**Holiday in a stranger's house**

Fifteen years after my mother squeezed me from her belly she became disgracefully famous for nurturing a revolution in the city where we lived. Flags were waved to new songs, but the only real change was in our home.

Everything hurt in the house - the scars of bullets and bombs in the brickwork, the constant stench of smoke and sulphur. Stacks of bricks, once for throwing, became museum relics, pilfered by visitors and built into the walls of their homes as trophies and luck charms, framed in cement of a different colour. My mother never noticed, spending her days victorious in discussion, hanging up her arms to accept treats which were surely not without attachments, looking out over the new city with a chameleon grin. No wonder she disappeared soon after: there was nothing else for her to do. Goodbye bricks, goodbye revolution, goodbye mother.

While festivities rolled on, I left the masquerade, wrapped, as I recall, in a sheet, as a token of resistance to my old battlewear. For five days I walked, dotting from town to village among the shrapnel of falling cries, "At last!" "Victory!", pacing without rest, until I found a place remote enough to be unsullied by the revolution’s touch.

My memories are mostly of skies, grey clouds, dark and birdless above barren fields; hard roads and wet paths - puddles, reflecting in the earth the sky's despair; fallen trees rotting at the feet of their fellows, unseen barking dogs and a thin orchard with a crow, half stripped by wind and rain, hanging by its neck from a skeletal tree to ward off other thieves and scavengers.

It was among these ruins that I hoped to find sanctuary from my disgust. That night I scrabbled with bared claws into dead leaves and damp earth and buried myself in the woods, head first, leaving a leg sticking upright from the soil like an indignant sapling. I wanted this forsaken place to devour what I had started, and at the same time to help me grow into some other form. Among this dark and smothering fertility I would start anew.

The next day the weather was better, so I brushed myself off and walked on. Attracted by a blast, I tracked it down to find more revellers. In the main street the rounds of songs they threw up carried far into the air, as high as the volleys of shots which punctuated their chorus like handclaps. The next town also bore jubilant faces, and in another village I found a notice nailed to a shack. Between towns I would hear carriages approaching. Usually I’d hide by the roadside or hurry into the trees and watch them from the shadows, but sometimes I would stay on the road. Occasionally passers-by would stop with a clatter of brakes and a "Hey there!" and, with new peace of mind borne of the revolution, offer me a lift.

In those backwoods I could never ask "Has the revolution reached here?" A reply of "What revolution?" and you've brought it with you. So I had to look closely for signs or wait for an unprovoked word. "City", "bombing", "won", "Hooray!", "Beneficial civil uprising". Certain words and gestures would provoke me immediately to move on. I once asked, to resounding laughter, "could you direct me to a place without revolution." I once kicked a barking dog, making its jaw drop and breaking its teeth, I once followed a gunshot to shopkeeper lying face down in the street, the blood spreading across his twisted apron and tunic. Four times I sat on bare hilltops looking down at towns lit with fireworks sparkling above. Of course I considered returning, but nothing would have changed; not yet. I imagined the backslapping, the feasts, the postcards, the glaziers’ busy smiles. There was no going back. So I kept walking.

The fifth day, evening: trees, tall trees, the tired sun already fallen, rain and the sound of its lash against the poplars. A long path I had followed since midday without seeing a single person; still no birds, and the sunlight almost completely blown out or washed away, sunken into dark woods; just cold rain and wet, grey outlines. My sheet was already in shreds, partially fixed in places with strands of plant and discarded pieces of cloth picked up in villages. Muddy, shivering but basically just tired, I happened upon a house which opened onto the track. It was large, almost gothic in proportion, though its lax construction, from an age when window glass was a luxury, lent it the air of a shambling, cosy cottage. A featureless front lawn spread before it, cut down the middle by a stone path. Alone, silent and unlit, nothing moved except the moon.

The door wasn't locked. I suppose there was no risk of theft in that place, so far from others. Inside the only sound was of muddy water dripping from my sheet to the floor. I let the sheet fall and followed the passage, past a small table, coat rack and wall clock, pushing doors and peering in - kitchen, lounge, dining room, reception, larder, hunting closet - then closing them again softly, leaving the rooms undisturbed. Upstairs I opened the nearest door, went in, passed the bed, and hid in a cupboard. I might have paid some attention to the decor - the colour of the deep velvet curtains, the shapes of the leafy wood carvings, the pictures in their gilded frames - but it was moon-dark, and anyway it doesn't interest me. Details are superfluous to the fact that I had found somewhere without revolution. In the cupboard, nothing celebrated. There were two shelves with folded sheets which had once, no doubt, proclaimed the fresh air in which they hung to dry, but now their fervour, mixed with the stale cupboard, smelt no fresher or cleaner than the surrounding walls. The wooden shelves had not been cut into banners or fires, sheet and brickwork remained devoid of slogans, and nobody cheered.

The cupboard was larger than its door suggested, and it was in this excess that I hid, curled on the floor behind a box, and shivered and sucked at dead air, and reflected that the people of the house must be on holiday.

Days were not evident from behind the box in the cupboard. I slept when sleep came and woke alike, regardless of the passing of the sun. I suppose that at that period I was living true days - days defined on my own waking and sleeping instead of the sun's - but I think the situation was more haphazard, and I would not give the name ‘days’ to those snatches of waking, or ‘nights’ to the brief blackouts of sleep, often as brief as heartbeats. Generally I was squashed into an approximate foetal position, head down, knees into chest, arms at sides then curved around folded legs, elbow points digging in above hips, with cheekbones rested on knees, pressing the sides of my teeth. It remained dark in the cupboard and soundless in the house. My only sensations were of points, weight and numbness, and the dry, dusty mud that still clung to parts of my skin. I was conscious of the pressure of my knees against the sides of my jaw, gradually pushing it forward and out, my head hanging from the crest of my spine. I felt the articulation at the base of my skull slipping again toward the back of my head, taking once more the form of a monkey who yearned to climb trees, chew leaves and forage for grubs with a lost loved one. Oh, for such a life… Every simple day, every waking ache, the sound she made when she sucked her teeth and the way she sometimes cleaned them with a stick: grooming, fighting intruders and playing among berries with a close friend. Returning from reminiscence, I found I had been scratching at a floorboard, digging for grubs and picking at splinters of wood with dirty claws. Forcing sore fingers through the hole, I tugged against nails and cramp and uprooted the thick old plank from its home, then the next, slithered through, and pulled the boards back into place. There I hid, in lost, forgotten space between panels of ceiling and floor, like a dormant mite, playing dead, ready to come to life at the vibration of footsteps as people return to the house.

I woke to the clatter of wheels as a carriage pulled into the driveway. There was a brief grate of the brake before a gravel splash of somebody jumping to the ground. A woman's voice said "Go and check the spare room", then running footsteps scattered the path, turned the handle and opened the front door with a creak, closer, up the stairs, along the passageway and stopped at the door of the room I had entered. Then they ran on to the next door, opened it and went in. The steps faltered briefly then padded across the room over a soft patch of rug, and I listened to their patterns as they came closer, further, over the floor beneath which I lay in silence.

The footsteps were light as of a child; energetic, though lacking in full infantine exuberance. Perhaps the child had not slept during the journey. The carriage had arrived from the opposite direction to that of the city, and I hoped that they had travelled far, from a place devoid of revolution. The child's steps back along the passageway and down the stairs, were reassuringly empty of revelry.

As they began unloading I realised I had left the door to the bedroom open. Moreover I had left a torn muddy sheet in a heap by the door, and probably muddy footprints through half the house, but I felt safe. I buried myself deeper into the house's guts as I listened to bags and cases and the creak of the front door. There was activity at the carriage. A man murmured "Let's take her in." The woman said softly "She's still sleeping." The first child, then a second, smaller, dragged at cases, while the footsteps of the man entered the house, muttered something, then together they walked slowly to the foot of the stairs with their precious charge wrapped in delicate whispers. "Welcome to your new home."

While the young struggled with baggage in the hallway, man and woman mounted the stairs with great care as if to creep up on me. As they passed the room I'd entered, I followed them, sliding along under the floor, through a hole in the wall and into the space beneath the next room, where their shuffling footsteps stopped above me like cast iron statues over a magnet.

You don’t see me, but I’m there! I can squeeze through the smallest gaps, crawl up walls to watch you from the ceiling, shake the crib like an earthquake and glide soundless to your sleeping bed. The house creaks, taking the blame for any sound I make as sliding flesh tears on protruding nail. The air's hiss covers my breath… From cracks in the wall, I watched Huyla and Spretz lay their new baby in the crib as the other two children unpacked quietly in their rooms. Melg next door set clothes in the cupboard where I had sat for days while Rikle fondly placed toys into a chest in the room opposite, but I, undreamed of in my wall dwelling, watched Huyla and Spretz stand over the cot and, through thin panels, heard Huyla ask if they shouldn't bring her in with them, and Spretz say solemnly not this first night, she'd be alright, they'd be aroused if she cried. Spretz put his arm around Huyla, round her aching back, and led her out of the room to say goodnight to the children before he went down to put the carriage away and bring up their cases, then join her again in their bedroom at the far end of the passageway for long-missed creaky penetration which ended reluctantly in tired disappointment and sleep.

The family breakfasted together, except for the baby who had suckled once by candlelight. Huyla was in bad humour after the long night, which had not been long enough for the refreshment she needed. She left breakfast while the others were still at table. Spretz was finishing the kidneys when Huyla noticed the dirty sheet still lying by the front door. "Melg!" "I'm coming, mother." I scuttled through the rafters after young Melg. "What is it, mother?" Huyla held up the sheet between thumb and forefinger, then let it fall. Ear to the dusty ceiling boards, I heard the dry crumple which Melg watched with incomprehension. "Do not leave things like this lying about the house. Now dispose of it properly." I loved it! Nothing about the dangers of hygiene risks or tripping. "But mother. I did not bring it in." "Of course you did. Rilke came in with your father and I, so I know full well it was you." Huyla raised her voice: "You never notice anything. Nobody here ever does." She hurried up the stairs leaving Melg looking down confusedly at the sheet heaped on the floor. Until her father arrived from the kitchen, maintaining his comportment along the deep passageway as he finished chewing. Rikle followed his father. "Have you upset your mother?" "Sorry father." "Did you leave that... thing lying there so untidily?" "I did not think so, father, but I must have been mistaken." "What do you intend to do with it?" "Shall I dig a hole?" "No. You might dirty your dress," so Melg deposited her sheet outside the front door and went off to find a box. I left Spretz and Rikle standing dumbly in the hall, scuttled off across the ceiling on five-point prints of toes and fingertips, to the deserted kitchen where I slipped through the back of a half empty cupboard, slamming the door silently behind me. The kidneys were gone. The sausage looked disgusting so I grabbed the two remaining greasy eggs in a dry fist, knocked the bread to the floor, and with long lean steps, as Spretz returned alone, I disappeared on a whisper of hinges to the pantry and back into the cold stonework. Huyla only looked in on the baby: there was nothing to do there, so she went down to organise the kitchen, where she told Spretz off for the bread; it encouraged infection. He hadn't seen the bread, was sorry for the mess.

I would have liked the people of the house to have been interesting, but in effect they probably did less than I did. Crawling on my private, uncarpeted floors, restricted between poorly finished walls without pictures, behind the roughly uncarved sides of panels, beneath low, unlit ceilings, I watched them for a while through unseen gaps, but soon found more interest in the debris - dropped nails, wall ties, textures of brick dust, disparate shapes of discarded floorboard offcuts, fastening of light fixtures, distortion curves caused by heavy furniture, a lost hammer and the total absence of any evidence of molds or animal life. I'd look in on them occasionally, but they only really grabbed my attention three days later when Melg discovered the hole I'd made in the floorboard. She was tidying the cupboard at the suggestion of her parents, who wanted her out the way as usual, and they'd asked her to take Sprikle with them to show him how it should be done.

Melg and Sprikle had been trying to squeeze from their parents some instruction on how to play the set of pipes hung on the wall in the reclining room, or even be granted permission to take them down from their hook. They had actually taken them down several times in the past couple of days, standing on chairs to do so, which Huyla and Spretz had utterly failed to notice. The children's indoor shoes had left no dusty marks on the velour, though it was obvious to me looking through the hole I’d made by pushing a dry knot from the wood, that the cushion was somewhat squashed. Spretz reclined, reading about 'Events of The World', not noticing that the pipes had been hanging the other way, while Huyla absently took the stray chair from beneath the disoriented pipes and, oblivious to the squashed cushion, replaced it at the table, then glared at the floor at my feet, below my spyhole. She popped up, back into vision, brandishing the wood knot, which she failed to identify, so told Rikle not to leave pieces of his toys lying about. Spretz and Huyla had also not noticed the occasional lonely dirges resonating from the children's bedrooms.

In tidying a cupboard there are complicated manoeuvres to be learnt, such as holding up with one hand a pile of light summer clothes in order to put heavier spring clothes beneath with the other, propping the door open with one foot while your brother is trying to pull your shoe off to use as a hammer. Rikle had not managed to push the piece of wood from the reclining room back into any of his toys in any way which seemed to fit. Using other toys to bash the small disk into available holes had not worked, but Rikle clearly was not going to simply throw it away. His only hope was to gain sufficient force to pulverise it into some orifice or break it in the attempt. I left the hammer I'd found among his toys in the chest. Later I watched him lift it out, look it over and place it with the other toys which did not have likely-looking holes.

Melg in the cupboard got a splinter in her bare foot. I watched from gaps around the warped shelf batons as she sat on a pile of stale cloth and lifted her foot onto the opposite knee to examine her sole. In the background Rikle hit a toy with her shoe, trying to force his peg home. It was then that she caught sight of the hole in the floorboard at the back of the cupboard.

She crouched and crawled to the corner, eyes fixed and breath held as I held mine for her not to hear me. She called Brikle who scampered over, still clutching shoe and peg, and crawled underneath his sister to see what she saw. His instant reaction was to drop the peg through it. Melg took the shoe from his other hand and lifted her foot to slip it back on, though otherwise she maintained her position, looking down over her brother's head into the darkness. He twisted up to look at her.

"Mouses ?"

They got out of the cupboard. Melg pushed the box back in, over the hole, then shut the door.

Rikle and Melg went down to the hunting closet where Spretz was cleaning a rifle, Huyla watching, nibbling biscuits. "What do mice eat?" "I have no idea.” “Consult the encyclopaedia." "You should not be in here when I'm cleaning guns."

According to the encyclopaedia, mice lived in fields and houses, destroyed crops and woodwork, could pass through small gaps and liked grain, cheese, biscuits and fat. In the kitchen they could not find the biscuits.

They cut a square of fat from a ham and left it in the centre of a plate by the hole in the cupboard. Rikle fell asleep in his sister's lap watching pork fat. Spretz was out for the afternoon in the company of nature and a clean gun. When the baby cried Huyla fed it with pendulous breasts until its mouth spilled over and slipped from the nipple, then she left it sleeping, sucking at warm air, to sit in the lounge dozing off the sugary biscuits. As the afternoon passed nobody stirred, not even the fat, as cracks of distant gunshots reflected off gathering clouds. I took a handful of honey, pierced the corners of the ceiling with twists of a knife to get a better view of the family breakfast, and scraped away wood around nails which had prevented me lifting floorboards beneath the pot stand.

The ham remained untouched. Rikle and Melg searched for mice until Spretz returned from hunting empty handed. Huyla told him not to put honey over the knife handles as she tidied the jar. "And look at those dirty marks. It's a disgraceful example for the children." Spretz, downcrested, hung his cap in the hunting closet. Trikle got the blame for the biscuit crumbs on his oilcloth. "You should not play in there. Guns are not for children." They ate a dinner of cold ham in the dining room.

The air chilled quite suddenly. Shutters rattled and the baby awoke. There was a flash of interaction: Spretz asked Huyla to bring down his smoking jacket after feeding the baby, Melg excused herself to fetch a cardigan, Huyla scraped her chair getting up and commented that the baby was worse than Brikle for interrupting mealtimes. Rikle poked his last square of ham about his plate, said his name was Rikle; Huyla would bring Melg's cardigan when she brought Spretz' smoking jacket, Spretz got up to close the shutters, he would have preferred rabbit, why was there no rabbit, then all fell silent in the dining room, amplifying the wind's howls, the crying of the baby and the scratching at the window.

"You know," said Spretz to his attentive infants, "I spent all day standing by those confounded traps and didn't see a single rabbit." He refilled his glass. "I tell you, Nikle, the life of a hunter can be hard and lonely." Rikle wrinkled his nose.

The dining room bore onto the back of the house, partially below Rikle's room. I observed Huyla from a slit in the top of the interior wall, though the thud as she fell should have been heard throughout the house. At table Melg looked up. "Would you like some more meat, father?" Spretz shook his head sorrowfully. "I have no taste for cold ham. A man should have a hot dish at the end of the day. I feel to have failed you and your mother. You need something hot inside you." "Yes, father." Huyla stormed in, red faced, between Spretz and their daughter: "What is the meaning of this?" She swung the plate under Melg's nose and sought support from Spretz: "It is a piece of ham fat! I slipped on it looking for her cardigan," then turning to Melg: "Do you want me to break my neck?" Forlorn malice trickled from the corner of Spretz' mouth. "I have had my fill of ham. I am a man, not a mouse." Rikle's head lifted from the tidy square of ham he’d left in the centre of his own plate to catch his sister’s eye, and mouthed "Mouse?"

Rain beat the patio outside in heavy drops and splashed up against the tight shutters, whipped by wind and leaves. Candleglow and family shivered in unison.

Melg surreptitiously pinched Rikle under the table. He shrieked and leapt back. "One just bit me!" - "I am sick of the untidiness in this house." - "I have to catch something soon." - "Mother, I think we have mice." Lightning flashed long-spiked shadows, revealing, in its brief illumination, the glinting eyes and sharp teeth of myriad hostile beasts hidden in the woods. Cosy in their hermetic home, behind strong walls and thick firm shutters, the family noticed none of this and started pudding. "What makes you think," asked Spretz between mouthfuls of cheese and biscuits, "that we have mice?"

It was declared that the hunt would begin tomorrow, since it was dark, getting cold, looked like there might be a storm. Before bed, Rikle and Melg were invited to join their parents in the reclining room. Melg was reassured that the mouse would not come into her room with the box over the hole and the cupboard door locked. Spretz said he had heard strange noises coming from behind the walls. Huyla said she thought there had been more biscuits in the tin. Rikle claimed that his windowsill was covered with tiny footprints, and was thus surely where they met at night. The baby woke again so Huyla tried unsuccessfully to feed it, after which she called Spretz to close the windows and shutters and fetch a mop and bucket for the floor. They wondered if it mightn't be a good idea to keep a gun by the bed in case a mouse came in during the night. One should be already loaded, since he hadn't shot anything today. Spretz went down to get it, cursing the stairs, but came back empty handed. He must have left it outside somewhere. Huyla reproached him for cursing in front of the baby, but he redressed himself with further mouse evidence: the trip downstairs had not been entirely wasted: he had found something foul-smelling on his hunting boots.

Rikle and Melg wanted to sleep in with their parents that night, however this was ruled out on account of Spretz' disappointment at his failed hunting trip. Before bed, Rikle and Melg played a lullaby for the baby on the old pipes which had fallen from the wall. The hook had apparently worked its way loose to the point of falling at a thunderclap. They played badly.

The search revealed nothing any mouse would have done, however they remained convinced, and Spretz put down the poker and went off in the carriage to fetch traps. I passed the day in a dark void. Human idiocy was once again making me sick, so I sealed the holes and cracks, using brick dust, hair, honey, spit, long sharp splinters, shit, old dirt and dry blood scraped from toes and fingernails, wood coated with earwax that fitted like sticky pegs, something yellow I coughed up, a trickle of urine, and whatever other viscous oozings I could squeeze from shrivelled glands to rub into putty between skeletal fingers. When all was evacuated, I lay on my back, shut my eyes, slowed my heart and closed down to re-emerge when the world had spun for the better, and life outside was what I desired.

"Why do we have mice?"

"People were made clean and animals unclean, and each thing has its proper place. All animals have their use, even if we cannot recognise it, however it remains the right of people, like you and me, to use them as we wish. Below Man, animals use one another for food to survive. Sometimes weaker animals lose their place to stronger animals. In this way each type of animal asserts its place, thus an animal's proper place may vary, both in function and significance, from simple creatures such as mice, to Man, who has asserted his place as the most important and strongest. Man's place is in superiority to the animals, who, despite the proper places they each assert for themselves beneath him, remain at his disposal. We see this not only in the food we eat, as do animals, but also in the houses we live in, built where once lived animals and plants; the clothes we wear, made from their products; the animals we use to power our transport and machinery; our ability to train them to obey our orders; the ornamental function we give animals and plants, as seen in parks and museums as well as the home; and in our ability to kill them.

"The Universe, this world and everything in it was created by God, who is with us, all around us and sees our every action. He sees everything we see and everything we do not see, and knows everything we know and everything we do not know. He made the animals. At his touch, life grew around him, filling every gap at his will, until there was an animal for each place and no place without an animal. He brought all kinds of animals; those which help us, which we think are kind, and those which we think wicked. We must always remember, when we think of the animals, that it is because He knows not only everything we understand but also everything we do not understand, that we cannot expect to know why He brought into existence those animals which do not appear to us to be useful.

"The mouse lies far below Man - so far that its function may not be apparent, however from what we know about it we can surmise its place among the animals. The mouse lives briefly and rapidly. It forages and eats at any time of day or night, thus the function of the mouse can be assumed to be food conversion. The mouse is small, soft-skinned, relatively defenceless, and breeds quickly, thus the place of a mouse is to be a compact, readily available and replenishing food source, converting diffuse energy of plant matter into a concentrated form, conveniently packaged for higher animals such as cats, stoats, birds of prey and reptiles.

"From deductions of their function to other animals, the function of mice to Man is not immediately apparent. It would be presumptuous to believe that He brought the many and varied animals into existence for our benefit, and it would be similarly presumptuous to assume that, should His reasons pertain to us, we would necessarily be able to understand them.

"If there is indeed a reason why we have mice, we can only assume it to be indirect, through their function of provision for other animals, with which Man has closer links."

I woke. Pushed up against the low ceiling. Boards creaked under balls of muscle at the sides of my spine, back, shoulders and the hard edges of shoulder blades. The floor lifted and I arose, back from the crypt, and cracked open crusted eyes. In the corner of the store closet, by a roll of wrapping paper, lay a sprung mousetrap, and another by the door, unsprung, baited with a cheese cube.

Along the corridor to the bathroom mice scattered. I laid a steaming egg in the sink and pissed the other over the floor. In the mirror, my skin didn't have any particular colour. Maybe it was sort of greyish but nothing I recognised. Eyes too. The crud seemed to have got into them. My shape had also been deformed - thin yet robustly strong. I was a kind of uniform patchy filth, a camouflage of wood and earth. I seemed fearsomely inhuman. My skin had become bark, arms now bore hard ridges, fungi grew around my trunk. The sink winked at me with its single shit-caked brown eye: I looked as fresh as a new-laid egg. I picked the dirt out of my ears. There was nothing to hear. The house was empty - of people, at least. Stopping heart and lungs, I could catch, above the background hiss of seemingly still air, the freshening breeze of mouse breaths like the whispered voices of trees in the wind, over a rising tide of tiny heartbeats.

The family returned with a cat. Melg and Rikle had spent a long time petting kittens. Spretz had favoured a large grey-whiskered female which the shopkeeper assured was an experienced mouser. The compromise had been settled by Huyla: the beast in the box was an almost full-grown kitten, son of the mouser, whom Rikle had named ‘Growl’. Huyla took the baby back upstairs to feed it and put it down for the evening while Melg ranged preserved cat foods and Rikle followed Spretz about the house baiting new traps with cubed ham and cheese and broken biscuits, though he ate most of the biscuits. "Did we not get more biscuits, Rigle?" Rikle finished his mouthful before answering, as he had been taught to.

I reopened the pores to my domain. Stale air mixed with mouse musk, trap oil, faeces, urine, the sweet cloying vapour of milky baby, Huyla's bad scent, Rikle's biscuit breath, wax polish, a hormonal cat and the sweat of old cheese baits which had been left near every found crevice in floor and wall. In the kitchen a group of mice emerged from a cupboard. Two sat by the skirting, nibbling fresh cheese squares they'd just found, one gnawed at the cat box and three more greeted a newcomer who had arrived with the cat. In the bathroom Rikle got scolded for the egg.

Huyla came down to the kitchen. She and Melg agreed on how hungry the cat must be after the long journey. Huyla prepared the bowl with butchery food. Beside the milk bowl she set a plate with the remains of a cake which neither Spretz nor Rikle would eat. The cat tucked in willingly. Spretz and Rikle joined them to watch it stroll round the kitchen afterwards and curl up to sleep by the travel box. When they had become uncomfortable crouching near the cat, Huyla washed the empty bowls and the plate for the cake, which the mice had finished.

Below the bedroom of Spretz and Huyla, I watched, at an unnoticed distance, a pair of mice install themselves in a corner of the rafters, partly recessed in some crumbled stonework. Chick-Chick approved the bed then went back up through the hole for more bedding from the rug. Tresk watched her as she scampered off, then re-arranged fallen gravel. Chick-Chick returned with a ball of frayed wool. Tresk went off for more as she rolled it to the corner. Tresk topped the bedding with feathers from a pillow. Chick-Chick slept after giving birth. When she woke, Tresk fetched a fresh piece of cheese.

"No, Spretz, please-" "But-" "Please. It hurts too much." There was a tear of tissue. "Spretz! I shall have to sew it." He sucked a breast, she held his head. He looked up crossly. "There is none left." Down the corridor the baby woke, crying hungrily. Huyla said "Oh." Spretz stood straight, smoothed his collar with sweaty palm then walked to the window, firm and upright, his back to Huyla, who took a new dress from the wardrobe and changed, intermittently looking up at Spretz to check he wasn't looking over his shoulder. Suddenly he caught sight of something out the window and dashed to the bedside. Huyla held the dress close to her chest and hips. As Spretz took up the gun from under the bed he noticed the trail of feathers across the floor. "Oh, this really is insupportable," he spurted. "You shall also have to sew my pillow." Spretz waved the gun out the window while Huyla dressed and shivered. Spretz left the room at a brisk gait bearing the gun, and Huyla folded the torn dress. A trap snapped by the linen basket. Huyla started and looked up at the open window.

The mice were doing well. The new-borns were healthy, as was Chick-Chick. She and Tresk were proud of their litter of four. All the mice in the house were thriving. Passing through the kitchen, Spretz stopped briefly with Melg and Rikle to watch the cat pace round the kitchen. He asked Rizle to fetch his boots from the hunting closet, then pulled them on, sitting at a chair by the table. "Will you go hunting, father?" "Yes. I saw a rabbit from the bedroom window with your mother a short while ago. There may be time to catch it for dinner." "It would be wonderful for you to catch something, father," said Melg. Flies hovered over the refilled cat's bowl. "Do you not think," began Melg, "that the cat-"

"‘Growl’" insisted Rikle.

"Yes, ‘Growl’" continued Melg, "Do you not think that Growl seems almost human, the way she walks about the kitchen?"

"Many animals-" began Spretz, "show human characteristics-"

"It's a he," Rikle interjected.

"Do not interrupt me, Rivle" continued Spretz with his boots on. "Many animals show human characteristics. It is not unusual. Growl's behaviour is no doubt some form of mimicry - and surely any animal would be a fool not to mimic we humans. Consider what we have which they do not! Would either of you care to mimic the animals and live in the wild? Why, you wouldn't last a minute! Growl clearly finds her - his - surroundings agreeable, and thus walks like us out of respect. But notice how he remains on all fours. Just yesterday I shot a rabbit that let out a shrill cry which, I tell you, neither of you would have been able to distinguish from a child's shriek. And my mother, your grandmother, kept in a cage a bird which could actually talk! Imagine that!"

The children were suitably impressed. Melg asked "Father? If you shot the rabbit, how come you did not bring it home?"

"Well," explained Spretz, standing and shouldering his gun. "I did not actually see the rabbit: just a movement in the bushes where it was hiding. Having shot it, the surrounding bush seemed somewhat thick. A man could get all manner of insects on his hunting clothes from thrashing through bushes."

When the baby cried again Huyla stopped sewing. She lifted the baby from the crib and held it to her breast. The baby suckled a while then continued to cry. Huyla's nose wrinkled at the smell of biscuits. The baby sucked a bit more before Huyla noticed its empty mouth and felt her breasts. In the kitchen she prepared too much milk for the baby's bottle so she gave the rest to the cat. There was a bang outside. She looked round and found a fallen bag of oatmeal. She swept up the spillage and replaced the bag on the shelf.

The proliferating mice had settled in most corners of the house, preferring the larder and the seclusion below the flooring. Flies hovered over unemptied traps, mouse dropping piles and unfinished food in the cat's bowl. The cat slept between explorations from the kitchen.

Over a dinner of potted meat, little was said. In the lounge Treckle, Tchk and Skrrch were instructing young mice on food acquisition. If one was small one could curl tightly in the centre of a trap so the sprung bar would arc over one's back. The food hook was then harmless, and cheese, fat or biscuit could be taken with impunity. Young mice practised the position on a deactivated trap. Crrk anticipated problems with stray tails. Treckle and Skrrch showed off their broken tails - the mark of a good trap-breaker. Tchk did not have a broken tail. He had trouble explaining to the others that you could tuck your tail underneath.

"I baited the traps five times today," offered Melg.

"With luck we should catch one soon," added Huyla.

"Only if we keep the traps topped up," stated Spretz.

"‘An empty trap is a useless trap’" recited Rikle.

Huyla said they should try honey: "I have noticed recently that the jar is often left out, surrounded by dirty prints." Before bed, Melg and Rikle played badly on the pipes.

The windows were left open to expel the flies. The family went out early for more traps, bait, another cat and some cartridges. It rained most of the day and the carpets and curtains got sodden. Water dripped in through cracks in the floor, and mixed with the dirt and dust and bits of fur and mouse shit. Leaves blew in and a couple of frogs appeared through the open doors at the end of the table where the family ate at night, to take profit of the flies, unseen by the stern regard of family portraits. For most of the day I stood still, arms out before the open landscape, grain in my hands and in the deep pits behind proud collar bones, nuts and fruits in my thickly tangled hair, flies buzzing in and out. Finches alighted on my branches and pecked at the fruits, treecreepers dug for maggots in the crevices, frogs croaked at my wet feet, swifts darted for insects, mice gnawed at nuts and bees hummed in my honey mouth. Spores settled in the carpet and began stretching their fibrous tendrils. The sun lowered and the creatures got ready for night. On rainwashed feet, I padded back to my hole.

Rikle, Melg, Huyla, Spretz, baby and two cats returned. For water and windows, blame was bounced between Spretz and Huyla. It was Spretz who spent the greatest part of the evening on his knees with cloth and bucket. Twelve babies and two adults, drunk on rotten grapes, perished in the chimneys above the fires he set to dry the house. The old cat, Growl, and the new cat, old Frazza - Growl's mother and grandmother - weren't to be seen for most of the evening. Whatever genes she had engendered in him, none of her mouse-killing talent would continue through his lineage. Nonetheless, heat was on and they bred on a rug. Huyla darned grain sacks which seemed prone to holing at the corners, then replaced them in the larder in a neat arrangement which made her smile. Rikle presented her with a plate of raisin-morsels he'd found in his clothes closet: "Mother. Is this what mice make?" She stopped smiling and burst into tears. Chick-Chick lay on her side with four blind pink babies sucking milk, all nestled in warm soft bedding. Melg cut cheese and Rikle told her to cut it bigger because the cubes were splitting on the hooks of the new bigger traps. Melg told Rikle they wouldn’t split if he did it properly, and they squabbled and the trap snapped on Rikle's finger, making him howl. Huyla went up and fed the baby who vomited on her dress. Spretz shouted at Drikle for not being able to do a simple thing like setting a mousetrap and Rikle cried more and hid in his room and Spretz told him to stay there, so Melg and Spretz were conscripted together into doing the rounds. Spretz said all that work had made him hungry. Huyla, still sewing her dress, refused to eat another thing or even go near the kitchen until she saw a dead mouse. That night there was no dinner. Huyla stayed upstairs in the reclining room with Melg until bedtime. Rikle, exiled to his room, played a lament on the pipes that rolled through dark holes, along passageways and hidden tunnels, tumbling slowly down the stairs like grim, malignant fog, through the damp carpets of the lower rooms, through wet wooden floors and into the black pools below, where it drowned and sank through mud and stone, to be sucked up by the deep roots of tall trees and shaken away with the leaves into the wind. His injured finger didn't make him play any better.

Spretz stalked the downstairs rooms, gun pointed along the skirting. At each turn he cursed the cats and traps. I was weary of the invasion, the legion of mice that clung around me, always glad to see me, "There you are, we've missed you!" like all the other morons. I was sick of the stench of these animals scurrying about aimlessly to no purpose, to no end except self-perpetuation. I was sick of the rising smell of rancid fat, stale biscuits and hard cheese which the heat of fires carried up into every corner of the rafters. Flat on my face, I lay in the mud below the house among the croaking of frogs, my skin tunnelled by blind worms.

The windows stayed open day after day but the house would not dry. Huyla didn't go downstairs much. Spretz spent most of his time outside looking for firewood or a mouse to present to Huyla, since his hunting efforts in the house had splintered floor and walls - to the convenience of the mice - and broken a window. Rikle and Melg continued feeding the mice, and Melg would also feed the cats and prepare the baby's milk for Huyla, though she got the milks mixed up and ended up giving the high-nourishment, high-sleep milk to the cats. Rikle failed to coordinate the closing of shutters with the arrival of rain, and it took ages for him to notice the broken pane, which he couldn't fix anyway. Under the floor the frogs multiplied, hopping out occasionally for flies but mainly eating the plentiful worms. They crawled and hopped on me as I lay motionless until eventually I had had enough and I broke out through the floorboards, stamped upstairs and into the baby's room. The baby was thin, half smothered by two cats sleeping on its chest, who dozily breathed in its milky exhalations. I threw them out. They looked at me imploringly, eyes full of questions. I kicked them down the stairs.

I slept tight in the crib with the baby. When Huyla or Melg approached with a bottle I hid in the cupboard or beneath the crib, out of sight behind the counterpane. From either of these places I could tunnel, without sound, through the floor and around the house, but I didn't find any of those other things interesting: the mice roaming about, breeding and eating; the frogs; the people doing the same thing only slower. I rather liked the baby for the honest way in which it did nothing at all. It would just lie there, eyes open, not really looking at anything, feeding only because others put a bottle in its face, making no sound, existing on its own terms with none of the repeated pretension, which fails in perpetuity, that, by doing anything, it could actually make a difference. I admired it for lying still in its brief human life before its inevitable death. It was this admiration which allowed me to pity it for the same reason. The poor, hopeless, defenceless baby was simply that: an insignificant mortal. This was its birthright and its inheritance, with no chance of anything else.

I raised myself from the baby's basket life and stood leaning against the wall, gazing across the room to the crib and the window beyond. The heavy old door in the corner hung half open, yellow-white light bouncing off its brown-stained handle. The ceiling looked the same from there as from the crib. No, not quite the same. The light reflected off it more clearly, showing its faults. It was just another ceiling in another home.

Outside, the light was whiter than it had been when I arrived. The year was ending. Time had scurried round, eating and excreting lives, trying to achieve great things without me. All it could do was push the fat baby sun a little further down the sky each day, making it squint through a thicker layer of blue air. Time would beat it, but not this year. The tired sun would crawl back up to give us another glorious summer of flies and breeding monsters. I anticipated winter's diffuse white glow, when I wouldn't even cast a shadow, the only shadows the long slow nights. It seemed as if time and the sun and the animals were locked in stalemate. They would always be fighting, time trying to beat the energy of life, energy trying to beat time, each alternately kicking the face of the other, neither winning. All these fossil animals lived only lost moments in the continual struggle, embedded so deeply they couldn't see beyond the stony homes they fought to maintain, and there was the baby, lying still, oblivious as the rest of them but not fighting; not yet.

I sucked gas through my teeth. The house still stank. It would always stink, as long as there were people in it. Crumbled bricks, recycled animals, stale food - all of it left a foul taste. Some crappy door handle made by idiots for idiots. When you know why it's there, what it's made of, even sand stinks, even diamonds make you sick. The door handle glinted at me. Fireworks flash for another revolution, a thousand plants and animals die and rot and are squashed together below more layers of sand and homes until they become a jewel that sparkles in dying eyes. I spat dust from my teeth. I didn’t grow them to shine.

My back ached. The crib hadn't really fitted. It never had, even as a baby. I remembered cradle days, climbing the bars to crawl around the rim or, draped like a leopard, to sleep. My mother would ask, each time she replaced me in the cot, "How do you expect to grow strong if you fall and break your neck?" to which I’d reply, "How do you expect me to grow strong if I never get any exercise?" As she lowered me with exaggerated care between protective bars back onto my mattress, she'd smile and pretend not to be worried, but she left piles of coats and linen around the cot to protect me should I fall. Left alone, I would fall upon soft padding to explore the house, crawling throughout before sleeping on a windowsill. In their efforts to contain me my parents walled a couple of windows before father said that if I wanted to fall I probably would, being such a determined infant. Mother had talked of it later, laughing with revolutionary compatriots over a bucket of mortar as they bricked the windows at the back of the house overlooking the river, to protect against the bullets and thrown bombs of our enemies.

Wall panels creaked as I stretched my aching back. I'd noticed recently the beginnings of woodworm. Now it was thriving, like the mice had, like the flies, like the cats would, like grass had, and maybe would again, among other plants. Their success was simply a matter of being the right creature in the right place at the right time. The mice explained it to their young, teaching them how to survive. "You've got to be in the right place at the right time," they said. Behind me two woodworm met in a tunnel. They wriggled to the surface and surveyed the lands around them, flat, lush and well seasoned, then patted each other on the back. "This is truly a wonderful place." "There is land enough for everyone in this provident realm." "All our children will survive. We will be multitude." One slight shift of position as I leant against the wall and the two woodworm chatting at my shoulder would be split in their middles, crushed, guts squeezed through their tail-holes. I didn't move. I let them go on calling it luck. A fly praised her good fortune as she buzzed close by my ear. "This is surely the greatest of times," she burped. I could still hear her tune as she hummed between the bars of the crib. "Now is our Time." Over the baby's milky mouth she passed her offering of thanks for the abundant food. "The great provider surely intends for us all to multiply thousandfold, and from this new beginning he will continue to provide." She flew into a web. I watched until venom paralysed her, and the spider sucked out her eggs. A second spider waved across from another meal on another web, and a third agreed: they were glad to be spiders.

The legs on the crib were as thin as my own. They would fall to woodworm. I imagined the baby tumbling in a crash of bored old dead wood. I could clearly picture its fall: the crib tipped toward the window, frail bars snapped as the baby rolled out to the wall, lay in a small awkward heap in the wet filth, a mousetrap snapped on its fat left foot. It would cry, helpless on the floor, small cuts in soft skin, bruises, left toes turning blue. As I stood there, leaning nonchalantly against the wall as if waiting for a tram, I watched all the animals whose only place was there, exactly where they were, in the house. They called it luck and thanked the gods - who were also thriving - all subject to the mercies of time, place and breed. How I despised their pretence of success when it was not of their choosing, not by their actions, but I who had brought all this about, I who made time work, I who made places as they were, who walked on clouds, slept in earth, soared with stars before folding them away to play with another day, I who was all creatures, who hid quiet as a mouse, crawled the ceiling as a spider, walked as a human, stood as a tree and vanished into the air. Unlike them, I had no place there. The crib creaked. Its fall could soon happen. I could speed it, push it over, but it was not my place. Even a woodworm could fell the baby - the most impotent, helpless, passively cage-bound of animals.

I stood there watching while my better judgement waited for me on the driveway. So much watching, while nothing there had caught even a glimpse of me. It was as if I had never been there at all. I had no desire to be. The place of these creatures stank of insignificance. I had had my fill, for a holiday and for any number of lifetimes. Much as the baby's pitiful state revolted me, I had no intention to become involved, to throw it to the floor, take it by the legs and swing it at everything in the house. For I knew if I touched any of them I would become as they were, stained by association, trapped as all creatures are, one to another.

A snake came through the doorway. A small puff-faced asp. It slithered to the centre of the rug where it hid, like me, among brown-square patterns. Mice stopped what they were doing, raised pointed noses, bristled their whiskers and sniffed, then scattered to their holes in panic. But the snake wasn't after mice. Mesmerised, it was following another, far more alluring aroma. It smelt milk.

It reared and flicked the long Y of its tongue toward the crib, then climbed, coiled round the leg at the corner near the baby's left foot, the baby still on its back making mountains under the covers. The snake trickled down the mountains, its weight hollowing troughs through the land, then swayed, fat head inhaling milky vapour. The tongue touched the tip of the baby's nose, just by chance perhaps - darted up a nostril, tickled as flies sometimes tickle. Baby gasped, almost sneezed, let out a yawn, and the asp plunged into the baby's milky mouth. Baby's eyes bulged with the snake in its throat, body coiling over its face, head already swallowed. Baby gulped it further down, tail squirming over covers and the baby's fat neck. The baby convulsed, snake sticking straight up, sliding further in, pushed along by scales which barbed into throat walls. Baby's eyes shone; it couldn't vomit, couldn't scream. With the snake’s tail sticking out like some long, pointed tongue, the baby slowly choked to death. They lay still. The baby was fatter now, eyes open, staring at the ceiling as usual.

Nobody came to feed the baby that evening. The night passed without hungry wails, so it remained unnoticed until the next morning when the family remembered it. Huyla picked it up by an arm and a leg as Spretz closed the shutters with a shiver: there was a synchronised creaking of hinges and stiff spine. The baby dangled sideways, its full rounded belly hanging down between its arms and legs like a hammock between two thick wobbly trees. The stretching of its trunk pulled the last remnant of the snake down the baby's throat and out of sight. Alerted by the cold, putty-like feel of the limbs in her hands, Huyla swung baby up to a maternal, cuddling position. She shook it and poked its hard, blue lips. "It's caught a chill," she said. "You shouldn't leave the windows open." They all cried when they realised the baby was dead. Melg felt most guilty as she pressed its swollen belly, but it was Huyla who took the blame for probably overfeeding it. Nobody wanted to stay with it so it was left on the kitchen table while they went off for the day to fetch a doctor.

"You know," said Huyla to Melg and Rikle as they pulled out of the driveway. "I don't think I much care for that house any more. I feel as though we have lost it to the brutality of nature." Back in the house, the flies had found a new food source for their eggs, and rats were coming in through the windows for a cold feast at table. Huyla called to Spretz working the horses, to ask if they could look at other houses while they were in town. "Something nearer. Central, perhaps. Not so remote, and away from the countryside. I feel I no longer have the stomach to face animals. They are riddled with disease and have no respect for where one lives. Animals in their place are tolerable, but they penetrate everywhere until your very skin crawls." "What name shall we put on the gravestone?" asked Rikle, but Huyla wasn't listening. She was gazing absently out the window, subconsciously stroking the beginnings of a swelling in her belly. As the carriage rattled into the distance I left the house and began the long walk home.

I ran back through snow, through a blizzard that hid everything around me. Absolutely everything.

I didn't even see a tree. The ground was white, the road, the ditches, the air… The air was a multitude of different whites which gained and lost clarity and beat my eyes so quickly that I was not sure I could even see the white, and the sky above, if I looked up, was the same, but more disorienting because I was running, and I felt like I was falling as it arced up and away over my head. Its layers evaded me, though I penetrated their depth with each jolting step, and I had no impression of colour of any kind, nor of the blackness associated with its absence, just as I couldn't grasp, in the snow's agitation, either the vision of forms nor their absence. As all these familiar things were gone, I also felt the loss of time in that swirling wilderness, though I could clearly feel the regular beat of my heart and feet. It was as if each step was the step before and each heartbeat the heartbeat I had just left, and nothing had moved on since, and I was still there. Though everything else was gone, I was still there.

I kept running through whatever it was - fields, snow, time, whatever one may call it - but whatever it was, it never noticed me, because it was Me running, Me, moving on, I knew not where, if anywhere, but still going, and all around was lifeless, static memory, hanging frozen and slipping behind. I was at once so small I could pass through those mortal bindings without their noticing, and so enormous that they were but specks to me, smaller and more evanescent than flakes of snow, and I feared nothing. All had been washed away.

The ruin is still there, set back from the track, between the trees, alone and unlit. The wooden floors and timbers have rotted away. The roof has caved in and the wall panels eaten. Weeds and bushes have grown from the earth beneath the rubble foundations, and the chimneys have cracked and fallen. All that remains are dark stone walls with empty sockets.

You can go and see it if you want.

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