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author Juli Zeh

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translated by Christine Lo

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contact Kathrin Scheel

email kathrin.scheel@schoeffling.de

phone +49 69 92 07 87 16

fax +49 69 92 07 87 20

mail Schöffling & Co.
Verlagsbuchhandlung GmbH
Foreign Rights
Kaiserstraße 79
60329 Frankfurt am Main
Germany

www www.schoeffling.de

Prologue

We did not hear everything but we saw most of what happened, for one of us was always there.

A detective superintendent with a fatal headache – who loves a theory of physics and does not believe in coincidence – solves his final case. A child is kidnapped but does not know it. A doctor does what he should not do. One man dies, two physicists fight and a senior constable falls in love. In the end, everything is different from what the detective superintendent thought, yet exactly the same. A man's ideas are his score and his life is the twisted music.

It went like this, we think.

Chapter one in seven sections. Sebastian cuts curves, Maike cooks and Oskar comes to visit. Physics is for lovers.

1

As you approach it from a height of about five hundred metres, Freiburg looks like a worn, faded patch in the expanse of the Black Forest. It seems to have fallen from the heavens one day and plopped right at the feet of the mountains. The peaks of Belchen, Schauinsland and Feldberg stand in a ring around it. Freiburg has existed for mere minutes in relation to these mountains, yet the town behaves as if it has always been there, next to the river with the funny name – *Dreisam*. *Eins, zwei, drei*. One, two, three. It's not called *ein-sam* – lonely – but *drei-sam*. Like three people being lonely together.

If Schauinsland were to ripple its slopes in a shrug of indifference, hundreds of people cycling, riding in cable cars or looking for butterflies on it would die. If Feldberg were to turn away in boredom, that would be the end of the entire district. But the mountains don't do that. Instead, they turn their sombre faces to the goings-on in the streets of Freiburg, seeking entertainment. They send a swarm of birds into the city every day to gather the latest news and report back.

The Middle Ages live on in the ochre yellows and dusty pinks of the narrow lanes where thick shadows gather. The roofs are dotted with dormer windows, ideal landing spots unless they are adorned with bird spikes. A passing cloud brushes across the bright surfaces of the buildings. A girl with pig-tails and a dead-straight fringe is buying an ice cream on Leopoldring.

A few flaps of the wings, and here is Sophie de la Roche Street, so leafy and green that it seems to have a micro-climate of its own. There is always a light breeze blowing here, making the leaves at the top of the chestnut trees rustle. The trees have outlived the town planners who planted them by a century, and they have grown beyond all expectations. Their branches brush the balconies, and their roots bulge beneath the pavement and dig their way under the wall right next to the foundations of the buildings. On the other side of the wall is the canal, in which Bonnie and Clyde – one head of brown and one of green – paddle along against the current, quacking

away. They always turn at the same spot, and let themselves be carried downstream. On their conveyer belt of water, they travel faster than the people walking past on the canal path, who they glance up at, begging for bread.

Sophie de la Roche Street has such a feeling of well-being about it that an objective observer might think that its residents are all at peace with the world. The buildings get damp, so their front doors are wide open to let air in, and the walkways over the canal look like tongues hanging out of gaping jaws. Number seven – in tasteful white stucco – is without doubt the most beautiful building in the street. Wisteria cascades down from it, sparrows chirp in the swathes of ivy on the walls and an old-fashioned lantern dozes in the porch, waiting to be lit at night. In an hour or so a taxi will come round the corner and stop at this building. The passenger in the backseat will raise his sunglasses in order to count change into the driver's hand. He will get out of the car, tip his head back and look up at the windows on the second floor. A couple of doves are already picking their way across one of the window ledges, nodding and bending, fluttering upwards occasionally to look into the flat. These winged observers watch Sebastian, Maike and Liam's every move on the first Friday of every month.

[1-line section break]

Behind one of the windows, Sebastian is sitting cross-legged on the floor in his study with his head bent over something. There are scissors and bits of paper all round him, as if he is making Christmas decorations. Crouching next to him is Liam – blond and pale like his father, a mini-Sebastian down to his posture. He is looking a sheet of red card on which the laser printer has marked a zigzag curve, like an outline of the Alps. As Sebastian puts the scissors to the card, Liam raises a warning finger.

‘Wait! Your hands are shaking!’

‘That's because I'm trying hard to hold still, clever clogs,’ Sebastian snaps.

Liam's eyes widen in surprise and Sebastian regrets his tone.

Sebastian is jumpy, the way he is every first Friday evening of the month. As usual, he puts it down to having had a bad day. Little things can ruin his mood on the first Friday of every month. Today, it was an encounter on the bank of the Dreisam, where he takes a break from his lectures at lunchtimes. He passed a group of people who were standing around a mound of earth a little way off the main path for no

apparent reason. In the earth was a pathetic looking seedling held upright only by a construction of wooden sticks and rubber bands. Three men were leaning on spades nearby and a lanky man in a dark suit, with a little girl hanging on to his leg, stepped up to the mound of earth and made a small celebratory speech. This was the tree of the year, he said, a black apple tree. He spoke of love – for home and hearth, for nature, for creation – as old ladies stood round silently in a semi-circle. Then came the thrust of the spade and a pathetic shovelful of earth and the little girl poured water from a tin can. Applause. Sebastian couldn't help thinking about what Oskar would have said if he had seen them. 'Look, a herd of forked beings celebrating their own helplessness!' And Sebastian would have laughed and stopped himself from saying that he felt very much like the tree of the year, actually. Like a seedling dwarfed by its scaffolding.

'Do you know about the tree of the year?' he asks his son, who shakes his head and stares at the scissors that have fallen still in his father's hand. 'It's nonsense,' he adds. 'The worst rubbish imaginable.'

'Oskar's coming today, isn't he?'

'Of course.' Sebastian starts cutting. 'Why?'

'You always talk about strange things when Oskar's coming. And,' Liam continues, pointing at the card, 'you bring work back home.'

'I thought you liked measuring curves!' Sebastian replies indignantly.

At ten, Liam is already clever enough to know not to reply to this. Of course he loves helping his father with physics experiments. He knows that the zigzag line marks the result of a radiometric measurement, even though he can't explain the meaning of 'radiometric'. The integral under the curve can be measured by cutting out the surface area and weighing the card. But Liam also knows that there are computers at the university that will give you the answer without cutting and weighing. This could definitely have waited still Monday. Sebastian has brought it home with him for Liam to have fun with and because he finds this activity calming late on a Friday afternoon. Even though the chopping board and the sharp knife that they need to cut out the tiny jagged bits are with Maike in the kitchen.

When Maike is cooking for Oskar, the kitchen utensils are hers and hers alone. Every time Oskar is due to arrive, Maike tells Sebastian about the new recipe she is

trying out that evening. He wonders why she takes Oskar's visits so seriously. He would have thought that Liam's hero-worship of the big-shot physicist from Geneva would put her off Oskar, not to mention the heavily ironic tone of voice in which Oskar invariably addresses her. Yet it was Maike herself who had started the tradition of monthly dinners with Oskar ten years ago, and she is the one who has maintained it to this very day. Sebastian suspects that, consciously or unconsciously, she is trying to steer something in a controlled manner – something that is playing out before her very eyes – rather than letting it develop unchecked in hidden corners. They have never spoken about what this certain something might be. Deep down, Sebastian admires his wife's calm persistence. 'He's coming on Friday, isn't he?' she asks, and Sebastian nods. That is all that is ever said.

The curve is easier to cut out in the middle, and it becomes more complicated again towards the end. Liam holds on to the card with both hands, cheering when the scissors have negotiated the final jagged cliffs and the zigzag cutting falls to the ground. He picks up the masterpiece carefully by the edges, and runs off to see if the kitchen scales can be used now.

[section break]

Maike is standing at the kitchen counter chopping some unruly looking salad leaves. She is wearing a white dress that makes her look as though she is about to be married for the second time. Her feet are bare, and she is absentmindedly scratching a mosquito bite on her left calf with her right foot. The window is open and summer air is wafting in with the smell of hot tarmac, flowing water and a wind that has been playing with the swallows high in the heavens. In the golden evening light, Maike looks more than ever like the kind of woman that men would like to ride up to on horseback and carry off into the sunset with them. She is unique, and not just at first glance. Her skin is even paler than Sebastian's and her mouth is very slightly lopsided, which makes her look a little pensive when she laughs. The small contemporary art gallery in Freiburg that Maike works at has her to thank for a great deal of its success, for she is not only the artists' agent, but also their occasional model. Maike's aesthetic feeling has almost the fervour of religion about it. Surroundings furnished without care depress her and she is the sort of person who checks every glass she is handed against the light before putting it down on the table.

When Sebastian approaches her from behind, she stretches her damp hands out in front of her, showing her shaved underarms. His fingers step lightly over the vertebrae on her back, all the way from her bottom to her neck.

‘Are you cold?’ she asks. ‘Your hands are trembling.’

‘Can’t you and Liam think about anything other than my clapped-out nervous system?’ Sebastian asks.

‘Yes,’ Maike replies. ‘I’m thinking about a glass of red wine.’

Sebastian kisses the back of her head. They both know that Oskar will have read the article in *Spiegel* magazine. Maike has no particular desire to get to grips with the reasons behind the long-standing scientific disagreement between Oskar and Sebastian. But she knows what will happen. Oskar’s voice will be threateningly quiet when he launches his attack. And Sebastian will blink more rapidly than usual while he is defending himself and his arms will dangle limply by his side.

‘I bought a Brunello,’ she said. ‘He’ll like it.’

As Sebastian reaches for the carafe of wine, a red point of light sweeps over Maike’s breasts, as if a drunken marksman is aiming through the window. Fruit, oak, earth. Sebastian resists the temptation to pour himself a glass and turns to Liam, who is waiting by the kitchen scales. Cheek to cheek, they look at the digital display together.

‘Excellent work, little professor.’ Sebastian presses his son against his side. ‘What conclusion can we draw?’

‘Nature behaves in accordance with our calculations,’ Liam says, glancing sideways at his mother. Her knife taps a solid rhythm on the wooden chopping board. She doesn’t like him to show off with sentences learned by heart.

Sebastian lingers at the kitchen door before he brings his graph back into the study. Maike will want to say that she will keep Liam off his back later. Off his back. She likes that expression. It reminds her of the battle of her everyday life, which she wins every evening. But Maike is not really the fighting kind. Before she met Sebastian, she was very much a dreamer. She used to walk through the streets at night, dreaming her way into every lighted window. In her head, she was watering strangers’ potted plants, laying their tables for dinner, and patting their children on the heads. Every man was a potential lover, and, depending on the colour of his eyes and

his build, she dreamed of living a wild or conventional or artistic or political life by his side. Maike's vagabond imagination had inhabited people and places as she encountered them. Until she met Sebastian. The moment she walked into his arms on the Kaiser-Joseph Strasse in Freiburg ('On the Münsterplatz!' Sebastian would say, for there were two versions of their first meeting – one for him and one for her), her hazy reality become solid. It was love at first sight, precluding alternatives, reducing an endless variety of possibilities to a here and a now. Sebastian's appearance in Maike's life was – as he would express it – a wave function collapse in quantum mechanics. From that moment on, Maike had had someone whose back she could keep troubles away from. She did it at every opportunity, and gladly.

'You two can talk in peace later,' she says, brushing a strand of hair off her forehead with her forearm. 'I'll keep...'

'I know,' Sebastian says. 'Thank you.'

She laughs, showing a glimpse of chewing gum between her molars. This does nothing to diminish her irresistible charm – all fair hair and childlike eyes.

'When is Oskar coming?' Liam pesters.

As his parents look at each other, he expresses his impatience by decorating the kitchen table with chunks of onion and cloves of garlic. Maike lets him get away with it because there is a seed of creativity in his cheekiness.

2

It's incredible, Oskar thinks, that all human beings consist of the same components. That the adrenal glands that give him a light rush of adrenaline can also be found in the autonomic nerve systems of the delicately built Oriental woman with the Yoko Ono face who is distributing coffee and sandwiches to the passengers. Incredible that her nails, hair and teeth are made of the same material as the nails, hair and teeth of all the passengers. That the hands pouring the coffee are being moved by the same tendons as those reaching for change in their wallets. That even the palm into which he – carefully avoiding any contact – drops a couple of coins, has the same pattern on it as on his own palm.

As she passes him the cup of coffee, the Oriental woman holds his gaze a split second longer than necessary. The train judders as it travels over a set of points and the coffee almost spills onto his trousers. Oskar takes the cup from the woman and looks down at the floor in order to avoid the beaming smile of farewell that she is about to give him. If only all they had in common were hydrogen, oxygen and carbon. But the shared elements go deeper than that, right down to the protons, neutrons and electrons from which he and the Oriental woman are made, which also make up the table supporting his elbows and the coffee cup warming his hands. So Oskar is merely a random collection of matter from which the world is made, containing everything that exists, because it is impossible to escape being so. He knows that the boundaries of his person blur in the enormous whirl of particles. He can literally feel his substance mixing with that of the people around him. This is almost always an unpleasant feeling for Oskar but there is one person who is an exception, and he is on his way to him now.

If Sebastian were to try to describe his friend Oskar, he would say that Oskar looked like the kind of person who could answer every conceivable question you put to him. Would string theory one day succeed in uniting the fundamental forces of physics? Can a dress shirt be worn with a dinner jacket? What time is it in Dubai? Oskar would know. Regardless of whether he was listening to someone or was speaking himself, Oskar's eyes of granite stayed fixed on you. Oskar was one of those people with quicksilver in their veins. One of those people who always stood at a commanding vantage point. People like Oskar did not have silly nicknames. In his presence, women had to sit on their hands in order to stop themselves from reaching out to touch him involuntarily. Ever since his thirtieth birthday, he had become ageless. He was tall and slim, with a smooth forehead and narrow eyebrows that seemed to be raised in permanent questioning. Despite careful shaving, a dark shadow of beard growth coloured his slightly sunken cheeks. He always looked as though he had dressed with care, even when he was simply wearing a pair of black trousers and a jumper, as he was now. On his body, clothes could do nothing but fall in the right lines. For the most part, he held himself with a mixture of apparent ease and inner tension that made other people look him in the face with curiosity. Behind his back,

they cast about for his name, taking him for an actor they ought to know. Oskar was indeed well known in certain circles, but not for acting. He was famous for his theories on the nature of time.

Outside, summer speeds by in a band of green and blue. A road runs alongside the tracks, so the cars follow the train as though they are glued to it. The tarmac is flecked with flat pools of light. Oskar has just pulled out his sunglasses when a young man asks if the seat beside him is taken. Oskar turns away and puts on his sunglasses, and the young man walks on down the aisle. A brown puddle of coffee spreads on the foldaway table.

Oskar's sense of propriety is what often makes life intolerable for him. Many people cannot stand their fellow men, but few can explain exactly why, as Oskar can. He can forgive the fact that his fellow human beings consist merely of protons, neutrons and electrons. But he cannot forgive their inability to maintain their composure in the face of this tragic state of affairs. When he thinks about his childhood, he sees himself at fourteen, surrounded by boys and girls who are laughing and pointing at his feet. He had – without his parents' permission – sold his bicycle in order to buy his first pair of handmade shoes, three sizes too big to be on the safe side. To this day he despises tactless laughter and avoids pompous people, show-offs and the *Schadenfreude* of the stupid. To his mind, there is no violence greater than bad form. If he were ever to commit murder – certainly unplanned – it would probably be because his victim had made an importunate remark of some kind.

The boys and girls in school suddenly stopped teasing him when he reached a height of 1.9 metres at the age of sixteen. They began to vie for his attention instead. They spoke loudly when he was in earshot on the school grounds, and when a girl raised her hand to answer a question in class, she glanced over at him as she spoke, as if to make sure that he was listening. Even the maths teacher, an untidy person who had neck hairs sticking out over his shirt collar, turned to Oskar with a 'That's right, isn't it?' after he had marked the full-stop at the end of an equation on the board. Yet Oskar was the only one in his class who had left school after the *Abitur* exam with no practical experience whatsoever of love for his fellow man. He viewed this as a personal victory, for he was convinced that there was not a single person on this earth whose presence he could endure for more than ten minutes.

When he met Sebastian at university, the magnitude of this error made him quite dizzy. It was their height that drew their attention to each other on the first day of the new semester. Their eyes met over the heads of the other students, and they seemed to be automatically drawn to sit down next to each other in the lecture theatre. They sat patiently through the embarrassing welcome speech by the dean, then started chatting easily as they left the hall. Sebastian did not say anything even faintly naïve in the following ten minutes, and he did not laugh in an irritating manner, not once. Oskar could not only tolerate his company, but even felt a desire to continue their conversation. They went into the dining hall together and continued talking into the evening. From that moment on, Oskar sought the company of his new friend, and Sebastian acquiesced. Their friendship had no preliminary stages – nothing had to grow and develop. It simply switched on the way a light comes on when the right switch is pressed.

Any attempt to describe the following months runs the risk of getting lost in exaggeration. Ever since Oskar started at university in Freiburg, he had appeared in public dressed always in a morning suit – long jacket and striped trousers – and a silver cravat. It was not long before Sebastian started appearing at lectures in a similar dandy's uniform. Every morning, they walked across the lawn in front of the Institute of Physics as if drawn to each other by an invisible string – bypassing all the other students in various different years who seemed to exist only to get in their way – and greeted each other with a handshake. They bought only one copy of every textbook because they liked bending their heads over each page together. The seats next to them in the lecture theatre stayed empty. Everyone found them odd, yet no one laughed at them, not even when they walked arm in arm on the bank of the Dreisam in the afternoons and stopped every couple of steps, because matters of importance could only be discussed while standing still. In their old-fashioned garb, they looked like something out of a yellowing postcard, carefully cut out and pasted – not without trace – into the present. The ripple of the Dreisam punctuated their conversation and the trees above them waved in the wind. The late summer sun was never more beautiful than in the moments when one of them gestured at the other and spoke about the solar neutrino problem.

In the evenings, they met in the library, where Oskar strolled along the shelves from time to time, returning to their shared table with a book. Ever since Oskar had got into the habit of putting his arm around his friend while bringing his attention to something interesting in a book, female students of German literature had started gathering on the benches behind the glass walls of their lecture theatre. At parties, when Oskar and Sebastian glided through the crowds separately, Sebastian sometimes kissed a girl, his tongue heavy. When he lifted his head, he could count on seeing Oskar smiling at him from across the room. At the end of the evening, the girl would be led to the door and handed over to anyone passing by like a piece of clothing. Then Oskar and Sebastian would walk together through the night until they had to part ways. They came to a standstill, the light from a streetlamp falling around them like a tent that neither of them wanted to leave. It was hard to decide on a suitable moment to say goodbye – this one, or the next? As the shadows of passing cars turned on the axis of the two friends, they made a silent vow that nothing would ever change between them. The future was an evenly woven carpet of togetherness unrolling before them. When the chirp of the first bird sounded, they turned away from each other and each disappeared into his half of the coming morning.

Every first Friday of the month, Oskar allows himself a few seconds of imagining that the InterCity Express is bringing him back to one of those farewells under the Freiburg streetlamps. Back to a heated discussion on the banks of the Dreisam or at least back to a moment over the shared textbook. He feels his lips curve into a smile, but immediately falls into a peevish mood. It is clear that the Freiburg he is thinking of no longer exists. What does exist is this: a circular underground tunnel in Switzerland where he makes elementary particles collide at nearly the speed of light. And the Freiburg to which he has been invited to dinner with the family by Sebastian's wife. It was on a Friday that Oskar had met Liam – tiny as a doll then – for the first time. It was on a Friday that he had learnt about Sebastian's standing at the university. On Fridays, they look each other in the eye and try not to think about the past. On Fridays, they fight. For Oskar, Sebastian is not just the only person whose presence brings him pleasure. Sebastian is also the person whose slightest movement can turn him white-hot with rage.

When the train comes to a standstill on an open stretch of land, Oskar leans down to his bag to remove the rolled-up copy of *Spiegel* magazine, which falls open at the right page. He doesn't need to read the article one more time – he practically knows it by heart already. He looks at the photo instead: it shows a forty-year-old man with blond hair and eyebrows, and clear blue eyes. He is laughing, and his half-open mouth has taken on a slightly squarish shape. Oskar is more familiar with this laugh than with his own. He touches the photograph carefully, stroking the forehead and cheeks, then suddenly presses his thumb into it, as if he is trying to stub out a cigarette. He is worried about the train stopping like this. In the seats across the aisle from him, a mother in a flowery outfit is handing out sandwiches from a Tupperware. The smell of salami fills the air.

‘So it's four now!’ exclaims the father, whose fat neck bulges over his collar. He slaps his newspaper with the back of his hand. ‘See! Four people have died now! Bled to death during their operations. The medical director continues to deny it.’

‘Four little negro boys,’ a childish voice sings, ‘on the river Rhine.’

‘Quiet,’ the mother says, and she stops the song mid-flow with a piece of apple.

‘Are pharmaceutical firms behind the experiments on patients?’ the father reads. His mouth stretches brutishly as he drinks from his bottle of beer.

‘Criminals, all of them,’ the mother says.

‘Ought to be locked up.’

‘If only.’

Oskar puts the *Spiegel* back into his bag and hopes that Sebastian will not smell salami on his clothes when they greet each other. He strides out of the carriage with quick movements, and almost stumbles and falls when the train suddenly jerks into motion. Send all the stupid people to war, he thinks, as he leans against the partition next to the toilets. Let them burn to a crisp in some African desert or in an Asian jungle, it really doesn't matter. If we have another fifty years of peace the people in this country will have regressed to the level of apes.

Outside, the first well-tended front gardens of the Freiburg suburbs have appeared.

‘Summer in Freiburg is just wonderful.’

Oskar is standing by the open window next to a half-drawn curtain, cradling a glass of wine and breathing in the scent of the wisteria that he had admired from the street when he got out of the taxi. He is wearing a dark jumper despite the heat, but he looks fresh as a daisy, as though sweating is not something he is capable of. He hears the parquet creak behind him, and turns his head.

Sebastian is walking across the large dining room, arms hanging by his sides, deliberately relaxed, quite the opposite of his friend. His hair is as startlingly fair as Oskar’s is dark. While Oskar always looks as if he is attending a formal celebration of some kind, Sebastian has something boyish about him. His movements have a playful openness about them, and though he dresses well – in a white shirt and linen trousers today – he always looks as if he is slightly outgrowing his shirt sleeves and trouser bottoms. On him, growing older seems to be a mistake, and age has merely deepened his laugh lines.

He walks right up to Oskar and puts a hand which he knows is warm and dry onto Oskar’s neck. Sebastian closes his eyes for a moment as the smell of his friend sweeps over him like a memory. The matter-of-fact way in which they stand close together indicates practice.

‘I’m going to murder someone in four days,’ says Sebastian, ‘but I don’t know anything about it yet.’

Sebastian could have said that without telling a lie. Instead, he says, ‘Summer in Freiburg is as beautiful as those who appreciate it.’ His words strike a false note – they betray his uneasiness rather than concealing it. Sebastian’s hand slides off Oskar and falls into emptiness as his friend steps smoothly to one side. In the river below them, Bonnie and Clyde have reached the start of the street. They turn and float past the house like flotsam and jetsam.

‘Let’s get to the point,’ Oskar says, his eyes resting on the ducks in the canal. ‘I read your outpourings in the *Spiegel*.’

‘I take it you’re congratulating me.’

‘I’m declaring war, *cher ami*.’

‘My God, Oskar.’ Sebastian shoves one hand into his pocket and passes the other over his face. ‘The sun is shining and the birds are singing. It’s not about life and death. It’s about a theory of physics.’

‘Even a harmless theory like the one about the earth being round cost a lot of people their lives.’

‘If Copernicus had had a friend like you,’ Sebastian replies, ‘the earth would still be flat.’

‘And if Copernicus had believed in the Many-Worlds Interpretation,’ Oskar retorts, the cigarette between his lips jerking as he speaks, ‘mankind would be mired in nonsense.’

Sebastian sighs. It isn’t easy arguing with someone who is part of the greatest intellectual endeavour of the new millennium. Oskar’s goal is to unite quantum physics with the general theory of relativity. He wants to bring $E=hc/\lambda$ together with $G_{\alpha\beta} = 8\pi T_{\alpha\beta}$ and thus make two views of the universe into one. One question and one answer. A single equation that describes everything. He is not alone in searching for a theory of everything. There are hordes of physicists working on it, all competing with each other, knowing that the winner will not only win the Nobel prize, but will also follow in the footsteps of Einstein, Planck and Heisenberg in gaining a piece of immortality. The winner’s name will for ever be associated with a certain epoch – the age of quantum gravity. Oskar’s chances of winning are not at all bad.

Sebastian’s focus, to put it carefully, lies elsewhere. He is an experimental physicist in nanotechnology at the University of Freiburg and is regarded as brilliant in his field. But from Oskar’s point of view, Sebastian is a mere bricklayer and it is theoretical physicists who are the architects. Sebastian is not engaged in fighting for immortality. His free time is taken up by the Many-Worlds Interpretation – not a single theory but a whole bundle of them, as is clear from its name. Sebastian is grazing in an empty field though. The great physicists have left it behind some fifty years ago. In Oskar’s eyes, it is now of esoteric interest only, or for show-offs. A dead end.

Sebastian knows that Oskar is basically right. Sometimes he feels like a child who stubbornly persists in trying to make a light bulb out of a glass jar and a piece of wire despite his parent’s advice to the contrary. But in front of his less gifted

colleagues, in front of his students, and, most of the time, to himself, he claims to be finding a new way of looking at questions of time and space. A way that would leave the Many-Worlds Interpretation behind it. Ultimately, it doesn't matter whether Sebastian still believes in it or not, for he has no choice but to continue on the path he had carved out. Even if he were to take it upon himself to join the race Oskar was in, he would never be able to catch up on more than ten years' head start. The final push in finding the theory of everything had begun once the existence of W and Z bosons had been successfully proved in experiments. Oskar and Sebastian had been in their twenties then, the age at which people have the best ideas of their lives, the age at which Oskar had had his only idea. Oskar had devoted himself to his theory of discrete time, behaving like an obsessive lover. Hour after hour, week after week – for ten years, he had pursued it, regardless of whether it would eventually yield to him. Sebastian had not wanted anything to do with it. At an appropriate juncture, he had turned his attention to other things – not only to other theories, but, above all, to another life.

The man who had the dubious honour of presiding over this turning point in Sebastian's life was called Little Red Riding Hood. He had earned the nickname because of the bald pate, glowing red from wine, that emerged through his threadbare fringe of hair. He was always dressed in a shabby corduroy jacket, the shoulders of which were covered with a white layer of dandruff. Unlike many of his colleagues, Little Red Riding Hood was adored by his students. He took them seriously, and stimulated their intelligence with complicated assignments. But their feeling for him was not by any means reciprocated. Little Red Riding Hood did not like them back, and he especially disliked students who challenged what he said.

He had a particular aversion to the two young men who stood blocking the entrance to the lecture theatre every morning. Their arrogance was legendary and their friendship was the subject of gossip even among the lecturers. They were said to love physics even more than they loved each other, and they fought over it with the passion of rivals. Little Red Riding Hood could not bear listening to their bragging conversation. Their backs were far too straight as they stood there with a circle of listeners around them, reciting equations like the verses of a libretto, putting the

universe into order with the waving hands of conductors. Oskar would turn his head to one side every now and then to draw on one of his Egyptian cigarettes, doing so with an affectation that stirred his audience into nervous movement.

The entire faculty had long since been made acquainted with Oskar's view that the world was a finely spun web of causalities, with a hidden pattern that could only be deciphered either from a great distance or from up close. Recognition of the pattern, he intoned, was a matter of being at the right distance, and was therefore only possible for God and for quantum physicists. Normal people remained in the middle distance, blind to the nature of things.

Sebastian, who always spoke a little less loudly and also more slowly, called his friend a despicable determinist. He claimed not to believe in causality himself. Causality was, like space and time, a theoretical problem of cognition. To wind up Oskar and everyone standing around them, he stated that he doubted the validity of empiricism as a method of establishing scientific findings. A man who stands by the river and watches 1,000 white swans swim by cannot conclude that there are no black swans. So physics was ultimately the servant of philosophy.

Little Red Riding Hood pushed past the arguing students impatiently. It was impossible to give a lecture any longer without hearing their intrusive voices. Sometimes he looked up grumpily from his notes, thinking that their whispering would drive him mad, only to realise that Oskar and Sebastian were not even present.

But they were very much present on the day that Little Red Riding Hood set a problem on dark energy, which could only be solved by the assumption of an Einsteinian constant that was not a constant. The next week, Oskar and Sebastian were not standing before the doors when Little Red Riding Hood arrived, but already sitting inside at their usual places, looking him straight in the face. He summoned them to the board even before he had reached the lectern. They rose in unison. Oskar went to the right-hand side of the board and Sebastian to the left, after a second's hesitation. They flung their tailcoats over their shoulders and held them with one hand each as the other hand scratched frenziedly with the piece of chalk on the board. They wrote like men possessed: Oskar from the right and Sebastian from the left. The lecture theatre was silent apart from the squeak of chalk that accompanied the growth of the equation. When their hands met in the middle of the bottom line, all fell still. A

few faces in the auditorium cracked into smiles. Oskar completed the final lambda and clapped his hands together to shake off the chalk dust. Little Red Riding Hood was standing behind them looking at the panorama of equations with his mouth half open, like someone gaping at an impossibly beautiful view. Oskar turned round and tapped him on the shoulder with the tip of his finger, as if he was striking a triangle.

‘Do you know what we have just proved, professor?’

His voice was loud and resonant, but Little Red Riding Hood was too deep in thought to reply.

‘Physics is for lovers.’

If Little Red Riding Hood made any retort, it was drowned out by the laughter and sounds of protest that had broken out in the room. The sound of the stick of chalk between Sebastian’s fingers breaking was also obscured. While Oskar drank in the admiration for their work of art, Sebastian was still standing in front of the blackboard looking thoughtful. He finally pulled on his jacket and left the lecture theatre, unnoticed by his friend. He had been shaken by the way Oskar had automatically stepped to the right-hand side of the blackboard while pointing him towards the left.

Knowing that the last thing that Oskar had meant to do was make him seem in any way lesser did not make it any easier for Sebastian. The feeling of his own unfairness mingled with his foolish sensation of humiliation. Oskar revelled in the spectacle of it and the exhilaration of pulling off a performance together, but Sebastian wanted to be a good physicist more than anything else in the world. Getting things right was never any effort for Oskar – it was the natural state of things for him. He had simply assumed that unlike him, Sebastian would be unable to write down the mathematical derivation from back to front. The worst thing was – he was right. The moment that their hands met in the middle of the blackboard was one of Oskar’s victory alone, and Sebastian felt the urge to punish him for this. Only Oskar saw it as a celebration of their friendship and their brilliance. Sebastian saw it as proof of his inferiority.

From that moment on, Sebastian grew stiff in Oskar’s presence. He was not able to explain to his friend why the laws that governed their friendship had suddenly lost all validity. When they argued, his rejoinders grew sharper, and he found less and less time for doing research together. Oskar did not fight against any of this. His half-

closed eyes gazed quietly at Sebastian, following him into his sleep. His friend's refusal to defend himself against this new aggressiveness made Sebastian even worse. In Oskar's room, he shouted and raged against narrow walls and limited world-views until Oskar told him quietly and calmly one evening that he was being ridiculous. That night, Sebastian walked through the streets punching lampposts and declaring to them that something was not right with the world, that there must be other universes in which things went differently. In which it would be impossible for a man like him to throw away his own happiness despite knowing better. In which he and Oskar would never lose each other.

When they were defending their PhD theses to each other, they no longer met on the bank of the Dreisam, but only for an occasional whisky, sitting on lumpy stools at a bar. They were no longer of one mind on anything, except on the subject of which one of them was the better physicist. It was Oskar, and after this conviction of theirs was confirmed by Oskar's *summa cum laude*, Sebastian exchanged his morning jacket for jeans and a shirt, and got married.

The guests at the wedding whispered behind raised hands about the best man keeping close to the walls at the reception – a dark figure made up of the shadows in the corners. From the expression on his face, it seemed that he had never been so amused about anything in his life. Instead of a veil, he told the painfully embarrassed guests, Sebastian should have put a green light on top of his bride's head. All emergency exits had them.

'I'll bet a case of Brunello,' Oskar says, 'that they only asked for your article because of that case of the time machine murder.'

Sebastian is silent. That is clear as daylight. It was even in the description on the contents page: Freiburg professor explains the theories of the time machine murderer. In his article, Sebastian had even tried to express certain things from the point of view of the murderer. After killing five people, the young man had explained that it was not murder at all, but a scientific experiment. He had travelled from the

year 2015 to prove the Many-Worlds Interpretation. According to this theory, time was not linear – instead, a countless number of universes existed at the same time, each of which was increasing in size every second, like a kind of time foam consisting of countless bubbles. So travelling into the past was not a return to an earlier point in human history, but simply changing between worlds. It was therefore perfectly possible for an action in the past not to change the present in any way. He could bear witness to the fact that all five of his victims were alive and well in 2015. In the world he belonged to, there were no murder victims and therefore no murderer, and he did not feel bound to the jurisdiction of the year 2007, which he was sorry about. His lawyer had recommended that he plead insanity, which he had refused indignantly.

‘So you end up writing something for the *Spiegel*,’ says Oskar, ‘that goes even beyond the ideas of this crazy fellow.’

‘Is an insane person automatically wrong? That’s news to me.’

‘What’s driving you isn’t even insanity. It’s the desire to relativize a particular reality.’ Oskar casts the words into the room over his shoulder.

‘Be quiet,’ Sebastian hisses. ‘That’s enough.’

At the other end of the dining room, Maïke is bending down over Liam, saying something to him. She is holding him by the hand, pulling him towards her and he is turning his head this way and that. Her hair is hanging over her forehead as she looks up at Sebastian, smiling.

‘I know just what you’re talking about,’ she calls. ‘The parallel universe in which Liam is not refusing to set the table.’

‘Exactly,’ Sebastian says genially.

‘And a universe in which Oskar doesn’t look so angry.’

‘Let’s hope so.’

‘And perhaps even one in which I am not your wife and Liam is not your son?’

Maïke laughs and Sebastian looks put out. The semi-orphan of a parallel universe has pulled himself free and is running past the table. He disappears into the hall, with Maïke in hot pursuit.

‘You long for other worlds,’ Oskar says in a low voice. ‘For the notion that you might be able to be two different men at the same time. At least.’

Sebastian forces himself to let go of the curtain that he has been fingering all this time, and has wanted more than anything to pull off the rail in one violent tug. Oskar's hand passes over his shoulder as he tosses his cigarette butt out of the window. Bonnie and Clyde race over the water to the edges of the double ripple it makes as it falls in, and prod the sinking butt with their beaks, disappointed.

'Do you remember the world in which you said this to me,' says Oskar. 'I want to be the ground beneath your feet when the gods take their revenge on you?' As he quotes his friend, two lines appear around his mouth – brackets of irony.

Sebastian has not forgotten – of course not. He said those words on the night that he and Oskar, with the help of a bottle of whisky, had solved Little Red Riding Hood's problem on dark energy. The chairs had been upended on the tables in the pub by that time, and the bartender had smoked his way through five cigarettes while waiting for them to leave. But the two of them had seen and heard nothing else – their eyes had been closed and their foreheads pressed together as their shadows on the wall accepted the Nobel prize for the year 2020. Over the talk of numbers, they had grown closer than ever before that evening. Their minds had worked so perfectly together that they might have belonged to the same being. Sebastian had lifted two fingers to touch his friend on the cheek, and said the words that had come into his head: I want to be the ground beneath your feet . . .

'Not long after,' Oskar said, 'I heard something quite different from you.'

Sebastian remembered that too. 'You overestimate your own importance,' he had screamed at Oskar in his room. 'You overestimate your own importance in general, and you overestimate your importance to me in particular!'

Oskar's understanding of behaving with propriety includes an ability to appreciate the sophistication of an attack, even one on himself. He admired the precise sequence of behaviour to cultivate trust (I want to be the ground . . .) and the deadly thrust (You overestimate . . .), so he had simply stayed sitting in his armchair and done nothing more than look at Sebastian casually as he worked himself up.

'So many worlds,' Oskar says now. 'Sometimes I wish I could find a way of pushing you off that path.'

'You're exaggerating.'

'You used to be a good physicist before you went off course.'

‘I haven’t gone off course,’ Sebastian says with utmost composure. ‘I have not recognised the Copenhagen interpretation as a final, binding truth. Even the Copenhagen interpretation is a point of view, Oskar. Not a religion.’

‘Not a religion, no. It is science. Quite the opposite of your Many-World escapades.’

‘Let’s be clear on one thing. I was not defending the Many-World Interpretation in the *Spiegel*, only explaining it. Because I had been asked to.’

‘If you’re not even defending the nonsense, that only shows cowardice on top of stupidity.’

‘Enough now.’

‘You need a good shake to wake you up. A slap in the face to bring you to reality.’

‘What’s reality?’ Sebastian asks insolently.

‘Everything,’ Oskar says, suddenly touching Sebastian’s stomach with the back of his hand, ‘that is open to experiment.’

Sebastian raises an arm helplessly, and lets it drop to his side again. His eyes flit from Oskar’s profile to a pigeon fluttering upwards, disappearing from sight immediately. His drooping shoulders and bent head signal capitulation. But Oskar does not notice. He has turned away, placed both hands on the windowsill, and is talking again.

‘Perhaps you’ve read Orwell’s *1984*. In Oceania, people learn under torture to see things as both real and unreal at the same time. They are forced to choose to see only one possibility out of many. Do you know what Orwell called that?’ Without looking round, Oskar makes a sudden grab for Sebastian. ‘Do you?’

Sebastian looks at the fingers wrapped round his hand. In a moment, he and Oskar will look each other straight in the eye for the first time that evening. Neither of them will be able to tear his gaze away for a few seconds. Oskar’s face will relax. Then he will hurriedly take out another cigarette and light it in silence.

The ground beneath their feet begins to shake as Liam runs noisily into the room. He throws himself against Oskar with full force, wrapping his arms round his hips and placing his sock-clad feet on each of Oskar’s polished Budapest shoes. Oskar’s fingers have let go of his friend’s hand very quickly.

‘Are you going to lay into me the whole evening simply because I’ve been in the *Spiegel*?’ Sebastian asks.

‘With a photo too,’ Liam pipes up.

‘*Mais non.*’ As Oskar strokes Liam’s hair, single hairs stand up, following the static electric charge in his hands. ‘I will enjoy visiting your life, as I always do.’

They exchange another fleeting glance while Liam tugs at Oskar’s jumper.

‘Come on, quantum feet!’ he shouts, smiling when Oskar laughs. They sway towards the table, a two-headed creature with only one pair of legs.

‘By the way,’ Oskar says, turning his head to speak to Sebastian over his shoulder, ‘I have something for you. An official gauntlet.’

He walks Liam round the table an extra time, then lets Maïke – who is sticking candles into holders – tell him where to sit, even though he already knows.

‘A gauntlet,’ Sebastian murmurs, still standing by the window. ‘And I know who will be choosing the weapons.’

He looks up into the chestnut trees where the sparrows are chirping, and wonders if the twittering would translate into human language if it were recorded and played backwards. Endless talk. A novel’s worth per bird, per day.

5

Maïke serves rucola leaves from a bowl – her long arms are marked with tan marks from wearing a short-sleeved gym top in the sun. She blows a strand of hair off her forehead, and gives Oskar a pleading look.

‘How’s it going with the particle catalyst?’

‘Oh Maik.’

Oskar has refused to use the final vowel in Maïke’s name from the first time he met her. Since then, he has stuck to this short form. Every time Maïke’s eyes meet his, their faces brighten with a mutual mockery. A casual observer might even think that they were secretly in love with each other.

‘You know that it took me ten years to get used to your existence on this world of Bohr’s.’

Liam butts in. ‘What’s Bohr?’

‘He’s a great physicist.’ Oskar says. ‘The world belongs to those who can explain it.’ He brings his finger to his nose, as if he has to press a button to find his way back to his thread of thought. When he finds it, he points to Maike. ‘And if you had to exist, I thought eventually, you could at least look out for him. But what do you do? A pathetically bad job of it. He’s disgracing himself in public.’

Maike lifts her left shoulder in a half-shrug, as she does whenever she is at a loss.

‘Come, sit,’ she says to Sebastian, who has come up to the table. Oskar is looking at her as if he knows a good joke about her which he is keeping to himself only out of courtesy.

Sebastian adjusts a strap on Maike’s dress so it is in place, and strokes the back of her head until her hair lies smooth before he pulls his chair towards him. He touches Maike more often than usual when Oskar is there. This irritates him, but he can’t stop himself. Right now, he is even hoping that Maike will put down the salad bowl and walk over to the window so that Oskar can see the fine fuzz on her cheeks in the light and the silhouette of her body. He wants Oskar to see that Maike is a rare thing, a woman to be watched over and to be envied for. He finds these thoughts repellent. Even more abhorrent is the fact that his changed behaviour in Oskar’s presence doesn’t disturb Maike in any way. Instead, she raises her eyes in a coquettish fashion, and her voice is half an octave higher than usual.

‘Do start.’

Oskar spreads his napkin over his lap, elbows raised as he does so, very much like when he used to fling the tails of his coat back before he sat down.

‘By the way,’ Sebastian says, deliberately signalling a change of subject, ‘my argument with Oskar is on a topic that is extremely current.’

‘How nice for you both.’ Maike folds salad leaves into tidy parcels with her knife and fork. ‘Then perhaps some people know what it’s actually all about.’

‘I think it’s old news, actually.’ Oskar says.

‘Not at all,’ Sebastian claims. ‘It’s ultimately about science versus morality. That’s always relevant. Think about that scandal with that doctor.’

‘I haven’t heard anything about that.’

‘Some heart patients bled to death during their operations at the university hospital, and charges were brought. Apparently, unauthorised drugs which stopped blood coagulation were tested on these patients.’

‘Oh yes, the Mengele of Freiburg!’ Oskar dabs his napkin on his lips after every bite. ‘Even the proles on the train are talking about it.’

‘What’s a Mengele?’ Liam asks. In the fight against the salad leaves, he has not had a single victory yet.

‘Let’s not talk about that now,’ Maike says quickly.

‘Every time you say that it’s about sex or the Nazis!’ Liam crows.

‘Don’t be too clever!’ Maike says.

Liam throws his fork down immediately. ‘The Nazis strung steel cables across the streets to cut off the heads of the Americans in open-top vehicles. I saw it on TV!’

‘Eat your broccoli,’ Sebastian says.

‘It’s rucola,’ Maike says.

‘I don’t think the case is about experimenting on patients.’ Sebastian continues, anxious to keep the conversation on track. ‘The pharmaceutical industry wouldn’t be so bold as to do anything like that, what with the press uproar . . .’

‘Do we have to talk about this?’ Maike interrupts.

Oskar lifts his head, astonished. ‘*Ca va, Maik?*’

‘Mum knows the murderer!’ Liam cries.

‘One more word and you’ll be going straight to bed!’

‘You’re talking nonsense, Liam,’ Sebastian says. He has not eaten a thing yet, but has already finished his second glass of wine. ‘Mum knows a senior registrar in Schlüter’s department.’ To Oskar he says, ‘Schlüter is the head of department who is under suspicion. He’s probably going to be suspended. For bodily harm resulting in death.’

Oskar’s face brightens. ‘Maik’s cycling friend! The one who works at the hospital. What’s his name again?’

‘Ralph,’ says Maike.

‘Dabbling,’ Sebastian adds, casting a warning glance at Oskar.

If Maike had not been trying so hard to stop herself blushing, she might have asked herself how Oskar knew about a cycling friend in the first place. Dabeling was certainly never mentioned at their Friday gatherings.

But he had been mentioned on another occasion, which Maike knew nothing about because she had thought Sebastian was at a conference in Dortmund. Instead, he had been lying under an attic roof on an old sofa, resting on one elbow like a Roman at a feast, gesticulating with his free hand. This Dabeling fellow, he said, was someone who had enough ambition in him to liquefy reinforced concrete. Apart from working crazy hours, he followed a training regime on his bike that took him to the peak of the Schauinsland in the early mornings or the late evenings, depending on his shift. He shaved his arms and legs in order to cut down his wind resistance, and when you shook his hand, you felt like you were touching a zombie. Sebastian had no idea why Maike had made friends with such a ghastly person, of all people in the cycling club, and how she could bear to see him two evenings a week. At this point, Oskar's amused voice interrupted him: two evenings a week? In tight-fitting cycling outfits? With red faces and sweaty hair? Sebastian had not known how to reply.

Now he stood up and walked round the table to pour wine.

'Maike doesn't like talking about Dabeling's involvement in the scandal,' he says. His jokey tone falls flat, as if he has played a note on a badly tuned instrument. He almost crashes into his wife as she stands up, still chewing, to collect the salad plates. The muscles beneath her temples are tensing visibly.

'That's not funny,' she says. 'Ralph is Schlüter's favourite anaesthetist. They get along well in operations and at conferences. Now everyone thinks that Ralph knows something about the suspicious contacts with the pharmaceutical firms. And that if he talks, the entire hospital will collapse.'

'I see.' Oskar's eyebrows are raised in sympathy. 'Has the poor fellow been threatened by anyone?'

'Yes indeed, he has,' Maike says. 'When you try, you can even be quite sensitive.'

She carries the pile of plates to the door, and all is silent until she tells them that they can have a cigarette before the next course. As soon as she leaves, Liam runs into the next room, where there is a plate of biscuits on top of the television. Sebastian

watches him through the half-open door, while Oskar sits with his head thrown back, blowing smoke sculptures into the air. For a few minutes, the silence is tender and good.

‘What I said before I meant seriously, *cher ami*,’ Oskar says then. ‘Our colleagues are laughing about your scientific endeavours. If public attention is so important to you . . .’

Sebastian makes an angry gesture with his hand and Liam, who has come back with crumbs on his lips, thinks it is meant for him. He pushes his way onto Oskar’s lap with a cheeky grin.

‘Aren’t you getting too old for this now?’

‘Not me,’ Liam says. ‘You may be.’

‘Do you know,’ Oskar says to Liam, ‘that every time you sneak a biscuit, another world opens up, in which you haven’t stolen one?’

‘Parallel universes.’ Liam nods. ‘When Mum asks if I’ve had a biscuit, I always say yes and no. But that doesn’t work with her.’

Oskar starts laughing, and has to wipe his eyes with the backs of his hands. ‘How right you are!’ he says. ‘If you’ll let me, I’m going to quote you tomorrow evening.’

‘Tomorrow evening?’ Sebastian asks.

‘What are you doing over the weekend?’

Sebastian gets up to fetch him an ashtray.

‘He’s bringing me to Scout camp on Sunday,’ Liam says.

‘And after that,’ Sebastian says, crashing the ashtray down on the table, ‘I’m barricading myself in my study and turning our understanding of the world upside down.’

‘What’s the work of genius going to be called?’

‘“A Long Exposure”, or “On the Nature of Time”.’

‘That suits you.’ Oskar suppresses another fit of laughter. ‘And what’s Maïke doing?’

‘Three weeks’ cycling in Airolo. So, what’s going on tomorrow night?’

Oskar waves his hand mysteriously.

‘In Airolo?’ he repeats. ‘Alone?’

Maike has come back in unnoticed, and is placing a bowl of tortellini on the table. Sebastian raises a palm and she gives him a high five, glancing sideways at Oskar at the same time. Unhappy that he is no longer the centre of attention, Liam kicks his legs impatiently and slides off Oskar's lap. Oskar stands up and, ignoring the ashtray, walks over the window, watching as his cigarette butt falls into the canal and is carried away by the current. Bonnie and Clyde are nowhere to be seen.

'While we're on the subject of holidays, perhaps you need a break too.' Maike helps Liam light the candles – the flames are almost invisible in the evening light. 'You don't as look well as you normally do.'

Oskar strolls back to the table, hands in his pockets. 'Insomnia,' he says.

'I'll pull out the bed in the study for you. It's quiet there.'

'The doctor has given me something.' Oskar taps his chest on the left-hand side, as if he is wearing a jacket with inside pockets.

'Me too!' Liam shouts, running out of the room before anyone can stop him. A door slams, and a drawer in the bathroom is pulled open. When Liam returns, he is carrying a little plastic case in his palm.

'Motion sickness,' Maike says. 'He gets as sick as a dog on longer journeys.'

'One for the way there, and one for the way back.' Liam says proudly.

Oskar looks at the tablets seriously. 'They look exactly like mine. Conditions like ours are the price to pay for extraordinary genius.'

'Really?' Liam's eyes grow round, and points of light shine in his pupils.

'Enough of that,' Sebastian interrupts.

Oskar has sat down and eaten a piece of tortellini. He holds his fork up in the air like a pointer.

'*Mes enfants*,' he says. 'There are areas of thought that we do not tread unpunished. Headaches and a bad character are the least we have to pay. I know what I'm talking about, Liam.' When he stretches his hand out, Liam lays his in it quickly. 'Your parents are lovely. But a bit too normal to know what real genius means.'

'Don't talk nonsense to him,' Maike says heatedly.

'Tell me,' Oskar says, chewing thoughtfully on his pasta, 'is there some rucola in this too?'

In the twilight, the twittering of the titmice is growing louder. They have a lot to talk about. A cloud of midges dances around an as yet unlit streetlamp, clearly drawn to it by the memory of light. The two swifts circling jaggedly around it in predatory fashion are happy to share that memory.

Inside, the late evening has painted the walls red. Spoons are clinking on the dessert plates, and the wine in the glasses looks almost black. Liam is not allowed to talk any longer, and his jutting lower lip gets in the way of eating his pudding. Maike is resting her chin on her hand, and turns the spoon this way and that as she licks chocolate mousse off it.

Quiet moments are as much part of the Friday gatherings as confrontations, diplomacy and barely averted war. In the reflective moments, it is mostly Maike who speaks. She enjoys talking about cycling, about the relentless heat on steep inclines with no shade, and the cool embrace of the wind going downhill. About the quick changes in temperature in the layers of air and about what freedom means – to get to a speed at which one can escape oneself. She says every time that speed preserves youth, and not only because physicists think that time passes more slowly for bodies in motion.

While Maike is speaking, Sebastian is gazing at her intently. It is only when she laughs that he darts a quick glance at Oskar, as if there is something to share. He absorbs little of what she is saying. He is thinking about how much he loves Maike, yet how happy he is that he will have some time alone from the day after tomorrow. The thought of the three weeks ahead, which he will be spending at his desk in isolation, fills him with a shudder of anticipation. On the first day he is on his own, he will fill the Volvo to the brim with shopping, and then not leave the house at all after that. He will pull out the telephone cord, turn the television to the wall and leave Oskar's folding bed down in the study. He will lock the doors to the other rooms and thereby erase them from the map of his daily habits. It will be quiet. He will be entirely undisturbed for a few weeks – the greatest luxury that Sebastian can think of. While thinking about space and time, images will form in his mind, not unlike the abstract brush strokes of Maike's paintings, which Sebastian has often thought do

pretty much the same thing in a naïve fashion – trying to get closer to the true physical nature of things with the help of shapes and colours. For three whole weeks, Sebastian will relish the growth of the chain of letters across the screen, filling page after page until finally coming to the sentence that he has long kept ready for this purpose, the sentence that will form the crowning conclusion: ‘And thus everything has been said.’

Sebastian’s head sinks a bit lower, and his supporting hand pushes the flesh of his cheek upwards. Oskar glances at him from across the table, humming in agreement now and then to keep Maike talking. As he does this, he smiles at Sebastian, who has lost the thread of conversation for good now, and is secretly occupied with a question of physics. Once, Oskar would have been able to guess what his friend was thinking about by reading the play of his eyebrows and the silent movement of his lips, but this was no longer the case. He sits beside Sebastian’s thoughts as if by a river which he can neither see nor hear, but which he knows is flowing constantly. Despite this, Oskar still enjoys the presence of this river of thought. It means a great deal to him. Ever since his teenage years, he has felt as if he has stumbled into the wrong century and is living the wrong life, that he ought to be somewhere else, and in some other time, engaging in discussions with people like Einstein and Bohr. Before the great European wars, there had been not only the necessary intellectual capacity but also the will to think things through to the end. Oskar thinks with longing of what it would have been like to have been born in 1880. He can reconcile himself to very little in the world today, a world in which stupidity, hysteria and hypocrisy reign, which has turned life into a carousel, rumbling along to music and spinning everything important away from the centre, rendering it secondary. Sebastian’s presence is a consolation, but when he thinks about his friend, he grows impatient again. Sebastian is a renegade, a defector who is trying to find another intellectual breakthrough one hundred years after Einstein and Bohr. Every new departure from the path of theoretical physics is a departure from their being together. If there is something that Oskar will never give up, it is the desire to get Sebastian back.

When Oskar realised that Maike’s stream of talk had petered out and that Sebastian was doing nothing about it, sitting silently instead tracing lines on the

tablecloth with the handle of a spoon, he broke the sudden silence by telling a vague anecdote about a young research assistant. This assistant had got it into his head that he would follow Heisenberg's example and have a brainwave while going for a walk on an island. He had spent his entire salary on a trip to Sylt, where he walked endlessly up and down dykes spotted with sheep until he found out one day that the uncertainty principle had come to Heisenberg not on the island of Sylt, but on Helgoland. Oskar didn't know how to continue from there. The story wasn't even true – it had merely worked well once in another situation.

[single-line section break]

It is almost dark now. The streetlamps beneath have missed being pressed into service, and will now stay unlit through the night. The mountains have sent a tawny owl as their night-time spy – it is sitting somewhere in the branches of the chestnut tree, calling sorrowfully as if through cupped hands. Cutlery lies criss-cross on the plates. Liam's head is nodding slowly to the beat of his drowsiness. With his legs crossed and his arms folded across him, Oskar looks like he is posing for a black and white photograph. Before the scene can freeze into a tableau, he stretches his back and draws breath into his lungs. It's clear that he is going to make an announcement. He runs his hand through his perfect hair and taps another filter out of the packet.

‘We would probably have met at the daybreak in some forest clearing before,’ he says to Sebastian.

Liam's head jerks up, curiosity stealing over his sleepy face, but Sebastian finds his way out of his thoughts only with some difficulty. He gradually realises that the darkness in the room is not a matter of his confused perception, then he leans back on his chair, tilts it backwards, and switches the ceiling light on. Maike suppresses a yawn and begins collecting cutlery half-heartedly, putting it on a half-finished plate.

‘Nowadays,’ Oskar says, looking at his unlit cigarette from all angles, ‘there are microphones and TV cameras on forest clearings like that.’

‘You're talking in riddles,’ Maike says, yawning and ending her sentence with her mouth stretched wide.

Oskar puts the cigarette down on the table without lighting it, folds his napkin, and continues speaking to Sebastian.

‘TV,’ he says. ‘The media. You like that after all, *n'est-ce pas?*’

There is something frightening in his voice that finally wipes the dreaminess of Sebastian's face.

'What are you thinking of?'

'ZDF started a new science show some time ago – *Circumpolar*,' Oskar says, standing up. 'I've agreed that both of us will go on it. We're going to Mainz tomorrow evening.' He is by the door now, raising a finger. 'At 23.00 exactly. It's live.'

Liam's excited scream gives Oskar the opportunity to leave the room. The boy runs excitedly round the table and grabs Sebastian by the shirt. At the same time, Maike has run to the open window and is shooing a fluttering something back into the darkness.

'That was a tawny owl!' she shouts. 'Did you see that? Unbelievable!'

'Daddy,' screams Liam, 'are you going to be on TV?'

'It feels more like I'm going to war.'

The bathroom door slams shut. Sebastian tries to catch Maike's eye but she is still hanging half out of the window, looking down at the unbelievable owl. The last thing Sebastian feels like doing is laughing, but then his stomach begins to twitch and a laugh rises up in him like bubbles of air, and shakes Liam's small body, which is leaning on his. When Sebastian hears the sound of his own laughter, he realises that the die has been cast. Oskar has reckoned with Sebastian's pride, and has engineered everything so that it is impossible to refuse the challenge.

'You scoundrel!' he shouts down the hall.

Why this ridiculous word has occurred to him, he cannot say.

There are three empty wine bottles left on the table. The window is closed and moths are flinging themselves against the glass. The grown-ups have moved to the living room. Two rooms down, Liam is practising insomnia. Low music weaves through the smoke curling up to the ceiling. Sebastian is sitting on the sofa, cradling an amber splash of whisky in a tumbler, relishing the burning sensation in his stomach, not

knowing if it is due to the whisky or to happiness. Oskar and Maike are dancing, limbs heavy from the wine and from fatigue. Her eyes are closed and her cheek is on his shoulder. Sebastian looks on, feeling himself sink into the upholstery. His free hand scrabbles in the sofa cushions, searching for a lever to pull to stop this moment in time from disappearing. It is the last evening of happiness in this flat, and it is a mercy – for Sebastian more than for the others – that humankind is not able to see into the future.

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