All the Things I Fear Have Already Happened

*Amor Mixtus: The longing of the soul and the desire of the body*

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This time, like all times, is a very good one,

if we but know what to do with it.

— Ralph Waldo Emerson

I have to get up. For have I not now for a long time attempted to sleep and it didn’t work, have I not tried to eat and it didn’t work, have I not tried to work and it didn’t work. I’ve done yoga, cycled, swum, and taken walks and it didn’t work, I’ve met friends, masturbated, and phoned around. I’ve read newspapers and books, listened to the news and watched shows, scrolled on Facebook, and it didn’t work. I considered giving up, considered taking hard drugs or changing my sexual orientation. I thought about all the good that once existed between me and the man who left me, I drank and I thought about refugees, victims of war and rape, children in need, the US under Trump, terrorism, the climate crisis, the COVID-19 pandemic, the world-wide devastation wrought by capitalism. I thought about all of those who are alone, like me, and that didn’t work either.

It’s as if all the things I fear have already happened. That I’ve lost everything. That I am utterlyand completely lonely andfree.

It is an early morning in May and the spring light stings my eyes, despite all the promise spring holds. Because spring is movement in what once stood still, first unnoticeably, then more clearly, a rustle becomes a roar,in the space of a breath everything is transformed, transmuted, the sky and the trees are mirrored in the water so it’s hard to tell what’s up and what’s down, everything a blurry notion. I’m standing at my desk, in front of the window in my apartment building in Valhallveien, watching as the west side of the city is washed in sunlight. I take a breath, then slowly release it, so I can feel my lungs pressing from within, an assurance that the walls, my inner ones, are still there. That they might yet hold.

For the first time since I was twenty, I live in an apartment alone. Throughout all my years of adult life, for fifty years, I’ve lived with women, men, and children — in relationships, in house-shares, with family. What it means to live alone, which I know many people do, is something I can’t yet know.

The sound of drilling into cement intrudes from what must be the apartment above mine. By the door are two boxes of folders and notebooks I haven’t mustered the energy to unpack yet, after bringing with me only the most necessary items from the home I shared with Ulf. I’ve always been afraid of being abandoned, forsaken. I know that now. I’d never realized that, before. Catastrophically afraid and hampered by a dire inability to handle said fear, nor comprehend it. This last abandonment is the latest in a series of abandonments. The pain I feel now, with its hollow intensity, is the outermost ring in the water, farthest from the stone that was thrown in so many years ago, which hit so hard it sank down deep. While I earlier, with a vital repression and the virility and opportunity of youth, was able to blindly plow on, this last time I sank all the way down to the murky bottom.

I now fear that this loneliness will last for the rest of my days. That I’m on the verge of toppling out of familiar life, that I’ll be cast out. My thighs tremblefrom fear of a future as an elderly single woman, they shake with unsatisfied longing, desire, wrenchingmemories, and missing companionship.

Dimly, or rather like a lightning strike, it flashes through me, though I am not fully capable of catching it: that there has to be something more. That it’s better to live with loss than to live somewhere indifference walks around in the guise of love.

I remember one morning at home in our bedroom in the time before I was left. I stood in the morning sun streaming through the window, looking out at the yard and thinking that, after all was said and done, life was good. Our child, all grown up, had the task of living well in hand, I had my friends, I had my work, I didn’t sleep very well but I’d slept worse in the past, I could support myself, which my mother had always premonished, I felt connected, to the world and to people at large. I could bolster myself on the everyday I saw ahead.

Now I am homeless, if not in the strictest sense. I’ve found refuge, an apartment. There is a pandemic, and the isolation thunders inside me. Everything shut down, everyone forced to press together at home with their people, all the places for being with others have closed, most workplaces are closed, the borders are closed, people give birth alone and people die alone while the authorities talk about families, households, and cohorts. Companionship, fellowship, love, community action. As if there are no people living alone, without a partner, whose families live in other cities or abroad. I exist in a silence the color of ashes.

More and more often, I grab my running shoes in the morning to run the poison out of my system, mad dashes up the hill behind my apartment building. With torn meniscuses I run through Ekeberg Wood in the vernal dew. The view of the fjord and Oslo islands doesn’t help any, and the sight of wood anemones and beautiful, bitter chicory only fractionally eases the thorny maze of memories I’m trying to escape. I’m running to the life-like sculpture *Walking Woman*. She seems to approach me in the woods, my perfect opposite:tall,authoritative, available. One morning, a crane flew over her. As I run by and start down the hill, I slap her bottom and ask her to preserve and protect me.

In the evenings, I drink boiling hot tea with honey, laced with generous amounts of the plum brandy Slivovitz, the way my Slovenian grandmother taught me. The drink makes my lips red and sore, hunger gnaws my guts clean, I sleep a spasmodic handful of morning hours in my new IKEA bed, in my monastic cell, a stone Mother Superior. And I wake up every morning with the knowledge that I have become indifferent to the person I loved for so many years. The dull gray feeling in my body tells me that what is hazardous about this condition is that I am on the verge of becoming indifferent to myself, too. I read a interview with the author Joyce Carol Oates, where she says, “When you are not alone, you are shielded.  You are shielded from the stark implacable unspeakable indescribable terror of aloneness. You are shielded from the knowledge of your own insignificance, your trash-soul.”I used to get back up like a motherfucker, eyes bright on new possibilities, but now I live on all fours.

One morning some weeks later, I wake up and see the fog hanging over Oslo, the gray sky has fallen down on the street in front of my apartment building like a wool throw, the dark clings to the day. The charcoal asphalt glistens, it is gloomy despite the furiously advancing spring of late May. Lonesome shadowy figures hurry by, blending into the fog and the grayness, my heart is black as pitch, there are dark circles under my eyes.

Luckily, some of the pandemic restrictions have now been lifted, and I can go to the hair salon, crossing the city from east to west on my bike. Piece by piece, I am in the process of replacing most of my former life. My person. My home. My borough. Some of my friends. My former in-laws. Not my hairdresser. She is still mine. A towel is placed around my neck so I can lean against the neckrest while she washes my hair. We’re both wearing face masks. She lets the warm water run over my scalp, I close my eyes and breathe out. After shampooing and rinsing she gives me a massage, massages my scalp, my temples, and my neck, the way she always does. Strong, warm hands. She holds my head in her hands, a hairdresser I’ve hired is cradling my head, and I cry feeling ashamed that she can see what a vulnerable being I’ve become.

My friends no longer praise my strength as much as they used to, nor do they remind me of everything I have to be proud of, which they did for so long. The egocentric symptoms of being left to fend for oneself seem to eventually repel them. I am a deep well into which my friends threw understanding, patience, and love, and everything sank to the depths without so much as an echo. What do I care about living if I don’t get to love? Instead, my friends now ask me what I’ve got planned for my summer vacation. That’s when I start crying. I don’t want to be this kind of person. But it is the decaying afterbirth of desertion that nourishes me now.

The next morning I get up all the same, and I decide to put on the new blouse I bought after my hair appointment. I have to start acting like everyone else, I’d thought, buy new clothes, it’s got something to do with hope. I can’t stand shopping for new clothes, yet I bought this blouse, somewhat out-of-step with my usual style. I fell for the green, 70s-inspired leaf pattern. It emphasizes my waist, my newly toned hips, and the sagging tits I lift with my best sports-bra. What am I actually doing, I feel uncomfortable, like I’m wearing a theatre costume, keenand anxious like when I was sixteen and going to my first high school party in Mosjøen, I got hammered and was hopelessly in love with Bjørn, who wanted to date pretty, quiet, gracefulAnne-Grete, but liked necking with me. I entered the kissing game early, no matter how dark things seem I’ve always soothed myself with my lust like a safety blanket, even now, though I have no one to share it with. I am now my own ever-raring sex object, my body is like an eager animal, wanting to live no matter the circumstances, independently of what I want. When he left me, I soon realized I had to listen to this body-animal of mine, nothing else remained. My heartbeats resounded in my skeleton with too-long intervals, and I immediately knew that this was the beginning of a fall that had no certain landing. Still, a scrap of survival instinct told me I needed to have strong muscles and sex, not the antidepressants I knew would be thrown at me. I had to keep access to my thoughts and feelings, even when they seductively whisper about giving up, since it was like I had myself become representative of my loss, they whispered that I could no longer perform the necessary actions of self-love. That more than anything I wanted to destroy this hated object, the thing no one wanted, the thing I had now become. But my body, that little animal, wants to stay alive, obstinate and independently of my will. I have therefore lately, despite my sad mien, developed a firm backside, sculpted biceps, and a strong core, including around my vulva and vagina, the muscles that provide a pulsing bloodflow to my clitoris, so it swells and the tip protrudes from my labia. The clitoris becomes erect and pulses spastically during my orgasm, inside it extends upwards, backwards, on both sides of my vagina. It has no other considerations to make, not like the penis, which is burdened by urination and reproduction, the clitoris’ only function is to give me pleasure and sustain me, regardless of what I should think on the matter.

I stand in the kitchen wearing my newly-purchased blouse and stir my oatmeal, and right below my window I can see the verdrigrisslope rising to the road the buses take. The dense vegetation is annoyingly beautiful. What a waste of beauty laid before a dead soul. This is my first spring alone, hellish months of keeping myself alive purely out of politeness. I can just about make out the red buses driving by. A sign of life. I have never seen any people on this steep hillside, no one has ever peeked into my cramped, narrow kitchen. The dawn light, filtered through the trees, flickers on the cabinets. I can see a red-furred, or orange rather, cat racing downhill, slaloming among the tree trunks. A wild and almost free life, despite the fact that it’s probably been castrated or fed contraceptives. I’ve been romantically castrated. De-desired. I lean against the washing machine, pressing with whatever tenderness is left to me, feel it trembling with centrifugal power; I am shaken and I come to the realization that I have to reinvent myself. I can’t keep being polite and considerate. Who the fuck cares. I laugh when I think about the person I’ve been these last few years. The stagnation. The washing machine’s tempo starts to increase, I increase my tender pressure.

The following day, I stand in my living room. In the copper-shaded lamp above the chest of drawers I see my face contorting. On the table lies some silver foil from a chocolate bar I ate yesterday. There’s a rushing sound in the bathroom pipes from someone flushing on one of the floors above. I listen for the quotidian small-talk I once took part in, about weather, about the wind, about nothing. I’ve missed an appointment with a master’s student I’m supervising in theatre arts. Now I’ll have to make my excuses and reschedule the meeting. My control is porous. I have to make an attempt at keeping up my regular daily life and work. Supervising students and lecturing a few times a month at the Theatre Academy is my bread-and-butter, the job that has allowed me to write plays the last few years. One play I started writing has been gathering dust for too long. That which usually got me up and going, helped me forget all of life’s orneriness, has lost its allure. Forgotten a meeting with a student! I’m not in the habit of forgetting stuff. My rememberance is a curse. The heartbreak is like a never-ending hangover, a heavy burden you can never put your mind off. It’s not the weight I struggle with. It’s my missing roots. It’s the emptiness.

The white light that makes it through the dirty living room windows promises summer. I’ll stand on Orre Beach in Jæren, like I do every summer, on the white sand, the dunes bathed in sunlight, looking out at the ocean which becomes blinding towards the horizon. Nothing shut down. It’ll be deserted. If I turn around, the North Sea will stretch out behind me, and my mother’s ash particles, her carbonized essence, will have mixed with the grains of sand and algae on the seabed. I will, like always, climb up onto one of the tallest dunes and look out over the countryside, watch the shadows of the clouds pull over the blue contours of distant mountains, above me the sky will be an expanse of white, it’s like I can see the whole country, including everything that moves within it. But it would be no more than a mirage, reality this summer will be different.

The thought of coming back to the Jæren landscape every summer keeps me steady when nothing else remains certain. I listen to all the travel plans and reports my friends tell me, I can share in some of their wanderlust, but it’s back I want to travel. Back to all the places I’ve already been. It’s possibly due to all the moving we did throughout my childhood, this desire to revisit everything I once lost. I don’t need to be somewhere more than once before I want to return there, live in the same house, sleep in the same bed, roam the same streets, swim in the same bay, eat at the same inn. The people, too. I want to go back to them.

During my childhood, it was the opposite. Moving was difficult for my family. For my mother, because it was never precipitated by her need or desire; for my father, because he time and again had to find a new job due to some conflict with his superiors; for us siblings, because we had to change homes, kindergartens, schools, friends. All were despondent. But I was exempted from the heaviness and sorrow of departing. My task was different. I had to be the lively, cheerful, optimistic one in our weighed-down family. Imagine — a new apartment, new school, new friends! It was worst for my two-year-older sister, Sirin. She didn’t make new friends as easily, spent a lot of time alone, and she was the black sheep of the family to boot, despite being the eldest. Our father used her as a scapegoat. She looked the most like him.

It has been three years since Sirin died, and I’ve lately started talking to her. It’s like she has come back to me, finally, after all the time that’s passed since I stood next to her bed in palliative care, staring, staring at my dead sister, made unrecognizable by the disfiguring work of disease, and no matter how much I stared, I was faced with the fundamental fact of death — the absence.

She fell ill during Easter, an aggressive cancer that spread to her liver, and three months later she was dead. One year later, I discovered that Ulf had started his double life with another woman that same spring. For me, the two events will always be tied together, Sirin’s illness and death and the fact that I, unknowingly, had lost the person closest to me. As if one event necessitated the other. I lost my sister, so beloved, I lost my husband, so beloved, and a short time later, my son, so beloved, moved to the other side of the planet. Who would I become in the wake of all of this loss?

I have to remember to buy groceries, I throw my backpack over my shoulder and run down the stairs. The closest grocery store is Kiwi, at the bottom of a steep hill right by Oslo Hospital. The hospital has the atmosphere of a time bygone, like the wall-enclosed garden of a monastery. I fantasize about sitting under one of the garden’s oak trees with a novel and a mild, milky tranquility.

I enter the Kiwi, I have to buy ingredients for dinner and I trawl listlessly down the aisles feeling ashamed over how lucky I am to be able to pick and choose. Meat or fish? Vegetarian? A pastry? I used to be so efficient, a list-shopper. But it can happen that we lose track of lists, appointments, our own life. When we’re struck down by illness, or when we leave or are left. It can happen when, for some reason or other, we pull the elastic band too far, overstepping a limit. That’s where madness and all-consuming intoxication lies, I think while standing apathetically in front of the frozen fish. It’s knowing that we can lose what we love, and never get it back. Maybe that’s when we feel the most alive, when we stand teetering on the edge, yet to fall. It’s probably been evolutionarily ingrained, this precipice between responsibility, care, safety on one side, and desire, the breach of limits, and destruction on the other. If this hadn’t been the case, then nothing would ever change. We’d barely be able to muster the energy to have sex for purposes other than reproduction, we wouldn’t understand the point of adventure, risk, competition, art. We would stay with the same people, in the same flock, we’d become unknowing victims of incest, dumbed down to wood blocks by repetition and boredom, we would’ve never discovered new peoples, roads, languages, thoughts, technology. But we probably wouldn’t start wars either, we’d just have the occasional urge to whack someone on the head. I put a pack of cod fillets in my shopping basket.

On the way up the steep hill to my apartment building, I think that I have to accept that I am alone. Things happened, and I was powerless to stop them. Or is this simply a belief I hold to protect myself?

“And now?” I hear Sirin ask, “what are you doing now?”

“Now I’m unpicking the past,” I answer. “The way the elderly do, to make sense of my misdeeds. To emerge from the mire and the fog. I can’t stand secrets and lies, including my own, I despise surprises. The last few years have been full of them.”

At the top of the hill, I draw a sigh of relief from the effort, and with a start I feel something within me cry out, as if my body and soul have been newly saved, that I’ve never felt more alive. Then I lower my head again.

“Head-hanging doesn’t suit you,” I hear Sirin say, then I clearly smell her take a drag of a cigarette. Prince Mild. I like the smell of the tobacco.

I stare at the plant on the windowsill by my desk. Bathing in the sun. I luckily remember to water it every now and then. If I keep it up, and my son, Filip, takes pity on it after my death, something I think I can justifiably hope for given his green thumbs, then perhaps the plant may spark some memory of me. The plant was once a cutting Trude, who I studied theatre with, gave me. She told me that she had herself inherited it from her father. At hers, the plant wraps around a big aquarium and creates a jungle-like atmosphere. My plant isn’t nearly as splendid as its mother, but it’s been with me since 1988. My gaze slides over to the brightly illuminated screen in front of me. A Facebook friend has posted a photo of himself and an older woman. Clinking glasses. He writes: “My fantastic mother has turned 80.” Christ how fabulous she looks, especially for her age, I think, before it occurs to me that in eleven years I will also be turning eighty. I have so little time left to get happy. What if I die before I turn eighty? Even less time. I’m terribly busy, and yet at the same time, every day flows by in a slow muddy churn, the days drag on, and I’m waiting for this one to pass too, I hang around and wait for something to happen, everything’s provisional, everything ends, there’s no point in beginning anything new. Before, I had too much time, but now there’s nothing else, nothing but empty time, I, whose most pressing task was once to live a good life, especially for the sake of others. Now, I have so little time left that every day should hold a whole life. I don’t know what I want to spend my days on. But I want to want.

I eat a cheese sandwich standing by the kitchen counter. I have to remember to buy a good bread knife. Memory can’t be relied on, but nor can I let it reduce me into a husk of sadness. My memories come from a crepuscular world, they are malleable and ripe for interpretation, and I think it means that one day, if I ever become happy again, my stories and the world, my world, can change. One day. My ex-husband has so many things to fill his time with, other than scouring his memory for his own transgressions. He is able to live. He dares, he can, he’s a man. I want to be like him. Imitate his joie de vivre, his virility, copy his instinct for self-preservation and ability to forget.

I’m beginning to get the sense that I’m no longer able to push away hopeful thoughts. What I once had, I want back. I want more. Viewed soberly, there are however two hurdles to getting it. The first is structural. I don’t know of any single men. Nor do my friends, even though they’ve thoroughly wracked their brains for one. A passably nice man, nigh irregardless of age, fitness, fortune, and disposition, would be like a gift from the heavens. The competition for these rare specimens on the heterosexual market is razor-sharp. It’s a problem all women my age face, no matter how gifted, funny, beautiful and/or sexy we may be; we simply don’t have the same opportunities for love and sex as do men of the same age. I can’t change this statistic, but I can put in many times over the same effort and hence increase my chance of success. It’s no different from what women the last few decades have had to undertake on a large number of things they were previously excluded from doing, in order to achieve the same position and status as men: three times the competence, the workload, the endeavor.

The second hurdle is more personal and intimate, I think, as I stand by the counter and chew my sandwich. The thought of looking into the eyes of a stranger drains the little spirit I have left, my heart shrivels into a tiny thin-skinnednut at the thought of kissing an unbidden mouth, feel unfamiliar stubble, my mouth goes dry at the thought of showing off my pitiable body, showing the decline that can’t be allayed by intimacy the way it can in a long-term relationship. The thought of touching the skin of some person I don’t know is revolting; feeling their muscles, flab, hair. I cannot, to the best of my ability, under any circumstance, allow myself to think about his genitals, a flaccid or erect penis, or I’ll just start crying again. And I have to suppress my memory of when Ulf, in the final few years, would actually meet my gaze. When I didn’t just see the graying old man, but also saw all the other ages I’d come to know since we were 22. I saw the young, handsome man with the ash-blonde hair, the high forehead and the narrow hips that had awakened my desire, I saw the mature man I’d found even more attractive for how the years had made him more defined, more courageous, the lust richer, and I saw the older man that I wanted to lie close to, enjoyed spending time with. It would vaguely pass through my mind already then, the thought that I couldn’t possibly do all of this with someone new, with a stranger. I would have to pull ashore in the latest edition of whomever they should be. How could there ever be enough room for another’s body, and what about the soul, is there no grace given my abandoned being?

Since I don’t know any single men, since it’s the middle of a pandemic wherein silence, loneliness, and meaninglessness lie over me like a thick fog, wherein I can only meet a few people at a time and the closure of bars has killed all nightlife, I decide to try online dating. I have to stop thinking that we for the first time in history can only look forward to catastrophe, that anything wish-worthy lies exclusively in the past: the era of relative happiness. And we are sorry that we didn’t realize as much back then, when the past was the present. But now I’m ready to grab hold of and get onboard with the present and the future. Up until now, I’ve scornedlate capitalism’s exploitation of intimacy, which is nourished by humanity’s existential and systemic loneliness, and which takes advantage of our need and compulsion for love, connection, and sex. So that I won’t go to the dogs, I think that I’ll have to do what many others in my situation seem to do. Couldn’t that fill the empty crater inside me, having for ages now felt the gnawing of a hunger for touch? I am one of the hungering hearts. I go to the newest market for flesh, desire, and love, the only remaining arena for meeting strangers in the time of the pandemic. I will put myself to the task of evaluating, judging, and sorting out one person from the next in quick succession, while I myself am judged the same way. We are living products with blood-filled, beating hearts, sex, and dashed hopes: fresh warm products for sale. Our hectic pulses pumping self-abasementthrough the algorithm’s digital vascular system. Some succeed. Maybe I will be one of them.

I sit at my computer and check out different dating platforms while invocatively murmuring that yes, I’m ready to take charge and try to overcome my deep aversion to meeting people in this manner. My friends have told me that the selection is pitiful and that I’ll have to expect a lot of rejection, so the question is whether it will ever result in actually meeting up with anyone. But there must be exceptions. There are always exceptions. Some older women have found love this way. I’ve read about it in magazines.

I set up a profile on three different dating apps, entering details like age, height, weight, eye color, hair color, haircut, figure, education, and interests. I upload a few photos and write that I am seeking candidates of my age. Based on this information, I am presented with a selection that says something about my “market worth”, which can be deduced given that this worth is reflected in the suggested candidates.

The results are dismaying. Fish in their arms, dead stags and moose at their feet, leaning against a camper van or sitting on a tropical beach with a drink in hand. But what right do I have to react this way, knowing that these are people as needy as myself. Considering their age, all the men I’ve been presented with must have faced the big questions of life — about power, powerlessness, betrayal, and guilt; about forgiveness and mercy; and the search for meaning, for all-consuming desire, and for unconditional love — which they’ve either lost or never found. Or so I assume, anyway. It’s heart-wrenching, how weathered they look; they look so much older than their professed age, they look unhealthy, they look like they’ve been ruined, like they’re ill, some look aggressive, others depressed, and some look entirely hopeless. Those who see my photo flicker past probably think I look tired and harried. Or something else. All the men present themselves in roughly the same manner. They write that they are youthful despite the fact that they are over eighty. Positive, social, kind, responsible, in good health and good shape, they exercise a lot, they also have healthy finances, many own a cabin, car, motorbike, or boat they’ve uploaded photos of. Then they write that they enjoy going skiing, playing golf, sailing, and they love the outdoors, both up in the mountains and down by the sea. Most of them sport sunglasses. They appreciate evenings spent at home in front of the TV with a glass of wine and someone snuggled under their arm, but will just as happily go out to a restaurant or the movies one evening. They’d love to fly south to warmer climes, and visit bustling big cities. Some require order and cleanliness. Some don’t like people with big heads and sharp elbows. The occasional person doesn’t like racists.

My criteria for getting in touch are simple, yet it still results in very few viable options. I decide that the candidate shouldn’t be considerably older or younger than myself. I’m looking for men whose photos show an open face, I’m looking for a sparkle in their eyes. Which means they can’t be wearing sunglasses. Then I read their bio, and if sets itself apart from the other profiles by even a smidge, I consider reaching out.

I do it even though there is nothing inside me that wants to. But anything can happen in nothing.

This was how I met Frank. He seemed nice. In a close-up, he sported a three-day beard and crow’s feet which had scored lines down his cheeks. He looked like he still had some vitality. We started writing to one another and telling each other about our interests, jobs, lives. Things seemed promising, he was only three years older than me, in contrast to most of the other candidates, who were between 75 and 85 years old. He wrote that he worked as an architect and wanted to continue doing so. Good. It’s hard to imagine bonding with someone who doesn’t do anything, have anyone. Frank wrote that he likes reading and movies, was thirty years married, now five years divorced. We wrote back and forth for several weeks: first in the dating app, then we transitioned to e-mail with a few texts here and there, and then came the first phone calls.

Dread accompanied our first scheduled call, I was so wary of the hope that had previously betrayed me. I made myself comfortable on the couch with a handsfree set. Failed at batting away a fruitfly. Couldn’t dial his number, and I wanted to scream out against my imperatives, compelling me as they were to call an unfamiliar man, I was in such dire straits. If only I had known about this earlier in life, that this is what my future held. If only I had known how blessed I once was. I was so full of life; I was attracted to others and attracted others in turn. I had one of those bodies in which everything worked as it was meant to, never too much, never too little, nothing needed to be removed or augmented. The kind of body that moved through the world without any doubt, wavering, or uncertainty. A body without shadow, without hesitation or double-sidedness, without any uncertainty about which motives came from within and which came from without. I know that this can’t be the full truth, because my body has had its share of tremors, of lopsidedness*,* of too much and too little, of pallor, of hideousness. That my body, in movement, back when it was young and strong, didn’t just stride ahead, but there were other directions pulling at me, too, objectioning nervous tracts, something was too heavy, too stiff, too provocatively puerile — too weak, furious, loud. Sometimes my hand squeezed to smithereens what my mouth had wanted to shout out, sometimes my tongue’s rambling tripped up my feet after they’d gotten ready and set, sometimes my sobs writhed through my body in warm spasms, pulsing more powerfully than my imprisoned heart. That must’ve been the case. And still, I’d never, ever had to pick up a phone to call a stranger to show myself off, try to sell myself off.

I dialed the number. Frank had a high-pitched voice and spoke with a sing-songy northern dialect. We said hello and agreed that calling like this was weird. We talked about the pandemic, how we wanted to meet up, how far apart we lived, in Trondheim and Oslo. He told me he liked jazz and classical music, mostly read crime fiction, liked skiing and going on hikes. I said that I also like walking, I read a lot. My breathing was erratic, listening to his voice for the soul that had to live there sapped all of my energy. We said goodbye, said we’d call again, that we’d write, that we’d meet up. After we finally ended the call, I cried. Whatever did I need a stranger with a high-pitched voice for.

Tears dripped down on my hands, which held my phone, while I thought that all men are strangers at first, high-pitched voice or no. That the fear of the unknown is life-restricting, and I remembered that my friends who were more practiced in the dating game had told me there was no point in dragging out the writing stage; spend lots of time, trigger an emotional connection, develop hopeful expectations. It was important to meet as soon as possible, find out whether there’s any compatibility and interest, though not necessarily attraction, that could be too much to expect of a first date. I wiped my tears and thought that I’d better give their advice a go, being so clueless myself.

Me and my friend Unn had planned a long weekend up in Oppdal where her parents have a cabin. I’ve known Unn for years, we both write for the stage and we’ve collaborated on quite a few projects. As it happens, Oppdal isn’t all that far from Trondheim. What if Frank rented one of the many rental cabins in the area, he had, after all, written that he loved hiking, and then maybe we could go for a hike together or meet up, socially distanced, at the cabin?

I felt eager, stared repeatedly at the pictures Frank had posted in the app that brought us together, I knew his bio by heart, re-read the texts we’d exchanged, was gripped by a pubescent nervousness, I started having palpitations, because in my fantasy I was naked with this northern stranger — but then I jammed up. I was thinking too far ahead, I had to screw my head on straight.

I sent him a text, putting forth the idea of meeting in Oppdal. His reply was immediate. He seemed just as eager and wrote that he’d rent a cabin. I suggested that he come for coffee the day after Unn and I arrived, maybe go for a hike together the next day. An hour later Frank texted, letting me know that he had managed to rent a small cabin in Oppdal, he wrote that it was quite near to where the cabin Unn and I were staying in was located. Then we agreed that he would call me the morning of the day before we were to meet, to hammer out the details.

I slept poorly the night after Unn and I arrived in Oppdal, despite the fact that I enjoyed going to bed with a hot water bottle under my duvet and the knowledge that Unn lay in the room next-door. It was a clear, chilly night in early June. The moon was up and cast a blue light over the mountains behind the cabin, some of the peaks still had patches of snow on them. I had opened the window a crack, so I breathed in the quiet and the cold air outside.

I woke up as early as five. The room was cold, and I got out of bed half an hour later, no longer able to stand simmering in my nervous thoughts. I snuck around the cabin with stockinged footsteps in order to not wake Unn, started a fire in the wood-burning stove, flipped through the guest book full of reports on hikes and happy getaways. What do people do with their guest books when they get divorced? What do they do with all the love that had been? They find new love. Or they don’t. Simple as that. It’s completely normal.

Finally, around 9 am, while I stood and stared at a painting on the wall, I heard Unn rummaging about. The painting depicted a woman. She was sitting at a table. The tabletop was red. She was wearing a dark-red shirt. The background was a shimmering green, sated with the light of midday. She sat, though there was nothing to sit on. Her face looked like it had been smeared outwards. Her upper body was curved forward slightly, as if there was nothing to wait for, and I thought that that’s the reason she waits.

Unn and I had a long breakfast. I waited for Frank to call. It became lunch-time. Unn wanted to go out for a hike. I was anxious that my aging phone would run out of battery and I would miss Frank’s call, so I told Unn she could go ahead of me on the trail we’d agreed on, turn back when she felt she’d walked far enough, and then I’d come meet her after Frank had called. She reluctantly agreed.

The hours passed unbearably slowly. The idea of calling and bothering him seemed too silly. It turned into afternoon. I sent Unn a text saying that there’d be no hike in the cards for me today. I paced the living room floor in the cabin, with a panoramic view over the valley and its mountainous backdrop. I even want a man I don’t want, when he keeps me waiting.

Finally, I called Frank. He didn’t answer the phone. That happens. I called again. I called after Unn had returned from her hike. I sent him a text. I sent him an email. I messaged him on Messenger. He didn’t answer. People do have accidents, of course, or something sometimes happens that prevents them from answering their phone or sending a text.

“He’s ghosted you,” said Unn, standing over a pot of moose stew, which she had a great recipe for. “It’s perfectly normal.”

All of my pitifulexpectations fell to pieces, they shriveled up like melting cellophane, as I admitted what I’d already known: no one wanted me. Not even this Frank. But what a coward. He could have called. Told me he’d changed his mind. He was a fully grown man, soon to be elderly. I asked Unn if I could borrow her phone, so that Frank wouldn’t recognize the number. I called him. He answered. I said it was me and asked him why he hadn’t called as agreed upon. Strangely, he didn’t hang up, he just became flustered, with that high-pitched voice of his, and he said right and that he really did like hiking, he repeated the fact that he liked hiking multiple times, but that something unexpected had come up at work that he’d had to sort out that day.

“No,” I said, “you didn’t answer the phone because you were too chicken to say that you didn’t want to meet me after all, which is good to know, what do I want such a coward for,” I said, and hung up.

I had now experienced ghosting. I’d judged and been judged. Select. Reject. No scruples. Unn said that I shouldn’t take it to heart.

I’m sitting on the train from Oppdal to Oslo, German cultural news playing in my earphones. I attended German and Swiss elementary schools for some years, so listening to German throws me back to the earI had when my language was not yet worn. In contrast to the many who say they find the German language harsh, I think the newscaster has a lyrical lilt.

Listening to the broadcast, I learn that a book has just been published — *Wir haben es nicht gut gemacht*  — containing the letters exchanged between the Austrian author Ingeborg Bachmann and the Swiss Max Frisch. Theirs is the most famous love affair in Germanic literary history. Their relationship lasted from 1985 to 1963. The title of the book, which can be translated to *We didn’t do well,* is a quote from Frisch after he ended things and entered a relationship with a much younger woman. Bachmann’s answer was that her heart had been broken. Shortly after the break-up, she was repeatedly admitted to psychiatric institutions, before she died in a hotel room in Rome in 1973. Her bedding had caught on fire from her cigarette.

On the other side of the aisle sits a couple in their thirties. It seems like the space between them, where their bodies aren’t touching, is compact. As if this little distance is filled with a thick ambivalence. I look at her profile, the blonde ponytail, her hair tight and shiny as if it were wet. He is staring down at his phone. Stop it, I want to say and think about all the times Ulf and I sat like that, instead of talking to each other. We didn’t write to each other either, apart from the little post-its I would sometimes leave him, with little messages or a heart. Bachmann and Frisch wrote a steady stream of letters to each other in the 1950s and 60s. I could never imagine, after Ulf ended things, writing him a long letter and telling him that he’d broken my heart. Instead, in the wake of our silence, we wrote emails and Messenger-texts about who had paid for which pieces of furniture in what used to be our home.

Back home in my apartment I reflect that Unn was right, I have to be more thick-skinned, I’m way too sensitive. Treat dating like a game, they say. And then, when you play it excellently, just for the sake of playing, then bam, you’ll suddenly meet someone you actually like. Sure, I think, but by then it might be too late.

The early days of summer, with the gentle transitions from night to day I move about in, are harsh. A long ago summer, Sirin and I raced down paved hills on new rollerblades that we’d fastened to our shoes with a key, we leapt on and off sidewalks, swung ourselves around streetlights, and triumphantly compared fresh scrapes and old scabs on our knees come eveningfall. I’m down on all fours and feel out my knees, once so strong, now free of grazes.

I’ve scheduled a date with Erlend on EliteSingles.

We’ve been writing each other for a while, but it’s proved difficult to meet up. Erlend lives in Bø and has a little apartment in St. Hanshaugen, so we tried to get together, but then his 101-year-old mother fell ill and passed away, and then he had to organize the funeral, and then he had to isolate the roof of a small farm in Valdres that his daughter was going to take over, and then he went on a trip to the Greek mountains with some friends.

We have planned a walk along Aker River from Vaterland Bridge. I stop in the shadows by the tables outside Stargate pub, gripping my bike’s handlebars, standing completely still as I look at all the old men drinking with intrepid thoroughness and exchanging fond-sounding phrases. I’m wearing a hooded green jacket. In my right pocket I have a receipt from Kaffebrenneriet: a double cortado and a müesli bun with brunost. In my left pocket, nothing. Erlend is waiting as I walk up with my bike, I recognize him from the photographs, I lock my bike and walk over to him. He is tall, with grayish blonde hair, a weathered face, thin lips, friendly blue eyes. He asks how I’m feeling about Covid and if he can give me a hug. I say that hugging feels unnatural for me just now, and he doesn’t seem to take offense. We start walking along the river together. Exchange trivialities about our lives, we’ve already told each other what we do for a living while we were writing, and to my surprise he starts talking about how he read *Kristin Lavransdatter* for the first time not too long ago, and how it felt like the text, or maybe the protagonist Kristin, was speaking to him personally across the centuries. I say something about how this recognition might be due to the fact that the 20s, when Undset wrote the book, weren’t actually all that long ago, and I feel enlivened, talking about reading. We have a glass of white wine at the bar Blå. Sit outside under the heat-lamps and look out in the same direction at a narrow road bathed in light from a lamp, orange like a low sun. We sit wrapped in a blanket, and this place puts me in mind of sitting outside an Austrian pub, in the valley where my grandparents lived, all the greenery around us, the cheerful chatter of the grown-ups, the laughter and goodwill we children were met with by all the tipsy relatives who were usually so strict.

Erlend tells me he is dangerously partial to chocolate. “Especially the kind with nuts,” he says. “When I was little, living on the small farmin Valdres, chocolate was a rare commodity. The combination of cocoa, suger, and butter can still white out my surroundings and completely overwhelm all my senses.”

I tell him about the bubblegum dispensers in München that Sirin and I always wanted to raid. Big colorful balls of perfume-sweet chewing gum. We rarely had the coin needed to place them in our mouths, crush them between our teeth so the sugary spit ran.

It’s possible that Erlend talks too much or I talk too little, I decide to turn down a second glass and suggest we let thingssink inand get in touch if we want to meet again. Then we give each other a hug, I want to now, and I have to stretch to reach up to him. I like that fact, it reminds me of a boyfriend I had in the beginning of my twenties I still enjoy thinking about.

A few days later, we agree to meet again, in front of the National Theatre this time; we plan to first take a walk around the neighborhood, then go to a restaurant by the parliament, he’s booked a table.

I’m standing by the fountain in front of the entrance of the National Theatre station where it is, as is usual for 7 pm, crowded. Some rush off in one direction or the other, while others stand around like me, looking like they’re waiting for someone. Like managers of own own lonesomeness. But here I stand waiting for a person of flesh and blood. I am in circulation, not stowed away in a warehouse. But why can’t I see Erlend’s tall likeness in the throng of passersby? I check the time, it’s fifteen minutes after we agreed to meet, am I being ghosted for the second time? I send a text saying that I’m waiting in front of the National Theatre and is he delayed? My phone dings, he’s doing the same, and then it occurs to me that he might be standing in front of the actual theatre and not the metro station. I hurry in the direction of the theatre, and there stands Erlend in a dark, becoming coat, tapping away at his phone.

We’re both relieved at clearing things up yet somewhat flustered, so we skip our planned stroll and go directly to the restaurant. There, we’re met by the maître d’ who hectically explains and excuses that they’ve had a power cut and so the kitchen is closed. Erlend parries that in that case we deserve a drink for our inconvenience, so we have a chance to get our bearings and book a table somewhere else. I like his resourcefulness, and we’re each given a glass of cava, my head feels light and we end up at an Indian restaurant in University Street.

We share a bottle of red wine. Two women in their 40s sit at the table next to ours, both with dark, long and wavy hair, I think that they look like each other. Both are eating stiffly, not talking. I look at Erlend’s hands. Do I like them? Maybe. They are neither slack nor callous. Despite the wine, the strain of trying to make conversation with Erlend wears on me. I sit across from this man and try to reach him. Fear simmers just under my diaphragm at the thought of how the night might progress. I can’t help but imagine him naked. I decide that he’s too big and heavy. It all feels unbearably awkward,I certainly can’t go home with Erlend if this is what he’s thinking about, too, but I don’t think it is what he’s thinking about, and that’s disappointing.

We stand outside in the night, and we are like an older married couple, young people swarming around us now that the pubs and bars are open again, fit and brimming with lust for life, a neverending line of them outside a nightclub. Erlend and I give each other a hug. I am relieved and sad and I don’t know what I want or think or feel or am doing and wasting my time with. We walk our separate ways, he to the west, me to the east.

I didn’t bring my bike, take neither the tram nor the bus, but trudge doggedly down Karl Johan Street***,*** leaning forward, my eyes lowered as if walking against the wind though there is none, walk east through Oslo’s new development in Bjørvika, down Queen Euphemia’s Street. I like that name, Euphemia. How long ago she lived her life. What she may have hoped for I have no clue. The only thing I know is that at the end of the 1200s, she married DukeHåkon Magnusson and insisted on lugging with her a massive library from Germany, one of the biggest in Europe. So she read and was presumably learned and most certainly didn’t scurry alone through the streets of Oslo at night in an overextended heartbreak, 69 years old, half-drunk, frustrated and horny, hunting for a man she can lie down with, someone up for firing up her rusty loins and filling her soul with an elixir of love. But I do, I’m walking down Queen Euphemia’s Street, which has become myartery between the city center and my new home. This broad boulevard is one of the most accident-liable streets in Oslo, with a chaos of cars, cyclists, scooters, pedestrians, buses, heavy cargo transport, and trams. I usually bike here daily without a helmet, at great speed, I need to feel the wind in my hair in summer as in winter, and every time I fly down Queen Euphemia’s Street, I thank my lucky stars that I get to avoid Frogner Street, previously a commute route for me for many years, and which is always filled with sweet, heavy, expensive perfume, and women both young and old in bad but pricey shoes, all bearing the same purses and poor puny mongrelsthey’ll abandon in the same wretched manner. How I despised Frogner Street, I think while I hunched hurry down Queen Euphemia’s Street after my date with Erlend. Here there is a headwind, there’s always headwind here, my eyes are streaming from the night’s cold wind, or the yearningand disappointment that everything remains the same.

Too much time shouldn’t pass before Erlend and I meet up again, my dating friends all advise, despite my complaining that I’ve lost all power of judgment and am no longer able to discern whether or not I like Erlend, whether I find him repulsive or attractive, when I used to have such an immediate sense of such things. I am an unowned commodity who is in no position to choose her buyer, I don’t know what my qualities are, it all depends on the eye of the customer. My friends tell me to calm down and stop exaggerating so much. But two influential psychologists and relationship experts have spoken on exactly this scenario. They advise women over 40 that when they, according to the psychologists, no longer have as high a “market value”, to lower their expectations and be satisfied with whatever they can get. I write to Erlend, thank him for our evening together and say that I’d love to meet again and I hope he wants the same thing.

Erlend doesn’t answer my text. But a week later I receive an email from him. He writes that he’s had some water damage in his apartment in Oslo and so he’s now staying in Bø, that he does want to meet up again and he hopes that we can be friends, that friendship wasn’t what he’d been looking for when we first met, but that to give the impression of wanting anything more at this point would be dishonest. Friends! What do I need with a new friend, I have enough friends. He doesn’t find me attractive, he’s not turned on by me, he doesn’t want me.

I am bone-tired from all of these thoughts about the future. Apathetic after the rejection. Small. Submissive. It’s tempting to give up, to not assume any responsibility, not least for my own unhappiness. What does love bring me? Nothing. Forget it. It’s got to be my fault that Erlend doesn’t find me attractive. I don’t know if I was even all that interested in him, that was what I had wanted to find out, but I never got the chance to. Now it doesn’t matter. I’ve been rejected. Was I the one who pushed Erlend away from me, who wasn’t open enough, who wasn’t interested enough, didn’t listen enough, didn’t indicate an open heart and bosom, who held back, held a distance, had a too evaluative gaze, talked about things that didn’t interest him, laughed too loud or too little, drank too much or too little, waited too long or not long enough before texting, weren’t my clothes suggestive enough, did I show too little skin, wore no sweet perfume, no nail polish and no earrings, no skirt or dress, no high or even half-high heels? I mistrust myself deeply, I don’t trust my own motives, I’m convinced that my subconscious is working against me, I just can’t get with the program, it must be my fault that Erlend, too, doesn’t want me. I finally conclude that I don’t want him or any other man. And still a ghastly hope burns inside me, plays havoc with me, gives me no rest. I need a success story. I know what prolonged dopamine and serotonin deprivation can lead to. A weakened immune system, misery makes ill. Just look at me!