Wencke Mühleisen

Save Yourself, Little Heart

Translated by Tara Chace

For Bettina

[Marguerite Duras quote]

Part I

Chapter 1

It was probably a totally ordinary October evening, about 70 degrees. An autumnal darkness had long since settled in, and the narrow cobblestone streets of Old Town, Trieste, were illuminated by the streetlights. Golden light poured out of windows and the open doorways of cafes, restaurants, and souvenir shops. Tourists and locals strolled the streets, as if they were one pulsing organism flowing through the street network’s fairways, not individuals each with their own life stories which they were reconciled to or distressed over. A totally ordinary evening for the residents of Trieste, but not for us Scandinavians, I thought as I sat at a sidewalk table with Jan. We had known each other since we were both 22. We had eaten stuffed peppers, and Jan had entertained me by telling me that Trieste was where Freud had done marine zoology research in the 1880s. He had been searching for eel testicles but had not found them. It was typical Jan to know obscure facts like that, which I had no idea about. This was why it was important to be on his team in trivia contests. We agreed that the house red was exceptionally good. It had that slightly tannic note that lingers on your tongue and we had ordered a second glass since this was the last night of our vacation, which we had spent in the Italian village of Muggia. We were going to fly home to Oslo by way of Venice the following day. I was surprised that Jan wanted to drink more wine. Lately he had gotten the idea that drinking more than one glass wasn’t good for him, but at any rate I was happy to be able to enjoy more wine with him.

Before we came to Italy, I thought this vacation would be a refreshing break following a spring and summer that had been one interminable protracted nightmare. For three straight months, I had sat by my eldest brother Kai’s sickbed, his deathbed. I watched him fade away before my eyes and in my manic, pathetic self-absorption I thought life couldn’t get much worse than that, my brother lying there in the nursing home, dying, as I sat looking on. And isn’t Jan fading away from me as well, even though we live together?

Such were my thoughts as I contemplated Kai’s face in those final days, as everything failed on him. The skin on his legs cracked and fluid seeped out. The contours of his gleaming white bones were visible through his skin, now taut over his cheek bones. His eyelids and lips were pulled inward toward the inner substance, decomposing down into topsoil, mulch, dirt, down into bog.

The sun had beat down on my head with merciless strength that summer of death and longing, as I had hurried back and forth on my countless visits between the hospital in Fredrikstad, the train station, and our apartment in Oslo’s Torshov neighborhood. Even without the death and longing, spring and summer were a tough time for people like me, those who had become unloved but had not stopped loving. The warm season had awakened hope that there was light in someone else’s eyes, in Jan’s eyes, when he looked at me, that the hands that held my body wanted me, only me. Was there any relief from this useless longing?

In addition to that for the last several months I had been worried about cellular changes in my cervix that I had been informed of following a routine test. In a text message I received, they said this was “totally normal” at my age. Meanwhile I was thinking: Tick tock, brother, soon my time will be up, too. Also: What else is totally normal at my age?

After all of that, this autumn week in October was meant to provide a little breathing room to refuel our energies and so that Jan and I could finally spend some time together instead of just living side by side focusing on our precarious necessities as we had been doing for a long time. In all the couples’ advice columns, it says: “Take a vacation together and cultivate your relationship, just the two of you.”

“There’s something I need to confess to you, Erika,” Jan said from across the table at the sidewalk restaurant partway through his second glass of wine.

Chapter 2

Before Jan confessed that last night in Trieste, we stayed in a little vacation apartment in a home owned by an Italian couple in the northern end of Muggia on a beautiful bay with secluded beaches, lush green hillsides, and mountains covered with deciduous trees, beech trees, pines and stone pines with their tall trunks and heavy crowns of needles. Only a small number of year-round residents lived in the village, and there was hardly a tourist to be seen now at the very end of the season, just what we had wanted. I began my mornings by slipping out of the double bed so as not to wake Jan, putting on my swimsuit, sweatpants, and hoodie, walking down to a little beach just below the apartment, and setting out for my first swim of the day. I love to swim. The water of the turquoise blue Adriatic Sea was at least seventy degrees, and I swam breaststroke, backstroke, and crawl across the bay and back. Through my swim goggles I spotted little fish with delicate blue and yellow strips on their sides, dancing in their school as if they were synchronized swimmers. Before I swam back to shore, I rolled over and floated on my back, letting the saltwater hold me up in the sun’s nascent heat. It was like being surrounded in amniotic fluid, rocked by the motions of the mother’s body, accompanied by the water-borne echoes of the mother’s heart, the rhythm of the blood, the movements of the bowels. This symbiotic origin and complete coalescence, the constant and comprehensive satisfaction of needs, a state without want, without sorrow, loss, or desire in particular, that’s what I thought on those mornings in Muggia when I was alone on the beach although a local dog I had befriended always stood waiting for me as—my teeth chattering—I quickly dried my aging body.

Would I—presumably the next woman to go if the chronology were followed, lying in a palliative care ward after all hope was gone and there were no more future-oriented options—would I also bite back my longing then, my craving for warm bodies, my connection to people? What was the point of that? It must be an evolutionary short circuit affecting some people, affecting me. Imagine if it actually were possible to liberate oneself from grief of loss and lose oneself becoming a mere cog in the machinery in the damned circus of desires. And who wanted a horny sixty-five-year-old woman anyway? What about when I was seventy, eighty, ninety? Me, with my decrepit body. My neck, collar bone, and breasts, at one time covered by soft, smooth skin which had now transformed into a mottled, blemished landscape. My once muscular thighs, which I used to enjoy casting an appreciative glance at, were now relegated to a flabby, hidden life. My knees had assumed oddly plump forms. If I lived long enough, my neck, breasts, belly, and thighs, my whole body would come to resemble an internal organ, the way the heart is entwined by veins and arteries. And yet: I wanted to live until I hardly resembled a person anymore. And yet: I wanted to love my body tenderly, both the one I had been given at birth and the one I would have when I died. But, oh, how I shuddered at the thought of living without a body to snuggle against, without warm skin. Wouldn’t the warmth, the sympathy, and the empathy run out of me then? Cold and without compassion for either my own fellow humans or myself, I would end up left behind, lying alone.

I pulled my clothes on over my wet swimsuit and strode back up the little hill to the apartment to make breakfast and coffee for Jan and myself in the barebones kitchen.

After breakfast, I sat down on the little deck with its view of the bay to read and sunbathe before the rays grew too strong, my frenetic attentiveness to the sun as if I suffered from some deficiency disorder. I did suffer from a deficiency disorder. That was why I loved those carcinogenic rays, even though I had never managed to give my pale skin a flattering color. The rays still damaged me, breaking down my protective layer. It was like with sex. I desired something that was destructive because it had become unattainable with the person I had chosen.

What, SEX? Unsavory word. Distended, throbbing, bluish-purple Viagra penis heads, monstrous-sized members shaved smooth, vaginally bleached, glistening-wet-pink childish vulvas with their labia corrected, close-ups thrust themselves at my eyes. Oh, this hideous word sex, what did I think about as I craved and yearned? I fantasized about primal sex, about being taken from behind, about my steaming wet cunt being pulled backward by strong hands that gripped my ass cheeks hard, about the cock, the fingers, or the fist sliding first across my swollen clitoris so its roots deep within swelled up so that I could be filled, my desires fulfilled, so the jouissance would finally pump in waves of pleasure, up through my abdomen, my breasts, effervescing up through my skull, until the word SEX was eradicated and a different language of desire could take its place, so that I could obliterate the language of sex that had brainwashed me.

Every morning I got Jan to go on a two-hour walk through the countryside surrounding the village. We remarked on the aroma of rosemary in the heat haze around midday and admired the tall crowns of the stone pines, the sculptural cypresses that gave the landscape its contours, the distinctive silvery green color of the olive trees. We talked about our son, work, missing Kai, and the gradual deterioration of our bodies. The goal and the high point for me was skinny dipping in one of the many coves. The paths we climbed down were so serpentine, until we were sure we wouldn’t encounter anyone else. Jan, who required even warmer water temperatures, found a rock formation to sit on and enjoyed the view, I thought as I undressed or I wondered what he thought about as he sat like that watching me, whether he was looking at me the way he had done many times over the decades as I had swum naked while he relaxed. Perhaps I hoped there was a glimmer of longing in his gaze.

For the rest of the day, we would each do our own thing. Jan read a book on his tablet. I had fixed up a workspace at the kitchen table, and I read and worked on an article for a few hours in the afternoon. We rounded off the day with a short evening stroll at sunset, made dinner together, and then drank wine in the double bed leaning back against the headboard as we finished off the evening with a few episodes of the Norwegian comedy, *Couples Therapy*, on NRK. Then we each turned to face our own wall, said good night, and read until we fell asleep.

That was our daily routine in Muggia, each day like the next. With one exception.

Chapter 3

On our next to last day in Muggia we decided to eat at a little beachside restaurant that was still open this late in the season. Jan wanted to finish the book he was reading, so I went on ahead, got a table and ordered a glass of wine. The restaurant was located on a cliff right over the beach. The sun was setting, dyeing the hillsides around the bay apricot colored. It made them look like the backdrop for a 1960s American Western. When I was a child, those kinds of movies made me dream of galloping bareback, at one with the horse’s muscular body, through an apricot-colored desert landscape just like this.

Although the temperature was still warm, I threw a jacket over my shoulders. A mellow mist mingled with the light from the sky, which had not yet faded entirely over the black sea, as if it wanted to protect me against the darkness that would soon descend. Something has to happen, I thought. Something has to be set in motion. Anything would be better than the last several years’ worth of wandering through the desert. As if we, Jan and I, polite and friendly, not completely uncaring, had been living side by side, but without expecting anything of each other, without wanting anything to do with each other.

Was that how it was? As if we knew about everything, all our foibles, negative traits, ingrained habits, ancient, eternally repeated patterns that we understood little of but which had settled like a specter over our life together. As if all our fights, all our passion, all our hopes for the future lay behind us. As if something had subsumed our individual volitions. It had come out of nowhere, suddenly or slowly, like a breaker or a long, drawn-out wave it rose to tower over us both. Once the wave broke, there was nothing else. It took up all the space that had been alive between us. The wave came down over us like brackish, polluted water. There was no way to withstand it, and perhaps we preferred not to. Maybe we were filled with a helpless powerlessness, a mutual resignation that this was just how things were. That’s just how Jan is. That’s just how Erika is. There’s nothing to be done about it.

Jan and I rarely managed to talk about what was difficult, the fact that we didn’t have sex anymore. It was as if talking about sexuality, or sooner my sexuality—well, my infidelity that time twenty years ago—had triggered an underground explosion that almost tore us apart and right up until this evening by the beach in Muggia it continued to send aftershocks through our lives. I had been certain that we had shared this experience, and that for Jan this had led to a corrosive distrust in me, even though after my betrayal I had never wanted to sleep with anyone else. I had assured him of that many times. He never wanted to discuss again what had happened back then. His emotions in the wake of my infidelity were like dark matter, impossible to detect. My remorse dwelled inside me like a chronic illness that was never treated. With its invisible force of negativity this condition slowly gnawed away at the love between us.

That’s how it must have been. On the rare occasion when we tried to approach the topic of why Jan didn’t want to have sex with me anymore, we sounded like we were on the panel of a radio call-in show, two sixty-five-year-old, highly educated, stammering people expressing themselves in seemingly communicative language, but the words sat like a steel lid atop years of despair, anger, jealousy, thoughts of revenge, defeatism, loss, longing, and waning hope, or whatever all the unarticulated sludge of emotions included. Two poor, helpless, older individuals, now on vacation in Italy.

The restaurant wasn’t very crowded. I happened to think of how the other day, not long before we left for our vacation, I went to call Jan to breakfast. I had opened the door to the bedroom and seen my husband lying naked on his stomach, turned slightly to one side, one knee up. He was hugging the comforter in his sleep. A painful tenderness ran helplessly through me at the sight of his naked body, as if I hadn’t seen it like that for a long time. I *hadn’t* seen it for a long time. It was like a memory that only existed in this display. My eyes welled up as I let my blurred vision trace the soft line from his straight, slender neck down the wings of his shoulders. Oh, his skin, once as soft as a horse’s muzzle in my hands, the line of his spine down to the small of his back and his perfectly formed butt, softened by the years, his still muscular legs. I wanted to stroke his back as if my hands were a singer singing him, as if his body sang itself right up against me. Oh, I especially loved his knees. They were so inexplicably solid when I closed my hands around them. I wanted to lie naked against him. He would wake up and mumble but not acquiesce. He would continue to lie on his stomach, I knew, not roll over toward me after I let my hands glide cautiously over his shoulders, hugged him, inhaled his sweet scent after the night’s sleep, slipped my hand in under the leg he had angled up to hold his balls. It wasn’t going to happen. He wouldn’t roll over toward me in all his sleep-drunk heaviness, wouldn’t press himself tightly to me with his nose against my neck, wouldn’t sigh, and wouldn’t let his morning-stiff wood slide into my soft, warm interior, wouldn’t let me hold, rock, and guide us both to an unconsciously sleepy morning orgasm or embrace. No, he wasn’t going to turn toward me. For the last, well, the last seven or eight years he had been too tired, too old, maybe coming down with something, overworked, understimulated, overstimulated, world-weary, a little sick and tired, worn out maybe, possibly going through a lingering late midlife crisis, a quiet depression, maybe he was keeping a serious illness a secret, some coming catastrophe. Or was it just over? He didn’t want me, didn’t want to, wasn’t into it. It wasn’t the same for him anymore, his loins no longer burned for me. He didn’t want me to break open his long-sealed body.

I had remained standing in the doorway there as Jan slept his sound morning sleep, and I found it too hopeful to say that I had surrendered, that I was ashamed to tell anyone about my need. To be known as the person unloved by the man who knew me best was like opening a shame-room, and I swam, swam holding my head above water, smiled, kidded around, ashamed, ashamed, like being naked among the clothed. In *Willful Disregard* by Swedish author Lena Andersson, the character Esther Nilsson comments, “The one who wants the least out of a romantic relationship always has the power,” but on the other hand, I thought, the one who has the power is not in love. I love Jan, I knew, standing there in the doorway, my eyes wet with tears like a needy, begging idiot, as if I couldn’t fathom that he wanted our mutual desire to be a thing of the past, it was even more behind us than childhood’s tremblings.

“Breakfast,” I announced and walked away.

Chapter 4

As the last stripe of apricot-colored light disappeared into the horizon, I thought back to when I had cheated on Jan. Does cheating on someone also require a kind of courage? The cheater is always ready with explanations and forthright, respectable motivations to legitimize their lies once the betrayal is discovered and explanations demanded. The cheater always thinks that the betrayal isn’t precisely what it is, a betrayal, but rather that it is some exception to a common, tawdry betrayal, that it was done in good faith so to speak. The lie doesn’t actually involve the person who was cheated on. The mutual bond and the trust weren’t broken, it didn’t have any consequences, indeed, it was considerate, downright responsible, and grown-up to omit mention of the adultery, damage control. Even leading relationship experts don’t think it’s always advisable to be truthful and tell the person who has been cheated on about the affair. Why should you hurt another person so deeply if there’s a minimal risk of being discovered? It’s unnecessary. It demonstrates a downright lack of consideration for the person who has been stabbed in the back. What you don’t know can’t hurt you. An otherwise successful relationship might fall apart once everything is confessed. That’s just sad.

But what happens to the person who fails to tell? And what happens to the person who wasn’t told, who isn’t aware of the what the actual terms of the relationship, who doesn’t have the chance to take a position, to orient themselves, who has been duped by the person closest to them, on a daily basis, every time their eyes met, in the seemingly trustworthy actions and agreements of everyday life: “I’ll be home late tonight. I have to put in a few hours extra at the office preparing for a meeting,” or “I’m having dinner out with Trine and Lena tonight. We haven’t seen each other in ages,” or “You go on ahead to the cabin on Friday. Then you can have some peace and quiet to work, and I’ll join you on Saturday.” How does the eagerly and painstakingly guarded secret actually function below the surface? How does the unpredictable life of the betrayal play out in its swampy subsistence, where lies slowly penetrate downward through the layers, through the strata of the earth, where the rats constantly strive to move deeper, until they are clinging to the actual foundation and are no longer going to budge. No force, no expression, no advice from any relationship expert in the world can unspeak the lies. Yes, how does the betrayal grow in the cheater’s own mind, how did it grow in *my* heart, twenty years ago, in my body’s wisdom, how did it percolate through my subconsciousness’s hopeless inability to repress it and into my dreams, settling between us during our conversations, sneaking into the cells of my mucous membranes, into the signals being exchanged between our nerve cells as Jan and I embraced and encroached on each other’s intimacy at night, because the cells don’t forget, of course they don’t, the secret settles between the two who will live together as if nothing had happened.

What happens to the person who was cheated on? What happened to Jan, who didn’t know all the realities, who didn’t know that he was one of three: two knew about one, about him, but he didn’t know about the two? Cheating was an abuse of the cheated-on partner’s trust and ignorance. It crept into his soul and deposited a sack of stinking entrails, or sooner sex juices, secretions that may have seemed fragrant when they were released from the glands like heavy dew, but which a short while later, once the bacteria blended with the ill will or the unconscious desire to strike the one who didn’t know, spread like a corrosive stench in the cellar of the betrayed person’s soul, where there was no overhead light, not so much as a single, cold, fluorescent tube. Jan didn’t know what he flailingly sensed. He wasn’t able to fight for his existence, his love, even though he was there in the bed with us, the two of us spineless liars. He was always there with the cheaters, right in close, between the two of us. In other words, the one who doesn’t know about the cheating is ipso facto the actual prerequisite for the liars’ lusty deeds. He was used as the seductive fuel for the desire, the forbidden, the secret, the wondrously transgressive.

It must have been like that even though that wasn’t how I remembered it at all. I didn’t think about it that way and had completely different memories of the times I had met the man I cheated on Jan with. But all the same that is the default for everyone who cheats no matter what they say later.

Beyond the yellowish glow of the beachside restaurant’s lanterns, the darkness was soft and still warm around me, enveloping me. *What happens to the one who chooses to be unfaithful?* I thought further. The cheaters make the decisions about the betrayal. Unfortunately, cold rationality and planning underlie the decision, despite ostensibly uncontrollable urges. No matter how the pundits, psychologists, psychoanalysts, and relationship experts talk and write about radical transgressive desire as an evolutionarily obscure inheritance we simply need to consider.

What had some of the relationship experts actually been recommending? That one of the two adults in an approximately equal relationship should decide what the other would benefit from knowing, what would injure or not injure the other person? Wasn’t that a fundamental disenfranchisement? This authority to withhold essential knowledge is normally something only parents of young children exercise, or psychiatrists when they need to decide what will benefit or harm their patients, and even those two examples are debatable, aren’t they? Lies are the most intimate ally of power and they always have been. A person who lies exercises power and ill will. That’s the way it is.

At any rate, on time twenty years ago, completely in line with the relationship experts’ recommendations, I was able to decide that Jan didn’t need to know anything, that it would just damage our good relationship, ruin our family, that it was really totally unnecessary. After all, he did have a jealous streak. I mean, I wasn’t planning to leave him. I loved him very much, him and everything we had together. I had only seen Mikael a few times over a two-year period, that wasn’t such a big deal, was it? It was almost like when Jan and I had gotten to know each other, back when we went to folk high school together in the early 1970s. Our class was comprised of young, seeking souls, budding artists who were soaking up the era’s longing for radical changes and willingness to experiment. By the end of the year we had pretty much all had sex with each other. Even some of the teachers had been in on the sexual experimentation. Mikael, who had also been in our class, and I dated for a spell—before Jan and I got together. What did it matter actually if Mikael and I picked up where we had left off, even though we were both living with other people now and bound by other agreements? After all, surely Jan and I had not grown so conventional that we thought that couples actually possessed a right of ownership over each other’s bodies, had we? Didn’t all people own their own bodies, their own sexuality? Any feminist knew that, right?

*But do we own our own souls?* I wondered, sitting there at the beachside restaurant in Muggia, twenty years after the lies I had never stopped feeling ashamed of. Could the soul exist as the property of an individual, a one-woman sole proprietorship? Wasn’t the soul, the emotions and the sexuality that dwelled in the body always a tapestry generated from previous and current ties and people? And wouldn’t you ultimately destroy yourself if you didn’t know which love you were true and faithful to? I didn’t know. I didn’t know twenty years ago at any rate, and now I had become another person, a far more fragile version of my former self. Maybe it was progress, if only it hadn’t left me so fearful.

Jan read my email. This was completely normal in situations like these. The truth will out. Maybe not until many years later, maybe as late as at their deathbeds for some. That is far from unusual. A dying person’s final chance to settle accounts, relegating a blind or naively gullible loved one to eternal anguish. Or alternatively, sentence them to hatred because their life was built on lies. Plus, there’s always someone who knows. There are clues—digital, analog, bodily remnants like hair, smells, another rhythm, a strange longing glance, a new light or darkness—especially darkness—in the iris of the eye, in addition to evasive gestures, failure to make eye contact, unfamiliar caresses, unexpected references, and curious assurances—often noted by the person who has been cheated on but not understood until after the revelation, because the person appears to have a mental block against losing trust in the one they love, against losing faith that the bonds of love will hold. Not entirely unlike the baby’s expectation that the mother’s breast will always return, even though many maternal breasts have demonstrably let their children down.

If a person learns of an affair right after it has happened, there is an opportunity to get one’s bearings. Wouldn’t this be more honorable, at least as an expression of your esteem for the person you once loved? Wouldn’t this be a way to minimize the harm or be the beginning of a fresh start or be the beginning of the end? But maybe love is precisely what the liar has lost or what she, for reasons she herself doesn’t understand, wants to destroy? Or does she just want to save herself from something that has grown stale and that she isn’t up to changing? It is possible, and this can be documented, to love and simultaneously want to shatter and destroy the one you love.

However, if a person who learns that they have been cheated on right after this has occurred, maybe this person has the opportunity to come to understand it. Maybe this person isn’t forced to despise the cheater. A person who has the opportunity to understand the liar may perhaps recognize the weakness in themselves and come to love again.

But then what does the person who has been cheated on do with the sudden awareness of having been lied to day after day? That is the hell of retrospective insight and the fatal radical transformation of one’s own lived experience. It’s like being invaded by a foreign power that presents a different narrative—dismaying, but truer than the one you had been living under—about your immediate past.

That’s how it must have been for Jan.

Chapter 5

Jan came walking toward the restaurant. He looked pensive. We ordered a venison goulash recommended by the waiter, local food. The woods around the village were perfect for deer. We had seen their tracks on our walks through the olive groves along the slopes up near the hilltops.

I must be brave, I thought, before the food was served and Jan also tasted the local white wine. Right now, I thought, before I drink myself tipsy sitting here, I need to stop dwelling on the past, there’s nothing I can do about that. I have to be sensible, take responsibility for the fact that something could happen. I needed to get out of the brackish water, before I ran out of life myself. There in Muggia, in the blackness of night, I would leave my muteness behind. And it was as if my years of powerlessness wanted to come tumbling out, all of my anxious, hopelessly greedy, longing-for-love life from the past few years was going to leak out of me and run down my stiffened, living-a-lie face. But instead of screaming and giving in, I thought that I had to be mature.

The venison goulash had arrived at the table. I sought out Jan’s eyes and asked, “What do you want, Jan?”

“What to you mean?” he replied guardedly, the way he often was when he realized I wanted to talk about us. This could only become uncomfortable.

“What do you want from your life? What do you want from me, from us? Is there something you want?”

Jan looked down at his plate, his lips narrowed, a pained expression came over his face, one that I had seen countless times in the last ten years. Maybe he was thinking, *not again. Do I really have to listen to this again?*

I inhaled the humid sea air deep into my lungs and suggested the very last thing I personally wanted, for Jan to tell me what he actually wanted. To put an end to what was.

“Shall we agree to set each other free, sexually?” I asked.

To my surprise, Jan did not seem surprised. He responded easily, almost indifferently, “Maybe?”

*Maybe?! Play it cool! Empty your heart of the blood of love. Do it fast, one cut, so that something could happen. The distressful part has already been continuously happening.*

“How would we do that?” I continued. “Would you want to know about it if I got together with someone?”

“No!” Jan said straightforwardly. “I couldn’t deal with that. Then I would be jealous. I don’t want to know.”

“But *I* need to know,” I said. “I need to know what the reality is even if I know I would be horribly jealous. I can’t even think about it. Still, I would prefer to know instead of imagining. We could try it—set each other free, have this be an open relationship and see what happens to us? Let’s talk more about it later,” I added. “If we want to.”

What had I hoped? That suddenly, at the thought of losing me to someone else, Jan would desire me again, view me from the eyes of a potential rival and discover what he didn’t want to lose? Jan seemed composed, silent, but more present than in a long time. We walked home to our little vacation apartment. We lay down side by side, rolled over as usual, each to face our own wall, and said good night.

But it did not turn out to be a good night. I woke up from a bloody nightmare. I had been sucked into a wind tunnel against a young naked woman who was twisting around a kind of stripper pole. She represented a destructive energy that threatened to obliterate me. I slashed at her with a large hunting knife. Hacking into the live flesh for dear life. When I woke up, I had trouble letting go of my fear of death and couldn’t fall back asleep.

My limbs stiff and crotchety from my sleepless night, in the morning I hurried down to my swimming spot on the beach with my jaw clenched. My fear sat undigested in my stomach. I couldn’t interpret Jan’s oddly easygoing response to my question about whether we should open up our relationship. Well, other than the jealousy part, that is, the fact that he didn’t want to know about it if I was with someone else.

I picked up my pace to keep warm as I headed down to the beach, and it occurred to me that I was walking like a soldier. Jan’s constant mistrust after I cheated on him might have led to my closing my body off to the world, to other people’s gazes, I thought. I used to move differently before, didn’t I? I used to enjoy the rhythmic feeling of my body as I walked, a sort of rocking weight centered in my thighs and hips. I used to walk for the sake of walking, not necessarily to get anywhere, and the way I walked used to insist on the body within the clothes. And I had liked that people would see me at the same time as I saw them. But then something had happened after Jan caught me. I suddenly became very busy getting places. After that my gait was always goal-oriented, even if I was walking in the woods or hiking in the mountains. As a rule, I walked fast. Rhythmically, with my eyes on the ground.

The dog that had adopted me came up to me on the beach wagging, sat down beside me, and we both stared out toward the horizon while I petted its fur. Did Jan value everything we had created together? Our long-term friendship, our shared life story, parenthood’s highs and lows, the archive of memories, the everyday habits, the conversations? Or had the stagnation between us, the fact that we thought we knew each other inside and out and that nothing could change, settled over his desire for me? And in that case what should we do with everything that separated us, the things that were almost unbearable about the other but which had been counterbalanced by grace as we fell into each other’s bodies over and over again to forget? I had thought that even in our separateness and loneliness, we belonged to each other.

Or, I thought as I put on my swim goggles, was the truth sooner that that balance of power had shifted? Following my betrayal twenty years ago, Jan had wanted to get divorced, but I didn’t and we had decided to gamble on each other, on our family. Jan had had to tolerate living with the certainty that I was able to go behind his back, that with my longing for freedom and my incessant efforts toward autonomy, everything I wanted and needed in the world, I didn’t see his needs and longings. All the same, he had wanted me, even after my infidelity. My affection and desire were a confirmation he couldn’t do without. And then maybe in the last few years he had realized that he could trust that I wasn’t sleeping with anyone else, and that my love for him, my desire for him were a reality. Everything that he had never been able to believe before. Could it be that once he knew that he had me, then he lost his desire?

The balance of power has shifted, I said softly, as the dog beside me pricked up his ears and looked at me. Jan finally had the upper hand. The fear abated. His cock shriveled. He had defeated me by closing off his body to me, by pushing me away. By not indulging, he also did not have to surrender. Maybe. He could leave me behind like the unloved person I now was. And was that not also a suitable punishment for me, I who had once left him so distressed?

But what does Jan do with *his* longings, with *his* desire? I sighed to the dog, waded out into the sea, and started swimming.

I submerged my head in the water and through my goggles I saw the fine furrows in the light-colored sand below me. They formed a pattern, as if someone had drawn them in refined relief expanding endlessly outward. We have to get that back, I thought. We have supported each other, divided up the burdens rather well, cared for each other and the hard work we each put into our jobs and eventually into sick and dying parents. Above all, we have shared the love for our child.

For a long time we reached for each other’s bodies, grateful to fall into each other. In spite of everything. We did.

Right up until we didn’t anymore.

Chapter 6

Back in the apartment after my swim, I peeked in the bedroom and saw Jan lying there, wrapped up in the covers. Unlike me, it looked like he had slept well, soundly, and for a long time. I saw his one knee jutting out from under the covers. Involuntarily I thought back to the last time we tried to have sex together, several years ago. It could just have been the way it was sometimes—that our bodies hadn’t managed to synch up, that one of us had been tired, that the other one was worried about something, that the minor disagreement we had had earlier in the day about who was supposed to remember to call the electrician was still bugging us. At any rate, it didn’t need to have been so fraught. We could have simply fallen asleep, together. Jan could have rested his head on my chest. I could have run my hand over the back of his head and the soft girdle of his shoulders, and we could have fallen asleep like that confident in the knowledge that in the future we would lie just like this as well. But that future never came. We never lay like that again, like children or lovers intertwined in each other in slumber. Instead, I remember Jan said, “We really shouldn’t.”

I had never thought we should anyway, so I remembered that moment like a cool puff of air on my naked skin, like a draft from a cellar access door. I didn’t know how to respond. I probably said, “No, of course not,” or maybe I said something else. Was that when it happened, that Jan’s love for me snuck past me, left me as I lay behind?

I also remembered the very first time we had sex, when we were both nineteen and studying together at the folk high school. I had already noticed Jan on the very first day of school. I earned his trust right away, his whole form sort of radiated heat at me. After only a week, we sought out a dusty storage room, where there was a narrow mattress on the floor along with some old office furniture. Jan watched me. I saw how his lips curled into a smile as his fingers touched my hips when I leaned against the wall to see the late summer night sunlight through a narrow window high up, light lover that I was. You’re gorgeous, I said to Jan, to the light through the window. Our hands sought each other out. I’m nervous, I said, resting my head on his stomach, my long hair on his naked belly, and I fell in love with how his breath moved his belly button. I felt that excited twitch in my lips as I brought my head over, right beside his warm cock, and moved my hand over it.

I stood in the little kitchen in the vacation apartment and poured water into the moka pot while Jan continued to sleep. Was it a relief to him, to be able to relate to me as a person he was only connected to like a friend or a brother? Was it liberating to think about living alone? For us both? Could life still offer movement, offer living and life-giving? Did we have any guarantee that June, when with the midnight sun the sky never grew dark over the plateau in the mountains, when the hot, early summer lusts throbbed in the loins and the leaves of the mountain birch are bursting with radical moisture, that this June would return again and again.

Well, it wasn’t like that.

Later in the afternoon, I was sitting in front of my computer screen at the kitchen table while my fingers sat beside the keyboard like props that had been left behind. Jan was out on the deck reading. The last several years I had often been haunted by memories about my own younger self in the late 60s—when I was hit by a feminist wave that was, to me, completely new. It was like a divine revelation that made me view in a new light all the lives of these middle-class women who had populated my childhood, their bitter, unlived, unactualized existences. My mother was tied to a marriage she didn’t have the money, the courage, or the social support to break out of. Year after year I had sat in my mother’s long shadow and listened to her endless, wistful tirades about another life. Agonizing tales about the fear in her conflict-ridden marriage to my father trickled down into me like a sickly blend of pity and disempowerment but also rage at this contagious gender mixture that oozed depression and passivity. I yearned to escape this as if my life depended on it. And my life did depend on it.

No political analysis or rhetoric could protect me or the young women of that era against a pathological lack of self-confidence. It was as if every woman was marked at birth as owing the world something, that they bore an unflagging responsibility for the wellbeing of everyone else. In particular, there was no protection from desire’s sweet, but dangerous demands, following the inherited gender power dynamic the newly minted feminists wanted to get away from. I had often thought that the need for love and lust, which insidiously insist on repeating the cycles of how we came into being, is the most conservative and backward-looking thing we can face. How was a person supposed to take up the fight against these forces?

To some brave women, living alone seemed to be worth the high price to pay in order to be able to help themselves. American author Vivian Gornick wrote in her memoirs, “[romantic love] haunted the psyche, was an ache in the bones; so deeply embedded in the makeup of the spirit, it hurt the eyes to look directly into its influence. It would be a cause of pain and conflict for the rest of my life. I prize my hardened heart—I have prized it all these years—but the loss of romantic love can still tear at it.[[1]](#footnote-1)”

But, I thought that afternoon in Muggia, my heart has grown too fragile to tolerate petrification. My heart is permanently debilitated by my love for Jan.

Chapter 7

Two nights after the unspoken conversation in Muggia about freeing each other up sexually, Jan and I sat at a sidewalk restaurant on one of Old-Town Trieste’s narrow, cobblestone streets between the brick buildings, ready for our trip home the next morning. Despite the profound fear the conversation in Muggia had put into me, I sensed a vague hope. I had budged the framework, hadn’t I, budged Jan’s resignation, budged my haggard sorrows. I thought we were both still up to making a choice that could be good for both of us, that we were responsible for our own lives and weren’t merely governed by forces we did not control. In the last few years we had also managed to make changes to our working conditions. Jan had sold his stake of the company and gone to work for a nonprofit, and I had cut back my hours at the School of Journalism and started working freelance half-time.

Let me enjoy this last night, I thought, leaning way back and welcomed the mercifully numbing effect of the wine dilating my blood vessels, all the way to the fine capillaries at the very surface of my skin, so I felt my heart beating in my fingertips. And wasn’t the mood between us easygoing, a bit jubilant perhaps? An extra glass of wine for Jan and this velvety warm mid-October evening.

“There’s something I have to confess to you, Erika,” he said.

I smiled with a twinkle in my eye, expecting him to confess that he had been to the bakery again. He was so fond of sweets, was really supposed to refrain from eating so many baked goods for the sake of his health, but caved just as touchingly and guiltily every time.

“I’m with Marie.”

“Marie who?” I replied, confused.

“Marie Dåsevik. We knew her when she was 18. Don’t you remember? She was the student who cleaned for the company where I worked back then. She had just moved to Oslo, was a little lost socially, so we took her a bit under our wing for a while and had her over for dinner a few times.”

“What do you mean *with*?”

I asked this at the same time that I saw myself from above, as if from a surveillance camera attached to the brick building across the narrow street.

“You’re fucking her?” I continued.

He didn’t answer that last one. The question was too dumb.

“How long have you been together?”

“A year and a half,” Jan replied.

“How old is she now?”

“About 15 years younger than us.”

“What do you want, Jan?”

“I’m hoping you’ll accept it?”

“Accept what?”

“That I’m with Marie.”

There followed a bang, an explosion without any sound, a massive, silent shock wave that hit me where I sat across from Jan at the sidewalk table as a steady, reliable stream of tourists and locals slid by in the darkness. The pressure compressed my ribcage, reaching for my heart like a fist, it had to be Jan’s. My heart was burst open by what was true, what I hadn’t known but had suspected. Suddenly everything was clear and bright, and yet my thoughts moved as if immersed in mud. Here I sat, having completely failed in the only valid model for a good life. I was betrayed, deceived, without love, without closeness, without sex, without future prospects. Only death was left. And that was no model.

How was I going to fall asleep tonight and all the nights to come?

“Why are you doing this to me?” I brought myself to ask.

Jan regarded me calmly then. I mean he eyed me steadily as he said, “You did exactly the same thing. Besides, it’s perfectly normal for a couple our age who’s lived together for a long time. They’re tired of having sex with each other.”

I was about to say, *yeah, but I love you! I never got tired of you*. But I didn’t, of course I didn’t. I’d already been down on my knees for a long time. I didn’t get up from the table. I didn’t run out into the narrow old streets, full of people on this warm October night. I didn’t think—save yourself, little heart, run away and never return to this moment when you were left. Instead, as I still sat there facing Jan, a moment passed and a thousand years, my heart was filled with blood and emptied of blood and then filled with blood again, I saw my arms fall to the cobblestones, and what had been my body went still.

I grew dizzy at the thought that for our whole vacation, trusting just as in all the preceding years, I had bared my aging body to Jan’s de-desired gaze in all those lonely coves I had swum in as he sat and watched me, comparing me to his younger lover, Marie. She, who might still be 18 somewhere in the world of his imagination. I couldn’t know that. What I knew was that I had to remember to cover my body so he wouldn’t have to see it anymore as long as we still saw each other.

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1. Gornick, Vivian. *The Old Woman in the City*. New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2015. p. 30. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)