

THE STORY

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I

IN THE worst village in the country, from which no good will ever come, certainly not now, a young woman was suffering from a terrible sadness. It was the worst kind of sadness, filling her with hatred, killing everything it touched.

The woman's name is unknown. Not long ago, she was the most famous woman in the country, but now no-one remembers her existence. She had three children and a husband. A kind, gentle man if the story is to be believed, which it must, if I am to continue. Slowly, of course, her sadness was making his life the worst kind of hell and some years later he hanged himself, a tragedy for which only she can be blamed.

It began on a dark October morning when the woman carried a chair, a tiny desk, and her favourite fountain pen to the village square. She assembled them, chair first, desk in front, pen on desk, with great care, and then, realising she had forgotten something, returned to the house to fetch paper. After three deep breaths, she began to write.

—I was born in the worst village in the country from which no good will ever come—

As she wrote each word she would recite it in a voice which surprised her. She hadn't realised she could speak so loudly.

—My childhood was a miserable one, though some say it was happy. My father—

Her description of her father continued for many hours, in which time half the village gathered to witness this display of lunacy. Lunacy was a rarity in that village, one of the many things that made it, as the story goes, the worst village in the country.

In the early evening, her father, on learning of his daughter's behaviour, arrived at the square. His first thought was that she must be cold. She wore only a light sweater, and her legs were bare. His second thought was to chide himself for his first thought. *To hell with cold*, he told himself, *she is making a spectacle of herself*. Drawing closer he stopped when he heard his own name recited in that unnatural voice that filled his mind with dread.

—My father was a lazy man who forced me to marry the wealthiest man in the village who, though kind and strong, I did not love.

That was untrue, her father thought, or unfair. But she was entitled to her point of view. *She must be cold*, he thought, *his concern resurfacing. I should fetch her a blanket*.

—He was a small man with a frail, whimpering voice.

That, her father thought, was nonsense. Since his youth he'd smoked only the roughest tobacco; his voice was like nails.

—He was unable to satisfy my mother,

she continued, then paused, her first pause in seven hours.

That couldn't be true, he reflected, although, now he thought about it, he had never thought about it before.

—My mother grew to love him, but I always saw him for the mean, cold-hearted bastard—

Stop, the father shouted. Come indoors, child. You're making a fool of yourself with these damn lies. Come inside, I tell you.

He was astonished by how weak his voice was. His daughter didn't seem to have heard him, and continued.

—It was no surprise to anyone when, at the age of thirty-four, my father died from a debilitating disease that left him in such agony that he was unable to speak and could only jerk his head from side to side like a horse.

And, with those words, her father vanished, disappeared from memory and existence. That is to say, everyone remembered his death, but from many years ago, when he was thirty-four. There is worse to come.

II

By late evening, the woman's husband had arrived. He had come home from work, fallen asleep, then been woken by a friend. He rushed to the square. For months he'd been suffering deep anxiety over his wife's condition, and it was with tears in

his eyes that he watched her chanting in that alien voice. Not one person, he saw, showed any concern. They looked *amused*, in fact. He threw himself at his wife's feet.

Come home, he said. The children are all by themselves. Even if I mean nothing to you, he said, glaring at the crowd who pushed closer to hear his words, but think of them.

But she barely heard him.

—After my father's death,

she continued,

my mother became happier. She met another man, a better man—

Please. If it's something I've said or done...tell me what to do and I'll do it.

—In 19— I met my husband. He was a good man, and when I began to hate him, it wasn't his fault.

He flung his head in her lap, sobbing freely.

—But in 19— he was struck by a terrible disease, she said, and at this her husband looked up and she saw, for the first time, that there was nothing in his eyes but love. But he recovered, she continued, and was healthier and happier than before.

When I began to write he would bring sweets and milk to the square for me.

And she smiled at him.

That's enough, the husband said, standing and snatching the paper away. Let's go home and pretend this never happened. We have to live, don't you see? We have to live as best we can.

—But then,
she said, tearing the paper away from him and pushing him onto his back,
eight years later, he hanged himself. No-one knew why. It was a terrible tragedy.
The husband picked himself up and began to walk home. He returned, an hour
later, with sweets and milk which he set by the desk. She did not look up, although,
some hours later, writing by the light of the moon, she drank some of the milk,
and nibbled at the sweets.

III

Six weeks later, the village had grown. There were no hotels, so visitors paid
families to house them, and when they could not pay they slept on the streets.
Some families let strangers sleep for free, but not many. There was a madness
about the visitors that was unwelcome.

The woman hadn't left her chair. She slept no longer than five minutes a day,
during which her husband would stand guard with a gun. No-one challenged him.
There was love in his eyes, the sort that kills without hesitation.

The crowd was bigger than ever. And the police had arrived, though they were
identifiable only by their uniforms. They watched, as fascinated and fearful as
anyone else.

The story had grown. She had filled sheet after sheet with her handwriting, and
they lay on a separate table, neatly bound and dated. The woman told stories of
anyone who came to mind. Old women became young; lonely women, sometimes

miles outside the village, found happiness when strangers arrived to take their loneliness away. But if only that were all.

Families who had lived in the village for years found themselves on the other side of the earth, unable to get back. One man awoke in jail for debts he hadn't incurred although he remembered, with brutal clarity, those wild spending sprees that had cost him his liberty. For others, nothing changed, but they couldn't sleep without visions of terrible things to come.

As the woman wrote on, her story wound its way into the future. Dozens learned that they would die, which came as no surprise, but also how and when. Some sighed with relief that they would pass into the next world—and there was a next world, she told them—with their loved ones beside them, their peace made with god. Others were not so lucky.

As her fame grew, people travelled greater distances to see the storyteller and the ever-increasing story. They brought gifts—cars, video cameras, compact disc players, the latest inventions from abroad—and whispered their names in her ear, praying for her to be kind to them. When this practice became frequent enough to annoy her, the storyteller ended it by gazing hard at one such supplicant and writing a single terrible sentence. He was never seen again.

Months went by, and it became clear that the village, and indeed the world, would never be the same. The storyteller began to write of far off lands while the course of history shifted, slowly, heavily, like the plates beneath the earth which cause continents to leave their neighbours and head out into the sea.

The chief of police arrived from the capital, and then the secret police, and then the army. The area around the storyteller was cordoned off. Ministers held emergency sessions that continued for days. It was impossible to kill her, they realised. It was written that she couldn't die (volume three of the story). It was impossible, too, to control her. She had more power than any man or woman alive and, while some begged her for favours and some trembled at the sound of her name, others met in secret to share their anger.

And that's where I come in.

IV

I can't tell you my name or where I was born or who my parents are. All I can say is that I used to live in our nation's capital. I was a lawyer by day, and a revolutionary by night.

My comrades and I were rationalists, intellectuals, though we did not shy away from action when the time was right. Remember that bomb blast at the southern end of the old city...but why betray old friends? Suffice to say, we were young, growing older, angry and growing angrier.

At first none of us believed it, but we had to admit that something was afoot. The newspapers spoke of little else. In fact, our clandestine press was the only one who ignored her. All that mattered to us was the state, and its destruction. However, when the news reached us that the storyteller had turned her attention to the

capital, we became uneasy. People were disappearing, and so, at long last, my comrades and I gathered around my kitchen table to discuss the question of the storyteller.

Damn the story! I remember saying. I can't speak for reactionaries, but she can write what she likes about me. Nothing will happen, comrades. *Words* will never hurt me.

They pretended to agree, but I knew what they were thinking. They were going insane and I could see it. They were worried that she would hear of my insolence and that I would disappear in mid-sentence, my memory erased from their minds. I was the only one who saw the truth, and I saw one world, a world gone mad.

We should draw straws, I urged. Whoever drew the shortest would seek the storyteller out, find her, and kill her. If the army killed him, then so be it. He would die a martyr.

I waited. Not one eye met mine. I stood, put on my hat and my overcoat, and, packing a knife and my gun, left for the railway station.

V

The journey took three days. On the second, I met a young priest and we began to talk.

Do you know which is the village of— he said.

I looked at his face. It was rigid with hatred.

You are going to see the storyteller? I asked, quietly.

Of course. I am going to kill her.

He sounded bored.

So am I, I replied, without hesitation.

We spoke little after that, but it seemed he felt his mission to be a divine ordinance, though I suspected the storyteller had also killed someone dear to him.

When we arrived at the storyteller's village it was evident that it was no longer a village. There were hotels and restaurants on every street, museums and amusement parks devoted to the storyteller. Young children hawked souvenirs, mostly scraps of parchment said to be fragments of the story. The priest and I ignored it all and found a hotel some distance from the centre. It was late. We spoke little but drank a good deal of brandy before falling asleep.

VI

The next morning we rose early and loaded our weapons. It was easy to find the square; the whole world, it seemed, was going that way. The hawkers were already up, and there were signposts on every street.

The young priest looked pale. He had clenched his fists as we left the hotel, and they remained clenched as we walked. I was not afraid. The gun is mightier than the pen, I told myself.

When we reached the square I could not help but be astonished. Never have I seen so many people in one space. It seemed senseless, I felt—what could they see?—until I noticed the enormous video screens mounted on scaffolds from somewhere in the centre of the crowd. The screens were sectioned. One half showed the storyteller, typing with terrible ferocity into a computer, and the other displayed each letter as it was typed, in bold capitals. From speakers, mounted on every side, the storyteller's words resounded into the crowd. It was a synthetic voice, generated by the computer, a truly bizarre sound.

—Born in 19—,

she was saying,

in the village of—. Died in 19—, from cancer of the lungs.

A scream from someone in the crowd.

—In 19— the village of — was razed to the ground by the army of —

I rubbed my eyes. This woman was evil itself. I had not realised she had gone so far.

—During the earthquake of—

—The famine—

—The civil war—

—The invasion—

—The massacre—

I stood, transfixed, until the priest grabbed my arm and pulled me into the crowd.

We made steady progress, but still it was half an hour till we found ourselves blinking in the light, pressed against the rope that separated us from her.

I was surprised. I had heard she was young and beautiful. Instead, her face was wrinkled and her hair was white. Her fingers moved so fast they were difficult to see, and I noticed that with every word she typed, her lips moved, as if repeating the word aloud.

The soldiers, standing behind the rope, faced us. They wore guns around their shoulders. They weren't there to protect the storyteller; she didn't need protection. They were to protect us from ourselves. I wondered how we would ever pass them.

The priest must have been thinking the same thing, and I noticed him staring away to the storyteller's right. A man was standing there, one hand in his pocket, the other holding a child's hand. The man's eyes were fixed on the storyteller without blinking. Her husband. I have never seen a man look so unhappy.

As I was thinking these thoughts, the priest took his pistol from his overcoat and pointed it at the storyteller's husband. Before anyone could react, he fired. The husband did not move, and the bullet missed him. He could not have been more than two metres away.

The storyteller did not look up, but the soldiers rushed towards the priest. I stepped aside, taking advantage of the confusion to slip beneath the rope. I decided, in that instant, to use the knife. To make certain.

I was so close to her I could have touched her, but before I could move she turned around. I froze, recovered, and drew my knife while she turned back and typed a sentence. My knife was raised, pointing at her throat.

—The assassin raised his knife and slit his own throat, dying instantly.

I watched as my hand pivoted and the knife turned, pointing towards me. I tried to raise my left hand to protect my neck, but couldn't move it.

The mind, I remembered. This is about the mind.

This is a story. Only a story.

only

a

story.

—He slit his own throat,

she repeated.

Only a story. Only a story.

The knife had stopped. Everything was frozen.

—He slit his own *throat*.

Only a story.

—He died, instantly.

Fear. I saw it. There was fear in her eyes. It was like a wall of ice shattering around me. I felt the strength in my muscles, the clarity of my thoughts, the heat of my blood, and I plunged my knife into the storyteller's neck. Blood arced upwards,

into the air. Again and again I stabbed her, until I felt a blow against the back of my head. Before I lost consciousness, my final thought...A happy ending, at last.

VII

But the story goes on.

She is dead, but the story goes on.

...who is the storyteller?

who else?

Here I sit, wrists chained to the keyboard. On either side of me are watchers whose eyes never leave the screen. They hold remote controls.

Attached to my temples are electrodes. One false *word*, and my brain will die in a thousandth of a second. Enough electricity to power a city, I was told.

I've thought about it. Let them kill me, was my first impulse. But they've outsmarted me. Not even the president knows of my existence. No-one but the Brotherhood of the Story, as they call themselves, who control us all, and always will. It was they who suggested that, as I had defied the story, I would have the power to tell it. I was kept in solitary until one day I was blindfolded and a man entered my room. He explained their decision to me.

I would write, all day, every day, Once a month I have a half-day holiday, which I spend in my cell. I write what they tell me to. Nothing more, nothing less. If I refuse, they will torture my comrades and kill them, then choose twelve villages from my province and burn the inhabitants alive.

I answered that they would do this anyway, but the man said no, it was not so. With the power of the story at the brotherhood's disposal, there would be little need for violence.

I would rather die, as they well know, but dying is not an option. So I agreed, and here I am.

I cannot tell you my name or where I came from. I was told to tell the story of the story, and you will never know if it actually happened, if we only think it happened, if it happened and was rewritten, or if, after all, it is only a story.

Perhaps no-one will ever read these words. The most I can say is perhaps. They will kill me otherwise.

It is late. I need sleep. I will finish now, with their permission. Finishing is a ritual. I type the final words and they unshackle me and take me to my quarters. At the end of each day, I write the same two sentences while they watch, fingers on buttons.

Here were go.

VIII

And the story goes on. It will never, ever stop.

