

The Smuggler's Daughter

By

Tomas Marcantonio

The wolves pawed at the earth between the silent pines and formed a triangle around their target. The ancient leader, a low-stomached beast with a diagonal scar across one eye, padded slowly forward. Ernesto pulled himself up, his fists bobbing in front of his chin like a boxer. Blood was smeared across his beard and strands of shaggy hair stuck to his face. His burgundy eyes were brought to fierce life by a wild cocktail of desperation and fear.

“Come at me, then,” he whispered.

The old wolf paused, its grey eyes narrowing with a dark humour. Then it charged, followed quickly by the other two, and Ernesto was lost under the swirl of white fur.

*

Freya awoke. Cold sweat had beaded on her forehead, and soaked her sheets. She gasped for breath, groping blindly at the darkness around her. Fumbling with the matches on her bedside table, she lit the candle and observed the new dancing light of her bedroom.

There were no wolves, no trees. There was no blood. No Ernesto. It was Freya's own attic, its ceiling slanted down towards the window, infused with the usual smell of damp wood.

She stepped into her slippers and opened the shutters to reveal a yellow moon high in the cloud-patched sky. The street below was smoky and quiet, the canal that ran between houses still. The world was just as it had been before she went to sleep.

The grandfather clock next to the door read three seventeen. Freya knew from the sound of the darkness that Ernesto wasn't home yet, but just to make sure, she flung open the door and burst into his room. Her hunch was right; his bed was empty, his room still a mess of papers and unwashed clothes.

Home alone, for the third night in a row. Ernesto was often away for several days at a time, but this night was different. He always said Freya would be able to dream one day, said it ran in the family. Now that her first one had come, she pictured herself beyond the wall with her father, collecting adventures to steal away into bottles. She imagined herself next to him as he faced the wolves, and her heart raced afresh.

She rummaged under her bed for the old shoebox of treasures. She put aside the hardcover book coated in dust; the first one Ernesto had ever smuggled over from across the wall. Then she pulled out the black and white photograph, scratched and frayed at the edges. Holding it up to the candlelight, she saw her own five year-old self smiling at Ernesto behind the camera. She saw the shape of her mother, cradling Freya in her lap, their cheeks pressed together. Her mother's face now was more faded than ever, little more than a blur, a smudged thumb print. The face in the photo and in Freya's memory had all but disappeared, and Freya dug her fingernails into her palms as a punishment to herself.

She threw on her most comfortable clothes: a pair of cotton trousers and a baggy grey t-shirt that hung about her elbows like curtains. She slipped the photo inside her pocket and put on the beaten leather shoes that Ernesto had bought second-hand from the harbour market. She considered herself in the mirror and tried to imagine herself twenty years older, searching for some semblance of her mother. The only thing she saw, though, was a skinny, freckled girl with mousey hair cut short like a boy's. She observed the hazel eyes and trophy ears and

the arms that looked far too long for her body. She couldn't imagine her mother looking anything like this. Huffing, she slapped Ernesto's flat cap on her head and turned a quarter to the side. From that angle, she saw the resemblance to her father, at least.

The kitchen smelled of cold stone and mouldy cheese. The glare of the moonlight through the window revealed a peppering of dust on the long oak table. Freya picked Ernesto's spare boxer bag off the hook by the door and threw in what little was left in the pantry: a hard loaf of bread, some cheese that had not yet turned, a couple of bruised apples. She slung the bag over one shoulder and took a last look around.

The wind tore through Abbey Mews as Freya closed the door behind her and took her first steps into the night. She half expected wolves to come charging up the lane to meet her, but the streets were empty save for the yellowish glow of the moonlight on the cobbled lane that ran down towards the harbour.

Brown was lounged over the decrepit fishing boat like a daddy long legs flattened by a wet wind, his spider limbs hanging over the sides. His mouth hung open and Freya smelled his sour breath from the jetty. It was the same smell as Ernesto's wet kisses on Friday nights when he came back from The Salty Clam.

“Oi!” Freya called with all of her father's brashness. “Oi!”

Brown snapped open one of his quick caramel eyes and it narrowed as he looked over the child on the jetty. He brushed the thick, ox-like hair off his forehead and glanced at the sombre, starless sky.

“Why did you wake me?” he breathed.

“I need you to take me across the wall. Ernesto's in trouble.”

Brown blinked heavily, the words seeping through his woolly head in slow instalments. “He's been gone longer than this before. Go home.”

“I had a dream.”

Brown smiled, his lips cracking at the centre. He ran his tongue over them.

“You want me to smuggle you across, is that it?” He pulled himself up by his elbows and observed her. “You want to have us both cuffed in the middle of the night because you've had your first dream.”

Freya said nothing.

“What's it worth?”

“Ernesto will pay you once we get to him.”

“Ernesto's word is worth something, little girl, but yours? What would he think if he found out I took his daughter across the wall? He'd have me flogged.”

Freya stared him down. Brown sat up and rubbed his eyes. “We'll all be food for worms,” he groaned. “Go on, then, untie that rope.”

(End of preview)

Want to read the full story? [Subscribe!](#)

Tomas Marcantonio is a fiction and travel writer from Brighton, England. His work has appeared in places such as *STORGY*, *The Fiction Pool*, and *Ellipsis Zine*. Tomas is currently based in Busan, South Korea, where he splits his time between writing, teaching, and getting lost in neon-lit backstreets. Twitter: <https://twitter.com/TJMarcantonio>