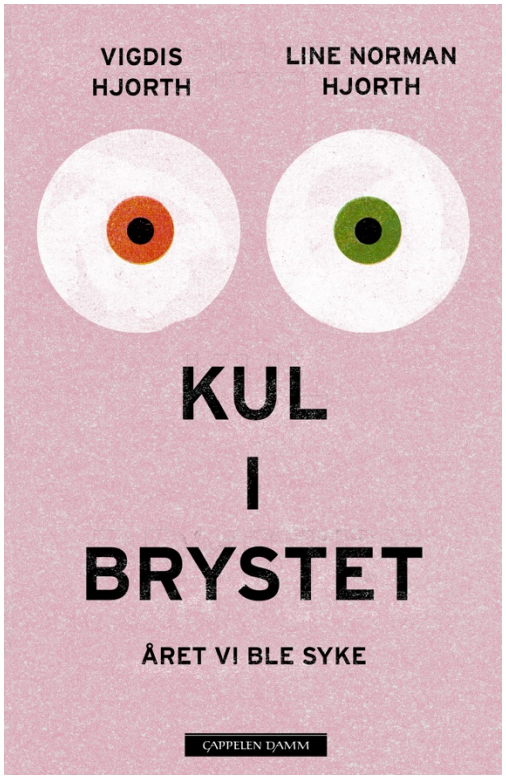
Cappelen Damm Agency *Spring 2025*



Like It or Lump It

Like It or Lump It is a book about the sudden upheaval and change a serious diagnosis can cause.

In spring 2023, mum-of-two Line Norman Hjorth was diagnosed with breast cancer. Barely six months later her mother – author Vigdis Hjorth – received the exact same diagnosis. In this book, where the narrative switches between mother and daughter, we follow the two women through their treatment as both patient and next of kin. Two roles that were completely new for them both, and two roles which can be difficult to balance - and which mother and daughter manage in very different ways. They go through highs and lows, both in terms of medical treatment and their parent-child relationship. But at least they bot got new boobs as part of the process!

This is an exceptionally moving story – unsentimental and yet poignantly narrated.

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Vigdis Hjorth & Line Norman Hjorth

Vigdis Hjorth (b. 1959) is one of Norway's most interesting, contemporary writers. She has won a number of prizes and awards, including The Gyldendal Prize (2011), the Critics Award multiple times, The Honorary Brage Award (2014), the Amalie Skram Award (2014), The Aschehoug Award (2015), the Dobloug Prize (2018), and she was longlisted for the International Booker Prize 2023 for Is mother dead. She has been published in over 30 countries.

Line Norman Hjorth is an associate professor in general literature at the University of Bergen. She also holds a master's degree in film studies from the University of Copenhagen. She made her debut as an author in 2021 with the non-fiction book Credibility in the courtroom, and has co-written books with her mother Vigdis Hjorth.

Reviews

«Mother and daughter Hjorth's story about having cancer is in every way heartbreakingly good.»
DAGBLADET, 6/6 stars

«What mother and daughter Hjorth offer is in fact a language for cancer beyond the metaphors of war and self-help. Even though a serious diagnosis disrupts life, it continues, albeit in a changed form. Isn't that what reconstruction is all about, whether it concerns a sequence of events or a breast? The body is sown in transience. Literature offers to add, to put together, to find words and to give new form to these experiences of disruption until we are no longer.»
MORGENBLADET

«For a book about cancer, *Like It or Lump It* is astonishingly funny and witty. [... it] becomes so much more than a cancer book because both authors dare to poke at emotional wounds.»
AFTENPOSTEN

«Almost everyone will come into contact with cancer during their lifetime, either as a patient or as next of kin. Chances are that both body and mind will react differently than you imagined when it happens.
Then radically open writing like this could be vital reading.»
VG

«Vigdis Hjorth and Line Norman Hjorth create a community with this book about their own experiences with cancer. ... therapeutic reading.»
KLASSEKAMPEN

LIKE IT OR LUMP IT

The year we got cancer

A reconstruction

(KUL I BRYSTET)

by

Line Norman Hjorth and Vigdis Hjorth

Pages 7-21 and 43-59 translated from the Norwegian by Charlotte Barslund

(Pages 7-21)

LINE

When I was a little girl and couldn't sleep at night because I was scared of dying from AIDS, I would calm myself down by imagining my afterlife in Duckburg. When I grew older, Pippi Longstocking's Villa Villekulla replaced Duckburg. I would close my eyes and fantasise about my adventures with Pippi's horse, her monkey Mr Nilsson and Pippi herself, obviously, a girl who didn't know the meaning of fear. Rather than rational explanations for what kind of disease AIDS actually was, a factual account of how it was transmitted and progressed over time, my ten-year-old self preferred to romanticise death. My night-time fear of death was an early expression of my rising hypochondria, a condition that kept me on tenterhooks during my childhood and teens. I would regularly discover a swelling here, a rash there, and it didn't take much before I would seek out my mother with ever new symptoms which I hoped she would dismiss as trivial. Which was usually exactly what she did.

I have no idea why I had such faith in her opinion. But then again she was an adult and I was a child. Perhaps it was primarily because she always knew what to say to calm me down. The right mix of taking my concerns seriously while at the same time dismissing them, normalising the physical body. I survived my childhood, but never managed to shake off my fears about my health.

My focus on my body has led to countless appointments with specialists and examinations at private and public hospitals. Through those I have acquired a familiarity with the healthcare system and an insight into the mechanisms which amplify or suppress my hypochondria; whenever my intellect isn't stimulated sufficiently, my chaotic thoughts turn inwards and become destructive. My imagination spins out of control and transforms a buzzing in my left ear into an incurable brain tumour.

During a time when I worked as a journalist in Denmark and learned how articles were produced conveyor belt style and with maximum click bait appeal, where deadlines took priority over exploration, I grew more nervous than ever. I wrote an op-ed about how the state ought to prescribe me a medical degree because it

was the only thing that could save me from admission to a psychiatric ward. The basis of my argument was that paying for my medical degree would ultimately be less expensive for society than resources spent on yet another psychiatric patient and, in addition, I could contribute with research. The op-ed was never printed.

Intellectual tasks that demand immersion and rigour have suppressed my tendency to lose myself in physical worries. Yet I frequently see my family doctor. After all, there is so much to discover about the body. Lumps in various sizes under my tongue, a lump in my head, my groin, my thigh. It is hard to know what to say when my doctor asks me how long they have been there because even if I only discovered them yesterday, I can't be sure that they haven't been there my whole life and that I just happened to have become aware of them now. A few years ago I was so anxious about what I decided was a lump of some kind near the top of my breast that I made my mother book me an appointment at Volvat, a private hospital in Oslo. I took the tram there a dreary, foggy morning after spending the night with a man in town. My mother met me in the car park. A few hours later the danger had passed and we sat, relieved, in the car on the way back.

I spent Easter 2023 with my mother and family on Nesøya. That is to say most of the time I locked myself in a small room in order to write. I had finally found the right approach to a script with which I had been struggling for some time, but now the writing came more easily and time flew. My family accepted my isolation, they understood the challenges of writing and knew of my financial problems. I was a single parent with two teenagers in Copenhagen, I had an unpredictable Norwegian income, but regular Danish bills. For months I had been applying for part-time jobs that would provide me with a stable Danish income; my need for the security it would give me felt more acute since a close friend had been struck down by depression. I knew that he was fluctuating between darkness and mania, but not that his gloom and apathy at the time were mixed up with huge debts. I had managed on little for a long time, but the exchange rate was poor and sooner rather than later I would have to find a way to combine my intellectual activities with a more practical, realistic and physical job.

For me financial worries overshadow all other and more abstract concerns. The constant vigilance required to earn a living and pay the bills keeps my health concerns at bay. How to make enough money for the next loan repayment.

It might have been Maundy Thursday or Good Friday, I was sitting in bed with my laptop and I raised my hand to my breasts in order to check them. I wasn't worried, it was more a kind of reflex. My mother had taught me how to move my fingers in small loops around the breast tissue. It had become a habit to carry out this physical examination on a regular basis, but I would often put it off until I was back in Norway, which I often was, so that I would not be alone with my body and my anxiety in case I discovered something unusual. I wanted another hand nearby for a second opinion and I regarded my mother's as highly qualified in that respect. After several women in our family had been diagnosed with breast cancer, she had been particularly aware of any irregularities in the heavy breasts that had characterised her figure since her youth, she had a mammogram every year and knew how to check breasts.

The advantage of small breasts is that they are easy to check. After breastfeeding two children, mine had shrunk to small, saggy flaps that only changed shape and size with the tightness of my waistband. With my left hand I examined my right breast, my index and middle finger moving in tiny circles across the tissue, nothing there, then my right hand on my left breast. It was a somewhat fumbling and vague activity because as far as I was concerned my breasts consisted of pretty much nothing but bumps and glands, I didn't really know what I was looking for. I had heard that you would know for sure when you felt something abnormal, a bit like the absence of doubt people claim to experience on meeting the love of their life. But that stuff belongs to fairytales. What was that hard, pointy thing I could feel in my left breast? Perhaps it had always been there, but not come to my attention until now as I had recently lost some weight. I dismissed it, carried on writing and decided to check in with my mother when the other members of my family had left.

My mother traced her fingers over the area where I believed I had discovered something sharp, I studied her facial expression meanwhile and told myself that with the vigilance of a child I would be able to spot any dissimulation. Was she looking alarmed? It might be gristle, she opined, but she still thought I should get a doctor to check it out, just to be on the safe side. I regarded her words as diffusing the situation, she didn't think there was cause for concern.

I carried on with my work, I forgot to make a doctor's appointment. It wasn't until a week later than my mother reminded me. I went online and picked the first available appointment with my family doctor, in

three weeks' time. In the old days the waiting would have been unbearable, I would have made a phone call and got an appointment that same week. This time, however, I felt a lesser sense of urgency, I thought that it could wait, that a doctor's appointment was a safety precaution, the mere act of booking the appointment had eased my mind.

Three weeks later I sat, topless, opposite the woman who has been my family doctor for the last twenty years. She made a referral for me to have a mammogram and an ultrasound scan. The nature of the lump meant it warranted further examination, she said, stressing at the same time that I should not allow myself to be rattled by the wheels that would start turning once the referral was made, that I was not to read anything into it. She knew me and my fears, she wanted me to be prepared.

In Denmark we have cancer pathways, as they are known. They are "standardised systems for treatment processes to ensure that all patients receive uniform treatment of high quality". Cancer pathways indicate how much time, ideally, should pass from the patient being referred to treatment commencing. In Copenhagen so many women are referred for breast examinations that the public hospitals don't have the capacity to carry them out. For that reason they have outsourced the task to private hospitals. On Wednesday 3 May, I caught a northbound bus to Capio Private Hospital. In the waiting room I was told to complete several forms while I moved from seat to seat in order to avoid an unpleasant smell of smoke that hung in the air. As it didn't disappear when I went to the lavatory, I realised the smell was coming from my own coat. Had I become someone who reeked of stale smoke? Someone people would think had ended up in hospital because of their own choices, their lifestyle, their bad habits. I decided to stand up with my coat bundled up in my arms until I was called in for my examination.

A woman with short hair and wearing a dark blue tunic had to pull and tug at my small breasts in order to get them properly onto the cold plate that takes the image. Routinely she instructed me in the unnatural positions, her experienced hand arranging my limbs in unfamiliar poses, a light push on my shoulder to lower it slightly, then a careful nudge across my lower back to bend my upper body towards the heavy machine which she finished off by wrapping my arm around it, like an embrace. Three or four images of my left breast and likewise on my right side. Then I was sent to another room where I was asked to lie down on a couch and wait for the doctor to arrive to perform the ultrasound scan. I lay there looking at the squares in the ceilings, five minutes passed, possibly ten. A dark and attractive woman entered and told me that the images were fine, they could see nothing to worry about, which was good news. Yet she was going to perform the scan all the same.

The doctor asked me to indicate where on my breast I had felt the lump. I tried to find it, but it was difficult when I was lying down, my breasts slid to the sides, I sensed her impatience. Perhaps I was wasting her time, perhaps I was one of those neurotic people who bothered the doctor, the worried well. Finally I gave up and said that it was in there somewhere, pointing to the left side of my left breast. The doctor placed the cold probe on my skin and moved it from the edge of my breast and towards my nipple. With a hint of weariness the doctor said that she couldn't see anything, then she interrupted herself as she noticed something on the screen which caused her hand to freeze. She had found it, it was small, but it was a good thing I had noticed it, she added and gave me a nod of approval.

She measured the lump and saved the images by tapping the keyboard, moving her hand with the probe a fraction, then taking another image. Eventually she returned the probe to the stand on the machine and got up to put on latex gloves. A nurse was already rolling in a trolley with individually wrapped syringes and various instruments whose purpose I couldn't fathom, but I gathered that they were going to take a tissue sample, a biopsy.

On two previous occasions I have had a mammogram and an ultrasound without anyone sticking a needle into me, the doctors could eliminate any danger based solely on what they saw on the screen. But not this time. I was given a local anaesthetic and I closed my eyes. In ten days I would be called in for an appointment at Gentofte Hospital. All patients had to turn up in person to learn the result of their biopsy, no results were given by telephone or email. Once I had left the hospital, I called my mother and cried my way through my account of the appointment, I told her what the doctor had said and the biopsy she had taken. There was a woman standing next to me at the bus stop, I had a sense of her listening to my conversation, I don't remember what my mother said.

I was booked in for an appointment at Gentofte Hospital's breast diagnostic unit on Friday 12 May at ten o'clock in the morning. I don't believe I was especially worried or troubled by anxiety in the days leading up to it. When I spoke to my mother, I found myself getting irritated whenever she brought it up, when she asked me how I was, if I was anxious about the result. She would have liked to come with me, but had plans that were difficult to change, and we were hoping that it was just a formality, of course we were. I believed it would be so more than she did, I needed to believe it in order to be able to sleep at night. And I did sleep at night. My mother spoke to my father who offered to fly to Denmark. The appointment letter said that I should bring a relative. I hope that was just the hospital's standard wording, the same phrases for everyone, and not an indication that the risk was particularly great in my case. I told my father that my friend, Thomas, would accompany me to the appointment, I didn't say that I felt too old to have my father come with me to the hospital.

Gentofte Hospital was easy to get to, it was a short walk from Christianshavn where I lived to the traffic hub of Nørreport Station, a bus from there going north would take me straight to the hospital's main entrance. It was a warm and bright day, I had put on makeup and a nice pair of shorts, my legs were already golden from the spring sunshine. I sat outside the hospital and waited for Thomas. He was early as he always is, we both suffer from a fear of not having enough time, it is one of the reasons our travels together have been so harmonious. We entered the waiting room, I went to the counter and was given some forms to fill in. It was while I was answering questions about smoking and exercise and drinking and the name of my next of kin that I felt my hand starting to shake and my voice quivered nervously when I discussed with Thomas how many cigarettes I smoked a day, there could be several days where I smoked none at all, then suddenly a lot if the nights became long and festive. An average number rarely matches real life.

A tanned nurse fetched us from the waiting area and took us to a room where we met two doctors. The breast surgeon, Alessandro, and a member of his team, a Swede whose name I can't remember. Both of them handsome men, I notice things like that. They looked at me, then at Thomas, and the glances they exchanged indicated that they took him to be my partner. When I mentioned that my family member was a close friend, a flash of surprise crossed their faces as if they wanted to probe further, but then decided against it.

The breast surgeon sat on an office chair with wheels, on which he rolled back and forth between the round table where we had sat down and the desk where a large computer with the ultrasound image of my breast was glowing on the screen. He began his address to me with "unfortunately". They had found cancer cells in the biopsy. Thomas took my hand, holding it in his. To my own surprise I didn't lose my composure when the doctor spoke. I nodded assuredly, grasping the reality and asked how soon they could operate. They had booked me in for ten days later, 22 May. The surgery would preserve my breast. It was a small lump, less than 0.5 centimetre. That's nice, I think I said, a part of me was definitely impressed at my own reaction, how I took the depressing news on the chin, I wasn't one of those people who crumbled, I thought, and mentally gave myself a pat on the back.

I sat in the room with the doctors, but I wasn't present, I could see myself from the outside and I observed the situation without any emotions, just like the time my father walked me down the aisle to the woman who would marry me to the man I would later divorce, the sunlight blessedly beautiful and warm on 1 October in Finse, but I hadn't taken anything in as I entered in my red silk dress, everything concrete felt so abstract.

And then my world imploded after all. Because of one word the doctor uttered when he had moved on to something else. He wasn't prepared for it to have such a strong impact on me, perhaps he had expected my reaction some minutes earlier, but not now, not when he said "chemotherapy". I was just as unprepared and disbelieving on hearing that word as I had been stoical and composed on receiving my cancer diagnosis. The blood drained from my face and into my abdomen while my "but" prevented the doctor from carrying on. At Gentofte Hospital, however, they dealt only with surgery; chemotherapy was the responsibility of the Department of Oncology at Rigshospitalet. He was reluctant to explain the treatment there in detail, but given my young age, I was thirty-nine years old, it was highly likely that I would be advised to have chemotherapy.

Often my subconscious fears only surface once reality catches up with them. When my reaction to a situation is unexpectedly strong, I try to discover and understand the thoughts that must have worked away inside me without me being aware of them. Had my ability to be composed been based on the idea that a cancer tumour in my breast could simply be operated away, that it was as easy as falling off a log, and then the job would be done? Because in my world chemotherapy was associated with mortal combat. The ashen-faced, bald people with their lifeless eyes. Now I would be joining them.

I undressed from the waist up and let the doctors examine my breasts, first one, then the other, they found the lump, they drew a circle in black felt tip pen on my skin. It was probably at this moment in time, on this blue couch on 12 May, that my breasts ceased to be a part of my intimate physical world; from now on they would no longer belong to a sexual body or an object of desire, instead they had become specimens for doctors, surgeons, oncologists and chemotherapy.

There were many other things to do at the hospital that day. After my appointment with the two doctors, Thomas and I were escorted to another room by the professional, cheerful nurse. A central part of her job was apparently to calm troubled waters after the doctors' direct and medical jargon. She was a plain speaker, too, but also took on a kind of caring role which included my mental health. I understood the

division of labour between them, but it was also symbiotic, as if one reinforced the other. I preferred the doctor's unfiltered, unsweetened delivery and I soon began to experience the nurse's tone of voice as a subtle form of pity. How lacking in nuance I was, I think now, or how few nuances I knew, I had so much to learn.

My picture was taken for the hospital's healthcare platform, I was praised for smiling, from now on my face could be found in the patient register. It might also say "oestrogen receptor positive" somewhere. The nurse mentioned it casually as she sat with her back to me, typing away on the keyboard. I didn't know what it meant. I had a feeling of not knowing the terminology properly, of being incapable of grasping the meaning and placing it in the right context, it was not unlike what it must be for a defendant in a trial who struggles to understand the legal linguistic games when they are examined. Oestrogen receptor positive breast cancer is the most common, the nurse referred to it as lazy, I interpreted that as being in contrast to angry, aggressive cancers. It made it relatively easy to treat because it fed on oestrogen. If you take away the hormone, oestrogen, the cancer will lose its food supply.

It is possible that I didn't learn everything that first day, one thing at a time, the nurse had said.

The nurse gave me a fat pile of leaflets from cancer charities – "When mum or dad gets cancer", "Cancer and sex", "A guide for relatives of cancer patients", "A guide to help and information", "Advice and activities", "Cancer and teenagers in the family" – and a card with telephone numbers and the name of the doctor and nurse who would be my first point of contact, along with dates and appointments for more examinations and the surgery. Thomas dealt with it all. We went to another ward at the hospital for blood samples. While the red liquid flowed out of me and into one vial after the other, Thomas told stories I don't remember now, but they made me laugh, his zany take on everything, I was glad that he was there.

Then we sat on a bench in the sunshine for a while. I leaned my head against his shoulder. Was I sobbing? The word feels like an exaggeration. I was crying, but I retained sufficient self-control as I often do in unpredictable situations. Perhaps it stems from my childhood, the fact that I rarely let go when I am not alone. I remember the green grass, the warm rays of the sun and how weird it was that the day was so beautiful and so hard at the same time. Thomas let me cry, he put his arm around me.

Before we left we would need to go back to the breast diagnostic unit. It wasn't clear to me why, but the waiting area suddenly seemed different; some hours earlier I had felt I had little in common with the people around me, now I embraced them as my new community: the bald, overweight woman by the water cooler, the old woman with her hearing aid, a woman sitting down and leaning back, relaxing, while she watched

East European television on her mobile, the volume high so that everyone could hear it, and a few men on their own, I didn't understand what they were doing there. Was this my tribe now? I felt young and different, and if I am to be completely honest, I felt I deserved to be there less than they did. It is not an honourable thought. But I was young, I exercised, I ate healthily, I wasn't overweight. As if justice is about balancing the books.

My mother had texted Thomas and me. Asking how things were going, that she was starting to worry, if we could please call soon. I called her, I said out loud for the first time that I had cancer, that I would be starting chemotherapy, I formed the words with my lips and I made them real. My mother was shocked, I could hear her fear, I could hear the terror in her voice. She would fly to Denmark, arriving later that same day. Thomas and I went for a walk around his neighbourhood, then we caught the bus into town and walked from Nørreport Station to my flat. The day was still pleasantly warm, the streets were teeming with lightly clad people, everything exuding the blissful atmosphere that belongs to spring.

Thomas and I were sitting on the balcony when my mother arrived in a taxi. She got out, looked up at us and spotted my older daughter who had also joined us on the balcony; Alma was supposed to be with her father, but had stopped by to fetch something. My mother's face dissolved. Alma had no idea what was going on. She knew that I had been to the hospital for an examination, but the word cancer had yet to be mentioned. I tried hard not to worry her and it was my impression that it was working. So what was Granny doing here? Why was she looking sad?

My mother got out of the taxi, unprepared for her granddaughter's presence, unprepared for having to put on a brave face for my as yet to be initiated daughter, who was thrilled to see Granny, overjoyed at her unannounced visit, Granny was always great fun.

We sat on the balcony long after my daughter had left. I didn't drink or smoke as I usually did, nothing was as it usually was, and yet everything was as it always was. We were focusing on the reassuring elements of the information we have been given. My prognosis was good, I would get through it and I would cope with the difficult times ahead as long as I survived. It grew darker while we moved between existential questions and cancer comedy with musical features – a love song to the consultant, a see you later song to my hair, serenading my breasts goodbye – entertaining the thought of wigs that could be changed according to my mood, "Oh, help us all, Line has a bob day today!" We have that in common, Thomas, my mother and I, this "it-will-be-all-fine-attitude", a natural inclination towards comic relief. It doesn't take away the seriousness, but it makes it easier to bear, being in it together. On our way across the bridge to a wine bar, we sang an improvised chemotherapy song at the top of our lungs.

(Pages 43-59)

VIGDIS

Several women in my family have had breast cancer. It didn't kill them, but still. Because of that I signed up for what at the time was called the Mammogram Ring, a programme run by Volvat, a private healthcare provider in Norway, located off a roundabout on Borgveien, just opposite the Colosseum Cinema. Once a year I would go to Volvat for a mammogram and my appointments were always associated with an unpleasant kind of tension followed by a liberating sense of relief when I left. In contrast to the public Norwegian mammogram programme where you don't get the results until long after your mammogram, at Volvat you are told straightaway as long as everything is in order. That was what you, that is to say I, was paying for.

I would sit in the waiting room until I got the all clear or more accurately confirmation that no signs of cancer had been detected in my breasts. I examined them regularly like the leaflet from Volvat recommended, by moving my left palm over my right breast and vice versa, as if I was tracing the hours on a clock face. I never discovered anything unusual, anything unexpectedly different from what it should be, then again, I had no idea how such a difference might feel.

When I made my debut as a writer, I joined The Norwegian Writers' Centre and on my way to my first meeting I was nervous, but the two of us who were new members were warmly welcomed; the other new member was a woman possibly fifteen years older than me, we chatted a bit that evening.

Some months later she called me and asked if we could meet. I didn't know what she wanted, why she had called and what we would be talking about. She had invited me to lunch at her terraced house in Bærum, not an area I knew, it felt strange. But anyway I rang the bell, she opened the door and in the kitchen the table was set for two, I was still feeling baffled and somewhat apprehensive. She didn't stop talking from the moment she opened the door, the words poured out of her, she had been diagnosed with breast cancer and was feeling depressed and a childhood friend had suggested she talked to me because apparently I

looked just like her when she was young. Seeing me was supposed to cheer her up, was how I took it. The disease scared her and no wonder, but what was I supposed to do, I had no idea what she had been like when she was young and her friend who thought she might have looked like me, didn't know me, how was I supposed to act? A lot had gone wrong in her life all at the same time, she said, because her husband had had an affair, but then ended it with the other woman, and the other woman had rung their house, and she had picked up the phone and screamed: Seriously?! I have cancer!

It was a lot. She made scrambled eggs because eggs are the source of new life, the lump had felt like a pea. Just like a pea, she said and added that she had realised when she suddenly felt the pea in her breast that it wasn't good news.

From then on I would search for a pea when I regularly checked my breasts as both my family doctor and the doctors at Volvat had recommended I did.

She called me one year later. She had been admitted to the Radium Hospital and she would like me to visit.

I went there. It was early autumn, I remember what I wore, beige trousers, a beige jumper, it was just before my own life changed, I sensed a huge shift happening inside me, that something was opening up towards the world in a new way, reaching for something else.

She wasn't in a room of her own. I was surprised to find her in a ward with other patients, with only a screen separating her from them. I didn't know how long she had been there or how long she was going to be there. She didn't speak in the way she had the last time we met, her hectic, nonstop words, her outrage at her husband's mistress who had had the nerve to call, so energetic in every way.

Now she was depleted and distant, and again I wondered how I should act, what she wanted from me. I didn't know what she wanted, if she wanted anything, perhaps she just wanted me to spend time with her because somehow we shared a literary history? When she fell silent and closed her eyes as if she was exhausted, I complimented her on her brown legs which were sticking out from underneath her hospital gown, they were slim, supple and suntanned, and she looked at them, seemingly surprised, then straightened them out. I didn't understand how ill she really was. Those long, tanned legs didn't look ill, I know better now. I didn't know her that well, I didn't know what I was supposed to do and I talked too much as I always do when I'm nervous, I talked away her silence; if there was something serious she had wanted to impart to me, I made it difficult for her. I tried to give her something though I didn't know what

she wanted, in case she wanted it, a stream of words about my work. At some point she said: You need to leave now. I'm tired.

I left with mixed emotions. Her emotions, too, must have been mixed and in ways I couldn't imagine. My visit must have been someone else's idea because apparently I looked like her when she was a young woman, I'm guessing her relatives were desperate, and who could blame them?

Her husband called me not long afterwards to tell me that she had "passed", as if she had stepped away from life on her tanned legs, he was beside himself, of course he was, he told me the time and place of her funeral. And I went to the funeral, I didn't know anyone there, and the many people who would appear to have known her well and for a long time, who talked about her or to her in the chapel, made me realise that I hadn't known her at all, that I had been brought into her life for a specific purpose, perhaps in order to remind her of her identity as an author at a difficult time in her life, but as far as I was concerned I had no identity as an author myself. Her husband called me a few times in the months that followed, he needed to talk, he said, I could understand that, he said that it had been strange to go through her things and having to deal with them, everything he had found, pieces she had written. I understood that too. He thought I might have had literary conversations with her, and perhaps I had, but all I can remember now was that she had breast cancer, that she was seriously ill, and that I couldn't think of anything but that, although I may have said a few words about literature.

I examined my breasts regularly, looking for a pea and finding none. But once when I had stopped breastfeeding my third child and a bloody fluid leaked from my left breast, a friend of mine, a doctor, thought I ought to have it looked at. I went to Volvat where I was seen immediately, it was what I had paid for. They took a mammogram, said that everything looked fine, that I could leave. But on another occasion when I thought I felt not a pea but a kind of lump in the same breast, I also went to Volvat where they took a mammogram, but didn't send me home immediately. The doctor wanted to examine my breast and he seemed worried as he did so, I remember saying: I go running every day. He looked at me gravely and said: I'm afraid that means nothing.

He referred me to the Radium Hospital. Volvat must have contacts there or an agreement with the Radium Hospital. The Volvat doctor called a doctor at the Radium Hospital, told me the name of that doctor and where to go, entrance, floor, ward. A drive time of 2.6 km, taking six minutes, unless there was heavy traffic, there was no heavy traffic that morning, a lovely spring day. I drove there in my little, green Golf, newly divorced and in crisis, estranged from my family, having just started psychoanalysis, and now

this; all I could do was steel myself so I steeled myself. I found the entrance, the floor, the doctor. That is how I remember it, all these years later, more than thirty, he stuck a needle into my breast where I had felt the lump or the mass, extracted something and studied it under a microscope. And then he said that it was benign, that I could go home.

I told my psychoanalyst because I spoke to him about the big as well as the small stuff and because the small and the big stuff intermingled when I lay on the couch where what I thought was small turned out to be big and what I thought was big turned out to be small. And the psychoanalyst thought it was an awful experience, I gathered, to be sent off to the Radium Hospital at such short notice to be tested for something potentially dangerous, fatal even. That took me aback, I remember, because I found lying on his couch just as nerve-racking as sitting in a chair at the Radium Hospital.

When I left the Radium Hospital that day, that lovely spring day all those years ago, in my small, green run-around car that I had taken over after the divorce, after the doctor had said that there was no cancer in my breast, I felt grateful. My legs were trembling, but I was grateful. I went home, I lived alone now with my three children every other week, they were with their father this week. I went home, grateful. Gratitude like that lasts several hours.

In early April 2023 when my older daughter asked me to check her left breast to see if I could feel the lump she thought she had discovered, I couldn't feel it at first. Over the years I had examined most of Line's body for lumps, cuts and bruises, she is the most hypochondriac of my children. And because I had once co-written a book about various illnesses with a doctor, my children credited me medical knowledge and I had let them stay in that belief given that there were so very few other tangible areas of information about which they could ask me. I felt her breast, but could feel no thickening, a mass or a pea. Then she checked her small, floppy breast herself, her breasts were tiny compared to my over-dimensioned ones for which it was impossible to find a comfortable bra. There, she insisted, with her eyes closed and showed me where; I, too, closed my eyes and I could feel something small and hard, not a pea, but possibly a gland?

Even so Line went to her doctor to have it checked out, I learned that a week later when she rang me in a state of distress. Because her doctor, whom she saw regularly in order to have her many symptoms classified as harmless, had not dismissed the small lump when she felt it, she hadn't eased Line's anxiety, which was ultimately why she had made the appointment in the first place. Surely the doctor, who must have examined countless breasts during her long career, must be able to tell a gland from a what? Line's doctor had told her to have it investigated further, something which involved her being put onto a breast cancer pathway, which might sound alarming, the doctor had said, but it was the only way Line could get an appointment for a mammogram, possibly an ultrasound scan and possibly a biopsy, in just a few days' time.

It was good that it would happen quickly, that the danger would soon pass.

I was on the train travelling from Arlanda Airport to Stockholm when Line rang me in tears. The train was packed, it was difficult to talk, why was she crying? I was going to Stockholm to receive the Sara Danius Foundation Prize, a prize named after the previous permanent secretary of the Swedish Academy who had died from breast cancer at the age of only fifty-seven. Line called, the train was packed, Line was crying, why? I had worked late yesterday, putting the finishing touches to a novel, submitted the manuscript at midnight, and got up half asleep to catch the train to the airport which I would need to be on in order to catch my plane to Sweden, I had completely forgotten that today was the day of Line's mammogram, possibly her ultrasound and possibly her biopsy. I had reassured her with my tales of all the times I had had a mammogram and been sent home again. She was sobbing down the phone and I didn't think that I could ask her to sob more quietly although I was aware that my fellow passengers could hear her. By now they had picked up on mammogram and ultrasound and biopsy, and the doctor who took the latter having said: Good thing you noticed it.

It wasn't a good sign, I gathered and my heart sank. Line was crying, I realised, because the doctor's words might mean the lump wasn't benign as I had presumed or had chosen to believe that it was a gland. It might mean, heaven forbid, that the lump might be a… the unmentionable word tumour, neither of us used the word cancer. I said they had to be absolutely sure what it was, hence the biopsy, in order to rule it out. The chances of the small lump being benign were greater than it being malignant, she was so very young, only thirty-nine.

We hoped for the best, we crossed our fingers that the tiny little lump, almost impossible to feel, was benign.

I have had many mammograms but never a biopsy, always the bridesmaid never the bride, unless that was what the doctor at the Radium Hospital had taken thirty years ago? But then I had received the result immediately, why wouldn't that be the case for Line? Because she wasn't a private patient like I had been, but a patient of the Danish National Health Service which had millions of patients and an infinite number of tests to analyse? If she had had a biopsy at a private hospital, would she have been told the result immediately? I considered telling her to go to a private hospital and that I would pay, but it would only make her more anxious, and that wasn't why she was calling me, she was calling for reassurance, so I reassured her. She would get an appointment to learn the result very soon.

I received my prize and an elegant portrait of Sara Danius, I gave my speech and drank only a little, I wasn't in the mood to celebrate. Sara Danius' publisher and her many siblings wanted to honour and commemorate her through the prize and I had dinner with them afterwards. Sara Danius was well-known to me, not just from the scandals surrounding the Swedish Academy, but also because Professor Toril Moi had been her supervisor at Duke University. Toril had told me about her and written Danius' fine obituary for the Norwegian newspaper, Morgenbladet, praising her unique intelligence, her aesthetic appreciation of clothes and shoes. I mentioned Toril's obituary about their sister, her siblings were delighted to hear about it and they talked about the disease, about breast cancer, and about how when she was terribly ill and the infighting at the Swedish Academy was at its worst, Sara had called them and said she needed something sparkling, she meant champagne. She died not long afterwards. And I listened to their words in a different way than if I had met them yesterday, I picked up on details I would not have picked up on if I had met them yesterday.

I didn't stay late, I went to my hotel room as soon as I could with my flowers and the framed portrait of Sara Danius, I needed something sparkling, the tax-free champagne I had bought at Gardermoen Airport in order to celebrate my prize. I was terribly thirsty, but it didn't taste like I had imagined even though it was a Charles Mignon, I didn't dance around my room on my own with a champagne flute I had borrowed from the hotel bar, I don't recall if I spoke to Line.

Now, as I write this exactly one year later, one year wiser, Line and I both believe that the doctor who carried out the ultrasound scan at the private Capio Hospital, to which the Danish healthcare system had outsourced mammography, ultrasound and biopsy services, must have known immediately with her trained eye that the lump was malignant. And that when she performed the biopsy, she still believed the lump would prove to be malignant, that was why she had taken a biopsy, not to rule cancer out, but to confirm it. She didn't do a biopsy to find out if it was cancer, but what kind and how aggressive. But they were under no obligation to tell us anything until the test results and the treatment plan were ready. The latter was the responsibility of the Danish healthcare system and their doctors who not only had the medical knowledge but also the skills to communicate with patients, doctors who could explain and answer all the questions that patients with serious illnesses and their relatives might have once they were presented with

a diagnosis, probably in shock. As early as the next day Line received a letter with an appointment at Gentofte Hospital. It said that she should bring a relative.

I returned home as previously planned after an event in Gothenburg the day before Line's next appointment and I was due to run the Holmenkollstafetten relay race the day after her appointment, however, I could travel from Gothenburg to Copenhagen by train or by car, it wasn't far, but how would I get back in time for the relay race? Wasn't it much ado for probably nothing? We talked as if we were expecting good news, an anticlimax, because that was what we were hoping for, we were betting on it, expecting it. Line said there was no need for me to travel to Denmark, she had friends who could come with her.

I was at Asker Station when we had this conversation, when we agreed that it was too much hassle for me to travel from Gothenburg to Copenhagen and then to Oslo, probably for nothing, potentially cancelling both the event in Gothenburg and my participation in the relay race, again for nothing. I suggested that she could ask her father, but she was reluctant, I could feel, to make him travel all the way to Copenhagen, the expensive plane ticket, probably for nothing, so we decided against it. Still I called her father after our conversation, I remember clearly where on the platform I was standing, to tell him what was happening, Line hadn't told him anything and I may well have indicated to him that I was more worried than I let on to Line. Trygve asked me straight up if there was cause for concern and I couldn't tell him there wasn't because I didn't know, how could I? Line had always been one to cry wolf. Even so I said that I thought there might be, I told him about the doctor who had said: Good thing you noticed it. Trygve called Line after our conversation and offered to fly down, but she thought it was unnecessary, such a long and expensive trip. Thomas would come with her.

Line and Thomas went to the appointment at Gentofte Hospital. They were due to be there at 10am. I thought about them as it came up for ten o'clock. I didn't want call, I didn't want to be pushy and intrusive, after all, Thomas was there. I thought about them when the clock struck ten, I thought about them as it passed ten, I thought about them as the time crawled at a snail's pace towards 10.30am, why didn't she call, happy and relieved, to tell me everything was fine? She must be so happy and relieved in the bright Copenhagen spring sunshine that she had forgotten to call her old mother in Norway, that must be what had happened.

At eleven o'clock I texted her, I texted Thomas, I asked how things were going, they didn't reply, neither of them, they were obviously so happy and relieved, the pair of them, in the spring sunshine that they had probably had a few drinks, Thomas must have started drinking again to celebrate that Line was cancer-free, that must be what had happened. Were they sitting in a park in Copenhagen with a six-pack of cold Tuborg? At 11.30am her father texted me to say he hadn't heard anything and wondered if that was a bad sign. I think I might have called him then, yes, I called him and said that I hadn't heard anything either and what were we to make of it, then Line called, in tears, to say that she had cancer and that she would have to go through the whole thing, have surgery, and she had been given a date for her operation, chemotherapy, everything, everything at her appointment at Gentofte Hospital which I had not attended because of that stupid event in Gothenburg and the even more stupid Holmenkollstafetten relay race. I said I was on my way, that I was leaving immediately, after all I had freed up the day just in case, just to be on the safe side, but found myself incapable of booking my plane ticket; somewhat hysterically I called Trygve to tell him what Line had said because she didn't have the energy to repeat herself, she had asked me to tell him that she had cancer and was due to have surgery and had been given a date for the operation and was going to have chemotherapy, everything, everything, I don't remember the rest, I think I told it the way she had told me, but then I said I had to ring off in order to book a plane ticket to Copenhagen, but then I couldn't do it because my hands were trembling as was my heart and I couldn't remember my logon details or account number and I couldn't get the app to work. I called Trygve again and he said he would book it for me, shortly afterwards I received an email with my plane ticket, booking number and departure time, which was quite imminent.

I was suddenly glad that my dog had died so that finding someone to look after it wouldn't slow me down. I packed a few things and jumped on a bus. I arrived at Gardermoen Airport, had a beer in the departure hall, I remember, although that was a big no-no, you can't turn up drunk at your daughter's place when she has just been told she has cancer, I wasn't supposed to drink, but I needed a beer in order to calm my heart. I wouldn't be able to run the Holmenkollstafetten relay race, I called Ida at my publishers and asked her to make my excuses, I called the Dramatists' Association, they had arranged it. I said the word for the first time, breast cancer, that Line had been diagnosed with breast cancer, over a therapeutic beer in the spring sunshine by the window in the seafood bar in the departure hall at Gardermoen Airport, the one next to gate E7 from which my plane was departing.

I took a taxi from Copenhagen Airport to Andreas Bjørns gade on Christianshavn, I couldn't get there fast enough for something with which I actually didn't want to be confronted. When I stepped out of the taxi, I could see them on the balcony, Thomas and Line, on the balcony because it was nice weather and because Thomas smokes, but then Alma appeared on the balcony, Line's twelve-year-old daughter, I didn't know she was going to be there, I wasn't prepared for that, I thought she was with her father, had they told her, no, they couldn't have given how she was beaming at me and waving, though she also seemed surprised that Granny had come for an unexpected visit, a surprise visit, for no reason at all. Then again, I often travelled to Copenhagen for work, Line might have made up an excuse, it meant that I couldn't let on, I couldn't start to cry and hug Line, I couldn't sob like I had imagined I would, for which I felt a great urge, it meant I had to pull myself together. And everything was made more difficult precisely because of the sight of the blissfully ignorant, smiling, but undeniably surprised young Alma who didn't understand why Thomas was hanging around for such a long time and why Granny was turning up unannounced. I swallowed my tears, pulled myself together and walked up the stairs and I didn't cry all the time Alma was there, which wasn't very long, she had just stopped by to pick up something she had forgotten when she moved her things from her mum's flat to her dad's, which she did every other Friday, it must be Friday today, fortunately her parents lived in the same apartment block, one of the biggest in Copenhagen, it covered a large area and housed four thousand residents. When Alma had left, I still didn't cry.

And suddenly my breathing calmed down. Because Line and Thomas looked like themselves and not like people who had been given a death sentence. I had a glass of wine, they understood that I needed it, neither of them were drinking, I asked them to tell me everything right from the start. Thomas began and that was helpful because he told a different story from the one a sobbing Line had told me earlier and in another tone of voice, obviously, though they agreed on the most important information, that she had cancer in her left breast, that she would have surgery and chemotherapy and would need to take medication for five years. That was why you needed to bring a relative because four ears hear better than two. Later Line would tell me that everyone gets cancer in their left breast, that it was always the left breast.

We sat on Line's small balcony in the mild May evening on Christianshavn. Thomas was chain-smoking. He had quit drinking, he used to drink quite heavily, the two of us had drunk a lot together, now he drank alcohol-free beer. I admired his resolve, I wouldn't have managed it, certainly not now, I was drinking tax-free white wine. Thomas stayed late and then he rode his bicycle home in the soft darkness of the Danish night. I don't think I slept in Hannah's or Alma's bed, I think I slept in Line's double bed in the living room that first night of the strange and vulnerable nights of which there would be so many. Was Line drinking? I don't think so and it doesn't matter, I'm the one who is obsessed with drinking.