

Cappelen Damm

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IN THE HOUSE OF PANTALOOON is a novel about the destructive power of shame and how the silence that follows in its wake can ripple through generations.

The novel is set in Oslo, over the course of a few months. We follow Eva and Cornelia in alternate chapters, as Eva is dealing with widowhood, and Cornelia with a broken relationship and single parenthood. Through chance, Eva and Cornelia's paths keep crossing. A tender and unexpected affinity develops between the two women, who at first seem to have little in common, and who find themselves in vastly different circumstances.

The story has a plot-driven narrative, with an existential nerve, slight satirical elements, and much warmth. By the end, the reader will realize how these two women's lives are intertwined through secrets of the past and "the sins of the fathers", with Henrik Ibsen's *Ghosts* as a hinted-at backdrop.

In the House of Pantaloon

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CAPPELEN DAMM AGENCY

In the House of Pantaloon
Hilde Rød-Larsen

Praise for the novel

«The novel's themes, such as longing and devotion, desire and hunger, across time and generations make it to that extent a novel from and by our time, and the sensitive depiction of ageing, women's skepticism and agency, as well as the considerate descriptions of the searching man resonates perfectly well with this reader.»

Susanne Bent-Andersen, acquiring editor Gutkind (Denmark)

Riveting about power

« The community, the warmth and the compassion make Hilde Rød-Larsen's novel a terrific example of a feminine writing in a traditionally male-dominated world.»

KLASSEKAMPEN

«A character driven drama which engages and entertains. [...] Rød-Larsen has a good grip on the text, with dialogue that flows well.»

ADRESSEAVISA, five/six stars

Hilde Rød-Larsen

b. 1974

Hilde Rød-Larsen (b. 1974) is a fiction translator and freelance editor. Her debut novel *Summer time* came in 2022, and in 2022 *Diamond nights* came out.



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Synopsis

Eva is 59 years old and an editor of foreign fiction at one of Norway's major, and most traditional, publishing houses. She has recently lost her husband, Sverre – who was an editor-in-chief of Norwegian fiction at a competing house – to a heart attack. She lives in a well-furnished, spacious flat in the centre of Oslo, overlooking a lush park. Her and Sverre's only son, Jonas, is married and has recently moved to Bergen with his wife. Eva grew up in a financially comfortable middle-class household, but with parents that had a dysfunctional relationship.

Cornelia is 31 years old and works in a luggage shop. She has recently broken up with her long-term boyfriend, Thomas, who is also the father of their six-year-old daughter Karla. Thomas has moved out of their rented flat, and Cornelia is struggling financially. She grew up with a single mother that suffered from both money and mental health issues. The mother now lives in Nice, where she works in a bar frequented by run-down Scandinavians. Cornelia has never known who her father is.

The opening scene of the novel is set in Bislet Bad, a beautiful swimming pool built in the 1920's in central Oslo. Eva is sitting in the sauna, looking out through the glass wall, noticing a young woman that has also caught her attention previously. When this woman touches her ear in particular way, a strange feeling – neither pleasant nor uncomfortable –

is unleashed in Eva.

At a dinner party hosted by Eva's best friend, Hilda, Eva meets Bjørnar. Bjørnar is a diplomat that has become disenchanted with the foreign service and has taken a leave of absence. He is divorced, with three grown up daughters – and also Hilda's ex-lover. He is an attentive listener, and this is not something Eva is accustomed to. They hit it off.

Hilda tells Eva that she needs to tell her that she knows about a book in progress, that is being written by a former secretary through 40 years at Sverre's publishing house; a kind of *roman à clef*, written under pseudonym: IN THE HOUSE OF PANTALOON. There is a scene involving a man resembling Sverre, where a young receptionist is sexually assaulted. Eva is also approached by one of Sverre's old friends – one of Norway's most celebrated authors, Niels Neumann – who says cryptically and uncomfortably that some rumours about Sverre are running in Oslo's literary circles. Eva brushes it all off, does not want to think about it.

As the novel progresses, it turns out that Cornelia lives in the same block of flats as Hilda. As a result of many twists and turns, Eva, Bjørnar and Cornelia end up spending Christmas Eve together in Hilda's flat, just the three of them. The two "adults" feel a strong urge to take care of this young woman, who is celebrating Christmas all alone – Karla is with her father – and is deeply unhappy.

As the new year unfolds, so does Eva's and Bjørnar's relationship. She spends many nights a week at his place. They dig into personal issues that Eva has never talked about before – she is a woman that shies away from personal talk, as was her own mother.

Cornelia has now realised that she cannot afford the flat she is living in and grows increasingly more desperate as she cannot find a new one. Time is running out; she and Karla need to move out by the end of March. Early one morning a woman steps into her shop and looks bewildered at Cornelia. She asks if she is the daughter of Kristin Undrumslie, as she has a striking resemblance to her old close friend, that disappeared very suddenly out of her life when they were both young. The woman wants to meet with Cornelia to talk about what happened back then. The two go for a walk in the Vigeland Park, and the woman tells Cornelia that she believes that her mother was raped, and that the rapist is Cornelia's father. The woman did not see it as rape at the time –

Cornelia´s mother had been infatuated with this man after having shown him some poems she had written and been highly praised. However, because of the Me Too-movement, the woman has come to realise it was a case of sexual assault. She feels very bad about having brushed it away lightly in the past. She also knows who the man was: The author Niels Neumann.

Eva bumps into a distraught Cornelia close to where Bjørnar lives (Neumann lives close by, and Cornelia has tried to stalk him), and becomes very worried about her. Bjørnar suggests that she and Karla can live in Eva´s flat for a few weeks or months, while she sorts out a new place to live – while Eva stays with him.

At the very end of the novel Jonas spends a few nights at his mother´s place, to go to a friend´s stag party. Cornelia drops by, with Karla, to see the flat. Seeing Cornelia and Jonas together, it dawns on Eva, horrifically: The two are brother and sister. (This final chapter is inspired by the final act in Ibsen´s play).

As a kind of epilogue there is a review of the novel IN THE HOUSE OF PANTALOOON. Through this review, we learn that the receptionist had been a sort of a plaything for three men: A young editor, a new literary star and third man working at the publishing house. The receptionist had a crush on the author, but it was the editor who raped her, when she was drunk at a reception at the publishing house, with the two other men as onlookers. The receptionist never returned to work, and nobody talked about what had happened.

Early synopsis of book 2 and 3

In the belly of the whale

Planned for 2025

Summer 2024: Eva's son Jonas has been abandoned by his wife and made redundant at work, and lives in a temporary studio apartment in Bergen. Gina is still living in the magnificent villa she grew up in, which they took over and renovated together when they moved from Oslo. At the time, she was pregnant with Magnus, who turns five when the novel opens. When Gina announces at the birthday party that she will take Magnus on a month-long holiday in France with her new boyfriend, Jonas decides to spend the summer in his hometown of Oslo. On the train from Bergen to Oslo, he notices a woman who turns out to be the grown-up version of a girl he fell intensely in love with as a teenager. He tries to talk to her, but she rejects him.

During a hot July month in Oslo, with the city full of tourists and emptied of locals, Jonas will go into experiences that take him far back in time, to his childhood with his mother Eva and father Sverre. He will also experience contemporary events which makes him question who he really is.

In the burning

Planned for 2026

Karla from *In the house of Pantaloon* has turned 16 years old. She feels lonely and abandoned at home, with two parents who are busy with their own things, especially with Karla's two perpetually nagging younger siblings. Despite her mother's wishes, Karla decides to spend the summer with her grandmother, whom she barely knows, in the small holiday town of Lønstrup in Northern Jutland in Denmark. The grandmother moved there a few years ago, together with a younger woman whom neither Karla nor her mother has met. Among the sand dunes and surf, it will dawn on Karla how little she actually knows about her family, or about herself. Gradually she decides not put up with it anymore, that no one tells her anything, that no one talks to each other.

Sample translation

In the House of Pantaloon

Hilde Rød-Larsen

Translated by Caroline Waight

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p. 9-46

She is *back*, the young woman with the strange way of moving. As though in water, even when outside the pool. Eva shuts the sauna door behind her and spreads her yellow towel on the top bench, near the window. Normally she'd lie on her back, stretch out and close her eyes, but now she sits, eyes on the pane of glass, alone in the room, in the heat. There's something stunned about the woman as she sinks down onto one of the benches at the shallow end of the pool. She draws her knees up to her chest, interlocks her arms around them. Tilts her head back at an angle that does not look natural. Stays that way, unmoving.

It's *back*, this word that has lit up in her mind, which tells Eva she has noticed the woman before. Now she realises when. One of those late, insistent summer days when the sun was following her everywhere. Coming in through the thin gap in the roller blind when she woke up in the morning. Falling across the dusty computer screen in her office as she tried to do the budget for a book that wouldn't add up right, no matter how she fudged the numbers. Onto the patch of lawn where she sought refuge during her lunchbreak, avoiding another half an hour in the cafeteria, chatting about TV shows she hasn't seen. Funny how little they talk about books at one of Norway's oldest publishing houses.

When it was late afternoon at last, and she stepped into the dim light of Bislet Baths, she had felt she wanted to remain forever. In the cocoon of it, its 1920s beauty. The original changing cubicles with their baby pink doors are still intact, arrayed around the pool and on the mezzanine above. The whole place gives her a sense of existing in Time itself, not merely in her own era. Only VIP members have access to the cubicles these days – Eva uses the communal changing room. Which is fine by her. She likes to be one body among other bodies. And she never breathes more freely than when floating on her back, gazing up at the vaulted glass ceiling far above.

On that day in late summer, she had dwelled a little longer over everything: undressing, showering, swimming strokes, laps, the rocking, the sauna, the second shower, the drying off, the moisturising. She had nobody to get back to anyway. As she rubbed in the cream, she noticed the young woman getting undressed by her locker. She had a small tattoo on her right shoulder blade, too small for Eva to make out. The woman was pulling off some loose clothes that had probably once been black, but by now were tumble-dryer grey. Her feet were turned out like a ballet dancer's, and yet there was that effortfulness to the way she moved. It made her seem older than she otherwise appeared. Her skin was smooth, her small buttocks firm. Did she have an injury of some kind? *Repair* was the word that formed in Eva's head as the woman bent down, cautiously somehow, to remove a sock. She felt the impulse to go over and stroke her cheek.

Now the woman is letting go of her knees, placing one foot on the floor and then the other. Pushing up from the bench with both hands, rising, walking slowly towards the pool on thin legs that drag. Eva leans forward, nose brushing against the glass. Straggles of wet mousy hair are clinging to the woman's head. As she turns around to climb backwards into the pool, she touches her ear, in a gesture that prompts a tiny *oh* from Eva. Something warm, something that trickles, spreads beginning in her belly to her fingertips, but she can't tell if it's pleasant or revolting. An old man, one of the regulars, is swimming slowly on his back in the middle of the pool. It doesn't look like either of them has noticed the other.

Sweat is beginning to bead between Eva's breasts. There is a weight to them now that has been there for several years, although she still thinks of it as new. She cups a hand over one of them, above the purple swimsuit. She looks down at her stomach, rolls of flesh beneath tight fabric, but not so many that it doesn't flatten if she straightens up. Next month she'll be fifty-nine, but she feels infinitely younger and older than that. *Unused*.

When she was young, so young, so shy that she had not been kissed, she would sometimes stand in front of the big mirror in her parents' bedroom, examining her naked body. Impatient, aching. Afterwards she'd fill the bathtub and lie in the hot water and touch herself until she came.

It's been a long time now since anyone has touched her, including herself. The possibility occurs to her sometimes, that's all.

Eva rarely stays in the sauna long enough that she begins to sweat, but now her thighs are glistening too. She gets up, takes her towel and walks out into the steamy space she knows is warm but feels cool. She puts the towel on the bench where the woman was just sitting, next to a single black hairband, and turns to the pool. The man gets out and makes a stumbling beeline for the jacuzzi as Eva gets in. Now it's just her and the woman. She allows herself to sink fully below the water, curls herself into a ball and pushes off with both feet against the side.

Thomas is the one taking Karla to the hospital, it's his week. He was the one the school called to say she'd hurt herself. Cornelia had been at the shop when he rang, stuck for what felt like ten minutes with an argumentative customer. There was nothing she could do: the man was demanding a replacement for his broken suitcase, but he hadn't bothered to bring a damage report from the airline. He'd almost certainly overfilled it, although he was never going to admit that. Not very nice, albeit a relief, to palm a customer like that off onto a brand new employee. Still, Cornelia herself had been handed full responsibility for the shop from day one, even though it was just a summer job. She hurried into the tiny broom-cupboard of a break room to take the call, expecting something, although she didn't yet know what.

'Karla's fallen off the climbing frame, so I'm on my way to the school,' he said, before Cornelia could even say hello. 'Banged her head, apparently. Possible concussion, and she's hurt her arm. I'm taking her to the hospital to be on the safe side. Give you a call when I'm there, just wanted to let you know.'

He had sounded so stiff and formal, as though she was a caseworker he'd been forced to notify, not someone he had shared a bed with for eight years, until four months ago.

If she and Thomas had still been together, she would have simply let him sort it out himself and stayed at work. Now her instincts were telling her he'd win some kind of meaningless point if she didn't leap into action.

'I'm jumping in a taxi right now,' she blurted, even though the customer had raised his voice a notch or two, even though she didn't really think Karla was seriously injured, even if it meant leaving Linda alone in the shop before she was fully trained. Even though she never takes taxis and would probably have got there just as quickly on the tram, and has only 600 kroner in her bank account, which needs to last the month. Six hundred kroner, a bag of bottles she can recycle for cashback, and two more visits on her Bislet Baths punchcard, a thirty-first birthday present from the girls. It's a much nicer gift than they usually give each other – Bislet is exorbitantly expensive. At the time it had warmed her heart to think how much they cared: enough to think of it, to shell out all that money. The morning afterward she wondered whether pity was what made them do it, if they thought there was something pathetic about her.

It's annoyance that she mostly feels now, sitting in the taxi, because it was Thomas they called. Plus a hint of irritation that she skipped washing her hair that day, and satisfaction that she wore the boots with a slight heel. And then a sudden thought: what if Karla really does have a concussion? They'll have to miss the autumn party at school tomorrow. Before she can stave it off, a surge of relief.

Cornelia doesn't think she had particularly unrealistic ideas of what having kids was like before she had one. She was unsurprised by the sleepless nights or the slow hours spent on early-morning playgrounds, clutching a Thermos of coffee she didn't really want. What caught her off

guard were all the other parents she was constantly having to deal with. The boredom of it. Hopefully things are looking up now that Karla is at school rather than nursery, but she can't tell yet, because somehow she forgot about the first Year One parents' meeting. She's not sure if she's pleased or upset that Thomas wasn't there either, for whatever ill-defined reason. Regardless: she'll be happy if she never has to hear another discussion about whether cheese strings are acceptable in a lunchbox.

She rubs off the lip gloss she has just put on as she waits for the driver to tap her Visa card against the reader. He gives her back the card without turning around, without meeting her eye in the mirror. Two hundred and twenty-one kroner. Oh well. She doesn't need to go shopping until Karla arrives, in three days, and after that there are only two more to go until payday.

Then it hits her, like a jab to the stomach: maybe Karla really *is* hurt.

The glass doors open to admit her and an elderly lady supported by someone Cornelia assumes is her daughter. There is something exasperated and despondent about the look on the younger woman's face, which anybody less close to her would never have let show. The older woman is in obvious pain, but the young one – who must be in her fifties – tugs her arm to hurry her along, although it doesn't have much effect. A nurse comes to meet them just inside the door, and the old lady immediately clutches at the stranger.

There aren't many people in the waiting room now. It's a weekday, and still office hours for GPs. That's how often she's been here in recent years. Chickenpox, mycoplasma, stove-burns, sprained wrist, broken arm. But it's been a whole year since the last time, a year exactly. When the three of them were here last summer, her and Thomas and Karla, the latter with a broken arm, it was full of people. A middle-aged man bleeding from the head and holding his hand over his mouth as though there was something wrong with his teeth. Cornelia had to tell Karla to stop staring. A buckle-kneed junkie. A limping boy with torn saggy jeans and a skateboard in his hand. And the three of them. Karla had fallen off her new bike, the birthday present they had given her only that day. It ruined their chances of swimming almost that whole summer, on top of everything else that was ruined.

Maybe she should wear the green dress, add a leather jacket on top. It's Thomas's week, so it's his job to bring something for the multi-cultural buffet, whatever that involves. She wonders if they'll meet at the school or if they'll go together, and the thought of standing alone in the schoolyard, without a child to look after, without a dish to set on the long table, makes her feel empty inside. They were together when she bought the dress that spring, at a flea market at Ila School. Karla was at a birthday party, and they had two unplanned hours to themselves. Afterwards she put it on in the loo at a bakery, over the skinny jeans that have torn now at the knee, while Thomas bought coffee. Nobody who saw them on a bench in the sun in St. Hanshaugen, holding their paper cups, could have guessed they would split up a few weeks later. They had already agreed she would keep living at their place until she found somewhere cheaper, while he would move into a nearby flat belonging to a former student friend who'd got a job abroad. Perhaps he had thought they wouldn't go through with the break-up, that it was just some bee Cornelia had

got into her bonnet, a passing mood. Sometimes days went by when they didn't talk about it, and at night they lay closer to each other than they had in ages. During those weeks he would put his arm around her now and then, as they lay body to body, and pull her closer to his belly like he used to do before.

She tries to cut through the room without stopping at reception, heading for the elephant trunks that point cheerily in the direction of the paediatric ward, but is stopped by a nurse, who does not offer her an arm.

'Can I help you?' A chilly smile, as though she couldn't possibly have any business with the trunks, this woman who has brought no children with her.

'My daughter's come in with her dad, she hit her head. She fell down at school, and they called him because it's his week.' As if that's anything to do with the nurse. 'I came as quickly as I could.'

He's sitting next to the aquarium. Head resting against the wall, eyes closed. Phone in hand. Typical. But that shirt he's got on, that's not typical. Jesus. Are those blue and red *flowers*? Really? And he's done something with his hair, something involving lots of fringe. The shoes are familiar, and the wad of chewing tobacco under his top lip. She thought he'd stopped using that.

'Mama?' Karla is in the doorway. 'Why are you here?'

Thomas opens his eyes, straightens up, puts his phone in his back pocket. Karla goes over to him, climbs onto his lap. There doesn't appear to be anything wrong with her arm, at any rate.

'I called Mama and said you'd had a bump, so she wanted to come and see how you're getting on,' he says, tucking her hair behind her ear. To Cornelia: 'She's had an X-ray. We're waiting for the doctor now.'

Apart from the three of them, the only people in the waiting room are a mother and a child, a boy. He's lying with his head in his mother's lap, gazing up at her. Her hand is resting on his stomach, and she murmurs something to him. He smiles dully back and shuts his eyes.

Karla fidgets, making herself comfortable in the crook of Thomas's arm. She doesn't look especially unwell. 'I had to wait with the nurse until Dada came to pick me up,' she says. 'I got some juice. But I like fizzy drinks now, Mama! Dada lets me have a taste when he drinks Coke.'

Thomas looks at Cornelia, shrugs his shoulders slightly. She refuses to say what he's expecting her to say. Karla can like Coke if she wants, it makes no difference to her, although he might want to stop drinking quite so much of it himself, grown man that he is, especially with that fledgling paunch. But then, dropping her gaze, Cornelia realises there is no longer any trace of it: his stomach is flat under the floral shirt, and his cheeks are narrower as well. It suits him, she can't say it doesn't.

There are plenty of free chairs, but Cornelia doesn't know where to sit, so she leans against the wall by the toilet door, across from Karla and Thomas. She regrets not having made plans for this evening. Pictures the heap of clothes she grabbed off the drying rack and threw onto the sofa last night without putting them away. The fridge with its bag of potatoes, a solitary egg, half a jar of blueberry jam and a carton of skimmed milk past its expiry date. She can't motivate herself to shop on the weeks when she doesn't have Karla, except to buy milk and coffee.

They walk in a row out through the sliding doors, Karla in the middle, Cornelia squinting in the low late-afternoon sun. No fractures, they said, and probably no concussion, but it would be good to keep an eye on her the next few hours, see if she felt sick or showed any signs of a headache. The doctor kept addressing Thomas as though Cornelia wasn't there, as if he could tell she wouldn't be the one keeping an eye out.

Outside the pharmacy, Cornelia squats down, takes Karla's arm, smiles and strokes her cheek. 'Hope you feel better soon, sweetheart. See you at the party tomorrow!' She says it a bit too loudly, even she can hear that, and when she glances up and meets Thomas's eye, she knows he's heard it too – it still feels like he sees right through her, registering every sound she makes, each tiny movement, like he knows precisely what they mean, better even than she does, and she can't bear him feeling sorry for her – and why should he?

'Come on, Dada,' Karla says. 'Let's go home.'

Cornelia turns down the offer to go with them. She should get back to work – the shop might be full of American tourists from the cruise ships at this very moment, pulling all the stock off the shelves and putting it on the floor, gabbling and gabbling – but she can't stand the thought of that, and she doesn't want to go home either. She doesn't know what she wants. But this is what she wanted.

For a brief moment as she pushes open the front door, the thought flashes across Eva's mind that Sverre is home. The ceiling lamp is on in the hall, revealing the thin layer of dust over the picture on the chest of drawers: Jonas on his first day of school. Skinny legs in shorts that are too wide, faintly knock-kneed – it's a pinprick to the heart. As usual she wants to take the picture down, put it in a drawer; as usual she doesn't. It will be her who left the light on, there's no other possibility anymore. She must have forgotten to switch it off before she went to work, although *forgotten* may

not be the right word. She sets down her handbag and her shopping and flowers as she kicks the door shut with her foot. There is an odour in the flat she cannot place. Not bad, not good. New. It's not that something has been added, but she can't put into words what's missing. Sverre is missing. She has had many words for him, but not now. Now it's just her, in this flat that first was his home and then theirs. Or that was how they saw it, anyway. These days it's hers for real, now that Jonas's slice of the inheritance has been paid out. It wasn't hers by default. Sverre had bought insurance policies, and she was a beneficiary too, she's grateful for that. She slips off her flat brown boots, picks up the flowers and the bag, and walks through the darkened living room into the kitchen. In the street outside a car alarm begins to howl, mingling with hoarse barks. She thinks she might have seen a shaggy little dog tied up outside the hairdresser's on the corner – the image of it pops into her head – but that may just be her brain's response to the sound. Perhaps it was yesterday she saw the dog, or perhaps the cognac-brown, stub-legged creature she's picturing doesn't even exist. But the barking exists, if only as an echo in her ears. The alarm has stopped as well.

She sets down the nearly empty Kiwi bag on the floor by the oven, puts the small bouquet of tulips from the florist on the counter, and switches on the blue Poul Henningsen lamp above the designer table. That smell, it's *fresh* – she doesn't need to crack open a window. She should go back into the hall to hang her coat up, but instead she hurries to free the flowers from their brown paper wrappings. Then the plastic, then the rubber bands, even though she's just been told for the umpteenth time that tulips are supposed to be stood in water with the plastic on for at least thirty minutes, because that way they stay upright. *Upright*, that's her word, but it isn't upright she needs right now. She needs the flowers to take effect at once, in this room she used to love because it was so open, so clean, and now is huge and barren. Something has leaked out of it, or in?

Rather than fetch down the appropriately tall Alvar Aalto vase from the cupboard above the sink, she walks into the living room to get the low, round one from the windowsill, a Christmas present from Jonas and Gina. For a moment she stops to look out at the park, yellow-glowing in the lamplight. There's no red to the autumn this year, or the red is yet to come. On her way back into the kitchen, she considers once again closing the double doors to Sverre's study, or *the library*, as he called it. She doesn't think that's the right name for a room nobody used but him. Still, the doors stay open. Lets more light into the front room.

She runs the water from the kitchen tap until it is ice-cold. Fills the vase almost completely, and flouting all the laws of tulips she snips a good bit off the stems. This way they can stretch and spread out and bend the way tulips aren't supposed to do, *defiant*. It must have been Jonas who chose this vase. Her daughter-in-law would never have picked something this small. Eva can't understand why two young people with no children would choose to live in a massive villa in suburban Jar, with a robot lawnmower and an SUV. Each time she visits, she is struck by how deserted it is – people have been supplanted by cars and lawns. She'll never understand how Jonas, who grew up here, a stone's throw from elegant, central St. Hanshaugen, can prefer a manicured lawn to a bustling park with a weeping willow over a little brook, no matter how much money his wife has been gifted by her parents. Both are nearing thirty and have had full-time jobs since before they even finished business school, but Eva still feels as though they're *playing* at adulthood. Take this insistence, for example, on getting married so quickly, and in a church at that. She remembers the glimpse she caught of Gina's mother on the church steps afterwards, eyes shining, and the subsequent feeling that she herself was lacking something. She and Sverre had

made a point of not marrying until a few years after Jonas was born, and inviting no one but the immediate wedding party to join them afterwards to celebrate at Blom.

She's starting to feel how warm the coat is, how heavy. She can't stand to keep it on a second longer, and the top button pings off and rolls underneath the kitchen table as she yanks it undone. She ignores the button, lets the coat drop to the floor. The blue woollen one she bought when she and Sverre were celebrating their silver wedding in Copenhagen, that too a kind of game, for that matter. She sits down on one of the kitchen chairs her grandfather and grandmother were given as a present at their own wedding. On the table is the old glass bowl picked up on a weekend outing to the Cobalt Works Museum when Jonas was little: it holds two lemons and a blushing, wrinkled apple. She turns her eyes to the countertop, to the white butter dish with a chipped lid, a hand-me-down from Sverre's childhood in Høvik. To the toaster in which Sverre toasted his single slice of bread each morning before smearing it with butter and marmalade. Including on the morning he died. Eva has spooled through the memory many times, examining it, trying to see if there was anything about that morning in particular, so much like other mornings, to suggest that just a few hours later his heart would stop while he was eating a prawn sandwich at the Bristol. As always, she read the Klassekampen first, while he leafed through the Aftenposten. The radio a steady background hum. Eva never makes toast, she should get rid of the toaster really – it's been sitting there unused for more than six months. She never will, though. She won't even take it down to the basement. Perhaps there was a minute tremor in his hand as he reached for his cup of coffee; perhaps he was less sarcastic than usual about the political debates on the radio; perhaps his lips were uncharacteristically pale as they wished each other a good day at work by the fountain before entering their respective publishing houses, heavy with the weight of tradition. Or perhaps not. All the mornings of all the years are whirling in her head.

She turns back to the tulips on the table: pink, edged in white. Thinks of Tom Ford's film adaptation of Isherwood's *A Single Man*, the colours in it, the way they flare up occasionally – but when exactly? She goes into the living room and finds the novel on the bookshelf, takes it back to the kitchen table, sits down, opens it to the first page. 'Waking up begins with saying *am* and *now*. That which has awoken then lies for a while staring up at the ceiling and down into itself until it has recognised *I*, and therefrom deduced *I am, I am now*.'

Eva closes the book and slides it a little further onto the table, sighing a sigh so heavy her chest burns. But it expands as well. She's breathing more easily now, and something is washing through her, a strength. She takes off the light-brown cashmere jumper and drops it onto the floor, unbuttons her olive-green silk blouse, hangs it over the back of one of the countless unoccupied chairs. Sits for some time in the lacy cream-coloured bra she bought at that little lingerie shop on Bogstadveien yesterday, a piece of clothing that has no history yet. She lets her eyes, her head, her body and the room spill over with pink.

OCTOBER

‘Perhaps you could come into my office when you’ve got that cup of coffee?’

Eva waits until she has pressed the button for black coffee before she turns around, and when she turns, she does it slowly. She’d thought there was a management meeting today, out of house. ‘Good morning, Håkon,’ she says, trying to keep her eyes on the senior editor’s face and not on the muscles in his arms and chest, which started to bulge as he approached his fiftieth birthday that spring, and which he is perpetually rubbing, in gluey, luxurious movements.

‘We should get our ducks in a row ahead of the sales meeting next week,’ he says, flexing his left pec. ‘Decide on the best way to present *Signature*.’

‘Ducks in a row, absolutely,’ Eva says. ‘Just let me hang up my coat and make sure accounts settles the translator’s invoice before I forget, then I’ll be right in.’

‘Great. Any time before ten, then I’m off to Holmen.’ Håkon Kvalheim smiles and raises a forefinger as he heads out the door towards the stairs. ‘Remember: tradition and innovation. We want this series to scream tradition, but also innovation. There’s still a little something missing, something about the jacket.’

She eats lunch in her office today. Again. Tuna salad and a greenish egg, a spoonful of capers. No onions. Eva pushes away the half-full plate, finds a pastille in her handbag, pops it into her mouth and puts her feet up on the sill. One sock is shorter than the other, revealing a section of luminously white calf. She leans forward and pulls it up to the hem of her jeans. She has *got* to spend the rest of the day going through the manuscript, even though she probably has about two hundred unread emails in her inbox. The goal is to finish the text before she goes to the book fair in Frankfurt – the translator’s been waiting to get the manuscript back for corrections far too long already. Eva is looking forward to digging back into the novel that first got under her skin two years ago, this time in Norwegian. It’s unlikely to be the book that salvages their spring budget, but she’ll be astonished if they don’t get good reviews. And a bulk order from the Cultural Association, they’ll have to get a bulk order for this one, otherwise the numbers are never going to balance. It’s madness to publish seven hundred pages of translated fiction, she knows that, especially by an unknown Canadian debut author. Even with a blurb from Margaret Atwood.

She read the manuscript one weekend when it rained and rained. She and Sverre were supposed to go away somewhere – where? – but then the trip was cancelled at the last minute, and they were left with two free days. The plan had been to skim a few pages on the Friday afternoon so that she could give the agent a reasonably justified refusal before taking the weekend off. After reading two pages on the screen, she printed out the whole thing. Over the next day or two at home, the stack of paper went with her from room to room. Sverre was going through one of his Faulkner phases, and for the most part he kept to his study and his Arne Jacobsen chair, holed

up with *The Sound and the Fury* and pots of strong Darjeeling tea. Eva no longer remembers the plot, she's read so many manuscripts since, but she remembers the way she felt, a peculiar need to *eat* the words. Now and again, more and more often, she forgets why she has devoted her entire adult life to fiction. That weekend she was reminded.

Her phone pings and vibrates. Eva can't figure out where the sound is coming from. She rummages in her handbag, checks her coat pocket, and eventually finds it under some papers on her desk. *Soup at mine tonight?* asks Hilda. Eva hesitates before replying. She'd planned to go for a swim after work, and what if Hilda's in her insistent mood today, she can't deal with that, making a meal of every single topic that happens to pop up in conversation. The sky above the square outside is a clear blue, and when she opens the window to let in the crisp October air, paper flutters on her desk. The fountain in the middle of the square, between the two publishing houses, is still running. On the edge, two pigeons are huddled. Usually the sound of water has a soothing effect on Eva, but today all she feels is a prickling fretfulness. She pictures one of those thingummies you use to scratch your back, and fantasises for a moment about using it to scratch yourself *on the inside*. She shuts the window. It won't be long now before the water is switched off for the season. Eva thinks of Hilda's little kitchenette, and then her own kitchen. It's almost empty of food, nothing tempting in there at the moment. She can swim any time she likes. *Yes please!* she texts. *Six?* Hilda messages back. *Sounds good!* Eva turns off email notifications as another one pops up, this one a reminder about the Publishers' Association's survey on sexual harassment, then puts her phone on silent, kicks off her shoes, rests one foot up on her chair and clicks to open the manuscript on her screen. Scrolls past the title page, dedication and epigraph to the first sentence: 'Margaret Soames wasn't herself that morning, or perhaps that's exactly what she was.'

Once she's crossed the Fairytale Bridge over the river and starts walking up Markveien, Eva gets the powerful urge to buy something. Anything, so long as it's something she doesn't need. There's something so enticing about those little shops, where you can get a sense of everything they sell in just a few minutes, and you're never far from the exit. Especially if there are other customers in the shop, so she doesn't have to be alone with a sales assistant she'll feel compulsively obliged to talk to. The conversation with Niels Neumann is still a jarring note in her head, her body too. She saw him out of the corner of her eye as he walked past her office that morning, already alert to the heavy male tread that grew tentative as it approached her door. It was ajar, as usual, but as narrowly as she can get away with at an office where, although she wouldn't call the work culture particularly open, doors remain so unless there are meetings going on behind them.

Neumann was with Ida Kielland, his new editor, presumably on their way to a meeting. She knows he's on the spring list, with a novel that doesn't have a title yet, although the sales presentations to the booksellers are just around the corner. A couple of hours later, Ida ushered him into Eva's office, knocking softly on the doorframe. He wanted a copy of the book by that Irish author, said Neumann, what was her name again? Oh, and congratulations on the Booker nomination. Ida made sure that Eva would show Neumann out, wished him luck with the final stages of the book, and returned to her own office. He had shrunk, somehow, thought Eva, as he sat down at her little conference table. She had always thought of Niels Neumann as a big man, *solid*. Partly it was that enormous mane of hair. Even at their first encounter she had spotted a

trace of grey amid the deep brown, and now it is the colour of steel, swept back in its customary waves from his high, broad brow. Perhaps it's also having seen him so often next to Sverre's slighter frame. *Restrained* Sverre, who would have fitted into his graduation suit the day they put him in the ground. Eva wasn't there when he got his degree, that was before her time, but she's seen pictures. He hadn't put on so much as an ounce. His hair had thinned, but evenly, no receding temples or tonsure, and it was always well groomed, a short trim with minimal variation, carried out by the same hairdresser every five weeks year on year on year. For more than three decades, Sverre went to see a woman that she, his wife, can't even picture. The woman's name escapes her now as she tries to recall it, although she's heard it many times. Sverre was entertained by the little anecdotes she told about her clientele, which due to the salon's proximity to the courthouse included judges, journalists and people in publishing.

It's paradoxical, or some might say unjust, that a man like Sverre – who lived with such consistent moderation, kept such control over the rhythm of his life – should die of a massive heart attack. Stark contrast, for example, to Niels Neumann, who has always seemed to want *more*. More food, more drink, more of the party. Moderation isn't exactly his hallmark as a writer, either. In a career that has spanned more than thirty years and several novels since his original, attention-grabbing debut as a poet, she can't name one that's less than five hundred pages, despite Sverre's indefatigable attempts to edit down his texts. She wonders how Ida Kielland handles that, now that Neumann, since Sverre's death, has defected to the publishing house across the square. This, it dawns on Eva, must be what she found so jarring: that there was something so peculiarly *cautious* about Niels Neumann today.

There is no one inside Papaya, so she contents herself with looking at the window display. When two friends walk into the shop and start to examine the quality of one of the green woollen scarves folded on a shelf just inside the door, she almost follows, but then checks herself. It's not a woollen scarf she's looking for. There are some shapeless dresses hanging outside the clothing and homewares boutique two doors down, and she can't work up the interest to go inside despite the several people in there already.

A dad is walking ahead of her with two children, one clutching each hand, and both of them with muddy coats and rucksacks on their back. The taller and presumably older child is trudging, the other bounding down the street. Eva can picture them at the kitchen table not long from now, eating a quick midweek dinner, most likely with a mother there as well. The little ones in high chairs studded with flakes of ossified porridge. Again, she wonders what effect it would have had on Jonas, growing up with a sibling. As usual she thinks of his sullenness, a sullenness that came over him tricklingly, leaching into their home when he was a teenager, and which appears to have stuck. From time to time she feels like shaking him, a grown man, trying to dislodge something, although she isn't sure what. 'How is Jonas taking it,' people ask her, 'losing his dad?' And she doesn't know what to say. As far as she can see, he isn't *taking* it at all. A bell chimes as she walks into Hasla – perhaps it's jewellery she's after. The young woman behind the counter meets Eva's gaze and smiles before turning her attention back to the grey-haired woman she's serving. Perhaps to her the woman looks indistinguishable from Eva, another grey-haired lady with a cheerful scarf around her neck. At least Eva knows what suits her, earth tones, like the one she's wearing now, rust-red, almost orange. She wonders what they do to make it always smell so good in this shop, so bright and clean. A pair of earrings, she doesn't need those – that's what she'll buy. She

wanders over to a display of jewellery by Anne Black. The gold ones with a sort of knot design might be just the ticket, but then she realises the grey-haired woman has asked the assistant to wrap her purchases. Eva doesn't really want to wait. She glances at the clock. Ten to six. She can squander her money at the off-licence instead. Eva mumbles a thank you as she steps outside, nearly barging into a group of what look like middle-school girls, or maybe high school. One of them puts a cigarette to her lips and laughs. None of them pays her any attention at all.

'Why don't all snails have shells, Mama?' asks Karla, stomping in a puddle on the footpath through Birkelunden Gardens, which sends dribbles of water over the purple Gore-Tex boots Cornelia has forgotten to waterproof. Her own brown leather shoes are blotchy, and one sole is coming loose at the toe. The first thing she needs to do when she gets home is to put on dry wool socks. The other pair. No, first of all she's going to lock the door behind them and lean against it and shut her eyes, like she always does these days when she's indoors at last. Sometimes, when she's alone, she slides down to the floor and sits there for ages, until her heart stops thudding the way it thuds. When Karla is at hers, she just takes a couple of breaths before opening her eyes and doing all the normal things you'd expect of a mother. Peeling off scarf and mittens and snowsuit from the little girl's body and hanging them up, tossing damp wool onto the warm bathroom floor. She should be asking Karla to do it herself, really, she's more than old enough, a schoolgirl, but first she'll have to put up some pegs at Karla's height. That's not going to happen. The drill will sit unused on the top shelf of the kitchen cupboard until eventually someone else steps in, but who would that be? The washer in the tap is on its last legs, it's already broken really, and who's going to help her with that? She can't call in a plumber for this stuff, not on her budget, and besides, it's embarrassing not to fix it herself. Strictly speaking it's the landlord's job, probably, but the thought of calling her about it feels overwhelming, and anyway, she's worried that any contact might start giving her ideas about putting up the rent. Best not to do anything at all.

'Come on, let's go home and make some dinner,' says Cornelia, trying to sound firm. She's forgotten what Karla asked. Grabbing the sleeve of her snowsuit, she drags the girl away from the puddle, in which she's now begun to dance around. Being with Karla is like watching a Lars von Trier film – the frame is never still. Does that make her the handheld camera, then? No, she's only a viewer, always and eternally a viewer. Karla tears herself free of her mother's hand and sets off running down the path, and Cornelia tries to take advantage of the momentum and rush after her. They should have stopped at the supermarket on the way home, really, but she can cobble something together out of what they've got. Worst case scenario, it'll be pancakes. Again. At least that way Karla won't be in a mood at the dinner table.

Karla speeds up when she sees their yellow building on the corner, running chafe-chafe-chafe in her bulky snowsuit.

‘Wait for me before you cross the road,’ cries Cornelia, trying to pick up the pace, but she can’t, her body is being dragged down towards the tarmac. We are all animals. Karla is a little foxcub, while Cornelia is increasingly mollusc-like with every passing day: her vertebrae are crumbling, until eventually she’ll be unable to stand upright. She’ll have to drag herself, crawl across the ground, along the pavement, if she wants to go anywhere. She has no idea why not all snails have shells, only that the ones that do are cute, and the ones that don’t are disgusting.

Tonight when she gets into her pyjamas, Karla will have hot chocolate. It will be cosy. When she asks Cornelia to read her one more book, just one more, she will do it, and she’ll sing the song she likes three times. And when Karla is asleep, she’ll drink the rest of the red wine she opened on Sunday, and then the day will be done. And tomorrow she doesn’t need to think about before tomorrow, and maybe tomorrow will be a good day, it could happen. Cornelia has always believed it is possible for Scarlett to get her Rhett at last, to seize her very final chance. Tomorrow is another day. She just needs to sleep it off and come up with a new plan. True, their flat is no Tara, but it’s theirs. Or the landlord’s, actually, but once she’s locked the door behind her and lit candles and drawn down the blinds that overlook the street, then, at least in glimmers, it feels like nobody can get to her. Last night she dreamt of the sick girl again. Sitting at the edge of the bed was a woman who could have been her mother, comforting the girl. But it wasn’t her mother, it was her, and the girl – the child – she was her as well. There’s hope in that, isn’t there? Or is it merely sad?

‘Mama!’ Karla beams as Cornelia reaches the crossing, as though it’s been several days since they last saw each other.

‘Karla,’ says Cornelia, crouching down to wrap her arms around the small, bundled body. The thing is that Scarlett, she knows what she wants, while Cornelia doesn’t have a clue. There won’t be any plans tomorrow, either. But tonight she’ll sing to Karla and hold her hand until she’s fast asleep, and she won’t get annoyed about anything. And why does this outdated movie – one so inextricably bound up with her own mother, one she absolutely does not want to think about – keep popping into her head anyway? She received another picture via text last night, answering with the obligatory heart, but there’s something wrong with the way her own heart beats at the sight of a selfie from Nice. She imagines the dreary bar where her mother works, run by a dreary Swede and his dreary daughter.

‘Come on, Mama,’ Karla says, ‘let’s go.’

Cornelia stands up and takes the girl by the hand to cross the street. But as she glances up, she sees their upstairs neighbour is letting herself in, a bag of shopping in her hand. *Sørensen*, it says on her postbox, which is next to Cornelia’s and Karla’s. *Thomas Johansen* is still written above hers and Karla’s names. Thankfully a car comes around the corner and doesn’t stop, so they can’t cross the road yet anyway. She’s in no mood for chitchat at the moment. She never is, but especially not right now. There, the gate is closing after Mrs Sørensen again, and Cornelia lets Karla draw her by the hand over the pedestrian crossing. They don’t step on the lines.

Now she's outside, rummaging around in her handbag for the keys. She's really got to find a regular compartment for them. But this time they aren't in any of the little pockets, and they haven't slipped through the hole in the lining to join the pens and lipsticks that have accumulated between it and the brown leather. It's not possible, she can't actually have lost them, but apparently it *is* possible, because they aren't there. They're in the pocket of the trousers she was wearing last night, when she went up to the attic to retrieve her old duffel coat, only to discover that she'd somehow repressed the fact it had a broken zip. They should ban doors that lock automatically.

'Mama, I'm cold,' Karla says.

'I'm cold too,' says Cornelia, as though that matters as much as her child freezing. 'I must have forgotten the keys inside, silly me,' she adds, with a desperate breeziness audible even to her.

'Mama,' Karla says, looking up and leaning in towards her, gently. 'It's going to be alright.'

Cornelia contemplates sinking to the ground, splat into the puddle in front of the gate, and shutting her eyes. She starts scrabbling through the bag a second time. Karla is very quiet. It's almost uncanny how quiet she is: she doesn't make a single sound. Cornelia swallows and, with all the jollity she can muster, is about to suggest they get McDonald's for dinner when something comes sprinkling down onto the pavement in front of them, and a little of it onto Karla's hat. Manna from heaven? That would do nicely right about now. She looks up.

'Hello down there!' cries a voice from above. 'Hi, Karla!'

'Ragnhild!' shouts Karla, and now Cornelia sees Mrs Sørensen in the second-floor window, smiling down at them. Have she and Karla met? There is already so much Cornelia doesn't know about her child.

'Sorry!' yells Mrs Sørensen, whose name is evidently Ragnhild. 'Did I get some sunflower seeds on your head?' She points at a round plastic object mounted on her window. 'Think some of it missed the bird feeder.'

'We've forgotten our keys,' Karla shouts gleefully up at the window, as if it's somehow a marvellous thing to happen.

Mrs Sørensen looks enquiringly at Cornelia, who tries to combine a sort of confirmatory gesture of the hand with a grin. Mustn't start crying. Got to come up with a plan.

'Ring the bell and you can come up to mine. We'll figure it out.'

Mrs Sørensen is standing in the doorway when they reach the second floor. 'Hi there!' she says, first addressing Karla, but then she lifts her head and meets Cornelia's eye, smiling, and everything about her is soft, the waves in her grey hair, the large breasts under the wide shirt, the uneven jawline. This unfamiliar lady who could have been her mother.

'Did you two lock yourselves out, then? Ah, that's bad luck. Good news for me, though – I can get to know your mum a bit better,' Mrs Sørensen says to Karla, and she looks up and holds out a hand. 'Hello,' she says. 'Ragnhild. It's always a pleasure chatting with Karla when we bump into each other downstairs. Nice to meet you properly too.'

And now tears are stinging in Cornelia's eyes, she knows Ragnhild can see them, and she barely manages to force out the word: 'Cornelia.'

The woman hesitates, as something Cornelia can't quite put a name to darts across her face, and then she opens the door wide. 'You do look terribly cold. Why don't you come in and warm up while we work out what to do about these keys.'

We.

'Do you fancy a cup of hot chocolate, Karla?' says Ragnhild.

'Yes!' whoops Karla, squeezing in between the doorframe and Ragnhild's legs, and in the hallway she flops down and starts taking off her mittens. Struggling to get the elastic strap of her snowsuit off from around her shoes. So focused, as though nothing else is in her head but shoe and elastic, shoe and elastic, shoe and elastic. The extraordinary number of times Cornelia has attempted meditation, and how extraordinarily bad at it she is.

Ragnhild puts out a hand and rests it on Cornelia's shoulder. 'Come on,' she says, and guides her in and shuts the door behind them.