

The Man I Became

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There was a time when I couldn't even talk. Perhaps I learned to talk and write like a man who can't stop tinkering with the things he has found on the street. The construction grows larger, and more and more fantastical, until one day he just gathers up his clothes and toothbrush and moves in.

Now that this story has been completed, I realize I didn't write it seeking forgiveness – life itself forgave me long ago – but because the emotions belong to everyone: the sorrow, the longing, even the happiness. And what is happiness anyway? Perhaps, after finishing the story, the reader, like me, will witness the way the evening sun can sink through a woman. The glow on the face of a woman that allows us to see the sun long after it has set – I come from a family who value things like that. Stay sitting where you are a little longer to wait for the stars, which will appear like embers years after the fire has gone out. That too is a miracle.

I don't know exactly when – I still couldn't think in terms of days and years, that's how long ago it was – but the heat made us so drowsy that we nodded off and slept whole afternoons away in a heap, spread-eagled on top of each other. We caught termites by pushing long twigs, as flexible as blades of grass, into their mounds and then licking the twigs clean. We risked being trampled underfoot to steal ostrich eggs out of the nest by running a few steps and then dropping to the ground so the surprised bird could no longer see us and would wander off to find out where we had got to. The sunsets were grandiose, so colourful and intoxicating that, sated with shoots and pith, we gathered in a tree to watch, arms wrapped around each other's shoulders, drinking in the reds, purples and oranges with our eyes.

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While we were picking berries, one of us disappeared. We thought he was playing a joke on us. When the joke went on too long, we forgot him. When the second disappeared, we remembered and grew restless. By the third disappearance we were panicking. Our certainties had been snatched away. We couldn't trust our own shadows. Without stopping to make a plan, we fled,

directionless. Our enemy was unknown. We didn't even know if there was an enemy. All we knew was that somebody who was right in front of us could disappear a minute later without trace, without a sound. Every time someone disappeared, we caught that same scent of musk and flowers.

The realization sank in: this wasn't going to stop.

Only later did it occur to me that those who were left were the skinny ones, the least interesting. My younger brother had a wound on his stomach; I was not yet fully grown. But eventually I too disappeared. One moment I was under a tree and quietly creeping up a hill to get a view of the plain, the next I felt something heavy falling onto my back, a sharp prick in my neck. Everything around me went black. I couldn't move.

In that blackness I found the others. We could only smell and feel and hear each other. We couldn't reach out or embrace. We were squeezed in, blindfolded, our wrists and ankles bound, but now and then, for a few stolen seconds, we could lay a head on a shoulder. And those seconds were enough to bear the lashes that followed.

Soon after my disappearance the journey began. They removed our blindfolds and – before we'd had a chance to adjust to the glaring light and with remnants of the poison they'd used to drug us still in our veins – the horse set off. A rope tied to its tail led to the wrists of the first, who was roped in turn to the wrists of the next in line, who was roped in turn to the wrists of the next in line, and so on... As long as everyone kept in step it was fine, but the moment someone stumbled or hesitated, the horse felt a stabbing pain in its tail and let fly with its sharp hooves.

We walked in the heat of the day from sunrise to sunset. When we came to a waterhole they let the horses drink first and then gave us a few minutes. The food – something dry that tasted of maize – was thrown down in a heap and we had to kneel forward, wrists tied, and fish it up out of the sand with our lips. If we made the slightest sound, the whips hissed.

We are a tough family. We keep going. If we don't get up, it can only mean we're dead. When someone from another family fell and stayed lying there, a rider jumped off his horse, cut the rope without a word and tied it to the wrists of whoever was marching behind them. Don't stop to think! And definitely don't look back! So far, no one from our family had been left behind. We learned to breathe in a certain rhythm to keep step with each other and at the same time our breathing became our way of secretly talking to each other, whispering encouragement.

Hungry, thirsty, hot and hurting – our wrists and the soles of our feet swelled. I felt so much like lying down on the ground and never getting up again. How do you survive something like that? By grabbing what you can. Every drop of water, every grain of maize counts. If someone falls? Step over them, eyes closed. Don't grieve, grieving takes energy. At most you think: when somebody doesn't get up, there's more food for me. Don't look further than the feet in front of you. Otherwise you will see something glimmering in the distance and, with every new step, that glimmer moves forward and you start thinking you'll never touch that glimmer no matter how long you live. Put your left foot in front of your right foot and your right foot in front of your left. And again.

During our journey through the desert we sometimes saw branches like bleached ribs sticking up out of the sand, carcasses of camels, tapestries unravelled by sun, sand and wind. We weren't the first to come this way. The nights cooled us off but also brought snakes and scorpions. The riders knew the desert, they wrapped cloth around their heads so that only their eyes were exposed and used charcoal to smear black around their eyelids to temper the sunlight. They slept in the saddle,

leaning against their horse's neck so they would feel the slightest movement of anyone tugging on the rope.

I hardly heard the riders speak during the journey, until the morning one pointed at the sky. Immediately the horses lay in a circle, covered by sheets of canvas. We were allowed to lie down inside the circle. For protection from the sharp grains of sand. It was the first time I thought we were valuable. When the storm passed they forced us to start marching again straight away. We had sand everywhere – in our hair, in our ears and in our mouths. There were riders with two rifles each on their backs who usually galloped ahead and behind us. One of them came to walk alongside our family. Suddenly he leapt from his horse and grabbed our rope. Someone had tried to gnaw through the fibres during the sandstorm. The rider didn't say a word. With a curved knife he cut the rope and attached it to the wrists of the next in line. I walked on with my head bowed. I saw out of the corner of my eye how sharp the blade was: two quick slashes and both Achilles tendons were cut through. Nothing else. The horses walked on. I couldn't help it, my knees buckled as if they had been my Achilles tendons. A shock passed through the group, but everyone immediately regained their senses. We all breathed a little louder. Those in front and behind me pulled the rope tighter, so that I was being carried, not dragged. The rider came to ride alongside me – he smelt of musk and flowers. He pulled the cloth off his head, but only to give me a better view of his smile. He rode next to me and bent forward, right in front of my nose. His smile. I started walking again. The rider held the mouth of his water skin under one of my eyes, as if to catch my tears.

After our journey through the desert we reached the sea. I had never seen anything like it, a new desert but blue, made of water and stretching away out of sight. We followed the horses onto a ship for our second trip. Finally no longer marching. Our group tried to stick together. The girls were separated from the boys. In the ship's hold we had just enough room to squat down.

During the voyage we got to know the sea: as if you were lying in a massive treetop on a mild summer's night and now and then a storm rose to shake you until you wanted to puke up your insides. When you licked your lips, you tasted salt. It stank horribly of faeces, sweat and rotten meat. We squatted down and held each other up shoulder to shoulder. Even when one of us passed out.

From where we were locked up I could see the night sky, but not the sunset. I looked around in the dark and saw that I wasn't the only one with his face turned up to the stars. Twinkling eyes, teeth catching the light. Men with sticks patrolled the gangway. They didn't hit you on the face or belly, but on the soles of your feet.

So as not to cause wounds that would leave scars. But I only realized that later.

One day we saw birds. From then on the men wrapped the sticks in cloth. And started hitting less hard. And then they stopped hitting us altogether. They sang songs that are sung around campfires in the desert, songs that made our hearts shrink. We inched closer together. As if invisible arms had wrapped around us.

Some of us had to stay below while they took me and others up on deck to hose us down with seawater. The fresh air and sunlight made my head spin. In the distance we saw land – a glimmer. Dozens of big white birds circled over us, screeching. We stood in lines on deck waiting for night to fall and the land in the distance glimmered even brighter, as if thousands of stars had come down to earth.

The guards were now holding burning torches instead of sticks. When one of us succumbed – collapsing from having stood there so long – they tossed him back down into the hold. I heard the thud and realized who they were, the ones who had to stay below: they were the weak, the sick, the ones who hadn't made it, who would never set foot on land. For a second, I swayed unsteadily. A raised torch appeared in front of me. A man stared into my eyes. I felt a drop of sweat run down my head and neck, and further down my back. But I didn't budge. I could have stood there a year without blinking. Whether the tears ran down my cheeks or not, I would stay standing there until the ship's engines started up again and it finally delivered me to the New World.

We sailed into the New World at night. The ship docked. We heard knocking. Only when the enormous lights turned on did we see the hundreds of people behind the glass walls. Their mouths opened and closed, but we couldn't hear what they were shouting. Or were they laughing? Why were they waving? Were they angry? We couldn't hear them through the thick glass, we could only hear their hands slapping the glass. Some of us hunched down, trying to make ourselves invisible. Flashes of light on all sides. And among all those red faces, all those gaping mouths, I saw – and will remember for ever – the face of a girl. She looked straight into my eyes, and hers were gleaming. And on her lips I saw the sweetest, quietest, most delicate smile.

They drove us off the deck. I glanced over my shoulder and stumbled, but still tried to catch one last glimpse. Instead I stared into the face of a man holding a torch in his raised hand. The next instant a blow that made me gasp for breath landed on my back.

Our education began in the very first minute. Unerringly we were plucked out of the chaos, family by family, genus by genus. Our group was made up of ten specimens. We followed each other through a narrow corridor. First we were shaved and after that warm water sprayed down from the ceiling. I saw our hair gather like coats over the grilles in the floor. One at a time we were pushed into the next corridor where we were blown dry. At the end of the corridor we were given ten seconds to pull on our first ever item of clothing.

A voice said, 'Once!'

It took a while to arrange ourselves in a line that allowed us all to see him.

'Once,' said the voice, 'I was... like you.'

Standing before us was a human. In a suit. The human curled his lips, then immediately reverted to a serious expression.

'And one day...' the human said, 'you will be like me.'

He nodded and studied us each in turn.

'If you fail, you will become... like him.'

In the corner of the room there was a – how can I put it? – a... thing. It was only when the thing raised itself up that we saw that it looked like us. I mean, the thing looked like us before the shave but then trampled down, miserable, broken.

'It's up to you,' the human said. 'Is there anyone here who wants to end like... like this?'

Silence.

‘For the time being I will address you,’ the human said, ‘in your own dialect. The intention is for you to learn to talk like this as quickly as possible.’ And the human said something in a language none of us understood. Again that smile appeared and disappeared.

‘First lesson,’ said the human. ‘These’ – he pointed at the garment we were wearing – ‘are called un-der-pants. All together: un-der-pants.’

We looked at our piece of clothing and then at the human.

‘All together,’ the human said a little louder. ‘Un-derpants.’

Hesitantly we repeated what the human had said.

‘Again,’ he said.

And we repeated what we had just said. Until the man nodded approvingly.

One of us bent forward and leaned on his fists while quietly repeating *underpants, underpants, underpants*, like a lullaby. He picked at a loose wooden splinter with his forefinger and brought the splinter up to his mouth. The human’s face tensed. He raised a hand. Everyone fell silent except the one who was bending forward and humming, eyes closed, chewing on a splinter. The human stretched out his arm. A flash shot out of the rod in his hand, a thread that looked like the lightning we had so often seen coming out of the clouds in our country. A single flash and the splinter-chewer lay groaning on the floor.

The human smiled.

‘Where were we?’ he asked.

Silence.

‘Un-der-pants! Un-der-pants! Un-der-pants!’

We learned to walk upright.

‘Faster! Taller!’ said the human.

We circled him with ramrod backs. Clockwise. Anticlockwise.

Then we learned how to shave.

‘A gentleman who doesn’t shave is not a gentleman,’ said the human.

We learned to greet each other politely. We learned a new language word by word. We learned to eat from a bowl and then with knife and fork. We learned what a toilet was, a shower, a bed. Shoes. We learned to powder our skin to make it lighter.

It wasn't so much the long days and short nights that exhausted us as the details, the constant remarks, the number of impressions we had to process. The least little weakness or mistake was punished with a kick to the back of the knee, a poke in the ribs, a clip on the ear, never hard enough to really hurt, but the repetition wore us down. With everything you did or didn't do, said or thought, you heard: 'Forget everything you know. Unlearn everything you've done your whole life. Don't do that. Don't do it ever again. Act like this instead. Like this. Are you deaf? Like this!'

By evening we were completely drained and fell asleep wherever we happened to be standing. In the middle of the night the human woke us up. He was impeccably dressed. He said, 'The ground is made to walk on, not sleep on.' We had to run around him.

Uncoordinated movements.

Numb toes and fingers.

Dizziness.

Unable to hold our urine.

'Goodnight, gentlemen. I have faith in you.'
