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Lovegods And Other Short Stories

Therese Borkenhagen

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LOVEGODS AND OTHER SHORT STORIES

by

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Bachelor of Arts, University of North Dakota, 2011

A Thesis
Submitted to the Graduate Faculty

of the

University of North Dakota

In partial fulfillment of the requirements

for the degree of

Master of Arts

Grand Forks, North Dakota

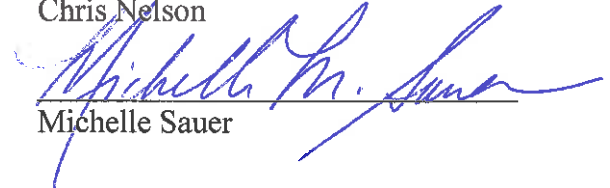
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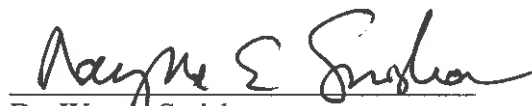
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This thesis is being submitted by the appointed advisory committee as having met all of the requirements of the Graduate School at the University of North Dakota and is hereby approved.


Dr. Wayne Swisher,
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Therese Nyberg Borkenhagen

May 2, 2013

TABLE OF CONTENTS

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS	vi
ABSTRACT	vii
CHAPTER	
I. INTRODUCTION	1
II. FICTION	12
Farsott	12
An Honorable Operator	27
The Substitute	49
Lovegods	70
WORKS CITED	93

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ABSTRACT

This thesis is a collection of four stories, which are all rooted in my Norwegian heritage. Two of the stories are historical narratives based on the German occupation of Norway, and the other two take place in an unspecified present. The stories deal largely with familial relationship and abandonment, but also include themes such as illness, war, and sexuality. I employ a variety of writing styles, inspired by, but not limited to, authors such as Franz Kafka, Erlend Loe, Ernest Hemingway, and Miranda July. I also experiment with time, language, and cultural references. Along with my stories, I am including an introduction describing my writing style in more detail, as well as discussing my influences and how they impact my writing.

CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION

My development as a semi-autobiographical writer began with failure when someone hinted that my writing read like a self-pitying, caricatural specimen of literary masturbation. At the time, my writing *seemed* therapeutic to me, and it took me months to fully accept that what mattered to me didn't necessarily matter to everyone else. My stories were generally fantastic with unrealistic and one-dimensional characters or one-sided outpours that merely glided on the icy surface of a frozen lake I had not dared dive into yet.

The first thing I had to do was decide what I wanted from my readers. I wished to use semi-autobiographical narratives, partly to achieve some deeper understanding of my experiences, but also to evoke some level of empathy in my readers. After all, I believe we often read to reaffirm that what we feel is natural, or as an attempt to comprehend the unfamiliar; we hope that what we read will benefit us, teach us, affect us. As a writer, then, I have the chance to connect with my readers by sharing relatable experiences in a setting or through a plot that I hope is new and thrilling. I want to move my readers, make them think, make them question the world I describe and the world they inhabit; I want to evoke empathy.

Evoking empathy in another person is challenging, especially doing it indirectly through a text. I regard good fiction as balanced between the familiar and the unfamiliar.

What I mean is that in order to evoke empathy, the writer cannot rely solely on the familiar, just as he or she cannot confuse the reader with too much unfamiliarity either. My previous works usually did the latter. Because those stories never grounded the reader enough in something familiar, they merely served to bewilder and ultimately alienate the reader. On the other hand, if I only introduced the reader to something familiar, the reader might just substitute the subjects and objects on the page with subjects and objects from his or her own life, and thus possibly insulating himself or herself from the text. In the middle of these two extremes, is empathy.

When it comes to writers who play with the familiar/unfamiliar dichotomy, Franz Kafka is arguably my biggest inspiration. Kafka emphasizes familiar feelings such as alienation, fear, loneliness, pride, grief, and loss, but rather than describing these themes in a familiar manner, he presents them through highly unfamiliar situations, thereby creating tension between the familiar and the unfamiliar. On the surface, Kafka's stories are often bizarre. My favorite Kafka stories, "The Metamorphosis" and "In the Penal Colony," are about fairly inhuman situations: Gregor's turning into a giant insect and the officer proudly demonstrating a gruesome torture and execution device. But at the heart of his stories, Kafka introduces human vulnerability, which bleeds through the entire text, making even a story like "The Metamorphosis" relatable and strangely realistic. Kafka evokes pathos by balancing the familiar with the unfamiliar, allowing his readers to empathize with the situations the characters find themselves in while also being entertained by the fantastic worlds he creates.

Norwegian author Erlend Loe also writes about fantastic scenarios, such as fork lift driver Kurt and his family who sail the ocean on a giant fish in *Fisken*, or the man who leaves city life behind to live in the forest where he adopts a moose calf in *Doppler*, and much like Kafka, Loe evokes recognizable human reactions and thoughts. But Loe also achieves a sense of familiarity and comprehension through his highly minimalistic, and at times strangely sardonic, language.

Because my writing style originated in Norway, and because I write in American English, my language will always be a “foreign” element in my writing. During a writers workshop a few years ago, author Loida Maritza Pérez told me that my syntax and my repetition of proper nouns instead of using pronouns revealed that my first language was not American English. While I cannot seem to always identify this tendency in my own writing, I recognize instances where my Norwegian literary influences are apparent. Loe's minimalistic style has definitely shaped the basis for the style I'm still developing. In *Doppler*, Loe writes: “I need milk. Skim milk. I don't function well without milk. I get irritable and frustrated. And I understand that I have to see people if I want milk. I'll do it with unpleasure, because I simply have to have milk” (*Doppler* 11, my translation). Word repetition is common in Norwegian literature, and is perhaps a remnant of the folktale tradition. In contemporary fiction, such repetition most likely increases readers' awareness of the fact that they are reading fiction. The most typical example of repetition as used in folk tales is the Rule of Three, which is a rhythmic storytelling technique that elicits both the mystical and the expected, thereby playing with the reader's experience and expectations. I employ this technique as well, although it appears as a stylistic pattern

more so than a plot device. Word repetition is also used in Norwegian literature because the definite form of a proper noun is most often expressed with two words in English (“the fish”), but only with one word in Norwegian (“fisken”).

In my own story, “Lovegods,” the narrator, Hedda, uses repetition to describe her father’s girlfriend, suspending the immediacy of the story for a moment: “Plump Beatrice with her forgettable looks and remarkably unremarkable personality. Boisterous Beatrice who laughs constantly, tilting her head so far back that her curly hair nearly touches the floor. Italian Beatrice whose English is so terrible...” (83). My intent is to describe Beatrice through repetition, adding new description in order to move the story forward. I also want to exemplify the narrator’s exhaustion with Beatrice in a style that might rouse up memories of Jan’s complaints about Marsha in the Brady Bunch.

The American use of repetition is often more rhythmic and poetic. In *A Farewell to Arms* Ernest Hemingway writes: “The trunks of the trees too were dusty and the leaves fell early that year and we saw the troops marching along the road and the dust rising and leaves, stirred by the breeze, falling and the soldiers marching and afterward the road bare and white except for the leaves” (3). The repetition of “and,” “leaves,” “marching,” “road,” and “dust/dusty” in the same sentence helps create musicality and rhythm in the sentence that emulates the rising and falling of the leaves as well as the marching of the troops. Hemingway also repeats sounds such as “T” (“The trunk of the trees too”) further accentuating this rhythm. In “Hills Like White Elephants” Hemingway employs repetition in a much more minimalistic way, through dialogue:

‘You want them with water?’ asked the woman.

‘Yes, with water.’ (212)

Not only is repetition in dialogue an effective tool to add rhythm, it also seems to add tension between characters. In the dramatic arts, repetition in dialogue is a way to emphasize both the word and the speaker’s objective. When characters repeat words, they add meaning to the way something was said the first time. In “Farsott” I include a short dialogue between the narrator, Nora, and her mother who is suffering from a brain tumor:

“Does this upset you?” she asks.

“Yes,” I say and pause. “Does it upset you?”

“Sometimes.”

“Sometimes is something,” I say, and for some reason I’m happy that my mother’s other extreme tumor upsets her sometimes. It means I’m not alone. (26)

“Upset” and “sometimes” are repeated to emphasize the lack of details both characters are vocalizing. My intention is to point out the much more complex conversation taking place in between the lines.

At times, rather than emphasizing “the unsaid,” I draw specific attention to the language by using Norwegian descriptive phrases and idioms. These allude to a long heritage of storytelling and the vast number of regional dialects as well as multiple foreign influences due to a history of colonization and immigration. I use Norwegian idioms as a way to introduce a sense of Norwegianness, even when the reader isn’t aware of the origin of the phrase. Some of these I introduce as Norwegian, and others I simply integrate into the text. In "An Honorable Operator" I describe the snow as "falling down

in icy rags" (33). "Rags" is used to describe snow falling in chunks—heavy and dense. Since Hans, the narrator, is Norwegian, this is a natural word choice for him, and by using it, I further characterize Hans as an individual with a specific speech pattern. In addition, this establishes a sort of foreignness in the narrative that corresponds with the narrator's nationality and the notion that the story is set in Norway.

In "Farsott" I use Norwegian idioms in a more explicit way. One such instance occurs when Nora describes her mother's problematic relationship with affectionate language: "Up North where my mother is from, people are very good at speaking "straight from the liver" as we say, but when it comes to affectionate communication it's as if no one has ever taught them the words" (24). In Norway, to speak straight from the liver is a common phrase referring to someone who is forthright in a positive way. Unlike snow "falling down in icy rags," this phrase would be more difficult to understand for a non-Norwegian without any explanation. I want each narrator to be as situated in the stories as the other characters, meaning that I don't want to deviate from their points of view. This requires that I make Norwegian phrases understandable without having to move out of the narrator's point of view and into the authorial point of view to comment on and explain the story.

Despite the automatic, but arguably subtle, "foreignness" of my language, I believe that I can separate my four thesis stories into two camps: stories grounded in the familiar and stories grounded in the unfamiliar. "Farsott" is one of the two stories that I would characterize as grounded in the familiar. The story is told by Nora whose mother has just been diagnosed with cancer for the second time, and the other, "Lovegods," is

told by Hedda as she goes to a “desert” island to reconcile with her physically and emotionally absent father. Both “Farsott” and “Lovegods” take place in the present day and neither focuses on specific political or historical events. While I believe in the importance of the themes in these two stories, I also recognize that they are typically middle-class, perhaps even universal, in the sense that most middle-class readers will have some level of experience with cancer or other serious illnesses, or have attempted to repair a problematic or non-existent relationship. In order to avoid the reader automatically over-informing the story with his or her own experiences and expectations, I incorporate unfamiliar elements.

“Farsott” actually came into being after I reread American author and director Miranda July’s collection *No One Belongs Here More Than You*. July is wonderful at creating empathy in the reader by making mundane situations extraordinary. The story “The Swim Team” is about a young woman who, in her living room, teaches a group of three senior citizens to swim. The swimmers lie on the floor with their heads in bowls filled with water. The entire story revolves around this group of people learning to swim, and the narrator's excitement over each achievement: “[Jack] was precocious, to say the least. He'd come pounding into the kitchen from a bedroom lap, covered with sweat and dust” (16). By supplementing surprising details and curious developments, July establishes tension between the reader’s experiences and expectations. After finishing this story, I realized that “Farsott,” didn’t need a monumentally fantastical plot. I didn’t have to situate the characters in a different time period or in an exotic location. What I needed were specific and intriguing details.

The title of the story refers to a plague, a highly contagious epidemic. “Farsott” is a Norwegian word; most commonly used as part of a phrase that denotes something that is moving by quickly, in this case, life. I contemplated using the word in the story, but decided that it wasn’t the word itself that was important; it was the meaning of the word. Since I don’t translate “farsott,” I might deprive some of my readers of this meaning, but the concept of a life that may or may not be running out too quickly is already apparent in the story. Therefore, the title itself serves as an unfamiliar detail that I hope helps create some sort of tension or at least intrigues the reader from the very beginning.

The narrative tone in "Farsott" is intentionally calm, almost nonchalant, to heighten the contrast with the dramatic gravity of the situation. Even when Nora describes her sadness, she does so in a matter-of-fact way:

At one point my mother tells me that she thinks the doctor misdiagnosed her, that this doesn't feel like cancer. The very next day, she's forgotten all about her suspicions, and jokes about removing one side of her brain like they did her left breast. I tell her that I think she's being inappropriate and that what she says really upsets me. I don't tell her that what upsets me the most is that sometimes when she jokes like this I wonder if, for a moment, she actually believes what she is saying. (26)

Nora's calm voice is meant to upset the "usual" way people talk of disease, death, and loss, without seeming unsympathetic. My hope is that "Farsott" not only deals with these themes, but also with the wonderful lives Nora and her mother have led. For that reason, I try to keep the narrative tone the same throughout the story and let Nora describe the

serious moments and the funnier moments as similarly as possible. I think I adopt Loe's childish and naive language in "Farsott" more than in any other story, but with the intention of evoking a sense of unfamiliarity and strangeness.

"Lovegods" is set in Hudhuveli, an island in the Maldives: I doubt many of my readers have visited the Maldives, least of all Hudhuveli, which means that the geographic location is a novelty in the story. I also incorporate three different nationalities, as well as three different languages. The location is unfamiliar and the characters are all more or less unfamiliar to Hedda, who "arrived yesterday" (75), and the reader explores this world along with her. To establish some sort of familiarity in the setting, I try not to introduce too many characters, and I make sure that Hedda returns to certain places as an act of repetition. Of course, her perception of each place changes every time she visits, but I want to ensure that the reader gains some level of understanding of Hudhuveli and its inhabitants.

In the other camp, stories grounded in the unfamiliar, are "An Honorable Operator" and "The Substitute," which are both historical narratives based on the German Occupation of Norway from 1940-45. Because "An Honorable Operator" is set in 1940-41 and "The Substitute" in the 1960s, the reader is automatically situated in an unfamiliar space and time. For over a year I struggled to make these stories work. As a writer, I too felt alienated from both stories in the sense that I wasn't connecting or empathizing with the characters I was exploring. I experimented with narrative for a while, and finally discovered that including a metafictional framework would help the reader connect more easily to the story. Storytelling eases the reader into an unfamiliar setting, as well as it

sets up a relationship between the narrator and the reader. "An Honorable Operator" opens with a statement that presupposes that the following story is being told post-war. The narrator, Hans, says: "You have to understand that the Christmas of '41 might have been the coldest Christmas in Oslo that century" (33). In the next paragraph, the narrator even comments on the story he is about to tell:

Perhaps the story begins with the occupation, but I think that everything really begins the day Rikard and I decided to take part in the resistance. You've heard the story: how Rikard and I joined Company Stokke and helped blow up several cement factories in Slemmestad. Maybe you've even heard that we killed a man. That part is not completely accurate, but I will get to that later. (33)

The narrator implies that the reason he is sharing the story is to clarify a previous version, which gives him motivation as a narrator. Due to the fact that he is narrating in the present day (or at least a while after the story takes place), this narrative framework allows for more familiarity—the reader is familiar with the act of revisiting the past through storytelling—as well as offering an explanation for why the story is being told in the first place. I hope that my reader recognizes Hans' need for redemption.

In "The Substitute" the narrator is less prevalent, but the story still opens with an allusion to the notion of a past story: "Back when Elida was fifteen, she worked at one of the cemeteries in the middle of Oslo" (54). "The Substitute" is probably my most alienating story, because there are more implications than there are specific details. In a sense, the reader is more aware of what he or she doesn't know than what he or she does

know. Another reason could be this story's point of view, for it is the only story in my thesis narrated in third-person. Since "The Substitute" is already removed from the reader due to its setting, the narrator creates another layer of removal from the main character. I have considered changing the story to first-person narrative several times, even changing it to present tense, but I always come back to third-person past tense. Elida is perhaps my most secluded character and my intent is that the third person narrative creates a more removed tone than does first-person and in that way can help illustrate her seclusion. Creating empathy for the characters in this story has been a much more challenging task than in the other stories, where some level of empathy seemed automatic, perhaps due to the first-person narrative voice.

As for future stories, I expect to write in a style similar to "Farsott" and "Lovegods." These are the stories I personally feel the closest connection to, and I enjoy adding peculiar details to familiar themes such as romantic and familial relationships. The most important result to me is inciting some sense of empathy in my reader, and I know that to do that I must maneuver the familiar and the unfamiliar in a way that doesn't bewilder the reader, nor risks the reader substituting the story with their own.

CHAPTER II

FICTION

Farsott

There is a photograph of my mother as she stands in front of Narvik Airport. On the back, she has scribbled in round and swirly letters, *April 26th, 1979*. She wears a black turtleneck sweater and a brightly colored skirt. Her hair is dark and thick, folding neatly on her shoulders. In other pictures of her from when she was young, her hair reaches all the way down to her lower back. I assume she's just had it cut before moving to Oslo—some idea of city life perhaps. She wears eye makeup as dark as her hair, and her eyes are open with anticipation. Her lips are pale and almost invisible against her white skin. She carries the same leather bag that I used all throughout high school. This is the last photo of my mom before the city changes her—makes her hard. Makes her my mother.

On April 26th, 1986, exactly seven years after she moves to Oslo, I am born with a bang. To my mother's disappointment my entrance into the world is overshadowed by the explosion of the Chernobyl Nuclear Power Plant in the former Ukrainian SSR. Over thirty people die in the explosion and it's all over the news and none of my family members pick up the phone when my mother calls to tell them about me. Because my mother never informed anyone that she was expecting me in the first place, she keeps my

existence a secret up until my fourth birthday when she decides to invite my grandparents and aunts and uncles and cousins to my birthday party.

My mother refuses to allow any of my family members take pictures during the celebration; she says they need to earn the right first. My grandparents, who have flown all the way from Northern Norway to meet me, snap a few shots of me anyway while my mother is getting the cake.

Growing up, my mother makes it very clear that the world owes us both, but damned if we will ever ask for charity. I'm ok with this. In fact, I rarely ask my mother or anyone else for anything. That's probably why I'm so surprised the day she asks if I can take her to the doctor. She says her head hurts. We take the 12 tram to Majorstuen where we switch to the 20 bus, which takes us to the hospital. The doctor talks to her in private for nearly an hour while I sift through every magazine in his waiting room. When they are done, the physician's assistant takes my mother's blood, and walks us to a room where they do all sorts of scans. For a full body scan the nurses inject her veins with a cold, tinted liquid and make her lie completely still for fifteen minutes. On the way home she swears it was more like forty minutes. After a while inside the dark machine she had lost track of where her limbs were. She worried her hand had disappeared and moved it to make sure it was still there. That's why the physician's assistant gave her an extra twenty-five minutes. "She kept giving me the eye," she says, and demonstrates "the eye."

Two days later, that same physician's assistant calls my mother and tells her that the results are in. She asks my mother if she is free to visit with the doctor the next day.

My mother tells her that no, she's not free, and asks if the doctor is free to meet with her the next day, to which the physician's assistant replies yes and schedules the appointment. I can hear her voice clearly; it's one of those voices that smiles through the phone. I'm sure her voice makes patients feel welcomed and maybe even special, but my mother is skeptical. "Voice like an angel, horns like a demon," she says about people with pretty voices. I once asked her if my father had a voice like that, and she told me that my father had both the voice and the horns of a demon, and that's why she liked him; "At least he was forthright about it." I'm pretty sure he was forthright about not wanting a child either; otherwise, I doubt my mother would have been so calm about his absence, which is nice because it makes me calm, too. The only time I was ever really upset about not knowing my father was in middle school when my friend Mille asked me why I wasn't sad that my father didn't want me. Never in my life had I thought of it that way, and the idea that he didn't want me stuck in my head for a while, until my mother explained that Mille didn't know a "goddamn thing about parenting," and that as long as I had a mother there was no reason why I should need a father who didn't want to be a father in the first place. Parenthood was not a right, she said. It was a privilege.

When I bring my mother back to the doctor's office for her results, my mother scowls at the physician's assistant who smiles back, unfazed, but tells us to expect a delay. My mother gives me one of those looks that signals, "I told you so," in this case, "I told you that physician's assistant is out to get me."

We wait only ten minutes, and when we enter his office, the doctor is tremendously apologetic for the wait. I try giving my mother a look to say, "I knew she

wasn't out to get you," but my mother casually ignores me. The doctor lets us take a seat before he folds his hands on his desk in this solemn manner and takes a deep breath. Then he tells my mother that she has grade III oligodendroglioma, a brain tumor. I turn to her; she's watching the doctor as if she is trying to evaluate his proficiency as a medical specialist, whether or not she should believe him. The doctor keeps talking, but to me his voice is muffled and I cannot understand a word he says.

My mother doesn't talk about the visit on our way home, and I don't ask. Instead she points out the young woman in front of us who's preparing to get off at the next stop. She has a little dog that she puts in her handbag, before zipping the bag shut. My mother shakes her head, and whispers "dog molester" loud enough for the woman to hear it. She glances in our direction, but doesn't say anything. My mother whispers again a little louder. This time the woman turns. "Excuse me," she says. Her eye twitches; she must be nervous, and I can't blame her. My mother is surprisingly tall even without her heels, and is easy to spot even when she's sitting down. Much like an Amazon, my mother only has one breast, and although this woman couldn't possibly know that, it gives my mother a sense of pride to know that she needs only one breast to get by. Yes, my mother has already had cancer once, and out of all her accomplishments and traits, this is probably the one she dismisses most often. After the successful removal of the tumor, the doctors gave her an *I'm a Survivor* button, but she refused to wear it, saying she wasn't going to market having paid large sums to delay the inevitable a few more years. I told her that I was sure people generally didn't interpret 'a survivor' that way, but she just threw me the button and said, "Congratulations on making it out of the womb alive."

Now, this woman on the bus doesn't know my mother like I do, and looking at her neat camelhair coat and Burberry scarf, I bet she's never imagined that someone like my mother even exists. Someone might expect my mother to laugh at this woman, either because he or she believes that this woman is in fact a "dog molester," or because they think my mother is a rude person who hides her insecurities by making others feel bad: a bully. But my mother just sits there, stone-faced. I know that face, and I know that she is not trying to be cruel or domineering. My mother believes that people no longer respond to polite inquiries, particularly those from strangers, and that some level of humiliation is crucial to changing someone's behavior. Whatever happens with this woman here on the bus is now inconsequential because my mother wholeheartedly believes that once this woman exits the bus she'll unzip her bag and let her dog breathe so as not to risk being confronted like this again. People are willing to do a lot to avoid confrontation. This is what my mother wants.

"Excuse me," the woman repeats. "Did you just call me a...a..." She stops. She can't say the word. If she says the word out loud then somehow it becomes true, at least to her. Words are magic that way, and both my mother and I know this. I can't help but feel a little proud of my mother. She might end up saving a dog's life today. I wonder if there's a button for that.

The bus stops and the woman gives my mother one last look before scurrying out the doors. When the bus passes her, she covers her face, but the bag is open and a little brown head with a long snout peaks out.

Over the following weeks, my mother is in and out of the hospital for tests. All she tells me is whether or not the physician's assistant was present, and if she was, what went wrong. I try to concentrate on my studies, but I find it impossible to study when *grade-three oligodendroglioma* loop in my head. Eventually, I look it up.

“Oligodendroglioma is a rare form of brain cancer, mostly found in men, that operates on a level I-IV scale; I as the least threatening and IV as the other extreme.” The other extreme. At a “III,” my mother is closer to “the other extreme,” and for the first time in my life, I am slightly disappointed in her. She hasn’t brought me along to any of her appointments since the day she got her diagnosis, and she doesn’t talk about anything that’s going on. When she had breast cancer she kept me updated on every test, every development. Perhaps this time, things aren’t as serious as they sound, and seeing that her breast cancer is in complete remission, maybe she doesn’t think there is any point in getting me involved. But I can’t seem to fully convince myself that everything is fine, so I try saying this out loud: “Everything is fine. My mother is well. She will pay large amounts of money and put off the inevitable just like last time. And I’ll put her new survivor button together with the first. Everything is fine.”

Before Christmas the kitchen counter had only one item on it: a yellow KitchenAid Classic Mixer. Not including me, this is my mother’s most valued possession. She never uses it for cooking, but claims it helped her quit smoking. “I don’t want to damage it,” she told me. “Smoke gets in everywhere and ruins everything from the inside out.” I’m pretty sure that the mixer is a euphemism for me. Up North, where

my mother is from, people are very good at speaking “straight from the liver” as we say, but when it comes to affectionate communication, it’s as if no one has ever taught them the words. None of my family members have ever said they love me, including my mother who instead says she’s “very fond of me,” and “God, I love that mixer!” I’m ok with this. I know my mother loves me.

This KitchenAid Classic Mixer used to be the only thing on the counter. Now, there is also a row of pill bottles, most of them orange, but one bottle is blue and another, yellow. The orange bottles are steroids and suppressants of sorts, the blue is a special pain killer, and the yellow is an over-the-counter iron supplement called *Fe-Bulous*. Those are for both of us, she says, and she’s only put them in a prescription bottle so they seem more important and she remembers to take them. Neither of us likes to swallow pills. We’ve both had pills stuck in our throats for an entire day, and so we never take one unless the other person is there with us, overseeing the situation. It’s a real condition. Pseudodysphagia it is called: fear of choking. Because my mother takes a pill every third hour, I’m home a lot, and I’m ok with that.

When I’m in a lecture I keep my phone next to my notes at all times. If my mother needs me, I’ll leave right away. But she never does. At least she never tells me that she does. Standing in the kitchen with her every third hour for her pills goes without saying, but other than that, she keeps herself entertained with books and magazines.

One morning after we both swallow our *Fe-Bulous*, I ask my mother the one question I’ve dreaded asking her for weeks now: “Are the medicines working?”

She sips her water, both probably to make sure the pill is down and to stall. “No,” she says. My first reaction is that I have to pee. “I have to pee,” I say and leave the room.

“Remember to put the lid down before you flush,” my mother calls after me as I run down the hall.

While I pee I try to envision my mother’s tumor. Is it ugly? Does it look like a clump of cells? What do cells look like? Can she feel it sitting there in her brain. Can she feel it when she sleeps, or when she eats, or when she pees? I wonder if it’s hurting her. I wash my hands, and before I walk out, I remember to put down the lid. My mother is still in the kitchen.

“Does this upset you?” she asks.

“Yes,” I say and pause. “Does it upset you?”

“Sometimes.”

“Sometimes is something,” I say, and for some reason I’m happy that my mother’s other extreme tumor upsets her sometimes. It means I’m not alone.

Weeks pass, and we don’t talk much about cancer or hospitals. At one point my mother tells me that she thinks the doctor misdiagnosed her, that this doesn’t feel like cancer. The very next day, she’s forgotten all about her suspicions, and jokes about removing one side of her brain, like they did her left breast. I tell her that I think she’s being inappropriate and that what she says really upsets me. I don’t tell her that what’s upsetting me the most is that sometimes when she jokes like this I wonder if, for a moment, she actually believes what she’s saying.

One night, two months after she started her medications, I wake up to find my mother sitting in the bathtub with no water, wearing her pajamas. She is filing her toenails and she doesn't seem to notice me until I ask her why she is filing her toenails at three in the morning. "They won't let me sleep," she tells me, her speech slurred as if she's not completely awake. But she is just as awake as I am. She doesn't look at me, continues filing her nails. Her toes are white from keratin residue, and I can't imagine she has any nails left. "That's ok, Mom," I tell her. "I'll take that." I reach for the file.

"No!" she screams at me. This is the first time my mother has ever screamed at me. I've never heard her scream, and for a moment I am paralyzed.

"Stop," I finally beg. "Why are you doing this?" I can hear the panic in my voice and I try to take deep breaths, but the truth is that I'm terrified.

"These fuckers won't let me sleep," she complains.

"How are they doing that?" I try to sound as calm as I can.

"Every time I close my eyes, they grow," she says. "Lucky I got to them when I did—they were about to take our heads off."

I've never felt so desperate in my life, and I am secretly hoping that her toenails are growing uncontrollably, just to prove that she is not crazy, that this erratic and delusional woman is not my mother.

I reach for the file a second time and she slaps my hand away. We lock eyes, and for a second I see my mother looking back at me, helplessly begging me to get her out of this hell she's somehow landed herself in. I instinctually turn on the water and she squeals as it hits her feet and washes off the white powder. She pulls her hands to her

chest as if she's scared of the water, but she doesn't try to climb out. The water warms up and I let it fill up halfway; her light blue pajamas turn gradually darker and darker as the water rises. My mother watches the water run from the faucet, and when I turn it off, her eyes follow every drop that leaks into the tub. I take a washcloth from the shelf and dip it into the warm water. Then I carefully clean her face: the sweat on her forehead, the stains in the corners of her mouth. I wash behind her ears and on her neck. I pull her pajama shirt down a little so I can reach her shoulders, one at a time. For some reason, warm water on my shoulders has always felt comforting to me, and I hope my mother experiences it the same way. I run the cloth over the thick pink line where her left breast used to be and I pick up each of her hands and wash up her arms and between her fingers. I worry about the state of her toes and I'm unsure if she'll let me touch them, but I think she spots me looking at them because she lifts her right foot up so it barely breaks the water surface. I place my hand under her ankle so she doesn't have to hold it up herself. Her wet pants cling to her legs. Her toes are dark pink where her nails used to be, and only her big toe has any significant nail left. The other foot is the same, and I am cautious not to rub on the sore areas; I just dab with the warm cloth. After I'm done I sit at her side until she gestures that she is ready to get out. I cover her with a towel and help her take her wet pajama off. Then I fetch her robe, which I put on her, before I lead her back to her bed where I will sleep next to her that night and every night that follows.

The following morning, my mother doesn't remember a thing.

Two and a half months after my mother gets diagnosed with her second bout of cancer, her doctor tells her that he's consulted the neurosurgeon, the oncologist, and the radiation oncologist, and that they've all decided that my mother needs chemotherapy. When I come home later that day, the counter has three new additions. The bottles' names are vincristine, lomustine, and procarbazine, and they come in orange, green, and yellow. My mother has already switched the *Fe-Bulous* with the pain killers, so I don't accidentally take an antineoplastic chemotherapy drug instead of my regular iron supplement. She laughs when she tells me this, and I desperately want to laugh along with her.

Chemotherapy makes my mother hollow and frail, but she fights through this. In the beginning she tries to vomit only when I'm out of the apartment, sometimes sending me out to buy things if she feels it coming. Although I know what she's doing I never say a word. A few times I return while she is still vomiting; I hear the coughs and guttural gasps through the front door. When that happens, I wait outside on the stairs until she's done. But after a while this unspoken arrangement becomes pointless. She can't eat without throwing up, and I tell her that if she doesn't stop pretending she's fine, I'm going to get her a button saying *I Fight for Life*.

I stop going to lectures. I tell my professors that my mother is sick, and they seem as understanding as they can be. "I'll ask my mom," I tell one of them after he asks when I'm planning to return. My mother says she's proud of me for that one, before giving me a speech on the importance of education.

One day my grandfather calls. I recognize the Northern dialect right away; my mother has lost most of hers. He asks me about school and I tell him I'm taking a break. He sounds mildly disappointed, and I ask him if he's talked to my mother lately. Not since Christmas, he says apologetically. He asks if she's out running an errand, and I realize that my mother hasn't told him and my grandmother that she's sick. Telling my grandfather that the daughter he hasn't spoken to in almost four months has been ill with cancer—the shitty kind—this whole time and hasn't been able to leave her bed for anything other than going to the bathroom in a week, is certain to break his heart and there is no way I can do that, so I tell him that, yes, she is out buying cucumbers for a cucumber salad. He laughs and says it must be my grandmother's recipe, and I assure him, that of course it is, and he laughs again. Then he asks me to ask my mother to call him soon, and tells me that I am always welcome to come visit them. I reply that I want nothing more than to visit him and my grandmother, and the second we hang up, I feel terrible for having said that. There is one thing I want more than going up North and visit my grandparents, and I hope the universe knows that.

There is green grass and flowers outside when the physician's assistant calls to remind my mother to come in early the next morning for her surgery. “What a bitch,” my mother shouts from the bedroom when she realizes who I'm speaking to. Her voice is like that of a little child. With my mother still in bed, I begin packing the bag she'll have with her at the hospital. “What do you want me to pack?” I ask her.

“How about my yellow pant suit?” she suggests, and I laugh. “I’m not joking,” she says.

“I know you’re not,” I say and put this ochre-colored creation in her leather bag. “Anything else?”

“How about the KitchenAid? It sure would be nice to have something to remind me of home while I’m there. I’ve heard those hospital rooms are god-awful.”

“I’ll see what I can do,” I say. I add underwear and socks, and two pairs of pajamas, as well as her toiletries and a few books. Then I go pack my own bag, and when I return, my mother is already asleep.

The next morning a black Mercedes pulls up onto the sidewalk outside our apartment building. On the side it has white and red lettering stating that it’s an official hospital vehicle. “The taxi is here,” I say, and my mother says she’s just going to throw up one last time before we leave.

My mother has to lie strapped to a gurney in the car, and she gives me these looks, as if to say, “Look at this. What do they take me for? A loony?” We share a few smiles while the hospital taxi shuttles us through the same route as the 12 tram and the 20 bus did about a season ago.

The car parks and as I peer out the window at the hospital parking lot, it suddenly becomes too real. Even though she is sick, having my mother at home with me feels safer for both of us.

“It’s ok,” my mother whispers to me. “You’re allowed to cry up until you turn twenty-five, but then you have to cut it out.” I kiss her on the cheek. Her skin feels cold and thin.

She’s lying. I heard her cry once in the bathroom, after she explained to me that Mille was wrong and that neither of us needed my father, that I shouldn’t ever waste my time missing him again. She must have thought I was asleep, but I heard all of it: the sobs, the wheezing, and the runny nose. I think she was afraid that I didn’t think she was enough. I brush her thinning hair away from her face. “I’m sorry I couldn’t bring the KitchenAid.”

“Next time,” she says.

When we enter the hospital, people in white lab coats speak to us, and they explain things to my mother and me, comfort us, in their medical language that I don’t understand. My mother is calm and polite even though I know she hates this as much as I do, and when we finally see the physician's assistant I’m sure even my mother feels slightly relieved. The physician's assistant asks my mother: “How are we feeling?” and my mother answers that, “We’re feeling peachy,” and if we could trouble her for a glass of water. Either the physician's assistant has the best poker face of all time, or she simply doesn’t understand that my mother’s making fun of her. She comes back, all smiles, with one of those little plastic cups filled with water, which she hands to my mother who takes one sip, then gives it to me. “Here,” she says. “Could you hold that for me until I get back?” And with that they roll her through swinging doors and out of my sight.

I find myself an open seat, and set the plastic cup down on the little coffee table next to my chair. I reach for my water bottle, which I put in my bag this morning, and pull out a blue pill bottle. We didn't have time to take our pills this morning at home, and now we've forgotten to take them here. I look around; maybe someone can help me. An old couple is waiting by the reception while the young man behind the desk is on the phone, a girl—maybe a few years older than me—with a baby in her arms, her boyfriend, husband, or brother trailing behind, a thin man two chairs over, snoring loudly and deeply. The lab coats are gone, and there are no smiling physician's assistants around, so I put the bottle back in my bag where it'll stay until my mother comes back, however long that takes. I can wait.

An Honorable Operator

Oh, I won't be doing anything after the war.

GREGERS GRAM

Norwegian Resistance Man and Saboteur

You have to understand that the Christmas of '41 might have been the coldest Christmas in Oslo that century; the snow fell down in icy rags. Christmas trees were banned, food was rationed, and Reichskommissar Terboven had just declared the death penalty for any Norwegian who tried to cross the borders. Some people made trees out of pine branches, while others entertained their families with memories of Christmases past. We diluted our foods and drinks, made bread out of bark, cakes out of ground dryfish. I'm not trying to make excuses; I just want you to understand.

Perhaps the story begins with the occupation, but I think that everything really begins the day Rikard and I decided to take part in the resistance. You've heard the story: how Rikard and I joined company Stokke and helped blow up several cement factories in Slemmestad. Maybe you've even heard that we killed a man. That part is not completely accurate, but I will get to that later.

Rikard and I, we met each other at sea. After my mother passed away, my father begged me to live with him in Berlin, but that was never an option for me. He left my

mother when I was very young, and only kept contact through letters and the rare visit. My mother took care of me the best she could, but by the time I was seventeen she was exhausted, and three weeks before my eighteenth birthday, she died. I went out to sea. To explore the world, to make money, to have a reason not to move to Germany. That's where I met Rikard. We were the youngest and most inexperienced shipmates and so we stuck together for our year out at sea.

Aase was Rikard's girl in Sandefjord. Dark and beautiful like a wood nymph, if I was to believe him. Aase was the reason why I disembarked in Sandefjord with Rikard instead of waiting until the ship docked in Oslo. Rikard and I took up board with a family Aase knew. Sophie was their daughter. She was the kind of girl who had no idea how cruel the world outside of Sandefjord could be, but who still wanted to make each day better for every person she met. She was the kind of girl that lived her life as if pain was a state of mind, that happiness was only a smile away. She was the kind of girl I could love.

On the day Quisling named himself Prime Minister, Rikard and I, along with my neighbor Nils, decided that we would do anything to end the misery we knew was coming. We were convinced that it was better to die standing than live on our knees. An opportunity presented itself only a few months later when Rikard's cousin, Åsmund, told us about a plan to destroy the cement factories in Slemmestad. Nils refused to come along. We didn't ask for a reason—I think we all knew he was more talk than action.

After an hour on the train we met Torleif Stokke—probably a code name—a red-headed and freckled commando soldier trained in England. He was our instructor. We

stayed with a group of maybe twelve other men at an apartment in downtown Slemmestad. Most of the others were local and slept in their own homes, but four of us were from out of town and slept together in the cramped apartment. We didn't go outside much. If someone noticed the large group of men crowding Bryggeveien every day and reported it, we would surely be arrested for treason. Such were the times. Terboven made sure that a cloud of public abuse, imprisonment, torture, execution, and disappearance hung over every Norwegian at all times. German partisans were everywhere, and the streets were drowning with paranoia, fear, and a commitment to survival unlike anything I had ever seen.

On the first day, Stokke handed us each a paperclip. "Wear these on your lapels," he said. "They symbolize your devotion to your country and our cause, and that you're a true Norwegian and accept no other ruler than the king himself." Rikard and I placed the paperclips on our lapels right away, proud and honored to be a part of such a noble cause.

Within a week, 'Operasjon Klara' was planned and we were all divided into groups of three or four. Rikard and I were in a three-man group with Stokke. I think both of us were relieved to have Stokke on our team, although neither of us said anything. During this time, I wrote two letters to Sophie, referring the whole time to my sick Aunt Klara. Since we married, I hadn't been away from her for more than a day at a time. Strangely enough, at that time, I felt no guilt for leaving, but I worried about her staying in the house by herself. I had to remind myself that she had Nils and his wife Maud to help her. And then there was Aase of course, in the same boat as Sophie.

‘Operasjon Klara’ depended on the Germans’ affinity for punctuality and precision. These were the opposition’s secret weapons, Stokke reminded us. He knew exactly how many seconds we had to dispose of the two German guards that patrolled the rectangular building. On each round they met twice on the short sides. We chose the south side as our spot of attack. There we could hide in the shadows of the main entrance without being detected unless someone looked directly at us. The guards, we knew, would look straight ahead at each other before scouting the surrounding area.

We attacked, jumped them from behind, and pulled their helmets back until their necks snapped. Stokke killed the first guard instantly. Rikard and I had to work harder on the other. This was the first time I’d ever killed anyone. The guard squirmed like a little child refusing to wear his Sunday clothes. Gurgles and pathetic moans. Rikard held him in place while I pressed all my weight on his head, forcing it backwards, waiting for a snap. When his neck finally broke, it wasn’t as much of a sound as it was a feeling. I felt the vibrations of his neck giving up as they rippled through my hands and up my arms. The guard toppled over Rikard, but I didn’t help. In some sort of Lady Macbethian way, I swear the shadows made my hands look as though they were dipped in blood, yet no blood had been spilled—not until Rikard and Stokke cut the guards’ throats. According to Stokke, sometimes death just wasn’t enough. I don’t remember planting the explosives or much of the explosion, but I do remember the birds that fled before us into the dark of the night.

I spent the rest of that night spitting bile into a bucket while listening to Rikard, Stokke, and the other men recount their stories from that night. A rush, Rikard called it. A

powerful, satisfying rush. How easy it was for Rikard to talk about it. To brag about it. But he didn't know what it felt like to bend over a man as if you were about to kiss him, feeling his last breath on your face. He couldn't say how much pressure a man's neck could take before it broke. He didn't know that we weren't soldiers. Rikard didn't kill anyone. I did. I killed a man. Stokke was a real soldier. He could brush death off his hands with a simple sweep. This was the first moment I felt guilty for leaving Sophie and going to Slemmestad. Now, when I imagined her face, I saw only the face of the man I had killed.

I didn't tell Sophie much about what happened in Slemmestad, and she never asked. I don't think she wanted to know. "Happiness cannot exist when you're consumed with sorrow," she would say. This was her attitude towards most things in life. I know Rikard told Aase; I could see it in her face every time we met. Her dark eyes would hold me captive for long moments, as if she were investigating me, deciding what sort of man I was. But she never let this slip when we spoke. She was as polite and open to me as Sophie was to Rikard, and as far as I know, she never said a word to Sophie. I wondered if Aase was as hesitant towards her own husband as she was towards me. I assumed that Rikard had left out the part where I was the one who killed the guard, not him.

We never took part in any operations after 'Operasjon Klara.' I knew Rikard wanted to, and I never told him that I had declined several offers from Stokke on both our behalfs. Stokke said we had what it took, but I didn't agree. I must admit that I blamed Sophie and Aase in my correspondence with Stokke. It was easier to blame someone else than to acknowledge that I was scared to fight, even if it was for my own country.

Rikard, Nils, and I started listening in on German radio broadcasts and ‘the voice from London’; I translated. As a wedding present, my father had sent Sophie and me a five-tube shortwave Junkers table radio made from heavy ivory plastic. This was before all communication between Norway and Germany was put under acute surveillance, before any communication with the rest of the world was terminated. Under the new NS government a radio in the hands of a private citizen was no less than a *waffe*, a weapon, and therefore punishable under law.

I hid my radio in the dresser that stood in our bedroom. I had built it myself, making sure that the bottom drawer could not be opened from the front, only from the back. The back plate was easy to remove. Beneath several layers of linen was my radio. I never showed Rikard and Nils where it was; I trusted them as much as anyone could trust anyone in those days, and I decided that it was safer for us all if only I knew. Sophie, of course, never asked.

Rikard loved that radio. He even made up a silly little rhyme that he would say: “I’ll turn those knobs till my prints are filed away, and hopefully we keep Gestapo at bay.” But still I worried that Rikard wasn’t satisfied. I worried that deep down he needed to kill that factory guard. As his best friend, I didn’t want him to go through what I went through after Slemmestad: the nightmares, the guilt, the faint trembling I couldn’t control in my hands. But I also feared that Rikard would need to experience that sort of guilt and pain to know once and for all that he was no soldier, so I kept my thoughts to myself. But I was wrong; I should have told him.

In the late fall of '41, the German police, Abteilung IV, raided and arrested several oppositionists. Rikard was among them. Aase told us that he had been building a transmitter when a German-friendly neighbor tipped off the Abteilung IV who in turn had ruled his unfinished gadget a weapon.

“No one will tell me anything,” Aase said, her voice hollow and dismal. “I’ve been to Viktoria Terrasse every day and they won’t even let me in the doors.”

Sophie had her arm around Aase. “I will come with you tomorrow,” she offered, but Aase just shook her head.

“It’s no use,” she said. “He’s at their mercy now.”

She was right. There was nothing we could do.

Show them the same mercy they’ve shown us, Stokke had told us right before we executed ‘Operasjon Klara.’ The image of the two dead men lying on the ground, the blood gathering beneath their slit throats, swam before my eyes, and the vigor in Stokke’s voice when he congratulated us on a job well done, echoed in my ears. They were going to execute Rikard.

Days went by with no more information on Rikard’s well-being or even the case against him. The representatives at Viktoria Terrasse were utterly uncommunicative and refused to give any of us the time of day. “I don’t know what more I can do,” Aase said.

Sophie was devastated. “I’ve never felt so helpless in my entire life,” she told me one night as we were lying in bed. “I know I should feel terrible, but I can’t help but feel thankful it wasn’t you. Does that make me a terrible human being?”

“No,” I said and pulled her towards me. “It makes you more human if anything.” I don’t know why I didn’t tell her that more times than not I felt the exact same way. It could easily have been me who was arrested. In fact, I was guiltier than Rikard, whose transmitter didn’t even work yet. I think I was afraid that if I said it out loud I would have to admit that I actually felt like a terrible human being. If there was any way I could breach the walls of the prison, ward off the guards, and break the locks of Rikard’s cell, I would save him. If there was any way, I would leave that very second. But there wasn’t, and I didn’t. Instead I held my wife as close as I could, and thanked God that I was not in Rikard’s place.

“Aren’t you worried?” Nils asked me the following morning. We were walking along the marina, having been turned away from Viktoria Terrasse again. The snow had completely covered the crescent-shaped bay.

“What do you mean?” I asked.

“Well, that Rikard might talk,” he said.

“About us, you mean?”

He nodded carefully as if ashamed he’d even brought it up. But I was glad he did. It was the first thing I’d thought about when I heard of Rikard’s arrest. I told Nils that I honestly didn’t know. “I’d like to think that he’d never give us up, but we don’t know what they’re putting him through,” I said. “Torture can make a man do unspeakable things.” We both fell silent for a while. We knew nothing of what they were doing to Rikard. We didn’t even know if he was dead or alive. As if he was reading my mind, Nils

finally said: "I'm sure we'd know if he was dead. They'd have to let Aase know. Wouldn't they?"

I shook my head. "It's hard to say, Nils. They do what they want. Any hope of ethics is lost when we're talking about torture and execution."

He nodded solemnly.

Across the bay stood Akershus Festning. Its towers and spires were mere hints of the massive structure that lay behind the tall stone façade.

"Do you think that's where they'll do it?" asked Nils.

"Probably," I said and cast one last glance at the fortress before turning to leave.

That evening I told Sophie we were getting rid of the radio and she must have told Aase, because the next morning Aase was at our door. "Please don't throw it away," she begged. Still tired, I waved her inside. "Your radio," she said as soon as I closed the door. "You have to keep it."

"Why?" I asked. "It's too dangerous for me to keep it here."

"He won't give them your names," she said quickly. "I promise."

"That's not your promise to give," I said, and immediately regretted it when her eyes began to water.

"No, it's not," she said quietly. "But I know my husband, and he wouldn't do that to us."

"I know he wouldn't," I said. "The radio is dangerous by itself. I just can't risk it anymore."

"Could you just keep it until the next German broadcast?"

I hesitated, and before I could say ‘no’ her eyes locked onto mine. Her eyes were like rocks after rain—glistening black—and hard. “You owe me that,” she said coolly.

So she did blame me for Rikard’s arrest. She had all this time. Perhaps she too had known that Rikard wasn’t satisfied with his contributions to the resistance. Perhaps she knew that my radio did not still his hunger. I nodded, agreed that I would keep it until the next German broadcast, but that was it. I would get rid of it after that. She thanked me and told me she would come back for the broadcast.

The broadcast took place less than a week later on one of the last evenings of the year. In addition to Aase, Sophie had invited Nils and Maud. “The more the merrier, isn’t that right?” she said, even though the monotony in her voice suggested she didn’t believe what she was saying. But we smiled at each other as if it were true, as if this would be another joyful holiday evening among friends. Her smile was feeble, and I knew she dreaded everything about the approaching hours—the parts we knew were coming, as well as the parts we didn’t.

Sophie did her best with the dinner preparations. “I just want something to be nice, you know?” she said.

“I know,” I said, and kissed her softly.

Despite Sophie’s efforts, dinner went by in silence. There was the occasional clinking of plates and glasses, scraping of cutlery, some quiet coughs, but no one said a word. By law, the blinding curtains were shut and the only light we had was the lazy flicker of two candles in the middle of the table. Aase sat right across from me. That had

been Sophie's idea. "She shouldn't have to feel as though she's the fifth wheel," she had said while setting the table. "I'll sit on the end."

Aase barely ate. Dressed all in black and with her hair tied tightly at the nape of her neck, pulling her skin taut, she looked tired and old. In the dim lighting her cheek bones were more prominent than ever, and her lips looked pale even under her lipstick. Everyone knew we had gathered to listen to the last broadcast of the year. Our last German broadcast. I wondered what each of us expected. Even though I knew Aase was desperate for any piece of information, I also knew we all hoped not to hear anything at all. No news generally meant good news, and on the rare occasion, a prisoner was set free.

"They don't have much evidence, do they?" I asked without thinking, and everyone looked up at me. Aase's lips thinned, and I worried I had said something very wrong. But after a moment Aase said: "He had barely started building it. Frankly, the transmitter could be anything. The only reason they arrested him was because of that tip." Her lips trembled slightly. She was getting angry. "I told him to keep quiet," she said sharply. "I told him."

"No one could have known," Sophie said.

"No," chimed in Maud. "No one could have known." We all nodded, even though I'm sure we all thought the same thing; we knew. We knew it could happen.

"Is it time yet?" Aase asked. I turned to the grandfather clock behind me.

"Almost."

The radio felt heavier than ever before as I carried it into the dining room. I sat it on the table and removed the sheet.

“It’s pretty,” Maud said, before looking around apologetically. “I’m sorry, I just meant it’s a nice radio.”

She was trying to break through ice that wasn’t going to break.

“Thank you,” I said. “It does the trick.”

I turned the volume knob. A loud crackle. I adjusted the tuner. I never left the frequency marker on the same spot. Some sort of preventive measure perhaps, even though I knew perfectly well that if the wrong person found my radio the location of the frequency marker didn’t matter at all. It was difficult for me to see well in the dim lighting, but once I leaned closer to the radio I was able to hear my way to the right frequency. The others appeared to be holding their breath around me. Quiet and tense minutes passed until I finally heard a low murmur.

“Masterful,” Nils whispered.

I adjusted the tuner ever so slightly, and the faint murmur became a voice, fast and monotone and sharp.

“He just started,” I told them, nodding at Aase to signal that everything was fine; we hadn’t missed anything. I began listening.

Es gab einen Angriff auf deutsches Eigentum in Måløy. Unter den Verlusten sind acht deutsche Schiffe und einige lokale Fabriken. Der Vorfall wird weiterhin untersucht.

“There was an attack,” I translated. “Extensive German losses in Måløy, including ships and factories.” I didn’t look up as I spoke, I just stared at the radio. I knew they

didn't care about the attack, I knew they didn't want any delays. But I wanted to translate all of it. That way, I hoped, I could pretend this was just another evening listening to broadcasts with Rikard and Nils.

It happened sooner than I had expected. Before I had the chance of hoping that maybe there would be no news, the voice turned to the case against the eight men arrested for treason and for conspiring against the state earlier that month:

Des Weiteren wurden die acht Norweger, die schon früher in diesem Monat verhaftet wurden schuldig gesprochen. Sie werden des Hochverrats und der Verschwörung gegen des Staates angeklagt.

They had been found guilty.

A million thoughts raced through my mind as the voice continued...*Sie werden des Hochverrats und der Verschwörung gegen des Staates angeklagt.* ... I had to tell the others...*Alle werden durch Kopfschuss hingerichtet...*Death by shooting. What if they blamed me because I told them? What if Aase told them it was my fault? Perhaps if I didn't say anything, nothing would happen. *Ihre Namen sind...*I was too late. The voice would list the names. They would know. *Venjar Strøm, Roar Bergesen, Ole Midtun...*Please don't say his name, please don't say his name...*Anders Danielsen...*please don't...*Rikard Borgen, und Jørgen Otta.*

Please.

I hadn't needed to translate after all. The list had been enough.

I didn't want to look up. I didn't want to see them. The sound of Sophie biting her nails sounded like bones snapping, and I had to sit on my hands to keep them from

shaking. I looked over at Aase. Her face was pale and blank, like someone had wiped it clean of any expression and character, as if Aase had disappeared. “Aase?” I tried. She didn’t answer. I tried again, and again, but I got no response. “Let her be, Hans,” Sophie said softly. “Give her some time.”

The voice kept talking, but the language sounded suddenly foreign and unintelligible to me. I hated the man behind the voice for naming the men, as if their names had any real significance to him or to his intended listeners. As if listing their names would make any difference. I had an urge to reach through the radio and break his neck.

Ich danke Ihnen für Ihre Aufmerksamkeit und wünsche Ihnen eine gute Nacht.

“Thank you and goodnight,” Aase replied slowly and turned off the radio.

The silence that followed was heavier than the one during dinner, loaded with pain and devastation. I could hear the snow fall outside, thumping like giants stepping, like bombs dropping in the distance, like the hollow memory of explosions I barely recalled.

Sophie asked me to walk Aase home that night. “I would do it myself,” she said, “but you know how things are out there.” To confuse foreign aircrafts, the new government required streetlights to be turned off at night. The poles were painted white, and now and then a streetlight would use a blue bulb, but it was never enough to account for the missing lights. Seeing that there was no police protecting civilians at night, young men acting as escorts had become a common service.

Aase and Rikard's apartment was downtown at St. Hanshaugen, while Sophie and I rented the second floor of a house at Røa in outer Oslo west. I would walk with Aase to the subway, which would take us to the Parliament. From there, it was a fifteen-minute walk to their apartment. "I'll take you the whole way, if you don't mind," I told Aase. She nodded in agreement and put on her long wool coat. I kissed Sophie goodbye, and waved to Nils and Maud who would stay with Sophie until I came back.

"Are you sure you don't want to stay here tonight?" Sophie asked Aase. "You can have our bed. We'll stay in the guestroom. I promise we don't mind."

Aase shook her head. "Thank you, but I think I should sleep at home," she said. "It feels like the right thing to do."

I could tell Sophie was agitated. She wanted so badly to help, but she couldn't. There was nothing she could do to bring Rikard home safely. Her only alternative was to let me bring Aase home safely. This time she couldn't find happiness by ignoring sorrow. Sorrow was Aase's bleak face. Sorrow had come to stay.

The steam in front of our faces was ghostly in the icy darkness as we walked towards the subway station. I waited for Aase to say something first. She didn't, and we reached the station without having shared anything but warm breaths in the cold air.

"Five minutes," I said and pointed to the subway schedule. "Are you cold?"

"Yes," she said. I was just about to offer her my coat when she said: "I like it." She took a deep breath, and cracked what could pass as a weak smile. "In times like these it's nice to feel something." She looked into the darkness as she spoke, and I listened.

“Lately, when I haven’t been down at Viktoria Terrasse, I’ve been spending a lot of time sitting by my window. Just looking outside, you know. I watch the people who walk below me on the street: wives, husbands, children, grandparents, lovers, friends, neighbors, enemies.” As she spoke it was like she was seeing them in front of us, her hand touching an invisible window. “Yesterday, a man walked by,” she continued, “old and raggedy. Patched hat, hair sticking out from under it turned to icicles. His scarf was unraveling, and as he walked, threads flapped in the air behind him. In his hand, I could see he held up his ration cards as if they were the most precious things he owned, as if he needed to keep his eyes on them at all times so he wouldn’t lose them. And watching him, I realized that the only thing that precious to me had been taken away, and I had no idea where to.” The dimmed, blue lights from the train appeared down the tracks, and we could hear the low rumble, the ringing off the iron rails. “And after tonight, I know that I will never again have something so special to me as those ration cards were to that man—as Rikard is to me.”

The train stopped in front of us and the doors opened. “After you,” I told her, annoyed by my inability to say the right thing—to say anything. I followed Aase into the car and seated myself opposite her. She had her face turned to the window the entire ride, the darkness outside only mirroring our reflections back to us. A few times the eyes of our reflections met and it was as if we were looking into a different world. The window, dirty and scratched, washed the lines off our faces showing us what we might have looked like if we never worried, never cared, never loved, never hated. Aase’s reflection was light and dark simultaneously: her smooth, pale skin shone lustrously around her

black eyes, framed by her even blacker hair. Dark and beautiful like a wood nymph, I thought to myself.

Aase and Rikard lived in a five-story apartment building built last century. Like so many of the apartment buildings in Oslo, its façade was decorated with mass-produced ornaments—perhaps to evoke some sense of luxury in the midst of the industrial expansion. I walked her all the way up to the main door. She opened it with just a nudge. “They broke the door when they came for him,” she said. “Now it won’t close properly. Sort of defeats the purpose of a door, doesn’t it?” She went inside. Snow had drifted into the hallway and lay like a veil over the white and green tiles.

“I’m sorry,” I said. “I could try to fix it.” I placed my hands on the door, but she waved them away.

“It’s broken. You can’t fix it.”

“Well, if you let me try.”

“No.” Her voice was hard. “You’ll only make it worse.”

I took a quick step backwards, my hands up in front of me. “I didn’t mean any harm.”

“And yet harm happened,” she said. “If it wasn’t for you, Rikard would be the one walking me home tonight.”

For the first time I didn’t fear this conversation; I wanted to embrace it. I wanted to apologize to Aase for being a coward, for keeping secrets, for not breaking her husband out of prison. “But I can’t apologize for something I didn’t do,” I told her. “I didn’t force Rikard to construct that transmitter—God, I didn’t even know what he was

doing.” I felt my voice growing harsher. “I could have told Rikard about the nightmares, the guilt, the trembles, but it wouldn’t have changed a thing.” As I spoke, everything seemed to make sense. It felt as though a plug I didn’t even know existed had been pulled out of my chest, and now, everything was oozing out of me. I couldn’t control this. I didn’t want to. “You see, Aase, nothing I could have said to Rikard would have changed his mind. He could never make peace with the fact that I killed the guard in Slemmestad, and he didn’t. He was so desperate to prove himself, but the only man he ended up killing was himself. A civilian. So if you want to blame anyone, blame him. Blame yourself—at least you knew about the transmitter. Just don’t blame me.”

I had to catch my breath. Aase was silent. No sighs, no breath. She just stood there.

“I’m sorry,” I said. “But it’s the truth.”

She nodded silently and bit her lip, stopping herself from speaking, and then her thoughts seemed to drift away. Maybe they were drifting to Rikard in his cell; maybe back to Sophie where she wished she had never gone, maybe back to Sandefjord where she wished she had never left.

“Would you like a cup of tea?” she asked suddenly.

I was so taken aback by this change in attitude, I could do nothing else but follow her upstairs.

The first thing I spotted when she opened the front door to their apartment was the dark brown overcoat hanging all alone on a tall wooden rack. It looked so more battered than I remembered.

“He left his coat,” I said.

“They didn’t let him pack a suitcase.”

“Of course, right, I’m sorry,” I said. “It’s just so strange seeing it here like this.”

She didn’t respond, but walked past me into the kitchen.

“I don’t have much to offer,” she called to me. “I hope you don’t mind hot water with some honey.”

“That will be fine,” I said. When she had invited me up for tea, I’d somehow forgotten that tea was rationed—I hadn’t had a decent cup of tea in almost two years.

Her hot honey water didn’t change that, but we both drank like it was a peace treaty between enemies—we were careful and polite. Each look we exchanged was soft, kind, apologetic.

“I’ve never felt more terrible,” she told me as she sat her empty cup aside.

“Knowing he’s about to die gives me immeasurable grief, but at the same time”—she paused—“at the same time, it’s a relief.” She was looking anywhere but at me, her eyes constantly moving, flinching, as if settling on an object would be dangerous. “I think waiting for information, knowing nothing, was worse. Sometimes it was easier just thinking he was dead already. What if I accepted it too soon? What if it really is my fault?”

I knew exactly what she meant. And so I told her about the guilt I had felt while trying to translate Rikard’s death sentence, as though translating it into Norwegian meant that I accepted it. As though accepting made it true.

“Thank you,” she said, and then she wrapped her arms around me, resting her head on my shoulder. Her hands were astonishingly cold on my neck, but her chest was soft and warm, and for a moment I forgot who was comforting whom. I put my arms lightly around her back, and as she pulled away from our embrace she looked at me in a way that was wholly familiar and unfamiliar at the same time. I was captured by her gaze, but she wasn’t investigating me or trying to decide what sort of man I was. Her eyes sparkled like embers flying off into the black night. She parted her lips slightly and I could feel her breath on my face. I moved my head and she moved hers—closer. My hands were still on the curve of her back, and I let my fingers move ever so slightly, feeling the fabric of her dress, grazing the zipper.

“What’s wrong?” she whispered.

I smiled at her; nothing was wrong.

“But your hands are shaking,” she said.

She was right. My hands were shaking. How could I not have noticed? And now that I had, they shook more violently than ever.

“I need to leave,” I said quickly and moved away from her.

Aase was confused, asked what she had done wrong, begged me to stay and explain, but I couldn’t, and as I ran down the stairs, she called after me: “Please don’t tell Sophie!”

I ran out into the street through the main door beating open shut open shut from the wind that sang in my ears. The last train would have left by now, so I began running. I

ran down Akersgata, I ran past the public library, past the Parliament with its red and black flags, I ran until I had no more breath. And then I ran even faster.

What kind of person was I? That entire evening had been a parade of things I wasn't. I wasn't a good husband. I wasn't a translator. I wasn't a soldier. I wasn't even a prisoner on death row. What was I but a pitiful radio operator? I was good at that; Nils had called my work masterful. But being an operator meant nothing to me.

I crossed the ice rink in front of the National Theatre, and when I slid and fell I was so exhausted that I could not get back up. I lay on my side, facing the theatre and its tall granite statues. A small flock of crows in the trees around me screeched, but lying there, it was as though the statues had come alive; the dead poets, symbols of Norwegian nationalism and pride, were laughing at me, mocking me. I was a disgrace.

I knew I needed to do something. Running back to Aase was not an option; I needed to move forward. I needed to go to Sophie, and I needed to find Rikard. I needed them to know I was sorry. I needed them to forgive me. I needed them.

I pulled myself up and off the ice and had just started running again when the snapping sound of fireworks broke in the sky around me. Cracks in rapid succession without a single silvery spark. Instinctively, I turned and sprinted towards the marina. It wasn't far, but when I finally saw the dark outline of the fortress against the deep blue undisturbed sky, the shots had ended.

A serpentine curl of smoke rose from behind the fortress walls. Pale, almost invisible, the only thing moving. I watched it swirl upwards, dissolving into the darkness. Rikard was dead. Until a few minutes before, he had been alive: breathing, talking,

crying, hoping, but not anymore. I knew. I looked down at my hands. They weren't trembling, they were absolutely still. A last single shot cleaved the air. Crisp silence followed. Whoever had survived the first shower was dead.

The Substitute

Back when Elida was fifteen, she worked at one of the cemeteries in the middle of Oslo, planting flowers, mowing lawns, pulling weeds. This was in the early sixties, so Elida was one of those baby boomers. But despite the amount of other kids her age, she had no friends, that much everyone knew. What they didn't know was that Elida sought comfort at each grave she tended. With the headstones right in front of her she'd begun filling in the blanks between the lines of the epitaphs. A name, a year, and sometimes a little line of remembrance were what defined the dead. Not much, but enough to fuel Elida's elaborate stories of life and death. Often times, several people were buried beneath the same headstone, which only added more details of love, betrayal, loss, and happiness. These stories eventually became a set of memories—memories of people she felt she knew. She did her work alone, but always feeling as though she was surrounded by friends.

As far as Elida knew, her mother did nothing but lie around in her once purple bathrobe smoking her South States. Only a few years ago, she had been beautiful: her hair pale, almost green, and her skin, translucent, with meandering blue threads like tattoos along her arms, legs, and on her chest. Elida had inherited the light hair and the fair skin, but not her mother's precariousness that had captivated her father and the men who turned to watch her wherever she went. Her mother was no longer that woman.

Now, it was as if she wore her own face like a lifeless, gaunt mask, with black caved eyes and bloodless lips. She drifted around the house like a ghost, only coming back to life now and then.

“Did you see your pappa,” she asked Elida in the afternoons. And Elida would answer yes every time.

“I pulled weeds and watered the begonias.”

“I wish you would’ve gotten something besides those dreadful flowers,” her mother said.

“I told you, we’re not paying for the maintenance or the flowers, and Odd Wilhelm doesn’t complain about the time I spend on pappa’s grave, or that I take flowers from his stock,” Elida said. “Also, I think begonias are beautiful, and they don’t wither and die right away like the other flowers.”

Her mother considered what Elida had said for a few seconds. “He’s a good man, isn’t he?” She took a deep drag from her cigarette. A fiery glow burned through the haze enveloping her. “We should be thankful we have someone like Odd Wilhelm in our lives,” she said in a low voice through a grey tobacco plume. “Oh and those are for you,” she added distantly, pointing at a large basket of apples on the floor.

The apples were the color of soft coral and looked tart and thin-skinned, but had some dark brown freckles here and there. She was hungry, but didn’t grab one. Her mother had never bought any food that wasn’t absolutely necessary, and the apples seemed disconcertingly out of place.

A good man, Elida thought. Her mother never spoke of her father that way anymore. “No matter what people say,” she used to say, “your father is a good man.” But now, it was as if he didn’t exist. As if he never had.

Elida’s father had fought on the German side during the war, and after the capitulation he’d been lucky to escape a prison sentence. All he had to do instead was give up any property he owned and any other significant belongings, as well as the life he had dreamed for himself and his family. Their family had never been social with neighbors, and if anyone invited them anywhere it was out of artificial politeness, to be able to say: we did our part, we turned the other cheek. If Elida was ever invited to a classmate’s home, it was as part of a group, and she always left early. The other girls made little effort to include her in any of their conversations or games, and she noticed how their parents always slunk out of her way. At Ingrid Paulsen’s twelfth birthday party, Elida caught Ingrid’s mother watching her eat a piece of cake, arms crossed, and a facial expression much too hard for the soft curls of her hair. “Don’t try anything,” Ingrid’s mother hissed when Elida asked to use the restroom. “I know your kind.” How peculiar that someone so pretty could be so ugly.

Two years ago, during a St. Hansaften celebration with her mother’s side of the family, Elida’s father had drowned. He walked into the waters of Paradise Bay and never came back up. Some said he drowned himself, others blamed the weeds or the water. “Never underestimate an undertow,” her uncle Geir said when they pulled the body out of the water four days later. That body looked nothing like her father. Not even close. But Elida knew it was him. She envisioned her father the way he would blow up his cheeks

like a blowfish to blow out the candles at night, or to blow raspberries on her stomach. She knew it was him.

“At least now you have a chance at a normal life,” her aunt Alma told Elida’s mother after the funeral service. This seemed to be the popular opinion on her mother’s side of the family, but if anything, life had become even more complicated and secluded for Elida and her mother. Putting food on the table was much harder for a widowed mother whose only education was from the Oslo Communal Finishing School.

Because her mother wanted to make as few arrangements as possible, Elida chose her father’s epitaph:

With land beneath him no rest he knew

Nay, better make his home on the blue,

On the vast and surging sea

Her mother didn’t say much when she first saw it, and she didn’t say anything about the pink begonias either. That came later. But she would never mention the epitaph.

Elida snuck down to her father’s grave as often as she could, and she purposely spent more time on the graves in that lot than in any other lot. And that’s where she was sitting the day Odd Wilhelm introduced her to Martin. She was pulling on a stubborn dandelion, when Odd Wilhelm tapped her shoulder. She jolted up, surprised, snapping the weed below the soil.

“This is Martin,” Odd Wilhelm said, gesturing to the boy standing behind him. “He’ll be doing some heavy duty work for me.”

Martin, wearing a sky blue button-up shirt and a pair of pressed tan trousers, nodded quickly at her before looking down at his feet. His rigid posture and perfectly shellacked side-part made him look older than Elida, but his cheeks, puffy and soft like a cherub, and his lips—like two pink begonia petals—suggested otherwise. She couldn't imagine what sort of heavy duty work Martin could do for Odd Wilhelm that she couldn't do herself.

“Show him around the place, will you?” Odd Wilhelm said and turned to leave. “You know, Elida, I almost thought you were your mother sitting here. I swear—you look more alike every day.” He hurried up the grounds to his office, his body rocking heavily from side to side. Elida wondered if he'd say the same if he saw her mother now.

“Are there any bones?” Martin suddenly asked. He had moved closer to her, and stood with the tip of his left foot in the grave bed. His stared at her, his eyes small and dark, like the pebble-eyes of a snowman.

“Bones?” she asked.

“Bones, yes.”

“I'm not sure,” she muttered. “Should there be?”

“We're standing on top of hundreds of decomposing bodies,” he said. “Of course there are bones.” He scanned the grounds intently.

“I think,” she replied, slowly and deliberately, “that they're all underground.”

“I'll find some bones,” he said as if he hadn't heard her, and he strode off.

In the two months she had worked here she had never come across a stray bone, and even if she had, she wouldn't have recognized it for what it was. A stone maybe, but

never a bone. Just the thought of spending an entire summer with someone as strange and aloof as Martin exhausted her.

“Martin is wonderful, isn’t he?” Odd Wilhelm called to her from his office as she gathered her things to leave that day. Martin wasn’t anywhere to be seen, but his black work boots stood perfectly aligned by the front door. Unlike hers, his were pristine and showed no signs of use.

“He dug three urn holes today,” Odd Wilhelm continued. “I tell you, that boy is gold. Looking at him, you’d never know it, but he doesn’t come from money or work ethic. His father is what we call a råttpeis up North. If you ask me, Martin did well disassociating from him. Stick with him. Maybe he can teach you a thing or two.”

Elida mumbled in agreement, and as she walked out, kicked one of Martin’s boots, tipping it over.

“You did your hair,” Elida commented when she came home and saw her mother. Her hair looked like it had been curled earlier, but the curls had lost their spring, and now they hung lazily on her shoulders. She seemed strangely unfamiliar to Elida, and although her mother looked better than she had in a long while, something didn’t seem right.

“Oh, I must look a mess,” her mother sighed, wafting her hand at Elida.

“No, you don’t.”

“Yes, I do.” Her mother smiled artificially. “How was work?”

“Fine.”

“Have some chocolate before dinner,” she said and gestured to the box of King Haakon chocolates on the table in front of her.

“Who gave you chocolates?” Elida asked.

“Oh, just some old admirer of mine, that’s all.”

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Elida rarely saw Martin. The graves and urn holes he dug were mostly in the newer lots where Elida wasn’t needed. Patrons of those graves usually planted their own flowers, and some graves were so fresh that they didn’t even have a headstone, only a white wooden cross and a deflating mound of withering flower arrangements.

July was hot. The flowers were all limp, and the little pond by her father’s grave in which she’d sometimes refill her watering can, was nearly dried-up. One morning, as she was watering flowers—half a can for each bed—Martin came over to her. He was taking a break and asked if he could join her. She had been content with their estrangement so far, but didn’t want to be rude. “I should really continue watering the flowers,” she said.

“Perfect,” Martin said. “I’ll come with you.”

He smelled sweetly of sweat and soil, but looked as if he hadn’t lifted a finger. Her hands were sooty and her clothes had the raw odor of spilled water, dirt, and salty sweat.

“How do you do that?” she asked.

“Do what?”

“You don’t have a spot of dirt on you.”

“I guess you’re just not looking hard enough.” He laughed and started walking.
“Are you really gonna make me walk by myself?”

He was still strange, but she decided that he was less off-putting than she had originally thought—she needed a break anyway. “If Odd Wilhelm sees us, I’m telling him you’re lost,” she told him. “I’m just helping you find your way back.” Just in case, they kept to the lower lots, which were all out of the office sightlines.

Martin spoke extensively about bones, claiming that he’d found a couple. “I hope to get a full set.”

“A full set?” Elida asked.

“Yeah,” he said. “A full set.”

“You mean an entire skeleton?”

“Yes,” he said and smiled. “An entire skeleton. For educational purposes, of course.”

“Of course.” She pictured an entire skeleton made up of bones from different people; people of different genders and ages, people who didn’t even live in the same time period fused together. God, she thought, what if he didn’t stop there; what if he wanted skin, hair, nails, the whole thing?

“What’s wrong?” he asked.

“Isn’t it wrong to use bones from different people to make one skeleton?”

He shook his head.

“Don’t you care about who they were?” she continued.

“No, why would I?”

“Just because we die doesn’t mean we cease to exist.”

“Yes, it does.” He gave her a look as if this was something everyone knew, something she should have known. He was so pragmatic. So cynical. So close-minded. He was her complete opposite, and yet, she was curious—he reminded Elida of her father. “Pigheaded,” her mother had called him at times, but in that loving sort of way.

“I want to show you something,” she told him. She brought him to her father’s lot; she knew the epitaphs there by heart.

“You see these epitaphs?” she said. “They tell stories.”

He scrunched his face. “Look,” she said and pointed to an ogee-shaped headstone. “This woman died right before Christmas in ’37, and her husband died the following February. That’s not a coincidence.” She imagined the lonely old man in his large, empty house. “I bet he couldn’t live without her.”

“He might have starved to death,” Martin suggested.

“You’re just blind to all the stories that are buried here,” she scoffed as playfully as she could.

“The only things that are buried here are loads and loads of bones.” He kneeled down and placed his hand carefully on the grass. “All the rest is transient.”

“What about this one?” Elida pulled him over to a tall peak-top headstone further down the lot.

Jens Traaen

4. Januar 1924— 19. November 1944

Falt for Sitt Land

“Fell for his country,” she emphasized.

“Of course that’s what it says,” he said and snickered lightly. “Not only does the family find the tallest stone in all the land, they also reserve the right to brag about their son’s feat for all eternity.”

“I don’t think they’re bragging,” Elida said.

“That’s why most of us have kids in the first place—to prove to the world that we can make something great, something that’s a perfect extension of ourselves.” His black eyes narrowed. “Every time an old lady bends over a stroller and utter the words ‘How cute’ or ‘What an adorable child,’ an angel loses its wings.”

She didn’t have the chance to respond before he continued. “This epitaph also discourages any speculation of suicide or reckless behavior—you know, the way young people tend to go.

“Young people?”

“Yeah, they start seeing the cruelty of the world, ignore the majesty, consumed by disdainful assumptions that things will never get better.” His tone was casual, as if he was telling her about a day at the beach or something simple like that. “Or, of course, they think they’re immortal, forever young—the cliché.”

“I guess I’ve never thought about it that way,” she said.

There it was again, the cynicism; it felt familiar and new all at the same time.

“Give me the story behind this one then,” he laughed and tapped a square-shaped stone.

“This was a soldier too,” she said. “Winter War.” She paused as if listening for the story. “A Soviet grenade exploded only meters from where he hid in a grave. He’d thought he was safe, but a fragment ricocheted off the trunk of a birch and splinters shot at him like bullets. But he lived; he crawled back to his station, lines of blood behind him. When he reached the station, they gave him a mirror.” Elida and her father always laughed at this part, both with tears in their eyes. There was blood everywhere, he would continue in his deep rusty voice. My face looked like a porcupine.

“Nice story,” Martin said and grinned. “A little over the top perhaps.”

“Probably,” she said and cracked a smile.

“This thing about the water,” he said and pointed at the epitaph, “*vast and surging*—sounds like another tired analogy for the eternal.”

“It’s from a poem,” she said.

“Even better,” he scoffed.

Elida wanted to say something, but worried about his reaction. On the other hand, she didn’t want him to apologize for his honesty either. She sat down in front of the grave. Over the weekend, a dandelion had sprung up in between the three begonias.

“These things can get pretty deep,” Martin said, kneeled down and reached for the dandelion. With his other hand he dug around the pedicel, and once the dandelion was double its surface length, he seized it at the base. “The trick is to be gentle—ease into it.” He wiggled the weed carefully and by and by the rough and callused root slid out of the soil, its veins unharmed, sprouting out in every direction. “Like that,” he said and placed the dandelion in Elida’s lap. The seed head was shriveled and hard. Most of the flowers

in the yard were in full bloom, but the dandelion had already withered and died. Too bad, she thought—she loved the yellow fields of dandelions in the spring or watching the fuzzy seeds as they danced with the wind. She tossed the weed into the pond, where it lay slumped on the bared sand.

“You’ve got steady hands,” she said. “I can almost never get the root.”

“I have to,” he said and raised hands in front of him, “I’m going to be an orthopedist.”

“Like a doctor?”

“Yes,” he laughed. “Like a doctor.” He dug in his pocket. “Here,” he said and lifted his hand in front of her face, holding what looked like a piece of crooked porcelain.

“This is an ilium,” he told her. He placed the small bone in her hand, letting her feel the polished surface—hard, but velvety—she had never felt anything like it. She traced her finger along the bone’s winged arch and Martin leaned in closer. She heard his uneven breath as he put his hand on her waist, slowly moving down to her hip. “It belongs right here,” he said.

Her hip had never felt more sensitive as if all her nerve endings had gathered right where his hand touched her skin, as if she didn’t exist beyond that one spot, as if all of her was right where he touched her. He brought his other hand up to hers, guiding her over the bone while naming all its facets in Latin. Under her breath she echoed each word.

Early in the afternoon, the city was hit by a rain shower. In fact, the downpour was so heavy that Odd Wilhelm told Martin and Elida to leave early. For a summer shower, the rain was freezing cold and because of the otherwise scorching temperatures, Elida had neglected to bring any sort of extra clothing. Mustering up the courage to run home, she stood shivering under the roofed church steps when Martin walked past, quite content, it seemed, dry under his umbrella. He didn't see her, so she sniffled, hoping he would stop. He did, and without looking at her he told her to hurry up and get under his umbrella. She couldn't tell if he was annoyed, or if this was just another quirk of his.

“Where do you live?” he asked once they exited the graveyard's iron gates.

“Briskeby,” she said.

“Well, I live at Torshov, so you better appreciate this. I promise you, I'm rarely this courteous.” She laughed carefully, still not sure how to interpret him. Just in case, she apologized. “I appreciate it,” she added, thinking of the hour it would take him to walk her home and then backtrack to get to Torshov.

The two of them walked down the hill towards Majorstuen, which was usually a chaotic center of trams, busses, trains, bikes, cars, and pedestrians. But it was still too early for workers to go home, and no one was out strolling in the rain, so the two of them were quite alone walking through the torrent. They didn't talk much—the rain was too loud—which Elida didn't mind. The entire way home, she muttered the Latin words over and over again to herself, making sure she didn't forget them. When they finally stopped outside her house on the corner of Eilert Sundts gate and Briskebyveien, the rain had subsided. Martin shook off his umbrella.

“Thank you,” Elida said.

“Thank you,” Martin replied. “Oh, and don’t forget your bone.” He took the ilium out of his pocket and slipped it in hers. “I already have a pelvis.”

She opened her mouth to speak, but just then a man exited her house, pushing himself between them. “Sorry,” the man said, flustered, before hurrying past them toward a green Goggomobil that stood parked a little ways down the otherwise empty street.

“That wasn’t your father, was it?” Martin asked.

“No,” Elida replied in a low voice. She watched as the Goggomobil took off down Eilert Sundts gate. She had never seen that man before in her life, but he had been in her house.

“Probably a salesman,” Martin said confidently, although he didn’t meet her eyes.

“I should go inside and dry off,” she said.

“You look pretty dry to me.” He was right. His umbrella had kept her dry, although her blue canvas shoes were soggy.

“My feet are cold,” she said, and it wasn’t until Martin turned to leave that she noticed he was soaking wet.

“You’re home early,” her mother commented. She lay on the sofa, lazily fingering her hair.

“Rain,” said Elida. “Who was that visiting?”

“Just a man from the bank,” she said without batting an eye. “I’m hoping to get us another loan.”

A few months after her father died, Elida's mother had taken out a loan, and since then, they'd been getting by. And even if they weren't, her mother seemed to have enough admirers as she called them, to feed both her and Elida.

"Did the banker bring those?" Elida asked, pointing at the box of dates on table.

"Have one," her mother said. "But don't eat too many; we're having pork chops for dinner."

During dinner, Elida barely ate. She wasn't hungry, especially not for pork chops. Her mother's lies played over and over again in her head. She knew they were lies; she just didn't know what they were concealing. Her mother didn't seem to mind. In fact, she didn't even seem to notice. She was in a world of her own. "Dessert," was about the only thing she said to Elida, gesturing to a bowl of plums on the kitchen counter. Elida stared at the fruit—small and scarlet red—and frustration started building inside of her. She wanted to throw every single plum against the wall, smash them, destroy them, obliterate them. What upset her most of all was that she didn't know why. She didn't know why.

She thrust her fork in the pork chop and began to rip the meat off the bone. Her mother said nothing. Once most of the meat was gone, she traced the lines of the pink bone with her finger, whispering Martin's words enough times to block out the echo of her mother's.

Before Elida climbed into bed that night, she grabbed the ilium from her pocket. She held the bone tightly—its hardness a startling comfort. Her frustration had made her sensitive; each hair was raised on her skin, and the slightest touch felt like lightening

throughout her body. The bed sheets felt amazing on her naked skin, giving her goose bumps, and her duvet seemed heavier than before and she enjoyed the way it pressed against her. When she closed her eyes she could feel Martin's hand on her waist, like ripples, moving down, making the skin on her hip come so inexplicably alive again. But this time, his hand didn't stop at her hip. His hand, hard and velvety, circled its way down her thighs, in between, over her cotton underwear, making her warm. It belongs right here, she could hear him say. She could feel her face flush, her toes curl, and just as she heard Martin whisper *eminencia iliopubica*, her bedroom door flung open.

There, framed in the doorway, encased by a brilliant glow from the hall, arms spreadeagle like Jesus on the cross, was her mother's silhouette. Without a single word, her mother stood perfectly still, the door wide open, while Elida lay in her bed listening to her mother's complete silence, which said much more than her mother could. And while she wanted to break the silence, she dared not make a sound, not even breathe, for fear of what might take its place. Finally, her mother reached for the door, shutting it, and Elida heard her walk back downstairs, leaving her enveloped in the darkness of her bedroom.

Her sleep was stressful, and she woke up in the middle of the night unsure of the time and too tired to check. All she wanted was a glass of water. She usually kept a glass by her bed, but in her daze she had forgotten to bring one with her to bed, and now her mouth was awfully dry. She rose from her bed and staggered into the hallway. The floorboards creaked, she knew, and the last thing she wanted was to wake her mother. She tiptoed down the stairs and into the kitchen where she filled a large glass with water

from the sink. She started back upstairs when the floorboards upstairs groaned painfully loud, as if someone much larger than herself were treading on them. Like a scared animal Elida hid under the kitchen table. There was something familiar, yet troubling about those heavy steps. Someone was coming downstairs, heading for the front door. She saw the massive outline of a man unlocking the door, but before opening the door, the man stopped. He moved away from the door, crossing towards the kitchen. Elida crouched down, wanting to melt into the floor. He walked up to the counter and when the bright blue moonlight from the window hit him in the face, Elida recognized him. Torn between confusion and disgust, Elida watched as Odd Wilhelm walked calmly into the quiet night.

She didn't sleep any more that night, and she left the house before her mother woke. When she arrived at the churchyard, she found Odd Wilhelm standing by her father's grave, wide-legged, holding a shovel that he had stuck in her father's bed, splicing one of the begonias.

"I've been thinking," he said. "Now that Martin is gone I think it's time for you to help with the digging."

"Martin isn't here?"

"No," said Odd Wilhelm. "He quit."

He said this as if she should have known. She was tired of not knowing, of feeling like she was the only one who didn't know anything.

"I'm sad to see him go," Odd Wilhelm continued. "But you'll do." He surveyed her body, up and down, up and down. "Now what's that face for?"

"I'm sorry," she said. "I didn't know I was making a face."

“Your mother would be very disappointed if you lost this job.” From his jacket pocket he pulled out a small plum. It was scarlet red. “You wouldn’t want to upset your mother would you?” he said, rolling the plum in his large hand.

She shook her head. She wanted Martin. She needed to talk to him.

“I have to say, sweetheart,” Odd Wilhelm said. “You sure do look like your mother.” He stuck the plum in his mouth—juice ran down the sides of his mouth as he chewed—before spitting out the pit. “More and more alike each day.” He took one last glance at her and walked away, leaving the shovel embedded deep in her father’s grave bed. She felt as though he had cut her in half.

Martin showed up later that day, dressed even more neatly than usual; his shirt pristine and white, and his hair like thin gold streamers in the sunlight.

“I thought you left,” Elida said coolly and turned back to the grave she was watering.

“I just stopped by for this.” He waited for her to look. “It’s my paycheck.”

She didn’t respond, wanting her silence to demonstrate her disappointment.

“It’s so nice out,” he continued. “The rain really made it nice. There’s water in the pond again. Did you notice?” His voice was much less sure; it was careful and hesitant like a person moving through unknown terrain at night.

“I didn’t,” she said and moved to the next bed, emptying the can.

“I’m sorry I didn’t tell you,” Martin said. “But this was the plan all along.”

“What was?”

“I’m going to America.” She turned to him, bewildered. “For school,” he added, as if that would lessen the shock.

“How could you even afford that?” Her words were coming out before she could think. “I know about your father. You don’t have any money.”

He put his hands in his pockets, and half-smiled in this innocent way that seemed completely unlike him. “I’m living with a couple,” he started. “They lost their son in Korea. They’re paying for my school and board.”

“You mean they’re adopting you?” she asked.

“Not exactly,” he said, and his smile faded. “It’s not like I’m a substitute for their son. They just want to help me out.”

“If you ask me”—she shook her head slowly—“I think it sounds unnatural.”

“Unnatural?”

“Yes,” she said. “Like you’re playing with the rules.”

“What rules?”

“The rules of life,” she said as if he should have known.

Now Martin shook his head at her. “You of all people should know those rules aren’t real.”

“What do you mean *me of all people*?”

“Well, you know”—he paused, searching for the right words—“Odd Willhelm told me about your”—

“I need to refill this,” she interjected and held up the empty can, before moving past him. He followed her.

“I’m not trying to make you feel bad,” he said. “Quite the opposite.”

She stepped onto the stone slab in front of the spigot, and Martin put his hand on her shoulder, squeezing it gently. “You’ll be much happier once you accept that nothing is written in stone. Much happier.”

The gushing water hitting the aluminum can cut through the tension between the two of them with a loud and hollow sound.

“Goodbye, Elida.” His voice was neither cold nor warm, just there. “I’ll write you sometime.”

She wasn’t sure what to say. She was upset, but unsure whether it was with him or with herself—it was all very confusing. Elida hadn’t known anyone like Martin before, and no one had ever taken the time to know her like Martin had. If he left, she’d have no one.

“Wait,” she said and turned. But he wasn’t there. He was at the bottom of the hill, almost through the iron gates. She waved to his back, as he crossed into the street, and didn’t put her hand back down until he had completely disappeared, until she knew she’d never see him again.

Something cold touched her toes and she looked down. The can was overflowing and water was running in every direction, leaving dark grey trails, before getting sucked into the grass surrounding the slab. Elida picked up the can and started walking the opposite way of the grave beds she was watering, towards her father’s lot. The can was heavy, and water splashed onto her legs as she walked. She walked up to the pond. Martin was right—the pond seemed fuller, and it did look nice. She poured the water into

the pond. Once the can was empty, she went back to spigot, refilled it, and returned to the pond where she emptied it again. This she did over and over and over again until her arms could barely lift the can anymore.

To her, the pond now looked wider and deeper than ever, a mirror of the cloudless blue sky. She took off her work shoes and pulled off her pants and shirt. Standing in the graveyard in only her underwear, feeling the sun wrap around her like a cape, she stepped into the pond. The water reached her ankles, and with every step, the water lapped a little bit higher. Once she reached the middle, she kneeled down; the water felt surprisingly warm. She placed both her hands in front of her, feeling the coarse sand beneath her. She would get up soon, just not yet, she thought, and held up the limp dandelion from the water, its veins sprouting to the north, to the south, to the west, to the east, down to the earth, and up to the sky.

Lovegods

I've heard somewhere that in thirty years, global warming will have submerged the Maldives completely underwater, and I tell my father this as we're sitting on the pale beach of Hudhuveli, a small island in the North male Atoll of the Maldives.

"Where will you go then?" I ask him.

He stares out past the turquoise and towards the dark blue of the ocean and tells me that submersion will take much longer than thirty years, and even if I were right, he'll be long gone by then.

My father has aged a lot since I saw him last. That was over three years ago, when he returned to Oslo for Christmas. The topography of his face has deep gorges and straits and dried-out riverbeds. My father looks like a grandfather, and I try hard not to calculate his age, which I lost track of years ago.

I arrived yesterday, having survived my first twelve-hour flight, not including the four hour layover at Gatwick, the hour at Dubai International, or the hour it took to board the Sri Lankans at Bandaranaike. Although the flight from Sri Lanka to Male took me westwards again it felt as though I flew further away from anything I'd ever seen or imagined. The islands are like eyes, green pupils and turquoise irises staring up at you while the plane itself flies so low you are almost surfing the whitecaps.

The plane landed in Male onto a terrifyingly small runway, and together with my father who welcomed me at the airport, I boarded a taxi boat which brought us to Hudhuveli. This is the bright kind of world you might think only exists on postcards, and naturally, I've left my camera at home.

Translation has brought my father all over the world, and although the Hudhuveli resort cannot pay him as much as the ad agency in Seattle or the Norwegian senior village in Marbella, he is provided permanent lodging in one of the resort huts, as well as breakfast, lunch, and dinner at the island's only buffet and bar. He says he's made a life for himself down here, and as long as Mamaduk, the barman, brings him his weekly cartons of Benson & Hedges, he has everything he could ever ask for.

"Paradise never looked this good," my father says and puts on an azure pair of swim trunks over the orange pair he's already wearing. He's also sporting three t-shirts and two shirts that he keeps unbuttoned. Sweat is surfacing through the layers. I watch him as he trots into the water until only his head is visible. Today is laundry day.

When he returns he takes off all his clothes except the orange swim trunks, wrings them out, and hangs them on a bamboo and rubber tie drying rack. The sand laps up every drop of water drizzling down.

"Do you need to wash that?" He points to the XL t-shirt I'm wearing.

I don't think I've actually ever lied to my father and I have no intention of starting now so I shrug—I'm not quite ready to parade my half-naked body in front of him.

He asks when I'll be done with school. "Last year," I say, and tell him about my bachelor degree in art history, and that I've been working in landscaping ever since. He asks if I got that from my mother, and I say I might move to London next year, and it isn't until I tell him that I recently got back together with my ex-boyfriend Even, whom my father has never met or heard of, that I realize he isn't listening. He nods but smiles at something behind me. I turn around in time to see two bronzed girls, each on a resort tanning bed, look away. The sound of their laughs rings in my head as I turn back to my father.

"I'm very proud of you, you know," he says, but I have no time to respond before he changes the subject. "Do you see those boys?" He points towards three men playing soccer by the water. Wet, brown sand sprays all around them. One of them, a comically well-shaped man who fits perfectly into my idea of a postcard paradise, waves to us. This man appears to have emerged straight out of a Versace or a Gucci ad; tall, muscular—but not too much—golden skin that glitters from sand and sweat, and sun-bleached hair that curls around his face like an ornate Renaissance frame. Guys like this know they're beautiful, which make them particularly irrelevant to me. They simply don't seem like a good idea.

"That's Michele," my father says. "Beatrice's son."

I'm unsure if Beatrice is one of the women from my father's emails, or if she's new, but I don't ask.

“She lives on Banos,” he says, and I follow his gaze. Some two kilometers off our little coast there is a line of white sand—a green palm line suggests Banos is bigger than it looks.

“Do you know that when the tide is low you can walk from island to island?” he asks.

“Is it dangerous?”

“Only if you get stuck somewhere with the wrong person.” He laughs deeply. “When I dated Beatrice I’d walk over in the early evenings and return the next day when the tide was right.”

“So you’re not together anymore?” I try to disguise the hopefulness in my voice. Whenever my father has a girlfriend all he talks about is her, and the only thing that seems to distract him is the possibility of exchanging her for another woman.

“Women change, Hedda,” he responds. “Suddenly nothing you give them is good enough.”

I nod, wondering if he sees me as exempt from them, or if he has yet to realize I have become one too.

“I knew a woman once”—he starts, and I know where this is going—“I gave her a house, a family, clothes, anything she asked for, but after a few years she wanted even more clothes, a better car, new closets.” He draws his breath as if this is particularly hard for him to talk about. “Eventually I left—there is nothing so painful as feeling like you’re not good enough for someone.”

He told me a similar story when I was ten, and the same story again a few times since. The first time was on New Year's Eve. In the car, on our way to light a candle on my grandfather's grave, he told me that he was leaving my mother. He emphasized the 'mother' part; he wasn't leaving me, only her. In the forty minutes it took us to drive to Ullern graveyard, I tried my best not to cry aloud. A few times I choked on my own sobs, and as we turned into the parking lot, he said: "This isn't really worth crying over, sweetheart."

I remember returning to the apartment and finding my mother sitting in one of the salon chairs. Apparently, my father told me about his plan before he told her. She sat staring blankly out into the living room, and while I couldn't identify her expression then, I can picture it now, and I know that she was afraid.

As my father left to celebrate the night with his twenty-six-year-old new friend, my mother and I stood on our balcony, watching the fireworks crackle in the dark around us. In the years following, I have never asked my mother what went through her head as we entered the new year alone, but it wouldn't surprise me if her thoughts were the same as mine—why wasn't I good enough for him?

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The setting sun casts off that warm, hazy glow that makes everything look soft and safe, and my father sits on his porch with his feet resting on a stack of old records he hasn't found a place for yet. The light fills in his aging face, making him look much more like the dad I remember from years ago. It's eight in the evening, and the shoreline has begun to recede. He tells me that tonight we're crossing over to Banos.

I take a shower before we leave. No matter how many times I lather, rinse, or rub, there is sand everywhere. My hair is tangled and refuses to cooperate, so I finally just pull it back into some sort of bun. Since it's only me and my father I don't put on any make-up.

We walk along the only proper road on the island, past the buffet patio, the bar, and the administrative building. The latter is the size of a kiosk, and is where my father works with three other people. "I'm the only one with a Mac," he says and gives a little snicker that ends in a snort.

He is holding his dark leather wallet in one hand and a lit cigarette in the other, and for a moment I miss the times when he would keep his wallet in his jeans pocket and my hand in his. He's always had his cigarettes. "They're the only thing I can count on," he told me once after his twenty-six-year-old friend, at that point thirty-two and the mother of his youngest son, kicked him out to make room for her new friend, the carpenter. I had hoped that her betrayal might make him recognize his own behavior, but it only launched him into a yearlong lament about treacherous women. On the bright side, my mother was no longer the most treacherous of all.

"Let me show you the pool," my father says, and before I know it, he's ducked in between the palms on the side of the road. I head in after him, slinking along a narrow pathway among dense vegetation. The air is thick and clammy in here; it smells salty, but tastes somewhat sweet. I wonder what it must feel like to breathe this air in every day, to sweat when you're standing still, and to be so far removed from everything that's

familiar—from everyone you know. I see my father stop ahead, a little bow bridge and the shimmery hints of water in front of him.

“It’s too dark,” he says. “So you can’t really see the fish.” He pats me on the head as if that’s the end of it.

“Why don’t we come back tomorrow?” I suggest hopefully.

He chortles like I just told him a joke that was only mildly funny. ‘Let’s go get some Garudhiya, I’m starving.’”

As we leave I take one last glance at the bow bridge. I really want to see that pool.

When we reach the beach the low tide is at its peak. As if the ocean has been unmasked, hundreds of little shells and pieces of coral lie exposed in the sand. I’m unsure if seeing the ocean so naked makes it more or less intimidating. I have always been afraid of water, and although it was my father’s biggest annoyance during the eleven years it took me to learn how to swim, I doubt he remembers now.

The water feels warm on my feet and calves.

“Did you know”—my father starts—“that dragonflies cross the Indian Ocean back and forth between India and east Africa every year?”

When my father moved here I did some research on the Maldives, and I do know that, but I tell him that I don’t.

“It’s the world’s longest insect migration,” he continues, sounding content.

I imagine millions of dragonflies flying together across the blackest parts of the ocean—beautiful.

“Those dragonflies have it figured out,” he says. “You can’t stay in one place too long.”

“But they go back and forth between the same places,” I tell him.

“Yes,” he says, “but once you leave, it’s not home anymore. So basically, it’s like going to a new place.”

Sometimes I wonder if he hears what he’s saying. If he recognizes the blatantly apparent and painfully significant parallels he’s drawing?

The fringes of my sarong dip in the water as we walk. Dark shadows, large clusters of coral and rock have made a frightening obstacle course, and all I can do now is trust that my father will lead me to the other side. I’m slightly comforted by the seeming confidence of his walk—his back straight and the occasional cut to the left or to the right to avoid unsuitable terrain. I fall behind, but stumble along as quickly as I can. I’ve focused on my feet so I don’t actually notice the gap between us until he’s more than twenty meters ahead. That’s when I speed up as best I can, but become reckless, and step on something sharp. I grab at my foot, barely balancing, and pull out a sharp piece of coral that has pierced the rubber foam soles of my flip-flop and dug into my heel. It doesn’t hurt—at least not yet. My father stops, waits for me as I limp towards him.

“Maybe”—he says and coughs—“while we’re here, you could meet Beatrice.”

He doesn’t even notice that I’m hurt.

“I’ve told her so much about you, and even though she and I aren’t together anymore, I think you two would make great friends.”

“I stepped on a coral,” I say.

“I did that once. Hurt like hell,” he says and stares dreamily at the village lights ahead of us. “Be careful with that coral.”

The last time I made friends with one of his girlfriends, she secretly hated me for one year and openly hated me for two, eventually asking my father to choose between us, about which he told me: “I don’t know—this is a very delicate situation for me.” She helped him make his decision by getting pregnant and I didn’t see my father again until they broke up years later. I have absolutely no intentions of making friends with Beatrice and I know now that this has been his plan all along. He is using me as an excuse to reconcile with an old girlfriend. Not only am I his way back to Beatrice, I’ve voluntarily crossed an ocean to do so. But as I look up at my father, his hopeful eyes looking back at me, I get the feeling he really believes he is doing this for me.

We finally step onto dry sand, and I can feel the burn as oxygen opens the cut in my foot.

That burn has grown into a fire by the time our entrees arrive, growing fiercer and more destructive each time I look over at Beatrice. Plump Beatrice with her forgettable looks and remarkably unremarkable personality. Boisterous Beatrice who laughs constantly, tilting her head so far back that her curly hair nearly touches the floor. Italian Beatrice whose English is so terrible that once I finish my dinner, even though I’m ready to burst, I order a banana split so I don’t have to actively engage in her conversation. I nod a lot and feign a few laughs when I can’t understand what she’s telling me. My father grins in that crooked way I’ve always hated, his tobacco-stained teeth showing, reminding me of how heavily he has aged; I just know he’s got his hand on her thigh.

I've sat through this dinner many times before, and when she once again tells me I'm "molto carina," this dinner officially deserves the title of one of my least favorites. Beatrice tells us about the time she threw away all of her furniture and hung thick oriental carpets on her walls and covered her floors with pillows and painting supplies. "Art is," she says, "l'amore della mia vita." And then she looks over at my father, winks, and when he winks back, she smiles like a little girl.

My father needs to make sure I've heard her story. "She threw away all of her stuff," he says and laughs. "Can you believe that?"

I can, and although I wish I could tell her that I really do admire people who will do anything for art, I lie and make it seem like I don't care.

My aloof reaction doesn't make a difference to my father. "Not a lot of women would do that," he says, and I feel the fire envelop me completely—smoldering. He's talking about my mother. I should defend her, but I'm afraid of what more he might say if I do. I don't want to hear stories about my mother, and so I sit mutely by, watching my father worship another woman because she is everything my mother is not. I feel pathetic, and I'm angry at myself for being so pathetic.

When I was eight, I overheard one of my parents' many arguments. My father was upset because my mother refused to throw away a big box of die cuts. It was a silly argument really, but they kept at it for hours. Their shouting kept me awake, and the next morning my father dropped off a large cardboard box in the dumpster before taking me to school. That same afternoon my mother picked me up, swinging by the dumpster to lift out that same cardboard box. I never said a word to either of them about it, and they

never said a word to me. Sometimes I think it was that cardboard box full of die cuts that started all of it; my father's infidelities, the divorce, the bitterness.

Before we part for the night, Beatrice tells me that I should go snorkeling while I'm here. I nod and smile. No way will I go snorkeling; the very idea terrifies me. But she puts an arm around me as though we're old buddies and tells me she'll make it happen. "Fish is fun," she breathes into my face. She smells of gin and tonic. My father stares at us intently, smiling in a way that seems far too emotional for this situation and completely unfamiliar to me. He probably thinks that this is the moment where Beatrice and I will bond.

Perhaps she is sincere. Perhaps she really is wonderful. And perhaps she really does think I'm pretty. But my father will never settle down with her. She and I will never see each other again.

The following morning I wake up to find Michele standing on my father's doorstep. He holds two sets of fins, goggles, and snorkels, and his hair is wet. Beatrice must have asked him to take me snorkeling. Now that I finally see him up-close, I'm surprised at how imperfect he actually looks. The outer corners of his eyes point downwards in a St. Bernard sort of way, and his teeth are small and gapped like a baby's. Great, I'm thinking; this actually makes him interesting.

"Buongiorno," he says and parades those deciduous teeth. My voice hasn't woken up yet and so I mutter a lazy hello and hold up my finger to signal him to hold on. Then I close the door and run into the bathroom where I lather myself with SPF 40, apply mascara, and swallow a large glob of toothpaste that makes me dry heave for a few

seconds afterwards. I change into my bikini, double-tying every knot, thinking how little I want to do this, but how this imperfect galleon figure of a man on the other side of the front door is expecting me to not be a coward and experience island-life the way I'm sure it's meant to be experienced. The little girl inside of me also doesn't want to remind my father how much he loves water and how much I hate it. My body is ready, but I'm a little unsure if my mind and heart will follow.

We wet our feet before we slip on our fins in the sand and I waddle self-consciously back into the water next to his gloriously smooth walk.

"Put on your goggles tightly over your eyes and nose," he instructs me. "Breathe with your mouth."

"That'll be a challenge," I joke, but he doesn't care. He just stares at the goggles in my hand, waiting for me to put them on.

Breathing with my mouth turns out to be surprisingly difficult and uncomfortable once he lets the air out and the rubber edges seal along my face.

"You okay?" he asks.

I'm trying hard not to hyperventilate, even though my entire body is telling me I should; I give him the thumbs up. He sticks the snorkel into my mouth and uses his other hand to close my lips around the plastic tube. "Bite down," he says, his hand now under my jaw, and I do.

"You can't touch, okay?" he says and gestures to the water. I ask if he means the coral, but forget that I have the snorkel in my mouth and the sound comes out garbled. He nods quickly and walks into the water where he lies down gently like a lily. I follow and

lean into the water. I fall. Although the splash is quite noticeable, it's nothing compared to the squeal I let out; so far I'm surprised at how unattractive he has made me feel. But once my face goes underwater, and the warm water embraces me, I forget. I am suspended in the crystalline water and the sand is like an endless desert underneath me. This world is less frightening than I expected.

But of course, as I'm basking in my newfound appreciation for water I am not thinking of my snorkel, and an unpleasant taste of salt washes into my mouth. I jump upright and spit out the snorkel along with the water. Michele watches me intently. "You swallowed water?" he asks.

"It's fine," I say. "I'm fine."

"Just do what I do," he says and turns over onto his stomach. I watch him until I realize that there's not much more to snorkeling than lying on your stomach. Keep the snorkel above water, breathe with my mouth, I remind myself as I lie down. I dip my face in the water, and try to breathe in a steady rhythm. Once I manage that, my body floats atop the water, and I feel as light as sea foam. Michele moves fluidly ahead of me. Golden and smooth. A galleon figure leading me through the unknown.

As we swim away from the beach, the ocean floor changes rapidly; my heart pounds a little bit faster. Every dark shadow from last night is staring up at me in pinks, greens, reds, blues, yellows, oranges, purples. I float above them all, and for the first time I'm not afraid. I don't have to navigate or worry that I'll cut myself: I'm flying.

I sail past a pale yellow coral that looks like a cross between a brain and a cantaloupe, and next to it, a bright red tree with outstretched, hard branches, that beckons

me to touch. Its surface is coarse and the closer I get the more I want to touch it. I remember Michele telling me not to, but that only makes me want to more. What could be the harm? I make sure Michele isn't looking and then I stretch my hand out towards the red coral. But as I put my fingers on it, I feel only the resistance of water. I've forgotten that water distorts, makes you see things differently.

When it's time for us to get back onto land I try to take my time—I don't want to leave the water just yet. But Michele is waiting for me in the shallows. I flap my fins faster, certain I don't have the grace of a mermaid, hoping Michele isn't watching me. Just when I reach him, he puts his hand on my stomach and I rest on his palm. His move is unexpected, but I like it. But then I see the stingray gliding underneath me. It's only the size of my mother's dinner plates, but the barb is long and stiff and deadly. The stingray takes its time, indifferent to me hovering above, fearing for my life. I don't move a muscle—I barely even breathe—until the fish is a shadow in the distance, and I dare plant my rubber feet in the sand.

“I'm sorry if I scared you,” Michele says once we're back on land. Our equipment is drying in the sand next to us.

“I don't scare easily,” I say and smile. Michele smiles back. Perhaps it's because he just saved my life, but I feel myself gravitate towards that childish smile, the droopy eyes, the almost metallic skin.

“You don't want il pungiglione—how you say”—he draws a straight line in the sand—“the tail?”

“The barb?”

“The barb, yes.” He laughs. Short and breathy. “It can hurt you.”

“I can handle it,” I say and he laughs again.

I move my knees towards him. I would like to stay on this beach with Michele a little bit longer, but it seems he doesn't notice, or doesn't care, and he begins to collect his equipment.

“Thank you for taking me out,” I tell him. He nods, smiles, and walks away. It's strange, but now that I know that he's imperfect—perhaps even more imperfect than me—he is strangely attractive. It's as if guys who have their flaws on the outside are less flawed on the inside—at least that's what I've come to believe.

That night my father and I eat pizza in the bar while Italian love songs resonate throughout the roofed deck.

“How was snorkeling?” he asks me.

“Wonderful,” I say. “Thanks for letting me know Michele was taking me,” I add sarcastically.

“You're welcome,” he says and winks. “I bet Michele is a good teacher, too.”

“Yes, I actually enjoyed being in the water.”

“Who wouldn't?” He takes a large bite and continues speaking with his mouth full. “You know, Beatrice used to teach.”

“Really,” I say, feigning interest.

“Yes,” says my father excitedly, oblivious to my tone. “She taught Portuguese back in Italy.”

I cut myself a large piece of the mushroom pizza that I stuff into my mouth.

“She speaks five different languages, Hedda,” he continues. “Can you believe it?”

I don’t answer; I chew, while my father goes on a tangent about this marvelous goddess of love, art, sex, and education; that she is going to teach him Portuguese; how maybe she can teach me as well. And all I do is eat. I chew too hard and I swallow too fast, and by the end of his speech I feel like vomiting all over the table, all over this pizza, all over my father’s glorification of this woman who isn’t my mother. Who isn’t me.

The bartender walks over and sets down a Guinness in front of my father.

“New girlfriend, aan’h?” he asks, raising his eyebrows.

“Mamaduk,” my father says. “This is my daughter, Hedda.” He grins in that crooked way again and I wonder if it’s because he’s proud that I’m his daughter, or if he’s simply taking in the compliment.

Mamaduk doesn’t say a word to me, he just walks back to his bar. I look back at my father who, I notice, has a green pepper flake lodged between his corner teeth. I could say something, but I don’t.

“What if Beatrice joined us here tonight?” he says.

Then I’d feel like killing myself, I think. “What about it?” I ask.

“She wants to spend more time with you.”

“With me?”

“She really likes you, Hedda.” He smiles at me with his stupid pepper flake, and I attempt to smile back. I would like to tell him that no, it is far from all right that Beatrice joins my father and me here tonight, and that for the moment, her name is at the top of a long list of names of my father’s friends whom I wouldn’t want to join us here tonight. I

open my mouth, but close it right away. What am I thinking? My father doesn't know, doesn't understand, doesn't see a goddamn thing, and that's not going to change if I tell him how I feel. A voice inside me reminds me that maybe it's better to have a bogus relationship with my father than one that's rotten at both ends.

“Maybe she can come over another day,” I suggest.

Although I'd like to think that he's about to say yes, he doesn't, and it won't have mattered anyway, because in walks Beatrice.

“Il mio bello,” she calls. Her hair is wild, bouncing lightly as she skips over to us. She wears jewelry: thick, clanking bracelets, more rings than she has fingers, and a chunky necklace that looks homemade from stones found on the beach. For the record, I'm feeling especially sexy, wearing only what I refer to as hyphenated clothes—t-shirt, cut-offs, and flip-flops. I didn't wash my hair after snorkeling, and it's salty and dry. No make-up this evening either.

“You're so beautiful,” Beatrice says to me. “È molto carina, vero?” she asks Michele who has just joined us. He mumbles in agreement and turns to a girl that appears right behind him. I think I remember her from the beach, one of the bronzed girls my father liked so much. Her name, they tell me, is Gia, and when Beatrice, Michele, and Gia sit down I am left at the end of the table, uncoupled, a visual rendition of how I feel.

I spend at least an hour trying to ignore my father and Beatrice's myopic flirtation, while at the same time attempting not to notice Michele and Gia tasting each other's drinks and feeding each other bits of pineapple.

When Mamaduk slides over to me with a red-turning-into-orange-turning-into-yellow cocktail I didn't order, I decide that it's time for me to leave. Do I think this will change anything? Absolutely not. But if I stay another minute all that pizza might actually make its way up my throat and onto the table.

I mumble something about a bathroom and exit the wall-less bar. Once I'm past the administrative kiosk and I know I'm out of their sightline, I break into a run.

The island looks overgrown and wild at night. I guess that's one of the many things my father likes. Weathered palm trees loom over me, their bases thick and coarse, draped in webs of bark, their branches standing out in every direction, the fronds rustling in the slight breeze. I run until I can't run any farther, until the blackness of the ocean is the only thing in front of me. Loose waves break quietly onto the sand and fireflies swirl around me like embers. Maybe I can stay here tonight—build myself a pillow on the sand. Maybe I can start swimming and hope I'm going in the direction of Banos. Maybe I can't do anything but spend time with my father and his ex-ex-girlfriend.

"Buonasera," a voice behind me says. Michele is alone, stepping towards me as fast as the sand will allow.

"Hi," I mutter, trying to contain my excitement.

"Why did you leave?" he asks. He is getting closer.

"I was tired."

"But you are not tired anymore?"

"Depends," I say and shrug. "Depends on what you'd like to do." I don't know where this sudden come-hither attitude is coming from, but I try telling myself that what

I'm doing is not flirting; it's coping. I'm only trying to make a terrible evening shine a little bit brighter. Michele doesn't seem too put-off, but he doesn't seem terribly engaged either. He just stares out towards the big black blue.

"Look," he says. "You see the manta rays?"

I look, I squint, I try to focus, but all I see is darkness, and the moon, like a white smile on a black canvas.

"They are making love," Michele continues in a low voice.

I take a minute to decide if this comment is all it will take to ruin this moment, too, but decide that maybe this is exactly what I need. Maybe this is all right, maybe the manta rays are making love, hinting for me to make a move.

"Do you want to go somewhere?" I ask, my voice straight-forward and wholly unromantic.

He smiles. His lovely baby teeth assure me that yes, he wants to go somewhere.

Absolutely.

"I know a place," I tell him, and we start walking along the beach. Then, Già's voice resonates through the trees. She is calling: Michele, Michele, Michele. But Michele doesn't reply. He just grabs my hand and starts walking, speeds up, starts running. We run in the sand, and as if in a dream, our feet sink, pulling us backwards for each step. We run across narrow pathways, in between palm trees, while holding onto each other's fingers. Già's calls echo in the distance. Michele, Michele, Michele.

Michele and I don't stop until we reach the bow bridge. I'm out of breath, but I can't breathe because I'm laughing so hard. Michele laughs too. The water shimmers all

around us, but now I can see the actual pool. The water is lit by green underwater lights, and gliding through it are fish much larger than I had imagined when my father told me about them. I squeeze Michele's hand.

"Don't be afraid of them," he says. "The two reef sharks are big, but not very dangerous."

"Is that a sting ray?" I ask and point towards a round shadow significantly larger than a dinner plate.

"Yes, but it won't sting you unless it feels threatened. You'll know if that's about to happen. The—barb—will come up like a whip." He makes a whipping movement with his hand.

"What do I do then?"

"Then it's too late. The stingray stings you." He looks terribly serious while he's telling me this: raised brows and stiff lips. "Sometimes the barb breaks off under your skin, which makes everything much worse."

"I can imagine," I say, but I can't.

"Would you like to touch it?" Michele asks.

"Yes!" I sound a little too excited perhaps, but Michele doesn't seem to mind.

He leads me to the edge of the pool where he leans down and waves his hand softly in the water. It takes only a few seconds before the stingray sweeps the water towards us. Its movements are like those of a sheet drying in the wind, round and fluid. Once at the edge, the stingray pokes its head up at us. Michele places his hand on top of

the stingray and its sides begin to flap. I reach out my hand and feel the wet and rubbery surface.

“Does he like this?” I ask.

“She. You see the two fins on top? Only females have those.” He lets her swim back into the pool. “And yes, she does like that.”

We sit by the edge for a while, talking about stingrays, sharks, and snorkeling until I can't wait anymore. I grab his chin and push my mouth onto his. His lips are clammy and hard, and I'm momentarily disappointed. “Be softer,” I tell him. “Be confident.” And eventually he adapts to my way, which makes his kisses long and deliberate. I place his hand on my thigh and unbutton my cut-offs. I put his hand down my panties and he puts mine on his cock that he's pulled out without me even noticing, and all I can think is, I should feel bad about this. But I don't. I just know that I should. I rub Michele all over, and it's as if my boyfriend no longer exists. He doesn't seem entirely real, a figment of my imagination. But I'm the one who's in another reality, a different dimension, and I think that whatever happens here will have no effect on my life at home. This isn't my life. This is island-life.

He whispers that he wants to fuck me, and I tell him that obviously, that's what we're about to do. He laughs, and then I hear his name called again, Michele, Michele, Michele, so I don't think and push him into the pool. But I don't worry about his reaction, I don't worry about a thing, I just jump in after him. He laughs and I can't believe how satisfying it is to be back in the water. We grab each other again and I wrap my legs

around his waist. “Watch out for il pungiglione,” he says and pokes me softly in the gut before thrusting his hips in between my legs.

The entire time I feel the rough walls of the pool scrape my back, and twice something rubbery slides by, caresses me. But the most exciting part of all is his name, playing like a broken record all around us, Michele, Michele, Michele, and Michele still doesn't care.

When he eventually comes, the stingray flaps somewhere on the water's surface like it's applauding. I let him pull out before I readjust the bikini bottom I never found the time to take off.

“Did I make you come?” he asks me.

I take my time getting out of the pool.

“I'd like to make you come sometime,” he says.

“Thank you.”

We scramble for our clothes, and all the while I have this nagging feeling that I'd rather be alone for a bit. Michele asks if I want to go with him in his boat back to Banos. He thinks Beatrice will stay with my father. “What about Gia?” I ask.

“Gia,” he says. “She's not staying.” He comes up to me and puts his arms around me. “She's a different kind of girl; not like you.” Something glows inside of me like a fire that's just been lit.

“I think you should go find her,” I say. “Let her know.”

Michele looks confused, but I tell him that I won't even consider going with him unless he talks to her first. This is, of course, a lie. If I wanted to, I'd go with him. I don't

owe Gia anything. But I don't want to. I want to be alone. "She's been calling all this time—I feel kind of bad for her," I say, and this he seems to understand. "I'll see you at my boat, sì?" he says, and I smile and nod once before he hurries out of sight through the palms.

The moon hangs higher now, a crooked smile, stained.

I seat myself on the edge of the pool and let my feet drop in the water. Neither the stingray nor any of the sharks swim up to me, and it's probably for the best. I fear sharks and stingrays just as much as I've feared the water my whole life, I've just forgotten about it up until now. In fact a lot of things I've forgotten or ignored seep back into my mind as I sit here by the pool. I feel my eyes swell, and one tear drops before I stop myself. This isn't worth crying over.

I hop into the water, clothes and all, and then I duck. I duck until I am entirely under water and then I open my eyes. But it is too dark to make anything out, too dark to see anything. I just feel the rubbery caresses against my skin. Paradise never felt this good.

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