

Tabula Rasa

Von MORITZ

Kapitel 5: Between The Wall And The Backrest

The streets were busy, not only with those who were working and running errands, weaving through the crowd and the coaches passing by, but also filled with people who had put on their good coats and dresses to stroll the streets on a nice summer day and do some shopping for leisure.

And really, it was such a lovely day that Daniel had decided to take Alexander into the city to look for a birthday present. After all, the 14th of August was approaching, the day he had taken the boy under his wing, which, theoretically, made it the day of Alexander's birth. Or so Daniel had worked it out. It would be Alexander's fifth birthday now - or at least his fifth year with Daniel. That was the only fix point they had in regards to Alexander's age, as Daniel was not quite sure how old the child had been as he had found him. But as he had been a small baby, Daniel figured he could not be too far off in any case.

Alexander held onto Daniel's hand as they walked down the pavement, his small fingers curling around Daniel's who in turn grabbed his hand more tightly. Daniel looked down at the boy in his burgundy tunic with his white round shirt collar poking out at his neck, and he smiled.

Yes, Alexander was a rather reserved child, but Daniel thought it was a sign of maturity and no need for worry. After all, Alexander was very passionate and talkative when it came to his interests. More than anything, he enjoyed being read to in the evenings, so Daniel thought a book full of children's stories a very fitting present for him. In fact, the boy had such an interest in the written word and was so good at remembering, Daniel wondered if he would be able to learn reading as easily as he had mastered talking.

Alexander had uttered his first word soon after he had learned how to walk across the drawing room. One day, he had demanded for his favourite toy by saying "ball", and then had continued to amaze Daniel every day. As it turned out, the boy picked up new words very quickly and it was not too long until he was putting his demands in small sentences. And as a result of Daniel's constant admonitions, Alexander had even started to phrase them more politely.

As the boy was getting more and more eloquent, Daniel could hardly read anything without Alexander interrupting and asking questions about why and how, and he

would press on until they were answered to his satisfaction.

He was undeniably intelligent, that much was for certain, and Daniel was not too surprised. Alexander was and had always been remarkable, after all.

Alexander's intellect was however not the only thing that was striking about him. Whenever they left the house, the boy stood out wherever he went and drew a lot of unwanted attention. People kept turning their heads and commented in awed whispers as they passed them, but Daniel did his best to ignore them and held onto Alexander's hand a little tighter.

He used to think that Alexander was just both an extraordinary and quite gorgeous sight to behold in his little tunic and white shirts. After all, he did look a bit unusual. Alexander's hair was still very pale and too thin to be curled into locks to frame his face like it was fashionable for children. His eyes had the colour of amber and he tended to stare at people even though Daniel kept telling him that this was a rather impolite thing to do. And then there was his skin, which had a rather strange darker shade, emphasized by the contrast to his hair. But even though all of this was uncommon, Daniel thought he did look quite neat and proper.

Yet he soon had to discover that the boy's unusual appearance caused more than admiration. What upset Daniel most were the preposterous assumptions people made when they looked at Alexander.

It had been on one of their first strolls through the city, when he had bought Alexander some sweets at a small store at the street corner. Alexander had received the bag from the shop owner with a clear, sincere "thank you, sir" before he opened it to eat a piece of liquorice gum.

There had been two gentlemen close by, maybe looking for a little something for the ladies they might be courting. However, rather than examining the different flavours of sweets on display, they looked at the boy with unconcealed wonder.

"Just one for now", Daniel told Alexander as they were about to leave, but he was interrupted by one of the two men who had been so interested in Alexander's behaviour.

"Is it not amazing?", the man told to his companion without even attempting to lower his voice as he gestured towards Alexander. "Here you have an excellent example of how the English civilization can even turn an exotic child like this into a young gentleman with proper manners." The other man agreed and even the shopkeeper murmured some words of approval, all their eyes on Alexander, who had stopped rummaging in his bag of sweets and looked back at them, wary and uncertain.

Daniel had felt the heat rise in him at so much audacity and took Alexander by the hand to leave the store. To make things worse, the man who had spoken gave him an approving nod as he was about to open the door, and Daniel stormed out on the street, fuming with barely contained anger and indignation.

It was horrible enough that his lie about Alexander's origins had entailed that his godparents thought of the boy as a foreign Algerian child, but strangers gawking at him like he was a savage was what truly outraged Daniel. He had wondered about Alexander's appearance of course, and he had little explanation except for blaming the supernatural forces which had turned Alexander into what he was. Yet if there was one thing he did know for certain, it was that the boy was no primitive savage of strange origins.

However, he had no way of clarifying that without disclosing the whole truth, and even then he doubted anyone would have believed him.

So by now, Daniel did try his best not to pay any heed to whatever talk might arise when they were out in public, also for Alexander's sake.

Still, he could not help but feel righteous anger at such remarks, and when a woman stepped to his side to greet him, he was about to tell her that she should mind her own business. Yet he hesitated as her face under the dark bonnet seemed familiar to him, even though he could not quite place it.

"Mr Mayfair", she said with a courteous bow of the head. "It has been a long time, and you may not remember me. I hope you do not think it terribly rude of me to approach you like this. I was the boy's nurse for his first years."

Now Daniel did recognize her, yet was no less astonished that she would take notice of him while passing him on the street. It had been two years, after all. But then he suspected that this was probably due to Alexander who was admittedly easier to spot.

She smiled down at the boy who was still holding onto Daniel's hand. "And how is the little master?"

Alexander did not answer, instead he closed up as he often did when others approached him. That he had barely talked to her at all had been one of the reasons why Daniel had decided Alexander did no longer need a nursemaid anymore. And really, it turned out that Alexander could occupy himself with his tin soldiers and wooden toys while Daniel was gone, and rarely did any damage to Daniel's things in the drawing room when examining them on his own.

Mrs Dinges did not approve at all, yet she did complain less when Daniel always returned early to make sure Alexander would eat his dinner.

"He is doing very well", Daniel informed her with emphasis.

Her curiosity concerning Alexander seemed odd to him, as well as the way she had practically jumped at him in public which he could hardly consider appropriate. He still clearly remembered her complaining that something about Alexander's nightmares did unsettle her, yet that she had refused to say what exactly she had meant by that. Daniel had of course dismissed all of her complaints entirely and she had never mentioned such things again. Still, to him she had seemed not awfully distressed over losing her employment soon after.

"Alexander, now tell her how old you are", Daniel demanded, determined to show her that Alexander was growing up just fine without any meddling of a nursemaid. When Daniel pulled him forward by his hand, Alexander finally looked up.

"Five", the boy said, a bit defiantly.

The woman's eyes widened.

"Five?", she echoed, and there was a note of disbelief in her tone that Daniel did not like.

"Well, in a few weeks. Is there any problem with that?", Daniel asked, his tone harsh, yet he did not care.

"Oh, no", she hastily assured him. "No, not at all. He is just a little, well, small for his age. But I am sure that is not too uncommon." She seemed very uncomfortable all of sudden, probably rightfully ashamed for her insulting demeanour, and was quick to add, "I apologize for bothering you, sir. I am sure you are very busy and I think-, I think I should leave now."

"Yes, I believe you should", Daniel said with barely concealed anger. He did not bother responding to her awkward goodbye and with a bit of grim satisfaction watched her all but flee the exchange.

Alexander was quiet after this strange encounter, yet Daniel noticed he had raised his free hand to his mouth and cast his eyes to the ground.

"Do not listen to that woman", Daniel told Alexander as they turned into an alley and approached the bookstore. "She does not know her place, and she clearly does not have much expertise when it comes to children."

Yet he did not have to worry about it. As soon as they entered the store, Alexander seemed to have forgotten all about his former nursemaid and her rudeness. His eyes lit up and he pulled at Daniel's hand, eager to examine the books on the shelves.

Daniel wished he could wipe her bewilderment from his mind just as easily, but it did bother him still. What did she know, he kept telling himself. Alexander was perfectly healthy and well. He would allow no one to belittle him in any way.

Then Alexander urged him to come with him, and Daniel could not dwell on these thoughts any longer. "Well", he announced. "Let us look for a suitable book that I can read to you in the nights to come."

Alexander's excited smile was contagious, and Daniel felt he could barely wait as well until he had new stories to read for him.

-

The lecture hall was rapidly starting to fill. That was no surprise, after all a renowned professor on the field of ethnology had announced to hold a talk for his fellow researchers. His books had gained popularity ever since he had presented his findings about the indigenous people of South America. Anyone who was anyone in the circles of anthropology in London had come, and neither Daniel nor Samuel would have missed it for the world.

"It will be enlightening, no doubt", Samuel said, as he took a seat and Daniel hurried to sit down next to him.

"Yes, though I have heard there are already some who dispute his theories", Daniel answered while adjusting his cravat.

"Well, there are always those who do not have their envy under control", Samuel chuckled, before he turned to greet an acquaintance.

Daniel used the moment to check his slicked back hair in the reflection of one of the darkening windows. But even after reassuring himself of his dapperness, he could not stop fidgeting with the seams of his vest. Samuel addressed him in order to introduce Daniel to his acquaintances, and Daniel had to force himself to stay focused on the exchange of pleasantries. There was something nagging at him and he felt the need to address it, even though he did not quite know how.

As he and Samuel sat back down, he mustered up his nerves.

"I have received a couple of letters", he started.

"Letters?", Samuel repeated, his eyes on his pocket watch.

"From your wife." Daniel did his best to sound not too accusing.

"My wife?" One of Samuel's eyebrows rose sharply. As Daniel struggled for words, Samuel put away his watch and sighed. "Don't tell me it is about this confounded expedition again."

"Her letters find their way to me on a regular basis, admittedly, with about half a year between them", Daniel explained.

He had secretly hoped Harriette would give up if he just ignored her inquiries and so far he had fared well doing so, but her latest letter had made it very clear she had read Herbert's journal and was very intent on knowing more about the artefact they had found. It had caused Daniel greatest discomfort. He knew he had to stop her disturbing his peace of mind, but he could not find it in himself to answer any letters on this subject. So even if he did not want to bother Samuel with such petty things, he had to turn to him.

Samuel's face grew darker for a moment. "I will talk to her, my boy. Trust me on this. Pestering my colleagues like this, the nerve!" The last words he only grumbled into his beard as the professor had stepped up to the lectern, conversations died down and

who had not been seated yet quickly settled down.

As much as he had been excited to hear this talk, Daniel felt it was hard to follow. His attention kept drifting, even when he tried to concentrate. Now that he had brought up Harriette's letters, it was difficult to willfully forget about them again. Daniel loosened his cravat. It was harder to breathe as usual with his corset on, which he wore for important events like this. Even though the hall was vast, the crowd seemed to press down on him, and it felt like the ceiling was getting lower, the walls were closing in.

Samuel beside him cleared his throat. That pulled Daniel out of his musings and made him realize that he had been jiggling his leg apparently for quite a while. Embarrassed, he shot a glance at Samuel. As opposed to Daniel, however, the man seemed to be completely taken in and made no sign that he noticed Daniel's restlessness.

Daniel tried to pull himself together and pay full attention to the orator, but every five minutes he realized he had not been listening at all. Instead, he had concentrated on concentrating. It was a bit too late that Daniel became aware he was making a face out of annoyance at his own absentmindedness.

A break was scheduled about halfway through the talk. Samuel and Daniel went for the lobby where they were provided with drinks and animated discussions about the revelations unveiled by the professor so far. Samuel joined his circle of friends, a preoccupied Daniel in the tow. The noise of dozens of men talking around him blended together into what sounded like a humming, and it surrounded him completely. Daniel was throwing the wall closest to him a glance. Standing with the back to it would probably feel better than here, right in the middle of the crowd.

"What do you think about this, Daniel?" Samuel, who had apparently been involved in a debate with his acquaintances, suddenly turned to him.

Daniel, not wanting to let on that he had no idea what the current topic of their argument was, quickly stuttered "I-I think what you said sounds quite reasonable!"

Fortunately, Samuel seemed satisfied with the half-hearted endorsement, as he turned his attention back to his conversational partner.

The bell signifying everyone to return to their seats rang.

In what felt like a kneejerk reaction, Daniel quickly excused himself from his friend and hastened away, leaving behind a very confused Samuel.

-

Back home Mrs Dinges was still preparing supper, as she had expected him later.

"Better too early than too late", she said as Daniel apologized. "It won't be long though. You can take a seat if you want to", she offered.

Daniel did as he was told and leaned back in the chair. He took a deep breath and noted how much better he felt. The calm kitchen with only Mrs Dinges rummaging about, it was so much more soothing.

He thankfully accepted the plate Mrs Dinges set down in front of him a couple of minutes later.

"I take it you have not seen the mess little Alexander has left in the drawing room yet...?", Mrs Dinges asked.

Alarmed, Daniel looked up at her. "Mess? No, I haven't! What... What did he do?"

"Oh, I'm afraid you will just have to see for yourself", she answered slightly indignant. "As much as I appreciate your effort, Mr Mayfair, do you really think a working man like you is able to raise a child alone?"

Daniel had no idea what Alexander had gotten up to again, but it certainly was not worth questioning his parenting abilities! He did not answer, but his lips formed a disgruntled line. So far, he had been holding up pretty well, and by now he was convinced there was not a single thing Alexander had been lacking in his life. To be honest, he was even sure there was nothing a mother could have given him that he, Daniel, could not.

After finishing supper, he would see to this himself.

Making his way upstairs and into the drawing room, Daniel prepared himself for the worst. Alexander was nowhere to be seen, and the same was true for the source of Mrs Dinges's agitation. Daniel strode up and down, inspected the carpet and the armchair, until he climbed on top of the sofa and looked behind it.

The space between it and the wall was too narrow for Daniel, but broad enough for a child to squeeze in. There was something down there in the dark fissure behind the backrest. Daniel took a lamp and lifted it above the chasm, but he still could not make out what was lying there. He furrowed his brows. How had Mrs Dinges even found this secret hideout? ...Had she been prying about...?

Pushing away the thought, Daniel hauled the piece of furniture forward. Mote filled the air, and Daniel had to sneeze. Quickly, he looked around the room. The sudden, loud sounds rose his hackles, despite the fact that he had caused them himself. Vague thoughts of something sneaking up on him under the cover of the noise invaded his mind. He turned his head and checked the door connecting the drawing room to the corridor as well as the one leading to the bedroom. Nothing there.

It took a moment until he could will himself to direct his attention back to the space behind the sofa. First, all he could really make out were a bunch of Alexander's tin soldiers. It was when he got down on one knee that he recognized some of them were missing limbs. He picked up one tiny arm. It showed traces of scratches and cuts, like someone had used sharp objects to sever it from the body. Daniel picked up another little figurine. First he had assumed he was holding it the wrong way around, but then,

and it felt like missing a step when going downstairs, he realized that in the place of its now missing legs, two arms had been stuck to the hip with small bits of wax.

"You are back!"

Daniel, who had sat on his heels, lost balance and fell to his side with a sound of surprise. Alexander came from the bedroom, smiling and apparently with intent to greet Daniel. But he slowed down and then stood still as he saw the tin soldier in Daniel's hand. Anxiously, he looked from the toy to Daniel and back to the toy, his little hands wandering up to his mouth to bite his nails, as had become a habit of him.

Daniel got up on his feet again and held the figurine in front of him. "What is this, Alexander?"

The boy did not answer. Instead, he took two shaky steps backwards, away from the toy, or from Daniel.

"Answer my question", Daniel demanded. He did notice he sounded a lot harsher than he had intended to, but there was this nagging feeling that pressed him forward and left no opportunity for reconsideration.

Alexander winced, fingers now firmly in place, pressed against his teeth.

The fear in the boy's eyes was what got to Daniel. He bit down on his lower lip and sighed. "If you keep breaking your toys, I will not buy you new ones. These are expensive, you know?", he explained.

As Alexander still did not move, Daniel put the toy aside and stretched out an arm to pet the boy's head. "Now stop that. I did not mean to frighten you", he murmured. Alexander's eyes were still fixed on the tin soldier. He was not responding through words, yet the apprehension on his face made Daniel's insides churn. He picked up the boy and carried him on his arm. "I have an idea, Alexander. Do you want me to read you something?"

That finally seemed to break the spell. Alexander tore his gaze from the mutilated little figurine on the ground and looked up at Daniel, though he was still confused. "How would you like to practice your poems a bit more, hm?", Daniel asked, putting up a carefree veneer to conceal his own worry. Finally, Alexander lowered his hands again and dug them into his skirt. But there was the trace of a smile already back on his face again, and Daniel returned it, in earnest this time.