

# **The Death of Oskar Taylor**

**By**

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Snow is falling in Oskar Taylor's living room and he can not tell if he is awake or dreaming, if he is standing upright or being carried on air. The familiar sounds of the world have become muffled, and the silence beneath all things is seeping into all things. The old man is becoming diffuse and defused through the once recognisable rooms of his home and out toward the front door, where someone is knocking. He can hear his wife, who is dying of cancer, in the front room, stirring and shifting on the cot. The crackle of her bedclothes against the plastic under-sheets is like a radio caught between stations. "The sound of radiation from the beginning of the universe," he thinks to himself, "from the stars where all matter was forged, the hydrogen, nitrogen and carbon, which are the foundations of all life, all beauty and all meaning in the world and which are also the constituents of cyanide gas." His wife is speaking, perhaps to herself or to him, but he can't go to her now, can't bear witness again to her skeletal remains and, as well as the disinfectant and shit, the constant stench of death that surrounds her and that has pervaded every moment of his life since...

He is trying to remember a time before death began to haunt everything, but he can see only the sketchy figure of a young man in old-fashioned clothes, inhabiting a series of sepia-toned hallucinations in which (despite his untroubled appearance) he already knows... can already smell the sickly-sweet aroma of what is to come. Of the gas chambers and of the chimneys and of the damned, laid out the way she is now, but in their hundreds and thousands and in their own filth, too weak to hope but tortured by hope nonetheless. He has often reflected that it is the human desire for life which makes death so unbearable, for dignity that makes its degradation so shameful and hope itself that makes hope unendurable. Yet we endure because we must endure or choose extinction, which is to choose nothing, and one can not choose nothing.

Snow is falling in Oskar Taylor's living room, and he can not tell if he is awake or dreaming. He has opened the front door and moved outside on to the step. He can feel the smooth, cold concrete under his bare feet and smell the warm pepper smells of the neighbours' cooking, drifting into the dark and lamplit street. A young woman hands him a package and holds a clipboard for him to sign. He takes the pen from her hand and signs, *O. Vingerhuot*. He looks at the name which once belonged to the young man and wonders why it has been so long since he has written it down. Then he looks up and smiles at the woman who smiles in return, thanks him and heads back down the path toward a waiting van. She is pretty, dark-skinned and sharp-featured and her black ponytail swings behind her as she jogs away from him. The street is peaceful, and the snow is beginning to fall here, too, the way the ash from the ovens fell that first morning in the camp, settling on the ground and on their clothes.

Sometimes all this is real, and the camp is only a dream and sometimes all of this... the pretty girl, the mail, the ordinariness of his home, his family, the pleasant smells of cooking, and the young man in his old-fashioned clothes are a dream and the Arbeitslager the reality to which he will awake at any moment. But now he is dreaming about the day his Sarah taught him to dance and to have faith in the world again and about his work and his books. But the world is shifting beneath him. Opposites are fusing and becoming indistinguishable; memory and existence, truth and untruth, hope and unhope are melting, vaporising, condensing and freezing into snow. It is settling on the corpses piled outside the incinerators and dappling the iron-hard ground around his feet as he drifts into the street and the inescapable cold. He has no shoes and only a threadbare shirt and trousers. Lights are being shined into his eyes and an engine is revving. He looks up expecting a rifle butt, but it is the young woman's face and the slithering and careening van that he sees as a man's voice shouts, "Wach Auf!"