Synopsis: *Trying and Failing*

The action takes place in Oslo, about a year prior to the pandemic.

*Key characters:*

**Magne Skarstad Blom** is in his late twenties. He has a degree in literature and is a wheelchair user. He works as a hotel receptionist at The Tower in downtown Oslo. His job is temporary and part of the hotel’s diversity program, and is contingent on a subsidy from the Norwegian welfare services. Effectively he is mascot for the hotel chain’s progressive image, and he does not like this one bit. His absentee father is a well-known writer; he grew up with his (relatively) poor mother. Magne lives with **Hannah Mysen*,*** a few years younger and midway through her psychology degree. She is delayed in her studies because of her history with mental illness, and because she took over Magne’s parental leave for their daughter, **Thea** (from six to eighteen months through the action). **Snorre Sverdrup** is Magne’s best and oldest friend – he too is a wheelchair user, but grew up in a more affluent home. Magne and Hannah live in student housing in Bjølsen, while Snorre owns his own apartment in Hovseter.

*Plot:*

Following a flashback to Magne and Snorre’s early teens, showing their outsiders’ friendship and their similar yet different experiences as young disabled men, the plot starts in January in Oslo. Magne tries to get to work on time – this is challenging, since he depends on paratransit services that rarely show up as planned. He is father to a small child, he is more or less handling his job, but he exhausts himself with everyday tasks and is terrified of snapping the thin thread that connects him to work life – even though he hates his job and is not very good at it. He dreamt of other things – being a writer or an intellectual – but sees these possibilities as closed off.

Hannah regrets her choice to be the only stay-at-home parent – she made this choice partly out of fear that Magne would not physically be able to manage being alone with Thea. In February, she goes out drinking with her friends **Stine** and **Anna** for the first time in a long while. They sympathize with her challenges as a mother, but they think of her as self-destructive and consider her relationship with Magne as a misconceived charity project. Stine is pregnant with her second child, and Hannah handles this news badly – she also dreams of a bigger family, but she can’t think how she and Magne could possibly manage it, not the way their lives are right now.

In flashback, we see more of Magne and Snorre as teens. Snorre was the intellectual; he knew very well how society views disabled people and what it takes to build a decent life. He was the one with the social skills and resources to navigate inaccessible movie theaters, plan ahead for university studies, and apply for subsidized apartment loans. But he was never the one to approach girls, because he was too afraid to lose the sense of security he felt at home. Magne didn’t plan as far ahead, but also felt he had less to lose. They spoke deeply about life and built a strong friendship, though it was also a painful relationship, built on shared suffering.

A few years later, they both study literature at university. Snorre started hosting literary events in his apartment at Hovseter. At one of these events, Snorre met Hannah for the first time – she was then an independent-living assistant to Snorre. Magne suspected that Snorre was in love with her (and perhaps with all his female assistants), and when instead Magne himself was the one to fall in love, and she with him, he felt deep guilt about this. Snorre wrote book reviews and short stories, where he tried to dig into society’s actual views of disability – its contempt for human weakness and its grim history of forced sterilization and – in Nazi Germany – euthanasia. Magne was in two minds, thinking both that Snorre was right and that there was some way to enjoy life, after all.

In the present, in May, Magne and Hannah are filmed for a reality program. Their home lives are nosily inspected and they are subjected to phony empathy mixed with prurient interest. At the same time they have a home visit from municipal services, since they have applied for public assistance for independent-living services. This was a hard decision for Magne, who knows that he will be scrutinized and found wanting both as a partner and as a father. But he, too hopes for a second child, and he realizes that he and Hannah need some form of help. The application process ends in failure – they are granted a few hours of nursing services per week – something Magne does not need and did not ask for.

In June Magne and Hannah go to the seaside at Bygdøy – an ordinary bus trip is an odyssey to them. They meet Snorre’s mother. We infer that Snorre is dead; his muscular dystrophy progressed rapidly, and very differently from Magne’s. In flashback, we read an extended email exchange between Magne and Snorre, where their friendship is affirmed, though Magne also tells the story of how his father, the writer Thor Skarstad, paid for Magne to have his sexual debut on a trip they took through Europe. In late summer, Magne and Hannah go to a garden party at Thor’s. They mingle with the cultural elite, and speak to a young philosopher who (politely, intellectually) confirms all of Snorre’s darkest perceptions of how many people view disability.

In fall, Hannah becomes pregnant. She decides to undergo prenatal diagnostics in order to test whether the fetus has Magne’s diagnosis. This is something they avoided the last time; now it feels too risky not to test. Magne’s condition is not life-threatening, but everyday life with a parent as well as a child in a wheelchair, with little help, will be impossible. They also feel that testing constitutes a failure for them as a family – they are allowing someone else to judge their lives. In flashback, we see a southern holiday when the two of them were alone – a romantic voyage where they decided to get serious as a couple, though also a trip that sharply showed the small and large risks they experience continually.

Towards the end of the year, Magne is travelling through Oslo with Thea on his lap. Hannah is in the emergency room with an ankle injury. She now knows that the prenatal test result is not what they hoped for; she hasn’t yet told Magne but he suspects what has happened. The path through the snowy streets is nearly impossible, particularly with an energetic eighteen-month-old on his lap. When Magne arrives, the great decision remains. The story ends without a resolution – Magne and Hannah have yet to decide whether or not to keep the baby.