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## *Quarks*

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Not quite three weeks after they arrived in Germany, Matt Coleman came home one evening to find his wife Mara hurling books and clothes into the same yellow cardboard boxes from which she had so recently removed them.

They had come from Bloomington Indiana, where Matt had been a graduate student in physics and Mara had practiced real estate law. It was 1974, inflation and unemployment were in double digits, and Nixon's budget cuts meant there were no jobs for Matt at home. With his adviser's encouragement, he had reluctantly applied for a junior scientist position at the *Institut für Astrophysik* in Cologne. But after less than a month, Mara had had enough. She could not make an independent life for herself in Germany. She was going back, she said, at least for a while.

At first he tried to think about it as little as possible so he could keep on working. That, he thought, was the main thing. He focused on what he had that was

still positive. For example, he found he rather liked being outside America—on, as his family had called it, “the other side.” He had come from a long line of Indiana farmers who had fled little Bavarian towns, and when he strolled along the Rhine at night watching the lights on a ship move slowly over the dark invisible water gave tiny fragments of his childhood surged into his mind. What he had once thought of as family eccentricities he saw now as typical German attitudes. The way his mother always kept the thermostat at 63 degrees all winter long, using the savings to buy meat for dinner from the best butcher in town. The fanatical scrubbing of floors, the ritual cleaning of curtains. The excessive meals on Sunday: T-bone steaks, prime rib roasts, cauliflower in cream sauce served on separate plates, chocolate cakes kept out in the pantry with toothpicks stuck in their yellow icing to hold up the protective waxed paper. The velvet dresses she had kept in her back closet “for good,” all smelling of rich perfume and other smells less easy to define.

He felt, of course, at loose ends. Sunday afternoons he took a leisurely stroll through the ancient forest of the Eifel side by side with the pensioners, feathered Bavarian hats atop their heads and gnarled walking sticks in their hands. On yet another of the cold, gray days that succeeded themselves one after another, he bought a used Peugeot sports convertible of a kind he would have never bought

himself in, as he sometimes called it now, “the States.” Weekends he drove it down the A 4 motorway to rock concerts in the Eifel Forest at 150, 160, 170 kilometers an hour—what was that in miles? When drunken adolescents in leather jackets jostled him as they gleefully threw beer bottles on the stage, he found himself torn between horror and a secret envy of people so spontaneous with seemingly had so little to lose.

Most troublesome of all was the end of the work day when he would return to the small, silent apartment he had rented for himself and Mara in a the modern high rise just outside of town. To postpone the moment, he would often take his dinner at the Grand Cafe on the Marktplatz, all blazing lights and chrome surfaces. With a feeling he had never known before he would pour a bit of evaporated milk into his coffee and stare at the aquiline European features and elegant, expensive clothes of the other inhabitants. Afterwards he would go to the movies, where he would buy ice cream bon-bons from the little old ladies in black aprons hawked sweets during the pre-film commercials, which included a rodeo clip of the Marlboro Man—the only part of the entertainment he could understand. He saw himself now as a heavy-set man who faced the world in a pair of hopelessly unfashionable maroon trousers, a chequered shirt, and hopelessly scuffed shoes.

When the divorce papers arrived by registered mail, Matt was distressed but

not surprised. At first he and Mara had written every day, passionate and tearful letters, but as time passed they wrote less and less. After skimming the papers, Matt made an unintelligible scrawl on the signature line and mailed them back. Then he went back to analyzing the data he'd just gotten from his first experiment on the cyclotron.

Winter came, and the rock concerts ended. To get the adrenalin rush he now needed, he began to take the sports car down to Frankfurt on Sundays. At first he frequented museums and restaurants, but little by little he allowed himself to spend the afternoons the bars along the river. To show he wasn't just another tourist, he would ask the waiter for a *lokales Bier*, then strike up a conversation with one of the women, all listless in their gestures and shod in tinselly high heels.

He would buy her a beer, and she would lean over slowly to let him light the filtered Ritter drooping from her manicured hand. She would chat then about the weather (*dreadful!*), German politics (a *Skandal*)—he would stare at the thin black charcoal lines around her eyes and feel foolishly grateful. Just then her attention would drift to some businessman in the back—some fellow in a dark wool suit with full, lascivious lips and a bank account beyond anything at the *Institut*. He would watch with anger and with relief as, making an excuse, she swung her legs off the stool.

He felt awkward about it, but what else could he do? Spend the day with Shelby Moore, the only other American at the institute, like some poor relation, shoveling down the roast pork and fried bananas that his wife Gloria in her real but cloying solicitude would force on him? Sit back on their couch while Shelby once more showed photographs from their last trip back to St. Kitts or whatever Caribbean island it was Gloria came from?

Humiliation aside, he found it hard to talk to them. All their sentences started with *we*. *We* made his voice crack or go embarrassingly soprano. He could say *I*, but *I* hurt him. *I* was an admission that he was alone, had been alone a long time now, perhaps even liked being alone.

In January, he went to look at a refurbished flat on the *Poppelsdorfer Allee*—a classic nineteenth century townhouse with a bay window that looked directly out on the park. He wandered slowly through the high-ceilinged rooms, then sat down at the burnished mahogany dining room under an electric candelabra. As he made out his deposit by Eurocheck, he felt an unfamiliar rush of joy.

But the moment passed. When he lay down to sleep in the rooms of the Poppelsdorfer flat, his eyes would stare out into the blackness until it filled and overfilled with little gold dots like a dark sky with small, judgmental stars.

At the end of March he went to give a talk about his work at some university in Texas. As he stood behind the podium, he could feel the palms of his hands began to sweat. His gray wool German suit, so entirely *korrekt* in the shop on the Marktplatz, felt awkward and foreign-looking—not to mention too warm. Everyone in the room looked odd and ugly to him, as if their bones had recently been broken and then incorrectly re-set.

But his talk must have been all right, for a wave of what sounded like genuine applause rose up from the audience. After a few questions he luckily could answer, they took him out to Captain John's Fish Fry in a strip mall just outside of town.

Captain John's was very crowded, with fat, pasty-faced children underfoot. The air was bad. Matt chafed at his collar as a brusque, cheerful waitress took their order. Jokes were made about people he knew; gossip that no longer interested him flew back and forth. Nonserious bets were made on which new subatomic particle would be discovered next, and by whom.

When the conversation faltered, he managed at last to get up the courage to ask how the department's funding had fared in the latest round of budget cuts. A silence fell. All the senior scientists stared at their beers with as much interest as if they had been looking at data runs.

Construction of the new cyclotron had been put on hold. One, perhaps two, of the younger scientists would not be renewed. They were confident, though, that as soon as the recession was over, it would surely turn around.

Someone put a plate of fried catfish and paper-cupped slaw before him without saying "Please." Matt reached for his fork and caught a sidewise glimpse of a pale blue dress—some soft, shimmering fabric and, above it, sleek black hair. A whiff of perfume assaulted his nose. Tea Rose? Shalimar? He'd never been good at remembering the names of Mara's perfumes.

She had sat down now at the end of the room and was turned toward him. A woman with fine features and light brown almond eyes. Nothing like Mara's Slavic cheekbones and black irises with green flecks. Nonetheless, he found himself trembling with as much excitement as if his wife really had been near.

He mumbled something about a cigarette, pushed his chair back, and walked blindly toward the *Exit* sign. Outside, a soft misty twilight. American spring. In front of the rest rooms he paced back and forth so passersby would think he was waiting for a friend. He breathed slowly to relieve the pressure in the back of his throat, but it didn't help.

"Shit," cried Matt Coleman.

And kicked the wall with his foot.

It was a little warmer when he returned to Germany. Every morning, a silk maroon scarf tied neatly around the collar of his gray wool coat bought at Hertie's on the *Marktplatz*, Matt steered his new folding bicycle down the narrow path that ran along the vegetable gardens. Slowly the cabbages, the butter lettuces, and the pale green watery vegetable called *kohlrabi* grew larger under the northern European sky. Children ran by, packs half-falling off their shoulders. He hardly noticed now that it was always gray and often raining. As he sat firmly on the little bicycle seat, the he liked how the *cling* of the hand-bell echoed before him in crisp, still-cold air.

One morning, something happened. A blur of green wool passed before his eyes. Over the handlebars he flew, down on the moist earth.

A young woman with short brown hair and rimless glasses wearing a hooded loden coat stood over him apologizing. She seemed genuinely upset. She was a law student at the university, she said. It was all her fault. She had been thinking about a lecture she had just heard on the laws governing intellectual property rights and not paying attention. She was so very sorry. Could she perhaps give him her address in case a repair would be needed to his bicycle? Matt rose and began to brush himself off. Her name was Anna, she said. Anna Hürter.



As he walked her down the *Allee* "to make sure she was quite all right," he wanted to invite her to dinner, but the words wouldn't come. It wasn't until later when, stopping by her flat one morning to collect a trivial sum for an entirely imaginary bicycle repair, he managed it, his voice quavering like any stupid seventeen-year old's. To his surprise, she accepted with a quick flash of a smile, then closed the door.

Instead of going on to work, Matt Coleman strolled all the way down to the river, past the old-fashioned trams creaking around narrow corners and the shopkeepers rolling up the external wooden blinds he now knew were called *Rolladen*, not *Rouladen*, which were slices of beef rolled around pickles and braised in sauce. On the square where the furrier shops had been all the winter were now ice cream shops run by Italians. On impulse, he walked in and ordered rum raisin, chocolate, and his new favorite, Málaga.

She had chosen patent law to please her parents, who owned an Edeka SuperMarkt out in the Eifel, but after she graduated she hoped to work on environmental law. She never watched the First or Second channels on the television, but only the more intellectual Third Program, where she preferred documentaries about the crimes of the Nazis and the conditions of life in Third World countries. Together with the other members of her study group, she went to

demonstrations where—he had read this in *Der Spiegel*—police agents circulated in the crowd, taking photographs for the already voluminous files of the *Bundeskriminalamt*. Her only concession to pleasure was a love of travel: she had been to Berlin and Prague and hoped next spring to go to Paris, which she pronounced Pah-*reese*.

"But aren't you afraid?" he asked her one evening over supper in his flat. "To go to these demonstrations, I mean?"

Her brown eyes, usually so soft, stared back unmoved.

"Someone must do these things. If no one does, what kind of world will we have live in? A world ruled by men such as your Nixon?"

Her fierceness reminded him oddly of Mara. As he helped himself to another sheaf of white asparagus, Matt pondered her answer, which he was not all sure he really understood.

When his end-of-winter cold failed to yield to hot tea and repeated snifters of the local brandy, called *Asbach Uralt*, she bundled him up and took him to the sauna. Naked except for the towel he sat on, he found himself surrounded by ten other people, all sweating quietly together. Slowly he breathed in the hot, dry air. From time to time someone would get up and ladle a green liquid over what looked like a bucket of hot coals, creating an intense if fleeting scene of pine. He tried not

to be self-conscious about the way that he, alone of all of them, didn't know where to look.

"Come," said Anna. Her brown curls drooped gently in the heat as she took him by the hand and led him to a large swimming pool. Side by side, they swam through white plastic flaps out and out into the forest. From far above, the ancient pines of the Eifel looked down. Feeling entirely warm, Matt breathed in the cold mountain air.

"So, are you feeling better now?" Anna said.

They were sitting in the restaurant in their white terrycloth robes, beholding their two boiled trouts with parslied potatoes, the white woodruff-scented wine, and *quark*—a word that here meant a soft cheese, not a subatomic particle not yet discovered.

"Much better," said Matt Coleman, wishing he could think of something romantic to say that wouldn't sound purely silly. "Can we come here again next Sunday?"

In the old Peugeot, its top down, he took her to the egrets, the gazelles, and the flamingoes of the *Jardin des Plantes*. As the clock in the Church of the Madeleine tolled two, Matt Coleman raised himself on one elbow and looked at her face, calm and peaceful, in the moonlight.

But still, there were days when just the feeling of a warm breeze and the sight of a woman with high cheekbones at the other end of the square was enough to make him feel like a cat hurled down a well.

One night after working very late, Matt stopped at the Grand Cafe on the Marktplatz so he wouldn't disturb Anna when he got home. As he went to sit down, he noticed a tall, thin man at a corner table.

"Why, Shelby," he said in surprise.

For Shelby was alone.

Matt Coleman hesitated. Should he join him? He had never talked with Shelby without Gloria being there. With her enormous warm-heartedness and generosity she had always been kind, but perhaps he had mistaken pity for friendship.

"Shelby," said Matt Coleman, "may I—? Or—?"

Shelby flung an arm to one side. He looked at Matt with large, flat eyes.

"No, no," he said. "I don't care. Everyone will know soon enough."

Matt Coleman felt a great foreboding. He had never heard Shelby say *I* before.

"It's the sun," Shelby said. "She says she just can't live without the sun."

Matt Coleman fastened the top button of the gray wool coat, furling the

maroon scarf about his throat, and went out. It had started to rain. Fierce gusts of wind blew the water across the square. All along the *Poppelsdorfer Allee* the turn-of-the-century streetlights were blurry dots before his eyes. He stumbled several times.

As the apartment door clicked shut behind him, he had the oddest sensation that Mara was thinking of him at just that moment. What was her life like now, he wondered? Was she happy? Was she ever sorry she had left him? A thousand things he wanted to say crowded his brain: that he hoped she was well; that he had survived and re-ordered his life. That he still loved her, would always love her.

"Mara," he said out loud.

But nothing came--or rather, not nothing exactly, but something worse. He could *see* Mara, he could see her long hair, he could see the black eyes above the wide cheekbones, but he felt nothing. The image in his mind was distant and clear, like a photograph of someone else's wife.

He got up and walked slowly down the dark, empty hall.

"Mateus?"

Anna was sitting up among pillows reading, a tasseled silk bed jacket around her shoulders. As he stood in the doorway, leaning on the lintel, her face filled with alarm.

"Mateus—what is wrong? Please tell me."

He could not answer. What was he doing here, in this place? Who was this beautiful young woman with her soft brown curls and generous, uninjured heart? Now that he had lost the pain he had lived with for so long, the world itself felt strange.

Anna put down her book.

"Mateus—? Are you all right? Has something happened?"

"I'm fine," he answered. "I'm perfectly fine."

The smell of late August rain over the cornfields in front of the house. The sound the floorboards of the old wooden front porch made as he walked on them. Pouring himself lemonade from a glass pitcher, sweat running down its sides. The hushed sounds of private conversations. Girls in pressed cotton dresses with little shirred sleeves. He suddenly wanted to a bacon, lettuce, and tomato sandwich with iceberg lettuce on toasted Wonder Bread with Hellmann's mayonnaise.

as he reached out to take her in his arms, he found to his horror but not surprise that something lay between them, something separated them—as if the air itself was filling up with particles; undiscovered and perhaps undiscoverable; heavier

far, he feared, than heavy water.