

ANTON SOLIMAN

The great ski-lift

(Zerbi's space)



The Immersion Point

Although early afternoon it was almost dark. Oskar was cold; impossible to stay in that lifeless forecourt any longer. He was growing tired: after rising at dawn and driving a great distance for many hours. The journey had been strange and taken him across unknown territory. Highway 26 South ran westward towards the great plains and traced a full U-turn before the Sierra mountain chain, followed by a dirt road full of potholes along an unfamiliar and tortuous route.

The mountain range stretched endlessly alongside the highway yet he'd never been curious enough to see it up close. He only knew they were remote and deserted, part of a land that didn't belong to him. A fictional canvas where nothing would be familiar: no plans to carry out, no reference points. It was late; he had to find a hotel for spending the night. Going back at this point in a strange region was unwise.

The village lay down-valley from the cable car's forecourt. Only after navigating several twists and turns did the first houses emerge, stone constructions with smoking chimneys. A few lights were already on.

On the village outskirts, a figure unloaded hay for a stable from a filthy carriage. He was a squat old man, wearing a brown velvet jacket. The slow pained movements indicated fatigue.

- Sorry to bother you, - said Oskar leaning out of his window seat with an awkward look: - I wondered if there's a hotel nearby.

The old man gave him a calm steady look before slowly approaching the car.

- Further down, before the village ends, there's a fellow called Ignatius. You'll see a green door with a yellow lamp. I know he has some rooms.

- I understand thanks. A door with a yellow lamp, - repeated Oskar, enunciating clearly to show he'd understood the directions.

- That's right but look carefully as the lamp is often off. In fact, tonight it's definitely off.

Oskar drove at a snail's pace checking each door, looking at everything with manic care, like a cat entering a dark attic. He crossed a small square with a

brightly lit tavern, snatches of conversation wafted through the glazed windows. The sounds of locals inside playing cards.

At the village outskirts, he spotted the hotel easily: the building was bigger than the others and seemed almost alive. It was straight out of a children's book, as if carved from a large pumpkin; the lit windows resembled two open eyes, and the light filtering from the door akin to a wide-open mouth...

He left the car and knocked on the green door. A man shuffled forward to open: - Good evening, I need a room for the night and a bite to eat if possible. -

- Of course sir, please come in. Is your luggage in the car? Good, don't worry and make yourself comfortable, I'll send someone to take it. -

Oskar stepped inside as the man scuttled ahead switching on lights. The smell of soup hangs heavy in the air. The innkeeper welcomed him into the dining room: the stacked tables in the corner, revealed poor quality floor tiles. The fireplace was artificial and looked like it had probably never worked. The hotel was a newly built monstrosity.

The innkeeper excused himself to the kitchen, to check what meals were available. Oskar saw the dining room had been built over much older architecture. The original walls were ancient, and the wooden door could be from an oak tree cut down centuries earlier. The smell of stale soup grew stronger.

The dining room was cold, and Oskar started fidgeting left to sit there waiting. He felt frozen stiff, and above all pretty disappointed by the start of his holidays. After a few minutes, a female figure slipped out of the wooden door dividing the private rooms from the hotel.

He heard a voice call out to the slim figure.

The innkeeper returned with a satisfied air: - My dear man, you are a lucky man! Tonight we have a delicious soup, followed by cabbage stew, and a cheeseboard with our fancy cheeses.

- I don't mean to be rude, - said Oskar, clearing his voice, which echoed loudly in the empty room. - I'd love to eat but this place is freezing, I can feel the cold right in my bones...anywhere warmer to eat in?

The man looked embarrassed, - You're quite right. We've turned on a powerful heater in your room so you won't have any problems tonight, but regrettably, it is cold here.

The hotel hardly works during the winter apart from an occasional salesperson. You'll see, a hearty dinner will do you a world of good,- he concluded smiling.

Oskar appraised the dining room's state in detail and thought that all public places were mostly squalid in any case. There was nothing here to chime with his past or shine a light on the future. People needed to find traces of themselves in some form; would this hold true in future? As this kind of research makes no distinction between past and future. You can easily lose yourself in the future too.

Perhaps Oskar's spirituality had turned rusty because of this very opaqueness. What made him slip over the Wall that the original Self fled from? An event that could certainly be traced back to childhood. Everything important happens during childhood when everything is seen for what it is.

When a great Singularity is present and events run in a neat sequence, like scenery viewed from a train.

Oskar often thought of what had happened during those years. He was now convinced of having slipped into an extreme state of oversight. This could have happened on the street, maybe looking at a dog, or at the bakery, maybe the cinema. Perhaps one morning he'd woken at dawn and looked in the mirror with excessive intensity: *the speculative Self had gone too far and was now lost forever in the Symbolic space...*

- Sir, you're quite right. It's cold here and I doubt that an electric heater will warm the place up enough. Come and eat with us in the kitchen if you don't mind. - He had glimpsed the female figure in the half-light. A prim looking female with hair wrapped in two braids that divided her head exactly in two. A white shirt collar peeked out from a blue dress creating a reassuring look, pleasing Oskar in that moment.

= Thank you very much, Miss, that's a great idea. There's an unbearable cold, which has chilled me right to my bones!

The woman opened a door and motioned for him to pass through the narrow corridor leading to the kitchen. The large room had an old-fashioned stove in the centre covered in bubbling pots. The innkeeper, with presumably his wife, and a silent old woman were seated at the table. The room was pleasantly hot. This was definitely the original older part of the inn.

- Please, pull up a seat, - said the innkeeper with a broad smile, - My daughter is quite right, the dining room is far too cold. You know, I would have invited you to eat myself but I was worried it was not appropriate.

Oskar sat down at the head of the table while the woman served him hot soup.

- Do many people pass through here, Mr...? - he said, glancing up at the wooden ceiling.

- My name is Ignazio, this is my wife Margherita, our daughter Clara, while this old trooper is my mother.

Everyone smiled; Clara poured him some beer and sat down alongside him with a happy look.

Oskar started eating with gusto and immediately felt almost euphoric, a strong reviving glow from inside.

He was in the best seat and the people around him had an expectant air, seemingly eager to listen. This seemed a favourable moment for talking about himself in a new place. A good chance to play up the best version of himself. Self-idealized and aggrandizing images played in his memory.

- How did you end up in this godforsaken village in the mountains? Are you here by chance? - asked the innkeeper's wife.

-Not quite, I'm here on holiday. Valle Chiara was recommended to me by a mountain-loving friend - an imperceptible pause before he added, - Although I was expecting something different.

- What do you mean, sir? - asked the young woman.

- We're on first name terms, please. My name is Oskar, - he took a sip of beer, - Well, I was expecting somewhere unusual because my friend doesn't like conventional places. For example, he would love this kitchen. Yet, when I arrived in town and saw the ski station forecourt, I must admit to being disappointed. The landscape is depressing; it doesn't look like a place for having much fun. I don't mean to be rude but Valle Chiara seems pretty desolate.

The present company nodded vigorously, an encouragement to continue being honest: - I mean, how can you expect that muddy forecourt to even connect up to the Great Ski Lift? It rains and there's no snow. Doesn't look like the situation changes much higher up anyway. What do you think? You're the locals and know far more.

The innkeeper looked uncomfortable: - You're perfectly right -he spluttered, - Valle Chiara is not somewhere quite ready for tourists yet. But believe me; it's slightly more complicated than that.

He glanced at his wife for a moment, who flashed an angry look back, and spoke, - I'm no expert, but the previous Mayor came up with an ambitious

project for this valley.

- I'm guessing this plan was later abandoned, - remarked Oskar ironically.

Clara looked at him smiling; she seemed interested in this topic. Meanwhile, the soup was finished, and the next course served.

The innkeeper reflected on the question, and after sipping his beer, decided to provide further details, - In fact, the previous Mayor was very prepared, he grew up in California with an uncle who'd moved there. Seems he studied for several years at some prestigious university. Then he returned to the village saying he would stay and help, even becoming Mayor soon after.

- What did he do over that time? - asked Oskar.

- The only thing he finished is that cable car you saw this afternoon. Well, some of us thought this initiative would be a massive boost to tourism, and many made investments. I myself, used my savings to expand the hotel, which was actually only still open for some lost salespeople and hunters during the season. -

- So, what's your verdict on the project? Seem the situation hasn't really changed much.

- Exactly, as I was saying, the Mayor ordered the ski station built and then promptly disappeared from the scene and Valle Chiara. I'm talking about a few weeks back. More to the point, he left the moment they finished testing. I remember him looking exhausted after all the organizing. Before leaving he expressed satisfaction and said that his work was over.

Oskar then turned to Clara, - how do you feel about what this strange Mayor did?

- It's hard to say, especially in just a few words. I respected him a lot initially; the man was very experienced and spent whole nights reading books. When he first arrived, I was studying in the city, but in Valle Chiara everyone knew who he was. He worked all day long and towards the evening you could spot him walking alone in the woods. Always at the same time.

Oskar now felt hot and removed his jacket. For a moment, he remembered the first, horrible impact with the hotel's frosty welcome. Although the disjointed conversation in the kitchen felt odd, for the first time since his arrival, he felt the warm glow of a festive atmosphere.

- Let me try to understand a bit better, - he said in a resolved yet relaxed tone, - So Valle Chiara has always been an isolated place. A few years back,

a man educated in California and full of ideas returned here. This man, perhaps as a tribute to his former villagers, decided to build something that would boost tourism. First, he considered a cable car to attract skiers during the winter season. He drafted a project and when this was complete, he left the village. Am I right so far?

- Well, I think it's a little bit more complicated, - replied the innkeeper, - At first I also thought events unfolded in this way

Clara shook her head. - I think the Mayor's project was interpreted badly.-

- Do you mean he didn't want to develop tourism? So what's the point of the cable car? - asked Oskar.

- I don't know exactly, but the Mayor never mentioned tourism, he talked about one *connection*, - replied Clara, her words halting and unsure, - All I can say is, apart from the village gossip, is that the Mayor was interested in connecting Valle Chiara to something. Once I heard him talk about an *Experimental Connection*. That's why he designed the ski station and worried over everything working properly...

- So the cable cars are still in use - exclaimed Oskar, - Maybe there's a company running it?

- Of course! The ski plant is fully functional and anyone can use it. If you want, tomorrow morning I'll take you to the manager, he knows all there is to know about the cable car.

Only Oskar and Clara remained in the kitchen hall, the others had gone to bed. The woman cleared the kitchen while he started smoking a cigar offered to him by Ignazio. Clara mopped the entire kitchen in an instant. This was her last chore for the day.

- We have a habit here of clearing everything away before sleeping. My parents are up early and the smell of yesterday's food can be unpleasant for guests, even though it's just you for now.

The damp left by the cloth evaporated almost instantly and the kitchen returned to sparkling clean. Just like in a cartoon he'd watched when little...

- Sorry if I ask you a personal question, but I couldn't help noticing you have a real clear understanding of things. Where did you study? asked Oskar.

- In town. I returned to Valle Chiara last year, after the Academy but I don't want to talk about me, - She said passing a hand across her forehead. Then, her tone changed and she asked, - Did a friend recommend this place to

you? You said the one telling you about the Great Ski Lift was a mountaineering fan.

- Yes, that's right. He's a bit of a character and not really into trendy places, instead always looking for *worlds not yet discovered*. I'm a bit sceptical that we can still find undiscovered places, - breathing deeply, he added, - This time, I trusted him but after seeing the state of the cable car, I'm not so sure.

- What did you expect?

- I expected somewhere more colourful. I don't mean to denigrate your village, but you must admit the area is not exactly suitable for Alpine skiing. To be blunt, I expected little wooden chalets, an illuminated modern forecourt covered in snow, a festive atmosphere and snowy mountain tops on the horizon.

- What you say is true in terms of first impressions. Even though I was born in this valley, I admit there's nothing beautiful here. In fact, Valle Chiara is not an alpine village and I felt the same as you until meeting the Mayor. He had thoroughly researched the situation and thought that a sort of *Wall* hid the real landscape. That's why he wanted the cable car line, to cross a frozen expanse and reach the plateau. Don't ask me where these plateaus supposedly are, because I've never gone that high.

- Do you mean you don't know the area where you were born?

- I know the village well and go for walks up to the first clearing in the woods. It's not just a question of my being lazy because my limited knowledge of the area is more or less representative of everyone living here. -

- Do you mean that people here don't travel? I find such disinterest difficult to understand-

- Of course people travel! Some villagers know everything about the surrounding area. Many move further out for work, for example, shepherds or woodcutters. However, their geographical knowledge is of no interest to you. You are a city boy looking for enchanted landscapes, that somehow mesh with the fairy tales you listened to when little. Townies always imagine some romanticized idyll that a working shepherd would never dream of. - Oskar poured more of the beer that Clara had left on the table.

- I understand. This sounds like the -Recognition- debate, a big problem, I've heard of it. You know, I'm an engineer and for some time I was interested in computer models. I've also read a few books on Artificial

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