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BELOW ZERO

November

A few days before the first of November I meant to write your mother a letter. I set aside three full days for it—I didn't leave my apartment, go to the store, the bank, or the post office, and I didn't answer the phone—and I thought that with that sort of determination I'd finish it that much sooner. I almost finished writing it. I've had an envelope bearing the right amount of postage—minus the address, of course—in my lower desk drawer along with all my other important documents for several months now, which is why the stamp dates to Red Cross Solidarity Week. But when it came to signing the letter, something went wrong. As usual, I changed my mind and burned it.

Who really wants to hear some truth about their daughter on the anniversary of her death? And try to understand it? There were so many contingencies. No. When it came time to sign it, my blood ran cold. And I sobered up. And then there's something else. I have the sense that your mother never particularly liked me. Perhaps I only think that on account of some things that you told me. I never had any particular impression of her, but that may be because I never especially looked her straight in the eye. You know me, every morning, whenever I could, I put on my clothes as quickly and quietly as possible and disappeared. Out of your attic room, down the creaky wooden staircase and into the wide, ceilingless day. Each time I locked the door behind me and tossed your keys in the mailbox, I always felt relieved.

Your mother supposedly said that all the other girls were at least your age or younger. And most of all attractive, talkative, and tanned. And women. Perhaps it was tasteless when you woke me up in the morning, tossed me your pajamas, and said I should come down to the kitchen for coffee. I felt like some stupid intruder—staring at the floor like a schoolgirl—you can imagine it's not exactly pleasant to sit at breakfast with ugly bags under your eyes and chapped lips, wearing pajamas that belong to mommy's little girl. That's why I felt guilty. I stared at the teddy bears on your pajamas, at my freezing bare feet, and all of it, including the fact that I felt I didn't dare ask for slippers, reminded me that it was time once again for the litany of eternal traumas that would be pressing me down soon, giving me a chance from close up to look into the cracks between the kitchen floorboards. Who knows, maybe I'm carrying some hidden disease, something—you know—contagious. Not that my complexion was sallow . . . but all those strange thoughts of mine aren't so readily concealed by a suntan. Or spoken. That's why I was afraid that things were building toward another episode that would last several days. I was filled with the same ominously vague thoughts that found no expression in words or the spaces between them—they barely left any faint trace on the tips of my fingers. It's true, I never quite knew after how many cups of coffee to say no, thanks, so as not to add impudence to my bizarreness. I didn't know and—I couldn't have said it, anyway. That's why I didn't try and instead just kept quiet—who knows what all might have rumbled and crashed and seeped out through the bunched up quotation marks, had I opened my mouth.

But you told your mother that beauty isn't everything. If that's what you really said—I don't know what was true after all. If by some chance you're somewhere close by, I don't know, in some formless shape in the air or under the dresser, you're probably wondering what I'm going on about. I know you don't remember all that. None of it, as long as it doesn't have to do

directly with you. And you're probably trying to persuade me how fitting and nice it would be if I did send your mother a letter. Because I write such interesting ones, it wouldn't be right if I kept it all pent up. And presumably because she's asked you so many times why I don't come to visit you. As if it was possible to live between some "you" and some "us." Don't you see, I haven't been able to come visit you, because there was no us for me to come from. No, this is my weak spot. So quit hoping. I know how calculating you can be. You know full well how much a single letter like that could cost me. But you just don't change, do you?

And thankfully, I can't hear a thing.

II

It was in January. A dry frost. The snow crunched under our boots as we got into your car. I wondered—I tried to imagine the two of us—what it would be like if it had been above zero. I left my friends and a half-empty bottle on the bar. I simply walked out with you. Without a word to anyone. You drove fast, as though you knew I'd barely just learned your name and might change my mind any instant and tell you to drive me home or, better yet, drop me off at the next corner. You asked if I was afraid. No, there was no fear. As long as everything passed as quickly as possible and it was morning again and I was already at the nearest bus stop, hunched over in the bitter predawn cold, stamping my feet and wondering which way—right or left—would take me to town.

That's how it began. Entirely by accident. And anything else would be an invention. Only now do I admit that I was driven by curiosity. Because I'd never yet slept with an active and I wanted to know what it was like when a woman doesn't allow you to touch her. What it means to be an object for another woman, what the power game is like when biology isn't fate. Or something like that. I don't know—as if it mattered anymore. I

certainly wasn't allowed to connect to any meaning, so I've no idea what good anatomy would've done me.

Yes, I liked you. Through all of it I still liked you. Over morning coffee—you caught me as I was hurriedly buttoning up my jacket and trying to dig a bus token out my tight jeans pockets—you lured me back into your fantasies. Put on your pajamas. The male ones with the vertical stripes. Even though I didn't want to get too much into your skin. Do you realize I didn't even know what color your nipples were, or how your skin creased when you lay on top of me.

It's true—I dreamed about you a few days before the first of November. It was probably the dream that led me to the ill-considered act of composing a letter to your mother. It was a strangely calm dream. You and I, alone, inside a bright, spacious room. I remember the big windows and some square, silver pipes. You lay naked on the biggest pipe and I was leaning over you. I held my hands, sticky from white dough, up in the air with the index and little fingers extended. You were so salty.

I don't know why that dream, of all things. In fact there was only one time when I managed to sneak up on your crotch. When I tasted you, you went blue in the face—that's the impression I had. You squeezed my neck. I could feel that you both wanted and hated it. Then you grabbed me by the hair and pulled my head up toward you. I didn't know what you wanted. Then, with the back of your free hand, you slapped me in the face. I noticed my response, a sweet spasm in my crotch. I didn't know what you wanted. You hit me in the face, and then I felt warm, and blood as viscous and salty as your juices dampened my mouth, which had gone dry from fast breathing, and I'd like to know if you felt as crazy as I did. Or if you were just that hateful, that furious. Perhaps because you'd warned me not to get mixed up with you. Or did you just feel that crazy. I'd like to know. Or was it because I'd told you, out of nowhere, apparently, that nobody gets away from me. I don't know why, what came over me, I didn't mean anything by it.

And there was no carefully fashioned blindfold at all, like the ones they write about, just an ordinary cotton kerchief, because I had a sore throat that day.

I also considered writing your mother about that.

III

Very soon I found out that I wasn't good at obeying you. You'd provoke me, sometimes implore me, who knows what all you tried, but it was impossible to respond in kind. Much less do your bidding. Fine, you made it look like I was the only one who couldn't get close, as though I was just too different, too radically different for you to be able to commit yourself to. At least not in this world. But I was a refuge of everything different, life hadn't beaten me, loneliness didn't exist for me. After my days-long episodes were over I felt much better—then I could express myself, but I had to begin with questions written all over the place, in the time and space of folds of skin. And if anything had ever been even the tiniest, most approximate bit all right, I wouldn't have had to make such beastly efforts. I never knew what you wanted. Once you asked me where I got all those questions from that seemed so sudden and unexpected to you. From your answers; I had no idea what else to tell you. And because each and every one of those answers slapped me so heedlessly—and I was afraid of new ones—I sometimes wanted to know how the story would end. Maybe that's why I finally forced it, determined it myself.

And when you told me that you didn't like me in jeans and with my hair slicked down under my cap, it came to me in a flash that an end had to be put to this. Because I came across tough that way? Come on, I could never have had long, blonde hair so you could fall in love with me, as though I still wanted to waste time trying to obey you better, let alone mess with anatomy.

Gradually I began to lower you below zero. I wanted to tell

you, signal to you, but how was I supposed to do that? You never heard what I said, and I never had anything of yours, nothing to bind you to and protect you from me. And everything I gave you cheated me, eluding my grasp, without even the phantom travails of severed umbilical cords. And if you took too long to slide down my body, I'd contract, grow impatient, my head would nod down to my knees and my stumps would slough off, little symbols shooting past my eyelids, and I became pleasantly strange and unfamiliarly beautiful, as though undergoing metamorphosis when I closed my eyes in delight. And how many times did I have to hold back from sinking my claws in your temples and shoving your head down, somewhere far below, at last beyond, beneath the line where everything turns to ice. Including fury. Let alone words or reasons.

The last night I spent with you, you'd already passed into the next decade. That's why it's easier for me today. Of course I know that you intended to live long, but I unexpectedly, brutally kept that from happening. I know everything. But it's easier for me—for *me*—because you'd already taken on that burden.

I called to tell you to come to Ljubljana as we'd already agreed, but you tried so inconsiderately and clumsily to wriggle out of it. In fact you simply ignored me. I've always hated that, don't you realize. When somebody brought me to the point where I had to beg. But you explained how warm it was there, and that the sun was shining—in between instructions you were giving to somebody in the background what to take along for a picnic—some people were even going into the water and you would've, too, if you weren't already so pleasantly high. Oh yes, and there are lots of people at our place, they've driven out from Ljubljana where it's always so boring on weekends. As though you didn't know that I didn't have any "our place," which wasn't just seen as abnormal, it was diseased, but you had to take your pokes at me and stir up my traumas, as though malicious irritability were more real than the danger of my fugitive thoughts.

Oh, of course you'll come, you just don't know when—*how to create a different kind of world*. You've always overlooked that. There are so many people around you and you're completely distracted, or whatever. This whole shower of meaningless words that are left hanging like patches of porous skin on the never-changing framework of imaginary states. You can imagine—because you know me so well already, not because you sensed anything during that conversation—how I was clenching my teeth and my muscles and sweating into the receiver. Once, I'd wanted to take away from you what you referred to as so many people. Actually, take you away from them, just pluck your head out of the sand, but somebody ought to tell them . . . because then maybe there could be a completely different kind of summertime without any sun, and then lots of people would flock to ski slopes and you'd be dialing my number again to yank some other strap on my straitjacket—I'll bet they're still sending you postcards and greetings and contorting their faces and writing with idiotic red felt pens, as if to say “guess who sends you hugs, hugs, hugs,” as though they had no idea you weren't reading them anymore. And that you'd have no idea who all the hugs, hugs, hugs were from. But why bother, your mother enjoys them and you—if you're still here in the air somewhere or under the dresser—think it's nice that you knew how to take up so much space that some people still insist on addressing cards to you—regardless of whether you exist or not. Yes, all those connections. But I had to work so hard for that. I'm your last connection. To life.

What a fucking zombie.

Even before my speechless thoughts had run out you'd hung up the phone. Maybe you even forgot to tack on that you loved me. I could be very grateful to you for that lack of manners.

But some other time.