one story

Morgondopp

Rachel Heng

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A Note from the Editor

by Patrick Ryan

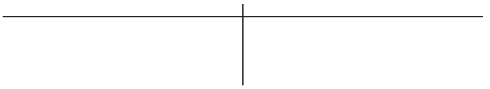
Our new issue is my favorite kind of love story—one fraught with uncertainty. And it turns out the author, Rachel Heng, didn't know her story would have any sort of romantic angle when she started writing it. As she says in our Q&A, it wasn't until she wrote the line, *I fell in love with your elbows*, that she knew what "Morgandopp" would, in part, be about.

Gunilla is an elderly widow in Sweden who's out for her daily swim when she spies a new swimmer: a Southeast Asian man who, it turns out, has a soothing, protective presence. He also has a dramatically troubled past she can neither touch nor scarcely imagine: he spent decades in isolation as a political prisoner in Singapore.

Imagine bringing that to the table, when you're starting a new relationship. But are they starting a relationship? Or are they just there for each other—for now? Gunilla doesn't know, nor does she know how to ask; she only knows that she wants to understand him, and love him, and hold him. But how do you hold someone who's been held against his will for half his life?

One Story is delighted to be publishing "Morgondopp," a very uncertain kind of love story by the author of *Suicide Club*, Rachel Heng. We hope you enjoy it as much as we did.

Morgondopp



Rachel Heng

Gunilla first met the strange man on the brygga, which had been renovated just last year with new wooden boards and comfortable benches. All to go with the sauna that had finally been completed, a seven-year-long project in the making, since the small town on the lip of this Swedish coast had taken a long time to make up its mind if it wanted to be the type of place with a seafront sauna.

By the time Gunilla met the man, many would have considered it too late. Oh, she was healthy enough, would celebrate her seventieth birthday next year no doubt surrounded by friends and nieces and whoever she cared to invite. Not her husband—her husband was dead. This was why, after decades of glorious summers, they had relocated permanently to their vacation home in this town, to see his slow cancer through. Now it was through, and William buried in a churchyard up north with his mother and

brothers, and Gunilla alone on the brygga one morning in October, the Baltic Sea silent and silver before her.

This late in the year, there were few bathers who persisted, and Gunilla knew all of them. Charlotte, the fishmonger, whom it was said had been born in the town's lighthouse. Per, whose wife had also recently died in a terrible biking accident. And Margot, the Frenchwoman who lived here year-round and had affairs with tourists in the summer. The slim figure now cutting through the water belonged to none of these people. For one, his hair was very dark, and his skin, like pale honey. He was swimming laps but, like a local, wore no wetsuit despite the icy water that within seconds would numb one's limbs. And he swam with a grace that Gunilla, in all her years in this seaside town, had never seen before.

I fell in love with your elbows, she would tell him later.

She watched him now, with no thought of love except for a quiet hum of interest that she would have denied, had anyone pointed to it. Back and forth he went, his turns in the water made with military precision, as if encountering some invisible wall in the sea. It was early when she'd arrived, the light angled and gray, but slowly the sun was coming out, clothing the waves in a weak shine. The man concluded his swim. As he climbed the ladder to the brygga, Gunilla saw, with some surprise, that he was East Asian. A tourist, then. But what tourist would show up in late October, what tourist swam with such precision and single-mindedness? Perhaps he was Swedish after all, from a different town,

somewhere further north, where the water was even colder and more brutal. It was wrong of her to assume that he was foreign based on his race, she knew. One was no longer to say such things aloud.

"Är det skönt i vattnet?" she said to him.

He stared at her quizzically.

"Is the water—" she paused. Skönt. There was no direct translation. "Nice?"

"Oh," he said. "It is very lovely."

His English was clipped, neither American nor British. Nor did he sound like the Japanese or Chinese tourists who sometimes came across the bridge from Copenhagen. She found herself staring at his chest, which was smooth and freckled. From the creases around his eyes, she thought he could be no more than ten years younger than herself.

He tilted his head toward the sea. "Are you going in?"

Gunilla nodded. Quickly she stripped off her thick bathrobe, exposing her skin to the chilled sunlight. She wanted to ask the man where he was from, but self-consciousness stole over her. The crinkled flesh of her knees, the violent whites of her thighs. However, she had always been proud of her narrow hips, her tall, straight back.

In any case, it was ludicrous. Gunilla went hurriedly down the ladder, into the clear water.

Morgondopp, morgondopp—the made-up ditty that her mother had always sung during their childhood swims had driven her mad when she was a girl but filled Gunilla with melancholy today. Her mother had swum laps too, right up

till her eightieth birthday. In a dozen short years, it struck Gunilla, she would be older than her mother had ever been.

The cold drew a gasp from her lungs. Here was the sharp burn, the seizing of skin and muscle. No matter how often you bathed, the water never lost its edge. He was still there when she came out, dry now except for his hair, dressed in a polo and cargo shorts that made him look like a boy.

"Oh dear," he said, pointing to her ankle.

She looked down. Blood was trickling along her foot, tinging pink a puddle on the dock. Sitting on a bench, she pressed her towel to the wound.

"I must have cut it on the ladder. Just a little scratch."

She was not one to make a fuss about cuts and bruises. But her towel was soaking through at an alarming rate; the cut must be deeper than it looked.

The man bent next to her. "May I?" he said.

When she nodded, he sat on the ground and pulled her foot into his lap. Expertly, he wrapped the thin towel around her ankle, making a tight knot that he then squeezed between his palms. The pressure felt good to Gunilla, like a firm hug. She had not been hugged in so long. Had anyone hugged her at William's funeral? Perhaps one of her grandnieces or nephews. But they were so tentative with their touch, thinking, perhaps, that she was frail and not wanting to hurt her. As a girl, she had thought that of her own grandmother. But she was not frail, she was strong, she was descended from Vikings, she swam in the Baltic Sea, a little cut on the foot was nothing.

Abruptly Gunilla moved to stand. But the blood rushed to her head and she sat down again. Another spell of dizziness—these had been plaguing her more and more lately.

"Sit a while," the man said. "Are you cold?"

She laughed. Was she cold! She was a local. Was *he* cold, she should be asking, an elegant little slip of a man like him. But she could see he did not mean to patronize her, and so only shook her head, good-naturedly.

"Where are you from?" she asked.

The man paused. "Singapore."

There was something about the way he said it. Deliberately neutral, as if the place were a lover who had caused him great pain.

"I hear it's beautiful," Gunilla said, struggling to remember exactly where it was. Not China, she knew that much. North of Malaysia? Or south. Either way, the Fredrickssons had lived there for over ten years, hadn't they, and they were always talking about the broad, clean streets, glittering swimming pools, their docile live-in maid. "I have friends who lived there. They loved it. So spotless and modern, they were always saying. And everything just worked. Beautifully efficient, unlike here. Oh! And you have a famous zoo, don't you?"

"I suppose we do," the man said. "I myself have never been."

"No," she said. "I don't go to such places either. There is no reason to, unless one has young children, which I have never had. Do you have children? Grandchildren?"

An awkward silence fell. Gunilla remembered suddenly what an American friend had once told her, that it was not done, in many other cultures, to talk about politics, religion, or one's personal life with strangers.

"No," the man said slowly. "No children."

"Are you on holiday?"

He smiled. "No."

"And when do you go home?"

"Home?"

"To Singapore."

"Oh." He slowly unwrapped the towel from her foot. The bright red was shocking, like cherry juice. "I don't live there anymore," he said, wiping her ankle; the wound had stopped bleeding now. "Does that feel better?"

Gunilla nodded. A frantic feeling arose: she did not want the conversation to end. But the man was already standing up. Carefully he folded her blood-soaked towel and handed it to her.

"Well, have a nice day," he said.

Normally, she would have no qualms about inviting a newcomer to tea. She could have him over to her little patio, put buns on the nice plates with the blue flowers on them, fuss over a pot of coffee. But something about the man made her hesitate. He held himself cautiously, almost warily. Behind the reserve, one sensed a bright, smoldering flame, and Gunilla longed to know what it was.

She had always had an infallible intuition about people. Hadn't she been right about William? From the moment

she met him that late summer evening in Stockholm, across the dinner table at an old friend's house—the gazpacho, particularly, had been wonderful, fresh and cool, like biting into a chilled, unripe tomato itself—she'd known she would marry him. William was nothing like this man. Perfectly ironed shirt, neat, gelled hair, eyes bluer and colder than even hers. His father owned a large shipping business, and Gunilla, a girl from a family of modest means in the South, whose mother had painstakingly built a lovely collection of Royal Copenhagen porcelain piece-by-piece, had always longed for a life of beauty. When she was thirteen, she'd worked a backbreaking summer clearing stones from the fields of any farmer who would pay her. How her calves had ached by the end of it, how her tender, girlish hands had grown rough. But, triumphantly, she counted her earnings, then went with her mother in the ferry across the channel to Copenhagen. There was no bridge in those days, and it took the boat seventy minutes to cross the Øresund. In the city, she bought her very first silk scarf, the fabric light and cool to touch, dyed a deep green, the same color the trees in their garden took on after an especially heavy rain. Walking out of that shop with the scarf knotted around her neck, Gunilla felt passersby look at her differently. Her life, she saw, could be something rare and beautiful, full of possibility.

William was like that scarf, with his slender hands, perfect manners and crisp linen shirts. She had led that life for close to fifty years, and now he was dead, and she, left with a

house full of lovely, expensive things, memories of weekend trips to Bordeaux and Bologna, and the dawning feeling that, in all this time, she had never really lived.

Perhaps it would have been different if she had had children. But she had never wanted them, those messy, snagging thorns who tore at the smooth fabric of one's life. Still there was the feeling of something missing, and here she was, almost seventy. There was not much time to find out what.

Gunilla stood on the brygga watching the stranger recede on his bicycle down the long wooden path. In her hands she still held the towel, neatly folded, soaked in blood.

At the same time every morning that week, Gunilla went to the brygga. But each time she found herself alone.

It was a very small town. If she had not seen the man again, he must have left. Well—such was life. She reconciled herself to forgetting his freckled chest, his careful hands; downplayed the wave of curiosity that struck her when she had first spoken to him.

But late one sleepless night, she found herself pulling out her phone and slowly typing in *Singapore*. South of Malaysia, then, and once a part of the same country. Humid all year long. High in all the key social indicators: education, public safety, healthcare, et cetera. A home ownership rate of ninety-one percent. Among the world's highest life expectancy, fastest internet, lowest infant mortality. On and on the glittering list of achievements went.

I don't live there anymore. Why would anyone choose to leave such a place? Why, for that matter, barring war or ruin, would anyone choose to leave their home?

And then, a few weeks later, there he was again, this time in the cheese aisle at their local ICA.

"Would you like to come over for tea?" Gunilla blurted.

"Hello," he said to her with mild surprise. "Tea would be lovely," he said.

He had used that word for the water, too. ***Lovely***.

The next day, Gunilla cut fresh roses from the garden, polished the silver candlesticks, dusted every cracked baseboard in her old, spotless house. "Sorry," she whispered to the spiders whose cobwebs she normally left untouched—a sign of a house's health and a great help in getting rid of pesky mosquitos—but cleared with her broom now. At five till three she sat and waited, cardamom buns neatly arranged on her best serving dish, mugs set out for tea. At five past, he still had not arrived. No matter. In some countries, she knew, it was polite to arrive slightly late, to allow the host extra time to prepare. But at fifteen past she began to fret. Of course he would not come. She was a strange woman he had met on the dock. And why she had allowed herself to fall into the embarrassing state of wanting, she had no idea. When she was young, she had thought that age would bring with it peaceful release from the desires that plagued her. But, if anything, her appetites had intensified, in inverse proportion to her ability to fulfill them.

The doorbell rang. Gunilla leapt to her feet. There he stood, in her doorway, once again in cargo shorts—was he not cold? She ushered him in.

He apologized for being late. He had been making these—he held up a small container of what looked like green cakes—and they had taken longer than he remembered.

Kueh, he called them. Not cakes exactly, but a dessert, meant for teatime. She would try them, wouldn't she?

Of course she would. Happily, she brought out an extra plate for his green cakes, which were sticky and a little misshapen, like lumps of plasticine.

An awkward silence as they sat down at the table.

"Did you know," he said slowly, as if picking up a conversation they had concluded minutes earlier. "Scientists have found that there is only one color universally recognized, and named, across all premodern human tribes?"

"Green?" she said. The color of grass and trees, and his little cakes.

"Red," he went on. "The lowest number of colors named by any one tribe was three: 'light,' 'dark,' and 'red.'"

"Surely light and dark are not colors," she said. A world was not comprised of light, dark, and red alone. It was a thought that didn't quite belong in her bright, airy house, amongst the fine porcelain cake plates and gently scented roses. "So they wouldn't be able to see this," she went on lightly, picking up one of the kueh.

"See it, yes. Perceive its color as being significant enough to name, probably not. Though the next named color for

many tribes, they found, was grue."

"Grue?"

"Green-blue."

"Ah." Gunilla's eyes were green-blue. His, she noted, were black as night. "What does it matter, anyway, whether you have a name for a color or not? They exist nonetheless."

An odd, harsh look settled into the man's face. He leaned back in his seat abruptly, the chair's legs scraping against the polished wooden floor. A scratch would be left. She knew nothing about this man, Gunilla realized, and had invited him into her house on a whim.

"It matters what you call a thing," he said.

"I—"

"There is nothing else that matters."

"I don't mean to offend."

Then the hard look disappeared, and he shrunk into his mild, polite self again. "My apologies," he said, bringing a hand to his forehead. "There is no offense."

Silence fell. Gunilla picked up the teapot and filled their cups, which now felt like silly playthings, children's toys, in her hands. She concentrated very hard on the stream of tea, with the feeling that something terrible would happen if she spilled.

"I truly am sorry." The man's voice was soft now. "I am a terrible guest."

Still, Gunilla did not say anything.

"It is no excuse," he went on, staring morosely at his hands. "But I have been alone a lot, for such a very long time."

It was exactly the sort of thing a serial killer or sociopath might say. And yet there it was again, that surge of curiosity that she would not acknowledge as desire. The words seemed to cost him so much.

"What do you mean?" she asked cautiously. Depending on what he answered, she thought, she would decide if he should stay or leave.

The man sighed.

"Have you ever done something that changed your life forever?" he asked.

Gunilla bristled. "No one action changes a life," she retorted, finding her voice again. "Except in sentimental movies, and novels. Life is a series of tiny, everyday choices."

The man nodded thoughtfully. "I suppose you are right. I made my choice over and over again."

Along with her curiousity, she found herself unable to avert her gaze from his slim but strong neck.

"Decades ago," he went on. "In the years my country had just broken free of the British, I was an opposition politician. The new ruling party was comprised of ambitious, idealistic Singaporeans. But for differences in opinion—how our young country's destiny ought to be accomplished, what could and could not be sacrificed in its name—perhaps I would have been prime minister." He chuckled. "And not—not—" The man stopped short, clearing his throat. "Well."

What she ought to say, Gunilla knew, was that they needn't talk about it if the man did not want to. Nothing about his demeanor had changed, but his eyes had taken on a

glassy look, and the way he cleared his throat made her think of her nephew, as a teenager, when he was trying not to cry. Something made her resist the urge to change the subject. She was probably being a bad host, but she could not help herself. She wanted to know.

"Anyway, they locked me up." He let out a clipped laugh.

"For what?"

His idealism had been his downfall. To him, pragmatism was expedient, heartless, mercenary; to the ruling party, it meant survival, power, wealth. Supporting the Americans was pragmatic, so he was arrested for unlawful assembly when he protested the Vietnam War. Urban redevelopment was pragmatic, so he was charged several times with sedition, for various articles he penned in newspapers criticizing the displacement of the working poor. Suspending due process in the name of national security was pragmatic. On and on the list went. So many daily battles, so many tearful conversations with his mother—here he paused, and blinked—who begged him time and time again to go back to his old life of being a clerk. But he could not return to that life of procurement documents and endless sheets of meaningless calculations. Eventually the inevitable happened, and he was put away.

"I was never tortured," he said mildly. "Just to be very clear."

That was indeed what Gunilla had been thinking; as always, her thoughts were too visible on her face.

"But there are far subtler ways of breaking a person. We were accused of being members of the Communist Party,

you see, working towards violent insurrection. Oh, and they could be persuasive, those in charge. They sent my mother to me, crying and pleading. They wouldn't let me sleep for three days, three nights. They took my glasses away. Other things, little indignities that, added together, could become quite intolerable. Almost everyone signed a confession, eventually. I hold it against no one for signing. But I could not renounce what I had never supported to begin with. I did not have it in me to submit."

"How long were you held?" Gunilla asked.

The man paused. His eyes, she saw now, were not black as she'd initially thought, but a deep, chestnut brown, like the slippery pebbles that washed up on the shore.

"Thirty years," he said calmly.

The sheer length of time was not the most unusual thing about his confinement, he went on. For the last decade, he had been required to live under house arrest on a rocky island off the coast of Singapore, no larger than a couple of hectares in size. He lived in the spartan room at the base of a lighthouse, one of the island's few buildings.

"Pulau Satumu. 'One tree island,' in Malay. Thankfully it had more than one tree on it." He chuckled drily. "When I arrived, the lighthouse was crewed by four men. Cheerful, simple guys who took bumboats out from the mainland each day, and shared the lunches their wives made with me. Oh, those were jolly times, especially after spending all those years in a cell. To walk on the rocky shore, to feel the breeze on my face every day—I thought I was in paradise.

Eventually they changed the lamps so that solar power could be used instead of generators, and the crew went down to two, and then to one. And the years dragged on. I grew more alone. Every night I watched the beams from the lighthouse sweep across the dark waves. And there were more and more ships, ever larger it seemed, lugging enormous steel containers of who knew what. Television sets, fresh produce, sand for construction. My beloved country was hungry, and I was watching it grow fat—from a distance. Once, I saw such a ship get into an accident, a container splitting open like a peapod. Out of it came shoes—orange sneakers, so bright they hurt one's eyes to look at in the afternoon sun. They floated for a long time, the sneakers, like little life buoys on the waves. The next morning they were all gone."

Gunilla did not know what to say to his strange tale. She had the feeling of shadows gathering in the corners of her house.

"Is that why," she asked, "you swim so well?"

"The sea has been my only friend, all these years."

The love of the sea Gunilla could understand. But what a hard, awful life, what a hard, awful place! Singapore, yes, but the world—all the world. What secrets did her beloved Sweden harbour beneath its graceful beauty? She was not naïve; she had grown up during the ugly war, remembered keenly the long, freezing winters when coal was rationed, knew what concessions to morality had been made in the name of survival. William's father's shipping company had thrived during that time, being one of the few involved in the export of ball bearings and iron ore to Germany. And

her life, her scarves, her house—all of it purchased with the money made from those ball bearings, all that iron ore ripped from the earth.

As if reaching for a life raft, Gunilla reached across the table and grasped the man's hand. It was warm and dry, more calloused than she expected. She wondered if only she felt the jolt that passed between them.

For a time, they saw each other almost every day. The man had come to Sweden to complete a doctorate degree in sociology, and though the university was in Stockholm, he'd been loaned the holiday home of an old professor to focus on completing his dissertation.

The man roused dark, confused feelings in Gunilla, made the world feel larger, more unsafe and impossible than ever before. And yet she felt she must see him. Endlessly she questioned him about his life and imprisonment. What had they fed him? Was he allowed visitors? How frequently would they try to get him to confess? What happened to the others who had been arrested and released?

Most of all, what she wanted to know was this: had it been worthwhile?

But he had no answer for this question.

"Some Western newspapers would compare my imprisonment to Nelson Mandela's," he said with distaste. "Because of the length. But he freed a nation's people. I, on the other hand, am an inconvenient footnote of history. I cannot claim to have achieved an iota of what he did."

Was the country better off for his holding out? Did the average Singaporean care for the ideals he clung to in their name? There could only be one answer, he said, and that was no. Singapore had grown unimaginably prosperous during his imprisonment, on the wings of globalization and under the careful tending of a technocratic government that was uncompromising but also undeniably effective. And so, did he regret all those lonely, useless years?

Though he'd asked the question himself, he could only shake his head slowly and say, "I don't know. I don't know, I don't know."

"I hear," Per said at a dinner party one night, "that you have taken a lover."

Gunilla flinched but said nothing.

"My, my," Margot said, lifting her dark eyebrows. "Let me guess. Lennart, the banker? Elias, the doctor? Or that new chap, Carl, who just bought the Johanssons' old mansion?"

Still, Gunilla remained silent.

"Nothing to be embarrassed about." Margot's voice was kind. "You have mourned for so long. And William would not want you to be alone. Would you not want the same for him, if your places were reversed?"

Gunilla imagined being deep in the cold, soft earth, listening to the muffled toll of church bells up above. This was not what Margot meant, she knew, and yet.

"I hear he is a foreigner," Per said. "An—interesting character."

"Oh?" Margot leaned back in her seat.

"He is from Singapore," Gunilla said at last, defensively.

It was something no one expected of her, she who had married William and laid perfect tables for dinner parties for so many years.

Margot leaned forward playfully, turning a silver napkin ring in her fingers.

"And are you in love?" she asked.

It was the end of dinner, and the candles were burning down in their frosted votives, throwing erratic light over the dark walls of the dining room. The other guests were standing up and beginning to make the polite conversation one used to signal the end of the evening. Only Margot, Per, and Gunilla remained seated, waiting for Gunilla to answer.

What was love? She thought of the man's slender neck, the hard flesh of his shoulders, the placid glitter of his eyes. Until she met him, she had not known that she too had been locked away, in a prison of her own making. In him she had found something missing her entire life, something she had actively avoided until now. The true nature of things, the ugly scaffolding beneath the careful existence she had actively, subconsciously, constructed.

Or perhaps it was simpler than that. Falling into bed together was like falling into the freezing seawater. Every nerve in her body crying out, and the pleasure coming not without fear—fear of drowning, of losing one's breath, of being ripped away by a tide far stronger than herself. She

burned for him, she breathed for him. Again and again, with him, she felt herself born anew.

Because they had met so late, Gunilla wanted to show him everything. Each weekend they went on drives to different parts of the country that meant something to her. The town where her grandfather had been born, once famous for apple cider markets and now known solely for the popular model of Ikea sofa named after it; the French restaurant in Stockholm where William had proposed, miraculously still thriving after so many decades, their peach pâte de fruit just as delicate and succulent as she remembered; the cobblestoned shopping street in Copenhagen where she had once, as a girl, shopped with her mother.

"Delicious," the man said as he chewed the tiny, peach-infused morsel.

"Beautiful," he pronounced of the windswept town.

"Like nothing I've ever felt before," he sighed, fingering cashmeres in a department store that smelled of sandalwood and lemon.

But behind his agreeable manner there was a distance Gunilla could not breach. She struggled to understand his coldness. Deprived of the world for so long, did the man not want to experience it now? Perhaps her life was too staid, too unadventurous for his tastes.

There were other issues. Snags, Gunilla thought of them, like loosened thread in fabric that could be snipped and darned. The man did not seem to sleep, for example. After

their lovemaking he would lie beside her, alert and still, his breath never quite slowing to slumber. She would pretend, herself, to be asleep, and shortly after, as quietly as a cat, he would slip from her bed and leave the room, closing the door softly behind him. All night she strained her ears for clues as to what he could be doing, but the house stayed silent, with no hint of his presence except the thin bar of light under her bedroom door. No footsteps sounded, no opening of the fridge, no turning of pages. She wondered, absurdly, if perhaps all he did was stand motionlessly outside her door.

It would be easy enough for her to get out of bed and find out, but something stopped her. She did not trust herself at that hour of the night, did not want the man to see the raw need that would surely reveal itself on her face. Instead, she lay there, night after night, listening to the silence of the man in her beautiful, clean house.

On the last weekend of November, six weeks after they'd met, she surprised him with a trip to Lapland. Away from the sun they drove, through snow and ice, towards a purpling sky. A tiny outpost hours from the closest town, the guesthouse was flanked by dense, fragrant firs, and sat beside a frozen pond whose frosted surface was set alight each night by the brilliant moon.

Gunilla sat with the man beside the pond, the two of them wrapped in blankets and thick down coats, their gloved hands clasped tightly. From time to time she snuck glances at him, and, catching her, he would smile. But his

smiles were not enough to fill the hole he had pricked in her calm existence from that very first morning on the brygga, a hole that seemed to widen each day and threaten to swallow her entirely.

"Look," she said, pointing up. Green and silver lights rippled softly across the velvet dark, spreading slowly until they almost entirely covered the sky. "Isn't it incredible? People come all over the world to see this."

"Stunning," the man answered.

She turned to him. "Do you really think so?"

"Of course."

They sat in silence.

"But really," she said. "I don't want you to humor me."

The man looked at her kindly. "I don't understand."

"What are you feeling? What are you thinking? Are you happy to be here, with me?"

"I am very happy," he said, taking her hand in both of his.

"What I mean is—" she stopped.

"What do you mean?"

She stared into his kind, cooperative face. She did not want him to be happy, she wanted him to be ecstatic, transformed. To feel that after decades of cruel deprivation, he was now, at last, truly living. She wanted his life with her to hold the shock of the sublime, the frisson of truth, the exposed nerve of sensual and spiritual delight. Through him, she might feel herself restored. Theirs would be a joint redemption, a mutual return to life. How to explain this? Years of marriage to William and she had never felt this way. Her eyes grew

hot, and she was glad now for the darkness.

The man threw his hand up to the night sky, palm open as if to catch the falling light.

"Gunilla. Isn't this enough?"

And briefly, for the rest of that week, it was. Each morning they woke in the dark, filled a thermos with hot tea and strapped snowshoes to their feet. Out they went into the frozen fields, the moon flinging bars of silver light through the slim firs. They spoke little in those dim hours, but the sound of their feet crushing the soft, cold powder felt like a kind of conversation too. Then, as the sky grew bright, they would begin to talk. The man told her about his little sister, who had died as a toddler from dysentery, so dehydrated by the end that she could shed neither tears nor urine. To this day, on many a sleepless night, he still saw her dry sunken eyes, her sallow face. In turn, Gunilla told him about the neighbor's baby she'd watched as a girl for pocket money. Although the child had been plump and rosy, Gunilla could never shake the paralyzing fear that it would cease breathing in her care.

"I didn't even dare go to the bathroom," she said. "Once I held my pee for so long that when my neighbour came home and I stood up from my seat, I wet myself all over her carpet."

At this the man let out a dry chuckle, and they walked on in comfortable silence, with only the sound of the soft snow between them.

"Is that why you never had children?" he asked, sometime later.

A question she would normally be offended by. Couldn't a woman simply not want children? But with sudden clarity she saw that the man was right. The neighbor's baby had only been the beginning of her long fear of death, a fear that had gripped her unnaturally young. Deep down it had always seemed untenable to her that any life she brought into the world would have delicate flesh, a brittle skull and breakable limbs, a mysterious heart that, for any number of reasons, could be brought to a stop. No, no, better to avoid such impossibilities altogether.

They did not speak of his imprisonment anymore, but always it loomed at the back of her mind. Instead, they talked about his life before politics; the abject poverty of his childhood that, aside from the sadness of his little sister's death, had been mostly cheerful and boisterous. He had grown up on a wet, crowded street, wooden houses leaning in on one another. Their own house had had no roof but only a tarpaulin sheet to keep out the rain, and his entire family had slept pressed together on thin mats in one room.

"It sounds bleak today," the man said. "But it was fun."

Long humid afternoons catching earthworms in the mud, elaborate games of marbles with the other children on the street, going to school for the first time and realizing that through books and learning, an entire world existed beyond his neighborhood.

Hungrily, Gunilla took in the man's stories about his life. In his company, she felt she finally knew herself, but even after all this time, all these disclosures, she did not feel like she knew him. She tried to find the question that would truly open him up to her, that would disturb him, prick the sealed bubble of his calm existence in the way he had done to her.

But she held back, as birds silently crossed the empty sky overhead, with all that blank, frozen beauty around them. The man's question from their first night of the trip always echoing in the back of her mind. *Isn't this enough?*

There was a lighthouse some distance away, one of the few that far north, and they decided they should take advantage of the spell of good weather to visit it. The bare branches of trees swayed in the slant light, afternoons coming in sideways this late in the year, the sun making its low swing over the bright snow.

At last, they reached the lighthouse. It was nothing like the one in Gunilla's own seaside town, which sat in a robust wildlife habitat where birds flocked all year round and seals troubled the waves with their smooth, gleaming selves. This lighthouse was cold and desolate, a lonely building of bleached brick perched on bare rocks, looking out into an empty sea.

The man regarded the building amicably, as if appraising a long-lost friend.

"Much larger," he said. "And I don't think this one has solar panels."

"It's not operational," Gunilla read from the sign. "Just a tourist attraction. In the summers you can arrange for a guide to bring you to the top, but it's all locked up now."

They stared in silence at the heavy gate with its padlock. Gunilla took his hand. A memory knocked loose inside her, like a pebble in a riverbed rattling free. Once, as a teenager, she had scaled a gate like this. Who had she been with? Karin, with the light gray eyes of a cat, Alice, who always had on dark stockings that somehow never ripped or ran. It was an old factory, its stone walls overgrown with moss and black mold, windows gaping. The three of them had climbed the gate. Adventure, they thought, sheltered girls for whom adventure consisted of breaking rules. In they went, stepping over broken bottles and piles of blackened cigarettes ground into the dirt. Their voices echoed satisfyingly in that decrepit space. They took turns shouting silly things—the names of the boys they thought themselves in love with, childish insults for their most disliked teacher, jokes about periods and other bodily excretions—eventually reducing themselves to a giggling mess. But then, as they lay sprawled on the dirty floor, a low, frightening laugh rose up from all around them. The girls fell silent, pale with fear. The building itself was laughing, Gunilla thought. They leapt to their feet. A movement in the corner of the room caught their eye. It was a pile of blankets, and when they looked more closely, they saw a man with a thin, hungry look and the long, matted hair of someone shipwrecked. At his feet was a dog, so frail its ribs seemed about to burst through its mottled, patchy skin.

They had seen vagrants before; the streets were full of them in those crowded, post-war days. But something about this man struck terror into Gunilla's heart. Perhaps it was the dog; she had always loved dogs. Or the man's aspect—his fine, hooked nose and piercing eyes—reminded her of her own father.

No, she thought. No to what? She blocked it out. The girls ran from the building and soon they were outside again, their breath making little clouds in the winter air. Slowly they straightened up and began the long walk home. No more did they giggle, and when they talked, they talked of mundane things—homework, the weather—all in hushed, distracted voices.

Now Gunilla stood before another padlocked gate, though this one stood in the sun and guarded nothing more sinister than a tourist attraction.

"A pity we can't go in," the man said. "You'd have a lovely view from the top."

When she didn't respond, he turned to her seriously.

"I am leaving," he said. "Soon."

"What? To where?"

"Singapore," he said. "My brother is quite ill."

Gunilla turned her face away. The waves filled their silence.

"Is it safe?" she said at last.

The man chuckled. "It is the safest country in the world."

"What I mean is—" Gunilla struggled for words. He had not been back in over a decade, after all, and she'd assumed it was for fear of further persecution.

"I am an old man," he said. "I am of no interest to them anymore. Besides, the people have forgotten me."

"I don't understand." She was embarrassed to feel heat gathering behind her eyes.

"The day I was released," the man said, "they told me: make no mistake. We can come get you any time, any place. However far you go, we'll be nearby."

All around them the cold wind whipped and whistled. Gray light danced across the glittering waves.

"I did not believe it. I went to America, Germany, at last, I came here. I gave interviews to newspapers, spoke at humanitarian conferences. I made myself known to journalists, always staying in powerful countries with vigorous beliefs about civil rights and freedoms. If I were whisked away in the middle of the night from one of these countries, my thinking went, there would be international outcry. And Singapore was no China. The veneer of civilization remains important to those in charge."

Surely all those things were still true, Gunilla thought. And added to that—there was now the fact of her. But she did not say this, only nodded patiently like the confessor she had wanted to be all this time. What are you thinking? What are you feeling? Are you happy?

"This past week, with you, it's made me realize: all these years I've misunderstood them. They didn't mean it literally. Far too crude to send in a team of plainclothesmen to spirit one's body away."

Gunilla thought of their long, cold walks in the snow.

All those sleepless nights, the man sitting in her living room silently. Were these the thoughts that had plagued him this whole while? Were these the thoughts that would plague him always?

"That was the whole point of placing me on that island," he said. "With all its fresh, salty air and natural beauty. Its cruel illusion of freedom."

She reached out and, with gentle fingers, touched his silver hair. Beneath the coarse strands and thin, soft skin were the hard bones of his skull.

"I will never feel free again," the man said. "I could go to the ends of the earth, I could take to sea. After thirty years, one never forgets. One is never free." He paused. "It is time I go home."

This the man said without bitterness or irony. A chill ran over Gunilla; she had never heard him refer to Singapore as home before. Foolishly she felt a wave of pride, as if it was the sparse conversations between them, her careful probing and listening and processing, that had helped the man come to this new acceptance.

"I'll come with you," she said impulsively, bringing his hand to her lips.

A wave of improbable happiness washed over her. They would go to Singapore together, together they would face his dark past. A new existence awaited—one of adventure and strife, shadowy politics, buried ideals. There was life in her yet.

The man looked at her with kindness.

"You would not like it. It is nothing like Sweden."

"I would," she said. "I would like anywhere with you."

"Gunilla—"

She waited, but he did not continue. Finally, she understood that for him, she could be little more than the pâte de fruit, the seaside drives, the soft embrace of a cashmere sweater. The past was never past; there was no great romance that could fix the tragedy of his life. There was no great romance that could fix the tragedy—so much smaller, so much slighter—of hers.

"I do love you," he said.

The words were small in the face of the wind.

"Let's go back," Gunilla said.

He looked as if he wanted to apologize, but he said nothing more.

They went back south to the seaside town. The man did not plan to leave for another few weeks, he told her gently, since there were flights to be booked, arrangements to be made with his university, other logistics to set in motion. But he understood if she did not want to see him any longer.

Gunilla considered it. It would be the healthy thing to do, to keep her distance, for the man to return to his professor colleague's house rather than remain in her bed. But the town was so small, she reasoned, she could not help but see him at the grocery store or on the brygga. Besides, said a small, pathetic voice inside her, it was her last chance to persuade him to stay.

So it was decided that the man would remain in her house. They returned to their daily ritual of *morgondopp*, the water now in the bracing high single digits. They ate companionable dinners by candlelight in the early dark evenings, silverware clinking pleasantly in the cozy warmth of her home. They made love often, Gunilla's fingernails leaving red moons on the man's taut flesh, he biting her shoulder with a hunger he had never shown before.

Ever since they returned from Lapland, the man was able to sleep. No longer did he steal from her bed in the middle of the night, but instead lay curled against her body, warm and soft and sweet-smelling as a child. His breath was slow and barely audible; he never twitched or muttered. It was the sleep of the dead; it was the sleep of a man who had not rested in years.

Now Gunilla was the one who lay awake, listening to the silence of her house. "Stay," she whispered to him over and over, breathing in his salty, familiar smell. "Stay, stay, stay." Sometimes the man would shift and grunt, and she would let herself believe that this was him agreeing.

But in the daylight hours, his preparations continued. Soon the university had issued its official letter of deferral for the completion of his degree. Then his passport was renewed, arriving freshly printed in the mail. Finally, the flight was booked, the date set.

The evening before the man's departure, they went for a final swim. There would be no time the next morning; the man

had to leave early for his flight from Copenhagen. At sunset the sea was like dark mercury, gleaming in the velvet dusk. Under the surface of that freezing water, Gunilla embraced the man, winding her numb limbs around his.

"Won't you reconsider?" she said.

"Oh, Gunilla," was all he would say.

Emerging from the sea onto the brygga, Gunilla stared at his slim back, trying to fix in her memory the precise topography of his bones, the constellation of moles scattered across his skin. She held no illusions. Singapore was a long way away. After he left, they would not see each other again.

Back in her house, they dined as they had so many times before, talked of mundane things—the news, Per's bad heart, the garden shed Gunnilla wanted to put up in the spring—and then turned in for the night. The entire time, she felt herself balanced on a tightrope. She was determined not to cry or make a scene. And she succeeded, she thought, in putting up an ordinary front, betraying nothing of what churned within her. It was only when he slipped his hand under her nightgown that she thought she might break. She pushed him away gently, and he did not try again.

Soon the man was asleep. Gunilla tossed and turned wretchedly. She could not bear to hear his peaceful breaths, so slow and steady, so filled with the certainty of his leaving. She tried to meditate, she visualized the ocean, she counted backwards from a thousand. All the while, the man slumbered beside her. Finally, after several hours, Gunilla got out of bed. Standing in the doorway, she

looked back at the man's cocooned form with the feeling that this was the last time she would see him, even if there was still the morning. Slowly, she closed the bedroom door behind her.

It was a door of the old kind, which could be locked by key from inside and out, and a long time ago, the key on the inside had been lost by the mischievous child of one of her grandnieces. The key on the outside remained, its dull, cold silver glinting softly in the moonlight that spilled from the living room windows.

Gunilla was surprised at how smoothly, how quietly, the key turned in the lock, though it had not been oiled or used in years. Of course, she thought with satisfaction, her house had never let her down before.

She meant to turn the key back. Truly, she did.

But instead, Gunilla found herself stepping away from the locked door and going to sit on the couch. Just for a little while, she told herself. Just to imagine what it would be like if the man were to stay. Minutes slipped by, then an hour, then two. *Have you ever done something that changed your life forever?* If the man awoke and realized what she had done, well, you could not take back a thing like that. She imagined the scene, him frantic, shouting, rattling the knob. Her, silent, impassive, as somewhere across the bridge in Copenhagen, his plane roared to take off.

But of course, she would open the door before he woke. She would turn the key back and, in the morning, he would rise sleepily, none the wiser.

For now, though, Gunilla stayed motionless on the couch. The man stayed sleeping. The door stayed locked. Somewhere outside, the bright beam of the lighthouse in her own little seaside town swept ceaselessly across the dark and rocky shore.

Rachel Heng is the author of the novels *The Great Reclamation* (forthcoming from Riverhead) and *Suicide Club* (Henry Holt, 2018), which has been translated into ten languages worldwide. Rachel's short fiction has been published in *The New Yorker*, *McSweeney's Quarterly*, *Best Small Fictions*, *Best New Singaporean Short Stories* and elsewhere. She is currently an Assistant Professor in English at Wesleyan University.

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Q&A with Rachel Heng

by Patrick Ryan

PR: Where did you get the idea for this story?

RH: Growing up in Singapore, I had heard about people who'd been detained by the government. One of the most memorable cases was former politician Chia Thye Poh, who had been detained between 1966 and 1989 under the Internal Security Act, and was for some years after confined to the island of Sentosa, a tourist resort off the southern coast of Singapore. His story has stuck in my mind for many years. He was released in 1997 and I always wondered, how do you go on living life after something like that? How do any of the people who have been detained in such a shroud of secrecy go on living after? So the first seed of this story came from imagining a character who has been through something like that, who is later released and must go on living life normally. Everything else—Gunilla, the setting of southern Sweden—followed after.

PR: How long did it take you to get a draft you were happy with?

RH: I wrote the first draft fairly quickly, in about two weeks, but it then took another four months to expand and revise to a draft that I felt was complete.

PR: Gunilla is one of the quietest and mildest characters

I've encountered in a while, yet she possesses such strength and agency. I found her a fascinating character to play off that of the man, who is so accustomed to solitude. Were there any surprises for you, as the two of them began to interact?

RH: When I first started writing, I knew the man's history—why he was there, why he was swimming—and I knew Gunilla would connect with him in some way, but I wasn't sure how or why. I could just see them standing there on the dock, Gunilla watching him, the empty sea all around them. Two people isolated in their own way. I did not actually know that it would be a romantic connection until I wrote the line "I fell in love with your elbows." So all of it was surprising to me really.

PR: Did you have a sense, before you started "Morgondopp," roughly how many pages you might need to tell the story? That's something I never know, going in. *Will this one be short? Long?* Each and every time, I just have to wait and see.

RH: I did not, but most of my stories tend to run fairly long, and this was no exception!

PR: Do you know what happens past the ending? (You can just say "yes" or "no" and nothing more!)

RH: Yes, I think I do.

PR: Try to complete this sentence with one word: "'Morgondopp' is about _____."

RH: Loneliness, beauty, what it means to be free.

PR: What are you working on now?

RH: I am in the very early stages of a new novel. Early enough that I can't talk about it yet, for the fear of scaring it away.

PR: What's the best piece of writing advice you've ever received?

RH: I was very fortunate to have studied with the inimitable Elizabeth McCracken. During my MFA, I would often go to her office when I was working on something and ask her if she thought writing some element—plot, character, style—a certain way would work. Maddeningly she would always shrug and say "Maybe!" Her point being that she and I would only know once I had written it. There was no way to think myself into a solution; the process was winding and messy and that was the work. So I often remind myself of that when I get stuck thinking about whether something "should" be one way or another, will it work, can I pull it off, etc. I hear Elizabeth's voice in my head: "Maybe!" The only way to find out is to get back to work.

News & Notes

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