

From *Doors Closing*
(*Dørene lukkes*)
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Translated from the Norwegian by Alison McCullough

One evening, I discovered I had hope.

It felt a bit like finding an anthill under the stairs.

All kinds of creepy-crawlies might be scurrying around under our floorboards for ages, without us knowing that they're there. Silverfish, long-tailed silverfish, cockroaches, lice, mites – there's no limit to the things you might suddenly find yourself infested by.

It had probably been there for some time, growing bigger and bigger while I looked the other way, but it wasn't until that Thursday in April that I noticed it. I listened to my body. There was something new in there, something I hadn't felt in years. I didn't recognise it at first, but then I realised – it was hope. Not for anything in particular – not 'I hope the bus comes soon' or 'I hope I get the job' or 'I hope the avocado on the kitchen counter has ripened by the time I get home'. Just... directionless hope. A curiosity about the future, as if everything might turn out to be a positive surprise.

Generalised hope disorder.

Fuck, I thought.

This changes everything.

The streets are full of people giddy with the joys of spring, making their way home to their balconies or out into the park after a long day at work. They have sweaters tied around their waists or carry their jackets over an arm, their faces open in a way they haven't been since they closed sometime in October or November last year.

But I'm heading into the darkness of work – I'm late, I hurry down the street, dragging my fingers through my hair. I notice that one of the fast-fashion stores has hung a new campaign poster in the window: "You shouldn't have to fit your clothes, your clothes should fit you!"

Pretty witty, actually, from a store that didn't start selling size XXL until they were threatened with pitchforks and torches by people on TikTok, but whatever. The point is that it feels very on the nose. Because lately, I've been spending a lot of time thinking about whether I'm supposed to fit my life, or my life is supposed to fit me. It's become one of the things I lie there pondering at night, and now here's this garish poster claiming to know the answer, with a nagging, bold font and an exclamation mark for good measure.

Whenever I start to expand too much, so life becomes too cramped, I can feel it straight away. It means I'm losing control. So I have to check things more often, reassure myself that I have a good grasp of the big picture, make sure I don't forget anything or do something wrong. It's exhausting. So for my entire adult life, I've downsized. Tried to make myself smaller, so I'll fit into my life, rather than making my life bigger so there's enough room for me in it. If you keep your life small and tidy, like one of those storage boxes where everything has its own intended compartment, you won't lose control. But now that blasted hope has started rummaging around in here, I feel the urge to grow. To take up more space. To expand. There's a reason Pandora's Box had hope in it, along with all the other shenanigans.

Hope can be dangerous.

It's important to anticipate, to plan for the worst, to always have a back-up plan, to never hope for more than I know I can handle. Because I can't handle losing things.

I shake my head, as if I can shake the feeling of loss out of my consciousness; hate it every time it pops up and surges through me, like a stomach bug I can't get rid of but just have to allow to run its course.

There are moments you remember so clearly that they almost don't feel true. Like when an anecdote is so detailed you start to suspect it of being a lie – it reeks of overcompensating. But I still remember exactly what he said and exactly what I felt on the day he ended it, even though it happened over two years ago now.

“I feel that staying with you would be *settling*,” he said.

That's the first Anglicism I've heard him use, I thought. Perhaps as a defence mechanism, so I wouldn't have to take in what he'd just said.

That he had taken me on a romantic weekend to Stockholm just to dump me after seven years together, because to stay with me would be to settle for too little.

“I owe myself... more than this,” he said.

By 'this', he meant me.

He sat down next to me on the hotel bed we'd had sex in little more than half an hour earlier. I was wrapped in a towel – he couldn't even wait until I'd got dressed, when I came out of the shower he was all geared up and ready to go.

“When we met, you had so many plans and ambitions,” he said. “And now... it feels as if I have to make excuses for you all the time. Tell people you're *actually* cool, if they just take the time to get to know you. That you're *actually* smart. I don't want to spend the rest of my life saying *actually*.”

He shook his head.

“We just want different things,” he said. “And I can't *settle*.”

There it was again.

Twice in under two minutes. And in a way, the Anglicism emphasised the point. He was evolving. He was moving on.

“I can get better,” I said. “I will get better.”

“And I'll be cheering you on,” he said, kissing my hair as if we were in one of those godawful theatre productions he constantly insisted on dragging me to.

But then he stood up, and this feeling I can conjure up again in an instant, as if it's always lurking there, just below the surface. A kind of life-and-death desperation. Don't go. Don't leave me here alone, because alone, I'm nothing.

“Where are you going?”

“I'm catching an earlier flight back,” he said. “Take care of yourself.”

He had already packed while I was in the bathroom, I only saw it now, that his things were no longer strewn across the floor. That his book wasn't on the bedside table. That his suitcase stood ready next to the minibar.

As he closed the door behind him I placed a hand on the depression in the duvet, where he'd sat next to me. It was still warm.

*

I hate that we don't have any staff toilets, just some shabby unisex loos we share with the customers. On bad days I often try not to drink too much water while I'm at work, so I won't have to pee. I regret not doing so tonight.

The innermost stall is vacant, the door is ajar. I walk past the guy who asked for an extra strong Moscow mule, but who didn't want to pay for the extra vodka – he looks at me as if he's about to start arguing with me again.

I go into the stall, close the door behind me and lock it. Tug on the door handle to check. Do it again. And again. Think about the Moscow mule guy, imagine him coming in because I forgot to lock the door, check yet again. It really is locked. I pull down my jeans and sit, but find myself unable to pee. A group of girls has come in, I can hear them laughing just outside the stall. I get up again, check the door one more time.

“I think someone's got locked in there,” a voice says. It comes closer. “Hello, is everything okay in there?”

“No, everything's fine, thanks,” I reply, my voice excessively cheerful.

I sit down again. Try to distract myself from the door by looking at the graffiti on the wall. I've read it so many times that I know it off by heart. The oldest scrawled phrase, ‘Call me S’, has been there for six years. Perhaps even longer, but that would have been before I worked here, so I wouldn't know.

I wonder whether S ever called.

I've made up so many stories about the graffiti artist and S in my head that I almost can't believe they exist in reality.

In my imagination, they've been on the run from the police – hence having to turn to random toilet walls to communicate. They've been old exes, or star-crossed lovers, desperate with longing for one another. They've been teenagers with no money to top up their phones, and sometimes they've been in serious trouble, possibly something connected to drugs. They've been celebrities fleeing the paparazzi, and this was the last place anyone would think to look for them. They've been colleagues, here in the bar, having a secret affair.

No matter who they were, I've decided they're married with kids now.

I finally manage to pee.

I wonder whether the graffiti artist and S have ever been in the bar while I've been here. Whether I've ever served them.

Whether they're happy.

I flush, pull up my jeans, double-check my fly, leave the stall and wash my hands. I'm about to go back out to the bar, but suddenly question whether I did in fact remember to flush. I go back into the stall, taking care not to touch the door handle, only nudging the door open with my shoulder.

I remembered to flush.

I leave the stall at the exact same moment a customer comes in. I'm sure she'll assume I've just been to the toilet, and I'm afraid she'll think I don't wash my hands before serving people their drinks, so I wash my hands again, even though they're already clean. Slowly and demonstratively, with lots of soap.

*

Jan Morten's playlist speaks to a serious identity crisis – it's a glorious bedlam of genres and decades, but I'm not complaining, because Jan Morten is a good friend, and also my boss. He always puts music on when we close up the bar together, it's the first thing he does after the last customer has left. I never put on music when I'm closing up alone. Because when I'm closing up alone, I have to stay sharp. Sharp while I double-check everything that has to be double-checked, sharp while I use my phone to film videos of the steamers and shakers and measuring cups and taps and fridges and light switches and plug sockets and the till and all the door locks. If I don't stay sharp, I have to do it again, and then I miss the last tram home. There have been times I've let myself get distracted, like when some random passer-by came and knocked on the window to ask if we were still open, and then I've had to start again, and then I've had to walk all the way up to Storo. It isn't that far, but it's far enough in the middle of the night. Alexander used to hate it. He said it was because he was nervous for me – that he didn't like me walking through the city alone at night, that he was afraid someone might try to hurt me. I once said it hurt me more that he viewed me that way. I never said it again.

Tonight it's fine. Nobody distracts me, and I make the last tram home. I sit behind a group of sixth-formers, all girls. One of them suddenly squeals with happiness – “he replied, he replied!” – and her phone is passed around. One of the girl's friends puts the phone in one

of the deep pockets of her red school-leaver's overalls and says: "You're not answering him when you're this drunk, we'll look at it tomorrow. You'll thank me for this, I promise."

And there's that feeling again – an unusual, forgotten feeling. Like seeing someone who you've not seen for years and not entirely remembering where you know them from, only that you used to like them.

I miss getting texts and smiling.

I miss the teamwork over a phone, all my friends performing a close reading of a message as if it were a question on a Norwegian language exam, interpreting every comma. I miss checking all the time: has he replied, has he replied, has he replied.

I close my eyes, tell myself in a strict voice: you can damn well forget all that.

The tram stops, and a man gets on at the front. He's clearly intoxicated and shouts loudly at the driver. Several of the other passengers lean forward to see what's going on. A tension in the bodies of several of them, like when animals smell danger. Nobody does anything. They all just wait. Wondering if the situation will escalate.

I feel the need to open the photo gallery on my phone and watch the videos. None of the taps are running in the sinks at work. I remembered to turn off all the lights. All the doors are locked.

When I get home, a bouquet of flowers is hanging on my door. I open the card as I let myself in.

"Dear Auntie Freya! Happy birthday, hope it's a great one! Love from Stefanie and Vegard, Gurrun and AAA."

Fine, it doesn't actually say that, but it certainly doesn't say 'Gudrun and Anna', either, because neither of those kids can write properly yet. Anna in particular is astonishingly bad, even though she has the easiest name; maybe her fine-motor skills are below average. I don't know when children of that age learn to hold a pencil, or their tongue, or their own, or any of the other things we humans ought to be able to hold in order to survive in the modern world.

I put the flowers in water and stick the card on the fridge, then go into the bathroom and get ready for bed. I study myself in the mirror a little longer than usual after brushing my teeth, but see no difference. I wonder whether I'm a 34-year-old with the face of a 33-year-old, or whether I was a 33-year-old with the face of a 34-year-old.

I try to sleep, but a minibus full of sixth-formers is driving round the neighbourhood, and the bass of the music it's blasting out is thumping adrenaline round my body.

I suddenly wonder whether I remembered to give that customer his other beer, or what else might have become of it.

I get up and double-check that I turned off the tap in the bathroom. Think: tomorrow will be better.

*

I'm administering first aid to a thirsty and overdramatic monstera on the windowsill when Madeleine and Aisha arrive, I see them down by the apartment block's main entrance. Aisha is carrying a cake – she probably got up at the crack of dawn to bake it, that would be just like her. They crouch down on the steps and light the candles, before Madeleine gets up and rings the doorbell.

When they come into the apartment I pretend to be surprised at the cake – “oh my God!” I say, “you brought a cake?!” – and Aisha and Madeleine smile, satisfied, and sing the birthday song and wish me many belated happy returns.

“Did you have a good day?” Aisha says, but she doesn't really expect an answer, she just pushes past me into the kitchen and takes out some plates. “We should sit out in the back courtyard,” she says. “The lilacs are in bloom, they smell like heaven.”

I eat cake while Madeleine and Aisha talk about their jobs. Sometimes they say things that make it obvious they've heard each other's updates before, that since our last get-together they've met up without me. That's not so strange, they work in the same street, and not least during normal daytime working hours – it's only logical that they meet up for lunch sometimes. It isn't that they're trying to shut me out.

“Tell Freya about that colleague of yours and the microwave!” Madeleine says, and Aisha lights up, gets all excited: “OMG, yes – shit, Freya – just listen to this!”

And when they have no more to say about their careers or microwave ovens, they move on to their partners, and to decorating, patios and family planning.

Madeleine and Julie are getting a puppy in a few days' time. She shows me photos and calls it her baby. It's much cuter than a baby, but I don't say so, because Aisha is pregnant.

She's hoping the baby won't arrive before her due date, because then his birthday will be in the summer holiday, and it's so boring for kids to have their birthday when everyone else is away.

"But it might be a good thing," I say, "if it turns out he's not all that keen on attention?"

"I'm sure he's not going to arrive before he's due," Madeleine says, flashing Aisha a reassuring smile.

Madeleine and I walk up the stairs from the Tøyen subway station; Aisha had to go home early to 'take a nap'. It still seems so odd to hear her say it – before she was pregnant she was like a machine, always working, never resting.

"I hope she keeps sleeping after the pregnancy, too," I say. "It seems like a good habit to have got into."

Madeleine laughs.

"Yeah, that's what new parents always say – that their sleep habits improved so much after the baby came."

We walk towards the botanical gardens. The air smells the way it did back when I was sitting my exams, and I feel a sense of relief that right now I have neither exams nor childbirth hanging over me, that I have only Madeleine, and dry asphalt, and slices of cake in a food container, and that I won't have to close up the bar alone tonight.

We sit on a bench, squinting in the spring light. The sun is actually warm on my face, I haven't got used to it yet, even though we're now well into May. It's been a long, long winter.

Madeleine wonders if I've started doing something different. Whether I've stopped eating gluten, or started taking multi-vitamins, or met someone. She thinks I have a 'different vibe' these days.

I shake my head.

"I don't know what it is," I say. "Things have just got better."

"Maybe you've finally got over Alexander."

"Maybe."

But to be honest I don't think I'll ever completely get over Alexander. My other exes feel like something that no longer has anything to do with me, like films I've seen or stories

I've heard, but Alexander is still always sort of present, like a warning my body daren't let go of.

"Can't we just create you a Tinder profile?" Madeleine says.

We've been here before.

"No," I say.

"Why not?"

"Because I don't want to be on Tinder, I've told you that."

She laughs.

"Nobody *wants* to be on Tinder," she says. "The only reason to be on Tinder, is to stop having to be on Tinder."

"You're really selling this well."

"I mean it. Give it a chance. It's been two years."

I shake my head.

"Oh, come on," she says. "I have that photo of you from Tuva's cabin, the one where you're holding a fish?"

"I refuse to be one of those people who have a picture of themselves with a fish on Tinder."

Madeleine ignores me.

"And then you can write one of those funny captions," she says. "*Me and fish. Fish to the left. Automatic swipe right.*"

"Does right mean yes or no?"

"Right means yes. You know – as in Mister Right."

"Ugh, just kill me."

*

I don't tell her the real reason I don't want to be on Tinder. I act as if I'm above online dating – that the meat market is for desperate people, that I want to meet people 'the old-fashioned way' – whatever the hell that means. I know that what Madeleine always says is right – that you're not in a relationship with a narrative, you're in a relationship with a person. "Never stay with somebody because you love telling the story of your relationship if it isn't currently working, and never refuse to give someone a chance just because the story of how you met isn't a sexy one." I've learned my lesson – Alexander and I had the world's best meet cute, and just look how that turned out. With me alone in a hotel room in Stockholm. And hardly

even that, when I think about it – I’m not even sure I was still me. I was me in a Ship of Theseus sense – all my original components had been replaced with parts I thought Alexander would like, but which, when it came down to it, he wasn’t willing to settle for.

So no. It isn’t that I’m too cool or too good for Tinder.

To be honest, I don’t give two hoots about *where* I meet someone.

I really mean that. If somebody would just find me and tell me I’m enough for them, then we could meet at the STD clinic or in a festival toilet or at the national convention of a political party neither of us wants to be associated with for all I care, it doesn’t have to be pretty or romantic as long as it works.

And I’m sure I’d manage to find some photos. I could use the one I have as my profile picture on Facebook, the one where I’m standing on Kjeragbolten. In it I’m only twenty-four, but surely it’s fine to use a few older photos as long as you include some up-to-date ones too, and with the exception of the colour of my hair I still look pretty much the same. I could include the one where I’m doing a handstand in front of Blindern, too, it shows that I’m sporty and playful, or at least that I was – to be fair, that photo is even older than the one taken on Kjeragbolten.

The photos on my phone from the past couple of years are almost exclusively door locks and kitchen taps and heaters and electrical sockets. A few grainy images of fireworks from last New Year’s Eve – that was before things started to improve, but Madeleine and the others had forced me to drop by regardless. One of them probably has some photos of me from that night, and in all likelihood I look perfectly fine in them, I was wearing a dress and make-up, and I smiled every time the situation required it.

But what on earth would I write in my bio? *That’s* the real problem.

How do you define yourself if you’re not your job, or somebody’s partner?

Who are you if you haven’t succeeded?

How do you sell yourself, when negativity isn’t attractive and you have no idea what you’re into yet?

“Freya. Thirty-four. Might like taking long walks on the beach one day. Have reason to believe I’ll love relaxing with a good book, just as soon as I can chill out and concentrate enough to be able to read. Constantly trying to become the woman my friends believe me to be. Hoping to discover a passion for travel and culture. Want to get to know me? Then that makes two of us. Ha ha, no, but seriously. Who the fuck am I, and how the hell do I get off Tinder?”

I mean, I'm not really going to write that.

I'm not even creating a profile.

Some lines just shouldn't be crossed.

If I knew what I'd write in a Tinder bio – without lying, and without it seeming more like a warning than a sales pitch – then of course I wouldn't need one. Then I'd be a person I both knew and liked, and I'd have no need of anything else.

*

Stefanie is only a year older than me, but she's been an adult ever since she left home, while I'm still waiting to grow up. You can see it in the family dynamic – if I were to introduce us, it's more natural to say, “Stefanie is Freya and Ulrikke's older sister” than “Stefanie and Freya are Ulrikke's older sisters.” I've sort of clung to my little sister energy, even after Ulrikke was born. And I feel this particularly strongly every time I visit Stefanie and Vegard at their house in Jar, with its four names on a plaque beside the front door (“♡ Stefanie ♡ Vegard ♡ Gudrun ♡ Anna ♡”), climbing roses lining the walls and children's chalk drawings on the asphalt.

And today, their driveway is utterly jam-packed. Which isn't a problem, or not a practical one, at least – I have no car I need to find a parking space for. But it means I'm late to the birthday party. I shouldn't have run back up to the apartment so many times, but first I was afraid I'd forgotten to unplug my hair straighteners, and then it just snowballed from there. I should have known better than to use the straighteners today, I know from experience that family gatherings stress me out, especially when Grandma and Grandpa come up to Oslo. Their visits have become more and more rare with the passing years, which has also made them more and more important. But that was precisely why I wanted to look as if I have everything under control – hence the straighteners – and that made me even more stressed, and once I'd started with the checking it was impossible to stop, ever more things I needed to reassure myself of just kept popping up until I finally felt I could go catch the train.

My heels make a clicking sound on the steps up to the front door. I'm annoyed at myself for wearing them, I know Grandma thinks they're too high. “The height of a woman's

heels should be inversely proportional to her age,” she said a few years ago, when I turned thirty.

I ring the doorbell and slip off my shoes. Luckily it’s Gudrun who opens the door – I’d expected as much, she never lets an opportunity for some attention pass her by.

“Happy birthday!” I shout, and she beams at me as she straightens her paper crown, glitter falling from the number six on it. She’s lost a tooth since I last saw her.

“Thanks,” she says, “...but it was yesterday, actually. Are they for me?”

She nods at my shoes.

“No, I’m afraid not, I think they’re probably a bit big. But I’ve got something else for you.”

She lets me into the hallway; I put down my shoes, then take the present from my bag. I’ve wrapped it myself, but that’s not why it looks godawful. I’m actually pretty good at wrapping gifts, but they all end up battered and bruised if you have to unwrap them to check – again and again and again – that you did in fact remember to take off the price tag.

“Ta-da!” I say, handing it to her.

Now Stefanie and Mum appear in the kitchen doorway, presumably wondering where the birthday girl had got to.

Stefanie hugs me with one arm as she continues to hold her phone to her ear with the other. Her long, blonde hair is prettily put up on the left side of her head but hangs loose on the right; she was obviously in the middle of doing it when she had to make the call.

“Poisons helpline,” she whispers, and I cast a curious glance at Mum, who comes into view right behind her.

“Anna’s eaten one of those expensive birthday candles,” Mum explains, rolling her eyes. Anna will eat anything that isn’t nailed down. Apparently this is especially problematic when her kindergarten class go on walks in the forest – someone always has to hold her hand so she doesn’t manage to grab a handful of poisonous mushrooms and stuff them into her mouth.

“It was *my* candle,” says Gudrun, who is now sitting on the floor and trying to pull the ribbon off the present. It’s too tight. I was so stressed when I tied it for the final time.

“And it was Auntie Freya’s, too,” Mum says in a stern voice. She still insists that the family hold a joint celebration for Gudrun and me each year because we’re ‘birthday twins’ – even though she knows Gudrun would rather have a party just for her, and that I’d rather not have a party at all. It’s infantilising – they’d never do this to Stefanie or Ulrikke, I know that

for a fact – but it’s as if I’m one of the children in this family. I turn my focus back to Gudrun, who has now started to bite the ribbon, without it helping much.

“Here. Use this.”

It’s Grandpa. He must have come into the hallway without me noticing.

He bends down towards Gudrun, past Mum and me, brandishing a Swiss army knife. He flashes a friendly smile.

Gudrun’s little hand closes around the knife, and her huge, curious eyes meet his.

“Go on then, you have to open it,” he says. Is he actually being impatient, or am I just projecting?

I watch, nervously. Gudrun is being too slow; Grandpa watches her expectantly. But Gudrun doesn’t know any better. To her, her great-grandfather is like Santa Claus, a man with a white beard who only pops up on occasions where she’s given gifts. When I try to see him through Gudrun’s eyes, he’s nothing but warm and kind and helpful.

She starts to pick at the small depressions on some of the tools, manages to get a grip, and pulls out a small screwdriver and a knife. She grins, and starts to pull at two of the other tools at the same time.

“Careful,” I say, and I hear a kind of echo behind me – Mum has said the exact same thing at almost the exact same time. Grandpa gives an irritated snort, and Gudrun ignores us all.

One of the tools is a bit stuck; Gudrun has to use extra force, and suddenly they both flick out, the scissors and the large knife, and Gudrun jumps, causing the army knife to shoot into the air. Both Mum and I throw ourselves forward, utterly instinctively, and soon Gudrun is under me and Mum partly over me, and the army knife makes an unpleasant sound as it hits the ground beside us, slides along the floor and crashes into the wall.

“JESUS,” Mum exclaims.

Grandpa gives her a look that makes her shrink. Grandpa’s Christianity has always been of the more old-testament variety than Grandma’s and Mum’s.

“Sorry,” Mum mumbles, sticking her finger in her mouth. She’s received a cut from the knife.

Gudrun seems overwhelmed by all the commotion, what with her grandmother cursing and this sudden, frightening change in her great-grandpa.

“You didn’t hurt yourself?” I ask. Gudrun shakes her head, almost imperceptibly.

Mum disappears into the kitchen. I hear her turning on the tap, probably sticking her finger under the cold water.

Grandpa, irritated, watches her go, then picks up the knife and cuts the ribbon on Gudrun's present with a brusque movement.

"There," he says. "This present better be a good one, after all that."

I think he's trying to make a joke, but I curse myself for not buying something better.

"It's just a book?" Gudrun says, disappointed.

"But it's about a horse?" I say.

Grandpa looks at me. Not impressed. As if *I'm* the problem here, and not him – the one who gave a six-year-old a Swiss army knife.

We sing 'Happy Birthday' for Gudrun (and me), and eat birthday lasagne and do our best to act as if everything is fine. But when Mum goes to pour some Fanta into Anna's glass she gets a little blood on the bottle, and Vegard asks if she's hurt herself.

"No, no," Mum says.

"But you're bleeding! What happened?"

"Nothing," she says. "... just a little accident."

But she can't help herself; her gaze flits towards Grandpa, and that's all it takes.

A wrinkle appears in Grandpa's brow.

I take out my phone and check my photos to make sure I remembered to lock the front door.

"What kind of accident?" Vegard asks, because after eight years in the family he still hasn't learned to read the room.

"We have Sprite, too," Stefanie says, in an attempt to smooth things over. "Would you like some? Gudrun? Anna? It's probably a good idea to have some before Uncle Viktor and Auntie Ulrikke arrive, because they usually drink it all up."

"There wouldn't have been an accident if Solveig and Freya had managed to stay calm," Grandpa says.

"Or if you hadn't given Gudrun a *knife*," Mum says. She tries to say it in a light, humorous tone, but a tense little clearing of her throat gives her away, and the criticism is obvious.

"A knife?" Vegard says.

"Just to open a present," Grandpa says. "Solveig is being dramatic."

"You didn't give Gudrun your Swiss army knife, did you?" Grandma asks, and I notice how Stefanie straightens her spine, that she too wants to stop Grandma from going any further, *don't push him now*.

“Now really, dear,” Grandpa says, “... surely she should be able to hold a knife without anyone getting injured. She’s not mentally challenged, is she?”

He’s speaking in a low voice, but so intensely that the children look up from their food, trying to understand what’s going on with the grown-ups.

Grandma pulls Mum’s hand to her and examines the cut on her finger, and this small movement, this silent expression of care, clearly strikes Grandpa as an accusation. He looks about him, feeling surrounded. Besieged.

“Well, fine,” he says. “Then I’m going out to the car. We’re leaving.”

“What?” Gudrun says. “But it’s my birthday?”

Grandpa demonstratively pushes his chair away from the table.

“We’re leaving,” he repeats, his voice louder now.

His eyes are two empty windows; he’s no longer in there.

The faces of Gudrun and Anna display all the emotions years of training have taught Stefanie and me to hide.

“But you were going to stay overnight?” Anna says. She hasn’t yet learned how little it takes to ruin everything, sometimes.

“Dad...” Mum says, but Grandpa doesn’t look at her.

I clear my throat.

“Well then shouldn’t we at least have a bit of cake first?” I ask, because I want to normalise the situation for the sake of the girls, and for Grandma, who will have to spend five hours stuck in the car with him as they drive south again.

But mentioning the cake wasn’t a smart move, because it gives Grandpa more ammunition.

“You’re looking at me as if I’m the one who’s irresponsible here, all because of a little Swiss army knife, but you were the ones who let that girl eat a *candle*,” he says.

“But it was fine,” Stefanie says, giving Anna a reassuring smile.

“Yes,” Anna says, nodding. “I threw it all up.”

Grandpa shakes his head, and his face is twisted into a sarcastic grimace, a kind of “well aren’t you just parent of the year”, and I see how hard this hits Stefanie – even though she knows as well as I do that he’s not himself when he gets like this. We have to remind ourselves of it all the time. This isn’t Grandpa. This isn’t what he thinks, not when he’s himself. When he’s himself, he’s wise and helpful. When he’s himself, we love him.

Grandma places a hand on his arm, an animal tamer trying to calm an injured bear.

“Please,” she says. “Can you just sit back down. Then we’ll go soon.”

He shakes her off, looking as if he wants to scream. Grandma moves away from him, only slightly, but it's enough for me to see it: she's afraid. She's the toughest, most stubborn old woman in the world, but when her husband is like this, she's afraid of him.

Then a tiny voice pipes up from the end of the table. It's Anna.

"Great-grandpa, you have to stay – you said you'd read me a bedtime story."

Grandpa is trapped between the rage that's taken up residence inside him and the good great-grandfather who's still in there, somewhere.

He stands there, every muscle in his body tensed. He doesn't sit down, but nor does he go out to the car.

"I promise not to play with the knife anymore," Gudrun says.

Grandma looks pleadingly at Grandpa. He turns his dark gaze to the floor. Then he sits down.

Mum tries to fill the silence.

"How come Viktor and Ulrikke are so late?"

"Ulrikke had to work," Stefanie says.

Grandpa shakes his head again, exasperated.

"They have a big presentation on Monday," I explain. "It's not her fault."

And suddenly Grandpa slams a fist on the table, making the porcelain clatter.

"I'm so *tired* of nobody in this family being able to take responsibility! You're acting like *children*, the lot of you. It's *embarrassing*."

I meet Stefanie's gaze, give a hint of a nod, know that she has to get out of here before she starts crying in front of the girls.

"Shall we go get the cake ready?" I say. "Stefanie, could you come and make the coffee?"

There are moments in life we're forced to relive so many times that we come to feel at home in them, even if we don't like them. We know them inside out, know the opportunities they do and don't contain, the repertoire available to us for the occasion.

I live in this moment:

Stefanie and I – and sometimes Ulrikke – out in the kitchen. Refugees from the atmosphere in the living room. Exactly who is in the living room varies. Different combinations of the players: Mum, Dad, Grandma, Grandpa.

We're always here under the pretext of wanting to do something useful, because that's the only way we're allowed to excuse ourselves and slip away, we learned this early on, how

to flee without escalating the conflict. I remember helping Stefanie to grind coffee with a small hand grinder when I was still in first grade.

I remember the feeling of being on high alert all the time, even as a little girl; how I tried to predict the changes in the weather before they came, so I could try to stop them. But Stefanie had it worse. The adults had a tendency to see her as grown-up, just because she was the oldest. I think she was afraid of seeming childish while everyone else her age was still afraid of the Groke.

We don't usually talk about what's just happened in the living room. Sometimes we come close to doing so, but generally we don't, generally we're so relieved at having escaped it that we talk about anything and everything else, pretending we can't hear the voices coming from in there.

But this time Anna and Gudrun are there, a new generation of potential little kitchen elves.

"Should we have asked them to come out here with us?" I ask, and Stefanie immediately understands who I mean.

"It's okay, Vegard will take them out if it escalates. I think it'll help that we left, then Grandpa won't feel so ganged up on."

I nod.

I tip coffee into a coffee filter. She takes some fresh birthday candles from a drawer.

We go back out with the cake and the coffee, and I'm relieved to discover that Grandpa is now only sullen, and no longer short-tempered. He's taken out his phone, and is sitting there reading an online newspaper in such a large font I could read it from where I'm standing if I wanted to. Mum and Vegard are chatting in a manically pleasant tone about the flowers in the garden, as if they can convince the kids that Great-grandpa's behaviour is totally normal by being twice as happy as usual. We just have time to hope that the rest of the evening might actually proceed peacefully, but then the doorbell rings. Ulrikke and Viktor come barging in before anyone has a chance to go answer the door, and Grandma and Grandpa exchange a look: *Rude*.

Ulrikke has a gift for Gudrun and one for me. Both of them feature ribbons so tight they're impossible to untie.

Fuck.

"Do you have a pair of scissors?" Viktor asks.

"Great-grandpa has a knife," Anna says.

*

I lie awake with racing thoughts – this always happens after I’ve spent time with my family. Every now and then I hear the subway trains down below, which is good, it means it can’t be that late just yet, the trains stop running at around one in the morning. I think about all the people getting on and off. Where they’re coming from and where they’re going, who they’re thinking about, whether they’re on autopilot or whether today is a special day, whether they’re looking forward to or dreading something. The kind of lives they live.

There are endless definitions of what it means to live. It means something different to each individual, and for some people the meaning changes depending on what day you ask them. It can mean something as simple as *breathing* and something as pretentious and complex as *being authentic*. It can mean being brave, wanting to achieve your dreams. Doing what you were born to do, to the extent any of us are born with a purpose. Some people say they feel alive when they do extreme sports, when their heart is hammering so hard it feels like it’s about to burst through their chest. When they take chances. The higher the risk, the more alive you are, as if *living* is synonymous with danger, or fear, or discomfort. For others it’s the opposite, to live is maintaining a kind of calm presence in the here and now, mindfulness – it’s coastal rock and sea breeze, it’s when you can see the heat from the radiators dancing in the sunlight against the living room wall, or when you listen for the sound of the falling snow.

It can be about making a difference, so the world looks slightly different than it would have had you never existed.

“To live is to love.”

Living can encompass everything.

But ‘wanting to die’ – that’s mainly treated as if it’s just one thing, even though sheer logic dictates it must have just as many meanings as wanting to live does.

For me, it pulls in three main directions:

The feeling of *wanting* to die.

The feeling of *having* to die.

The feeling of not wanting to be in my life any more.

And although these might all sound the same, they feel dramatically different.

Wanting to die, feels like death pulling at me.

Having to die, feels like something in me pushing, something in me that's broken, something insistent and loud in my brain.

Not wanting to be in my life any more is both these things and neither of them at once. Here, it's just that life is intolerable. It isn't that I want to or have to die, it's that I don't have the strength to live.

These past few years, I've wanted to die. That's been the main headline. But not even that has looked the same from day to day.

I've just felt the need to be in emptiness, like when you walk in baking hot sunshine carrying a heavy load and the straps of your pack cut into your sweaty, sunburned skin, and everything is blisters and hair in your eyes, and all you want is to be somewhere cool and dark and quiet. I've longed for it, been lured, the way sailors were lured to the deep by sirens.

I've fantasised about waking up old, that my life will soon be over, that I might drift away in my sleep and never wake up.

On other days it's been different, more dangerous, and I've thought about 'how' because it's unbearable to think about 'why'.

I've tried to imagine how it feels to be hit by a subway train, and the thought has resonated as a kind of gruff and authoritative form of comfort in my body, the only kind of embrace I could imagine myself accepting. I've longed to feel the violence, the suddenness and the intensity, the *hardness*, a moment's release from the nauseating apathy in my body, the soft, velvety meaninglessness, like a furred blanket of mould over the nervous system. To feel the crushing of the bones, *hard, hard, hard*, and finally wake from the torpor, if only for a millisecond.

A kiss with a fist is better than none.

I've woken in the morning and felt there was no reason to get up, every day like all the rest. I've lain there for hours, feeling the hunger come and go again, like a child who learns to stop asking for comfort because it knows it will never arrive.

I've tried to imagine a future for myself, and seen only darkness.

I've tried to imagine what the world would look like without me in it, and felt relief on behalf of everyone I love. That they'd finally be released from a responsibility, a burden, a cause for concern they're constantly forced to grapple with, because – unfortunately for them – they're good people who care.

At other times, my brain has pushed. It feels like when I have to check the door or the candles, only now the thought isn't 'check', it's 'jump'.

It's an order.

It isn't necessarily that I want to die, it's that I *have to*. Something in me insists.

Drive into the mountainside.

Jump from the balcony.

Stab yourself in the belly with that knife you're using to cut vegetables.

It's happened at times in which my brain has been particularly nagging, when I haven't managed to leave the apartment at all because there's been so much to check, or when life has been especially awful for a while, and my ability to resist is therefore low.

"If you're tired of checking, then here's a solution for you," says my brain.

"But I don't want to be dead," I say.

"Jump in front of the train," says my brain.

At times like these, I'm exhausted from living in two perilous, self-contradictory emotional states at once:

The pull towards death, and my fear of it.

The feeling of having to expire, *now*, and the urge to check, always to check and double-check, because *what if you have cancer, what if it's on fire, what if you die*.

And then there are the times when I haven't wanted to be in my life. This is when all of existence is unbearable. I'm just so unbelievably exhausted. Desperate for a break. I want to be in a coma. I want to be dead for a month or two. I want to disappear, to not have to deal with anything anymore, to not have to feel anything anymore – not feel, not be, not check, not subject other people to me. I don't want to keep going. Just can't take any more.

Sometimes, when I don't want to be in my life, and my brain pushes, and death pulls, it's as if the planets align. A total eclipse, where anything might happen. Then it's the fates who decide whether or not I'll survive.

It's during one of these solar eclipses that I'm going to die. I've known this for as long as I can remember.

*

I wake before the alarm clock, even though I prepared everything yesterday. The dough is ready, all I have to do is roll out the buns and bake them. My traditional bunad is looking lovely, the shirt neatly ironed. I got up four times during the night and double-checked the iron to make sure I'd remembered to unplug it.

You wouldn't think it was possible to be late when you've prepared everything in advance and woken up two hours before you have to leave the house, but somehow I still manage it. I struggle to get out of the apartment. I have the feeling something isn't as it should be, that I forgot to fix something or other, it always happens at the worst possible times. Wearing my bunad I stand there in front of the oven, staring at it, pointing at the knobs, saying "off, off, off, its *off*, Freya," out loud to myself, but I can't quite make myself leave. I film another video of the oven and go out into the hallway, put on my traditional shoes, say "okay, you're leaving now, you've *checked*," but then I think about the old woman who lives on the floor above and who it takes half an hour to get down all the stairs. If I haven't turned off the oven and something starts burning and the fire spreads to the upper floors then it'll be my fault that she dies. And of course I simply can't allow that to happen. Just because I had a champagne breakfast to get to. I'm so tired and angry at myself that I almost start to cry as I go back in and check the oven one more time (I manage to stop myself crying, though – if I cry now, I'll have to re-do my make-up). My phone vibrates. It's the alarm I've set to remind myself that I have a train to catch – I've never *actually* forgotten to leave home when I have somewhere to be, but I still get stressed if I don't set an alarm the night before, just to be on the safe side.

I take several photos of the oven, but it still feels as if it's on, and I can't give up until I feel that it's off. But in the end I have to, and I feel like the world's most terrible person as I tear myself away from it, as if my whole body believes that I'm murdering someone, while at the same time I'm furious at myself, it's pathetic, I *know* it's off, I *know* that even if it really *was* on, then it would probably still be absolutely fine. I film myself locking the front door and checking the handle, then hurry down the road with the buns. On my way to the station my heart is pounding so hard I wonder if I might be about to die, and then I think: no, you can't die now, if you do you'll ruin the Constitution Day celebrations.

*

Everyone looks up from their plates as I walk through the door. I'm the last to arrive. I just have time to register that Madeleine and Julie have invited several people I don't know this

year, something I hadn't counted on when I planned this day in my head. I want to turn around and go home, but Madeleine hurries to reassure me that it's no problem I'm late, and ushers me to my place at the table. Loud barking can be heard from Madeleine and Julie's bedroom. Julie explains that it's the new puppy; it isn't used to the sound of the front door yet. The entire table spends the next quarter of an hour discussing puppy names. In the end the choice is between Kuzko and Bjørnson, but I suspect Bjørnson will be discounted the moment everyone's Constitution-Day-tinted glasses come off.

The guy next to me introduces himself as Fredrik. He's a doctor.

"Freya studied psychology!" Madeleine says.

"Cool," Fredrik says.

I smile and take a bite of my bun. Note that nobody sees fit to tell him that I dropped out, or that I've also started thousands of other courses. But Fredrik asks no follow-up questions; he's far too keen for me to know how tired he is of talking about how he's a doctor for that.

We go out onto the balcony and wave our flags as the children's parade passes by. Aisha puts a hand to her belly and smiles, I know she's imagining her little bundle of joy wearing national dress in a few years' time. I try to imagine someone, too, a tiny tot in a Vest-Agder bunad, perhaps. I don't know what I'm hoping for, but I know I'm hoping for *something*, and it feels both good and distressing at once, so I hurry to find something else to think about. I fiddle with my bunad's traditional silver jewellery, double-check that it's sitting nice and flat. Then we go back inside and eat some more, and Fredrik talks about the kinds of injuries they can expect to see in Accident and Emergency over the course of the day. Sack races, scooters, barbecues, drunkenness. That's just the way it is when an entire nation celebrates. It's risky to be too happy – you have to work much harder to hurt yourself if all you do is sit indoors and cry.

In the end I get up and tell Madeleine and Julie that I have to get going – I'm expected at a family celebration at my older sister's house.

"What a shame," Fredrik says. "It was so nice talking with you."

At me, I think, but I don't say it out loud. I haven't said anything to him since I arrived, and there's no point starting now.

*

I sit in the wardrobe, waiting to be found. One of my legs has fallen asleep.

I can hear Gudrun walking past outside – she’s the one doing the seeking, but she doesn’t open the door, and I stay still.

I close my eyes and count, the way I do when I’m searching for myself:

What if everything doesn’t go to hell.

What if it all works out fine.

What if they find a solution to the climate crisis.

What if they find a solution to antibiotic-resistant bacteria.

What if there is no nuclear war.

What if the Internet and technology don’t kill the truth or democracy after all.

What if people generally want the best for each other.

What if nobody hates you.

What if nobody is mad at you or thinks you’re a nuisance.

What if nobody remembers that thing you said in ninth grade.

What if you remembered to unplug your straightening iron.

What if nothing bad happens if you step on the manhole covers.

What if it isn’t cancer.

What if *that* isn’t cancer, either.

Or that.

Or that.

What if *nothing* is cancer.

What if you discover something that makes you happy tomorrow.

What if you can do it after all.

What if everyone pulls themselves together in the areas where we need to pull ourselves together, and does a little less in the areas where we all just need to chill out.

What if things are actually moving in the right direction.

What if this is the moment before Simba comes back and sorts everything out up there on Pride Rock.

What if the world doesn’t go under.

What if everything blows over.

Then it really would be a crying shame if you’re dead.

There’s a tugging at the wardrobe door, and I open my eyes. It’s Stefanie.

“Gudrun got tired of searching,” she says. “But you can stay here for a bit longer, if you like.”

*

One of our regulars, Alf, has already been in the bar for a while when my shift begins. Jan Morten is happy to see me – he finds it weird, talking to Alf alone.

I try out what I think are some safe small-talk topics, and say that the botanical gardens are looking beautiful at the moment, with all the flowers in bloom. Alf’s brow furrows.

“I used to pick flowers from there for the missus,” he says. “Before she ran off.”

“You picked flowers from the botanical gardens?” I say.

“It was a long time ago, before all the hysteria about causing offence. You could do that kind of thing back then.”

Jan Morten and I exchange glances, and Alf notices.

“See,” he says, “that’s *exactly* what I’m talking about! You’re horrified because I picked a few flowers. *That’s* what’s wrong with your generation – you can’t tolerate the slightest thing. Every little thing is the end of the world.”

I help Alf out of the door when his time is up. On the days he’s here, he’s always the last one to leave. I usually ask him if he’s sure he’ll be okay getting home, and he usually replies: “What will you do if I say no?”. But today he stumbles on the threshold and falls down the steps. He says it doesn’t hurt. I imagine the alcohol in his system, a protective layer of bubble wrap just beneath his skin. During the night he’ll sleep off the drunkenness and then the bubbles will pop, and in the morning he’ll wake up and feel it, I have no doubt about that. But he won’t let me help him; he insists that he’s fine. I sit down next to him on the step. “Why do you still work here?” he says. “New, young bartenders turn up every year, and then they finish their studies and move on. But you’re not so young anymore.”

Jan Morten and I close up together, and Jan Morten plays ‘It’s the End of the World as We Know It (And I Feel Fine)’ at full volume.

I sneak over to double-check that the doors to the fridges are properly closed before we leave (and I feel fine).

*

It starts with us being tagged in the same photo on Instagram. All of us wearing our bunads, Madeleine trying to uncork a bottle of champagne, Kuzko jumping up and trying to bite her bunad's purse. A short time later, he sends me a follower request. Fredrik – the guy I sat next to that day. I request to follow him back, not because I necessarily want to, but because it's polite. He accepts immediately. I navigate to his profile, scroll past all the pictures of tents and hammocks and skiing trips, fancy dishes at expensive restaurants, the weeks he spent with his right leg in a cast, the year he took several selfies in various European capitals together with a woman with long, black hair. Fredrik's very first image is one of a teddy bear with a stethoscope and a Helse Nord hospital staff pass. The caption reads: "I'm finally a doctor!" Well, it could have been worse. I take great pains to ensure that I don't like the image as I close it, but an anxious prickling still moves from the crown of my head and down my face when I see that he's sent me a message, as if someone has cracked a huge, hot egg over my head. *Did I manage to accidentally tap like after all?* In my inbox it's only possible to see the start of the message: "Hi Freya! I see that you...". In my head, I complete the sentence: "...are stalking me?"

I hurry back to his profile, scroll all the way down, check the photo.

I haven't liked it.

What about the others, the ones I only quickly scrolled past – have I accidentally tapped on something there?

I force myself to go back to my inbox, take a deep breath, and open the message.

"Hi Freya! I see that you're holding a black umbrella in the photo Julie posted of us. I seem to have brought one just like it home with me, so I'm wondering whether you might have mine? Mine's black too when it's closed, so it would be easy to mix them up, but when mine is open, it has a pattern that matches my bunad, hehe 😊".

I'm so relieved that my stalking hasn't been exposed that I immediately get up from the sofa and go out into the hallway to check the umbrella that lies there on the floor. I open it, take a picture of the pattern on it and send it to him: "This one?"

He replies "YES!" followed by five heart emojis.

"I could come over and pick it up now if you're home," he writes. "Where do you live?"

I look at the state of my apartment. I simply don't have the energy to tackle the mess.

"Would you be able to meet in the city centre?" I ask.

“Fuglen at 2pm?” he writes.

I close his umbrella and put it in my bag.

“Great!” I write.

I think about how people say it’s bad luck to open an umbrella indoors. But that’s not a good enough reason not to go out and meet people.

*

He’s already sitting on a bench outside the café when I arrive; my umbrella is on the table beside his cup of coffee. He gets up when he sees me, and hugs me as if we know each other. I note the tension in my body, but I let him embrace me, even though I hate social situations where I don’t know what’s expected of me.

“It’s so nice to see you again,” he says. “It was such a shame you had to leave early – but Julie said you had aunt duties to attend to.”

I’m flattered he’s asked Julie about me, but I’m also surprised – I mean, he never asked *me* about me.

“My nieces are still at the age where they think I’m cool,” I say.

“I think you’ll stay just as cool, no matter how old they get,” he says.

“Smooth,” I say.

“Oh I didn’t say ‘just as cool’ meant *cool*. I just meant that your coolness level will stay the same, independently of them.”

He gesticulates with his hand, indicating that my coolness level is low. I take his hand and lift it, unable to accept him putting it all the way down there, and realise too late that it’s weird to touch him like that – aggressive flirting in broad daylight. Fuck. His gaze flies to the table, to the cup and the umbrella.

“Do you have time for a coffee?” he asks. “Or do you just want to...?”

“Exchange the hostages?”

He laughs a little too heartily, as if I’ve said something extremely funny.

“Right,” he says, picking up my umbrella.

I take his from my bag, and we exchange them at the exact same time, two adults playing kidnapping, it’s surprisingly sweet. I wonder if this is what he’s actually like, or whether he’s creating this version of himself for my sake.

“I’ll buy you a coffee,” he says, even though I haven’t said whether or not I actually have the time. “What would you like?”

I watch him through the window as he stands reading the menu behind the till.

I weigh the pros and cons. He's good-looking, in an indisputable and classic and slightly boring kind of way – if he were one of the servants in *Beauty and the Beast*, he'd have turned into a mahogany table. He has an important job and likes helping people – that's appealing and impressive – he's an old friend of Julie's, and I trust her judgement. He acts with a naturalness I envy, as if life is straightforward and easy to navigate, what you see is what you get. He gives me the feeling that everything can be fixed, that all problems have a practical solution.

I can't imagine him overthinking things.

I watch him make small talk with the woman behind the till while she makes my coffee. He makes it look so easy, and he's certainly not going to lie awake tonight analysing what he said, wondering if he might have unintentionally upset her. I think about how he laughed when I made a joke – that worries me, I remember how Alexander always said that the best thing about me was that I was funny. Madeleine once mentioned in passing that I sometimes turned into my very own stand-up show when Alexander was around; she said there was something exhausting and breathless about it, and she was right, of course: you'll never see me do more joking around than when I'm afraid or uncomfortable. Maybe this time I ought not to fall for someone who provides positive reinforcement on my survival strategies.

“You *are* funny though,” Madeleine has said several times since my break-up. “You shouldn't stop kidding around, it's your personality. Not just a survival strategy.”

“But how do I know when it's one or the other?”

“Maybe you don't actually need to think about it so much?”

I wonder whether Fredrik might like my personality, or whether he's mostly the kind of person who would like the fact that I'm afraid. That I need his reassurance. That he's the one in control.

He comes through the doorway with my coffee, sets it down in front of me and says: “She's so funny, the woman who works here.”

Something in me says that it might be worth a try. The ant infestation.

I recognise it, the feeling I got from the school-leavers on the tram a week ago. The feeling of wanting to have *something*. Not necessarily him. Just *something*. A hint of a love life, like when I was fifteen and dreamed up an entire person from a guy I met on MySpace but never in reality.

By the time we've emptied our cups I've agreed to go to the Munch Museum with him on Friday, because neither of us has ever been there, and that's kind of inexcusable when you live in Oslo.

*

The museum excursion goes well – he tells me about his colleagues and about his family, and I say, “how nice” and “wow” and “oh, that sounds lovely” in all the right places. I can't shake the feeling that it's a little too convenient we're at a museum we both only seem mildly interested in, but which we both know we ought to give a chance, because we've heard that it's good.

We stop in front of a painting, and we're quiet for a moment too long as we both try to think of something to say. It's a little tense, and I start to fumble for the pockets of the jacket I'm carrying over my arm, to see whether my phone or keys might have fallen out when I took it off. They haven't. I exhale.

“Imagine being so stark raving mad,” Fredrik says.

I'm afraid he's seen right through me, but he's still looking at Munch's painting. I turn to face it, consider it with him. I don't see madness. I see pain.

“Why do some people make things so difficult for themselves?” Fredrik goes on. “I'll never understand it.”

*

“I think I might be dating Fredrik?” I say.

Madeleine and Julie look at each other, and something is exchanged between them. This irritates me, like when Mum and Dad would speak German when I was little whenever there was something they didn't want me to understand.

“Is that a bad idea?” I ask. “Is there something I ought to know about him?”

Julie hesitates.

“No, it's just... I didn't think you were dating right now.”

I laugh.

“Are you kidding? The two of you have been bugging me to get back out there!”

“Excuse me, but I most certainly have not!” Julie says.

“Okay, fine, but Madeleine has,” I say.

I can see that this puts Madeleine in a bit of a squeeze – what she’s said to me, and what she’s told Julie, are obviously two different things.

“Julie’s just worried about you,” Madeleine says finally. “I think it’s good, Freya, I really do.”

Julie looks at Madeleine as if she can’t believe what she’s hearing.

“Was I just supposed to stop dating forever after Alexander?” I ask.

Julie searches for the right words.

“No, of course not, it’s just... we’re a little afraid that...”

“...that?”

“That you might end up ill again. The way you were after Stockholm.”

Julie looks at the floor. A wave of shame, and something else, something even darker, rushes towards me. I can sense that Madeleine is trying to meet my gaze, but I can’t bear to look her in the eye.

“I don’t think there’s anything like that to worry about where Fredrik is concerned,” I say. I can hear that my voice is cold, and I wonder how my eyes look. I’m glad to have inherited Grandpa’s physical agility and nose and love of skiing, but I hope I haven’t inherited the dark, empty look that comes over him when he’s angry.

Madeleine exhales heavily.

“Do you think you could go down to the shop and buy some cottage cheese before they close?” she asks, as if Julie and I are stupid, and Julie nods.

“Sure,” she says. And then we pretend, all three of us, that Madeleine and Julie are simply DESPERATE for some cottage cheese at 22:49 on a Friday night, and that Madeleine hasn’t just sent Julie away so she can talk to me alone.

“I can take Kuzko out for a walk while I’m at it,” Julie says, the subtext being: “We have a dog you can blame, why in the hell are you sending me out to buy cottage cheese, you dumbass?”

“Yes, great! And take your phone with you!” Madeleine replies. (Subtext: “I’ll text you when the coast is clear.”)

The moment Julie has gone, Madeleine apologises.

“It’s okay,” I say. “I should have known you can’t keep secrets from Julie.”

Madeleine shakes her head.

“It isn’t just that,” she says. “I needed to talk to *someone* about it. And you don’t want me to talk to Aisha about any of your stuff.”

I feel embarrassed. It's so awkward to be somebody she needs to talk to someone about. To be a problem.

"Okay," I say. "But... this really isn't something you guys need to worry about."

"It's a bit hard not to," Madeleine says. "After Alexander... you were completely destroyed, Freya. I was really worried about you, all the time. It was fucking awful."

I take out my phone. I just need to check it isn't accidentally calling someone.

"Yeah, but, I mean, there's no risk of that now," I say. "Fredrik isn't Alexander. And there's been some kind of change in me lately, like, I can't explain it. It's just... I have the energy to give all the dating stuff a chance now."

"And that's great, but... do you have the energy to cope if it all comes crashing down?"

It's so rare that Madeleine is so earnest, it makes me feel like some kind of emotional voyeur.

"I'm just worried you're dating because I've pushed you into it, and that it might not work out, and then..."

"It isn't like that, I promise," I say. "And you're not the reason I'm dating, either."

"No?"

"No. I want to find someone."

"Because?"

"Being single in Oslo is way too expensive."

She rolls her eyes, but she smiles.

*

I run up the long hills towards Grefsen, hearing Madeleine's voice saying "Because?" in my head, over and over again. I couldn't explain it to her, she wouldn't have understood.

If somebody chooses you – forever and ever, out of all the people in the world, just *you* – then that's the most safe and secure validation you're ever going to get. An overwhelming confirmation that you're not only good enough, you're *the best* in another person's eyes.

Just imagine waking up every morning and knowing you're enough.

That you have nothing to prove, justify, or make up for – that you're entitled to exist simply by virtue of being somebody's Most Important Person.

Madeleine's "because" mixes with the rhythm of the music; I fix my eyes on the uppermost lamppost and drag myself up the hill, feeling the sweat run down my neck, the taste of blood in my mouth, refusing to give up.

I know that I can't love myself healthy.

But if somebody else loves me, then I've finally made it, I've done it, I won't have to film the doors any more. If somebody else loves me, I'm no longer in freefall – I'm safe. There's space for me. If somebody else loves me, I can finally rest.

*

I was five minutes early and he's already five minutes late, which means I've been on high alert for ten minutes in one of the most stressful places in the city.

I feel as if I'm getting in the way of all the tourists – I try to duck out of their photographs, try to avoid the eyes of the beggars and charity fundraisers who make me feel guilty and the peppy mobile phone subscription sellers who refuse to take no for an answer. This is why I don't like meeting people at the Tiger statue outside Oslo-S station, but it was Fredrik who suggested it, and I thought it might seem weird to say no.

Then I see him, on the other side of the road, making his way down Karl Johan. We nod to each other, and I walk towards him, having no idea where to look as I walk – it's weird to walk along staring at each other, this shouldn't be as awkward as it feels. There's a red light – we each stand on either side of the road, fiddling excessively with our AirPods and their cases in order to seem busy and avoid making eye contact.

We meet on the little traffic island in the middle of the road. He gives me a hug but doesn't apologise for being late, so I apologise for not knowing whether or not I ought to walk up to meet him. He looks at me as if I'm a bit strange, and he laughs, before asking: "Where shall we go?". The light flashes yellow and I don't know, because we haven't agreed on what we're going to do, only where we should meet. He takes a step into the road and I follow him. We walk back to the tiger statue.

"What do you fancy?" he asks.

"Shall we just find a café?" I ask.

He nods, but doesn't look convinced.

"I thought we could maybe take a little walk?" he says. "Up to Ekeberg, or somewhere?"

I look up at the sky. It's grey.

“I have my umbrella,” he adds. “Not the nice one with the bunad pattern on it, but still.”

I smile.

“Great,” I say. “But... it’s just...”

“Yeah?”

“They’ve forecasted thunder and lightning.”

“And?”

I hesitate.

“Are you scared of thunderstorms?” he asks.

“I *know* it’s silly,” I say. “And I know, I’ve seen the statistics. It’s just... okay, fine, it’s unlikely we’ll be struck by lightning, but I once bumped into my ex on the street in Kyoto, and, like, what were the odds of *that* – especially when I was only in the city for a day. So, yeah, I prefer to play it safe.”

He laughs.

“Wow... that’s... a lot,” he says.

“I know, I’m sorry,” I say.

“Let’s go get a beer,” he says.

One beer becomes several, the way one beer often does. Every time it seems the weather is about to stabilise the rain starts pouring again, and we buy another round, and another, and another.

A stag party tumbles in after beer number four, making so much noise we’re no longer able to hear each other across the table, so he comes and sits next to me on the bench against the wall.

When we finally kiss, all I can think is that we’ll be in the background of all the photos the stag party is taking. I try to twist around so I won’t be recognisable. He makes a “hm?” sound as we kiss, and I pretend not to hear.

*

Madeleine calls me when I’m on my way home, wanting to know how it’s all going.

“He’s nice,” I say. “But it feels a bit like we’ve both agreed to watch something on Netflix that wasn’t our first choice, if you know what I mean. It’s like watching reruns of *Friends*.”

Madeleine becomes exasperated with me, says I need to give it a chance. Focus on what we have in common.

“What *do* we have in common?” I say.

“You’re single.”

“Is that all?”

She laughs.

“Before I met Julie, I carried on with people I didn’t even have *that* in common with,” she says.

“So you’re saying he’s the person I’m carrying on with until I meet my Julie?”

“Jesus, Freya. Do you have to have a plan for everything?”

“Um, yes?”

But all the same, I agree to try. Without a plan.

“Just see how it goes.”

I still don’t like him as much as I should, but I like him in theory. Individually, all his qualities are good, but there’s something about the combination that just doesn’t quite work for me. He’s Rachel’s English trifle: half desert and half meat pie.

Custard? Good. Jam? Good. Meat? Good.

But all together, only for those who are especially interested. And I’m not especially interested.

Not yet, anyway.

*

It’s rare I have time to feel bored at work on Saturdays, but today there are surprisingly few customers, there must be a football match on or something. There certainly doesn’t need to be two of us on duty, but Jan Morten couldn’t have known that when he set up the rota, so here we are, Hennie and me. She goes on and on about her love life, and I realise that if I don’t escape soon, she’ll start asking me about mine, and then *I’ll* have to ask me about mine, and I’m not ready for that, so I go to the bathroom. Look at the ‘Call me S’ graffiti again and wonder whether S sat on the fence for a while before making their decision. Once I’m back behind the bar, I send Fredrik a text asking what he’s up to, and if he’d like to meet up after work.

At first I think I’m just doing it to be polite, but when he doesn’t answer, I start to wonder if maybe I wasn’t just being polite after all. I open Instagram for the fiftieth time this

hour to see if he's replied, but every time the little red flag pops up it's somebody else, somebody who has reacted to a photo I've posted (someone has graffitied 'NOT ANY MORE' and an arrow pointing downwards above the ancient 'I LOVE YOU JOHANNES' graffiti in the toilet at work), and Madeleine, who sent me the story of a woman we apparently went to high school with. I see that he's posted a new story after I sent him the message, so he's been logged in, but he hasn't opened the message. I try not to read too much into it – it could mean anything at all. But in any event, I don't open his story, I don't want to seem too desperate. I get annoyed at myself, *now you're playing a game you don't even want to win, Freya*, I know that, it would be a totally different story if I was in love with him. But at the same time, it's precisely because I'm *not* in love with him that I can stick with it. That I dare. It feels as if I'm still in control, that I'm safe.

Being in love is like sitting on the rear rack of a bike while somebody else pedals and steers. I imagine how Fredrik would probably stick his arms in the air on the downhill: *Look, no hands!*

It's an incredibly vulnerable position. When you're in love, you're at the mercy of the person whose bike you're hitching a ride on not having the sudden urge to cycle straight across the motorway.

Jan Morten notices that I'm constantly checking my phone; he asks if I'm waiting for something special. I say I'm just checking the time.

"You know we have a clock on the till, right?" he says with a lopsided smile.

I ignore him.

It clearly amuses him every time anyone at work is having dating or relationship issues – it's alright for him, he's married. It brings to mind Easter egg hunting when I was a kid – I was always the last to find my egg. The whole family would be sitting on the sofa, gobbling down their chocolate and enjoying themselves, while I searched ever more desperately.

I take the tram home from work (no answer), get ready for bed (no answer), end up staying up and watching an old episode of *Grey's Anatomy* in case he sends a message asking to meet up (no answer), fall asleep on the sofa and wake up again (no answer), admit defeat and go to bed.

Two-and-a-half hours later, I still haven't fallen asleep. I turn the light back on, open the message he still hasn't answered and consider deleting it. But that seems a stupid thing to

do, if he's already seen that I've sent something and just decided not to open it yet. I put down my phone, turn off the light again.

Close my eyes.

Nope. This isn't going to work. Not in the slightest.

I pick up my phone again, find a podcast about celebrities by celebrities and turn up the volume, just high enough that I can't hear myself think.

*

On Sunday morning I wake with a pounding headache to the sound of an actor laughing a loud, fake laugh. I pull the phone to me to turn off the podcast series that has clearly been playing in my ears all night and immediately get a little dopamine rush from seeing that I have '3 new messages'. I open them:

1. 'Sorry, busy shift last night, didn't see your message until now'
2. 'You're not still awake, are you???'
3. That awful emoji of a cat with hearts for eyes x 4

There's nothing about these messages that I like. But I reply all the same. It's too soon to give up. *What if it works out!!!*, as blasted hope would say.

*

Fuglen is almost full, so we decide I'll keep our table while he goes and orders for both of us. When he asks what I'd like, I hesitate for a moment.

"A cortado," I say. "Topped up with milk, please?"

Alexander used to hate it when people ordered cortados with milk, he said you may as well not bother, and so I didn't – bother, that is – I drank my coffee black for all the years we were together.

But Fredrik doesn't raise his eyebrows or snort, he just asks whether I'd like semi-skimmed, full-fat or oat milk.

And he's actually pretty cute when he smiles.

You mustn't think about it too much, because then it'll die. It doesn't matter what 'it' is – you can think anything to death, deconstructing, deconstructing, deconstructing, until there's nothing left, just components, ingredients. A build-your-own panic attack kit.

I think anyway. I know I should leave well alone, but I just can't help myself.

I think:

In what ways might this all come crashing down?

In what ways might this become the start of a story I'm reluctant to tell, because I should have known better?

I think:

How quickly will this all go to hell?

It's always best if it happens quickly, even though it feels brutal there and then. Because if it takes time, then it *takes* time, right – and suddenly months and years have passed, and in the meantime doors that used to be wide open have closed.

I realise that I haven't been listening while he's been talking to me, but he doesn't seem to have noticed in the slightest. I laugh, just to be on the safe side; say "Oh my God!" as if he's so funny it's impossible for me to think of a comeback – *how can I follow that?* – and he smiles, satisfied, and I'm slightly disappointed that my gamble has paid off yet again, that he doesn't catch me out. I may as well be a laugh track from a nineties sitcom, it makes no difference what I think.

"Don't be annoyed at *him* because *you* weren't listening," I say to myself in a strict voice and lean forward, determined to listen more closely from now on.

*

I've just taken off my shoes when one of Madeleine's work colleagues calls, and she disappears out onto the balcony to speak to them. I sit down in the kitchen with Julie, and watch her as she pickles some red onions.

"So it's going well with Fredrik?" she says, but she doesn't wait for me to answer.

"Y'know, he's a really good friend of mine," she continues. "I love him, y'know."

Two "y'knows" in a row, as if she's arguing against something I can't remember having said.

There are tears in her eyes, but that's just the onion – it isn't always the case that you feel a particular emotion just because your body is performing the associated ritual.

“I would never have thought the two of you had so much in common,” she says. “But clearly I was wrong.”

“Well, we’ll see how it goes,” I say.

She puts down the knife for a moment, looking pensive. Then she takes a breath, and I can hear that she’s trying to seem open. Curious, in a friendly way.

“So do you know anyone else who’s single?”

“Somebody else I can date, you mean?”

She laughs.

“No, it’s just... I’ve been thinking...”

I cast a questioning look in her direction.

“You do know that it’s okay to be single, right?” she says finally.

“Is it?” I say, mostly just to say something.

“You don’t *have* to be with someone, if you don’t want to.”

“Has Fredrik said something?”

She shakes her head, and is about to say more, but Madeleine comes in from the balcony, looking annoyed.

“Just one colleague who knows how to do their job,” she says. “That’s all I’m asking for. One. Jesus.”

This is what I’m asking for:

To be sure.

Once and for all.

To be given a final confirmation, to be reassured in a way that will allow my brain to finally feel satisfied and stop asking questions, stop desperately searching for calmness, stop saying “maybe if you close the door one more time”, “maybe if you wave your hand back and forth under the tap a few more times so you can feel the water isn’t running”, “maybe if you just check, then you’ll have a little peace”.

I want an outsider, a neutral third-party, an objective judge and jury who can say:

Now it’s fine.

Now it’s right.

Now you’ve made it, now your life is meaningful, now you’re allowed to take up space, now you’re no longer in the way.

Now you are right.

Someone who confirms, just by being there when you wake up and when you're upset and when you laugh too loudly and when you fuck up and when you enter the wrong answer in the crossword puzzle and when you drink too much and when you cook the wrong amount of rice and when you forget to turn off the oven, someone who confirms, by not leaving in spite of it all: you're still right for me.

I just want that peace.

I'm unable to create it for myself.

*

He's put out the salt and pepper, and this makes me more grateful than it should, because Alexander always took it as a deathly offence if I tampered with the food after he'd prepared it. The meal Fredrik has made doesn't need salt or pepper, but I'm still happy it's up to me to decide for myself. I don't tell Fredrik this, both because I understand how excessively self-pitying it sounds, and because there's no space for me to say anything. I simply can't grasp why he thinks what he's going on about is so exciting, but he is a doctor, after all, so maybe I'm missing something.

When we've finished eating an almost formal air comes over him, as if he's about to clap his hands together and say we need to move on to the next item in the programme.

He gets up and walks around the table, stands behind my chair, leans down and starts to kiss me in a kind of ambush. It feels awkward, it's hard to kiss him back without getting a crick in my neck. Why does he have to do it like this – he's a doctor, surely he knows how anatomy works?

I realise I'm going to have to do something, so I get up, and he takes this as a hint that I want us to move things along more quickly, and I think yes, yes, at some point we're probably going to have to get that over and done with.

He's the first after Alexander, and I realise too late that this stresses me out far more than it should. I try to breathe all the way down into my belly, try to remember the tips I was given by the gynaecologist, I know it will only be more painful the more I tense up. I remember the day I slumped dumbfounded onto a café chair opposite Madeleine and told her I'd managed to get myself a diagnosis of vaginismus. The gynaecologist had explained that I tensed too much, which was why it hurt to insert so much as a tampon, and now I was going to have to practice relaxing again.

“But how come you’re so stressed?” Madeleine said. “You’re taking a break from your course, aren’t you?”

I should have realised it then, that something was wrong. That I shouldn’t have been so stressed while doing nothing at all.

“She gave me some exercises,” I said.

“Like, sex homework?”

“Nah,” I said. “She wants me to work on being less tense.”

“Just... manifest your inner jellyfish,” Madeleine said, making some disturbing, jelly-like movements with her hands.

“Thanks for that,” I said, and she laughed loudly.

But now I’m lying here thinking jellyfish, jellyfish, jellyfish and looking up into his face, and God knows what he’s thinking – or at least, I certainly don’t – his eyes are fixed on a point far, far away, we’re the jellyfish and the somnambulist.

He starts to moan, and I feel myself tensing again, my stress level rising.

“I’m coming...” he groans.

I hear Alexander saying “God, that’s so performative” – he always said this when anyone commented on how they were getting close in films or on TV, and thinking of Alexander only makes it worse. I’m so tense that Fredrik feels like a knife.

He moans more loudly – too loudly – and I suddenly think of my phone. What if it’s lying there calling someone right now. Or live-streaming on Instagram or Facebook. Just think if it’s sending this sound out into the world in some way. *I have to check it.*

“I’m coming...”

I have to check, I have to check.

“I’m coming...”

Have to check, have to check.

“I’m... coming...!”

And finally he’s done. He lies there, still, I can feel his heart beating against mine, his body slack and heavy. He kisses me on the neck and pushes some curls out of my eyes, smiling.

“Hey...” he says.

I try to return his smile, then shove him off me.

“I have to pee,” I say, “otherwise I might get a urinary tract infection.”

He nods, but doesn’t move.

I hurry into the living room and take my phone from the table; it hasn't called anyone, or live-streamed. Of course it hasn't. But still.

I breathe out. Simultaneously relieved and ashamed.

I go into the bathroom, thinking that next time, I'll put the damn thing in flight mode. If there is a next time.

*

Madeleine is balancing on one leg, trying to pull on her bikini bottoms without dropping the towel from around her waist. She's convinced me to go swimming with her. Aisha will just have to watch – getting her into cold water hasn't exactly become any easier since she got pregnant.

“But it's normal for it not to be *amazing* the first time, right?” Madeleine says.

“Yeah...” I say. “Just... forget I said anything.”

When they asked how it had gone with Fredrik, I'd replied with: “It was... well, it was, you know, okay,” which everyone knows means that it *wasn't* okay, and now they won't let the subject drop. But they don't know just how not okay it really was, or that it was all my fault.

“Don't cry because it was mediocre,” Aisha says. “Smile because it wasn't Alexander.”

Madeleine nods.

“Exactly,” she says. “This is good! This is progress!”

I pretend I'm too busy adjusting the straps on my bikini to reply.

“Ready?” Madeleine says.

It's only seventeen degrees, and I'm not usually all that enthusiastic about swimming at the best of times. So Madeleine quickly understands something's up when I suggest we swim out to the floating pier.

I notice her glancing at me as we swim, but I don't want to say anything yet, I don't want Aisha to overhear. Although, I'm not sure why. I love Aisha, and I know that she wouldn't judge me, but I've never managed to tell her about any of my issues, it feels safer to talk to Madeleine.

I pull myself up onto the floating pier. Madeleine climbs up the ladder and sits down next to me.

“You okay?” she asks. Her voice is light, breezy, but I recognise the worry in her eyes and then I feel bad. I wish I could be one of those friends there isn’t always something wrong with.

“I... it’s...”

I don’t know how to explain it, it’s so embarrassing.

“Come on,” she says. “We’re going to end up frozen stiff if you have to find the perfect phrase.”

“You can’t tell Aisha or Julie.”

She nods, understands roughly what territory we’re heading into. It’s only here that I ever ask Madeleine to keep something to herself.

“When we had sex...,” I start. “I... shit, I’m so fucked up, I just don’t get it.”

I shake my head.

“You’re going to have to give me a bit more than that,” Madeleine says, and I know she’s right, but I can’t, I’m just so excruciatingly embarrassed.

“... are you kink-shaming yourself right now, or...?”

I shake my head again.

I see a group of kids swimming towards the pier. Shit. I’m going to have to spit it out before they get here.

I stare at my water-logged fingertips. Speak to them, quietly:

“While we were... doing it... I couldn’t stop thinking of...”

“Alexander?”

I shake my head.

“Or, yes, but... it wasn’t just that.”

She gives me an inquisitive look, without judging me, but I just can’t do it.

I’m unable to say it out loud. I feel far too ashamed. *I can’t have sex, I’m too scared that my phone will live-stream it* – it’s impossible to say it, I know how mad it will sound, God, why can’t I just be normal?

The children climb up the ladder one by one and stand there, gasping for breath.

Madeleine turns to face me.

“Is Clippy back with a vengeance?”

I cast a meaningful glance at the kids, so she’ll understand I don’t want to say any more until they’ve gone. Luckily she gets my meaning, and we sit there in silence and wait.

A couple of years ago, I read some advice on the Internet about giving your anxiety a name, because doing so makes it easier to brush off. I’d decided to call mine Clippy, after the

irritating little paperclip that used to pop up and wave at you and give you stupid, unsolicited advice in Microsoft Word.

A girl pushes a boy into the water, and soon the air is full of screeching and whining and shouts of “no!” and splashing, until the last kid has bombed into the water to join the others and the pier is empty again.

I wait until they’ve swum a short distance away before I answer.

“Not with a vengeance,” I say. “It’s been much, much worse. But... yeah. It’s been better, too.”

We see Aisha get up and wave us ashore. She’s holding a phone in the air.

“Shit,” Madeleine says. “It’ll be the builders. *Of course* they decide to call me in the ten minutes I’m away from my phone. Julie’s going to murder me.”

I’m irritated, even though it isn’t her fault. I needed to talk about this.

Madeleine stands up. Water droplets from her hair land on my arm and thigh.

“Just... be kind to yourself,” she says. “And tell Clippy to shut up.”

But it isn’t a case of just telling Clippy to shut up, or just ignoring my thoughts. I can’t override them with common sense or logic – in the best-case scenario I can delay acting on them, but it’s exhausting, like holding your breath. It feels physically impossible, like needing to pee and trying to wait for the feeling to pass.

Compulsive thoughts are like being so hungry that you think you’re about to starve to death – it doesn’t help to tell yourself “But you’ve just eaten”, even when you know you have. If you’re hungry, you’re hungry. And I’m hungry all the time.

*

The next times we sleep together aren’t much better. I manage to command my body to relax, but not my mind. I feel that our phones are lying there, live-streaming. I feel that the door to the apartment is ajar, that all the neighbours can hear us. I feel that I’ve nicked the condom with a fingernail, and that I’m about to get pregnant (even though I’m on the pill), that he’ll give me a disease (even though he says he doesn’t have any, and he’s a doctor), that I’ll give him a disease (even though my GP says I don’t have any). But I continue to try, and he, it seems, continues not to notice that I just want to get it over with. At one point he even says: “I don’t think I can hold back much longer”, as if he’s afraid of disappointing me, and I’m dangerously close to bursting out laughing, but manage not to.

After we've finished, I check our phones and the doors and windows, and then I can lie down on the bed again and finally it's *my* time. Everything is closed, locked, quiet, finished, done, completed, check, check, check. He pulls me to him and says something nice, sort of half in a daze, and I see us from the outside: we look like a couple.

*

I want it to work. He goes around wearing my hairband on his wrist all day, and I like this so much – I can't explain why it makes me so happy, but I never want him to take it off.

I secretly watch him as he stands out on the balcony talking on the phone, and I order myself to be in love with him, because if I'm in love with him and he's in love with me, then I've finally made it.

I try to feel it, search for signs of whether I've succeeded or failed.

What if I convince myself to love him, but then it's wrong?

What if it should happen of its own accord, and I'm not supposed to force it?

What if I'm actually feeling what I'm supposed to be feeling, but I'm killing it by over-analysing it, asking too many questions?

What if this is it?

It isn't particularly overwhelming, the way it's portrayed in films or pop music, but maybe this is as much as I'm able to feel? I wish I could test out being another person, just for a day, just so I could feel how it's supposed to feel, just so I could be sure. Just so I could check I have the right answer.

I remember the first time I saw *Star Wars*. Everyone said it was the best thing they'd ever seen, but I had found it a snoozefest. Maybe it's the same with love?

*

I try to lie still so as not to wake him, but I can't help it – something is brewing. Something is stressing me out, I don't know what, it's a thought or feeling just beyond reach, like when there's a word on the tip of your tongue. And then it suddenly becomes clear to me, as if Clippy has screeched it into my ear: it's the tampon terror again. I try to laugh, because of course I know it's laughable, but it doesn't work, because I'm actually afraid, I'm laughing *at* myself, rather than *with*. This specific fear pops up from time to time, and it's never turned out to be justified – I try to remind myself of that – but it doesn't help. I think about articles

I've read about women who have died of toxic shock syndrome, completely ordinary women who lived completely ordinary lives, only they made one fatal mistake: they forgot to take out a tampon. It doesn't seem like it should be possible, but clearly it is, because people die of it – a tampon can vanish way up into your vagina and then you die. I feel that I simply *have* to look, but I can't do that while I'm lying next to him – some lines just shouldn't be crossed. I get out of bed and tiptoe into the bathroom, locking the door behind me.

I search with my fingers, but find nothing. The problem is that it isn't possible to know that something *isn't* there, there's no confirmation that you've had a good enough look, it could be that you just haven't found it yet. All at once I feel as if I'm burning up, and this frightens me, because isn't that one of the symptoms of infection?

My pulse quickens. I try to breathe calmly, now I'm just scaring myself, in all likelihood it isn't an infection. But now here comes the nausea, too – I retch without anything coming up, and don't I, in fact, have a bit of a stomach ache, too? Yes. Yes, I do have a stomach ache.

I try to scold myself into calmness, but it doesn't work, the strict voice does nothing to help the cold sweat, and at best the rational order to calm down only confuses my system when accompanied by me desperately digging around inside myself. *Do as I say, not as I do*, I think, and then: *Also, stop talking to yourself*.

I wash my hands, then go into the living room to get my phone (still not a peep from the bedroom) and take it back into the bathroom with me. I check Messenger to see whether anyone is logged in, someone who might be able to mollify me, but there's only a few green dots and they all belong to people it wouldn't be natural for me to message at 3.37 in the morning. People who were on my course at university, a second cousin, a guy I don't even recognise, one of Madeleine's exes. I tap on the name of a colleague I worked with at the events agency; apparently we haven't been in touch since she last asked if I could cover a shift for her. I can't write to her out of the blue: 'Hey, it's been a while, I think a tampon might be lost inside me, can you please tell me I'm not going to die before the doctor's surgery opens tomorrow morning?'

I think about how there's a doctor lying there sleeping less than ten metres from me, but I can't, I can't wake him up and tell him this, he'll think I'm crazy and gross because *I am* crazy and gross.

So in the end I call the out-of-hours clinic and wait in a queue, trembling on the bathroom floor for a thousand years before I finally get through to a tired and stressed nurse

who asks me whether I have any symptoms of infection. If it isn't urgent, I can contact my GP.

“Right, and I don't mean to be a nuisance, but my doctor doesn't have an appointment available until three weeks from now, and by then it might be too late.”

She sighs. Understandably enough.

“If you have no fever, stomach pain or nausea...”

“But that's just it, I *do* – the problem is I don't know if they're real or not.”

“You have a fever?”

“I don't know, I'm at my boyfriend's place, I don't know if he has a thermometer here somewhere. But I think my symptoms began after I started to worry that I might have TSS, so it's most likely psychosomatic?”

I end up booking the first available appointment the next morning at the Dr. Dropin clinic – even though I know using private healthcare undermines the public health service – and go back to bed.

Fredrik pulls me to him in his sleep, and I don't get why I usually feel safe when he does this, because now I only feel trapped. Will he notice if I go into shock and die? Will he wake up? Will I manage to get free of his arms?

I give them a little nudge as a test, but he only hugs me tighter, and it's actually sweet – he wants me close – and OH MY GOD, a new fear: do they record the calls made to the out-of-hours clinic? For training, stuff like that? Is it possible Fredrik might hear what I said? I called him my boyfriend. When we haven't defined what this is yet, only it felt way too tedious to explain it all to the nurse. But just imagine if he hears the conversation and thinks I call him that to everyone?

I'm so angry at myself that I start to cry, and I'm so afraid, it feels as if every single cell in my body is doing bridge pose, every muscle tensing.

The woman at Dr. Dropin finds nothing, of course. So today it costs me 1,195 kroner to be nuts. On my way home I stop by the pharmacy and buy myself a menstrual cup.

*

I'm helping Gudrun to play a game on her iPad, or at least that's what we say I'm doing, I'm actually just sitting next to her watching her tap random things on the screen. I ask her if she'd like me to translate the mission for her, because it's in English, but she doesn't have the

patience for that, just clicks quickly and irritably past everything the strict little owl has to tell her.

“But then you don’t know what you’re trying to do?” I say.

“It’s fun,” she says, and the iPad makes a triumphant sound, as if in agreement with her.

That night I lie in bed staring at the cracks in the ceiling, trying not to think about the meaning of life. “It’s fun,” I say to myself, then turn over for the thousandth time, my muscles aching because I’ve been tensing them through anxiety all day.

It’s fun.

*

It feels as if he’s pulling away, and of course I’m so utterly conventional that this only gets me even more hooked.

He says he’s really busy at work right now; I offer to stop by during his lunch break. He says he probably won’t have time to eat lunch with me. I get annoyed at myself when I hear the pleading note in my voice: “Well, we can try, and then you can just ask me to leave when you need me to go?”

He hesitates, but says okay, and I feel so grateful. It’s tragic. I think of a conversation I had with Stefanie just after Gudrun was born. About how we had suddenly become role models, whether we liked it or not. Just think if one day, Gudrun actually starts to see my behaviour as something to aspire to. Then I’ll have to tell her I’m a feminist of the “do as I say, not as I do” variety.

*

It’s a quiet day at work. I haven’t had a single customer in two hours, everyone must be out enjoying the sunshine or on holiday with their families. My phone vibrates, and I get a bad feeling, I’m afraid it will be him. I remember how I used to feel this way all the time when I was with Alexander, always scared to open messages. But it isn’t Fredrik, it’s the group chat. A message from Aisha: ‘I’m about to give birth to a little summer holiday baby – anyone need anything from the hospital?’

Madeleine comes into the bar no more than half an hour later. I pour us both a beer and we raise our glasses to ‘no unwanted teenage pregnancies!’ – the toast we’ve given since all the way back in high school, when Aisha’s period was a week late and we celebrated its arrival with chocolate milk in the cafeteria.

“To think that Aisha is someone’s mum,” Madeleine says.

“To think we’ve seen someone’s mum smoking hash,” I say.

“Do you think grown-ups have always been like this?”

“Like, just overgrown teenagers, you mean?”

“Yeah.”

“No. The grown-ups that came before us were *actually* grown-up.”

She nods.

“Nobody had to teach them to call the bank to ask for a better interest rate,” she says.

“They were born with that knowledge.”

“They probably never called their parents for help with the fuse box.”

“Or to ask how to build IKEA furniture.”

“They never impulse-bought a bubble gun.”

“They never muted the six o’clock news and made up their own stupid dialogue for the boring politicians droning on.”

She laughs.

“Wow, the grown-ups before us really sucked,” she says.

I’m about to pour us another beer, but she stops me. It’ll have to be alcohol free – in a few hours she and Julie are going to test drive a used car they’re considering buying.

*

That night, I lie awake in bed again. Aisha has a daughter, Madeleine and Julie are married. Fredrik and I haven’t had the conversation yet, we’re both together and not together – we’re Schrödinger’s couple, and it’s exhausting. It feels absurd to introduce him to anyone as “my boyfriend” – he’s just a stranger I’ve spoken to and slept with a few times. Mostly spoken to, because my brain constantly comes up with new things to stress about whenever we try to have sex.

But at the same time, I don’t want it to end. I can’t stand the thought of being sad again. Don’t have the strength to start searching again. Don’t have the energy to sit alone at

yet another wedding, joking about how my boyfriend was eaten by the washing machine along with half my socks.

I can't stand the thought of trying to drown out Clippy when he whispers: *That's what I've been telling you. You're too difficult to love.*

*

I'm in my pyjamas, lying on the sofa and watching *Community*, when the doorbell rings. I stiffen. Who *rings the doorbell* without first asking if they can come over? I hold my breath, hoping whoever it is will think I'm not home and go away. The doorbell rings again, and I'm scared. What have I done wrong now? I glance around the apartment – there's nothing smouldering, the windows aren't open, I haven't been making any noise. Could it be someone from the Residents' Association wanting to complain about how I couldn't volunteer for some of the little jobs that need doing around the building, even though I said I had to work?

My phone rings. It's Fredrik.

"Hello?" I say.

"Hey, are you home?"

I glance at the door. *Fuck.*

"Why?" I ask, as if I can evade the problem by dragging it out. I start searching through the pile of clothes on the sofa for something I can change into.

"I'm right outside!"

"Oh, great," my words say, but he must also be able to hear that my tone is saying: "Are you a complete psycho?"

He laughs.

"Sorry I turned up without any advance warning. I took a chance that you'd be home, seeing as you said you had today off."

I look around the apartment again. This time I'm not looking for things I've done, but what I *haven't* done: tidied up. Not for days, maybe even weeks. I haven't emptied pots or frying pans, I haven't put the dishwasher on, I haven't vacuumed, I haven't picked up my clothes from the floor. I haven't had the energy. Dating is nice, but it demands so much from me – it's pathetic, but it's true. I ponder and think and wonder and analyse and double-check, it's like I'm moving underwater, everything feels so much heavier than usual.

"Well are you going to let me in, or...?"

“Um, just a minute,” I say. I’ve finally put some clothes on, but my hair looks awful. “I just have to…” I say, but leave the sentence hanging in mid-air. I rescue a hairband from under the sofa and blow a little dust off it before I use it to put my hair up in a kind of palm tree on top of my head, hoping he’ll think it’s trendy and laid-back.

“Coming!” I say, and hang up.

I open the door just enough for me to squeeze out through the crack, then close the door behind me so he can’t see into the apartment.

“Hi,” I say.

“Hi,” he says.

He leans down and kisses me. He smells of soap and suncream and something else that makes me feel a little calmer: himself.

“Can’t I come in?” he asks.

“Sorry, it’s not really a good time,” I say.

He gives me a questioning look, waiting for an explanation.

“I was just on my way out,” I continue.

“Oh, okay!” he says, looking a little disappointed. “Where are you off to? I could walk with you. Maybe we can grab an ice-cream on the way?”

I consider letting him walk with me to some random place where I can get rid of him, but no, that’s totally out of the question, because then he’ll see all the checking I have to do before I leave the apartment, and then he’ll realise that I’m bonkers, and then I may as well just let him see how my apartment looks – after all, I suspect messy is better than cuckoo.

“Um,” I say, “that would have been really nice, but I have to prepare first.”

“Prepare?”

I wish I had a job that involved conferences or important presentations – of course he knows there’s no preparation needed for my work at the bar.

“Yeah, I have some stuff to do. For my little sister. I’m going over to her place this afternoon.”

This last thing is actually true – not that I have to do anything beforehand, but that I’m going to see Ulrikke.

He still doesn’t look convinced.

“She always likes me to bring an apple cake,” I babble. “I make the world’s best apple cake.”

Luckily, he doesn’t ask if he can help me.

“Well, be sure to save a piece for me!” he says.

“Of course!” I say. “I can come over to your place after I’ve been to see Ulrikke and Viktor.”

There was no need for me to suggest this, but I’m just so relieved he’s about to go. He kisses me again, says he’ll look forward to it.

We’re like two kids on a seesaw – we can never be on the same level, one of us has to be down for the other to be up and vice versa. Right now, he’s the one who wants me.

He’ll start to find me exhausting soon enough.

Up and down, up and down.

*

“You have to see this film,” Ulrikke chirps.

She’s sitting in the corner of the sofa, fumbling with her phone. Viktor comes in from the kitchen, carrying a bottle of Pepsi Max and three glasses.

“Now?” Viktor says.

Ulrikke nods enthusiastically. Viktor smiles, and sits down with us.

Ulrikke manages to connect her phone to the TV, so her background image – one of their wedding photos taken in front of the church in Grimstad, with Ulrikke in a white Audrey Hepburn dress that cost more than all my clothes put together – appears on the screen.

“Okay,” she says. “Seriously, this is the best film I’ve ever seen.”

“Are we really going to watch an entire movie?” I say. I no longer have the patience or concentration to watch entire films.

“It isn’t very long,” Ulrikke says. “You’ll like it, I promise.”

But she doesn’t open Netflix or YouTube or any of the other usual streaming apps – she opens her Photos, and a sneaking suspicion begins to gnaw at me.

She taps a file, and there it is: a video clip from an ultrasound.

“You’re going to be an auntie!” Viktor says, and I think of the time Alexander said that Viktor is the kind of person who always has to state the obvious.

“Again!” Viktor adds, in case I might have forgotten Anna and Gudrun.

My little sister is pregnant, and I have to go home and Google apple cake recipes because I’m lying to the guy who may or may not be my boyfriend so he won’t know how messy my apartment is.

*

Madeleine is late meeting me for coffee, she didn't say anything about why in her text, just "grab a table and I'll be there as fast as I can!". When she finally arrives, I'm standing outside, and I've got fairly wet in the rain.

"Why didn't you go inside?" she asks.

"I did, but then I had to leave again."

She gives me a questioning look.

"I'd just managed to sit down when the pushchair mafia came in, and I had the only free table in the café."

"Well, it wasn't free – you were sitting at it?"

"Yes, but... I was the only person who was on my own. So then I kind of had to leave."

Madeleine shakes her head as if she doesn't know what to do with me.

"You have just as much right to take a table, even if it's just you!"

She opens the door to the café, and we go in together. The pushchair mafia is still sitting at my table – one of them is drinking a cup of tea, the rest of them are trying to gather up as many serviettes as possible to deal with two babies who are drowning in yoghurt.

"I don't think the café is earning much more from them than they would have done from you," Madeleine says in a low voice. Since the café is still full we go up to the counter and order our coffees to go. I nod – I agree with her, actually.

"And by the way," I continue, "isn't there like *a million* single adults in Norway? If they don't want to lose us as customers and they don't want us to take up big tables, then they should provide some smaller ones."

"Exactly," Madeleine says. "Only, you're not single."

"Well," I say. "I suppose not."

We go outside with our coffees. The rain has stopped.

"So how come you were late?" I ask.

"Just some stuff with Julie," she says, and this seems strange, Madeleine isn't usually so evasive. I wait for her to explain, but instead she asks:

"Do you think you and Fredrik will have kids?"

I laugh, surprised at the question.

"Umm... I dunno? We haven't talked about it. I don't even know if he wants children."

"Do you know if you do?" she asks.

We stop and watch an old woman feeding the pigeons.

“I dunno...” I say again. “Alexander decided we were never having kids, so there never seemed to be any point in me thinking about it.”

Thinking about it now, I feel bitter. All the years I’ve lost. All the choices I never got to make.

“But if I *did* have kids, I’d certainly never chase single people away from their tables in cafés,” I say.

“But did they actually chase you?” Madeleine asks. “Or did you just leave when they came in?”

“Hey, whose side are you on anyway?” I say.

*