

Before Forgetting

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Several hours after dawn a woman emerges from the bedroom on the other side of town and goes downstairs, past the stone bottle with the thorn stem, past the white blouse she draped over the banister last night after the party. She hears her husband putting plates and cutlery on the table for breakfast. From the toilet she asks for a small loaf from the baker's. 'I want to get a little more sleep,' she says. She goes back upstairs. Less than a minute later her husband follows her up and opens the bedroom door (white or brown?). His wife is lying on the bed with one arm under her head like always, but he has immediately seen the white face and half-open mouth. It can't have taken more than a few seconds: a heavy lethargy overwhelmed her; delicate bark slid over her soft breast; her arms became branches; her feet hardened as roots. A spray of leaves wreathed her face. The familiar jetlag after waking. I go into the bathroom and stand under the hot shower until time and place have finally synchronised. Clouds of steam and the pale shadows of bath, washbasin, towels and walls. Dripping wet, I bend forward. The white mat sucks tight to the soles of my feet like a prawn cracker on a tongue. I go downstairs, drink a glass of water and grab an apple. I notice there's no light on in the studio – my wife must be working away from home today.

I read about the attacks in Paris, analyses – eye-witness accounts, rants, statements by politicians – while smoking my first cigarette of the day. After half an hour I have managed to distil several questions from the various texts; I am starting to understand what the attacks might mean. The cat is curled up next to my keyboard, chest rising and falling. Her right ear shoots up when the phone vibrates in the charger. I see my father's photo on the screen, but before I've had a chance to speak I hear him shout, 'I think Mum's dying.'

You can't find the keys under your nose. You can't find your coat. In the car you call your wife, who doesn't pick up. You can only scream and pound the wheel because all the cars are driving way too slow and all the lights have changed to red. You call your wife again. You try not to frighten her by shouting, but you know you'll be too late. You have to get your breathing under control. In the distance you see the flashing light above the fluorescent yellow of the ambulance (back doors open/interior empty/a surge of hope). As you run down the street to the house where you were born, your sister comes out through the open door shaking her head, hands covering her open mouth. Still you run up the stairs, despite knowing better you run up the beige-carpeted stairs. Past the yellow-veined enamel flowerpot you run, past the stone with a line about time chiselled into it, up the stairs. Almost on all fours, that's how fast you're trying to go, brushing the wall with the oxblood-coloured silkscreen full of Cyrillic letters. Past the stain drawings of an old woman and an ancient, bent-over man. Past the stone bottle with the dried thorn stem. Past the white blouse draped over the bannister, the festive blouse with the blue collar. Faster!

Fourteen steps, fifteen at the most.

The bedroom.

In a flash: your mother's white face and half-open mouth.

The bedroom with your father next to the bed. With your father who throws himself on the bed. Your father who gets up again and lies down on the bed. Lies down next to your mother. Stroking her cheek and forehead. Saying her name. Trying to wake her up. While on the other side of the bed you kneel and press your forehead against your mother's hand. Her face as white as chalk – she has her other arm under her head, her eyes closed. Your father is standing next to the bed, he raises his arms up into the air and shakes his head as he lets them drop back down against his legs. He doesn't seem to see or hear. And you try to take him in your arms, but you can't stop him. He lies down on the bed again. Stroking her face. Saying her name.

Only now do you see that there are other in the people there in the bedroom. Looking down at the ground. They didn't even need to click open their boxes. Oxygen bottles, defibrillator, stretcher: useless. You want them to go away. A ringing in your ears. Fingertips tingling. Until you put your hand on your stomach.

Count to 5. Breathe in.

Count to 5. Breathe out.

It's been waiting for that moment to hit home – visceral, like vomiting: the realisation.

But you immediately breathe in again as deeply as you can.

On the very tips of your toes.

As long as you're holding your breath, it won't...

As soon as you breathe out it hits you like a hammer to the gut.

Breathe in!

We're sitting in the living room. The funeral director and his assistant nod (hands clasped in front of their bellies) and exit the room for upstairs. My father, sister and I pretend we're talking, but we're trying to drown out the footsteps overhead. A little later the conversation falls silent. We don't look at each other. That steep smooth-carpeted staircase with triangular steps in the much too narrow turn: how are they ever going to get my mother around that – in a coffin, on a stretcher, in a body bag? Thumping and bumping. And then finally the funeral director knocks on the door and comes into the living room, followed by his assistant who is tugging his suit straight. They nod and bow (hands clasped in front of their bellies) and tell us we can visit my mother in a few hours.

(When they carried my mother out, I felt that a beam of highly compacted air was being removed from the house, pressed together so hard that the remaining atoms of air had to rearrange themselves over the whole house, settling into a new constellation before I could breathe again.)

When I have to get something out of the car a little later, I go upstairs to the bed my mother is no longer lying in. My father is absolutely determined to sleep there that night without changing the sheets. He will tell me several weeks later that Mum was lying beside him again – phantom joy. The bed in which my mother lay with one arm under her head. Her breath stopped short and her shadow slid off the bed, sped to the door, slid under it and stood at the top of the stairs.

After the doctor has left, we adopt the words *aneurysm* and *ruptured*, not because they tell us what happened (when did it swell, why did it rupture), but because we need something to give form to our bewilderment – if we repeat the words often enough, if we say them everywhere, to each other, to ourselves, into the phone, on the toilet, in the dark, on the street, at the baker's, we might one day be able to do it without feeling our stomachs shrinking.

A friend who's a nurse will tell me that my mother won't have noticed a thing. He snaps his fingers. 'The light goes off. You're unconscious from one second to the next.' What a beautiful death for someone who was panicked by death. Breathe in. Ruptured aortic aneurysm. Pitch dark. 'What a beautiful death,' I say. After a silence that lasts minutes, my father says, 'I. Have. Still. Lost. Her.'

A rupture in time, which no longer forms a comforting straight line but, buffeted by fury, raw grief, astonishment, memories and loss, starts to swirl. My memories break free from their familiar positions. Someone on the street looks like my mother from behind – the same hair, the same clothes. Getting out of the car I hear her voice, but no one is calling my name. For months afterwards I see something beautiful and reach for the phone to call her. Now and then I say *Mum* in the car, when I'm alone, *Mum*, calmly, the word no longer has a body. *Mum* I say lying in bed.

PYRRHA (Matrushka)

In Ovid's *Metamorphoses*, Pyrrha survives a deluge by fleeing in a boat with her husband Deucalion. When the water level sinks they are stranded on Mount Parnassus. After consulting an oracle they discover that the stones are bones and throw them over their shoulders. From each stone a new body grows.

My mother's breath stops short and her shadow slides off the bed, speeds to the door, slides under it and stands at the top of the stairs. From her shadow comes another shadow that descends to the next step and freezes there, while yet another shadow descends to the next step and so on.

At the same time similar shadows emerge from the sides of the first and stay standing there at the top of the stairs, after which more shadows emerge from them to descend to the next step, and so on.

Until from those shadows too...

Until the entire staircase is overpopulated with shadows frozen in all possible variants of running, from which new shadows spring and freeze and it doesn't stop, it grows exponentially, echo after echo. But it is happening in complete silence, as if each shadow waits open-mouthed to breathe in again – as if they have leapt up out of the water with bursting lungs.

Millions of specks of dust swirling in the sunlight over the beige-carpeted staircase.
