

First chapter from the novel – translated by Mark Mussari

Morten Brask

A Girl and a Boy

ONE OF OUR FIRST DAYS HERE, I see her with a naked boy at the entrance to the hotel gardens. They're walking in the shade of the tall date palms, and they stop a few yards from the steps to the hotel's pool area. She leans over the boy and points at the huge swimming pool. His gaze follows her finger and he nods.

I don't recognize the boy. I've never seen him before. Or maybe I've seen him without noticing him, as you sometimes do, looking right at objects and people without seeing them. Because they aren't important, because they don't have any meaning in the moment that you see them.

When they reach the marble stairs, she steps down onto the second highest step. She waits for him to follow her, to take the first step down, but the boy stops in front of the stairs. She remains standing, patient, waiting, and in this moment, as she stands there waiting for the boy, I notice the change. Her mouth. The way she smiles at the boy. The light in her face, and a fragility I've never seen before in her. She says something to him, her lips moving. Maybe she's asking the boy if she should carry him down the stairs. But the boy doesn't hear what she

says. He's too focused on the steps sinking before him. Their hands. She holds the boy's hand so carefully. Her nails are painted a pale pink.

He takes the first step forward. His right foot sinks to the step below, and then his left. The steps are high for the boy's legs. They reach above his knees. Each step is an effort for him, but they make their way down. One step. Another step. The only thing that exists for him is to come down.

It falls apart on the lowest step. He stumbles. I can see it in his face. His widening eyes and gaping mouth, the fear. He knows that he's falling, that his body, his arms, his head soon will hit the hard marble tiles, that the pain is coming. But the boy doesn't fall. She holds his hand, holds him up, lifting him by his arm. His stumble doesn't turn into the expected fall; the pain never materializes. His feet find their footing, and the fear in the boy's face disappears.

They walk down to the pool. She holds up her hand to shade her eyes against the sharp light while looking for the boy's parents among the hotel guests surrounding the pool. She doesn't know who they are, what they look like, and no one appears to be searching for a runaway boy. She squats down beside him, points at random hotel guests, points to several other places, but the boy only shakes his head. He presses his hands against his eyes, and she sets down her Hermès bag so she can hug the little boy.

Movement at the other end of the hotel gardens. A man suddenly gets up from a deck chair. He is pale-skinned—he must have come to the island recently. He runs toward them and almost slips on the wet tiles. When the boy spots the man,

he reaches out his arms. The man lifts up his son, kisses his cheeks. The boy laughs.

The man turns toward her and shakes her hand. He says something to her, they talk together, maybe for a minute, then he goes back to his deck chair. The boy waves at her over the man's shoulder.

As she bends down for her bag, her long hair falls, hiding her face. Her black hair takes on a blue sheen in the early afternoon sunlight. Walking along the row of deck chairs, she slings her bag over one shoulder.

The Lawyer gave it to her. He'd had it sown especially for her at Hermès in Paris. There was a two-year wait. It's the only one of his gifts that she kept. She wanted to return it along with his other gifts. She thought that was the right thing to do, but I told her she should keep it, that it was just one gift among so many. She shook her head. Not for him, she said, for him, my keeping the bag is a sign. Still, I insisted. I knew what it meant to her, what a joy it was each day for her to hang it on her shoulder. Of course she should keep it.

She has wrapped a towel around her body. It's too small, the top of her breasts visible above the towel's border. It's one of the hotel towels, the hotel's logo, a jumping dolphin is embroidered on the white fabric. She knows it's not permitted. It's written in all the bathrooms, signs have been posted in several places. You are not allowed to take the hotel towels with you to the pool or the beach. But she does it. Just as she's done all the other days. Just as she's always done.

Some of the fathers playing with their children in the water look up as she walks by. I don't think she knows they're watching her, or maybe she knows and doesn't care. She stops by an empty deck chair, loosens the towel and tosses it on the chair.

She has on the yellow bikini. She took five bikinis with her on this trip. I like all her bikinis, but there's something about the yellow one, something very vulgar and sexy that makes her body even more beautiful when she's wearing it.

She stands by the edge of the pool and stares at the bright surface. What is she thinking. Maybe I know, maybe I know what she's thinking at this moment, but I hope she's not thinking that. That she's only standing by the edge of the pool and not thinking, that she's waiting, just that, waiting to take the plunge.

She lifts her chin and, bending her legs slightly, swings her arms up and takes off. She jumps. For a second she is weightless, floating, before she hits the water's surface and enters, precisely, smoothly. I can see her beneath the ribbed surface, her legs scissor-kicking, her arms tight against her body. The yellow of her bikini against the brown of her skin above the pool's azure-blue bottom. She swims underwater until she reaches the other end and shoots up through the water's crust. Sunlight glints in droplets on her skin. She rests her arms on the pool's edge and waves up to the veranda where I'm sitting.