

The Meaning of Atlas

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English excerpt translated from the Norwegian by Johanne Elster Hanson

I shall call out for you

if I see a lion coming towards you.

I shall call out, take care.

In the same way I call out when I write.

I call to save your life.

I call out your name as loudly as I can so that you shall not die.

Atlas stands in the middle of the hall at Oslo Central Station. He lets his thoughts wander, collide against each other, wander, collide, like he's a container full of scrap he's examining one last time. He makes up his mind, unclogs, clears a path, looks at the platform display of places you can travel to above the underpass to the tracks, and the large clock reminding him about the passing of time.

He walks over to the ticket machine, finds Gothenburg on the screen, inserts his card and enters his pin.

Fuck.

They haven't transferred.

He hoists his backpack up on his shoulder, takes a deep breath and walks into the buzzing crowd as though he was one of them.

But...

They're not limping. He can't see anyone else dragging their right leg.

The fact that he is might just mean that he sprained it while running to catch a bus. Or a maths lesson. The history lessons. He's gonna miss those.

Everywhere around him, suitcases rattle as they roll over the irregularities where the platform's joined together. The noise hits him where the muscles in his neck attach to his skull. I want a tattoo, he thinks. It comes to be a connection between carving something into the skin and his neck, the sounds that pierce him. It ends up in the same layer of memory. On his upper arm, he thinks.

He walks past another carriage, wants to pick the right one.

As though there's such a thing as right and wrong.

Not in his experience.

About halfway down the train he makes a decision, walks back one carriage, opens the door and lifts the bad leg up the two steps. A sour smell of plastic and metal hangs in the narrow corridor.

And nauseating mixed with bleach when he walks past the crapper.

Inside the compartment the smell changes yet again.

He doesn't know why he keeps smelling everything. Sniffing his way like an animal. A dog. It's like his senses have grown sharper, his sense of smell, hearing, eyesight, and he's worried that if someone bumps into him it will feel like an electric shock.

He likes how everything's intensified. Sometimes. Other times it's just awful.

Atlas drops his bag into the seat next to him so no one can come and sit there, takes his phone out of his pocket and opens it on notes. He continues after the 'I' that was left standing there all by itself, like an abyss in the sentence, when he got off the tram taking him to the Central Station. *'m on a train leaving the city where I was born on 12 August 16 years and a little over a month ago, he writes. Ullevål Hospital. Fifth floor. 20,5 inches, 4230 grams. Now: 5' 10". Too thin according to those who claim to know anything about it. I give zero shits. I'm leaving. Have to figure out some stuff. That's the point. That's the whole point. Nothing is the whole point.*

The outside world moves past so quickly that everything close to him – road signs and lampposts, a fence, trees, a level crossing and a tractor waiting for the train to pass, becomes blurred, is done and over with before it's even had time to become anything. What's distant is clear and distinct. Atlas takes it all in before letting his eyes wander, imagining how the train worms its way along the tracks, across the fields, between the motorway and the edge of the forest, along lakes and carriageways. He feels the railway joints like tiny topples in his body. Kadonk, kadonk, kadonk. A countdown, he thinks, beat by beat by beat. The joints make him sleepy. His eyes grow heavy, eyelids slide shut, don't fall sleep, he thinks, don't, or? Perhaps. If I'm asleep, the ticket inspector might just walk straight past me, and if he does... that would be... nice...

Atlas loses all coherence, the words, his head tilts over, lips part. He's asleep.

He sleeps a lot more than he used to. He dreams as well, but rarely ever remember more than fragments and snippets, like something found, but broken, a shard you turn over in your hand, wondering what it used to be a part of. You put it in your pocket, take it out from time to time

and look at it again, try to picture it as part of something whole. Something that fills out that little piece into something comprehensible.

(new chapter)

All of a sudden, the sleep-inducing sound of train on tracks becomes loud and screeching. Atlas wakes with a start and peeks out between the seats. The door at the other end of the compartment closes and shuts out the noise as though it's under a duvet. A voice is asking them to have their tickets ready. He grabs his backpack and slips out the door, into the corridor between compartments. A woman with a toddler on her arm comes out of the toilet. He holds the door for her, she thanks him, he's secretly thankful she was finished just when he needed it.

It smells sharply of toilet in the tiny piss-yellow room. He shuts off his nose in the roof of his mouth and breathes through a corner of his jumper, has to make it, has to endure until the ticket inspector has passed.

But what are the chances of him passing if he sees the toilet is occupied?

Should he unlock so that the light shows green?

Or do they check the toilets anyway?

That's when his phone rings. For fuck's sake... He fumbles. Finds it. Mutes it. 'Mum' flash across the display. He opens messages and writes, *Please*, adds a pair of pleading hands before continuing. *Transfer money. Please.*

Before he's able to send it, he has decided, he'll take a chance on being saved by unoccupied and green.

But too late.

The compartment door opens. It slides shut.

There's a knock.

Atlas is no longer afraid of anything, the worst has already happened, but his blood is pumping, that shitty body is still reacting, as though it's been programmed to do so and doesn't know how to stop. Useless excuses and explanations for why he shouldn't simply open the door and show his ticket flick through his brain. The noise from the tracks grows fainter. His ears have tuned into even the tiniest sounds from the other side of the flimsy toilet door. He's an animal again, just sensing, knows how animals feel, remembers a hare he saw in a thicket when he was out orienteering a few years back, he stopped, it stopped, froze, only its quivering snout, whiskers and shiny eyes betrayed that it was still alive. Now, after the worst, he knows how the hare must have felt when confronted with a possible murderer, knows how it sensed the world, without any filters, unprotected, defenseless. But then it ran, was gone as quickly as it had appeared. Something came over it, broke in between the whiskers and the world, a sudden impulse that whispered, run, a hare runs faster than any danger. If only it was that simple, Atlas thinks. If you only run fast enough, you can escape murderers and death.

The door between the compartments slam. The ticket inspector gave up and kept going.

Atlas breathes more normally and sends the texts.

(new chapter)

Atlas sits bent over his backpack, once again sleeping heavily, not knowing the train has crossed the border. He doesn't wake until a bloke dressed in the colours of the Swedish State Railways asks him for his ticket for what is probably the third time.

They cannot get any further away from each other in the cramped corridor between the compartments. They lean against opposite walls and stare out at the landscape passing by the window in the door.

The ticket inspector slurps annoyingly at something hot in a cardboard cup. One has to have one's finances in place if one seeks to travel, he says. One has to learn that nothing in this world is free.

Atlas says nothing.

One needs a reality check before one can delve into life, the ticket inspector says and slurps some more.

The train moves into more densely built-up areas. The houses glide past more slowly. They're nearing a station.

Atlas turns and looks straight at the ticket inspector until he responds by looking equally defiant, raising his eyebrows high up on his forehead.

Are you dying? Atlas asks.

The ticket inspector laughs briskly. No, he says, rubbing his nose.

At least not today, he says.

The train comes to a halt.

Atlas opens the door and steps out on the platform, turns, gives the inspector another fierce look. It must be nice to be so certain, he says, gives him the finger and walks towards the station of a sparsely populated part of Sweden he's never even heard of before.

Yellow leaves from the birch trees along the river are carried with the stream underneath the bridge where Atlas is googling where in the world he has ended up. Not very far from the main road. He thumbs the map up and down, zooms in and out. If I walk... towards Uddevalla, he thinks. He's been there once, played a handball tournament in Rimnershallen. Although he hasn't exactly *been* there, he took the bus in, he took the bus out, he could've been anywhere. He hoists his backpack further up on his shoulder, crosses the road and starts walking between dry tufts of grass clinging to gravel and patchy asphalt.

Thanks for the lift, Atlas says, and smiles at the very concerned lady behind the wheel of the Volvo that stopped and picked him up when he was tempted to just scrap his entire plan and go back home. She even took a detour for him. To a car park full of lorries.

Be careful, she says. Try to get a lift with someone who's going all the way.

Promise, Atlas says, and looks around the vast car park. There must be at least twenty lorries there.

All the way to Copenhagen, she says.

Point taken, he says and slams the door shut.

She shakes her head and looks like she'd rather drive him all the way there herself, before she reverses, turns and indicates her way onto the main road.

It smells of diesel and rubber and dust. Atlas walks between the large wheels looking up at the driver's seats. Maybe they're all in the café having a burger or today's special, he thinks, but then he finally spots an older bloke in a lorry with lights turned in the direction he's heading.

Atlas knocks on the door, takes a step back. Hi! he shouts.

The man in the lorry looks out and rolls down the window.

(new chapter)

Atlas has never been this high above the road before. He's got a complete overview in all directions. He's not discounting lorry driver as a profession if he were to get a job one day. He probably wouldn't decorate the driver's cab with this much Liverpool riff raff, but...

He leans back and lets his backpack slide down from his lap. It feels like he'll finally get where he's going.

So they know you're hitchhiking? the driver asks suddenly.

Atlas straightens up again.

Frank, by the way, he says.

Atlas, says Atlas.

They've been informed? asks Frank.

Mhm... Atlas confirms the lie with a nod.

It used to be more common, Frank says. Now everyone's got a car. Or if they don't, they have the money to...

He looks over at Atlas, like people who drive usually do, with one eye on the road.

I've got money, Atlas says, it'll be in my account soon. It'll be there ...

But? Frank asks when Atlas falls silent.

I couldn't wait any longer, Atlas says.

So you're in a hurry?

Atlas nods.

May I ask what's so urgent?

Atlas doesn't respond until Frank looks directly at him, away from the road.

The rest of my life, Atlas says.

Frank sighs deeply as though he understands only too well. The rest of your life comes sooner than you think, he says, and then one day you realise the adventure will soon be over.

Exactly, Atlas says.

What do you mean? Frank jerks his head backwards in surprise.

I said that's what I knew, Atlas says.

You knew?

Yes.

Nope. How can you? says Frank. You who has your whole life ahead of you. What I just said, that's for old folks, for those who've become so obsolete they've started feeling sorry for themselves for all the things they didn't do while they still had the chance.

I get that, Atlas says pensively, those sorts of things, he adds quietly, but before Frank has time to retort he asks, what then?

What didn't you do while you still had the chance? he repeats when it seems Frank has forgotten what they were talking about.

Well... Frank pauses. Things like ... He halts again.

Then they just sit there in deep thought, both of them, until Frank discards his ponderings with a shrug.

I actually don't know. I could have studied at some university, and... He wrinkles his nose. Maybe I didn't miss out on that much after all. It didn't turn out too bad. Wife. Kids. Long distance transport. And here I am, missing them. Looking forward to going home. Looking forward to the next trip, to missing them again. He taps the steering wheel a couple

of times, as though beating out the rhythm to an inner song. And you? he asks. Any girls? Do you have a girlfriend?

No, Atlas says and bites his lip, then releases it. I've never slept with anyone, he says.

Jesus Christ! Frank laughs. Didn't see that one coming. I mean... you know..., he tries again, search with his hand as though there is words and meaning to find in the air between them. Something needs to be done about that, he says and laughs again.

Yes, Atlas says seriously. He means it.

And Frank isn't laughing anymore. Seriousness is contagious.

You're absolutely sure they know you're on your way to Copenhagen? he asks a little while later. Your mother and...

Father. Yes, Atlas says firmly, and doesn't look away until Frank faces the road again. I have a sister as well, he says. Mimmi. She's just twelve, he says. She's probably brushing her teeth in the bathroom sink, at this very moment, he thinks to himself, hard, as a punishment. But it's not her fault. It's not her fault mum and dad's probably arguing. Closing the bathroom door doesn't help, you still hear their voices, the tone of their voices, just not what they're saying. He's done it himself, opened the tap further to avoid the discussions of what's the right thing to do, to think, when everything's wrong. Maybe they're in the kitchen, his mother tidying even though everything's perfect, his father sitting at the table, his head in his hands, saying something about how that treatment might prolong his life with only... Then his mother interrupts him by saying, that's good enough for me. Even if it's just a couple more days, that's good enough for me.

But it's not good enough for me, thinks Atlas. I don't want to have to go through another hellish treatment just to live a couple more days.

(new chapter)

The lorry rattles heavily before falling silent, it feels like a small collapse of something finally allowed to rest. The floodlit car park with a couple of other lorries, a few bins, a street food truck and a gas station, is surrounded by absolute darkness. The glow of the streetlamps along the motorway is the only thing showing the way in and out of this pocket of light.

Frank turns.

Atlas is asleep on top of some blankets in the bed he's improvised behind the seats.

Hey, he says. Hey! You! he says a little louder.

Atlas takes a deep breath and opens his eyes.

Copenhagen, Frank says.

Atlas sits up, confused, blinks a couple of times and peers out. Like, where?

I can't get any closer in this one here, but there's a bus. Frank points.

Atlas cranes his neck to see a bus shelter in a little pocket of light close by.

Frank pulls out a Danish 100 kroner note.

Atlas accepts it, a little embarrassed, mumbles thank you. And you? Are you just continuing, or? he asks, before crawling into the front seat to put on his jacket and find his shoes.

Frank pours himself something from a thermos. Nope. I'm required by law to catch up on some sleep, he says.

The bus shelter might be well lit, but it's not exactly summer. Atlas gathers his jacket collar and pulls the zipper all the way up to his neck. It will help once I get the sleep out of my body, he thinks, after all, it's not as cold in Denmark as it was in Oslo. Autumn hasn't come that far on the outskirts of Copenhagen. Actually, everything is different. The vast sky filled with stars above the open landscape, the smells, the weight of the air filling his lungs, the resistance he feels when he exhales. And Danish voices. Two others who are also waiting for the bus. He understands almost everything they say. Sometimes they laugh. Atlas wish he could understand their humour as well. He could do with a laugh. Can't remember the last time. He bends forward slightly, gazes over towards the parking lot and the lorry and Frank. Then the lights go out in the driver's cab.

Good night, he thinks, gets up, and walks away.

Copenhagen east. Copenhagen west. Atlas has no idea. He wants to get to the middle of Copenhagen. What's closest to the middle? What's quickest? A smaller sign with a bicycle saying only *City center* makes more sense. It points towards a small, darkened road that coils away, then disappears into an underpass before it continues on the other side of the motorway. He can feel the money he got in his pocket and considers the bus instead, but too late, it's just about to pull out from the stop. The two who were laughing are no longer there.

Fair enough, Atlas thinks. That money might come in handy. And I'm not exactly in a hurry, he thinks, and allows the astonishing lie to dangle back and forth in his brain, like the lanterns above the cycle path. I'm not in *that* kind of hurry, he concludes.

He's no longer cold. He walks as briskly as he can whilst dragging that hopeless hip. Fortunately, Denmark is very flat, with lots of benches to sit on. In many ways it's more civilised here than back home, he thinks, before he gets up and starts walking again.

Light is ascending. The city awakens. Lorries drive up on the pavement, stops, their sliding doors are opened, then shut, and the lorry continue, traffic accumulates slowly whilst awaiting a green light at intersections, dogs drag their humans after them in their collars, the dog owners check their watch, they want to go home, a flock of seagulls squabble over some rubbish in a carrier bag, lights are switched on in the shops at street level.

Atlas has never done anything like this before, walked through the night on his own, in a new and unfamiliar place, without knowing what awaits at the next crossroad, around the next corner, without knowing what will pay off, left, right or just straight on. It's a labyrinthine experience, he's fumbling around in a strange, enigmatic room. He kicks an empty beer can. Shouldn't have done that. It rolls into the gutter, and the rattling scrapes the inside of his skull. The agony might've been bearable if he wasn't so tired. After all, he didn't get many hours of sleep in Frank's lorry-bed. He doesn't quite know why, but he changes direction and walks into a park. Maybe his ears picked up on the trickling of the drinking fountain there, heard more than he realised and guided him, understood what he needed: water. He opens his backpack and finds his blister pack of painkillers, swallows one with the cold, fresh water, wipes his mouth with his hand, hoists up his backpack and walks back out on the street.

But no, he has to rest.

At least until the painkiller starts working.

There, he thinks, and crosses the street, sits down on the steps of a church squeezed in between two buildings. Someone's playing the organ in there. Something familiar. A psalm he's heard before. Maybe. Don't know.

Then he hears another kind of music, or rather, he feels it. In his body. Heavy bass from a car, which drowns out everything else as it passes.

Like a pounding heart, Atlas thinks.

And then he thinks that now he thought of *that*.

And feels the heart in his own chest.

How it beats.

Like a clock.

Nothing wrong with my heart.

How odd to be assembled this way, he thinks. To all of a sudden have a thought you've never had before, or at least not in the same way. Strange to be a human with thoughts in a body. To be the outline of all these leaps of thought. He stares and stares and stares after the pounding car. It takes a whole forever for it to disappear down the street.

That's how long a moment can last, he thinks, and suddenly it could be the last one.

(new chapter)

The city centre? asks the woman with the pram.

Yes, says Atlas.

You mean Central Station maybe? she asks and points across the street towards a wide, red brick building with spires and a large curved window above the entrance. There, she says.

Oh? says Atlas. I thought that was a castle, he says.

The woman with the pram laughs.

He should've laughed too, replied jokingly, but he's so tired his brain's stopped operating. It feels like it's come loose and is flapping around above his head and the deafening morning rush. He can't help seeming a bit odd and forlorn. He tries to smile, but it

ends up more like a grimace, then he just turns and walks towards the zebra crossing, stops at a red light in a sea of Danes who've now idea and doesn't care how lost he is.

The light changes. Atlas follows the stream of people pouring like thick porridge across the street towards as close to the middle of Copenhagen you can come.

He has managed almost the entire burger, but not the fries. Coke is easier. He can feel the sugar spread through his body, how it follows his bloodstream all the way out to his fingertips, down to his toes, it's a prickling sensation. He imagines small, sparkling sugar crystals dart along the walls, all the way out to his most delicate veins. Atlas is seated in the innermost corner of McDonalds, recuperating. He could probably sit there and take up space for a long time without anyone complaining because most people don't eat burgers this early in the morning. Most hurry to a job they have somewhere in the city or a train ride away in the opposite direction. He opens his phone and continues typing on a note that already says, *People come and go. They're going somewhere.* He adds a line break and waits for the continuation, for something that just comes into existence as though it was a message from outer space. *They believe in what lies ahead of them. That it'll be there when they arrive. That they will arrive,* he writes. Then outer space grows quiet. His fingers await a letter to begin the next sentence, but no. Silence. Atlas blanks out, lifts his gaze and stares absentmindedly at nothing until his surroundings interfere. Once again, it's the scraggly little pack at the other end of the restaurant. They're not exactly shy, and make so much noise you'd think they were twice as many. He sneaks another peek at them, studies them in secret. Not a group of goodie two shoes, as some adults would say. Six dubious individuals just hanging around a table. One girl, younger than the rest, maybe fourteen, with her hands deep in the pockets of an overly large jacket, seems a bit left out, doesn't say much, but follows everything that happens attentively. The others, two boys and three girls, warm their hands on

cardboard cups of steaming coffee and talk loud and louder, drowning out each other, competing for attention. They laugh a lot. Just can't seem to stop laughing. One of the boys puts his cup down on the table and takes a packet of cigarettes out of his pocket.

The girl with the jacket acts quickly, snatches his cup and take several large sips.

What the hell? shouts the owner and tears the cup from her.

The girl whimpers and clutches her throat, it burns from drinking the scolding hot liquid and. What's the fucking matter? she says.

It's mine, says the owner.

Then she nicks it back. He tries to retrieve it, but fails, she holds it close, shields it from his snatching hands.

But whatever is mine is fine to share with just about everyone anytime, she yells.

There's a brief struggle, which they both lose. The content spills all over before the cup tumbles to the floor.

Fuck you! bellows the owner. And what do you think I should do with this? He rubs coffee from his jacket in the girl's face.

Do I have it worse? she snarls. Do I have coffee all over me and shit?

Then he goes for her. Hits her. She fights back, kicking and punching, she tears of her jacket, tears off her jumper as well, stands there shameless, half naked, screams again, squats down and starts wringing her jumper over the smashed cup while the boy tries to topple her over.

The other girls interfere, tries to put her clothes back on, but she pushes them away and keeps wringing, wants some drops back in the cup and yells something intelligible to them. The boys howl with laughter, clutching each other, but pull themselves together when a security guard, and then another, comes running. They can't stop her either. She scratches at

them like a cat, but at least she puts on her jacket, before she tears herself loose and runs for it.

Atlas cranes his neck, gazes after her, but she's gone as something in the night.

And suddenly everything at the Central Station seems strangely quiet, the people walking in all directions, a couple running to catch a train, an announcement over the speakers, all sounds, all movement is nothing compared to what just happened, an avalanche in the middle of what is otherwise normal.

Atlas pieces the world together, bit by bit, until it resembles its old self. Then he's no longer sure if what just happened actually did.

(new chapter)

The lukewarm water keeps running through his hands and into the sink. Atlas bends over and rinses his face. Not quite like having a shower, he thinks, and is transported back home for a moment, to the bathroom with underfloor heating, the soap that smells of almonds, the soft towels, he fills his hands again and rinses until the memory fades and disappears, he shakes off the drops, looks at himself in the mirror, pulls his fingers through his hair. It has grown out somewhat. I look vaguely like myself, he thinks, and fiddles with what moisture is left on his hands, first to one side, then the other, and thinks, I'll just have a painkiller now, then I'm out in the streets, drifting around, I'll follow some impulse, a stream, see what happens, believe in signs, try to read them.

He's just got his blister pack of pills out of the packet when the door to one of the cubicles behind him opens, without a sound, but he catches a glimpse in the mirror, turns around.

It's her.

The wildcat from McDonalds sits across the toilet lid with her back against one wall, her legs pressed against the other, glaring at him.

Atlas just goes on with what he was doing, pushes one pill out of the pack, then another, and gobble them down with some water from the tap.

Have you got some for me too? asks The Cat.

Atlas only half turns, shakes his head without looking directly at her.

Don't you want to give me just one? she asks.

Atlas closes the zipper on his backpack and leaves the men's room at the Central Station.

(new chapter)

On the wall in front of Atlas hangs a map of Copenhagen's underground, buses and railway services. It's not telling him a great deal. Enghave, Fuglebakken. Hareskov and Sorgenfri, nice names, but he doesn't want to travel that far outside the centre...

You don't know where you're going, do you? he hears just behind him, recognising the voice.

He squints, his eyes become narrow slits.

It is her. The Cat.

I don't know either, she says, and stands right next to the map so that he can't avoid looking at her. She shrugs her shoulders, pulls at the fine skin at the back of her hand, releases it, grips it again, pulls and plucks at the skin as though it's too tight and she'd rather shed it.

She's got three tiny, blue dots tattooed between her thumb and index finger. Atlas has seen it before, mainly on old men and homeless people.

No one knows where they're going, says The Cat. They go somewhere, and then everything's changed. Get it? You can't know if there's been a tsunami or if the earth's axis has changed. Have you read about that? There's this thing going straight through the earth that does whatever it wants. And suddenly everything's all skewed. You risk getting very dizzy, and that's not even a lie.

What were you doing there? asks Atlas.

The Cat laughs as though she doesn't understand. Where?

In the men's room?

The Cat lets her eyes wander, first here, then there, then up at the ceiling, before she shrugs her shoulders again, wrinkles her nose and sniffs. Needed some money, she says. Cash.

It sinks in. Atlas can't quite imagine it, but he knows what some girls do to get money, boys too for that matter, everyone knows, but it's never been more than something in a film, a documentary on Netflix or an article in the paper. It happens, but somewhere else, in the shadows, on the outskirts of the world. And it might just be something she's saying, for all he knows it's just talk, because she thinks it gives cred.

Do you have money? she asks.

Not for you, he says.

But do you?

Atlas shakes his head. No.

Me neither, she says. That's so shit. Especially when it rains. Atlas looks up at where the sun floods through the curved window and shines down at them.

'Cause then you want something hot with milk in it, she says. Right?

He catches himself studying her more closely. Looks away, but can't resist, looks back at her. The pale face, freckles across the nose. Brown eyes. Pretty small. Delicate. He's maybe one head taller.

Tea, for example, she says.

She resembles something someone lost or just displaced and then never searched for, but she might also be something more than just what he sees. Like in the fairytales, where you'll only find out at midnight when the spell is broken. Stop it, he tells himself. Has your brain gone all soft or what? Come to your stupid senses. She's obviously a clever one who's out to scam someone like him.

Makes you want to go and have tea somewhere, she says.

But then, maybe not. He couldn't know. He mostly doesn't know. That's why he left, to get to know more, to notice, listen, see, to subject himself to life before it's too late to subject himself to anything at all. Look for the secret. The big one. The one that'll make the gates spring open.

Or real chocolate. Break it up into bits and dissolve it in milk while you're stirring. Something like that, she says. That's all I need, she says, before she lowers her head and sniffs again. That's all I need to be happy, she mumbles, and bites her lip as though she's about to cry.

It hits Atlas somewhere he can't defend. He can sense that her grief is genuine. He looks away quickly.

Damn.

She is fooling him.

And she's doing it very well. Tricking him into her web by playing sad.

When it rains, she says. It has to rain.

He steels himself before looking at her again.

She smiles, a faint little grin. As if half of her doesn't dare playing along.

Atlas can't help what he thinks he's seeing, it just comes, the way words come when he writes, fall from some unknown place, behind the curbed smile he thinks he can see a soul.

What do you want most? she asks.

Atlas knows he has to answer truthfully, it strikes him as absolutely necessary, but?

Why though?

He doesn't owe The Cat anything. A complete stranger in a strange city.

Then it dawns on him. He owes it to himself to be truthful. It's like she's standing there conjuring it up in him with her eyes.

What I want most, he mutters, and searches within himself, feels his way, stammers, dunno, mission impossible, and yet, he looks down at the body he still possesses, the hips, the knees, the ankles... This, he says, shows her with his open hands how his own body is what he wants more than anything in the world.

The Cat tilts her head. Yourself?

Yes.

Funny, she says, to want something you already have, I mean, do you want another similar one?

She takes his silence as a yes.

A clone then, she asks?

Maybe not a clone, but ...

She creates a tiny gap between her thumb and index finger. If I ever met someone who resembled me only *this* much, I'd walk straight past them, she says, but changes her mind, shakes her head determinately. Nope, I'd run away. Look, she says and pulls her jacket sleeves above her wrists, shows them to him.

Both have visible scars.

I tried it first with this one, she stretches out her left arm, but I failed, she says. When I tried it with the other one, I was saved. But I'll do it again. I'm just going to save the rainforest first. Or maybe the Greenland ice sheet. Dunno. Both, maybe.

The rainforest? asks Atlas, though he's more curious about all the other things she just said.

Yes. Someone has to save the rainforest, otherwise there won't be enough oxygen, she says. People are gonna... She grips her own neck with both hands, strangles herself, crosses her eyes and shows him how no one will be able to breathe.

But if you're planning on, he jerks his shoulder in the direction of her wrists, the cuts, why bother with the rainforest and the Greenland ice sheet?

She looks out at the large hall, people hurrying past, she follows them with her eyes. I pity all of them, she says. They just walk around here and... She stops for a quarter of a second. Same, same every day, she continues. And then they go back home, watch television, put their children of divorce to bed. She looks at him again. I'm thinking about their children, she says. They haven't done anything wrong.

Atlas isn't following. Haven't done? Haven't done what?

It's not the children's fault, she says. The rainforest shrinking. Wars. Hunger. Africa. All the poor people and the junkies. Or the bees. The bees are dying out. You know what'll happen then?

Atlas knows, but it probably doesn't look like that from where she stands listing all the world's disasters, because she keeps going in the same preachy tone.

There won't be pollination, she says. Of flowers and trees.

That's not good, Atlas says, and can hear how it sounded more like a question than an answer. It's not because he didn't know or isn't curious about the thing with the bees, but because he is curious about everything about her, her sudden changes and leaps of thought, who she really is. That's what rubbed off on his tone of voice.

We need pollination, she says.

They turn at the same time. Two of the girls from McDonalds who tried to get her clothes on are running past them towards one of the escalators leading down to the trains.

The Cat rolls her eyes. Weird how something so important, and so romantic in series on television for example, can be so hideous. She looks at Atlas, wrinkles her forehead and nods as though she just read his mind. Correct. They've probably got themselves a deal with some dude in the suburbs. With dollars, she says with an acrid smile.

Oh, says Atlas, he doesn't really care, they may do whatever the hell they want with their lives. And anyway, who is *she* to talk? Isn't she doing the same thing? What's the difference? She's sort of in the middle of the picture, but blurred.

Boys get paid better, she says. Always been that way. Unfair. But the worst is that thing about the rainforest. Much worse than? She widens her eyes and nods for him to finish her sentence.

Atlas's looks tentatively towards the girls who are no longer there.

Right, says The Cat, pleased he hit the nail on the head. Are you hungry too?

He's not. Maybe a little bit, he tells her.

What's your name? she asks.

Atlas, he says, holds out his hand, but in the same moment he finds it's probably out of place and tries to make it into a random gesture towards his forehead or neck or something.

She has already caught it.

Molly, she says, without letting go.

He doesn't either. It's the body again, it does things.

Atlas, he says again.