

Peeling

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p 7-13

Prologue

A girl. Wet hair. A strip of exposed belly. She sticks her thumb out when I drive past. I stop a little further along, pat down my coat pockets. My gloves. I'd taken them off to fold the towels. Did I leave them on top of the tumble dryer? I rummage in the baby carrier in the back, between the seats, in the glove compartment. Maybe there's a spare pair. Even just a single glove would be good. I could wear it on my right hand while driving and hold the other casually at the bottom of the steering wheel. All I find are coins, scrunched-up tissues, a carpenter's pencil I'd lost. I stick it in my pocket and check the wing mirror. The girl is nearly here. Three more steps. Two. She opens the door, mentions a small village on the hill.

'Get in.'

She plonks down beside me, a rainbow-coloured backpack on her lap, slams the door shut and slumps down in her seat, an elbow propped against the window. She's younger than I thought. Twelve? Thirteen? A child. I feel as if I've seen her before. In the supermarket perhaps? Or is she one of the youths who loiter in the village square?

She looks outside, even though it's too dark to see anything. I know where we are: past the last cow pasture. Up ahead is the wood, beyond it the sheep field, then the lock keeper's cottage and the bridge across the canal. In the distance the hill.

'You must be cold,' I say.

A stupid thing to say. It's autumn. She's wearing wet summer clothes. Still, an answer would be nice. A smile. A nod to indicate that she's heard me. Good manners are easy enough.

'Shall I switch the heating on?'

Yes. No. Why is there no answer? She was able to tell me her destination. Is she scared? Did anything happen to her?

I switch on the light. She gives me a dirty look, is shocked at the sight of the chapped skin and the raw, open flesh on my hands and turns back to the window. She doesn't *want* to answer. That's it.

'Your seatbelt.' I'd rather talk to her in a friendlier tone, but she's making it hard for me.

I help her, loosen the belt, pull it over her shoulder. I smell cigarettes. A hint of perfume. And something else. A familiar fragrance. Soap? Detergent? She shrinks into her seat when I click the seatbelt into place. Shudders. What else did I expect? I pull a towel from the carry cot and put it on her lap.

'It's still warm,' I say.

She hisses that I should keep my hands to myself. *Paws*. That's what she calls them. *Mitts*. She picks up the threadbare towel between her thumb and index finger and drops it by her feet.

It's disrespectful. I tell her. I could have kept going. She'd still be standing there now. On a Saturday, at this time of night, there's not a lot of traffic on the hill road.

'Just drop me off here,' she says.

It's because I ask questions. Stand my ground. Somebody has to set an example. Show her what's right and wrong. She shouldn't be hitchhiking. Smoking. Wearing make-up. She's still a child. She needs dry clothes. Fresh food. A warm bed.

'I live over there.' I point to the woodland track off to the side.

She unclicks her seat belt and says she wants to get out.

I accelerate.

It's too soon. I thought so. She sits pressed up against the door, clutching the backpack to her stomach, ready to jump out of the car and spread nasty rumours about me. Maybe she'll wait till we get to the bridge. The lock keeper's light is on. I rub my hands on my trousers, one after the other, first the backs, then the palms, hard, so the fabric scrapes across my skin, the itching stops and I can think straight again.

'She's asleep,' I say eventually.

'Who is?' she asks petulantly.

'My little girl.' I point to the baby carrier on the back seat.

She looks over her shoulder. Then back at me.

'You have a daughter?'

'Ellie,' I say. 'She's nearly one. She falls asleep quite easily with my wife, but when it's just the two of us, I have to drive around at night.'

I switch off the dome light when she tries to sneak a peek inside the travel cot. 'Not now. If she wakes up just after dozing off, she could cry for ages.'

'Where's your wife?'

'Abroad for work.'

By the time we arrive in the village, I know her name is Chloé and she's fourteen. She loves children and likes to babysit. The things I tell her about Ellie make her laugh. Things I remember from the old days. Ellie pulling a little bath full of water over herself on the changing mat, splashing about in it, roaring with laughter. Ellie standing bow-legged in the playground, fumbling in her nappy. When we change it, we discover her pacifier. Twinkling eyes. Toddler humour.

'Cute,' Chloé says. She has quietly picked up the towel and has run it through her hair.

'Right,' she says. And when we get to a crossing: 'Left over there. Stop.'

I recognise the peeling front door and the dangling shutters, the faded awning over the concrete patio. This is where I saw her, that time I toured the villages to retrieve the items missing from the house. I'd nearly reached the gate that was propped up against the hedge among a load of junk, when she emerged from the house in shorts and a skimpy top, crossed the patio and sauntered towards me, barefoot through the long grass, her eyes squinting in the sun. She wanted to know what I was doing in their garden. I pointed to the gate and said it was mine. She never even glanced at it, brushed an insect off her arm and slowly scratched her elbow. Still, I couldn't get myself to carry it away in front of her. I left it and headed back to the car. As I got in, I heard a man shout at me.

Now she seems nervous.

'I don't know it off by heart,' she says sharply when I ask for her number, 'and my mobile is out of juice.'

Before she has a chance to get out, I take the pencil from my coat pocket, dig out the scrunched-up receipt and smooth it on the dashboard. I scribble my number in the glow of the streetlight.

‘Be careful when you hitchhike.’ I hand her the scrap of paper. She snatches it from my hands. ‘Call me instead.’

She holds the backpack over her head as she crosses the street and I keep my eyes on the bit of exposed back until she’s inside and the lights come on. Then I reverse the car. She shouldn’t dress like that. Men are predatory. She could run into the wrong kind. The kind who seems nice, cracks jokes, makes her feel comfortable, but then heads into the woods and has his way with her.

I drive off. Slowly.

At the bottom of the hill I stop to sniff the towel. The wet parts smell fresh. The fragrance is familiar. Mint? I press my nose into the fabric again. Yes, mint. And something else. Something that makes me happy. I lower the towel. Rosemary. Mint and rosemary. Mum’s scent.

Back home, I rummage in the cupboard under the washbasin until I’ve found the blue bottle. I squeeze it, cut it open with the kitchen scissors when nothing comes out. The shampoo has turned thick and gloopy. I rub it into my hands, lather them up and rinse them off under the tap. They look good wet. Smooth and shiny. It’s only when they dry that they start peeling and turn into *paws*. Into *mitts*.

1981

Felix

‘What’s up?’ I put down my comic book when Louise saunters past, looking sad. ‘Did you have a row with mum?’

I join her beside the paddling pool.

She puts the giant toy ant on the edge.

‘He’s going for a plunge,’ she says.

An orb-weaver spider and a weevil float around on a few oak leaves.

‘What are they up to?’ I ask.

‘They’re having an aperitif.’

The leaves rock from side to side when the giant ant plunges into the water. The spider falls overboard and I’m about to fish her out when Louise stops me.

‘She should do it herself.’

‘Is it a female?’

She nods.

We watch her go under, come back up, thrash about wildly.

‘She doesn’t know which way to go,’ I say. ‘To her, a pool is as big as an ocean.’

The spider bobs about for a while. Then she sinks to the bottom where she remains.

‘That’s so sad.’ I take her out of the water and lay her on the grass.

‘She’s pretending,’ Louise says. ‘Like that one over there.’ She points to a trembling butterfly nearby.

‘I thought butterflies flew off when you place them on a leaf,’ I say.

‘Not when you hold them under water first.’

At the table she shrieks when a crane fly scurries on its stick-like legs among the plates of salami, cubed cheese and olives. Mum laughs and brushes it off the table. ‘Scaredy cat,’ she says, and then, teasing her: ‘What do you think those flecks in the herbed cheese are?’

Louise starts shouting. ‘You’re the one who’s scared! You were yelling when you spotted a centipede on the wall the other night!’

‘That’s because I almost put my hand on it,’ mum says calmly. ‘They have a nasty bite. But it’s true. I’m not that keen on centipedes.’

She sticks a cube of cheese into her mouth.

‘Yum,’ she says.

She smiles as she offers the plate to Louise.

1982

Felix

Check!' I say.

Dad cusses.

I chuckle.

While he ponders his next move, I look around.

The twin brothers who were in front of me at the breakfast buffet this morning get out of the swimming pool and walk over to their father who is reading in a deckchair. He puts down his book. Hands over towels. They jabber away. Point to the ice-cream stand on the hotel patio. He gets up. For a split second, our eyes meet. He smiles at me. I quickly look away.

Dad resigns.

'You're getting better than me,' he says.

I feel a warm glow inside.

I'm about to set up again when Louise appears at our table.

She says she's bored.

Dad boops her nose. 'You've been in the pool with the twins all afternoon. I could hear you shrieking with laughter.'

She whines about wanting to do something else. Something with him.

'What?'

'The playground.'

'I came along yesterday.'

She angrily replies that he doesn't mind playing chess with me every day.

'I'll go,' I say quickly.

That's okay with her too.

Dad says we'll play another game later.

'Race you to the entrance,' I say to Louise.

I hang back a moment before I give chase down the path between the hotel and the pool. She squeals with laughter, but as soon as I overtake her she stops running.

'Not fair!' she exclaims.

I stand still.

'You're older!'

'That's why I gave you a head start!'

She complains about a stitch.

'Shall we walk?'

She nods.

A few metres from the entrance, she starts running again.

Hey! I go after her, but she's already tapped the turnstile.

'I win!' Without so much as a glance, she runs over to the twins who are sitting on the slide. Their father is with them. He helps Louise up the ladder. Then he comes over to me with a smile. 'The chess grandmaster. I saw what you did! Well done!'

He shakes my hand. Tells me his name is Willem. He asks me who taught me to play chess. 'Your dad?'

'I taught myself.'

'All alone?' His eyes widen.

'From a library book.'

'I've never heard anything like it,' he says softly. 'You must be a very special young man.'

He asks if I'd care to play a game of chess with him. 'Later? After dinner?'

I hesitate. There's a film on at the hotel tonight.

'You're not going to let me down, are you?' He winks at me.

Before I can say it's fine, he's turned around. He peers at the empty slide. Cusses. 'Sallywags! I can't let them out of my sight for even one minute!'

He looks around, shaking his head.

'I can make tonight,' I hurry to say.

'What's that?'

'Chess.'

'Ah.' He brushes it off. Says he shouldn't have brought it up. Of course I'd rather watch the film.

I feel myself going red.

'Not at all!'

He says it's okay. He gets it. At my age he'd have known what to choose.

'But I'd much rather play chess!'

His face lights up.

I'm about to ask where I should meet him when he says we'll see each other around.

He pats me on the back.

Walks away.

I fiddle with the seams of my swimming trunks.

I should have said that I was up for it straightaway. That I'm always up for it. There's nothing I'd rather do than play chess with him.

When he disappears behind the climbing frames, I want to call Louise, but I don't see her purple swimsuit anywhere. I start wandering around the deserted playground. Check behind the climbing frames and the sandpit. Look underneath the broken carousel. Inside the play tower. Beside the rusty swings.

I finally locate her in a wooden playhouse at the back, naked on a table, the twins standing on either side of her. They quickly pull up their swimming trunks.

'What are you doing?' I ask.

Louise tells me to go away.

'Where's your swimsuit?'

That's when I spot it. Slung over the open window in the roof. I stand on the bench. Reach out my hand.

When Louise screams that I always ruin everything and she furiously yanks at my swimming trunks and pulls them down to my knees, I lose my balance and hit my head hard on the edge of the table.

2009

Louise

There's a punnet of apricots on the table.

'From next door,' mum says.

'Across the landing?'

She nods.

'Any reason?'

'She came round to ask if I needed anything from the shops.'

'So you asked for apricots? When we've got plenty of fruit in the house?'

'That's what I said, but she brought something for me anyway.'

'Nice!' I sit down next to her on the sofa. 'Did she mention the television?'

'The television?'

'Never mind,' I say quickly.

'What about it?'

'Nothing. Forget it.'

She insists.

'She reckons it's too loud,' I say eventually.

'But it's hardly ever on! The radio is, but only on low!'

'That's what I said to her.'

'Did she believe you?'

'You just said it's not you. So what does it matter?'

'I've got a right to know!'

I sigh.

'She claims the whole building can hear,' I go on to say.

'That's impossible!'

I take her wrinkly hands in mind. 'You don't turn up the volume when I'm away, do you?'

She becomes agitated. 'Don't you trust me?'

'I do, I do. She sounded really convincing, that's all. I promised I'd keep an ear out.'

'You should have told me sooner!'

'Now, now,' I say when she just stares quietly into space. 'This is exactly what she's after.'

'What is?'

'Us fighting.'

'Why's that?'

'She has a daughter, right?'

'Two.'

'That's your answer right there.'

She doesn't get it.

'Does she ever have company?'

'I rarely set foot in the hallway.'

‘I do every day. The only people she ever talks to are the upstairs neighbours. And they’re always gossiping.’

‘About me?’

I wrap the plaid around her.

‘Imagine it the other way around.’ I rub her back. ‘You never get visitors, she has them every day. You’d be upset too.’

‘I wouldn’t start lying and gossiping!’

‘You wouldn’t.’ I say. ‘Nor would I.’ But not everybody is well-meaning.
