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# ON THE CALCULATION OF VOLUME

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## BOOK I

### SOLVEJ BALLE

*Translated from the Danish by  
Barbara J. Haveland*

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## # 121

There is someone in the house. Heard as he moves around the room upstairs. When he gets out of bed or when he goes down the stairs and into the kitchen. There's the gush of water through the pipes when he fills a kettle. The sound of metal on metal when he sets the kettle on the stove and the very faint click when he turns on the gas. Then there's a pause until the water comes to the boil. There's the rustle of tea leaves and paper as first one, then another spoonful of tea leaves is taken from a paper bag and poured into the teapot, then the sound of water being poured over the tea leaves, but such sounds can only be heard in the kitchen. I can hear the fridge being opened, because the door bumps against a corner of the worktop. Then there's another pause, while the tea steeps and in a moment I'll hear the chink of a cup and saucer being taken from the cupboard. I don't hear the sound of the tea being poured into the cup, but I can hear footsteps moving from the kitchen to the living room as he carries the cup of tea through the house. His name is Thomas Selter. The house is a two-storey stone cottage on the outskirts of the town of Clairon-sous-Bois in northern France. No one enters the back room overlooking the garden and a woodpile.

It is the eighteenth of November. I have got used to that thought. I have got used to the sounds, to the grey morning light and to the rain that will soon start to fall in the garden. I have got used to footsteps on the floor and doors being opened and closed. I can hear Thomas going from the living room to the kitchen and putting the cup down on the worktop and before long I hear him in the hall. I hear him take his coat from its peg and I hear him drop his umbrella on the floor and pick it up.

Once Thomas has gone out into the November rain there is silence in the house. Broken only by my own sounds and the soft patter of rain outside. There is the scratch of pencil on paper and the scrape of the chair on the floor when I push it back and get up from the table. There are the sounds of my footsteps as I cross the room and the very slight creak of the door handle when I open the door into the hall.

While Thomas is out I usually wander around the house. I go to the toilet, get water from the kitchen, but I soon go back to the room. I close the door and sit down on the bed or the chair in the corner, so I won't be seen from the garden path if anyone should look in.

When Thomas returns carrying two thin plastic bags the sounds start up again. The key in the door and shoes being wiped on the mat. The crinkle of the plastic bags when he sets down his shopping. The sound of the rolled umbrella, which

he lays on the chair in the hall, and a moment later that of his coat being hung on the rack by the door. I hear the repeated crinkle of plastic as he places his carrier bags on the worktop and puts things away. He puts cheese in the fridge, pops two tins of tomatoes into a cupboard and leaves a bar of chocolate on the worktop. When the bags are empty he crumples them up and stows them in the cupboard under the sink. Then he closes the door and leaves them to carry on crinkling in there.

During the day I hear him in the office upstairs. I hear a swivel chair rolling across the floor and the printer churning out labels and letters. I hear footsteps on the stairs and the gentle thud on the floorboards as Thomas sets down parcels and letters in the hall. I hear him in the kitchen and the living room. I hear the sound of a hand or a sleeve brushing the wall as he goes back upstairs, I hear him in the bathroom and I hear a sound from the toilet that can only be made by a man peeing upright.

Presently I hear him on the stairs and in the hall again, then he goes into the living room and sits down in an armchair by the window facing the road. And there he waits, reading and watching the November rain.

He is waiting for me. My name is Tara Selter. I am sitting in the back room overlooking the garden and a woodpile. It is the eighteenth of November. Every night when I lie down to sleep in the bed in the guest room it is the eighteenth

of November and every morning, when I wake up, it is the eighteenth of November. I no longer expect to wake up to the nineteenth of November and I no longer remember the seventeenth of November as if it were yesterday.

I open the window and throw out some bread for the birds that will soon be gathering in the garden. They show up when there is a break in the rain. First the blackbirds, who peck at the last apples on the apple tree or the bread I've thrown out, and then a lone robin. Moments later a long-tailed tit flies down, closely followed by some great tits who are promptly seen off by the blackbirds. Shortly afterwards the rain comes on again. The blackbirds carry on feeding for a little while longer, but when the rain gets heavier they fly off to take shelter in the hedge.

Thomas has lit a fire in the living room. He has brought in wood from the garden shed and I soon start to feel the house growing warmer. I heard the sounds from the hall and the living room, but now that Thomas is sitting reading, all I can hear is my pencil on the paper, a whisper, soon eclipsed by the sound of the rain.

I have counted the days and if my calculations are correct today is the eighteenth of November # 121. I keep track of the days. I keep track of the sounds in the house. When it is quiet I do nothing. I lie down and rest on the bed or I read a book, but I make no sound. Or hardly any. I breathe. I get

up and tiptoe about the room. The sounds carry me around. I sit on the bed or gently pull the chair out from the table by the window.

In the middle of the afternoon Thomas puts on some music in the living room. First I hear him in the hall and the kitchen. I hear him putting a kettle on the gas ring, hear his footsteps on the floor as he goes back through to the living room and puts on the music. Then I know it will soon clear up. The clouds will pass and there will be a glimmer of sunshine.

I usually get ready to go out as soon as the music starts. I get up and put on my coat and my boots. I stand by the door for a few moments until the music is so loud that I can leave the house without being heard, the strains issuing from the living room masking the sound of doors being opened, of footsteps on the floor and doors being closed.

I leave the house by the garden door. I slip my bag over my shoulder, softly open the guest-room door, step into the hall and close it behind me. On the floor are three medium-sized envelopes and four brown cardboard parcels with our name on them: T. & T. Selter. That's us. We deal in antiquarian books, specialising in illustrated works from the eighteenth century. We buy the books at auction, from private collectors or other booksellers and then sell them on, sending them off in brown parcels bearing our name. I slip silently past the parcels on the floor, open the door and step outside. I don't

need an umbrella. It is still raining slightly, but it won't be long before it stops completely. I don't take the garden path leading up to the gate, instead I turn left and go around the side of the house, past the shed and on down to a corner of the garden that can't be seen from the house. I pass a plot of leeks and two rows of Swiss chard and come to a gap in the fence which brings me out onto the road. I glance back briefly. I see a thin trail of smoke coiling up from the chimney, hear the very faint sound of music, but I hurry on. A few steps further and I can hear neither music nor rain because the rain has stopped, the music has been left behind me and the only sounds are my footsteps on the pavement, the rumble of a few cars and the distant voices of children at a school some streets away.

Not long afterwards, when Thomas sees that the rain has stopped, he turns off the music. He puts on his coat and picks up the pile of letters and parcels from the hall floor. He leaves the house at 15.24. Carrying letters and parcels. T. & T. Selter. That's us. But time has come between us. We walk along the narrow roads into town or back to the house. We are outside, we walk around in a break in the rain, but we do not take the same roads. He does not expect to meet me along the way, nor will he. I know another route and by the time he returns to the house I am back in the room looking out onto the garden.

If there is anything I need I buy it in a small supermarket a

couple of streets over. I allow plenty of time and usually take a roundabout way home. I come through the gate and up the garden path to the back door and let myself in. The house is quiet. Thomas is out and it is no longer raining. He is on his way into town and by the time he has dropped off his parcels the sun will have broken through. He will take a walk through the woods and down to the river and won't return until late in the afternoon after the rain has started again, because there is no one waiting for him in the house and there is nothing he has to do.

Usually, when I return I leave my shopping in the guest room. I hang my coat over the back of the chair, I take off my boots and go through to the kitchen. There's a cup next to the sink and the kettle on the stove is still slightly warm. I can follow Thomas's tracks through the house. I go upstairs and into the office. There are piles of books on the desk and a scattering of papers. There are books on the shelves and in boxes on the floor. One of the boxes is open because Thomas has been searching through it for something and hasn't closed it again. In the bedroom next door to the office it looks as though someone has just got up, but only one side of the bed has been slept on.

I have an hour and half in the house before Thomas gets back. I have time to have a bath or wash some clothes in the sink, I have time to take a book from the shelf and sit down with it in one of the armchairs by the window.

If I spend the time in the living room I usually listen to music or read until it starts to get dark, but today I am staying in here, in the room overlooking the garden and a woodpile. I heard Thomas take his coat off the peg and I heard him leave the house. I opened the door into the hall, the packages are gone from the floor and now I am sitting at the table by the window. It is the eighteenth of November. I am becoming used to that thought.

On the morning of the seventeenth of November I said goodbye to Thomas at the door of the house. The time was quarter to eight, the taxi was waiting outside and I caught the 8.17 train from Clairon-sous-Bois. I was going to Bordeaux for the annual auction of illustrated works from the eighteenth century. The sky was grey, there was moisture in the air, but it didn't come to rain.

From Clairon station I travelled to Lille-Flandres, switched to Lille-Europe and went from there to Paris, where I changed trains for Bordeaux. I got to the station in Bordeaux just before two o'clock and after a moment's confusion due to roadworks outside the station, with lots of barriers, signs and closed footpaths, I found my way to the exhibition centre where the auction was to be held, arriving there a few minutes later. I registered and was given a programme and a badge that read '7ème Salon Lumières', followed by my name, and below that our company name, T. & T. Selter.

I was in good time for the main auction of illustrated books, which was due to start at three o'clock. A couple of auctions had already been held and I could see from the programme that again this year there would be talks and panel discussions, but none that I was planning to attend.

Once inside I faltered for a moment, again slightly disoriented by a scene that spoke of a conference in progress, all closed doors and abandoned coffee cups, until I spotted the signs and arrows pointing to the auction room and the adjoining exhibition hall where scores of antiquarian booksellers had, as always, set up their stands displaying books and scientific illustrations. I had a fairly good idea of which books I wanted to bid for in the auction and once I had taken a look at the most important of these I did a round of the exhibition hall. I said hello to some booksellers I knew from before and then, at a few minutes to three, I took my seat in the auction room, which soon began to fill up with people streaming out of the conference rooms.

I managed to buy twelve works at the auction. Five for which we had already had requests and seven others for which I thought we could get decent prices. We deal mainly in moderately priced books and sell to a mixed bunch of collectors, most of them in Europe, although we do also have a few customers in other parts of the world. As a rule I am the one who travels to auctions and visits antiquarian bookshops while Thomas takes care of cataloguing and shipping.