

The Edges

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An extract

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I

You taste blood and you smell wet chalk. Earlier that day you'd used a half a bucket of lukewarm water and an old sponge to dampen the edges of the wallpaper so that you could gently ease it from the wall with a palette knife, taking care not to accidentally chip out a chunk of plaster. It will become a common smell, wet chalk that you can taste at the back of the tongue. You will move house at least nine times, everything you own right now, you will lose, everything that seems valuable will disappear. You will gradually lose sight of some things, other things you will flog to buy food or cigarettes, and other things still you will burn, give away or leave behind. You want to cry out but you can't because there's a hand around your throat. That hand is pushing your head against the wall. Black vinyl tiles fall to the floor, a comic strip of nocturnal frames that crumbles before your eyes. You see the darkest squares, glue remnants on their backs, glue remnants on the wall (and time that had slowly wormed its way between them, as well as damp and soap residue). The people who lived in this house before you, an elderly couple that never had children, had thought it a fine idea in an age of progress, to abandon old-fashioned tiles and opt for a material of the future: vinyl. On top of this they would paste pale blue wallpaper, which you have just scraped from the wall, decades later. Blood runs over your lip, down your chin, and over her fingers. You hear her voice echoing in the space where the tiles are falling. You have nothing, you are wearing nothing and you are nothing. She keeps repeating this last bit, loudly, that you are nothing. It echoes and water splashes over the edge of the bath now. You don't know what you did wrong but it doesn't matter now. You grip her wrists and squeeze as hard as you can, but this only seems to tighten her grip around your neck, like a pair of pliers. Your hearing is failing but you see her mouth open and close. You smell cigarettes, and you taste them too, now she spits in your face and releases her grip, allowing you to take a deep breath before the back of your head hits the rim of the bath. You try your best not to cry as your mother storms out of the room, through your bedroom, down the stairs, out of the door, into the car, out of the drive, until there is silence. Until you begin to sob, gasping for breath, your throat full of chalk, the nasty tiles floating in the water that has grown cold, empty shells in stagnant water. You cup your hands and wash your face. You run a finger across your lip, the inside of your lip. You realize you aren't bleeding which makes you cry even more. You heat up some soup without turning on any lights. Your larynx hurts when you swallow but you eat without making a sound because you never know. You lie down, Beauty and the Beast dance on your bedcovers but you pretend to sleep and hope that everything will soon be over.

[...]

VI

I no longer remember the first time I saw him. There's one memory that is stronger than the others, that overwrites all the previous ones like an old video tape: we are arguing in the playground and I whack him. I can no longer remember what the argument was about and I've forgotten what happened afterwards. The memory is brief, it lasts from the second before I hit his chin until just after that. The impact. Nothing more, nothing less. The moment a part of my body touches him, that's when the tape stops.

He is lying close to me. His nose between my shoulder blades, his legs drawn up slightly, like mine. His hands are folded between his chest and my lower back. I can hear his breathing and my own. He asks me what I'm thinking about and I'm thinking about him and I say I'm thinking about what we're actually doing here now. We're lying down, he says, and I ask him whether he likes it and he says it's OK. I asks whether he wants to hold me and before I've finished the sentence, his arm is tucked around me. Like this? He shunts closer, pressing his lower body against mine. Is this better? I say yes, quietly and deeply. He hears it, his head is close, I feel his words in my neck. Do you want to talk, he asks, and I say yes and then he says he felt a lot of anger towards me over recent years and I apologise and he says it isn't my fault and I want to cry but instead I say: really not? He says he was angry because he thought it was all a mistake, me being so far away and him here. I say that he'd told me he never wanted to see me again, because he wasn't like this, and I'd laughed and I'd said but you just came in my mouth and he'd got angry and back then I'd thought: I will always love you and already on the train I caught myself thinking that I was a sentimental sop because seriously.

If I go anywhere, he says now, anywhere they know you, they always ask after you. They ask how you're doing because they assume I'll know, that I'll always know how you are and some of them ask whether I've heard from you recently, whether I know what you are up to and I say I don't know. From time to time I look at the photos you've posted online and then I know: that's where he is, that's what he's doing. And then suddenly, I swear, just as I was scrolling through your pictures, you sent me a totally unexpected friendship request. I went over to the window, I opened the curtains because I was thinking: he's standing there, he's looking at me. He's laughing at me.

I'd never laugh at him, I say, and I hold his arm, wrapped around my chest.

Why not? Look where I live, he says. This house doesn't belong to me, nor does the bed, even the sheets were provided by the man who comes by once a month to check the place hasn't burned down. I have nothing. Just a dog and some books.

And a swimming proficiency certificate. You got yours before I did. You could swim like a frog.

Yes.

You were always faster than me,

Yes, but you weren't there half the time.

That's true, I say.

His breath catches momentarily. I want to disappear into his lungs like smoke.

Do you remember that time at the pool?

I nod.

I can still remember, I was on my way to see him and there was so much I wanted to tell him. I wanted to tell him that I loved him, that I would take care of him, and that he had to take care of me because I'd never be able to manage without him. In the end we just hung out and then we watched TV and there was nobody home and I jerked him off a bit and after that we made toast and I slept beside him and he asked whether I'd ever been skiing and I said no.

Are you unhappy?

He doesn't reply to my question. He sighs. He swallows. I hear him swallow and I picture his Adam's apple, going up and down.

Hmm?

I don't think so. How do you know? Happy, unhappy, I don't know those things. People say it so easily, it's a TV thing, from soaps.

I take hold of his hand and press my thumb between his thumb and index finger. I think of the time I was allowed to go to an amusement park with him and his parents. We sat together in a rollercoaster that tick-ticked slowly upwards and then rushed down at breakneck speed. In between, in between those two opposing forces, there's a moment of weightlessness, when the clattering of the upwards motions stops and the train is actually already falling but hasn't picked up speed yet. At that instant, he grabbed my hand and squeezed as hard as he could. As though he was afraid I would fall, or that he'd fall. Or we both would. Later that day, after a lunch of hamburgers and fries, we went into a dark haunted house attraction. He stopped in a corner where you could clearly see the sun shining through the chinks of the airbrushed graveyard. Look, he said, pulling down the elastic of his trousers to show me his hard-on. For you, he said and behind us we could hear people screaming. A rubber doll with an air pressure pump was giving them a fright. Come, he said, and we mounted the mechanically vibrating stairs. Higher, higher.

Are you asleep, he asks.

No, I say.

Can I take off your top?

Your top.

Yes, that one.

Go on.

I feel his hands gripping the bottom of the top, he slowly pulls it upwards.

Do you want it back already, I ask.

He lets out a short laugh.

Yes, he says. I'm worried you're going to steal it.

That was my plan, I say, to take it home with me and never give it back.

You were planning on never coming back.

Not if you don't want that.

He pulls the top over my head, I raise my body to help him. He turns me onto my back. I can't see anything, I feel his hands on my chest, my belly.

Where are those scars?

Lower, I say. Yes, there.

Beautiful. They look like tiny drawings. His fingertips touch the scar tissue. Can you feel that?

Yes, I say.

He looks at me and says: and still you are less damaged than you used to be. I look at him and he continues: you're stronger. Fewer bruises too.

Yes, I say. I'm less clumsy.

That'll be it, he says.

Outside the storm is still raging. Inside a young man lays his hand on the chest of another, and then his head. They breathe in and out together.

He takes off his top now too, skin on skin, and pulls down the elastic of his trousers and briefly displays his hard-on. For you, he says and I laugh out loud.
[...]

X

I feel the cold floor against my shoulders, I feel the grains of sand between my skin and the tiles, I feel his hand and the way it lifts my leg up, I feel him slowly glide into me, I feel him exhale, rest his chest on the back of my thigh and move his hips back and forth, his forehead gently touching mine. I smell sweat, his other hand flat on the floor next to my head. The gusts of breath, The fuck fuck fuck, yes. I grip his back, my hands on his thighs and I try to press him even closer into me, to keep him there but time and time again he glides away. He opens his eyes, his pupils wide, his mahogany irises. He gazes right into mine and smiles. Jesus, he says. I smile back and give him a kiss.

The first morning light is already announcing itself and the windows of the wooden house and no longer black mirrors. I feel him quickening the pace, losing himself, I feel myself moving my hips in time with his, us seeming to merge for a moment.

The last time we had sex ended with tears. He had placed a pillow under my hips, one of my legs up against his neck and he'd first put a finger inside me, then two, then his dick and barely three breaths later, he laid his head on my chest, pulled out and sobbed hard. He cried on top of me.

He jerks now too, I look at his face as the muscles in his neck tense and his mouth sets into a determined expression, he closes his dark eyes. One final thrust and then he stops deep inside me, as though frozen in time. After he has quickly brought me to orgasm too, he says that it's getting light outside.

He gets up and washes his hands which makes me feel dirty, there on his floor. I wipe myself with a piece of kitchen roll and pull on some clothes. Even before he's out of the bathroom, I'm dressed, coat on.

He doesn't look surprised. I say: I have to go. He nods. I say: I'll be here for the rest of the day too, fixing things and so well. I already know I won't see him again. He nods, barely looks at me, in this blue morning light that now flows through the wooden house, chasing me outside. I say: I'm glad you answered my message.

He: yeah.

Is everything OK?

He doesn't speak. In his mind I've already left.

I no longer remember if I go over to him. If I give him a kiss or shakes his hand, put an arm around him or give him an amicable hug, for a few seconds, each of us slapping the other's shoulder with a flat hand a few times. I stay where I am, an old sofa and a world between us.

The last time we took leave of each other we hadn't said anything. He didn't send me any messages afterwards and I didn't know what to do and I'd spent days crying in the city I live in now and it felt as though part of me was drowning and I'd never be happy again, but it seemed to pass, the sedation worked. I fitted myself to the city's demands, I fitted myself to others, my leg folded between my chest and theirs, I fitted myself around other bodies in busses and trams that brought me to more and more new places, in daylight and in morning light, in the orange glow of streetlamps, on my way to the address of someone whose name I didn't know and I folded myself in two and I folded my clothes in order to pack them, to move house again and again, without ever living anywhere. I folded the letters again in three along the folding lines, slid them back into the envelopes and thought: it is real now, it has happened. She's dead and she's ashes and I have to go there and see what's left. Immediately after that: I have to go to him, I have to see him, I wonder how he's doing, maybe he's married with kids. I looked him up online and I found him. It was three days before he accepted my friendship request. I said: Hey and he said hey and I said long time no see and he said yes and I asked how things were and he said not bad really. I said I'd be taking the train soon and maybe we could meet up and he didn't respond for four days by which time I had given up hope and then he told me he'd moved house and two hours later I received an address I knew because I'd once been there. Yesterday – no, the day before yesterday in the meantime – I'd asked him whether it was still OK for me to come round and he'd replied: why not?

I remember the birthday party his parents organized for him. We all went swimming and then we ate pancakes and had fizzy drinks and I can still remember climbing the concrete steps to the big yellow slide again and again, he ahead of me, his swimming trunks sticking to his pale thighs, the rubber strap with the key to his locker around his ankle, his eyes that shone when he looked back over his shoulder to check that I was following him. The loud rushing of the water being pumped through the tube, the enthusiastic shrieks of the children before us, the hands in my back urging us to hurry up. Him leaving and me waiting until he was out of sight, past the first bend. Me pushing off to go faster and crashing into him after the first bend. Him laughing hard. He'd stopped himself inside the tube with his hands and his feet and waiting for me. My legs around his upper body, him roaring with laughter, me smiling, my arms around his legs, under the edge of his wet trunks. Sliding together, bend after bend, and shrieking loudly, no longer knowing what was up or down, where he ended and I began, the muscles of his thighs, the speed and the time that seemed elastic, endless. And then the splash when we broke the water surface, a single body. Again, he shouted as he hauled himself out of the water. Wait for me, I said, and he gave me a hand.

We are silent as we stride uphill, to the gate. In the dun morning light I see how small everything is: the identical houses, someone of them decorated with graffiti, here and there a broken window, wooden walls. The dog walks besides him and so do I. When we get to the fence, his fingers find the right key with ease. He opens the lock and I look at him and think: ask me to stay and I'll stay, say that you want me to stay here with you and I'll never go away again, until the bulldozers and the wrecking balls come and tear everything here, the entire world, to the ground. We will sink to the bottom of the lake along with the rubble, I will hold

your hand, push your hair back behind your ear to see your face, I will hold you, watch you while you sleep, or I won't, whatever you want, everything you want. He pushes against the gate and it slides open without making a sound.

I bend double over the handlebars of the borrowed bike. A bus drives past in the opposite direction. People leaving this place, most of them will return, along the same road, at the end of the day.

The house that was once white is still standing. The supermarket is open. In the window of the electrical shop: washing machines, bagless vacuum cleaners and wand mixers on special offer.

Past the church, next to the park of which half has been built up by now, the petrol station and the crossroads where a boy I was in first grade with got run over. One and a half kilometres further, a woman was killed by a drunk driver. In the first side street after the bakery is the house I once saw a certain boy go into. I'd never seen him fully dressed before. The first time was in the swimming pool where he told me that his friend – indicating a paunchy man in his fifties – wondered whether I had plans and I shrugged and followed him and went into a changing cubicle with them and the bellyman sunk onto his knees in front of the boy and as he gave him a blowjob, his hand (there was a tattoo of a rose on the back of that hand) for the waistband of my trunks, rummaged inside, found my semi-erect penis and played with it. The boy smiled at me.

Nice, right?

I nodded and he came after which the bellyman blew me off while the boy dried himself. The second time was in the bellyman's living room, and the boy's thigh pressed against mine. We were sitting on the sofa-bed together which he had pulled out and the bellyman took us into his wet mouth in turns. In between the groans (his), he gave us instructions: kiss each other. I felt the boy next to me stick his tongue into my mouth and I thought: nice. I thought: he smells of chlorine and spunk and I heard the sighing between my legs, felt the boy's hands on the back of my head and on my chest.

When I'd got dressed again – I wanted to leave as soon as I had come – I saw the boy being given a twenty-euro note and I wondered why I wasn't getting anything. The hand with the wilted rose opened the door for me and I never went back there.

The house I think the boy used to live in had several steps, downstairs was a garage and he'd just locked up his bike when I saw him from the other side of the street and he saw me. I smiled at the boy, who seemed to look right through me and I thought: I know what your tongue tastes like.

In front of the door of the house there's a builder's van, the windows have gone, the house is a face with wide open eyes, frozen in time, it seems. In a few months this house will be as good as new – the plaster on the wall still drying as a couple assemble their first table, get a rug out of its plastic wrapper, unroll and call the place home.

Maybe it's the boy with the tongue who won't take his eyes off his children for a second when they go swimming.

XI

I unload the last shells from the box onto a table at the end of the drive, in front of the black square of the garage door: a twisted brown and white shell, and then the same but smaller. You arrange them on the table. In total there are a hundred and seven. You just counted them a second time. You wrote down all the names in the exercise book and in another colour you added the (sometimes guessed at) place they were found. You found most of them yourself on the tideline between two mossy green breakwaters. Others you were given – your aunty went to Greece and brought you back a basket of shells wrapped in plastic. You asked are whether they were all Greek shells and she said they were from Greece so yes and you wrote ‘Greece (?)’ next to each shell from the basket, next to the names you’d copied from the big library book. The prettiest, in the middle of the table, fits perfectly into the palm of your hand and dovetails with the shape between your fingers and wrist. There are five holes in it, five holes used by the creature to expel oxygenated water and waste. The convex side is stony and grey, rough, but when you turn it over, you can see, and particularly now the sun is shining so brightly, high above your head, the lovely colours of its hollow interior: the colours of the rainbow, like an oil spill in a pool. *Mother of pearl* is what it’s called, you’d looked up the English term. They grow slowly and when the water is cold they hibernate, this variety is mainly found in New Zealand. She gave you the shell. It was the second day of the summer holidays and she’d come home with the shell she’d bought in a shop that sold stones and shells, fossils and minerals. This was for you and what do you say? You say thank you. Thank you, mummy, she says, and you repeat the words and she says OK. You look at the colours inside the shell for the first time and you think of a monster with five teeth – how could the holes of got there otherwise? – and you almost cry at the thought of the little animal in the shell and how frightened it must have been but you don’t and you hold the shell and let go of the thought. In some cultures they make beads from the abalone (that’s the name of the shell), which they wear around their necks like pearls. You see her car stop at the gate and you want to hurry to open the gate but you have stitches in both arms and one leg so you can’t move very fast and she toots and you almost trip but you manage to open the gate and make way for the car. She has wound down the window and she says you need to tidy up your rubbish because she has to be able to access the garage and you say OK and you fill the box with the shells and the exercise book. The next day she won’t open the garage and it will be the last time you arrange the shells on the table.
