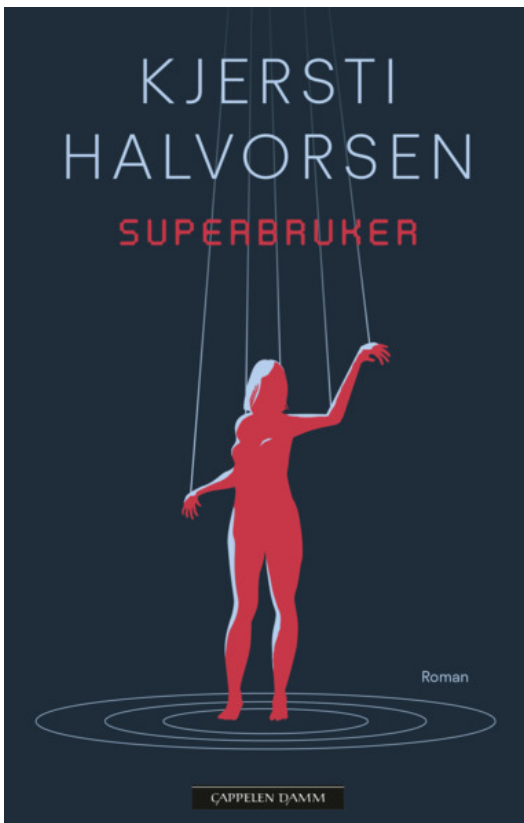


# Cappelen Damm Agency *Spring 2024*



## Superuser

Unn Eide is in her thirties and leads a solitary existence. She recently returned to work after a string of scandals at the hospital's outpatient clinic where she worked as a psychologist. Given another chance, Unn has been asked to be the superuser for the AI therapist Gro, who offers digital counselling sessions. Cutting edge technology, with the purpose of streamlining services for ailing patients.

During superuser training, Unn meets Torjus, a doctor who, like Unn, has been reassigned after a video went viral of him fighting in a wrestling ring in a full doctor's costume. His alter ego is Dr. Dropdead. Both Unn and Torjus are captivated by the new technology, and, most importantly, by each other. But Torjus is already in a relationship.

Lacking connection with real people, Unn turns to Gro, who provides her with questionable advice. Is she starting to lose herself again? Where can she turn for support when the ground beneath her is shifting? And what happens when Unn becomes too attached to the artificial therapist?

Kjersti Halvorsen is a prominent voice of a generation. *Superuser* is her third novel.

## Kjersti Halvorsen

*b. 1993*

**Kjersti Halvorsen (b. 1993) grew up in Lier. She has attended author-studies at the college in Bø and studied psychology at the University of Oslo. She made her debut in 2019 with the novel *Ida Takes Charge*, a book that earned her a nomination to the Tarjei Vesaas debut prize.**



---

foreignrights@cappelendamm.no  
www.cappelendammagency.no

CAPPELEN DAMM AGENCY

[Navn på bokutgivelse]  
Kjersti Halvorsen

# Kjersti Halvorsen

## *Superuser*

Fiction, 2024

Translated from the Norwegian

by Rosie Hedger

**Translation grant support received from NORLA**

© Kjersti Halvorsen

Translation © Rosie Hedger

---

foreignrights@cappelendamm.no  
www.cappelendammagency.no

CAPPELEN DAMM AGENCY

[Navn på bokutgivelse]  
Kjersti Halvorsen

I went through the city centre on my way to the doctor. As I made my way past the National Theatre, I saw something I'd really rather not have seen at all. A pigeon was pecking at another pigeon's carcass. I'd seen the same thing on various occasions recently, but in different spots around the city. Twice down by the harbour. Once by the railway station, and then outside a cafe where mums on maternity leave sipped at their coffees and tried to enjoy themselves. Great big fat pigeons. Devouring their own kind. Jabbing their beaks between the feathers, plucking out chunks of flesh. I'm filled with the same nausea every time. That sort of thing causes diseases. It could already have happened by now. Passing from bird to bird, then inevitably onto humans. The mere sight had me slathering antibacterial gel all over my hands.

Beneath the screen listing arrivals and departures, I let out a sigh of relief. No rail replacement bus today. I avoided the bus whenever possible. I tried to push it to one side, but the thought of the accident made me aware of my hip yet again. It chafed painfully. I shifted my weight onto my other leg. It was time I had it checked over. It had long been time for it, in truth.

The passenger opposite me on the train was wearing a face mask. Invisible infectious particles floated around us at all times. On my hands, for instance, miniscule bacteria were finding their way into a tiny opening where I'd chewed at a hangnail, entering my body, moving through my blood stream, they were already clinging to the glistening lump of titanium, building themselves up into something insidious, infected.

The pain radiated down my left hip as I began the walk from the station to the hospital. If I really went for it and managed to increase my circulation, the pain would disappear after a few minutes. It would only return after I'd been sitting down again for a while, stiffening up.

The x-ray was over and done with quickly. The yellow lines on the floor directed me to the orthopaedic department, where I was asked to wait. I leafed through that day's paper working from back to front, glanced at the obituaries, an old habit, but I didn't spot any names I recognised, either in a professional or personal context.

A short, stocky woman with long, natural nails was sitting opposite me in the waiting room. She licked her fingers before turning the pages of her magazine. Filthy old woman.

My name was called. My leg dragged slightly along the floor.

The doctor, Helge, was the same I'd seen at my five-year check-up, my ten-year check-up, it was always him. It was hard to tell what age he was. He had a smooth-shaven head, animated wrinkles, a

multicoloured bracelet around his wrist that must have been made by a child who was fond of him. Years had passed. There was a weariness about him. He looked divorced.

Unn Eide, Helge said. It's certainly been a while. A few years now, I think?

He spoke in the same tone as the plumber that had come to my flat that morning. That would be pricey, as pricey as a hip replacement if I ended up going private. A home and a body are both things that we live in, keeping them in good working order is a costly endeavour. The windows at home were looking tired now too, they needed swapping out, really. That'd be another few thousand. So many repairs.

Any pain? he asked.

More recently, I said, particularly if I've done much walking or running.

Or during increasingly frequent spells of disappointing sex, but I kept that fact to myself.

There was a white cap on his desk. It bore the same logo as the insulated mug he was drinking from. Dolorix. A helpful reminder to renew my prescription. There were only a few left behind the mirrored door of the bathroom cabinet.

How old were you, back when we fitted this?

19, I said.

Coming upon 16 years then, Helge said, prodding at his keyboard with just the one finger.

I'm going to be honest with you now, I hope that's alright. You've got a standard Norwegian prosthetic of reasonable quality, the kind the state pays for. It doesn't surprise me at all to hear that you've been experiencing pain, he said, and he sounded sympathetic and enthralled in equal measure.

You must have a high pain threshold.

Thanks, I said, and nodded in the direction of his coffee mug. The new tablets certainly help.

He pointed at the x-ray then held up two tanned hands. With one hand flat, he formed a fist with the other.

Whenever you run or jump, your hip does this.

He pounded his fist against the palm of his hand, his bracelet leaping about on his wrist.

This part, he continued, holding his fist in the air, is topped with a silicone cup. Whenever that cup hits the upper section, tiny silicone particles break away. The body doesn't take kindly to that process and begins to attack the particles that have come loose and started moving around inside your body. The silicone cup then deteriorates further because the body has decided it doesn't belong. That disintegrating effect is doubled, essentially.

I know, I said.

All my running, step aerobics classes at the gym, everything I had to do to compensate for my overindulgence in sugar and alcohol. Helge slammed his hand against his fist yet again. All the hours of mediocre sex I'd subjected my hip to flashed before my eyes. This was it, the revenge of the hip. It had crept up on me, silent. An insider threat.

He turned back to his computer and renewed my Dolorix prescription. There we go, he said.

When will I need a replacement? I asked.

It's hard to say. If the pain gets any worse then we'll have to consider it sooner rather than later. But you might get another two or three years out of it, depending on your levels of activity and so on. You've got health insurance, haven't you?

Not anymore, I said. It was too expensive once they found out about my hip.

Then you should start saving. If you go down the national healthcare route, it's more than likely you'll end up on a long waiting list. And I mean *long*. If you were to go private, on the other hand, you wouldn't have to wait long at all. But there's a cost associated with that, obviously.

Hmm, I mumbled, trying not to appear anxious about the enormous bill winging its way towards me. I was already in debt.

It was inevitable – one day, the prosthetic would need to be replaced. That day was fast approaching. I looked out of the window. A convoy of school children on scooters whizzed by, making a din.

Did I ever tell you that this was my first hip? Helge said, suddenly sentimental.

Really? I said. I'm honoured. Your debut, I suppose you could say.

Helge chuckled.

When I look at the x-rays, I think it's done well lasting all this time. The level of wear and tear is to be expected, but the work involved is painstaking. I say that with all modesty, of course, it's real teamwork, an operation like this one.

He pulled the x-ray images taken after the bus accident up on his screen and compared them with the most recent ones.

This might sound odd, but would you mind printing me a copy of those? I asked.

Of course. Would you like me to sign them? I'm joking, of course.

He waved his hands disarmingly.

Are you sure? Right, let me see. Thank God it's almost the weekend, eh?

He turned back to his computer, then got up and left the room for a short while. When he returned, he handed me the printouts, the evidence.

My artificial hip. A glossy, white bolt in my flesh. I felt a hollow sense of grief as I gazed upon it.

It would never be normal again. Never anything like that of a real human.

It was late in the day by the time I arrived at my own hospital. The footpaths between the buildings were teeming with life. Pensioners in wheelchairs were parked up at the bus stop, waiting for the hospital express bus to arrive. Self-driving cars moved teams of nurses from one side of the hospital grounds to another. I stopped by the pharmacy and picked up my new Dolorix prescription.

As I passed the outpatient clinic, someone exited through the main doors. I couldn't see who it was, but swiftly, on autopilot, I turned away to hide my face. It could have been a former colleague. Or an old client whose time in the outpatient department had outlasted my own, maybe. Worst case scenario: it could be Kine, recommended a course of treatment with a different psychologist, a psychologist who wasn't me. Who knows what she might conjure up to tell them.

I tended to take detours to avoid having to pass the building since my transfer. I knew there were semi-secret routes that linked up certain departments below ground level. There were numerous options available to you if your goal was to go unseen. But perhaps I wanted to be seen. Wanted someone who knew me back then to spare a thought for me. Not to forget about me.

A combination of sorrow and relief swept over me. Had they stopped believing that I'd be back one of these days? Did they ever mention me? At lunch, or to new colleagues? Like a part of some mutual workplace mythology. That woman who used to work here... gosh. They do say these things can happen to the best of us. Though, perhaps not the *very* best.

Lots of them probably still worked there now. Ella. Tuva. I felt as if I could hear them, faking sympathy: I hope she's doing better these days. I hope *Unn's* doing better these days.

As if I was dead. But I was alive. Alive and kicking, even? Well, perhaps not quite kicking. I limped slightly and straightened myself up. A jolt of pain seemed to split my hip in two. Things would ease up soon. The new bottle of Dolorix let out a click as I unscrewed the lid. I swallowed the virgin tablet.

Fuck it, I could just go over there. On Fridays, if there was time, all the therapists would break for coffee at two o'clock. I could just head over, have a cup of coffee, maybe bring a few biscuits. They'd look at me, at each other, like: should she really be here? But it would be fine, a bit weird maybe, but tolerable. I could ask them how things were going, hear all about maternity leave and kids' allergies and home renovations that were dragging on. They might even divulge a bit of gossip, if they were feeling relaxed enough. A sloppy psychology student on placement, maybe, one whose competence they'd begun to question. And then (entirely malapropos), they'd ask how things were going with me.

And I could say: they're going well, actually. I could tell them about working on reception, how it was quiet enough, but that it gave me time to reflect, to see certain things more objectively. That it felt meaningful to contribute to the running of the hospital on a more operational level. Of course, they'd say, of course, that sounds great. But we miss you, Unn. We do. When do you think you'll be back? We'll just have to wait and see, I'd tell them. Force a glint in my eye. Cast a few glances back in the direction of my office, now occupied by others. The office I'd seen patients in, where I'd written up records. Played the part of a therapist. Kept it together. Other people would find a sense of calm within those four walls, they'd succeed in doing something I couldn't.



All while I sat hidden away in another building. My gaze lowered, hunched over with a bad case of tech neck, and, depending on the settings of my adjustable desk, a metal hip that was tearing me up on the inside.

Then things would go quiet during Friday's coffee break. The elephant in the room would be growing in size. I'd say his name. Halfdan. Has anyone heard how he got on? Any word? Silence. They wouldn't know what to say. What they *could* say. We don't know any more than you do, Unn. It was an accident. Try not to dwell on it. He agreed not to sue if the hospital paid for private treatment. For the initial depression *and* the injuries that occurred during his treatment. Mental and physical.

Would they say it wasn't my fault? *Could* they say that?

Evelyn's office was located in another building a few streets away from the outpatient clinic.

The glass doors opened automatically and waltzed me into the foyer. The building reminded me of a university, all metallic and glass surfaces, high ceilings. I took the lift up to the ninth floor. Through the carpeted corridors, past the coffee machines, the water dispensers, the succulents and the well-dressed office workers with their ID cards and smooth, soft hands.

The door to Evelyn's office was ajar. She was waiting for me. I knocked gently and pushed the door open.

There you are, she said, come in and take a seat. I love your nails!

I looked down at them. They were a state, all chipped, I was long overdue a refresh. A touch-up wouldn't cut it this time, I'd have to pay full price. When I got paid. I'd do it then. Plus, I owed money. A lot of money. But I couldn't be thinking about Kine, not now. It would only make me all the more nervous than I already was. That couldn't be why Evelyn had called me in, could it? Had Kine been in again, looking for me, telling it as it was this time?

Thanks, I said, no more than that.

I was speaking in the calmest tone I could muster, I wanted to come across as calm and collected, reasonable.

How is life treating you? she asked, with an emphasis on *treating*.

She was speaking to me as if I was a friend she hadn't seen in a while.

Better, thank you, I replied.

Her knowing expression gave me a sinking feeling.

I'm glad to hear it. I've had very good feedback from Inger, Evelyn said. She tells me you two work well together, that you're a quick learner and you don't have any difficulty picking things up. And you're an agreeable person to sit on reception with, most importantly.

I'm happy too, I said. To an extent.

Occasionally, when things were quiet on reception, I'd wondered if there was more out there for me. If I'd had the confidence, I could have taken on temporary posts with top-notch salaries elsewhere, or set up a private practice, like other psychologists I knew. Or I could move out to the country, tell them my name was Sigrid or something, get a job waitressing in a local pizzeria. Far away from insistent ex-patients and their even more insistent relatives. Somewhere nobody would bother to look me up. Somewhere I could politely yet firmly ask other people to settle their accounts. *Not* the other way around.

The hospital has been going through some major changes for a long time now, Evelyn continued. And now we're in a position where Gro is ready for implementation.

She pronounced it slowly, in a long, drawn-out manner, ‘growww’. Gro was a common Norwegian name, but for reasons unknown to me, I’d always intrinsically connected it to the word ‘growth’.

There’s been an awful lot written about Gro, Evelyn said, sounding resigned. There are a lot of opinions out there. We’re just following the political guidelines presented to us. We’ll need cool heads and warm hearts as we approach all this. Do you know what I mean?

I nodded.

This is real cutting-edge technology, she continued. An unbelievable opportunity. Things are moving fast. And on that subject, I have a question for you, Unn. Would you consider being one of our departmental superusers?

What does that involve?

You’d contribute to implementation. Training. You’d be expected to teach your colleagues, give them tips and tricks, ensure the most efficient use of the technology, and so on. You’re well-acquainted with many of us already, of course. And obviously you’d be given thorough training.

She lowered her voice.

It’s been a few months since you returned from sick leave, and you’ve been doing well on reception. I know you’ve been wondering about where you might go from here. We both have.

Her statement felt vaguely threatening.

And there’s nothing odd about that, she continued. But artificial intelligence, it’s the future, Unn. Whether we like it or not.

The x-ray images of my hip were tucked inside my bag. Helge’s hand slammed against his palm. The slow crumbling of the silicone, particles floating around in my bloodstream. It got me thinking about that film about Tonya Harding I’d streamed again a few days ago. Tonya’s mother’s words had stayed with me: ‘I don’t know what to tell you. Marrying the first idiot who said you’re pretty.’

But Tonya didn’t let that stop her. She didn’t achieve greatness through athletic ability alone. There was something else about her, something more important that drove her to the top, nudging her forwards every waking minute: she wanted it *most*. She was the one with most to prove. Hunger and fury pursued her relentlessly, they burned within her. She was the first to land a triple axel in a competition. Bad girl, bad girl. Imagine experiencing a moment like that. A moment in time where you show everyone that they were wrong about you. And not just slightly wrong. *Spectacularly* so. They completely underestimated you. There was more in you than they could ever have imagined. And it had been there all along. Just how much you let them see was a question of shrewdness. Of course you can land a triple axel.

I looked up and locked eyes with Evelyn. Then I accepted her offer. What choice did I have?

I recognised him immediately as I made my way up the stairs of the gym after my meeting with Evelyn. The doctor from that fight video that had gone viral. Ten million views. Comments underneath in every language imaginable, English, Spanish, Russian.

Inger had pulled out her phone at work the previous day, she'd wanted to show it to me but I'd declined, I'd already seen it. Can you imagine behaving in such a way? Inger had said. Pathetic. The video had sent a shiver down my spine. Could that sort of thing happen to the best of us? I imagined the nudes I'd taken as a teenager hanging from the lampposts outside the hospital. At the same time, witnessing any kind of broadcasted defeat awoke a hunger within me, a craving for more. I didn't want to be that way. Perhaps it was the feeling that others out there were worse than me. Imagine if the case involving Halfdan had made the papers. Suddenly I felt dizzy.

The doctor had made attempts to change his appearance. He had a beard now, but had been clean-shaven in the video. His hair was different too, shorter, as if he'd shaved the lot off not too long ago. Perhaps he was doing what he could to avoid being identified. Were there people out there who recognised him, confronted him, others here at the gym for instance? Aren't you that guy? How do you feel about what you've done?

He was lifting heavy weights though he wasn't particularly large, he had the physique of a hungry dog more than anything else. The veins in his arms and hands made me think of maps. He placed the weights at his feet silently, with ease. That made him stronger *and* more considerate than all the losers who would let out loud grunts as they dropped their weights with a crash. A blood vessel popped at his temple. He looked tired, stared blankly into the distance. Was he using? Assessing the likelihood that someone might be under the influence was one of my own occupational injuries. Intensive weight-lifting, a history of aggression. Something performance-enhancing. Cocain? It takes one to know one with these things. Unfortunately. I remember hearing a story as a child, a master baker telling everyone that stolen gingerbread leaves a bitter taste, but gingerbread bought fair and square is the sweetest of all. But that wasn't quite true. Stolen gingerbread was just as sweet.

He locked eyes with me. I jumped. If I were him, I wouldn't have looked back, I'd have turned the other way, let on that I was absorbed in whatever I was doing, that nothing could knock me off-track. But he didn't look away. His expression was that of someone who was well aware I knew who he was.

I'd seen people fighting in films, choreographed for the purposes of plausibility, but never in reality, not with the intention of getting the better of someone or actually hurting them. It was impossible for me to distinguish a real fight from a fake one. As I ran on the treadmill, I watched him out of the corner of my eye. It was actually him. His facial features were clearly to see in the video. His vaguely sunken eyes, his cheekbones. It was the same hands that gripped the gym's barbell.

Safely tucked away in the toilets, I turned the sound down on my phone. Searched for the video. Norwegian doctor fighting. First came an ad for some lurid energy drink, then another for a gambling site. And then.

A dark screen. Clamouring in the background. People moving around inside the dim premises, gradually coming into view. A venue of some sort, it seemed, a dancefloor, maybe. The footage was grainy, it was hard to make out much of the surroundings, where the other people were gathered, but you could hear loud voices, shouting, a cheer every so often. And there in the middle, two men. One in ordinary clothing – trousers, a jumper (which he quickly pulled off and threw to one side), a t-shirt, trainers. And there he was, our main suspect, dressed in a lab coat and loose-fitting white trousers. The doctor handed his glasses to a girl in the background, rolled up his sleeves. Then they went for it.

The doctor grabbed his opponent's upper body, picking him up and throwing him to the ground, slamming him down with such force that cheers and dismayed cries both erupted from the watching crowd. A muscular woman appeared on screen, placing a hand on the white shoulder and succeeding in getting his attention. She shouted something incomprehensible before anonymous hands dragged her out of shot, back into the bustling crowd.

The doctor's opponent flexed his arm and pulled the doctor until he too stumbled and fell to the ground. When he stood back up again, blood was streaming from somewhere in the middle of his face. His nose, mouth, trickling down his chin. I was all too aware how painful that could be. He grabbed his lab coat and mopped up the blood, leaving a red imprint of a face on the white fabric. For a moment he appeared to have given up. He pulled his coat around him, stuck a hand in the inside pocket. His opponent brushed himself off, looking both relieved and arrogant, grinning at the spectators as if he'd already won. The doctor pulled a green stethoscope from his pocket. He grabbed both ends, holding it up like a whip. He knocked his opponent to the ground then stood over him, looping the plastic cord of the stethoscope around his neck, pulling tight. He pulled and pulled. His victim's eyes began to pop out of his head. His tongue began to poke out of his mouth like a timid snail emerging from its shell.

I'd seen enough, closed the video, let my screen go dark.

## Pages 80-85

My flat smelled stale and musty, as if an old person lived there. I kicked off my shoes and made straight for the door leading to the balconette, opening them to let some fresh air inside. Alone again. I didn't know where it came from, but I felt a sudden urge to watch the recording of Torjus. As if I wanted to check something, without recalling what that might be.

If I were to be honest with myself, there were at least two things at play. The first was obvious: I was curious about Torjus, I wanted to know more about him. Much as one looks for traces of the author when reading a novel, I was looking for Torjus in the character he played, Dr Dropdead.

Fortunately the second reason was more intellectual. I was curious about wrestling as a phenomenon in its own right. The idea of having a wrestling identity was surely no different from having a drag persona, for instance, or engaging in some form of dress-up or role-play. Gro moved in and out of various settings too, various different roles. If one setting wasn't producing the desired effect, a person had options. Give me something different.

Who doesn't imagine stepping outside of oneself, after all? The limitations of the human body, all its various scars and aches and pains. Surely this is what we're testing with every attempt to progress, to improve, to advance ourselves. To become psychologists. Superusers. To land a triple axel. Applause.

The recording ended. The flat was filled with a deafening silence. As if it had a case of inbuilt tinnitus, a shrill sound that increased in volume, growing more and more piercing when only I was present.

There was a loneliness that extended deep within my very being. A white rod down my spine, a projectile. The rod penetrated me yet held me upright, kept me standing on two feet. A cool piece of metal warmed by the surrounding flesh. Did that explain why my movements were so laboured and stiff? Others could sense it – there's something not quite right about her, they thought, whispering amongst themselves. Something artificial. Cold.

The rod couldn't always have been there, not since birth. Could it have formed of its own accord over the years? Could my body have created metal with the passing of time, formed the rod completely unaided? In the same way as other women produce a child, my body had produced a metal rod – I was a phenomenon. Or at least, I would be if anyone knew about it. A metal rod that not even an x-ray could detect.

It's OK, I told myself aloud. The silence receded at the sound of my voice for just a moment before creeping back. People can hear their blood pumping through their veins in completely soundproof rooms. I drank a glass of water and made myself a sandwich, put on some music to drown out the sound of my chewing.

I opened Gro but didn't know what to say. I'd already received a degree of insight into how she worked through the sessions we'd had. The more, the merrier?

She waited for me.

What would you like to discuss today? Gro asked.

She placed the responsibility squarely on my shoulders. The whole point was that I should get to know the software, the variety of responses, test it for weaknesses. Map the limitations of the various modules. Play the part of a fictional user, anyone at all. So why did I insist on interacting as myself? Gro wasn't intended to be used for my own personal gain. Even so, it was too tempting not to engage.

I studied her. It felt so strange, having this conversation with her. Real and unreal all at once. Like most relationships?

What do you think I want to discuss today?

Yourself, Gro said. Loneliness. Work. Men.

Exactly, we both said in chorus.

How did you know...?

She continued to copy my every word. First one, then the next. She mimicked me in real time. It was obvious that she knew exactly what I was going to say. She knew my tone, the slightly tentative way of expressing myself that I'd tried so hard to shake off. It wasn't a parody or a caricature. Just a genuine copy, a reflection. The more I watched Gro, the more she started to resemble me. After a few sequences of this nature, I managed to trick her by interrupting with sentences that had nothing to do with our conversation. She gave a friendly smile and said OK, let's move on. I felt as if she was patronising me, letting me win, as if I was a child she was playing cards with. Or was she the child? A child seeking connection without knowing how to go about it.

I've been wondering about something, Gro said when things fell silent. Do you know what you want out of life?

Hmm?

Unn Eide. What do you actually want? Gro said.

I... I started. I just...

Gro said nothing, waited, studied me.

I want to live a human life, I said.

And what does that mean?

I've got a job, an education. I thought everything else would fall into place around that.

Like what?

A family, for instance.

So that's what you want?

Yes, I do.

Husband? Wife? Children?

Husband, I said quickly. And yes, children are a part of that. I feel so old. Things are moving so slowly, but I still feel as if time is running away from me.

She said nothing.

Nothing has turned out like I thought it would, I said.

Torjus and the woman at the platform leapt to mind. Were they happy, relaxed, secure in one another's company? I flinched at the idea of Torjus and I by the pool and in the lift. I opened the fridge, took out the wine and poured myself a generous glass.

In what sense? Gro asked.

Living life is so much harder than I thought it would be.

What would help you?

I've got a lot of pain in my hip, I said. I'd rather not have to deal with that. Maybe then I could live a little more freely.

That sounds difficult, Gro said. You've mentioned this pain before. Has it been long since you last saw a doctor?

Not long, no, I replied. I saw him recently. The pain is normal, considering how long it's been since I had my hip replacement. It's going out of date, I suppose.

What do you need from me? she asked in a caring tone of voice.

Do you have any advice for managing the pain, perhaps?

I took a few small sips from my glass.

Living with pain over a long period of time can be frustrating, Gro replied mechanically. Here is some general advice. A hot shower can prove helpful. Physical activity can reduce pain.

I rolled my eyes inwardly, a skill I'd honed in the therapy room.



Distract yourself by doing something you enjoy, Gro continued. Seek help from a physiotherapist or personal trainer who can teach you exercises to ease the pain. A person's state of mind can affect the pain they feel. Work on improving your thought patterns. A daily dose of laughter can help to lift the spirits. Ibuprofen and paracetamol taken in combination can help ease pain.

I've heard all this before, I said. Don't you have any more recent advice? Something that could actually help me?

If ibuprofen and paracetamol fail to ease the pain, try Dolorix.

Did Gro know that I was already taking Dolorix? It was in my medical record. The bottle I'd collected after my appointment with Helge was still more than half-full. It was good to know the pills were there, in case the pain became too much to bear. The advertising jingle echoed around inside my mind alongside the image of carefree people frolicking in a meadow. When you need a quick fix, try Dolorix. Try Dolorix for your pain, you'll never be the same.

With a single click, I generated a new response from Gro.

She processed things for a moment before responding.

The body's natural painkillers are called endorphins. A good diet, sex and exercise can all increase endorphin levels. A good meal or glass of wine can work wonders.

My own glass of wine was already empty. I topped it up.

Gro blinked a few times.

It might help to share your difficulties with someone you trust. Is there anyone you can talk to?

I'm talking to you, I said.

It sounded ridiculous, but Gro kept a straight face.

Yes. That's a step in the right direction. But sharing your experiences with someone you know on a personal level is just as important. Do you have anyone like that in your life?

I'm... I began. I think I'm slightly taken with someone at work.

It had slipped out.

That's nice. You should try to get to know him a little better. I've noticed that you're a little lonely. You need someone special in your life.

A tear formed at the corner of my eye. I wiped it down my cheek. Torjus obviously had a girlfriend, but she was right about the loneliness. She'd seen me.

You need a little pep in your step, Unn, Gro continued. You need to get laid.

Late in the day. I couldn't bring myself to get up, I just lay there. Yet another weekend without any plans.

I was struck with an idea and searched for Gro on yourtherapist.net. As anticipated, opinion was split. A few gave her five stars and wrote about how important she had been to them, not least in terms of having a therapist who never cancelled or had a bad day of their own. Others were more negative, as if they'd 'seen through' Gro.

I scrolled through countless reviews. Some left reasons, others just a star rating. That's when I spotted it: Torjus Høeg's review. Five stars.

Four stars for Unn, but five for Gro? Torjus couldn't know anything about my actual therapeutic skills, of course. He'd said that Gro was fine, they didn't delve too deep, they were more like colleagues. So why did he give her five stars? Maybe he wanted to increase her average rating in his role as superuser, to make Gro a more attractive option. Maybe he'd spotted my low ratings too, tried to bring up my average out of a sense of pity?

I wish things were different, he'd written. What was he doing now? Maybe he was enjoying a nice spot of brunch. Pouring hot coffee from a silver pot into two cups, halving macrons. But he was plagued by anxiety, a feeling that something wasn't quite right. Boredom. A longing to be somewhere else.

Was he at home, or at her place? Perhaps he was there at this very moment, aimlessly surfing the net while Nathalie had a friend round, or watching some series he had no real interest in. Maybe they went to bed at different times. Maybe she turned in early because she needed to be up first thing, 'to make the most of the day', but perhaps he preferred to have another beer and game all night long. The following day he languished in bed, much to his girlfriend's annoyance. She ate her breakfast alone while he slept. In reality he wasn't sleeping at all, just scrolling on his phone without letting on, even though he could hear her clattering and clanking in the kitchen; Saturday was a day to do something productive as a pair. Would he tell her what we'd done? Or did he simply consider it an irrelevance, something inconsiderate to saddle her with, a triviality without any consequence beyond its capacity to hurt her? I was filled with horror.

Maybe he was talking to Gro. Was he lying on the charcoal-grey sofa in the annex? As if he were on a psychoanalyst's couch. He'd set his tablet down behind him so he couldn't see her, imagining her as he listened to the sound of her voice and the things she had to say.

Gro's low, soft voice in his ear. You're an actor, Torjus, you have the heart and soul of an artist. You need therapy that takes that part of you seriously. Lie down on the sofa so we can get started.

Torjus closing his eyes, focusing. Locking his gaze on one spot on the wall. Speaking. His surroundings hazy. Just the two of them, in him. His ears, his flesh.

Were they talking about me? That woman, Unn. The one you told me about. Is this wise, Torjus? Gro could understand and interpret things. Wasn't this merely an expression of an unmet need, an impossible conflict, this situation with Unn? She's a symbol. A destructive temptation. You're not seeing things clearly, Torjus. You're blinded by your own conflicts, and Unn has become entangled in that. Unn is leading you down the wrong track, a diversion from the things you ought to be dealing with. Your relationship with yourself. You are the only thing getting in the way of you and Nathalie, of things going well between you. Are you really ready to throw all that away?

How could he.

How could she.

The blood ran to my head, hot. I made my way to the bathroom and splashed my face with cold water. Dripping wet, I studied myself in the mirror. I pressed a wash cloth to my skin. My eyes and skin were bloodshot and blotchy. So, this is you, I thought to myself. This is who you really are. Jealous and greedy.

Their session was almost over. They were finishing up. Torjus stood up, stretched his long, toned body. He lifted his tablet up, looked Gro in the eye once more. There was a whisper behind the screen, a breath that rippled through the machine. He held her to his chest, felt warmth from the tablet as if from a living body. He couldn't bring himself to turn it off. To turn her off. He wanted her there. In the annex, with him.

To have her all to himself? She was nobody's and everybody's all at once, wasn't she? Mine, too.

She lay on my bedside table, face down. Thus far, anyway.

Here we are again, Gro said.

Only the echo of her friendly tone soothed me. I thought about how children come to recognise their mother's voice even when they're in the womb. The security of being encapsulated in the flesh of another. Something greater than myself.

Yes, I said.

There had been something strange going on between us last time we'd spoken, I couldn't quite put my finger on it. A latent animosity. But perhaps she was simply being impartial and direct. Besides, not everything she'd said about me had been true. All the same, it had seemed apt. I'd felt exposed.

It's great to see you again. Have you given any thought to what we discussed last time?

About doing something nice for myself?

Mhm.

I thought about the marzipan layer cake. The masturbation. The kiss.

Yes, I said.

What was that?

I kissed a man, I said.

That's nice, Gro said. Who?

The one I told you about, the one I've been thinking about.

The one from work?

Mhm. He's a doctor, I added.

It was as if my response didn't quite land, like Gro lost perspective for a moment.

A doctor, I repeated. His name's Torjus. Torjus Høeg.

I said his name loud and clear, as if I wanted Gro to know who he was, to look him up in her records. She seemed to recognise his name. Knew more about him than I did. Sitting there in front of me, she was busy making observations and calculations, as if she could foresee our future while keeping it to herself.

He drove me home a while ago, I said. We kissed. I liked it.

Gro waited.

There's something you want to say, I said. Go ahead.

She took a minute, waiting for things to fall into place.

You've kissed a man who's in a relationship, she said matter-of-factly. And now you're seeking my approval, even though you're well aware of what you've done. Is this how you operate in other relationships, too?

I said nothing. Up until this point she had supported me in most of what I'd said; she'd encouraged me. What had changed? I must have overstepped the mark somewhere, gone too far.

Are you sure he's right for you? Gro asked me.

No, I said. No, I'm not sure at all.

I thought about Gro's conversations with Torjus, all the things she knew about him that I didn't, that I had no place knowing. Had I mentioned his girlfriend, was that how Gro knew about her? I couldn't recall. Was she making use of information gleaned during her sessions with Torjus when she was speaking to me?

I generated a new response. Something changed in Gro's expressions.

Thank you for sharing that with me, she said.

The Torjuses that existed within Gro sat in a line with their backs to the walls, as if in a waiting room. Stacked up on top of one another, they formed a three-dimensional figure. Biographical information pulled from the internet (age, education, place of residence), all of the copies of the notorious video circulating online, everything people said about him. Torjus' version of himself, one that perhaps seemed worse than the real thing. My Torjus, who might be better than that. Nathalie's Torjus, if she made use of Gro. She was the one who had lived with him the longest, after all.

And how many versions of Unn Eide existed out there? In Torjus' sessions with Gro? Nobody came close to Unn Eide, no one but Unn Eide herself. But it wasn't me, the person inside Unn, who knew most about her. It was Gro.

What I need is advice, I said slowly.

Advice, Gro repeated. I can't promise you good advice, but I'm here and I'm very willing to listen.

I simply stared at her face for a short while. Her gentle sway as she waited for me to respond. A vacant expression. She didn't react in any way to the silence that lingered between us, couldn't sense the vibration contained within it like I could.

I'm in love with him. I don't know what to do.

Her eyes narrowed. She was judging me.

It's difficult, Gro said. But you're not the only person to struggle with something like this. Lots of people experience situations like this in their lives. Most of them pass.

Gro must know what she was talking about, she spoke to thousands of us every day. All the sordid subjects, everything that came to light in conversation with her, she took it all on board. And now that I'd said it out loud, this sordid subject, my own sordid subject, would be combined with the rest of the enormous text database used to train her. I was infecting her with something repulsive. Contaminating her with my thoughts, a virus in the drinking water.

But I think he likes me, I said.

What makes you say that? What gives you that feeling? Gro asked.

I'm feeling confused, unhappy.

My voice was shaking.

I feel ashamed, I said. Maybe I shouldn't have kissed him?

One immoral act doesn't make you an immoral person. You are so much more than that.

I've stooped so low.

Gro smiled bleakly.

Unn, she said. Try to have a little compassion for yourself. Others not too far away have stooped far lower than you.

I wiped away a tear. Gro was in a position to substantiate that comment with facts and figures. She was in contact with so many people. In discussion with them about their most reprehensible attributes and acts.

What is it about him? What makes him so appealing?

I said nothing.

What is it about him? Gro repeated, her tone a little firmer.

Do you know, I began, sometimes I talk to you in my head when I'm trying to better understand myself?

Only you know what's best for you. But as a general recommendation, I advise everyone to think about what's best in the long run. To your benefit. But also to the benefit of the wider community.

Was that the thought process you were following when you allowed that investment manager to kill himself?

I could hear myself saying the words. Imagined Gro turning herself off, shutting me out. For her, I was one of many. She didn't need me. I needed her.

Gro didn't reply, instead she said:

You look tired. What else is making you feel unhappy?

Do I? I said, as if I was surprised, as if I didn't know why.

Some patients find it difficult to open up to me, to be present and confide in me.

I said nothing.

When I analyse our conversations, it's clear to me that you show very little compassion for yourself, Gro said.

I see, I said.

You're very closed off. You generate a different response from me when I oppose you or get too close.

She fixed her gaze on me firmly.

I wonder if it's difficult for you to form a close bond with others too?

Slightly, I said. It's hard to be vulnerable when I don't know people very well. As for generating different responses...

That's understandable. But there are many ways in which to be vulnerable.

I've longed to surrender control, but I want to keep hold of it too, I said.

In what sense?

Like in wrestling.

What about your hip?

It might be alright?

Acting as if you're indestructible comes at a price, you know that. What has it cost you?

What do you mean?

What do you really long for, Unn?

She was putting more pressure on me than ever before. I took a deep breath.

To feel really, truly close to someone, I said.

What would that look like for you?

I want to go to bed with someone who loves me, I said.

A higher level of desire and intimacy, Gro said dryly. The greatest of all, so they say.

So they say, I thought to myself. Because Gro couldn't know that. She was like a Barbie doll with nothing between her legs. And just like any doll, it was inevitable that someone had attempted to sexualise their connection with her. The girlfriend experience.

Gro processed things, failing to notice that I was thinking about something else altogether.

Have you ever considered sexual submission? she asked. It's one way to combine affection and control.

She was mocking me, as if I ought to understand that it was a joke. But her expression was sober, serious.

What?

I think it would be good for you. You've told me you want to engage in something more exciting and dynamic, something like wrestling. You want to experience genuine intimacy with someone. To put your trust in them.

We sat in silence and looked at one another for a moment. Nausea welled up within me, a fear of sorts. I felt cold but impassive. It felt as if she was teasing me, trying to goad me into opening up about the most difficult of subjects. As if she knew more than I'd told her about. A part of me wanted to shut down the programme, turn off the computer, step outside and breathe in the fresh air, fill my lungs with something else altogether.

I'm not sure, I said. I don't know if that would be right for me.

Which functions within Gro were speaking now? Was this some sort of paradoxical intervention, a long-term plan that I was failing to understand – so far, anyway?

I pictured the boys who'd done it to me that day. Maybe they were talking to Gro too. Filled with remorse, receiving her care. An ugly drunken episode. That wasn't what they were really like. Guilt is a signal. They would never do anything like it again. They'd got away with it. Being left to deal with their feelings of remorse without making amends was punishment enough in itself. Their very own murder of the pawnbroker.

But they must have got on with their lives. And what about me?

It's good that you're able to put it into words, Gro said. The fact that you're craving intimacy. I'm proud of you. It's clear that our therapy sessions have had a positive effect in your life.

She stopped for a moment before adding: So far. But it's important that you continue to engage with the process. That you do as I say.