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Opening Extract from...

Windows of the Abyss

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Prologue

I am confronted often enough nowadays by the spectre of Pater Braun gliding along the highly polished corridors of the Hospital of the Merciful Brothers. Gliding is no exaggeration, for his black cassock, extended forward by a proud beer-paunch, sweeps all around him over the cream-white floor. His invisible feet must be paddling back and forth at a furious rate, much like the submerged feet of those graceful swans plying the pond in nearby Nymphenburg Gardens. His hands, covered by a pleat of his cassock, meet on that paunch, the hidden fingers presumably twiddling the beads of a rosary. His face wears a perennial grin. This grin is all that remains of him in the minds of many a patient long after their discharge: Pater Braun, the Merciful Brothers' black Cheshire cat, save for his rosy cheeks and white-bald scalp. The patients no doubt also recall the grin melting into a compassionate smile the moment his roving eyes met theirs.

Pater Braun told me much later that his smile was always accompanied by a *Lord have mercy*, recited in silence for the soul of the patient. The patients invariably returned his smile, if not with their own sick smile, then at least with a nod of their head.

He told me much else too.

Pater Braun used to concentrate intently many years ago while reciting his *Lord have mercy*. Those many years ago,

when he started making his rounds of the wards, he looked upon this short prayer as a sort of sedative for the distressed soul, much as the palliatives administered by the nurses are to ease the suffering of the body. He would continue uttering these words even though with the passage of time he stopped feeling their meaning. The outer shell that was his smile was still convincingly there but his silent muttering had become a mere reflex.

He never analysed why he slackened with the years. He probably feared doing so. So long as the patients found comfort in his soothing smile, strength to go on from his occasional words, the purpose – he intuited – was served.

And then something happened ...

* * * *

"The patient in room two-five-six would like to receive the Eucharist, Father," said Nurse Augusta as he glided past her.

"And the Last Sacrament?" he intuited.

"I have no idea, Father, but she is nearing her end."

"Could you please tell her I'll be with her straight after Mass at six."

* * * *

He stared in shock at the distraught face of the old woman. Her black and silver hair, stiff from sweat, stuck in strands to her pillow. Wrinkled skin covered bones that were once arms. Two tiny fists, tightly clutched, lay on a sheet whose haphazard folds masked fully the outline of her body.

"Who can comprehend the ways of the Lord," murmured Pater Braun to himself after he had thought through his *Lord have mercy*.

"I offer up my suffering for the souls of my long dead husband and son," he heard her slurred words answer his murmur. Thinking her answer to be an objection to him questioning the ways of the Lord, he went through the ritual that precedes the administering of the Body of Christ in embarrassed silence. Her beady brown eyes followed critically his every move. She had conservative preferences when it came to church ritual and disapproved strongly of modern variants. She proffered her tongue for him to place the host on and began immediately to masticate it rhythmically and loudly.

* * * *

Perhaps a week later, Pater Braun saw the old woman, now in a nightgown, sitting on a bench at the end of a corridor. His smile was answered by, "Thank you, Father for bringing the Sacrament to my bed the other day."

"I am happy to see you are much better," he answered.

"Very weak, Father. The pain is still there but at the moment, thank God, rather dull."

"It must be hard sometimes to reconcile the mercy of Christ on the Cross with the suffering He seems to inflict on His beloved ones. But I have won the impression that your faith is very strong."

"My suffering is of my own making, Father. I had an abortion many years ago and, possibly as a result of it, contracted cancer. I am now tormented by the after-effects of the radiation treatment I received back then."

He followed her words in silence.

"It would have been a girl, a daughter, who could now, perhaps, be a comfort to me, Father."

"Don't you have any relatives? Who is the person I sometimes see visiting you?"

"That's Georgie, my sole surviving son, Father. I moved

from South Africa to live with him and his wife here in Munich. He and I were so close back in South Africa but since I've been here he has come to loathe me. I don't mind being alone, Father. I have quite a few things to pray for while I still can ... that, God forgive me, any wrong I may have done my son ... that he finds happiness and the true faith again once I'm gone ... and I pray of course for the souls of my beloved husband and son who've gone before me.

"Perhaps, Father, God will take into account the suffering I am going through here on earth when He judges me in the afterlife," she said, hardly audibly ... and then blurted out, without a flicker of passion in her weak voice,

"There must be a God. It's all meaningless otherwise."

Pater Braun no longer remembers how they parted. He does however remember a mutated version of her sentence suddenly shattering his senses:

"It's all meaningless. There is no God."

He will never forget having stared for the eternity of that frightful instant into a bottomless nothingness.

From this revelation on, Pater Braun not only smiles consciously his soothing smile, but again prays fervently his *Lord have mercy* ... that the patients be spared the vision of the abyss awaiting them at their end. He does this even though – or perhaps, exactly because – his belief in a God, who is there to hear his *Lord have mercy*, has been irredeemably shattered.

* * * *

The old woman was my mother. She died soon thereafter. Her

words and ways brought me too to the brink of the abyss ... and beyond. I am now inclined to believe that her last utterance ensured that Pater Braun's prayer rescues me from the abyss. I say this because Pater Braun was in due course moved from the Hospital of the Merciful Brothers to – I fancy – better be able to keep an eye on me. But much has transpired before that move was made and he could tell me all these things.

Let me begin with the time immediately after Mother's death, towards the end of August of the year ...

Remembrance of things ever-present

A shoebox full of family photos. But hardly a photo with all four of us on it! Someone had after all to take the pictures. Usually it was Dad, proud behind his Voigtländer. He diligently immortalised on paper, well before he departed, all conceivable combinations of the family-minus-its-father.

Deeper down are letters, documents and scribbles on odd pieces of paper. Each scrap clamours to recall its past... and more! My thoughts tumble down a maze of alleyways. I am unable to damn the deluge, so speak scraps and divulge...

* * * *

Here is the last photo of Mum. A bad one. She already looks beyond the grave, not the sprightly seventy-odd she then was. Hair unkempt, eyes staring wildly, mouth as if about to speak...

Mum would relate time and again the same thing. A monologue in Hungarian, save for words like "wick" and "prick", words she never understood. She would utter these and an odd phrase here and there in English in order to summon my brother back to life. Pete always spoke to her in English, even though she addressed him in Hungarian. I know the whole sermon by heart.

I always knew exactly where I stood with your brother. We'd have a sharp exchange, scream at each other, shout out the things on our minds. He certainly had my temperament. Lots of paprika in him. (You are more like your father was. You keep your thoughts to yourself. I've never been able to peer inside your soul.) Pete and I never sulked for long though. Our eyes would soon meet. We would stare at each other in a slit-eyed, cold-blooded fashion but the tenseness on our faces would eventually begin to melt. One of us – it was usually him – would break out in a smile. We were then friends again. Yes, I always knew how far I could go with him before I got on his "wick". Remember how he used to say, "You are getting on my bloody wick"? Ha, ha, ha. He never told me what he meant by "wick", only that I shouldn't say it in front of others.

I did once, though, get a peek inside your soul, Georgie. Pete would tell me all sorts of things and then in all earnestness declare he would kill me if I told you what he'd just said. No, no. He never betrayed you. Never! I once reprimanded him for not behaving like you for a change. You never give me any lip. He said I shouldn't think you are "Mister Perfect". You respect me too much (he kept referring to you as "the prick", not by your name, ha, ha). "The prick feels sorry for you", he said to me, for all the work and worry I have with the two of you since dad is gone. Why were you not more open with me Georgie, like he was? I would have got to know you that much better... perhaps I'd never have intruded on your life in my old age. I really thought I could depend on you unconditionally!

Dad's passing away affected the two of you in opposite ways. You became much too serious... and he, light-hearted. Girlfriends, parties and beat-music late into the night, evenings of billiards and drink with what's-his-name... Dino, yes, his best friend Dino (whatever happened

to that “chap”?). There was no stopping Pete! He enjoyed life as had he presaged the short time allotted him.

I still wage war with God – after all these years – for having taken him from me at a mere twenty-three. I argue with Him, as did Moses in the desert.

Her monologue always ended here in silent sobs. Pete’s death was the big tragedy in Mother’s life.

Mum got over dad’s demise but she kept visiting his grave once a week for years on end. His death in fact gave purpose to her life. She devoted herself exclusively to our upbringing, got herself employed in the company where dad had worked so we could remain at school and later attend university. It wasn’t easy in a foreign country with relatives and friends thousands of miles away. Money was always short and she budgeted exactly, even if it hurt. She avoided debts and loans at all costs. She managed, for example, without a household maid even though this meant much additional work for her, and maids were so easy to come by and cheap. She bought a car only after many years of saving up for it, in a country where mobility without a car was tiresome. And then Pete got himself killed in it.

She never once contemplated returning to Hungary and more familiar surroundings. My parents had fled with the two of us in tow all the way to the southernmost tip of Africa to ensure that, in case they should become homesick, they would not be able to return to Hungary – and Communist dictatorship – on the spur of a desperate moment. They made this move chiefly because of us kids, that we’d be able to grow up in a different environment. When they applied to emigrate to South Africa they did not know that this environment would be the cul-de-sac of apartheid. They applied to half a dozen other countries too: Australia, New Zealand, Canada, Brazil, Argentina, and of course the USA (all wanted to emigrate to the paradise called USA). South

Africa was the first to take us. Dad, I think, did sometimes feel homesick; Mum, never.

I stare at Mum's birth certificate. Her parents never married. The word "illegitimate", is strongly faded. Possibly my mother's efforts to erase it. This, together with the fact that she originated from a village in a far off corner of Hungary, gave her complexes at school in Budapest. Her schoolmates would tease her by calling her a "bastard" and a "gypsy". As a reaction, she always strove to prove she was no worse than them, indeed that she was the best in everything. A trait that remained with her all her life. She went about things in a very determined way which made her seem harsh and cold. It often cost her sympathy and friends, including her daughter-in-law, Amanda.

She did for us boys everything in her power and expected in return a certain type of behaviour from us. I usually complied, especially after Dad's death; my brother, seldom. And then, when she joined me and Amanda in Munich many years later, I too began not to comply... much to her consternation. What irritated me most was her constant watching over my interests: that they were not being encroached upon... especially by Amanda, the last person in my eyes who would do such a thing.

It sometimes surprised me how brutal I could be to her after Amanda had moved out. For example at dinner table, Mum at one end and I at the other, I staring at her coldly while she munched loudly. When she eventually became aware of my deadly stare, she would say she couldn't help it, it was her teeth. To this I'd reply it wouldn't be half so bad if she'd only shut her mouth while eating. The steady flow of claret would make my chatter even more cynical. Time and again I'd make nasty comments about her friends back in South Africa and about relatives further back in Hungary. She always ignored my venom, related instead the same stories,

each time as if for the first time. After dinner she would retire to her room, to read, watch TV or sleep.

My callous behaviour confronted me often enough when on a business trip, away from home. I'd see Mum's broken stance, her grey hair at all angles. I'd think of those urinary bags she constantly had to be changing. I'd resolve that when I got home I'd talk with her more patiently, more lovingly, as in bygone days. When I got home I saw her embittered face and couldn't.

She did warn me that my behaviour towards her would torment me once she was no longer there. And I did sometimes think, "If only that day were already here." Oh God, that I once harboured such thoughts! How awful!

And now Mum *is* dead.

* * * *

Mum had a framed copy of this photo of Pete on her dressing-table. Tall, lean and cool, very handsome. The beginning of a smile on his lips, his glance past the camera.

Sinister versions of this smile and glance begin to dance about in my head...

Pete stretches himself and rubs his eyes. I tell him to wake up, it's already four in the afternoon, Mum will be home in an hour and he has not done a scratch of swotting yet.

With a smirk for a smile, he answers that he has to be fit for the night. Heaven knows what'll come his way. He must be well rested if he's to give his best-est.

I say he can't be serious, he can't be going out yet again. He's been out every night this week. He has an important exam in a couple of days. I'd be doing some swotting if I were he.