

What Only We Know

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An extract pp 1-21

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We distilled stories from everything.

Of course she knew how things were, but stories made the situation bearable.

I learnt to tell stories.

Thanks to her I know, stories help.

Stories are to the mind as breath is to the lungs.

I say breath, not oxygen. Oxygen is a given, breathing is a process.

There's no rain in the air today, just a gentle warmth on which a bird is hovering. I keep my eye on the bird, see how its back is turned to the sun. It flies with languid beats of its wings, as if it has all the time in the world, soaring by in silence, concealing its call.

It's not the bird I'm looking for.

Sometimes I imagine that it will suddenly rise up and I'll recognise it. That it carries a soul under its wings, a small soul, and that I'll recognise that as well. She's soft as comfort, that soul, fragile, and the bird won't let her fall.

Around the corners of my mouth I feel a smile unfolding and someone has guessed why, I don't have to know precisely where she is. The sky, it can go in any direction.

Just like me.

The game – Bent over on my chair, every nerve tensed, I survey the pitch, alert to any unexpected twist. I steer with a firm hand, make decisions, quickly and faultlessly, do not allow myself to be distracted from the essence, which means life or death, I have to put up a fight against a higher power, seek cover, I mustn't go down.

Ai.

I get up, straighten my back, suddenly my sister is standing next to me, silently she looks with me at the screen. She must have opened the door inaudibly and crept in. Her feet in socks. Nour is an expert at that. Sometimes she even manages to make herself invisible. Suddenly we realise she's not there anymore, a moment ago she was playing in the armchair, whispering to her doll, then she's gone, vanished.

Where's Nour?

At first mum would look worried, even accusatory, as if I hadn't been paying attention. She was afraid Nour had gone to hide away in a corner, as cats do, to wait it out on her own.

We rushed to the cellar and the attic, looked under her bed, ran into the garden, she was nowhere to be seen. Back in the living room she was sitting in the armchair with her doll as if she'd been there the whole time.

Where were you?

Just here.

She had no idea we'd been looking for her, as far as she was concerned nothing was wrong.

We didn't press the issue.

Still our hearts stop every time she disappears.

It's a skill she's taught herself.

Whether it's calculation, convenience, or just a sense of shelter, calm, we don't know. We can't always keep an eye on her. She must instantly feel it when our attention wanders, when we become immersed in a task or sunk in thought. Then she withdraws to a place in the house or the garden where she can be undisturbed for a while, enjoy her heartbeat perhaps, her breath, her presence in her body. We don't talk about it. But not once have we managed to bring ourselves not to go unobtrusively searching for her.

We never find her. Before we succeed, she emerges for herself. A skill we've made our peace with in the end. It's the way Nour is.

Now she's standing beside me.

Are you dead, she asks.

Yes, I say, I didn't watch out. I'll stop, shall we go and play outside?

The sun is shining, I know she loves that, the warmth of the sun's rays. But she has to protect herself, draw thin sleeves over her arms, a wide sunhat on her crown. She usually places her doll on a stone in full sun. She herself sits on a cushion in the shade. She doesn't say what she's thinking or imagining.

I'm waiting for my doll, she says then.

Once the doll has been lying on the stone long enough to have warmed up properly, she picks her up, presses her to her cheek.

The doll gives me the warmth she saved up from the sun.

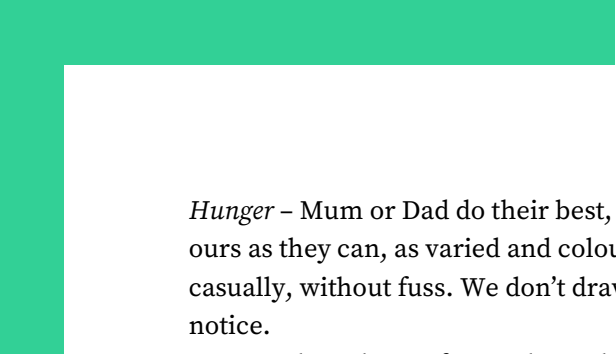
I understand, I reply.

The bird – In the garden a tarpaulin has been stretched between two trees. As we play with the ball – I roll it to her, she kicks it back – I hear her wheezing. Now and then she cries out to add power to a kick. It's an effort, but she doesn't give up. She cheers and beams when I miss a ball and have to go into the bushes after it. After a while I roll the ball slower, keep it longer. Shortly afterwards the game stalls. Fatigue falls with a dull thud on her shoulders, she turns white as a sheet and her wheezing sounds heavy. I fetch her a glass of water, which she drinks in small sips. Sitting under the tarpaulin on the grass, she places her doll on her lap. Then we tell each other stories.

About a bird who can't decide which branch to sit on. It flutters from here to there. Each branch offers a different view. Every tree has a different scent: apple, pear, linden, cherry, pine, spruce. One tree stands on a hill, another in a wood, another on the heath, yet another in a valley. It's even more difficult for the bird when it's time to build his nest. Should it be in the fork of the branch, the knotted armpit of a trunk, or in the thicket of a bush or the wicker of a hedge?

In the end it's a bird we've become familiar with. It's not a blackbird or a pigeon, not a finch or a swallow, nor a great tit, purely a bird, neither male nor female. Although it's building a nest, it has not laid an egg in any story so far. But it can sing. Its song is the most beautiful ever to sound from a bird's throat. Except it rarely sings. Because it can't find the right branch to send its song into the world.

It's getting hot, even in the shade under the tarpaulin. I offer her my hand as she offers her doll hers, and the three of us go in.



Hunger – Mum or Dad do their best, despite her diet, to make the food on her plate look as much like ours as they can, as varied and colourful. Once a week we eat precisely the same as her. It happens casually, without fuss. We don't draw her attention to it, nor does she remark on it, as if none of us notice.

Barely an hour after such meals I often find myself fetching a bowl of cereal or opening a bag of crisps. I make sure no one sees.

The verdict – Spring, autumn, summer, the seasons merge when Nour is constantly travelling back and forth to hospital. Often she's away for weeks, while the trees gain or shed leaves. She lies there attached to tubes and wires and straps. There's a plastic tube in her mouth, which makes it difficult to understand what she's trying to tell me, I only hear murmuring.

The third time she was allowed home from hospital for a bit, Dad took me aside in the kitchen. In a bowl on the table was a bunch of grapes on which dozens of flies were dancing up and down. The grapes had been there a whole week and I'd been reluctant to touch them because I thought we'd eat them together and every time there was someone missing. Now we could eat them, we were all home again.

Dad said things weren't looking good for Nour and that she was unlikely to live beyond the age of eight or nine.

I wondered if his hands were itching to grasp at the flies or at me for a hug. They hovered aimlessly on his arms.

I didn't know what there was to understand, how I could understand it, why I needed to.

Eight, nine.

Nine, eight.

I'd just passed twelve myself and had expected Nour always to be there. I had no idea how to change that idea.

I'm her big brother and she'll always be my sister, I replied. Even when she's grown until she can't grow anymore.

A thousand days – Perhaps the bird knows a way of understanding it.

Eight, it chirps, nine, it chirps. That's plenty of days to fill. We don't count in years. A thousand days, he sings, I'll carry a thousand days, all the way to you.

And Nour nods, yes that many days.

She gives me her doll and walks downstairs in front of me.

Perhaps I was really the one who needed to get used to it, I felt helpless with the doll in my hand.

Collecting points – Concentrating I follow every movement, peering at anything that moves, ready to intervene immediately, determined not to give up without a fight. But too late.

Behind my ear I hear a sound.

I turn, again I didn't hear her come in. She only sighed when she was standing just by me.

Are you dead again, she asks.

Not yet, I say. But she's right, in turning to her I've failed to stay under cover.

I'm dead.

Can't you ever just stay alive?

The more you play, the more difficult it gets.

I see her thinking about it, a frown on her forehead.

Do you like coming back to life again and again?

I click the game away.

I have to, I say, if I want to keep playing the game.

Do the others like dying?

They come back to life too, but they lose points, like I do when I die.

But if you kill them, do you get points?

That's how it works. Whoever collects the most points wins.

The drowning man – She stands at the window looking out. All day a slow, lazy, tantalising rain has been falling. Would you take her outside, asks Mum, now there's no sun.

Okay.

We walk around the neighbourhood, her little footsteps setting the pace, I hold her hand firmly. Nour pretty much only sees the area when it's raining. The neighbours' houses next door and across the road, the houses further along the street, the streets beyond and the little square around the corner, where there's some playground equipment. Where the children from the neighbourhood, as well as my friends and I, regularly meet.

Now it's raining there's no one. I let go of her hand, she runs to the climbing frame. Although the bars are slippery, she climbs all the way to the top. I know I have to be ready to catch her. She waves. I know her face, I can read the pain in her grimace. Still, she's smiling.

The pain is always there, whether she smiles or not, so why wouldn't she?

She climbs onto the slide, glides down on her belly, tumbles in the wet grass. Her jacket and dress are soaking, her bare legs dripping with rain. Again she runs up the steps, again she slides down, on her back this time, feet first. As she slides, the rain hammers droplets into her face and tongue, her mouth wide open, she gulps. Then she goes on the swing. I push her. She squeals, in harmony with the squeaking of the hinges, each time the swing returns.

Back home Dad, who is frantically busy, says I should put Nour straight in the bath. Put her wet clothes in the basket, I know all that.

She's shivering in her frail body with the milk-white skin.

I lift her under her armpits into the bath, like a mermaid she sinks into the water, her legs together, her feet turned outward like a fishtail. She sinks down into a bed of foam.

The mermaid also experiences a stab of pain. The pain seems to follow her bloodstream, flowing over her entire body. When it reaches her forehead, she closes her eyes tightly. A brief sob behind her gills, that's all.

I tell Nour about the mermaid from the sea. How she brought a drowning man through the storm and surf onto dry land. She heaved herself along with the drowning man from the water, laid him out on a breakwater, pressed the salt water from his stomach and lungs, and breathed for him, mouth to mouth, until he could breathe for himself again.

Never had the mermaid been so close to a kiss.

Across the smooth stones and the sand she floundered back to the sea.

Once under water she could not forget the drowned man. He's human, I'm a mermaid, it won't work, she realised.

But I want it so much, she thought, it's thanks to me he's still alive, and now I feel that he's also living in me.

Nour looks at me from the foam, her eyes serious, the water undulating around her feet, she listens in deathly silence.

Every day the mermaid swam with hasty strokes to the place where the breakwater jutted into the sea.

For days she peered at the coast, until she caught a glimpse of him in the revolving door of a hotel. She wriggled her tailfin through the water and attempted to throw herself at his feet with the rolling waves, but the tide was going out, the waves lacked the power to throw her onto the beach, her scales and fins scraped fruitlessly over the sand, she had to make her way painfully back.

What could she do?

Wait, says Nour and she dives under the foam and comes straight back up, rubbing the suds from her eyes. She's listening again.

The mermaid knew, there was *one* way that was definitive, irreversible: to become a human among humans. Slit her fishtail into legs, her tail fins to feet and walk on dry land. I'll swim helplessly like a human and in my legs and my lower back I'll always feel the pain of what's no longer there, every step will be a stab of longing, she realised. She could go to the drowning man. But was she prepared for all that pain?

What does she choose, asks Nour.

She thought about it, I say, but she didn't have much time, humans don't live forever.

I know that, she replies.

Come on, lean your head back, I'll wash the soap out of your hair.

She sinks back, places her head trustingly in my hand, with eyes that seem to sparkle, so lively is their reflection of the bathroom light.

Watch out that soap doesn't get in your eyes, I say, and I pick up the shower head. As I rinse her hair, she continues to look at me. She's daring me. When I'm finished with her hair, I suddenly turn the shower head straight towards her face. She bursts into shrieks of laughter.

Come on.

I help her out of the bath.

Sometimes her chest looks so fragile, the skin so thin, that I see it swell with every heartbeat, as if her heart is beating on the surface.

I throw a towel around her.

What happens next, she asks, what does she choose?

The mermaid wanted to live on land, despite the pain in her back and her legs, I say. But once on land she couldn't speak the humans' language. She'd never learnt it underwater, she didn't know how to form the sounds with just air to breathe in. And after a while, when she found the man she'd saved and upon whose mouth she had placed her lips, he looked at her searchingly, as if he vaguely recognised her from somewhere. She couldn't tell him who she was.

What do you want, he asked, who are you?

She tried, stuttered out a few sounds, she gestured, imitated a drowning man, a kiss. But he couldn't understand her.

They looked at one another in silence.

Her beauty stirred him. The silent smile on her lips emanated warmth, trust, but something in her gaze was elusive, salty, he thought, as if he were looking into the eyes of a fish.

She saw curiosity in his gaze, calculation, pride, but also a hesitant longing, awe at the unknown which clung to her. She had as good as kissed this man and he didn't know it, he had almost drowned and washed up dead on the beach. How could she tell him that he was alive thanks to her? How sweet it would be to walk next to him, it would make the pain in her legs lighter with every step. He didn't understand all that. The man took her to his house, which was deeper inland, far from the sea. And with every step at his hand she really did forget the pain.

At home he introduced her to his heavily pregnant wife and they took her into service as a housekeeper. The former mermaid spent her days with the man she had saved and almost kissed, for whom she had since longed, and still longed, without ever being able to love him. She didn't succeed in learning his language, she was mute, helpful, friendly and devoted. She was permitted to live with them forever and they even entrusted the care of the baby to her.

But the sea was far away and the pain in her legs nagged more insistently each day. She could tell no one about it, her tears were salty as seawater.

Is that how it ends, asks Nour.

Yes, unless you know a better ending.

She thinks about it for a moment.

Her tears cause the sea to rise, she says, the sea washes up to the house where she lives. And when the baby almost drowns, she saves him as she saved the father. That's how the father finds out who she is, he suddenly remembers.

She smiles proudly.

We don't talk about what has to happen after that.
