

The Disappearing Act

A NOVEL



Translated by Sasha Dugdale

Maria Stepanova

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Translated from the Russian
by Sasha Dugdale

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1.

In the summer of 2023 the grass carried on growing as if nothing at all was wrong. It grew as if that was simply how things had to be, as if to demonstrate once again that, no matter how much killing took place on the face of the earth, the grass at least intended to keep on stubbornly pushing up through the soil. Perhaps it was a duller green than usual, perhaps it lost the milk-white tinge of its tips almost immediately, but still it grew on undeterred. Almost as if the lack of water forced the grass to cling tighter to the earth, sending out ever-newer shoots that dried and withered before they could reach their full growth.

In the summer of 2023 the planet experienced its hottest day since records began. Picture the scene: generations of Lilliputian scientists pressing themselves against Earth's vast body, measuring her temperature day and night, gathering samples of the sweat at her brow and taking particular pleasure in noting the parts of her that were coldest. All this information they recorded in a logbook, presumably finding consolation in the steady breathing of the sleeping giant; the way in which extraordinary rushes of fever and chills were quickly followed by what might be called normal temperatures; or the condition of her hair and nails, which was as good as could be expected

for someone who had lain motionless through the ages, allowing others to do with her as they wished. Perhaps long ago she had shifted into a very different state of mind, one in which she was no longer provoked to anger or dismay by our actions, and now feels herself to be a star, pierced through with fire and already smoldering; or a swath of cloth, boundless and featureless, indifferent to everything, like a stage curtain in the darkness. Or, who knows, perhaps she's amused by the way we assume nothing new will ever come of her, that we continue to expect our daily and yearly deliveries of milk and honey like children expecting breakfast, yawning children who scramble to the kitchen and wait for their mother to put bowls of yogurt or cornflakes on the table in front of them. But what if the bowls suddenly contained scorpions, or writhing grubs, or bluebottles? What if the thermostat was turned right up, so the kitchen was stiflingly hot, or what if frogs rained down from the sky, slapping against the windows? What if a plague on the firstborn began? This is a game that can be kept going for a good while, especially if it begins with almost imperceptible changes: the grass that withers a little early, or the trains that seem to forget the timetable, delayed for hours, or else rushing ahead with preternatural speed, only then to stand silent on a wide plain, waiting for their allotted arrival time.

It was on such a train that the novelist, who went by the name of M, sat waiting, wondering just how late she was going to be. The yellowing fields outside, the net on the seatback with an empty Coke bottle jammed into it, even the occupant of the seat next to hers—all were portents of a delay she could not avoid. Trains now behaved as if

they were living creatures, free from human control; all one could do was hope for their good will, although it was unclear how or even whether this differed from the good will of humans. Ticket inspectors had all but disappeared from the trains, and no one seemed to care any longer; you could go a long way without having to show a ticket.

Still, the novelist M, who was traveling from one country to another, confidently expected to arrive at her destination, if not on this train then at least on another. She was armed with a ticket and a seat reservation, and she'd picked up an avocado sandwich from one of the more up-market station kiosks where the bread was fresh and the coffee strong. She'd once heard that an action only needed to be repeated twelve times for a new and enduring habit to be formed. For example, if, after a day's work, you were to go to a café with a river view and drink a simple glass of white wine then on the thirteenth evening, the habit would suddenly manifest itself, like the head of a seal emerging from the water, and you'd be a new and different person: the sort of person who sits sipping wine in the evening, without really knowing why, waiting for the new words that fit this new life like a glove, and that will in time appear in your mouth together with the taste of wine.

In any case, as M sometimes reflected, they say that the human body has a habit of replacing all its cells with new ones every seven years. After seven years you wake up a completely different person without even noticing and only continue to think of yourself as a familiar and predictable creature because you aren't paying attention. But then again, she wondered, turning away from the occupant of the seat next to hers with his expanse of news-

paper, and looking grumpily out of the window, could one really call this behavior a genuine *habit*, when in most cases the human body doesn't manage to renew itself the full twelve times. By the thirteenth you'd be over ninety, a rare achievement for the human organism, and at that age a person is facing inevitable transformation into a handful of ashes in an urn, or a box whose contents we'd prefer not to think about.

She'd certainly passed through the city's main station twelve or more times. So her desire to join the morning line for coffee and a paper bag filled with something warm and nourishing (and from one particular kiosk) could by now be considered a habit rather than a passing whim; and she herself looked like a woman who knew what she wanted, placing her paper cup decisively into its carton tray and pressing on the correct lid. For M, who hadn't lived in this city long, precision of movement and the knowledge of one's future trajectory (the underpass to platform five for northbound trains and platform one for southbound) had a particular importance, as if guaranteeing that she had a place both on the waiting train and the journey towards it, as well as in the new life itself, to which she had not yet been entirely reconciled.

Judging by the number of times she'd had to travel somewhere and work "as a novelist" in different cities and countries and then travel back, pulling her light suitcase easily from the luggage rack each time, then she clearly did have a place in this new life, many places in fact, and in each one people wanted to ask her about the books she had once written; and then, with far more curiosity, about the country she'd come from. This country was currently

waging war against a neighboring country, killing the inhabitants with missiles, with fire from the skies, with bare hands, and yet it still couldn't conquer it, nor accept that its opponent was not going to offer itself up on a plate.

Sometimes—fairly frequently, in fact—this country of hers also found time to kill its own inhabitants, seeming to consider them as nothing more than mutinous body parts that had become dangerous distractions from the acts of hunting and feeding. The foreign city where M now lived was full of people fleeing from both countries, and those who'd been attacked by her own compatriots regarded their former neighbors with horror and suspicion, as if life before the war had ceased to have any meaning and had simply masked a similarity with the devouring beast.

Many of the people who were native to this foreign city wanted to know more about this beast, not simply to protect themselves from its repulsive maw, but also because big predators interest us, we herbivores, who find it hard to understand where such violence comes from and how it functions. They interrogated the novelist M on the beast's habits with a sort of anxious compassion, as if she too had been bitten, even half-swallowed, and the fact she had been left lying in the grass, relatively untouched, was only an accident. Some wanted to know how it was possible that the beast hadn't yet been killed or hadn't consumed itself in its unbounded greed, and these people hinted that M and those she knew in her country should have taken measures against it long before the beast grew to its present size and began consuming everyone.

M absolutely agreed with this, but she found it hard to explain that the very nature of the beast made it tricky to

hunt down or to fight. You see, she might have reasoned, it's not as if the beast was there in front of me, or even behind me. No, it was all around me, and to such an extent that it's taken me years to realize that I was living inside it, that I was perhaps even born inside it. Do you remember the story, she continued to herself silently, about the old man and the wooden boy, sitting inside a sea monster with only a stump of tallow candle? They could have caused the monster some discomfort by, say, jumping up and down in its belly or by making a fire. But in our case the disproportionate size of the beast means you can do it no real harm, let alone kill it. The only hope is that one day it will begin to choke and puke, and, without knowing how it happened, you suddenly find yourself on the outside, seeing quite distinctly that the room you spent so long in was in fact its stomach. It so happened that I was a part of a beast, if only because I was swallowed accidentally, or grew up inside it by mistake. I understand this means my experience is flawed and my account hardly reliable. Still, if necessary, I am willing to report on the internal fixings of the creature, a creature I left only recently for dry land.