

Giant

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An extract

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Photo 1

I'm the woman with the knife. It's a white plastic knife I bought for picnicking. I used to do that sort of thing: picnicking, buying plastic cutlery. But here, in this photo, all that was over and done with. Here I'm using the knife to threaten. The boy I'm threatening is called Wim. I lived with him for three years and I think he wanted to marry me. As you can see from his face, he's not much impressed with my knife. That's not really his fault. Threatening someone with a knife that can barely cut butter is pretty theatrical. But I felt that I couldn't just leave.

The slender girl is my sister Kim. She's packing my bags. The grey sweater in her bony fingers, she has one just like it. Together forever was never a promise, always a fact.

I don't associate much in the way of sound with the photo. Zip fasteners on the luggage; cagoules crumpled into bum bags; a gentle but insistent breeze billowing against the bedroom windows. While I'm threatening my beloved with a knife, I tell Kim that I love her. Of course she doesn't answer. She's done with talking and what I'm telling her she's known for an age.

Our departure has become a digital photograph. Because that's the way I want it. I'll send you the file before I delete it. If this address works, my past will invade your house in a matter of seconds even though I'm really far away. If they were to extract the world from between us, our foot soles would be left touching. Far seems ever closer, close ever farther. Magic has become so easy, so practical.

Should you go to the trouble to print my departure, then use extra strong photographic paper. Silky gloss with a smooth surface. Very strong with photo-feel. Suitable for inkjet printers. Then take a fine, black felt-tip pen and write something on the back in stylish, adult handwriting. If you can think of something brilliant, go for it. Something stupid is also fine with me. 'The beginning of the end', for example. A particularly stupid and always appropriate truth you can use to seriously

spoil the fun at weddings and birthdays. At births. You get up from the aluminium hospital chair they fetched for you, hold the newborn in your outstretched arms and say: 'New babies are slapped into life every day, surrounded by people waiting edgily for the first screech. You might ask yourself why. When you think about it, we're all terminal cases and emptying your bowels is just as much a miracle.' You sit back down. You manage to chortle long and hard, choking for several minutes on your own saliva while everybody looks round ill at ease, muttering anxiously and removing the child to a place of safety. Or you can hold your tongue, just as Kim did when they took the photo. Protracted and flawless. Even without your contribution, everything is still the beginning of an end.

Take another look at the woman with the knife. She is thirty something and is wearing expensive clothes. The shadow over her left eye doesn't stop you from seeing immediately how unreliable her expression is. She's doing her best to force a tear or two but without much success. She hates farewells, even if she herself has laboured to bring them on. Her name is Hannah.

Don't consider yourself honoured because you ended up with her photo or because she's telling you stories. She typed addresses in at random, put names together with letters plucked from the air, positioned the cursor on 'send' and clicked on the left mouse button. Your imaginary address was the only one that worked. Accident. Commonplace magic. It is completely pointless to believe anything else. She doesn't know you, you don't know her, and take it for me, you don't want to meet her.

Just to be clear, I'm talking about myself in the third person. As I said, I am the woman with the knife, I am Hannah.

Maybe I'm underestimating you. Maybe you're an intelligent woman of thirty-five, putting the finishing touches to a doctoral dissertation with an unpronounceable title. As a result, you probably don't have time for this and won't read on because you think I'm going to involve you in some sort of irregularity or other. You're not entirely left of the mark. But profit-seeking would have been a good deal simpler. This is no clandestine diamond operation.

Even if you're a jovial grandparent, I'll still have to disappoint you. Your soup might be highly commendable but it's not going to change a word of what I have to say. I know it was worse during the war, that there was nothing in those days and that I have everything now. But don't expect that to make a difference. This is no confession of guilt.

If you're a nice guy with time and love to spare, watch out. Your intentions might be understandable but they're so inappropriate they're embarrassing. Don't build your hopes up or your expectations. You're no chosen one, no hero. Don't go looking for me. You'll never persuade me to do anything nor keep me from doing anything. This is all you get.

This is the beginning of an end. Don't ever show it to me again.

Part I

As my days pass in the busy market place of this world and my hands are filled with daily profit, let me always sense that I have won nothing.

- Rabindranath Tagore, from Gitanjali (LXXIX)

Bad Weather

Kim called me again six months ago. I was on my way home from work. So was she. She had muttered something vague about chaos. I first thought she was talking about the weather. It was four in the afternoon and the streets were flooded. I parked my car with two wheels on the pavement, the motor still running. Outside a bowlegged, stockingless gipsy child raced into the confusion of the early evening rush hour, intent on cleaning windscreens. Such children sometimes have their legs broken on purpose, they say. I held my hand at the ready to dismiss her with a wave and laughed heartily at something my sister said.

I still knew her in those days, my sister. A little less than before, for sure. She told me at her wedding that she had never dared to dream that it might indeed be the most beautiful day of her life. I danced myself crazy.

Dirty hands knocked on my windscreen. I signalled no with my index finger, shook my head.

‘Are you happy?’ asked Kim. It wasn’t her style. She was happy.

‘Yes,’ said I, ‘you?’

‘Yes.’

The girl at my windscreen had a large shiny lump on her forehead. She was holding a plastic bottle upside down and pouring yellow soap, which was immediately transformed into foam under the windscreen wipers. I knocked three times on the window and used my entire hand this time to turn her away. The gesture she used in response was unfamiliar to me. It was clearly not intended to be nice. I used the same gesture back. She stuck out her chin and revealed her lower teeth. A slither of black hair glistened in the corner of her mouth like a snail.

‘What’s going on?’ asked Kim.

‘Just a second’, said I.

The girl pressed her nose against the window on the passenger side. I buzzed it open half an inch and shouted: ‘No, non, nein!’ My command didn’t make the slightest difference. She let me see how many teeth were missing, effortlessly blinked away the raindrops that were threatening to glide from her eyebrows into her eyes. Her exaggeratedly large hands clasped the bottle. She drew a large dick on the window in liquid soap. It had two uneven balls and an ample head. She licked it off. Greedily. Foam slithered from the corner of her mouth along the lither of hair. The lump had turned pinkish.

I wedged my mobile between my shoulder and my ear and fished a pound coin from my purse.

‘Almost there’, I said to Kim.

With the window completely open, the child quickly hoisted herself inside as far as her waist. She grabbed the money from my hand and clasped hold of my head. She seemed to be floating. All I could do was gaze at her. Words I didn’t understand escaped from her mouth. She reeked of soap and chemical candies. The smell filled the car. She repeated what she had said with greater urgency.

‘What?’ I said.

‘What?’ said Kim.

Just at that moment I sensed that someone was watching me. Clear as day. From a distance with binoculars or so close by that I didn’t notice. The girl stopped floating and folded double. It seemed for a moment that she had disappeared into her immense coat. She then let herself be dragged backwards out of the car by a boy who was clearly her accomplice. While she stood in front of him, he pinched her cheeks together, stuck his finger in her fish mouth, yanked it out again and sniffed at it assiduously. What he shouted and the clout he gave her might well have been friendly. Whatever the case, they laughed excitedly. I watched them disappear between the cars through my slowly closing window.

‘The world’s going mad,’ I said.

‘Right,’ said Kim, ‘I need to see you.’

Fatal accident and other pleasant memories

We agreed to meet at a pavement café. A small heater dangled above our heads. Rain dripped from the canvas awning. It had been raining more and more frequently and if it wasn’t raining it was misty.

‘Tell me about before,’ she said. ‘Pretend its not about us. Say “Kim” and “Hannah”.’

‘Fit of nostalgia?’ I laughed.

‘Doesn’t matter.’

She preferred certainties and she had no doubt that the past was one of them. I did. The stories she wanted to hear had led to serious rows with many a dearly beloved who didn’t understand what we were on about. Memories that Kim and I had ultimately half buried in order to avoid any doubts about their importance.

'Hannah is three years and four months old, Kim two and a half. The world smells like flannel sheets with fabric softener. Everyone loves them, laughter is everywhere and there is a fair chance, one of these days, their dog is going to confess that he can speak. But there are misunderstandings now and then nevertheless. When Mum tells them the school they're going to has a refectory, Hannah imagines the word has something to do with a manual vacuum cleaner. "I'd better be sure it doesn't suck up my toes", she says. Mum asks what she means. Hannah realises with silent shame that there are words she still has to learn. She looks at Kim who looks at her toes.'

'Kim has invented a new game. It's called Fatal Accident. Hannah has to go and sit in their bedroom. The game requires a little preparation. Once Hannah has counted to five-hundred, she hears Kim screaming in the distance: "You can come now! Garage!" She shouts back: "I'm coming!"

Hannah hurls herself downstairs. She opens the garage door with restored serenity. Fatal accident.

The door of the carefully parked car is slightly ajar.

"Kim?"

She doesn't answer. Hannah steps unhurriedly round the car and opens the door wide. Kim's head glides from the steering wheel. Her body falls limply out of the car. Her arm touches the ground, motionless. Raspberry jam drips from the corner of her mouth. She's got it down to perfection. Hannah watches for a whole three seconds as Kim straightens her lips and then she bursts into uncontrollable laughter. Her sister laughs likewise, stands up and says: "Now you."

Kim is waiting in the bedroom while Hannah, her head between her legs, models her hair into a fright with Dad's gel. When she returns to the mirror everything collapses again. She panics and grabs a comb. This has to work. She combs aggressively up and down through wisps of hair held brusquely aloft. She then sprays her hair with lacquer until it defies gravity.

"Ready! Bathroom!" she screams and she pretends to stick her fingers in the electric socket next to the mirror. "I'm coming!" Kim shouts back. Just before she opens the door, Hannah opens her eyes wide and shapes her mouth into an ample scream, revealing all her new teeth.

After opening the bathroom door and scaring herself half to death, Kim presses her forehead against a cabinet and laughs noiselessly.'

'They're off on a stealing spree. The sun is shining and the people on the street nod at them jovially.

"You're wearing the same clothes", notes a sales assistant with a smile. They leave the shop without buying anything. They're just two giggling thirteen-year-old girls. He isn't aware of the beads of sweat on the palms of their hands and even less of the Leatherman's in their pockets. They're the best pocket knives available. "Pocket knife" is actually an insult when it comes to such a multipurpose device. They were in an unlocked display case. The sales assistant smiles back with a sparkle.

On the other side of the door Hannah says: "Of course, sir, we always steal exactly the same things." Kim laughs, holding her hand in front of her mouth as she always does when she finds something exciting.

The sun keeps shining, passers-by keep on nodding. From tomorrow they're going to give up stealing from shop-keepers, but today nothing can stop them.'

'According to Kim, Sander is in love with Hannah. They're at a surf camp and Sander is the best surfer. Hannah is waiting for him next to a tree. She feels lighter than usual. Sander arrives with his hands in his pockets. Being in love seems to be a heavy burden. He concentrates on carving in a tree with his knife. Not a Leatherman, Hannah observes. She doesn't know what to say. She looks at the splintered bark and wonders if it's really necessary. After a while – seems like a month and a half – Sander breaks the silence.

"How's your sister?" he asks.

"Fine", says Hannah.

"Is she with Jan?" he asks.

"I think so", says Hannah.

He snorts. A bird is singing, but Hannah thinks it sounds poorly. She doesn't feel so good herself. Chunks of tree bark fall on the grass. Sander is just carving a hole, no drawing, no name.

"If you turn my name back to front it stays the same", says Hannah. The bird sounds as if it's going to give up at any moment. "I'm always Hannah."

Sander keeps on carving.

A week before I got here I had an operation. I used to have six fingers on each hand. Like extra pinkies only more crooked and without nails. Before they called me 'the octopus', says Hannah. She wants to show him her scars. She doesn't know why.

"Does she talk about me sometimes?" he asks.

"No", says Hannah. Her hands have got to stop shaking. She can't bear the sight of the hole in the tree for another second.

"I have to go", she says.

Sander doesn't answer.

Hannah discovers Kim in a disagreeable recreation room. The people around her stop laughing as Hannah approaches. Kim turns towards her for a moment. She's different. "How's Sander, Hannah?" she asks with a lilt while she looks at the others, her face slightly twisted. The extras stare at her with a mixture of delight and malice. Hannah waits until her sister looks in her

direction again and throws her a stare she's never seen before. Kim is startled. That'll teach her. She heads downstairs. Kim chases after her.

"What's the matter?" she says

"You deserted me", says Hannah.

"No." Kim shakes her head. Her eyes are so big and helpless that Hannah wishes she'd kept her mouth shut. But Kim has deserted her.

Hannah keeps walking without looking back. She makes up her mind never to look back. Afterwards she marches in a rage twice around the lake on which they had been surfing. An unpleasant sport, surfing. It was Kim's idea and Hannah had tagged along. Kim has deserted her. A whirlwind of pain bored its way into her heart. It almost became soft and sweet, almost the way she wanted to feel. Kim has deserted her. Third time round the lake and Hannah's feet begin to hurt. Her rage subsides. Then she sees what her sister is doing. She's standing on the edge of the lake with her extended foot touching the surface of the water. She stretches, spreads her arms. Hannah runs to her and asks what she's doing. Then she sees that Kim is sobbing. She's never sobbed so hard.

"I want to jump", she says. "If you're not there, what's the point?" They're thirteen and fourteen. Hannah has no idea what she's hearing.

Then it happens. Kim throws her arms swiftly and firmly around Hannah. Hannah's chest bursts into flame and she reinforces her sister's hold. Her legs are shaking. She sees someone pass by and quickly look away.

They've never been hugged before. No one can ever be more important.'

I had succeeded in my mission. Kim seemed moved and slowly stirred her drink.

'Everything OK with Wim?' she asked finally.

I nodded. Her husband and my boyfriend were both called Wim. We reckoned our respective Wims were decent guys and were able to appreciate each other's Wim. They loved us. You could see it. They vacuumed, replenished the kitchen salt when it was done and had sex with us five times a day if we were in the mood. Now and then they even surprised us.

I had already prepared a teary farewell speech in my head: 'It's over because I love you but not enough. Everything I told you is a lie because you love me more. I really don't think we should live with that. My feet are getting further and further from the ground every day. You've no idea where I am and I'm not going to tell you.' That's what I repeated time after time, behind the wheel, in the bath, when I woke. When I finally turned nail-bitingly to Wim, I said: 'I want you to stay with me forever,' and I meant it. I recognised my boundaries and even handled them with care on occasion.

I wanted to ask my sister if she planned to stay with her husband forever and how many times a day she thought about Mum. But I had forgotten how she was exactly and was no longer

sure what I could tell her. I remembered that she loved me. Everything about her seemed to bathe in carefree palpability. Even her doubts.

That day she said she didn't want to have a child after all.

'A while ago you said you really wanted one', said I.

'Do you want a child?'

'Not really. Not at the moment.'

'One day perhaps?'

'Not sure.'

A conversation like a scratched record. We had talked about the child so often it almost seemed real. A problematic presence that sometimes popped up in my dreams. It ripped my body to shreds. It cried all the time. I wanted to bathe it but didn't know where to look for water. I asked if we should draw a picture and it began to screech and throw crayons at my head with its fat arms. I tucked it in with an overheated electric blanket and only realised what I had done after it had melted into a shapeless lump of blubber.

'I don't think it's a good idea', I said. 'I don't think I'm up to it.'

In my imagination, the child has grown up and is holding a Ceska Zbrojovka P-01 against its temple and looking at me reproachfully. It has a serious skin complaint, one leg significantly shorter than the other, finds it difficult to make contact, is constantly being dumped after short relationships, doesn't enjoy any kind of work, has an inexhaustible craving for attention and narcotics and, to top it all, is highly intelligent and inclined to absolutes.

'Sure, but what if you change your mind and it's too late?' she asked.

How many people bring babies into the world because they might later regret never having done it while simultaneously running the risk that they might regret ever having done it?

'Why don't you want children?' I asked.

'Because I consider myself more important,' she said and slurped at her Campari through a straw.

We watched the nervous clown on the corner of the street for a while. The elongated balloon in his hand refused to become a dog.

'Thanks for the stories', said Kim. 'I had forgotten how much I enjoyed stealing. Have you done it since?'

The way she looked at me foretold what she was about to suggest and that it wouldn't be a good idea. I shook my head and wasn't inclined to answer that it was wrong to try and do things over again, to try to experience something as before. I wasn't actually sure if that was right though. Maybe what really matters is to repeat fun things as often as possible – even if we have to force

ourselves – and that happiness is to be found in the process and not in the result. In any case, it still sounded absurd. Happiness on the whole, actually.

We decided to start with off-the-peg clothing. It was exceptionally hot in the fitting cubicle. We focused on ripping the security magnets from a couple of grey sweaters. We looked at the hole left behind in the wool. It would probably expand pretty quickly. I thought about the hole in the bark from the story I had just told her. We smiled briefly at one another and pulled the sweaters over our heads. The last time we wore matching clothes was years ago. We looked at ourselves in the mirror.

‘They’re going to spot us’, I said.

She nodded. I noticed she felt just as tired as me. Neither of us was into grey. But we sauntered awkwardly towards the exit, because the idea of returning everything to the racks seemed so depressing. A sales assistant filling a shelf watched us go. When we increased our pace a little, two others appeared at the door. Everyone was looking at us but we were looking at no one, not even each other. I only heard her voice when we were sitting in a small office somewhere waiting for the department head, a severe sales assistant on one side and a store detective on the other.

‘No police’, she said. It sounded so adult I couldn’t resist turning to look at her. Her earnestness crumbled when she became aware of me staring. An officer asked if we thought it was funny. He looked a little stoned, actually, probably natural. Kim rested her head on the table and laughed with drawn out gulps, just as I remembered her. I muttered nervous apologies. There was nothing the matter with our freedom. Everything still belonged to us. We paid for the sweaters, took them off and nodded gratefully for the spotless police record.