

# Desire Lines

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**An extract**

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## I Yield

*Come down by the banks of the river. Place your hands in the water. And hold them there. Slowly let the cold take you. Close your eyes and yield. And just as the river has found its way into the landscape, century over century. Find your hands and arms between rock and stone. Find your place through touch and instinct. And I promise that just before the pain becomes unbearable. Before your body begins to shake uncontrollably. A deep stillness will wash over you. And you will forget. And by the banks of the river. The pain will slowly, imperceptibly subside. The gift of stillness will gradually pass. And your muscles will move again.*

The temperature had dipped below freezing again and everything was silvered with frost—the grass, the lower branches of the bushes... There was a dense fog, too. In one field it was laid out like a still, white pond for the sheep to drink from; in the next there was no fog at all; in another it stretched like a veil between the heads of the pollard willows, while elsewhere it rippled like water... It was unpleasant, walking in that damp cold. And I needed to cross a slippery little bridge made from logs. I scooted across on my butt—I didn't trust my leg. Further down, a small gray heron was pacing in the water, the thin white tufts on its head like an old man's comb-over.

As I crossed a swampy patch of land dotted with spindly trees and scrub, I thought I saw a large bird in the nearest tree, but it was hard to be sure through the fog. Until he took flight and headed in my direction, so low it scared me. He emitted a high-pitched *she-eee* that scared the crap out of me—I tried to duck down, but it ended up being more of a stumble. He hovered there for several wingbeats; his wings were huge. Almost white, seen from below. Even his stomach was pale, like smoke. And his face! Bright yellow eyes trained on me, set back in a ghostlike head—it only took a moment before he realized what he was looking at and beat a hasty retreat. I'd peed my pants a little when he flew over me, but he was stunning! Minutes later I could still feel my heart galloping inside my chest.

Your breath fogging the air on cold days—at times it was the only visible sign of life for miles around.

The wafer-thin sheets of ice on the lakes, and the small pleasure of cracking them with the tip of your shoe.

The skeletal trees in winter—how they look like skinny old men leaning against each other for support.

The rise and fall of the fields.  
The silent, motionless woods.  
The clouds.  
The wintry light.  
The sun, setting bare treetops ablaze.  
The reflections where the Rin is wide and smooth.  
The dull lead of the water on days when the sky is made of clay.  
The low-slung houses in the distance—farms hunkering down for warmth, and nothing but barren fields surrounding them.  
The chapels on the crossings, the churches in the villages.

I dreamt of stars dancing: in the blue hour, the stars gathered in a dense throng and swarmed like starlings, thousands of twinkling specks that danced with each other. And at the end, when all those stars drifted apart again and shimmered back to their own nook of the firmament, hundreds of crows that must have been playing unseen in the black between the dancing stars dropped down from the sky at the same time, their wings spread wide—a hurtle of crows. And just as they were about to crash down to earth, they were swallowed up by the black of the land.

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Even when everything else had stopped, you still needed to pee and you *really* needed to go after the funeral. So when Felix opened the front door, you bolted right past him in the dark—and immediately careered into that new piece of furniture. There's no piece of furniture that...yielding. There's no piece of furniture that sways like that, that trumpets and roars in fear. Of course you peed yourself. And the elephant, in its panic, knelt down right on your leg.

When you got back from the hospital the creature was still there. It even seemed to have grown—it barely fit beneath the ceiling, it couldn't even lift its head. It was a living, ten-ton double-decker bus, like something from a nightmare. A snorting, stinking, stomping, thudding, bellowing mastodon.

The monster stood there, its tail and trunk erect, ears flat against its neck, eyes wide with the whites showing—who was more afraid of whom?

Felix quickly ushered you out the door and helped you sneak back in around the back.

But it was impossible to ignore a creature like that in your house—there was a trembling, a deep rumble in the air, the stench of belching, flatulence and manure, crashing and banging between the walls, bellowing and roaring and, at night, the dragging rasps of its snoring, so deep it was like an organ reverberating through the house.

How could you get used to something like that?

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Before long a comfortable routine began to emerge. I review the day's route and head for the Rin. Once I'm going, I no longer look at the map. Following a river is like following an elephant—there's no getting lost.

I pause somewhere scenic and shielded to have bread with cheese and read for a while, or if the weather allows to write this logbook. Then I carry on until dusk starts to fall and I reach a village, ideally, or a city, if needs be.

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You opened the door a crack and peered breathlessly at the ugly, high-legged creature with its bulbous head, the mean little slits of its eyes, the massive tusks, the angrily flicking tail, the deep leathery creases of its skin hanging down from its emaciated stomach, the shriveled teats between its front legs.

She flapped her enormous ears and spread them wide, trumpeting and roaring loudly through that dangerously swinging trunk. Like a giant's arm, the trunk lunged toward the door handle, ripped the door off its hinges and hurled it back through the door opening. You were shaking in your boots and on your crutch. Cold sweat had begun to stream down your temples and your spine. A snuffling trunk and two enormous tusks emerged into the hallway. The trunk knocked over the stool and you fell. You thought this was it, as you would think again on countless occasions to come.

But the tip of that trunk was like a deformed little hand with a mind of its own. It carefully felt its way along your busted leg. You could sense its breathing, slow and hot. For minutes on end there was silence, silent and thorough examination.

And you realized that you had to take better care of the frightened creature. To begin with, you had to give it food and water. And space. So that it could lift its head, so that it could move.

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I am a small, slowly moving dot, nothing more than that, a small, slow movement along the water in a vast, silent landscape. Nothing but space in all directions.

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You're sitting halfway down the stairs looking at the animal.

Those ears, which you could wrap around yourself like a blanket, fanning slowly and symmetrically from front to back, with the audible scrape of dry cartilage against dry skin, like a prehistoric moth opening and closing its wings.

That formidable forehead, those gray cheeks, broader than Felix's chest, the trunk longer than you from head to toe.

And then the surprise of that inscrutable amber eye with its long eyelashes.

And for the first time you dared to reach out your hand to touch her.

And she let you.

The soft leather of her forehead was warmer than your hand. You let your palm glide down the ribbed wall of her forehead to the trunk, and then down along the trunk, down the rows of fat, rough, warm wrinkles. You felt a slight vibration in the air, you heard a soft humming—she seemed to like you stroking her between the eyes. The soft, moist tip of the trunk prodded and snuffled you, trembling.

Gradually you grew fond of the elephant. You gave her a name—you called her Dolore.

She greeted you delightedly in the mornings, spinning around in circles like an overgrown puppy, pissing and shitting on the spot from sheer excitement. A powerful stream flowed from her temporal ducts, too. She held her head and ears aloft and trumpeted wildly into the silence.

The way that trunk snuffled at your mouth, your ears, your temples, your crotch without the slightest bit of shame.

The strange rumbles and belches of her digestion.

The slight flaring of the skin where her forehead ended and her trunk began when she rumbled.

The way her hind legs were more sensitive than her front legs.

The way she'd rock back and forth as if in a trance when she was bored.

The way her head would sway gently from side to side when she was contented.

The way you knew you'd better leave when she started flapping her ears in irritation.

The way you knew it was time to get the hell out when she threw her head back and arched her trunk or started throwing straw around.

The way you knew she was in a playful mood when she would clomp around with those saggy knees, letting her trunk swing around and her ears flap against her head.

The way that, when you were lying weeping on the floor, she'd come and stand over you protectively, a canopy of safe flesh. The way that trunktip would gently probe its way along your eyes and your spine.

The way that, when you were screaming and raving, she'd lift you up onto her back. You'd lie there on your stomach with your hands behind the soft folds of her ears, on the calmly beating vein that ran from head to heart.

One morning, when you saw her trying to do a little dance, you thought: there's one more wall that still needs to be knocked down, the one that faces the outside. The elephant needs to be able to go for a walk. To the sea, for example. Elephants love water. And you wanted to come, you wanted to see Dolore frolic in the ocean, to see her rolling around in the surf, all four legs thrashing in water and air. Show me the way, Dolore.

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Early in the morning I often see wild rabbits, the white tufts of their little tails popping up like a cheerful *hel-lo! hel-lo!* in the half-dark. After that, mainly birds. An arrowhead of geese. I only notice the pheasants when they startle me by loudly bursting up out of their hiding place. On one occasion, a fox—he was standing in the middle of the road when I came around the corner. For a moment we both stood there, mesmerized; then he bolted, tail stiff as a board.

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On the day she left, she looked more lively and cheerful than I'd see her all winter. I didn't know what to say when we said goodbye and it was hard to put my arms around her with that big knapsack on her belly.

I'm still not thrilled that she left her phone at home. She preferred to take that Annie Dillard book that she's been carrying around everywhere for years, from one room to another, from one purse to another, the spine cracked, the margins filled with scribbles. I would open it at random and read something like *'I am the arrow shaft, carved along my length by unexpected lights and gashes from the very sky, and this book is the straying trail of blood,'* and I'd have no clue. What if her leg starts acting up again and she doesn't have a phone and there are no people around because who walks the length of a river in the dead of winter?

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Gray clouds crowd together like a herd of panicking elephants. Whether the tears come falling down from the sky or from your own eyes, they wash right by you. Your knees get wet and are blown dry again. Your path leads straight into the blue, and the sun on your back and your shoulders feels like small, warm hands. You feel the strain in the small of your back and in the muscles between your

neck and shoulders, exactly the same pain as when you spend a long time carrying a big child on your arm—but the knapsack does warm your stomach.

You walk past the backs of gardens. A rose nursery. A cluster of cats on fallow land. A dead crow dangling from a rope in a thick pollarded plane tree. A ‘venison farm’ where slender deer throng together on a much-too-small apron of concrete behind a hangar.

The Rin, an open sewer. The Rin, a dried-up creek. The Rin, brown like stout. The Rin, invisible behind wide ruffs of reed or shoulder-high nettles.

You walk through lowlands with flooded meadows on either side of the trail and wind-lashed pollard willows along the Rin. You walk down holloways lined with ancient blackberry bushes on the steep banks and trees with knotted tangles of desiccated honeysuckle vines. Ivy hangs down like a stage curtain from the tallest trees, all the way down to the ground. Birds tap, chirp, scream, coo. Apart from that there’s just wind in the treetops, your own footstep and breath.

In the silence of the afternoon you see a hovering kestrel.

Sometimes you talk quietly to yourself, not in reproach like you do at home, but encouragingly.

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My cigarette was done. I threw the butt into the sweetbrier bush behind the linden tree and shoved my hands into my pockets. It was chilly.

I’d been so relieved when she’d started getting into these walks.

The first few years of her grief had been hard on me, too—the crying jags, those scary panic attacks, the aimless rage at times, the days of paralyzed silence, her spent face with those black eyes full of pain... I couldn’t find a way to bring her back to life—my attempts only made her angry or despondent.

It was all much more unnerving than I’d expected.

And then she hurt her leg.

The first time she was just coming through the door carrying a large flowerpot. She landed badly on her elbow, she thought she’d slipped. She couldn’t stand on that leg anymore, the left one. One doctor after another was at a loss. Meanwhile Mari hobbled around the house on crutches. Sometimes she seemed to forget about the non-functional leg and would fall again. Her brown skin, normally so flawless, was constantly marred by bruises in those days, her mood soured by frustration.

A psychologist suspected conversion: *a functional disorder resulting from a psychological issue that is ‘solved’ by being ‘converted’ into physical symptoms, without the patient being aware of it*—I can still rattle it off word by word. Medically speaking everything is fine; no physiological explanation for the dysfunction can be found. An MRI confirmed the diagnosis.

The good news was that three in four patients were cured of their symptoms by hypnosis or suggestion. Imagination as the catalyst for change: that was right up her street. My Spanish fury could do anything—I was convinced of that.

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The pitter-patter on the hood of my coat is cozy—it sounds like being in a tent.

If I don’t want the rain to run down my pants and seep into my socks and shoes, I’ll have to put on my rain pants too. I don’t like them, they squeak and shwoosh too loudly.

The rain falls straight down, like the fronds of a weeping willow in summer.

Her fresh, rain-dappled little face...

No matter the weather, she always wanted to go outside.

She was so much tougher than me.

Of course I'll never walk away from Tully's death—my grief is my elephant. Sometimes our ankles are shackled together with a heavy, greasy chain, sometimes I pull myself forward by its tail, a thin rain lashing my back, sometimes I step into its shit, sometimes I let myself be carried...

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The rhythm of putting one foot in front of the other lifted her out of time, she told me. It was mainly that rhythm she needed, she said, like a metronome—and the silence and solitude. Being nothing but a pair of feet, nothing but the rhythm of those walking eyes, just looking, nothing else. The lashless coals of her eyes when she tries to explain these things to me.

But now... Now she no longer walks in loops and circles, now she doesn't come home at the end of the day, now she walks along the Rin in a straight line toward her goal and this time her goal isn't our home, isn't me, but the ocean.

This is ridiculous—why wouldn't she come back? I roll a cigarette, light it and head back, stopping by the chicken coop for a chat.

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