

November 7

A letter came. Just a few lines, jotted down on a piece of copy paper.

*Marta, Mart! I'm in Mervas. It's not possible to get any farther away. And no closer either. Your Kosti.*

That's all it said. And he hadn't been in touch for over twenty years. Not that I've been counting the years; I stopped doing that a long time ago. But now he'd sent me this message and it was like being filled with air, like being hit in the face by a gale so strong it made me gasp for breath.

I read the letter again and again. My first thought was that it was fake, that someone wanted to taunt me. But who would want to do that? I have no friends; there's no one who would know that such a cryptic little note would weigh on me. No one, except perhaps Kosti himself. And now he had written it. A faint cry from one end of life to the other, a cry straight through the years. And from Mervas. What kind of place was Mervas?

I wept. A sadness so vast washed over me I wasn't sure I'd be able to contain it. In some ways, it was myself that I mourned. I mourned my own life; it was as if I'd been invited to my own funeral and now stood above

the coffin, where everything had been completed and settled, where for the first time my life could be looked upon as something finished and concluded, and there was nothing, absolutely nothing, that could be added to it. And I cried over everything that was lost, everything that had gone wrong and been led astray. My tears were unnaturally hot, they ran down my neck and onto my chest and I felt their entire path, felt how hot they were, strangely, remarkably hot, as if there'd been boiling, volcanic wells hidden inside me, and now they were overflowing through my eyes.

To keep from falling to pieces, I started pacing. I covered every room. The small, dismal apartment became a dreamscape. My tears made everything blurry, almost blotted things out, and in this intense and charged absence, I reached for objects like a blind person. I used my fingertips to see, my eyes were elsewhere.

I must have plodded for hours. The entire time, I thought I would implode from sadness, that I would break like a clay vessel in pressured heat. I touched potted plants, rocks, books, furniture, and lamp shades. It grew darker in the rooms, I could sense the gloam through my skin. The midday gray seeped inside and settled on the floor, the walls, and grew denser.

In my head echoed the idiotic little saying "A letter means so much." I couldn't get rid of it; the insinuating voice followed me wherever I went. I knew that the letter I'd received wasn't much of a letter, but still, the few words he'd written were alive inside me, they'd awakened and shaken me, struck me with something I'd nearly lost. They'd reminded me of my life and the fact that I was still living it, that I was supposed to live it. I'd forgotten that. I'd stayed away from that truth. And a person can actually hide inside her own life, hide from life itself within the minutiae and everyday chores, hide from herself inside herself. She can do it, I know this, I knew it even then, but I didn't pay it any mind.

Finally, I went to the bathroom and turned on the light. Avoiding my reflection in the mirror, I filled the sink with cold water and submerged my hot, tear-swollen face. I held it in the ice-cold water until it ached. Then I straightened slowly and met my image in the mirror. I have never liked my face; I've somehow never been able to pull it together. Here it was, large and unignorable, looming in the mirror like an approaching storm. It was an old face, I could see that. Ugly. The ugly face stared back at me and simultaneously, in an alarming maneuver, crawled inside me and stared out at itself. I was old and ugly and here I stood. A letter from the other end of time had arrived and the blind and complacent one-day-at-a-time existence I'd been living for so many years had instantly burst to pieces. Instead, I now held my entire life, my whole story, in my arms, and it looked like a skinned animal, a skinned yet still living, struggling animal. I shook from holding it, shook from the very core of my being. And as I stood there, the thought went through my mind that I'd waited for him my entire life. My whole adult life I'd longed for him, kept a small place ready, a little backyard, a secret, hidden place for him, for Kosti. I knew that this place had been the only one that mattered, the one thing that had kept me alive, even though I myself didn't even know it existed. Now I'd discovered it. I'd caught myself in the act. I too had been carried along by a dream. Simply being alive isn't enough. Perhaps that's how it must be.

I stood captive before the bathroom mirror and stared into the face that was supposed to be mine. Once you get lost in your life, I thought, you just keep getting more and more lost. Meanwhile, the years close in on you like a thick forest. They tangle and grow denser, they become tangled forests of years.

The apartment now lay in darkness. Mervas, I thought dimly. What kind of place is Mervas? I stood in the kitchen and the lamp over the

kitchen table was lit. His letter lay there, exposed. Written in blue ink. I'd avoided letting my tears fall onto it. He'd always used blue ink that tears could dissolve. *Your Kosti*, it said. *Your Kosti*, he'd written. How could he? Only those who are truly alone know what it's like to be a lost child in the world, a lost child in a great war. But all of us are alone, more or less. Someone lost us along the way. With my hands still trembling slightly, I refolded the paper and put it back inside the envelope. No more tears were coming, no hot tears. The wells had evidently dried up. All I felt was a dry cramping in my chest, a feeling of something inconsolable draining me, feeding off me. I wasn't feeling sorry for myself, I think, not even then. I'm not worth pitying. But my life hurt inside me. It moved like a child, like a fetus inside me, a bundle of hammering, kicking willpower. This is unbearable, I remember thinking. Only that single word: unbearable.

Somewhere in my life is a city shrouded in darkness. It's a big city, probably a capital. All roads lead to it, into the dark, where they dissolve. I know this city exists, that like all cities it has houses and streets, that a kind of living takes place there, stories are formed, meetings and scenes. But nothing can be distinguished in that darkness. It is like a mute weave that has been pushed into the center of my life, thread upon thread of silence. And I'm afraid of this darkness, I know that from it, anything can break through: a bright, blind violence, a rage like a forest fire igniting even the air. There are monsters living there that have courted me, monsters that hatch in darkness, and I don't want to see them, don't want to know about them. Sometimes I imagine that the city gulps down the darkness, that it greedily fills itself with more and more darkness and grows, swells – and in this way, it is active, a volcano in reverse. A crater that drinks and devours rather than spewing things out.

Standing there by the kitchen table looking at the envelope where I'd just put Kosti's letter, I suddenly caught a glimpse of the dark city, as if

it had been illuminated in a flash of light. A bright white sheen pumped through it like a heartbeat, and I realized I had to enter it, perhaps it wasn't always sunk in darkness; light could blow into it, a wind of light.

Now it was really evening, and I felt I had to get out, had to leave my apartment, get away from everything that had settled in its walls, the sour breathing of years that felt as if it would suffocate me. I took a comb from the bathroom cabinet and pulled it lovelessly through my shoulder-length, nowadays thin gray hair. After that, I painted my lips red and dabbed some powder on my large-pored skin, swollen from crying. Have to get out of the apartment, I thought, perhaps down to the store to buy some food, anything.

It was after suppertime. November. The air had gotten cold and spots on the ground that used to be wet had turned into ice. There was a faint wind and I walked around the block. Three-story buildings were arranged around the yards like loaves of bread, and there were a few single-family houses on display. These were residential neighborhoods, the streets seemed bored; the whole area caught in a suppressed yawn. I walked on listlessly, and suddenly stood outside the front door of my building again. I had nowhere to go and the mere thought of the grocery store made me anxious, it was too bright in there for me tonight, I didn't want to walk around with a basket on my arm and have to pick and choose; it seemed impossible, disgusting. So without actually making any kind of decision, I walked over to a small neighborhood restaurant that had recently opened, a place I'd never been before and never even considered going, because I don't go to restaurants. I walked in and sat down at a table. I had the remarkable feeling that everything was an illusion, a liberating sensation of not being myself but someone else, perhaps someone in a movie, someone outside myself I could watch and perhaps pretend to be for a little while. I ordered food and a small carafe of red wine and a little

later another glass of red wine and a pack of cigarettes. Except, it wasn't really me, it was the woman in the movie who did all this. She was a tired middle-aged woman, just like me, but far more interesting and confident. She was now getting a little drunk sitting in the small, cozy space, its red dimness reflecting her life back to her like a crystal ball. She saw all the images and allowed them to emerge without resisting. She sat there gazing into the beautiful red wine in her glass while the thoughts and images in her mind drifted freely: it was as if she saw her life inside that glass and she leaned over it in order to take a close, careful look.

A letter has come, I thought, and a sudden fearlessness filled me: I wanted somehow to feel how time had passed, all those years after Kosti, how my life turned out, how everything turned out. I dared thinking about the fact that I had been a mother: even someone like me had become a mother by giving birth to a child, a boy, my deformed boy, unfit for life. And now I saw the years, months, hours, and minutes bound to him, the peculiar slowness, millimeter upon millimeter of the gray, faintly buzzing slowness I'd felt together with him. It was like a period of timelessness injected into my life, and when I looked into the glass, I saw those years, saw them moving faintly down there on the bottom. I'd been absorbed by timelessness back then; I'd let myself be nourished by it. I'd been a mother during those years after Kosti, a mother to a helpless child, and even though this child was no longer alive, I dared to think I'd gone on being his mother, and that I'd kept living with him in that timelessness. Perhaps that's why I'd been hit so hard by Kosti's letter; he'd jolted me into the present. And that hurt. Timelessness is a kind of death that attracts those who cannot or do not have the courage to live. But despite my pain, I also noticed that something had awakened in me during the day and it was calling me, there was something intriguing about the memories and images that flashed through me as I drank. It was as

if I'd been missing myself for a very long time. As if I'd been standing abandoned for a very long time.

November 10

The boy's face. Heavy and impossible to read. The mouth without control and constantly glistening wet, a mere cavity that had happened to end up in his face. He couldn't reach his own mouth, couldn't access it fully. It was as if a thread, the link that connected him to his own body, had been severed. His legs and hands were also half-asleep, somehow muddled. He couldn't reach himself anywhere.

Except his eyes. He existed through his eyes. His gaze reached out from that big, lifeless body, found its way past an otherwise meaninglessly constructed face. From the moment he was born, his gaze had been the same. And it seized me. From the very beginning, there was an intimacy between us so profound that as soon as I recognized it, I knew I'd never be able to escape it. His gaze went straight into my life.

I remember the first few days after his birth as a quake. A quake that reached all the way to the center of the earth. I had just delivered, felt so recently opened. At the same time, I burned with a sense of presence. They left me alone with him for twenty-four hours. Then they came and tore us apart. They stole my boy.

It was at the radiology ward, you know, where there are lots of odd little booths with drapes covering the open doors. I sat in one of those

booths and waited for them to return with my boy. The booths around me were empty: the whole place seemed deserted. Perhaps it was the weekend. During the night, my breasts had filled with something that felt like cement. They were enormous. Rock hard. So tender that even the light feeling of my clothes against my skin made me shiver with pain. I thought I was the one who had just been born. I was as newly born as my small child that they'd just carried away. And in this strange new world, nothing existed but him, nothing but the child, only his gaze, his smell, and the feeling of his small, eager mouth searching for my nipples.

I remember that it took a while. Then I heard steps, and voices far away in the maze of booths. I sat, alert, and listened. A man's voice called out:

"I've found a space in ward nineteen!"

I'd already left the booth and ran like a blind person through the maze. Suddenly, I saw the doctor standing there, the one who'd called out, and I threw myself at him.

"Where's my boy?" I screamed, my fists hitting his chest. "Where have you taken my child?"

"Calm down!" the doctor yelled, and grabbed my wrists. "Calm down a little, and I'll explain."

But I wasn't calm. I tried to drag him in the direction where I thought they'd taken my boy.

"Give me back my child right now!" I screamed. "I want my child, I want my child, I want –"

I burst into tears, and the doctor I had attacked a moment earlier put his arm around me and led me into a booth.

"Try and pull yourself together. I'm going to explain what's going on," he said formally and rather sternly. He took a pencil from the breast pocket of his shirt, and I hated him. Go on, talk, I thought. I know you're

lying. I know you've taken away my son to slaughter him. My hatred was so intense it ought to have made him dissolve like a fly in an acid bath.

"You're going to slaughter my son," I said.

"No, we're not. We're going to try to help him. Your son is gravely ill and I insist that you make an effort to listen to me."

He drew something on the paper that covered the examination table inside the booth and explained how something was very wrong inside the boy's head. I didn't believe what he was saying, and listened with only half an ear since I was sure they'd taken the boy to slaughter him. I knew I was the only thing my boy needed, and it was up to me to save him.

"I want to go to ward nineteen, where my child is," I said as soon as the doctor had finished talking.

"You can't do that," he said. "You have to go back to the maternity ward first. They have to discharge you there before you can come back to the children's ward."

"Then the police will have to come and take me back to the maternity ward. I'm going to my boy now."

I felt strong enough to upend the whole hospital, if necessary.

The doctor thought I was being difficult and couldn't hide his irritation. Finally, he gave in a little.

"You know, there's no room for you in ward nineteen anyway. It's an intensive care ward. You can't stay there overnight."

We then made our way in silence through the big hospital over to the remote children's ward where they'd taken my child.

Entering the dimly lit room where the boy was supposed to be, I thought for a moment I'd ended up in Hieronymus Bosch's Hell. Fetuses with tubes and hoses taped everywhere on their perplexing little bodies lay in their incubators, exposed in the strong lights like ancient relics or the crown jewels in a museum's glass case. Around the room, between

these incubators, were transparent carts with infants, and I immediately focused on a baby with shiny white pieces of tape on its face. The tape seemed to hold the unnaturally round cheeks together. I was filled with violent disgust at the thought that they had to tape the child's cheeks to keep them in place, that otherwise they would fall away to each side like two loose lumps. My gaze searched the dim room and there, at the farthest end, I spotted the boy. The first thing I saw was that they'd taped his cheeks too. Narrow white strips appeared to tear his tiny face apart; it was as if they had marked him like a sacrificial animal.

At the sight of the boy, my breasts, which all day had been on the verge of exploding from the pressure of the hardening cement filling them, began to leak. I closed my eyes and leaned over the bed to finally inhale his scent, to feel his skin against mine. When I carefully folded the blanket aside to lift him up, I saw that the tape on his cheeks held a thin tube in place. It was placed inside one of his nostrils. A tube. A feeding tube. They don't want me to feed him anymore, I thought. He would no longer get to lie in my arms and catch my nipple to drink with his whimsical, eager mouth. The doctors thought this boy was so sick he didn't need a mother. He'd get a new, clinical mother; someone approved of, perhaps even a man.

I remember that I shook with a sense of injustice; it moved through every cell in my body. For a while, I stood and cried with the boy pressed against me. Then I put him back in the bed and went out to the nearby reception area. At a desk, a doctor was talking on the phone.

"Why have you given my child a feeding tube?" I asked, trying my utmost to remain calm, to not throw up, to not rush up to the man by the desk and start hitting him with the phone.

"Could you hold on a second?" he said. "As you can see, I'm on the phone."

“I want to know why you’ve given my child a feeding tube!” I screamed. “He can eat on his own. I’m going to feed him. Me! You hear me? He’s my child!”

“Sorry,” the doctor said into the phone. “I think I’ve got a nursing-crazed mother on my hands.”

He turned to me. I saw the horns in his forehead.

“Which child are you referring to?” he asked.

The days that followed were like a slow descent into a warped underground realm, an abyss where faces in gaudy colors floated through the air, their voices snapping as if they had fangs. I searched for the boy everywhere, and everywhere he was taken away from me, following protocol after protocol according to regulations so sacred they couldn’t be questioned by anyone in heaven or on earth.

“We think the feeding tube is more practical because then we’ll know exactly how much he eats. We can send a breast pump to your room, so maybe eventually we’ll let you bottle-feed him,” someone said.

The first few days I tried to defend myself by transforming into a bear mother, a lioness, a tigress. But the high priests weren’t scared by any mother animals, they didn’t understand the meaning of words like mother, milk, mouths; they didn’t understand what thousands of years of deep dark knowledge and desire can awaken in a human being. They didn’t realize how close they were to driving me insane when they ignored the inner forces that threatened to tear me apart.

One evening when I sat in the little hospital room I had demanded, a nurse came to me and whispered:

“Don’t sit here pumping. Bring the baby in here and nurse him. Screw the doctors, they don’t understand anything.”

But by then it was too late; the claws of the tigress had already been trimmed, her teeth pulled out. The milk was drying up, and I didn't dare try placing the child on my breast.

It would probably have been good for the boy to nurse. And for me too. When he was a week old, one of his arms began twitching strangely, and at the same time he started crying. And the crying never ceased. It went on day and night, every waking moment, and sometimes even when he slept. His cries were sometimes hoarse and exhausted, other times high and shrill.

But in the midst of this wailing, his gaze was alive, the boy's gaze. It pierced through his tears. And it was insistent. Insistent that the world give him an answer.