

# He, She, and the Inevitable Us

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p 12-21

## She

### 2

I see my bedroom in full sunlight again for the first time. Everything is as I remember it, yet everything has changed. Lifeless. Cold. As if no one ever grew up here, as if no one ever laughed or cried. As though everything had to be forgotten. I lie in bed and listen to the silence I have so longed for these past few years. But now I yearn mostly for the noises that make life normal. The everyday sounds I used to wake up to. The ones that made this house my home. Mama's footsteps. The clatter of glasses, cups, and plates. The sound of warmth. It's not something you can describe, but you'll surely hear it when it's gone.

I would have prevented the sun from coming up, if I could. It shines stubbornly into my bedroom and reminds me that I belong to the living. But I can't make myself get up. I'm wearing jogging pants, socks, and a sweater; it's a sizzling early September morning, and yet it feels ice-cold in here. I want to get out of bed, but what then? What's my next step? Life has never been so not-cut-and-dried. As long as I stay in bed, I can cling to the thought that I don't owe life anything. That I don't owe anyone anything. Through the closed window I hear the small park up the street come to life. The grassy field allows the neighborhood children to dream, just like we used to dream there. Life was simple then, the ball just had to cross the white line. No more and definitely no less. Out on that field, we all believed we could conquer the world. That we could *be* something. Nothing, not even sunset, could keep us from getting closer to our dreams. We would keep on playing, keep on kicking the ball over the white line. No thirst, hunger, pain, or doubt could come between our feet, the ball, and the net. It was there on the grass, surrounded by oak trees and dandelions, that I learned to fight for something. For myself. For my dream. But I've forgotten how. The white line used to be your goal. But that line's gone now. I have no idea which way I have to go. No idea at all.

A child has just one wish before she falls to sleep: to grow up. Now I would give anything to revert to my youth, because only there can you really start with a clean slate. When I got out, they told me I was getting a second chance, and that I should make the most of it. I wonder if it's really a second chance, or if they're just asking me to retrace the rocky path of my first chance. Rocks that, every one of them, cut deep into my flesh.

Finally, I've managed. I'm out of bed. I stretch and give a long, deep sigh. From this perspective, too, it's a fact: nothing has changed, and yet everything is different.

My wardrobe in the corner still looks just as puny as the last time I took my clothes out of it. I'd like nothing more right now than to shatter the two mirrored doors. I used to stare at myself in these mirrors during my

years of self-searching, exploring who I would become, but now I don't even dare look. If I saw anything in myself back then, I certainly won't see it today. I close my eyes and take two steps forward while I grope for the handles. I jerk the doors open and sniff the musty smell of a wardrobe that's been shut for too long. I open my eyes. It's not just my old clothes lying in there, it's much more. Every pair of pants, every skirt and every T-shirt comes with a memory, and every memory comes with regret. Smells, colors, and sounds come tumbling out. I hadn't expected this. I close my eyes again, quickly close the wardrobe doors and take a few steps to one side. My jeans and favorite sweater are still hanging on the hooks. I feel around in the jeans pockets and come across a few reminders of my old life. A piece of chewing gum, some small change, a movie theater ticket. The ticket stub is illegible now, but I know exactly what it says. Which movie it was. Time can blur an event, but it can't erase it entirely. The memory lies dormant, waiting for someone to dig deep enough to find it. I hold the ticket stub. My stomach knots up. I still remember. Summer evening. Hand in hand. Popcorn and laughter. Cuddles and tender words. Jokes and Cokes. Movie and making out. Strolling and a talking, so many talks, for hours on end. About us. Children. Names. If we had a boy, he could choose the name. 'Samir,' he says. I remember how happy he was when he talked about our children who still had to be made and born. I knew then: he'll be a dream father. I push that memory away and wonder if I'll ever see him again. I wonder if I still want to.

### 3

I lie back on my bed and hear passing cars slow down, children noisily making their way to school, the crescendo of chirping birds. And I hear how these sounds fade into the background when the coffee machine starts gurgling downstairs. Father is awake. There is one person in my life I don't ever want to let down again, and that's Father. Not because I'm afraid of him, but because I owe everything to him. I hear him walk across the kitchen. Then I hear the door to the toilet, he's in there for just as long as he used to be. He flushes. The sound spreads throughout the plumbing, which winds its way like veins through the walls of the house. Now he walks to the bathroom next to the WC. I hear water splashing, and then not. It's being caught by his large hands, which when cupped together are bigger than the old fruit bowl on the kitchen table. He freshens his face, to let his body know it's time, that life awaits.

The scuff of the second chair echoes all the way to my room. It's my younger brother, the brother I no longer know and who no longer knows me. And yet, once I played an important role in his life. I was, after all, the only one who could be a bit of a mother to him. As a toddler, he used to gaze at me from his bed for minutes on end. Those laughing eyes, without words or intent. Just looking into each other's eyes. As a youngster, he could still look at me like that. Karim is now eleven, and I'm more of a stranger to him than the mailman.

I get out of bed again. The sun is a bit higher now, and I listen as father and brother head for the front door. I wait until I hear the car drive off before I open my bedroom door and go downstairs. My left hand grazes the light-gray wallpaper, and with my right hand I reach for the worn wooden banister for support.

There's not much coffee left, not enough for a cup. I can see how far up the pot had been filled. Father clearly did not drink just out of thirst. I chew on my brother's leftover breadcrusts. I was always taught that you mustn't waste food, a lesson that apparently hasn't been passed on to Karim.

Mama was the one who taught me the rules. She exuded attention, Father exuded aloofness. I didn't always understand what she said, but I knew it was important. Father was a quiet man who made sure we never lacked for anything. He saw to it that Mama's rules were adhered to. But that was then.

I sit alone at the kitchen table, with my feet on the floor tiles. I get up and count them. From the door, twelve tiles to the north, six tiles to the east, and then I land on the warmest tile in the house. It almost makes me smile. The warmth radiates via my feet, through my ankles and up to my legs. I am standing at the heart of the house. That's what Mama always said. That we had to care for the house with the heart. The tiles are warmed by the radiator pipes that ran under the floor, but I didn't know that back then.

Mama's explanation sounded better. I hear the tick of the second-hand on the kitchen clock. I hear it ask me questions I have no answer to.

An hour later I'm back on my bed. In the late afternoon I hear a car pull up outside. Through my bedroom window I see my father and brother get out. It's good to see them together like this. They have managed to get by without a woman in their life.

Maybe my absence is the reason they've become so close. You can convince yourself of anything if it helps free you from your pain and guilt. I'm happy for you, little brother.

It is evening. Downstairs, the television is on. I hear the noise of pots and pans, and the phone ringing off the hook. I eavesdrop from the top of the stairs. Everyone calls to ask how I'm doing. Some who are genuinely interested, others who are just nosy. All my father can do at this moment is lie. I hear him say everything is okay, but it's not, and I don't think it ever will be okay. He says what he thinks he should say, just as I'm sure they ask what they think they should ask. If they all only realized that neither side wants this right now. Everyone must be calling, judging from Father's answers. Family, old friends, neighbors, journalists who have been stalking their prey. Then I hear my father call my brother to dinner. I do not hear my name. I am a memory, something from the past. I don't blame them. In a way, I'm relieved. We haven't yet reached the moment that I have to look Father straight in the eye.

I hear Karim leave the table after dinner and walk to the hallway. I hurry back into my room, softly shut the door. Then I retreat under the covers, like a child who doesn't want to be caught still awake. I hear the footsteps of a young soccer player on the stairs. Quick, in a regular rhythm. They cause the wooden steps to creak, they come closer, slow down, and pause in front of my room. I can hear his breathing on the other side of the closed door.

My heart beats so loudly that I press a pillow against my chest. Then he walks on, to his room.

Downstairs, the TV volume is turned up. Father is probably sitting in his usual corner of the sofa, watching the news. The satellite's on. I hear the dish up on the roof rotate to bring images into the house that you can't get here otherwise, to tell a portion of the truth that isn't told here otherwise. Father will watch and listen intently, as he has always done, now without the fear that his daughter's face will appear on the screen, because his daughter is now lying above him, in bed.

## 4

A dark-blue light glows above the rooftops. The moon is low, lower than I've ever seen her. The moon is a 'she', my mother always said, because who else could be the bringer of rest. I turn over and through the gap in the bedroom door I notice a bright light. It flashes in a whole sequence of colors. It's coming from downstairs. I go down; my footsteps no longer betray the footballer in me.

Father has fallen asleep in front of the TV. Yes, he's in his usual corner of the sofa. His short legs are stretched out and crossed, his arms, too. Heaps of rubble are reflected in his glasses. The Western coalition has hit a target again, a hospital this time. Our bombs have caused casualties. I read the subtitles, right to left. I look from the TV screen to my father. I want to wake him, but I don't have the courage. The remote control is stuck between him and the sofa back. I hesitantly reach over him to retrieve it. No distance has ever felt so great. Then I push myself back upright, and just then I see he has opened his eyes. I look at him, by accident. He looks at me, by accident. I want to say something to him. That I only wanted to turn off the TV. I want to say he should get some sleep. I want to tell him I'm sorry. I want to ask him for help, but I say nothing, in the hope that he is sleeping with his eyes open. But he's not. Through the reflection in his glasses, I see his pupils move back and forth ever so slightly. Eyes searching for something. Now he focuses on me. I see the dark circles. I feel a jab in my heart, it is pity, pity for this man because he is my father. On each pupil I see a white speck, a jellyfish floating on water. But Father is only short-sighted, not blind. He

turns his face toward the television screen, seems to realize where he is now. On the screen, bodies are being covered with sheets. He watches it for a short while and then lets his head sink back against the sofa, and he shuts his eyes, as though he had seen something that is not actually there.

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p 76-81

## She

There are no windows in the waiting room, only doors. Large, heavy doors leading to who knows where. I sit under a flickering fluorescent light. Across from me, a few seats to the left, sits a skinny woman. Next to her is a man with a mustache, presumably her husband. He's wearing gray jogging pants and black slippers. The tips of his fingers are yellow, like his nails.

It's quiet here, and calm. Occasionally there's the sound of a distant voice or a closing door. Or a rolling bed or cart. The only constant is the hum of the vending machine—even in a hospital you can buy Coke, chips, and candy.

Every now and then I glance at the door to the waiting room. Father hasn't arrived yet. I'm far too warm, but I try to ignore the discomfort. No one has come out yet, neither for me nor for the couple across from me. A doctor is tending to Karim and I'm anxious to know how he is.

The man with the slippers looks at me. He's probably wondering who would dress like this. The sweat under my three pairs of socks makes my feet itch, but my shoes are too tight for me to wriggle my toes. I look at my feet. Shoes are telling, because if there's one article of clothing that can reveal the state of the wearer, it's shoes.

The man with the slippers mutters something at me. His words get stuck in his long, bristly mustache, like an insect in a spider's web. I have no idea what he wants from me, not the faintest idea of his intentions. Come on, where's the doctor? The man asks if I understand Dutch. Why would he assume I don't? I apologize and say I didn't hear him. He looks surprised, the wrinkles and lines on his forehead come to life.

'Ah, I thought you were one of them who won't learn the language.'

'Sorry, I didn't mean it badly.'

'Sure. You people never mean it badly, do you?' He laughs.

I do my best to ignore him.

'Just kidding, heh. That's a lot of blood. I saw you two come in. It don't look too good. You start 'em young, don't you?'

He laughs again. 'Well, y'know, sometimes people just get fed up.'

I feel a cramp in my stomach; he's baiting me. I endure his words in the hope that he'll get bored with my passiveness and leave me alone. But he's not finished yet.

He takes out a packet of shag and starts rolling a cigarette. His fingers know exactly what to do, so well that they no longer need his eyes.

'But do you get that? That sometimes we just get fed up? You got to understand that. We can't always look the other way. Really, I got nothing against you people, but sometimes it comes to this. These things happen.' He licks a piece of cigarette paper. His teeth and tongue are as vile-looking as his words.

'But a lot of you don't see that. And that gets on people's nerves, 'cause it's almost like we're not allowed to be honest anymore. And if you can't be honest, what's left, eh? In the end it comes down to gratitude, you know? Maybe that's what people want: that you folks show this country a little gratitude. I mean, you're far better off here than there. You're grateful to us, right? Are you grateful?'

I look around. I want to leave, but I have to stay for my little brother. If the doctor comes looking for me, I have to be here.

'Lemme put it another way,' he says, pausing to finally roll up the cigarette. 'Do you people have this in your country? That when you're sick or get beat up you can just waltz into a hospital, free and all? Do you have that there?'

'I...'

'It's them little things, see, we take pretty good care of you people and don't expect so much in return. Learn the language, work, just act like normal people, be normal. You know, we got values here, either you go along with them or you leave. Not that I'm sticking up for the racists, but sometimes they've got a point. If somebody don't like it here then they can just go back where they came from. And by the way, some of your people are friends of mine, and they think the same way I do.'

He looks at his cigarette, satisfied. 'So the question is: are you grateful to be allowed to live in this country?'

It sounds so simple that his words almost become self-evident. But the message behind his words infuriates me. I am ashamed when my lips surrender to the power he has over me: 'Yes.'

'Well, well. Good to hear. You people might want to say so now and then. That, and sorry. Sorry's something we could do with hearing a little more often. Now I'm gonna go smoke this thing, if you're gonna poison your lungs, what better place to do it than in a hospital.' A big fat guffaw, and off he walks. His wife hasn't moved a muscle the whole time.

I check back with the receptionist. I ask if there's word about my brother. If she has any idea how long it might take. She says she doesn't know and that I should wait here. So I wait.

The longer it takes, the more my blood boils. This *is* my home, you idiot. idiot! I was born here. I'm here and there, I'm good and bad. I'm not half, I'm double. That's what I should have answered back.

I calm down when I see the waiting room door open. He looks tired, worried, but he's here. Father has arrived.

I walk down the third floor corridor carrying a coffee in a plastic cup. Father wants it black with two sugars. Some of the doors are open. For some people, this hospital is where they begin their life, for others, it's the end. I think of Mama. Hers was room 423. On her last day she said that a deathbed is the only place you can forgive the devil, not so much because his wickedness can't harm you anymore, but because you realize forgiveness brings you peace. I wonder if she'd have forgiven me. I wonder if I can ever forgive those two kids who did this to my little brother. I'm not sure if forgiveness is still done anymore. Nowadays people see being harsh and judgmental as a sign of strength.

A few drops of coffee splash onto my shoe. Karim's door is open, too. Father is sitting next to him. From here it's hard to say if my brother is asleep or awake. His eyelids are purple and swollen. He's got two stitches.

I walk over to Father, hand him the coffee and perch on the edge of the windowsill.

'Where were you?'

'The machine was all the way downstairs.'

'Where were you when Karim was in the park?'

'I... was home. On the computer, looking for work.'

'Why are you dressed like that?'

'I was about to go jogging.'

Father raises one eyebrow. 'Go home and pick up some things for your brother. He'll have to stay here for two or three nights. I'll wait until he wakes up.'

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p 113-114

## She

*It was 4:20 a.m., I was lying in bed and could barely keep my eyes open. They had booked a cheap flight from Paris to Nador, at least that's what they said. The only thing was, they needed to catch an early-morning bus from downtown Brussels. And the first bus from our town to Brussels left too late.*

*I checked my watch occasionally, knowing they would ring the doorbell if I was even a minute late. I did not want Father or my little brother to be woken up.*

*I was already in my father's car when I heard their suitcase come rolling up. They had one big gray roller suitcase, and a small backpack each. I wanted to help them load their luggage, because the last thing I needed was a lecture from Father on account of a scratch on his new car. But he said he'd rather do it himself. We didn't say much on the way. I wanted to put on some music, but didn't. I knew they had become ultra-religious and I didn't feel like having to defend my favorite songs at half past four in the morning.*

*So anyway, we got to the bus station in Brussels. I got out and watched as they took their luggage out of the trunk. I was surprised how little they had with them, for a trip to Morocco. You usually brought at least a shirt, trousers, or pair of shoes for each family member, and every year the family got bigger. Expectations can be pretty high. That's the moment I should have known. There's so much I should have known. But you don't know something until it's too late, and realize you should have asked questions much earlier. So I drove home, the music on quietly, and hoped my brother would let me sleep in. At that moment they walked into the bus station, where they waited for a third person. Three hours later I was lying in bed when they blew up the gray suitcase. They took the bus station and sixteen people with them.*

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p 127-128

## He

The silence in the house feels different today. As though it's even quieter than usual. I roll onto my side, give myself a boost, and sit up cautiously. I think I know what it is. I push my feet into my slippers. It takes me a while to stand completely upright. Today I manage it on the third try.

I shuffle to the bathroom and listen as I look at the bathtub. I don't hear it anymore. The dripping. The faucet, it's no longer dripping. I go a few steps closer, bend over, and notice that a single droplet is clinging to the bathtub spout. And just stays there. My eyes well up. I wait. I sit down on the toilet seat lid and stare at the bathtub faucet. The silence is now ear-splitting. Her silence.

I gasp for breath, feel warmth trickle down my cheeks. I can't even cry properly anymore. My vocal cords are sore. Damn that faucet.

I hoist myself up by the handrail on the wall, begin the day, fill the sink with water. I hold my hands under the stream, wash them and rub the gold wedding ring a few times. It's still shiny. I fill my cupped hands with water and bring them to my face. But they're too slow, the water runs down my forearms and into my pajama sleeves. Then I comb my hair, letting my arm rest every few strokes. The toothbrush is propped in the cup, next to hers. I don't brush anymore, at least not regularly. Haven't in a while. I never much liked it but I knew she appreciated it. She had a way of getting me to do things without having to ask. Except for the leaky bathtub faucet: she didn't manage that in time.

My hand reaches for the banister. I breathe deeply a few times before heading down. I stop halfway. I think I've heard something upstairs, but I'm not sure. My breathing disrupts everything. I wait until I've caught my breath again. Now I'm sure. I hear it. Release. The fear that had me in a chokehold is gone. Droplets fall from the bathtub faucet.

A bit lighter now, I walk to the kitchen. I'm relieved. The bathtub tap is leaking. The droplets fall. I hear her ask when I'm going to finally fix that faucet. Comforted, I take some bread out of the freezer. She is still here.

## He

The match will be starting soon. I've been ready to leave for a while now, my team scarf in hand, waiting for Hassan. I shuffle restlessly from the kitchen to the living room and back. He should have been here by now.

Being late is probably normal for them, but damn it, now it's starting to annoy me. I'll call Thomas later and tell him I want someone else. I want to get going, but I put it off for a minute, then another. The choice is simple: either I wait here and miss the beginning of the match, or I leave and have to pick up the groceries myself at Hassan's later.

I've never been late for a football match. Well, a few times, because of Maria. She always took her time getting ready. I would stand at the front door, doing my best to stifle my impatience. You could hear the hair dryer blowing upstairs. A persistent noise, it infuriated me, but at least then I could swear out loud without Maria hearing. Then it was quiet between us on the way to the playing field.

But then once we were there, sitting among all those people, cheering, swearing, and shouting, I would occasionally glance to the side. At her. What I saw, I'll never be able to explain to anyone. I couldn't even explain it to Maria, how much love I felt for her. And even if she spent way too much time up in the bathroom on Saturdays, I had the privilege of sitting next to her in the bleachers.

I look at the clock. Another fifteen minutes late. The match is about to start, but I try to contain my anger. I've got to stop being so grumpy. I should do what I should have done back then. I could have told her how pretty she looked, could have told her what a lucky dog I was.

They say grief is as deep as the love was. Some days I appreciate how lucky I was to have had Maria at my side for so long, and other days I think that if she hadn't been at my side for so long, missing her wouldn't be so hard. Every day I have to decide whether I'm grateful or angry, but the only damn thing I want is to have her back. That's what I want. And then I'll finally know how she reacts when she's the one who has to wait. I chuckle.

The doorbell slices through the silence. Hassan. A glance at the clock. I can still catch the second half. I just have to make sure we keep the small talk to a minimum. Albert's words suddenly resurface. D'you think Hassan knew about it? Am I spending my money on them now? The bell goes again. I walk to the door and turn the knob. I'm blinded by the autumn light.

All I see is a dark silhouette. My heart beats faster. I grasp the door frame for support. It's not Hassan. I look at the bag on the stoop. I recognize it. I've got dozens of them in my cupboard. It's definitely from Hassan's shop. I hear her say something. Her voice sounds soft. Too soft. She sounds genuinely friendly and warm. I try to look her in the eye, but I can't, partly because of my own confusion and partly because she's pulled her cap so low.

She waits and I wait. I try to stall, just to be sure, but actually I am sure. Not only do my eyes see it, every fiber in my body feels it.

It's her.

I turn and walk to the kitchen. I wonder why I let this happen, but I do it anyway. I hear the door close behind me. She steps inside. The day has arrived. I've always dreaded bumping into her in the neighborhood. But it's happening here, at home. The woman who took my wife from me is in my house.

## He & She



She's right on time. She smiles as soon as she sees me, and as I walk with her from the front door to the kitchen, she asks how I'm doing.

I shrug my shoulders, I don't really know.

Then she politely asks if she can start on the tea. She takes off her jacket and fills the kettle with water. The bag with the bunch of mint leaves is already lying on the counter.

I look at the clock. 22:34.

At 22:41 she sits down across from me and fills the glasses. First mine, then hers.

'It's good.'

'Really?'

'Have you been practicing?'

'No, not really, or yes, I've been making tea at home a lot the past few days.'

'It's better than the last time.'

'Thank you.'

'You seem surprised that I like it.'

'A bit. Maybe it's because I compare it with my mother's. Nothing beats Mama's tea.'

'What does she think of it?'

'Who, Mama?'

'Yes.'

'If she were still here, she'd say it wasn't good enough yet.'

'Then it's not good enough, I guess.'

'Yes.'

I take another sip. 'Is your mother dead?'

'Eight years ago. She had cancer.'

'Oh, right. Sorry to hear that.' I clear my throat. 'And your brother? Will he break the record?'

'He says he will. He's on his way.'

'I'm sure he'll do it. He's good.'

'How do you know? Have you seen him play?'

'I was early for the first string's match and saw him in action. At least, I assume it was him.'

'I didn't know you were a football fan.'

'I'm just curious to see who's going to break my record.'

'Your record?'

'Yes, mine. Forty-three goals. In 1965.'

'Really?'

'Can't an old man be an ex-champion?'

'Eh. . . of course. I mean: what a coincidence. My brother won't believe it when I tell him I've met you. That I know who you are.'

You don't know who I am, Soumia.

'Do you mind if I ask you something?'

'Depends.'

'If you see him sometime on the football field. Would you give him some encouragement? Say he's on the right track? I think it would mean a lot to him. He's going through a rough patch right now.'

'Oh?'

'You see, I'm his sister and that causes him trouble at school and at football. They call him a terrorist.'

I nod.

'That's really kind of you. By the way, I'm glad Home Care needs help again. I thought I wouldn't see you anymore.'

'Pour us another glass?'



'Sure.'

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