

Translated excerpt

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The Trials

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RAIN

We couldn't sleep. Ezra and I left our hotel room at dawn, and didn't run into anyone. Ezra knew the way.

In the dunes, we took off our shoes. The sand had turned cold overnight. It reminded me of a dead dragon's skin; dry, delicate and cold. Individual grains of sand moved around. The sky, clouds and sea formed a silver-blue unity, a sphere.

We laid in a hollow the white blankets and hand towels we had brought with us from the hotel. I was wearing my new green parka, and had the hood up. I looked at Ezra's slender foot; the hairs seemed to be growing directly out of the bone. It was the 12th of September.

All Ezra had with him were the black flared trousers I'd given him. They were so tight I couldn't help but laugh every time he laid down to squeeze himself into them, even though he was so thin. He undid the top button. His purple woollen pullover slipped up, and I saw his pelvic bone and the dark hairs beneath his belly button. It should have been impossible to find trousers that were too tight for him, but I had managed. And he wore them regardless.

I had brought water. He took a gulp, wrapped himself in a blanket and fell asleep. I stroked his dark-blonde eyebrows, which joined in the middle. He fitted in well among the dunes, with the soft grasses and grey sand. A factory trawler provided the sole night-time illumination. We were both good at sleeping out in the open air. We're German only children; we live in Brussels.

Ezra is older than me, by seven years. I'm twenty-nine. Ezra is a thousand years old.

I woke up when I received a text message, but didn't read it. I didn't move. I fell back to sleep.

I slowly came around as though from a long anaesthesia. The sky was yellow. Everything had changed. Ezra had turned away from me in his sleep. I sat up, it was windy, there was no reason to hurry. The sky looked unfathomable, overcast and deep. Everything was yellow. Yellow sand had flowed to the edges of the blanket. The silhouettes of yellow clouds stood out against the horizon, smudged, it was raining there. My cheeks felt hot, so I pulled down my hood. I heard the monotonous rushing sound and drew a spiral in the sand with my finger. In this moment, I had a good relationship with life and with everything that followed it. Thunder rumbled across the sea towards us.

Down on the sand, two knights in pointed helmets were locked in battle, wearing chainmail vests and skirts of tattered fabric. I loved knights. I was in my medieval phase. Ezra no longer had phases. I could see it in his eyes; he sometimes got this thousand-years-gaze, as though he were envisaging something very far away.

The knights' swords glinted whenever they raised their arms to strike, and I couldn't understand where the light reflected by the blades was coming from. They blocked the attacks and sometimes struck each other's armour, but that didn't bother them. I tried to wake Ezra; gently at first, then more firmly. He cleared his throat and breathed heavily, unevenly.

I plaited a strand of hair behind my ear and picked a favourite from the two knights. I didn't bind the braids at the bottom, so they untwisted again. My hair

wasn't very long back then; it only came down to my chin. Ezra didn't like me experimenting with my hair. I felt slightly afraid, not wanting one of the knights to be struck by lightning.

They pulled off their helmets and waited for the next rumble of thunder. Serenely, they pushed their swords into the sand, pointed out into the rain and drank from a leather flask. They were really very well kitted out. Then they walked across the dunes to the parking lot. Ezra simply wouldn't wake up.

I grabbed his upper arm, squeezed it tightly, and felt without wanting to this skin against my thumbnail, this skin that covers bones.

“Ezra,” I said.

He pulled himself upright, looked at me, then closed his eyes again. I filmed across the beach and the sea, into the yellow sky.

“I think it's starting to rain.”

“I'm not feeling well,” said Ezra. One of his sleeves had slipped up. His arms were still tanned from summer.

“What's wrong?”

“I need to go back to the hotel.”

He spoke calmly and solemnly. Something wasn't right, so we hurried and left the blankets and towels behind. He walked a step ahead of me. I stayed silent. He had assured me he had this illness under control. “Butterfly skin”, he called it, *epidermolysis bullosa*. He could be a little old-fashioned. He didn't talk about illnesses much, he'd told me it was harmless and unimportant. I didn't want to talk about illnesses. I try not to let certain information into my system. The less I know, the better. Ezra knows everything. We were a very good match.

I saw us through the eyes of the people on the promenade, who turned to stare as we rushed past, two tall men; one gaunt and elegant, and then me, behind,

long-haired and covered in sand. It calmed me to see us reflected in the mirror of others, to know how grotesque and strange we looked, how grotesque and strange everything we did looked.

We hurried through the bright entrance lobby of the vast hotel. The Thermae Palace's reception was unstaffed, the marble tiles broken and worn.

“Do you have the key?”

I gave him the card. We walked down a long, dark corridor, across old blue carpet that had dark water stains here and there. It was as though the hotel were preparing itself to become an emergency hospital. I had spotted badly painted-over mould on the ceilings.

“Why do they never turn the lights on?”

I didn't say a word. It had been Ezra's idea to book into this strange, massive hotel.

Back in our room, he emptied out his messenger bag: papers, cables, a blister pack. He travelled very light.

“They were in my bag.”

He read the back of the packaging and tossed it aside.

“Isn't that it?”

“Aspirin.”

“Maybe you forgot it?”

“Maybe. But I don't think so.”

“When was the last time you didn't have the medication with you?”

He answered without taking a beat: “Eighteen.”

The way he lay there on the carpeted floor, one leg bent at an angle beneath him, his trousers unbuttoned again, speaking to his doctor in Brussels on the phone, I thought he had everything under control. Ezra smiled. He and his doctor were strangely close. He explained the situation, told him how we'd

been swimming in the cold sea and that we'd slept outside, while I looked at the art print on the pale-blue wall, a painting by James Ensor. Even though it was actually a cheerful picture, it reminded me of the war.

"He says I'm to rest," said Ezra, pulling on mismatching socks. Something he never did.

We waited, me at the table, Ezra in bed, for his doctor to send the prescription. His lips were trembling, though he didn't notice. I told myself that I can only be my true self with him, a leaf blowing in the wind. It had always been like that. I watched the videos from the last few days: Ezra in the sand and in the sea, the dunes and the wind.

“I've got it.” Ezra forwarded me the prescription.

“I don't have any money.”

I pulled his trousers off. He was wearing expensive underwear, the blonde hairs on his thighs glistened in the light. He always gave me money.

“Here.”

He leaned forward slightly, stretched his hand out. I gave him my smart phone; he saved his credit card on it.

“I won't use that,” I said, but he had already closed his eyes and pulled up the covers.

At first, I couldn't find my way out of the hotel. Calcified plastic tubs stood beneath leaking radiators. At the end of a corridor, I ran into a maid. I thought she was talking to herself, but she was speaking to the robotic vacuum cleaner that was following her. I heard her say something about “shoes” and “barefoot”, I can't speak Flemish.

I stepped into the breakfast room with the cut-glass chandeliers and glass tanks of clear fruit juices. Hundreds of tables were covered with short white tablecloths and set with silver cutlery, even though I hadn't yet seen any other guests. Ezra had said the hotel had cost next to nothing and would be closing permanently soon anyway, that the whole thing was a joke. So I didn't understand why our room looked out on the empty parking lot and not the sea.

It was raining. The hotel's colonnade was propped up with steel bars to prevent it from collapsing. It smelt of urine and burnt Styrofoam, I think.

Along Ostende's wide beach ran a seemingly unending promenade, densely packed with multi-storied apartment buildings. In the pharmacy, I showed the prescription to the pharmacist and she explained the process for taking the anti-Malaria tablets. Then she mixed up a ointment, for the rash, she said. Perhaps she thought I was the one who was sick. I said I also needed hair oil, to signal that I was healthy. The hair oil was more expensive than Ezra's medications.

On my way back, I shielded the paper bag under my parka from the rain. I love this dark-green parka. Ezra bought it for me. The parka was from autumn 2001, as I'd discovered in the Internet Archive. With the hoodie I was wearing, I possibly looked a little military-esque; but with the right shirt, I would quickly resemble the deserter I wanted to be. I walked across the beach and searched for the blankets and hand towels we had left there. Ezra had said I should leave them there, but I didn't agree.

In moments like these, it struck me how much money he had. Ezra wasn't interested in money. Rich people don't need money. His family came from the caste of money. Inclusive of its genetic defects, careers, greed, paranoia, he had said. Ezra hated money. In that way you can only hate money when you have it and don't need any. No one knew how rich he really was, not even me. It struck me whenever he ate like an animal, in sudden attacks, when he wore threadbare suit trousers, when he used my small Vichy face cream for his whole body. Or when he said I should stop cleaning up.

"Who else will do it, Ezra?" I asked as I cleaned.

"No-one," he said.

Our room was on the third floor. I quietly opened the door, crept across the carpet and sat down on the edge of the bed. Ezra signalled with his eyes that he'd heard me. I smoothed ointment onto his cheeks and nose. I couldn't see any sign of a rash.

"It would've been better if we'd driven out into the wilderness."

He laid his hand on mine.

"I need to rest."

His fingertips were snow-white. I pulled my hand away. He scratched his forehead. He wanted me to give him socks for his hands. I showed him the anti-Malaria tablets.

"Two," he said.

It got dark early. I enjoyed spending the whole day in bed. We lay next to one another, and from time to time my eyes would fall shut, then I would immediately wrench them open again and for a few moments, as I looked at our naked body parts stored there motionless in the dark room, like frozen cod in the blue light of the display, I got the feeling that we were dead. Or no, that we didn't exist, and were merely there to have information projected upon us.

Eventually Ezra fell asleep and I got up. When I opened the curtains, it seemed as though it was getting even darker. I stretched quietly on the floor. We had planned to travel onwards to Dunkirk. That wouldn't happen now. For me, that wasn't a problem.

Later, I walked through the hotel; the rain outside was torrential. At the reception, I saw a face in the glow of a table lamp. I asked the night porter whether I could extend our stay by five nights. She thought I was Ezra, and I signed with his signature.

On the morning of the 13th of September, I found the breakfast room on my first attempt. A friendly child in an oversized uniform handed me a plastic basket with croissants, tea and honey. Ezra tried to eat. He didn't like breakfast, just like me. We're kindred spirits, but sometimes I get the feeling our souls aren't entirely in sync.

“I’m going into the city. Is that okay?”

“Check out the Atlantic Wall Museum and send me videos.”

“There’s a storm outside,” I said. “Drink a bit more, please.”

He wanted me to bring back fruit and cigarettes.

“Fruit and cigarettes? Should you be smoking?”

He gave me a questioning look, his face white from the ointment, his short hair dishevelled, his t-shirt collar frayed, like all his collars.

“That doesn’t matter.”

The rain streamed down the solar panels on the roofs of the beach huts, the sand foamed. Beneath a bench, gulls picked at a rat’s carcass, separating the sallow entrails from the edible sections.

In front of an old covered market on the harbour, oyster shells rested in wood shavings. For a moment, I thought I’d already been here. I’m always getting these *déjà-vus*. When you’re always experiencing that kind of thing, you start to believe in past lives. Ezra always said it’s because I suppress everything, that my body wants to signal to me that I had a past. I really struggle to remember things. Nothing of what’s in me from before feels genuine, or real.

At standing tables between cast-iron columns, couples were eating glistening fish soup. Beer glasses stood on a counter and wine labels swam in iced water inside stainless-steel buckets. Rain pelted down onto the corrugated iron roof. Everyone was quiet, eating; the rain was too loud for talking. I love watching people as they eat.

In a corner of the hall, a street trader crouched in front of her stand, where books and magazines were strung up, fastened with an elastic band. Some had gotten wet. There were portraits printed on the covers of the cheap little red books, Hitler in front of old-fashioned aeroplanes; emperors and kings; Robespierre with a handkerchief over his mouth; and the historically-accurate reconstruction of Julius Caesar's head.

I ate an oyster. The fisherman had a large scar on his cheek. He wasn't at all bothered that I wanted only one oyster, and was very nice. In front of a pyramid of persimmons, I drank a juice and leafed through the Caesar book. I wrote an email about my apartment, which I had given notice on for the end of September, and arranged a video call for the day of our return. I bought apples and pears, cigarettes, cheese, and a small, fancy bottle of olive oil.

Ezra was asleep when I got back. The ointment smelt a little strange, dull, though maybe it was this blue-white hotel room. I simply sat there and waited. Eventually, he woke up.

“I went to a covered market.”

“Really?”

“I ate an oyster.”

He didn't react.

“The fisherman had a scar on his cheek.”

“A scar on his cheek,” he repeated, absent-minded. He hadn't been listening to me. He added nonsensically: “A big scar?”

I always told him everything. I now realised that this was inappropriate, and apologised. I washed a pear for him in the bath, then he wanted me to wash the pear again with mineral water. I apologised, I always apologised for everything. Ezra ate a bit of the pear, then put it down. My eyes had been

burning the whole day already, and as I watched him from the edge of the bed, a tear fell on his foot. He flinched and brushed his other foot across it.

The next day, in a wing of the hotel, I photographed an empty gym with dumb bells, old cardio machines and tired-looking leather exercise balls. I rowed for an hour on a rowing machine. With every stroke, I got closer to my destination in the small, ancient animation, even though the only thing that passed was time. One minute per minute, one second per second. I couldn't properly grip afterwards; my fingers were stiff.

On the 15th of September, a butterfly-shaped rash formed on Ezra's face, just like he'd said. The display shimmered as a reflection in the ointment. His facial expression became more normal. The sleepiness disappeared and a faint expression of aliveness returned, something furtive in his eyes.

Ezra has this online persona called Deborn. He has numerous blogs, comments on everything, writes about everything. Deborn has no face. Before, his profile pictures were landscapes in Occitania, where it's been raining without pause for years now. Only after the psychiatry did he change his profile picture to Angelus Novus, a painting from 1920, half child, half ogre.

Before, Deborn had written about the Sixth Mass Extinction, the extinction of the species, about the extinction of humanity, an under-the-radar surreal story without structure, without a climax and without resolution. Later, extinction became the absolute cypher for him, the secret of all conditions. He came to the conviction that reflecting on extinction needed to become the centre of our culture. Deborn was the Extinction Angel. He had this cult-like following. Online, there were forums that tried to find out what Deborn wanted.

Ezra is amused by this. He types away into his old smart phone. When he writes, he's pierced by this strange light.

Two days passed. I walked along the beach beneath an umbrella, across the hard sand. I visited a sauna complex. An old Flemish couple were talking to one another, and I imagined their words dispersing in the steam. I no longer remember anything else that happened. I don't have any other records of these two days, no photos, no videos, no messages I sent.

Early on the morning of the 18th of September, a Wednesday, we bought tickets online for the first Ostende-Brussels express. Ezra moved a little clumsily under the hotel umbrella, but nothing in his appearance suggested that he'd been in bed for almost a week. In front of Ostende station, a woman in a light-grey coat was distributing red poppies made of plastic. Raindrops ran down the lenses of her frameless glasses. We took two poppies, but later left them on the train.

I stared across the wet meadows and fields of Flanders. I was cold, I was breathing, and I was happy. About what? I love rain, I love the green of these meadows and fields.

Shortly before our arrival at Bruxelles-Nord, there was an announcement about which counter to report to if you wanted to enter Anderlecht.

“They still seem to be fighting,” I said. Ezra nodded. A video had been smuggled out of an internment camp in Libya. There had been protests not only in Brussels, but other cities across Europe too; everywhere possible.

“They still haven’t managed it,” he said. Anderlecht had been cordoned off for days. Cars were burning, the Westland shopping centre was burning, hooded men on scooters had been scouring the European quarter for those responsible. Ezra and I watched a BBC summary.

The train slowly pulled into Brussels. I saw the church spires and the glass towers in front of the cemeteries, the city gates, the chimneys, the smoke expanding in the dark rain.

In the train, we heard the next announcement, information on Saison au Congo, a city festival to commemorate the 70th anniversary of the Congolese and African emancipation, which was due to begin at the weekend.

“Do you want to go?”

He shrugged.

“Bea asked me whether we’re going.”

“Of course we’re going,” he said, without looking up, as though he were trying to convince himself.