

# She.

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**p 7-10**

She dips her fingertips into the warmed oil. She starts at the crown, running little circles on her skull, leaving no spot untouched, until the roots of her dark-blond hair shine. Her ears, supple bone tissue, soft earlobe with a scar from when, as a five-year-old, she tumbled from the sofa's narrow back, hitting her ear on the corner of the glass side table, because she wanted to fly, because she could. She takes more oil, slides her fingertips along her neck where the short hair stops and bare skin begins, the triangular intersection of jaw, neck and ear, her jaw always tense, she doesn't know why, the more she worries about it, the more her jaw tenses. More oil, her shoulders, that place on her shoulder blade that never stops being sore because too much comes together there, too much tendon, too much muscle, too much unseen grief, her left shoulder that doesn't want to stay in its socket, crack, I'm flying, I'm falling. Warm oil across her chest, ribs like hard sand the sea has just retreated from, her breasts with the stretchmarks she hated as a young woman, now they are part of her, her ribcage splits open, her ribs leave the sternum, float, she follows them with her fingertips to a back she can't see, never sees, she closes her eyes. Herself. Her wrists turning and facilitating fingers that bend, reaching for the protruding shoulder blades, tired wings, she breathes in, an obstruction there, she reaches forward with everything: breasts, heart, collarbone, allows her forefingers to flirt momentarily with her vertebrae, her hands return, sliding across her chest to her shoulders, arms, familiar territory, more oil. Elbows, bridge between upper and lower parts, she goes from bridge to bridge, connects connection points, lubricates them, says hello and thank you for supporting me, thank you for bearing me all these years. She traces her fingers now, one by one, the fingers that write her, her knuckles, and she fills the ancient grooves that make her human with oil. Herself. Her belly. She writes herself. Her belly, which is round, she doesn't know why, fluid retention, maybe because she will bleed soon, hopefully not tonight, she takes the belly she doesn't want, the one she never wanted, too much fat, she takes it in her hands, says hello, hello belly that I don't want, the belly says nothing, swells. The mole on her lower back, her hard pelvis and soft tender lower belly, her rough hairs, she has to cut them again, she still has to shave, later, in the shower, when the oil has had time to soak in, deep into her hipbones, kneecaps, labia, all the way to the core she doesn't know, she can only circle it, trace, touch the skin, under which everything flows. All the way to her smallest toe, she pushes her fingers between her toes, spreads them, stretches skin. Herself. Her foot soles. They heave a sigh of relief. Whenever she has an evening performance, whenever she has to go on stage, she prepares her body, she makes it receptive, or who knows, protects it, adding a layer so that the opinions she always hears, no matter how quiet it is in the theatre, won't be able to penetrate deeply enough. Perhaps that's what she is doing, safeguarding, covering herself. With oil. She's forgotten her face, slides over the wretched body parts, everything

has become one now, upwards, her stiff jaw, cheeks, forehead, the nose she got from her father. Herself. Eyes that shut. She cups her hands and lays them over her eyelids. It is 6.45, pitch dark in the small bathroom and the city isn't aware of how loud it can be.

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p 64-76

Fran holds up eight fingers to me. I've got eight minutes. I decide to do it, I'll go for a pee, it's possible, I'm in the dark, I'm free, I learned this by carefully observing him, it's the way he inhabits the stage, not pretending to be somebody else. I catch Fran's eyes and point at the side door, she nods, I turn around. As soon as the door closes behind me, the din quieters to the buzz of a bees' nest, hanging in a tall tree at a pleasantly safe distance. I run down the stairs with quick bare feet, the white light in the corridor hurts my eyes. After he'd disappeared from my life, I began to avoid them: passageways, staircases, corridors, in-between spaces. Not the specific places in which we'd shared our love, but all connections between two spaces. Only then does it become clear that we only exist by grace of the corridor. Nothing more elemental than that vital connecting-piece. Without corridors everything becomes an undifferentiated slop. Residential kitchen, office-cum-toilet, basement nursery.

I push open the heavy grey toilet door with clammy hands. The speaker on the wall assures me that they are still pouring in, the spectators, with accounts of their day's experiences, a loud laugh breaks through the soothing buzz. I sit on the toilet and fill my lungs. There's no tiny window I can climb out of. Focus, Ada, you've got eight minutes. Go back, one last time, break the pattern so that I can finally take my place on the stage without regression. Back to the corridors, Ada, back to the staircases, the doors. Back to the beginning. The corridor of my student house where I received a text from an unknown number, but I did know it myself. After our first kiss, he'd whispered his number to me and I'd memorised it because it would be dangerous to save in my phone. We're not really doing anything wrong, he'd said, but what if one of your classmates happened to see my name appear on your screen and rumours started... The message said, I'm here. Bang, front door open, I tripped over my pounding heart, right into his red four-wheel drive. Why a four-wheel drive, I asked. I'd stopped using verbs, stopped using pronouns. Had he noticed? Did he notice how red my cheeks were? He said something about deserts and Morocco. Only then did I see his sturdy walking boots, cheerful laces. I nodded. A pause. What now? Don't panic. I knew what to do. Um... I'm a bit tired. Yes? he said, smiling in his monkish manner. Can I offer you a bed then? I no longer remember whether I said yes out loud, but everything in me that stayed silent wanted that bed.

I flush, look at myself in the mirror. A nervous twist to the lips, which is familiar from my mother and her mother's faces. Tense jaw. It is a mouth that pacifies rage even before it reaches the lips. It is a mouth that has never learned to cry out. My mother didn't want to burden me with her own battle with the violence of an unaccountable mother so she zipped her lips. But what she never understood is that the thing that doesn't want to be seen somehow finds its way beneath the surface of everyday countenance, into her daughter's jaw. What my mother never understood - and now it is too late, her words no longer say what she means by them - is that trauma never makes its way out in silence. Is that the reason I act, the reason I open my mouth each time? I open it wide now, try to relax my jaw, my teeth reveal

themselves, my eyes big, muwaamuwaamuwamuwaa, I warm them up as best I can, the muscles that will carry my words up there on the stage. One last look, it's time, I push open the grey door and climb the stairs, slowly this time, almost stately, the people will wait. I feel each cold step beneath my bare feet. The staircase of his house, his house, smelled of cabbage and my unpredictable grandmother's soap. I talked continuously as I took each step, wedging my shoulder under the silence. He frowned but listened attentively. We sat down at the kitchen table. There were glass pots of unknown foodstuffs in an open kitchen cupboard, seaweed? Grains whose names I didn't know. Dried things. He asked why someone as young as me was tired. I just dumped my boyfriend. When? Last night. Not for me I hope? Yeah, yeah. But I didn't say so. Things weren't going so well. Oh. He called me a whore. Why? Just because. Us. Against the wall in the corridor. So I thought. I believed. I only want you. But I said nothing. Tired? I nodded. Do you want to lie down? Yes. His bedroom curtains as red as his scarf. No verb. He took off my sweater, my t-shirt, so I unhooked my bra. The Sunday afternoon light broke through the curtains, but that wasn't right. Time stood still. He massaged my back. His hands on my shoulders. His long fingers gave me everything they had to offer. The way a doctor listens with deep focus on the lungs of a patient, professionally ignoring the racing heart in the bared chest. He kissed my hair. Take a nap. Closed the door behind him. I was cared for in that house that smelled of cabbage.

I open the door and make my way to the centre of the dark stage which feels more familiar than when I left it. The room is half-filled now. On the first balcony, a row of young people, they reach for each other while they still can, cram thick coats beside to their feet, a phone is passed around and they laugh at something I can't see. The door behind them opens and my racing heart misses a beat. That's not the man I want to see. This isn't his city. David. With his wife. What's her name? What does she know? Impossible that she knows nothing. I was fifteen. I was infatuated the way I was infatuated with the poster of Leonardo DiCaprio on the slant of my bedroom's wood-panelled wall, next to a picture of cartoon character Jommeke and his friends. I had a photograph of him I would gaze at longingly. Soft eyes, black hair, tanned skin. David. Head of the family with his decent, drab-coloured family car with space for three kids on the backseat. I was their regular babysitter and they took me skiing with them. And on the skiing holiday, my knees touched his under the table. That and my lingering gaze catching his proved enough. Another corridor. He kissed me. The laughter of the children at the table I had just left to grow up in the course of a single French kiss. I was more adult than any other girl. I didn't know you were so horny. Oh no! That's not Leonardo's line on a boat about to sink, these are words without contrast in a corridor between snowy mountain peaks. Tomorrow we'll say we're sick, okay? I'll come to your room. Tomorrow morning. And off he went. So fast I didn't see the bottomless hole in his chest. The next day everyone went skiing. He came as promised. Why did I open my trousers, let his fingers in?

Why didn't I say no? Because I'd lusted after his photo? Because I'd pressed my knee between his? There's a large gap between the man and his photograph, a black slope which he traversed with thoughtless skill. I was three years older than his eldest daughter who was learning to schuss out there, on the other side of the window.

What's in between taking and being taken? Between wanting and being wanted? Where's the middle ground? Do tragedies come to an end? How then? There are lessons to be learned from the surviving Greek myths. But as long as you're in love with an impossible man you don't pay attention in drama composition class and the pattern, the pattern repeats itself endlessly. I don't feel the need to look at people anymore. I don't want him to see that I have

seen him either. I don't want to act for him. So it must be. Me standing here, arms idle, in a revealing dress, and I feel dirty, watched, humiliated. He shouldn't have been here. I was a girl, he a grown man, he didn't have the right, he shouldn't, he certainly shouldn't now either, but an elongated shadow falls over my anger. It is shame for failing to say no myself.

Months after the ski holiday, the phone rang. Ada, it's for you! Who is it? David. Oh... About babysitting, I think. My mother, clad in an unsuspecting dressing gown, laid the receiver in front of me. I was sixteen by then. Hey. Oh... hello. My mother with a newspaper in the armchair. I'm going to come pick you up. Okay. So when? Sunday at 3 at the supermarket on the main road. Okay. I glanced at my mother and improvised a babysitting line. I'll check if I can and I'll call you back. Click. He didn't have a four-wheel drive, he had a decent, drab-coloured family car and cold hands. His fingers weren't long. He parked at the entrance to a forest. I was wearing a white t-shirt and faded jeans because he'd told me he thought that was sexy. Hey, my dad comes jogging here sometimes. When? On weekends. He unzipped my faded jeans. There was nothing nice about those cold fingers. I did my best to tug at his thing the way I had with a previous boyfriend. It worked. I can still picture his semen on my hand. A jogger went past. David ducked like a cowardly soldier. What are you doing? I thought...it might be... your father. No, my dad wears aviator glasses. To see better. Why did he tell me, buttoning his jeans, about the woman at work with whom he was having an affair? What she was like, what she did. She had red hair. I wanted to go home. It was cold on the black slope. He would make one more attempt, several months later, to finish the work he had so carefully begun. Ada, it's for you. Who is it? There's a party, his voice on the phone, you can stay over, we have a guest room. Um... I can't. Now I know he wanted to be the first. The first man in me. In his house. At a party. Among his friends' coats. I said no.

He lays his thick coat over the railing of the first balcony. He seeks out my gaze. His wife is an engineer. The last time I saw him his eyes were bloodshot. How old was I? Thirty. Twice as old as back then in the snow. A large family gathering and he turned out to be a distant acquaintance of distant barely-acquainted cousins of mine. I was wearing a black dress that encircled my hips and I danced with it. Away, further and further away from his eyes. They wanted something from me. My father had died a year before that. I stood on the patio, under lanterns, the dancing evaporated from my body. I heard about your dad, I'm so sorry, I... My glass swirled a no in his direction. The bubbles splashed onto his crotch. Heads turned towards us. Oh sorry, did I get you? It's the high heels... Hang on, I'll fetch a cloth. He stayed on the patio with the large black hole in his chest. How it got there, I don't know. It's only grown larger, I can see that from here. From miles away at sea. And it is right, mother, that Hellenes should rule barbarians, but not barbarians Hellenes, those being slaves, while these are free.

I've known the words for so long. The first time I spoke them, I was only sixteen – how many events are there in a girl's year? – and then too, I was standing right in the middle of the stage in the amateur theatre. Then too, David sat shamelessly in the audience; then too she was at his side; then too he sought out my eyes. Back then I didn't feel shame, I had no time for it because I was infatuated again. Not with David-the-photo-version, but the part-time freelance director who had picked me to play Iphigenia. Of all the things I wanted before I knew you, I wanted you, I wrote to the director in a letter. Because I wanted him, I think. And because I always wanted what I wanted. I take full responsibility for that. On a rainy autumn evening, the forest was not far away, it never was, the director drove me home after the performance. Along the steep main road. On his moped. I clasped his silent man's waist. Rain. Breath.

Driveway. I read your letter, he said, we can't do this. Gulp. It wasn't a gesture of intention. It wasn't a fathomless black hole that wanted to fill itself with the blood of willing virgins. It was a boundary. In that exact spot on the drive between my family home and the dark forest. The man gave me permission. He let me do what sixteen year olds ought to do. He let longing be longing.

The desired teachers, scouting leaders, married men, piled up in my diary. And because I wanted what I wanted, I wrote letters, showed my heart, took initiative. It was rare for them to set a boundary. Tirelessly I hitched my wagon to saviours with authority, with my long blonde hair. Should I have looked for the saviour inside myself? Who would have shown me the way? A father who called me 'little one' in a tone of sweet condescension? A mother who went through life as invisibly as possible? The strong women, beautiful women, catastrophic women, lusty women, tragic women described by men in plays and books and based on what they craved in their imagination? Is it any surprise that half of my life I was not a woman but a man's desire? I read them. I played them often enough. The heroines praised by men, shaped in a world of men. The poor creations in thrall to higher powers, no matter how hard they fought, they would die, they were not believed, elevated to sainthood, shoved to the sidelines, hidden in the ground or placed high up in heaven. But never did any of them end up in the middle. It could not be tragic then. A story needs conflict, it seems. But this story is more persistent, this story is me, lived by me, conceived by me, each second a choice. The path unfolds endlessly, only here, only now. Every moment a possible answer to the question of what now. Not the hands-in-the-air-what-now, but the time question. What now? That answer regularly changes colour, touching the entire spectrum between black and white. A human is a more persistent story than I could ever have imagined because a human is not a story at all. Or she is thousands of them. I am a mishmash of projections and ideas. But what binds them together is the decision, mine, to shine the light on one of them. I write me.

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