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*Journal of the Plague Week*

Friday afternoon, March 27, in the 2015<sup>th</sup> year of Our Lord Jesus Christ, and the sun is beginning to set over the Mount Mee campgrounds at the foot of Neurum Creek, when a little girl crouches beside her family tent and vomits something the colour of port wine. Her mother is there in an instant. Her father, an instant too late, is bitingly aware that he can do nothing but watch, until the mother yells for him to bring water and a washcloth.

Eleven-year-old Wendy Horak had put up with a strained stomach all day, enduring very much the same feeling as the time she did too many sit-ups in Miss Clark's P.E. class. All day she had nursed something in her head, directly behind and between her eyes, that made her feel as though she was always just a few steps back from everything – as though the world was happening just outside of her reach. But, because of childish ignorance, this little girl wasn't able to distinguish symptom from the gently persistent nausea that marks all childhood.

Apparently they'd gone camping near the D'Aguiar National Park once before, back when she was really little. But Wendy's mother wasn't surprised that she didn't remember.

"We weren't here for long," she'd said. "And you were very little."

It was the strange certainty that did it – knowing where things were, like the toilets at the campsites, the memory, like a dream, of various rock faces and cliffs. But the one thing that really reminded her of a time that she couldn't remember was the smell of the insect repellent, blisteringly sweet, like a chemical flower. A smell so sharp and crystal it made something tingle behind her eyes. The tacky touch of half dried insect repellent. Ticks were a problem all year round, Daddy said. But no one said anything about fleas.

They had done this last time too, so Mummy said – gone camping and then spent Good Friday to Easter Monday with Mum's parents. They'd only shared Easter with Dad's family once, back before she could really remember, in the Czech Republic. But her memories of that Easter were memories of photographs rather than memories of memories. Spying her Babi and Děde from the attic of their house in Sedlec, watching them out in the yard, plucking feathers from the chicken they had just decapitated. Babi and Děde, both larger than life, both marked with the same dark half-circles under their eyes that she had associated with a persistent sadness that was unique to all eastern European faces. Something about the cold and communism.

When her little girl vomits, Mummy is there, holding her only child, brushing that very long and very dark brown hair back from her daughter's face. She is there, rubbing a

hand on her back and assuring her that everything is ok: that it's ok to be sick, that it's not fair to be sick.

They will think things that they will regret. Mummy, holding her daughter, will wonder why her little girl's vomit – so thin, so liquid – doesn't sink into the ground, why it sits afloat as though even the earth itself is rejecting it. She will momentarily think of her daughter's body as something poisonous. Daddy, at his distance, will, for an instant, think about how much he wants a cigarette. And he will think, very clearly, in his own language, that if you've never been truly terrified but want to be – more terrified than watching Russian tanks roll in – then have a daughter.

Water and washcloth at the ready, Daddy is kneeling beside them asking everything obvious – '*did Wendy just vomit?*' Except, Daddy's accent makes the word vomit sound like '*warm-it.*' That's what Wendy finds herself thinking about as he wipes her face. The way her daddy has his Ws and Vs around the wrong way.

"Did *Wendy* just *warm-it?*" As though it's not right there in front of him.

When you are a child, there is always a strange excitement that takes hold the moment you have proof that you are sick. It's a strange sense of entitlement and individuality that, because you are not old enough to realise the seriousness of illness, makes you feel that you are set apart from everyone else.

As the sun clears the summit of Mount Mee, the seizures begin.

No one was watching when plague came to Australia. The rest of the world wasn't watching in any case and, if Australia's forgetting of its brush with the plague is anything to go by, nor were many Australians. But it came, 1900, in an awkward period between our letting go of Old World fears and our replacing them with a world of science and medicine. We had given up believing in divine punishment, but we weren't quite done seeking penance. By then, doctors were treating divine punishment with one of Pasteur's vaccines, or treating plague as pneumonia – antibiotics were still some twenty-eight years away, but we had anesthetic and morphine, we had Germ Theory, and the rigging-up of quarantine stations, like Spiegel tents, just to the sides of ports, might have provoked carnival curiosity rather than dread among the public.

Nothing about the Australian epidemic – if we can even call it that – was Old World. Plague first touched the Australian shores sometime in January 1900, Adelaide its first victim. But death didn't arrive as a pale, cloaked reaper, as Ingmar Bergman imagined it in *The Seventh Seal*, and in any case, there was no handsome Swedish Crusader, deft in the art of chess, to buy us time. No *danse macabre* either. Just water and heat and slums and rats. The plague made its tour of Australia throughout the early 1900s, touching the lives of thousands of people, killing over half that number.

The first news report of plague in Australia wasn't even considered front page material, but appeared on page four in the morning edition of *The Mercury* on 13 March 1900: "The Government bacteriologist has discovered the plague bacillus in some rats submitted to him. His investigations will not be completed for a few days."

These were still sinister and auspicious times, for the *images* of fear weren't gone completely. Australians recognised the Black Death's old familiars, and they attempted to

annihilate them. In Queensland alone, over 90,000 rats were said to have been destroyed. Australia, in its quest to become a “pure nation” in its drive to escape Old World problems and illnesses, was still well and truly haunted by the specter of the past. Like the medieval doctors who had burned herbs to purify the air, desperate sufferers in the slums of Sydney burned barrels of kerosene in the streets in the hopes of dispelling what was thought to be air-borne disease. Home remedies of the Middle Ages, of bathing in urine and menstrual blood, were revisited, and quacks and herbalists prescribed plague victims a placebo of Indian root pills and “protective anklets”.

While bubonic plague has long been thought to have died out, died of natural causes, or to have died, perhaps, like God, plagues never really die. They sleep. But they always reawaken. There are some parts of the world where the plague lives on – in November 2014 the Minister of Health in Madagascar reported the outbreak of bubonic plague. Even to this day it is reported that of the estimated 20 people who contract bubonic plague in North America each year, only 10 survive. But Australia, as yet, and as far as we know – perhaps because of its isolation, perhaps because of its refusal to believe in ghosts – has not so much as heard a *rat-tat-tat* since 1925.

Of all Czech traditions – and there are many wonderful ones – one of the most curious is the tradition for the third Sunday of Lent: what was, and is to this day, known in Bohemia as *Neděle Kýchávná* or “Sneezing Sunday”. On this day, the faithful attend masses in which prayer is directed to averting the plague. Such a communal response to plague and plague death may have emerged sometime after the sixth century “sneezing plague”, which as its name suggests was a pandemic in which mortality was marked by excessive sneezing. To sneeze, or to be in the presence of sneezers, was to have your death warrant signed.

Wednesday early afternoon, March 25, in the 2015<sup>th</sup> year of Our Lord Jesus Christ, and the sun is beginning to set over the Mount Mee campgrounds at the foot of the Neurum Creek. A little girl crouches beside something dank and furry that is lying on the ground. She pokes it with a stick. It must have been dead for days, she thinks. In that time, its skin has separated from its carcass and hardened to a slightly misshapen shell. The blood on its nose looks like tree sap. She can see the light shining through it – the blood has crystalized, is ruby-ish, like it is made of crushed jewels. The dried blood reminds her of the inside of a pomegranate, like fleshy sequins, glittering, red, wet and many. Like spider’s eyes. She drops her stick and is about to touch it with an index finger. Her father is there in an instant, sweeping her away, her mother, an instant too late, but crying from a distance.

“Wendy, don’t touch that dirty thing.”

And Wendy, calmly tries to explain that she feels sorry for it, that she wants to give it a good Christian burial. Wendy, who has never been to a funeral before, intrigued by the solemnity of mourners with candles, imagines a makeshift grave and a prayer for this poor, dead rat. Mummy and Daddy usher her away, explain the reality of ticks and infection. And Mummy assumes that this is the end of it.

One beast and one alone is considered pestilence above all others.

The black rat, *rattus rattus*, eyes like twin drops of blood in the night. Slender body and a tail twice as long. The rat, its body melts under the crack of a door, slick and dark as molasses. The animal of the plague. It is now well known that the rat was not the cause of the plague, but the carrier. Rats are both exemplars of the impossibly filthy and impossibly hygienic. They clean themselves more than any other animal. Yet because of their ability to hold so many infectious bacteria in and on them at any one time, they are nearly perfect disease traffickers – they are resilient vectors to the bacteria they spread. Black rats – the plague rat – are Old World Rats.

The link between rats and seafaring may explain the reason why rats, in the popular imagination, often take on a liquid quality, why an ocean of rats, a wave of rats, is so unnerving. No longer single drops of water, but a torrent. Rats, stowaways on ships, turning common cargo trawlers into ghost ships, captains lashed to their wheels, their crew all perished, bodies coated in the white salt of sea spray. Rats abandoning sinking ships. Rats, tourists commuting from one dead port city to another.

Everyone knows the story of the Pied Piper. A German town called Hamelin is overrun with rats and nothing will get rid of them. A piper appears and tells the city council that he can rid the town of its infestation if they agree to pay him for his work. The councilors agree. That evening, the piper plays a song that attracts the rats. He leads the rats into the moat surrounding the town and drowns them. When all the rats have died, the piper returns to the councilors and asks for his payment. Despite his success, the councilors refuse to pay the full amount of his reward. The piper warns them that they will pay for their actions. They do not heed him. The next night, the piper begins to play his pipe again, but this time, instead of rats, all of the children in the town follow him as though they are sleepwalkers. They follow him into a cave just outside of the city. There is a tremendous rockslide and the mouth of the cave is sealed over. According to legend, the Piper steals away all of the children except for one little boy who could not move fast enough because he was crippled.

But of course, not all of the children could have been lost to the Pied Piper. There were those who were too weak or lame to pursue him. There were those who were imprisoned for petty crimes. There were those who were ill in hospital or at home. Those who could not follow the piper went mad in their attempts to go with him. They stretched their bodies against the bars of their prison cells, they cut themselves as they tried to climb through windows. They ruptured their dressed wounds, they vomited from exertion, they cut the fine skin under their fingernails as they dragged themselves along the ground. They wept and writhed and begged to be taken with the music. A question, though: what song does the Pied Piper play? And does he play the same song that he used to lure the rats away? Is it a song that is at once like Galton's dog whistle and yet enchantingly Orphic – but Orpheus, we must remember, played the lyre, not a pipe. Perhaps, then, this is *Panic* music – the music of Pan, whose pipe songs were said to be both piercing and sweet. The god of the woods, whose music caused a strange, some say *contagious* sense of fear and unrest among herds of animals and crowds of people.

Now, because they had lost their minds, the children that were left in Hamelin were believed to speak in tongues, were believed to have been touched by God. The piper thus became analogous to God: by removing the rats he showed us mercy. But for his actions, we are forever indebted to him. There are consequences for not repaying the redeemer.

Wednesday evening, March 25, in the 2015<sup>th</sup> year of Our Lord Jesus Christ, Mummy and Daddy are preparing dinner, and they do not see their daughter sneak off. The rat is still there, right where she found it, curiously untouched by carrion feeders. Wendy, for want of digging utensils, uses her hands. The earth is cold and hard and doesn't break easily. Wendy has to shave the top layer of soil down with her fingernails, wriggle her fingers into the earth and then pry bits and pieces of soil loose. The earth is cold. Shallow graves for sweet creatures. Sometimes six feet is too deep.

Everything about this animal is stark and jagged. Even its fur has stiffened. The smell of the dead rat reminds her of mustard – putrid yellow and tangy. The same smell as the time that possum had died in their ceiling. It had taken Mummy and Daddy days to find it. But the smell had been a small price to pay for a return to silent nights; nights free of the sound of something, quite like a child, moving about in the ceiling.

Wendy, fingers and forearms smeared with soil, now realises that she doesn't have a coffin for this poor creature. Not even a handkerchief to wrap it in. She is about to gather a handful of leaves to lay over the inside of the grave – to cushion the rat in its final resting place – when she comes to a better idea. Wendy wipes her hands on her parka, hitches up her skirt and pulls down her knickers. These are her least favourite pair of pants. The white ones with a pattern of timid yellow jonquils all over them. She wonders why Mummy always buys her underpants that have flowers on them. Wendy doesn't know whether it is permissible to forge a winding sheet out of underwear. But, she reasons, her knickers are clean enough. Mostly. Still, she can't shake the memory of that time, years ago now, when she had been in year two and she had been spectating at a school swimming carnival. Bored and restless before lunch, she had gone through the contents of her bag with one of the boys from year six. They had lined up her possessions on her towel: goggles, swimming cap, lunch, a fresh pair of socks, a fresh pair of knickers – the ones with the bluebell motif. When the boy had realised what he had just touched, he had shoved the knickers back, wagged a finger at her, and said: "These are naughty". Was it naughty, then, to bury a rat in a pair of knickers? She didn't suppose that the rat would mind. And at least she would never have to wear that pair of underpants again.

The biggest problem with being a kid, Wendy has decided – the biggest problem with being a *girl*, maybe – is boredom. Sometimes Wendy got bored in ways that didn't quite make sense to her, in ways that she couldn't really describe. Bored, but saddened by her boredom at the loving things that her parents did. Bored with knickers with floral patterns. Bored with the cautious way that Mummy, before their long drive the other day, had fed her half a travelsick tablet, crushed up on a spoonful of jam because Wendy didn't yet know how to swallow tablets halved or whole. That shuddersome flavor of the caustic insides of the tablet, mixed with Cottées raspberry jam. Spoon-fed, even at

eleven. Bored. Daddy telling her bedtime stories off the top of his head; stories about Czech princesses who had Faberge eggs for toys, who wore bear-skin hats, who rode albino ponies through the snow. Sweet, but sad. And bored.

But there were diversions from this boredom. Moments of chance discovery, like the time that she had found that kangaroo trapped in the fence, dead. Mummy and Daddy had said that the ranger wouldn't pick it up if it was on their property; that the ranger would only collect it and dispose of it if it was on the roadside. And then, that glorious moment when Mummy and Daddy had each pulled on a pair of gardening gloves, retrieved the wheelbarrow from the shed, and, together, had pulled the kangaroo free from the fence, hoisted it into the wheelbarrow and carted it down to the road. Wendy, in raptures, running alongside them asking: can I help you lift it? Can I push the wheelbarrow? How do you think it died? What does it feel like?

Wendy thinks about all of this as she wraps the dead rat in her knickers, sets it in its hand-dug grave. With a free hand she pushes the tilled soil over her shrouded friend. She tries to think of a prayer to say – something she's seen in a movie. Some line about earth and ashes and dust. But all she can think of is how being a little girl is sometimes very boring. Really, it's very boring.