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180° Meer

180° Sea

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Tim's shoes are in the hall outside my flat. Tied together with a neat bow. That's what Tim does. What he's done ever since he first learnt to tie a bow. Having finally learned, at the age of nine, he saw no reason to tie his laces just when they were on his feet, and began tying them whether they were on his person or not. To each other. He does this with all his shoes. And with anything else which can be tied with a bow. The drawstrings on jogging bottoms and jackets, the braided cords on my hats. If it's not possible to do a bow, he ties things up some other way. He doesn't just fold pairs of socks up inside each other in pairs; he does it with gloves. When he undoes my bra he does it up again once it's off my body. He seems to like things to belong together. He feels uneasy if the plugs on electrical appliances aren't in a socket. In his world there is no reason for A, on the one side, which fits perfectly with B, on the other, not to take up this obvious chance. He likes to make pairs. If there are two flexible elements in each other's vicinity they should be connected. Ideally with a bow.

I slip my trainers off without undoing them and put them next to Tim's shoes, which are done up, in a bow, but not to each other. It's entirely possible that Tim will remedy this situation later.

In my flat it smells of würost-riced. Tim has made supper. Several hours ago judging by the smell of cold fat.

'Hi.'

'Hi. Your mother called.' Tim is sitting on the bed leafing through a photography magazine. He only looks up for a second.

'Called you?'

'Yes. I said you were working and you'd call back.'

My stomach flares up, and for a second I'm afraid I'm going to throw up traces of Andreas' semen, which makes me panic, because this is not the place for Andreas. This is a me-place. Outsiders do not belong here. So I swallow and rinse my mouth with water from the tap.

The fire in my stomach hasn't stopped burning. It's become a tight ball in my belly, pressing hot against my ribs.

'Why did you say I'd call back?' I ask Tim sharply.

My tone makes him look up in surprise. He looks hurt, but pulls rights himself and answers with a shrug, 'What else am I supposed to say? That you hate her and she should fuck off out of your life?'

'Yes.'

Tim makes vague effort to smile at what is, on the face of it, a joke, then goes back to his magazine.

'How was it in the bar?' he asks once we've both taken a few deep breaths. Things haven't got off to a good start, now he's looking for a way to tie a bow.

'Shit.'

Tim sighs, gives up, and reties the knot on his hoody.

He would love to say that I should quit if it's as bad as all that. That I really don't need the money and I should do something which does me good instead. Reward myself, go travelling for

instance. But Tim knows that this discussion would ruin the evening, just as the discussion about my mother would, so instead he gets up to reheat the würost-rice for me.

Würost-rice is the only thing we can cook. And it's a joint invention: rice, baby würost and onions, fried; curry powder, cayenne pepper and ketchup. All our favourite ingredients mixed up in one pan.

I take my ghastly red dress off. Actually it's not that ghastly, the dress, but it counts as work clothing and must be removed forthwith. I replace it with a desultory greatest hits of the clothes lying about. This lands me in printed leggings, one of Tim's vests, and a poplin windcheater. I banish my hair under my *chullo*, but then change my mind and put a baseball cap on, otherwise Tim will want to tie the cords dangling from the earflaps into a bow under my chin. While Tim swirls the würost-rice round in the pan in silence, I sit with my back to him at the tiny table in my tiny flat and watch him in the mirror. The hot ball in my stomach is still raging thanks to my mother, but it's briefly submerged under a wave of self-hatred. I'm sitting here, watching my boyfriend cooking in reflected slivers. Why couldn't I change position and look straight at him. Touch him even. We didn't so much as kiss when I came in, I realise. Monika came between us after the first 'hi.' And then lots of loose ends, which couldn't be tied into bows, and now I'm sitting with my back to Tim, as if I'm being punished, staring at him secretively. He probably feels he's being punished too, I think, and get angrier still. Tim shouldn't be punished. Tim hasn't earned it. Tim should be loved. He's the only person in my life I really like to be with, can bear to be with.

I breathe in, ready to say something which will make that clear, but having opened my mouth, it freezes mute, and I just continue breathing.

'Here. Might be too much ketchup, not sure,' Tim says, and puts a plate in front of me. I say thanks and wait till he sits down. Only then do I start pressing the rice flat onto the plate with the fork, till it looks like an unappetising pizza. It's a ritual I observe automatically, although I'm not hungry. When the rice has been flattened you can lift it up in small, firm chunks with the fork. I squash my supper for what seems like an eternity. I can't eat now, I'm too angry about Monika's call, and me, and Daniel and me, and Andreas and me. And me. I'm always angry. How difficult that must be. Is.

Although Tim is now sitting opposite me, I continue to watch him in the mirror. This time all I can see is his back. And my face. Although I can only see the lower half because of the baseball cap, I look tough. The visible half of my face looks like it's made of wax. Not nice, I think, and concentrate again on Tim's back in the mirror.

'Everything okay?' he asks. 'Would you rather be on your own? I can go.'

'No, please stay. I'll pull myself together in a minute,' I say to Tim's back in the mirror, then risk a quick look at his face, as if my eyes are making a brief detour on their way back to the plate, where my food is waiting, flat and sorry, to be broken at long last into chunks.

Later we lie in my narrow bed and hug. I needed an hour and a half to relax sufficiently. While Tim washed up and returned to leafing through magazines I spent ninety minutes in the bath calming down. Chipping off the ugly façade I present to the world outside. Now I feel dusty and tired, but I'm in the here and now – enough to be hugged. We lie still and inhale body odours. Tim has always smelled unusually neutral. He never uses deodorant or aftershave and mostly has a slight smell of soap and human being. I like that a lot, because I always have to make an effort to catch any smell at all. So I slide my face deeper into his armpit till I actually find some sweat. I like armpits. I like the way they are like little caves you have to crawl into to find things. For me they are the most intimate areas of the human body. Or are they parts in their own right? Probably not. An armpit is not something you can clearly define, cut off and place in freezer bags. Not a part, then; an area.

Tim is breathing in my hair. Probably his face has disappeared entirely in the chaos on my head. Or maybe he looks as if he has grown a thick beard. My eyes search for the mirror to see if I can check, but this time the angle is wrong so I stay in the safety of my armpit and inhale.

'Can I ask you something?' Tim says.

'Please don't,' I murmur into the armpit.

I do not want to talk. Questions like that lead into discussing problems. I don't want problems. Don't want discussion. Don't want listen to someone else's position then defend my own. Don't want a supposedly solution-orientated discussion about a purported problem which will just be stirred up, not solved. I don't want to solve problems. Not on an interpersonal level. They shouldn't exist in the first place. Why can't there be nothing but love between people? Unconditional love, rising above conflicts. Why do we have to talk, express needs, exchange views? If we work on the understanding that everything is as it is anyway, and that it's not possible to change human character, behaviour or needs more than five percent at the most, we could cut out this stage, however popular it remains, and come to terms with things as they in fact are. No self-analysis, none of this constant self-monitoring. No searching for the moderate middle way. None of this constant reflecting and empathizing. Just all or nothing, love or hate. I have an abundance of both in me. Why isn't that enough? Why do we have to talk and change things and make an effort? Let's grab what's available and move on if it's not enough. Love or hatred. Simple.

'Where have you been recently?' Tim ignores my wish. 'I don't mean physically of course. More... I don't know... your head, your heart, *you*. Where do you go the whole time?'

'I'm right here. In your armpit.' I try evasion.

Tim ignores my silly answer, delivered in a babyish voice, and perseveres. 'You're hardly ever here, somehow. I mean of course you're here, but half the time you're here and yet somewhere else entirely. Or here but someone else entirely.' I can tell Tim is annoyed that it sounds so clichéd, this observation, people being physically present but somewhere else in their minds. But he can't find a better description, and he doesn't need to; it's not like I don't know what he means.

So I open my eyes, my lashes brushing Tim's armpit hairs, and I pause for one last moment before sliding from the safety of my warm cave. This is probably what it feels like to be born. You are forced to exchange a familiar, warm, confined space for an alien, cold, wide-open one. Ghastly.

I don't want to reply. Tim's need to have this discussion has made alarm bells ring. My wall, which everyone including Tim comes up against, rises slowly but steadily. I can actually hear faint creaks and groans. I feel attacked already, endangered. But I want to stay in the moment. This strange state of contentment and love. No thoughts, just a warm armpit. It's enough for me. But not for Tim.

'Then let me put it another way,' he persists. Now he can hear the wall shooting up around me too, but he can't stop. 'Are you happy?'

The wall between us clicks shut, with one last small sound. Tim has no chance now. I will hurt him. I will hate him for disrupting my contentment with a totally superfluous problem-discussion, and I will hate myself for hating him. I wish I could get into the same vicious circles with love.

'I don't believe in happiness as a persistent state,' I say, and have to make a real effort to make sure he doesn't notice how angry I'm getting.

Tim thinks about this, nods thoughtfully, but it still isn't enough for him, so he adds, 'well are you content at least?'

For a moment I'm able to see through my wall, and smell Tim's würost breath, able to think about this nice, complex quest for his smell each evening, my satisfaction when I locate it, in his most secret place, and I think yes, I'm content. But only here, under your arm and my duvet, within my four walls. The two of us together in our various caves within caves. I'm the smallest of a set of Russian dolls, encased within three small caves, and here inside I feel something approaching contentment. But outside is a world I cannot stand. In which my mother and everyone else are only interested in themselves, where everyone wears a mask and wants attention. A world where you are expected to show empathy and make an effort for other people's sakes. A world in which I don't seem to function, where I can't stand anyone, myself included.

'No,' I say.

Just occasionally, when I'm in that rare state between rage and contentment, more or less neutral, in other words, I allow myself to think about myself. I go very slowly back through my life, recapping like someone who has lost their keys at some point that day, to see if there were moments when I

was different. More generous, less callous. Have there been moments when I felt good? What has put me at ease? I walk and walk, looking from side to side, but find nothing.

Throughout my life, basically, I have only ever been relaxed when I was away. Away from home, away from my mother, away from problems, or people with problems.

As a child I always felt most at ease at my grandparents'. They were the only people who didn't want anything from me. I remember the way my grandma lay next to me during our afternoon naps and showed me how our breathing synchronised as if by magic when we lay very close together. I never believed it was true, as secretly I would adjust my breathing to hers anyway, because it was such a lovely feeling, as if grandma and I were one person with a double helping of everything: two heads, four arms and legs, but one breath. And one breath meant just one person. For as long as the nap lasted I wasn't me, I was my grandma – a gentle, warm woman who loved and comforted her grandchild and let her be a child.

At home I was something else. At home I was the man in the family, a responsibility it was only right I had to bear, as it was my fault the real man of the family was no longer there. I remember my grandma saying quietly to my grandpa that the child wasn't enough like a child, that since her mother and father had split up her mother had stopped treating her like a child and was treating her like a therapist. I didn't know what a therapist was, but I felt incredibly guilty.

When my father once picked me up from the kindergarten with another woman on his arm, I told my mother. I found it exciting. How nice it was of my father, I thought, who was otherwise so distant, that he didn't just love my mother, he also loved this friendly woman. I liked this man, who displayed his love. Who he loved barely mattered; this loving face looked good on him. It made him gentler. My mother didn't see it that way, and I realised I'd made a mistake.

At supper few months later, just before my first day at school, she asked me if I thought she should divorce my father. I said a definite no. But she did it. She told my grandma I had insisted. 'And if that's what the child wants, you shouldn't ignore it.'

So I split my parents up twice. I thought that whatever this therapist person does, if they stop any more terrible things happening, if they always wait till mummy's coffee has cooled down slightly before giving it to her, so she doesn't deliberately scald herself, then a therapist is what I am. I take care, avert harm, keep secrets to myself. In the worst phases of my mother's 'sadness' ('Don't worry, Julie dear, your old mum's fine. She's just very sad!'), when she took so many tranquilizers she was too drowsy to make it to the toilet, I would wash her bedsheet and hang it on the balcony to dry. When the neighbours on the next balcony eyed the sheet and asked if I wasn't a bit old for bedwetting, I would say a quiet 'yes' and feel ashamed, as if it had been my urine staining the floral print. I gave nothing away. I would never give anything away. After all, mummy only had me now. That was what she always said. 'Oh darling, you are all I have now!' Sometimes, depending how sad my mother was, how many obstacles life was placing in her way, she would add the sentence, 'If I didn't have you, I would do myself in.'

So I took care that my mother didn't do herself in. And although for a long while I didn't know exactly what that meant, I knew it couldn't be allowed to happen. And that sole responsibility lay with me. So I made sure it didn't happen.