

A conversation with Wolfgang

I get on the bus.

As I enter the front living room my feet sink into the thick, white carpet. The cuckoo clock on the wall is ticking steadily, and I can tell by the height of the weights, that it was wound not too long ago. The sounds to my right give away someone's presence in the kitchen. I turn towards the door and open it slowly. The kitchen isn't all that big, so you want to be careful with opening it, as you never know how close the person on the other side might be.

"Opa?", the white-haired man at the stove doesn't turn his head, "You're late.", is all he answers, lifting the lid off a pot to take a look at the contents.

"The train was delayed, so I missed my connection."

"Is that right? You should have taken the car then."

"I don't drive, Opa.", I walk past him and set down one of my bags, on the counter by the window, next to the sink. I plunge my hand into it and pull out a paper bag.

"I brought bread."

"Why? We have a bakery here."

"I made it. I thought you might want to try it. I can take it back if you don't want it."

"No, that's fine. Leave it."

I step next to him, to take a look at the food on the stove. He's not that tall now. When I was a kid, he seemed to me this towering giant. Stern and easily annoyed. That last part might have only been my imagination, or due to me being a loud child. Children weren't easy for him.

"Smooth. Just the way you like it.", he has taken the lid off of one of the pots, revealing a smooth tomato sauce, "And the pasta you like.", he nods at another pot, just as the timer goes off. I rummage through the shelves to find the sieve, until my grandfather takes pity on me, and tells me where it is.

"I thought that we could have some of it with honey.", I shake out the pasta in the sieve and pour it back into the pot. I don't remember if my grandfather puts oil or butter with it, so I leave it as it is. Better for the sauce anyway.

"What's that?"

"The bread. I thought we could have some with honey, for dessert."

"That's not dessert, that's breakfast."

"It's just that I haven't had the lavender honey in so long.", I shrug.

My grandfather looks at me sternly, "That's because you never visit. I'll give you some to take home, but for dessert, we'll have just that."

I nod, and slide open the other kitchen door, pot in hands. This one is more practical, it just disappears into the wall, no need to worry about hitting anyone behind it.

I get off the bus, cross the street, and get to the platform, as the train pulls into the station.

We serve ourselves in silence, but once we've had the first few bites, the conversation returns.

"Sit up straight," my grandfather comments, "and don't flap your arms. You look like a bird, it's very undignified."

"Yes, Opa. Sorry, Opa.", I smile and correct my posture accordingly.

"By the way, I've been meaning to ask, what's that on your arm?", anyone less proper than my grandfather might have used their cutlery to point, he does not.

"My tattoo? I think it's fairly obvious.", I put down my cutlery, and turn towards him, so that I can rest my forearm on the corner of the table, next to his plate.

"It's a nice flower, what is it?"

"A Snapdragon."

"Did it hurt?"

"Not at all."

He smiles and rests his hand on my arm for a moment, then he turns his attention back to his food. I follow his example. After I've taken a few more bites, I turn my head to him again.

"I already know what I want next."

"Another one?"

"Of course. You wouldn't hang just one painting in you house, right? Well, I don't own a house.", my eyes wander to rest on the painting hanging on the wall across from me. A group of pears painted with dark, muted tones. I've always liked it.

"What are you going to get then?", my grandfather interrupts my line of thought.

I turn to face him again, and smile wide.

"A Stag beetle."

He looks at me with something that might be surprise, I wouldn't know.

"Did you know that I wanted to get a Stag beetle tattooed, after the war?"

"Yes, Tony said so. That's what made me want to get it. You never did, so now I will. Plus, it has potential in terms of its design, and it fits with the aesthetic I'm going for. It's ideal, really."

He nods, his eyes fixed on the centre of the table.

"The food is getting cold.", he notes, as he picks up his fork again.

I make a sound of agreement, and do the same.

After we've emptied our plates he turns to me again, "What is it you do now?", he asks,

weighing his head pensively.

“I’m at university, almost halfway through with my Bachelor’s.”

“And after that? You can’t do much with just a Bachelor’s.”

“I know, that’s what mom keeps saying too.”, I shrug, and look at my glass, “But I think I’ll do something different after. I can’t really think of anything I’d want to do with my English degree. So now I’m just studying for knowledge’s sake.”

He nods, then he pours me some more water.

“I went back to university after I retired. French.”, he nods again.

I smile as I pick up my glass, “I know, mom told me.”, I drink.

“I liked French. I like France.”

I say nothing. I can only imagine the array of emotions my grandfather must experience when thinking of France. He was a prisoner of war there. My mother said he had a rather nice time there. Didn’t experience the same food scarcity as his parents and brothers back home.

He gets up from the table and picks up his plate, “Time for dessert. Help me clear the table, then we can set up outside.”

I get off the train. It takes me a moment to figure out which way it is to the trams. I barely catch the one I was hoping for.

Once coffee and tea have been poured, and we each have a slice of cake in front of us, my grandfather lights a cigar and looks out onto the garden. Dragonflies hover above the pond, scurrying from side to side, the lavender at the end of the terrace is in full bloom.

“You know, I don’t remember you smoking when I was a kid, even though there’s pictures of me sitting next to you, as you do.”, I note.

He laughs.

“What about you?”

“Oh no,” I shake my head, “I quit.”

“You’re too young to have quit already.”

“And yet, I have.”, I respond teasingly.

We continue to look out onto the garden. I eat. He smokes. He eats.

“I’m sorry I haven’t visited in a while. But I’ve figured out the trains now, so I’ll come more often.”

My grandfather nods. The white-blue smoke he exhales smells sweet, and conceals a part of his face.

“I miss you; you know. So, I really want to come by more often. Tell you what I’ve been up to. The others too. I want to tell Oma too.”, I continue.

“I’m sure she would like that.”, his eyes are fixed on a dragonfly, that’s hovering closer to the terrace now.

“How do you like the cake?”, he diverts from the topic.

“I like it, it’s not bad.”

He nods, “Not bad.”, he echoes.

The clock in the front living room chimes.

“It’s late.”, my grandfather notes.

I nod in agreement, “I should get going. I’ll leave you with the bread.”

“I’ll let you know how I liked it.”

“Please do.”, I smile at him.

He walks me to the door and watches as I put on my shoes and jacket.

“Are you sure, you have everything?”

I pat my pockets, look into my bag, then I nod.

“Thank you for the nice afternoon, Opa. Take care.”

“You too.”

I hug him goodbye, I’m not sure he was expecting it, he just strokes my back.

He really isn’t as tall as he always seemed to me.

I get off the tram, and start to walk. I stop at the flower shop to look around a little. I find the sunflowers rather quickly.

“Anything I can help you with?”

“Do you have any lavender?”

“Over there.”

I walk over to where the florist points and pick the pot with the nicest plant. I also choose a few of the sunflowers and go up to the counter to pay. They’re not as expensive as I had expected.

I pass through the gate, take a left at the church and keep walking straight.

It’s been some time, but I still know the way. It’s a good spot. At the very end of a path, right by a big tree.

“Hello Opa, hello Oma.”

I brush some leaves off the steps, pluck them from the plants growing in the lot.

“I brought your favourites, Opa. It’s the right season for them.”

I empty the rain water from the vase, no old flowers to discard, they don’t get visited nearly as often as they should.

I go to fill up the vase, and arrange the sunflowers in them when I return. I brought a small

shovel, just in case, nicked it from my mom's tools.

I part the vines that have dug into the earth, covering almost the entire thing, and start to scrape at the ground.

Once the hole is big enough, I remove the lavender from its pot and put it in.

"There you go.", I tilt my head and regard my work with satisfaction.

I brush the dirt off my hands and wipe them on a tissue, that I have to tenuously pry from the pocket of my trousers, trying all the while not to get them dirty.

I rummage around my bag and pull out a candle and, after a little more searching, a lighter as well. I sit down on the steps and light the candle beside me. I look out across the graveyard, listen to the wind in the trees, and the birds calling.

"I'm sorry, I've been gone so long. I swear I've thought about you."

They don't answer. Of course not. I wish I knew, what they would say.

I pull out a bottle from my bag. I use the lighter to open it and put the lid in my pocket.

"Here's to you, Opa. Happy fourteenth."

I gently clink the side of the bottle against one of the steps, and take a swig.

Once I've put down the bottle, I turn to halfway face the headstone.

"I've been making my own bread."