An excerpt from *Så mye hadde jeg* by Trude Marstein
Translated from the Norwegian by David M. Smith

All Happy Childhoods Are Alike

December 2006

Tummyegg: that's what Frøya says instead of *tummyache*, and *innitating* when she means *irritating.* "She is so *innitating*," she says whenever Maiken is teasing her. She also says *top* and *no* and *peak* instead of *stop*, *snow*, and *speak*. It's a quarter past six; if I get up now, I'll have time for a smoke in the barn after I've fed the chickens. Every morning, when I get up from the warm bed and Trond Henrik, it feels like ripping off a plaster, but it's sweet nevertheless: the certainty of the repetitions, the routines, my life now. Trond Henrik is half-asleep and won't let me go; I briefly yield, with a moan that's somewhere between suffering and satisfaction. The first thing I thought of upon waking was the chickens. The white one is harassed by the others; every morning when I come into the henhouse, she is ruffled up and frazzled, often with blood on the back feathers. White as snow, red as blood, Frøya has dubbed her Snow White. In the last two days, the Jæren hen, Sigri, has started to brood, even though the eggs aren't fertilised. She has a fit whenever I try to take the eggs; I have to reach under with gloves on.

The Advent star shines in the window. I pack the lunches and make coffee before pouring fermented milk over muesli in old, mismatched bowls. Frøya isn't wearing any socks, I put my hand on her foot, it's cold. Maiken comes slowly down the stairs. Frøya says they're making Christmas presents in the day care again today, and that Simon broke what she'd made yesterday: a house with an elf in the door.

"The elf said: *Merry Christmas, Merry Christmas*," she screeches.

She is standing on her knees on a chair in a pair of red wool pants, the feet bare. Maiken's sweatpants have holes in the knees, so I can see she's not got any tights under. We have to leave home at quarter past seven, at the latest, to be on time for school, day care, work. The girls are six years apart; when we met, Frøya was still wearing diapers at night. That man and the girl in the apartment where there was no

cheese slicer or clean handtowels and the kitchen counter was greasy and the toilet grimy: I just wanted to take care of them, give them a family life, and Maiken, I wanted to give Maiken a family life. Play Ludo, watch films, dinner for four around the table, holidays together.

It's seven below outside. I crouch down and pull socks onto Frøya's feet.

"You need to put on your tights," I tell Maiken. "It's so cold out."

She's got pearls woven into her hair, threaded in by a girlfriend at Geir's house yesterday: two strips down each side.

"That was a real test of my patience!" said Maiken happily, for once happily. Every day, she goes home to Geir after school and waits until I'm off work.

A car glides down the motorway with pale yellow headlights, the darkness still lying over the fields. There has been a black frost all autumn; the weather has been mild every time there's been any precipitation. Boxes still line the wall in the living room. Clearing them out has proved a never-ending job. Trond Henrik has boxes he hasn't opened since separating from Frøya's mother three years ago. Now, everything has to go. His hat from *russ*, a leather jacket he inherited from his father, required books from his classes at uni. Personal effects from the military, the plastic bride and groom from the cake when he married Frøya's mother, the first books he wrote on notepads in pencil, with the inscription on the first page: *Author: Trond Henrik Gulbrandsen*. He once told me he learned to read as a four year old. He's talking about buying a rope swing, and a hammock for the common room upstairs.

I hear Trond Henrik flush the toilet on the second floor. The cistern is leaking, a small puddle of water drips onto the floor with every flush. Then he lies down again.

"Merry Christmas, Merry Christmas, Merry Christmas," squeals Frøya, and Maiken looks at her icily. I tell them to finish up their food and brush their teeth and get ready to go, reminding Maiken one more time to put on her tights.

"Play?" says Frøya, looking at me with her head cocked, smiling.

"Ten minutes," I say.

I take my coffee cup and winter coat and step out to see to the chickens and have a smoke.

There's barely enough light at this hour to glimpse the outlines of buildings, the horizon beyond the fields. On all sides the fields are covered with stubble, apart from one that is ploughed, its black furrows tinged with frost.

Two of the chickens go out to peck and stamp at the frozen ground. I go inside the barn and open the door leading into the closed part of the henhouse. It smells rank, ranker than usual, I'm inclined to think: hostility, aggression. Snow White is sitting on the lowest roost, blood on her back feathers again, dirtied with faeces around the rectum. She might have to be shielded off from the others.

Sigri is still lying in the nesting box, now on a new egg. She makes a big commotion when I try to take it, flapping and pecking at my hand, so I leave it alone. I find three eggs from the others, putting them carefully in my coat pocket. I have to drive out to Roy's farm this afternoon and ask Anette's advice.

I sit down in the open barn door and light a cigarette, take the first drag, and feel the friendly shock to my lungs. Trond Henrik grew up here, but the house hadn't been lived in for ten years, ever since his brother moved to Oslo. We moved in with a lot of furniture. Most of what was in the house was from the seventies and eighties, but in the barn, there was a lot of older furniture. I kept finding things I wanted to use in the house. I scraped and painted the bench bed for the kitchen, along with two different night tables. There is something primordial about building a home, perhaps reminiscent of decorating a dollhouse as a child, and it also reminds me of my little corner at the town dump back home in Fredrikstad. No one could find me there, among the hills and valleys of usable and unusable things, a boundless source of riches, always new treasures to discover: the kitchen table with the Formica chipping off, sofa pillows with the upholstery poking out, watering cans, waterlogged books, mattresses, bed frames, and a rusty lawnmower. I brought along food from the pantry at home. Marie biscuits, wrinkled winter apples, cooking chocolate, half a bottle of bland orange juice, a bun with codlin apples and redcurrants. I brought Anne Lovise, Halvor, Gunnar, as well as others, unsure whether the place, with each new person that came and saw it, lost or gained something.

There is a weak orange light in the horizon above the fields. I'm meeting Geir for lunch today, our process has been going better after a long, painful period. Geir resisted everything. Trond Henrik, the smallholding, the move. He saw no reason why Maiken and I shouldn't stay in the small two-room apartment.

Elise and Jan Olav have been celebrating Christmas at their house in recent years, ever since right after I met Geir, Mum is happy to get out of it, and Geir and I have been there every other year, spending the alternating years at his mother's. In Elise's Christmas letter, it said as a matter of course that "we look forward to seeing

you here for Christmas," even though I've told her we're going to have everyone here.

Halfway through the cigarette, Maiken walks over in Trond Henrik's rubber boots, without a jacket, her breath visible in the cold air. She sits down, silent. The cigarette glows when I take another drag.

"It's too cold to be out here with no jacket," I say.

She looks at me with despair or aggression, as if I'm trying to draw her attention toward trivialities while her head is full of the gravity of life. The rows of pearls dangle on each side of her head.

"Snow White's in bad shape," I say. "The other hens aren't nice to her."

"Can't she have her own room?" says Maiken.

"I don't know," I say. "She'd be terribly lonely, you know. And we only have one heat lamp."

Maiken goes into the open door and disappears into the henhouse.

"Poor thing," I hear her say.

"I'm going to drop by Anette's this afternoon and talk to her about it," I say. "Are you ready to go?"

She is standing in the narrow doorway between the henhouse and the barn, fingering the metal hook on the door.

"I've been thinking, and I'd rather be with Dad this Christmas," she says. "I want to see Grandma and Grandpa. I'm almost always there for Christmas. It's tradition." She looks over the barn, turning round, as if this were the first time she'd ever been in here.

"I'm always at Grandpa and Grandpa's for Christmas," she says.

But that's not true.

"Dad said I might be able to," she said.

I put out the cigarette and drop it into the terracotta pot. It's my turn this year, I want to say. That's how it is. Those are the rules.

"But we're going to celebrate Christmas here!" I say. "Maybe everyone will come! It'll be a wonderful Christmas. With porridge in the barn for Santa!" Maiken looks at me, astonished. Porridge for Santa? How old do I think she is?

As usual, I have to gripe and plead with Frøya to get her away from her Nintendo game, and when I do she is slow and unhelpful, so I have to dress her, pulling the

neck warmer and beanie over her head, sliding the winter boots onto her feet.

I send Frøya out, telling Maiken to put on her beanie and mittens and to remember her lunchbox. I run up the stairs fully dressed and subject myself to the gruesome, pleasing sensation of Trond Henrik's warm body in the warm bed for ten seconds before I have to run down the stairs again.

"I'm going to have lunch with Geir today," I say, "and Maiken just said they've been talking about having her there this Christmas, too."

Trond Henrik shakes his head.

"No, Maiken is staying with us," he says. The taste of sleep is in his mouth, his neck and chest clammy, as he takes a deep breath through his nose and says, "Stay here, just stay here."

All these little, idiotic declarations of love: running up the stairs even though I don't have time, the fact that he won't let me leave me even though it's impossible, that we can't get enough of each other, that we are always ready to give and take as many caresses as we can possibly fit into the hours of the day. That ache we seek that is in the impossible, and all the limits for the unfolding of our love, first and foremost represented by the children.

Frøya is standing in the hallway when I come down, gleefully announcing the snow outside: "It's *no-ing*!"

She's right. The air is thick with small snowflakes. Suddenly Maiken comes out, without her beanie, and sits in the front seat. She is wearing the same ragged sweatpants, but I can see she's put on her tights underneath. The snow lies in a thin veil over the yard and the fields and in the trees, landing on the windshield as we drive along, it snows and snows, and I feel a delicate joy, the idea of a white Christmas, as though this joy were so programmed in me that I can never avoid it when it occurs: snow at Christmas. A relief, above all. A sense of peace in the soul.

I don't know what will happen. I don't know how Christmas'll be this year.

When I told Elise about Trond Henrik, she immediately brought out two opinions of her own, presented as conclusions, even though I hadn't asked for opinions or conclusions. "It's all so fast," she said. "You shouldn't involve Maiken in it for a while." I said, "This is just because you both think it's a law of nature that you have to be depressed after a separation." She looked me pityingly and condescendingly, shook her head imperceptibly and didn't answer.

I tried to explain to Elise that even though Geir and I had officially split eight months ago, and it was only five months since we'd started living apart, mentally the breakup had occurred much earlier. Ever since Christmas, I told her, or last autumn, truth be told. Elise shook her head. "I just think it might be a good idea to take things slower," she said. She looked at the clock on the kitchen wall, and said she'd got a hectic afternoon ahead of her, she had to pick up Sondre from football practice, and then she was baking a cake for a raffle.

"Isn't it awful to be away from Maiken an entire week? Don't you miss her terribly?" she said. Once Jan Olav took some time off from work during the autumn holiday and went to the cabine with Sondre and Stian; Jonas was in Sweden with a friend. "I was alone four days," Elise said, "and I thought I was about to start crawling up the walls."

I took Trond Henrik with me home to Mum and Dad and told them about the old house at the smallholding where Trond Henrik had grown up. They were sceptical. How would we make this work? How would we combine it with the job in Oslo? And Maiken's school? Not to mention the time and expense of travelling. The children. Trond Henrik held my hand as we sat there, Dad scowled as he looked at our hands. Trond Henrik smiled nervously.

"It *is* closer to you," I said. "It takes maybe forty, fifty minutes to drive. And that'll be nice, won't it, you'll get to see Maiken more. And Frøya," I added.

Neither Mum nor Dad had any reply.

"So you're going to commute?" said Dad. I nodded.

"It's only a little over a half-hour from Oslo," I said. "Maiken and Frøya'll keep going to school and day care in Oslo, we aren't going to tear up those roots." Dad twitched and gave an inaudible snort. He got up, but stood by the chair a few seconds, as if reconsidering, before shuffling out into the kitchen. This was only a few months after he'd been diagnosed with colon cancer that had spread, and I thought it'd be nice to be closer to them in the time to come, but I couldn't bring myself to say it. I think my biggest fear was that I'd say it only to have him snort, or say nothing.

In the car on the way back to Oslo, Trond Henrik said:

"You know, I wonder how old they think you are. It's as if you can't make your own choices."

"Yes," I said. "Yes, that's how it's always been."

I had an image of us eating kale soup with egg of our own free will.

Kristin and Ivar came and visited us here only a couple of weeks after we moved in. It had come as such a surprise, and it was as if they'd switched on the positivity like a lamp; it struck me that that was something these two could actually summon at will, whenever they wanted. Everything here was fantastic: "My God, you have a barn! Are you going to have chickens? Oh, look at the paint on these panels! I want to live in an old house too!"

As usual, there is traffic coming into Oslo, but I haven't yet learned to take that into account. Maiken unfastens her seatbelt and sighs heavily when I stop outside Østensjø School, the bell has rung. Frøya gives a kick with one leg.

"Quickly, quickly, Maiken," I say.

I see her hurry through the empty schoolyard with her knapsack hopping from side to side. I always loathed coming too late, even at her age, but then it was always my own fault. I heard Maiken say to Kristen once: "I'm almost always late to school when I'm at Mum's." That was a clear exaggeration. "What does the teacher say when you're late?" said Kristen. "'Good morning, Maiken,'" said Maiken.

"I hate getting up in the morning," she said.

"When do you go to bed at night?" said Kristen.

I drive on to Frøya's day care at Kampen and park, holding Frøya's hand on the way inside. No one is in the cloakroom, I sit her on my lap and start taking off her outerwear myself because it'll go faster and I'm late as it is, pulling off the little beanie and mittens, unzipping the jacket. She's five years old. Picky, likes almost nothing. She was eating Honey Smacks several times a day when I met Trond Henrik; I put my foot down, we had to have some ground rules, I said. Trond Henrik seemed relieved when I took control. Things had gotten out of hand, he said, it had all become too much for him.

"I love Dad just as much as I do Mum," says Frøya.

"Yes," I say. I pull the winter shoes off her feet and put on the slippers. "Did someone say you shouldn't?" I say. She shakes her head, picks at the latch of her lunchbox.

"Did your mum say that?" I say.

She shakes her head.

"Well, do you love me?" I say.

It's a moment before she answers.

"You're not my mum," she says.

"No," I say. "No. But you can love me a little, anyway. If you want." I put my hand over hers to stop her from opening the lunchbox, stroking the little thumb.

I met Trond Henrik at a poetry reading, he was the third reader that night: Trond Henrik Gulbrandsen. He was reading from his last poetry collection, about motorways, seas, absence, chipped coffee cups and the hollow left by someone's head in a pillow. His long hair was drawn into a ponytail. In a couple of places, his words touched me in a whole new way. The sensation was almost physical, like a small wave of angst or happiness, but fleeting, leaving me frustrated, searching for what had just occurred, what the words had to do with me, and longing for more, or to recover what was there a moment before. There was something about joining the abstract to the concrete, absence to coffee cups, vantage point to Kleenex, out of which arose something as new as it was familiar, wholly familiar. Trond Henrik stared at me as he stepped down from the stage, holding the book open against his thigh, as if he was going to continue reading. That night, I was wearing my high, black boots and a short skirt. I also had on the bright red lipstick—I had to remind myself of how startled I was when I looked at myself in the mirror the first few times I'd worn it, and that I'd only just grown used to it, whereas for others it was just as shocking when they saw it on me the first time. He sat down at a table right below the stage, together with two men and two women, one of them with long, curly, dark hair. His editor, I later learned. Nina and I sat at the table just behind. In the programme it said he was born in 1964. He's four years younger than me, with skinny arms. He's released two poetry collections. Now he's working on a novel.

The faint physical sensation grew stronger while the next poet read, a woman with braids. I couldn't pay attention to her words, which she read in an affected and dramatic way. Trond Henrik's attention was directed at her as he took sips from his beer now and then. I sat, a little numb, and looked at Nina, astounded by the realisation of how little we shared, how little we really knew about each other; irritated at myself, too, for being satisfied with so little, for leading such an empty existence for so long.

Trond Henrik looked at me again on the way to the bathroom. When he came back, he stopped and looked at me once more. I looked at him and smiled. The crowd inside was thinning out, and he said:

"You two should come over and sit with us."

I looked at Nina. Nina shook her head.

"I need to get home," she said.

I found that rather disloyal of her. She could see that something was at stake here. Nina got up and put on her coat, whispering in my ear as she did so: "Good luck with the poet!"

"No, stay," I whispered insistently, but she had to go. Eirin's maths exam was the next day. But she knew that I had just seen Roar again, and that I really needed something else to happen.

His editor was named Karen, she laughed a lot. She and Trond Henrik had gone to a literature festival in Stavanger a few weeks earlier, and she wouldn't stop talking about some after-party where a female Swedish novelist had got so drunk.

There was something in the way Trond Henrik related to the people around him; he was, in a sense, above them, not at all consciously, but involuntarily, as if there was nothing he could do about it. But at the same time, he had a generosity and openness that went a good way toward compensating for the arrogance or whatever I might call it, which also had the effect of making him hard to get in an attractive way; I felt all too keenly how I had been longing a bit of a challenge.

I went back with Trond Henrik to his apartment in Gamlebyen; he'd spilled coffee all over the floor without wiping it up, which he did now, scouring away the dried outlines of the spill. There were books everywhere, lining the bookshelf and shoved in sideways, along window sills and in piles on the floor and on chairs. He offered me wine, filling two glasses from a box on the counter. I looked out the window, the apartment was on the third floor, with a view over the rear courtyard scattered with rotting leaves and rubbish bins, a snow shovel leaning against a wooden wall. And I thought about living there, looking out onto the courtyard every day, and I imagined all the possibilities, all the apartments, living rooms, views, and I thought about a hedgehog at home in the garden in Fredrikstad; I wanted to give it milk, but Mum wouldn't let me, said it'd get a tummyache. I wondered how often Trond Henrik took women home, and how much this night would mean to him.

He wasn't able to perform, making me think this wasn't something he usually did. "Puh," he said, looking up at the ceiling, before turning and looking at me with a smile and saying "Sorry." It didn't matter to me; things could only go up from there, after all, which they did. "I've been going through a bit of a low period," he said, with

a misplaced cheerfulness which, along with so many things, reinforced the dawning love affair. "*Very* low."

The morning after, I went into the bathroom, peed and washed my face, the skin stiff with his saliva. A pile of children's clothes lay on the floor; I picked one of them up, a small, pink pair of sweatpants spotted with food stains. That evening, I was electric, hungover and woozy. As I picked up Maiken from Geir at Ulsrud, he said:

"Everything okay?" I had an urge to tell Geir *something* of what I was feeling. He was the one person who was closest to me, in spite of everything. I told him I'd been to a poetry reading.

"Poetry reading?" said Geir. "Is this a midlife crisis?" But my midlife crisis had gone straight over Geir's head, the time I fell in love with Kalle and had sex with him in the house next door while Geir was at a football match in Liverpool, and besides, I've always had an interest in poetry, even though I mostly consume novels. While I stood there, my mobile buzzed. I could hardly wait to read the message. Maiken went before me down the gravel path, Geir closed the door behind me, and I opened the message.

Wish I hadn't let you leave. Next time I won't. When can I see you again?

The day after, Maiken was with Nina, and I lay on my back on Trond Henrik's couch as he read poetry to me—not his own. Everything in the poems glided into the new love, becoming a part of it and expanding it: the little child and the petals and the endlessness, an ashtray on a marble tabletop, and a purple suitcase wet with rain. I wanted to have everything, to enter everything, with every ounce of my being; everything seemed impossible, hence all the more enticing. We drank red wine. He asked me about how I was as a child and how I am now, about my relationship with my mother, about what made me happy, anxious, revengeful, nostalgic, whether I had any fear of the dark, claustrophobia, fear of heights. My life unfolded before him, or was raised to the nth degree. It was all-embracing, and it felt limitless, an unmixed good.

He talked about himself with brutal honesty and without mitigation. He was self-absorbed, he said, dependent on his mother—until she died. A poor cook, he'd been at times lax with his personal hygiene, careless when it came to finances. Unambitious, afraid of the dark, afraid in general.

Just like Halvor.

Afraid of the dark, afraid of thunder, afraid of being abandoned.

These were grave matters, and the fact that his face broke into broad smiles as he spoke, only served to magnify the gravity. A gravity with multiple facets, a gravity that went deeper, and higher, than any other gravity I'd ever encountered.

"I was a bedwetter until I reached puberty," he said, smiling. "If I hadn't become an author, nothing would've become of me."

Two days before I met Trond Henrik, Roar called me, wanting to meet for coffee. He stared at me, an old man, fascinated and in love.

"You don't look a day older," he said. But he sure did.

"You have a *daughter* now?" he said, with quivering enthusiasm. But that was the way he always spoke, his general expression.

"Can it be? What's her name?" He tested the name out.

"Maiken...lovely." Everything about me was lovely, as always, even the name of my daughter. "Nine years old!" I suddenly had an image of Maiken as a composed and dignified nine year old, at her most beautiful, with her hair in a ponytail, sitting on a wall with her legs together. "She's not mine, is she?," said Roar, laughing. Did I have a picture of her? Maiken looks like Geir and Geir's sister; few people ever say she looks like me.

I found a picture on my phone where Maiken was pretending to dump a whole bag of crisps in her mouth; she looked childish, theatrical.

"Where does the time go?" said Roar.

He showed me pictures of his daughters, all of them grown; they sat next to each other at an outdoor restaurant with gleaming foreheads and wine glasses in front of them.

"France, last summer," said Roar. "Dad paid for the holiday. Those two ladies are go-getters. Tyra's degree is in architecture, Sofia is an instructor in the nursing school. But we haven't been blessed with grandchildren as yet. I think you are even more beautiful now than ten years ago. If that's even possible. But really, I think you are, most definitely."

After that, I gave in—we were three hundred metres away from my apartment in Helgesens gate—falling into his arms on the sofa-bed in the living room (the bedroom belonged to Maiken). Kissing folds and wrinkles, thinking about soft-boiled eggs and lukewarm tea with milk from the time we lived together. Watching him go into the shower, watching him come out of it. "Quite a cosy place you've got here,"

he said; of course he wasn't especially impressed by the apartment. His skin lay loose and wrinkly above his pelvic girdle; he really had aged quite badly. It had been eleven years since we last lay in a bed together. He wasn't able to climax until he pulled out of me; then he managed it, all over my thigh. It came out thick and lumpy, like the string inside an egg. The love that could never end, which was nailed inside me, needed no sustenance, no renewal. It was a given, a fact of life, like a handicap. His hair, a little too long on the back of the neck and very thin on the top. The thick semen on my thigh. The blood that seemed frozen in the veins that resembled larvae on his hands. I'd once thought he had big hands, but they were so little. A gnome's hands.

He spent the night, lying in foetal position with deep furrows in his cheeks, yellow teeth. Ann was visiting a girlfriend in Røros.

The day after, he left a t-shirt of his, with his sour smell. His cup was on the kitchen counter, he'd peeled an apple and the skin lay in the sink. Yet more evidence of his age, the fact that he didn't eat apples with the skin. The fact that he wanted two sugar cubes to dip in his coffee and put in his mouth.

Roar sent a *that was great* message from Rome. I didn't answer. For me it was neither here nor there.

Trond Henrik and I saw each other as much as we could. I felt an entirely new form of desperation when it turned out I'd looked at the calendar wrong or a misunderstanding arose between Geir and myself and I should've had Maiken when I thought it wasn't my turn. It was as if all happiness and meaning slid away in those moments, leaving me counting the minutes until I could get it back. Everything was uncertain, and I was always on edge. Above all, this was why I was eager to move in with Trond Henrik, to avoid wanting to be somewhere else when I was with Maiken. I had to join those two lives together, for my own sake, and if I was to be a good mother.

And then, one day, we sat the two girls in front of each other. I was nervous. I didn't know what I could expect from Maiken. Or what I ought to expect. She had lost some teeth and the new ones changed her appearance, making her look like a stranger every time she came back after a week with Geir. I hoped that Geir wouldn't know we'd introduced them to each other already. We had tacos, played snakes and ladders, and Maiken slept on the mattress in Frøya's room. In the morning the two girls had Honey Smacks, Trond Henrik had bread slices with ham, while I was so wound up I couldn't eat, so I only had a couple bites of cucumber. Trond Henrik

guided my hand to his crotch under the table; he hadn't been able to hold an erection the night before, but he was hard now. To lie hour after hour in the same bed as him without being able to *do it* made, paradoxically, for an even greater intensity, a desperate burning. Without that release, we floated on a wave and never came down. On the tram on the way home Maiken said, "She talks like a baby."

"She's only four," I said.

"So now we have to get to know each other and I have to be nice to her?" said Maiken.

"You will be nice to her, won't you?" I said.

"Did you see what she ate on the tortilla?" said Maiken. "Just corn and sour cream. Nothing else."

"Yes, I saw that," I said.

"But what if she isn't nice to me?"

"But you're the older of the two," I said.

"Well, what does that have to do with anything?" said Maiken. But that same evening she started going through her toys: Frøya could have that, and that, and that...

Bobo presents the interim plan for the Regional Health Authority project. Jonatan says they are far from finished with the photography.

"I'm struggling," says Bobo. "What's hard is striking the right balance with the language. This has to be read by both health personnel and politicians."

Bobo shows me a list of the interviewees.

"I've set up an interview time with over half of mine," he says. "It is very time-consuming. The rest are Holger's, I think he's got it under control. You seem tired, Monika. Everything alright?"

I tell Bobo about the chickens.

Bobo shakes his head and smiles.

"It's just so damned exotic," he says.

"It's been a lot more stress than I had expected," I say.

Lene comes in without knocking.

"Monika," she says. "Can we have a little meeting in ten minutes? We need to go over your text."

"Ah, no," I say. "I can't. I have to meet Geir for lunch now, and it's important. It's about Maiken." Lene stares at me, holds my gaze a long time, as if she hopes I'll change my mind.

"Okay. 1:00?"

"1:30?"

"Okay." She walks out, the door shuts silently after her.

Jonatan rolls his eyes and shrugs, but he's not very convincing, and I have the feeling that there's something wrong with the text. That there's something wrong with me. I send Trond Henrik a text message: *On the way to lunch with Geir, send me good thoughts. Love you.* I get a reply on the instant: *All that is just noise. I love you. Come home soon.*

Geir and I meet at Egertorget and find a cafe with big glass panes. It's still snowing. The streets are decked with Christmas decorations, Christmas lighting is everywhere. An overweight young man is sitting and typing on a laptop with one finger. The waitress gives us the menus. Geir flips through his while asking me, absently:

"Well, how's life out in the country?"

He glances up at the waitress over his glasses, which I think gives him a singular, oldish air, along with an attractive distance, a kind of authority.

"The quiche," says Geir. "Does it come with bread and butter?"

"Sure, you can have that," says the waitress. Geir nods, looks down at the menu, taking his time. Then he looks at me and says:

"I'm hungry." Then he looks at the waitress and says:

"I'll have a quiche, then. And a Farris mineral water, the green bottle."

"We only have the blue ones," she says.

"Hmm," he says. He smiles at her and says: "Right, I'll take a blue one, then."

I have an old feeling of ownership when I hear him talking to others, even at a purely superficial or professional level. The man in the kiosk. Maiken's teacher. A raw goods supplier on the phone while I stand in the hallway, irritated, waiting for him to find Maiken's winter clothes. Even his own sister, my sisters, and now the waitress. He said, at one point:

"If we ever loved each other at all."

If we ever loved each other at all? If he hadn't said that, I could've been certain in my love, and declared it to him all over again, only I didn't want to be alone in it.

Yes, maybe we never really did love each other.

Maybe nothing but desire and friendship.

That's the sort of thing we could say to each other, ostensibly deliberate and constructive, but in reality to wound the other. Ostensibly, with magnanimity and distance, soberly and honestly, but really anything but: pathetic in its contrived insensitivity.

A woman gets up from the table and pulls the zipper of her jacket all the way up her throat, before standing there with her neck outstretched, looking upward, at a diagonal. Geir glances at me.

"Maiken," he says. "Maiken has expressed a wish to be with me this Christmas."

Expressed a wish.

"But she can't," I say. "This year she's with me. Last year she was with you."

"They say you should listen to what the child wants," he says. He pours his Farris, and neither of us says anything while the soft fizzling fades. I hear the happy reunion of two women behind me. Geir speaks in a low, composed voice as he lifts his glass, drinks, and goes on. About how the child must have a say. Always important to listen to the child. I want to say "the little shit." I want to say "the conniving, manipulative girl." It feels like that's what he's angling for, that kind of outburst from me, after which he wins. Game over.

"Maiken says she feels a little ignored when it comes to moving to Askim and getting a stepfather and a stepsister and so on," says Geir.

I gasp for breath.

"But that's what she wants! It's something we agreed on."

I can't believe how meagre that sounds. Untrue, even.

Geir gives a short nod.

"But she's ten," he says. "She was nine then. She had no way of comprehending what that would involve."

You can get whatever you want out of a ten year old. I can't even imagine Maiken confiding in Geir. For all I know, a lot of what I know about Maiken might be different around Geir—her characteristics and preferences, maybe she prefers her

eggs sunny side up rather than cooked on both sides, maybe she insists on two bedspreads, or maybe she's in an entirely different mood in the mornings, and in the evening, she responds in an entirely different tone to Geir's questions than to mine, maybe she doesn't fly into tantrums or fits of crying that she's really outgrown. I've always told Geir everything, and he's wished me well and given me advice. But now we're in a situation where he can misuse my confidences, so I have to keep my mouth shut. I can never again say to him: *Oh, I'm such a terrible mother. Oh, Maiken's going to hate me when she grows up.*

The waitress comes out with our quiches. Geir's about to say something, but stops. Typical Geir: composure, discretion.

"If we could only talk normally to each other," he says once the waitress has left. "Stay on topic, be constructive. That would be an unimaginable relief."

Unimaginable relief. No one but Geir can get away with saying things like that.

But then Geir puts his fork down.

"There's no way we can eat this," he says.

I look at what's on the plate. A dry, burnt quiche with a pale slice of tomato and withered lettuce leaf.

I nod. The sense of togetherness hits me like a flash of lightning and spreads throughout me. Geir puts his napkin down and looks around the room, then meets my eyes. He has irritation in his eyes, but so have I: irritation directed somewhere else. We're united again.

Geir looks about for the waitress, but since neither of us has time to wait for a new dish, there's not much that can be done.

So we eat the quiche.

Geir says Yvonne said to say hi, she's going to call me, she'd like to have coffee one day. He tells me he has the impression not everything is going quite well.

"Yvonne's been coming home in the morning," he says. "That's not normal."

"But doesn't she have work?" I say.

"Well, she's on sick leave. The back," says Geir.

"So she can drive a car, but she can't sit in a chair at the welfare office?" I say.

"Clearly," says Geir. "But there's probably some mental stress in the mix as well, since the welfare office is being merged with other agencies, so it's not certain what'll happen to her job."

We look at each other without saying anything. A small nod from me, a trace of a smile from him.

Afterward we're standing on Karl Johans gate in a cold December wind without Maiken, and everything is cleared up. He embraces me, a farewell hug. I've got what I want. Maiken will be with me over Christmas. I take two steps back, out of his arms. I want to say to him: It still hurts a lot to see children with both their parents; do you remember how Maiken wanted to take us both by the hand so we could swing her forward?

Initially, right after I'd moved out, we would sometimes get together on Sunday, the three of us. We would meet at cafes or schoolyards, Maiken in the centre. Maiken was giddy with high spirits that left her worn out; absorbed in her staggering and goofing about; alternating between wanting to be in between us and withdrawing so we could be alone; and each time we swung her forward, I saw her eyes on us. We bought overpriced buns in paper bags and coffee in paper cups, leaning against a jungle gym as we spoke, and Maiken behind us, like a solitary spider on the jungle gym, her face turned towards us, a limb hanging over each side.

Geir says he has a meeting, I remember my own meeting with Lene and look at the clock, I've got to run. Geir goes up Øvre Slottsgate, under garlands and red hearts. His coat tails flap in the wind. He looks so silly with that coat and those glasses.

On Lene's desk there's a bowl with three Twist candies, two marzipans and one piece of liquorice. A transparent disposable salad container with a plastic fork is in the dustbin. I give in to everything and accept all the edits, but it's not enough. Lene wants me to be constructive and creative and come up with something completely original here and now, but my head's a blank, I'm not myself at the moment, and I miss the freelancing life. Driving back and forth every day wears me out. With Maiken's football practice, the logistics become even more hopeless, and that was before she started talking about gymnastics to boot.

Everything Lene says could be a metaphor for my life, and I want to tell her that so we can share a laugh.

"It's not enough to remove something that isn't working," says Lene. "You have to replace it with something else, something that does work."

I tell her it sounds like she's analysing my life.

Lene doesn't laugh, just smiles and gives a little chuckle through closed lips, before going on.

"I need a new text from you," she says. "When can you have it done? Tomorrow?"

I look at her and take a deep breath and nod, all of this exaggeratedly, as if I'm still trying to spark some humour between us, but I feel like a teenager, an ashamed teenager, refusing to accept defeat.

Two months after we moved into the old house, Mum and Dad and Elise and Jan Olav came to visit for the first time, even though it was barely an hour's drive away. Elise and Jan Olav had Sondre with them. It was July, scorching hot. I was surprised at how swift Dad's decline had been. He walked slowly, sat slowly in a chair.

"Well!" said Mum. "Quite an idyllic place you've got here."

"Yes, quite," said Dad. A scrapped car was covered with vegetation. There was a lot of rotten siding on the barn, but right beside it were the new, fresh materials for the henhouse. The grass was parched, the sky a bright blue with only a few drawn-out clouds all the way down on the horizon. The sprinkler moved in slow arcs, a sparkling rain over the mostly brown yard.

"It's beautiful here, Monika," said Mum, her hands clasped together, the way she always did when trying to show excitement.

"But you need to weed out the vegetables," said Dad. He glanced at Trond Henrik, but looked away as if remembering he didn't know the man, that this man was totally new to the family and not someone he could boss around and admonish.

"It doesn't really matter how it looks," I said.

"Sure. But the weeds draw the nutrients away from the vegetables," said Dad.

Trond Henrik gave a short nod. He looked out over the patch.

"Yes, we'll weed it," he said.

We sat in white plastic chairs in the tiny grove of birches between the house and the barn; the chairs were fouled with mould, the pillows bleached by the sun. Trond Henrik talked about his translation assignments, that he'd probably be getting more and more. He picked at the bark on one of the birches.

"Do you know anything about electric appliances?" said Dad.

“Do you know Swedish?” said Mum. I sighed, but didn’t feel like saying anything. Trond Henrik twiddled with the white bark and said:

“First and foremost I’m working on a novel.”

It was so hot that day, the swelter turning everything inedible, undrinkable. Dad said it was going to be great living here. That this was an odd project. But it was our home, and we’d already done a lot. And got used to being here, had a lot of daily activities, dinners, breakfast. It was as if Mum and Dad didn’t realise that we’d settled here, that our lives were here now, day after day. Dad kept wiping sweat from his brow, and Mum looked uneasily at him, she seemed irritated at him for sweating so much and talking so slowly. We had a two-litre box of ice cream, and it melted almost before anyone had a chance to have some. Maiken, Sondre and Frøya played in the barn, and Frøya came over in tears three times, Maiken and Sondre were being mean. Trond Henrik gave a start. Finally Jan Olav got up and said: “Alright, they need to cut it out,” following Frøya back to the barn.

Dad always said: You have to fulfil your potential. Realise your own possibilities.

They didn’t want to stay over.

“No,” said Elise. “Jan Olav is so dependent on his morning coffee. To him, making it in any other coffee maker than the one we have at home is out of the question.” She smiled a tentative smile to indicate resignation, but there was something else in it, she looked as if she were in love, or else simply refused to take sides with anyone else against Jan Olav. I imagined pleading with Elise: Help me to stay in this relationship. Help me so this doesn’t go all wrong again.

They drove back home while the afternoon light was at its most magnificent. A veil of light around every flower, every blade of grass. I stood by the little barn bridge. Flowering cow parsley and some similar yellow ones, love-in-idleness, red clover. The overgrown scrapped car, abandoned by Trond Henrik’s big brother many years ago. Maiken and Frøya got to drink the rest of the melted ice cream straight from the carton like a milkshake. I went to Trond Henrik, who was standing in backlight, I leaned against him. He said:

“Talk about two simple souls.”

“Mum and Dad?” I said. I didn’t know what he meant; I thought they’d been condescending, almost rude in their intrusiveness, but I didn’t think of them as simple.

"I mean, your parents are quite old," he said. "I thought of your sister and that bloke of hers. I can't remember the last time I heard so many banalities, one after the other."

Trond Henrik had his arms around me as he said this. It felt justified, yet undeserved at the same time. I knew that life is difficult, and that it gets no easier with age: the impossible shared existences, the feeling of living a split life without the hope of reconciliation. I wanted Trond Henrik to accept aspects of Elise and Jan Olav that I cannot accept myself. And I felt something resembling tenderness towards Jan Olav; he does the best he can, or he's unable to do anything else. In order to feel such contempt for the man as I did, it required an acceptance and a tenderness at bottom.

I snip the salmon filets out of the plastic wrapping and put them into an ovenproof dish; fish juices drip all over the counter. Trond Henrik has two wine glasses in one hand and the box of red wine hooked onto the index finger of the other, kissing me on the back of the neck. I fill the pot with water for the pasta and put it on the stove to boil, quickly chop up broccoli in small bunches, and then go to join Trond Henrik.

We are trying to hold on to the golden moments, which was what we started calling them—so cliché, but at least aware of the cliché—as early as the first week with both girls here. We resolved that every day—preferably several times a day—we would steal these small moments alone, and so far we have. As we drink our wine on the glassed-covered veranda before dinner, I tell Trond Henrik about the lunch with Geir. He sits on the stool with his back to the glass panes, I sit on the settee, we are leaned towards each other, mouth to cheek, nose to nose, mouth to mouth. Through the open door I hear the beep-beep of the kids' PlayStation. The whole conflict with Geir, and all the frustration over Elise and the others, becomes something of no importance, far away, when I talk to Trond Henrik about it.

We are French kissing as if we were seventeen and haven't seen each other in forever.

Then he pulls his face back and looks at me.

"But can you make ribs?" he says. I laugh softly and shake my head.

"First time for everything," he says. "But I hope you aren't counting on any help from me."

"Only insofar as I know you support me no matter what the result," I say.

“I support you in everything, no matter what,” he says in his doubly reassuring way, smiling so broadly that his eyes become two small slits.

He kisses me again, and I never want to sleep with him more than in these stolen make-out sessions when there’s no time for it. We grind against each other, he’s hard, I lose control of my breath. *Beep-beep-beepbeepbeep*, inside the living room. I take a deep breath and get up with a joy vibrating through all my limbs. Ecstasy is always just a little ways away: we live together, we share a bed, we’ll always be together, through thick and thin, and in a few hours, we’ll sleep with each other again.

Trond Henrik pours more wine. Red wine with salmon; Geir would’ve been scandalised—there was so much that was impossible for Geir. I tell Maiken that I’ve talked to Geir. Maiken becomes enraged.

“I don’t want to be here,” she says. “The nurse says you have to listen to what I want.”

“It’s better this way for Dad, too,” I say. “You can stay with him again next year.”

I call for Frøya. Maiken says:

“Why is it you absolutely must get a divorce from Dad?” And I say something about how things are complicated, it isn’t always that simple.

“What’s not simple?” says Maiken. “Just tell me, what is it? Hello, if you can’t just say it, then it isn’t really anything, right? Mum? Mum? Hello?”

Trond Henrik calls for Frøya.

“Quiet, Maiken,” I say.

As expected, this makes her even louder.

Frøya comes in and crawls up on the Tripp Trapp chair. She looks across the table, purses her lips and shakes her head.

“I don’t like fish,” she says.

“Taste it,” says Trond Henrik.

Maiken shoves the plate away roughly so it clatters against the glass.

“I don’t want that fish crap either!”

“Maiken!” says Trond Henrik sharply. Maiken makes a sound, a strange, throaty buzzing that grows into a growl, before once more yelling:

"Fish crap!" Just those words. *Fish crap*. Anger over fish for dinner. I'd envisioned making Christmas decorations and presents for them yesterday. The afternoons are so short, and before I know it, the week is over and the girls are going back to their other home.

It'll be empty here. Empty and wonderful. I'll use some of my sick leave, we can lie in bed all day.

Trond Henrik's head is bent over his plate. Maiken's head is turned away, she stares into the wall with the spice rack and the old board with the inscription, *Give us this day our daily bread*. I don't know if her anger is directed at me or Trond Henrik, or the fish, or Geir. Then the chair legs scrape against the floor, the back slams down, and Maiken runs upstairs.

When I came home to Mum and Dad with Maiken on the weekends after Geir and I had separated, Dad seemed more and more indifferent.

"Sure, that should be fine," he would say when we called to see if we could come over. Once he said, "Mum's a little tired. Maybe don't stay much past Sunday."

That Sunday evening, Kristin called and said she thought it'd be wise for me to limit my visits a little.

"Besides, it seems Dad's not quite well at the moment," she said.

"Did they tell you I should limit my visits?" I said.

"He said it had been a bit much," said Kristin, "when you come over every other weekend."

I thought I was doing something nice for them. And with Maiken, that was like killing two birds with one stone. She got to see her grandparents; they got to see their grandchild. I had the feeling I was giving something, but it was perceived as me taking.

No, it wasn't to avoid having to make dinner and avoid getting up early in the morning with Maiken, Maiken took care of herself, you only needed to put her in front of the TV. It was actually in many ways easier to be in Oslo with her. And every time I sat on the sofa in Fredrikstad after Maiken had gone to bed, I regretted coming, since the hours were long, and the desire I'd had to talk to Mum and Dad was replaced with irritation over their questions—or lack thereof—and their reactions to my answers. Dad made me feel like a student daughter who'd moved out and came home from time to time for some free meals and pampering.

Some time after, Elise told me that Mum and Aunt Liv had been concerned for me ever since they'd dropped in on me in Helgesens gate.

"They discussed whether you were depressed or not," said Elise.

"Depressed?" I said.

"There were different things," Elise said. She said that Mum and Aunt Liv had taken note of the fact the price tag was still hanging from the handle of Maiken's new doll pram.

"And the fact that you lacked various kitchen utensils. A tea strainer. An egg separator. And that in general it was messy and uninviting. The light fixture under the kitchen cabinets wasn't working. But," said Elise, "Aunt Liv did say that you had a small plate with crispbread on the table when they came, which you were eating. And the crispbreads were topped with bell pepper and cucumber." Elise said this with some enthusiasm, as if she were on my side.

I remembered that day. I was irritated that they came unannounced, and impatient for them to leave. I wasn't a fan of surprise visits. I wasn't depressed, not to mention this was right after I'd met Trond Henrik. I was in love.

I didn't have a grater either, nor one of those things you mash potatoes with.

"No, no," I told Elise. "I haven't been anywhere near depressed."

I stack the dishes and carry them over to the counter. Trond Henrik comes over to me, embraces me from behind, kisses the back of my neck.

"I'll just pop outside for a smoke," he says. "I'll take care of the dishes after."

Frøya is watching TV. Maiken is still up in her room. The outdoor lighting over the steps illuminates the yard, while further away, it's darker. I can just see the contours of the outbuilding and the barn and the trees beyond. There are no birds at the Christmas sheaf.

A plaster mould of Frøya's hand hangs on the kitchen wall. At Elise's, there isn't just one wall with drawings and hand paintings, they're everywhere. How little I've preserved of Maiken's. I couldn't have imagined how time would pass, or that I'd mourn the time once it had passed, since it seemed to pass so slowly. She did the same things, said the same things, day after day.

I should've rewritten the text I have to turn in to Lene tomorrow—the first few hours of work have a tendency to fill up with other things—but I have to go to the farm first.

I'm troubled by the problems with the chickens. Neither of the girls wants to come with me. It is only a four-minute drive. It's stopped snowing, but there is still a thin layer to see by.

"You're here to talk to Anette?" says Roy. The lights are on and it's warm behind him. The smell of pork chops is in the air, he is wearing a wool vest with the zipper open at the neck, and the German Shepherd is trying to get past him to greet me, but he keeps it behind him.

"She's out in the sheep shed—the sheep have been mating," he says.

There's more noise than usual in the shed, a mass of bleating and thumping sounds, the strong odours of sheep and chickens, blending together in the feeding room. That of the chickens is moister, sickeningly sweet, while sheep odour is brisker, more pungent, containing something of mountains and moss and weather and wind. Anette has promised me a bottle-fed lamb this spring, it can go with the chickens. I go in to the right, toward the sheep. Anette is about to move some of the animals to another pen. It's going quite brutally.

"Almost finished," she shouts. "I'm just going to put Karsten Bruse with this hot young babe over here." She pulls the ram by the horn and shoves him into the little pen. He turns around and wants back out, but she shuts the gate and comes over to me.

"Karsten prefers older women," she says. "The exact opposite of most men. So I end up having to keep the young girls separate and let him be alone with them. As long as he doesn't have any older women to choose from, he'll knock them up before long."

The ram takes some puzzled leaps toward the barrier. Then he turns round in a circle before half-heartedly beginning to sniff the young sheep's butts.

"He has a harness with chalk between his front legs," says Anette, "so we can tell who he's been mating with. You can see who's got some." She points towards the other flock of sheep. Almost all of them have a blue colouring on the wool on their backs.

"He goes straight from one to the other, often five, ten in a row, before going to get some water or a bite to eat," says Anette. "He's usually a few kilos lighter after a raid like that."

"But does he like it?" I say. Anette laughs.

"Does he like it? It would certainly appear that way."

“It’s not just pure instinct?” I say. “What if he can’t do anything else, has no choice?”

Anette laughs again, a coarse and at the same time uncomfortable laughter. She knocks a bale of hay down from a stack and cuts the twine from around it.

“Nature doesn’t ask those kinds of questions,” she says.

I tell her about the chickens at home.

“Oh, she’s gone broody,” she says. “That’s the accepted term, by the way,” she adds. “That’s when the hens insist on brooding even though the eggs aren’t fertilised. That’s a real mother instinct, that there.”

She says I can take some fertilised eggs home with me, maybe the hens will hatch them.

“Sometimes these ladies will protest being nothing but egg suppliers and want to do as nature intended,” she says. “It suddenly occurs to them to ask what happened to all that offspring. They don’t even think about the fact that no cock ever entered the picture. They want to be mums!”

Anette is a couple years younger than me, a blunt, resolute figure, not ugly, far from it, but not very feminine either. She has no children. She went to school with Trond Henrik, but they haven’t kept in touch.

I think about the first time I met her. Trond Henrik had told me how to get there, and I’d driven over alone to inquire about raising chickens. Anette was about to eat her lunch and invited me to sit down, which we did on the old garden furniture outside the sheep shed. She had on a purple fleece sweater and a long braid that hung over one shoulder. She offered me coffee from a thermos in plastic cups she rinsed in the outdoor faucet. Anette got out her lunch, one slice of bread with *leverpostei* and gherkin, and another with *ridderost* cheese. She offered me some, but I said no thanks. It smelled like she had just washed her hair. I was almost paralysed by all the smells: the *ridderost*, gherkin, shampoo, and the dry sheep odour from the empty shed behind. She told me she’d grown up on the neighbouring farm. “Cows and tilling the soil,” she said. She was really the only one who was interested in taking over, but the father wouldn’t have it. “He’ll spend many years trying to convince one of my brothers, but it won’t be any use,” she said. “So I’m working here while I wait.” It was unclear where her hairline was; the hair grew down past her ears and some ways down her forehead. The braid was very thick.

I tell her about Snow White. “When she walks, she’s very unsteady, and the beak is always pointed straight to the ground,” I say. “Sometimes, she has wounds on her back and on the neck that don’t look very nice. Blood on the feathers.”

Anette shakes her head. “Certain animals get picked out as the bullying victims,” she says. “Solitary white hens might be the worst off. I think it’s the whiteness the other hens don’t like, they look so pristine and innocent.” She tells me it’s not a good idea to shield her off—unless we could get used to having her in the living room. “Hens don’t do well alone,” she says.

“I wouldn’t count on her surviving,” she says, as a warning, as if I’m a little girl who can’t withstand life’s realities, so I have to be prepared gently. “It’s really a pity,” she says. “But to be on the safe side you’d better slaughter her before she draws her last breath. Hens that die on their own aren’t worth anything.”

I nod in a neutral, distanced manner. I’ve been introduced to slaughtering, it seems pretty straightforward. Nevertheless, I can’t imagine eating any of the chickens, but it seems a little overdramatic telling her that.

“Maybe you should hang all the perches the same height, so at least they don’t have to fight over who rules the roost,” says Anette. “You can hang up some pieces of bread on a piece of string, give them something to do. As we all know, idleness is the root of all evil.”

I take the eggs for hatching packed in straw in a grocery bag.

“It’s cold,” says Anette. “Don’t wait too long to get them under the hen.”

I lay the eggs in the front seat beside me and start heading towards the motorway. The road winds its way down; no cars are in front of me, a trailer approaches off in the distance. I look over the black fields and the naked trees in the divisions between each plot, and the road before me, storehouses.

Just as I pull into the yard, Elise calls. I tell her I’m in the car, I’ve been at the farm to get eggs for hatching. I tell her about the hens. She listens.

“That’s awesome, Monika!” she says. “I can’t wait to come over and see them again!”

I’m ashamed when I hear her excitement. Lights are on in the house, and a faint light comes from the heat lamp in the henhouse too.

“But about Christmas,” says Elise. She has her soft, slow voice, and says in no uncertain terms than Christmas at Askim is out.

"Dad's in no condition for it. And Mum can't manage having so many people in such a small place." And when I open my mouth for what I hope will be an unanswerable objection, she cuts in.

"No, Monica." And I can just see her, shaking her head with her mouth pressed into a straight line, her eyes wide.

I'm the one who brings the conversation to an end. "Well," I say. "I need to get these eggs inside and see how it goes."

"Good luck!" says Elise.

Sigri is brooding the dormant egg in the nesting box closest the heat lamp. I put gloves on and gently change the egg out with the three fertilised ones.

"There," I say. "Brood away." She spreads her big body and resolutely covers the eggs, staring defiantly and anxiously at me with her small, black eyes. All the other hens are sitting on perches, apart from the white hen, which is on the ground with its head tipped forward. While I regard her, she tumbles forward with her legs in the air in a somersault, then flaps her wings and gets back on her feet, swaying. The feathers are begrimed with blood and filth. I crouch down and put my hand out to her, but she pays me no attention. I stroke the sticky feathers, her back, her breast. There are a lot of feathers to get through to reach the skin, the body.

Maiken and Frøya are at their PlayStation, Frøya's chin and cheeks are red from the frost outside and heat inside. Trond Henrik has washed up and lies on the sofa with his book; the wine glass and boxed wine are on the table next to him. He lifts his hand and waves.

"Come come come. *Come come come come*," he whispers.

"One of the hens isn't at all well," I say.

"What's wrong with it?" says Trond Henrik.

"It's the white one," I say. "The one Frøya named Snow White. The others'll soon be the death of her."

"But should we take that one away from the others, then?" says Trond Henrik.

I tell him what Anette said. "We can't exactly have her in here," I say.

"Not exactly," he says. The two girls, without the least bit of empathy, frantically pressing buttons to get some character on a screen to scamper back and forth, irritate me.

“But Sigri broods the new eggs as though she were getting paid for it,” I say. “Maybe we’ll get chickens for Christmas?”

“Can we have cocoa,” says Maiken with her eyes on the screen.

“But Snow White does seem in a very bad way,” I say. “It seems like she’s dying. She lies there with her head half-tucked under her body and her eyes closed.”

Trond Henrik starts to laugh.

“You are too cute,” he says. I had mimed the chicken.

“I think we should slaughter the hen,” I say, “if she’s suffering.”

“Slaughter?” says Trond Henrik.

“Yes, we have to,” I say, “instead of letting her just die.”

“Kill her? Are you crazy?” says Maiken in a monotone, her attention still fully engaged on the TV screen.

“I must disappoint you as a man,” says Trond Henrik. “But you’ll never get me to do it. I won’t even kill a wasp.”

“But what if she’s suffering,” I say.

“Me neither,” says Maiken. “I’m going to be vegetarian.”

Trond Henrik smiles and kisses my neck.

“I could never chop the head off of anything,” he says.

“Anette doesn’t use an axe,” I say. “She holds the head and cuts it off with a sharp knife.”

“Mum!” yells Maiken, putting down the controller. “Are you really going to cut Snow White’s head off?”

“Huh?” says Frøya. “Monika? Are you cutting the head off of No-White? Dad, is Monica cutting No-White’s head off?”

“Take it easy!” I say. “No one is cutting off anyone’s heads.”

I laugh into Trond Henrik’s chest. I can feel him laughing too.

After the girls have gone to bed, I tell Trond Henrik about Elise and Christmas. He and I are making out, our hands all over each other on the sofa, to the click-clack of the wood stove.

“I have some homework to do from the job,” I say. “I need to get it done before bed.”

Trond Henrik sits up and pours more wine into the glasses from the box.

“It’ll be packed,” he says. “And do we really know what we’re in for, having

Christmas for a big family?"

I'm not sure what to think or feel at that. It's a mixture of betrayal and comfort. As if he's going over to the enemy side, while also standing by me, unwaveringly, remaining one with me, so to speak. He takes a sip from his glass, puts it down and puts his arms around me again.

"Plus it'll be hard writing a novel with so many people here," he says.

"Are you going to write while all the children are here?" I say.

"I have to," he says, "but I'll try to limit myself."

"I don't want you to have to limit yourself," I say.

Trond Henrik's breath amid the repose and gentle swaying of everything in the stillness. He once told me that writing's the only thing keeping him alive.

I've been thinking we need to move the rocking chair away from the wood stove and put the Christmas tree there. Put the elves on the bureau. The Advent star is swaying almost imperceptibly in the window. Trond Henrik kisses me and puts his hand under my sweater and tells me I'm beautiful.

I think about the text I have to rewrite, whether I really have to start from scratch. When I write, I like to weave in and out of the main idea as thoughts and digressions occur to me, but that presumes there was a main idea to begin with, I know that. But it seemed as if Lena disliked not only the structure, but also the whole notion of the bullfinch and the biscuit crumbs; she was unhappy with the whole thing. Trond Henrik strokes my nipple with his thumb in the way he knows is one of my biggest turn-ons.

It was only after our fourth night together that Trond Henrik was able to perform. The third time he wept, and I thought it would never happen. The next time, however, he seemed sullen and detached, but very single-minded. It wasn't especially thrilling for me, but not unpleasant either, and auspicious besides. I was relived and happy, and he was too, glad and proud in an introverted, almost reluctant manner—he reminded me of Maiken when she's just scored a goal—and I was brimming over with love.

He puts his hand on my belly and slides it down my pants.

Maiken yells. Trond Henrik's hand freezes between my legs. Maiken yells again. He lets me go.

I walk up the stairs to Maiken in the pink bedroom. The lamp on her night table is on. I'm in a daze. The tabletop is covered with pastel-coloured figures in

various positions and configurations; she'll never clean up since she'll have to put everything the way it was again. She says she can't sleep. I sit on the edge of the bed. Ice ferns have spread out within the double glazed windows.

"Why can't you sleep?" I say.

"I'm thinking too much," she says.

"What are you thinking about?" I say.

She looks at me with a forlorn look.

"I don't understand how spider webs and snowflakes can exist." I look questioningly at her; she looks questioningly at me.

"I mean," she says, "how something so..." She tries to demonstrate with her fingers. "Something so...complicated can exist. By itself."

I tell her there's a lot we don't understand. I stroke her hair, it's dirty, I need to get her in the shower tomorrow morning; the bath is cold and uninviting, its plastic liner decaying.

"What do you want for Christmas?" I say.

"I really want to go home for Christmas," says Maiken. "That would be the best present ever." My skin tenses up, and I shudder. That one sentence, and all it contains of suffering, sentimentality, classic literature. And I am so cold. I shake my head.

"I can't give you that," I say.

She turns her head slowly to the wall and puts her hand over her eyes.

"I have to go check on the chickens," I say.

Trond Henrik is still on the sofa, staring up at the ceiling, I walk over to him. "Thinking about the novel?"

"If only," he says. "Just thinking about you. Your tits, your ass."

"Let's go to bed. I want you," I say. "But I have to feed the chickens first. Then we can."

The thermometer at the kitchen window shows four below. It's snowing again; the snow on the ground is several centimetres thick. At this rate it'll be hard to get the car out in the morning, if the plow hasn't come by. I hear a dampened chorus of *bop bop bop bo-o-op* that becomes more distinct as I approach the henhouse.

Both girls were here at the end of July; we'd put up the framework for the henhouse, and I'd come inside to make milkshakes, moving in and out of the sunlight in the kitchen window. I took milk out of the fridge, lifted the mixer onto the counter, wearing the apron Maiken had made for me at school. I looked out over the yard and saw the three of them next to the red barn, and the grain whose green was giving way to golden. Frøya yelled something gleefully. Maiken gave Trond Henrik something, a small cardboard box, which Trond Henrik accepted. Trond Henrik hammered the chicken wire to the wooden frame. And that was all I heard: *bank, bank, bank, bank*. I scraped the vanilla ice cream out of the carton with a knife. Suddenly Maiken was inside the kitchen with a loud, animal squeal when she saw I was making milkshakes. Then her face opened up right before me, broad and shiny. "I *love* living here, Mum." Then she was back outside, full speed over the yard. It came down over me like a glass container, and I stood alone in the container. The hillside behind the barn and the trenches in the driveway were teeming with summer flowers: red clover, bellflower, cranesbill, cow parsley, bird's-foot, forget-me-not. Love-in-idleness.

Like a child I stumble over to Trond Henrik on the sofa. Trond Henrik embraces me, and then he sees I'm crying.

"The hen died," I whisper.

He holds me close and strokes my back.

Everything is still, apart from the flames in the fireplace, squeaking and crackling.

"She was on her back on the floor," I say. "She was still warm."

"It was probably for the best," he whispers.

I swallow salt tears and snot, my thumb follows a sinew on Trond Henrik's neck, slowly and softly, back and forth. I am so sad.

"I'm probably being childish, but I guess Christmas is a little important to me," I say.

"It's not childish," he whispers. "I like that. I like you. But I need to get that novel written now."

"Yes," I say.

"That's the most important thing for me right now," he says.

I nod into his shoulder.

He says, “Other things can never come between me and the novel. I cannot allow all these random things take over all the time. If I get it in my head that it’s important to wash up and make peanut butter sandwiches, I’ll never get this novel finished. If I have to go to the parent-teacher conference at Frøya’s day care, I might as well forget it. You understand?”

I tell him I understand.

“There is a beauty and a meaning which nothing else in life can ever approach,” he says. “These feelings that no one else comprehends. It is as if I am living parts of my life somewhere else, somewhere isolated from all others, isolated from the world.”

I nod.

I can see Elise writing her Christmas letters; I think about her, and a wave of sorrow goes through me. Elise, who wants to write about her life, about the fact that there is never enough time, time to notice and take joy in all of life’s details. I see her sitting at the bureau with the light in the kitchen off, though the Advent star in the kitchen window shines out into the passageway. But it’s impossible to write about life the way she wants to; she can’t do it. And when the letter’s finished, it looks like any other Christmas letter. She wants to take the contents of her life and put them on paper compellingly. Jonas and Stian have moved out of the house. How empty it seems without them! But that’s life for you. The trips to the apartment on Gran Canaria, that happiness. The new boat. The job as a nurse for people living out their last days. So very meaningful. She walks into the kitchen, turns on the light, the rack on the counter is full of doughnuts, brown, gleaming, but she can’t write about them. She puts ten each in Ziploc bags to put in the freezer. Jan Olav comes in and begs for one. He eats it standing up, his stomach bulging, the big hands breaking off piece by piece, fingertips glistening. A glass of water is left on the counter after dinner, along with leftover slices of fish pudding on a small dish, which she puts into the fridge. There is so much she wants to write about, so much to tell everyone.