

Closed doors

The doors are closed. The train rattles through the city from the center towards the suburbs. A man looks at me and I notice it. That's how it started, the beginning of my husband's end. What if I hadn't noticed the man looking at me? But I did. I can't change the past, can I?

I try to focus on my shoes instead. I stare for seconds that feel like minutes. Why did I choose the uncomfortable stilettos today? It *was* just a usual workday at the office. Every pair of sneakers would have done the job. I remember wanting to look pretty, but I don't remember why. When I can't stare at my shoes anymore, I look up and... he doesn't look at me. The lump in my throat loosens. I exhale and lean back in my seat. My eyes haven't fully closed when his head turns around. His green eyes meet mine.

His eyes were a darkish brown. Most of the time, I couldn't even separate the iris from the pupil. But when he roughly grabbed my arm and pulled me closer, I saw the difference. And I saw myself, reflected in his eyes. At this moment I didn't know that the reflection I saw - a young, smart, maybe pretty, adroit person - had no similarities with the woman he was seeing. "Stop talking and come here!" He said. His voice was dark and hoarse. I felt my pulse fastening until the beat was present all over my body, in my chest, my lips, even my fingertips. I wish it wasn't true, but at that moment I felt happy.

I close my eyes and count to three. When I open them, the man is gone. The tenseness in my body vanishes again. After a few glimpses around the compartment, I lean back into my seat. What is wrong with me today? I hadn't felt this wary for months. The sound of the brakes pulls me back to reality and I realize I'd missed a few stops. The next one would be mine and I make my way to the doors.

It is rush hour and everybody is leaving downtown. I live in a quiet district but still close to the city center. The train is still filled with people living further outside in the suburbs. A few people in suits and skirts gather around the doors so that I can't find a free handrail to hold myself onto. And then there are the shoes. Again I condemn myself for wearing them. What else could happen with these shoes and nowhere to hold onto? In the last bend, I lose my balance.

"I got you," someone says.

"I got you," he said. I put my left foot back onto the ladder rung and restored my balance. I looked down the ladder. My eyes assured me what my body already knew: His hands were holding me steady. I truly smiled and thanked him. After I had hung the last picture onto the wall, I climbed down and turned around just to find myself captured between

the ladder and his body. With a predatory gaze, he said, “Caught you!” For a moment a queasy feeling filled my stomach. Did my instincts try to warn me? If they did so, I have ignored it. I pushed the feeling away and tried to do the same with his body. With a smile on my lips, I said, “Come on! We have so much to do and we’re moving in next week already!” When he didn’t listen to me, I wriggled out of the trap and escaped into the freshly painted kitchen.

I feel a hand enclosing my upper arm and holding me steady. When I turn around, I stop breathing. “Are you alright?” He asks looking down at me. I stare into the green eyes. I can’t move and a million dark pictures of shards, pain, and ice-cold water appear in front of my inner eyes. The sound of the opening doors awakens my paralyzed body and I squeeze myself quickly through the crowd into the open air. Someone is shouting “wait”, but I tell myself that it isn’t meant for me. Instead, I rush towards the stairs leading down from the platform. *Rushing* is probably an exaggeration. I can’t even take a step without carefully trying not to slip my heels into the small gaps of the metal lattice. I promise myself to never wear these shoes again.

At the foot of the stairs, I turned around. Why didn’t I just walk on? He was standing in our apartment door with his brown eyes glooming down on me and his hands clenched to fists. Between us were fourteen stair steps and the memory of a naked woman in our bed. Not me though. “Where are you going, Mary?” he said. It wasn’t a question. It was a warning. I tried to talk with a steady voice, but the tears forming in my eyes and the lump in my throat didn’t help with that. “I need some fresh air,” I stuttered. He walked down a few steps toward me. “No, you don’t. Come back inside,” he commanded. I watched the muscles in his arms hardening and his fingers almost crushing the banisters. That moment my power for resistance was scared away and the suitcase in my hand felt awfully heavy. He slowly repeated with a dark, rough voice, “Come back inside.”

“Wait,” he keeps shouting from the top of the stairs. A woman walking down next to me tries to get my attention. “Miss, I think he is talking to you.” I show her my professional smile “Oh! No, I don’t think so.” I turn away at the foot of the stairs and walk quickly along the road. It feels good to be in a familiar neighborhood. I moved here a few months ago after a friend had gotten me a secretary job at a law firm. I had two choices: Living with her in an overcrowded apartment building downtown or moving into this district which is famous for happy families and friendly pensioners and the lowest crime rate in the city. No rapes, no murders, no domestic violence. People care about keeping their dogs on a leash, about tipping the newspaper boy, and picking up litter.

With a snap of his fingers, he flicked the cigarette over the edge of the balcony. I stared at the empty ashtray on the table next to him. He grumbled, “Your bad mood is pulling me down. Just show me a smile once in a while.” I showed him a professional smile and asked why he wanted me to come out onto the balcony. “This man, Mat or Max...” I told him it was Mike. He shrugged and continued, “I don’t want you to work with him anymore. He is not a good guy.” I needed a second to process what he’d just said. “Not a *good* guy?” I asked while secretly wondering what a good guy would be. He lit another cigarette. “He knows that you are my wife and he is still making a move on you.” Mike didn’t make *a move on me*, but I couldn’t tell my husband the truth: Mike was a divorce lawyer.

I see the sign on their door for the first time. Red and white letters scream into my face *for sale*. For a moment I hesitate. When nobody is around, I walk up the few steps to the entrance door and lean over the banisters to gaze through the window. The house is empty. No furniture, no family, no life. “Can I help you?” I jerk back and turn around. An elderly woman is standing on top of the stairs next door. “I am so sorry,” I say and continue, “It’s just... I live around the corner and Mr. and Mrs. Williams seemed to be really happy living here.” The woman looks at me with pity. “You haven’t heard?” She asks and continues, “*Everybody* thought they were happy. I suppose she *was*. And then, a couple of weeks ago, I and some other neighbors heard the gunshot.” She shakes her head in disbelief. “He’s locked away now and her kids were sent to some distinct relatives abroad.” She looks up and down the three-story terrace house. Finally, she mumbles lost in thought, “You never know what’s going on behind closed doors.”

I held the papers in my shaking hands. I needed to put them down onto the table to carefully read every sentence. But just one word screamed at me: *Divorce*. I couldn’t really get my feelings in line. Was I supposed to be happy, relieved, or sad? The word did awaken something inside me, something that was too deeply buried in my inner hidden world so that I couldn’t find it anymore. I had many feelings locked up down there, but my self-determination had joined them, I had finally lost the strength to release them on my own. Mike had tried to help, but all he could do is bring over a pile of divorce papers. I had hoped these papers would restore my strengths, but they just came with more trouble.

“What is he doing here?” His voice was ice-cold. He stood in the apartment door staring at the scene in front of him. His wife sitting on the couch with the man he had forbidden her to see. While the rage-filled every part of his body, I used the opportunity and shoved the papers between the pages of my cooking magazines. That day ended with a couple of broken ribs, a shattered cheekbone, the neighbors’ call for an ambulance, and a police report against

my husband that he would never forgive me for. I was forbidden to visit Mike at the hospital and never saw him again.

At night I lie in my little top floor apartment thinking about Mr. and Mrs. Williams. I remember Mrs. William smiling through the closed kitchen window every time I passed their house after work. Sometimes she had waved at me with her fingers drenched in dishwashing detergent. The yellow of her cooking apron would always be spotted with tomato sauce or baby food. Mr. Williams would normally sit in his office. I could see him through the window on the other side of the closed entrance door. He wouldn't look outside. He would stare at the computer screen and talk to someone on the phone, probably his clients. Suddenly I wonder about the gun. Was it right there, next to him or in the top drawer of his office desk? What if she had found it early enough? What if she had known what he was planning to do to her? Or did she know? Did she, behind the smile of a happy housewife, hide her fear?

Then I hear the shot. My whole body awakens and I stare with wide-opened eyes into the darkness of my bedroom. I hear the sound echoing in my memory, knowing that I had just imagined it. Instinctively my hand rises to my left collar bone. My fingers slide over the small bump of a scar that would never vanish from my body or my memory. Remembering the sharp piece of a broken wine glass, I pull back my hand as if the glass was still in there cutting through my skin.

I find myself on the train again. Today I don't look around as usual. I stare at my sneakers hardly being able to keep my eyes open. I couldn't sleep much last night with my thoughts circling around Mrs. Williams' smile and the big closed entrance door. And then an unfamiliar thought crosses my mind: Have I been too obsessed with my own past so I couldn't see the present of others anymore? Am I not the only person who can understand them? Then I tell myself that I'm too broken to help others. I couldn't even help myself.

"Excuse me?" A male voice says. I know the voice. Not too long ago, exactly twenty-four hours, it had spoken to me right on this train. I raise my head and stare into green eyes. "Yesterday I..." he continues, but I jump to my feet and already push myself through the crowd when I say, "Leave me alone." Other people must have heard me and place themselves between me and the stranger. "You've heard the woman. Leave her alone," someone said. I take the opportunity and jump through the open doors onto the platform. The fresh air releases the lump in my throat. I feel my pulse slowing down and watch the train passing by. For a moment a tiny wave of success drowns my worries, but then I see him again.

He must have left the train through another door. We are still close to the city center but at a place usually, nobody would want to leave the train. But I did and he did. "Please,

don't..." he begins, but again he can't finish the sentence. Today I am wearing sneakers and my only choice is to escape. I start my escape journey, but this time he doesn't wait on top of the stairs. He follows me. I run through the dark, smelly alleys. The gloomy shadows of the huge decrepit buildings lurk over me. I pass broken windows and rotten, kicked-in doors. This is the graveyard of happiness where things do not happen behind closed doors but right in the middle of the street - and still stay unseen. I run for minutes that feel like hours until I turn left for the last time. Walls. Walls to the left, to the right and straight ahead. No windows, no doors. In other words: I find myself in a dead-end. It was too late to turn around, because there, in the middle of my way out, a man is standing like a padlock to my cage.

I found him sitting on the living room couch and he was crying. The balcony door stood wide open and fresh air was filling the room. For a second I hesitated. His whole body portrayed weakness and maybe shame. My hand carefully touched his shoulder. It was the first touch I had willingly given him in months. Something inside me warmed up and for a moment I felt affection. I remembered moments of fun, laughter, and even passion - something I had lost on the endless path he had pushed us onto. "I am sorry," he whispered and looked at me with his brown eyes. The words hit me right into the stomach. I hadn't known how much I wanted to hear them. My gaze shifted to the cooking magazine on the shelf under the couch table and a feeling of shame came over me, shame for having ever wanted to divorce my husband. "Can you forgive me?" He asked without looking at me. Could I forgive him for betraying me, for verbally abusing me, for taking my freedom, for trying to *own* me like a possession? I had to. Who would I be without him? "Always", I said.

He smiled at me and I returned the gesture. "What if I open up a bottle of wine and cook something for us?" I asked carefully and he agreed. I went into the kitchen, opened a bottle, and poured two glasses of red wine. Then I saw our photo on the fridge. We looked happy standing in front of the tree under which he'd proposed to me. I was smiling, not professionally but authentically. I picked up the photo from the fridge and looked at the light-hearted, free-spirited woman on the left. I put down my hand onto the photo until the man on the right side was fully covered. The woman I saw in the picture could stand alone, was independent, and didn't *need* anybody. What has happened to her?

He was still sitting on the couch when I returned to the living room, but his expression had changed. This expression was the one I woke up to every morning, that sneaked into bed late at night, that despised me when I spoke too much, and that degraded me when I opened any doors without his permission. That night this expression was turned towards an open

cooking magazine with a pile of white papers between its pages. Thick black letters screamed at his face: *Divorce*.

His blackish eyes were fixed on me. I couldn't move. I just stared at the open balcony door. He must have realized my pleading expression, because he walked to the door, closed it, and drew the curtains. Then he came towards me. One of the wine glasses slid through my shaking fingers and shattered into pieces. The other one followed after a push of his hand. Dark red wine slowly spread out on the floor. That night, for the first time, he made my body feel his anger. My soul had felt the pain for years. But inner scars can be hidden, like feelings in a prison cell. That night inner scars became outer ones. And many nights were to follow.

I am alone in the middle of a dead-end, between walls and a stranger. Who will help me this time? There are no windows to open and no doors to kick in. A picture of Mrs. Williams appears in my mind. She is standing behind the kitchen window. I don't see her usual smile. I see her pale, hurtful face. A tear runs down her cheek. She reaches for the window handle. She is almost there, but... her hand falls down and I see the blood. The dark red color drenches her cooking apron. In front of my eyes, she sinks to the ground and out of my sight. The window is still closed. Someone draws the curtains like to the Final Act of a twenty-year-long stage play of marriage. Nobody came to help her. Nobody saw what was going on behind closed doors.

I close my eyes. For how long am I supposed to run away? I take a deep breath. When I open my eyes, I look up and see the cloudless sky. There it is, right above me, without any windows, doors, or walls. "Excuse me..." the man says, but I interrupt him again. "Leave me alone." When I turn around, I don't try to run. I look right into his green eyes and take a step forward. "Stop following me and just go away!" My voice is steady. Adrenaline is rushing through my body and awakens a strength that I didn't know I have. I feel a door in my inner prison burst open. Apparently, I didn't need a key, just the power to break the locks. One might call it adrenaline. I call it revival from a cloudy time of my life that nobody but myself could save me from.

I come closer and he steps away. I'm free to leave. The end of the road is right in front of me and the sound of the rattling train calls for me, but his next words change everything. "I need your help, Mrs. North. This is about Mike Hanson" Why do I stop? While fear about being captured again arises, something else inside me seems to be more powerful. I hear his words echoing in my mind. *I need your help, Mrs. North. We agree on a meeting.*

The public café is located a few walking minutes away from my workplace and also halfway to the train station. Since he had followed me twice, I figured that he already knew

about my job. The room is crowded with people in suits and dresses. I chose a table in the center of the room with a clear path to the exit door. He enters and his green eyes find me.

He puts a packed file onto the table and sits down across from me. “I apologize for having approached you so desperately, but it wasn’t easy to find you and when I finally did, I couldn’t miss out on talking to you.” He reaches into his jacket and a business card appears. I see his picture and a name: Thomas Morris. Mr. Morris continues, “I am a private investigator. Five months ago I was hired by Jane Hanson to investigate her husband’s murder. I think you knew Mike Hanson?” He opens the file. A picture of a man standing on a balcony and smoking a cigarette appears. “He was killed by this man, John North.” I feel sick and look away.

I was alone that summer night in September. The ice-cold bathtub water swallowed up my whole body. Just my mouth and nose still fulfilled their obligation to supply my lungs with oxygen. What if they wouldn’t? Would he mind? By that night, every feeling of hope and joy and every memory of strength, independence, and self-determination was locked away deep inside me. What had remained were bruises, scars, and painful memories. Not even the ice-cold water could cool down the pain. So what if the pain disappeared forever? I took a final breath and let my head slowly slide beneath the surface. For ten seconds I felt free. However, at that moment I realized that I did not even have the strength to free myself. That night I packed a few things and disappeared. I am hiding from my past for six months by now, while still being bound to John North by marriage. For six months I am imprisoned by fear and paranoia of my husband finding me.

“I can’t go back, Mr. Morris,” I say and lower my voice before I add, “He can’t find me.” Thomas Morris sighs almost in despair. “Mrs. North,” he says, but I interrupt. “Please, don’t call me by that name.” He nods and continues, “I am sorry. I must admit, it wasn’t easy to find you. Have you officially changed your name?” I shake my head and say, “I never got a divorce. I use my mother’s birth name to stay hidden.” I stare out the window and add, “She was the strongest woman I have ever met.”

He almost looks at me with pity. “And so can you be.” He passes me a piece of paper. I remember a pile of papers that had led to shards, blood, and pain. But this seems different. I see a date: Twenty-fourth of April. “It’s an invitation to a court hearing. On this day the jury will decide if John North is guilty of shooting Michael Hanson. There are no direct witnesses to the crime. Mike’s wife had testified that North had shown aggressive behavior towards him more than once in the past. John had accused Mike several times before the murder of having

an affair with his wife and of hiding her. John North had said that he was, I quote, ‘*going to rescue her*’.”

I didn’t know about Mike’s death. At the thought of it I feel sick and, more importantly, guilty. I try to think about something else at night, but I always see his friendly face when I close my eyes. I see him standing behind a closed window and next to him a woman in a bloody apron. They both look at me with lifeless expressions. I remember my own pale and bruised body lying in the ice-cold water of a bathtub. But I’m still alive. I wonder why. Whether it is for a greater purpose or just out of luck, the result is the same. I can still help.

On the twenty-fourth of April, I step in front of a courtroom. I know that it is just a door separating me and my past. When Thomas Morris enters the building, he is not alone. A small but impressively fierce woman follows him. When Jane Hanson approaches me, my heart feels heavy. To my surprise, she smiles, takes my hands into a strong grip and whispers, “Thank you.” Then the doors open and my instincts order me to run away. I’m wearing my sneakers. Hypothetically I could escape.

But I enter the courtroom.

I feel his presence before I see him. Then he turns around. For a moment I look directly into his black eyes. John North, my husband – no – my puppeteer, stands less than five meters away from me. At this moment, there is nobody else but us as it has always been. The pain of every bruise, every wound, and every abusive word echoes inside me. A memory of ice-cold water enclosing my face and taking my breath away freezes my body. I remember the night I didn’t have the strength to take myself away from him forever. When I chose to escape instead, I knew that one day I would have to see him again.

The doors of the courtroom are being closed.

His head begins to move from site to site. He doesn’t want me to talk. He never wanted me to talk. He is pulling at the strings that still connect us. I feel the doors inside me locking up all the warm feelings and all the strength I have regained. But there is one door that doesn’t want to be closed. I remember a moment in a dark alley, a dead-end, and I remember a door bursting open. The lock is broken. What had escaped that day cannot return. It cannot be locked away anymore. My gaze shifts from John North to the witness stand. Once he had asked me if I could forgive him and my answer had been “Always.” But I have never forgiven myself. I approach the witness stand.

On the twenty-fourth of April, thirty minutes after me and my husband had stepped into the same courtroom, the doors are being opened again and I am free to leave. On the same day, my prison disappears and his becomes reality.