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Awakened

She was born in a placenta. The women had fussed around her mother's belly for two days, massaging, praying and chanting. When everything calmed down, she slipped out all by herself. It was a quarter to three. She wriggled up to her mother's breast herself and started suckling. The feeding was more painful than giving birth. The baby bit and pulled as if extracting underground milk from the swollen nipples. When she was full and clean, she cried loudest. The women came running to help again, and they took turns cuddling and rocking her. She wore out each one of them. The first came down with welts on her face, the next started to go grey, and the third developed a bunion. Her mother already had three children, but she was crazed as if this was her first. She pulled out her hair, tore at her breasts and frantically scratched her thighs.

"What did I do wrong to get you?" she leaned over the cot and screamed. She mourned for her old life until her husband grabbed her by the neck and squeezed her against the wall like a fly.

"Who did you make her with? Speak!" he glared at her with bloodshot eyes and shouted. "You know full well I never fail! My seed is good. It makes male children, not monsters. Whore breeds whore!"

He let her slide down the wall to slump like a battered bag. He spat in the cot on the way out and rushed to the first tavern to drown his disgust; he didn't return for days. To prevent their daughter from demolishing the house, they took her away to her grandmother for minding. There she learned to walk and speak. Later they brought her back.

"She'll have work to do around the house. She can wait on her brothers. Let her learn."

When she was five, her mother taught her to make bread. She taught her patiently.

"Now we'll cover the dough and let it rise."

As soon as her mother turned away to do some other chore, the girl tore off pieces of dough and made them into little figures. She lined them up in front of her, stabbed them with a fork and groaned instead of them; she chopped off one's head and made the others play with it like a ball; she tore the limbs off the disobedient, transplanted them onto the backs of others

and laughed at the company of little monsters that multiplied beneath her hands. Her mother was horrified and stared at her agape.

“I’ll throttle her! May the bread forgive me,” she hissed and lunged at the girl, but an intent gaze stopped her.

“Shh!” she put her finger to her mouth. “Can you hear? Someone’s wailing!”

Her mother listened as if spellbound, and her heart pounded in her ears. She heard crying and calling for help, widow’s weeds rustling and being drenched with tears. An open grave yawned, candles fizzled and wreaths were plaited.

“Someone’s going to die!” the girl said, and her mother was taken aback. She clouted her on the mouth, then picked up the scattered little figures and pressed them back into the dough. *It’s childish nonsense*, she tried to calm herself. *She turns everything upside down and invents things when she’s playing. We all did when we were little, and later we forgot it all.*

The next day she kneaded the bread herself. *Let her be, she’s still small. There’s time for her to learn*, she thought as she stoked the fire. She had no sooner put the bread in the oven when her husband came in and crashed onto the couch.

“My old lady’s died,” he said and covered his eyes.

When she turned seven, they reluctantly sent her to school.

“School is for shirkers. They cram kids’ heads with all sorts of stuff and turn them into sluggards!” her father grumbled.

Her mother glowered and tugged as she plaited the girl’s hair.

“Let her go then, she’s no good for anything else!” he concluded and spat in the doorway. “Why do you comb her all day? It’s not as if she’s getting married!” he yelled and brandished his fist. She raised her hands to protect her head, while the girl dashed out of the house. She ran as fast as her legs would carry her, without looking back.

She loved books at school, but she couldn’t stand other children. She kept double exercise books – one for herself, and the other with imaginary lessons and fake assignments in case someone asked if they could copy from her. Soon no one asked her for anything and they left her alone. She didn’t spend the breaks with anyone or share her snacks. The teachers didn’t dispute that she was bright, but her cleverness was uncanny and sent a chill down their spines.

“As bright as a button,” they whispered. “Even if she’s the brightest in the world, she won’t be happy!”

In fourth year, she was accused of stealing a watch. Everyone in the class stared at her when the golden-haired girl from the first row stood in front of the teacher and explained in a weepy voice:

“My blue watch. It does up like a bracelet. My uncle bought it for me in Vienna. My mum will kill me if I don’t find it! I just want it back, I won’t tell anyone! Please don’t punish anyone, just let me have back what’s mine!”

She felt all those looks – they got under her skirt and crawled over her irritated skin like ants, searching every inch of her body for the blue watch.

“She swallowed it!” they whispered, pointed at her and laughed maliciously. Without the slightest hint of anxiety, she drew in one of her double exercise books and did not take her eyes off the paper. The teacher demanded that everyone empty their bags and pockets, so all the students obediently heaped textbooks, exercise books, pencil cases and leftover sandwiches on their desks. She finished the drawing, enlivened it with some quick shading and closed the exercise book. She was content. She leaned down to put the exercise book back in her bag, but the teacher’s hand intercepted it. He tightened his grip around her wrist and the exercise book fell to his feet.

“Let me see what kind of records you’re keeping there,” he mocked and stared at the drawing. His lips trembled, his face changed colour and she felt his pulse around her wrist.

“What’s this?” he shouted and turned the drawing towards the class.

“A watch, a watch!” resounded like an echo in the classroom.

“My watch!” the golden-haired girl jumped and reached out her hand as if to tear it out of the exercise book.

The teacher rubbed his temples and hushed the class; he could have sworn he saw the hands move in the drawing. When everyone was quiet, the watch could be heard ticking, and the class broke into an uproar. The teacher dropped the exercise book as if it were cursed.

“Give back the watch!” he commanded.

“I haven’t got it. That’s just a drawing,” she said calmly. The teacher slapped her.

“Where’s the watch?” he yelled.

“I know where it is, but I’d rather not say,” she replied soberly, looking him straight in the eyes. He slapped her once more, and her lip began to bleed.

“Speak!”

She wiped the blood with her handkerchief and adjusted her plait.

“It’s on your wrist,” she said. The teacher swung his arm to strike her once more, but it remained in mid-air, as if petrified. A blue children’s watch was engraved on his skin. And with every tick the clasp sank deeper into his flesh. They could not get it off without cutting.

She attended the rest of primary school three hundred kilometres away, sent to a great-aunt who was alleged to be mother of many, although she had never given birth. Her great-aunt lived alone in a small house. She gave her a bed in the hallway, and next to the headboard was a cardboard box full of newly hatched chickens.

“Just so that you take care of them for me!” she said with satisfaction, in a tone that promised that everything in life would fall into place some day.

Her great-aunt didn’t pester her, the chickens pooped on her bed like giant double-headed birds, and she took revenge on them in her dreams: she dreamed of plucking them alive, tearing off their legs and throwing them away over the roofs, then she would paint their beaks and made them into a colourful necklace.

The new school was good. Her great-aunt didn’t stop her from doing her homework, and she taught her practical skills. She trimmed her fringe, bought her a short, chequered skirt and a white blouse.

“When you see a boy you like, do this,” she said, and pulled the fringe over her eyes. “*When it sticks in my eyes, may every cockle of his heart warm to me!* You say that three times and then puff into your bosom. Any one of them will be yours!”

She wasn’t interested in boys, so she just puffed the fringe off her forehead, but she remembered every one of her great-aunt’s words.

In biology classes, she discovered a new world under the microscope: onion skin, birch leaf, moss, chamomile petal, dragonfly’s wing, fly’s eye, moths’ antennae, the golden dust of a swallowtail, a peppercorn, saliva and a human hair. Snippets of the world contain whole worlds. She was ecstatic – she wanted to put everything onto the glass slide and then under the microscope. She felt she could spend her life doing nothing else.

She would ask her great-aunt to buy her a microscope, she thought, but first she had to explain in detail what that was so she didn’t end up with glasses on her nose. Her great-aunt bought her a desk lamp with a magnifying glass. She wasn’t thrilled, but the class where the biology teacher dissected a frog soon gave the device a purpose. A small anatomy class took place at her desk, and pride and excitement stirred in her chest. The teacher stretched out the frog and skilfully cut the skin to reveal its inner organs. The frog was alive and pulsating. The

teacher gave her metal tweezers to touch its bare femur. She would gladly have pulled it out and kept it as a souvenir. The other girls watched with concealed horror, fearing the frog could jump when touched and cling to someone's face. The frog still pulsated silently, consigning its dissected body to science in children's hands. She tapped on the frog's bone and imagined with glowing eyes: What if we squished its heart in under the microscope, immersed its lungs in water, unwound its intestines... But the class soon ended and the frog was crumpled into a plastic cup.

"Who's going to throw it in the toilet?" the teacher glanced around the class with the pulsating cup.

Everyone backed away, but her hand shot up. She gripped the cup in her hand and strode down the corridor, determined to repeat the experiment at home. She dissected frogs, lizards and small rodents under the magnifying glass. It excited her how alive they were as they died.

She reluctantly spent the holidays at home, lonely as in a foreign land. She helped her mother and was bored by the work. She scrubbed the floors, peeled potatoes, tenderised the meat, polished the plates and hung up the laundry. Her mother never stopped.

"The two of us can finish in an hour. For two pairs of hands it's nothing!" she said. When she enumerated all the tasks, she always began with *I didn't ask you*. "I didn't ask you, but would you gather up those apples? Could you sift the flour and spread out the sheet of pastry? Bake the pie? Take it to your brothers?"

She had always been alienated from her brothers. They didn't like her hanging around and were suspicious of her food. They looked askance at how round she had become, they avoided her eyes, and they didn't know what to talk about with her. The eldest collected badges. When their mother sent her to clean up after him, she took the opportunity to look at his collection. She peered at the backing they were pinned to – something like that would come in handy for her golden-winged beetles and butterflies. She would also pin locusts, especially the huge yellow ones with red legs; they just needed to be cleaned of their insides so they wouldn't rot. Once her brother caught her reading his badges with her fingers and frowned like a father in miniature.

"Hey, what are you doing?"

"Just looking."

"Only the blind look with their fingers."

Her middle brother loved hunting and was learning to stuff animals. She might have a common topic with him, but she felt he would make fun of every question she asked. The head of a dead deer protruded from the wall of his room. Its horns were slightly larger than a goat's, its eyes were like glass and its muzzle was dry and black. Sometimes the way the light fell into the room made the deer look as if it was smiling, as if triumphing after having broken through the wall. She would pat it, whisper secrets in its hairy ear, wrap her arms around its severed neck, and cool her head next to its.

The youngest brother hid books under his bed. Lots of books. If she took one to amuse herself, no one would notice. She took the thickest and marvelled at how light it was. When she opened it, she saw that the pages were cut away in the middle and that it served as a box, where her brother kept smutty pictures. Images of sprawling bodies, naked skin, spread legs, protruding buttocks and huge teeth around a purple nipple. She shuddered as she looked at them, but at the same time something made her browse further and devour all those bodies with her eyes. She put the book back in its place and borrowed it occasionally... until her youngest brother told her out of the blue:

“Go home! Why did you come here? You just stir things up!”

She returned to her great-aunt's in the autumn and never went home again. In the final year of primary school, in biology, she already knew the whole year's material and excelled. Her knowledge of bones and muscles, the network of blood vessels, neural maps and lymph nodes – how everything that pulsates beneath the skin fitted together – was awe-inspiring.

“It would be a shame not to enrol in the lyceum,” the teacher told her. “Such talent shouldn't be wasted!”

The girl levitated on the way back from school, the ground beneath her feet was fluffy and everything seemed to fall apart like a dandelion head. She couldn't wait to ask her great-aunt what a lyceum was. Her great-aunt was less than enthusiastic.

“It's that building near the market. I've heard they torture children there.”

She would gladly agree to be tortured just so as not to be sent home.

“It's best you learn a trade,” her great-aunt tried to persuade her. “Here, I'll teach you to sew. My eyes aren't what they used to be, but I still know the basics. Whoever's measurements you take is a bird in your hand. Even if you take in his suit here and let it out there, he will be indebted to you forever. What more do you need for a good life? I'll teach you everything!”

She looked at her great-aunt as if she would cry at any moment. If she was forced to sew, she would swallow all the buttons and stab herself all over with poisoned needles; she would fall asleep out of spite and only wake up when she was sure everyone she knew was dead.

“Alright, but what good will the lyceum be?”

“I’ll have biology three times a week. And four years to think.”

Her great-aunt grumbled. She was suspicious of going down that path, and she didn’t know anyone who was happy in science, let alone education. They were in that melee all their life – when would they do some living?

But in the end she gave in, “Have it your way.”

She felt she was meeting likeminded people at the lyceum, but she soon realised she was wrong. Her name disturbed the famous and respectable surnames in the roll book, and she was proud of it from the first day until the last. She despised the boys with guitars instead of backbones and as shabby as year-one pupils’ music notebooks – she called them invertebrates who stole others’ chords. She rolled her eyes when the girls talked about make-up and waterproof eyelashes, or about needing to abstain from chocolate if you wanted your face to be as smooth as paper. She was sick of couples groping around in corners, scratching initials in hearts and cracking their knuckles in class as if it was longer than a Siberian winter. The ugly, dowdy, spotty and maladjusted girls wanted her to tribe up with them, but that offended her. She preferred not to have anyone. She didn’t go to birthday parties, didn’t go out on Friday nights, and boycotted organised skiving and excursions where sex games alternated with visits to monasteries. None of that bothered her as much as the fact that biology was not what it used to be. If a horned cow and a hornless bull cross, what is the probability of the calf having horns? She wasn’t interested in the slightest. By the end of school, her thirst for discovery had been quenched.

In Physical Education, she didn’t sweat from the running and stretching, but from uneasiness. The teacher had a malevolent look. He ordered them around with a whistle between his teeth, and she felt like a circus poodle. He lined up the girls and stared at their chests, judging whether they were lush, white and firm enough. Something in his eye reminded her of her angry father, her suspicious brothers and the unfair teacher. Everything she had tried to avoid converged in that man. Long after the class had ended she could still feel his eyes on her skin, so she rubbed herself with a rough towel, scouring her skin until it was red. She would flay

herself just to get him off. In a gymnastics class, he held his arm around her waist for too long as he was positioning her on the beam.

“You would’ve fallen if I’d let go!” he shouted, making fun of how clumsy and unstable she was. “Keep your balance!” He straightened her back and slipped his fingers under the clasp of her bra. Her face flushed like the sound of a whistle.

She came to the next PE class without her sports gear and asked to be excused.

“Why would I excuse you?” the teacher taunted.

“My period.”

“Louder, I can’t hear you.”

“I’ve got my period,” she repeated. The teacher flipped through his notebook, found her name, and pressed it with his index finger as if crushing a stray insect.

“Do you have it twice a month? You know I have a right to check? After class, in my office. Or it’s into the gym now!”

She didn’t move from the bench.

“Good,” he said, circled her name in red and blew his whistle.

She ran back to her great-aunt’s as if a pack of devils were at her heels. She sat in the shower and let the water wash away everything, and the shame, and the blood inside. She heard her great-aunt dozing in the armchair, went up to her, crouched down, hugged her knees and spread her wet hair over her lap.

“Teach me to sew.”

“Really?” her great-aunt started and absently caressed the girl’s face. “You’re back early. Dry your hair or you’ll catch a cold.”

“I will. And then will you teach me?”

“Uh-huh. What shall it be?”

“A dress for the school formal.”

“We’ll have lunch first. When we’re hungry we’re nervous, and the needle doesn’t obey nervous fingers.”

Her great-aunt climbed up on a chair, opened the closet, took out a roll of turquoise silk and stroked it like a sleeping child.

“I knew this day would come,” she chirruped.

She taught the girl after lunch. She marked the fabric with chalk, cut the pieces and pinned them together, wound the bobbin and threaded the sewing machine, which purred

away like a contented cat. The girl gathered up the snippets and made them into a stuffed doll. Her great-aunt laughed.

“What’s that for? You’re too big to play babies!”

“For practice.”

The doll was male, had a slit for a mouth, a whistle in it, and pointed buttons for eyes. *If the fringe sticks in, needles will stick in even better*, she thought and pierced the doll’s groin. As the needle stabbed the doll, she watched with her third eye. She saw spat-out balls of hair in the gym, the floor stained with urine, a crushed whistle and two wrenched-out teeth. She saw him toothless and bald, wetting his own bed, yet grateful to God he wasn’t pissing blood. She saw a celebration where no one asked why he was not there.

Satisfied with what she saw, she buried the doll. Then she slipped her fingers in between her legs and marked her forehead with a red dot. She was awakened.

Translated by Will Firth