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Suddenly it all made sense, and he opened his eyes.

A herd of red deer stands motionless in a clearing in the wildlife reserve. Some of the deer now rouse themselves and start grazing, while others stay standing in the snow, as if hypnotised, their heads raised. It is as though they are listening to something in the air somewhere nearby, fifty metres away at most. From time to time their flanks shiver and a sudden tremor passes over their fur.

They were definitely not just in his imagination. When he concentrated he could see their breath, and the way its warmth was absorbed by the cold air and transformed into something else.

Just lying there in Lainz Hospital looking out of a window at the park, where the first snow was falling, the feeling crept over him that his body was measuring the time he had left. If he focused his attention on himself, he plunged into his own flesh and blood. With a groan he flung himself back onto the pillows that supported his back, neck and head, and laid his speckled hands, crooked with arthritis, on the blanket. Reluctantly he closed his eyes.

*It is like a journey through skin, fat, muscles, nerves and bones right into the cells and molecules. Then on to the atoms, where enormous spaces unfurl and pulses measure his time like atomic clocks, continuing ever deeper until he reaches a kind of space-time lather where everything happens simultaneously. He strains to look more closely. But his consciousness changes things by perceiving them, so he doesn't know whether they are simply there, or whether he himself has brought them into being.*

*The chaos at the heart of things makes him afraid. His hands twitch on the sheet, as if from an electric current, and his head twists as if trying to free itself from a noose. Sweat appears on his forehead: secretions smelling of the medicines he has had to take since being stranded here. But in the pulsating darkness behind his closed eyes does he actually see all the way to the heart of things? This carnival of forces, an anarchic dance of waves that come and go, seemingly out of nothingness, without obeying any known rules. An underworld full of ghosts and spirits that defies human understanding.*

*He cannot even say what happens first here, and what comes next. Time itself seems to lack any direction in this strange place.*

“Everything is disintegrating” he groaned, several times, and rolled over onto his side. He wanted to open his eyes to get back to the dimension of large objects, but his eyelids were stuck closed as if he were in a dream. His consciousness was in freefall, there was a roaring in his head and his pulse was racing.

With the power of desperation he focused his thoughts again to try and finally comprehend the mysteries of his body. Surely there must be a way, he pondered, right at the heart of the world where the forces of chaos separate. A way out that finally leads into the open, to that place where everything is logically, or even divinely, connected to everything else.

He felt someone grip his shoulder, tried to jerk himself away and nearly fell out of bed. A firm hand held him back. When he opened his eyes, the clearing in the park was suddenly empty. As empty as a white hole in the landscape. The red deer were nowhere to be seen now. The thickly falling snow had stealthily covered up all traces. Had he simply dreamt it all?

“Professor Schrödinger!”

He knew that voice, didn't he? He couldn't help turning his head towards it. When he saw the worried face of Sister Helene close above his own, he exhaled. She dabbed sweat from his brow with a cloth. Then she arranged a small handful of tablets into a smiley face on a tray and placed it on his chest.

For several days and nights now she had accompanied him down the endless corridors of the hospital, from one department to the next, where his brain, heart and lungs were examined, he increasingly suspected, for signs of his impending death. They had both come to enjoy sharing a mostly innocent joke or two, silly as they might be. After all, how else was one supposed to defy the course of events here? The path of his illness, which more often than not just took him back to the same place he had been minutes ago (or hours ago, he didn't know) in his thoughts (or in his dreams?). Where someone, possibly he himself, disintegrated into his smallest particles, to be transformed once again by the forces of nature.

When he breathed and the tablet-face rose and fell on his chest it looked as if it were smiling at his worries. When he tried to return the smile he was seized by another of these troublesome coughing fits. He wheezed, coughed and jerked until the tablets flew up and scattered in all directions. Sister Helene collected up the ones she could find.

“You know, don’t you,” he said, his face flushed and his voice wheezing, “how easily patients fall in love with their nurses?”

“You’d better not talk like that once your wife gets here!” She pointedly placed a glass of water on the metal bedside cabinet.

That too was just a game, a way of passing the time in the sterile environment of the hospital. All his life he had been fond of women and now, as his time drew to an end, he regretted that as little as he regretted his passions for physics, philosophy, art and literature. He was convinced, in fact, that it was all connected in some way. The one simply would not have been possible without the other in his case. And whether whatever awaited him now would actually be the end was a secret still guarded by the stars.

“My wife will like you just as much as I do”, he said. Anny was making a slow recovery from an asthma attack that had nearly killed her. When he pondered, once again, why their marriage was as it was, a to-ing and fro-ing and coming and going all through the years, he couldn’t fathom it. Both of them had taken liberties where faithfulness was concerned, and the question of who had started it had paled into insignificance over time – though, when he thought back to his youth, it was himself he suspected. But who had invited death along? That leveller that was here creeping around the building in search of his room. “Because of all the trouble you go to for an old fool like me”, he said to the nurse, sinking back into his memories.

“You are a famous man”, she said. “You would be well looked after anywhere.”

“There hasn’t been much sign of that in this country for a long time”, he said. “What do you think about physics, Sister?”

She often didn’t know where she stood with him. Looking into his eyes, which were very lively behind the twinkling glasses despite his condition, she saw that it was apparently meant as a serious question. “Most of all, what physics means for me”, she said after a pause, “is that I feel the weight of my tired body when I have to get up in the night and see to you.”

“Will you sit down with me?” He shifted a bit to the side and smoothed the sheet over the mattress.

“But I’ve got things to do”, she said, sitting down on the bed next to him. Wasn’t it her job to listen to patients when they felt the need to talk to someone? There may not be a section for this in the logbook, but that needn’t stop her occasionally spending time with patients other than for matters of

hygiene or administering medication. She risked a discreet look at the modern apparatus, wholly unaware that this handy bit of equipment wouldn't even exist were it not for this man's equation. The machine went on flashing away quietly to itself.

"But you've heard of Einstein haven't you?"

"You mean the guy who wore shoes without socks?"

"That was probably some kind of side effect, Sister. A quirk that helped him get a better sense of himself and his calling. That way he was in no danger of forgetting that, despite his fame, he was still an outsider."

"Did he stick his tongue out at you too?" She laughed out loud at the thought that a man – a world-famous scientist at that – could be so childish.

"We were friends", he said, fixing his gaze on a fir tree in the park to help him remember. It would soon be Christmas again, a time he still didn't like even after all these years. The tree was weighed down with the fresh snow, its branches sagging ever lower. "We wanted to understand how everything is connected, the smallest and the largest, the heaviest and the lightest, the fastest and the slowest, the strongest and the weakest, the closest and the furthest, and express it in a single theory."

"That's over my head, Professor." She reached for his forehead and felt his temperature. "But isn't everything connected anyway if God created it? You should sleep until I come back with the tablets."

He didn't like that practised sympathy in her look. He liked her better when she joked with him and was frivolous. "Do you believe in God?" What a question, he thought, just as he was asking it. The clearing over in the park was still empty, the deer had disappeared. She took his hand the way his wife used to during the hours she spent by his sickbed before her asthma nearly got the better of her. In spite of what their critics said, they had had a shared life, of that he had no doubt, even though both of them, as if on different wavelengths, had still lived each for him or herself.

Why was he thinking about his life as if it were already over? He repeated his question to the nurse, who was now staring at the clearing in the park opposite as if that would give her some clue as to whether she believed in a god.

"Isn't it more important", she asked, "whether God believes in me? Here, where children sometimes die and bad guys are saved, things are surely different than in a church or a laboratory. As someone who has been involved in science his whole life, do you think I believe in God?"

He closed his eyes and sighed. His heart was beating so loudly he could hardly hear himself speak, and every beat, so halting it seemed it might soon stop altogether, gave him a stabbing pain that pierced right through him. He thought of Alpbach, the place in the Tyrolean mountains where he had recently written a report about life and work and had, incidentally, managed to get rid of his tuberculosis (or was it the other way round?), which had flared up again after forty years. In the mountains he was almost always happy, whether he was working, skiing, walking or ill. As if there he were utterly unburdened of the gravity that accumulated over the course of a lifetime.

He seemed to have forgotten what she had asked him, so the nurse stood up and placed his hand back on the sheet. "Try to get some sleep. I'll come by again soon." She straightened her white coat, smoothed it flat over her behind, hips and thighs with both hands, and picked up the tray with the leftovers from the table. "You should eat more", she said, "sleep *and* eat, if you want to get your strength back."

He attempted to lend his voice the steadiness he had been searching for in vain ever since he ended up here. "But wait, sister! It's all just words, really, in my view."

She paused, one hand on the door, turned back around on her heel, looked at him questioningly and said: "Words?"

"Words, terms, metaphors, numbers, formulae. Models of something, I think, that we may never be quite able to identify, because we are not just observers but are also always players in the universal game. And that is neither good nor bad, it's just the way things are."

"Did your friend Einstein think that as well?"

"We wanted to know for certain back then", he said and smiled, turning his gaze outside just to make sure. "And I had the misfortune to disappoint him twice over. Once in a private matter and once in a work matter. But isn't that what happens in life, Sister, you betray the heroes of your youth? Be they Grillparzer, Einstein, your own father or God. A kind of murder that each of us commits, this patricide. Freud said it often enough. Have you read Freud, Helene?" There was suddenly something aggressive in his tone, as he continued to look out of the window. "Can you get hold of Freud's *The Interpretation of Dreams* for me? But as soon as you can, Helene, before it's too late! I've been having strange dreams since I ended up here!"

Was he being serious? She wasn't sure. They had certainly moved on now from the jokes they had been cracking up until then that put their roles in this bleak piece of reality into perspective.

“I’ll fetch the tablets now”, she said, “then you’ll sleep better and not dream such nonsense. There are still some tests to be done tomorrow.”

“The dream of reason produces monsters!” As he called out after her he couldn’t remember who had said that, neither did he know why he had called out.

With night came the dreams in waves. Again and again he would awake with a start from a dream (or were they memories?) in which he was suffocating, gasping for air, until his heart and breathing settled down again. Atman, he thought, breath, river of life that no longer carries me. Where would it deposit him, what shore might he wash up on? Or would he be pulled under, sink to the bottom in the vortex of time and disintegrate into nothing for ever? Something would happen, there was no doubt of that, and perhaps he would never find out what it was.

The snow covering the clearing glowed blue in the moonlight. The blue reminded him of a night in Duino when he almost plunged off the cliff into the breakers. He was so young at the time, over fifty years ago and – even though his liaison with Ella had failed and Boltzmann had died – he was full of hope, a thirst for knowledge, and life. But now he lay here helpless, sleepless or plagued by dreams, waiting for something (metamorphosis?), and found, instead of sleep, a mass of questions; but fear as well.

If only Anny were here! At least he still had her. What would she do and say? That he didn’t need to worry, especially about her! She would say that to comfort him because time was irreversible and could not be undone. Human time at any rate. She would sit by his bed, more beautiful after all these years than she had been before. Like a rare species that surpasses itself in its distress. She would hold his papery hand, which was getting ever lighter here, night after night, and he would know that everything was fine as it was. He could ask after Ruth, for example. As if he were enquiring, as so often, about the daughter they had not had together, but who existed all the same.

He concentrated on the flow of his breath in an attempt to relax and fall asleep. Before he slipped into the inky blackness something or other always bubbled up inside him and kept him awake – images, events, scenes, faces, thoughts, but also things he thought he had forgotten: the smell of Aunt Minnie as she lifted him up and pressed him to her chest, his friend Fränzel, who always invokes God, Lise and him when he went to receive his *Pour le Mérite*, his mother’s illness, impressions from the kaleidoscope of his life that sparkle like crystals in the light, Sheila against the green background of Irish hills in the rain, and suddenly there are even three daughters, two of whom he is losing touch with... stretches of countryside, towns, apartments where he had lived over the years, women’s faces

that he can no longer place, the self-absorbed smile of Lotte, his first love, which turns into Maya's mouth, which suddenly metamorphoses into her sex, where she is hiding a child... Einstein's disappointment with him, the summit of the Weisshorn in driving snow, but also Einstein's relief over his equation, the pull of the black hole of sleep, which is like death, to which he does not succumb because the war keeps him from it, that whistling of grenades that describes trajectories that never end where he is ... The campus in Princeton in spring, the atmosphere of mistrust at Nazi-infested Graz University, then the magnifying of a cell under the microscope, a picture that mutates into Vienna's first district as seen from the bell tower of the cathedral...

He opened his eyes and stared for a long time into the darkness of the hospital room. He was stalked by all kinds of impressions, but sleep kept passing him by. He thought of Hamlet, and managed a smile in the darkness. *To sleep; to sleep: perchance to dream...* But Hamlet was young and a firebrand! He, on the other hand, was an old man whose dramas were behind him and who deserved some peace at last.

He shuffled around in bed to keep the clearing in his sight. He definitely didn't want to miss the animals if they did turn up again.

For a long time he wondered whether he should ring for the nurse and ask her for stronger sleeping pills. If he woke her now in the middle of the night, just because he couldn't sleep, she may not be as friendly to him as she had been before.

He shoved the blanket away, pulled himself up using the strap dangling above his head, sat upright and, without looking, slid his feet into his slippers, which were exactly where they were supposed to be. Then he switched on the bedside lamp and started searching, methodically and painstakingly, the way he used to work in the laboratory. He divided the room into a grid and worked his way across the squares one at a time. By the time he had finished he had gathered up all the tablets that the nurse had overlooked earlier. Eleven of them. He separated out the ones for his lungs and his heart. That left tranquillisers, sleeping tablets and painkillers containing morphine. With those he got out of the drawer of the bedside table, he was back to eleven tablets.

He lay down in bed, made himself comfortable as best he could and washed the tablets down with a big sip of cold tea. Then he turned off the light and waited for sleep to overpower every memory that was keeping him awake; but also above all to overpower those dreams that transported him into the inside of his ailing body. He waited to travel to a land far beyond those daydreams and nightmares. To where there was no time and therefore no enduring pain.

He waited for his metamorphosis.

Time dissolved. And as it disappeared, so did the memories and images that had kept him from sleep. The faces of the women who had been a part of his life gradually faded. Only the figure of Maya, as he remembered her from Arosa, sensual, confident and embodying a mystery that he would only solve ten years later, remained in his mind's eye for a little while, until she too faded. Everything receded. Everything drew itself right back into itself until it disappeared. Until all that remained were things he could not visualise however hard he tried.

Instead he imagined the uncoupling of his bodily functions and the way connections damaged by age and illness were being driven ever wider apart. Was it possible that his mind would be recycled when the end came, in which case it would not be a genuine end at all? At any rate he could no longer feel his body or the pain that had long been bound to it.

He may not have been expecting a celestial blaze or a tunnel of light that would save him, but he certainly hadn't expected this abyss that now came rushing towards him.

*When everything comes to a standstill he is still there. He is floating in a room that seems to be inside another slightly larger room. He can't move or even feel. As he tries to get his bearings he discovers that he can at least move his eyes. Now, little by little, shapes emerge from the darkness surrounding him. It gets lighter, but it is still dim. He can't see exactly where he is and what is around him, but he gathers his impressions so as to arrange them into some kind of order. Once he has noted everything he can make out from his limited angle of vision, he closes his eyes to concentrate.*

*The silence in which he floats does not match any place in the system of coordinates that he lays out in his mind in order to position the things within it. Also it is not silence in the conventional sense, but rather the absence of sound. As if the small room were fitted inside the large room and the whole thing vacuum-packed. However, the model he builds in his head is missing the elements he could only guess at in the half-light. When he starts adding the missing components, a new room forms in his consciousness, and the more complete this room becomes, the better he understands where he is, and the greater his unease.*

*Suddenly he knows what place this is and what it's for. It's no wonder the things all seem familiar to him now, and not just that – the way those things are arranged and the reason for that arrangement as well.*

*He is himself part of an experiment that he designed twenty-five years ago. He did it in order to help Einstein, who was in dispute with colleagues who wanted to make chance a fixed parameter in physics. There is a fifty percent probability that radioactive material in this room will emit a quantum of radiation in the next hour that will be picked up by a detector which will then trigger a hammer that shatters a flask filled with poison gas that will kill him.*

*And anyone who even just looked into this room to check on him would, by the very fact of observation, trigger a quantum leap which would again result in him being killed by the exact same sequence of events.*

*His time is ticking in the atoms and he can't move to do anything about it! If he calls the nurse for help, she will kill him by opening the door to his room, that is if she comes at all after he possibly offended her; and if he can't manage to move his lips and call for help (or it simply doesn't come because she really is offended), his life will for a time hang by the thread of the probability of atomic decay.*

*Whatever happens, all possibilities and probabilities are ultimately stacked against him. He is still alive but is already as good as dead. Half dead and half alive. Someone has swapped him for the cat that had been part of his concept, and trapped him in his own experiment!*