



Svenja Leiber

Nelka

A Novel

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Sample translation by Jackie Smith

You won't remember me. You wouldn't recognise my face if we ran into one another in the street somewhere. But me, I remember your face. I can still see it clearly in my mind's eye. I've forgotten nothing.

Marten places the letter on the table as if it were something fragile. Or something toxic. He leans back and, for a long time, stares at the wall opposite. It's true he is struggling to summon up her face from his memory. Not because he has never thought of her since back then. It's just that the times he did think of her were precisely when he was trying to put her out of his mind – something that, for years, he succeeded in.

At some point he gets up and walks over to one of the two north-facing windows overlooking the orchard which now, in the morning light of early October, is a blaze of reds and yellows: Cox, Boskoop,

Elstar – or in his words, the yield. In a hollow at the near end of the field, which this morning is pale with hoar frost, stands an old tree that is much too tall for the orchard, its crown half-broken. Its vivid red fruits seem to glow.

“Pomme de Coeur,” he murmurs to himself. “Pomme de Coeur,” and it sounds as if he is torn between an approving or dismissive tone of voice. Undecided, he turns away, goes back to the table and bends over it as though he were about to re-read the letter, or even smell it. He has to lean on the tabletop for support. He closes his eyes, and finds he is now able to picture her after all. His gaze surveys her in his memory: it takes in her fingers blue with cold and moves up her arm, over the coarse fabric of her jacket to the collar where her neck emerges, tense just like the surprised, or more likely frightened face above it. That woman, so very young, standing in the entrance hall, just on the point of taking something that wasn’t hers – one of the apples lying there in front of the mirror.

“Such a lovely apple,” she said softly and, to Marten’s surprise, in German. “Its flesh is white, with a red tinge beneath the skin. But it’s not a blood apple...” And she looked at him. It was probably hard for her to make out his face, as he was standing with his back to the window. She blinked like someone in an interrogation. But Marten himself was so taken aback by the words she was reciting and the very fact she was doing it that he could only stare at her. “It’s harvested in October,” she went on, “and stores well...”.

At this point Marten had interrupted her, he remembers with horrible clarity. He had cut her short – but with his hand, grasping her face and holding on to it. It took him by surprise too. He'd had no inkling he was going to do that. Why was she telling him those things, he demanded to know. And she waited for him to release her before quietly replying that it was valuable information.

“For whom?”

She gave no answer to that, almost as if she had none. And he had thrown her out, even though he had only just summoned her. She had gone, head down, out into the cold, and Marten had snatched up one of the apples and hurled it so hard against the door that the apple smashed.

The image blurs. Perhaps that's not how it happened. It may well have been different. Marten straightens up, walks round the table and out of the silent dining room, that place of failure, into the entrance hall. He takes a look around him, sees the old furniture, the coat rack, the speckled mirror, and himself reflected in it. He has been living here alone for years. And it's been years since anyone opened the windows. There are draughts everywhere, though, an incessant whistling. Or perhaps the whistling is only in his head, his mind ravaged over time by the perpetual wind blowing across the plain, or by something else altogether.

He opens the door, leaves the house, crosses the forecourt and drive of the former estate and goes down the other side to the little lake,

a millpond dug out a hundred years ago which has long since ceased to power a mill and is now just turning to swamp. He stops by the water's edge. He is not afraid, he tells himself. Should he be afraid of her? After so many years? Or precisely for that reason? Something always grows, in time, to cover old wounds: skin, grass, scars, bark. And by and large... Marten stares into the water. But to receive one of those letters so late in the day, later than everyone else... He realises that he is freezing cold, that maybe he has been freezing for a long time. Shivering, he turns his gaze away from the murky depths of the pond and looks back at the house, and suddenly he sees the external view of it as though for the first time: this big brick building with, in its middle section, a recessed entrance sheltered from the wind, as dark as the threshold of a fox's den. The house is not the typical shape of the other houses in the area, which stand in the drab landscape like massive barns, livestock and harvest all under one roof, with dark indoor threshing floors and hidden courtyards to ensure the occupants don't have to go outside any more than necessary during the wet, windswept half of the year. This house, by contrast, extends out sideways, asserts itself. Then again, it is not sited on the plain, but in a dip. Only the green and white painted window frames match the others in the vicinity. But the windowpanes, grown dull now, appear sightless to Marten from where he is standing, as if still covered with blackout paper from the war. The house stares blankly at him. And yet it is a decent enough house, he thinks. The orchard alone... He has no reason to be ashamed. Not then, not today. At this thought he straightens up, stands as tall as possible.

He has no reason to be ashamed. He walks back around the house to the orchard and along between the rows of low-growing fruit trees. He is not afraid. Alert, maybe. On his guard. He walks along the whole row of Elstar and back again between two rows of Boskoop. A sweetish scent hangs in the air, the scent of autumn and decay. Marten's mind is fixed on one tree only, the broken one down in the hollow. That tree is as old as this whole business, he thinks. Not part of the orchard at all as such, but certainly part of his life, standing there like a figure of fate, like his fate. He descends into the field, stoops down several times to pick up apples and carries them back to the house. He puts them on the kitchen table, pronouncing the words "Pomme de Coeur" once again, this time in a neutral tone. Then he sits down, draws a gardener's knife from his trouser pocket, carefully opens the blade and slowly cuts one of the apples in half crosswise. He regards the bisected core for a while, the regular star, before biting into one of the halves, closing his eyes as if inwardly testing the flavour. All at once he starts to his feet, rushes to the sink and spits out the bitten-off chunk.

Only once he has drunk a glass of water and wiped his mouth with the back of his hand does he regain his composure. He sits back down at the table and waits for the nausea to pass.

These letters have been turning up at houses in the neighbourhood for a year or two now, drifting late into the autumn of people's lives, when no one expected them anymore. Very occasionally there were also friendly letters full of a curious kind of gratitude. But those were the

ones, when people spoke of them at the bar or on the sidelines of some meeting, that Marten was secretly most surprised at. Those he found even more unsettling than threats or demands. And so now it is his turn. A vague something, dark and dull, creeps over him, starts to rear up on the horizon of his memory, impalpable, indistinct.

He goes to the telephone in the entrance hall and, slowly but without hesitation, dials his housekeeper's number.

"You have to come over today, Gonda. Some jobs I need doing." He struggles to suppress his instinctive sternness. "Please, yes?" he adds. Then hangs up.

There are doors in the house he hasn't opened in years. He hasn't been up to the top floor at all since his wife died. Perhaps since before that even. He makes his way along the corridors in a state of something like surprise as it all comes back to him, all those details you would tell someone who is not familiar with the house: the top floor has five rooms, just like the ground floor, a big old estate manager's house with its smells of leather, cold ash and dogs, with its empty chambers, its sideboards and serving hatches, its fireplace, its entrance hall, its walls bristling with antlers, trophies of past hunts with guests of the estate – this estate that foundered like everything else of its era, that went down with all the rest. There was no saving its reputation. They divided it up, split it into smaller and smaller pieces, as if it stood for something quite different that they were determined to break up, eviscerate, obliterate. Then the portions were sold off. The managed estate no longer exists.

All the same, Marten made the most of the hectare he was left with, maximised the orchard's output. But the mansion remains unoccupied to this day. Too large, too tainted, too ugly. The estate manager's house was always the more homely building, though it too is much too big for a single family, let alone a single person.

When Gonda finally arrives, Marten puts on his old work jacket, goes back outside, fetches the lawnmower from the lean-to and mows the dry grass, mows everything to the ground, anger bubbling up now, anger at the perpetual regrowth of the unwanted, while indoors the housekeeper cleans, airs, takes clean sheets from the cupboards, makes the beds and then drives to the shops, as if they were expecting an international delegation of pomologists.

In fact, only one woman is arriving. In three days' time. The short notice was evidently deliberate. Maybe she was afraid he might disappear or even die in the interim. It's possible. Indeed she has no way of even knowing for sure that he is still alive. Or she wanted to catch him off-guard. Or else – but he dismisses the thought straight away. It doesn't matter. At any rate, everything needs to be in good shape, himself included; everything needs to be battle-ready. He makes an appointment at the hairdresser's and asks the housekeeper to be available to drive him there. He avoids driving alone. He cannot see so well nowadays, especially in the twilight.

Two days later, Marten looks at himself in the harshly lit mirror as he waits for his shave and haircut. He is seventy-seven. That woman must

be about sixty-six now, a little older or younger maybe. She is sure to look older, he thinks. She is bound to have led a tough working life. Those people are working folk and always will be. He turns his head a fraction and observes a brownish mark on his neck. Images come into his mind, memories of the woman and him in another mirror. He feels the hairdresser's hands on his head. She made far too much noise with the hairdryer; now she is running her fingers and comb through his white hair and setting it in the usual way. His hair has grown accustomed to this parting, and so has he. But how it felt to be touched – that's something he had forgotten. Which is just as well, he thinks: the hairdresser's fingers on his scalp are much too close for his liking. He has no need of that kind of contact. He is briefly tempted to swipe the intrusive hands away. Then the young woman smiles at him in the mirror, and Marten grits his teeth and waits in silence for her to finish the job.

Back at the house, he stands in the entrance hall for a moment. It might be an idea to sort out some better lighting in here tomorrow. Then, with a twitch of the head, he goes into his study, takes something out of the inside pocket of his jacket and slips it into a wide envelope, which he seals there and then. Next he goes upstairs and casts an eye over Gonda's handiwork. He sits down in an armchair in the corner of the furthest room. This room, which was a late addition created from converted attic rooms, is the only one that brings back any memories. Yet he has lived in this house for fifty years. His son and daughter grew

up here. His wife died here. But none of it holds any particular associations for him. This room, though – there's something about it. Marten blinks. He feels as if he is not alone. It is still cool in the room. The autumn weather and the passing years have made everything damp and clammy. There is a musty smell in the air that turns his stomach. He doubts the woman will stay the night at his house; that's absurd. Then again, it is almost impossible to get back into town from out here in the evenings. She is going to have to stay; she must know that. At this, he stands up, goes downstairs to the kitchen and picks up the rest of the apples he brought in earlier. He takes them into the living room and places them next to each other on the mantelpiece, not noticing how it looks, not realising at first how exhausted he is. When he does then realise it, he keeps hold of the last apple, leans on the mantelpiece with his other hand, brings the apple up to his face and closes his eyes: and there it is again, coming at him like a wave, breaking over him, roaring and terrible. He feels a surge of longing; he doesn't notice how his jaw is working, as if his body were resisting these feelings, as if it knew the truth he has been suppressing all these years to the point that any resolution seems impossible and his muscles clench under the strain. It is not an immediate bodily longing, but rather a disembodied, almost undead longing for something that cannot be named. Something that had been erased from every narrative and had eventually faded over time. But that void that once seemed to have closed over is now bursting open, like a cheap seam. And the flesh of the past is showing through, raw and tender. It is emerging. The flesh is returning to him.

