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Wormholes

When the time travel business still seemed possible, it rained almost all the time. Torben would go off to the seaside all the same and would come back a few hours later completely drenched, talking away and with a broad smile on his face. Then he would strip down to his underpants at the front door so as to keep any damp stains off the floor. While he was having a shower, Katharina and I would lay the table, and over dinner Torben would tell us about the new route he had tried out that day, about clambering over slippery rocks and about views we should definitely not miss, come rain or shine. So what have you been up to, he then asked, and Katharina would say: This and that, and I would say nothing. This and that applied to me, too.

After dinner Torben, Katharina and I would always play “catch the hat”. It was the only game in the house which still had most of its pieces left. I don’t think any one of us really liked the game, but after a couple of days it became an unquestioned part of our evening routine. We never concentrated very much on playing, and just pushed our pieces casually across the board as we talked about other things. This meant that we were constantly forgetting whose turn it was to throw the dice and had to decide at random. Then at some point, even in the middle of a game, one of us, usually Katharina, would yawn, then someone else, usually me, would say: Yes, I’m tired, too, and then we went to bed. That’s to say, Torben and Katharina went to bed, and I went off to sleep on the couch in the living-room. There’d been no discussion about this. After all I was the guest and Katharina and Torben were the couple, and after all

the house belonged to Torben's uncle, and after all Katharina and Torben were staying the whole summer and I was only there for nine days, during which time I wanted to cause as little nuisance as possible.

The house was a small holiday cottage in Normandy and, as Torben had explained, since his uncle's divorce it stood empty most of the time, leaving it available for the rest of the family to use when they wanted.

Torben had asked me in the middle of June whether I fancied going there to visit Katharina and him. I had been rather surprised by the invitation, but apparently Torben had asked several other people. At least three or four others wanted to come too, he had said, and it would be really nice, lots of swimming, eating, sleeping, so I'd said I'd think about it. The end of July came and I was still thinking about it; then in August the city emptied out and I realised there really wasn't much to think about, and at the beginning of September I stopped thinking and bought myself a ticket.

The fact that the three or four others had all already left I only found out when Katharina and Torben picked me up at the station, and then it was too late to start thinking again. Are you sure it's OK, I asked, and Torben said, Of course, and I looked at Katharina. She shrugged her shoulders and said, Of course, too.

I had known Katharina and Torben for about two years, and, as I realised at the station, not particularly well. Standing there at the station was the first time I had been alone with both of them, otherwise they had always just been around – they were Katharina'n'Torben. Katharina'n'Torben will be coming later. Have you heard anything about Katharina'n'Torben, the delicious salad is courtesy of Katharina'n'Torben. Now the 'n' was suddenly impossible to overlook, and as I asked without thinking about

it, “How are you both”, it sounded wrong for the first time. Great, said Torben, and he seemed to be answering for the two of them.

It wasn't yet raining the day I arrived. After I'd made some appropriately impressed noises about the house, we walked down to the sea. Torben and I played beach tennis, Katharina lay on a large printed beach towel reading a book, and she didn't even look up when the ball landed in the sand right next to her head. As planned, we went swimming a lot the first day, we ate a lot, as planned, and went to bed early after three games of “catch the hat”, as planned. The next day the rain set in and Torben said: I'm not going to sit around inside all day. He put on his jacket and went off to try out some new routes, and Katharina and I did this and that.

It's probably unfair to make the rain solely responsible for this and that, for the fact that this and that didn't stop at just reading and getting dinner ready and not even washing and drying the dishes, but went beyond that to taking showers and removing traces. The rain is not to blame, although without the rain things probably wouldn't have got that far, even though I sometimes hoped that it would stop, that it would suddenly no longer be natural to stay at home and do this and that, and that the whole thing could be put down to a weather-induced disturbance. But in fact the rain only stopped the day before I left, when it was too late to put anything down to anything else. Unfortunately, it's not exactly tenable to blame the rain, and yet I'm almost certain that without it the holiday would have gone according to plan: lots of swimming, lots of eating, lots of sleeping, even lots of games. It was after all a good plan.

On the first rainy day, this and that – the deviations from the plan – wasn't yet quite what it later became. It seemed to be just a temporary

interruption. Katharina lay on the couch and read, and I washed the lunch dishes and prepared dinner, even though it was far too early. Every now and then I would make some coffee, Katharina would come and sit at the table with me, and we would talk to each other politely. What are you reading, I asked her as we drank our second coffee, and Katharina said: Something about time travel. But it's scientific, she emphasised, and, by way of proving it, she named a few names that even I had heard before. She talked about quanta and space-time curves and photons, she talked about singularities and about a Mozart sonata that had been sent backwards in time for a few tiny fractions of a second, and also about one or two laws of thermodynamics. What she talked about most, however, was wormholes. I didn't understand much about them, and I don't know whether Katharina understood much herself, but she talked about them very well, her voice precise and her eyes so fixed on me that I had to blink all the time. If it were possible to keep a wormhole open, said Katharina, then it should also be possible to send particles to it from a second wormhole, in other words, back to the time when the first wormhole was created. The only problem is that we don't yet know how to keep wormholes open, she said, and looked at me, as if she expected me to come up with a suggestion. I didn't even know what a wormhole was, and so in order to contribute something at last instead of just nodding, I asked whether that meant that you could send the particles back no earlier than the time the first wormhole was created, and Katharina said, Yes, anything earlier than that is no longer possible. Then she went back to the couch and I carried on getting dinner ready, and when Torben came back some time later, he was soaked and happy, and when we played "catch the hat" time travel was not mentioned again.

On the second rainy day I accompanied Torben; I wanted to share out the disturbance I was causing as equitably as possible. He said: OK, and we set off. Minutes later my trousers were already sticking to my legs, my feet were making squelching noises in my leaking shoes, rain water was dripping off my hair into my eyes so that I could hardly see what was making Torben so enthusiastic. After about half an hour I said that I'd prefer to get back under a dry roof. Again Torben said, OK, and went off on his own. I walked back to the house. Katharina was lying on the couch reading a book. Still no solution for the wormholes, I asked her, after I had changed my clothes. No, she said, not yet.

That was the last time I went out with Torben. Perhaps tomorrow, I said, when he asked me the next rainy day. I had at last found some tasks to keep me occupied: I washed up, got dinner ready and tried to be as little a burden as possible. Katharina lay on the couch reading, and we hardly spoke all afternoon. Only when a fierce gust of wind blew the rain against the window pane for a few seconds did we both look up briefly.

On the fourth day of rain, Katharina said: I've finished. She put the book aside, came up to me at the sink and took a tea-towel. I passed her the plates, she dried, and when we'd finished, she handed me the towel to dry my wet hands and kissed me on the mouth. Not for very long, but long enough to make it clear that it was no mistake, no reflex, no sudden outburst. Then she looked at me long and hard until I was forced to blink and then she kissed me again. Our mouths lay against each other, closed and unmoving like in a black-and-white film, and in one hand we each held one end of the tea-towel, whose damp coldness I could feel more distinctly than Katharina's lips. I was amazed that I didn't end the kiss, that I didn't shy away in fright, outrage or shame. I remember wondering

whether it might be impolite for a guest to withdraw from the kiss. I also remember that I didn't quite believe it at the time. Finally, Katharina took her mouth off mine and put the towel back on the hook. Perhaps we should get on with preparing the dinner, she said. Later on, as we played "catch the hat" I was the first to yawn.

The following day it was still raining and after lunch it was obvious that the comparatively safe period when we were all together would soon be over again. Obviously I had to decide, but I didn't want to decide anything. I didn't want to start talking about anything or keep quiet about anything and above all I didn't want to give anything away, but of course everything gave something away, it's just that I wasn't sure what, and when Torben asked me whether I wanted to come along, I said: Perhaps tomorrow, and I only said it because it was what I had said the other days, too.

Once Torben had left, I washed the dishes, Katharina dried up, and when she had finished, I didn't shy away and this time we kissed in colour and went upstairs to the bedroom. Later on, while I had a shower, Katharina made the bed, and then we got dinner ready.

The next three days went by almost exactly the same way. Each time, beforehand we did the washing up and afterwards we had dinner. We spoke little and not about the things we should have spoken about. We didn't exchange secret glances over "catch the hat", and when it stopped raining the day before I was due to leave, and Torben asked us if we finally wanted to come with him, it was Katharina who first said Yes. I tried not to let that disturb me, I tried not to let the fact that it wasn't raining disturb me, and most of all I tried not to be disturbed by seeing Torben take Katharina by the arm from behind as we eventually did get to see one of the sights Torben had told us we shouldn't miss; she even leant against him and her

cheek nestled into the fold of his arm. I talked a lot and smiled backwards and forwards between the two of them and didn't stop until I left.

While I was packing my things and Torben was getting dinner ready, because, as he said, he had a guilty conscience about me cooking all the time, I asked Katharina if she could lend me the book. She started slightly. Sure, she said. If you're interested.

At the station I hugged first Katharina and then Torben, making sure that I didn't hug one longer than the other. Thanks a lot, I said. You're welcome, said Katharina. I'm sorry about the weather, said Torben. They waved to me through the window for a while. I waved back and smiled.

On the train I read Katharina's book. I understood even less than before, which was partly due to the photons and the time-space curve and partly due to my lack of concentration. In one chapter I lost the thread of what I was reading so often that after a while I started opening pages at random. Then I would skim over a few lines and leaf through the book a bit further. Every time my eye fell on the word *wormhole* I read the surrounding paragraph. There was only one paragraph, close to the end, that I think I really understood. It talked about the fact that there had been a period of a few years when science had seriously hoped to make it possible to leap between time levels with the help of wormholes but that for some years now scientists were certain that this was impossible. I read the paragraph twice, then I closed the book. Belgium was already beginning to float before my eyes. In seven or eight hours I would be home. That much could be assumed.