

# You are my Story

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There is a type of Prozac called Reconcile that is made for dogs. The pills are meat flavoured. I told you this the summer we moved into this house. A small black dog was tied up in the shade of a large elm tree in the neighbour's yard across the road. Day after day it was out there. The dog had large, sorrowful eyes and a drooping tail. The owner was an elderly man with a stooping demeanour and two old Mercedes in his garage. We almost never saw him. His yard was full of junk; the lawn was littered with scrap vehicles and other rusty objects. From the window facing west in the sitting room of our house, we could look down at the little dog. On one rare occasion we caught a glimpse of the old man through what I presumed to be his kitchen window. I talked about it as we rolled dark, grey paint onto the white sitting room walls in our new home, that we should walk down there, you and I, and unchain the dog, maybe even take him home with us. Give it care and attention and a small dose of antidepressants. But one day it was gone. We never saw it again. A couple of years later the old man moved away, or maybe he died, I don't know. The house was sold at any rate. The scrap vehicles disappeared. A family with children lives there now. They have a trampoline in the back yard. Poppies are growing along the wall of the garage.

It was actually the wrong time of year to do renovations. The heat was insufferable that summer. The risk of forest fires was rated as extreme. I stopped going for walks in the forest. The weather stayed like this for several weeks. Because of the paint smell, we had to leave the doors and windows wide open and the house was filled with an intense, nauseating heat. We grew sluggish. When evening came, we didn't have the energy to do anything but flop down on the couch in front of the television in the old house, where our beds and most of our things remained. All the days were the same. We painted and painted, the sitting room and four bedrooms, the rec room and the stairwell. The colours had names like Free Spirit, Statement Blue, Matrix, and Labrador. We painted with aching backs and hands full of blisters, our eyes dull.

That was a long time ago. That summer. We moved in and I thought that everything could start over. Then some time passed and you started leaving us. Down along the river you wandered, in the early and late hours, day and night.

Just before midnight on December 31, 2020, I take two pictures of you. The first photograph shows your head sticking up out of the black hole in the ice. Snow and ice, loads of ice, and water. Your face could have been carved out of the grey ice. I am standing on the dock wrapped in a towel, wet and shivering, my stiff fingers clutching the camera. Everything around us is silent, silent and dark. You don't look into the camera, you don't look at anything. Your eyes are as black as the lake. Your mouth is shaped like an o.

You want to get out, it isn't exactly pleasant in the water. The water temperature is three, maybe four degrees. But I have read that it is supposed to be good for your health. Call it a New Year's resolution. I think you are a good sport. You climb the ladder and at that exact moment the sky above the city explodes. You seem wholly unmoved. You walk over to stand on the wool blanket beside me and pull off your wet bathing trunks with stiff movements. I turn away and look toward the city. Above the old building that long ago housed the telephone company, the sky is awash with shades of pink and orange, the fireworks banging and crackling and bursting, and I think of Lea, who is home alone. What was I thinking, really, but I know, I know what I was thinking, that Lea should come with us, she should have been here with us, but then she changed her mind at the last minute, she often does so, and we can't always let Lea decide. You agreed, we agreed, you and I, so we went anyway, down here, this was sort of the only plan we had for the evening, you and I and Lea. We would go ice swimming while the fireworks exploded above our heads and then we would drive home and shower until we were good and warm, and afterwards we would finish watching the film we had started after our New Year's supper.

I take the second photograph when you are climbing the swimming ladder. Your face is a black shadow. Had I not known it was you I wouldn't have recognized you.

New Year's Day. It is already late in the day. The sun is shining through the window and my body feels leaden. It shouldn't be like this, on the contrary, my body should feel light now that Christmas is over.

The tapered and bushy Christmas spruce, symmetric and lovely, a mountain spruce apparently, the red flowers on the table, the star glowing in the window. The fireplace fills the room with warmth and the strains of a symphony orchestra in Vienna can be heard from the television. There is nothing in the room suggesting that something is out of the ordinary.

But today everything has come to a standstill. I don't feel anything, you say. You are sitting in the armchair in front of the television. I am completely numb, you say.

I sit on the edge of the couch. Your words attach themselves somewhere on the outside of my body, on my clothes, like small transparent insects, almost invisible. I sit studying the shadows on the wall behind you.

You turn toward me to see if I'm paying attention, if I have heard what you said, if I have a response. The inside of my head is full of noise. I want to take care of you but can't seem to get it right.

The light in the sitting room changes while we are sitting there like that. I look at the shadows on the wall. A huge set of jaws, a dog's jaws full of sharp teeth and a long, dripping tongue. The shadows make me think of Garm, the dog of the Goddess Hel. Garm, who was tied up and guarded the entrance to the underworld.

I have to get out of the house. I dress warmly; it has been cold for the past few days. Hat, gloves, my heaviest jacket. I take the shortcut through the grove and continue over the bridge. The river is covered with snow, here and there a black, shiny opening, like damp, staring animal eyes. I like the sharpness of the air, the crunching of snow under my boots.

The sky is rusty around the edges. I follow the river for a while down the hill toward the primary school Lea attended through grade seven. I don't run into anyone. Everything is silent. A Sunday feeling times ten. I cross the schoolyard, stepping over burnt firework tubes and broken plastic glasses, empty bottles. It resembles a disaster zone. I look toward the dark classroom windows that are decorated with snowflakes and stars cut out by small children's hands and my stomach plummets. The look in her eyes when I left her; with every passing morning, I fall apart a little more. Lea is a big girl now, it's been a long time since I had to accompany her to school. She walks by herself, or I drive her on mornings when things are difficult. Risk level red and home schooling made her happy.

On the way home I take the road past the underground station so I can see the moon when it rises above the field. Three girls are sitting in the last underground train carriage, teenagers, I recognize one of them. Madeleine, or Marlene? I believe it's her, the blonde one, the one sitting across from the other two. They are talking together, all of them, laughing, throwing their heads back, they almost look like adults, so different from my Lea. Every time Madeleine, or Marlene, rang our doorbell and asked if Lea wanted to come out and play, I felt the urge to hug her, show my gratitude.

Sometimes when I am out in the evening, out in the darkness, when the spruce trees to the north are a black wall against the blackness, I imagine that you are standing inside our house, in the sitting room and looking out, that you see me, I am barely visible, but you see me and you want me to turn and look up toward the house, toward the window where you are standing, and I turn around and then you wave, and you smile.

When the river is open and free of ice, every now and then we can hear the water falling from the reservoir a few hundred meters further north, a stupefying roar. The lake is called a dam. It is said that the lake, the dam is popular for both fishing and swimming, but that isn't true. Nobody goes swimming there, not even the dogs, and the fishermen, they stand on the far side of the dam, where the river is the widest, the shiniest. The summer we moved here the dam was drained for inspection. There was talk of an upgrading of the bottom sluices. For an entire

year there was almost no water in the dam. It was a brownish crater, with just enough water to keep the river alive. In geography, the word depression means a hollow in the landscape. The Dead Sea, for example, is the world's deepest depression. Our dam doesn't come close, it isn't even a real depression, it just looked that way, during the time when it lay exposed like an open and aching wound in the landscape.

I dream that I am in a boat. In the boat with me is a stranger, a man. He is suntanned and wearing a gold chain around his neck. The man has strangled his wife. We drive around on the lake in this boat aimlessly and the corpse of his wife is lying below deck. It bothers me that I am obliged to drive around with the deceased. It is unseemly. I ask the man whether I ought to transport him to Ila Penitentiary.

Your rifle is in the attic. You served me ptarmigan you'd shot yourself on our first date, remember? Ptarmigan you'd shot yourself and non-alcoholic wine. The meat was full of gunshot and wholly inedible, and the wine tasted hideous. We laughed about the inedible ptarmigan meat and the bad wine. So much effort. You had made up the double bed with yellow sheets and there were retro plaid curtains on the windows. While we were having sex on the yellow sheets, I heard your mother flush the toilet upstairs.

A woman I knew was shot in the back of her head by her boyfriend. He took the rifle out of the cupboard and shot her in bed. Maybe she was asleep when it happened. She was the kind of woman who nagged about everything and everyone, all the time. She had a Sunnmøre dialect, was sort of always on the brink. He'd had enough, I bet, and made short shrift of her.

No. Your rifle is not in the attic, because we don't have an attic in this house. Now I don't know where the rifle is. Maybe in the cellar storeroom, along with the cushions for the garden furniture, your fishing tackle and the boxes of baby clothes. Or in the garage, leaning against the wall in the corner, beside the skis, the sacks of firewood.

We needed more space. We bought this house so we could continue being a family. We had no need for an attic. What we needed were more doors, more rooms. A house that was big enough for several parallel lives. For a long time I had a good feeling.

The land our house was built on is an old apple orchard. Only one of the apple trees remains, just on the other side of the border to the neighbouring property, to the east. The tree is as gnarled as an old woman, as its owner Else, a tangle of branches, beautiful in its own particular way. I have grown fond of it. We talk about the tree, or I do, mostly.

In late winter I say, for instance, I don't understand why she doesn't prune it, look at the branches, they point every which-way. When Easter approaches, I might muse about when she is planning to take down the Christmas lights, I don't like Christmas in the spring. In the autumn the apples come, they ripen and tumble to the ground, a handful or two every day, and I act irritated when I kick them across the gravel: Oh, these dumb apples, I sometimes exclaim.

The truth is that I like the sight of the almost luminous, pink apples, even when they are lying on the ground. And I like the wild, splaying branches, and I like the Christmas lights that illuminate my bedroom at night. I like the snow that settles on the branches. The snow and the lights, the old woman has decorated for a party.

Most of all I like the thought that the tree has been in the same place for one hundred and fifty years.

You can't see the tree from the window in the room where you sleep. Or maybe you can? If you lean out a little? From my bedroom I can see both the apple tree and Else's yellow house and the television screen that lights up her sitting room every evening and behind her house the apartment buildings and the hill with two peaks and landslide-ready slopes. Quite a few people jump down from those peaks. Usually they choose to jump from the southernmost peak that others climb on nice, clear days.