

EDY POPPY IGGY

ROMAN



GYLDENDAL

IGGY

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EDY POPPY

Earlier publications

Anatomy.Monotony. Novel, 2005

Coming. Apart. Short Stories, 2011

Edy Poppy

IGGY

Novel

“To write about yourself, that is to rewrite yourself.”

Atle Kittang

First part

1995

- I WILL ALWAYS be proud of having been married to you, my boyfriend Cyril says with a strong French accent and surprisingly correct grammar (he must have swotted the proposal). He goes down on his knees in Vigelandsparken, not among the roses, obviously, where everyone proposes, but in front of the sculpture of a naked man trying to get rid of four clinging babies. It starts to pour down, and I become convinced.

A couple of months later, just after the final exam of high school, we get married in the old church in Bø. We stand out on the church steps and wait. Cyril fiddles with his teased hair, while I fasten the top button on my Dracula cape and feel how my Converse shoes rub against my heel. As my childhood friend Iris starts to play the organ, I give Cyril a quick kiss, my black lipstick rubbing off on his lips. It makes me smile. Iris' organ playing intensifies, and I open the heavy church door.

Then we walk in, hand in hand, to a jampacked hall, I almost said. In front of my Norwegian relatives and his French relatives, who shared the bill for the wedding, and all our friends, we promise each other eternal infidelity, artistic delirium, always to overstep borders, our own and those of others, never wasting time to earn money, never to become parents.

- For better or for worse, till literature us do part, we say at the altar.

I wouldn't have believed it would be such fun to get married. So touching. That it should make a difference to sign some papers, give each other promises and put on a ring. Now it's us, Ragnhild and Cyril and all our wild plans, now it's in earnest.

I STRAIGHTEN MY short leather skirt and go down to the basement in my parents' house, where Cyril and I have lived since I moved back to finish third year high school in Bø. I wanted to have an additional year of Norwegian studies, thought it was important for my future as a writer, but now I don't know anymore. All our things are packed. All that's left are the 80s furniture of my parents, the double bed from when they got married towards the end of the sixties, and the table tennis table that my big brother and I loved to use. I open the America-suitcase, the antique suitcase I inherited from my great grandfather when he emigrated to America, on which I've written the names of the post-punk band Sonic Youth, Marguerite Duras, the German experimental band Einstürzende Neubauten, and PJ Harvey who Cyril and I watched on stage when she was almost unknown. I shove the typewriter and a few novel notes into it. Write and make love, write and fuck, that's the plan.

My husband hoots impatiently from the car. It's fun to call him "my husband". I look out of the basement window, at the farmyard. Cyril used to have a red Renault 5, that we were driving around in the South of France. It was a present from his parents. But when he decided to terminate his economy course at *Université de Montpellier* to come with me to Bø in Telemark, their protest was to sell the car. Now he's sitting in the blue Volvo station wagon we've borrowed from my parents until we can afford to buy our own car. On the dirty back window we've written *Just married* and *Tout juste mariés* with our fingers.

I open the basement window and shout in French that I'll soon be ready. Since we met in the French language, we almost only speak French. No wonder Cyril's Norwegian is broken, that he has a strong accent, while my French is almost fluent. My motivation is stronger, I'm learning one of the world's most beautiful languages, want to be more

international. While Norwegian ... who cares? As long as my husband's able to read what I write (if I'm going to write in Norwegian?), I'm not going to complain, I think, close the basement window and walk into the bathroom.

I sit on the toilet and hope it's going to come now, the red blood. But there's only piss. I flush and pull up my leather skirt. My hair is short, coloured black. I wash my hands and look at myself in the mirror. Arrange my hair into a spiral in front of my ears, Liza Minnelli-style, pick tweezers from my vanity bag and pluck my eyebrows. In the 80s, I was proud of the thick eyebrows I'd inherited from my Dad, but now the fashion is only a thin line. I'm thin, too, but I eat. I'm thin in the way you are when you're hungry for life. I have high metabolism. High tempo. Longing to put the rural childhood behind me and continue the French way of life I acquired a taste for when I was an exchange student for two years at *Lycée Jean Monnet* in Montpellier. At *Rockstore* I met Cyril. He stood bashfully in a corner of the dance floor, leaning against a post, looking down every time I gazed at him. When my favourite hit came on, a number by Pixies, his personality changed. He came out on the dance floor with sexy movements.

- *Where is my mind?* he sang with a French accent.
- *Where is my mind?* I sang back.
- *Where is my mind?* we sang in chorus.

He touched my bum, and my small tits. I put my tongue into his mouth and pushed him up against a wall.

I wash off a speck of toothpaste from the mirror and drag a finger over my lips, the way I've seen Jean Seberg do in *Breathless*. A secret code for all the initiated. All the intellectuals. Thus a code from myself, the one I'm hopefully beginning to become, to my image in the mirror, the one I'll definitely be in the future.

I remove the ring from my nose and replace it with a skull. My parents hate that look. I've changed so much since I went to France as a seventeen-year-old that they hardly recognise me. At least that's what they say.

I open the bathroom door, carry the heavy America-suitcase out of the basement flat and up the stairs, out of breath. Mum and Dad are waiting on the ground floor, their eyes wet.

- Our little girl, they say and hug me.

I remind them that I'm a grown-up girl now, recently turned twenty and married. I say that they should rather worry about my big brother, who's out burning rubber at night.

- Wouldn't it be a good idea to study first, Ragnhild, Mum says and strokes my chin. – Hardly anyone becomes an author, we ...

Cyril honks the horn. I get the denim jacket, put my feet into my Dr Martens shoes, carry the suitcase out of my childhood home, over to the car and shoves it into the boot.

During my childhood I felt that life took place somewhere else. That Bø was a waiting room. Bø has been a bit more fun this year with my husband, but it has still been a waiting room. Luckily, we're now on our way out into the world again, I think and jump in next to Cyril, roll down the car window and look around for the last time, farms and fields as long as the eye can see, corn, corn, corn.

My bum is sticking to the seat leather. I try not to cross my legs. I want to be liberated, not frigid. My role model is the French actress Jeanne Moreau in the threesome film *Jules et Jim*. We have no one to look up to in the village. Here, Cyril and I only learn about life via film or books. Now we're finally going to turn fiction into reality again, I hope and spread my legs.

I look at my husband, the car window on his side is open, his elbow resting on the frame, one hand on the wheel. His wedding ring has two small diamonds. I spent all my savings on it. I don't know what we're going to live on now, but I'm sure we'll work something out.

- The future, I answer when Cyril asks what I'm thinking about and we drive

past the ramshackle barn I loved to play in as a child.

- I look forward to growing old with you, he says and changes gears.
- I look forward to being young with you, I answer, kick off my shoes, my feet

on the dashboard, a cassette of the underground band Sprung aus den Wolken in the car stereo.

- *Nous, nous, sommes si jeunes, nous ne pouvons pas attendre ...*

After Mum and Dad have disappeared from view, we increase the speed.

- *We, we're so young, we cannot wait,* we sing all the way out of Bø city centre.

I think my husband is good-looking. Chestnut, half-long hair, brown-green eyes, and a pronounced nose. Cyril is often told that he looks like the Indie-American actor Vincent Gallo. My husband doesn't want to look like anybody.

WE'RE ON OUR WAY to my parents-in-law's villa in the outskirts of Nîmes. We've estimated that the drive itself should take just about 24 hours, but with all the stops to fuck in the backseat, eat at petrol stations, do wees on the motorway toilets (still no blood?), dance in parking places to The Cure on the car stereo and sleep in the car, it takes more than double that.

When we finally come to downtown Nîmes, the ashtray is filled with cigarette butts, and in the back seat: cardboard cups, sandwich boxes, chewed gum and apple cores. I ask Cyril to stop at a chemist. He drives past the city's pride Les Arènes, an intact Roman Amphitheatre, and puts on the blinkers. I walk into the white pharmacy building. Feel uncomfortable when I ask for a pregnancy test and the chemist's face lights up.

- Hope it's good news, *des bonnes nouvelles*, she says and gives me a small white box. I hide it in my worn denim bag, under *The Second Sex*. Simone de Beauvoir and Jean Paul Sartre weren't interested in reproducing themselves, having children. They didn't want banal, everyday intrusions. Diapers and such business. Crying. So we don't want it either. That's part of our marriage vows.

We keep driving, out of the city, into the suburb, up the steep, twisting gravel road with hedges, brick walls and half hidden country estates, all the way until the roof of my parents-in-law becomes visible behind the ivy-covered wall. Cyril takes a quick look in the rear-view mirror, fixes his half-long hair his mother has always hoped he'll cut short again, before he opens the electric gate to his childhood home with the remote control he forgot to hand back before he came with me to Norway.

After I've kissed my parents-in-law three times on the cheek, in the way of southern France, and reminisced a bit over our wedding in Bø, I sneak into the bathroom

and pee on the plastic pin. Wait. Two red lines. I scream. Hold my hand over my mouth. My scream has been heard. Cyril comes running.

- Fuck, I say, showing him the result. We stare at the red lines together.
- *Merde*, he says.

We tell my parents-in-law when we're eating *foie gras* on toast the same evening. They remain silent. I don't know whether it's a good or bad silence. I fill my wine glass with red *Châteauneuf-du-Pape*. My father-in-law always takes out the best wines when I'm visiting. Teaching me. I'm a keen student, grateful, while his spoilt son, my husband, takes all this for granted. As I lift the wine glass to my mouth, my mother-in-law looks strictly at me. She's a pharmacist, and in opposition to most French women who takes the occasional drink during the pregnancy, she told me proudly the first time I met her that she hadn't drunk a single drop when she was pregnant. I tell them they've misunderstood, that we've chosen not to become parents. We're going to be artists, writers, not parents, I say. It doesn't help that Cyril's parents say they're willing to pay for an au pair. – We've decided, I say and slurp my wine greedily.

My parents-in-law look questioningly at their son.

- Ragnhild's right, Cyril says in a low voice, uncertainly?

Does he only say what *I* want him to say, something that suits our emancipated plans?

Cyril sips his wine, then he clears his throat.

- We want to explore life to the very edge, not stay at home, making sure our child grows up in a safe, adjusted environment. We have bigger plans for our future than changing nappies.

That sounds better, I think and hope he means it.

My mother-in-law turns to my father-in-law with a worried look. Opens her mouth to say something, but he refills our glasses, and she just puckers her mouth.

- We know a doctor, he's a good friend of the family, he can fix this, if that's really what you want, my father-in-law says and straightens his silk tie.

Then we clink glasses. For what, I've no idea.

CYRIL IS LYING in a foetal position under the tight French sheets they use here instead of doonas. He breathes heavily, with his eyes closed. I put on one of my mother-in-law's dressing gowns, the one in burgundy silk, and tiptoe across the Persian carpet. Look at the golden cage hanging from the ceiling, with the two stuffed parrots Cyril loved as a child, when they were alive, but that the neighbour shot with an air rifle once when they flew across the wall. Then I close the door to his nursery and walk carefully down the staircase and over to the living room, open the globe cocktail cabinet and pour vintage whisky in a crystal glass. I have to get rid of what's in my stomach. I take a sip and walk into the garden. Drink whisky at night-time and eat figs straight from the tree. The cicadas are singing so loudly that I can hardly hear my thoughts. I sit down on the edge of the pool, feet in the water.

Imagine, Cyril grew up here, in all this luxury. Walls everywhere. Protected? Once, one of father-in-law's psychiatric patients climbed the wall, she probably wanted to see her doctor. Cyril was alone at home with the maid, he was four or five years old and was splashing around in the pool wearing his arm floaties. He told me that the patient, a young woman, was sexy (typical of him to add such an adjective in retrospect, make the incident piquant). Large boobs and long, black hair. But with wild eyes. Green. Apparently, she took her clothes off and jumped into the pool. Her long, black hair clinging to her body, wet. That was the first time Cyril saw a naked woman who wasn't his mother. He enjoyed the event, the surprise. He hoped the patient would come back, but she never did.

A bird flies over my head and drops something in the pool. I walk over to *The Pool House*, as they call it here, I enjoy how they say it in French, *Le Pola Ous*. I find a golf club in my mother-in-law's bag. Use it to pick up what the bird dropped and that's now

floating on the surface of the water. When I finally manage to get it, I almost fall into the pool, looking at the dirty dummy in my hand. I study the chewed dummy, imagine that this is what my nipple will look like if I change my mind and have children after all. I throw it over the wall, lie down on the nearest sunlounge and listen to cicada-song, cicada-song, cicada-song.

On the grass is an ashtray with a half-smoked menthol cigarette. Mine. That night three years ago when I met Cyril at *Rockstore* was promising, I think and light the cigarette. When my husband, after he'd touched my bum and small tits, whispered what he'd done with all the woman in town, I knew I'd be the next. But when we were going to his student flat for him to make me a woman, as they say, in the unpretentious bachelor bed, he chickened out. When we finally made love, months later, virgins both, I wasn't quite sure if it had actually happened? Shouldn't there be lots of blood? Shouldn't I become someone else? Or did there have to be stronger things to change me?

I lean back in the sunlounge and take a new sip of whisky. We have to open up, not just books, but our relationship too, the way we proclaimed in front of the priest, and later, both in Norwegian and French, under the combined moose- and snail-marriage dinner. We have to fuck others, get a broader experience, I think, sucking and sucking on the cigarette.

Suddenly it's as if my stomach turns itself inside out. Is the little being inside me inebriated now? I stub out the cigarette and pour the rest of the whisky into the grass. I'm scared of having a child. And of never having one.

THE NEXT DAY we go to a *clinique privée*. That's quite cool for the village girl. The doctor kisses my cheeks three times. His name is Jesus and he's a good friend of Cyril's family. I'm asked to lie down on the hospital bed. There's only Jesus, Cyril and me in the room. He has squeezed us into an otherwise fully booked timetable. He rubs something sticky on my stomach so we can look into it on a screen. I hold my breath. There is life in there. Jesus shows us the foetus on the screen, looks at me with a tender smile. Not everyone can get pregnant, and here I lie, one of the chosen ones, he may be thinking. Cyril seems touched, grabs my hand. Several of the joyriding girls in my parallel class on Bø High School have already been knocked up or have given birth. When I watched them walking down the street with their prams last summer, I felt sorry for them.

- *C'est parfait*, Jesus says about the foetus on the screen, perfect.

Apparently, I am eleven weeks pregnant. Jesus chatters about all the precautions we have to take now, eat this, not that, so the foetus can grow big and strong.

- We don't want to keep the baby, I say in a low voice.
- No? Jesus looks shocked away from the screen, at us.

Cyril drops my hand. I notice that my nail has made a deep mark in the back of his hand.

- Why don't you think about it until tomorrow?

Think about it? Become part of the French upper-class family? Find an au pair? And then maybe write as well, not as a border-exceeding wild animal but as a French *Madame à la* mother-in-law? I imagine how sweet our child is going to look if it inherits Cyril's chestnut hair and my light blue eyes with a yellow ring around the pupils. I imagine how it's going to suck nourishment from my boob, a parasite. I think about the chewed to death-dummy from last night.

I draw my breath, look at the foetus on the screen, hear the little heartbeat.

- No, I say. – No, no, no.

ÇA VA, HOW ARE YOU? Jesus asks while he washes his hands with the iconic Marseille soap, then he dries them thoroughly and gives me a package of painkillers.

Ça va, I'm good, I answer, without knowing if that's true. It's not important. *Ça va* is a polite remark. It took time before I realised that. My first month at *Lycée Jean Monnet*, I tried to give an honest answer. Usually, the person who'd asked, continued along the corridor and into a classroom before I could open my mouth.

I get out of the hospital bed, disappear behind the curtain. The pad in my underpants is bloodied. I remove my hospital gown and change into my normal clothes. I can't bear to consider how I feel. Done is done, there's no way back now, I think, open my denim bag, find my eyeshadow, mascara and white powder. Outside the window I notice a church yard, on several of the graves there are soft toys.

- Do you regret it? Cyril asks as we leave the hospital and sit down in my parents' Volvo.

- Oh no, I say, my voice breaking. – What about you? I stutter.

- Me neither, Cyril mumbles and starts the car.

- Iggy, I whisper as we approach the villa of my parents-in-law.

- What?

- The foetus has to have a name, even if it's dead, should we call it Iggy?

- Yes, Cyril says.

YOU DIDN'T BECOME the one who was going to run into my arms when I get you from kindergarten.

You didn't become the one who wanted me to tell you the story about how your daddy and I met, about how you came into being.

You didn't become the one I argued with more than anyone else but forgave regardless.

You didn't become the one I should love more than everything else, including myself and Cyril.

You didn't.

You've only experienced the inside of my body.

You've only experienced swimming around inside me, in the amniotic water.

You've only experienced being dead.

The sun is hot. A lizard scurries along the edge of the pool. I dip my feet into the water. I regret that I didn't ask to see Iggy before we left the hospital. I wonder if he looks like me. I wonder what Jesus does with all the dead foetuses in the hospital. Are they thrown in the bin? Should I tell Cyril that we have to hurry back, ask to see our child one last time? Take it home and bury it?

My husband and I haven't had sex since I had an abort two months ago, even if I make sure I take the pill every day now and at the right time. My mother-in-law has an alarm that goes off and reminds me that I have to take it, it's usually after lunch. I'm the one who doesn't want sex. I'm in contact with the empty cavity inside my body, with Iggy, but not with the skin outside and at least not with my cunt.

WE'RE YOUNG. Life is now. We can't be bothered anymore to have therapy with a colleague of my father-in-law. We have no time to lose, we say to each other, again and again, like a mantra. To choose to lose Iggy has made this mantra even more important. Losing Iggy means choosing art, doesn't it? Marina Abramović has had three abortions. She claims that having children makes women lag behind in the art world. That you have to be conscious of how you spend your energy. Now that won't be on me, I think and stroke my flat stomach.

We decide to move back to Montpellier, where we met. Explore the bohemian life there. I'm sick of my maiden name Ragnhild Moe, of everything it contains of associations, staunch and rustic, I give myself the artistic name Edy Poppy. It feels more open, like something I can fill myself with, the one I want to be. Cyril changes his name to Tamara Pontopidan, but I forget to call him that, and he doesn't correct me. Doesn't he want it enough? When I glance at the thought, I push it aside. We don't get money from our parents anymore, so to be able to afford our – hopefully soon debauched – new life, Cyril secretly sells the thick golden bracelet he got from his parents on his 18th birthday, as well as most of our wedding presents and the expensive designer bag my mother-in-law gave me after the abortion. In addition, I get money from The Norwegian Student Loan Fund. I pretend I'm going to study “examen philosophicum” and French, so I can enrol in a B.A. at Oslo University, but the reality is that Cyril and I move into 1 Rue Durand in Montpellier. This is where we're going to write. A new chapter in the history of literature. Have eternal life, post-mortem, post Iggy.

One night we're out on town, we see a man who stands out. He's hanging at the bar at *Rockstore*. He reminds me of the American cult-director Jim Jarmusch whose films Cyril and I are really into. I look at Cyril, he nods encouragingly.

- Show me your teeth, he says and removes a spot of lipstick from my front tooth with his finger.

- What if he doesn't like me? I ask and put my hand through my short, black-coloured hair. Feel a tangle. Correct the peace symbol in my nose.

- Then we'll just try someone else, someone who reminds us of David Lynch or David Cronenberg, it'll be alright, Cyril says and gives me a passionate kiss. Then he pushes me in the stranger's direction.

Nervously I go over to the Jim Jarmusch guy in the bar and clears my throat.

- Hi, I'm Edy Poppy, I'm married, but I can do whatever I like, I say and smile. I feel my upper lip turning, making a pouting mouth. The bigger the smile, the plumper my lips, Cyril has told me.

The stranger looks at me with curious eyes, friendly?

- That sounds good, he says and smiles back. – Edy Poppy, is that your real name?

- Yes, I say in a low voice and ask if I can call him Jarmusch.

He nods, seems happy with his nickname, takes a sip of his drink. I take a sip of his drink too, points at my husband, who waves, puts on his leather coat, and leaves us there alone.

Jarmusch is over thirty, experienced. When I go to the loo, he follows. I don't say no, I take his hand and lead him into the toilet room, lock the door. Jarmusch pulls off my short Marimekko dress inherited from Mum and as I'm not wearing either panties or a bra, encouraged by my husband, I'm naked at once. I sit down on the toilet seat and spread my legs while Jarmusch says how good my *minou* smells. And that he loves the contrast between my short, black-coloured hair and the natural colour of my albino-blond pubic hair. (I don't tell him that I colour it like Marilyn Monroe used to do). Jarmusch says he wants to paint me. That I'm going to be his muse.

People are knocking impatiently on the toilet door. We try not to enjoy too loudly. I bite Jarmusch's upper arm, scratch his bum, the way I've seen it done passionately in French films. Now his cock is thrusting in and out of me. I look forward to telling my husband this. Cyril's going to be proud of me, I think, go down on my knees and suck Jarmusch over his strawberry-smelling, ultrathin condom.

With the rubber tied with semen inside in my pocket, as a souvenir, I walk out of the toilet with Jarmusch in tow, past the long toilet queue, but not shamefully, no, proudly, with glowing cheeks.

I want to introduce Jarmusch to Cyril, who is surely waiting eagerly in the flat at home. Perhaps Jarmusch is just what we need. An adult man in our bed, instead of Iggy.

To the Nirvana-hit *Smells Like Teen Spirit*, we run out of *Rockstore*, down the almost deserted streets, past Place de la Comédie, where I had the first date with my husband, and into a bakery that has just opened in our street. We queue behind a mother and her daughter who keep crawling towards the exit. The mother leaves the queue, says sorry, picks up her daughter, and gets into the queue again and again and again. When the mother finally gets to pay, the little girl picks up one of the paper bags and turns it upside-down so the contents fall out. The girl begins to laugh. Claps her hands delightfully. Her mother sits down on her haunches and picks up *pains au chocolat*, *croissants* and *baguettes* from the dirty floor. I get filled with fear from looking at the mother and child. Don't understand how the mother manages to control herself. She strokes the child's face and says in a mild voice:

- No no, darling girl!

I feel how my throat contracts and my pulse is beating unnaturally fast. When it's our turn, I buy fresh croissants and take-away coffee, grab Jarmusch's hand and pull him out of the bakery, quickly, quickly. Before the exit door closes, Jarmusch turns to the child and waves. The girl waves back and smiles.

- How cute, he says, *mignonne*.

My throat constricts again. I run with Jarmusch three blocks down the street, until we're standing in front of our flat in number 1.

- Are you sure this is alright, he asks out of breath and runs his fingers through his dark slick hairstyle.

- Yes, I say and open the door to the flat I share with Cyril and hope it's true. The smell of cigarettes hits us.

- *Bienvenue*, I say and throw off my jacket in the *entrée*, feel how shaky my legs are. Jarmusch puts his shoes neatly down and pulls me towards him. His mouth smells of my cunt. I hold the paper bag with croissants hard in my hand while I lead Jarmusch past all our mess and into the bedroom. A cockroach runs across the floor and disappears into a hole in the wall. I put our breakfast on the bedside table and study my husband who's lying with closed eyes stretched out on the double mattress on the floor. Suddenly he opens his eyes and looks at us. We jump, step back. Cyril starts to laugh. His laughter is contagious, soon the three of us are laughing. For an unnaturally long time.

Cyril and Jarmusch kiss each other's cheeks, then Cyril makes room for us on the mattress. We lie down, bashfully. Me, still hot between my legs.

- *Et alors?* Cyril says and gives Jarmusch a friendly pat on the shoulder.

- *Et alors*, Jarmusch says uncertainly, with a confused look at me.

- My husband wants to know every little detail, I whisper, and finally light the after-fuck cigarette I've been longing for since we came out of the toilet. – We won't leave anything out. I blow menthol smoke from my nose and look at Cyril who's eating his croissant, drinking coffee and giving me an appreciative smile.

- My husband can take everything, I say.

1998

WE MOVE TO LONDON, to the unhip working class area Brick Lane, that's all we can afford. We share a room in a collective. I'm home alone and try to write about how it feels to be home alone waiting for Cyril – who's on a date with his English flame 18-year-old Beverly – to come back. I dream about turning what I'm writing into a novel. I write slowly. I have to wait for life to happen in reality before I can write about it in fiction. In one year, I've only written thirty pages. While Cyril gets horny at the thought of other men fucking me, I don't get horny at the thought that he's fucking other women. I write to stay awake. Sleep scares me. Since we removed Iggy, I've had the strangest dreams. In my dreams, Iggy is always a boy.

I look at the watch on my wrist, it shows 2 o'clock. I want to stay awake until Cyril gets home. I want to show him what I've written today. And I want to hear about what I don't want to hear about, his night with Beverly. We tell each other everything. That's our pride as a married couple, the truth between us.

Without wanting to, I put my head down on my desk, and without me wanting to, sleep catches up on me.

Second part

2005

I STUDY MYSELF in the sidemirror of a Mercedes parked in K benhavn Street in Oslo. The hole in my nose has closed over, my eyebrows have grown thicker again and my hair is long and bleached blond. From an open window in a block of flats I hear "Toxic" blaring away. Something in me just can't manage to upgrade to the 2000s. I miss the 90s grunge and Kurt Cobain. Or is it the fact that I've turned ten years older that I don't like? I braid my hair and pin it up into two pretzels. Try to make my milk-maid appearance look impeccable. I've started to own my rustic background as something exotic out there in the world, instead of being ashamed. My plaits have become a statement, I think, and break off the star of a Mercedes hood that looks new, and fasten it in the chain I wear around my neck. I'll give it to Cyril, he collects them. I look forward to travelling back to him and Berlin tomorrow, enjoy the summer there together, wander along the many canals, swim in the lakes, buy vintage clothes, style up to go to *KitKatClub* with our artist friends. Get senselessly drunk and forget Iggy for a while. How can someone, who doesn't exist, take up so much place in me? If only I'd regretted it at least. But I'm convinced that Cyril and I did the only right thing, I think, hungry and tired. I still have to push myself to find something to do this last night in Oslo. I want to have something exiting to tell my husband when we see each other again. Even if I most of all want to go home to Iris and relax, I'm on my way to the opening of an exhibition in an abandoned chocolate factory.

As soon as I'm inside the factory wall, I feel unwell and lonely. I cram chips into my mouth and take a free beer. Gulp it down and get a new one. It doesn't help. How can I believe that my home country had anything to offer me, any kind of excitement.

I'm about to leave when someone catches my attention. I pretend that I'm looking at the police-reported video *All Gym Queens Deserve to Die* by Bjarne Melgaard, where an

adult man is sucking the arm of a baby, but in reality I'm studying a young man with orange-red hair. I'm possessed by red hair, this anomaly from nature's side.

I like your rustic plaits, the young man says, turns away from the art video and looks straight at me. – Did you plait them yourself?

- Yes, I say and laugh, lower my shoulders, feel I'm found.

- I'm Antonio, he says and pulls his hand through his thick hair. It's shoulder-length.

- Hi Antonio, I say and smile.

- I'm half Italian, he continues without me having asked, - the typical half-part.

- The typical?

- Yes, my mother is Norwegian.

I laugh again.

- And you? he asks and blows away some orange-red strands of hair from his eyes.

- I'm Edy Poppy, I say. Empty the beer in one last gulp. Put the empty bottle on the gallery floor. – I'm half French, I add, but regret it immediately.

- *Trop cool, j'adore la France*, he says then, - why don't we leave?

- *Qui, Monsieur.*

I feel the gnawing in my stomach, the little lie. We take several free bottles of beer with us on our way out. Behind a container, a bit further down the street, I catch a glimpse of a girl in a bunny costume injecting herself.

- Where are we going? I ask.

- No idea, Antonio says.

We're drinking beer and I laugh.

- Twenty-one, he says when I ask how old he is. He gathers his hair in a

rubber band, but when he sees my alarmed face, he adds - I'm soon twenty-two. What about you?

- Thirty.

- And I who thought we were the same age, Antonio says, surprised, or is it me who says it? It's probably me.

When I empty the last beer bottle a while later and put it down in front of a bin in Slottsparken, Antonio takes out a pocket flask. I should really stop drinking, instead I take a large gulp of grappa and my throat and chest get warm. This is my last night in Oslo I think and keep drinking. I shouldn't have. I get dizzy. And when we walk past Kunsternes Hus, I vomit in a hedge. I look around. No onlookers, luckily. I'm invisible in this town. Cyril says I must enjoy the anonymity now that I'm finally accepted and have delivered the last proof of my novel to the publishers in Oslo. In a few months I'm a famous writer. I feel my bowels turning inside out and I vomit again. Antonio holds my rustic plaits, that have come loose from the hairpins I put them up with, away from my mouth with a warm hand, dries the corners of my mouth on the arms on his denim jacket, thrusts a piece of gum into my mouth. I blow a bubble and laugh. Tears are popping, like in a Japanese anime film. It's a long time since I've laughed so much. I've been so stressed during my last time in Berlin. Been writing and changing my novel far into the night. Been scared that the publisher should pull out.

- Look, Antonio says and points at a squirrel trying to remove the synthetic blond hair of a Barbie doll with its teeth. It stares at us with button-like eyes, before it jumps into a tree

Antonio tries to kiss me. I tighten my lips into a line, think about my husband in Berlin, wonder what he's doing at this very moment. Perhaps he's just sleeping?

- Relax, Antonio says and tries again.

I spit out the gum and ask Antonio what sort of thing he's doing. He says he's studying nuclear physics at Blindern University, he's following in his father's footsteps

and doesn't need to worry about what's he's going to live on. I've never been a student myself, Cyril and I don't want to have a plan B. When we'd spent the money from his gold bracelet, our wedding presents and my student loan and moved to London to try our luck there, I was writing my novel while I earned money as a *cigarette girl*, (nude) model, ice-cream seller, museums guard, *party maker*, barkeeper, and in the black part of Brixton I was a psychiatric nurse-assistant as the only white in the ward. Cyril minded upper-class babies and worked in an art gallery. The mail brought one rejection letter after the other from French and Norwegian publishers.

- And you? Antonio asks.

- Me?

- Yes, you, he says and laughs. His laugh is so fresh, without a single hint of bitterness.

- I'm an author, I say and clear my voice. I've dreamt of saying it ever since my childhood in Bø. Now I said it. It feels like a lie.

I WAKE UP from the phone squeaking. *Look forward to meeting you in Sofienbergperken in an hour*, Antonio writes. I have a splitting headache. The smell of fried mushroom is drifting up to where I'm sleeping. Iris is shouting that brunch is ready. I climb down the staircase from the open loft, get a glimpse of myself in the mirror in the hallway. Only now do I loosen the plaits, my hair looks like the creped style of the 80s.

Iris is making an omelette in the kitchen. She's framed a poster of Sophia Loren on the wall, holding an over-dimensional fork and spoon. The glass is sprayed with fat. Iris smiles, the corner tooth with the golden star is revealed.

- Look, she says and shows me her latest tattoo: *Mum and Dad*, written in cursive over the main artery.

- Christ.

The black ink hides her many self-inflicted scars. I swallow an aspirin and the pill, write an SMS to Cyril about looking forward to our reunion today. Check what train-times correspond with my journey to Berlin. I should've done that before. The plane leaves in two hours. If I hurry, I can just make it. I throw on a pair of light-blue jeans with a low waistline and a top that shows my navel. It has a mole on each side. I turn off the computer, push my things into the America-suitcase.

- What about brunch? Iris says disappointedly, fiddling with the piercing in her left eyebrow.

- Next time, I answer, hide my face behind big sunglasses, coil my hair into Cyril's male hat and run out the door with all my things.

I walk as fast as I can away from my craving for Antonio. After a few hundred meters I cross the street.

- How lovely you are when you're walking, a youthful male voice says when I

reach the edge of the footpath. – I like to follow people, see who they are when they feel unseen, he continues.

I remove my sunglasses and the male hat, let my blond hair fall loose. Antonio looks different in the light of day, younger than the night before. Twenty-one, soon twenty-two. He's freshly shaved, a speck of blood has dried on his chin. I want to pick it off.

- Come, Antonio says.

- Weren't we going to Sofienbergparken?

- Obviously not, he says, takes the suitcase from my arm, keeps going while he tells me that he slept on a bench in Vigelandspark last night, not because he had to, but because he wanted to try it. – I want to try everything, he continues. – Or at least almost everything, he adds cheerfully.

I walk beside him and listen. Like his self-confidence. The way he's trying to impress me. And his knowledge that he can have me. Antonio seems free in another way than my husband and I, or perhaps he's more like a young version of us?

We're soon in Oslo downtown, over at Trafikanten, then inside Oslo Railway station. Beneath the joining point of the large screens stands an old man with plaited beard, juggling four doll-heads. When he throws the doll-heads into the air, their eyes open, then they close again when he catches them. I hurry into a kiosk, buy a packet of menthol cigarettes and throw my last Norwegian kroner into the juggler's paper cup, ready for Berlin.

- Wait here, Antonio says, puts down my suitcase, walks over to a vending machine and buys two train tickets without asking if I want to come, but I obviously do, because suddenly I'm with him on a train heading I don't know where. On the other side of the platform the train to Gardermoen Airport is ready to leave. My phone is vibrating, the screen lights up. It's Cyril. I put it on soundless. Observe myself from the outside. Like I'm a character in a novel I'm going to write later.

- Life's full of surprises, says Antonio.

I fiddle with my large designer ring that doesn't look like a wedding ring, and wonder if this is the right time to tell him that I'm married. I open my mouth, but just then the conductor arrives. I close it again. There's no rush.

We get off the train at Halden station. Antonio carries my suitcase to his parents' architect-designed funkis house close by. His mother is in the garden watering poppies. She seems young and energetic, in the middle of her forties, perhaps, orange-red hair and white clothes. Antonio introduces us. She gives him car keys, a backpack, an accordion, a water jug and a basket of food.

- Drive carefully, darling, remember that you've only had the licence for two weeks, she says and kisses him on the mouth as we take our seats in a bottle-green Alfa Romeo with an open roof.

- Take it easy, Mum, I'm in full control, Antonio says. – When's Dad coming home, by the way?

- Federico has gone to inspect the nuclear reactor in Fukushima, so I've no idea. But don't worry about me, darling, I'm fine on my own.

- Are you sure? Antonio asks in a worried voice.

His mother nods. Antonio puts his foot on the gas pedal, and his orange-red and my bleached hair are flying in the wind, just like in a film. I've no idea where we're going. Just that we're driving further and further away from Halden city centre, past farmyards, into gravel roads, through forests. My phone is still on soundless, but I can see that I've several messages and unanswered calls from Cyril. I turn it off altogether.

- Imagine getting you to come with me on this, Antonio says, clutching the wheel.

Outside it's getting darker. An owl crosses the sky with heavy flap of his wings. Antonio turns on the radio. A Brazilian electrician has just been shot seven times in the

head in London's underground. The policeman thought he was a terrorist about to perform a suicide action. The car radio loses its signal, then gets it back. Norway has got a majority government for the first time since 1985. It'll be Red-Green with Jens Stoltenberg as Prime Minister.

We disappear further and further into no man's land. *Once upon a time I was falling in love. Now I'm only falling apart. There's nothing I can do. A total eclipse of the heart* Bonny Taylor sings hoarsely on the local radio channel as Antonio parks in front of an old wooden hut with peeling, mustard-yellow painting. He tears open the car door and disappears into the darkness. Not long after I hear a splash. I leave the car, disoriented.

- Come, he shouts.

I almost stumble on a rusty can. I hear techno music in the distance, as if there was a rave somewhere in the forest. Antonio's clothes are spread on the ground. I slowly undress. Walk carefully and shyly out on an old, creaking diving board. Thinking about Cyril who's waiting at Schönefeld. Why can't I never stop while the game is good? I count to ten, hold my nose, and jump in.

- *Benvenuto*, Antonio says, and swims over to me.

As we both go up from the water, he kisses me.

This time I don't straighten my lips.

After Antonio has fallen asleep and I've pretended to, I lift his arm from my stomach, sneak out of the cottage, sit down on the edge of the creaking diving board, take out my phone and call my husband.

I sneak inside again, lie down next to Antonio in the double bed, carefully so as not to wake him up. It feels odd to lie here next to a strange young man. It takes some time before I fall asleep.

When I finally do, I dream that I'm standing by the brick wall around my parents-

in-law's villa, Iggy in a doll's pram next to me. I push the button that opens the gate and slip out quickly before it closes behind me.

On the other side of the wall, it's as if I see everything for the first time, all the things Iggy won't experience, the strong sunlight, the shadow of the olive trees, the neighbour's black Siamese cat with its bright blue eyes scurrying down the curvy road.

- You had back luck with us, I say in such a low voice that I'm not sure whether I've only thought it. Only now do I notice that I'm not wearing shoes. The asphalt is hot under the soles of my feet. I must take care I don't step on a scorpion or a snake.

- Your mummy is indeed a bit of a flibbertigibbet, I say, chuckling into Iggy's pram.

I stay outside the tall walls for a long time. No one else goes for walks here. Now and then a Rolls Royce, Jaguar and Bugatti drive past, a tanned hand sticks out of a car window holding a remote control, and an electric gate opens soundlessly before the car disappears behind tall walls.

After a couple of kilometres my bare feet are sore and dirty. I sit down on the wayside, lift Iggy out of the pram and put him carefully down next to me on the bone-dry grass, yellow. I pick at his throat, but of course he doesn't laugh, he is dead. A lizard scurries over my foot in the baking sun. Perhaps I'm not ready to be a mother, but I'm not a bad mother after all, I think and bite my underlip. I study the pouting mouth of my baby. Iggy. His upper lip has a marked Cupid's bow, almost like a drawing, I think, and feel the small vertical hollow between his nose and mouth. This is my boy, no doubt about that.

I WAKE UP with a jerk, look around. Where am I? A poster of the Italian boob-woman Sabrina hangs on the pine wall, and under the double bed I find a pile of Illustrated Science magazines from the 90s. Their edges are worn, with dog-ears on many of the pages. I try to remember what I was dreaming, if I don't write it down immediately, it just disappears. I find the box with the pill in the pocket of my jacket, take one, then I count the freckles in Antonio's face, give up. Pull out a straw of orange-red hair, twists it round two fingers and move it back and forth over my lips so it tickles. A conch lies in the windowsill. I stand up. Am pulled back again.

- I thought you were a dream, Antonio says and holds my head in his hands. It's nice, but also a bit awkward to lie there and look each other deeply in the eyes. I must stop comparing life with a book I can edit. Cliches are fine in real life but not in literature. And this is life, I remind myself, as Antonio pulls my string-knickers aside and starts to finger me. Am I ready for this, I ask myself, but my vulva has started to swell.

- How lovely that you get wet so quickly, Antonio says in a groaning voice and starts to feel my whole body. His hands are so hot, my body is unable to resist them. My mouth makes sexual moaning sounds, like in a porno film.

- I'm so horny, he says, turns me around, licks my asshole uninhibited. Isn't he getting the least put out by the fact that I'm so much older? I think as he penetrates me hard, self-confidently and without a condom.

- I love fucking, Antonio says. After so many years with the French language, it's lovely to make love with someone who speaks Norwegian.

- Your cunt tastes so lovely, he says.

It's the first time I hear this fuck-language in my mother tongue, and not as

sentences in my novel that's about to be published, sentences that actually were never expressed in Norwegian, but always either in French or English. Sentences I roared with laughter at when Iris and I found a pile of Cupido magazines in her mother's sewing box when we were children.

- Suck me, Edy, Antonio moans.

Is this my mid-life crisis? A young red-head lover instead of a Harley-Davidson? Am I the scolded, married man now? Or am I less of an asshole because I'm a woman? A feminist? I slap myself in the face. That does it. I repress all thoughts of my husband waiting for me in Berlin.

When the semen flows slowly out of me, down my thigh, my head is turned on again.

- If you get pregnant, we'll keep the child, Antonio whispers tenderly in my ear. His body sets off small twitches, a Duracell rabbit just before the battery runs out.

I find the packet of menthol cigarettes. I have really stopped smoking, but it's impossible to stop the after-fuck cigarette. So why did I buy the packet at Oslo Railway Station. There's so much I have to tell Antonio, I don't know where to start. So I don't start. Instead, I hand him the half-smoked cigarette.

- Do you really want children, at your young age? I ask.

- Every time I fuck someone, he answers, sucking on the cigarette and blowing the smoke out.

THE NEXT FEW DAYS we fuck away his memories of Kari-Anne, Fatma, Iram, Eira and Valentina. We do it on a rock out in the sea, against a tree in the forest, on the top of an observation tower, inside a decayed barracks, down in a dump, on the small beach in front of the cottage, in the wooden boat, on the kitchen floor while the water for the pasta's boiling or when I wash the dishes and Antonio dries them.

- If you get pregnant, we'll keep the child, he continues to say every time fuck.

And I hide that I continue to take the pill and that I sneak out at night when he's asleep, sit on the creaking diving board and ring my husband.

- Come back to Berlin now! Cyril screams every time.

- There, there, I say, there, there, I whisper. – Just give me a few more weeks until I've got rid of the horniness, *mon amour*. Do we have an open relationship or not?

I've decided to tell Antonio that I'm talking to my husband; I try at breakfast; while we're swimming; in the sauna; while we walk in the forest and pick chantarelles, but I can't do it.

It's ten at night. Antonio wants to go to bed. I know him now, I know it means he wants to fuck. I smile and close my novel, follow him into the bedroom, undress. He pulls the lamp cord.

- I'm married, I say in the dark, and the lamp is lit again. – I got married when I'd just turned twenty.

- Christ ... Antonio opens his eyes wide.

I've never been with someone with grey eyes before, or thought about it as nice, but it is.

- We have an open relationship, I add quickly when I see the expression on his worried face. – My husband, Cyril, is French, it was his idea.

Antonio looks at me with scrutinising eyes that I don't like.

- I'll go back to him in Berlin tonight, and you'll get rid of me, I say, my heart beating. I get up from the bed, take my clothes out of the wardrobe and put them in the suitcase.

- You misunderstand me, Edy, Antonio says, picks up one of my jumpers and puts it into the wardrobe.

WHEN TWO WEEKS have passed, and something reminiscent of a rhythm has become part of our days, Antonio suggests that we row across the lake to the farm on the other side and meet Günter and Sibylla, a German yoga couple who has escaped from Frankfurt's business life and started a wellness centre there. Antonio tells me that they saved him last year, when he became depressed. When he didn't know what to do with his life. When he didn't know me. He picks up the conch from the windowsill, walks out to the veranda and blows in it. On the other side of the lake, a cow bell answers.

- We're welcome, he explains.

We sit down by the lake at Günter and Sibylla's farmyard, legs in the lotus position and breathe together. In the background their albino husky Heidegger runs back and forth. I get dizzy by filling my lungs with so much fresh air only to slowly push it out again and again and again. Something good is happening with me. Cyril and I have perhaps been too single-tracked in our interests? Art and sex, art and sex, art and sex, art and sex ... with Antonio, perhaps the world becomes a little larger?

- Tongue *raus*, Sibylla says with a dark voice, she stands on all fours and begins to huff and puff like a dog. Günter and Antonio do the same.

- It's called *Feueratmung*, Sibylla says and looks at me.

- Feueratmung? I ask.

- Fire breath, Günter answers, and in contrast to Sibylla's dark voice, his is light, as if his voice never broke.

At first I'm embarrassed. It doesn't look pretty, does it. But Antonio makes me

get rid of inhibitions like that. I put my tongue out and stand on all fours. The most important is how it feels, bla, bla, bla. But it's right. Afterwards we bend our backs, up and down, like cats. Lie on our backs and roll back and forth.

When the yoga lesson is over, I feel so revitalised and concentrated that I, after having asked permission, sit in Günter and Sibylla's greenhouse and write. After a while, I hear their voices outside. I secretly sit and listen. Antonio is sort of proud to tell his middle-aged, German friends, that I'm a writer, married and in an open relationship.

ANTONIO WALKS PAST ME where I sit on the diving board outside his family cottage in the darkness, talking to Cyril in French. My ear is warm, but I'm cold.

- Say hi to your Frenchman, he says happily, walks out to the rock and takes a photo of me with his polaroid camera.

I do as he says. Cyril laughs a little forced on the other end.

- *Quel charmeur*, he says ironically.

Antonio come out to say hello almost every time I talk to my husband. I don't know if he thinks about the fact that my husband never says hello back?

- *Tu écoutes*, are you listening? Cyril asks.

- *Oui, oui*, I say, but it's a lie. I continue to look at my young lover. Antonio is now standing down by the beach, shaking the polaroid photo.

He has no idea that Cyril's tired of our open relationship. Something has to be sacrificed. This time it's Cyril, perhaps? The next time perhaps it's me, or Antonio? Once it was Iggy.

- *Tu m'aimes encore*, you still love me? Cyril asks after a long silence, and I reassure him that he's got nothing to fear, it's we who are married, and that Antonio is just an amusing summer flirt.

After I'd put down the phone and the polaroid photo has been developed, I make love to Antonio on the diving board. It creaks like an old bed. Far into the forest somewhere someone's still playing techno music.

- This time I'm sure you'll get pregnant, Antonio says after he's had a more than average powerful ejaculation. He combs my hair behind my ears with his fingers. I'm sticky between my thighs from his semen. I light the after-fuck cigarette.

- I'm on the pill I say without looking him in the eyes. – I want to live for art,
not

family, I continue finally honest, or am I talking on autopilot? Like from a manifest? I take a deep breath. Look worriedly at Antonio. Perhaps he doesn't like me anymore, now that I'm not going to carry his child, be mother, I think and blow menthol smoke from my nose.

Antonio takes a puff, says:

- I'm young, there's no rush.

We're cold, go into the bedroom and lie down under the doona.

- What are you thinking about, Antonio says after a while in silence.

There's a mousetrap on the bedside table. Something is caught in it, and it's definitively not a dead mouse.

- What are you thinking about? he asks again.
- How do you say I love you in Italian? I ask.
- *Ti amo*, Antonio says and smiles.
- *Ti amo*, I say.

In the mousetrap there's a purple dildo and on it is written "*Symbiose*" by *April Buñuel*. Is it a mini-installation, a conceptual work? I open the mousetrap.

- *Ti amo*, I repeat with the small purple dildo in my hand.

It's easier to say that I love Antonio in Italian than in Norwegian or French. If I say *ti amo* I feel that I can love him and my husband simultaneously. Then it's as if they're on different frequencies, and that the one declaration of love doesn't make the other a lie.

I SUDDENLY SIT up in bed. Did I fall asleep? I turn towards Antonio, but he isn't lying in bed next to me. I look at the clock, it's past twelve. In the middle of the day. I pull the doona over me. Did I really say *ti amo* to Antonio last night? I must pull myself together, I think. To love more than one was not part of our wedding vows. I have to take those words back, erase them, before they begin to take hold of me.

- Antonio! I call. No answer.

I get out of bed, walk from room to room. Run around the cottage, no one. I turn on the computer, find a ticket on a flight to Berlin on the net, tonight already. The palms of my hands are sweaty. I book and confirm the ticket. There, done. I dress. Decide that it's our destiny to part here and now, at a cottage just outside Halden. Disappear into our different futures. I'm not resisting it.

I sit down on the pine sofa and ring my husband.

- *Je t'aime*, I say, my body full of adrenaline.

Cyril starts to cry.

- My plane's landing in Berlin at seven tonight, I continue, - can you pick me up at Schönefeld?

Silence. Just Cyril's sniffing and the ticking from the clock that hangs over the living room table.

- Can you forgive me? I ask, wandering restlessly around. Look nervously for Antonio out of the cottage window, light my first menthol cigarette for years without having fucked first.

- You always come back to me, my husband finally says, submissively, his vocal cords breaking.

- I always come back to you, I repeat and stub out the cigarette.

- What are you doing? Antonio asks appalled when he comes into to bedroom.

He has stretched his knitted jumper to make a pocket, now filled with chanterelles. I sit down on the America-suitcase, only just manage to press it shut. I ask him to drive me to Rygge Airport.

- What about what you said yesterday? he says and scratched his neck.

- That was a mistake, I say.

- A mistake?

- Yes, you were a mistake.

- Was *I* a mistake? he says. By now his face has taken on the same colour as his hair.

- You should find someone your own age, a nice girl who wants children and a family. Perhaps someone you study with at Blindern University?

Antonio doesn't answer. He stands there, sort of stiffly, like an animal pretending not to exist.

- Can you drive me to the airport, or should I catch the bus? I ask and carry the suitcase into the hall.

While we're in the check-in queue, I regret it. It's too early to finish the Antonio story. If this had been a novel and I the reader, I'd been frustrated, felt tricked. I'd wanted more pages, more sex, a more dignified ending.

- Let's drive back to the cottage, I say.

- Are you sure? Antonio asks, and his whole face lights up.

- No, I say, but let's do it anyway.

