

Imaginary Countries

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“WE CAN’T DRIVE to the river on Sunday,” the baron said, “because we’re leaving on Friday.” The two little ones gazed at him across the breakfast table. Zida said, “Marmalade, please,” but Paul, a year older, found in a remote, disused part of his memory a darker dining-room from the windows of which one saw rain falling. “Back to the city?” he asked. His father nodded. And at the nod the sunlit hill outside these windows changed entirely, facing north now instead of south. That day red and yellow ran through the woods like fire, grapes swelled fat on the heavy vines, and the clear, fierce, fenced fields of August stretched themselves out, patient and unboundaried, into the haze of September. Next day Paul knew the moment he woke that it was autumn, and Wednesday. “This is Wednesday,” he told Zida, “tomorrow’s Thursday, and then Friday when we leave.”

“I’m not going to,” she replied with indifference, and went off to the Little Woods to work on her unicorn trap. It was made of an egg-crate and many little bits of cloth, with various kinds of bait. She had been making it ever since they found the tracks, and Paul doubted if she would catch even a squirrel in it. He, aware of time and season, ran full speed to the High Cliff to finish the tunnel there before they had to go back to the city.

Inside the house the baroness’s voice dipped like a swallow down the attic stairs. “O Rosa! Where *is* the blue trunk then?” And Rosa not answering, she followed her voice, pursuing it and Rosa and the lost trunk down stairs and ever farther hallways to a joyful reunion at the cellar door. Then from his study the baron heard Tomas and the trunk come grunting upward step by step, while Rosa and the baroness began to empty the children’s closets, carrying off little loads of shirts and dresses like delicate, methodical thieves. “What are you doing?” Zida asked sternly, having come back for a coat-hanger in which the unicorn might entangle his hoof. “Packing,” said the maid. “Not my things,” Zida ordered, and departed. Rosa continued rifling her closet. In his study the baron read on undisturbed except

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by a sense of regret which rose perhaps from the sound of his wife's sweet, distant voice, perhaps from the quality of the sunlight falling across his desk from the uncurtained window.

In another room his older son Stanislas put a microscope, a tennis racket, and a box full of rocks with their labels coming unstuck into his suitcase, then gave it up. A notebook in his pocket, he went down the cool red halls and stairs, out the door into the vast and sudden sunlight of the yard. Josef, reading under the Four Elms, said, "Where are you off to? It's hot." There was no time for stopping and talking. "Back soon," Stanislas replied politely and went on, up the road in dust and sunlight, past the High Cliff where his half-brother Paul was digging. He stopped to survey the engineering. Roads metalled with white clay zigzagged over the cliff-face. The Citroen and the Rolls were parked near a bridge spanning an erosion-gully. A tunnel had been pierced and was in process of enlargement. "Good tunnel," Stanislas said. Radiant and filthy, the engineer replied, "It'll be ready to drive through this evening, you want to come to the ceremony?" Stanislas nodded, and went on. His road led up a long, high hillslope, but he soon turned from it and, leaping the ditch, entered his kingdom and the kingdom of the trees. Within a few steps all dust and bright light were gone. Leaves overhead and underfoot; an air like green water through which birds swam and the dark trunks rose lifting their burdens, their crowns, towards the other element, the sky. Stanislas went first to the Oak and stretched his arms out, straining to reach a quarter of the way around the trunk. His chest and cheek were pressed against the harsh, scored bark; the smell of it and its shelf-fungi and moss was in his nostrils and the darkness of it in his eyes. It was a bigger thing than he could ever hold. It was very old, and alive, and did not know that he was there. Smiling, he went on quietly, a notebook full of maps in his pocket, among the trees towards yet-uncharted regions of his land.

Josef Brone, who had spent the summer assisting his professor with documentation of the history of the Ten Provinces in the Early Middle Ages, sat uneasily reading in the shade of elms. Country wind blew across the pages, across his lips. He looked up from the Latin chronicle of a battle lost nine hundred years ago to the roofs of the house called Asgard. Square

as a box, with a sediment of porches, sheds, and stables, and square to the compass, the house stood in its flat yard; after a while in all directions the fields rose up slowly, turning into hills, and behind them were higher hills, and behind them sky. It was like a white box in a blue and yellow bowl, and Josef, fresh from college and intent upon the Jesuit seminary he would enter in the fall, ready to read documents and make abstracts and copy references, had been embarrassed to find that the baron's family called the place after the home of the northern gods. But this no longer troubled him. So much had happened here that he had not expected, and so little seemed to have been finished. The history was years from completion. In three months he had never found out where Stanislas went, alone, up the road. They were leaving on Friday. Now or never. He got up and followed the boy. The road passed a ten-foot bank, halfway up which clung the little boy Paul, digging in the dirt with his fingers, making a noise in his throat: rrrm, rrrrm. A couple of toy cars lay at the foot of the bank. Josef followed the road on up the hill and presently began expecting to reach the top, from which he would see where Stanislas had gone. A farm came into sight and went out of sight, the road climbed, a lark went up singing as if very near the sun; but there was no top. The only way to go downhill on this road was to turn around. He did so. As he neared the woods above Asgard a boy leapt out onto the road, quick as a hawk's shadow. Josef called his name, and they met in the white glare of dust. "Where have you been?" asked Josef, sweating. —"In the Great Woods," Stanislas answered, "that grove there." Behind him the trees gathered thick and dark. "Is it cool in there?" Josef asked wistfully. "What do you do in there?" —"Oh, I map trails. Just for the fun of it. It's bigger than it looks." Stanislas hesitated, then added, "You haven't been in it? You might like to see the Oak." Josef followed him over the ditch and through the close green air to the Oak. It was the biggest tree he had ever seen; he had not seen very many. "I suppose it's very old," he said, looking up puzzled at the reach of branches, galaxy after galaxy of green leaves without end. "Oh, a century or two or three or six," said the boy, "see if you can reach around it!" Josef spread out his arms and strained, trying vainly to keep his cheek off the rough bark. "It takes four men

to reach around it," Stanislas said. "I call it Yggdrasil. You know. Only of course Yggdrasil was an ash, not an oak. Want to see Loki's Grove?" The road and the hot white sunlight were gone entirely. The young man followed his guide farther into the maze and game of names which was also a real forest: trees, still air, earth. Under tall grey alders above a dry stream-bed they discussed the tale of the death of Baldur, and Stanislas pointed out to Josef the dark clots, high in the boughs of lesser oaks, of mistletoe. They left the woods and went down the road towards Asgard. Josef walked along stiffly in the dark suit he had bought for his last year at the University, in his pocket a book in a dead language. Sweat ran down his face, he felt very happy. Though he had no maps and was rather late arriving, at least he had walked once through the forest. They passed Paul still burrowing, ignoring the clang of the iron triangle down at the house, which signalled meals, fires, lost children, and other noteworthy events. "Come on, lunch!" Stanislas ordered. Paul slid down the bank and they proceeded, seven, fourteen and twenty-one, sedately to the house.

That afternoon Josef helped the professor pack books, two trunks full of books, a small library of medieval history. Josef liked to read books, not pack them. The professor had asked him, not Tomas, "Lend me a hand with the books, will you?" It was not the kind of work he had expected to do here. He sorted and lifted and stowed away load after load of resentment in insatiable iron trunks, while the professor worked with energy and interest, swaddling incunabula like babies, handling each volume with affection and despatch. Kneeling with keys he said, "Thanks, Josef! That's that," and lowering the brass catchbars locked away their summer's work, done with, that's that. Josef had done so much here that he had not expected to do, and now nothing was left to do. Disconsolate, he wandered back to the shade of the elms; but the professor's wife, with whom he had not expected to fall in love, was sitting there. "I stole your chair," she said amiably, "sit on the grass." It was more dirt than grass, but they called it grass, and he obeyed. "Rosa and I are worn out," she said, "and I can't bear to think of tomorrow. It's the worst, the next-to-last day—linens and silver and turning dishes upside down and putting out mousetraps and there's always a doll lost and found after

everybody's searched for hours under a pile of laundry—and then sweeping the house and locking it all up. And I hate every bit of it, I hate to close this house." Her voice was light and plaintive as a bird's calling in the woods, careless whether anybody heard its plaintiveness, careless of its plaintiveness. "I hope you've liked it here," she said.

"Very much, baroness."

"I hope so. I know Severin has worked you very hard. And we're so disorganised. We and the children and the visitors, we always seem to scatter so, and only meet in passing. . . . I hope it hasn't been distracting." It was true; all summer in tides and cycles the house had been full or half full of visitors, friends of the children, friends of the baroness, friends, colleagues and neighbors of the baron, duck-hunters who slept in the disused stable since the spare bedrooms were full of Polish medieval historians, ladies with broods of children the smallest of whom fell inevitably into the pond about this time of the afternoon. No wonder it was so still, so autumnal now: the rooms vacant, the pond smooth, the hills empty of dispersing laughter.

"I have enjoyed knowing the children," Josef said, "particularly Stanislas." Then he went red as a beet, for Stanislas alone was not her child. She smiled and said with timidity, "Stanislas is very nice. And fourteen—fourteen is such a fearful age, when you find out so fast what you're capable of being, but also what a toll the world expects. . . . He handles it very gracefully. Paul and Zida now, when they get that age they'll lump through it and be tiresome. But Stanislas learned loss so young. . . . When will you enter the seminary?" she asked, moving from the boy to him in one reach of thought. "Next month," he answered looking down, and she asked, "Then you're quite certain it's the life you want to lead?" After a pause and still not looking at her face, though the white of her dress and the green and gold of leaves above her filled his eyes, he said, "Why do you ask, baroness?"

"Because the idea of celibacy terrifies me," she replied, and he wanted to stretch out on the ground flecked with elm leaves like thin oval coins of gold, and die.

"Sterility," she said, "you see, sterility is what I fear, I dread. It is my enemy. I know we have other enemies, but I hate it

most, because it makes life less than death. And its allies are horrible: hunger, sickness, deformation, and perversion, and ambition, and the wish to be secure. What on earth are the children doing down there?” Paul had asked Stanislas at lunch if they could play Ragnarok once more. Stanislas had consented, and so was now a Frost Giant storming with roars the ramparts of Asgard represented by a drainage ditch behind the pond. Odin hurled lightning from the walls, and Thor—“Stanislas!” called the mother rising slender and in white from her chair beside the young man, “don’t let Zida use the hammer, please.”

“I’m Thor, I’m Thor, I got to have a hammer!” Zida screamed. Stanislas intervened briefly, then made ready to storm the ramparts again, with Zida now at his side, on all fours. “She’s Fenris the Wolf now,” he called up to the mother, his voice ringing through the hot afternoon with the faintest edge of laughter. Grim and stern, one eye shut, Paul gripped his staff and faced the advancing armies of Hel and the Frozen Lands.

“I’m going to find some lemonade for everybody,” the baroness said, and left Josef to sink at last face down on the earth, surrendering to the awful sweetness and anguish she had awakened in him, and would it ever sleep again? while down by the pond Odin strove with the icy army on the sunlit battlements of heaven.

Next day only the walls of the house were left standing. Inside it was only a litter of boxes and open drawers and hurrying people carrying things. Tomas and Zida escaped, he, being slow-witted amid turmoil and the only year-round occupant of Asgard, to clean up the yard out of harm’s way, and she to the Little Woods all afternoon. At five Paul shrilled from his window, “The car! The car! It’s coming!” An enormous black taxi built in 1923 groaned into the yard, feeling its way, its blind, protruding headlamps flashing in the western sun. Boxes, valises, the blue trunk and the two iron trunks were loaded into it by Tomas, Stanislas, Josef, and the taxi-driver from the village, under the agile and efficient supervision of Baron Severin Egideskar, holder of the Follen Chair of Medieval Studies at the University of Krasnoy. “And you’ll get us back together with all this at the station tomorrow at eight—right?” The

taxi-driver, who had done so each September for seven years, nodded. The taxi laden with the material impediments of seven people lumbered away, changing gears down the road in the weary, sunny stillness of late afternoon, in which the house stood intact once more room after empty room.

The baron now also escaped. Lighting a pipe he strolled slowly but softly, like one escaping, past the pond and past Tomas's chickencoops, along a fence overgrown with ripe wild grasses bowing their heavy, sunlit heads, down to the grove of weeping birch called the Little Woods. "Zida?" he said, pausing in the faint, hot shade shaken by the ceaseless trilling of crickets in the fields around the grove. No answer. In a cloud of blue pipe-smoke he paused again beside an egg-crate decorated with many little bits of figured cloth and colored paper. On the mossy, much-trodden ground in front of it lay a wooden coat hanger. In one of the compartments of the crate was an eggshell painted gold, in another a bit of quartz, in another a breadcrumb. Nearby, a small girl lay sound asleep with her shoes off, her rump higher than her head. The baron sat down on the moss near her, relit his pipe, and contemplated the egg-crate. Presently he tickled the soles of the child's feet. She snorted. When she began to wake, he took her onto his lap.

"What is that?"

"A trap for catching a unicorn." She brushed hair and leafmold off her face and arranged herself more comfortably on him.

"Caught any?"

"No."

"Seen any?"

"Paul and I found some tracks."

"Split-hoofed ones, eh?"

She nodded. Delicately through twilight in the baron's imagination walked their neighbor's young white pig, silver between birch trunks.

"Only young girls can catch them, they say," he murmured, and then they sat still for a long time.

"Time for dinner," he said. "All the tablecloths and knives and forks are packed. How shall we eat?"

"With our fingers!" She leapt up, sprang away. "Shoes," he

ordered, and laboriously she fitted her small, cool, dirty feet into leather sandals, and then, shouting "Come on, papa!" was off. Quick and yet reluctant, seeming not to follow and yet never far behind her, he came on between the long vague shadows of the birch trees, along the fence, past the chicken-coops and the shining pond, into captivity.

They all sat on the ground under the Four Elms. There was cold ham, pickles, cold fried eggplant with salt, hard bread and hard red wine. Elm leaves like thin coins stuck to the bread. The pure, void, windy sky of after-sunset reflected in the pond and in the wine. Stanislas and Paul had a wrestling match and dirt flew over the remains of the ham; the baroness and Rosa, lamenting, dusted the ham. The boys went off to run cars through the tunnel in High Cliff, and discuss what ruin the winter rains might cause. For it would rain. All the nine months they were gone from Asgard rain would beat on the roads and hills, and the tunnel would collapse. Stanislas lifted his head a moment thinking of the Oak in winter when he had never seen it, the roots of the tree that upheld the world drinking dark rain underground. Zida rode clear round the house twice on the shoulders of the unicorn, screaming loudly for pure joy, for eating outside on the ground with fingers, for the first star seen (only from the corner of the eye) over the high fields faint in twilight. Screaming louder with rage she was taken to bed by Rosa, and instantly fell asleep. One by one the stars came out, meeting the eye straight on. One by one the young people went to bed. Tomas with the last half-bottle sang long and hoarsely in the Dorian mode in his room above the stable. Only the baron and his wife remained out in the autumn darkness under leaves and stars.

"I don't want to leave," she murmured.

"Nor I."

"Let's send the books and clothes on back to town, and stay here without them. . . ."

"Forever," he said; but they could not. In the observance of season lies order, which was their realm. They sat on for a while longer, close side by side as lovers of twenty; then rising he said, "Come along, it's late, Freya." They went through darkness to the house, and entered.

In coats and hats, everyone ate bread and drank hot milk

and coffee out on the porch in the brilliant early morning. "The car! It's coming!" Paul shouted, dropping his bread in the dirt. Grinding and changing gears, headlamps sightlessly flashing, the taxi came, it was there. Zida stared at it, the enemy within the walls, and began to cry. Faithful to the last to the lost cause of summer, she was carried into the taxi head first, screaming, "I won't go! I don't want to go!" Grinding and changing gears the taxi started. Stanislas's head stuck out of the right front window, the baroness's head out of the left rear, and Zida's red, desolate, and furious face was pressed against the oval back window, so that those three saw Tomas waving good-bye under the white walls of Asgard in the sunlight in the bowl of hills. Paul had no access to a window; but he was already thinking of the train. He saw, at the end of the smoke and the shining tracks, the light of candles in a high dark dining-room, the stare of a rockinghorse in an attic corner, leaves wet with rain overhead on the way to school, and a grey street shortened by a cold, foggy dusk through which shone, remote and festive, the first streetlight of December.

But all this happened a long time ago, nearly forty years ago; I do not know if it happens now, even in imaginary countries.