



Hunting

Da brennt ihre Fahne mitten im Feind, und sie jagen ihr nach.*

Rainer Maria Rilke, *Die Weise von Liebe
und Tod des Cornets Christopher Rilke*

THE DUNES stroll away like waves of the yellow sea.

My friend – Finch, we call him – has made a cityscape. It fills this little house – more like a shack. The room – could be a street in some Soho, London, New York, miniature, quite personal. He adds a small restored Colosseum, statue of the Colossus too – him, Finch, in his country clothes. On the sidewalks, blobby replicas of us, his friends. Friends of his, of our, youth:

Dea, the joyous, uninvited friend of life. Mansour, forever destitute, unaccepting of poverty as his destiny. Luca, the pure but not especially noble soul – slave to old books. Odile,

* Their banner is burning in the midst of the enemy, and they ride after it.

mundane, untrusting, in a set of mismatched clothes. The women, naturally, more beautiful, desirable, than now. Myself – between experiences, then as now.

There's other friends as well, no family, though Finch gets his power from relatives – this little country, just a hop across the sea from us, is almost his, there to pick up like a fallen fruit of good or evil – and we drop in when driven or when bored. Finch. Friend.

The miniature fills the only room, alcoves left for sleeping in, if the mood takes hold of you. Outside, the sand.

'It's to avoid nostalgia, this mock-up,' he says. 'See, you're all there, quite small. Just like real city life.'

I say, 'You could have stayed back there and seen us life-size every day.'

He pushes me out back – 'There is a cat. Quite desperate. There's lots of sand here, as you see, but not a lot to eat. I can't meet all its needs,' and he points around – there's not much here. We don't see the cat.

'The locals think a pet's a stupid luxury,' he says, 'You'll see, there's no rats here.'

I say, 'The locals seem to draw too fine a point.' At this, he nods.

‘It’s all memory,’ he says, ‘And yes, it’s all a little false. All there even when you don’t want to remember. Or can’t.’

I say, ‘You don’t seem to have much time for us, individually. It’s just a made-up scene. You might add figurines of people who you’ve never met,’ and he says,

‘Yes! I might. This here, though, is all my living space. And friends – well, you need this little lump of them to fill a little section of your life. See – here’s the bar, that guy was shot there for bad debts. We didn’t drink there, after. Superstition! Whores lived here,’ he points, and yes – surely it is a Soho somewhere, where we passed our youth – guys selling strass from barrows, whispering of horses. Females that trade themselves, or promise to.

‘You see,’ says Finch, ‘It’s the whole range – titillation, bit of artistic stripping, little theatres, clubs. Lettuces too, and mangoes here. And in the buildings,’ and he pushes my head down to the painted roadway, ‘are waiting guys who I, we, never knew. They wait their cue – the famous ones, in photos, ready to come flitting through our lives. Leaders, groups, bands,’ and he laughs loud.

The figurines are roughly made, but there's a tiny stamp of life, of difference. If you don't recognise them, it's because you forget the original.

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In walks the cat. I say, 'It has a most mature gaze.'

Finch says, 'Don't be so solemn about it all. No one keeps a record. It's a cat, just don't exaggerate to make a talking point.'

I say, 'We have to throw ourselves in – this soup of life. Like laying down a fiche, staking, spinning the wheel. It absolves you – everyone is in the game, accepts whatever. Whatever turns up. Like the cat.'

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'You need a cause,' Finch says, sternly, 'The game can last forever.'

Finch is an awkward guy. My host. He's important too – his name, his family's important, it passes to him, gives him a substance.

There's uprising in the air – even here, rebellion. All this sand.

I scan his books – there’s *All You Need to Know about Shrapnel and Burns* – not poetry, I guess.

There is a lot of silence. He says, ‘Maybe we should try some shooting. I get good stuff, arms and the rest, quite locally – the market.’

I say, ‘No, not animals. And are there any here?’

He says, ‘No, there’s no animals. There’s people. That tree’s the frontier – just go beyond it, when the bad guys come in trucks ... We shoo them off. They can’t pursue – this here’s another country.’

‘It seems arbitrary,’ I say.

‘All wars are like this now. The killing, the real stuff, the quantity, it’s done in other ways – by famine, the price of pills and rugs ... Then, there’s prisons. And the sea. Back you go – the horsemen of the old apocalypse. But here, it’s all attrition – big bangs and bombs is out. It’s arrangements between the soldieries here, the risk is slight, and none at all for us. Or hardly so.’

I ask, ‘You’re sure the bad guys are authentic, evil?’

He says, ‘Absolutely so. And then – it’s back to eat. I hope you like my

pickles. Even if you don't, that's what there is.'

He's shouting now – 'The rims! The rims, you fool. If you don't watch it, they jam it up, those bullets jam your gun.'

I say, 'Of course, I know all that, the loading magazines. It's just another rule, it's reason coming through. The guys here – they've got computers. They could reason, but they've got machines instead. Though it is true, that when the big wave comes, they say it is the Elephant, come to bathe.'

'Just owning things, even computers, doesn't make you rational,' he says. 'Besides, you must believe in something. If you don't anthropomorphise bad things, the universe is just a box of curios. It's not just you, that you're finite – it's life, unpleasant all the time. Things need a cause – and so do you. A big thing needs its Elephant.'

He waves his gun. Now, mine's prepared. He says,

'I give you just one magazine – even if you load it right, you get to shoot one guy thirty times or so.'

I'm not convinced. I say, 'You are the strategist, not me.'

He says, ‘We put sheepskins on our heads, so’s not to stick out. It’s not a thing that I do well, this finalising, aiming. Lucky for them that they’re bad guys and we’re bad shots.’

I say, ‘I remember, last time I visited, there were lush houses here, not shacks like this. The people came for safety, now they’ve fled again. Brought it with them, anxiety and peril.’

It had everything, this place. Bars, massages. Just to visit.

Finch says, ‘The big change. Revolution. Coming to take repression off our backs.’

He says, ‘Even if you get to choose your olive enemy, you won’t know his circumstance.’

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