

The Ascent

Rasmus' desk was clean, unlike the ones of most of his classmates. When he looked around the classroom, he could see the shiny surfaces scarred by scribbles in pen and pencil, scissor-made scratches and blots of nail polish. Some desks had love notes and dirty jokes, others words like 'bitch' and 'faggot'. But not his. His was clean.

He dug his fingers into his hair and scratched his scalp violently. It was several days ago that he had let Anna dye his hair in his sink, but his head was still itching and burning. She had promised it would go away; she had experience with this stuff. Starting with dyeing her hair blonde when she was fourteen, Anna had been through a thousand different colours over the years – at least. Black, ginger, pink, blue, the entire electromagnetic spectrum had been represented in her hair, a tapestry telling colourful epics. She had ended the story about two years ago and gone back to her original, mousy brown. Of course, she was now nineteen and an adult, not a confused fifteen-year-old like Rasmus.

He lowered his hand and squinted at it, trying to discern whether the pink hue of his fingertips was due to the hair dye leaving stains or just his blood flowing beneath the skin.

Raising his gaze to the blackboard, he watched his teacher's mouth move up and down and sideways. She was talking about some book or another, maybe, he wasn't sure; he hadn't been paying attention. There was no point, because he wasn't going to raise his hand, anyway. He hated the sound of his own voice.

But his body was bending backwards and folding in on itself in boredom and Rasmus could take it no longer.

The teacher's voice droned on, "So can anyone tell me what happens next; no, still in chapter four", and her eyes seemed to light up in pleasant surprise when Rasmus raised his hand, "Yes, Lærke."

"I need to go, I have an appointment at the dentist."

The light went away as she returned her attention to the other students, answering Rasmus' request almost as an afterthought, "Oh. You're excused. Maja, how about you tell me about chapter four."

He got out of his chair, left the classroom, walked down the stone stairs and left the building. The dentist's office was right across the schoolyard and his excuse would only buy him ten minutes at most. But it was enough; better than nothing at least. Once outside, he took a few steps into the schoolyard, staying close enough to the windows to avoid being visible from the classrooms behind, knowing that half a hundred eyes would be wistfully gazing out. Over the entrance of the school a banner hung, which had been painted in the occasion of some event or another several years ago, he couldn't remember which and supposed it wasn't really important either. It didn't seem like they were planning on taking it down anytime soon. In white and green it proudly proclaimed,

REMEMBER WHAT YOU ARE

He stared up at those bold and playful letters, remembering a time where they had been a great source of comfort, an inspiring slogan about staying true not only to oneself, but also to the family and the community and the role one plays. But now he could only see that word, "WHAT", and he marvelled at the power of the two letters alone needed to change it from "WHO" and how it dehumanized the whole sentence and everyone who read it. He recalled what his physics teacher had said a few days earlier, mouthing the words as the hoarse voice played back in his head: "The painful, sad truth is that our schools are facilities not for the education of persons, but for the production of citizens." He had given Rasmus this message after the boy's classmates had already scurried out, and Rasmus felt like the sole bearer of a grave secret. If it was true, that banner was the proof of concept. It had hung there for as long as Rasmus remembered, and it would hang there long after he grew up and left, carrying its sterilized message onto generations to come and there was nothing he could do about it.

Unless, perhaps, there was.

The banner was only two floors up. It was not impossible. Throwing his jacket to the ground, Rasmus walked back to the wall and pulled tentatively at a drain pipe. As a child, he had often climbed in trees; tall ones, too. The cool metal felt somewhat different from bark and wood in his hands, but he figured the same basic principles could be applied. Going up the pipe was harder than expected; the rough surface clawed at the skin in his palms and his feet kept slipping on the brick wall. Nevertheless, he slowly progressed upwards, one step at a time. Don't look down, don't look down, he thought to himself, following the example of the TV-heroes from his childhood despite the fact that he had no fear of heights at all. On the first floor, he caught some kid's eye through the window.

She was clutching a pencil in her hand and staring at him open-mouthed, and for a moment Rasmus worried that she was going to scream. But he raised a trembling finger to his lips and the girl dutifully returned to her workbook, having learned not to question her elders and their odd behaviours.

And he ascended. He almost lost his grip as the bell sounded, so much louder up there, but he held on and now he was inching his way to where the banner was fastened as people started to pour into the schoolyard. He could hear comments of “Wow, look!” and “What is she doing up there” rising up from the usual chit-chat, and even without looking he knew a crowd was forming. Staring up at him with their millions of eyes.

He pulled at the knot of the banner, struggling to get it untied, afraid of letting go of the drain pipe in order to use his other hand.

“Lærke? Lærke! Lærke Rød, would you get down from there this instant!” He recognized and ignored the voice of one of his teachers. Now the knot finally gave in, and the banner loosened, one corner flapping in the breeze. Now given a voice by the wind, he heard it scream to be set free.

He needed to get to the other side to untie the other end — “Lærke! You’re going to hurt yourself” — and carefully he let go of the drain pipe, sliding like a squirrel or small bird across the wall. ‘Woo!’s and rounds of applause rose up from the schoolyard, originating from kids who didn’t know what was going on, but saw chaos and a break from the routine and heartily welcomed it.

“If you don’t come down from there right now, Lærke, I’m going to call your parents. How do you think they will feel if they find out their daughter has broken her neck from falling?” He felt justified in ignoring his teacher’s warnings, continuing his edging, because there was no Lærke up there clinging to the wall. Lærke was fiction, she had been a “WHAT” and he, Rasmus, was a “WHO” and he was going to untie that knot. Finally he was within reach, and he pulled, he tugged, and then it came loose. The banner was caught by the wind, swooshing up a few meters before idly floating to the ground, towards the sound of the crowd cheering and laughing and clapping and Rasmus slowly turned around, regarding his work with an odd sense of contentedness.

He spotted his teacher in the crowd. She was shaking her head, “Alright, are you done? Come on now, get down from there.”

Rasmus had to laugh. “I can’t,” he replied.

“What are you talking about?”

He looked down at the banner, a green and white pile on the ground and already dirty from footprints. Expectant, worried, and amused eyes looked up at him.

“I can’t come down. I’m too scared to.”

And then he started to cry.