ONE'S OWN CHILDREN
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Soon after we pass Töcksfors, Pål tells me that he had a hamster when he was a boy, and that it died in the most grotesque way. His hair is greying at the temples, and he has only one hand on the wheel. There's a hoarding by the side of the road advertising cheap meat and tobacco, which is immediately followed by a much smaller sign on a pole saying fresh potatoes and strawberries for sale. A tractor trundles over a field.

We stayed at Pål's flat in Malerhaugen last night. We set the alarm for seven, woke up, found each other and had a sleepy tumble, before we got up, drank some coffee and ate toast and marmalade. Marmalade has made a late entrance into my life. Marmalade and patterned serviettes, and sour beer and true crime series. Then we set off. It is now twenty to ten.

'I don't think it would be an exaggeration to say it was one of my childhood traumas,' he says. 'Killing something you love, albeit unintentionally.' He turns to look at me and smiles.

'Is it actually possible to love a hamster?' I say.

'Oh yes,' Pål says. 'Oh yes, I can assure you, Anja. They don't live for very long, so you don't have much time.' He turns again to look at me.

'The love has to be fast and furious.'

Then he points at a bulb symbol on the dashboard.

'The indicator bulb is broken,' he says.

'Does it matter?' I ask. 'I mean, it's light all the time at the moment.'

'You can be fined. Might as well get it done. And anyway, there's a few other things I need to buy. But yes, hamsters can in fact be very devoted pets, and you really can develop a bond.'

'How did it die?' I ask.

Paul laughs quietly, and lifts a hand to rub his forehead. 'Well, it was run over by an exercise bike.'

I snort with laughter.

Pål shakes his head. 'And I was the one sitting on the bike at the time,' he says. He takes both hands off the steering wheel to demonstrate as he explains how the hamster was squashed between the wheel and the belt of the exercise bike.

'Oh, how awful,' I say, and then burst out laughing. I put my hand on his thigh and give it a little squeeze. It is a large, solid thigh.

Two small girls pushing a pram with a baby in it along a dirt track, a family sitting on garden chairs right next to the road. Then green rolling fields open up on both sides.

'I actually think it's a good thing when a child's first encounter with death is losing a pet,' he says. 'Elisabeth has allergies, so Nora has never had a pet.'

The name Nora fills me with warmth, tenderness and irritation. I think about her blue tooth and her haircut that would suit an Astrid Lindgren character. Knees with dimples. Her plump little hands, how she loves to hold people by the hand. An affectionate girl, if a little intense. Every time I feel antipathy, I have to do a circuit of mental exercises and turn my ill will into care, responsibility and a broader picture. She's only four.

'Maybe we should get a dog together one day?' Pål says.

'Hm,' is my response.

I point through the windscreen at sign for a petrol station, and Pål nods.

'Or maybe a cat,' I say. 'Dogs are a lot of work.'

When Lotte heard about the planned work at the cottage, she said icily: ‘Don’t know why you need to come, don’t understand why you and Dad have to *mix* at all.’ She said this with an arched eyebrow and a sarcastic smile. She’s fourteen. ‘You hate each other, why can’t you just keep it like that?’

Her accusation made me want to cry, I could hardly talk.

‘We don’t,’ I said. ‘We never have.’

‘Ha, ha!’ Lotte said.

I wanted to tell her that Ivar had said that I would always be a pearl in his heart, no matter what happened, but it didn’t feel right, somehow.

‘Are Pål and Dad suddenly going to be *mates* and you and Solveig *best friends*?’ she said, her mouth twisted in disgust.

I stand with my face to the sun while Pål goes into the petrol station shop. I’ve been here many times before. I remember the yellow and green building, the drawing of a bear, the small cluster of trees and picnic table on a low mound that separates asphalt from more asphalt. There are cars at nearly every pump, the open car doors gleam, a hotdog wrapper moves in breezy bursts from the sunlight into the shade.

I long for Falk, but there is a thorn in the longing. He had a football match the day he went to Ivar. At breakfast, he read something in the paper about older people’s mental health and he pointed his finger at the expression “joie de vivre” and said: ‘That’s something I don’t have.’

Nora was sitting on the other side of the table on Falk’s old Tripp Trapp chair. A doll with pink hair, a plastic tiger and a Lego lifeboat lay between her glass and plate, where a piece of bread had been left uneaten.

I leaned over Falk’s shoulder to skim the article, which was about working together and renewed joie de vivre, and had a photograph of two older women and a man standing by a hedge.

‘What? You don’t love life?’ I said to Falk. I poured some chocolate milk into Nora’s glass, then put the carton back in the fridge.

‘Eat your bread, Nora,’ I said.

‘Certainly don’t feel it,’ Falk said. ‘I’m not often happy, or there’s not a lot of joy.’

What do you want me to do, was my first thought. Then: *what can I do about it?* I thought that he and I should spend more time together, doing things and talking. Just spare me the amusement park or water world, I would rather not do that. I thought maybe we could go camping. I thought that I’d better give it some more thought, but not just think about. Then Falk spilt chocolate milk on his football shorts, I snapped: ‘Eleven years old and you still can’t eat breakfast without spilling on yourself!’ I said it in front of Nora, who was four. Pål came out of the bedroom, his boxer shorts straining over a diminishing morning erection. He stretched himself and said: ‘Ready for the match, Falk?’

Falk didn’t reply.

‘Falk?’ I said.

Pål sits hunkered down by one side of the car with the bonnet open; he’s been fiddling around for about ten minutes now. I enjoy watching him, his hairy brown legs and busy arms. Everything that happens with and to us is more or less spectacular and yet safe. Everything is good, everything is interesting, anything can be tolerated. But the clock is ticking and it takes time to paint a house, not matter how small.

‘Shit,’ Pål says. He’s on his knees with his head in the engine. A man and a girl in Crocs come out of the station, and the girl tears the wrapper off her ice cream, then holds it over the bin for a few moments before letting it go. Bottles of blue screen wash stand

regimented on a pallet beside a shelf of garden games and beach toys, and beyond that, bags of charcoal and a tower of disposable BBQs. It's a quarter past ten.

The Easter before Ivar and I split up, we stopped here to buy ice-cream on our way back from the cottage with the children. Tuva was with us, as well. Ivar had suddenly decided he had to keep everyone jolly from dawn until dusk, but there was something forced about it and I think even the children saw through it. We had argued the night before we left for the weekend. Tuva was fifteen and normally out with her friends or lying on her bed at home playing with her mobile phone, but now, when Ivar and I were desperate for some time to ourselves, she wanted to be with us, stayed with us in the living room after Lotte and Falk had gone to bed, wanted to play cards, chat. Tuva asked: 'Is it normal to carry on being friends with people you've been friends with since primary school? Do you know anything about that?' And: 'How much does your personality change from when you're fifteen to when you're an adult, say thirty-five?' I knew nothing about that. 'Is love more real when you're grown up?' I had so much I wanted to say to Ivar, so many considered and reasonable criticisms and questions. I had thought about all I had done and how far I had stretched myself, all that I had put into our kitty, all that was never returned. Suddenly everything was offset, balanced, forgotten, and we were quits, just because Ivar was in a good mood one weekend, and that weekend, the mood – his and mine – was all that remained of our relationship. His good mood was a weapon and a defence.

'Who wants an ice-dream?' he shouted in the car, and then we pulled into this petrol station. It was Easter Monday, and the Easter eggs and Easter marzipan were already on sale. I remember that Ivar spent a long time trying to decide if he wanted a hot dog or an ice-cream. Lotte chose a colourful ice-lolly and Falk took a vanilla ice-cream covered in a thick layer of chocolate. He was going to start school that autumn and dreaded it with every fibre in his body, unlike his sisters who had looked forward to it. I didn't want anything other than a bottle of Loka. And Tuva wanted a Coke Zero. I wondered when she ate, I hardly ever saw her eating, but she wasn't skinny.

'It kind of feels like you've given up,' Ivar said to me over the car roof.

'What do you mean?' I said.

'We at least have to try,' he said.

'Is that not what I'm doing all the time?' I said.

Ivar sent me a piercing look before he opened the car door. I got back in and we barely spoke for the rest of the journey. At regular intervals I unscrewed the top of my bottle of water, took a sip, put the top back on and let the bottle rest in my lap, and ever since have associated those stubby Loka bottles with my mood on that journey, with suffering and bitterness, but also, given the imminent split, a hint of the promise of something completely new, and my attempts to nurture this, to make it grow and spread, because I think already then I knew that the longing would die if we really did leave each other.

'There!' Pål says. He stands up, brushes his hands clean, undoes the catch and with a smile, lets the bonnet bang closed.

'Good,' I say. 'It's nearly half past ten.'

I open the passenger door and see something lying on my seat.

'For the kids,' Pål says.

Two bags of Ahlgren's Cars. Pål starts the engine and pulls out around the parked cars towards the road. Oh, something he had to buy. He wanted to surprise the children.

Pål accelerates and stays close to the tail of a truck.

'Ivar and I had plans to get a dog,' I say. 'When the children were older. Then we separated. Ivar and Solveig have a dog now though.'

‘Solveig doesn’t have children then?’ Pål asks. ‘Do they want to have children together?’

‘I don’t think so,’ I say. ‘They’ve been together for a few years now and Solveig is nearly forty.’

‘And she doesn’t want to have children of her own?’ Pål says.

‘Don’t think so,’ I say. ‘She’s very hands on with Lotte and Falk. I think that’s enough for her.’

Pål shakes his head.

‘In my experience, most women want to have children,’ he says. ‘When Elisabeth couldn’t conceive, everything lost all meaning, nothing else mattered, the only thing that was important was to get pregnant.’

The sky is blue over the hillocks and green trees on the left-hand side of the road. There is not a cloud to be seen.

‘I got a dog after my hamster died,’ Pål says.

‘Anyway, I think Ivar has more than enough with the children he already has,’ I say.

‘Molly. But my stepfather took her with him when he moved out.’

‘Oh yes, the dog,’ I say.

‘That was my second loss,’ Pål says. ‘And I lost a father at the same time.’

‘That must have been ... really tough,’ I say.

‘It was,’ Pål says. ‘In fact, it’s hard to believe that I’ve turned into such a reliable, sound guy.’

‘Astonishing,’ I say, and give his thigh a gentle squeeze.

‘I’ll be less sad when my mother dies than I was when Molly disappeared,’ he says. He wrinkles his nose in that sweet way, and I laugh.

‘Nice for Lotte and Falk that they’ve got a dog,’ he says.

He keeps his eyes on the road, one hand on the wheel.

‘My hunch is that Ivar got the dog because he was worried that Lotte and Falk would choose to spend more time with me,’ I say. ‘As a way to keep the children there. I think we were all slightly surprised that it was so important for him that they spent as much time there.’

‘Ah well, we have to use whatever means we have,’ Pål says.

I turn to look at him. He grins.

‘I mean, if that was the only way,’ he said.

But Ivar has always liked having the children around! He needed them around him. He just didn’t like all the work involved. But at the end of the day, he still chose the children, despite all the practicalities.

‘What kind of dog have they got?’ Pål asks.

‘Some kind of terrier, I think,’ I say. ‘Small, brown and white patches. Jack Daniels!’

‘Jack Russell, ha, ha!’ Pål says. ‘That’s what Molly was. And she answered with a woof when I asked if she wanted to go walkies.’

Pål falls silent, he looks at the road.

‘*Woof*,’ he says, all of sudden, and I jump. We laugh.

‘That was Molly,’ he says.

When Pål was twelve, his mother and stepfather got divorced. His biological father had died before he was born and his stepfather had been there for as long as he could remember.

‘Rolf was like a father to me,’ Pål said. ‘Not a particularly good father, but still. You’re just not ready to lose your dad at that age. And you’re certainly not ready to lose your dog.’

‘But did you really lose him?’ I ask.

‘Yes,’ Pål says.

Pål told me this on our second date, and it made a deep impression on me.

The streets outside were full of Christmas decorations. We sat in a bar, with a fancy drink each, and asked each other about our families and childhood. I was interested in everything about him, and interested in myself as well, through the lens of my interest in him, I wanted to show him me. I had said: 'I think I had quite a happy childhood in quite a happy home.'

'Quite,' Pål quipped.

When Pål's mother told him that she and Rolf were getting divorced, Rolf was sitting on the sofa, with his short, fat fingers and just like that, he stopped being Pål's stepfather. I was fascinated, I wanted to know everything, but Pål said that he didn't know the details and had not been particularly interested in finding out either.

'Generally, when your parents get divorced, you keep in touch with both of them,' he said, as he impaled the mint leaves and grapefruit on a small wooden cocktail stick. 'But that's not so automatic when it's a step-parent. I never saw Rolf again after that day. Incredible, isn't it? Neither him, nor the dog.'

Pål faltered in his story, leaving a sense of catastrophe, of walls that had suddenly caved in, the crashing emptiness left by the dog, the months that passed in an impenetrable fog. It did not take his mother long to meet another man, and Pål soon had a half-brother and a half-sister. They grew up in a secure family, and according to Pål, were totally unaware of the family history before they were born.

'I never got close to him,' Pål said. 'I didn't dare.'

He finished his drink, and the ice cubes slide back down the sides of the glass and clinked at bottom when he put it down.

'Shall we have another of these?' he asked. 'Or should we try something else?'

I pushed the drinks menu over towards him and said I wanted him to choose. The table was black, with a slightly wavy, imitation wood finish.

'You've never tried to contact him?' I said.

'I think about it every so often,' he said. 'But no, not really. Molly will be dead by now, obviously. And I guess Rolf will be soon, as well.'

The story stayed with me, and I mull on it a lot. My head was all abuzz when he told it, it made me want to write again, in a way that I hadn't felt for a long time.

I can just picture Rolf sitting there on the sofa, the moment when he ceased to be Pål's stepfather, when the connection between him and everything in the house was broken, the curtains, the sofa, the vacuum cleaner that was possibly still in the living room after Pål's mother had used it. Suddenly he was disconnected from everything, a stranger, and the surroundings and objects possibly became alien to him too. And twelve-year-old Pål, a child of flesh and blood, a living product of nature and nurture, slipped from his hands. Rolf was no longer someone who concerned Pål, their father-son relationship no more than a temporary constellation.

The whole place is bathed in sunlight when we arrive. The only shade is under the cherry tree, and a short shadow from the outhouse.

'Oh, the lilac is still flowering,' I say.

A bank of purple and white lilac fills one end of the garden.

To the right of the cottage, the plot borders on a piece of fallow land, full of weeds and raspberry bushes. Summer flowers also grow there, but the flowering is unpredictable, and varies from year to year. On the far side, there is a road that leads to a dam, with a bridge over it, with low railings. The water is very deep here, but there is a swimming spot some way up from the dam.

There are already two cars parked outside.

‘Wow, fancy car,’ Pål says. ‘Is that Ivar’s?’ He parks beside the shiny, black, low-slung beast. The other car is small, silver grey and a bit battered.

‘Must be Solveig’s,’ I say. ‘But who does the other one belong to?’

I see Ivar and Solveig out on the veranda. Ivar has grown a beard, but has never had particularly robust facial hair.

Pål and I get out of the car, and Solveig and Ivar’s dog, Astor, immediately comes running towards us, as fast as his little legs will carry him. Pål bends to pat him, he takes off his sunglasses and has that sleepy, sexy look on his face, eyes half-open, as he crouches down and murmurs to the dog, scratches its ears; the dappled light under the cherry tree dances on the dog and the man with muscular, hairy legs in shorts. He’s so positive about everything. Open and positive. He can, of course, be surly and does have bad moods, but he is so transparent that I never need to wonder if I have done something wrong.

Pål sent me a text message on the Monday after our first night together. I was in a meeting with the author of a politician’s biography; I was too excited to wait to read the message, so I pretended it was something important and opened it. It said: *About Saturday night* and then there was a photograph of paragraph from a newspaper: *The storm that struck yesterday had a speed of 3 million km/h and the magnetic field was the opposite of the earth’s magnetic field.*

Then a new message: *I knew that something had happened. So good to have an explanation!*

I thought it was like something Ivar might do, and yet not quite, and I wondered if it was more or less intelligent, I thought about it a lot. It was romantic and sweet and witty from Pål, but if Ivar had sent it, it would be playing with something simple and infinite that would change it into something more, something sublime. But I knew that I was fed up with all that, and I liked Pål’s honest and unpretentious approach. He wanted to tell me that he liked me, but rather than saying that *he* was someone who liked me, he wanted to say that *I* was someone he liked; with Ivar, it was always the opposite.

Someone else came out onto the veranda.

‘Tuva,’ I say to Pål.

It looks like Tuva. Such long hair.

‘Tuva is here. But Tuva hasn’t passed her driving test.’

Her hair gleams in the sun, she has bare legs and slow movements.

‘I don’t understand, Tuva’s here now,’ I say. ‘I didn’t know.’

‘Well, then I’ll finally get to meet her,’ Pål says

The last time I saw Tuva was a few weeks ago, when she came to pick up some things from the cellar. She had slow movements then as well. I don’t know what she came to collect, because she didn’t come back up to the flat. From the window, I saw her cross the road in her Doc Martens and mini-skirt; she was carrying a white plastic bag, as well as another bag. It was the first time I had seen her since she came to do some Christmas baking at the beginning of December.

Ivar calls to us from the veranda. A young man comes out through the door and stands behind Tuva, puts his arms around her. Ivar stands leaning against the balustrade, ever secure in his skin, he is at ease in all social settings, something I have always respected and been grateful for on many occasions, the times when he has used it to good ends. Nothing makes Ivar uncomfortable, unless he wants to be uncomfortable, which he sometimes does, in order to achieve something: to makes himself interesting, to be left in peace, to make those around him insecure, so he can then shine and bathe in glory.

Ivar lets go of the balustrade and bounds down the steps – is so essentially Ivar. Pål gets our bags out of the car, slams the door and puts the car keys in his pocket. I look beseechingly at his back: hold it together, carry this through, don’t make any mistakes, don’t

let this break. I am sweaty after sitting in the car, I pull my blouse free from my back, tuck it into my shorts. Pål pauses at the bottom of the stops, his broad back, before going up.

'Hi Mum,' Tuva says, short and sweet. Then she looks at Pål.

'Hi,' I say. 'Hi Tuva. So you're here too?' As though I were talking to a child or a dog. I hug her, put one hand on her shoulder and the other on her back, touch my cheek to hers, squeeze her even tighter to emphasise that it's heartfelt. I have not paid attention, I have not kept up to date, I don't know what has happened. I try to choose between two sentences: *I've missed you* and *you're so beautiful.*

Tuva bends down and picks up the dog, like a buffer between us.

I turn to the young man behind her.

'This is Adrian,' Tuva says. 'My boyfriend.'

She is half-turned away from me, with the dog in her arms, his head resting on her lower arm, looking very relaxed.

'And this is my mother, Anja,' she says and nods in my direction.

I shake Adrian's hand. It is thin, but firm.

Behind me, I hear Pål say: 'Nice dog. I had one like that when I was a boy.'

'Did you?' Solveig says.

'Yes, little Molly. My stepfather took her with him when he moved out.'

'Tuva and Adrian came last night, so lovely,' Ivar says. 'They appeared without warning, hungry and thirsty, with lots to talk about.'

Adrian is tall and thin. His skin is pale and golden at the same time, as though he were dark-skinned, but ill. Shoulder length, wavy hair. A slightly jutting jaw and deep-set eyes. There's something feral about him, he's not unattractive, but nor is he good-looking.

'Adrian is studying psychology,' Ivar says, 'which I thought might be useful for some of us here.'

I smile.

'I'll send the invoice for last night,' Adrian says to Ivar, and Ivar laughs.

'Yes, who doesn't need a good psychologist?' I say.

Adrian's jeans rest on his hips, and the top of his boxer shorts are visible. I turn back to Pål.

'This is Pål,' I say. 'My boyfriend.'

'Hi!' Tuva says and holds her hand out to Pål. She's lost weight and is wearing cut-off denim shorts. Her legs are brown.

'I've heard so much about you,' Pål says to Tuva, and Tuva looks at him without even raising an eyebrow. 'So, are you on holiday?'

'Just passing through,' Adrian says. 'We're driving around, visiting friends, at home and in their cabins. And we like to turn up unexpectedly.'

He grins, showing his small, white teeth, and I feel uncertain as to whether he is serious or not.

'That way you meet people when their guard is down,' Adrian says. 'It's much nicer.'

Falk is sitting in the hammock, cross-legged, playing on his mobile phone. Solveig stays standing where she is, an arm across her stomach; she's attentive, approachable, calm, and her skin looks like it never tans. Delicate in a non-fragile way. She and Ivar have been together for six and half years now. I cross over to her, she drops her arm from her stomach and we embrace. She is a lawyer and has a job as an executive or advisor in some ministry or other – I can't remember which one, and I know I should. She was only thirty-three when she and Ivar met.

'Isn't it great that we managed to do this?' Solveig says. It's the sort of thing I might say.

'Yes,' I say. 'I'm really pleased.'

I move on to Falk, lean over and kiss him on the head. He grunts. He has brown, smooth legs, with white patches on his knees, left by scabs. Lotte got scabs and bruises because she was reckless, whereas Falk gets them because he's clumsy. When he was born, he shot out, thin and shrivelled, with stiff, nervous movements and a frown, and Ivar said he looked like Gollum. He always had cold hands as a baby.

'I've missed you,' I whisper.

I ruffle his hair and he glances up at me and smiles, then looks back at the screen. Solveig and Pål shake hands.

Sharing the cottage was a challenge that helped us to focus when things were at their worst between us. We told the children with great solemnity.

'And maybe we can all stay there together now and then,' we said. At the time, I felt a great fondness for Ivar, interspersed with flashes of intense disgust; I nurtured the affection, I liked to demonstrate it, to him and others, but I also needed to vent my disgust. Falk pulled a face.

'There's too many mosquitoes there,' he said. He couldn't pronounce his Rs properly yet.

The first time I took Pål to the cabin was in March. We had taken the Friday off, and drove down late on Thursday evening, after the launch of a knitting book at the publishing house. I was left to tidy away the chairs and empty wine boxes, even though it wasn't really my job. Pål was full of enthusiasm, he said he loved old houses, he had always dreamt of having a place in the country. We bought craft beers and large volumes of white wine at the nearest bottle shop. We made love on the coarse, hessian-like sofa, and on the foam mattress in the bed, as well as several other places. We were enthralled by a winter-drowsy fly that we caught in an upturned wine glass, everything trembled or exploded with meaning, or lust, a lust for life and our relationship and all that that contains and entails: our morning coffee, the conversations when we go for a walk, the things we see and experience, our afternoon sex, our morning and middle of the night sex. Everything is astonishingly new and yet astonishingly familiar. We didn't talk about a shared future with the children. I didn't ask if he thought Nora would like the cottage. Nor did I ask if he pictured us moving together with all the children at some point. But I thought about all these things. It started to rain on the last day. We were about to go for a swim, even though there had been a frost during the night, and suddenly it started to pour. We sat under the roof on the veranda, in our bathrobes and wellington boots, while the rain bucketed down outside. I wanted the world to disappear, all I wanted was to be left alone in my bubble with Pål. The children, the people at work, everything could disappear, for all I cared.

'How long do you think this will last?' Pål said.

'I don't know,' I said. 'Not long, I hope .'

'Oh,' he said. 'I meant the relationship.'

'Oh,' I said.

We laughed. Then we kissed.

Then the rain eased. I searched for words.

'A long time, I hope,' I said.

'I hope so, too,' he whispered against my temple.

I was so happy, and embarrassed, and excited, I felt like I was eight, seventeen and sixty-five all the same time, and at the mercy of my emotions at all ages. Pål loves swimming

just as much as I do. Ivar didn't like swimming, and the more this became established as one of Ivar's truths, the more unpersuadable he became.

Pål and I didn't wait for the rain to stop, we ran, in our wellies and bathing robes, over the field with the weeds and flowers, along the dam, over the bridge and up to the swimming spot. We threw off our robes and charged naked into the water, which was far colder than I had imagined. I was in a state of both over-sensitivity and under-sensitivity. I was alert, open to impressions and emotions, and at the same time wrapped in cotton, numb. We were even more full of adrenaline when we walked back to the cottage, and fucked on the sofa. Afterwards I lay there in his arms, lay there and listened to the rain.

A breeze passes over the veranda and I feel the air against my damp skin, on my neck, lower back and behind my knees. Tuva stands with her back to Adrian's stomach and his arms around her waist. Ivar holds out his hand to Pål, and Pål takes it. Pål is much taller than Ivar, much stronger, his eyes and mouth are bigger, his hands are bigger and his facial hair is stronger. Everything here is green, the garden and forest and fields that stretch down to the houses along the road, Gunilla and Bo's white house, a red house, another red house. The walls of our cottage look faded and worn, and that is why we are here, everything will be fine. The cottage is going to be washed and painted. Then Ivar hugs me, with both arms, both palms against my sweaty back, I feel as though we're standing on a stage in front of an audience that is not interested in us, because there are others things going on, like Tuva and Adrian standing there in love, young love.

I no longer know Ivar's day to day life. I don't know if he still put himself and his feelings and needs before all else, if he can still sit and watch an entire TV series he has seen before, and if he still feels ashamed and empty afterwards, if he eats oat crispbread and Blue Castello for breakfast, takes full-fat milk in cafetière coffee, pisses with the door open, sleeps on his back with his arms above his head like a baby, eats milk chocolate mixed with raisins and nuts in the evening. He could stop suddenly in the middle of the kitchen, pinch his belly and say in astonishment: "I'm getting fatter ..." Open doors could send him into a rage, or if I took my socks off when I was reading on the sofa and left them there. All too often, he lost his temper when the children were noisy, when dogs were barking, when there were sirens, dripping taps and children's TV sounds, anything that might disturb his concentration when he was writing. I used to marvel at how harmless the children thought he was. Tuva often fell on the floor laughing when Ivar screamed *Fucking bitch dog, shut the fuck up!* out of the window. That's how secure they were.

It took a couple of weeks before I told Pål that I had written a book, eighteen years ago. As both I and the book were unknown to him, I assumed that he thought the book was of no note; for him, quality and importance are reflected in sales figures, that's the kind of books he reads. Not that it bothers me so much anymore. He's interested in my job, and always wants to know which books I am working on, in stark contrast to Ivar; Ivar was only interested in his own books. I try to show equal interest in Pål. He's a construction manager, and looks after renovation projects and things like that, a handyman with solid experience and knowledge, in no way a wheeler-dealer.

'Do you want to write more books?' he asked. We were out walking in the December slush. We had stopped for a couple of beers and were now on the way home.

'Maybe once the children have left home,' I said.

A parking fine on a dirty mound of snow provided a flash of yellow.

'Maybe once I retire,' I joked. 'I do still feel the urge every now and then. And when I do, it's somehow more important than anything else.'

‘More important than anything,’ Pål said, sympathetically, slowly, and distracted. Two men dressed in yellow in a blue cherry picker were hanging garlands above the window of a restaurant.

‘You seem to be good at your job,’ he said.

‘I certainly don’t get any complaints,’ I said. ‘But I don’t know that I could honestly say I’m passionate about it.’

I stopped, something stopped inside me. There were white salt marks on the toes of my boots. I felt it was crucial to transmit what I was feeling to him, all that I wanted, everything that felt good right now.

‘I suppose I feel that my life has not turned out quite as I imagined it would,’ I said.

I must have said this with a degree of sadness or desperation, because Pål stopped and smiled sympathetically, then put his arms around me and I felt myself falling towards him. I thought about my children, and about Ivar, and about the novel I had wanted to write for all these years, about the fact that I was almost fifty.

‘I feel like I haven’t succeeded in anything, I’ve made so many bad choices and focused on the wrong things, had the wrong values, there’s so much I regret, and I’ve been so ...’ I said, disjointed and tense. He cupped my head in his hands, kissed me and whispered: ‘It’s okay.’

The December wind was cutting and raw. Pål held, people passed, my hands were cold. I’m just starting over again, I thought.

I put a hand on the faded Falun red panelling.

‘Shall we make a start then?’ I say.

‘Yes, soon,’ Ivar say. ‘But first some coffee. Lotte is making waffles.’

‘Lotte?’ I say.

‘Shall we move out into the annex for the night?’ Ivar says to me. ‘Then you can get the bedroom straightaway. Or one of the kids can sleep there. Lotte refuses to share a room with Falk.’

The annex is part of the outhouse, but has been given interior panels and painted blue, with a wooden floor that is rotting in one corner. Falk doesn’t dare to sleep there, not even if Lotte is with him. Falk has lots of phobias, but they seem to be easing as he gets older, that’s to say, they are not getting any worse or multiplying. When he was little, he always wanted to sleep in my bed; he accepted that he couldn’t do that all the time, but it was definitely what he would have preferred. Not with Ivar, because he didn’t smell as good as me. Falk said I smelt warm-warm-warm.

‘No, no,’ I say. ‘We’re more than happy to sleep in the annex tonight.’

Pål places his hand on my lower back, and I press my spine gently into his hand.

Solveig points to the flower beds below the veranda.

‘I’ve planted some perennials,’ she says. ‘Peonies, lupins and iris. They’ll appear year after year after year.’ She moves the finger that is pointing at the beds over towards the outhouse and I follow her eyes and make some approving noises. Because now I really see them. Big, white blooms and purple flowers on tall stems, and blue and pink. I had actually registered them before, somewhere at the back of my mind, waiting to be discovered, as there is so much else happening, not least in my head.

‘Oh, they’re beautiful,’ I say.

I planted some gooseberry and redcurrant bushes along the wall of the outhouse the first summer we were here - not a particularly successful project. It took several years before they produced any berries and then none of the children liked them. Falk clawed at his tongue to get rid of the sour taste. But the bushes still stand there, and are green, if a bit spindly.

‘I can show you what’s what later, if you like,’ Solveig says.

‘Yes, please,’ I say.

I squat down and run my finger tip down a stalk. None of the children have grown up as fast as Tuva, from one day to the next she was sitting there at the kitchen table with long legs and foundation and eating grapefruit and avocado. Unrecognisable. Four walnuts halves.

Tuva is taller than me, and has been since she was fifteen.

A couple of years ago, Tuva said how hard it had been for her when Ivar and I split up, even though he wasn’t her father, even though she didn’t particularly like him.

‘But there’s something about your family breaking up, even if it’s a family you never asked for,’ she said. ‘No family ever is,’ she added.

I had no time to say anything before she continued.

‘You get very involved when you’re a child,’ she says. ‘For better or worse. In a way, you don’t really have a choice. It’s a bit like Stockholm Syndrome.’

‘Stockholm Syndrome?’

‘And it was the second time my family fell apart,’ she said.

‘I’m really sorry that things have turned out the way they have,’ I said. ‘You were only two the first time, but I’m sorry. All I can say is that I wish it had been otherwise, I really tried as best I could every step of the way.’

Tuva gave a slow nod, but didn’t look at me when she said: ‘Okay.’

‘Lotte has been in a great mood,’ Ivar says. ‘She and Solveig have been making waffles. Healthy oat waffles.’

‘Oh, great,’ I say.

Pål comes up behind me and puts his arms around my waist.

‘Maybe it’s because she realised she couldn’t get away with saying all the lighters in her pockets were for scented candles, whenever we did the laundry,’ Ivar says.

‘Oh dear,’ I say. ‘Is she still smoking?’

‘I suspect so,’ Ivar says. I can sense the anxiety in Pål’s embrance, the anxiety that perhaps my children will go through their teens in the same home as his daughter, the anxiety that I’m too lenient. There’s not much that makes Pål anxious, but the lack of rules and limits does.

‘Lotte is so lovely,’ Solveig says. ‘All your children are lovely.’

I send her a smile.

‘You have a daughter too, don’t you?’ Solveig says to Pål.

‘Yes, she’s at her mother’s,’ Pål says.

‘Was she not able to come as well?’

Pål explains that she’s only four, so he wouldn’t be able to help as much if she had come.

No, because Nora is not particularly good at entertaining herself. She is used to being stimulated by her father. She is constantly looking for contact, and chatters away. But no one can avoid being charmed by Nora, she melts everyone’s heart, a bit like a Labrador puppy. The best of me wants her to like me and need me, for me to be important in her life.

‘What’s she called?’ Solveig asks.

Lotte comes out onto the veranda, in grey tracksuit bottoms with baggy knees. Her hair is greasy. Pål lets me go as he says: ‘Hi, Lotte,’ and then, to Solveig: ‘She’s called Nora.’ I walk over to Lotte and put my arms around her. Her body fizzes with activity, a passive repulsion, an active non-contact, but I hug her tight.

‘Hi Mum,’ Lotte says. She is fourteen, has spots on her forehead and fine hair on her legs, and a need to control her feelings, which is a huge operation to understand and manage, she transforms any feelings she does not want into feelings she does want, she no longer runs raging from the room, but carries her frustration and offence with dignity, until suddenly she

collapses and everything pours out, at times and in ways that are not always comprehensible to those around her. Sometimes it's the need for love and physical contact that breaks her, and in the course of ten seconds, she makes up for all the moodiness and indifference and loudly declared independence, when she wants a hug, to be held, and to talk, talk, talk. Pål thinks I'm too indulgent, but has said that he won't get involved, and I said *good.* I think to myself, just wait and see, wait until he has his own teenage daughter. I know my teenage daughters, I want to tell him, even though I know that's an exaggeration and a claim that might make me unnecessarily vulnerable. I, at least, have experience. Lotte's love is unpredictable and capricious, and most easily given when she gets what she wants.

'Have you missed me?' I say.

'Missed you terribly,' she says with arched eyebrows and obvious irony.

I kiss her on the ear and drink in the smell of unwashed skin and waffle steam, as she twists away with determination. She needs to be reminded about personal hygiene, and Ivar is no good at that. He wasn't always so good with his own hygiene either. His hair would get greasy, he forgot to change his socks, there were stains in his boxer shorts, and I was calm and thought I can cope with that, but then it dawned on me that there was nothing particularly heroic about it, everyone coped with things like that – generally, one copes with what one copes with to an astonishing degree. It also dawned on me that I actually didn't cope with it very well. He is a man who needs a partner. But I'm not so sure that he deserves one.

'I need to take the waffles out,' Lotte says and pulls herself free.

I carry the pile of towels and bed linen that I have washed at home up the steep staircase to the first floor, to the open space that has served as a work room for all these years.

I put the bed linen in the cupboard. Ivar's Mac is lying, closed, on the desk in front of the window – an old Formica table that we found at a jumble sale. His glasses are there, and two books: Virginia Woolf and Øyvind Berg's poetry collection from the nineties. The door to the room where Ivar and Solveig are sleeping is open. The bed is unmade, there are clothes on the chair, a towel on the floor.

On the wall between the windows hangs a photograph of Falk.

'I don't like that picture,' I once said when I was feeling negative about anything that was Ivar. 'He should have been comforted, not photographed.'

In the picture, Falk is sitting on a chair crying in front of a mirror. It's taken from the back, and he's kneeling: a naked back and bare feet against a bare bottom, and in the mirror you see him from the front, his crumpled face, all twisted. It was taken in the bedroom where it now hangs. There is a marked difference between the panelling in the photograph and reality. Falk had been asleep for a long time and when he woke up, he discovered that I had already gone to the shops, without him. He was devastated.

When Pål, Nora, Falk and I were here for the Ascension Day weekend, Nora pointed at Falk's contorted face in the mirror in the photograph and said: 'He's scary.'

'But it's Falk. He was very sad,' I said.

'He looks like an angry troll,' Nora said.

'Oh no, just upset,' I said. 'His mummy's not there.'

Nora turned and took her finger out of her mouth, and pointed at me with a string of saliva running from her finger to her mouth. 'You're his mummy.'

She constantly wanted to go upstairs to look at the picture. And I wanted to hold her by the hand, because the stairs are so steep, and she was happy to let me do that. But I never held Lotte or Falk by the hand when they went up the stairs.

There's a creak on one of the treads, and Pål's head appears.

'Everything alright?' he says.

He comes up and stands there, looking around. All the bedroom doors are open. The checked flannel shirt that I use here is hanging on the door hook, and the faded, navy towelling robe. Pål looks at me. We have already had a week together without the children, but we were both working. And after the weekend, we'll have two more weeks together without the children, only now we'll be properly on holiday. When Ivar, Solveig and the children go back to Oslo tomorrow afternoon, we will be on our own. I have him, but then, suddenly, he feels like something that could just slip out of my hands. If I don't hold him tight. But there are so many ways to hold on to him, and most of them are wrong. We play with the idea of getting a flat together, big enough for all three children to have their own room. But I'm not sure if we really mean it or if it's actually a good idea, if it is too early, or if it might be too late if we wait too long.

'Yes,' I say. 'And you?'

'I'm just fine,' he says. He puts his arms around me from behind and kisses me on the head. He is always fine.

'I'm glad you're here,' I whisper, in a voice that is deflated, but still sounds high-pitched and complaining. So I laugh a little at myself, and long for Pål to hold me, and he understands and tightens his embrace.

'Is your relationship with Tuva difficult?' he says, quietly.

'I don't really know what it's like at all,' I say. 'I don't know if it's difficult or normal. But I was a bit taken aback that no one had told me she was here.'

'I can understand that,' Paul says.

'And that she's got a boyfriend, and no one said a word,' I whisper.

He strokes my back.

'You haven't told me much about Tuva,' he says.

'No, maybe I haven't,' I say.

'Is there anything I should know?' he says.

'She's twenty-one,' I say. A barrier suddenly drops in my mind. I can't remember anything about Tuva. Then I remember: 'She works in a shoe shop,' I say. 'But I've probably told you that already.'

'Yes, maybe you have,' he says.

'She was at university for a while,' I say. 'But I don't think it really worked for her.'

She is sensitive, dramatic, has a troubled relationship with food, school, me. She suffered from spots as a teenager, I bought her some cream that discoloured her clothes and pillow case.

'Oh, you can see the water from here!' Pål says. He leans over Ivar's Mac and looks out of the small window. 'I hadn't noticed that before.'

'Yes,' I say.

'Lake view,' Pål says.

There's a worn sticker of a horse on Ivar's Mac that Falk stuck there many years ago. Once, we had organised childcare so we could come down here for the weekend alone. The children were with Ivar's parents. But Ivar had a breakthrough on his novel the very first evening and wanted to write the whole weekend. A storm was raging in my head, I could not find peace. Ivar paid no attention. I stacked wood, pruned the lilac bushes, made a renewed attempted to read *Ulysses*. Sometimes it got too much for me and I gave vent to my frustrations, and grief, but there was no response. I would not have minded if he was annoyed, angry. But the fact was he didn't care, he was calm, almost happy, because of something else altogether. If he had only been *a little* upset, for *me.*

'I dreamt about you last night,' I said. Ivar was sitting with his back to me, writing. He turned to look at me, then turned back and continued to stare at the screen. *Tap-tap-tap-tap-tap-tap.*

‘I dreamt that I left our bed to swim alone in the freezing cold lake. I swam around and around in the lake. And in the dream, I kind of dreamt the interpretation as well,’ I said.

Ivar wrote something slowly, *tap-tap-tap-tap.* Then he shook his head, and without even turning towards me, said: ‘And what was the interpretation?’

‘I’m lonely in this relationship with you,’ I said. ‘And I miss my own writing time.’ *Tap-tap-tap-tap. Tap-tap-tap-tap-tap-tap-tap.* ‘But if I had the writing time ...’ *Tap-tap-tap-tap*. ‘... then maybe I would rather be with you,’ I said.

Ivar turned around and looked at me. My heart was thumping. The screen behind him was illuminated, his face was in shadow. I wasn’t sure if I wanted him to comfort me or to desire me. I doubt that Ivar saw me as profound, or of human interest, he probably didn’t even know if I was someone he could love or not love, tolerate or not tolerate, or someone he could pity or care for because she had just revealed an undignified desire and need – no, he probably saw me as something that had unexpectedly expanded its use for him. Something in me had opened up, and revealed something to him that he could take and use, without him fully understanding why or how, and that was always the best, he used to say.

‘The uncanny.’

There always had to be something he didn’t understand himself in his work, because that’s what made it art. It looked as though he was wavering between turning back to his computer to write, and being present in the moment, not out of consideration to me, but rather to prolong the sensation, to embrace it fully while he had the opportunity, so he could milk for all it was worth when he sat back down to write. I didn’t know whether to feel proud or humiliated, and as he didn’t say a word about what had happened, I never found out. I don’t think there was anything literary about me, but rather something that he made into literature, as he was able to do with everything in life, no matter how big or small, ugly or beautiful. But it didn’t matter so much anymore. To the extent that I felt any need, I tried to think that most of the problems in our relationship were to do with Ivar, not me, and that whatever I said or did, was or wasn’t, made very little difference.

The first time I met Ivar, he called me a vision for the gods, not something that I heard very often. He said that I was wiser than I was aware of myself, as well as mysterious. ‘There’s something naive about the fact that you don’t recognise your own wisdom,’ he said. Then he paused for thought, and added: ‘But also something about the fact that you’re fully aware of your own naivety.’ We were at a publisher’s party, six months after my book had been published. The party was at my publisher’s not his, but he was there all the same. People had high expectations of me, and I had high expectations of myself. When Ivar came over, I was standing near the bar with Eddie, a poet, who had published his first book at the same time as me, and become a good friend. From the way Ivar looked at me, it was clear that he wanted something. I smiled, I needed a refill, so he took the empty wine glass from my hand. Then we stood talking intensely where someone had split some chilli nuts on the floor and we kept stepping on them, until they were pulverised. Eddie disappeared at some point.

‘I’ve been wanting to read your book,’ Ivar said, ‘but now I’m going to do it.’

When the party was over and they started to gather up the glasses and serviettes, we found ourselves two open bottles of wine and snuck out. We kissed in a lift. Drank wine straight from the bottle on a rooftop. There were stacks of folded deckchairs there, so we set up two.

‘Why are all these doors open?’ I said.

‘I’ll take that metaphorically,’ Ivar said.

We passed the wine bottles between us.

‘Are these bottles half-full or half-empty?’ he asked.

‘Half-full,’ I said.

‘Right answer,’ Ivar replied.

He asked me to tell him about myself.

‘Everything!’ he said. ‘What about your love life?’ And settled back to listen.

‘My love life has been a disaster so far,’ I said.

‘Well, I’ll take over from here then!’ he said.

He was wearing a loose-fitting suit and had spilt red wine on his crotch. Crumpled shirt. So elegant and yet so dishevelled.

‘I’m a single mother,’ I said, in pitiful voice and pouting, pulling at my lower lip with my finger, but pretending to be sad only made me sad, so I smiled. I had never thought of my position as particularly sad.

It was the first time that Ivar called me a free spirit.

‘Free spirits flock together,’ I said, and Ivar burst out laughing and kissed me, and this far too enthusiastic response to something that was below my standard, left me feeling flat, both proud and embarrassed like a child.

He talked about free spirits and love with a kind of sophisticated irony, which allowed the clichés to become more than themselves, a kind of rise-above-everything irony, he and everything he touched was raised to another level, including me, as long as I was with him.

As we left the building, Ivar turned to look at me with a determination, a purposefulness, brows knitted, he wanted something from me, a lot, and I gave, and I gave and I gave.

I had been alone with Tuva for a year and half, and in that time had managed to finish writing and publish my first book, a collection of short prose, and had started on my second. I wrote whenever I could. I got out of bed when Tuva woke up, dressed her, had breakfast, took her to nursery and then on to university where I went to lectures and had meetings with my supervisor, read all that I should and tried to write as much as possible, before I picked Tuva up again. Bought food for dinner. I wanted the days to be buoyant, to keep my humour up, but quickly realised that life alone with a small child did not offer many good days. I began to nag and scold as soon as we started to climb the stairs, and Tuva was often crying by the time we opened the door. I nagged her in the kitchen and in the living room and in the bathroom. Tuva ate with her hands, ran squealing between rooms, Lego pieces and Barbie dolls, hair clips and Chinese slippers, beads in all kinds of colours and shapes. We stood in the kitchen and screamed at each other. I grabbed her by the arm, pushed her out of the room, I lifted her up, almost threw her onto the bed, and slammed the door as I left the room. I lay awake at night and listened to Tuva breathing, counted the days until my next free weekend. Sometimes I lifted her over into my bed. Her hair had an intense smell of sand that filled my nostrils. I saw a light being switched on and off on the other side of the street, the heavily pregnant woman there must have gone for a pee. The delicate leaves moving, the street light. And then spring came. I had strange thoughts in my head: *I can’t do this, I can’t do anything but this*. About writing a novel, about looking after Tuva. Every second Friday, Hans Peter picked Tuva up from nursery and on the Sunday I went to collect her from Hans Peter and estate agent Ane. The house was full of the smell of waffles and the sounds of children and Ane’s bright voice. Ane wore nude nylon tights and lipstick, but still exuded warmth and homeliness, I thought she had everything, but I wanted none of what she had, all the same. I had lived there myself, with Tuva and Hans Peter, and Henrik every second weekend. We had not achieved homeliness – I was focused on finishing my book, and Hans Peter had stopped seeing me and touching me, and expected me to do everything with the children, which I simply refused to do.

I remember standing on the street below my new flat in Herslebs Gate, by the no parking sign, with a banana crate in my arms that contained my last few belongings from Hans Peter’s flat, and I balanced it on my hip when I lifted a hand to wave to Hans Peter

before he got into his car. I stood there on the pavement and felt helpless and alone, but was then filled with a brisk sense of achievement. Tuva was up in the flat watching Teletubbies; Hans Peter had helped to install the TV. But now it was finished, and he could start his new life with Ane. Ane and Hans Peter went on to have babies, two of them, both girls, eighteen months apart.

My greatest triumph, which felt like the happiest moment of my life, was when Hans Peter said to me: 'I didn't know you were going to publish a book. How amazing that you managed.' I didn't need to say: yes, it would have been impossible in a relationship with you.

When I met Ivar, I was writing book number two, which was going to be a novel. I thought about it all the time, about the structure and continuity and narrative perspective, what my protagonist wanted and what I wanted from her. Was she heartbroken? What kind of relationship did she have with her mother? What did she want from her life? Would she have children or not? Should she be interested in material things or not? And should she suffer from existential angst?

Already on our first night together, Ivar said that he wanted it all. We were in his small studio flat, with a kitchenette and a mattress on a mezzanine.

'Two authors,' Ivar said. 'Can't we just be partners straightaway? I want us to support each other, and admire each other, and be proud of each other. I want the most beautiful woman at the garden party to know she's mine and will be going home with me.'

He looked me in the eye, and held and held my gaze.

'You touch my head, my heart, my body and soul.'

'And you do mine, too,' I said.

'I know,' he whispered and kissed me.

'I want to have children with you,' he said and stroked my stomach. 'Maybe lots of them. We already have one, well, you do. But we'll have more.'

I nodded, dumbfounded. Of course I wanted more children, even though I didn't know what I would do with them.

'Reproduction is the meaning of life,' Ivar said. 'There is no other purpose.'

I remember Ivar sat with either Lotte or Falk as a newborn in his arms and asked strange questions: 'Do you know your place in this world?' 'Do you why you've been born?' He pulled out the small baby arms so the baby's body arched and the head flopped back. 'So that I will have something to focus on that is bigger than me,' he said.

The first time Ivar met Tuva, he squatted down, and stayed completely still, didn't say a word. Tuva chewed her lower lip as she looked at him. Say something, I thought. Say something.

'Hi Tuva,' he said. 'My name is Ivar.'

'I know,' Tuva whispered.

'And I'm thirty-three years old,' Ivar said, and Tuva nodded.

'I know that too,' she said.

'And I'm in love with your mother,' Ivar said, and Tuva nodded again, slowly.

'Cool t-shirt,' he said, and Tuva put a hand on her tummy, but kept her eyes firmly on Ivar.

Later, he said: 'It felt like she knew everything about me.'

I smiled.

'Not only the facts, it felt like she could see straight through me,' he said.

'She's a monster,' I said.

Ivar came over more and more often, when Tuva wasn't there, and when she was. She looked up at him whenever he came, and then looked back at the TV. She didn't say hello.

'I don't want to force anything,' Ivar said.

‘She’s going to Hans Peter’s the day after tomorrow,’ I said.

I liked, and was a little proud, of my bohemian lifestyle, student and author and freelancer, and I said: ‘We live a bit hand to mouth, and I never know if I’ll have enough money for food next month, but I don’t want a full-time job, I want to study and write a novel,’ and Tuva looked up from her Barbie dolls and came over to me and slipped onto my lap, and I put my arms around her and made her welcome.

‘But we’ll manage,’ I said. ‘Won’t we, Tuva?’

‘Huh?’ Tuva said.

‘You should apply for grants and scholarships,’ Ivar said. ‘Everything you can.’

‘We’re not exactly starving, are we?’ I said.

Tuva looked at me, then she shook her head. Suddenly she was full of energy, barged between us, climbed all over Ivar, jumped up and down on us in the sofa, her arms, legs and very hard head everywhere.

‘Oh, she’s so clingy,’ I said.

‘Haha, it’s fine,’ Ivar said with a smile.

I couldn’t focus on my dissertation, I couldn’t focus on my novel, there were constant deadlines, reports to deliver, and a proof I needed to get done, but all I thought about was when I would see Ivar again.

Being in love with Ivar left me reeling for months, following his ups and downs. He told me that he was an emotional rollercoaster, and soon enough it affected me physically, and my relationship with my daughter. Being utterly present and yet not there at all. Abandoning all responsibility was glorious, and yet it was there at the back of my mind the whole time, not just as a reminder or distraction, but as something all-consuming and fatal, a feeling of giving up on my life, neglecting everything was I was responsible for, my daughter, the novel I was going to write. I felt constantly sick, my diaphragm and core muscles were worn out, as though I could no longer stand upright, as though I was giving up on my ability to do anything, a conviction that this was out of my control.

Solveig bends over the table, her spine visible like a bumpy line through the fabric of her blouse, she sends around the plate of waffles. I take one, it’s flat and sticky. Raspberry jam and sour cream have been put out on the table.

‘Tuva and Adrian are driving to Gothenburg this afternoon,’ Ivar says.

‘How long have you been together?’ I ask Tuva. She’s sitting beside Adrian in the hammock.

Tuva looks at Adrian, he smiles, all white teeth, and Tuva smiles back, she doesn’t look at me.

‘Well, hard to say, really,’ Adrian says. ‘Or what do you reckon, Tuva?’

Tuva’s smile broadens into a grin, and she cocks her head and lays it against his chest, There is something new about her rejection, maybe it’s because she’s in love. She is not so concerned about hiding her feelings from me, as long as she does not need to share them with me. I am allowed to see her life and love, as long as she does not have to communicate directly with me, not meet my eyes and not hear my comments. Tuva has a gap between her front teeth that makes her look simple, but also attractive. She wanted to have it fixed for a while, and I held my tongue and said nothing because she would always do the opposite of what I said, then Ivar said: ‘Having a gap between your teeth is super-sexy, Tuva!’

And Tuva kept the gap between her front teeth. She inherited it from Hans Peter, only his gap gives him a brash, uninhibited appearance. If I asked Tuva to put her laundry in the bathroom or asked if she’d had a nice time with her friend, she felt invaded, while Ivar, over the years, could say almost whatever he liked to her, I have heard him give advice about erotic capital, about spending money on oneself and others, about feminine clothes and make-up,

and he knew that I could hear him. ‘That’s how it is, Tuva, you can never quite free yourself from traditional gender roles.’

Lotte roared with anger at my apparent transgressions, whereas Tuva, in her time, walked from room to room with her head bent, her face expressionless, vulnerable, indignant, defeated.

‘Yum,’ I say. ‘The waffles are delicious, Lotte.’

‘Very good,’ Pål says.

‘It’s such a surprise to see you here,’ I say to Tuva. ‘Can’t you stay until tomorrow?’

I find it hard to settle on the right tone of voice for Tuva, it’s so easy to sound superficial and so easy to sound invasive. Latitude is not something she understands.

‘We can’t,’ she says, without any expression. ‘We’re going to meet Lea and Billy in Gothenburg.’ Then she lifts her head, opens her mouth, wiggles her jaw, raises her hands and inspects her fingers, and seems to nod at one after the other as she says: ‘And Hans. And Kaspar. And Emma and Emma. B and P.’

‘Sorry?’ I say.

‘Emma B and Emma P,’ she says, and is suddenly thirteen again. Adrian pulls her towards him, as though she needs comfort or security. I sit here, in my trainers, a woman of nearly fifty with far too much and far too little power, stamina, authority. Home owner and mother of three. My skin has started to sag around my knees and under my arms, under my chin, my mind is slower and my emotions are stronger, more irrelevant, quick to stir, useless.

‘Hans and Kasper and one of the Emmas study psychology with me,’ Adrian says.

‘Ah, right,’ I say.

‘And Emma B is my step-sister,’ he says.

‘Lea sounds familiar,’ I say.

Pål helps himself to another waffle and reaches over for the sour cream.

‘Yes, I went to high school with her,’ Tuva says.

‘That’s right, yes,’ I say. ‘And what about Billy?’

‘They’re a couple,’ Tuva says.

Adrian talks to Solveig about a direction in psychology that interests him. Tuva lets her hair down, pulls it all back and puts it up again in a relatively high ponytail, she tightens it, loosens it, rolls her head.

‘The basic premise is that our emotions determine everything,’ Adrian says. ‘How we think, how we behave, how we perceive others and ourselves.’

‘That certainly doesn’t sound too far from the truth,’ Solveig says. ‘We are to a large extent ruled by our emotions. Very interesting!’

Tuva lifts her hand and shades her eyes. Adrian says that he’s always wanted to be a psychologist, even before he knew what a psychologist was.

‘Poor souls. I feel sorry for them, something I’ve felt physically since I was very young,’ he says.

‘Strindberg!’ Ivar shouts.

‘Are these proper waffles?’ Falk asks.

‘What do you do, Pål?’ Adrian says.

‘I’m an entrepreneur,’ Pål says.

Ivar had that Strindberg quote on a broad strip of light blue paper attached to the fridge at home with a magnet, and I often pondered what the quote meant or what Ivar wanted it to mean, if it was a quote imbued with empathy. Or was it disillusioned, or mocking, or self-pitying? I wondered about what influence it might have on the three children, each in their own way. I thought it might reinforce Tuva’s feelings of helplessness and being a victim, it might make Falk generally more anxious, confirmation that the world was an unsafe and unpredictable place. And Lotte, I almost couldn’t bear to think what I thought. I thought it

might make her feel superior to others, or discover weaknesses in them that she could then exploit.

Yesterday evening. Pål and I. We met at Nationaltheatret after work, I was late because an author had come personally to thank me and give me a bouquet of flowers, we talked about this and that, but mainly important things; he has a daughter who has recently decided to transition to a man, and he was very open about it. I was so glad that he was happy with all our work on his book, which was about extroverts and introverts in working life, even though I felt there had been some glitches. Pål had to wait for a quarter of an hour, and I felt the need to apologise sincerely, something that neither Ivar or I had been good at, for our own and very different. It was as though I felt something lift, in Pål's body, in the air around us. We had the summer night ahead of us, and it was good.

'Are these *normal* waffles?' Falk says.

'It's not long since we got up,' Solveig says, with a little laugh. 'We sat up drinking wine with Tuva and Adrian, and went to bed far too late.'

'They don't taste like normal waffles,' Falk says.

'What exactly is an entrepreneur?' Adrian asks.

'Hello! Are these actually waffles?' Falk says to Lotte. 'Hello!'

'Hm,' Lotte says, and bends over the plate of waffles. 'Looks like waffles, smells like waffles, tastes like waffles ... I do believe they are waffles!'

'I'm a kind of boss,' Pål says. 'My company does renovation work, and I make sure that the right people are lined up to work on each project, and that they join at the right time. For example, we only use certain plumbers and electricians.'

'Maybe these waffles are a bit healthier,' Lotte said. 'And that would be a crisis, wouldn't it, Falk?'

Tuva and Adrian and Falk are sitting in full sunlight, Lotte and I in part-shade, and Ivar and Solveig have their back to the sun.

'They're good,' Falk says. 'Just a bit different.'

'Someone from the awning company is coming out this afternoon,' I say. 'It would be nice to have a little shade.'

'Absolutely,' Solveig says. 'We're not allowed to complain about having too much sun, but still.'

'Aren't we?' Ivar said. 'We're allowed to complain about whatever we like.'

'But we long for the sun when it's not there,' Solveig says.

'Not me,' Ivar says. 'I only need you. You are my sun.'

Solveig gives an exaggerated smile, she moves almost imperceptibly closer to Ivar, and then just as imperceptibly moves back, she is a child and an old lady, something swells in her, then deflates, then swells, she doesn't know quite where to put herself or what to do, and I understand that better than anyone, Ivar on a stage sharing their most intimate and private moments, she suddenly feels very alone, and doesn't know if these declarations of love on stage have more or less value.

Astor pads in between our legs, and the chair and table legs, all the time, back and forth.

'Do you own the company?' Solveig asks. Pål nods.

'Tell them about the rats,' I say. 'Show the picture.'

'We were at a client's house, doing a reccy for a kitchen renovation,' he says. 'The work had become urgent because of a rat problem. They came up the waste pipe behind the kitchen cupboard and they had chewed the drain hose from the dishwasher to pieces, so the water flooded out onto the kitchen floor. That's how they discovered them. Rats can in fact be very quiet and well behaved.'

He starts to swipe through the photographs on his mobile phone.

‘We found this when we were there,’ he says and holds up his phone.

‘This is the plug for the dishwasher,’ he says. ‘A rat had gnawed through to the live wire. It was one bite away from a swift and painful death.’

Tuva leans forward and looks at Pål’s phone, and makes a delighted sound, she looks up at Pål with a thrilled smile, and something inside me bursts open.

‘But why do rats eat plastic?’ Solveig asks.

‘They don’t eat it,’ Pål says. ‘They’re sharpening their teeth. Their teeth continue to grow throughout their lives and they have to grind them down.’

Every time I look at Tuva, I feel a mixture of thoughtless joy, painful recognition, irritation, and loss. A constant, steady loss and I’m unable to decide if I am suppressing it or to the contrary, exaggerating it and inflicting an even greater burden on myself. Not that I think of Tuva that much, but whenever I do, it’s as if my life fell apart some years ago and has never been whole again. As if I have ruined everything or she has ruined everything, only the destruction has been healing for her and given her life, which is not the case for me.

Lotte looks at Tuva and says: ‘Pål once owned a retired circus horse. Is that right?’

‘A circus horse? Wasn’t me, no,’ Pål says. He smiles, but Lotte isn’t looking at him. I know that her head is fizzing right now, but on the outside she is completely calm and smiling, I am the only who sees that her smile is brittle. We both know that she knows perfectly well that it wasn’t Pål who had an old circus horse, it was Arne.

Astor keeps padding around. Adrian stretches out a hand to stroke him.

‘This animal has a fantastic personality,’ Adrian says and scratches Astor so vigorously on the chest that you can hear it.

‘I’m going to study at Blindern,’ I hear Tuva say to Pål. ‘We don’t have anywhere to live yet, but will stay with my brother until we find our own place. He’s got a two-bedroom flat in Bislett, and lives on his own, so there’s plenty of space.’

‘Your brother?’ Pål says.

He puts a large spoonful of jam on the waffle on his plate.

‘My half-brother,’ Tuva says. ‘My dad’s son. He’s got two daughters as well, but they’re younger than me.’

When Tuva got confirmed, I forgot Henrik when I counted the guests and made the seating plan. It was one of the very few times I have seen her angry. She was generally more passive-aggressive in her rebellion, almost apathetic.

Tuva said: ‘I don’t understand how you could forget him.’ And ‘You’re never interested when I tell you about Henrik or Malin or Helene. They’re actually just as much my brother and sisters as Falk and Lotte, only I don’t think you appreciate that.’

‘Oh! But I am interested,’ I said. ‘Does it really not seem like that?’

No children could be of as little personal interest to me than Malin and Helene. I was not related to them, I felt nothing for them, other than a slight aversion, but they were Tuva’s sisters, fast-growing, energetic, chewing-gum-chewing, fabric-conditioner-smelling. Half-sisters, I would say, but at home we did not differentiate between half and full: Tuva and Lotte and Falk were just siblings. In the same way that Tuva, Malin and Helene were siblings. And Henrik. But Henrik was not irrelevant to me, because I had lived with him, had been responsible for him when I was far too young.

‘I have two lives,’ Tuva said. ‘And you’re not interested in my other life. But it’s there, and it means just as much to me as this one here. Always.’ Tuva gave a nonchalant shrug, both clumsy and graceful at the same time, which reminded me of when she was small and did ballet.

‘How is Henrik?’ I said. ‘It’s absolutely not the case that I’m not interested.’

Tuva shook her head.

‘So, tell me!’ I said.

‘What should I tell someone who’s not interested?’ Tuva said, with an edge of drama. ‘Henrik is amazing at chess. He makes divine spaghetti carbonara. And he makes up the best knock-knock jokes.’

‘Oh, he sounds great,’ I said.

Henrik came to Tuva’s confirmation, and I hadn’t seen him for years. Hans Peter and estate-agent Ane were there as well, she was wearing a red, sleeveless dress. Henrik was tall, good-looking, and seemed genuinely pleased to see me and told that he was in his final year at school and had applied to the School of Economics in Bergen. I was surprised, I had expected someone less well-functioning.

‘Have you read Mykle?’ I asked. ‘*The Song of the Red Ruby*?’

‘No,’ Henrik replied. ‘Should I?’

‘The protagonist, Ask Burlefot, studies at the School of Economics,’ I said. And then I said something about his success with the girls, which I later regretted, when I went to bed that night, but Ivar managed to convince me it was fine. He stroked me as he held me tight.

‘But I said “fuck”,’ I said. ‘I said “Ask Burlefot studies at the School of Economics and fucks loads of women”.’

‘That’s cool,’ Ivar said. ‘You’re cool.’

If I was really upset and it had nothing to do with him, no hint of an accusation against him or anything he might have done, Ivar could be amazing. He could be a self-appointed authority in any emotional sphere, and I never doubted his authority.

Henrik used to cry in the evening, he always missed his mother, Anne-Mette, and I would lie down on his bed and stay there until he fell asleep, but I never knew if it helped, if he felt a little less alone. Whatever the case, I was there. What did I feel as I lay there? I was impatient, every muscle was tense, I wanted to get up and do something else. The care I gave him was in many ways without love, and yet it opened a well of tenderness in me, also for myself who was giving this care despite my aversion to the rather dishevelled, gawky child who smelt revolting, of spit, piss, dummy rubber, and old food.

‘You’re a good mother, Anja,’ Ivar said, emphatically, when we had a coffee together to discuss Lotte’s confirmation. ‘You’ve always been finely tuned to your children’s emotional lives. You have full control of your three children, their lives, their confidence, drug use, favourite food, shoe size, abilities and preferences. Nothing slips under your radar, and your assessment and response is always competent and loving.’

‘Do you mean that?’ I said, swooning with gratitude. As if he knew or knows anything about it. Not that it was not true then and nor is it true now, but sometimes I think he’s right, that he is an expert in human behaviour, but whatever the case, I’m still glad he said it.