

Flood

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An extract

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XIV

Day after day I head downtown to forage for supplies.

Alone.

Since the hornets' attack in the convent garden, Nina can no longer be bothered. She prefers to hang out in the kitchen with Joke, chatting, drinking gallons of tea and rereading old women's magazines until they know every piece of gossip, style tip and advert off by heart. Whenever I manage to bring them a 'new' issue, I am met with childish delight, and the kitchen fills with squeals of joy and dancing. But one time it almost degenerated into a fight: both wanted first dibs on the magazine. Like some angry father I had to threaten to burn the glossy before they agreed to compromise and take turns reading each other an article. Since then I always make sure to get my hands on two magazines. If I find just the one, I keep it back.

It is still raining, but downtown it bothers me less. I am usually glad to swap our musty building for some fresh air. Besides, the town is full of surprises.

The fear is gone too. I now walk quite openly down the middle of the street, whistling. I smash windows just to hear the sound of breaking glass – a tinkling waterfall –, chuck furniture from the third floor and collect the pieces of wood that will go in the barrel later and wank in abandoned girls' rooms until I come with much rejoicing. My seed is starting to stain all the knickers in town.

Behind the façades I come across the most astonishing still lifes.

Not in the communal areas, where the odd visitor is possible, if unlikely, but further into the dwellings where even relatives and bosom buddies never venture.

I have a sneaking suspicion that I am only the second person ever to breathe the air in some of these rooms.

Not in the bedrooms either. The bedside cabinets harbour the usual erotic paraphernalia: truly monstrous dildos as big as a forearm, fucked-up inflatable dolls, intricate pink contraptions, proper machines with razor-sharp cogs and gears and still slick with lubricant, designs that make my organ shrink right up my pelvis. The usual stuff.

Save for that one nature magazine full of pictures of wild animals. Its owner had covered the animal heads with the carefully cut-out heads of well-known female newsreaders – a hairy grizzly with the head of a blonde, a wild boar with a woman's face solemnly smiling – and then splattered its pages. A succession of landscapes and forested regions, all suffused with Pritt Stick and old seed. Did he watch the news while he was at it? Animal documentaries? Both, in split screen?

Nor in the predictable backrooms, hidden behind clumsy trompe l'oeils or concealed doors, with padded interior, rings fixed to the wall, piles of gleaming chains like curled-up steel

rattlesnakes on the washable vinyl floor, purple shelves with leashes and leather masks with zippered mouths.

In one street, several houses contained identical St. Andrew's crosses and latex-covered altars, leading you to suspect that a specialist mail order company had targeted the area or had even offered group discounts.

Maybe the neighbours had not known this about each other. Maybe they had indulged their passions with whips and clasps in splendid isolation, while cherishing their secret pleasure at the annual street party. Or perhaps the lechers had just discovered one another and had formed a bizarre neighbourhood committee – enjoying the support of an unsuspecting city council – in which the permutations of the flesh were almost infinite, especially when new arrivals came forward and were immediately swallowed up by the sadistic little township.

Either way, they had probably all been incredibly happy with their minor sins and were now feeling terribly homesick for their humble abode.

And yet these are not the most fascinating places. That honour goes to the cellars and the attics, the storerooms of shame and sorrow.

In the basement of a villa I stumbled upon a miniature world. The whole thing put together with the most acute sense of detail.

It had started innocently enough, with a classic model train set in the far corner of the cellar: an alpine landscape surrounded by a complex railway network. The set-up featured old steam locomotives as well as high-speed trains, a jumble of points, crossings, signals and tunnels disappearing into mountain ranges. The mountain sides were covered with fake little pines right up to the tree line, while a ski lift ran to the artificial snow-covered top and would no doubt be working if the electricity still pulsed through the transformers.

Up there, by the ski lift, things must have taken a turn for the worse.

Through a hole in the wall, the lifts led to the second room, where they arrived in a mountain village littered with chalets. Plastic figurines were enjoying wintry pursuits: some were cross-country skiing in the woods, while others were building an igloo, rolling balls for a snowman-in-the-making or having a riotous snowball fight.

A closer look revealed that every single chalet had been fully furnished. In one, tiny inhabitants were celebrating Christmas at a lavishly set table in front of an open fire with flickering paper flames. The corner boasted a decorated Christmas tree, its artificial branches resting on a stack of presents, each wrapped in different paper and tied with a different ribbon. I would not have been surprised to find they contained a small teddy bear, a mini sweater or a bottle of wine – the creator had not missed a single detail and had given every resident his or her own facial expression; no two figures looked the same.

A New Year's Eve party was in full swing next door. Young-looking figures were dancing in frozen poses under disco balls and garlands to inaudible music, others were lounging on the sofa, beer bottles in hand, and a young couple were kissing passionately under a kitchen clock that indicated midnight – their plastic lips joined together for all time. But the neighbours did not look too impressed with the carousing: a grey man in stripy pyjamas was banging furiously on the wall, while a little granny sat up in bed, index fingers in both ears.

With each new room, the seasons shifted. In the adjacent one summer had already arrived.

The inhabitants of a semi-detached house were getting ready to go on holiday: parked out front was a family car with canoes tied to the roof and a caravan in tow in which the mother figure was arranging their things. On the first floor, the older children were dutifully packing their suitcases while the younger ones were trampolining on their beds (one little tot with a huge grin frozen on its face was dangling from an almost invisible nylon thread above the mattress).

The father figure was nowhere to be seen; not under the bonnet, not in the garage, not up in the attic, not in the garden shed. I finally found him not that far away in the fake forest, where he had tied a small Alsatian to a leafy tree. The dog was eyeing its master eagerly, its pink tongue

hanging out of its mouth, curious to see what game they would be playing this time. The father figure held a hand pressed to his forehead in horror.

In the garage the maker had surpassed himself. Large trestle tables and a requisitioned ping-pong table featured a naturalistic model of the entire town, taking in everything from the station to the historic centre and the surrounding hill tops. All reproduced down to the smallest detail.

The gothic spires, including the ravens in the gutters and the golden weather vane. The whole thing nicely reflected in the glazed façade of the new bank. At the foot of the church, the old market square with its outdoor cafés and Japanese tourists traipsing behind a banner and taking photos of the reconstructed university library and the world-famous façade of the town hall which boasted dozens of sculptures and hand-painted stained-glass windows. A bit further along were the low white convent and pavilion – a little nun was raking the gravel path in the garden – and higher up the supermarket with a retractable roof, revealing housewives pushing shopping carts up and down the aisles and children licking their lips at the array of sweets by the checkout.

He had copied everything to perfection – like a medieval monk.

And at the edge, on one of the hilltops, stood Torres in all its kitschy glory.

Had I had an alter ego figure, I could have re-enacted my recent hikes through town. Or I could have pinched a deck chair and a parasol from the summer scene and deposited myself on top of Torres's roof. Unfortunately, no blue cool boxes were available, nor a half-scorched figurine or a girl figure with a swollen belly.

It was not immediately obvious, but something was missing.

My eyes traced the route I had taken today and alighted on an empty stretch of artificial grass, a field where this villa was supposed to be. Hard to believe that the man had not crowned his magnum opus with the ultimate model, that of his own home. Had the water come too early?

Along the wall by the garage door, where the bikes, gardening tools and lawn mower are usually stored, was a long workbench. Laid out under a row of halogen spotlights and magnifying glasses on spring-arms was a carefully ordered arsenal of instruments, all clearly of a high quality. The set-up seemed more suited to micro-surgery than an out-of-control hobby – the studio of a watchmaker, of someone who forces time into boxes no bigger than a coin.

The shelves above the immaculate work surface held all kinds of airtight and labelled plastic boxes. Projects in progress: church, school, police station, hospital.

One of the name tags was blank.

Save for some paintwork on the external walls, the miniature villa was done. Why had he not placed the building in the landscape? It did not need a lot more work. A few minutes later I understood.

An ingenious modular system allowed you to look at each floor separately. I lifted the upper floors – the cellar made my head swim.

It reminded me of those round cheese boxes with the demonically laughing red cow. In her ears she wore exact copies of the box, on which she also showed her toothy grin and sported the same earrings. A perpetually repeated image that used to instil a strange fear in me.

This was worse: as if I was suddenly standing between two mirrors reflecting me into infinity.

In the basement of the replica the maker had rebuilt his mini universe on an even smaller scale. The model railway set, the Tyrolean landscape, the summer scene, the bird's eye view of the town – even the workbench I was leaning against. It could have included a male figure, in his hand the model of the villa, and on its bottom floor...

Nauseous, and with trembling fingers, I covered the basement with the next floor. It showed a perfectly normal middle-class home: a kitchen with freestanding cooker, children's drawings tacked to the fridge, a living room with trendy armchair in front of the television, a dining table and a sideboard with some nondescript knickknacks, a coffee table with newspapers and fashion magazines, a large family photo greeting you in the hallway, coats on the rack, plants on the window sill, umbrellas in the stand, even a toilet with witty maxims on the wall.

A little bored and ready to stick the small villa back into its plastic box, I finally detached the pitched roof. I never expected to find any figures there, at least not in this way. My first thought was that something had gone wrong, that the glue had come undone and the paint had run. But then, horrified, I realized that everything was in its gruesome, perfect place and in just the right colour.

I discovered the mother figure in the parental bed under a blanket which I initially thought was decorated with a large blooming rose. As I tried to lift the duvet with a fingernail, to see if she was naked, the little head with the shoulder-length blond hair rolled off the pillow and bounced across the laminate like a dented marble. Her neck was red-rimmed. I found the body in the bathroom, disembowelled in the bathtub; red splashes of paint on the shower curtain, viscous splodges on the bright white tiles, anatomically correct intestines in the washing machine.

The larger of the children's bedrooms – the one belonging to the eldest judging by the metal posters, the stereo and the laptop – looked empty at first sight. Until I spied a slender streak of bright red gouache under the wardrobe door. As I tried to prize open the little door, my fingertips were itching with frustration. They felt clumsy, gigantic, and were burning with a bizarre and irresistible desire to be flattened by a rolling pin into gossamer-thin tentacles. Eventually, through sheer luck, the door gave way.

In the wardrobe I found a teenage son, strung up, hands tied behind his back, dick sticking half-erect out of his fly, a blood-red smudge across his stomach, a bluish tongue between the lips like a rotting sausage.

A centrefold was tacked to the inside of the wardrobe door.

The father figure was in the second children's room, sitting on a low stool, elbows on his knees, head in his hands. Across from him two identical children were sleeping peacefully in bunk beds, each clutching a cuddly toy.

The walls were covered in posters of cartoon characters, colourful drawings and rainbow wallpaper. On the floor, by way of a rug, was a street map you could drive toy cars on. Down by the stool, next to an overturned fire engine, lay a large Japanese kitchen knife. The blade had been painted red.

I could feel the leaden weight of the house above me. Each floor pressed heavily on my shoulders. I carefully snapped the pitched roof back onto the villa and put the building back in its box before closing it as quietly as possible and slipping it back onto the shelf. I could barely look around, let alone up. I felt like shitting my pants and puking my guts out at the same time – if only to feel lighter, to lose all excess matter, to remove the filth from my body.

With the greatest effort, as if I had to wrench myself free with a large pair of metal pincers, I turned round and made my way to the garage door through which I had entered. The door had not been locked. Now I knew why.

The water had not come for nothing.

Only too late perhaps.

XV

This is the end.

I am standing by the water's edge, peering at the flat horizon. Next to me lies the large red kayak, its nose half-submerged in the water. It splashes, hollow-sounding, against the hard, plastic hull.

And it is still raining. It is a gentle rain that leans into me, a rain you can actually see slanting in the sky. A dismal curtain, prey to a listless wind. Drops are falling into the two cockpits of the red kayak, but that is no problem. I will simply haul it up a bit later and turn it over. In between the two openings is a handy, practically watertight compartment. It is empty at the moment.

The bank is not exactly a bank. No pebbles, reeds or mud. No jetty or bollards, but paving stones. Nearby, a zebra crossing recedes into the water, its final white stripe like rippling marble, a treasure from another world.

Somewhere between the horizon and me, the gothic towers rise above the steely water surface, forsaken, like fancy cakes at an abandoned buffet. The jet-black birds are nowhere to be seen, but that does not mean a thing.

Behind me, far behind me, stands Torres. Cold, dripping with damp, glistening, as though someone had dipped the building in slime. I try not to think about it.

The gap is still there too. Right now it looks like a ridged tube, a passage of wet wool, revealing the merest suggestion of light. No bright yellow halo, just a greyish hole in the cloud cover, little more than an inflamed wound that refuses to heal.

No rainbow today. The light is not bright enough. Thank goodness. The wealth of colours was getting on my nerves. The cheery spectacle was just as inappropriate as a peacock on a dung-hill.
[...]

The city has given up the fight.

Its buildings are being eroded by the incessant rain. Increasingly, large pieces of debris obstruct the pavements; the concrete crumbles when you kick it. Occasionally, in the distance, you hear thunderous rumbling and creaking, followed by the roar of falling bricks. Clouds of grey dust billow beside the façades of the townhouses until the rain beats them down again. When it happens nearby, the ground shakes beneath your feet. These days it is better to walk down the middle of the road.

Closer to the water's edge, the houses are subsiding. The foundations are slowly softening and the walls are starting to warp, as if someone had taken hold of the frame and was wringing it like a cloth. Gripped by a bizarre hankering, the buildings list towards the lake until they collapse and get swallowed up by the water.

Plant life is teeming.

Strange plants are appearing out of sewers, sporting leathery leaves that grow to a terrifying size, big enough for a human to lie in were it not for the razor-sharp thorns at the end of each vein. Little stands in their way as the plants take over roundabouts and squares.

The upper parts of some façades are completely covered in tall grass that sways in the wind. The vertical lawns are not unlike a winter coat keeping the buildings nice and snug. If it were not for the constant rain, they would undoubtedly glisten with dew in the mornings. In the afternoon you would see bees and butterflies skimming across them. But flowers are nowhere to be seen.

The bottom floors, where the light is even dimmer, are covered in thick, sticky clusters of moss; hard knobs that grow out of the vents and remind me of broccoli.

Other plants look like garlands as thick as a man's arm; a jumble of tough spears coiling and twisting into a long khaki sausage. They stretch right across the street, linking houses through front doors, split letterboxes and broken windows, like a new system of piping, or even a new communications network. Sometimes they take possession of an entire car. After slipping through a door they fill it to bursting. A couple of days later the vehicle will have disappeared. A green tangle the size of a garage and some pieces of glass on the road are all that remain.

The plants are best left alone. The green spears are extremely sticky and leave your skin burning when you rip them off. Not to mention the itching caused by the downy hairs. Once they get into your clothes, you scratch yourself silly and there is usually nothing for it but to burn them in the barrel and plunder a new wardrobe.

The crescent-shaped stings on the man-sized leaves look like the claws of prehistoric monsters. Take an axe to the growth and a viscous beige substance will seep from the stems, smelling of rotten eggs and making your eyes water. The stench is unbearable.

The streets are theirs now. I am forced to make lengthy detours to get back to Torres and once there I have to walk the same path in the courtyard every day to keep it more or less passable. The table salt I sprinkled in the beginning has no effect. Washed away by the rain.

I clamber back up through the labyrinth that the plants have created and that changes shape from one day to the next.

The roundabout has turned into a public garden. Only the white flagpoles are unassailable as they jut into the sky. At the top, the fabric has long since rotted away.

This is no man's land.

In front of the gutted supermarket the plants are gratefully using the barricade of shopping trolleys as a climbing frame. The metalwork has all but disappeared, leaving just the odd orange handle with coin lock and a couple of rubber wheels.

Down the front of the sandwich bar I can just make out a greasy handprint, like a greeting from a bygone era. I give a small wave back.

I embark on the final ascent, the steepest section, the mountain where Torres is situated. The windows of the houses along the way have all been boarded up. Where the doors are open, nobody is home.

We must not harbour any illusions: soon this city will be gone, turned forest, a jungle where we do not belong. We have been rendered obsolete, redundant chunks of meat, which, at best, may serve as compost.

From now on it is better to be a tree.