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# WHAT HAPPENED ON SHALLOW STREET?

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*This is the story of three individuals moving through life,  
living in a society based on patriarchy,  
in a society where girls and women are being killed  
because they are female.*

## – Chapter 0 –

October 6th, 1906,

A chilly Friday evening, the Londoner streets seemed calmer than usual. The sun had already set, and London's alleys were plunged into darkness. Fog was spreading across the city when the street lanterns went on.

It seemed quite peaceful, the only sound you could hear, was the people's laughter in the distance coming from the taverns and saloons.

In the twilight you could see a young woman in a green dress, walking down the street, as she turned into Shallow Street...

### **The Witnesses**

I was walking home, and it was already getting dark. I started to hurry, as I didn't want to get home too late...

*Today had been a really exhausting day and the only thing I could think about were the spaghetti Jenna had left me on the kitchen table. As I was warming up my dinner, I opened the window to let some fresh air in and distract myself from the dead silence in the apartment.*

From afar I could see a woman in a long, stunning dress. I wondered where she got it from. She looked like she had dressed up for a special occasion. I envied her for a second, because she seemed like she had nothing to worry about. Her eyes were shining and as she walked into the streetlight, I could see a little smile on her face. A light breeze blew her long hair out of her face and brought her, with freckles covered, face to sight.

Just before I passed her, she turned the corner, into a side street.

*Just as I wanted to go back to check on the spaghetti, I suddenly heard quick steps coming from the street. I looked outside and my gaze fell on a woman hurrying down the alley.*

*I noticed her smile disappearing from her face while her grip tightened around her little yellow purse. I wondered why she was still outside at this time. It was pretty dangerous in this neighborhood after the sun had already set. I was lost in my thoughts when I smelled my burning spaghetti and rushed to the stove.*

At the exact same moment, I noticed a rather tall man crossing the street. When he passed me, he stared at the ground, avoiding any eye contact, which made me feel uncomfortable. Determined, he turned into the same street as the woman before, which gave me the impression that he was following her. Suddenly I got a strange feeling and had the urge to turn around and check on the woman. But I remembered that I was already way too late and so I kept on walking.

*I was eating my half-burned dinner and reading yesterday's journal, I didn't have the time to go and get the recent one. My gaze fell on an article that talked about a manifestation. A group of women went out on the streets, demanding woman's voting rights. Out of nowhere a scream interrupted my thoughts. It came from outside. Without wasting a second I ran to the window. The woman I saw before was trying to free herself from the grip of a huge man. He was pressing his palm on her mouth, to prevent her from screaming, while pinning her to the wall. His hand slid from her mouth to her throat and tightened around it...*

## – Chapter 1 –

### E

One of my earliest memories of my mother took place in the backyard of our first house. She enjoyed gardening a lot and as a small child I was always willing to help her, constantly looking for something to do, waiting for an adventure, trying to discover something new or see something extraordinary. I remember her as she was picking unwanted weeds and shouting at me to stop digging out earthworms. I guess I couldn't help it, then and even now they seemed so fascinating to me. "Mommy how are they walking if they don't have legs and arms? ", I asked curiously, and she answered, " Well, that's one of the mysteries of life, isn't it?" She used to say that a lot and I used to ask a lot. Now when I think about it, I know she did that on purpose, because it was forcing me to find an answer by myself.

I wouldn't say that she was a great mom, but I have to admit I wasn't the kindest child either. "He is so loud. He can't even stand still! Where are his manners?", they used to say. All they saw in me was this naughty child that was running away from his parents and couldn't concentrate for more than two seconds. All I saw was this beautiful, big world that was waiting for me to explore it and the possibilities stretching right in front of me. I just couldn't wait any longer.

As impatient and chaotic as I was, my mom decided to find a solution to calm me down. It started as a free time occupation, something to shut off my mind and distract me with and throughout the years it evolved to my greatest passion. She taught me how to paint and this was the one mystery of life I found the answer to.

It was like painting was meant for me. Every time I sat down and picked up a painting brush, I was disappearing into a different dimension. It allowed me to explore the world and its truth colors in a new way, the way I saw it. I could

finally show its beauty to others. I could show them what I see and what I have been seeing all these years. It wasn't arrogance and lack of obedience, but curiosity and the need of freedom that made me behave in a certain way as a child.

Of course, my first paintings represented earthworms, but I guess it's one of the easiest things a child can paint anyhow. A few simple, curved lines colored in pink that I called "The mystery of earthworms". Obviously, I didn't stop at painting worms. Growing up I often painted landscapes. The beautiful sights of the Netherlands and places that gave me the feeling of freedom. I think freedom was the one thing I was looking for all along. All my life I felt trapped, but not until later in life I discovered the source of it.

## – Chapter 2 –

### E

As the years flew by my passion for painting evolved. I started taking it more seriously. It wasn't a pastime activity anymore. I knew I found the missing piece and as soon as I realized it, it was obvious that it will become my profession in the future.

And so, after finishing school, I applied to the Royal Danish Academy of Fine Arts in Copenhagen. It was as if my dreams came true.

Imagine being an impostor your whole life long. Like you don't belong anywhere. Like you don't belong with anyone. Every single person tells you that you are making a huge mistake, that will impact your whole life. They think they know better. They know better what you want and what you need.

As you can imagine, my parents were not thrilled with me, deciding that I want to become an artist. They simply couldn't see what I saw. I don't blame them, everyone perceives the world differently and due to the fact that I come from a rather conservative family, it's just the way they saw it. My father was furious, he said I'm throwing my life away. I always knew that he wanted me to become a kind of businessman, but I never, ever showed any interest in that.

My mother was the more compassionate one, but like every good wife, she tried to agree with my father's principles. Of course, he blamed her, for the decision I have made and one evening he even said it out loud. "If only you would have shown him soccer or maybe chess, he wouldn't end up like this, but no, of course you had to wake his interest in painting! You could have sign him up for ballet of some other girly activity right away! Would have turned out the same!", were his exact words. Obviously, my mother didn't reply anything to that. She let that slide, like many other things he did or said. All in favor of being a good wife.

...

Art Academy was finally the place where I belonged. It was the place I felt accepted in. I no longer was the weirdo, but I simply was like everybody else and they were like me. A whole lot of people that felt trapped in the word and expressed themselves through painting. Right then, when I thought my life was on the right track and nothing could stop me, I met her.

“Is it just me or does that look like shit?” asked a girl next to me, pointing at the self-portrait I was just painting. “Thanks, really nice of you. Is it just your way of saying I’m not good looking?”. She laughed and looked a little embarrassed. “No, my apologies I didn’t mean it that way. It’s your technique I don’t like. See, it doesn’t really have a perspective, you misplaced the shadow, and the light comes from the wrong direction”, she explained as she examined my portrait closely. “Oh, well. I guess, you’re right. You must know, I don’t usually paint portraits or even people. I prefer landscapes or still life. Do you want to know a secret?”, I whispered, and she leaned closer in my direction. “It’s my first time painting a portrait.” She blinked confused and frowned,

“How come? Wasn’t that mandatory, to get in the Academy? I had to show a dossier with both a few landscapes and portrait paintings, painted with different techniques.”

“Actually, I’m not supposed to say that, but the academy council was so impressed by my landscapes, that when I said I couldn’t paint portraits, they simply waved their hand and said that I could just learn it here.”

As soon as I said that her eyes opened, and she begun to laugh. “What’s so funny about that?”, I said smiling myself. “I find it funny that you’re apparently such a landscape genius and can’t even paint you own face correctly!”

I smirked and examined my painting again. Then I glance over at her painting and to be honest I was surprised by how good it was. The thing was, not only the painting was done perfectly, but also the woman on the painting looked incredibly beautiful. It was the first time I saw her beauty.

“Then, you should teach me”



“And why exactly would I do that?”

“I will tell you all my secrets about landscapes painting”

She looked at me curiously and I could see her, considering her options.

“Deal”, she answered and at that exact same moment I realized something new was being born. An everlasting relationship developed.

## – Chapter 3 –

A

We moved to London in 1890. I was 11 at that time. We weren't the first Italians who had fled to London during the time of dire, rural poverty in Italy, mainly in Southern Italy and Sicily. The majority were men who fled to the United States, desperate to find a job. Most of them then sent the money to their families back in Italy. However, my mother had a friend who lived in London with her husband, so she decided to try her luck in London.

Until I was 8, it was always mom and I against the world. I never knew who my father was and why he was absent. I asked my mother several times about him, but she never answered my questions so at some point I simply gave up. By now I only know his name, "Fernando" and that I have his eyes.

I never had a problem of it being just the two of us, but I knew how hard it was for mom to work and take care of me. I respect her a lot for being so strong, even though she was often judged for going to work and having a child without being married. She never admitted it, but I knew she sometimes felt lonely, which made me sad.

In the year of my eighth birthday mom met Riccardo. He moved into the apartment above us. It all started when he helped mom bring up the groceries. Afterwards she invited him in to have a coffee. Riccardo started caring more and more for my mother.

This was the first time that I had to share her with someone and didn't have all her attention on me, so I got jealous and behaved quite mean and arrogant.

But every time Riccardo visited, he brought my mom flowers and me some sweets, it was mostly chocolate. I remember he also sometimes picked me up from school and we went to the park, and he played football with me, when mom had to work extra shifts, to earn enough money, so she can pay for the rent. From time to time, it got so bad, that all we had to eat was bread and milk. Then Riccardo even lent us some money. I noticed how happy he made mom. She was relieved that he took some of her burden from her shoulders and supported her in any way he could. A few months later they started dating and he moved into

our apartment, but I must mention that he never talked about marrying her.

I remember how she even started looking younger and her eyes were shining like I had never seen before. Despite facing numerous challenges in her life, mom was always a cheerful person, after she met Riccardo, she got even more joyful. Later on, mom told me that she at first didn't want to accept any help from Riccardo, as she didn't want to owe him. Like I said, she was always a proud woman, who never wanted to depend on anyone. But at one point life brought her to the situation, that she had to outgrow her pride and accept Riccardo's help, even though she didn't enjoy it.

At first everything was fine. I accepted him and even started enjoying him coming by.

But at one point I noticed that he wasn't as perfect as he seemed. I was nine at that point and mostly didn't understand why Riccardo and mom argued. But I hated it when he started shouting at her. I saw that it made my mom upset, although she never allowed herself to cry when I was around.

It started with the arguing and yelling. Then once, after one of their fights I saw that mom had bruises all over her wrists. When I asked her what had happened, she avoided eye contact and told me that she had run into a table. I didn't ask her further questions, even though, I had doubts that she told me the truth.

The sparkle in her eyes that she got when she met Riccardo disappeared. And once again I began not to like him. However, after every single one of their fights, Riccardo came back with gifts for my mom and me. Thereby, the size of the gifts depended on the amount of bruises on mom's body.

He always came to her with the words: "Evelina, mio caro amore, you know I love you. You know that I care about you, because you and Angelo can't manage without me. So, let me in and we can talk like adults. I'm not a violent person, but you made me angry, and you know what happens when I get angry. I love you and take care of you and your boy, who is not even my son, you know that I'm the best man you could possibly have. The only thing I ask in return is that you make me happy and satisfy my needs whenever I want. It's so simple. But even that you have failed, so the only one you can blame for what happened is yourself. And still I came back to you, my Evelina, because I'm an honorable man. So just open the fucking door and let me in."

I have to admit, the ability to convince someone to get what he wants was remarkable.

And every time mom opened the door and accepted him back. Later on, she told me that for way too long she didn't want to give up on Riccardo's good side. Even though he hurt her, she still loved him. And she also wanted me to have someone like a father.

But time after time their fights got worse, and moms' body was more and more covered with bruises. Just her face stayed perfect as always. Riccardo was clever enough not to hurt her on places where others could see the bruises.

One evening he came home drunk, which wasn't the first time, but this time he had two of his friends with him. It was late at night, so I was asleep, but I woke up when I heard him shout: "Evelina, Evelinaa, my amazing girl, come here, I want to show my friend how pretty you are. Fast. Come out, you don't want me to get mad, right?"

I felt that mom got up from our bed and headed in the direction of the door.

I also got up,

"Mom" - she turned around,

"Mom, please don't go. Don't go to him. I don't want him to hurt you again. Please!"

"Angie, my love, I'm sorry he woke you up, just go to bed again."

"But mom, he will hurt you. Just stay here with me. If he gets angry at least we'll be together. We can protect one another!"

"Angie, don't worry about me, I'll be fine. Just be brave. Promise me you stay here, no matter what you hear downstairs, just stay in bed. You have to promise me."

"But..."

"Promise me!"

"I promise, but just come back", I whispered, but she had already left the room.

I curled into a ball under the duvet. I was too afraid to move, or to breathe, or to even think about what they were doing to my mother right now. I heard their laughter and loud noises, as if they were knocking over furniture.

I wanted so bad to go help mom, but she had always taught me that I must keep my promises. So, I hid my head under the pillow and waited for her to hopefully come back soon. A very small part

of me hated my mom, for going to them. But the rest of me was just so terribly concerned.

After what felt like an eternity to me, I heard the front door of the apartment open and close again. Then the door of the bedroom slowly slid open.

I jumped up from the bed and wanted to hug mom. That's when I saw the blood running down her legs. I froze. It felt like my body didn't belong to me anymore. I just stared at the blood while tears welled up in my eyes.

My mother's eyes, however, were dry. Without looking at me, she wiped the blood from her legs with a towel. Then she came over and took my face in her palms. She wiped my tears away with her thumbs and said: "Pack your things. I have a friend in London. I saved some money to buy us a train ticket. We're leaving."

And at sunrise we were on the train headed to London.

Between 1880 and 1924 more than four million Italians immigrated to the United States. They were driven by a variety of factors, including poverty, political instability, and the search for new economic opportunities. The US was experiencing a period of rapid industrialization and economic growth, and many Italians believed that they could find work and improve their standard of living there.

Many people believe that rape cannot occur within a relationship because consent is assumed to be given due to the intimate nature of the relationship. However, consent must be freely given, informed, and enthusiastic, and it must be present for each sexual act, regardless of the relationship between the individuals involved.

Research has shown that rape and sexual violence within intimate relationships are all too common. According to the National Sexual Violence Resource Center (NSVRC), approximately 1 in 4 women and 1 in 9 men in the United States have experienced severe physical violence, sexual violence, and/or stalking by an intimate partner in their lifetime. This also includes a range of behaviors like slapping, shoving, pushing and in some cases might not be considered "domestic violence."

## – Chapter 4 –

### E

Late night painting with Gerda, long hours spent in the library and hurrying from class to class. The next few years of my life looked exactly like that. To be honest, life did seem perfect at the time. Sometimes I wonder what it would be like, if I just stayed there forever. If I could freeze time and stay in a never-ending loop. Just me, Gerda and the Art Academy.

Gerda was one of a kind. And I'm not only saying that, because I fell unconditionally in love with her, but because she really was different. She had a strong opinion and said what she thought from the beginning. Quite the opposite of what I have known from my parents. She had a goal, a dream she longed for. She was determined, firm and yet so subtle and delicate. You could see it in her work. She was meticulous about details and poured her whole heart into the paintings she was working on. During the years I have spent at the Art Academy I have met many great artists and painters, but to really reach something in this area, you have to have one single quality. You have to see what others don't see. You have to perceive the world differently. You have to show the public, something unknown, but yet so fascinating that they will be drawn to it. It has to be something exotic, unexplored and unexplained. Something that makes you think outside of the box. Then, and only then your work will be exceptional and appreciated. And you know what? She had it. She simply had what it takes to be a truly great artist. There indeed was something in her paintings that attracted your attention and still you couldn't figure what it exactly was.

Gerda dreamed of being an independent artist. She dreamed of moving to Paris, the city of art and love. In Paris, she said, you can be whoever you want to be, and no one will judge you. In Paris, your dreams come true. In Paris you can spread your wings and fly. "Why don't we go then?", I

said to her one night. “Seriously? Would you do that for me?”, she asked, surprised by my words. “We don’t know anything or anyone there. Our whole life is here. Our families, friends, our home is here.”, she added. I could hear the hesitation in her voice. She didn’t want to make the wrong decision, certainly not if it was going to affect my life so much as well. However, I could see the spark in her eyes, the excitement as she realized I was being serious. I came closer to her and looked deep into her eyes, “My home is wherever you are.” She smiled and hugged me tight. There was no need to say another word, we both knew what was about to happen.

Later that evening we invited our friends over to announce the news. I have never seen Gerda so happy, so free. Even though we were still in Copenhagen, her mind was already in Paris.

We danced all night. We wandered through the streets and visited a couple of pubs. Later on, in our apartment we told goofy stories and were laughing like never before. We reminded ourselves about our time together at the Art Academy, gossiping about the professors and telling each other secrets from a long time ago. Everything was perfect. I felt the excitement and immediately knew that I, once again have made the right decision. And then, in the spark of the moment I proposed to Gerda. I apologize for lying earlier, because it was then that I have never seen her happier.

...

Our flat in Paris was humble. Small and cozy, but I couldn’t wish for more. We had one of the idealistic views at the Eiffel Tower, you know. The view, everyone wished they had.

It wasn’t as hard to get a job as we expected. I started working at an art gallery, selling paintings by day and working on my own pieces at night. Slowly, after a couple of months the owner saw the potential in me and agreed to also sell my own paintings. I was progressively becoming



better at my job and the opportunity of working in an art gallery opened many doors for me as well as for Gerda. Finally, I introduced the two of them and after some time the owner, Mr. Barrock agreed to host Gerda's very first art exhibition. And I'm telling you, it was a huge success. Every guest was impressed by Gerda's talent and wanted to know more about this foreign painter from the Netherlands. Soon, we were invited to all sorts of events and were surrounded by all kinds of artists. From investors, to freestyle painters and amongst them, were our future friends, that we had no idea of.

...

Gerda was running through the apartment, holding a glass of wine and spilling it all over. "Why did it have to happen! Right now, when the exhibition is in a week!", she said to nobody in particular. "No, I don't want to do it anymore. Not like that.", she sat down on the floor and her long, blue cape spread around her. She looked like she was drowning in the middle of it, like she would sit in a lake. She bent her knees, pulling them closer to her chest and gave me that look. Then, after I didn't respond, she sighted and looked out of the window, still holding the wine glass in her hand. "Can't you find someone else?", I asked, trying to help. "Who? I have to start right away. I'm late anyhow. I won't find anyone on such short notice."

"You can try at least, have you asked Cecile?"

"She's in the countryside, visiting her parents."

"Gerda, come on, don't be so devastated. Anyone can model, right?"

Again, she gave me that look. I took the big, black hat, lying at the table and run up to her. I took off her long, blue cape and put in on. "See? Anyone.", I said as I was spinning around the living room, making the cape flutter around me. She looked at me, entertained by the show I was now performing. I picked up a range from the cupboard and started posing for her, laughing and goofing around. She couldn't help it and giggled at the sight of it.

"It's not funny. I'm in a very serious position, I don't have time for this.", she said, still pretending to be grumpy.

“And yet you’re laughing!”, I answered and helped her stand up.

“Fine, okay, you win.”, she said laughing, as her watery eyes lit up. Then, all of the sudden, her expression totally changed. She stepped back and took a closer look at me. “Oh, what is it?”, I couldn’t quite read her face. She glanced down, then back up, at me. “I have an idea...”, she started unsure, looking me up and down. “Oh no, do I want to know what it is?”, I responded confused and slightly afraid of the answer. There is one thing you have to know about Gilda, sometimes she has crazy ideas. Her beautiful imagination carries her away and she goes with it.

“Oh no, I might know what your idea is about...”, I suddenly realized and shook my head. “Please Einar, it will only be this one time. And besides, you came up with it.”, she was holding my hands and the way she glanced at me, I knew what the outcome would be. “It really means that much to you, doesn’t it?”, I asked quietly, and she nodded her head. “Please, it will be our secret and I promise not to tell anyone.”, she whispered with a smile. I closed my eyes and took a deep breath “Fine. But only this one time”, I finally agreed.

“You will see, it won’t be that bad. Actually, it might turn out even a bit funny, think about it. You always liked to dress up with me for Halloween parties or events.”

I rolled my eyes, accepting my fate and letting her do the job. What am I getting myself into, went through my mind, but only one look at Gerda made me know that it was worth it.

She immediately disappeared into the dressing room, already choosing outfits for me. I loved seeing her lost in her work. She always fell into this flow. She was lost in her thoughts, always planning the next step. Seeing her motivated gave me the feeling of happiness. I knew that I would do anything to help her in any way possible. Even this.

...

I was wearing a green, long dress with bare shoulders. The makeup was subtle, but visible and the red, bright lipstick gave it a sharp touch. My short hair was hidden

under a big, green hat, that kept falling down and annoying me more by the second.

“Sit here”, said Gerda and pointed at the small sofa by the window.

“The lightning there is perfect”, she added as I was walking towards the spot. The dress was too tight, scratching my back. “Put your arm up there.”, she added pointing in the right direction. The hat kept sliding on my forehead and I constantly had to pull it back. “Lean a bit to the left”, she suggested. I could smell the artificial scent of the powder, spread on my cheeks. “Lift your chin up”, she demanded. The lace from the sleeves was rubbing on my arms, leaving red marks. “Einar?”, she suddenly asked, and I looked directly at her.

“Relax” She smiled and took a paintbrush in her hand. I put myself in the position she asked me to and closed my eyes. I took a deep breath and opened them again, my gaze falling on the small mirror, right in front of me. I observed my face. I have never seen myself, looking like this. So feminine. So delicate. So fragile, I thought. I slowly glanced at Gerda, without moving my head. Her face was concentrated, her grip firm around the paintbrush.

Suddenly, I had to think about my mother. The way she looked, while painting. The concentrated glance and the precision she was working with. I remember thinking how beautiful she was and how my father never really saw it. The beauty she reflected through painting and her patience with me.

What would she think now? Of me? Would she be disappointed? Would she find it inappropriate? My thoughts kept wondering, as I sat there, in the most beautiful dress, staring at my reflection.

## – Chapter 5 –

### M

There are multiple ways one can hide. During a hide and seek game, you have to find that one spot where you can hide from your friend. Hoping to be the last one to be found, awaiting victory.

You may be hiding from a previous lover, or from the pain you think you would feel if you had to encounter them again. You may fear the awkwardness the encounter would cause, when not long ago the same person had been the one who felt like home.

One can also hide behind a bottle of whiskey. People playing this particular game usually hide from the problems they would have to face, were it not for that exact bottle.

Mary hid behind her words. Behind words she could not speak out loud. So, she wrote them down. They were tucked in her leather-wrapped journal, safely hidden in the little cupboard beside her bed.

You may be asking yourself now what was she hiding from?

Well, first, you have to know that being the prime minister's wife was almost as hard as being the prime minister himself. Nobody was expecting anything from you but at the same time, there were so many expectations you had to reach.

The prime minister's wife always had to present herself perfectly. Never once did she raise her voice to her husband, no matter what he did or said. And behold if she was ever anything but quiet. Women didn't have an opinion when it came to politics. Or rather society seemed to pretend they didn't have one. They were robbed of their voice. Silenced.

It was raining outside when the maid came in. The sky was covered in grey clouds. Mary was sitting on the windowsill in her room, scribbling down her thoughts into her journal.

“Miss, dinner is ready to be served.” Ann was the quietest out of all of Mary’s maids. She never participated in the conversations about others and preferred keeping her thoughts to herself. She was also the youngest and hence the maid Mary got along with best.

“I will be down in a minute.”

“You have visitors, Miss.”

“Are they dining with my husband and I?”

“Yes, Miss, I believe it’s the Lord Chancellor, Viscount Finlay, Miss.”

“Thank you, Ann.”

Herbert Henry Asquith had never been a talkative man, nor a talkative husband... Except when it came to politics. And when the chancellor was around, both men talked about the country’s future, like it was their own little game they were playing. Trying to conduct the pawns in the direction they wished. Except that the board was a country and its pawns, Britain’s citizens.

The long wooden staircase leading to the kitchen creaked under Mary’s steps and both men, sitting at the dining table, turned around.

“Miss Asquith, lovely to see you again. Please join us.”

As soon as Mary had sat down both men continued their conversation. She was like the wind. They didn’t see her, so they didn’t talk to her. Or more like a wall, because one can at least hear the wind, and they didn’t hear Mary, not really.

Mary let her gaze wander through the dining room. By now, she was familiar with its high ceiling, its grand chandelier, even with the portraits of the Royal Family hanging on the wall. But still the room, nor the house for that matter, felt like home. She couldn’t remember the last time she had truly felt at home. Was it at her husband’s last residence? In the house they had lived at before moving to this even bigger mansion, when he got elected prime minister? Probably not... Or was it in the cottage she had spent most part of her childhood in with her seven younger sisters? She could still hear their laughs, echoing through the halls and remembered how her mother held her after waking up from a nightmare...

Her husband started raising his voice and Mary woke up from her daydream.

“The Pankhursts are ridiculing themselves at this point. They should be more concerned with their household and stop harassing British citizens. Their little demo today was not only a waste of time for themselves but also a waste of resources. Our policemen have more important things to do than to run after those delusional, so-called suffragettes...”

Mary stopped listening to their conversation... She knew her husband’s opinion on whether women should be granted the right to vote or not. She also knew that he was set in his ways and she was not going to be the one to try and change his mind.

The suffragettes were a group of women’s rights activists who advocated for women’s suffrage, or the right to vote, and gender equality. They were part of the broader women’s rights movement that emerged in the late 19<sup>th</sup> century and continued into the early 20<sup>th</sup> century.

The most well-known suffragette organization was the Women’s Social and Political Union (WSPU), which was founded in 1903 by Emmeline Pankhurst and her daughters Christabel and Sylvia Pankhurst. The WSPU was known for its militant tactics, such as hunger strikes, arson, and other forms of

## – Chapter 6 –

### E

You could hear the piano in the background. The fragile, but firm sound of it. Every key played precisely, in a flow that hypnotized me, making me come closer to its source, until finally I found myself standing right next to it. Staring at the massive, black instrument I kept losing touch with reality. Fingers moving fast and yet not hurrying. It looked so easy, so effortless, but you could see the concentrated gaze of the young man playing. His hair falling on his face, while his body was fully engaged in the task. He was in a trance, couldn't stop. Wouldn't stop. I knew that feeling, being completely devoted to something. Being in your element, you know? That was exactly the feeling I was experiencing while painting. Getting lost in your thoughts, losing track of time, forgetting the surrounding.

“Everything's fine, miss?”, a voice brought me back from my thoughts.

I blinked and looked around, reminding myself where I was. Standing in the middle of a big hall room. In the middle of a huge exhibition, Gerda's exhibition.

I think I have to explain, how I got to this point. After she had sold her paintings of me, each tilted as “the danish girl”, more customers appeared, asking whether there would be more paintings of this kind. They said, the woman on the paintings seemed different, fascinating, one of a kind. People kept asking and Gerda kept denying, not wanting to force me to model again and when I found out, something in me realized, it was a one-of-a-kind opportunity. As the days went by, Gerda begun painting me again and after some time I got used to it. It didn't bother me anymore, I even enjoyed it after some time. Anyhow, nobody knew who this mysterious woman from the paintings was, so my identity remained a secret, and Gerda kept it. Each day brought more attention from the public to her paintings featuring me. “The Danish girl in the emerald dress”, “the Danish girl on a terrace”, “the Danish girl and the vase”. She

was caught up in her work and I found myself in the middle of attention. Being her muse, her inspiration, her aspiration. It was the first time in my life that I have experienced such a thing and it awoke something in me. A part of me that was always there, yet remained hidden, secret. I enjoyed being the center of attention. I enjoyed being the object of sights. And I certainly enjoyed the privacy.

Do you know that feeling, when you're in a place where nobody knows you? Like moving to another country or changing school? You can completely change your personality, become whoever you want, start fresh. That was what the Danish girl became to me, this secret personality. A fictive part of me. A non-existing identity, but yet here I was, pretending it was real. With every painting, I felt her presence more. With every day she became more me, and I became her. The mysterious woman, everybody was suddenly talking about. They were trying to get in, discover the mystery and I was struggling not to let it out. Until I finally couldn't anymore.

When did he stop playing? Now, he was staring at me with a confused, but slightly entertained glance. "Miss?", he asked again, tilting his head in my direction. "Oh, yes... Yes, everything's fine, I'm sorry", I was blushing, embarrassed being caught staring at him playing the piano just a few minutes earlier. "Don't apologize, I'm glad you like it", he smiled, "Most of them, didn't even noticed", he said, waving his hand around the room as I looked around. He was right, everyone was fascinated by the paintings, walking around with a drink in one hand and examining each carefully. The music was just an addition, something to reclaim the atmosphere, the paintings were in the center of attention.

"Yes, I guess you're right.", I admitted and before I knew it, I was caught up in a conversation, that I surprisingly enjoyed more than I would have thought. But not because of a certain topic, but because of the person I was having it with. That's how it all started, just a single innocent chat with a single innocent stranger.



## – Chapter 7 –

A

I am running. The distance between me and my pursuers is getting increasingly smaller. I run as fast as I can, but I don't seem to be moving forwards. They catch up with me, grab me around the arms and drag me, with an ugly laughter, towards the school toilet. I try to free myself, but there are three of them against me alone. They push me into a toilet cabin, open the toilet bowl and force me to my knees, holding my head millimeters from it. One takes my chin and lifts my head up, so that now I'm looking up to them.

"Ha! See, now he doesn't feel like a superhero anymore, who saves little, innocent girls from the bad, bad guys."

"Let's show him what happens to those, who disturbs us while we're having fun."

I feel how someone's hand is pushing my head down, into the water of the toilet seat. First, the feeling of disgust and helplessness comes up. Every fiber of my being is shouting that I need air, and I can not suppress the overwhelming urge to gasp for breath. I try to free myself, but his grip is way too strong. And then I probably do the most stupid thing I could do in this situation. I scream the remaining air out of my lungs.

I open my eyes, lying soaked in sweat, in my bed in London, near me my wife Jenna. I am pretty sure I screamed, but thankfully she didn't wake up. This wasn't the first time that I had such a dream. It's like I didn't suffer enough because of these assholes during my school years, no, they had to haunt me in my dreams and cause me nightmares. Often the reason they bullied me, was that I stood up for some women. Was it a teacher they disrespected, or some random girl they harassed. Even though I perfectly knew the consequences my actions would have, I just couldn't simply ignore when someone treated woman as if they were dirt on their shoes. It reminded me too much of Riccardo.

However, mostly they didn't need to have a reason to bully me. They just did it for fun. It made them feel powerful.

I get up gently from the bed without awaking Jenna, put on a bathrobe, and go with a pack of cigarettes out onto the tiny terrace of our apartment.

It seems unlikely that I'll be able to sleep at this point. It's five o'clock in the morning, in one hour I have to go open the bookshop.

Standing here, on the terrace of my proper apartment, with a cigarette in my hand and a amazing woman lying in our bed, I think about that small boy who was so traumatized by his mother's boyfriend, that he developed the urge to protect every woman he met. Even if that caused him troubles.

I had always been a chubby and a rather nonathletic kid. However, I remember how at one point, after one of the countless times I got beaten up by some boys who needed to ensure their self-esteem, I decided that I had enough of not being able to defend myself. So, I joined a boxing club.

And now years later, boxing has gotten more than just a hobby, it's a part of who I am. I basically live two completely different lives. By day, I'm the friendly guy who works at a bookshop in central London. But in the evenings, I'm the rude coach of the best underage boxers in London.

My thoughts are interrupted by the church ringing in the distance. Only now do I realize how cold I have actually become and go back inside.

As I prepare breakfast for Jenna and myself, my eyes fall on a newspaper article lying on the table. It talks about the countless women, who have disappeared in the last few months.

No bodies have been found yet, so officially no one is talking about the fact that they might have been murdered. However, I heard rumors, that these are femicides.

In my opinion, the government is clearly hiding information from people, so it wouldn't surprise me if the rumors were true and those aren't some innocent disappearances, but actually someone, who murders women just because of their gender.

I eat my breakfast alone, since Jenna is still asleep. Near the fried egg I made for her, I leave a small note, which tells her that I will be back late, because in the afternoon I have an appointment at the barber.

## – Chapter 8 –

### M

Mary was woken up by a loud noise coming from the other side of the house. It was still dark outside. After regaining her orientation, Mary looked at the clock on her cupboard. It was 4 in the morning... The voice that had woken her up grew louder and louder. Someone was pacing back and forth. She could hear the steps echoing through the large rooms of the house.

After throwing back her bedsheets, Mary left the safe, warm place of her bed and followed the noise. The house's floor was old and wooden and liked making noises when walked on. Her bedroom door creaked when she opened it and so she waited silently behind it, holding her breath, to make sure no one had heard her. Tiptoeing along the corridor she followed the voice around the house, until she stopped in front of her husband's office.

She pressed her ear against the massive wooden door and tried to make out what her husband was so upset about... "This cannot reach the public's ear! ...stealing their honest husband's money... absolutely ridiculous... probably prostitutes...outrageous to concern the government with this...loss of time..."

Mary heard a distant thud. Her husband had ended the call. She could hear steps coming towards her, and so she quickly hid in the small storeroom next to the office. And once again, she was holding her breath, hiding from the person she was supposed to spend the rest of her life with.

As a child she had always known that her parents were doing everything they could to make sure Mary and her sisters had everything they needed. And so, when Herbert Asquith had proposed to her five years ago, she did what was best for her family. She did what she had felt was the only way to get her family out of that small cottage and into an easier life. And she tried to not regret it. She really tried. But sometimes there were those moments, when she remembered that warm feeling of being loved, of being truly loved... And every time this grief for a life she could never go

back to bubbled up, she would shut it down. And she would feel so selfish later, because she knew, she had done what was best for her family.

And so once again, standing in that small storage room, she shut the homesickness out.

Mary waited another few minutes, until she heard her husband's bedroom door close before she dared to leave the storeroom.

As quietly as she could, Mary opened the door to the office and sneaked inside. She wanted to know what had happened that would upset her husband so much. Was it one of the ministers? Or the suffragettes? Had the press written something negative on Herbert?

She closed the door behind her and headed for the desk. Standing behind the desk, Mary realised that she hadn't been in Herbert's office often. He had the curtains always closed, so nobody could look inside from the garden. And the only other people ever coming inside were other politicians when there was something to discuss. The only time she had really been in this room, was when they had visited the house before moving in.

Her husband had left an envelope on the desk. It had already been ripped open, but he seemed to have forgotten to put it back, which was quite unusual for him, as he was a very organised person. Mary opened the envelope and took exactly two sheets of paper out. One of them was a typewritten letter and the other seemed to be a record of data or some kind of statistics.

Even though Mary only went to primary school for a few years, her parents had put a lot of emphasis on her and her sister's reading and writing skills. First, she read the letter... Mary had never shown too much interest in her husband's politics. She knew that if she had, he would have reminded her of her role as a woman, which definitely did not have anything to do with politics, but that didn't mean she didn't understand the content of the letter. It seemed to be the draft for a newspaper, analysing the murder of multiple women... They had all died on the same street and the author of the article seemed to suspect that there was a serial killer on the loose, choosing women at random and strangling them in a dark alley.

The data on the second sheet of paper contained some information about the women, which did not seem to have anything in common and came from different social classes.

The only thing the victims had in common, was that every single one of them was female.

So this was what her husband had been so upset about. If the article was ever published, the public would blame the government for not reacting appropriately to the incidents. They seemed to have had the data all along and still did not inform the public that there was a serial killer going around, murdering innocent women. The government had failed to protect its citizens.

Mary did not know what to do with this information. Her husband was certainly going to try everything possible to hide this information from the public. It would enrage the suffragettes more and maybe even shift the public's opinion on the movement. And what if the murderer stroke again? What if another innocent woman was killed? Every single one of the women had been one too many.

Without thinking Mary hid the envelope under her nightgown and quickly left the office. As quietly as she could, she passed through the corridors, tiptoeing past her husband's bedroom.

She knew that the first thing her husband would do in the morning, was close himself in his office and try to somehow make this information vanish. Herbert Asquith would be outraged when he found his desk empty. He would probably turn the house upside down in order to find the envelope.

The question was, what Mary would do with this new gained information?

Femicides, also known as femicides, refer to the intentional killing of women and girls because of their gender. These murders are rooted in a larger system of gender-based violence and discrimination, and they are a violation of human rights.

In 1908, the issue of femicides was largely dismissed or downplayed by the government and society at large in the UK. Women's experiences of violence and abuse were often minimized or ignored, and laws and policies reinforced gender inequality and violence against women. Women did not have the right to vote until 1918, and divorce was highly stigmatized and difficult to obtain, making it difficult for women to leave abusive marriages. Overall, the situation in 1908 reflected a larger culture of sexism and gender inequality that pervaded society at the time.

## – Chapter 9 –

### E

“Look me in the eyes and say it”, repeated Gerda. She was standing right next to the armchair I sat her in and told her we have to talk. My beautiful wife-to-be. My dearest fiend. My muse, my lover, my soulmate. She stared at me and I insolently tried to avoid looking back. What a coward I was. I couldn’t even tell my own fiancée and not because I was afraid of her reaction, but the minute I would say it, it would be out in the world forever. The strength of these worlds. The meaning of the sentence I was trying to squeeze out of myself was just so enormous that I couldn’t handle it myself.

“I... I simply...it just isn’t...”, were the worlds that came out instead. “Oh, dearest”, Gerda came closer to me, knelt on the floor right beside the couch I was sitting on and held my hands. “You realize, I know you too well. I saw it, Einar. I saw it in your eyes when you were putting on the clothes to model for me. I saw it in your smile as you were introducing yourself as Lili to the people at the gallery.”, her hands were squeezing mine and her lips were trembling as she spoke the words. “I’m so sorry, Gerda. I didn’t know, I promise you. I would never... if I knew that I’m...I would never do that to you”, there were too many tears flowing down my cheeks. “I know, love, I know. And don’t apologize. How could you apologize for something you can’t control? How could I hate you for something that gives you so much joy, so much freedom? You are still him; you know. You are still that person I fell in love with and I...”, this time it was her tears that interrupted her. I held her close, in my arms “Oh Gerda, I know. I will always love you... just not in that way anymore.” We sat there, the two of us, alone in the big living room. We hadn’t even finished unpacking. There were empty boxes on the floor and random books lying around. The silence, so loud that you couldn’t hear it anymore was surrounding us. The sun was setting and the streets of Paris were getting emptier by the minute. Paris, how ironic. The city that lives non-stop. The crowded city, filled with young

people, new ideas, always full of excitement, now seemed so empty and quiet. The time stopped, it was just the two of us and the still unspoken worlds, that yet seemed so obvious. “I just want to be a woman”, I said breaking the silence and letting go of everything I have known before.



## – Chapter 10 –

### A

I love walking through London's streets on early mornings. The bookshop is in the city center. So, it always takes me a half an hour to get there from the Shallow Street where the apartment is. The sun just starts rising, nobody is yet out on the streets, what makes London seem so quiet and peaceful, that you could almost forget about women constantly disappearing in a mysterious way.

The last month, I need these mornings walks to be left in peace and clear my head. It's not only the dreams that bother me, but also Jenna. Some time ago, she started speaking about having a child. We have been married now for five years and I understand that slowly it gets time to think about it. Jenna gets along perfectly with kids, she loves them and they adore her. I know that she would be a perfect mother. Financially, we're also stable enough to be able to raise a child.

The only problem is me. I have never planned on starting a family, I always thought that I would end up alone. But then I met Jenna and everything changed. With her, I can imagine having a child. But I'm so afraid. I'm afraid that I would be a bad father. A child is so much responsibility and as a parent you can do so much wrong, and unintentionally harm them. The thought of hurting my own child terrifies me. And I didn't exactly have a good father, from whom I could take example.

I have told Jenna about my struggles; she accepted it and didn't put pressure on me. She simply told me to take my time and tell her when I'm ready to speak about it again. But every time she sees children, the look in her eyes tells me, how badly she wants to have one of her own.

When I walk to the barber in the late afternoon, the streets aren't as peaceful anymore. They are crowded with busy people heading somewhere important.

I expect the barbershop to also be crowded, but when I enter, I find it almost empty. The only people there are two barbers and one man who gets his beard done.

The barber places me on the seat next to the man and starts cutting my hair. Then I see that the man beside me is holding the same newspaper article I have read this morning. "Have you heard the rumors, that these aren't just some harmless disappearances?", I ask him.

"Sure, I have heard them. Some paranoids are even talking about femicides.", the whole time he spoke, he didn't even once look up from the newspaper.

"So what do you think about it?", he seems not interested to speak with me, but somehow he is fascinating and I want to hear more from him.

"I think it's the women's fault if they're being murdered. What do they expect if they walk around alone? They are the weaker gender and just a burden for our society. So they should at least do the only thing they're capable of, being a housewife. You know, in nature, the weaker ones always die first. In addition, all the women who disappeared, were prostitutes, so they got the male attention they always seek. So you should thank the one, who is behind these disappearances, because he's actually doing everyone a favor.", he finally lifts his head and looks me in the eyes.

I freeze. For a few seconds, I forget everything he has said. I'm shocked about how big and intense his sapphire-blue eyes are. It feels like I'm drowning in them.

Then the realization of what he just said comes back to me. It was deeply disturbing to hear him speak so disrespectfully about women. "You can seriously think that women deserve to be killed?"

"Why should I tell you lies?", he says, and stands up. He pays the barber and departs without uttering another word.

After I left the barber, I still couldn't stop thinking about the man. His sexist words about women were truly shocking and offensive.

What could have possibly made someone think like that? I realize I found one more reason not to have kids. I don't want someone to grow up in a society, where people care more about your gender, than about who you actually are. Especially if the kid would be a girl. I wouldn't feel comfortable letting her out of my sight when we're out in public, knowing that there are people who share the same opinion as that man.

Now I even start worrying about Jenna's safety. When I come home, I'm going to tell her that she should take a pocketknife with her whenever she goes out. Just in case

something happens. As it seems, it's dangerous nowadays for a woman to be alone in public.

In the late 1800s, there were a series of unsolved murders of women in the Whitechapel area of London. The exact number of victims is uncertain, but at least five women, all prostitutes, are generally considered to have been killed by the same person. The killer's method was to slit the throats of his victims and mutilate their bodies in a gruesome and precise manner. Despite extensive police investigations and public scrutiny, the killer was never caught, and his identity remains one of the most enduring mysteries in criminal history. Over the years, numerous suspects have been proposed, but none have been definitively proven to be the killer. He was though given the nickname "Jack the Ripper" by the press. The case inspired numerous books, movies, and television shows.

## – Chapter 11 –

### E

“All art is at once surface and symbol. Those who go beneath the surface do so at their peril. Those who read the symbol do so at their peril. It is the spectator, and not life, that art really mirrors”, wrote Oscar Wilde in one of his books. If you read it the first time, it might be difficult to understand. Then, you reread it. Once more. You think about it. Try to find the meaning. Try to identify with it and slowly start to understand.

The first time I came across that quote was in its initial place, the book “The Picture of Dorian Grey” and to be honest, it has kind of stuck with me since then. It can be associated both with art, like a painting, and with life. You can either go beneath the surface, find the deeper meaning, read in between the lines, see what can’t be seen with the bare eye. Or you can read the symbol, look at what’s there to be seen, rely on the evidence, rely on your senses.

A painting can represent something, a person, a landscape, an object, a situation, but what is it that the painter really wanted it to represent? A person can behave in a certain way, fit into certain standards, act their role in society, but is it really who they are or are they only showing what’s above the surface? What if you decided to go under it and discover their true self?

That’s exactly what I did. Believe me or not, but it happened by accident that I discovered my true self. In the world we live in, you and me, it’s hard to be honest. It’s hard to tell the truth, express yourself, show yourself and be accepted. It’s hard to understand your feelings, however sometimes they’re stronger than us.

I still don’t know exactly what it is, this feeling inside of me. It eats me up at night and doesn’t let me think during the day. However, I cannot ignore it, pretend it’s not there, pretend it’s not a part of me. Now, that it became so strong, too strong, too powerful.

## – Chapter 12 –

### M

Mary did not go back to sleep after finding the envelope. She had been sitting in front of her dressing table for hours now. Simply staring at the envelope in her hand. What would her husband do if he found it in her room? If he found out that she had been in his office and that she had gone through his things? That she had stolen from him. She could still bring it back. Pretend like she hadn't seen it. Because if she kept it, he would know. There was no one else in the house at night but the two of them. There was no one else who could've taken it. And leaving him was not an option. She didn't have an income. It would be almost impossible for her to find a proper job. Especially as the prime minister's wife. Getting a divorce granted was almost as unlikely as winning the lottery. And going back to her parents would only bring shame to the family.

And so Mary did the one thing she had always done, when she couldn't speak up. She shared her thoughts with her journal. She wrote everything down and she didn't stop until dawn, when the night sky started getting lighter and the sun started showing itself.

When Mary's husband woke up in the morning and went back to his office, the envelope was lying on the exact same spot where he had left it the night before. It looked like no one had touched it after he had left the office the previous night. Herbert hadn't even gone down for breakfast. Eventually his wife would send a maid with a plate to him. He knew that he had to do something about that news article draft. He didn't know who the author was and where he intended to publish it, but Herbert was going to make sure that this article would never be published. It would give the suffragettes only more gunpowder.

Most her time, Mary spent inside the house. She would go out and take walks in the garden. Sometimes she would ask Ann to accompany her, but that was about it. The

occasions where she actually did something where she had to leave the property were rather rare. Especially after her husband became prime minister.

Today, she had decided to go to the local library. A plan had formed in her mind. For the first time since a long time, Mary had a goal. Something she truly aspired to.

Mary took her handbag, informed one of the maids that she was going out for the day and left the house.

The air seemed to smell differently outside of the house. And it was not like she wasn't allowed to leave the property. She just never really had to. If she ever needed something, she would send someone to get it for her.

The streets of London were rather empty on this quiet Thursday afternoon. The weather was nice and there was not even one single cloud in the sky. The wind was brushing through Mary's hair as she passed the small stores along the street.

When she arrived at the library, she made her way to the row of desks, on the right side of the bookshelves. On each of them sat a typewriter, ready to be used.

Mary sat down, took her leather-bound journal out of her little handbag, and laid it open on the desk. And then she started typing.

Mary sat in the library for five hours before she looked at the clock. It was 2pm and she had not even had lunch yet. She needed to get back home.

On her way home, she could hear screams from a few roads down. Her first instinct was to move closer to the house's walls on the side of the road. The closer she came, the louder the shouting became. She turned the corner, and what she witnessed would change her as a person. It would've changed anyone.

Women were standing in the streets. Hundreds of them, no thousands. Policemen were running around, trying to arrest as many of the protestors as possible. But the women were defending themselves. They didn't come just to be suppressed by the police. This ocean of faces, every single one of them had brought a different story. And every single one of them had a different past. But they had

something that unified them. They shared a belief. They had come together, because they believed that they had the right to make decisions for themselves. They had the right to have a say about what was going on in their country. They saw themselves as equals to men. And they demanded to be respected.

But they were not being respected. Women in handcuffs were being led away. Women, whose only crime had been to demand their freedom.

In 1908, the WSPU had already organized several large demonstrations and acts of civil disobedience, including the Women's Sunday demonstration in Hyde Park in June, which attracted an estimated 250,000 people. However, the government was resistant to granting women the right to vote and had responded to the suffragettes' activities with harsh tactics, including arrests and imprisonment.

## – Chapter 13 –

L

Walking down the street, I look around. Thousand thoughts in my head, thousand people around me. Every stranger I pass is heading somewhere. Everyone has a goal, a destination, a plan and I do too. My first appointment. My first step. Now, it's becoming real, more real every second I walk. Now, only meters away, I can see the sign of the pub I'm about to enter. Do I turn around and walk the other way? Now is my only chance and as soon as I walk in, it will be too late. My faith will be decided. My future will be set in stone. But what if it's a trap? Can I trust them? How do I know? No, it cannot be true. I trust Cassy and she was the one who gave me the contact. My palms start sweating. My breath's shallow and fast. I look up and meet the eyes of a woman walking past. She looks at me, I look at her and for a second all the muscles in my body relax. A warm, comforting feeling enters my body and I immediately know what to do. The decision has already been made long ago.

The pub is quiet, but not empty. It smells like beer and wood, which gives me an uncomfortable feeling. I search for a man in a brown hat. "He'll be wearing a brown hat, you'll know when you see him.", were Cassy's exact words. One. Two. Three steps. Only a few meters are separating us. He already saw me, the moment I walked in. One. Two. Three seconds. I'm standing right in front of him. Silence in my head. Noises around. I stretch my arm for a handshake.

"Lilly", I say.

"Magnus", he says.

I sit across him, and he hands me the drink he already ordered for both of us. I take a sip, without looking away, letting him start the conversation.

"Here you are", he smiles.

"Here I am", I smile back, not showing any signs of uncertainty. Silence. I examine his face, try to find out something about him. He has hazel brown eyes and drooping eyelids. His eyebrows are messy, and his face



lightly tanned. No, I think he's naturally a bit tanned. Where does he come from? Surely not France, he doesn't seem French at all. Nobody seems like they true self nowadays. How old could he be? Probably in his early forties. However, his hands look younger and this twinkle in his eyes, this energy makes him youthful. Fearless, determined, concentrated.

"I'm just going to be direct and say it.", he started "It is possible...but risky."

It's possible, he said. It's real. It can happen. I can have the life of my dreams. The future of my dreams. I can be free, escape my body, get rid of my currently identity.

Risky, he said. Risky, I think. What does risky mean? Everything can be risky. Crossing the street can be risky. Walking past a pub at night can be risky. Swimming in the sea can be risky. Anything can be risky.

"I'm also going to be direct and say it", I replied. "I'm in"

He stared at me, probably not expecting such a fast answer.

"Are you sure? I don't think you realize what the consequences might be. It has never been done before. And... there's no way back, after it's done.", he looked me straight in the eyes, putting more importance on his words. I looked at him, not knowing whether I could fully trust him, not knowing whether he would truly understand the meaning of the worlds I was about to say out loud.

"I don't think you know what the consequences might be if I don't do it.", was the only think I could say. It was also the only think that expressed enough how I felt about it. It was my only possibility to make him understand the importance.

"We should start, then", he said. "Tell me about everything.", where the only worlds I needed to hear.

## – Chapter 14 –

### L

At first, we met weekly at his place, that was both his apartment and his private clinic. His name was Magnus and he worked at a hospital, but it wasn't his dream job. The one thing you have to know about Magnus, was that he wasn't only a surgeon, but he was honestly fascinated by the human body. He wanted to find out more. He wanted to know more. He wanted to find new ways, new methods. He wanted to expand the medical world. And as much as I needed him, he needed me. And so, we became dependent on each other.

“We'll start with building trust”, he said.

Magnus not only deeply cared about biology, but also about the way we approach it. He said, in order to understand the human body, you have to understand the human, meaning me. We had to get to know each other. He had to understand my case, my urges, my reasons. He not only had to study my body, but he had to find out what's going on in my mind. I understood him and after some time he could also understand me. The thing I liked the most about him was that he never judged me. I knew, I could tell him everything, anything. He didn't only become my doctor; he became my friend. He could really see me and as much as Gerda understood and supported me, he acknowledged the real me. And that made all the difference.

During the next few weeks, Magnus got to know me, and I got to find out who he really was. We talked a lot about our childhood, parents, the circumstance we grew up in. The difficulties and experiences we had to face, during puberty. The feelings, emotions, thoughts. Magnus also told me about his work with other people like me. People that wanted to change, people that didn't belong, people that were different. Magnus, he had a theory. He didn't think these people were unhuman, crazy or outcasts. He never looked at it from the ethical point of view, like our society did. However, he thought, that it's a biological thing, that it's explainable and natural. He thought, people with this

disposition were already born like this. Even though, he didn't really have a proof for it, he seemed to believe it, and so did I. He told me about the research he was doing, with another surgeon in England. The research, that led him to the place in life, he's at now. "There are certain chemical components in our bodies and I believe they might be the answer to the way you feel. You see, these components cannot be affected by the outside world, but they just exist in the human body. They influence our feelings, our needs, our emotions in a way we can't fully comprehend yet." What he was talking about sounded like an unknown language to me, but after hours spent together, I could understand what he meant. He claimed that some people have more or less of these chemical components in their brain and that's the reason for their behavior. Back in England, he was doing a research, trying to capture them, to prove they exist. However, he didn't have enough support from the financial and medical point of view. Also, he needed more patients, he said. Patients like me.

## – Chapter 15 –

A

When I was eight and visited my first boxing lesson, I didn't like it at first. My only reason to continue, was that I wanted to be able to defend myself and others, who were also bullied by some guys, who enjoyed beating up someone. I was awful and lost almost every fight. Nevertheless, my mom was my biggest supporter. She came to every single one of my fights and every time I lost she told me how great I was and that I just should trust the process.

After some time I got better and started enjoying the fights. I noticed, that while boxing, I can let out my feelings and distract myself from thoughts that bother me. Even now, I love to remember the rush of adrenaline, the focus required to dodge and strike the opponents. I no longer felt helpless.

As I continued to win more and more fights, the idea of pursuing a career in boxing began to cross my mind. That was around the time when my mom was diagnosed with stage three of cancer. The doctor suggested doing a surgery, but we've heard enough stories about people who die during the operation, so we declined the proposal. First, mom stopped going to work and coming to my fights because she got tired very fast, then she was too sick, to get out of bed.

I was eighteen at that point and had just finished school. I started working at a textile factory, to be able to pay the rent of our apartment and in the evenings I had fights. If I did win the fight, I also got a few pounds. I was away the whole, so I had to find someone, who could take care of mom. That's when I met Jenna. She was the daughter of mother's friend and looked for a job. I warned her, that I can't pay her much, but she told me that she doesn't care about the money.

Then, during a fight, my arm got heavily injured. The doctors said, that it will heal, and I'll be able to use it, but I can forget boxing professionally and making it a career. A week later, my mom passed away.

I barely remember the next weeks. The funeral and the days that followed felt muted and unreal. It was as though my

mind had shut down in order to protect me from all the pain.

I struggled to find any joy or purpose in life. I felt as though I was simply going through the motions, a shell of the person I used to be. It was terrifying. I just couldn't accept that my lovely mother was taken away from me. She was so young and had many goals she wanted to accomplish in life. Even if life wasn't kind to her, mom always tried to make the best out of the situation. She didn't deserve to die. I have to admit, the only thing that kept me going and helped to get out of that phase, was Jenna. And I am so grateful to her for going through all of it with me.

Half a year after mom's death, I slowly started to come back to life again and to accept, that she isn't there anymore. I started to work at the bookshop and moved with Jenna into the apartment on Shallow Street.

My arm had healed, but I had other things on my mind and didn't even once show up at the boxing club. I knew, I could slowly start to train again, but I knew, that I'll never be able to box how I did before the injury. So I gave it up entirely.

It was only years later that I dared to go back to the club. I realised, how much I missed it and started regularly to train for fun. I remembered, how boxing gave me a sense of purpose and discipline that I couldn't find anywhere else. My old coach was very excited to see me again and proposed me to train a group of kids. I was up for trying something new, so I agreed.

That's when I met Elli. She was one of the kids I trained. Since she was very good, she stood out among the others. She often stayed after the trainings and asked me questions about different techniques and strategies, that she could use in her own fights. I started to train her specifically, because I truly believed, that she could make a career in boxing. I noticed that there is something different about her, but it took me a ridiculously long time, to realise that she isn't a boy. It was only when she told me, that she is thankful, that I support her even though she is a girl, when I understood.

When Elli saw the surprised expression on my face, she laughed and explained, that she tried to get into several other clubs as a girl but they sent her away with a condescending remark about how young ladies ought to pursue ballet rather than boxing. So, Elli got tired of fighting

for the right to participate in a sport, so she decided to try her luck as a boy.

Even now, several years late, she still hides her gender. People always suppose that she's a boy and often tell her that she is a big role model for little boys. But Elli hates it. She wants to tell the world that a girl can also be good at doing things, that our society thinks are meant only for boys. She wants to be a role model not only for little boys, but also for little girls.

But she's afraid that revealing her gender would end her career in boxing, because no one would accept to fight against a girl. Although I know she's right about that, her correctness leaves me feeling sad and frustrated. Elli is in fact better than most boys her age and wins almost every fight. She is not only a natural latent, but also works hard for her goals.

## – Chapter 16 –

### L

“Let’s go out!”, said Gerda, standing up from the couch and looking down at me. I sighed and looked out of the window, not answering. “Come on, we’re hardly doing anything fun these days. I just want to spend some time with you.” Silence. “We could meet up with Maddy?” More silence. “Or we could do something just the two of us. Go to a restaurant or to the cinema.” Even more silence. “Lilly? You and me. What do you say? Like old times” I couldn’t hold it anymore. Abruptly I stood up and walked to the window. Looking out, I saw people walking in the streets. A couple holding hands. A working man with his bag. Two women hurrying somewhere. I closed my eyes and when I opened them, I saw my reflection in the window. My now longer hair. Freckles. Red lipstick. In the background I could see Gerda, still standing next to the couch and looking in my direction. Her hands were hanging down along her body, her gaze not leaving me for a second. I turned around, now facing her, only the couch separating us. When did it become so hard? When did it all change so fast? Even though we were only few meters away from each other, I felt like we’re oceans apart. If I only stretched my arm out, I could touch hers and yet she seemed miles away.

She walked around the couch, took my hand and silently led me to the atelier. I followed her, without saying anything, like a puppet, being pulled by the strings. She sat me down on the floor, next to the brown, leather armchair. Next, she took her painting easel, her paint brushes and her paints, setting it up a few meters away from me. She sat down on a stove and begun to sketch. Me, I was leaning on the armchair, looking in her direction, following her every movement. The lace cap I was wearing was spread on the ground and my hair was messed up. I lifted my arms, to fix it. “Don’t”, she whispered and looked me deep in the eyes. I lowered them again, now placing them under my head,

forming a cushion to lean on. I stayed still. Breathe in, breathe out. Looking at Gerda, I couldn't read any of her emotions, just the focused gaze she had, while painting. Suddenly, the very moment reminded me of the first time she painted me. The first time I wore a dress. The first time, I heard the voice in my head, saying "is this really you?". I was so clueless, we were so clueless and now, look where it led us. My dear Gerda, what have I done to her? Her sad, sad eyes. These eyes I fell in love with. These eyes I woke up to every single morning. These eyes I wanted to look at for the rest of my life. Now, seeing her like that, I feel guilty. Guilty, for changing and not being there for her. It was me, that messed it up. I destroyed us. I did it to us. We're here because of me, she had to give up so much, because of me. However, she never ever companied, even not for a second. She never doubted in me, never second guessed or questioned my decision. Never tried to stop me or change my mind. She just accepted me; she heard what I had to say and held me while I cried. "I don't deserve her", there was the voice in my head again. "She doesn't deserve this life", it claimed again and before I realized it, there was a tear dropping down my cheek. And another and another, following the first one.

Just the two of us, she said. And there we were, just the two of us, right where it all started.



## – Chapter 17 –

### M

Mary was sitting on her windowsill in her room again. Her journal was sitting in her lap, but she couldn't really focus on anything. She was just looking outside; her thoughts were fixed on what she had seen today. She had gone to the library to retype what she had written in her journal, because after finding the article she did not want to feel like she had not done anything for those women that had lost their lives for nothing. She had planned on publishing her experience and knowledge on what it was like to live as the prime minister's wife, who was a misogynist and not supporting the women's suffrage at all. She had wanted to publish it anonymously in the *Votes for Women* newspaper, but after what she had witnessed today, she knew that it was not enough. She could not pretend she had not seen the article, when there was a serial killer going around murdering women.

And so once again she was going to have to sneak through her own house. She would lie in bed, awake, waiting for complete silence to fall over the house. She would wait, listen for steps, making sure her husband had gone to sleep. She would open the door, hoping it would not creak, squeezing her eyes shut, like that would help anything. And then she would sneak through the corridors, as silently as she could, tiptoeing to the office.

Mary opened the door to the office. Sneaked inside... The envelope was not lying on the desk anymore. How was she going to find it? She started opening every single drawer. Still, the envelope was nowhere to be seen. Panic started to rise in her chest. What if her husband had gotten rid of the information? Destroyed the proof? She would have no evidence for the murders. No way of warning all the women at risk. She had to find that envelope.

The last drawer was closed by key. This had to be the drawer where her husband kept the confidential information. But how was she going to open it? And more

importantly... How was she going to close it again? If her husband found the drawer open in the morning, would he get suspicious? Or would he just think that he had forgotten to close it in the evening? There was no way of knowing.

Mary found a letter opener that had been lying on the desk and started to try opening the drawer. She had to be careful. She could not leave any traces behind that might indicate someone had intruded the office. Finally, after multiple tries, the drawer popped open. And on top of the pile of papers in the drawer laid the envelope.

Mary quickly checked its contents, to make sure both the papers were inside. Closed the drawer. She had to hope her husband would think he had forgotten to close it. And made her way back to her bedroom.

As soon as she was back in her room, Mary hid the envelope in her pillowcase and went back to bed, even though she knew that tonight she would not be able to fall asleep.

## – Chapter 18 –

### L

Looking out of the window, I see a pine tree forest. Then, the landscape changes and hectares of land stretch in front of me. It reminds me of home, of the Netherlands. The beautiful flatland I used to paint. It all seems so long ago now, too long ago.

I stretch my arms, tired from the long train drive. “How much longer will it take?”, I ask. He looks at his watch, “About three more hours.” I sigh. I cannot hold it any longer. I take my purse and stand up, opening the door and walking out to the corridor. It’s small, which makes me feel both claustrophobic and anxious at the same time. I walk along the cabins, all of them filled with travelers, families on vacation or working men. I can feel the smell of a cigarette. I could really use one right now. I see a man, standing beside a half-open window. In one hand he’s holding a cigarette and in the other a book. He looks up, as I come closer in his direction. “What are you reading?”, I ask without any particular reason. “To have and to hold, by some American author”, he answers casually.

“Any good?”, I ask.

“Depends on what kind of books you like”, he looks up with a smirk on his face.

“What is it about then?”, I keep on asking.

“Motherhood”, he responds quickly.

I tilt my head and study him with my eyes. “How come a man like you is interested in the topic of motherhood? Excuse me for any wrong interpretations, but you do not seem like that type.”

“Ha!”, he bursts out with laughter. “Well Miss, do you care to tell me why?”

“Naturally, I didn’t mean to offend you, but to be fair, nobody seems to care about women in the society nowadays. That’s why I find it interesting and a bit odd, that a man, like yourself is keen on reading a book about motherhood”, I explain slowly, watching his facial expression change with

every word I say. I realize how careful he is with his answer, considering his options.

“I don’t quite know if I should thank you or turn around and walk away from you.”, he answers “It’s hard to find out whether it’s a compliment or an insult.”, he adds. “The choice is yours. “, I smile “It was nice meeting you”, I say as I stretch my hand out to shake his. “Wait a second”, he says in the moment I walk back to my cabin. “Who are you and why did you come up to me? “, he asked curiously. “Does it even matter? We probably won’t see each other again.”, I answer.

He tilted his head and sighted, “Can you at least tell me what a lonely woman, like yourself does on a train to Germany on a random Tuesday? “

“Well... “, I thought about my response. I couldn’t tell the truth to a stranger I just met minutes ago. But what if I did? What could possibly happen? The excitement of this thought made me shiver. “Let’s just say it isn’t a random trip on a casual Tuesday for me.”, I paused, taking a big breath. “I’m going to have a surgery that will change my whole life.”, I smiled and looked him in the eyes, hoping he would leave the tiny bit of mystery hanging in the air to me. He smiled back, realizing just now the importance of our encounter. “I wish you luck then”, he tilted his head and bowed his hat as a sign. One last time, I look him in the eyes before turning around and making my way to the cabin.

## - Chapter 19 -

A

Today is a quite important night for Elli and me. If she wins this fight, in one week we'll be heading to a championship in Germany. That would be a great step in Elli's career.

The guy Elli is fighting tonight, is known for being brutal, so I know that she is a bit worried, even though she would never admit it.

The moment I enter the boxing club, I see her running towards me. "I saw him. My opponent. He looks gritty and not sympathetic at all. And I also overheard him say, that he's sure that he'll win tonight. He's arrogant and thinks he doesn't have to make an effort to defeat me."

"First of all, hi. And as you already said, he's quite arrogant, so he's underestimating you and will lose. Just remember, he is stronger than you, but you're quicker and cleverer. Use that! So I would wish you luck, but I know, you won't need it."

Elli smiles, nods, gives me a big hug and rushes away to get ready for the fight.

I love, how our relationship outgrew that of a trainer and an athlete. We understand each other so well, that I might even consider her as my best friend. Despite the fact, that she's 14, and I'm 27, we often have interesting discussions and she always opens my eyes on topics, I never had thought about before. As an example, she was the one who told me about the suffragettes. We often talk about the suffragette movement and you can see how much they inspire Elli.

I go take my seat near the ring, since the fight will begin in about five minutes. The boxing club is unusually crowded. Normally, not many people are coming to watch a fight between some teenagers. I notice that the majority of the crowd are parents with children.

There are also many signs, that say "Go Elli", so I suggest Elli got way more popular, than she thought she ever would. I just hope, she won't be distracted by that.

A bell rings and Elli and her opponent come into the ring. The bell rings once more, and the fight starts. Elli inspires

me by her courage and determination, she is so strong, determined and unapologetically feminist.

And as she fights in the ring, I feel a sense of pride, knowing that she is fighting not just for herself, but for all the girls and women in our society, who are often unfairly limited in their opportunities due to the pervasive belief that certain activities and professions are solely reserved for men.

I know that each time she steps into the boxing ring, she channels her frustration with the injustices and limitations imposed by our society into her fighting and feels a sense of solidarity with the suffragettes. For Elli, boxing is more than just a sport. It is a symbol of the fight for equality.

As soon as the bell rings, Elli springs into action. She moves quickly and gracefully, bobbing and weaving as her opponent tries to land a blow. He is in fact much taller and stronger than her, so she keeps her distance, waiting for the perfect opportunity to strike.

For twelve rounds, Elli and her opponent trade blows, neither of them willing to back down. But in the end, it is Elli who emerges victorious, her arms raised high as the crowd roars with approval.

For her, this night is the culmination of years of hard work and dedication.

And as she leaves the ring, we both know that she has proven, that being a girl doesn't mean being weak.

## – Chapter 20 –

### L

We arrived at the train station, as the sun set. To be honest, Heidelberg was nothing like I imagined. The building differed from the Parisian architecture and the people seemed different too. “He’ll be here in a minute”, said Magnus and we made our way to the main street, waiting for his friend to pick us up.

Kurt lived on the borders of the city, in a rather extravagant house. You could see that he came from a rather wealthy family. However, unlike many people of his kind he didn’t act like it and that’s what I liked about him the most. He thought that everyone had a specific purpose on the earth and his wasn’t to just enjoy the luxury he was born into, but to use it in a way, that helps others. Like Magnus, he also had a crazy mind, full of ideas and new projects. You could easily see why they got along so well. Sometimes you could think, even a little bit too good, but I never questioned it, as it wasn’t any of my business. I respected their privacy, as they respected me.

Nevertheless, there was a side to Kurt I only got to discover a few days later. This side of him, reminded me of my father. You see, even though Konrad was a good, fair man he liked things to be his way. That’s why it was easy to get into an argument with him. Because of certain advantages he had in life, he liked to think that he and only he was right. I obviously didn’t like that about him, and it made me untrustful at sometimes. And the idea of the similarity to my father made me feel uncomfortable.

The thought of my father brought back unpleasant memories. You could call it fear. You could call it anxiety. You could call it childhood trauma, but at this time I didn’t call it any of these worlds. I think, I was simply hurt. My father obviously didn’t want me and feeling unwanted as a child and as an adult, by the person that raised you is one of the worse feelings, I discovered.

Now, sitting at the dining table, all the memories come back, and I start drifting further into my thoughts. His angry eyes at the coffee table, his hurtful words, his lack of trust, disgust, disappointment.

All of a sudden, I hear a voice far in the background. Somebody calling my name. The clattering of the silverware. The burning fire in the chimney.

“Lilly?”, I blink and look around. Magnus is looking at me from across the table. “Is everything all right?”, he asks confused. I look at him, then at Konrad and at my plate. “Sorry... yes, yes of course. Everything’s fine.”, I stumble. “I just feel tired today. Lately, so much has been going on and I think the medical tests today just exhausted me so much.”, I add, looking at both of them. “Of course, it’s understandable.”, says Magnus. “Maybe you should call it a night, have some rest before tomorrow. We don’t want anything to go wrong with the first operation. Safety is our priority, as you know.”, added Kurt a little bit too severe. I nod. I take a look around and appreciate the effort they made for me. A delicious, fancy diner, for my last evening, before it all begins. Candles, fire, music in the background. Everything is perfect and yet something seems off. No matter how much I want to enjoy the moment, I can’t.

“Yes, you’re right. Excuse me and thank you for the dinner.”, I say, forcing a smile. I get up and head upstairs to my room. My head is spinning, my thoughts are spinning. I open the balcony door and step outside, into the cold breeze. Breathe in, breathe out. Where do all these unpleasant feelings come from? Shouldn’t I be happy? Shouldn’t I celebrate? The moment I’ve been waiting for, my dream, the one and only thing I long for. Maybe it’s the medication I’ve been on. Maybe it’s just the excitement. Maybe it’s the fear. But what fear? The fear of failure of the surgery? No, I’d rather die now, lie than then live in this body forever. What fear then? Maybe the fear that something happens in the last second and the surgery won’t occur? No, whatever happens, it will eventually take place. The fear of uncertainty? No, I know that it’s the right decision.

I look into the darkness. It’s so quiet here, I realize. It’s so calm. So peaceful. I inhale and smell the scent that hangs in the air. Fresh ground. After so many years, it still



remained my favorite one. The fear of the unspoken words and undone matters. That's it. That's what I fear. I'm not scared of the death; I'm scared of what I will leave behind. The things they will remember me by. The things I've done or on the contrary I haven't done. All the unspoken words. All the forgotten dreams. What happened with them?

I go back inside, sit at the vanity table and pull out two pieces of paper. The first one is addressed to my parents.

*Dear father and mother,*

*I know, there's been silence between us for so many years. I didn't write and I also didn't bother to visit. I feel that we just grew apart. I went my way and you remained in the same place.*

*However, don't dare to think that I forgot about you, that I did it on purpose. I missed you. I missed home. So many times, I wished you were by my side. I want to tell you so much. All that has happened, places I've been and people I've met. However, now it doesn't make any difference, it's too late. The truth is, we're so different. We don't understand each other anymore. You must know, I don't blame you for letting me go. I thank you for this. And I also don't blame you for not understanding, I wouldn't dare. I guess, I'm just trying to tell you that I miss you and that I never stopped missing you. I hope you do too.*

*Please forgive me for everything you had to go through. I wish it could have been different.*

*Your daughter,*

*Lilly*

I folded the letter and put it in the envelope. Then I took the other piece of paper, this time only writing two sentences.

*My dearest,*

*I never thought I could have everything in life, until I met you.*

*I will forever be grateful for you.*

*Lilly.*

Sometimes less means more and some things cannot be summed up with words. That's exactly what Gerda and I were.

## – Chapter 21 –

L

All I can remember was sitting on a chair. “Just some last checkups”, Kurt stood above me. “How do you feel?”, he asked, ready to note my answer. I swallowed, “Good, I guess. I don’t know. “, I said. In the next moment I was lying on a lounge. A strong light above my whole body and Kurt and Magnus preparing some last adjustments. It all happened so quickly. “Everything will be fine. Don’t worry.”, I heard Magnus in the background as Kurt places a plastic mask above my nose and mouth. I was tired. I closed my eyes. I fell asleep. It begun, before I could realize it.

...

For ten days, I’ve been lying in bed. Only me and my thoughts. My whole-body hurts, although I felt worse at first. The sharp pain in the lower part of my body, the headache, the numbness were feelings I experienced so many times, too many. Feeling powerless can really destroy you. It’s a challenge both for your body and mind. You can’t move, you can barely talk, every breath is a struggle. I remember thinking for a moment, that it’s over, that I won’t make it. It was just too much. Flashbacks of Magnus, carrying for me, giving me water and forcing me to eat. Flashbacks of Kurt, checking on my medical condition, writing down every observation, every issue.

“So? How are you feeling today?”, Magnus said, coming into my room in the morning and opening the curtains and a window. The light, summer breeze entered the room and the sunlight fell on my skin. Breathe in, breathe out. “I feel the need to go outside.”, I whispered and looked at him with a reassuring smile. “Well, you can’t go outside by yourself, but I feel like I could find a way to make that happen”, he answered and disappeared behind the door. After some time, he came back with a cart on wheels and two maids, to help me stand up and change my place.

Then, he covered me with blankets and made his way outside. He placed the cart on the big patio, situated at the back of the house, that overlooked the gardens. A maid brought me breakfast and orange juice. I looked onto the big space, stretching right in front of me. Hectares of land, a small lake and a forest to my right. Suddenly a feeling of melancholy entered my body and looking at the beautiful, magnificent view, a tear fell on my cheek.

“We made it.”, I whispered, still looking straight into the garden. “No”, said Magnus “You made it”, he looked at me and I looked back. He came closer and squat next to my chair. “You’re one of the strongest human beings I’ve ever met.”, he said holding my hand. “And now, you finally can have the life you always wished for. Enjoy it, you deserve it.”, he added, squeezing my hand. We sat on the patio, without saying a word and stared at the green grass. After some time, Magnus stood up and was about to go back inside.

“Magnus?”

“Hm?”

“Can I ask you one last favor?”

“Of course, you can”

“Do you mind bringing me an easel and some paints?”

He smiled and two minutes later I begun to paint the beautiful garden. Finishing it, I examined the painting, feeling that something was missing. I took the paintbrush and wrote my signature at the bottom, right side. The only difference was that this time it said *Lilly* and it felt honestly, completely right.

## – Chapter 22 –

### M

Mary had spent the whole day running around London, trying to find the WPSU's headquarters. She did not even know if they had something like headquarters. Mary had ended up just going to the Post Office, where she had asked if they knew the address that would reach the WPSU's newspaper. The man at the counter had looked at her strangely, but thankfully he had not asked any further questions. The envelope got posted and sent. It only contained two things: the article and the data. Mary had not dared to add a note. She just hoped the article would be published, so that any further killings could be prevented.

It had started getting dark during Mary's walk home. Her maids were probably already wondering where she was and she was scared Herbert would get suspicious. Had he already noticed that the envelope was missing? Would he connect it to Mary since she never came home this late...?

Mary started hurrying home now. She had the statistics about the murders in her head and knew that it was not safe to be outside at this time.

From afar, she could see woman in a long, stunning dress. She seemed to be dressed for a special occasion. Her eyes were shining as she walked into the streetlight. A light breeze blew her long hair out of her face and brought her, with freckles covered, face to sight.

Just before Mary passed her, the woman turned the corner, into a side street.

At the exact same moment, Mary noticed a rather tall man crossing the street. As soon as he passed her, he stared at the ground, avoiding any eye contact. He turned determined into the same street as the woman before, which made it look like he was following her. Suddenly Mary got a strange feeling and had the urge to turn around and check on the woman. But she remembered that she was already way too late and so she kept on walking.

## – Chapter 23 –

L

As a child I always wanted to have fun. To explore new things. To play. To talk. To dance. Every day was a new challenge. Every hour was a mystery. Every minute, something new happened. I didn't care if I was late. If I didn't do my homework. If I didn't clean my room. I didn't look at my past or wondered what happens in the future. I just lived in the moment. Lived for the moment. Without second thoughts, without boundaries, fearless.

Growing up, more issues started to appear. The conflicts with my father, the misunderstandings with my mother, the decisions that were going to shape my future. The questions in my head: Am I good enough? Am I smart enough? Do they like me? The confusion in my head, the butterflies in my stomach, the feelings in my bones. The time when you start questioning everything. Have I made the right decision? Did I say the right thing?

Then come the everyday struggles. You have finally gained your independence, you're free, you can do whatever you want. And all of a sudden, all the boundaries appear. The financial struggles, the expectations of the adulthood. Get a real job, they say. Settle down. Have children. You're not a teenager anymore. That's not how an adult would behave. Adulthood and the freedom suddenly become too much. Things are happening too fast. The decisions have already been made. You find yourself in a fixed position, everything around you is already decided. And you? You start to wander where it all went wrong. When did I stop living? How did I change so fast? Where is the child in me, the child that only cared about the here and now? That cared about the living. When did it all stop?

...

Thinking about it all now, makes me realize that I lost a part of myself long ago. I lost my freedom and my happiness within. I lost myself. My identity. My dreams. My longings.

After the surgery I had a lot of time to think. I realized how much one decision can change your whole circle of life. Your whole future. It gives you a new perspective, a new goal. I know that life isn't always like you imagined. I know that you don't always get what you want. However, during this time, I realized I have to start living my life like I did before. I have to stop caring so much, overthinking every action, every step. I have to start living now, not in the future or the past.

I must see Gerda, was my first thought.

## – Chapter 24 –

### A

I just came home from the trip to Germany. Being in the train the whole day, had been a really exhausting and the only thing I could think about were the spaghetti Jenna had left me on the kitchen table. It is a Friday evening, so Jenna is out with some friends. I'm a bit worried about her being out so late, but I understand that she wants to have some fun. And at least she's not alone.

While warming up my dinner, I open the window, to let some fresh air in and distract myself from the dead silence in the apartment.

The championship in Germany was a success for me and Elli in several ways.

First, at the train station, we met a group of suffragettes. We recognized them because of their sashes adorned with the words "Votes for Women". They just completed a demonstration and happened to board the same train as us. Elli was so excited to see them and wanted to speak to them so badly, that we chose to board the same carriage as them. She was thrilled to be in the presence of these women who had fought for her rights and immediately struck up a conversation with them, asking about their experiences and what it is like to be a suffragette. The women were happy to oblige and shared stories of their struggles and triumphs. I also listened intently as the women recounted their fight for equal rights and was struck by their passion and determination.

After some time, I decided to give Elli and the suffragettes some privacy, so I took my book, lit a cigarette and went out into the corridor.

The landscape outside changed, from a pine tree forest, to hectares of flatland. I opened a window and just stood there, with my eyes closed, enjoying the cool wind breeze.

I don't know, how long I stood there, just enjoying the moment, but I opened my eyes only when I heard someone coming in my direction.

A woman stopped next to me. She was quite tall for a woman, but her long hair and freckles made her look very feminine. Something in her seemed different, but I didn't quite understand what. But she fascinated me.



"What are you reading?", she asked me suddenly. I was a bit perplexed; I didn't expect a stranger to speak to me.

"To have and to hold, by some American author.", I answered, trying to seem casual.

The mysterious woman wanted to know if the book is good and what it is about. When I told her that it's about motherhood, she seemed surprised that a man like me is keen on reading such a book. In her words, nobody seems to care about women in the society nowadays. I couldn't agree more with these words.

The mysterious woman wanted to leave, but I wanted to know more about her.

"What does a lonely woman, like yourself, do on a train to Germany on a random Tuesday?", I asked her curiously.

The answer didn't come at once. It was, as if she's thinking how much she can tell about herself to a random stranger.

"I'm going to have a surgery that will change my whole life.", she told me, smiling. I smiled back, realizing just now the importance of our encounter, and wished her luck.

When she left, I knew, that this conversation was somehow special, and that it will stay in my head for some time.

I notice, that once again I was lost in my thoughts for a while. Just as I want to go back to check on the spaghetti, I suddenly hear quick steps coming from the street. I look outside, and my gaze falls on a woman hurrying down the alley. Something in the way her long hair blows in the wind seems familiar. Then I recognize her. It's the mysterious woman from the train. Her tall silhouette, her freckles, her gorgeous face.

I wondered what she's doing here and why she is still outside at this time. It is pretty dangerous being by yourself as a woman in London after the sun has already set.

Suddenly, I smell my spaghetti burning and rush to the stove, still amazed about this coincidence.

I again start thinking about Elli's championship in Germany. I was so proud of her, when she stepped on the podium, receiving a medal for being the third-best fighter.

After the fight, Elli came to me with the words: "You know, when we get back to London they will for sure want to have an interview with me. I am then going to tell everyone who I am. I have enough, I don't want to be afraid and hide any more. I will find a way to continue my boxing career as a girl, whatever they say. And someday, I am going to open a

boxing club for girls and women. So that you, Angelo, can teach them, the way you taught me. If you want or course." In that moment, I was even prouder of her. She is one of those people, thanks to which I hope, that our society still could be changed in a better way.

I'm eating my half-burned dinner, when out of nowhere a scream interrupts my thoughts. It comes from outside. Without wasting a second, I run to the window. The mysterious woman is trying to free herself from the grip of a huge man. He is pressing his palm on her mouth, to prevent her from screaming again, while pinning her to the wall. His hand slides from her mouth to her throat and tightens around it. She still tries to fight him, there is so much will to live in her. But the man is way stronger than her, so she has no chance.

I want to scream, I want to call the police, I want to go down to help her, but fear and shock paralyses me. I disgust myself, but I'm again that eight years old boy, lying in a bead under the covers, too afraid to even breathe.

## – Chapter 25 –

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I said goodbye to Germany and got on the train, heading to London, where Gerda was. She hosted a great exposition there, last week and decided to stay a little bit longer. I announced, visiting her and counted days until we would meet.

The train ride back, felt different. I felt different. To be honest, I was different. On the one side, there was this feeling of freedom and genuine happiness that I constantly felt. On the other side, there was a tiny bit of fear and shame. Fear, of the encounter with Gerda and shame, triggered by the thought of my parents.

I walked out of my cabin, into the hallway, like on the way to Germany. I looked around, secretly hoping that the man I met in the past, would by some kind of magical, mysterious way still be here. Of course, the hallway was empty and so I only had the vast memory of him, standing by the window with the book in one and the cigarette in the other hand. I stood by the window and pulled out a cigarette. My first cigarette, since my transition was finished. Breathe in, breathe out. Before I knew it, I was already in London.

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It's a Friday night and the pub is crowded. I step in and scan the room with my eyes, looking for Gerda. I can't find her. There's a man on my right, staring at me, which makes me feel uncomfortable. He says something to his friends, and they all laugh at once. I walk further into the pub, moving away from their table. I still can't see Gerda. People laughing, dancing and drinking. I suddenly start to panic, and the feeling of comfort is leaving my body. All the noises make me nervous, and it feels like all the unfamiliar faces are staring at me. My head begins to turn. I can't figure out if it's the side effects of the operation that Magnus told me about or if it's because of my emotions and the surrounding. It's loud, I remark. Really loud, too loud. I try

to take deep breaths, but it feels impossible. I close my eyes and count to ten, but the sharp pain in my head doesn't stop. I will break down on the floor any second now, I think to myself. I open my eyes and suddenly there she is. She's standing next to a table, only a few meters away from me. She looks me straight in the eyes and when I look back, the whole room goes silent. I only see her; she only sees me. Time stops and we stand still. Like in a trance we stare at each other, not able to take a step closer. My Gerda. My lovely Gerda. There she is. Looking right back at me, I feel so naked. All my secrets are exposed. All at once, I feel everything. Melancholy, sadness, longing, shame, happiness, fear. In this moment I realize that she's the only person that can trigger all these emotions in me, only by one simple glance. Never have I thought such a thing might be possible. My eyes slowly fill up with tears and a shiver goes down my spine. I blink, unable to explain what exactly is happening. Breathe in, breathe out. I take the first step; my legs don't want to obey me. My heart beats faster and faster every second. I take another step, still not looking away from her even for just a second. And another step, until finally, I'm standing right in front of her. Now, tears are flowing down my cheeks. Without a word, she raises her hand and gently wipes them. Mesmerized by her, I'm unable to look away.

"I missed you", she whispers.

How do you tell the person you love the most, how much they mean to you? How do you express how much you've missed them? I feel, like there's no possible words that can describe this feeling. In French, they say "Tu me manques", which means you're missing from me. By all means, I find it most suitable, because if you have found the right person, every time you're without them, it feels like a piece of you is missing. You feel so incomplete and so lonely. You have this feeling of uncertainty, and nothing feels right, until the moment you discover why. Now, I know, that all along, it has been her. She has always been the person I care about most. She was the reason for the decisions I have made in the past. She's the reason I became the person I'm now. And she's the reason I fought and survived. From the moment I

met her I knew that she is and will be forever the one piece missing from me.

I can't hold it any longer. I sink into her arms and let every emotion; every feeling go. In her arms, I finally feel safe.

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Gerda and I talked the whole evening long. We cried, laughed and drank. I told her everything, without holding anything back. I told her about the first meeting with Magnus, about the man on the train, about the first surgery and about the painting of the garden. She told me about her exhibitions, about leaving Paris and how she met someone here, in London. She said I'd love him and she's considering moving to London, to live with him. I couldn't be happier, for her, for me. We were sitting in the pub until late at night and the time flew by. I enjoyed every second of it, thinking how glad and happy I am right now, in this very exact moment.

"Oh, look at the time", Gerda said, still smiling.

"Yes, it's getting pretty late", I answered.

"And yet, I could stay here for hours, talking to you", she added.

I looked her deep in the eyes and took her hand. "Come on, we should get going, they will be closing soon"

We left the pub and stopped outside.

"Do you want to come with me? I'm sure you could stay at my place for tonight", she asked

"Thank you, but my hotel is nearby. I feel like talking a walk.", I answered, hugging her tight.

"Well then, see you tomorrow for lunch?", she reminded me.

"Of course, darling", I said smiling. Her cab arrived and she went inside. I waved and watched her drive away, knowing that I will see her very soon.

I started walking down the street, the smile on my face not leaving me for a second. I finally felt free, all the worries and uncertainties leaving my body. The cool wind blew my hair, and I felt a bit cold. It was a beautiful evening, that now turned into a quiet, peaceful night. All I could think about was Gerda and our meeting tomorrow. Bring Conrad, I suggested. I will, she promised. Finally, my life began to fall into place. Everything felt right, as it should be. What if I'll

stay in London for some time too, I thought? I liked that idea. Find a new job, being close to Gerda.

I looked up, waking up from the daydream and met the eyes of another woman. She seemed familiar, went through my mind. I noticed that she had been observing me for a while now, but I didn't bother. Finally, I was seen by others. Finally, I didn't have to hide anymore. I slightly smiled at her, as I turned into a side street. The wind blew harder, and I shivered. I suddenly felt tired, so tired. The excitement, the noises and the alcohol might have been too much for one evening. I picked up my pace, longing to finally be in the hotel room. Suddenly, a weird feeling entered my body. I looked around, but the street was empty, just a few lights, coming from the windows of the building on my left. Only now, I realized how awfully quiet the street was, my heels were the only sound. Even though, I couldn't see or hear anyone, I had the feeling I'm not alone. Has someone been following me? The street turned darker and darker as I walked further. I pressed my purse tight onto my body and started walking even faster. The urge of getting back to the hotel, now grew stronger. My breath quickened, my heart speeding up. I turned around one more time and saw a silhouette of a man behind me. He was heading straight at me, coming closer and closer. I looked around, remarking that there's no one but us. My head suddenly went clear, my thoughts focused. I need to get out of here, I said to myself and before I knew it, I started running.

I was just about to turn into the next street, as he grabbed my hand and pulled me back. "Let me go!", I screamed and tried to free my hand from his grip. He was strong, too strong and the last few hours had exhausted me. It all happened so quickly. Before I knew it he pressed his palm on my mouth and pinned me to the wall. I kicked and tried to get him away, but nothing worked. I began to panic, my heart beating faster than before. I began to cry, to beg, tried to scream, but it was too late. His hand tightened around my throat and I couldn't breathe. I began to gasp for air, but this made him only tighten the grip more. My mind went crazy, my body unable to move. I tried to breathe one more time, but it was too late. The last thing I saw were his angry blue eyes and Gerda was my last thought.

### **Lili Elbe**

Lili Elbe (28 December 1882 – 13 September 1931) was a Danish painter and a trans woman that underwent the first ever documented gender-affirming surgery (sex reassignment surgery). Her birth name is Einar Wegener and she identified almost her whole life as male. Only at the age of 48 she began her transition to a woman.

After finishing school, she attended the Royal Danish Academy of Fine Arts in Copenhagen, where she met her future wife, Gerda Gottlieb. According to Lili Elbe's autobiography it was while they have been married that she discovered her gender dysmorphia. It started when her wife, a well-known painter herself asked her to wear feminine clothing and pretend to be a model for her paintings. Soon, the two of them moved to Paris and Einar felt comfortable to sometimes appear in public in feminine clothing, calling herself Lili Elbe.

As soon as Lili began her transitioning, she and Gerda Gottlieb split, however they remained good friends.

In order to undergo the procedure of sex reassignment Lili visited the German physician Magnus Hirschfeld. Afterwards she had five highly experimental surgeries performed by Kurt Warnerkros, a German gynecologist.

Lili Elbe died of complications, short after the fifth surgery due to a cardiac arrest at the age of 49. The story of her transition was published shortly after her death and since then have been retold many times, also in form of a movie in 2015.



*3 characters*  
*3 different stories*  
*Only one possible ending...*  
*Fighting for their rights.*



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