

The Dropout

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p 9-12

I hate the October day when I first saw the images.

Human beings are capable of all this, I thought.

I'd thought it before, about other events, but now, seeing these images, that insight was reaffirmed in the most horrific manner. The way one person, filled with hatred, can slaughter another. The unimaginable panic that must have arisen, out there in the desert. I hate the way the images keep on recurring before my eyes. Even images I've never seen, that my brain seems to generate for itself.

The sand, the desert, the cars scattered over the dunes. People rushing between cars, young people, women, men, lightly dressed. The dash cam registers it all ruthlessly. Other men appear. They're wearing dark clothes and heavy shoes, holding guns in front of them. The sand crunches ominously. Then gunfire. Someone hiding under a car is discovered and dies. Further along there's a girl in party clothes, upbeat make-up. She gestures, she's unarmed, she's spent the night dancing, probably just wants to sleep this morning, to lie down and rest. A burst of fire. She falls asleep for all time, eternal rest. The man behind the shots continues his search.

That's what horrifies me, the way one person slaughters another merely because one has a weapon and the other does not, because one dares to cock his gun, take aim and pull the trigger. The murder of a human being is such a simple and banal matter. I hate the fact that I'm capable of hate.

A bang, someone falls on the sand. The man aims again, fires again, finishes them off. He shoots because he can. There in the sand, between the cars, in the spot where dawn is breaking after an entire night of dancing, a boy is held at gunpoint and three metres away his girlfriend is forced onto a motorbike, pushed onto the saddle, wedged between two men, one of whom waves a gun while the other accelerates, they ride off. Taken hostage. While the boyfriend can only look on.

That's what happens at first light that morning. The dancing is done.

There's no mercy to the images. They proliferate, they keep on proliferating. A continuous stream of new images, continually showing the same thing. The hate is real. The way it exists between people.

I hate living in a world that produces this. While also being part of that world myself. It makes me sick. The way someone shoots dead a human being he's never met, without questions, without answers, without hesitation, then goes on his way, gun in hand. I see it before my eyes. Someone is hiding under a car. The man with the gun bends down, sees the person under the car. He doesn't care, he fires. That's how it goes, dying. It merely demands blood, blood flowing away, away from the body, away from the heart.

In the open boot of a pick-up truck lies the carelessly dumped body of a young woman, who was still dancing on her slim legs just an hour ago. On either side of her are men in dark clothes with weapons in their hands. The truck drives on through the image, taking the woman with it to the next place, the next scene, which can only be guessed at.

Another tableau shows people along a road, houses on one side, fields and wasteland on the other. Young lads in shorts throw stones towards the side with the houses, soldiers in their jeep watching. Armed men emerge from the house side, immediately aim their guns at the stone-throwers, pull the triggers, a child and an older onlooker fall. The soldiers don't move, they let it happen.

Death arrives so simply. That's the truth, that's the image. I hate that truth, I hate those images. The way people slaughter one another, in our civilised world, with civilised weapons. You don't even need to get your hands dirty, feel or smell the other person's breath, hear the beating of a heart. You don't need to know the other person's motives, what they live for or what keeps them going. You needn't even explain why you're bringing that life to a halt, why you're ending that breathing, that heartbeat, that continuing life. A burst of gunshots is sufficient. So meaningless, so banal.

What should I do with my hatred? How deeply do I have to feel it? To do what?

Quietly go to bed, lock the door, a glance through the window, no one in the garden, the moon in the sky, close my eyes. Leave the images behind. How do you stop a gun without a gun?

I want to sleep, like the young woman after a night of dancing, and awake again. There in the room, where there's no road or desert, no cars to hide under, just a bed, no one beside me. No one hiding in the wardrobe, no one even in the mirror. I'm alone with myself and my heart.

p 22-23

I don't know the precise moment when death took her. Like him I was in the room and ten minutes earlier, perhaps only five, I'd been speaking with my mother. She knew he was there, making as if to approach the bed, to lay his bony hand on her soul, his invitation. My mother would go with him, accompany him, I knew that.

It was an unexpectedly animated conversation, I even thought my mother was gesturing to him to wait a moment.

Then we were silent, everything there was to say had been said.

I held my mother's hand between mine, stroked her forehead, moistened her lips. I made sure she could feel that there was life around her.

And suddenly she was dead. Perhaps it had already been a minute, perhaps two, perhaps only just then. I didn't know that passing could be so quiet, so casual.

I stare ahead and no longer know what I'm seeing. My gaze has nothing to rest on, holds onto nothing, I merely experience sight, the presence of light, nothing more. My gaze remains dry. Even the tear welling up is dry. An arid grief over what I've known and will never see again, a life that has disappeared. My mother is dead and it occurs to me that there's nothing to keep me here anymore.

After the cremation, the cemetery and the exhausting obligatory formalities, I stand in my room and look at the bed, the crumpled sheets, the faint impression of my head on the pillow. What does it matter whether I sleep here or somewhere else?

My gaze shifts to the wardrobe, one of its doors open. I see my pannier bags on the floor inside. I reach out and toss the bag onto the bed. In a couple of moments I grab some clothes,

stuff them into the bag, scrabble together some toiletries, take my pocket knife, my raincoat, an extra pair of shoes and close the door.

All without thinking.

I have no desires, no expectations, I want to get away from the world that's worn me out. What was familiar has grown strange to me. The world I always inhabited with fire has slipped away, the spark extinguished, as if death has its hand in everything.

I take my bike and begin to pedal, south, at random. I'll see where it takes me.

p 30

I've never considered throwing in the towel, one day I simply realised I no longer had one. I stood empty-handed, looking at everything I'd held onto and was no longer able to carry. My hands had lost their grip. After three days' cycling I took my bike and boarded a train to speed my escape from that old world, to then explore a new one as slowly as possible, back on my bike. The morning was cold, my hands froze on the handlebars, my breath emerged as icy steam. I stopped at this spot because the Cavée was too steep for me and evening already hung in the air with its pink and purple tones, its chill sun licking the hills and its last threads of light tracing the fields.

'Stay!' lowed the cows.

'Stay!' cried the buzzard.

That's still how I imagine it.

Here the world brought me to a halt. This house against the flank of a hill, abandoned, for rent.

I grasped it.

p 32-33

After a week I was able to watch the cows. Not just see them, but follow them in their movements, the way they graze and ruminate. Now I know they stand all together in the meadow, day after day, tugging with their tongues and lips – their teeth remain hidden – plucking at the grass down to just above the roots. Their noses jerk up and down a couple of times, then they move their feet a step forward. One back foot remains standing as they graze on, until that one too is lifted and placed a little further forward. Their udders swing gently. They graze as they walk.

That was all new to me, including the way the cows sometimes stand motionless for minutes on end, in the shade of a row of trees, or simply in the sun, staring into space. Once in a while they whip at the flies with their tails or roughly throw their head to one side to sling spit over their flank and back, driving away the insects. Or they rub their hide against the trunk of a tree.

What most stands out to me is how little the cows expect of one another, their presence appears to be sufficient. They tramp around together under the row of trees or spread out across the field. They each lie down a little distance from the other bovine bodies, but always close enough to hear the sound of another, the snuffling or snorting, the grinding of teeth during rumination, the lowing or coughing. They really do form a herd. Within it they each

go their own way and the way of one differs minimally from that of the others. The need for company keeps them together.

My garden is separated from their field by a hedge. On their side there's barbed wire that's worn through in places. It doesn't matter, the hedge is enough. Sometimes one of them lays her snout on the hedge and stares at me. I look up and smile back. I can't tell if she understands me, she could just be staring into space. I don't cross the hedge either, although I often feel a longing to be part of that herd, my presence simply permitted, noticed for who I am, and yet one of them, nothing more asked of me.

They're present, I'm present, together, without demands or obligations, without intent.

p 68

'Look at me. Do I differ at all from all those billions of others who are born, eat, sleep, mate and populate the economy?'

'What a question.'

'Is that what remains to us? The indifference of the herd, which grazes and grazes and tramples the grass it grazes?'

'You can't think that way,' H el ene objects.

'It's because of the cows,' I say.

'There's more than cows to this region.'

p 75-77

Charlotte Corday was heaved into a red gown before she was taken to the guillotine. That way the public would know the reason for her execution, red was the colour for murder. The painter had just made the finishing touches to her portrait. Reports stated that she was satisfied with the resemblance he had achieved in such a brief time. She was ordered to sit while her hair was cropped so that her throat was clear for the knife. After that only the portrait remained to reveal the person she knew she really was. She saw the curls fall from her head just as her head would fall from her body. Dead, separated from what was now still alive. Her head would drop into the basket and the world would continue without Charlotte Corday, she would never see her sister or father again, never again feel the breeze on her cheeks, never know the paths taken by the lives of those remaining. She was led outside. 'She was incredibly calm and serene,' those who saw her in her final moments remarked. As if she'd known the hand she'd been dealt from the outset.

When she was arrested, she had her birth certificate with her so that there could be no doubt as to who she was. She had nothing to hide, no interest in misleading anyone or involving anyone outside herself. She hadn't informed her father or sister. During the trial she maintained that she had acted entirely on her own initiative. Did people not think her capable of acting alone? She patiently repeated that she and only she and come up with the plan and carried it out. She had made the journey to Paris alone, she had bought a kitchen knife on her own, one long and strong enough to reach a heart. Twice she had presented herself at Marat's house in vain, the staff would not let her in. The third time, it was already evening, she was allowed in. She had come up with the pretext that she wanted to inform him about opponents to his politics. He listened willingly while making notes in his bath, which

he took daily due to his skin disease – perhaps she was surprised that he received her in the bath – until she planted the knife in his breast.

Every gesture, every action she took that day had been determined by her. The moment of her arrest brought an end to that, she was taken away, without the slightest chance to escape. She still had three days to live. She admitted everything, the Comité wasted no time, she pled guilty and the guillotine awaited. Now she was brought out and placed in the carriage that would drive her to the scaffold, perhaps drawn by a pair of black horses.

She will hardly have felt the sun on her skin, as according to the stories, commentaries, witness reports, a storm broke over Paris when she was driven through the streets in an open carriage with bars. Yet onlookers stood along the side of the road jeering and sometimes throwing what they could get their hands on at the carriage.

We don't know what she thought. Throughout the carriage journey she remained serene.

p 138

'What does life mean if you can't live it as it's intended?'

'How is it intended?'

'That you get out of it what's in it.'

'What's in it then?'

'That your heart beats and not just for yourself. A heart is something you have for someone else. A heart without another is a dead heart.'
