

Two words for destruction

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“What is your first memory?” people ask. As if it means something, as if our first memory is a kind of ground zero.

When I asked you, you laughed.

«What an idiotic question,» you said. «Memory is the most unreliable thing in the world. You know all about that.»

You were referring to my black holes, that sometimes I wake up and can't remember anything.

«Maybe,» I said. «But some people claim that our first memory is a kind of primal symbol for our subsequent formation of reality. That it determines our entire experience of being alive.»

You raised your eyebrows.

«Our formation of reality, sure. You said it right there. We form reality. Did you know that we only remember things we have put into words? Remembering something means expressing it through language. Or maybe I should say obscuring it through language.»

«My God,» I said. «Just answer the question, what is your first memory?»

You stared up at the sky, for a long time, as if it were the past.

«I remember so little of my childhood.»

«You must remember something?»

For a moment, you were silent.

«The first thing I remember is a toy,» you said. «My Mum had been away for a while. When she came back, she brought a gift, a little toy car I had wanted for a long time.»

«Doesn't that mean that the first memory you have is of your mother being gone?»

You rolled your eyes.

«No, no. Nothing like that. No pining, no trauma. The first thing I remember is the car. It's no more complicated than that.»

You looked straight at me. Your gaze was open now.

«What about you?»

«Mum,» I said, without giving it a second thought.

Mum with me in the sand, Mum against me in the sand, Mum and me in the sand, entangled, like one body. She is so close, I can smell her, Mum rests her nose against my neck and sniffs me, we sniff each other like animals. The scent of the sand mixes with the scent of Mum, the scent of the air mixes with the scent of Mum, the scent of the earth and Mum, the sea and Mum, everything smells like Mum, Mum smells like everything.

Mum whispers. Her mouth is against my ear, damp, her voice is inside my head. I close my eyes, don't need to see. Mum describes our surroundings, so they become visible inside me. *Look at that cloud, it looks like a bonsai*, Mum whispers, *Look at that colour blue, it's like the darkest feathers on a pigeon.*"

Inside me, it is Mum who sees. Mum sees inside me.

1

When I woke up today, Ninja was gone. She left last night, after she said:

«When you are right in front of me, it's as if I love you. When you aren't there, it's as if you don't exist.»

I hear her voice speaking the words over and over again. With each repetition, they sound more and more improbable. I suspect that I have invented them. But Ninja often says things that defy reason. Things that afterwards I decide she could not have said, or that I must have misunderstood or made her say, against her will.

The room was dark. I couldn't see her eyes. A faint light from outdoors leaked through the window. Ninja sat in bed with her back to the light, so the shadows swallowed up her face. The light was falling on me, so I was visible for her. I wanted to cover my face with my hands to protect myself, but my arms had shrivelled and hung limply at my sides.

When I went out into the sitting room, I could feel a gaze of contempt in my back.

She has another face; I have caught glimpses of it before. Her eyes darken, her mouth tightens, and her features melt off her face. As if her usual face is actually a mask, and I have never seen how she really looks.

I turned away on those occasions, could not bear to see it: She has another face, a face I don't recognize, the eyes are black and it's full of shadows.

I think it appeared yesterday on the beach. The sky was overcast. The sea lay like a dark cloak over the sand. To our right there was green vegetation. We walked on the pale strip of sand where nothing grows.

I tried talking to her about the future. It has been less than a year since I moved in with her in the apartment building on the beach. Ninja doesn't want to live here anymore. She has talked about Moscow, and Malmö, but never anything definite. She wriggles away, I can't get hold of her.

Yesterday I decided that I would not give in. Ninja began running zigzags in the sand, wearing a white track suit. Her back reflected what little light there was, so she emitted a light all her own. She picked up empty shells and dried seaweed, while she talked about the sea. About everything that exists in the dark depths, about which we know less than we know about the universe.

I guided the conversation back to the future, to where we are going live. Finally, it was as if she acquiesced. She exhaled and collapsed into the sand.

«I put on the brakes,» she said. «The sentry posted in front of my heart. I can't make it go away.»

I've heard about the sentry before. She was referring to my drinking. When I moved in with her, I got drunk from time to time, very drunk. It was because of insecurity, or a desire to disappear, or both. And my drinking had given her doubts.

Since then, I have been working on myself. I have stopped drinking. Nina helped me, she has helped me dry out, become more whole. I am grateful.

A few weeks ago, she said the sentry was gone. We were at a restaurant by the sea, she gave me a note that read: *Access for all eternity.*

You can't get any closer to me, she said then.

But yesterday she stood on the beach and said that sentry was still there after all.

I didn't make a sound. When Ninja saw that I was crying, she twisted away from me, abruptly, as if she couldn't bear to look at me. As she turned away, I saw how her face contracted and became dark, severe, alien.

She stood with her back to me. The muscles under her track suit tensed. I wanted to touch her but didn't dare.

Then a rapid trembling passed through her body. When she turned to face me again, her gaze was kind. She approached me with the face I know so well.

«I can't bear to see you in pain,» she said.

I was the one who asked her to leave. I woke her up in the middle of the night, after I had read some messages that she had written to somebody else, to Kristina, an actress she has been working with recently.

I stood on the balcony and read the messages several times to be sure that I wasn't mistaken. I wasn't mistaken. I know how Ninja sounds when she wants somebody.

She was sleeping heavily, her face buried deep in the pillow and she grunted when I tried to wake her. Then she propped herself up on her elbows.

«Maybe you just have to leave,» I said.

I think I said it to give her the chance to object. She didn't. When I went out into the sitting room, she got out of bed and started packing.

We didn't shout, didn't argue. I have never been able to shout at her. The few times I did, I was afraid that I had ruined everything, like when I was a child and shouted at Mum.

We didn't say a word. I stood leaning against the sitting room wall with my arms crossed over my chest as she walked slowly past me. She had packed the little suitcase. She didn't look sad. The scar on my left cheek ached, but she couldn't know that.

She spent a long time putting on her shoes in the hallway. She didn't close the front door behind her when she left. I heard her steps on the stairway, rhythmic, like a drumbeat. Soon the beats slid into each other and became a hollow rumbling. She rushed down the stairs and spilled out into the streets, like a river.

The first time I saw her, she was floating in the air in a gallery in Malmö. A child was playing a loud game with flying ninjas. She imitated the ninjas, jumped up and stayed there, suspended in mid-air, for a long time, while she drew patterns in the air with her hands. The child looked at her wide-eyed and shouted: Ninja! Ninja!

I was hung over. The gallery owner had invited me to speak about a text I had written for a newspaper, about fear and hope as political sentiments. How they were distributed differently according to gender, class, generation, or world region. How the one feeling excludes the other, the more fear, the less hope.

While the gallery owner was introducing me, I clutched an empty wine glass. My hands were sweaty and I was afraid my voice would tremble. I was wearing a shirt with a print of Niagara Falls in a square frame on the front. It was a mistake, the square was a window, everyone could see right inside me and the situation in there was volatile.

When I took position behind the microphone, the room was completely silent. I turned the right side of my face towards the audience. When I started speaking, I heard to my amazement that my voice was calm and controlled. Afterwards I went outside to smoke a cigarette.

In the back garden of the gallery was a tree that was shedding its leaves. Dried leaves crunched beneath my feet, red, yellow, orange. The tree absorbed all the green into its trunk in preparation for a prolonged period without light or warmth. I thought I could see the leaves changing colours.

She followed me wearing a green oilcloth jacket that smelled like diesel.

«Nina,» she said and took my hand. «But Ninja is better, don't you think?»

I squeezed her hand hard, so she wouldn't notice that I was shaking.

«Frida,» I said.

Her smile was crooked; I felt like she could see through me.

«Beautiful,» she said.

«But –»

«Not but. Beautiful. Frida means beautiful.»

I laughed.

«And peace,» I said. «My name doesn't suit me.»

She had long, black hair and light turquoise eyes, like wolves and huskies, they danced around in her face.

«I appreciated what you said in there,» she said.

Then she threw her cigarette butt to the ground, crushed it with her foot and said she had to go. She had to get up early the next morning, had just come to Malmö to deal with a few things. She had moved, rented an apartment on a beach in southern Europe.

«I can't take this city anymore. The people, the hierarchies, the networks.»

«So, you moved to ... Club Med?»

She shook her head slowly, smiling.

«The ideas you Norwegians have. Club Med isn't a place!»

«Of course it is!»

«Where is it then?»

«No idea. I've never been. It was my dream when I was little, but Mum was afraid of flying.»

She tilted her head.

«Is she dead?»

I had to tip my head back, she was taller than me.

«Was,» she said. «The past tense. Your mother *was* afraid of flying.»

«My mistake. Present tense. Mum is *not* dead. And she's still afraid of flying.»

The light turquoise eyes were motionless in her face, focused on me.

«You are certainly old enough to travel on your own now?» she asked.

«Fortunately,» I said.

«Then I'll give you my number. So you can call me when you arrive.»

She stood close to me while she punched in the number. Under the diesel smell from the oilcloth jacket was something else, lavender. Her hand was warmer than mine when she gave me back my phone. She walked through the gate and disappeared among the trees out on the street.

The gallery owner made a beeline straight for me as soon as I stepped inside again. She patted me on the shoulder and gave me a glass full of a transparent liquid. Then I could breathe.

I had intense conversations with people I knew and didn't know. When it got dark, I ended up having an argument about gender with a high-profile journalist.

«Women aren't aggressive anyway,» he slurred.

«Ha,» I snorted.

«Hit me then!» he barked and I hit him, with a clenched fist and the force of several glasses of transparent liquid.

The entire gallery fell silent. The journalist gaped while holding his chin. I staggered home.

The next morning my hands were shaking. The night was a pair of bloodthirsty and snapping jaws. The only thing I remembered, besides the blows I had thrown at the journalist, was what the woman in the green coat had said about leaving town, the hierarchies, the people.

The sharp autumn light glared through the windows. Immediately I saw how dirty they were. A dull film covered the glass, which was invisible when the light wasn't shining directly on it.

I put on my sunglasses and went to a hardware store. Looking at the products on the shelves calmed me, soaps, sponges, it was easy to make a mess but usually it was possible to clean up after oneself. I bought the most expensive squeegee and a cleanser that guaranteed the shiniest of surfaces.

It took a long time to wash the windows in the little apartment. A little water always escaped from the squeegee and left marks on the glass. Something grew inside me, a kind of rage, the same as when I had to eat food I usually avoided, dairy products and flour.

When I was done, the light fell into the room differently. From a distance I almost couldn't see where the marks on the glass were.

An article I had written would be published that day, about the burden of choice in the era of freedom of choice. The discrepancy between the freedom we are told we have and the freedom we actually experience. The confusion that discrepancy can create.

I winced as I read the article. It was high time I found something else to do, that I moved to the countryside and worked with something I mastered, or semi-mastered, I could be a server, maybe, I would manage that, at least if I were given a uniform, so I would be spared having to decide what to wear. Anyway, it would mean more to people than these text fragments I wrote that were published and that I thought would ... yes, what did I actually think they would do?

My telephone vibrated after I had gone to bed. Nina Ahl.

I would really like to see you again. Do you have time tomorrow? Ninja.

My heart skipped when I saw her face on the Internet. Dark creeping eyebrows above the light turquoise eyes embedded deep in their sockets and waiting for something.

After she left last night, I got out the big bottle of gin and poured myself a glass. I drank it down in one gulp and poured another. Then I called Mum. It was the middle of the night. Mum always puts her phone on mute when she goes to bed, but she answered.

It had been a long time since we'd talked. I dreaded what she would say, that I would have to apologize for my silence, but Mum just said that she was happy to hear my voice.

She wasn't surprised when I told her that Ninja had left. She was relieved.

«The two of you would never have worked,» she said. «It would only have gotten worse. *She* would have only gotten worse.»

We talked for a long time. I felt lighter and lighter.

«What luck that your phone wasn't on mute tonight,» I said.

«That's how it is with the two of us, you know,» Mum said. «You and me.»

I poured more gin, I felt clairvoyant. It would never have worked.

I must have fallen asleep the moment I went to bed, can't remember lying awake. I believe I was thinking: It's good that she left.

I was able to sleep because I was not completely distraught.

At one point, my sleep was disrupted by some noises. In a daze, I thought I was in my old bedroom at Mum's house. That she was cleaning outside my door, quickly, because she was angry that I wasn't helping her. I fought my way back to sleep, to escape the smell of citrus and chemicals.

My mind was a complete blank when I woke up. When I remembered what had happened, I ran out into the living room naked. I hoped that Ninja had come back, that she would be lying on the sofa, so we could talk, work things out.

My breath moved through my body in rapid bursts, long inhaleds and short exhales, as if I had been under water for a long time and my body was trying to take in as much oxygen as it could.

The apartment was empty. The moment of clarity was gone. She wasn't there.

I almost cancelled our first meeting. Ninja had suggested going for coffee. I was far too nervous. It had been a long time since I'd had any desire to try and get close to anyone, with good reason, it always turned out badly. I did distance best.

Mum tried giving me a pep talk over the phone.

«You're the best!» she said. «Period. You have to stop being so afraid of people.»

«I'm not *afraid* of Ninja, I just ...»

Mum interrupted me.

«Ninja?» she says. «Who calls themselves something like that?»

«Nina, then,» I said.

«Go to the ocean pool,» Mum said. «It will clear your head.»

I sent a message saying that I couldn't meet her until eight o'clock. *Then I'll be hungry when I get there*, she replied. I'd hoped that eight qualified for a drink. Eating in front of strangers was the worst thing I knew. But it was even worse meeting her in broad daylight, then she could see everything, my face, the scar.

The ocean pool was far out on the water, like a wooden submarine. A bridge connected the pool to the beach. When I stepped onto the bridge, a green figure came walking towards me. I recognized her right away. The movements of the tall body were controlled, as if she had to exert herself to keep from running. Her dark hair hung around her face like wet seaweed. She was prettier than I remembered. I was not wearing makeup and didn't know whether I should call her Nina or Ninja.

«It's you!» I said.

She turned towards me.

«Oh, hello,» she said with a barely perceptible nod.

It was as if she couldn't see me properly. We both fell silent. Silence wasn't good.

«See you tonight!» I said.

The ice-cold water didn't help. The empty eyes on the bridge were still tormenting me when I got home. I composed different excuses explaining why I couldn't meet her after all. But I didn't send any of them. I have to stop being so afraid of people, I thought.

I mixed a watered-down drink and drank it as slowly as I could. Combed my hair into a bun on my head. Tying my hair back tightly made me feel contained. I brushed my teeth well. Tried to look at myself with kind eyes in the mirror before I left.

The bar was deserted when I arrived. I ordered a small beer and tried not to look at my watch. Ten past. The tied back hair wasn't helping. Maybe she had changed her mind when she saw me on the bridge. I decided to leave at a quarter past.

At twenty past Ninja walked in the door. She lit up when she saw me, raising both hands above her head. When she approached the table, it was as if she zoomed in on me.

«There you are!» she said.

Now she saw me properly.

«Sorry for being so late,» she said and sat down surprisingly close to me.

«Everything is a bit chaotic right now.»

I gave her an inquisitive look. She explained that she'd come to Malmö to pick up some papers from the Theatre Academy. She had dropped out in protest, just a few months before finishing her degree.

«What were you studying?»

«Theatre direction,» she said.

Her hands moved in the air between us.

«The dramatic arts programme is infected by a power that will not budge.

Everyone says things have improved, but that doesn't mean it's true. It's just a verbal façade.»

She had called a meeting for the entire school in the cafeteria and given a speech about the situation at the academy, during which she announced that she was quitting. The students gave her a standing ovation. The teachers stood leaning against the walls hanging their heads.

«Anyway, there wasn't anyone there who could teach me anything,» she said.

«The teachers aren't interested in theatre. They're interested in themselves.»

She ordered a meat pie. I ordered risotto. While we waited for our food, I told her about the time Mum and I made a sorrow pie. Something sad had happened, I couldn't remember what, so it couldn't have been that bad, but anyway we decided that we wanted to make a ritual pie.

She laughed.

«In that case, this is a joy pie,» she said and guided her fork towards my mouth.

I opened my mouth without looking at her. I couldn't bring myself to tell her that I was a vegetarian. A warm morsel landed on my tongue, I washed it down with a sip of wine. She watched me the whole time.

I was unable to finish the risotto. She ate my leftovers. When I got to my feet to go buy another glass of wine, she jumped up and waved me back into my seat.

«My treat,» she said. «I was just awarded a grant.»

I studied her profile while she was standing at the bar. There was strength in the lines of her body, a clarity, it was like looking at a mountain on the horizon, as if she had always been there.

«Mythopia,» she said when she returned and set the glasses down on the table. «Unfiltered, from the Alps. The grapevines are planted in mica schist.»

Ninja spoke Norwegian. She spoke it well, the intonation, the vocabulary.

«Mum is a librarian,» she said. «I've read a lot of Norwegian literature, Undset, Hagerup, Askildsen. One of his books made an impression on me, *From now on, I will walk you all the way home*.

I had never even heard of it; I didn't have time to read fiction.

«Because of my research,» I said.

«Your article about freedom of choice was good,» she said. «Have you thought about writing a book?»

«Mum is a journalist, too,» I said. «When I was little, I thought that was mediocre. I wanted to write books. Can you imagine a more obnoxious child?»

«Not really,» she laughed.

The table we were seated at was round. No sharp edges anywhere. We slid closer to one another. Ninja spoke about how the theatre is fossilized in a language that seldom means anything, except for those who want to identify with that language. Not people who actually need a language for their experience.

«It's all about which words you choose,» she said. «Saying something in a way that resonates with those who hear it.»

«But isn't language fundamentally exclusive anyway?» I said. «If you speak in one way, it connects with someone. If you speak in another way, it connects with someone else.»

She nodded.

«But I have to believe that language can be more than that. If not, I can't work with theatre. I have to believe that language is a possibility to apprehend reality and each other. That it is a shared space.»

«And a lonely space,» I said. «Language brings us together but it also separates us from one another. I can never *fully* understand what you mean when you say something.»

«I understand *exactly* what you mean,» she said.

Her voice buzzed in my head. I told her that Mum had gone into mourning when I learned to talk. Up until then, our bodies had been the language, and our eyes. When the words came, they took over.

«The symbiosis was broken,» Ninja said.

«Ostensibly, at least» I said.

We had ended up sitting squeezed together, side by side. When I asked if she knew that there was a blood moon that night, she nodded and said she was interested in astronomy. Blood moons were rare. This one was wholly unique, the fourth in a series of four total lunar eclipses.

«Some people say that it is an omen of the Last Days and the Second Coming,» I said.

We laughed. Her breath in my face, meat pie and wine, and something else, her. I took a deep breath.

«I'm at least certain that it has given rise to some miraculous movements,» she said and stood up.

She walked over to a piano that was against the wall behind us. It was black, shiny, and reminded me of something alive, a horse. She placed her hands on the keys, and sat there like that, without making a sound. Then she raised her left hand and struck a key.

She played a slow melody that made me think of salvation.

I haven't heard anything from Ninja since she left last night. It is now late morning. I walk around the apartment and make mental notes of what she took with her. On the bookshelves are books and manuscripts. Her notes are in the margins, in her large, looping handwriting. She is everywhere, and not here. Her clothes are lying in the bedroom closet. She hasn't taken hardly anything with her, she can't stay away for long.

My phone buzzes. I throw myself at it.

I am so proud of you, Mum writes. You always spot new opportunities and find something positive in the worst situations. That's huge!

She is referring to our conversation of last night, but I can no longer remember what I said. The moment of clarity is gone, everything is gone, was I drunk?

No wonder Ninja left. I am incorrigible.

Mum picks up after one ring.

«Did I sound drunk when we spoke last night?»

«Not at all,» Mum says. That is reassuring.

«I am having regrets,» I say. «I never should have asked her to leave.»

Mum snorts.

«It's the best thing you could have done,» she says. «I don't understand how you've put up with her.»

«She's the one who has put up with me,» I say. «I have destroyed her trust. I am the one who drove her away.»

Mum knows about the sentry.

«This is not your fault,» she says. «She has this strange hold on you.»

«She has *helped me*,» I say. «I should have stuck it out a while longer, tried talking to her.»

«You've tried talking to her,» Mum says. «She turns everything you say against you. You can't accept everything, just because you got drunk a few times.»

«I don't accept everything,»

«Yes, you do.»

«Good God, Mum. What should I do?»

«Get angry!»

«I'm furious! At myself.»

She says that I should practise directing my empathy inward and my criticism outward.

«Try treating yourself as if you were your own child,» Mum says.

Ninja didn't take her little crucifix. It is in the bathroom, leaned up against the mirror. A hanging Jesus in ivory, with a broken arm. Ninja is a believer, she has talked about this ever since we met, the goodness in people that must be cultivated, about morality and responsibility, how the strong have a duty to stand up for the weak.

She always brings the crucifix with her when she travels. *It is the most beloved thing I have besides you.* Now she has left the crucifix behind. I wonder whether she forgot it or left it behind on purpose, and if either of these alternatives mean something.

The bathroom mirror has two side-mirrors which I can angle so I see both sides of my face. They are very different. From the right I look like a human being who is whole. From the left, the scar clings to my face like a crab's claw. My upper lip curves upward and my lower lip droops downward, so my mouth doesn't close completely. I instinctively turn my left side away from people. Press my upper lip down on my lower lip, so I won't leak.

Now I see my face change in the bathroom mirror. The wrinkles fan out from my eyes, the pores dilate. My pupils pulsate, as if they don't know where to focus. Maybe they are in the process of dissolving inside the eyeball, leaking out, so my eyes will turn completely black. No wonder Ninja couldn't stand to be with me anymore, the way I look, the way I am.

I lie down on the bathroom floor, like I did when I was a child. I was sensitive to the cold as a child, always freezing. In the bathroom it was warm and damp. No windows, nobody who could see me when I locked the door, except for me. I studied my face in the mirror. My eyes changed from one day to the next. Sometimes one of the eyes was light, while the other was dark, like it was extinguished. Sometimes my eyes were green, like Mum's, sometimes blue, like Dad's.

The heat in the bathroom floor was always on the lowest setting because Mum had to save on electricity. But when I lay down on the floor, the warmth seeped into my body, until my skeleton became soft and glowing.

Mum also liked to be in the bathroom. *Is this where you're hiding,* she used to say when she knocked on the door. She filled up the bathtub and sank naked into the suds. I sat on a towel and filed my nails while Mum confided in me. Her words slid through the

steam. She didn't know who she loved, Dad or Stian. I understood her very well. I didn't know who I loved either, Peder or Simon.

What would I have done without you, Mum said.

I lay in the lukewarm water in the tub after she got out. All the bubbles had burst. Mum rubbed lotion into her skin while she talked about the complexes she'd had at my age. Her hair had been stringy, her boobs too small. She'd even had complexes about her knees because Nan had criticized them. Apparently, they sagged, but not even Nan could make the knees assume the shape she wanted them to have.

I understood Mum very well. On some days I was so ugly that I didn't want to go to school. *Look at yourself in the mirror and tell yourself you are good enough,* Mum said. I stood in front of the mirror and practised angling my face so the scar wouldn't show. It throbbed faintly when I got nervous, as if it was connected to my bloodstream and beat in time with my heart. *You don't notice it from directly in front of you,* Mum said. *And it's not visible from the other side.*

I never did become good enough. Neither did Mum. She laid out her clothes in the evening, studied herself through squinted eyes in the mirror, the way she studied me.

There were some colours she didn't wear. Navy blue was conservative and reminded her of her childhood, when she was not allowed to laugh or cry, because both made noise. Maybe everything became so extreme inside her because it had piled up. When she cried, she howled, when she laughed, she became hysterical and when she was silent, she was completely silent for a long, long time.

Mum's favourite colour was sea green. *But the sea is dark blue,* I said once. Then she looked at me sternly and said that was a huge misunderstanding. She laid out flowing garments that had nuances between green and blue.

In the morning, Mum was anxious. She threw cold water on her face and drank water with lemon for her skin, and her liver. She put on make-up. She let me borrow powder, rouge, we covered up one thing, enhanced another, we knew how we were supposed to look. I looked at us in the mirror, it was true what everyone said, that we looked alike, just that Mum was prettier than me.

Then Mum would go out into the world, anxiously, Mum was always anxious, that's why she drank red wine when she came home. She had to calm herself, her nerves, I understood her very well.

I have always understood Mum very well.

Ninja came home with me the first night.

«From now on, I'll walk you all the way home,» she said. «Even though you haven't read that book.»

The streets were silent. I concentrated on not weaving as I walked. The blood moon glowed softly behind the clouds, we couldn't see it properly.

«The moon is a strange planet,» I said. «Like a mirror in the sky.»

«Or a lump of sand that reflects the light from another,» she said.

I laughed.

«Or that.»

Outside my building, I fumbled with the keys. When the door opened, I turned my head so the right side of my face was towards her. She was lit up by the beam of a street lamp.

«Why do you always turn your right side towards me?» she asked.

Nobody had asked me about that before.

«My face is so asymmetrical,» I said. «And the scar is on the left side.»

She took my face between her hands, turned it back and forth, examining both sides.

«It's your left side that's the most beautiful,» she said and released me.

When we were standing outside the entrance down on the street, we agreed that this was not all the way home. She walked up the stairs with me to the door to my apartment. That wasn't all the way home either; all the way home had to be further inside.

«I just know the way to here,» I said as I unlocked the door.

«Then we'll start here,» she said.

We slept on the sofa in the sitting room. It was her idea, as if we were both guests. I hadn't slept in the sitting room before; it was strange to see the lights from cars sliding across the ceiling.

The sofa was narrow. We snuggled against each other in the darkness. I lay on the outside. She had her arm around me. She was bigger than me, I melted into her side.

When I woke up, it was light. I didn't dare open my eyes. My scar prickled. Then a warmth spread across my face. Her lips, they were soft. She kissed the right side of my face and the left, stroking the scar lightly with her tongue.

«I need a charmed life,» she whispered.

«You need a charmed life?» I said, without opening my eyes.

«*I lead a charmed life,*» she said, slowly, her voice deepening. «You're the most beautiful thing I've ever seen.»

When I opened my eyes, her face was all the way up against mine. Her eyes opened inward, like a kaleidoscope.

I got the scar on my face the day I thought World War III had begun. I was terrified of war, searched everywhere for signs, found signs everywhere, watched documentaries about war on the sofa with Mum. She was also terrified of war. We were prepared for the worst.

I was for that reason not surprised when I passed some soldiers while riding my bike to school one day. I was relieved. The war is here now, I thought. Better that than the suspense of waiting for it.

When I rode my bike down the hill past the library, where the bomb shelter was, I turned to see if people had gathered there. To my astonishment, nobody was there. Then I ran into something hard and passed out. I had ridden my bike into a tree and my face was bleeding. When I came to, I scrambled to my feet and rode away.

The teacher's face twisted into a grimace when I entered the classroom. World War III had not broken out, but the cut was too deep for me to stay at school.

The sofa was empty when I got home. Mum had been sitting there for days. She didn't respond when I called for her. The house was as silent as the grave.

Then I heard a guttural moaning coming from the bathroom. Mum didn't look up when I walked in. She was bent over the toilet. Her bathrobe lay around her like a deflated parachute. I wiped the blood off my face in a hurry so I wouldn't scare her. I approached her slowly, so she wouldn't be frightened.

«What happened to you?» she asked.

Her gaze was bleary.

«I fell off my bike, that's all» I said.

I helped her get into the shower. The water poured down; I saw the contours of her naked body through the curtain. I washed the cut on my face thoroughly, making sure to remove all the traces of blood on my skin.

When Mum came out of the shower, she wrapped the towel around her head like a turban. The skin of her face was pulled back, so she looked younger. Now her eyes were clear again. She took my face between her hands and studied the cut.

«It's deep.»

«Do you think it will scar?» I asked.

«It probably will. We'll just have to hope it doesn't become a keloid scar.»

«What kind of scar?»

«Keloid, Greek for crab's claw,» Mum said. «It's a scar that keeps growing, that becomes larger than the original wound.»

I studied the cut in the mirror, tried to picture it as a scar and then, the scar as something that kept growing, spilling out of itself and turning into a crab's claw on my face.

Mum didn't think it was necessary to see a doctor.

«Keloids develop over the course of many years,» she said. «We'll just have to wait and see. What will be will be!»

I was afraid that Mum would go back to the sofa, but she got out a comb and elastic bands and sat down on a stool in front of the mirror. I was envious of all the girls in my class who had been to southern Europe on holiday and had their hair done in beaded plaits all over their heads while they were there.

«You're not envious,» Mum said. «You are happy for them, and you want plaits too. That's different.»

She stuck the pointy end of the comb into my scalp and divided my hair into small sections. The comb jabbed and my scalp tingled. When I whimpered, Mum said one had to suffer for beauty. I wanted to say that was a cliché but all of a sudden her face in the mirror looked so happy. I folded my hands and gritted my teeth.

Mum plaited tightly. Tears filled my eyes. When she was done plaiting, she looked at me expectantly. The plaits did not look like the plaits my friends had. Mine hung around my head like wispy ropes and didn't have beads in them. I smiled and thanked her. I was not suffering for beauty, I was suffering for Mum.

My scalp was still sore when I went to bed. The cut on the left side of my face was throbbing. I imagined it rising like dough overnight, swelling out of itself, turning my face into a nondescript lump.

(END EXCERPT)