

Yellow Warning

Original Title: *Gult farevarsel*

Written by Brit Bildøen © Det Norske Samlaget 2023

English sample translated from Norwegian by Olivia Lasky © 2023

FRIDAY

DORTE

She spins out on the last hill, dreading the thought of her father driving the same road only a few hours later. The gravel road is slick with mud over extended stretches. It's not that far from the main road up to the mountain farm, but it's far enough. Spruces line the muddy road, their dripping branches accusatory, somehow: *This was your idea*. This is what they're going to think – every one of them – as they drive up toward Innsetra. *This was Dorte's idea*.

This is so typical Dorte, Anette will say to Jan Inge when get stuck and their tires sink deeper and deeper into the mud. Typical Dorte, the one who simply *had* to drag us all out here on a dark and wet October weekend.

But their parents got married in October, and this weekend will mark exactly fifty years. You should celebrate it on the actual day, Dorte thinks as she approaches what is likely supposed to indicate a gate – two thick tree stumps painted dark brown. She turns off the gravel road and rolls through. After a short, bumpy downhill, she finally sees the mountain farm ahead.

Sure, but they could've celebrated at the hotel at home, she can hear Anette droning on, and if Dorte isn't mistaken, her father will agree. Then they wouldn't have had to travel so far. Then they wouldn't have had to pack their suitcases, lock up the house, turn down the thermostats, unplug the devices, ask the neighbors to bring in the newspapers, worry, worry, worry.

And Karl... what does he think? Her twin brother never says what he thinks. He just sits there with a crooked smile, looking amused by everything being said and done around him. Karl checked out early. He hasn't found it necessary to report where he is and what he's up to since middle school. And yet he – who has the longest journey of them all, coming

straight from a surfing trip in Morocco – simply texts: *Okay, I'll be there*. The indefinable resistance has been greater with the others, the ones who have less than two hours to drive, the ones who really could do with some fresh air.

At first glance, the buildings look small and faded somehow. But what *doesn't* look gray and tragic in weather like this? Her colleague, who just celebrated her fiftieth birthday at Innsetra, had praised the ambiance, hosts, food, and especially the fact that the owner knew a thing or two about wine. At the hotel where the family normally celebrates important occasions, they would've gotten the same thing they always did and the white wine would've been semi-dry and lukewarm. Doesn't being married for fifty years merit something a bit out of the ordinary?

Dorte parks next to the only other car that's there, a not-quite-clean, silver-gray van. She steps carefully out onto the muddy yard. White sneakers definitely weren't the right choice here. She stretches out her back and tries to reconcile what's around her with the images she's seen of the place. They showed the farm illuminated by torches, bewitching and inviting. The hosts will probably light torches come evening.

The three buildings form a small yard. A glass passage connects a two-story log house to a lower wooden structure. Directly opposite the wooden building is an old storehouse that tilts slightly to one side. The suite where she'd planned on putting her parents is in the storehouse, but Dorte soon sees that the old stone staircase will be too steep for her father. It's probably better to accommodate her parents in the main building so they don't have to go back and forth across the courtyard if the rain continues – and continue it will, according to the forecasts. The heavy rainfall over Southern Norway has persisted for almost a week now. Dorte sighs and peers up at the sky. It looked like it was clearing up for a while, but now the clouds are gathering into a dark fist above her. She feels a few light drops on her forehead. Well, no one can do anything about the weather. And the suite... Maybe Anette and Jan Inge will feel more positively inclined about the trip if they get a four-poster bed and a hot tub?

She turns around at the sound of a door slamming. A man has come out from what must be the main building. He stands there, wiping his hands on his apron. The red apron and a white smile light up the dark entryway.

"Don't just stand there getting soaked!" he shouts.

Dorte gets her purse from the car and makes her way toward the entrance.

"I wasn't expecting anyone this early," he says, extending a damp hand. "I'm Ole. I was just chopping veggies for tonight's dinner."

"I'm Dorte. Sorry I'm here so early. I wanted to get here a little before the others."

Ole holds the door open and Dorte walks through a small hallway and into the lobby. It's dimly lit in there, and he lights some candles as he chatters away.

"If I knew you were coming I would've made sure to light the fire!"

"It's fine." Dorte wraps her coat around herself more tightly. There are a few small tables and wicker chairs with gray and white sheepskins in front of the large, white fireplace. The lobby evidently doubles as a bar. Ole goes behind the heavy pine counter and presses a couple of buttons. The shelves behind him light up with row upon row of colorful bottles.

"A bit early for a welcome drink, perhaps?" he laughs, and before she can respond, he opens a binder lying in front of him. "We agreed on dinner at seven, right?"

He has tousled, longish hair that covers his face a bit as he leans over the book. He tucks it behind his ears and glances up at her.

"Yes, I told them to be here before six."

"Do you want your room right away?"

"Yeah, but I'm not sure... The thing is, I was planning for the anniversary couple to take the suite, but my father recently had hip surgery, and..."

Ole's eyes have a gentle, light brown hue. He furrows his brow. Then he smiles again. "You're probably right. That staircase is pretty steep. Do you want to take a look?"

He fetches a key attached to a wooden plate. Both the key and plate are impractically large. Again, he holds the door open for her. Dorte scurries across the courtyard behind him. It's really coming down now and she has to zigzag to avoid the biggest puddles. Ole is already inside by the time she reaches the staircase. Four tall and uneven steps and then a small, dark hallway. The first thing she sees when she enters is the enormous four-poster bed. It's painted red and adorned with tulle curtains. Dorte reaches out to feel the mattress, which Ole notices.

"The bed's two hundred years old, but the mattress is new and guaranteed bed bug-free!"

Dorte navigates around the bed and follows him further inside. On a low platform, she spots the hot tub she recognizes from the website she studied so thoroughly. The tub is barrel-shaped and filled with water. Ole presses a button and a red light comes on.

"I filled it up earlier today. Takes about an hour to heat up. I assume you'll be wanting a soak after the long drive?"

Dorte looks at him uncertainly. "I don't know... I'm not sure if I'll even be the one staying here."

"But you're the first one here! Of course you should get the nicest room."

Dorte thinks about her sister. The storehouse is probably a little too rustic for Anette anyway. It *was* pretty tempting to grab her bags and move right in...

“I think I’ll have to wait and see what the others say.”

She realizes she’s holding onto the edge of the tub. Ole is so close she can feel the warmth of his body.

“Excuse me,” he says, and she realizes she’s blocking the way. She quickly releases her grip on the hot tub and takes a step back. Her foot doesn’t find solid ground and she stumbles. He reacts quickly, grabbing her arm and straightening her up.

“That was a close one!” He takes hold of her with his other hand and studies her, concerned. “You okay?”

“Yeah, yeah,” she mumbles, feeling the blood rushing to her face.

He guides her safely around the corner of the four-poster bed.

“We mostly use the suite for newlyweds. And foreign tourists think it’s exotic.”

“It’s really nice,” Dorte says. “Romantic.”

The daylight is blinding compared to the subdued light of the storehouse, even though the sky has wrapped itself even more tightly around the mountain farm. Dorte stops in the doorway and gazes out at the gray curtain of rain concealing both the view and whatever was left of the fall colors. This wasn’t exactly how she was envisioning it when she was planning the anniversary weekend. Now it’s as if the rain is going straight through her, wiping out all the images she’d been picturing for this stay: strolls in vibrant red and gold, a hike with Karl, lounge chairs on the terrace. They were supposed to sit here and enjoy the sun’s warm rays, the view of the valley, a glass of crisp, dry white wine.

Ole comes out and takes a spot by her side. They stand there for a while without saying anything. This probably isn’t all that much fun for him either, welcoming guests when the weather’s like this. He’s a bit younger than Dorte had imagined. Or perhaps more youthful? They must live a pretty good life up here. Fresh air, hikes, local produce. Peace, above all. Peace. She takes a deep breath.

“If you’d like, you can join me in the kitchen and keep me company,” Ole says. “I need to finish prepping dinner. You can have a glass of wine while you wait.”

The kitchen is surprisingly industrial, sleek, and tidy with a lot of shiny steel and two enormous stoves. Carrots, potatoes, and onions are piled on one of the steel counters.

They discussed the menu in detail via phone and email. The first evening, they’ll be having the house elk stew with home-baked flatbread and organic sour cream from one of the farms down in the valley.

Ole grabs an open bottle of white wine from the fridge and pours two glasses. She doesn't get a look at the label before the bottle disappears back into the fridge. *Maybe he wants to test me*, she thinks as she swirls the wine back and forth in her glass. She holds it under her nose. Fresh meadow. What could this be? The host just winks at her and starts on the vegetables.

"Find yourself a chair," he says, waving the knife.

She pulls a high stool over to the end of the counter and drapes her coat over another one.

"It's like being at a bar," she laughs, settling into her seat. She takes another sniff of the wine before sipping it carefully. It doesn't taste as floral as it smells, but there's a sweet aroma lingering in her nose. She sets the glass down and watches his efficient movements.

"Can I help since I'm just sitting here anyway?"

"No, no, it's nice to just have some company."

"But are you all alone here?"

"Elisabeth had to go down to Oslo, so I have to manage on my own tonight. But luckily we'll be two tomorrow."

Ole pours a tray of chopped carrots into a large pot. Then he raises his glass toward her, nods slightly, and takes a sip. She lifts her glass as well, letting the wine wash over her palate before swallowing.

"I'm trying to figure out what this is."

"It's not that exciting. You write about wine, right?"

"Yeah, for a few different magazines."

"Impressive!"

"No, no, not at all. I just started. I had to come up with something when the ad agency I work for had to furlough people."

"Oh, damn. The pandemic?"

"Yeah." She swirls her glass. "Now I'm back part-time and I'm actually pretty happy with that. I've always wanted to write, so..."

"Maybe I've read your work? We subscribe to several food and wine magazines."

"I write regularly for a women's magazine. And more casually for a few websites."

Dorte realizes she hasn't checked her phone in a while. Where's her purse? There, under her coat. She rummages through receipts and makeup before finding the smooth, hard surface. Two messages. One from Karl. Her heart beats faster. She's been scared he'll cancel this whole time. There are so many things that can go wrong. His flight's been canceled. He's

gotten sick. His car broke down. Karl has to come, or this won't work. She opens the message. A wave of relief washes through her, carrying with it a faint tingling from the alcohol.

She looks at Ole's back as he gets something from the fridge. At his hair, which curls slightly at the nape of his neck. It's both gray and black at the same time. Salt and pepper. He turns and looks at her.

"Everything okay?"

She puts down her phone. "Yeah, luckily. I was worried my brother couldn't come after all. But he's just delayed."

Ole lights the gas and she stares at the licking blue flames until he places a frying pan over them. She shouldn't drink much more. She *definitely* shouldn't be tipsy when the others arrive. But the wine has started appealing to her now. It just needed a little time. Not flowery, but still a rich, fresh taste. Could it be one of those newer ones from New Zealand?

There's still at least an hour until the others arrive. Karl writes that he's in a charging line. Did he really get an electric car? His last one was a banged-up old van. She suggested he could ride up with her, but he wanted to drive himself. Everyone wanted to drive themselves. *Why do we need so many cars up here?* Dorte thought. *Six people and four cars?* Anette and Jan Inge could have picked up Mom and Dad on the way, but they insisted on coming in their own car as well. Her parents have always been so concerned with not being a bother, not to anyone, and especially not to their own children.

"When I've finished cooking the meat, I can show you the other rooms. And then I'll light a fire."

Dorte nods and takes another sip of wine. She suddenly realizes how tense she's been. It's nice to get warm, to feel the knots slowly unraveling. Now, she's actually starting to look forward to seeing everyone.

ANETTE

“Why are there never more than two hangers in Norwegian hotel rooms?” Jan Inge asks. He’s standing in front of the narrow wardrobe, holding two white shirts up in front of him.

“No idea. Maybe people steal them,” Anette says. “But we’ve learned, haven’t we?” She pulls four hangers out of her small suitcase with a smile. Jan Inge’s face lights up and he takes them.

“You’re the best.”

“We just have to remember to take them with us. It’s okay that I said no to the suite, right?”

“Yeah, perfectly fine with me. Especially considering Laban. Wouldn’t have been nice to leave him alone out there.”

Two gentle wags against the edge of the dog bed indicate that the labrador heard his name. He doesn’t lift his head but he peers up at them. Two black eyes gleaming from black fur.

“No long walk for you today, Labby-boy,” Jan Inge says, sitting down heavily on the edge of the bed. The speed of the wagging increases. He leans over and scratches the dog’s head before taking off his pants with a sigh and a groan.

“I was only out with him for five minutes and got completely soaked. And I only have these and my dress pants.”

Anette has finished unpacking her suitcase and pushes it under the bed.

“You couldn’t have gotten *that* wet, can you?”

“Feel! I *really* don’t want to catch a cold again.”

“I can try to dry your pants with the hairdryer?”

“Won’t help. Look, there’s mud all up the legs, too. No, I’ll just wear my dress pants and a sweater.”

He goes to the bathroom with his wet pants. Anette sighs and sinks down on the bed where he was sitting. She bends down and scratches the dog’s belly. Cutie. Laban grunts and rolls over. The scent of a warm, wet dog belly isn’t the worst thing in the world. She sighs again. The hotel seems nice enough, the host too, but with this dreadful weather, she’s afraid it’s going to be a long couple of days.

“Did you see Dorte? She was pretty glassy-eyed when we got here,” she says loudly.

“Oh? I didn’t notice,” Jan Inge says from the bathroom. He turns on the tap and lets the water run. She can hear him brushing his teeth.

They’ve decided to do their best on this trip. Dorte means well, she’s just so... overbearing. Always hustling and bustling, always coming up with new things – like bringing them up here without considering that older people don’t really like surprises. Their parents are most comfortable in their familiar surroundings; expeditions like this just stress them out. Their father was clearly tired after the drive. And who was the one who had to run out with the umbrella to make sure they got inside nice and dry? Dorte never thinks about things like that. Jan Inge also came rushing out to help with the bags. No wonder he got wet.

He comes out of the bathroom in only his boxers and a t-shirt. “I’m excited to see what kind of car Karl got. Didn’t Dorte say he was stuck in the charging line? Can he afford an electric car?”

“I find that hard to believe. Maybe it’s a rental.”

“He *has* always been a nature freak. But an electric car up here?”

Anette shrugs. Laban makes a dissatisfied sound as if to draw attention to the fact that the scratching has stopped. She pets the dog’s smooth fur a couple of times and stands up. It’s a bit tight when they’re both trying to get changed, but eventually, they’re ready: he in his dress pants and a dark blue sweater, she in her much-used black skirt and a loose patterned blouse that conceals her muffin top. It’s grown over the past year alongside hot flashes and mood swings. She spots their reflection in the dark windowpane. The water trickling down the glass outside makes them look distorted, like two strange figures on a brightly lit stage.

“Hang on a second,” she says and goes back into the bathroom with her toiletry bag.

He’s standing with his hands in his pockets when she comes out. Straight-backed. Her husband. A man she hardly sees anymore and who definitely doesn’t see her. She could’ve gone out with mascara running down her cheeks and he wouldn’t have even said anything. She takes him by the arm.

“Let’s go. We can take Laban out after dinner.”

She avoids looking at the dog but can feel his sad eyes on her back as they leave. The corridor is poorly lit. While the lobby was bright, inviting, and modern, this part with its eight to ten rooms has simpler furnishings. The room they’ve been given is right next to the glass corridor leading to the lobby. In the corridor, a couple of comfortable armchairs face the darkness beyond the glass panes. A sliding door leads to a terrace with piles of slippery wet leaves. They won’t be able to enjoy the outdoor space at all. But large, white candles give off

a cozy light from lanterns that reflect in the glass. Soft jazz music streams from the lobby. Karl is standing by the counter with a huge bag slung over his shoulder. Signal yellow with angular black letters down the side. A sports brand she doesn't know.

"Big sister!" he shouts and sets the bag down. He's taller than both her and Jan Inge. They both get a hug around their heads.

"Good to be here! Did everyone make it up? I almost got stuck down there..."

Jan Inge has gone out onto the porch and left the front door slightly ajar. There are only a couple of weak outdoor lamps illuminating the yard. The host had to give up on the torches; it was raining and blowing too hard.

Jan Inge turns around. "Just looking for your car. Is it new?"

Karl grins. "Brand new. I got a company car!"

"Company car?" Anette asks.

The two men go to the edge of the porch and Anette is content with standing in the doorway. A small green van is parked next to their black Golf. She tries to make out the logo. "Call of..."

"Call of the Wild," Karl says, beaming at her. His teeth are terribly white. They seem even whiter because he's so tan. A life in the sun. She's never really sure what to say when people ask what her brother does. Oh, my little brother, he's a surfer. No, he's not a beach bum, he's an instructor. And he snowboards. Sometimes he teaches skiing.

They gave up trying to keep track of where he was at all times a while ago. Now he's been in Morocco, apparently. Last summer it was Stadlandet, which they knew because Dorte sent their parents a news story on the surf scene there. Her mother was utterly enthralled by the images of her son riding a roaring wave. He must be so strong, doing that kind of thing all the time. Anette blinks into the darkness and the rain out there. So now he's started a company?

She goes back inside. Karl and Jan Inge come after her. They're talking cars. Jan Inge loves talking cars. No one else in the family does, but now Karl sounds like he's actually into it, too. He's probably trying to convince Jan Inge of the benefits of an electric car. *Good luck with that*, Anette thinks.

"Look, here come the guests of honor!" she exclaims. Because here they are. Her father a step ahead, as usual. Even with a fake hip. Tall and hunched, a birch in a storm. Her mother lights up at the sight of her son, who hurries over to hug them. He takes his mother by the arm and leads her to a chair by the fireplace. Anette makes sure to push Karl's heavy bag out of the way.

“How lovely to be here all together,” her mother says, stroking Karl’s cheek before sitting down.

“But where’s Dorte?” her father asks. He’s standing in the middle of the room.

“Probably enjoying the hot tub,” Anette says with a smile. “I think she was happy no one else wanted the suite.”

“Yuck. Best to stay inside in this weather.”

“No one asked if *I* wanted the suite with a hot tub,” Karl says.

“Then you should’ve gotten here earlier,” Jan Inge smirks. “Not wasted time in the charging line.”

“Well, I’d better go unpack.” Karl gets his keys from the counter and slings his bag over his shoulder.”

“Don’t be long,” his mother calls after him. “Isn’t it almost dinner?” she asks Anette, who’s sat down in the chair next to her.

“We should be at the table in ten minutes. Why don’t you sit down, Dad?”

Her father doesn’t respond. He’s standing with his back to them, studying one of the many framed black-and-white photographs hanging around the lobby. They all seem to be from the old days on the farm. A large, abstract oil painting is hanging over the fireplace. Vibrant orange strokes that come together in a circle. Perhaps it’s supposed to represent the sun? If that’s the case, it’s the only glimpse of the sun they’ll be getting here.

The crackling of the fireplace mingles with the pattering rain outside. It occasionally builds up to intense bursts that drown out all other sounds with a tremendous roar. The rain’s supposed to continue like this all night. So no matter the weather tomorrow, it’ll be too wet for a walk regardless. Anette shivers. They’ll quite simply have to stay inside these heavy timber walls. Her father will probably get restless. At home, he always has something to occupy himself with. Paint the fence, wash the car, mow the lawn, clear the gutters, dig ditches. He hates being on display, being celebrated. She knows he’s dreading it; he’s practically said it outright.

“Should I go look for her?” He’s positioned himself by the window facing the yard. He squints, trying to see through the pouring rain. Anette shifts in the wicker chair, which gives a dissatisfied creak.

“No, Dad, there’s no need. Stay inside at all costs.”

“But isn’t it seven now?” her mother asks.

Jan Inge saunters in from the dining room.

“Everything’s ready,” he says. “Table’s set, candles are lit, and it smells fantastic.”

“But we’re waiting for Karl and Dorte, aren’t we? There’s no rush, is there?” Anette detects the sharpness in her tone.

“No, no,” he mumbles and takes a seat.

“Your hair looks lovely, Mom,” Anette says quickly. She knows her mother was at the salon the day before. The last time she visited, she also got to see the new dress her mother bought. She’s probably saving it for tomorrow. *The big day*. Anette suspects her mother has been looking forward to this weekend, even though she moaned and groaned just as much as her husband. The master of the house, as she calls him. Now the master of the house is tossing another log on the fire. It flares up with a shower of sparks.

“That really wasn’t necessary,” her mother sighs. “We’re going to eat soon.”

“I think it’s nice having a fire,” Jan Inge says.

A gust of wind sends sparks flying around the fireplace. Dorte shakes off her umbrella in the small hallway before coming inside.

“Oh, close the door behind you,” Anette says. “It’s drafty.”

Dorte has to give the door to the mudroom a kick before it closes fully. Her long hair is hanging loose and isn’t quite dry. She’s changed into a light hoodie and jeans with small tassels and sparkling silver nails around the pockets. *So this is how women in Oslo dress these days*, Anette thinks. Whether they’re thirty or forty or fifty. She feels more than ever that she belongs to a different generation than her brother and sister. There is a whole decade between her and the twins, but the gap seems even bigger. Perhaps because neither Dorte nor Karl is married or has kids. Perhaps because they both dress like her own daughters and their friends.

“Here comes the bathing nymph,” her father says with a smile.

“Yeah, now you can all be sorry, every one of you.” Dorte stands next to her father and puts an arm around his shoulders. “The hot tub is amazing. Anyone who wants to can give it a try!”

“I do!” Karl steps into the flickering light of the fire. Dorte lets go of her father and throws herself around her brother’s neck.

“You made it!” She turns toward the others and smiles. “Now we’re all here. Isn’t that fantastic!”

Fantastic. The word resounds in the room, sharp and jarring. No one really knows how to respond to this outburst. Some mumble, “yes, indeed”, and Karl pats his sister on the back with an awkward smile. It’s like a movie that’s frozen, waiting to buffer. Anette feels a twinge in her neck, probably because she’s twisted her upper body around in the chair. She

should twist back, turn toward her parents, and say, yes, fantastic, *so* fantastic. But she's frozen. She sees Jan Inge, she sees Dorte and Karl, and behind them, Ole, the host, comes out of the dining room. He's the one who restarts the film by clapping his hands.

“Well, then, now I have the pleasure of welcoming everyone to Innsetra. Please join me at the dining table!”

DORTE

She'd planned out a seating arrangement, but her father marched right in and plopped down on the closest chair. The others followed suit, and Dorte can't bring herself to start ordering them around now. She'd thought that Karl could sit next to her mother, but Anette is there now. They see each other often enough. Dorte ends up in a corner with her father opposite and Karl beside her. It's not how she pictured it. But the conversation is flowing. Chairs scrape and napkins are unfolded.

When she was there earlier that evening, the room had a faded gray light to it. Now, lively candles are burning on the table in freshly polished brass candlesticks. There are sconces with lit candles on the timber walls as well, casting a flickering, dim glow over the room. The lace curtains are drawn, a fragile shield against the dark and wet outside, but they don't muffle the sound of the pounding rain against the window.

Her mother has discovered that the plates are the same ones as the china they got as a wedding gift, only in a different color. What a coincidence! Her father doesn't agree, though; he can't remember that china. Her mother insists. The two of them have always supported each other, but they also make sure to keep each other in check – not much, just enough. Jan Inge, always hungry, dives into the flatbread and sour cream that has been set out. She, on the other hand, scans the table for the wine. There are only pitchers of water, though. She stands up and fills everyone's glasses.

Ole comes in with two bottles of wine and a corkscrew. He's still wearing the red apron. Or perhaps he's changed to a new one. It's stiff and freshly ironed, without a single stain. He positions himself at the head of the table with a smile and welcomes them once again as he opens one of the bottles. Dorte sees the label with the white bird and nods in approval.

"I assume you're all hungry," Ole says, "So we'll keep it simple. I won't tell you the whole story of Innsetra today. That can wait until tomorrow."

He sniffs the cork and winks at Dorte.

“The wine for tomorrow’s dinner has been thoroughly discussed with the family’s wine expert, but I’m in charge of things tonight. And for Innsetra’s classic elk stew, I’ve chosen to serve a Colombier Crozes-Hermitage.” Ole holds out the bottle and then starts to pour. He doesn’t mention the vintage, perhaps realizing this audience isn’t all that concerned with such details. The golden anniversary couple first. Dorte last. When he pours for her, she notices that he’s poured exactly the same amount in each glass.

“Be right back,” he says and disappears with the empty bottle.

“Let’s toast!” Dorte lifts her glass. The wine sparkles in the glow from the candles, deep red – a sacred, clear, and shining space into which they can solemnly ascend. Everyone obeys, and the other five also raise their glasses and look at one another. Inquisitively? Lovingly? Or is it just politely? Isn’t anyone going to say something? Dorte is the one who speaks up.

“Cheers to Anna and Jon!”

The older couple smile awkwardly but obediently clink their glasses. Then the food arrives. Scents and steam waft from the large pot that Ole places on the table. He sticks a huge spoon into the soft mixture of meat, tomatoes, and vegetables. Then he nods gently and disappears. Dinner is served.

Karl takes it upon himself to serve the food and asks for his mother’s plate. As he reaches for it, Dorte sees that his dark green sweater has a logo on the arm she hadn’t noticed before: a howling wolf and some words she can’t quite make out. She doesn’t think much of it until the worst of their hunger has been quelled. Then Jan Inge turns to Karl and asks him to tell them more about his company.

Karl looks a bit uncomfortable and says they can talk about it later – but now, everyone around the table has perked up their ears.

“Company? Have you started a company?” Dorte asks.

Her mother stops chewing and looks at him while her father blithely asks Jan Inge to pass the flatbread.

Karl turns to Dorte: “Yeah, a buddy and I started a company.”

“Call of the Wild,” Jan Inge chimes in. You don’t have to strain to hear the irony in his voice. Now her father also looks at his son, but he quickly returns his focus to the food. He’s cutting the elk meat into even smaller pieces. Has he started having trouble with his teeth? Dorte takes another look at the logo.

“Congrats,” she says. “Your own company? With a logo and everything?”

“And company car,” Anette interjects.

“But what kind of company is it?” Dorte asks.

“We’re going to run trips,” Karl replies. “Out in the wilderness. For small groups who want to get closer to nature.”

“But... when did this happen?” Dorte can’t quite conceal her surprise. “I mean, you’ve been in Morocco for months, and...”

“I was only there for a month,” Karl says dryly. “And they have internet in Morocco, too.”

Then he sets his fork and knife down and looks around the table.

“We’ve been planning the company for a while, but I wanted to wait until we were up and running to tell everyone. We’re starting with our first trips right after the new year. Dog sledding in Finnmark beneath the Northern Lights.”

Dorte can see the skepticism in her sister’s eyes as her brother talks about eagle safaris and trips in the land of the wild reindeer. Whales, muskox, lynx, wolves. Their father chews calmly and attentively, his face revealing nothing. But Dorte can sense what the retired college dean is thinking. Another whim. Another stunt from his youngest. This son of his who never pursued a higher education. How could he possibly run his own company? What does he know about finances and accounting?

Dorte suspects her parents had come to terms with the fact that their son would never get his act together. And then he goes and starts a company. In such uncertain times. Worries, worries.

It stings a little that her brother hasn’t told her about his plans. Even though he’s off traveling a lot, they’ve always told each other everything. At least that’s what she thought. Dorte takes a deep breath.

“What a great surprise, Karl! To your success!” she says as she raises her glass.

He smiles at her gratefully. Her handsome brother. Blond, tousled hair. Free. What was supposed to be a late addition – “before it was too late,” as their mother says – wound up being twins. It probably wasn’t that easy for two parents with busy jobs, but the situation allowed Dorte and Karl a tremendous amount of freedom. They’re quite similar, even though they’re fraternal. They’re the two restless ones. The two hopeless ones. The two who haven’t delivered. Not grandchildren, at least.

For her part, Dorte could have imagined a different life – living in a villa with a husband and children and a dog. But that’s not how things have turned out. And now Karl has gone a step further. Karl, the one who always seemed to be so content with the vagrant life he’d chosen. Dorte feels confusion, unrest. But his smile is warm. At least she has Karl.

Now Ole is back and asking if everything is alright. And everything is. The food is delicious, everyone helps themselves to seconds and thirds, and the pot seems bottomless. He opens a fresh bottle of wine, fills the glasses, and quietly disappears. Dorte feels a tingling on her skin every time he's around – the stiff, red apron, the slender body at the head of the table, close to her right arm. The tingling turns into a warm feeling that spreads to her shoulder and beyond. It can't reach her heart, though, it can't paralyze her mind. She tells herself she has to be careful. She knows she has to.

Dorte reaches for her wine glass but changes her mind and picks up her glass of water instead. There's more to watch out for now, and she has to make sure she doesn't drink faster than the others. It's hard since her parents drink so slowly. They enjoy wine, but they don't exactly gulp it down. If she doesn't pull herself together, it won't be long until her sister or brother-in-law makes some kind of playful comment. *The family's wine expert*. They really got something to poke fun at there. The two of them both think wine tasting is pretentious. They don't think much of the advertising industry, either, she's noticed.

But now, Karl's the one in the spotlight and Dorte can relax. She traces the pattern on the tablecloth with one finger, an embroidered flower branch winding its way across the table. She can't help but be annoyed at how they're seated. They could have at least managed to alternate men and women! Now the table almost seems weighed down by the two men on her side and the two women on the other, like that part of the table is tilting downward while the end where she and her father are sitting rises like the bow of a boat about to sink.

"Did you like the food, Dad?" she asks carefully. He doesn't hear her at first but notices her eyes on him and looks up, surprised. That strong, blue gaze.

"What did you say, honey?"

She's not entirely sure what he thinks of having a daughter in the advertising industry, a grown-up daughter who's still single. But he calls her "honey". She knows her siblings think she's the apple of her father's eye. And why shouldn't it be that way? Her mother has always gotten a special expression when she looks at Karl, a unique sparkle in her eyes, a crinkly smile. And she's practically declared her eldest daughter to be a saint. Anette followed in her mother's footsteps and became a nurse. But while her mother specialized and became a midwife, Anette worked her way up in the bureaucracy of the healthcare industry and now holds a prominent position in the municipality. A nice title. Stable salary. Good pension. But Anette's most impressive achievement – both in her own eyes as well as her parents' – is her two children. Two healthy, beautiful daughters. She gets extra points for still

being married to the same man. Who also works for the municipality. Technical director. Solid and reliable.

Not long ago, Dorte overheard a conversation between her mother and one of her friends. With an almost imperceptible sigh, her mother said: “She was almost married once.” How many decades of women’s sighs did that comment encompass? And Dorte *has* thought about it herself – that she should have married her high school sweetheart. They were together for over eight years and had even started planning their wedding when, to everyone’s surprise, things ended. Now she no longer even remembers why it fell apart. Wear and tear, panic, misunderstandings. If they’d gotten married, she would at least be divorced by now. After all, being a divorced woman has more status than never having been married at all.

But for the only son, things were different. Their mother always said Karl just hasn’t had time to settle down. She says it with loving affection. And who knows? Karl *could* still settle down. As a man, he has time on his side. Now, her brother is sitting there trying to scrape his plate clean with a piece of flatbread, which isn’t going particularly well.

“I’m so glad you could come,” she says quietly.

“Of course, sis,” he replies, wiping his fingers on the napkin in his lap. “I wouldn’t have missed this elk stew for anything in the world!”

“Who’s the friend you’re starting the company with? Anyone I know?”

“No, I don’t think so. Amund knows the north but I’m going to try to find some nice locations here in Southern Norway.”

“Are you trying to attract foreign guests as well?”

“Of course.”

Her father clears his throat and joins the conversation. “And you think people are going to flock to the country that almost managed to wipe out the whales... to look at other animals that’ll be wiped out soon?”

Before Karl can reply, their father continues: “Tours to see lynx and wolves? Do you know how few wild animals are left in this country?”

“Last time I checked, there were between fifty and seventy wolves in Norway. And a little over three hundred lynx.” Karl’s voice is defiant.

“Sure, good luck tracking *them* down,” he retorts, stabbing a large piece of carrot and diligently continuing to eat.

Dorte glances over at Karl. It’s been a long time since her brother let himself get hurt by their father’s skepticism toward everything he is and does. But this was unexpected. She

tries to change the subject. “Are you staying here for a while now, then? In the country, I mean.”

“Yeah, from now on, what matters is what’s here at home!”

Karl winks at her and they silently raise their glasses to each other. Anette notices and chimes in.

“Shall we toast to the two who couldn’t be here? Karoline and Kristina?”

Everyone raises their glasses. Their mother sets hers down without taking a sip. Dorte leans forward and catches Anette’s eye: “How are things going with Karoline? Is she still in Brazil?”

“Yes, we talk once a week. Her work sounds exciting.”

“It’s not dangerous, is it?” their mother asks.

This concern isn’t difficult to understand. When Dorte imagines her niece doing fieldwork, she’s either standing amidst charred and twisted trees or wandering through the smoldering ruins of small villages. Karoline is involved in assessing the impact of deforestation in the Amazon on the people living there.

Initially, neither Anette nor Jan Inge was particularly pleased that their eldest daughter chose to study anthropology; Jan Inge even referred to it as a “dead end”. But now, he almost seems a little proud. “It’s not entirely without risks, but they have good routines,” he says.

“Shame neither of them could be here.” As she says this, Dorte realizes she doesn’t actually mean it. She likes her nieces, but for this celebration and in these surroundings, it feels right that it’s just the six of them. Nevertheless, her remark makes Anette think she needs to defend her youngest daughter; Kristina had chosen to prioritize a party this weekend.

“It’s early in the semester and it’s important to get to know the other students,” Anette says, and Dorte nods and hurries to say she completely understands. She secretly wonders if Kristina still has lip fillers. The pretty young face somehow stretched out and distorted. Karoline and Kristina are like night and day – as siblings often are, strangely enough.

“It’s so unpleasant,” her mother says.

“Unpleasant? What?”

“Just listen.”

Everyone sits quietly and listens. The rain isn’t just lashing against the windows, it’s a pressure, a force from all sides.

“They’ve issued a yellow warning for all of Southern Norway,” her father mutters.

“Now they’ve actually upgraded it to orange,” Anette adds. “But only for vulnerable areas.”

“Ah, these warnings,” Karl scoffs. “Meteorologists go around flinging out so many warning triangles that we stop taking them seriously.”

“At least we’re safe in here.” Jan Inge reaches for the giant spoon and smiles apologetically. “Anyone else want another helping?”

Anette watches tight-lipped as he piles a small heap of stew on his plate.

“When we left home, the river had risen all the way up to the birch forest,” their mother says.

Dorte tries to picture it. The small cluster of birch trees is actually quite a distance from the river. It must have risen quite a bit. Just beyond the birch forest is the residential area where her parents own a small, low wooden house with a lovely view down toward the river. A house they bought when her father retired and they moved out of the rowhouse that belonged to the college. It’s nice to stroll through the forest. The last time Dorte visited, the river had risen so high that it trickled over the fields just below the garden fence. But that was spring. Spring floods happen every year, more or less.

Dorte lifts her wine glass and set it down again, annoyed with herself for not being able to relax. She’s painfully aware that this celebration was her idea and hers alone. At least, she’s the one who pushed to have it in a place none of them has ever been before. But who could have known the weather would be like this? Now her parents would be worrying all weekend – about the house, the garden, the rising river. And they’ll blame her. Not directly, but the grudge will seep through in small comments, in stolen glances. Dorte had thought everyone would be pleased when they first arrived and saw how nice it is here, but behind the lace curtains, the rain pounds against the windows with the same force as a car driving through a car wash.

“I thought the west coast was going to get the worst of the precipitation,” Karl says.

“Can’t get much worse than this.” Their father pushes his plate away.

“We’ll have to watch the news later,” their mother says. “There’s TV here, right?”

“Of course there’s TV here. But first, dessert,” Dorte says.

Karl’s sports watch displays large numbers. 7:59. Dorte reaches for her wine glass again. It’s going to be a long evening. It’s going to be a long couple of days.