

Nothing Goes Unnoticed

By **Pia de Jong** - December 12, 2018



Illustration by Eliane Gerrits

A dozen people sit down at a huge conference table on the 25th floor of a skyscraper in Manhattan. In the middle of the table is a long slit bristling with charging outlets. One at a time we plug into the slot our smart phones, notebook computers, and iPads, and settle in behind our devices.

On the screen of the woman sitting next to me an image of a red beating heart suddenly lights up. She blushes and quickly deletes it. Zip! The man across from me pulls his iPad out of its charger and stands up to take a panoramic picture of the view of the Freedom Tower under a sky filled with snow flurries. Back at the conference table he sends off the photo in an email. Zip!

My shoes get entangled in a jumble of cables under the table. Where are they going? Where is that place where all our messages, photos, fears, losses, and desires are sent forever?

The idea that God sees everything, that he knows even my

innermost thoughts, was presented to me as a child. I thought that was a disturbing thought. It meant that I had no privacy anywhere, even in bed. But how could that much too curious God actually know everything about me?

According to my childish reasoning he operated through the white cables that ran from my bedroom lamps down the wall, then under the carpet to my wardrobe, to disappear somewhere in the outside world with an unclear final destination. It was no more complicated than that: high in the clouds, God listened in on my secrets through these lines.

And then I thought that one day, when I was dead, God was going to do something with all the information he had gathered. On the basis of all my actions and thoughts, whether or not sinful, he would decide whether I would end up in heaven or hell. Because there was an eternal life, that much was certain.

The woman seated next to me sends off an emoji of two folded hands. Zip!

A neighbor has found my runaway cat and sends me a picture of her eating a can of tuna. "When can I come to pick her up?" I ask him. Zip!

The meeting finally ends. People briskly pull their devices out of the chargers. The man on my left checks Google Maps to see what time he will get home. The woman on my right says that she has been seriously delayed by the snow and is forced to spend the night in New York City. Zip!

"It has been seen. It has not gone unnoticed," murmurs the protagonist of the Dutch writer Gerard van het Reve's novel *De Avonden*. And so it is.

Everything we do is stored, kept forever. Nothing will fall into oblivion. Somewhere there is always the panic about the missing cat and the joy if it is found. The emotion about the enchanting

view. The desire for the distant lover.

Eternal life exists. Now it's in bits and bytes, somewhere high in the cloud. We all have our own private heaven and hell, to which we do not have the key, but into which we voluntarily pour the secrets of our souls.

Nothing has gone unnoticed. And that is a disturbing thought.

Pia de Jong is a Dutch writer who lives in Princeton. Her memoir, "Saving Charlotte," was published by W.W. Norton in 2017. She can be contacted at pdejong@ias.edu. She is filling in for Richard K. Rein, who is on assignment.

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