



Arcane Witness

It's freezing. The cold seeps into my pain-filled body, settles itself into the bones and stays there, comfortable as an old familiar friend. I cannot help but shiver which is a big mistake because the pile of shit in which I am submerged clings even closer, if that were possible, and if I were not by now immune, I would be suffocated by the stench alone.

Perhaps soon the boy will bring me food. Food. Even so close to death my belly yearns to taste again the homemade sauerkraut and spatzle of my childhood but I know I'll be lucky to get the potato peelings and rat infested black bread which is our staple diet here. And yet, I amaze myself. Why cling to life when life has led me to this hell? Fear of the unknown I suppose although in my darkest days, which is all I have now, I think surely even death is preferable to this. And yet I cling on.

I hear a soft barefoot tread. It's the boy. With food. I struggle to sit up but cannot. My rebellious body refuses to move as if punishing me for the days and nights I lie stiff and fearful of discovery. "It's safe," he whispers and thrusts a few crusts forward which I grab with my claw-like hand and cram into my mouth. He shakes his head at me, serious eyes roaming furtively around for discovery would mean death for both of us and it occurs to me that if I were less selfish I would do the decent thing and die. The boy, I think, has the same thought for he says "Greta, how you still live is a mystery. Anyone else would have perished yet you live on."

"Because I don't know what else to do," I replied.

"Your strong constitution has helped," he observed evenly.

"Much good has it done me."

The boy nodded consideringly. "Now we are equal," he said.

"Don't go," I hated myself for the whining tone which always finds its way into my voice when he leaves but still I go on "stay a little."

He stepped back as if the very air around me is contaminated. "I cannot. You know I cannot. I will come again."

"When, lieblich?"

"When I can."

He was gone.

The camp is silent. I lie in my latrine bed, old wounds and limbs screaming with pain but I dare not move. In my weakened state I find my mind remarkably clear and there are times when I – or rather my mind – move sideways and out from the body. I know this to be so because it is then I can see myself and the parody of a woman I have become. Strange, but I never saw myself quite so small, so shrunken and old and the eyes – are they really so light a blue as to be almost colourless? Starvation makes the mind wander, I think. To pass the time and to avoid thinking of my fate, I practice with this movement and find I can move quite a way from my body. I can see the medical block of Doctor Clauberg and the commandant's quarters where a light burns darkly in the window. I see the shacks which house the prisoners. Where does the boy sleep, I wonder? Tentatively I find I can travel although I do so slowly and with a hammering heart. I look back at the latrine but my body lies unseen. I move on. Such a strange sensation of lightness, of freedom comes over me and the dread I live with falls away. I search the wooden huts for the boy. I hear the groans and cries of those who try to rest their bones on the boards they use for beds. I can almost taste the misery.

I find myself back with my body and the forgotten pain hits me at once. It seems I can will myself into the sideways movement which gives me a fleeting peace but I cannot say when I will return. I did not find the boy.

The other thing I can do to forget myself is dream.

It must be dawn for I can hear the harsh croak of the kapo rousing the prisoners. I see it all in my mind's eye but I don't have to think too hard for I know the routine exactly. It was my job once.

I hear the noises of the awakening camp. I am shivering badly with cold and with fear as the prisoners make their first visit to the latrines. The starvation rations, the lack of medical care and the constant fear of the prisoners make the latrines a place too filthy to mention. I squirm even as they near, trying to scratch a new rash that came upon my eyes in the night. I almost smile when I realise I can see more clearly when I am away from the body than I can with these half blind things I am left with. I almost smile but I don't. Even the smallest movement would be madly dangerous. I settle myself at one of the edges with only my nostrils visible.

And the dreams come.

* * * * *

Greta! Come here at once. Mutti is looking for you and she is very angry.”

Five-year-old Greta Meerkatz looked up from the glass beads she was playing with. “Mutti is always angry,” she replied in a low voice.

“And put those back where they belong,” seven-year-old Gretchen said worriedly “you know you must not play with her beads.”

Sullenly the younger girl complied and, with small heart heavy in her chest, went off in search of her mother.

Strange dreams. Even although I know it is a dream I still fear the fear I felt then, and I know I will say the words I said then. And the outcome will be the same. Still, I dream on.

“Come here lieblich,” Marta Meerkatz spoke in her soft voice, the voice that terrified the girls, especially the timid Gretchen. “Come along now, your Mutti is very busy getting ready for tonight. You wouldn’t want to make me angry now, would you?”

Rhetorical question of course. Greta had no wish to madden her volatile mother but she knew that somehow she’d manage to do just that.

“Ja Mutti,” she said obediently but as soon as she drew close enough Marta grabbed her soft upper arm in a painful grip. “This,” she hissed into the child’s face “what is the meaning of this?” In her hand she held a broken circlet of gold.

“It wasn’t me,” the child cried in panic “Mutti, it wasn’t me –“

“Then who?” Face pressed down close, Greta smelt the alcohol on her mother’s breath. Mutti’s special perfume.

“Mutti I – I’m not sure. Maybe someone else?” Even at five years old Greta hated her quavering voice and her inability to control it. It was almost as if she knew the best way to stand up to her mother was to be fearless.

“Gretchen perhaps?” The voice was silky smooth now.

Greta shook her head frantically. “Nein. Not Gretchen,” she replied firmly, for she knew she could withstand the inevitable beating far better than her older but more delicate sister.

“Then it was you.”

Greta nodded her head.

But this was not enough. “Say the words,” Marta commanded.

“I broke it, Mutti.”

I try to move away but the dream holds me fast. How many times must I experience these same things? I fear I am losing my mind. Or perhaps I lost that many years ago. The dream must run its course.

Marta took up the handle of a heavy lacquered hairbrush. Greta shivered, but she stood stalwartly while her mother systematically and without any visible show of anger, beat her around her head and shoulders. Greta knew she’d stop when her arm became tired.

Oh Mutti, even now reliving this and all the other beatings yet again, how I wish you would have just held me afterwards. But you never did.

Marta carefully stepped over the sobbing child and, with a final check in the mirror, picked up her coat and quietly left the room.

Why is this happening? Either I stay with this and endure the pain again and again or I pull away from the dream and return to my body. Either way pain is inescapable. Oh but look, I am moving away. Slowly I rise and I look down on the sobbing child that was – is – me. I study carefully the marks on the shoulders and neck. Nothing a high-collared dress will not conceal. Mutti is very clever. Now I am leaving I want to stay but I cannot.

I hear a soft splashing a little way off. Someone is using the latrine. I fill my lungs with rancid air and submerge myself completely and there I stay with the thin skin peeling off my eyelids and my lungs threatening to burst. Slowly I raise my head and the splashing goes on, but this time closer. There is someone standing right above my head doing his business in the latrine. Mein Gott! I inhale deeply, filling my lungs again but my movement causes a ripple and in fright I jerk my head. I come face to face with a musselman. One of the living dead who tour this place, their minds gone now, but like me they seem unable to die. My eyes travel up the thin shanks encased in striped and tattered trousers, narrow chest with ribs clearly visible, and stop at the ravaged and empty face. He looks down at me blankly. "Bitte," I moan "please do not give me away." But this one is almost gone. His face registers nothing and he shuffles away. I breathe a sigh of relief.

Its dark again by the time the boy returns. This time he has no food but he carries a grimy cup of water in his hands. When I marched around this place as kapo I would avoid drinking the water if I could, preferring to procure the remains of fine wine and food from the officers table by whatever means I could. Now I don't notice the water's foul stench and I drink it down greedily.

"I can bring no food tonight," the boy says.

I nod, grateful for anything he brings.

"How are you bearing up?"

"My head spins all of the time, and I am almost blind," I reply "but I am alive."

The boy looks at me strangely, in fact not looking at me at all but at something over the top of my head. "It will be over soon," he says.

"Over? The war?"

The boy does not reply.

I struggle a little with excitement but the morass of shit holds me fast.

"Do you mean the war will soon be over? Can I believe I will be free?"

The boy backs away and I lose sight of him in the darkness.

"Bitte," I cry "don't leave me like this. Tell me."

"It will be over soon. I promise," he melts into the blackness.

The camp is silent now. How many days have I been here? Seems like forever but when I allow my mind to travel back to the events which brought me here, my memory becomes cloudy. Memories are different from dreams. The dreams omit nothing and are correct down to the smallest of details. I think of the dreams as memories of the soul and while I do fear them I welcome them also for without them to sustain me I would surely die.

I sleep fitfully, jerking myself awake whenever my head leans too close to the putrid waste that surrounds me. This time I awake with my few remaining teeth rattling against my swollen gums. My mouth is so painful I hope the boy does not appear with food for it would be a pity not to eat it and I fear I am unable to eat now.

My mind steps sideways a little before dawn and I watch the walking dead, men, women and even some children who have not yet

succumbed to the myriad diseases, starvation or the ovens. I am surprised to see how old the children look. There was one, a boy maybe seven or eight years of age with the face of an old man of ninety. Why do they live on? Because they don't know what else to do, I suppose and in that they are not different to me.

This time I move further away. I travel to the perimeter of the camp with its barbed wire and electrified fence. I see the watchtower and smile to myself. The sentries, ever vigilant with mounted machine guns at the ready have no choice but to let me pass. I see the boy and float over to where he is standing, queuing for food. I know he is assigned to the medical block and I move alongside him as he returns there. Then I see it – and the brilliance of it in this place shocks me – a light of gold which seems to emanate from his body. I watch others but no one seems to see it and I do not think the boy himself is aware but still, the light is beautiful and I am compelled to follow it and him. I stay with the boy all day. His work here is gruesome. There are people, mostly children, kept in cages and it is the boy's job to bring them food – good food so they must be in some part favoured – and when they are marched away by the guards the boy cleans out each cage carefully. When they return they are often bleeding or in pain and some do not return at all. I think these are people are the “living experiments” I had heard of but never, until now, seen.

The boy, whose name I remember now is Aaron, carries out his work with a gentleness and serenity I have rarely, if ever, seen. He takes time to comfort his charges, seemingly unmindful of his own safety and there are many times he stands stock-still, eyes closed, in some sort of communion with others unseen and the blows and threats of the guards seem not to affect him at all.

I move on although I wish to stay. I am returned to the latrine and the pain in my body intensifies as if punishing me for my absence.

It grows dark again and I fight against the dream which calls for me for I know Aaron will come soon, but the dream will have its way.

Where am I? This house is unfamiliar – or is it? I must look more closely. Yes, it is Mutti's place of work standing stately and proud as it did in the days of the Kaiser before the SS burned it down. The majestic façade of the house belies the work going on inside but the fat bankers and lawyers who scurry from its door know well its secret. Mutti comes to this place every night and tells us to be grateful for it puts food in our bellies and marks in our pocket. Gretchen and I know better than to ask Mutti what she does here in this grand house but one day my curiosity overwhelms me and, in a fit of mad bravado, I follow her.

It was easy to follow the smart click of Mutti's heels on the wet pavement. The streets were busy with office workers returning home and I had no difficulty in remaining hidden. She made a sharp left and went inside the house. I loitered outside, unsure and just a little afraid but excited too. I looked around for a sign but there was no board to tell passers-by the nature of the business within. Hidden by

a hedge, I watched the smartly dressed men scurry up the half-moon stone steps. Perhaps this place is so famous it needs no sign. But how to get in? Already darkness was falling and the shuttered windows upstairs reveal no clue. A group of men left the bier keller across the street and made towards the house. As they passed me by I recognised the scent of Mutti's special perfume on their breath. Without thinking I tagged along behind and it was surprisingly easy to slip in behind them and while the Fraulein at the desk fussed with their coats and umbrellas, I made off up the thickly carpeted stairway. There was a long row of doors all tightly closed. I know this because I pushed against every one. There were voices and muted footsteps on the stairs and I knew I had to hide. I pulled at the very last door which opened and I flung myself inside, pressing up against the inside of the door. Had I been spotted? I didn't think so and I heaved a sigh of relief when the footsteps halted outside another door and then disappeared.

I have to look down at myself to guess my age. I'm wearing a sunflower yellow dress and back patent high-buckle shoes. Mutti always likes her girls to look smart. I remember that dress, it was a present for my tenth birthday. I always hated that dress.

"What is she doing here?"

I whirled round to see a hippopotamus of a man roll off the girl lying beneath him, his puckered pale flesh quivering as he found his clothes which were strewn everywhere. A giggle escaped me. The girl, less modest by far, lunged at me with face furious and unfettered breasts swinging.

"You're naked," I observed wonderingly.

She lifted a hand and her red talons left a stinging mark across my face. I burst into tears. "Where the hell did you come from?" she panted furiously.

"I - I'm looking for Mutti," I gabbled "she works here."

"Does she indeed, my pretty Fraulein," the hippopotamus man croaked "what is her name? Perhaps I know her too," he was beside me stroking my leg. "Such soft, soft skin," he muttered absent-mindedly.

This seemed to infuriate the girl. "Come back to bed," and her false smile masked her anger. "Come, your liebling has more to show you," she went on, tugging at him when he ignored her. I felt his eyes move over my body.

No, no. Not this. I thought I had forgotten...

Finally he gave the girl his attention. "Ah my dear," he crooned "beautiful and talented as you are, I find myself drawn towards younger, fresher sport. You don't mind, do you?" he asked candidly.

"I'm sure I do not," she spat "but perhaps the girl's mother will. After all what is she nine, ten years of age?"

"Where is your Mutti?" he asked, pushing his face up close. I buried my neck in the collar of the sunflower yellow dress.

"I - I don't know," I stammered "I know only she works here."

"Then what is her name?"

“Marta.”

“Ah Marta,” the hippopotamus drooled “I have had the pleasure of meeting your dear Mutti, although I must say her daughter puts her quite in the shade.”

I have no idea what his words mean. The smell of him is strange and I shrink inside myself.

“Come now liebchen, don’t be shy,” a thick arm played a sickening caress on my shoulders “but then again there is nothing more exciting than a shy Fraulein.”

He picked me up and carried me to the rumpled bed in his hairy hippopotamus arms. I wanted to be sick. I looked at the girl who was flinging her clothes on and wore Mutti’s angry face although if I were her I’d have been glad to escape. “Please call Mutti for me,” I appealed before she slammed the door but I never could be sure if she heard.

I will myself back to my body. I close my eyes and concentrate until I fear my head will explode at the force of it. I’m still here.

I am flung on the bed and he flings himself on top of me. I wriggle to one side and he cracks his head on the edge of the bed. I scream.

And I am screaming still...

I try to push myself off the bed but he hauls me back, thick hands around my ankles. I kick back hard with my high-buckled shoes. Now he is angrier than ever. ‘Mutti!’ I scream ‘Mutti. Help!’

With my dream eyes I see Mutti a few doors along with another hippo man. Engrossed in her sport as she is, she cannot hear the wails of her daughter. And if she could, would it make any difference?

He tears the sunflower yellow dress and for a second I am glad the hated dress is ruined but he does not stop there, next my vest and underpants are hauled off leaving my limbs shaking and exposed and his hands take control of my body. ‘Bitte,’ I sob ‘please stop. You are hurting me’ but he seems not to hear and launches his mass across me, pinning me to the bed and knocking the breath from my lungs. I gasp, greedy for air and he moves his hand across my mouth. ‘Quiet liebchen,’ he mutters close to my ear ‘and I’ll let you into a secret. Will you be silent now?’ He looks at me closely, as if my answer really matters to him. No one has ever looked at me this way before. Not even Mutti when she is sure I am lying to her. I nod my head and he takes his hand away from my mouth. I inhale noisily. Gently he wipes the tears from my eyes. ‘What- what is the secret?’ I stammer.

I know this. I know the words he’s going to say.

‘You were made for this,’ he whispers ‘not everyone is but you, little Fraulein, are a born whore.’

Who knows, maybe he was right.

In a rush I find myself back in my body. My ears are assaulted by the harsh voices of the guards. Something has happened. From here I can see nothing, but the screams of the guards I know so well. A single gunshot. Now silence. What’s one more death?

I scratch my eyes with my right hand, my left dangling uselessly in the slime. The bones broke many days ago. My eyes are becoming worse. I strain to watch for the familiar cloudy shape of the boy Aaron

but I do not think he will come tonight. A camp execution means all prisoners will be confined to quarters but strangely enough I don't mind. I have no appetite for vile bread and fetid water tonight. But I would like to see Aaron. Maybe tomorrow. But wait, there is someone. I peer hopelessly at the shape above me. *Liebling, is it you?* There is no reply but the shape bends down close. *Aaron move away.* Disease is rife here. The shape remains and I know. This is not the boy.

"Who are you?" I croak.

I listen very carefully for a reply but none comes. The shape becomes more defined. Perhaps they have found me at last. Fear rises like an icicle in my torn belly.

"Do I know you?"

The shape speaks no words but nevertheless I hear in the stillness of my mind.

"I must go with you? To where?"

The fear leaves as quickly as it came and I feel almost joyous. To leave this place is something I never thought I'd do and yet here is someone telling me we can leave.

Go? Just like that? But you see my body is weak now, too weak even to walk, and the guards – they cannot see me leave...

My frantic flow of words are stemmed and I feel them pushed back down my throat although the shape has neither spoken aloud or moved at all. Then the shape becomes clearer still and I see a face. *Do I know you?* I must be hallucinating but the shape seems to know me for it smiles a beautiful smile amidst the stench and filth of this place and I feel myself moving sideways. But wait, this is different. I do not move to the side and way from the body but arc out and upwards, moving fast and free and when I look down at myself I know this time I will not come back.

Aaron makes his way furtively across to the place where Greta is hidden. When he is sure the coast is clear he pulls some black crusts from his pocket. "Greta, here," he proffers then roughly to her. She does not move and he thinks she is asleep but when he looks more closely, pity moves him to kneel beside her. "Ah Greta," he whispers "you have passed alone." Quickly he pushes the body down and hurries back to the camp.