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She Is Not Me

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World Editions

Published in Great Britain in 2015 by World Editions Ltd., London

www.worldeditions.org

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Cover design Multitude
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First published as *Hon är inte jag* in Sweden by
Wahlström & Widstrand, 2012
Published by agreement with Ahlander Agency

British Library Cataloguing-in-Publication Data
A catalogue record for this book is available on request from
the British Library

ISBN 978-94-6238-031-8

Typeset in Minion Pro

The cost of this translation was defrayed by a subsidy from
the Swedish Arts Council, gratefully acknowledged

Distribution Europe (except the Netherlands and Belgium):
Turnaround Publishers Services, London
Distribution the Netherlands and Belgium: Centraal Boekhuis,
Culemborg, the Netherlands

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The Girl knew they had done something big. She had felt it in Mama's shaking hand as the soldier studied their passports and cast coal-black glances at her face, comparing it to the photo.

'What's your name?'

'Setareh,' Mama had answered.

She had wanted to protest, but Mama's nails were digging deeply into the palm of her hand. Pomegranate-red drops pushed out through her skin and burnt her fingers, tearing her eyes away from the soldier's darkness.

'Can't she speak for herself?'

'She's tired; it's early.'

She knew they had done something big. She had felt it in the pit of her stomach as the plane was taking off, and Mama was sometimes shaking with laughter, sometimes shaking with tears, or was it something else entirely? But most of all she had seen it in Grandpa's eyes when he released his tight grasp on her and handed her to Mama. Grandpa, the biggest and strongest person she knew. Who hated tears.

She had felt the unknown, ungraspable plan so strongly that she had felt called upon to do her part when the plane touched down and they were met by the police again. Police officers who said no. Police officers who opened the door to a small room. She had pulled away, screamed. She had tried running out to Papa. Wasn't that his voice she

heard on the other side of the thin wall? They couldn't be stopped now, not when they were so close, had come so far. Where were they going?

She had been caught and gave up. She lay down on a cold stone bench, and with her eyes half-closed she followed the police officer's writing hand, as it filled in one sheet after another. Mama's voice churned on, a mixture of words she understood and something else. The Girl could see in the police officer's hesitating hand that she didn't understand all of Mama's words either, but there were stacks of paper with questions that needed to be answered.

She didn't understand the police officer, and she didn't understand Mama. She didn't understand how the police officer could be a woman, a woman with such thin, such fair-coloured hair.

'Tell them your name,' Mama said now, and stroked her back. She hesitated. What did they want to hear?

'Setareh,' she heard herself answer. She was trying to support the plan, but it must have been the wrong answer because the policewoman stopped writing. Mama froze.

'No, your real name!' Mama's nails dug into her skin again.

The policewoman stood up, and shouted out into the corridor. She closed her eyes completely, hoping to make herself invisible until the plan had been carried out. It was probably too big for her.

The small room was smaller than all of the flats they had lived in over there. She knew because she had measured by taking long strides from one end to another. But this room felt bigger, it felt endless. She curled up in the window. The white ground stretched as far as the eye could see,

and then those tall trees took over. The window made all the difference. They had never had windows before. Back there they had hung large sheets along the walls; it was the first thing they did every time they moved in someplace new. Dark sheets that sometimes allowed blinking police lights to slip through, making Mama's hand search for hers, and Papa's hand reach for the pack of cigarettes. Back there, the world had ended at the wall. Here, it was at the wall, at the window, that the world began. She stretched out on the windowsill, rested her ear against her upper arm. There was no movement outside. She was used to outside meaning that she had to hold Mama's hand tightly and struggle against the flood of people who wanted to pull her along with them. She was used to seeing the women's black *chadors* dragging in the dust from the street. She was used to everyone looking like Mama. And to the fear that one day she would look up and discover that she was holding the wrong hand.

She was used to new smells at every street corner: saffron on newly steamed rice, raw lamb, man-sweat, and heated oil. She was used to Mama's eyes opening wide every time they left the house. Used to focusing her own gaze up, toward Mama's face. She was watching over Mama's eyes.

She was used to the crushing sound of car tyres against uneven asphalt, the street seller's songs, the sirens that screamed the second before a sea of people dressed in black streamed toward open cellar doors in search of protection. She was used to the loud beats of Mama's heart drowning out the ear-splitting sound of the sirens. The beats that never grew silent, not even when they were lying next to each other at night.

Here, *outside* was something else. It was quiet outside. She had never heard such a silence. It was so quiet it was deafening. If she lay in the window long enough someone would race by. Someone in bright, colourful clothes. Someone who held two sticks in his hands and glided over the white. Someone just as soundless as the trees. The colourful one reminded her of the white rabbit that leads the way to Wonderland, the rabbit that is in a terrible hurry. She wanted to run after the colourful figure to see if he had fallen into a hole when he changed from a ball of colour to a dot to nothing. She had tried once. She had run out into the snow in just her socks, but there was nothing there. Nothing but the silence. She had fallen to her knees and felt the tracks in the snow with her bare hands to reassure herself that something had actually passed by. There was something unnatural about the movement, the speed. This place was made for silence. She breathed in the scentless cold. Treading carefully, she tried retracing her steps back to the window.

It deserved stillness, this place.

*

The Girl chose to lie with her back to the room and to Mama and Papa, her gaze focused outside. She didn't need to look to know that Papa was resting his head in one hand and holding a cigarette in the other. Or that Mama was standing by the simmering teapot on the stove. They were waiting. In the same place. With the same expression on their faces every day.

'*They* decide if we're allowed to stay,' Papa had explained.

She had only nodded in reply. She didn't need to ask who *they* were. As long as she could remember, *they* had decided everything. *They* had taken Amo Taghi, Papa's best friend. *They* had taken the red car. *They* had forced Mama to wear a heavy, black *chador*. It was time to move again, because of *them*. And now *they* would decide: between sheet-covered walls or the white endlessness. She thought that the big plan was to get away from *them*, to make Mama stop arching her eyebrows, to keep her eyes from becoming wide and filled with fear. To make Mama's heart stop pounding when they were lying close together in the large bed, all three of them. Make it so that she wouldn't have to feel the beats echoing inside of her.

*

Sometimes she felt something in the air change and Mama and Papa would go into a kind of trance. Papa's wide Cheshire grin stretched out bright and shining, and Mama's laughter raced like pearls between the walls. Papa slapped *oddkollon* against his newly shaven cheeks and pulled her in so close that the aftershave made her eyes water, and Mama drew black lines around her eyes and looked at Papa, blushing.

'We did it, *dokhtaram*, Mama and Papa did it!' Papa would shout then, while Mama stood at the stove and carefully spread *esfand* over the warm burner. The burnt seeds would make sure that the good luck didn't end here. It would travel through the cosmos and make sure *they* made the right decisions. 'We're in Sweden! Do you know how many people there are back in Iran who want the same thing?'

She had no idea how many people were left in Iran, but she knew how much Mama and Papa had wanted this. How much they had whispered, how often they had made phone calls at night, how many times they had packed and later repacked.

'Do you understand what's different, *dokhtaram*?' Papa looked at her with hope in his eyes. She wanted to point out the window. She wanted to discuss the stillness, the endlessness, dots of colour gliding over untouched snow, rabbits and holes. But she let him answer the question. The plan was his, after all.

'Here, you're free! You are free *dokhtaram*! You can do whatever you want. You have rights. There are laws and rules that say you have to be treated like a person. No one is allowed to force you to think and believe what they think and believe. No one is allowed to kill you. Do you know what that means?'

She nodded, shook her head. Looked deep into his honey eyes, so many shades lighter than hers. Papa's honey look was so pure. She wondered if it knew what his hands seemed to know. His hands that shook and fumbled for the pack of cigarettes when his honey gaze disappeared and was replaced by something she still didn't understand.

'Everything we've been hiding from, all of the terrible things that could have happened, are gone. As soon as we get the right papers from *them* we'll get a new home, a home no one can make us leave. You'll get your own room with your own toys that will be yours forever. Then you'll learn Swedish, and do your homework, and get the highest marks, and do you know what the best thing is? Then you can become whatever you want. You can become a doctor,

an engineer, a cabinet minister, a lawyer, anything! There are *emkanat* here, *dokhtaram*.' Opportunities.

She recognized that voice. Papa had used the same voice during his *jaleseh*: meetings with strangers who arrived by motorbike; they would put on blindfolds and sit in a circle on the floor and never stop talking. She wondered where all of the words came from. Wondered who had taught these strangers all the thoughts and ideas that kept the sentences alive. Circle after circle of grown-ups with covered eyes who never stopped talking. They picked their noses and scratched their groins, convinced that no one saw. That was the whole point: the words could never be connected to a face. No one ever tried to look, to cheat. No one except her. She couldn't resist.

She recognized the voice and suspected that things hadn't turned out the way Papa had hoped the last time he had spoken that way. She hoped that he didn't remember, that he wouldn't be reminded. That this time was the time the plan would work.

In these moments, Mama didn't say much. Her red lips cast pearl laughter against the walls, but her eyes were blank between the lines of kohl. If you looked carefully, you could see that Mama sometimes let her guard down, that she tried to imitate Papa's happiness, but sometimes she forgot why. The Girl nodded to herself. *That's the way it is.* She looked at the empty air between Mama and Papa. There was no tension. They hadn't noticed that Mama wasn't really participating. The Girl chewed on the inside of her bottom lip and wondered how long it would take for them to notice, and if she could deceive them, mount blinders alongside their bright eyes, and absorb their sight into her own dark gaze.

She could read their every thought. In her, they only met silence.

LETTERS HOME

It's hard to explain. If only you were here and could see for yourselves. I wish I was there with you and that things hadn't ended up like this, but we can't turn back time. Both of us have understood that. We talk about it a lot. What if we had done this, what if that had worked, what if we had come up with a different plan. But we understand that there were no other options. No, I'm lying when I write that. I haven't understood. But he says that I have to, so I'm trying.

This is a strange place. I was prepared for the cold; that's not a problem. There are many different types of clothing to wear. A ski-suit for her that's made of plastic and feathers. Pants and jacket-in-one. Like baby clothes, only thicker. He thinks we should get some for ourselves too. It's important not to get sick, he says. We need all our energy to understand this. He says that all the time. That we need to do our best to understand. He wrinkles his brow and rubs his chin as he did when we were writing speeches and planning travel routes. Do you think this is a maths problem? I say to him then. Do you think we can sit and philosophize and suddenly, eureka*, there's the solution? We'll never understand because we won't be here long enough to understand; that's what I say to him. Then it becomes quiet, and he turns his back to me.*