

The Absence of Music

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The Meeting Place

From early on, when I was still very young, but no longer a child, I thought it was with women that I could become myself. This is undoubtedly a naïve and certainly a covetous admission, but when I look back, it is clear that I have had few ambitions and barely a single longing apart from satisfying this constant need, this desire, and though it has changed shape over the years, it continues to follow me right up to maturity.

Down from the high rise blocks of flats where I grew up, in one of the quiet residential roads, lived two women in a yellow house surrounded by a garden of fruit trees. They were lovers. One must have been around thirty, the other in her mid twenties. The younger one was slender and tall, with short, dark hair; the older was curvier with long, blonde tresses. I passed their house on my way to and from school, and one day as I meandered home on my own, I stopped and looked into their garden and I fantasised about how they would touch each other, passionately yet with familiarity, at the kitchen sink where they shared the washing up, or on the sofa, by the ironing board, or in the basement where they stacked jars of hermetically sealed fruit on shelves. But what was it that aroused me? Possibly that they were so accessible

to each other, in all likelihood that was what turned me on, and it has followed me ever since like an echo.

I have heard or read somewhere that he who has two women loses his soul, and furthermore that he who has two houses will lose his mind. When I was around thirty I had two girlfriends, two women who shared a flat in the Oslo area of Majorstua. For various reasons, which in time have slipped my mind, I never moved in with them, but we met once or twice a month, and these encounters were beyond sleep and rest, like constant mechanical motions with no heart. That is not to say this relationship was devoid of warmth, far from it; I anticipated our meetings with affection and elation, yet for some strange reason the relationship was characterised by monotony all the same. It was as if the excesses of the first night were repeated indefinitely; the pleasure was replicated as if it had found its ultimate form, as if it was a law of nature; I eventually became filled with restlessness, yes, even a state of boredom, which I had only experienced in my youth, or after an extended period of intoxication, and one day, when I was awoken by the usual noises of school children in the street, as I lay there inhaling the sweet smell that lingered from the night before, it seemed to me that this relationship, this generosity, would soon be lost, that it would fade away and this proved to be true; it did and then it was no more.

The first time I saw M was one autumn many years later. I was in town and was sheltering from the rain outside an ironmonger's when I spotted two women kissing in the street. They had stopped just a few metres away from me. One of them caught my attention. She was wearing a red woolly cap, she was skinny and gangly and in her mid thirties, I estimated, a little boyish, not masculine, not at all, no, rather she was noticeably feminine, with her red lipstick and her heart-shaped face, but she had slim hips and small breasts and there was something about the way she moved, a hint of aggression as she grabbed hold of her girlfriend and pulled her towards her, which reminded me of myself as a young man. They

kissed each other, they stood like this for a long time and I was unable to tear myself away, I could not bear to take my eyes of her, not even when she looked directly at me. Instead of focusing on something else, my watch, or the tram which screeched past, I gave her a cautious smile and she smiled back and did not appear to be uncomfortable in the least. She said goodbye to her girlfriend, as though nothing had happened, before they went their separate ways. It was a non-event really, not worth mentioning, yet this moment lingered and as the days passed its impact and value even increased, so that this everyday and completely random meeting was endowed with a heightened significance, as though something unusual had been uncovered.

Early one morning, some weeks later, I was on the train into town again. I was tired and sat pondering something I had written, it had seemed tolerable and clear the night before, but now it came across as an entirely superfluous dramaturgical device, a dubious acceleration of the plot, or the allegory, so that all other interpretations, every minor and major incident, were momentarily erased, or in other words; my impatience had caused a sequence in the novel to lose its meaning. Consequently I was feeling despondent as I leaned against the window and gazed sleepily out at the rain, the landscape, at various objects in the twilight; glimpses of light from cars and buildings. You end up living like a thousand books piled on top of each other, I thought, trying unsuccessfully to remember where I had heard that before. An elderly man got up from the seat in front of me. He swayed for a few seconds and before he headed for the exit, he studied his reflection in the vibrating glass. I don't know what he saw, perhaps himself as a boy in an empty house, or perhaps the dark image reminded him of infidelity, of a woman he had once loved in secret, a mistress he had left without a word of explanation, or perhaps he sensed his own mortality, perhaps he was staring into a dream like a child standing motionless at the bottom of the ocean. You see the world, and then you see yourself, always in that order: First the world and then yourself reflected in the world, and this

mirror-image, this visible resonance, embodies a boundless prescience, it glows in us like bodily articulations; limb by limb, in every movement and facial expression, in every learned effort, in our greed and thrift and in every studied phrase, in the lightness and in every kind gesture, in the smallest impulse, in the most generous or indifferent moments; even reticence and avoidance exude a thirst for knowledge, and in the tantalising chaos, in the overwhelming throng, we are like gods, gods of everything which is unique and about to happen, everything that is agonising or pleasurable, creators of all the misery and of every defeat, in this immense and overpowering confluence we are careless rulers of everything we conquer, of all that is lost and all that remains in the unknown.

I spotted her on the escalator going up from the underground station. I only saw her from behind, yet I recognised her instantly: the same cap, her athletic figure, she really did look like a young man. She was talking on her mobile, excited and tense at the same time, as if she was wound up about something, a disappointing message perhaps, something upsetting. Halfway up she turned and stood sideways. She was obviously sad, she did not say much, she merely rolled her eyes, shrugged and moved the mobile away from her ear a couple of times. I climbed a few steps, quite casually, and driven by a vague, but persistent urge, I started speaking to her, and we got talking as if my approach was quite normal; I don't remember what we talked about, but our conversation lasted several stops in the direction of Egertorget. It really is deplorable that I can't recall more of what we said because the events that followed are still vivid: The beam of light that lay across her thighs... and when she shuffled nearer to the edge of the kitchen counter, so I could get closer, her open slit gleamed with moisture and I stopped for a moment, in mid-motion, simply to enjoy the sight. She asked what I was thinking, but I could not think of anything to say. Out of nowhere I recalled an incident from my childhood: It was summer, the heat was oppressive, the high rise blocks of flats gleamed white against the blue sky. I was standing on the grass facing the wall. There was not much to

see, apart from the white paint, which had bubbled up in the sun in some places, and the large, iridescent flies, which appeared from above and below, and buzzed around with lightning speed making it impossible to say where they had come from or where they were going. What this image had to do with the present one, I don't know, only that the image of the female sex in the sun that streamed through the window brought back memories with such an immediacy that all I could do was surrender to the logic that had brought these two incidents together, and when I thrust into her and pulled out, I, too, gleamed with moisture, warm and tumescent, and she moaned and looked down open-mouthed, it was obvious that she, too, was enjoying the sight, and so we kept going, me thrusting deeply and then pulling all the way out, and soon a sparkling stream ejected from her, a brief splash, completely unexpected it seemed because she looked up at me, blushed and apologised. I caressed her cheek, leaned towards her and whispered into her ear that I wanted the rest. I will store this in my memory, too, I thought, as she led me to the bathroom. She got in the shower, took my hand, pressed it against her soft flesh and soon the trickling started, cautiously at first, forced, then she relaxed and out burst a powerful warm spurt. She held my hand firmly and I felt her, I cupped my palm against the stream. It smelled sweet, I savoured it, when a surprising urge to laugh bubbled up inside me and I had to suppress my urge to giggle. I thought: Watch the orthography and try to imagine yourself in the protagonist's head, but the absurdity of these random sentences merely contributed to making the whole situation even more ridiculous. Fortunately it all resolved itself when she straightened up, leaned against me for support and apologised a second time. I assured her that it did not matter.

When we said goodbye in the dimly-lit hall way, all I managed to say was 'thank you,' as though she had given me a precious gift. The worrying thing was that she had not even told me her full name, nor did she know what my surname was. We talked about meeting up again, but were vague about when. On the calendar, which hung on the wall behind her and

which was illustrated by a print by Adolphe Bouguereaus, *Jeune fille se défendant contre l'amour*, I read a quaint note scribbled in fat, red pen: "L'homme est plus important que sa psychose" it said. The feeling of amusement resurged and it was only made worse when I caught my impish reflection in the mirror. She gave me a quizzical look and mumbled something which I took to referring to my sudden jollity. I touched her forehead with my hand, but she pulled away from me at this gesture and opened the door to the stairwell. Had I insulted her? I wasn't sure, you never can tell what a stranger will pick up on or react to. All the same, as she stood there, it felt as though it was vital for her to insure herself against further humiliation. I wondered if I should apologise right away, but decided not to, after all my intentions had been good, she had no reason to be upset and there really was nothing contemptible about my conduct, she must know that after what we had done, after our spontaneous encounter. Back on the pavement I stopped to read the names below the buttons, a few had been written in black ink, others with a ballpoint pen, one or two punched out on plastic strips, and one was even scribbled in pencil, in a twisted hand, almost illegible, foreign, like Asian or Arabic symbols. Yet I tried to decipher it, as if it was a requirement, as if it was a code I had to break before I could see her again. Because the next time would be even better. I would get to know her and that which at present consisted merely of hints and shadows would emerge with lucidity and trust. We had the best of all possible starting points, I thought, because no matter how much she resisted, surely the obvious desire I had demonstrated had to be sufficient proof; it could be not misunderstood or rejected given how far we had already exposed ourselves to each other?

Back on the train, this time on my way home, it all seemed straightforward to me, the idea that she might have interpreted my smile as one of contempt now existed only in my imagination. Though I didn't know if this was the case, I assumed that it was her middle-class upbringing which had triggered this sensitivity, or rather suspicion. She would soon realise

that my intentions were honourable, I was certain of that, perhaps she already had, sitting on her sofa, not dressed yet, savouring the reverberations, she, too, astounded at the hungry hours we had spent together. I took off my coat and placed it across my lap. My groin was still swollen and warm. The packed carriage and the faulty heating system turned these late night journeys into something both disturbing and fascinating. The suburban stations were busy, people poured in and out of the train, ghostly, transitory spirits, and I pretended that in this crowd were thousands of separate dreams, an endless gleam of light behind the eye lids; the crushes of school children, the twilight of the old, the horizons of immigrants, the exchange of furtive glances, stolen moments, like an unfinished sentence, or the distant humming of a fan or the flickering of neon light. The woman directly opposite me coughed loudly and persistently, and the elderly man next to her kept nodding off so his head jerked backwards and uncontrolled snoring rose from his gaping mouth. But I was not disturbed or bothered. I was in a good mood. I enjoyed looking out at the milky-white sky and at the landscape, which had changed colour during the early evening hours; and in the condensation which had formed on the window, I drew a childish outline of a running dog.