



Espido Freire

The Wooden Monster

Translated by Toshiya Kamei

There's a garden. Beyond the window there's a garden. And I don't like it. There's a garden, and I'm here with my cat, a large maroon cat named Beetle, my hand covered with his hairs. He comes and goes like memories and leaves a trace of dark claws.

I talked about the garden. There's a garden there, beyond the window. Someone plays music somewhere, because I hear the wind sing, and I'm afraid to think who wants to stay outside in this kind of cold.

It all started when Rotgen died. I didn't know it—no one knew it then—but the night we found him swinging from the ceiling over the smell of burned wax brought us the darkness and the eternal fear of talking about cellos.

The children were next—eight from the red and white school where I taught. The little girl, so lively, the blonde in a blue dress who bent gracefully every time she picked up something from the floor. Now she sometimes plays in the garden, and she and her friends still have the pockmarks they received when they crossed over to the other side. I don't understand. I don't know exactly why she comes here to play at my house. I don't know many things. I don't want to think. Neither does Beetle. He paces restlessly around the living room if I shut him in, instead of purring with his eyes closed in his basket.

Györg is my brother and he's lost. He paced like a caged animal. Finally this morning after breakfast, he said, "I'm leaving." I made him swear: "All right, I won't go near the garden, Andrea." But if he had listened to me, the food wouldn't have gone cold on the table.

Hush! No, it's nothing. I thought I heard the cello. No, it's nothing. It must be the cat, or the wind. When things were better, we didn't hear anything. My brother said, "How quiet, how boring Tiselder is. Not even a bird comes to wake us." Then we didn't realize those were good times. Every morning I showed the children Czechoslovakia on the blackboard. Györg was busy with his flowerbeds. "Don't you think it's too hot for June? Ah, Györg. The seasons make mistakes like everyone else." Rotgen waited and walked me home every afternoon, keeping

a polite distance, until I stood at the gate of Tiselder, and he took me to his house. I was dressed in black with a white veil and a bunch of orange blossoms.

The children are there again. They run around barefoot in the snow, making faces. I think I see Györg's gangly silhouette, even from a distance. I call aloud: "Beetle, where are you? Come here, Beetle. Beetle, snakes. Beetle." My cat is afraid of snakes, and he's too stupid to know snakes are asleep during the winter.

Our marriage ended when we raised our voices for the third time. Rotgen faced the window, I turned my back to him, and then nothing. He spent his afternoons deciphering music scores with the wooden monster. When he touched my shoulder, I cried and struck him. Then I went back to Tiselder, hugged my brother, whose hands were covered with dirt, and lay down on my single bed.

I went back to the school. I actually wanted to avoid the pained expression Rotgen gave me when I refused to look him in the eye. My brother Györg, the child who had grown up too fast and didn't seem to know what to do with his foal-like legs, moved among us like a disoriented fish.

Rotgen talked to him often. Györg trimmed the hedges, planted the pot marigolds that Rotgen held out to him, and watched him with his oval eyes. "Györg," I call him, as I called Beetle before. "Come, Györg. The soup is getting cold." But Györg mixes with the children in the garden more and more openly, and no one will eat the soup.

When we found Rotgen, I had to turn my eyes away from the pendulous shadow above the candles scattered over the floor. Then I cried and wore mourning, but they didn't give him back to me. I could have cried and banged on the door with my fists and feet, but they wouldn't have given him back. He swung on a rope in the room, and I didn't want to look at him or pick up the abandoned cello. It's odd—he had left the wooden monster behind. But I never thought of leaving him, not even for a second.

If I at least knew whom I should think about, everything would be easier. Things lose their essence, and my garden is no longer Györg's garden, but a place with green grass stamped into the snow, with empty vases and withered flowers, with eight or nine pock-scarred children, a lanky boy with absent eyes, a fat maroon cat, and a hidden cello blowing its notes at the foot of the steps. I only have to open the window to the cold winter air and walk around and they'll see, who knows, a dress of a woman with rings under her eyes and a long braid who will turn when someone calls "Andrea."

I hardly remember what it was like before. The sweet monotony of the morning to toast white bread and spread it with butter and rose jam, Györg's favorite. It's really hard to leave life.

I feel it.

Now the cello calls again. I don't know if I ever felt it before. I don't know if I feel it. I regret the punishment, but not the way I act. I don't know. I don't know what springs Rotgen could have reversed or what sin I must purge to deserve the garden strewn with figures that make gestures and form a circle and bluish snow with the arrival of afternoon.

Husband, school, cat, brother. Simple words. It hurts. It hurts to remember. I don't know. Maybe everything is a lie. Maybe I don't feel anything and want to find excuses for the pungent smell that fills my throat when I hear music in the garden, like before.

Györg is late and the cat has run away. I'll go look for them and tell the children not to play near the seedbeds we recently planted. Or not.