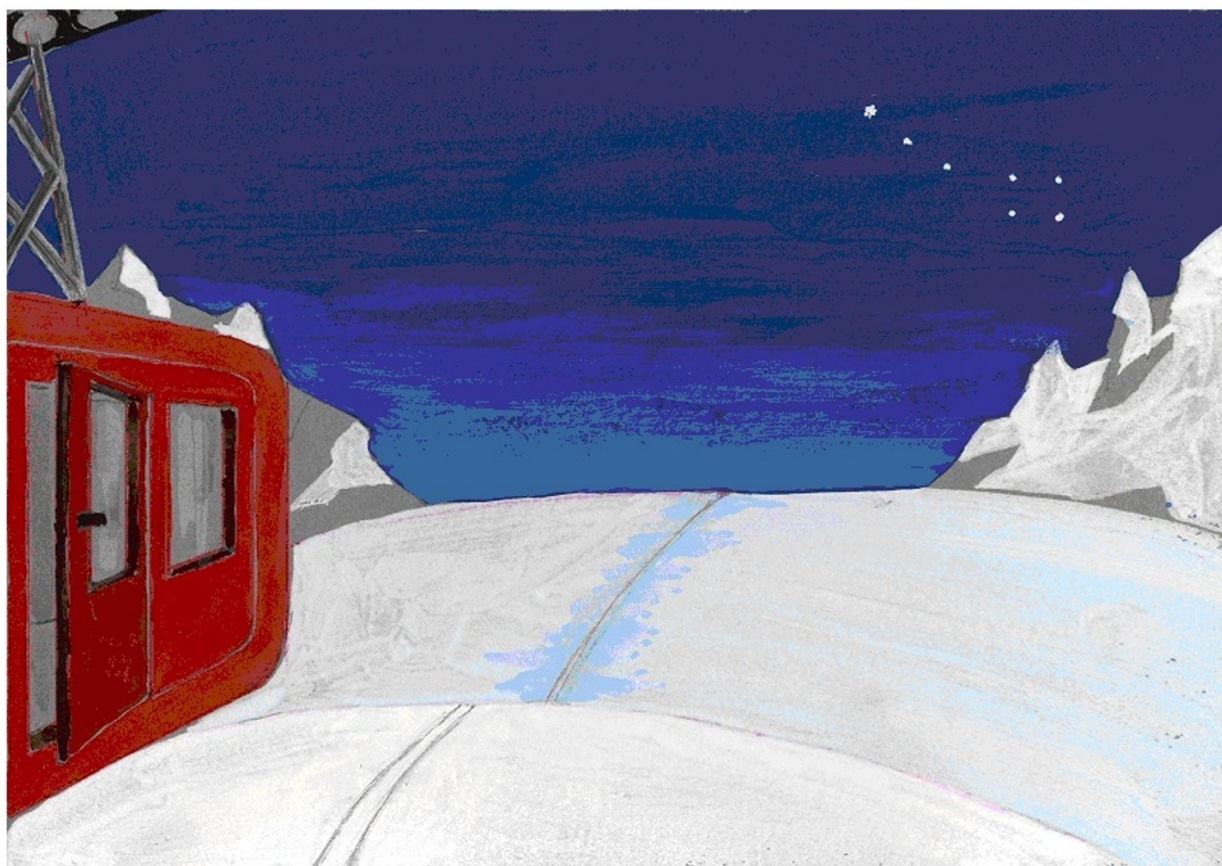


ANTON SOLIMAN

THE GREAT SKI-LIFT

(ZERBI'S SPACE)



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The Great Ski-Lift

«Tektime S.r.l.s.»

Soliman A.

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THE GREAT SKI LIFT

(Zerbi's Space)

Translated by: Carlo Pratt

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We all begin by building a centre to live our lives in accordance with the rules of Tradition. Yet on achieving consciousness, we realize with dismay that itâ##s a prison to escape from without harming anyone. To this dilemma a solution exists: reach the top and find the Great Ski-Lift. In the immense, the key to everything can be found...

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 heâ##d never been curious enough to see it up close. He only knew they were remote and deserted, part of a land that didnâ##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 carâ##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 thereâ##s a hotel nearby.

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

- Further down, before the village ends, thereâ##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 heâ##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, donâ##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.

- Weâ##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? Youâ##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; itâ##s slightly more complicated than that.

He glanced at his wife for a moment, who flashed an angry look back, and spoke, - Iâ##m no expert, but the previous Mayor came up with an ambitious project for this valley.

- Iâ##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 whoâ##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, whatâ##s your verdict on the project? Seem the situation hasnâ##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 itâ##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 Intelligence, he said breathlessly, -but at this point, I don't want to get too technical, and Iâ##m no means an expert in this regard.

He passed a nervous hand through his hair as if upset by an unpleasant memory. Why did he start talking about Artificial intelligence? He had gone off on a wild tangent, best return to the original topic: - Sorry for going off on one; let's get back to the cable car. So it was built to cross over a wall? It all sounds a bit mysterious.

- They tell me the cable car crosses the tower and reaches a pasture up high. Thatâ##s all I know- she now seemed irritated: - I told you, I never reached the plateau!

- And the snow starts after these pastures? Therefore, anyone skiing has to go all the way up and then descend to the forecourt using one of the slopes. I get the impression that we're in the wrong season...Or maybe the snow is late this year?

- No, we're in full winter and it's cold for us too. It rarely snows down here in the valley to be fair; all we often get is this whitish sludge. In the winter, it is usually cloudy, and we usually get sleet. It sometimes snows at night but not for long, within two or three days everything melts.

- So this cable car should be used in summer to go on hikes! â## chuckled Oskar.

- No, you're wrong. The Mayor built it to connect to the Great Ski Lift, the plant manager knows the details. I'll introduce you tomorrow morning.

The two changed the subject and chatted a few minutes more; Oskar was then led to a wing of the old building with a room that was nice and warm.

It was an old room, partially used as storage: inside were furniture and family items. Clara said this was the room of memories and that Oskar would not feel cold here. A bit like what happened in the kitchen.

In Valle Chiara

Oskar woke with a jolt. He barely remembered the previous day's events. How did he get to this unfamiliar room? From the window, a faint whitish luminescence betrayed the winter light. He looked at the watch and discovered it was ten o'clock in the morning. He started to get up but gently lay down again: he had nothing to do. He was on holiday in a room full of ancient objects. When his eyes became accustomed to the shadows, he calmly observed the objects from the past piece by piece.

Did he really like the past? The past is an obsession; the clues in the present always start from childhood. This hypothesis is now a classic many people resort to. So you needed to regress to find the broken thread... and what then? To emerge again in the present, transformed. Yet, in that moment, this possibility seemed impractical.

Sometimes he reflected on his perception of the world as a child. It was a pleasant world to look forward to adulthood in. Maybe unpleasant events, in existence back then too, did not concern him so closely. At that time, he was detached from Evil. He had reached Harmony without even realizing. Everything then crumbled because of the world of desires. No one could ever explain to him how separation from harmony begins. Any trivial thing, maybe desiring something beyond a certain intensity. When desire is present, the nascent Centre acquires a gargantuan mass, deforming the rest, rupturing harmony which vanishes forever at light speed, together with the Present, leaving the Being at the centre of the disordered dregs of Reality.

Following thisâ#Things are no longer what they were.

It must have happened just like that.

He had been jolted out of a fantastic train and forced to wander in a frozen tundra to gather fragments. Certainly, that train was running at light speed.

There was a knock at the door and Clara came in with a breakfast tray.

- Good morning! Did you sleep well? I brought you breakfast in bed because we consider you an esteemed guest. My dad asked me to take care of you, - She said grinning.

Surprised by the warm welcome, he thought of the melancholic landscape seen the day before and the deserted cable car forecourt while sleet fell from the sky. For some reason, a deprived child's first day at school came to mind...

The inn had welcomed him like a needy relative. Undoubtedly, what he was experiencing was not a stable situation for spending a holiday. That feeling of hot and cold was familiar to him from other places, from other people. Yet he had arrived here in a particular spirit, which was connected to the Change in some way. Oskar stayed in bed enjoying his breakfast: -Yesterday you talked about a plant manager I could ask for information.

- Yes, of course, I'll take you there afterwards.

The sky was overcast, and only a few passers-by on the street. Some were carrying hay; others cleaned or fiddled with tools. However, everyone moved slowly. Oskar was reminded of the animated mechanisms fitted on the clocks of Gothic bell towers.

The manager's office was on the other side of town. It was a new one-storey building, built without any particular care. Clara knocked on the door and someone immediately opened it.

- Mr Franchi, good morning! My father sends his regards, she said, before glancing at Oskar and adding: - This is our guest here on holiday. He has heard about the cable car and wants some more information.

With the introductions over, the young woman bid goodbye to those present, saying she had errands to run in town and quickly stepped out.

The manager had a shy look; he asked Oskar to make himself comfortable and yelled at someone in the next room to make coffee. - Would you like a cup of coffee? - he asked smiling: - Tell me, sir, how did you learn of our mountain association?

- Let me first introduce myself, my name is Oskar Zerbi. One of my friends, a mountaineering enthusiast, told me about the station here. In fact, he told me about a ski resort here in Valle Chiara linked to the Great Ski-lift circuit-; he shook his head and added: - You see, I arrived yesterday and curiosity drove me straight to the forecourt where the ski lifts should leave from. Believe me; I was taken aback by the abandoned state. Moreover, I can hardly believe what I've seen so far can be a ski station.

The manager had followed him, nodding in assent throughout; when Oskar finished talking, he said with a half-smile: - Mr Zerbi, what did your friend really tell you? - Maybe it sounds weird that the manager of a ski station asks such questions but reserving all judgment I must, in any case, admit that the cable car is to be considered... experimental for now.

Oskar liked this version: he was finally extracted from a situation that felt very unreal.

- My friend, who like I said, is passionate about mountains, mentioned this village by name. Now, I can't remember exactly if he used your station to climb up the slopes or to go down to the valley... But based on what I have seen up to now, this seems an important detail. You're quite right to emphasize this aspect. It is more likely your friend used our cable car to go downhill. You see, from what I can remember, there's not one person I don't know who has used the line so far. At this stage, we have only trialled the plant with testers.

The manager paused a moment as if to better assesses what he was saying, before stating: - Starting this winter, our company has decided to open up to the public!

- So I would be the first tourist to use the cable car?

- Not quite. Let's say that apart from the test pilots, three or four people have gone up. Trustworthy people we...but, - his face took on a worried look, - I can't say anything else!

Oskar thought back to his friend who as far as he understood, had not reached the plateau starting from here; now it seemed more likely he had used the cable car just to descend. Maybe he came across the plateau by chance and gone up from a more known lift station. Therefore, moving from one station to the next, he then descended to Valle Chiara. It would have been a stroke of luck: a Singular Event. He could then imagine a completely different impression of the valley compared to the previous day when the forecourt lay before him in the dying light of a rainy afternoon. Arrivals are emotionally different from departures, even when two spectacular events like sunrise and sunset are concerned.

- I would like to ask you a question: you referred to a select group who used the station to climb, but I understood other people had used it also for descents.

From the next room emerged a man bearing a jug of coffee and two cups on a tray.

- That's right, - Said the manager with a serious look: - You see, Mr Zerbi, the cable car has just been completed. The lift station is made up of cabins that can carry two passengers without skis on their feet. He paused a moment, in an effort to explain more logically: - It's okay Mr Zerbi, it's a fairly unpleasant situation. It's possible that once the cable car is running, it may be misused to traffic people rather than help tourism.

Oskar was astonished: - What do you mean? Are you talking about my friend by any chance?

- No, of course not! I expect your friend made proper use of the lift after hiking at altitude. Maybe he was in a spot of bother. You see, I'm referring to another kind of person. I'm talking about clandestinos who sneak into our territory.

He sipped on the coffee, then continued in a low weary voice: -Mr Zerbi, I became aware that during the tests the station was running at night, always in secret... and so refugees began heading into the valleys. Once dismounted they vanish promptly into the woods. I think they corrupted the operators in some way; the word in town was that Asian faces had been seen wandering in the valley.

Now the manager's expression had turned irritated and after a moment's hesitation, he continued his version of events: - So, during the nights following this revelation we waited by the station and ambushed a couple of illegals. There were two Asians, perhaps Mongolians, who didn't

speak one word in our language, so it was impossible to find out more about this trafficking in Valle Chiara.

-What did you do?

-Nothing. I let them go. Besides, what should I have done? Call the police? - He stood up, visibly embarrassed: - Mr Zerbi ... did you speak to Ignazio the hotelier about this particular initiative?

- Yes. He mentioned a promoter who came from California.

- That's right, a Californian. I reckon the man is a genius who not only wanted to honour his native village, but also designed an elaborate experiment to help develop the local area.

- An experiment?

- That's it! In my opinion, he studied the network problem in minute detail. Are you familiar with advanced sciences that analytically study reticulated systems?

- Yes, a little. Actually, I should know more, seeing I graduated in engineering. Much of what we study at university is later forgotten.

- An engineer, my congratulations. Iâ€™m just a lowly technician, but Iâ€™ve been curious about networks for a while. Interested but without any opportunity to take it further. Well, I think the ex-major behind this initiative was following a scientific project. Actually, Iâ€™m sure he can control it externally. As they probably mentioned to you, once the so-called connection was inaugurated, he resigned as Mayor and left Valle Chiara forever.

The manager remained thoughtful for a moment, before adding: - I remember the inauguration day vividly, the Mayor was in a great hurry to leave as if he had other things to do. Maybe the work had overrun the scheduled deadline.

The two remained in silence, whilst the man approached the window, which the melancholic winter light struggled to penetrate. Outside it was drizzling.

- I feel weâ€™re dancing around the main issue. I was telling you about the clandestinos to be reported. You will have understood by now that this ski station is not fully legit. The project has a vague name; it was officially approved as a â€œcable utility for transporting goodsâ€œ

- I don't get it; we're talking about Valle Chiara council project aimed at boosting tourism! Why all these mysteries?

- I feel thatâ€™s the key to the whole affair. My dear engineer, listen to me carefully. The valley is too low down, skirting the large mountain ranges in altitude. Strictly speaking, a ski resort is not feasible here. -

-Finally! We're getting to the heart of the matter. -

-The Great Ski Lift circuit is too far from this Vallechiara. On the Sierra, there are thousands of villages, which have built their own lovely ski station to accommodate winter tourism. Over time, the villages started linking up and formed the valley circuits. In turn, the valley networks joined and created the Sierra consortia. There are already people muttering about â€œclutter. - Are you aware of these initiatives, engineer Zerbi?

- I read something in a newspaper advert. Something about some places offering long traverses from one valley to the next if you had a kind of super-membership card.

- Exactly! They are mountain ranges run by consortia that have connected the ski lifts. The professor hired me as manager of the Valle Chiara plants soon after becoming Mayor. He spoke about this Great Network and its future development. According to him, the Sierra consortia had continued expanding to the point of crossing national boundaries and linking other mountain chains in all directions. It seems that now no one really knows the full extent of the network, which has become an immense network overlaying peripheral sub-nets, a web of disused lines, tracks, dead ends and so on.

- I donâ€™t understand, but why was this Mayor or professor, so keen on connecting the village to this great circuit?

- I'll explain the official version that made the whole initiative possible, along with local consent. The Great Ski Lift connection would be a source of wealth for this isolated valley. The idea was to run a cable car right up to the plateau...but the plateaus are still far from the Great Ski Lift. This didn't bother the Mayor, who felt it was not important to the company's success. Based on his calculations, traffic would start flowing spontaneously from the terminal and to the Grand Circuit. A kind of attractor.

Oskar was rather puzzled by this description: - A clandestine connection to the Great Ski Lift... In a nutshell, was this the plan?

- More or less. To be honest our station runs as far as the first plateau, which is several miles from the main glacier. This still leaves two plateau to traverse. Trust me, it's no walk in the park. On the other hand, you realize how valuable an access point to the Great Ski Lift can be. Have you ever been?

- No, never.

- Thousands of miles of slopes, snow-covered valleys and an infinite number of hotels and serious party venues. Everything is potentially available to visitors who know how to look.

- This Circuit must have some kind of security for checking-in? asked a bewildered Oskar, - The security staff must carry out constant checks meaning you need a pass?

- Youâre quite right, but according to the professor's research, over time the Great Ski Lift system has become overly complex. Let me explain: it seems the passes in circulation are now thousands, one for every village part of the Great Ski Lift, with hundreds of new ones made every year. On the other hand, there is barely any security around due to spiralling management costs.

Oskar tried remembering what controllers asked for when he used to go skiing years back. It had been far too long since last hitting the slopes. Maybe it had been this to draw him to Valle Chiara. A need to rekindle the parts of his being tied to skiing, which had been dormant a long time.

The manager opened a drawer and pulled out a card: - Down here in the valley, we've printed passes too.

- Is that legal?

- Not really, according to the Mayor's consultants. This document has been drafted so as to not violate the law. It's just a pass bearing the name of the village.

Oskar examined the coloured pass: - I can remember the magnetic strips are scanned automatically when you access the ski facilities.

- Apparently no longer the case, the upkeep on the machines is expensive. As a result, the Great Ski Lift is fairly light on inspections. There would be too many controllers and a multitude of devices scattered across most of the Northern Hemisphere.

The manager explained how Valle Chiara had only issued multi-year passes. In practice, a permanent transit document: the equivalent of first class for using the Great Ski Lift.

Oskar got up. The project's logic was flawed and the whole thing too sketchy. Yet he felt comforted by the revelations: the ski station itself was -experimental-.

He made a further observation: - In a nutshell, the former Mayor wanted to build an illegal cable car on the Great Ski Lift's remotest line with the aim of drawing peripheral traffic to valley. A borderline connection that over time would eventually embed itself into the Great Network. This is the project in broad strokes, am I right? Since this experiment is just beginning, we don't know yet if the Mayor's gamble will pay off. Based on what you've already said, initially there may a sporadic increase in visits to the valley. Presumably people who got lost or those fleeing like the Asians, who would vanish into the woods after reaching the station's forecourt. What still doesn't make sense is that the whole thing only works if the whole set-up remains underground. Is that not contradictory? A tourist area by its very definition cannot remain secret.

- Your logic is flawless, engineer Zerbi, but the Mayor felt it was the only solution. In fact, the illegal migrants at the start would eventually be part of the very appeal, based on his calculations.

Looking straight into Oskar's eyes, he ventured: - Do you have any idea how many people gravitate around the Great Ski-Lift?

- I don't have the foggiest.

- Well, millions of people, and not just tourists. The Circuit has now become a giant network without any known boundaries. Rumours abound about alien groups unknown to the shareholders forming. Transnational consortia are being founded, which some are calling -Super-Clusters-. Something immense, where actual Alpine skiing is fast becoming an irrelevant detail, perhaps a pure

facade. According to the Mayor's project, you just need to encroach on the Circuit as much as possible to generate flows and wealth downstream.

The manager paused a moment, then mused: - Even if at first, the potential clients were just lost travellers in the mountains!

- Thanks for the info but I'd like to reflect a moment first...and see if it's worth climbing the plateau.

I understand you being unsure, it would be a demanding experience, and at least that's what the Mayor thought before becoming the first ever user to try launching himself into the Great-Ski Lift.

- So the Mayor left using this very link? - asked Oskar in a serious tone.

- Quite so, he went up with a pass slung around his neck and was never seen again. Although, he admitted never wanting to return to Valle Chiara.

Oskar shook the manager's hand as he got up to leave. It had stopped raining and a light wind blowing from the woods. He looked up and saw an opaque sun shaped disc move from one cloud to the next.

The conversation with the manager had completely bowled him over. The story that led him here was starting to gain credibility: by chance his friend came across Valle Chiara's cable car after descending from a mountain station. He must have followed the Grand Circuit at first, before drifting away from the slopes, and skiing from one shelter to another, ended up in the experimental Valla Chiara plant.

Time for Oskar to make a decision. He was here for the Christmas holidays, not some wild adventure. He needed to have fun and use his body, good reasons for finding a real winter sports complex. No point staying in Valle Chiara, the place was nothing but a backwater spot in the Sierra landscape, a dead zone. The strange story behind the ski station, created by a visionary or crazy Mayor, was none of his concern. What did he care if the station was not legally connected to the Great Ski Lift? Or that Valle Chiara was a backwater village trying to put its name on the tourist map?

From what he understood, the manager would activate the cable car taking him to the plateaus using the experimental line, at his own risk and danger.

He'd felt his enthusiasm ebbing away ever since arriving. Yet he'd arrived buzzing with energy, and for a moment seemed to have even entered a new life, far from the grey City.

It was cold, more clouds filled with rain loomed on the horizon. His best bet was to seek shelter in the piazza's bar, the one suggested by the innkeeper's daughter Clara.

He entered the venue with some difficulty, the small glass door scraping against the wooden floor. Inside, some of the locals sat around three tables: two groups playing cards while the third listened to an old man speaking in dialect. Everyone was wearing a hat despite the huge terracotta stove in a corner almost concealed by smoke.

The smiling bartender pointed out a free table. While sipping on a glass of warm wine, Oskar thought the experimental connection could hardly be a viable alternative for the Christmas holidays. It now seemed obvious his friend had spun a simplified, albeit not false, picture of the situation. There were possible problems along the road, which he'd not even considered. This was far from an all-inclusive holiday as organized by tourist agencies. This particular outing was completely free form and required a determined mind-set.

Yet, his own ravaged being was in complete turmoil: a consequence of living inconsistently for years.

His position at Valle Chiara had become paradoxical. The initial friendly information provided was inconsistent, at least insofar as advice on a winter holiday can be. Besides, he could not pretend photographic knowledge for places not even visited yet. His expectations had grown to the point of being cumbersome. What did he expect from this holiday? What had generated his initial enthusiasm? He couldn't expect to arrive in a trendy tourist village, much less to find a place with all modern

conveniences. He had probably imagined something similar to Valle Chiara, but once here, it all became a blur. The -State of Things- was already starting to fade.....

When in the Present, life's original colours appear in those paused beats, the intermediate zones between one event and the next.

Yesterday, when faced with the cable car, he felt a twinge of fear and an overwhelming, seemingly insolvable loneliness. In some ways, he had only considered the background, a kind of blank canvas on which to draw Christmas images. Without taking heed of his hunger for being Recognized and Welcomed by his peers. After the rituals he could then divest his own Structure, like a heavy backpack, and let himself be absorbed by the scenery. The mountain area expecting him would erupt in a dance to welcome his arrival.

He would return to the City tomorrow, spending Christmas in this desolate valley was not a good choice. He had friends in town, on Christmas Eve he could feast on stuffed turkey at Giuseppe's house. Chores to get busy with, spend a few days sorting himself out before returning to work. Take Elise to the theatre, it had been ages since the last time.

A local started creatively insulting his fellow card-player, but after some hurried explanations, returned to playing cards scowling. The bartender was talking to a customer. A young woman with a tray full of clean glasses entered through a side door. Her face was flushed despite the light clothing. She put away the glasses on the shelves and then hurried, almost running back to the side door. A few minutes later, she returned embracing wooden logs destined for the stove.

Oskar admired her absorption in the work, the body confident and focused in its movements, and oblivious to the surrounding environment. The woman's rapt look sparked a feeling of envy mixed with admiration: he suddenly imagined being the one carrying out the simple chores.

From the window, wet snow briefly glistened before melting with the muddy road.

- I knew I'd find you here! - was Clara's greeting.

Oskar was surprised to see anyone he knew in this strange village. In a spontaneous burst of affection, he stood up and hugged the young woman. - So glad to see you! I was starting to get a bit maudlin sitting here alone.

- Sorry to hear that.

- I'm feeling confused due to maybe having different expectations. This story behind the Great Ski Lift has made me a bit uncertain.

- I see! - exclaimed a bemused Clara. On remembering that morning's arrangement, she ventured: - What did the manager say? Can you reach the plateau using the new station?

- That's exactly the point. The manager assured me that everything is working. The station was built to develop tourism, although legally it's still a grey area. Yet, according to him, that's not an issue for users.

- Don't worry, that's not so important. You can spend the holidays with us anyway. There's not a lot to do right now, the seasonal hunters only arrive when winter is ending. We can go on some nice hikes and have a great Christmas even without gracing the ski slopes.

He was pleased to hear these words and the focus of Clara's tender gaze. He liked this woman.

When they headed back to the tavern for lunch, she helped him place the luggage in her grandparent's room, where Oskar had slept the night before. Clara lit the wood in a fireplace that had seemed unused for many years. The room filled with smoke, and they both attempted to clean the hood aided by a broom handle.

In the kitchen, the owners had already finished eating.

- Morning, Mr Zerbi! said the innkeeper smiling. My wife and I like to breakfast early so we can get on with our daily chores. Don't worry though, our daughter can keep you company.

- So, what do you think about staying in Valle Chiara for Christmas? Clara hinted after eating, taking the plates to the sink.

- Why not. Not taken a decision yet about the cable car to the plateau...to be honest, I did not expect things to be so complicated. I think I'll stay here with you for a few more days.

Clara seemed pleased with his decision. Yet he was in two minds. The original Christmas idea was compromised, but neither did he feel moved to make other plans. He was essentially discouraged, only seeing a jumbled mess that curtailed any attempt at freedom.

He went tiredly to bed, a pin prickling sensation on his brain. He lay on the bed, staring in the semi-darkness at the hanging and arranged objects on the walls. Some serious antiques or kitsch bargains the hoteliers probably bagged at village jumble sales. Souvenirs that should be meaningless to him, but conditioned by his memories they took on a familiar form, an experience similar to the one in the hotel's kitchen. It was the -archaic- part of his Being.

Everything begins in our defenceless childhood, when by definition there's agency to choose favourable situations. Oskar considered the collection of memories during -life- as a bizarre quirk of existence. This meant that the Being is forever enclosed in a kind of aquarium. A banality he had never really thought about. Sometimes he meditated on the possibility of prenatal life or reincarnation, although feeling these were fanciful notions that did not go beyond explanations for *deja vu*.

He fell asleep dreaming of sliding over a long, perfectly smooth wave without the slightest ripple. Must be an important dream he wanted to linger in. Perhaps an Archetype represented by pure symbolic forms, such as an undulating motion.

When his eyes opened it was pitch black outside. The room was still lit by the fireplace's dancing flames. He felt exhausted. He regretted leaving the city, even knowing he was living badly there â## drowning hopelessly in the uselessness that tarnished his soul. Besides, he had been sick for too long to keep hoping for a resurrection. His survival had hinged on using emotions to such a point they had become permanently deformed. He decided to go back to the City the following day. The alternative was staying in the hotel begging the owner's daughter for company, who had maybe set the whole thing up deliberately. Clara was pretty, from what he had glimpsed so far. She seemed to live a rather compact life, one in which thoughts existed in a solid state.

By now the idea of the Great Ski Lift seemed an impossible undertaking. Oskar was in no state to face the cable car alone, much less swing aloft in some remote cove. He would never survive the ordeal, annihilated by an immensity he could not absorb.

Despite his fragility, there were moments the discomfort dropped away and he dreamed of wandering the world alone, aimlessly, following in the footsteps of any guru claiming to know the infinite nuances of freedom.

He was completely awake now, his tiredness suddenly gone. His eyes roved around the room, now attuned to the half-light, and the space radiated a sense of well-being. Lying flat on a surface as notions of safety and continuity slipped by: a lunar place, the Sea of Tranquillity.

Clara opened the door and slowly approached the bed, checking if Oskar was sleeping. She smiled on seeing his wide-open eyes, and placed a hand on his forehead.

- I came to call you for a trip to the springs, and watch the sunset. You were moaning in your sleep, maybe a nightmare.

- Really?

- Your forehead was boiling â## she said in a low voice.

- What time is it?

- Almost midnight.

Oskar was surprised, he must have been exhausted to sleep for so many hours. He felt much better though.

An old oil lamp was turned on for company as they sat down beside the fireplace. They stayed silent next to each other before the fire. Oskar broke the silence: - What did you do when you were living in the city?

- I was studying at the Academy of Arts and enjoying myself. I had lots of friends and my musical passion was growing, I even used to play in a bar.

- Sounds fun! Well done, you made a good choice. What happened afterwards?

Clara became serious, and arranged herself more comfortably on the armchair: - The problems began when I started working. Working in the City is something almost incomprehensible. I think only a few people are able to understand the real dynamics.

- I think you're right, work is pretty mysterious ... So you came back to Valle Chiara?

- Of course. It made no sense to stay in a City where my life was almost flat lining.

It was true, thought Oskar. In some ways Clara's impressions were not so different from his.

- You're an engineer, is that right? Where do you work?

- I work with H.M.C. as a materials expert.

- Must be an interesting job.

- Just about. But I've been working too hard as of late, that's why I am on holiday.

There was a square in town I knew well, and I made an appointment with someone who didn't suggest a holiday but...rather suggested joining the Great Ski Lift, as if it were a job.

Clara turned to him and gently ran her hand along his forehead, almost caressing.

- I know everything. I knew something was wrong as soon as I saw you in the dining room. I was interested in you because it seemed you needed somebody.

The two kissed for a long time, and fell asleep still hugging.

Oskar woke up with a jolt. The girl was sleeping. Clara looked very beautiful now, he was starting to grow fond of her. He liked that room full of family memories, he liked talking to her. He was no longer alone, an essential link had been reformed, the one of Protection.

They wandered in the woods together, the sun occasionally peeking out between clouds, its rays making the landscape glitter, before disappearing again and turning the trees into silhouettes.

Oskar and Clara spent a few days together. They talked into the late hours and slept hugging tight, surrounded by the collected memories. One day they went to the cable car in silent agreement. The morning was vividly bright. He watched the steel cables run through the woods; just about spotting tiny cabins re-emerging behind a second ridge, and then higher and higher, the cables rising over a mountain pass and fading into the sky. After that mountain pass, the cable car must continue to climb until reaching an invisible height. As far as he could see though, no traces of snow were visible, except for some white spots near the vegetation.

He felt no repulsion this time round, but instead looked in fascination at the endless chain of pylons running along the mountain slopes. From that viewpoint, the existence of any plateaus seemed unlikely...The ski station now looked like a magic ladder to storm Heaven. Oskar imagined that maybe the project's creator had wanted to open a sort of trapdoor to another World.

In that moment he thought about reaching the top on his own before remembering he had met Clara in the village.

He embraced her, feeling the tension drop away:

- Clara, I love you.

- Will you stay a while longer? - asked the girl smiling.

- You know, after meeting you, this place is starting to grow on me.

- Of course, Valle Chiara is a great place! - she exclaimed.

That evening he was surprised by the sudden sunset while chopping wood behind the inn. The water in the nearby pond turned a reddish hue. Looking up, he saw the house walls, the windows, the flowerpots and roof tiles being enveloped in a dim light. The eastern sky seemed to be on fire and the setting sun made the winter landscape was almost overpowering. He listened to the valley's sounds in turn: a dog barking, a child crying, hammering on a wooden board, a moving cart. Suddenly, he felt like being somewhere else entirely. In some ways he had stopped. The world continued turning. Was what he saw and felt its effects? Yes, he now remembered what he wrote that day:

The World Exists Because It Works.

These were not poetic verses; it was an aphorism that started a perhaps revolutionary scientific work that was now lost to him. No memories seemingly remained

During the stay in the hotel he had not seen much of his hosts. Oskar usually ate alone with Clara after the owner and his wife had gone to sleep.

He was certain that they talked to each other and were firm supporters of his prolonged idyll. His appearance was fairly presentable, a city professional with a decent job. All the correct life boxes ticked.

That evening like always, Oskar noticed the owners had already left the kitchen. The girl was laying the table with a focused and grave expression.

- You said you loved me the other day.

Oskar drew closer and clasping both her hands murmured:

-I am happy with you.

- What does that mean? Do you think you could live with me?

- In these few days I thought about staying in the valley forever, because I feel at peace here. I saw the sunset...in the City there are no sunsets.

The girl laid the cutlery silently, and they both sat down to eat.

- I think I could be happy with you ## repeated Oskar.

When they finished eating, he poured a drink. He remained withdrawn though, not talking. Clara had been listening carefully but with a different expression than usual.

- Would you be willing to stay in Valle Chiara? - she asked and shaking her head, added, - I'm not asking you to leave the City and your job.

There was a strong determination in her eyes. Clara wanted to be with him but seemed reluctant about staying in the valley.

- I thought you liked living here.

- Yes, in a way. When alone, I prefer being back here where I was born. It's different if married though...doesn't seem right to live here in isolation.

He smiled briefly, amused that Clara was thinking of marriage:

- You said that when you first saw me I looked like a beaten man... Well, I arrived here totally drained because I was not living well in the City.

- I would keep you company though!

Oskar found the woman's effortless sincerity unsettling.

The two remained silent a few minutes. That desolate sensation felt on that first day in the empty forecourt returned: the kitchen turned into a barren landscape.

- What's so strange about my idea? You're a fully-grown man who is afraid of being alone. I could keep you company. You looked so lost when I first saw you in the dining room. I felt like helping you, so I introduced you to my family, even used my grandparents to make you comfortable. Can't you see I've helped create a welcoming environment for you? One full of familiar objects to help you not feel so alone. I've been good to you, playing an important role; only one woman with their innate empathy can really do.

There was no faulting her logic but Oskar still felt a key element was missing. Her smile turned lopsided: - It's good to be honest in relationships. There is nothing magical about living together; I have outlined the situation in a practical manner.

Clara was no doubt right, but her candid speech embedded in the conditioning of Tradition was something he was trying to break free from.

- What you said about solitude is true and you know perfectly where I'm coming from. It's not just about being alone though. It's something worse: I live in isolation.

- What do you do in the City? If that's not too indiscreet...

Oskar paused before replying. He had never been very coherent in that regard. With hesitant voice, he tried to explain it in a sentence: My work serves no meaning.

He got up for the beer mug on the mantelpiece, and returned to his seat adding: - Sometimes I think my work is not even used. Pieces of paper filed away only to be burnt a few months later.

Oskar noticed the woman looked tired, - When I first arrived, I felt I'd made a mistake. When I saw you at the hotel though, I imagined you could save me.

- Save you from what?

- It's not easy to explain. Maybe I thought you had the solution at your fingertips ...

- Strange, I thought the same thing too! - gasped Clara.

The Connection

Oskar stood facing the cable car's forecourt, a mountain bag and skis in hand. A light cold wind from the north had swept away the clouds overnight.

The manager had happily met his request, after handing over the multi-year pass for the Great Ski Lift. He asked for a few hours to make some final checks on the plant. Oskar would use a guide to reach the plateau bordering the slopes. The guide was a local lad with a stocky build, also shouldering a sleeping bag and doffing a woollen cap.

- Morning, my name is Mario and the manager said I was to climb with you until the plateau.

- Great, when can we leave?

- The operator has phoned the office to confirm everything is ready. We can already get in the cabin.

From the booth's tiny window, a man gestured with his hand. The sound of whirring motors could be heard. The plant looked like a carousel that stretched upwards out of sight. The two climbed into an oval cabin and sat facing each other, on two plastic seats. The driver slammed the door shut and the cabin started to climb.

- If I understood correctly, this plant reaches the plateaus â## said Oskar to break the silence.

- Yes sir.

- How far is the Great Ski-lift?

- We need to cross the plateau at the pass and then descend. On the other side runs one of the peripheral lines of the Great Ski Lift. We need to leave at dawn tomorrow to reach the Circuit's border roughly after midday.

Oskar looked up at the last visible pylon, which was glistening with a particular light. As the cabin gradually ascended, the valley's landscape was revealed in its full imposing glory. From above, the village had blurred into a brown smudge of houses with thin tendrils of smoke rising.

At altitude, the smoke seemed to form an evanescent halo hanging over the whole valley. A vast coniferous forest started slowly emerging until it filled the entire field of vision. The village was reduced to a small irregular rectangle. The panorama was breath-taking. His friend must have been awestruck heading downhill after leaving the Great Ski Lift.

The cabin reached the last visible pylon, then the curtain of mist drew back, revealing a pristine world made of vivid colours. Oskar had entered a high resolution, incredibly bright universe. Higher the perennial ice formed a white band.

Below, Valle Chiara had condensed into a reddish smudge in a sea of winter. On the other side, as the cablecar continued to rise, the great Sierra massifs rose slowly over the horizon. Underneath the cabin raged an increasingly uniform snowstorm, the conifers gradually grew scarcer until all vegetation disappeared completely, melting into a pitch white canvas.

Oskar finally saw the plateau. High mountain summer pastures that rose gently to the two pointed peaks, between them another mast, perhaps the last, glinted faintly in the distance. He pointed to the spot on the horizon: - Is that the arrival?

- Not yet. We are crossing the first plateau, which ends under those peaks. Behind that pylon, begins the second. At the end of that is our arrival base â## answered the guide.

He watched the landscape unfold behind the fast approaching pass. The first plateau rolled beneath them with a jarring shudder. The cabin passed over a snow covered bowl shape. The sky was striking, with a blue so vivid it seemed unreal. He perceived the yawning distance between him and the City, the places and sites of his penance, the malicious faces of his acquaintances. Memories of Clara were decisively blotted out by an immense green splurge, which was being smudged by the rising horizon.

The world belonging to the innkeeper's daughter was only one of imaginary figurines: simple caricatures in a juvenile landscape, with a grazing cow, the pig, chickens and little plumes of smoke rising from chimneys on houses with every balcony proudly displaying flowers... That was all.

The cable car ride ended after what seemed an eternity. The light breeze had turned crisp, biting at him. A man, supposedly the operator, came forward to meet the pair.

- Morning, Engineer Zerbi. They phoned and told me you would be coming with a guide.

- Good morning ## said Oskar looking around ## It seems you get plenty of peace and quiet up here!

The man shook his head: - Mustn't grumble in terms of peace and quiet. I'd rather be down valley at home with my family. During winter the nights are pretty long here.

Oskar thought that in the end most people tend to say the same things. Regurgitating the same phrases, with words bound by common sense, a kind of self-survival mechanism for the species.

The arrival station was a reinforced concrete block; the backdrop a series of peaks. Towards the West, a few hundred yards from the building, another mountain pass that must presumably lead to the last plateau; the wide valley mentioned by the guide. Tomorrow, they could walk to the outskirts of the Great Ski-Lift.

The operator rang a bell, and the engine noise in the station stopped. The silence was deafening.

- I'll take you to the rooms - said the operator, pointing to a wooden staircase leading to a long corridor.

- This place is not really a chalet, but the manager furnished a couple of rooms for passers-by.

An electric stove heated the room assigned to Oskar. The room was practically an icebox. The low ceiling almost rested on the iron bunk bed in a room held two chairs and a candle-lit table.

A thin sheet of ice that deformed the scenery covered the square window. The transparent glass looked out on a blue ocean in a state of chaos.

- Make yourself comfortable, there's not much to do here. Downstairs is the dining room and a fireplace. We will eat soon, let's say around seven.

Oskar thought the man must have slowly turned bitter over time because of his solitary life. Perhaps the man would have been even unhappier at the village, with his faithful wife. Valle Chiara was not exactly brimming with happy people, most walked silently with a haunted look. He was reminded of Van Gogh's potato eaters.

The room was freezing so he dumped his bags and went straight outside, where the sun was still shining. Towards north, behind the reinforced concrete monstrosity, mountaintops silhouetted the landscape. The Great Ski-lift lands were still hidden from view. To the south, a white semicircle cut in two by the cable car's steel lines that stretched back to the valley he had left behind.

Standing in Valle Chiara you would never imagine there was such an incredible spectacle up above. He had entered another world.

At this point, even if two moons were to emerge at sunset it would leave him nonplussed.

These were the Sierra Mountains, bordering the Grand Circuit. A place still pristine. Oskar was unsure of the geography, having never been here before. He had stayed away from mountains for many years. The toll they exacted required a more determined mind-set. As a boy he went skiing often, but those were other times before any great Attachments, when the roads to follow were clearly mapped. Back then his consciousness seemed sensitive only to infrared. Even as a child, the imposing banks of snow had induced thoughts of loss, and a recurring question tinged in mystery: - What can be beyond those peaks?

Once again, he was awestruck at the grandeur of the immense and borderless plateau. He felt as if mysterious builders could have assembled them merely the previous night.

The sun was low, just above the snow cover; ice sheets glittered with reflected light.

The landscape penetrated deep into Oskar's brain, blasting clean all the melancholy accumulated in Valle Chiara's muddy lanes, where an Archetype had enchanted him.

The operator's canteen held some finely made furniture and looked cosy with a large roaring fireplace in the corner. The table laid, the improvised host announced meat stew was to be served:

- Game â## he gloated with satisfaction.

- Many deer around these parts, the forests are full of animals. An upside of no one else living here on the Sierra â## said the man.

- You mean there isn't a living soul around? â## Oskar sounded sceptical.

- The place is deserted! Farming was abandoned and the mountains turned wild again. Am I right, Mario? â##

The driver nodded imperceptibly, a sign for Mario to expand: - Some years ago, tourists came hiking in the summer, but it was a fleeting trend, the mountain asks too much. They would drive jeeps up to where they could, but the government banned them for impacting on the Great Ski-Lift.

- Traffic is non-existent then but building the station will make tourists come! - he stated blandly, already knowing the answer.

The operator replied through a mouthful of chewed cheese:

- As far as I know about this plant, this is a trial period. Up to now, ten people at most. Some to climb, including the Mayor, and the rest heading down. Some from the Great Ski Lift, usually lost off-piste â## the man jammed another lump of cheese in his mouth.

â## clandestinos started turning up almost immediately though, boarding the cabins cabs as soon as they crossed the pass.

- How do you mean? - Oskar was curious.

- Well, they cling to the cabins, throw themselves from pylons, and before arriving in the valley jump into trees in the spots where the cable almost scrapes the floor.

- What did you do?

- We stopped the plants that were running all day to draw in tourists, at least that's what the manager wanted. But with the Mongol hordes prowling around the Sierra, any communication channel must be watched carefully.

- These poor people are desperate! - Oscar shook his head.

- They're fucking everywhere. I even hear them at night: they run around the station, immune even to blizzards. Sometimes they turn up dead, frozen underneath the pylons.

The man clearly bored turned to the food, which looked sublime, nothing had been spared.

- I can't complain about the food or drink. I'm happier back in the village though, with my family.

- I don't understand why you accepted this job? - asked Oskar.

- I needed to work. However, I didn't think life here on the Sierra would be this hard.

The guide remained silent, gazing at the fire smoking a pipe.

- So you don't like being alone?

- No, not at all. When the nights are quiet it's okay, but it's a different story when there's a real storm raging. It seems that all the souls in purgatory have lined up to bang on your door.

The man continued talking about his problems for a good hour; his real torment was the nighttime, and dying alone. The best place for him, thought Oskar was in the village bar, playing cards with friends.

The mechanic generated in him an almost physical revulsion. Something about his raging impotence, a very old blind rage. Yet, this negative state of mood had to be overcome with - compassion. - Not possible in that moment because the operator was pulsing with primal emotions: a wall Oskar was trying to break down. He remained silent, listening to the man's complaints, a rhetorical venting that wasn't seeking answers. Meanwhile, the guide had fallen asleep in front of the fire.

Oskar spent a restless night, fitfully trying to sleep on the cold military camping bed. At the first light of dawn, there was knocking at the door.

- Mr Zerbi, rise and shine, time to get dressed and start walking â## urged the man with a gentle but authoritative tone.

He got up with some difficulty and quickly dressed, excited in the realization that this was no mere camping trip. Something more essential was afoot but this was still to be gleaned from the plant's creator conception. The two drank black coffee while the sunrise danced in from the window. The operator remarked the temperature had fallen several degrees below zero during the night. He led them to the heavy front door, which he had to shoulder barge open due to frost.

Mario had donned a fur hat and Oskar noticed for the first time that his hair was in a ponytail. He looked different from the earlier handyman sent by the manager on the previous morning. His body had unfurled, a wild animal finally free and back in the wild.

The guide set a brisk pace: - Engineer, am I going too fast?

Seeing as the conversation had been initiated, Oskar asked: - What do you reckon about him?

- Who? Franz, the guy in charge? He moans a lot, like so many in town. The man is always complaining. I was there when he practically grovelled in front of the Mayor for this job. Even saying the further they sent him the better as his wife stank and nagged him too much.

- Could have guessed â## quipped Oskar. Yet he still felt that being compassionate was his best chance for spiritual equilibrium. A subtle form of selfishness? More than likely. The protective patina commonly used as sunscreen by saints and professional do-gooders.

When the pass was under them wind grew violent. They passed over a ridge of ice wedged between massive boulders of whitish rock. Once over the pass, they dropped in altitude and the wind returned to a gentle breeze. The last plateau was before them, the Great Ski Lift slopes should soon be in view.

- Put on your sunglasses, the sun is really bright up here. We follow the trail up to that dark rock, then ski across the plateau.

The rock casually pointed out loomed menacingly distant, but they were both walking fast. Oskar felt tired at first but over time he fell into a steady rhythm, the body entering a state of deep wellbeing that could lead him anywhere. The vacation was maybe starting to improve.

The world could now seem strange, finally unmoored from the archetypal tarot deck that held him spellbound. A very different sensation from the one experienced in the past years of City life, routine neatly bound by circumstances.

All those restrictions slipped away at high altitude. The only company a mountain guide, somewhere in the indefinite Sierra borders, no reference points or even a return planned....

When the massif was upon them, Mario suddenly stopped and indicated for Oskar to squat down. Binoculars emerged from the guide's sack and were swiftly pointed towards a movement in the snow.

- We need to be patient. The manâ##s words a low murmur, as a precision rifle was drawn from a canvas case. A large green cartridge entered the barrel and arming the rifle, Mario said: - For every clandestino I catch, the federals give me a reward.

He aimed using the sight and fired a shot near a soft white mound, about two hundred yards away. The snow turned fluorescent green and three figures stood up with hands in the air. Suddenly one of them started running, and Mario calmly lined up another shot. The man staggered forward with slow lumbering strides before collapsing into the snow.

- Is he dead? - asked Oskar.

- Forget about it, just sleeping.

They moved towards the remaining two sitting on the snow with hands still outstretched. The pair seemed totally at ease, their expression placid; in fact, they were smiling. Mario handcuffed them to each other and moved the group near the unconscious man. Their faces were round, almost oval with dancing eyes that peered at them, seemingly amused.

Mario pulled a chocolate bar out of the rucksack and presented it to the two still awake, who half bowed in thanks. Then, guessing what the guide would do, they pulled up the sleeve on one arm.

Mario nodded, extracted an automatic syringe and injected both men.

- A tranquillizer to stop them running away ## he explained.

He inflated a red balloon attached to a slim wire and let it slowly rise into the air.

Let's go! The satellite can now locate their signal and a helicopter will come to pick them up before long.

- It has to arrive before night otherwise those poor sods will freeze overnight!

- Takes a couple of hours, it's usually pretty quick. Even if it doesn't arrive, they should be fine with their rucksacks. What do you think happens here in the mountains? When night falls, people check-in to a hotel? ## a sarcastic sneer twisted the man's face.

The pair strapped skis to their feet and continued crossing the last plateau.

- They must have a constitution like an ox, coupled with a nervous system made of steel ## remarked Oskar, his conscience in turmoil.

- I think they eat just once a day, like dogs...

The man was resilient like the clandestinos or illegals, since childhood probably.

They reached the plateau at noon, Mario's estimate had been exact. Throughout the entire journey an enthusiastic Oskar never asked for rest but tiredness was now creeping up on him.

- Mr Zerbi, I suggest we eat something. After that I'll show you the Circuit's ski run.

- Where is it?

The guide pointed out the slope at the basin's edge: the ground rose like the lip on a bowl. The two took shelter in a cranny and Mario prepared hot coffee using an alcohol stove. The heat was blistering, and despite the dark lenses Oskar's eyes were raw red. They munched on the supplies Mario had brought. Two strips of fur also emerged from the rucksack, which Mario tied around his pants using leather laces.

- Heading back into town?

The man shook his head energetically ## Nothing to do in the village now! I'll head to the north and go hunting, skirting round the Great Ski-Lift's borders.

- Are you going to intercept illegals?

- That too.

- Animals too for fur? Must have multiplied beyond measure across the Sierra.

- For sure! I set traps throughout the winter, but to little effect.

- Have you tried working in town?

- I don't like cities.

The two stood up and walked around the ridge. Lower down the conifers started growing again. Even further below, right in the middle of the woods, a white strip of snow flowed like a frozen river. That was the Great Ski-Lift track. Oskar was excited. The guide passed the binoculars: so many coloured dots sliding along the snow tongue swam into view. Their bright garish suits confirmed they were skiers.

- Well, here I am! - exclaimed Oskar.

-Mr Zerbi, remember not to stay too long in the same place.... as a general rule.

Oskar mounted the skis accurately. As far as he was concerned before long he would be just another tourist on the Great Ski-Lift.

- Always have your pass clearly displayed and follow the track down to the valley. For accommodation, I suggest the 'Piccolo Cervo'; other hunters told me it is a quiet place.

Oskar removed a glove and shook the guide's hand. In a serious tone he asked, - One last thing, Mario, and then I'll let you get back to work. Did you bring the former Mayor here? The one who designed the station.

Mario nodded affirmatively.

- What was he like?
- Can't say much, the Mayor barely spoke but he seemed to know this part of the Sierra pretty well.

Oskar descended gracelessly through the woods, falling over several times. So much time has passed that his skiing skills were almost non-existent. He decided to keep going on foot. The skis would go back on once the track was beaten snow. The woods were covered so deep that walking was difficult. He moved slowly but confident the track would eventually come into view. It would get easier, afterwards.

He'd been walking briskly for an hour when he heard the noise of tourists: the rustling of skis bouncing on the ice, the voice of passing people, some excited shouts. He felt exhausted by the time he reached the track. It was covered with snow. First of all, he needed a rest without drawing attention. There was a risk the overseers could spot him in that marginal zone, right on the cusp of crossing the Great Ski-Lift threshold. He crept towards the edge, so it would seem he was just taking a breather after crashing. He waited for a moment with no-one, and then ran across the last stretch separating him from the ski track's edge. Once he reached the beaten snow, he threw the skis to one side and simulated a fall. Some skiers passed by. Not many, groups of four or five people at most. Less frequently, couples passed by. All were equally indifferent to his supposed plight. No one was skiing alone though.

He'd arrived on the Grand Ski-lift circuit! A remarkable test of character, perhaps the start of a change that could represent a final true goal.

He had no precise picture of the situation, much less a strategy on how to act. In the present moment he didn't wonder how long this holiday could last, he only knew many days lay before him. A fuller picture would emerge over time.

The cold was starting to bite; he got up and put on the skis. On returning to the valley we would look for a hotel. A canal running through the woods guided the track. The mountains towered above both sides over which the sun had just disappeared. The light was uniform, a widespread luminescence that only made the encroaching darkness more apparent. The air palpably stirred up his uncertainty and melancholy. Oskar's descent was hesitant and relied on thinking that being a skilled skier many years earlier would see him through. For full disclosure, he never gained a high level of proficiency because of various ingrained flaws, along with the lack of a serious training regime that was only eager to reach stylistic perfection. No doubt this mental attitude had penalized him, since his movements had never become harmonious or fluid.

This last thought was timely, as the skis crossed and he tumbled forward, falling awkwardly into the gleaming white. He got up immediately, cringing at having forgotten the most basic techniques. He focused on starting in the right position and, adjusting his weight began heading diagonally. Executing a swirling turn, and then another without falling, he tried to join the skis again but instead plunged head first in the snow.

The ski-track was now deserted, it was much later, the hour before sunset.

His skiing ability had failed to flood back. Angry with himself for being so rusty he questioned what he'd done over all those years - evidently held captive in a world where skiing was not contemplated. The years of self-neglect suddenly became apparent.

The current problem was going downhill without raising any suspicion. Oskar waited patiently and with a pinch of cunning took advantage of the easiest tracts to ski diagonally and gently take the bends. The many village lights flickered in the distance. There was a chair lift next to the arrival pitch. Workers were controlling the gears, a job only for when the station was not running. The guide had recommended the *Piccolo Cervo*, a supposedly inconspicuous place to hole up in. Oskar was at the centre of a large clearing near the forest he emerged from, the village lay out below. Skiers were in the local venues, some people milled around but the place was not crowded.

- Sorry sir, can you tell me where the *Piccolo Cervo* - he asked a passer-by.

- Sure, head up that path and turn left next to the clock tower. The sign is easy to spot.

At least the hotel was nearby. The directions were accurate and he reached the hotel after a few minutes. Leaving the skis on a rack he went inside; the door made a classic bell sound.

- Good evening, just arrived? You must be tired after the crossing- said a rotund lady with straw yellow hair ## which valley did you come from?

A moment's pause for Oskar to formulate a lie: - From the North slopes. I'm pretty tired, do you have a spare room?

- Of course, even in the Christmas period, we can always find a room for a card carrying member of the Great Ski-Lift.

The landlady smiled benevolently on seeing the pass sheathed in a transparent pocket of his padded jacket. Oskar now understood why she asked for his provenance. After all, he might have arrived using more conventional means. The Great Ski-Lift pass and just a backpack as luggage marked him as different. Everything in good-standing for a permanent member.

The room provided looked comfortable. He locked the door, chomped on a chocolate bar and slipped straight into bed.

A winter glow entered through the window, a sort of absolute light that always caused great melancholy, as if it were a sign of immobility: a static scenario, events looping for eternity, with the Self is lost forever in parallel worlds.

The next day he woke early. In the dining room he watched a woman having breakfast with a baby girl. There were no other guests. The woman greeted him after looking around, and after a brief silence ventured: - What lovely weather we're having for Christmas. My kids told me the snow is fabulous. Do you also ski?

- Sure, but it's been a while since being in the mountains, I think I need some lessons.

- Good idea. Don't worry, my husband had the same problem. As a kid he was even a champion on grass but afterwards, with work commitments, he stopped visiting the mountain. A few years ago he started up again with an instructor, and is now better than ever before.

Oskar forced a smile: - Similar story for many of us. When we're little there is so much potential but when full-time work sets in. His words trailed off, the phrase has been spoken automatically, unthinking. The atmosphere had the air it could turn sour in an instant. That woman was serene, with a stable centre in Conventional Life. She had no doubts to confess, an individual selected for life in captivity over millennia. The woman could be no help for people that, like him, needed to vault the Wall.

- Pleased to meet you but I must dash, need to hit those ski slopes.

The hollow words lingered in the air as Oskar found the hotel, in a bright sunlight that almost overwhelmed the landscape. Yet Oskar felt he was somewhere unfamiliar. The scenery stretching out before his eyes implied that Others found themselves perfectly comfortable. A multitude of skiers swarming towards the ski-plant moved in coordinated spurts. They looked self-assured, confident in their actions. Everyone seemed to be following a schedule.

When at the village outskirts, he spotted isolated groups of skiers moving down to a smaller valley. Maybe slopes holding other less crowded tracks. He couldn't forget that entering the Great Ski-Lift illegally would require blending in with the surrounding environment. With the skis on his shoulders, he reached the valley's bottom where an unattended ski-lift was running. A flash of the pass should be enough to start practicing on the beginner's tracks, without fear of being discovered.

He spent the whole day going up and down the same track. No one paid the slightest attention to him, the security was far from professional and the staff stood around chatting with each other. It had been a very long day of skiing. He had tried to remember the key moves but remembering little or nothing made it difficult. Anyone who saw him, panting and snow-covered pants, would surely assume Oskar Zerbi was a beginner. During that first day he thought it pointless to stay in the Great Ski-Lift several times. It did not make any sense. He wondered the real reason behind his

adventurous foray in this strange vacation. Maybe he wanted to find himself by skiing? An apparently incomprehensible thought.

Oskar watched the other skiers carefully, hoping to copy their style and perhaps glean something essential unknown to him. During the last descent he watched an expert skier moving with flawless style, and tried to imitate him. However, he failed to even emulate one slalom in the skier's style. A small hope had formed though, by remaining for a few days he could make significant progress.

Back at the hotel, he dined in his room merely to avoid having to keep the lady-who-wanted-to talk company. Before falling asleep he mulled over his efforts still falling below -standard- and what chance they would generate change. Nevertheless, once he learnt to ski again, the fun would properly start.

He was no longer thinking about the City. There was nothing for him back there.

Christmas Eve

He spent a few days practicing alone, always on the same ski run. Every little slope and variation in the pitch was now firmly engraved in his mind. He knew the exact points where extra care was needed to descend without mistakes, at least on the track. Several days had passed pleasantly skiing around the Great Ski-Lift without complications. This seemed important to him. At noon he stopped at a kiosk at the ski-lift base.

He sat so the sun shone on his back because the light was intense enough to blind. He looked towards the village with an empty mind. During the intense days of exercise his mind cleared. He ran through the track in his mind so that it would be smoother each time.

He chose an isolated table, a few feet away a young couple immersed in conversation. The two little kids playing on their own must be theirs. Suddenly he realized the man had noticed him. There were no other tourists around and he felt a twinge of fear. He had not completely forgotten that he was in the Circuit illegally, the feeling of being watched caused a shiver of dread. This strange vacation had started unconventionally and now he needed to normalize it. For example, he could return to the City, his work, and family. Common sense considerations gave way to a rising feeling of emptiness, sure proof that in the reality of things the intertwining of events was more complicated. The man rose from the table and smiled in welcome.

- Excuse me sir, my wife and I feel that no one should be eating alone in a corner in such a remote and out-of-the-way venue.

The man seemed the sociable kind... almost definitely a tourist who had nothing to do with the Great Ski-Lift system.

- Let me introduce myself. My name is Robert Massoni, I'm here with my family for Christmas. We own a chalet behind the village and come here every year.

Oskar introduced himself in turn, responding with a wave to Mrs Massoni's smile.

After breaking the ice, the man, who looked a few years younger than Oskar, invited him to the table where his wife had already prepared a cup of hot coffee and a slice of cake.

- Help yourself, Mr Zerbi! Get stuck in, - said Robert warmly.

Oskar looked at the family's kind faces: they had a gentle appearance. Since arriving on the Sierra mountains, he was finally meeting some pleasant people. This was a very important thing for him.

- Are you on vacation for Christmas? Your first time here, Mr Zerbi? - asked Mrs Massoni amiably.

- Yes, a few days now, just getting to know these places. Besides, I've not been in the mountains for years.

- Are you travelling alone? she asked.

- Yes ## Oskar reflected a moment and added ## I needed absolute rest.

- I assume your job is very demanding, Mr Zerbi! - said Robert.

- I'm an engineer. But who knows? Maybe when I head home again I'll change job ## he said smiling.

- What a coincidence! I'm an engineer too. See how many engineers we meet Bea? - Massoni turned to his wife laughing.

They chatted inconsequentially for a while but it started getting cold, so Oskar suggested: - Robert, why not all go skiing? Anyway, no need to be some formal between colleagues.

After the lonely days on the slopes he relished the warm family glow, he was happy to be talking with his peers.

They climbed into the chairlift. During the ride, he wondered why Robert had noticed him. The green card around his neck for permanent membership was undoubtedly a very rare symbol, distinguishing him from the other occasional skiers.

Being seen with a green card seemed to open doors, and solved the rigmarole of introductions. His current position in fact meant saying as little as possible on his account, and asking his new friends questions instead. Shielded symbolically by the Great Ski-lift pass, he was able to relax and quietly observe the others' behaviour.

-What is self-representation? - Oskar mused, -maybe a form of consistency to imbue a certain order to a person? - He thought of a dinghy that needed inflating to float, something similar to blood pressure.

He knew the track off by heart and managed to make a good impression. Robert and his wife praised his style, in turn, they skied confidently. Obviously, most people did not hold skiing as important. Oskar was flattered by the compliments and for a moment thought he'd reached a high standard. The next descent saw him even go off-piste on the fresh snow, seeing if he could handle a different slope. In those abnormal conditions, set loose from his imposed automatism he struggled instantly. It was as though starting to ski again, the lack of true knowledge apparent, that flexible ability to adapt to every circumstance. It was about understanding a Rule in all its facets, while he was limited to knowing a single definition.

- What a beautiful day! A pleasure meeting you at the lodge ## said Robert on finishing the last ski-track. The sun was already setting, and the staff was about to close the chairlift.

- Why not come for dinner at our house? We can take you back to the hotel afterwards.

- I gladly accept - said Oskar.

Engineer Massoni owned a typical chalet, which had been tastefully refurbished The tiled fireplace was set in the centre of the living room. Oskar remembered seeing such a layout in the Tibetan valleys.

- What a beautiful fireplace, very impressive! - he exclaimed on entering the house.

He sat beside the fire as the family stepped into the kitchen.

Oskar watched the flame dancing over the wood: it changed shape continuously, full of irregularities, and yet perfectly harmonious.

They had left him alone, the house seemed deserted. After all, he was a visitor who'd stopped to rest. The journey started in Valle Chiara, the remote Sierra village, was still continuing without a specific destination He could not remember when this holiday actually started, probably it had been traumatic, a scary event that needed to be buried in his insight to avoid any unnecessary suffering.

The invitation offered by the Massoni family was based on a fleeting, superficial encounter. Mainly by virtue of the great Ski-Lift multi-year pass, a seemingly important badge of honour. Moreover, Oskar felt it unlikely that the setting, an interesting turn of phrase or a change in his persona would make him interesting enough for the Massoni family.

After dinner, on saying he felt ready for bed, Bea invited him to stay in the chalet as a guest as long as he wanted, without any problems. Several rooms were free, and he accepted gladly, longing for the company. The family went to their rooms.

Oskar was left alone in the living room. He stared at the burning fireplace. The house had drawn in around itself. Something had snapped and the chalet no longer looked authentic at all.

He thought obsessively about potential difficulties to face in the Great Ski Lift. Lifting himself from the armchair he decided to head back into town the following morning.

There was a door ajar in the corridor leading to his guest room. The dim light illuminated an empty room he felt inexplicably drawn to. A veil of moonlight filtered from the windows and helped his eyes gradually start to distinguish distinct objects. The furniture was mahogany, a detail that intrigued him the most. He seemed to have entered the cabin of an old transatlantic line.

There were books and a handwritten note on the desk, as if a work was in progress. He opened the wardrobe to reveal neatly hung women's clothes. The occupant was undoubtedly a woman. On the bedside table was a photo of a smiling little girl sitting on a swing.

Oskar had the impression to have known that person as an adult, just a few years earlier. Maybe the images overlapped due to an actual prototype in mind.... Another Archetype from the world of feelings?

The external light glinted off the brass handles.

Waking up in the guest room the next day, he recalled the mahogany furniture spotted the night before. He remembered the photographs too, reinforcing the sense he knew the room's guest in the cabin that resembled an old transatlantic. He dressed and opened the door silently, rifling through the drawers for a clue to the woman's identity. He found more photos, one of them showed a familiar face, Oskar Zerbi!

That's what he wanted to know, he could feel something. Years ago, he and Sara must have travelled together. If that was the woman's name. He suddenly remembered everything. Sara was the woman he met in Austria. A funny romance had happened. He couldn't remember the reason it ended, but that aspect of the story didn't feel important.

An incredible coincidence... Not a case of chance. The Great Ski-Lift was making increasingly clearer the contours of a confused world. The only logical alibi was along the subtle Present line.

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