Cecilie Enger

*A Minute’s Silence*

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Translated from the Norwegian

by Rosie Hedger

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1

It is unfathomable to me, the fact that I’ve ended up here. In a corner of our flat in Warsaw. Surrounded by bookshelves filled with literature in Norwegian and English, both so many miles from the languages I speak. I feel frustrated, yet also curious, because I find that I am able to express myself with the help of this computer. I rest my old fingers on the keys and painstakingly fumble around on the hunt for the words I need, I watch them as they slither across the screen like a snake. What I’m hoping to describe is how life left me trapped in this way. How I ended up so dependent on a young woman whose company I can no longer stand. Little Ane, who makes me understood to those around me, who saunters around my home in a self-assured manner, who tells Thomas all about Chopin.

It was almost a year ago that language became a prisoner in my mind. That was autumn 2020.

I had been attending an English-language lecture at the university by Professor David Dunajski. For two years I’d had the pleasure of hearing him speak on the subject of 20th century European literature, and in spite of the pandemic, we had been given permission to continue our lessons in one of the older auditoria.

As I’d made my way through the white stone gateway, the trees by the roadside and the old-fashioned lampposts and the wide pavement packed with people had suddenly become unstable. I had stopped and watched as men and women vanished from my line of sight. The people who had been directly in front of me disappeared entirely. Naturally the whole experience left me baffled and anxious. I had no time to dwell on things any further; very suddenly, all that was left of my vision was ripped in two. I felt bitterly cold, then a dull ache filled my head, though it wasn’t unbearably painful. I ascertained that I was still able to see, even if not very clearly and only whatever was directly in front of me. I must have stopped in my tracks, because I remember a woman approaching me to ask me something, she spoke very clearly but all I was able to tell her was that the sun was stinging me. I was still speaking in English at that point. The rays of light were painful, they drilled their way through my skull. Then I opened my mouth. I wrenched it open, stretching it wide as if in an endless wail of torment. The sound I heard, that unfamiliar gurgle, was coming from me. Then I collapsed, and everything went quiet and dark.

In the two weeks following the stroke, I felt as though I had fallen apart. I lay in the hospital bed and did my best to pull myself together again, but it was impossible. Mostly I slept; I was treated for pneumonia and a UTI and prescribed a course of blood thinners. When I did attempt to speak, I could only manage simple, associated words. I said *food* when I meant *hungry*. Or *fire* when I was actually trying to make it known that I was *freezing*.

‘Try not to worry,’ the Polish nurse said in English. ‘This loss will change with time.’ But I wasn’t panicking, and nor did I feel concerned, in spite of the fact that I only understand some of what she was saying to me, not to mention my inability to make myself understood. Because my feelings were numb too, as if sedated.

You hear about impressive willpower, people who wake up and announce that they’re going to fight their way back to living their so-called former lives. But all I wanted was to lie still and silent and shun thought of any kind. It was only when the sedatives began to wear off that my sense of unease started to grow. Let it pass, I thought to myself. Let it all be over.

I was like a page, a page crammed with words and coherent sentences that had been folded up and slipped into a trouser pocket. And by some accident or another, I had ended up in a washing machine. I’d been left out to dry and then unfolded once again, stiff and creased. But the words had become indecipherable, illegible, meaningless.

I tumbled into a downward spiral: who had I become? Who had I once been? What would it cost me to become that person once again? Was that what I wanted? Around and around I went. As my stooped body struggled to get out of the bed. As I was escorted to the toilet. As I draped myself over the frame of the walker like an old rag doll, a *balkonik*, as the Poles call it.

Other thoughts that crossed my mind centred around Thomas. I tried to picture him wandering around at home, restless and upset. Unable to sleep, weeping and tearing at his clothing. But I knew that he wore his suits and calmly continued to show up for work, before visiting the hospital - once the pandemic allowed it - and sitting there in silence, then making his way home, where he and Ane would share a bottle of wine.

It’s been just over ten months since a tiny blood clot broke away from one of the arteries in my heart and rushed upwards in two heartbeats, surging through my carotid artery and pushing its way into one of the narrower veins on the left side of my brain. There it stopped - like a cork – at the exact point the artery narrowed, preventing any further blood flow to the area of my brain responsible for language.

Nowadays I can say that much of my body belongs to me once again. Not counting the odd dizzy episode and a slightly numb right hand, that is. But parts of the English language got lost along the way, they faded into aphasia. Words disappear the moment I attempt to use them. Sometimes I know exactly what it is that I want to say, but very different words entirely emerge from my mouth. They become muddled, prevent my tongue from reaching the roof of my mouth, they make themselves costly and uncooperative, my body refuses me the ability to form certain sounds. In the beginning, when I first arrived home from hospital, I despaired over the situation, I wept. After that I became furious; I’d purposefully scald my tongue with burning hot coffee.

I’ve basically given up on speaking English at this point. I can’t bear to hear myself try, and nor can I bear to see the despairing look on Thomas’ face when I make an attempt. The same is true when I catch sight of others’ expressions, for that matter. I still understand many English words and phrases when others speak, but if I happen to try, everything becomes distorted. I see an orange and think I remember the word *orange*, but what emerges is hesitant and questioning: *Spain*?

I’ve stopped thinking about the language that’s been mine for forty-five years. On the other hand, set phrases, songs and sayings still flow with ease.

*Through thick and thin, have a nice day. Come rain, come shine. Here comes the sun, little darling. Yesterday, all my troubles seemed so far away.* And a few in Polish, too. *Dobry Wieczór. Dziekuje za jedzenie.* And some Norwegian. *God kveld. Takk for maten.*

Thomas asks me questions I can answer with a nod or a shake of my head. After a lifelong marriage, this has become our means of conversation. But what is a conversation, really? It is the act of speaking, which I am no longer capable of doing, and no more than a social construction, when it comes down to it. A way of building understanding. Once upon a time we understood one another without object and predicate, as they used to be known. A look, a touch, a smile, those things were enough.

Who am I now, without English? I ask the question in Norwegian. Because the language that has once again become mine is – by some unfathomable magic – precisely the one I left behind me back in my twenties. In spite of the fact that it is difficult to articulate myself, the aphasia isn’t an issue when I’m writing. What’s more, the screen cannot disclose the reduced mobility of my right hand. Even though it takes a long time for me to remember words and sentences, and the machine continues to ask me questions - ‘Did you mean: *object and predicament*?’ ‘Did you mean: *by some unmanageable magic*?’ - I select the words and replace them with any suggestions that make more sense upon further reflection. They become *object and predicate*, and *unfathomable magic*. Other words I simply delete, erase. As if the corrections and my acknowledgement of them also serve to correct the reality of the situation. But it is the aphasia that represents a break with reality, the aphasia is the exception.

In the good months before the stroke, back when Ane was still devoted and enthusiastic, she and I would speak Norwegian every day. She had arrived early in the summer, like some sort of linguistic lady’s companion. To bring my old language back to me.

‘The language of your childhood has been reactivated,’ my speech therapist Jan Kowalski told me when I first visited him after the stroke. He explained the damage to me with the help of a yellowing, plastic half-head sitting on his desk. A relic from the Soviet era, no doubt. He plucked the pink, plastic brain from the skull and offered it up to me, fumbling as he pulled a pen from his chest pocket and prodded the grey matter. ‘That,’ he said, pointing at a dark mark left by numerous jabs from the pen, ‘is where your little injury is. At the front of the cerebral hemisphere, there on the left. Verbal apraxia.’ I nodded. It had been the hospital that had put me in touch with Kowalski. He had gained his qualifications in Oslo in the early nineties and still speaks good Norwegian, though his English is poor. I imagine he’s in his mid-fifties. He has a mournful appearance, his eyes droop downwards, his cheeks are two heavy folds of skin. But he’s patient, and he stubbornly repeats the words of the doctor at the hospital; I’ve been lucky. Lucky? He tells me lots of people are worse off than I am. As if I’ve signed up to some sort of competition. I’m lucky because much of my language centre hasn’t sustained any damage, he tells me, and because access to my Norwegian is fairly good, plus the fact that the issues with my vision have been resolved, meaning I can read full sentences without missing anything. And, not least, because I’m able to see him; Warsaw’s only Norwegian-speaking speech therapist, who, thanks to me, has now developed an interest in multilingual stroke patients struggling to express themselves, suffering from what is otherwise known as anomic aphasia.

Initially I visited an English-language speech therapist, given that English is my own language. But after just one session with her, I longed to be far, far away. She took a strict approach and made me feel that English was an impossible hurdle for me to overcome. After that, I was recommended Kowalski.

My initial sessions with him were filled with optimistic exercises and wordplay. He would ask me to identify English words that were missing in sentences, or to come up with synonyms and practise difficult words. But my progress was poor, and after a while he felt that we ought to concentrate on Norwegian.

‘You should use the language you have best access to; your first language. Norwegian. With any luck, English won’t be far behind.’

I told him Ane was the only one who spoke Norwegian, and that I needed to be able to speak to Thomas.

‘You have to be patient,’ he said. ‘Write in Norwegian, then read it aloud. Find Norwegian words and phrases that connect you with the person you were when you used the language on a daily basis.’ Then he repeated himself with his distinctly Polish twang: ‘Writing and speaking *in Norwegian*. English won’t be far behind.’

‘But I don’t remember who I was!’

‘Show some curiosity for young Åsta,’ he said. ‘Write in Norwegian. And remember to read what you’ve written aloud.’

Getting bogged down in one’s memories is the kind of thing people do when they realise their lives have fallen short in some way, but I couldn’t explain that. Instead I said: ‘I’ve been English all my adult life. It was in English that I became the person I am.’

‘Became the person you a re, eh.’ He gave a resigned smile. Then he gazed into the distance and said: ‘The past and the present are one. Ideas move and change within us, like the flickering of a lamp.’

It was something he’d read somewhere, no doubt.

I told Ane about Kowalski’s suggestions, and a few days later she turned up with this computer, as thin as a sheet of paper, with a silver apple on the lid.

Aside from Kowalski, she’s the only one who understands anything I say. For that, she is generously compensated.

The fact that I barely said a word at home for six months of my young adult life, in spite of there being no impediment to my ability, is a mystery to this day. I cannot recall or understand why I felt no desire to express myself. Perhaps this anomic aphasia is a corporeal act of revenge for the silence my mother and father had to endure.

Would English be far behind?

*Where have all the flowers gone?*

2

By the time I collapsed outside the university, Ane had already been living with us for several months. She came to us for a kind of language exchange programme.

It all started in November 2019. Thomas and I had reserved a table at Alewino, one of the nicer restaurants in Warsaw. That seems like an age ago now. I was perfectly capable of speaking fluently and we ate out at restaurants. After ordering a three-course menu and a bottle of Hungarian wine, Thomas asked me, completely out of the blue, whether I missed speaking Norwegian.

‘What do you mean?’ I asked.

‘I feel like the root of your sadness and the reason for all this recent talk of Norway might be that you’re missing speaking Norwegian.’

‘That’s the most ridiculous thing I’ve ever heard,’ I said. ‘I hardly ever talk about Norway.’

‘I said *missing speaking Norwegian*,’ Thomas said.

He maintained that *my sadness* was a direct result of the fact that I never spoke the language of my childhood.

‘The language your future dreams were once built upon,’ he said.

His manner of speaking was so unnatural, it sounded comical, and I laughed.

‘It’s something I’ve spoken to a psychiatrist about.’

‘You’ve done what?’ I said, serious now. ‘You’ve spoken to a psychiatrist? About me?’

‘Not like that. It was something that was mentioned in a presentation I attended yesterday. By an English psychiatrist. And then I had a brief chat with him afterwards. His name is William Blackwell, he’s fairly well-known. His books are very popular throughout Europe and the US.’

‘Oh, I know the type,’ I said.

‘I don’t think you do. He’s not another Jordan Peterson, if that’s what you’re getting at,’ Thomas said.

The fact that Thomas was familiar with the Canadian psychologist surprised me so much that I remained silent.

‘He’s speaking at a conference on depression among older people. It’s a widespread problem, and goes largely unnoticed. It’s here in Warsaw, the conference. But older people are everywhere, I mean, look at us!’ He smiled and explained that the psychiatrist had been a guest at the embassy, he’d given a more concise version of one of his lectures for the employees and had sold copies of his latest book afterwards: *Surviving Old Age*.

This was upsetting. Had Thomas, upon hearing such a lecture, or perhaps while waiting for the psychiatrist to sign his book on old age, had he spoken about *me*? Mentioned that I was depressed, and been informed that the reason was the fact I didn’t speak Norwegian?

A young, female waitress with short hair and a tattoo of some sort of prehistoric creature creeping from her open shirt collar and up her neck poured us both a glass of red wine. I took a sip without saying a word. ‘You never walk alone’ blared from Thomas’ mobile, loud and robotic-sounding. I knew that the ringtone indicated he’d received a message from Richard, his younger brother by five years, who had always been a Liverpool supporter in spite of his close ties to London.

‘It’s Richard,’ he said. ‘I’d better answer him. Sam has asked to borrow some money, quite a bit of it, in fact.’ He used air quotes when he used the word ‘borrow’. Sam is our nephew, the youngest of his brother’s two adult sons. Neither of them appears to possess any desire to live independently. Both are in their mid-thirties, perhaps older, and they treat their parents like marriage counsellors and cash machines and act as if their home is a hotel. Sam, in particular, has never contemplated a life of financial independence. He has notions of becoming an artist, and is a member of a theatre ensemble group that puts on performances lasting hours at a time, where the actors all wear enormous papier mâché heads. Both he and his partner are keen to evade the shackles of market forces, but they live in an apartment in Kensington that Richard and his mother Lauren pay for. Richard, for his part, asks Thomas advice about almost everything.

I nodded and continued drinking. The wine eased any resistance I might have been feeling, and inwardly I admitted that I hadn’t been sleeping well for some time now, and my appetite had been poor. I’d also noticed myself spending long periods of time doing nothing, and watching an awful lot of television. I recalled Thomas mentioning Caleb a few weeks ago, one of the secretaries at the embassy, and the fact that his parents had a passion for genealogy and enjoyed watercolour painting. And I had replied, my eyes still glued to the television screen: ‘God forbid!’. Because while I enjoyed Dunajski’s literary lectures, the prospect of sitting in the company of a load of strangers and painting mellow landscapes and smudgy skies was highly unappealing. I made my thoughts known.

While Thomas wrote a seemingly endless message to Richard about whether or not to loan money to Sam, I pondered the truth that I’d acknowledged, or perhaps ignored, for some time; the fact that I was approaching seventy years of age, that I wasn’t long for this world, and I no longer knew what would bring about my demise. I poured myself yet another glass of wine, and caught Thomas’ expression as he glanced up from his phone, an expression that said; I can see you drinking, but I am sufficiently magnanimous not to pass comment. He delved back into his message, which I felt ought to suggest that Sam enter into a written contract with his particularly affluent parents with regards to repayment or else receive a firm ‘no’ to his request, but Thomas didn’t ask for my advice, and I said nothing.

Another thought altogether leapt to my mind, less flattering this time: If I were depressed, I’d lose the moral upper hand. Depression was an illness that would rob me of the trump card I’d had for years, one I’d used whenever arguments had arisen, the fact that I’d sacrificed both my own career and the possibility of close friendships, all because I’d followed Thomas to London, Cairo, Tokyo, Addis Ababa, and here, to Warsaw. If I had depression, Thomas would assume that I no longer knew what was best for me, and that he was in the right whenever we disagreed on anything.

He slipped his phone back in his jacket pocket with an expression that suggested he was satisfied with the response he’d sent. Then he prudently sipped his wine, demonstrating his moderate nature. When he placed his glass back down on the rough wood tabletop (everything in this restaurant had the air of having been assembled in a very hasty yet deliberate manner), he warmly declared: ‘I think you ought to consider it, Åsta. The possibilities available to you.’

In the week that followed, I mulled over this bizarre suggestion, and I began to wonder if it might not be such a bad idea to speak a little Norwegian, now and then. Primarily because it might signify a change.

On the day I told him the psychiatrist might have a point, his face lit up.

‘I really believe this will bring you happiness,’ he said.

‘Don’t get your hopes up too high,’ I said. ‘I don’t have it in me to talk to my brother every week, never mind to trawl the internet for some stranger or another.’

‘Maybe we could employ some sort of au pair?’ he suggested.

I smiled, and he elaborated: ‘A Norwegian girl to spend the summer with us, perhaps?’

Could I bear the thought of yet another stranger in our flat, in addition to Rayna who took care of the cleaning and Elyzaveta who did our cooking? Someone with whom Thomas could share his many pieces of good advice, or to whom he could show off his familiarity with the art of flirtation, in spite of his advanced years? Of course, there was nothing to say that it had to be a woman. But it would have felt all the stranger with a young man. Either way, I started to imagine a nice, young person I could talk to, someone close who might give my hours and days some substance.

‘Where would we find such an individual? And how would we go about choosing the right person?’ I asked.

‘We can leave that to the embassy,’ he said. I knew that meant one of the women working at the embassy would be given the task. Thomas liked to help them out when he could, and no doubt felt that a favour in return wouldn’t be too much to ask.

I nodded. The following day he contacted one of the women working in the British Embassy’s communications department, who in turn contacted a colleague working for the Norwegian embassy. Together they compiled an advertisement to be published on the Norwegian Embassy website, and agreed to assist in finding a suitable candidate.

We spent several evenings eagerly discussing things, what sort of person might apply for such a role, whether they’d be my age or younger, maybe, if they’d be a religious type from the west coast or a young woman from Oslo with Polish parents. Thomas said he was hoping for a blonde nursing student, and flashed me the same playful smile he would back in the day. I was hoping for an eloquent, middle-aged academic, but I knew that was asking a lot for what was essentially a summer job.

Just two weeks after the Norwegian embassy posted the job online, I was given Ane Knutsen’s name. She was thirty years old, with ‘excellent Norwegian, experience working with older people, and a great deal of interest in Polish culture’. I presumed she was acquainted with someone influential.

The initial idea was that she would spend eight weeks with us, and in turn would be provided with a generous salary, meals and a room of her own just behind the kitchen.

She arrived on 17th May, Norwegian Constitution Day.

I’ve never given much thought to Constitution Day, in spite of the fanfare it inspire in Norway; I’ve all but ignored it for the last forty-five years, to be perfectly frank. Given that fact, I was surprised, but also pleased, when I caught sight of her in the airport arrival’s hall. She was wearing a traditional bunad, a surgical face mask and a long, fluttering, red, white and blue bow in the colours of the Norwegian flag, and pulling a suitcase on wheels. Several people took her photograph. Thomas smiled too, and waved at her, as if she were a long-lost daughter who had just returned home. He took her suitcase and babbled away as we made our way towards the taxi rank, where a long line of vehicles awaited us: ‘What a wonderful bunad! Which part of Norway is it from? Ah, Valdres, that’s right. Aha, so your grandmother is from there, I see. Did she really weave that belt herself?’

He’d never been that interested in bunads before; he’d always described them as nationalistic folk costumes.

The children’s parade through the centre of Oslo had been cancelled due to the pandemic for the first time since the war. For that reason, Ane explained, she’d chosen to surprise us by wearing her bunad. Because we wouldn’t be seeing any photographs of the parade online. I nodded. When we arrived back at the flat, she gave Rayna a hug.

‘The cleaner,’ I said in Norwegian. ‘She’s not been vaccinated. She thinks coronavirus is the will of God, or some such nonsense.’

Ane smiled at me. A sincere smile. As if she understood what I was getting at. I felt myself warming to her.

We’d agreed in advance on an hour of conversation in the morning and an hour in the afternoon. Outside of those times, Ane could do as she pleased, at least as far as any coronavirus restrictions allowed. The topics of our conversations was something we’d play by ear. I’d hoped she would be an avid reader, and that her use of language would be advanced and sophisticated. I’d pictured us sitting together in the sitting room, each in our own chair, both of us resting our feet on the broad, low footstool upholstered in a mossy green wool fabric. I’d ask her if she’d read Amalie Skram and she’d say that *The* *People of* *Hellemyr* was just as relevant today as it ever had been a century ago.

As it happened, she hadn’t dedicated a great deal of her time to books, but still she asked me about my own reading with interest, and was curious to learn about my life. She sighed as I told her about the years I spent in Cairo, and she longed to see Tokyo, she said after I’d shown her photographs of the cherry blossom in the Japanese countryside. She practised responding to Thomas in his own very British way, and became remarkably good at doing so. All in all, her enthusiasm was entertaining, touching and, I must admit, rather flattering. She didn’t come across as particularly self-important, but nor was she submissive. She laughed at the many things that I no longer knew about Norway, whether big or small (the fact that there were more female medical students these days than male, that so-called esports was more popular than cross-country skiing, that Oslo had a nightlife to rival any major European city), and she teased me by mimicking my old-fashioned turns of phrase. She would make an exaggerated nasal sound as she imitated my pronunciation of certain words. But her laughter wasn’t scornful or annoying, on the contrary, it was rather infectious. I laughed with her, and for the first time in a long while I felt the Norwegian language awakening within me. We spoke more and more frequently, and the two hours of conversation that we’d previously agreed upon became engulfed in endless chatter and small-talk. The days flew by, and the many hours of nothingness that I’d spent in front of the television evaporated like a patch of mist.

Thomas joked that he was beginning to feel jealous and suggested we spend some time speaking English so that he could participate, all in an effort to understand *the ladies of the house*, as he started calling us.

He smiled too, like he used to. He didn’t get annoyed when Ane spilled wine on the tablecloth, and if she expressed herself in an overly-enthusiastic manner or inadvertently interrupted him, he said nothing; he simply let it go. In the evening, after we’d gone to bed, Thomas would occasionally stroke my arm and tell me he hoped I slept well.

I’d always spoken Norwegian on the phone to my mother over the years, of course. The same was true for my father and brother Nils. I’d also taken the occasional holiday in Norway, or travelled there to attend the odd funeral. But by the time Ane came to stay, all this was a distant memory, all apart from my conversations with Nils a few times a year. In any case, she awakened an unexpected joy within me.

One day, as we were standing side-by-side in the sitting room, I noticed that she was a little taller than me. I asked her what her height was.

‘One hundred and seventy-eight centimetres,’ she said.

I told her that I’d been the very same height myself. Then I remembered some of my old clothing, packed away in a suitcase that I’d taken with me wherever we’d lived. The items I’d always brought along because I’d once dreamt of seeing a daughter wear my clothing.

‘I’ve got a few dresses from the sixties and seventies,’ I said. ‘And some other bits from the eighties.’

She looked at me and smile. ‘It’s lovely that you’ve kept them.’

‘I feel quite sure they’re very old-fashioned now. But you could take a look, if you like.’

‘Definitely,’ Ane said.

There are no other words to explain it; the sight of my old clothes on her body was a joy and a delight.

‘Wow!’ she said, twirling in front of the mirror in my tight-fitting beige and black dress with a slim plastic belt around the waist. She tried on a colourful batik-style gown afterwards, which I hadn’t worn often, in truth. In a fabric bag I found the light-coloured men’s trousers I’d liked to wear at one point in time, along with a white shirt, dark waistcoat and tie. I’d bought the outfit in Paris sometime around 1980.

‘You’re welcome to keep them if they fit you.’ I looked at her encouragingly.

She slipped out of the batik gown and into the trousers, shirt and waistcoat. I had to help her with the tie. I could barely take my eyes off her.

When we ventured into town the following day, I felt proud to walk by her side. She was like a little Annie Hall. A Diane Keaton. Me.

Ane had told me that an acquaintance had alerted her to the advertisement for the job, that she’d thought it would suit her given that she’d just ended a relationship and had left her job as an unskilled worker in a care home to ‘do something different’. And why couldn’t that ‘something different’ be ‘a nice little stay in Poland’, as she called it?

She’d grown up in Alna, just east of Oslo, with her mother, who was a hairdresser; she never said much about her father.

She sounded polished one minute, keenly inquiring about towers and spires on the ancient cathedrals we passed, but when she tripped in one of the many potholes in the pavement the swearwords tumbled out of her, as if they’d risen up from some hidden space within her. Like Professor Higgins, I pointed out the fact that she would pronounce things differently when she was tired, growing lazier as the day went on. She laughed and admitted it was true. She wasn’t embarrassed in the slightest. That gave her character, as far as I was concerned.

‘What does perpetual mean?’, ‘What’s a whizzkid?’, ‘Odds and ends?’, ‘Is posh supposed to be a good or a bad thing?’

I relished explaining things to her. But I, too, would ask her questions: ‘What does non-binary mean?’, ‘Can you swim in the Akerselva river?’, ‘Is the new Munch museum really supposed to look like that?’

She would sit down to dinner with me and Thomas and would blurt out rude jokes that made Thomas look more like himself. She mentioned that she loved fish and chips and scones and tea with milk and that she could almost guarantee that she had ancient English blood running through her veins.

Before Ane came to us, it was rare that Thomas and I would eat together during the week if we weren’t eating out. Elyzaveta would put our meals in the oven and we’d eat them at different times. The silence between us on those occasions we ate our meals at the same time usually ended with Thomas checking his watch and telling me the BBC News was about to begin. He’d pick up his plate and sink down in the low, dust-coloured armchair, it had been sold to us taupe, which is French for mole. I tended to think of him as retreating to his burrow.

With Ane here, we ate together, with vases of fresh cut flowers on the table, and she might tell us that the neighbour’s colourful stained-glass windows were the most beautiful she’d ever seen, and that when the sun shone down the street, they’d twinkle in shades of red and yellow and green. And Thomas explained about *fin de siècle*, and Ane said: Doesn’t the whole world dream of returning to those days of old? She told us that Rayna was vehemently opposed to abortion, and Thomas told her that English girls were Europe’s youngest mothers. We’d often remain at the table long after the meal had ended.

We would also visit museums, Ane and I. This was something new for us both. We were particularly keen on the National Museum, where we would gaze at a self-portrait of Russian-Polish Anne Bilinska, painted in 1892. Neither of us tired of studying the mournful yet poised expression on the face of the young woman with a lap full of paintbrushes and a paint palette by her side. She stared back at us, her gaze never faltering.

‘I want to be just like her,’ Ane whispered.

‘So do I,’ I whispered back. ‘Though less mournful, perhaps,’ I added.

‘If that’s even possible,’ she said.

We made our way down to the Saxon Garden, each of us carrying a cup of coffee, then stopped by the painstakingly-forged wrought-iron bench. Ane sat in the middle of the bench and patted the spot beside her so I ended up sitting right beside her.

She told me about the regulars at her mother’s salon. About old women who clung to their vanity well into old age, and worn-out women who would nod off and start snoring when her mother gave them a head massage. She told me that all the Pakistani women dyed their husbands’ hair black in their kitchens at home, and that the salon had been the world’s best nursery school. She told me she’d never missed having a father.

‘He was handsome but unreliable, my mother would always tell me when I asked about him.’

It’s that simple for some people, presumably. Unreliable.

We finished our coffee but remained seated on the bench. I recall the afternoon sunshine so clearly. The warmth, the cheap sunglasses we’d bought, the sluggishness we felt from head-to-toe as we sat there. The fact that I felt happy. And as Ane sat there with her eyes closed and her face upturned towards the sun, she asked me about my very first memory.

I followed her lead, closing my eyes and tilting my head back. I told her it might not be the very first thing I remember, but that I’d never forgotten the way my father had behaved at my maternal grandfather’s funeral.

‘Do you want to talk about it?’ she asked, her eyes still closed.

‘I can certainly try,’ I said, thinking for a few moments about exactly how to begin. ‘Well,’ I said, ‘my father was the sort of man who refused to pay his respects to anyone but those he truly admired, and he would save this admiration for successful businesspeople.’

‘Oh?’ Ane said. ‘Why was that?’

I couldn’t really answer that, but I explained that he’d come from a poor background, which had left him preoccupied with money and business and had given him faith in capitalism, ‘as if it were some sort of divine entity’, I said. My maternal grandfather had been very religious, and an unsuccessful businessman to boot.

‘What did he do? Your grandfather?’

‘He was a cabbage farmer,’ I said.

Then I told her all about my God-fearing grandparents from Vestfossen. Grandad, who had been a young newly-wed just before the first world war broke out, and who had borrowed some money to purchase a steam-powered tractor.

‘The tractor was supposed to make them less reliant on horsepower and to reduce the need for my grandfather to work the fields. It came from Germany and it was a complicated, technical piece of machinery, my grandfather spent a lot of time learning how to repair and maintain it. During the war, Grandad was furious with the Germans, which was hardly unusual, of course, but when parts of the tractor became worn out or broken, he refused to repair them, as if it were some sort of act of revenge. He said the tractor was a German war machine that didn’t deserve to be maintained. Eventually it would no longer go, and it sat there and began to rust. After that, there was very little cabbage-growing to speak of, and very little income to repay the debt. My grandfather lost possession of the little croft he’d inherited from his parents, in the end.’

‘What happened to him after that?’

‘He was still a cabbage farmer, but he made do with old-fashioned methods, a horse and plough, working a field that wasn’t his own.’

Ane stopped me in my tracks; I told stories as if I were a writer, she said.

Just like that: ‘You tell stories as if you were a writer, Åsta.’

I felt overwhelmed, I wanted to thank her, but I said nothing. Instead I carried on with my story, working my way up towards the memory that had always stayed with me.

‘We rarely ever visited, a few times a year at most. When I was seven years old, my grandmother died, and after that my grandfather talked about life as if it were one long, exhausting pathway to heaven. He died a few years later and his funeral was held in the old Free Church they’d attended. Towards the end of the ceremony, the pastor asked us to take to our feet for a minute’s silence in memory of my grandfather and his time on earth. But my father refused. He whispered to me that he simply couldn’t stand up to honour a man for whom he had no respect.

‘What? Not even at his funeral?’ Ane said.

‘Not even then. I stood there and prayed that he would stand up. My mother was on her feet beside me with her eyes closed, but my father sat tight. He refused to take to his feet. When the others sat back down after the minute was over, I saw father’s entire body sink, as if he could finally relax.’

‘Why couldn’t he do it, even if just to please you and your mother?’

‘I don’t know. Perhaps he didn’t think much of us.’

Had I really said that? I’d never thought it before.

Ane nodded without saying a word.

The sun disappeared behind the tall trees in the park, and we got up to start making our way home. Ane linked her arm through mine. We walked together all the way home, still arm-in-arm as we let ourselves in the brown front door.

After eight weeks together, there was no mention of any return to Norway.

5

I see the way Thomas, Rayna and Elyzaveta focus on making it through even the briefest of encounters with me when Ane isn’t around. They look away or disappear into another room as soon as we catch sight of one another. Only Ane tends to act differently, but not this afternoon. She was restless and impatient, right up until the moment Thomas entered the room.

‘We are just speaking Norwegian,’ Ane said brightly.

Obviously we were speaking Norwegian. That’s what I can do, that’s what we do.

Her tone was nauseatingly insincere, but Thomas smiled encouragingly. It almost seemed like the little language assistant had been the one to have a stroke, and that she was now performing quite the accomplishment in the aftermath.

‘It’s hardly an accomplishment,’ I said.

‘Do you want me to translate for you?’

I nodded.

Ane told Thomas that what I was doing was hardly an accomplishment.

‘I meant that it wasn’t an accomplishment for *you* to speak Norwegian,’ I said.

‘Oh!’ She laughed with feigned embarrassment and translated the misunderstanding.

Thomas smiled at Ane yet again and left the room.

He returned to look in on me not long after, tucked away here in my reading nook. Ane was in her room. He stood in the space between the shelves and pointed at the spine of a book, like a child. Then he spoke very clearly in English: ‘Why in God’s name do you always have to be on the offensive?’

I said nothing. In the same calm tone of voice, he continued: ‘Always on the offensive, whether against Ane or Rayna or me or anyone else, for that matter. Can’t you see that you’re hurting people? Or is that simply beyond your grasp?’

I looked out of the window. The evenings are still light, it’s September.

Here it comes, I thought to myself. Poor Thomas, married to a miserable old crone who can’t speak his language since her stroke, and who instead spends her time launching attacks on anyone around her.

I saw the way he was looking at me.

‘No,’ he said. ‘This isn’t since the stroke. You’ve been this way for a long time. There was a brief hiatus after Ane came, that’s all.’

He was speaking more quietly now, I really had to concentrate in order to understand that he was accusing me of having become self-righteous and rude.

‘Are you going to spend the years you have left blaming your dead mother, or your father, maybe? Or is it our marriage that’s at fault for the fact you feel your life has come to nothing?’

Those were his exact words: Your life has come to nothing.

Then he left. I went over the sentence again and again in my mind, like an echo. I turned away and looked up at the space between the shelves where he’d just been standing. That’s it! I thought to myself. You’ve hit the nail on the head there; self-righteous, furious and bitter, that’s me. And yet you’re still here! Why don’t you just leave me, walk out the door and head back to London? Why not take Ane with you? You were the one who said she’s like a daughter, after all. I don’t feel as if my life is over. But which of us is living with a mouthful of English words that feel like the deadliest of enemies? Which of us is lumbered with a decrepit body and a circulatory system tied up in knots? And how about you, *Ambassador*? Is this how you imagined things would turn out?

I’ve written it down now. I’ll read it aloud later. Kowalski gets what he wants. But if nothing happens with my English very soon, I’ll be bidding farewell to Queen Elizabeth and London Bridge for good. *Every breath you take, every move you make, every bond you break*.

9

It’s the last week of October. The wind whips dry, fallen leaves up into the air and twirls them around, but I can also see people back out on the street.

I wrote that my father told me not to look at him in a particular way that summer’s day. Am I getting mixed up with memories of Frøya?

It happened when I was still silent. I’d been riding Frøya for a few years by that point, it was winter, I was sixteen years old. I’d just started at Asker Upper Secondary School, and at home they knew very little about my day-to-day life. I worked in the shop, but my contribution was negligible. Inwardly I would roll my eyes at my father when I heard him using his ridiculous merchant’s patter, telling myself how relieved I was not to be stuck here peddling cabbage and potatoes for the rest of my life.

I visited the stable down at Hofstad several evenings a week. The farm there had been one of the first in the country to breed Icelandic horses. As the safe, distinct scent of the animals reached my nostrils, hay, manure, as I heard the snorting and stamping of hooves and felt Frøya’s warmth where she waited for me in the third bay, as I nuzzled her thick, reddish-brown coat. Inhaled her scent. If I were to cry, her coat would absorb my tears. I gave her carrots, scraped her hooves, plaited her golden mane and told her she could always count on me. I knew she was an animal, but still I told her all about Nils, about my father’s decision, and about my mother, who hadn’t mentioned it.

As ‘payment’ for feeding and mucking her out, I was permitted to ride her from time to time.

I was due to spend the whole day with her one cold, overcast Sunday in January. Another girl would be riding Balder. Frøya was eighteen years old, Balder was just five, but even so, the two of them seemed to enjoy each other’s company. During the summer they would stand together on warm days, each facing opposite directions, their muzzles resting on each other’s back. Riding her, feeling the movement of her muscles beneath the saddle, it was the most soothing thing I could imagine.

We’d been experiencing sub-zero temperatures for a few weeks, and it had snowed during the night when that Sunday came around. Wrapped up in my duffle coat and scarf, we rode one after the other uphill from Hofstad to Sem. It was so beautiful up there; the ice on the lake was blanketed in snow, like a great, white ocean. The clouds shifted overhead in shades of grey, Tveter Farm was just across the water, and we spotted several people on skis making their way along a solitary ski track. Our plan was to ride along the track by the water’s edge and up towards one of the cabins in the woods. But we hadn’t even reached Tømmervika when we heard a loud bang, which we later found out had been a petrol tank that had exploded at the agricultural college. The reverberations echoed all the way from Skaugumsåsen, and both Frøya and Balder reared up in fright. They whinnied, threw us from our saddles and charged off down the gentle slope and onto the snow-covered ice. They both fell through. We ran towards the horses, both of them struggling in the water, but the more they struggled, the more the ice broke up. A man on skis charged towards us at speed, he lay on his stomach with his skis and his poles and did his best to grab hold of a rein. We crawled towards them, shouting, reassuring, screaming, flailing our arms, desperate for help. Another man arrived, but nobody had a rope or anything we could use to drag the horses out of the water. Ingvild – that’s right, that was her name – Ingvild roared that we had to pull Balder out first. But I had crawled in Frøya’s direction and had managed to get hold of her headpiece, and I couldn’t let go. She’d grown still in the ice-cold water. As if she felt like all was well because I was with her. She looked at me, let me hold her head, her great big head, the only part of her still above water. She must have been able to feel the bottom of the lake beneath her hooves as she wasn’t sinking, but nor was she kicking in panic. Suddenly I felt as if Ingvild’s cries were commands. She was ordering me to help Balder, the youngest of the two, and that must have sounded logical to me at the time because I looked at Frøya, as if I were seeking her approval to save Balder first, as if to signal that she should remain calm until I could come back for her. I wrapped my arms around her head for a few more seconds and heard the others shouting, telling me I needed to move. And working together, us two girls and the two men, we managed to pull Balder up and out of the water. The cold had left him subdued, but he allowed us to pull him out, and I don’t know how, but out he came, where he lay on the ice for a while before getting up. A huge burst of strength surged through me, and I shouted to Frøya that it was her turn now. Parts of her head were still above water. I really believed that she was able to stand up, I did. But then she sank. She looked at me before she disappeared under the black water.

My brain and my body grew still, and I stood there and stared into the black depths. I heard men from the fire brigade and the sound of a tractor’s engine. I saw ropes and heard machinery and loud cries as Frøya was heaved from the water. As if she were a sunken log or a wreck of a car. Laid out on the bed of a truck in the aftermath, her eyes were grey, like greasy iron.

I’ve always felt that she was looking at me, even though she was dead.

One day, when I have the strength, I’ll write about Ranveig Folkestad too. The woman who spoke to me after what happened with Frøya. Who comforted me. Who gave me books to read. I haven’t been able to write about her yet, but the past is like the flickering of a lamp, Kowalski says. I can see her now. He tells us that loss can be the threshold to freedom. Perhaps I’ve never crossed that particular line.

Who am I writing this for, really? For my own sake? I’ve got no children who might like to read my ‘life story’. Perhaps it’s no more complicated than whatever compels people to keep a diary. Or to carve their name into a tree trunk. Or to use their ski pole to trace their signature in the snow. People want to be seen in writing.

13

What a strange time this is. Even though the restrictions are less extreme and the pandemic is no longer as deadly, Thomas is only in the embassy every other day. We had breakfast together this morning, just the two of us. Ane slept in. As he spread marmalade on his toast, he asked if I was aware that Chopin was actually called Szopen.

‘*Ja*,’ I said. ‘Yes. And I told Ane. Did she tell you?’

I spent a mortifyingly long time formulating the sentences, not like when they appear on screen. As I searched for the words, Thomas rearranged the untouched napkin beside his plate.

‘Yes.’ He nodded in response to my question. ‘And we had an interesting conversation. I didn’t know very much about him.’ He got up, said it was time he got to work, then made for his office.

One day, before the stroke, Ane and I set out to find the composer’s heart. It sounds pretentious, but it’s the truth.

It was only after lying together on the floor of the sitting room listening to his Ballad No. 1 in G minor that I seriously introduced her to the depressed, feverish Frédéric Chopin.

‘He was ill for his entire adult life, more or less,’ I said.

‘And created the most beautiful music the world has ever known,’ Ane said.

‘It’s true. I want to take you to a concert,’ I said.

We went to two concerts at the Chopin Institute, and visited the very beautiful Chopin Museum. We made our way through the heavy, narrow wooden door and delved into the compositions that had shaped his life. Or was the opposite true? Ane told me she couldn’t get enough, that she was like a bottomless pit when it came to his music. She spent a long while standing before a sketch depicting the young, fragile-looking Fryderyka Chopina playing his final chords. Propped up by pillows, he sits at the piano, slim fingers resting on the keys, eyes closed, forehead pale and clammy. In spite of it all, his expression is one of pleasure. On the piano is a candlestick with two arms, only one candle lit and flickering, the other extinguished. I didn’t want to disturb her. Over and over again she pressed the button that played tinny piano music from a speaker just beneath the picture.

‘As long as he’s playing, it is as if he’s alive.’

She was so vulnerable as she stood there, willing life into the image. As if bewitched by what she saw. Later on, she asked that we read *A Winter in Majorca* by Chopin’s lover.

‘I want a male version of George Sand,’ Ane said. ‘Someone to whisk me away to a warm island, to make me feel alive.’

I thought about the fact that I wanted to show her the world.

One Saturday afternoon we made our way to the beautiful, baroque Holy Cross Church, which is just opposite the stately white stone entrance to the university district. We heard ‘Prelude No. 4 in E minor’ playing somewhere. Silently we made our way down the checkerboard-patterned aisle and eased ourselves into a row at the very front, just by the pianist. Ane closed her eyes. I could see her breathing, her profile, the tears that fell from her eyes. On a few occasions she rocked gently from side to side. At one point she glanced at the pillar behind us, where I’d told her the urn containing Chopin’s heart lay.

I imagined him, Chopin in Paris. His breathing difficulties and diarrhoea. Violent haemorrhages, fever and pneumonia. Hallucinating, yet with a quill and sheet music and a piano within reach. In 1849, when Chopin was thirty-nine years of age and knew that he would die before too long, he remarked that he would like Mozart’s Requiem in D minor played at his funeral. But when that day came, the French Eglise de la Madeleine refused to agree on a requiem featuring female voices. The hierocracy rejected the request. It took two weeks for them to give in, and only on one condition; the female singers would have to stand behind a black velvet curtain. Nobody was to see them, nor to know to whom the voices belonged. Chopin’s body was buried in Paris, but his sister Ludwika was sent her brother’s heart, and she brought it here, to Warsaw, in a hermetically-sealed crystal jar filled with brandy. Here it was preserved behind one of the many pillars in the Holy Cross Church.

When the concert was over and the audience had slowly made its way out of the pews and towards the wide staircase and street outside, Ane and I remained seated in silence.

‘Ane?’ I said after a while.

‘That was so beautiful,’ she said and she looked at me, her eyes red. On a sudden impulse, perhaps because I felt so touched to see how moved she was by it all, I placed my old hand on hers. Her skin was so soft.

‘Let’s go to his heart,’ she whispered.

I nodded. We got up and made our way towards the pillar, where an inscription read: ‘Here lies the heart of Frederick Chopin.’

‘Are you crying?’ Ane asked.

‘A little,’ I replied.

She patted the pillar, then stroked my cheek. I could have asked for nothing more.

Afterwards we wandered past the side chapels. There were small copper name plates all around us. Name upon name upon name. On the railings, the walls, the pillars, the archways. Some old, others new. Hundreds of them, one after another.

‘It’s as if we haven’t existed unless we leave a name behind,’ I said.

Ane nodded.

As we walked home, back to the flat, we paid special attention to spotting and naming as many animals and plants as possible. It was September and there weren’t many insects to be seen, but we rattled off what we did see, fly, sparrow, magpie, pigeon, worm, golden retriever, cornflower, poodle, maple tree, snail, oak, rose, withered calendula and yew.

Ane popped her head around behind the bookshelves to let me know I wouldn’t be going to see Kowalski this afternoon after all.

‘He just rang. He’s got covid. Let me know if you want to take a walk anyway, though.’

I didn’t manage to respond. Perhaps I did want to go out, but I didn’t get a chance to say so; I’d been so primed to spend an hour with him.

Loss of language, Kowalski says, is the loss of a world, no less than that. A spiritual catastrophe.

14

I think it can be hard to look at old peoples’ faces and see the features they once had in their youth. On occasion it’s almost impossible to imagine that they ever had a youth at all. How difficult is it, then, to rediscover, let alone to explain, your thoughts and actions during that time? Your own young feelings?

But this I do know: Ranveig Folkestad was increasingly present in my mind. I started to dress like her, casting aside my stripy jumpers and buying washed-out cardigans and white shirts at flea markets. I wanted her to think I was special. I loved it when she said: ‘Åsta, do you have a moment?’ after the school bell had rung. As often as I was able to do so, I would memorise words and sentences I could drop into conversation with her. I studied paragraphs of the novels she lent me and took delight in her expression when she realised.

But since then – all my life – I’ve acted as if she didn’t exist. Whenever a thought has wandered in her direction, I’ve redirected my attention towards work, responsibilities, a new book, a glass of wine, an exotic meal out in London or Addis Ababa, the television. I wrote the novella ‘The Teacher’ without realising that it was her I was writing about. But after starting to put my memories into writing in Norwegian, obediently following Kowalski’s orders, she started cropping up all the more frequently. Particularly after Ane pulled Zweig from the bookshelf. Since then, I’ve been able to hear her voice. The enthusiastic, intimate, warm tones that once filled my mind.

Now the thought of her turns me into a young person all over again. A slim, tall, dark-haired version of myself in a white shirt, jeans and brown shoes. Uncertain, but with an intense yearning to be relaxed and natural around my teacher. If she didn’t show up to school and we had a substitute, I worried that something had happened to her. Before our Norwegian classes were due to begin, I’d imagine the sound of her footsteps along the hallway, opening the door, I’d imagine her looking at me. If she were delayed for some reason, the suspense was almost unbearable as I wondered if she’d fail to appear. I’d stab the palm of my hand with a sharpened pencil, like some sort of antidote to my apprehension.

It was April, I was seventeen at the time. During the first few days of the Easter break I had written Folkestad a long letter, at her suggestion.

‘Write down everything you remember about Frøya,’ she’d said to me. ‘There’s an opportunity here for you to create poetry from your thoughts.’

It had been more than a year since Frøya had drowned. Still, writing to Folkestad about her had been cleansing. During those holidays, I’d cried and written about Frøya’s goodness, her scent, the work I’d done in the stable, the fact she’d made me feel so safe, about how she looked and the accident on the ice. Even then I’d written about her dead eyes looking like greasy iron.

The first lesson after the holiday rolled around. The sun was low in the sky outside and drips could be heard from the gutters. Back in the classroom, we discussed a dystopian American short story by Alice Glaser called *The Tunnel Ahead*. We were supposed to discuss why the protagonist, Tom, allows his family to travel through the tunnel – which is occasionally sealed off and gassed – when a safer, longer alternative route to the coast exists.

‘Life has grown so dull and predictable that seeing if they live or die is the only excitement available to them,’ someone suggests.

‘Like playing Russian roulette,’ another chimes in.

‘Nobody feels free anymore, what with overpopulation, so people see it as the only right thing to do.’

Miss Folkestad made her way around the classroom, nodding as she went. ‘Very good,’ she said, ‘but do you think this Tom might have felt anything else at all?’

She came so close to me that I caught the scent of her perfume: ‘Do you have any ideas, Åsta?’

I said: ‘Perhaps they can’t really, truly love each other if they don’t share their fears. Then they feel even more closely bonded afterwards, because the Italian family in the car behind them doesn’t make it out.’

The bell rang, and as I passed her desk, Ranveig Folkestad told me that my answer had surprised her. ‘It was so wonderful and brave to hear you use the word “love” like that,’ she said.

I smiled and did a silly sort of curtsy as thanks. I hadn’t noticed that all of the others had left the classroom, and that the door was now closed.

‘Shall we meet after school sometime? Take a walk in the spring sunshine and have a chat about your beautiful letter? I’ve read it many times,’ she said.

Her tone was gentle, she sounded completely ordinary, but still I blushed. Being the focus of her attention was like standing in front of an electric heater.

‘OK,’ I said, nodding.

We agreed to meet on Thursday afternoon.

It was a warm day, with goslings among the trees and patches of filthy snow in the ditches lining the road. A faint layer of bright, whitish clouds up above made the centre of Asker feel less familiar than it otherwise might have done. As we passed the old wooden houses, they seemed like strangers stationed between the large, modern, anonymous brick buildings. We knotted our cord jackets around our waists and made our way up towards the farms. The light up there changed, grew warmer. She asked me about Easter, about Frøya and the letter. She asked whether I’d spoken to anyone about the fact that none of it was my fault. I answered her to the best of my ability, and told her that I’d always believe that Frøya would have lived if I hadn’t taken her out that day.

‘But you did. There’s no blame to be had there.’

‘I can’t talk about it,’ I said.

I was convinced that what I really wanted was to forget Frøya altogether. To forget that she had ever existed. I wanted to walk along by the fields and past the buildings, to pass gardens filled with blue scilla, to talk about everyday things, and to move on.

She didn’t ask me any more questions, and as we walked through the churchyard, we started to read the names on the occasional gravestone.

‘Do you imagine any of these people lived particularly special lives?’ I asked.

‘Oh yes, I know they did,’ she said.

‘How do you know? You didn’t know them, did you?’ I asked, allowing my gaze to wander around the cemetery.

‘Oh no.’ She laughed. ‘But isn’t every life special to the person living it?’

‘I think my life is fairly ordinary,’ I said.

That’s how desperate I was for attention.

‘A world of possibility exists within you, Åsta.’ She looked at me, and it sounded true to my ears. As if it were simply a question of choosing to live a rich, full life. I wanted her to tell me more about it, so I said: ‘I think you might be mistaken about that.’

‘It all depends on what you want, of course. How bold you are, if you find that you are able to dream of straying from the beaten path.’

‘What do you mean?’

‘What do I mean? Hm.’ She shrugged and tied the arms of her jacket more tightly around her waist. ‘To dare to make an unconventional choice. An unexpected line of work, for instance. Or for someone like you, who’s brave enough to talk about love in the classroom; to dare to choose a kind of love that exists outside of the norm.’

I mustered up my courage and asked: ‘Have you been brave enough to do that?’

‘To choose a love outside of the norm, you mean?’

‘Yes.’

‘Perhaps,’ she said. ‘It’s certainly not like most people’s notion of love.’

All of a sudden, I realised that she was attracted to other women. I’d never thought about it before. Had she picked me out of the crowd because she thought the same was true for me? It felt inappropriate, confusing. I hadn’t ever spoken to anyone I thought might be a lesbian. But I felt no fear. Quite the contrary, in fact, I liked that she spoke to me in an intimate, vulnerable way. I was flattered by it. I was the person to whom she chose to divulge a deep, secret and solitary longing.

I linked arms with her to show her that I was forward-thinking rather than judgmental. I said nothing, but I smiled when she spoke of a future where peoples’ love was no longer forbidden. We walked downhill towards *Petters*. I pointed at the windows and explained that the two middle ones with lace curtains were our living room, and the one on the right was the kitchen window. She carried on down towards Hofstad. She was going to catch a bus on Slemmestadveien. I stood and watched her go until she disappeared from sight. With every step she took, she appeared to sink further and further into the tarmac. Eventually only her head was visible. A few steps later, and that disappeared too.

I know why I lingered over this memory. Because the worst is yet to come.

16

‘Don’t you feel that things are going the way you wanted them to? With your English, I mean?’ Kowalski asked, looking sorrowful.

I shook my head. I’d told him that it all felt hopeless at the moment, I felt resigned and saw no progress, even though I felt that things were going better with my Norwegian.

‘And you’re doing all the things we talked about, reading and writing in Norwegian?’

‘Yes,’ I said. ‘I’ve been writing. You’d think I was seeing a psychologist.’

He lifted his head slightly and a faint smile flickered across his face. ‘Not a psychologist, but a good speech therapist.’

Is it because the past is a tidal wave and I am too old to resist? Is it time I wrote about that lesson, without making excuses, but instead being as truthful as I can? So I can never be forgiven if anyone else should read my words? If Thomas should read my words?

After our walk in April, during which Ranveig Folkestad had made clear to me that she was a lesbian, it felt as though there was an invisible bond between us that only grew stronger with time. She continued to lend me books, including those she had read several times, which featured tiny, personal comments or underlined sections. It was like a code, a letter or a diary. I read every word she’d written: ‘Remember this!’, ‘Never stop hoping.’ And the underlined sections in Hesse’s *Demian* too: *The bird fights its way out of the egg. The egg is the world.* Or: *All I really wanted was to try and live the life that was spontaneously welling up within me. Why was that so very difficult?*

I wanted to share a secret in return. I told her about my father’s decision when it came to the matter of inheritance. My concerns about Nils, whether he would cope with running the shop in the future. Ranveig Folkestad told me that my father’s ruthless decision had created an opportunity for me in life. She made it clear to me that she enjoyed our conversations, and that they would continue, that our friendship would develop.

During the summer, I read the *Kristin Lavransdatter* trilogy and sent her a letter about the books. I mentioned that I liked Simon Darre more than Erlend, and that I’d found many of the numerous flowers described in *The Wreath* when out and about, and that I was looking forward to seeing her in August.

But when autumn arrived and I started my final year at high school, it felt as though the classroom had become a toxic environment. Within just a few days, the experiences over the summer became a quagmire of competitiveness and ugly gossip. Some were accused of having loose morals while others were accused of lying and exaggerating events to make themselves appear more interesting. There was talk of wild parties, ‘forbidden’ trips to Copenhagen and cheating on tests. After a while, several of us grew nervous of participating in such talk for fear that we ourselves might become the subject of rumours. Ranveig Folkestad observed us with increasing concern. She spoke to the class about it. Told us that it was painful to witness such behaviour without being able to put a stop to it. She spoke about toxic group dynamics and made clear that it not only affected our time in class, but also our futures. On several occasions she sought my advice, asked me to help her put a stop to things and set a good example. I promised to try. But I did nothing. It was as if the fear of being excluded left me paralysed. At the same time, I received my very first invitation to a party.

Then, one autumn morning as I made my way into the classroom, I found all of the desks pushed up against one wall, while the chairs had been arranged in a circle, with one chair in the middle.

We’d be having our syntax lesson at a later date, Ranveig Folkestad told us. She asked Lise to sit in the middle of the circle, while the rest of us took our places around her. We’d take it in turns. She wanted us to say things directly to the person concerned, rather than going behind each other’s backs.

‘It’s a very different thing to say something to someone’s face,’ she said. ‘But more than anything I want to encourage you all to say something *nice*. So you realise how pleasant that can be, both for the person making the comment *and* for the recipient’

Beate was first; she had an ability to inveigle herself in numerous goings-ons and a clever way of talking behind people’s backs, and it was clear that she wanted to look cool. She told Lise that she didn’t like the way she dressed, as well as the fact she seemed to think she was ‘better than anyone else’. Lise chuckled, looking anxious. Marit, who always wanted to be liked by Beate, said that Lise smelled of body odour. But then she added that Lise was also fun to be around, and that her mum was always so nice, making waffles for them whenever they were over at her house. Then the others followed suit, making positive comments, and as things became more constructive, Beate’s opening remarks began to look silly. Lots of people wanted to sit in the middle. People would tell you that you were pretty, funny, clever, a good dancer, helpful. Things like that. After a while, Anne-Berit asked whether it might not be time for Ranveig Folkestad to sit in the middle. She probably imagined that it would be a good opportunity for people to praise someone they all liked and admired.

Ranveig Folkestad did just that; she sat in the middle of the circle. She straightened herself up and rubbed her palms on her thighs a little nervously, but even so, she looked expectantly around at all of us. We started to share our thoughts: Folkestad is the best teacher I’ve ever had. She’s so knowledgeable. Fair. Engaging. She’s beautiful. She sometimes looks sad. She’s well-read. I just said that I thought she was really nice, for fear of revealing how well I really knew her.

Then Grethe said: ‘Ranveig has changed my life.’ She turned to look directly at her. ‘You’ve shown me a whole new world by lending me all of your books and talking to me about them.’

Ranveig Folkestad winked at her, as if it were some sort of secret code, and a thank you.

‘You know we don’t have a single book at home,’ she continued. ‘So, when you first leant me Stefan Zweig and Hermann Hesse, with all those little comments in the margins, it was like you opened up… well, me! You’ve been so important to me, and I’ve decided that I want to be a teacher too. Just like you encouraged me to do.’

Seeing Grethe blush as she spoke filled me with rage.

I had noticed that Grethe had sought out Ranveig Folkestad on a few occasions, and I’d observed the two of them speaking, but I hadn’t ever suspected it was anything more than a chat about school matters, the kind that every teacher had with their students.

Now I felt a certain despair grip me; all the novels that had ignited me from within were extinguished one by one. My thoughts became a snarled mess, wrapped around my windpipe in a panicked knot. I longed for a way to untangle this feeling. Quite unexpectedly, I laughed mockingly and declared: ‘You all think you know her, but she’s not who you think. You can’t trust her.’

The whole circle fell silent. I saw Ranveig Folkestad’s enquiring expression as she looked at me, but my fury eclipsed any concern about her fears. ‘She’s the kind of woman who prefers the company of other women. In *that* way. Her whole life is a disgusting lie,’ I said. I brushed off my arms, as if I was brushing off everything that disgusted me about her, as if trying to make it clear to everyone that she’d tried it on with me. Her whole body seemed to pull away. I clocked it, but she remained seated. Still, nobody said a word. Beate never usually passed up any opportunity to aggravate a situation, but she sat there and gazed at her nails. Perhaps I was fired up by the silence, or hoping that someone might stop me, I don’t know. A heady rushing sensation filled my mind and I heard myself saying that it was criminal, what our teacher was doing, that we could have her removed from her position, if we wanted.

Why didn’t she get up? Why didn’t she fetch the headteacher? Why didn’t she say that I was a liar, that I’d always been a liar? Her face had turned a shade of whiteish-grey and her lips quivered as she said: ‘The bell’s going to go soon. Put the desks back where they belong, please.’

Nobody said anything to me afterwards, but I saw some of the girls giggling nervously. As if they didn’t know what to do about what they’d just witnessed.

I don’t remember going home, and I don’t recall anything about the days that followed. I don’t know if I was ill or went back to school. I don’t think I felt any remorse, I can only recall a sense of rage and a feeling that I’d been hoodwinked or violated, somehow. Now, many years later, I ask myself why I hadn’t been able to think or act differently at any point in time.

What I do remember of the following weeks is Ranveig Folkestad turning up to our classes as usual. Every day, up until the middle of November, she was forthcoming, polite and attentive. To me, and everyone else. Every day felt like torture.

‘Interesting,’ she said, if I muttered an answer to a question I was posed. ‘We can talk about that later on.’

But we didn’t speak again. Nobody in the class spoke to me. I no longer participated in any chats during breaktimes, nor was I was privy to any conversations in the girls’ toilets, I never heard about any parties. There was only silence, and I was lost. But I had no idea what lost truly meant until that Friday in November, when Folkestad asked us what we thought Ibsen might have meant when he used the expression ‘life-lie’ in *The Wild Duck*.

I gazed down at my desk.

‘He places the following words in the mouth of Dr Relling,’ she said: ‘*Don't use that foreign word "ideals”. We’ve as good a word: lies*.’

Several people in the class suggested synonyms for *life*-*lie*, and she wrote each of them up on the board. Repression, survival, faith, hope, consideration. There were more, no doubt. Grethe was the one to suggest hope.

But that evening, Ranveig Folkestad changed into dark-coloured clothing and set off walking along the motorway, heading towards Oslo. The man who knocked her down wasn’t charged or sentenced. Nobody was supposed to be walking there.

The whole class wore black to her funeral. Even then nobody spoke a word to me, and there was no room for me to sit beside the other girls. I looked over at Lise, but she simply stared at the white coffin. I stood at the very back, just by the exit. I felt betrayed; even then I felt betrayed.

Page 190 – end

Many weeks have passed. I’m not sure how many, exactly. It’s summertime outside. As I asked myself why Thomas hadn’t ever told me he couldn’t have children, it struck me that people don’t talk about most things. He’s never heard of Ranveig Folkestad. But it felt as if someone had opened a window into my mind, and snowflakes had swarmed in.

‘Åsta?’ It was Thomas. I had no words. Did God know how wretched words could be when he declared them to be the beginning of all things? Is it possible that He actually meant the beginning of the end?

Another stroke. There are fewer Norwegian words now, too. I get this down with the help of the keyboard. Things are even slower than they used to be. I use computer software to help me find the words, as well as to correct me. I gaze upon my wrinkled hands. Five fingers on each hand. I type with just my index fingers. So many months of writing. As if Åsta is no longer me, but someone I’ve created to find my way back to language. But to what end? Kowalski was sure that English would come after Norwegian, if only I practised reading and writing. He was wrong. Nothing comes after me. But had I known in advance what my life would become – how would I have lived it, then? If I had known the consequences of every individual word and action, I’d never have dared to get up in the morning.

I feel so incredibly tired. I want to describe the rest of this afternoon in the present tense. Then I’m going to lie down.

Yellow light streams in through the windows of the Danish drawing room. There are two wide, golden rectangles on the floor. I kneel down where the light falls, slowly and carefully. Like an old person. Eventually I’m lying in one of the strips of sunlight. Perhaps Ane has moved out. But here comes Thomas, armed with the blue pillow. He slides it under my head. Then he lies down beside me on the floor, he’s moving slowly too. I see him there, lying in the second rectangle.

London, January 2023

To the Editor,

This manuscript was retrieved from my late wife Åsta Cooper’s laptop a couple of weeks after her passing last summer. Its discovery prompted a collaboration with Ms Ane Knutsen, who assisted in the translation and shared in the discussion of its surprisingly honest contents. Both Mr. Per Pettersen, Åsta’s father, and her brother Nils, have read the manuscript. Her father was the only one of the two to offer any objections; he asked that a number of paragraphs about the running of the shop be erased, and his request has been honoured.

With the exception of the few paragraphs mentioned above, the manuscript has not been altered or edited in any way.

There are two non-negotiable terms to be met, provided that you also feel compelled to see this work published:

1. It is to be published as it is written.

2. It shall be titled *Ett minutts stillhet*.

Yours sincerely,

Thomas Cooper