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The Prince of Insignificance

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First Love

I decided to visit Nana Anni the following weekend. She moved into an old people's home near Cloppenburg two years ago: The Elisabeth Garrel Centre for Senior Citizens. *It just couldn't go on like that anymore* – my mother moaned and groaned. *It just couldn't go on like that anymore. She has got so dodderly. It'd be the death of me if she fell down the stairs.* So instead of it being the death of my mother, it's now the death of Nana Anni.

She's cut off her children. You don't speak to those who commit such an act of betrayal as to disown their own mother. Such things would never have happened in the past. Her children feel guilty. Guilty for having cast her out. For having delivered her into the hands of the minimum wage slaves at the Elisabeth Garrel Centre. She's not going to speak to them either. Why should she? These people are monsters from the future. Monsters incapable of understanding Nana Anni, without an ear for her language, without any sensitivity for her times. For the times she lives in. The times she carries with her. The times she is. Her life is made up of the times she has experienced. She drags a large supply around with her, a sack full of old, past experiences which she wants to lug into the present and into the future. Whenever we talk together I always feel as though we are speaking to each other through a tunnel. From her past to my present. And sometimes, only very occasionally, when we go deeper and really understand each other, this tunnel collapses, and we are in the same time, the same moment, somewhere in the Here and Now. If there is such a thing. These are the most beautiful moments we have together. For, in fact, we are very similar. It's just that I am standing in front of the mountain, and she is behind it.

I'm not going to drop in on my parents this time. That would seem like a betrayal of my grandmother. So I take the train on Sunday to Cloppenburg and then, after waiting for an age at the main bus station, travel on by bus to the old people's home. It looks dreadful from outside. Like practically every old people's home. An architectural slap in the face for the retired inhabitants. The main thing is they've got a roof over their heads. The main thing is

there's something to eat on the table. The main thing is it's clean and warm. As for the rest ... The Elisabeth Garrel Centre is a kind of open prison. In front of the entrance three old men sit smoking. None of them says a word; they stare with dulled eyes at the grey paving stones under their slippers. When I greet them, the one in the middle answers in a monotone voice: "Well, well ..."

I go inside and walk along the corridor by the entrance in search of someone to speak to. Where can I find Nana Anni? A few doors are open; cleaners are cleaning the rooms; it stinks of urine and old age. At the end of the corridor there's a day room. In front of the central window five old people are sitting, three men on chairs and two women in wheelchairs. Someone has arranged them in a semi-circle as though they are a sociable and chatty group, but they are silent and stare. Because of the seating arrangement they are all staring at each other. Staring at a fixed point on someone else's head because he or she is in the line of vision. But in fact their gaze is turned inwards. Towards other, distant times and different circles of life; towards moments still filled with the vitality of real life. The five have clearly been dumped here by the staff and left to their own devices until lunch time. What are you supposed to do with them? They are waiting. Waiting at the bus stop of death. Waiting for life finally to take pity on them and release them from the feverish spasm of its grip. The day has three high points: breakfast, lunch, supper. Then it's back to waiting. Lying, sitting, standing.

I walk up to the group since I can't find anyone else to ask. To my astonishment I discover that one of the old ladies is Nana Anni. She looks completely different. Very small and shrivelled. As though someone has let the air out of her. I can only recognise the features of her face; the rest of her appearance has been lost.

"Anni," I say.

No reaction. From anyone.

"Nana Anni," I say again.

She stirs; a twitch in her face indicates that she has awoken from the inner film she has just been watching. Her eyes wander through the room and finally come to rest on me, finding my own eyes. She stares at me blankly. Who might I be? What do I want? Am I bringing food? Is it already time to visit the loo again?

"Hello, Nana. It's me. Michael. Your grandson. Don't you recognise me?"

For a moment she stares at me at a loss. Then the pieces come together inside her, and she becomes fully conscious. Since I am her grandson she feels no resentment towards me.

"Ah, yes, Michael, yes. It's nice you've come to visit me."

"I've been meaning to for ages but it's never worked out. But now I've found the time. How are things here?"

“Good, my dear. I’m fine. Can’t complain.”

“Well, to be honest, Nana, it looks a bit boring. Actually, it seems dead boring. What do you all get up to all the time?”

“What are we supposed to get up to? I can’t stand up anymore because of my knees, and the care assistants don’t have any time for us. So you start thinking, and life passes before your eyes.”

I take her wheelchair and push it along the corridor towards the exit.

“Nana, you could watch TV or read or chat amongst yourselves.”

“Oh, I don’t know, Michael. What’s the point of all that? I’m no longer interested in what’s on TV. And I don’t know the other people in here from Adam. I often think about the past. About Papa Willem and the time before; about when I was a kid and growing up. I can remember everything very exactly, I think about the past almost every day. As I get older I get better at it. You know, the years between thirty and now have vanished, I can hardly remember anything about them. It’s all gone. But the time I was a child and a young woman is still all there.”

“That’s a curious thing. Why is it like that?”

“I don’t know. Perhaps things are at their most exciting when you experience them for the first time. Later on, everything always stays the same, work, food, life as a whole. But in the beginning everything is still new.”

“That sounds dreadful, Nana. Everything stays the same after you’re thirty?”

“Yes. There’s not a lot else to come. You’ve just got to get through it.”

“Oh, Nana. You’re making me afraid.”

“There’s no point in being afraid. I can remember, for instance, still very precisely the first time I fell in love.”

We’ve arrived outside, and in the garden I push her wheelchair to a patch between the trees illuminated by the sun. I cover her legs with a woollen blanket and sit down on the stump of a tree next to her.

“Nana, tell me the story.”

“Oh, well. You know, with Papa Willem I had the best husband I could have had. He was there for me all my life and did everything for me. Every day we worked together in the fields and every night we slept in the same bed. And God knows I was genuinely grateful for this man.”

“That’s nice, Nana.”

“But I loved another.”

“Nana! What do you mean another?”

“You know, Michael, life plays a strange game with us. When I was still very young, perhaps fourteen, I used to sit every morning on the street in front of our yard and would wait for the horse and carriage to come and take me to school. The street wasn’t tarred then but pot-holed and dusty. I sat there opposite the entrance to the yard and waited. It was 1930, I think.”

I can remember the entrance to the yard where I myself played as a child when visiting Nana. We both had at this moment before our eyes the same beautiful yellowed picture of our childhoods, separated by many years.

“I can remember, Nana.”

“And every morning before the horse and carriage came, a milk cart came past us. The driver did the rounds of the yards, and his lad jumped down and filled up the cans. He was the same age as me. I knew his name was Friedrich, and every morning I combed my hair for him so it was especially beautiful. He was so strong and supple; he had such a lovely laugh and always grinned at me very shyly. When the driver of the milk cart was ill Friedrich came by on his own. Then I helped him fill up the cans. And sometimes he came by in the afternoon as well, and we would sit down on the side of the street and talk.”

“What about, Nana?”

“Oh, everything. You could talk to him about everything, about animals, the weather, music. He was such a funny lad. One day when he came alone and I knew mum and dad were in the fields, we kissed, in the corn. Only once, but by then it had happened.”

“Nana!”

“I had fallen head over heels in love with him. And he with me. Every day we waited impatiently to see each other again. But never again were we alone.”

“And then?”

“Six months later his father moved away with him. Just imagine that! Somewhere in the south. I never got hold of his address, and there were no telephones then. I was so unhappy! I never saw him again.”

“And Papa?”

“Papa came later. A couple of years later. He was the best. But I never loved him as much as I did the boy on the milk cart.”

“That’s a sad story.”

“But it’s not over yet.”

“Well, tell me the rest. Please, Nana.”

“A few years ago, after Papa’s death, when I could still walk properly, I was on holiday in Denmark. I was walking through a big park in Copenhagen, all on my own, along a dead straight avenue between tall old trees. At the end of the avenue a man was coming towards me. I didn’t take any notice of him, nor did he of me, but when we got nearer, we both looked at each other. I didn’t know immediately where to place him and kept looking at him, and he kept looking at me. We were getting nearer and nearer, and suddenly I knew: It’s him, Friedrich, the lad on the milk cart, the love of my life. And he recognised me too, I’m sure. But we didn’t dare speak; we continued walking up to each other and then passed each other by.”

“And what happened then, Nana – what happened?”

“I carried on walking and didn’t know what to do. After all those years – I just simply couldn’t speak to him. I was old now, and so was he. I turned around one more time to see him, and he turned to see me. He smiled briefly, just as he did in the past, and then we both continued on our way.”

“But why? Why didn’t you speak?”

“I don’t know. It was probably too late. We had missed each other.”

Nana Anni looks up into the crown of the oak above us with large, old eyes, and I see the whole of life in her gaze, all the sadness, all the devotion and all the wonder at the paths fate takes. I don’t know what to say in response because I have a lump in my throat and I can’t think of the words to say. What should I say anyway? In the end I am the product of these confused paths and Nana’s trust in fate.

“Nana, I love you lots. I think you did everything right. You couldn’t’ve made any other decision.”

“Perhaps, my dear, who knows? Who really knows? And now take me back, please. I’m cold and there’ll be something to eat soon.”

I take her back, and as I push her wheelchair some of my tears fall on to its armrest. Meanwhile Nana is silently transported back into the realm of dreams.

I’m going to try never to be so submissive to fate. I’d rather fight till the last moment against predestination to keep life in my own hands. Even if it was meant to be my fate.

When I leave the old people’s home I wonder whether to abduct Nana from here. I could take her with me. Make her my new flatmate. Perhaps she would reawaken to life through my talking to her. Perhaps she would be steered back from the past, into which she is being sucked as though by a whirlpool, into the present. Could I rescue her from the clutches of

time? Or would she also fade away with me and at some point stare with empty eyes into space? What do we human beings gain from getting older and older? All the time that we have conned out of nature with more or less dishonest tricks later straps us to wheelchairs and hospital beds. The idea is inherently wrong. We shouldn't hitch this stolen time to the end but insert it at the beginning. The twenty years we've stolen should be implanted in the time between twenty and forty. And from fifty there would be a neat and rapid deterioration with an uncomplicated death from sixty onwards, that is, in actual fact, eighty. One of the many logical and useful ideas for making improvements which I'll have had in vain.

I can't take Nana Anni from this place. I can't save her.

Life will carry her away from me

To a place we do not know.

A longer sample translation is available from NBG – please contact Charlotte on
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