

Essay Contest 2015/16

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8 Jahre

„Canada I've given you all and now I'm nothing“

Sometimes everything that could possibly go wrong does, and then it did. Looking back today, it is hard to believe. What happened and how it happened and why no one could see it coming. How no one could prevent it. But it is also that looking back hurts. You see everything that might have been and everything that was and everything that wasn't. It is hard to bear. It is hard to take. But some tales need to be told and this is one of them.

The sun was standing high on the horizon when his plane took off. One moment down on the ground, the next high up in the air, inside him the thing he loved most about flying. Timelessness, spacelessness, like up here, anything could happen; like up here, he would never grow old. But this time was different. This time felt too final, because he could still hear his wife's quiet sobs, desperately trying to stay in but failing, and he could still see his daughter's tight jaw.

And he knew that he could not go back ere he had managed to do what he was leaving home for. *Leaving home*, he told himself, *for a new home. Canada will be my new home, my family's new home. We will have a good life there. As good as the one we have lost.*

“Even today, I can still see him,” Dora tells me. She's looking at me but not really looking, the way people are when they look through you into the past. She is looking back across the years, at her husband, at his receding figure.

"What is it you see?" I ask.

"How he walked away from us at the..." She cannot remember the word for gate; the years got to her. "Examination area. It was the last time I saw him."

They had lost everything, but here they would make themselves a new everything. First he took a look at a golf course (the golf course was the reason he had chosen Canada, because a friend had told him about it and about how it would make a good campsite), but soon another offer caught his attention. A restaurant in a summer holiday destination, just next to the beach. They had had a restaurant at their campsite (before the bank had demanded back the money, before they had had to leave home, before they had lost all their houses trying to save the one dearest to them), so restaurant was what he could do, restaurant was what he was good at; restaurant was familiar. He had begun to miss the Tyrol, but most of all, he missed their old lives. His wife and his children. He told himself that what he was doing here was the only option; that his family needed him now; that they needed him to set things right and to make a new life for them. They would love Canada. They would come gladly.

"But why?" I want to know of Doris, his daughter. "Why did he keep driving from one place to another, why didn't he settle right away? What was it that drew him to that restaurant, and away again?"

"I don't know. Honestly, I don't know. I suppose someone made him a good offer. I don't know who it was he knew there, but he must have had his contacts, he must have known someone who told him of the restaurant."

In the summer, his children came to visit. It was such a relief to see them well and happy (And so grown up! How do they grow so fast?) that he promised himself that soon he'd have enough money to have them all live here. That soon he'd see his wife again and that she'd forgive him for leaving. (Forgive him for dreaming, for wanting this, for leaving them, but it was the only way he could ever cope with everything that had happened.) The children helped him run the restaurant and when the summer came to an end, his second eldest daughter, Doris, came up to him and told him that they would not leave without him. "You are coming with us," she said. She could tell how lonely he must be. If only. If only he could come. But he had promised, promised himself and promised his wife that he would make a living here. Or else. All would have been for nothing. No, he could not leave.

"I should not have left without him." Afterwards, this is all that remains. I should not have gone. I'm sorry.

There were no heaters in the flat above the restaurant and the windows let the cold into the rooms; but worst of all, there were no customers. And soon there wasn't anything to eat either. All his savings were gone and he would catch his death if he stayed one more night. But where could he go? Who would take him in?

"A family just a village further took him in. I don't know how he knew them but maybe he didn't at all. Maybe they took him in as one takes in a refugee. We must be grateful." Doris tells me.

"So that was the last winter then?" I ask. The information I get comes slowly and I can tell how much it hurts her to provide it. Forgive me, I tell her with my eyes, forgive me for asking.

"That was the last winter," she affirms.

"And then?" I try hard to banish the impatience from my voice. "What was the last time you talked? Did he seem strange?"

"Well, we talked at Christmas, he was staying with that family then and everything seemed quite normal. Next time was in February, and even then, everything was fine."

"What about that family? They didn't know anything? Did you talk to them?"

"I did. I told them what had happened and they were shocked. They thought he was with us. He had told them that he was going back to Austria."

He figured that as customers weren't coming to him, he might as well come to them. A little further to the west was a skiing region where the family could spend their winters while the restaurant at the seaside stood cold and vacated. He could see their future there. It was perfect.

"What else did the family say? I mean, they must have known something!"

"They said...they said that they had seen his car leaving. They could not say who was driving."

"They did not know...but then there must have been someone with him! Else they wouldn't have said something like that!"

Time and memory are struggling in Doris' face. "I don't know. It was all too much back then...it was like we were in a trance. We just left it to the police and the police didn't do anything. We should have gone there to investigate, but we didn't have the money."

"I know." So much time has come between that day and us, but when I look at their faces, it does not seem like it. They look so drawn, so tired, and still not quite able to believe it.

In the late afternoon, a call came in. The eldest daughter went to take it. One word stuck: strangled. Found at a winter vacation site. They did not know what had happened.

“What was it like?” I want to know, not quite sure how to phrase my question and sorry for asking it. “After.”

She looks at me for a moment, considering. Then, she says: “It was like the world coming to an end.”

“I will write about it,” I promise her. “And maybe next summer, we can go there. Maybe the family he stayed with is still alive. We must ask them what they know. They will know something, I am sure of it.” None of this will bring him back, of course, I know that. It was his Canadian dream and it killed him. But in a way he died for us: in a way he died trying to build a life for his family. It is small consolation.

Sometimes everything goes wrong... everything went wrong then. It is unbearable.

Death. Life. *„If only my heart were made of stone.“*

A short note on the text:

Although based on true circumstances, this is a work of fiction, and to be treated as such. Many details were omitted, others changed. In this text I made my grandfather a hero, but his heroism was a strange one. In the end there are no true heroes left alive and at the same time all of us are heroes — to others and sometimes even to ourselves. Johann Stoll was such a hero. Not a real hero, not even your everyday hero, just a person like you and me. A quite ordinary man with a heroic deed, and in the end, this heroic deed makes him something more than a hero. So he cannot be my hero as I do not believe in heroes, but he can always be my something more than a hero. He always will be. No matter how his story ended.