GIRLS IN TREES

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**FIRST DAY**

**THE ISLAND**

The island is rugged. A mountain at the center and houses scattered along the edge, the hem. A school, a meeting house, a doctor, a shop, a place Marta never stopped. A cemetery, a chapel. A windbreak in the chapel; a bucket a shovel a rake.

The work is simple: clear out spruce branches and wilted lilies. Turn the earth for one begonia and two lobelias, turn the earth for Marta. I brush catkins off her stone, I say: I’m here alone. We have a tradition of isolation, don’t we? Sorry for rhyming. She says: thank you, rhyming’s just fine. But you’ve always been one for *finery*, haven’t you, the snooty girl from the big city. A touch better than us, but no more than that. I say: and you, so cheeky. She says: you inherited that. And those thick ankles.

I put the bucket back in the windbreak beneath the psalm embroidery: Etch in stone with care and strife: I am resurrection, I am life.

**EMBROIDER, UNRAVEL, EMBROIDER**

Marta was from the mainland and was firmly rooted to the ground when Father said:  
 You’re going to work on the island, with the midwife. There’s nothing here for you.

What about Hanso?

Hanso is nothing.

The little fishing boat approaches the north side of the island. Adrift in the wind, she sways on the bow. She clutches her bag of needlework, so hard her fingers are white as fish flesh. She thinks about Hanso’s hands doing whatever she asks, pushing her on the swing on the oak tree that creaks and rots and she’s a child who wants more, and his hands down in her skirt when she shows him how he should rub the base of her stomach and further down and she wants more more, and his hands make her blood bubble like carbonation and he is nothing, that’s what Father said. Mother’s silence concurs and her rough hands come together in a posture of bygone piety, in an amen.

The island is a floating mountain that’s broken from the range behind it. A drifting, black colossus, this is where she’ll live. It’s hard to imagine an ordinary society; people and farms, grass and trees, grazing livestock. She envisions the tide and the animals wandering up the mountain, people on rocky knolls. They’re waiting for the ebb tide, looking down at strips of soggy earth at the foot of the mountain, boots sloshing when they return to flooded houses.

Father calls her aftward from the wheelhouse, she frees herself from his sounds, he is mostly racket and rumbling. She wants to be a back for a little while longer, she wants to be a back to the mainland, to the past, to Father and fuckery, she slings the last word into the air again and again until her tongue is cold and dry.

Now she spots the moorland on the south side, the green train of a dress. And soon, the unassuming pier resting in the midday sun. She strokes her hands over her dress, strokes her hands over her hair, strokes out rough waves until they give in. She will rise from the sea and go ashore anew, a breezy thought she likes.

**JUDITH**

She is my mother Judith, Magni’s sister Judith, Marta and Vilhelm’s daughter Judith, stated property owner Judith, and against her will: death-of-the-house Judith.

She was once a warm and comfortable place, a bathtub at the perfect temperature. You move freely in her golden light in a weightless state and happily study your fingers growing, what’ll be next. Days and weeks pass and you know nothing of days or weeks or what to do with your fingers, the water is the perfect temperature, everything is served. You are everything, an ocean, I am her and she is me. You are nothing, a turd, a lily, you don’t know the difference. You are water fingers universe, long before it contains baby teeth scraped knees girl gangs.

And then: spewing, screeching, shrieking or however I’ll put it, squeezed down an existentially threatening canal, you really should be equipped with protective glasses, crash helmet and oxygen tank, then they crack your collarbone, ouch. Sharp white light, red sheets, black arrows in all directions, you are a blue child.

We’ve come together on this: getting Magni’s urn. It’s on Judith’s kitchen counter next to the instant coffee. A strange placement, the one who put it there doesn’t see that. So I guess I’m the strange one, filling my head with trivialities in troubled times. Petty, an insignificant coincidence, unworthy of dwelling upon. Where else would she have put it? There’s not much space here, not many free surfaces; she likes to decorate. She put it where there was room, she wasn’t thinking, sad and listless as she is, as am I. You have to create meaning where it doesn’t exist, and Magni liked coffee. She drank several cups a day, in the evenings, too. Often with a piece of cooking chocolate she snapped off with both hands inside the pantry, humming along to the crinkling of the paper.

There’s a house on an island up north that torments me. I clear my throat for Judith who is remembering and weeping. I want her to hear me over the dripping faucet and the grief filling throat ears nose. I say: someone needs to take care of the house, it’s falling apart up there. She places one hand on the table and the other gently over it, lets her hands sit there, twitching her little finger. She looks away. Not today.

I have a bleak and wilted room inside me that is filled with nectar and bustling honey bees. I want to follow Magni home, I want to take over the house. An almost imperceptible gesture, of what significance, one might ask, with what resources? It’s a big house. But then again, isolation affords the privilege of eluding cynical questions.

**THE HOUSE**

Once the house was finished, it started to die. Airborne spores take flight, sprout in damp wood. Wood dries, mycelium goes dormant, wood becomes a bench for the balcony and a crate for Marta’s potatoes. A wet summer, there are lots of those here, latent mycelium wakes and grows. Who controls such things. In all directions, over a meter a year. Hidden, through mortar and lime, behind a baseboard, feeding on wallpaper and fiberboard in the stairwell. But first: a brown layer of cinnamon-dust between crates of potatoes and damp walls. Serpula lacrymans, the weeping serpent. Later: gray-white mycelial threads, branching, deep shrinkage cracks, alligator skin. That’s the way things go.

**MAGNI**

It starts the way it normally does, at Mother and Father’s. Marta only has two hands, goodness how they tremble, she can’t even manage a proper home. Vilhelm’s hands wave when he comes and goes, most of the time they work themselves raw at the construction site. They’re ready at the institution, a great big bouquet of bustling grabbing guiding hands. You need all of these, the doctor and state say in unison, pointing out the Mental Handicap Act of 1949.

Magni doesn’t decide anything. Home is a place that moves around.

Home, the institution, home, the nursing home before she turns fifty. Each stay lasts for a few years, then surroundings and circumstances want her moved to a place that suits the surroundings and circumstances better.

It ends the way it normally does, at a hospital. She’s in hospice for a month. Caregivers have been replaced by nurses, they rush through the corridors, catheters and intravenous lines, drip drip drip.

Her belly has swollen up, her face is hollow beneath her cheekbones. She shuts her eyes, every time she opens them they shove painkillers into her mouth.

I pick up Judith. We don’t speak in the car. She bites her nails without her nails feeling it, dead. I twist my hair without it causing any pain in my hair, dead. The cells are growing inside Magni like mad.

They’ve spread throughout her body undisturbed, in all directions, hidden, burrowing into organs, the walls around her blood. Traveled on tracks and fed on tissue, far from the original thickening.

She dies just before the evening meal. Boiled gruel with evening dew is left untouched, cooling. Magni disappears into the vast darkness, all the stars in the sky go out at the same time.

We pack her things in a blue IKEA bag. The coffee mug with a picture of Elvis, the red leather-bound Bible with gold lettering, the jeans, the flannel shirts, the wool sweaters. The belt with less wear around the holes the further in you go, a linear narrative of the body’s decay.

**MARTA**

Look at the girl. Running alongside the boy with thunderheads rolling at her heels, the mountain painted dark behind them, they run past the boathouse where her father is taking the fish down from the drying racks and the house where her mother is working in the kitchen and sweeping the floors with a besom she’s carved three crosses into the shaft of and the cleft she spits on every morning to keep the bad juju away from the little farm, and look at the girl, how little thought she has for earthbound toil, how little fear of God as she runs out of the girl’s body and into the woman’s body that summer the cloudburst colors the sky black as night in the middle of the day and sends the girl and the boy beneath the oak to seek shelter.

Suddenly close, there’s no other way to be beneath a tree when thunder is rolling over the treetops. They lean against the trunk, against each other, frantic breathing out of sync. Frenetic foolish fiddling and giggling, she likes this new game. Beneath his clothes she finds a new Hanso within the old one; the boy who was simply there, leaning over the fence.

When they were children she had the habit of watching him out of the corner of her eye for a while, seemingly absorbed in her own world of hopscotch in the yard or from the stairs with her nose deep in her needlework and her gaze flitting over the fabric. From her lookout post in the tree she could watch his curiously open face that thought it was alone until she rustled the branches in a sudden gale and he leaped over the fence and scurried up the trunk, hunker bunker beneath the foliage. Quiet quiet when Mother came out onto the stairs with the besom, him with his hand over her mouth, her hand over his. Sometimes she’d pull a flatbread out of her apron and he’d devour it like an animal. There wasn’t much to eat across the road at Hanso’s. Goddamn white trash is what Father used to call them, hunger is a sharp sword he used to say, stay away from those types.

Indecency, sin and the devil’s kin, Mother was scared of it all. She had spells and rituals against hexing of the livestock, which Marta learned by heart. She once hammered Father’s abscessed tooth into the trunk of the oak to transfer the bad juju into the tree, down to the roots, and back to the underworld where they came from. She gave Father a catskin to lay over his gout and forbade Marta from going across the road to Hanso’s. It was said that his family had the sixth and seventh Book of Moses in their possession, stolen from an old Bible and filled with witchcraft, and that this is what sent the family into disgrace and poverty. A thousand generations of mercy for those who love God and obey his commandments, or else… she chanted with her finger raised. Marta nodded obediently then snuck out with Hanso in her sights.

Look at Mother. She’s standing at the window and getting worked up over the laundry on the clotheslines in the south wall, sweeping her gaze across the sky suddenly gone dark and letting it land on the tree. Marta and Hanso, isn’t it, she squints through the veil of water. It is. Tangled up beneath the oak, all pell-mell and disorder.

Marta! She waves her in, slams the window. That little fool, slippery as bladderwrack, slides out of her hands and into whoever’s offering to break the sixth commandment.

Don’t go, Marta holds Hanso in her arms. The storm has raged past. The sun strikes Hanso’s chest, exposing the loose thread from the missing button on his shirt, and the pit throbbing beneath his Adam’s apple. Everything comes into view on his face, a hundred variations of surrender. She hops onto the swing and thrashes her solid legs. Push!

Her feet swing over the horizon, more, her feet swing over the roof of the boathouse, more, her feet touch a cloud wisp, more, and for a moment high up there she’s light as floating dandelion fluff, free in her body, free from Mother and Father.

And the rain that’s fallen over the trees and collected in the leaves’ soft bowls trickles over her, a cool and glittering drapery over her face, her dress, her bare legs. She shrieks the cormorant out of its nesting place on the skerry, she shrieks for the whole sleepy village.

Look at Father. He comes trundling up the road with heavy footfalls, a man without a shadow while Mother is busy inside. The wheelbarrow is full of stiff gray fish he’s going to send south with the boat. The storm has settled in his face.

Don’t you have work to do? Git on home, you mangy little fox! He gives his wheelbarrow an extra shove as if to push Hanso toward the property line and over to the other side of the road.

Marta sits alone on the swing until it slows and for a long time after that. The sun hits the mountain, the sun paints the sea light green. The sun locks the cat’s position on the stoop and the insects in the air. God must be the one who sent the sun, putting the village and its inhabitants into hibernation. Quiet quiet it shall be, for Him and Mother and Father.

**FOOD**

The shop was called Stabil and it lived up to its name in the sense that it provided the island with goods over seven decades. I go in with the stubborn and naive belief that even with a new name and new facade it’s still the same shop, or at least traces of it, that I’ll find a face with inherited features I can trace back to the origins, or the origins of the origins, or that my face will awaken some old soul with vague memories of bygone times but vivid memories of summer guests, each of whom was a small event: Well if it isn’t Vilhelm and Marta’s little gal come to visit.

Kardis worked at Stabil when I was a child, before she retired. She was still there afterwards, though, sitting outside on the stool or going inside the shop to chat with the new owners, showing the summer guests where the various goods were. She eagerly shared news with acquaintances and random customers alike and accepted it with the same zeal. Kardis didn’t have children or grandchildren of her own and I think she liked me, or at least she liked that I came to the shop. Well if it isn’t the little gal visiting from the big city. I’ll bet Vilhelm and Marta are on cloud nine. Then she jutted her head out from her hunched back like a turtle and waited for a reply.

I look for orange cookies in the aisles and look for a Kardis who no longer exists and who knows where everything is, I look for someone who can reflect the story of summers on the island. Someone who can confirm that I was here, that I’m here again, someone I’ll awaken a tiny bit of curiosity in, there’s something familiar, isn’t there. I don’t awaken anyone until I walk toward the deli counter.

I don’t know why I’ve had the misfortune of stirring up her intractability, we have no history that needs rehashing. I haven’t even opened my mouth before she locks her wrathful gaze on me. I still want to start a conversation, it might be a good opportunity to get an overview of a few things: local handymen who can be trusted, whether other houses on the island have suffered from rot. Or were we an island on the island? I say: that chicken, what do you do with it, it looks delicious. She says: nothing, it comes by car, then she jabs a fork into the animal’s chest and packs it in a bag she puts on the counter without me actually having placed any clear order. Then she leaves, leaves me and the counter with grilled chickens in aluminum foil containers and pre-made sandwiches beneath a thin plastic canvas. I take the bag and grab a six pack and hope to awaken less aversion at the cash register, to be transparent.

I stop by a notice on my way out of the shop: all kinds of handiwork, big and small. I’m the first to tear a scrap off the row of phone numbers and choose one of the front teeth. It says Tage and has a number on the tooth. I remember a Tage, his lazy eye and long arms flailing down the road.

Fluttering and fighting over a wheat bun outside the shop. You know how I feel about seagulls is what Judith would have said if she were here. As her daughter I would nod. I don’t know what she would say about the new shop. In theory she has a taste for progress. Leaving the old behind, throwing it into the river that runs past. She has a special gesture she tips the expression over her shoulder with. We would’ve agreed that the chicken at the deli counter looks good and bought a whole one that I’d have to ask the clerk to cut in half. She would’ve given me a wary look to communicate that we shouldn’t bother people unnecessarily. I would’ve whispered that I don’t trust the kitchen equipment in the cabin I’ve rented at the campsite, and I’m thinking about the knives in particular, now whispering at the lowest possible volume before silence so as to not embarrass her in front of the clerk who in all likelihood lives and has roots on the island and deep down in business operations of both the shop and the campsite. When I paid at the register she would’ve insisted on giving me half in cash while she fiddled around for her wallet. I would’ve said nodon’tworryaboutit and she’d let go of her wallet with a sigh and stand there for a while with her arm deep in her purse. It would’ve been quiet in the car until the fly on the windshield started buzzing.

The shopping bag with chicken and beer gets the passenger seat next to me, where Judith sat when we got the urn with Magni. She had her sister in a little biodegradable pot in her lap. Now Magni is in the bag with summer clothes, mostly wool. I rolled her in a thick sweater like a bottle of wine even though she’d already come apart. I get the better of the fly with the newspaper Judith had under her wet leatherette boots with fur and a thick sole, it’s been lying there for weeks, stiff and rippled. She knows how I feel about flies. Up here, so fat that you can make a meal of them. I don’t miss the flies, she says when one of Oslo’s miniature versions is buzzing around her little apartment. I wonder what she does miss and start the car.

I need to get control over my concentration. Death is a busy man, in a week the urn is going in the ground. The house is rotting next to the marsh. Judith cultivates mushrooms there in doors, stairwells, and arable walls, I’ve decided to put a stop to it.

The landscape strikes me as I drive on the main road toward Vågen, so endlessly small and so endlessly large. On a clear day you can spot the Lofoten Mountains, Røst out in the mouth of the fjord. On the other side of the road: Herløv’s house deep in the marsh, a small yellow territory at the foot of the mountain. I imagine him sitting at the kitchen window, his body tight as a guitar string the harder the island pounds against the walls, I hear a faint slurping from the coffee he’s drinking through pursed lips, follow his gaze sweeping over weedless flowerbeds. I find it hard to imagine that someone has taken over the property, that there are other lives that can be lived in the house with Judithapples on one side and Martaberries on the other.

**HERLØV**

Herløv liked suntanned legs, not gams. Herløv liked the proper way they talked on television and hated the slangy words in his own dialect. He liked to formulate flowery and witty sentences in his head, he disliked the notebook on his nightstand with all the poems he never got around to writing. He liked smooth skin without body hair, and he disliked how the thicket around his prick shot up over his stomach like an arch and exploded across his chest in a disarray. He loved his mother now that she was dead, a love clear as day. He disliked some of the memories, they betrayed him time and time again, hard hefty hands, her gaze devoured by darkness. He loved symmetry, a solid bridge construction, the pattern in flower petals. He despised asymmetry, the weeds that popped up in his flower beds at random and disrupted meticulous rows, the sight of budding boys cycling on the road toward the mirror image of the withering body in the kitchen window. He liked the mind-bending conversations about engineering and literature with Vilhelm, he disliked the conversations on the pier and at the shop, or rather, the spiral of the one conversation that grew and grew like an ever-thinner train of dead meat: the bridge over to the mainland that was never built, the quartz quarry that was no longer profitable.

Herløv likes Saturdays. Vilhem says yes to more coffee, they’ve taken down the birch that was stealing the view of the bluff. Vilhem holds the cup and Herløv holds the carafe, Vilhem lifts up the cup, Herløv tilts the carafe, Herløv pours slowly, and for an instant he sees their hands connected in one movement: from his hand and handle through the carafe and out of the spout down into Vilhelm’s cup up to handle and hand, interwoven, eternity.

Thanks. Vilhelm sets the cup carefully on the table and fiddles with the radio antenna to get a better signal, peers out the window.

Judith is lying on her stomach in the grass reading a newspaper, slowly moving her legs up and down in a scissor-motion. It’s the summer the world gets its first female prime minister, it says she’s called Mrs. B. In August, King Olav is opening the first official television broadcast, but Judith suspects neither Vilhelm nor Herløv will be purchasing a television set any time soon. It’s the summer Vilhelm buys a small organ for Magni, it’s in the living room waiting for her to come home from the institution for a summer visit. Judith’s itching to write about the organ in her letters to Magni, itching to plunk around on the keys. She abstains with considerable effort. It’s going to be a surprise, and Magni will be the first to play.

Herløv dislikes Mondays. He’s back at the quartz quarry where they started, two young men versus the rock. They make the long commute north for many years, become grown men in the face of the cold of the barracks, the conditions at the power plants.

Now he drags his body to the quarry every day, a body that is progressively succumbing to increasingly violent struggles against machine and rock. He’s built a pigsty with Vilhelm’s help and bought some pigs and a parcel of land for grazing at the foot of the mountain. He’s done with the quarry and the quarry with him. The island will soon be done with the quarry as well; a bridge is gradually being built and the island will be connected to the mainland, the mainland draws workers from the island and those who remain are farmers or too old or too young to leave, they leave as soon as they’re old enough or take over farming and expand and modernize or drift aimlessly around the village in cars that blow past Herløv’s windows like the wind, he sees them from the kitchen when he drinks his coffee and waits for Saturdays.

**MARTA**

Marta walks along the road, her suitcase is heavy, the island is a blank page. She knows nothing about the golden sand she walks on or the fields she passes, nothing about the tall man cycling toward her. His languid pedaling isn’t in proportion to his speed, and with a little breeze and a shy hello he’s past. She stops, switches hands and turns to look at him. He has a long holster on his back, the longest she’s ever seen, filled with arrows or something she can’t imagine. The suitcase on his luggage rack is lashed with twine in a repeating cross, she thinks of the baby Jesus. He turns off the road and cycles up the avenue toward the house up there, a red house with the mountain at its back and a view of the sea. Someone is walking in the yard. And he, the tallest man she’s ever seen, can cycle all the way up to the horn of the mountain if he wants, she’s sure of that. So tall and strong, she’s never seen the likes before, he’s going to shoot eagles from the top, could be, he looks like no one else. He draws himself onto the blank page together with the mountain and the red house, the avenue she didn’t notice when she passed, a white stone with light red marbling she picks up and puts in her bag of needlework. A bicycle wheel sent it to the tip of her shoe, a gift, a sign.

Perhaps she can see a future here after all, perhaps it doesn’t have to be so hard. How quickly a new thought arises, how blessed. She walks in pink sand; they don’t have that on the mainland.

Soon she arrives at the midwife’s yellow house, Hilma is sitting on the steps. Marta opens the gate and Hilma doesn’t stand up. When she shuts it behind her, Hilma is gone, the door is open. Like bad juju.

Life had a brusque start for everyone who was born on the island: Hilma’s face, an accurate representation of her inner being. An expression of combat readiness both at work and at rest, deep-set gray-blue eyes beneath bushy brow. A gaze that demanded answers, a brow that fomented stories of the calling cards Spanish and Italian sailors had left along the coast. If the child didn’t make a sound, she picked it up by its feet and let it hang like a greasy Christmas ham before giving it a good slap on the rear. Scream. She pulled children out with forceps, she saved lives. First the mother’s, then the child’s, sometimes she encountered death. Anyone who suggested something about God’s will was given a lesson in the course of Nature.

Hilma introduced herself to Marta without any chitchat, she said: You’re going to learn what I do when I have to go out on business, if you’re strong you can come with me, we’ll see. She opened her midwife’s case and laid the equipment out over the kitchen table, scissors, stethoscope, birthing forceps, she spoke of women with narrow pelvises and dead fetuses that in the olden days had to be pried out with fishing hooks and sheath knives. She said, we will save the Mother.

**VILHELM**

A storm glides imperceptibly into a new one and rolls over the island in a relentless rampage that subdues trees, houses, and people the winter the brothers’ father didn’t come home from fishing. Vilhelm and Einar stand like posts on the jetty in the evenings, measuring their strength against the wind and each other. The waves rise up and crash down on the sand like grieving widows. Boats stay in boathouses. The sea disappears into a sky with an abrupt depth, sorrow and sea spray become one.

Mother’s worries morph into illness. Gramps emerges from the storehouse they’ve converted into a dwelling, he and the brothers take turns watching over her. She coughs until bulging veins swell in her temples, a loosening tooth rattles. When the wind outside subsides, her breath ebbs away.

Buds sprout on trees around the funeral procession, a light green canopy above the brothers. The transformation continues in the coffin they carry; nebula embryo child woman mother earth the greenery in the foliage that reaches toward the sky.

Father’s wish. The brothers will run the farm together. Ha, it wasn’t big enough for allodial rights. A few patches of earth, a modest pigsty, chickens, a couple parcels of land close to the mountain over by the marsh. A small wood by Keipan. Father’s dreams, to continue, to expand. He’d talked like a bigwig with a manor.

Einar took over running the smallholding and bred more pigs and bought a few decares of grazing land from the neighboring farm. Soon he became a man with local appeal. The nuptials transpired and Kardis moved in.

At first it was difficult to notice the way the rooms were shrinking. A candlestick here, an ottoman there, each and every one a strange addition on its own. Then came pillows blankets tablecloths and the reverberation of the room disappeared. The walls were adorned with gold-framed photos of family and acquaintances. On the mantlepiece, the window sills, glass crystal porcelain, clink clatter rattle. Vilhelm had a way of knocking things over. He became a kind of bothersome guest in his own childhood home. At Gramps’ in the storehouse he could think, read, draw in peace, interrupted by the occasional tap on the shoulder. They carried the bed across the yard together.

Kardis and Einar had ambitions and gradually took over the shop from old Karl in Dal. Vilhelm had plans of his own. Arrogance visions of grandeur absurd fantasies, the words buzzed around Einar’s head like flies the night Vilhelm told him he’d applied to the college in Gothenburg. The unrealistic dreaming that Einar despised so deeply didn’t disappear with his father, it shone through his brother. So the farm’s mine, he concluded. It had already been Einar’s for years. A feeling of compulsion released its grip on Vilhelm as he packed his drawing supplies, a couple of shirts, underwear, suspenders, the books Gramps had paid for, and set course for Gothenburg and Chalmers University of Technology.

**INTROSPECTION**

Birds, gray weather, such silence. The mountain is where it should be, likewise the neighboring farm. That’s where Tage and his brother Almar stayed when they weren’t roaming along the road, dragging their muddy fox tails through the puddles that rarely had a chance to dry up before the next downpour.

I get my protective mask from the trunk, open the gate, feel a bit dizzy. It’s a lot to take in after having driven a thousand kilometers, most of them with the windows down.

The house stands there, shrinking, consumed by relentless nature, masonry faded and pale, no luster in the windows. Embarked on a journey with hope on the horizon. It already looks like a shipwreck.

Now there won't be any mournful accordion music to accompany me. I’m neither sad nor cheerful, not anymore, I just don’t remember the last time I had any joy or desire in me. Drifting with the current, simultaneously carried out onto the shores where you get entangled in other flotsam, weak-willed accretions with front-row seats to the passing menagerie of time. But you insist on living, don’t you. And when a sudden wind strikes, one that makes rotten branches snap, stories of the past whistle in the trees, you crawl up onto the banks and pursue them, who wouldn’t.

One last cigarette with me first, cowardice suggests. No thanks, my chest wheezes. Now I’m going in, as the third-generation stated property owner. Inspect, room by room, investigate, improve, restore. Get the lay of the land. Take action. I have an apartment I can sell, I have a grown daughter, more grown up than me; her life is richer, her education is higher, she travels more, she has more people around her. She exposes herself to life. We grew up together, she and I. I’ve taught her not to depend too much on others. There’s nothing particularly sensational about her, but she’s well-functioning, and it’s baffling how that happened. That’s the lay of the land.

**OSLO SUMMER**

A little girl is growing inside a little girl. There’s so much the pregnant girl doesn’t know and she can rattle off a lot of facts. When she lights up a cigarette she doesn’t know if the girl in her belly notices, if she sticks to under ten a day the doctor says it’ll be fine since she’s not able to quit. She doesn’t know her father, the fox, but has been told he was winsome beautiful red, a real monster. She doesn’t know if the girl in her belly will know her own father, but she hopes so. His smile lights up the whole room, and everyone in the room shines with him and she hopes the little girl in her belly will inherit that smile, but not his flat back of the head or his mendacity. She knows the heart can change quickly. He doesn’t want to be with her anymore, and she doesn’t want to be with him. He’s angry that she wants to keep the child and his mother is angrier than she even knows. They both say he’s too young to be a father when they invite her to their place for dinner, she’s never been invited before and it never happens again. The girl is too young to be a mother but she’s too young to know that. She only realizes it later, when the girl in her belly is a child and people they don’t know think they’re sisters. She notices it at the preschool when she picks up the girl, the mothers who can’t help staring at her youth, the thing that stops them from having a normal conversation with her. When they come to pick up their child who’s been over at the girl’s little apartment, they look around curiously as if to assure themselves that their child is okay here. They comment that it smells good in the apartment and it does because the girl has a yellow fabric softener in small bowls that covers up most of the smoke smell and she airs out the place before they come, straightens out the turquoise fitted sheet she put over the sofa. They wave a friendly goodbye before they head out because they’re relieved that it went okay and they think to themselves that the next time she asks if their child wants to come over they’ll have an excuse ready. It’s better that the girl’s little girl comes home to them, that’s just fine, the girl’s little girl is pleasant and affable and they don’t want to exclude anyone, but that stays a well-kept secret from the girl and the girl’s little girl.

It’s early June and the girl is walking the sidewalks of the suburb, greeting people she knows who touch her belly. It sticks straight out, it looks like you swallowed a basketball, they say. Turn around. You can’t even see it from behind, you look just the same as before, they say. She’s proud of how she looks both front and back and says thanks. When they ask if she’s dreading giving birth she says she doesn’t know because she’s never done it before.

She likes walking around in the evenings, in the hour when the darkness settles over the buildings and the colors of the flowers become luminescent before they close. At the bottom of the hill near the shopping center she knows a path that leads to a grove. She follows the path and emerges in a small clearing, the place she and the father of the little girl in her belly used to call theirs. Now it’s hers and hers alone. There are remnants from an old stone wall at the center of the clearing, there was once a house or a cottage here. At the center of the stone wall are remnants from a fire, at the center of the fire a broken beer bottle. Outside the stone wall there’s a sun-bleached plastic bag and an empty bottle of sixty-percent, and she picks up the bag that’s messing up her place but drops it when she feels it’s sticky with old beer that stinks and clings to the fingers she rubs back and forth in the damp grass until they turn red and smell of earth and vegetation. There are lilac trees on the other side of the clearing, that’s why she came. She breaks off branches with clusters of flowers until she has a big bouquet. She’s going to put the bouquet in a vase on the table with the checkered tablecloth she got from Judith. When Judith is feeling up for it she sometimes comes to visit, she lives just a few blocks away. Judith spends long periods of time lying down, she has an aching in her joints that comes and goes and comes back again, neither she nor the girl knows why. She says she hopes she’ll be healthy when the little girl in her belly comes into the world so she can hold her in her arms. The girl walks with one hand around the bouquet and the other in the pocket of her overwalls. Across the clearing, on the path, through the grove, along the sidewalk, up to the apartment building. She puts the flowers in a vase on the table, they fill the room with a strong scent of the summer evening. She has a stool with an ashtray and a padded reclining chair on the little balcony. From here she can see all the way to the bay and the fjord and Nesodden on the other side. Some teenagers are zooming down the sidewalk on rollerblades, shouting and hollering in the suburban evening and it has nothing to do with her. She’s somewhere else, on her own balcony overlooking the fjord. She’s set big things in motion, secured an apartment the social welfare office pays for and applied for a year off of her final year of high school starting in the fall. She’ll return next fall when the little girl is old enough to go to preschool and then she’ll pursue an education but she doesn’t know what it’ll be in. She rolls her overalls down to her hips to let her belly breathe. It’s warm for June, her breasts rise and peek over the edge of her short tank top. The little girl moves inside her belly, sliding to one side so her body becomes strange and crooked, her belly button has popped out like the eye of a fish out of water. She places one hand on her belly and feels an arm a leg a head, she doesn’t know, but she knows that the girl in her belly will be named Lisa Marie after her cat who died and the king’s daughter and in honor of Magni. She’s going to send Magni a letter and a picture when the girl is born, but she won’t travel north, not this summer, maybe the next, but it won’t be the same because she’s no longer the same, and that’s why she won’t travel for many years but she doesn’t know that yet. She fishes a half-smoked cigarette from the pack on the stool, she smokes half at a time because then she smokes less. The paper crackles as she lights the cigarette, two glowing flakes break free and drift in the summer evening, one goes out in the air and one lands on her belly and she brushes it off. It leaves a small red dot above her navel that stings. She strokes both hands over her belly and the dot and the little girl and continues smoking without any hands, inhaling on one side of her mouth and exhaling on the other.

**THE BROTHERS**

The gate between the garden and the barn is overgrown. Vilhelm transformed all his savings into something tangible, and he rarely threw anything away. Something can become something else. Two old ship’s bells are rusting on the fence posts, he filled them with soil and flowering perennials.

The gate marks the boundary between the garden and the old pasture. The wrought iron has fused together at the hinges beneath a thick layer of rust. Thistles and nettles await in the waterlogged soil on the other side, the unmistakable scent of bilberries wafts from the marsh. Enormous hogweeds grow in clusters, towering like white parasols over grass and thickets.

I’m eleven, twelve, it’s always the same summer, the whole pasture has been overtaken by hogweeds. They tower overhead and Magni and I tread a labyrinth, snapping hollow stems with our boots that eat their way into the meadow. We spend entire days, we hardly eat, at night our hands swell up and we get blisters from sun and sap. We spend weeks, we wear gloves when we have open sores on our hands, fevers, we tread corridors that lead to new corridors that lead to new corridors. We run in the corridors, we shout, we hear the other but don’t see each other. We eat breakfast and tread corridors until Vilhelm fetches us in the evenings that look like days, and when the labyrinth is finished we eat breakfast and run in the labyrinth until Vilhelm fetches us in the evenings that have turned dove-blue.

I’m faster than Magni, she’s heavy and a bit stiff, I’m craftier than Magni, she follows the paths we’ve trodden while I sneak between the parasols and attack her from the side. She shakes and screams, laughs so hard the prosthesis in her upper jaw comes loose. It’s disgusting when she loses parts of her mouth like that, I point at the row of three teeth on the path so she can pick it up herself. She fumbles with the teeth and I say nothing until I say: you can count, I can hide. I sneak through patches of lights and shadow, there’s a rustling behind me, I slip into the weeds to attack her from behind when she passes. Her body stiffens.

Almar’s hair is almost flush with the white flower crowns, big matte curls bobbing up and down, he walks through the reeds like a majestic lion. Tage follows him, his gaze swinging from side to side, half a head shorter than his brother, throbbing in fingertips and ears, palate and scalp. His gaze sweeps over the hiding place and blood clots in the veins, hand wounds heal. Marta said: you can’t get engaged to fox trash like that when Almar drove down the road on his moped, his hair his helmet. Marta continued: that goddamn riffraff is flying over the marsh to Herløv’s. And definitely not to the likes of him, she spat toward Tage, who was trailing his brother on the gravel road, and I’m eleven, twelve, it’s the same summer and I don’t understand the fear in her eyes until I’m frozen in place and see the brothers up close, repulsive, alluring, and against my mind’s will my body draws me toward the magnetic fields passing through the weeds and my boots carry me onto the paths they’ve trodden.

I run around the labyrinth in ecstasy, the wild dogs at my heels. They catch me and I kick them away, they howl and laugh and shout things that I don’t understand. It’s the same summer when I transform like a chameleon changes color; sweaty upper lip onion smell under my arms one small bluish breast, and I run around without aim filled with purpose with stinking wild dogs coming after me and I’d be lying if I didn’t say it’s the first time I feel true freedom in my body.

Magni. Magni! I don’t know how long I’ve been running with the brothers but the evening is dark blue when I find her by the marsh, skittish as a deer, driven out of the labyrinth in search of teeth we never find.

The weather turns gray and wet. We forget what the sky looks like and that the mountain exists, we forget the brothers across the road and the labyrinth, we forget the time, we have nothing to do, we forget what day it is, it doesn’t matter, our eyes adjust to the gloaming in the house and our skin to the dampness, it’s only when we’re sitting in front of the fireplace one evening and hear glockenspiel from glowing embers that our skin thaws in long shudders. Then Magni forgets herself and lights up with a toothless smile I embrace and let go of just as quickly, vacillating like the sea.

**VILHELM**

At first he had the sun at his back, and a little wind. Vilhelm draws a dream and then another. Functionalistic fantasies. He sleeps little, eats less, feeds on the professor’s appreciative nods. The only thing that matters are the pure forms; symbol-bearing redundancies must yield to a completed construction and the utility of the materials. He is Vilhelm van der Rohe, Vilhelm Korsmo, Vilhelm Gropius, Vilhelm Backer and Bang, he is better. But such overwrought fantasies seldom turn out well.

Time passes, four years, one more and he’s an architect. Now the sunlight strikes his eyes, desperate spring sun, desperate action, what will be revealed in such action, what will be revealed here in Gothenburg, what will he conquer in a foreign country, with old glasses and worn-out clothes. A drafty room, he shivers and starves, he draws with stiff frozen hands, cracked fingertips, now the sun is piercing the rifts. He walks to think, to warm up his body, he tries to concentrate on his steps and lets his gaze land on worn-out shoes. Is he going to die here? Madness, he is a man without money. Uniform loneliness, he works, that’s what he does. Austerity, unpaid debts to the shopkeeper and a table without food.

He rolls up his dreams, seals them with a mourning band of black twine. He curses himself and writes to Einar, asking for money for the train home.

For four years, Einar has had a long string of taunts waiting patiently behind clenched teeth. Now he unleashes them in the letter he wraps around the banknotes and licks the envelope with a scraped-clean tongue.

They gather, he sees them when he comes cycling down the road. The mountain streams’ journey toward the foaming waterfall that draws them in and breathes them out; trembling veils of mist drift over thirsty treetops, over Einar’s roof and the childhood home. Family friend Herløv strolling indolently up the avenue, he feels those heavy arms. Kardis on the porch, now she’s standing up. Einar placing his hands behind his back. Gramps coming out from the storehouse. Now they’re emerging, now he’s coming home.

A girl with honey-colored hair is walking down the road, she’s carrying a suitcase, he says hello to her. White hands, eyes casting shadows over smooth, smiling cheeks. Perhaps it doesn’t have to be so difficult. Perhaps he can still see a future here. How quickly a new thought arises, how foolish he is.

And later. The coffee’s been drunk, charming little fibs have been served, ancient patterns resumed. Einar has given Vilhelm a couple plots of land near the marsh, relieved over his brother’s thwarted fantasy, what if it had actually turned out? Einar pushes his hand through his hair and the thought out of his head.

A grand gesture: Vilhelm lays drawings on the kitchen table, unrolls his dreams for his brother. Kardis and Herløv lean back in their chairs to make room, these are big dreams, functionalist fantasies, unlike anything they’ve ever seen. Gramps leans in closer, squinting at the minute pen strokes in elegant lines, crosses and curves.

A small gesture: Einar strokes his mustache. He nods repeatedly at the drawing, my goodness my goodness my goodness. Then he stands up and severs it with a gaze as if it were a foreign body. He places a hand on Vilhelm’s shoulder and says, we build with wood here. He shakes his head, shoulders chuckling. Gramps snorts at Einar and says what he’s always said: a fart has no nose.

Vilhelm packs up the dreams and retreats to the storehouse where he swears to himself that he will build a brick house, a modernist economic physical-functional and constructive reality. Even if he must engage in an eternal feud with his brother, even if he has to spend all his time on this earth, even if he has to send prayers for money to someone up there who is just as invisible and omnipresent as the mocking laughter behind his back. He is better than all of them, he is Vilhelm Lund.