

DER WIEDEREINBAU (REPLACEMENT)

Esther felt all her tense concentration lift as the ink of her last exam dried along her writing hand. All around, her relieved classmates stretched, smiled and pulled faces across the sea of desks.

Leaving the hall, she gathered up her backpack and then answered the phone that had begun buzzing dully against her leg. It was Ernst calling from the lab phone, and the smile that sprang to her lips was unbidden and from her core.

“I can’t meet you, darling. I’m so sorry, there’s been a change of plan and we’ve got two more tests to run.”

He sounded deeply sheepish and regretful, but still, it was not what she wanted to hear. Sighing, she agreed to see him that evening at the apartment and peeved, she punched call end. The pair had lived in this grand Austrian city for months now and this would have been their first free afternoon together to explore.

Esther dawdled along the gilded leafy streets, reaching to pat the carriage horses as they steamed and blew in the autumn beauty, blending into scenes that could have burst into being two hundred years ago.

With a shock, whilst lazily rounding a corner, she almost clashed noses with a gargantuan set of doors, at least three times her full height. They were of beaten bronze inlaid with ebony. Dark curlicues and ivy leaves framed a procession – a funeral carriage surrounded by weeping mourners. Above the carriage, embossed wooden clouds parted to reveal two fleshy angels, arms entwined and kissing rapturously, oblivious to the sad scene below. Polished brass rings either side of each door held colossal trailing bunches of ‘Love Lies Bleeding’, blushing tea roses and miniature corn dollies.

Ropes of rosaries tinkled in the sudden breeze, including some which surely had to be gemstones.

Esther stretched out a finger to give a pearlised Christ a push, like some child in an amethyst swing. At that moment a smaller door within the great one swung silently open. A diminutive, angry looking priest emerged and drew his brows close with venom.

“Who are you looking for, dear?”

He spoke German but with an Italian or Spanish accent, Esther couldn't tell.

“Oh! I'm sorry - nobody. I was just looking at the rosaries. They're lovely.”

“Then please don't look with your hands,” he said, softening slightly on seeing Esther's wispy champagne hair and fairy features.

“I'm sorry. Ah- where is this? Is it a church?”

“Not really, although we do have a chapel in the old part of the building. Would you like to have a quick look around? I have twenty minutes and there is only me-I don't often get nice company when I lock up at night!”

Esther smiled and decided to trust the little man. She had to stoop slightly to enter the inner door. Once inside the fragrance of flowers, attar of roses and orange oil was oppressive and faintly stole Esther's breath away.

“It's a very noble mausoleum,” explained the priest in a whisper. It holds eight generations of our big local family, the Meininger-Kreutzers.”

“Is it still used? I mean, it seems so well kept.”

She flushed immediately, afraid she'd been rude. He laughed.

“We do try! Yes, it is, as you would say, a working mausoleum.”

The great set of doors opened out, from the corner into an imposing square of corridors. Stretching out along the vaulted walls were many doors, dark blue enamel and spangled with sharp silver stars. In the ceiling, some eighteen feet high, were countless twisting, interlocking bodies. Some wrestled, some sat weeping but most kissed and even made love. They were wrought from delicate eggshell-blue granite.

Esther began to wander and noticed that above each door were a nameplate and the dates of each life. Something odd jumped out – all the names were female and none of them had managed to live beyond the age of thirty five.

One of the doors was open a crack, and inside she glimpsed slender indigo and scarlet glass cylinders, each holding a dim candle. Beyond these was a bank smothered with dolls in various states of repair. The priest reached around her gently to close and bolt the door.

“A sad room. The infant daughter of one of the Saltzburg branches of the family. Cholera, we think.”

“It’s so modern-looking! Well, the tiny bit I saw.”

“The family are very big on keeping their heritage alive. It’s as if with them, no one really dies at all.”

“Hm! That’s a sweet way to look at it. Where are the men buried, by the way? I didn’t see any so far.”

“Ah, they are on the other side. Historically, the sexes have been kept apart here. Just a tradition.”

“These women are all so young...”

“You must remember medicine was not so good back then. Money can buy the best but in the end, even golden palaces can tarnish.”

They had come to a stop in front of a chamber whose door was surrounded with rich sepia prints of a long-necked, graceful girl leaning sensuously against a white Daimler, leaving a wedding chapel and then dancing with two laughing, curly headed boys.

“This is Elfi, the last one to be interred here. Left us in 1935 aged thirty two.”

Esther felt a pricking of doubt-*I thought he said it was a working mausoleum.*

“May I have a look inside one of the rooms?”

“Unfortunately not, young lady. We don’t open the rooms themselves to the public.

However, the family are recruiting volunteers for this autumn. We need people to keep the flowers fresh, clean our stained glass, admit the visitors, that kind of thing.

Would you perhaps be interested?”

“Oh! Well, I could certainly think about it. I live in the city and I’m studying-I’m always looking for things to do.”

“That would be perfect.”

As the sunlight dimmed through the figure of a knight in the nearest window, she felt suddenly uneasy and politely excused herself. The priest showed her to the cavernous doors, and as she passed the baby’s door again she thought she caught a muted scratching, as of so many fleeing night creatures.

That evening, and during that first weekend of the autumn break, Esther’s dreams and musings drew her back to the mausoleum again and again. It had a beauty all it’s own, and at times Esther wondered if she was falling in love with death itself. She had never been the type to like such places, being the sort of girl who cherished the lighter side of life-concerts, long afternoon liquid lunches. Ernst, growing tired of hearing about it, urged her to volunteer.

A week to the day of her first visit, she found her way with little difficulty back to the place that wouldn't let her thoughts out of its grip. The same priest greeted her with a smile, and introduced himself as Father Martinez.

"I'm so glad to see you again. On a gorgeous day I am glad you are giving the gift of your time to us."

"Don't mention it. It's marvellous, I've been telling everyone about it! I could quite happily spend all day here."

"Everyone?" There was a slight hesitation to his voice.

"Well, just my boyfriend really. I didn't mention I was coming here this afternoon, though. I think he's sick of hearing about it."

The priest laughed cordially and ushered her in, admitting that the M-K mausoleum, as he fondly called it, tended to have a way of making people want to return.

As they walked along the corridor to the left, Esther asked where he wanted her to begin.

A huge smile cracked his olive skin.

"I have saved one of our special rooms for you today. There's a lot of work to be done though, I warn you."

"Don't worry about that. I can't wait to get stuck in-who have you got for me?"

"This lady," he breathed, "is wonderful. I've been saving her for somebody like you, someone who understands."

They reached the corner of the square and Martinez ushered her to sit beside him on the filigree bench outside the doors.

Esther reached for the broom and box of cleaning tools leaning against the bench but the priest tenderly caught her elbow.

“Please, let me tell you about her first. It’s only fair for you to know who you’re helping, isn’t it?”

Thinking that was a strange way to put it, Esther settled back down. Martinez went into a sort of trance, barely pausing for breath, as if he’d told the story many times.

“Maria Carolina was not born into this family-she was engaged to be married to Leopold, heir to the main family home in 1865. Or 1867, I can never remember. I am sorry. She turned down offers from royalty before she met him you know! She was very childlike-even owned her own toyshop as an amusement.”

“Was she young, too? When she died?”

“Yes, yes. She died on the night of her engagement ball, at the town hall. She was on the way from the dance floor to the meal and someone called out that there was a fire. Everyone panicked- the town hall had many hangings and wooden panels and very small exits. Wine and hysteria don’t mix well. There was a bottleneck of a hundred or more guests trapped in a hallway. The greatest tragedy is that it was a false alarm. Amongst thirteen others, Maria Carolina was trampled in her beautiful yellow taffeta dress.”

“That’s so sad,” mused Esther, wondering with a shiver what it felt like to have your breath stamped out by those you love.

They sat in awkward silence until Esther reached for the broom and Father Martinez bowed to her and left to go into another room, trying to hide the brimming tears in his eyes. Trying the door handle, she found that it stuck. Try as she might, she could not budge it by even one twist.

Suddenly, from within came a delightfully musical voice, asking her to come in. The handle gave in with a crack to reveal a lovely young woman standing in the centre of

the room. She was typically Aryan, with an exquisite green woollen dress, short travelling cape and hat, timelessly classic and clearly expensive.

“Oh, I’m really sorry! Father Martinez didn’t tell me anyone was visiting today.”

“Don’t think anything of it. Are you our new volunteer? Father M mentioned that someone had started with us.”

With deep embarrassment Esther realised this person must be from the Meininger-Kreutz family to have had her own access like this. She couldn’t have been much older than Esther but she was so formal and poised in comparison. Then she broke the tension by jumping up onto the marble bier in the centre of the room, spry and irreverent as a kingfisher. Esther felt clumsy in her t-shirt and cargo pants under the blue, blue eyes and bending her head, muttered something about getting on.

All the while, the lady watched. As Esther swept, the captivating guest asked polite questions; where was Esther’s family from? Did she have a husband or fiancé? She wanted to know a lot about Ernst-where did he *work*? She sounded slightly put out when she asked this-as if the word tasted bitter in her pretty mouth.

“I’ve kept you too long from your task, I apologise. You will enjoy it here, I hope. Thank you so much for coming.”

Looking deeply into Esther’s eyes, she fluttered lightly from her cool perch and slipped through the door. From her pocket she produced an iron key and showed it to Esther through the viewing panel in the door.

“I must lock the door for now, dear,” she called, “we cannot let visitors wander in, if they should come while the rooms are open.”

“I don’t have a key!”

The lady smiled,

“I will come back. Of course, I will come back soon.” She left, leaving only the sound of Esther’s tense sweeping. It was only then that Esther noticed the message above the door. “*Adel verpflichtet- Koste es was es wolle.*” (Aristocracy obligates- achieve something, whatever it costs).