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Doctor Copernicus

A NOVEL

JOHN BANVILLE



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John Banville was born in Wexford, Ireland, in 1945. His first book, *Long Lankin*, was published in 1970. His other books are *Nightspawn*, *Birchwood*, *Doctor Copernicus*, *Kepler*, *The Newton Letter*, *Mefisto*, *The Book of Evidence* (which was shortlisted for the 1989 Booker Prize), *Ghosts*, *Athena*, *The Untouchable*, *Eclipse*, and *Shroud*. He won the Booker Prize for his novel *The Sea* in 2005. He lives in Dublin.



INTERNATIONAL

The Sea

Shroud

Eclipse

The Untouchable

Athena

Ghosts

The Book of Evidence

Mefisto

The Newton Letter

Kepler

Birchwood

Nightspawn

Long Lankin

Doctor Copernicus

—
a novel by

JOHN BANVILLE

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in memoriam
Douglas Synnott

Acknowledgments

A fully comprehensive bibliography would be wholly inappropriate, and probably impossible to compile, in a work of this nature; nevertheless, there is a small number of books which, during the years of composition of *Doctor Copernicus*, have won my deep respect, and whose scholarship and vision have been of invaluable help to me, and these I must mention. I name them also as suggested further reading for anyone seeking a fuller and perhaps more scrupulously factual account of the astronomer's life and work.

The standard biography is Ludwig Prowe's *Nicolaus Copernicus* (2 vols., Berlin, 1883–4); it has not, however, been translated into English, so far as I can ascertain. Two brief and delightful accounts of the life and work are Angus Armitage's *Copernicus, Founder of Modern Astronomy* (London, 1938), and *Sun, Stand Thou Still* (London, 1947). A more technical, but very elegant and readable explication of the heliocentric theory is contained in Professor Fred Hoyle's *Nicolaus Copernicus* (London, 1973). However, the two works on which I have mainly drawn are Thomas S. Kuhn's *The Copernican Revolution* (Harvard, 1957), and Arthur Koestler's *The Sleepwalkers: A History of Man's Changing Vision of the Universe* (London, 1959). To these two beautiful, lucid and engaging books I owe more than a mere acknowledgment can repay.

For the light which they shed upon the history and thought of the period I am grateful to L. Carsten, whose *The Origins of Prussia* (Oxford, 1954) was extremely helpful; Frances Yates, who, in *Giordano Bruno and the Hermetic Tradition* (London, 1964), revealed the influences of Hermetic mysticism and Neoplatonism upon Copernicus and his contemporaries; W. P. D. Wightman's *Science in a Renaissance Society* (London, 1972), and M. E. Mallett's *The Borgias* (London, 1969).

I must emphasise, however, that any factual errors, willed or otherwise, and any questionable interpretations in this book are my own, and are in no way to be imputed to the sources listed above.

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As well as the numerous extracts from Copernicus's own writings which I have incorporated in my text, and which I do not feel I need to identify, I have quoted from six different sources, which are identified in the Note on [this page](#)

*

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You must become an ignorant man again
And see the sun again with an ignorant eye
And see it clearly in the idea of it.

Wallace Stevens,
“Notes Toward a Supreme Fiction”

Europe in 1500



Orbitas Lumenque

~~At first it had no name. It was the thing itself, the vivid thing. It was his friend. On wind~~
days it danced, demented, waving wild arms, or in the silence of evening drowsed and
dreamed, swaying in the blue, the goldeny air. Even at night it did not go away. Wrapped
his truckle bed, he could hear it stirring darkly outside in the dark, all the long night long.
There were others, nearer to him, more vivid still than this, they came and went, talking, but
they were wholly familiar, almost a part of himself, while it, steadfast and aloof, belonged
the mysterious outside, to the wind and the weather and the goldeny blue air. It was a part
of the world, and yet it was his friend.

Look, Nicolas, look! See the big tree!

Tree. That was its name. And also: the linden. They were nice words. He had known them
a long time before he knew what they meant. They did not mean themselves, they were
nothing in themselves, they meant the dancing singing thing outside. In wind, in silence,
at night, in the changing air, it changed and yet was changelessly the tree, the linden tree. That
was strange.

Everything had a name, but although every name was nothing without the thing named,
the thing cared nothing for its name, had no need of a name, and was itself only. And then
there were the names that signified no substantial thing, as linden and tree signified that dancing
dancer. His mother asked him who did he love the best. Love did not dance, nor tap the
window with frantic fingers, love had no leafy arms to shake, yet when she spoke that name
that named nothing, some impalpable but real thing within him responded as if to
summons, as if it had heard its name spoken. That was very strange.

He soon forgot about these enigmatic matters, and learned to talk as others talked, full of
conviction, unquestioningly.

The sky is blue, the sun is gold, the linden tree is green. Day is light, it ends, night falls
and then it is dark. You sleep, and in the morning wake again. But a day will come when you
will not wake. That is death. Death is sad. Sadness is what happiness is not. And so on. How
simple it all was, after all! There was no need even to think about it. He had only to be, and
life would do the rest, would send day to follow day until there were no days left, for him
and then he would go to Heaven and be an angel. Hell was under the ground.

Matthew Mark Luke and John

Bless the bed that I lie on

If I die before I wake

Ask holy God my soul to take

He peered from behind clasped hands at his mother kneeling beside him in the candlelight.
Under a burnished coil of coiled hair her face was pale and still, like the face of the Madonna
in the picture. Her eyes were closed, and her lips moved, mouthing mutely the pious lines
he recited them aloud. When he stumbled on the hard words she bore him up gently, in a
wonderfully gentle voice. He loved her the best, he said. She rocked him in her arms and
sang a song.

See saw Margery Daw

*

He liked to lie in bed awake, listening to the furtive noises of the night all around him, the creaks and groans and abrupt muffled cracks which he imagined were the voice of the house complaining as, braced under the weight of the enormous darkness outside, it stealthily stretched and shifted the aching bones of its back. The wind sang in the chimney, the rain drummed on the roof, the linden tree tapped and tapped, tap tap tap. He was warm. In the room below his room his mother and father were talking, telling each other of their doings that day abroad in the world. How could they be so calm, and speak so softly, when surely they had such fabulous tales to recount? Their voices were like the voice of sleep itself calling him away. There were other voices, of churchbells gravely tolling the hours, of dogs that barked afar, and of the river too, though that was not so much a voice as a huge dark liquidity, faintly frightening rushing in the darkness that was felt not heard. All called, called him to sleep. He slept.

But sometimes Andreas in the bed in the corner made strange noises and woke him up again. Andreas was his older brother: he had bad dreams.

The children played games together. There was hide and seek, and hide the linger, jackstones and giant steps, and others that had no names. Katharina, who was older than Andreas, soon came to despise such childish frivolity. Andreas too grew tired of play. He lived in his own silent troubled world from whence he rarely emerged, and when he did it was only to pounce on them, pummelling and pinching, or twisting an arm, smiling, with eyes glittering before withdrawing again as swiftly as he had come. Barbara alone, although she was the eldest of the four, was always glad of the excuse to abandon her gawky height and chase her little brother on all fours about the floor and under the tables, grinning and growling like a happy hound all jaws and paws and raggedy fur. It was Barbara that he loved the best, really, although he did not tell anyone, even her. She was going to be a nun. She told him about God, who resembled her strangely, an amiable, loving and sad person given to losing things and dropping things. He it was, struggling to hold aloft so much, that fumbled and let fall their mother from out his tender embrace.

That was an awful day. The house seemed full of old women and the dreary sound of weeping. His father's face, usually so stern and set, was shockingly naked, all pink and green and shiny. Even Katharina and Andreas were polite to each other. They paced about the rooms with measured tread, emulating their elders, bowing their heads and clasping their hands and speaking in soft stiff formal voices. It was all very alarming. His mother was laid out upon her bed, her jaw bound fast with a white rag. She was utterly, uniquely still, and seemed in this unique utter stillness to have arrived at last at a true and total definition of what she was, herself, her vivid self itself. Everything around her, even the living creatures coming and going, appeared vague and unfinished compared with her stark thereness. And yet she was dead, she was no longer his mother, who was in Heaven, so they told him. But that was so, then what was this thing that remained?

They took it away and buried it, and in time he forgot what it was that had puzzled him.

Now his father loomed large in his life. With his wife's death he had changed, or rather the change that her departure had wrought in the life of the household left him stranded in an old, discarded world, so that he trod with clumsy feet among the family's new preoccupations like a faintly comical, faintly sinister and exasperating ghost. The other children avoided him. Only Nicolas continued willingly to seek his company, tracking to its source the dark threads of silence that his father spun out behind him in his fitful wanderings about the house. They spent long hours together, saying nothing, each hardly acknowledging the other's presence, bathing in the balm of a shared solitude. But it was only in these pools of quiet that they were at ease together, and thrust into unavoidable contact elsewhere they were as strangers.

Despite the helplessness and pain of their public encounters, the father clung obstinately to his dream of a hearty man-to-man communion with his son, one that the town of Toru would recognise and approve. He explained the meaning of money. It was more than coins, much more. Coins, you see, are only for poor people, simple people, and for little boys. They are only a kind of picture of the real thing, but the real thing itself you cannot see, nor put in your pocket, and it does not jingle. When I do business with other merchants I have no need of these silly bits of metal, and my purse may be full or empty, it makes no difference. I give my word, and that is sufficient, because my word is money. Do you see? He did not see, and they looked at each other in silence helplessly, baffled, and inexplicably embarrassed.

Nevertheless once a week they sallied forth from the big house in St Anne's Lane to display to the town the impregnable eternal edifice that is the merchant and his heir. The boy performed his part as best he could, and gravely paced the narrow streets with his hands clasped behind his back, while his insides writhed in an agony of shame and self-consciousness. His father, sabled, black-hatted, wagging an ornate cane, was a grotesque caricature of the vigorous bluff businessman he imagined himself to be. The garrulous greetings—*Grüss Gott, mein-herr!* fine day! how's trade?—that he bestowed on friend and stranger alike in a booming public voice, fell clumsily about the streets, a horrible hollow crashing. When he paused to speak to an acquaintance, his sententiousness and grating joviality made the boy suck his teeth and grind one heel slowly, slowly, into the ground.

"And this is Nicolas, he is my youngest, but he has a nose already for the business, have you not, hey, what do you say, young scamp?"

He said nothing, only smiled weakly and turned away, seeking the consolation of poplars and the great bundles of steely light above the river, and brass clouds in a high blue sky.

They made their way along the wharf, where Nicolas's fearful soul ventured out of hiding, enticed by the uproar of men and ships, so different from the inane babbling back there in the streets. Here was not a world of mere words but of glorious clamour and chaos, the big black barrels rumbling and thudding, winch ropes humming, the barefoot loaders singing and swearing as they trotted back and forth under their burdens across the thrumming gangplanks. The boy was entranced, prey to terror and an awful glee, discerning in all this haste and hugeness the prospect of some dazzling, irresistible annihilation.

His father too was nervous of the river and the teeming wharves, and hurried along in silence now, with his head bent and shoulders hunched, seeking shelter. The house of Koppernigk & Sons stood back from the quayside and contemplated with obvious satisfaction the frantic hither and thithering of trade below its windows; under that stony gaze even the

unruly Vistula lay down meekly and flowed away. In the dusty offices, the cool dim caverns of the warehouses, the boy watched, fascinated and appalled, his father put on once more the grimacing mask of the man of consequence, and a familiar mingling of contempt and pity began to ache again within him.

Yet secretly he delighted in these visits. An obscure hunger fed its fill here in this tight-assured little world. He wandered dreamily through the warren of pokey offices, breathing the crumbly odours of dust and ink, spying on inky dusty grey old men crouched with their quills over enormous ledgers. Great quivering blades of sunlight smote the air, the clamour of the quayside stormed the windows, but nothing could shake the stout twin pillars of debt and credit on which the house was balanced. Here was harmony. In the furry honeybrown gloom of the warehouses his senses reeled, assailed by smells and colours and textures, of brandy and vodka snoozing in casks, of wax and pitch, and tight-packed tuns of herring, of timber and corn and an orient of spices. Burnished sheets of copper glowed with a soft dark flame in their tattered wraps of sacking and old ropes, and happiness seemed a copper-coloured word.

It was from this metal that the family had its name, his father said, and not from the Polish *coper*, meaning horseradish, as some were spiteful enough to suggest. Horseradish indeed! Never forget, ours is a distinguished line, merchants and magistrates and ministers of Holy Church—patricians all! Yes, Papa.

*

The Koppernigks had originated in Upper Silesia, from whence in 1396 one Niklas Koppernigk, a stonemason by trade, had moved to Cracow and taken Polish citizenship. His son, Johannes, was the founder of the merchant house that in the late 1450s young Nicolas's father was to transfer to Torun in Royal Prussia. There, among the old German settler families, the Koppernigks laboured long and diligently to rid themselves of Poland and all things Polish. They were not entirely successful; the children's German was still tainted with a southern something, a faint afterglow of boiled cabbage as it were, that had troubled the mother greatly during her brief unhappy life. She was a Waczelrodt. The Waczelrodts it is true were Silesians just like the Koppernigks, having their name from the village of Weizenrodau near Schweidnitz, but apart from that they were something quite different from the Koppernigks: no stonemasons there, indeed no. There had been Waczelrodts among the aldermen and councillors of Münsterburg in the thirteenth century, and, a little later, in Breslau. Towards the end of the last century they had arrived in Torun, where they had soon become influential, and were among the governors of the Old City. Nicolas's maternal grandfather had been a wealthy man, with property in the town and also a number of large estates at Kulm. The Waczelrodts were connected by marriage with the Peckaus of Magdeburg and the von Aliens of Torun. They had also, of course, married into the Koppernigks, late of Cracow, but that was hardly a connection that one would wish to boast of, as Nicolas's Aunt Christina Waczelrodt, a very grand and formidable lady, had often pointed out.

"Remember," his mother told him, "you are as much a Waczelrodt as a Koppernigk. Your uncle will be Bishop one day. Remember!"

Father and son returned weary and disgruntled from their outings, and parted quickly, with faces averted, the father to nurse in solitude his disappointment and unaccountable sense of shame, the son to endure the torment of Andreas's baiting.

"And how was business today, brother, eh?"

Andreas was the rightful heir, being the elder son. The notion elicited from his father one of his rare brief barks of laughter. "That wastrel? Ho no. Let him go for the Church, where his Uncle Lucas can find a fat prebend for him." And Andreas gnawed his knuckles, and slurred away.

Andreas hated his brother. His hatred was like a kind of anguish, and Nicolas sometimes fancied he could hear it, a high-pitched excruciating whine.

"The Turk is coming, little brother, he has invaded the south." Nicolas turned pale. Andreas smirked. "O yes, it is true, you know, believe me. Are you afraid? Nothing will stop the Turk. He impales his prisoners, they say. A big sharp stake right up your bum—like *that!* Ha!"

They walked to school and home again together. Andreas chose to be elaborate and indifferent to Nicolas's meek presence beside him, and whistled through his teeth, and considered the sky, slowed up his pace abruptly to scrutinise some fascinating thing floating in a sewer or quickened it to lurch in mockery behind an unsuspecting cripple, so that, trying to anticipate these sudden checks and advances, Nicolas was forced to dance smiling a puppet's foolish fixed smile, on the end of his capricious master's invisible leash. And the harder he tried to efface himself the fiercer became Andreas's scorn.

"You, creepy—do not creep behind me always!"

Andreas was handsomely made, very tall and slender, dark, fastidious, cold. Running or walking he moved with languorous negligent grace, but it was in repose that he appeared most lovely, standing by a window lost in a blue dream, with his pale thin face lifted up to the light like a perfect vase, or a shell out of the sea, some exquisite fragile thing. He had a way when addressed directly of frowning quickly and turning his head away; then, poised thus, he seemed shaped in his beauty by the action of an ineradicable distress within him. In the smelly classrooms and the corridors of St John's School he floundered, a vulnerable aethereal creature brought low in an alien element, and the masters roared in his face and beat him, their stolid souls enraged by this enigma, who learned nothing, and trailed home to endure in silence, with his face turned away, the abuse of a disappointed father.

Gaiety took him like a falling sickness, and sent him whinnying mad through the house with his long limbs wildly spinning. These frantic fits of glee were rare and brief, and ended abruptly with the sound of something shattering, a toy, a tile, a windowpane. The other children covered their ears, as the silence fluttered down.

He chose for friends the roughest brutes of boys St John's could offer. They gathered outside the school gates each afternoon for fights and farting contests and other fun. Nicolas dreaded that bored malicious crowd. Nepomuk Müller snatched his cap and pranced away brandishing the prize aloft.

"Here, Nepomuk, chuck it here!"

"Me, Müller, me!"

The dark disc sailed here and there in the bitter sunlight, sustained in flight it seemed by the wild cries rising around it. A familiar gloom invaded Nicolas's soul. If only he could

angry! Red rage would have flung him into the game, where even the part of victim would have been preferable to this contemptuous detachment. He waited morose and silent outside the ring of howling boys, drawing patterns on the ground with the toe of his shoe.

The cap came by Andreas and he reached up and plucked it out of the air, but instead of sending it on its way again instantly he paused, seeking as always some means of investing the game with a touch of grace. The others groaned.

“O come on, Andy, throw it!”

He turned to Nicolas and smiled his smile, and began to measure up the distance separating them, making feints like a rings player, taking careful aim.

“Watch me land it on his noggin.”

But catching Nicolas’s eye he hesitated again, and frowned, and then with a surly defiant glance over his shoulder at the others he stepped forward and offered the cap to his brother. “Here,” he murmured, “take it.” But Nicolas looked away. He could cope with cruelty, which was predictable. Andreas’s face darkened. “Take your damned cap, you little snout!”

They straggled homeward, wrapped in a throbbing silence. Nicolas, sighing and sweating, raged inwardly in fierce impotence against Andreas, who was so impressively grown-up in so many ways, and yet could be so childish sometimes. That with the cap had been silly. You *must not expect me to understand you, even though I do!* He did not quite know what that meant, but he thought it might mean that the business of the cap had not really been silly at all. O, it was hopeless! There were times such as this when the muddle of his feelings for Andreas took on the alarming aspect of hatred.

They were no longer heading homeward. Nicolas halted.

“Where are we going?”

“Never mind.”

But he knew well where they were going. Their father had forbidden them to venture beyond themselves beyond the walls. Out there was the New Town, a maze of hovels and steaming alleys rife with the thick green stench of humankind. That was the world of the poor, the lepers and the Jews, the renegades. Nicolas feared that world. His flesh crawled at the thought of it. When he was dragged there by Andreas, who revelled in the low life, the hideousness rolled over him in choking slimy waves, and he seemed to drown. “Where are we going? We are not to go down there! You know we are not supposed to go down there!” Andreas.”

But Andreas did not answer, and went on alone down the hill, whistling, toward the gate and the drawbridge, and gradually the distance made of him a crawling crablike thing. Nicolas, abandoned, began discreetly to cry.

*

The room was poised, weirdly still. A fly buzzed and boomed tinily against the diamond panes of the window. On the floor a dropped book was surreptitiously shutting itself page by page, slowly. The beady eager eye of a mirror set in a gilt sunburst on the far wall contained another room in miniature, and another doorway in which there floated a small pale frightened face gaping aghast at the image of that stricken creature swimming like an eyelid come detached on the rim of the glass. Look! On tiptoe teetering by the window he hung suspended from invisible struts, an impossibly huge stark black puppet, clawing at his breast

his swollen face clenched in terrible hurt.

And here comes a chopper

To chop off his

head

He dropped, slack bag-of-bones, and with him the whole room seemed to collapse.

“Children, your father is dead, of his heart.”

*

The reverberations of that collapse persisted, muted but palpable, and the house, bruised and raw from the shedding of tears, seemed to throb hugely in pain. Grief was the shape of a squat grey rodent lodged in the heart.

The more fiercely this grief-rat struggled the clearer became Nicolas’s thinking, as if his mind, horrified by that squirming thing down there, were scrambling higher and higher away from it into rarer and rarer heights of chill bright air. His mother’s death had puzzled him, yet he had looked upon it as an accident, in dimensions out of all proportion to the small flaw in the machine that had caused it. This death was different. The machine seemed damaged now beyond repair. Life, he saw, had gone horribly awry, and nothing they had told him could explain it, none of the names they had taught him could name the cause. Even Barbara’s God withdrew, in a shocked silence.

*

Uncle Lucas, Canon Waczelrodt, travelled post-haste from Frauenburg in Ermland when the news reached him of his brother-in-law’s death. The affairs of the Chapter of Canons of Frauenburg Cathedral were as usual in disarray, and it was not a good time to be absent for a man with his eye on the bishopric. Canon Lucas was extremely annoyed—but then, his life was a constant state of vast profound annoyance. The ravages wrought by the unending war between his wilfulness and a recalcitrant world were written in nerveknots on the grey marble of his face, and his little eyes, cold and still above the nose thick as a hammerhead, were those of the lean sentinel that crouched within the fleshy carapace of his bulk. He did not like things as they were, but luckily for things he had not yet decided finally how they should be. It was said that he had never in his life been known to laugh.

His coming was the boom of a bronze gong marking the entry of a new order into the children’s lives.

He strode about the house sniffing after discrepancies, with the four of them trotting in his wake like a flock of frightened mice, twittering. Nicolas was mesmerised by this harsh, fascinatingly ugly, overbearing manager of men. His cloak, flying out behind him, sliced the air ruthlessly, as once Nicolas had seen him on the magistrate’s bench in the Town Hall slicing to shreds the arguments of whining plaintiffs. In the strange, incomprehensible and sometimes cruel world of adults, Uncle Lucas was the most adult of all.

“Your father in his will has delivered you his children into my care. It is not my responsibility that I welcome, yet it is my duty to fulfil his wishes. I shall speak to each of

you in turn. You will wait here.”

He swept into the study and shut the door behind him. The children sat on a bench in the sanded hall outside, picking at their fingernails and sighing. Barbara began quietly to weep. Andreas tapped his feet on the floor in time to the rhythm of his worried thoughts. Sweat sprang out on Nicolas’s skin, as always when he was upset. Katharina nudged him.

“You will be sent away, do you know that?” she whispered. “O yes, far far away, to a place where you will not have Barbara to protect you. Far, far away.”

She smiled. He pressed his lips tightly together. He would not cry for her.

The time went slowly. They listened intently to the tiny sounds within, the rustle of papers, squeak of a pen, and once a loud grunt, of astonishment, so it sounded. Andreas announced that he was not going to sit here any longer doing nothing, and stood up, but then sat down again immediately when the door flew open and Uncle Lucas came out. He looked at them with a frown, as if wondering where it was that he had seen them before, then shook his head and withdrew again. The flurry of air he had left behind him in the hall subsided.

At last the summons came. Andreas went in first, pausing at the doorway to wipe his damp hands on his tunic and fix on his face an ingratiating leer. In a little while he came out again scowling, and jerked his thumb at Nicolas.

“You next.”

“But what did he say to you?”

“Nothing. We are to be sent away.”

O!

Nicolas went in. The door snapped shut behind him like a mouth. Uncle Lucas was sitting at the big desk by the window with the family papers spread before him. He reminded Nicolas of a huge implacable frog. A panel of the high window stood open on a summer evening full of white clouds and dusty golden light.

“Sit, child.”

The desk was raised upon a dais, and when he sat on the low stool before it he could see only his uncle’s head and shoulders looming above him like a bust of hard grey grainy stone. He was frightened, and his knees would not stay still. The voice addressing him was a hollow booming noise directed less at him than at an idea in Uncle Lucas’s mind called vaguely Child or Nephew, or Responsibility, and Nicolas could distinguish only the meaning of the words and not the sense of what was being said. His life was being calmly wrenched apart at the joints and reassembled unrecognisably in his uncle’s hands. He gazed intently upward through the window, and a part of him detached itself and floated free, out into the blue and golden air. *Włocławek*. It was the sound of some living thing being torn asunder ...

The interview was at an end, yet Nicolas still sat with his hands gripping his knees, quaking but determined. Uncle Lucas looked up darkly from the desk. “Well?”

“Please sir, I am to be a merchant, like my father.”

“What do you say, boy? Speak up.”

“Papa said that one day I should own the offices and the warehouses and all the ships and Andreas would go for the Church because you would find a place for him but I would stay here in Torun to tend the business, Papa said. You see,” faintly, “I do not think I really want to go away.”

Uncle Lucas blinked. “What age are you, child?”

“Ten years, sir.”

“You must finish your schooling.”

“But I am at St John’s.”

“Yes yes, but you will leave St John’s! Have you not listened? You will go to the Cathedral School at Włocławek, you and your brother both, and after that to the University of Cracow where you will study canon law. Then you will enter the Church. I do not ask you to understand, only to obey.”

“But I want to stay here, please sir, with respect.”

There was a silence. Uncle Lucas gazed at the boy without expression, and then the great head turned, like part of an immense engine turning, to the window. He sighed.

“Your father’s business has failed. Torun has failed. The trade has gone to Danzig. He time his death well. These papers, these so-called accounts: I am appalled. It is a disgrace, such incompetence. The Waczelrodts made him, and this is how he repays us. The house will be retained, and there will be some small annuities, but the rest must be sold off. I have said to my child, that I do not expect you to understand, only to obey. Now you may go.”

Katharina was waiting for him in the hall. “I told you: far far away.”

*

The evening waned. He would not, could not weep, and his face, aching for tears, pained him. Anna the cook fed him sugar cakes and hot milk in the kitchen. He sat under the table. That was his favourite place. The last of the day’s sunlight shone through the window on the copper pots and polished tiles. Outside, the spires of Torun dreamed in summer and silence. Everywhere he looked was inexpressible melancholy. Anna leaned down and peered at him in his lair.

“Aye, master, you’ll be a good boy now, eh?”

She grinned, baring yellowed stumps of teeth, and nodded and nodded. The sun withdrew stealthily, and a cloud the colour of a bruise loomed in the window.

“What is canon law, Anna, do you know?”

Barbara was to be sent to the Cistercian Convent at Kulm. He thought of his mother. The future was a foreign country; he did not want to go there.

“*Ach ja, you be a good boy, du, Knabe.*”

*

The wind blew on the day that he left, and everything waved and waved. The linden trees waved. Goodbye!

* * *

Dearest Sister:

I am sorry that I did not write to you before. Are you happy at the Convent? I am not very happy here. I am not very unhappy. I miss you & Katharina & our house. The Masters here are very Cross. I have learned Latin very well & can speak it very well. We learn Geometry also which I like very much. There is one who is named Wodka but he calls himself Abstemijs. We think that is very funny. There is another by name Caspar Sturm. He teaches Latin & other things. Does Andreas write to you? I do not see him very often: he goes with the older fellows. I am very Lonely. It is snowing here now & very Cold. Uncle Lucas came to visit us. He did not remember my name. He tested me in Latin & gave me a Florin. He did not give Andreas a Florin. The Masters were afraid of him. They say he is to be the Bishop soon in Ermland. He did not say anything to me of that matter. I must go to Vespers now. Do you like Music: do you? I say Prayers for you & for everyone. We are going home for Christmas tide: I mean to Torun. I hope that you are well. I hope that you will write to me soon & then I will write to you again.

Your Loving Brother

Nic: Koppernigk

*

He was not very unhappy. He was waiting. Everything familiar had been taken away from him, and all here was strange. The school was a whirling wheel of noise and violence at the still centre of which he cowered, dizzy and frightened, wondering at the poise of those swaggering fellows with their rocky knuckles and terrible teeth, who knew all the rules, and never stumbled, and ignored him so completely. And even when the wheel slowed down, and he ventured out to the very rim, still he felt that he was living only half his life here. Włocławek, and that the other, better half was elsewhere, mysteriously. How otherwise explain the small dull ache within him always, the ache that a severed limb leaves throbbing like an imprint of itself upon the emptiness dangling from the stump? In the cold and the dark at five in the mornings he rose in the mewling dormitory, aware that somewhere a part of him was turning languidly into a deeper lovelier sleep than his hard pallet would ever allow. Throughout his days that other self crossed his path again and again, always in sunlight, always smiling, taunting him with the beauty and grace of a phantom existence. So he waited, and endured as patiently as he could the mean years, believing that someday his sundered selves must meet in some far finer place, of which at moments he was afforded intimations, in green April weather, in the enormous wreckage of clouds, or in the aethereal splendours of High Mass.

He found curiously consoling the rigours of discipline and study. They sustained him in those times when the mind went dead, after he had been trounced by the band of bullies that were Andreas's friends, or flogged for a minor misdemeanor, or when memories of home made him weep inside.

Lessons commenced at seven in the Great Hall after matins. At that grey hour nothing was real except discomfort, and there was neither sleep nor waking but a state very like a hallucination between the two. The clatter and crack of boots on floorboards were the precise sounds that in the imagination chilled bones were making in their stiff sockets. Slowly the

hours passed, sleep withdrew, and the morning settled down to endure itself until noon when there was dinner in the refectory and then what they called play for an hour. The afternoons were awful. Time slackened to a standstill as the orbit of the day yawned out in emptiness in a long, slow, eccentric arc. The raucous babble of a dozen classes ranged about the room clashed in the stale thickening air, and the masters bellowed through the din mounting desperation, and by evening the school, creeping befuddled toward sleep, knew that another such day was not to be borne. But day followed day with deathly inevitability into weeks distinguished one from the next only by the dead caesura of the sabbath.

He learned with ease, perhaps too easily. The masters resented him, who swallowed down their hard-won knowledge in swift effortless draughts. It was as if they were not really teaching him, but were merely confirming what he knew already. Dimly he saw how deeply he thus insulted them, and so he feigned dull-wittedness. He watched certain of his classmates, and learned from them, to whom it came quite naturally, the knack of letting his lower lip hang and his eyes glaze over when some complexity held up the progress of a lesson; and sure enough the masters softened toward him, and at length to his relief began to ignore him.

But there were some not so easily fooled.

*

Caspar Sturm was a Canon of the Chapter of Włocławek Cathedral, to which the school was attached. He taught the *trivium* of logic and grammar and Latin rhetoric. Tall and lean, hair dark, death-laden, he stalked through the school like a wolf, always alone, always seeming searching. He was famous in the town for his women and his solitary drinking bouts. He feared neither God nor the Bishop, and hated many things. Some said he had killed a man once long ago, and had entered the Church to atone for his sin: that was why he had not taken Holy Orders. There were other stories too, that he was the King of Poland's bastard, that he had gambled away an immense fortune, that he slept in sheets of scarlet silk. Nicolas believed it all.

The school feared Canon Sturm and his moods. Some days his classes were the quietest in the hall, when the boys sat mute and meek, transfixed by his icy stare and the hypnotic rhythm of his voice; at other times he held riotous assembly, stamping about and waving his arms, roaring, laughing, leaping among the benches to slash with the whip he always carried at the fleeing shoulders of a miscreant. His fellow teachers eyed him with distaste as he pranced and yelled, but they said nothing, even when his antics threatened to turn the classes too into bedlam. Their forbearance was an acknowledgment of his wayward brilliance—or it might have been only that they too, like the boys, were afraid of him.

He chose his favourites from among the dullards of the school, hulking fellows bulging with brawn and boils who sprawled at their desks and grinned and guffawed, basking in the assurance of his patronage. He looked on them with a kind of warm contempt. They amused him. He cuffed and pummelled them merrily, and with cruel shafts of wit exposed their irredeemable ignorance, making them squirm before the class in stuttering sullen shame; yet still they loved him, and were fiercely loyal.

On Nicolas he turned a keen and quizzical eye. The boy blushed and bowed his head, embarrassed. There was something indecent in the way Caspar Sturm looked at him, gentle

but firmly lifting aside the mask and delving into the soft palpitating core of his soul. Nicolas clenched his fists, and a drop of sweat trickled down his breastbone. *You must not understand me!* The master rarely addressed him directly, and when he did there settled around them a private silence fraught with cloying unspeakable intimacies that neither would think of attempting to speak, and Canon Sturm stepped back and nodded curtly, as if he had satisfied himself once again of the validity of a conclusion previously reached.

“And here is Andreas, elder scion of the house of Koppernigk! Come, dolt, what can you tell us now of Tullius’s rules for the art of memory, eh?”

*

He learned with ease, perhaps too easily: his studies bored him. Only now and then, in the grave cold music of mathematics, in the stately march of a Latin line, in logic’s hard bright lucid, faintly frightening certainties, did he dimly perceive the contours of some glistening ravishing thing assembling itself out of blocks of glassy air in a clear blue unearthly sky, and then there thrummed within him a coppery chord of perfect bliss.

“Herr Sturm Herr Sturm!” the class cried, “a conundrum, Herr Sturm!”

“What! Are we here to learn or to play games?”

“Ach, Herr Sturm!”

“Very well, very well. Regard:”

In a room there are 3 men, A & B who are blindfold, & C who is blind. On a table in the room there are 3 black hats & 2 white hats, 5 hats in all. A 4th man enters: call him D. He places a hat on each of the heads of A & B & C, and the 2 remaining hats he hides. Now D removes the blindfold from A, who thus can see the hats that B & C are wearing, but not the hat that he himself wears, nor the 2 hats that are hidden. D asks A if he can say what colour is the hat that he, A, is wearing? A ponders, and answers:

“No.”

Now D removes the blindfold from B, who thus can see the hats that A & C are wearing but not the hat that he himself wears, nor the two hats that are hidden. D asks B if he can say what colour is the hat that he, B, is wearing? B ponders, hesitates, and answers:

“No.”

Now: D cannot remove the blindfold from C, who does not wear a blindfold, and can see no hats at all, not white nor black, not worn nor hidden, for C, as said, is blind. D asks C if he can say what colour is the hat that he, C, is wearing? C ponders, smiles, and answers:

“Yes!”

“—Well, gentlemen,” said Canon Sturm, “what is the colour of the blind man’s hat, and how does he know it?”

The glass blocks sailed in silence through the bright air, and locked.

Done!

Harmonia.

“Well, young Koppernigk? You have solved it?”

Startled, Nicolas ducked his head and began scribbling feverishly on his slate. He was hot all over, and sweating, aghast to think that his face might have betrayed him, but despite that he was ridiculously pleased with himself, and had to concentrate very hard on the thought of death in order to keep from grinning.

“Come, man,” the Canon muttered. “Have you got it?”

“Not yet, sir, I am working on it sir.”

“Ah. You are working on it.”

And Caspar Sturm stepped back, and nodded curtly.

*

And then there was Canon Wodka. Nicolas walked with him by the river. It was the Vistula, the same that washed in vain the ineradicable mire of Torun—that is, the name was the same, but the name meant nothing. Here the river was young, as it were, a bright swift stream, while there it was old and weary. Yet it was at once here and there, young and old at once, and its youth and age were separated not by years but leagues. He murmured aloud the river’s name and heard in that word suddenly the concepts of space and time fractured.

Canon Wodka laughed. “You have a clerkly conscience, Nicolas.” It was true: what the world took for granted he found a source of doubt and fear. He would not have had otherwise. The Canon’s smile faltered, and he glanced at the boy timidly, tenderly, out of troubled eyes. “Beware these enigmas, my young friend. They exercise the mind, but they cannot teach us how to live.”

Canon Wodka was an old man of thirty. He was startlingly ugly, a squat fat waddling creature with a globular head and pockmarked face and tiny wet red mouth. His hands were extraordinary things, brown and withered like the claws of a bat. Only his eyes, disconsolate and bright, revealed the sad maimed soul within. To the school he was a figure of rare fun and Canon Sturm’s boys loved to follow him at a lurch down the corridors, mocking his preposterous gait. Even his name, so perfectly inapt, conspired to make a clown of him, a role to which he seemed to have resigned himself, for it was in irony that he had taken the name Abstemius, and when thus addressed would sometimes cross his eyes and let his greying head loll about in a travesty of drunkenness. Nicolas suspected that the Canon, despite his admonition, derived from the intricacies of pure playful thought the only consolation afforded by a life that he had never quite learned how to live.

He taught the *quadrivium* of arithmetic and geometry, astronomy and music theory. He was a very bad teacher. His was not the disciplined mind that his subjects required. It was too excitable. In the midst of a trigonometrical exposition he would go scampering off after Zeno’s arrow, which will never traverse the 100 ells that separate the target from the bow because first it must fly 50 ells, and before that 25, and before that $12\frac{1}{2}$, and so on to infinity, where it comes to a disgruntled kind of halt. But the farther that the arrow did not go the nearer Nicolas drew to this poor fat laughable master. They became friends cautiously, timidly, with many checks and starts, unwilling to believe in their good fortune but friends they did become, and even when one day in the airy silence of the organ loft in the cathedral Canon Wodka put one of his little withered claws on Nicolas’s leg, the boy stared steadily off into the gloom under the vaulted ceiling and began to talk very rapidly about nothing, as if nothing at all were happening.

In their walks by the river the Canon sketched the long confused history of cosmology. At first he was reluctant to implant new ideas in a young mind that he considered too much concerned already with abstractions, but then the wonder of the subject possessed him and he was whirled away into stammering starry heights. He spoke of the oyster universe of the

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