

From *You Can Call Me Jan*

(*Du kan kalle meg Jan*)

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*“I am not what happened to me, I am what I choose to become.”*

Carl Jung

She refused to put on the other sock. She always refused to put on something. A hairband. A belt. The halter. Little pieces of his costumes. *Remember-me-bits*, she had started to call them. Because they reminded her that she had to hold on to the one tiny piece she had managed to hide. The piece that was keeping her alive. The piece that was still *her*. The piece he would never manage to lock up.

Now he waved the limp sock in front of her little nose. Was he going to stuff it into her mouth as a punishment? It swung from side to side, like a ticking metronome that insisted on determining the situation’s rhythm. Lingering. Suffocating. Her heart beat disobediently, out of time, as she followed the sock with her eyes. It was probably white once. Now it was more yellow. A cut off and re-sewn scrap of a sheet that should be *fuckin’ grateful* for having been given a new life.

Sometimes, she wondered if he was right. But not today. Today, she sharpened her splintered claws and bared her gappy teeth. Didn’t care that afterwards he would unscrew the lightbulb from the ceiling lamp and cast her into darkness. She’d just close her eyes and fly home to Mamma.

She wasn’t able to raise her arm and cover her head fast enough. His hand was faster. A fist today. Something snaps. Cracks. The light begins to tremble. Or is it her?

She lies on the floor, winded. In a red Christmas dress made of glittering velvet. A red bow in her dark, curly hair. A red, bloody lip.

A girl, hidden. Forgotten.

Beneath her thighs a wet, lukewarm puddle spreads across the floor. She doesn't cry. Not any more. Instead she moves her lips, emitting sounds: tiny, strong, a question. The same question she has asked over and over during these broken days, weeks, months, now all matted together into a petrified troll that will never, never, crack.

'What's your name?' she asks.

Perhaps a name will make him human.

The hand that floored her, lovingly strokes her hair. She tries to lie still, but her belly jerks with uncontrollable spasms, her guts searching desperately for nourishment. How many more days will she have to go without food? The regret creeps in, as if it's been lying in wait in the shadows. It coils through her veins. It's been coming to her more often lately. Now all she wants is for him to pick her up, to clean her wounds, to give her something other than the pink bunny ear she's chewed to pieces, to sing her a lullaby. His hand is warm. It warms me. I hold it. Hold on tight. 'Please, say it,' I whisper. 'I won't tell. I promise.'

His breath comes closer. It blows like a flame, burns a hole through my cheek. Will he bite me again now? Bite off the piece. The final one. Me. No? In reply he whispers that I've been a good girl. That I deserve a reward. His words crawl into my ear like aroused larvae:

'You can call me Jan.'

## *One*

Lost. That's how I would describe Fride now. She's sitting on the edge of the bed, her narrow feet smothered in her mother's home-knitted socks and hanging just a couple of inches off the floor. I consider her for a moment, as if to give her a few extra seconds before I have to nudge her back out into the world she's become so afraid of.

She hasn't noticed me. Nor her parents, who I've let into the bare room in which Fride has ensconced herself for the past three months. Her pale face is turned to the window, where the low autumn sun illuminates the greasy marks left by fumbling fingers and the tip of a nose, but she isn't staring at them. Her gaze is turned inward, towards the stream of thoughts that has made her body so bony, so brittle. Her thin, dark hair is pulled into a tight, high ponytail that emphasises her prominent cheekbones, her un-made-up eyes, the overbite that means her mouth is rarely fully closed. If I didn't know her, I would guess that she was thirteen, maybe fourteen – right at that break between child and adult. But Fride is eighteen years old, fully grown. Which is at least old enough to be kept behind the locked doors of Østmarka Psychiatric Hospital, on the specialist ward for young adults recently diagnosed with psychosis and additional challenges relating to drug abuse. In my report I'll write that she seemed to be in good spirits.

Or at least this is the impression I have to hold on to. Because I've tried to speak up. I've said that I think Fride is pretending to be healthier than she really is. That I believe she has thoughts she daren't say aloud, because all she wants is to be a normal teenager. But her psychologist has chosen to listen to the other nurses. Those who have observed a young woman who came in to be assessed and receive treatment for paranoia and who has responded well to medications and milieu therapy, to reality orientation and safe boundaries. A girl who was on the run from her fear, but who has now recovered her ability to sleep, her appetite and her smile. They think it's past time she left. There are others who are more ill, who need the bed more than her.

The rubber soles of my clogs squeak as I move towards her, like an echo of all the distressed and anguished screams that remain in these century-old walls. A whiff of coconut wafts towards me, telling me that Fride washed her hair this morning, even though she also washed it during yesterday's evening shift. In an attempt to scrub away her stay here? I reach out a hand to call her back from wherever she is, but just then the moment seems to snag.

I've caught sight of something.

Just behind the bone of my wrist.

A hair.

A lonely black strand of hair. Stiffly and rebelliously sticking up from the skin.

The most natural reaction would have been to withdraw my hand, smile, offer up a believable apology that I've forgotten something and then go out, slip away behind a corner and do away with the hair as quickly as possible. But I was brought up to fight against my reflexes, so I therefore complete the movement. I give Fride's shoulder a gentle shake, and as I say her name in a friendly voice, I bury my wrist deep in my trouser pocket.

This is what I was constantly warned about. This is what happens when I let someone get too close: I become careless.

Before me, Fride's questioning eyes catch mine.

I smile.

'Are you ready?'

She gives a weak nod.

Her mother has already picked up the black, lace-up boots from beside the door.

'Come on, honey, let's go home.'

She doesn't wait for a response, just shoves the solid shoes onto Fride's feet, then practically drags her off the bed. Even though Fride's mother is small and neat – the kind of woman who feels stuffed after eating a limp salad – she's strong, an angry she-bear. She holds out a well-worn, pale blue rain jacket she's brought from home, but Fride makes no move to take it from her.

'It's cold outside,' her mother says.

Fride is silent. Her arms hang beside her narrow hips in defiance. Her mother lifts her chest, causing the buttons on her fitted vintage coat to quiver.

'Have you told your parents you have an appointment at the outpatient clinic tomorrow?' I ask, in an attempt to avert a new argument.

Fride nods again. I know she's told them. I've told her parents myself, too.

Her mother avoids looking me in the eye. Squeezes the rain jacket harder.

'We'll be there at twelve on the dot,' Fride's father says. 'No problem at all.'

He casts me a grateful smile, which spreads to his round cheeks. That first night, when he had been forced to entrust the care of his only child to us, he'd given me the same smile and said how relieved he was to see that those of us who work here looked *totally normal*. He's the one who has visited Fride most often, coming in every evening with big bear hugs and bear-shaped chocolates. The times Fride's mother has accompanied him they've arrived hand in hand, as if to cover up the distance and disagreements between them.

‘Pappa? Did you manage to get it?’ Fride asks.

‘Of course.’ Fride’s father pulls a flat, square package from his large jacket pocket. The garish logo of the family business shines brightly on either side of the jacket’s zip, which he only just manages to do up. He’s approaching sixty, but despite being an active handyman Fride’s father hasn’t managed to ward off the effects of the passing years as well as his fourteen-year-younger wife.

Fride grabs the gift and holds it out to me.

‘This is for you, Ida. For being so nice to me.’

I don’t know whether it’s the tenderness in her eyes, that I’ve never received a gift from a patient before, or the fact that Fride is on her way out into a world that is, in fact, awful, but I have to swallow hard in order to steady my voice.

‘Oh Fride. I was just doing my job.’

‘You’ve done much more than that,’ her father says. ‘Things would never have worked out so well without you, Ida.’

I don’t protest at this. I’ve done more than I needed to. Not only have I created an effective, individual patient plan for Fride and ensured that she’s experienced mutual trust, developed coping strategies and made progress – I’ve dropped my own breaks and instead offered her a chat or a walk outside, given her a few extra cheese sandwiches, played an extra round of table tennis with her, let her spend additional time in the art room, allowed her to borrow my favourite books, held her hand at bedtime. I’m the only one who has truly understood her fear.

‘Open it,’ Fride says.

I do as she asks. Without mentioning that we nurses are obligated to put any gifts we receive in the reporting room. It’s a box of chocolate hearts. Thin chocolate hearts that easily snap in two.

‘Oh, thank you so much,’ I say. ‘I love chocolate.’

Fride smiles with the natural bashfulness of a child.

‘I know. You’re just like Pappa.’

‘Fride has become very fond of you,’ her father says. ‘You have no idea just how much it means to us that you’ve taken such good care of our little girl.’

Fride’s mother turns her back to me and begins to inspect the empty wardrobe, her movements irritated.

I give Fride a hug. She seems tense. I actually want to hold her for a good long while, but instead I pull away. She mustn’t notice how worried I am. How I think she’s being pushed

out of the nest before she's learned how to fly, that I'm anxious she'll be one of those patients who comes back again, in a few weeks, a few months, in a slightly worse state each time.

'I'll see you out,' I say. I move to pick up the large bag I helped Fride pack earlier this morning, but her father stops me.

'I can see to that.' He slings the bag over his shoulder, pretending to drop towards the ground with the weight of it and teasing a spontaneous, sweet laugh from Fride. Then he puts his arm around her, and together they saunter out into the corridor.

Fride's mother slams the wardrobe doors and turns to face me. She stands there, her whole body vibrating now.

'Well, I think that's everything,' I say, and then I just can't help myself. 'We've even swept up all the dead skin cells and nail clippings and sealed them up in a little plastic bag.'

*So no one will be able to prove that your daughter has been a patient here.*

Fride's mother doesn't laugh, as her husband would have done. Maybe she would have found it funnier if I'd said *hairs*, but I need to avoid focusing on hair for the moment.

'And what happens if he continues to bother her?' she says.

She's looking straight at me now. She has the same brown eyes as Fride, but hers are hardened.

'Well, you need to reassure her, use the reality orientation techniques and...'

But I get no further.

'*You're* the ones who need to get a grip on reality,' she spits at me. 'You haven't done a damn thing to try and find out who this stalker actually is!'

She's blocking the doorway, and I have the urge to slam her against the wall and demand that she support her daughter, *see* her, instead of shoving her into a pair of shoes that don't even fit. Instead, I try to put on my most reassuring smile as I search for a reply that will get us both out of here.

Fride had hardly stepped over the threshold of the specialist psychiatric ward when her mother assaulted me with explanations about how Fride wasn't sick, that it was a grave mistake to transfer her here from the emergency unit, a violation, a breach of the law. Because this man – the stalker – was real. He'd been following Fride for several weeks, on the street outside her school, the gym, their home. At first, Fride's parents had thought it was just a boy of Fride's age who was overly interested in her; that Fride was overreacting, that she was stressed and exhausted, overwhelmed by her school work. But the fear of this stranger soon became so paralysing that Fride stopped going to school and the gym; she stopped meeting friends, stopped eating, stopped sleeping. One night, when she had taped black refuse sacks

over her bedroom windows and armed herself with the biggest knife from the kitchen, her father had realised that the person his daughter insisted was out in the garden was actually inside her head. So he had taken Fride to the doctor. Fride's mother, on the other hand, thought they should have gone to the police.

'Fride will receive excellent, personalised follow-up from the skilled staff at the outpatient clinic,' I say. If you have any questions or concerns, you're more than welcome to contact them.'

I'm trying to sound professional, experienced, because Fride's mother has expressed on a number of occasions that in order to do a good job, a psychiatric nurse ought to have a decent amount of life experience – something no twenty-eight-year-old has, according to her. Or at least, not one who is also fat, and who doesn't even know how to take care of herself.

Sometimes I've wanted to tell her that my compulsive eating *is* my way of taking care of myself, my way of surviving. That the extra kilos I carry on my body are my fortress, my defence. As are the long, bleached-blond hair, the blue contact lenses. The bare skin that must be subjected to a daily ritual of hair removal.

Fride's mother disappears through the doorway like an inaudible thunderclap.

A few minutes later, I lock myself in the staff toilet. Fride is on her way home, a scrap of paper with my phone number on it in her back pocket. I fish my little red friend from my bra: a Swiss Army knife, with thirty-three functions. I pull out the tweezers and pluck out the black hair at the root. Then I swallow it, along with three large gulps of water straight from the tap.

Still, I don't feel any calmer.

## Two

Barbro puts her phone on the table and looks me in the eye. She withers slightly.

‘Right, I’ve just texted him again to tell him we’re still here. Since he hasn’t replied. But yeah, I’m sure he’s just busy. He likes to get out there, you know, and wave his rod around...’ She gasps. ‘His *fishing* rod, I mean!’ Her unbecoming blush shows how embarrassed she is to have come out with something that might seem like a Freudian slip. She pulls off her reading glasses, which are attached to a cord around her neck, and tries to drown herself in her half pint. We’re sitting in one of the city’s traditional pubs, in one of the old brewhouses in Bakklandet, where we blend in, unnoticed, among the wonky woodwork and a clientele spanning all ages. I’ve chosen a corner table, where I have a wall at my back and a view of the entrance. No nasty surprises will sneak in without me noticing while I’m sitting here.

I went for a long bike ride after work, but it didn’t help. I made a double portion of dinner. That didn’t help, either. This simmering unease just won’t release its grasp, it’s wormed its way under my skin now, prickling, itching. Maybe it’s the hair. Maybe it’s the feeling that I should have done more for Fride. Or maybe it’s nothing in particular – this isn’t an unfamiliar uneasiness, after all. It’s an adversary that often turns up unannounced, and on the days when he refuses to leave again, there’s only one thing that can chase him back into the shadows.

Barbro tries to ignore her silent phone as she begins to tell me about a cutting she’s been trying to get to take root, disappearing as usual into a long and uninteresting monologue. Outside the window the Nidelva River looks still. The barge that bobs on its surface has been stripped of furniture now, the outdoor seating area will be closed for the rest of the year. The red-painted, Old Town Bridge stretches across the river at an angle, and on it a pair of lovers stand with their limbs entwined as they take a selfie in the gloaming. This bridge is the first memory I have of Trondheim. Mamma and I came here on the very first day after we had fled north, to this weather-beaten coastal town. Mamma had thought it might bring us luck to walk beneath the magnificent wooden arches of the Portal of Happiness.

Being with Barbro always makes me start to think about my mother. Even though Barbro is ten years younger, speaks with a broad northern dialect, and looks nothing like her: Barbro has probably never been beautiful. Her hair is thin and dull, her face too long, her eyes too far apart. While Mamma dresses in a classic, neutral style that suits her shape, Barbro dresses in shapeless and gaudy baggy tunic-style tops. Nevertheless, there’s one thing they



have in common – they smell the same: bitter at life not having turned out the way they once dreamed it would.

Barbro slyly sneaks a hand along the edge of the table and taps her phone; its message-free display pouts at her. I sip my beer as she sends yet another text. This is like a rerun of the last time we went out on the town. And the time before that.

‘Maybe you just ought to fire him?’ I say. ‘You’re always telling everyone how they shouldn’t get involved with someone at work.’

She ignores me. As she usually does. Perhaps I didn’t say it loudly enough.

‘Maybe he’s taken on an extra night shift, so he’s asleep right now,’ she says. ‘Alan always volunteers whenever someone is off sick. Did you hear he’s thinking of applying to start studying for his nursing qualification next year?’

As a general rule, it’s the students from the university’s various health sciences courses that get given the extra shifts on our ward, but Alan was allowed to take on a few trial shifts with us this spring, despite having zero healthcare-related experience. It was Barbro who had taken the responsibility for getting him started on his first day – even though she, as head of section and the direct line manager for the nurses in our department, should have delegated the task to someone else – and it was no more than a matter of hours before she was besotted. Alan was exceptionally good with the patients, she said, but what she really meant was that she’d allowed herself to be charmed by his excessive flirting. I mean, I get it. It can be easy to end up eternally single, childless and over fifty and therefore beyond both your best-before *and* use-by dates, if men of Barbro’s age are to be believed. Of course it’s tempting to cling to any subpar offer you’re being made in secret. Barbro can’t see that Alan is using her, that he only comes crawling through her wide-open door when he’s bored, or doesn’t have another woman dangling from his hook.

Although I’m really not much better myself. Every time the itch becomes too strong I send Barbro a text, because I know she’ll always say yes to a night on the town. She has nobody else to invite her out, and I don’t have anyone else to ask. Barbro is too self-obsessed to ask questions about me or my background. She makes no demands, has no hopes of cultivating a close friendship.

She’s now clearly hurt at the lack of response from Alan, but she’s still fumbling around for an explanation.

‘He’ll be helping his landlady to prepare the garden for the winter – he’s always so kind to her, you know.’

Maybe he's having sex with her, I want to say, maybe he's humping and slobbering and panting on top of the dry and shrivelled-up ninety-year-old right this minute, but luckily I manage to stop myself. I should feel sorry for Barbro, clinging to her childish and naïve idea of the good in people – I should have sympathy for her eternal search for someone to love her – but instead she irritates me. It's as if her lack of self-confidence brings out the worst in everyone around her, an unconscious projection that causes strangers and acquaintances alike to walk all over her, whether they want to or not, thereby confirming her simple view of herself.

The ding of a phone cuts through the air and Barbro lights up, but deflates just as quickly when she realises that I'm the one who's received a message. I take my phone from my pocket, thinking that it must be from Fride. Going home has been overwhelming for her, and now she feels unsafe and anxious, in need of someone to talk to. On my evening shifts, we'd always take a walk at around this time. It was easier for her to open up when she didn't have to look me in the eye, and the rhythm of our footsteps helped the conversation to flow naturally. There was so much that she was worried about. That she was behind in several of her subjects at school. That she was going to choose the wrong course of study. That it was her fault her parents fought so much. That she would never be good enough for her mother. That she had so few friends. That the few friends she did have wouldn't want to hang out with her any more if they found out she was crazy. That she'd never have a boyfriend. That she was an outsider, different, far from everyone and everything else. That she despised her weaknesses, despised herself. There was so much about her that resonated with me – in an entirely different way than I had experienced with other patients. That was why it was so hard not to get too close to her. And why I never should have given her my number.

But it isn't a message from Fride, just a piano-learning app that's missing me because I haven't used it in a while. I block the app's notifications and try to swallow down the agitation by holding my breath until my lungs force the air out of me again. But it's no use.

The door to the pub opens as I lift my gaze towards it, and expectation rises within me when a rowdy group of people my age tumbles in. Their cheeks are full of laughter, which erupts from them as soon as they find a free table. In those first few minutes, everything is revealed. That's when the critical contact occurs. This doesn't need to be a long night.

But the boys are too occupied with the slim, pretty girls that are with them. The few other men in the premises I've already assessed and found to be too old. Ten years older than me is where I draw the line.

'Should we move on?' I ask.

Barbro looks at my half-full glass of beer.

‘Aren’t you going to drink up first?’

‘Nah, it’s too bland.’

‘You’re far too picky, Ida.’

I get up, and Barbro grabs my glass and swills down its remaining contents, too tipsy to notice that it’s alcohol-free. She wants to go to one of the music bars she likes so much, but I’m impatient and convince her to hitch a ride on the back of my bike, and we cycle away from the cobblestones and low wooden buildings, coasting along beside the river until we come to the round, red structure that stands squat and steady beside the Elgeseter Bridge: Samfundet, the circus ring of a student union, where I can always find some willing idiot or other.

We aimlessly wander the hallways for a while before settling down at a table in Edgar Kafé, where crackly vinyl records feed our ears. Barbro sends several more messages to Alan while I attempt to catch the eye of the guys at the next table, who are obviously not this semester’s new hopefuls – they seem confident, they’ve found their tribe, a sense of belonging. I’ve missed them over the summer, the city feels far too lean without all these thrill-seeking students. We move and end up in Klubben, where a poetry slam is in full swing. A guy with dreadlocks is standing on stage and has the entire room holding its breath as he recites his original rhymes. We find a couple of vacant plastic chairs in the back row, and I immediately make eye contact with a half-bearded guy who is sitting at a slight angle two rows in front of us. A couple of years younger than me, I’d guess. On his shaved neck the ears of a tattooed tiger peek above the edge of his denim jacket. He’s not the type who can pick and choose from the top shelf – I can see that from the way his eyes are devouring my breasts. Still, he’s confident enough to have come here alone on a Thursday evening, on the hunt for an untamed tigress.

When the room erupts into applause, Barbro eagerly joins in. She sticks her fingers between her lips and whistles so loudly and for so long that I’m afraid she’ll scare the tiger boy away. When a new wordsmith takes the stage, she becomes increasingly engrossed in her phone. Then she suddenly wants to go home, even though it’s still nowhere near midnight.

‘We have to be at work early tomorrow,’ she says.

I accompany her to the cloakroom and fetch our jackets. I wish I could go home and sleep now, too, but with this itch it’ll be impossible.

‘I just have to go to the toilet before I leave,’ I say.

She attempts to give me a hug, clumsily bumping her cheekbone against my forehead. I watch her disappear through the exit before I return to the poets, taking up a position standing against the wall this time. I watch the tiger boy as he notices that my chair is empty. I see his searching gaze. The delight that illuminates his face when his eyes catch sight of me again. I smile. I've undone an extra button on my shirt.

As the jury are deciding the evening's winner, he boldly comes over. Squints at me.

'So who are you?' he asks.

He's more drunk than I would like, his eyes red and swimming.

I don't give a name, which would be the most boring response; just an equally direct stare. Maybe he's a philosophy student. His falsely 'deep' pick-up line isn't that of a realist, at any rate.

His next is more ordinary:

'Fancy a beer?'

'Maybe afterwards,' I say.

'It'll be a while before things wrap up here.'

'After the two of us have taken a little detour into the toilets.'

On the odd rare occasion I've been wrong about the guy and been turned down. But a crooked smile spreads beneath his sporadic stubble.

I pick out one of the disabled toilets. I lock the door behind us and he giggles, revealing that perhaps he isn't as experienced as I first thought. I pretend to be unsure, too, until he dares to make the first move and kisses me, surprisingly tenderly. I help him to pull down his jeans. It seems he's sprayed deodorant on his boxer shorts, which is at least better than the smell of the sweaty, confined trouser snakes I've encountered more than once. I unbutton my own jeans. He kisses me on the neck, his beard rasping, hands groping, growing ever more hungry as his desire overshadows his shyness. I guide his hands away from my crotch and he understands he's being given access to the other entrance. This almost sends him over the edge, and I close my eyes, receive him, find the rhythm, flow with its beat in the thrusting dance,

here, in the here and now, holding on –

until everything reminiscent of a feeling flattens out and I become numb, the itch subsiding as I slide into neither plus nor minus, am simply cancelled out.

Afterwards, I decline his offer of a beer and leave him before he can leave me. Outside the round, red building the cool September air is filled with drizzle. I lift my head and let the

tiny droplets of water tickle my cheeks. I should do this more often. Moments like this give me strength.

The strength to be disobedient.

I take out my phone, and with two quick thumbs, I send a text.

### Three

I don't go home. Instead, I cycle in the opposite direction, along the narrow road that starts at Samfundet and travels alongside the lush Høyskoleparken. This is one of the places in the city I like best. Although I don't come here too often, of course. Never twice in one week, and preferably never more than twice in a month. Mamma's warning has been hammered deep into my bones: *A creature of habit makes easy prey*. I want to make the most of this unclouded moment and wait here until I receive a reply to my message.

I cycle towards the main building of the Norwegian University of Science and Technology that towers at the top of the hill, inspired by Nidaros Cathedral, which looms on the other side of the river. While the gothic medieval cathedral was decorated with grotesque gargoyles to ward off evil spirits, the facade of this building features carved animal masks with sinister expressions. Protection has always been part of human instinct. Whether against real or imagined dangers.

I stop, and drink in the robust face of the building. Illuminated rectangles and arched windows glow watchfully at me in the darkness. On either side of the massive pale oak doors extend two pilasters, each topped with an empty plinth with space for a sculpture. I've heard they were made this way to make the university's students dream big. So that every time they walked up this long hill, they would see that one day, a statue in their image would be erected there. If I'd had a choice, I would have taken my master's degree here and become a civil engineer; I was naturally interested in all forms of science from a young age. But I was forced to suppress everything natural. At school I had to pretend I didn't understand algebra and factorisation. I mustn't get grades that were too good, mustn't stand out. Which is why I ended up becoming a nurse. Someone who can always blend into the crowd, change job.

I check my phone. The message I sent has been read, but I haven't received a reply. I have an urge to send another, but then the autumn darkness instantly creeps inside me, and I realise how pathetic and pitiful I must look, standing here, weak in the face of my own selfish impulses, hounding and nagging, in the process of becoming a carbon copy of Barbro. A sudden gust of wind rips away my pride, leaving me feeling naked and ashamed. Sometimes I've thought that this is what death must feel like to others. When you realise you're standing on the outside, cut off from everything near and far, and you find there's no way back.

Sometimes I've wondered what death will mean for me.

I leave a slim, attractive version of Ida Hansen standing on the empty plinths above the entrance, before I cycle over to Midtbyen, to the best burger joint in the city, where I

purchase two of the biggest they have on the menu. As I make my way home it starts pouring with rain, but I don't care. The unstable Trøndelag weather, which can suddenly give you all seasons in one day, suits me well. I like being cold and wet, when the wind chills me to the marrow. It keeps me alert, on the lookout.

The burgers are almost cold by the time I let myself into one of the low wooden houses in Ila, to the cosy apartment I've been renting through an illegal sublease since last summer. A small, furnished two-room apartment with an open plan kitchen, sticky and scratched wooden floors, stucco ceilings and a grandmotherly smell in the walls. I take a seat at the rickety dining table and shove the pieces of meat down my throat, my movements accompanied by Chopin's Nocturnes, which I recently discovered, two-hundred years after everyone else. Outside the window I have a view of Ilaparken, a midpoint in this central district where industry has now been replaced by green lungs and street art. On the other side of the park are more small wooden houses. With old electrical systems. There have been many city fires in Trondheim. It isn't always possible to predict what will happen in life.

For dessert, I eat the entire box of milk chocolate hearts that Fride gave me. I always make sure to eat so much it gives me a stomach ache. The subsequent nausea usually serves to paralyse the thing inside me, but not this time, now the unease is back, it's unruly this evening. Although that's not so unusual. I tap my phone to turn off Chopin's romantic sentimentalism. What was I thinking? I've been told in no uncertain terms that I mustn't contact him outside of working hours. I delete the unanswered message and crumple up the burger boxes, squeezing hard, three times three, everything has to add up to nine, but as I get to my feet I feel a prickling at the back of my neck. Have the sense I'm being watched.

I move closer to the window, peer around the edge of the curtain.

Outside, down on the pavement, a man stands alone, his back half turned to me. The hood of his sweater is so large that his face is well-hidden deep within it. His trousers are tight around the thighs, he's physically fit and over my maximum age of thirty-eight, I can tell from the way he holds himself, the energy that radiates from him – young men are more uncertain or arrogant. Does he live nearby? Does he work in the area? Has he been to visit a friend, or family? I can't remember having seen him in the neighbourhood before. Might he have followed me here from Midtbyen? Is this what the uneasiness has been trying to tell me? That I haven't been paying close enough attention?

I cast a glance at the front door. Both the safety chain and the three solid steel bolts are slid into place. The control panel for the burglar arm is flashing, I remember turning on the boundary protection when I got home, the routine is drilled into me, I do it automatically.

Or? The hair. I *have* been careless.

I turn back to the man. His head is slightly bent: he's looking at his phone. Or is he, in fact, looking at me? Has he put his camera on selfie mode, in order to secretly film me?

A taxi stops beside him. The man swiftly climbs into the back seat without so much as a glance over his shoulder. The door slams shut. The car drives away. I pull the curtains closed. I'm overreacting. This is just a bad day.

As I creep under the soft duvet I realise how tired I am, how good it will feel to have a break. I've never had problems sleeping, luckily enough – if anything it's the opposite, I sleep far too much. I close my eyes and begin the easiest and fastest method of switching off my mind, coming up with an alphabetical list of it doesn't really matter what: names, nouns, films, books, words that rhyme. Today I choose places in Norway, three for each letter: *Alta, Arendal, Asker...*

I suddenly wake to a high-pitched sound. I want to get up, but lie still. I quite simply can't do it – I can't move. My breathing has stopped. At the foot of my bed stands a figure. A man. I can just make out the outline of him. His face is well-hidden in the darkness. Still, I know his eyes. How intense they are – paralysing. Then, between two blinks, he suddenly vanishes, and I realise it was just the remnants of yet another nightmare.

But the alarm isn't. It's blaring. I manage to bring my hand back to life and pull my army knife from my bra, automatically flicking out the longest blade as I scan the room with my eyes. The bedroom door is closed, the bolt is on. The window is shut. It takes several seconds before it sinks in that it isn't the burglar alarm; the sound is different, higher in pitch. My phone is ringing.

I take it out from under my pillow. The display shows an unknown number. It's 5:11 am. Never in my life have I received a telephone call at this hour before. I let it ring one more time. The most probable explanation is that it's something to do with Mamma.

I swipe my finger across the screen and press the phone to my ear.

'Yes, hello?'

I'm prepared to hear a professional, level-headed voice: a nurse, a doctor, a priest? But all I can hear on the other end of the line is rapid breathing.

'Hello?' I repeat.

'Fride,' a voice whispers into my ear.



I look at the display again, trying to see whether the number will give me a clue as to who this is, but the unknown series of digits that doesn't add up to nine only vibrates blankly at me.

'Who is this?'

A dank silence.

'Hello? To whom am I speaking?' I ask, more loudly now.

'This is Frøydis Strand. Fride's mother.'

The voice is familiar, and yet still strange.

'Has something happened?' I say. 'To Fride? Has she been admitted again?'

'Fride is gone.'

The strangeness that envelops her words, it's crackling now.

'What do you mean, gone?' I ask.

'Aren't you listening to what I'm saying!' Frøydis screams into my ear. 'The fucking bastard has taken her!'

## *Four*

A sudden shower has roused the raw scent of earth from the gardens and lawns of Ladehalvøya, north-east of the city centre. I haven't slept since the phone call woke me, and still I was late getting out of the door. I simply didn't know what to do. Whether I should stay home or go out; whether I ought to call someone. I've checked all the online newspapers. There are no reports of a teenage girl being kidnapped.

I pedal harder as I enter the hospital complex, cycling between the stalwart trees that tower on either side of the road, these wrinkled centenarians, silent witnesses to every season of the human mind. When Fride was admitted, their leaves were fresh and green and provided shade from the summer sun. Now they've begun to fall to the ground.

I lock my bicycle outside the psychiatric ward and hurry down into the cellar, to the changing rooms. I change into my uniform and check my watch: 7:14 am. The shift handover is about to start. Have the others heard about Fride? Has she come home yet?

When I reach the reporting room on the first floor, the mood is lively. Alan is standing with his feet planted far apart, entertaining the staff of both the night and the day shifts with a story I've heard before, about how he caught a salmon weighing 22.3 kilos in the Nidelva River this summer. In a boastful Bergen dialect, along with a sprinkling of local words and a Polish accent, he recounts the intense battle to pull the salmon ashore. How he suddenly began to experience a squeezing sensation in his chest and was convinced it was him, and not the monster salmon, that was about to be sent up to heaven.

When he realised it was just his phone vibrating in his breast pocket.

Of everyone in the room, Barbro is the one who laughs loudest at this.

I feel queasy. I've eaten too much, or perhaps too little. I have to concentrate, so nobody will see that I'm shaking. I squeeze my way down the large table and into a free seat next to Barbro. I tap her arm.

'Haven't you heard about Fride?'

Barbro gives me a questioning look, as if she's only now realising that I've arrived.

'Who?'

'Fride Strand. She was discharged yesterday. She disappeared during the night.'

'Disappeared?'

'Yes – her mother called me at five o'clock this morning, and...'

'Her mother called you privately?' Barbro interrupts me, lowering her voice. 'Ida. You know you're not allowed to give your private number to patients or their relatives.'

‘I... I don’t know how she got hold of it, but she says Fride has been kidnapped.’

Barbro tucks in her chin, making it double.

*‘Kidnapped?’*

She says it loudly, but none of the others seems to overhear. They’re too busy ordering coffees from Alan, who has appointed himself the new barista at the coffee machine.

‘Yes,’ I say. ‘By the stalker.’

Barbro laughs.

‘I mean, really Ida, Fride’s mother is completely nuts.’

She reaches out to take a cappuccino from Alan, who is trying to catch my eye, but I bend closer to Barbro.

‘Fride’s mother says that Fride didn’t come home from the gym yesterday evening. They’ve been out searching for her all night.’

Barbro puts on her reading glasses and scribbles something down in the notebook she always has with her. I wonder whether I’m speaking too quietly, so I shake her arm.

‘Fride is missing. Nobody knows where she is!’

Barbro gives an exaggerated groan and pulls off her glasses.

‘Oh, Ida. You know that Fride has run away from home before, several times.’

‘What? No.’

‘She once ran off to Oppdal and rented herself a room at a hotel there,’ she says. ‘I would have done the same, if I were her.’

‘What do you mean?’

‘Haven’t you seen how dominating her mother is? No wonder the poor girl started using drugs and became ill.’

The night shift is giving a brief report. I hear only snatches, fragments: a relatively quiet night.

Afterwards, Barbro weighs in as the duty manager is allocating the day’s tasks. Although Alan usually drives the minibus on the regular patient daytrips out, today he’ll have to stay behind to look after one of the patients who is too ill to join the excursion. I, too, am to stay on the ward. I’m to be the contact person for a new patient, the one who took over Fride’s bed yesterday, a twenty-four-year-old woman with a troubled youth spent at various child welfare institutions. Over the past few years she’s moved from one sheltered housing project to the next, drugging herself up to the eyeballs on anything she can get her hands on, spending too much time with violent boyfriends and too little on her voluntary admissions to the emergency psychiatric ward following a couple of overdoses that were thought to be

suicide attempts. She was recently admitted again, this time involuntarily, and now she's been transferred to us for assessment and treatment after experiencing her first episode of psychosis.

Empty coffee cups are set on the table. Everyone saunters out of the room, chattering away, while I remain on the sofa scrolling through all the online newspapers on my phone. There's still nothing about a missing teenage girl, not in the local or the national press.

Outside the windows a flock of birds has gathered to form an arrow against the cloudy grey sky. For most people this will be an utterly ordinary day, one that will merge into all the other days, become indistinct. Who cares that a girl has disappeared? One day, everyone will stop searching for her anyway.

I get up and go into the duty room next door, where the duty manager has sat down behind the computer. I take a personal safety alarm from the cabinet, and am attaching it to my trousers as Barbro sticks her head around the door.

'Ida? The toilet up here is blocked again.'

She has a habit of delegating this shitty task to me. I was the only person who managed to fix it on one of the other occasions it became stopped up, and I've henceforth become known as the resident toilet expert. Barbro disappears into the boss's office, while I fetch a bucket and a plunger, pull on a pair of long rubber gloves, and go into the patients' shared bathroom. Water has splashed all over the walls and floor, and from the toilet I pull an entire roll of toilet paper, a pair of boxer shorts and a torn-up daily schedule before I manage to get it to flush again. Then I go and introduce myself to my patient. Her name is Gizem. She's wearing dirty leggings and refuses to shake my hand; has anxious eyes she tries to hide under her long, dark fringe. I ensure that she washes, takes her medication, eats her breakfast. Time passes, time stands still. Frida never told me she had tried to run away from home. What other secrets was she hiding from me?

The psychologist she had here has said he's coming in later today. Has he heard that Frida is missing?

I tell Gizem we'd like to take some blood samples from her in the lab, to get a better idea of her physical health and an overview of her drug use, but she doesn't want to, not yet. She's suspicious, on high alert, as Frida often was during her first few weeks here.

Gizem restlessly wanders the corridors, and I feel restless, too, so I suggest that we take a walk outside since she's been granted permission to go out as long as she's accompanied. She seems like a pleasant and self-reflective girl once I get her chatting. She'd managed to get onto a prestigious music course at the university and had planned on pursuing

a career as a professional pianist, but she was only a semester in when she dropped out. Since then she's had a few sporadic sales jobs that she hasn't managed to hold down because she's unable to get up in the mornings. She openly admits she's craving a joint right now. Fride smoked hash, too. It was thought it could have been a factor in triggering her delusions. To me, she said that she didn't actually like getting high, but that it was hard to say no when everyone else was doing it. Throughout high school she hadn't had many friends – she'd been unhappy and in contact with the youth psychiatric service for refusing to attend – but in sixth form she had got to know two girls who often invited her out to parties, sometimes with slightly older boys. Has she now run off with one of them?

Gizem and I saunter along the narrow path that loops between the various departments, and as we pass the modern emergency unit that opened a few years ago, she mentions how nice the room she had there was, compared to the one she has now. I gloss over this by saying there's much more charm and soul in old buildings, and sing the praises of our huge, venerable brick building, which has stood here ever since the asylum was built over a century ago. Back then the hospital had consisted of several large houses, each with its own garden where patients could work themselves back to health. I don't say anything about how ridiculous it is that our ward hasn't also been renovated, which is why my new patient has to share both a shower and a blocked toilet with ten others. How she and the other young people on the ward would have been offered far better facilities had they been struggling with other challenges, rather than drug abuse and their mental health. Young people suffering from mental illness, who for this reason also often struggle with their personal hygiene and care. Fride wasn't the only one who would delay visiting the bathroom until she absolutely had to. Is she home again now?

After our walk, I show Gizem the activity rooms in the cellar, and we play a couple of rounds of table tennis. I let her win, and this sense of achievement brings out a childish enthusiasm in her. Fride could be like this, too. In her final weeks here, it took little to coax a smile from her. When had she planned to run away? Here on the ward, she followed the treatment programme to the letter. She never showed any signs of rebellion or anger. A typical good girl. Someone who liked to escape into books, to write little poems on her phone and to paint. When she said she was writing her poems, could she actually have been chatting to a stranger online?

Her psychologist turns up just before the shift change. He disappears straight into the duty room and I hurry after him. As I storm into the room I see that Barbro has already grabbed him to discuss a debrief for some of the other nurses, about an episode that occurred

while I was off duty and in which a patient is said to have hit his primary contact after returning from a period of leave. Thomas looks a little darker under the eyes than usual. His blonde hair is gathered into a bun at the back of his head and hasn't been tightened for a while – some stray strands of hair have become entangled in his long beard. He hasn't bothered to change into the uniform that was introduced during the pandemic, and which erases both the hierarchy and any distinguishing features among us employees. Instead, he's wearing a pair of light coloured corduroy trousers and a cardigan. Thomas Magne is eight years older than me and the youngest specialist psychologist in the department, but he's still the one who makes the most waves. He looks like a redesigned hippie – and he behaves like one, too. He likes to challenge people, to confront ingrained attitudes and prejudices. Where others have given up, he sees opportunities. His motivation is strong, and his glowing energy is both infectious and elicits envy. In addition to a degree within clinical adult psychology, he's also specialised in hypnotherapy, which he uses on a select number of his patients – something that has got the more conservative practitioners at the hospital all worked up, since they believe it's irresponsible to use hypnosis on patients suffering from psychosis. While their counter arguments haven't been strong enough to stop Thomas, they do mean that he often repackages his methods as *visualisation tools*, and that he prefers to have conversations with his patients alone, without us nurses present, or at least not the most sceptical among us. Now he interrupts Barbro before she can finish her monologue.

'A friend of the Strand family is here,' he says. 'He says he's here to collect some clothes that Fride's parents called about yesterday afternoon, which Fride apparently left behind in the laundry room?'

'Oh right. Yes, there they are.' Barbro points to a bag beside the door.

Thomas glances at it, but ignores me. Which he tends to be good at doing.

'He's also wondering whether anyone here has time for a quick chat,' he says to Barbro.

'A chat about what?'

'He wants to know whether Fride might have told anyone where she was going.'

Barbro looks at him over her glasses.

'Everything Fride has shared with us is subject to patient confidentiality.'

'Her parents sent him. They're worried.'

'Have you said anything to him?'

'I have nothing relevant to say. But perhaps one of her nurses might?'

I shouldn't have come in today. This family friend has probably been sent here to confirm the accusations Fride's mother screamed down the phone and into my ear in the early hours of this morning. I try to leave, but I'm too late.

'Ida?' I hear Barbro say behind me. 'Could you speak to him?'

I'm forced to turn to face them. I meet Thomas's questioning gaze behind his round, gold-framed glasses.

'Now's not such a good time,' I say. 'I... I'm on my way out with a patient.'

I'm sure I can convince my new patient to take one more walk around the grounds.

'Don't worry about it,' Barbro smiles. 'I'll get someone else to do it.'

'I can come with you,' Thomas says to me.

I grasp around for another excuse, but quickly understand that it's useless. Thomas is already on his way out of the room with the bag of clothes – I can do nothing but follow after him.

As we walk down the stairs, I try to get a handle on his silence. Does he know that Frøydis called me in the early hours of this morning? Is that why he wants to join the conversation now, because he's learned that I gave my private phone number to Fride?

'He works for the police, by the way,' Thomas says.

'Who?'

'The guy we're about to speak with.'

I should turn around. I really ought to turn around.

'I thought you said he was a friend of the family?' I say.

'He is. So he's here in a private capacity – he was very keen that I should emphasise that.'

Every muscle in my body tenses. When I worked on one of the emergency psych wards I sometimes had to deal with the police if they brought in an aggressive patient from accident and emergency or a doctor's surgery. That was one of the reasons I changed ward. Not because police officers aren't nice people. I truly admire their courage, strength and sense of justice. Their desire to help, to restore peace and order. Their attempts to get evil off the streets. They reassure the local population.

But in me they trigger a suffocating sense of shame.

## *Five*

At first glance he could be anyone's relative, or at least, he's too old to be mistaken for a patient. The man sitting in the visitor's room must be in his mid-forties, his crow-black hair flecked with grey, limbs and fingers slim, nails clean. He's wearing a dark-coloured, freshly ironed shirt and chinos. His police ID must be hidden away somewhere, in his pocket or under his sweater, or maybe he's left it at home. Still, he doesn't fool me. Behind his friendly eyes I recognise what I fear most: that hungry urge to dig unstoppably for answers.

Thomas closes the door and introduces me.

'This is Ida. She's the nurse who Fride had most contact with during her stay here.'

Do I sense an abdication of responsibility beneath his words?

The man gets up and greets me briefly.

'Noman.'

His tone is as cool and sharp-edged as his general demeanour, his firm handshake.

I take a seat in the chair Thomas directs me to, even though it's furthest from the doors and prevents me from making an easy escape. I fold my hands in my lap. Breathe. Smile. This will be fine. It isn't about me.

Noman doesn't smile.

'Fride's parents were wondering whether you might have any tips as to where she might be.'

He's just eaten – a couple of pale breadcrumbs remain at one corner of his mouth, clashing with his otherwise meticulous appearance. Maybe he's the kind of person who stuffs himself with sweet baked goods when no one is watching.

'You think Fride has run away?' I ask.

This is a trick I've learned: to ask questions myself in order to avoid responding to ones I can't answer.

'That's correct,' Noman replies.

He studies me closely with his light brown eyes. Maybe he's wondering how someone as fat as me can work in such a demanding place as this. Is that why I'm here? Is everyone going to try to say it's my fault that Fride was discharged too early?

'Surely the police have initiated a search for her?' I ask. 'Although I haven't seen anything about it in the newspapers?'

'Her parents haven't formally reported her missing.'

'Why not?'



‘This isn’t the first time this has happened, and they don’t want to cause too much of a scene. Out of concern for Fride, of course. So now several friends of the family, myself included, are trying to help.’

He must see that I’m wondering which of Fride’s parents he’s friends with, because he adds:

‘I know the Strand family through my younger sister. She’s a friend of Fride’s mother. We grew up in the same neighbourhood.’

His flat tone and not-so-thick l’s make his way of speaking a refined version of the Trønderlag dialect. But it seems acquired, artificial, born of a need to prove he’s above everyone else. What has Fride’s mother told him about me? Might he have looked me up in the police records?

‘Did Fride say anything to you about places she wanted to go after being discharged?’ he continues, before I can counter with yet another question. ‘Or did she mention any people she wanted to meet?’

I bite the inside of my cheek. I have to focus now. Stay present. Come up with answers.

Fride told me she wanted to spend the weekend catching up on some of her subjects before she returned to school on Monday. She planned to take it easy at first, just a couple of hours each day.

‘No,’ I say. ‘Has nobody heard anything at all from her since yesterday evening? Has she not been answering her texts, either?’

‘She hasn’t answered the calls or messages from her parents, at least. And she hasn’t been active on social media such as Instagram or Facebook, but she rarely is, so that isn’t so unusual. How active she’s been on Snapchat with her friends we don’t know just yet.’

‘Have you checked the places she went on the previous occasions she ran away from home?’

‘Yes. And Accident and Emergency.’

‘What about other things? Security cameras, for example?’

‘As I said: I’m here as a friend of the family. So I have access to no more information than the average man on the street does.’

There are so many things I should have asked Fride about.

‘I understand from her parents that Fride wanted to be discharged?’ Noman says.

I glance at Thomas. He smiles encouragingly at me, fiddling with the bead bracelet one of his kids made for him. What is he thinking right now? Three days before Fride was

discharged, Thomas had arranged for the status of her stay to be changed from involuntary to voluntary. She was now so well, he believed, that she was capable of providing consent; furthermore, she was motivated to follow her treatment programme. The following day, when I wasn't at work, Thomas had spontaneously met with Fride and her parents, and this was when her discharge had been decided. I got the impression that Thomas felt pressured by management, by their constant complaints about how there were many patients with more serious problems, all in need of a bed.

'Yes,' I nod.

'Did she express any thoughts of taking her own life?' Noman asks.

'What? No.' I look at Thomas again, unsure whether I ought to have refused to answer on grounds of patient confidentiality.

Thomas addresses Noman.

'Fride was never considered suicidal during her stay here.' He adds a small smile to his statement, as if in an attempt to loosen up the thick air.

I should have pushed harder, tried to get more out of Fride, but of course I know how futile that tactic can often be. Was that why she seemed happier in those last few weeks, because she had decided to end her own life? I shake off the thought as quickly as it arises. Yes, Fride was worried about many things, but she talked about the future, how she was looking forward to moving into her own place after she finished sixth form, either to study or to work, perhaps in another town.

'What actually happened?' I ask. 'Yesterday, before she disappeared? What have her parents said?'

Noman pulls a box of snus from his trouser pocket and pushes one of the small white pouches of tobacco beneath his smooth-shaven upper lip.

'Fride and her mother had an argument yesterday evening, and Fride went out to the 3T gym in Moholt at around eight.' His voice is monotone, as if he's reading from a report. 'After that, she went to Midtbyen, to the Burger King on Olav Tryggvasons gate. We know this because she sent a Snapchat message to a classmate from there at 22:50. Since then, nobody we've been in contact with so far has seen or heard from her. Or that's what they're telling us, at least.'

Fride might have been in the city centre while I was there. Burger King is on the same street as the burger joint I went to. Could she have seen me?

'What was the argument with her mother about?' I ask.

Noman hesitates.

‘I’m not sure you need to know all the details.’

‘But maybe they argued about something I can shed light on?’

He presses his lips together, and I get the feeling he doesn’t like being challenged.

‘Curfews,’ he says.

‘They argued about curfews?’

Noman nods.

‘Fride is eighteen, but her mother feels there should still be certain rules while they’re all still living under the same roof. Which I can empathise with – I have a stepchild who’s around the same age. Fride wanted to go to a party this weekend, but her mother felt she shouldn’t go. Or that Fride should come home early, at the very least.’

Fride had told me she often left parties early, that she soon began to feel exhausted once the music’s volume was cranked up to full blast. Now I wonder whether this was just something she said, in order to lead me to believe she’s more like me than she actually is – but why? For an extra cheese sandwich or two at suppertime?

‘So where does Fride’s mother think Fride is?’ I ask.

Noman pushes the snus further up under his lip with his tongue.

‘I’m sure she’s already told you that herself?’

So he knows Fride’s mother called me early this morning. But does he also know that she screamed at me for ten minutes straight, telling me that if Fride never came home again, or, God forbid, was found dead, I was the one she would hold responsible?

‘So have you looked into this theory about the stalker?’ I ask.

Thomas casts a surprised glance in my direction.

‘I mean, since Fride’s mother is so insistent about it?’ I continue.

Thomas leans forward now, propping his elbows on his thighs.

‘That’s unfortunately how it is for many parents,’ he says. ‘They find it extremely shameful that their child is mentally ill. They think it’s their fault. So they look for other explanations. We instinctively bury things that are too painful to acknowledge in parts of our psyche we don’t wish to explore. It’s hard for all of us to confront our darker sides.’

He’s looking more at me than he is at Noman. I look down at my hands. My knuckles are white. On my forearm is a tiny scab – it must be from last night, I often scratch myself in my sleep. I have the urge to pick at it. I shouldn’t have asked. Thomas felt attacked and so felt he had to defend himself by becoming didactic. It wouldn’t be the first time. He has a habit of giving me instructions.

Noman also leans towards me now, as if Thomas has opened the door for him and he boorishly bounds through it, armed with all the questions he's so far held back: *What did Fride tell you about her mother? Did she want to move out? Did she have a secret boyfriend? Do you know who she bought her hash from? What other drugs was she using?*

I want to answer as honestly as I can, but I'm unable to open my mouth, my jaw is aching, clamped shut. I look down at my hands again. At my feet dangling over the edge of the chair, wearing new red summer shoes with pink flowers on them. The floor is covered in Lego bricks that once formed a tall tower, reminding me just how much of a clumsy idiot I am. I look up. The room's colours are different. Children's drawings hang on the walls. Faces stare at me, researchers whose names I can't remember; their questions drown out all other sound.

*Can you describe the bed you slept in?*

*What did it smell like?*

*Was there a window?*

*Was there a man? Other people?*

*What were you given to eat?*

The faces come closer, crowding around me, pushing me to give them some tiny detail, a clue, anything. *Surely you must be able to remember something, for fuck's sake?* 'Ida?'

Thomas's gentle voice brings me back. I meet his gaze behind the lenses of his glasses. He gives me an inquisitive look. I grip the arms of my chair. Breathe. Try to stay present.

'I'm sorry,' I say. 'What did you say?'

Noman picks up the thread.

'Is there nothing you can think of that might help us to find Fride?'

'No, I'm sorry.'

'Well, if you do think of anything, it would be great if you could contact me.'

He plucks a business card from his chest pocket. It seems old-fashioned, and the way he pushes the card across the table tells me that he thinks he's special. One of the state's golden lions, although his card says nothing about him being a police officer, it features just a phone number and his full name: *Noman Ahmed*.

'But surely her parents will report her missing so the police can also start searching for her?' I say.

Noman gets up.

‘I’m sure she’ll turn up again soon. The vast majority of them do.’

‘Do they?’ I ask.

He brushes some invisible specks of dust from his shirt.

‘Let me put it this way: not everyone who goes missing wants to be found.’

His statement hangs in the air, uncontested.

‘I’ll walk you out to your car,’ Thomas says. He hands Noman the bag of Fride’s forgotten clothes, then unlocks the door that will lead them directly out of the building.

As the door slams shut behind them I sink back into my chair. I understand it all too well, why Fride’s parents haven’t reported her missing. The police never do enough anyway. They gave up long before they found me. I look at my hands. They’re shaking. Too much adrenaline raging through my body.

‘Are you okay?’ Thomas asks.

He’s standing in the other doorway now, the one that leads into the corridor. How long has he been standing there?

I quickly get up.

‘Yes. Yes, of course.’

I try to leave the room, but Thomas doesn’t move. Instead, he sets a hand on my arm. It’s cold. And is it shaking, too?

‘Ida. You must let me know if you need to talk about this. You’ve probably not experienced a situation like this before, and I know that you were very invested in Fride. I’m sure you hoped and believed she would make better choices following her treatment. But you should know that we all did what we considered to be best for her, based on the information available to us.’

Something new has taken up residence in his eyes. Something I’ve never seen in him before. An uncertainty.

Once the night shift has taken over on the ward, I stay behind in the reporting room, alone. There are certain rules about accessing the records of discharged patients, but I log in to Fride's, under the pretence that I'm doing so to provide her with medical assistance. Because I'm concerned about her, and want to see if I can find any relevant information that might help us to figure out where she might be. First, I read all the notes made by Fride's care team. I read every single word that has been written about her since she was first admitted here, searching for the thoughts behind each formulation, tiny hints, hidden messages, something that might cast a light on anything I might have overlooked. Why did my gut tell me she wasn't being completely honest about the thing stirring inside her? Was it her evasive gaze? Her tone of voice, which would sometimes become higher in pitch? The way in which she sometimes squirmed in her chair before speaking? Or was it something I was picking up on subconsciously, something that wasn't so easy to catch sight of, something that resonated with my own experience, with my own lies? My interpretation had been that Fride was struggling with an inner unease, a restless wind within her that never stilled, because she was still afraid of the man who had been stalking her – because she now understood he wasn't real. It must be terrifying to lose control of your own mind, to no longer be able to trust your own experiences. To lose the filter between your inner and outer worlds.

Now, going through Fride's records with a fine-toothed comb, I notice that both I and the other nurses have used the same words when recounting certain statements she made. Were we influenced by each other, or has Fride repeated the exact same sentences, like a mantra, to convince herself? Or to convince us?

*I now understand I was psychotic and mentally ill.*

*I'm not afraid anymore.*

*I feel like myself again now.*

I read the notes Thomas has entered about her. At first, his conversations with Fride didn't last very long. But as she began to trust me, and to trust him, they grew longer. Every time I came on shift I would read up on what she'd said and done while I was away. So there's nothing here that I haven't read before. Back then, I looked for signs of improvement. Now I'm looking for signs of illness.

Thomas's notes differ from those of the other psychologists and doctors and the way they usually express themselves. He isn't quite as brief and serious, he feels no need to prove how smart he is. Instead, his notes radiate genuine care. *Patient denies auditory and visual*

*hallucinations* is the usual kind of lingo that might be used, but Thomas writes: *I ask whether she's hearing voices now. I hear yours, is the answer she gives me, with a wry smile. The girl has a witty sense of humour. This will be an important resource in her assessment and treatment going forward.* I know that he's working on a book about hypnotherapy, and I can see that he avoids mentioning the specific methods he uses in his consultations, instead focusing on the results and Fride's experience of the situation. This is in accordance with the ward's overall vision, which is that our main focus isn't necessarily the patient's diagnosis, but the individual problems in the here and now.

In his notes from six days ago, Thomas mentions Fride's trip to Oppdal. He refers to a conversation he had alone with her father, who described the trip as something Fride had decided to do on a whim on the day after her eighteenth birthday, when she and a friend had taken a spontaneous mini break without informing anyone of where they were going or for how long. She disappeared a couple of times after this, too. Most often after an argument with her mother. She would be gone for a day or two before she turned up again. According to Thomas, Fride's father had dismissed this as typical teenage rebellion – that Fride was keen to break free, show her parents she was grown up now, that she didn't need to let them know where she was at every hour of the day. I must have interpreted these notes in the same way the last time I read them. What else might I have misinterpreted?

The door opens, making me jump, and Alan comes tramping in with a coffee cup in his hand. When he sees me, he pulls a playful face.

'Well hello there! Are you just sitting around here moping?'

He's taken on a double shift because one of the nurses is off sick with a stomach bug.

'I'm working on patient plans,' I lie, turning back to the screen.

I hear him pushing the buttons of the coffee machine and expect him to leave the room as quickly as he entered it, but instead he comes over to me and sets a full cup of coffee next to the computer's keyboard.

'Black, right?'

'Um, yes. Thank you.'

'There are still some leftover tacos in the kitchen?'

'I'm fine, thanks.'

He tilts his head, looks at me with his fox-like eyes. Had he been a little taller, he could probably have been a model for one of those brands that specialise in outdoor clothing for middle-aged men. When he's out of uniform he always wears hiking trousers and a well-

worn grey woollen sweater. His hair is shaved short, his torso muscular, his smile excessively white – despite the fact that he pours at least a bucketful of coffee down his throat every day.

‘You work too hard,’ he says. ‘You need to have more fun.’ He rolls his r’s excessively against the roof of his mouth.

I want to bring the conversation to an end.

‘Oh, I have lots of fun, Alan. If only you knew.’

He raises his bushy eyebrows, curious now.

‘Oh... do tell.’

I hesitate.

He laughs, suddenly and loudly, the way he always does.

‘It’s a really bad sign if you have to think about it.’ He shakes my shoulder with his hairy fist. ‘*Babcia* was just like you. My grandmother. Her heart was too warm, far too warm, she thought only about others. And what do you think happened to her?’ He takes a rehearsed pause here, for effect. ‘She died at the age of fifty, just a year older than I am now. You have to laugh in life, she used to say, but she forgot to laugh herself.’ He shakes me again, harder this time. ‘You have to laugh more, Ida. Nobody will thank you for working yourself to death.’

This last statement he makes with a deep seriousness, and I feel the need to lighten the mood.

‘I laugh a lot at work.’ *At you*, I think. ‘Does that count?’

He takes a sip of coffee and glances at the computer screen.

‘You mustn’t feel guilty about Fride.’

I regret not logging out of her notes the moment he came in.

‘You don’t draw too much attention to yourself around here, do you?’ he goes on. ‘Most people don’t see all the hard work you put in. How much you mean to your patients. But when I’m at work, lots of people come up to me, asking after you: *Is Ida at work? When will she be in?* You’re good at your job. You make a difference. But you can’t help everyone.’

He smiles again, as if to comfort me now. I should log off and go, but instead I remain in my seat. Alan, as usual, is audaciously blurting out weighty statements without the slightest professional backing. He trained to be a carpenter. He’s a labourer, for god’s sake.

‘A professional healthcare worker should never give up trying to help,’ I say.

‘Not everyone wants help. And Fride was one of those people. She’d made her choice.’

‘What choice?’



‘To end her own life.’

‘Why do you say that?’

‘Barbro told me.’

‘What does Barbro know about it?’

‘Thomas told her. That Fride’s dad told that family friend of theirs.’

‘That Fride has taken her own life?’

He nods.

It sounds improbable. Why would Fride’s father believe that? It’s never come up in any of the many long conversations I’ve had with him, often after my shift was over, because he wanted to know whether Fride would ever make a full recovery. And why didn’t Thomas say anything about this to me just now?

‘Fride has run away from home, that’s all,’ I say. ‘She’s done it before. Didn’t Barbro tell you that, too?’

My tone is probably sharp, but it doesn’t seem to bother Alan. He takes another swig of his coffee.

‘Everyone has the right to end their life when they wish.’

I have to concentrate on keeping the muscles of my face deadly still so as not to reveal just how much he’s irritating me.

‘And,’ he adds, ‘some people have experienced such horrors that I can understand why they would feel they couldn’t go on.’

The heavy cloak of aftershave that always hangs around him makes me feel even more nauseous.

‘When someone wants to take their own life, Alan, it’s because they haven’t received adequate help.’ I know very well that I’m punching below the belt now, that I’m imitating the same didactic tone Thomas uses. ‘They haven’t received adequate help to understand that their wish to die is only a temporary desire to flee from the problems and pain they’re facing in the here and now. But there’s always hope, a solution, a way of making things better.’

‘Always?’

‘Always.’

‘Are you sure about that?’

He thrusts his chin skywards, a reflex that men in particular seem to resort to when they feel threatened, in order to seem taller.

‘So let’s say a patient here expresses suicidal thoughts to you,’ I say. ‘What do you say? Do you say: go ahead, be my guest, you’re completely within your rights to end your own life? Maybe you give them advice about the various methods they might use, too?’

I really ought to tell Barbro to fire him.

His smile is even wider now.

‘I say they need to talk to a nurse who understands those sorts of things.’ He winks and chinks his coffee cup against mine. ‘I know you have strong opinions, Ida. But you have to be brave enough to share them with the right people. If you were, you wouldn’t be sitting here right now, worried to death about whether you’ve done a good enough job.’

He disappears out the door, while I stay sitting there, embarrassed and hot in the cheeks. I bit his hook. I know, of course, that Alan loves to provoke. To get people all worked up. Just to have something to laugh about later.

Still. Some of his words have struck a chord with me.

## *Seven*

A girl stands on the pavement, crying. A little girl. Four years old, or five maybe, not big enough to have started school. Her chubby cheeks are red and wet. She cries silently as she stares, heartbroken, at the tarmac, across which a set of French fries is strewn like some experimental work of street art. The girl's older double crouches down in front of her, whispers something and glances furtively about, embarrassed, before with efficient movements she sweeps up the French fries with her hands and throws them into a nearby bin. Then the woman takes her daughter by the hand, and together they walk through the doors of the same Burger King Fride is said to have visited last night. Through the windows I see her sitting at a table in the corner, with her friends. They're generously sharing their chicken nuggets and milkshakes as they chatter and giggle. But it isn't Fride sitting there, just someone who looks like her. All the girls look like Fride today. For a split second, at least.

I cycle onwards and turn onto Nordre gate. I imagine Fride wandering down this cobblestoned pedestrian street last night, in the dark, alone. A man, or perhaps a gang of them, saw her as the perfect ending to a boring night out and dragged her into an alleyway and raped her. Now she's lying lifeless and cold in a dumpster, along with the limp French fries. Or she went to an after party with a boy and is now sleeping off her high on some dirty sofa. Maybe someone put something illegal in her drink in order to do something illegal to her. Or she wandered restlessly around the city, too angry at her mother to go home, too proud to be the first to have to apologise in such a banal argument. Maybe she ended up beside the river, needing to pee, and lost her balance and fell into the water, as several young residents before her have done.

She can't have jumped into the river voluntarily.

Nothing has happened to her. She just wants to prove to her mother that she's eighteen years old and free to do as she wishes. She understands that you have to laugh in life.

Above the apartment buildings are heavy grey clouds threatening to release their pressure. The city residents who are out shopping have equipped themselves with rain jackets and umbrellas, on their way to buy a woollen sweater or a book they can curl up with on the sofa. Had they known that an eighteen-year-old was missing, they likely would have just shrugged their shoulders, perhaps felt a certain glee at how big the problems of other families are, thought that it could never happen to them. The vast majority of people are far too gullible. They don't understand that life can go from blissful to hellish in the time it takes to clench a fist.

I reach the top of the pedestrian street and coast past the Church of Our Lady, the city's caring church, which is open every day. In the church grounds the city's heaviest drug users have gathered for a cup of the coffee being served by church volunteers. These shipwrecked rogues who once said yes to something to which they should have said no.

In front of the row of low buildings behind the stone church, I stop outside a red two-floor structure to which Google Maps has led me. From above the front door screams the bright yellow company name *Experientia*, but there is nothing to indicate that the event planning agency owned by Fride's parents will offer any great experiences today. A sheet of paper crookedly attached to the front door informs customers that the company is closed *due to personal reasons*. The sign is handwritten, in sloppy script, perhaps hastily scribbled and put up? I try the door all the same, knock, peer through the window. Of course Fride's father isn't at work. He's out searching for his daughter. Scouring every last one of the city's streets in his van. He probably thinks he sees her everywhere, too. Could she have left the city? Taken a train across the Swedish border? Or has she fled to the countryside? Jumped off a cliff. Holed up in a cave and swallowed some pills she managed to buy outside Our Lady. Tied a skipping rope to a tree.

I push away the horrors offered up by my imagination and cycle over to the Portal of Happiness, out of the city centre, up the hills. I take a circuitous route – I never dare approach a destination directly – reach Tyholttårnet and turn onto Dr. Sands veg, where I park my bike outside the white, completely renovated detached property that belongs to the Strand family. I've been here once before, a few weeks ago. When Fride was allowed to make a visit home for the first time. I went with her because she asked me to, and because I regarded it as an opportunity to see how she functioned with her parents beyond the ward. It was an awkward affair. Frøydis had scrubbed the house before we arrived. Baked wholemeal bread rolls and brewed green tea. Carefully planned how she would convince me that this was a perfect family with no mental problems. We sat on the fine, freshly cleaned sofas in the living room, beneath the emotionless paintings that hung on the walls. Fride's mother brought out photo albums containing pictures from Fride's baptism and confirmation, from family holidays and special occasions. Fride had smiled and laughed – she clearly enjoyed looking at the photos of herself when she was little. Because she had been free of all her worries back then? Her father had stayed silent. It seemed he didn't like the act his wife was putting on, and he soon disappeared into the kitchen to make some work calls.

His van isn't in the driveway. In the house's front garden a cosy pergola has been erected, and features hanging plants and pale-coloured, now damp cushions. Lining the wall

are several wooden crates, filled with flowers still clinging to summer. The window of the Wendy house is decorated with little paper hands. Fride's father has made all this, presumably out of love for his little nuclear family. I walk around to the back of the house and up the steps that lead to a turquoise-coloured door. *Fride, Freddy and Frøydis* says a wooden sign beneath the doorbell – the F clan. It's painted in vivid colours by a child's hand, a large yellow sun shining above the names. I ring the doorbell. A standard ding-dong rings out on the inside. I can see that the door is locked. Beyond the kitchen window that faces the steps, the house is dark.

I ring the bell once more as I prepare to finally admit to myself that this has been a wasted trip. Should I call Thomas instead? He did say that I should call him if I needed to talk. Did he mean outside of working hours, too?

I'm on my way back down the steps when I hear the click of the door's lock behind me.

I turn around.

Freddy is standing in the doorway, squinting. He looks as if he's just woken. At first he seems confused. Then his face lights up.

'Have you found her?' he asks. 'Has she been committed to the ward again?'

I shake my head, and watch as the disappointment pushes his head down towards his shoulder blades. Still, he forces a smile. He's always been so generous with his smiles. Perhaps it's a natural part of his profession, his personality, to be an optimist. But now?

'Do you think we could talk?' I say.

His gaze flits about. Perhaps it's only just occurred to him that it isn't usual for a nurse to seek out the home of a discharged patient on her free time. But nor is this a usual situation. Or at least, it isn't for me.

Freddy gestures for me to follow him into the hallway. I close the door behind me. The air doesn't smell of floor soap, as it did the last time I was here. Nor is it a meticulously tidy home that greets me. Several pairs of shoes are strewn unsymmetrically across the floor. The hooks are overflowing with jackets of various shapes and thicknesses. I follow Freddy into the living room, where a clothes horse with underwear drying on it stands in front of the TV. The sofa cushions are in disarray, along with a crumpled blanket. Under the coffee table is a plate with a crust of bread on it, an empty milk glass, a chocolate wrapper.

Freddy is quick to pick up the blanket.

'I just needed to get some food in me and catch forty winks. I've been out all night, and my blood sugar was totally out of whack. I have diabetes, you see.'

He seems ashamed, as if he feels he has no right to food or sleep right now. He picks up the plate and shoves the chocolate wrapper into his pocket.

‘And Frøydis?’ I ask.

‘She and my mother-in-law wanted to try to speak to everyone in Fride’s class at school. Someone must know something, right?’ Freddy takes out his phone from where it has slipped down between the sofa cushions. ‘Cup of tea?’ he asks.

‘No, thank you. Don’t put yourself out for my sake.’

‘Well I need something before I go back out there again anyway.’ He goes into the kitchen and I hear the banging of cabinet doors, the hiss of the kettle. Beside the sofa, next to a basket of knitting, is Fride’s handbag. The scrap of paper with my phone number on it lies on the table, along with Fride’s rose-gold coloured laptop. She had that with her on the ward, too. She’d tried to get some schoolwork done over the past few weeks, was so keen to catch up on everything she had missed.

‘We can’t get into it.’ Freddy has returned without me noticing. He dips a spoon into a small pot of yoghurt. I don’t want to ask, but I have to, I have to know.

‘I heard you told your police officer friend that you’re afraid Fride... might have taken her own life?’

He stares down into the yoghurt pot, slowly stirring the spoon.

‘It’s just that I’m so afraid that’s what’s happened every time Fride disappears without letting us know... Not that she would do it on purpose, but that it might happen by accident. That she might take some pills or something else her body can’t handle. Fentanyl, for example.’ He looks at me with anxious eyes. ‘Do you think she could become psychotic again, if she starts using?’

‘I don’t know.’

But if she does, I’ll make sure she becomes strong enough to resist every last destructive temptation and impulse.

‘You’re not going to report her missing to the police?’ I say.

‘No,’ he answers quickly.

‘Why not? If you’re so worried, I mean.’

He sighs heavily.

‘I’m afraid it’s not that simple. Fride is so adamant that we mustn’t reveal things about her life. She wants to decide for herself what other people know about her.’ He looks at me. ‘I know she trusts you. But I’m sure there’s still a lot she hasn’t told you.’

‘I know that she’s run away a couple of times before.’

‘It’s more than a couple of times.’

I’m unable to hide my surprise.

‘Fride didn’t want you to know absolutely everything. And Frøydis and I thought that was fine. After all, the main focus of her treatment was supposed to be her problems in the here and now, right?’

I should have made more of an effort to dig into Fride’s past.

‘So how often has she run away?’

He hesitates.

‘I understand if you don’t want to tell me,’ I say. ‘Out of respect for Fride.’

‘I’m genuinely grateful that you care so much about her.’ He puts a spoonful of yoghurt into his mouth and chews, appearing doubtful. ‘Fride’s always had a bit of a temperament. Just like her mother. And when the hormones hit with full force in Year 9, it escalated somewhat... She got involved with the wrong crowd, and would “forget” to let us know where she was or if she was staying over with a friend. The youth psychiatric services were briefly involved because she played truant for a while. And when she started sixth form there were a few occasions we couldn’t find her and contacted the police.’

‘Like the time she went to Oppdal?’

He nods.

‘She’s eighteen, and of course she’s allowed to go places without telling us, but on that occasion we became extremely worried and a huge search was initiated. And then it turned out she was just drugged up in some hotel.’ He licks the spoon clean of yoghurt. ‘You must know how it is if you cry wolf too many times? The last time we reported her missing the police asked us to be patient, and then she came home after a few days.’

‘I’m sure she will this time, too.’

I’m not sure whether I’m saying this to comfort Freddy or myself.

‘If we report Fride missing to the police, or post on Facebook that we’re searching for her, I’m afraid she’ll never speak to us again,’ he says. ‘She was so angry at us after Oppdal that she went off to stay with a friend for two weeks.’

He disappears into the kitchen again. There’s complete silence out there for a while, before the chink of cups starts up.

‘Milk or sugar?’ he shouts.

‘No, thank you.’

Freddy returns a short time later, his eyes redder, carrying two large cups of tea. I take a sip too quickly and burn my tongue.

He doesn't sit down, as if he can't permit himself to take another break. I blow on the tea, which has filled the room with the sweet smell of apple and cinnamon. Frida never said a bad word about her father. It seemed her relationship with him was a close one. That Freddy is one of those loving fathers who is always there for his daughter, no matter what.

'We should have convinced Frida to stay with us for longer,' I say.

'Thomas tried, but I asked him to stop,' Freddy says.

'Oh? How come?'

He turns his face to the window, as if trying to absorb strength from the daylight.

'Frida had asked me to speak to him so many times. She wanted to go home. Frøydis didn't agree. After being completely against Frida's admission from the start, she now thought it was safer for Frida to be admitted, locked up. Of course, as you well know, Frøydis has had problems accepting Frida's illness. But I supported Frida when she wanted to discharge herself.' He tenses his jaw. 'I thought that, together, we'd be able to handle it.'

Frida never mentioned this to me. Perhaps because she knew that I thought she should stay on the ward for longer?

His phone beeps. He stiffens, as if he daren't look at it. Finally, he does so anyway.

Something in him brightens. As if the sun peeks out from behind the clouds for just a moment.

'Frøydis wants me to look for Frida's pink sweater,' he says. 'A boy in Frida's class thinks he might have seen her this morning. Wearing it.'

Hope flickers in his eyes now. I find it infectious.

'Would you like me to help you look for it?'



## *Eight*

Freddy takes the stairs two at a time as he runs up to the floor above. I hurry after him, past a rough summary of Fride's life as she smiles at me from the panelling in a well-groomed collage of photographs. Her christening. Kindergarten. First day at school. Confirmation. She was seen this morning. She hasn't left the city. She hasn't left her life. Even if she hasn't had a psychotic relapse, I'm still going to try to convince her to request another admission to the ward when I see her.

At the top of the stairs a pleasant loft room greets me, with several doors leading off it. I didn't go into Fride's room last time, and it's more messy than I would have imagined. In the ward she took care to keep her room neat and tidy. Here, crumpled clothes are slung across the floor. The desk is overflowing with boxes of make-up, but I never saw her use so much as a bit of mascara. Fairy lights in various colours hang like a fishing net from the ceiling. On the walls are several framed quotes: *Keep calm and be free. You can do it. Live and get lost.* A large pot plant is dying in a corner. Many books on a bookcase indicate that she at least wasn't lying about her love of reading. The room smells of Fride, of coconut.

Freddy opens the doors of the wardrobe that stands against one wall, and begins to search. I look through the large bag that lies open on the bed. No pink sweater. Nor under the duvet, under the pillow. The desk features several large, deep drawers on either side of the office chair. In the top two are old notebooks and art supplies, mixed with creams, more make-up, a sewing kit, small handbags, bikinis. Clothing and objects that define who Fride is, or who she wishes to be. Are the vintage clothes a straightjacket imposed on her by her mother, or evidence of a genuine passion for sustainability? Do the huge volumes of make-up and the Asian-inspired bits and bobs reveal a different Fride than the one I got to know? Has she actually read the works by Tolkien and Amalie Skram that line her bookshelves?

In the bottom drawer I catch sight of something pink. I pull it out –

And then. It's as if. Everything stops.

All sound vanishes. As if something has suddenly shut off my ears, but at the same time sharpened all my senses. All I can hear is my own breathing.

In.

Out.

Becoming more rapid with each breath.

The floor is vibrating, as are the walls – as am I? I turn to face Freddy. He’s still standing before the wardrobe pulling out one garment after another, throwing them onto the floor.

I breathe in. I breathe out. I blink. I’m awake.

I turn my head back to my hand. It’s shaking. I’m sweating, I’m hot, I’m cold. Is this my hand?

Breathe in.

Breathe out.

I squeeze my fingers harder around the soft, pink object. It squeaks. I loosen my grip. Then squeeze it again. Yet another squeak, a familiar squeak, one that awakens long-locked-up feelings, a mixture of everything and nothing that takes me in a stranglehold, tightens its grip, causes my spine to sway. I lose my footing and can no longer tell where I start and end, this isn’t me standing here, all at once everything feels unreal. I’m not real.

I move without being aware of it and suddenly find myself standing right behind Freddy. I register that I part my lips, hear my voice climbing out:

‘Do you have a dog?’

‘What? No.’

He answers without looking at me. Digs deeper into the wardrobe, grasping.

I’m trying to think, but it’s hard to hold on to any single thought.

‘Did you used to have a dog?’ I ask.

‘No.’

‘So then where did Fride get this dog toy?’

I don’t know where my strength is coming from, the strength to stand upright, to speak – I should have collapsed to the floor, lost consciousness. Sweat is running from my brow now, from my armpits, I think my heart has stopped beating.

‘Tell me – where in the hell did Fride get this dog toy!?’

Am I the one shouting?

Freddy turns and looks at me. Surprised, at first. Then confused. He looks at the pink rabbit trembling in my hand.

‘That thing?’ he says.

I nod.

‘I don’t know...’ he says.

‘You *must* know.’ I’m whispering now. ‘You must know *who* she got it from.’

He looks at the rabbit again. I can see he’s thinking hard.

‘To be honest, I’ve never seen it before.’

When I fall silent, he turns back to the wardrobe. He pulls out yet another drawer – and picks up a pink sweater.

He stands there with his back to me, and I watch as all the hope leaches out of him and flies out of the window.

The rabbit, however, doesn’t follow. It’s staring at me. As if it has been waiting for this moment. As if it has lain there alone in the drawer, biding its time, expecting me to come here and find it.

*It can’t be the same rabbit.* I repeat the phrase inside me, like an awful refrain: *It can’t be the same rabbit.*

I hold it at arm’s length, as if I’m afraid it will attack me if I let it too close. It’s made of a tough canvas. Has three legs. The fourth is gone, and the remaining hole has been tightly sewn up, an amputation completed with two neat, black cross stitches, the same colour as the eyes. The animal’s nose is lighter, almost brownish. It’s ears hang limply towards its fat belly. One of the ears is different than the other, replacing an ear that must once have been torn off – it’s longer, reaches all the way down to the rabbit’s bottom. Just like the amputated foot, this ear has also been sewn with the same neat cross stitches. The lower part of the ear has a kink in it. It’s a sock. A child’s sock. It isn’t dark pink, as the other ear is. It might have been white once, but now it’s more yellow.

## *Nine*

My bike wobbles along the river promenade on Øya. I have my phone in one hand. I dial Mamma's number again. It rings and rings. Why is the person behind me cycling so slowly? Has he been there this whole time? I shouldn't have taken the quickest way to Mamma's apartment, but she's not picking up the phone.

I don't remember what I said to Freddy, how I got out of the house. Which route did I take to get here? I slow down and let the cyclist behind me pass. He doesn't turn around, just quickly cycles onwards and disappears out of sight. Another man comes jogging towards me, in running tights and wearing headphones. His technique is heavy and halting. Has he been standing there behind the trees, waiting for me? I quickly stick my phone into my jacket pocket and sneak my hand beneath my sweater, ready to pull out the army knife that lies ready, always ready, in my bra. The jogger is just a few metres away now. His gaze is distant. The bass from his headphones pounds towards me as he stomps past. Is he turning towards me?

An ill-tempered barking makes me look straight ahead again, and I have to swerve so as not to crash into a Prague ratter and its irritable pensioner owner.

I take a detour, cycling between detached houses and public housing blocks. I call Mamma again. Still no answer. In my bag the pink rabbit burns against my back. The chances of there being another dog toy with exactly the same defects are close to zero.

I stop on one of the street corners and huddle against a hedge. No one is coming. Just a sparrow that lands on the asphalt in front of me, its eyes pleading.

I cycle the final stretch to the rusty brown brick building in Klostergata quickly. Let myself in to the stairwell closest to the river. Carry my bike up the stairs to the second floor. Put my ear to the front door of Mamma's apartment. I ring the doorbell. No footsteps on the other side. I try the door handle. Locked. Everything appears to be as it should be. I stick my key into the main lock and twist first it, and then the upper lock.

The air in the hallway is thick and close. I put down my bike and lock the door, giving the handle a tug to double check it. As I walk past the bathroom and storeroom the familiar smell of Mamma wafts towards me from the living room: a mixture of cigarette smoke, coffee and urine. Sometimes vomit, but not today.

The radio is playing faintly. She's lying on the sofa. Deeply asleep. Wearing a clean, pretty blouse, non-iron trousers. Her short, grey hair is freshly permed, her face heavily made

up. She's become more and more forgetful in recent years, but she never forgets to put on her mask.

I go over to the window and sneak an eye between the drawn curtains to stare out at the balcony free of furniture, then lift my gaze to the view, past the sports centre and Trondheim Spektrum, which lies at the tip of this peninsula where the Nidelva River winds its way. A stone's throw across the river is Ila. If I had a pair of binoculars, might I be able to see if *he* is standing there, waiting for me outside my apartment?

I sink down into the armchair. Try to gather my thoughts before I have to wake Mamma with the news she has feared ever since she decided that she and I would leave Pappa and my little brothers. That we would abandon our old life. Abandon ourselves.

It can't be long since she dozed off. A thin blanket of cigarette smoke still hangs beneath the acid yellow plaster ceiling. The coffee pot and her regular cup with pink lipstick marks on it stands on the worn coffee table. The bottle of booze is probably hidden behind one of the decorative cushions. I know I should have come here more often, but she was the one who threw me out once I became a fully qualified nurse. So she could shut out the world and drink in peace.

I get up. I can't wait any longer. We don't have much time. We have to leave. Where are we going to go?

'Mamma?'

I shake her. She gives a rough grunt.

'Mamma, come on, you have to wake up.'

I put my arms around her and pull her into a sitting position. She blinks and wipes the back of a hand across her mouth to wipe away the saliva that has dribbled from its corner. Then she smiles. 'Oh, my dear little Ida – it's you. How nice that you have time to stop by and visit your old mother. Are you hungry?'

'No.'

There's no gentle way to do this. I sit down next to her and pull the pink rabbit from my bag. I set it on the table in front of her. It wobbles a little before finding support in the coffee pot, coming to rest against it.

Mamma looks at the dog toy, her face expressionless. Her chest lifts calmly. Then she turns to look at me again.

'I baked a cake yesterday – a traybake. Would you like a piece?'

'Mamma.' I grab the rabbit, wave it in front of her face. 'He's found me!'

Her eyebrows twitch together.

‘Who?’

So it’s one of those days, when her memory is switched off.

I shuffle closer to her. Take her limp hand in mine and squeeze it, hard, so she’ll pay attention.

‘Mamma, listen to me. A girl who was admitted to the ward at work disappeared yesterday evening. She was committed because she thought a man was following her. Everybody thought she was psychotic and suffering from delusions, but when I went to her house today, I found this in her room.’

Mamma refuses to look at the rabbit or at me. She pulls her hand away and takes her packet of cigarettes from the table. With shaking alcoholic fingers she puts a cigarette in her mouth and lights it with a lighter. The cigarette’s tip crackles as she inhales the poison deep into her lungs. Then her lips release the filter and she blows out, the smoke dancing around the lampshade above the table, the only source of light in the room.

‘Mamma?’

She doesn’t answer.

‘What did you do with this dog toy back then?’

The ember of her cigarette burns down towards the filter as she remains silent.

‘Mamma!’ I’m shaking her now. ‘Did you throw it away? Give it to someone? To a flea market, someone we knew? Did the police get it back?’

Ash drops onto the sofa, but she doesn’t bother to brush it away. Simply stares emptily off into space.

I remember that I cried when Mamma took the pink rabbit from me on the day we escaped. And that I cried for several weeks afterwards. I even wrote many letters to it, which Mamma burned. I asked her over and over where it was, but she wanted me to forget it. Now she’s the one who’s forgotten it.

Sometimes I wonder if she’s pretending.

In the first few years after we moved here, she would repeat the same thing to me, every day:

*I hope you’re aware that not knowing what actually happened to you is much worse than knowing.*

It seemed that she, too, thought I was fooling everyone. That I actually remembered every last detail of *the incident*, but refused to tell a single soul. At the time she was only drinking the odd glass of wine in the evenings to help her sleep, but her imagination slowly began to eat her up, more and more, and the alcohol soon became the only thing that could

obscure the horrifying notions of what might have happened to me. It's now many years since the first glass of wine would appear on the table as early as at breakfast.

Sometimes, I also wonder if she's pretending she no longer remembers in order to punish me.

*If you can't remember anything, then I'm going to repress everything, too.*

I force the pink rabbit into her hand.

'Mamma. Do you remember the day I came home?' I say. 'Do you remember how I had this dog toy with me?'

She squeezes her hand around it. The toy squeaks. She laughs.

'Oh, my dear little Ida – aren't you a bit too old for teddy bears?'

She puts the rabbit back on the table and stands.

'I'll go get us some cake.'

I want to scream at her that she has to get it together, she has to look after me – after all, that was why she forced me to let go of who I used to be.

Instead, I let her potter out to the kitchen. I hear her opening the drawers.

I look at the rabbit. A pink lump of dark secrets.

We have to leave tonight.

Where will we go?

A crash from the kitchen tears me from the sofa. I storm into the kitchen. On the laminate tiles is a chair with its legs in the air. Mamma lies beside it. Her trousers are wet at the crotch.

I bend down and grab her arm. She quickly shoves me away, swears at me, at herself. I take a couple of steps back – I've learned that it's best to tread carefully on the worst days. She mumbles something incomprehensible as she first drags herself onto all fours and groans, then places a hand on the scratched Respatex table and pulls herself to standing. She remains there for a few seconds, her knees bent, swaying. It was never actually the drink that broke her. It was the guilt.

*Yes, you go on over to the playground, honey. I'll be there in just a minute.*

Should we go north, south? Abroad? Will Mamma be able to cope with sitting on a bus or a train for several hours? Will she be refused permission to board a plane?

Mamma becomes aware of the pee stain. Her eyes grow wet, and her chin begins to tremble.

'Why don't you go into the bathroom, Mamma. I'll find you some clean clothes.'

She doesn't protest. On unsteady legs she totters out of the kitchen and into the hallway, using the wall, with its cheap reproduction painting of a fruit platter, to support herself. There is no collage of my life here. No photographs from my baptism, no school portraits. I was never confirmed. I never took part in after-school activities, friends' birthday parties. I had to take care that no one took photos of me, that they wouldn't end up online or in the local newspaper. *Just in case.*

I turn to face the kitchen counter. There's no cake here. Just dirty plates and empty packaging from the ready meals she has delivered to the front door. I'm the one who orders her groceries. The booze she orders herself – she remembers that.

I go into the bedroom, which is next to the kitchen. The bed is made. She always slept on the sofa when I lived here. Her clothes are neatly folded in the wardrobe, but not in the same rigid system as before. She's mixed the trousers with the blouses, and in her underwear drawer is her phone and a fork.

I pick out a new outfit and knock on the bathroom door.

'Mamma? How are you doing?'

It's quiet behind the door, so I stick my nail into the depression on the screw in the lock and twist it.

She's sitting on the lid of the toilet, her toothbrush in her hand. Still wearing her wet trousers.

'It'll be good to have a shower now, won't it?'

I begin to undress her. She only stares vacantly into space, and as she stands there in all her wrinkled magnificence, I accompany her to the shower seat I purchased for her a couple of months ago, following an incident one morning when she had slipped on the tiles and hurt her hip. She closes her eyes as I lather up her back. I wash her hair, too, while I'm at it. I wonder whether she still loses herself in thoughts of how her life might have been had she been able to continue to be a wife, friend, aunt, daughter, colleague, had she been able to continue to teach teenagers maths and PE, instead of ending up a disabled single mother. Will I manage to get her to leave the apartment? Will she wet herself on the bus, scream at me, insist on drinking in public or make such a scene that everyone will notice us?

I can tell that she enjoys me massaging her scalp, even though she doesn't say so. I want to pinch her arm, the way she always pinched me when I forgot myself and slipped back into my old habits. I can still remember the day we escaped in detail. How painful it was to wear contact lenses to hide my chestnut eyes. The stranger staring back at me from the mirror, with blue eyes and short, blonde hair. Now I can no longer remember what I used to look like.



I no longer remember how Mamma looked before she had all her implants, either. The faces of Pappa and my brothers have long since been erased.

Will I now have to find myself a new disguise?

I dry Mamma thoroughly with a towel. She puts on the clean blouse and trousers herself, but I help her with her socks.

‘Are you hungry?’ she asks. ‘I baked a cake yesterday.’

As she applies a fresh coat of lipstick, I clean the scratch on my forearm and put a plaster on it. I don’t know when I started scratching myself in my sleep, whether I also did it before *the incident*.

I help Mamma back to the sofa, then heat up some stew for both of us.

I could leave alone, without Mamma.

She only eats half her portion, so I eat the rest of hers too. She doesn’t care that I see her pour vodka into her coffee. There’s a prickling at the back of my neck. I get up and make sure there’s no crack in the curtains.

‘I baked a cake – a traybake – if you’d like dessert,’ Mamma says.

‘There’s no cake left.’

She strokes my cheek as I sit down beside her again.

‘You always loved the cakes I would bake, my dear little Ida.’

I’ve always hated traybake cakes, and Mamma knows it. She once stuffed so much traybake into my mouth that it got stuck in my throat, like a cork in my windpipe. She didn’t help me to get it out. I had to stick my fingers down my throat myself.

She lights another cigarette, and her smoke signals float towards the ceiling.

I can’t run away this time. Mamma is stuck here, and without me, she has no one. And who do I have, other than her? The loneliness creeps out from its hiding place to stare at me with its anxious eyes. This is how Fride must be feeling right now. Here I am, drowning in self-pity, but what about Fride? Where is she?

The pink rabbit scowls at me from the coffee table. It was in Fride’s room, not mine. This time he’s taken Fride, not me. Has he abandoned the search for me, and started taking other girls captive instead? Perhaps he’s been locking up other girls for over twenty years, and it’s now sheer coincidence that he’s operating close to where I live – Norway is a small country, after all. Because if he knew who I am now – what I’m called, where I work, where I live – then isn’t it utterly fucking illogical that he’s taken Fride instead of me?

Still, there’s no escaping the facts:

Fride is the one who's missing now. Because *I* didn't stop him, back when I had the chance.