

Fortunately We're Powerless

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An extract

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p 7-8

When dramas like this unfold, there is always one person keeping their icy calm. Uncle Lex has often been that person. Forced to just stand and watch, alone and powerless, while others circle around him wildly, blinded by their ignorance and fear, each shout feeding the chaos like a greedy child. Now he is standing here, on the hill. Looking out over the slope that runs into the abyss. Smoothing the lapels of his jacket with one hand. Lost in thought like a hunter.

Follow his gaze. Zoom in. Zoom until you see the perfectly composed picture.

Down there, in the garden, an Asian girl sits on the edge of a trampoline. Her feet a few inches above the grass. Behind her, a bit further on: a wall of ivy, hiding the fields and the horizon.

Skinny jeans, baseball cap. Bright yellow Converse sneakers. A Palestinian scarf draped over a tight T-shirt. Her hands are holding a game.

Softly sighing she begins to sing the song. Her legs are swinging up and down.

Bye, Mahatsuko. Bye, dear Mahatsuko, bye bye.

The smell of the buffet mingles with the sound of her voice.

Hello, Mahatsuko, hello, hello.

She stops. Someone throws a ball on the grass. Two boys appear. She glances backward at them, then looks forward at him. She jumps up from the trampoline and walks towards the boys, nimbly yet slowly, her head held high, playful and elegant at the same time.

A majestic gazelle.

p 5, chapter 3

It started with heavy, separate drops like a tap dripping. One instant later, water was pouring down so much that telling the drops apart became impossible.

Billie seemed absent. She endured the patter and thunder without any evident emotion. The shed was shaken quite forcefully. The bird held still too, sitting on Billie's lap, looking outside, like us.

I once read somewhere that what happens in the sky can have a strong impact on people's feelings. A full moon, above all. But lightning or a rainbow too. Polar lights, it seems, induce

euphoria. I don't know what the thunderstorm did to Billie, but she suddenly seemed miles away, as if she was listening to voices I could not hear. She seemed older. In the shimmering light the storm cast into the shed, I now saw an attractive, young, sorrowful woman. This afternoon I had told her off as if she were a child. Perhaps I had been wrong.

I said that maybe we should go home when the weather cleared and asked if she would agree. I said enough is enough. I tried to make it sound determined and convincing.

To my surprise, she nodded.

'I had a really good time, Uncle Lex. Thank you. Can I take the bird home? Please?'

She said thank you. That says enough, doesn't it?

I told her that it was likely to be a Northern Gannet, which would possibly be better off in the polder. At sea was where it really belonged.

Billie carefully lifted the gannet up from her lap, put it on the ground and released him from my jacket. Quietly whining, the bird dragged itself to a corner of the shed, where it stayed.

'Yes,' said Billie, 'you make yourself comfortable there, boy. You're perfectly safe over there.'

I wanted to put my arm around her shoulder and hold her tight. There was no reason to be scared. I asked her why she had run away.

'There is no one,' Billie said, 'no one there who understands me.'

Aha. I asked her what she would've liked them to understand.

She spread her arms, turned her hands towards the floor, then lifted them up as if to catch something that would fall from the sky. 'There has to be a place where others like me live, right? I don't want to become anything, you know, I want to be something. I don't want to sing for them, not for other people. I want to live and sing and dance with others, with people like me. But everyone just keeps talking about work.'

So young, and yet so wise. A remarkable girl indeed.

I asked if she meant the wandering choir, from her song.

'Yes,' said Billie. Shyly she shrugged her shoulders.

'Do you think it's weird? Of course it's stupid, that wandering choir, but wouldn't it be amazing if it existed? I'd hate to be alone forever.'

I remained silent.

The rain became heavier and now each flash of lightning was almost instantly followed by a violent explosion of dark sound. I tried to remember how it worked with the lightning and the thunder, tried to work out whether we were safe here or not. Our shed was not very tall. I could not sit up

straight without bumping my head, but nevertheless this was the highest point in that vast green field in which we had been wandering around for hours – and still are.

Such a lot of water. It seemed as if the sea had decided to reclaim a piece of land.

Billie stood up. The top of her cap touched the roof, she was hopping from one leg to the other.

I thought she was cold, although I could hardly believe it, as it was hot and sultry still. I imagined what the meadows would smell like once the rain had stopped and the sun was drying the grass. I imagined how we'd walk through them, hand in hand, heading home, everything carefree and new.

What a ridiculous thought, in retrospect, when you see me walking here, her limp body in my arms, the red scratches in her neck.

'I want to dance!' Billie suddenly shouted. 'I want to da-ha-hance!'

And before I realized, she ran out into the rain and started jumping, swinging around her skinny arms while her tinkling young girl's voice threw sounds I could make no sense of into the sky like confetti. After each lightning and thunderclap she stretched out her arms, flapping her hands and yelled: 'Woohooohoo!'

Extraordinary.

She was challenging the storm. Why? They too will ask this question. Why? It'll be a difficult moment. It'll be my word against the image they'll have of me. It'll be the facts as they presented themselves to me against that intangible, shimmering cloud of suspicions and reproaches in their ears, which will stop them from properly listening to anything I say. But I must and I shall be honest. Regardless of the consequences.

Within a few seconds she was soaked. Her hair stuck to her forehead, her top became the colour of her skin. She put her hands together and raised them above her head, her arms entangled like two snakes. She moved her hips in small circles, like a belly dancer. I thought it was inappropriate. I wanted to call her back in, but she wouldn't listen, she had her eyes shut and was letting the water run across her body as if it were a warm shower.

And I sat there, in my shirt - my jacket was lying on the ground - I was sweaty and tired and I looked at her like she was something – and I curse myself for the way I have to describe her now – something I wanted to have.

Part 5, chapter 4

Billie was ecstatic. Rain and mud were splashing on her trousers and top every time her feet touched the grass. She was twisting like a mountain stream, her hands, like fish, were gliding across her face and down her small bosom and smooth tummy, across her thighs towards her feet until she sat close to the ground curled up like a hedgehog only to jump up again, spreading her arms and legs, stretching her body as far as she could. She seemed suspended in the air for minutes, carried by the wind and the rain – and she sang. She sang as loud as she could, with the high-pitched sound of a siren and when she landed, light as a feather on the green waves, she clenched

her fists and started marching like a soldier, lifting her knees up high, up and down in front of the shed in which I was still standing, paralyzed and frozen.

Then she ran away and vanished from my sight. I hesitated, not sure whether or not I should go and look for her. But even before I'd reached a decision, she reappeared on the other side and hurled past me. Drops were splashing from her sneakers, landed on my shoulders and face. It's bizarre which details I remember out of everything that happened. I touched my nose, scooped up a drop with my finger and put it in my mouth.

'Hey! Mahatsuko!'

That's when she shouted it.

She had walked another round, and another one. She was circling around the shed like a planet orbiting around the sun, her voice was spinning through my mind and I didn't understand what she was calling, her cries faded and became louder again. She was properly shouting. The next time she appeared, she didn't walk on, but threw herself upon me like a feral cat, she really did, she hugged me, screaming with laughter, she got me soaking wet and I didn't dare to move, I stood still as a pillar and let her touch me, I felt the warmth of her body and the coolness of the water running from her clothes into mine.

They have to believe me. I have nothing else to tell except what happened. I'm not there yet though.

'Hug!' Billy called. Yes. 'Hug!' And she took my hands and put them over her shoulders. I let her, I never should have, but that's how it went and that's how we stood there: a fiery angel embracing a statue.

It was a bizarre moment. A nervous tingling spread across my body like some vague memory. I started to breathe heavily. I realized what was happening and I swear: I tried to think of other things. Books I've read, whether I had any cigarettes left, the ugly old women in my block, that wrinkled Belgian national football team manager from ages ago, what's his name – Guy Thys!

It didn't help.

I'm not a statue, I'm a human being.

Everything inside me was alive and clinging to me was a girl, a young, wet woman and she too must have felt it; her head was lying on my chest, her belly was pressing against my crotch. It was embarrassing.

'Hey! Mahatsuko!' She called again. But why? Then she pushed herself away from me, stared at me with large eyes and ran back into the deluge, screaming and laughing, further and further away, much further than before. The rain pulled up a screen that made her body fade slowly, she seemed hundreds of yards away when suddenly the sky split in two. A blinding light set fire to the fields and transformed Billie into a pitch-black silhouette.

I squeezed my eyes shut, bewildered by what was happening and what had happened. I put my hands in front of my face, but it didn't make any difference – the light penetrated my skin and drew red spots inside my eyelids, hard, raging fireballs exploding in a furious bang, too loud for human ears to grasp.

When I opened my eyes again, I was lying on the ground. Rain was falling, softly and soothing.

The gannet crept out of its corner and shuffled to the open side of the shed. I got up with great difficulty and walked towards the place where I had last seen Billie. The bird followed me. There was a strange echo in the air, a trembling whistle like a lost satellite searching for the right frequency.

I still wonder what it is, a Mahatsuko.

A bit further, Billie was lying on the ground - like a rag. That image has come back to me all this time I've been walking here, through these godforsaken polders, carrying this rag in my arms.