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Unfinished

by Barry Brennessel

The cries of geese cut through the awkward silence. Teta Katharine seemed not to notice, or perhaps did not hear; she leaned forward in her chair, her eyes focused on the village below, the rooftops disappearing beneath a shroud of fog.

The birds cried again, this time from behind them. Ondřej looked toward the barn. Beyond the branches of an oak, its leaves a burning orange-red, he watched a flock drift apart over the pond.

Though he could barely make them out through the grove of pines, he was certain three geese landed. As he strained to see one glide across the water, Teta Katharine grasped his arm, her small hand curved, wrinkled. "If you wish, we can walk through the woods later," she said, slowly letting go of him. Her eyes were still sparkling blue, almost dancing as she looked him up and down, as she did when he arrived this morning at her home outside this small Czech town. "Now, though, I have a surprise."

She turned and carefully pulled the dessert cart a little closer. As she removed the cover, Ondřej spotted his favorite: *Zwetschgenkuchen*, a tart she made for him often when he was a child, with plums they had picked from her small orchard behind the house. "The first I've made in a long time," she said.

He wondered how she managed to do it, and whether she gathered the fruit herself. Baking took more patience and energy than he could ever imagine, at less than half her age. And *he* could move about without pain. Still, as much trouble as he knew she went to, he refused. "I promise I'll take some with me."

The geese called out again. Ondřej turned just in time to see them rise up from the pond and rush over the roof of the vacant farmhouse. He gazed beyond the trees, into the rising mist. Their cries grew faint, then the birds disappeared.

"And to think I once knew a boy who practically lived on my desserts," his aunt said, placing the cover back onto the tray. "Of course, they were probably tastier then. Or perhaps, when one turns twenty, he loses his taste for sweets?" She shook her head. "No, not you. Impossible."

Ondřej smiled. "The plane ride made me a little bit queasy."

She flashed a look of disapproval. "That's what you get for traveling that way. Planes are forever falling from the sky."

From inside the house a clock struck the quarter hour. Teta Katharine listened attentively. She smiled at the last chime. "It's still striking a flat note. They can't seem to fix it." She paused a moment. "But it is over one-hundred years old now."

"From Babička, isn't it?"

"Your prababička. From Karlsruhe."

Ondřej thought of the painting in the front hall: his great-grandmother, her silver hair bobbed, a string of pearls offsetting her deep purple gown. She smiled confidently, though the eyes held an exaggerated look of distraction. He used to admire this touch of the artist, but upon seeing it again, after all this time, he realized how disproportionate it was. He couldn't decide if he felt embarrassed for himself-for once thinking this clever-or for the artist and the clumsy technique and lack of subtlety.

"The clock keeps excellent time," Teta Katharine went on to say, "but I've often thought about selling it. Sometimes it's just too hard to listen to."

"I'm sure you could get a good price for it. Antiques are popular these days."

"Yes, but certainly I would get nowhere near its true value. Well, at least what I think it's worth."

A soft wind began to blow. Leaves drifted across the lawn. Teta Katharine buttoned her sweater and glanced at the sky.

"Perhaps we should move inside," she suggested.

He rose and walked toward her. She waved him away.

"I'm fine," she said, and slowly rose from the chair, leaning on the table, her hands trembling.

It started to sprinkle. Ondřej took hold of Teta Katharine's arm and helped her toward the patio door.

"I'll clear the table in a few minutes," he assured her.

He stepped into the front room, which, after all this time, remained entirely unchanged: the furniture his grandfather built after he'd returned from the war, the odd peach color of the tattered wallpaper, the arrangement of books on the shelf near the fireplace were just as he remembered.

"I admit," Teta Katharine said, "that when I received the news about my sister..." She stopped suddenly, as though she'd uttered some term she felt she shouldn't use. "The news about your *Teta* Elisabeth... I was surprised by her wishes. I'd never have dreamt she'd want to return to the old family homestead."

Ondřej's Teta Elisabeth had requested as inconspicuous a ceremony as possible: nothing more than her ashes being sprinkled somewhere "lovely" on the family farm. Her only other request was that Ondřej be the one to do the deed. No stipulation about who should be in attendance. Teta Katharine decided not to accompany him, due to the hilly terrain. And, she seemed fairly convinced Teta Elisabeth wouldn't have wanted it, though he knew this not to be the case. It would have been futile to try to convince her otherwise, however, so he didn't attempt it. He realized even if the request had come from Teta Elisabeth herself, Teta Katharine would have accused her of just clinging

to some sense of obligation.

"It's been almost twelve years since she took....since the two of you left. How is that possible?"

For the first time Ondřej noticed that the door of her studio across the hall was open. He remembered this door always being closed, locked tight, as it was upon his arrival this morning. Even as her student he was allowed in for only an hour a week, no more. "No one should see your thoughts until you alone have come to terms with them," she would say. Though she made an exception, every Tuesday and Thursday at five o'clock, when they would share each other's ideas, sketch an outline, assign shapes and color, show them off to Teta Elisabeth, their neighbors, Ondřej's grammar school teachers.

Now the door stood open, the curtains drawn just enough to let in the faint light of the day. At some point she must have slipped away to unlock it, Ondřej realized, perhaps on her way to take her medicine, after she'd asked if he would move a couple of large boxes into the cellar.

From where he sat he could see canvasses of half-finished paintings propped against the wall, several more stacked on the floor. "I thought you hadn't been working on anything lately," Ondřej commented, remembering her writing to him, almost indecipherably, about the unbearable pain in her hands.

She looked toward the studio. "It was foolish to think I could. Give up, I mean." She glanced at her nephew, but then looked toward the room again. "It nags at you," she said, after a pause.

He stood and started toward the room. He was a bit hesitant, but felt he knew her well enough to recognize the open door as a signal: not an invitation, exactly, but perhaps more an offer, or better yet, an opportunity.

"I haven't been able to finish a single one of them," she said.

He studied the work. The strokes were brash, the sketches overly detailed. Two things she told him, when he was eleven or twelve, that he must never do.

"I can't seem to concentrate," she said, standing just outside the doorway.

Ondřej picked up another canvas: heavily detailed shadows of a building—a castle or manor house perhaps, with little definition. No balance. Formless. He looked up at the walls, at paintings that, when he was a child, mesmerized him, compelled him to study every inch of them until Teta Katharine's stern voice pulled him back to reality and her vigorous instruction. There they hung, in the exact same places, but how different they now seemed. Uninteresting. Insignificant. Was he seeing them now with a seasoned perspective? Or, at least a *changed* one? Or could it be that his eyes had become somewhat more critical over time, too much for his own good? All these years at museums, staring at the same works...how does one tell the difference between acquiring a discriminating eye, or simply becoming bored?

"Isn't it funny, though?" she said, her fingers pressed against her chin, as if the notion had just occurred to her. "Perhaps it's finally your turn to play teacher."

Ondřej knelt down and continued rummaging through the work, seeing outlines of ideas that left him unmoved. He turned toward her, but she had walked back

to the front room, where she struggled to sit in the chair near the fireplace. He sensed she had now become uncomfortable with his presence in her studio, so he returned the canvas to a pile beneath the window. He rose and walked out of the room, gently closing the door behind him.

She started to leaf through a box of phonograph records that belonged to Teta Elisabeth. Ondřej stared at the box, one side torn and ready to give away. Teta Katharine picked up one of the albums. "I haven't thought of these in years," she said, looking pensively at the record. It was a Wagner opera, an old recording. "Did Elisabeth miss living out here? She must have, at least a bit, though she'd never admit it." She carefully put the record back. "Certainly she did. She used to talk all the time about how beautiful this house was. And how much she liked walking past the lake and out toward the edge of the far woods."

The exact area where Ondřej had sprinkled Teta Elisabeth's ashes, at the base of a maple tree.

The antique clock chimed once more. He wondered for an instant if it might be the last time he would hear it.

"I'd like so much to come to Prague to see you," she continued. "To be away from here myself, for a little while, at least." She stood up and walked slowly toward the window. "It would have to wait, of course, until after your studies in France. But truthfully, I don't have the energy anymore. And I would only travel by train, which would take too much time. So you can see my predicament."

It was growing late, and Ondřej had to catch the next train or be forced to wait until the morning. He hadn't asked Teta Katharine if he might stay at the house, and she hadn't offered. He wondered if each was afraid of hearing the other say "no." He feared that might have been his answer had she asked, though deep down he suspected each felt a sense of relief the topic was never broached. His old room was now a storage area for boxed-up clothing and shoes; a dark, cold, and dusty space. There was no comfortable place here to sleep.

He glanced into the front hall to make sure his coat and bag were near the door where he'd left them this morning. "Teta Elisabeth did ask about you many times," he said suddenly, after debating whether or not he should mention it.

Teta Katharine pulled open the curtains. The lamp in the front yard had come on, and its reflection shimmered in puddles along the road.

"There's an expression your teta always used," she said, staring out the window. "About the street lamps. Something your babička used to tell us when we were children." She paused a moment, leaning closer to the glass. "If one dims, then goes out while you're watching it..."

She stopped. Ondřej felt she wanted him to finish the sentence. He knew this expression well, for she had mentioned it in more than one of her letters. But he said nothing. Just as he said nothing-not a sentence, word, not even a gesture-moments ago in her studio. Just as he said nothing twelve years ago when Teta Elisabeth and Teta Katharine argued over who would keep him-and there he stood, within earshot, as one accused the other of selfishness and apathy. And then Teta Katharine finally exploded, saying she had no patience,

no time, and no desire to raise a child. "And really," she'd added, "since you were driving, Elisabeth, *the night of the accident that took his poor, dear mother from us....*"

Ondřej thought, in retrospect, it might have been that very moment that those paintings in Teta Katharine's studio ceased to interest him. And it was now that he stopped this flood of feeling he so despised, but that had been growing more frequent the last few months. Especially since he couldn't figure out what Teta Katharine's design was. If, indeed, she had one.

She turned toward him. She smiled a moment, half-heartedly, but turned quickly toward the window again. "'Be careful,' she used to tell me," Teta Katharine said. "'Be careful that you never stare at the lights. Because if one dims, then goes out while you're watching it....'"

He stared at her small, fragile body, so hunched. Her hands were clenched in pain he prayed he would never have to endure. It occurred to him how perfectly the window framed her, and how her form stood out against the darkening sky.

"It's probably best if you take the records," she said suddenly, sternly, without looking at him, without even glancing at his faint reflection in the window. "I have no use for them."

At that instant he realized to what degree everything had changed. Teta Elisabeth was gone. His studies in France were incomplete, a waste of time and money. Money he could now use. But perhaps worst of all—well, no, *indeed* worst of all—there was Brian. The sweet American boy he'd met in France. The boy who'd managed to break through his walls. All things he was not able, or willing, to discuss with Teta Katharine. As a matter of fact, he felt he couldn't even tell her something as mundane as what his favorite color was, since he'd always had the impression she wouldn't care. Or, more accurately, that she didn't deserve to know.

But if he'd shared too little with Teta Katharine, he'd shared too much with Brian. How could he explain this to anyone and make them understand? How could he make Brian understand? He needed the studio door to open just inches at a time, until he was ready to step into it once more. Brian had yanked the door open, with too much excitement. Too much enthusiasm. Too much expectation.

Teta Elisabeth, sometimes in admiration, sometimes in frustration, would tell him she knew of no person who could hold a grudge longer than he could. And he still heard over and over in his mind the badminton game his aunts played, with him as the undesirable token. He knew, of course, that growing up with Teta Elisabeth brought the two of them closer than Teta Katharine and he could ever hope to become—yet there was always a wall there. He believed maybe deep down it stemmed from their feeling they'd been stuck with one another. Something now bubbled up inside him with more intensity than he'd ever felt before, despite all he'd been through.

"Has it all been a waste?" Teta Katharine said softly, as if talking to herself, as if Ondřej had just disappeared from the room. Her forehead touched the glass. "Have you really given up?" she asked. Her words were barely audible, almost a whisper, and he wasn't sure if she was talking to herself, or to him. "What a mess we've made." Her posture remained unchanged, but her voice grew

louder. He presumed this was so he could hear her clearly. "How could I have felt so threatened by everything?"

After all this time, her words still stung him. But now he couldn't decide if her questions were rhetorical, or if she knew all too well the effect she could have on the people around her. His mind raced, and he wondered exactly what she was referring to. Was it the fact that Ondřej's mother was the only one of them to bear a child? Or was it that Teta Elisabeth's husband carted them off to Prague, leaving Teta Katharine to care for the homestead that at one time both sisters had vowed they would never forsake? Once, while Teta Elisabeth was at her sickest, and taking more pills than her frail body could handle, she murmured something about Teta Katharine having been driven mad by Ondřej's talent. He thought she was delirious, rambling, but Teta Elisabeth went on, saying that Teta Katharine didn't want him around because she couldn't stand the thought of her nephew being a more accomplished artist. He still didn't want to believe there was any truth to it, and he refused to even address it, especially now as she stood before him.

He didn't want to think about what might have been, had he not made a vow to himself never to paint again. He didn't want to dwell on whether it was simply spite, anger, or—perhaps more truthfully—the numbing sense of abandonment knowing that Teta Katharine had tossed him out like an unwanted pet. Or maybe a sketch she decided wasn't worth developing.

Just as he'd done to Brian.

The rain fell harder. Thunder rumbled in the distance. He walked over and took his coat from the bench near the front door. As he started to put it on, Teta Katharine walked toward the kitchen. He realized he hadn't cleared the patio table. He heard the patio door slide open, followed by the sound of Teta Katharine's shoes against the cement, and the clinking of silverware against china. He walked to the kitchen entrance, and saw her out on the patio, stooped over the table. Whether or not she saw him out of the corner of her eye, he wasn't sure. She didn't look up.

From the window in the front room he could still see the path winding around the barn, heading through the woods. Though it would take twice as long to reach the main road along this path, and probably a good hour to walk back down to the village, Ondřej decided on this route.

It would be the highlight of his day.

"Unfinished" will appear in Barry's collection *Reunion*, to be published by Lethe Press (<http://www.lethepressbooks.com/>). His novel *Tinseltown* is forthcoming from MLR Press and his novella *The Price of Silence* is forthcoming from L & L Dreamspell. His work has appeared in *SNReview*, *Perspectives*, *Time Pilot*, *Liquid Ohio*, *Nocturnal Lyric*, *Midnight Times*, Gival Press's *ArLiJo*, *Polari Journal*, and the *Dreamspell Nightmares (I & II)* and *Dreamspell Revenge (I & II)* anthologies from L & L Dreamspell. His stories, novels and teleplays have won awards, including a 2008 Pushcart Prize nomination; 3rd Place in the 2010 Pacific Northwest Writers Association (PNWA) literary contest and finalist status in the 2006, 2008 and 2009 PNWA contests; 3rd Place in the 79th Annual Writer's Digest Writing Competition and finalist status in the Winter 2010 WILDsound Screenplay competition. When not embroiled in his own writing, Barry serves as an assistant editor for *Narrative Magazine*. Barry earned his MFA in Writing from the Johns Hopkins University.

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