AFTER SHE'D GONE

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An Aries Book

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For the fiercest women I've known – Marianne, Fevziye, Emmanuelle, Silje Birgitte and Anastasia

Part One

1

Adrian

Before the bell sounds and the children surge toward the brightly lit building, he hides among the trees at the edge of the schoolyard. He knows them well, these trees, and can easily tell one trunk from another by touch. He especially likes a trio of tall pine trees that marks the end of the school grounds; if he pushes his way through their low, dense branches that touch at the tips, there is a cozy, silent space in the middle. He waits quietly until the last child has disappeared through the sliding doors, then he slips out from his hiding place and runs quickly across the empty playground. He usually manages to take his seat in the classroom at the exact moment the teacher walks in and presses the door shut behind herself. He sits right at the front, by the window; they decided it was best that way. He likes it there; he can watch the black winter sky weaken into a misty gray, and the barely moving lights of the cars that crawl up toward the motorway.

Sometimes, the flight path is directed over the town, and

he gets to see the planes just after takeoff from Torp, the roar of the engines momentarily drowning out the teacher's monotonous voice. In his mind, he places himself inside the plane as he watches it rise upward, and instead of gazing out the classroom window, he is looking out of the plane's plastic one, down at the school. He knows where each plane that takes off from Torp is going to: he memorized the schedule long ago, so quite often he's already looking out the window by the time the plane appears, anticipating the 0820 KLM City Hopper to Amsterdam, or the 0905 Widerøe Fokker X to Bergen. From his window seat he can see the big, ugly school nestled in between the paint factories by the water, and the patch of trees at the edge of the playground. He can even see the boy among the trees, waiting for playtime to be over, revealed from the aerial vantage point.

The teacher knows that he needs these interludes, these moments of losing himself in thought and gazing out of the window, so she doesn't say anything, just keeps talking and lets him be. The other kids sometimes make a mean comment or emulate the sound of a plane when they see him looking out the window. One boy, Steffen, frequently throws little rolled-up scraps of paper at the back of Adrian's head, but Adrian makes a point out of never responding, never turning around. His mother says that bullies are actually just weak people who try to zap some of the strength out of those they sense are stronger and better than themselves, but Adrian doesn't quite believe her – it sounds like something adults say to make kids feel better.

The teacher talks about different kinds of grain and how they are grown. She draws a rudimentary illustration of

various grains on the whiteboard: wheat, barley, rye, corn. Adrian pays careful attention and copies the drawing into his notebook, but he doesn't feel quite right today and his hand trembles as he moves the pencil across the page. It's Wednesday, and he always finds the first day of the week back at school difficult after a peaceful weekend at home with Mama. Yesterday they baked cinnamon buns together, his favorites, and the delicious scent of them lingered in the house this morning when he'd sat at the kitchen table chewing his breakfast, dreading the moment it would be time to go off to school. He watched the crawl of the long hand on the clock on the wall; when it touched the 5 it was time to leave. Mama had already left and he'd have to set off on the twenty-minute walk to school in the dark and bitter cold. These things didn't bother him much; it was more the fact that he'd end up at the school when it was finished.

'Do you know how cross-germination works?' asks Marie, the teacher. Adrian likes her; she's kind to him and makes every effort to make him comfortable. Once, at the beginning of the year, she'd pulled him aside at the end of a particularly bad day, and said softly – *You know, Adrian, it's a good thing to be like you*. He wants to put his hand up and speak, because he does indeed know how cross-germination works, but he knows that it would be impossible. The words wouldn't come. His voice wouldn't be able to carry them. He feels Marie looking at him, and he knows that she knows that he would be able to answer the question, that he is perhaps the only one in the class who could, but he's careful to avoid her gaze. To Adrian it feels difficult and often impossible, to meet the eyes of other people. It's as

though the act of sharing a gaze is just too much; it leaves him with the sensation of a burn. Sometimes he can bear to look into Mama's eyes, the eyes that are so like his own that he has the sensation of looking in the mirror, but even then, he has to work up to it, to consciously steel himself for the moment when they fully look at each other.

The bell sounds and he's filled with an instant, visceral dread. It's too soon. He's barely gotten used to being inside the warm, lit-up building after the long walk in the dark and the silent moments between the trees, and now it's time for the first break. The children lurch to their feet and rush from the room. Adrian stands up too, slowly, and shuffles toward the door; as much as he doesn't want to go outside, risking being left alone with the boys in the class, he also can't bear Marie's pity if he stays behind at his desk. If he's lucky, he might be able to slip out from the school's less-used side entrance; it's closer to the far end of the playground and the trees. He turns the corner, avoiding the glances of the other kids, keeping his eyes firmly on the linoleum floor, then on the rectangular window inset into the door at the far end of the corridor. It's just gone nine thirty and there is a beautiful, deep-blue light outside, giving Adrian the sensation of looking into water from the windows of a submerged ship.

'Hey there,' says a voice, close to his ear. He freezes in his tracks, one hand on the door handle.

'He can't hear you,' says another voice, this one ice cold and cruel: Steffen. 'He's deaf, remember?' Adrian moves swiftly forward, using all his force to shove the door open so he can run outside into the freezing blue air, away from them, but he is jerked back hard, by a hand grabbing the

hair at the back of his head. It hurts terribly and Adrian crumples to the ground, breathless. He makes himself stay completely still, focusing on stopping the tears that pool in his eyes.

'He's not deaf,' says the first voice, belonging to a boy called Josef, Steffen's henchman, a burly and dumb kid Adrian recognizes by his shoes. 'He's just a mute.' The black, scuffed sneaker in front of Adrian's face suddenly leaps into action and delivers a swift kick into his shoulder. He sits up and tries to get his bearings. If only he could get to the door…

'Fucking weirdo,' says Steffen, laughing. He grabs him by the hood of his parka and drags him back up to his feet. Adrian's knees are trembling and he feels as though he'll fall back down if Steffen releases his vice-like grip. 'Can you imagine being that fucking weird?' The two boys laugh. 'Hit him,' says Steffen, so Josef does, very hard, in the soft pit of his stomach.

'If you tell him to stop, he'll stop,' says Steffen.

'Yeah,' says Josef. 'Just say stop.' Adrian pushes his tongue against his teeth, mouth clamped shut. All he has to do is find the word, that one word, *stop*. But he can't. Josef hits him again, in the face, so hard he topples over and strikes his cheekbone on the window ledge as he falls. They both laugh.

'Why don't you just tell him to stop?' says Steffen, pushing his wide, red face close to Adrian's, his sour breath making Adrian's stomach lurch. 'Look at me. I said, look at me!'

'Hey! Stop! Let him go!' a voice hollers down the corridor. Steffen's grip is instantly released. The two boys

shoot out the door, leaving it swinging on its hinges, icy air being sucked into the building. Adrian collapses back on the floor but is picked back up again, very gently this time. 'Oh no. Oh, sweetie,' says Marie, touching a patch of broken skin on his cheek with her fingertip. 'I'm so sorry.'

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They can't get hold of his mother, but after the school nurse has disinfected the cut on his cheek and pressed a plaster across it, he's allowed to sit out the rest of the morning in a corner of the teacher's room, doing exercises in a physics book. Steffen and Josef are sent home, not for the first time. At lunchtime, he tries to eat his lunch, but feels violently nauseous and needs to lie down in the nurse's office. They still can't get hold of his mother.

He must have fallen asleep for a moment because when he opens his eyes again, someone is sitting beside him on the sofa – it's Marie.

'I'm going to drive you home, okay?' she says, softly, taking his hand in her own warm one.

In the car, Adrian looks out of the window. It's just past two o'clock and already the light is reduced to a violet gloom. Marie doesn't speak, but he can feel her occasionally glancing over at him. She knows where to drop him off, that the road doesn't go all the way up to the house; it's not the first time she's driven him. She pulls over in the lay-by tucked in from the road beneath a rocky outcrop on top of which row upon row of new houses are being built. On his way to school, Adrian sometimes takes the longer route up the hill and past the building site, walking beyond the path, close to the drop, looking out at the harbor basin spreading

out far below. More than once, he's imagined losing his footing and tumbling down the cliffside, his broken body landing messily in the lay-by where Marie has just stopped the car. He can almost see himself out there, in front of the car on the asphalt, dead.

'Bye, sweetie,' says Marie. 'Please tell your mom to call me, or stop in to see me, okay?' Adrian nods and watches as she pulls away and merges back into the traffic toward the town. He steps onto the steep path that leads from the main road and toward their house nestled high above the western end of the town, on top of the next cliff over from the one where the houses are being built. His mother has told him that the construction company wants to buy their house too, and demolish it to build modern apartments, but that she'll never sell it. The thing she loves about it, which Adrian loves too, is that it sits entirely on its own, shielded from view by a thick line of trees on one side, and by the massive rocky cliff on the other, below which lies a narrow strip of sand, completely unreachable by car. Once it was a summer cabin and the people who owned it used to moor a little boat down on the beach, accessing the house by a narrow, perilous path. Then the new road was built, bringing the house considerably closer to the town, but to access it, you still have to walk the final stretch, up and down, past the beach, through the last steep thicket.

At home, Adrian closes the door behind him, then he begins to cry, unleashing everything he has held inside. His howls tear through the little house, sounding like wind trapped in the chimney. He paces through the house aimlessly, trying to dissolve the feelings he can't put into words, throwing things to the floor as he goes. Clothes

from hangers, a framed photograph of himself as a much younger child, newspapers left on the table, books from the bookshelves; all indiscriminately flung to the ground. The glass frame shatters and it's as though its sound brings Adrian back into himself, making him stop in his tracks. He stops crying and stares at the mess he's made. Slowly, he makes his way back through the rooms, picking up everything he has thrown around, placing everything carefully back in its designated place. He sweeps up the glass shards of the picture frame and places the photograph itself between the pages of an encyclopedia in the bookshelf, hoping Mama won't immediately notice its absence.

He feels exhausted, and walks over to the bench beneath the window in the kitchen. He sits there for a long while, looking out over the town, and has the strange sensation that though the world is out there, he's not really a part of it. He can see cars lining up to drive onto the ferry to Sweden, specks of people walking home from work, another plane taking off in the distance, turning east and quickly disappearing into the low gauzy clouds – it's the 1510 Ryanair flight to London Stansted. The people out there all seem to be going places, meeting family and friends, doing things. Adrian never goes anywhere; he's never even been on a plane. He doesn't have family except for Mama. The kids at school are so different to him, even the ones that aren't mean. It's like he's a different species, a strange little bird who should be among other strange little birds in the sky, or sitting in a tree, except he's never met anyone like himself.

The sun has gone down beyond the hills across the inner harbor, leaving the sky a wistful indigo. Adrian waits and

waits, feeling empty inside, unable to motivate himself to get up off the bench and do something, anything, like he normally would. Just after four, when it is completely dark and Adrian struggles to tell the lights from the houses scattered on the hills surrounding Sandefjord from the pinprick stars appearing in the sky, Mama's key slots into the lock. He waits for her to drop her bag on the ground in the hallway, kick off her shoes, and to make her way into the open-plan kitchen and living area, letting her discover him. At the sight of his bruised face and sad expression, Mama's expression darkens and she rushes over to him and cups his face in her hands.

'Who did this to you?' she whispers. He won't look at her, but she angles his face so that in the end, he has no choice. 'Tell me, baby. Please.' He shakes his head.

'Let's have a burgers-and-Boeings kind of afternoon,' says Mama, knowing it's the only thing that could make him feel better.

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They walk slowly together down the ice-encrusted path, then along the wooden walkway that leads from the beach, up the rocky hill to the main road. They don't have to wait long for the bus, which pulls into the lay-by where Marie dropped Adrian off hours before, but still they're shivering from the few minutes spent standing still. They sit side by side in silence until they reach the airport.

Outside, it's minus thirteen degrees Celsius and they walk quickly toward the terminal building, holding hands. There's a McDonald's in the arrivals area, with a seating area overlooking the runway. Mama orders the food at

the self-serve station, then brings it over to where Adrian is sitting staring out at the flashing red light from the air traffic control tower. He gets to work on his cheeseburger and fries, his eyes not leaving the skies for a moment.

'Look,' he says, the word clear and strong. 'The Amsterdam plane's early.' Mama follows his pointed finger to a pinprick light pulsating above the frosty forested hills to the north. They watch as it moves closer, going from a barely discernible speck of light to a nimble white-and-blue Fokker 70 that perfectly touches down on the runway.

There is a lull in the traffic, but Adrian doesn't tire from staring out the window, waiting. Mama sits quietly, lost in thought. A Boeing 737 from Wizz Air lines up on the runway, its white fuselage twinkling in the glare from the lights at the far end of the runway. Adrian sits rapt, enthralled, entirely still, his fingers hovering above the rest of his fries, careful not to make a sound as the plane revs its engines, sending hot air crumbling from the turbines. It surges toward where they're sitting in the warm terminal building, strangely slowly, as if it is too heavy to take flight, but as soon as the nose lifts, the plane is in its element and it goes from clunky and earth-bound to something other, a thing of the heavens, a beautiful, roaring bird of prey.

Mama stands and motions for Adrian to follow. She strokes his hair, then places his fleece hat back on his head before they step outside. They don't speak all the way back to the house, not even on the walk from the lay-by; they just walk quickly beside each other in the icy darkness of the January evening, gloved hands intertwined. Later, when Adrian is in bed, Mama sits by his side.

'We might go away sometime soon,' she whispers in

their secret language, gently stroking the curve of his brow. Adrian looks at her, and their eyes briefly meet before he feels he has to look away. He realizes she looks different suddenly, but struggles to identify the expression on her face: fear or sadness, or perhaps both?

'Where?' he says, his voice unfamiliar and loud in his little room. Mama smiles and kisses the top of his head, her lips lingering on his skin.

'I don't know,' she says. 'But I know that I love you more than anything and will always keep you safe.'