

Not People I Can Depend On

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Novel

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One day, after living together for twenty years, Svein stood right in front of the microwave and said he no longer loved me. That was in 2014, and I suppose he still thinks that I never gave him enough love, and that's why the relationship ended, and I'm sure more people believe his version than mine, but that's because he has more influence than me: there's a lot more people who go in and out of Autopartner than the mayor's office. Plus, he had a head start. I've thought about how energetic he was in the weeks before that day when he told me he'd lost his feelings for me. Instead of collapsing on the sofa in the evenings, he went out to the garage to tinker with cars. He started to talk about setting up on his own again, buying, repairing and selling second-hand cars. That's why he spent so much time on the internet, and why he had to go here and there to look at potential cars, and why he, who normally went to bed at the same time as me, might stay up until one or two in the morning and still bounce out of bed before half-six – which was a change from before as well, that he jumped out of bed and didn't lie there dozing until I turned on the light.

It's strange, really, that I didn't react, or, perhaps that's exactly what I did, because his energy, it was so obvious, I just thought it was great that he'd got back the spark that had

been missing for so long. He even started to work out, down in the basement. He had a rubber mat between the sewing table and the old baby cot and took down a couple of manuals that he'd bought from that ingratiating southerner at the bakery. The manuals didn't weigh much more than eight kilos, but produced gallons of sweat, as my father-in-law likes to say, and after fifteen minutes of exercise and more than a few minutes in front the bathroom mirror to check his progress, he stood dripping in the kitchen as he made a protein shake, gulped it down and belched, which I thought was sweet. I thought it was sweet that only an hour after all that carry-on he said he was dizzy because his blood sugar was low. An unexpected deficit, he said, and treated himself to a sausage roll or two from the freezer.

I called him His Weightiness, because all his attempts to slim and get fit were manic, the story of history repeating itself. My gorgeous Gorby, I said, and just the thought that I said that, that I pinched his waist, just the thought, the intimacy, it's embarrassing, but I was actually proud of Svein, that he'd taken control of his life, and when he sat at the dining table with his laptop in the evenings while I helped Sigurd with his homework or watched TV, I could be distracted from whatever it was I was doing and just stare at him.

I loved to see him so engrossed that he didn't even notice he was being watched. His eyes fixed on the screen, as he tapped away on the keyboard, he was so focused and engaged that his cheeks were flushed. There he sat, an entirely independent being. I felt a peace when I looked at him. I thought he was attractive, and to be honest, I hadn't thought that in a while. Sometimes he smiled, presumably at something on the screen, or something inside, not a smile to be shared with the room, but he looked so canny, intelligent, that was part of the attraction, and I was pleased that he had an interest that was his alone, because he'd been at home that whole year with his depression, and the year before that, when he wasn't on top form mentally, I'd nagged at him to be active, to find himself a hobby, something to do.

He was so clingy when he was depressed, even when I was reading. He knew that I didn't like to talk when I was reading a book or documents from work, but when you're depressed, you don't need to respect other people's needs. He'd stand right in front of me and just look at me, or balance matchsticks on his nose – once he put on Sigurd's Ninja mask – but the fact that he took no initiative, had no interests, and was constantly circling me like a dog, made me feel claustrophobic, and I told him so, that one partner shouldn't be the other's crutch, it would kill any relationship.

So it felt liberating when he finally got a job again, at Autopartner, and in addition, had enough energy to try and breathe life into his own company, because that had always been the dream, as he said, to work for himself, and one evening when he was sitting like that, working at the table, I realised how much I loved him. That's to say, the feeling was particularly strong that evening. I don't know why. It was an ordinary evening, a Friday towards the end of February. The snow was swirling around the streetlights in Liaveien; I could just make out the nursing home and football pitch, and the fog made the Shell sign down in the centre look like a UFO hovering over the Coop roof. Sigurd was in bed, and Eivor was probably in her room or out roaming around. That famous peace reigned. All our

duties were done. I was sitting on the sofa over by the TV and was probably watching a reality programme as I have a vague memory of a man in red shorts, an American, standing on a beach waiting for a parade of ladies in bikinis to waltz past, and I guess something was said on the programme that made me appreciate the life I had with Svein and the children.

Even though it was nearly three years ago, and even though Svein had probably been unfaithful to me already by then, or was certainly planning to do so, I can still be filled with the same sentimentality I felt that evening. I remember admiring the teak sideboard inherited from my grandparents, which stood beside the TV-unit and was actually a monstrosity, but I felt real affection because there was a mark on the bottom left corner of the sideboard where the door hinge had scraped it when Svein and I struggled to get it into the living room. We had to take the terrace door off its hinges, with a lot of bickering and complaining in the process, and it wasn't easy to get the door back on again, but afterwards we had a G&T under the awning on the terrace, because it was raining, it was sultry, there were beads of sweat in the hair on the back of Svein's neck, and it's not unusual to get sentimental every now and then, but I actually got tears in my eyes when I looked at the sideboard that evening. Just sitting in the sofa and looking at it, I could feel the rough scratch against my thumb, the weight of the terrace door, the sweat on Svein's neck. I loved that sideboard. Every time I opened the top drawer to get out the playing cards or dice, a strong, sweet smell was released as Granddad used to keep his new year cigars in there, in the good old days, and when we'd finished playing cards, all four of us, the whole family, generally in the holidays, Sigurd and Eivor would wash their hands on their own initiative, but it's ridiculous really to say that I'm fond of a sideboard, a piece of furniture, and yet that evening I was, I thought, and one day I would no longer exist.

But Svein was in the living room with me. He sat there at the table staring at his computer screen, his cheeks were bright red. I looked at his feet under the table, they were living their own life down there in his cotton socks, and as I watched, the big toe and toe beside it on the right foot pulled the cotton sock off the left foot, and the toes on the left foot started to scratch the eczema on the sole of his right foot. The sound of toenails against cotton, the friction, is more piecing than a grasshopper's song, and once you've heard it, it's impossible to hear anything else. It's impossible to hear yourself think, as I'd pointed out on numerous occasions, because more than once I had the urge to put plaster casts on his both feet, but that evening, there and then, it was calming and reassuring, and the eczema, well, apparently it was some kind of physical reaction that had started the year he was at home, and as I sat there watching him that evening, I regretted not being more sympathetic when he was depressed.

'You're wonderful,' I said. It just popped out, but Svein obviously didn't hear what I'd said, because he said: "what?", so I repeated what I'd said, it wasn't hard. But I didn't normally say things like that to him. I could tell he was surprised, but managed to compose himself, he smiled and said: 'Thank you, you're wonderful too. Linda Belinda,' he said. I couldn't keep still with the joy, or perhaps it was gratitude rather than joy, for the deep sense of security I felt in that moment. I had to touch him. And, as I walked across the room, he

closed his computer, so I went right up to him, I stroked his flaming cheeks, which were as hot as a stove, it felt like he was still taken aback but in a good way, I thought, expectant, and he quickened when I bent down and kissed him, he squeezed my bum with both hands.

‘What are you doing?’ I asked and nodded at the computer. I thought he was taking this car business very seriously, but without batting an eyelid, he said it was secret, that he was making plans for us. I mustn’t try to sneak a look, it was a surprise, then already the next day, or maybe it was the day after, he told me he’d booked a weekend for all of us at Norefjell, and of course that may well have been what he was doing on the internet that evening, booking hotel rooms, but I’m guessing not, and he certainly wasn’t looking for potential deals, because he’d already found his potential deal. Her name was Veronica Hagen. He was in love. And that’s what he’d been doing, night after night: sitting there writing messages to Veronica Hagen.

The first time I spoke to Veronica Hagen was back in 1996, and the reason I remember the exact year is because it was the year I was supposed to move to Bergen to study law, but instead I stayed and moved into my father-in-law’s house in Kirkebygda, where Svein and I were given the basement flat, and lived under the illusion we were a committed, grown-up couple. I was 19. Svein was 22. We had a living room with a tiny open-plan kitchen, a bedroom and a bathroom, plus a sauna that we never used, at least, not as it was intended to be used; it was the coldest room in the house and sometimes I put on layers of woolly clothes, took a headtorch, a pillow and one of Svein’s mum’s fleece rugs and lay down on the benches to read. *The Vagabond, Sugar Street, The Star Rover, World Without Watchmakers*, books that I’d inherited from my grandma, and when I read them in the sauna it was as if I was nowhere, or rather anywhere, in a prison cell, in a guesthouse in Paris, Moscow, because I don’t think either Svein or his father registered that I set up camp in there, and there were no distractions in the room, no football matches on TV, no washing up stacked in the bowl, no trousers left on the floor, no Svein talking cars with Terje Levorsen who came to visit far too often and left a lingering smell of cod-liver oil and sweaty feet in his wake.

I know that some of Svein’s friends thought I was boring. They thought I was ok, to be fair, but they said I was weird, which was about the worst thing anyone could be, but then, I thought they were boring. I noticed that Svein limited his vocabulary when he was with them, but he’d always been more sociable than me, and as he got himself access to the internet earlier than his mates, a ten-metre, green ISDN-cable that ran from the telephone socket up in my father-in-law’s house all the way down the stairs to the computer which stood on a bureau, we always had people coming to see us, and when they weren’t in the flat, they were outside in the yard or in the garage helping Svein with some car project or another, something that had to be adjusted, tweaked and maybe I was just jealous of them because at the very start, the first year that Svein and I were together, in 94, it was just him and me all

the time, and I liked to go with him to my father-in-law's garage, and pretend to be his sidekick, or just sit on beer case in the grease pit.

I went with him to Hvittingfoss and Krødsherad and Nesbyen to get parts. We ate in restaurants with white tablecloths and once, when we drove all the way down to Åmli and haggled our way to a new stereo that Svein had read about in *Auto Zeitung*, we stayed overnight in the spa hotel in Langesund. He subscribed to the magazine. Even though, on every page, he had to look up several words in the German dictionary, he snailed his way through every single sentence in every edition of *Auto Zeitung* for ten-fifteen years. He read how to install the loudspeakers in the back of the Manta. They were supposed to be absolutely amazing, those loudspeakers. I think they were Blaupunkt. And if I tried to speak to him when he was reading, he didn't hear what I said, and he wasn't terribly communicative as he struggled to install the speakers over the next few days, but when his face was illuminated by the soldering gun and he bit the insulation plastic away from the copper wires and then spat out small grains of plastic from his tongue, all I wanted to do was to touch him, I never wanted him more than in those moments.

I was fascinated by how much he knew. And I remember I told Elin that Svein ate pickled beetroot on his liver pate sandwiches, that he peppered them as well, and she heard how over the moon I was and that obviously annoyed her, because she asked if I thought my boyfriend was super special, and I said no, I said what I knew she wanted to hear, that he was sexy and easy to talk to. But I did think he was special. He was the only person who could make me feel that I wasn't alone, but the feeling evaporated as soon as we were surrounded by his friends, and in my last year at school, when we'd been together just over a year, he let them all back in and I went to the garage less and less often. I wasn't even going to pretend to be interested when Terje was there and they discussed G-force and seals and limited slip differentials. There was forever something wrong with the drive shaft, or so it seemed, and instead of charming them with my lack of knowledge or sitting there smiling like a fan girl, I tried to immerse myself in a book, which only reinforced my weirdness, but it was impossible to concentrate given their constant chat, so after we'd moved in with my father-in-law, I often went upstairs.

I worked in community care at the time and didn't like it much, but I made sure to swap to early shifts on Saturday and Sundays so I had an excuse stay at home at the weekend and watch the Swedish shows *På spåret* and *Konst som retat manga* with my father-in-law rather than go with Svein and his mates to Trollstua or to Terje's mother's cabin in Wetterhusgrenda. 'You spend more time with my dad than you do with me,' Svein said. That's to say, during the time that we lived with my father-in-law, the relationship between father and son deteriorated. To the point where Svein stopped calling his father Dad and started to say Sjöberg or the Swede, like everyone else. Svein actually called him the fake Swede. He left the room whenever my father-in-law indulged in the story that he was the descendant of a navy who had more or less built the Numedal railtrack on his own and what's more, had been the model for the Stein-Kalle statue that stood down by the power station, because, according to Svein, the navy hero was nothing more than a drunk who'd

left when my father-in-law was two. Sjöberg was a name he'd taken, according to Svein, and he asked if I hadn't noticed that my father-in-law forgot to speak Swedish when he was angry.

'You're with the fake Swede more than you're with me,' he said, but that was one of the reasons we'd moved there, which was probably an illusion as well, to help my father-in-law, as he'd recently been widowed. Well, that was certainly my argument when Svein was getting ready for weekends away at the cabin, striding in and out in his rubber boots and lined denim jacket, taking sausages and pork steaks out to the car, beer and Kalinka, and going on and on about early shifts being a poor excuse for missing a party, and once I said that being jealous of his father was not very attractive, and his face turned beetroot.. I wasn't able to say that I didn't like his trips to Wetterhusgrenda with Terje, that I wanted him to stay with me.

'Do you think I like living here?' I asked. I also said: 'If you're going to cry, why can't you look at me?' I knew I was more stubborn than him when it came to conflicts. He was always the one who came crawling, but his subservience only made me more defensive. The worst thing he could do was to try and hug me. 'Don't think you're getting anything,' I said and pushed him away, imitated his stutter. I said he didn't have a single opinion of his own. 'You just copy Terje,' I said, then said the stupidest things, about his hair, about how he stood and walked. 'Your teeth are yellow,' I said, and Svein, well, there was plenty he couldn't do much about, and plenty I reproached him for.

I regretted not moving to Bergen. I should have been reading thick books at university. I should have been walking around the city, on the cobblestones, taking the bus out to Fana Stadium and running round and round the track there in my new spikes, and even though, at that point, I'd never eaten a fresh prawn in my life, I should have been sitting on the quayside, dangling my feet over the edge, as I ate fresh prawns from a paper bag and threw the shells down into the water. I should have been making new friends instead of sitting in a basement flat in Kirkebygda, with a view of Asbjørn Sivertsen's veranda, and the bathtub and septic tank that were standing there, the rolls of glass wool insulation and tarpaulins all over the lawn, where Asbjørn Sivertsen came out of the house every afternoon and walked between the fruit trees carrying a plank of wood.

The world had never been smaller. The only thing that kept me there was my conscience. Obviously, that wasn't true, but it's perfectly possible I imagined it was. Whatever the case, it was easier to live with the illusion that I was living there so I could help my father-in-law than to believe the other illusion: that Svein and I were grown up and settled, living together, because the basement flat was basically a storage space for all the stuff that Svein's parents had decided over the years was not good enough to keep in the part of the house that their friends saw, but too valuable to give or throw away, like the corner sofa, which was the size of a whale, with red and orange cushions, the pinewood dining table with eight chairs, a brown Stressless recliner chair, a rocking chair, two teak bureaus, two Tandberg radios, rolls of fabric, as well as a stuffed squirrel and a stuffed mink. The walls in the bathroom and bedroom were more or less covered with framed embroideries of

mountains and birds made by Svein's mother, and she'd also made all the rag rugs on the floor, and a worn, brown woven blanket that hung on the wall over the sofa, because she loved making things with her hands, Svein said, which was also why there was a loom and a sewing machine in the flat. His mother had also painted the porcelain dinner set in the kitchen cupboard, with stars and crescent moons. There was a collection of old jars in case we suddenly felt the need to make raspberry or redcurrant jam, in addition to three carafes, a fondue set, a raclette set, naturally, and another brown stoneware dinner set, including a sauceboat and a tea pot, and drawers full of assorted kitchen utensils, mainly can openers and corkscrews, rolls of freezer tape, and a complete Skaugum cutlery set in its original case, which Svein's trickiest sister, the older one, had managed to acquire by the time I asked for it some years later, as well as roasting thermometers, ladles, olive pitters, but what irritated me most was all the vases, on the window sills and along the wall in the hallway, in the bedroom, filled with plastic flowers and heather, bog cotton, some of them also served as storage for smoke alarms and cables, remote controls without battery covers, detonating cord and card decks, black and white Mastermind pegs, and actually, I'm lying when I say it irritated me, because to begin with, when I first lived there, it was like living in a treasure trove and I could become engrossed in any object, but after a while, I felt the need to tidy and get rid of stuff, only I could forget that, because it was all full of memories, Svein said, but their weren't my memories because I was too late to build any chemistry with his mother, Edith, and no matter what I ate down there in the flat, there was an after-taste of diesel as the kitchen area was wall-to-wall with the garage, and that's why going up to my father-in-law, up the stairs with a Swedish Dala horse on every step, made me happy, and desperate, because up there, the world was bigger, or so it felt, it was at least possible to see beyond Asbjørn Sivertsen's house.

My father-in-law liked to talk politics. About Ingvar Carlsson, about Bosnia. He talked about the lost battle of 94 and the protectionism of landowners by the stupid farmers of the Centre Party who were scared of tourists, the far left who were scared of everything. And he played records for me, Povel Ramel and Monica Zetterlund, Hasse & Tage skits, which I didn't understand the half of, but as he played the same records again and again, I eventually knew where to laugh. He didn't play the records for Svein, or talk politics with him, because according to my father-in-law, Svein was a bit behind in some areas, but then Svein didn't make dinner for him either and didn't see his father putting on a short apron to wash up the pots and pans.

We listened to the records after dinner, or watched TV, read. I sat where his wife used to sit, in the brown winged armchair, and he lay on the sofa with his feet up on the armrest, his tartan slippers dangling from his toes. He would throw the newspaper into my lap, the local rag, ask me to read an article, usually a piece where he was mentioned by name, because he'd made a statement as chair of the Rotary Club, as an entrepreneur, as a private individual, or because someone had said something about him. He was called greedy, vindictive, and Tov Johanneson, who was a natural science teacher in the lower high school and who played the guitar and organ for Ten Sing and whistled about with test tubes in his

free time doing acid rain tests on the bogs, tarns, rivers and streams, he once said in connection with the expansion of the skiing facilities that my father-in-law used Mafia tactics, but Tov and all the others should have seen the pleasure that my father-in-law got from their accusations. ‘They’re so stupid,’ he said, ‘it’s just politics’, and as I read, he lay there chuckling on the sofa, rubbing his knees together, and pursing his lips as though to kiss, but only so he wouldn’t break into a smile, but when I read out that he was unscrupulous and rude, grotesque and arrogant, he couldn’t stop himself from grinning. ‘Things are getting lively,’ he said and checked his pulse: ‘52 beats on a full stomach.’ He said the food I made was too good. My gravy was better than anything that had been made in the house before. He groaned, it sounded like he had a cooing pigeon in his stomach, and just before farting, he pushed his heels hard against the armrest, lifted his bum and said: ‘Forgive me, they call me Mr Boomer.’

It was nice having me in the house, he said, he liked talking to me, though he did most of the talking – I’m not ashamed to admit I was proud that he saw me as a confidante. This is between us, he said and told me about the time that he’d managed to badmouth Roger Hansen sufficiently for him to be thrown out of the planning team up at Høk, and how in late summer and early autumn 95 he managed to get information from Sølvi on the switchboard, among others, that would sabotage his Conservative Party colleague Jørn Roald Antonsen’s bid for mayor, the hotel manager in a suit, he of the liquorice lace moustache, because my father-in-law felt sick when he saw him bobbing and fawning beside his stamp collection that was displayed in the glass cases up in the gym hall for Culture Week, but also because Antonsen basically no idea how the municipality should be run and only talked about bringing dignity back into politics, which according to him, he’d learnt from Jan, and it you couldn’t get a bigger red flag to wave in front of my father-in-law than that, as Antonsen always emphasised the “d” when he said dignity, and the Jan he was referring to was Jan Peterson, the leader of the Conservative Party, but what kind of dignity were you demonstrating when you bowed so low that your chin almost bumped your knees only because Jan Petersen, on his way home from a holiday in Vestlandet, had chosen Numedal by mistake, instead of Hallingdal and had to book into the hotel at the last minute because his wife, Vesla, was being driven demented by all the potholes in the road over the mountains, but thanks to the Socialists, my father-in-law was not responsible for the roads, which was a bonus.

I know that people have gossiped over the years, and of course, it was no disadvantage for Sjöberg to have a daughter-in-law who worked in the mayor’s office, but even if he did pull a few strings here and there and lobbied like crazy when the position became vacant, it was me who was interviewed, and no matter what people say, I’ve done a good job in the time that I’ve been there, and as my father-in-law would say: it’s not that unusual for family members to talk at the dinner table. And if my father-in-law did start to speculate about how he could use me already back then when Sven and I were living with him, it was because he liked me.

I was most keenly aware of this when we went shopping on Saturdays. Svein never came with us. He liked to sleep in. And anyway, he wasn’t allowed to drive my father-in-

law's weekend Mercedes, the champagne-coloured one – or beige, as Svein said – but when my father-in-law and I went down to Rødberg to run the morning errands, it was me who drove, as my father-in-law never chose footwear that was suitable for driving, and the only time that I asked him why he preferred to wear his slippers to the shop, the very same tartan ones, he said: 'I'm bold.'

He was still a big, solid man back then, and to stop himself from toppling forwards, thanks to his big belly, he leaned back when he walked like a proud, pregnant woman, at one with the elements, full of insights that were impenetrable to others, and people who noticed how comfortable he was in his slippers, wondered why on earth they had been stupid enough not to wear something else on their feet, and some men, Gøran Aspedokken and Per Otto Berg among others, and that little man with curly hair who was a regular with Marie Haugen, they even tried to be slipper-wearers in the shop, but were such clumsy clods that they slipped on the linoleum, or ended up tottering around in the socks when their slippers got caught in the grate outside the entrance, and everyone laughed at them. No one laughed at my father-in-law. He had dignity. He could make anything brilliant, a bunch of bananas, a packet of salami, for example, and box of eggs. When he carried a box of eggs through the shop, it was with great ceremony. He looked so proud. He carried the eggs with a tenderness that witnessed respect for all the world's hens, he carried them as though he were the only person who had ever carried a box of eggs, the only person who knew that a box of eggs was the most valuable thing on earth, and everyone around him understood for the first time just how amazing eggs actually were.

I was always chuffed when he met someone he knew and said: 'You know Linda, don't you, my daughter-in-law.' I thought people were jealous that I was part of Olof Sjöberg's inner circle. I imagined they talked among themselves and said things like: that Linda, the one who used to ski so much, Linda Hansen, so good of her to look after Sjöberg, him being a widower and all that, he's like butter in her hand, always in a good mood, brags about her timings, how fast she is, says she's even better than Mona Evjen, and isn't she beautiful, with those green eyes?

I felt so special when I went shopping with my father-in-law, because he seemed to think it was a treat to be shopping with me. Even if we were at different ends of the shop, he'd shout over to me, no matter how many other customers were there, the more there were the louder he'd bellow: 'Linda, have you remembered the potato salad? The potato salad we both like!' And I'd sashay back to the deli counter, my jeans pulled up between my bum cheeks, and ask Bjørg to get me a pot of potato salad, the one without leek, or I'd complain that the roast beef was too fatty. A stream of complaints. And I've had to pay for it later. It's not for nothing that I'm still called The Chieftain. But I was nineteen and a real twat, I thought I was smart, and I know it sounds cringy now, but I really felt that my father-in-law understood me, better than anyone else, he understood who I was and I think I convinced myself that that was why I didn't break up with Svein and go to Bergen: I didn't want to disappoint my father-in-law.

But yet, that wasn't really the case. 'You're too bright to be cleaning Gunnhild Aasen's dentures, wiping that old witch's bum,' my father-in-law said. 'Gifted,' he said, and he said that I shouldn't let Svein be a ball and chain. But because he was always saying things like that, it's really only now when I can see the whole picture – I didn't realise that he was actually encouraging me to leave. I wish I'd told him about going to study law. He would definitely have driven me to Geilo and made sure I got on the first train to Bergen, because he could see how unhappy I was, only I didn't realise myself at the time. What was I thinking? Did I really believe that he, a man in his late fifties, thought it was interesting to spend time with a nineteen-year-old girl, that he didn't find it strange that I chose to sit with him and watch *Som löven i Vallombrosa*, spend hour after hour in front of the telly rather than go out partying with my boyfriend? It was my father-in-law who took care of me, not the other way round, and he did it to keep me together until I had sense enough to leave.

'Could you drive me to the debate at parish hall?' he said, with the excuse that he wanted a dram before going in, to lubricate his rhetoric. He could easily have driven after a snifter, or just dropped it, but he made it out I was doing him a favour, when in fact all he wanted to do was get me out of the house, interrupt my moping. That was why he asked me to be his bridge partner, and why he needed help with serving the refreshments at the historical society meetings, why I was his map-reader for the veteran car race at Sauherad, sat in his cabriolet with a scarf on my head, and as he was the chair of the local sports association and I went running anyway, could I perhaps help him at Rødstubben, when people were trying to get their sports certificate as he always thought it was a bit trying to be surrounded by all the volunteers – their smug, pleby smiles – and it was there, at one of those events, that I spoke to Veronika Hagen for the first time.

I was in charge of recording the timings for the 60-metre, pressed in the stopwatch when Ståle of the Hair fired the starting gun, and Veronika Hagen just popped out of the red gravel: puff, there she was, or so the story goes. In reality, she'd been out wandering around aimlessly as she often did, looking for someone to talk to, criss-crossing from one side to the other of the road, all the way up Tannlegeveien, and she was no doubt delighted to see all the people at Rødstubb and made straight for the 60-metre starting line. She certainly hadn't signed up to take part. I'd have noticed if she'd been there when my father-in-law explained the various activities to those present earlier in the afternoon, because she was wearing a long yellow dress, and there weren't more than fifteen-twenty people there and I knew them all, most of them pensioners with milky thighs in disintegrating sports' gear, doing prehistoric warm-ups that made their bodies steam as though it was late September and cold.

There was nothing sporty about Veronika Hagen. She was one of the Dissenter kids back then, ten years old, knocked-kneed and lanky, a couple of heads taller than anyone else in her class, and people simply had to turn away as she toiled along the track. I've never seen a slower runner, and perhaps it's a trick of fate that the only result I can remember from that evening is Veronika's 19.38 for the 60-metre. She was triumphant when she reached the finishing line. Arms and legs, and big front teeth. 'Did I win?' she asked. 'Did I do well?' 'You look very nice,' I said, as I brushed the red gravel off her dress. And I think I said her

name. Veronika. ‘Lovely material,’ I said. ‘Made in France,’ she said, and stood right in front of me so the toes of our shoes touched, stood there smiling, mouth open, her eyes full of anticipation, waiting for me to say or do something, and when I took a couple of steps back, she followed me, as though we were playing some kind of game. She reached my nose, and she’s never managed to close her mouth properly, but back then I wasn’t aware that it was normal for her to look gormless: I thought she was putting it on.

‘Sorry, you’re going to have to move,’ I said, ‘so I can take the next person’s timing. Go and try another exercise,’ I said, ‘throw the ball,’ but instead, she stood beside me and how we ended up holding hands, I’ll never know, I didn’t even notice because Tor Arne Hovden, the old head teacher, who’d run at the same time as Veronika Hagen, well, he made a scene when he was given his timing and he snatched the stopwatch out of my hand, and as his nose dripped and the dribble bubbled in the corners of his mouth, he ran on the spot, kicking his backside with his military service gym shoes that he’d boasted about during the warm-up – forty years old and still as good – and he said he should have another go because not only had I probably pressed in the stopwatch too late at the finish line, Ståle of the Hair had fired the start gun too early, at almost the same time that he said “On your marks”, and he hadn’t said “get set”, as it said you should in the protocol, Hovden claimed, they hadn’t followed the protocol, and when I finally managed to calm the man down and was about to hold out my hand to get the stopwatch again, I discovered that Veronika Hagen was holding on to it.

Judging by her smile, she expected me to laugh at how funny she was. It’s possible I forced a laugh. I explained to her that I needed both hands free to take the times, but for the rest of the 60-metre run, she stood next to me holding onto my joggers. She talked non-stop. I can knit, she said. I’m going to get a rabbit. Go, go, go. And every time I looked at her, she smiled. I couldn’t bring myself to say she had to let go of my trousers. I guess I felt sorry for her. Her nickname was Pedo-Kid. Her father had been hounded out of the community a few years earlier. He couldn’t keep his hands to himself either.

The Emissary, as he was called, didn’t have a job, but wrote reader letters to the local newspaper where he criticised the films that were being shown in the cinema, the outfits worn by girls’ gymnastic team. He spent most of his time at the Dissenter school, the white building on the slope by Sporan Bridge, hot on the heels of the only teacher there, and it can’t have been at the teacher’s request as there were never more than five or six pupils and surely he didn’t need help with them, but the Emissary was said to be a benefactor of the school, a financial one, which was also why it had to close when he upped and left, but it was actually because the teacher got a taste for sin in the form of the physiotherapist’s wife, and took her back with him to where he came from, somewhere down in Vestfold, and consequently, the Dissenter kids who weren’t prepared for the real world, were bussed up to the normal primary school and Elin, who at the time had managed to worm her way into a temporary teaching position at the school because her mum volunteered with the same charity as Svanhild, the school inspector, told me that the Dissenter kids always stood at the back of the queue and were quiet and polite and a couple of them even managed to make friends, but not Veronika

Hagen. No one liked her, Elin said, but it seems that Veronika Hagen herself wasn't aware of that. She spoke loudly and a lot in class, and in the breaks she hung around the fringes of the other children's games and asked if she could join, and she always had her pencil case with her, but the other children didn't care that she had a picture of a seal on her pencil case, a blue smiling seal, or that it had four sections, and when they didn't want to play with her, she tagged along behind the teacher on duty, or she went to the edge of the playground and stood by the fence, showing her pencil case to the old people sitting on the benches outside the old folks home.

Elin said it was easy to understand why certain children got bullied, and I'm not going to make myself out to be any better than I am: I felt sorry for Veronika Hagen t,hat time at Rødstubben, but I was also mortified that it might look like we knew each other. When people came over to get their timing, she tried to be a shield between them and me. She stood with her back to whoever I was talking to and just stared at me, as though she was obsessed, in love, and at one point, when I was talking to Kristian Tandberg about stride, she put her arms around my waist and pressed into me.

When the 60-metre was finished, I tried to sneak off, away from her, over to my father-in-law and the soup stall, but no more than a few minutes later I felt a finger prodding me in the back, and since Veronika Hagen obviously had no social skills and only limited motor skills and could easily collide with someone doing the long jump, I realised that Tor Arne Hovden and his sort would make things difficult for my father-in-law if I didn't keep her close and make sure to avoid any major catastrophes, but I still didn't manage to stop her from injuring herself, but before that, Svein popped down to the track with some chocolate and a woolly sweater for me. Thought it might be a bit chilly, he said, or something like that.

He would do things like that. If I've given the impression that it was an ordeal living with Svein at my father-in-law's, that's of course not the whole truth. If I take time to think about it, I'm sure there are more good memories from our time in the over-full basement flat in Kirkebygda. It was in the bathroom there, surrounded by all the framed embroideries of mountains and birds, the jays, that I found out I was pregnant with Eivor. For some reason, I took off all my clothes to pee on the pregnancy test, and when I saw that it was positive and I shouted for Svein, he came into the bathroom and found me sitting naked and dazed on the toilet with the test on the tiled floor in front of me, but he just laughed and went down on his knees with a cheer and broke an antique toilet-roll holder in pure joy. Truth be told, we went around naked quite a lot up there. Or put on clothes that his parents no longer used. We sat and watched videos in grey knickerbockers. *Blade Runner*, I recall, *The Deer Hunter*. We danced. Svein was nearly always happy. When he woke up in the morning, he used to say: Is the day ready for a likeable lad? And whenever he did sink into despair after losing his mother, it was only when it was the two of us and he wanted comforting. He liked to lie with his head in my lap, and I liked it too, it felt good to be able to comfort him.

I think Svein kissed me that evening when he came down to Rødstubben with the bar of chocolate and woolly sweater, but sometimes I don't trust my own memory. It feels like

something I've imagined, not actually experienced. Maybe I've just made it up, that Veronika Hagen stood there staring at us as we kissed and afterwards laughed and asked if we were boyfriend and girlfriend, and caught the hem of her dress with her finger and twisted it so the dress rode up her thighs, and Svein looked at me, rolled his eyes, and whispered, but not very quietly: 'The Pedo-kid smells like washer fluid.'

I can do whatever I want with the memory. I can get Svein to squat down and scratch Veronika Hagen under the chin, and tell her to piss off. But it doesn't mean anything. It's still impossible to believe that Svein chose Veronika Hagen over me. I know that it's pointless to think like that, but I do all the same, because if, and what if and if only: it would be easy to wish that a prophet had appeared on the red track that evening and told me that this is the man in your life, you'll have two children, a nice house, good jobs, reasonable finances, the possibility of one holiday a year, to Denmark or Sweden, Greece, Kiel, Jotunheimen, a romantic trip to Paris, but only once, and things might get a bit choppy at times, but you'll think that you've made the right choice and it's a good life until that girl there, the spectacle in the yellow dress, comes along in twenty years' time and ruins it all.

I think I even gave her most of the chocolate. Svein left before she hurt herself. It was in the long jump pit. She wanted to show me she could cartwheels. Only she couldn't. She thought it was fun to roll around in the sawdust. Her knickers were white with red splodges, presumably some berry or other. 'Look at me now,' she said. 'Look at me.' The other children pulled back, as though she was jinxed, they didn't even dare laugh at her, and Håvard Tveiten, the grumpy old sod behind the counter at the post office, was responsible for raking out the pit after every jump, and he jabbed her with the rake. I saw his jaw tighten as he did it, but Veronika Hagen thought he was joking and made a face at him and blah blah blah. In the end there was only the three of us there. Most of the others had moved on to the shotput. 'Why don't you do a jump?' I said to her, 'and then that's that for today', but when she eventually stopped rolling around and actually tried to do a long jump, she managed to smash her knee into her face on landing.

'Out of control,' Håvard said, as the blood poured from her nose. He put a finger to his temple and twisted it before throwing down the rake, then he marched off towards the edge of the woods and took the shortcut to Lia, leaving me alone with Veronika Hagen. She didn't cry. And I don't quite remember in which order, but I managed to stop the bleeding and wash her face in the Bendelorm stream. Her dress was a mess, covered in blood and sawdust, but at some point during the operation I said that she had to go home, and then she started bawling, shaking and trembling, and at first it was impossible to understand what she was saying, but eventually, after I'd actually stood there stroking her cheek, I realised she was scared of her mother, because she said: 'Mummy's going to think I've been picking my nose again.'

And in that moment, I felt sorry for her. She was somehow sweeter when she was crying, you could understand why her mouth was open, but when I told Svein about the whole palaver later, he said she was an awful kid. And my father-in-law, who would later

become Veronika Hagen's father-in-law, seemed to think the same. I asked if I could borrow his car to drive her home. I had to explain what had happened to her mother, I said, but my father-in-law looked horrified, and put a blanket over the passenger seat, then emptied a bin liner full of cones and other bits of equipment, made three holes in it, and pulled it over the girl's head. There were some medals in the bag, so I took a bronze medal and hung round Veronika Hagen's neck, despite all the protests from Tor Arne Hagen who was still standing there stamping his military gym shoes on the red gravel as we drove off.

But it was probably all an act on her part. I certainly had my suspicions in the car, because any anxiety she'd had about her mother seemed to evaporate and she looked happy, almost blissful, and wanted to touch everything, opened the glove compartment and flicked the door lock up and down, played with my father-in-law's pipe tobacco. 'Sit still,' I said, but she didn't listen, just looked at me, challenged me, smiled with her already open mouth, and her eyes, there was nothing but impudence in her eyes. I felt the urge to make her cry again. I asked where her father lived, but she didn't know. 'Why is he not with you?' I asked, and Veronika Hagen in the bin liner said: 'He's doing good deeds.'

Not that I feel the need to get all nostalgic with her, but it would be interesting to know what she remembers from back then. Does she realise that I, the wife of the man she threw herself at, actually drove her home one evening, or is everything from that time enveloped in a fog and I'm just one of many adults she attached herself to and didn't have the ability to separate from each other? Does she remember that I parked the car behind the Dissenter school, so her mother wouldn't see me peeling the bin liner off, and that we peered into the only classroom where the chairs were up on the desks and that she led me between the raspberry canes over to the small timber house on the Sporan site, and took off her dress and the bronze medal on the front step, then slipped into the house without so much as a goodbye when her mother opened the door?

Whatever the case: two-three years later she got chlamydia. Frank Jensen. And of course, it's not really fair to say that a girl of thirteen is loose, but it became apparent as time passed. She tended to hang out with the gang that sniffed glue in the derelict kindergarten. Jørn Nordås and that lot. I saw her there once when I was doing interval training up and down Liabakken. She waded out of the bushes with a bag of glue in her hand and her shorts down around her knees. And when she was old enough to get into Trollstua, possibly a couple of years before that as well, I saw her in action a number of times, and those guys there, they weren't exactly prime specimens. Just the dregs. The dirt thick on their jeans. But there were also others who thought they were better: the Geilo boys in white trainers and expensive puffer jackets who used her as practice. People stopped calling her the Pedo-Kid. Instead they said Hotlips and Diesel Whore. Someone hung a picture of her fanny up on the noticeboard beside the cinema poster. But then she moved in with Ole Tommy Øverlie, the sheet metalworker, and the most disgusting pig you can imagine. He put a ladder up to their bedroom window so his mates could come and watch. Football folk, mainly, like Nils and Trond Strand, uncle and nephew. According to Svein, they called themselves Pussy Partners. They bragged about going to Drammen and Oslo to buy services. They were the business,

and said they were regulars with a Brazilian babe who called them her favourites and gave them a discount because they were so much better than the townies. But the time that they went over to Ole Tommy, when Nils came back down the ladder after watching Veronika Hagen spread her legs, he was so unwell that he fainted and couldn't hold up the ladder for his nephew.

Of course it's possible for people to change, and you can use what knowledge you have in whatever way you like, or to put it another way: Svein was my only source when it came to Veronika Hagen's shenanigans. When he told me this and that, what she'd been called, I never got the impression that he saw her as a victim, and Ole Tommy Øverlie, well, he's a pushover, so if one of them had the other around their little finger, it definitely wasn't Veronika who was being twisted. When she was seven months pregnant with their child, she dumped Ole Tommy, despite the fact that he'd got his mother to move out and made her bedroom ready for the baby with a cot that he made sure everyone knew was custom-made – the Stradivarius of cots, no less, he'd got Hoffarten to make it from flame birch and it cost more than ten thousand.

Veronika Hagen couldn't give the child a normal name. Oh no, she called him Benjamin André. My diamond, Veronika Hagen said. She said that on TV, because over the years, parallel to all the complications, she's kept singing, always in the front row at Ten Sing, and as the conductor, the deacon at the nursing home, was her mother's new beau, not a single 17 May went by without Veronika Hagen singing a solo, the only one who was allowed to, and she'd been the vocalist in several local bands, including White Meadows, Silent Types, and when she went on *Idol*, when she was in her mid-twenties, she had Benjamin André with her, presumably to drum up sympathy because there's obviously something wrong with one of the boy's legs.

Maybe it's not her big front teeth, but rather all the singing that makes it so hard for her to close her mouth. Either way, it was grotesque to see that mouth tripled in size on the TV screen. Everyone in the vicinity saw the programme. Svein and I watched it with Eivor. You can still find it online, ten minutes with Veronika Hagen. It starts with her walking along the dirt track up by Vestsida in the mist, trying to look serious. She says that the only place she really feels at home is on the stage, and in music, she says, it's her way of giving the finger to everyone who's bullied and hounded her. She stands with her arms crossed, looking out over Hans Grøtterud's field, and says that she's felt, with her body, what it's like to be different. I want to give my all, my life, she says, and it cuts to her sitting waiting, before the audition. Feeling and interpretation, she says, that's what's most important. She says that she's always thought of herself as an artist, but has prioritised her family, and then Benjamin André is brought into the picture. He has new clothes for the occasion, a light-blue waistcoat and pink bow tie, with his hair gelled up into a Mohican, and he's obviously been instructed to look cute and not say anything, because when the presenter asks him if Mum is good at singing, he taps his lower lip with his forefinger, raises his eyebrows a couple of times and then throws his arms around his mother's neck. 'My diamond,' Veronika Hagen says and kisses him on the forehead. 'I want to make him proud,' she says, and just before she goes

into the audition, they dance to a boy playing the acoustic guitar, and Benjamin André is wearing trousers with a centre crease and expensive sneakers, but it's still clear as day that something's not right.

Svein cringed when they started to dance. He went out into the kitchen and hummed to himself to avoid any further embarrassment. Eivor and I laughed at him. Eivor shouted through to him everything Veronika Hagen said. 'I want to show my range. Whitney Houston,' she shouted. 'My diamond,' I said, and kissed her on the forehead, and Eivor put on a voice, more nasal than her own, and like Veronika Hagen tried to speak posher than she normally did and said that she was an artist and loved to be on stage, to perform for the audience, and Svein, when he came back into the living room to hear Veronika Hagen sing, didn't sit back down on the sofa in case he needed to escape again, but stood in the middle of the room, several metres away from the TV, and munching on a cold pork chop.

'She's actually good,' Eivor said. 'She'll get through to the next round,' Svein said, and the first judge said that she had nuance in her voice, and there weren't many who managed those high notes, he said, but the next judge, well, she'd heard it all before, 'you don't have the personality,' she said, and so it was up to the last judge, but sadly all he said was good luck, so Svein went back to the kitchen. He muttered something about the weirdos they managed to find to be the judges: does that woman really think that Whitney Houston has no personality? I was disappointed as well. I'd hoped that Veronika Hagen would get through, and felt it in my eyes when she didn't manage to say a word to the presenter, just stood there crying with Benjamin André hanging onto her leg. She stroked his Mohican and eventually managed to stutter that this was her dream and no one was going to spoil her dream.

Svein thought she was better than at least two of the others who got through. 'The viewers respond to things like that,' he said, 'gets you sympathy,' he said, 'having the kid with her.' And people would see Veronika Hagen and think she's a good woman. Or did he say attractive? I certainly remember asking him if he thought she was good-looking, but he said he was only imagining what the viewers would think. 'Objectively,' he said. 'If only they knew. There's a difference between cause and individual,' he said, and read out a couple of messages he'd got from Terje Levorsen, where Terje wrote that Benjamin André must have been heavily medicated to stay so still, and Veronika Hagen, she was so stupid she couldn't hide it. Bullying, always felt different, Terje wrote, do some people know no shame?

Even my father-in-law watched the programme. He said that it took some nerve, and that was the general opinion, really. People felt that Veronica Hagen had attacked them live on TV, not a word about the man who'd been down to Nordefjord and popped into Korea and pawed one of Ellisiv Hillestad's adopted sons, and nothing about the fact that this man, her father, that is, didn't want to have anything to do with anyone who wasn't in his congregation when he lived here; when he wasn't keeping an eye on the anaemic children in the Dissenter school, he was generally to be found with a stick by the roadside down by Sporan bridge, beating the willow weed and lupins with a stick, who knows why, but that's what he did, or

the snow banks in winter, and if Veronika Hagen had been bullied at some point or other – which wasn't nice, of course, it hadn't done her any damage – it was peculiar, as Svein liked to say, it was peculiar that she could sit yarning with Sonja Gravermoen in the bakery every bloody day.

Because she was working in Sonja's business at the time. Azea Spedition & Logistics. They had their office in the old dentist's surgery above the Shell station, and I've no idea where the Azea name came from, but it presumably had something to do with Sonja's Turkish boyfriend, a scrawny, bearded man she had with her when she came back after studying, in Gjøvik apparently. Sonja's bloke drove to and from Kongsberg a couple of times a week, with some boxes in the back of a small, two-seater Opel, with "Azea" on the bonnet, but other than that, there didn't seem to be much going for the company, according to Svein who thought the key cards that Sonja and Veronika had round their necks on lanyards were a joke, because what was there worth stealing up there other than paper and cardboard boxes, unless of course there was a lot to steal, drugs that is, which was very possible, I heard Svein say several times, that the whole business was a cover, and the two ladies, they just sat up there on the first floor doing nothing, but around midday, they went out in their long coats and heels and clattered down the street.

As far as I know, Veronika Hagen didn't have a steady boyfriend when she worked for Sonja, but Sonja's bloke had a mate who sometimes came up, who they called Sonja's bloke's brother, even though they weren't brothers. They weren't even from the same country. People thought he was probably actually gay, as he always wore a tight, purple leather jacket with zips everywhere, and rolled his hips in trousers that sat tight over his bum, but according to Elin who had Sonja's son in her nursery, there was something going on between him and Veronika Hagen. I met him once in the corridor down at the council offices. I knew who he was because of the jacket, but I'd never spoken to him, and he couldn't possibly have had any reason to be in the council offices, other than to have a nose around, but when we passed in the corridor you'd have thought we were old friends, the way he looked at me and smiled, but that smile, it wasn't friendly, he smiled as if he knew something about me that I didn't even know myself.

I wasn't the only one who reacted to the way he looked at you. Elin said he undressed her with his eyes. Whenever he went to the bakery, because he didn't have a job or anything else of much use to do here, he liked to sit at the table by the window and look down at Gunnild Strøm's shop, but he'd glance around the café every now and then, and if he found someone interesting he'd stare at them, smiling to himself, but as soon as Sonja and Veronika Hagen came in the door, he jumped up and it was all hugging and kissing on both cheeks, even though they'd probably seen each other only a few hours before, and when the ladies took off their fashionable coats, it looked like there were two enormous duvets hanging over the back of the chair, and they spoke in English, key cards around their necks, as they tore off pieces from a cheese croissant and tapped on their mobiles that were lying on the table, tapped with their false nails that were so long that they made their hands look even bigger, almost like men's hands, and they talked in loud voices, of course, so everyone could hear

that English was actually the preferred language, and the old ladies over the pensioners' corner barely spoke to each other as they had to listen to what was being said over at the window table, and try to understand it, and Elin's Arvid said that Ågot Haug, the old midwife who'd worked in Africa for Doctors without Borders and had seen a lot, she frowned so hard that her red beret slid back over her perm.

It wouldn't surprise me if Svein is friends with that sort now. For a while, I had no control over who the children met, but back then Svein said that Sonja's bloke and the other guy were a couple of absolute dickheads, not to be trusted, but then he didn't like Veronika Hagen back then either. There was certainly nothing to indicate it, because when we were upstairs at Trollstua to celebrate Terje's birthday a couple of weekends after Veronika Hagen's appearance on *Idol*, and Sonja and Veronika Hagen were there as well with the two men, Svein said that they both had yellow, evil eyes. The four of them stood up at the bar for most of the night, with their fancy drinks and straws. Veronika Hagen in white faux fur and a black mini skirt, high heels, and sometimes she would nod to the music that was being played through the loudspeakers, her head tilted to one side as though she was catching nuances with one ear that none of the rest of us could hear with both. Only the artist had her outside jacket on inside, and maybe I thought about the time I'd driven her home from Rødstubben a few years earlier, because I actually considered going over and congratulating her on her performance on TV, but she was soon holding court, for the youngsters mainly, eighteen and nineteen-year-olds, but also a number of men in their forties or older, and at one point when I went up to the bar to get us some beers, I heard her say that the real reason she hadn't gone forwards was that she was polished already and couldn't be moulded in the same way that younger participants could: Shit luck, I am who I am, right?

I don't know if Svein talked to her that evening. I was upstairs most of the time with Elin and Astrid and Mona of the Racer Rump, but what I meant when I said there was nothing to indicate that Svein liked Veronika Hagen, was that he and Terje got really drunk as usual, and there were loads of people in Trollstua, and lots going on, but later on the evening people started to pay attention to what Svein and Terje were doing: they lurched around and took pictures down from the walls and looked up under lampshades, pulled a fire extinguisher down from the wall in the stairwell, opened the toilet roll holders in the men's toilet and the women's, they even went onto the dancefloor and pushed the loudspeakers around, wrapped themselves up in the curtains on the big windows that looked over the seaplane harbour, they asked people to get up from the chairs and sofas, and when someone asked why they were lifting the sofa cushions and looking at the seat of people's trousers who'd just stood up, they stood there raised their glasses, spilling their beer, rocked on their heels and smiled like proud, happy children and said that they were looking for Veronika Hagen's personality.

That's why I'll never understand it. Svein had no respect for Veronika Hagen. He knew too much about her. And you don't become a different person just because you start a club, or whatever you want to call it, a club for people with anxiety. That was where they met each other. And then there was clearly no difference between cause and individual. The cause

was so good that the individual became attractive. She was beautiful and inspiring, both objectively and subjectively, the answer to all desires. But of course there's a difference. There's a limit to how much people can change in a couple of years, with or without anxiety. And that time she was on TV, Svein himself said she wasn't the most intelligent person they'd had on the programme. So what did they have to talk about, other than their anxiety? She was clearly not a diesel whore anymore. He had discovered her rich personality, but that time back in Trollstua, when Elin phoned Arvid and got him to pick us up in the ambulance, and Svein and Terje both lay on a stretcher in the back, they lay there laughing at Veronika Hagen, because if there was anyone who didn't need to give more of themselves, they said, it was her, because she'd already given so much of herself to so many, and they laughed at how funny they were, while Astrid and I, I'm afraid to say, were competing to be the snarkiest and said that they were both an embarrassment and we'd like to see them on TV, cowards that they were. It was bullying, in fact, we said, but then Elin wanted to pass the laughing gas round and Arvid put on some music, we took a puff as well and sang at the top of our voices – might even have been Whitney Houston – and I remember I had to help Svein take his shoes off that night, that he fell asleep across the bed, on his stomach, with his clothes on, and I ended up lying down in the same direction, with my feet dangling over the edge of the mattress.

It's funny, you can miss the strangest things. Svein used to walk around in a dressing gown when he was hungover. A turquoise towelling dressing gown and woolly socks. He sat at the kitchen table with one elbow on the windowsill, his head cupped in his hand. 'I should have a shower,' he'd say, then just sat there, for a long time. 'I'm not human,' he'd say, and he hadn't tied the belt on his dressing gown, and was only wearing boxers on underneath, and sat there twirling the hair in his armpits or studying the size of his belly, studying something he found in his bellybutton, and whether it was the shenanigans of the night before, or the dressing gown, or the morning light, a combination, or just something I imagined, I don't know, but it wasn't only the dressing gown that was turquoise, the whole man was turquoise. Magic, he said, if I made scrambled egg and bacon. Oh, the joy. He lifted up the rashers of bacon, one by one, and as if he'd never seen the like before, studied each one for several minutes, ears and eyes closed off to any distractions around him, licked the fat from his finger tips as though he'd been given a task and was determined to give it his best, and sometimes, not because I particularly wanted to, but because I wanted to see how happy it made him, I wanted to see the turquoise colour fade from his body, I'd ask if we could maybe go back to bed again.