

BEHIND THE SUN

by Roland H., Brandenburg prison

Fiction's a lie. The truth is far worse. Every day, I think about the time before. I think about my tree house deep in the woods, my sandy beach and my white-lacquered seagulls. Running through the fields again, tearing icy diamonds from the mayweed, barefoot. A crane crying out, the Baltic Sea deep in its throat. When I dream, I am. When I dream, I live. The village is so run down that you have to travel a very long way to reach Hope. At night, the place stretches out, bleak and bitter as a disposable towel under a lifeless sky. Time seemed to expand in the summer heat. People moan about the government, the fuzz and coronavirus. Longing is the beast that refuses to be talked to. Time out.

I pretty much chanced upon life in a train station toilet. Mum had the hump, no fags to hand and more Botox in her face than there is poison in a snake's tooth. I heard something about labour pains and a premature birth, and how she was swearing like a trooper. Reason enough to beat a hasty and furtive retreat before she remembered me. To achieve the possible, you have to try the impossible. It was a long time ago that I made that snap decision not to have a memory any more.

You're entitled to confront people with uncomfortable truths. Be brave, don't behave. I stuck to the rule. A growing child begets a grown-up. None of what happened next should ever have happened in the first place.

Granny's the best. She has silvery hair, a chamber pot under her bed and a stuffed budgerigar on her shelf. Granny smokes cigars and cooks tasty fried potatoes with lots of bacon. She never complains, always has time for you and often needs help. Sometimes, her false teeth fall out and then she shouts: 'Damn, no, get back in there!' Her kisses are too wet, but I put up with them as usual because it gets me a bit of pocket money.

Dad's a total prick. He's been fucking me since I was seven. The Baltic Sea crane is screeching its soul out through its white feathers. I'm dying before I die. A trace of my shadow survives. When I grow up, I'll be a killer or a schizophrenic. To achieve your goals, you just have to want them enough. Some good did come of it all: people now had something to gossip about. Only my world remained barren, a place of unprecedented silence.

It's hard to be a child. Just getting all those years out of the way, ashes to ashes, trash to trash. You hang around the place on your matchstick legs, trembling. The end sounds like the end, not a fresh start.

Dad always thought sex and freedom were cheap gifts you didn't have to pay for. Dad was mistaken. Dad was sorely mistaken. His life for my time in prison, that was the deal. I wasn't afraid. Forget what you can never forget.

The last few miles of the drive to the detention centre went by way too fast. I stared out of the window, listless, apathetic. Children were playing on the pavement. They were skidding around on the ice, laughing, all wrapped up in thick scarves and coats. Barely discernable, shrouded in mist, a little group of wintry insects.

They craned their necks to get a good look when the police convoy, lights flashing, sirens blaring, stopped right in front of them at the traffic lights and took a left towards the city. Street after street went by, one blending into the next, slushy grey stripes between dreary rows of houses. Facades peeled away from the shadows, shops appeared out of nowhere, and an end-of-day-weary bridge spanned the space between dusk and darkness. Horse chestnut trees beckoned, their branches bent and bare, rigid poplars, bizarre Christmas stars outside shops, their flickering lights bouncing off the windscreen and dissolving into a colourful glow. One final, short farewell from freedom.

The prison by the cornfield stands at an angle, as if glued on. Expressionless as an angler who's retreated into total solitude, it reeked of longing. I'm greeted like a dog that's peed on a kitchen chair even though it's not allowed. An officer strides up, ruining my visions of the Baltic Sea and freedom. He seems stressed and is looking for something, can't find anything, wrinkles his brow and keeps on looking. He looks like a normal bloke, the kind who wears off-the-peg suits and leads a respectable life, unmarried, childless, friendless, gets up in good time every morning, listens to Classic FM, sits down to pee and reads the paper over breakfast; arrogant and creased, a garden shed kind of guy with thinning, brittle hair, eyes swollen and red, two holes without a soul. Off-kilter, lashless, massive, they're stuck onto a high forehead as pale as death, flanked by blue, flaccid cheeks. He's wearing a shirt and tie, and a plastic watch made in China. The back of his trousers are crumpled and greasy, his side pockets worn to a shine. 'You are...' I become a number, a note on a computer, for an eternity of years. Nothing starts any more, nothing happens, nothing ends. Dead flies dangle in front of the fan.

Sleep, wait, smoke. It's the first cigarette I've had in hours. I take a deep drag and stare out of the barred window. The yard is brightly lit. Wet grey slush decks the pathways, benches and high, serrated ledges.

Random clumps of dead grass poke through to meet the light. Barbed wire looms menacingly over the massive iron gate. Sharp, stacked up in rolls. A horde of wild geese honks its way across the landscape. Ghostly, invisible. Cars blow their horns, a dog barks in the distance, cranes perch on the roof opposite. Fat and black, outlaws like me. Banished, cancelled, discarded. A smell of decay and the day before rises from the yard.

There's nothing tragic about dying. Never having lived is worse by far. I dream, hope, wish I was on my way home. I want to breathe again and feel the ice-cold mayweed under my feet. I want to go deep into the woods that are mine. How, I don't know. I've not been myself for a long time now. Who, I don't know.

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