



KELLY IN TOMALES, CALIFORNIA.  
PHOTOGRAPH BY GINA KELLY.

# Two Stories

DORTHE NORS

## The Duckling

Alongside the big farm, Dad ran a duck farm, and because he was a clever man he earned a lot of money from it. It helped, too, that he was orderly and always had a good grip on things. He liked that. He was known for saying, whenever anyone brought something up that had already been discussed, that he thought all that had been *put away in the right boxes*. It didn't matter whether it was me or my sister, a business acquaintance or just a neighbor he'd been talking politics with, he'd always say: *I thought we'd got all that put away in the right boxes*. He'd say it to Mom whenever anything came between them, just like he'd say it to his other women whenever they got distraught about him not wanting a divorce.

I remember one time one of the others came home to us. I was sitting up in the window in the gable end where I could see everything. A car came, and this little woman got out. Mom wasn't home, and I couldn't hear what Dad was saying to begin with. He was standing on the step and she was by the hood of the car talking in a sharp voice about tidying up after yourself. I would have closed the window but I was too scared, and then he said it to her, that he thought they'd got all that *put away in the right boxes*. I don't think she said anything to that. She just took this not

very big plastic bag from the back seat of the car and gave it to him and then drove off.

That was the first time I saw one of the women Dad had on the side. Actually, it was the only time, but Mom said he had several and that it all came in periods. At his funeral years later, I was too scared to look up from the hole for fear that there'd be all these women I didn't know standing around it too. I looked at the lid of the coffin instead and told myself there was only the close family and the priest. I didn't want to think about what Dad looked like in the coffin. And I didn't want to think about what he would look like in time. Liquids can seep in anywhere, and the body means something to those left behind.

Obviously I was a bit quiet for a time after seeing the business with the other woman from the window in the gable end. Dad could detect things. He was sharp, and he was watching me to see the expressions on my face. Then one evening not long afterward he looked at my sister during dinner and said that a man with a wife had no business sleeping with women outside his marriage. Not if there were feelings involved. If there were no feelings, there was no problem. Man was like any other animal then who had to have his basic needs fulfilled. He had no respect for girls who went to bed with men on the first night, and he had no respect for men who beat their wives. My sister sat looking into her glass of water while Dad said that a woman shouldn't have a deep voice either. And it was no good thing if she tried to be funny. She was allowed to be subtle. But a woman trying to be funny was compensating for being fat or ugly in some other way. A woman who knew she was good looking and for that reason could afford to keep quiet was a completely different thing.

That's what he said, and then my sister drank up her water and looked across at me. There wasn't that much in it that was new. Dad had his boxes and he put things away in them, even things that contradicted each other.

But I remember afterward when the table had been cleared. We were sitting in the livingroom watching television. He prodded me on the knee and pointed to Mom who had fallen asleep in the armchair. Her chin had dropped onto her chest, and she was twitching just beneath the skin every time her muscles relaxed. Dad smiled then and said: *The way she's sitting there, you can see that Mom's really just an animal.*

But he was fond of Mom. He couldn't have lived without her, because men couldn't, he said. Men had to have wives, and my sister and I still talk about how moved he was at their 25th anniversary. He'd already lost a lot of weight then and there he was making a speech for Mom and looking down at her. He said he'd be a goner without her, and we were so fond of him. When I think about personal memories of him I've lots. We never wanted for anything, and my sister and I were allowed to do all sorts. I remember him tow-starting cars, and I remember when we were snowed in and he got us out. I remember the feeling of being held up high and thrown into the air without knowing if I'd be caught again. For me happiness will always be the feeling of landing in his arms.

I especially remember how he hatched the ducklings in this big hatching machine that smelled of warm eggs and feathers. Sometimes he'd hold the eggs up to his ear and shake them to see if there was any life. If there wasn't he'd let me throw them in among the trees, and the other ones he put back. When the ducklings were about to hatch, a little hole would appear in the egg. Then you could see the duckling pecking away in there. It was always an excitement to see if they'd survive. If they couldn't stand and walk properly Dad would bash them hard against the floor. I remember once he gave me this weedy little duckling. He said I could see if I could keep it alive. I came up with the idea that the oven would have the same effect as the hatching machine. I took a little box and lined it with a

floor cloth. I put the duckling inside and put the box in the oven. I don't know what I set the oven on, but it wasn't more than fifty degrees. Then I closed the oven door and sat down in front of the glass. Of course it died eventually, and he was kind and said I shouldn't be upset. Ducklings like that almost always died eventually. We buried it together behind the machine shed in a plastic bag, and he let me fill up the hole myself.

# She frequented cemeteries

DORTHE NORS

She started frequenting cemeteries that summer, preferring the ones others rarely visited. She could go straight from social events like receptions with white wine, canapés and peripheral acquaintances, and cycle to the nearest cemetery and find the corner where no one ever really came. At the far end of Vestre Cemetery, by the Inuit and the Faeroese and the war graves, down by the disused chapel was a quiet spot. Well away from the plots where brewers, publishers and prime ministers lay shoulder to shoulder and were dead. There was no edged grass, no small ponds with specially purchased ducks. Most of all, it resembled the hinterland of Jutland, depopulated and with plywood boards across the windows, and through it all a diagonal tunnel of willow trees. No one ever came there, so that was where she liked to go. In the same way, she was fond of the Jewish cemetery and the Catholic cemetery, and, provided she chose the right times and the right spots, Assistens Cemetery could be quiet, too.

Her favorite, though, was just between Frederiksberg and Valby. It was best in the twilight. In late July the evenings were still long and the place was like an overgrown park. Going through the paths in the middle she found the unkempt graves of long-forgotten painters and poets, and at the northern end she came across a part with the same

roses everywhere. The bushes had grown over the stones, weeds had tangled up in them, and they were the same roses her mother had at home. Pink, with small flowers, and no one bothered to cut them back.

When she got to this part of the cemetery she would stroll peacefully around the paths like she was drawing arabesques with her feet.

She was thirty-five years old and that summer she was avoiding her girlfriends. Now and then they would call her and ask if they should meet up, but she would decline whenever possible. She knew they would be troubled by her situation, and that her way of dealing with what she claimed had happened would excite them and cause them to speculate impulsively. On a few occasions she tried to explain the situation to them, but it had not been pleasant. A few of them had tried to talk her out of it, suggesting her condition was the result of loneliness or biology. One had interrogated her, she felt. Was she quite sure, was it wise, wouldn't it be better if. . . . All of them wanted to give her advice, even if she didn't need any. She knew why she was going to the cemeteries, why she continued to walk back and forth, and around and about, eating ice-cream and rolling rose petals between her fingers. She was waiting, and while she was waiting she was putting something behind her and trying to find a new way of looking at the future. She walked slowly and if not devoutly then at least pensively and with a sense for the little things she didn't feel she'd noticed for years. She saw the wild cats that lived in the bushes. She saw how they drank water from the pond in the middle of the cemetery. She saw the magpie's young and the graves that had fallen in and the gravestones that had tipped over so it looked like the dead and their monuments were about to change places. As summer passed she saw the plants grow and fade, and some evenings she would pick a few of the pink roses and take them home with her to put in a vase on the bedside table. She thought mostly about how hard it

was to be allowed to believe that good would arrive and how things would be when in spite of everything it did.

What had happened wasn't exactly spectacular. She had met a man. That was all. She loved him, and the way she loved him had made her settle into a place inside her where intangible things took on natural substance. She felt at home there and she knew that at some point she would look back on this summer as the one when she lost her reservations. Her feelings were strong and reciprocated. She sensed that, yet she knew also it would take time before they could be together. He was in mourning for things he'd lost, and his mourning was unhurried. She could see that when he looked up at her from the table. But she was all right about it, because when he looked at her she was in no doubt and could abandon herself to the hope that he would bring all the good with him when he came.

But there was no way she could tell her girlfriends how it was. They demanded evidence. They wanted to know who had died, why he kept crying, and if it really wasn't just his own fault. They wanted to know if she'd checked him out and if she knew what laying down arms involved. She mustn't get her heart broken, they said. That was the important thing. Not to get her heart broken. And all the time they jumped from floe to floe with their dreams of disappearing in the current, losing control, abandoning themselves. Always trying to fill in the empty spaces and keep things moving in the meantime. Doing their best to avoid going home too early to their little apartments that reminded them of coffee bars and bus shelters every time they stepped in through the door. Love, nothing less. That was what they wanted. That was what they craved, unconditionally. It was what they talked about when they put their arm under hers and dragged her through the parks, as though the parks were eyes in a storm that had to be sat out, and now she had found it. But she couldn't tell them. There was no way she could share it with them, so that summer she frequented cemeteries.

She would focus on her job, including the representative side, but when it was done she would get up on her bike and be gone. In the early evening she would pass through the iron gates into the Park Cemetery, stroll past the dead painters, the poets, and head for the place where the pink roses were. When she got there she would amble between the graves, and as she went she closed her eyes to the parts of reality the others were keeping a watch on and sensed how the man, who could only be with her in spirit, wormed his fingers in between hers. They would walk there in various scenarios, sometimes silently, though together. They would be walking there when he said he loved her. Things like that would be said as they walked side by side through the cemeteries in the various stages of their as-yet-uninitiated time together. She had no trouble picturing how the man zigzagged in between the small plots with a child on his shoulders. She could see how the man and the child came leaping out from among the bushes where the wild cats lived. She could feel how he kissed her behind the cemetery toilets, see how the child fell and hurt itself, hear how the wheels of the buggy squeaked. Often he would sit down on one of the benches a little farther on and pat the space beside him so she could sit there with him, and that was what she did.

There was nothing secretive about it. She was in love with someone, and while it was happening she thought about the good that had happened and the good that was going to happen. The noise of traffic on Søndre Fasanvej and Roskildevej remained a distant hum as she stole names for the child from the gravestones, and it felt nice, the same way it felt nice to let all thoughts sink into the earth where one day they themselves would lie, white into the bone and tangled up in each other while the world carried on above them. That was okay, she thought. That kind of death was a good thing, and she would tell him that when he came, and she would tell the child when it was old enough, and

perhaps a particularly distraught girlfriend one day. Until then she would keep it to herself, frequent the cemeteries, waiting and occasionally squatting down to see the cats stretch their necks toward the water to reach.

—*Translated from the Danish by Martin Aitken*