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Waves

Novel

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Sample translation by Kári Driscoll

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In the evening you ask me why I love you and I say, “Because you smell the way you smell.”

And then you ask: “What do I smell like?” and I say, “Like only you smell.”

And you smile, I can see it even though it’s dark, and you kiss me on the forehead, lay your head on your pillow, and fall asleep.

And I think about how we met and how we realized that we wanted to be together, and then how we realized that we actually could, that we could be together and look at the world together and try to hold onto something every now and then, to put into words what we liked and what we didn’t like, what scared us, what amazed us, what made us laugh, or cry.

And I never could have imagined before we met that something like this might be possible, and that’s why for me, everything—you, me, the world, language—became one. And since then all I have wanted was for it to stay like this for ever.

I awake when everyone else is asleep.

I go into the kitchen. I turn on the tap and pick up the sponge. I hear loud crying.

So I put down the sponge and reach for the thermos. I pour the pre-boiled water into a small plastic bottle, add powdered milk, turning the bottle in a slow circular motion, and then head in the direction of our younger daughter who is just a couple of weeks old. By the time I reach her, she is already so worked up that she cannot drink. She coughs, splutters. I pick her up. Her crying grows louder. I try pressing her closer to me to calm her down. I squeeze her into my chest, which sometimes does the trick, even though it feels violent, and I am amazed at how quickly my inner calm evaporates and my compassion diminishes the longer I hear her like this: high-pitched, monotonous, shrill.

And at a certain point I realize that there's no point in squeezing her like this, that she just keeps twisting away from me with all the astonishing strength of her tiny body, crying ever louder, and so in a fit of anger I jump up in the air and she falls silent, and I come back down with her in my arms and I kneel down on the floor and hold her, hear her quiet whimpering and feel her whole body trembling.

And I ask myself why it doesn't bother me more than it does that I am incapable of experiencing this situation as anything other than exasperating. I am incapable of seeing this tiny, defenceless creature in my arms at this moment as anything other than a kind of machine that appears to be malfunctioning but which it ought to be possible to get back under control with a few deft adjustments. I feel my own coldness even when I look at her tiny mouth, which is open again, at her tongue quivering inside it, and I imagine the sound of her cries passing through my face, my skull, my brain.

I wonder if maybe the water in the thermos is the wrong temperature. I carry the stiff, noisy creature on my left arm back

into the kitchen, switch on the kettle, put several plastic spoonfuls of powdered milk into the little plastic bottle and then pour out some of the water I boiled hours ago and pour some of the freshly boiled water in instead. I take a little sip to make sure it's not too hot and moments later I am sitting on the couch, sticking the nipple of the bottle into that gaping mouth out of which there now issues a keening that rises and falls like a wave, so intense that she chokes and splutters as she gasps for air, her tiny body rocked by fits of coughing until, having succeeded in taking some in, Z vomits the milk from last time all over my chest, and I decide not to wipe her or myself clean and instead mechanically move the bottle back and forth, back and forth, back and forth. And out of the corner of my eye I can see that, depending on what she is doing, I am jabbing the tip of the bottle by turns at her chin, her cheek, or into the empty void of her crying mouth.

And I know that this is all normal.

What I don't know is if it's normal to have ugly scenes pass before my mind's eye, scenes involving my fist, and I also don't know if my sudden sense of fellow feeling with those parents who don't manage to raise their children into adulthood, who neglect them or harm them in some way, is a sign of my growing or shrinking empathy. And I also don't know if it's normal to wonder how you are supposed to feel empathy for something that can't even look at you, let alone talk to you.

And just as I have convinced myself that we are all lost, that there is no hope of holding back the inevitable collapse of human community into ever cooler individualities, at that very moment you come and take the screaming baby from me and carry her back into the bedroom, and soon all is quiet, and I fall asleep on the couch. I wake up at the alarm, go and get our elder daughter B up, have breakfast with her, all the while sorting out the little linen bags for the Advent calendar. I help her get dressed and ask her what she wants in her calendar, toys or sweets. Toys, she

answers, and, she says, she wants an Advent wreath. We agree that we will make one on Saturday. She brushes her teeth. I get the laundry out of the machine in the basement. Then the doorbell rings. The neighbour's daughter is here to accompany B to school. And not long after I am standing on the balcony and waving them off. I am still waving long after they have turned to look at the ground at the leaves through which their feet are carrying them into the day.

And no one has ever been able to explain how to love without holding on, or how to live without letting go. And I feel the towel against my skin, and I know that I will feel better if I rub it hard against my face. After all, it makes sense: the receptors in my skin that are being stimulated by the towel are connected to my brain. So why shouldn't it be possible to rub away bad thoughts? And that reminds me of the legend that Ivan Karamazov tells his brother Alyosha about the saint who lies down beside a sick man and breathes in his foul breath, and how Ivan finds this all completely overblown and pointless, a lie designed to uphold the worldly power of the Church. To him this sort of closeness is not just impossible but not even desirable, and I remember that I thought the same thing until I read the answer Alyosha finds to his sad brother's doubts: a kiss on the mouth.

And perhaps I was only so touched by that kiss at the time because it seemed so true, so clear, so close, so quick and fleeting, because perhaps that is the only kind of truth that is possible, a momentary truth, of lips briefly touching and then that's it, the very next moment the lie is again possible and even necessary, for love, slowness, or amazement. Like in the novel by Hanya Yanagihara where Willem deliberately trips and falls flat on his face every day to make the disabled children he looks after laugh. And it works: every day they kill themselves laughing all over again, as they say, though in fact of course they're *healing* themselves laughing. And what would be gained if I told Z as soon as she is old enough to understand me that I didn't have the courage to kiss her when I saw her lying there in the NICU with tubes in her nose and mouth providing her with air and food, and as I stood there next to her she was so tiny and I didn't know how to let her know that I wanted her to be all right and I think, if I'm being completely honest, it was probably because I was afraid of wanting it too much, because, you see, if, in the end, she hadn't been all right, that would have meant that I'd lost, somehow, as if this were all some sort of game of who-knows-what I was playing against who-knows-whom. And so,

instead, in part because of the two nurses who were there, I just put my hand on her back, but withdrew it again soon because my hand was of course much colder than the heat lamp above her, and only when I gently lifted my hand did I feel the delicate little hairs on her reddened skin.

And a few days later I come across this passage in *A Little Life*: “There were times when the pressure to achieve happiness felt almost oppressive, as if happiness were something that everyone should and could attain, and that any sort of compromise in its pursuit was somehow your fault,” and I copy it out because I have a feeling it could be important for us and then a few minutes later I still fail to suppress my anger when I see you crying as you sit on the sofa looking out the window holding your morning coffee in your hands. The little one is still sleeping and the big one is already at school, so I get up and do the washing up or hang the laundry, while I contemplate the defeat of the Sixth Army at Stalingrad.

And when you asked me recently what it feels like to be a member of a potentially violent sex I thought for a long time, in part because it seemed right not to answer such a question impulsively, in part because I realized that I had never asked myself the question in this way, which is surprising given that I live in the present, that I have a mother and a sister and two daughters, that I’ve read Solnit and marched in solidarity with the Zurich women’s strike, thinking all the while and with a certain degree of pride that gender equality must be just around the corner thanks to good men like me. But I had so far completely disregarded how the most important, most puzzling, most interesting aspect of gender inequality, namely that it’s the men who are violent, might factor into my self-constitution. And yet I’ve known for a long time, since long before I flipped over that table when we were having an argument, that there are forces inside me that I can neither name nor control once they are set in motion, and that all I can do is to try and control the

cognitive and emotional mechanisms that set them off, which, since that time, with the help of a therapist, I have been more or less managing to do. But then I remembered that my capacity for destruction had begun to preoccupy me much earlier: in the mornings, on the Munich U-Bahn, on my way to school, when I used to stare at my feet while other kids got on, kids who were bigger and stronger than me and more numerous, talking loudly in foreign languages, and I would think about whether I would be able to take them if they attacked me, and if so how, with the emergency hammer beside the window or the fire extinguisher beneath the seat; or at night, when I would dream of piles of emaciated corpses, of dismembered soldiers, of *Volkssturm* men hanging from streetlamps, raped BDM girls or truncheon-swinging concentration camp guards, kids with rocket launchers facing down advancing T-34 tanks, and endless mass graves filled with ever-more-slowly twitching naked bodies, surrounded by the rank and file, military, police, military police, and it occurs to me that when it comes to the question of what I might be capable of I've always thought of myself primarily as a German, not so much as a man.

And then it's the evening and I'm sitting on a bench outside our elder daughter's school, giving the younger the bottle, getting increasingly annoyed at the Spanish-speaking women sitting right in front of me who are even louder than the already much-too-loud music that is drowning out the choir standing in front of the old, brightly lit building and in which our daughter is supposedly also singing – this morning at breakfast she had been practicing – a Spanish Christmas carol at a Zurich primary school. Perhaps the women in front of me are only talking so loudly because they already know the song. And projected onto the school in giant letters are the words, We Stand Up for Women, an equal rights initiative against domestic violence. And even more strongly than usual I feel that I am on the Right Side of History, and suddenly it seems to me that for the first time our second daughter, the one I am feeding from the bottle and who

is wrapped in my French army jacket, is looking at me, her brown eyes suddenly calm, clear, focused and earnest, and that there seems to be a person behind them, unlike the eyes of the stuffed seagull, given to us by a friend from Hamburg to celebrate the birth, that has been sitting on the dining table in the living room ever since and that I sometimes catch staring at me when I stumble out of bed with back-pain at three-thirty in the morning to sit beside it with a pen and paper and wait until my bleary eyes can see clearly again.

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