

RISE AND FALL

Novel, Rosinante 2010. By: Josefine Klougart

Extracts

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That fall I got a horse. It was a light brown colt; she had a soft streak of charcoal, like a black eel, running from a point in her forehead all the way down through her mane, where the darkness divided itself into hundreds of smaller rivulets as it spread through the tufts of long rough hairs; those hairs, that continually twisted together in heavy corkscrews, were ropes falling to either side of her. All the way over her back darkness ran, like drops across a windowpane, it was a line through the animal, like the horizon is a line across the landscape, a low outline, the bellies of clouds over the moor, a parting sliced with the shaft of a bone comb in sun-bleached hair—a line, most certainly, out there in the darkness of its tail, so long it reached the earth. Brown, black, a couple white hairs between, as if collected from countless brushes, those we let dry on the old newspapers we covered the windowsill with; the brushes I see on the bridge of the harbor, dipped in oil, in shellac, in boat paint, stiff as needles; behind them the living fence of sweaty hands within plastic gloves. She had already been given her name. That fall she'd already been called Molly for a long time. She already existed, hoofs and sweetness beneath her mane; it could've been white foam on her chest and in the skin folds between her forelegs. Like this she wobbled from the trailer onto the ramp, her flanks pumping, nostrils flaring, springing the last meter down and out onto the gravel in front of our house. My parents watch me intensely, like when my mother examines a mushroom, we find it out in the fields in October and pull the root up, clean it with a small French knife with soft bristles at its shaft end, turn it to see if there are gills, if it's poisonous. They see the horse as a shadow in my eyes, shiny from the wind, and they're so engrossed in me that they completely don't see her; how she stumbles like a kid, a shamed fawn emerging from the trailer, rolling her eyes so the whites appear in them, sheets that are shaken from a window. Scared by all the newness, that which is there to see the first time: Helge's blue pony, Massey Harris, the strident, cold aluminum ramp to the paddock, the old railroad cars with cables, the drawings on the wall and the phrase written in black India ink: *Je suis un passage clandestine, je viens de Marseille, capture moi!*

It's the eyes that frighten me; a full moon in the bucket of water on the backstairs, white, which can't be poured out but lays itself upon the pavement, lakes which freeze with morning's arrival; Agri Lake, my older sister's breath collecting like pearls of ice on her green woolen scarf.

I continue to be frightened, just like Molly continues to be. I ride her down the hill and she steps carefully, alternately placing her right foreleg in front of her left and her left in front of her right; in this way she braids the air ahead of her, down towards Bogens, along the sunken road, left around Tinghulen,

down the gravel path from Toggerbo, past Piersen i Hullet. In this way she wriggles herself along, a chain of angled jerks, eye on eye collected within one another (unclear translation), the next one, the next one; a clumsy wave tumbling in too small a pool; the saddle leather gives, the stirrups whine and rub against kneecaps, I lean back; can't breathe from fear that she'll tumble, that she'll break a leg and land on me, heavy as a suitcase upon a bed.

Lakes lay in the windowsill, we're drying our laundry inside, it hangs on clotheslines beneath the ceiling; it's raining. My mother opens a window (note—America doesn't have the same type of windows—hence no *nedeste sprosse*) the rubber seal releases with a sluggish suck like toothless gums in old cheeks. It gets cold and damp in the scullery, cold in the living room, there are drafts along the windowsills and baseboards; the carpenters, who are skimping on insulation, are robbing us blind; my mother makes coffee for them, more coffee; the renovations last nearly half a year, my little sister takes her first steps, the workers nod and smile with rotten teeth, she sees my mother clasp her hands in front of her breast and reaches out for her. The worst is the cold in the scullery, the winter begins here, the frost settles beneath the tiles, it's like a Russian land, packed into deep red shawls, fastened with brooches and blue fingers, claws that burrow through fabric and hold you tightly by the throat. In the evenings I run on tiptoes through the scullery to get to the toilet, I sit so far back on the seat that my feet don't touch the tiles. The water in the tap never manages to get warm, on my way back I dry my hands on the closest towel to the door. I force myself to walk calmly back; shoulders forced down. I never flush the toilet at night because I can't stand hearing the cistern empty its water; and no matter how many lights we turn on and let burn behind us, however much we squander it, it's dark in our house all November, all December, all January, all February and March, far into March as well.

I don't believe my mother will ever find peace. Later that same fall she talks herself warm and confides in me. We're walking up near Stablehojen, behind the vicarage of the church, we sit ourselves down in our blue rain pants, hers too short, mine too long. The drops fall from the trees in the woods and from the wild birches. All she never accomplished, oh not that she regrets having us, but still. She looks out across the landscape, Ebeltoft, Helgenas, Skodsoved. She sighs and takes my hand, as though she thinks it's me that needs comforting for her confidences.

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My grandmother is from Herning, she keeps talking about heather, the church shall be filled with heather the day we bury her. She's such a generous person; she has given everything away, one thing at a time. The crystal dish disappears. The placemats, candleholders, raisins, the little bag from the specialty shop filled with dried figs, the tall vase, hyacinth glasses. The brass scissors to trim the candle wicks, at least half of her embroidered doilies disappear, the white tablecloth disappeared when they needed to use it for Henrik's birthday in February. In May she gives my mother's confirmation

present away to her own brother. He's in debt. Thirteen hundred and seventy five kroner. It's hard, my mother says, to blame someone who wants the best for others.

My grandmother dries off the table in the living room, I sit between my mother and my little sister, and we lift our tea cups and lunch plates so she can get beneath them, then, once again, she disappears from the living room, shuffles out into the kitchen, hurried short steps, round calves in nylon stockings, forward, forward, forward; and then already back again, back near the dining room table, she's found some scraps, four cinnamon rolls. My mother has to leave, and my grandmother tells us again about Musse, her horse, how it found its own way home in the snowstorm, the carriage and the whole family; when morning came, and they flung the blankets aside, they saw the farm, the stable, and the door to the stable which was nearly buried beneath the snowdrifts. My mother gives my hand a last squeeze, wants to drive now, and with the three steps she takes through the foyer, I lose precisely three liters of air, one liter at a time; with the smack of the front door my lungs sink and lay themselves like an angel's costume placed in a flat, dark box in the basement at the end of December.

I know that horses are good at finding their way home.

My grandmother turns off the lights, keeps a couple still burning, opens the window a crack, dries her forehead with a handkerchief, and finally we lay there on the foam rubber mattress waiting.

No matter how far they've come, nor from which paths—a whole journey away, through water—they can still find their way home, and find home, like waves they continue a movement, the whole time returning, letters finally reaching their destination.

My grandmother leans over us, kisses us; she smells sweet and unfamiliar, lets the door stay open, her kiss growing cold on our cheeks.

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I count thirty-four bruises on my legs alone; it's that summer. The chickens are running free and it's work to find the eggs, not all chickens enjoy laying their eggs in the coop, even though the door yawns wide into the cubicle of darkness that is the chicken house. For each egg we find we can get a kroner or a vanilla cookie; this we get to decide for ourselves. We search.

We have fenced the vegetable garden in—I understand—it's either that or the chickens, one or the other needs to be fenced in, that summer it was the vegetable garden. We try to sow peas near the fence, but they don't even let the peas have their rest. At least they certainly don't grow like they should. The chickens do, the big Austalorps can hardly stop themselves from growing,

the male's combs grow thick and meaty like swollen fingers, fold over, falling to one side.

It's those red Americans that don't want to go into the coop. They're independent. There's something with their eyes, too, they bulge, resemble ears of corn, protruding from the bird's heads, pointy end outwards.

My little sister finds an egg in the hedge by the road and nearby we find a nest with eight more. It's impossible to say which one of us spots the nest first, it's like deciding which of my sister's eyes fell upon the first egg. It all runs together. It's our find.

I shove the chicken aside. It's with the rake, and the hen flaps from the hedge like a tarp in the wind with the thunder of its wings.

I don't know if my sister totally understands.

We eat vanilla cookies in the kitchen. In the shadows we don't say so much.

My stomach scrunches tight like a cramped muscle when I see my mother crack one of the eight eggs for dessert that evening. I vomit into my hands and it runs through my nose with soggy French bread and spit.

This time you can see the wings, it's not just milky thickening, it's more like a baby chick. With each egg we crack I grow paler.

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My older sister tells me that there's never complete silence. I tell her that on Mols you can find total silence, it's in the evenings during winter when the snow has fallen. She helps me to cover my ears; listen yourself, she says. White noise, she says, looking at me seriously. I shake my head.

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We see our mother go to bed soon after dinner; she places her plate in the dishwasher and leaves, dragging a pale trail behind her, like one dredges the bottom of the sea, her feet a rake across the ocean's floor, up the stairs.

We remain seated at the table, hear her pull the door shut behind her. My father takes a single heavy breath, sighs, looks around and gathers our glances as if with a long thread; when he finally rolls his eyes, we gather together, folding over one another like fabric.

We clean up, like usual, but it's all foreign. The light falls differently. It's as though the house has rotated a couple degrees on the cadastre, turned in its sleep; the bed of rhododendrons must be completely ruined, the cobblestones

must be yawning on the streets, pushing themselves against one another like ice floes in the shallow water by Nappedam, when the thaws changes to hard frost, when cold arrives with the wind, suddenly over East Jutland, high pressure and crisp, blue skies; when the melted slush and floating shards collect all at once into a heavy sheet of ice. The evening is different, the taste of toothpaste foreign, the nightgown colder than before, for three days, a whole season.

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No colors are foreign, the Victoria plums' cheeks are red, green, yellow, blue, fish scale blue; no colors are excluded. I pour them from the bucket down into the sink, wash them like potatoes under the faucet and lift them in large handfuls onto the dish towel. Gather together the corners, two by two, and lift the harvest up and over the bowl. The plums are heavy like a limp body in cloth, a cat one lifts with a blanket off the bed and onto a chair; I release a corner and the Victoria plums thunder down into the clay dish, all the steps from the walk yesterday stacked and bundled loosely together, hemp twine that gives, flapping, that fall out into the bowl, loose heavy pages from a book without a spine.