

Colder Layers of Air

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[pp. 7-15]

About light they knew everything.

They knew it in every shade. They had seen how it made the sky appear brittle and torn, or waxed blue-black. They knew how the light looked under foaming clouds; how it fell diagonally over the Fjell; how it struck the rocks over the forest and the thick underbrush. They knew how fleeting, how illusive it was. If the lake had just shone turquoise to the bottom, the next moment it lay leaden and sealed like asphalt. They had seen how the light made the pines and blackberry bushes appear matt in the rain; they had seen how the roads looked at four in the morning, devastated by falling rocks, and at noon on neatly mown Swedish front lawns. They knew it in the shimmering yellow from the heat, in the greenish glow of the evening; they could say how it looked above the roof of the tool-shed on overcast days.

They knew how faces change when glaring light falls upon them. Every morning, when they left their tents and went to the wash area, they had to cross the grassy field that had been cleared from the forest. There the faces became stable. They changed from milky-gray, the color of night, into a harsh, polished tan. They knew it. They saw it every morning.

And later, when only a few clouds were left in the sky, this tan had a certain sharpness, as faces only here have, on this peninsula. It was brutal how the sun shone.

Nobody spoke about the light.

There were other things to discuss. They had to take care of the tent walls that had torn in the storm and were lying on the field like shed skins in need of mending. They had to replenish the supplies and food that came every Saturday from Berlin; they telephoned often. They reordered potatoes and coffee, charcoal and sausages and rice, and they never forgot fruit, because fruit was particularly expensive this summer in Sweden. They sent the newly arrived youth groups to the lakes, first to the small *Stora Le* and then to the wind-whipped *Foxen*; they gave the crew photocopies of outdoor cookbooks so they knew how many cans of chili to empty into the pans at night. In the kitchen tents, they packed weekly supplies in waterproofed plastic barrels. They explained how to cook over an open fire and assigned

boats down at the dock. They were slim canoes for two people, made of light-gray sheet metal. The ghetto-blaster played all day long.

They lived rootless. Time suspended. They had come to an unknown realm, another country, a strange region, where what they did was who they were, each day, all summer long; they were canoe scouts, they built teepees, collected berries; they barbecued salmon and swam in the lake. It was as if their present life had no connection to their previous one, except for some wounds and a few abstract reflections. Retro-crap, as someone put it at the campfire.

There was little distraction. They inflated every rumor. And if the rumors fizzled out, they invented new ones, or they enriched the old ones with new facts, and it was impossible to find out what was true in all the gossip. They had gotten used to it. It didn't bother anyone when Svenja, the camp boss, complained about Ralf. When he got his hunting license, she said she was certain he'd *had humans in front of a gun barrel* in his lifetime. Behind her back, they asked how Ralf could get along with somebody like Svenja.

They lived rootless; they tried to make the best of it.

One morning, a girl was walking alone on the shore.

The girl stepped between the boats; her dress blew. It was a light dress, nobody wore dresses here. In the camp, they wore Gore-Tex sandals and gray or beige functional trousers with zippers at the thighs. When it got warm, they simply tore-off the pant legs.

The girl walked down to the dock, she moved drunkenly. She walked without stopping to remove her dress; she walked to the edge of the dock and plunged into the water.

The people near the boats were startled by her body slapping the water. They looked over. The lake was calm. The girl surfaced next to a buoy, her hair stuck to her head. She swam back slowly. The others lost interest. They returned to their clipboards and wrote down the numbers of the boats that would go out that day. Months ago, they had announced swimming was forbidden near the dock. Now they acted as if the incident was of no concern to them.

The girl climbed slowly back on land. She came ashore. The water running over her face didn't seem to bother her.

She stopped close to the pines.

"Schmoll", she said, and she turned to me. "You're a smart boy. You paid close attention the whole time." She gazed at the swimming area covered in raspberry bushes and buckthorn, and I saw she wasn't a girl anymore. "I'm sure you can tell me where the towels are."

I was inadvertently standing close to where she came ashore. I wasn't by the boats; I stood somewhat apart from the dock, now I moved as if I'd been standing there frozen for hours.

"I'm not Schmoll," I said. "And I'm not a boy."

She tilted her head to the side and looked at me. Her brows were dark from the water in a very pale face.

"Towels don't come with the equipment," I said.

The lake was calm this morning; the sea-birds drifted further on. Gray Herons. Swans. The others had probably finished with the boats. She blocked my path as I moved to leave.

"I just want to see something," she said, and came closer. Her skin was white. A white that was reminiscent of shiny, smooth, polished wood you sometimes find on wild beaches. Her toes briefly grazed the sand. She wanted to touch my naked foot, missed it and stumbled.

She'd have fallen if I hadn't held her.

She put her arms around my neck. I smelled her wet hair.

It was early morning, the sand was cool, the shadows fell long. Around noon it would get hot, the boats had to be tipped over and registered early; nobody wanted to be on the treeless beach in the heat, especially with the boat's glistening aluminum bellies making it twice as hot.

We stood there like a billboard at the Zoo metro station. One of those glossy photos. Petite little girls nestled in the strong arms of confident boys. Boys who looked down at their girls and the KuDamm. We fit perfectly into this image.

"Are you okay?" I said.

She pressed herself against me. To the others it must have seemed as if I wanted to strip off her dress, slide the cloth slowly up her thighs. They must have imagined how she'd look naked, her hips, her butt; how I'd hold her in the sand, on the shore, by the swimming area, hidden behind the bushes.

Her body pulsed; her skin glowed beneath the wetness.

"You see," she said in my ear. "I finally found you. I knew it."

Then she let go of me immediately. She grabbed her towel from near the pines and walked across the sand towards the street. She walked quickly, she didn't turn around. Her legs were lanky under the dress; it was a child's dress, a dress for very young girls. I wasn't sure. I kept looking at her, and since nobody by the boats noticed her, I yelled, "Hey! Why don't you get changed and have breakfast with us? We've got fresh rolls!"

She didn't react; she reached the road. Her wet dress didn't seem to bother her; she turned left up at the shoulder.

I went back to the others. They hauled a few boats from the water and tilted them belly-up on the beach. Slowly, it grew warmer.

Later, in the washroom, I looked at myself in the mirror. I wore jeans and a light blouse, unisex, typical outdoor clothing. I was strong and slim; I was tanned like all the others, my hair had this straw-colored, washed-out look from swimming in the lake; I had been living outdoors for four weeks. The scar above my eyebrow was the only thing that distinguished me from the others.

I went out into the sun again, where they were busy planing wood. They were building a teepee from smooth, polished tree trunks and it was going well. The bark peeled-off in soft, long splinters. They knew how to apply pressure lightly to remove the upper layer without damaging the wood. They'd done it often. Two meter-high teepees wrapped in tarp stood on the grass by the edge of the forest.

I joined them for a while. I began at the tips. I watched the men covertly and found nothing in them that resembled me.

Around noon the food supply arrived; a pick-up made the rounds, honking its horn through the camp. The exhausted driver parked in the delivery area. He'd left from Berlin that night. Now he was searching for a bed with bleary, red eyes.

*Hey, Marco, where are the lists? And the charcoal? Did those idiots in Berlin forget them again? Barbeques are in the kids' program, don't they get it?*

*They don't get it, because they don't care. They're kids, right? They're not going to start a camp rebellion if they don't get exactly what their folks paid for.*

*Assholes.*

*Asshole yourself. Take a look behind the passenger seat.*

Marco squeezed through the clotheslines and disappeared into the house. The house: a shed made of thin plywood and three windows. You could hear every noise.

*Stop making such a fuss, people,* called Marco from the lower window. *Now that we're here, we've gotta stick together, no matter what.*

Nobody agreed. Had they agreed, it would have been like admitting they were stranded, and that would be a capitulation, an avowal that this condition was permanent.

Outside, they started unloading the crates. They dragged them over to the kitchen tent, where Svenja was busy preparing the blue containers. Huge cheese bundles were halved and

the halves went into a container along with salami, canned beans and bread. When the kids took them out later on their canoe tours, the food in the containers would be protected from the water.

Friday at noon they all met in the kitchen tent. Maybe they gravitated there because they craved fresh fruit. By the end of the week, the food got monotonous. Or maybe it was the odor the sealed containers gave off; they smelled of vegetables, butter, bacon, and plastic. The smell was like a memory of being outdoors on the lakes, where they'd prefer to be. But the camp was understaffed, and there were too few of them to handle the onslaught of weekly busloads. The lights often burned through the night.

As I got up to rinse the sweat and dirt off my face with the garden hose, I saw the woman on the other side of the road. She was leaning against a pine. Her knees were bent; her head tilted to the side, her face in the shade. She wore a different dress now, a blue one. She sat motionless by the tree. Her arms hung by her side. The right hand was slightly opened in my direction, as though she wanted to give me something, as though she were offering me the grass and the earth and the pine roots. She seemed to have her eyes closed. At least, she didn't react; although I'd been watching her for a long time. I remembered how forcefully she had pressed her body to mine at the shore. Her glowing body. Her white skin that seemed in strange contrast to the glow. I thought about my idiotic answer. And then it occurred to me, she'd recoil if I were to suddenly walk up and touch her. She'd be scared the minute she felt me, and her eyes, which seemed so restless and tragic to me, would open wide. Maybe this impression was caused by the light. Green speckles gathered in an otherwise clear brown iris.

Ralf had run after me. He took the hose from my hand and dunked his face into the jet. "Damned busy today, huh?" The water ran down his shirt. "Listen, I'll help you distribute the life vests. Then you'll have time for a break."

"It's okay. I can handle it. Really."

"Half for you, half for me," said Ralf. "Are we a team or not?" He put his arm around my shoulder and pulled me closer. Then he looked over to the forest. "Who's that?"

"Who?"

"What's she gaping at? I'm gonna tell her 'this is private property. She's got no business here.'"

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[pp. 22-23]

I was gone from Halberstadt, gone from the oppressive pub scene, the revamped Gothic and the new apartment houses painted in gaudy colors; gone from the duplexes and the bureaucracy with people always asking what I did and who I was; gone from all of it and from who I used to be; gone from the whole mess. And who was I anyway? Moved away from home, took a correspondence course I never completed, worked as a light board operator for a rundown theater, putting others in the limelight. I'd written a few articles for the local newspaper, opened my mouth a few times, though it didn't change anything, since the baldies - that's what my brothers called the neo-Nazis - hadn't vanished from the streets.

My brothers had outgrown me. They found jobs as salesmen; one of them took an extra job delivering newspapers at night. I didn't envy them, but I knew they thought I was a loser for running away.

I liked it here. I liked the concentration. The stillness hovering over the grassy field, I felt no pressure, even though I had to work hard and the tone was rough.

I liked this summer in Sweden. This air saturated with the scent of wood and earth. I liked the sky stretched so flat it lay over the treetops of the forest like a serrated line. I liked the harsh, sudden shadows you could dive into if you took one of the fir tree-lined roads. The asphalt looked like reddish velvet from afar. I liked the quietness of the towns and the tranquility. The people seemed calm, as if they were floating absent-mindedly through the day, and yet they possessed a certain awareness that comes from lavishly consuming something expensive. By the end of August summer was over. Until mid-month it would still be lighter here than in Halberstadt. It darkened discreetly at the edges. But nobody was deceived about the impending, rapid change that came in the next weeks, about the plunge of afternoon into the night.

Sometimes it was so quiet the light seemed to ignite from the silence, as though a smoldering fire had singed everything. There were unconscious people in the blinding sun. Red-overheated faces after too much beer. Limp bodies on the playgrounds. People collapsing at park kiosks.

Nobody picked fights. There was no violence. People folded away noiselessly. They stumbled home, they tottered, they collided with trucks; they fell from their bicycles. Strange accidents often occurred in summer: somebody got caught on the electric fence and hung there, another drove a lawn mower blade into his leg, the chain from a power saw sprung

loose and smashed someone's face, somebody was always falling drunk into the lake and drowning.

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\*note: As Anja is drawn further into Siri's web of fiction, her co-workers grow increasingly hostile towards her. In the following passage, Anja discovers a ball in the middle of the camp bearing the words "no gays" and this marks the beginning of things turning violent.

[65-69 excerpts]

I went behind the outhouse with the soccer ball. The stench from the dry toilet was so intense it kept the others away. I took a brush, detergent and sand, and my heart began to race, I had to stand still and breath slowly, wait for it to calm down. The writing wouldn't come off.

I put the brush away. I saw myself squatting there [...] going nuts over two words.

[...]

Later that evening, when the others had made a fire, and night rose in the sky around tearing clouds, when they were talking about Uwe, who was still busy with his Gore-Tex people, and debated at what point fundraising turned into groveling, when Svenja said, *Don't worry that was never a problem for Uwe*, [...] I said:

"Did you guys see the soccer ball?"

You could hear the crickets and radios from a distance. Nobody reacted. . Sabine leaned on the stick she was using to shift wood in the flames.

"But you were in the camp all afternoon," Marco finally answered as he opened another beer.

A plastic package burst into flames and lit each face harshly. The whites of their eyes gleamed. I knew all of them, I had been here for four weeks; they all knew me. Each of them had seen me morning, noon and night\_every hour, every day and now nobody would look at me.

"No tetra packs in the fire", said Sabine on auto-pilot. "No plastic." She poked the rest of the carton with the stick and pulled it out.

"No gays!" I said, "On a soccer ball." I knew all of them, each face, how they stared into the fire, or into the sky, or at a point that wasn't visible, that was perhaps inside of them, somebody lit a cigarette, somebody played with his sandals, and all of them drank beer. Beer was in high demand.

I'd have liked to go to my tepee, I'd have lain on the thermo-mat over the crunching stones, and thought about nothing, but I didn't leave, I said: "No gays in the fire."

It felt as if I was talking to her, to this woman in the dress, as if I had to prove something to her, or to myself, I spoke as if half-asleep, a voice that wasn't completely my own, normally I would have ignored the writing, or kicked the ball away, kept dreaming and acted as if it had never existed.

"Maybe the kids were playing with it", said Svenja. "Stop being so humorless. You know everybody's welcome here, blacks, whites, Indians, fat people, skinny people, or do you think somebody's got something against you personally?"

"Keep cool", said Ralf, "if somebody put some bullshit on a ball, somebody can go and take it off."

It was morning when he entered the tepee.

The stones crunched. He walked quietly; he avoided the fire pit in the middle of the tepee. His shadow loomed large on the tent wall. The ash in the fire pit glowed in the draft of the opened tent flap. He pulled the zipper down my sleeping bag. He slid his hand under the lining while I was dreaming, he pulled the sheet away. I dreamt I was standing high up on the Fjell, getting ready to fly, and I felt his hand on my breast, and him pushing his arm under my neck, Svenja and the others stood below the Fjell, craning their necks as though the sky was heading towards them; that was me when I took off, when I was able to sit up. "Shhh, take it easy." Ralf whispered. "Don't make trouble." He was strong and smelled freshly shaven, I pushed his hand away. "Come on, you'll like it. I saw it in your eyes." He tried to push his body inside the sleeping bag.

He didn't have any pants on. "Are you being coy, or what?" he whispered in a soft voice as though he was talking to a child; he pushed himself onto me, his T-shirt brushed against my mouth. "Come on. I've been with all kinds. You're probably still a virgin, right?"

I saw his silhouette over me, a staggering outline, the Fjell, the camp, the whole world suddenly consisted of outlines, of remnants of light, I plunged, I crashed to the ground; finally I woke up.



"Shhhh, you'll wake the others- stop making such a fuss.

It took a few seconds for me to find the flashlight next to the thermo-mat. I hit him in the back with the flashlight, on the neck, I didn't know where I got him. Then he groaned and let go. I crawled out from under his body.

The light hung in the tree tops.

The air tasted like salt.

I always knew something like that would never happen to me, and it never did; the person it was now happening to was miles away from me.

I stood there for a while. I watched the outlines of the shed slowly become visible.

Then I walked to Svenja's tent, pulled down the zipper and crept under the awning.

I said: "Ralf. He's lying over there in the tepee. Something happened." I cried.

Svenja put her hand on my shoulder. She pulled me to her. She held me, she whispered, she was half asleep. Only now did my legs begin to tremble. The rest of the day went by like that, later it would get better.

[pp. 128-133]

"Hey, that's private property!" I yelled. "You can't just keep showing up around here." When I got closer, I said quietly. "You're going to get me in trouble."

"But Schmoll. You said you'd wait here."

She wore a colorful linen dress with a square neck.

"Don't keep calling me Schmoll! At least, not in front of everybody."

She tore at a lone blade of grass growing between the rocks.

"At least, not so loud. Not in front of the others."

"You're scared, right?" She said to the rocks.

"That's not so hard to figure out."

I took a breath.

"You don't want to see me again?"

"I do," I said, "but couldn't we do our flirting somewhere else?"

Her dress, as always, was too short, it flapped around her legs. Somebody by the boats was hauling in a fishing net.

"You think you can be like the waves, right?" she said. "First they wash everything ashore, then they take it away again, but so thoroughly that afterwards much more is missing than

there was to begin with..."

Somebody whistled, she didn't look over.

"You're being so mysterious! "

"No, Schmoll, I'm not." She looked at me, at the boy, the boy wearing make-up at the Zoo metro station, the boy everybody could buy.

"I'm not Schmoll!"

"Why do you want to hurt me?"

I wasn't saying it for her sake, it was meant for the others by the boats.

But she was right. I hurt her. I hurt her because I cared too much about what the others were thinking. It must have seemed as if I had the others on my mind the whole time, not her. I hadn't made much of an effort for her.

My whole life I hadn't made the least effort, I always thought everything depended on what the others thought; the others by the boats, the others wherever, even falling in love, or not, ultimately depended on the others, that was clear. And what could they see, a *coming-of-age-story*, as Sabine would put it, but that I was growing younger in the process wasn't in their repertory. I heard her in the distance, I heard Svenja saying, *you know how things are*, except now the boy had an erection as he watched Siri crouching in front of me half-dressed in the sand.

The sky stretched wide over me.

"What's wrong with you? You are totally pale."

Piercing blue above me. It started to flow, drift apart, it opened, drew me in, I reeled. I tumbled and fell before her.

I lay on my back. Eyes closed. I didn't breathe.

I heard bees flying in the buckthorn.

I was lying there as if dead, and then a cool shadow fell over my face. Siri felt my forehead. She caressed my cheek. She put her ear to my heart, she examined me and I felt her body, the sky streamed through my eyelashes. It was up high and extended into infinity, an ever deepening blue, and then it took the shape of a blossom, a blossom wrought in the firmament, it's shiny leaves opened, grew towards me, encircled my neck like a collar, then I felt Siri's mouth.

I kissed her.

"Stop!" She yelled indignantly. "You're just pretending! Get up!"

She pulled me up. She forced me to stand, and I stood up, and the sky looked like sky again.

(...)

"No," I said, my forehead feverish. "You have to tell me! You have to tell me how to do it. What do I need to do? I have to know. Otherwise, I have no, I don't have any- "

"*What* don't you have? My dear! Are you still afraid?" She grabbed my leg. "By the way, your pants are open." She pulled up the zipper with one hand. Her neck so close, her breasts exposed below the collarbone.

"Are you hurt?"

I was exhausted. "I was only pretending."

"I know," she said brightly. "But why are you whispering?"

She slid her dress higher. I was hot; she touched me on the hips, the thighs, mine or the boys, she did it right.

My head was burning.

The silhouettes at the shore were matt in the haze. The glitter of the lake, the blinding brightness, shimmering leaves and plunging light made her body blur in the shadow of the reeds. They made it indistinct, they almost made it disappear.

But as soon as I was the boy, I wanted clear contours, contrast.

He desired her. That was very clear, very physical, from the chest downwards, painfully real.

(...)

*Schmoll, you're not listening to me.*

Again, she was right. I needed to get out of my body, out of the old stories in my head. I had to make room for the boy. I had to stop seeing thirty years in our faces, it didn't matter how old we were. Where we came from. How we lived. Who she was. That was what the others wanted to know. Pure bureaucracy. The boy was beyond that. .

Yet I still thought of him as being separate from me, as if learned by the book. And now he was sitting there in the sand in front of her, playing with her dress, his leg bent, the knee scraped. Frightened. He didn't want to reveal his fear of being curious, but he was curious and awkward and beaming at her.

"Who do I remind you of?"

She took my hand away. "But Schmoll!"

When she ran down to the bridge, her pony tail bounced to the right and left.

"Don't turn everything into a mystery," she shouted. "It's very simple."

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