

Catalogue
1001
Dec 18, 2019
5430 words
9 pages

To the Sea (excerpt)

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We're driving straight through underneath the sea. I can hear its roar. The tunnel walls contract, expand; an enormous heart is throbbing. Beating firmly, steadily. I close my eyes. I'll never have to open them again. Someone's holding me, rocking me, everything's OK. It could all be OK; instead, we smoke our cigarettes, their tips gleam red. I can see the end of the tunnel already—a small bright hole that gets larger and larger. And then it's over, we're past it.

The woman next to me is in her fifties. Short on words, a heavily made up austere face, an extravagant ring with jagged edges on her finger. I'm sure her hands are always cool, not hot and sweaty like mine, as they are now as I take a close look at the island. I don't know what that really means, "to take a close look at" because, after all, there doesn't seem to be anything there. A low-hanging sky, ploughed fields, dirty brown, and yellowish meadows that stretch out to the horizon. Black ravens sit on clods of soil. They open their beaks wide, caw, flap their wings. Black ravens bring bad luck.

I look the other way. I look towards the town, which appears from behind a curve. Many of the shutters have been closed, only a few isolated columns of smoke issue above the roofs. Where are the people? I ask. Where do they go in winter? When there are no tourists, they live in the city and work there, she says. I like that. They cover up their windows, pull slipcovers over their sofas, lock their doors, wander off like migratory birds at the start of winter, let the island be an island again. Cold creeps through the walls and settles in.

Out of the corner of my eye I can see the woman's hands on the steering wheel. Loose, relaxed, she has life by the hand just like her hands control the car, such people do exist. Everything comes easily to them, you can't put anything over on them. Yes, that's how it goes. She's a doctor, she told me—no, informed me, when we were still on the mainland. Then she closed her mouth again over her perfectly regular white teeth. She wouldn't have said it if I hadn't asked her. I'm always curious, especially about people who never miss a beat, how do they do that? Her mother lives on the island, she'll spend Christmas with her. I imagine her mother as a well-groomed old woman with white hair, she stands up very straight, her tiny fingers spread out as she brings the fork to her mouth. Her little house is neat as a pin. Black and white tiles, chequered kitchen curtains, a chandelier in the living room, old furniture, a small garden where dahlias bloom in summer. Often I imagine things, drop out of my own life, sit there staring at nothing, take a walk in an unknown garden, insert myself into someone else's head, and whatever is happening goes right by me. I won't notice it. I won't even hear Mia-Sophie crying. No, that's not completely true. I hear it and don't hear it, I'm aware of it, but

it doesn't concern me. It scratches at the borderline of my consciousness, as if I were inside a bell jar and nails were scratching at the glass. It's an unpleasant sound. Someone wants something from me, but I'm not there. I'm not available.

The woman knows Steffi's aunt, who owns a hotel on the island, one of the few open in winter. I'll take you there, she says, but she doesn't ask why I'm here, she doesn't want to know anything about me. People like her are like that, nothing interests them. She falls silent and suddenly I'm furious with her. She could at least open her damned, subtly made up mouth once in a while and ask her fellow human being a question. I can feel the rage rising up in me, I wouldn't be surprised if lava were gushing from my lips. I'm like that, it's all good now, I'm going a hundred and eighty all of a sudden.

To calm myself down I think about Kurt, the truck driver who picked me up just before the tunnel, his nameplate in the window and a Barbie with curly blonde hair hanging from his rear-view mirror. Kurt was as talkative as this woman is tight-lipped. In his free time, he drives classic cars. I was charmed by how enthusiastically he talked, I could almost see him painting a fender with glossy paint and doing a little dance around the car, his eyes gleaming brilliantly. Completely different for sure from this stupid chick next to me, who has made a bundle, owns a classy penthouse apartment, a small glass of red wine in the evening, quiet classical music. Oh cut it out, I tell myself, but I can't, I keep running her down, with all the cliches I know, I want to show her how bourgeois her life is, how detached, how boring. Words fail me. How can anyone be so absurdly modest. And all this anger just because she isn't paying any attention to me. It makes me sick. It makes me fidgety. Suddenly I can hardly wait to be there, to see the hotel, maybe it's right on the sea, yes, it *must* have a view of the sea. I want to feel small and humble, I want to forget everything. I want the wheels in my head to come to a full stop, and for that I need something powerful, something tremendous like the sea. Under no circumstances do I ever want to experience a Christmas like the last one, such a thing should never happen again, never. It's lucky that at the last moment I was struck by the wonderful thought that I should go away. Who knows what would have happened otherwise. I've thrown Mia-Sophie across the room once already, but thank God she was all bundled up in her snowsuit. In that moment I thought to myself, get out as fast as you can. I left a note behind to the others in the group house and a sleeping, newly fed, newly diapered child. I knew that one of them would be there soon. I really thought of everything, I even left some money and a packet of diapers. Then—a few warm things in my bag, out into the street, and my thumb out.

It's beginning to get dark. Why for heaven's sake, it's barely four. It crosses my mind that the island is in the north so the day will come to an end earlier. I hadn't thought of that. Oh God, no, I really hadn't thought of that, how much every minute counts here when it's light out, the shortest day of the year is still ahead, so it's going to get worse. I feel as if an enormous fist has just punched me in the pit of my stomach. But there's nothing I can do about the fact that Steffi's aunt owns a hotel here and not farther south. How lovely that would have been, mild soft air, an orange-red sun plopping down into the sea every evening just the way it did then, two years ago. It wouldn't take much for me to be smelling cedar trees again instead of gasoline. I can smell manure here too, hog's piss. I flick the ashes from my cigarette into the

ashtray, take a deep breath, look at my watch again. Half an hour has been lost. There's an extra half hour where I would be otherwise, it's still bright out where I live. And now this half an hour seems to me a gift I have voluntarily given up. Because of my flight, night comes on half an hour earlier. Darkness falls at breakneck speed here. Just a minute ago there was light, straightaway it's dark. I'm not exaggerating at all this time. Calm down, I tell myself, breathe deeply. As if half an hour mattered. My head is quite used to receiving commands. Commands like: settle down, don't get hysterical, and for that reason it pays as little attention to them as Mia-Sophie does when I threaten her with something. She knows I won't follow through, not on prohibitions, not on promises.

More houses now, both right and left. Many are empty hotels, gray patches of snow covered with layers of soot line the road, it's not at all inviting. The woman keeps driving. Here it is, she says. She points to a flat-roofed building six stories tall. A few windows have light in them, a Christmas tree stands in front of the building decked out with small electric light bulbs. Christmas is very much in evidence. I don't move, I don't bestir myself. Perhaps she has some understanding for me and will once more take me with her. In my life guardian angels have always appeared at moments of crisis, perhaps she's one of them, perhaps I've misjudged her. I turn my head and smile at her. OK, good-bye then, she says. Merry Christmas. Well she can kiss my ass.

Proudly I turn my head, reach for my bag, open the door, get out, slam the door noisily shut in its lock. I'm not surprised she drives off right away, of course her tires don't squeal, she's too genteel for that, the stupid cow. I lay my head backwards into the nape of my neck and gaze up at the façade of the house. It's started to drizzle, soon the rain will turn to snow. I ask myself what had I expected. As always, I had expected something beautiful, something festive and grand, something that could sweep me off my feet, allow me to forget myself. It should always be like that, as if I'm running across a field towards the sun and into the sun, but when I finally get there, I find only stubble, the stalks prick my feet.

And here is the hotel. A naked fir tree in the entrance hall, next to it cardboard boxes with Christmas tree balls still half wrapped up in paper. A string with electric candles lying on the floor. Against the wall, a massive table around which six, seven people are sitting, all of them in worn-out clothes, C&A brand, not looking my way, with some kind of papers in front of them. A bright lamp burns above; everywhere else, the light is dull, even at the reception desk. Some keys hang on the wall, but no one's there. It smells like—like what? Something fishy, sweaty. The smell comes from those at the table or from their overcoats, which must be damp and clammy. The brown carpet is completely worn out. An enormous man stands up, his long hair sticking to his head. He recites something that has *sunset* and *swaying fir trees* and *chirping crickets* in it. When he's done—quite proud of himself—he sees me, makes a deep bow, and approaches. We're writers, by your leave, he says. He's the one who stinks so badly it's almost unbearable. Come join us if you're a writer too, he says, we're always happy to welcome new members. I shake my head, sidle up to the reception desk, ring the bell. I don't know what I'm doing here, there must be some misunderstanding. What have I got to do with smelly writers

in an old down-at-the-mouth hotel. Somehow I've gotten into the wrong movie. Why didn't Steffi tell me what this place looked like. Typical Steffi. You can't ever rely on her.

No one comes. If there's one thing I can't do, it's wait. It wears me out, it makes me feel as if I were a dead hare on all fours, split open and tautly stretched out. You could beat a drum on my skin, at least I'm useful for that. I don't have things in hand, my feelings are going every which way, fantasies rise up in my head like eels in dead matter, they wriggle and raise themselves up and I stand there powerless and stupefied, staring at the bell I could ring again if I could find the will, my hand is already raised up without my doing anything, but then it falls back down. I hear a rustling of the pages one of the writers is turning, it's a dry rasping sound and fits with the slight cough that comes from the mouth of one of them. Indeed, they all seem completely dried out, old skin that that has been sloughed off and become a remnant. What on earth could I create with those people, with them and their stink.

I strain to locate the image in my brain I had constructed of this hotel. I want to think about wine-red plush, fleecy carpets, modern ceiling lamps, and the sea, which I had imagined as Turkish-green with tiny little waves—an idiotic thought at this time of year. Instead, these keys, hanging on their hooks like flying dogs; below them, small letter boxes, all empty and dark, little boxes open at the back leading to the wall where the letters fall and pile up in a heap in a dark, closed-up room where no wind blows, sinister as in a tunnel. But no, that can't be, that my window should look out over a space like that, no, that can't be allowed. That would be reason enough to buzz off right away but where to? To buzz off, flies buzz off, that's not a very pretty expression. Flies buzz back and forth over shit, romp over heaps of manure. How much more beautiful to take off like a bird, a seagull, with softly flapping wings.

I hear footsteps on the staircase, there's a creaking sound. I have to make a good impression on the aunt. I imagine the aunt as haggard, gaunt, bony, with brittle hair and a penetrating gaze. The Wicked Witch in the picture book, who will let me know right away what I can do and what I can't, who will grab my little finger and decide I'm too skinny. I can't help being so thin. I feel how my stomach is contracting, turning into a small stone. How my little hairs are standing up in a line. My teeth feel as if I had just eaten something cold. I'm on red alert. The footsteps are coming nearer.

A smiling face, whose countless wrinkles burst into a fireworks display of fine lines. Green eyes with a sparkling star in the middle. The aunt wears leggings. She wears leggings in a leopard print, and over them a very roomy black pullover, black cuffs, a silver necklace. She's maybe in her middle fifties. Large, slender. She must see how great an effort it's costing me to bring the two pictures into alignment. It seems to amuse her, how I'm acting. I'm sure I have a stupid expression on my face.

She puts out her hand.

Saskia? she asks.

I nod.

Welcome.

I hadn't expected her to be so friendly. That's dangerous, I'll go soft and start to melt, I'll want to throw myself in her arms. That's how it always starts. That's how it started with Rafael, too. Let no one say I can't dazzle people. I'm good at it when I want to be. I can make my eyes sparkle, my lips full. I use make-up too: mascara, lip gloss, rouge. There's hardly a day goes by when I don't wear make-up, you never know. The darker my eyes, the better. I also use eyelash extensions, I wear earrings that jingle when I shake my head, I use wax on my hair, my hairs stand up around my head going every which way. According to Steffi I look like Picasso's Young Man. A boyish look. Nobody looks better.

The aunt gives me her hand. Does she know something about me. Steffi's a chatterbox. Perhaps she knows I have a child, that my child is the color of coffee with milk and the father is Brazilian. That I left school. I don't know if older women have motherly feelings towards young women. I don't have a mother, no aunts like Steffi. I'm lost, I'm completely lost, out on a limb by myself. I'm afraid she'll pass sentence on me. As if it mattered, what a person I don't know thinks about me. Well, yes, I suppose it does matter, I don't know why. Because she has a friendly smile. Just because she said *Welcome*. I'm always becoming dependent on other people. As if what they thought about my life was a matter of life and death. This time I had good luck, for the very first time. She's still smiling, seizes my hand, tells me my room is ready, reaches behind her and takes a key from its hook. Number 19, she says. Sixth floor, with a view of the sea. Go ahead and get settled in, we'll talk about everything else later.

A wave seizes me abruptly, washes me high up, I grin down at her stupidly from where I am in the heights. I'm light, light as a bird. With the key in my hand, I run—no, I skip up the stairs. The carpet is the same green color as bottles, and soft, almost like in my dreams, edged with gold bars. If Mia were to see it, she'd crawl up the steps, her tongue between her teeth. Oh Mia, I hope they're taking good care of you, I'm sure they're better at it than I am. Not that it takes much for someone to take better care of you than I do. But now, in this moment, she should be here. What all couldn't I tell her. That the carpet is made of moss, that leprechauns stretched it out over the steps. It's moss, Mia, I'd say, it's soft and firm at the same time, that's how people must be, how your mother must be, isn't that so, my little one. I'd stroke her little fluffy black curls. The black she has from her Papa, the softness from me. I'd put her on my shoulders, one flight up and then another. Soon, little Mia, I will show you the sea. I'm chirping like a bird, my beak opens and closes, a black beak against a bright background.

The key turns in the lock. I push the door open, I flick the light on. The curtains have been pulled shut, it's night already in here. I see a wide double bed, a small writing table, and a wardrobe. I open the window. I can hear the sea, how it's roaring and raging, how it crashes down on the sand. I tell myself to breathe, but I don't see my breath. It's as dark as the sky, the moon is hidden behind the clouds. The wave I've been riding bursts on the sand. The darkness is terrible. I can hardly get any air. I hold my hand out, and it's swallowed up in the gloom, which sucks me in as well. Soon it will draw me outside. Quickly I turn around.

The room is empty. If only Mia were here, if I were able to take care of her. I'd take off her snow suit and her little boots, I'd set her on my lap and tell her all about the leprechauns.

I'd give her hugs, really I would, I'd be fond of her, until the darkness had spread itself out in this room too, because no one escapes it. It wins in the end, that I know for sure, and Mia-Sophie would start to cry. How that gets on my nerves, when children cry, moan, whimper. It makes me gasp for breath.

But she's not here. Mia-Sophie's not here. That's good, because now I don't have to be afraid that I might harm her. That's at least something. I open my suitcase and get out some weed, I have enough for two weeks. I roll a joint and put it on the night table, I have to have it because when I smoke, I feel good. I can't sleep if I don't smoke some weed. I tell myself tomorrow will be a nice day, tomorrow you'll see the sea, tomorrow you'll know why you're here. Right now the idea of driving to the Baltic Sea in winter seems totally, absolutely crazy, but I didn't have any choice, money was the main thing, and I don't have to pay anything here. You can help my aunt, Steffi said, then you can take your meals with her, she's always happy when she doesn't have to take care of everything by herself.

There probably isn't even one bar around here that's open. I turn on the television. Sex and the City, I like that program, I watch it a lot, but today it makes me ill. I turn it off again. The silence pounds in my head. Are there any other guests in this house, am I the only one? Does the aunt lock up in the evening and go off to her cottage by the sea? She'd be sure to have cats with long silken hair, cats that would circle her legs, purring, would sit on the sofa with her, cuddle up to her. Steffi's said the aunt's a widow and doesn't have any children. She has Persian carpets on display, pillows everywhere, heavy curtains that go down all the way to the floor, she listens to something on the radio. I realize how I'm starting to move around in her house, poke my nose first in one corner, then in another. I see her wide bed, on which there are always two pillows, a coverlet in a rose pattern, an old-fashioned floor lamp near the couch. A clock with a long pendulum ticks softly, gently. She puts her legs up on a stool, she's tired, she closes her eyes, she falls asleep, wakes up, listens to opera music—what nonsense. I really have no idea. Maybe she has a lover and isn't alone at all. I'm the only one who's alone. I should have brought Mia-Sophie with me so she would distract me. I only needed to control myself and should have brought her with me, I could have done a mother-child spa treatment. There actually is such a thing. I would have put her next to me in bed and covered her up and told her a story, something about a deep blue sea and hot sand and whitecaps that lie motionless on the sea like meringues. She wouldn't have understood much but she would have listened to the sound of my voice, smiled with her eyes closed. No, Mia, wake up, don't let me be alone!

But she would have let me be alone. Children always leave a person alone. They curl up like embryos and close themselves off from the world. When she does that I can poke her with my knuckles and she won't stir.

I jump up, run up and down the room, three paces one way, two paces the other, it's not very big. I tear the door open. Can it be that I'm really the only person here? I listen, hear the sea thundering, the corridor is poorly lit, there's an elevator at the end. I press the button, the cables vibrate, it takes a long time before it comes. The door opens wide like a set of jaws that wants to gobble me up. Quickly I press the button for the ground floor, pull my hand back.

The jaws close, the box glides into the deep. It would be nice if there were a guest in it. Even if he made a face at me, it would still be good. That would have given me an anchor again, brought me back into life, maybe I would have been able to feel like myself again. I'm lost to myself, my skin is made of glass. The stairs lead downwards like a fire escape, you have to be careful you don't miss a step, it creaks as if thousands of worms were gnawing through the wood. That's disgusting, stepping on worms. It's the same on the fifth floor: dull light, silence, no shoes outside the doors, nothing. The aunt wanted to get rid of me, why else would she have given me a room on the top floor where I fly around like a space ship through the darkness of the universe. What did Steffi tell her about me? Steffi, who made me dance on a table in the bar, made me do a strip-tease while she stood in front of me, her arms crossed and laughing herself to death. Steffi, my friend, has she told her that I always lose everything: cell phone, purse, house keys. Has she said: this woman is very agitated, very confused?

On the fourth floor, a strip of light comes through from under a door. I feel weak in the knees, I have to lean up against the wall, a television's on. I think I hear the dry voice of a news anchor. Inside, an actual human being is peacefully watching the news!

In high spirits, I run through the third floor. Nothing. Two rooms are occupied on the second floor; on the first floor, three (!) That's fantastic, it's all been my craziness, I'm not alone! And the Aunt, maybe she lives here after all, in the basement, she's making a shopping list, she's sorting through the bed linen. I have no idea what all is involved in running a hotel. I think about the writers who invited me to join them. Maybe they're still there. I'd like to read a wild and crazy text to them, about Brazil for example. It's good that Mia isn't here, I can come and go as I want. For the first time since she came into the world I can come and go as I want. Hardly surprising, that such a thing should be unusual. Yes, it's all OK now. I'm here so I can rest and recover. No wonder I'm cracking up. I'll feel better soon. I'm at a health resort. Isn't that awesome?

The writers have gone, but the Aunt is there. Not listening to opera arias in her cottage, not with her lover, she's sitting at the reception desk and turning pages in a ring binder, she's totally into it. I stand there, look around the room. Fish in an aquarium push their thick mouths against the glass, tiny bubbles rise up. Three armchairs and a small table stand in a corner, then two more identical arrangements. She looks up, stops short, smiles at me. Her skin is wrinkled, it looks pretty.

Everything OK? she says.

I come nearer and nod, I'd like to sit down near her in the sphere of light. There's not much going on here in the evenings, she says. She's not making excuses, she's stating a fact.

I get depressed in this region when it gets dark so early, I say. Every year it's the same.

But she doesn't want to get into it. She says: The breakfast room is over there, behind the sliding door.

I try again. I'm sure she just didn't understand what I was saying.

The darkness, I say. The cold. Such awful images come into in my head, every year.

Hmm, she says. And then: It would be nice if you could clean up the breakfast dishes and after that, change the bedlinen of the guests who are leaving. Other than that, there's not much to do. It's always quiet here this time of year. You should see what it's like in summer.

As far as I'm concerned, she can stick her whole hotel up her ass. I just opened my heart to her and she didn't even listen. It pisses me off. She let me come here as cheap labor, I knew that.

She looks at me, very observantly, but no, I'm through with her. It's a good thing someone like her doesn't have children.

She's looking through her ring binder again, I'm dismissed. People always disappoint you, I've never experienced anything to the contrary. Rafael was the worst. Offering me crack. In Salvador young boys run free, eight, nine, ten year old boys, with limbs thin as flower stems, sell themselves just for crack. They don't eat anything, and he offered it to me. Me, his girlfriend. I kicked him until blood came out of his nose, that was our last quarrel. Then I was high in the air, his child in my belly. And all the while I loved him. He broke my heart. But that's what people are like. All the same. They all said he tried to make money off the Gringa. It's true, I supported him. Out of love. I got him out of prison, I paid a lawyer, I ate from garbage cans and slept on the street, all of it for him.

Behind me, I hear pages being turned. She asks how Steffi is. I say in a cold, scornful way, she's quite well. But that, too, fizzles out. Stupid cow. And I had almost gone soft, made myself vulnerable to her. The best thing is to pull back, keep one's guard up. I turn away. There's a bulletin board with a slip of paper: *Help sought for animal shelter*. I walk on, go up the steps, no one's getting me on that elevator, the rug is worn out too, the house is nothing but an empty crate. Yes indeed, what a life, to run such a barn of a place. What a shitty, shitty life.

A little while later I light up my joint, sit on the bed, raise my legs up, inhale. The end glimmers, once, twice, how good that is. The Aunt can go take a running jump. I send a puff of smoke into the air, lie back. The quilt is the color of eggshells, puff-puff-puff, I'm the little chicken that taps on the shell, shreds the thin skin, with the end of my beak I'm out already, I'm off, it's starting. Wings flattened and through. The air is soft and dries my feathers. A pleasant feeling, not too warm, not too cold, I'm in the air, I spread my wings, I'm off.

I have to laugh, because the Aunt is still studying her books while I feel so good, her and her earthly heaviness, her and duties, I'm sure she hasn't seen anything yet of the world. Born on the island, raised on the island, inherited the hotel from her parents, oh how stupid, I could die laughing. It's her own fault, the heck with it.

I hear a familiar crying, that's Mia, how on earth did she get here, but no, it's the background music when I smoke my joint, she doesn't like it. I hear her because I always hear her, just habit, nothing more. Sometimes I've thought that when she's sleeping she can sense when I light up my joint, she always wakes up and starts to cry, isn't that the dumbest thing. But I can't afford anything larger than a room, waiting on tables doesn't bring in very much money. I've seen her through her first year, little Mia-Sophie. I'm proud of that. I've done it all alone. I can feel how the corners of my mouth are turning up again, laughing does one good. We laugh so little, I think, although the world is full of hilarious things, you just have to see them. All you have to do is think about that poet and his greasy hair. How he stuck out his chest. I giggle to myself, I'm getting tired now, that's the good thing about hash. You fall asleep happy, completely relaxed, and if the sound of a brat doesn't wake you up, you can sleep through the night. All the nights I have before me, I can sleep through. What bliss, what good fortune. I didn't bother to brush my teeth, the quilt under me is so soft, I really have to crawl under it. The joint is out. I crush it in the ashtray. Good night, sweet little Mia-Sophie.