



On a fine spring day in the year 1838, a new kind of reality was created on the Boulevard du Temple in Paris. It changed human vision, knowledge and memory. Ultimately, it changed the truth.

Daguerre was a French theatrical designer. He wanted to create scenery that looked like reality itself. He let light fall on iodized silver plates through a hole in a wooden box. Mercury vapour made what was in front of the box visible, but it took the silver salts a long time to react: horses and pedestrians moved too fast to be shown, movement was still invisible, the light left a record only of buildings, trees and streets on the plates. Daguerre had invented photography.

In his 1838 photograph, the figure of a man is clearly visible in the formless shadows left behind by the movement of carriages and people. While everything around him is in motion he stands still, his hands clasped behind him. Only his head is blurred. The man knew nothing about Daguerre and his invention; he was a passerby who had stopped to have his shoes





cleaned by a bootblack. The apparatus was able to make a visible record of the bootblack and his customer – they were the first two people to appear in a photograph.

Sebastian von Eschburg had often thought about that motionless man and the way his head was dissolving. But only now, only after everything had happened and the course of events could not be reversed, did he understand that the man was himself.





Green







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The village of Eschburg is halfway between Munich and Salzburg, a little way from the major roads. Only a few stones of the castle up on the hill that once gave the village its name still stand today. An Eschburg had been Bavarian ambassador to Berlin in the eighteenth century, and when he came back he built the new house beside the lake.

The last time the Eschburgs had been rich was at the beginning of the 20th century, when they owned a paperworks and a spinning mill. In 1912 the first-born son and heir drowned in the sinking of the *Titanic*. Later, the family had felt a little proud of that. He had booked a first-class cabin, and was travelling with his dog as his only companion. He had declined to get into a lifeboat, presumably because he was too drunk.

His younger brother sold the family firms, speculated, and lost most of his fortune during the crash of the 1920s. After that, there was never enough money to renovate the house properly. Plaster flaked off the walls, the two side wings were not heated in winter, and moss grew on the rooftops. In





spring and autumn metal buckets stood in the attics to catch the rain.

Almost all the Eschburgs had been hunters and travellers, and for two hundred and fifty years they had filled the rooms of the house with the things they liked. There were three umbrella stands made of elephant feet in the entrance hall, and mediaeval boar spears on the walls – long lances used for hunting wild boar. Two stuffed crocodiles lay locked in combat on the upstairs landing; one had lost a glass eye, and part of the other's tail was missing. In the domestic offices, there was a huge brown bear with almost all the fur worn away from his belly. The horned heads of kudu and oryx were mounted on the library walls, and the head of a squint-eyed gibbon stood on a shelf there between busts of Goethe and Herder. Beside the hearth lay drums, natural horns and lamellophones. Two grave, black figures, African fertility gods made of ebony, sat either side of the billiard room door.

Icons of saints from Poland and Russia hung in the corridors, next to enlarged postage stamps from India and Japanese ink drawings. There were little Chinese wooden horses, spear tips from South America, the yellow fangs of a polar bear, the head of a swordfish, a stool with the four hooves of a sable antelope, ostrich eggs, and wooden chests from Indonesia to which the keys had long ago been lost. One guest room contained fake Baroque furniture from Florence, in another there was a glass-topped showcase full of brooches, cigarette cases, and a family Bible with a silver lock.

Right at the back of the park there was a small stable with





five stalls. Ivy grew on the walls and grass between the paving stones in the yard. Paint was peeling off the shutters, rust had turned the water brown. Firewood was drying in two of the stalls; tubs for plants, salt for the paths and fodder for game were stored in another.

Sebastian came into the world in this house. His mother had intended to give birth in hospital in Munich, but the car had been standing out in the cold too long and wouldn't start. Her labour pains began while Sebastian's father was still trying to get the ignition to catch. The pharmacist and his wife came up from the village, and Sebastian's father waited in the corridor outside his wife's room. Two hours later, when the pharmacist asked if he wanted to cut the baby's cord, he shouted at the man that the starter was no bloody good. Later he apologized, but in the village they wondered, for a long time, what that portended.

Not much attention had ever been paid to children in Sebastian's family. They were taught how to hold a knife and fork properly, boys learned to kiss a lady's hand, and they were told that as far as possible children should be seen and not heard. Most of the time, however, no one took any notice of them. Sebastian was eight when he was allowed to eat with his parents for the first time.

Sebastian couldn't imagine living anywhere else. When he went away with his family in the holidays, he felt strange in the hotels where they stayed. He was glad to come home and find everything still there: the dark floorboards in the corridors; the



worn stone staircase; the soft afternoon light in the chapel, which didn't stand quite straight.

There had always been two worlds in Sebastian's life. The retinas of his eyes perceived electromagnetic waves between 380 and 780 nanometres, his brain translated them into two hundred tones of colour, five hundred degrees of brightness and twenty different shades of white. He saw what other people saw, but *in his mind* the colours were different. They had no names because there weren't enough words for them. His nanny's hands were cyan and amber; his hair, as he saw it, shone violet with a touch of ochre; his father's skin was a pale greenish blue. Only his mother had no colour at all. For a long time Sebastian thought that she was made of water, and took on the shape that everyone knew when he went into her room. He admired the speed with which she always successfully performed this transformation.

When he learned to read, the letters had colours too. 'A' was red, like the village school-teacher's cardigan, or the Swiss flag that he had seen on the mountain hut last winter: a fat, strong, unmistakable red. 'B' was a much lighter tone: it was yellow and smelled like the fields of oilseed rape he passed on the way to school. It floated in the room above pale green 'C', it was higher and friendlier than dark green 'K'.

Since everything had not just its visible but also its other, invisible colour, Sebastian's brain began putting that world into order. Gradually he created a map of colours with thousands of streets, squares and alleys, and every year a new level was added to it. He could move about that map, he found his



memories through the colours. The map became a complete picture of his childhood. The household dust was the colour of the time he spent in the lakeside house: a dark, soft green.

He did not talk about it; he still thought that everyone saw in the same way. He couldn't stand it when his mother wanted him to wear brightly multi-coloured sweaters; he would fall into a rage, tear them to pieces or bury them in the garden. Finally he got his way, and was allowed to dress solely in the dark blue jackets that were the usual rustic garb of the district. Until he was ten years old they were his daily wear. In summer he sometimes wore a cap just because it was the right colour. The au pair girl guessed that Sebastian was different. He commented on it when she wore a new perfume or a different lipstick. Sometimes she called her boyfriend in Lyons. She spoke French to him on the phone, but she felt as if Sebastian understood that foreign language, as if the sound of her voice was enough for him to know what she was saying.

At the age of ten Sebastian went to boarding school. His father, his grandfather and his great-grandfather had been to the same school before him, and as the family no longer had enough money for the fees, he obtained a scholarship. The school sent a letter to his home, saying exactly what clothes every boy was to bring with him, how many pairs of trousers and pyjamas, how many sweaters. The cook had to sew numbers into all his clothes, so that the school laundry could keep the children's things separate. When she brought his trunk down from the attic, the cook cried, and Sebastian's father told her crossly to stop making all that fuss, it wasn't as if the boy was going to





prison. She shed tears all the same, and although the letter expressly forbade any such thing, she packed a jar of jam and some money among his clean shirts.

The cook wasn't really a cook; it was a long time since the Eschburg family had employed any domestic staff. She was one of the family herself, a distant relation, some kind of aunt, and in better days she had been the housekeeper and lover of a German consul to Tunisia. The consul died without leaving her anything, and she was glad to be taken in by the Eschburgs. Sometimes she was paid a salary, but usually she simply got free board and lodging.

When Sebastian's father took him to the boarding school, the child would have liked to take the white water-crowfoot flowers floating on the lake with him, and the wagtails and plane trees from the front of the house. His dog was lying in the sun, his coat was warm, and Sebastian didn't know what to say to him. The dog died six months later.

