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Rikki Ducornet

WORMWOOD

for Steve Moore

Gran'père was dying, and p'tit Pierre stood at the door clutching his cap, clawing at the rim in his terror and excitement. P'tit Pierre was not yet nine and in the light of the lantern his face was very small and white—like a lima bean. M'man ran for her shawl and the two of us set off after p'tit Pierre, who was walking very fast, already a good way ahead. M'man and I were wearing our nightgowns and slippers; we had to walk carefully else stub our toes on the cobbles. M'man called out: "*Allez! Pierre! Pas si vite!*"

It was very dark and foggy. We chased after p'tit Pierre's lantern, which blinked like the Devil in the distance, and once I stumbled. When we reached the gate where Old Owl Head lived in her tiny room above the street, I was frightened and tried to take M'man's hand, but she pulled away. "Slow down!" she yelled at p'tit Pierre again. "*Brigand!*"

Walking as fast as we could, it took us twenty minutes to reach Gran'père's. We could hear his raving even before Margarethe opened the door. I was afraid to go in; the house was transformed by Gran'père's terrible cries. M'man prodded me, her knuckles hard in my back: "*Allez! Allez! Dépêche-toi, Nanu!*" We followed Margarethe up the stairs and the closer we got to Gran'père's room, the louder the sound he made. I thought: *What if he's already in Hell?* Pulling back, I collided with M'man. "*Merde! Nanu!*" she cried. "*Je me fâche!*" I hid my face with my hands because I feared she would strike me, but she only pushed me into the room, which was dark except for Gran'père's head lit as if from within by Margarethe's lamp. She set it down on the bedstand beside Gran'père's teeth and offered M'man a chair. Gran'père could have been dead but for all the noise he was making.

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“P’pa!” M’man shouted. “P’pa!” Gran’père snorted and smacked his lips. “He’s thirsty,” M’man decided. Dipping the edge of her shawl into his glass she squeezed some water into his open mouth. “Rah!” he said. “*Oui!*” said M’man. “*C’est moi, Reine. I’m here beside you: Reine.*” A strange sound came from Gran’père—like a bullfrog’s croaking—so that I laughed out loud. “Nanu!” M’man made a slicing gesture across her neck. This sobered me enough to approach Gran’père. “Gran’père,” I said. “It’s me, Nanu.” Gran’père said, “Nah?” “*Si!*” I said. “Nanu. Your little Nanu.” When he did not respond I asked M’man: “Does he know us?” “Shut up!” M’man said. “*Conasse!*” I wanted to cry then so I looked around the room for my own place to sit. I found Gran’père’s chair beside the desk where in the old days he went over his accounts. For a time I sat there in the dark, staring at the ugly statuette Gran’père called Wormwood. His nose and tongue and knees horribly protruding, Wormwood was sitting on a stump.

Gran’père was asleep and as he slept he whistled: a sound as monotonous as the wind. Downstairs a clock ticked; I could hear M’man’s soft breathing and from time to time I heard her sigh: “*Ah, merde. Merde, merde, merde.*” She was almost singing.

On the desk there was a little china vase and because it was too deep to see inside I emptied it into my hand. Some pen nibs tumbled out, two coins, and a key. I slipped the coins in the pocket of my nightgown and examined the key. It was very small and appeared to be made of green brass. I held it in the palm of my hand and, making a fist, squeezed hard. When I opened my hand I could feel the key’s impress in my flesh with the tips of my fingers.

Once when I was a tiny child I had asked Gran’père why he kept a thing as ugly as Wormwood around. “If Wormwood were mine,” I told him, “I would throw him into the fire.” Gran’père said: “Little *idiote!* Wormwood is made of brass and cannot burn. But he has a hot temper: behave yourself, Nanu, or he’ll wake up—because yes, even though his eyes are open he is fast asleep. If I decide to wake him, you’re finished, Nanu! *Foutu! Foutu!* Fucked, *petite garce. Tu comprends?*”

Remembering this, I bit my lip, but what I really wanted to do was bite Gran’père. I imagined creeping across the room and poking my head under his covers. Before he or M’man would know what was up, I’d have taken a good bite out of Gran’père. And because the room

was dark, Gran'père asleep and M'man sleeping too, I stuck out my tongue. I stuck it out so far it touched the bottom of my chin and still I had not stuck it out far enough. Then I saw p'tit Pierre standing inside the door. Made fearless by the dark and the fact that Gran'père was dying, he crept over to me. His mouth hot against my ear, he said, "I saw you! If *le père* Foucart doesn't die I'll tell him! I'll tell him I saw Nanu making faces in the dark. And then I'll watch him give you a good spanking with his shoe."

I said, "I don't give a fuck." P'tit Pierre grinned. He said, "Can I kiss you? You are so pretty, Nanu." I said, "You make me want to shit you are so ugly." P'tit Pierre began to laugh. I could hear him laughing quietly beside me in the dark. Then, crouching down, he waddled like a dwarf around the room, sidling dangerously close to M'man's chair and Gran'père's bed, looking droll and sinister, too. Once more he was standing beside me. He picked up Wormwood and the china vase, scattering the pen nibs on the table.

"There's a key," he whispered. "Help me find it." I said, "Why? Why should I help you find it? You're nothing but a little thief." I was squeezing the key so tightly my hand was throbbing. "Because," he said, "it's a thing *le père* Foucart showed me." And he imitated Gran'père's voice so well the hair stood up on the back of my neck: "P'tit Pierre! *Viens!* Look at what old Wormwood knows how to do! And better than you, I warrant, little brigand!"

In the dark room, M'man softly snoring and Gran'père whistling like the Devil, I said, "Hush! You sound just like him! I'm afraid! Stop or I'll do it in my pants."

P'tit Pierre fell to his knees and then, his fist in his mouth to keep the laughter deep in his belly, he rolled across the floor. I could hear Margarethe stirring in the house just under us. "Are you going to sleep here?" P'tit Pierre, now at my feet, gazed up at me.

"*Bien sûr!* Idiot! Gran'père is *dying*. I have to stay till he's dead." P'tit Pierre then said very seriously: "Nanu . . . I'll be your husband one day." I said, "*Non!* M'man told me we can't be married because your m'man is a maid who empties Gran'père's bedpan." Hurt to the quick, p'tit Pierre growled: "Your papa has run away! You're no better than a bastard like me." "My papa did *not* run away!" I pinched p'tit Pierre's arm so hard he cried out, waking my m'man. "Hush!" she

scolded. "Hush, Nanu. Or I'll burn your tongue in the fire!" But almost as soon as she said this she was asleep.

"My papa is a soldier," I said. "He's fighting the *boche*. When he comes home he's taking me to Holland," I said. It seemed to me p'tit Pierre was crying. "We could elope," I said, "and live deep in the woods on the hill. No one would look for us there. We'll eat berries—"

P'tit Pierre was beaming. "And nuts and wild partridge eggs," he said. "We'll sleep in a big pile of leaves."

"I'll make us a blanket of moss," I said eagerly. "And when we have babies I'll kiss them over and over." As p'tit Pierre looked on I held an imaginary baby in my arms and covered it with kisses. P'tit Pierre bent over me, kissing the air.

"We'll sleep in a bed of roses," he said, recalling a song he had heard in the street. "We'll burn frankincense like they do in church."

"Roses!" I pretended to spit. "Where will you find roses?"

"In Iron Corset's garden," he said gleefully, his smile complicitous.

"I don't want my m'man's roses," I said, and I pulled his hair.

He said, "I'll make you a bed of fox fur. And when the werewolf comes I'll chop off his head."

"When I am a woman," I said, "I'll run away for sure."

"When I am a man," p'tit Pierre said, "I'll shit without dropping my pants." We both collapsed on the floor, silently laughing. Then for a time we lay together and I could hear p'tit Pierre's heart moving beneath mine.



Because of M'man's violent temper and the injury caused by Papa's departure, to recall the past meant upheaval and isolation. But that night in p'tit Pierre's arms I dared remember an afternoon when Papa and I climbed the hill up to the Bosc du Puy. At the top we rested beneath the ancient trees. We saw a fox pass by, a glassy-eyed rabbit thrown over its back. We saw a snake, green and gold, its eyes gold, moving among the roots and leaves.

Papa was a geologist—he worked for the mines—and that day he told me about the creatures that were buried when the hill was formed.

He said we sat at the foot of a tree rooted in a soil black with volcanic ash and the bone dust of woolly rhinos and horses no bigger than cats. He described the water volcanoes of Iceland, the volcanic bombs of Vesuvius, the eruption of Mount Pelée in Martinique caused (or so some said) by an unusual conjunction of the sun and moon. And although it was a story I had heard before, Papa described the whale skull his own father had found digging a wine cellar deep in the yellow clay under rue Dauphine. The famous naturalist Lamanon had rewarded my great-grandfather with a kiss.

“One day I will take you to Holland,” Papa had said, tenderly stroking my hair. “The skull sits alone in a hall of the Teyler Museum.” After a moment’s reflection he added: “The hall is the size of this wood.”

I was roused from this memory, so like a reverie, by Gran’père’s snores. They sounded like a knife shaving bone. M’man’s snores made the sound of a glue pot simmering. I knew that because once I had helped Papa make glue with the hoof of a horse.

“Fais moi peur, Nanu!” p’tit Pierre whispered in my ear.

“I can’t. Not with them so near.”

“Yes you can! They are both as good as dead. Start like this: ‘The voyage was doomed from the start.’” He nuzzled my neck.

“The voyage was doomed from the start,” I began, and p’tit Pierre sighed with pleasure. “A week off the Java coast the ship was swept by plague and all the sailors died.”

“The stench was terrible,” p’tit Pierre agreed. “All the sailors died but one.”

“And this is his story.”

“L’Histoire du marin qui se trouvait seul.”

“All his friends were dead and all his enemies too. And now—”

“Sometimes people die of loneliness, Nanu.” Solemnly, p’tit Pierre licked the inside of my elbow.

“Stop that!” I scolded. “You’re like a little dog!” He licked me again.

“A lion,” he corrected me. “A lion. Lions lick each other. Then what happened?”

“He couldn’t manage the ship. The sails were down and he was at the mercy of the tides. There were roaches in the crackers and the

water was black.”

“He could fish—”

“The fish were all too big to catch. Off Java the fish are as big as elephants.”

“He ate shit and he was lonely.”

“So lonely one day he shouted into the wind: ‘Goddamn! I’d take the Devil for a bride!’”

“He shouldn’t have said that! Your sailor—*quel con!*”

“He had an inspiration—”

“What’s that?”

“He thought: An entire wood was cut down to fill the hold of this ship with sandal, ebony, and cedar. I’ll find a nice log and cut off a piece and carve a bride for myself.”

“Like Pinocchio! Pinocella! Pinocella!”

“Shut up, idiot. Not like that. You’ll see. . . . He took a lantern and made his way down into the hold.”

“It was dark and full of rats! God knows what else!”

“Pierre—*tais toi*. Some logs were loose and rolling. It *was* dangerous down there. But he climbed a pile as high as a hill and looked until he found something he liked. With his ax he hacked away until he had a piece about one meter long. The wood was so hard that each time he struck it he made sparks! And it was as dense as lead. Even his small piece was too heavy to lift. He struggled with it until he lost patience and gave it a kick.”

“Saying, ‘Goddamn it! Goddamn it! Goddamn it!’”

“The log rolled with the sound of thunder, and when it hit the floor the whole ship shuddered. He scrambled down after it and saw that the log had split wide open. The heart of the wood was green. Green as a corpse.”

“I’m *scared*, Nanu. . . .”

“And it smelled queer. But he was a stubborn man. He heaved it up to the deck and began to carve. He made so many sparks he needed no lantern to work by. It took him six days to cut her rough form: her head, her body, her arms—”

“He made her beautiful, Nanu.”

“—and it took him seven days to carve her features: her eyes, her lips, her little teeth.”

“Thirteen days for bad luck!”

“When he was finished she *was* beautiful. He kept her beside him and at night he held her close.”

“He called her Plaisance.”

“That’s stupid! Plaisance! What are you thinking? No. He called her . . . Amadée.”

“*Si. C’est mieux.*”

“Amadée. But, now listen to this, that wood was *strange*. It was the strangest wood in the world. Because even though it had taken him ages to carve her face, hour after hour, her features had a life of their own. Soon his little bride’s smile was a sneer. The expression of her eyes changed also. Deep lines appeared—on her forehead and beside her nose and mouth. One morning when he woke up, Amadée was so hideous he threw her away in a corner where the ropes—”

“Coiled like snakes!”

“That night he went to sleep alone.”

“*Le pauvre, pauvre con!*”

“And he had nightmares. In the middle of the night he woke up screaming—”

“A rat! He was bitten by a rat, eh? Nanu?”

“He *thought* it was a rat. Until he lit his lamp and found Amadée back in his bed, scowling like a shark—”

“Green as death!”

“Cold to the touch. Cold—”

“As ice, Nanu!”

“Colder. Cold as *brass*. He picked her up—”

“Although she was so heavy he almost ruptured his kidneys, *le pauvre connard*—”

“—and he threw Amadée into the sea.”

“The sea swallowed her up whole! *C’est fini?*”

“*Non*. That night, a strong current pulled the ship back to the Java coast. In the moonlight the sailor saw that the ship was heading toward some immense rocks, so he dropped anchor. But the sea was too deep!”

“*Bottomless!* And Amadée sinking and sinking!”

“Helpless, he watched as the rocks—”

“Shining in the moon, black as Hell . . .”

“—loomed closer. Mountains of black stone.”

“There was a sound! Like teeth tearing into the belly of a whale!”

“The ship shuddered and dipped. Water bubbled up everywhere. When the ship rolled over the logs in the hold broke loose—”

“An entire forest!”

“—shattering the ship.”

“Like a matchbox!”

“As the ship sank the sailor was spat into the water. He was crushed against the rocks by the trees that boiled and leapt in the sea. Just before he died he saw Amadée floating past—but fast. Churning the water! Like the Devil speeding back to Hell! But it wasn’t Amadée any longer—”

“It wasn’t? It wasn’t? Who was it?”

“Wormwood.”

“Wormwood!” P’tit Pierre took my hand and held it against his heart, which was wildly beating. “*Tu m’as fait grand peur, Nanu,*” he said. “I am so afraid!” For a time he was silent, brooding. “Nanu?” he whispered then, his voice tremulous. “He’s *here*, in this room with us now!”

“*Je sais.*”

“Nanu?”

“Be quiet now, Pierre.”

“How did *le père* Foucart get him?”

“Because he is *evil*,” I whispered.

“Yes, but how did he *get him*?”

“Once a beggar came to the door wanting bread. It was winter and he was near dead with cold and hunger. ‘Fuck you!’ said Gran’père. ‘Why should I give you bread?’ The beggar pulled Wormwood out from under his rags. ‘I’ll give you this for a piece of bread,’ he said. ‘He’s a precious thing . . . very, very old. . . .’”

“And it does a trick! But you know, Nanu . . . *le père* Foucart won Wormwood at the fair in St. Firmat.”

The shadows in our corner of the room dispersed for a moment; it was Margarethe, come in with a candle. Looking up I saw her standing over us, her breasts like loaves of good, round country bread.

“P’tit Pierre!” she whispered, bending down and tugging at his sleeve. “Get up and go to sleep! Nanu, you come too. I’ve made a bed for you

in the kitchen.” I said, “*Non*. I want to stay here with M’man and Gran’père. “*Bien*,” she said. She took off her shawl and put it across my knees. Then she went to the cupboard and fetched a pillow. When she gave it to me I told her it smelled like sour milk. “Sour milk?” she said. “What will you dream up next? I’m going to sleep for a few hours if I can. *Le père* Foucart has kept me up for two nights in a row. Come and get me, Nanu, when he’s near the end.”

M’man snorted in her sleep and Margarethe winked. “You’ll come for me?” I nodded. My hand ached because I had been squeezing the key. I said, “Margarethe? After he is dead and I am sleeping, will I see his face behind the flames?”

“Only if you are bad, Nanu.” She left the room, taking p’tit Pierre by the hand.

For a time I lay there on the floor. Then, because I could not sleep, I went back to the desk and picked up Wormwood. He was not very large—maybe thirty centimeters tall—but being made of solid brass he was very heavy. It was too dark for me to see where to put the key, so I rubbed Wormwood’s base and felt where his toes curled into the bark of the stump; I rubbed Wormwood’s skull and ears, and I put my finger into his mouth. At last I found the place—a small hole in Wormwood’s back, between his shoulder blades. I slipped in the key and slowly wound Wormwood up. A small sound came from him, a little like the sound a clock makes before it strikes the hour, only far fainter. And then I saw Wormwood’s penis—invisible before—rising between his thighs like a great green finger. Slowly, slowly it rose, revealing a majestic set of balls. At that instant Gran’père seemed to crow and M’man, waking, cried out: “What is it?” Springing to her feet, she stood over Gran’père shouting, “What is it? What is it?” I put out my hand to hide Wormwood’s penis but there was no need; it had vanished.

Margarethe came running up the stairs and p’tit Pierre too; suddenly there was a commotion in the room as though a flock of birds was feeding there or a flock of sheep on their way to slaughter, bleating. My heart was in my throat and I could think of nothing but winding Wormwood up again. M’man called to me then: *Vite*,” she cried, “*Hurry*, Nanu! Come to your Gran’père’s bedside right away because he is dying. Come here at once, Nanu.”

“He’s dead,” Margarethe said even before I reached him; and as M’man and I looked on she tied Gran’père’s jaw shut with a handkerchief. He looked very odd—as though he’d just had a tooth pulled—and I could tell that p’tit Pierre was thinking the same thing.

Then Margarethe walked to Gran’père’s desk. Overturning the china vase she said: “There were two coins; where are they? Did you take them, Nanu?” M’man shrieked: “Give them back! Otherwise we cannot close his eyes!” and she grabbed me by the arm. Terrified, I pulled the coins from my pocket. When M’man slapped me—and she slapped me hard—the key flew from my hand, flashing once in the lamplight as it fell, flashing once again as it hit the floor.