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IF ONLY

A Novel
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VERSO

London • New York

I

A long, long time ago when I was nineteen, I was at a railway station in another country. I felt so alone, so wretched. I remember asking myself: What's going to happen to me? What am I going to do, where will I be twenty years from now?

The curtain rises and here I am!

In a café at a railway station once more, twenty years later, yes, it's me!

I write in my diary, I raise my glass. Secret signals to the girl I was twenty years ago. I lean back and tentatively smile, I act as if she were watching me.

And I remember her as she sat there all alone, wretched, lost. I try to resurrect her in my mind. Call out to her, get her attention in order to comfort her.

What seemed mortifying then, doesn't seem so now. The pain she felt then filled her with shame, which she had no need to feel and I'm not ashamed now because I understand the secret of the unhappy girl.

I can remember the smell of the railway, the café. I can remember the words which had left her with that shame. They were ridiculous, too ridiculous for her, for me, to take the pain they caused seriously. They hurt, but I also felt ashamed at the pain, I collapsed under the weight of my own pain. Poor, poor girl.

Why wasn't I with you back then? Why couldn't I go to you, sit down next to you, hug you and console you?

I, your mature self, was many years away. At a railway station twenty years too late.

II

A relatively young woman, aged thirty. She married in her early twenties, had two children. She writes radio plays and edits a magazine on the same subject. It is winter. January and minus 14°C, white, frosty mist around the parked car, around the spruces, the mailbox on its post, but higher up the sky is blue, clear, the sun has come back. She has written in her diary that she is waiting for the heartbreak that will turn her into her true self. She has an impending sense of doom or possibly her own death.

Her children are at school and at nursery. When she stops writing, the house is very quiet. She gets up and wanders around. There is a debate in the newspaper. A young, male dramatist has attacked more senior ones and the seniors have responded. The issue will be discussed at a seminar at which she has been invited to speak. February, melting snow drips from the roofs. She knows what she is going to say, that is not what is troubling her or why she is so restless. It is the arrival of spring itself.

A reporter from a radio station is present at the seminar. The angry young man is the first speaker. He says he is no

longer angry. It might be because his most recent play has been well received, he says. Or because the weather has been good lately, he says.

It is March now, spring is coming. But anyway, he is no longer angry.

Any comments? the radio journalist asks the panellists in turn, but what can they say? If the young man is no longer angry, there is nothing to discuss. Nothing to argue against, nothing to defend. Only the final panellist, a small man with close-cropped hair who is sitting on the far left, the Brecht translator Arnold Bush, wishes to respond. He completely disagrees, he says.

He completely disagrees? The audience pricks up its ears, the radio journalist rushes over to him.

'The weather hasn't been that good lately. Certainly not up north in Trondheim where I live.'

In the evening they drink. Arnold Bush tries to stroke some woman's hand, the woman snatches it back, startled. He is bold, Ida thinks to herself. Some go to bed, others stay behind. The last ones end up around a small table. There aren't enough chairs so Ida perches on the armrest of Arnold Bush's chair. Some participants have accommodation in an annex a short walk from the main building, they need a separate key to get in and agree to leave together. When they get up to leave, when he gets up to leave, Ida says: You don't need to go, you can sleep in my room. So he sits down.

Later, when they finally retire, he follows her up the stairs, he took me seriously, she thinks. He is of slim build, he has a diamond stud in one ear, he might be gay, they can sleep top to tail. She undresses and gets into the bed. He undresses, fetches a glass of water from the bathroom and gets into the bed, his head at the same end as hers, he takes out his contact lenses and puts them in the glass.

'Mind you don't drink it,' he says.

She turns out the light. He touches her as if they are going to make love. They try to make love, but he hasn't come by the time dawn breaks.

'Aren't you married?' he says.

'Yes.'

'Me too.'

'I thought you were gay,' she says.

'I have a three-year-old son,' he says, he sounds offended.

She is giving the first presentation that morning so they get up. Her body feels strangely light. While she is in the bathroom, she wonders if he will be there when she comes out, he is, it makes her happy, he stands naked on the floor and he has a scar that reaches from his armpit to his shoulder.

'What's that?'

'A scar. They don't call me Scarnold for nothing.'

I bet he says that to all the girls, she thinks to herself. They leave her room and walk downstairs. She continues onwards to the auditorium, he turns left so that people won't see them arrive together, she realises. He sits in the audience while she speaks, then he disappears, but returns

after the next presentation in a clean shirt. A young man talks about writing with his body, writing with his penis. Arnold Bush holds up a pale hand and is given the floor. He gets up and stands with his lips pressed together. He waits until there is silence, until everyone is looking at him, he waits too long before he speaks and his voice is too soft so everyone has to strain to hear what he is saying, it is as if he can't be bothered to raise his voice, as if it is not worth it, as if he is bored by the whole thing.

'I have', he drawls, 'during this seminar had confirmed something I have long suspected. That Norwegian dramatists are better off than we – and they themselves – think. In contrast to my university colleagues and I who view writing as a challenge, who struggle to write, the dramatists enjoy writing, they say. And not only that. I've also just learned that it brings them to orgasm.'

She couldn't get over it. An orgasm. While she was in the room. Something he hadn't managed last night. He wanted to get a laugh. And the audience laughs. Leaning slightly forwards in a clean, pale-yellow shirt, he shows his true colours. Even this early on it is clear what kind of man he is.

Later that day, the day of departure, he is walking along the waterfront with another participant. She runs down to join them and taps him on the back.

'I need a word with you,' she says.

The other man nods and disappears.

'Do you regret last night?' Arnold wants to know.

No, that's not it. They walk fifty metres along the waterfront before they turn and walk fifty metres back. He is a decade older than her and his career is going well, he will be made a professor soon. Hers has barely begun.

'We're both married,' he says. 'This affects people other than us.'

That's still not it. He has misunderstood. It was just because. She needs nothing. It is time to leave; up by the hotel the other seminar participants are ready with their suitcases and bags. Ida and Arnold hug each other politely by way of goodbye and walk up to join them. They say goodbye, they shake hands, they hug everybody – except each other. He is going home to Trondheim and is catching a bus to the airport. She is going home to Oslo and is catching the train. Most people fall asleep on the train, but not Ida. Not because she has a guilty conscience. She has done this before. She is heading for a divorce, she has known it for a long time. But what she didn't know then was what the future held for her, what had only just started.

You can be aware of your capacity for love before you meet your beloved. Sense your potential for passion before you experience passion itself. You can know it as a child, as a latent possibility: I am able to love deeply. Even if you never meet him, you still comprehend something about love. The spirit sleeps in stones, it slumbers in plants. It awakens in animals, she is about to become an animal.

Her husband picks up her from the station, she doesn't feel guilty, rather she feels strangely elated. She doesn't think about him in the days that follow. Then a brown envelope arrives from the University of Trondheim with a handwritten A. Bush above the university logo. A poetry collection by Göran Sonnevi, *The Impossible*. She is delighted. She reads it and writes back to thank him for it. She thought, not at the time, but often later on, that he had gone to the bookshop and asked for it or found it himself on a shelf, placed it on the counter, paid for it, decided what he would write on the title page: *If better poetry has been written in modern times / then I have yet to read it / in the darkness / in the shadows of shadows* – as if to say that not only Sonnevi, but also the sender is of a lyrical nature, he can even be regarded as an artist – he put it in an envelope, wrote A. Bush with a red pen above the university logo, looked up her address, a call to directory enquiries, she assumes, bought a stamp, licked it and dropped the envelope into a post box; the title of the collection, however, *The Impossible*, is telling her not to get her hopes up. She dreams explicit sexual dreams, they have a cinematic feel to them, as if disconnected from her, but she enjoys them nonetheless and after her pleasure someone is killed for what she has done.

I set things in motion, she writes in her diary, and then I run away as if they have nothing to do with me, I'm still trembling, one day something terrible will happen.

His letter arrives three days after her thank-you note. Four handwritten pages on German drama, about his work as a translator, about this and that, about the sun that sets in the fjord while he sits on the terrace with a glass of wine as he writes. His wife is away. Kjersti is away, he writes. She replies, not as lengthy a reply as his. He is older than her, a well-established academic. He critiques contemporary drama. She writes it, she has only just begun. She is a little intimidated by him. She writes that. She mentions the age gap. She doesn't enter into a discussion about Goethe and Schopenhauer.

Easter comes. She goes skiing with her family. She goes for walks, lost in thought, along the lake in the darkness. She stands by the hotel window, watching her husband. He is outside talking to a woman, it is agony, she is losing him now, he knows she doesn't love him and he is distancing himself from her. She must divorce him before it happens, before he leaves her. She skis right up to the glacier on her own, then returns to the illuminated hotel via the lake in the twilight. Where are the children? They are with their father. He is standing with them outside. He is talking to mothers who stand with their children between their legs on the slope. Her body is warm, the air is chilly, the mountains are cold, the only sound is her breathing. A dark shadow on the other track is heading towards the hotel, she skis back slowly in order to make it last longer. Back to dinner, children, music, the other guests. Only wine helps,

wine helps. She inhales the darkness as she leans over her ski poles: What is going to happen to me? What is he doing now? He is in the lobby with hoarfrost in his holiday stubble, dark, talking to other women who appreciate him, who find him attractive. Their smiles say: I will be nice to you. My arms are warm. I will give you what she doesn't, which everyone can see she isn't giving you, which you need and long for. She is in the process of leaving him and braces herself for the loss, that is what is going on here. She is rehearsing losing him so that she will know what to do, so that it won't take her by surprise. This is what it means: You will lose him, he will kiss someone else. He will direct his energy, all of his enormous, positive energy at someone else. She dreams that he is unfaithful to her, it is horrible. But it is also agony when he talks about the weather, about the food, when he chats to strangers, and she has to walk away. His language is unbearable, that is the worst, but that is who he is. When they get home there is a letter from A. Bush in their mailbox, she picks up their post and sorts it. Over Easter he has read an article she wrote for *The Journal*, which she edits, and discussed it with his mother-in-law. His mother-in-law is a librarian, he writes. His mother-in-law is there. He is sitting with a glass of wine, watching the sun sink into the sea this time as well. Kjersti has gone away again. He mentions Kjersti. He mentions her age because Ida brought up the subject. Kjersti is twenty-five, he writes. He is thirty-nine, how strange to think that she is older now than he was when they first met. Thirty-nine

and hearing the thundering of old age across the steppes, he writes, it is pretty. Would it be possible, he finishes off, or impossible for them, the two of them, to one day watch the sun go down in the sea together?

She reads it under a streetlight near the forest. She puts his letter with the others in an envelope behind the books on the bookcase in her study. She writes back, not as lengthy a reply as his, but longer than the last one. It is April now. Yes, I think that might be possible, she writes. He replies that he will be in Oslo in late May, on the twenty-fifth, he is the external examiner for first-year German students, and he asks if they can meet.

Was it Constitution Day in May that year? Did she dress up the children and join them in the parade? Did they have a festive meal with the family, did she go to the children's school and take part in the egg and spoon race? Yes, we can meet, she writes as the date approaches, we can meet 'as if nothing has happened'. She doesn't hear back and grows increasingly nervous, has she ruined it before it has even started, has she wrecked it already? The days pass, it is getting closer, she hears nothing. She doesn't think he is being very kind, she can't call what happened at the seminar love. Why is her body filled with such trembling anticipation and why does she want to cry? She writes to him that they can meet 'as if everything, as if everything has happened'. Four days pass before he replies, four desperate, nerve-racking days before she receives two letters. One in