

RANDOM HOUSE  BOOKS



Dark Matter

Juli Zeh

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Translated from the German
by Christine Lo

Harvill Secker
London

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Few people master the art
of fearing the right things.

contents

[Cover Page](#)

[Title Page](#)

[Copyright Page](#)

[Dedication](#)

[About the Author](#)

[Prologue](#)

[Chapter one in seven parts. Sebastian cuts curves. Maike cooks. Oskar comes to visit. Physics is for lovers.](#)

[Chapter two in seven parts: in which the first half of the crime happens. Man is everywhere surrounded by animals.](#)

[Chapter three in seven parts. High time for the murder. Everything goes to plan at first, and then it doesn't. Showing a person waiting is not without its dangers.](#)

[Chapter four in seven parts. Rita Skura has a cat. The human being is a hole in nothingness. After a delay the detective chief superintendent enters the scene.](#)

[Chapter five: in which the detective chief superintendent solves the case but the story does not end.](#)

Chapter six in seven parts. The detective chief superintendent crouches in the ferns. A witness who does not matter appears for the second time. Many a man travels to Geneva.

Chapter seven: in which the perpetrator is hunted down. In the end, it is conscience that decides. A bird soars into the air.

Epilogue

Also by Juli Zeh

Angels and Eagles

prologue

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

A detective 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 young police officer falls in love. In the end, everything seems different from what the detective thought, yet exactly the same. A man's ideas are his score, his life the twisted music.

It went, we think, something like this.

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

1

As you approach it from the south-west, at a height of about five hundred metres, Freiburg looks like a bright, worn patch in the folds of the Black Forest. It lies there as if it had fallen from the heavens one day, 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 Dreisam.

If Schauinsland were to ripple its slopes in a shrug of indifference, hundreds of people cycling, riding in cable cars or looking for butterflies 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, where people set out to entertain. Every day mountains and forests send a swarm of birds into the city 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 sweeps the brightness from the facades. A girl with pigtails is buying an ice cream on Leopoldring. Her parting is straight as an arrow.

A few beats of the wings, and here is Sophie-de-la-Roche-Strasse, so leafy and green that it seems to have its own microclimate. 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 planner who planted them by a century, and they have grown larger than he had envisaged. Their long-fingered branches brush the balconies, and their roots bulge beneath the pavement and dig their way under the walls of the canal which flows by the buildings' foundations. Bonnie and Clyde - one head of brown and one of green - paddle along against the current, quacking away, always turning at the same spot, and allowing themselves to be carried downstream. On their conveyer belt, they travel faster than the people walking on the canal path and look up at them, begging for bread.

Sophie-de-la-Roche-Strasse radiates such a feeling of well-being that an objective observer might think its residents are all at peace with the world. Because the canal makes the walls damp, the front doors are wide open, so that the walkways over the canal look like tongues hanging out of gaping jaws. Number 7 - in tasteful white stucco - is without doubt the most beautiful building in the street. Wisteria cascades down 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 back seat 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, bowing to each other, fluttering upwards occasionally to look into the flat. These winged observers watch Sebastian, Maike and Liam closely on the first Friday evening of every month.

Behind one of the windows, Sebastian is sitting cross-legged on the floor of his study, head bent over something. He is surrounded by scissors and bits of paper, as if he were 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 at 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 on edge, as he is on the first Friday evening of every month. As usual, he puts it down to having had a bad day. Little things can spoil 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 lunchtime. 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 gardeners 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. The tree of the year. A black apple tree. Love for home and hearth, for nature, for creation. Elderly 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 refrained 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 says 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 which will give you the answer without cutting and weighing. This could definitely have waited till Monday. Sebastian has brought it home 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 Maike tells Sebastian about the new dish she is trying out that evening, he wonders why Oskar's visits are so important to her. 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 with which Oskar invariably addresses her. Yet it was Maike herself who had

started the tradition of dinners with Oskar ten years ago, and she is the one who has insisted on it to this very day. Sebastian suspects that, consciously or unconsciously, she is trying to steer something in a controlled manner. Something that should play out before her very eyes, rather than 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.

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 are free.

Maike is standing at the kitchen worktop 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. Summer air is wafting in with the smell of hot tarmac, flowing water and a wind that is juggling with the swallows high in the heavens. In the golden evening light, Maike looks more than ever like the kind of woman a man would like to ride up to on horseback and carry off into the sunset. 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 where Maike works 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 almost has the fervour of religion about it. Surroundings furnished without care depress her and she is the sort of person who checks every glass against the light before placing it 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 climb the staircase of her vertebrae, 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 says.

'Yes,' Maike replies. '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 understand the intricacies of 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 were 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 read the digital display.

'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 bringing 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 each 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 mind, she was watering strangers' potted plants, laying their tables for dinner, and patting their children's 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 became 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 protect. She does so at every opportunity, and gladly, too.

'You two can talk in peace later,' she says, brushing a strand of hair off her brow 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 are made up 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 Asian woman with the Yoko Ono face who is distributing coffee and rolls. 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 Asian 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 to avoid the beaming smile of farewell that she is about to give him. If only it were just the similarity of their hands that connected him into her. If 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 Asian 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 formed, containing everything that exists, because it is impossible to be otherwise. 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. There is one exception. He is on his way to him now.

If Sebastian were to try to describe his friend Oskar, he would say that Oskar looks like the kind of person who could answer every question 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? Regardless of whether he is listening or speaking himself, Oskar's granite eyes stay fixed on you. Oskar is one of those people who have quicksilver in their veins. One of those people who always stand at a commanding vantage point. People like Oskar do not have silly nicknames. In his presence, women sit on their hands in order to stop themselves from reaching out to touch him involuntarily. When he was twenty people put him at thirty. After his thirtieth birthday, he seemed ageless. He is tall and slim, with a smooth forehead and narrow eyebrows that seem to be raised in permanent questioning. Although he shaves carefully, a dark shadow colours his slightly sunken cheeks. He always looks as though he has dressed with care, even when he is simply wearing a pair of black trousers and a jumper, as he is now. On his body, clothes can do nothing but fall in the right lines. For the most part, he holds himself with a mixture of apparent ease and inner tension that makes others 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 is indeed well known in certain circles, but not for acting. He is 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. 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 hides his eyes behind the dark glasses. The young man walks on down the aisle. A brown puddle of coffee spreads on the foldaway table.

Oskar's aesthetic sense is what often makes life intolerable for him. Many people cannot stand their fellow men, but few are able to explain precisely why. Oskar can forgive the fact that they 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 an offence against aesthetics. If he were ever to commit murder - certainly not something he has planned - it would probably be because his victim had made an importunate remark.

His schoolmates 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 whenever he was in earshot in the school grounds. When a girl raised her hand to answer a question in class, she would glance over at him to make sure he was listening. Even the maths teacher, an unkempt person whose neck hair stuck out over his shirt collar, turned to Oskar with a 'That's right, isn't it?' when he placed the chalk-breaking point after a row of figures on the board. Yet Oskar was the only one in his class who had left school after the *Abitur* exam without any practical experience of love for his fellow

man. He viewed this as a victory. 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. The fact that they noticed each other on the first day of the new term was down to their height. Their eyes met over the heads of the other students, and they seemed to be automatically drawn to sit next to each other in the lecture theatre. They sat in silence through the embarrassing welcome speech by the dean, then started chatting easily as they left the hall. Sebastian did not say anything even faintly naive in the following ten minutes, nor did he 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 turned on, like a lamp when the right switch is pressed.

Any attempt to describe the following months runs the risk of getting lost in exaggeration. From the moment Oskar started university in Freiburg, he had appeared in public dressed always in a morning suit - long coat 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 remained empty.

Everyone found that get-up odd, yet no one laughed at them, not even when they walked arm in arm on the bank of the Dreisam in the afternoons, stopping 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 - but not seamlessly - into the present. The ripple of the river punctuated their conversation and the trees above them waved in the wind. The late-summer sun was never more beautiful than when one of them pointed at it and said something about the solar neutrino problem.

In the evenings, they met in the library. Oskar strolled along the shelves, returning from time to time 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 the reading room. At parties, when Oskar and Sebastian glided through the crowds separately, Sebastian, with a heavy heart, sometimes kissed a girl. 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 street lamp 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 headlights of passing cars caused their shadow to rotate on its axis, the friends 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 and each disappeared into his half of the coming morning. On the first Friday of every month, Oskar allows himself to imagine for a few seconds that the Intercity Express is bringing him back to one of those farewells beneath the street lamps of Freiburg. 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. Clearly the Freiburg of the street lamps 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 where 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 learned about Sebastian's renown 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 a rolled-up copy of *Spiegel* magazine, which falls open at the right page. He doesn't need to read the article again - he practically knows it by heart. 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 rectangular 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 were 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 container. 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 surgery. 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.

"'Is the pharmaceutical industry behind the experiments on patients?'" the father reads. He shoves out his lips crudely as he drinks from his bottle of beer.

'Criminals, the lot 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 and almost stumbles when the train jerks into motion. Send all the stupid people to war, he thinks, as he leans against the wall next to the toilets. Let them burn to a crisp in some African desert or in an Asian jungle, it really doesn't matter. Another fifty years of peace and 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.

3

‘Summer in Freiburg is just wonderful.’

Oskar is standing by the open window behind 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 dangling 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, and though he dresses well – today in a white shirt and linen trousers – he always looks as if he has slightly outgrown his shirtsleeves and trouser legs. On him, growing older seems to be a mistake, and age has merely deepened his laugh lines.

He walks up to Oskar and places 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 calm way they stand so close together indicates habit.

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

At least 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. 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.'

'It's a declaration of 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 a matter of life and death. It's about a theory of physics.'

'Even a harmless theory like 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.'

The corner of Oskar's mouth twitches. He takes out a crumpled pack of cigarettes and waits until Sebastian, who doesn't smoke, has found some matches and given him a light.

'And if Copernicus had believed in the Many-Worlds Interpretation,' Oskar retorts, the cigarette between his lips jerking as he speaks, 'mankind would have been wiped out by idiocy.'

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 $E = hv$ 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 receive 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 forever 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 - whose very name, from Oskar's point of view, reveals that it is not a theory but a hobby horse. Sebastian is grazing in an empty field. The great physicists 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 preserving jar and a piece of wire despite his parents' objections. But in front of his less gifted colleagues, in front of his students, and, most of the time, to himself, he claims to be looking for a new approach to questions of time and space. An approach that would leave the Many-Worlds Interpretation behind. 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 has carved out. Even if he were to take it upon himself to join in Oskar's game, he would never be able to make up for the ten years he has lost. 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 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 another theory, 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 always wore 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. The feeling, however, was not mutual. Little Red Riding Hood 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 surrounded by a circle of listeners, reciting formulae like the verses of a libretto, ordering the universe with conductors' hands. Every now and then Oscar would turn his head to draw on one of his