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Before It All Disappears

Novel

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The place to which the journey leads is fictional, as are its inhabitants; any similarities to real people, to still existing, demolished or sunken places are coincidental. And: Anyone or anything that has crept in unnoticed is allowed to stay.

[...]

Mona

The Proclamation

It's one of those rainy mornings left over from the past November, bitterly cold and yet without snow or sub-zero temperatures. And that in January. Mona Winz – who dreams of one day being immortal, who made a failed escape attempt almost ten years ago and then swore to stay forever, and who will have disappeared in a few months' time – Mona was the first to find out. Mona is the first to face the Armageddon. As usual at that time of day, she's on her way home. She's done her shopping: everything she needs for chicken stew. A nice hotpot is just right in this cold weather. Mona walks down the road, saying hello to Greta Mallnicht, who's also on her way home, on the way to the graveyard: 'Hello there, Greta.' And Greta says a friendly hello back, not suspecting anything is wrong, and nor does Mona – how could they, after all?

Coming from the next village along you see the golden cross rising high above the wooded hills. The crooked church is built in a valley, with a river running through it: the liquid fire in which the newborns have always been submerged by their proud fathers, and after that the only place the children can end up is the frying pan; they've been through the worst already, tied to the place forever with their first swallow of brackish water.

The two pallid men notice the cross as well, that January day. They pull up to the place around midday, and just as man number 1 raises his head to the heavens a ray of sunshine squeezes through the clouds, slamming onto the cross and making it flash. Number 2 is behind the wheel and that's where the ray of light hits him, far too bright for that winter. Irritated, he points at the cross:

'That'll be the first thing to go.'

'You can't decide that,' says number 1, flexing the information material between his hands. 'It's not up to us to decide.'

The cross reflects as best it can. It presses the light all the way into the gloomy depths of the cellar, where David Wacholder is standing at the foot of the staircase. It's always here that he stops, unable

to tear himself away from the figure in the painting. The figure is the same age as he is and yet David is separated by decades from this person, whom he can imagine so well, by centuries and by the doubt whether he ever really existed, in this building, in this world. But if he did, thinks David, that would be good. He has to hurry; he hears the footsteps up above. He runs his forefinger over the stranger's hair. The hair is made of oil, hard and unyielding, no life in it, and David manages to tear himself away, to forget his silly daydreams. He goes up the stairs, taking his father the wine so that his father isn't afraid, so that there's calm, so that there's peace on earth, so that everything can go on as before.

Number 1 gazes languidly around the place lying down there in the valley as if it were asleep.

'Dead as a doornail,' he says. 'But that's no surprise. The memo says most of them cleared off years ago.'

'Did you see that one back there by the sign?' asks number 2.

'Who?' asks number 1, taking a fleeting look in the rear-view mirror. 'Who was there, d'you say?'

'There was this boy. I don't know. Kind of odd.' Number 1 shrugs. 'I could swear there was someone there!' Number 2 studies the world in the mirror: cloud-shrouded sky, isolated farmsteads, an abandoned bus stop, bare trees and an almost forgotten country road. There's no sign of the translucent boy with the strange look in his eye.

Before she decided on chicken hotpot that morning, Mona had considered venturing her lentil stew already, but then she'd shaken her head and told herself, 'No, Mona, no lentils before the first of February.' That's one of her golden rules; that's one of the reasons why some people here consider her crazy. Mona takes no notice. As long as she's included in the chats in the shop on the corner, as long as they let her listen in to the local gossip, to the planning of the big centennial festival in the summer and she's allowed to share concerns for anyone younger or much older than herself, Mona doesn't care if anyone shakes their head over her now and then. And anyway, they're always shaking their heads, about everything, about everyone, even about themselves if no one else happens to pass by; if there's nothing to wonder at but themselves. Mona doesn't have a TV, nor a black cat, but she does have a comfy cushion and a good view of the main square. Nobody knows it but Mona is a good observer with her glasses on, and she hears everything; she even hears the flowers growing in the garden, and that even through her closed bedroom window.

'And that's not nothing,' Mona likes to say, and she says it now, absent-mindedly and to herself once again, right before the black car drives into her.

[...]

Mona has lost her glasses. Her sight is blurry but good enough. Her vegetables are on the ground and she can just make out the emblem on the black car, the size of a pumpkin: three wild horses rearing out of a raging river. Her eyes wander; to the right of her is a dark blue man, to the left of her is a dark blue man, the emblem on both chests. Mona can't concentrate because she finds the two uniformed men flanking her like bodyguards really rather attractive in all their blurriness. She won't get to see a sight like again this all too soon and she'd like to make the most of it, never mind the carrots,

in the hope of someone coming past and taking a photo, all the better to admire Mona, nearly blind but flanked in dark blue for eternity.

'Are you really alright?' one of the men asks, and Mona smiles for a moment. [...] The lenses from which all eyes usually bounce off have disappeared, and number 1 sees Mona in very good focus and she sees him hazily, but well enough:

'Yes, no, everything's fine.'

[...]

'Where can we find the mayor?' the man asks, and Mona's voice falters at that very point. She can't remember where to find him, the mayor, Mr Martin Wacholder, Wacho for short to the locals. But in fact you can find him just along from her, at number twelve, him and his silent son David, both their houses timber-framed like almost all of them here, but only Wacho's has been renovated. 'It's the town hall as well, isn't it, it serves a function for all of us,' Wacho said back when they took down the scaffolding, knocking proudly on the shiny wood. Mona remembers that [...] and then she remembers the man's question: 'On the main square, twenty metres down the road.' That's how most directions go here, only the metres varying. Everything important is on the main square, and everything else you have to look for outside of the place.

'What is it you want?' Mona asks.

'It's about the flooding.'

'What flooding? Has Wacho –' Mona stops. She wanted to ask if Wacho had caused another scene. Sometimes – everyone here knows it because here everyone knows everything – sometimes the mayor has problems with his optimism, with his lost wife's persistent absence, and then he deliberately drinks more than enough punch and gets in his car and drives around the main square like a wild thing and it's better to keep the children inside on those days. Despite the risk, they're all glad Wacho has his way of venting. As long as all he does is drive and drink, everything stays within reason. [...]

The man takes Mona's hands in his. It doesn't bother her that his palms are moist. [...] The man speaks:

'It's about something important. It's about everything, about all of you, but essentially, please don't get me wrong, when it comes down to it it's not all that bad after all.'

Then he takes a breath and number 2 leaps in. His eyes look very normal to Mona. He's one of those average grey-blue-eyed men and his voice is too small for his body. And all the man can do is whisper:

'It's about the flooding, about the energy project, it's about the dam measures. It's about demolishing this place.'

[...]

The twins Jules and Jula Salamander are standing under the wintry bare linden tree on the main square, trying in vain not to get wet. They look extremely decorative and they know it. They are the

fairest; only over the hills and far away could there be anyone to match them in a charisma contest. But what do they care for hills, faraway cities, fairer people? They're here and so they're the fairest of them all. The twins are officially grown-up, just turned eighteen, but for everyone in this place they're still the boy and the girl.

You can't blame everything on your parents but you can blame them for your name, and in this case it's Eleni and Jeremias Salamander's fault. Jula and Jules have surrendered to their fate and always appear together; they'll never part, that's been clear ever since they can remember and perhaps even longer than that.

'What do you think those guys want from Wacho?' asks Jules. 'I've never seen them here before.'

'They want to convert him to the true faith or something,' says Jula. Her voice sounds as though she'd make an excellent singer. But Jula never sings; Jules sings, but only in secret. And he laughs, Jules always laughs when Jula makes a joke. He laughs loudest when her jokes are bad.

'And that big thing they're carrying?'

'It's a sail. Wacho's going to tell David to attach it to the roof and then they'll sail away with their house. You know, they're going to look for Anna, on land and sea.' Jules likes the idea of David and Wacho on the high seas. He can imagine that's where they'll find Anna.

'Mona looks strange when she runs,' says Jula.

'Right,' says Jules.

'Mona's funny,' says Jula, and Jules nods.

'Right.' Everything's always right between the two of them.

David sees Mona running too – a rare sight. David himself is standing as ever, his hands buried as deep as possible in his jacket pockets, standing by the well outside The Gates and trying to pull himself together. He's sure everything's fine with Mona; sometimes you just feel the need to run, just not too far. David doesn't want her to pass it on to him so he looks at the ground, his head submerged between his shoulders, and in his mind he conceals a forbidden 'Where to?' They watch him from the windows of The Gates but he barely notices that any more. He's used to it and they're concerned, so to speak, they're talking about how he'll make a run for it one day, like his mother, and how he's got that same look in his eyes and how Wacho will lose his mind entirely then. But David doesn't intend to leave at all; he just likes imagining other worlds and unfamiliar lives and people, one in particular, the only person he'd like to be with, best of all very close. Wacho and David balance each other out in a wobbly equation of endurance and desperation.

David can't resist any longer. He takes his hand out of his pocket and chews the nail bed raw, looking for ideas for the future. [...] It's his birthday tomorrow. He lives in the town hall with his father. He earns his money in The Gates, behind the bar on shifts in shirtsleeves, pouring beer and punch and spirits. He can carry seven plates at once without his arms trembling and he doesn't talk much at work. He's strong and stubborn and determined and brave and he's scared to high heaven and beyond and he doesn't know what of.

A black car with an odd emblem parks outside the town hall, with a registration number David doesn't know. Two men in dark clothes stand in front of the lion, and he knows instantly that the day has come. The day when everything gets out of balance, when the world tips out of kilter. [...]

The pallid gents creep cautiously past the larger-than-life stone lion and up the white steps into the town hall. Number 2 inspects the neatness of the cloakroom, the carefully lined-up shoes, inhaling deeply the smell of freshly made coffee. He puts the placard down; too clear to begin with. They follow the scent of coffee through the hallway in its friendly yellow tones, into the large open-plan kitchen.

As if he'd expected them, Wacho the mayor is standing there in the middle of the room, and he smiles at them and he asks them to join him at the table, still decked from breakfast. Wacho apologises: he was just about to wash up and the office is even worse, the files, the binders, all those binders, they knew what he meant, didn't they? 'I'm actually an investment consultant,' says Wacho, and it sounds like a confession.

Everything radiates cosy comfort, think number 1 and number 2, and he comes across as a friendly person, as a contented mayor of a tiny place, and he even has a brown beard.

'Do you have children?' asks number 2. Wacho beams.

'One son, David.'

'That's good,' says number 2. 'How old is he?' Wacho looks suddenly distressed.

'Nearly twenty-seven.' Amazed, number 1 and number 2 cast another glance at the child's drawings on the fridge.

'So you're a granddaddy already,' says number 2, and number 1 is even more amazed, not expecting a word like that from number 2. He's always seemed to him like someone who says 'grandfather', 'self-evidently' and 'necessarily'.

'No,' says Wacho, 'not yet.' He appears really rather concerned. He pours coffee for the men, even though they reject it with a wave of their hands. That's one of the rules: only drink coffee with affected civilians; with officials you only ever drink water at the most, or later a glass of something stronger. Number 1 and number 2 merely stir, not drinking.

'Is something up with David?' Wacho gasps. 'Has something happened to him?'

'No, no,' intone number 1 and number 2, but Wacho is already at the window, peering through the net curtains, searching.

'There he is, my son, he's standing there.'

'It's not about your son. We must apologise, we haven't even introduced ourselves. We work for the Poseidon Water Power Company. We're here about the measures, you remember, they're beginning shortly.' The men don't give their names; that's part of the corporate philosophy – they don't want things to get personal.

'Something's wrong with Mona,' murmurs Wacho, still looking out of the window.

'Did you understand?' asks number 1 and gets to his feet. They're going to have to get more formal, more explicit, it seems. The message has to hit home or none of it will work out.

'Measures,' Wacho repeats quietly. 'What do you mean by that?'

A sigh from the two men; and yet what else could they have expected? The five phases of mourning apply not only for the dying; they're the same for almost anyone facing a loss.

'Please sit down,' says number 2 and gestures at the table. 'We'll show you the plans.'