

Asphalt

A short story by Kamilla Tolnø

Someone grabs hold of my arm.

I am walking on a road with black asphalt when it happens. On both sides of the road are tall fences with curls of barbed wire along the top. There is only one way to go, and that is forward.

As long as I can remember I have walked here. You imagine that all roads must end somewhere. Not this one. The asphalt beneath me is endless, it continues mile after mile. I can't remember what it is like not walking here. Sometimes I get a feeling in my gut that reminds me of all the things that were here before the asphalt, but I no longer know what it was. Only the feeling remains.

The asphalt is hot, burning hot. The forceful sun flickers above it like a defect in the eye. The straight white stripe in the middle shines bright against all the black, and I follow its direction. Straight ahead. There is no reason for a detour if you can walk straight on. My plan is to reach the end of the asphalt as quickly as possible, if there is an end. I tell myself that I just have to keep to the white stripe.

Keep walking until the soles of your feet are burnt to the bone.

It hurts. The heat from the blackness underneath me feels like sharp teeth in my toes and under the heel. My hair is on fire and it can't be put out by the moisture at the back of my neck. My shoulders have assumed the same colour as salt from far-away mountains, and it probably won't be long before it starts flaking off.

I am waiting for the sun to set. Maybe that will reduce some of the unbearable heat from the asphalt.

My eyes are constantly searching the surroundings, trying to catch a glimpse of something. I am not sure what, but something apart from black asphalt and white skin. An oasis with clean water and a hut shaded by palm trees, maybe. A large city with grey skyscrapers and wide awnings that shade the pavements. I don't know exactly what, but I know how it is supposed to feel. Cool and a bit like home.

Sometimes the landscape changes. From bone-dry desert over damp pine forests with treetops that reach the sky to coastal areas with flat, white beaches and palm trees. I prefer being surrounded by mountains. It is easy to keep your eyes fixed on a mountain top and keep track of the distance you have travelled.

But no matter what surrounds us, the asphalt continues. Always the same black shade with the white stripes. It is so continuous that it is both comforting and terrorizing.

I am walking alone, but I am surrounded by other walkers. The many feet block my view, and I can't see more than a few yards of asphalt in every direction.

They are different from me. They speak to each other and to me while walking. I take in their words, but I can't work out their meaning. They are dissolved in the air like beads of sweat on the asphalt.

Apparently it doesn't hurt them. Their feet are just like mine as they walk on calmly like going for a walk in a park on a foggy Sunday morning. The naked soles of their feet are pressed directly against the black stones, but the skin underneath is still lovely and sand-coloured when they lift them.

Their feet follow other routes than mine. They don't follow the white stripe, the straight road, but they still advance faster than me.

And they look alike. Their skin is not red like mine, but white and flawless like antique china. Only the tops of their cheeks show a faint rose nuance, a brush of water colour. Their bodies are completely the same, moulded on the same template. If I could just look like them, I could merge into the crowd.

That is my only wish. To be swallowed up by the crowd. It is like an entire organism, and I am a single cell drifting forlorn around them. I can see that they support each other, that they suffer together, and all I have is skin flaking off.

Sometimes I have tried to find someone to walk along with. The others are in groups, and I join them because it feels like a good thing to do. Sometimes I can even talk their language, imitate their sounds, until they look at me and smile with recognition in their eyes. At that precise moment it feels good to be part of something. At one point someone grabbed my hand so that I wouldn't drop behind.

But I still do. Maybe I can stick it out in some groups longer than in others, but I am always a bit slow. So I have decided to walk alone from now on. Walk alone and focus on what lies ahead.

Until someone grabs my arm.

It is not because I am unfamiliar with touch. It happens all the time because we walk so close to each other that it is impossible not to accidentally brush against someone else. An elbow on a rib, fingers on a wrist, hair on a shoulder. It is quite normal to feel another person on your own body.

But the premeditation of the touch, the pressure and the strength with which it is performed frightens me. Someone has grabbed my body, touched me, with the sole purpose of catching my attention.

That has never happened before.

And that is why I turn round without reservation. I have to find out who has seen me in the crowd and discovered that I am worth contacting.

At first I don't wonder who I am looking at, but what. Apparently it is a person, but my brain finds it hard to fit the colourful creature into that category. To me a person is just arms and legs, a few pieces of fabric and maybe a pair of eyes with something behind them, if you are lucky. My idea is that human beings should look alike. But she doesn't look like anything I have ever seen, and she sends me a smile out of another world.

Her lips are bright red and fat like larvae. Her front teeth are divided by a large gap like an opening stage curtain. Her jawbone is sharp, but her head is small and her neck so thin that I am surprised it doesn't snap. It is all framed by long, untamed curls burned by the sun, but still with their deep, brown colour. She is not dressed in anonymous grey like the rest of us, but in a bulging dress in candy colours, and there are sparkling stones in her hair, on her wrist and under her eyes.

Her eyes are as untamed as the rest of her. They are fixed on me, but are wide open and shiny as if she is seeing something far more interesting and captivating than another face in front of her. It is impossible to feel sure what that look is concealing.

Actually I only notice all the little things later. What really strikes me and catches my eye is the lack of shine at the top of her hair, the red stripe in the parting where the sun has burned her, and the flakes of dead skin threatening to let go of her chest.

Before I have time to take a closer look at her feet, to see if they are naked and burnt like mine, she speaks, "Are you walking alone?"

Her voice is different. It is not a problem to understand her, like the others, but she twists the words as if she comes from somewhere else.

But is there somewhere else?

"Yes."

“Why?”

“I can't keep up with the others.”

We have stopped, and they are passing us in a steady flow, an endless snake of bodies.

She turns her head to look around, as if she hasn't noticed the crowd around us until now. The people who from birth have been protected from the asphalt, the heat and everything that hurts.

“Would you like to get away from here with me?”

The words strike a chord. Something from a far-away dream, a frustrated wish finally expressed.

“How do you mean – away from here? We can't.”

“Oh.” She glances at the sky.

“What?”

“Let us walk together.”

“I can't walk so fast.”

“It doesn't matter,” she says. “It is not a question of speed.”

I nod. Her hand is still on my arm, and even though I can feel how our sweat blends between the two warm pieces of skin, it feels oddly reassuring. As if she mustn't remove it.

I start walking beside her.

“Why do you walk like that?” She points at my feet that are carefully placed after each other on the white stripe.

“So that I don't burn my feet.”

She smiles. “I would like to show you a place where you don't have to worry about your feet.”

I frown. The parched skin pains me. “What do you mean?”

“Let's get away from here.”

“Away from the road?”

“Yes.”

“Is that possible?”

Her smile broadens. “Of course. Let me show you.”

She pulls at my arm. It stings under my toes when we step on the black asphalt. Some of the others loudly grumble that we are in their way, but apparently that doesn't affect her. She keeps smiling until she has pulled me into the ditch. There is a narrow stripe of trodden down grass between the edge of the road and the fence.

I stop and look around. I have been walking for so many hours on end, my feet have not felt anything but thick paint for so long that it feels weird suddenly to be standing still on the grass. The voice in my head interrupts me: *You are wasting your time. Just keep walking.*

“Now what?”

“Now we slip out of here.”

My skeptical eyes glance at the curled barbed wire at the top of the fence. It is exactly as painful as it looks. “And how do you propose we do that?”

“It is not so difficult.”

“I have tried a lot of times.” If I am not mistaken, the small star-shaped scars in my palms are still there. “And I haven't succeeded yet.”

“That's because you have been trying to climb the fence. That is no use – you have to climb

under.”

Before I have time to object, she is on her knees. Nimbly she lifts the bottom part of the fence and slips underneath. Less than a minute later she is on the other side of the fence with green grass around her ankles and a smile on her face. The pretty dress has been soiled by thick stripes of mud, but apart from that she seems unharmed.

“Oh.” That looked easy. She gives me an encouraging nod, and I decide to give it a try. What have I got to lose? I kneel down and squeeze into the crack between the fence and the ground. The pointed ends of the stiff wire bump against my body in several places, but it is surprisingly easy to disentangle myself and squeeze through. My smile is enormous when I am on my feet again.

The feeling of the soft, cool, yielding earth on my feet – I can't even try to express it.

“Can you believe that it has been so easy all the time?”

“All the time,” she concedes.

“Why hasn't anyone tried it before?” I turn around as I ask the question. If I had seen anyone successfully appear on the other side of the fence, I would have tried at once to do the same. But there is no-one behind me waiting their turn. They keep passing by with their eyes fixed on an unknown spot on the horizon. “Why don't they follow us?”

She shrugs. “I have asked myself the same question,” she answers. “But maybe they like it in there. The straight road, the fence as a clear boundary. It keeps them in, but it also keeps other things out.”

My relief is penetrated by misgivings. “Other things?”

“My friends. Do you want to meet them?”

I am not sure. “Are there many?”

“Yes, of course. There are more of us than you'd think. But there are most of the others, that's why it's so hard for us to find each other.” The red lips meet in a dissatisfied pout.

“That makes sense.”

“Let us get going.” Again she grabs my arm, determinedly, but it doesn't feel unaccustomed any more. It is almost scary how quickly you get used to something as long as it feels good. The heat from the asphalt I would never get used to even though I walked on the road until the day I gave up.

Only then do I notice the landscape around us. I am no longer forced to watch it from a distance, as if it was all a flat piece of scenery. Now I have stepped out into it. Towards the right a dark forest with tall trees spreads out, in front of us green fields unfold. And it is no longer only what I can see. I can also feel it under my feet, I can smell the flowers, I can hear the birds.

It is incomprehensible how my whole existence could change just because she reached out and grabbed my arm. She must not let go.

“Are the others also sensitive?”

She looks back at me, but continues to take long steps towards the horizon. “What do you mean?”

“Our skin and hair. Are they getting burnt too?”

“Yes. Does that mean that we are sensitive?”

I hesitate. “I don't know. I have always thought of it that way. The others don't get burnt.”

“We are all sensitive,” she says with a smile. “But in different ways. It is lucky that skin and hair grow out again.”

At first I find it hard to imagine the others as sensitive, but I say nothing. Instead I focus on

enjoying all the new impressions, on appreciating everything I have been cheated out of until now. We step into a swamp until the water reaches our ankles, and the thick water is a loving hand. For the first time ever I have the energy to enjoy the sun, the heat as a kiss on my shoulders. When the trees cast their shadows on us, a cool breeze slides along our skin, and it feels better than a real, physical caress. I want to lie down and soak it all up. It still feels as something I might lose.

A dream I might lose if I don't hold on to it.

But she continues. Very purposefully, as if she is completely sure where we are going.

“How do you know where your friends are?”

She is out of breath. “I can feel it.”

And just as I thought it couldn't get any better, other people appear. The flat landscape is broken by shapes getting up on two legs. They are swarming around something that looks like a big, black triangle. From here it is difficult to determine exactly how many they are, but the sight makes me gasp. I haven't even got used to the idea that there is a single person like me.

We are still a few hundred yards from them when they spot us. Some of them break out of the group and start running towards us. After greeting my heroine they take my hand and lead me towards the rest of the group. Almost as if they want me there.

I am completely overwhelmed. Not only by their kindness, but by them. They all look like my saviour in the way that they don't look like anything I have seen before. They are all distinct, there are bodies in all shapes and sizes, faces with their own characteristics, clothes and accessories that belong in fairy tales. I get so flustered that I don't know how to react to it all. I settle for a smile and an answer to the questions they ask me. They mostly ask if I come from the road, and when I say yes, they squeeze my hand and answer that they are happy I was found.

Most of all I notice that they all have something in common with me. Their skin does not flake, but it has been burnt rose-pink by the sun. Their hair is not on the point of falling out, but it has clearly been dried out by the heat. Something tells me that once they were all like me. That they got through it.

Only when I am very close to them I again notice the black triangle they are gathered around. It is a tall stack of thick branches piled up with their points against each other. It seems to be kind of a centre for the group, a core around which they all move. I sit down on the ground close to them and stay silent, looking around me. Just fancy that only a couple of hours ago I was toasted like an ant on the road with all the others. It is a weird thought that they are still walking, and that they will keep on walking, even though there are places like this.

My heroine finds me again and sits down crossed-legged beside me. In her eyes I see recognition, as if she knows exactly how I feel. Who knows, maybe she has been through the same thing.

“What is it for?” I nod in the direction of the wooden construction.

“It is in your honour,” she says with a smile. “We'll set it on fire when the sun sets. We are having a celebration in your honour.”

“A celebration?” The word has almost lost its meaning. “For me?”

She nods eagerly, “There is always something to celebrate when we find new people like us.”

“People like you?”

She blinks. “People who are different. They are hard to find.”

I can't help smiling.

“But you can't be the guest of honour looking like that.”

I frown.

“I didn't mean it as in insult,” she adds quickly. “But you have been walking out there for too long. It takes its toll when you are in a place where you are not supposed to be. Luckily I know what to do. Stay here and we'll fix it, all right?”

I assume that she is talking about my face and hair. A moment later she returns with a pair of scissors. She looks experienced, as if she does this often, when she starts removing the dead skin from my face and my chest. Then she cuts my hair. It takes some time, but I am enjoying it. I can't put my finger on it, but something about the closeness makes me feel whole.

Finally she concludes: “That was much better. You are worthy of any celebration now.”

My hair is very short. I can feel the ends against my earlobes when I move my head. “Does it look nice on me?”

“Yes, it is much better than before.” She nods as if she is agreeing with herself. “You look like yourself now.”

I don't doubt her.

Afterwards she fetches food and water for me. I can't tell where it comes from, but that is not important. The taste is fantastic, like an explosion, and I almost forget where I am. When I am done, she is in the same spot, still smiling.

“I am happy you found us,” she says.

“So am I.”

“It may be a good idea to get some rest before tonight.” She spreads her arms wide open.

I lean back and allow myself to be caught up in her arms. It feels natural. With a sigh I close my eyes and let my thoughts drift like the white cotton clouds far above us.

I hope you enjoyed reading my short story “Asphalt”.

I'd love to hear your thoughts on this piece. Feel free to DM me at every time (@k.tolnoe on instagram) or send me an email on kamillatolnoe@gmail.com.

Lots of love,

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