

1.

(...)

You've decided to make a report, yet sometimes your hands shake, a twin shake matching that of your words, an aftershock in your throat; you stare at the door as if it were a window onto an unforgettable landscape, then an awakening; you dig into your pockets and place your wife's passport, a slim photo album and your marriage certificate on the table. The ante mortem questionnaire: twenty-two chapters collating the characteristics of a missing person, traits she possessed during her lifetime, *ante mortem*, with the aim of finding something through analysis and comparison with *post mortem* skeletons, splinters of bone and data. What is found is not the person, just her remains. The innermost remains, if you like, but also the outermost, in the sense of the last remains, the very last, and yet they talk of identity, those missing and seeking that person, meaning *a perfect match*, and at the same time *the person's inner entity*. The levels mix, seeming inseparable: there is no way to avoid it – the corpse becomes an individual. How long can this thought last? Surely only as long as the human fragment has not been seen, as long as its death is allowed to remain an abstraction, an idea.

The dead don't care whether their identity is established or not, it is no longer of interest to them whether they possess one or it has

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been lost over the years; from their point of view it exists only for the others, not for themselves. If it is eventually established, it is physical and coincidental; coincidental because it was never really about them, merely about classification.

Identity is clearly defined according to the questionnaire, composed of sex, age, disease, clothing, eye-witness reports and coincidental encounters. As we speak we attempt to encircle the missing person, to hold onto them, to fix them. Perhaps it is true: the unique character of a human being – her identity? – really is immortal, it can be found long after her death; every sentence is an *action*, every word is *made use of*: forming an identity as we speak, allocating an identity, gnawing at the substance as we speak on behalf of a human being, treading in unknown footsteps always several sizes too large; the outsider's perspective additionally alienating –

And one distinguishing characteristic steals all the others the show: the fact of disappearance mutates into a birthmark on a forehead, a scar on a cheek; to a love of swimming in the rain, of wandering the streets after midnight.

Who told you about the abduction?

My mother, Emine Alushi.

Your voice a little overcast; your eyes glassy at the edges, you knead your hands without pause.

I saw something had happened before I even got there. The front door was wide open, our neighbours and my brother were out on

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the street with no jackets on, even though it was very cold.

Special thick gloves, the gardens on the way to the village piled with snow, your breath leaves traces on the air. When you notice the commotion you start to hurry, you park in front of the drive, run the last few feet to the door, your brother Fehmi waves, Emine screams, *They've arrested her, they've taken her away!* Everyone talks at the same time, before you incessant weeping, you tell them to calm down, who have they taken away, you ask, who? *Your wife!* they sob, you try to pacify them, it must be a mistake, a misunderstanding, why should they arrest her, you say, you want to hear the whole story, all in the right order, Emine screams, *Three hours ago, they came three hours ago and took her and Ali!* I interrupt.

Who is Ali?

My neighbour.

You sigh; I've disrupted your flow. I give you a glass of water, you drink, beads of sweat on your forehead, your knees twitch.

What happened?

A dozen masked men at the door, hammering wildly, speaking Albanian, some of them in uniforms, some in civilian clothing, several wearing black sleeveless jackets and red gloves, most of them masked, only one unmasked, with long blond hair. They command them to open the door, the family is hesitant, the question is: should they run or hide, Emine wants to talk to the men, but Fehmi and his sons have to disappear first, she's heard about arrests but they were only after men, Fehmi, she commands,

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you all have to hide in the cellar and then we'll open the door, but only a crack. The men shove her into the living room, they shout, they want *weapons, gold and money!* The women don't answer, they beat them so badly with their guns that the children whimper. We have nothing, cries Emine, her body black and blue from their blows, they break her hand, we haven't got any weapons, *bullshit!* They don't believe her, they kick her, punch her in the face, chain the children together by their necks, force them to kneel on the kitchen floor, your wife is insulted, taken away, nobody dares to contradict, *bad things brood in their ears.* They hear the van door opening and closing, the engine starting.

Did anyone see the vehicle?

My nephew, he said it was a white VW bus, the tyre tracks were still visible the next morning.

What did the men cover their faces with?

Black scarves over their mouths and noses.

What did the uniform look like? Did your family notice a particular emblem?

It was green, there was a white eagle on the badge.

I've heard of them, of the *White Eagles* and *Arkan's Tigers*, paramilitary units lured into the war by the thought of twenty thousand marks a month, not including the bonuses for villages destroyed, successful expulsions, sweeping whole regions empty, *precision work*, finally for taking refugees hostage, only returned to their families in exchange for large sums of money, providing the hostage survived –

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We have the same suspicion, but we don't mention it.

Only now am I allowed to take an interest in the missing person's name; the questions strictly according to plan, no deviations possible. Avoid the past tense, at all cost.

What is your wife's name?

Fahrie Alushi.

Does she have a nickname?

No.

What was her surname before marriage?

Ivanova.

Where was she born?

Prishtinë.

When was she born?

5 August 1977.

Do you have any personal documents for your wife apart from her passport?

No.

Do you have any photos of your wife?

You place colour copies of the passport on the table: a turquoise background, Fahrie wearing a grey suit, black curls dangling over her forehead.

Where was she living before the war?

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In B.

What was her working status?

She was a student.

Have you ever heard from another person, a person from outside your family, that your wife may have died?

You stare at me as if you didn't understand, how could you, you believe your wife is still alive, or do you have doubts? I don't want to ask this question either, I'd rather skip this chapter, believe me, but still –

I carry on; I notice your voice getting quieter, you frown as if you were trying to move your ears closer to me.

If so, did the witness give a written testimony? Do you know where this information might be? Do you happen to know where, in what municipality, the body might be buried according to the witness?

Are you indignant, are you incensed? I can't tell, your gaze blocks me out, a wall; you fold your arms.

No, there aren't any witnesses like that, but I'm sure there's a list of all the graves, hidden somewhere, buried –

Like there's a *book of sightings*? A register describing which of the missing persons was seen where and when; it allegedly goes round restaurants and cafés, a work that promises miracles, yet its appearances are random, just as random as the abductions and arrests it tells of.

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What was your wife wearing when she was abducted? Trousers or a skirt? Was she barefoot or wearing shoes? If so, what kind?

You flick through your address book.

She was wearing a long black cotton skirt, tights, boots and a white blouse.

Was she wearing underwear?

You nod.

What exactly? Bra and vest? Knickers?

You shake your head, you have no notes about that. When you answer I suspect you're only speaking to fill the gaps on the form.

A white cotton vest and white knickers.

What colour were the boots and tights?

The boots were brown leather, the tights –

You shrug, you don't know; and the less you know, the more unlikely it seems to you that you'll ever see Fahrie again, the more guilty you feel; as if it were within your power to lead her out of her supposed captivity with every question you manage to answer.

What brand was her clothing? Can you remember where your wife liked shopping, which store?

A helpless look.

Was she wearing anything else under her blouse apart from underwear, perhaps a T-shirt?

No.

What did the blouse look like? Did it have short sleeves, long

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sleeves or puffed sleeves? Did it have a particular pattern? Was it ruffled or waisted?

You sigh, glancing through the pictures in the album. No white blouse. I don't know, I can't remember, maybe striped, yes, I think it had stripes.

What colour were the stripes? Where they thin, broad or patterned?

The evening darkens your thoughts, you know this track, this is how a delicate path behaves: Now your sighing is back again; what can it be, the preliminary stage to tears? At least you sigh several times before you start to cry; and sometimes the sighing seems to replace crying up until it becomes irreplaceable.

How tall is your wife?

She was small, delicate –

You gesture, drawing her body in the air then halting abruptly. You sigh, suppressed, barely audible but still. Showing there are no more right words, at the same time searching, reaching hand over hand for the right phrases. The pause remains; it is a vacant space. As long as there are no *right words*, this space will have to be left blank –

She's short, a head shorter than me.

About one metre sixty?

Yes.

Or is sighing just a sound after all, a sound that catapults from inside to out and back from outside to in like a boomerang? A

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characteristic, unacceptable physical expression, unacceptable in the sense of unanswerable, or what might be the right answer to a sigh? There's no answer to lift the excess weight of the sigh, every consolation loses force, loses weight, in the moment it is uttered; all at once the words are light as a feather, disappear sheepishly in a conversation that isn't a conversation: It is impossible to answer the sigher with sighs, not mocking or imitating but empathetic, expressive sighs, heavy with content, pregnant with meaning, but still months away from giving birth.

What colour is her hair?

Dark brown, almost black, small tight curls.

Long or short?

Shoulder length, longer when it's wet.

Perhaps, though, sighing is an allegory for grief, an allegory for the act of crying, which is to genuine crying as imagination is to reality; sighing leads to nothing in the end, but gives rise to a symbolic replacement: an image, an illustration, a symbol of one's state of mind, an allegory for tears.

Does she have grey hair?

No.

Does she dye her hair?

No.

Or there are two tongues living inside you, one past and one present, feeding on two different memories, identities. The dichotomy is articulated in linguistic fractures, hybrid sentences: in

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sighs. Double-dutch arises from the attempt not to lose contact to that sunken language, by making excursions to the present day. The translations are in vain; your speech is clearly now anchored at the *end of language*.

Does she write with her left or right hand? Or is she ambidextrous?

She's right-handed.

Does she wear glasses? If so, can you describe the frames?

No. Her eyes are very good.

Does she have any scars on her body, from an operation or injury, does she have any tattoos or distinctive birthmarks?

She has a scar on her thigh. The skin there is darker, it's a big brown round mark.

Does she take regular medication?

No.

Is she diabetic? Does she suffer from asthma?

No.

Perhaps your sighing indicates the once existent, now lost answers. *Once upon a time, long long ago*, solutions nestled comfortably in their dolly nest, *catalogue*, cosy and warm in their matter-of-factness, more than one for every question. Now you think there were only one possible answer to everything, all that remains is the pauses between the sentences.

Has she ever had an operation? Has she had any operations on the

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brain or head?

No.

Has she ever had a broken bone, a leg or an arm?

No.

Does she walk with a limp?

No.

Does she have prostheses, artificial limbs?

No.

Too harmless, this explanation, much too harmless. You really have forgotten the rules of speech, you've forgotten what it's like to comprehend and be comprehended. Your sighs always express the same answer, because there is only this one answer now. After endlessly long days and nights spent thinking, you are *empty of comprehension* up to the brim.

Is she a smoker or a non-smoker?

She doesn't smoke.

Was she pregnant at the time of the abduction?

A slight pause.

No.

Does she have any fillings in her teeth?

You nod, I show you the schematic sketch of a set of teeth, ask you to mark the teeth with fillings, you hesitate, you'd rather not say anything, you might be wrong.

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Has she had any teeth removed?

The top right wisdom tooth.

Does she have any gold teeth, silver teeth, broken teeth, crowns, black teeth?

You shake your head.

Is there a gap or space between her upper two front teeth? Is there a gap or space between her lower two front teeth?

You shake your head again.

Perhaps in the end, considering the nature of the sigh, it could be a pause for breath before the next sentence, the next word, a rest on the way to meaning during a silent walk, in which every answer in the form of gesture and language has become meaningless; then your sigh would be merely a voiced expression of pain that exists outside of the body, but now and again slips into your eyes and nose, your hands and shoulders, and begins to tug at you, so that at some point, all at once defenceless, you *break into* your body.

Does she have an overbite?

No.

(...)

Translation: Katy Derbyshire