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Chapter 9 ((pp 78-93))

The prioress and Sister Iris had spent the whole morning with the stranger, trying to jog his memory. Unsuccessfully, at first, as had been the case when Rivenport, Oriani, Godoy and the nurses had attempted to unlock amnesia's mysterious mechanism. The dark depths of his past had resisted their efforts, however. What's more, his speech impediment and consistent cheerfulness had convinced all involved that his brain must have suffered irreparable damage.

It was only when the sisters read a picture book to the stranger that he gave a sudden reaction. He had merely laughed at the nuns taking turns to read to him at first, but spying an open page with an idyllic country scene unlike anything found in Jujuy, complete with green pastures and grazing horses, he made a harsh sound: 'Kurt.' He ran his fingers over the picture as if he might be able to touch the trees and fields, the lush meadows and the animals. The nuns were overjoyed to have elicited a word from the stranger, and from then on everyone called him Kurt.

This incident had caused widespread euphoria, but it made Rivenport pensive. Was this another clue? A further piece of the jigsaw? Why had the man responded to those pictures? Was it a first indication of healing? What about the name? Kurt. What kind of name was that? Was it even his own?

Rivenport's initial hope that the man's disclosure of his name would lead to further revelations went unfulfilled. Yet this almost vowel-free word, this mumbled, monosyllabic 'Kurt', was endlessly repeated. Kurt himself said almost nothing else. He delighted in pronouncing the word over and over again. Kurt, Kurt, Kurt. But it was also on the lips of everyone involved: the hospital staff, the nuns, the police officers and, very soon, the inhabitants of S. The fascinating news sailed forth like a leaf on the wind, from ear to ear, and in the twinkling of an eye, everyone knew.

The name was pronounced in every possible fashion, none of them correct. No one could enunciate it as sharply and clearly as Kurt himself. The prioress polished it into a soft ‘Gurd’. In the mouths of grunting agricultural labourers in the inns and taverns along the main street it became ‘Kurdte’. At the market it acquired a Latin twist to form ‘Kuerto’. It was there that Maria first heard it as she was buying meat from the butcher – a chicken for consommé and pork fillet for the main course. It was only when Rivenport was sitting in his favourite armchair in the study before dinner, leafing through an entomological journal, that she felt brave enough to bring up the subject. She too mangled the name, though, and the timid ‘Ghurdos’ that passed her lips caused a misunderstanding. Rivenport interpreted it as a reference to the Kurds, an ethnic group from western Asia, and worried that she was preparing to try out an oriental recipe. It was only after much toing and froing that it became clear that his housekeeper had succumbed to the prevailing gossip. She was curious to learn first-hand the identity of the mysterious stranger everyone was talking about. Rivenport instructed her that the man’s name was not ‘Ghurdos’ (he did not come from Kurdistan) but ‘Curt’, which sounded a little like John Curtis, the entomologist and author of what may have been the previous century’s most important study on butterflies.

No matter how one pronounced the stranger’s name, Rivenport still didn’t know what to do with him. His condition was improving by the day and his physical data was positive across the board. His systolic blood pressure was well under 130 millimetres of mercury and the diastolic pressure below 82. His total cholesterol level did not exceed 180 milligrams per decilitre, and his blood sugar was still slightly too low at 75 milligrams per decilitre. He had a healthy appetite and his bowel movements were regular. After his evening visit, Doctor Godoy suggested that Kurt be taken for a drive; after all, he knew nothing but the intensive unit’s four walls and the faces of the staff and the nuns.

‘A little outing will do him a power of good and might even refresh his memory.’

Rivenport was sceptical. They all knew with a probability verging on certainty that Kurt wasn't local. Driving him around the neighbourhood was unlikely to prompt the desired breakthrough. Not that he had a better idea. Kurt had made a complete physical recovery but his mental state showed no signs of improvement. So Rivenport agreed, although he did insist that Kurt be taken to the spot where he had been found because only there could he conceivably react.

The outing quickly became complex and soon resembled an expedition. The first hurdle was to win over the prioress who believed that Kurt's condition was too delicate. She was mollified all morning, only coming round when she received a guarantee that Doctor Oriani would go along with Rivenport, Doctor Godoy and Nurse Sental. She had Sister Iris accompany her and, when the inspector got wind of the operation, Police Sergeant Rodriguez also joined them. And so it was that two fully laden automobiles set out together and the group arrived to find not the familiar desolation of the high plateau but a garden party in full swing.

Pedrales was standing at the front with his wife and children. They were all dressed up, his young daughters with bows in their hair, his wife in a hat with a rakish curve better suited to a Buenos Aires ballroom. Lined up behind them were relatives, friends and acquaintances. Rivenport recognised a few of them from the gentlemen's club, although many men, including Pedrales, considered the local establishment to be beneath them and frequented clubs further away. Placho stuck out from the assembled servants, part of the gathering yet scowling like a caged circus animal torn from its natural habitat.

What a carry-on, Rivenport muttered to himself, and all because the 'Kurt case' had become the talk of the town. Even the Pedrales family was surrendering to the lure of local prattle. The upper crust too were desperate to catch a glimpse of the mysterious stranger all of S. was talking about. The area wasn't exactly spoilt for entertainment, so an event like this was obviously welcome. Usually they had to make do with the grocer Della Luz's amorous liaisons or with stories of 'returnees', characters who had made their way home

from the city and, despite failing there, found a keen audience for their cosmopolitan tales here.

Placho was to thank for this great discovery and, alongside Kurt, he was the star of the show. Rivenport was struck by how the farm workers had been spruced up for the occasion. Their curly hair had been slicked back with large amounts of pomade and parted on the side, their working suits pressed and their boots polished to a shine. It simply didn't suit Placho to be so forcibly primped. His hair rebelled against the pomade and his suit hung with unnatural stiffness from his shoulders. His demeanour and tugs at his clothing suggested that this transformation was not to his liking.

Hands were shaken and small talk made while people cast furtive glances in the direction of the car where Kurt was still sitting. Curiosity eventually prevailed over etiquette. So this was the famous stranger? The man who'd appeared from nowhere? Were the rumours about him correct? Did he really have long yellow hair and eyes like ice? Was he truly almost two metres tall? Could he only grunt like a wild beast?

Kurt got out of the car with the aid of Nurse Sental and Doctor Godoy. The stitches in his thigh were fresh; he was not to make any sudden movements just yet. He was wearing a coat over his patient's smock. The clothes he had been wearing when he was admitted were beyond repair, and there was no question of providing any new clothing before the legal situation had been resolved. Doctor Godoy had therefore lent him a coat for the occasion, the longest and biggest one he owned. It was still far too small for Kurt, two whole sizes too small, which was why he wore it draped over his shoulders like a cape.

The stranger Kurt and the farmhand Placho were brought face to face. Finder and foundling. A circle quickly formed around them. Everyone was waiting expectantly to see what would happen between the two. How would they react? Would Kurt recognise Placho? They stared at each other, unsure of what was expected of them. The foreman spoke first.

‘Placho.’

‘Kurt.’

Those were the only words they exchanged before falling silent again. Kurt smiled benignly, tilting his head slightly and looking around. His eyes wandered from Nurse Sental to Godoy and Rivenport, then on to Sister Iris and over to the unfamiliar faces of the fair-skinned guests and their dark-skinned servants. Rivenport cut the face-off short. Kurt hadn’t recognised Placho and while Kurt was enjoying the grand to-do, the same could not be said of Placho.

‘Placho, be so kind as to show Kurt the precise spot where you found him.’

However, when they reached the place and Rivenport asked Kurt if he could remember, the stranger didn’t appear to understand the question. All of a sudden, his attention was captured by the prodigious landscape all around them. Kurt seemed fascinated and completely mesmerised by the vast expanses and towering mountains, whose size the barren countryside only served to magnify. He signalled by moaning and straining that he wanted Godoy and Sental to release him. So had he understood Rivenport after all? He was thrashing around now. Had something come back to him?

‘Do you recognise something? Let go of him, Godoy.’

Godoy and Sental set Kurt loose. In a flash he was gone. He shot off like a rocket, galloping for several hundred yards until he ran out of breath. The wound in his thigh must surely have reopened and be causing him pain, but in his hope for a clue Rivenport cared less about that now. When they caught up with Kurt, he was scrabbling in the dirt with his hands and feet. He kicked aside the earth and some scattered lumps of rock, disturbing the sand and pressing his hands to the arid ground as if he wanted to feel what kind of element this was. He picked up some earth, but to Rivenport’s horror it wasn’t earth but dung. Small dried balls of guanaco dung, maybe. Kurt held them up in front of his face, enraptured, overwhelmed, as if staring at a handful of gems. He sniffed them.

Rivenport turned away in disgust. Out of the corner of his eye he saw Godoy and Sental knock the dung out of Kurt's hand. The man with the blond mane recalled nothing. He was fooling about! Kurt was playing in the sand like a toddler. He was probably excited by the novelty of it all, not because this place had triggered any memories. To his eyes the whole world must be bursting with discoveries, the energy bottled up during his hospital stay craving for release. The stark contrast between the four walls of his room and the sweeping landscape, along with the myriad sensations, colours, shapes and smells beneath the blazing northern sun, must be engulfing him in the same way a newborn baby, opening its eyes for the first time, looks up at the sky and revels in life's splendours.

Rivenport did not share his pleasure. The experiment had proved a miserable failure. They were in the only place Kurt had definitely visited, but even this had prompted no memories. What were they supposed to do next? Rivenport was not alone in being disappointed; so were the spectators. Their initial excitement soon subsided when it became clear that the encounter between Placho and Kurt on the spot where the latter had been found had yielded nothing. Accordingly, their departure was a far less spectacular affair than their arrival had been.

Rivenport could find no objection to the prioress' proposal to stop off at the church for mass before they returned to the hospital. After this new fiasco he lacked the strength to defy the stubborn woman's will. The prioress, finger raised, was preaching now: 'There is no medicine and no technology that heals like the pure air of the House of God.' With this the entire party proceeded to the church which was directly on the main street of S., not far from the market place.

It was a rounded seventeenth-century building made entirely of light-coloured adobe – a sun- and air-dried amalgam of earth, sand, water and straw. Mass was already underway. When Kurt and his companions entered, the priest was standing at the front by the altar, saying the collect to the worshippers

gathered in the choir. They sat down towards the back so as not to create a stir, but even so half the congregation turned to look at them.

The congregation repeated the priest's words in unison: 'Almighty God and Father . . .', 'Grant us through Jesus Christ, Your Son, our Lord and God . . .', ' . . . who lives with You in the unity of the Holy Spirit and rules for all eternity.' Then a gentleman in the front row stood up, walked forward and read from the Old Testament, concluding with the message 'This is the word of the living God', to which the congregation responded, 'Thanks be to God', before mass continued as masses had continued for hundreds of years.

Kurt sat quietly the whole time, standing up when the prioress instructed him to, sitting back down, standing up again, sitting down and even kneeling once on the prayer stool. The recurring gestures and words, the sweet scent of incense, as intoxicating as the singsong of the rites, and probably the physical exertion – they had had a strenuous morning – all appeared to make Kurt tired. His eyes went dull, his eyelids drooped and Rivenport would not have been surprised if, from one moment to the next, Kurt had dozed off. It was only when the widow Martinez sat down at the small chest organ and struck up some monotonous hymns that Kurt suddenly perked up and began to twitch as he had on the high plateau earlier. The simple chords issuing from the organ pipes wrought a laugh from him and he bobbed his head as if trying to keep time with the music.

At the end of the introduction, when the whole congregation rose to sing, Kurt leapt to his feet. The hymn seemed to provoke a sense of ecstasy in him. He hopped around so much that it was only by exerting a great deal of force that Nurse Sental and Doctor Godoy were able to subdue him. He appeared to want to sing along but of course he couldn't, so he hummed the tune. He seemed to come alive during the dreary hymn singing, a mixture of Latino and litany.

The peace, which Kurt seemed to particularly like because the worshippers did a great deal of hugging, was followed by the liturgical dismissal, and the churchgoers cast covert glances at Kurt as they left the church. Before Father Guillermo, a still-young priest who had only recently been appointed to S.,

could remove his stole, the prioress ushered Kurt and the rest of their party to the front. She asked the priest to give Kurt a special blessing, even though, like other participants in the mass, he had already been blessed.

Father Guillermo crossed himself and went up on his tiptoes to bless Kurt, who was at least a head taller than him and everyone else. Kurt was very keen on the priest's emerald-green stole, even taking it in one hand and stroking it. He also seemed very impressed by the gold vessels and ornaments on the altar before losing interest in them when he caught sight of the wooden chest housing the organ mechanism at the side of the nave. He backed rudely away from the priest before he could sprinkle him with holy water and went over to sit down on the organ bench.

What followed was one of the most astonishing scenes Rivenport had ever witnessed. Even catching the rarest of butterflies had never given him so many goosebumps. Nurse Sental and Sister Iris rushed over to fetch Kurt back. The prioress apologised to Father Guillermo, explaining that Kurt, in his innocence, knew not what he did. However, her words were drowned out by the sudden strains of the organ.

Kurt had initially surveyed the keyboard, bending low over it until the tip of his nose was virtually touching the black keys and running his fingers over the whole keyboard once. After completing this inspection, he immediately began to play without any further preparations. The first sounds rang out cautiously, individually and apparently accidentally from the organ pipes before dying away in the nave. Rivenport knew that this would lead into a caterwaul of wildly dissonant notes and chord jumps, but when he listened more closely he thought he detected some structure amid the chaos. The long interludes between notes unsettled him, but this was no katzenjammer. He was not the only one who was amazed; the others seemed to be listening too now. The nuns and nurses had paused beside the organ and were now watching Kurt raise his hands from the keyboard and press the individual keys with his index fingers.

Was it possible that someone could simply sit down at an organ and produce a coherent melody at the first attempt? Rivenport was stunned. The sounds echoing around the nave sounded familiar. Though it was played relatively plainly and in seemingly disjointed fashion, he eventually realised that this was the song they had sung in unison during mass.

Rivenport had been forced to play the violin as a boy but had since had too little free time to master the instrument. His late wife Rosa, on the other hand, had been a music-lover and a capable pianist, yet even she had never managed to break down a piece that she had heard once, however simple, into its component parts and then reproduce it.

Yet that was precisely what Kurt was doing, and he didn't stop there. Now he expanded the simple series of notes he had played with only his two index fingers at first to three, four and then finally all his fingers. The song was the same, but now it was joined by other sounds, trills and polyphonic chords in thirds, fourths, sixths or octaves, swelling into new melodies. The ponderous litany was performed in such a tonal crescendo that to Rivenport it was transformed into a sophisticated composition.

Kurt played a final note before pulling back his arms in delight. The listeners all stood there in visible shock. An earnest expression came over Kurt's face, as if a shadow were passing across his soul. He closed his eyes and raised his hands until they were almost level with his head before bringing them down on the keyboard with a crash. Incredible though it seemed, Rivenport was suddenly conscious that the now concluded hymn must have been intended merely as an overture. Now Kurt was playing wildly, his fingers flying across the keyboard as if he were desperate to wring every last sound out of the small wooden chest. His body swayed in a circular motion. He kept his eyes screwed shut and his head thrown back as if his inner vision were directed out through the roof and up into the skies. That was how Kurt played. And the music . . . oh, what music! Had Rivenport been religious, even half as religious as Rosa or Maria, he would have called what was taking place inside that bare-walled church in S. a miracle.

It was the most magnificent, most beautiful music his ears had ever heard, music of such sweetness and grace that it was tempting to think it had been composed by angels. Rivenport believed he detected similarities with Johann Sebastian Bach. His wife had raved about Bach and often played his works on the piano or the record player. Not only Rivenport was captivated; the entire group was in rapture: Doctor Godoy, Doctor Oriani, the priest, his fingers still wet with holy water, Nurse Sental, the prioress and Sister Iris, even the humble police officer Rodriguez whose otherwise phlegmatic face was glowing. It was as if the trance that had come over Kurt as he played had transported them all into a state of musical ecstasy.

It was Rivenport who broke the silence at last. He simply couldn't bear not to know the composer of the wonderful melody he was listening to. He turned to the priest and whispered as quietly as he could, 'Do you know what he's playing?'

Father Guillermo shook his head but said a few seconds later that the organist, Mrs Martinez, might know. Rivenport asked Doctor Oriani to go outside and fetch her. He just had to know what this music was. Entering the church a few minutes later, she was as enthralled by this exceptional concert as everyone else. In disbelief she approached the instrument she played day in, day out with considerably less impressive results, unable to fathom how this fair-haired man with the closed eyes and gifted hands was able to produce such complex polyphonic sounds. When she took up a position next to Rivenport, he enquired in a whisper whether she knew which piece Kurt was playing. The organist listened for a minute more and then replied, 'I'm not sure, but I think it might be Dieterich Buxtehude.'

Rivenport had never heard this name before but now he knew it was earthly music he was able to sit down calmly in the front pew and listen to the many sounds coalescing in the air into one single, masterful melody. Kurt played on and on, and the first piece was a prelude to many others. The music flowed from his fingers almost without interruption, as if it had been waiting for far too long to be set free. He played for perhaps an hour, but it was hard to tell because the

music banished all sense of time. Rivenport recognised Pachelbel and Handel, his suppositions confirmed by widow Martinez's nods, and several pieces by Bach that Rivenport liked best of all.

Kurt played with an unexpected passion and concentration that was out of keeping with his otherwise cheery, infantile nature. The magnificence of the music that filled the church that day was equally unprecedented for S. It aroused in those present emotions that none of them would ever forget. A final chord echoed around the nave and then Kurt got to his feet. His cheery demeanour had suddenly returned. There was a fraught silence. No one dared to clap. Kurt looked in bewilderment at all the impassioned faces, all the eyes glued to him as if he were an alien, before flashing them a friendly smile as if to say, 'So what?'

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