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The Gap

I

The first appearance of the two accused, Franz T. and Eberhard M., drew an astonished reaction from the public gallery. It was not intellectuals with a hint of the office worker about them who stood before the court, which was to pass judgement on their supposed responsibility for the disappearance of twelve million marks from a casino, but rather respectable, almost timid members of the lower middle class. Nor did the start of the proceedings conform to expectations:

At the very beginning, when they were being asked about their personal circumstances, former tax consultant Eberhard M.—with the agreement of Franz T., seated next to him, whose other jobs had included temporary waiter, windsurfing teacher, film extra and electronic engineer—stressed that the information in the documents had to remain provisional, since these might not have been their only careers—although point for point they matched the facts in every detail.

That was not "the only truth", shouted Franz T. when the indictment had been read to the court—although he was unable to provide any further explanation of this, being interrupted by the presiding judge who attached a great deal of importance to the idea that there was only truth, and that it could only be determined after the end of the main hearing.

Thus, only the statements of the accused could provide a clear idea of their view of what had happened:

"It is not our intention," Eberhard M. began, "to contradict the version of events proposed by the public prosecutors. Everything may have occurred as they suggest, but—and we think that the question of criminal responsibility currently under discussion has an importance that goes far beyond our individual case—the truly remarkable thing in relation to the disappearance of the twelve million—about whose location we are sadly, as prisoners, unable to provide any information—is not the fact of its unnoticed removal from the safe, but the possible discovery of different, really existing realities connected with it."

A whisper passed through the court, the court reporter took notes with a frown, the lawyers laughed with a shake of their heads—not without a flicker of uncertainty in their faces.

'There may even,' the accused continued, 'be several true realities in different periods of time; we were unable to find that out. As to the question of the vanished money, however, that is of secondary importance; what is crucial is that the longer we are prevented from trying to get it back, the more likely it is that it will be spent by someone else who may get hold of it in another reality. Incidentally, this suggests that traditional

legal ideas need to be revolutionised: is it right, for example, that the individual involved in that case will not be subject to criminal proceedings, while we, as we have been informed, face a sentence of five to ten years? At this point we might also remark that—'

The rest of his words were drowned in a loud murmur from the public; according to his lawyers, Eberhard M. stressed that the sentencing and imprisonment of the two accused would put the seal on the disappearance of the twelve million once and for all.

An intervention from the public prosecutor was rejected on procedural grounds—he had demanded that a stop be put to 'this nonsense', but was informed that the accused were talking about the case at hand, and that it was thus the court's responsibility to decide what was sense and what was nonsense—after this interruption on behalf of the prosecution, it was Franz T's turn to provide more detailed explanations:

The whole business started when we got bored at work. There we were sitting at our monitors day in, day out, and we had nothing else to do. The pictures from the gaining rooms were the most interesting ones, but during working hours they were the least important, because of course they were manned by plain-clothed guards. The pictures from the entrance and the lifts were hardly any more varied—there was a certain excitement in the fact that we had to make a preliminary check on them; but even here we practically never had to go into action, and watching the same pictures on the screens with the necessary concentration was becoming more and more of an effort. Most disagreeable were the screens showing the street, the underground car park and the various staircases. They were empty most of the time, and every time a person appeared we had the same reflex reaction: "Was that something?—Does it mean something?—Are we supposed to react in some way?"—all questions that could be answered immediately with a blunt "No". and we found ourselves thrown back into a state of dull, listless brooding. All sense of time threatens to vanish, there's nothing to talk about, soon you can't tell whether you're awake or dreaming—and we might remark in passing that those pictures pursue you into your dreams—you think you're hallucinating and you can't tell whether or not you've just seen something, and you've long since given up trying to see the sense in looking at something when you know what it's going to be. But your resistance to the slow process of seeing your own person, your identity and, finally, your intelligence, overpowered, breaks down under the relentless-ness of this deadly, farcical repetition, and in your few lucid moments you find yourself thinking, "If things go on like this, I'm going to turn into an animal!"

'I—Eberhard M. picked up the thread—'of course felt much the same. I must, however, confess that my reaction was rather fatalistic, and I tried as best I could to get through the working day, although I sometimes came close to wasting away with apathy. If the court takes all these circumstances into account, it will surely understand my astonishment when, one night, at that dead time between two and three, suddenly, on the screen, I saw my colleague going up the stairs. I rubbed my eyes. I pinched myself, I grabbed his arm: he was sitting next to me, flesh and blood, and at the same time he was going up the stairs; it was crazy, I thought, I'm going mad, my sense organs have given out on me, particularly since my colleague went on acting as if everything was normal, and paid no attention to my excitement. Finally he disappeared from the picture and I decided I must have been hallucinating—when he appeared again down at the bottom! I slowly grasped that I was having my leg pulled, and I calmed down. When I saw that Franz could no longer keep from grinning, I asked him how he'd done it.' It was quite easy, of course,' said Franz T., "once I'd realised things couldn't go on like

that I thought, well, then, make your own programme. Or a different one, at least. Right, so what I had to do was get hold of a recorder, do a bit of rewiring and find a chance to do a recording. It went like a dream. I only wish I'd thought of recording his face as it switched from dull and dozy to staring, gaping like a halfwit—that was a sight, priceless, and something I'll never forget as long as I live.'

It may well be that it was highly amusing for my colleague to see me like that. And his need for diversion may have been satisfied for the time being. My own, on the other hand, had just been awakened, and I suggested continuing the game, but with a few variations.'

II

'First of all,' Eberhard M. began to explain, 'I wanted to be filmed too. The games rooms, free at that time of day, were best suited to the purpose. As we were playing back the tape on a different monitor, we were able to see simultaneously what we had just recorded and the usual view of the games room next to it.'

Franz T. continued: 'I asked him to go back downstairs, so that I could see him both live and on tape, side by side. Please don't ask me why.' With these last words he turned to the presiding judge as if awaiting a reply. The judge smiled and nodded.

'We agreed,' Eberhard M. continued, 'that I would take up exactly the same position and, if possible, say something without moving my mouth—he was to guess which was the real and which the recorded image.'

'Having arrived downstairs,' Franz T. picked up the thread, 'he did assume the agreed position, but called to me to come down, because the door to the safe was unlocked, and hardly had he finished speaking than he vanished from the screen so quickly I thought his real image was the one on the tape, and that it had come to an end.'

'But I didn't give it another thought, and ran downstairs.'

'He was nowhere to be seen. At first I thought it was a bad joke and called out to him. No reply. I looked around the rooms. No Eberhard anywhere. I tried the door to the safe. It really wasn't locked. But he couldn't be in there either, as the cameras set off an alarm the minute someone walks into the picture. I stood in the games room without a notion of what I should do.'

'Exactly the same thing happened to me. When I thought Franz was on his way down to me I walked back to the unlocked safe door and thought about what I should do. But Franz didn't come. I called up to him once more. No reply. Was he playing a trick on me again? I got annoyed and went upstairs.'

'But there was no Franz up there either.'

'We couldn't have missed each other,' Franz went on, 'because there was only one way to get from the gaming hall to the surveillance room. So this time I was the one whose leg was being pulled. I decided to go back upstairs.'

'In the meantime the tape had run out. Snow flickered on the monitor. I began to feel uneasy.'

'I felt the same in that respect,' Eberhard M. confirmed. 'Had something happened the moment we used the monitor for something else? A robbery? And was Franz working with the thieves? I considered phoning the relevant section of the police, where we had a special number. But when I got my wallet out of my jacket I started having doubts: if I did that, it would come out that we'd been manipulating the surveillance system. On the other hand, Franz might be in danger!'

'I thought much the same, but I was understandably more hesitant about getting help, given that it was me who had started the whole thing off. I looked thoughtfully at the empty picture showing the gaming hall. Eberhard had been in it only a moment before. Mechanically, with no precise purpose in mind, I ran back the tape on which I'd recorded him. Perhaps I wanted to console myself with a reproduction of him.'

'I, meanwhile, had decided to have another look down.. stairs. But once again there was no one to be seen, and I made one last attempt to get Franz on the intercom.' And I thought, 'Franz el'. broke in, 'there was something wrong with my eyes. Hardly had the tape started up again when, just as suddenly as he had vanished, Eberhard reappeared on the live screen! At exactly the same moment I heard him calling to me, sounding upset I answered him, and once he had stormed back upstairs we got into an argument. He claimed he had been upstairs and had left his wallet behind and accused me of stealing it because it was, of course, nowhere to be found.'

'It was a while before we calmed down again and managed to listen to each other's stories. Unlikely as Franz's story sounded, neither could I imagine him stealing my wallet, and if he had been having me on he'd have given it back then and there.'

'First of all,' Franz began to explain the further course of events, 'in an attempt at reconstruction, we looked again at the tape we had recorded. But we couldn't see anything out of the ordinary.'

'But then I remembered the speed with which he had vanished and reappeared. In fact, he said, he hadn't moved with particular speed at any point. And if I recalled correctly, he was, both when he vanished and when he reappeared, in the same position on both screens, the position we'd originally agreed upon.'

'Maybe it was a kind of short circuit resulting from the fact that both screens showed identical images? Eberhard said no: the same picture often appeared on several screens, but it never produced a short circuit. My objection: these are all reproductions, while here you have a match between the reproduction of reality and reality itself, the man-made image of reality and that same reality. Could it bear that? Eberhard asked which?, and asked the difference:

'Only in purely technical, logically arrestable reality would a short circuit have meant an instrument breakdown. But the instruments went on working!'

'Might the disturbance of reality that we have perceived,' Eberhard M. interrupted excitedly, 'be attributed to a break-down in our own heads? A short circuit of reason, so to speak? And a short circuit both simultaneous and simultaneously perceived?'

'Both of us knew, however,' Franz T. objected, 'that we hadn't lost our reason. The "short circuit" therefore had to take in the whole of reality in some form as yet unknown'

to us.

'And we had a clue to that: Eberhard's vanished wallet'

'The problem could not be solved,~ Eberhard M. concluded, 'with logic and reasoning alone. We had to proceed in experimental fashion, So I proposed that we repeat the whole sequence of events using the same tape. Working on the premise that the congruence of reality and its reproduction was the crux of our dilemma, we worked out a number of situations in which I would assume exactly the same position as I had in the recording, and a number in which I assumed a different one.'

It was Franz T.'s turn to speak. 'Now everything started happening very quickly. In fact the process repeated itself as we suspected it would: at the moment when both positions matched, he vanished from the live screen, and contact was broken.'

'And hardly had I taken the position up again,' added Eberhard M. 'when our contact was re-established.

'We timed our experiment, and once we'd observed that our measurements agreed to the second, I decided to test our premise and go and get the wallet back,'

'To avoid taking any risks we established not only the exact time at which tape and reality were to match, but also established, down to the smallest detail, every hand movement, every body posture, even gestures and facial expressions: he took up his position, vanished from the screen—and reappeared after the agreed time. Laughing, he took his wallet out of his jacket.'

'Laughing with relief, however,' Eberhard M. hastened to add, 'at being freed from uncertainty: I had been in familiar, all too familiar surroundings, and yet were they somehow different? Nothing had changed, except that contact with Franz had broken off, and yet it suddenly seemed strange and uncanny. I secretly hoped, during my last steps towards the control room, that it would all turn out to be a joke, and Franz would be waiting for me, laughing—but that's not how it was. The room was empty, the wallet was still where I had inadvertently left it. I quickly picked it up and hurried back to the agreed place.'

Franz T. summed things up. 'So we seemed to have proven that the perfect identity between a recorded and an actual reality led to the breakdown of the latter, to a cellular division, a kind of cloning of reality, you might say, the constitution of a precisely identical reality, in which everything is duplicated, apart, perhaps, from human beings.'

Once again, his face bright red, the prosecution lawyer interrupted. Controlling his voice with some effort he demanded that 'this impudence' be brought to an end. He was rebuked by the judge. It was disagreeable to have to remind the prosecution that forbidding the accused to speak could constitute grounds for appeal.

Franz T. continued, 'Only gradually did we realise that we might have made a discovery which could have utterly unpredictable ramifications. Either we had been dreaming or we had gone mad—or else we had discovered something that could revolutionise man's view of the world more completely than the discoveries of Galileo or Einstein; a discovery, then, for which we would go down in history.'

'Rather than concentrating on this historical dimension, however, we had—and with the best will in the world we can't say which of us had it first—quite a different idea: the money in the safe.'

III

Eberhard M. cleared his throat. 'The source of all this excitement—and I should like to make this perfectly clear—was the fact that the door to the safe was unlocked. So it was only because we were fulfilling our duties so conscientiously that our thoughts in this confusing situation immediately turned to the money in the safe. In view of the fact, of course, that we had just made the discovery that reality existed twice over, we couldn't help thinking that the money would also have to exist in duplicate.'

'And not only twice,' said Franz T. quietly, 'if we assume that the duplicated reality must also be subject to duplication—something that we could easily verify—the twelve million must also exist twice, three times, four times—an infinite number of times.'

'So it was primarily a problem of transport,' Eberhard M. continued, but was immediately interrupted by the judge:

'Am I given to understand that you intended to transfer money?'

'I thank you for this question, your honour,' said Eberhard M., 'for my statement naturally requires some clarification. We intended to transfer the money from this second reality—which we had discovered and towards which we therefore felt we had certain rights of ownership—into our own, in which we probably are at this very moment, and not, for instance, the other way round! This must be acknowledged as the actual intention behind our action! All further actions were, in fact, only ways and means of realising that intention—although it might initially seem either otherwise or even the other way round!'

'Our problem was, in fact,' Franz T. hastened to explain, 'that we didn't know whether the other reality was purely material, or whether people existed in it as well. We hadn't met with ourselves there, so we did not need to assume, for example, that there was a police station there, or more precisely, a manned police station where someone might object to our intention of removing the money from the safe in the second reality'

'So,' the public prosecutor was heard to say, his voice raised in fury, 'the conditions of ownership were not entirely straightforward!'

'Seen from over there, of course not,' Eberhard M. answered quickly, 'but from here, they certainly were. No legal provision has hitherto been made for goods from another reality.'

'The public prosecutor shook his head and bent over his papers.'

Franz T. spoke again. 'That was not the only reason we had to avoid any risks. Could it not be that realities were constantly being duplicated somewhere or other, since the invention of film and television? Could it be that some people didn't even notice that they were suddenly in a different identical world? Could this be the cause of the disappearance of fifty thousand people a year in this country, whom no one has been able to find despite watertight surveillance and the introduction of new ID cards? Wasn't

a crashed light aircraft recently found with no one in it? Could this have led to the failure of the authorities in the face of political violence? Could it be that people were being duplicated without being aware of it? Are we all in real reality, or have we been in the second or third or the who-knows-which reality for heaven knows how long? As regards these proceedings, might we not also ask ourselves whether they are actually happening in the reality in which we imagine them to be happening? And those are only a few examples of the questions we had to ask ourselves?

'Anyway, they compelled us,' Eberhard M. summed up, 'first of all to carry out an experiment in the first reality, as we might call it for purposes of convenience, that might make it easier to transfer the money from the second?'

'We can't really talk of compulsion here,' protested the visibly enraged state prosecutor, who seemed to be on the verge of losing his temper altogether, 'it is an outrage to use such formulations in this context; I ask the court to reprimand the accused.'

The judge frowned.

'The court has noted the formulation used—and also the public prosecutor's intervention. Further counsel will be required before we can arrive at an opinion on the matter. It is the right of the accused in all cases to present his own version of events?' Turning to Eberhard M., he said, 'Please continue!'

'Thank you very much!' said Eberhard M. 'Whichever way one looks at it, the risk involved in bringing the money back from the safe in the second reality was, given the many imponderables, too great—so the obvious thing to do was to borrow the money from the safe in the first reality, place it near the transfer area, transfer it to the other reality, and then to fetch the duplicate from there.'

Since it was becoming clear that they needed to provide a technical explanation of how the removal of the money was to be effected despite all the safety precautions they had undertaken, Franz T. spoke.

'That was quite simple, of course, it worked according to the same principle which we had already been following the whole time. We made a fairly lengthy recording with the surveillance camera of the room next to the safe. Then we fed our recording back into the camera and were able to walk into the anteroom without setting off the alarm.'

'As we knew the combination of the safe for professional reasons, we were able to get the money out in only a few minutes.'

'That is a confession!' cried the public prosecutor, his voice tremulous with triumph.

Seriously irritated, the judge turned to the prosecutor. 'I must call you to order,' he said, 'this is an explanation of the matter at hand, which only the court is allowed to interrupt. The court is, as I have already stressed a number of times, in a position to form an opinion itself. Even the defence strategy employed by the accused, unorthodox as it may be, cannot be grounds for the instruments of the law to behave in a similarly unorthodox manner.'

Now Eberhard M. picked up the thread. 'As I already knew of the alternation of the realities from my own experience, my intention was to fetch over the money that was,

we presumed, already in the second reality. I only mention the fact that we naturally intended to return the original money simply to complete the picture, because we never for a second dreamed of keeping it for ourselves?

'The way we imagined it, we wouldn't have needed it anyway,' added Franz T., 'once we were in possession of twelve million things would really get going: because these would be duplicated again, and the resulting twenty-four would turn into forty-eight—and so on and so on. The possibility of switching from the second to the third, and from the third to the fourth, and collecting the money in each—that was excluded for the time being. We didn't have a great deal of time to carry out our experiments.'

'Experiments' the prosecutor murmured.

Eberhard M. went on: 'So we put the money on the roulette table near the camera, made a recording a few minutes long, and after making a final check to see that everything was OK, Franz ran the picture. Shortly afterwards the connection was broken—so I was in the second reality.'

'Was I really going to find the money? And would it be equally easy to bring it back? Would I, thanks to these inexplicable and indisputable events, be a millionaire, or would I face a rude awakening?'

'My heart beating madly, I turned around:

'There it was!

'I quickly grabbed the money and assumed my position.

'I waited impatiently for contact to be re-established.

'We'd finally done it!'

'But at that moment we saw something astonishing,' Franz T. continued. 'Hardly had Eberhard reappeared on the control monitor, than we noticed that the money had vanished from the roulette table!'

A loud whisper in the public gallery; a gasp of excitement even escaped the public prosecutor, before he started muttering to his colleagues.

'Silence in court,' shouted the judge. Even he seemed to have grown nervous.

Anyway,' Eberhard hastened to say, 'I still had the money from the second reality on me!'

'After Franz had hurried downstairs, we stood around for a bit, wondering how we could recover from our disappointment'

'You don't,' Franz T. interjected, 'throw away the chance of being a millionaire as easily as that.'

'So I suggested,' Eberhard M. continued, 'returning to the status quo ante. According to the laws of logic which—in spite of the experiments we had just undertaken, which tended to contradict them—we still thought we could apply to these phenomena, if the duplicate that we had brought back could be returned to the second reality, the original money from the first reality would reappear.'

'No sooner said than done. I took the money, assumed my position, waited until the

contact broke—'

'—but no money appeared when Eberhard vanished,' Franz T. concluded his explanation. 'I waited with feverish excitement to see what would happen now, whether Eberhard would bring it back, or whether it would only reappear when he came back—but there was no sign of it. I wondered briefly whether Eberhard ought be taking me for a ride, so that he could have the twelve million all to himself, but that was nonsense, because the twelve million were only going to be the basis of our plan.'

'I wondered that as well,' said Eberhard M., 'but as I saw it there was the additional problem that Franz couldn't have got downstairs as quickly as that.'

'Obviously, we concluded, the duplicate had assumed the properties of the original after it had caused the original to vanish, and now possessed the attribute of presumably real reality. Therefore, if anything was as it should be, it must be possible to bring the money, like the wallet, back from the second reality.'

'So we made a new recording, and with the greatest excitement I waited for the contact to break, my heart was thumping its way into my throat, I turned around:

'No money.'

'At that very moment everything was clear to me in a flash.'

'Because we had made a new recording, this second reality could only be a duplicate of the first one: hence one without the twelve million.'

'It seemed an age before I came back.'

'In the meantime I'd noticed it as well,' Franz T. said sadly, 'and I'd also been struck by something else: the original of the recording, made when the twelve million was still there, had been wiped when we taped over it.'

'This idiot,' said Eberhard M., 'has effectively wiped the twelve million.'

There was a moment of unease in the court.

'Which doesn't mean,' Franz T. remarked, 'that the money has actually been wiped! How do we know that the second reality, once it has been created, doesn't exist for ever? Might we not just have to find a way into it again? How do we know which reality we're in at the moment, for example?'

'But we would not answer such questions that night. Day was already dawning, arid, more or less apathetically, we let events take their course.'

'However,' said Eberhard M., 'the chances of getting the money back will diminish with the passing of each day that we—if we are sentenced—are forced to sit in jail instead of being allowed to go in search of the lost reality.'

The petition on the part of the defence that the court should decide which was the real reality was rejected as inadmissible.

The second petition to test the statements of the accused with an experimental demonstration, so as to ascertain its truth component. was granted. The presiding judge then added the following procedural constraints: first of all that the public should be

excluded, and secondly, that the process should be followed via the court's surveillance camera.

The court official who, following Franz T.'s instructions, matched the recording with the picture in the courtroom, later reported:

'Suddenly they were all gone.'