

LIFE OF KLARA.

(this is: a slice of life from Klara, 12 years old, on the country side, outside a Swedish small-town called Blacka, and her mum, and her BFF whose name is also Klara, and the horses, and the horses and the war)

"Do you remember when we first met?"

Klara whispers in my ear. Just behind and below my head, on the bus seat on the grey spiky fabric, someone may have scratched a piece of gum. Then it may have been picked off, but the fibres and bacteria may still be there, even though the gum is gone. And if anyone finds out I leaned my hair against the seat, I'll die. My back is by the bus window. Soft-Ior has to be amputated right now, I can't keep him in the handle of my neck, not anymore, I have to grow up. I can't keep him, I can't, I can't. But at snack time, when I take out the scissors to remove him, he has puppy eyes and screams that I can't, I won't make it without him. So, he stays, and I continue my childhood. On the seat behind my bag sits Klara. Next to Klara sits Lisa dancing to Dabuzz. She's done the choreography almost by herself, just like they do at her jazz dance in town. Lisa closes her eyes and if I were to see her, I would see a body with movements so different from mine that I would immediately turn into a wasp. Without Lisa noticing, Klara leans towards the gap between the top corners of the seats.

"The grove by the kindergarten. I was just playing with Patrik. Then you were there, we met, we stood opposite each other, I remember I was holding like a big thing or something, and then I asked what your name was, and you just stood there and watched. I thought you were retarded. So, I said:

My name is...

And then, at the exact same time.

Art pause where the melon flavour on her gum reaches my consciousness. Through a mud-stained film I see autumn falling in cascades of colour from the sky.

"And then, at exactly the same time:

KLARA.

You got so scared you started crying and ran away. You ran so funny that I had the worst laughing fit."

I laugh. Klara laughs. Klara suddenly stops and my own laughter is lonely, and then becomes weird. I try to console myself by thinking of the look on Lisa's face when she dances. Is she normal? I'll imitate her in front of the mirror at home. Pout my lips. Lisa is so silly; Klara has to choose me.

Klara is so very Klara.

It's so hard for me to be Klara when Klara is so very Klara and so very good at it. What's with the name? I think I've dropped something under the bus seat, but there's only snuff and chewing gum. How can I be called Klara when Klara is Klara?

How can I be anything other than Klara, when Klara,
when Klara,
when Klara...

Then I imitate Klara's face. But her face is so perverse. I can't. I roll my eyes and feel ashamed. I'm afraid that Klara will see me through the mirror in the bus window.

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I'm afraid I'll cut her face if I laugh now.

I am laughing.

Nothing happens.

I'm a sea, you just sweat all the time even when it's cold, for example if say something. I often think of myself as water, I think it's the ocean, but I've never seen the ocean, so I don't know. That's how Klara does the bomb. In the swimming pool. Beaten by the waves against the tiles. You can think of it as circling out. You can also think of Klara as the sea. I often get tired of thinking.

How can I know everything and not handle anything? You can think of the war.

You can think that you are in the war, and you just have to survive every day. This high school. That's the war. I'm a soldier climbing muddy trenches. I'm dirty and disgusting. Sometimes when I look in the mirror, I see the dirt and the disgust. And I can't help but like it. I'm fascinated. Am I ugly? Is the ugly nice? Sometimes when I look, I think I'm wonderful. I'll just get a little narrower, a dimple under each eye, to remind me of the trenches. You have to have something. Something that's all your own.

Now the bus is leaving Blacka. The smell from the mill will still be there, the bus will not go out of the smell. I will, because I walk in it all day, always smell like the smell in Blacka. I smell paper pulp. What does paper smell like? Not hot like when it comes out of the copier, freshly printed with weeklies and instructions. No, it smells like vomit. I smell vomit. No, it smells worse than vomit. It smells like you want to throw up. It's not a smell, it's an invitation to vomit.

Now the bus goes past the old school. They've already redone it. It used to be pink with poo. Now it's concrete prison grey.

Now the bus goes past Sandra's chicken farm. Once there was a fire. All the chicken carcasses were roasted. I can feel the panic in my wings at the memory.

When there's a fire in the barn and you lead the horses out to save them, they'll run back into the fire again. Because when they were wild on the prairie and there was a grass fire, they could run through the fire, and come out the other side. Where the grass had already burned, it couldn't burn again. But if you run into a burning house. There is no other side.

If there's a fire in our house, the only person I'll save is Sally. Sally, Sally. She's two years older than me. She's already old enough to be a cat. She could still live for many more years if she didn't burn inside. I see the flames reflected in her eyes and I take her away from the fire. She never even gets to touch the tea lights. She's the only one, come to think of it, she's the only one. I can believe I love... *others*. But only Sally will be faithful. I hope so.

Now the bus passes the other factory, which glows in the dark. It has a name that sounds like English marmalade or hunting clothes, but they do something unclear. Sometimes it smells like popcorn.

Now the bus goes past the Roxen pizza. The light loop is so ugly it makes you want to kill yourself. But somehow you still get comfort.

Now the bus goes past the riding school. But today is Thursday, not Wednesday or Saturday. Wednesday, I go with my mother to her riding lesson. While Mom, along with all the other grown women, I ride Candy. Scratch on scratch on scratch. The stable is completely empty, just the sound of horses. I love Candy then. I love Candy whether Candy cares about me then. I love the shavings in the spindles, the way they stick to the riding socks and the seams of the shoes. I pick the best brushes. I brush in long, hard strokes. I brush just the right amount. The brushes glide over Candy's fur, it's so shiny. I rub away the piss stains, I comb the mane, untangle the tail, crate the hooves, no more crows in the eyes. I caress Candy's ears.

Thursdays, Alicia and Madde ride. Once they were drunk on the bus on the way to the stables.

"God what's wrong with you," Lisa asked.

"Here." Madde holds out a Coke bottle with water-like contents.

"God, are you drunk or."

Alicia and Madde at exactly the same time:

"Yessss."

They collapse on the floor in the back.

Klara says: "But are you completely stupid in the head."

Klara can wear morality like a glittering tiara:

When Klara says you *have to take responsibility*. Then it's serious, that's what matters, but it's also, the height of Cool. Klara knows you can't drink in the stable. Klara knows, knows, knows. And when Klara knows, then it's true. Klara can be strict, very strict. And when Klara is Strict, then it's the height of Cool.

This is: Fact.

I myself am silent. My legs are bubbling, and I can't really feel the seat under me.

Saturdays I ride with Klara. We've always ridden on Saturdays, but maybe Klara will switch and join the private group now. Aston can be ridden lesson with, actually worth it, to load him in the transport and drive to the riding school with him. Zorro is too old. Not worth riding the transport with him. Aston worth it. Maybe you can race him later. Klara can race Aston.

In the afternoons when I go with Klara to Klara's stable, we greet him together. Always a moment with Aston before work starts. Klara and I, with Aston's head between us, pat his forehead, the bridge of his nose, down to the mullet, let him lick his palms, he looks so nice, so alert and happy. It's so easy to love Aston. It's so hard to love Fleygur. And Zorro. Easier to love Zorro than Fleygur. Candy medium. She's so slow and you have to bang your knuckles. You feel so mean when you ride her. You feel like violence itself. You feel that she's against you, that she hates you. The love for Candy is based entirely on mutual hatred. That she's so hard to like that you have no choice but to love her. And no one is so boring back, no one is so uninteresting - Candy has no choice but to love back.

Candy 4-ever

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I shape with my finger like a carving in the bus seat.

Only for Candy do I tell her about Madde and Alicia and the drunken battle. There's something about it that makes it so terrifying. I watch them walk across the stall. This is not

walking, this is giggling. I'm very scared. What they can do and what can be done with-with them.

I'm afraid of what's in their bodies. Would it ever get into mine?

Mom rides so bad. She has a big body but rides like she's small. She has no steering, she can't keep her knees still, not her back straight, not her hands lowered, not anything. I can't look at mum when she rides, I can look at the others in her group but not at mum.

Klara's mother doesn't ride.

A lot of people have said I look like my mum, but I'd rather look like Klara's mum. I suck in my nostrils and draw my eyebrows to my temples.

When Mom gets off and I come into the ring to help her hold while she pulls up the stirrups.

Mom's breathlessness at the back of my neck:

"Did you see that?"

I nod.

Mom's body is soft and furless. The bare skin on her hands. My own body: so disturbing.

Jessica throws a meatball into the flowerpot on stage. The dining room has a stage where the music classes sometimes perform. Jessica threw the meatball up there. When she does that, something in me gets all weird, in some places on my body the skin disappears. Jessica throws a piece of sausage so that it ends up on top of the light pipes in the ceiling. Why isn't anyone rescuing me from here? Why doesn't anyone tell Jessica? I fall from the light pipes, from the grey-melted tiles in the ceiling, down towards everything in the dining room. The floor, I'll end up on the floor and all the disgust on the floor will stick to my front.

There's something about the food. The food that's going into my body. There is something that is sacred. There is something that is whole. But when Jessica throws the food across the room, it gets all disjointed. I turn into a meatball, a sausage. I can't separate the meat that is my body from the meat that is in the meatball. *All meat is hay*. That's what the Bible says. That's what God said. Now anything can happen. I can be thrown away any way I want.

Before, I also knew: What goes on the plate goes in the stomach. Now I know: What goes on the plate can also be thrown across the room. Thrown like a bomb and explode in my stomach. Guts and fat-fat-fat all over the plastic furniture.

I think of the war.