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# The Same and Something Completely Different

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*All summer I'd lain pregnant on the bed thinking that now, now, now I had to write that book, now, well knowing that this now was always going to be postponed, sudden illness, poor excuses, anxiety. I've got a drawer full of beginnings, I've written so many different versions I no longer know what's what. I've got just as many forewords. The latest one, written only in my head, goes like this: Don't panic, people, it's 50% auto, 50% fiction. A foreword that's already crossed out and scribbled over, a voice saying over and over again: It's a novel, a novel, a novel. I've got a drawer full of beginnings, a head full of forewords, and why would it work out this time? Why?*

*All summer I'd been thinking: And what if the book actually did get written, what publishers would you give it to? What person would you entrust it to? Who are you going to give your heart? So then all I could think about was that instead of how I was going to get it written, it had been yet another distraction, and still I lay on the bed thinking: no more distractions.*

*All summer I'd been in doubt and it felt like it was going to be too hard, to go into all that, those two phone calls that changed my life, and I told my husband, it feels like it's going to be "too hard".*

*My words dangled in the air between us.*

*We were in Sweden.*

*'Besides, I don't think I can,' I said. 'Not without my life coming apart.'*

*I explained that writing has a nasty habit of kicking you back in the most unpredictable of ways, that writing never comes cheap.*

*'I don't think I can,' I repeated. 'It'll be the most difficult book I've ever written.'*

*But my husband just laughed and said if it wasn't difficult there wouldn't be much point.*

*'Anyway, how do you actually know it'll be difficult?' he said. 'Haven't you always said it's impossible to predict how a book's going to come together?'*

*We were lying beside each other in bed, our house was surrounded by lustrous, green woodland, and my husband said it would probably be better for me to write the book than to go around with it inside me, unreleased.*

*'But what if my life comes apart?' I said.*

*'Then we'll put it together again,' he said. 'It's just a book.'*

*Just a book.*

*That's the safeguard I need, it occurs to me: It's not life and death, it's just a book. A writer needs to be able to safeguard themselves against their own book, that's the way I look at it. The book is like a child, forcefully, painfully finding its way into life, and the mother, the grown-up, needs to be able to stand firm and give it some boundaries and a sense of direction.*

*Or what?*

*It's a lie, of course. If I ever even get close to the true scope of my subject, it won't be just a book. It'll feel more like life and death, not life and death in the physical sense, but life and death as in what's alive inside me and what isn't.*

1.

The phone rings insistently and I wake up from deep inside a dream. It's 1988, and Anne's room, which I'm renting while she's in Nicaragua, is so small that I can't open the door without it banging against the bed. I'm annoyed at being woken and pass, fuming, hurriedly, through the kitchen and down a long hall into the living room where a grey rotary phone is ringing, chiming, insisting.

I curtail the sound, lifting the receiver.

It's a friend of Anne's mother.

'Are you sitting down?' she asks.

'No, why?' I reply. 'What's the matter?'

'Anne's dead,' she says.

'What?' I say.

'She's been shot,' the woman says.

I go back to my room, bang the door against the bed. I close my eyes, sit down on the bed, try to understand what's happened. I pace up and down the hall, decide to go into town, to the communist newspaper *Land & Folk*, to the secretariat of Communist Youth of Denmark, maybe somebody there will know something. I bike in, to the Communist party headquarters on Dronningens Tværgade, field questions from the reporters. I bike home again, the others who live in the flat come home too. I can't stay. They know Anne and they don't know her, not the way I do. I can't, won't sit and drink tea with them. But I can't and won't visit Anne's mother, instead I travel to a meaningless seminar in Svendborg, the world goes on, and does not, the world goes on and on, everything has stopped, everything is displaced.

I come home from Svendborg, and eventually I go up to Lyngby, to Anne's mother's, for a while I'm nowhere, I'm staring out of the grimy train windows. I've got the feeling of having lost something that can't be replaced, of needing to live my life with more intensity, at twice the speed. I take the bus out to Anne's childhood home, I arrive at Anne's house. How can a person stand in front of such a door? I can't understand it, I don't know the door, and I know it, of course, I know it from before, I've come to see Anne lots of times. I stand in front of the door. I knock, I don't know what to do with the thought of touching someone, Anne's mother, death can be catching.

There's a constant toing and froing of people, in and out of the house. People making tea and coffee, sitting down, standing up, making cheese sandwiches. Do you want some tea? Do you want some coffee? What are you supposed to answer? What are you supposed to say? What *can* you say? People drink coffee and tea in mechanical ways, utter platitudes, uncertainties popping out. The tea's too hot, I burn my lips, it doesn't taste of anything. I look out into the garden where last summer we sat and applied to go to Nicaragua together. We wanted to support the revolution, help with the coffee harvest, of course we did, and we did too, it was my first big adventure in life. Anne fell in love and a year later went back to Nicaragua again. Anne's childhood home has a cosy feel to it, something to do with small potted plants and hessian on the walls, a sense of being looked after, tea cosies and that sort of thing. I go into her room behind the kitchen.

I feel like I'm overstepping a boundary, I'm standing in the middle of the room looking at her desk, an old school photo on the notice board. I've slept here

lots of times, and it feels as if she's still here. It feels as if I'm in her room without permission. I'm standing in the middle of the room and I'm not crying, because I feel no grief, I can't understand what's happened, I'm still uncertain as to what's happened, death speaks a language I don't know and don't understand.

I come to think of some of the many times I've slept here. I remember there was always clean, fragrant linen, how Anne's mother would help make a bed up, the way she was there and yet not, the way she withdrew so we could be on our own. It was all so proper, so relaxed, Anne's father who'd be at a meeting, Anne's mother who'd be in the garden. Not like at ours, where a person could make up their own bed, for crying out loud.

I hear a kerfuffle in the kitchen and people coming back in, I don't know where they've been, but again they're making tea, making coffee, making sandwiches, helping. Everyone wants to help, but no one knows how, I don't know how to help anyone, how to behave. Suddenly someone laughs and it's a release, oxygen to the blood. And then there are the practicalities. They're waiting for news from Nicaragua. How are they going to bring Anne home? What state is she in? And where are Anne's parents? Have they broken down, do they still exist? Or have they just gone into a room? Are they still able to function, to breathe, to live, to die, or are they gone? Did they disappear along with the phone call: Your only child is dead, gunned down on an open street in Nicaragua. Who survives such a thing? Who takes such a thing in? Who can take such a thing in? Maybe that's why we're all clinging to the practicalities, what about the funeral, where's it going to be, who's to be invited, who's going to say a few words, can Anne be brought back in time? And is it true she's going to be embalmed? Is she going to be left on her own in a freezing cargo hold all the way over the Atlantic?

Reports say she was killed during an armed robbery, they say the robbers shot because they were scared. But scared of what? They've already held a memorial service over there. Nicaragua's president was even in attendance.

Anne's cousin hands me a baby and I fall asleep with it on my stomach, in the middle of the living room, I go for a walk with Anne's mother and I don't know if she's looking after me or I'm looking after her. She's so small, her hair curls in a vulnerable way, she reminds me of a furry animal, a small furry animal that someone has hit very, very hard. We go through woods, and if it really is true that Anne is dead, who's going to write in her hand, Anne's own special handwriting? Who can take on that task? Who can take on the task of being Anne?

2.

All at once Anne's body has arrived and we're going up to see her. She's been transported across the Atlantic in a military aircraft and lies now in a dim room in the chapel of rest, sort of half in darkness. She looks different, the boundary between herself and the world around her is in dissolution, she's been embalmed, her eyes aren't properly closed, or are they? Maybe it's the boundary between life and death that I'm looking at when I stare at her the way I do, maybe that boundary is dissolving, her skin, I sit very still and look at her eyes, eyes of glass. Abruptly I have to leave the room, I can't stand to be so close to it, I can't breathe. I go back to the house with the others, Maria has come, Maria who was with Anne in Nicaragua when it happened. You two have never liked each other, someone's mother tells me, and it's true we never have, but what does she know about it? And what business is it of hers?

Anyone who wants is welcome to say a few words at the funeral, and we gather together, a small number of friends, in a bedroom, but what do you say, who'll say what, and why? It's difficult, and eventually we agree that we can't all say a few words, that only one of us will speak, and that person is me, and what do I say?

I'm staying with my mother at the other end of Lyngby, listening to Madonna's *La Isla Bonita* and speaking on the phone every day with my father, who lives in an old farmhouse outside Skælskør, house and farm buildings around a cobbled yard. They got divorced when I was thirteen. I tell him I'm writing a few words for Anne, that I'm saying she was an inquisitive person, a good friend, and I speak to my cousin too, only I don't know what I say to her. I'm used to saying a few words, rising to my feet, chinking my glass for attention, tapping the mic in the school hall, at a demo, but I'm not used to this, to saying a few words in the same room as someone who is dead. I'm petrified, and my brain makes the connection that if I rise to my feet to say a few words for someone who is dead, then I will die myself.

At the funeral Anne's mother reads *To Youth* by Nordahl Grieg, we listen to a piece of Nicaraguan guitar music, *Nicaragua, Nicaragüita*. People cry audibly, but Anne's father sits quite still, tears run down his cheeks. The place is packed and I'm to get to my feet, and I do, only I feel I can't, I feel that the boundary between life and death falls open in front of me, and yet I do. I'm there and I'm not there, I can't, and then suddenly I stand up, force myself into saying my few words.

Afterwards there's a wake at our old school and all at once I'm unburdened, exuberant almost, because I survived, I'm alive. I'm happy too because that same morning I've been let off paying an 8,000 kroner telephone bill. The Chilean guy who'd been living with me in my flat before I moved into Anne's room had it seems been ringing his mother in Chile, at any rate the phone bill was huge all of a sudden and I've been trying to explain to the phone company that something wasn't right. In the meantime the Chilean guy has run off to Sweden and before I moved out the police came and conducted an illegal search of the flat, something to do with weapons, something to do with a bank robbery on Valby Langgade and him driving the getaway car.

3.

The next morning I travel down to my dad's. I tell him about the funeral, about the phone bill that's been waived. We've spoken every day on the phone since Anne died, but it's not the same as being together, talking properly together, and when the people who've been giving him a hand with a job over the weekend have at last gone home we sit in the kitchen and his girlfriend makes pancakes.

I expect us to talk about all the serious stuff that's happened, but my father keeps messing around trying to make me laugh, only I don't laugh, I get annoyed with him which is why he throws a pancake in my face and I reply by tossing a glass of squash in his face and his beard is dripping.

'Sorry, I wasn't thinking,' I say. 'It was a reflex,' I say, and my father laughs and says, no it wasn't, and he smiles, he knows me, and it's a release from everything. As yet, death has not taken hold of my body, as yet it is something outside of me, its disease has not spread, I can keep it down. My father knows me, and it's a release, but I feel too that he's avoiding the obvious. Because it could have been me, it could have been him, I could have been the girl who was dead, he could have been the father who was crying, but he won't talk about it, he'd rather try and make me laugh, throw pancakes in my face.

I don't know how I fall asleep.

In the morning I'm woken by my father saying goodybe, he's standing in the door, he comes over to the settee where I'm lying and have slept. I've slept with all my clothes on, and he gives me a kiss and whispers to me that there's some breakfast on the table. I'm still under the duvet, protecting myself with that extra layer, an extra layer of skin, no one can reach me now. I hear my father's car in the yard, tyres on cobbles. I fall asleep again and sleep myself to a place far away, a beach somewhere, and that place is completely still, the calm arrival of calm waves at a shore, the catastrophe is over now.

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*I'm in Sweden. Alone. I've got two boxes of old letters and diaries with me, I'm in writing mode, a little bit beside myself. I'm happy to finally be getting started, I've been waiting to get started on this book for as long as I remember. I'm happy that it's finally happening, and the kids will be phoning soon. I've got the best of both worlds, I tell myself, descending into the material with a feeling that the material is a pool I can climb out of whenever I want, first drip a bit on the edge and then climb out. I read, old letters and diaries, and am pulled further and further down, the past pulling me down, and I know that's how it's got to be, down, down, down.*

*The feeling comes back to me again of always having written to survive. Maybe all my books are infected with this wish to survive, maybe I've clung to my writing the way others cling to wreckage after a ship has sunk. Maybe I've been writing to make sure the ground is firm under my feet. But what now, now that I've survived? What now, now that I'm not dead, but have survived? Am I supposed to just carry on writing?*

*I walk in the forest and abruptly feel dejected, unhappy on behalf of all books, if a person can be unhappy that way, unhappy at the thought of even the smallest word, if a person can be unhappy that way, which probably they can't. Maybe I'm just fearful of this darkness into which I descend, I'm afraid my own story is going to pull me all the way down, and in a way I hope so too, I want to be whole again. I can already sense things shifting when I write about them, it's almost as if the writing comes to life, as if something is brought out into the open, wriggling and squirming and coming to life. I think of the writing as something being hatched before my eyes, I think of young birds, and lizards that suddenly scurry away, across the paper, alive in their own realities, then gone, into the forest, back to the forest.*

1.

Again I'm woken up by the phone ringing. I'm not in my room in the city's Østerbro quarter, I'm at my father's farmhouse. We buried Anne on Saturday and now it's Monday and I've slept in my clothes. This time I wake up at the first ring. I'm on my feet, a sudden upright projection in the middle of the room. I go, stagger, stumble into the kitchen where the phone is, I answer it, in my clothes.

'Hello?'

It's my mother. My mother says that my father hasn't turned up at work yet, it's almost ten o'clock and she just tried to call him there about something. She's heard on the radio that there's been a major train crash outside Sorø and do I know where he is? Did he leave for work? I look at the breakfast my father has left out for me, oatmeal and milk. I try phoning the police. They put me through and put me through, but I can't get through. I pick up the keys of the decommissioned postal van, I go outside, the cold air against my face, I drive off down the long gravel track and vanish like a dot and never come back, not as the same person.

I drive around between Sorø, Slagelse and Ringsted, I speak to different rescue workers and policemen. I remember at some point standing inside a police station and no one can tell me anything, I know nothing, they know nothing, and that's the worst thing, that they don't answer, can't answer, can't help, I feel like hitting someone.

I go to the hospital at Ringsted and the nurse promises to look for my father among the injured, the nurse is nice and kind and helpful, at last someone is listening to me, looking into my eyes, trying to help. I sit in a waiting area, I try to relax, steady my breathing, I tell myself that now at last I've come to the right place. In a short while she'll come out and tell me she's found him.

'Come with me,' she'll say. 'He's over here.'

Maybe he's broken his leg, maybe he's asleep, maybe he's exhausted, confused, in shock, maybe that's why he hasn't phoned, but something will explain it and the nice nurse will make everything good again and together we'll shudder at the thought of those who have died, the next of kin who couldn't find their family members, it's so terrible. In a short while I'll heave a sigh of relief, the nurse only needs to locate him behind his curtain. I try to breathe, I try to relax. Instead, the newspapers come, instead some reporter wants to take pictures, and keeps asking:

'Who are you trying to find? What are you feeling right now?'

I can only stare in silence out of the window, out at the fields, the ludicrous fields, the hopeless sun.

The nurse doesn't come, I wait and I wait, I wait in a way that gives death every chance, is how it feels. Eventually, I go through the doors onto the ward and look for her, ask for her, and I repeat my father's name, but the people I ask know nothing. The nurse appears and looks like she's forgotten me, she apologises profusely and tells me he's not there. She's been looking for him, he's not there, sorry, she says, sorry, sorry, and I go out to the car, get in and drive around, I'll find him before long, of course I will.

Eventually I drive back to the farmhouse where I'm rung up by the Slagelse police asking me to identify a man at the mortuary there. They don't know if it's



my father, they say, and I say OK, I'm on my way, and they say I'm not to drive on my own, they're going to send someone, I've got to wait, they say, and I hope the world is going to stop in a minute. Half an hour later a car comes up the track, it comes into view, a growing dot, a sick dot, something that's got in your eye, that just keeps growing and growing.

I step outside, watching the car get bigger and bigger, I hear it, see it. The car pulls up and I get inside, I confirm my name and we drive off. On the way into Skælskør the police radio crackles, they've managed to get hold of my father's girlfriend and there's some talk of her coming too, only then she isn't, which is a relief, I hardly know her, I don't want any people with me here. Maybe I'm still thinking it'll all go away again, that if no one knows then maybe it hasn't happened. Again, I ask the policeman if it's my father they've found, and he says he doesn't know.

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