



Lightness

a novel

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I've already told you that I came into this world a little early.

I weigh four pounds. I brown in the incubator for a good while, intubated like a little chicken that needs to be fattened up in a hurry.

Once out of the hospital, I don't remain a runt for very long. I never stop suckling; I'm bottomless. Within a month, I make up the missing pounds, to the detriment of the mental and physical health of my mother, who soon relegates me to bottles of Similac. I'm a baby on vacuum mode.

In the last world, my hunger must have been so great that it could never be appeased in this life.

I'm at the seaside. My mother and father, on either side of me, hold my hands. We're waiting in line. I have ice cream sundae all over my face. Its overpowering taste completely satisfies me. All around us, the blinking colours of the rides flash in a delirious frenzy. I get a giant buzz: so much beauty to be taken in at once. I'm one and a half.

The line comes to an end. The wooden carousel appears. The most extraordinary thing I will see in my whole life. The horses' movements frozen in mid-race, the pigs' and roosters' too. A majestic circle festooned with the golden light of bulbs as big as my head. I am placed on a yellow pony.

The ride starts to shake. Magical music emanates from its heart, rises into the night. I'm hallucinating. We go around, then once more, and once more again. I pass my parents every time, and they smile and wave at me. And it begins anew. I discover perfection. I want it to go on forever.

The carousel slows down and stops. The music ends, with brutal suddenness. My mother smiles at me. It's over.

My father tries to get me off the pony. In vain. He finally allows me a second ride.

Transported by the music, I immediately find my way back to a state of bliss, even more intense now than the first time. The smiling, the photos, the waving hands.

To my great disappointment, the moment ends, again. I am consumed with despair.

My parents let me go on a third time, then a fourth, and then once more, and once more after that. The fair is about to close. We have to leave. My face is hot, insane with pain and pleasure.

My father scoops up his little addict. My mother tries to calm me down. Impossible to manage grief of this magnitude. I watch the carousel fade away in the ocean of sparkling lights. I cry.

Somewhere in my brain, one zone turns off, and another lights up. I understand that everything has to end, and that this is just the way things are in the natural scheme of things. I was born and I died on a wooden pony.

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My mother goes away and leaves me in my godmother's capable hands. What my godmother doesn't know is that my world revolves around excess. Whenever it's time to wean me, I throw a tantrum.

My mother had let her know that I love grapefruit. So, she arrives with a whole case.

At snack time, she brings me to the table and slices a nice, juicy, pink one. The aroma of paradise splashes my face and wakes up the monster in me. I begin to choke on my saliva.

She brings the first piece to my mouth, and the momentum is unleashed. The pulp of this grapefruit is so perfectly and deliciously sweet that I need more, many more, so I can have this taste on my tongue forever.

I eat a grapefruit, then, from somewhere deep and guttural inside me, demand another. More, I order her. My godmother cuts up another grapefruit and I immediately devour it. Grunting, I ask for more. I suck up the juice until the fruit is nothing more than an empty, dry piece of rind.

After the sixth one, she calls my mother.

"Your daughter's eaten a lot of grapefruit. She's already had six and she wants another one. Should I give it to her?"

"No. She could go on forever."

She's right.

Whenever I'm told that something has to stop, a part of me breaks down a little more.

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During the first years of my life, whenever I arrive at my grandfather's house, he laughs and sings a song that goes, "As long as there's something in the fridge." My grandparents receive the briefest greeting from me, a greeting to satisfy the minimal requirements of politeness, before I dash straight to the fridge, or the candy cupboard, or the box of Danish shortbread. I seize everything within reach, even the black licorice, which I hate.

I'm not sure my grandmother finds that funny.

My mother decrees that I must not be laughed at, as if I were handicapped. I don't care. What's important is what's in my mouth.

I wonder what is so special about my behaviour.

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My grandfather reads to me. He tells me disquieting tales: of ghosts, of a mechanical nightingale, and of an endless winter. Tales spangled with the sublime, and with dread. He sings me songs, not just the one about the refrigerator. My grandfather sings, and the blue jays scream in the cedar trees, near the lake. We walk around the big meadow in the shade of Mount Orford.

I stuff myself with his stories, his words; I drown in them. They become as real as everything else. My mind begins to fill with their spectres.

Walking in the woods surrounding the cottage, I feel the trees' shadow on my skin. The old trunks squeak, and life swarms around me. Sometimes, deep in the woods,

there's a broken shell lying on the ground, and you can see a poor little chick inside, all curled-up and shriveled. In the fields at the end of the road, flowers blaze in the sunshine and crushed grass snakes cook on the dirt roads.

The water from the spring flows through my fingers, cold and silky like no other. Muddy pebbles give way beneath my feet. I dislike looking at the seaweed at the bottom of lakes and streams. The sight of these long, stretching arms claws at my stomach. I imagine myself buried under the mud at their roots, wrapped in their cool clamminess. I also hate seeing rocks emerging from the depths. Their black silhouette, sinisterly passive, unsettles me.

I avoid looking below the water's surface.

The swirling water grows dark, the forest quiet, and I return to the cottage. I open the fridge and stuff myself, filling the little holes that are growing inside me.

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My grandfather sits in his armchair and gradually begins to die from the inside. He laughs less and less, doesn't sing anymore. A slow, abrasive death, born somewhere in his kidneys. He doesn't know it yet.

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My mother's scared. Of strangers, of accidents, of robberies, of crazy people, of dogs. When I go out walking by myself I can't go past the bicycle path, which is three houses from ours. I'm not allowed to cross Chambly Road. The further you venture, the greater the risk. From the other side of the street, everything seems dangerous to me.

I never dare transgress these boundaries.

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