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THE ENDS OF THE EARTH



RAIN



Achille, gruff in his sheepskin, says –

‘We shan’t have great wealth. Be assured: never. They bring amounts, on show. As though it made them ours, somehow. Jewels, as if we’d used our axes to break down the sultan’s doors and steal. Frescoes scraped off – as if we’d prayed in caves for comfort when the caravan was lost. And painted saints.... The good – they look like demons – you need them to fight the others, the bad demons. The good smooth blues against the scaly greens.

‘Riches, faith, despair – all goes in a glass case, like Sleeping Beauty – we kiss the crystal but she doesn’t wake.

‘My – our – father hadn’t been a miner – “here’s your snap”, my mother used to say, giving a sandwich. She must have thought a miner would be eager for her, more used to digging and to tunnels. Then he left. The mine was closed. Neither ever spoke about their work, so it was as if they did nothing, just had to leave the house all day and come back tired.

‘You can’t complain – besides, it makes no difference, the complaining, and the situation. I knew I was a tragic figure – I didn’t realise that everyone is, except the stupid who don’t know what’s coming for them. Not all of us have moral dilemmas, but we all wait for fate, Osud, judgement, to have its say and invent our crimes.

‘On the vast empty moors – there, I felt – not free, not solitary, but overwhelmed. It’s very hot, where once were sheep, there’s dunes, as if there’s sea receded, returning one day with tidal waves that would raise up ordinary things, dumping them high, grotesque.’

‘You and your brother,’ says Zenia, dressed in red, in case it snows and she is lost. ‘If I’d known how you planned turning out...! Would I have chosen either? Two puzzles, having anniversaries, moving so rhythmically

on to somewhere. Yves and you could be twins – except he’s more immersed in himself – both struggling to break out of the carapace. Your eggs.’

‘Of course we see things in a similar way,’ Achille says. ‘We all do. Otherwise each would see things as differently as they pleased, or as something pleased. It would be crazy. Very interesting, but unclassifiable, livable but chance. Total fluidity and happenstance. No social, to each their uncertain personal universe.’

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Yves, city-suited, says:

‘This village was nearly deserted. I thought I’d restore the houses, have music in them, in the square – all turning back like last century, except we’d wear modern clothes, such as they are, and I’d be the engineer, smoothe down ascents, stop floods and droughts. Now you see: people were smart: they died, they went away, there’s only monsters left. Once, long ago, they were shepherds, barmen – now their faces have caved in, eyes yellow under aspic, teeth a cemetery, the noses spiked swollen teasels... Dirty wool all round. Food in a credence. Bread, an onion, and a can of beans.

‘Dusk brings them out, they scurry, then it’s dark – what do they do all night? They sleep, the bed’s a pasture full of sheep. Smell the kerosene!

*

Zenia sees a vinyl disc – ‘The brass junkies’ – it’s famous, horns in a row, aping to the snapper. ‘I model myself on the drummer, Ginger,’ Achille says: ‘Talent and fortitude. I’m sure I’ve talent, but it’s latent. I know I have the power. Don’t exaggerate when you see clues,

Zenia: it's my hidden side – we all have one – mostly the sculptor doesn't bother to smoothe it down – it's rough and knobbly, invisible when you're on your plinth.'

Zenia can't decide who's more interesting, Yves or Achille. People who try impossible things – they always have a following, though it's perverse. Both brothers look quite nondescript – human beauty is a myth – if I were a panther, Zenia thinks, I'd laugh at them! Except the men have machines to make up for their lack of skills.

'Our father,' says Yves, bending down from height to seem more interested in shorter people, 'started in a clan. In Albania, they choose who's to go to jail for what is done. He fled, instead. He went on, we suppose, for ever, fleeing the good, the bad, the dutiful, and the rebellious.'

'Our mother,' Achille says, 'came from an Africa. Everybody's mother did, they say. Was it the Maghreb? Or Senegal? Congo? She knew each song, and so, maybe, wasn't trusted, came from nowhere. That chimes. Professionally, I'm an expert in Nothing. "Everything"'s been done. There's an enormity of Nothing, and you can work on it from anywhere – a moving tank; from space – or from a shepherd's hut. A *baita*. This was a luxury – tufo walls. There'd have been a thousand baas, at night a rustling, never quiet.

'Nowheres seem to fit in Nothing. Families come from one, and that's our destination. Where we've tried to live right here.'

He laughs, stands tall – he's still quite short, a useful travel size.

'He'll do for me,' thinks Zenia.

The brothers pick up, drop, loose clothes, stuff books into a bag – Nomades et caravanes d'Orient.... Morality and criminality, Tongues in Trees, Minima moralia – 'Throw them out!' shouts Yves. 'We've lived it all. You don't read, Achille, you think: don't burden us with snobbery....'

'Where do we go?' asks Zenia. 'We've little time, then we must evacuate. Maybe they only need our space, there's fresh people coming in. Or else they've dropped, spilled something – or an attack.... Marauders? The young? The old?'

'Oh,' says Yves, 'just wild weather, I expect. It happens everywhere – for some, leaving is for ever – no water, winter or summer all the time. It seems quite urgent – but it never is. There's ample time for fear, dread, and hope.'

'We have to walk,' Achille says. 'They only bus those who say they may return.'

The stones of the little house are firm – it's the roof, the floor, the rest, that's finished.

'It could all be fixed,' says Yves. 'I'd do it – but the landscapes shift, and we shift with them. There's seep and sand and crack. Best not trust what's underfoot, walk light and wear a mask.'

'No trains, if there's a poison,' says Achille. 'A crash. No road if it's a flood. We'll have to walk to Zenia's.'

'Oh, well,' says Zenia. 'The trouble is – I'm between houses. Between most things. Work and money too.'

'Yves and me – we didn't live by happenstance, expedients, or finding empty shells and creeping in, like crabs,' Achille says. 'We had a plan. Now there is none. We've nowhere left to go.'

'It's clear,' says Yves. 'In all I did, there was a progression – a seed that sometimes sprouted, and on you went, and it might be grass, or palms. You were long gone – you'd never know. The palm – that might

become an arm, l'homme armé,' and he laughs. 'Or an odd seed, big as a bobbin, that might become a tree. Tales – a strophe that becomes a Ramayana. How we went to Africa, what we did there. What use we made of Siberia, the expanse. How we recovered from a war. Kosova – someone remembers that, and who stayed, who left. How they suffered, every one.... Each becomes strange, muddy and ethereal. Anyway – time fools us all: it seems there is progression. One thing after another, big grey clouds each holding the tail of one in front – it seems there is a story, plot, a logic.... And yet – people see events, history, quite differently. A sequence without meaning, without reflection. People act "as if" it's like that, as if events don't have an eye, or even hundreds, set in a circle ... watching everything. So, are they right?'

'I imagine – yes, a thousand eyes set in one brain, that all at once – they weep,' says Zenia, trying to make up for her inhospitality, or indigence. 'If I knew more about your life, Yves, I'd see there was growth in it, I'm sure.'

'No,' says Achille. 'Yves and I discard all the precedents, and expect to find another route. Not force, not violence – they're venomous, they disappoint, they vitiate. Another way, there had to be, that's not the state, nor the unrestricted will. Not soviet and not kibbutz. But – it's too late. It's gone beyond us. There is no return, it's coda time, recapitulation, climax....You can see – it's what we live, right now.'

'It sounds grand,' says Zenia. 'So big I don't understand a thing. It's true, that people who can't find a way ahead – they always say that it's too late. No doubt it is....'

'Ahead?' asks Achille. 'It's not a march, Zenia.'

'I constructed,' Yves says. 'Achille found the sites. All hypothetical. All left behind, all trace and record – left back there, the *baita*.'

'Thought experiments – they're done in empires,' Zenia says.

'The earth now,' says Achille, 'is Austro-Hungary. The rich and educated – they're the Austrians.'

'*Assez vu, assez connu*. That's where we're at,' says Yves. 'Look at the mist. I'll go down, see if there is anyone.....' and off he goes. It's cold and silent.

He goes invisible – the mist is motionless, covers the valley.

They never see Yves again..

They daren't go in the mist. It kills everything: a test, or a mistake?

'There's nothing left for him to build,' says Achille.

He and Zenia – they are suspects. It seems improbable: sex? The suspicion lasts.

'They never say if they have poisoned you,' Achille says. 'A question? Is it worth it, an inquiry, that will last out your life?'

They don't know how to respond, and Achille presses on. 'You may have thought – our project sounds like 'model villages, potato soup'. It isn't so, but leave it there.'



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