

## Sehnsucht

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He grabbed both shoulders and started to shake uncontrollably. His fingers felt like scythes, penetrating the skin.

“Think, Joseph! For Christ’s sake, think!”

The young, frail boy stared attentively at the numbers. The surrounding blank space seemed like an approaching abyss in the distance. He bit his lip.

“Why are you sobbing like a little baby? Do you think that will solve anything? Answer me!”

The child felt naked and guilty, experiencing the awkward desire to howl. It was dreadful when the old man tried to explain the square root of numbers and the boy failed to understand, over and over again.

Life happened to me. I am Joseph and the old man is my father. Math never made sense to me, but I did what my father forced me to do. I started to think. I thought about my father who was ill. Without his pills, he would die. I have often wondered if my mother ever wanted to hide them. She used to lock herself up in the bathroom and cry all day. Or she came into my room to tell me she would drown herself in the river. The hollow creature in the bottomless lake wasn’t Nessie, but my bloody mother. The only thing she left was a shadow of the person that she used to be, fading into nothingness. That was before she got better. And I don’t live near a river anymore. In fact, I am a fifty year old postman, with a black beard and cigarettes in every pocket. A chain smoker, that’s how they call it.

I have been afraid of my father for a long time. They argued a lot. I always ran upstairs, making myself invisible and escaping the tensions. But you couldn’t run from my father’s voice. When he yelled at my mother, the walls became paper-thin and shivers ran down my spine. The silence afterwards was the worst part. My father took his car and disappeared for hours, always coming back with a breath that smelled like liquor. He always came back. My mother was scrambled into pieces, tears running down her pale and motionless face.

“Come, Joseph. Come here and give mummy a hug.”

I never hugged her, because it would have been for the wrong reasons. I wanted her to smile, to feel the warmth of her skin pressing against mine. But she was a cold shadow, too fragile to embrace. I wish I could put the memories in the pocket of my coat and forget about them. But they never disappeared and I somehow clung to them in order to feel less hollow. I remember standing on top of the staircase, looking down at my eldest brother. His name was Melvin. I used to live in a house with marble, shimmering stairs. No matter how pretty and polished they might seem, they stayed as hard as stone.

The old man seized him by the scruff of his neck, degrading him like a worthless kitten. He kept kicking him in his back, so he lost his grip and fell. I looked down at the whole scene, trembling and frozen. When he raised his head, I only could think of one thing. I hoped that a bomb would drop on the house at night so that everything would vanish. “Kaboom!”

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I was married once. Tall, blonde and skinny little thing, that was the opposite of my Ellis. She was a fat ginger. But she had dimples. She told me she couldn't live with a man that blew up bridges between people, especially between those who stood close to him. I don't hold that against her. However, she should have warned me before she decided to remarry the millionaire with his house that's bigger than the Amazon rainforest. I bet their whole jungle smells like cash. Curtains made of money, money spread on the floor and sticking to the ceiling. Money for liposuction, Ellis. I don't mean to be so rude. I just really loved her all right. What is love without its delicate, unintelligible face? Love is neither the opposite of sadness, nor of hope. You ain't supposed to bleed for someone if you ain't bled for yourself first. The best wretch is capable of reaching the best bottom, while others will never catch a glimpse of it.

Pedro never left me. He was a gift from an old, German acquaintance whom I met when I was in my thirties. I didn't tell him that dogs were the filthiest beasts on earth, so I accepted the gift. I accepted Heinrich. That was the dog's name before I changed it into Pedro. People tend to call you, pay random visits or give you unexpected presents when they know you're living alone. As if they're afraid that an empty house might forget the ocean on which it floats and will ultimately drift ashore. I got a fake bird from the neighbor for Easter.

“It is a jackdaw,” he whispered.

It didn't comfort me, because I did not pretend to feed it, so it died. Besides, I've never been a great fan of stuffed animals. Stuffed humans, yes. No, I don't mean that, of course. I'm just trying to be funny, that's all. Anyway, we've been taught to think that inflicting pain on other human beings (for example, removing their intestines and stuffing them like a juicy turkey) is wrong. So no more jokes from now on.

I can't remember the last conversation with my brother. We didn't talk that much. He led his life, I led mine. There was a time that I desperately wanted him to like me, to be impressed by me. I stuffed some crumbs of bread in my nose and yelled: "Look, Melvin! Look, it is snowing!" I exhaled and let the little pieces fall down on his plate. He didn't think it was funny, until my eyes started watering and I could barely breathe because some pieces were too big to get out. He had that kind of humour. There were rare times in which we did have serious conversations. He once told me that it must be great to be dead. I asked him why.

"Because people have never returned, so it must be amazing!"

There was always a flock of saliva hanging at the left side of his upper lip. No one told him, so I figured it had dried over the years and the lip and the saliva somehow melted together. I can't imagine him without saliva. I sometimes called him "Salivin" instead of "Melvin", but he never knew why.

"What if people have returned?"

He looked at me, grinning.

"Well, if they had, they would have talked about it, right? So we would know everything about it. It would have been on the front page of every newspaper, they would be interviewed and probably got their own talk show."

"Maybe they can't talk about it, because it was like hell and it's too painful to remember."

"Fine, go on then, slit your wrists, Joseph. You're just talking shit."

It's not that I wanted to die or anything. But if this world was a chair, I would never consider sitting on it. I heard Pedro bark and looked outside. A man in a grey suit was looking at me. I've been told that women like men in suits, because it makes them look decent. I never wore a suit for Ellis. And I pick me nose in the train when I know that people are staring at me. I felt the urge to pick my nose right now, just to make Mister Decent feel uncomfortable. My mother

always made a big deal about people who picked their nose or grabbed their crotch in public. I didn't. I admired them.

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Three days and seventy-two cigarettes later, the man in his suit was standing in the front garden again. This continued for five years. He would appear in the garden on Mondays, Thursdays and Sundays. I never went outside. And I never picked my nose in front of him. I just stared through the window and he just stared back. I did follow him once. He drove a white van, the kind that pedophiles use to kidnap kids. Not that I want to imply anything. If Mister Decent was fond of children, he was definitely standing in the wrong yard. What about children who kidnap grannies? It's uncommon to reverse the roles. Everything should remain in order, I get it. Above all, children are innocent and vulnerable and need to be protected against the violent, savage world. Bullshit. I saw a kid on a bike with a granny once. And birdie looked pretty scared. I think the kid's name was Danny. He looked like a Danny. A spoiled child, neat hair, horrible grin, rich parents and tons of friends. No doubt in my mind that it was a Danny. I still link a life to one's name. I can't help myself. Some call it prejudice, others imagination or maybe fantasy. I used to discuss this with Ludwig. I told him imagination was like a very large and endless river. You could swim and swim and keep on swimming, without reaching the end and without being sure about the depth. Fantasy on the other hand, was a little plastic pool. You knew exactly how deep it was and could step out of it any minute. The German didn't like this. He told me fantasy was like the bank of a river, where the plants grew and frogs rested. I told him this was illogical, since imagination reached further than fantasy, so the latter would never be able to surround it. He shook his head, but didn't say a word. He must have thought I was a *verrückter Schweinhund*. If I hear the name Tommy, then it's a shy boy with glasses who was bullied in high school and who wears white socks. A Zoey plays tennis, has freckles and is gap-toothed. A bit chubby too. Pedro's name didn't fit with the life he led. A Pedro is a fat Italian with a sweaty upper lip and three gorgeous wives. A Pedro shouldn't be driven over by a truck. (plaats)

“Arriverderci, Pedro!”

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I write letters. I've posted more than two thousand together to the daily newspaper. I always write the same thing. The reasons for this are too long to mention. When I was thirteen years old,

I realized that life was a wet cigarette that couldn't be lit. I cried myself to sleep, pressing my palms against my temples. I took a whole bunch of pills and drifted off easily. But the next morning I just slept a bit longer than usual and I woke up in the same place, same life and same world. Blimey, that was one of the best jokes ever. I was a shy and introverted kid, until I learned that shyness was a sad form of vanity. I taught myself to think that not everyone was paying attention to me when I entered a shop, library or pub.

So as I began to fade from the world, I gradually started opening up, but I still blush pretty quickly. That's not an asset for an alpha male, like me. However, I am not the kind of guy who goes off to hunt down the ladies. Good flirts are never too self-conscious of their walk, talk and facial expression. In response to my insistent awareness of myself, I have developed my own flirting techniques over the years, since the traditional ones are too difficult. I don't wink, but I blink instead. This way, the chick has a difficult job figuring out whether I have a certain mania that involves blinking heavily, or she might wonder if I was trying to blink. If this is the case, then the ball is definitely rolling, baby. Now it's her time to move. And if she does move, or just moves for that matter, then I try to lick my nose, instead of my lips. Ellis was the only one who experienced the ultimate stage of my flirting techniques (moving my shoulders seductively up and down instead of my eyebrows). Apparently the opposite sex is intrigued by a face that speaks without saying a word. I never quite got that. Ellis once asked me whether she should wear more dresses. She was the jeans-type that dressed more comfortably than elegantly. I smiled because I was trying to show her that she would always be mine, no matter what she wore. She freaked out completely. No kidding.

"Why are you grinning? Are you laughing at me?"

"Of course not, why would..."

"Then why don't you tell me the truth and stop lying to me, Joseph!"

"Come on, Ellis, I've never lied to you. Why are you so upset?"

"Upset? If a woman asks you whether she looks like a man with titties, and you just stand there smiling, then what the hell am I supposed to think, wanker?!"

Ellis swore a lot. I didn't mind, because she amused me when she got frustrated or angry. I think she thought it was pretty funny herself. Every time she cursed, the dimples appeared and her eyes lit up. I wonder if Mister Millionaire ever acknowledged how beautiful she really was. I could

write books about that woman. Whatever the facts, we didn't have a chance of spending a lifetime together. I would be the animal that devoured her golden heart.

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If I tell you my name isn't Joseph, you might be a bit confused. Or maybe you won't. I can be: a kid, a husband, a neighbor, a postman, the painting on the wall, a bus driver, a Mercedes Benz, a Joseph, a belly dancer, Ned Flanders, the sister you wish you never had, LeBron James, a mirror, Faulkner's burning barn, a rotten banana, a slice of bread, a breath, a verb phrase, a twisted ankle, an eyelash, the head of Jotie T'Hooft, the Bible, S.V.'s meat, a pimp, an imaginary friend, a wrinkled skin, the smell of wet grass, a black horse, a cherry tree, a unminded gap, a metro line, a silver spoon, Noah's flood, a Watergate scandal, a coffee filter, an abortion pill, a hidden camera, emptiness, a weeping willow, a tree diagram, a forest, Septimus Warren Smith, topsyturvy, a leap year, Gargamel, a television spot for Espresso, le moustache de monsieur Dali, Einaudi's shining Yamaha, the food that Joey doesn't share, a falling intonation, a unibrow, an urban riot, propriety, the door of J. Morrison, hospital room 306, morituri te salutant, peppermint foot spray, a clause of Hugo Claus, the shahada, schwarzer Tee, the man that laughed in your face when you told him you didn't know how to fart, the man that farted all day. Take your pick. I didn't slaughter my parents and I didn't murder Ellis. "Life happened to them." That's what I told the police. Of course they would never believe me.

"Cage the freak! He's mentally distorted!"

Of course.

A light breeze stirred my wings and I flew like a jackdaw, high and free. Far away from that place.

#### **Footnote for Abner:**

Abner, my friend, I have been thinking a lot of you lately. You were right. I might visit you and show you who Joseph truly is. But like I said, that's not my real name. I will come in the morning. No need to check the mailbox, I'll hand over your newspaper. I probably won't be nice. I will yell something, take my bag with exclamation marks with me and throw them at your face. Either you'll hastily grab the phone, because you feel threatened, or you will stare at me. I will wait patiently until you look. In the beginning, you won't see a lot. "What on earth is there to

see?” you might ask yourself. If you ask me that particular question: pick up the phone and call the police. You go ahead, it’s fine. However, if you have a tiny doubt in your mind, keep looking at me. No need to be scared, I understand. Fear is a good steppingstone. Furthermore, you need a little bit of excitement to know you’re alive. You might exclaim: “But I *am* alive, I don’t need to feel it, I already do!” Hahaha! Dear Abner, you still haven’t lost your sense of humour. If you would like to come to my place (hospital room 306) and bring a bag of question marks, please do. Throw them at me, force them down my throat and suffocate me. I can wait.

