The Tundra Doctor

A Year in Karasjok

Original Title: *Legen på vidda: Et år i Karasjok*
Written by Ingvild Holtan-Hartwig
English sample translated from Norwegian by Olivia Lasky

Summary:
CURE SOMETIMES, RELIEVE OFTEN, COMFORT ALWAYS. As a young, newly graduated doctor from Oslo, Ingvild Holtan-Hartwig applies for a residency at a GP office in Karasjok—a small, isolated village in northern Norway. This book is about her encounter with a community and a way of life completely different from what she used to. Life on the tundra is an abrupt transition from life in the big city. She shares stories of conversations with the sick and vulnerable, with next of kin and colleagues, and how these interactions shape her as a doctor. Gradually, she becomes familiar with all aspects of rural life—both the good and the bad. As an intern and eventually a GP, she faces all kinds of challenges: when do you decide to treat someone or not? Who decides when a life has been fully lived? What truly constitutes good healthcare? What does it really mean to do a good job and live a good life? *The Tundra Doctor* is a funny, poignant, and touching book about living life a little differently than initially planned—and about trying to be a good doctor.

The Light of the North Star

"Too bad you have to go all the way up to Karasjok! Did you get a bad lottery number or something?"

People still think there's a lottery for residency spots. For what feels like the thousandth time, I explain that I *applied* for the job—voluntarily—and accepted it—voluntarily. I've just wrapped up a year of working at a hospital and was supposed to start as a resident with a GP in Oslo. Then, a couple of months ago, I changed my mind. I applied for a job in Karasjok and gave up my spot in the city.

I'm starting to get used to the confusion that appears on my conversation partner's face. I can practically see their brain cells working overtime to make sense of the information. But after a few seconds, they all give up. No matter how they twist and turn it, it simply doesn't add up.

But… *Everyone* wants to be in Oslo, so why did you choose Karasjok?

Do you know anyone there?

Have you been there before?

What are you going to do there?

I don't have a good answer. All I know is that I'm tired. Tired of the big city and everything it forces me to be. I'm tired of all the fuss about careers, buying a house, money, making plans. And maybe most importantly, I'm tired of being a doctor at a big hospital.

According to Hippocrates, doctors should "cure sometimes, relieve often, comfort always." At the hospital, the words have been rearranged. Here, I must *always* cure, and I rarely have time to comfort. I'm trapped in an endless web of forms and rigid guidelines. I don't need to think, and I don't need to be human.

I'm sick of being a factory worker without freedom, a will, or a soul.

Because the hospital where I work really *is* a factory, and I'm just a tired little worker in a uniform, standing at my fixed position on the assembly line. Broken objects come through in a continuous stream day in and day out. The objects vary in size, color, and shape. Some are thin and pale, others are fat and tan. Some shout and nag, others can only lie there in agony. Most are wrinkled and gray-haired. The assembly line stops at my station, where I mechanically listen to the heart and lungs and ask about allergies, smoking habits, bowel movements, and vaccination statuses. I barely even glance up from my notes as I apathetically input the information in the right places in the right forms. When the patient starts talking about missing their brother, who passed away last year, I press the *next* button and the patient moves along the assembly line for further examination. There's nothing about grief and loss on my forms; it's not relevant, and besides—it's a waste of time in the factory.

When I started medical school, I was brimming with enthusiasm to help others. I may not have had ambitions for finding a cure for cancer or figuring out how to treat dementia, but at the very least, I planned on making a difference. I wanted to be an important person for someone besides myself.

Now, as I stand at the assembly line in the emergency room, I've forgotten why I became a doctor in the first place.

To be fair, the factory where I work is impressive. Almost divine. There are practically no limits to what it can renew and repair. A clogged artery in the heart can easily be cleared. Even a clogged artery in the brain can be fixed by the most skilled workers. They insert a metal wire worth several hundred thousand kroner into the groin, thread it up through the main artery, and into the brain. Then, they maneuver it through various intersections before finally reaching the blockage deep inside. There, they inflate a tiny balloon—and *ta-*

da, the artery is clear again. The patient who came in with acute paralysis on one side of their body can suddenly walk as if nothing ever happened. It's almost magic.

Some are so sick that replacing or repairing just one part of them won't suffice. But even if the body is ridden with rot and bacteria, even if the thread life is hanging by is so thin that even the slightest tremor could break it, even if Charon has already loaded his ferry and cast off, we will do our best. Despite the advanced decomposition of an aging body, a trip through the factory can trick death and revitalize the most damaged and worn-out.

If old Frøydis—who has dementia, diabetes, heart disease, and COPD—has gotten an infection in her foot, she first arrives at my station, sailing down the assembly line. I diligently check off the boxes on my forms and get her started on antibiotics. Her next stop is with the orthopedic surgeon, who decides the foot needs to be amputated. She then moves on to the operating room, where the anesthesiologist puts her to sleep and the orthopedic surgeon amputates her leg. The assembly line continues to the recovery ward, where new doctors and nurses take over and mix the cocktail intended to keep her alive. *Please open wide and swallow*. The bacteria are having a field day in Frøydis's organs, and the assembly line carries her further to the ICU. Her lungs need help to breathe, and her heart needs help to beat. The line stops here for a few days before she's rolled back to the recovery ward. New cocktails are mixed, and more things must be ingested. When Frøydis is well enough to remember her name and can recite the days of the week in *almost* the correct order, she's ready for discharge. She's packed up in a box with new tablets, a wheelchair, and bandages. The instruction manual is a discharge summary written in incomprehensible medical jargon. The address label on the package is "home." Everyone is supposed to go home.

But what did Frøydis *actually* want? What did her smile look like? What brought her joy? What made life meaningful for her?

I don't know. I never had time to ask.

In any case, the factory workers are satisfied. The illness has been cured. The diagnosis codes have been filled out and the bills sent. The money flows in. If I'd had time to ask Frøydis what was important to her, she would've told me that she didn't actually *want* to be treated. Being in the hospital is such a bother, she would've said. She's lived a long life and is content with it. Ever since her husband passed away, she feels like there isn't much joy left in life—and that's okay. She accepts it. She feels lucky to have experienced so much. Everyone dies of something; if it's not from this infection, it'll be from the next. A few months here or there won't really matter. What does matter is that life is as good as possible for the time she has left.

Frøydis never got the chance to say any of this. Once she was placed on the assembly line, there was no turning back. The assembly line rolls on and on, and none of the stops are a "how are you really doing" station.

I'm standing in my apartment in Oslo, surrounded by chaos: ski boots, bread knives, pictures, toothbrushes, bedsheets, swim goggles, and stethoscopes are scattered everywhere. I pick up things at random. Swim goggles? There's a river in Karasjok; maybe they'll come in handy. Squash racket? There might be a court up there. I wonder if I'll need my high heels…

Of course not.

My car, which I call Molly, creaks under the weight of everything I feel guilty about leaving behind. As I try to wedge my electric keyboard on top of the hockey skates and ceramic flower pots, she lets out a long, exasperated sigh.

But doesn't she understand that I'm afraid of getting lonely? I need to have things to do in case I don't make any friends. The dark season is rapidly approaching, and I'm terrified of getting the winter blues.

These arguments don't hold water, though. Molly wins.

The electric keyboard stays behind—along with the tea set, bicycle, and globe.

Molly and I haven't known each other for long, but we make a good team. The 1,800-kilometer drive we have ahead of us should be a breeze.

We've barely made it past the Swedish border before I need a break. My eyes are stinging and my neck is stiff. I haven't even rested my head against the headrest once. The ten-part podcast about Sámi history wasn't as captivating as I'd hoped, and my usual Spotify playlists just aren't cutting it today. I check Google Maps: only 22 hours and 37 minutes left to my destination.

Fir trees fly by, standing tall and dark on both sides of the road like a line of silent sentinels showing me the way forward. I find myself in a strange limbo: I've left the safe and familiar but haven't yet gotten started on the new and unknown. It feels like standing on the edge of a dock just before jumping into cold water—your body resists, and every nerve in your skin anticipates the intense pain you'll feel as you break the surface. Your brain, on the other hand, whispers that the water will feel nice eventually. If only I could just dive in right away! But I have three days of travel ahead of me. For three long days, I have to stay standing at the edge of the dock.

I have no idea what I've gotten myself into. I have it in my head that working as a doctor in a rural area will be more rewarding. In a small town like Karasjok, I can tailor comfort and treatment because I'll have time to get to know the people behind the diagnoses. I can finally use all of myself—as a professional and as a human being—to help others. But maybe I'm being naive. Maybe the tasks of a GP have grown so numerous and extensive that I won't have time to be the good doctor I want to be.

I'm also absolutely terrified. Terrified I won't be good enough, that I'll have to make difficult decisions all on my own, and most of all, I'm terrified of making fatal mistakes.

Troubles at the Office

It's Monday morning, and I've been on duty for 72 hours. My head feels like it's filled with lead and I'm practically cross-eyed. I've just handed the duty phone and radio to a colleague. It feels like taking off a heavy backpack after three days of hiking. But I can't rest yet. First, I have to get through eight hours at the clinic—and a long list of patients who need attention.

I yawn and rub my eyes before looking over today's list. Most of the patients have at least three names. The first one even has five! Should I call out all five or just use the last name? Or should I just bet on the first of the four given names being the right one?

My office is the farthest from the waiting room. It only takes twelve seconds to walk to the waiting room from my desk, but that's long enough to forget a name with five parts. I mumble to myself as I walk down the hallway.

"Lemet Piera Ánte Niittyvuopio Somby. Lemet Piera Án…"

"Ingvild! I just emailed you your payslip," Elle says as she passes me.

"Great, thanks," I reply quickly, returning to my mumbling monologue.

"Let's see…" Lem… Johan? Svein? Somby? I'm pretty sure it was a Somby, but the four first names have vanished. I don't have time to rack my brain any further in search of the first names before I'm standing in the waiting room.

"Somby?" I say hesitantly. There's a brief silence before the six or seven people waiting there burst into laughter.

"Do you mean me?" a man in a reflective jacket and heavy boots says.

"Or maybe me?" An older woman waves from the window.

"Or me?" asks yet another man.

I know I should laugh, but my embarrassment stops me. I let out a small, awkward snort and try to smile as my brain makes one last futile attempt to remember the first name.

"I'm looking for someone who's supposed to see Ingvild at nine."

The man in the reflective jacket stands up.

"*Bures, bures*!" I say and shake his hand.

"*Halat go sámegiela*?" he asks, raising his eyebrows in surprise. I think he's asking if I speak Sámi, but I'm not quite sure. I shake my head and say I only know a few words. He seems satisfied and says something else in Sámi, but I don't understand a thing.

Mr. Somby needs a medical certificate to renew his bus driver's license—which expires tomorrow, so he needs to get it sorted out as soon as possible. When I ask whether he didn't consider coming a bit earlier, he just shrugs. He did get an appointment today, after all.

Conducting the medical exam required for a health certificate isn't difficult. What *is* challenging is that the height of the stack of paperwork that needs to be filled out rivals the Tower of Babel.

There are countless questions on every single page. One reads: "Does the applicant have a hearing impairment that prevents speech from being heard from a distance of four meters?' I have to read the sentence three times before I understand whether I should check "yes" or "no," as I believe Mr. Somby has normal hearing.

My tongue slips out between my lips as I painstakingly check one box after another. I then sign all the pages and read through them one more time before finally handing Mr. Somby his medical certificate.

"*Ollu giitu*," he says.

"You're welcome."

"It's *leage buorre*," Mr. Somby says with a friendly nod.

"*Leage buorre*."

"Eirik Strandvik, Eirik Strandvik," I mumble under my breath on my way to the waiting room.

"Eirik Strandvik!"

A man just under retirement age stands up. He has a thick beard and an equally thick belly.

"*Buorre beaivi*!" I say. Eirik nods.

I've decided to try to introduce myself with my name and profession in Sámi. I take a deep breath before saying: "*Mu namma lea Ingvild. Mun lean turnus doavttir*."

“Um, I’m from Trondheim,” Eirik Strandvik replies. “I don’t understand what you’re saying.

Peter and Elle laugh when I tell them about Eirik from Trondheim. “You have to look at the name,” they say. “Strandvik isn’t a Sámi name.”

“But neither are Solbakken, Nordsletta, Nedrejord, or Nystad,” I protest. “And all of those are Sámi!”

Elle explains that under the Norwegianization policy at the beginning of the 20th century, a law was introduced requiring people to be Norwegian and speak Norwegian if they wanted to purchase land from the state. Furthermore, the property had to have a Norwegian name, so many Sámi families replaced their Sámi surnames with Norwegian ones.

That sounds utterly insane to me. I’d learned a little about the Sámi and Norwegianization in elementary school, but now I realize how little I actually know. The Sámi were essentially forced to give up their identity, culture, and language to be allowed to buy the land they’d already been living on for generations.

The Big Wide Wilderness

I walk slowly down the path. Half an hour ago, I could still make out the contours of the stones and roots at my feet, but now I practically have to feel my way forward. I didn’t bring a headlamp, and my phone is dead. My thin jacket is barely keeping the cold at bay.

I’m on my way down from a viewpoint outside the village. Sukkertoppen—Sugar Loaf—as the locals call it. When I headed up, I was set on making it to the top by sunset. I did make it, in a way; the sun went down as I went up. I just didn’t see it from the top. I did, however, see a hare hopping around the bushes, not seeming to care much about my presence. It was only when a raven shot down from the sky and plucked something up from the ground that it scurried off. I sat there for a long time, looking out over the landscape. From the top, I could see the little village—my village—in the distance. Otherwise, I could only see the seemingly endless plateau scattered with low, leafless trees and bushes. There are people living in the village, but in the hundreds of square kilometers around it, the animals and nature reign. Just think: this is my new home.

In the village down there, people are going about their business just like anybody else, whether they live in small towns or big cities. They get up in the morning and curse the alarm clock before shivering their way to the bathroom. They eat breakfast and brush their teeth, pack their lunch, and drop off their kids at preschool. The dilemma of the day is what to have for dinner, and after much deliberation, it'll be spaghetti and marinara sauce. After a little bit of relaxation in front of the TV, there's some scrolling on the phone before bed. Then they get up the next day and the cycle starts all over again. Life here is pretty normal. But unlike most other places, this tiny village is completely isolated, far away from the next group of people.

Four roads lead out of Karasjok. The road north goes straight across the plateau to the coast, to Lakselv. Lakselv is Karasjok's closest neighbor—an hour's drive away. The road to the east leads directly into Finland's deep forests, where the trees are tall and dark, and I don't know how many hours it would take before you could even entertain the idea of meeting another person. To the northeast, the road follows the Tana River, which marks the border between Norway and Finland. After two and a half hours along the slow-flowing river, you reach Tana, a small settlement with a bridge so big you almost miss the small cluster of houses beside it. The last road, to the west, leads across the plateau to Kautokeino and Alta. That's the road I came from a few weeks ago.

Why did people settle right here, in what seems like a completely random place in the middle of the plateau, in the heart of the animal kingdom? Moose trudge around like self-appointed kings with their hundreds of kilos and majestic antlers. The bear mostly keeps to itself but occasionally visits the trash cans on the outskirts of the village, making sure to leave some footprints on the nearby trails. You'd almost think it knows people will take pictures of the tracks and post them on Facebook—then no one dares to use the trails until winter comes and the bear goes to sleep. The fox and the hare are frequent visitors,
darting around before finding their way back to their wilderness. Capercaillies, black grouse, chickadees, woodpeckers, Siberian jays, and boreal owls hide in the trees. Up in the sky, the golden eagle soars with its impressive wingspan, keeping watch over it all. And a small group of people are living amongst all this. Two thousand five hundred people have clustered together in the wilderness. Two thousand five hundred people—and me.

I chatted on the phone with Julie for a while before setting out on my hike. She got me up to date on life in the big city—the life I used to live.

“We were at an AWESOME concert yesterday, then afterward we went to this new Italian restaurant that just opened downtown. Super good food. We should go there next time you’re in town.”

“Definitely! And when you come here, we can eat at the local pizza place.”

“Do they have Italian crust? Any vegetarian options?”

“No, I can pretty much promise you they don’t. Thick crust and meat, bacon, and pepperoni on everything.”

“Are there any other places to eat, then? Or maybe we can order delivery?”

“Julie… there’s no delivery here, haha!”

“Seriously? Or… I guess that makes sense.”

Concerts, restaurants, delivery—I’ve almost forgotten all that exists. When we talk about it now, I feel nothing. I thought I’d miss it, but I don’t.

“When’s the last time you were out in nature?”

“Dunno. A long time ago. Why?”

“It feels healthy. Having nature in my everyday life, I mean. Not just on vacation or on the weekends every once in a while. Seriously, I recommend it.”

My flimsy sneakers are soaked through and I’m regretting the advice I gave Julie only a couple of hours ago. What’s the point of having nature in your life when you can’t even see it? Right now, I could’ve been sitting in a restaurant with Julie, chatting about cats, baby names, our Norwegian teacher in high school, the latest Wordle, scratchers, and all kinds of inane things. Inane things that become exciting when Julie and I are talking about them together. Gosh, I miss her.

The path I’m following was clearly marked on the map I looked at earlier, but now it hits me that it might have been a cross-country ski trail and not a summer path—because this particular path has now gone through more than a few soggy marshlands. My feet have gotten so numb that I can no longer feel the ice-cold water that fills my shoes every time I cross a small marsh. I can’t see the village from here, and I’m starting to wonder if I’m even going in the right direction. The way back feels endlessly long compared with the way there. Did I make a wrong turn at some point?

My eyes fight desperately to make out the contours of the dark world around me. The path keeps leading me downward until suddenly, there’s no path anymore. In front of me is a large, dark expanse. Based on the swampy ground and the water creeping up my ankles, I’m guessing it’s another marsh. Did I walk through here earlier? I’m not tempted to turn back,

and the way around the marsh seems too long. I hesitantly continue forward, straight through the marsh.

I feel it in my body before I see it. It vibrates in my stomach. Then in my chest. Soon, it spreads out through my arms and down my legs. The hairs on the back of my neck stand up. I stop. Someone is calling out to me, someone wants to tell me something. The voice is brutally silent, pulling me in every direction. I'm paralyzed.

Then the song comes—a kind of angelic choir with tones and melodies I've never heard before, but they're so beautiful I almost want to cry. The song is coming from the sky. I look up. Something is dancing up there—a force so grand and powerful I've never felt smaller. Greens and reds intertwine and spread across the sky, first calm and enticing, then suddenly fast, almost aggressive. Green streaks race furiously with a seemingly uneven rhythm. The rhythm can't be described as eighth notes, triplets, or any other rhythm I'm familiar with, but it resonates inside me like no rhythm ever has before

Suddenly, I'm not standing on the Earth looking up at the northern lights; I'm *in* the northern lights, and they're only dancing for me. They're trying to tell me something, they're longing for me. And I'm longing for them. It's as though the northern lights know something I don't, as though they have something I once had. A sense of loss grows inside me, so immense it feels like I'm going to burst. I miss what the northern lights are hiding from me. Maybe it's my past, maybe it's Mom, Grandma, Grandpa, and everyone I've ever been close to. Now, the northern lights whisper that everything is up there, hidden between the glowing waves, sharp streaks, delicate tones, and icy cold. Tears start welling up in my eyes. I want the northern lights to take me further. I want them to embrace me and show me everything I'm missing.

I can no longer feel my fingers, and the cold is spreading through my body. Suddenly, it's over. I'm back in the marsh, and the world around me sleeps in its endless darkness as if nothing has happened. It feels like I've been given the greatest gift of all time, but just as I was about to open it, it slipped through my fingers. I'm alone in the dark again. Alone in Finnmark.

What am I doing here? Far from my family and friends. I went north to become a better doctor. A doctor who sees their patients as people, not just as broken objects on an assembly line. I came here to escape the noise and demands of the big city. To find a life without stress and sky-high expectations. What have I found here in the darkness?

I'm not sure.

Thanks for Calling, In Any Case

The call tone sounds for the ninth time. My pulse has gone up with each ring, and it doesn't go down after I hang up. It keeps pounding. My thumb trembles as I turn off my phone screen. I rest my forehead against the steering wheel and breathe heavily. My hair is tied up in a ponytail with a floral scrunchie. I'm wearing a silk blouse and glass earrings I bought at the local glassblowing studio. I have four beers in the plastic bag on the passenger seat. Music is flowing from the house I'm parked outside; I can hear it as a faint hum. Can I go to a party right now? Or should I wait for an answer?

I stopped by the office a few hours earlier. I needed to print something out, so I turned on my computer, logged in, and automatically opened the journal system. Before I could close it, my eyes were drawn to a name on the screen: Lillian.

The results of her MRI were back. I shouldn't have opened it. It was the weekend, and I could practically hear Peter's voice telling me that you shouldn't work on weekends. He's always said that the most important thing he has to teach me is how to set boundaries. As a GP, you can work yourself to death. And if you're dead, you can't help anyone.

But I couldn't resist. I double-clicked on the name and opened the report. The words that glowed on the screen wiped out the world around me.

Lillian is a year older than me. She has two young children, a four-year-old boy and a two-year-old girl. The children have different fathers, and neither lives here in the village. The little family lives in Lillian's parents' basement. Money's tight, but they manage to get by since she lives almost rent-free. She's been on sick leave for a while because she's been feeling burnt out lately.

I met Lillian for the first time a couple of months ago. She told me about her low energy and lack of enthusiasm. We talked about her life, daily routine, and work. Lillian felt like she needed to disconnect, to recover from her stressful job at the preschool. She felt like she didn't have the energy to care for her children when she got home. I did a quick exam, took her blood pressure, listened to her heart and lungs, and checked her lymph nodes. That was all I had time for.

She had some blood tests done the following week. Her iron levels were a little low, but her hemoglobin was normal. According to previous blood tests, her iron levels tended to

be a bit low, likely because she has a relatively heavy period. I recommended iron supplements. The next time she came in, we spent a long time discussing strategies for recharging her batteries. Resting doesn't restore your energy on its own; you also have to do activities you enjoy. Lillian mentioned she might like to try crocheting, so we agreed she would borrow a crochet hook and some yarn from her grandmother. She mentioned she'd been having headaches lately on her way out the door, but we were already over her allotted time, so we didn't manage to discuss it any further.

When she came back two weeks later, the headaches were the first thing she brought up. They'd gotten worse. She'd struggled with headaches her whole life, so she was pretty used to them—but now, something was different. The old headaches usually developed later in the day and felt like a tight band across her forehead. Now, she was often waking up with a headache in the morning, and it felt heavy or dull. It was hard to find the right words to describe it.

Doing a neurological exam didn't take long. I asked her to wrinkle her forehead, squeeze her eyes shut, puff out her cheeks, and smile with her teeth. Then I checked her pupils. The right one was slightly larger than the left, but both constricted when I shone a light on them. Many people have slightly different pupil sizes, which is perfectly normal.

I asked Lillian if she'd noticed that one pupil was slightly larger than the other, but she hadn't. I wasn't particularly concerned. Even though people can spend hours in front of the mirror, it's striking how many haven't noticed their slightly asymmetrical pupils. I checked her medical records to see if it had been noted before. A check-up from almost ten years ago read: normal pupils. I turned off the light and shone it on her pupils again. And again. And again. The right pupil was reacting a little more slowly than the left, wasn't it?

I told her it was probably nothing to worry about, but it might be a good idea to get some scans of her head just to be sure. Lillian didn't seem all that worried. She shrugged and said that if I thought it was necessary, it was fine by her.

My heart skips a beat when my phone suddenly rings. I graze the horn as I lift my forehead off the steering wheel and Molly lets out a short, whining yelp. I naturally recognize the number I've tried calling three times today.

It's almost eight on a Saturday night. I immediately regret having called. Wouldn't it have been better to call on Monday, in peace and quiet? She won't get an appointment over the weekend anyway. Should I have sent her a message and asked her to come in for a chat on Monday morning, maybe with a friend or family member? No, then she'd realize

something was wrong and be worried all weekend. I wouldn't have seen the test results if I hadn't stopped by work today. I would have seen them on Monday, and then I would have called her. Maybe I can just pretend I didn't see them?

But that feels impossible. Because I know I have a responsibility to tell her. And what if the hospital gets in touch with her before I have the chance? I want her to hear it from me. It has to be now.

I clear my throat and say, "Hi, this is Ingvild," three times out loud before picking up the phone.

"Hi, this is Ingvild, resident doctor in Karasjok."

"Oh hi, is it you?"

"I'm sorry for calling so late, but do you have time for a chat?"

"Yeah, sure, that's fine."

Her voice sounds a bit uncertain, but seemingly still calm.

"I've received the results of your MRI, and we can't be completely sure yet, but it looks like you have cancerous tumors in your brain."

My fingers are ice cold and my jaw is trembling uncontrollably. Luckily, my voice is steady. I turn away from the microphone and take a deep breath. It's completely silent on the other end. I shouldn't say anything more, not yet. It's Lillian's turn. She takes her time.

"What are you saying? Cancer?"

Her voice has taken on a different tone now.

"Yes, it looks that way."

She's silent again.

"That's not what I thought you were calling about. That's… what can I say? I thought you… I wasn't expecting this."

"Neither was I."

That's not a great response. But what can I say to make this better? I consider whether I should give her some more information—about the possible types of cancer, next steps—but push the thought aside. We need to go at her pace. No matter how unnatural it feels, I stay silent.

Lillian is silent too. For a long time. Then she asks: "What happens now? Do I go to the hospital, or what do I do?"

"I've already sent a referral to the hospital. They'll probably give you a call next week to set up an appointment, then they'll run a lot of new tests to find out more about what this is."

“Is there any chance it could be something besides cancer?”

I immediately regret my phrasing. You can’t make a cancer diagnosis based on a single MRI, which is why more tests needed to be run to be one hundred percent sure. But the radiologist’s report was pretty clear; there wasn’t much doubt. There is, of course, a tiny chance that this is something else, but is it worth nurturing that hope?

“It’s very unlikely that it’s anything other than cancer.”

“Oh. Okay. I see.”

I want to tell her that everything will be fine, that we have a lot of excellent cancer treatments and there’s a real possibility she’ll make a full recovery, that she’ll probably go through a tough time for a while, but then everything will be okay.

But I don’t say anything. Because that would be a lie. I don’t think everything is going to be okay. Not at all. The cancer in her brain most likely metastasized from somewhere else in her body, maybe her breasts or a mole we missed during a checkup. With so many tumors in her brain, the cancer has most likely spread to other places as well. Cancer that’s growing in one place—that hasn’t spread yet—can often be surgically removed. Then, you can make a full recovery. Lillian’s not going to recover, though. She’s most likely going to die young, and her children are going to lose their mother. Just like I did when I was little.

I feel the tears welling up and swallow a few times to get control over the lump rising in my throat.

“Can I get better from this?”

“It’s too early to say. There’s no point in making guesses before we’ve run all the tests, then we’ll be able to say a bit more about the prognosis.”

I’m not lying; I’m just not telling her all the facts. I’m not sure, but I think that this is the right thing to do.

“No, I don’t need to think about that right now.”

“I agree.”

More silence.

“Okay, but… that was that? This is… Okay. Yeah.”

“Do you have someone you can be with now?”

“Yeah, my sister is coming over. I’ll tell her.”

“Good. Just call me if you have any questions. We’ll stay in touch.”

“Yeah, we will. Thanks for calling, in any case.”

“No problem. We’ll talk soon, Lillian. Bye.”

“Yes. Bye.”

As I hang up, an image of Lillian in a white coffin appears in my head. Her two children are standing on either side, staring down at their mother's stiff, grayish face.

Lillian's face changes and turns into my mother's. The children standing around her are me, my little sister, and my older brother. The face that was once full of so much life and warmth is now cold and strange. The wrinkles that appeared when she smiled have been wiped out in this stiff face. The warm lips that once kissed my cheeks are tight and blue. The lively eyes that once looked at me and made me feel like the luckiest kid in the world are dull and dry behind half-closed eyelids.

Nothing in this lifeless face reminds me of the Mom I knew. The facial features are hers, but nothing else is left. The face down there no longer loves me. It's empty, and that terrifies me. But it's still Mom's face. My beloved Mom. And this is the very last time I'll ever see her. I so desperately want to stand here and look at her forever. I want to be wherever she is. If she's dead, I want to be dead. I don't want to keep living alone. It'll be too painful, too scary. The pain eats me up inside. I can't breathe, I can't think. Soon, they'll put the lid on the coffin and lower her down into the earth. Soon, she'll be gone. Forever. For real.

She's leaving behind three small children and a husband who has no clue how he'll make things work by himself.

But at least I had a dad. A dad who did everything in his power for the three of us to have as good a life as possible—even without our mom.

Lillian's children don't even have a dad. They're probably asleep right now, blissfully unaware that the childhood they have ahead of them will be incredibly difficult. My own childhood is behind me, but it's not hard to recall the feeling of grief, the loss, and the meaninglessness that dictated my life for so many years. Everyone around us said things like "you'll get through this," "she would've wanted you to be happy," and "everything gets easier with time." But it wasn't like that. Not anywhere close.

Luckily, we didn't know how hard it would be; if we had, we would've given up before it even really started. Lillian's children can't find out how hard it's going to be. They just have to get through it, step by step. Hopefully, they'll make it out on the other side of childhood whole.

The door of the house opens up and Amund comes out onto the stairs. The music gets louder as he opens the door.

"Ingvild, what's up? You coming?" He has a beer in one hand. "Everything okay?"

I stroke the back of my index finger under one eye and realize it's wet.

"No, it's nothing, just had a rough day."

He doesn't hesitate before giving me a hug.

"Good thing you came over. We're playing Yahtzee."

"Yahtzee?"

"Yeah, Yahtzee. Mandatory Yahtzee. I'm pretty good. How bout you?"

Amund is buzzing with anticipation. His eyes are wide, and he grins as he waits for my response. Steam rises from his mouth in the cold air. I laugh. The dark monster from my childhood slowly shrinks and retreats back to its resting place, deep inside my stomach.

A Joyful February Reunion

We're running up the mountainside. Or, it might be more accurate to say that we're *struggling* up it. I sink into the deep snow with every step I take, and even though the baskets on my poles are pretty big, they disappear far below the surface before I feel any resistance I can use to push off. I can barely see my skis, pointing out to each side beneath the snow and getting stuck on bent birch trees and juniper bushes. I alternate between walking herringbone and sideways. Both are equally exhausting. Even though I'm moving as fast as I can, I'm hardly making any progress. Sweat is running down my back and my hat feels damp against my forehead. Despite almost my entire body feeling too warm, my cheeks and nose are ice cold.

Amund is struggling even more than I am, about fifty or sixty feet behind me. The extra weight he has on me is making him sink even deeper into the snow than I am. His small racing baskets aren't helping the situation, either. I can hear him cursing to himself.

When I look up toward the top of the hill to the north—our destination—my heart skips a beat. The golden strip of light that blessed the summit just a few minutes ago is now almost gone. Only the crown of a solitary pine tree at the top of the hill is fortunate enough to be basking in the riches.

"Hurry up, Amund!"

He lifts his head and sees the same thing as me. He doesn't respond, but the speed of his arms and legs picks up. He still doesn't go any faster; he just sinks even deeper than before. I'm not planning on waiting, though, so I keep going. The birch trees thin out closer

to the top, and soon, there aren't any trees left. The snow beneath my skis gets firmer over the last few hundred feet, and I start moving faster. I have a steady course set toward the pine tree with the glowing crown at the top of the hill. I consider whether I can climb it, but judging by its thin branches, that doesn't seem like the best idea. The disappointment of reaching the shade at the top of the hill is replaced by the joy of seeing a new, higher summit ahead of me. And this one is bathed in golden spring sunlight.

"Amund! It's not too late! There's sun on the next summit!" I wave my arms enthusiastically as I shout.

He stops, leaning against his ski poles and gasping for breath. Even from this distance, I can see the drool from one corner of his mouth has frozen into his beard.

"Ingvild! Is it even worth it? We'll probably see the sun in a few days anyway."

"Yes! I have to get up there! I want to see it now."

"But you can see the sunlight up there already… do you really have to see the actual sun?"

"Those are two totally different things."

He grimaces but doesn't reply. Is he going to ask me to wait? It doesn't look like it. He makes a futile attempt to wipe the frozen drool off his face before gathering his strength and picking up the pace.

I have no plans on letting him catch me. The snow beneath my skis has now gotten rock-hard and uneven. There's nothing but an open expanse around me and not a single tree in sight. I push with all my strength, hearing my skis creak against the crusty snow. I'm half skating, half running uphill toward the next peak. The icy air rushing into my lungs doesn't bother me. I've forgotten all about my frozen nose. The only thing I'm focused on is seeing the sun.

My long shadow appears in the snow ahead of me as I feel warmth on the back of my head, and I'm tempted to turn around right away but resist the urge. Instead, I move the last few meters to the top, my shadow as my guide. Then I stop for a moment and prepare myself for what's about to happen. My heart is beating so hard it nearly bursts from my chest, and my legs are shaking. My entire body is trembling with excitement as I slowly turn around.

The sunlight hits me with a tremendous force. It's so overwhelming I have to take a step back to keep from losing my balance. My lower lip instantly starts to quiver. My throat tightens, and then the tears start flowing.

It’s the most beautiful thing I’ve ever seen. The sun is resting on a pure white hill to the south, its golden-orange rays stretching toward me like arms longing to pull me into their warm embrace. Hello there, nice to see you again.

I feel like a child—a child who finally gets to see their best friend after months of separation. The hilltops are bathed in an intense orange-pink hue in every direction. The valleys between the hills are dark and cold with shadows. It’s like two different worlds: a shadow world down there, a godly world up here.

Life begins anew. Starting today, the sun will be back every day. Every day, it will spread joy and warmth, and slowly but surely, the snow around us will melt away. Snow crystal by snow crystal will turn into droplets of water, which will trickle into the earth and give life to green plants.

Amund finally reaches the top. He leans heavily on his poles, gasping for breath. His beard is frozen stiff. He looks not only exhausted, but also noticeably displeased about getting here last. He pays no attention to either the sun or my tears.

I say nothing, and simply stare at the beauty to the south. Spring is on its way.