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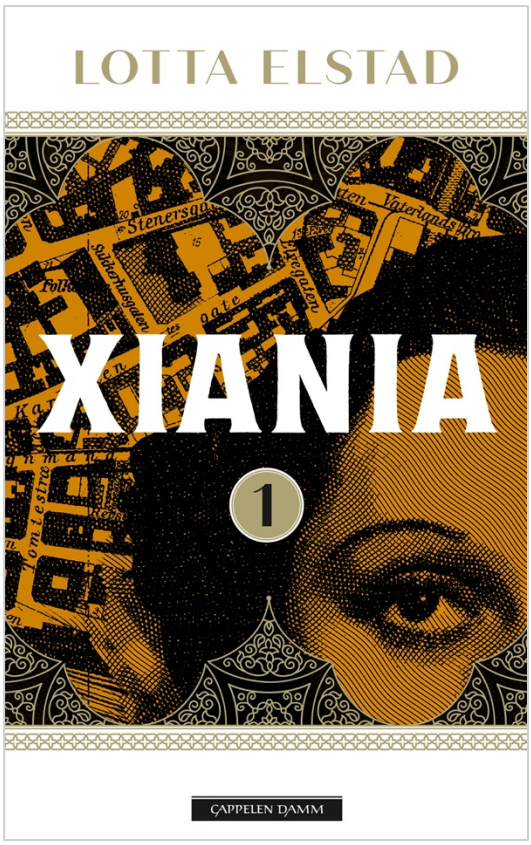

Xiania: Klara

Xiania is a new trilogy by Lotta Elstad set in Oslo, which starts with Klara's story in 1921, when the capital still went by the name Christiania.

Klara is 19, a housemaid, and pregnant after a very forgettable evening inside a woodshed. After a nearly fatal attempt at self-abortion, Klara goes to a doctor which hands her a note with an address in the capital, Christiania (Xiania), and the password SOMETHING ELSE. Klara arrives to find a hat shop, believed to be a brothel, but in reality, a cellar abortion clinic run by the mysterious Madame Zavarella. This marks the beginning of a whirlwind of events and characters. The rent Klara pays at Madame Zavarella is shockingly high, but the pay is more than covered by Klara's housing post with the bohemian and well-off lady Freddi. Now, Klara enters the strange and fascinating milieus of 1920's Christiania: revolutionary communists, the bourgeoise and booze smugglers, from late-night dancing in the marble halls of Hotel Bristol, to the stinking sewage worker strikes in the borough of Vaterland. And before she knows it, Klara finds herself entangled in affairs she never could have foreseen.

Xiania: Klara is the first book in the trilogy, written in a light, snarky, fresh and contemporary tone.

My part in the story starts like most stories do: with a thrust and a premature ejaculation.

It was a November's evening in 1921, and for two romantic minutes, inside a freezing cold woodshed near Field Farm, Abraham Pihl's grave and the studio of the local madwoman, we were husband and wife. Me in my inherited wool bloomers. Him in a silly trapper hat. I don't recall his name.

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Reviews

«Lotta Elstad's richly-colored story from 1920's Oslo is a slow-burning bildungsroman that screams to be adapted for film.»

«Not only does the author have a keen eye and a sensitive nose for the less appealing sides the urban life, she also has a downright poetic approach to the hedonism and zest that is often associated with the roaring 20's …»
VINDUET

Cheeky and fresh!

«Elstad folds out a canvas that is wide, vivid and colourful.»

«… Elstad writes with a crunch so satisfying that one will sometimes re-read whole paragraphs to fully take in the cheeky style.»

VG, 5/6 stars

«Xi*ania 1* is an unusually charming novel ... more than anything it's a story with great drive, told with bounce in its language.»

NRK

Clever and wild noir from the east side

«*Xiania* definitely created expectations to the continuation, more than anything because the author is so inspired and inventive.

AFTENPOSTEN

Lotta Elstad
b. 1982

Lotta Elstad (b. 1982) is a writer, journalist, historian, and non-fiction editor. She has since her debut in 2008 published several acclaimed books, narrative non-fiction as well as fiction novels.

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Xiania: Klara
Lotta Elstad

CAPPELEN DAMM AGENCY

XIANIA synopsis by Lotta Elstad

Book 1: Klara

The first book in the XIANIA-trilogy is the story of 19-year-old Klara. Klara is reluctant to tell us much about herself, but we sense immediately that she swings between arrogance and insecurity, being a nice girl and a naughty one, with a desire to hide away – but also to explore the world by going to New York where she has an aunt who works at the Swedish Grill in Brooklyn.
Klara's background is vague. We learn she has a regional accent, a strict Christian and rural childhood, all of which she has put behind her. At the start of the novel, in November 1921, she works as a maid for a wealthy family near Hamar. On her nights off, she likes to go drinking, dancing and occasionally having sex with young migrants from Sweden who have come to work on the railways.

One of them gets her pregnant. This unplanned pregnancy is the book's catalyst.
After a painful and failed abortion attempt, she ends up via a tip-off from an exasperated but sympathetic doctor at a secret abortion clinic in Norway's capital, Xiania – a clever, affectionate spelling of Kristiania, Oslo's former name.

The abortion clinic is in the basement of a hat shop run by Madame Zavarella, a name Klara initially finds unlikely. The doctor is female, the trouser-wearing Nastinka. The doctor's assistant is the son of the house, 17-year-old Matteo, who soon falls in love with Klara. Klara finally gets her abortion, but she is very ill and spends six weeks in a semi-coma. When she wakes up in this strange house, she hears the sound of a woman, Lilly, sobbing in the next room. Klara is in a box room in Elvegata 2, in Vaterland, a downtown area of the city full of drunks, brawling, shrieking whores, welfare ladies looking for children who have run away from orphanages, the squeal of factory whistles, and the river, which divides Norway's capital into east and west, and stinks of sewage.

Feeling lost, Klara needs a plan. Matteo, however, insist that she must stay with them. And she does, perhaps overstaying her welcome. She is offered a job with a woman called Freddi, an upper-class friend of Madame Zavarella, who lives on the fashionable Bygdøy peninsula.
Klara is to be Freddi's maid – or so Klara thinks.

But this, too, is unclear. It is a strange job. As is the atmosphere in the house. Klara has no responsibilities but spends the whole summer on the veranda drinking vermouth, watching the fjord, reading women's magazines about society girls behind the wheel in California and the pros and cons of "the shingle", the ghastly but fashionable hairstyle that makes your hair look like a helmet. She is being paid more than ever but feels uneasy. Yet she chooses to ignore that feeling for several months, drawn instead to the alcohol which flows freely – despite the prohibition ban in Norway, to the capital which is becoming a genuinely cosmopolitan city with tantalising jazz music imported from America and upmarket restaurants where people whisper about shipping shares and Russian assets, and to her passionate infatuation with Leander. He is Matteo's uncle and the brother of Madame Zavarella. A love triangle develops.

Klara is torn between Matteo, who is nice, drives a car, reads Lenin, goes to meetings in a part of the city known as Petrograd because of its popularity with communists, and is a keen and playful lover – and Leander, an introverted man with a boat, brilliantine in his hair, a new girlfriend every week, a man who makes her scream in ecstasy, in the boathouse by the private jetty on Bygdøy.

A second dilemma: should she stay – or should she go? Klara is developing a taste for the high life on Bygdøy. Meanwhile she is increasingly fed up with Lilly, the young woman who is always crying in the room next to hers in Elvegata. Lilly is poor, sad and has fled an abusive husband, Klara assumes. Lilly has an annoying way of speaking and wears shabby clothes which remind Klara of everything she desperately wants to escape. Klara would rather smoke Monte Carlo cigarettes with the rich than mix with the desperate women who come to the abortion clinic, where she is now renting her old basement room. She would rather get drunk and dance in marble ballrooms than go to meetings in Petrograd to discuss politics. She prefers Leander to Matteo. But she fears that what she is doing is against the law: being involved with an uncle and a nephew, who know nothing about each other, at the same time. Lilly eventually goes back to her husband, who then dies unexpectedly. Klara suspects Lilly of killing him.

Yet it is Madame Zavarella, who in June 1923, is arrested for his murder. Her long charge sheet includes everything from providing illegal abortions to trading in banned alcohol. And when Klara is interviewed by the police, she realises she is somehow mixed up in all these crimes, but what should she do now? What will happen to Madame Zavarella? Where is Nastinka, the female doctor? Who is Freddi, the upper-class friend, really? And finally, which man will Klara ultimately choose: Matteo or Leander? The reader will have to wait until the next book to find out.

Book 2: Ada

Book 2 is about Ada's life up until the point where Klara's story begins (1880-1922).

Ada: A relatively calculating and (at times) quiet woman who covers up her anxiety with cocksureness and airs of superiority.

We start at the beginning, in 1880, when she's born – she thinks (there are no papers) – and follow briefly through her childhood on a Swedish island close to the Norwegian coastline. Her father is a fisher – and a gambler. Her mother, a distant figure, experiences several pregnancies. Most of the children die except Hugo, Ada and finally Leander – who in turn is the cause of their mother's death (in childbirth). Ada is, with the help of her aunt, the one who deliver at these births, and it's suggested that being witness to this brutal and often bloody female life, from early on, marks her view on what we today call «reproductive rights». (It is also a part of the story that she has a somewhat unclear moral relationship to the phenomenon murder.)

Ada is married off at fifteen, but she escapes on the «honeymoon», fleeing to Xiania, where she works in the cleaning staff of an «establishment» (i.e., brothel) in Elvegata 2. The establishment is run by Madam Josefine (who is loosely inspired by a historic person, the real madam Abelone, who operated in the same Vaterland-area during the 1890s). Here, Ada also meets Nastinka, a poor medicine student who rents a room in the basement. They have a cool relationship, which develops into a conflict – Ada begins a «side hustle», kicking prostitutes in the belly as a means of abortion, which of course upsets the future doctor. A certain alliance still forms between the two during the years in Elvegata. Nastinka teaches Ada to read. The only book in the house, however, is The Old Testament – a book Ada reads cover to cover, knows by heart, and which marks her outlook on life going forward: revenge, violence and justice.

After a conflict with one of the customers in the house – Teodor – Ada must flee. Teodor is also the lover of the upper-class woman Frederika Blidts, and thus Freddi is written into the story around 1899. Freddi helps Ada to escape to Italy, by getting her a job as a governess (with a false diploma) with a Swedish-Austrian family. In Italy she meets Matteo's father and falls in love, but when the war arrives, she must flee back to Scandinavia. She goes to Sweden first, for a family confrontation before she reconnects with her brothers. Hugo, a sailor, has already started dabbling in smuggling alcohol during the war. Ada goes back to Xiania and finds Madam Josefine, now old and sick, who since their last meeting has turned the establishment into a delicatessen. Running an "establishment" has become difficult: During Ada's years abroad, it's become illegal to drink. The union with Sweden has also dissolved – and women are given the right to vote (something she never reflects upon).

In Xiania, Ada reconnects with Nastinka, Freddi – and Redvald: a policeman she hardly knows, but who's been lurking in the background the whole time. Eventually, she inherits the delicatessen, gets rid of the smell of anchovies, and opens a hat store on the ground floor – and an illegal abortion clinic in the basement.

Book 3: Redvald

It's with Redvald's story, which play out across his long life, from 1870-1959, that the puzzle is finally complete.

Redvald: A police officer, born and raised in Karl 12 gate (some blocks away from Elvegata), is of a relatively despairing nature, with stomach issues and a strong interest in philosophy (which he can never afford to study), He's a hopeless romantic behind a rigid façade. Redvald's tragedy is his prolonged, unhappy, long-distance unrequited love for Ada.

The novel opens in 1959, with Redvald standing on top of the Ekeberg hill, gazing out on his native city which now has changed its name from Christiania to Oslo (for which he has mixed feelings). This day Elvegata is to be cleared – it's an effect of the modernization the city is currently undergoing, hereunder an effect slum clearance, and construction of an underground. Parts of the borough of Vaterland, therein Redvald's own home, is already demolished. On this day, Redvald holds in his hands a letter from Klara – the letter she was attempting to write at the end of book I. She now lives in the USA, and Redvald reads her letter at the end of the book.

To Redvald's story: large parts of the novel is a psychological drama where we discover Redvald's internal life, fantasies and emotions; how he observes Ada moving through the streets of Vaterland, attempting to get closer to her, and wanting her. Redvald fantasizes about rescuing her from the brothel (he takes her for a prostitute, which she is not), and when he finally finds his courage to propose to her, she has left (for Italy). In his despair, he is demoted from his position at work, and reaches a rock bottom. But slowly, he builds himself back up, has his first sexual encounter, and meets a new woman – Kristiane – whom he marries.

And then, Ada returns. From here, Redvald is caught in an emotional split between the two women. He goes out for innocent walks with Ada, but this way he also learns more on what is going on in Elvegata 2

(the smuggling, the abortions). Kristiane has her misgivings, becomes jealous, hears word about the abortions; she starts planting rumors, snitches, and Redvald decides it would be a good idea to bring the abortion practice to a halt (to calm Kristiane down and to save Ada), so he arrests Nastinka in March 1922. On Christmas eve 1922 he also meets a very drunk Hugo; and thus, he gains greater insight into the smuggling business' connection to Elvegata 2. Some months later, a distraught Lilly arrives at the police station. She admits to killing her husband Francis – using poisonous mushrooms and herbs she has picked in the woods, together with Ada.

These external events culminate with Redvald's decision to, finally, "choose" Kristiane over Ada. In the end he has Ada arrested, reveals the ongoing smuggling activity, and ensures that Ada is sentenced to prison for Francis' murder instead of Lilly. He keeps visiting Ada in prison, and finally, he helps her end her own life. Around the time of Ada's suicide, Xiania dies as well: As of January 1st, 1925, the city's official name is Oslo.

Meanwhile, Klara, Matteo and Leander have all disappeared – they have left for USA. Redvald sends letters to Klara to tell her what has happened, that Ada is dead, but there's no reply. Until 1959, when Redvald finally learns what happened to Klara, Matteo and Leander after 1923.

XIANIA

BOOK 1: KLARA

By

Lotta Elstad

Pages 1 to 35 translated from the Norwegian
by Charlotte Barslund

NOVEMBER 1921 - SPRING 1922

Chapter 1

My part in the story starts like most stories do: with a thrust and a premature ejaculation.

It was a November's evening in 1921, and for two romantic minutes, inside a freezing cold woodshed near Field Farm, Abraham Pihl's grave and the studio of the local madwoman, we were like husband and wife. Me in my inherited wool bloomers. Him in a silly trapper hat. I don't recall his name. Or what he looked like. Only that he was a sweaty whim, something to do on a night off, his eager tongue running over my teeth, his clammy breath in my ear. His chat-up line: 'I'm a pilot'. And me pretending to believe him – despite his common labourer's breath – because why not? He was new, from out of town, the first one for a long time and that was enough for me, besides our union would soon be over. I never saw him again.

It took a while before I started to panic.

No one could tell from looking at me the next day. When I turned up at the cold church – and when it came to God, I believed in Him or I didn't believe or I believed a little bit or I didn't believe at all, but I did go, I turned up, on time as usual, knelt on the hard wood which ripped open the blisters from the last time, and the vicar drew a crucifix in the dust while he went on and on about the sisters Martha and Mary – a reading with which I have never been entirely comfortable. Christ's exasperated voice when he complains that the older sister is busy in the kitchen. His moaning. *Martha, Martha, relax, you're always rushing around, you're too caught up in things, you should be more like your sister, sit at my feet, listen and learn* – as if words trump food? And meals cook themselves? As if spirit can overcome matter? The latter was something Matteo would have said, not me – and I always felt that the criticism was aimed at me. That I was wrong. That I stare too much. That I don't look people in the eye. That I don't say enough, that I talk too much, that I need to say something should a silence arise, but then when I do, yes, whenever I break a silence, I take up too much space, I make a fool of myself and cause everyone to feel embarrassed and then I just want the earth to swallow me up; but anyway. Whatever: after the sermon I did as I had been told.

I drank the herbal tea. A pungent concoction of parsley, fennel and chamomile with an added teaspoon of rheumatism medicine. A powder based on black cohosh, whatever that is, which the specialist shop in Hamar imported from America. And I don't like talking about myself, but it belongs to this story that I used to be someone like that: the sort of person who would keep such remedies in her bedside drawer. In her dark room behind the kitchen, for emergencies.

I had brought it from home where we all knew – the knowledge passed on from aunts, grandmothers, best friends – that it prevented "uterine disturbances".

And once I had drunk the herbal tea, I could forget all about the encounter, I thought, the pilot's tongue and his lost heir – had there been one – would be consigned to history.

Over the New Year, however, the memory of both would force its way into the light once more.

Seven weeks late. For a long time, I tried to ignore it.

However, in the end I panicked when I threw up all over the wet sheets on the stairs from the laundry room to the airing loft, and I had to wash them again. And when the performance repeated itself the next day, when I bent over in the low passage to the mangle in the basement; and the day after that, over the tablecloth I was ironing, and then when I was polishing the silver and when I puked over the hens who clucked in angry protest and pecked me with their beaks, and then in the larder – I finally broke down and cried.

And I was found out. By Anine. The cook, the last person on earth I would have trusted, had it been any other time in my life – and that wasn't just because I had seen her eat her own earwax. My logic may be unfair, but she also had straggly hair, a passion for sour cream and a lethargic disposition, besides she was half-witted, she would kill wasps with her thumb yet cry out in pain when they stung her. Her limited vocabulary didn't help either. I'm thinking here in particular of the word "simple," which was one she used most often, and frequently about herself. I didn't have the heart to tell her how much it irritated me, I didn't want to seem stuck-up, I didn't want to make it obvious how I longed for the day when her vocabulary would be expanded, a day that would never come, when she would realise that a little variety would not result in a loss of meaning. What was wrong with a *plain* appearance? An *effortless* hairstyle? A *plebeian* view of the world? Or an *earthy* one?

Because she turned out to be earthy enough to know what my situation called for.

In fact, she impressed me. Tender yet decisive, she dragged me out of the larder and marched me to her daughter's, a married woman with three children. They lived a few houses away, and this daughter evidently had experience of planning and taking precautions. She instructed me in how to use the *lady syringe*, the married woman's secret, a black tube with a nozzle, connected to a red rubber balloon which you filled with vinegar and soapy water. You inserted the nozzle between your legs. Then you squeezed. Filled yourself. She had a spare. I took it home. And I did exactly what she had told me and afterwards, when I assumed that the problem had been fixed, that I was saved, the gadget, too, ended up in my bedside drawer, next to the rheumatism remedy.

I left it inside my *Oxford Grammar* as a mutant bookmark.

But the weeks passed – and still there was no sign of the red flag going up.

So I undertook a second sanitation attempt, retrieved the gadget from the drawer, fetched some vinegar from the larder and this time, out of sheer desperation, in an attempt to do something rather than continue to be consumed by panic, I made my own mixture: I added an extra measure though the instructions had been strict, only one dose, Anine's daughter had said, but at this point I attributed my past failure to cowardice, I had been too cautious and now I had to go about it more heavy-handedly. I took a deep breath, inserted the nozzle, pushed the tube upwards, indeed so far up that it bumped again something hard and knobbly while I arched my back and squeeze the balloon so forcefully that the stinging liquid erupted upwards before it trickled down over my genitals, which began to burn and itch. Obviously, I wanted to get this exorcism over and done with. Of course, I did. And then find something that would calm everything down. Soothe it. But instead, I wriggled the tube around, scraping it against the sides and lashing my

genitals with the tube, bashing it against my stomach and I kept going for half an hour – until I started to bleed.

My first thought was that the blood was evidence that my troubles were over.

My second: I'm going to die.

Because then the pain began.

A delirious pain. A disorienting pain. The kind of pain you respect. It turned out to be an wild beast, it clawed, it bit, it pounced and ripped open and I tore internally, over and over, and the skin peeled like paint in the dark bedroom and my body shook and my head started to spin and jumble up sensory impressions, the pilot's clammy breath, the narrow passage to the mangle, a block plane going over me. Then a pause. And I came to realise that the pain attacked in fits and spasms. At first, I thought it had passed. But no. It had merely shifted. It moved about frantically, gave my stomach some hard kicks like a hyperactive kid, then it went away, then it came back, then it went away, and during one of these pauses, I decided I had to face the music.

I went to the doctors. I opened with: 'Inexplicable pain.' I was modestly dressed, perhaps I had overdone it. Three plaits arranged in a bun, held in place with a couple of simple bronze hair slides at the back of my head, my maternal grandmother's black mourning blouse in a Victorian design, with a buttoned collar that constricted my throat; I fiddled with it as I carried on talking.

'It came on unannounced,' I said. 'I have no idea why.'

However, having pressed my stomach gently and studied my face – I continued to keep up appearances – I know, I know, it gave everything away, I was unable to control it – the doctor said in a weary voice, which reminded me of Christ's complaints, that he didn't "want to have this conversation." He shook his head. Heaved a sigh and asked me to leave. I dragged myself out of the chair. Leaned on the large, dark desk between us for support and in doing so brushed against a fountain pen which was swept to the floor, and every movement, every sound was like a punch to my stomach, and perhaps it was this, him seeing how pathetic I was, how I struggled, which caused him to have second thoughts.

He breathed heavily, in and out, in, out, a squealing whine through his nostrils.

And eventually he said that he would give me "a prescription for the pain."

After which I was never to show my face again.

Then he waved a piece of paper in one hand at me and with the other he chivvied me out of the damask tapestry consulting room, all the while averting his eyes as if the sight of me might turn him into a pillar of salt.

The chemist, however, looked bewildered at the note. Then he frowned. The prescription was useless.

It took me half an hour to decipher what it said:

MADAME ZAVARELLA
ELVEGATA 2
VATERLAND, X,
CODEWORD: SOMETHING ELSE

Madame Zavarella? What a ridiculous name, I thought. Pretentious like a long, fluffy feather boa.

And the X? That was short for Kristiania. Or Xiania, as some people still spelled it.

I had always liked the abbreviation. I thought it was clever. A term of endearment. I decided the doctor must be from there. Yes, he must have come from the capital *and* from the previous century – because only people like him, relics, retained any affection for the city which everyone else referred to as the arse end of Norway. The mountains were the country's spine, the fjords its arteries; however, this X – it was like a secret language, as if only the locals knew what I know now: that not only did the capital need a crucifix to hang over its fleshpots, but also that it was a cross – and a crude one at that – between croquet lawns and wooden shacks, pulpits and revolutionary platforms, elegant heels and split-open boots, it was sincere yet hypocritical like a temperance café reeking of alcohol, and now overrun by country bumpkins, it was said. By people like me.

In short: some hours after the – how can I put it – rather humiliating, rather depressing, and rather bizarre doctor's visit, I boarded the train just as it blew its whistle to depart from Hamar.

I remember it was in February. Ash Wednesday, I believe. An ash cross on your forehead, a mark of penance. The year was 1922.

Chapter 2

When it came to fasting on Ash Wednesday, I had jumped the gun. Was I trying to starve the child? Although it had already died, I did know that.

Or did my anxiety suppress my appetite or was it to punish myself?

It was at this point that I started to become horribly aware of my own mortality, something of which I would have been reminded, in a droning voice, had I gone to church that day. As a result of that insight one thought at least was clear in my mind: if I survive this, I'm never going back. Yes, if I live, I'll take it as a sign to get the hell out of there, away from snatched breaks and days belonging to other people.

And, as I said earlier, I don't like talking about my background, about where I come from. But I guess it is part of the story that for the last three years I had been a skivvy – or in service as it is called – for an introverted lawyer, his pale wife and four boring children, a stone's throw from Hedmark Cathedral, several kilometres from my home. And those weren't wasted years, obviously. No, that wasn't the problem. Definitely not. I had earned some money. My own money, 18 kroner a month, not a fortune, but it was something, and supplemented by bonuses in the form of knowledge of etiquette; for example, I know what time on a Sunday you would pay someone a visit, that you should write *p.c.* on a sympathy card, it means *pour condolence* which is French for my condolences, I know that *bisque de homard* means lobster bisque and that you tip your plate away from you when you eat the last few mouthfuls, that slurping is a crime, elbows on the table are a mortal sin and, most importantly, I have observed how you behave at a party, how you move, talk, pitch your voice, use foreign words from far-flung places, and it helped that I had an ear for languages. She's a natural, they used to say at school. I would hoard such testimonials. All the recognition I could get: that I looked like a fourteen-year-old when I was eleven, like a seventeen-year-old when I was fourteen, and so on. I filed everything. Compliments. My school reports were among the few things I packed for the train journey that Ash Wednesday in February 1922.

In a travel bag of felted wool. I kept it on my lap the entire journey. It was no bigger than that.

I sat pressing the warm fabric against the insistent spasms of pain that rippled through my body and caused me to hold my breath.

I even got it into my head that if I took a deep breath, my belly would burst open, and all my sins would pour out.

The white blanket over Lake Mjøsa was like a shroud. Everything seemed buried in deep snow. The landscape that flickered past. Farms waiting to be repossessed, glum-looking men, women wrapped in

scarves loading their belongings up on rickety carts they would pull themselves. The train chugged on without sparing them a thought, along the lake, over slushy ground, past frozen ditches; it puffed as it drove uphill and panted while fields flew flat through the reflection in the cold windowpane against which I rested my forehead. The compartment with its acrid smell. Leather partitions. Muffled conversation. Someone coughed. A deep sigh. We stopped for five minutes – and I feared that someone might have read my mind, understood my plans, guessed my intentions, and called a sheriff who was now on his way to interrogate me.

But then a train passed ours and we were in motion once more. The carriage shook mercilessly so the collapsible table rattled and got covered in ashes from a man who was staring hard at the *Social-Demokraten* newspaper. He was old and had an old-fashioned, lush and patriarchal beard, to cover a pockmarked face perhaps, I thought, while I, for want of anything better to do, watched the glowing tip of the cigar he was holding in the same hand with which he stroked his beard.

I should stop thinking about misfortune, disease and death, I thought to myself.

Then I thought a little more about death.

I thought: I should have read. Done something useful. Made the most of my time. And I had reading material with me, my *Oxford Grammar*, but I was unable to concentrate, I didn't have the energy to study now. I fidgeted with my bag. My underwear, the doctor's "prescription." I took out a note with the address of a distant cousin I had never met – or I certainly couldn't remember meeting her and I'm still not sure whether she was my cousin, third or fourth removed – who lived in the capital, in the northern part of the city, I deciphered my own handwriting, in Stockfleths gate 49, while I fantasised about the job she would help me get. I imagined myself behind a till. In front of a typewriter. Wearing a headset in a telephone exchange. I imagined that if I could live with her cheaply, I would be able to save enough money for a third-class ticket for the Queen of the Atlantic and eventually join my Aunt Jenny, who perhaps – what did I know – at this very moment was on her way to the *Swedish Grill* in Brooklyn where she worked. She had written about it to me in a letter last Christmas and included a photograph of herself in a swimsuit on a beach called Coney Island, and I had practised the pronunciation ever since: the "o" was like a Norwegian "å" rolling around a "u", and the "i" was pronounced "ai" while the "a" was like "æ" in Norwegian and the "s" was silent. Then the pain returned.

It tore through my body, don't think of death.

Then a break. I used it to flick through the newspaper which the man with the bushy beard had left behind on the table when he got off at Lillestrøm. The headlines were about grain prices, after years of plenty, famine will follow, a tram strike which had been called off, words such as financial crash, deflationary

policy, an advertisement for the Riviera, Japanese troops on their way to Siberia to help *the Whites,* a workers' leader who had died from tuberculosis, his funeral had just taken place, they had played Handel's Largo as his coffin was lowered into the ground, I thought of death again. I tried to distract myself with an article about a wigmaker in Tønsberg believed to have been given a dispensation from the prohibition ban by the authorities; they had allowed him to use alcohol in the make-up he sold, but he would appear to have promoted the effects of alcohol rather than beauty in his merchandise and was fined one hundred and fifty kroner, and I shuddered at the thought of a fine of one hundred and fifty kroner, a sickening feeling, and with it the waves of pain came back. I tried not to breathe.

Don't grimace. Don't breathe. Don't get found out.

I turned my face away. Stared at my reflection in the window. I saw how my face contorted, how I narrowed my eyes to stop myself from crying, gritted my teeth and chewed my lip, and thus I kept my torments at bay until the train arrived at Xiania.

There is such a thing as a standing advertisement. Advert columns for *Bjellands Fishcakes* or a production of *A Doll's House* at the National theatre. There are also walking advertisements: Brewery horses carrying kegs with large labels: *Ringnes! Frydenlund! Schous!* They will mow you down if you don't look where you are going, they will rear, kick and whinny – *I was here first!* – at an automobile sounding its horn as it tries to carve out some space on the road. The traffic was chaotic. I didn't know where I was going. The racket intimidated me – cabbies plying for fares, the metal clanging of a fire engine, a noisy tram, windows rattling, doors slamming, wheels screeching against tramlines and conductors ringing a bell to remind people to pay and those standing on the rear platform would jump off while the tram was still moving – so I could barely hear a kind old man when he tried to give me directions. It's only fifteen minutes away, he said. He pointed his cane. Eastwards, but with an unfortunate domino effect: his cane tripped up some poor messenger boy and the letters he carried in his enormous rucksack were sent flying over the nearest newspaper boy and silenced that day's extra-extra-read-all-about-it cries of how the Finnish Interior Minister had been MURDERED, and startled boys dropped the sausages they had just bought *25 øre each – plenty of mustard!* Welcome to X! I was a long way from home. I stumbled, I hesitated, I felt small. Trapped in a performance, a nightmare where everyone but me knew the choreography; yes, apart from the messenger accident it seemed to be in their blood: the pace. Knowing where you were going, how to navigate, how to dodge the cyclists who darted past you without a care in the world for anyone's safety. How to bow your head to shield yourself against the fierce wind.

Icicles hung like organ pipes from rusty gutters. I walked along the river. Through the slush. The dilapidated barges. The stench was foul, but I refused to hold my nose, I didn't want to offend those who

lived in the derelict houseboats that rocked between the ice floes. I followed the kind old man's instructions as best I could. I passed the scrap merchant, the hairdresser, the specialist fur seller – *with twenty years' experience in the profession!* But the old man never mentioned a gramophone shop, it was called *His Master's Voice* or Linda Larsen's temperance café or Bøndenes Hotel where a dark-haired boy was begging – *soldi, soldi* – in a language I didn't understand. I looked down. My boots were soaked through. Soon my feet would be squelching around in them, and I looked up at the jungle of houses – some were shacks with holes in the rotten planks while others seemed grand. Ancient. Made from bricks. I kept walking at random, down a dead end, along a lane where a man tried to sell me hooch, then through a small passage and down an alleyway where the street signs were either missing or crooked, Vognmannsgangen, Tomtegangen, Pølsesunden, Klostergangen, unreliable, random signs casually mounted, Repslagergangen a steep and slippery street, a child was tobogganing down Karl 12s gate in an old metal basin and a mother had hung a pram out of the window – for lack of space inside, would be my guess. Vaskeribakken. Tomtegata. Tomtestredet. The streets were laid out vertically, horizontally, in parallel and diagonally, they were winding, so winding that it was impossible to work out which door belonged to which address. Finally, I just stopped. In the junction between Rødfyllgata and Elvegata.

I couldn't make out the numbering: where was number 2? Where was the front door? I did a few more rounds, trudging up and down the slush in front of a filthy, half-timbered, white brick house. It had an iron gate and I concluded that this must be the place.

The house was on two floors – three if you included the basement. Small windows peeked up at the kerb. One of them had a beaded curtain. If you opened the damaged shutters on the top floor, you would have a view of the barges. Then I spotted a door around the corner. And in front of it, a hat stand covered in snow with three fedoras.

As I came closer, I no longer had any doubts.

A brass sign flashed at me: *Madame Zavarella, Milliner.*

Chapter 3

A bell rang out as I stepped onto the chequerboard floor tiles. The shop was clean, quite tidy, but unstaffed. No one was behind the counter – but from upstairs I could hear someone play a fast piece of music on a piano which, apart from a few out-of-tune keys, had a fine sound. I remember experiencing the tune as strange, how the stress landed in unexpected places, in between rather than on the metronome beats, as if the notes either avoided or were racing staccato and moved up and down, one octave, well, whatever, up and down. I couldn't help smiling. I almost forgot how much pain I was in.

The same applied to the room. I had been expecting a doctor's surgery. Instead, I found hats: Trilbys, top hats, Stetsons, tweed flat caps, respectable goods, broad-brimmed head coverings in every colour, a feather here and there, coquettish cloches which would fit closely over your head and merge with your hairstyle, even fluffy feather boas draped over a velvet upholstered Rococo chair in a corner. I leaned against the counter. I needed to breathe again. I noticed a bamboo curtain leading to another room, a combined kitchen and bedroom with a stock room and an office. I could make out a stepladder. A broom. A slop sink, a gas cooker, a daybed in khaki corduroy in front of a desk by a window facing a scruffy cobblestone courtyard where a red automobile was parked.

The art on the walls wouldn't frighten anyone, I remember thinking. A full-rigged ship at sea. Framed in coiled metal. But I didn't want to snoop.

I took a seat on the Rococo chair and waited for the musician to finish.

I breathed. In and out. I tried not to think about the pain, but the pain had become unbearable again, I felt dizzy, worse than a few minutes ago in the shanty town, so I got up and hobbled to the front door which I opened and closed a couple of times so the bell rang out again. And in response the melody upstairs made a disharmonic little leap. Then it stopped abruptly.

'I hope I haven't kept you waiting!'

A young man came running down the stairs. Dark grey flannel trousers. A knitted cardigan with a shawl collar that couldn't offend anyone. Out of breath, he jumped behind the counter, swiftly put on a pair of spectacles which magnified his eyes and gave his eyelashes a quite unfair advantage; and I thought immediately and again when I got a better look at him: cute. He was younger than me. No more than seventeen, would be my guess. He had barely any hairs on his chin, but his thick, dark hair the colour of prunes more than made up for it – it fell in waves, which with only partial success he had managed to

flatten with some sticky oil that smelled of cedar, a strong, rather heady scent. I felt instantly at ease with him.

But how should I proceed? Was this beardless boy the right person for my delicate request? For a moment I couldn't remember the codeword the doctor had written down for me – so instead I asked, as humbly as I could, if Madame Zavarella was available – and then I wondered if perhaps this pretentious name was in fact the codeword. Not a person, but a covert operation, a military unit like the ones I had read about in pulp fiction about the war? I felt dizzy again, I needed to sit down, and I was starting to have doubts about the whole thing. The young man looked at me hesitantly. He briefly tugged at the sleeve of his cardigan. And as I made eye contact with him, he began to blink fiercely, he trembled as if the question confused him, as if he didn't know to whom I was referring, Madame Zavarella, what a strange name, but a second later he composed himself, adjusted his glasses, got his tic under control and told me in a clumsy syntax that "mum" wasn't here right now.

She was at a funeral, he said. In Sweden. She would probably be gone for some days, and again I thought: so cute. You don't often hear people say mum.

'But perhaps I can help?' He flung out a hand to illustrate just how helpful he could be – and caused the latest fashion, a turquoise turban with a rhinestone which had been lying on the counter, to be swept onto the floor. We both made a beeline for the turban. We ended up squatting, face to face, pulling it in opposite directions, a battle he won; triumphantly he returned the turban to the counter while I stayed on the floor, crouching, my palms pressed against the floor tiles. At first, he didn't notice. How hard I fought not to die. With his back to me, he continued to insist that he would be "delighted to assist me with whatever I might need," yes, whatever, whatever it is, his tone of voice was reassuring, almost too much, but then when he saw that I was still on the floor, he re-joined me immediately. He touched my shoulder and squatted down again. He crouched as well and stared at the same point as me, at the rhinestone that had come off in our tug-of-war. His breathing settled. And he lowered his voice: 'I'd be happy to help.' Yet still insistent. 'Whether you're looking for a hat. Or something else,' and then I remembered what I was supposed to say. I blurted out:

'Something else.'

He glanced at my stomach, my waist, further down, then up at the mourning blouse, the top buttons, then checked himself, wrong body part, he started to nod fervently as he let go of my shoulder and stumbled back to the counter, then he must have changed his mind because he returned to escort me, slowly and gently, to the chair.

'Please wait here.' He rested on his haunches with his hand in mine for several seconds.

'My name is Matteo,' he then said.

The clinic: it was downstairs in the basement underneath the hat shop. A strange room. Full of tinned food. One wall was practically papered with can of meatballs, whale rissoles and tomato soup as if the city was about to be besieged. It did nothing to reassure me. Neither did the display cupboard with its flaking, turquoise paint where sewing and knitting articles lay next to a box of French letters, condongs or condoms or whatever you call them, and especially not the medical equipment that was set out on the shelf above: syringes, forceps, catheters, a stethoscope, a first aid box.

What was the plan? Would they stitch me together with the Singer sewing machine if I split? On a white-painted sideboard with woodcarvings, space had been made for a wash basin, two flannels and a towel on which a terrifying weapon rested, a silver cylinder of some kind with a long handle and two hinged bills.

I spread my legs. I felt a contemptuous cold draught below.

I was lying on a couch. My legs in metal stirrups with Matteo standing behind me, the doctor having given him strict instructions to stay there.

And the doctor was a woman. At first that had made me feel better, but now I started to have doubts about her, too.

Wearing trousers, she had burst in, no-nonsense, dumped a black leather bag on the sideboard, swiftly unbuttoned a beige coat, roughly pushed up her sleeves, taken off her hat, smoothed her greying hair, which was tightly combed back, and her mouth was sharp, pale. No greeting. No nodding. She didn't even deign to look at me. She just seemed annoyed, and I felt naked, which to some extent I was, I thought that she was judging me, judging people like me, I wanted to hold Matteo's hand again, my only friend in the whole wide world now.

She launched into something I took to be a rant. At him though, not at me, yes, it literally took place over my head, and though the pain made it hard for me to keep up, I eventually worked out what it was the doctor was so het up about, and I was relieved when I realised that it wasn't my sin that was the source of her irritation, but because it was Matteo, Madame Zavarella's son, and not "the lady herself" who today "yet again" was her operating assistant. Where was Madame Zavarella incidentally? In Sweden? For a funeral? Whose, did you say? Oh, her?

I didn't catch the name of the deceased. Only that it caused the doctor to snort.

She shrugged off Matteo's details about the death; it was expected, the woman had been ill for a long time, stomach problems for years and more; and I was overcome with homesickness. What had I got myself into? Who were these people? Did they have my best interests at heart? Right there and then all I

wanted was to be back in the larder, have Anine find me, get a second chance, see the open, snow-covered, endless landscape again, even if it was for one final time. I didn't want to die. Certainly not here. Below a basement window. Close to the kerb where every sound cut through the glass, the tripping of ankle boots, Wellington boots trudging through the slush, die in agony, die *from* agony, the pain was insane, I was a gutted fish lying on the shore, flapping, I was a stranger here, I was among strangers.

The doctor stood over me now. The stethoscope dangled from her neck. She made to press my stomach and I panicked and started to wriggle. I elbowed my way up the couch, clutching the sheet, my eyes were probably wide, desperate, and when this woman who wore trousers saw how frightened I was, her gaze softened for the first time. She stopped her examination. She took a folding chair, sat down next to me. And her voice was kind.

'What's your name, my girl?' She kept her eyes on mine.

'K-Klara.'

'And how old are you?'

'Nineteen.'

In the same calm voice, she asked me when I last had my "monthly", and I sobbed and sniffled as if I were five years old: 'four months,' I said, 'at least I think so.' And she wanted to know if I had made any efforts to "get rid of it" on my own, whereupon I nodded, I could feel tears rolling down my cheeks, but apart from that there was nothing else she wanted to know. She placed the chest piece of the stethoscope on my chest. Listened to my heartbeat. She told me her name was Nastinka, that she was a trained gynaecologist, that she had done this many times before and that everything was going to be all right – and I thought that it was magic how strangers turn into people and how you automatically like them more the moment they have a name.

Then she told me to focus on something. 'The balls of yarn over there.' She pointed to the knitting items in the display cupboard, and I did as I was told. I fixed my eyes on the yarn. It was wool. One ball was the colour of red wine. Another forest green. And the harder I stared at them, the more convinced I became that there was money inside them. Dirty pink banknotes. Wasn't that, right?

Yes, I thought I could see wads of banknotes inside the balls of wool, but it could have been an optical illusion, I must accept that, I was pretty out of it. Then the sewing machine, which I could see out of the corner of my eye, started to clatter. It went tak-tak-tak-tak-tak-tak down a seam as if it was in full swing, something it wasn't, no, it wasn't in use. So, given that my ears must be deceiving me, perhaps my eyes were doing the same? If so, then I put it down to the damp handkerchief which Matteo with a trembling hand placed below my nostrils – I remember a sweet and nauseating smell like red wine mixed with some

kind of chemical and rotting towels, and after that it all happened so fast. My brain muddled everything up. My abandoned offspring, the pilot's abused bastard, the married woman's secret, the shrill tram, shoes clip-clopping, the cold metal bills going into my groin, and my eyes blinked, they closed, they opened, to balls of wool, to twilight, to forest green. Pitch black. Some light. Wine red. A black void. A bottomless well.

Chapter 4

I spent six weeks in bed. Woozy. Almost unconscious.

I woke up five times – or so I remember.

The first time to a cacophony: the insistent drumming of rain, doors creaking, chairs scraping, the bamboo curtain rustling, pigeons cooing, a distant factory whistle that cut to the bone and replaced the night time carousing, the shrill laughter of whores, and later a mighty voice, a booming male voice, a deep baritone which came from above and rolled down the stairs and in a weak, possibly penitent moment made me think that God was calling me.

The second time by the shop bell ringing maniacally – followed by a discussion upstairs. Between a hoarse female voice and plaintive boy's voice, mother and son, I presumed. Madame Zavarella and Matteo. The bell kept ringing not because customers were rushing in and out, I realised eventually, but because Madame Zavarella insisted on airing the room. She complained about a bad smell in the shop, she thought it stank of fish, strong, pickled, rotten anchovies, she said, it was the worst thing she knew – while Matteo argued that it was her airing that caused stinking fumes to be blown in whenever a car braked suddenly for chickens or stray children. He reminded her that it was he who worked there. She called him pedantic. No better than a housing inspector, interfering do-gooders, women appointed by the authorities to force their way into basements and write prudish reports. She couldn't stand them or their "damned hygiene movement" and reminded him of the time he – "my own son" – had come home from school with a note telling all pupils to bring a toothbrush the next day so that the teacher could show them how to clean their teeth properly.

'What were they insinuating?!'

The third time by a dream. I had been floating through the air and I landed softly – before I was caught up in a flood. Streams of water were pouring in under the uneven threshold, spreading across the floor and

before I knew it, I was splashing around in water up to my knees, in water up to my chest, to my neck, my chin, I gasped; and then I woke up. My mouth was dry. My hair clammy. Beads of sweat were sticking to my feverish forehead, and it took several minutes before I got my bearings before I realised that I had been moved to another room. I was no longer in the clinic. No longer among meatballs and tomato soup. But in a small box room. Barely big enough for one bed.

Next to it was a wobbly cast-iron chair where my grandmother's mourning blouse lay neatly folded. The window, though halved by a partition wall, still offered a view of the kerb and a ray of sunshine slipped through the cream-coloured bead curtain, which was missing several beads, and lit up the whirling dust. On the opposite wall, above the crooked, dark and stained wainscoting, hung a picture of the old King of Sweden. Oscar the Second. A man with medals, a mournful expression and a white moustache twirled gallantly to each side. There was a smell, I remember. Harsh. A raw smell which would stick to my clothes, I thought, and the clothes I was now wearing, a thick Icelandic sweater, far too big, knitted for a man, over a light blue linen shift with fringes. Someone had changed my clothes. Someone had tucked woollen blankets around my legs, and I was amazed that I hadn't noticed it, I must have been very fast asleep.

Then I thought I heard a noise. A sob? The door to my room was ajar.

I peered outside, I could see the turquoise display cupboard which made me think of the last thing I saw before I lost consciousness: the balls of yarn, forest green, wine red, the wads of money. I wondered if I had imagined them all. My curiosity got the better of me and I forgot how exhausted I was and boldly hoisted myself up, leaned on my elbows, then let the dancing dots settle before I reached down my big toe and moved it in a figure of eight towards the soft floor. I grabbed hold of the bedpost and pulled myself up to standing. I waited a little before I crept outside.

The display cupboard, however, proved to be a disappointment: no dirty pink bank notes. Perhaps someone had taken them away? Or perhaps there was nothing strange about it? Or perhaps I was still dreaming? And I was definitely not well enough for this, even so I decided to explore the rest of the basement, all the time supporting myself against the wall. Under the stairs was a living room with no windows. Sparsely furnished. A solid wood table. Folding chairs lined up. Three doors. One to my box room, one to the clinic, and one to an unknown room. A narrow passage. Dark like a secret corridor, which led to some steps, creaking and rotten ones, which led up to the second exit of the house, it turned out: a hatch to the courtyard. I edged it open. An oxeye daisy pushed its way up between some cobblestones. There was still a little snow. A woodshed. A hut with some latrines – or privies as they were also called, or even more fancy: *appartement d'oscurité*, as it said in joined-up writing on the door sign. I got a better view of the car this time. I was impressed that they owned a car at all. And it was well-maintained. Painted red, open body work, high seats, much loved I could tell from the surrounding tools which at that moment

were lit up by a single ray of sunshine, what little was able to force its way into the courtyard, and perhaps it was the sun, the bright sun, yes, this sudden light, such a contrast to the basement, which triggered the fear that now surged inside me. I struggled to swallow. I felt a prickling in my head, a swishing and a swooshing, I got scared that I might fall from the steps, scared that someone might discover me, where was I? Who were these people?

I forced myself to think straight. I considered making my escape right there and then, without telling anyone, through this hatch. Put on the mourning blouse, sneak out of the courtyard, an act that would also have solved my dilemma because how do you say thank you for a dilation and curettage? This sin – do you pay for it? How much? Should I explain myself? Account for my situation? Would we keep in touch?

Yet I abandoned my escape plan when I realised how exhausted I was.

Indeed, I was unbelievably tired and that plus the cold meant that all I wanted was get back under the woollen blanket.

The fourth time I woke up – it might have been just hours later or perhaps days – I was curious about the third door. The room I hadn't explored. Again, I heard sobbing, it was impossible to ignore, and again I forced myself to sit up, and again it was a little too early in my recovery. I still struggled to keep my balance when I snuck out, so I used the door for support. Then I bent forwards and peered through the keyhole. I saw a figure.

A young woman, a desperate creature. She had sunken cheeks, skinny arms, she continued to cry, yes, her eyes were streaming like a whale's blowhole and snot the colour of porridge was smeared across her face like a sticky lotion. She massaged the mess into her temples, it was both revolting and heart-breaking, and I wondered whether I should knock.

I didn't like crying people; I didn't like to cry myself.

But then I realised that she didn't need me, that she was not alone. I heard it now. A reassuring "sssshhhhh". Someone was in there; someone was comforting her. The keyhole wasn't big enough for me to see who it was, but I could hear that whoever it was managed to make the young woman calm down, a few notches at least. Yes, half a minute or so later the sobbing turned into occasional sniffles, and I could hear that they whispered intensely for a long time but could not make out what they said – and I was confused. I didn't know, in fact, I still don't know on what to judge this house: on the crying or the comforting?

Chapter 5

The reason people enjoy dancing to ragtime, something I learned later after countless piano lessons, is that it is a playful take on a march. The melody jumps carefree over the basic rhythm. Bizarre and intoxicating were the words Scott Joplin used about this effect which paradoxically highlights the rhythm by giving the audience the urge to fill in the gaps themselves by moving to the music; ragtime is thus not a rhythm, as in a time or a beat, but an effect that drives the song forwards, an expectation of more to come, and this ingredient is called syncopation, which can best be translated as a pause. Or possibly a deviation. Or a shift, a void, a loss – the sense that something is missing. I didn't know when I woke up again – for the fifth time – that it was this musical style with which Matteo would inspire me to get out of bed.

At the time I had no idea of the name of the genre or that he was playing *Georgia Camp Meeting*, which might have morphed into *Stoptime Rag* or *Climax Rag*. Only that I had heard it before.

At any rate I woke up. And spring was here.

A lonely anemone by the window was evidence of that.

I also felt well. For the first time in a long time. In good spirits and I decided that it was about time I expressed my thanks and moved on to be nineteen and free.

I got dressed and followed the music up the stairs.

And here I would like to take a snapshot. The hat shop in Elvegata 2 was still clean and unstaffed but perfectly presentable; the tiles had been washed and continued to be accompanied by the cheerful music coming from above. The wallpaper by the stairs was old-fashioned. Blue with a pattern of medallions and purple butterflies with green tips and baroque borders, and the higher up you went, the more torn it was, great strips flapped along the passage to the living room, whose wall was an indeterminate yellow where layers of dirt formed strange patterns. The furnishings were lumpy. There was too much furniture: a scratched chiffonier, a chaise longue upholstered in a green fabric, a velvet sofa with dangling tassels and springs popping up through the fabric, wine red velvet curtains either side of the damaged shutters, a high-backed armchair with padded armrests and a dusty, red headrest covered by a lace doily, the kind mothers make to protect their furniture against their sons' brilliantine oiled hair. An old stone fireplace. Logs in a wicker basket. A dark brown corner cupboard, a home-made wooden ladder leading to a skylight in the ceiling and further in I could make out a plain bedroom with a sloping roof and a large wardrobe. Everything looked archaic. The piano, too, had seen better days.

Matteo was sitting by it, on a stool upholstered with leather. He hadn't noticed me yet. He was concentrating, he played without sheet music, his left-hand taking care of the low notes – but when he sensed my presence, his fingers immediately started to flounder and the room was filled by one disharmony after another, followed by a "bother" and a "bugger."

And: 'I give up.' He laughed. He held up his hands in a gesture of surrender, then he smiled at me.

He moved sideways to make room for me on the piano stool. 'Do you play?'

I smiled and shook my head. He took my hand, he started moving it over the keys while he explained about notes, music theory, that jazz means alarm, wonderful noise, things like that, his enthusiasm was infectious, and a gust of warmth spread as our thighs briefly touched. He started playing a tune. I began to study an old photograph next to a small, filthy plaster bust of Beethoven on the piano. It was of a dark and rather handsome man with a dent in the bridge of his nose. He looked like an older version of Matteo, who, while he played, nodded at it with approval, 'my father,' he said. And he seemed less nervous now. 'You look like him.' We smiled to each other. And after the song I turned on all my charm, thanking him for both my treatment and for the concert, said that I would pay for my stay as soon as I could, that a cousin had promised me a job and blah-blah-blah – yes, I embellished, invented a lie, but he wanted me to stay. He insisted. I had to meet his mother, his family, come for a drive in the car, and not least, and this was the most important: the doctor would need to examine me first.

But before I had time to answer, the bell rang.

A booming baritone – 'hallo!' – which I recognised immediately, the voice of God from the cacophony, could be heard below.

'Upstairs!' Matteo called out. A moment late the stairs reverberated from heavy footsteps.

A man entered, he had to duck to get through the doorway.

His nose was plum-coloured, he had large pores around his nostrils, rough cheeks, a badly shaven chin, small glasses, and the smell he gave off was wholly unpleasant. He was sweating for an entire battalion and he went on to greet us with an ironic military salute before he climbed the home-made ladder, pressed his face against the skylight, looked across the roofs, called out something unintelligible to Matteo, came back down, put a log on the fire and blew life into the embers; from the corner cupboard he then fetched three small glasses and a bottle of alcohol which he held up to me with a look I could not refuse.

'Meet my Uncle Hugo.'

Matteo sent me an apologetic look. 'He builds roof terraces.'

A few minutes later I was left alone in the living room with this uncle. Unfortunately, Matteo had something to see to downstairs. We sat at opposite ends of the velvet sofa. Uncle Hugo said nothing. He just stared

into the flames while he fiddled with a steel ring on his finger and for possibly as long as twenty minutes, the air was quivering, as was I – should I take responsibility or shut up or say something, anything, make a fool of myself, *Martha, Martha*, but I couldn't manage it, I could think of nothing we had in common. We were saved by alcohol. As he drank, his mood improved, his tongue loosened and he started telling me stories of him lying on the back of a beached whale, sleeping off a bender, about the places he had visited, Amsterdam, Oporto, Kingston, Batavia, and he leaned forwards – in order to hear me better, I guess, though I only ever said 'you don't say', that was all – and a massive hand with nicotine-stained fingers landed on my thigh. I inched a little further away from him. He might have looked at the floor, ashamed, I don't know. But anyway, from his pocket then he produced a picture of his wife. Quite nice looking, somewhat plump, red hair. She lived in Frederikshavn in Denmark – his second home, as he told me with moist eyes, or first or third or fourth, fifth – 'depending how you look at it!' – and Matteo, who finally returned, my only friend in the whole world, joined in and got the conversation going. Suddenly it was evening, and a spontaneous little party came about. More people turned up.

A young woman. I don't remember her name, only that she bared her ankles and played with her hair with manicured nails; I thought that her hairstyle was ghastly, her neck was shaved, it reminded me of pig's trotters. She used every joke as an excuse to show off her silvery laughter while she draped herself around the man with whom she had arrived.

And the man: a fresh scent of thyme from a centre parting, his hair was brushed back.

His name was Leander. He was another uncle. Considerably younger. Definitely fitter than his older brother. High sideburns. A wool vest with a diamond pattern over a white shirt. He seemed monosyllabic, borderline shy. But he made it throb down below, so much that I hardly dared look in his direction.

I got drunk and I remember thinking, becoming almost emotional, during the evening: what a family! It was the kind of family you dream of, a family of sounds, a family that laughs, that enjoys, that dances – a family that drinks! Hugo filled up all our glasses, I don't know what with, but I drank, Leander drank, his date drank, Matteo drank – he was in charge of the music before he got cramp in his fingers, and Hugo produced a gramophone record, he set down the needle, a rhythmic waltz, and he wailed along to it in indeterminate notes as he tried to make his way back to the sofa only to crash onto the floor, then he rolled onto his back and suddenly and with inappropriate gravity, he declared: '*I'm ruined*.' And – like a baby practising its facial expressions – in the seconds that followed it wasn't clear whether he was going to laugh

or cry. We gauged the tension, we looked at each other before he opted for laughter, and we all joined in, heaving a sigh of relief, and it was then that Leander and I caught each other's eyes.

One second. Then his attention returned to his date with the short hair, who had now flopped onto his lap in the armchair, and I still feel giddy when I think back to this evening, fascinated by the enigma: what is it with us, why do we see a pair of lips clearly coated with arsenic and yet all we want to do is kiss them?

Items of clothing were shed. Matteo's cardigan. Leander's knitted vest, he tugged at his shirt front to get some air. The room was boiling hot now – the fire had caused the temperature to rise and set the stage for Hugo's crude jokes so I, too, dared to say yes when Matteo asked me to dance, and the dancing made me dizzy, I clearly wasn't well enough yet, but I didn't care about that or how clumsy I must have looked when he spun me around the crowded living room, past the chiffonier, the wicker basket. Matteo was no longer shy. He didn't hesitate when he showed me the steps: foxtrot, quickstep, one-step, Boston waltz and tango and more, several styles at the same time even, he improvised and threw me against the wall and an oil portrait of a harsh old trout crashed to the floor, but was saved at the last moment by the padding of the chaise longue, and Matteo and I both collapsed in a fit of giggles before I noticed the mistress of the house.

She was standing in the doorway, and I sobered up at once. How long had she been there?

She had a great presence. She instantly ceased to be a ridiculous name and turned into a mighty one; yes, the sight of her changed everything: her arms folded across her chest, a half-smoked cigarette between two straight fingers, she was a quiet, beautiful woman with olive skin, crystal blue eyes, a prominent chin, hair glistening with silver with some unruly strands escaping a casual up-do. A sweet, earthly perfume. The hem of her dress reached her ankles, her clothes were somewhat worn, a tear in the fabric exposed the lining, and a shawl with a scruffy fringe was thrown over her shoulders, and yet she came across as elegant. She was shorter than me. She had some wrinkles, but not many. She was somewhere in her forties, would be my guess.

'Say hello to my mum!' Matteo guided me towards her.

'Madame Zavarella,' I greeted her by pressing my hand against my chest.

'Ada,' she said. She was friendly, but uninterested.

Silence followed.

It was so quiet that I blurted out a meek and inappropriate: 'I'm sorry for your loss.'

She looked at me with a frown. And I proceeded to make matters worse: 'You were at a funeral?' I regretted saying it immediately. 'Matteo mentioned…' I stuttered. She said: 'Oh, yes, that.' She didn't

look at me. She raised her glass to Leander. She nodded and winked at the girl with the short hair, and he returned his older sister's greeting with a raised eyebrow and an embarrassed smile. Our conversation appeared to be over, and I was relieved. I studied the siblings through the smoke. They looked like one another. I remembered Nastinka, was she one of them – now what did she look like? Her trousers. Her irritated expression which had softened. How incredible it ultimately all was, the help I had been given, I wanted to thank her.

Where had I come from? What had my job been? Did I prefer the mountains, the sea or the forest? Suddenly it was no longer my hostess who was standing next to me, friendly but uninterested, now she was a stern and persistent interrogating judge.

'The sea,' I replied.

'Hm.'

She took a small drag on her cigarette.

And that was it. She smiled. Friendly once again, borderline cheerful, quite possibly indulgent. Apart from that, her face invited no further contact. She didn't say anything else; she drank nothing. No, for the next quarter of an hour, she just leaned against the doorframe and only once, admittedly with reluctance, did she take up her son's invitation to dance the second half of a waltz, and afterwards, in the gramophone's crackling pause, I heard her ask him: 'Have you seen Lilly?'

He nodded towards the stairs. She left.

Chapter 6

A severe infection. A ruptured uterus. Peritonitis. That had been my diagnosis when I arrived at the basement clinic. And what precisely had caused it, the rheumatism powder? The vinegar? The soapy water? Not that it mattered now. The warnings were clear nonetheless: next time, God forbid, I had to get there sooner, preferably four months earlier, and I was still not well enough to leave, no, not yet, regrettably not.

Matteo popped in to see me the day after the living room party to pass on this information from the doctor.

Deep down I was hugely grateful for the message. Being ordered to stay in bed. I was hungover like never before, I didn't even have the capacity to feel shame that this pain, too, was self-inflicted, this time from drinking contests rather than clammy breath and exploring tongues. My head was pounding. Thousands of hammers were hitting my eardrums, galloping horses in the street above attacked me, yes, every sound breached my ear canals, barrel organs, monkeys, automobile horns, the blacksmith bashing

metal against metal, musicians playing Viennese waltzes while coins rolled after them and pinged loudly as they hit the window by the kerb. I heard clinking. And I couldn't work out whether it came from workers in the port or the marbles for which the boys in the archway were competing, they talked about bowling and lofting, which resulted in keepsies and that you had to knuckle down or lag, apparently the idea was to win the others' marbles, and I didn't understand the point of the game and anyway they were chased away when the chocolate cart arrived, the horse-drawn carriage belonging to the latrine men. Two men stomped into the courtyard and "*is a lockout a sacking*?' echoed between the walls as they dragged the buckets over the uneven cobblestones. They emptied them over the edge of the cart and there was splashing and spluttering and a stench of death and green peas before the waste disappeared to end up, I don't know where.

I fell asleep early. I was woken up by the sound of sobbing. I fell asleep again.

Every morning when I asked to see the doctor, Matteo said that she would try to stop by "tomorrow." Tomorrow. Tomorrow. Tomorrow. And May arrived.

I could always leave. I did know that. I was definitely on the mend. I didn't need the doctor's blessing, besides Nastinka was noticeable by her absence; I was free to pack my bag, but I didn't want to hurt anyone, I didn't want to hurt Matteo or offend anyone, so I kept making excuses and in time they turned into a feeling of being held hostage. Not by the Zavarella family, true, but by my own politeness, a debt of gratitude, the urge to please, yes, I was just too nice, that was my problem. The truth was that I was procrastinating. That I was scared. I barely had the courage to walk around the corner from my new home, Elvegata 2, I had a vague fear that someone might see me, that someone was looking for me, that someone might demand an explanation, that I would be forced to go back although I knew that no one was looking for me, and I was proved right. Nor had I any idea what to do with myself. How to seize this second chance that I had been given, how – strictly speaking I had been at death's door – I would use this extra time; I owed this life of mine something now, I was very much convinced of that – but I was at a loss when it came to what – and how. I made no effort at all to find out where my cousin lived.

And today I think it was because I was reluctant to see a face with familiar features. Loath to confront anything which might remind me of myself.