

Tonguecat

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Strawberry Mouth

That year the icy cold was a snake that snapped at your heels, at your dangling hands, before climbing up them, crawling past your spine, curling around your neck, between your lips.

Brains stiffened gelatin-like in the bone-white dish of your skull. The cold clamped onto your teeth like glittering diamonds. Your whole body took on the color of hardened candle wax.

That year the freezing cold jolted our country a thousand kilometers northwards with one punch of its fist so that words stuck to our tongues like crystals.

It was the year watches stopped, fell silent.

The year Zero.

Winter came after it had rained for days. Until the clouds had emptied themselves and the garden shone like polished leather in the moonlight. There was no warning. Nothing. It was an evening like any other. Maybe the stars shone a bit brighter in the sky, a bit redder, maybe they didn't.

You closed doors and windows.

You went to bed.

You woke up in a glass world.

Maybe it was the strange silence that woke us.

My brother came into my room, hopping from one foot to the other. Threw back my bedcovers, cuddled up to me, shivering, rubbed the cold out of his ears with my hands. Huddled like a chick under the heat of my breath.

Suddenly he sat up.

"Can you hear it?" he asked.

"I don't hear anything," I answered.

"That's what I mean."

We sat there together, crouching, frightened, back-to-back, as if under a bell jar. And still I think my brother was wrong. We did hear something. Hold a glass to your ear and you hear the sea. That kind of silence: something not there that threatens in its absence. We didn't speak. His spine dug into my back. I watched as my breath curled up from my mouth like a plume. Two heads protruding from a blanket pitched around us like a tent. Breathe in. Breathe out. His shoulder blade against my spine.

"What's happening?" he asked.

I shrugged.

"Look," he said, scraping a frost flower off the windowpane. At that same moment he screamed. And with that scream the house came alive. My mother had to use boiling water to separate my brother's finger from the frost flower. What was left on the windowpane had instantly frozen into a fingerprint of matte, red glass.

We ate our breakfast in silence, occasionally jumping at the sound of the creaking that seemed to move through the walls of our house. But no matter how hard we looked, nowhere could we find a crack in the plaster. I held a glass to the wall and put my ear to it. We all held our breath.

The creaking sounded like breaking bones.

The sudden freeze had cut us off from the outside world. Telephone, radio, television: all dead. My father and mother spoke in whispers at the table as my brother and I hovered near the stove. It was still morning and the wood supply was already exhausted. My father put on his shoes and tried to open the front door. Nothing. No matter how hard he pushed and pulled, it was like the wood had become one with the walls. It took forever before he managed to separate it from the rest of the house, using boiling water. And that says a lot, because my father had the shoulders of a bull. He swore, snorted, took a running leap at the creaking door. Poured boiling water over the hinges, rammed it again. And again, and again. In the end the ice was no match for my father's fury. My brother and I held our breaths as he took the hissing pan off the stove and lugged it outside. My father and that steaming, bubbling cauldron. He wanted to throw the water against the door in one broad sweep. But the stream froze mid-air and fell in splinters to the frozen ground.

Even with our eyes closed we could hear my father walking in the garden. The grass shattering under his feet. The icicles tinkling, vibrating as he passed. One night was all it took for a new crystal garden to be blown.

When my father came in, laden with chunks of frozen wood, my mother pointed to his feet. He'd cut himself on the crystal; dozen of red drops clung to his ankles like rubies. He struggled to lift his shoulders. It took forever before he could move his lips again.

While my parents fought to keep the hissing fire alive, my brother and I looked outside. At the bluish sheen on the stones. At the white stubble that had once been grass. At the icicles hanging from the eaves.

Despite my parents' desperate attempts to stir up a blaze, our house didn't get any warmer. My brother and I clung to each other, and watched as the frost flowers spread over the walls. Then my mother screamed. At that same instant my brother and I looked over our shoulders. The flame in the fire died before our very eyes.

No efforts were spared in trying to defy the extreme conditions. A state of emergency was declared. The king ordered the word *winter* banned from all books. But the decrees crumbled, whirled through the air like snowflakes. Then he outlawed the words *cold* and *warmth*. His subjects nodded, beating their arms rhythmically against their ribs. And we banned the words *warmth* and *cold* from our thoughts in the hope our bodies would forget them too.

The archbishop urged the faithful to pray but our prayers hardened and stuck in our throats.

The winter was oblivious to everything, felling one inhabitant after another. It turned out the human body wasn't made for that season. The tender, bloodshot flesh was taken by surprise. The body curled up, shrank, hoping the cold wouldn't see. But it snapped at the heels, crept up to the brain. Formed ice crystals there, ice tumors that attached themselves to the spinal cord, before crystallizing, metastasizing into the skeleton. Those bones of frozen milk.

Outside, your clothes froze to cardboard in a second. You drew your head in, and watched as a misty veil curled up out of your mouth. As if the cold were sucking the last bit of warmth from your body. And sometimes, when the sun hovered yolk-like in the sky, a rainbow would appear between your lips, as if your tongue were a prism and the cold were dispersing the evaporating body fluids into an array of colors. But you closed your mouth in a hurry. The words for describing the cold pierced your tongue like icicles.

They say sensations like cold and warm are subjective. Forget it. Cold and warm are physical, and your body obeys laws that are mutable only through prolonged concentration and superhuman discipline. But we'd never learned to live with such laws. And what's more, we hadn't been given the time to adjust to the cold. Our souls froze, together with our bodies.

Winter persisted, attacking the muscles, until the bones were covered with white fish meat. Turning skin into plastic, bleaching hair, changing eyes into marbles. There was hardly a person around who wasn't frozen. And there were so few of us that if we ventured out onto the street, we were immediately surrounded by a throng of frozen bodies trying to steal our last ounce of warmth.

Fits of shivering.

Chattering teeth.

Infected lungs.

Breathlessness.

Black toes, fingers, noses.

What was frozen had to be amputated, to keep the toxins from reaching the heart. Doctors couldn't anesthetize their patients because the fluid turned to glass in the syringe. Moaning filled the air. Amputated toes and fingers lay scattered along the roadside, like blue sugar-coated scraps. We hid behind the trees until the few remaining dogs could no longer resist the scraps. Then we threw ourselves onto the dogs' viciously snapping jaws, bound their snouts in leather muzzles, and sewed those bundles of flailing limbs into our jackets.

They kept us warm for a few days.

But when they died, the cold returned with a vengeance.

Frostbite.

Amputations.

Hallucinations.

Death.

In the mornings a special squad arrived, all condemned men, to collect the bodies and take them to the churchyard. It was impossible to get a shovel into the ground because of the freeze. Scattered zigzag across the churchyard, the corpses performed a choreography of death.

Because the church was on a hill, we had to pull stockings over our shoes to reach the top without breaking any bones. On Sundays the survivors gathered in a circle around the churchyard. Before long there were more statues than spectators. The only sound was a remote tinkling: exhaled air, which crystallized instantly, like a cloud of spun glass escaping from your lips. And with every breath, you could hear those tiny powdery slivers of breath whirling through the air. As if we were spitting ice.

It was so cold even the clocks on the church towers fell silent. Timepieces stopped in their tracks. Time froze, literally. Women were assigned to count the seconds, but their brains were soon covered with layers of ice. Time became no more than the memory of warmth. But even that faded, as we became more and more obsessed by the trials of winter.

Survival.

Don't freeze to death.

Don't freeze to death!

Even this worry disappeared. The human body is a chameleon. We became as white and cold as the world around us, for the simple reason that we no longer used our blood. How could we? The world was so cold even our veins froze in our bodies. Twigs of red coral.

So it will come as no surprise to hear that the word *love* quickly became obsolete. Rub two ice cubes together. Does that produce heat? Well then.

In the end there was no difference between night and day. Was that the moon up there, that luminous egg cell? That glazed egg yolk, was that the sun? What we saw at night, was that the sun's reflection? Was the sun a figment of our imagination?

One night we woke up to the clamor of people in the street. Everyone's head was drawn deeply into his shoulders. Was that too an illusion? Had heaven itself gone mad? The sky was a writhing snake pit of color. We watched, and watched, and watched.

Someone said something about the Northern Lights but we refused to listen.

Someone said it was heaven, that it had lapped up our warmth and the colors of our body fluids and was now returning them.

Us and heaven. We nodded hopefully.

Someone replied that nothing was being returned. Heaven didn't exist.

Someone pointed to the colors, to the exploding sky, as if trying to lure the colors with his beckoning finger.

Someone crossed himself.

Someone fainted and froze instantly to the ground.

Someone clenched his fists, cleared his throat, tried to call the colors back. Demanded their return. *Here. Now.*

That lone, pathetic voice, under that reeling sky. That waxen fist.

We watched, and watched, and watched.

No one else was brave enough to raise his fist to heaven.

We said nothing, and watched, overwhelmed by those colorful fists raining down on us incessantly from the sky.

Us.

Me.

I lost my brother first, and a short time later my parents. My brother was found near Dogs Lake. Rumor had it that dogs showed up there from time to time. People hung around there too, for obvious reasons, and would go to any lengths to catch one of the dogs. A dog meant warmth and warmth meant money. Maybe my brother had hoped for a bit of warmth, or money. What he found was a death no one would have wished for. They beat him to death. Literally. Then they sucked the last remnants of warmth out of his bones as if it were marrow. How did we recognize him? We recognized him. That's all I want to remember.

A short time later my parents died too. I think they lost all hope after their son died. You needed all your concentration to survive. They were so tired they didn't even close their eyes.

Maybe they were happy – their lips bore the trace of a smile. That was the only noticeable difference between the living and the dead: that eerie smile. My parents died in each other's arms; it was impossible to separate them. I think my heart froze when I found them in bed. It was a few days before I could say goodbye to them.

When I returned from the hill – I'd taken my parents to their final resting place and left them standing as statues in their eternal embrace – our house had already been occupied by another family. They kept shaking their heads when I said it was my house. My room. No. My key, see? No. How could I prove it was my key? The lock was frozen solid.

You can survive on the street, provided you think like an animal: me, eat, survive. I wasn't the only child to be evicted. We found each other instinctively, banded together, told each other stories to kill time. Stole for each other, took care of each other, accompanied each other to the final resting place. Us, eat, survive.

And we learned things from each other. For example, that two spoonfuls of ether in a plastic bag were enough to induce dreams. Until that ether, too, thickened like marzipan. Together we carved ice blocks out of the river with endless patience and used them to build igloos. In the evenings we listened as our youthful breathing, with its last glimmer of warmth, slowly smoothed the walls, until they gleamed like the inside of a body. Every night we crawled out of our igloos to gaze at the sky. One night the play of colors was so intense we thought the world was coming to an end. Everyone came out of their house and watched, heads drawn deeply into their shoulders, breathless, scared to death. I don't know who decided what anymore, but the crowd suddenly started moving. A silent, gray column, falling down, scrambling up, trying to reach the church at the top of the hill.

And there, under that reeling sky, between the frozen corpses and dazed townspeople, stood a woman in a brown blanket, barefoot, arms splayed, scissors-like. Around her neck was a sign with a message, but the letters were overgrown with crystals. She was silent, and pointed upwards. We followed her arms and saw that someone had projected an enormous liquid slide onto the sky.

The church.

Dozens of bodies, frozen in their final movements.

Dozens of people, heads drawn deeply into their shoulders.

One woman, her index fingers pointing to invisible stars.

After a while someone called out: "What d'you see up there?" The woman wagged her fingers more emphatically, stretching upwards, standing on her toes. There, she gestured. Again everyone's eyes traced her arms and extended fingers up to the milky-white sky. We saw nothing.

Some people returned to the town. Most were silent and waited, for no reason. Some grumbled. The woman smiled as if she'd seen God, even after the first ice splinter shattered into pieces on her shoulder, even after a shower of splinters. Then, suddenly, she let her arms drop and cupped her hands around her mouth: "Is there a point to suffering?" she pealed.

The ice shower stopped. What was she saying?

"You want an answer? Good! Then look at me! I'm a sponge! You're standing here in front of me, spitting, spitting, spitting. Fear, bitterness, loathing! The bilious color of your misery! Keep on spitting!"

We were silent.

"Why don't you look up? If you really want answers, don't look at me! The answers are up there!"

"We haven't even asked a question," someone snapped.

A chunk of ice barely missed her forehead.

Her smile.

Almost everyone had left. A few boys stayed, out of boredom, together with a few men who were still too angry to go down the hill safely. One man went and stood in front of the woman, made the sign of the devil with his fingers, hissed in her face, then turned around and went down the hill. We followed. There was no reason for us to stay.

"Crime must be punished!" she shouted to our backs.

We laughed.

"Sinners!"

The man who'd made the sign of the devil turned around one last time: "Maybe sin will bring back the sun!"

Every day the squad of condemned men returned from the church on the hill with stories about the woman. No matter what they did, no matter how obscene their proposals, she just stood there, continually repeating her message. *Crime must be punished!* And every time they piled more corpses up behind her, she ranted on about heaven again. According to her, it had once been a mirror. But it had become so tired of being a mirror to us sinners that it had shattered to pieces. The splinters had fallen down and covered the earth. She begged us to collect them one by one and hang them on the church walls. After the church had been transformed into an enormous hall of mirrors, the splinters would find their own way back to heaven. Sins would be forgiven. The sun would shine again.

Everyone laughed. *Madwoman*. The cold was affecting her brain.

But one day the body collectors came into town, breathless. A miracle! A miracle! Everyone who still had legs rushed up the hill. We heard the woman singing from a long way off. We saw something red. As we approached, we saw blood trickling from the chests of three corpses that were piled up behind her. Blood! Something liquid! We dipped our index fingers into the drops, jabbed our thumbs into the wounds, smiled, patted each other on the shoulder. Real blood! Was the Ice Age about to end after all?

The woman was beside herself with rage. "Sinners!" she cried. "You see the crumbs, but not the bread!"

What bread? Blood, yes!

“Use your eyes. Read!”

That’s when we saw what she meant. Large letters were visible midway down the frozen corpses. That’s where the blood was coming from. We had to poke our fingers into the letters to believe our eyes: O, R, A, the crumbs; ORA, the bread.

“Pray!”

A sign, an order. Kneel! Pray! Send your prayers to heaven like arrows. We knelt, and sent our prayers to heaven like arrows. The woman calmed down, and spread her hands over us like wings.

“Now pray,” she said. “Send your prayers to heaven, torment me with your misery. I’m a sponge. Let me fill myself with your fears.”

So that’s what we did: spit, and spit, and spit. Until the woman was engulfed in our fears, until she exuded them. And still she beckoned, lapped them up, swallowed them, became engorged with them.

Relieved, we went down the hill, firmly resolved to go up it again every day weighed down with misery – and to go down it again later, with hope on our backs like wings.

The next day there was another letter. M.

AMOR.

“Give prayers and you’ll be given love.” We gave God what he had coming to him and took what came to us. Faith, hope, and love. For the first time we dared to think about the future again. We decided then and there to make a supreme effort. With God’s help we’d give back to the world what had been taken from it: warmth. We didn’t utter the word. The king had forbidden it. Give the king his due; be silent about what he has forbidden.

When you think of warmth, logic points both up and down. Some of us dreamt aloud of lava oozing up from the earth. Because our town was at sea level – during a normal spring most of the streets were flooded – we were hopeful. Encouraged, full of optimism, we pounded on the ground again, but it wouldn’t yield. Spades broke. Still we didn’t give up. We tried driving piles into the ground. Nothing. We confiscated precious jewels, decorated piles with diamonds, and tried again to sink them into the ground. Still nothing. Then we heard the woman’s voice: “Don’t look down for what you’ll only find above.”

We looked up and were amazed at our stupidity. Of course there was no reason to look down. Cold air sinks, warm air rises. We could only look up.

“Remember the mirror,” cried the woman. “Cover the church with splinters and heaven will become a mirror again.”

We decided to place our bet on two horses. The women would collect the splinters from wherever they could find them, and the men would build a tower. And so it happened. The women

dispersed, and returned later, tinkling. The men carved ice beams from the ground and placed scaffolding against the church wall. That way they could decorate it and keep climbing it at the same time. Before long the scaffolding was higher than the church. They worked in shifts. Pulleys were attached to the highest beams. The heaviest men tied ropes around their waists and plunged down, shouting, raising a new load of beams with their weight. When one man, overwhelmed by exhaustion, started complaining, he was sent to the woman. She spread her arms and cried: "It's all right! I'll cover myself with your suffering. Like I cover a twig with jam. I collect suffering. Whole swarms of bees are heading straight for me. Sting. Spit out your poison. But keep looking up. Up!"

And higher we went. When the men became overwhelmed by the dizzying heights, children were assigned in their place. "Because you said we could do something too," they said. "Because of your liveness," others cried. Yes. We looked down without being afraid. Beneath us we heard the tinkling of splinters as the men and women hung them on the church walls.

Our group could fly. There were five of us. We linked arms, and the others wound a rope around us. We let us ourselves fall like a bundle from the highest beam. Now we didn't need ether to dream; the fall made our minds sing.

The church wall shone brightly with splinters.

It took a few seconds before we reached the ground.

It took a lot longer before we reached the top again.

The ice beams changed before our very eyes. Maybe it was because of the cold that they shone like silver. We preferred to think it was because of our hard work and prayers. The crystals with their fanciful shapes reminded us of the exquisite inside of rocks. Take such a rock, split it in two, and a world of quartzes is revealed, a sugarcoated world. The more ice we dragged up, the more the church came to resemble a Gothic cathedral. Buttresses of lace. What one day was a lump of ice, the next day had indisputably turned into a gargoyle, except that only ice gushed from its mouth. Everywhere along the walls, flowers of powdered glass sprouted. Just as sharp. Whoever took a wrong turn risked a horrible death: he'd slip down the diamond wall and hit the ground, fleshless, stripped to the bone.

We stood in silence for hours, looking at how the church broke the nocturnal light into all the colors of the rainbow. Some saw this as a sign that all suffering would soon end. The nun assured us we were on the right road but hadn't reached our goal yet. Not yet? Not yet. "The road is long but the reward will exceed your wildest dreams." We lugged and dragged, trying to see our exhaustion as a form of devotion, a way to ecstasy. And indeed, one of us came so close to total exhaustion, maybe even went beyond it, that one day he stopped in his tracks, his face replete with pain and pleasure. A *singing* face, looking towards heaven, always towards heaven. Reveling, swooning. A trembling hand pointing to what we couldn't see. Dreams come true. Dearly beloved resurrected from the dead, embracing the lucky ones. He heard music; it flooded out of his face like light, so beautiful. There was light! There was a sun! Everyone stopped working and stood in a circle, trying, just by looking, to partake of that happiness and that warmth. And, as the man nervously removed his clothes, all the while looking upwards, the circle became smaller, so that we too could feel the warmth.

Such ecstasy was always a foreboding of death, a stiffness induced by a cold more intense than the cold around us. As one person dragged the newest corpse to the churchyard, others set to

work again, this time a bit harder, a bit more determined. Maybe they worked this hard so they could reach that limit themselves. If a dying man looks so blissful, we want it too ...Yes, yes. To feel that warmth for just one moment.

Maybe doubt is just a sign of fatigue. Or so we thought. It became quieter down below. As the work up top became increasingly difficult, there was more time to think. But the woman tried to keep up our spirits. "Faith, hope, and love!" she cried. But what's the difference between hope and doubt? Maybe one is only a gradation of the other. Fewer people spent the night at the foot of the tower. The woman had so many whiners to deal with that we had to bolster her arms up with ice beams. Her wings encased us. "Faith, hope, and love!" The church was a mirror framed with baroque ice fractals. But, for now, heaven said nothing.

One day, during a momentary lapse of attention, we failed to tie the ropes securely. The bundle of five youths jumped. There was no singing this time. The ice beams didn't come up. Instead, the empty loop of a rope snapped sharply against the reel. We didn't even take the time to tie ourselves together. We grabbed the loop and let ourselves fall. Five youths lay like shards on the ground. Deathly silence. The cold had stolen even our tears.

The next day we saw the new letter: T.

AMORT.

People went down the hill in silence. We didn't. Maybe we felt guilty about the boys' death. Maybe we were afraid the others would punish us.

"Faith, hope, and love!" Her voice became shriller. Silently we sat at her feet, watching as her eyes turned white. As frost flowers grew on her like blossoms. She was oblivious to our presence. She talked about rain. "The air is made of skin. When it rains, someone throws a spear into its side. Drops swell." But it didn't rain. At best, the odd treacherous ice needle fell from the sky.

Because of the extreme cold, the ice turned to powder and the mirror-church lost its sheen. In vain we sought shelter under the tower. From there, one night, we saw two new letters appear. We didn't dare to approach them. It was as if hands were crawling over the flesh like rats, and scratching out the letters with their nails. A short time later we heard the roar of a motorcycle. The boy riding it was naked. On his head were two burning horns. The nail-studded tires glistened. He stopped in front of the woman, revved the engine as if intending to plow into her, then spun his back wheel and sped off, leaving a cloud of ice sparks in his wake.

We decided not to say anything about the motorcycle boy. We no longer trusted our own eyes. There were no certainties. We did tell about the new letters though. We went up the mountain in silence, the townspeople trailing behind us. When we made a circle around the woman, she wrenched her eyes away from heaven and wearily rubbed the ice crystals from her lips, then tried to mouth the letters: MATADOR. Disbelief, laughter, murmurs. "Is that why we had to work so hard? Is that the answer? That?"

We had to move closer to understand what she was saying. "We're almost ... there. Heaven. I ... full of ... your suffering. You ... all ... warmth." Warmth. She'd uttered the forbidden word. *Warmth*. We pretended we hadn't understood and turned away. "There's ... still ... hope!" she shouted to our backs. "Last night ... I saw a bull ... with burning horns! A bull ... with a burning

crown!" She tried to swivel her hips matador-fashion, but all we saw were freezing wounds that etched a black skin onto her body.

"Madwoman!" someone cried. "Witch!"

"*Lèse majesté*," shouted others.

A few days later the king came to town. He nodded to us disdainfully from his open car. Together we pushed the car up the hill.

When the woman uttered the word *warmth*, the king raised an eyebrow. The chauffeur accelerated. When the first ice splinter smashed to pieces on her shoulder, the king raised his right arm, smiled, and glided slowly back down the hill. Faith, hope, and love? No. Anger, loathing, and hate. Splinters shooting in all directions.

Shortly after we'd thrown the woman's mutilated body off the hill, we were invited to the palace. The king liked to surround himself with loyal subjects, with men and women who dared to show their teeth in the name of defending the monarchy.

There was great consternation. We took leave of our dead and turned our backs on the church. Again we felt hope.

In the first days after our arrival, we learned that palaces were purposely built too large, so that whoever wandered about in them would feel more insignificant than ever. Here too the cold had ensured that everything – the walls, the ceilings, the floors – was covered in ice. It was one vast hall of mirrors, in which everyone was reflected a thousandfold. Much to the king's displeasure. *Outside* he wanted to be surrounded by crowds; *inside* he wanted to be alone whenever possible. Which is why he ordered huge, blood-red tapestries to be hung on the walls, tapestries that froze solid within a week. I was chosen, because of my lightheartedness and my loyalty, to beat those ice creatures, those red mirrors in the royal chambers, to smithereens.

My tools: stilts, bucket, hammer.

My uniform: red jacket, red pants, red boots.

This kept me busy every day from ten in the morning until noon, from three until six.

My method: to check the tapestry, fasten my stilts, and rhythmically beat the ice mirror to smithereens. Starting at the top left, finishing at the bottom right. Holding the bucket under the hammer, and, when the bucket was full, emptying it into a large, mobile container. It was forbidden, on pain of death, to take a single splinter outside – outside meaning outside the royal chambers. Every worker was searched at the end of the day. The punishment for violation was death.

It took a while before I realized why the king was so strict: he thought mirrors had memories. Whoever smuggled ice splinters out of the palace had a stored portrait of the king. And whoever had a portrait of another also had power over him.

It was only after I learned this that I started to appreciate my own work on the tapestries. And the splinters. Every day I smuggled one outside. A person has enough orifices to hide things in.

At night I slept with the booty under my pillow. I was convinced that one night the splinters' secrets would seep into my dreams.

In the morning, disenchanted, I'd throw the splinter into the bucket.

At first, we – the townspeople, the new courtiers – were surprised at the ease with which the king violated his own laws. Maybe that's true power: to proclaim laws then blatantly defy them yourself.

And so we heard the king use the word *winter* in one of his conversations. *Warmth. Cold. Heat of the battle. Hot thing.* No one fumed with indignation, no one even batted an eye. They just leaned forwards and listened, heads tilted, nodding.

The king even derived a certain pleasure from allowing his subjects to address him as *the power that be*. Those with power delight in seeing themselves as forces of nature. Pride, vanity, even unfriendliness: the king knew all these vices. When I caught his eye for the first time, I was perched on my spindly stilt-legs, hammer in one hand, bucket in the other. He opened the door and I froze in awe, petrified, in my red suit, a bloodstain against the red backdrop. Maybe that's why he didn't see me right away. He stopped in front of me, his startled glance sliding upwards from the floor to the stilts, from the stilts to my legs. I was embarrassed because he had to look up. Red uniform, red tapestry, flaming red face. I didn't dare to breathe. Not even when a smile broke out on his serious face. "Good afternoon," he said. Before I caught my breath again, he'd already disappeared behind the next door.

Was it a coincidence that I had to wear a black jacket over my uniform from that day onwards?

The king had smiled at me! No one believed me. "Maybe it was just a twitch," teased the kitchen-boy. "Maybe he likes children," gibed the stable-boy in his wavering falsetto. The other boys jeered, slapping their open palms ominously over their clenched fists. I straightened my jacket lapels and left.

"Did he really notice you?" asked the king's valet a few moments later. I was leaning over, looking at the ice fountain, in what had once been called one of the most beautiful gardens in the world. Even now, hidden behind winter's glass, its beauty was visible. As if the layer of ice captured, preserved, fed the color of the blooms. And the fountain, designed so water eddied rather than spouted from it, the holes so miniscule that the water emerged as gossamer threads that instantly entangled. The fountain had been so ingeniously constructed as to give the viewer the impression of looking at a dress being woven from water. And because the fountain faced southwards, the sun had free play: in the filigree drops the light broke into all the colors of the rainbow. The cold took these colors by surprise. All the colors except one. Red was missing. Which is why the inside of the palace was painted red.

Rumor had it the king was waiting for a girl to arrive at the palace who would put on that dress and complete the rainbow with the color of her hair.

It was at the ice fountain the king's valet told me his master sometimes slept with diamonds on his face. Because he was nostalgic for tears. I laughed. Don't laugh! Whoever was caught talking about the king's personal habits would lose his head! The valet and I made a deal: I'd bring him splinters, he'd bring me stories. The next day he told me the king lay awake at night listening to the tinkling of frost flowers on the windowpane. Every night he was startled by the

sound of a bottle bursting next to his bed. Every night the bottle cracked into two equal parts. Where it broke, there was a second bottle – of ice. Every morning the valet cleaned up the broken bottle and replaced it with a new one. But that morning – the valet looked around uneasily before continuing in a muted voice – the king had complained about a strange sensation in his chest. No, no doctor. No need for that. It wasn't his heart that was keeping him awake, nor the bursting bottles. It was, he whispered, a strange dream.

"He didn't see me. His eyes wandered off. I no longer existed for him," said the valet.

The king kept repeating that one word to himself, a word that sat on his tongue like a bubble, a sweet memory, a dollop of rich ice cream: that word was *warmth*.

Warmth? His advisers were mystified. They asked the king for permission to deliberate. Each withdrew to a corner of the bedroom. But how can chickens hatch eggs when they produce no warmth?

After a week the king still had no answer. Messengers were dispatched to all corners of the kingdom to discover the origins or meaning of the word. And after a few weeks they had no choice but to return empty-handed. One day, when no one, not even the king, expected an answer anymore, a gypsy boy was brought to the palace. Warmth, the king enquired, and the boy nodded. The boy called for his motorcycle. Its tires were studded with nails, and over the crossbars lay a helmet from which two charcoaled horns protruded. The boy opened one of the leather bags straddling the back of the motorcycle. Everyone watched with bated breath. He reached in and pulled out two stones, a stick, and a flask filled with a liquid he called gasoline. He took off his jacket, cut off a sleeve, wrapped it around the stick, sprinkled it with gasoline, and rubbed the stones together.

How do people react when they see fire for the first time?

Only the king wasn't afraid. He ordered the boy to approach him. The boy shook his head. But the king insisted he wanted to hold the flame in his hands. Before he'd finished speaking, the boy had taken a sip of gasoline and blown a golden cloud over the heads of the courtiers.

Within seconds he was dead. Prone, at the king's feet. Like a hedgehog pierced by a dozen lances. But the torch, the flint, and the gasoline had been saved.

The warmth lasted until all the gasoline was gone.

Frantically, the king's advisers tried to transfer the warmth into a human body. Volunteers drank a burning glass down to the last drop and died a terrible death. One man let himself be wrapped in cloth and sprinkled with gasoline, then ran through the palace for a few moments like a torch. None of these efforts resulted in an acceptable way of linking warmth to the human body.

Finally, there were only two small glasses of gasoline left. It was the king himself who decided what was to be done with them. He pointed to a pregnant lady-in-waiting and ordered her to rub the liquid onto her stomach. He rubbed the stones together with his own hands. The stomach ignited briefly. The woman was unhurt. Now the court had to wait for four months until the baby was born, to see if it produced warmth.

That left the second glass. In a tremulous voice the king confided to his courtiers that he and no one else would be the last guinea pig. Several ladies-in-waiting fainted. The king's advisers implored him to abandon his plan. Nothing helped. Silencing the courtiers with a wave of his arm, the king approached the throne and ceremoniously emptied the glass onto it. The most senior adviser rubbed the stones together, and when the flame ignited, the king hastened to sit on the throne.

Silence.

Nothing happened. After a while the king opened his eyes. The courtiers looked at him, speechless, waiting for a signal. He rose, slowly, nodded, then strode out of the room to overwhelming applause. We stared in awe at the burnt patch halfway down the royal cloak. The next day messengers were sent out into the kingdom again, with the news that the king himself had defied the enemy, risked his own life for the welfare of his subjects, even narrowly escaped death.

The king sat up in bed and looked at the burnt patch on his cloak. Although it had lasted only briefly, he'd still felt the warmth. And he who has felt warmth will never be the same again.

The king waited patiently for four long months. Then the lady-in-waiting's son was born. The advisers examined the infant. In no way did he differ from the children born before it. He looked and felt like a bottle of frozen milk.

In the utmost secrecy the king ordered the country's only magician to be taken from his dungeon and brought before him. Many years earlier, the magician had been banished to the darkest corners of the palace, where he'd been left up to his waist in ice. All he'd been allowed to take with him were his books. Books aren't dangerous, especially at that depth. Since the food was already frozen solid by the time the guards reached the dungeon, the magician lived off his books. When he entered the king's chambers, he was wearing a hoop of ice around his waist.

Warmth? The magician nodded, apologized, then turned away, coughing uncontrollably. With every fit, a page fluttered out of his mouth. He confessed to the king that the book would help him find a solution.

"Here it is: warmth." The magician placed his finger under the word, cleared his throat, and read aloud: "Noun; no plural." Encouraged, the king nodded. The magician continued: "... the quality or state of being warm."

The magician looked at the king. "Is that all?" the king asked.

The magician studied the page carefully, raised his finger, and went on reading: "Also referring to normal body temperature." After hesitating for a moment, he added: "... warmth of the blood."

Warmth of the blood? Intently, the king touched the magician's arm, feeling the maze of frozen veins under the skin. Just when the king was about to order the magician back to his dungeon, the magician added: "... can be found – during severe conditions such as the Great Ice Age – in the heart of the Girl-with-Red-Hair."

"Here it is, Sire," said the magician, showing him the page. The king pretended to read the letters. Distracted, he ordered the guards to lock the magician up again.

Where was the Girl-with-Red-Hair?

Again messengers were dispatched and again they returned empty-handed. Desperate, the king decided to go and look for himself.

One day he found himself in a forest of huge trees heavy with glass branches. It was in a clearing that he found her, the Girl-with-Red-Hair. Leaning over snow-white fruit, plucking the largest ones, arranging them on her apron. She was sitting in a pool of her own white hair. And there it was, upright on her forehead, like a quivering flame: red hair. The king climbed off his horse and walked towards her. She looked up in surprise, touching her unruly lock.

At a signal from the king, everyone kneeled.

Shyly the girl lowered her eyes and whispered something.

The king had to put his ear to her lips to hear what she was saying: "Last night I danced on hot coals."

But everyone heard what the king asked her: "Can you make warmth?"

The girl was silent, as if lost in thought, then laid her fruit-filled apron aside.

"Here?" she asked.

The king nodded.

The girl went and stood directly in front of the king. The guards gestured for him to step back.

At that moment the girl had a new vision. She saw herself sitting in the snow arranging fruit, but the fruit was no longer snow-white. It was deep red, flecked with gold. In her vision, the girl brought the fruit to her mouth, then turned her head to a man who'd emerged from the forest. He bent over her, and his mouth too closed over the fruit.

And so it happened. Eagerly the king sank his teeth into the girl's mouth. Almost instantly they both felt it, their lips tingling, their veins coming to life. Soon a blush spread over their bodies. The courtiers stood as if nailed to the ground. And still the king and the girl went on kissing. Suddenly a crimson-red drop welled up between their lips. It was impossible to see whose blood it was. But one thing is certain: the drop fell to the frozen ground and swelled instantly into a pulsating, heart-shaped strawberry. The king and the girl continued in their embrace. The drops welled up one after another, falling to the ground and turning into strawberries, until they lay in piles around the lovers. Hesitantly, the courtiers came into action and made a circle, but it grew smaller and smaller. One courtier forgot his amazement, and his manners, and bent over to slip a warm beating heart into his mouth. There was no stopping them after that. The courtiers hurled themselves onto the fruit, tumbling over each other, grabbing blindly, eating until they could eat no more, shouting "don't chew, don't chew!" There they stood, in the eye of the storm, the king and the Girl-with-Red-Hair. No one even noticed how radiant they'd become from their own warmth. How first the girl, then the king, slowly lifted off the ground, how they wafted upwards, still embracing, then evaporated into thin air between two snow-white trees.