

Simon Elson

Story of Disorder

Sample translation by Jamie Lee Searle

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Her emotions are a sea; deep, and with tall waves of black-green water, as though illuminated from below. A screeching seagull plunges from the sky, seemingly wanting to pierce the white crest with its beak, swerves at the very last moment, soars back up again. High and higher still climbs the wave, then, without breaking, it rolls forwards, outwards. Behind, the silhouette of a ship, a lurching white fleck in the darkness, gripped by the next incoming wave.

Her emotions are like a sea, and yet she doesn't particularly like water. She almost never gets in the bathtub, into pools or lakes, and doesn't enjoy swimming in the ocean, with its eddies, currents and storms. She prefers sitting on the shore, a paperback in front of her nose, on a towel in the shade of a wicker beach chair. From time to time, she puts on her sun hat; it's red. She goes down to the sea and cools her feet – which aren't tanned in the slightest – in the water. Small Baltic Sea waves reach her toes. She bends down, picks up a shell, tucks it away in the pocket of her loose trousers, then another, and another. She immerses herself in the shell gathering, hypnotised by the colours and shapes. She begins to hum softly. An old Christian song. Hearing the cry of a gull, she looks up, shielding her eyes with her hand. She gazes over the water, which glistens in the midday light. A bird soaring, the distant fishing boat, peace – like this, the sea is bearable.

Her emotional life impacted on me like a storm, like a wave, probably even when I was little, before I could call her Mama. I must have felt the wave, the dark water towering up and threatening to engulf us. I also felt the longing for tenderness and calm – though my mother, when I told her about my sea-

vision, cried dully down her ancient telephone: “But those are your emotions you’re describing! That’s *your* sea!”

I had no emotional vision of my father. I didn’t dare ask my mother how she would describe his emotional character. She was even more reluctant to talk about him than she was about herself.

I Childhood

Spring

The large living room in our house, which was surrounded by wild forestland, stretched steeply upwards, almost as pointed as a circus tent. The ceiling was made of a pale pine wood, whose grain and knot-holes produced ever-renewing patterns when I stared at it for long enough. It was dusk now; I could barely see the ceiling. My father was carrying me on his arm, my head rested on his shoulder, I was crying.

I had been playing in the garden, where the crocuses, dandelions and daisies were already blossoming, when a storm gathered. Scared by the thunder, I fled inside. As my father was home, which wasn’t often the case, he comforted me. First, he turned off all the lights. Electricity attracts lightning, he said. We stood in the half-dark living room as it boomed and flashed outside. I jumped at every bang and cried louder. My father wanted to move closer to the window with me, I struggled against him. But he went closer anyway, ever so slowly, to the thunderbolts and lightning flashes. He wore thick socks, his steps on the wooden floorboards almost soundless. I buried my face in his shoulder. He spoke to me soothingly.

I felt his calm breathing, his body so completely relaxed. And I became calmer too. I clung to the brown, dense cotton of his pullover, and finally dared peer out of the small living room window. Through the branches and young leaves of the tall trees around our house, I saw lightning flashes in the sky. They blazed in a dazzling blue-white I had never seen before. Then the thunder, a rumbling that stayed in the distance, no longer coursing through

my belly. I grasped that this wouldn't bring the world to an end. I barely heard what my father was saying, but his strength spread to me.

He was proud, and recounted at supper that night how bravely I had watched from the window. My little brother wasn't listening, and my two older sisters smirked. They already dared to venture out on the terrace during storms, to my mother's disapproval. She sat opposite Papa, at the other end of our large, oval wooden table, spreading slices of bread with butter and helping my brother eat. Contentedly, she pushed the little pieces of bread and honey into his mouth. She didn't like dares. At my swimming class, she struggled to hand me over to the robust instructor, who sometimes, if necessary, shoved me off the one-metre board and pushed me underwater during diving so I'd get the seahorse badge. Other mothers watched their children through a glass partition that separated the cafeteria from the pool. My mother rarely did that. I was kind of a cry-baby and she was sensitive, often a bit "wimpy" – I learnt this word from her early on. When she spoke on the phone, sitting on the sofa with the brown wool cover, I sometimes went to her and she would caress me. Rhythmically, like a weaver at her loom, she stroked my hair behind my ear, looked at me with her green, cat-like eyes, which contrasted with her dark hair. My three siblings also knew she liked doing that while she was on the phone.

Our garden, a seemingly giant forest, was the best playground. The house, built into a slope, had three floors in the lower part, and just two above. It was new, built according to the anthroposophical principles of our parents, with lots of pale wood and nooks and crannies; cosy, muddled. I didn't wonder why the windows had to be partly "wonky", as I would have described it as a child, or why there wasn't one single square-shaped room. It was home, my circus tent, cave and castle. All around, on a plot of land larger than a football field, stood at least thirty tall trees, mostly oak. The narrow path around the house could be ridden along with a tricycle or bike, which my mother soon forbade us from doing, because we often strayed off the path and destroyed her plants. "Only ground elder is a weed, because it's so rampant," she explained.

I didn't go to kindergarten, because I had my younger brother to play with. And Mama. She was always home, and taught me everything. That the body of water at the bottom of our wooded plot wasn't a river, but a stream, a small one. But that it was still possible to drown in it, especially in spring, when it rained a lot. She explained to me that although rubber boots stay watertight at the bottom, they fill from the top if the water's too deep. And then what? Empty them out, put them back on, carry on playing. It didn't bother her that we never came in from the garden clean, and rarely with dry feet. We could drink the water from the stream, "but not from the puddles on the street," she warned us. After all, she knew I had once scraped some grey-pink chewing gum from the concrete and put it in my mouth, something my father had merely laughed at. Dirt was good, he said, because it strengthened a child's immunity.

Things my mother didn't warn us about, because she blocked them out: how mean the neighbours could be. Mr. Nagle, who we nicknamed the Old Nag, regularly ranted over the wooden lattice fence of his property, directly behind the stream. "Get out of there, you can't build a dam, this land belongs to the city!"

We retreated, cowed, but returned the next day regardless. When my courageous, quick-tempered, curly-blond-haired brother and I weren't arguing with the neighbours, we argued with one another. We pushed one another into the cold water, flung mud, pulled each other's hair, pinched. Sometimes we bit into our own arms and legs so hard you could see the indent of the teeth, showing it to our parents as proof of the other's guilt.

But we also loved one another, were affectionate, gave good night kisses, shared our spoils: spiked sticks, sharp flints or coins found buried with the building rubble. From time to time, as the older one, I was able to make my brother do exactly what I wanted. At night in bed, he had to listen to my home-spun fairy tales; outside, he trotted obediently along behind me, armed with wooden swords or stones, while I sung the fitting song to some invented story I had woven around us.

When I wasn't ordering my brother around, my sisters ordered me around. They sat up in the tree house in snug winter coats and purred that I was "so fast", and "so strong". I felt good when I was sent for the hundredth time to ask Mama for raisins and apples, a hand towel or some other thing. She scolded my sisters: "Stop making your brother run around for you!"

"But he wants to," the girls defended themselves, without moving even a millimetre. I didn't understand what the problem was; I was happy. Once again, I climbed down the crooked treehouse ladder, ran across the terrace into the house, stumbled over the doorstep, flew in, pulled myself upright again, and eventually reached my mother in the kitchen. "Can we have some nuts?"

I was always running. Red-cheeked, breathless, warm with sweat.

"You're properly steaming," said my mother.

"Like a steam engine?"

"Something like that."

I had already run off again with the nuts.

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II Death

Only the hallway light burned, casting its glow into my parents' empty bedroom. The spartan double bed was made, as though they were already up. So early in the morning? I heard a sound on the stairs: our lodger. Because Mama and Papa had gone to the cinema, she had looked after us the previous evening. Her red hair was even more dishevelled than usual, enhancing the shocked expression on her face. She had slept on the sofa, she said, because –

"Huh?" I scratched my head. My pyjama bottoms slipped down a little as I sat next to her on the stairs.

Before she could say anything more, the front door opened downstairs, Mama came in, her steps even quieter than usual.

“You don’t have to go to school today,” she said. Her face pale, ancient, otherworldly, but her hand, which briefly stroked my cheek, was warm. There had been an accident, she told me, “Your father’s in the hospital, I’m going back there in a moment.” Her voice had a steady and reassuring tone. “Make sure you all put your slippers on, it’s cold,” she said. Then she was gone again.

We sat down to breakfast at the dining table, like on Sundays, but without our parents. Skipping school was exciting, but an eerie mood soon spread. The lodger kept darting off into her apartment, smoking one cigarette after the next. Slowly, hesitantly, it became lighter, the clouds hanging from the tips of the bare trees, or that’s how it looked when I peered outside, my nose pressed up against the cold windowpane. Boring brown foliage, dead mulberries. Nothing moved. A February without snow, the day after mother’s birthday.

“It must be something bad,” I said – my brother, who was standing next to me, punched me.

“That’s not true!” But his eyes said otherwise. We tried to imagine what the hospital Papa was lying in looked like, except I’d never seen one from the inside and my brother barely remembered. “It was dumb,” that’s all he knew. We weren’t in the mood to play.

Hours later, Mama returned again, accompanied by our grandmother and a woman preacher. Cold blew into the house behind them, all three of them deathly pale, and not because of the February light. Papa had died, we found out while we were still in the hallway, by the front door. I hadn’t noticed who had said it, my mother, the preacher, I could only make out my grandmother’s voice, “my poor little ones,” a loving coo that I wanted to answer with a scream. I beat my hand against the hall cupboard. Mama’s face was as motionless as the preacher’s. They were still wearing their coats, black, silent statues. I had to do something, I ran off, wrenched open the door that separated the self-contained flat from our hallway. The lodger was standing there, she had heard, her round face a grimace of horror. I fell into her arms.

“Papa’s dead!”

She howled. Her smell a little smoky, like always. The wooden floor I was standing on in my threadbare slippers was the same as yesterday and the days, weeks, months and years beforehand; stained, springy, homely. Except a frozen pole was growing inside me, from my stomach to my throat. It choked and pressed. I knew immediately what my father's death meant: he was gone and never coming back. His soul, so small and delicate, had ascended to heaven.

I ran back to our part of the house. My brother, his gaze fixed on the living room sofa, wasn't making a sound. I cried until I couldn't cry anymore, and then again and again, nothing got better. My mother in the midst of us children, hugging and caressing, her arms not long enough to stretch around us all. She seemed to be elsewhere in her thoughts. She wasn't crying.

Hollow-eyed and tired, my older sister decided to go back to school the very next day. We joined her, wanting to leave the house that felt lifeless, as though all its breathable air had been used up.

My teacher, surprised by my presence the next morning, took me in his arms, his wrinkled loving face incredibly close, soft and helpless. He sent me into the playground to explain to the class what had happened. I was allowed to take a classmate as company, and deliberately chose one I didn't know well. While I told him about my father's amazing animal books, which I would inherit, he stared helplessly at the half-frozen February puddles in the playground, his hands buried in his trouser pockets. His shoulders were hunched up like mine. I couldn't feel the cold, but still shivered. The cold, pressing feeling was inside me again, gurgling and glugging, a dammed-up river.

"There are pictures of lions in the books," I said.

He nodded.

"And tigers, crocodiles, bears."

"Sounds good," he said, pulling one hand out of his trouser pocket and scratching his chin.

That night, I laid down with Mama on the bed. She was just lying there, her arms outstretched. I saw something run out of her eye and down her cheek.

“Are you crying?” I asked.

“No,” she said. “I’m just tired.”

Soon she moved out of their bedroom into the smaller room on the ground floor, and later down into the cellar. Their shared bed had consisted of two single beds pushed together, one of which she took with her as she moved around the house. The other disappeared, initially downgraded to guest bed status, then I slept in it. The lodger, a student, had long since moved out, fleeing the grey cement wave of despair.

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