Excerpt from *Trial and Error*

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**Chapter Seventeen**

It starts to snow just as we come outside. Soft, white flakes wafting from the pitch-black sky.

I feel the anger rising. This was not forecasted. This is unforecasted snow.

I feel deceived. I always follow the weather forecasts. Tonight and tomorrow morning were supposed to be cold and clear.

I steady my grip on Thea and pull her closer. She gazes up at the snow and is completely still now, full of wonder. That helps, a little.

The snow falls to rest on patches of ice. For one week now, the weather’s been icy cold and clear, but just this afternoon, while I was waiting in the reception for the car to take me to the kindergarten, *that’s* when the very first speck dropped from the gray cloud cover.

It’s coming down now. Not yet heavy and sopping, but milder, and it’s slippery, we won’t be able to stay on the sidewalk for much longer. I don’t know if we should forge ahead on our odyssey through the city. We’ve only just begun. There’s still a long way to go, too long. But alternative is there?

We turn onto Bergensgata, we’ve only made it two blocks from the kindergarten so far, everything’s shaking and shuddering. Every few yards I have to stop because it feels like Thea is going to slip off my lap to the ground. It’s a hopeless undertaking.

I feel enraged now. I cannot show it. I must be her safe space. I stop again and brace with all my strength against the footboard to pull her up, closer to me.

And I notice she’s happy. Which helps. She’s much more cheerful outside in the cold than she was in the hot, narrow cloakroom. She likes when we bump over the ice patches. It’s a fun game to her. But it puts her in a playful mood and she’s harder to hold onto.

With my left arm, I grip her as well as I’m able but her snowsuit is slippery against my quilted jacket and thin, gray, synthetic uniform pants, and there’s no stable position in which to best hold her. Every second is a strain, my entire body is tense, and our way forward seems endlessly drawn out, but we can’t go home now. Not only because I forgot the keys this morning, because it would be such a hassle to get in, but because we have to move, we cannot sit at home waiting while Hannah is at the ER. We must go to Hannah and take care of her. We are going to Mama and then we are going to go home all together.

There were a few more hours left on my shift when Hannah called. A busy afternoon in December, toward the high season, I was busy and couldn’t pick up. So, she texted, four sentences, each one shorter than the one prior, as if the perspective was narrowing:

*On my way to the ER, I’ve hurt my ankle. I hope it isn’t broken. Can you pick up? Sorry.*

I did my best to scramble. I spoke with Stian to make sure it was okay, sure thing, he could cover the rest of the shift. There weren’t any large groups waiting. There wasn’t a good reason, really, for two security guards to be on hand. Other than for appearances.

I let Turid know it was urgent, that I had to leave. She asked wasn’t there someone else who could go, I said no. She must have known it, that there is no one else.

I called the mobility services transportation center. The prerecorded voice. *It is important to arrange your trip well in advance. It may be difficult to procure a vehicle on short notice.*

And so, I sat there in the reception area, waiting. Time passed, and there was nothing I could do about it. There was no point in calling the transportation center until the pick-up time had come and gone. I called Hannah but she didn’t answer. I cannot go home and wait, be inactive. That’s not an option.

I pictured her, on her way from the taxi into the ER. The driver helping her into a wheelchair, maybe, or if she was able, limping inside on her own. At times the distance between us feels so vast. Like I’m unable to comprehend what she can or cannot do.

If Hannah had been the one to receive the phone call, and if it was me on my way to the ER, what would she have done?

Worried, obviously, she’s worries too much about me. But not before she would have made plans for the rest of the day. If wouldn’t matter if she was at home or in the lecture hall or somewhere else. She would find oceans of time. Enough time to finish whatever she was doing and then head to the kindergarten with time to spare.

I *told* her to get some cramp-ons. I nagged her about it, but she didn’t want them, she didn’t want to look like an old woman. Just like the time she was in her third trimester and was still walking around in high heels. I pictured exactly how it must have happened, on her way out of the stores down at Grünerløkka, not paying attention because she was thinking of something else. Waiting for the phone call. Or, while she was talking on the phone, or while she got a text. She must have gotten a text.

One of those things that just happens, only it’s the kind of thing that cannot happen to us. We cannot afford *things that just happen*, we simply can’t, it’s clear. We can’t do what everyone else does, *play it by ear, roll with the punches*. Improvise. We can’t do whatever we feel like, without giving it our full consideration.

The snow falls. If I was alone right now, I’d have put on music and turned it up to max. Set my jaw, driven full speed while thinking *fuckfuckfuck* as everything rattled. An oldy, a classic.

Dead Kennedys, *Holiday in Cambodia.*

The drum intro, dark and good and the rapid bass riff, the guitar entrance to light up the sky, and then Jello Biafra, shrill and theatrical and insane.

*So you’ve been to school for a year or two / And you know you’ve seen it all / In daddy’s car, thinking you’ll go far / Back east your type don’t crawl*.

And there it is, on a track somewhere in the deepest reaches of my consciousness, I know the words by heart and let the soundtrack play while I hold on as tightly as I can to Thea. It’s as good as listening on headphones. Almost.

*Well you’ll work harder with a gun in your back / for a bowl of rice a day / Slave for soldiers till you starve / and your head is skewered on a stake . . .*

And from nowhere I suddenly miss Snorre so much that it hurts. Arguing about music with him at an afterparty in his room. Finding out that my taste was immature and banal, grinning at him and screwing the volume up until he got scared, afraid his parents would wake up.

The funky non-darkness of Oslo in the pre-Christmas weeks. The streetlights and windows all decked out give the feeling of being indoors. And not enough space, the throngs. Too little space on the sidewalk. I steer unsteadily along something that is neither a path nor a ditch. A figure in a dark jacket and hood steps out toward the edge of the snowbank, and I swing instinctively in toward the building, we start to slide on the ice, but then I am able to keep going.

Thea slips down and I stop again. Heave ho. She likes it, this slip and slide, she’s at a fun fair. A rollercoaster. I have to remind myself, she’s safe, she’s been *picked up*, she doesn’t have to know where we’re going as long as she is with Papa.

*Hop a little, jump a little, one two three!*

It’s not punk rock, but it’s what she likes. I hum and hum, trying to remember the rest of the rhyme, the songs keep getting jumbled in my head.

*What you need my son. . . / What you need, my son . . . / Is a holiday in Cambodia / Where people dress in black / A holiday in Cambodia / Where you’ll kiss ass or crack.*

And Thea works with me, in her own way. She hasn’t attempted to hop out of my lap or stand up, she hasn’t tried grabbing hold of the joystick. We’ve practiced this, but her world is not yet fixed and stable. Everything is fluid. I sit ready at any moment to let go of the joystick and fling both arms around her.

Still, she understands more than I believe and remember. How many words is she in possession of now, four, five? It’s not language, exactly, but it is *meaning*, clear as ink. She’s on her way in to the world.

Ma-ma.

Pa-pa.

No.

No is an important one. That’s written in the books, online. *To react to no is a milestone*. It is to understand something about the world. Hannah and I, Mama and Papa, say it when she is about to do something dangerous. When she pulls on the cord or gets too close to the garbage can. We say it, and Hannah runs over to her or I try to steer myself as close as I can. This is because she wants more than she can have.

And so, she hears *no*. She learns something from this, but what? She does not find out what the danger is, she does not find out that broken glass is sharp and hurts or that boiling water scalds the skin so that it blisters. She cannot learn in that way, in the dangerous way. We hope it’s enough, until we can explain to her *why*, explain *how* the world works. Explain where the boundaries are.

“No, hot!” we say and hope that the words are enough to form a bridge from culture to nature.

That Thea will learn that our rules are not ours but exist because the world demands it. The world cannot be thought into nonexistence.

And yet every morning, Thea is the one who creates the world, over and over again. When she wakes up, she’s not angry anymore. All spring, she would wake up in a foul mood at four thirty in the morning, every morning. She was not able to sleep any longer, and therefore we were not able to sleep any longer, and the days were long.

And then, at some point during the summer, she began to walk. This was completely new, now she could wear herself out, crossing the floor, back and forth, chasing whatever excited her. Even if it was lighter out now, her wake-up time kept getting pushed back until later, five, a quarter past five, five thirty, and she was no longer in a foul mood, it was a miracle. It was only a matter of accomplishment. Doing something for oneself. Mastering the body. Mastering the world because she’d mastered her body.

She was happy and babbled, and every morning she created a new existence, was just as happy to explore the same corner of the estate with the rocking horse she was too small to sit in alone.

And more and more often we found ourselves saying no.

No, not that. No, not there.

Her disappointment and frustration.

That’s the thing I like the least about being a father: being the one who must vouch for the real world.

For the fact that the fruit squeezy really is empty.

That the broken banana can’t be put back together.

That Thea, no matter how hard she tries, or how intensively she reaches toward the sky and stretches with her legs, cannot fly.

That the world is as it is.

I’m disappointed too. Angry and dejected. But I am always like that in the winter months, from the start of October to May. Denial, anger, acceptance, grief. It takes time to acknowledge that the summer is over, that the last warm day is coming to an end and the drizzle announces that a cold front has moved in overnight. Like a prison door slamming shut.

I don’t ski, did I mention that? I’m not one of those good Norwegians who appreciates the cold season and *hygge*. I just wait, wait, wait around for it to end. For better seasons to come.

This year I had false hopes. The snow was long overdue. It was going to come. One day we will reach the tipping point and then we’ll turn into England. A land where winter is a non-event, an absence, a long dreary Thursday afternoon.

I wish I could handle it better. I feel disloyal, unpatriotic, out of step with everything that is wholesome and healthy in the nation.

Nor do I love the uninterrupted darkness. I noted this last year, the first winter with Thea, when we never got enough sleep, we were never fully awake, I wasn’t yet used to the hotel shift work and took a taxi to get there through dark streets and it felt like I was in the wrong time zone on the wrong planet and hung over. A year has passed since then, more than that, and now it’s become a routine of sorts, but to handle it well, that’s something else.

But the darkness isn’t the worst of it. When November comes, I start to get a feeling of dread inside, it flares up with the first snow. Not the first light, dry dusting over empty streets, but the really heavy stuff, the snow that collapses into itself and creates the first layer of the growing, geological formations that build up on the sidewalks. Oslo, after the snow has fallen, turns impassible and hostile.

Sometimes I think the city in winter is like a drowned landscape. The water rises and the hills become islands, places where one used to be able to walk now require a boat to reach. What is it called, that place in France, in Normandy? Mont-Saint-Michel. The tidal castle. The water rises quick as a racehorse, Dad said, he said there was never a year or two that passed without someone drowning there.

We are at a crossing, and this is where I finally give up the sidewalk. Sidewalk be damned. Down and out into the street. Away from the path now and into the woods, goblins and trolls, here we come. This is an adventure. I haven’t told Hannah that we are on our way to her. I don’t know if she is waiting for us. She can’t believe that we won’t come. She simply hasn’t asked.

*Did you pick her up?*

*Yes. All good.*

And anyway, I know what I’m doing. My new chair is a Permobil C500 Corpus 3G, *top of the line*, headlights, reflectors, neck support. Equipped for active users and adapted to Norwegian conditions.

*A seat so soft you’ll never want to walk again*.

They don’t say this in the advertisement because they don’t make advertisements like that, because the chair is federal property, but they should. Everything and everyone needs a good advertisement, but wheelchairs most of all.

We are down. On the street. In the middle of traffic. I often end up here, in the winter. I don’t have a choice. The streets are what gets ploughed, for cars and bicycles, the bicycle lanes are almost always snow-free to allow the handful of winter cyclists to bike freely.

Instead, the snow gets piled up onto the sidewalks so that pedestrians can hobble over rough terrain. It’s undoubtedly good for one’s back.

We have red reflectors.

We are easy to see.

It’s highly unlikely any car would sideswipe me or crash into me from behind, we’re not on the highway, after all.

It feels like we are though, with Thea on my lap.

But I can’t keep going like that on the icy sidewalk. It will wear me out. It’s as simple as that. There are limits to things.

Besides, we don’t have too far left to go.

There’s not much traffic on Bjølsen this afternoon. A car makes a large, slow arc around us. Thea follows it with her head. *Car* is not one of her words yet, but she thinks it’s exciting, all big machines are exciting. The wheelchair is exciting, that’s all that it is. The rest will come later.

And that time is getting closer, I think about it more and more often, about how it is going to be. How much I’ll have to hold back and what I can allow myself to show her. How I will be able to tell her about who I am, how I will be able to compete with the world’s narrative about me, the one she is going to hear over and over and over again.

She gazes up in wonder. The snow floats down slowly and evenly. The flakes fall lethargically through the light of the streetlamps. As if appearing out of nothing, as if appearing from the outermost reaches of the universe.

Once the car has passed, our surroundings become strangely quiet. I note the absence of birds, of rustling leaves, of street life. I miss everything that is no longer here. This is the season to be indoors, and I don’t want to be out here, but here we are.

My legs are cold. My legs are really, very cold. The quilted jacket is warm, and I am sweating from the effort of holding Thea tightly on my lap, but the cold cuts sharply through my gray uniform pants. I hadn’t planned this, hadn’t planned to be outside for more than a few minutes today, I *should* still have been at work, and Hannah *should* have been the one to pick her up and bring her home, and this was not how the day was supposed to be, I try to think it back onto the right track, and this feels like pushing a beached whale back into the sea.

I know with absolute certainty that Hannah has received the call by now. She’s received word, and that’s the reason why she sprained her ankle. She knows what she doesn’t want to know, what we don’t want to know, and now it’s up to her how she is going to tell me. I’ll see it on her the moment I see her face. And she will scrutinize my face too, so I must prepare my expression in time.

I’m jealous of Thea’s snowsuit. She’s insulated head to toe, with a white cap that wraps around her neck and sits tightly on her head. She is a small nun with a questioning, trusting face framed and lifted. She is safe. But she is growing more and more restless, I can tell. She squirms back and forth.

“Calm down now, Thea, calm, calm,” I say, and this helps for a little while, whether she understands what I’m saying or is listening to my voice to discern what I want or whether it’s just a coincidence, but then, before we’ve reached the next crossing, she makes an *eh-eh-eh* sound, one of her protest noises that I know best.

Damn. A full diaper on its way. If only this had happened while we were still at the kindergarten, only a short while ago, or else in half an hour, we’ll arrive in half an hour if everything goes as planned.

But it doesn’t. This isn’t one of those days, a day when things go as planned. I don’t know what a day like that would look like. I don’t know what kind of people have days like that.

There’s no odor from her snowsuit yet. Nothing noticeable. Maybe it hasn’t happened yet. But the clock is ticking. There’s no doubt what she is going to do, as she squirms on my lap.

Alright. The diaper will be full very soon. She won’t be able to wait for half an hour, three quarters of an hour, not while she’s sitting and wiggling around on top of me. What do we do now?

I was already insane with stress by the time I got to the kindergarten, ten minutes before closing. I sat trying to push open the gate, for how long? It felt like hours. I pushed. With both hands, with all my strength, even though I knew it was too heavy, like pushing on a locked door. Not something that gradually gives way, but either/or, opens/doesn’t open. And it didn’t open.

These new gates with cylinders and balls on top, against which all strength must be aimed upward, with one’s triceps. Child-safe. And safe from me. And almost safe from Linh’s mom, who isn’t taller than 5,1, max, I watched her stand there struggling once; with her child in a baby carrier, she could hardly open it.

But there weren’t any others when I got there, the parents and children I saw from the car window had gone. I drove to the gate and lifted the seat and positioned myself to standing and pushed and pushed as hard as I could and it wasn’t enough. I could see the light in the windows on the other side of the fence, and my frustration was humongous and sharp and burst from my diaphragm.

And then Kjetil came, I think it was, Kjetil or Kjartan or something like that, I don’t remember the names of adults anymore. *Ellinor’s dad*. He waited behind me, allowed a few seconds pass before he stepped forward. I could feel his impatience like something sharp in my back. I was blocking his way.

“I can get it,” he said flatly and lifted the bolt out with one hand. Light as a feather. “Thanks,” I said, because what else could I say? He had done me a service. He wasn’t the one who had installed the gate, built it like that, there wasn’t anyone *there* to complain to.

It was the end of rush hour, and the cloakroom was emptying out. Mio and Alfred, two runaway starfish in their snowsuits, and their mom. At this time of day all the children are wild and crazy. Mio’s mom was finished first, she pulled on his last mitten, picked him up resolutely and carried him to the door.

Lene stuck her head around the door and nodded at me. Then she said, in a loud, cheerful voice: “Thea’s papa is here!” She came over and said to me in a lower voice, not quite as cheerful, but professionally mild and soft: “Hi, Magne, are you the one doing pick-up today?”

That’s the thing about kindergarten. You can say something completely obvious, and no one thinks it’s odd. “Hi, Thea, is it you?” “Are you sitting on that man’s lap?” “Is the man in the wheelchair your dad?”

A pedagogical exercise: Say something about the world that is obvious. Say it as if the world is new and everything is strange. Say it as if you are giving names to the animals.

Lene is a newly graduated pedagogical leader. Ambitious bordering on hyperactive. At the first parent meeting that fall she had spent half an hour going through the pedagogical principles that guided the kindergarten’s pedagogical activities. She said the words *pedagogical principles* so many times that she wore them out, like old tires, they lost their grip and spun off.

We parents sat spread around the room with the bitter coffee and competed to look engaged. Never too small to learn, as long as learning is a game. Language, motor skills, social competencies, emotional mastering. The kindergarten is the most important arena to prevent alienation.

“Yep, it’s me today. A small change in plans.”

“That’s fine,” said Lene. “But I thought we agreed that you would let us know when that’s the case, didn’t you? I’m not trying to be difficult, but it tends to be quite busy during pickup and drop-off. And since you require extra help getting Thea dressed and undressed, it’s helpful for us to know in advance so we can plan for you.”

“I can do it without any help,” I said. “It just takes a bit longer. And, like I said, it was a change in our plans. Hannah was planning to pick her up, but she couldn’t. It isn’t uncommon for one parent to decide to pick up a child instead of the other without giving advance notice.”

“*Of* *course* it’s not, Magne,” said Lene. “And I know *very well* that every day logistics can be a challenge. It’s called a time crunch for a reason, isn’t it? When I say I would like advance notice, it’s only because I and the others in this unit would like to know that we’ll have enough time to follow up with every single child as best as possible!”

I was going to respond but in that moment Thea came toddling into the cloakroom. Sofie walked behind her, a caretaker three times her height with a welcoming smile, but Thea didn’t notice her, she saw only me. Her grin was wide, and she picked up speed. She shuffled across the floor as quickly as she could, still unsteady on her feet.

She tripped on herself, or on nothing, just as she got there. Her little face veered toward the footrest and shoes, but she barely hit it, I saw everything from where I sat, she braced herself with her hands, something I was never able to do, and the moment of contact was so slight, so soft, that she might have been lying down to take a nap. When she began to howl, it was because she was surprised and annoyed, she didn’t start howling until she looked up at me and was certain that I had seen the cruel joke that gravity had played on her.

Sofie rushed from the doorway with quick steps. I caught her eye and slowly shook my head, whispering, “Wait a minute.” Sofie looked at the large, white clock up on the wall, two to three minutes before the hour, and then back at me. Kjetil or Kjartan had captured Ellinor and was packing her into her snowsuit, otherwise it was empty in the cloakroom.

“Come, Thea,” I said, as upbeat as I could manage. “Everything’s okay. Come to me.”

I looked down to the right and saw the red, yellow and green light on the control panel, stuck out my hand and pushed the off-button so the chair wouldn’t make a sudden lurch. Then I leaned forward as far as I was able and stretched out my arms, made myself into a jungle-gym. Thea looked up with a quivering lip and tears in her eyes, but she reached out her arms and came as close as she could, and while I tugged, she kicked and worked her way up my calves and thighs until I had her in my lap.

The little body encased in wool was sweaty and warm and full of the long day, and for a moment I felt my own heartbeat slow down now that she was with me.

I steered us over to the cloakroom spot where Thea’s name was written on an oval piece of cardboard decorated with flowers around the edge. Her snowsuit hung on its hook. I normally wouldn’t bother with it, we don’t live far away. But normally I had the child carrier with me. In which case, I could keep my jacket open and have her right up against my chest, and then her wool sweater and cap and mittens were sufficiently warm. Her snowsuit was big and unwieldy, and she didn’t like putting it on inside, she got hot and grumpy quickly. I swung the chair around so I could get close enough to take it off the hook, I could already tell she didn’t want to wear it.

“Can I help you?” asked Lene, she sounded irritated, and I glanced up at the clock. Four minutes past. Sofie had left to start the closing procedure.

“It’s kind of important that we manage it ourselves,” I said, even though I hardly believed it myself, not in this moment. *Why* was it important? Because the clock was ticking. Because soon, maybe, there were going to be even more of us. Because our margins might get even narrower. It was this sense that had been carrying me for a long time, the sense that we were living on borrowed time.

Thea struggled and resisted. I couldn’t get her into her snowsuit when she was kicking, her two small legs had borne her weight for long enough now that they had a bit of strength to them.

“I think I’m going to help you a little,” said Lene, loud and clear. She lifted Thea off my lap and got her quickly and efficiently into the suit.

It only took a few seconds. Soon we were outside in the cool air. Thea calmed down, for a while.

She should have had a few extra minutes in the kindergarten, time enough to go over to the corner and poop in peace, the way she often signaled to us that she wanted to do. She should have had her way and had her diaper changed there.

But it was too much to ask, and she was hardly capable of asking; she’d tried.

Even though I dread what’s to come, at the same time I long for the day when we will better understand each other. They say it tends to happen around a child’s second birthday, or two and a half, an avalanche of words, two meanings rubbed up against each other until a fire is lit. And I could see the omens, in the way she would listen to me and Hannah for short, concentrated stretches before being distracted by something more exciting, a shoe, a cat, a bird.

At the same time, I was sad that what we had now would soon be gone. Thea had transformed herself into a new creature several times already, when she started walking, when she started crawling, when she got teeth. Her little dolphin smile was long gone. And I was sad for every single day I had been at the hotel and not at home, been there pretending to work, as if I did anything of consequence, while Hannah stayed home with Thea.

Be present. Appreciate this time. Seize the moment. But the moment is unseizable. It eludes you no matter how much you grasp for it, and then another moment comes, and another, the moments stream past, like a river, and the best you can do is position yourself in the middle and let the water flow over you.

If anyone is able to seize the moment, it’s Thea, and she can only do this because she doesn’t know that it will be gone. When language finally comes, so will the idea of the future. She’ll turn into a creature who understands that it will one day die.

But not yet. Not yet.

She still seizes the moments with both hands. Running water and the texture of wool carpets and the many shapes and contours of the wheelchair, the valve caps on the wheels that Hannah has to screw on extra tight so Thea won’t pull them off and swallow them.

Before she could walk, she would slink over to me like a pudgy, uncoordinated tiger, with razor-sharp focus on her magical prey.

And shoes. This thing with the shoes. Not like a tiger, that’s not right. More like a dog. A clumsy, nice, playful and curious dog that wonders what the humans are doing. Who is like them, but not entirely.

That’s what it’s like when you don’t know the world. A shoe, what’s that? A fabulous thing. It sits on the foot, but it is *not* the foot., it can be removed and put back on, it has soft and hard parts, parts that can open and close. That sounds like a riddle, and it is a riddle; the world is a riddle and a mystery.

Every time I yanked her out of the moment or let her be yanked out of it, it felt like violence, and it had become necessary more and more often now, now with the kindergarten. While Hannah dove back into her studies and I clung to my work at the hotel, I felt guilty every time I went on watch because the moment would vanish, once more. But we don’t have time for it now.

I breathed easier those first hours, and for as long as the feelings of freedom lasted, I felt guilty for that too, but then I arrived at a tipping point of sorts, especially if it was a laid-back night on watch, when the emptiness took over and I knew that it was still a long time to go before I went home.

I used to use these periods to write, I was as discrete as I could be about it in a small, thin notebook that I kept in my jacket pocket.

I wrote what I could and thought about Snorre, about the book I never got to write, that I wished I had finished; now I’ve given it up. The book I’m writing, I’m writing it inside of myself.

There are fragments and ideas and stories that don’t connect. But it’s all okay, as long as I forget about ambition and about things needing to connect. About them being between two covers.

As long as I don’t try saying anything clever about the world.

As long as I don’t try shaping meaning for anyone other than myself.

Then I can write.

We’re a long way down Bergensgata now. It’s not too late to turn around, and yet it is too late, we are not going to go home now and sit there waiting for god knows how long, we aren’t going to sit there as Thea grows more restless because it’s the time of day she needs to breastfeed, as she gets mad at me and paws at my chest in frustration because I don’t have breasts, because my body has to say no.

She never took to the bottle. Not a chance. It took hours and hours just to get her to drink half a thimble full. Different bags, different angles, different times of day. Not a chance.

Her sour little face saying: I *know* what a *breast* feels like. Do you think I was born yesterday?

Oh. Now it’s happening.

She becomes quiet and concentrated. She would have preferred sitting in the corner by herself, but that isn’t possible here, so she does her baby-zen-thing while having her out-of-body-experience. I recognize that expression. A little cross but mostly concentrated.

It’s fine. We just have to figure out what to do. I’m determined and focused now, I’m on a mission, special ops, green beret’s *and* *all that*. Senses sharpened, I drive along the street, my gaze lifted, scanning, scanning, calling up the mental map of the surrounding area.

*Deploy grid.*

*Scan and search.*

The shop on the corner of Sarpsborggata, nope. There are two tall steps up to the door that swings outward, that wouldn’t be an option even if I was alone. But two blocks further down: a grocery store. I glimpse the brick building, visualize the entryway, have I been inside? Can it be? Automatic doors, *check,* smooth flat asphalt outside, *check.*

We have a winner.

The diaper change itself will be worse. What other options are beyond that, how far is it between the islands now? The bakery a bit further up, no, they’d have closed by now. The pizza place at the roundabout, maybe, no. The pub, I don’t think so.

If I want to absolute certainty, it has to be the Sagene Community Center. Which is a detour, but not a huge one. Down Maridalsveien and across Arendalsgata. Yes.

And then . . . take a bus the rest of the way? But no, not the bus. Never the bus. That would require having to wave down the driver, convince him to lower the ramp, and then wait for the next bus if he acts like he doesn’t hear me. The series of barriers piles up, none of them are things I have energy for. Energy to smile, energy to ingratiate myself.

An odor. Faint but noticeable. We’re on borrowed time now. The longer she sits squirming around on my lap, the worse it’s going to be. But ok. *This is where we’re at*.

Buy diapers first.

Then, to the community center.

We’ve got a plan.

For a while it felt good to be useful. The hotel was a large machine set down in the middle of the city, even in the middle of the night buses drove to Jernbanetorget and there was a constant stream of desperate people running in the direction of the 24/7 pharmacy on the other side of the plaza. Once when I got bored at work, I looked up the name of this plaza: The Council of Europe Square. I had lived in Oslo my whole life but never come across this name. A nondescript name for a nondescript place and the longer I sat staring out toward the ugly, random buildings, the less useful I felt.

Some hotels are managed almost without receptionists. Budget hotels, cheap hotels, hostels, there are a lot of them. As a rule, there’s usually one human available just in case, *just in case*, but your average checking-in and -out procedure is the easiest thing in the world to automate. Keycards are cheap, they’re just as easy to activate as to deactivate, it doesn’t matter if they aren’t returned, they are completely replaceable. Or a phone-operated lock.

“That’s what makes us unique,” said Turid.

We were supposed to be big, but on a human scale. Effective, but generous. Accommodating and professional.

“People remember faces,” said Tormod. “That’s how we evolved. We remember faces, and we react to facial expressions. If someone smiles at us, we want to smile back. That’s just how we’re hardwired.”

Turid nodded as he spoke.

Tormod enjoyed giving these small lectures for us. For motivation. For those of us who were diversity hires and therefore needed extra motivation. A little morality boost. Not unlike those postcards in the bathrooms urging the guests to reuse their towels.

There is a limit to how long a person can be someone else’s morality boost without it taking a toll. But what else is one to do with a C-average in some useless Humanities major? Has good character, the description said. Not good enough to get a job. Only exceptional people got jobs, those who stood out. I didn’t stand out. At least, not in any way that helped.

I only ever went to an interview once. Application number hundred and something. Hannah was in her eighth month, and I didn’t know if my welfare benefits would be extended. The interview was with a company that, among other things, produced content descriptions of TV programs. Based on longer descriptions from the producers or the channel but boiled down to a semi-grammatically correct sentence.

*An investigative team is given free rein to mop up the wave of crime threatening to overwhelm the big city*.

*Pia’s residential dream came true when she purchased Bølling Mølle* *outside of Egtvedt in 2008.*

*Julia is 27 and enjoying her life of luxury.*

I had, for some reason or other, never in my life considered that these texts had been written by a human being. But I wrote on the application that I was good at reading and processing information quickly and also that I was positive and conscientious and took initiative.

There must not have been very many applicants for that job.

The office was located in Holberg Terrace, just near the college that was on its way to getting accredited as a university.

I didn’t mention in my application that I was a wheelchair user, but when they called to invite me to the interview, I knew I had to say something. After scheduling the appointment, I took a deep breath and asked in as calm a voice as I could muster: “Is your office wheelchair accessible?”

The pause seemed longer than it must have been.

“Wheelchair accessible?”

“Yes.”

“Yes. . ., yes, I believe so. We have an elevator?”

For the next two days, I waited for them to call and cancel, or just send an email.

I turned off the notification because I jumped whenever I saw the red dot above the little letter-icon, but instead I logged in and checked every ten minutes to see if I’d received a friendly cancellation notice. *We are grateful for your interest, but…*

But that never happened. Instead, I showed up at the appointed time. The door into the building was heavy, and there wasn’t an automatic opener, but a man in a grey suit was on the way out and held it open for me. I took the elevator up to the fifth floor and knocked.

In the window of time from when the door was opened and his gaze shifted, looking down and not away, a cup could have fallen through that window, fallen down from a table to smash on the floor.

His name was Rune and he was the office manager, he took it upon himself to show me around the office landscape. Show me that the desks were adjustable, for ergonomic reasons, they could go up or down, up or down.

I took a writing test. I had learned typing in elementary school and could type 65 words per minute on a good day.

“Very impressive,” said Rune. He showed me the rest of the space. The lunchroom was on the other side of the stairwell. Rune held open the first door, I drove out, he walked past me and held open the second door.

“This might be a challenge,” he said, as if to himself.

We talked about what the job entailed, where the information came from and where it was going. Rune filled me in on the company’s history and how they’d recently entered a good phase. Even if things weren’t going well with print newspapers, there was enough to do. “The market for metadata is big and hungry. Information about information. In that way, we’re in the same line of work as Netflix and Amazon,” said Rune, chuckling. He was wearing a light green button-down shirt that stretched tightly over his stomach, and his access card hung around his neck on a strap that said Telenor.

It felt like a real interview, he even asked me when I might possibly be able to start. Possibly.

Three days passed. After that I received an email in which Rune took care to write that our conversation had been very nice and that I would have been a valuable addition to the staff, but that I was simply too overqualified for the job. With my master’s degree in literary science, it was obvious I had my sites set higher and that I would not stay for long at InfoTec A/S. Rune wished me the best of luck in my career.

And that was that.

It took a long time for social services to get me plugged into the diversity hire program. A fantastic opportunity, a first step into the labor market for *members of vulnerable groups*. A federal wage supplement for one year and thereafter the possibility of ordinary employment.

How could I say no to that?

And I did have something to offer; it was true. I was a morality boost. One day, early on, the first month, a man who I was checking in gave me with a very peculiar look. A hungry look.

Hannah had told me about this, how it felt to be stared at in this way, outside on the street, from the age of thirteen, and I knew what she meant, but I had never experienced it, on the contrary. In general, people usually tried expressly *not* to stare, which was obvious too, once I first began taking note of it, but someone who is actively trying *not* to stare is also a strange sight, they move just as stiffly and unnaturally as the palace guards.

The man was in his sixties and had short, white hair and a beard: God after a trip to the barbershop.

“Your room is on the eleventh floor,” I said. “It’s high up with a great view. The elevator is just around the corner over there, you’ll need your card to make it work. Breakfast is from six thirty a.m. and you can access the WiFi by logging in with your room number and surname.”

“Thank you,” he said.

He stood. I handed him the keycard, tucked into a small paper envelope.

He stared at me.

To my right, Stian was talking to another guest at the counter, but behind him, Selima was alone, and it was a quiet day, no one else was in line. No reason to hurry.

The man’s face was mild and friendly, but he couldn’t take his eyes off me. Then he came out with what he had been waiting to say.

“If you don’t mind my asking, why are you sitting in that vehicle?”

At first, I didn’t know what he meant. I mean that I didn’t understand the wording of his question. It must have been the old-fashioned formulation of *vehicle*, as if he was trying as hard as he could to avoid the designation *wheelchair*. But then I understood what he was asking. My stomach grew tight; my heartbeat started pounding.

“Why?” I said.

“Yes, you must excuse me,” he said. “Maybe the question is too personal.”

If I hadn’t been so tense, I might have laughed. No, the question wasn’t too personal. It was no more personal than if he had asked Selima where she was from, originally. To which Selima would smile her intense smile, the smile that was so enormous and American that it looked aggressive, and every time she was asked that question she replied, “Haugesund.”

If they asked her again, she would repeat her answer once more and make her dialect broad and glittery as a fish. “Haugesund.”

That was what I should have said.

“Why are you sitting in that vehicle?”

“Yes, well, you know. Haugesund.”

I hesitated. The silence continued.

I knew I was making it difficult for him. All I needed to give him was some small explanation. A little story. A solution to the mystery. Only a few words. A life story and a tragedy, compounded into a single sentence. Something he already knew but packaged finely. A little parable he could take with him.

I couldn’t do it. It wasn’t in me. I didn’t know if he wanted to heal me or show me empathy or what exactly he was after, but whatever he wanted to offer me, I didn’t want it.

I was trapped behind the counter. I couldn’t think of an excuse to end the conversation, some secret trick. I stared at the telephone and tried to force it to ring telepathically but it stayed quiet.

Finally, he gave up and began to speak.

“The reason I’m asking, you see, is because my brother, he was paralyzed. Had an accident. Hit his head on a rock when he was nineteen. I’m from the south, you can probably hear from my accent. We practically lived in the water every summer. We were half-fish half-human. And my brother, Kristian, he was incredibly athletic. Much more so than me. And he always wanted to show off a little bit, you know. For the ladies.”

“So, once, we were down on the bedrock at the shore. At night. That’s why. We knew the beach and the rocks and the water like the back of our hand. But not in the dark. It was so stupid what he decided to do, Kristian, jumping like that in the dark. But he did it. It’s almost like you start to believe in your own hubris, like the old Greeks.”

The man was moved by his own story, his eyes were glossy. He swallowed heavily. Took off his glasses with the red frames and rubbed the bridge of his nose with his thumb and forefinger.

“I don’t want to saddle you with this. My brother died several years ago, which was later than he actually wished he would die. It wasn’t a life, you know. Things weren’t like they are today.”

“What I guess I’m trying to say is that I think it’s great, what you’re capable of doing. It’s great that you’re able to work. I want to compliment you on that.”

He coughed and pulled himself together. I sat, frozen. I nodded carefully.

“Okay, thanks,” I said. “Thanks for that.”

He smiled at me.

“You have a good day now.”

I smiled back, as much as I could.

“Thanks, you too.”

Toward the end of that week, Turid asked if I could come by when my shift ended. For a quick chat.

I felt nauseous for the rest of the day. I wondered what I’d done wrong. I thought about that guest, whether I’d offended him, but he had seemed satisfied when he left, I couldn’t figure it out. I had arrived late to work one of the days, my transport car was late, but not more than two or three minutes late, I hadn’t even thought Turid had noticed.

I went over everything I had done, task by task, point by point. There was nothing other than that one late day.

Turid was beaming when I came in. One of the guests had left such a nice review.

“Yes, and it’s very clear that you’re the one he’s writing about,” she said, winking at me. “He says you both shared an incredibly good conversation when he was checked in. I thought you’d appreciate the praise.”

Yes, thanks. It’s good I was able to make his day a bit more meaningful, to allow him to feel some warmth around the edges of his heart. That little bit extra, a human touch. Priceless.

There’s no doubt in my mind that I play an important role in modern, complex society. In this season, in this portion of the great narrative. I’m just not certain that role has a future.

The automatic doors at the supermarket glide open and we drive into the light and warmth, through the step-free portal, hallelujah. It’s a seedy little shop, but Thea’s ecstatic. She likes anything new, colors, movements, textures.

We make our way in. Past the bananas, past the milk, I’m going to need something to keep her going. There. She sees them already, her arms start waving and she says deh-deh-DEH. Fruit squeezies. Baby crack.

I drive straight up to them. Turn off the wheelchair so we won’t suddenly lurch or bump into something.

“Yes, yes, you’re going to get one.”

I stretch and pick out three different flavors. Banana and passionfruit, strawberry and carrot, pear and apricot. Why do I get three? A variation in fare? Fear that she will be one of those adults who never eats anything but banana and passionfruit?

“Wait just a minute, okay.”

Alright. So, this was not completely thought through. The diapers are over there, a bit further down the aisle on the shelf, but there’s no getting to them now, not now that she’s realized it’s time for treats.

“Thea, you need to get down now, okay? Down on the floor?”

I hand her one of the squeezies and put the other two back on the shelf. I will need both hands for this. To grip her beneath her shoulders and to nudge and guide her forward on my knees, hoping she understands, that she is with me on this.

She’s with me. She’s focused on the squeezie now, the reward, she would rob a bank with me if I asked her to. Down onto the floor, take off the mittens, twist the stopper from the squeezie. Success. Don’t forget about the other two squeezies, grab and put them into my pocket.

“And now, the diapers. Diapers, right, a fresh diaper? And wipes.”

Never forget wipes. I should keep a supply of them in the bag behind my seat. I reprimand myself about this at least once a week.

We’ve almost made it to the cashier when someone says “Magne?” and I think, no, not Magne, but it’s always me. It’s never once happened that anyone has ever mistaken me for someone else. Go figure.

There’s something familiar about him, he’s tall with short, curly hair and he’s pushing a stroller with another baby strapped to his chest, but it’s Terje from Literary Science with that same old nervous energy of his.

I nod. He’s holding a shopping basket and a bag in one hand and is pointing at Thea with the other hand and saying: “Is this your daughter?”

Two seconds’ pause and I say:

“Well, one can never be too sure. Your kids?” I say, nodding at the three-year-old in the stroller and the one on his chest.

Terje laughs nervously.

“Of course,” he says. “I’m not sure why I said that. That’s the kind of thing people just say, isn’t it?”

It sure is. People say things like that to me all the time.

“It’s been so long,” says Terje. “Do you live nearby?”

“Yes,” I say. “We live in Bjølsen.”

“Ah, gentrification,” he says. And to illustrate his meaning, he holds up the bag, which is from Nøstebarn. The boutique kids shop where he paid four hundred kroner for a wool onesie. We used to have one, a gift from my mom. After two rounds of burping and one round in the washing machine, the onesie had shrunk a size smaller, hard and shriveled. Hannah went into the store to ask if it might be due to product failure, and they asked her in turn whether she had used the normal laundry soap, and when she said yes, they nodded back sadly, yes, a lot of people did that, people who hadn’t read the instructions. The natural wool soap that included lanolin cost forty kroner for one hundred milliliters, but if there was a really stubborn stain, they could also recommend a stain remover spray for one hundred and thirty. But in that case, it might be better to buy a lanolin treatment for one hundred and twenty kroner.

“Anette and I live in Torshov, up near the park. It’s nice there. A lot of cultured people. Almost like it was in Ullevål when I was little. A great back yard.”

I remember how much dad would complain about the petty bourgeoisie. He said he would rather live in Frogner, to have a proper bourgeois life. He called the Ullevål Hageby residential area a monument to the historical defeat of the working class and said that living there was like living in the old Jewish quarter in Berlin, surrounded by Germans. He likes saying things like that. Snorre liked it too.

Sometimes I think that Snorre was the one who should have been his son, but maybe I just wished Snorre’s parents could have been my own. Maybe that would have made everything different now.

“So, how are things, where do you work?” Terje asks, as if we have all the time in the world. Thea has emptied her squeezie, some of its contents are on her cheeks, but not too much, she’s getting better with her hands. My legs are still freezing but I am sweating more and more beneath my jacket, I glance in the direction of the cash register, but can’t quite break it off.

A part of me replies *it doesn’t matter, I’ll be going on welfare soon*, but instead I say, “Hotel and restaurant,” and smile. “I’m mostly at The Tower, in the city center.”

“Oh,” he says. “Oh?”

“Yes, I surprised myself a little too,” I say. Something happens then and I keep talking, covering up, it’s like a rail has been switched in my head and the train is traveling down its own track.

“I realized I couldn’t stand the whole humanities-thing. It’s a pretty destructive and critical culture, at least for me it was. Always tearing apart what someone else is saying, looking for what’s wrong, you know? It might be a big cliché, but the private sector is about what works, about how a person can contribute. It’s a much more positive construct.”

Terje nods while I’m speaking, following along halfway.

“And you?” I ask.

“A fellowship in the dissemination of literature at OsloMet university.” He kind of shudders. “*OsloMet*, it’s not like it’s the University of Oslo. Still, I can’t complain.”

The increasingly powerful odor from Thea’s diaper no longer phases me. I’ve become an octopus, I’ve concealed myself in a cloud of words.

“Mhm,” I say. “I see. Well, I’m sort of in a rush.”

“Me too,” says Terje, nodding down at his chest. “She’s going to wake up any minute. By the way, how are things with Snorre? You were both close, weren’t you?”

“I don’t know,” I say. “I haven’t really kept tabs.”

And we exchange a look, we two successful dads on our way home to our idyllic families. Maybe I should tell him Snorre is dead and Hannah is pregnant and we’re waiting for test results and that everything is falling to pieces. But why on earth would I mention that.

Terje lets me pass and I drive up to the register. Place the package of diapers and the wipes onto the conveyer belt and then remember the squeezies in my pocket. Thea protests when I want to take the empty squeezie from her hands.

“Eeiah!”

“Could you just scan one of the other ones twice?”

“That’s fine. Do you need a bag?”

I hesitate. The bag will have to be placed behind the seat, which means I will have to stand up and turn around to hang it there, which is easier to do when we are outside, but harder to get it into place. I swallow.

“Yes. Yes, please. Could you please bag up my things for me?”

“Huh?”

The checker is nineteen or twenty. He’s not unfriendly, but he’s not friendly either, he has more of a neutral I’m-sitting-here-but-I’m-somewhere-else expression.

“Can you please *put the things into a bag for me*?” I say again. “Please. And then come around and hook it over the back of the seat? There’s a hook on the back, here.”

“Um, okay,” he says with a tone that sounds like I’ve just asked him to come pick my nose. But he does it. He places the diapers and wipes and the squeezies into the plastic bag and then he waits while I fish my card holder out of the inner pocket of my jacket and insert it into the card reader. He checks that it is authorized, that I am not harboring some insidious plan to distract him while making off with loads more cash in diaper form, and then he comes around and fastens the bag onto the carabiner on the back of my seat.

I can feel Terje’s gaze on us throughout this entire transaction. I don’t know what he is thinking, but when I am finally finished, equipped for the journey ahead, I hear a cough and my name.

I turn the chair around. He’s standing at the register, the stroller pushed ahead of him, a small pile of goods on the conveyor belt, the baby in the carrier on his chest, and the Nøstebarn bag in his hand, but he is unaffected by all of this, by all the things he is juggling.

“I read your father’s latest book,” he says. “The one from last year. It’s really good.”

He gives me a thumbs up, and I lift my chin as a response, I don’t have any hands left over.

The rage returns as soon as we are back outside in the cold, as soon as I’m alone with Thea. Poor Terje. It’s not his fault. It’s no one’s fault. The rage does not have a source, it comes from every direction, like cosmic rays. It reflects and amplifies within me, but I don’t have anywhere to direct it to either, I just emit the rays back, I’m radioactive with rage.

But I cannot show this because the saying isn’t: raging cripple.

It’s: emotional.

We fly through the darkness, fly through the cold, fly through the snow. Thea sings a little song to herself on my lap, eeeEEEeeeEEEEeee, I sing in my head along with Afrika Bambaataa and John Lydon.

*Speak about destruction / Speak about destruction / Speak about destruction.*

That helps. It almost makes me happy. As long as I can square my shoulders and squeeze Thea to me and speed onward, determined as a rugby player.

My left side is starting to hurt from the strain, it is going to be uncomfortable soon, but at least we are on the move, and this is the goal, for now.

I don’t know whether it was such a good idea to deceive Terje like that. We have enough acquaintances in common that the topic could come up in conversation. I don’t want to have a reputation that I lie about having a better job than I actually do. But where are our common acquaintances, who might he possibly mention it to? I don’t have anything to do with the literary world anymore, or with the university, I hardly ever meet anyone.

But if Terje does say something, to someone, it will most likely be in passing, you know Magne, I met him at a show, yeah, he’s doing well. He’s working and everything.

And that will be it.

I could have just told him the truth. That I’m on my second year of wage subsidies and that things at this point could go either up or downhill, that I have a job in hotel reception on charity, that hundreds of other rejected applicants are waiting in the wings, but I didn’t say that, the obstinance and resistance inside me would not give that to Terje, I didn’t want him to be able to leave the conversation thinking *oh, poor Magne, he's not doing so well.*

I don’t know where it comes from, this stubbornness. It’s not from dad, he hasn’t been driven by stubbornness, he’s been driven by restlessness and egoism and ambitions.

Dad is more self-pitying than any other person I know, but I suspect it’s because I don’t know any other authors. Snorre tended to say that they’re exactly the same as everyone else. They guard their wounds and injuries like baby birds, pecking and scratching at them and making sure they don’t heal over, not until they’re sure they will turn into beautiful scars.

The stubbornness isn’t from Mom either. She gave Dad up, but she was never quite free of him, he hung around like an odor she couldn’t air out.

She wasn’t good at giving things up, but on the other hand she wasn’t all that good at starting anything either, or completing things. I asked her why I didn’t start at Sagene school, which was the school closest to where we lived, and she only said: It didn’t work out. Nothing about why, or how hard she’d tried, maybe she never tried at all, maybe she only received messages.

It didn’t work out, unfortunately. It’s somewhat impractical for everyone.

Ah, well.

That’s just how it is, then, I suppose.

I can’t believe that Hannah is pregnant again.

I can’t believe she could let this happen. She was so certain she wasn’t menstruating. She was so certain it was safe. I count backwards, count down from twelve, as if that’s going to solve anything. As if that could turn back time. As if the outcome isn’t fixed, hasn’t been fixed for a long time.

The Community Center is up ahead, it’s still open, the windows are lit up. An oasis in the desert, the Shangri-La for every exhausted parent of small children. With its café in which no one raises an eyebrow if the floor is covered in food, and you just can go straight in, and there are bathrooms with changing tables.

It’s not a moment too soon. Before we’ve even entered the warmth, Thea starts to whimper, she is wet and sticky and has been smearing around in her diaper, my entire body knows this is true.

Her feelings are not my feelings, they aren’t, but it is my job to embrace them, to hold them safe and sound, for they are mine too, when she is on my lap, the contact is close, when she is in the carrier, even with several layers of fabric between us, we are body against body, the way it was from the very beginning.

The first time I held her in the carrier, it felt like a phantom limb became reality, as if an outline, a transparent form, was filled in with flesh and blood. It was at the hospital, for the earliest period she had been Hannah’s alone, but now I held her in my arms, although I was nervous about not supporting her enough, and each time I counted the seconds until I had to give her back.

And then I was handed a baby carrier with the newborn inside it and saw that she was secure, I could bend my head down toward her soft head and inhale the scent of her without thinking about anything else, I could just think, *you are mine*. Heartbeat against heartbeat and breath against breath.

Now she is on her way to becoming something else, her own creature, but the bond is still strong, we are both agitated as I push the button to open the door and it slowly pushes open, as we cross the entryway and find the door to the bathroom, as I do the clumsy little pirouette to pull the door closed, I hesitate and consider whether to lock it or not.

*Don’t*, a voice inside me says, and I listen to it. You never know.

“So, Thea, now we can get you in order,” I say. She’s unhappy and impatient, but there’s no quick fix here. First thing’s first, I raise the seat of the chair, far enough that I can stretch out my arms and loosen the mechanism on the changing table, it folds down heavily into place with a small shudder, I will need it first to pile with mittens, hats, anything I don’t want to have to pick up from the floor.

I pull these things off her and put them on the table, the same with her shoes, I won’t be able to get her snowsuit off if her shoes are still on. There is a hold and a technique in which she can stand upright and be changed while her snowsuit is in a little pile around her legs, but this is beyond my reach, and so we have to go about it systematically here so we don’t make a mess of things.

I open my own jacket and let it rest on the chair seat. Should I stand or not? I can get up higher on my legs, but then I’m less stable; I am more secure in the chair, but then everything takes longer, to turn toward the sink and turn back, the changing table is just high enough that it makes things awkward in either case.

“Thea, you need to get onto the changing table now, up onto the table, can you climb?”

And she understands what I am saying to her. Precisely in this moment I am able to get through to her, she recognizes her surroundings, what kind of a room we are in, we share the same project now, and this is a good moment, it fortifies me. She pushes off and crawls off my lap onto the changing table, stands there and tuts with pride: taller than Papa.

This isn’t going to work, not from this angle, I raise the seat higher, a bit more, back the wheelchair up, I lift myself and stand. “Sit down, Thea, don’t stand, I’m coming, sit down, sit down now.”

I grasp the chair as I walk around behind it, take the package of diapers and the wipes out of the bag, put them into the sink. The pack of diapers has tough plastic at the opening, I use my teeth to open it and using my teeth again, pull out a diaper from the compressed mass inside, they are too compressed for me to use my fingers. Now we are ready, Thea has been ready for a long time.

Snap open her wool bodysuit, pull it up and snap it onto her shoulder so it doesn’t fall down. Praise be to whoever invented snap buttons, but why do they have to be so small, so hard?

“Thea, no dancing now, please. Stay still, stay still.”

“EeeeEEEEeee. Papa!”

Pull down her leggings, it’s a miracle, nothing has leaked out. Relief like a wave floods my body.

“Okay. Okay.”

Should I change her standing up or lying down?

I have no chance of holding her legs, not if she kicks. Small chubby thighs have grown stronger, they’ve been carrying her body around for a while now. At least that’s one thing we don’t have to worry about.

I undo the diaper flaps on one side, on the other, try to hold the diaper like a shovel and excavate as much as I can as I pull it off.

Okay.

Well, things could be worse, they could be better. I go at it with the wipes. So what if I have to use the whole pack. She marches up and down, exercising on the spot, wants to get up and pull my beard. So happy and free. If only we lived in a land where it was never winter. If only we could walk around in the warmth every day.

Wipe, wipe, wipe, gather all the wipes into the open diaper, we’re getting close now, the goal is in sight.

That’s when it happens. I feel it before I think it, I think it before I feel it. Something is wrong, and I think no, but it’s already too late. I am packing the diaper full of wipes and poop, closing it up and I take a step to the garbage bin, toss it in, am back at the sink and have the new diaper ready to put on, I wish I had thought to buy cream too at the store, her skin is so sore and red from all the wipes, but there’s nothing I can do about that now, and that’s when I fall.

My left foot hits the wheelchair footrest on my way back, and that’s all it takes, a shift that messes up the balance, and there’s nothing I can do to restore it again. I know why I’m falling. It happens when I calculate wrong and don’t look out, and it happens when I’m tired. I’ve been tired ever since Thea was born. Since long before that. I am going to be tired in the future. There’s still a long way to go.

Everything happens very, very slowly on my way down. That’s the worst thing about it. I do not have the reflexes to catch myself, but I know that I’m falling, the world spins at a ninety-degree tilt and the brick floor is closing in and there’s nothing I can do.

After Hannah took the second pregnancy test, after we were certain, I called the genetics center at Riks Hospital. I hardly remembered having spoken to someone there, but they remembered who I was. They had my file. And they scheduled us for a consultation, an urgent one. It was as if they had suddenly found out that Hannah was carrying a time bomb in her belly.

We sat there one Tuesday morning, in a room that was just a room. No examination table, no stethoscopes or blood pressure monitors. No skeleton on a stand in the corner and no cupboards.

Nothing but a small box of toys and a carpet on the floor, in case a child needed to be distracted while the adults spoke about what would have to happen for this child to become an older sibling. But Thea was at kindergarten that day.

And I explained how my illness negatively affected my quality of life. I gave a thorough and detailed explanation, to substantiate that this condition was a *serious illness*.

I told them about everything that I was unable to do, I talked about the pains in my ankles and the wear and tear on my muscles.

It sounded ridiculous even to myself.

My descriptions sounded no more serious than the kind of ailments suffered as a result of soccer practice.

The doctor nodded and took notes. She seemed about ten years older than me, but she was friendly and exuded extreme confidence. Authoritative. But it was important that this came from me. That the confession had my own signature and had been formed by my own words. This was not a decision to be made on our behalf. This was a decision we had to make ourselves.

“Regardless of how it goes, I must emphasize that conducting such tests can have . . . strong effects on people. Whatever the outcome. You will not be the same afterwards. It’s important to be prepared for this.”

What kind of preparation could she possibly mean? Preparation for disappointment? In that case I was well prepared. Inaccessible busses, the housing market, the joys of late capitalism, fuck it, why not take responsibility for this, too?

I couldn’t bring myself to look at Hannah. Not while I was talking. It was too much. I could feel her hand on mine, but I couldn’t look at her or to touch her while I said the necessary words, the words in the confession that was also a betrayal of our life together. Or, rather, an unveiling, a nail puncturing the balloon. The narrative that we were like everyone else, that there wasn’t anything particularly wrong with me. That we were normal.

We had reached the core of the issue now. This was reality. Behind all the mild words like diversity and inclusivity and equality and full participation, there was this, blood and bones and DNA and placenta tests, a long, pointed needle going into Hannah’s abdomen. Not my body, her body, but because of me and what I carried inside me. Blood and bones.

I spoke until I was empty, told everything that I could about how serious this illness was, about how heavily my life was affected because of it, that it didn’t have anything to do with the society around us, the fault wasn’t in the stars, but in me, and when it came down to it, this illness was not compatible with having a good life. If it turned out that the fetus inside of Hannah carried it, then we would have to invoke Section 2(c), the eugenic indication, and kill that fetus before it destroyed our lives. For our sake and for its own.

I have not been seriously injured. I think. Although I don’t know how I would know if I was. I have hit my head, and I can feel that, it hit hard, I could feel it, but almost as abstractly as a feeling of *hard*, and now it just feels tender there on the left side, tender and throbbing somewhat.

Thea is crying. I hear it now. She is on the changing table. Thea is on the changing table and can’t get down. She must not try to climb down by herself.

“Thea!” I say, and then: breathe in, breathe out. Calmer now:

“Thea. Wait, wait. Papa is coming.”

She hears my voice but doesn’t understand what’s happening. I am trying to understand it myself. There must be a solution to this. I test out my muscles as I speak to Thea, saying words and sentences I hope are calming. A light voice, cheerful, mild. This is all a game, nothing bad has happened. Isn’t it fun to have a bare bottom, to air yourself out a little? We aren’t in a hurry. We have all the time in the world, and we are going to need it.

I consider the way up, the way back. I consider that I can call for help, that there are people outside the door, that the door isn’t locked. I consider what kind of a scene we will make for whoever comes in and what will happen afterwards. I must manage this myself. I must.

And then I think of it, it’s so simple, and I start to sing. It is a song that Thea never tires of, it has an infinite number of verses, both Hannah and I sing it for her when she doesn’t want to sing, the words light up in my head, and as I start to turn, as I force my body to move, I start singing, with limited remaining breath, with a thin voice that is somewhat staccato, but loud enough for Thea to hear, the absurd, creepy folk song I know she loves.

*A man went awalk in the timber wood, hey farah in the timber wood…*

And at once she calms down. We are on a little adventure together now.

I take hold of the wheelchair. With my right hand, I grab the left footrest and hold on so tightly my knuckles whiten. I think of that scene in *Kill Bill* when Uma Thurman wakes up from her coma and wheels herself out to her car. Mobility has returned to her arms but not yet to her legs, and she drags herself into the back seat and gets situated and then she commands herself, her body: *Wiggle your big toe.*

I can’t do it. This way is too heavy. My elbows down on the floor, forcing my upper body up. Yes. I could use stomach muscles. To get into range. The floor provides good friction. I can feel the hard stone through my pants, against my knees.

I am now standing in a low arc. My head pressed against the footrest, I can feel its sharp edge against my forehead. It isn’t painful, just hard, uncomfortable. Now slightly higher. I climb with my hand up along the edge of the wheelchair until it is far up, all the way up to the seat. The armrest is in reach. A good grip.

And then, at last. Cue triumphant music. I haul myself up onto my knees. I peer up at Thea. Don’t cry. I’m coming now.

Closer against the wheelchair. Embrace it like a friend. My upper body against the metal and rubber and nylon fabric. I feel you, and you feel me. My whole body feels beat up, battered, but now I am safe, back in the embrace.

My left hand finds the steering panel. The on button and the little, electronic sign of life. Beep. Careful now, be extremely careful. Don’t touch the joystick, the beast is alive, it must not suddenly lurch forward, roll me over. The right button, the button to lift the seat. I can press it down. Carefully grip the steering panel. Shift weight over on the right side, lean myself as far into the seat as possible.

I am as focused as it is possible to be. Thea, everything is alright. Everything is alright. We’ll manage this.

And if we can’t, if I slip or fall off now and the seat is too high up for me to reach, what then? I will lie on the floor and call for help. Be witnessed like this, with Thea crying on the changing table. No.

The seat rises unbearably slowly and lifts my body with it. And there, *there*, I feel that my leg is high enough up. My heels on the floor and my knees against the chair. I am shaking. Careful now. I push the button and turn the chair off. Create tension against it with my feet and from my elbows and press all my weight toward the chair.

The chair is as solid as a rock, like an oil platform embedded in the seafloor. Wheelchair-bound, indeed.

I press all my weight forward, and by fits and start, one centimeter per fit and start, I shift position, up, up. I’m up at last.

Thea is surprisingly calm. I maneuver the seat up to the highest position and steer the chair over to her. She cooperates as I help her with her pull-up and leggings. Snap the stubborn snaps on her onesie. She is whimpering a little but she’s not pushing back. Maybe she’s scared, but I can’t think about that, I don’t have any use for that thought.

I glance at myself in the mirror.

It could be worse. Scraped up on my temple, but it’s only a few drops of blood. Nothing major. And in any case, we’re on our way to the ER. A blessing in disguise.

Out into the cold once more. Out into the world. I feel calm and collected. We’re on our way to the ER. To Mama. That is where we are going. Where we will all be together. Hannah is waiting for us, even if she doesn’t realize it.

I steer out into the road again. Arendalsgata, in the direction of Bentsebrua. Over to Torshov and then take the tram to the center.

I sometimes wonder how often Hannah regrets being together with me. Whether she stays because she doesn’t want to prove her parents right. To prove the world right. She’s stubborn, this much I know about her. Stubbornness is good. It’s just not enough.

In the old Woody-Allen film, from the days when he was young and creepy instead of old and creepy, there is this scene. Snorre loved those movies. Woody is walking around in a bookstore with Diane Keaton showing her all his favorite books, the ones about death, and then he says that there is an important divide between *the miserable* and *the horrible*, and he doesn’t know how they can stand it, the horrible, the people with real problems, but at the very least their situation puts his own suffering into perspective.

He can’t imagine how it is to live like that, he doesn’t actually want to, either. He merely wants to know that they exist, those who are worse off than him.

Sometimes it seems like Hannah thinks she’s a kind of single parent. That she’s the only one caring for Thea, that everything depends on her and her alone. I wish she had worked things out better with my mom. Who *was*, in fact, a single parent.

It didn’t help matters that she was the one who had all the maternity leave time. That she was the one who had to delay her studies and kind of took the hit. That she’s the only one who has had to give something up. We’ve reached a dead end and I don’t know how we can get out of it. It’s like she’s decided she’s the only one who can take care of Thea. Even if I’m the one sitting with Thea on my lap right now. And if we have another child, if this happens, we will be heading even deeper down the dead end track. If it turns out to be a child with the same diagnosis as me. If we have to do everything we’re doing now, only more so. I don’t know what we will do. What I will do. We’ll drown.

And it’s true that she is the mother, of course, but it’s not only about breastfeeding and the things that, because of purely biological reasons, only she can do. She’s anxious about leaving Thea alone with me, still. I remember the first time I noticed it, in the very beginning. “Is something wrong,” I asked, but there wasn’t anything wrong, at least not anything she could say, it was just this look, the way she looked at Thea and me, at me and Thea, if I was playing with her, and later, when she tried climbing up into the wheelchair, there was this looks that was so far from what it should have been, it was scrutinizing and probing, and then I realized what it was, that she didn’t trust me.

We are moving through the icy darkness, both of us, and I still have a kernel of this strange goal-oriented attitude inside of me, this determination to reach our destination, it’s as if Thea has caught it from me seated there on my lap.

I’ve noticed it before, how restless she gets when we get restless and how different it is when we have things to do, regardless what it is, clean the apartment or make lunch, she likes to see us doing things, moving, working with something, then she can follow us with her eyes and move her own small limbs the way we do, if Hannah is drying the counter with a cloth, then Thea wants her own cloth, to imitate us, to do the same thing.

“Look at the houses,” I say to her. “Look at the lights, look at the city. Look at the people.”

I never feel as much like her papa as in moments like this, when we are both moving together.

There are so few photos of me together with my father. But I have one, it’s one I take care of. They are going on a walk in the woods, he and mom. They did try, sometimes. Tried going for a walk together, with me.

She’s the one taking the picture, I’m sitting in a framed carrier backpack on his back. Unsupported, undoubtedly, but well-secured in the backpack. And he is looking at the camera, and I am looking at the camera, and I see that I am safe, in this photo, entirely safe.