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Edith

There's a specific kind of noise – one so sharp that it pierces through you at every moment, becoming more defined as time goes by. At one point, it starts to sound a certain way: the dark songs of a piano, or the somewhat mellow tones of a violin. Eventually, it gains a voice. A human one, echoing around you with every step of your life. Once you are acquainted with it and the words it tells you, it takes on a tangible form. The form of Edith.

Edith is a diligent woman. She starts all her days with tea, the mug she drinks it from always clasped between her hands in a way to reveal the floral imagery painted on it. There is no audience around her paying attention to details like this that she goes out of her way to show, and still, she acts as if there's countless eyes analysing her every move. Even when she plays the piano, it isn't for her own amusement. A feeling of urgency seeps from her, her movements almost stiff, but never executed with anything less than utmost precision. Her eyes are closed, her brows furrowed. For a while, she becomes a human.

She was always expected to be a mother, her fate was sealed the very day she was born. Despite being the scion of a family with more debts to pay than money left, the aristocratic blood of a once prestigious lineage continued to flow through her veins. For this reason, she looked forward to the day she'd prove to be valuable to her parents by marrying rich. Though, this is all she'd ever end up being - an asset, with all her personality stripped away from her.

She named me, her son, *Franz* - a symbol for freedom. I became the one thing that solidified the role that she would forever end up playing. Her destiny was to give birth to a son, but the biological bond between us was never enough to make her a mother in my eyes.

However, my father Henry seemed so different from her. He was an amusing man with lots of passion for various things, but as a lover of the bohemian lifestyle, his family was not one of them. It was always clear that he never wanted to settle down for good. I only ever got to meet him on what he called his 'errand days'. In situations concerning his countless visits to Germany, I was the one in charge of all there was to settle before his departure. The last time he was about to leave, he behaved differently. He looked at me sternly, while in his eyes I could almost see my

mother's longing. Only later did I realize that at that point, he had been yearning for more time with me. Before he passed, I had not been aware of the illness he had been plagued by.

Along with some inheritance, this dear late father of mine had sent me and Edith a several page long letter before expiring a few weeks after leaving, detailing his hopes I would continue to honour the family name. Even in the moments before his death, he found a way to bring up our long lost importance.

„... And to my son Franz: it is with great sorrow that I must inform you of my soon passing. I do much hope that you continue to bring pride and joy to our family. A bright young man like you with such an important ancestry is hard to find nowadays, you can be assured that you will have no trouble looking for a proper wife for yourself.

To say I am fain of being your father would be an understatement, you've grown into quite the refined gentleman. In this aspect, you tend to take after that old mother of yours – she too is a lady who knows how to honour traditions. Do not run from your obligations, Franz. Respect the blood of your ancestors, of which I will always be a part of. ...”

Unfortunately, I never got the chance to send him a response – not one he would ever get to read. His untimely death came to me as a surprise, though it was difficult to even assume what Edith was thinking at this point. She is a resilient woman. Even if she felt any trace of emotion – heartache, regret, *anything* - at that time, nothing was visible. I admit, I took offense to just how little she seemed to mourn his death, as I missed him so openly. Our routines didn't change, her apathy was latched onto me just like it had been before he was gone.

Maybe the staleness of this life is what drove me to leave home for good, just as I had hoped to do for quite some time. Among the things I had to decide before departing was, naturally, the destination I would be headed for. My father got to see so many different nations during his travels to mainland Europe and would tell me all about them, but what captured my attention the most were his stories about France - a country full of history, music and culture. And for people such as myself, it was the best place to rise to prominence through art.

I did not see Edith off on my final way out of the house. I grabbed my bag, some spare cash, and headed towards the harbour, excitedly passing the buildings I would never see again. Standing near the ships and growing increasingly colder by the minute, my hands were shoved deep in the pockets of my coat.

I stepped forward to an old acquaintance of mine – an older gentleman named Gil Carter. Up until recently he was some sort of clerk near my house, so I was used to seeing him around.

“Franz Kraus? To what do I owe the pleasure of seeing you?” Gil inquired, checking my ticket.

“Mister Carter, there is no point in staying here any longer. France is where I am headed. To start with a clean slate!” I exclaimed, “To worry about my family- no, my mother no more!”

“Hasn’t this mother of yours funded your travels? Otherwise, where on earth would you earn enough to afford this? After your father passed, your family has-”

“Not my family anymore, not my mother!” I grinned, “Seven pounds to leave them behind...’

The former clerk fixes me with a serious gaze, but hands me back my ticket and signals the way to the ship with his hand.

I was in quite the low spirits as I was stepping onto the ship. Not regret by any means, but being around these families, the parents their little children... How pleasant it would be to have something of that sort. And though there was no time for me to wallow in melancholy, I was feeling so restless.

Upon boarding, I was told we would sail in around an hour. That’s more than enough time to find a quiet spot on the deck and immortalize the scenery with a sketch, isn’t it? This time around, I was not drawn to spending the night in the luxurious lounges downstairs echoing with laughter. A dimmer atmosphere upstairs on the ship was more to my liking. Carefully searching for a stack of papers in the depths of my luggage, I occasionally gazed out at the open sea ahead of me. For years, I wanted to pursue my dreams among the artists in France. Though mainly, I wished to get away from Edith and her sharp gaze. Finally, I reached my art supplies, put them on the ground and smiled to myself for a moment. She used to help me whenever I wished to draw. Her hands would be guiding mine, moving them across the pages and instructing them on how to hold the pencil so they would create the lines I wanted. Sometimes, she almost smiled. Her eyes were relaxed, and her voice sounded gentler. Almost motherly. So different from her usual self; one that seldom bothered to utter more than a few cold words.

Lost in thought, I failed to notice a man approaching me, “Laurens,” he said, and I returned the introduction. “Kraus.” The stranger sat next to me and reached out for the drawings laid out on the ground, carefully observing them one by one. He let out a deep sigh. “Boring.”

“Excuse me?” I asked, annoyed, “Frankly, I do not recall asking for criticism from a stranger such as yourself.”

“Oh, pardon me!” he apologized, clearly with a sardonic tone, “Everyone looks quite the same. Of course, some features seem different, but I would argue that everyone bears too striking of a resemblance to each other.”

What an impolite claim! I gathered my belongings and stood up.

As I was leaving, I took a better look at the sketches and noticed that everyone did look the same – downturned eyes, an oval face, a rather stern gaze. He was right. But... Do they all look like Edith? Am I not free of her even in my art?

Laurens did not get the hint about me not wanting to talk to him and rudely interrupted my train of thought. “So, France? Are you headed there because of the war?” he asked, “If that happens to be the case, is fleeing to the mainland the best idea?”

“No war yet!” I responded, agitated, “Unless they attack us, I doubt we will get even more involved than we already have.” I paused. For a long time, I hoped that diplomats would settle the matters themselves without military intervention. My mother, however, wholeheartedly believed we would find ourselves amidst a large-scale conflict soon. I used to see her wandering around our house, lost in thought. She, unlike me, remembered the Great War in much detail. “History repeats itself, is that not right?” he smiled sheepishly, “As for me, I am from South Carolina. I pray that once I leave France with some money in a few years and return home, life will be better there than it is now!” he said, a brooding silence filling the air for a moment, “I will rise above my station abroad. If not for me, then for my mother.”

It was inspiring to hear how much he seemed to be willing to do for her. Would I do that for *my* mother? As the years went by, it got increasingly more difficult to despise her, since she was just as much of a victim of our lineage as I have been. Under different circumstances, if my calls for her had not been met with indifference... If I were to see the world through her eyes, if my life was devoted to involuntarily being a mother, would I enjoy such a life? Would I love my child, even if just silently, despite all my burdens?

I decided to devote my attention to the people gathering at the almost fully crowded harbour. A tall and slender woman, one with a serious expression, appeared only a few feet away from me. Our eyes met, her gaze softened - her brows no longer tense, she elegantly walked towards me and Laurens. She placed her hand on my shoulder, the corners of her lips turned up.

“Franz,” my mother said, “I am glad to be here.”

Laurens, for once, took the hint and made his way elsewhere, joining the company of higher-class people nearby and leaving us alone.

While I was waiting for her to continue and explain how she managed to find me, she stood motionless. For the first time, I was glad that we could share a moment of quiet.

“Mister Carter sent out a colleague of his to our house,” she eventually broke the silence, “who claimed my son was behaving in a suspicious manner at the harbour. I purchased a ticket last minute to find you here.” *I do have to stop acting like a fool sometimes*, I thought to myself.

“You were not obligated to come and see me,” I informed her.

Her hands started fidgeting, and as she was thinking, every now and then she tightened the scarf hastily tucked around her neck. “I never blamed you for inheriting your father’s nature. I have always wished for you to be free in a way I could never afford to be,” she said, “but I do wish for your freedom to no longer be limited to a life without me in it.”

“Will you change your ways?” I asked.

“No longer will I keep up appearances for the sake of honour. For you, and for my husband.”

She went quiet for a while to regain her composure. “When I heard you were about to leave, I knew I had to make a choice between being a perfect daughter and becoming a mother.”

It was such a bittersweet feeling to hear her regret, but with hints of hope that I would welcome her into my life as if she were a new person I was so eager to meet.

Following her words, we did not have an emotional reconciliation. We spent the night discussing anything that came to mind, and only then did I realize that she did not need to catch up on all the trials and tribulations of my life. She had been paying attention to me all along.

As we sailed across the dark waters, I felt a sense of wonder wash over me. It was only a matter of time before the tranquillity of the moment began to fill up with chatter of the crowd, as the morning drew closer and we arrived at the port.

To me, France became the place where I got to meet my mother for the first time. Not as the woman tasked with taking care of me, but as someone who learned to stay true to herself and her feelings.

My mother is a good person. She did not change herself in a fundamental way, but for my sake she chose to live authentically. Sometimes, that is the biggest sacrifice one can make.