The Keys to D'Espérance

Chaz Brenchley

Actually, by thetime the keys came, he no longer believed in the house.

It was like God, he thought; they oversold it. Say too often that a thing isso, and how can people help but doubt? Most facts prove not to be the caseafter all, under any serious examination. Even the Earthisn't round.

One day, they said, D'Espérance will be yours. You will receive it in sorrow, they said, and pass it on in joy. That is as it is, they said, as italways is, as it should be.

Butthey said it when he was five and he thought they meant for Christmas, they'dnever make him wait to be six.

When hewas six they said it, and when he was seven and eight and nine.

At ten, he asked if he could visit.

Visit D'Espérance?theysaid, laughing at him. Of course you can't, you haven'tbeen invited. Youcan't just visit. Youcan't call at D'Espérance.

In passing, looking at each other, laughing.Youcan't pass D'Espérance.

Butif it was going to be his, he said at twelve, wasn't he entitled? Didn'the have a right to know?He'd never seen a painting, even, never seena photograph...

There are none, they said, and,Be patient.And , No, don't be foolish, of courseyou're not entitled. Title to D'Espérance does not vest in you, they said. Yet, they said.

Andsomewhere round about fifteen he stopped believing. The guns still thunderedacross the Channel, and he believed in those; he believed in his owndeath to come, glorious and dreadful; he believed in Rupert Brooke and Euclidean geometry and the sweet breath of a girl, her name whispered into hisbolster but never to be uttered aloud, never in hearing; and no, he did notbelieve in D'Espérance.

Two years later the girl was dead and his parents also, and none of them in glory. His school would have no more of him, and the war was over; and that lastwas the cruellest touch in a long and savage peal, because it took fromhim the chance of an unremarked death, a way to follow quietly.

Now it must needs be the river, rocks in his pockets and thankGod he had neverlearnt to swim. There would be notice taken, that was inevitable; but

thiswould be the last of it. No more family, no one more to accuse or cut orscorn. The name quite gone, it would simply cease to matter. He hoped thathe might never be recovered, that he might lie on the bottom till his bonesrotted, being washed and washed by fast unheeding waters.

Quite coldly determined, he refused to lurk withindoors on his last long day. At sunset he would go to the bridge, rocks in my pockets, yes, and no matterwho sees, they shan't stop me; but first he would let himself be seenand hissed at and whispered about, today as every day, no craven he. It was honour and honour only that would take him to the river; he wanted thatclearly understood.

So he walked abroad, returning some books to the public library and settlinghis accounts with the last few merchants to allow him credit. He tookcoffee in town and almost smiled as the room emptied around him, did permithimself the indulgence of a murmured word with the cashier on his wayout, "Please don't trouble yourself, I shan't come back again."

And so he went home, and met the postman at the door; and was handed a package, and stood on his doorstep watching as the postman walked away, wipinghis hand on his trousers.

The packagewas well wrapped in brown paper, tied with string and the knots

sealed. It was unexpectedly heavy for its size, and made softly metallic noisesas he felt its hard angles shift between his fingers.

Preferring the kitchen in his solitude to the oppressions of velvet and oak, of photographs and memories and names, he went straight through and openedthe package on the long deal table under the window.

Keys, three separate rings of keys: brasskeys and bronze and steel, keys shorterthan his thumb and longer than his hand, keys still glittering new andkeys older than he had ever seen, older than he could believe, almost.

For long minutes he only held them, played with them, laid them out and lookedat them; finally he turned away, to read the letter that had accompaniedthem.

An envelope addressed to him in neat copperplate, nothing extravagant; heavylaid paper of good quality, little creased or marked despite its journeyingin with the keys. A long journey, he noted, unfolding the single sheetand reading the address at the top. His correspondent, this remitter ofkeys was apparently a country solicitor; but the town and the company's namewere entirely unfamiliar to him, although he had spent two months now immersedin his parents' affairs, reading everything.

My dear lad, the letter said - and this from a stranger, strange in itself - I believe that this will reach you at the proper time; I hope you may learnto view it as good news.

In plain, you are now the master of D'Espérance, at least in so far as such ahouse may ever be mastered by one man. The deeds, I regret, you may not view; they are kept otherwhere, and I have never had sight of them. The keys, however, are enclosed. You may be sure that none will challenge your title, for so long as you choose to exercise it.

I look forward to making your acquaintance, as and when you see fit to call uponme.

Yours, etc.

His first impulse was to laugh, to toss the letter down, his resolution quiteunchallenged, quite unchanged. Just another house, and what didhe wantwith it? He had one already, and meant to leave it tonight and forever.

Buthe was a boy, he was curious; and while he would welcome death, while hemeant to welcome it, come, sweet Death, embrace me, he was very afraid ofwater.

His hands came back to the keys and played upon them, a silent music, a songof summoning. Death could surely wait a day, two days. So could the

river. It was going nowhere;he'd be back.

And sothe train, trains, taking him slow and dirty into the north country. Soon he could be anonymous, no name to him, just a lad too young to have beenin the war, though he was old enough now. That was odd, to have people lookat him and not know him. To have them sit just across the compartment andnot shift their feet away from his, not lour or sniff or turn a cold, contemptuous, ostentatious shoulder.

One woman even tried to mother him, poor fool: not knowing what a mother meantto him, bare feet knocking at his eyeballs, knocking and knocking, knockknock. He was cold himself then, he was savage, gave her more reason thanmost had to disdain him, though still she wouldn't do it.

And at last there were sullen moors turned purple with the season, there wasa quiet station with a single taxi waiting and the locals hanging back, no, lad, you take it, it's only a ten-minute walk into the town for us and weknow it well, it's no hardship.

Hewouldn't do that, though. Their kindness was inappropriate, born of ignorancethat he refused to exploit; and he had no need of it in any case. It was aftersix o'clock , too late to call on the solicitor, and hedidn't planto seek lodgings in town. His name was uncommon, and might be recognised. Too proud to hide behind a false one, he preferred to sleep in

hisblanket roll under whatever shelter he could find and so preserve this unaccustomedanonymity at least for the short time he was here.

Leaving the station and turning away from the town, he walked past a farm wherevociferous dogs discouraged him from stopping; and was passed in his turnby a motor car, the driver pausing briefly to call down to him, to offerhim a ride to the next village. He refused as courteously as he knew how, and left the road at the next stile.

Rising, the path degenerated quickly into a sheep-track between boulders, andseemed to be taking him further and further from any hope of shelter. He persevered, however, content to sleep with the stars if it meant he couldavoid company and questions. Whenever the path disappeared into bog, heforced his way through heather or bracken until he found another; and at lasthe came over the top of that valley's wall, and looked down into an unexpectedwood.

He'dnot seen a tree since the train, and here there were spruce and larch belowhim, oak and ash and others, secret and undisturbed. And a path too, aclear and unequivocal path, discovered just in time as the light faded.

He followed the path into the wood, but not to its heart. He was tired and thirsty, and he came soon to a brook where he could lie on his stomach and

drawwater with his hands, fearing nothing and wanting nothing but to stay, tomove no more tonight.

He unrolled his blankets and made his simple bed there, heaping needles and oldleaves into a mattress between path and brook; and only at the last, onlya little before he slept did he think he saw the girl flit between trees, there on the very edge of vision, pale and nameless as the light slipped.

Pale and nameless and never to be named; nor seen again except like this, a flickerof memory and a wicked trick of the light. He closed his eyes, not toallow it passage. And breathed deeply, smelling sharp resins and the mustinessof rot, and so cleared his mind, and so slept.

Slept well and woke well, sunlight through trees and a clean cool breeze andno fear, no anger, nothing but hunger in him. With the river's resolutionto come, all else was resolved; there was, there could be nothingto be afraid of except that last great terror.And why be angry againsta town he'd left already, a world he would so shortly be leaving?

Breakfast was an apple from his backpack, eaten on the march: not enough forhis belly, but that too was no longer the driving force it had been. He hadhigher considerations now; with time so short, a grumbling gut seemed lessthan urgent.

Oddly, with time so short, he felt himself totally unhurried. He would walk backthe way he had come, he would find his way into the town and so to the solicitor- but not yet. Justnow he would walk here, solitary among trees andseeking nothing, driven by nothing...

Which is how he came to D'Espérance, called perhaps but quite undriven: strollingwhere others before him had run, finding by chance what was his already, though he meant to take only the briefest possession.

The path he took grew wider, though no better cared for. Tree roots had brokenit, in places the fall of leaves on leaves had buried it; but logic andlight discovered its route to him, not possible to lose it now. It turneddown the slope of the valley and found the brook again, and soon the brookmet something broader, too shallow for a river, too wide for a stream. The path tracked the water until the water was suddenly gone, plungingthrough an iron grid into a culvert, an arch of brick mounded by earth. Steps climbed the mound, and so did he; and standing there above the soundof water, he was granted his first sight of D'Espérance.

Never any doubt of what he saw. He knew it in that instant, and his soul

sang.

The house was dark in its valley, built of stone washed dark by rains and rains. Even where the sun touched, it kept its shadow.

A long front, with the implication of wings turned back behind, though he couldn'tsee for certain even from this elevation, with the house full-face andstaring him down. A long front and small windows, three storeys and thena mansard roof with dormers; in the centre a small portico sheltering ahigh door, and he wasn't sure even the largest of his keys would open sucha door.Wasn't sure that it deserved to.

No lights, no movement: only dark windows in a dark wall, and the sun strikingbrightly around it.

Between himself and the house there were formal gardens wrecked by growth, rampanthedges and choked beds; but the hedges and beds stood only as a frameto water. Long stone-lined pools were cut strict and square at the corners, though they were green and stagnant now and the jutting fountainheadswere still; and below the gardens, lapping almost at his feet nowlay the deeper, darker waters of a lake. No need for the return journey afterall. No need for anything more, perhaps, now that he'd seen the house. He could run down the slope before him, twenty yards at a good flyingsprint and he'd be too fast to stop. And so the plunge into cold coldwater and the weight of his pack, the saturated blankets, even the keyshelping to drag him down...

Butthis side of all that water, on the verge of unkept grass between trees andlake stood a building, a small lodge perhaps, though its weight of stoneand its leaded dome spoke of higher ambition. Ivy-clad and strange, seeminglyunwindowed and halfway at least to a folly, it must look splendid fromthe house, one last positive touch of man against the dark rise of the wood.And it would be a shame not to have set foot in any part of D'Espérance, all this way for no more than a glimpse; shame too to go on an impulse, on a sudden whim, seizing an unexpected opportunity. No, let it at leastbe a decision well thought through, weighed carefully and found correct.Nothing hasty, no abrupt leap into glory or oblivion. He needed to besure of his own motives, to feel the balance of his mind undisturbed; theremust be no question but that it was a rational deed, in response to anuntenable situation.

So no, hedidn't take the chance to run. He walked carefully down the steep slopeand turned to parallel the lake's edge as soon as the ground was level, skirting the last of the trees, keeping as far from the water as he could. Looking across to the further shore, where the gardens' gravel walks endedin a stone balustrade and a set of steps leading down into the lake, hesaw a man he thought might have been his father. Blindfold and blunderingin the bright dry light, the man teetered on the steps' edge, on therim of falling; and then there was dazzle burning on the water as a softbreeze rippled the sun, and when his eyes had cleared he could no longersee the man.

It is a truism that anything seems larger as you get closer, that you lose perspective; but here he thought it was the other way, that his eyes had madehim think the lodge small because they couldn't credit the house with beingso very large. It must be so, although hewasn't looking at the house nowto make comparisons. This near, the lodge took everything. Squat and massiveit sat below its dome and drew him, dragged him forward; he thought thatit was so dense it made its own gravity, and that he was trapped now, noway out.

The lodge had double doors that faced the water, too close for his liking, onlythree low steps and half a dozen flagstones between them. In echo of thehouse, there was a small pediment above the high doors, with columns to supportit in a classic portico.Still no proper windows. He could see a thinrun of glass at the cupola's foot, between lead and stone; but even withthat, even at this season with the sun low enough to strike through thedoorway at the height of the day, it was going to be dark in there.

Nolock on the doors, though, no need to struggle with the keys. He climbed thesteps, laid his backpack down, set his shoulder to one of the doors and pushed.

There was rust in the hinges, and it spoke to him: its voice was cold and harsh, it said "Guilty," and then it squealed with laughter.

He jumped back, sweating, clutched at a column for support and looked out acrossthe lake again. Saw nothing, no movement, no man.

Stood still, listened; heard the blood hiss and suck in his ears, heard his heartlabour behind his ribs, eventually heard birdsong and the soft lappingof the lakewater, a more distant rushing which must be the undergroundflow to feed and freshen it.

The door stood ajar, silent now, its greeting spoken and its accusation or itsjudgement made. He stepped forward and pushed again, and it swung wide withno sound beyond the grating of rust in its hinges.

Not a lodge, then.Surely a folly after all.

He stood in the doorway, and the sun threw his long and slender shadow acrossan enamelled iron bath. One of eight, all set in a circle, radiating; and at the centre a square tiled pit, a plunge-bath large enough fora dozen men to share.

There was nothing else in the great circular chamber except for wooden slat

benchesaround the sides, dark with mould and damp. The wallswere adorned withintricate murals, figures from history painted in the Pre-Raphaelite style, though the light was too dim for him to identify the scenes portrayed.

Abath-house , he thought, a bathing-house. This vastconstruction, and it wasonly a place to bathe, ensemble or en famille; and that with the lake outside, just there, wide and deep and surely more attractive...

Perhaps there'd been a club, a bathing-club, the local gentlemen anxious to preservetheir modesty or their ladies' blushes. That or something like it: nothingelse could explain so much labour, so much expense to such frivolouseffect.

Butfrivolous or not it was here, and so was he. If D'Espérance could spawn astructure so large and strange at such a distance, then he thought his keyscould stay where they were, safely in his pack. Something he lacked, totake him up to the house.He'd settle for this, at least for today. The childis father to the man; there were lessons here to be learned, aspects ofthe parent surely reflected in its idiot son.

He thrust the door as wide as it would go and then opened theother also, tolet in as much light as he could, and to allow the breeze to freshen the mustyair. Some few cracks in the domed roof added a little further light towhat the door gave, and that high circle of glass below the dome, but thismust be the most it ever saw by nature. He thought they would have

neededlamps, those who used it. Whatever they used itfor .

Still, there was enough to seeby . Stepping inside, he could see a gallery now, circling just at the wall's height, below that ring of glass and the dome'sfirst curving: all wrought iron, the gallery, and likewise the spiralstair that led up to it from behind the door. That must have been forstrangers, he thought, for observers, non-participants.

Now he was concerned about the murals, he thought at the very leastthey mustbe lewd. Some provincial Medmenham set he imagined building this bath-house, ambitious to reproduce the Hell-Fire Club in their own gardens. Butlowering his eyes tentatively to look, expecting grave disappointment, expectinga grand fancy rendered simply sordid, he found nothing like it.

King Arthur and Excalibur he found, Oberon and Puck he found, Wayland in hissmithy and other men or fairies that he couldn't identify, but all surelyharmless even to his nervous sensibilities.

And all flaking, too, some cracking as the plaster bulged behind them or stainingdarkly from beneath. Seeing one crack too long, too straight for nature, he went closer and found the outline of a door within the picture, founda painted leather strap to tug it open.

Andtugged, and first saw the mirror that backed the door, that showed him hisown shape marvellously moving in this still place. Then saw the closet

behindthe door, with its hooks and bars for hanging clothes, its slatted shelvesfor towels and other necessaries.

Closed that door and looked for others, found them regularly spaced around thechamber; and none hid anything more than an empty closet, until the last.

On the other side of the double doors was the iron spiral leading up;here, asthough in secret reflection behind its concealing door, was a stone spiralleading down, leading into darkness.

Bold he could be, curious he certainly was; but he needed a light in his handbefore he ventured those narrow steps. And hot food in his belly, that too.

One thing at leasthe'd learned in his time at school, though not from his teachers. Like many a boy before him, he'd befriended the local poachers forthe sake of an occasional salmon or grouse to scorch over his study fireand eat with his fingers, with his friends. At the start of termhe'd broughtthem bottles of brandy filched from his father's cabinet; in return they'dtaken him out more than once, shown him how to make a snare and whereto set a night-line.

Those skills would feed him now. There must be fish in the lake; there were

certainlyrabbits in the wood's fringe, he'd seen signs of them already. He hadn'tthought to bring fishing-line or wire, why should he? Hewasn't here forsport.But he could improvise. He had bootlaces, there were springy willow-shootsgrowing by the water. No need to visit the town, even to shop forwhat would ensure he need not visit again.

Sitting on the steps in the sunshine while water rippled before him, that waterreflecting clouds and light and nothing of the great dark house, he reflectedon the house; and almost felt he had a duty there at least, if noneto family and reputation gone or a name that was meaningless now, himselfthe last shamed bearer of it. He should go to the solicitor, and askhow arrangements might be made. If he had to be honest, I shall be dead soon, and the house needs an heir, then so be it. He could do that, once. More than once, he thought not; but once would be sufficient.

Something screamed in the wood behind him, with the voice of a young girl. He started, shifted on the warming stone, and went to check his snares.

Already there was a rabbit kicking, held tight around the neck and its feet barelyin contact with earth. He gathered wood for a fire, laid it in the porticoand lit it with flint and tinder from his pack; then he fetched the rabbit. Carried it still living to his fire, though it lay still as a dead thingin his hands, only its eyes alive. Those he killed first, with a pencil. Contrary to all his tutors' lessons he let it die slow and suffering, tutor himself now and pain all his lesson, the real world his

theme.

"See it?" he whispered, poking with his pencil, digging gently. "See the light, little brother, see the light?"

What the rabbit saw, of course, was darkness: which was what he saw also, whicheverway he looked, into the bath-house or out across the lake. Shapes wovenfrom shadow moved in the shadows inside, avoiding the last of the sun'sfall across the floor; or they moved darkly in the water, under the glitterof light.

Ragged gunfire sounded through the wood and birds rose like smoke, screamingon the wind. A posse shooting crows, he thought; but he still thoughthimself alone in this valley, and he didn't believe that anyone wouldshoot at crows with a .303.

Later, as his fire hissed under the rabbit's dripping quarters, he heard soundsof soft knocking, dull and rhythmic.

Sat and listened; and no, not knocking after all.Sounds of kicking. Slow, steady, unremitting, a foot thudding into flesh and breaking bone.

He tended his fire, but his hands were trembling now.

Sitting in the twilight, licking greasy fingers - not wanting to go to the laketo wash, not while it was light enough to see what moved within the waters- he thought he saw words scratched black across the red disc of the sun.

Guilty he thought was said again, and other words he couldn't read for the firein his eyes, but they might have been names. His father's or his mother's, the girl's or his own. Itdidn't matter which. Any name was a betrayal.

He thought he should leave this valley before the games turned worse than cruel, before they remembered the real world and turned to blood. Not at night, though, he wouldn't leave at night. The wood had been friendly to himonce; but there was coming in and there was going out, and they were different. He felt a little like an eel in a basket, trapped without trying. Come the morning,he'd test that.Not now.

Sohe made his bed in the portico, on hard stone because there were too manyshadows in the long grass moving, too many murmurs coming up. Between thewood and the water, even the bath-house seemed to offer something of protection.

Something, perhaps; but not enough.Waking in the cold night, he felt a

moistwarmth on his face and smelt sour breath, smelt blood.

Heard his own breathing change, heard his blood rush. Stiffened every musclenot to move, not to roll away; and thought there was no greater giveaway, no louder announcement, I'm awake!

An unshaven cheek brushed his, dry lips kissed him, and he held himself rock-still. A voice moaned in whispers, and hewouldn't moan back. Then touchagain and harder this time, hard to hold against such pressure as the man'sface stropped itself against his.Skin and stubble and the bone beneath: and something else he felt, wouldn't open his eyes to see it but hefelt coarse cloth, a blindfold.

And thenthere was nothing but the hard sounds of breathing, and the sounds offootsteps gone too quickly. He couldn't hear water, but he thought the manhad walked straight into the lake.

In themorning he found a thread of linen caught in his own soft stubble. He tied it in a coil and put it in his wallet for safe keeping, where he mighthave put a lock of someone's hair; and no, he couldn't think of leavingnow.Too much of betrayal already, too much of guilt.

Besides, the wood would never pass him through. He tested that. He went backto the culvert, and tried to walk the path upstream; and tree-roots trippedhim, leaves hid hollows underfoot where he fell and hurt his ankle, mighthave broken it. Where the path slid beneath his feet and he could

barelyscramble back to solid ground, watching earth crumble into water, therehe gave it up, there he turned and came back; but it had been nothing morethan a token in any case, he'd only meant to scout.

No escape from the valley, then.Not by the wood, at least.There must be a road, however ill-kept; but between himself and any road the house lay, massiveand dissuasive. My house, he thought; but that was a legal fiction atbest, and more of a brutal joke. Even at this distance, he was learning alittle. The lesson was that D'Espérancedidn't belong, it wasn't owned. It might, on sufferance, permit; but he was not yet ready to confront what thatwould mean, being accepted by D'Espérance.

So no, not that way.He wouldn't even skirt the borders of the house; this wascloser than he liked already, in its ambit even this further side of thelake.

Locked out of the wood, not ready for the house and no water-baby, never that, there was only the bath-house left him. This much he could encompass, heavyas it was, as it might prove to be. This much he could carry, for a while. For a brief while, his thoughts reminded him, and were still.

In the best of the light, with the doors wide, he went in with a pale torch burningand opened the door to the spiral stair.

Walking down in sinking circles, he smeltmust and mould and dead air. The flameflickered, making shadows dance around him; but that was only mechanical, the action of light unfiltered by strangeness, he could understandthat and not fear it.

Distant sounds of rushing,like a hard wind contained: he thought of the culvert, and the hurry of hidden water.

The stair turned one final time, and brought him into a high cold chamber linedwith brick, dark with moisture. This too was dedicated to the mechanical, though, and nothing to fear. His weak torch showed him pumps andboilers, copper pipes and iron, gauges and valves. His eye traced the runof pipes, what would be the flow of the water; he followed it, he learnedit, he loved it. This was how he wanted the world to be, all in orderand all explaining itself.

Until his torch went out; and this was not how he wanted the world to be, utterlydark and cold and empty, nothing in reach of his groping hands.

Groping, his hands found nothing but his eyes did. Knock knock, cool and stifflike fingers but not that, not fingers: lightly knocking against his eyesand knocking again like crooked fingers while he only stood there, too muchknocked upon.

Moaning, he heard his voice say "Mama"; but all moans sound more or less likemama, and he hadn't called her that since he was a child, not since he wasvery small indeed.

He stepped backwards, away from the knocking; and kept his hands rigidly at hissides not to grope again, not to feel.

Not to find.

His feet found a wall for him, and he kept his shoulder against it until theycame to the rise of the stairs.And so up, still in darkness and that rushingsound in his ears changing now, turning rhythmic, turning to kicks; andthe door closed at the top but his barging shoulder crashing it open andhis stumbling feet carrying him out into the cool and shadowed bath-housewhich was so much warmer, so very much brighter than what lay below.

And stillhe couldn't leave, and wouldn't. Not if she were here too, and thegirl somewhere in the wood, perhaps: that early glimpse no trick of lightor memory, those sounds of kicking no folly of his mind.

He saw his father again across the lake, bound and blindfold,a khaki

figurein an early light although the sun was setting.

Beset by his own senses, he struggled for that numb normalityhe'd worn likea cloak before.Horror was unexceptional ,pockets were a proper place forrocks, one deep plunge and never rising after was a fit deed in a nothing, nothing world.

Butpoking at a rabbit's eyes wouldn't do it now, wouldn't keep him. Not wherehis father's eyes were too much on his mind, where his mother dangled alwaysin his thoughts, where the girl might be watching from the wood.

What could keep him, the only thing that might keep him from the slip,from slidingthrough terror and into its undermath, would be to walk that slip's edge, to hang on terror's lips against its speaking. To go back into the bath-houseand take possession of the dark below, where his mother currentlypossessed it.

Gathering cobnuts and filberts at the wood's edge, his back turned to whateverthreatened in the water, he heard a snuffling that might have been tearsand saliva backed up in a sobbing girl's throat. He heard a scratchingthat might have been a girl's desperate nails digging furrows in thepath, and then a steady heavy thud-and-scrape that sounded like nothing somuch as a boot falling and falling, and its metal studs scraping on the pathbetween falls as the foot drew back and lifted to fall again. He could

hearbreathing too, hard grunts tied to the same rhythm.

He lifted his head expecting to see her, expecting to see her kicked; and sawinstead a bloated pink-brown rump swing and rub against a tree, hard enoughto shake the trunk. And it swung away and swung back, thud and scrape, and it was only a pig after all: a great sow twice or thrice his weight, let forage in the wood or else - more likely, he thought, out here whereno one was - escaped its sty and living feral. Unless D'Espérance did thistoo, throwing up animals unexpectedly and when they were most desired.

He needed this sow badly, and lacked the means to take her.

Meanscould be made , though. Made or found.

He slipped away quietly, not to disturb her at her scratching, not to startleher off into the depths of the wood where he might not be allowed tofollow. If this was her current rooting-ground, then above all he wanted herto keep to it.

He blunted his knife cutting at ash-saplings, hacking them away from their roots. With the blade given an edge again on the granite steps of the portico, he spent the evening trimming and whittling until he had an armouryof sorts, three straight poles each sharpened at one end. He

hardenedthe points in his fire, remembering an engraving in a book that showedcavemen doing the same; and the work absorbed him so that he forgot tolook over the water before the light failed, to see if his father were there.

He still listened for the creak of rope in thebath-house or sounds of kickingin the wood, as he turned his spears in the glowing ashes; but he heardneither tonight, only the sow's noise among the trees. He might have chasedher then, but that he was learning to fear the dark, or those things thatwere couched within it.Instead he trusted her still to be there in themorning, and lay all night fretting in his blankets, doubting her.

Up at first light, he found the sow moved on; butdidn't need his acquired skillsto track her. A blindfold man could have followed this trail, the brokenundergrowth and the furrowed earth.

He caught up with her quickly, and with no hindrance from the wood: no trippingroots, no hanging branches tangling in his hair. There was hunting, apparently, and there was trying to leave, and they too were different.

Slowing as soon as he heard the sow's heedless progress, he crept close enoughto sight her rump again; and ah, he wanted to do this hero-style, onemighty cast to fell her swift and sure.

Butthis wasn't sport, there was no one to applaud, and his spears weren't madefor throwing. Silent as he knew how, as he had been taught, he slid forwardinto the wind and the sow never heard him, her great flap ears trailingon the ground as she snouted under leaves and bushes, eating nuts andacorns, eating insects, eating frogs.

At three yards' distance he set two spears to stand against a tree, and heftedthe other in both hands above his head. The sow moved one, two casualpaces forward, blithe in her size and strength, and oh she was big, shewas just what he needed; and he took a breath and ran and thrust, all hisstrength in his arms as he stabbed down, driving the spear's haft deep ashe could into the sow's flank.

She screamed, as he was screaming as he stabbed: high and shrill both of them, vicious and unrestrained. But he thought she'd run, or try to; and shedidn't run. She turned, although her hind leg failed her where the spearjutted from it, and her eyes were red in the shadowed wood, and her festeringyellow teeth were snapping at him; and he tried to jump backwards, and he fell.

Sprawled on his back, he looked up into a canopy of branchesbaring themselvesbefore winter, and he saw his mother twist above his head, lollingat the rope's end. Her bare feet swayed and turned, one way and the other, feeling in the absence for his eyes.

He screamed again, and rolled; and though he only sought to roll away from hismother, he was sprayed with slaver from the sow's jaws as her bite just barelymissed him. Gasping and shaken he scrambled away, and the sow strainedto follow, hauling her weight unsteadily on three legs, slipping andrising again, squealing in pain and fury.

Up at last, he wanted only to run; but his eyes snagged on his two spare spears, and this was what they were for, after all, he'd never expected to finishher with one.So he snatched up one of them, holding it two-handed againagainst her sheer mass; and as she came at him open-mouthed, he rammedits dark point into what was soft at the back of her throat.

And barely released his grip in time as her jaws threshed about its haft, juttingout between them; but she was a spent force now, crippled and gagged, blood colouring her leg and frothing out between her teeth. He couldtake time to recover his last spear, time to consider his aim before thrusting.

Trying for her heart, hedidn't find it. She fell away, though, all her effortson breathing now, no fight left in her; and he could work the spear deeper, turning and thrusting and leaning on it like pushing a stick into theearth. At last something vital gave, be it her heart or her spirit. One lastshudder, and then the slow moan of leaking air with no breath behind it, and she was dead.

Andhe lifted his head, ready to howl if he needed to; and his mother was gone, there was no body dangling, wanting to knock, knock knock against his eyesin this dappled daylight.

He butchered the sow where she lay, bleeding on a bed of dead leaves. There wasno other choice; he couldn't possibly have dragged her back to the porticofor a cleaner dismemberment.

He hewed at her with his short-bladed knife, and this was butchery indeed, upto the elbows in blood and ankle-deep in the run of her spilt guts with thestink of her rising all about him. The knife slipped often in his slimy hands, so that he added his own blood to hers; but he worked all day, and atlast had all the pieces of her laid out on cool clean stone under the shelterof the pediment. Then he could wash, he could strip his fouled clothesoff and wash those also, naked under the cold sun; and briefly he hadno fear of the lake, he watched only with exhaustion and no hint of terroras dark shapes rose to question his shadow only a little further out, where the lake-bed suddenly fell steep away.

Because he had no other way to do it, he built a slow fire beneath one of theiron tubs in the bath-house, and laid pieces of pork inside it on a bed

ofwell-scrubbed stones. As the bath and the stones heated, so fat melted andran down to spit and hiss on hot enamel; and this was what he needed, notthe meat.

While the lard rendered, he made crude pots from clayhe'd dug with his fingersfrom the lake's edge. Baking in the fire's ashes, several of them crackedor flindered; but some survived well enough to use, he thought.

Pork for dinner, roasted dry but hewouldn't heed that. The skin had gone tocrackling; as he crunched it something roiled and stirred the water, far outin the centre of the lake. He heard his father cry out in the darkness, andhe heard a staccato rattle of gunfire; and he heard his mother's slow choking; and louder than any, louder than all of those he heard the sounds ofkicking.

His father came to him again when he should have been sleeping. Wet serge warnedhim, smelling strongly in the damp air; cracking his eyelids barely openshowed him an outline against the sky, the glint of moonlight on buckles.

He heard boots shift onstone, he heard each separate breath like a groan. Butno kiss this time, no touch at all; and after his father was gone, what heheard until he slept was his mother's rope creaking in the wind, as she dangledsomewhere close at hand. Hewouldn't open his eyes again to look,

buthe thought perhaps she was up between the pillars of the portico, that close.

In the morning, he scooped a potful of lard from the bath and set it to meltby his cooking-fire outside. Threads drawn from his blanket and plaitedtogether made a wick; he laid that across the pot and let it sink, withends trailing out on either side.

When he lit them in the shadows behind thebath-house door, they made more sootand smell than light; but they made light enough to work by, Light enoughto reclaim the cellars from his mother, perhaps, though she could dangleas well in light as darkness.

She couldn't knock, knock knock at his eyes in the light, and that was what counted.

He made as much light as he could, three lamps each with two wicks burning atboth ends, twelve guttering flames to save him. He carried them down one ata time, and even the first time there was no body swinging at the head ofthe stairs, nor any at the foot, nor in the chamber below: only the boilersand the pumps and the constant rushing sound of water.

By his third trip down, coming from light into light with light right there inhis hands, he felt secure until he looked more closely at the machinery. All the surfaceswere coated in a sticky black mixture of dust and grease, generationsold; but two words gleamed out at him in the light he'd brought, shining where someone had written them with a finger in that claggingmuck. One of course was Guilty, and Coward was the other.

One quick sobbing breath, staring, seeing the finger in his mind - fine and delicatefor sure, trembling a little perhaps with the enormity of it all - andthen he turned abruptly, and saw the box of tools in the corner, half-hidden under dark and heavy piping.

A galvanised iron bucket, and a wooden box of tools: hammers and screwdriversand wrenches, everything he could possibly need.No can of grease, but he didn't need grease now, he had his bathful of rendered fat. He could sieve that through his shirt to get the grit out. Not first, though. Cleaning came first; and first for cleaning were the boilers that borethose two accusations, those truths.

Days he worked down there, days and into the nights sometimes, cleaning and greasingand taking apart, sketching plans and patterns of flow with charredsticks on the tiled floor. His parents left him largely undisturbed, his father no longer crossing the lake, his mother only

distantlydangling. If they were making room for the girl, if it was her turnnow, she was being slow to show; and he wasn't waiting.

Not consciously, at least.Consciously, he was learning how to plumb.

At last, the turn of a great brass stopcock brought water gushing through thepipes. The furnace burned hot and fast on gathered wood; and as soon as pressurestarted to build, the first leaks showed where rubber had perished andhis rabbitskin-and-porkfat improvisations wouldn't hold. He patched as besthe could, and set the bucket to catch the worst of the drips. It didn'tmatter, he was only testing the system, and there was a drain in the floorin any case. If itwasn't blocked.

Sweating, he refilled the furnace and threw a lever, and the pump started toknock, knock knock. Knocked and failed, and knocked again. More leaks, jetsof steam now, clouding out the light; briefly he thought the show was overfor the day, knock knock and nothing more.

But againa knock, and a faster knocking; the rhythm changed abruptly, hard andsteady and unfaltering now, and he thought of course of kicking; and thegirl came walking to him out of the steam and oh, she was so afraid.

She wore white, as she had when last he saw her. Her fingers plucked at the

fabricof her dress, her eyes were wide and panic-lost and all her body was trembling. Her mouth shook somuch, at first she could say nothing.

There was nothing he could say,and nothing he wanted said between them; butshe tried, and tried again, and at last,

"They shot your father," she said. "They took him out and shot him. For cowardice," she said; and she had said all this before though not like this, not so dreadfully afraid. "There was a court martial and they found himguilty, and they shot him."

Her voice had been hard before, hard and accusatory. You lied to me, it had beensaying, you're a coward too. There had been no tears then, and none of thepleading, none of the terror he saw in her pallid face.

Then as now, he had been unable to speak at all; then as now, she had gone drivingheedlessly on, far past what was honourable or decent. And yes, he wasan expert on honour by then, he'd seen it from both sides and knew it betterthan any.

"Your mother," she said, though she clearly, she so muchdidn't want to. "That's why she, why she hanged herself," she said. "For shame," she said, "shehanged herself for shame."

Letherself dangle in the dark for him to find when he walked clean into her, her bare toes knock knock against his blinded, desperate eyes.

"You should do that too," she said, "why not? Whydon't you? A coward and theson of a coward, and your mother the only honourable one among you all, whydon't you just jump in the river? Too scared, I suppose," she said, answeringherself. "I should have known then, when I realised you were a water-funk.Once a coward, always a coward. Like father, like son..."

Andthat was all she said, because it was all she had said the first time. Afterthat it was only crying out, and grunting.

And nowas then, and this was what she'd been so afraid of: that it would happenagain as it had, that it would have to.

Andof course it did. He swung wildly, and felt the solidity of her against theback of his hand as she sprawled at his feet; and feet, yes, already he waskicking.

Kicking and kicking, but not to silence her this time, not for shame. Only becauseshe was there, as his parents were intermittently there, in their intermittentdeaths; and the thing was there to be done, and so he did it.

Felt better, second time.Not good, never that; but better. She cried, but nothe cried. No choking, no fire in his throat or eyes, neither anger nor griefcould find him. Fear might have found him, perhaps, but hewasn't afraidof this.

Neutral at last, he kicked until his feet lost her in the steam, untilshe wasentirely gone from there.

And then he felt his way up the stairs and out into the bath-house where a coupleof taps were hissing and spitting, scalding to his hand as he turned themon.

He scrubbed one of the baths as best he could, and washed every piece of clothingthat he'd brought. He laid them out on the portico steps, and came backnaked to fill the bath again.

Lying back with his eyes closed, with burning water lapping at his ears and thecorners of his mouth, he thought that nothing was finished, even now; butit didn't seem to matter. Let his father stumble blindfold against death, let his mother dangle, let the girl come for kicking when she chose. Orwhen he called her. The world was wider, much wider than this; and here hewas only on the fringes of it yet, he hadn't even been up to the house...

Later, in the darkness, when his clothes were dry, he thought he might walk downto the lake and into the water. He would be borne up, he thought, and carriedover, because in his pockets he carried the keys to D'Espérance.

But actually, he slept; and in the morning he walked the other way, he walkedinto town looking for the solicitor.

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