

storms

Maaïke Neuville

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Translator Quaid Cey

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Dear reader,

With this note I would like to offer you a few points of entry into the text you are about to read.

The story revolves around two characters living in two different times: Abbie and Therese. Abbie is a film actress in the present day, who plays the role of Therese Mae Smith, an early twentieth-century Irish writer, in a film about her tragic life. Therese drowned herself at the age of thirty-eight. Playing this troubled woman - an orphan, an unrecognised writer, a patient in an asylum, and a mother-forces Abbie to confront her own mother's suicide, as well as her fear of becoming as mentally unstable as her mother.

Throughout the novel, as well as in this fragment, the storylines of Abbie and Therese alternate. This excerpt opens with an entry of Therese's diary in which she feverishly recalls an intimate encounter with Molly, a novice at the monastery where Therese lives. She also mentions sister Helen, the Mother Superior. These entries are dated 1910. In the mean time, in the present day, Abbie is preparing for the first reading of the filmscript. As a source of inspiration, she is reading a volume of selections from Therese Mae Smith's diaries, entitled 'The Storms'. So when that title appears in Abbie's storyline, this is the book she is referring to.

The difference in style will help you to distinguish Abbie's voice from Therese's.

'storms' is a deep dive into the inner worlds of two women, two mothers, two daughters, two artists: one who takes her own life, and the other who is left behind after her mother chooses to die. The novel does not seek to provide a resolution to these complex matters. Instead, it sheds light on their many different facets, offering a kaleidoscopic reflection on motherhood, mental health, death and the life of an artist across the centuries.

Enjoy the reading.

Warm greetings,

Maaïke Neuville

This is everything.

I want to feel you, she said, and came to sit on my lap. The raindrops were shards of broken glass beating relentlessly against the window. If this is the end, Molly whispered in my ear. But the rest of her sentence disappeared in a deafening roar of thunder as the room was lit up by a flash of lightning. Our naked torsos intertwined, and I couldn't imagine Helen's divine union in any other way than Molly's hands gliding over my feverish skin. And still, there was something, something that couldn't be said. A ghost between us.

Our lips touched, I held her face in both hands and searched her eyes for irrefutable evidence that this, this lovemaking, this loving, this stormy simplicity, wasn't a dream. The only evidence I have now, now that she's disappeared again, is the watery purple stain beside me, left by the plum pie Molly squashed with her knee. When we heard footsteps and shouting in the hallway of the convent, which normally bathed in silence at that hour, Molly threw on her slip and apron and quickly covered me up. Your temperature still hasn't gone down, Sister. I'm glad I came to check on you.

And just as swiftly as she'd weaseled her way into my room, she vanished through the door, leaving me behind, agape, gasping for breath, unlocked, an irreversible O

In my life, Molly is the difference between believing in something and not believing, she's the difference between air charged with tension and air without hope, she's the difference between living with passion, reading with passion, writing with passion, and not doing any of those things, she's the difference between sense and nonsense, between mysticism and a flat, straight line, and it has to do with desire, the fulfillment of a long-held wish, the preparation of soil for seedlings. Growth has to do with attention, passionate action has to do with desire, a meaningful experience has to do with lust, lust for what you can never quite have, I think I understand Helen's love of God better now, our sin has made me a devout believer, and just as humble, that too. How sensual, how visceral – there's no resisting it, I want to tear my heart open – that desire for what is already gone.

But here comes darkness. Because now that she's felt me, it's over, this year-long pact, yes, the circle is complete. O. I've been touched and she will survive this, but I won't, that's what I really see when I let go of all the metaphors. She won't desire me anymore, she'll go on pretending for a while that she does, but her interest will wane, my skin will no longer draw her in the way it used to, before she came to my room. She'll see me as I am: Therese, unimportantly pale, with drooping breasts. She'll tire of me like a chapter she's read too many times. (No more metaphors, T, only the naked truth from now on.)

* * *

We meet in le taureau, the bar that still carries the same name it had twenty years ago, when it was our favorite hangout. It's just as dingy as before, the barstools have been replaced, but the stench of beer and urine has found its way effortlessly into the cushions of the new ones. The second I walk in, a knot in my stomach cuts my thoughts off from any physical sensation.

I greet my old classmates enthusiastically and thank Carl for reuniting us, twenty years after we graduated from theater school, but it's like I'm right back in that haze, the haze in which I had fought my way through my entire school career. I didn't belong to the world. The world didn't even unfold around me. There were things and experiences. And none of them were connected. There was alcohol, lots of it, there was loud laughter that didn't sound joyful, there was a mother who sat in the first row at every performance but otherwise paid no attention to me, there was going out, black

holes with sharp edges that made themselves felt when you racked your brain trying to remember what had happened the night before, so you stopped trying, fewer headaches. There were men. I was the only woman in our year, and there was almost no one who wasn't in love with me. Except for Boris B. So I wanted him.

I try to concentrate on Carl, who wants to know what her name was again, my daughter's, and how she's doing, and because I don't feel like pretending that my life is a walk in the park, and because Carl's always been the only one in the group who could really listen, I tell him about my postpartum depression and how I was admitted to a psychiatric clinic. Carl gives me a pitying look. He reminds me of Roman. I tell him that ending up in a place like that was always my biggest fear, given my family situation, but that I think it saved my life and Lucy's. Meanwhile, I glance over at Boris B, who's talking about his latest role in a historical drama, a TV show, I don't know what about, something with soldiers. I'll never admit that I'm still waiting for him.

We sat at the same exact table after our performance of *Caligula* in our third year. Not Boris B, though, Boris B sat at the bar. I saw him when I came back from the bathroom. He wasn't alone. Everyone raved about Cat that night, about how nice it was to see a mother at a bar with her daughter. I drank it away, pint after pint, all my frustration at the fact that the night revolved around her and not me. Cat had the ability to draw everyone's attention in making herself as invisible as possible. And of course Boris B's existential darkness found a companion in the enigmatic Cat. When I walked past them and opened the door to drift through the streets in the only way fitting for a humiliated twenty-something with a broken heart, Boris B's hand was on Cat's thigh.

* * *

Diary, tell me, who else can I ask, am I losing my mind? What am I seeing and what do I only think I'm seeing?

This morning – I can't stop thinking about Molly, the wave of warm, charged particles moving through my chest like a tornado sucking everything toward it, so I had to, I rolled over onto my belly, I needed something between my legs now that Molly was gone, I did it quickly, like there was a corner someone might walk out from behind, I pulled up my skirt and bunched up the blanket, it scratched my bare thighs and I rubbed against it, my fever seemed to come back, blood rushed to my cheeks, Molly's perfect neck, I bit into it, I bit into my pillow, I opened my mouth, licked my lips, and something nameless sprang open deep inside me, it spread through my stomach and breathed through me. It all happened in a matter of seconds and then Sister Helen knocked on my door! I tried to compose myself, but she must have seen my blushing cheeks, and the blanket too, no blushing or disarray ever escapes her. Helen, with her square face, her broad chin, her piercing eyes that bore straight through you on the hunt for weakness, it seemed as if she understood everything in just one second. She gave me stern orders to join the charity fair, it was high time that all this negligent behavior since my sickness finally came to an end.

And when she addressed us all at the opening of the fair, she talked about how bitter the bad weather is for the disabled and the poor, about the rich who boast of their possessions while businesses are suffering and there's no relief for the poor in the workhouses. She reminded us of the gift we cultivate here, the gift of self-knowledge. Self-love, on the other hand, she warned us, is the source of the bitterness that arises from all our trials and tribulations, and when she said that word, self-love, she looked right at me, I'm sure of it! But, she added, it's in selflessness and joy that we relieve ourselves of our tasks, a plum pie brings joy. And you can bet that when Sister Madeleine brought the pie, Helen's eyes went straight to Molly. Molly, who hasn't even looked at me in days. And Sister Bethany, forever trying to win Helen's favor, and always on the lookout for any violation of the order she can report to Mother Superior, looked at me like she knew something, what does she

know? She's treated me with hostility ever since I set foot in the convent, I can tell she's envious of my privileged position in the vegetable garden. Helen recognized as soon as I arrived that the walls of this place would be an insurmountable barrier for me and was merciful enough to let me work in the garden alongside Martin, but Sister Bethany can't stand it, and she'll take any excuse she can get to expose me so that I'll fall out of Helen's good graces. What does she know? What does Sister Helen know? And why won't Molly look at me anymore? Help me.

* * *

"May I speak to her, please?"

It's quiet on the other end of the line and I'm in a bad mood. I wanted to read today. Tonight is the first read-through of the script I still haven't received. Antonio wants us to discover it together. So I decided to dwell a while longer on Therese's diary. Self-care was the plan. First a swim. Then coffee, feet on the table, *the storms* on my knees, taking a photo of the book with a filter and the caption "Something's cooking," posting it, feeling alive. Or at least giving other people the feeling that I have a life and maybe starting to believe it myself, since they do.

I look outside while the secretary whose name I still don't know after five years says that she can't step away from her desk, and that I can trust her, "your child is sick." I see an ambulance on the other side of the street, lights on, parked diagonally across the sidewalk. Flashing lights with no sound, they do something to me. The absence of the sirens can mean one of two things: it's nothing serious, or it's already too late. In my imagination, it's always too late.

"Okay, well what does she have?"

"She says her stomach hurts."

"She says that every other day. Sometimes she just doesn't want to be at school. If you'd just let me sp—"

"Sorry, Mrs., uh, Delange, but I need to get to a meeting."

"I thought you couldn't leave your desk?"

"Someone's filling in for – could you please just come pick your daughter up? Then you can discuss with a doctor whether her stomachache is legitimate or not."

"I'd prefer to discuss it with my daughter directly. On the phone."

"I don't have time for this."

"Neither do I."

There's still nothing happening on the other side of the street. The blue light reflects off of the cars parked nearby. It's too late. The old man is dead. Or the young woman overdosed. Or the drug dealer was murdered. Or the mother drowned.

"Can't your husband come pick her up?"

"My husband has a job."

"What about you?"

I look at the book in my hand.

"I – I already told you. I know my daughter. If I dropped everything to lay her down on the couch and tuck her under a blanket every time she had a stomachache, I wouldn't have a life of my own."

It goes quiet on the other end of the line again. What other weapons does this secretary woman have at her disposal? I'll call her Secretia.

"I read once," Secretia starts, surprising me with a completely different tone from the impatient one she's used to answer my questions until now, "that sometimes we, as parents, have to go along with the things our kids tell us, even if we're sure that they're lying. We have to set aside our desire for the truth and let them be in charge."

* * *

Lucy is tucked under a blanket on the couch. She reaches an arm out to me, looking like the saddest puppy dog at the shelter.

“I’m already feeling a little bit better, Mom.”

“That’s good, Lu.”

“Can I have a piece of candy?”

“First an apple, Princess Bellyache.”

“I’m not a princess.”

“I don’t know, Secretia said I should let you be in charge.”

“Who’s Secretia?”

“A friend.”

“But princesses don’t get to be in charge.”

“They don’t?”

“No. Kings do.”

“What about queens?”

“Only when there’s no one else.”

“Really?”

“Yeah, like if the king dies of starvation, and all the ministers too, and all the mayors.”

“Because no one will give them any candy?”

“Yeah, exactly. Mom?”

“Yeah?”

“I don’t feel happy.”

The flashing lights have gone off.

The silence is deafening.

The mother drowned.