

Marcel

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Chapter 1

The house resembled all the others in the road: sagging somewhat after two centuries of habitation, driving winds and war. Behind the hedge a spine of roof-tiles slumped between two gables. The windows sat a little tipsily in the walls; wooden clogs potted up with petunias hung by the door.

Most of the rooms housed a limbo of darkness, cool in summer, chilly in winter. Elsewhere the walls had absorbed the smell of generations of cooked dinners, as in the kitchen, where the grease clung to the rafters. The cellar stored, the attic forgot.

By the end of August the cold started rising from the floors. At night there was a smell of frost in the air. Sometimes, before a downpour, the clouds skimmed so low over the roof that they seemed to be torn asunder by the finial. The light grew thin. The grass in the orchard sparkled until well after midday. The garden shrugged off its last lingering touches of colour and assumed the same grey shade as the gravestones in the churchyard nearby.

I was taken there once a year by the grandmother, but she herself was a daily visitor. It was less than five turnings between the garden gate and the place where her dead lay sleeping. She did not hold with buying flowers for All Souls Day. There were always daisies pushing up from the graves as it was. That would do well enough, she thought. Tombstone plaques decorated with porcelain roses filled her with scorn. She had epitaphs of her own carved in the granite of her soul.

She was the unbending midwife of her tribe. She would not allow her dead to vanish unattended. Once they were buried their bodies became earth. She raked partings in their hair and clipped the bushes by their headstones as if they were fingernails. Wedding rings had been transferred from the cold fingers of the dead to those of the warm-blooded living. She had folded their spectacles and laid them in a drawer, where they joined the tangle of all the other pairs with their long, grasshopper legs.

After each funeral she would open the curtains in the back room, raise the roller blind and put fresh sheets on the bed.

'The time will come for each and every one of us,' she would say, opening the covers. 'Into bed with you, no dawdling now.' The chapel of rest had become a guest room again.

The alarm clock on the bedside table ground the seconds away. The phosphorescent green face glowed spectrally in the dark. I hardly dared move between the sheets for fear of rousing the lost souls in the bedsprings, which jangled accusingly with the slightest movement of your limbs.

*

The house was a temporary annex to heaven, due to a shortage of space. Within the confines of the glass-fronted cabinet the dead faded less rapidly than the living, whose austere framed portraits hung unprotected on the walls of the parlour. They were not swathed in garlands of gilt or ribbons of silver, nor were they as worthily cherished.

All Souls Day came four times a month at the grandmother's house. First she whisked her duster over the statue of the Virgin Mary and the miniature Yser Tower commemorating the Flemish soldiers killed in the Great War. Then she instructed me to hand her the photographs - one by one, not randomly, but in the order in which they had left their realm. They piled up. A young generation had arisen, the old one was gently falling away. In the end there were more photographs than I could hold. I laid them on the table, in the proper sequence, and patiently slid them over one at a time to be replaced in the cabinet. In their ornate frames they looked like fragile carriages lining up to go through customs.

The grandmother blessed them with her duster and told me all their names. Clutches of aunts, nephews, distant cousins, nieces came up for review. Most of them were unknown to me, aside from a picture and a terminal disease. Four times a month I would listen to her reel off the same causes of death, pausing now and then to give a little sniff of resignation.

*

Bertrand was one of the few I had actually met. My first dead body. Someone had to be the first, and I could have done worse. One sunny Friday afternoon I came upon him quite rigid, hunched over the table in the low-ceilinged back kitchen of his tumble-down home. His hand was reaching for his inhaler.

'Asthma,' the grandmother declared. 'His lungs wheezed so loud you could hear it out in the street.'

His daughter could barely wait to flog his antiques, tear the old house down and build a villa plus swimming pool.

The grandmother took a dim view of this. 'She never even lifted a finger for him.' A hint of malice came into her voice, for the daughter's gleeful anticipation of her riches had been short-lived.

'Popped her clogs before the week was out. A burst appendix, it seems, after eating a boiled egg with a piece of egg-shell on it. She was bent double with pain. Too mean to call a doctor, though.'

Bertrand's daughter was relegated to the darkest corner of the shelf. No one was given any old place in the cramped afterlife of the cabinet, which was shared with the wine glasses and coffee service. There was hell, paradise and purgatory. Aside from a few blessed souls who had special claims to closeness with the Virgin, no one could count on a fixed ranking. Posthumous promotion could happen, but coming down a peg or two was more likely.

One day Bertrand too found himself in purgatory: second row, behind the Virgin's back. News had reached the grandmother of some sin he had committed. 'It seems he beat his wife.'

When I asked her why, she went all quiet.

'Indeed lad,' she sighed at last, 'why would anyone do such a thing?'

*

She was given to remarks like that. 'Well my dear Maurice, they won't be back, that's for sure,' she would sigh. Maurice ran a draper's shop in town, which she visited every few weeks. She always phoned first, saying: 'Maurice, I need some *marchandise*. I'm coming to see you.'

He would be waiting in the doorway for her to arrive. A short man, bald but for a few tufts around the ears, with a lumpy red nose over a pencil moustache. The shop window bore the name 'Beernaerts Textiles' elegantly scripted in white paint.

'Getting himself worked up for one of his Italian welcomes, no doubt,' the grandmother would hiss between her teeth as we rounded the corner.

She was seldom mistaken. As soon as he spotted us Maurice rushed forward, flapping his arms and rubbing his hands. He seized the grandmother's shoulders and kissed her loudly three times. 'Whenever Andrea calls,' he rejoiced, 'it makes my day.'

'That will do, Maurice.' She glanced round to see if there weren't too many people watching. 'I'm not the Queen you know.'

*

The air in the shop smelled dry. Rolls of cloth were suspended row upon row from tall racks. The floor was strewn with multi-coloured sewing threads, and the strip-lights humming on the ceiling cast a cold white glow over the fabrics.

'Come now, fellows,' Maurice cried, 'this floor needs sweeping. It's a right mess.'

At this, several pallid assistants in grey dust-coats emerged from behind the racks, pushing wide mops trailing beards of fluff across the floor without a sound. Sometimes I noticed them huddling together behind the racks. I could hear them sniggering at 'Mijnheer' Maurice's affectations. They wore soft slippers. They padded about the shop like cats on velvet paws.

*

'I have received a bolt of serge,' Maurice crowed, 'Andrea my dear, it is good enough to eat. Such quality!' His fingers fluttered fan-like around his ears.

'It's not quite what I had in mind. I'm looking for something different. What else have you got?'

Maurice snapped his fingers. Behind the racks the assistants broke away and reappeared from all sides with a mildly perturbed look on their pale faces, as if they had been hard at work. The manager's hands flew this way and that. The assistants unhooked the shafts from the sides of the racks and released the catches. A plaintive creaking filled the air as lengths of fabric cascaded down to resemble tapestried walls. The shop turned into a maze panelled with tweed, raw silk and velour.

Maurice escorted the grandmother down one passage and up the next, indicating the different materials with a long pointer as if they were maps showing strange continents. Every few steps he motioned his assistants to resume the demonstration, whereupon they swung their shafts and released yet more walls of fabric. Whenever the grandmother slowed her pace he snatched up the material in both hands and held it under her nose.

She rubbed it between thumb and forefinger, sniffed it, and came very close to taking a bite. 'Samples?' she said.

He reached under the rack for the book of swatches. Turning the pages he escorted the grandmother across his emporium back to the window, where they inspected each sample in turn.

'Daylight cannot tell a lie,' the grandmother said.

They moved closer together. Maurice's head swung from left to right in sync with his hands.

The grandmother muttered something.

Maurice shrugged and raised his eyebrows.

The grandmother shook her head, giving her hat a stern little shake in the process. 'Bon, I've made up my mind,' she said finally.

They crossed side by side to the long wooden counter. Maurice noted down her order on a sheet of brown paper. Each item filled him with delight.

'And I need some more of those *perlefine* beads,' the grandmother said. 'I've run out again.'

He grinned.

'You know what they're like in the country,' she said brightly. 'Anything gaudy and glittery makes them feel rich.'

Maurice manoeuvred a stepladder between the counter and the wall fitment made up of countless little drawers.

'Yes,' he said, 'there's not much call for such items around here. I always keep the country things somewhere at the top.'

They exchanged grins.

'*Perlefines, perlefines.*' He opened a drawer. 'How many do you require?'

'A good supply.'

He filled a paper bag with tear-shaped beads strung on glistening thread and cautiously descended the ladder.

'*Voila!* Finery for country lasses. Can I offer you a glass of something?'

*

A long windowless passage led to a dimly lit sitting-room, where Maurice poured himself a snifter of cognac. The grandmother opted for a glass of Elixir, a colourless liquid that clung to the sides of the small glass.

'Well now,' she said, her cheeks flushing a deep pink, 'that goes down a treat, I must say.'

They sat facing each other at a long table by the window. Small flowerpots with Mother-in-law's Tongues were lined up on the sill.

I was not listening to their conversation. I had been given a glass of grass-green lemonade and a magazine with pictures of Monte Carlo to keep me occupied.

'When?' I heard Maurice moan. 'When, when, when?' With each 'when' he banged his fists on the table. 'The answer is: never. The licence is still in my brother's name, dammit!'

'There there Maurice, no need to get all excited.'

'I've paid my dues, haven't I?'

He stared out of the window. It was drizzling. Women in nylon raincoats moved past the sanseverias. He topped up their glasses.

'Not so full, not so full,' the grandmother cried. 'It goes down far too easily.'

The rain drew slanting stripes across the window. The stripes merged. People opened their umbrellas. Others, ghost-like, hurried by holding shopping bags over their heads.

Maurice and the grandmother talked in whispers. Their voices blended with the pattering rain. Now and then their voices rose.

'They're the ones who took advantage,' sniffed the grandmother. 'You can guess who's taken to driving a Mercedes, can't you Maurice? A Mercedes, no less.'

A brief silence ensued.

Then Maurice said something odd.

It sounded like: 'Hee.'

Silence.

Again he said: 'Hee.'

When I dared raise my head I caught a glimpse of him stuffing his handkerchief into the pocket of his dust-coat. He threw the grandmother a red-eyed, helpless look, uncorked the bottle and poured himself another drink.

The grandmother declined a refill, covering her glass with her hand. Maurice emptied his cognac in one draught and sank into silence. He inhaled through gritted teeth. A last stifled sob sent a shudder through his body.

The grandmother stood up, adjusted her hat and shook the creases out of her skirt. 'Indeed, Maurice, indeed,' she said at last, 'There's no putting the clock back, is there.'

'He still hasn't got over it,' she declared to no one in particular as we walked back to the railway station. 'Whatever would Agnes say.'

*

Agnes wore black satin; she had a white face and large eyes behind thick glasses. She smiled wanly in the display cabinet, baring brown teeth. Her son Léon, in his early twenties, stared out at the world from the shop front, where he stood arm in arm with Marcel, the grandmother's youngest brother. They were pals, their destinies undecided as yet. They shared the same shiny black frame, at the foot of the Yser Tower.

'The war had already begun by then,' the grandmother remarked. 'Léon was an only child. Maurice certainly had his share of misfortune, poor soul.'

They had wanted another son. Agnes was nearly forty at the time. Too old really, the grandmother thought, but what can you expect, she couldn't get over her boy's death. Things didn't turn out well.

'It was like a donkey's pregnancy. Thirteen, fourteen months and no contractions. Agnes said: "It'll come in its own good time." She carried on for a year and a half, poor thing. In the end they cut her open, but it had gone stone-hard.'

They cut her open, but it had gone stone-hard. I imagined doctors and nurses letting fly with hammers and chisels in an attempt to excavate a stone foetus from Agnes' fleshy insides. I did not dare ask if they had installed it on Agnes' tombstone. It would not have surprised me if they had.

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