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Novel

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Roman)

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Alma was an impatient child, who couldn't bear to lose, cheated at board games, preferred to scream than be silent, and often clenched her hands into fists that seldom opened even in her sleep. Her family home was always empty, cathedral-like, too big for a little person. In the living room hung a gigantic painting, with grapes so lifelike that in summer the birds flew through the open windows and tried to pluck them from the canvas. It was so quiet that even the faintest noise came as a shock, and when the telephone rang, it felt as though it was ringing inside her own head. On hot days, Alma was transfixed by the birdsong in the garden; she would stand beneath the trees and listen breathlessly to the invisible orchestra, but as often as she tried, the sequence of notes just wasn't suited for singing along. With every year she gained, she became more present in the world, more visible, growing into herself, taking up her place, born into questioning and into the gap which exists in the world before a person fills it. The reality of the house she lived in soon seemed to be the kind a person couldn't rely upon. She observed her parents wandering ghost-like through the rooms, sometimes playing Mother and Father, then doing the loving couple, and from time to time receiving visitors whom they would laugh for. On some Sundays, they ate lunch out in the garden with Alma's grandfather, amid faltering conversation, with sparkling wine and small beetles that fell out of the large trees and into their soup like peppercorns. Whenever Alma saw her parents with the old man, she thought to herself that in place of a language, a person could also be taught silence. To finish off the meal, there was always coffee and cake, so fatty that the cream was almost butter, or so dry that they joked the crumbs would clog their bodies all the way to their ears, depending on

whether it came from her mother's kitchen or the bakery. There were children's games, too. Even many years later, Alma still remembered how on lazy Sunday afternoons she would count the fingers and bare toes of those around the table, singing a rhyme, and always stumble in confusion once she reached her grandfather, because on his right foot she found only three toes. The possibility that, as well as there being something missing on the old man, there was also more everywhere than she was permitted to see, became for Alma a vague thought, a hazy childhood feeling which she was unable to escape. She felt constantly deceived over something, without being entirely sure what that something was – as though she were ricocheting off reality. Even the fruits in the bowls in the big room were made of glass, transparent and so hard that one could lose teeth biting into them. From time to time her home seemed alarmingly like a stage set; not an illusory world, but one knocked together in an unstable fashion, rickety and inconsistent in its details, as though they were only borrowed. In every corner she came across odds and ends which didn't fit together or stand up to closer examination, that toppled over soundlessly if one looked at them for too long. Some disappeared entirely, others returned in altered form or inadequately disguised. People were silent with their mouths open. Conversations died out at a single false word, one which, just minutes before, had been considered unsuspecting. A concern suddenly revealed itself to be an annoyance, a gesture of affection came to nothing, a harmless sentence became an accusation, a laugh foundered and turned into an averted gaze. Many a thing shifted almost imperceptibly, yet remained similar enough to its original form that one would only pause briefly and then overlook it. Feelings seemed artificial and transitory and confusing to a child's view. It was as though all the people in Alma's life had something to hide, her parents and her grandparents, whose relationship to one another and to the world was so fraught that they could barely endure it. Alma couldn't rid herself of the idea that they were playacting for her. In every room, a stage was erected for the endless performances, in which everyone gave their best and were secretly disappointed when their efforts weren't rewarded with applause. The roles had been assigned by invisible forces, and uncertainties were compensated for with vehemence. As Alma grew up, she reflected on how exhausting it must be: not to be the director of one's own life but instead to merely play along, in a didactic play without the release of an interval, without a curtain ever falling. Engines of one's own biography, producing life lies, presenting oneself sometimes as this version, other times as that. Weary marionettes with a black stain on their hearts, acting for dear life, constantly bending, yet never allowed to bow.

[...]

She spoke about her husband, Alma's grandfather, as though every piece of knowledge were only temporary, as though while she talked, she was endlessly discovering new details about him which had only just occurred to her. She tried out words for him, listening into their echo to see whether they were appropriate and doing him justice; tinkered with his character as though he were a crossword puzzle and not a human being of flesh and blood. Every sentence conveyed both guarded affection and a peculiar distance, as though it were impossible to get close to this man. It's the war, she always said, when she faltered and couldn't go on, when she slaved away at his life as it tried to evade her enactment. It seemed to Alma as though her grandmother was struggling to capture the person who had emerged from the events, to bring his contradictions together into a single, recognisable man, to tell of one character rather than of many – connected only by the same name and body. She became agitated when she spoke of him, in one moment anxious not to give the wrong impression; in the next so harsh in her judgement that she seemed to frighten even herself. She filled in the gaps and corrected the dates which had so confused Alma in her childhood and younger years. She spoke of his years as a boy and as a soldier; of the earth in his coat pocket which he was sure had brought him back home – for superstition was a form of faith too – recounted what she had discovered in the course of a shared life, in the grandfather's weakest and strongest moments, collected from wine-merry, porous hours. His stubbornness in shirking the duty of remembering was matched only by the grandmother's insistence on doing it in his place. As she aged, she went through an astounding transformation, no longer feeling bound to the family's concept of loyalty, no longer feeling the need for concealment, and deception became a foreign concept to her; she thought as straight as the crow flies. She called things by their name, and even if her narratives were theatrical, she herself played no role in them. She despised what the grandfather had done, condemned his crimes, his alien deeds, but didn't feel shame for them, only for the lies, the excuses, the justifications which were supposed to undo them. To her, the truth no longer seemed like a betrayal. Pictures, facts and locations came to light, most of which Alma had never heard before. Her grandmother's war sounded different to the one that had been whispered about at home. The adventurous aspect became lost, a mixture of boredom and horror took its place. The story of having become a victim of circumstances wasn't one she allowed her husband; she knew that guilt was a personal exercise, and he who didn't take it on couldn't ask for forgiveness – even if it gave neither acquittal from evil nor divine applause for the attempt to be a good person. She coughed at the thought. She had the grandfather walk through his entire life once more for Alma, making him first a newborn, then in turn a boy, a soldier, a murderer, who wasn't protected from this judgement even by the orders he may have

followed. Then into a man who was imprisoned and tortured, who returned and yet left himself behind, and finally into a husband, a father, a grandfather lacking toes. This transformation from singing child to silent old man happened in a matter of hours, even though in reality it had taken years. She always answered Alma's questions precisely and unhurriedly, not wanting to conceal anything. Again and again during these conversations, she said that mercy was unearned devotion, that sad people often kept dogs they secretly loved, and evil people too, and as she spoke her hands rested on the grey heads of the two German shepherds. Even though it had always been hard to live with him, she said, she didn't want to die without him. And even though she usually only drank to the dead, when she was talking about him she always took a sip of Napoléon, briskly and with her eyes closed, as though there were no difference.

The two women grew close. Their encounters were walks in the memory of one; the other a visitor in the museum of a vanishing life, a guest in a mind filled with stories which had set the stage for her own life. Many childhood questions and some adult ones found an answer. It was enough for a late love. Once, on a morning when her grandfather wasn't there, Alma came by with a bunch of flowers, went through the house searching for her grandmother and found her in the bathroom. She was sitting in the tub, in shallow, cold water, and washing her hair amid cries of pain. When she saw Alma, she greeted her as though nothing had happened. She was too proud to send her out, but thanked her politely and hoarsely for the flowers. The image of the yellow daffodils in the hands of the old, naked woman – the goose-bumped skin above her hairless pudenda, that ascetic gallows beauty which precedes death – was one Alma would never forget for the rest of her life.

[...]

Emil's insensitivity to pain pushed his parents to their limits, as well as to the limits of language. How were they supposed to make it clear to him what it meant to torment oneself, to hurt someone with words, and what it meant when someone said in conversation, *you've hurt me*. How do you teach someone pain, how do you explain a feeling that can't be experienced, how do you describe an ache that never materialises? What is the flesh without the fundamental ability to suffer? Alma and Friedrich rejoiced at every small yet visible wound, every scratch, every bruise, because these harmless injuries made the danger visible. There was nothing they feared more than the invisible threat, hidden within the organs; inner, visceral damage, which, without causing discomfort, would go undiscovered until it was far too late. Both of them tried

to assume their child's pain sensitivity on his behalf, using their own bodily knowledge to think and predict, to verbally supply the warning signal which their son's organism was incapable of giving. Together they exercised the function of pain, devised safety rules and precautionary measures, and understood that they also had to protect Emil from the dangers that lurked in day-to-day household tasks. Even the most harmless, benign objects were capable, if used incorrectly, of inflicting damage. And so Emil had to be consistently reminded at Christmastime not to pull the hot baking tray with the cinnamon stars and raspberry thumbprint cookies out of the oven with bare hands, and that he had to sit hungrily in front of a steaming bowl of soup for minutes on end before he was allowed to eat it. To wash with lukewarm water only, not too hot and not too cold. That if something fell accidentally into an open fire, he wasn't to thrust his arm deep into the flames in order to rescue it. That new shoes could inflict blisters and chafed feet. That he couldn't bang his head against the wall when he was angry, or bend his fingers back so far that they broke in order to get attention, applause or a disbelieving look. That the body had limits and contained a fragility which was designed to protect it. Little by little he understood, but the most difficult thing was teaching him that injuring himself wasn't a magic trick or stunt with which to impress; that it wasn't an exotic performance, neither for himself nor for others.

Every evening, they examined Emil like an animal that was to be sold. They patted him down from top to bottom, to see if he had a swollen wrist or a nail embedded in the sole of his foot. They checked the intactness of his body, following a strict protocol to ensure they didn't forget anything, and searched for an error, an inconsistency, a defect. They knew every bone and every tendon, everything that a person could comprehend, from the outside, of another's body. They counted his young ribs and traced their arcs with their fingers, became familiar with every kink and every irregularity both on and beneath his skin. They looked into his throat and ears, and beneath his tongue like someone peeking under a carpet, wishing that their gaze reached even further, down into his belly, to his organs, his liver, his heart. Emil reluctantly submitted to these examinations, feeling even in his first few years of life that his body didn't belong to him alone, but that his parents had a peculiar claim to it. Alma and Friedrich themselves sometimes found it improper, almost impolite, to leave their son no secrets and to so shamelessly grant themselves access to a body that wasn't theirs. It was an unsolicited, necessary closeness, which they often didn't want, and for which, on some days, they weren't sure who suffered the most: the one enforcing it upon the other, or the one who had to submit to it.

The self-control it took them not to go mad or to become the kind of unbearable parents who make the unavoidable dangers of existing in this world into one great big ban. They took turns cautioning one another against alarmism and paranoia, and urged a composure that took into account the uncontrollability of the world. As much as they raised Emil to be cautious, they didn't want his vigilance to turn into a fear of life. And they often asked themselves how you can teach a child who doesn't know vulnerability how to be a human being. How can you teach it compassion when it doesn't know how greatly something can hurt? In the evenings at the kitchen table, over wine and gin, they debated to what extent vulnerability and the accompanying presentiment of death makes a human a human. And whether it's possible to love without it.

As the years passed, Emil began to learn not pain itself, but its forms of expression. It was a mimicry of the painless. He imitated gestures when people hurt themselves, studied his playmates and emulated their contorted expressions and plaintive cries at home in front of the mirror. He attributed reactions to specific injuries and boo-boos, getting to know roughly which ones belonged together; that a cut knee required an Ow and that a grimace was appropriate after bumping into a door. Like an actor, he began to cry when he fell down the stairs, always hesitating for a second and observing the reactions from those around him, with tears in his eyes that had vanished by his next blink. He learned the fitting answers and, if someone asked whether it had hurt, said amid vigorous nodding and with great pride, *a little*. He soon understood that pain was important and made you important in the world, that it drew people's attention to you and made them familiar with one another. Yet despite all his efforts he still found it difficult to gauge the suffering of others. If other children, his friends, or aging neighbours were unwell, he would look at them either with interest or confusion, but always coolly, and on more than one occasion he misjudged his own strength during harmless scuffles and playful battles in the playground and hit out so forcefully that he hurt the other children without wanting to; there was no experience or inhibition to hold him back. But because he knew the feeling of melancholy and desperation only too well – a dead pet, lonely hours, a hurtful word –, Alma explained to him that he had to imagine pain as a kind of sadness in the body, a lovesickness of the hands, arms and legs. In the evenings he often sat on the velvet sofa and debated with his mother exactly how much something hurt somebody. He assessed the pain of scenarios thought up for him by Alma, concentrating as though making a mental calculation of the hurt, taking a guess and invariably estimating the extent of the misfortune as either too

large or too small. She gave him brainteasers on illnesses and accidents, gave him puzzles to solve about the fragility of the human being; she asked: how would a boy feel who bangs his head against the edge of the table, and what about a girl who falls from the garage roof? What happens to a man who is hit by a bullet? Does being elbowed in the side hurt more than having your hair pulled? Is it worse if you cut off your arm with a power saw, or if you run bare-legged through a field of stinging nettles? Is it more dangerous to jump off the kitchen chair or from the top of an apple tree? Does the cuff around the ear or a blow to the kidney have more repercussions? The mystery of whether it hurts more to break your knee or your heart – this she kept to herself for now. Both of them learnt that pain is something individual, and sometimes culturally influenced too. Alma had read that Cubans consider toothache and labour to be the worst pains, that a mountain tribe in the Philippines is afraid of dog bites and headaches above all else, and that German doctors agree there is nothing more painful than a heart attack and the colic which results from kidney stones. Together, Emil and Alma compared chilblains and burn blisters, fever and bruises, discovered stomach cramps and upsets, cuts and scratches, measles and whooping cough, spoke about splinters of glass and electric irons, heavy stones and sharp objects, sewing needles that prick through fingertips and pencils that stab into eyeballs. This was a catalogue of obvious and invisible wounds, and they worked their way steadily through it. For the secret ailments that could afflict a person, the ones concealed beneath the body's surface, they consulted medical books and encyclopaedias, which contained cross-sections that enabled Emil to look inside the human body, showing it as a being inhabited by strange forms and things, which, within the darkness of the body, could be struck by God-knows-what kind of illnesses. The mere idea of this exhausted Emil. Everything could cause pain, even things you couldn't see. The labyrinth of the intestine, the lungs, the liver (which lay inside the body like a stone), even the muscle fibres, which, it seemed to him, were sewn around a person like a suit, and the bony serpent of the spinal column which held him upright. Absorbed in his thoughts, he drew markings with coloured pens on the illustrations of the body's interior, as though this was his way of visualizing that pain resided there too, and then often fell asleep, worn out, in his mother's arms. Alma too felt sensitive and drained after these guessing games, as though the discussion of pain alone generated it and injected it into the body, and as though she needed to recover from its power.

Emil's bedroom was small, filled with football stickers, superhero figures and stuffed toys, but instead of posters, the bright walls were covered with x-rays. His own bones decorated the room, and Emil liked these light-flooded images of his unseen and unfelt pains. He remembered the occasion of each and every one, as though they were holiday mementoes. They were his

outsourced pain archive. Alma had begun to stick them to the wall so he didn't forget to take care of his bones even though he couldn't see or feel them, and before long an entire album adorned the wall. Every fracture told the story of a particular event, of a moment of larking around or a shock, of the familiar drive to the hospital, which they sometimes embarked upon out of precaution and sometimes out of necessity. They preferred to go once too often than once too little, because any undetected break could make the bones grow into abstruse shapes, so the doctors had explained. If they weren't careful, this could turn Emil into a geriatric, an invalid, while he was still a child, with a crooked back or stunted leg that would make him dependent on a walking frame or even confine him to a wheelchair. Radiographies of calf bones, ankle joints, jaw and pelvic bones filled his childhood bedroom, resembling the Sedlec Ossuary; a white hand seemed to wave its splayed fingers from the wardrobe, a skull next to the wooden miniature shop stared silently to the left. At bedtime, Alma and Emil often stood in the room as though they were in a museum, gazing at the depictions of his insides like someone would look at a painting. They studied the broken and re-knitted lines, the opacities and translucencies, the milky semi-tones. They looked inside Emil. These were intimate portraits, the complete blueprint of a child – an entire ghostly human skeleton, from the little bones of the toe up to the skullcap, hung on the bedroom walls. Alma was consistently amazed that a person could break so easily into pieces and yet still stand upright. Sometimes her child seemed brittle, fragile, almost glass-like, and other times he possessed a cold, energetic strength which startled her. Every evening, once Emil had gone to sleep, she stood wearily in front of her son's bed, looking down at him, following with her gaze the contours of his body beneath the blanket and assuring herself one last time of its wholeness. There seemed to be something strangely unbroken about him, and there in the x-ray ossuary a confusing feeling of tenderness overcame her, which she had to familiarise herself with again and again. Then she left the room and Emil – without a nightlight, but with his own gleaming bones.

Alma liked sleep; she was grateful to it, for it meant her son was in safe hands. These were the least dangerous hours of the day. Only for a while did Emil suffer from the night terrors which often haunt little children. Then he would awaken at the wrong moment from the deepest sleep, his pupils wide, in a highly-energetic state, his little shirt drenched in cold sweat, thrashing around in fear, and wouldn't recognise his parents as they rushed to his side. Disoriented, he flailed around him, a child, fallen out of the night, without location, without a dream, his skin blue with fear. He saw only morphic shapes, tangled geometries, and screamed in mortal agony at Alma as she shook him that she was a triangle, a circle, a ball, and they trembled together:

Emil, seized by the horror of loneliness, and Alma, stricken by the horror of not being recognised. And while Emil would have forgotten all about it by the next morning, Alma was haunted for days by an unease which reached beyond the horrors of the night.

Despite all the challenges, Emil's parents tried to give him a normal life. Alma and Friedrich learnt more with every passing day about how to handle their unusual child, and in the beginning distributed flyers at each of the biannual meetings in their building, so that everyone knew what to do if they were to find Emil with a visible injury, or in the throes of some daredevilry. Most of the neighbours and cohabitants were half interested, half confused. They always made an effort to do the right thing, but kept their distance. The children, who were in a state of constant transformation themselves, were scarcely bothered by his otherness, and unabashed with their curiosity. Despite their differences, they still grew up together, sharing not childhood illnesses but instead the invisible growing pains that set in when not only the body, but the human being inside it, shoots upwards. Alma carved notches into the bark of the trees next to the merry-go-round when the throng of children gathered there in spring, queuing up to be measured out in the open air. Wiry, muscular children, at first pale from the winter and then sunburnt after the warm months. When the summer came to an end, those who had gone on holiday or to see relatives returned, grown and unfamiliar, with a few more centimetres and a new expression, sometimes serious, sometimes arrogant. Emaciated from all the growing, so that their ribs were visible beneath their T-shirts, and with dark circles beneath their eyes. Once everyone had returned, they stared at one another, asked Emil about his latest scars and positioned themselves by Alma's notches, to see how far they had grown beyond her and themselves. Emil spent every summer at home; they never travelled far, not daring to spend long in a different place, because if something were to happen, they wanted to be close to the familiar doctors and hospitals. Year after year, he sat with Alma on the roof terrace, on an old Persian rug and beneath a parasol, a Gameboy or comic book in his hand, the taste of milk lolly on his tongue – and, if he had sucked it down to the stick, also of wood. The man with the prosthesis from the floor above stretched out beside them on a sun lounger, becoming browner each summer than the one before, and only his artificial leg always remained pale. Mothers with children climbed up the steps to sunbathe, putting the little ones in wash tubs and large buckets filled with water, sat down on the hot floor and dipped their hands into the cool wetness. Sometimes they went to the swimming pool, like back in Alma's darkest time, and Emil jumped so often from the ten-metre tower that, down by the pool's edge, Alma hands went cold with nerves, despite the heat of the summer day.