

Purity



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OUTBURST



It all starts with the voice. *I'll kick your teeth in.* Then I see the man. He's walking up the gangway of the bus. He moves forwards, spitting out threats. I'm standing by the doors, next to a buggy. I've been at my mum's seventy-fifth birthday party and have brought away two big plastic bags full of fruit. Apples, oranges, pears, pomegranates, kiwis and grapes. I've put the bags down in between my legs, and now I push them closer to the side, carefully so the fruit doesn't tumble out, as I think about how he must be on the phone to someone. It's like I'm making space for him and his threats. But then I look up again, just as he's passing me, and see that he's not on the phone; it's us, the other passengers, he's addressing. Not anyone in particular, but everyone, and somehow no one. *You don't know who you're dealing with. A monster. I'll fuck you up. Get me? I'm a monster.* He's wearing a black T-shirt with a martial arts logo, DOJO-something or other, it says. He's short and muscular, with big letters tattooed on his forearms, but I don't catch what they say. I can only see the swaying, the neck, the big triceps. He's holding a pale grey bundle in one hand, a jacket maybe, or a sweater. *What are you looking at? I'll beat the shit out of you, get me, I'll beat the shit out of you.* Then I can't see him any more, I just hear his voice. I prepare myself for something but I'm not sure what. How far will he go? Who's going to intervene if he jumps someone? Is he armed? Should I risk my life for the sake of a stranger? I take a deep breath and suddenly feel horribly tired. It's warm on the bus. I note the play of looks – averted, curious, fearful,

cautious. Lucky I'm getting off soon, I think. I'm not cut out for this stuff. And then the bus pulls in at my stop by Nobelorget, without anything else happening. But when I've got off the bus, with my bags of fruit, I see he's also on the pavement. For some reason I don't leave, I just stand there, staring at him, along with two or three other people. A man shakes his head, an older woman says with a crystal-clear Eastern European accent:

'This is actual verbal abuse. This is actually an attack. You're attacking us all.'

He doesn't seem to hear anything, makes a few more threats, kicks the headlights and smashes the bus's big wing mirror with an advanced elbow strike.

'Not just verbal, now,' someone smirks.

The bus driver is on the phone.

The dojo guy walks off in one direction, I in another.

When I get home, I make coffee in the moka pot my brother gave me for my birthday, rinse some of the fruit and sit to jot down a few lines about the bus journey. It puts me in mind of the plot, so to speak, or the content, the events described, in Raymond Queneau's *Exercises in Style*. An encounter on a bus. A dispute, or some form of staged hostility. And then a repeat encounter. Wasn't that it? In ninety-nine different ways. Is that what's awaiting me? Ninety-nine different versions of getting my teeth kicked in? Is the monster going to beat the shit out of me? Am I going to bump into him in one of the doorways down here? Is he going to offer me drugs? Are we going to pass each other in a nightclub, stand there, heads bobbing, a few metres from one another on the dancefloor? Or am I just going to catch sight of him, in the distance, somewhere else? See him when he's in a completely different frame of mind. In the library, leant over a pocket calculator, glasses on his nose, with an orange pencil that he's twirling on his finger. With his kids in a playground. Tired and unshaven, his daughter's flowery jumper shoved into his back pocket and a grimy teddy in one hand. Or sitting with some friends

outside a café, a cappuccino or a beer in front of him. Funny stories and laughter. Or maybe he'll sit next to me on the train tomorrow. We'll say a reserved but friendly hello and then fight, in silence and without touching each other more than is necessary, over the little armrest between the seats. That familiar old ritual. But at least he'll say *Excuse me* when he has to push past to go and buy a drink or go and take a piss in the little toilet where the paper's all gone and the floor is wet. His mum will call him. Maybe it's her he's going to see. I can hear they're speaking Albanian, but I only understand a few words, among other things *Të dua*, which means 'I love you'. I recognise it because I had a girlfriend once who was from Kosovo, and sometimes she used to say those very words to me. Valentina, she was called. I think about her and am struck by the fact I haven't seen her in sixteen years.

I slice a pear and cut a pomegranate in two, then I take a heavy wooden spoon and beat the kernels into a bowl. I still haven't learned that trick where you just cut into the skin and open up the fruit like a flower. Of course I get juice all over my T-shirt, it's always the way. Tiny little blood-red specks on the white fabric. I put the fruit down and watch the juice collecting in the lines on my palms.

Valentina. She told me she was named after Valentina Tereshkova, the first woman in space, but I don't know if she just made that up. I used to call her Valle. She moved to the US later, to study, something to do with biochemistry. I wonder how things went for her. Well, I guess. She was always so serious and disciplined, not like her brother Valon, who also got called Valle and who did a few stints for various petty crimes. But he sorted himself out after a while and got a job at a carwash on Norra Grängesbergsgatan. He threatened my life once because he got it into his head that I'd hit his sister. It was a misunderstanding, I've never hit a woman in my life. All this was in the early noughties. At that time, after 9/11, there was a lot of chat in my family about 'the Muslims', and I knew many people disliked the fact I was seeing an Albanian girl. Not that they ever

said anything to me, they weren't confrontational like that. They didn't need to be, I could tell something was up. My grandma had suddenly started referring to herself as 'Christian' and wearing a gold cross she'd inherited from a relative. But I knew she wasn't religious, she probably hadn't set foot in a church since leaving Albufeira, a town in southern Portugal, at the end of the fifties, to live with my granddad, who was a Russian sailor. They spent a few years in Holland in the sixties, then Germany and Denmark, and finally Sweden, Gothenburg at first and then Malmö. My grandma's brother and my grandpa's niece moved there with their families. Then Grandpa got cancer and died. The last few months he just lay around reading Joseph Conrad novels and Plato's *Phaedo* and seemed so elated and jolly people thought he'd gone mad.

The pear is hard and unripe. The pomegranate, on the other hand, is overripe; at least half the kernels are bad. I eat the pear anyway and start thinking about the time I drank freshly pressed pomegranate juice on the street by the Galata Bridge in Istanbul. I was there with Valle, her friend Sandra and my friend Bülent, who we called Bullet. We were hungover, because we'd been out dancing the night before. It was at a separatist gay club, with a women-only section. Bullet had gone off somewhere so I stood around drinking beer on my own for a while, then the girls came back to the mixed side and we danced to Destiny's Child and what I remember as hard Eurotechno, I can't tell you what exactly, it's not really my music. But I remember clearly: that pomegranate tasted absolutely fantastic. Then we ate some fish and started drinking raki again.

I sit down at the kitchen table and try to remember whether Beyoncé was in Destiny's Child, as I crush the kernels in the bowl. Then I drain the deep red juice into a glass and drink it in two or three gulps. I think about the people who were fishing on the Galata Bridge and I think about the Golden Horn, and the Bosphorus and the Aynur concert and how I'd suddenly, unexpectedly burst into tears when she and her band played an intense yet tranquil song.

I started sobbing uncontrollably and felt deeply embarrassed, because I realised I was disturbing the concert. I toss the crushed kernels into the food waste bag and think about the boats of the Bosphorus and about the mosques, about the little glasses of sweet tea, about Valentina's black hair, which she tied up in a big low bun while telling me she'd really like to take a walk on her own the next day.

Të dua, I say aloud as I sit at the table, and realise it feels like I dreamt all that, as though it never really happened. As though I'd made it all up, these Albanian words in Istanbul. Then I remember where the phrase came from and again I see the guy on the train before me. He feels completely real.

A while after he speaks to his mum, he calls someone – a friend, I guess.

'Hey, it's Dardan,' he says.

He turns away from me, in towards the window, but he's talking so loudly I can't help hearing every word. It becomes hard to concentrate on anything else and I regret not choosing the quiet carriage.

'No, listen, listen,' he says. 'Yeah. We were at the gym. Me and Blerim as usual. We did an evening session – it's quieter then, not so many people. Yeah, it was pretty late, so it was dark and so on, and it was just us and two guys we didn't know, but I knew they were fresh off the boat, like from Syria or Iraq or something, we'd said hello to them and stuff, chatted a few times, you know, and Blerim put some music on, like, some nineties gangsta rap or something, I don't know what exactly, but you know, it was pretty hard and so on, like, Wu Tang or whatever, and don't say it, I know Wu Tang's not gangsta rap, but like, you know what I mean, ah come on, stop it, and anyway, we're doing our reps, nice and chill, you know, and these guys are totally green, running round from one machine to the next, taking selfies the whole time, lifting here a little, there a little, then here again, yeah you know, curls by the squat rack, kind of thing, trying to look totally serious, and fiddling with their phones non-stop, and Blerim burst out laughing, and then suddenly there

was a little skit, you know, one of those interlude things, between the songs, that was like some fucking murder or something, on the record I mean, like shots firing, shouts, you know, bitches screaming hysterically and more shots and like a load of furniture falling over, and bam bam bam, it's noisy as hell, chaos, you know, pure chaos, and the thing was, so like, I was sitting right next to these guys, and the thing was, I saw them leap up, and their eyes, like, it was panic, man, real panic, I swear, they looked over at the door, the windows, and you know it's totally black out there, completely dark, like a wall, you get me, it was only a few seconds, but I could see their pulses had gone right up, to like 150, 200 beats per minute, yeah, and then afterwards, when they realise it's only on the record, that it was just a *skit*, one of those interlude things, like, it was just on the record, it wasn't for real, that's when they start feeling a bit embarrassed, and the vibe gets weird, everyone laughs, what the fuck, chill man, and I said to Blerim afterwards that's the last fucking time you play that shit in there, you get me, and he agreed 100 per cent, there was no doubt at all, he'd seen it too, those looks, I swear man, it was no joke, you get me, something happened there, it was for fucking real, and to be honest, it's not something you can hack seeing day in day out, you know, it's like, not a look you want to see, I mean, like, maybe it sounds like ego or something, but that's just how it is, you don't want to be faced with that panic, get me, you don't want to be standing next to someone who's feeling that panic, I mean, I don't know, that's just how it is, I mean, go ahead and shoot me, yeah, but I just want to go down the gym with my mate in the evening, cool, calm, do my reps, chat shit, wind down, you know, my job is stressful too, getting so much shit the whole time, so I need space, you know, a free space, where I can forget about other people's problems, you get me, so I don't want to have to take their panic, it's got nothing to do with me, you get me, I mean a man's got to fucking be able to listen to skits, really, a man's got to be able to listen to his interludes without some guy next to him flipping out, to be honest.'