The favourite – Sarah Jollien-Fardell

Translated by Holly James

Days pass, my body mechanically complies with its obligations. Death has a way of freezing the frame. Moments that seem insignificant at the time, snippets of banal scenes, remain forever imprinted in memory. Scenes of everyday life, stopped in its tracks, forming complete images. Scenes from past deaths blend into fresh grief.

A memory of me as a child, yet to experience the pain of grief. My late uncle’s apartment is heavy with the reverential silence of mourning. His body is laid out in the centre of the room in an open coffin. I’m not afraid. If anything it feels quite natural. I’m impressed by all the adults’ grave expressions. My mother leads Emma and I outside. We hide under a set of stairs near a cellar that reeks of mould. She’s crying in silence.

“What’s the matter?”

“Nothing.”

“Why are you crying?”

“Because I’m afraid.”

The only thing I’m afraid of is my father. It’s the first time in my life that death has presented itself and it seems normal to me. I can’t comprehend my mother’s fear. Out of loyalty to her, and because she’s an adult, Emma and I believe her – death means fear.

And what about my sister? What was she trying to say with her sudden death? Was she trying to frighten us once and for all, or to frighten him? Did she think she could shake things up, change things? Or was it that everything – being rejected, the abortion, the child that was never born – plunged her into such a black despair that death was the only thing that could stop the pain? I can’t accept that dying is the only way to stop suffering. It's too absolute. It means we’ve lost against our father. I can’t accept that I was incapable of saving her.

Emma knew better than I did about the grief and guilt that comes when death takes you by surprise. That night at supper, after paying our respects to our distant uncle – probably to break the heavy silence imposed by my father’s presence – ten-year-old Emma remarks:

“What an awful thing, to die.”

Our mother tries to comfort her, our mother, who confessed her own fears only a few hours earlier.

“You think death is awful? Stupid girl! It’s completely normal.”

That very moment, by some terrible coincidence, Micky the cat slinks cautiously past the doorway. My father and I, who are facing the kitchen door, spot him at the same time. He jumps up from his chair, rushes towards the creature, grabs it by the scruff of the neck, and holds it firmly over the table, right in front of my sister’s nose.

“You think it’s awful for some old bastard to die? Answer me, stupid girl! You think it's awful?”

The cat is squirming for its life, thrashing the air with its paws. My father grabs Emma with his other and she has no choice but to follow him. I’m frozen to the spot. I hear the water running in the bathtub, Emma’s screams, the cat's shrill, piercing cries, my father's yells:

“Shut the fuck up, mog!”

He drowned Micky. It took a long time, but he did it. He forced Emma to watch the whole thing, then bury her beloved pet at the bottom of the garden. He stood there with a beer in his hand, yelling at my sister:

“Hurry up, stupid girl!”

The whole neighbourhood could hear. As usual, nobody did anything. By the time the whole thing was over, it was pitch-black outside. My mother had put me to bed. Through the bedroom wall, I could hear Emma’s relentless sobs. I heard the sound of my father yanking off his belt on the other side of the wall.

“If either of you tries to do anything, I’ll destroy the pair of you, too!”

Emma didn’t speak again for a week.

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I didn’t know a thing about attraction, desire, or even my tastes. Nothing. At the age of twenty, I was completely indifferent to sex because I was impervious to all kinds of pleasure. Hypervigilance had taken over my entire existence. Mind and body. Day in, day out. Anticipating my father’s actions, constantly being afraid. It’s hard to imagine, living in fear every day. Every single day. Coming home from school, wondering if he’d be there, if he’d be drunk, if he’d be angry. Holding my breath every time I heard the faintest noise, or worse, the sound of his voice, listening to the way he put on or took off his shoes, barely daring to breathe at the dinner table, in the bathroom, doing my homework, reading. My body is a fortress: it doesn’t know peace. My legs are always anxious to run away. My body is a radar for detecting my father’s presence: neck bent, eyes fixed on what's in front of me, head and shoulders contracted. A buffalo's hump is all that’s missing. My body hurts and I deny the pain it causes me: heartburn and stomach ulcers at the age of twenty, a mangled back. My body doesn’t exist, my body knows neither consolation nor pleasure. My body doesn’t belong to me. My heart has been hollowed out. There’s only one dream in my head, one hope in my mind, and it’s stronger than me, than anything. I have to leave.

Much later, when I confessed to Marine that I had never had a single sexual thought during my teenage years, she gasped in shock.

“That’s impossible! Everyone thinks about sex! Sex is life.”

I was born dead.

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In my mother’s kitchen, the memory, like a consolation, is superimposed over Charlotte’s exaggeratedly posh laugh. You can’t laugh like that in a shabby kitchen when you grew up in a mansion by a lake, raised by a nanny. You can’t laugh like that in front of a woman withering away in an old-fashioned dress that’s too formal for a Saturday afternoon. You can’t laugh like that when you're looking at the fading, greenish tinge of a black eye. Yet there she is, laughing almost obnoxiously. She reminds me of those rich tourists, who trill gleefully about how “wonderfully authentic” the region is, when faced with a level of poverty they’ll never experience. She finds the coffee cups “gloriously old-fashioned”, the curtains “so very romantic”. Upon spotting the wooden table, she asks: “Valasian, I assume?” It was there in the kitchen that it dawned on me. She’d chosen me to escape from her roots. Just like I did. Only in the opposite direction. I realise that, in spite of the denial, in spite of the antics we’ve each forced ourselves to perform, the things we’ve done as part of our metamorphoses, our origins have left their mark. Eternal, ineffable, you see it whenever we feel uncomfortable, or conversely, when the guard is let down. No matter how hard we fight it, Charlotte will always say “drat”, when I say “fuck”.

I’m not capable of hugging my mother. I’m not capable of stroking her back. I can’t hold her hand though it’s inches from my own. I’m made of stone. It pains me to see her cautious, modest glances, the love in her eyes that I don’t know how to return. I’m ashamed to have pushed her so far from my memory, my shrivelled heart.

The door slams shut. My throat contracts the moment I hear his clumsy footsteps on the tiles.

“You’re here.”

That’s all he says. I look at him. My childish impudence has vanished. I try to reason with myself. He's not going to kill all three of us. Four years have passed, but looking at him, you’d think it was ten. He’s just as imposing as I remember. Three sounds. That’s all it takes for the past to come flooding back. My shoulders tense up, my movements become robotic. I’m glued to my chair, unable to get up. Charlotte comes back from the bathroom and says hi to him, as though he were just a normal person. He is, to her. Just an oaf who commands respect by virtue of being under his own roof. She works her magic. She faces him, smiles sweetly, and holds out her hand.

“Jeanne told me a lot about you,” she coos.

I watch the scene unfold as though watching a play. I see the hollow, insincere politeness she's been brought up with. I see the way she coaxes and soothes people to make them like her. And she certainly does it well. I haven't even told her a fraction of the story: being dragged across the room by the hair, the touching (it will be years until I’m able to use the word “rape”), my mother’s muffled screams, their bed banging against the wall like a metronome beneath his weight. Charlotte continues to beguile him. He awkwardly offers her something to eat. He’s pathetic. He starts asking her questions.

“Ah! So you and Jeanne are doing your studies together? Yes, she’s always been a clever girl.”

I take advantage of the distraction to grab mum’s hand under the table. I give it a little squeeze. Her hand is sticky. She smears Vaseline on her hands and feet. It’s cheap and effective. There's a silent complicity between us; we share a hole in the heart. It’s unbearably sad, so I clear away the dishes and manage to drag Charlotte away as she spews out promises about when they’ll next meet.

My teeth remain clenched for the entire journey back. I grind them down, my jaw moving from left to right in an effort to assuage the guilt, the remorse. I’m digesting my sadness and coming to terms with the mediocrity I’ve discovered in Charlotte all at once. I’m suddenly dazzled by how petty our relationship is. All the while, she pesters me, oblivious to my realisation, irrevocable, uncompromising .

“What's the matter? It's not that bad. Your parent's place is bucolic. Talk to me, Jeanne, I want you to say something. Please tell me what the matter is.”

Then come the tears. Crocodile tears I suppose, rolling down the pink Guerlain powder on her cheeks. She simpers, mutters, then finally loses her temper as she struggles to keep up with me on the Chauderon bridge, apparently upset by my silence and my long and resolute strides. I slam the bedroom door and collapse onto the bed. I’m enraged and crushed in equal measures.

“Seriously, Jeanne, don’t you think you’re exaggerating a little? It was difficult for me too. Everyone has a difficult childhood. You know my dad cheated on my mum, you know that she ended up spending a fortune on plastic surgery and clothes in the hopes he’d be attracted to her again. Can you imagine what that must have been like?”

It’s pathetic. Too rehearsed. I turn to her and scream:

“STOP!” Shut the fuck up!”

I’m standing there, fists clenched so tight I can feel the nails digging into the fleshy pads of my hands. She might have taught me the coquetry, the airs and graces, but none of that matters. There are things I’ve conquered on my own: the lake, for example, treading its shores on a daily basis until I knew my way around it with my eyes closed. I’m strong. I leap towards her and start shaking her.

Two seconds doesn’t seem like a long time. But these two seconds unfold at an agonising pace. She curls up into a ball, and covers her head with both arms. I shake and shake her. Harder and harder. It only lasts two seconds. I see my father punching my mother’s back as she curls into a ball on the floor. I’m him. My insides have turned to fire. There’s no going back. I want to release my grip on her bony shoulders. I can't do it. I’m a spectator and participant of the action in spite of myself. She’s tested my patience to the very end with her theatrical monologue, her phoney airs, her rehearsed speech, her endless words. I’m a fly caught in her trap. I’m the moth, she’s the dazzling allure of a lamp that shines too bright, Two seconds.

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Back in the bedroom, Marine puts him in a chair next to the window so he can look at the chestnut trees in the park, the apple trees scattered across the Rhône valley gently shaking off the winter. I call the nurse to come and help us. At no point do I touch him. Finally, the end comes. Marine bends over to kiss his cheek. I stay standing by his swollen feet. He's looking at me with a terrible sadness in his eyes. He knows his time is coming. If his beliefs are anything to go by, hell is waiting for him on the other side. Or maybe the years of repenting like a hangdog, his declarations of love for my mother, were all to clean him of his sins. Smart man. God forgives. But not me.

“Bye then,” I say.

He grabs my wrist, his eyes imploring me.

“Please!”

“Don’t.”

He’s about to start bawling. He's really struggling to speak. I’m already exasperated by the litany I know is coming next.

“I know you hate me. But I love you.”

He pauses, before adding:

“I’m sorry.”

I hear Marine hiccupping softly behind me, choking back sobs. In a film, this would be enough to make anyone cry. But I’m not anyone. I’m the daughter of this monster, I’m the woman who cheats, I’m the woman who hits, I’m the woman made of stone, I’m the woman who’s rotten to the core, I’m the daughter who didn’t save her mother or her sister, I’m the daughter of a murderer, I’m the hollow woman, I’m the daughter watching her father die, I’m the woman who ignores her girlfriend’s pleads:

“Make peace.”

I’m the woman who can't forgive.

I look at him – not at him, but through him. I feel a little stab of emotion, of fear in my belly. I look at him again.

I spit in his face.

In the fraction of a second it takes to spew drool on his face, I already want to rewind the tape. Erase the bubbles of saliva between his eyes. I should have rushed to his feet, put my head in his lap, said that fucking word: “sorry”.

Nothing will ever be the same after doing that. Nothing will ever be innocent again. Every time Marine looks at me, she’ll see that trickle of slime. That filthy gesture has stripped away what was left of my humanity. If only I’d known.

If only I’d known. Maybe deep down, I did know. I knew subconsciously that this terrible, humiliating, demeaning gesture for both him and me – worse than a slap or an insult, worse than my arrogance, worse than my pride – would have its consequences. I knew I would never be able to erase it. Not from Marine’s memory. Not from mine.

He died in the early hours of the morning. Just as day was breaking.