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THE SINGULARITY

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PROLOGUE

Meanwhile somewhere else just as the light turns green and the cars along a coastline prepare to leave the city and continue out to half-desert and mountains, a woman more slowly than ever crosses the highway, which is all, along with the corniche, that keeps the haze and the ocean rising higher away from the city center and beyond.

The woman is alone, searching for her child.

Nothing in her face recalls what once was and if someone shouts her name she doesn't turn around and say *no* or *stop it* in the language no one here understands, neither do they want to be reminded of it; if they stop she doesn't meet their gaze and if they say wait she doesn't come back with *why* nor later *I have just as much right to walk here as you do, don't you get that?*

It's Friday and soon the city dissolving with heat will fill up with lightly dressed tourists on a ramble through the food markets with fried fish and oysters and the shopping area swarming street after street leading to the square; from the large galleria the tourists, as from out of a hole, will make their

way to the museum quarter and the souvenir stores and once they've finished shopping move on to the rose garden and the university, the bookshops and parks and later the corn seller alone in the sun on the corner and the drooping palm groves where cats in repose from the heat stretch out only to later, once it cools, scurry along the sidewalks and walls to a restaurant patio, where they'll stay.

Further on—at the very front where a hill obscures the view and the road muddies in the tracks of digging machines waiting for work to resume—are abandoned new builds made of pale concrete and steel girders and a small library where only students go.

Yes, right across the road invisible to those looking out from the university across the green belt and the faculties, the new builds stand half-finished missing most of the walls to what could have been a living room or bedroom, bathroom kitchen store-room and now gaping mostly keep the students from the south shielded from wind and rain.

At night the students roll out their bedding on the concrete and push their one bag the only thing they have left against the wall, dozing off beside it. Then they wake up to the sun and the morning haze and lug their bag across the muddy earth up to their department, look around. At this time of day no one but the cleaners walks the empty corridors and no

cafes are open with discounted tea and coffee and yesterday's sandwich for a few coins and none of the guards ask where they're coming from or what they're doing there and no one plants their backpack on the empty chair next to them, saying sorry this seat is taken. The students wash under their arms and between their legs in the large bathroom at one end of the corridor and then sit down to wait for their first seminar in the armchairs outside the door, falling asleep, sleeping long.

Later they'll meet up around the fire by the sleeping area and go over how best to make this unfinished building a home—they'll discuss which walls are essential and from where they'll get the sheet metal and who's best at construction and where they can get a hold of screws and drills. The students will talk and laugh and before bedtime open their bag and repack it, take out dry socks and a sweater and walk flashlight and books in hand up to their spot by the wall.

It's Friday a late summer afternoon and soon the beach now vacant makes way for the trash to spread across sun chairs and parasol stands and softly the ocean will draw back from the rocks and reeds; the ice cream sellers will shove their broken carts up the hill past the palms and grill kiosks and the taxi drivers will run a rag over the seats and the cracked

windshield, will wait for men in suits to wave them down and with company beside them ask to be driven away from the corniche. Soon—just as they for safety's sake place a hand over their handbags and look around for the children who while waiting for work on the beach have fallen asleep sack and rake in hand—the tourists will climb the broad sidewalk to the corniche lit up at twilight and the ocean view indescribable to those who can afford to buy themselves dinner and a little wine at one of the restaurants along the corniche; the tourists will take a seat and ask for sparkling water and maybe a large bottle of house wine, marinated olives with capers and garlic and salted nuts to tide them over reclining with the late summer sea in minor revolt and the sky pitch dark and matte above the soon-to-be teeming corniche.

The woman searching for her child has been there, she knows what the corniche looks like and will tonight as every other Friday night since the child disappeared return there and wait; the woman will watch the girls who appear out of nowhere with mop and rag and follow them as they like The Missing One approach fresh spills and polish the floor to a shine again.

She's going to search and have a look around the corniche.

The fatigue endless she will wander up there slowly—determined and clutching her bag like the most valuable thing she owns she will sit on one of the benches outside the restaurant where her child was working soon before she went missing and keep the knife warm by passing it from hand to hand on the corniche.

It is the corniche she thinks of as the traffic light turns green and the streets near the city center darken and the shadows deeper than the day before render her invisible; it's the corniche and the girl and the grill kiosks and the children she sees as she steps out and slowly starts making her way across the road—it's the waiters in their black trousers black shoes and the men who stop beer in hand and shout after the children.

Like any other day she means to continue to the square, the alley, and on to the place where the greengrocer is already stacking melons and stone fruit (bouquets of cauliflower leaves broken in two and the coriander The Missing One always wanted to bring home to the alley) but she can't move anymore, is stock-still in the middle of the road.

Today the world feels different somehow new and if she squeezes her wounds round and open it doesn't matter if the pus seeps out as thick and yellow as before and if she loses her head scarf on the

roadside where she has laid her tired self down to sleep it doesn't matter if she gets it back— the air is stifling yet empty and as the woman perceives this she also senses The Missing One's presence and could it be her smell too from across the road.

If she stands here long enough—if she with her eyes and hands shut tight stands among the cars in a prayer so intimate that nothing but the wish pushes through—maybe the god who gave her, but then took back, this child would return it to her.

If she prays loudly enough *dear god* as the shouts from the cars resound and the sun burns great and unending *I pray to you with all I have* maybe something will happen that couldn't have happened before.

If she says the most intimate thing *of all my children* as she falls to her knees on the asphalt *she was the one I loved most* maybe something beyond comprehension can come to pass and the child will appear as if in a dream.

She waits, why doesn't the dream manifest?

In the heat her kneecaps stick to the ground and grow numb, alongside the traffic creeps by her then zips off.

In the cars children sit up and watch the woman—her shirt against her chest gossamer and along her back a tear from one shoulder down, her body already in decline in the late summer heat and sun and across her pant leg blood dried in black stains from thigh to ankle and out to her toes blue and swollen. She seems unaffected by the people who want her to move along and when she turns around and fixes her gaze somewhere it is still as though she sees nothing of this world.

Is she going to get run over the children ask, is she going to die here on the road they ask and their parents say I don't know, maybe.

In the bag are the same papers as always and across her slippers worn ragged by the streets, the same broken straps that rub the back of her foot raw then fall off—around her neck she wears one of the girl's shawls growing darker with each passing day and in her pocket the jack knife she carries with her wherever she goes in the city; later when the slippers no longer hold she'll walk barefoot to the restaurants and the corniche and on towards the railing and when no one is looking climb up and over the railing to the sea- and sky-blackened cliffs.

Today something is different somehow still-born and the woman feels it as she pounds her fists on the hoods of the cars passing closest by and presses a flyer to their windshield:

Has anyone seen my daughter? 17 years old, missing since dawn on May 1. Help me find her, help me get justice.

She wedges the flyer in the window wipers and doesn't turn around when the driver shouts for her to come back, doesn't care if he spits and doesn't go back to hit him when he shouts that she is a slum rat, dirt.

She just keeps moving and when later that same night she stops searching hands and forehead bloody you are standing nearby gazing out over the ocean. You don't see the blood, you only see the woman and then the woman throwing herself off.

Late summer one Friday night in a city half obscured by skyscrapers or left to the half-desert and the deep yellow that rolls in from it and covers the streets and lawns like a hand; several times a day the cigarette sellers dust off their carts even though nothing helps but rain and in the bushes that line the parks from north to south a pale green unfurls where once were flowers and red berries to suck on and spit out.

You haven't been here before even though you've wanted to visit many times and when you finally walk these streets it's as a tourist, no matter how many times you've spoken the language you have known since childhood and no matter how often you read the signs and menus placed on the tables and ask the hotel staff how it's going, picking up the odd newspaper where you slowly get up to speed and then relate what you've read to your co-workers sitting beside.

Rising from the corniche is the buzz of men in suits in the company of women and along the road rose sellers are waiting all in a row; you have strayed

from your co-workers to get a little air—*baby needs a walk* you said with your hand on your belly—and when you pass the entrance to the restaurant with climbing flowers and cut flowers arranged in garlands over the trellises, as though from the gaps the children draw near and greet you; the children ask if you want to buy the bracelet they're holding out or would you prefer a pot holder crocheted with thread and bottle caps and you crouch down to get a better look at the children, answering *yes* and *thank you* and putting the bracelet on and the pot holder in your bag. You give them the banknotes you've taken out and then continue across the corniche.

You have just turned to face the sky and the ocean an unbounded darkness when you see her.

The woman stands on the other side of the railing, body leaning forward almost one with the cliffs and the sea and from there looks out to where there is no horizon no moon is making itself known; when she turns around and looks at or past you, you follow her gaze along the large road out to the grill kiosks and jewelry sellers and see as she does the street lamps white and yellow down by the harbor and the beach.

It's cooling off—you can feel it and so does the woman standing there her shirt wide open letting the ocean breeze beat her bare chest and the bleeding cuts across her stomach; she wants to kick off her

pants but doesn't know how, to pull the girl's shawl tighter around her neck but can't.

From this night forward the children she has left behind in her search for The Missing One and to whom she has never quite returned will huddle closer together and curl up more tightly and the sun will be blinding at times, at times cold and white above the alley—she knows this.

She knows that the water from the bathroom taps will wane and stay cold the whole winter long and their light will more often be blown out by the wind in the alley; she knows that the blankets with their small and large tears will no longer keep the heat in and the palm leaves the children gather in their arms across the road won't have a chance to dry in the damp and fog like an unending rain drawing into the alley come autumn.

Not before the morning when the sun is again beating down the walls and the roofs and sweeping across their feet numbed and blue will the children let go and once again begin to make their way out of the alley; not before the light as white and unbearable as before weighs on the earth and on the children's bodies as they wait for what will never return will they set off and slowly wander away from there, leaving that alley for good.

I hope the woman thinks as her hands grab hold of the railing more tightly and she sees the sky

and ocean, a single vast home to which to return—*I hope the children will one day take each other by the hand and go elsewhere* she says and starts listing the names of the children she has left behind so the ocean and sky won't forget them like they forgot and abandoned The Missing One.

Take care of my Pearl and teach her to ride a bike properly she says and her foot slips on the slick rocks—*let Minna learn everything about the stars and galaxies, she likes that, and give Mo a hard ball that no one else has had a chance to kick yet* says the woman and falls silent.

That's all, that's all she hopes for before you see her throw herself off and then nothing more—then only the dark of night and the ocean breeze and the bars and the food, then you and the child in your belly and the woman's bag left on one of the park benches scattered around white-painted and worn where the vast restaurant facades block the ocean view along the cornice.

Later you take it—you take the bag with you and give the waiters one of the flyers you find, but keep the soap mostly a stump from the depths of her bag; you show them the picture of the girl wearing shorts and a sweater and turn around, don't wave goodbye and don't say *okay* when your co-workers shout good night, see you tomorrow, take care now.

In the hospital bed you will try to remember if you were tired or happy that night and if you were wearing the green or the black velvet dress you'd packed; you will try to remember if you felt the child kicking as you stood for what felt like an eternity on the corniche and if the woman was tall or short, if her hair was the same color as yours and if it was you she fixed her gaze on when she turned around and saw the flow of tourists made up of people like you all the while streaming back and forth and all the while as though you were one with the strip of bars aglow and the street lamps ornamenting the corniche.

When the woman lets go and slams against the rocks first once then twice it is neither more quiet nor more solemn than usual—this at least you remember and this you tell those who later wonder why you're always circling back to the woman and the corniche. The light from the restaurants didn't go from bright to something else and the music didn't die down—the waiters didn't stop serving aperitifs and small plates of cheese and olives and along the lookout point the tourists didn't back away, didn't leave the corniche; you remember that the rocks were glassy, almost mirrored and a scream was heard that you later hoped came from you even though you've never been able to scream like that and neither did you understand the point of it—*I*

don't have it in me you later say in the hospital bed and clench your fists two hard rocks, beating your face and chest with all your might.

You won't remember what you did other than shout for help, say you saw a woman throw herself off—*I saw her over there* you'll shout so the whole cornice comes running and when you're surrounded by the diners you'll point to the place where the water black its softness untold is washing over the rocks and once again you'll say *there—see?*

The child was healthy at the check-up only a few days ago, what do you mean you can't see a heartbeat? you ask one of the two doctors who have followed the nurse in and who are now standing in silence in front of the ultrasound image of your dead child. Your stomach is sticky and hard and in the examination room you only have the doctors and the turned-away screen to fix your eyes on, outside nothing is the same anymore and when the doctors search for words you interrupt them, saying *no* or *what*.

You know the irreversible has already taken place, but your refusal to let two white women with a life that never was nor will be yours rewrite what has happened to your child makes you pull yourself together, makes you strict. *What do you mean you can't see a heartbeat? What do you mean you can't see a heartbeat? What do you mean you can't see a heartbeat?* you ask again and again and are finally drowned out

by the one who is saying I mean that the child has died, it is no longer alive—this is what no heartbeat means, she says and turns to her colleague.

On the corniche the diners ask you if you can remember what the woman looked like and if you're sure that this is where she jumped, there's no trace? Was she short or tall and was she wearing a dress or pants? Was she white or black they ask and were you standing here a long time before it happened?

The tourists in caps and shorts who like you have been dining and drinking on the corniche ask if you are sure it was a person you saw and you will later think that it was already clear then that you would soon thereafter have a hard time telling a person from the cliffs and the cliffs from the corniche, the railing and yourself.

It was a person—I'm sure of it you say as you walk through the hospital corridor and wait for your mother, brother, and sister to arrive.

As you stood still a moment and no one was speaking to you or shouting that the police was on their way perhaps you saw the body float to the surface and then as if in a dream vanish again—could that be?

Maybe the woman floated up as though transparent or only half born into the world as you gaze fixed on

the space between cliff and sky saw the sea foam take shape in an eternal play across the rocks and beach, do you remember if she did?

Yes, maybe—when you for a moment fixed your gaze on the place where she during the fall slammed not first but later and saw the water roll in over the rocks—did you think she could have had a few breaths left in her but you didn't know it, what were you to do?

Later you are sure of almost nothing anymore, but it's the woman you think of as you lift your child out of the refrigerator and press it cold to your milk-heavy breasts.

Later you will think that your child also died on the corniche even if it continued to grow and kick for several months thereafter.

Yes, there you'll think—in a rift between ocean and sky the moment you got up in an attempt to avoid your co-workers and find a calmer place on the corniche—you suddenly remembered Rozia and how one afternoon she stopped wanting to play with you.

It was in the days before you all left and you asked her if you could go to the hut to draw and sing and she replied that she didn't want to be your friend anymore because you'd taken her glove puppet and anyway you were moving away soon. *You*

can have the glove puppet back, Rozia you said and then who said we're moving away?

Later that evening your grandmother told you that people in military uniforms had dropped by and so it was time to pack.

You did as she said and stuffed your favorite dress and the drawings Rozia had given you into a large bag and then the woman was standing there as the memory was ending and your gaze was again fixed elsewhere. She was standing on the other side of the railing and turning around, looking past you on the corniche.