# 1.

I’ve handed myself over to the police. I’m trying to get rid of the dirt stuck underneath my fingernails but I’m having a hard time. I can’t seem to get them completely clean. What I need is a thin blade like the tip of the steel scissors I keep next to my toothbrush on the bathroom sink. My nails are long enough to get dirty but too short to scrape the dirt out. I should wash my hands. I want to wash my hands. No I don’t… It wasn't my idea to wash them. At this moment in time, I don’t think my hygiene is an issue. It’s keeping me occupied, that's all. But when I walked into the office, one of them looked at me and said:

### You can go and clean yourself up if you want.

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In the moment, I politely declined. Now it's all I can think about. Without the fine blade of my scissors, I’m just shifting the dirt from one nail to the next. Whichever one does the cleaning ends up dirty. I’ve never used nail clippers. I don't like the idea of the clippings flying off in any old direction. I’d use the plastic corner of my driving licence but it's in my wallet, which I don’t have in my jacket anymore. My pockets are empty. Looking at the pale brown dirt under my fingernails, I start thinking about that sentence again.

### You can go and clean yourself up if you want.

The link between the two has now become an obsession. Water, soap, and the foam that forms when the two meet. Because they wouldn’t have suggested I clean myself up unless I needed to. I must need to do it. I need to do it. They're right. All this shit under my fingernails is disgusting. I have to get rid of it. I lift my head, swallow my saliva to wake up my numb vocal chords, and ask them if

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I can go and wash my hands. They smile and calmly explain that now is not the time. I should have said something sooner, should have accepted their offer. I was too slow. I regret that now. But by the time I hang my head and start staring at my feet again, I’ve forgotten about it. The urge has gone. Maybe because it wasn’t my idea to begin with. It wasn’t a *visceral* urge. When it comes down to it, I’m sure I only felt dirty because they assumed I would be. They assume, therefore I am.

I handed myself over to the police. That’s what Jeanne told me. I don’t remember. I guess I imagined them coming to my house to get me and dragging me out by the collar, handcuffs around my wrists. But what actually happened, this Sunday morning around 8.30, was that I went to the police station all by myself. Of my own free will.

*I think you need to use the bathroom.*

Just as I was tackling the ring finger, cleaning it as best I could, they asked

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me again if I wanted to use the bathroom. But this time it was for a different reason. This time they sounded certain: I needed to go urgently. As if I were a child, unable to let anyone know in time to prevent a catastrophe. I thought to myself, surely at my age, I’d know whether I needed to go or not? But the next thing I knew, they just stopped asking what I thought. Jeanne took my arm and lifted me up from the chair. She didn’t need to insist. My body just followed her. With her hand between my armpit and elbow, I felt the cold, damp sweat against my skin. I don’t usually sweat. I don’t know if it was her who said it, if it was her who wanted me to go to the bathroom. But I know she was the one who initiated things, seeing as I was being indecisive.

*I think you need to use the bathroom.*

Since the beginning of all this, I haven’t been able to tell their voices apart. The timbre always sounds exactly the same. And I don’t know if they’re doing it on purpose but they only talk when I’m not looking. Every time I

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lift my head up, their mouths are closed. I don’t know whether it’s a game they’re playing or whether it’s just that I can’t hold my head upright anymore and that’s why I can’t tell for certain who’s talking to me. But I’m ashamed about having turned myself in. That’s why I have to look at my feet.

We reach the bathroom at the end of a long hallway. Jeanne shows me where to go and stands nearby. I can hear her waiting on the other side of the door. I pull my trousers down and hold onto the toilet paper dispenser so I don’t have to sit on the seat because that would be disgusting. My urine comes out a reddish colour in the bowl. It looks as though there’s blood in it. I pee for ages, all the while looking down at my shoes. I realise they were right. I did need to go to the bathroom. How did they know? What else do they know that I don’t?

QUESTION: What was the first thing she said to you?

ANSWER: She called me on her mobile phone at 08.16. She was crying... in a complete state of panic. She told me she'd done something stupid.

# 2.

*Right. Let's start again from the beginning.*

It’s Sunday morning. October has been unusually mild this year. It’s almost too hot. When evening comes around, you don’t want to go home. You can go out in a T-shirt even at night, so people are staying out late to prolong the summer. Fraying shorts are getting extra time on the streets. The sound of rubber flip flops has become endearing, seeing as it’s so unusual at this time of year. *You can recognise happiness by the sound it makes when it leaves,* as the poet once said. *Flip flop flip flop*. Things that were irritating in August can bring comfort in October. Even though it's hot, I’m wearing closed-toe shoes,

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with the laces tied up tightly. I know. Wrapping up all year round is a habit of a lifetime. It’s a question of modesty.

### Right. Let's start again from the beginning.

The chief inspector gets up to open one of the two windows and knocks a pack of cigarettes down from the window ledge. He’s looking outside, still as a statue, not saying a word. I can barely hear the noise coming from the street. I’m deaf in my left ear. Sometimes it makes me lose my balance. You need an ear on each side for horizontal orientation, to keep you upright. I have to turn my head to hear what the chief inspector is saying to me. I think my left eardrum is ruptured. It took me a while to realise but now my body is used to it. I just turn my head to hear things better.

### Right. Let's start again from the beginning.

The chief inspector slowly puts his hands in his pockets, one after the other. Without thinking, I guess. His wristwatch gets caught on the fabric of his chinos and

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is pulled up his arm slightly as a result. The metal has begun to bite into his flesh. At that moment, a little saliva starts to collect in my mouth, waking up my numb gums. It comes from the back of my mouth, just behind the molars, and makes its way along the pink flesh towards the canines, where it settles. There’s a lingering taste of rum on my tongue and my nostrils are exhaling filthy, hot air. My breath isn’t as dense as the cold air in the room. It quickly rises to the ceiling where it remains, as though embarrassed by what its scent might have to say about last night. All the chief inspector needs to do is climb up on his desk, lift his chin, and take a deep breath to find out more.

He probably has a daughter my age. That's what’s worrying him. He wouldn’t want her to end up in my shoes. He's wondering how I could’ve done such a thing. Whether it could happen to his little darling, too. That's just the way it is. When we hear about something like this, the first thing we want to know is whether it could happen to us. The chief inspector is sure none of this could’ve happened to him. He would’ve done things differently. He’s not stupid. Then

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he thinks of his daughter. Not that *she's* particularly stupid… that's not it at all. No. It’s just that he's responsible for her. That's why he’s thinking about her. Could his little darling end up in a situation like this? One that reeks of rum and coke mixed together in a plastic bottle? At this point, the chief inspector still thinks I’m twenty or so. I don’t look my age, nor my gender. People who don’t know me always guess these things wrong, then go overboard with their apologies. Apparently, the worst thing you can do to someone is take them for a person of the opposite sex. Recently, the waiter serving me in the café of a train took me for a woman, then a man, then a woman, then gave me a helpless look, hoping I might be able solve the mystery for him once and for all. I’d only ordered a sandwich. Soon, the chief inspector will learn that I’m no longer a child and that’ll reassure him somewhat. He’ll think: *Well, at her age, you can’t really blame the parents.* And then he’ll feel better as a father. What happened to me could never happen to his daughter. He’s keeping a good eye on her.

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The chief inspector didn’t see or hear the pack of cigarettes landing by his shoe. Right there next to him. Judging by the sound it made when it hit the floor, I’d say there were about fifteen cigarettes in there. The chief inspector still hasn’t noticed. But I saw it coming before it even happened: a pack of cigarettes pushed into the void by a window being opened. It was bound to happen. Unless the chief inspector had suddenly had an urge to scratch his ear or knee. That would have interrupted him mid-gesture as he was opening the window and he would have almost certainly spotted the pack of cigarettes in peril. Likewise if a colleague had knocked on the door. Or if his phone had rung. Or if a pigeon had flown past and given him a fright. Or if the neighbour opposite, watching the scene from the very beginning through a pair of binoculars, had tried to warn him. Or if I had said something. *Chief Inspector, do you think that sometimes it’s impossible to prevent an occurrence, even before it happens? Do you think that before every event, there's a fraction of a fraction of a second in which nothing has happened yet, but it's already too late?* My eyes are fixed on the red cigarette pack on the floor. I imagine him crushing it with the large sole of his shoe, the white paper wrapped around the cigarettes tearing

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and releasing all the tobacco, the filters getting squashed. If the chief inspector turns slightly to his right to go into his office, he’ll crush them. There’s no doubt about it. I hope he does. I want him to crush all of his cigarettes with his whole body weight. *Young lady, the question is not: Is it too late? But rather: What, exactly, is it too late for? Until an event occurs, we cannot be sure of its nature.* He hasn’t budged his feet an inch. Anything is still possible. I already know the nature of the event: fifteen cigarettes wasted; a small urge for destruction satisfied. I unclench my fists.

When I arrived at the police station, a police officer took two photos of me out in the hallway. He told me to stand in front of the wall and pulled down the hood of my black sweatshirt to reveal my face. He didn’t ask me to do it, he just did it himself. He grabbed me by the arm and pulled me towards him, slightly away from the wall, so that the hood would sit between my back and the wall rather than getting bunched up behind my neck. In the first shot,

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my eyes and fists are closed. In a peaceful way. Almost like a newborn baby.

*Right. Let’s start again from the beginning.*

The chief inspector closes the window and turns on his heels, dodging the pack of cigarettes. Then he sees it, picks it up, and puts it in his pocket. End of story. With the palm of his left hand, he pushes the keyboard back into its place in front of his screen. The plastic screeches loudly, but this doesn’t trigger any kind of sensation in the roots of my teeth. No twisting of the nerves. He furrows his brow as he reads what he’s written, using the cursor to guide him along the lines. Then he looks at me. I’ve put the hood of my sweatshirt back up. The fabric around the end of my left sleeve is coming undone and it looks like a little explosion. A fireworks display for Bastille Day in the form of an excessively worn cuff. It’s an old sweatshirt I bought when I was in high school. My body doesn’t take up any more space than it did back then. Yesterday, I decided to go out at the last minute. A last minute decision. And I chose an outfit for the occasion. An outfit for a Saturday night and a brand new pair of

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white socks to go with it. I wasn’t sure I’d be able to pull off all that glowing white around my ankles but in the end, Lola talked me into it. There’s no denying it. Lola’s got style. I unclench my fists. I can still smell the tobacco I smoked last night. Some smells are so strong you can see them. At the tips of my fingers, I can see a pile of cigarette butts crushed into the ground at the foot of a park bench. The chief inspector should really come over and take a sniff.

In the second photo taken in the hallway by the police officer, my eyes are open. The red clock above the chief inspector’s desk says 9.16. It’s Sunday, the day of rest or resurrection. Both, perhaps. One after the other. Just like the two photos of me, first sleeping, then awake but changed. Did I open my eyes between the two photos because I was asked to?

*Right, right, right. Let's...*

Some people like to start their stories long before the actual beginning, adding details at every turn,

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producing endless odysseys. *All the others, those who had escaped sheer destruction, had reached home, now delivered from war and the sea; one man alone, longing to return to his home and his wife, was detained by Calypso, revered nymph, bright among goddesses, in her hollow caverns, desiring him to be her husband.* That’s how Homer’s begins. And it was there, thinking about Ulysses, that I noticed the stain on my trousers. And when I saw the yellowish ring around the stain, I realised it had already had time to dry. I’d pissed myself. And those trousers didn't belong to me.