

# Raw and As If

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**An extract pp 1-25**

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**p 1-25**

I've come back.  
Because that's what murderers do.  
They go back to the scene of the crime.

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He is no longer lying in the road, where I left him about ten minutes ago, but close by, slumped at the base of the wall that he shoved me up against earlier in the evening. Judging by the trail of blood, he must have dragged himself over. He is clutching his belly with one arm, as if to stop the bleeding, but there are too many cuts. His other arm is hanging limply by his side, palm up. A passer-by could drop in some change, except nobody passes by around here. His shirt is soaked through and he feels ice cold. If I don't do something soon, he will bleed to death right here in the street, against this wall, and I'm not at all sure if I want that.

'Help,' he whispers. 'Help me, please.'

His voice is croaky. I run my fingers through his hair, trying to comfort him. I squeeze his cold hand and caress the inside of his arm with my fingertips. I don't think he recognizes me.

'Help is coming,' I say. 'Help is coming soon.'

I use his mobile to call an ambulance. I give them the location and describe his condition. 'He's still breathing, but there's blood, there's blood everywhere. A mugging, I think.'

'Hurry up,' I say. 'He's in a bad way.'

I slip his mobile into my coat pocket. Next, I take off his watch, followed by his wallet, which he keeps in the inside pocket of his jacket. Then I leave him, again. For good this time.

At home I arrange his effects on the kitchen table. His wallet, his watch and his mobile phone. His wallet contains five fifty-euro notes, his ID card and his driving licence. Plus two bank cards, a library card and a few old photos. One is of his parents. He looks like his father, but I knew that. He told me. Then there is one of four children, lined up in order of size. He is the second child, that too I knew. Girl, boy, girl, boy. A passport photo of a teenager, a brother or sister, hard to tell, unless you know. His elder sister who wanted to be a boy, who became a boy. Very much against the wishes of her, of his parents. And then finally a polaroid. A young, blonde woman. Drop-dead gorgeous. Adeline. The love of his life, who was always there for him.

Also in the wallet are business cards from restaurants, galleries and the bar where he works. And, carefully folded in four, the snippet of paper on which I hastily scribbled my phone number for him that time in the coffeeshop, not quite three months ago.

I break.

I break and tear the scrap of paper into pieces, along the fold lines. To stop myself from breaking even more.

There's no time for tears; I have to get rid of him. I have to get rid of everything in this house that ties me to him and do it as quickly as possible. I take a lighter out of a kitchen drawer and use it to burn the notes, photos, business cards and paper snippets that I have tossed into the sink. The flames flare up and I take a step back, waiting for the fire to die down and burn out, until only a small heap of smouldering ashes remains. Next up, I wrap his mobile into a tea towel and smash it with a hammer. I'm about to do the same to his watch when I change my mind. It is a strikingly beautiful one and there ought to be something of his that I can hang on to. Something to remind me of him. The coffee cup I keep in my cupboard is not enough. I need more. He was different, that's why I want more than just that cup. He penetrated the very core of me. He cracked open my head, burrowed into it like a tick, that first time I laid eyes on him in the supermarket. And later, not much later, when I got to know him, he slid from my head down into the rest of my body. He entered every vein, every fibre, every cell of my being, until nothing was mine and everything his.

I fasten the watch around my left wrist. Maybe I will need this, even more so than the coffee cup, to reassure myself later. To remind myself that he was not a figment of my imagination, that he was real, of flesh and blood. I throw the empty wallet and the mobile phone in the bin bag I tie up, take down and dump in the large container in the basement. Tomorrow is collection day. Then he will be really gone, along with the knife I hid in another resident's rubbish earlier.

They will find me. Of course they will find me. They saw us leave the bar together. And then there's the painting, the photos and the article in the paper. They will find me and they will ask me questions. I will confess. I will confess my guilt.

I'm not scared.

I'm scared to death.

In the bathroom I splash ice-cold water onto my face. His dried blood is caked on the palms of my hands and under my fingernails. When I look in the mirror above the washbasin, something akin to guilt takes hold of my neck and shoulders. I squeeze my eyes shut. Try to produce some tears. No luck.

I wasn't myself.

I'm still not myself.

I haven't been myself for days.

Is that possible: not being yourself?

If so: then who are you?

Back in the kitchen I scrub my hands and nails with a washing-up brush until my skin looks red and raw. It is four o'clock in the morning and I'm wide awake. Something starts burning again inside, burning more and more intensely, as if he could storm in here any moment. I turn around. I jump. There's nobody. Just the cat. I check to see if I have locked the front door properly. I do the same with the windows and the patio door. I search all the rooms, look behind every door and even under the bed. Nobody.

Finally, I plonk down on the sofa and reach for my laptop. The result of a search I have had up for weeks appears on the screen.

***Article 71 There is no crime when the accused or the defendant at the time the act was committed suffered from a mental disorder that impaired either his judgement or his ability to control his actions, or when he was compelled by a force he was unable to resist.***

Yes, that's it. A force. A force I was unable to resist. I hope he survives. I think he will. Maybe I could phone the hospital tomorrow. Ask about him. Tell them I was the one who found him.

'Yes, he's still alive. Thanks to you.' Would I like to visit? He will want to thank me.

'No, I'd better not. I just did what had to be done, what anyone would have done.'

So now, as The Captain nestles itself purring on my lap, he beats a gradual retreat. He withdraws from my body, leaving me feeling both liberated and distraught. The last thing to disappear is the red mist of his blood before my eyes. Yes, I did what had to be done. He did not deserve it, no, but I had no choice. It was either him or me.

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Those images. Always those images, what we call memories. Like slides – click, click, click – they rotate in my head. Going round and round in the same old circle. The projector is on stand-by. The light goes down and the buzzing grows louder as something triggers you to look back. For a moment, a split second, you are blinded by the bright beam in which the dust starts its macabre dance and then they come, the images. Like bullets. Unforgiving. They enter your head, your heart and your belly. I'm on the edge of an imaginary seat, because I never know what's going to come.

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A little pink bicycle. I squeeze the handlebars, the whiter-than-white grips. Other than that, I'm at the mercy of Father's whims. With one hand he holds the saddle I'm sitting on. The hand that hits mother is now teaching me how to ride a bike. When he lets go of me my fight with gravity commences. I'm falling, I'm not falling. I'm about to fall. I fall. He walks over and kneels down beside me. Comforts me. Picks the minuscule bits of gravel out of my knee and spits some saliva onto his index finger to clean the graze. I look at him. Baffled. Bemused.

'It helps,' he says. 'It really does.'

On another slide Father is standing beside me. I'm on my bike, my tiny feet barely touching the ground. I'm cycling alone now, without any help. Father is making his way over to the oil barrels behind the pigsty, lugging the rubbish he wants to burn. He is going to make a fire. Cardboard boxes. Newspapers. The empty paper bags that once held maize, chicken feed, rabbit pellets. A busted rubber tyre and a ripped piece of plastic that used to cover the feed pit. He pours petrol onto the rubbish and lights a match, in the lee of the barrel, so the wind does not put a stop to the fun. He shows me how to do it.

'Look,' he says.

The rubbish catches fire in no time and the flames shoot up into the air. I'm standing far too close, and he yanks me back, swearing, but I refuse to budge. I want to keep looking inside the barrel, warm myself on the fire and watch as everything shrivels up, melts and disappears. The black, acrid smoke penetrates my nose. I cough, tears streaming down my face.

'Watch out, sis,' Father says, and he tries to pull me a little further from the barrel. I look from the oil barrel to him and then back again, at the fire and the smoke drifting away from us.

'The wind's right,' he says.

Two small fires flicker in his eyes. He crosses his arms, nods contentedly. He smiles and rests his hand on my head. I think I know what he's feeling when he's watching the oil barrel, because I feel it too, even though I'm only five. That same fire is burning inside our heads. It disinfects and it purifies, like saliva, like alcohol, and it gets rid of everything. Absolutely everything that stings, festers and poisons.

It wasn't until years later that I thought back to the oil barrels, to the fire and what it made me feel. I met Meier on the stairs of the faculty building. We were barely two months into the academic year. He was after a light. We got talking and went for coffee. We met again the next day, and the day after and quite a few days altogether. We fell in love, at least that's what it looked like. For a week, we were inseparable, like Siamese twins. Where you saw Meier, you saw me. Where you saw me, you saw Meier. Until he realised that, because of my constant presence, he was neglecting his studies. Before I arrived on the scene he had, by his own account, taken his degree very seriously. But from one day to the next he decided that I was taking up too much of his time and he asked me to only visit him late at night, preferably every other day. And so I did. Because he asked me to. Because I wanted to do as he asked. Because I wanted him. For six months, I stayed over at his every other night, until one afternoon he phoned me. Could I come and collect something. It was urgent. Could I come today.

'It's a box,' he said.

'What kind of box?' I asked.

'You'll see.'

Meier's box stood in the corridor. Stuck to it was an envelope with a letter inside. I sat down on the box, which was not as firm as it looked, so I ended up sitting at an angle, and ripped open the envelope.

*This box contains everything belonging or relating to you. Little of it matters. What do you expect? I never really knew you. You usually turned up late at night, lay down in my bed and fell asleep after we made love, or I made love to you. You left again first thing in the morning, often without even a single word.*

*How do you build a relationship with someone who doesn't open up? With someone who doesn't say anything, except yes, no or maybe? I've been patient, for six long months. Sometimes people need time and I was prepared to give you that, but you didn't want me to get to know you better. You're still as much a mystery to me now as you were on that first day. I can no longer invest in you. In us.*

*Don't ring the doorbell, I'd rather not see you again. Take this box and everything that's in it with you.*

**Meier**

From my position on the dented box, I reached a little clumsily for the bell. I pressed it seven times. Seven short signals, morse code for 'mistake'. Hilarious, I thought, but I don't think Meier agreed. To him it was just another reason to not open up. He was at home, I could hear him stomping about. The stomping came closer but stopped after a few seconds. He was probably standing on the other side of the door now, peering through the peephole into the corridor. Could he see me sitting on the box?

He was the one who had taught me morse code. Whenever I lay in his bed, he would use his index finger to tap first letters and later entire messages on my arms, back and belly, almost ad nauseam, until finally I was able to decipher them. It turned me on, those fingers drumming on my skin, it did, but I never tapped anything in return.

I pressed the doorbell again. A question mark this time. Two dots, two dashes, two dots. The same stomping sounds growing louder and then fading again. The door remained shut.

I sat cross-legged on the floor and pulled the box towards me, out of the peephole's sight. I shook it and tried to imagine what treasures he had saved for me. It would, as he wrote, contain little of note. I don't care much for material things and besides, I would never leave what little valuables I own with someone else. Not even with Meier.

I used to my house key to slash open the tape with which he had carefully sealed the box. I found four records, two of mine and two of his, which we had listened to a lot. Four books, a T-shirt, a sweatshirt with holes in it, three pairs of knickers, a couple of hairpins, earrings, a photo of the two of us and the Chinese money plant I had propagated for him, because I find homes without plants a bit sad. And finally the cup, his cup, from which I always had a few hurried sips of coffee in the morning before I rushed out the door to go to a class or to go home.

The T-shirt and the knickers had been washed and carefully folded. I was moved by that, but I no longer wanted them. I could not wear them again. I cannot bear the thought of someone washing and folding my clothes. It makes my skin crawl. The only thing I wanted to take from the box was the cup. The cup he had served me coffee in so many times. His less than successful attempt at keeping me with him longer than strictly necessary in the morning.

With Meier came the cups. With Meier I began my collection. Nearly every man I have ever spent the night with is represented by a cup in my cupboard. I never asked for them, for the cups, I just took them. In most cases on the first and only morning I woke up in a strange bed beside the boy, or man, I had met the night before. Every now and then, I would delay my theft, a night, two nights at most, only when I was sure I would want to see my lover again. A couple of times I missed the boat and there was no next morning, because, against all expectations, I was unceremoniously dumped by the other party. It means my collection is incomplete.

Meier's cup was my first, although Meier was not my first lover. That was Fischer, the boy next door. The man next door. Meier's cup has an English feel to it, very prim and proper, with its pale pink flower motif and gold rim. Fragile, like Meier himself, not like the other cups I usually steal. Meier has pride of place in my cupboard, because six months is a long time. He was my first real boyfriend, and as far as I was concerned there was no reason for things to end between us at that point. This cup, it is a blessing in disguise.

I never expected Meier to show me the door so suddenly, and so literally. I assumed that he did not mind us interacting in this way. He was busy studying and wanted to let off steam in the evening. In bed. Sex and sleep. A bit of TV. That was all there was to it. He had made it clear almost from the start that he was not interested in a relationship. Not with me, and not with anyone else. Very early on in our relationship, which was not a relationship to him, he said we weren't compatible. I wasn't ambitious enough, or not like he was anyway. I had nodded, although I had also wanted to ask what made him jump to that conclusion and what was wrong with having little or no ambition. I had a suspicion what he would say, but ultimately it didn't matter. It was what he thought it was, and I had to reconcile myself to that. As a rule, I'm not all that interested in changing people's minds.

I got up from the cardboard box, because I wanted to leave, because I did not want to wait around, and took a lighter out of my coat pocket that I held up to the letter and the envelope. They caught fire at once. I dropped the burning paper into the box and waited for the cardboard to ignite as well. Then I pulled the large, heavy front door shut behind me.

Too bad, I thought to myself, as I cycled away from the street, with Meier's cup in my handbag. I was into him, I really was. He was calm and controlled. He never raised his voice and he did not drink. And I like people who pretend they don't need anyone yet somehow make a vulnerable, fragile impression. Besides, Meier was handsome. Tall, broad and strong. And sweet in bed. I could snuggle in his lap and safely drift off to sleep while he told me stories. I listened to him. I really listened. But, as he wrote in his letter, I only gave the shortest possible answers to his questions.

His obsession with morse code was something I put up with. Like I said: it turned me on in some strange way. And that, together with the fact that he took his studies so seriously, was ultimately the only reason I needed him.

There was always Misja if I wanted to talk.

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