THE TELLER OF TALL TALES

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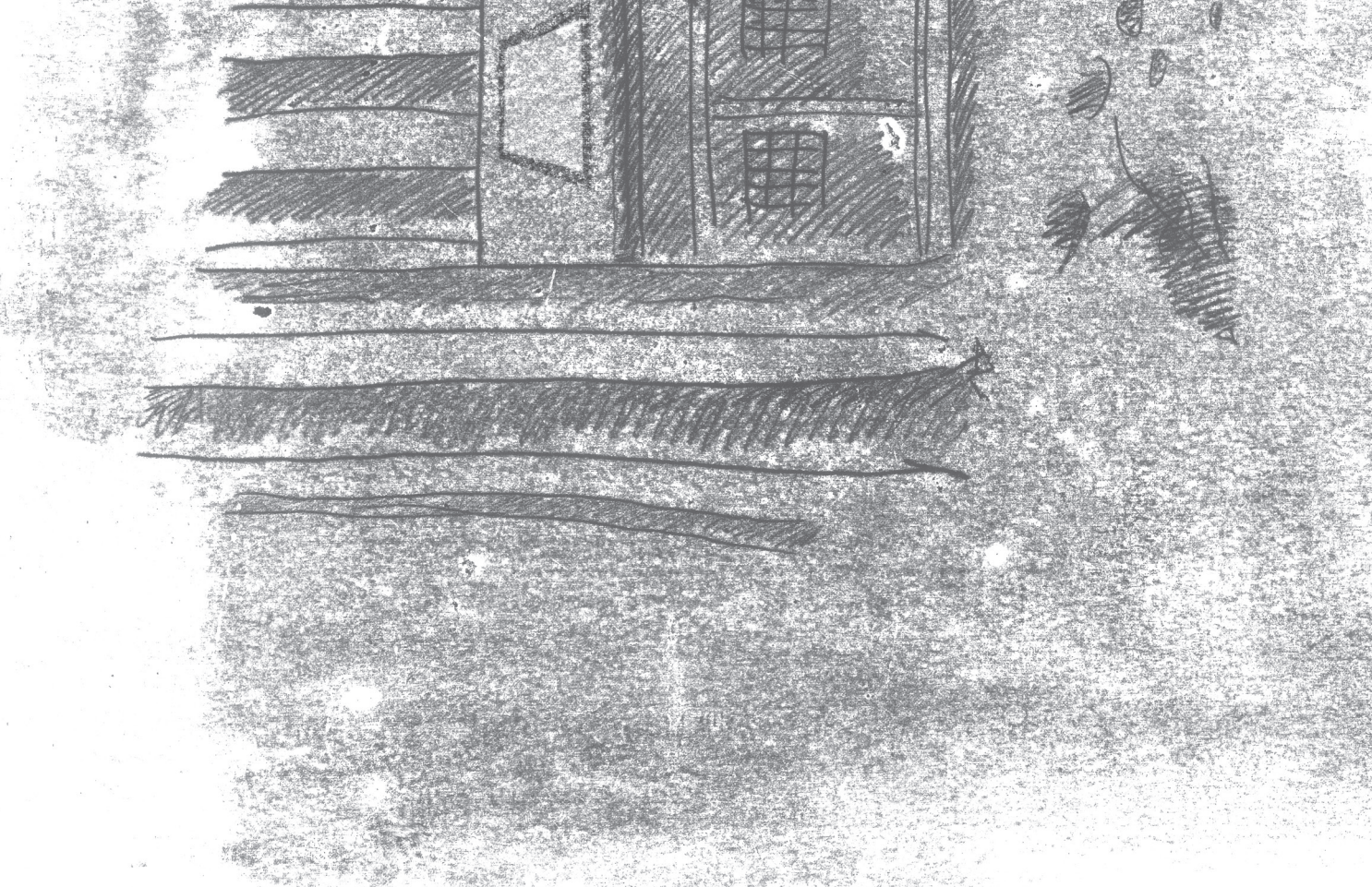


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Beginnings

The light is going by the time you arrive and the low winter sun only just peeks above the tallest treetops. It'll be dark soon and you don't want to be out in the snow a moment longer. The black shadows of the forest stretch towards you, reaching out like spindly fingers across ice-white fields. Her cabin's not far now and its bright windows guide you onwards like a beacon. Thick snow muffles the last of the birdsong, distorting the notes around you. Even your footsteps sound peculiar, a squeak and crunch underfoot as you trudge uphill, barely able to make out the hidden path underneath. Your breath comes fast and ragged as you pick up the pace, shifting the bag on your shoulders, eager to get indoors and into the warm.

You've wondered the whole way here—a journey that's taken the best part of a day with two trains and a lift in a big red truck from Mum's friend—what this would be like, what *she* might be like. So many questions. Your nerves build as you approach, seeing her cabin in more detail now that you're closer. The wooden beams and planks make it look like a child's drawing, the sort of thing you did in primary school that Mum would proudly pin to the fridge. There's a central door with two large windows framing either side. Perfectly symmetrical. The sloping roof tilts upwards, leaning towards the sky. And it's odd, but because the snow is so thick, it almost looks as if the cabin is hovering. Not quite of this earth. Like it might be a spaceship in disguise or a boat in a frozen sea. You shake the thought from your head. Too much imagination. That's what Dad says.

You think about what you should say, what your first words to her should be. Do you hug her? Kiss her on the

cheek? Do you shake hands like Dad does at parents' evening when he meets someone new? But then she's not new to you—is she? And yet…

You suddenly wish Mum had insisted harder on coming along with you. Or Dad even. To help smooth out any awkwardness. But you'd been adamant you wanted to come alone and, besides, Mum gave in pretty quickly and Dad hadn't seemed overly keen. So many questions you still don't know the answers to. Why you'd never met her before, why you thought she was on the other side of the world—not a day away from where you've always lived. Why she hadn't been in your life all this time. You've tried to get the truth out of Mum and Dad so many times since you found out she was here. You've heard them say 'It's complicated' or 'it was all a misunderstanding' a million times since. But maybe you can get the truth out of her. Maybe *she'll* tell you everything. Yet something makes you pause for a moment on the icy path, the cold of the snow rising up through your boots and into your bones as you hesitate. After all, you're not even sure what you should call her…

Your mind is still churning when the door suddenly opens and there she is. A little silhouette with the light behind her. She steps forward into a beam of brightness that clicks on above the porch and you see her clearly then. She's shorter than you, curly white hair like a lamb, plump rosy cheeks and a smile upon her face. For some reason she reminds you of an apple, the sort that Snow White was tempted by.

'You made it!' she says, and you hear the warmth in her

voice. 'I'm Oma… and I'm so very pleased to see you!'

Oh-ma. You want to say it out loud, roll it around your mouth like a boiled sweet, but you're struck dumb, unable to take your eyes off her, searching for similarities and differences. To you, to Mum. Because there she is.

A total stranger.

Your grandmother.

❊❊

Oma watches as you enter, stepping back to give you space. You tower above her and she wants to tell you how tall you've grown but bites her tongue. So long since she last saw you. And look at you now! Half-child, half-adult. She can't quite believe you're fourteen… All those years she's missed out on in what feels like the click of a finger.

'You must be tired from such a long journey!' Oma says, trying to sound bright, and you nod, big eyes staring at her before flicking around the cabin. She tries to see it how you might. Unfamiliar. Strange. The vast woollen tapestry, an abstract of the forest, a wedding present from years ago that takes up almost an entire wall. Dozens of colourful paintings scattered elsewhere. A fire flickers in the hearth and two tall-backed armchairs bask in its glow, one with a patchwork-coloured cat in it, curled up fast asleep. In the corner sits a small table with three chairs, and a vase of green sprigs with white scented flowers. Oma tidied up especially but now worries it looks rather bare, even with the huge striped rug across the floor, so thick she can dig her toes into it like summer grass.

She peers at you, unsure of what to say, how or where to begin, until your belly rumbles, audible above the crackling fire. A smile rises within her like a bubble.

'Come now, put your heavy bag down. A cup of tea makes everything better,' she says, brightly. 'And the only thing better than a cuppa is a freshly made biscuit or two, warm from the oven.'

You lift your nose up to inhale and it pleases her. You haven't said a word but the light in your eyes is like a smile in itself.

'Aha! You can smell them too, eh? Come on, let's see if they're ready. Now that bright blue door is the bathroom and this red one, to the left, is the kitchen.' She goes into the tiny, cramped room, grabs a faded tea towel, and opens the old oven with it.

'Stand back, love!' she says. 'The handle gets hot. Ah now, that door's as creaky as my bones.' Oma gently lifts the tray of round buttery biscuits out and puts them on top of the oven to cool. 'Got to wait a minute else they'll burn our fingers as well as our mouths.'

She made them especially for you. Her favourites. A recipe passed down from one of the old women in the village many moons ago. Oma absentmindedly runs a hand over her belly, feels the plumpness she hasn't been able to shake off for years now. She always did have a sweet tooth. Any chance to bake and she'd jump at it: birthday cakes, Christmas, Easter buns, anniversaries, always making sure there was a little left over at the end for her own cake tin too…

She sees you hungrily eye the biscuits. *So quiet.* But then,

wasn't she at your age too? Holding it all in, listening and waiting, thinking and imagining, until the words burst out like a wave.

'Well. Here we are then…' Oma says softly. *Finally*.

She wrinkles her nose, wondering how she'll entertain you now that you're actually here. A long weekend stretches out in front of you both. Three whole nights. The things that entertain her, well, will they entertain you? Her one and only grandchild. So precious yet so unknown.

'Fancy a game?' she ventures, seeing how your eyes dart to the pile of tatty boardgames on top of the kitchen cupboard, a slight frown emerging on your forehead. 'Oh no!' Oma says cheerily. 'Not one of those old things. Haven't used them in years! Can't you see the layer of dust? We don't need a board for the sort of game I had in mind…'

Her voice tails off as the lights blink and go out, plunging the whole cabin into darkness, the flickering fire in the main room the only source of illumination. She hears you gasp.

'Not to worry, love! It's only the power!' Oma says, reassuringly. 'Part of living far from the city. I'll light the candles but it'll be back up in no time, you'll see. Fire's nice and warm. Pop yourself in there and I'll bring the tea and biscuits through.'

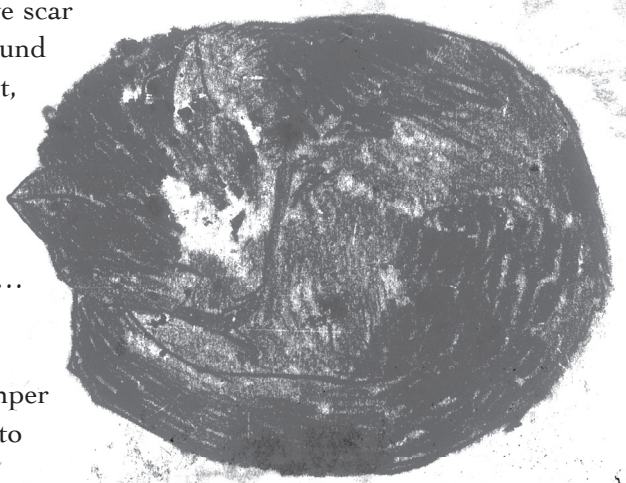
Oma reaches for the cupboard under the sink and lights the stubs of candles within, the scratch of matches taking her back to her own childhood. When she looks up, you're still there, waiting. The glow of candlelight lights up your face and it's as if your parents have merged into one. But the longer she looks, the more she sees an echo of *his* face too.

Tomas, her late husband. Your grandfather. She swallows the memory away.

'Ah now, will you listen to that fire?' she says, ushering you back into the main room. 'Hissing and spitting, why it's like Tig when she was just a kitten and the worst behaved little critter in the world. Look at her now, daft softie, rolling onto her back so you can tickle her belly… Come on, you take that seat and I'll take this one.'

Oma pulls up a side table and puts the candles down before scooping up the cat and gently pushing you into the armchair.

'Do you like cats?' she asks, and you nod eagerly as she places Tig onto your lap. You gently reach a hand out to Tig's soft thick fur and Oma sees the distinctive scar wrapped around your left wrist, dark but faded. Her mouth is suddenly dry. *Her fault…* You see her looking and pull your jumper sleeve down to hide it.



'Ah now, look at Tig!' Oma says, trying to shake the guilt away. 'She likes you, does Tig! You can tell, can't you?'

You nod, shyly, as the cat kneads at you with her paws before settling down onto your lap and Oma fetches the tray from the kitchen. Teapot, mugs, jug of milk, biscuits warm from the oven. You smile at her and it's so like the one Oma sees in her own mirror every day that it throws her as she puts the tray down. She picks up the poker and nudges the fire.

'There now! Never mind the shadows, let the light banish them to the corners…'

She plumps herself down in the other armchair and offers you the plate of biscuits, watching you hesitate for a moment before taking one.

'Oh! I'd half-forgotten with the power going. The game I mentioned. Well now…' Oma leans forward. 'It's a guessing game, a challenge if you will. Can you guess the strangest thing that's happened around here? And bear in mind, this area is full of *very* strange things indeed…'

'Murder…' you say with a full mouth, crumbs tumbling from your lips, and she laughs. The first word you've spoken since you arrived.

'Oh goodness me, no!' Oma chuckles. 'Not murder. Something *far* stranger…'

You shoot up out of your chair, taking Oma by surprise as the cat flies off your lap.

'She was twitching!' you say, startled, your head close to the beams of the cabin. 'The cat! I thought she was having a fit!'

'Tig was just dreaming, that's all. Bless you. You took her by surprise. Me too!'

Oma stands up beside you. 'Goodness…' she says softly.

'You're so tall, you nearly reach the ceiling. And look, there's something in your hair…'

She holds it out to show you. 'Fancy that! A long dead moth! Nothing but dust and powder now.' She rubs it between her fingers, firelight catching it as it dissolves and drifts into the air like glitter.

'There now. Sit back down,' she says. 'Tig'll be back on your lap soon enough. She's very forgiving. Even though she's a grand old lady these days, she's soft as muck. Ah, there we are. That's it, stroke her gently and her purring will start all over again.'

Oma watches as you settle, reaching for another biscuit as your shoulders lower. *Good*, she thinks, seeing you relax into the chair. She clears her throat.

'It's funny, that moth. You know, it's reminded me of the strangest thing that happened around here. A long time ago. Long before you and long before me. Now, mind your hands. Here's your mug of tea, piping hot. Are you sitting comfortably? Then I'll begin…'

