

also by Agota Kristof

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The Illiterate

Agota Kristof

The Notebook

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The Notebook

Arrival at Grandmother's

We arrive from the Big Town. We've been travelling all night. Mother's eyes are red. She's carrying a big cardboard box and we two boys are each carrying a small suitcase containing our clothes, plus Father's big dictionary, which we take it in turns to carry since our arms get tired.

We walk for a long time. Grandmother's house is a long way from the station, at the other end of the Little Town. There are no trams, buses or cars here. Just a few army trucks driving around.

There aren't many people in the streets. The town is very quiet. Our footsteps echo on the pavement; we walk, without speaking, Mother in the middle, between the two of us.

When we get to Grandmother's garden gate, Mother says:

'Wait for me here.'

We wait for a while, then we go into the garden, walk round the house, and crouch down under a window, where we can hear voices. We hear Mother say:

'There's nothing more to eat at home, no bread, no meat, no vegetables, no milk. Nothing. I can't feed them any more.'

Another voice says:

'So you've remembered me. For ten years you didn't give me a thought. You never came. You never wrote.'

Mother says:

'You know why. I *loved* Father.'

The other voice says:

‘Yes, and now you remember that you also have a mother. You come here and ask me to help you.’

Mother says:

‘I’m not asking anything for myself. I just want my children to survive this war. The Big Town is being bombed night and day, and there’s no food left. All the children are being evacuated to the country, with relations or with strangers, anywhere.’

The other voice says:

‘So why didn’t you send them to strangers, anywhere?’

Mother says:

‘They’re your grandsons.’

‘My grandsons? I don’t even know them. How many are there?’

‘Two. Two boys. Twins.’

The other voice asks:

‘What have you done with the others?’

Mother asks:

‘What others?’

‘Bitches have four or five puppies at a time. You keep one or two and drown the others.’

The other voice laughs loudly. Mother says nothing, then the other voice asks:

‘They have a father, at least? You aren’t married, as far as I know. I wasn’t invited to any wedding.’

‘I am married. Their father is at the front. I haven’t had any news of him for six months.’

‘Then you can put a cross over him.’

The other voice laughs again. Mother starts crying. We go back to the garden gate.

Mother comes out of the house with an old woman.

Mother says to us:

‘This is your grandmother. You’ll be staying with her for a while – till the end of the war.’

Grandmother says:

‘It could last a long time. But I’ll put them to work, don’t you fret. Food isn’t free here either.’

Mother says:

‘I’ll send you money. Their clothes are in the suitcases. And there are sheets and blankets in the box. Be good, you two. I’ll write to you.’

She kisses us and goes away, crying.

Grandmother laughs very loudly and says:

‘Sheets and blankets! White shirts and patent-leather shoes! I’ll teach you what life is about!’

We stick out our tongues at Grandmother. She laughs even louder and slaps her thighs.

Grandmother's House

Grandmother's house is five minutes' walk from the last houses in the Little Town. After that, there is nothing but the dusty road, blocked a bit further on by a barrier. It is forbidden to go any further, a soldier is on guard there. He has a machine-gun and binoculars and, when it rains, he takes shelter in a sentry box. We know that beyond the barrier, hidden by the trees, there's a secret military base and, beyond the base, the frontier of another country.

Grandmother's house is surrounded by a garden, at the bottom of which there is a stream, then the forest.

The garden contains all sorts of vegetables and fruit trees. In a corner, there's a hutch, a hen-house, a pigsty and a hut for the goats. We have tried to climb on to the back of one of the biggest pigs, but it's impossible to stay on.

The vegetables, the fruit, the rabbits, the ducks and the chickens are sold at the market by Grandmother, as well as the hens' and ducks' eggs and the goat's cheese. The pigs are sold to the butcher, who pays for them with money, or with hams and smoked sausage.

There is also a dog to keep away thieves and a cat to keep away mice and rats. We mustn't give the cat anything to eat, so that he's always hungry.

Grandmother also owns a vineyard on the other side of the road.

You enter the house through the kitchen, which is large and warm. A fire burns all day long in the wood-stove. Near the window there's a huge table and a corner bench.

We sleep on the bench.

From the kitchen a door leads to Grandmother's bedroom, but it's always locked. Only Grandmother goes into it and, even then, only at night, to sleep.

There's another room, which can be reached without going through the kitchen, directly from the garden. This room is occupied by a foreign officer. The door to that room is also locked.

Under the house there's a cellar full of things to eat and, under the roof, an attic where Grandmother doesn't go any more since we sawed away one of the rungs of the ladder and she fell and hurt herself. The entrance to the attic is just above the officer's door and we get up there by means of a rope. It's there that we hide the notebook, Father's dictionary and the other things we have to hide.

We have now made a key, which opens all the doors in the house, and made holes in the attic floor. With the key we can move freely about the house when nobody's in and, through the holes, we can observe Grandmother and the officer in their rooms, without anybody knowing.

Grandmother

Grandmother is Mother's mother. Before coming to live in her house, we didn't even know that Mother still had a mother.

We call her Grandmother.

People call her the Witch. She calls us 'sons of a bitch'.

Grandmother is small and thin. She has a black shawl on her head. Her clothes are dark grey. She wears old army shoes. When it's fine, she walks barefoot. Her face is covered with wrinkles, brown spots and warts with hairs growing out of them. She has no teeth left, at least none that can be seen.

Grandmother never washes. She wipes her mouth with the corner of her shawl when she has finished eating or drinking. She doesn't wear knickers. When she wants to urinate, she just stops wherever she happens to be, spreads her legs and pisses on the ground under her skirt. Of course, she doesn't do it in the house.

Grandmother never undresses. We have watched her in her room at night. She takes off one skirt and there's another skirt underneath. She takes off her blouse and there's another one underneath. She goes to bed like that. She doesn't take off her shawl.

Grandmother doesn't say much. Except in the evening. In the evening, she takes a bottle down from a shelf and drinks straight out of it. Soon she starts to talk in a language we don't know. It's not the language that the foreign soldiers speak, it's a quite different language.

In that unknown language, Grandmother asks herself questions and answers them. Sometimes she laughs, sometimes she gets angry and starts shouting. In the end, almost always, she starts crying, she staggers into her room, drops on to her bed and we hear her sobbing long into the night.

Our Tasks

We have to do certain jobs for Grandmother, otherwise she doesn't give us anything to eat and leaves us to spend the night out of doors.

But at first we refuse to obey her. We sleep in the garden, and eat fruit and raw vegetables.

In the morning, before daybreak, we see Grandmother leave the house. She says nothing to us. She goes and feeds the animals, milks the goats, then takes them to the edge of the stream, where she ties them to a tree. Then she waters the garden and picks the vegetables and fruit, which she loads into her wheelbarrow. She also puts on to it a basket full of eggs, a small cage with a rabbit, and a chicken or duck with its legs tied together.

She goes off to the market, pushing her wheelbarrow with the strap around her scrawny neck, which forces her head down. She staggers under the weight. The bumps and stones in the road make her lose her balance, but she goes on walking, her feet turned inwards, like a duck. She walks to the town, to the market, without stopping, without putting her wheelbarrow down once.

When she gets back from the market, she makes a soup with the vegetables she hasn't sold and jams with the fruit. She eats, she goes and has a nap in her vineyard, she sleeps for an hour, then she works in the vineyard or, if there is nothing to do there, she comes back to the house, she cuts wood, she feeds the animals again, she brings back the goats, she milks them, she goes out into the forest, comes

back with mushrooms and kindling, she makes cheeses, she dries mushrooms and beans, she bottles other vegetables, waters the garden again, puts things away in the cellar and so on until nightfall.

On the sixth morning, when she leaves the house, we have already watered the garden. We take heavy buckets full of pig-feed from her, we take the goats to the edge of the stream, we help her load the wheelbarrow. When she comes back from the market, we are cutting wood.

At the meal, Grandmother says:

'Now you know you have to earn your board and lodging.'

We say:

'It's not that. The work is hard, but to watch someone working and not do anything is even harder, especially if it's someone old.'

Grandmother sniggers:

'Sons of a bitch! You mean you felt sorry for me?'

'No, Grandmother. We just felt ashamed.'

In the afternoon we go and gather wood in the forest.

From now on we do all the work we can.