



The Space between Thought

a novel of love, life, death,
tea and time travel

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CHAPTER 26

Kat's eyes opened to darkness, as they usually did. He rarely slept more than a few hours. He knew it would read a little after four a.m., if he bothered to check the clock. If he'd had a clock.

He closed his eyes again and, dropping into a void deeper than sleep, began to calculate. As always, he started from first principles: Assume there is energy. Let that energy be light. Let it radiate from a single point; two points; three; then points to the n th dimension ...

The fundamentals, like a solid foundation, had to be constructed with the most care, always took the longest. As the process advanced, the calculation got progressively, logarithmically more complex. The mathematical formulas undulated as if alive and writhing in pain—swelling, growing fat and unwieldy as they consumed the variables until finally they disgorged the next level and the pressure inside Kat's mind eased, like the moment after vomiting or childbirth. Then, spent, those equations deflated into nothingness. Kat collected their remains, nuggets of mathematical coal with which he methodically, meticulously, dutifully stoked the engine of the next equation. The train of his thoughts gained momentum, inched up through a dense fog on spiraling tracks toward a sunlit summit.

It was a process he could never detail to another human being. It would take a lifetime to scribe every step. His agile mind felt its way, leaping, bounding, sometimes gliding on ethereal thermals. His consciousness became a thin thread tethering a million quantifiables into the approximation of a cosmos.

At 8:22, Kat's eyes flew open, and he sighed heavily.

He would have to put on the kettle.

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The old stone mansion clung to a cliff face overlooking the ocean. Instead of millionaires, it housed starving college students and other young romantics. In true Fairfield fashion, eight large, old bedrooms had been converted into tiny character suites. According to the address on the leather bookmark, Kat's apartment would be the one

below ground. The entrance was around back, on the ocean side of the house. There was no bell, and the outside door was solid oak. Sound did not carry far below ground level.

It was noon when Kat finally opened the door. He had oversized, green, fuzzy, monster-claw slippers on his feet. As if it were all arranged and nothing needed to be said, Kat turned and shuffled back down the stairs, descending into the ground. It was not the warmest of greetings, but it was a refreshing change from “you look horrible/sick/tired/miserable/a mess,” which was the standard theme of greetings he got these days. Earlier, Simon hadn’t been able to think of what he might say to the strange little man, and nothing occurred to him now. He followed. The descent, the dark stone walls, reminded him of the long walk to Hannibal Lecter’s cell.

An odd mix of emotions pricked Simon’s innards. The person he’d come to respect as a brilliant scientific authority had turned out also to be the little toad of a man he loathed. As well, he’d finally humbled himself enough to ask for help, and the toad had forced him to hover at the doorstep for fifteen minutes before answering. He was both angered and in awe, and it teased at him, like wet branches over flame. In his confusion, he simultaneously smoldered and was embarrassed.

The apartment was large and made entirely of stone, dungeon-like. Probably a converted wine cellar, Simon decided. It was well below ground, and there were no windows. From the main room, you could see two other rooms through wide arched doorways, a bedroom and kitchen. Electricity ran along floor edges and up wall corners inside dull gray metal pipes. The lighting was subdued; low-wattage sconces set, like torches, on every wall. A huge hearth had been upgraded with a wood-burning stove. Embers glowed dully through smoke-tarred glass. Unexpectedly, the large granite room was very warm. Simon immediately shed his overcoat.

“Sit.” Kat sighed as if Simon’s presence already drained and bored him. He waved a hand carelessly in the direction of everywhere and without a glance continued on to the kitchen.

The room was stark. There were a couple of darkly stained, old wooden chairs—one draped with lambskin, the other beneath a

quilt—as well, a low, round, battered wooden table. Three walls were lined with bookcases filled with dusty volumes and a bubbling fish tank in which flickering slashes of electric red and blue weaved past green tendrils. Simon sat on the quilt, unwilling to share a sensuous lambskin with someone like Kat. Who knew what events had transpired on the huge, soft, puffy quilt? Though male, Kat always moved in a feminine, feline way, which had helped Simon decide that Kat was probably gay. After he sat, he noticed the quilt pattern was of anatomically detailed male cherubs.

It was more than just warm. It was hot. Simon pulled at his sweat-shirt, bellowing air through it. He wasn't dressing very formally these days.

Kat fussed over an antique gas stove in the kitchen, and Simon peeked into the bedroom. As stark as was the living room, the bedroom was cluttered. Books and magazines lay strewn across the floor. A large wooden tool bench took up most of the space. On it, an oscilloscope, digital voltmeter, some sort of large copper coil and a collection of strange metal implements or sculptures, he couldn't be certain which. Kat's bed was a thin mattress on a rattan mat of some kind. There was no bedding, and Simon suddenly realized that unless it was laundry day, odds were he was sitting on Kat's duvet. He had never been so uncomfortable.

As Kat poured steaming liquid into mugs, Simon noticed tiny stickers pasted to many items around the room, including a magazine, light switch, the door, the table, the other chair.

Kat sat, handed Simon hot tea. A worn and faded label with barely legible Cyrillic characters had been casually stuck to the mug at some time in the distant past. It might have been a price tag. Simon sniffed, then stared into the cup.

"It's herbal. You need it."

It smelled appealing, so Simon sipped. "No bird?" Simon said, nodding toward the aquarium.

"Birds are too expensive. It's an experiment."

"In what? Dinner?" he said into the feline mask.

"Reality," Kat corrected.

Here we go, thought Simon, but he leaned forward to take a closer look at the fish. He was no expert, but they looked like common

neon tetras. As far as he knew, neons were the size of guppies. These were as large as goldfish. He wondered if the aquarium glass was ground to magnify, then realized that the filter and plants all seemed normal size. “If those are neons, they’re huge.”

“They are, and they aren’t,” Kat said.

Simon sighed. Kat sighed back. There was silence. Then Kat sighed again. “They are neons, but they aren’t larger than ordinary neons ... they just look that way from your frame of reference.”

The lines of Simon’s face grew taut. Kat scratched his temple. “By now you must know something about Einstein’s theory of relativity.”

“How—”

“Robert told me about your meeting with him,” he injected. “So, you know about frames of reference, that two people traveling at different speeds have different frames of reference. Well consider that even small differences like one person sitting in a chair while the other, say, spins in circles actually alters everything in each person’s universe. The sitter sees a man spinning before him. The spinner sees a world whirling around him. Which is correct? Both. Neither. If you think of it that way, then you might be able to see that the two people are effectively in two separate realities, two slightly different universes. If you can imagine that, then perhaps you can imagine larger differences in observable realities. What if those fish exist in a universe where three dimensions are at different scales from our own?”

Simon had had enough. “What if they’re just big fish? Forget that. Talk to me about this.” He held out Celeste’s old book.

“I bind each volume myself, by hand. The cover is goatskin. The paper, hundred-pound luna gloss—”

Simon cut him off. “You wrote this?”

“You won’t like my answer,” he warned.

“Are you Dr. Konstantin A. Atkinofski, PhD?” Simon stared hard into Kat’s eyes; he no longer had to refer to the cover. The name was burned into his retinas, his brain stem, and his dreams.

“You still won’t like my answer.” Kat looked like he was genuinely puzzled for a way to respond. Simon waited, stared.

“Let me hear your Russian,” he demanded.

“Kruzhdka, stol, dver’, lampa,” Kat said.

Simon recognized the words from the little labels. He checked his

mug.

“You’re not Russian,” Simon challenged.

“Never have been.”

“How could you have written this book?”

“I wrote it in English.”

Simon ignored the evasion. “So, it’s a work of fiction?” he whispered, letting that possibility sink like a sheet of paper on a pond. Old wooden slats creaked like wicker as Simon slumped heavily into the chair. As if the two of them were attached by a string, Kat leaned forward, became very serious. “Not a word.”

Simon glared sideways at him, looking for any hint of a joke. There was none.

Eventually, Kat said, “I will be Dr. Konstantin A. Atkinofski, PhD.”

Simon closed his eyes for a long time. His lips were drawn down until he displayed jowls and his breathing was long and moist. He wanted to cry. It was time to admit that Kat knew nothing, was nothing more than a twister of phrases.

“So hung up on inconsequential details. Simply focus on the relevant questions,” Kat suggested, his tone suddenly tender.

“Shut up!” Simon spat. Then with taut control, he spoke more quietly. “I’m sorry. Just don’t say anything, okay?” His eyes were still tightly shut as he contemplated that this stupid long shot of his would be the final scene in his two-year-long ordeal, his holy quest. He would not conquer time, could not rescue Celeste, would not bring her murderer to justice, would live plagued by guilt and regret.

Simon stood without a word, and the heavy book flopped to the floor. He barely noticed. Through the fog of his emotional agony, he made his way half-blindly, like a drunkard, toward the door.

“To know what you must do, you must reflect on what you have done.” Kat’s words chased him up the stairwell.

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Simon stood just outside Kat’s apartment on the small patch of scruffy lawn that fringed the great stone house. He did not feel the cold wind that lashed foamy waves into the Pacific and then leapt skyward to clear the cliff face, reach out and whip at him. He felt nothing. Everything. His eyes stung, and droplets formed, traced a

path until they were smeared across his cheeks by the Nor'easter air-brush. Numb as he was, he couldn't tell if he was crying.

He walked to the edge of the precipice, looked down, and dispassionately considered ending his strange odyssey here and now. But the cliff face was timeworn clay and not sheer; the beach, sand and pebble. He could well break his neck, or just a leg, or he might lose only a coat button. It was not a sure thing, and so, not very tempting.

He shook his head, and life seemed to snap back into focus. He was despondent, certainly, but suicidal? He decided not. Just thumbing through possibilities. In the privacy of one's own mind, one can consider the unconsiderable.

The wind nipped at his face and shot a cold bolt even through his trench coat. He shuddered, stepped back from the edge. As he passed Kat's door on the way to his car, he remembered the big book, recalled dropping it. He grimaced and stepped faster toward his old Porsche parked in the semicircular driveway.

As soon as he rounded the corner of the massive stone structure, the wind dropped away abruptly. On the lee side of the structure, even the trees were still.

The old Porsche's door lock was stiff when he turned it, and he made a note to himself to make the rounds with the penetrating oil. The ignition was even tighter, but he forced the issue, and the lights on the dashboard slowly flickered to life, but the engine did not even groan. Simon pulled the key, examined its contours. Nothing.

Experimentally, Simon turned on the radio. It ticked irregularly like some broken wall clock. "What the hell?"

He popped the hood, scanned the engine. What he knew about car engines could be written on the head of a pin with a paintbrush. He tapped the few basic components that he recognized, tried to wiggle the battery terminals, but they were fastened tight.

Hunched over cold metal, Simon considered his options. No doubt, Kat would have no phone and would make some infuriatingly stupid comment that started, "Once, when I was a tree frog in London ..." or some such thing.

Simon peeked over the raised hood, scanned six darkened windows. No one else home. But as he watched, a light flickered on. Simon's heart leapt; he wouldn't have to visit the sideshow freak again.

The apartments were very small—he could tell from the lack of echo when he knocked, if not from the dimensions of the building itself—and he was sure he had the right room. There was no way he couldn't be heard, but still, no one answered. Through the crack under the door, Simon saw the light fade out. There was someone home, and they were ignoring him! Frustration glowed within him, and he knocked again, hard and with the base of his fist. He forced the anger from his voice. "Look, my car's just died. Could you call BCAA for me? I can give you the number. I don't have to come in."

Silence. The light came back on. Simon waited. Silence.

"For Christ's sake, I know you're home. I can see the light under the door. This is Victoria, damn it, not New York!" He was shouting now. He gave the door one final thump and turned away toward the balustrade overlooking the main lobby. That's when it hit him.

The lobby was large, the stairwell cavernous. His shouting should have echoed. Instead, the sound of his words and pounding fell away as if he were standing in a coat closet. Simon turned back toward the door, turned the handle. It was unlocked. Inside a young man stood frozen. He was eating a piece of toast, a tennis ball floated between his position on the tattered sofa and a scudded wall. Whether it was headed for the wall or rebounding was impossible to say. Overhead, the fluorescent tube flickered off again.

Simon grinned widely.

This was Victoria and not New York City and so, as he expected, Kat's door was unlocked. The little man was sitting in the lambskin-draped chair. In his lap, he held his mug, a twisty ribbon of steam suspended above it. His eyes were closed. Feline irises stared blindly. Whether he was asleep or had blinked was of no concern to Simon. He barely glanced at Kat; didn't really like looking at the little freak. Instead, he wandered the apartment, considering his options. He could now retrieve Celeste's book without having to put up with the antics of Sideshow Bob, but he felt the need to leave a message. He wanted a little revenge; for what, exactly, he wasn't sure. He could leave ghostly messages, put the fish in the toilet, dump all the books, even remove the chair from under Kat. He could do anything—rig the gas stove to blow up, if he wanted. He was a spirit, a malevolent ghost. He chuckled at the thought of turning all of Kat's farfetched

beliefs against him.

Simon stopped at the wood stove, opened the tempered glass door, felt a slow wave of warmth envelop his hand as he withdrew a wedge of Douglas fir. Though engulfed in solid flame, it was merely warm, not hot. He stood, momentarily inanimate as the rest of reality, looked across at the immobile figure. He held frozen fire in his palm and thought about dropping it in Kat's lap.

The feline lids flipped open. "Playing with fire. Now there's an apt metaphor."

Simon yelped and fumbled the still-blaze. It flew upward then stopped, floated, flames poking downward near Simon's nose. Simon's saucer eyes slipped from Kat to the floating fire and back several times, his mind unable to resolve the contradiction. If Kat was animate, if time had resumed, then why were the flames still frozen?

Kat rose and moved to the kitchen as if he hadn't noticed that all of time had ground to a halt. And, as if Simon had never left, he continued a conversation that Simon did not recall having started. "The mass of a thirty-foot canvas hose, brass coupling, and valve is about forty kilograms. When empty, hydro dynamically speaking, it has the unwieldy inertial mass description equivalent to a long wafer of aluminum held against a hundred-kilometer-per-hour wind. Taking most things into account, if such a hose is stretched to length and twisted eight times in a twentieth of a second, the material loses all structural integrity," Kat said as he rummaged through a cupboard.

Simon was flustered, filled with embarrassment and a dash of guilt. "What?"

Kat returned carrying a small, brown paper bag, the kind used for lunches or penny candy. As he placed it on the coffee table, he picked up the goat-skin-covered book. Then he pulled the flaming wood from the air in front of Simon's nose and stuffed it back into the wood stove. "Such speeds would even yield measurable quantum effects. Given the stresses, the hose at the heliport should have disintegrated from the force required to move it so far in such a short time. What occurs on the video tape is physically impossible, in this frame of reference."

Simon's embarrassment evaporated. "My God. How could you know all that?"

Kat twisted to look at Simon, cocked his head. “You have a strange fascination with the irrelevant,” he observed matter-of-factly. He turned back, wedged the large volume into the wood stove, splayed the pages so they would ignite well.

“What are you doing? I need that.” Simon felt panic rise.

“A linear intellect messing with such concepts is like a finger stirring acid.”

“But that was Celeste’s,” he pleaded, desperate without understanding why.

“She will possess it no less for its burning,” Kat said as he secured the fire door latch.

“But that book is my only hope ...” Simon’s words trailed off to a whisper. He could have pushed the smaller man aside, pulled open the fireplace, and grabbed the book, but instinct or confusion kept him from acting.

“Correction: That book is only your hope. Without faith, it is just a book; might as well be fiction or ash.”

“But Fawkes said ...”

“Fawkes does not need imperial proof to believe in something. He has faith. You, on the other hand ...” Kat spilled the contents of the paper bag across the tabletop. Simon saw a multicolored array of tablets and capsules. “This is ephedrine, an herbal excitant and natural antihistamine. These ... combinations of various vitamins, herbs and minerals including B-9, B-12, E, choline, ginkgo biloba, arsenic, sodium, selenium, mace ...”

“Arsenic? Mace? You’ve got to be kidding?”

“Arsenic, as found in cereals, fish, and starchy vegetables. And mace, which is basically nutmeg. Along with a variety of others you will never have heard of.” Stubby fingers separated one of each, arranged them in a rainbow ribbon. “And, of course, these are the amphetamines. Uppers.” Kat scraped the line of drugs off the table into a palm, pushed it toward Simon’s face. “Smell.”

Tentatively, Simon sniffed. It smelled nice, and he faintly recognized the odor. He sniffed again. “Little bastard, you put all that into my tea!” He stepped back a pace as if struck, horrified to think what those drugs might be doing to his body and brain. His mind did a quick diagnostic, and except for his palpitating heart and a sudden

sheen of sweat, he felt fine.

Kat unfolded his hand, left the conglomeration of pills floating under Simon's nose, then eased back into the lambskin, slipped his mug from under a lick of still-vapor. "That is why this episode is different from the others you've experienced. You should find it easier to breathe and that the experience lasts longer. As a further bonus, you might have a slight buzz on."

"You gave me mind-altering drugs without my knowledge ..." He wanted to shout into Kat's ink-scarred face, but once again his body refused, and his words came out low and monotone. Somewhere under the tumbling jumble of new and shocking information, he knew that he was talking mostly to himself.

"Long overdue, if you ask me. I will attempt to tell you what you need to know ... if you have a second." He winked a cat's eye at Simon, who found the affectation as revolting as the rest of the man.

He ignored the double entendre. "Why would you help me?" he asked, strength returning to his voice.

"Time travel is not a recipe for muffins, and you are no Martha Stewart. And that is not a good thing." ...

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