

Babel

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p 113-127

Alice tore up a chunk of bread and tossed the crumbs on the table. The birds descended on them immediately.

“Not on the table, Alice. It’s not hygienic.”

Alice smiled at her grandfather, but she kept on scattering the crumbs. It was the thing she most liked to do when she was finished eating. She didn’t know why she liked it so much. Maybe because it didn’t suit her age. Only children and old ladies threw crumbs to the birds. Children, half frightened and half hysterical, enjoyed that magical moment when they seemed to have nature under their control, and old ladies did it because they found it wasteful to throw stale bread in the garbage. And maybe because their own offspring had left the nest so long ago and they had to do something with all that love. The table was soon covered with colorful birds, little pecking machines who worked the crumbs over as if their lives depended on it. Some ventured onto the plates, planting their fragile little feet right in the sauce. One of them lighted on a small wooden box that lay on the table in front of Alice, using it for his lookout point.

“Look at how close that one is.” Alice pointed to an African starling that had walked up to the largest chunk of bread, even though it was next to her water glass. “Almost nothing frightens him.”

The bird’s head swelled when it disappeared behind the glass. It turned into a splotch of India ink, a nightmarish head with an unexpectedly gigantic eye that stared at her through the water. The black, pupilless circle was an empty eye that admitted no light. What was going on inside that head? The bird inhabited another world that she would never visit, a world that had also been promised by the adventures of her namesake.

“Not frightened?” her grandfather asked. He waved at the startling, and the cloud of birds disappeared with a great racket into the bushes of the orangery.

“If you’re so abrupt with them of course they fly away.”

“They’re always frightened, Alice. Otherwise they wouldn’t survive.”

“After all this time they ought to know they needn’t be afraid. They have no natural predators here.”

“Birds follow their instincts. Only human beings are stupid enough to venture too far, trusting in the goodness of their environment.”

“Should we always be on our guard then?”

"Not you, my dear. Why? What's the matter? Are you worried about your safety?"

"No. I know I'm in good hands."

She didn't have to look at him to know how his severe features would relax upon hearing these words. He was proud of the security in the tower. And he loved compliments. It wasn't only the birds that she could please with a handful of crumbs. But his cheerfulness didn't last long. No matter how good the security was, unforeseen circumstances could always crop up.

"How are you doing?"

"Fine. Just as fine as I was five minutes ago."

"I'm sorry if my concern irritates you."

"Of course it doesn't irritate me. But you must believe me when I tell you there's nothing wrong. I'm in the best of health. That entire hospital episode was unnecessary."

"You were unconscious for a whole minute."

"That was just an attempt to get the guard to apply mouth-to-mouth resuscitation."

"Alice!"

"Sorry, Grandfather."

She knew he didn't like to hear those kinds of remarks. He loved her, she had no doubt of that, but he mainly loved his idea of her, and in his head she was still a little girl of twelve, innocence itself. Her growing older was difficult for him. If it were up to him, he'd make time stand still. Then he'd shower her with dolls. Unfortunately she no longer had any interest in dolls; she wanted to feel warm flesh.

"Young girls should speak civilly. When I was young..."

"Were you ever young, Grandfather?" she laughed.

"Is that so hard to believe?"

"I can't imagine you ever being young. Or hopelessly in love. Have you ever written melancholy letters, or spent nights waiting outside the window of your beloved?"

He placed his hand next to hers on the table.

"Look at this. You can hardly call it a hand. A claw is a better word for it. Age spots, thick blue veins, crooked fingers – and covered with wrinkles. It's no wonder you can't believe that this hand was once as white and soft as yours."

She took his hand and pressed it to her cheek. They sat this way for a while.

The birds, attracted by the sudden silence, landed on the table one by one.

"If I should lose you, too ..."

"You are not going to lose me."

Alice released his hand and tapped on the arm of her wheelchair.

"Where would I go?"

"Sometimes people don't have to go away in order to disappear," he said.

"Sometimes people don't have to be nearby in order to be close."

"Do you want to go away?"

"Sometimes."

"I have no one anymore, my dear. Only you."

"I know."

She picked at the bread so she wouldn't have to look at him.

"I don't want to leave you, Babu. I just want to go away. Can you understand that?"

"It's not possible. Not yet. It's too dangerous."

"When will it be possible, then?"

He shook his head.

There was no point in continuing the discussion. He would never let her go. He was too fearful and she was too cowardly. And where would she go, anyway? Perhaps he was right. Perhaps they were lurking out there somewhere. But now that she had reminded him that he couldn't give her everything, he might be more willing to grant her one last request. At least that's what she hoped.

"As far as the girl is concerned ..." she continued.

"Are you sure?" he asked.

"No. That's why I want you to meet with her. You can see right through people."

Anika came into the orangery, irritably waving away the birds who were walking all over the plates again, and cleared the table.

"Leave the glasses here," Babel said.

"Of course, Mr. Babel."

"And the cheesecake," said Alice.

"Haven't you had enough?"

"It's not for me," Alice said. "Not only for me."

"Anika!" Babel shouted.

Anika turned around.

"Is she here already?"

"She's waiting in the Byzantine room."

"Bring her in."

Anika walked down the path to the sluice gate. Alice watched her go.

"Do I dare ask her to put a tray on her head, to give the place more of a jungle feeling?"

He smiled faintly.

"You seem tense, my dear."

"I'm not tense at all," Alice lied.

"If the arrangement doesn't suit you, all you have to do is say so."

What if the arrangement doesn't suit her, Alice said to herself.

"Prynne has a reserve position for her. D6."

"D6. What's that?"

"Logistical support. A job with few responsibilities, but it's fairly well-paid and it's a handy springboard to better positions. She is still young, after all."

"D6," Alice repeated.

Suddenly Anika and Naomi were standing at the table.

"Here she is, then," said Anika.

Babel waved her away.

"So! You are Naomi."

Naomi nodded.

"Sit down. You needn't be afraid. We don't bite."

Naomi warily pulled a chair up to the table.

"Care for a piece of cheesecake?" Alice asked.

"No, thank you."

Was this the same girl? The Naomi who had stood in her room in a white bra and with hate in her eyes had seems somewhat taller. The Naomi who had popped up out of nowhere and jumped into the swimming pool, without hesitation, was a fiery angel who had pulled her from the jaws of death. And here she sat, looking like a gray mouse in her colorless sub clothes with her eyes downcast and her hands in her lap.

She seemed so banal. A sub. Had Alice been mistaken? Had it been a stupid move to catapult this very common girl into their lives, uninvited, out of the blue? She looked at her grandfather. He shrugged. He, too, saw nothing special in this girl, but for him that was good news. He distrusted anything special.

"Naomi," Alice said gently. Now the girl dared to look at her. That face – no, it wasn't particularly pretty. A face with character that was the best you could say about it. But you had to keep looking. You didn't see everything at once. And those eyes. She had just seen the very same eyes, behind her drinking glass, the same unfathomable black that took everything in but conceded nothing.

"Would you like something to drink? A glass of wine?"

Naomi shook her head.

"Sensible." The old man poured himself some wine and spun it around in his glass.

Naomi stole a glance at Babel.

"It's called swirling," Alice said, just to say something.

"You do it to coax the aromas from the wine."

"Or to show off," said Alice.

"Let an old man have his idiosyncrasies. This is the only form of swirling left to me."

He lowered his nose into the glass and sniffed.

"I, on the other hand, am going to the ball tomorrow," said Alice. "If you'd like, I'll save a spot for you on my dance card."

"Alice, please," said the man.

Alice touched his arm.

"Sorry, Babu," she said. "If we ever get that far, you'll have the first dance."

"I'll drink to that," he said, and he placed his lips on the glass.

Naomi had said nothing so far, which wasn't surprising. After all, she was in the presence of the most powerful man in the country. But she had also barely looked around. She had barely even looked at Alice. You would think she'd be curious to know how Alice was doing after her near-death by drowning in the swimming pool, the pool of tears.

"What do you think of the orangery?" Alice asked Naomi. "It was an idea of my grandfather. It hardly looks anything like the real Africa, of course, but we don't tell him that."

She winked at Naomi, who shrank back as if she could barely follow what was being said. Was she really so frightened? After all, Grandfather had made an attempt to be friendly, almost human.

"Next time I'm going to do my best to make it more realistic," she heard him say. "I can't wait to have lunch in the middle of a starving village with unbearable heat and malaria."

A couple of birds had landed on the table and were gazing at the cheesecake with their cold eyes. A cockatoo walked brazenly around the plate. Alice waved him away, but while the other birds flew off he just hopped a bit farther and came to a halt behind the box, studying the plate closely.

"Are you sure you don't want a piece, Naomi? Or you, Grandfather?"

"No, man does not live by cheesecake alone."

"I'm always ready to put that to the test."

Alice pulled the plate closer.

Her grandfather put his glass down, and Naomi almost jumped out of her chair.

"Do you know who I am, Naomi?"

"Babel!"

"You say it as if it were a magic formula for making hidden granite gates swing open," Alice laughed. "There are other people with this name. We're probably descended from the family of Isaac Babel, the writer. Does that mean anything to you? No? Sic transit gloria mundi."

She broke off a piece of cheesecake with her fork.

"That's going to be my secret alias someday if I ever go into hiding. I'll call myself Gloria Mundy, and no one will know how to find me."

"You just gave away your alias."

"Only to you two," said Alice with her mouth full, "and you won't betray me."

The bird screeched loudly.

"Before the cockatoo crows three times," Alice laughed. She waved the bird away from the table. It managed to evade her hand once again and disappeared noisily into the dense foliage, but not until Alice had flung her fork at it.

"Is that true?" asked the old man. "Is Alice right? Would you ever betray her, Naomi?"

Naomi lifted her eyes. Alice smiled, but Naomi did not smile back. It took a while for her to answer. It was as if she were turning it over in her mind and only then able to reach a decision. She had hardly said a thing so far. Was she so frightened that she couldn't speak? Finally, and with great difficulty, a word came out of her mouth.

"No."

"Very good," said Grandfather. "Then we can move on to the business at hand. You saved my granddaughter's life, and that deserves a reward. You know who I am, so you know I'm serious when I say you may ask for whatever you want. How can I make you happy?"

"I didn't do anything special," said Naomi.

"Nothing special? Without you Alice wouldn't be here. You saved not only her life but mine as well."

"I don't need anything," said Naomi.

"Think about it, Naomi," said Alice. "There must be something you'd like. You'd be surprised at the crazy wishes Grandfather can grant."

"You'll never have a chance like this again, my girl," said Grandfather.

"What do you want most of all?" Alice asked.

Naomi bit her lips. The question seemed to cause her pain, as if it had stirred up hidden memories.

Alice had not expected this. She had been looking forward to a surprised reaction from Naomi. She herself had nothing to wish for. Grandfather had given her everything that was in his power to give. That's why it was twice as nice to see how happy his money could make other people. She had hoped to see a smile on that earnest face. Gratitude, too. And secretly she had hoped that in this way she could redeem her guilt, because there was nothing wonderful about being indebted to someone for the rest of your life. This girl, however, seemed anything but delighted.

"I brought some things with me," said Alice. "Maybe you could pick something out if you don't know right away what you want."

Babel picked up the little box and scattered the contents on the table. Her most expensive jewellery was in the safe, but these things on the table were still quite valuable: among the earrings and bracelets was a string of pearls, big as marbles, next to a little necklace of golden beech leaves, so delicately worked that her fingers itched to pluck it from the rest of the cluster of jewellery. A ring studded with little diamonds rolled off the table and landed among the plants, where a goldfinch pecked at it indifferently.

"They're real, if you have any doubts."

Naomi stared at the jewellery lying among the cake crumbs and the bird droppings.

"Can you not be enticed by jewellery? You can have money if you want, although I find it rather impersonal."

Naomi shook her head and tucked her hands under her armpits.

"Thank you. I don't need anything."

Grandfather looked at Alice with surprise.

"If you don't want anything for yourself, aren't there family members or friends you'd like to help?"

"I have no one," she said.

"Then buy yourself some friends," Babel said.

"I don't need any."

"Alice, help me here. I've never met anyone who didn't want anything from me."

"Leave me out of this. I like seeing you helpless for a change. Beaten at your own game by a young girl."

"I won't stand for that. Come with me, Naomi."

He got out of his chair with difficulty and started down the path, going deeper into the jungle. Naomi looked at Alice. Did she read fear in those eyes? It seemed more like anger. Had the Naomi she was hoping for finally emerged?

"Follow him," she whispered.

Naomi trailed along after Babel, who was making his way down the winding path among the bushes. The path was constructed to seem endless, but of course it soon came to a dead end at the windows. A small bench stood in the midst of all the greenery where you could sit and survey the city. The old man sat down with a groan and tapped the place beside him. Naomi remained standing.

Yes, thought Alice, observing them through the bushes, there's the stubborn Naomi she had been looking for all that time and had not found. She expected her grandfather to repeat his gesture with irritation, or at least to make some kind of remark. He was Naomi's boss, after all, and he could put her out on the street with a snap of his fingers. But he decided to overlook her disobedience.

"What do you see?" he asked.

"The city," said Naomi.

"Yes, the city. The center of diplomacy. The mecca of art and culture, the gathering place of the best that humanity has produced. A beacon lighting the future. Is that what you see?"

"Maybe, from up here."

"Do you know what I see?"

Naomi shook her head.

"I see people fighting to survive or to get ahead. Out there the only law that applies is the survival of the fittest, and today that's no longer the one with the most strength, but the one with the most money, the strongest will, the most cunning plans and the hardest heart. The real jungle is not in Africa but here at our feet. And do you know who the king is here? I am! When I roar, they tremble. This city is mine, Naomi. I rarely say it out loud, but that doesn't make it any less true. I own everything and everyone of importance. Do you understand that? I can give you everything. Whether I want to or not is another matter. I am not a king from some Oriental fairy tale who gives away half his kingdom to the first beggar who can make his daughter laugh. But I could be. Try me, girl."

Naomi shook her head.

"No one goes through life without wishes. You've made it clear that you don't want any material things. That does you credit, although I've never really understood what some people

have against money. But if there's no one you want to make happy, is there someone you'd like to get even with? I can imagine that not everyone is equally friendly to subs. Is there someone you'd like me to dismiss?"

"No."

"Don't test my patience, girl. Everyone wants something. What do you want?"

"What I want, no one can give me."

"Ask."

"You're not God."

"What did you say?"

"Can you bring the dead back to life?"

"No."

"Then you have nothing that I want."

Alice was back at the table, sitting quietly, when Grandfather popped up from between the bushes. She was surprised to see Naomi supporting him. He rarely allowed this.

"She is one of us," he said.

"I don't understand."

"She is one of the mourners. I can't do anything for her right now. But perhaps you can."

He placed his hand on Naomi's shoulder.

"You saved a person's life, Naomi. That is a great responsibility."

And he disappeared among the trees.