

The Keys to D'Espérance
a short story by
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Actually, by the time the keys came, he no longer believed in the house.

It was like God, he thought; they oversold it. Say too often that a thing is so, and how can people help but doubt? Most facts prove not to be the case after all, under any serious examination. Even the Earth isn't round.

One day, they said, D'Espérance will be yours. You will receive it in sorrow, they said, and pass it on in joy. That is as it is, they said, as it always is, as it should be.

But they said it when he was five and he thought they meant for Christmas, they'd never make him wait to be six.

When he was six they said it, and when he was seven and eight and nine.

At ten, he asked if he could visit.

Visit D'Espérance? they said, laughing at him. Of course you can't, you haven't been invited. You can't just visit. You can't call at D'Espérance. In passing, looking at each other, laughing. You can't pass D'Espérance.

But if it was going to be his, he said at twelve, wasn't he entitled? Didn't he have a right to know? He'd never seen a painting, even, never seen a photograph...

There are none, they said, and, Be patient. And, No, don't be foolish, of course you're not entitled. Title to D'Espérance does not vest in you, they said. Yet, they said.

And somewhere round about fifteen he stopped believing. The guns still thundered across the Channel, and he believed in those; he believed in his own death to come, glorious and dreadful; he believed in Rupert Brooke and Euclidean geometry and the sweet breath of a girl, her name whispered into his bolster but never to be uttered aloud, never in hearing; and no, he did not believe in D'Espérance.

Two years later the girl was dead and his parents also, and none of them in glory. His school would have no more of him, and the war was over; and that last was the cruellest touch in a long and savage peal, because it took from him the chance of an unremarked death, a way to follow quietly.

Now it must needs be the river, rocks in his pockets and thank God he had never learnt to swim. There would be notice taken, that was inevitable; but this would be the last of it. No more family, no one more to accuse or cut or scorn. The name quite gone, it would simply cease to matter. He hoped that he might never be recovered, that he might lie on the bottom till his bones rotted, being washed and washed by fast unheeding waters.

Quite coldly determined, he refused to lurk withindoors on his last long day. At sunset he would go to the bridge, rocks in my pockets, yes, and no matter who sees, they shan't stop me; but first he would let himself be seen and hissed at and whispered about, today as every day, no craven he.

It was honour and honour only that would take him to the river; he wanted that clearly understood.

So he walked abroad, returning some books to the public library and settling his accounts with the last few merchants to allow him credit. He took coffee in town and almost smiled as the room emptied around him, did permit himself the indulgence of a murmured word with the cashier on his way out, "Please don't trouble yourself, I shan't come back again."

And so he went home, and met the postman at the door; and was handed a package, and stood on his doorstep watching as the postman walked away, wiping his hand on his trousers.

The package was well wrapped in brown paper, tied with string and the knots sealed. It was unexpectedly heavy for its size, and made softly metallic noises as he felt its hard angles shift between his fingers.

Preferring the kitchen in his solitude to the oppressions of velvet and oak, of photographs and memories and names, he went straight through and opened the package on the long deal table under the window.

Keys, three separate rings of keys: brass keys and bronze and steel, keys shorter than his thumb and longer than his hand, keys still glittering new and keys older than he had ever seen, older than he could believe, almost.

For long minutes he only held them, played with them, laid them out and looked at them; finally he turned away, to read the letter that had accompanied them.

An envelope addressed to him in neat copperplate, nothing extravagant; heavy laid paper of good quality, little creased or marked despite its journeying in with the keys. A long journey, he noted, unfolding the single sheet and reading the address at the top. His correspondent, this remitter of keys was apparently a country solicitor; but the town and the company's name were entirely unfamiliar to him, although he had spent two months now immersed in his parents' affairs, reading everything.

My dear lad, the letter said - and this from a stranger, strange in itself - I believe that this will reach you at the proper time; I hope you may learn to view it as good news.

In plain, you are now the master of D'Espérance, at least in so far as such a house may ever be mastered by one man. The deeds, I regret, you may not view; they are kept elsewhere, and I have never had sight of them. The keys, however, are enclosed. You may be sure that none will challenge your title, for so long as you choose to exercise it.

I look forward to making your acquaintance, as and when you see fit to call upon me.

Yours, etc.

His first impulse was to laugh, to toss the letter down, his resolution quite unchallenged, quite unchanged. Just another house, and what did he want with it? He had one already, and meant to leave it tonight and forever.

But he was a boy, he was curious; and while he would welcome death, while he meant to welcome it, come, sweet Death, embrace me, he was very afraid of water.

His hands came back to the keys and played upon them, a silent music, a song of summoning. Death could surely wait a day, two days. So could the river. It was going nowhere; he'd be back.

And so the train, trains, taking him slow and dirty into the north country. Soon he could be anonymous, no name to him, just a lad too young to have been in the war, though he was old enough now. That was odd, to have people look at him and not know him. To have them sit just across the compartment and not shift their feet away from his, not lour or sniff or turn a cold, contemptuous, ostentatious shoulder.

One woman even tried to mother him, poor fool: not knowing what a mother meant to him, bare feet knocking at his eyeballs, knocking and knocking, knock knock. He was cold himself then, he was savage, gave her more reason than most had to disdain him, though still she wouldn't do it.

And at last there were sullen moors turned purple with the season, there was a quiet station with a single taxi waiting and the locals hanging back, no, lad, you take it, it's only a ten-minute walk into the town for us and we know it well, it's no hardship.

He wouldn't do that, though. Their kindness was inappropriate, born of ignorance that he refused to exploit; and he had no need of it in any case. It was after six o'clock, too late to call on the solicitor, and he didn't plan to seek lodgings in town. His name was uncommon, and might be recognised. Too proud to hide behind a false one, he preferred to sleep in his blanket roll under whatever shelter he could find and so preserve this unaccustomed anonymity at least for the short time he was here.

Leaving the station and turning away from the town, he walked past a farm where vociferous dogs discouraged him from stopping; and was passed in his turn by a motor car, the driver pausing briefly to call down to him, to offer him a ride to the next village. He refused as courteously as he knew how, and left the road at the next stile.

Rising, the path degenerated quickly into a sheep-track between boulders, and seemed to be taking him further and further from any hope of shelter. He persevered, however, content to sleep with the stars if it meant he could avoid company and questions. Whenever the path disappeared into bog, he forced his way through heather or bracken until he found another; and at last he came over the top of that valley's wall, and looked down into an unexpected wood.

He'd not seen a tree since the train, and here there were spruce and larch below him, oak and ash and others, secret and undisturbed. And a path too, a clear and unequivocal path, discovered just in time as the light faded.

He followed the path into the wood, but not to its heart. He was tired and thirsty, and he came soon to a brook where he could lie on his stomach and draw water with his hands, fearing nothing and wanting nothing but to stay, to move no more tonight.

He unrolled his blankets and made his simple bed there, heaping needles and old leaves into a mattress between path and brook; and only at the last, only a little before he slept did he think he saw the girl flit between trees, there on the very edge of vision, pale and nameless as the light slipped.

Pale and nameless and never to be named; nor seen again except like this, a flicker of memory and a wicked trick of the light. He closed his eyes, not to allow it passage. And breathed deeply, smelling sharp resins and the mustiness of rot, and so cleared his mind, and so slept.

Slept well and woke well, sunlight through trees and a clean cool breeze and no fear, no anger, nothing but hunger in him. With the river's resolution to come, all else was resolved; there was, there could be nothing to be afraid of except that last great terror. And why be angry against a town he'd left already, a world he would so shortly be leaving?

Breakfast was an apple from his backpack, eaten on the march: not enough for his belly, but that too was no longer the driving force it had been. He had higher considerations now; with time so short, a grumbling gut seemed less than urgent.

Oddly, with time so short, he felt himself totally unhurried. He would walk back the way he had come, he would find his way into the town and so to the solicitor - but not yet. Just now he would walk here, solitary among trees and seeking nothing, driven by nothing...

Which is how he came to D'Espérance, called perhaps but quite undriven: strolling where others before him had run, finding by chance what was his already, though he meant to take only the briefest possession.

The path he took grew wider, though no better cared for. Tree roots had broken it, in places the fall of leaves on leaves had buried it; but logic and light discovered its route to him, not possible to lose it now. It turned down the slope of the valley and found the brook again, and soon the brook met something broader, too shallow for a river, too wide for a stream. The path tracked the water until the water was suddenly gone, plunging through an iron grid into a culvert, an arch of brick mounded by earth. Steps climbed the mound, and so did he; and standing there above the sound of water, he was granted his first sight of D'Espérance.

Never any doubt of what he saw. He knew it in that instant, and his soul sang.

The house was dark in its valley, built of stone washed dark by rains and rains. Even where the sun touched, it kept its shadow.

A long front, with the implication of wings turned back behind, though he couldn't see for certain even from this elevation, with the house full-face and staring him down. A long front and small windows, three storeys and then a mansard roof with dormers; in the centre a small portico sheltering a high door, and he wasn't sure even the largest of his keys would open such a door. Wasn't sure that it deserved to.

No lights, no movement: only dark windows in a dark wall, and the sun striking brightly around it.

Between himself and the house there were formal gardens wrecked by growth, rampant hedges and choked beds; but the hedges and beds stood only as a frame to water. Long stone-lined pools were cut strict and square at the corners, though they were green and stagnant now and the jutting fountainheads were still; and below the gardens, lapping almost at his feet now lay the deeper, darker waters of a lake. No need for the return journey after all. No need for anything more, perhaps, now that he'd seen the house. He could run down the slope before him, twenty yards at a good flying sprint and he'd be too fast to stop. And so the plunge into cold cold water and the weight of his pack, the saturated blankets, even the keys helping to drag him down...

But this side of all that water, on the verge of unkept grass between trees and lake stood a building, a small lodge perhaps, though its weight of stone and its leaded dome spoke of higher ambition. Ivy-clad and strange, seemingly unwindowed and halfway at least to a folly, it must look splendid from the house, one last positive touch of man against the dark rise of the wood. And it would be a shame not to have set foot in any part of D'Espérance, all this way for no more than a glimpse; shame too to go on an impulse, on a sudden whim, seizing an unexpected opportunity. No, let it at least be a decision well thought through, weighed carefully and found correct. Nothing hasty, no abrupt leap into glory or oblivion. He needed to be sure of his own motives, to feel the balance of his mind undisturbed; there must be no question but that it was a rational deed, in response to an untenable situation.

So no, he didn't take the chance to run. He walked carefully down the steep slope and turned to parallel the lake's edge as soon as the ground was level, skirting the last of the trees, keeping as far from the water as he could. Looking across to the further shore, where the gardens' gravel walks ended in a stone balustrade and a set of steps leading down into the lake, he saw a man he thought might have been his father. Blindfold and blundering in the bright dry light, the man teetered on the steps' edge, on the rim of falling; and then there was dazzle burning on the water as a soft breeze rippled the sun, and when his eyes had cleared he could no longer see the man.

It is a truism that anything seems larger as you get closer, that you lose perspective; but here he thought it was the other way, that his eyes had made him think the lodge small because they couldn't credit the house with being so very large. It must be so, although he wasn't looking at the house now to make comparisons. This near, the lodge took everything. Squat and massive it sat below its dome and drew him, dragged him forward; he thought that it was so dense it made its own gravity, and that he was trapped now, no way out.

The lodge had double doors that faced the water, too close for his liking, only three low steps and half a dozen flagstones between them. In echo of the house, there was a small pediment above the high doors, with columns to support it in a classic portico. Still no proper windows. He could see a thin run of glass at the cupola's foot, between lead and stone; but even with that, even at this season with the sun low enough to strike through the doorway at the height of the day, it was going to be dark in there.

No lock on the doors, though, no need to struggle with the keys. He climbed the steps, laid his backpack down, set his shoulder to one of the doors and pushed.

There was rust in the hinges, and it spoke to him: its voice was cold and harsh, it said "Guilty," and then it squealed with laughter.

He jumped back, sweating, clutched at a column for support and looked out across the lake again. Saw nothing, no movement, no man.

Stood still, listened; heard the blood hiss and suck in his ears, heard his heart labour behind his ribs, eventually heard birdsong and the soft lapping of the lakewater, a more distant rushing which must be the underground flow to feed and freshen it.

The door stood ajar, silent now, its greeting spoken and its accusation or its judgement made. He stepped forward and pushed again, and it swung wide with no sound beyond the grating of rust in its hinges.

Not a lodge, then. Surely a folly after all.

He stood in the doorway, and the sun threw his long and slender shadow across an enamelled iron bath. One of eight, all set in a circle, radiating; and at the centre a square tiled pit, a plunge-bath large enough for a dozen men to share.

There was nothing else in the great circular chamber except for wooden slat benches around the sides, dark with mould and damp. The walls were adorned with intricate murals, figures from history painted in the Pre-Raphaelite style, though the light was too dim for him to identify the scenes portrayed.

A bath-house, he thought, a bathing-house. This vast construction, and it was only a place to bathe, ensemble or en famille; and that with the lake outside, just there, wide and deep and surely more attractive...

Perhaps there'd been a club, a bathing-club, the local gentlemen anxious to preserve their modesty or their ladies' blushes. That or something like it: nothing else could explain so much labour, so much expense to such frivolous effect.

But frivolous or not it was here, and so was he. If D'Espérance could spawn a structure so large and strange at such a distance, then he thought his keys could stay where they were, safely in his pack. Something he lacked, to take him up to the house. He'd settle for this, at least for today. The child is father to the man; there were lessons here to be learned, aspects of the parent surely reflected in its idiot son.

He thrust the door as wide as it would go and then opened the other also, to let in as much light as he could, and to allow the breeze to freshen the musty air. Some few cracks in the domed roof added a little further light to what the door gave, and that high circle of glass below the dome, but this must be the most it ever saw by nature. He thought they would have needed lamps, those who used it. Whatever they used it for.

Still, there was enough to see by. Stepping inside, he could see a gallery

now, circling just at the wall's height, below that ring of glass and the dome's first curving: all wrought iron, the gallery, and likewise the spiral stair that led up to it from behind the door. That must have been for strangers, he thought, for observers, non-participants.

Now he was concerned about the murals, he thought at the very least they must be lewd. Some provincial Medmenham set he imagined building this bath-house, ambitious to reproduce the Hell-Fire Club in their own gardens. But lowering his eyes tentatively to look, expecting grave disappointment, expecting a grand fancy rendered simply sordid, he found nothing like it.

King Arthur and Excalibur he found, Oberon and Puck he found, Wayland in his smithy and other men or fairies that he couldn't identify, but all surely harmless even to his nervous sensibilities.

And all flaking, too, some cracking as the plaster bulged behind them or staining darkly from beneath. Seeing one crack too long, too straight for nature, he went closer and found the outline of a door within the picture, found a painted leather strap to tug it open.

And tugged, and first saw the mirror that backed the door, that showed him his own shape marvellously moving in this still place. Then saw the closet behind the door, with its hooks and bars for hanging clothes, its slatted shelves for towels and other necessaries.

Closed that door and looked for others, found them regularly spaced around the chamber; and none hid anything more than an empty closet, until the last.

On the other side of the double doors was the iron spiral leading up; here, as though in secret reflection behind its concealing door, was a stone spiral leading down, leading into darkness.

Bold he could be, curious he certainly was; but he needed a light in his hand before he ventured those narrow steps. And hot food in his belly, that too.

One thing at least he'd learned in his time at school, though not from his teachers. Like many a boy before him, he'd befriended the local poachers for the sake of an occasional salmon or grouse to scorch over his study fire and eat with his fingers, with his friends. At the start of term he'd brought them bottles of brandy filched from his father's cabinet; in return they'd taken him out more than once, shown him how to make a snare and where to set a night-line.

Those skills would feed him now. There must be fish in the lake; there were certainly rabbits in the wood's fringe, he'd seen signs of them already. He hadn't thought to bring fishing-line or wire, why should he? He wasn't here for sport. But he could improvise. He had bootlaces, there were springy willow-shoots growing by the water. No need to visit the town, even to shop for what would ensure he need not visit again.

Sitting on the steps in the sunshine while water rippled before him, that water reflecting clouds and light and nothing of the great dark house, he reflected on the house; and almost felt he had a duty there at least, if none to family and reputation gone or a name that was meaningless now, himself the last shamed bearer of it. He should go to the solicitor, and ask how arrangements might be made. If he had to be honest, I shall be dead

soon, and the house needs an heir, then so be it. He could do that, once. More than once, he thought not; but once would be sufficient.

Something screamed in the wood behind him, with the voice of a young girl. He started, shifted on the warming stone, and went to check his snares.

Already there was a rabbit kicking, held tight around the neck and its feet barely in contact with earth. He gathered wood for a fire, laid it in the portico and lit it with flint and tinder from his pack; then he fetched the rabbit. Carried it still living to his fire, though it lay still as a dead thing in his hands, only its eyes alive. Those he killed first, with a pencil. Contrary to all his tutors' lessons he let it die slow and suffering, tutor himself now and pain all his lesson, the real world his theme.

"See it?" he whispered, poking with his pencil, digging gently. "See the light, little brother, see the light?"

What the rabbit saw, of course, was darkness: which was what he saw also, whichever way he looked, into the bath-house or out across the lake. Shapes woven from shadow moved in the shadows inside, avoiding the last of the sun's fall across the floor; or they moved darkly in the water, under the glitter of light.

Ragged gunfire sounded through the wood and birds rose like smoke, screaming on the wind. A posse shooting crows, he thought; but he still thought himself alone in this valley, and he didn't believe that anyone would shoot at crows with a .303.

Later, as his fire hissed under the rabbit's dripping quarters, he heard sounds of soft knocking, dull and rhythmic.

Sat and listened; and no, not knocking after all. Sounds of kicking. Slow, steady, unremitting, a foot thudding into flesh and breaking bone.

He tended his fire, but his hands were trembling now.

Sitting in the twilight, licking greasy fingers - not wanting to go to the lake to wash, not while it was light enough to see what moved within the waters - he thought he saw words scratched black across the red disc of the sun.

Guilty he thought was said again, and other words he couldn't read for the fire in his eyes, but they might have been names. His father's or his mother's, the girl's or his own. It didn't matter which. Any name was a betrayal.

He thought he should leave this valley before the games turned worse than cruel, before they remembered the real world and turned to blood. Not at night, though, he wouldn't leave at night. The wood had been friendly to him once; but there was coming in and there was going out, and they were different. He felt a little like an eel in a basket, trapped without trying. Come the morning, he'd test that. Not now.

So he made his bed in the portico, on hard stone because there were too many shadows in the long grass moving, too many murmurs coming up. Between

the wood and the water, even the bath-house seemed to offer something of protection.

Something, perhaps; but not enough. Waking in the cold night, he felt a moist warmth on his face and smelt sour breath, smelt blood.

Heard his own breathing change, heard his blood rush. Stiffened every muscle not to move, not to roll away; and thought there was no greater giveaway, no louder announcement, I'm awake!

An unshaven cheek brushed his, dry lips kissed him, and he held himself rock-still. A voice moaned in whispers, and he wouldn't moan back. Then touch again and harder this time, hard to hold against such pressure as the man's face stropped itself against his. Skin and stubble and the bone beneath: and something else he felt, wouldn't open his eyes to see it but he felt coarse cloth, a blindfold.

And then there was nothing but the hard sounds of breathing, and the sounds of footsteps gone too quickly. He couldn't hear water, but he thought the man had walked straight into the lake.

In the morning he found a thread of linen caught in his own soft stubble. He tied it in a coil and put it in his wallet for safe keeping, where he might have put a lock of someone's hair; and no, he couldn't think of leaving now. Too much of betrayal already, too much of guilt.

Besides, the wood would never pass him through. He tested that. He went back to the culvert, and tried to walk the path upstream; and tree-roots tripped him, leaves hid hollows underfoot where he fell and hurt his ankle, might have broken it. Where the path slid beneath his feet and he could barely scramble back to solid ground, watching earth crumble into water, there he gave it up, there he turned and came back; but it had been nothing more than a token in any case, he'd only meant to scout.

No escape from the valley, then. Not by the wood, at least. There must be a road, however ill-kept; but between himself and any road the house lay, massive and dissuasive. My house, he thought; but that was a legal fiction at best, and more of a brutal joke. Even at this distance, he was learning a little. The lesson was that D'Espérance didn't belong, it wasn't owned. It might, on sufferance, permit; but he was not yet ready to confront what that would mean, being accepted by D'Espérance.

So no, not that way. He wouldn't even skirt the borders of the house; this was closer than he liked already, in its ambit even this further side of the lake.

Locked out of the wood, not ready for the house and no water-baby, never that, there was only the bath-house left him. This much he could encompass, heavy as it was, as it might prove to be. This much he could carry, for a while. For a brief while, his thoughts reminded him, and were still.

In the best of the light, with the doors wide, he went in with a pale torch burning and opened the door to the spiral stair.

Walking down in sinking circles, he smelt must and mould and dead air. The flame flickered, making shadows dance around him; but that was only

mechanical, the action of light unfiltered by strangeness, he could understand that and not fear it.

Distant sounds of rushing, like a hard wind contained: he thought of the culvert, and the hurry of hidden water.

The stair turned one final time, and brought him into a high cold chamber lined with brick, dark with moisture. This too was dedicated to the mechanical, though, and nothing to fear. His weak torch showed him pumps and boilers, copper pipes and iron, gauges and valves. His eye traced the run of pipes, what would be the flow of the water; he followed it, he learned it, he loved it. This was how he wanted the world to be, all in order and all explaining itself.

Until his torch went out; and this was not how he wanted the world to be, utterly dark and cold and empty, nothing in reach of his groping hands.

Groping, his hands found nothing but his eyes did. Knock knock, cool and stiff like fingers but not that, not fingers: lightly knocking against his eyes and knocking again like crooked fingers while he only stood there, too much knocked upon.

Moaning, he heard his voice say "Mama"; but all moans sound more or less like mama, and he hadn't called her that since he was a child, not since he was very small indeed.

He stepped backwards, away from the knocking; and kept his hands rigidly at his sides not to grope again, not to feel.

Not to find.

His feet found a wall for him, and he kept his shoulder against it until they came to the rise of the stairs. And so up, still in darkness and that rushing sound in his ears changing now, turning rhythmic, turning to kicks; and the door closed at the top but his barging shoulder crashing it open and his stumbling feet carrying him out into the cool and shadowed bath-house which was so much warmer, so very much brighter than what lay below.

And still he couldn't leave, and wouldn't. Not if she were here too, and the girl somewhere in the wood, perhaps: that early glimpse no trick of light or memory, those sounds of kicking no folly of his mind.

He saw his father again across the lake, bound and blindfold, a khaki figure in an early light although the sun was setting.

Beset by his own senses, he struggled for that numb normality he'd worn like a cloak before. Horror was unexceptional, pockets were a proper place for rocks, one deep plunge and never rising after was a fit deed in a nothing, nothing world.

But poking at a rabbit's eyes wouldn't do it now, wouldn't keep him. Not where his father's eyes were too much on his mind, where his mother dangled always in his thoughts, where the girl might be watching from the wood.

What could keep him, the only thing that might keep him from the slip, from sliding through terror and into its undermath, would be to walk that slip's edge, to hang on terror's lips against its speaking. To go back into the

bath-house and take possession of the dark below, where his mother currently possessed it.

Gathering cobnuts and filberts at the wood's edge, his back turned to whatever threatened in the water, he heard a snuffling that might have been tears and saliva backed up in a sobbing girl's throat. He heard a scratching that might have been a girl's desperate nails digging furrows in the path, and then a steady heavy thud-and-scrape that sounded like nothing so much as a boot falling and falling, and its metal studs scraping on the path between falls as the foot drew back and lifted to fall again. He could hear breathing too, hard grunts tied to the same rhythm.

He lifted his head expecting to see her, expecting to see her kicked; and saw instead a bloated pink-brown rump swing and rub against a tree, hard enough to shake the trunk. And it swung away and swung back, thud and scrape, and it was only a pig after all: a great sow twice or thrice his weight, let forage in the wood or else - more likely, he thought, out here where no one was - escaped its sty and living feral. Unless D'Espérance did this too, throwing up animals unexpectedly and when they were most desired.

He needed this sow badly, and lacked the means to take her.

Means could be made, though. Made or found.

He slipped away quietly, not to disturb her at her scratching, not to startle her off into the depths of the wood where he might not be allowed to follow. If this was her current rooting-ground, then above all he wanted her to keep to it.

He blunted his knife cutting at ash-saplings, hacking them away from their roots. With the blade given an edge again on the granite steps of the portico, he spent the evening trimming and whittling until he had an armoury of sorts, three straight poles each sharpened at one end. He hardened the points in his fire, remembering an engraving in a book that showed cavemen doing the same; and the work absorbed him so that he forgot to look over the water before the light failed, to see if his father were there.

He still listened for the creak of rope in the bath-house or sounds of kicking in the wood, as he turned his spears in the glowing ashes; but he heard neither tonight, only the sow's noise among the trees. He might have chased her then, but that he was learning to fear the dark, or those things that were couched within it. Instead he trusted her still to be there in the morning, and lay all night fretting in his blankets, doubting her.

Up at first light, he found the sow moved on; but didn't need his acquired skills to track her. A blindfold man could have followed this trail, the broken undergrowth and the furrowed earth.

He caught up with her quickly, and with no hindrance from the wood: no tripping roots, no hanging branches tangling in his hair. There was hunting, apparently, and there was trying to leave, and they too were different.

Slowing as soon as he heard the sow's heedless progress, he crept close enough to sight her rump again; and ah, he wanted to do this hero-style, one mighty cast to fell her swift and sure.

But this wasn't sport, there was no one to applaud, and his spears weren't made for throwing. Silent as he knew how, as he had been taught, he slid forward into the wind and the sow never heard him, her great flap ears trailing on the ground as she snouted under leaves and bushes, eating nuts and acorns, eating insects, eating frogs.

At three yards' distance he set two spears to stand against a tree, and hefted the other in both hands above his head. The sow moved one, two casual paces forward, blithe in her size and strength, and oh she was big, she was just what he needed; and he took a breath and ran and thrust, all his strength in his arms as he stabbed down, driving the spear's haft deep as he could into the sow's flank.

She screamed, as he was screaming as he stabbed: high and shrill both of them, vicious and unrestrained. But he thought she'd run, or try to; and she didn't run. She turned, although her hind leg failed her where the spear jutted from it, and her eyes were red in the shadowed wood, and her festering yellow teeth were snapping at him; and he tried to jump backwards, and he fell.

Sprawled on his back, he looked up into a canopy of branches baring themselves before winter, and he saw his mother twist above his head, lolling at the rope's end. Her bare feet swayed and turned, one way and the other, feeling in the absence for his eyes.

He screamed again, and rolled; and though he only sought to roll away from his mother, he was sprayed with slaver from the sow's jaws as her bite just barely missed him. Gasping and shaken he scrambled away, and the sow strained to follow, hauling her weight unsteadily on three legs, slipping and rising again, squealing in pain and fury.

Up at last, he wanted only to run; but his eyes snagged on his two spare spears, and this was what they were for, after all, he'd never expected to finish her with one. So he snatched up one of them, holding it two-handed again against her sheer mass; and as she came at him open-mouthed, he rammed its dark point into what was soft at the back of her throat.

And barely released his grip in time as her jaws threshed about its haft, jutting out between them; but she was a spent force now, crippled and gagged, blood colouring her leg and frothing out between her teeth. He could take time to recover his last spear, time to consider his aim before thrusting.

Trying for her heart, he didn't find it. She fell away, though, all her efforts on breathing now, no fight left in her; and he could work the spear deeper, turning and thrusting and leaning on it like pushing a stick into the earth. At last something vital gave, be it her heart or her spirit. One last shudder, and then the slow moan of leaking air with no breath behind it, and she was dead.

And he lifted his head, ready to howl if he needed to; and his mother was gone, there was no body dangling, wanting to knock, knock knock against his eyes in this dappled daylight.

He butchered the sow where she lay, bleeding on a bed of dead leaves. There was no other choice; he couldn't possibly have dragged her back to the portico for a cleaner dismemberment.

He hewed at her with his short-bladed knife, and this was butchery indeed, up to the elbows in blood and ankle-deep in the run of her spilt guts with the stink of her rising all about him. The knife slipped often in his slimy hands, so that he added his own blood to hers; but he worked all day, and at last had all the pieces of her laid out on cool clean stone under the shelter of the pediment. Then he could wash, he could strip his fouled clothes off and wash those also, naked under the cold sun; and briefly he had no fear of the lake, he watched only with exhaustion and no hint of terror as dark shapes rose to question his shadow only a little further out, where the lake-bed suddenly fell steep away.

Because he had no other way to do it, he built a slow fire beneath one of the iron tubs in the bath-house, and laid pieces of pork inside it on a bed of well-scrubbed stones. As the bath and the stones heated, so fat melted and ran down to spit and hiss on hot enamel; and this was what he needed, not the meat.

While the lard rendered, he made crude pots from clay he'd dug with his fingers from the lake's edge. Baking in the fire's ashes, several of them cracked or flinched; but some survived well enough to use, he thought.

Pork for dinner, roasted dry but he wouldn't heed that. The skin had gone to crackling; as he crunched it something roiled and stirred the water, far out in the centre of the lake. He heard his father cry out in the darkness, and he heard a staccato rattle of gunfire; and he heard his mother's slow choking; and louder than any, louder than all of those he heard the sounds of kicking.

His father came to him again when he should have been sleeping. Wet serge warned him, smelling strongly in the damp air; cracking his eyelids barely open showed him an outline against the sky, the glint of moonlight on buckles.

He heard boots shift on stone, he heard each separate breath like a groan. But no kiss this time, no touch at all; and after his father was gone, what he heard until he slept was his mother's rope creaking in the wind, as she dangled somewhere close at hand. He wouldn't open his eyes again to look, but he thought perhaps she was up between the pillars of the portico, that close.

In the morning, he scooped a potful of lard from the bath and set it to melt by his cooking-fire outside. Threads drawn from his blanket and plaited together made a wick; he laid that across the pot and let it sink, with ends trailing out on either side.

When he lit them in the shadows behind the bath-house door, they made more soot and smell than light; but they made light enough to work by, Light enough to reclaim the cellars from his mother, perhaps, though she could dangle as well in light as darkness.

She couldn't knock, knock knock at his eyes in the light, and that was what counted.

He made as much light as he could, three lamps each with two wicks burning at both ends, twelve guttering flames to save him. He carried them down one at a time, and even the first time there was no body swinging at the head of the stairs, nor any at the foot, nor in the chamber below: only the boilers and the pumps and the constant rushing sound of water.

By his third trip down, coming from light into light with light right there in his hands, he felt secure until he looked more closely at the machinery. All the surfaces were coated in a sticky black mixture of dust and grease, generations old; but two words gleamed out at him in the light he'd brought, shining where someone had written them with a finger in that clagging muck. One of course was Guilty, and Coward was the other.

One quick sobbing breath, staring, seeing the finger in his mind - fine and delicate for sure, trembling a little perhaps with the enormity of it all - and then he turned abruptly, and saw the box of tools in the corner, half-hidden under dark and heavy piping.

A galvanised iron bucket, and a wooden box of tools: hammers and screwdrivers and wrenches, everything he could possibly need. No can of grease, but he didn't need grease now, he had his bathful of rendered fat. He could sieve that through his shirt to get the grit out. Not first, though. Cleaning came first; and first for cleaning were the boilers that bore those two accusations, those truths.

Days he worked down there, days and into the nights sometimes, cleaning and greasing and taking apart, sketching plans and patterns of flow with charred sticks on the tiled floor. His parents left him largely undisturbed, his father no longer crossing the lake, his mother only distantly dangling. If they were making room for the girl, if it was her turn now, she was being slow to show; and he wasn't waiting.

Not consciously, at least. Consciously, he was learning how to plumb.

At last, the turn of a great brass stopcock brought water gushing through the pipes. The furnace burned hot and fast on gathered wood; and as soon as pressure started to build, the first leaks showed where rubber had perished and his rabbitskin-and-porkfat improvisations wouldn't hold. He patched as best he could, and set the bucket to catch the worst of the drips. It didn't matter, he was only testing the system, and there was a drain in the floor in any case. If it wasn't blocked.

Sweating, he refilled the furnace and threw a lever, and the pump started to knock, knock knock. Knocked and failed, and knocked again. More leaks, jets of steam now, clouding out the light; briefly he thought the show was over for the day, knock knock and nothing more.

But again a knock, and a faster knocking; the rhythm changed abruptly, hard and steady and unfaltering now, and he thought of course of kicking; and the girl came walking to him out of the steam and oh, she was so afraid.

She wore white, as she had when last he saw her. Her fingers plucked at the fabric of her dress, her eyes were wide and panic-lost and all her body was trembling. Her mouth shook so much, at first she could say nothing.

There was nothing he could say, and nothing he wanted said between them; but she tried, and tried again, and at last,

"They shot your father," she said. "They took him out and shot him. For cowardice," she said; and she had said all this before though not like this, not so dreadfully afraid. "There was a court martial and they found him guilty, and they shot him."

Her voice had been hard before, hard and accusatory. You lied to me, it had been saying, you're a coward too. There had been no tears then, and none of the pleading, none of the terror he saw in her pallid face.

Then as now, he had been unable to speak at all; then as now, she had gone driving heedlessly on, far past what was honourable or decent. And yes, he was an expert on honour by then, he'd seen it from both sides and knew it better than any.

"Your mother," she said, though she clearly, she so much didn't want to. "That's why she, why she hanged herself," she said. "For shame," she said, "she hanged herself for shame."

Let herself dangle in the dark for him to find when he walked clean into her, her bare toes knock knock against his blinded, desperate eyes.

"You should do that too," she said, "why not? Why don't you? A coward and the son of a coward, and your mother the only honourable one among you all, why don't you just jump in the river? Too scared, I suppose," she said, answering herself. "I should have known then, when I realised you were a water-funk. Once a coward, always a coward. Like father, like son..."

And that was all she said, because it was all she had said the first time. After that it was only crying out, and grunting.

And now as then, and this was what she'd been so afraid of: that it would happen again as it had, that it would have to.

And of course it did. He swung wildly, and felt the solidity of her against the back of his hand as she sprawled at his feet; and feet, yes, already he was kicking.

Kicking and kicking, but not to silence her this time, not for shame. Only because she was there, as his parents were intermittently there, in their intermittent deaths; and the thing was there to be done, and so he did it.

Felt better, second time. Not good, never that; but better. She cried, but not he cried. No choking, no fire in his throat or eyes, neither anger nor grief could find him. Fear might have found him, perhaps, but he wasn't afraid of this.

Neutral at last, he kicked until his feet lost her in the steam, until she was entirely gone from there.

And then he felt his way up the stairs and out into the bath-house where a couple of taps were hissing and spitting, scalding to his hand as he turned them on.

He scrubbed one of the baths as best he could, and washed every piece of clothing that he'd brought. He laid them out on the portico steps, and came back naked to fill the bath again.

Lying back with his eyes closed, with burning water lapping at his ears and the corners of his mouth, he thought that nothing was finished, even now; but it didn't seem to matter. Let his father stumble blindfold against death, let his mother dangle, let the girl come for kicking when she chose. Or when he called her. The world was wider, much wider than this; and here he was only on the fringes of it yet, he hadn't even been up to the house...

Later, in the darkness, when his clothes were dry, he thought he might walk down to the lake and into the water. He would be borne up, he thought, and carried over, because in his pockets he carried the keys to D'Espérance.

But actually, he slept; and in the morning he walked the other way, he walked into town looking for the solicitor.

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