

# God's Rainbow

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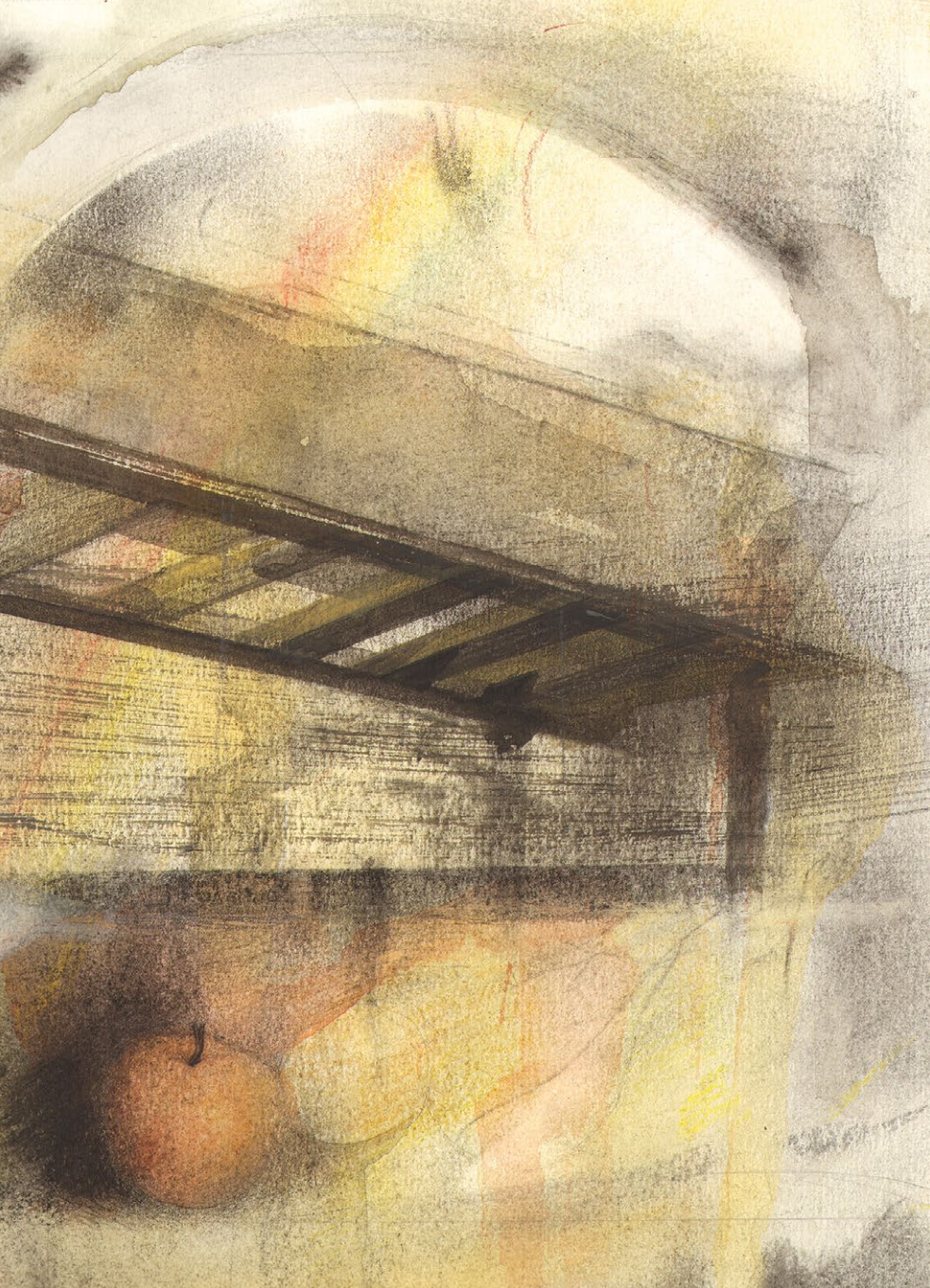
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There used to be times when, having been seated on a train for several hours, it would begin to dawn on me what I'd forgotten to bring. Back then it wasn't so serious. If I did leave something behind, I rarely regretted it much, because I usually managed perfectly well without it. But this time I was into the fifth day of my journey when I discovered that I had left behind the most important thing of all, namely my better judgement. That had never happened before. How had it happened now?

Well, happened it had. And to the extent that I was quite calm thinking about it, this was actually no odder than that I might ever have had any better judgement at all and that I might subsequently have left even that at home. Such things can and do happen. When all's said and done, if I had acquired some, it was certainly no thanks to any effort on my part, but due more to my incaution, as may occasionally happen to a fish that snaps at something in murky water only for it to get stuck in its mouth and stay there. Thus I, too, had snapped at something in the stagnant sludge beds

of my senses, having not the slightest inkling what it might be, and there it was. I'm sure I was no happier about it than the fish about the hook in its mouth, or a dancing bear about the ring in its nose, and I certainly have no recollection of how and from what I recognised that the disagreeable thing that caused me moments of anguish did have a value. Later, though, it brought me occasional gratification. I savoured it, licking and turning it in the wound, and then we grew so accustomed to each other that it stopped aching and pricking and pinching until finally, without my even noticing it, it worked itself loose from the wound and almost fell to the ground at my feet. So I learned how to fix it in and take it out like a gypsy girl's earring, sometimes showing it off in all its lustre, sometimes hiding it as a philandering husband hides his wedding ring. After all, it's not always best judged to exhibit one's better judgement. And that's exactly how I could have happened to leave it at home.

As noted, I only spotted this unfortunate oversight on the fifth day, and not because I'd started to hanker after it. It dawned on me that it was missing in the way I might miss something that isn't particularly essential, but which I'm used to having on me more from habit; I hardly need say that it doesn't weigh much. And yet I was perturbed. Should I have gone back for it?

Certainly not! From the very outset, that journey was evidence enough that the very idea of it had arisen in defiance of the principles of sound judgement. They wouldn't have got along together. So?

There are journeys and journeys. And this was a special one. No one had forced me to undertake it. No one had imposed it on me as a penance. I had sought no one's advice about it and I would not have been deflected from undertaking it by either warnings from friends, or by the dangers and discomforts without which it couldn't have taken place. I had meant to decide on my actual destination only once I was on the way, having selected a region that was little known and even less accessible.

But what was I after?

Well, the choice was mine, wasn't it? To seek seclusion, oblivion and much needed repose, to nurse body and soul and ponder on death and the life to come, as doubtless befits one of my years. But if that were all! Doubtless I might even have seen and admired myself in the mirror of perfection, for therein resides the culmination of all the most precious distractions, and who can resist the urge to have their impeccable charms revealed? Not I for one. Oh, I have seen myself already! Look, there I am! How refined I'm becoming! How I'm getting the better of temptation, of myself, of the

world. I'm sure I might have drooled in anticipation. And rightly so. No one who hasn't tried it can believe what it must be like to worship one's own puerility.

However, all that would have been foolish and risible. After all, I could easily have done any of it at home, and it would have been more sensible and above all more genuine. If the point was to rectify my failings, why not go about it at the place where I had committed the offenses? Why escape to some secluded place? Surely that is only permitted when one is being tantalised by a woman, and I am pretty sure that by that age I was being tantalised by none.

But it was worse than that. During those hapless years when I'd looked penury in the face, all the lures of perfection were nothing short of repugnant, and what drove me to embark upon such a strange journey was an impious self-pity, which had grown toxic with my advancing years, and a blasphemous contumacy. And that had often left me feeling apprehensive, because I couldn't trust the living, and I would have been ashamed of myself before the dead. Too late now though! I was on my way.

Oh, old age, you miserable thing! How happily do you descend from your heights to the pit where the carcasses of vain dreams and desires lie interred! How gladly you go back to places you should not!



And why? Is it really so unbearable for the time spent awaiting death to be protracted, or is death unworthy of being awaited with greater patience than one's wedding night? Why are you so sold on it? Where do you think you're going, having donned a ridiculous mask of obduracy, as if, after a thousand days' fasting and a thousand days' praying, you meant to blaspheme mortally? That kind of defiance will gain you nothing. Or are you still impelled to have a good weep over the phantoms of your unaccomplished sins? Do you wish to stir them up like a swarm of rabid flies and wait to see yourself go mad?

The people whom I met and talked to doubtless thought that I was insane, being incapable of concealing how sorry they felt for me. But seeing that I was in earnest, and being quite well-meaning, they tried to smooth my troublesome passage, assisting me by word or deed, and thus I reached the furthest little town to which I could travel, with all my luggage, by some means of transport or other, thence to trudge onwards on foot. The sight of me would certainly have made a cat laugh. Look, a man well into his sixties, unaccustomed to physical exertion and not in the best of health, heading out, stick in hand and a heavy rucksack on his back, for some place where even crows would croak themselves to death, but where he wishes to live alone,

quite alone, although he is generally clueless and woe-fully lacking in experience.

But there I was, on the way. I'd left my larger items of luggage with some kindly folk in the town and kept with me just enough to see me through ten days or so, so at first the going was fairly good. Then it got harder. Not so much on the shoulders, or on the lower back. It was hardest on the eyes, then on the mouth and the ears.

I grew used to the sight of spellbound settlements that were more like the funerary assembly points of lost souls than places where living beings had dwelt, and to the sight of abandoned and weed-infested fields over which not even crows could be bothered to fly, and every step I took created an echo like an unremitting call to pray for the departed, or like one unending and painful litany. There weren't many houses tumbling down or already in ruins, but that only made everything all the gloomier. Doors ajar, and behind them a silent, frightful darkness. Plant pots on window ledges, the plants in them withered brown. Instead of curtains cobwebs dangled. Oh, those cobwebs! Scary, and they knew it! I was certain that the spiders that had spun them had also dried up with fright. And there were up-rooted fences, stakes with no goats attached to them, kennels without dogs, fruit trees that no one harvested, and the gloomily spectacular thickets of nettles and

sundry weeds with which Nature had replaced human life, or rather wiped out all trace of it. And yet it was still not entirely forlorn. In the distance at least there was still smoke to be observed rising from a chimney. And here and there the imprints of wheels, and even of hooves and boots, had not yet been obliterated. There were still people here who had survived the devastation.

All around on the hilltops and steep scarps forests daydreamed, living their own lives, breathing their own breath and gloomy with their own, not in the least human, gloominess. There had been times when I'd found that alluring. Times! Times past! But this time things were quite different. Now I no longer needed to seek refuge in them, or solitude, a place to hide from anything that reminded me, however remotely, that there were people in the world. Their abodes had ceased to be offensively repellent and characteristically sordid and had taken on a conciliatory, cadaverous beauty and a sombre magnificence. A deathly hush reigned in majesty over all, death was everywhere, every house was like a tomb, everything was gaping into eternity. The forests that used to seem so pure and noble and beautiful, ah, how might they ever compare now to the purity, nobility and beauty of this ineffable silence of devastation and death! The most desperate cry of a bird strangulated in the direst spot was as nothing compared

to the creaking of a gate hanging off its hinges. The beauty of scudding clouds seemed barely of note until reflected in the black, lifeless and sightless panes of the low-set windows.

The breath of the loveliest of Indian summers acquired its true sweetness only when mixed with the odour of advanced decomposition and decay, and the eye was lured less by the showy wings of belated butterflies than by the languid lumbering of carrion-seeking blowflies. And the best spot to take one's ease was not on the untouched moss or amid the heather, but on the thresholds of the abandoned and bygone cottages and in the shade of the contorted lindens whose ageing away in the graveyards had passed unperceived.

I would have liked to walk by as slowly as possible. I would have liked to pause at every threshold. I would have liked to carry on walking until deep into the night, maybe until God's break of the day. Oh, could there be anything more awesome than to gaze into the darkness behind the black and lifeless panes of the low-set windows against which I pressed my forehead and my mouth and nose?

Surely it was inconceivable that nothing would look out from behind them ever again. I kept expecting that those dead and motionless cobwebs would, after all, suddenly part and that through them at least

the spectre of a tormented visage would show itself, whether human or ophidian, and that it, from its side, would also press against the glass, whether to frame a kiss, or a snakebite, or any other token that would not, either then or later, be made real unless our motionlessly appressed and benumbed lips broke through the glass that separated us like death or a curse. And the darkness behind those half-open doors! How it threw one off-balance! The drumming in one's ears and the stabbing sensation in one's brow! How terrifying it was, how stupefying, and how it coaxed one to one's knees to await death!

My advancing years had begun to give notice of their demands. I hadn't covered much ground, but had had nothing to eat or drink since the morning because the awe inspired by these afflicted places would not have permitted it. And then when the sun began to dip more alarmingly towards the earth and my mind, after a whole day spent meandering through these deserted places, started clouding with a peculiar, suffocating sorrowfulness, it began to dawn that I ought really to proceed with all haste to my destination and there, while it was still light, seek out somewhere fitting to spend the night.

I noticed that the road ahead twisted and turned before arching broadly towards a forest that could be

reached in a much straighter line by a steep, but wide sunken track, and it struck me that it would be better if I took a short cut along this track.

If I were indeed to take this short cut, I would, unless I were to walk backwards, have to turn my back on all these spectral places. I felt rather awkward about that. It was as if I would be turning my back on an uncanny graveyard with ravaged and empty graves, in which lay neither coffin nor corpse, as if from some particular date no one had been permitted to die and as if the dying had had, by some incomprehensible device, to bear their bodies away straight to the Other Side. But fatigue was adding to the instability of my mind, whose attention was now engaged by the forest as a welcome change.

Its trees were quite young and at first it seemed quite an ordinary forest. But then it began to exude a balmy scent. And now I was faint and the balm was stupefying. At first only my hearing went berserk, as in the midst of an infinite, ponderous silence, then my sight started playing games and soon I was beset by various imaginings in the face of which I would, on any other occasion, have begun to tremble, but this time I desired that they would not leave me and perhaps take me with them all the way to perdition. They were akin to those visions of a felicity that has been devoured by time or

veiled over by death. But common sense told me that I was acting like a dog who runs ahead and hasn't noticed that he's dragging a chain as well. But try arguing with someone who doesn't know what he wants!

So I walked on and on until I entered a glade, where, on one side, stood some strangely illuminated and seemingly bewitched and spellbound spruces, across whose silent and dreamy rooftops the light danced like surges of pinkish and bluish waves hurrying off for a romp in the adjacent darkness. And I saw the sky and the clouds, more alone than I had ever been myself, and I felt sad and something whispered suggestively:

That's her! There! Can't you see?

But all I could see was a jay flying, or rather the fleeting shadow of it, more reminiscent of a distressed bat. Then the surges of pinkish and bluish waves seemed to want to laugh at something. And maybe they did laugh. Though my keyed-up hearing perceived no more than the mournful rasp of the old jay and the tweeting of its young. Only the treacherous sorrow in the dark recesses of my soul told me:

Just look! Don't you recognise her? The sublime glitter on the spruce trees! The airiness! The stoop of the branches! Can you really not remember her dress, or her face, or how she stood as she looked down, clinging

to the golden gate of God's rainbow, down into your boyhood dreams.

The silent surges of pinkish and bluish waves rolled on. Overhead, the rooftops of the spruces turned grey, ahead of me the forest thinned and all around me stood tall trees that admitted a magical light in wide, slanting and iridescent stripes, waiting for beings invisible to my tired eyes to suspend a canopy from them and for that most beautiful one to appear beneath the canopy, she who had looked down, clinging to the golden gate of God's rainbow, down into my boyhood dreams. And now I was approaching those strips of light that were like columns supporting the weight of both sun and rainbow, and something prompted me to leave the path and draw near, touch them and lean against them and wait. Maybe she will come. And I might have walked on, but the recollection of years bemourned and buried detained me. I told myself:

Do you even know if she's alive? And if she isn't dead, she has certainly so aged that nothing would trouble us so grievously as my having not come before this.

But the voice replied:

Are you not afraid to say it? And if she were, as you say, dead, should you now not be chasing after her and seeking and kissing that grave, or, more likely, digging with fingers, elbows and arms and head all the way



down to her? Just hurry along and tarry not! It's now, or never!

Well, it sounded encouraging. I was completely alone and I could have done even the most ridiculously silly things. And yet I said to myself:

And where am I supposed to be going?