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THE CHINA BOWL

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It was white, elegant — and adorned at the brim with a wreath of tiny, round notches.

"I could go on looking at it forever," grandma would say with pride. "And to think of a design like that: a wreath full of notches like nails".

You see, it was no ordinary bowl, which one might pick up and bargain for at a country fair — it had been bought in Vilnius. Only once in her hard life had grandma journeyed to the big city, and among other things, had brought home with her this precious token.

But many days have passed since then: her children have grown up, and the First World War has swept past them like a torpid dream, taking with it her husband... Yes, a great deal has happened since those days, and it was difficult to recall everything, but the bowl, the lovely white bowl has remained.

And so in time, it came to represent to grandma a bowl into which all her experiences — both painful and pleasant — were stored, and since it had all happened so long ago, she could dwell on them without fear or anguish.

It usually stood in the farthest corner of the china cupboard and no one was allowed to put anything above or below it, and once because of this she and her daughter-in-law had quarreled. Since then grandma's hands alone have the right to touch it.

"Don't you go washing up that bowl", she had warned her daughter-in-law this very morning. "If you were to break it, I don't know what a would do to you".

They were merely words; hard and full of roughness, but grandma had a forgiving heart.

She was hastening now with the cows to the grazing ground, so that when she had tied them up, she would have time to run to the thicket and gather a few handfuls of nuts for her grandson. She wished that she could stay there longer, but her own son had been summoned to the local council this very morning, and her daughter-in-law was busy raking the spring corn. Nevertheless, she must bring some nuts for her grandson, the ceaseless prattler with his white, fluffy dandelion hair.

From time to time, as she hurriedly recited her morning prayers, she would look up at the rising sun, and one could catch words like son, grandson, daughter-in-law, and God knows what about the old days, which long since have glided away, cloudlike in the azure sky.

"Why, I see there's not much left of you, Marijona", she talked to herself... "In the old days, the housework would be done in no time at all and you were always the first at mushrooming. And now, look at you, you run and you pant and the hazel thicket is still nowhere in sight".

At the edge of the clearing she found that the bushes were already combed over, so there was nothing for it, but to wade into the dew.

"Lord, if they were to go and break it", she sighed to herself, and in her mind's eye stood the comely white bowl.

Yesterday the schoolmaster had called to see them, and they begged him to taste their honey. Her daughter-in-law thought that a deeper plate would do, but old grandma insisted on bringing out her china bowl, spooned it full of honey and placed

it on the table to eat. And while the schoolmaster was eating he talked of many things, but to grandma, they were strange and uninteresting and she kept glancing at the white wreath of notches above the clouded honey, and looked as if she longed to ask him something. Only the others were so quick with their questions.

But at last, when everyone fell silent, searching for new words, she summoned enough courage to say,

"And has the schoolmaster been to Vilnius?"

To the big city? No, he had never been there. And, he thought, if ever he did have occasion to go there, he was bound to get lost at once.

Oh, but she had been. And how wonderful it all was. And such wealth everywhere. And it was in Vilnius that she came to buy this very china bowl.

They listened to her in silence, and as she talked, she found that she had such a lot to say to this young man, who had never seen the big city.

On her way home, as she waded through the wet grass, she recalled yesterday's talk, and the words which she forgot to say, but now quite different words came to mind, and her heart grieved that she expressed herself so badly.

The grandson was waiting for her on the threshold. A little while ago, his mother walked out to the fields and told him to sit at the window and wait for his grandmother. She would bring him a whole apron full of nuts.

"Grandmamma, have you brought me any nuts, Grand-mama?"...

And when she began to heap large clusters of yellow nuts from her pockets and onto the table, the boy hurriedly pulled up a chair, clambered onto it, jumped up and down, up and down, clapped his hands and squealed for joy.

A smile transfigured grandma's old face; she stroked her grandson's hair gently and looked at him with profound devotion. Then she seated the boy on the table, brought him a small hammer, — and at once the child was absorbed in the serious business of cracking nuts. He was barely four and the task came none too easily to him. Sometimes the nut became hopelessly squashed, or it shot from under his hammer like a bullet, and into the middle of the floor, and then the child cried, "Grandma, Grandma, reach me the nut, Grandma".

She never failed to find it, hobbling and looking for it around the beds and under the table. And suddenly he made a surprising discovery. When you hit the nut with the point of your hammer, it always zoomed away from you. And now the race began: earnest and full of zest. The boy with his head thrown backwards laughed and shot the nuts as fast as he could, while his grandmother retrieved them faithfully from underneath the table and from the middle of the floor. When at last all the nuts had found their way into her pocket, she came up to the table, placed her toil-worn hand on the fair head, and said in a serious voice,

"That will do, sonny. You'll be the end of me yet. Be a good boy now, piglet is hungry, I am going for some beetroot leaves, so you stay here, eat your nuts and look out the window".

And smiling she went out to the kitchen garden.

Now the child watched her — stooping and bending, with her skirts tucked up, among the thriving beds of beetroot. No, he did not like piglet. Let loose, she grunted her way towards him, as if about to hollow out his tummy with her pointed snout. He'd far rather his grandmother did not feed her at all.

After a while, he went back to his nuts. He tried to break them carefully, now, without squashing them, and he almost succeeded.

But soon his attention was caught by a few nail heads, which someone had driven in at the end of the table, at some time or other; they stood out a little from the wood and gleamed with constant scrubbing. The boy hit at these nails once, twice, but to no effect and suddenly a passion for hammering seized him. The nails had long since disappeared into the boards, yet the child went on hammering. His face, when at last he raised it, was flushed and his eyes shone brightly.

"Oh", thought he, "if only there were more nails. Long nails and tiny nails, like fir needles".

His grandmother, having gathered a sheaf of rustling beetroot leaves, sat down on the cottage doorstep to chop them up. Usually, he loved to sit near her, on an ancient stone sunk deep into the ground, and watch the beetroot leaves fall into an untidy pyramid.

Gladly he would run to her now and sit at her feet, if it were not for this strange object, which he held in his hands — turning it this way and that and fingering lightly the round nail-like notches. His grandmother had forgotten it in her haste — leaving it still unrinsed at the edge of the table. The boy lifted the bowl up once more, smiled and even giggled in a high,

childish voice. Yes, he would drive all these nails in, so that it would be some time before his grandmother discovered them. And that would be a far more difficult task for her, than picking up nuts from the floor. He listened in silence, smiling a clever traitor's smile. No, his grandmother was not coming back, for he could still hear the even, rhythmical sound of her knife. If only she had a huge heap of beetroot leaves, and would go on chopping them until all the nails were hammered in. And then he would say to her,

"See if you can find them, Grandma".

The child concentrated, then raised the little hammer above his head, and brought it down on the nearest nail-like notch.

Something quite undreamt of happened. There was a sharp breaking sound, several fine pieces of china shot into the air — and the lovely white bowl lay split in two on the table.

The child shuddered. He sensed that something terrible had happened, and sat there awestruck and motionless. Then suddenly, he seized the two broken parts of the bowl and pressed them together with all his might.

Grandmother's ears had caught the sharp, ringing sound, and she knew at once that the boy had broken something. Slowly she laid aside a handful of beetroot leaves, brushing some away with the blade of her knife from the doorstep, and rising to her feet she exclaimed,

"It must be a window".

As soon as she opened the door, she saw everything at a glance. Pieces of broken china lay scattered on the table, (it was strange how many of them she seemed to see), and the boy sat there white and trembling.

"Oh, my Lord!" she exclaimed in a frightening voice.

The child jumped. He saw his grandmother crossing the threshold and knew that he must get away. He scrambled to his feet and began to run, but his shirt tripped him up — he stumbled, missed the chair and with arms held wide open fell on the floor; he lay there motionless, as though embracing the earth.

Grandmother was stunned, and did not seem to understand what had happened. Her mind was still full of the broken pieces of porcelain, yet she stood with her gaze fixed on her grandson.

Only a moment ago, she was beside herself with anger, aching to punish the boy, to give him a good beating, but now as she stood there looking at him a thought more terrible than all others pierced her. Was the boy still alive? And forgetting all else she hastened to him.

"Merciful God", she whispered humbly, as she bathed the boy's mouth, and tried to stop the blood from flowing. The child did not cry: he only trembled and sobbed silently...

The she seated herself on the bench, without a thought or a word, and rocked her grandson for a long time; blindly aware that a hostile force had entered their lives to bereave them of this warm and gentle being.

And when the child began to breath deeply, and start once or twice in his sleep, she put him carefully to bed, gathered up the fragments of the china bowl, and knotting them in a piece of rag, buried them at the bottom of her dowry chest.

She felt that she had lost a great treasure; a part of her very life, her only pride, and words could not express her loss. But her heart trembled on remembering that something far more precious could so easily have been taken from them, but no one, no one ever must know of it, and fetching a brush and a handful of ashes, she stooped to rub out stains of blood from the damp, earthen floor.

Translated by Danguolė Sealey