

# The Treasure

I went to find my fortunes in the southern forests of Lithuania, behind the ancient villas that creak beneath the oaks. There, beside overgrown hedges and columns (cracking at the seams, bending underneath their own weight), I brought my shovel to work, taking only short and rapid breaks to upset the monotony. I'd come here to dig, and to find my treasure, deep beneath the Earth.

In the beginning, the weather proved conducive, and the rains and wet snows outside Vilnius rarely upset my work so much that I couldn't continue. In the coldest winter months, or the rainy days of spring, I sat smoking inside the vestibule of the manor, where little Chinese dolls adorned the mantle and the candelabras burnt incessantly and without fail. Who lit them, I don't know (there are no Lithuanians in Lithuania anymore, only Lithuanian-speakers).

I dug alone for many years this way, lumbering into the earth, scaling down the pit to cut apart the roots with axes and careful, well-placed, *meticulous* instruments, like an archeologist tracing a triceratops. Like a lobotomy. You've repeatedly asked me on what day and from where she arrived, and I just don't know the answer to that question. She appeared one day among the firs, ensconced in an ivory velvet coat. She would sit hunched above the great rim of my excavation, the foundation pit. The search to end all searches. The search for my treasure. She couldn't have been that old, in her ribbed white dress. In her little halfway pose, making faces at me as I worked, she looked like one of the dolls from the empty mansion, from a time before nations.

I did not pay attention to her. Every evening I would compose myself – alone – by gathering my thoughts on the great veranda and warming myself beside the burning pages. Miłosz, Mrozek, all the Mickiewicz in the world, and so many -ski's – what use were your tomes to me? All I really need sits beneath the earth.

Those early days were some of the happiest moments of my life, when the library was still well stocked with literary tinder and the sky shone bright with a warm lunar tinge and the smell of smoke. She didn't upset me at all, though she did steal scraps from what was left of my luncheons. I didn't remember it then, but she grew so fast; you could already see the little ballet shoes peering from underneath the dress... but I didn't pay attention then, other than to just note the obvious. Crouched beside the fire, beaming little eyes pointed in my direction, she never quite left my side. God knows I'd try to make her go away; she wouldn't get any of my food, nor any of my attention, if I had anything to say about it. And yet, she'd still follow me around, and collect branches to put on the fire when the *Encyclopedia Britannica SA-SL* was turning to ash. Meanwhile, I kept to my work. At night, I crept to the conservatory on the second floor and locked the double doors. Outside the windowpanes, I observed my dig, the great throat yawning into the earth. Both my hands lay flat upon the window sill; the sky roared with the coming

season. If it was raining, I would see her glistening eyes reflected in the windowpane, peering through the keyhole, hair dripping (how had she left herself in, the rogue?).

Every day I would wake early in the morning, at the crack of dawn. Every season had its flavor. In the winter, the sunlight grew dim and tired. And with spring came the rains, with the cruel overtop of clouds and storms dropping oceans onto the re-awakened Earth. Too often, my excavation was flooded, and I sat out on the veranda in despair. There was one night, during a particularly savage thunderstorm, when the deluge unraveled a year's worth of work – a plague upon my project. I sat hunched in the manor, my eyes stained with crimson half-moons, my heart weighing heavy with despair. Outside, I could see that she was breaking all the rules I'd told here – she had climbed into the pit, scooping out the brown water with her little porcelain cup. But what good could she do?

In time, when the waters receded, so much work was undone. I told myself I wouldn't give up - I didn't. She in turn (I only noticed this because she visited me every day now) exchanged her tired, worn dress for jeans and a blouse. In the summer, she finally came with a spade all her own, holding it up like a fish for me to see, grinning. *I don't need your help at all, little girl*, I indicated. But she began digging for her own little treasure beside mine, so they could be connected together one day (she said). Her excavation was so small and so inept, that I nearly laughed - but I caught myself.

And what did I do, to keep myself occupied, all those years? I must profess, like many a young man my age, I had a certain juvenile, *insatiable* weakness for women. In the neighboring village, maybe a short distance down the road from the empty manors, there lived many young peasant girls enamored by a treasure hunter such as I. During my idle evenings, we'd sit beside the lakes and streams and talk until the sun set. Their mothers loved me; a treasure hunter from the New World is not so easy to find in this forgotten green corner of Europa. They sent their daughters with woven bread baskets and apple treats, but I never let them distract me from my purpose. I would stroke their hair and tell them about the dig, about the manor that I'd inherited from an older century. Sometimes we'd stroll back and, laughing, climb up the marble winding stairwell and then slip into the old servants' staircase (concealed behind the wall, like a hive running through the manor). Up on the secret balcony, underneath a thicket of stars, I'd rummage through their mother's baskets and pick out the chocolates and little raspberry liquors, and stare down onto the great diamond-shaped pit extending into Earth, and my companion would rest her chin on my shoulder, glazed eyes and a leaden smile.

I must also admit a certain weakness for cards and games of chance. I recall one story in particular, in the spring, when the floods that swept down from the Vilnius catacombs made the roads impassable and sickly. Despite the little gazebo I had erected over my great project to protect it from the rain (my God, she'd painted little lilacs over its roof; little orange clovers interspersed with purple diamonds) these Biblical floods made it impossible to reach the excavation. So I sat above the stairwell and watched the library flood with mud and novella, and

the grisly orange bones of Vilnius royalty. The flood made it cold, but there was nothing to make a fire of, or light cigars with; everything under the glowing chandelier (who lights it? I don't even know anymore; some servant or serf who never got the message) was wet. So instead I arranged my deck of cards and decided to play my game of solitaire to pass the time. That was when *she* rowed over in a little boat, ever older, ever taller. Her hair trailed through the rivulets that were reaching past the marble stairs, and I thought I saw her legs shiver. And that was because the boat was imperfect; streams of water flowed into her canoe, pages of Mann slipped inside the black gondola. Of course, I paid no attention; I played my game. The three of clubs on the four of diamonds, and the ten of clubs on the Jack of diamonds. But I was ignoring her as she slipped off the boat and quietly swam up behind me.

In a moment of idle meditation, I looked away from deck, but when I looked back – my god!

She'd *manipulated my deck!* I raced through my piles searching for the remaining cards, but alas, half were missing. There was no way to win this game! But then it was too late by any means. Her flowing wet locks flung water across me as she jumped from the table and onto the windowsill, dancing like a jester. Discarding all the spades into the whirling typhoon rumbling beneath us, she destroyed my game. I hurried to collect what she'd dropped, but no avail. I cannot play with three suites and thirteen replacements from a Nabokovian tomb (not that one). The element of stochasticity is gone, pages don't resemble cards, the game is dull and bereft of feeling.

But she – she escape laughing with the cards, out the window, into a waiting escape boat, prepared just for the occasion.

When the waters receded and summer finally arrived, and her childish boats lay scuttled on the little dry piles of salt and bones, I returned to my project and resumed my work. Little clovers – unusual ones, atypical and superstitious little four-leafed clubs – began to cover the walls of my pit (which, by now, had exceeded all my expectations; from its depths, the sky was not visible, the rain could not be felt). The ground here grew hard and difficult and stubborn beyond compare.

At night, *she* would climb down the rope into the pit until an archipelago of little calluses sprouted on her hand; her hair was tied back that winter, and she'd long abandoned her parallel project beside mine, which had never surpassed half a meter and had vanished in the wake of repeated floods. Underneath the light of the retreating harvest moon, deep inside my project, she broke all my rules once more and stabbed at the earth with her tin spade, while I slept. She never bothered to carry the dirt out, and besides, I had made the extraction device so advanced, and so complex, that she would never understand how to use it. She just moved dirt from one pile to another.

(So let me explain my ingenuity. A system of gears propels the automaton from top to bottom, but – and this is the brilliance, my friend – another system of ropes, like a string of pretzels, carries ever more gears to my person. Built upon this entire design is an expandable array of buckets that, carried forth by the ingenious workings of the gears, carries away the refuse of the earth with the unwavering resolve of a bygone era. Propelled by steam and the wonders of science, I have automated all but the most difficult of labors – that is, the search for treasure itself, and the accompanying need for imagination and ingenuity. I composed this advanced machinery on my own, drinking my liquors, in the historic map room of the old duke, with smokes and a lamp and a stinky, one-eyed, stuffed falcon).

But still she beat the black earth with her shovel, and in the nighttime, when I descended into my excavation, for several moments I reaped the fruits of her labor, depositing the loose earth into three bucketfuls (at most) and returning to the Herculean, Sisyphean task left to me.

Increasingly, though, I felt that I was closer and nearer to achieving it.

In the frigid January wind, I remember unraveling my tools and my map. I was approaching the end. The weather had turned for the worse; snow had frozen and crystallized against the barren tundra of the manor's gardens. The old brass water pipes had exploded. But the treasure was near; the dotted dashes on my map were running out (Need I add who had crossed them out with such diligence, such precision?) and it would all soon come to pass. Off the right edge of my forehead, I felt a tear that did not belong to me.

Her nose was running, dripping from up above. Unraveling my scarf, removing my coat, I unsheathed my long telescope (the dig had taken me further than I would have ever imagined; from down here, I could barely see the sun). But up there, high above me, if I squinted my eye and recalled her face...

I could see her. She was standing in the wind, her face numb, and her nose red. A perfect symmetry of wintertime flu had formed across the length of her face like a gray moth. She'd wrapped the hair around herself to keep warm, and a thick dark burka of a coat was tied tight across her body, as if there was no body underneath *at all*. In the distance, through my lens, I saw her standing there eyeing me, without her spade, without despair, without any emotion that I could detect (despite my talent for empathy). A crown of ice had formed over her eyelashes, just as I was so close to my treasure, to my prize. I couldn't help her now (you understand; the books had run out, I was burning my playing cards to keep warm now, and after all, she'd taken a quarter of them). So I told her, my voice scaling up the rectangular perfection of my archeological masterpiece:

“Go away now, you banal distraction from greater things”

Little crystals of ice dropped down on me from up above. They fell like little glass flutes onto the surface of my project, and shattered. When I turned my eye again to see her, only the black unreality of her winter coat lay there.

But I had to keep digging; I couldn't stop.

You can't stop.

It was in early February when the entire operation came to a fore. As I landed my pickaxe into the granite dirt, I heard the same unmistakable wooden echo that I had long yearned for in my dreams, all these years. I'd found it. Throwing aside my instruments, discarding the gloves I had worn since before I could remember, I brushed and blew aside the final layer of dirt that covered the great treasure chest now before me. On its surface, old inscriptions and chants grew clearer in the distant winter daylight, but I had no time to read them. Straightening my back, flexing my fingers (so numb already; pale and coarse like dried soap) I leaned down and, with great exertion, removed the tremendous trove from the Earth, leaving behind an odd diamond-shaped absence in the cold, forsaken earth.

What an unusual shape for a chest full of riches.

And so, deep in the throes of my final winter, I opened the coffin and found her there. She'd aged to infinity. Now her ribbed ivory dress covered ashen gray skin, and her long white hair drifted up and away, across my face like the forgotten remnants of a summertime harvest. Her eyes were closed, her arms were cold and erect and stretched beside her sides. Already, little clovers grew across the inside of her palm.

And In her hands, gripped across the front of her ivory dress, was the tin spade, weathered and worn. Its edges, bent and cut, were still covered in the cold frozen dirt. Lying across the folds of her dress, I spied the cards she'd stolen – the ace, the four, and the jack of hearts.

She'd scribbled a word on all of them; I turned them every which way to understand. But it's not so easy, you see. I couldn't make heads or tails out of them.

And I can tell you why.

Because I don't speak the language here.

I don't know what she meant.