

The Tower

by Erika Byrne-Ludwig

Magda drove up the road and circled the park — her usual route for shopping and other duties. She would attend first to her son Gino's piano lessons. Delighted, though quite surprised, at his choice of instrument, she opened her music book for beginners and played a piece with one hand on the wheel as she followed the wide road bordered by trees. When she arrived her tapping stopped but the melody stayed in her mind while she parked the car in the shade.

Standing on the footpath, one hand as an eye-shade, she looked at the building at the back of the garden. Straightaway she remembered. The castle ... She hadn't given her boys much attention when they had talked about it. There it stood. She started walking on the drawbridge leading to the door and rang the bell which a man answered.

“Mr Hawkins, I suppose.”

“Yes, that's me. Paul Hawkins.”

“Magda Gull.” They shook hands. “Is Mrs Hawkins in by any chance? I've ...”

“No, won't be back before five.”

“It's about the music lessons ... ”

He looked at her from under coarse eyebrows.

“Well, I'll just have to come back, won't I?”

“We're on the phone.”

“I'd rather talk to her personally.” Looking around with amazement, she added, “a castle you've got here ... how unusual! Built it yourself?”

“Yes ...” he coughed and smoothed his beard.

“Marvellous ...”

“Took me ten years, just about.”

“Marvellous!” she repeated.

“It's only a miniature one, more like a big toy.”

“Your toy, or the children's?”

A grin more than a smile lined his face. "The dog sleeps in it at night."

"I'm sure visitors ..."

"Want to see it?" His interest wasn't evident, unless his voice only suggested so.

"I mean anytime ... no problem ..."

She looked up at the tower.

"Well ..."

"Now ... let's see. We ..." He began planning the tour.

"That's the drawbridge here, isn't it?" she prattled.

"Huu ... Let's start with the watch tower. Might as well. Go from top to bottom. I'll go first. Mind your head. They're quite sharp these rocks."

They climbed the spiral stairs. At the top a cool wind was blowing. She discreetly aired her armpits.

"Why a castle?"

"Why?" He grinned into the distance. "Tin knights I had once, and a castle. Timber it was made of."

"Children's toys stick with you for life, don't they? Now you wouldn't want to leave this place, would you? I mean all those years of labour you put in. You get attached."

"Maybe ..." He didn't seem convinced. "Still, acreage, that's what I want. And build another one. Bigger this time. On a hill. Not much of a view down here, is it?"

"That's if you look towards the town. Nice directly down. Any fish in the moat?"

"Some carps and a couple of turtles."

"And the well there, in the middle ... the kids must enjoy dropping things in it. We had one. Stones, branches, paper boats ..."

"No, they don't. Not if I can help it anyway."

"Yes, you want them to look at it with awe, pay respect to it," she said in a conciliatory voice.

"Wouldn't go that far."

They leaned quietly against the tower wall, their glances hovering around.

"Yes, it's got to be bigger," he muttered as to himself. "Not bursting through from all sides. No, it's got to be real."

"A tourist attraction then?"

"We'd see about that. Show you the chapel now."

Its entrance was in width the size of a bear. She thought she would fit in her shoulders with ease but might find it hard to drag her hips in. Still, if she squatted as low as possible, and with a slight sideways ...

"Got to get in there ... say a prayer," she half-joked.

She crawled in like a bear. Paul Hawkins waited behind. Inside the chapel she sat on one of the two chairs, wiped her forehead and fanned her face. Angels above, on the ceiling, pink and blue, gazed down with petrified innocence. A prayer somehow escaped.

"It's lovely," she called out. Crawling out on all fours, she looked up, a strand of hair idling on her cheek.

Their walk continued along the wall around the property. Magda commented on the rambling cart, the weathered plough, and wondered at the tiny snapdragon beds.

"Dragons ... fiery beasts ... a bit of mythology in the mix." He pointed to a shady spot. "And trees for shade." With a wide gesture he talked about his display of old tools, picked up throughout his life at demolition sales — all nailed to the pebble-dashed wall.

Magda lingered near the well, caressing it lightly for her childhood's sake. "It's a charming place," she said, a little absentminded.

"My lodge's turn now," he called out. "And that'll be it."

"Your ..."

"The rumpus ... Light needs fixing."

She could have ended the tour there. It would have suited her in a way. But then she might as well complete it. In his own taciturn way he had been obliging. She followed him in to the dark room, dropping her thin shawl on her shoulders.

Stirrups and saddles dangling down from beams like giant bats stirred her hair. Lances and swords shone faintly on the walls amidst shields and helmets. In front of her Mr Hawkins, suddenly more

open, talked about his obsession. In the musty room, his voice, deep and gruff, seemed to rise from a grave.

"All these weapons ..." she said in wonder.

"Gathered all these years ..."

"A table ..."

"The Knights' Round Table. Cedar. Cedar chairs." Her hand ran over the red wood. "Watch out!" he said when she moved near a silhouette staring at her with hollow eyes.

"Some statue ..."

"The king. Queen's just opposite. I leave her in a darker corner. She's got a crack. She was carved in wood. The king ... just a boulder once."

Magda walked to the queen and touched her. Her fingers curled into the groove cracking her chest. She quickly withdrew her hand and turned round. In her brusque motion she found herself facing him. He was near her. She could hear his deep breathing. In the subdued light his wolfy eyes were fixed on hers. She moved back a step towards a slit window.

"Well, I suppose I've taken enough of your time," she said, suddenly aware the tour was taking an unpredicted turn. "I must be going." She looked at the frame of light shining at the entrance.

He took her wrists and pushed her against the wall. She saw his eyes. The ray of light coming in from the slit window was shining in them, forming blades and weapons. She was facing the eyes of a warrior. She panicked, pushed him away and started towards the entrance.

The light outside was bright. She walked out, tripping on a rock, fell on her knees and her hands but quickly stood up. Her shawl got entangled with a large tin soldier's hand. She pulled it and tore its lace. Paul Hawkins' dog caught up with her and barked. She hurried to the footpath, saw her car through a curtain of mist and fumbled with her keys.

She followed the wide road shaded by trees. Behind her stood the fortress with its stone walls. She reconstructed her tour right from the start. Toys break, she thought, or lose their charm. The rocks,

the weapons, the tools, the soldiers — a joyless toy-castle really, with the irritating grinding of the weathervane, the faintly lit rumpus room, where the shadowy creatures on the walls had seen the two visitors move closely and abruptly separate.

Magda stopped the car a while before reaching the shops, tried to read the shopping list she had left at home. A piece of music came to her mind instead. A little sonata she loved. She imagined Gino's fingers touching the piano. A tear had fallen on the steering wheel. She watched it slide, slowly, with a light wriggle. Gino was playing the little sonata. She listened, seemingly calm, then climbed the spiral stairs. At the top of the tower a cool wind was blowing. She picked up a sharp stone and with all her strength threw it down into the well below.

