**Diamond Nights**

**Hilde Rød-Larsen**

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When I opened the balcony door this morning, waiting for the coffee to brew, my husband had just stroked my cheek, kissed me on the mouth and left.

Before we went to bed last night he packed his biggest suitcase, and laid out his clothes for the next day so he wouldn’t have to wake me. He must have forgotten something, though, because at one point he crept into the bedroom, gently nudged a wardrobe door ajar and took out an item of clothing. A shirt, maybe; I heard the empty hangers jangle.

I barely opened my eyes as I felt him kiss me, mumbling my goodbye, and had shut them again by the time I heard his footsteps in the stairwell, the wheels of his suitcase trundling over the asphalt outside the block of flats, and then the long-drawn scratch of the main gate opening, followed by a metallic clang as it swung back into place.

Then I pushed the covers aside, set my feet on the floor and shrugged into the dressing gown that lay in a heap by the side of the bed. No lights were on in the building opposite ours as I stood by the edge of the balcony, listening to the percolator gurgle at my back. The chill air folded itself around me; the darkness showed no sign of giving ground. To the people across the way, it was still night.

I was struck by how snugly the old pink building with its peeling plaster was ensconced in the broad inner yard, flanked by new and old mansion blocks facing out onto four different streets. Our little clutch of buildings sits along the park. If I’d walked through the flat and looked out through one of the windows in the living room, I’d probably have glimpsed, in the light of a street lamp, a lone figure out for a walk with the dog.

But I lingered in the doorway. The sheepskin slippers I’d been looking for for several days were underneath the kitchen table. I thought how lovely it would be to sink my cold, bare feet into the soft fleece, but contented myself with imagining. The smell of wet earth rose to meet me.

The old birch behind the bike rack has started to yellow – I noticed yesterday when I got back from work – but as I stood there on the threshold, the tree was only a tracing in black and grey. By the time my husband comes home, the leaves will have fallen from the trees outside the flats and in the park, perhaps with a sprinkling of snow. I might have hung the Christmas wreath on the door, might have started worrying about the presents I haven’t bought. But first there will be autumn, first the darkness will extend, little by little, until there’s barely a strip of true day left and I am curled beneath two duvets, cold air grazing my face as the moon shines through the naked branches.

I took a step back into the warmth, into the kitchen scented faintly with burnt dust from the space heater my husband must have switched on before he left, and closed the door.

Still more than two hours before I had to wake my daughter and make breakfast for the two of us, plus a packed lunch for her. That’s my routine even now.

I’m clinging to the ritual mostly for my sake, perhaps, but I think she also values this start to the day, this little piece of common time before it leads us on our different paths.

When she leaves home in a couple of years, it’s these mornings I will miss the most, even though I’m used to doing without them every other week, when she’s with her dad. The evenings I ceded ages ago – she spends them in her room with a screen, or out with her friends.

The unease I felt as I sat down at the kitchen table and took the first sip of coffee wasn’t just because I hadn’t got up with my husband, like I usually do, and laid out breakfast while he showered. I choose to believe he meant it when he said there was no need, since he was setting off so early.

But: chances are my faith is increasingly unfounded. Maybe I can’t tell what’s going on behind his eyes either, beneath his words, not now.

We haven’t talked about it, this too left unspoken, but we both know I won’t be visiting him while he’s away. What I don’t know is whether he’s sorry or relieved, and I don’t know if these words fit me either. But I’ll stay here. And perhaps there’s stuff he needs to figure out as well.

The coffee signalled to my brain that my day had started, the day I’ve decided to stop turning away from myself when I ask what happened, and why. This is how I’m going to use the state of emergency that descends when you don’t have the well-travelled paths of coupledom to follow through your day. No chatting over the morning news, no bedside quizzes on Saturdays, no TV series to catch up on after the dinner table has been cleared, no one to fall asleep next to, no breath to wake to other than my own.

In front of me were the daily papers. My husband brought them in before he left: I heard the front door open and close again almost immediately, but it didn’t look like he had opened them. Nor did I. I sat at idle, yet unready.

It’s evening now, TVs flickering in the pink inner yard. If anybody were to glance across at my apartment, they’d see a candle guttering on the sill, and me at the kitchen table with my face illuminated by a blue computer screen.

On the wall in front of me, between the windows, hangs a large mirror. At this distance, with the ceiling lamp subdued, you don’t see the short grey hairs poking out among the long dark ones at the centre parting.

My hairdresser says, and I’ve read the same online, that three months after a shock or something very stressful you can lose a lot of hair all in one go, but for me it started straight away. I was in the bathroom that same day, and felt it coming out.

For months I’ve not been able to run my hand through my hair without coming away with a fistful of loose strands. I have to clean the drain in the shower several times a week; my pillow is covered with long dark hairs each morning. It’s like when I was breastfeeding my daughter. Back then I ended up cutting it short, for the second time in my life. That’s out of the question now.

How well I discipline, control my body, my mind. I know it can be confusing for other people how soberly, almost nonchalantly I can talk about dreadful things. Well it can’t be all that dreadful for her, can it? they must think, and after a brief flurry of bewilderment they reflect my nonchalance, and then the moment, the opportunity, is past.

Still, my hair does as it pleases: falls out, grows out, coarsens, starts to curl.

I’m ready now, I’ll seize this chance, even if I still don’t know how this story begins, nor how it ends.

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The sensation of hunger, like a pit in the belly or a vague sickness, of a nail clipped too short, of trousers grown too tight around the waist, of a mouth biting down on your nipple, of stiff thigh muscles walking down the stairs. A sip of coffee from just the right mug, with just the right amount of milk, a pair of old leather shoes polished so they’re soft and glossy, a dart of acute compassion as you bat away a fly that doesn’t even have the strength to move; all the dead wasps that appear when summer’s over, a blushing lily in full bloom, almost obscene, the way it offers itself, its voluptuous scent, a small child pedalling by, so proud now that the training wheels are off, only to fall, the humiliation of it.

The more powerfully the moment affects us as it unfolds in real time, the more we’re at its mercy, and the second it ends, the second a new one takes its place, it fades, it dwindles into nothing. Poof. But the sediment remains, like ashes in the body.

No, I can’t get at what I want this way, at the reason why I’m writing; I’m in my way. *I* have to go.

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Alexander helps her out of her jacket, hangs it on a coat stand she hasn’t noticed before. She takes off her boots.

He doesn’t switch on the ceiling light, just the standing lamp beside the leather armchair, the one where she sat the day before. She sits in it now, too, draws up her legs and hugs her knees, arranging her nightie to cover herself as best she can.

‘What happened?’ he says.

At first she doesn’t know what he means – then, realisation. The dream. The dream she didn’t dream.

‘Well, not that much happened, really,’ she improvises, and then it comes to her after all, what she dreamed of, if not tonight then many, many others.

‘It was just these two faces. One dark and furrowed, like the bark of an ancient tree. Hard. And one bright one, round as the moon. Waxy, with a faint white down.’

Alexander’s eyes widen. He gives a tiny nod, encouraging her to go on. Marianne swallows.

‘That’s it, really. Nothing happens, it’s the feeling that’s so creepy.’ She looks down at her hands. They’re shaking, her legs are shaking, her knees knocking. ‘The faces are stock still. They just stare and stare.’ That’s all there ever is, only those immobile faces, waiting for something, demanding something of her, but she can’t tell what it is.

Marianne doesn’t know what made her think of the dream. It’s the first time she’s shared it with anyone. After all, what is there really to tell – two faces? She wishes she had something more interesting to offer. The Munch dream was better. But the faces hover in her mind’s eye even now, free floating. There’s a pressure in her temples; two metal bands snake up from the back of her neck and settle like lead over her eyes, bearing down against her nose. She’s breathing fast.

‘Come here,’ Alexander says, and he gets to his feet, and so does she. He takes a step towards her and brushes her cheek. ‘Marianne,’ he says, and her name has never been so lovely, and he puts both arms around her, smelling of wine and earth and wool. ‘Marianne. Sweet Marianne. You just need looking after.’ And she’s so little in his arms, and now he touches her chin, tilts it up and looks into her eyes.

‘Do you want this, Marianne?’ he says.

She wants him to look and look and look.

‘I just want you to be alright,’ he says, cupping her face in his hands, ‘to see you open up. But you know this has to stay between us, don’t you?’

She nods, swallows.

He kisses the top of her head, lets her go and crosses to the low cabinet where the stereo is, opens it and takes out a piece of white cloth, a sheet. He shakes it out over the couch.

‘Let me have a look at you, Marianne,’ he says, his fingers curling slowly into her nightdress. And she raises up her arms.

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In recent years, like so many women, I’ve examined every moment of my life to see if I could – if I should – add a *me too* of my own. No, I thought for the longest time, standing up a little straighter, a definite *no*. I’ve made my own decisions. I won’t let anybody make me a victim.

And then C was dead and I was in the bathroom shaking, and not with grief, and then my hair began to fall out in great tangles, to fall and fall, blocking the drain in the shower, coming out on the pillow when I woke up in the morning, finding its way into the food I made, clinging to my clothes.

I had stomach aches too, and I took Paracetamol, and my jaws clenched, and I took ibuprofen. I ground and ground my teeth, and had a mouthguard made. And I lay sleepless in the nights and wandered hazily by day, and I took Zopiclone. And I got through the days, and I got through the nights.

But my hair fell and fell, and wouldn’t let me off so lightly.

I’ll try again, start at what might also have been the beginning:

‘I can see it’s not easy being you, Agnete,’ he said, putting his hand on my shoulder and his head aslant. That last part is my imagination, but the words are fact, and so are these: ‘I think you might recognise yourself in what I’m writing at the moment.’

A few days later there was a sheaf of canary yellow paper (why canary yellow? but it was) in my mailbox. A chapter from the book that would eventually be published and read by tens of thousands of others.

But this had been sent to *me*, on bright yellow sheets, and what I read was that C knew something about me no one else did, that there was a name for it, and a solace.

Next time I saw him, I lay down on the couch and spread my legs.

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For all those years, fifteen, I was certain that, no matter what, I’d always have C. If reality started to slip he could hook me back in, that was his trade, and there was a time he’d seen the need behind my eyes, the one that no one else had noticed.

‘My husband is a doctor,’ said the French writer Vanessa Springora in an interview, herself a victim of abuse. ‘And he has a different understanding of the necessity of being interested in others, of looking beyond oneself, and the importance of being seen.’ As though there were an indisputable logic to this – the clear-sightedness of the physician, his ability to act accordingly.

It was a doctor who had interviewed her.

*I can see it’s not easy being you, Agnete*, C said to me late one night. *I think you might recognise yourself in what I’m writing at the moment.*

*Look more!* a voice in me kept shouting, once I’d read the yellow sheets to tatters.

*I think you’re going to like my office*, he had said.

What I didn’t think of at the time were the people on the coach before and after I was. Body after body after body, prayer after prayer after prayer.

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But why C, why now?

Because, the unease. Because, the con.

Because who am *I* if not the telling of myself, in layer after layer of faces, pale as the moon and dark as bark. Because when my hair began to fall one grimy grey Sunday in spring, the faces started falling too.

I’ve tried to pick them up, one by one, and look them in the eye, caress their cheeks. Some of them are only stories. Poof.

And this is what I’m left with.