

Friends of the Light

Next to me, the girl with the purple plastic earring tries to grab her beer pitcher, but the fingers fail to grasp, glide through. She is so pale, almost transparent. Seems to flicker in the bad light. She opens her mouth, but says nothing. The eyes: scared stiff.

“Well then,” I say, “how did you get here?”

The man in the flannel shirt shakes his head. His beard is long and shaggy. He seems nice. Around the throat: a blue stain circling around itself and down toward the chest.

“I don’t know,” he says. “I was chopping up some wood. Then I’m just ... gone.”

His eyes are shiny, glazed in panic. But he’s trying to hide it. *Brave.*

There are other people here. It is evening, but not late enough to make you have to elbow your way to the bar. The fact that I have nothing to drink hits me. I contemplate ordering a whiskey sour, my favorite. But I don’t want to leave them. I don’t know why, but the thought of leaving them cuts my insides. Next to the bearded man and the girl with the earring there is a woman in her sixties with a scar on her forehead and a young man certainly not a day over twenty, dressed in a dark brown turtleneck sweater. Thin like a reed, his gaze jumping, skittering all over the place. A glass filled to the brim with Coca-Cola in front of him. Untouched. As if he doesn’t dare. As if he’s afraid his fingers won’t obey him. The older woman suddenly makes me think of my mother, and the image of her faded butterfly tattoo flickers before my eyes. A second, maybe two. My fingers reach out. Try to grasp it. But it flutters away, lands on the rim of the turtleneck sweater’s glass. Totters a

while on the edge, then flies along. The nausea that follows is intense, but short-lived.

“The water was pleasant. Warm. I think I must have dozed off. And ... then it wasn't ... it wasn't warm. Or, yeah, but like frying oil, when it jumps out of the frying pan. Like I was a sausage.”

It's the girl with the earring. Her face; a flickering orb of light. Why is she disappearing? Is the dark outside making its way inside? *What darkness does*. Her voice is so soft and nice. Dark eyes. They blink to and fro; traffic lights made of shiny, ripe blackberries. I want to lay down but stand up instead, go over to the bar. One of them inhales, sucks the air in. It happens so fast it sounds like an involuntary hiccup. I imagine it's the boy in the brown turtleneck sweater. I imagine his mouth totally devoid of teeth (*as they kicked all of them down his throat before he lost consciousness*). When I've turned my back on them, I know they're gone forever.

“Honey.”

The scent of cinnamon. The lemon of the dish soap. Burned meatballs. All this and something else. But what?

“Honey. Honey. Can you hear me?”

I blink. Blink. *Blink*. Try to get up. I'm lying on a couch. Our couch. And you, on your knees, on the floor. Pushing me back.

“Don't get up. Stay down. You fell. Stay where you are. Are you hurt?”

I turn my head. Someone has tied a burning piano wire around my left shoulder and is pulling as if there's no tomorrow. The air before me flickers and I caw once — a whiny, pathetic sound. But you stay put. On your knees. My love. And your eyes — clear, even in the dimmest of lights — emerald gooseberries. The best part of the traffic light.

I see you've been crying and I want to caress your cheek. *So silly.* But you force my hand away. Force a smile. Later we'll talk. Later.

“Are you hungry? There are meatballs on the stove.”

Copyright © 2015 by Alexander Nyström
English translation copyright © 2016 by Alexander Nyström