



## The Conquest of the Invisible (or: Mountain without summit)

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### 1) The Coma Dream

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I woke up in one of the still, nameless hours of the night when all of daylight's hustle and noise has retreated to the innermost recesses of darkness like Genie to her bottle. The absolute quietness provided no indication of the hour. Of that first moment of being present again, aware of myself and the world, I remember realizing slightly astonished that I didn't care what the time was - usually so important to me, time, especially when I woke at night - as if I was beyond such mundane things as clocks, as if issues much more important needed to be considered. I felt clearly that this was not the usual phase of the day which was going to end with a morning when life would resume its usual business.

I lay motionless, corpselike, hands folded on my chest, in bottomless darkness. I could not remember its beginning. It felt like it would never end. It was lit only dimly by numerous flickering numbers and jagged white lines running horizontally on dark monitors without emitting a single tone. They moved from valleys to small peaks and down and back again ceaseless, restless, in a frenzy, as if afraid that if they ever stop then they would never be able to start again. I didn't understand their significance. *Do they concern me?*

The monitors were placed on both sides of my bed like mute sentinels watching over me impassively, absolutely indifferent to whether I was awake or sleeping, living or dying. There were some more monitors on the other side of what must have been a very small room, connected to another person lying there like me, inanimate and alone in his or her own dark

## 2 The Conquest of the Invisible



twilight, suspended between life and death as I, not quite there yet (in death), not really here any longer (in life). Painless, fearless, in a state out of time, hope, fear, past or future.

My awakening had been sudden and abrupt, not at all like after a long restorative night's sleep, when drifting into consciousness is a slow, natural process without intention, the way Taoism would have it: Like a child letting go of one's hand, like snow sliding off a branch by its own weight.

It was as if an unheard alarm had gone off and jerked my eyes open, as if a stern inner voice had called me back to action from a state of inertia I had spent an unthinkable outer-space-like distance away. The voice was saying "Enough!", and "See!", and after what may have been a very long time or yesterday I was seeing again and connecting with the world of reality, things, images and thought. In this first moment of awareness it took no time at all to get my bearings - who I was, where I was, and why I was there. "I am Thomas, I'm a climber, and I am in the hospital because I had a car accident on the highway at the *Verona* junction to Milan. I was driving more than 200, and there was an icy patch I didn't expect and it sent me flying".

No doubt about it in my mind. Those were the precise facts. 200 at the Verona junction!? Was I so foolish and immature - at my age!? It did not occur to me that I did not remember the accident itself, whether any other cars had been involved or whether I was alone in the car or not. For a while, all that mattered to me was that I saw an image of the outcome of the crash (and I can still see it today) in utmost detail, as if in a photograph. However, this "seeing" was the strangest thing, because I saw two Thomas: one lying in the hospital, the other one in the car after the accident.

### 3 The Conquest of the Invisible



It is a silver Porsche 911 lying on its left side in the wide, dry bed of the *Isonzo* River. Light-grey boulders as far as the eye can see, some the size of a pebble, some bigger than a fist, washed almost white by sun and water. The river is only a trickle now at the end of winter, before the snow-melt would swell it to tenfold, fiftyfold its present volume and size. The two wheels of the car against a fresh blue sky that have a notion of spring in it, the tires in the air motionless and shiny black, as if never used. The car looks pristine, without the slightest scratch, as if fresh from the factory, as if it had been deliberately and with great care placed there on its side for an artsy commercial photo shoot. My friend Günther, wearing his orange summer-down jacket, is standing beside the car, a cigarette dangling from his mouth as always. He is talking calmly into his cell phone. He seems very relaxed, not in the least bit worried. Günther - why is he there? Has he been in the car with me? How had he got out? I see myself too, behind the wheel, seat belt attached, lying on my left side with my head against the intact window, round boulders only millimeters away touching the glass tenderly, tentatively, as if afraid to break it.

I am not injured and not in pain and unworried like my friend, very calm, lying on the ground quietly without turning my head. For some reason I cannot not do anything but to watch Günther who had turned his back on me. My eyes are wide open, shining very white in my mountain-tanned face, looking at the world like a child, taking in all things as they are, without judgment, surprise or expectation.

I am not waiting for Günther to do something because I am unable to do anything at all, but I am wondering what he has to say and to whom he is speaking. There is no buzzing of the intense permanent traffic from the highway that should be quite near. An unearthly silence prevails over the whole scene. The chirping of birds is increasing its peacefulness. The

#### 4 The Conquest of the Invisible



bushes at the shore of the *Isonzo* are budding in fresh light-green for the first time this year. Lying in the car I cannot not see those bushes nor the rocks from which my cheek was only separated by the window of the car; but lying in the hospital bed looking at the picture of myself as if from a birds eyes perspective I can see it all, and I see all the colors distinctly, green, and silver, grey-white and blue and Günther's orange jacket.

While I was reflecting on this unambiguous image I understood that a number of things did not add up. It was a fact that I was in the hospital and that another *me* was in the car. It was also a fact that the *Isonzo* River is some 200 miles to the east of Verona; that there are no icy patches on the highway this far south on a beautiful spring day; strange too that the car showed not the slightest scratch when it must have been flipping over many times to end up in the middle of this wide river bed far from the highway. Furthermore, while I am not a slow driver, I am not a reckless driver either. Why had I driven so fast in a curve I knew so well, not to speak of the speed limit that is in place there (40km/h)? It did not make sense. In my silent reflective monologue, I also pointed out to myself that the color of my 911 wasn't silver but chalk, *crayon*, and the n in *crayon* is not pronounced but only hinted at towards the curve of the palate when it follows the O. For a fleeting moment, it seemed important to make that clear – *crayon*.

And why did Günther speak into the phone and not to me? If he had been in the car at the time of the accident, how did he get out? It must have been quite a feat for a passenger to climb out of a car that lay on the drivers' side.

I mused for a while in a calm, detached way about these discrepancies and the strange duality of my perspectives. Both seemed very real - but at the same time as if in a dream. I understood certain things were off, and it puzzled me, but I did not care too much.

## 5 The Conquest of the Invisible



The thought occurred to me that maybe, for some strange reason, I was a bit mad like Büchner's Lenz, who, when roaming the mountains in the Romantic period in Germany, should have felt so well had it not been for the fact that he could not walk on his head... Maybe the accident had happened to me but not to me at all. I considered the existence of two realms of reality, one where I was *he* (*him* in the car in the *Isonzo* River), and the other where I was myself, the real Thomas (lying in the hospital); but I was the other one also, as if there were two dimensions that bore certain similarities but were not the same, and how could I be sure which one I should believe in.

This was quite something to think about, but none of it troubled me much, for since my mind worked so well, since I was smart enough not to be fooled by an image that tried to insinuate that the Isonzo was close to Verona, I had nothing to worry about! *Or had I?*