

Fading Light

Novel

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Gyldendal Agency

«... not knowing whether she had dreamt a very vivid dream, or was now living a very faint reality.» – Christa Wolf

Part One

Day one

I saw a man on TV the other day who reminded me of Mikael. It was on one of those shows where a line-up of comedians take turns stepping up to a microphone and improvising one-liners. I watched for a long time. Each time the man who had Mikael's features walked up to the mic, I felt a small rush of happiness.

It's as if my body is trying draw out time; today is the fourth day of pain. When I was younger, I'd bleed heavily for two days and hardly notice. I'd wake up in the morning and go out to pee, and there'd be blood. Now it's reduced to a sparse, malignant trickle, the blood pale pink and sharp in smell. If I were to describe the feeling, I'd say it's like a thin thread of glass is being slowly pulled out of me. I had been feeling depressed and feeble as I often do on days like this, but then something inside me shifted! It's been a fine, clear October day. It helps that Puss is on my lap, purring away. She smacks her lips a little when I scratch her under the chin, then rolls onto her back. Today is a day which could still rear up on its hind legs.

I'm sitting in the attic room as usual. I've opened a new document on the computer.

That man on TV. A year ago, I would have switched it off and tossed the remote aside. But now I wanted to watch. There was something about his gesticulation which reminded me of how Mikael would use his hands when he spoke, his movements like birds in the air. Little birds flitting around the kitchen. Mikael could really get on my nerves. He would interrupt me mid-sentence – that's what it felt like – and go on and on while I was trying to tell him something. It really got on my nerves! But look at his hands fluttering about: We were both so eager, couldn't bear to wait, we wanted to share everything with one another, be together, take the words right out of each other's mouths.

When we got married, I decided to wear the wedding ring on my left hand. I hadn't expected to marry again, but as it turned out, there was nothing I wanted more. I wanted to tie myself to Mikael with something indestructible: a symbol. The left hand is connected to the heart. Only after I had had the ring resized to fit my left ring finger did I read online: 'We wear the wedding ring on the right hand, the hand

we make agreements and oaths with. When our spouse dies, we move the ring to the left hand.'

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This afternoon I went for a walk through the woods, out past the fields. The pale sun shone low from a grey sky. I thought of how I would write the story of us, if I were to write it. The thought made me smile. When I think of Mikael, I think of a hand. I still despair when I try to summon the smell of his neck or a certain tone of voice and realise that I can't. But I remember – perfectly clearly, as if it were there now – the weight of his hand on my hip. I can feel his hand, its light pressure, perfectly clearly.

As I walked along the gravel road between the fields, a cool mist came drifting in from the water. The moist, white air draped itself across the ground, the lamps formed orbs of light above front doors and in front gardens. Down by the stacked hay bales, the floodlights were on. I heard a sound as I passed them, and when I turned my head I saw the white cows through the barn door, lined up in rows. There were no people or cars on the road. On the pasture stood two deer, completely still. When I stopped to look at them, they took off. On my way back I saw another deer. It was walking at the edge of the field, right up against the woods.

When I got home, I could see the light from the house from far away, both the outdoor lamps by the front steps and those inside were turned on. It gives a special feeling to walk across the yard of a big white house and know that you live there. I could almost see Mikael through the kitchen window, washing up at the counter. How many times haven't I walked across the yard and seen him in that very spot? He couldn't see me, because he was inside in the light, and I was outside in the dark. I stood there and watched, full of such tenderness for him.

So where do I begin?

I'll begin twenty years ago, that summer it was so hot. The fields gasped for water, the muddy roadside ditches dried up into pale, scorched patches of dust. Down in the cove, the motionless water was like silvery sheet metal. In this gluttoned heat, Mikael

and Sofia went about their days with their almost newborn daughter. They hung wet linens on the clothesline in the garden to form a short-lasting wall of cool relief. When they lay Maren on her back in the grass beneath a tree, the baby looked up into the shadows cast by the leaves. When a rare breeze arose, she would grab at the dapples of sun above with her miniature hands.

All this is something I've been told, of course. I wasn't here. I was in the capital, a long way from the fields and the water and the woods.

That summer the entire city reeked of garbage. I was working for a women's magazine downtown, and each afternoon I'd make my way home through the city streets to a practically empty flat. At the corner kiosk the bouquets wilted in their buckets; dog owners would lift the bouquets and let their pets drink from the flower water. My first marriage was over. My husband had moved out. We had married early – I was 27 years old and already done with that chapter of life.

Three years went by. Then I quit my job and sublet my flat. A colleague from the magazine was looking for someplace to live on her own, so I gave her the keys and kept a storage room in the basement for my things. I wanted to get away from the city. I had found a listing for a room to rent. The landlord described himself briefly in the ad, but it was the picture of the white house – this house – that called to me. He was separated, his wife had recently moved out, their young daughter lived alternately with both of them. The room wasn't big, he said, but it had a lovely view. That suited me just fine. I wanted a little cell to write in, nothing more. The picture of the house was slightly lopsided, taken from the road. You could see the fields and a glimpse of water shimmering in the background, and at the foot of the pasture behind the house, some dark shapes I later realised were the cows. Jutting up from the roof was a crooked weathervane.

I moved in with my selected belongings. Most things from my old life I had stored away. On the few occasions when Mikael and I drove to the capital in the following years, we'd bring things back with us little by little, some pieces of furniture and boxes of books, but after each time I'd forget what remained in the basement; the objects no longer felt like mine. My first impression of him was of a handsome man with feminine movements. He collected me from the train station in the village, and we drove for about a quarter of an hour out into the fields, which were green and yellow on this July morning. I had never been to this part of the country before. The

sky was blue with hardly any clouds, it surrounded the car completely. The road wound its way through the landscape. Then we turned down a gravel lane, passed through a small stretch of woods, and at the foot of a valley I saw the white house I recognised from the picture: the crooked weathervane, farming equipment leaning against a wall, letterboxes, rubbish bins, a little kitten that dove underneath the wooden terrace. That was Puss.

I fell in love with the place. The room in the attic suited my temperament, it was small and dark, and the window faced the water. Mikael carried my things upstairs but didn't step through the door to the room.

'I hope you'll like it here,' he said. His eyes were big and brown.

'I'm sure I will,' I said.

It wasn't hard. My room was furnished with the essentials, I was free to use the living room and kitchen as I pleased. I went for walks in the landscape, greeted the neighbours when I crossed paths with them. Did laundry in the laundry room.

A few days later, when I came back from a trip to the grocer's, there was a little girl sitting on the front steps, examining a fresh cut on her knee. The wound glistened red in the sun. When I came closer, she looked up at me with a serious expression. She pointed to her knee.

'I have blood,' she said.

'I see that.'

The child's eyes glistened at the corners. They were the same brown eyes as her father's. I crouched down and blew on the cut. A thin, translucent drop of blood ran down her shin and dried almost instantly, leaving behind a greasy, dusty stripe. The girl lay her little hand on my shoulder, towards the hollow of my neck. The immediate trust small children show! I felt a strong urge to protect her against all hurt. She pointed at the uneven border the cobblestones drew between the grass and the gravel.

'No crossing the line,' she said.

'No, it could be dangerous,' I agreed.

I'd like to say that after this first meeting with Maren, I was part of the family. Perhaps that's not quite true, but she accepted me right from the start, accepted that I lived with her and her father the way one accepts that leaves fall from the trees in

autumn. She could sit for ages on the kitchen floor conversing with Puss, all the sentence-scrap she tested out sounding like questions. She would move the crayon round and round on the paper and say: 'Round and round.' Until Sofia came through the door like a whirlwind and swept the child up off the floor.

Sofia was hit in the head by the side-view mirror of a bus a few months after giving birth. Not on the narrow country road where there's hardly space for a bus in the turns. It was on one of the busy streets in the village. The bus was going fast and Sofia was pushing the buggy, lost in thought, that's how the story went. She teetered at the very edge of the pavement, perhaps mulling over a project she wanted to begin. There were many witnesses to the accident. Afterwards, no one could say for sure whether she had in fact been hit. Was it really possible? Or could it have been the air pressure? A bus drove by, and the side-view mirror swiped Sofia across the top of her head so she fell face-first into the buggy. It wasn't Mikael who first told me this, but one of the neighbours. Some evenings I'd see Sofia on the pasture below the house, roaming around in the mud beneath the stars, patting the white cows.

When I think of Sofia's mood swings, they remind me of the fluctuations of my own cycle. Just of a different magnitude. On good days she was radiant with industriousness, already hard at work in her studio in the barn across the yard when Mikael got up in the morning. From time to time we wouldn't see her for several days. Then Mikael would bike down to hers. Sometimes he returned without Maren, other times she was sitting on the back of his bike. He didn't say anything when he came home, not about his ex-wife's mood or the state of her flat, simply went into the kitchen and heated up milk with honey for his daughter.

I just lifted my head to look out the window, and the glow the of the setting sun fell across the woods; the trees' half-naked canopies ignited with red and yellow. Suddenly an hour has passed. The light changes, evening comes.

I'm sitting at the desk Mikael built. I've always loved this room. The view from here is not only beautiful, it is also brutal. Or rather, the landscape is brutal. It seems to be hiding a secret, full of hollows and caves, hiding-places and pockets. You get the sense, when you come walking along the forest trail in the afternoon and stumble

across a clearing, or round a bend on the gravel road early one morning, that you've just missed something spectacular: that nature unfurled, dancing with life, and you arrived one second too late to see it. In summer when the cattails release their fluff and swarms of white woolly seeds drift across the pastures, the place seems to whisper in a foreign language. From where I'm sitting, I can see down to the inlet and across to land on the other side. Mikael used to say that ours is a landscape you don't get out of alive. I think he meant that you carry it with you, like a grain of sand in your eye.

Sofia lived in her own flat, by the little junction where there's also a grocer and a nursing home. And she still used the studio in the old red barn across the yard. Today there's nothing there, but in summer the site is covered in red poppies which thrive in the ash-enriched soil. Mikael had told me his ex-wife worked in there, but I had yet to meet her. One day I heard a sound from inside the barn, just as Mikael crossed the yard. It was the sound of something heavy being dragged across the floor.

'It's not a ghost,' he said when he saw my face. 'That's Sofia.'

I imagined a large animal moving around in there.

I let myself into the barn one morning under the pretence of looking for Mikael. It was cool inside, with lofty ceilings like a church. Wide columns of dust-speckled light fell through the grimy windows of the gable but didn't quite reach the floor. It smelled of wood and turpentine. At one point the barn had housed livestock, but the previous owners had used it to store their boating equipment. Thick ropes and a few buoys were still suspended from the rafters.

I couldn't see to the opposite end of the barn, it was too dark. The walls were lined with framed paintings with their front sides facing away. In the middle of the room stood a large canvas stretched across a frame. The paint was applied in thick layers, various shades of blue and black and a little bit of yellow, and at the centre of the chaos was a shadow sort of resembling an eye. The longer I stared at the painting, the more I felt I could make out an eyebrow here, a cheekbone there, a black hole which could have been a gaping mouth.

‘It’s not done yet,’ said a voice behind me. A woman emerged from the murk. She looked at me probingly, as if intrigued, then walked up to the canvas and resumed her painting. She was shorter than me, slender in build, with blonde hair gathered on top of her head. She did something with her hand in front of the painting, made a few swift motions with the palette knife, and suddenly it was as if the face within its depths materialised and came to life. Something was looking out at me.

‘So you’re Johanne?’ Sofia said and turned to face me. She smiled courteously – almost indulgently – and extended her hand.

‘So, what brings you here?’

I wasn’t sure whether she meant to the barn or, more generally, to this area.

‘I wanted to ask Mikael something,’ I said.

‘You can ask me,’ she answered. ‘It’s my house too.’

For a long time, I couldn’t tell whether Mikael and Sofia were still a couple after all. Her presence in and around the house confused me. I’d come downstairs into the hall in the morning and discover that my wellies had disappeared, or that the bag of pears I bought the day before was empty, and later bump into Sofia, with wellies on and holding a pear, who’d say: ‘Oh, sorry. I thought they were Mikael’s.’ When I saw her wearing what had to be one of his shirts, its sleeves rolled up above the elbows, I didn’t know whether it was a relic from back when they were married, or if she had been upstairs just now to fetch it from his closet.

Worst were the fights. Mikael and Sofia fought the way you only fight with someone you’re still intimately connected to. She would become furious in a way I’d almost call lustful. Maybe that was why I felt so uncomfortable when she stood in front of Mikael, screaming at him – it reminded me of something...

How do I go about describing this time?

I thought I was surrounded by people when I lived in the city. But in this house there were people around us constantly – that’s how I remember it, and Sofia drifted about at the periphery of our relationship like a shadow, or a small thundercloud which sometimes blew over and other times struck with full force. It’s the time Mikael and I spent alone together I think of most. The small pockets of time

where there were no other witnesses: It's these I want to pick up, like jellyfish, and hold to the light. See the filaments inside.

It's almost dark now. A line of pink smoulders on the horizon, but the warm orange rays I saw among the tree trunks moment ago are now gone. I didn't lift my gaze in time to observe the daily wonder: the light that fades in minutes, leaving luminous threads in its wake. It's beautiful when night falls. The sky takes on a materiality, the darkness comes alive, and stars appear everywhere: immense constellations that twinkle and pulsate. I've never seen anything like it in the city. At night there's not a sound apart from the distant hum of traffic.

Puss is no longer purring, she's fallen asleep. Her legs kick. I went out into the garden earlier to hang balls of birdseed in the apple tree, and she was beside herself with delight over all the little birds – tits, finches, sparrows – which suddenly come flocking to her territory. She extends her front paws and curls them up, as if grabbing hold of something, dreaming of hunt and light. I'll lift her onto the bed and go for a walk, feel the final remnants of the day on my face. I pull on wellies and a jumper of Mikael's that fits under my coat. The air is crisp and cold. When I reach the barrier on the gravel road between the fields, I turn around – quickly – to look for the sun over the ridge. It's still there, just barely: a band of burning red across the dark earth.

Here's another beginning:

I had been living with Mikael for a few months when one evening we stayed at the table long after dinner, talking. It wasn't unusual for us to eat together, or to sit around and talk afterwards. Outside it had grown pitch black.

'Are you still hungry?' he asked. 'It's late.'

He stood up and took out bread and milk. I watched his back as he stood by the kitchen counter. It occurred to me that I didn't want to go to bed after eating the slice of bread. I wanted to keep sitting here, talking to Mikael. There was an energy radiating from him, he turned and looked at me with a warm, interested gaze. I said something, and he threw back his head and laughed, loudly and heartily. I'd never seen anyone do that before.

Outside the winds had picked up, we heard the gales whipping round the corners of the house. We said goodnight at the top of the stairs, outside my room. Suddenly I could feel my vulva, as if part of me had awoken. Heat flooded through my arms. I wanted to let myself sink into Mikael's body. Where did this desire come from? We stood silently across from one another, I could see his chest rising and falling. He stood very straight and looked at me solemnly. I wanted him, I didn't know the urge could be so strong, but it was; it had been there for a long time. He placed his hand on my shoulder.

'I don't know what's going on,' he said. 'You live here.'

I pressed my cheek against the warm back of his hand. He turned it around so his palm became a bowl, and I laid my cheek in the bowl and looked up at him.

'Oh,' he said. 'Wow.'

He took a step forward and placed his other hand on the side of my face. I thought I could hear his heartbeat, but maybe it was just the sound of my own blood flowing through my veins, because Mikael's hands were covering both my ears. He placed his fingertips on my head, and when he slid his fingers underneath my hair, I nearly turned to liquid. I leaned back into his fingertips, and he held me that way: I was just a head. Mikael looked almost startled. Then he kissed me. His lips were soft and cold from the milk he had just drunk. He took a step forward, pressed his body into mine and inserted a thigh between my legs. I let all my weight sink onto his thigh and drove my face into his chest. He wrapped a hand around my neck.

Once I asked Mikael why he and Sofia had had a child. We were in the smaller bathroom upstairs; thin afternoon light fell through the roof window and coated the objects in the room in its lustre. Mikael sat on the toilet's closed lid.

'I longed for someone to direct my love and attention at,' he said.

Mikael told me about his youth. While he spoke, he formed a cup with his hands. I don't think he noticed. He gathered his hands on his thighs with his palms facing upwards, as if to drink from a stream. I was reminded of the story of Thumbelina who's born from a tulip and sails away on a lily pad. In his hands' cup: the dream of a child.

Day two

Yesterday I said that I got up from my desk and walked out across the fields. I wrote it down before I got up and went, of course. But it was precisely as I described it: the sun across the ridge, the darkness closing over the earth like the lid of a box. It's a liberty I take. I realise it may give the impression that I'm just sitting here making things up, but I suppose that's a risk one always runs.

I'm sitting at the desk looking out at the water lapping softly against the rocks in the cove, and across the fields, where the soil has turned its black underside to the sky. I look towards the trees which draw a sharp line to the east. Visibility is poor, everything appears grainy. Early morning is so beautiful and brief. Soon the sun will rise above the ridgeline and let its flat rays wash across the land. An opening on the horizon – then it all goes fast. The sky sets into motion, grows brighter, and the animals emerge, the deer and birds. The trees gain contours, bark and branches. The fog across the pasture lifts.

Here is what I can say about the landscape surrounding the white house: In spring the grass is covered by scilla, also known as squills. You wake up, and it's as if the cove's blue water has overflowed its banks. In the woods is a vale that's cool like a cellar in summer, and warm like a pocket in autumn and winter. Sometimes, when it's drizzling and foggy and a smoke-like vapour fills the air – where does it come from? – the world seems almost yellow.

Every time I reach a certain curve in the road, the dogs in one of the gardens begin to bark, sending echoes throughout the whole landscape. As if a glass wall beyond the fields were throwing the sound back at me. When I went out yesterday evening, I passed the house where I've never seen any people. Only the traces they leave behind: the tractor in the yard, a watering can in the grass beneath the trampoline with its torn net. Enormous speckled hens rummage about in the gravel. Their bodies appear far too heavy for their twiggy legs, they look like they were made in a lab.

Down at the junction by the grocer's, I spotted the old man. He lives at the nursing home there. He was standing by the gate, looking up at the sky. He isn't allowed out on his own after dark – he can go to the gate, but no further. I think he's

a walk-taker, like me. He itches to feel the clear evening air against his neck and wrists and put one foot in front of the other. I imagine he grew up not far from here. That he has lived most of his life in the village. He has a daughter and a grandchild, whom he rarely sees. He could be in his nineties.

Out at sea, a storm was brewing. I turned back, but before I made it home the dark clouds had blown across land, and the rain came pouring down over this small world of ours.

My mother made me a walk-taker. As a child, I would go strolling with her after dinner in our suburban neighbourhood. We would walk in the dark and look through people's windows, into their lit-up homes. There were so many houses I dreamt of living in, and occasionally there'd be one which seemed appallingly bleak. I liked watching people in their kitchens best. It reminded me of the fairy tale about the swineherd – in fact, he's a prince in disguise – who boils a pot where, if you hold a finger in the steam, you can smell what's being cooked in every house in town. It wasn't just seeing how other people lived that appealed to me: who had fancy things in their windowsills, who watched TV while they ate. Here and there lived children who came home late from training and ate dinner in their football kits. It was knowing that all these people had each their own life, a long day behind them now coming to a close. Every one of them had experienced something, thought something, grown tired, and here we were, looking in without them seeing us. It was also spending time with my mother without talking. We simply walked, together, in the dark. The walk would end with us returning to our own house – a yellow brick bungalow with a white garage – and my mother saying: 'This one looks cosy, let's go inside!'

I remember the peculiar sense of estrangement which occasionally struck me when I lived in the capital with my first husband. I was working at the women's magazine, where I had become increasingly stuck – despite having been there for a long time, I never got the interesting assignments. When I came home in the afternoon, I'd sometimes stop in the middle of the living room, keys in my hand and purse over my shoulder, overcome by a feeling of having let myself into the wrong flat. But it wasn't the wrong flat, this was our home. The round table beneath the pendant lamp, the overstuffed bookshelves. The flowers in the vase. It all had an aura of replaceability,

as if my husband or my job or my home – or I myself – could just as well be swapped out with something else. When we divorced, the rooms in the flat acquired a different tone. I mean that both literally and figuratively. The empty rooms, almost without furniture, took on new acoustics. For a few months, it felt to me as if a light emanated from everything (the few items that remained), a kind of meaning or significance, and all I had to do was reach out my hand to take part in the radiance of things.

The flat was on the eighth floor and opened out to a flat rooftop. Protruding from the middle of the roof was a ventilation pipe, like the periscope of a submarine. The pipe transected the entire building, from the ground-floor pizza joint and through the kitchens on every floor. In the evening, you could smell the thousand smells of all that was being cooked, a commingling of meat, spices, fish. I got in the habit of sitting up there, drinking wine and looking out across the city. I didn't think of 'The Swineherd' then, but 'The Shepherdess and the Chimneysweep,' the story of the two porcelain figurines who escape up through the chimney because they can't have each other. Above them is the starry sky, and below the city with all its rooftops. And for the little shepherdess, the world is much too big! I sat there sipping wine from my mother's old wineglasses and felt wealthy. All of this was mine: the flat roof, the city, the night, the darkened flat behind me.

In the wake of the divorce, I slept with a number of men and women. I'm not ashamed of it – the number, I mean – though there were plenty of things during that period about which one could easily feel shame. I had met my first husband early in life, and when we divorced and I was just three years from thirty, I felt as though I had never really been young. I needed to reclaim my youth. Maybe that's why I didn't feel any particular anxiety or resistance when I slept with Mikael the first time. I was used to succumbing to my desire, it made no difference whether it was at work or in my social circle or neighbourhood. What I'm saying is, I wasn't particularly worried about the consequences when Mikael and I crossed that border – the night I leaned against him at the top of the stairs, and he understood that I wanted him. I had already burned a lot of bridges when I moved into this house.

One morning I woke up and sensed that it was winter. It was the light filtering through a narrow slit between the curtains and windowsill that told me. It must have snowed. I lay still and listened, the sounds were muffled, as if the landscape out there had been wadded. The bed smelled of Mikael. I got up, wrapped the duvet around me and pulled back the curtains. It had snowed, astonishing amounts! Everything was white, the trees, the yard, the fields. It was cold by the window. Then I heard the door open and close in the hallway below, Mikael had either just left or already returned.

I went downstairs, still wrapped in the duvet. His boots stood on a newspaper on the floor, he was here, he was in the kitchen washing his hands. When he noticed me, he came over and slipped his dripping, ice-cold hands beneath the duvet, under my T-shirt.

‘Imagine having someone like you in one’s kitchen,’ he said.

It was as if the house showed itself from a new angle, revealed a secret it had kept hidden from me. This was the Winter House. It felt different being inside when through the kitchen windows I could see snow instead of the yard, snow instead of the pasture beyond the yard, and instead of the fields beyond the pasture, snow. It was as if Mikael and I were alone in an utterly untouched world. As if he had fought his way through a white landscape for a hundred years to reach me, the sleeper, and woken me with his hands on my back.

I tumbled back into time.

‘Why did you pick me as your tenant?’ I asked as he guided me back up the stairs with his two hands.

‘There was no one else who wanted the small room out here,’ he said. ‘And you amazed me.’

I had seen Mikael naked once before we slept together. It was dawn, practically still night, I had come out of my room and sat down on the stairs. I couldn’t decide whether to go to the kitchen or back into bed. Suddenly the door to the big ground-floor bathroom opened, the one I never used. Steam and loud music – Rolling Stones – poured out, and there was Mikael, stark naked. I froze; in a moment he would come walking up the stairs and find me here. But he went to the kitchen and poured himself a glass of water. He stood by the counter drinking water and looking out at the garden, then he refilled the glass and stood there and looked out.

There was something magical about that first winter. I had been living in the house for six months and already seen the fields cast off their lavish, green-and-yellow cloak to reveal mile upon mile of brown-black flatlands, this perennial shedding of skin which I have observed with the same mild wonder every year since. In my memory, it only snowed this one night, and the snow remained on the ground for many months.

Mikael was rarely home. He worked on the farms in the area, and sometimes he did smaller carpentry jobs on commission. Then he'd usually be in the workshop in the garage. My first novel had been published while I still lived in the city. In that novel I had left behind everything I moved away from, the marriage, the capital, I felt done with all of it. This winter I was working on a new book. Out here, I could live off the income from my articles and consultancy assignments, and spend much of my time on the novel. I wrote in the mornings and evenings, but the long hours in the middle of the day have always been difficult for me. Those few hours of daylight. The sound of tyres across the gravel, Maren's laughter from the living room or the winter sun finally emerging outside the window were enough for me to shut the computer and leave the office.

We mostly lived in bed, Mikael and I. That's how I think of it now. During the day we led separate lives. In bed, at night, we were together. I slept lightly and woke often. There was Mikael, so very close, I'd snuggle against his warm skin. I loved sleeping in the big, cool bedroom with him. The bed was a little too narrow. Mikael got up early and left the house before I woke. Then Puss would jump into bed, curl up at my feet and warm me like a little oven. When I finally did get up, I could spend all day looking forward to lying down next to Mikael again.

In the horrible period before the divorce, I'd wake up each morning from a dream in good spirits, blissfully ignorant. Only the next moment did the grief and rage come tumbling down onto me. It was as if a heavy sack was placed on my chest before I had to get up and fight through the day. Now it was the other way around. I might wake from a sombre dream, defeated and downcast, and suddenly remember that Mikael had just been lying next to me, the sheets were still warm, and I'd feel so happy! So incredibly happy.

One Sunday, when spring had loosened the frost from the ground, I took Maren to see the horses which had been brought out to pasture on the other side of the woods. The air had a sharpness to it, ice rimed the grass, but it wasn't cold. It smelled of wet soil where the snow was melting. The moisture changed the light and the colours, maybe the sounds, too? Everything appeared stronger, more vivid: the white sunlight, the birdsong which incised the air. On the stones which formed a knee-high fence along the gravel road glowed lush, pale-green moss. Maren scurried ahead on her short legs.

‘Careful!’

It was a lengthy expedition. Up to the little forest which extends across the landscape like a reclining body. On the other side of the forest, the landscape opens up, wheat stalks ripple on the fields and the water glints in the cove. Here was the logging area with naked, little stumps. I told Maren about the time her dad and I had freed a fawn that had got tangled up in a wire fence; I pointed – right over there. A little baby fawn. Maren stopped on the road and held up her hands, perplexed.

‘But where was its mummy?’ she said.

I lay a hand around her neck.

‘She must have been right nearby.’

The horses stood at the bottom of the enclosure. At the sight of us, they came loping over, the small one in front and the bigger two trailing behind. At first, I thought it was a foal with two parents, but now I saw that the smallest horse was fully grown. Slowly they approached us. I could tell they understood that Maren was a child, they were patient when I lifted her up. Soft, warm muzzles reached over the fence.

She fell asleep in my arms as we walked the last stretch back through the woods. She was heavy, I carried her the whole way. It made me happy. Her warm head smelled of biscuits and grass. When we were nearly home, Maren woke up and began to babble about the horses with her cheek pressed against mine, disoriented and flushed. But it was a dream: She had ridden a horse. She whispered it, like a secret. Galloped at full speed across the fields. Suddenly she turned her head and kissed me on the mouth.

I was reminded of the grief I had felt at age five or six, when my parents couldn't or wouldn't carry me anymore. I thought of it when I saw Maren clambering around on

Mikael like an animal on a cliff, or when she came over to me and reached up her arms to be lifted. Such trust she had in the world, in us! She would climb onto a table or a chair, stretch out her arms to the sides and proclaim: 'I'm jumping!' And every time, a grown-up would appear, as if by magic, to catch her.

It's a trust in the world that can't be restored after early childhood. Still, when I held Mikael in bed, I couldn't help but wonder whether he did in fact recapture a bit that weightlessness from his earliest years. He'd grow so calm and tired in my arms. But when Mikael slept heavily, he really vanished into himself. It frightened me. There was no retrieving him from down there. If I tried to wake him, if I spoke to him and shook his shoulder, he'd make a sound, open his eyes just a sliver, then sink back, downwards. He worked all day and went out like a light in the evening. He was so far away. I worried about his health, that he would wear himself out.

For a while after the divorce, I slept with a very tall man. One day, when I was standing naked in front of him while he sat on a chair, he suddenly flung one arm around my waist and stood up. And I went with him! He lifted me that way, with one arm, and placed his chin against my stomach to look up at me, towering high above him. It was extremely arousing.

This was what I was thinking about as I came walking down the gravel path, around the bend to our house, while Maren's little hand clasped the neck of my jumper. I hadn't thought about the tall man in years. He appeared there in the bend, like a fish in a well, and picked me up. And like a fish swishing its tail, I sensed a faint flick of desire as I walked along, carrying the child in my arms.

Another memory: We were underground, in the cool, damp corridors of the old cisterns in the capital. There was a smell down there like in a church, of stone and water, and like in a forest, of moss and bog. I didn't know the tall man very well. We showed our tickets and descended into the ground. In the pitch dark, while the other visitors walked by clutching the white ropes, he held my head in both hands and tilted it backwards so he could kiss me. The sound of trickling water. The smell of wet stone. I remember: hands and mouth. And the light which poured from the exit as we rose back up to the surface.

When Maren and I returned from our outing, we heard the loud voices of Mikael and Sofia from inside the barn even before we made it across the yard.

‘You’re leaving our daughter with a stranger! I think it’s about time you start taking some responsibility.’

‘I don’t understand. Johanne has been living here for eight months. You complain about not being able to work when Maren is home. What’s the problem?’

‘The problem is that you don’t take responsibility! Johanne is your tenant. What if Maren is hurt?’

‘She won’t get hurt. They just went for a little walk.’

I had stopped in the middle of the yard at the sound of voices; now I noticed Maren on my hip, staring over at the barn with her mouth open. A bit of saliva had pooled on her lower lip. I hurried across the yard and up the front steps, quickly letting us into the house. In the front hall, I sat her on the bench and pulled off her muddy boots.

‘Want to play advertising agency?’

Maren’s face softened into a little smile.

‘I want to draw,’ she said.

While I got out the drawing supplies, I weighed the possibility of Sofia not knowing about Mikael and me. Had he not told her about our relationship? We slept together in the master bedroom. My room was used as an office. It had to be obvious to anyone who looked inside, I thought, that no one had lain in that bed for many months. I thought of all the times Sofia had gone up to sing lullabies to Maren while Mikael and I were downstairs. It seemed unthinkable that she hadn’t peeked into the big bedroom and spotted my T-shirt on the bed, or a face cream on the dresser, these small items that I – admittedly – left out on purpose. In the kitchen I covered the dining table with newspaper, and Maren arranged her favourite-coloured crayons in front of her. Purple, green and pink.

‘Today we’re selling tropical holidays,’ I said. ‘I’ll write, and you draw.’

Maren drew on the back of some of my discarded printouts. Her mother had taught her to draw tulips with three simple motions, and lately she had drawn nothing else: tulips, tulips, tulips.

When Mikael came inside later on, Maren was cross-legged on the rug, absorbed in a children’s TV show, and I said: ‘Does Sofia not know we’re together? Haven’t you told her?’

He smiled guardedly.

‘She knows,’ he said. ‘She’s just trying to provoke me. It’s... a little hard to explain.’

I went over to him, and his arms enveloped me like wings. His chin was level with my mouth when I looked up.

‘But you’ve told her that we’re a couple?’

‘She knows. But it’s none of her business.’

A flock of geese just flew past above my head, honking and flapping, and I caught myself uttering aloud: ‘Wow.’ I had gone out onto the terrace to drink my coffee standing up, in the day’s last sunlight. It’s still possible to feel its warmth if you face it directly. The geese are heading southwards. They were flying so low over the house I could practically feel the blasts of air from their enormous wingbeats all the way down here. I looked around to see whether Puss was nearby, but I was alone. So I’ve begun talking to myself, it appears. Or to nature. Or simply to Mikael. It strikes me that in a way, it’s the same thing.

Yesterday the clocks were set back. All day I walked around thinking: Really, it’s already three! Really, it’s already four! And I relished the extra hour in which I could go about thinking that thought. But today the delight is gone. It’s half past four, and the sun is swiftly setting, its red glimmer already among the trees.

As I close the terrace door behind me, Puss appears out of nowhere and claws at it. She always comes the second after I go back inside. She rubs herself against my legs; when I bend down to scratch her head, I catch the spiced scent of chimney smoke in her fur. Then she turns and slips back out. She doesn’t want to come inside – she just wants to make sure ‘inside’ still exists.

For a long time, I speculated about Sofia and her accident, about how it might have affected her. Much of the time she seemed so volatile, but in other instances she exuded an almost zen-like composure. It made me curious. I tried to bring it up with Mikael, but he replied as if he didn’t understand what I meant.

‘It was exhausting because Maren was so small,’ he said. ‘It was exhausting for both of us, I mean. Sofia would quickly overtire and had to rest a lot. But it passed.’

But what I meant was the fights. How Sofia would fly into a rage, from one moment to the next. These outbursts came as if from nowhere – that’s how it felt sometimes, like standing under a clear blue sky and suddenly finding yourself soaked to the bone. We were in bed, Mikael had already been up for a few hours but had come back upstairs to me.

‘I thought it had something to do with the accident,’ I said, ‘... the way she gets so angry. Something to do with synapses and neurons and that sort of thing.’

An inscrutable look came over his face.

‘I hadn’t thought about that,’ he said. ‘I get what you mean. But she was like this before, too. At least in the later years.’

He suddenly became very quiet and stared blankly into space. Then he turned to me and pulled the warm duvet up over our heads.

‘No more talk about Sofia,’ he said.

Mikael and I, we hardly ever fought. Our little quarrels were wordless, as if neither of us wanted to waste energy on something so foolish; falling out only to make up again. There was a tenderness which kept us from saying the worst things. But we could hurt each other, of course we could.

Like the night Mikael helped with the lambing down at the largest of the nearby farms. He took part in this event every year, but for me it was entirely new. I felt so anxious that evening, I couldn’t quite understand why. Something about the small, slippery animals being born and all the things that could go wrong, a leg getting caught or a placenta not delivering, made me feel strangely crazy. I lay awake for what felt like half the night. Finally, I heard the door open downstairs in the hall and soon after, the sound of water in the big bathroom. The whole ordeal seemed to take forever. Then he came up the stairs and into the bedroom, warm and damp from the shower, and climbed into bed. I was so tired. Mikael straddled me and kissed me deeply, there was an abandon to his movements. And I was so tired.

‘Just do whatever you want,’ I said.

That made him angry. One of the lambs had died, I later found out, and the mother had mourned with such a loud, plaintive sound. Mikael was full of adrenaline

and life and wonder. But he didn't want me, not like this. He got back up and went to the attic to sleep in my old bed.

My body went cold. It wasn't clear to me who had rejected whom. Here I was, waiting for him almost all night, and he walks through the door like that! I hovered on the edge of sleep. Half-dreams flickered past my eyes. Then I was sucked back out of depths, as if the house called to me with a loud whisper: 'Johanne!'

I lurched up. No one had called my name. The house was quiet. I sat in bed alone and was wide-awake. I must have summoned myself from within sleep.

Later in the night, Mikael came back and laid down beside me. I was awoken when he crept under the duvet; it was past three in the morning. He rested his hand on my hip. And when I woke up again, it was morning, and he was holding me close, his stomach against my back.

Another time:

We had a hushed argument one night, right after making love. Or did we argue because we were making love, and then stopped? Mikael rolled onto his side, turning his back to me.

'Fine,' he said. 'Let's draw the line here.'

I was furious. He didn't get to decide where we drew the line! I got up and went downstairs. Two squares of light fell across the living room floor from the big panes in the terrace doors. I opened the door and stepped outside. A white gleam tinged the air – for a moment I thought the ground was covered in snow. The pasture glowed with night, as if drained of all the day's colour. It was because of the fog. Tiny particles of water refreshed my skin. When I slipped back into bed and turned to face Mikael, he placed his hand over my face. I think it was a habit from working with the animals. He did the same thing with Puss: placed his hand over her head like a dome, and she burrowed her little nose into the dome and licked him between his fingers.

So another day has passed. I've started writing about Mikael – not just in my thoughts. There are many printed pages here in front of me. How strange. I'm the one who wrote them, but when I place my hand on the stack, it's as though it contains something unknown and intangible, something I can only long for. The

paper is still warm from the printer. The past two days I've felt oddly uplifted, the way you might feel before a date when you're in love. Expectant and alive. And young. Soon it will be November.

I should mention that I no longer sleep in the master bedroom. I've begun sleeping in the attic, where I also write. I don't remember when or why I first came in here to lie in my old bed. Maybe I couldn't fall asleep. It felt like returning to one's childhood room. I go down to the kitchen and brew coffee and cook, and I spend a few late-morning hours reading in the living room when the sun shines through the terrace doors there. But I feel most at ease here, in my old room beneath the roof.

~

They're blowing up mountains further inland now. I can hear the blasts at night, glimpse flashes of light in the distance. Someone has marked the map with a pen: Here's where the motorway will go. Someone has drawn a line. Tonight, a man is burning something, perhaps garden waste, in a barrel in his backyard while an immense round moon shines between the trees. There are lights on in the houses. An outdoor lamp that switches on when I walk by feels auspicious. As I head home, dense clouds have gathered. They loom above the horizon, dim, heavy with rain. The strip of orange dividing the dark earth and the equally dark sky is magnificent.

Day three

Across the water this morning was the type of clouds that seem to grow out of themselves, vaulting upwards and outwards in large domes, like live edifices. I went for a long walk through the woods and across the fields, there was a mild breeze in the air.

I think you can spend a whole lifetime trying to grasp a landscape. I had walked the same route hundreds of times before I discovered the little path which runs from The Meadow through the woods and out to the fields on the other side. We call it The Meadow because this small, fallow field stands apart from everything else in the area. No one cultivates the soil, no animals graze here, an entirely untouched plot of land growing wildly year after year. On The Meadow begins the secret passageway someone – human or animal – has trampled. The path had been there the whole time, and I hadn't seen it. Until I came walking through the woods one day some years ago and noticed the little artery winding through the trees. A hidden world, it seemed, in the familiar. I walked the trail this morning and thought about writing, about reading the same paragraph again and again until I see what it says.

Puss has slinked out to the apple tree. She flattens herself against the grass, watching the birds, her ears pressed backwards. Her reflexes aren't as quick anymore; the birds know they can eat undisturbed. I think they take pleasure in taunting her. Every once in a while they'll swoop down from the seed ball in the tree, practically grazing the cat's back. How many times hasn't she come home with a sparrow or nuthatch and delivered it on the doormat? Sometimes a blackbird or a starling, and once a jay with its brilliant blue wings. For a long time, I couldn't figure out what killed them. They lay motionless outside the door, breathing rapidly. Did they die of fright? I couldn't see any broken limbs. The soft chest heaved, the silky throat quivered, they were so beautiful. And then they died. Later I learned – I don't remember from where – that the birds die of internal bleeding. The cat's sharp claws cut through the abdomen, through the thin skin and puncture their inner organs. Right now, they're happily chirping away.

The skin of each of my fingertips is enflamed, they tingle and pulsate each time I press a key. I burned myself when cooking, forgot to use the mitt when lifting the pot.

The morning after the lambing, when Michael brought me over to see the tiny little creatures, he said: 'I'm sorry about last night. I shouldn't have ambushed you that way. I'm just a very passionate person.'

We had been walking hand in hand to the farm, which lies about forty-five minutes from the house. The landscape was waking from its slumber; sprouts of green dotted the ditches along the road. Mikael greeted the farmer and let us into the warm barn where the lambs were.

I was speechless. What was that supposed to mean? I loved sleeping with Mikael, his strong arms when he lifted himself over me, the smell of his skin. I pulled my knees to my shoulders and hugged him close. Was there something I couldn't give him? I thought of Sofia, the way she moved, the thin jumpers that somehow clung to her body. She would touch Mikael, rest a hand on his arm or chest while she spoke. It testified to old habit, an intimacy the body didn't forget. Or was there a deliberateness to those gestures? Sofia struck me as a very passionate person. In every sense of the word.

The newborn lambs with their soft, curly wool were already on their feet, tumbling around in the pen. They bumped their hard foreheads against their mother's belly, searching for milk. Perhaps Mikael sensed I was hurt, because he came over and wrapped his arms around me.

'Sometimes I lose control when I get angry,' he said.

For a moment, I felt that he and Sofia were made for each other. One of the lambs came over and sniffed the hand I had placed on top of the gate. Then it stuck out its tongue and licked me.

Once Mikael said: 'You should have seen her. Sofia was magnetic. Everyone wanted to be with her. She's wildly intelligent, you know.' Why did he tell me these things?

~

The first part of spring had passed, the time of thaw and drip, everything wet, wet. When trees trickled and let pour, and lumps of snow skidded down the roof, hitting

the terrace with heavy thuds. Blue scilla cropped up all over the pasture, and crocus and thimbleweed. It was then the animals appeared. Large skeletons I found one day in a glade in the woods. Some of the bones were still covered with sunken tufts of fur. Breathlessly I hurried home to Mikael and reported my discovery.

‘A terrible predator!’ I yelled, ‘... an epidemic!’

One of the neighbours, it turned out, had deposited cadavers collected from the roadside throughout winter there.

I was busy at work with what would become my second novel. It was about a mother who loses contact with her adult daughter and sets out on a journey to find her. One day when I was stuck on a particularly difficult passage, I borrowed Mikael’s bike and took a long ride towards the village. The trees swayed lightly, it smelled of earth, there was hardly any breeze. I could hear a tractor on a field behind the forest, a lark sat on a phone line singing. The quiet and calm and the big sky above: I felt cared for, like I was being carried as I came coasting down the road.

I had been living in this landscape for a long time before I noticed what was missing. It was the clamour of the city. Cars, bicycle bells, sirens. Out here it was so quiet. Nothing except water trickling, a squirrel jumping between two treetops, wheat rustling in the wind. But those were singular sounds. In the capital, I had grown accustomed to perpetual background noise, a great, buzzing roar behind everything. As I biked, I listened for the big sound behind the smaller sounds, but it didn’t exist.

There were hardly any cars on the road. Every once in a while I was overtaken by a van or a moped. I could hear them coming long before they passed me. When I reached the hill which leads up to town, I could see the cemetery, exposed on its perch up high in the terrain, at the mercy of the elements. The old, crooked gravestones lean against the hillside, and at the top is the old linden tree which Mikael claims has been there since before the church was built. The cemetery is situated up there to protect it from flooding.

I had to stand on the pedals to climb the hill. Across the low stone fence, I spotted someone sitting among the graves. A silhouette on the bench by the church wall. I biked on and realised it was the small, slender figure of Sofia in a windbreaker, her blonde hair gathered in a bun. She was sitting there, facing a gravestone. I didn’t call

out to her. She looked withdrawn, as if she didn't want to be disturbed. She was still as a statue. Maybe she was listening for something.

When I came home, I found Mikael in the workshop, polishing the armrest of a chair.

'Are Sofia's parents alive?' I asked.

Mikael looked up from his work, puzzled.

'Yes? Why do you ask?'

I thought of the gravestone Sofia had been sitting in front of at the cemetery. It didn't seem like any old stone, like she had just sat down on the bench to rest.

'No reason,' I said. 'But where is she from, originally?'

'Sofia?'

'Where do her parents live?'

Mikael sighed.

'They divorced when she was a child. Her mother still lives in the capital. Her father... I'm not sure.' Then his body language changed, and he resumed his polishing.

'I don't understand why you're so interested in her,' he said with his eyes fixed on his work. 'Sofia is my ex-wife. She's Maren's mother. You don't have to worry about her.'

Around this time, I began to understand a little more of the background to Sofia's rage. I had picked up scraps from her outbursts now and then, and gradually – and for lack of sufficient information – cobbled together a story. Sofia had grown up in the capital. She had studied art in London. She had never dreamt of living here 'out in the sticks,' as I'd heard her scream more than once. She was angry about having to be alone with Maren half the time, it detracted from her work. And she was still furious about the birth, now, four years later: the panic in the labour room, the feeling of decisions being made over her head. The fight for life. And in the time afterwards, the little creature who fussed in the heatwave, who couldn't sleep when it was so hot. All of this was concealed beneath her words, I thought to myself, when she began to yell.

'It was a dramatic birth,' Mikael explained one of the few times I got him to tell me about it. 'We were scared something would go wrong.' That was all he said.

~

One evening he appeared in the door to my room. I looked up from the computer and saw him standing there, leaning against the doorway. I got the sense he had been standing there for a while. It was as if the threshold marked a boundary. At night we slept closely intertwined in the double bed in the master bedroom, but Mikael had never stepped foot in my room. He stood by the door which I had left open and regarded the stacks of books and papers on the bed and on the desk.

‘We’re going out to look at the stars,’ he said.

‘Is that Sofia’s idea?’

He didn’t answer, but smiled a little.

‘Put on some warm clothes,’ he said. ‘If you want to join.’

We turned off all the lights inside before going out. Mikael and Sofia had rolled out sleeping mats on the terrace and fetched duvets, blankets and sheepskins. Maren was wrapped up in a sleeping bag in the middle of the pile with a beanie pulled down over her ears. I laid down at the edge. I had put on wool socks and a warm scarf, the evening air was still brisk and cold. I saw the sky for the first time. I don’t just mean out here – this was the first time I really saw the sky, the whole entire firmament, anywhere. A strip of bright blue drew an arc at bottom of the horizon. Above the arc, the sky rose up, deep and dark and concave. Stars formed twinkling pictures. Some tiny and compact, like the microscopic drawings Maren made with the crayon clasped in her hand and her head resting on her arm, others big and clear. The moon shone so brightly I could see the others’ faces when I turned my head: Mikael, Maren, Sofia. It was so beautiful I almost wished I were alone. Please don’t let Sofia start to sing, I thought. Beneath the heap of quilts and blankets, Mikael took my hand.

I notice a sound. It’s been there before. That is to say, I’ve heard it a few times, but haven’t registered it until now. It’s the doorbell. In the last hour, someone has rung my doorbell two or three times. And again, just now. Who’s trying to get a hold of me? The thought I had been sitting with, a thin silver thread in the air, is instantly

gone. I won't be going downstairs to open. But I would have liked to know who it was.

Puss is lying on the desk next to the computer. Every so often, she lifts her head and looks at me with her alligator eyes. They're big and round like marbles; bisected by the narrow pupil. Yellow-green. Her eyes are beautiful and empty, in a way, but not as if void of consciousness. She's an entirely objective creature who looks at you without judging.

'Such a sweet puss,' I tell her.

Whoever it was that rang the bell, he or she is gone now. I stroke Puss across her back, and she rests her head on the table and squints. Her third eyelid slowly slides out from the corner of her eye.

The day after we went stargazing, the weather turned. A warm wind blew inland, so strong the rubbish bins toppled in the shed. It felt unsettling. I sat in the attic trying to work but had to give up after a few hours.

I went downstairs. As usual I had the house to myself at this time of day. Large clouds drifted quickly across the sky, periodically blocking out the sun so the living room became dark and impenetrable, only to let blinding light shoot into every corner where I had just turned on the lamps. In a corner of the kitchen, behind the dining table, Mikael had built a spot for me. He installed a bench beneath the window, painted it blue and put cushions on it. Now I curled up on the bench and pressed my feet against the wall.

There was nothing I could do to change my mood. Or maybe I didn't want to change it, there was something pleasurable and self-pitying about lying there as the daylight waned, not being productive. My body was sorrowful, angry, slightly unnerved, I can't describe it any better than that it was like the feeling of having been deceived. I might have slept. When Mikael got home, he came into the kitchen and switched on the radio. He turned up the volume. I heard him take out a pot and turn on the faucet. I rolled over, watched him for a moment in his own world. Then he noticed me, I saw surprise and recognition slide across his face in quick succession.

'You're lying here?' he said.

He stood still, as if a little frightened. Then he walked around the dining table and came over to the bench, bent down and kissed me.

‘Did you have a good day?’ he said.

Something about his tone put me slightly on guard. I felt so sad. I wanted Mikael to hold me, and at the same time I felt this incomprehensible rage inside.

‘I’m sick of living out here,’ I said.

Mikael took a step back and looked at me.

‘You don’t mean that,’ he said and returned to the sink.

I stood up and shuffled into the living room. The delightful anger was gone, instead I felt heavy and miserable. I could feel Mikael keeping an eye on me, following my movements around the house. I wanted to knock something over.

When I went up the stairs to the attic – after half an hour? An hour? – my breasts were so sore I had to hold them with one hand. In the other I had a cup of tea. I left without saying a word. When Mikael found me a few hours later, I would be sleeping in my old bed, and he would tell me I was a bad person and had to move out. I took off my clothes, drew the curtains and crawled beneath the duvet while the tea grew cold on the floor.

Mikael stood in the doorway.

‘There’s a cloud hanging over your head,’ he said.

I knew I was being unreasonable, that I didn’t deserve this. I wanted to cry. Why was he so nice?

‘May I lie down with you?’

He lay down behind me in the bed and held me, and I fell asleep almost instantly with his hand on my warm belly. The next day came the blood.

Did I confuse Mikael with another man? Maybe the memory of other men and women lay beneath every conversation, such that I, when speaking to Mikael – with rancour or reverence – was simultaneously addressing all of them. Sometimes I wondered if the things Mikael said to me were meant for me, or if they were really intended for Sofia.

There aren’t many positive things to say about menstruation, but there is this: When I spent an entire day lying in bed and didn’t want to go out, didn’t want to see people, didn’t want to work, it wasn’t because I was a failure. It was because I was like a shooting victim, prostrate, losing blood. When I lay like that a whole day, I

could tell myself: It's just the life force slowly draining out of me. I knew it would return. Joy, vitality, creativity: It would all come rushing back.

I remember the relief when we finally slept together after several days of unease. Finally we were naked, warm and alone together again. I let out a long scream as I sat on top of him. Afterwards followed several hours of sleepy, silent closeness.

So strange to think of. Him inside me. Strange and wonderful.

I'm reminded of an incident a few weeks ago. I touched a deer. Its short fur was at once dry and oily, coarse and smooth.

Two deer were standing at the edge of the pasture when we came outside that morning, Puss and I. The animals had grown winter coats, thicker and more grey. They made their way calmly across the grass, pausing every so often to graze. We followed them from the terrace with our eyes. Then they turned and bounded off, white backsides bobbing. When they reached the old fence towards the neighbour, the largest one jumped over; it must have been a male. But when the female jumped, she was impaled – her groin struck an iron pole and she was caught there, dangling. Not a sound escaped her. She was eerily quiet. I ran down to the road in my slippers. When I got closer, I stopped and approached her slowly. She still didn't make a sound. Her big, black eyes stared at me with terror. The deer kicked her legs, but she was thoroughly stuck.

I once heard a story about a woman on a train as a child – when she looked out the window, she spotted a deer hanging this way, impaled on a fence, while the train calmly slid past. I walked up to the animal and laid my hands on its firm flank. She squirmed and tossed her head, I spoke to her soothingly even though my heart was pounding in my chest. Then I lifted her heavy hind body. The deer kicked her legs and propelled herself over the fence with a mighty leap. A tuft of fur was left on the pole. She bolted, one leg now limping, but after a few metres she stopped and looked back at me. Then she set off again, and I watched the two animals disappear into the woods.

This is one of the few times during the past year when my impulse has been to go out to the garage and tell Mikael what happened. I wanted to see his face when I told him about it, wanted it so much it made me mad.

When I write about the incident now, perhaps it's partly because I'm tormented by an entirely different memory of a fawn that got caught in a wire fence. This has happened before. What is it with these animals? I realise I've avoided the memory. Now I'm beginning to understand what it means and how it has lodged itself in my body, though to this day I'm unsure what was real and what was a dream.

Down by the cove is a building where kids from the capital and big cities come for school camps between March and September. For half the year, their howls ring out in the night.

It was an unmistakable sign of spring. Ever since the snow began to melt, we had seen and heard children in the woods below the house. It was a bit of a show. They arrived in big buses and were unleashed into this exceptional landscape. Then came campfires, singalongs and ghost hunts. Especially the older children fascinated me. Class after class would come, practically identical in clothing and gesture, but already the first night it was as if they underwent a transformation. As if they discarded something, something they had brought with them from the city. Their movements became less tethered.

I would keep an eye on the youngsters from the window in the attic. In the evening, many hours after darkness had fallen, they would howl among the trees. It was too late for them to be awake. They riled each other up, were probably seized by a euphoria they hadn't felt since they were small children. They were overpowered by their games. But their howls weren't pretend. These were the howls of young people who were afraid of dying. Because there was an ominous rustle in the forest, because the sky above them was vast and dark and ceaseless.

Once in a while I'd spot Mikael when he went out to fetch firewood or took the shortcut to the farm across the cove. There was an image in my head which often recurred, originating from my earliest time here. One evening when I was working, I had lifted my head and seen him heading out. He disappeared into the woods. I saw

him in glimpses among the dark trunks, appearing first in a clearing, then scaling a rock. I discerned his figure in the darkness, but suddenly it was as if he dropped off the face of the earth. I lost sight of him. Where did he go? Next thing, I saw him come ambling across the pasture below, towards the water. He crossed the pasture, and suddenly I envisioned the young campers, twenty, maybe thirty of them, come storming out of the woods and ambushing him from all sides.

Mikael and I discovered the little fawn caught in a wire fence one day when he was showing me around the area. It was the summer I moved in. We came down the gravel road, and suddenly I sensed something alive nearby. The fawn couldn't have been many months old. It still had the beautiful white spots on its back, that pattern meant to mimic sunspots on the forest floor when the fawn lies pressed to the ground while its mother searches for food. But now it had stood up and got into trouble. The animal was standing in front of the fence with its thin forelegs planted on the ground, but both hind legs were caught in the wire so that its rear body was lifted above the front.

Mikael stepped cautiously through the dry leaves and pushed aside the ferns. He took hold of the wire loop that had tightened around one hind leg and squeezed its sides to widen the hole. The fawn let out a loud, startled scream when it withdrew its leg. Mikael did the same thing with the other loop, and again the animal screamed – an awful, almost human scream – before retracting its leg and bounding off with stiff leaps.

That night I dreamt of animal cries. Of campers that howled like warriors when they attacked, the fawn stuck in the fence, screaming with pain and fear. A horrible scream. Again and again the animal got caught in the fence and shrieked when Mikael set it free. But then it wasn't animal screams I heard, it was something else. Someone was screaming. Not with fear or pain. It was Sofia. Her drawn-out vowels twisted through the house. She was working her way forwards, her breath resolute, focused. She tilted back her head and closed her eyes, rocked back and forth with precise, powerful thrusts. Her back arched. Her hands on Mikael's chest. Her open mouth.

I didn't want to hear it. I could feel the blood rush to my genitals; I pressed a flat hand against my pubic bone. I could smell myself. My little room was warm and

dark. Sofia's deep moans reverberated between the walls. It was as if she was right behind them, even though the master bedroom was at the other end of the hallway. She was chasing something now, something was building, she pushed it forward, here it came, the sound of my breath laid itself on top of hers. Sofia moaned loudly, she wailed, a powerful wail that became a whimper, she had no more voice left, but she wasn't done, she cried out twice, loud and hard: 'Oh! Oh!'

It was quiet when I woke up. Quieter than usual. It took me a little while to figure out what was different, I lay under the duvet listening. The campers. They had been yelling and howling and singing for days; they were gone.

The sky is flickering so strangely. A thunderstorm rolls by not far off. I hear a low rumble in the distance, bolts of lightning flash across the water; short blinks against a dirty, grey-yellow backdrop.

When I go for walks – even now, the last day in October – I still find glittering sweet wrappers on the forest floor from the last flock of campers.

This afternoon, I walk through the woods and out past the fields. The sun is setting. The white cows stand motionlessly and watch as I pass their enclosure. Down at the foot of the valley I turn around; they're still frozen in the same spot watching me. I don't meet anyone. The old man isn't by the gate outside the nursing home like usual, either. But when I come to the bend in our road, I see the local children running from house to house. So it was them who rang my doorbell. They vanish into a garden just as I round the corner. Little ghosts and witches and skeletons – as the red sun glints among the trees – hunting for sugar.

I hardly bleed anymore. What comes out of me is like dust.

Like dust?

Yes, like dust.