



LINA

WOLFF

THE

POLYGLOT

LOVERS

TRANSLATED BY SASKIA VOGEL

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I. ELLINOR
II. MAX
III. LUCREZIA

I. ELLINOR

*Hearts can break. Yes, hearts can break. Sometimes I think it
would be better if we died when they did, but we don't.*

STEPHEN KING

When trying to find the one, I'd never thought the internet would be my thing. There was something commercial about it, not to mention I'd never written a personal ad, or anything else for that matter, and had no idea how to sell myself in writing. My boyfriends had always been regular guys from my village. The first one, for instance, was called "Johnny" and there was nothing special about him at all, at least not on the surface, at least not until it became clear that he was in fact sick. We were in the same class at school and it started with him saying:

"Is there anything you've always dreamed a man would do for you?"

I guess he'd heard it in a movie and, in all seriousness, already actually thought he was a man. And I suppose he wasn't expecting the answer I gave him, but something more like: "Yes, I've always wished for a man who could make me lose my mind in bed." Or a concrete wish that would help him along. But I said:

"I've always wanted to be taught how to fight."

And when he didn't look as surprised as I'd thought he would, I added:

"Fight like a motherfucker."

Johnny nodded slowly, spat on the ground, and said:

"If that's what you want, doll."

That very night he took me to what he called his fight club. It was a bunch of people who'd seen and been inspired by the movie, but unlike the people in the film, they actually practiced various martial arts and met up three times a week to fight. Everyone went up against everyone else. You had to go into a basement beneath a school. It had tiles that faded from brown to orange; a strange matte tile that didn't behave as tile usually does, but seemed to absorb every sound. From there, you went deep inside a series of corridors. Everyone was dead silent, barefoot, and had bags full of gym clothes slung over their shoulders. Only the fans made a noise. Then you entered the room and there they were, the people from our village who wanted to fight. A temporary captain was appointed, and we all warmed up together. Everyone was flexible, even the guys, and no one was ashamed of showing that they could do forward or side splits. People farted loudly, stretched out like that, but not laughing was an unwritten rule. Then we fought. I was the only beginner and had one thing going for me: I was scared to death. Being scared to death gives you an edge, Johnny said. Being really fucking afraid had some hidden benefits – the body was smarter than you thought, and when you let it run on autopilot, it was capable of almost anything. But then you had to take control.

“Most people aren't angry because they get attacked, they're angry because they can't defend themselves,” Johnny said.

Johnny could do more than fight. He could shoot, too. We used to visit a firing range on the way from our village to the next. We walked around wearing orange earmuffs, watching the people shooting handguns and then the ones shooting rifles. Johnny showed me how to take a wide

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stance, lift the rifle, and nail a clay pigeon. First in a simulator and then in real life. One day he said I was ready – he could take me hunting now. He talked a lot about that hunt before we went, how you had to go out after dark, use your night vision, and keep real quiet the whole time.

Only one shot was fired the time I joined the hunters, at a wild boar. The shot cracked the silence, and you could hear the boar still running, not like before, but clumsily, branches breaking around it, and in the end limping and confused, as if it knew it was going to die and was pulling itself through the brushwood in a panic. As we came closer, Johnny swung the beam of his flashlight upward. I saw the beech's bare branches, like long, dark bones reaching for the night sky. Johnny took my hand, clamped the flashlight between his legs, and started rubbing his buzz cut back and forth, and I wanted to ask him why but kept quiet. He was just about to whisper in my ear – I think it was going to be something big, about us – but one of the hunters interrupted, saying he'd found the pig. He shined a light on it. A clean shot to the shoulder, blood pumping out over the black bristles. It was a large sow, and we all had to help carry her on a pole to the pickup. The next day it was going to be cut up in Johnny's friend's yard. We headed over after breakfast, and by the time we arrived there was blood and bristles everywhere because no one actually knew anything about butchery. Everyone went at it as best they knew how, all the while saying it had to be fast. I never went poaching again.

One night I told Johnny that if he was ready, so was I. He smiled at me, and I was thinking this was the first time I'd ever really seen his teeth, and they were big and white like sugar cubes, perfectly set in his mouth, an odd contrast to his face, which was irregular and acne-scarred. We

did it on the bed of his pickup, and the jacket he'd spread underneath me got covered in blood.

"Girls today don't normally bleed their first time," the school nurse told us during sex ed. "Because they go riding and biking, jump and bounce around, their hymens aren't normally intact."

I must've had an incredibly subdued childhood, because my hymen was absolutely still intact. The sight of all that blood didn't disgust Johnny at all, in fact it only took him seconds to come. I didn't know what to say when he was done. But I could already tell that Johnny was a person to watch out for. Of course, like most of the guys in my village, he had violent tendencies, was uneducated and horny and would be for the rest of his life. But there was more to him.

"I didn't know you were a virgin," he said.

"What about you?" I asked.

"Yeah. I was too."

He looked at his stained jacket and said:

"I guess you gotta start somewhere."

The next time was much better. Not to mention the third, fourth, and fifth times. Johnny said he thought the two of us, we fucked like porn stars.

When we were sixteen years old, I broke Johnny's nose with the back of my hand. It wasn't on purpose in the sense that I wanted it to happen, my arm just flew out by reflex, it had nothing to do with martial arts. Anyhow, it turned into a big thing, because we were in high school and everyone heard about it, the teachers and the nurse and Johnny's parents and mine. Johnny's mother said:

"I don't want you seeing that girl anymore."

We were in the schoolyard and his nose was bleeding.

His mother had rushed over as soon as she found out and was standing there giving me dirty looks.

“Mom, Ellinor isn’t some little girl,” Johnny said. “She’s a lady. And what a lady she is.”

He smiled at me, hair falling over his eyes.

“And what a lady she is,” he repeated, smiling even wider with those sugar cubes of his.

I wanted to say, don’t stand there grinning, remember how hot my blood got you, you’re a sick fuck, Johnny, there’s no hiding that kind of thing. That’s what I wanted to say, but I suppose it was the bloody nose that made me feel differently, and so I went over and hugged him. The gesture was unusual for us. We did everything together. We helped each other with the repeating rifles and other weapons, we fought and we fucked, but we never hugged. And yet here we were, and I could feel his hot blood dripping down my neck.

“Now you’ve learned everything I wanted to teach you,” he said.

But he added that if I ever used what he’d taught me against him again, he wouldn’t think twice about killing me.

“Just you try,” I replied.

“Don’t piss me off,” he said, and his eyes went black.

Soon we fell into a sort of sexual routine, even if you couldn’t really call it a routine, the way we were back then.

“Let’s go to my place,” he’d declare, sliding his hand between my legs while driving.

Going to his place meant his dad’s hunting cabin outside the village, where you could be left alone. It was a small cabin with gnarled bead and butt paneling and bright yellow curtains with white stripes that his mother must have hung. The cabin had two small bedrooms plus a living room with a stove. We went into one of the bedrooms and he said:

“Take your clothes off and get on the bed.”

While I did that, he went to the kitchen and made coffee. He returned with his cup, dragged the chair over to the bed, and drank it as he looked at me lying there on my back, legs spread. It felt like he could see right into me, up and through my interior, if you can say that, as if there was a dark channel inside me, and if you followed that channel, you’d surface somewhere else entirely.

“Do you have to stare like that?” I asked.

“Think about the actors in porn. They’ve got no problem showing themselves off.”

“Think about when I broke your nose,” I replied.

“You’re like bread between my teeth,” he said and raised his cup, proposing a toast.

He went on sitting there, drinking his coffee. When he’d finished it, he put the cup on a shelf and started taking off his trousers.

“When are you going to let me do you in the butt?” he groaned once when we were getting it on.

I replied that if I was a truck driver and had access to a nice, comfortable garage, I’d never even consider parking my vehicle down in a ditch. Johnny laughed, but didn’t ask about it again.

A few years later I put on some weight. I never really got fat, but it was enough for Johnny to stop finding me attractive. We met up less and less, and eventually he stopped calling. Once I plucked up the courage to call him.

“Should we go shooting one of these days?” I asked. “Or fighting?”

He told me he’d met someone. After that I saw him in the village with her. She was thin and fit with long dark hair tied in a ponytail that hung all the way down her back.

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I wondered what it was like for them in bed, if he sat at its foot, drinking his coffee while taking her in and if so, what she thought about it.

I kept up the fighting over the years. Like other people play bridge, sing in a choir or dance a few nights a week, taking comfort in it as they get older – a pursuit, so to speak, that shores you up against old age, or at least lessens its effects – I kept going back to that basement and spent time with the people there. Fighting was good; you got better with age. Being young and good-looking didn't buy you any cred, nothing came for free, and every last thing had to be fought for. Later, when I found friends who came from other places, they said they couldn't understand why a person would choose to spend their time like that when they could be spending it with a good book, good company, or a glass of wine instead.

“Not much in life compares to fighting,” I'd reply.

I knew how it must have sounded to them, but I still think it's true. I've never been as close to anyone as I have in that basement over the years. It has to do with concentration and how you read people's eyes. Sex doesn't work like that. There are people who close their eyes and jack off their whole lives, into their own hands or between someone's legs, and nothing ever goes on in their brains. But when you face an opponent, there's a moment when you can see right into them and understand exactly who they are. Not to mention, and this is what I told my friends, you're not really old as long as you can kick someone taller than you in the head.

Sometimes I thought about Johnny and how he was a sick fuck. But sick or not, I'd come to understand that wasn't what's important. What's important is not being alone.

I ended up having a number of boyfriends over the years, pretty normal ones too, at least compared with what was to come. I never moved in with them. I was more the kind of person who just lived, took each day as it came, and didn't get worked up for no reason. I wasn't really serious about any of the men in my life before the thing with Ruben and the manuscript happened. And that began with me creating a profile on a dating site with the following introduction:

I'm thirty-six years old and seeking a tender, but not too tender, man.

I left "interests" blank, I left "favorite authors" blank. Same with "favorite food" and "favorite places in the world." But in the space for your motto, I did write: *Meeting the aforementioned man*. Then it occurred to me that a motto is actually something else, a sentence or phrase that can act like a word of wisdom would in various situations. But I've never had that kind of motto, so I left the sentence there, even if it did say something about me, suggesting a laconic side some people might find off-putting. But on the other hand, I wasn't after a verbal person. I also included a picture of myself. It's a picture a friend of mine took where I'm lying on my stomach on his bed. The signs of my age aren't visible because the only light source in that picture

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is a few candles, and like my friend says, most people look pretty decent in the glow of a few of those.

A week went by before I logged on again. I'd gotten a ton of replies. Surprised, I worked my way through them, one by one. I've never been the kind of girl who gets shown any appreciation. Once Johnny said I was like an onion, you had to peel away the layers to get inside. Most girls would have been insulted if you said something like that to them, but I could tell Johnny meant it as a compliment. And now when I opened my email in the mornings I had dozens of responses. An older man promised me "economic freedom" in exchange for "satisfying him" sexually three times a week. A twenty-year-old wondered if I could school him. I sat there, coffee in hand, laughing out loud. I was touched, but not so much because these men were showing me appreciation (the photo, when all was said and done, was a con) but because I understood that the people writing to me actually believed in love, in the sense that I'd be able to give them what they were looking for.

Some time passed before I next visited the site. Things came up, but when I finally logged back on I saw that several of the men who'd replied had kept writing to me. Some of them had written almost every day for weeks. The twenty-year-old who thought I could teach him something seemed to have become a little obsessed with me, and wrote in a message that *I've always had girls who talk and talk, they never want to do anything but talk, but you seem wordless and genuine*. Wordless and genuine. I thought that was nicely put. I wrote to him:

I guess you're inviting them to have a conversation, plain and simple. Try inviting them to do something else. Kind regards, E