

WALTER NOWAK WON'T GET UP

a novel by
JULIA WOLF



Sample translation
by Hannah Vinter

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Contact

Frankfurter Verlagsanstalt GmbH
Nadya Hartmann
Tel.: 069-74 30 55 97
Email: hartmann@frankfurter-verlagsanstalt.de

Oh Walter, she said, and was already out the door. Bright and early, just as promised. She wants to beat the rush hour, wants to make it in good time. Yvonne wants a bit of down time before the conference starts. No kiss, no bye, just oh Walter, I'll be back. An absurd feeling, a small feeling, then her promise is reassuring. Yes, it was a promise. Yvonne will come back. Since I've known Yvonne, I've never been apart from her, we've never been apart from each other for more than two days. It's really true. No one's died, it's not the end of the world. It can all be explained, Yvonne will understand. I'll tell her. Where should I begin?

The wax earplugs. I roll them into balls and with my index finger I shove a plug into my ear, into my head, until it's locked in place. Same on the other side, and then I pull the cap over my ears, double protection. The birds go quiet, I can't hear them any more, I just see them wagging their heads, the sparrows. I'm sorry, I don't speak beak. Yvonne would laugh, Yvonne would have laughed. When she has the chance. When she next has the chance, when this is all over, when I've explained everything to her, I'll waggle my head: Sorry, I can't beak-read. And Yvonne, tweet tweet, ha ha, just like her, light and clear, no trace of mockery. Why should there be.

[...]

I step out of my pool shoes, I dip my foot in the water, what's the good in that, I plunge my whole leg in at once. I slide into the water, no shilly-shallying, no shying away from the nineteen degrees. It's refreshing, or not, nineteen degrees, that's actually. Well obviously that's cold. So what. Come on now. Chattering teeth. The hot shower afterwards, the thought of the hot shower afterwards, a cup of coffee. You just have to keep a hold of yourself, you can't give in to this shilly-shallying. It's duty first, then. There and back is fifty, ten times fifty, that's five hundred, twice that, well that's, that's decent. Never let it be said. Listen here Mrs Doctor, Mrs whatever your name is, I swim a thousand metres every morning, that's a kilometre, note that down. Every morning. This expression on Yvonne's face. She has to admit, that's decent, that's not half bad. Say what you like, whoever wants to come and say, whoever wants, say what, wants to come, say, what? Come rain or shine, says Yvonne on the phone to her friend. Walter goes swimming, come what may, she says, and sighs. But she likes it really, her husband, I keep myself fit. Her sighing was an act, of course, you know I've seen the looks. I saw how Olga looked at me. She stood in the doorway a moment too long, the Hoover in her hand. Embarrassed, but not so embarrassed that she turned away at once, she stayed standing in the doorway and looked. With that contorted face, contorted, but somehow still pretty. Just that her mouth is pulled so high up towards her nose. I put on trousers and a shirt right away, of course. I'm entirely proper in these matters. Such a young thing, and from Russia too, so no. I've had everything that a man, I've really had it all. At some point, it's enough.

Ten times there and back, when you start it always seems like a lot. But it actually goes by very quickly, you just have to think of something else.

[...]

A hot shower, a cup of hot coffee. And push off, and let's go, just keep, I'm already gliding through the water, going. I close my eyes and imagine how I'm gliding through the water, and everything is blue and cool, the sunlight sparkles just so, bliss. I close my eyes, and. The way she looked at me. If Yvonne had seen how Olga,

the girl would have been straight out of the picture, it would have been quite long enough, twelve euros an hour, paid on the nail, cash in hand. Yvonne has a tender heart for the poor, she doesn't want to exploit anyone. Twelve euros, I showed her the bird. You can clean it yourself, Yvonne said. It's better if I don't mention Olga's look at all, I won't tell Yvonne about it, because it doesn't matter how the girl looked at me, no look could justify. And so on. I know what it looks like, what I look like. An old man, naked, on the bathroom floor. I can't mention Olga's look. That would seem as if I wanted. As if I felt it was an encouragement. There's nothing to discuss.

How long have I been lying here? Yvonne said she was coming back, but she didn't say when. Of course I could, I could grit my teeth, get up, I could look for my phone, that would tell me what day it is. My teeth, probably the pain would move into my head, this pain whimpering quietly underneath my skull would explode as soon as I got upright. Nothing I couldn't survive. I'd get a bit dizzy, but then I'd know the date and the time. What if I've been lying here for days? If Yvonne should have been here ages ago? Well that would mean. What would that mean?

At the beginning your arms are always a bit heavy, there's a twinge in your muscles that lasts for two lengths, it drags on you like lead. But it wears off. You just have to clench your teeth, your arse cheeks, bite. [...]

The black line on the bottom of the pool helps, on and on, I pull myself along the line, tug by tug, no thinking. Left right left, breathe. At some point things really get moving, once my muscles have warmed up, I get into gear, my body is a little machine, my heart drums out the rhythm. What do you say to that, Mrs Doctor? He's still in pretty good shape? Streamlined, I tuck my head in, roll forwards, I push off with both feet. I feel the power contained in my legs. I stretch out, glide, my hands pierce the surface of the water.

[...]

Why don't they make swimming caps compulsory? I don't care what it looks like, in my opinion everyone ought to. I swim, a little machine, and suddenly there's a feeling on my hand. Quite subtle. I swim, and suddenly it breaks my flow. It feels like algae, like tentacles. I've swum into a hair. I stick my head above the water in alarm, I thrash my legs and try not to panic. A long black hair has gotten caught between my fingers, it's stuck between my index finger and my middle finger. I try to shake it off. I thrash my legs, I shake, but the hair won't come off. I try to keep my cool, calm down Walter, it's disgusting, but nothing more than that. Breathe. It's just a hair. I drag my hand through the water, try to get the hair off me, try to get it to go over the edge of the pool and glug down the drain. I stay calm, I stay fairly calm and it pays off. The hair disentangles itself from my fingers. It floats away in one direction, I thrash my legs and swim off in the other, I change lanes. Yvonne would have laughed, oh Walter, she knows what I'm like. I'm keen on long hair on women's heads, generally speaking I like long hair when it's on women's heads, but in the sink, in the shower, on the pillow, I just lose it. Yvonne thinks I overdo it a bit, but nevertheless she's careful about it, Yvonne was always careful about it, when she still needed to be. We all have our quirks.

The hair breaks my flow, the shock, I have to. I hang on the edge of the pool and tread water. I sun my face, dry out my fur, I give my legs a workout. I have to let myself recover from the shock a bit. The pool attendant comes out of his cabin, I say hello, I always say hello to him. Good morning!, I call out. And as always, no answer, he goes past me, toward the huts. He's a strange bird. I say hello every morning, and him behind his mirrored sunglasses, behind his ski-instructor sunglasses – not even a nod. I can't remember ever having seen him without his sunglasses. He's probably about my age, maybe a bit younger. What makes him do this job? All

day long he sits in his cabin, every so often he walks around the pool, tells off a couple of rowdy boys. He must have fished one out at some point, but still. There's only one reason why someone would do a job like that, he needs the money. Maybe he took on a mortgage that was too big, or has an expensive ex. Hanging there on the edge of the pool, I feel sorry for him. At some point, you've got to call it a day, at some point you've spent enough time slaving away. Poor devil. But still, he could say hello. I tread water, time to get back to it. I start counting from four again because I didn't finish the last length, it doesn't count. I look over to the kiddie pool. A group of women are standing there in a circle, up to their knees, they pull their kids through the water. I look hard at one of them. Pink swimsuit, ponytail. Yvonne used to have a ponytail just like that. It would always go left to right, behind her head, when she walked down the street, towards me. I hang on the edge of the pool and something stirs inside of me, something always stirs inside of me when I think of it. [...] I was so crazy about that girl. It seemed like someone had sculpted her just for me. It stirs when I think about, even now, in this state, it still stirs when I think about that petite, compact body. It stirs and then suddenly it doesn't stir any more, then Yvonne lays her hand on my chest, Yvonne's hand on my cheek, she says: it's not that bad. When really it's as bad as it could be. She strokes my face and says: please, don't make a big deal out of it. These things happen. But not to me, I've never had problems in that department. And it's clear now that it is a big deal, it could be a big deal.

[...] No. Yvonne isn't a girl any more, at forty she got rid of the ponytail, her fortieth birthday, out on the terrace, rhododendron, short hair. Pretty, I couldn't bring myself to tell her she looks pretty. It was as if someone had taken something away from me, something that belonged to me, gone. It was a feeling like being insulted. Maybe that was the first time I saw this expression on her face, tired eyes, oh Walter. A moment ago anything was still possible, and the next moment she looks at me with these eyes, the next moment Yvonne is in her mid-forties and sighs. A moment ago, she was still one of them, Yvonne could still have been one of the women in their mid-twenties in the kiddie pool, or mid-thirties, they're having kids later and later these days. She could have been up to her knees in the kiddie pool, in a pink swimsuit, with her friends, the other older mothers. Yvonne still with her ponytail, a lovely thought, it's pointless, Yvonne doesn't care about it. I wouldn't, if she'd wanted it, I wouldn't have denied her that experience. But it really wasn't an issue, there was no great yearning. Yvonne isn't that way, wasn't that way. We're happy just as we are, she always says, things are good with us. From a distance, the woman in the pink swimsuit really does look like her, that laugh. When was the last time Yvonne laughed like that?

She is in a hurry to get out of the house and onto the motorway, [...] her lips barely brush my cheek, she is in such a hurry. I've never seen her wearing that skirt before, it must be new, and her hair clipped short, like a dog's fur, it feels nice, but. She doesn't wave, I stand at the kitchen window, an idiot, I stand there and watch her leave, she doesn't look back.

Lately that's been happening to me more, that I drift. Then when I come back to myself minutes have gone by, I've just been staring into the distance, have been thinking of everything and nothing, as if my thoughts were shooting into a different orbit, and then turning circles there, up above, somewhere, in space. When I come back to myself – How long was I? Was my mouth open? Did someone see?

I stare at her, and the moment I realise I'm staring she's also frowning, she pulls her kid to the other end of the pool. Old man at the edge of the pool, suddenly I've become a lecher. [...] Her pretty, bright face darkens and I think, the young Fräulein is flattering herself a bit. Does she think I've never. I've seen plenty of pretty mothers in my time. I don't normally spend time hanging on the edge of the pool at all, I swim a thousand metres

and leave right away. I'm about to push off again, then I see her handing over her kid, she gives her kid to another one of the mothers and gets out of the kiddie pool, one big step. Maybe she needs the loo I think, but no, she walks past the toilets, she comes towards me, for the first time I see how muscly she is, lovely calves. She smiles at me, maybe I wasn't staring at all, maybe that was a misunderstanding, a misunderstanding of a misunderstanding, it cancels itself out, two minuses make a plus? She must have understood my look for what it was. Harmless, completely and utterly harmless. And while I'm still, minus and plus, she comes up to the edge of the pool. Before I can return her smile – truce – she stretches her arms out like arrows and jumps. Upsy-daisy. Fräulein glides noiselessly into the water. She's really got it, Fräulein flies along, not a splash, she can really swim. The turn is just right too, she must have done this competitively. And as I watch her something seizes hold of me, there's something that seizes hold of me, hang on a moment. I'm going to catch this fish. I'm already shooting through the water, for a moment there is only the burning in my muscles, in my chest, there are only bubbles and her pink swimsuit. I see her feet moving back and forth, completely effortless, the white soles of her feet, flippers. I give it everything, I grit my teeth, I pull ahead of her, of her calves, of her pink chassis, of her head, with my last bit of strength I pull forwards, close my eyes –

Yes. That's what happened. At this point in the story, Yvonne will look at me wide-eyed because she doesn't know what's coming. I'll pause artfully, increase the suspense. And then, I'll say: there was a smack! Yvonne puts her hand to her mouth, Oh no. Oh yes. At full tilt, I crash into the side of the pool.

[...] My goodness, when I think about it. That was quite a smack on the head, a bit of a thwack. And I get into the car as if nothing has happened, I drive off, along the quiet street and onto the main road, by the post office, by the bank, by the market square, ice-cream parlour, town hall. Past the petrol station, onto the road out of town, I drive between the cornfields and I don't ask myself what's with the music. [...] The music is just in my head. I don't hear it. I don't hear the humming of the motor, don't hear the motor going quiet in the entrance to the garage, don't hear the clink of the key. Full of energy, I'm out the car, into the house. And it's not until I'm in the corridor, in front of the mirror, that I realise. I look in the mirror and think, hang on a moment, what's that thing glistening there? On my head? Panting, I've had a shock. I've given myself a shock. Then something flashes through my mind, a sense, no, a certainty, of how this will play out. This is the beginning. This is the end. From now on it's all downhill for me, it's only downhill. I shake myself, I rip the swimming cap off my head and the plugs out of my ears. Suddenly I can hear, outside the birds are twittering. A panting in my chest, panic. From the swimming pool to the house, the whole journey, with swimming cap and ear plugs, I stand in front of the mirror and can't believe it. What do you do with this panic? Breathe. Keep calm. It's hard to think about nothing. Nothing. It's only a word. A word for orbit. A word like space, you can lose yourself in it.

[...] Yvonne said she was coming back. She'll come. I'll hear her unlock the door, lay the key on the cabinet next to the coatrack. Walter!, she'll call, Walter, are you there? She'll glance into the kitchen, she'll see the mess, all the blood, and she'll be frightened. I'll hear her fear, like the beat of a pulse, her fear pulses through the whole house, now she knows that something's not right. Something's not right, her footsteps, more decisive now, into the dining room, Walter?, into the living room, Walter?, out onto the terrace. Her flowers have been flattened, the storm has finished them off. She'll resist the impulse to see to them immediately, Yvonne is worried. She comes back into the house, I'll hear every footstep, through the house, up the stairs, along the corridor to the bathroom, she comes closer and closer. I won't make a sound. I'll wait. Yvonne will push open the door, she'll catch sight of me, she can't miss me, naked on the tiles. Walter! She'll immediately kneel down, bend over me. Her hands on my chest, on my face. I'll smile. I'll give her a smile to show that everything's okay.

Nothing I can't survive, my darling. I'll call her darling because she likes that. I think she likes that. After the initial shock, the kiss on my forehead, Yvonne will sit down next to me. What on earth happened?, Yvonne will ask. Then I say: You won't believe it, listen to this. And of course Yvonne listens, of course Yvonne believes me.

And when I've told her everything and the initial shock has passed, we'll remember the documentary we watched together years ago on TV about dolphins in captivity that commit suicide by swimming into the side of their pool again and again. Yvonne will smile, *My little Flipper*, she'll say to me, and a trace of anxiety will resonate in her voice.