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The Ice Fairy's Nocturnal Bath

There was nothing to suggest that it was a Thursday. Far from the orderly routines of urban life, far from the humdrum life of school, morning papers and evening news, the names of the days lost their meaning so rapidly that it made you wonder if they had ever really *had* any meaning. Time burst out of its corset, stretching and extending any which way it fancied, and turning the notion that she had arrived in Dahlem a mere day and a half ago into an impudent trick of the memory. It felt as if two weeks had passed since her arrival, and Ada was already starting to find her normal life unbelievable. Had she been more experienced, she would have read the fact that her entire previous life had suddenly lost all its plausibility, as proof positive that she had an altogether modish talent for the bohemian life. She, though, took this effect to be the result of something she wasn't accustomed to: being alone among people. Something that, by contrast with her usual state of being alone *without* other people, was striking for the fact that it took up considerably more energy.

At around 10 in the evening, Smutek put the final touches to a fictive tour of Vienna. In the various rooms of the hostel, groups of pupils were preparing a presentation of the city sights and – oxymoron or no oxymoron – of important historical events. They were daubing the wallpaper, rehearsing dramatic scenes, sticking photos and postcards to the walls. Ada, not a natural team player, had asked if she could recite a piece of Musil that she would learn by heart. As Smutek dismissed the pupils with a cheerful voice and expansive hand gestures, a whole swarm of incomplete thoughts churned away inside her, so that the prospect of spending the rest of the evening with human capsules whose contents were completely unknown to her, seemed positively unbearable. Unseen, she reached the entrance hall, laced up her running shoes, and fled into the open air.

The night was as fresh and clear as water. So as not to lose her way, Ada took the same path that she had taken on her walk during the day. She breathed deeply: in through her nose, out through her mouth; the taste of the whole forest, with its fur-coated and armour-plated denizens, its snow with a frozen crust, its crushed plants, spongy, sopping moss and sodden tree-bark, lingered on her tongue. The moon sent Ada's own shadow out in front of her, a kind of scout. After a few minutes a warmth

started to spread through her; a cloud of steam enveloped her; the earth felt springy to her feet; the trees by the wayside merged and became black shapes, shifting closer together until they could clasp each other's hands high up and obscure the moon. The darkness closed in behind Ada like an opaque wall.

When a clearing opened up on the right-hand side, Ada slowed down and finally halted. On her daytime walk she had seen this place from the path, and had imagined what it would be like to come here at night. It would have been a perfect setting for a fairy-tale film: a meeting place for the hare and the wolf to discuss the essential nature of the world; a playground for elf children safe from parental interference; the perfect backdrop for talking springs and thinking mushrooms with huge, brown hats to step on the stage. The grass was short, as if it were regularly mown. In the middle was a pool the length and breadth of a hockey pitch, surrounded by trees which stood together in little groups like teams hatching their strategy for the next few minutes of play. The surface of the pool was frozen white and covered in snow.

Ada crossed the ditch that bordered the path, picking the thorns of dried-out blackberry shoots out of her clothes as carefully as if they were the hands of the very tiniest creatures. Heading straight across the clearing, she followed an indistinct track which she first of all took to be a little-used animal path, and suddenly found herself facing something that penetrated the control centre of her nervous system like a red-hot needle, totally disabling it for several seconds. She couldn't even think, never mind move. She stood still in the moonlit field and stared. She was not alone.

The other person was in the pool, handsomely framed by the edges of a star-shaped hole. Her forearms were propped on the edge of the icy surface as if on a window-sill, and her body hung down, unmoving, in the water below. Ada saw the creature's profile, noticing that the eyes were open and staring into space, and thought she could just make out a smile: the corners of the mouth were clearly turned upwards. She had caught an ice fairy having her nocturnal bath.

The mind and emotions need a certain amount of time to re-adjust after a shock – and once this had happened, Ada spotted a trail of footsteps going in a dead straight line across the snow-covered ice. The jagged edges of the hole were the result of several attempts by the fairy to prop herself up and heave herself out of the water, causing the icy surface to keep cracking. With just a few steps, Ada reached the water's edge and called out to the sylph. Not the faintest trace of movement flickered in Frau Smutek's white, demonically smiling face.

Taking off her jacket and pullover and loosening the laces of her running shoes, Ada wondered whether it was God or the devil compelling her to enter the icy water in sub-zero temperatures. Along with fear, excitement, and a heart pounding against her rib cage, Ada felt a certain inner fire that only the devil could have inspired. The situation turned her instantly and unequivocally into a despot within her own private world. Her commands were sharp and unambiguous: shoes off, trousers on, breathe slowly; and she was gratified to see that her body, like a well-drilled soldier, faced up to the danger without a moment's hesitation. God would have suggested using a quick pair of legs like hers to run back to the hostel to fetch help – and God would, as always, have been too late. Ada threw herself to the ground and, like a young dog, rolled her heated body in the snow to lessen the physical shock that awaited her. She then sprang up, jumped up and down a few times on the spot, and set off at a run, down the filthy river bank and onto the ice.

After only a couple of metres it began to break beneath her feet. Frau Smutek had stepped on to the pond from the other side; she weighed less, and had got much further. Ada's speed carried her a few more steps across the crackling surface – and then down she went. The water met her with electric shocks from all sides: impossible to decide whether it was boiling hot or freezing cold, and this uncertainty was more bearable than the cold shock she had expected. She could still feel the ground beneath her feet, pushed herself off, and thrust her upper body against the cracking, singing surface which immediately broke up into a mass of small thin chunks. When the water became too deep, her legs began entirely of their own accord to make feverish little swimming movements, while her elbows thrashed ahead and forged a black trail across the bright surface. She crossed the jagged hole with the quick, twitchy movements of a non-swimmer, accompanied by the agitated clinking and swaying of the pieces of broken ice all around her.

Just seconds before she could actually touch Frau Smutek with her outstretched hand, she asked herself for the first time how she was supposed to carry a totally lifeless body back to dry land. Her initial contact with the water had caused a kind of fury to surge up inside her, but the cold unremittingly sucked all the strength from her arms and legs, scrambled her thoughts, and gripped her brain with gentle fingers. Relax, lie back, I'll carry you, it could be so lovely. Moments later, Ada had reached the ice fairy. She lifted one arm out of the water, hit her on the shoulder – and felt the brief sharp resistance of frozen fabric covering part of a body as cold and hard as stone. With a slow, good-natured movement Frau Smutek turned her head, revealing a

blissful, rigid face, and looked with unseeing eyes and half-closed lids to left and right.

“Nie wiedzalam, ze to tak latwo,” she said, and her voice sounded almost laughably normal.

Ada was at a loss. She knew even now that the other woman, speaking whilst half asleep, would never remember a single one of the words she had just said – so she let the sentence go. She roughly seized the slender upper body with both hands and pulled it down from the icy surface and into the water. Frau Smutek went under and immediately re-emerged, smiling, her black hair gleaming with wetness and sticking to her scalp.

“Swim!” Ada bellowed in her ear. “Swim!”

And Frau Smutek, too, obeyed like a good soldier. She swam obediently with jerky, automatic movements, her head alongside Ada’s, as if they were both connected to the same nerve tract. Ada carried on speaking in order not to lose her mind; she spoke as if they were both one person: well done, good girl, just carry on swimming, for God’s sake *swim*.

Afraid of snapping the thread that bound them together, she didn’t dare to try to feel the ground with her feet, but carried on swimming until her stomach scratched the stones and her hands started to feel the shock of vegetation at the water’s edge. She reached dry land; Frau Smutek lay where she was in the water, as pale as a dead reptile; and Ada noticed that she must have gone out onto the ice barefoot and wearing only a thin blouse and summer trousers. There was not a single item of clothing at the edge of the water that didn’t belong to Ada.

With one hand grabbing Frau Smutek’s dripping black locks and the other under her arm, Ada dragged her onto dry land. The connection between them was severed; swimming had worked, but standing up didn’t. Ada went down on her knees and pulled the ice-cold fairy, who all of a sudden weighed as much as five people, onto her back. The alien head dangled down over her shoulder, the long hair touching her thighs and sticking to her skin like seaweed clinging to rocks on the shore at low tide. Ada managed to carry her a couple of paces, doggedly retracing her steps, and the exertion warmed her up. When she could go no further, they stood in the middle of the clearing, the one half naked and clutching the other’s rib cage, swaying and

whispering, brows touching like a pair of demented lovers. Ada shifted the weight in order to free her right arm, raised her hand, and began to slap Frau Smutek. Once, twice, over and over again, alternating between the back of her hand and her palm –but always slapping her face. Every blow had more effect than the last until Frau Smutek emitted a whimper and tried to turn away. “Move!” yelled Ada. “Move!”

And she moved. On legs that she could barely control, staggering along like a marionette cut from its strings, bearing down heavily with her arm on Ada’s shoulders, and repeatedly collapsing and having to be dragged along. Thus they made their way through the ditch to the path, and then down the path. Sometimes it was easier, sometimes harder – and then Ada yelled at her, hit her, kicked her with bare feet, and whipped her the next few metres like a half-dead animal.

The hostel came into view, its entrance casting a warm glow. Marshalling all her resources one last time, Ada flung herself and her charge in the direction of the light; the door swung open; brightness scorched her eyes; a phalanx of pupils’ shoes lay in her path. Frau Smutek landed on the floor with a thump. The smell of people. Jackets on hooks. For a moment, Ada wished herself back in the forest.

Then she screwed up every last bit of energy she possessed, and screamed. And because she couldn’t think of a single other word, she screamed the same as before: move! Move – she howled, drawing out the vowel. Move! And then the steps at the end of the entrance hall began to vibrate and Smutek appeared in her field of vision from bottom to top – first his legs, then his hips, then his upper body. Behind him was Höfi, his tiny little button eyes glazed with horror.

Frau Smutek disappeared into the air and Ada, who had long been practically on her knees, slid completely onto the floor and for minutes remained prostrate on the wet doormat. Her body refused to obey orders. Her arms and legs seemed to have no bones – just jelly. Höfi, unable to lift her up, crouched beside her, felt her face with frenzied fingers, and when she felt something hot dripping onto her cheek, she realised that he was crying, bent double as if over a dead child, bemoaning some remote misery or his own weakness, and reeling off things that she didn’t understand. When Smutek reappeared, Höfi had gone, vanished like an apparition, and Ada was floating high above the ground, looking directly at Smutek’s chin, fleshy like a split-open rambutan.

“Thank you,” he whispered as he carried her through the house in his arms. “Thank you.”

“I didn’t help you,” said Ada. “I helped your wife.”

The voice sounded positively familiar. Ada immediately recognised it as her own, without having any idea how or where her body made it. Smutek stood still and looked straight into her face. An unnatural pallor aside, she didn’t look unwell but, even in this situation, blase and arrogant. In Smutek the German resistance to any type of sentimentality arose and wrestled with the Polish yearning for soaring heights and deepest depths. For a moment he stood there at a loss; he would have liked to have kissed her or strongly rebuked her, but he finally carried on running, kicking the doors open, and didn’t utter another word until he reached the last one.

“Okay, Ada,” he said. “I hereby thank you on my wife’s behalf.”

She nodded. Okay. Thick steam filled the air; streams of condensation ran down the tiled walls; a black, steamed-up window; probably night-time outside. They were in one of the bathrooms on the topmost floor where the hostel staff slept.

Smutek placed her on the toilet lid and removed her tights. They were frozen solid and fell onto the tiles like little boards. He freed her from her knickers and tugged at her bra, and Ada was already lashing out in all directions when he lifted her up in his arms again. When one of his shoulders came within her reach, she bit it. Smutek emitted a half-suppressed moan and carried on lowering Ada slowly and carefully into the bath-tub. The hot water hurt like boiling oil, more unbearable than anything that she had yet experienced. Ada thought she was still screaming, and was at last still, overcome by pain, just in the process of losing consciousness, when she managed to say one last thing. Fetch my running shoes, please, they’re still in the field... and then she, too, was gone.

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