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By the Sward

Novel

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PROLOGUE

In Paris I keep my focus permanently on something else so that I cannot, it cannot happen to me here, not whilst I am en route, not now, not: I take deep breaths in and out just in time, my lungs unfurl, and retract, like a paper bag along the line of its creases.

If I close my eyes for a moment, there, beyond my blinking, I can see another one blow himself up, see my own self tucked under a seat; I watch the explosion, my head pulled in, feel the shock wave, hear it, see someone make a sign and press something, make a sign and shout something, and then everything is torn to smithereens. I open my eyes. As if I had any idea what a blast does to a body.

I breathe and breathe and focus on this as much as I can; I pay no attention to items of luggage, to men's luggage (all the images and audio files are of men), I pay no attention to their daypacks, their money-belts, their suitcases, plastic bags, holdalls. I don't listen to the suitcase wheels clattering on the edges of the escalator steps or dragging over the flooring panels. They can clatter without me. The lobes of my lungs, it is the lobes of my lungs deflated in my ribcage which I concentrate on, my footsteps, too, and where they are taking me. Through the arched windows it is already twilight, streams of people walking the concourse after work, hundreds of homeward journeys, commuting footfall to the trains for neighbouring towns or the *banlieues*. Everyone knows their way through the identical tunnel-like passages, no one seems

to hesitate, no one stops after a few paces to fish their ticket out of their rucksack one last time, as if it were a compass.

It works. I am able to keep things in order. I ignore the tinny rattling of luggage trolleys (like the ones in the footage from Brussels Airport - one of them was wearing a fishing hat, a daft little fishing cap, an incredibly mundane detail). I do not look at anyone long enough for any real suspicion to form, none of those unbearable suspicious feelings I cannot atone for. Just as I am incapable of reeling back in any of those situations, unable to make them undone, cannot simply go up to the person and say: I am sorry. Really sorry that I assumed someone like you, no, specifically you, were a murderer - my mistake. Instead I look down at the flooring panels with their arrows pointing the way to the platform. Along the passage and down to the metro, descending into one of the underground tunnels, deeper and warmer here, in the caverns, in the bowels, of the underground.

The platform reached, the water bottle in my hand is like an aluminium baseball bat, that flashes through my mind for the briefest of moments, but it's a comforting thought nonetheless. I take small sips, other chests rise and fall near me, packed in close, those clouds of breath on the back of my neck practically. In the throng, it is impossible to tell whether anyone in my vicinity has one of those belts on, or anything in his sport's bag, whether anyone looks nervous, underslept, or are about to pull out a gun.

I can only glimpse the ground, there are so many shoes on it.

The train pulls in, sucking air with it that tugs at the straps of my backpack, the wind audible as it bursts from the tunnel. I have to unclench my shoulders again. A person squeezes out from the carriage in front of me, a young woman who makes her way towards a man when the doors open. He greets her. I turn my head towards them, not wanting to miss the moment their mouths meet, her big smile just beforehand and their expressions as their lips combine fiercely.

It was cold by the edge of the French country road, the asphalt gleaming beneath a single lantern, and it took more than half an hour for any car to appear, a Citroën that would once have been white. It drew to a standstill right in front of me and before I could panic the driver got out and it was Ella with a friendly smile, come to collect me.

“This is what we use sometimes to take the sheep to slaughter,” Ella said, throwing my luggage into the back of the small van. “Or maybe to move them to a different pasture. A few rams got out once and we had to gather them up, one by one, along the country road. They were totally stressed-out, poor things.” I smiled politely. It was muggy and warm inside the car and it smelled of straw, sheep dung and plastic.

I had only a limited view of our surroundings in the beam of the headlights. Everything was sharp-edged, the rocks by the side of the road were rugged, the vegetation jagged. It had rained the entire bus journey, and now moisture hung over the surface of the road. The curves in the road were pocketed with mist, and I could neither see nor guess what lay beyond. When a few windows shone dimly from the darkness, Ella pointed to them and said that was where they lived. She drove with confidence, although the clutch sounded like it was being scraped along the asphalt.

“Gregor will have cooked by now, I hope. Are you vegetarian?”

I nodded.

“Not too strictly, I hope. Our daughter’s poorly just now, so any dish without meat is impossible.” She laughed. “Well, we’ll test the waters.”

I fished around for something to say. I stared out into the darkness in silence, feeling like I was still alone by the edge of the road.

“Oh, you have a daughter?” I said eventually. “I hadn’t picked up on that from your emails.” She had once mentioned a Jade in passing, and I’d thought it was a pretty eccentric name for a dog.

Jade was wearing a blue jumper and that was the only part of her that was visible. She was lying stretched out on the sofa in the kitchen-cum-living-room when we arrived and took no notice of me at first. She called out to Ella, who sat down next to her before she had even put her bag down or taken off her shoes. The two of them whispered together. The man, Gregor, had his

back to me, and was leaning over the sink. The second Ella had entered the room he had started talking to her, unaware that she was preoccupied with her daughter. I stood in the doorway and my eyes were drawn to the phone, within reach on the computer desk. I yearned to pick it up and to hear voices other than those in this room, Lukas, Aseel and Mejet, Merle. The car ride with Merle; it was just a few hours ago that I'd been sitting next to her, wanting to ask her if she would travel all the way with me, if she would carry me into the hostel that evening and into the train station the next morning: can you order for me in the restaurant and spoon the food into my mouth, beneath the scarf I plan to wear over my head from now on? Can you explain at the reception desk why you are carrying me on your back, how you are my guardian and why I have to wear this scarf over my face?

“Hello Noa,” Gregor said, wiping his forehead with the back of his hands. His hands were still foamy as he hugged me and my backpack hello when I finally took the whole of myself into the room. He helped me with my rucksack, hesitated briefly and then placed it outside in the hallway. “There’s never enough space in here,” he said. I could take a seat at the table, no, no need to help, it was my time to rest. I took in my surroundings as surreptitiously as possible. The walls of the parlour had plenty of patches of dark discolouring, soot perhaps or something else. There was a small wood-burning stove in the alcove where an open fireplace would once have been; the wall behind it showed the exposed stone-work of the external wall. The mantelpiece was cluttered with stuff, some animal bones maybe, other things so cloaked in dust they were unrecognisable with a few faded plastic figures in amongst, chocolate egg surprises.

I tipped back my head. The wooden slats of the ceiling probably doubled as the floorboards of the upper storey. In some places the dark wood looked ravaged, white flecks whether from the fire or mould, it was hard to tell. I continued to look around, and my eyes met those of the kid. Jade had stopped whispering and was examining me openly and very attentively for a sick child. Ella was no longer by her side.

“Hello.” I smiled, but my jaw was clenched.

“Hello.”

Her eyes struck me as being extraordinarily green but it could have been the light. She was obviously used to these first evenings and took over the talking role.

“Was your journey alright?”

I gave a quick nod.

“Yes, it was just very long, but it was okay, I had an overnight stop.”

“I’m not well today, I have a stomach ache,” she said weakly and propped her head back.

“Time to sit down at the table anyway, please.” Gregor set down the steaming baking-form in front of me. “We’re not going to eat with you reclining and groaning on the couch.”

Ella was standing behind him and shook her head and made a face at Jade. She reached out her hand: “Come on, then, you can sit on my lap.”

A cedar tree grew in front of the house. From the children’s room where I had spent the first night, I could see the dew caught in its branches and the height of its branches as they reached into the air, but little else. The area beyond remained obscured. The Citroën C15 which Ella had picked me up in was parked under the cedar. A model that was discontinued, but there was a black market trade for the remaining few. *Rather than re-starting production*, Gregor had said with a dismissive wave - *that’s the French for you*, he’d added.

It was so cold in the children’s room that I could see my own breath. I got dressed all tensed up, and caught my eye in the mirror. It was almost like having an accomplice, I could have winked at my reflection, encouragingly, as if one of us was Merle telling me that tomorrow everything would be easier and better.

My first job would be taking the sheep up to the crest of the mountain with Gregor and Jade, and then to keep an eye on them for several hours. *You’ll be expected to do this on your own soon*, Ella had said before falling asleep.

I went into the kitchen-cum-living-room. No one was there, and the room seemed bleaker by daylight, the walls more obviously un-plastered. *It’s no Alpine chalet with gingham tablecloths, you know?* I hadn’t been able to work out from Ella’s last email, whether this was said in jest or with an aggressive tone.

I found some small bowls, cut a banana into some oat flakes and poured milk from a plastic bottle from the discount store. Only to find I couldn’t eat it because my stomach was a knot of nerves.

Ella wouldn’t be home until lunchtime from the community shop which sold produce from the small farms of the surrounding valleys. Gregor and Ella had preserved goods there, jams mainly, the occasional chutney. I discovered opened jars in the fridge; I would unscrew them and smell them when the nausea had passed.

I had got up too early. For an hour I listened to the clock that could be taken down off the wall and used as a kitchen scale, leafed through the brochures piled high on the coffee table,

and began rinsing measuring beakers and ladles. I didn't dare leave the room. In case they had to come looking for me and be held up because of me. I didn't want to throw away the muesli but nor could I just leave it there. Eventually I took it up to the fridge-like temperature of the children's room and could have laughed aloud about how embarrassing this was or told Merle about it, or bitten down on my hand.

Jade came stumbling down the stairs at last, rubbing her eyes with sleep, and wearing an extremely grubby sweatshirt.

“Dad's already gone, I think.”

As we were putting our shoes on, I asked her first if she was feeling better, and then how to pronounce her name correctly. We barely made eye contact. I must have spoken too softly, it was only on my second attempt that she understood me. The previous evening, I'd had to repeat myself continuously, my voice strained. My own smallness was hard to bear. Merle would have told me you simply need to be patient on your first day.

“It's said the French way.” Jade demonstrated it a few times, the soft French *s-c-h* and then the barely audible *e* at the end.

“If you wrote that down in German, your name would be *Schade*/'a shame'!” I wanted to grin at her, but she was already up and away, skipping down the steps. But at least I could hear her laughing, as she shouted back: *Ha! That's silly!*

Gregor was standing with both dogs on the pasture on the other side of the road and he waved us over. I couldn't remember the name of the older dog, the female. The big fellow, Wolf Two, was higher than Gregor's waist when seated. Gregor opened the gate and rattled a bucket of pellets. The pasture was on the flank of a slope, and the animals made their way towards us slowly over the precipitous meadow, stopping frequently to nip at the short grass. It was drizzling wet, and the animals appeared dirty to my eyes, almost grey.

“Normally we leave them up on the mountain by themselves all winter, and they come down here much later. We take them up in November and that's them,” Gregor said. Jade had disappeared into the meadow. When I saw her again, she was running after the sheep and driving them onwards.

“They wander freely over the hillsides and feed on last year's chestnuts. We only head up once a day to give them water and the occasional new salt block.”

Gregor turned around and led the way, right along the middle of the road. I kept beside him, and a few metres behind us the animals followed, the dogs walking with Jade. For a brief

moment, through the trees above us, we could see the house; it stood out all long in its stonework against the hillside, brightly plastering only around the windows. There must be other people living in it; so far I had seen less than half the house. I didn't manage to ask Gregor - I was too busy turning my head and looking back: the swaying sheep bodies, crowded in behind us, absurd and beautiful.

“We have winter and summer pastures. Actually, the way we do it is a semi-*transhumance*.”

He noticed my silence.

“The moving of a flock from one location to another. There's a major re-location here every summer, comparable to the Alm activity in Germany. Thousands of animals are on the move. It's still a good two weeks walking from here to the high plateaus. Ella thinks it's silly, she calls it shepherd romanticism. Maybe she's right. But it must be breathtaking to take part in.”

I nodded but I still couldn't really imagine it. Even this, walking with fifty animals along a rural road, seemed illogical, as if it wasn't real, from times gone by. My feet were freezing. The road rose steeply for a time, not a single car in sight, no one who had to stop for us. A wall ran along the road to our left, and the drop beyond it must have been deep, for only the tops of trees were visible, and their roots must have been a long way down. Mist rose from the basin of the valley, or perhaps it was cloud, I didn't know how to tell the difference.

To our right, scrub and bent-over trees grew on the slope, olive trees, I presumed, I could stretch out my arm and feel for the firm leaves. Craggy rocks jutted out from the ground below.

“They're southern European, hardy, they keep their foliage all year. Called evergreen oaks, you probably haven't heard of them, right? You don't get them in northern Europe, if we count Germany as part of northern Europe. The half of the continent that gets things done.” Suddenly Gregor took hold of one of the oak tree trunks, placed his foot on an outcrop of rock and started to climb his way up the slope. I followed him. I didn't know Gregor well enough yet to start a discussion about the price of things, or his definition of *getting things done* - but when did I ever know anyone well enough for a discussion: I lapsed into silence again, and felt ashamed, as though that were somehow a legitimate contribution.

The hillside rose steeply and the drizzling rain made the earth bubble up. I lost my footing once. I looked around again; the sheep were following us with ease. Sheep are amazingly good climbers and are even related to chamois. Gregor was out of breath.

“We’d just brought them down actually. But now Ella wants the slopes to be systematically grazed again. The meadow still has some growing to do. I would have left them up there, me, saved some time. On the other hand, you’ll see it in a moment - when you get here you’ll look forward to being up there.”

It took a long while until almost all the animals had left the road. One lone sheep remained, stock-still. Jade, not much bigger than the sheep, grabbed hold of it, dug her small hands into its wool and pushed with all her might until the sheep yielded and joined the rest.

“You are so strong,” I shouted across, and although she shrugged her shoulders, she looked pleased all the same.

The climb required concentration now, and Gregor too was silent. Eventually the woods thinned out, the green oaks were replaced by chestnut trees, their trunks more spaced out. The gradient eased, the going was comfortable. Gregor paused.

“We’ll let them wander at peace now for two hours and later we’ll take them down a bit. There’s a place we can access by car to bring them water.” He leaned on the staff he had used along the way to hold back individual animals who had tried to push past. The flock spread out, the only sound to be heard was their rootling around in the leaves. I crouched down and reached out a hand towards a plump sheep munching on a chestnut. Before I could touch it, it ran off; I felt stung, and hoped neither Gregor nor Jade had noticed. Jade was further down, out of range of my voice, maybe deliberately, or to be left in peace to play with the dogs.

I stood up and stretched my back. I had to give myself time, that was all, remind myself that I had plenty of days and weeks ahead of me. And besides from up here I could survey the whole valley for the first time. Wet, certainly, with a scattering of pale clouds, hatched, partially obscured, but the individual houses were old and made of stone and the trees were clad in green for all it was winter, as if time followed different rules here.

For lunch we ate a loaf of light bread which Ella had brought from the bakery after work, along with a salty salad of olives, onions and sheep’s cheese. I sat down next to Gregor, because from there you could see through the window to the the valley beyond. The fog had lifted in the slight breeze, borne upwards as if up a chimney: I hadn’t realised. Pale sunlight shone over the knoll and onto the far side of the valley; below it, I could just make out the curving course of the slender river.

“Oh, that’s Jade’s place,” Ella said, but Jade, her cheeks still rosy from our expedition, just shrugged and plopped down on the chair opposite mine.

“Don’t mind.”

“Alright, but let’s keep to this now, don’t switch places every time, ok?” This was directed at me and I had to look at Ella to catch her smile.

I tore off a hunk of bread and heaped a helping of salad on my plate; at last, an appetite of the sort I got after swimming, and all the knots in my stomach had gone.

“Look, this is the best way to do it.” Jade pressed her piece of bread into the oily dressing at the bottom of the dish. We grinned at each other as I copied her. We ate, and apart from some discussion between Ella and Gregor about the afternoon’s work, that I couldn’t really follow, hardly any words were exchanged. I found it difficult, this silence at the table. It had to mean something, it must be my fault that they didn’t ask me anything.

“How did you happen to move here?”

Ella cut the rind off a piece of cheese, popped it in her mouth and nodded over to Gregor, who understood it as a request.

“We were around thirty years old. I was the one who had a particular yearning to come here. I had always liked the area, even before the two of us met. But you have no idea what this place looked like at the start!” When Gregor laughed his voice was much higher than his speaking voice. A high-pitched giggle that contained a hint of embarrassment at his own laughter.

“How do you mean?”

“This place used to be a chateau.” As Gregor continued to speak, I discreetly wiped some oil from my chin. “Well-to-do families had lived here for a long time, because of the view, I suppose. But the last time the land had actually been farmed would be several hundred years ago. In the eighteenth century monks lived here.” He pointed vaguely behind us and I turned my head, but all I could see, of course, was the wall of the kitchen and living area. “Take a closer look at the other wings of the house when you’re out later. As many as twenty people used to live here at once.”

I frowned: “The walls must be really ancient. Creepy.” Ella nodded.

I turned to look at the wall again, which surely had to contain some clue of all those years of habitation, a lingering warmth perhaps, or a scent. Jade was humming to herself. I would have loved to ask something original to make me stand out from the helpers who had gone before me.

“In any event,” Gregor continued, “we had to clear whole sections, the brambles left us no choice. Honestly, there were proper forests of thorns. We worked away for weeks, like oxen, on so many fronts at once. As I remember it, we never got more than three hours sleep. We had to make the house habitable. And above all else, we had to prepare the fields. It was a sheer act

of faith. It took months simply to make the land usable again. Ella became pregnant soon thereafter, and when Jade arrived we had just harvested our first crop.”

Ella’s face lit up, it was like a veil being drawn back: “To my dying day I’ll be able to remember those first aubergines, what it was like to hold them in my hands and to fill those first potato crates.”

It was as if Jade and I were witnessing the younger versions of themselves, oblivious to the splinters of thorns in the skin of their arms and hands, because they had to get everything *ready*. They were so strong and shimmered across the table from one another.

Then Ella stood up, cradling the teapot in both hands. “It is so long ago. If I were to get just three hours sleep these days, I’d soon give up the ghost.”

The glow had left the air, drawn upwards like the mist. Jade jumped up from her chair.

“I’d like to watch videos now, can you finish your lunch-break somewhere else? And what’s the plan this afternoon, is Noa going to plant more onions? I don’t feel like doing it anymore, I’ve been outside for hours, Mama, I’m *crevée*.”
