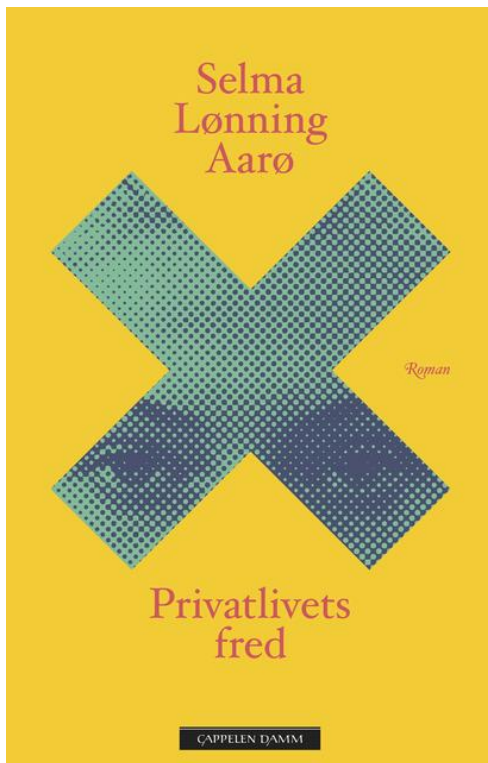


Cappelen Damm Agency *Fall 2021*



An author wakes up in hospital. Something dramatic has happened – she just can't quite remember what. What she can recall, however, is what happened before.

When the author moves to Fredrikstad from Oslo with her family, she finds new friends, a new life and what she hopes will be the starting-point for a new novel. Her new girlfriend X has given her permission to write whatever she wants about what they describe as a major issue that has marked X's life. It looks set to be the author's best novel ever, but X gradually becomes increasingly unstable and intimidating, and the author realises that her entire writing project is in jeopardy. The same goes for her artistic freedom, her finances, her relationship to her publisher and colleagues – not to mention the relationships in her own family. What can an author allow herself, and who really owns a story?

Selma Lønning Aarø's new novel is funny, sometimes frightening and unusually topical. A continuation of a strong feminist tradition, it also comments on the debate about reality literature.

Right to Privacy

foreignrights@cappelendamm.no
www.cappelendammagency.no

CAPPELEN DAMM AGENCY

Right to Privacy
Selma Lønning Aarø

Selma Lønning Aarø
b. 1972

Selma Lønning Aarø (b. 1972) made her debut in 1995 with *The Final* story. She has been a newspaper columnist for *Dagbladet* and *Klassekampen* for a number of years. Her novel, *I'm Coming*, was translated into several languages. Her *Lying Face* is her latest novel, praised by critics and readers.



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Synopsis

An author wakes up to find herself in hospital, with her mother and husband at her bedside. It's unclear to her why she is lying there, but as her mind clears, the memories come flooding back.

We follow the author after she moves out of the Norwegian capital to settle with her family in a small coastal town. There, she meets X, a young woman with whom she quickly forms an intense relationship, almost an infatuation. X suggests that the author should write a book about her. The author is honoured to take on the task, and the thought of X's enthusiastic reception of the resulting book sets her writerly juices flowing.

As it turns out, X is anything but enthusiastic. On the contrary, she insists that the author – who has already spent a long time writing the book and has a contract with her publisher – must withdraw the novel entirely. The author hesitates, but comes under pressure from her husband, her mother and her publisher – not to mention X, whose behaviour becomes increasingly threatening. Even so, the author tries to stand her ground, claiming that 'no one can own a story'. As the publisher prepares the cover design and marketing strategy, the author keeps working on the book. X's disturbing behaviour continues, with threats to burn down the author's house if she publishes the novel.

A visit to the doctor with her daughter will change everything. The author finds herself facing an unfounded accusation of alcoholism and suddenly realises how defenceless victims of novels must feel when they're included in a story they have no control over. In the end, the author agrees to withdraw her novel.

The part of the plot that is set in the present day starts at the beginning of the corona epidemic. The author is locked down with her husband and children. She has lost a novel (and a cat, which she finds dead on the lawn), and the atmosphere is becoming increasingly oppressive. After a serious argument with her husband, in which he says the marriage is over, the author ends up defying the health authorities' travel ban. She goes to the family holiday cabin and decides to make a flower bed using round pebbles. Then she walks along the seashore collecting stones, which she puts in her jacket pocket. An accidental slip sends her into the water and the weight of the pebbles drags her to the bottom.

A neighbour comes rushing out and pulls her out of the water. He quickly jumps to the same conclusion as the ambulance staff: the author has tried to take her own life.

So that's how she ends up in hospital.

Afraid that her husband will make good on his threat to leave her, she does nothing to clear up the misunderstanding. She allows those around her to believe she is suicidal – a narrative that it becomes increasingly difficult to escape.

The situation remains equally unclear to the reader as the plot unfolds until close to the end of the novel.

Every chapter starts at the hospital where the author lies trying to disentangle events. The novel goes on to tell the story of the meeting with X, the author's relationship with ideas and writing, her literary preferences and fragments from her earlier life.

Towards the end of the book, the author is discharged from hospital and meets X in the street. She realises that neither the idea for the novel nor X were what she had hoped for.

Sample translation by Lucy Moffatt

Privatlivets fred (Right to Privacy)
by Selma Lønning Aarø

Publisher: Cappelen Damm
foreignrights@cappelendamm.no

Translation © Lucy Moffatt
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[p 34–37]

On this particular Saturday, Mum’s old university friend Annie called for what must have been the fourteenth time and invited us to Fredrikstad for tea and cakes. Mum had told us tale after tale of how crazy she and Annie had been in their youth. One time, Annie had stolen a stuffed rooster from the Zoological Museum in Bergen. The mere thought of Annie was enough to set Mum humming Irving Berlin’s Annie Get Your Gun with a dreamy, enthusiastic look on her face.

Desperate to escape our unfinished bathroom, we took her up on the invitation and got in the car. We didn’t much feel like visiting anyone but we didn’t much feel like staying at home either, so the choice was a simple one.

The rain eased off as we drove out of Oslo. Suddenly a holiday atmosphere set in Fredrikstad. I loved being there. I’d lived in central Oslo so long and had never seriously considered leaving for good. Yet at the same time, the noise bothered me. And my idiosyncrasy had reached unprecedented heights in recent years. I couldn’t cope with the slamming car doors or the animated voices of rowdy passers-by at night. And I could no longer cope with any of the sounds that bounced back and forth between the walls of the apartment block. The city was never quiet. People dumped glass in bottle banks, trucks reversed, beeping and screeching, and then there were the kids. I suddenly realised that the irritation had been gnawing away at me for years. And when I saw that little metropolis laid out along the river, I felt a kind of relief.

Annie lived close to the railway station in a brick villa right beside the river. Her house was surrounded by a little garden. I got a good feeling as we walked up the gravel drive and caught the scent of the bird cherry beside the front door. Until then, I’d been a bit irritated by this friend of Mum’s who was always nagging me to come for a cup of tea with her. I hadn’t the slightest desire to have a cup of tea with a stranger in a strange town; but Annie’s house and garden gave me a good feeling right away.

Gerhard and the kids were smiling too, I noticed.

Annie seemed much younger than Mum. She had a natural energy. She seemed like the kind of person who can muster enthusiasm about pretty much anything: our visit, Ylva's long hair, the fact that summer seemed to be here to stay and that I had dutifully brought along a cake.

'You certainly are your mother's daughter! Bringing a cake – ah, that's just the kind of thing Maren would have thought of,' she chattered.

And I smiled and admitted that yes, I was, even though Mum and I had never been especially alike. Annie wasn't like Mum either and if Mum had been 'thick as thieves' with anyone in her student days, I found it quite odd that it should have been someone like Annie. Annie had long ago given up her teaching job. Now she had a studio in the shed and her red-varnished nails were spattered with paint. She was dressed in what one might call flowing garments – a kind of tunic that was the very model of what you'd expect an eccentric artist to wear. I tried to imagine a young Mum running around with Annie – cheery, perhaps even with a devil-may-care expression on her wrinkle-free face. I imagined them meeting before Mum's illness, before that fateful weekend in November when she spent forever waiting for a bus that never turned up in an overly short skirt and woke the next day to find her entire body racked with inexplicable pain.

And there too, in the garden, sat X. I was surprised to find someone like X there. She looked so cosmopolitan in her ankle-grazer trousers and oversized trainers. Her nose was large and crooked. It reminded me of the kind of nose people drew on cartoons of Jews in the 1930s, or of extremely distinguished aristocrats. Her face was strikingly beautiful and when she smiled her eyes narrowed as her mouth split open to reveal a set of great white, somewhat rodent-like front teeth.

In hindsight, I barely recall what we talked about. Apparently I stared at X and apparently she didn't notice because she was used to people staring at her. We sat in that idyllic garden looking out across the river. On the other side we could see the ramparts of the Old Town and it was like gazing into a different world. Both the view and X's face were exotic and alluring.

X talked a lot. Rarely have I liked anyone so quickly. Rarely have I got to know anyone so quickly. Or that's how it felt at any rate.

Ylva was immediately taken with X too. X clearly understood all the Instagram and Snapchat stuff that I found so mystifying. After a mere half an hour, Ylva's head was bent confidentially towards X as they discussed nails and trainers. X wasn't all that much younger than me, yet she lived in an utterly different world from a purely technological point of view. X was cool and Ylva picked up on this difference. She must come to X's flat and help herself to some clothes X had ordered online that had turned out to be too small. They had the same taste, they agreed. I felt good in X's company too. She

radiated her own special warmth. It was easy to make her laugh – bubbling, contagious laughter. After a while, that became something I would strive for, to make her laugh.

[p. 46-50]

The time I spent with X soon took up so much of my existence that I had to wonder what I'd done before X came into my life. Of course, I had a husband and children, but this business with X was something else entirely.

Within a couple of weeks of the move, she and I had already visited most of the city's watering holes. We had ended up at afterparties on yachts and at holiday homes. It felt as if we were old friends.

We went scrumping, we scarpered from restaurants without paying the bill, we drunk-drove motorboats. We lived on the edge the law – like Thelma and Louise, I thought. Meeting X made me feel like I'd fallen in love. I went to great lengths to do things X would appreciate and at the same time I thirsted for her recognition. For example, X loathed anything that smacked of home improvement and interior design.

When I was with her, I pretended I loathed that sort of thing too, but it really wasn't true. I'd lost count of how many flats I'd refurbished – but now I saw myself through X's eyes. I saw how superficial, how shallow I really was. And so I suppressed the fizz of inner joy I felt as the house made fresh progress, as more and more of the rooms became habitable.

Between my meeting with X and the refurbishing work, I found it difficult to gather my faculties enough to write. It seemed well-nigh impossible. I was as excited as a little kid. Ordinarily, that would have made me feel desperate – but it didn't. I was happy.

Even though we didn't share a passion for interior design or literature, X was the perfect friend, the kind of friend I'd longed for my entire life. A friend you felt would always be there, would always stand up for you.

Well, apart from the times when X didn't pick up my calls. The first few times it happened, I thought it was an accident, but for periods, her absence became increasingly systematic. She seemed to vanish.

It made me uneasy and restless. I phoned, she didn't answer, I continued to phone, the way a desperate mistress phones her married lover. I phoned and phoned and felt how my yearning for her had rooted itself in me like an addiction. I felt spurned, even jealous of something – though I didn't know what.

Why wasn't she answering? What was she doing? Was she with other people? Was she asleep

because she'd been out with other people? Crazy with jealousy, I tapped her illuminated name on the screen of my phone. Tapped and tapped. I carried my mobile around with me everywhere, waiting for it to buzz, but for days at a time X would remain silent.

If it went on for a really long time, I'd get desperate enough to go to her house. She didn't open when I rang the doorbell even though I could see she was home – her bike and her car, a little electric BMW, were both in the garden. That made me even more uneasy. We were so close and yet I got the feeling she was hiding something from me, something she didn't want me to see.

At first glance, X was a cheery soul and that cheeriness was what I'd fallen in love with; that cheeriness mingled with a devil-may-care attitude that created the impression X had pretty much everything under control. She sneered at rules and regulations that I took seriously. Why shouldn't we be able to drink in the park? Why should we have to put up with this or that?

X had no compunction whatsoever about making phone calls left, right and centre whenever there was something she didn't intend to put up with. Perhaps it was because of her job. At the lawyers' office she was constantly having to call discontented parties and brief them on various outcomes.

'I'm so used to conflict I just don't care anymore,' she said.

Over the six years she had worked there, she had, by her own account, had two lawyers fired from the partnership. One of them, according to X, was a pig of a man who wasn't fit to work in a professional setting. He was the kind of man who would stare at women with shameless insolence; the kind of man who was incapable of decent behaviour at the Christmas party, who exploited his position to force himself on his female employees. The other was apparently a middle-aged female lawyer who had been so lacking in self-confidence that X had ended up having to make most of her decisions for her.

'So what happened to her after she left the partnership?' I asked when X described how the woman left the office with her belongings in a cardboard box, just like in the movies.

'I haven't a clue,' X replied.

It seemed odd that a clerical assistant who'd never even finished law school – and worked part-time besides – could have such tremendous influence over the lawyers, I thought. And yet it didn't surprise me either. Didn't I do whatever X told me to as well? The fact was, I was willing to do pretty much anything just to keep her close.

Based on what she told me, X gave me the impression that she ran the legal practice single-handedly. She seemed to be the one making most of the decisions. She spoke of deciding which cases to take on and which ones to avoid. It was unclear why she was constantly off sick. When I tried to dig deeper into these matters, she offered vague answers and her usually open face closed.

Gradually, it dawned on me that X was struggling with something and did not want to talk about

it. Or not to me at least.

‘Is something the matter?’ I’d ask, and X would quickly change the subject and regale me with work anecdotes, or get up and say it was time to head home.

For a long time, I thought maybe it was heartache; maybe she was in love with one of the handsome lawyers at the office, who was married and either couldn’t or wouldn’t leave his wife and kids.

That was not the case.

‘I wouldn’t dream of seeing a lawyer. They’re a treacherous bunch,’ she huffed scornfully – and I believed her.

I tried to think back to my first meeting with X, to think about how carefree and strong she had seemed, how easy it had been to get close to her. But now I couldn’t get any further, I thought.

Somewhere inside her was an almost insurmountable obstacle. X was not just the bright, light-hearted soul she passed herself off as.

She was something else too. Something painful.

[p.78-7]

To my surprise, the pain X spoke of made the same holes in me as Mum’s pain once had. I’d tried to fill them in, these holes. I’d filled them with travel and childbirth, with fun and frivolity, but as X spoke, each of these holes seemed to open up again, as if a plaster had been ripped off a wound. As X spoke, I was reduced to the same powerlessness I had experienced as a child. I felt the same anger I had felt as a child. X, who could fix pretty much anything, X, who went with the flow and did exactly what she felt like all the time, could not fix this. She was powerless and I didn’t want X to be powerless, just as I hadn’t wanted Mum to be when I was younger. If I was meant to write anything at all, this was it. It was a peculiar feeling and when I left X that evening, I did the only thing I could do.

I went home across the bridge with the ever-present wind in my hair. My head grew cold and clear. I crept into my house and up the stairs and started to write.

[273-288]

It was in the early days of lockdown. I was sitting waiting in the GP’s surgery with Ylva. I shouldn’t really have been there at all – at a doctor’s surgery during a pandemic – but Ylva had swollen glands in her neck. Of course I knew that didn’t automatically mean leukaemia or Covid-19, but I had to check. Always check. If I didn’t check I’d lie awake all night, brain in overdrive, and I already had too many things keeping me awake as it was; besides, her glands really were enormous. Maybe I exaggerated a bit on the phone to convince the GP to see her.

Despite the Covid crisis, the waiting room was full of sallow-faced people – it was March after all and not just high season for corona. The screen in the waiting room churned out news about the virus. People had received emphatic instructions not to come to the surgery if they even suspected they had something along those lines, but you never could tell with people. One guy in his thirties dressed in paint-spattered work trousers was coughing so hard you could see the droplets. He wiped his nose on the back of the hand and sniffed so loudly that the waiting-room resounded with the resulting snotty gurgle. The aerosols flew around the waiting-room like fireflies. People were capable of absolutely anything, I thought, as I took Ylva's fingers out of her mouth.

'Don't stick your fingers in your mouth,' I whispered. 'This place is full of bugs!'

She swatted my hand away irritably without looking at me. As if I was a fly she was trying to get rid of. Then she stuck her fingers straight back in her mouth.

I examined her as she sat there fidgeting in her chair, jacket still on, gaze fixed firmly on her phone. I was seemingly invisible to her. She took her hand out of her mouth and swiped her phone. An array of female faces scrolled past on her Instagram feed. She hadn't even wanted to see the doctor because she had a Facetime meeting set up with Oda and Ulrikke; that's why she was giving me the invisible treatment. She was punishing me.

Despite radiating discontent, she was lovely, with her long fair hair and regular features. Her legs in their ultra-skinny jeans were crossed and she was idly jiggling her Ugg-booted right foot up and down. I could still remember the excitement when I went for my eight-week ultrasound with her. Until then, I'd only given birth to boys. I was a mother of boys and that was all I could do. When people asked, that's what I'd tell them: boys probably suit me best. In a way, I meant it too, because the last thing I wanted was to have a girl like me who'd have to live in a body like mine. The thought scared me. But then, when the blurry images on the ultrasound screen revealed that this was a girl, a tingle of joy ran through my whole body. I wouldn't be left alone with four men. I would have a girl who'd be interested in the same things as me. We could go shopping together and put on make-up together and when she had kids of her own some day I'd be the maternal grandmother, not the paternal one. All the research showed that maternal grandmothers were the most important grandparents.

The doctor called us in. Whenever I went to the doctor's I was overcome with the same embarrassment. Because the GPs, already pressed for time, were having to deal with the corona crisis on top of everything else and because of all the stuff I'd read in the newspapers about how overworked they were.

The GP's face was grey. Her hair was grey too. She really did look overworked. I suddenly realised I hadn't got the results for some blood tests I'd taken more than two months earlier. It was

probably all clear, but it wouldn't harm to ask. Since I was here.

'I know this appointment isn't for me but for Ylva who's got swollen lymph nodes in her neck, but I was just wondering if you got the results for those tests I took a couple of months back?'

'If you haven't heard anything, it's probably all clear, but I'll check.'

She rolled her chair back to her desk, asked for my date of birth and typed it into her computer with quick, expert fingers.

'Everything looks fine, but you do have slightly high cholesterol. It's not a crisis or anything, but it ought to be lower at your age' the GP said.

Of course I had high cholesterol. Was it because I ate too many eggs? First they were dangerous, then they weren't and the latest I'd read in the paper was that they were dangerous again, at least for people who were prone to high cholesterol – which maybe I was?

'I do eat an awful lot of eggs,' I admitted shamefacedly.

The GP shrugged.

'That doesn't really make much difference. The important thing is not to eat too much sugar. Or drink too much alcohol.'

'Mum's an alcoholic.'

Ylva still had both thumbs glued to the screen of her mobile. After offering this observation, she returned to Instagram as if nothing had happened.

My ears began to ring.

Suddenly the GP's interest was piqued. She rolled her chair away from her desk and trundled right up to me. I could see a glint in her eyes. How was I supposed to react?

If I offered a frantic defence, wouldn't that be suspicious? Wouldn't that be as good as an admission of guilt? But if I didn't defend myself at all, wouldn't that be the same as an admission too? My best option was probably something in between.

'I guess I drink at least once a week.'

That wasn't strictly true. There were plenty of weeks when I didn't drink anything at all, but I didn't want to understate the case. That might give off the wrong signal.

'At least? Does that mean that you actually drink more?'

'Only on special occasions,' I said hesitantly.

'And are there often special occasions?'

I shook my head vigorously, thinking to myself that if they happened often, they wouldn't be special.

'So what is a special occasion?'

She wasn't about to give up. Was this really happening?

Of course Ylva hadn't a clue what she'd started, but I still felt like giving her a good shake. She barely even saw us drinking. It only ever happened when we had guests. What on earth would make her say something like that? Didn't she realise how nasty this could get? Suddenly, I felt rage well up inside me. The spoilt brat!

'I am not an alcoholic!' it came out almost as a shout.

The GP was silent. It felt like a very eloquent silence.

Should I tell her about the novel? About how much of a strain it was to have written a novel that met with such resistance? To be cold-shouldered by your nearest and dearest?

No, the GP probably wouldn't understand. She was probably more interested in the question of alcohol and my reaction pattern. Of course, denial would be the automatic response of any alcoholic who found themselves under suspicion. But what about all those people who genuinely weren't alcoholics – wouldn't they deny it too?

My brain worked at top speed. I had no emergency plan for this particular crisis. I'm one of those people who like planning and thinking through all the eventualities. As per the civil defence emergency preparedness plan, my cellar contains thirty-six litres of water, three days' worth of canned food, dried goods, iodine tablets – and wine. I had an awful lot of wine in the cellar. Was that what Ylva had seen? Had it made her anxious seeing all that wine on the shelves down there? Had it made her think her parents were alcoholics?

Well, that was certainly a pity but I had no time to think about it right now.

'Seriously. I'm really not an alcoholic.'

My voice was perfectly calm now. Trustworthy. The voice of a person with a relaxed attitude to alcohol, I thought. It struck me that it was important for me not to overreact in front of Ylva. If she realised this was a sore point, she'd use it in other situations. I needed to pretend nothing had happened, not even to mention it.

The GP rolled her chair back to her desk, adjusting her white jacket. She was a woman of around sixty. She had probably seen a few things in her time. Now she typed something into her computer. What was she writing? I wanted to ask but I really couldn't afford to seem hysterical. Calm down, I thought, as I craned my neck and tried to see the words she was depositing on the screen.

The GP exhaled and turned to us.

Right, now. Let's take a look at you, then' she said, turning to Ylva, who reluctantly put down her mobile.

'Can you open wide for me?'

Ylva opened wide. Said ‘Ah’ when asked as the GP poked a cotton bud down her throat. Just seconds ago I had been raging, but now warmth flowed through my body. A tenderness I could feel only for her. I found myself thinking about the time we went to the doctor’s with Alfred. The GP asked him if he could open wide and say ‘Ah’. Ylva wasn’t even three years old, but she quickly parried: ‘Yes, he can say Ah but he can’t say Ar!’

It was true; Alfred couldn’t say the letter R. He got furious and kicked his sister in the shins. She started crying. The GP started laughing. That was a different GP in a different town.

This GP checked Ylva’s neck.

‘Yes, there’s an infection here. We can’t rule out mononucleosis.’

‘Do you really think it could be that? Kissing disease?’

Mononucleosis is better than corona. We won’t have to quarantine, I thought.

‘I’ll send you down to the lab for a blood test. We just need to rule it out,’ the GP said, looking at Ylva again.

I nodded and got up. I hoped it was over.

‘And how about setting up an appointment for you next week? To check your cholesterol again?’

The way she said it made me feel as if the word cholesterol was in quotation marks. Why would any GP be measuring cholesterol in a time of crisis like this? But there was no point trying to defend myself.

‘Okay,’ I said.

But when I left, I didn’t book an appointment in reception. The newspapers were full of stories about how overworked GPs were. Surely they couldn’t have time to follow up on baseless accusations from children?

*

Back home, I collapsed on the sofa. My first impulse was to treat myself to a glass of wine from the box in the cellar but given the events of the past hour, I decided against it.

Was this how victims of novels felt?

You’re wrong if you speak out. But you’re wrong if you don’t say anything either. You simply can’t win. Just how easy was it not to rock the boat?

Suddenly, I felt a trace of sympathy for X. Who was I to force through a novel about an issue I couldn’t really understand? A novel in which she and her problem were identifiable?

These thoughts made me uneasy.

I poured myself that glass of wine after all. To make sure Ylva wouldn't catch me, I drank it out in the garage sitting on a chopping block as I waited impatiently for calm to descend. It didn't. Thoughts of X and the novel churned around in my brain. Did I really want to publish it? Would I be harming another human being? X might not be the person I'd thought she was, but hadn't I been fond of her?

I tried to tell myself I was a professional. A real author wouldn't worry about stuff like this. A real author wrote what was true! Or at least what felt true for the author. If I betrayed my project, I would be weak – and besides, it wasn't just up to me anymore. Somewhere out there a designer was working on a bold-hued cover for the novel. The marketing department had just started thinking through a marketing strategy and my editor had already put in countless working hours. My editor had listened patiently to all my failed projects year after year, and maybe he'd done that because he'd guessed this novel would turn up one day. Maybe this was the novel he'd been waiting for too.

But my editor wasn't part of my life, not like that. My life consisted of a handful of intimate relationships and now Gerhard was unhappy with me, Mum was worried and X apparently planned never to speak to me again. And all this was the novel's fault.

That night, I slept badly. Gerhard snored, the wind shook the house and my thoughts churned round and round as if someone was tightening the screws in my head and making it that little bit more painful.

When I woke up, I found to my surprise that it was almost ten o'clock. Gerhard no longer lay beside me and I could hear him rummaging around downstairs in the kitchen. There were two messages on my mobile. One from Lindex who had a 25 per cent discount on bras that Thursday and one from the health service. I logged in with my mobile ID app. It was a message from my GP. She wanted to refer me to the municipal substance abuse service.

The municipal substance abuse service?

Was she out of her mind?

I was an author. An author's life mostly involves imagining things. Well, you could say that about any life, really. Dreams. Lottery wins and unexpected prizes on the one hand, potential tragedies and accidents on the other. Deaths in the family, murder and divorce. But this – the idea of my GP referring me to the municipal substance abuse service via an app – was one thing I could never have foreseen even in my wildest imaginings.

Hands trembling, I started to formulate a reply within the meagre character limit the app offered me. It proved impossible. I would have to call.

'Would you like to make an appointment?' the receptionist asked when she answered the phone after quite a few minutes.

‘No. I just want to talk to her. There’s been a misunderstanding.’

The receptionist went quiet. What kind of a silence was this, I thought guardedly. Did the receptionist know what I was calling about?

It seemed possible.

Sweat beaded on my forehead.

‘I’ll ask her to ring you, but it’ll probably be a little while. She has a full day.’

My pulse rate was disturbingly high. Maybe I was sick. Maybe I should make an appointment after all.

‘How soon could I have an appointment?’

‘Is it urgent?’

‘Yes,’ I said, genuinely surprising myself with my answer.

‘Then I can set you up for early tomorrow morning, eight o’clock.’

‘Thanks,’ I said.

*

The next morning, I prepared to put on a dignified performance. I would calmly explain to my GP that this alcoholism business was something Ylva had simply made up. She’s one of those people who says stuff even though there’s nothing in it. She’s one of those people who likes to keep us on our toes, I would say.

I got up earlier than the rest of the family, ate some porridge, drank some coffee, showered and put on a moderate amount of makeup before cycling down to the doctor’s surgery. The wind nipped at my cheeks and I hoped it would give me the kind of healthy glow you rarely see on the face of an alcoholic.

The waiting room was already full. Five GPs worked at this surgery. It looked as if all of them were overbooked. The people sitting on the chairs around me were all grey-faced. Many of them coughed without bothering to cover their mouths. I felt the same discomfort as before. Again, I literally saw the aerosols flying around the room and caught myself holding my breath as best I could. After what felt like an eternity, by which time the healthy red glow in my cheeks was long gone, my GP came out of her office and called my name. I got up and followed her obediently.

‘So, here we are then,’ she said, pointing to one of the two chairs in front of her desk, as she pushed her glasses up onto her forehead and gave me an indulgent look.

I proffered something between a grimace and a smile before launching in.

‘Okay, so ... This alcohol business is a misunderstanding. I really don’t have a clue why Ylva said it. She barely sees us drink and we never drink anything unless we have guests. Like most people, we have wine in the cellar and she’s probably seen that, but that doesn’t mean ...’

‘Are you alright? You seem a little stressed.’

‘I am not stressed,’ I said, hearing as I said it that I was speaking much louder than I needed to. The GP said nothing. She perched her glasses on her nose and stared at her screen.

‘Maybe I am a bit stressed,’ I said.

The GP took her glasses off again and looked at me encouragingly.

I had nothing left to lose. I told her about the novel and X, about my publisher’s demands, about having to tighten the screws to make it even more painful, about how difficult it was, all of it.

The GP still said nothing.

‘I’m not an alcoholic. Really – seriously,’ I said.

My GP looked at the clock.

‘I believe you. There’s nice healthy flush to your cheeks at any rate,’ she said.

The relief cascaded through my body.

‘Perhaps you’d be better off not publishing this novel. I’m not a psychologist or a publisher but as a human being I know it’s important not to compromise yourself. It’s important not to do something you don’t want to just because other people want you to.’

I nodded. The fact was, I was ready to agree with anything just to get out of there.

‘Would you like me to refer you to a psychologist?’

‘No, I don’t think so.’

‘Well, just get in touch via the app if you change your mind.’

She looked at the clock once more, and I nodded and thanked her, backing out of the room as quickly as possible before she could have any more bright ideas.

When I got home, I sat down in front of my Mac with a coffee. Gerhard was probably out running and the kids were in their rooms home schooling. I could hear the sound of their Teams meetings. Although I appreciated the peace, it made me feel lonely and superfluous. Even during a pandemic, being an author was still lonelier than any other occupation.

I thought about X. It occurred to me that she had brought a kind of fellowship to writing. As long as I’d been writing about and to X, for X, I hadn’t been alone – not until that crushing meeting at the coffee shop. I actually missed her.

I picked up my phone and pulled up her number. It was still in my favourites. I’d been incapable

of deleting it. After all, I had once believed we were ‘thick as thieves’, I thought, as my finger hit her name without quite meaning to.

She won’t answer, I told myself, as the telephone searched for X somewhere out there.

She did answer.

‘I have nothing to say to you,’ she said.

‘But just listen to me!’

‘Listen to you?’

X said this in a way that made it sound extremely unlikely that she would. To make her more receptive, I quickly said:

‘I’m not going to publish my novel.’

I was as surprised as X to hear myself say this, but I felt as if I really meant it.

It went quiet on the other end. Not a breath from X, and when she finally started talking, she was a changed person. She was the old X, the one I’d been missing, the one I’d been ‘thick as thieves’ with.

Now she was friendly. Like a purring cat, she started suggesting other things I could write about instead. She wanted nothing more than to help. There were plenty of exciting things to write about at her office.

How about I went into work with her? It was perfectly feasible. I would get an insight into things the person on the street simply didn’t have access to.

‘As I understand it, a novel needs a conflict and if there’s one place where there are always conflicts, it’s a lawyer’s office,’ X told me mysteriously.

I felt a wash of regret. For a brief moment, I’d kind of understood that helpless feeling, the feeling of not being master of one’s own circumstances, the feeling of being hung out to dry; but X wasn’t helpless, I realised. I felt as if I had walked straight into a trap.