**From *The Other Mother***

**(*Den andre moren*)**

**by Tina Åmodt**

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The night before they left, I woke with the feeling that there was no going back. Now I just had to tell her, I thought, because I was certain Helene would be able to see it on me. As if I had been savaged by a dog I had petted without permission during the night, or as if I had woken to find my hair turned completely white. But the day came without Helene saying anything at all. Henry and I had been up for over an hour when she came down to us, sweet-smelling and freshly showered. She poured herself a cup of coffee, grazed my hip as she took a glass from the shelf above the sink, not stopping to ask why I looked so strange, or to place a hand on my chest and say: how come your heart’s beating so fast?

She lifted Henry from his high chair and sat him on her lap, asked how the night had been, ‘I didn’t hear him,’ she said, ‘did you both sleep well?’ while Henry tugged at her shirt as usual, crazed at the prospect of finally getting some milk. ‘We did,’ I replied. I felt shaky, but that could be down to all sorts of things, I’ve felt that way almost every morning after this long year of night weaning and sleep training and everything else we’ve had to battle our way through to get life back on an even keel. ‘We should probably wake Olav, too,’ Helene said. I nodded, smiled so she wouldn’t assume I was in a bad mood. Had she really not noticed?

Olav’s room was warm, almost pitch dark. It was my mother-in-law who recommended we get the blackout curtains. I like to keep them closed, as if to deny the miserable view of the apartment blocks opposite our neighbourhood, and the railway line that divides the suburb’s expensive and cheap properties from one another like a poorly camouflaged barrier. ‘Good morning,’ I said softly. Nothing strange about my voice. Olav didn’t answer. Nothing strange about that, either. I stepped over the mattress on the floor that keeps Helene and me apart at night, we lie there on alternating evenings, one of us with Henry in our bedroom in the so-called marital bed while the other seeks refuge on the mattress here in his big brother’s room, earplugs bestowing a good night’s sleep. Nightly separation. The best part of the day.

I crouched down beside the sticker-covered edge of the bed. Olav was lying on his stomach in his Ninjago underpants, the duvet kicked off him. I placed my palm on his naked back, between his slender shoulder blades. ‘Are you awake, honey?’ I said. ‘You’re going to Grandma and Grandad’s house today.’ He shifted slightly, mumbled, but continued to lie there with his eyes closed. I stroked his long hair, the blonde curls that had appeared to our amazement and which I now can’t get enough of. Sticking out from beneath his pillow, something glittered – it was a little plastic animal he’d been given by an older girl at the kindergarten ages ago and which he had recently rediscovered, some garish piece of pink crap covered in sequins. Oh, my sweet little boy. All I wanted to do was sit there. To watch him in the warm, peaceful darkness, just be us.

Us, us, us. And nobody else.

When I realised I was on the verge of tears I sat up, put my hands to my face and tapped their backs against my cheekbones three times, an idiotic but useful ritual I have performed for as long as I can remember. I had to concentrate. Just see them off, act warmly, look normal, say the kinds of things I usually said. If I managed that, I thought, there might still be hope. I might still be able to find my way back, like in the Grimms’ Fairy Tales, a path of small, shining white stones appearing before me the moment moonlight floods the forest.

I wait for the night sky to brighten. It’s an entire day since they left. I stand at the sink in the bathroom and study the woman who looks at me from within the frame of the mottled mirror. Her short hair is not white. Beneath the thin t-shirt she has slept in, no wound weeps as a result of teeth that have sunk through the flesh to the bone. She looks normal. She sucks in her stomach. Tries to avoid looking at her pasty upper arms. It’s Monday, the summer holiday, and I’m alone in the house. I can’t remember when I last had so much time to myself, the last time I studied myself this way. And this is just the start. The plan is that I’ll follow them on Sunday, the day before the Latvian carpenters move in – they don’t take their holiday at the same time as everyone else, which is why we chose them – when I’m finished with all the preparations. Sorting and tidying up. Stacking heavy boxes in the loft. Emptying the kitchen drawers – the entire kitchen will eventually be removed in favour of a new one. I have to prise up floorboards and skirting. Fill and paint the walls of what will be both boys’ bedroom, and those of our bedroom too, if I have the time. Stick to the budget. Do a decent job. Erase almost every trace of our lives here, so the house can be transformed into a place we won’t want to leave. Or give up, without a very good reason.

It’s a lot of work, but we set aside ample time when we booked the flights back in the spring – it was Helene who wanted me to come on the Sunday instead of the Friday, ‘so you can do something nice once you’re done,’ she said, ‘meet up with friends or go out on the town, whatever you want.’ I understood that this was the greatest gift she could give me, additional days and nights to myself. To further liberate me from the physical demands of motherhood, relieve me from having to perform as a wife and daughter-in-law for a few extra days. But I was unsure of her motives. Maybe she quite liked the idea of a couple more days free of my dark mood. Or did she actually hope the person she would drive to pick up from Trondheim airport would meet her with a soft and hopeful gaze – be the same, but changed, like when Gandalf the Grey returns as Gandalf the White after bringing down the Balrog, a virtually immortal demon.

She’s always had greater faith than me.

We watched *Lord of the Rings* again during the winter, I was surprised at how fun I found it. As the first images of the landscape of the horse kingdom of Rohan flickered across the screen, Helene had placed a sofa cushion in her lap: ‘Here – would you like to lie down?’ The tender gesture blindsided me.

I rub the sleep away with cold water. My fringe is greasy, and therefore darker than usual. During the first years of our marriage, I hardly ever allowed myself to be seen without peach-coloured lipstick and black eyeliner, I was trying to be elegant, I think. I can no longer put on make-up like that, I no longer have the face of someone who believes beauty can ensure her happiness, or at the very least a constructive mindset. My eyes – it almost looks as if I have an eye infection. It drives me insane, always having to meet that mournful gaze! But I do remember how I used to laugh so loudly that strangers on the bus would look up from their phones and start to chuckle. At work, one of the auditors who checks the annual report once came over to my desk and said: ‘You always cheer me up whenever I see you – I just wanted you to know that.’

Being happy is like being bewitched. But there is nobody here to bewitch me. The tasks I face might be extensive – the house is still overflowing with them – but I have a schedule, a plan, it isn’t the house that’s the problem. I really don’t know how I’m supposed to dissolve this thing that has lodged in my throat. The waves of stomach cramps, like contractions. I recognise the feeling from when I was small, from when I sat at the dinner table or curled up in my hiding place among the ivy at the bottom of the garden. Is everything that seems safe about to collapse? Is my body trying to warn me?

The evening before they left, as I was on my way home from the supermarket with a carrier bag full of squeezy yoghurt pouches and raisins and new colouring supplies for the plane, I spoke to Mayliss on the phone. ‘Surely you can understand why I might be feeling a bit put out,’ she said. ‘One minute you’re sitting here in my living room eating cake, and the next you’re calling me and talking about DNA tests.’

Then came the accusations, the ugly, invasive allegations. ‘Well, I suppose I shouldn’t be surprised. You’re not exactly overflowing with love for Henry, either.’ ‘Where on earth did you get that from?’ I replied, ‘You’re way out of line!’ ‘I’m only repeating what I’ve heard,’ she went on, ‘I’m only saying what I’ve seen. And Mamma completely agrees.’ ‘Your mother?’ I asked. She didn’t reply. She tartly rounded off the conversation; I was standing beside the row of garages, where Helene and the children couldn’t see me. ‘Well, speak soon. Or no – I’m sorry – I suppose we’ll speak whenever it next suits *you*.’

I haven’t heard from her since.

The Sunday arrives. I imagine Helene there in the arrivals hall. The kids aren’t with her, they’re waiting with their grandparents, we spare them long car journeys whenever we can. Helene stands first beside the kiosk, then the baggage belt. She calls to find out where I am. No answer. She waits, calls again; maybe she sighs loudly, feeling fed up. She checks the online newspapers to confirm that the airport express train hasn’t derailed, that the queues at Oslo airport are normal. The messages stream into my phone, irritated at first, perhaps accompanied by a little joke – *have you barricaded yourself in the toilets, or what?* – then anxious, full of confusion: *did you get the day wrong?* But not angry, because the idea that I would fail to keep our agreement still hasn’t occurred to her.

But it wouldn’t have happened like that. I never would have given Olav false hope. I would have given them plenty of notice.

What constitutes plenty of notice? A day before? Two?

This isn’t something I need to consider, because I’m not going to do anything of the sort. I’m going to stick to the plan. Everything shall proceed as normal. I’m not going to see Mayliss again, no matter what she says – I’ll say no, it isn’t appropriate, this has gone way too far, I’m sorry I wasn’t clearer from the start, I’m sure you understand. She has to respect my decision. Surely she’ll respect it? But I don’t know where her boundaries are, whether she’s the type of person who throws all propriety out the window when she feels affronted.

I think I crossed that line.

‘All this ruminating,’ Janne would have said had I shared this with her, ‘you can just press pause on it now and continue with it after the holiday, or how about waiting even longer, until the redecorating is finished, or maybe even until next summer?’ She’s only too happy to share the techniques she’s learned at couples counselling: ‘Try to think of your ruminating as self-sabotage.’

But I haven’t shared this with Janne. She’s just as unsuspecting as Helene. They don’t even know that Mayliss exists, or, well, of course Helene has picked up on the fact that there’s a Mayliss who I’ve spent a lot of time with while on maternity leave, but she has no idea who she is. Why we ended up spending time together. Neither of them has seen the photo Mayliss sent me of her son and Henry playing in the sandpit: turned slightly away from the camera they squat on their haunches, each holding a spade, the sun shining on their skinny little-boy necks; their ears look a tad oversized because they both have so little hair. They are so small. They have no idea just how alike they are. As I stared at the screen, a jolt of terror shot through me. Even though I deleted the image I felt its reverberations all that evening, there was something almost sexual about their intensity, as if an orgasm had surged through a cadaver. And still I didn’t stop. Still I met up with them again the following week.

Everybody knows I’m the kind of person who gets things done. That I’m the kind of person who works systematically, who never delivers anything that hasn’t been checked through one final time. So I’ve made a start on my tasks. I’ve emptied all the wardrobes – Helene’s clothes fit in four transparent refuse sacks, mine in three; the boys’ clothes I’ve sorted by season. Many of Henry’s have long since become too small. He’s big for his age, taller than his brother was at this stage in his development. I don’t like to see the clothes in bags like this, there’s something vulgar about it. But that’s just a feeling. I’m doing it this way because it’s practical. I’ve also cleared out quite a few of the boys’ things, have thrown away piles of drawings and put the baby toys Henry has grown out of into a separate cardboard box, along with the least used toy cars and bits of plastic rubbish that came free with the magazines Olav pesters us for every now and then. All this I’m going to give away. The boys won’t even notice.

But the work is slow going. The house is silent, I’m silent, I haven’t spoken to anyone other than Helene and a couple of the neighbours who haven’t gone away on holiday. And I’ve texted Joakim to tell him I’ll call him soon. I have to, because soon I might need him in a way I’ve never needed him before. I really ought to call Janne, too – all my friends, I still have them. I ought to write them letters and send gifts, strengthen those connections, cultivate their sense of loyalty.

Or is it already too late for that?

Yesterday I didn’t get to bed until the early hours, and this morning I lazed about until after eight. I’ve eaten a family-sized bag of cheese puffs and haven’t bothered to change my underwear. Long-awaited pleasures. But they fail to soothe this heavy sharpness that moves deep in my chest.

I feel lost. Not just because I don’t know what I’ll do if Mayliss refuses to let this go. And not just because I’m unsure whether I can keep it up any more, this role I’ve been assigned and which I have to play as if my life depends on it. It’s also that I now have time to sit around and think. Think, without being interrupted by crying, or shouts of *Mamma, Henry bit me!*, or a dirty nappy that needs changing, or questions like whether I forgot to buy washing powder. All the details I’ve divulged to Mayliss are one thing. But that I have the time to think – that’s much more far-reaching. And it disturbs me. Like lone, young male wolves my thoughts roam further and further, until all at once I find myself in a place I never imagined I’d end up, having believed I’d never again manage to think anything more advanced than: if Henry doesn’t fall asleep this instant, I am going to go insane.

It probably shouldn’t surprise me, the fact that this reunion with free thought feels so overwhelming. They’ve always known it, those who have kept women occupied with caring for children, with scrubbing and peeling, with lacing up their corsets nice and tight. There’s also a kind of grief in it. But if I continue to think without restraint, I have no idea who I’ll find staring back at me from the mirror by the end of the week.

The house without my family. It’s bigger. The silence pushes the ugly Anaglypta-covered walls further apart. Our furniture and all the toys almost seem like stage props. The children’s toothbrushes, crusted with blue toothpaste, sit on the bottom shelf of the bookcase – we forgot to both brush their teeth and pack their toothbrushes before we hurried out to the car and headed for the airport yesterday morning. Their mess is scattered, floating flotsam and jetsam. Henry’s sticker book full of diggers, a gift from Helene’s brother. Olav’s many hair elastics and Kinder Surprise figurines and sticks. Helene’s dirty socks. An over-washed and faded bra slung over the back of the sofa.

I drink coffee at the kitchen table, dip a spoon into a bowl filled with sugary cereal and whole milk. Fat and sugar are what’s keeping me going. The stapled booklet that contains the architect’s drawings and vision for the house lie next to the little vase filled with the clover Olav picked as a parting gift, ‘for you, Mamma.’ Darling Olav. Since he was born, I’ve hardly been able to distinguish love from grief, have been plagued by the recurring thought: I’m going to have to bury my child. I don’t know whether Helene has similar thoughts about Henry – she may well do, of course – but we’re not alike in this. She doesn’t cry at the news of abortion bans or people searching in vain for their relatives among the rubble of destroyed buildings, she doesn’t devour the Amnesty International newsletter about how many gay people were hung in Iran over the past week. She doesn’t have this brutally intense urge to flee every time she feels offended or afraid. If she did, she probably never would have taken me back.

As young as he is, it’s already clear that Henry takes after Helene, after members of her family – he’s so jovial, has such a spring in his step. He’s going to be just fine. Despite growing up with me.

With me, in this patchwork of a so-called family.

As I lay there tossing and turning in bed last night, I suddenly heard him pulling himself to standing in his cot, his breathing focused and rapid. The evening sunlight forced its way between the gap in the curtains to cut straight across my forehead. First his tiny hand stuck up over the edge of the bed, followed by his chubby arm in his sheep-patterned pyjamas, then his face, his full lips, his beautiful but slightly protruding brown eyes. Helene’s eyes are brown. Mine and Olav’s are blue. I thought he was going to start screaming, to demand milk. But the moment he realised that it was me lying there, he smiled, as if he’d caught sight of himself in a mirror.

‘You have to go to sleep now, it’s night time,’ I said. I felt sickly and feeble, as if I’d been trying to hide but had been discovered. Then I picked him up, laid him down beside me and pulled him close.

I don’t think Henry can have been more than three weeks old when he began to smile, much earlier than Olav. But it took time for me to give myself over to those smiles, to interpret them as being down to anything other than tummy aches or reflexes – the smile, the infant’s ancient survival strategy. ‘I don’t think he recognises me,’ I said as I sat next to Helene on the sofa, my feet on the coffee table and using my thighs to support the tiny baby in the too-big woollen bodysuit I was cradling so he was facing us. ‘He probably thinks I’m just some random woman.’ ‘Of course he recognises you,’ Helene exclaimed, ‘don’t be so ridiculous.’ I fell silent. Shame always makes me hot and red in the cheeks, it’s so easy to see it on me. I smiled at Henry, allowing him to grip both my thumbs, sticking out my tongue to get him to copy me. Then, in my most pathetic, manipulative voice, I said: ‘You know how good it makes me feel when you sound just like my mother.’

Out on the patio it’s pouring with rain. The garden furniture’s cushions have turned dark with it, I should have brought them inside to prevent them growing mouldy, it’s rained constantly since Helene and the boys left. The flowerbeds that line the garden are beautiful, flowers I don’t know the names of growing in an attractively arranged and sopping wet tangle. The people who lived here before us planted them. The apple trees are young and wispy. At the entrance to the garden stands a yellow bag I’m supposed to fill with building waste once I finally make a start on laying the laminate flooring. I’m cold, still wearing only my underwear and the top I’ve slept in, but there’s nobody here to see my rolls of flab and cellulite.

The dining table is teak, taken from my grandmother’s house after her death. Helene thinks it’s ugly, she wants to replace it with something in Valchromat or untreated oak, ‘something that doesn’t feel so 2009, I don’t think the teak will really go with anything once we’ve redecorated.’ She’s probably right. She’s binge-watched every episode of all the Scandinavian versions of *Architects’ Homes* and feels a deep sense of joy at being surrounded by beautiful, solid objects. I like it too, and I trust her taste, she and the architect had hit it off, they were on the same wavelength. But I don’t know when she became like this, yet another middle-class woman with an interest in interior design. When we met, all she owned was a few IKEA chairs and a lamp she’d been given by a friend. And she knows how I feel about the table. She doesn’t listen. She doesn’t want to listen. Which children’s book is that from? *Karius and Bactus*, maybe?

I’ve never slept alone in this house. I’ve been a stay-at-home parent for almost an entire year now, since last summer, when Henry had just learned to wriggle along on his tummy and I offered my colleagues a pack of cheap ice-creams on sticks before leaving the office and taking over the parental leave. The co-mother’s quota. Just after we moved here.

I’m alone, yes, but my wild and ever-expanding mental landscape is crammed with people. Not just Helene and the boys. Not just Mayliss. Not just friends I have or once had. When I opened the door to the laundry room yesterday evening, it was as if I was looking straight at Fitness Guri. It was Helene who nicknamed her that, and out of loyalty and in an attempt to shake a private joke out of the catastrophe, and probably also as a kind of defence mechanism, I’ve kept using the name ever since.

A little way off, under a tree, or whatever it might have been, stood my mother. I started. It isn’t that I haven’t thought about Fitness Guri and my mother and my sister over the past year – of course I have, time and again – but the thoughts have been automatic and stagnant, like a collection of old Barbie dolls I’ve occasionally picked up and looked at and not known what to do with. Now the dolls have started moving. They shift their positions, recreating scenes I thought I was long since done with. All at once I feel a small hand touch the thin skin just behind my earlobe. I stiffen, as if waking to someone parting my thighs and telling me to stay silent.

‘You can think of your relationship like a bank account,’ Janne once said when we met up for coffee and a debrief after she and Peter had been to the family welfare office. ‘Exactly,’ I replied, ‘that’s so inspiring!’ ‘It explains everything,’ Janne went on, ‘just listen to this! As a couple, you have to constantly put money into your account and keep an eye on the balance. A kiss goodbye might be fifty kroner in; some friendly words in the middle of an argument might increase your available funds by a thousand. The aim is to have the greatest safety margin possible, because then you’re prepared for the crises. With a million kroner in the bank, having to take out fifty thousand might not feel great, but it isn’t actually a problem. But if you’re scraping the bottom of the barrel, poor as shit and with only ten kroner left, taking out even a single kroner is going to hurt like hell. Does that make sense?’ ‘Of course,’ I replied, nodding, ‘of course it does.’ ‘But that’s not all,’ Janne continued, her eyes shining with a-ha moment glossiness, and I was buoyed by her enthusiasm, how she truly seemed to believe that couples counselling and its metaphors were going to get her and Peter over the hump, ‘because then there are the things that instantly put you in the red. Anything from events or memories to a triggering type of behaviour, which can cause your account to slide from, say, a million in the plus to three-hundred thousand in the minus, no matter how much you might keep up the loving gestures or make your deposits. It’s fucking unfair. But for some of us, these huge outgoings crop up all the time, almost out of the blue – everything from your partner responding to you in a way that reminds you of a childhood trauma to open wounds in the relationship’s history. And when you come up against any of this stuff you simply don’t have a chance, because that’s when your cerebellum takes over. All you can do is accept that your savings are gone and start the whole fucking process of building up your balance all over again. Do you get what I’m trying to say? Can you relate to any of this?’ She looked at me. ‘Not in the slightest,’ I said, and then we both burst out laughing, a long, raw wave of laughter crashing over us, as if we were two broke, drunken bums who knew each other’s dirtiest tricks and ugliest secrets.

Us, us, us. And nobody else. We live as a modern nuclear family. Without anyone to help us with the babysitting, without grandparents next door. Among friends and neighbours who avoid interacting with the children to any significant extent, either because they aren’t interested or because they have enough on their plates with their own families and busy lives. It’s just Helene and me. Here in the house we are the adults, we make the rules and control the narrative. Only we know how Olav likes to have the crusts cut off his bread, that both he and Henry refuse to wear anything made of denim, or smart trousers with creases down the front. No one else is alert to how Henry’s left big toenail grows into his toe if it isn’t clipped in a special way. The trick that makes him forget just how much he dislikes being covered in sun cream, by singing ‘Head, Shoulders, Knees and Toes’, is something only we know how to do. Presumably we’re the only ones who understand that Olav doesn’t want to taste the pear-flavoured ice lolly because he’s convinced it’s made of cucumber. We are their mothers. If they catch a stomach bug, we wipe up their vomit. When they learn something new, we clap for them or ask them to show us again. We’re the ones who take their temperatures, cut their fringes, Google *how to teach boys to pee standing up*, build things out of Lego, read aloud cheap picture books with sound effects even when the batteries have run out. Only we think Olav’s paintings of castles and bluebells are breathtakingly beautiful. We’re the ones who sing lullabies for them at bedtime, and we’re the only ones who get to enjoy the sight of them in the morning, when Henry is allowed to climb up into his big brother’s bed and they hide beneath the duvet, tittering. Their thrashing legs, the never-failing, gleeful excitement when we pretend we can’t see them: ‘Where are they?’ Helene says, ‘Have they gone out?’

Us, us, us. And nobody else. That’s how it feels, and yet it isn’t true.

When Helene became pregnant with Henry, it didn’t bother us that the boys wouldn’t be genetically related. We said: they’ll be brothers no matter what. We said: they’ll never doubt that they belong together. That there were probably many other children, many other mothers – of course I knew this, but until I met Mayliss, I didn’t understand it. It was abstract theory, something we sometimes threw into conversations as if in passing – ‘Do you ever wonder whether they have any half-siblings out there?’ – but without ever really believing it, or thinking that it might apply to us.

It isn’t just the fact that Mayliss and Nicolai exist that makes me so restless. The thing that’s dangerous isn’t just stumbling into a jumble of biological ties.

It was so easy. Not to say anything to Helene.

As if I pressed play on a song that had been paused for almost two years: that was how I demolished everything we had rebuilt after my digression – *poof!* Suddenly I was at it again, with my double life, with my lies and cock and bull stories, as the old people back home would say.

What does it mean? I don’t know. Only: I can’t live like this anymore.

But what do I want? To tell all, to lance the abscess, so I can at least purify myself? Or to simply leave her sooner rather than later, to be alone, to rip our children’s lives to shreds, but in return be spared further accusations, be spared the risk of hearing that I’m a fucking hypocrite, once and for all? A hypocrite of a wife. And a fake mother. The latter she would never forgive me.

I’ve only really got to know Mayliss since winter, but I’ve known of her and Nicolai for over a year. That first meeting was pure chance. It was last year, before the terrorist attack, before we moved, at the very start of my maternity leave. We were due to travel to Spain the following week; I had taken Henry into the city to buy UV-protection swimsuits and sandals when all at once I found myself outside Pride in the Park. At the entrance I bumped into an acquaintance from Helene’s old choir, a doctor who works with sex ed; she was stationed at a stall featuring condom balloons and huge bowls of lube. ‘You should check out the kids’ area,’ she suggested, ‘it’s really nice!’ Henry was hot and tired, we should have been heading back to pick up Olav from kindergarten, but surely a quick look wouldn’t hurt, we couldn’t not go in now that we were right there. Maybe I would even bump into someone I knew, perhaps someone I couldn’t admit I was hoping to see.

I pushed the pushchair past the many food trucks decorated with rainbows, the empty stage, the tables in the baking heat where some groups of young friends wearing matching vest tops and rainbow socks were sitting, along with the odd poor country homo with an aura of loneliness so intense I had to pretend I was looking for somewhere to change the baby’s nappy. Henry was grizzling, we had just made the transition from the pushchair’s carrycot to the seat and it was too big for him, he sort of slithered around in it. ‘Do you want to come out?’ I asked, unbuckling the harness and picking him up. He looked about him, squinting in the sunlight. The park had just opened, the crowds were sparse as yet. Where was the children’s area? I had no idea, and it didn’t really matter. I just sat down on a bench. On which a woman with a pushchair was already sitting; a small child stood beside her, practising keeping its balance by holding onto the bench’s seat. The woman smiled at me. I smiled back. Because that’s what you do, at Pride in the Park, you smile at strangers, it’s safe, you’re happy, happy for the park, happy for pride, happy to belong to the minority that has suddenly become the majority. I held Henry under the arms; his short, stiff legs pushed against my thighs. ‘How old is he?’ I heard the woman say, ‘he’s a boy, right?’ ‘Almost six months,’ I replied. I had no time to say anything further because her child toppled backwards towards me, and before I knew it he had crashed into my legs. ‘Oopsy!’ I cried. ‘Careful!’

It was so random, the whole thing. The fact that I just happened to sit right there. That the boy looked up at me – and I down at him. I stared into his little face. A distortion – that’s what it was. There must have been several months between them, but I recognised almost everything. The childhood photos of Helene, against which we had been constantly comparing Henry’s features, it was as if they were instantly erased and I saw nothing but this new likeness. There was the shape of the eyes, large and slightly protruding; both were almost completely bald. Two little copies of each other. Or no, not copies. This strange boy had slightly odd ears, and his face was both narrower and longer than Henry’s face, and yes, weren’t they actually quite different, when it came down to it? And don’t young children all look alike, isn’t it true there’s a limit to how different such small children can be, and why should I care at all, why did I feel queasy, as if I had just been caught doing something terrible?

I reacted not rationally, but on instinct. I had to get away, remove myself from the situation, just as I’ve fled Oslo City shopping centre several times because I think the two men ahead of me on the escalator are each wearing an explosive vest under their down jackets, or got up from my table outside a café after just a couple of sips of coffee because a white van is slowly reversing up onto the pavement. But I saw the look in her eyes. The other mother. She had seen what I had seen, of course she had, it was as vivid as the colours in all the flags that had been raised around us, and I felt it in my entire body, just as you can sense when you’re about to be locked in somewhere: she was about to say something, and the castle in the air I had built for our family was now about to go up in smoke.

It could have been an insignificant encounter. It could have been no more than an exchanged glance, perhaps a knowing smile, followed by a discreet retreat, a shuffling back to our respective lives, perhaps with our hearts beating a little faster than usual, the unease like a vague pressure in our heads, but also with the possibility that things were not as we feared, that there was still hope we’d get to live in peace for at least the next fourteen years, until the children turned fifteen and would be able to decide for themselves whether they wished to seek each other out. We might still have been able to think: maybe there are no other children except mine. Because that’s what we want to imagine, Helene and me. Even with friends who have had children in the same way, we never speak about the wishes we expressed at the clinic. We hardly even talk about it with each other. When I read interviews with celebrity lesbian couples who declare how thankful they are to their donor, how they constantly tell their children about that kind, Danish man, I never quite believe them – of course they’re grateful that their children exist, of course both they and we know that this is one of the few opportunities afforded to people like us, and moreover, that we’re blessed to have this right enshrined in law, but who wouldn’t prefer that he didn’t exist, that the children were created in us entirely of their own accord? That they are ours, and no one else’s. That we know all there is to know. That we have control.

‘Shit,’ I said. ‘Isn’t my kid the spitting image of yours?’

Did I really say that? Apparently so. I could have got up, I could have walked away, I could have left well alone, but oh no, there I was, in the searing heat at Pride in the Park, smiling as I faced this stranger who sat there with her boy in her lap and her huge breasts and her big beer belly stuffed into her black denim shirt. The lower half of her face appeared to have sort of melted; the ears seemed smaller and lower than was normal, her mouth hung too far down towards her chin. Her bare arms were covered in black tattoos. Among the throng of shapes, among the poppies and topless women, I glimpsed the face of a cat.

She laughed. ‘Holy shit, he really is!’

What now? What now? Why did I say anything at all? What a fucking idiot! I wanted to leave. To bundle Henry back into the pushchair, to strap him in and vanish into thin air. But it was too late. ‘They’re so alike,’ she continued. ‘I guess you must have used Dandy too?’ ‘I must have done what?’ My voice was harsh, she should have taken the hint, but the hint only glanced off her, she smiled as if she had asked me the time and then she said it again, the donor alias, one of these peculiar, made-up names that are listed alphabetically on the sperm bank’s website along with information about the donor’s ethnicity, height, eye colour. ‘Dandy,’ she said. ‘The donor. You must have used him too?’

I was stunned. Not just at the fact that I had started this conversation. But that she could take it all with such… good humour? As if she had helped herself to a dish I had served, and just managed to identify the secret ingredient. But I didn’t even have an answer for her, it felt as if I were being forced to stand before a meeting room full of people and explain a set of accounts I had never seen. ‘Actually, I don’t know,’ I said. It was a confession. An intimate, crude confession to a stranger. She laughed a little, a stupid, bumpkin-esque laugh – where was she from, Toten? ‘You don’t know?’ I shook my head. Now I really had to leave! But of course I kept speaking. ‘No, you’re not allowed to choose your donor in Norway,’ I said didactically. ‘Not anymore.’ ‘You’re not?’ she said. ‘Well that’s pretty crazy.’ I felt something repulsive and wet swelling within me, like a dirty nappy left out in the rain, this unpleasant feeling that she had a point. Henry mewled and squirmed, he was so hot. ‘But maybe you didn’t have your treatment in Norway,’ I continued. Anything to ease the discomfort. ‘No,’ she said. ‘Stork Fertility – Denmark! And he stuck on the first try. So that made it cheap!’ She laughed again, patted her stomach. I thought I had never seen anything so vulgar.

What came afterwards? How did I end up giving her my number? Was it because she told me she had been living in Oslo for no more than a few months, that she knew so few people? Was it the fact that she gave Nikolai her phone as we spoke, and later, when I heard an ad jingle, I realised she had opened YouTube – *YouTube* – for a little boy who wasn’t even a year old, Jesus, how I hated seeing kids paralysed by screens! Was it the way she took off her sunglasses when she said: ‘It’s just Nikolai and me.’ Or was it quite simply Nikolai himself, Nikolai’s Henry-like face – apart from the ears he looked nothing like his mother – that beautiful, chubby little boy on her arm. Four months older than my boy, Helene’s boy, was it the feeling of responsibility towards this stranger-child that made me blurt it out? ‘I’ve just taken over the maternity leave – maybe we could meet up during the day for a play date?’

I could have followed my instincts, said actually I wasn’t that interested, that it was funny to have bumped into her and nice to have met her, but I felt no pressing need to get to know them, especially since Henry already had a big brother. Or I could have mentioned Helene, blamed her, said that she would have found it extremely difficult – there were countless ways I could have got out of it. But I chose none of them, I chose to act upon the feeling that I had to be loyal to a stranger, and had I had access to a little self-insight right then, I would have thought about what my old doctor used to say about how I needed to practice setting boundaries and stop trying to please everyone all the time, but self-insight evaporates in life’s times of crisis, and I hadn’t the faintest idea of what was sown in that moment.

The kitchen cupboards are crammed with containers, packets and cans. On the bookshelves – which I have to take down – there are still books, while on the sofa towers of baby clothes and equipment I’m going to sell are accumulating. I just have to place the ads online before I pack everything away in separate boxes. Have I set enough time aside?

If there’s one thing I’m hoping to find as I go through our things, it’s the old Casio watch I’ve had since long before I met Helene, a common sight on lesbian wrists in the 2000s, and apparently also preferred among terrorist networks’ bomb-builders, because it’s both cheap and can be relied upon when you need to initiate a countdown. 09:18, says my wretched phone’s screen. Monday 10th July.

It isn’t only Mayliss who will celebrate her birthday in the summer. When I was a kid, the countdown would have started long ago – to the family gathering with strawberries and cream, the birthday song and a neat row of knees lined up along the sofa. Don’t speak too loudly. Don’t be rude. Smiling, smiling, remembering that saying no will have consequences. Working hard to come up with something impressive and preferably a little precocious to say, perhaps dazzling our guests with my times tables or showing them the badges on my scout’s uniform so they can exclaim how extraordinarily clever I am. Me and my sister – look, see how clever they are. If Pappa is home from the North Sea, he sits in his recliner with his hands in his lap. Nobody seems to notice him picking at the skin around the fingernails of his thumbs when he’s nervous, but I do. Mamma serves cream cake decorated with sliced kiwi fruit and even more strawberries, the guests are delighted even though it’s the same cake she bakes every year, they simply cannot get over how talented she is.

How old will she be next week – sixty-two? Or was that last year? I haven’t spoken to her since New Year’s Eve, and she was the one who called me – I had finally picked up after four ignored calls – but on her birthday there’ll be no doubt as to where the responsibility lies. I’m dreading it. When I’m feeling on top of things, I can manage to both be in touch with her and to laugh afterwards at what was said and the emotions stirred up in me without too much effort, but in my current state it’ll be dangerous, because she can sense it, she’ll hear it straight away, that I’m practically transparent, she’ll know just how little it will take for her to find a crack through which she can sneak in. ‘I’ve been to the shopping centre and bought some new bedding for the boys, are you coming to stay this summer?’ And Helene isn’t here to help me drive her out, to help me meticulously close myself back up again, as if I’m a threadbare womb that needs stitching up after yet another life-threatening birth.

Our house was built in 1987, the year my mother became pregnant for the first time. It’s easy to fall into the trap of thinking that all pregnant women are alike. All the detached properties I can see from the big living room windows are identical, with the exception of those that have managed to add extensions to their fronts. Before we moved here, I was entirely unprepared for just how much I would obsess over how it feels to be surrounded by such… monotonous architecture. I hate it, I really do. I want to saw down all the thuja hedges, spray the blank façades turquoise and pink. That Helene and I are A4-lesbians with kids and a car and straight jobs is one thing. But what does it say about me, the fact that I’ve moved to this conformist suburban dump? Would we storm the barricades if it were required of us, or would we stay here in the comfort and safety of our Daz whiteness, light a fire in the log burner and open a bag of crisps?

When the Oslo Pride Parade took place in June, for the first time since the pandemic, we were away on holiday at a cabin.

A friend of Helene’s, who lives on an upper floor of one of the apartment blocks in Enerhaug, said: ‘We watched from the balcony as the police got themselves set up – there were sharpshooters on the rooftops all across Grønland.’

It doesn’t help that the neighbours, who are all outdoorsy but sweet types, go on about how happy they are here. Or that guests who come to visit call the area things like cosy and idyllic. And you’re so close to nature, they say, to Marka and Ulrudsvann! You have everything right on your doorstep! I’m not sure I can so much as point in the general direction of Marka from here, and I certainly wouldn’t know how to get home should I ever find myself lost there. The lake I’ve been to once – on one of the hottest days in June I dragged myself and the kids through the sunburnt and swollen crowds of parents and their young children, walking in a zig-zag so as not to step in all the goose shit that lay scattered like small indignities across the dark-grey sand.

‘Do you know what it’s like for me when you take that attitude?’ Helene says. ‘You’re the one who didn’t want to stay in Torshov. You’re the one who talked *me* into all this.’

As I was driving them to the airport yesterday, it suddenly began pouring with rain. Out beyond the city limits I still think the sky above Western Norway is almost eerily vast, like that above the Great Plains in North America. Dark clouds covered half the sky. I was nervous – Helene almost always does the driving, I no longer dare, I often imagine myself doing something that ends up with both boys being paralysed or brain-damaged. And for Helene it’s easy – she learned to drive in her father’s rickety HiAce, she borrows other people’s vans with no problem and has manoeuvred rental cars through the middle of New York City. But always having to be the driver irritates her. ‘We have to be able to take it in turns,’ she says, ‘what if something happens to the kids when I’m not there? Do you want to be one of those doddery old biddies who can’t reverse or parallel park, or are you going to book yourself a few refresher lessons?’ I can’t stand it when she speaks to me like this. I hate how we have to be equals in every single situation. If she were a man, I often find myself thinking, I’d have been more easily let off the hook.

But this time, yesterday, I also found a certain relief in driving. At having to concentrate on the road, at not being required to talk and therefore not having to risk letting the cat out of the bag. We listened to Captain Sabretooth songs; in the back seat the boys constantly chattered and sang. The rain flowed off the lorries that passed us, and outside the car’s fogged-up side windows purple lupins lined the roadside verges. I didn’t dare to drive a single kilometre over eighty. ‘Are you finding it stressful?’ Helene asked. And I could hear it. I could hear how she softened her voice, made it kind. ‘Do you think you can relax a bit more?’ I didn’t answer, just concentrated on my breathing, on keeping the thoughts of hydroplaning and huge elk bounding out in front of the car at bay. Suddenly, she put a hand on my thigh.

That touch: once it would have sent a tremor through my entire body. Then, for a long time, it fostered a warmth in me, reassured me that I was loved. More recently it’s taken on a new function, has become an attempt at reconciliation, often after an argument, and sometimes it’s enough, sometimes it has caused the hardness in me to soften.

But now: I felt nothing. She may as well have placed her hand in her own lap. Can you really not see it? I thought.

Just then the tiny ping of a text being received cut through Pinky’s song. I cast a quick glance at my mobile but didn’t manage to see who the sender was before the notification disappeared. I knew, of course, that Mayliss and Nikolai had no travel plans – it was high season, she was probably standing in the hotel reception checking in some sweaty tourists right then – there was no chance of us bumping into them at the airport. I glanced at Helene, who sat scrolling on her own phone with her free hand. I tried not to let myself be swept away by my indignant reaction, but I just couldn’t help it: ‘There’s no need to speak to me as if I’ve never driven a car before.’

As we stood in the departure hall and said our goodbyes – Henry hanging in a baby carrier at Helene’s chest, while Olav clung to my leg and repeated in an irritating, whining voice that I mustn’t go – I felt sad. Not because I thought this might be the last time Helene and I would say goodbye to each other like this, but because any sense of longing seemed entirely absent, the relief that I would soon be alone so great. And that would have been fine, entirely understandable, if in this relief there had also been joy and anticipation. But there wasn’t. I was sweaty after hauling the suitcases onto the baggage belt, overcompensating for all the hassle and stress I would soon be spared. I agreed to give Olav a piggyback as I walked over to the special baggage drop with Henry’s folded-up pushchair on a trolley; he kicked me in the hips with his light-up shoes and held on too tightly around my neck, but I didn’t tell him off, as I might otherwise have done. Henry’s nose was snotty, his hair wet from the rain after the walk from the car to the terminal. I kissed him on the forehead, then crouched down in front of Olav. He stared at the polished airport floor as if it were transparent and a frightening animated fairy story was playing out below it.

‘Have a nice time with Grandma, okay?’ I said. ‘Mamma,’ he mumbled, ‘I want to stay with you.’

In order to appear calm, and perhaps because this was like countless farewell scenes I’d seen in movies, I took his little hands in mine. At his request, Helene had painted his nails a pale shade of pink earlier in the week, and now the polish had almost completely peeled away. Something had stirred in me the day I saw the nail polish, as if some creature deep inside me were flicking its tail, but I’d held my tongue.

‘Mamma has work to do on the house,’ I replied, ‘so I’ll come and join you in a little while.’ ‘Grandma and Grandpa are really looking forward to seeing you,’ Helene said. Olav peered up at her. His eyes were brimming with tears, which was so typical of him. ‘I know that,’ he said, his voice thin. ‘But I want Mamma to come, too.’

I wanted to shake his hands off me, to shake him, to shout: Come on now, fucking pull yourself together, this is embarrassing! But I swallowed that down, too. That’s what makes the crucial difference.

Helene and I kissed. It was cold, sterile, like politely hugging an old great-uncle at a Christmas party. As her breasts grazed my arm I felt a pang of unease, like when that same great-uncle holds the hug for just a little too long. Jesus, I thought, things cannot go on like this.

‘Bye then,’ I began, ‘bye Olav, bye Mamma Helene, bye Henry. Can you wave?’

Henry waved, then blew me a kiss. I blew one back, grateful that was all that was required of me. Then I walked away, but when I rounded a sports car that stood there on display I stopped and watched them from behind it. Helene’s expression was stern and focussed as along with the other overloaded parents with young children she hauled her way down the family lane. She was wearing a new pale blue linen shirt she hadn’t told me she had bought. Her long, damp hair hung loose down her back. When I see her from behind, I often think it can’t possibly be her.

The crowd began to close in, but I glimpsed how Olav helped to lift the hand luggage onto the belt at the security check. Henry was pointing at everything and kicking his legs, and Olav patted him on the thigh in a big-brotherly gesture. That gorgeous, sweet little boy. How I love him. And Henry too, of course. Of course.

And Helene. In a different way, but still.

My family.

But as they were waved over to walk through the metal detector, I thought it again. The thought. It isn’t true. It’s shameless and false and childish, and I didn’t want to think it. But I did.

There they go with my child.

Just then a man bumped into me with such force I had to steady myself against the sports car, marking its paintwork with the prints of my clammy, traitorous hands. ‘I am so sorry,’ the man exclaimed, with such bewilderment it could hardly have been anything but an accident. I wanted to punch him. Instead, I turned and walked away. As I walked, I finally checked the message on my phone, but it was just some web store’s advertising I keep forgetting to unsubscribe from.

The first encounters are a pitch, seductive and detached from all future costs. They have nothing to do with what will happen later. Still, these are the times people cling to, replaying them over and over and calling them the starting point. The intensity of the desire, that feeling of finding and being found: the stronger it was, the more dangerous it is, because then you simply can’t stop hoping you’ll find it again. It compels you to keep going, even as you stray deeper and deeper into the fog.

I recognised her from her profile picture straight away. She was sitting on the edge of the Sjøfartsmonument, her legs spread wide, torso hanging forward a little and with her elbows resting on her thighs, like some relaxed and liberated galleon figurehead. Yes, I thought. I want this. She was masculine, but with a certain finesse. Butch – not in that trashy, garish way, but like a cover girl on the kind of alternative lesbian magazine I hoped to discover every time I scoured the shelves of the Narvesen newsagents. Her chestnut hair was short over the ears, her fringe swept back (how did she get it to sit like that?); she was wearing turned-up jeans, a white t-shirt, and – and it was this garment that made me think there was no going back, now everyone was going to see me for what I really was – a short, open waistcoat. It suited her, actually. When she caught sight of me she smiled, a kind of warmth radiating from her, a self-confidence that wasn’t coy, but generous – she was still able to look at people that way back then – and she held my gaze as if, at the bottom of the monument’s pool of water, she had already glimpsed how the evening and the coming years would be tipped in our favour.

As an ironic comment on the extensive chatting we’d been doing online over the past few days, we introduced ourselves with a handshake. Silje Marie – you can use both or just Silje, it’s all the same to me. Helene. Then we laughed a little, and I picked up on it immediately: we might end up saying each other’s names many times, in many different ways. I just had to play my cards right.

‘So here you are,’ she said at last.

‘So what do you fancy doing?’ I asked. ‘Shall we walk?’

I knew very well that she had a summer job as a receptionist at a dental surgery and would soon be starting her final year studying dentistry. Over in Lyder Sagens gate was where she worked on her project paper. ‘Well, where do I start,’ she said as we sat down with our beers outside Café Opera, ‘I’m from a… pretty unique farm. My brother was always determined to do something in IT, so my parents pinned all their hopes on me, they wanted me to take over the farm, or failing that to become a vet. But I didn’t want to. I think I would have enjoyed working with animals, but not full time. And running the farm is out of the question. It’s far too much work, far too lonely. It’s… demanding. Pappa is working himself to the bone.’

I didn’t follow up with a question about what made her family’s farm so unique. Instead, I tried to be funny. ‘So you’re becoming a dentist instead. A stress-free life, completely free of responsibility. Isn’t that one of the professions that carries the greatest risk of suicide?’

She smiled, said something about how she’d have to apply for a job feeding the penguins at the National Aquarium if her mind began to unravel, it wasn’t very funny, but I laughed: I loved listening to her talk. I loved that she didn’t look like a dentistry student, loved that in one of her profile pictures she was standing on a longboard, wearing a patterned shirt. Say more, I thought. Tell me. Then she ordered two more beers and a bowl of chili nuts from which she greedily scooped great handfuls, which I was happy to see. All these skinny, hyper-intelligent girls with self-control not of this world – in their presence I could hardly think of anything other than how chubby and inferior I felt.

‘So are you happy,’ she asked, the corners of her mouth red with chili powder, ‘in your job?’ She leaned forward slightly, the waistcoat gaping so I could see she wasn’t wearing anything under the t-shirt: ‘How does it make you *feel*?’

The sensual voice was a joke, but it’s effect on my body was acute, as if she had just stuck a hypodermic needle into my thigh. I began to fiddle with my hair, to look at her from below my lashes, now I’m blushing, I thought, that’s really gone and done it.

‘Fairly happy,’ I replied, feeling that I couldn’t have said anything more stupid. ‘I’ve always liked maths and thought I’d end up working with numbers. I would have liked to stay in Copenhagen, actually, but then I was offered a really good job in Oslo. I’m sure it’ll be fine. The most important thing for me is that I don’t end up back on Sotra. ‘So you’re not planning on becoming a cub scout leader any time soon?’ ‘Did you google me?’ ‘You mean you *didn’t* google me? You looked so cute in the photos in the local paper.’

Night fell. There’s nothing finer than Bergen on a summer’s night. The smell of the Bergen lilacs is enough to make even perfumiers swoon, and every single building and crooked alley provides the perfect backdrop for a proposal. People sing in harmony outside Burger King. The windows of the houses scattered across the dark mountainsides shine like stellar constellations. On the park benches, drunkards sleep deeply as infants drunk on milk, and the fountains of Lille Lungegårdsvann flow as if all the world’s despondency can be washed away by water.

She was three years older than me, a little taller and much fitter. Before she had changed subjects to get onto the course in dentistry she had studied nutrition and backpacked around Asia. She had recently broken up with her partner, who was constantly surrounded by an entire flock of friends, albeit none close enough for her to call when Helene had said she wanted to move out. ‘There’s something disconcerting about people who don’t have good friends,’ she said, ‘don’t you think?’ We spent a long time walking the streets, talking constantly, high on the chemistry between us that made the conversation flow so easily. But as we passed the apartment building up in Fosswinckels gate, I prattled on about the time my grandmother came to visit me in Copenhagen; she had wanted to wash her hair and didn’t realise that the reason the shower was behaving so strangely was because Joachim had put an anal douche head on it the night before – one of my funniest stories. I glanced up at the pale yellow brick building. I used to live up there, on the second floor, with my best friend, I should have said. But I didn’t. What did that mean? Probably no more than that I didn’t want to interrupt the flow of the conversation. The first lie.

She walked with me to the bus stop next to Hotell Norge, where all the buses from the surrounding rural areas stop. My old bus stop, where in my youth I had stood countless times, waiting to be picked up and carried away from the city’s extraordinarily boundless streets and over the Sotra Bridge, which stretched out like a tongue, and straight into the jaws of small town life.

‘I live not far from here,’ she said, ‘if you fancy a nightcap.’ ‘Nobody in Bergen lives far from here,’ I replied, and when she didn’t smile I nudged her, lightly, as if I were a young boy and puberty had me tongue-tied. ‘Can we take a rain check?’

She looked hesitant. Embarrassed, or sceptical? I should have slipped a hand up the back of her waistcoat, kissed her as compensation. Kissed her because I should, so I wouldn’t leave her in any doubt, to avoid the discomfort of disappointing her. Who didn’t do that? I had done it many times. I was tipsy, I wanted to, it should have been easy. But it was late. People were shitfaced. I was no longer in Copenhagen. I saw nobody I knew for the moment, but it was only a matter of time.

I clasped my hands together and shook them in a begging gesture. ‘Please, *please*,’ I said, ‘can we take a rain check?’

On the bus I took out my phone. I was more drunk than I had realised, had to focus in order to get the spelling right: *They say it’s best to wait a while before texting someone you’ve just been on a date with, but clearly I can’t control myself. Thanks for a fantastic evening.*

After sending the message I put my phone on silent and resisted the urge to check it as the night bus sped through the tunnels. As we drove over the Sotra Bridge I cast a glance in the direction of Askøy, where the pearl necklace of the Askøy Bridge hung as if to adorn the very road to god’s kingdom, arcing high above the fjord. The first girl I kissed was from Askøy. Nobody knew about it.

The youths at the back of the bus were shrieking so loudly the driver had to tell them to keep it down. A girl frantically pushed the stop button while yelling that her friend needed to throw up. I tried to close my eyes and rest, but time after time I noticed my eyes were open again. Not until I had stepped off the bus and was making my way past my sister’s house did I dare to take out my phone.

1 unread message.

Only the outside light was on; they had gone to bed. I let myself in, undressed, peed and brushed my teeth, then lay on my bed in my childhood bedroom where I was staying for the summer, my face lit by the phone’s greenish yellow glow, feeling something tugging at both my heart and between my legs as I read: *Speak for yourself. I’m the one who can’t control myself.*

Excerpt, pp. 59–67

After that first meeting at Pride in the Park, the overriding feeling was one of wanting to throw up. Queasy and dazed, I sat on the number 12 tram in the bright, baking heat with Henry on my lap and thought: a half-sibling. Fuck. Holy fuck. How many of them are there? What does this mean? Why have I never truly *understood* this before? A real live little boy. And an unknown mother. To whom I had given my phone number. A real live little boy, an entirely concrete reminder that our family is not like other families, no matter how earnestly we might insist that it is, no matter how well I might manage to hide the thoughts I’ve struggled with ever since Henry was born.

‘We’re unfortunately out of sperm from the donor you used last time,’ the doctor said as we sat there in the clinic at our so-called ‘sibling discussion’. Helene and I glanced at one another, and despite the gust of disappointment – Olav was perfect, so of course we wanted to try the same *magic formula* one more time – we couldn’t help but laugh, because how could we not laugh, it was absurd: we’re terribly sorry but the product is sold out, we might get it back in stock but there’s no guarantee, would you like to wait, or would you like to try with a different product?

Nobody at the clinic mentioned anything about the other half-sibling, nobody asked a single problematising question, and we smiled and nodded and trusted them, why wouldn’t we trust these people who had been doing this for so many years, and we’d never heard a single horror story, none of the other lesbian couples we knew who had children had ever uttered a single word of doubt, and we already had Olav, and we loved Olav, our blonde-mopped ‘Let It Go’-singing son, and now Olav would have a younger sibling, three would become four, and although Helene and I might be going through a bit of a rough patch there was never any doubt that expanding our family was something we wanted to do, and the thought that there was first one and then two outsiders, two real live men with unknown motives who had made this possible, it was abstract, it wasn’t something we really needed to think about – it was even the clinic who would select the donor for us – everything would be done by the book, in accordance with the rules, there was nothing to reflect on, everything we were doing was laid down in Norwegian law. We didn’t feel we were being short-sighted and greedy, we didn’t feel like lesbians who only see children as products and who inflict a handicap upon them, as the philosopher Nina Karin Monsen put it before she was awarded the Fritt Ord Prize in 2009, because how could anyone in their right mind argue against this huge and extraordinary and entirely fundamental human impulse: the desire to create and care for a tiny life.

But when I stepped off the tram and pushed Henry’s pushchair towards the kindergarten gates and Olav came running towards us, dusted brown with sand and with his t-shirt stained with blueberry juice, eyes glittering as he threw himself at his brother, utterly overjoyed to see him, all I could think was: Have we done something seriously wrong? Are we deceiving them?

When she got home, Helene was tired. She’d had to work overtime again, an upper jaw surgery that had turned out to be more complicated than expected. Of course I should have told her the moment she walked into our apartment in Torshov and kicked off her shoes – you won’t believe what happened when Henry and I were at Pride in the Park today – I should simply have said that I’d been blindsided into handing over my number, so that Helene, slightly irritated but firm in the way I love she can be firm, could say that naturally I was going to cancel, just text her and say you’re not interested after all, you don’t owe her anything.

But I didn’t manage to say anything. Clearly I wasn’t capable of saying anything any more, not without planning it first, without weighing up the consequences. Why didn’t I do it? Because the first thing she said was ‘This place is a total mess’? Because it was one of those afternoons on which it was utterly impossible to speak, at least when it came to bringing up something so huge, something that risked sending a crack through the middle of the life we were pretending to live? This fragile life of ours.

Olav threw a raging tantrum because the macaroni and carrots on his plate were touching, then refused to both pee and to have his hair washed, and Henry wouldn’t sleep, despite being breastfed for hours. Exhausted, we fell into bed when the evening sun finally disappeared behind the neighbouring tower block.

Then I had the opportunity. It would have been easy, I could just have said: ‘You know what? The craziest thing happened today!’ She even tried to establish a connection, as Janne told me her couple’s counsellor called it. ‘Is everything okay?’ Helene asked as she lay there. I could sense her scrutinising me. ‘You’re so quiet.’ I hesitated. The face of the strange child had popped into my thoughts at regular intervals all afternoon, and I’d thought I would bring it up once everything had calmed down and the mood was better between us, but now I felt unsure. What good would it do for her to know about it? How stressed would she be? Would she take the news calmly, or get angry at me for not having called her right there and then from Pride in the Park? I had promised never to keep anything important from her ever again – that was the very condition for us staying together. And what if it gave rise to a sense of unease in her, inflicted upon her even the tiniest morsel of doubt as to whether it was right that we had created these children in this way? It wasn’t dramatic, it was no crisis, but still it was an alternative I wished to avoid at all cost. Because to see her begin to doubt, to get the feeling that she was starting to change her mind – it would break my heart, make me feel unsafe and afraid.

Or would she simply shrug and shake her head and say: ‘Don’t give it another thought. We don’t actually know whether they’re related, it could well be just a coincidence that they look so alike. And even if they are related: does it matter?’

But when I met her gaze, I was caught off guard. Her expression was hard, and I knew immediately what that hardness meant. She spat it out, the wretched sentence that made turning away in denial and dejection the only answer I could give: ‘Are you thinking about *her*?’

In the night I got up, went into the bathroom, sat down on the toilet with my phone and navigated to the fertility clinic’s website. The text there stated that each donor can provide children to a maximum of six families. But it didn’t say that almost all the sperm is imported, that it’s distributed all across the EU from Denmark, and that each country sets its own maximum number of families. I tapped my way to the sperm bank’s website and opened the list of available donors, it wasn’t long, it consisted of little more than twenty or so men. And yes, there he was. DANDY. *Eye colour: Brown. Hair: Brown. Occupation: Sciences student. Height: 185 cm*. You could pay for more information – see childhood photos, hear his voice, read a letter about why he had chosen to become a donor. But I didn’t want to. It wasn’t him I was looking for. I tapped on the sperm bank’s contact form. *I’m just wondering how many children each donor can father, globally?*

Then I somehow found myself reading a Swedish newspaper article. *Several of the expectant parents* Dagens Nyheter *spoke to were shocked upon hearing this – they were unaware that sperm from Livio sperm bank can also be sold abroad. “Just imagine if my future child is told ‘you might have half-siblings in five other Swedish families’, but then it turns out they have fifty half-siblings scattered across the world. I think that would come as a huge shock,” said one woman, who wished to remain anonymous.*

I did some more googling, then sat there and read an interview with a young Swedish woman who was critical of her own birth story. *The purpose of the donation industry is to make its customers – that is, people longing for a child – satisfied*, I read. *To make money, and to make a profit. But I think we have a right to know who our close relatives are. That we have a right to know if, after several years, the donor develops an illness, or if someone in the donor’s family develops an illness that might be relevant to us and our children. And if your only option is to use an anonymous donor or to not have children at all? Well, I don’t think the desire to have a child should come before people’s right to know their genetic identity!*

Anonymous donor, I thought, almost relieved. At least that wasn’t us! But then I came across a Norwegian article, about another donor-conceived woman of around my age. She was angrier, less philosophical. *It’s already a huge emotional burden to be donor-conceived with many half-siblings in different families, all with different family dynamics, and then you might suddenly learn you also have many half-siblings abroad*, she said. *This sends the message that these children a just a product, that they don’t have the same rights as other children. Having so many half-siblings makes me feel mass-produced. It feels a bit like being only half a person.*

Product? Mass-produced? What happened to the research we’d had in the back of our minds when we were newly married and looking into things and booking our first consultation at the fertility clinic, about how the children of lesbians are slightly better off than the children of heterosexual couples? What about the recommendation from the doctor at the clinic, who a few years later believed it a good thing that there was no longer any semen available from the donor we’d had Olav with, so the child Helene hoped to have wouldn’t find out their biological origins several years too early should Olav wish to seek out his donor as soon as he turned fifteen? Half a person. Nausea oozed into my mouth. Like morning sickness, or like being small again, like having been caught red-handed by Mamma after eating all the sweets my sister and I were supposed to share. Waiting for the punishment. The terrible period of waiting before the punishment is decided.

When I finally stood up, I didn’t go back in to Helene and Henry, but to Olav. I crept over to his child-sized bed and snuggled down next to him, in the same bed I had sat on the edge of the morning before they left, only now it has more stickers on it than it did when we lived in Torshov and there’s hardly space for me any more, his legs are longer and thinner, and the room in the apartment has been swapped for a room in this house, and now he’s gone, he’s on holiday with his other mother, still entirely unaware, still longing for me to come into his room and snuggle down next to him in the middle of the night.

In the news that is broadcast ahead of pride, everyone seems to agree that people who vote against their housing cooperative putting up a flag, or who won’t permit their children to participate in the kindergarten’s rainbow parade, need to get with the programme. They’re the ones who are passé. Everyone says: research shows that the children of same-sex couples do at least as well as any other child. Very few know precisely what research they’re referring to. The famous blonde lesbian couple in their cute dresses, who say that ‘people forget that all that matters when you have children is that you show them love,’ fail to mention the Danish bank account into which they have transferred thousands of Euros – and why should they? The individuals running the organisations that offer conversion therapy will soon risk prison time. The out-of-work losers who send the famous blonde lesbian couple messages telling them that they’re unnatural, that they’re child abusers, are mentioned as a reminder that the fight must continue for a little while longer. Some lesbians travel to Barcelona for a long weekend, to have an embryo created from donor sperm and their partner’s egg implanted in their uterus. A few years later, the same procedure is repeated, but with the partner’s uterus and the first’s egg. Even in the most sparsely populated of villages, the parades are growing longer and longer. How could anyone help but love them? To join a pride march is to be teleported to a carefree utopia.

In the midst of all this, hardly anyone asks: but are we entirely sure? Could it be that those who go after the primary school’s pride flag, night after night, year after year, have concerns that ought to be heard? Nobody in their right mind says: diversity is great, but a good father might be the greatest gift you can give a child. Only fanatics say: yes, we have a national limit, but why do the sperm banks refuse to provide information about how many more half-siblings the child might have in other countries? Absolutely nobody asks: what about all the unknowing biological grandparents who don’t have a right to even the tiniest glimpse of how their family bloodline has uncoiled, does anyone think about them? Not a single surrogate baby daddy makes himself comfortable on the sofa on Good Morning Norway and says: of course, the price of this little life is that we used our privileged position. The parental quartet consisting of two same-sex couples, one male and one female, never asks the question: and what if we split up, can we actually stand by the choice we have made? No co-mother staggers onto the pride festival stage and says: it doesn’t feel as if the child is mine.