

# The Sacrifice

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There is a train in slow motion pulling up behind you. Its presence casts a shadow over your left shoulder; you know it's there because you have been waiting for it. This locomotive has silently crossed between Afghanistan and Leningrad in a single night and will go on through Cologne, Yugoslavia, Andalusia, and onto North America, wind permitting. In the very back car, which seems to be made of nothing but glass, sit a man and a woman. They are sitting upright, but not stiffly. Their child sits several rows behind them, singing to herself, looking out the windows, smiling. The woman is pretty. She's olive skinned with black hair and intelligent eyes. The man is handsome in a more jagged way. He is darker skinned, with angular features and warm brown eyes. They are both dressed in simple clothes. The child closely resembles him, with her dark shiny hair pulled back. She sits alone telling herself cheerful stories while the train rattles on and on.

## wind permitting

During this night you will travel across voluminous fields of yellow and green. Oceans of swaying wheat and other grains surround you for miles. As if on a smaller-than-life map the train will fly across the continents in seconds. You are sitting on the glass car watching this little family of three. They look beautiful to you, jostling back and forth. You see them as happy, fulfilling some kind of important task of which they are only slightly aware. Even if they suffer, are bored, have hurt each other terribly, you want them to be there—symbolic, like a flag, waving back and forth as the train rattles onward through the night.

Shots of color dot the landscape and suddenly you say to yourself, *I'm in Vladivostock, on the edge of the Sea of Japan*. Then all goes dark, you are in an underwater tunnel—your own image reflected in the glass.

## **wheat**

The man is giving a political lecture to his wife and daughter, describing each territory crossed:

*Here is where the leaders crossed the river while the rebels were waiting for their orders. The guerrillas trained and gathered their strength in the surrounding hills... Now, right out there in the valley you can see the exact location of the peasant's rebellion—they burnt all their crops in a protest which touched off a mass rebellion. Of course it sounds strange, but they burnt their own fields. Crops they had planted and tended lovingly throughout the season... Why? Because their landlords were taking all the harvests for themselves. They needed to do this.*

The train continues to descend and ascend across plains and hills. The man's monologue continues uninterrupted.

*Look. If you look to the far off left you will see the exact site of their leader's famed capture. He was tortured for thirty seven days in enemy hands, but ended up escaping then walking hundreds of miles...*

*Now we are passing over Kharlakov, for three years they succeeded in setting up a coalition government which reflected the population's agrarian interests...It was short-lived experiment but, optimistically...*

## **frederic**

As the woman listens to her husband, her dark side shifts in front of her, behind her eyes, like a film flickering with static. She remembers, in flashes, the times she would leave the child sleeping and meet her lover at the bottom of a grassy hill behind the village. Under twin willows the two would roll around wildly together; and without removing their clothes they would join beneath her skirt. And she'd cry out like a wounded animal and then cry all over him. Tears would flow on his chest hairs, his stomach, and groin. Then she would return home and write letters to her husband knowing he'd never get them because she'd never send them. And the reason she never sent them is that his location was unknown. The emotions she wrote would get caught in this vicious web. The only way to release them was to go meet that other man again and again.

## **from field aflame**

*Dear K, I think it is the law that has made me what I am, not chaos. The law shapes me, even as I transgress it. For crossing its invisible parameters leaves terrible scars. When I break the law, I can feel it breaking inside me, leaving little pieces getting caught in my flesh and memory—I know they will come back to haunt me. I am made by the very boundaries I cross, and then I hate what I have become.*

*If you were here, you would be the law. But you are not, so you are the absent law, which is even stronger, like god. The strange part is that I don't feel like a sinner or a fallen woman. Because I know all laws have a hidden evil face, cold and unknowing. You may not want to forgive me, but you'll be forced to in time. And when you do perhaps I'll find it in me to do the same for you.*

## **absence**

A father, a mother, and their small child are all sitting together in one row on the left side of the train. They are the only passengers in this old fashioned car. Now you are watching them from a point somewhere outside the train. The sky is colored greenish-gray and tiny raindrops spackle the windows. Even through the droplets of water you can see them quite clearly; but you can't hear the words they are saying. The child sits happily between the two adults. She may be five or six years old. She looks up often to her father, who is sitting on the aisle, then to her mother who occupies the window seat. Sometimes the little girl laughs at something the man has said. He seems eager to both please her and instruct her at the same time. Every few minutes the man leans across both of them to point out the window, and all three of them look at whatever he shows them. But sometimes the man points out the window and only the child looks.

## **on the eve**

*Please don't leave. What are you doing to us?* These are her own words, which the woman hears as she travels this night voyage. Her past breaks in—and she sees the grim images and hears the sounds that go with them: *Why should you go? I know we're suffering, we will always be suffering. If you get killed—will that help anything?* She pleads with him then suddenly turns her back to look out the window of their little two room house. The winter sky is a dull hue of charcoal and ash. She picks up her favorite ceramic bowl from the windowsill. It is a beautiful shade of cobalt blue with a delicate pattern of flowers which she traces with her fingers.

Behind her, she hears him saying: *Everyone has stood up and agreed, and you want me to stay behind? You can move back to town with your mother while I'm gone. You'll be comfortable there. She'll help you when the baby comes.* The woman turns and hurls the

bowl across the room. It breaks and she cries out: *Don't talk to me about comfort. If you had any love left in you you'd know how ridiculous you sound.*

## **wheat**

Something about trains, the way they seem to traverse the limits of time—the space of one hundred years or more is crossed when you watch from a window, the countryside passing before your eyes. The collage of scenes when misted over, brings the same melancholy as an actual memory. A swollen tumor of pain rises up through the throat to the edges of your eyes as you watch the dense layers of mist rise from a field which you seem to pass endlessly. The continuous rocking motion and the clacking on the tracks reminds you

of the inevitability of living out the history that has been handed down to you, the legacy of ancestors—the ones you have known, the ones you never knew. Of the inevitable arrival of children when a man and a woman meet night after night over time. How the waters of the man and the woman join to create a third, expanding. There is the movement of the child inside—an invisible dove—then one day the birthing of a tiny dark-haired girl...

Now this child sits in the train in a seat by herself, creating tales with the playful exaggeration and cheerful heart that only children can muster. Meanwhile the two adults sit in relative silence, heads back, moving in rhythm with the onward thrust of the train, going quietly wherever it is taking them.

## **on the eve of his departure**

In her memory she sees herself weeping among the shards of bowl scattered on the wooden floor. The snow which had been powdering their doorstep was now raging against the windows of their tumble down house. The little wood stove burnt in the corner, hardly a match for the storm. Her husband was standing in the dim light of the kitchen looking down on her body. *Anna*, he said then paused. *Anna, get up. Come here.* Regardless of whatever she said or did, he would not alter his plans. To him it wasn't a choice, but a duty, and all of her protestations made little sense to him. While she lay weeping on the floor he sat down at the table and began to explain, *We are about to join forces with all of the other villages, and we still have a lot of training... If we manage to do this we will all be better off. Don't you see?* He paused for a moment then continued, *Solidarity means we all fight together—I promise to send word soon.* He stood up slowly. *I'll need my rest. I'm going to bed, if you want to come.* She stayed lying there on the floor with her eyes closed.

When she finally rose up and walked into the bedroom that night, she hoped he would already be sleeping. Although he'd be gone in the morning, perhaps forever, she didn't

want to have to say yes or no to him about whether or not they would share a few last moments of love. She knew that her intimacy with him would be a way of saying, *Go in peace*. It would be a surrender, a gift she didn't want to give. Everything inside her—blood, joints, stomach, and groin told her that that the two of them were sworn as one forever. She felt as though half of her own body was being ripped away.

Slowly entering the room, she stopped by the head of their bed. He was not sleeping, but lying awake on his back, waiting.

### **from the land you left**

*Dear K, I am writing to tell you that sometimes oppression's source is simple distance. You who know so much about oppression, do you know I am suffering an endless hunger for something beautiful? Every day is worthless. You have been gone so long, even your smell, and the memory of your smell, has left our home. Winter has almost run its course. The little plum tree is thawing by the window, but I have nothing to say. Our child inside me was an orphan at the very moment of conception. Any day now the baby will be born, but I no longer believe in birth and re-birth.*

*You were the first to betray me, not with another woman, but by cutting me out of your life. When you were here you'd sit in the back room for hours with the men, discussing, planning. You've always been a stranger. Your affection has been condescending, given or withheld at your own discretion. And the terrible part is that I love you with a passion you don't deserve. You, of course, **are** a believer—a rational believer in all causes except your own.*

### **on the eve**

By the light of a single candle the woman looks upon her husband's face. His dark complexion, warm eyes. She knows in an instant why this cut her so deeply. She loves him as much as the first time she had laid eyes on him when she was a young woman. She studies his face in one glance and almost enters the long corridor of his eyes. But briskly she turns and moves to the other side of the room and begins to undress.

He watches her removing her clothes. He follows her movements as she places her double-layered skirt on the chair, as she takes off her slip and undergarments.

She is then completely naked, standing on her side of the bed. *Look at you*, he breaks the silence. The room is freezing cold—she quickly re-dresses into some woolen leggings and a nightshirt and darts under the white crochet covers which had been part of her trousseau. He continues speaking in a whisper: *Come here. Come lie next to me.*

She responds slowly from her side of the bed. *No*. She is not in the habit of saying no to him, so is difficult, even strenuous. But she continues, *I've already decided, so please don't even ask me*.

*I'm leaving*, he whispers gently. Then he leans over and blows the candle out.

### **crossing over**

The black iron locomotive crosses over a river, a blue flash, quick as a dream— then briskly enters a tunnel and all goes silent. Suddenly the train emerges into an expansive green valley. The rattle and clack of the tracks is gone; the child falls asleep on her mother's lap. In the lull of this moment you can hear the woman speaking aloud, either to the man or to herself:

*My soul had always been, to me, an actual thing, a thing of beauty. Whenever it rained, gushes of sadness rivered through me on their way toward the ocean. My soul remained and took the shape of whatever was needed. One day it was a vase for water. The next day, a tree with wind in it. On another day the shape of a song—a lullaby. Or the shape of seven pieces of fruit in a small basket. I never had a need to name it, for there it was in me, and I owned it. But now over time, the soul has dwindled and I can't say that it takes any shape at all, except for the shape of longing...*

The woman pauses, still looking out at the shadows in the valley.

*Did you say something?* the man asks his wife.

### **on the eve of his departure**

A man and a woman are facing each other in the dark. There is a terrible anguish between them, an essential misunderstanding which can't be bridged by words, deeds, or even an act of love. *Please....go to sleep*, she says to him.

*I need to have you one last time*, he says as if his body is on fire. He feels she's depriving him of something that's his right, her love. She says to him: *You know I love you, but go to sleep and you can dream of the rest*.

*No*, he responds, *you are the dreamer, remember? I'm the one who believes in action*.

*You have always acted alone. You may as well continue to do so*, she says bitterly then turns her back to him and feigns sleep.

## **fruitless**

*Did you say something? The man in the train repeats himself sharply. She turns her head from the window and gives him a long hard look. I was just thinking out loud. I was thinking that change doesn't suit me. I can't forget about the bad old days.*

*You torture yourself, he says with a smile. You are a weak person who wants to be strong. You place more weight in illusions than in substance.*

*So there is no place for memory? Tears? Understanding all these things?*

*Not if these are the things which will come back and destroy you! He looks at his wife accusingly and continues: Look where your emotions led you while I was gone. Yes, you were lonely, but instead of finding friendship with the other women you chose to find a lover...Never mind about me, but look at our daughter. It seems you were willing to forget all about her.*

## **frederic**

*The past—a revolting dance of gray clouds lit by an awkward sun—recedes as if having said the wrong words. There's a thin film left behind from yesterday's compromise with the world of men. Vile life surrounds and brings us down. Once there was the ache of organs. It was overriding; Dipping into tills without tilling, fulfilling one version of hunger. We met beneath heavy skies, the betrayal was always mine. You slid beneath my body and touched me with your deepest scorn. In the end you left with the wish to be remembered as a harm to me forever.*

## **on the eve**

As the woman lay in her wedding bed in the dark, she listened to the heavy sighs of her husband behind her. Even in his wordlessness she felt his disappointment bearing down on her. Trapped in a complicated vise, she knew, despite her anger and fear, that there was always the possibility that she was wrong. He was lying on his side, agitated, not at all resigned to sleep. Both of them knew that sooner or later one of them would have to speak. But it would need to be the right word. And so they waited for many minutes in the dark, listening to the storm outside rattling their fragile walls. Finally, it was he that broke the silence; his voice gently made its way to her,

*Anna?*

The sound of her own name from his lips was soft and tender. It was not simply a word. It was her name, and on his lips alone, the name was *I know you*. The echoes of his voice flowed through her, bringing a torment of warmth, which arrived at the back of her eyes in the form of tears.

*Anna*, he said again. *What do you want?*

### **fruitless hours**

With the steady sound of the train in the background, the woman speaks with her head leaning back and her eyes closed tightly. *I'm so exhausted from this the perpetual argument. You were the one who left us to go join a movement which, so far, hasn't changed much. I raised April, so I ask you not to bring her into this.*

The man runs his fingers through the sleeping child's hair. *Yes! You raised her during the day. But what were you doing at night? Nursing your infidelity right into her!*

*You know perfectly well who loved who, the woman responds, I loved you in ways that you'll never understand. I know my mistakes, I'm haunted by them, although the truth is, I shouldn't be. But you'll never admit to your mistakes, because they are invisible to you and the rest of the world. Ever since you came back, I have been trying to put all the pieces together.*

*Your problem, Anna, is that you still haven't begun to understand that this whole human struggle...*

*Human struggle? I am struggling. Aren't I human?*

*If you'd let me finish I'd tell you. Yes, you're human.*

*Thank you....*

*But if you'd let me finish what I was saying. That the human struggle depends on someone risking their life for change. What have you ever sacrificed?*

### **on the eve**

*It's you, Karl. She responds in the darkness of their room, It's you who will decide. It's you, in the end who will get what he wants. The woman turns around and faces him and whispers, So why do you call my name?*

He moves toward her, almost lunging, and wraps his arms around her, burying his face in her loose black hair. She allows him to hold her, but remains frozen, motionless. *Because*

*I love your name. Your name is the most precious word I know. He puts his lips against her cheek.*

As he caresses her back with his raspy, work-worn hands, the muscles of his stomach and lower body press against her. His lips are close to her and she inhales the smell of his sweet breath; and a thousand memories of midnight, sex, and forgiveness flood through her. And in this instant she becomes aware of the truth. That he is free to leave and that he will leave to fight for what he believes. *I must endure*, she thinks, *I must live this moment of departure.*

Snow taps against the windows behind her as she moves her face toward him. She places her lips on his, softly, barely parted, but makes no bodily motion. Nor does he. They lay together—motionless—with mouths lightly touching, listening to the snow and gusts of wind. As the world collapses inward and she tastes the scent of her lover's breath, her salty tears begin to drop onto the pillow, one by one.

*I'm giving you up*, she whispers, *No one knows how good you are.*

*I'll be back soon*, he murmurs. Her tears dampen the crevices of his neck as he lifts her nightgown and strokes her rounded belly. *This little one will be born in spring. That's a good sign. It's a sign that everything will be fine.*

### **the silence of children's dreams**

There's a train flying across continents this evening, and on it a small girl is sleeping. She has always been a happy child. Her first two years were spent in the calm shade of her mother's persistent labor. Now she is dreaming again of those years.

She sees herself in a deep forest overgrown with ivy and blackberry vines. A little girl and her mother are walking through dense woods. They have left a confusion of angry rioting people behind them. The child stops often to pick the ripened berries, squealing, *Look! Mama, there's a big one! Can you get it for me?* Meanwhile the mother keeps urging her onward, *Come along. Come along.* It begins to grow dark and they are still trudging alone amongst the trees. And the girl asks her mother:

*Why am I walking here in this forest with you, Mama? It's getting so late. I'm tired.*

*We are looking for the house which will be our home*, the mother answers.

*How will we know it?*

*We will know it because it is so peaceful. It stands alone in a grassy meadow. It looks almost like a barn. When you open the double doors, you will see a vast open space with no furniture, just rugs covering the expansive floor. It is very sunny and light. In the corner there is an old wooden desk. It is the only furniture in the whole house.*

*But Mama? Where will we sit?*

*We'll sit on the floor.*

*And where will we eat?*

*We shall eat in the artichoke grove.*

*And what is the desk for, Mama?*

*It's for writing letters to the people we love.*

*And who will you write to first?*

### **from this field aflame**

*I watched you walk away. I wasn't even awake enough to say "how typical." You were gone so long and I toiled alone. If you could have seen those first two years with the baby! She was a miracle, and she looked just like you. And every time I looked at her I prayed that I would see you alive again. It was terrible and cruel. I worked from sun up to sundown every day. Every day exhausted. There's a whole world that I created in those years. I only wish you could have entered it.*

*One evening I saw you coming with your torches at dusk. There was no warning. I saw you send the frightened mare back to the village. Smoke was filling the air— it was even darker than night. You were walking with the others down the road, torching everything that stood in your way. Nothing was spared. Heat was scorching us even well inside our doorjamb— we women crouching with our children and babies as ashes came floating in and onto the wooden floors. Some of the women were crying, others were screaming for joy, hoping that this was the moment of liberation. Many neighbors were running around with red flags, waving them wildly, dancing and shrieking with delight!*

*It was in this instant, in the face of all those flames, that I became conscious of what a fighter I had become! The fields were burning up along with every storehouse of grain, and I just felt a powerful surge of joy running through me. Up to that point I had faced so much trouble— and in a flash I realized it. My God, I just stood there and watched it all burn, and my anger with it.*

*I was the one who for two years tilled the fields. I planted the seeds, helped them grow, toiled for weeks of harvest...But you came in an hour and burnt it all to the ground. And I didn't care. Suddenly it just dawned on me that none of it had been mine...that I had been just a slave to survival. And I stood and watched it all burn. I wasn't thinking about our hunger or our work or our desperation. I realized that a new life was about to begin and that I would be at the center of it. In that moment I would have rather died of starvation than compromise ever again with anyone or anything. I ran inside and held on to our daughter who was still a baby. I held her and told her: It's my turn to fight for you.*

*Soon you walked up to me through the smoke. You were smiling and reached out your arms to me. And I looked at you, and you were as beautiful as ever. I knew then that despite everything, I still loved you, and that the real struggle was about to begin. The rebuilding.*

## **wheat**

*What have you ever sacrificed?* The man's question hangs in the air. She leaves it there, unanswered, letting it echo throughout the car. She is simply too tired to go on speaking. The man hears his own question again and again, *What have you ever sacrificed?* It sounds ridiculously loud in his ears. He looks in her direction, pursing his lips in a twisted half-humorous grimace and says, *I take it back, Anna. It was a stupid question.* She lets out a long, deep sigh and turns to look out the window without saying a word.

In a minute he draws up next to her and looks with her out the window. Together they quietly watch the century go by. A century of wheat. A century of scarved women gathering bundles until dusk. A century of dusty trains bringing grain to starving men at the front; bringing grain to beleaguered cities under siege: Leningrad, Kiev, Minsk. A century of tanks rolling through these same fields, remorseless. As the man and the woman watch, they are aware that they too are a part of the landscape. There is no distance between themselves and the world. The sun dips lower to the horizon and sends a glow over the land. And progressively as the reddish light fills the space of the glass car, there rises between the man and the woman a feeling of ease and peace, a warm sensation of calm.

## **in the silence of dreams**

The train remains empty but for you and three passengers. You watch the family as if they were the essence of all dilemmas and sorrows, both the problem and the solution at the same time. And somehow, even in their smallness, they exude an elusive power and strength. Now the child rests in her mother's lap, now the parents talk, now they fight bitterly, now sleep washes over them as a tide. In the silence of dreams, they lean on each other and nothing will break this bond.

There is a mist forming on the fields in the distance; trees are dripping with dew. The noise of the train clacking on the tracks is becoming louder and louder. The sound has become an overwhelming din. Suddenly the train lets out a loud whistle which pierces the night air, then fades. It pierces again, then fades. Three times you hear the cry of the shriek of steam being forced through the train's forward whistle. You look out across the orchards, fields, and pastures spreading out on all sides, and the tiny shacks that are visible only as shadows in the dark and you wonder, *Whose land is this we are crossing in the dead of night? Whose land is this we cross?*

