

The joints of the old house creaked in the breeze

by

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The joints of the old house creaked in the breeze. Brittle wooden bones settled deeper into their foundations. The nails in the rafters shuddered, remembering seasons of long ago, still recollecting fragments of the past in their death-like state. Time had passed, day after month after year, settling into this – the winter of Klara’s life. The frost played havoc with her rheumatism, gave her chills that could well be deathly, drained the blood from her already pale cheeks and yet – the frost preserved her, returned sensation to her numbed body, gave her room to contemplate. And oh! how her mind would wander on nights like this, as she sat frozen to the bench, blanket becoming superfluous, oh how she would wander! Skipping so lightly over the white white snow without leaving a print and dancing about the mighty trunks of those pines, stretching upwards and upwards and on into the green canopy splashing through the void beyond. She would run her memories over the rough surface of their bark. Occasionally a needle would drift down, or a tiny snowflake, as she watched – delighting her, making her *remember*.

The puddles were her favourite. She would slowly dribble tea, whole pots of tea, over the snow; watching the pure white surface of the snow being stained and melted into a sepia sea. She saw in the shiny reflections her earliest memory, taking a cup to her grandmother and holding it precariously, tasting the tea, the bitter tannin, her face contorting, eugh, and her grandmother’s sweet laughter singing forth from across that sepia sea. She became used to the bitterness, it slowly became pleasurable, and she could

feel her face opening in welcome over a steaming cup. Oma had left, but lived in Klara's smile at the memory of her ringing laughter.

Whole rivers ran down the yard, as Klara cared less and less about being seen as an eccentric. For the first time in her life she felt artistic, as if she were saying something about herself – for herself. Other days, when she had less energy and could not make the tea, she would fill a bowl to the brim and set it out in the chill. Then she would watch, watch. It amazed her how the water would go from something fluid, intangible, to something solid and cold. This, she felt, must be the secret – and she rejoiced in her own freezing, her life becoming solid. Everything was clearer, sharper. She had only retrospect left, and in hindsight all seemed terribly obvious and clear. Defined. She could draw lines, almost. That was her favourite thing, the reflections. She would look deeply into the bowl, or sometimes only at the surface, and observe life continuing around her. The boy had tripped on a bowl she had forgotten, one day, and had fallen face first into the snow. How she had laughed! He puzzled, and worried. Eventually laughter faded into a smile and she needed to look again, into the bowl. She knew real life, she had lived it, but in her looking glass it was something different – after living with texture and shapes and pains she felt she had only half of something. Now she stared, seeing shapes more abstracted – beyond hearing the last birds twittering or snow settling. It was as if she had found a new sense, a faculty. At first she had merely stared. But it was inevitable; her eyes glazed back, and she remembered.

Mostly it was the house that made her remember, with its crackling paint and splitting wood. Shingles had escaped from their nails, plunging to the ground and

settling. Pans and pots had to be placed around the house to collect drops. The back balcony had crumbled – no one had used it in years. Yet it could not be said, like Klara, that the house had been neglected. It was old. Its surfaces had been scrubbed clean, every wrinkle scoured, and slowly life had passed; through the house, through its inhabitants, through their calloused palms and over the worn surfaces of chairs and tables. It rested in that shine of wear. Scratches and grooves had been carved into the benches, Klara could run her hands over the surface and read its features. She had knelt, the other day, with knees aching and joints reluctantly bowing, scrubbing the very spot – the very spot – that Alois had fallen. Pounding the floorboards one last time before – thump! – dead. How those boards rejoiced! It had been a violent stroke, his own. One morning and that was it – she had turned from the sink to fill his cup, when he took his last stand, moustache bristling like a row of bayonets – he had caught a bit of yoke in it – opened his mouth, and tumbled meaninglessly to the floor. Thud. And she just stood there, stunned, spilling the contents of the teapot in an amber stream. Yes, he was old, but still – one always expected that God would get in the last word, but still, never how. And now he was dead. She had always wondered – was it the eggs?

The house was still again. She listened. Far off in the distance were insects clicking and whirring – or was that just her imagination? She listened harder, straining. The petals of a tobacco rose drifted to the ground, shaken loose by the gentle persuasion of the wind. A wisp of hair was blown free from its tight bun, and writhed aimlessly before being stuck to her forehead. She was rooted to the spot, her flesh fused with the brittle splinters of the bench. Sitting for so long may have been uncomfortable, but she hadn't

moved and was yet to find out. Time passed, as she listened, hearing the clock in the hall slice off second after second. Sec-ond, sec-ond, sec-ond, sec-ond. It was 1907 now. The century had turned. Chronos had traded his scythe for something much sharper. Time passed. She settled into her foundations.

Did she remember planting the rose? Yes. Planted one autumn, although she had no idea whether or not it was the right time for it. The leaves had seemed so golden and the needles from the pine had made an ochre carpet that she had dug through and dug. The feeling – she remembered the feeling! – of so many prickly shards snapping at her fingers. And the cool relief when her fingertips breached the earth, dirt gathering under her fingernails. She had loved that planting, although she had never learnt when to prune and what to grow. The garden was a wilderness with a clearing for Alois' bee hives – honeycombs housing a wealth of rich, sticky stories. Some sweet and flowing, one sad and blackened. The day after his death, the boy, the son, had stood in the back yard for – oh – so long. Thinking what, she did not know. Then taking a match and the rags – for smoking out the bees – he set fire to the entire structure. She hadn't heard the screams, the buzzing, young Klara had been too busy grieving and had not yet let go of her tyrant husband. Do bees scream? She wondered now. She used to. Inside. Again and again. Maybe her son too, although he kept it from her. His first act marking his succession was one of destruction, fire. But she forgave him now, he had never really been cruel to insects as a child, and perhaps just suffered the touch of his father's ghost. Let the earth hide thee. The blackened stumps smouldered and went out, the garden eventually grew over them. Nature forgives, or forgets. Yet she still remembers. Was it an important

event in her life? It was so hard to tell now, the event clear but the impact dissipated. There were so many events, and their feeling faded eventually like the old rug in the hall. Almost white, a whiteish grey, except in patches, and threadbare – yet still there.

Yes, every piece of her life came from this house, her home. Inside Klara could explore her belongings, her memories. Picking up a worn pebble, smooth and cold, hinting at recollection. Had she found it one day? On the riverbank? Tempted to throw it in, watch it, never to rise again. Tempted to follow it. It lived in her apron for weeks; she squeezed it, drawing blood from her – so that was how it was done. How she lived with that man. Long after the dreadful Customs officer's death certificate was stamped and signed, belongings cleared away, she had spaces to fill. The pebble was placed on a shelf, no longer needed any more, except occasionally. For days Klara could potter about the house, her mind, cloaked in nostalgia. Then, when sheer remembrance was too much, she would escape outside and think. Think. Never moving from the bench, exploring every inch of the house from memory, but with space to think, urged on by its creaks and moans of age and remembrance.

There was another slow rasp, and it came back to her – a terrible memory. Alois was still alive, oh, very much alive, and he was sitting in his armchair again with his mirror. The children were sitting at the table, eating, and Alois would never join them, with the high back of his armchair to the table as he smoked or read or watched them intently with the mirror. It was the day of that dreadful cabbage soup, that looked and tasted like dishwater – she had cooked it in a rush, and had very little to use; it was towards the end of the week and the meagre money she got for housekeeping was all but

used up. But Alois watched, like an eagle, and she hovered nervously at the sideboard.

There must be silence at the table, when Alois was home. Thou shalt not speak at the table. Yet the boy foolishly whispered to the others.

– What was that, boy? The voice boomed from the mountainous armchair, and all froze, especially Klara.

– Nothing, father. She could see the boy shaking.

– What did he say, Paula? The voice persisted, attacking the boy's listener – yes, Paula or Edmund, he was still with us then.

– He said – the girl trembled, sympathising, hesitating, fearing, – he said; he said nothing father. She closed her mouth and stared at her mother, pleading.

– Edmund? Alois would not yield. Edmund?

The older child broke, where the younger hadn't.

– He said it was terrible – – blurting it out in one guilt ridden sentence. He glanced over at the boy in apology, knowing what this denouncement would mean, but the boy was staring fixedly at his plate.

The children were dismissed, except the boy, and she shuddered to remember the details. Paula received ten lashes of Alois' belt for not telling, Edmund ten for telling. But her boy suffered the worst. For six hours Alois sat at that table with the boy, making him eat plate after plate after plate after plate. Eventually, Alois broke the boy's willpower, and the boy was violently sick on the porch. Klara can still hear the retching, when she stands in the right spot in the kitchen at night. Alois was there with him, comforting the boy. He thought of himself as even handed, a disciplinarian, willing to

forgive on that porch, dispensing underserved grace – the boy thought otherwise and did not attend his funeral. She thought otherwise now too, and saw that he was the champion of sincerity; a sadist of bad faith.

Klara was haunted by that constant sense of *déjà vu*, as if her life was eternally recurring. She lived through old memories; reliving them as if they were forgotten and discovering them again. There would soon come a time when she would have to move on to other things, less certain things. How did she feel about this? She did not know. One tires of living in the past, eventually, and it becomes necessary to know new things – fresh things. But not yet. Her son was home, finally, and he would keep her company. So much of her life gone, there was only the past to live in. Past, bleak. There was truth in bleakness, truth in beauty, beauty in bleakness.

He came home a week ago, perhaps longer, the time seemed nothing compared with the bare stretch of his absence. She had Paula as a companion, yes, but without her son Paula seemed to just itch and chafe. They spent many days sitting at the table; eating, drinking, or just staring. The light would shine in great blocks, through the windows, and the dust would become unsettled in the light of the sun. It was the only thing that she had to animate the decrepit house, the sun. Paula would dust and dust, and yet more would appear as the rest was thrown up into the air, swirling chaotically. No, in patterns? Patterns. She fancied she could see patterns in everything; in the millions of stars, burning. Intolerable, if there were no patterns. She spread her hands across the table and would study them to occupy herself. Her swollen knuckles, and plentiful brown liver spots on her eggshell skin. It would make her smile, the corners of her

mouth wrinkling. There was something beautiful in age, and despite her hardships she felt more than the plain girl she once was. Perhaps because of. Like the pebble, that had been thrown away, like the base Judean threw a pearl away. Worn away at the bottom of the stream, and polished until it shone with such a beautiful lustre. The stream would dry up, and leave it to sparkle in the sun. She smiled still, indents of her face curving in finely beaten grace. That was the question she wanted to ask herself, through the pages and pages of her life. Was she happy? No, that was not the question. Happiness fades away to a nothing in the finality of life. There were no remaining questions. Just the solidity of the table, her hands, the past.

The sun had long left the sky. The shadows of the house had lengthened. The lines of Klara's brow deepened. Memory can have its splinters.

When he came back he wore an expression. She can remember it very clearly, unusual because it was a recent memory and not a long forgotten one. Disappointed. He was looking at that sideboard, giving an occasional malicious glance at the patterned crockery, he was dissatisfied and had returned from his work or his studies, some occupation she forgot. Not by choice, although he hadn't told her so, but she had heard. Not happy there, but uncomfortable here and hating to admit failure. She was pierced instantly by that look, he was not happy here either, and it made her afraid. But a proper, terrifying fear; not old Alois' solid endurable fear, but a new cutting fear – of aloneness. Lurking, pointing, centring on nothing. He avoided her eyes, she remembered. He, of course, was never affected by her – he was too independent – but he was easily wounded by others judgements, of failure. His own judgements. Such a boy too! Yet to see the

world's look of disappointment on his face, yes, she too had learnt that expression quickly enough. His father gave that look, too, standing in that spot once – but his eyes were more clearly focused, fixed on her that time. Yes. Except it was her turn to look away. It was the sting of tobacco smoke that eventually made her cry, in front of him. Why he was so disappointed with her was lost, soaked into the banks of the stream. All of it was so long ago, but yesterday – all past becomes a fabric of yesterday. Merging seamlessly with other memories, of the boy standing there, his father standing there, her standing there, looking with that gaze inwardly, outwardly. She had once run her fingers over his cheek, and remarked on how much he looked like his father – he pulled away suddenly. She supposed he had no reason to love the man, even though she once had.

The trees shifted in the breeze, crisply applauding her memories. So this was what it was like to be something else, and live outside time. Briefly. Looking at the trees, listening to the heavy breathing of the night. Eventually, though, she would slip back into the past or the future.

And the pipes used to rattle in the times when her hands could still use the taps. The steam would rise into the air and collect on the window, or mingle with the sweat on her face. Sometimes, when the sun shone through the pane, they would glisten in beautiful colours and she could watch her little boy play outside. Sometimes with his siblings, mostly by himself. Building great big sandcastles, or dreaming, what an imagination that boy had! or exploring his thoughts, which she could not penetrate. She tried. But mostly he would not tell, only sometimes, and these times formed her innermost secrets. Her refuge. Until the table had to be laid and the dishes scrubbed and

the floor polished for Alois' fall. Bacon and eggs, toast, sausage, stroke. Yes, she remembered.

The deeper parts of the night were approaching, the sky deepening into a void that made all the blacks that came before it blue. It was at this time that Klara was the clearest to herself, and her thoughts shone out with a wonderful lustre – freed from the dreaded ordinariness of daylight. The horizon twinkled in response, a moistened eye, as families lit their hearths in preparation. The old woman did not move. She was illuminated by her thoughts, as she circled around her bruise, probing with mental fingers. She could not lose her warmth to the blanket of enclosing night. She was on the hearth, so close, reaching out and almost on fire –

It was not long after he was born that the boy developed a fever. It was terrible. His tiny little body on fire. He cried and cried. Alois was not interested. He barely looked at the boy. Never touched him. Alois said she was smothering him.

– Leave him Klara. The fever will break, or he will die.

He was so detached, while her only son burned before her eyes. It wasn't his child, he had others. He could always beget more. But not Klara – she couldn't endure any more dry thrusting, any more strangling linen, any more –

At nights she would lie on the floor in the kitchen beside his cot, or nurse him in her lap. Alois would not have him in the bed and would not tolerate the crying. He was an old man needing his sleep, she was still young then. She became as exhausted, as weak and helpless, as her child. But she held on. The fever broke – when exactly swept away under the rugs of the hall – but it seemed to stretch on forever until it was finally over.

Periods of her life seemed to stretch on forever and later be over in an instant. The boy remained pale, but she would always feel – he still burned.

Darkness obscured most of the house, and only the faint silvery outline was visible in the weak moonlight. Amongst brooding shadows she closed her transparent lids. The soft crunch of footsteps travelled up the driveway, unheard. Klara was far away.

The spot was tenderly purplish, blackening in places. She could see the burst dams of fine veins, stretching tenuously like precariously balanced reasons. You can hide in memories for so long, yes, she realised this. Of floods, battles, betrayals, revelations. Then came a time to purse the lips, and turn towards. Towards what? She had no conception of what she was avoiding. Yes she did, it was time to be honest with herself. She had caught herself looking through the keyhole, and now it was time to confess all. It was –

– Mother, it is late. What are you doing up, outside? You must be freezing – the fire, there's no fire lit. Wait –

The shadows wavered and she saw a figure, a stranger. The figure removed his shadowy visage as he approached, spoke.

– Why aren't you in bed, mother?

Ah yes, she could see him now. The boy. And listen to him, you would think her the child. His eyes were expectant in the moonlight, but she was unmoved. What did he expect of her? She felt old, and was possibly strange in her ways. Buried in the past. All she could gather now, temporarily woken, were remnants of the cryptic; cobwebs of her contemplations.

– I’ve been cold long now.

He did not understand.

–Well, we must go inside.

But he was practical. He held out his hand and slowly she uprooted herself from the cold ground surrounding the bench. It was like awakening from a deep sleep – time had continued to slip – but she was not aware of what had happened. She was in exile, with occasional visits from her son. Like visits to the opera – the Opera! He was there tonight.

Yes. She must ask him.

– How did you find the opera tonight?

She had lit the spark.

– It was magnificent! Oh – you can’t imagine – the emotions. I was telling Gustl how Wagner is the master of men’s emotions.

– Only men’s? But her remark was lost.

– He soars like an eagle, and swoops! I could almost see it, sinking its talons into the audience and uplifting a lucky victim!

– And it was your turn tonight?

This struck him as odd.

– Well yes – it is my turn every night. I mean, it is a metaphor mother – there wasn’t a person in the room who wasn’t carried away.

She had sat through a Wagner opera once, and had been carried away with the boredom and the noise. The crusades of great men inflicted upon the world, yet she could picture the same little boys that played in their castles outside her kitchen window.

– Your father liked Wagner.

– My father was a philistine.

She should not have said that. He began to close again.

– He wanted nothing more out of life than his damned pipes and those bee hives he kept.

He never even – mother? Are you alright?

Of course she had been dying forever.

– I am fine, I just need to sit again. It is cold boy, light the fire.

He moved away, but not without pressing her hand as he left. It was so warm against her chilled flesh. She could have cried for the contact – her son still loved her, cared, felt her. It was this that fulfilled her life. Moments made it worth while.

The tinder was slow to catch alight. She was glad, needing time to gather herself while he was still looking away. She felt momentarily exposed by his enthusiasm, by his youth. It was not a bad exposure, but sensitive and pleasurable – overly sensitive. Guilt, propriety made her want to turn, so that she could resume the countenance required of her age, status. Parents must be idols, made of stone. Distant. Elusive bubbles of heat began to emanate from the hearth. She watched him grapple with the flue of the chimney, oblivious, but she had no more room for thought now that she was not alone. Thoughts of unwashed dishes scurried about, reminding her of the mundane. He turned.

– Will you be up early in the morning?

It was a silly question, he was just making conversation with his half-lost parent. She was deaf, but not completely blind.

– Yes. As I have been for the past countless years. Long before you were born, since I was young. Another cough, and with a strain – A long time. Very long. She began to fade.

– So you will be up then? He was growing impatient, watching her meander down the halls of unreality again. She was lost, surely. And he was irritable, coming here after an evening of escape. He rose.

– I am going to bed, mother. Goodnight.

– Yes. But her sense of restraint kept her from adding a cryptic message. Coded in experience. Instead she thought about sleep. Stealing more of our lives than we will ever know.

She had drifted off already, he could see.

Night enclosed the old, creaking house. She shivered, and was alone.

[Note to the text: Klara Hitler died on the 21st of December, 1907, of idofom poisoning from the treatment following surgery for breast cancer.]