

Sample translation

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***KOSTER* by Ida Fjeldbraaten**

Sample translation by David M. Smith

(Pages 1 – 31 in original)

No summer is more summer than the Swedish summer.

It is full of a nostalgia that never runs out. The idea of a perfect, bright summer day. The day you reach out to, and can almost touch, each time you see the water glimmering in the morning sun, each time you hear the seagulls' squall and the waves beating against the rocks.

Sweden maintains this season like a sanctuary. Like they are the ones who have the answer key. Like their summer is the original.

The real one.

The Koster Islands, off the coast of Strömstad, lie as far west as you can go before the Swedish summer vanishes in the borderlands of Norway. Which is perhaps why it is here, of all places, you can experience its crescendo: the smell of seaweed, rope, the boat's engine oil. Flowers blooming. Bright evenings. Legs that can't keep still.

This was where Oda Bakken was headed on the ferry from Strömstad. She'd brought enough clothes for a few weeks, a MacBook Air she'd just purchased, and a belief she would find out the truth about Lina Ebbel.

Oslo, April 2026. The managing director of the advertising agency FND Oslo, Karl “Kalle” Langaas, ran a hand through his hair. His hair was still slicked back, in keeping with the heydays of the 90s, only now it was white. The black wool sweater he wore over his shirt was covered in little hairs from his beard. The beard was also totally white.

Oda and Kalle had spent years working together. They’d shared a bottle of wine in Cannes, sat in bars in Brussels, and shot commercials all over Europe. Supported each other through demanding projects, hopeless clients, and long, grueling pitches. Won some, lost some.

They’d laughed. Fought. Traded gossip and badmouthed others in the industry. Got drunk late at night and pulled themselves together in time for client meetings the next morning.

Now they sat across from each other in the large conference room. They were both quiet. The colleagues looked at each other, each waiting for the other to begin. Both had learned that in such meetings, the person who said the least usually came away with the win. Kalle knew it was a game Oda had mastered, having seen her in action countless times and asked her to take on the budget negotiations with several clients, as she was so incredibly good at keeping her mouth shut.

Oda wasn’t surprised that it was her turn to sit here, being one of the highest paid employees in the firm; they’d save a lot of money by cutting her loose. She was furious all the same. All the years she’d devoted here. All the goddamned clients, the late work hours, the pitches she’d won by working herself half to death. She was, moreover, disappointed in herself because of the tears that were still in this fury.

Kalle thought he might as well say something; he’d be the first to buckle, anyway. All that came out were platitudes. Things that didn’t need to be said.

No one wanted this, he said. Telia Mobile had gone in-house. Toyota too. It wasn’t just her, if it helped at all to hear it. Which of course it didn’t.

The creative awards FND had garnered over the years were arrayed behind him. The statuettes evoked sweet memories of champagne, oysters, and envy from their competitors. The gilt on the last prize had started to fade.

Before they lay the contract she'd signed more than fifteen years ago. Kalle was surprised to see that the period of notice was only one month. Oda reminded him that it was she who'd insisted on it. She got claustrophobia from being stuck in situations or places she didn't want to be in. The thought of showing up for months at an office she was going to leave seemed like a nightmare.

They agreed she would get paid leave for the month.

Kalle went further down the agenda. It was important they agree on the same version of events, what they'd say publicly about her departure. It was Oda who normally wrote all the firm's press releases anyway; would she be okay writing this one, too?

She had to get out. Now.

Let someone else do it, she said.

Kalle knew she hated what came next, but it had to be done. He decided to pretend she was someone else, put out his lower lip like a sad little kid, tilted his head, and put out his arms. He was almost moved by his own ability to overcome the social discomfort, to play the game.

He held her for an uncomfortable amount of time.

Oda felt queasy. Stale air. A grip on the lungs. What would people say? Retreat. She let go. The old man. The embodiment of the entire advertising industry. Funny, attractive, and rich in the 90s. Now he just looked lonely.

The story hit the trade journal headlines the very same day. They'd used a photo of Oda and a former team partner back from a time FND had some nice news to share. Signed a new customer, won a new prize, been recognized for something or other—she couldn't remember what it was. The article was full of words that would virtually guarantee no other agency would be interested. As a copywriter, she collected synonyms that could be used in a range of industries. There were limits to how many times you

could say *unrivaled quality* in a car ad, for instance. Usable: *unique driving pleasure, unique handling, unparalleled comfort*. She knew that ChatGPT and Claude could conjure up every one, and more besides.

She picked up on all the synonyms in the article. *Seasoned veteran. Towering figure. Long experience.*

In other words, *old*.

Oda gave Kalle her access card, got her things, and headed straight for the elevator. She'd come back to turn in her laptop another day, she said, and then maybe they could get a coffee, though really she'd already made up her mind to have it sent to the office instead. The elevator door closed, and through the small window she could see the neon sign with the agency motto on the wall as it rose and vanished behind the elevator shaft one last time: *Truth well told*.

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On the island by the Oslo Fjord, Oda thrust her phone into one of her shoes. She saw a client had tried to reach her, but she couldn't bring herself to deal with that call right now. Christine Ebbel had been one of Oda's favorite clients over the past ten years. Now she'd probably run across the news and was calling to try and console her, just like the other clients who'd reached out over the past few days. Oda had answered each call full of hope that an in-house job offer was waiting on the other end, a highly flexible senior position and a small pay raise, but each conversation only reinforced her fears: that all the female copywriters still in the industry past 40 could be counted on one hand.

The instant Oda ducked her head under the surface, she saw it all too clearly. She'd given her life to an identity that could be taken from her on a second's notice. A personality she'd spent years grinding and polishing. She'd tried to suppress all that was feminine. To the young women who wanted to work in the same industry she'd given clear advice, leaving them with no illusions that this industry was something other than it was. Never show any tears, she said. She'd lasted longer than most by following her own advice. Drink them under the table. Go to the strip clubs with them, to FIFA tournaments on the PlayStation, to football at the pub if you're invited. That's where the important conversations go on, where everyone bonds, where they talk about other things than work and have all the best ideas.

As much as you can, keep your mouth shut during salary negotiations: you'll get more that way. Agree to sit on prize juries, even when you're overworked as it is; go to the ad industry festival in

Cannes, even if you have to go with handsy clients. Walk on stage, stand at the front, agree to interviews. Don't wear wool cardigans; they'll assume you're a project manager, not a creative, and treat you accordingly. Never insult a man over 50 in a way he'll notice; he'll never forget it. Never blow the whistle; they'll act like they take it seriously for a while, but it will always blow back on you. Keep any period pain to yourself; find yourself a floor to lie down on where no one will see you until it passes.

Never show that you're tired.

She was so tired. Her body resisting every stroke she took out into the Oslo Fjord. The water was dirty and had no smell of the sea, but rather of things from land. Sewers. Further in the distance, a ferry sailed full of passengers bound for Kiel, who waited eagerly for the opening of the duty free. On the side of the boat were words she'd written on a note, stuck to a wall, typed on a laptop, shown to a client: *Life's better at sea.* A claim the target audience would nod along to, a cultural truth any brand could use to refer to itself, make its own, and shine within. A slogan. *Less is more. The marketplace of possibilities. Always Coca-Cola.*

She'd always found it weird seeing those little letters of hers blown up in the real world. When the tiny ants she shipped off had become signs in mall windows and on the sides of buses. The sight of the colossal words on the side of the ferry now stung. Lying there, she felt the words no longer rang true.

The water had tipped over to 18 degrees after the warm spring they'd had. It was now May. Her last month with pay. The trash, the Q-Tips, the plastic wrap floated alongside her body, the body of a full-grown woman. One that never bore children. Never got pregnant. She could never allow herself that. The pregnant body is too fragile, too sensitive. The pregnant body has to have sick leave. The pregnant woman is a complainer. Draws attention to herself. Makes plain the woman in her. Mothers are tired. Sick at home. At home with sick kids. Got to get to daycare before it closes.

There was more to the advice she gave the young female hires. Make men over 50 feel like they're heroes; they'll never forget it. Never discuss illness. Never bring up the temperature inside the office. Talk trash, but not as much as them. Join in when your colleagues deride bad work from other agencies. Always have Advil on you. Stay vaccinated. Take Theraflu when you have a cold. Never let anyone else present your own work.

Was this her personality? What else could she use it for now?

She had a hard time seeing that personality in any other role. It had been forged and tempered to work in creative departments in the ad industry, but her body wasn't made for it anymore. Her face had too many lines. She was too weighed down by her experience.

She turned over to float on her back. Waiting for some revelation from the sea. A threadlike something she hoped was seaweed brushed against her ear.

It was hopeless, like lying on a mountain of plastic. You couldn't drown yourself if you wanted to in this fjord. What was it she'd been a part of, really? She swam back to the shore and got dressed. The ferry's horn blew in the distance. The duty free would soon be open.

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At the Bristol, Christine Ebbel was already sitting down. She had earbuds in and was talking to someone on the phone at a rapid clip while staring into empty space. She got up as soon as she saw Oda and waved her over. She ended her conversation as Oda approached and gave her, true to form, a short, stiff hug.

They sat down and ordered the sole and a glass of Riesling each. Christine Ebbel's manner was short and to the point, just as Oda remembered from their long working relationship.

She'd heard about Oda being laid off and wondered whether that was the case or no; Oda confirmed it.

Then I've got an assignment for you, said Christine, leaning over the table.

Finally, Oda thought, picturing herself walking through the doors of the bright offices of Linné AS on Karenslyst allé.

I hope you say yes—I don't know anyone else who can do it, said Christine.

Then she laid out the assignment before paying for lunch and saying she had to run. Christine was out the door before Oda finished eating.

Oda was left sitting there, unsure whether she should feel steamrolled or flattered. She took her MacBook out of her bag and began investigating.

The Koster Islands lay between Norway and Sweden, just a few kilometers from Hvaler and Strömstad. The two biggest islands, North and South Koster, had around three hundred permanent inhabitants between them, but a full eight thousand tourists visited every day in summer. The islands were one of the sunniest spots in all Sweden, making it a favorite destination for both Norwegian and Swedish beachgoers. Each summer, ferries full of passengers ran between Strömstad and the Koster Islands several times an hour, seven days a week.

With their unique flora, their rich botanical diversity, the islands were also a popular travel destination for botanical hobbyists as well as scientists. The surrounding sea was known as Sweden's most biodiverse, with several hundred species found nowhere else in the country. This was also why the Koster Sea had been anointed as Sweden's first marine national park.

Oda zoomed in on the largest island, South Koster. A short distance from Ekenäs Pier, she finally found Sveviken.

That's where she lived. Lina Ebbel, Christine's mother, the millionaire mogul who'd founded the cosmetics juggernaut Linné AS, which, ever since that brutal pitch in 2015, had been one of Oda's most important clients.

Oda had never met Lina. Christine had taken over as company CEO before Oda and FND won the contract. Only once had she ever heard her voice. It was in the days leading up to a major product launch at NK in Stockholm where the launch event itself would take place. Christine was having a conversation with her mother when she put the phone on speaker by mistake. She managed to get a solid earful in front of a whole crowd of event coordinators, models, and agency people before she switched the speaker back off.

Like mother like daughter, thought Oda while ordering another glass. She'd seen how women took to being in the highest corporate echelons. These were the kinds of clients she could easily get behind, the sort who could dish out straight-shooting feedback rather than beating around the bush, and who, in Oda's world, only stood for more work and rounds of revision.

Still sitting at her table, Oda sketched out a rough brief and an offer for the assignment.

The assignment:

Linné AS is celebrating 50 years with an anniversary campaign as well as a large event. As part of the celebration, the company wants to put out a biography of the woman behind everything: Lina Ebbel. The book will delve into Ebbel's life and work with Linné.

Oda Bakken will work as a ghost writer and will be credited in the book by name, after "as told to."

The work will involve a number of in-depth interviews with Lina Ebbel and other relevant persons. Further research into the history of both the book's central figure and the company will also be necessary.

Target audience: Women, 28+ in the Nordics and Germany (discuss: use AI or network to translate?)

Interests: Books, female entrepreneurs, biographies, cosmetics, fashion, history of trends.

Timeline:

Writing period: Summer and fall 2026

Editing and revisions: January and February 2027

Translation and production: March and April 2027

In stores: 2 weeks prior to company's 50th—June 6, 2027

Work location: South Koster/Oslo

Estimated budget

450 hours (12 weeks full-time)

750,000 NOK excl. VAT, plus lodging in Koster and travel expenses.

Any unforeseen expenses will be discussed along the way and invoiced to the client as an addition to final invoice.

The Riesling was below average and the flounder could have been juicier, but otherwise Oda felt a glow in the restaurant around her. Her relief over again having the means to cover her apartment and credit cards was one thing, but there was something more to it: she actually looked forward to the job. It wasn't quite the offer she'd been hoping for the past few days—a permanent role in the marketing division of Linné AS—but what if this was even better? It might result in an important book. Not only would it deal with Norwegian industry from the perspective of history, society, and gender equality, but also with what surely was an uncommonly compelling life.

Oda was aware that the company had plenty of other people to choose from—there were numerous bestselling authors who took on this kind of work—but they'd chosen her. It was hard not to be a little flattered.

Oda allowed herself a dark chocolate cake for dessert, and by the time she left the restaurant, she'd sent the offer to Christine and booked a well-deserved vacation to Hydra, the posh island in Greece.

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Had Oda undersold herself? Christine Ebbel approved the offer quickly, no questions asked. This usually meant you'd offered a price lower than what you could have gotten, Oda thought as she searched the archives in the NRK building at Marienlyst. Oda had gotten right down to work in the days since the meeting at the Bristol. She'd gone to the National Library, National Archives, and TV2, on top of scouring the web, for anything she could find about Lina Ebbel's public life.

It happened that the successful entrepreneur had been interviewed several times on television toward the beginning of her career. Oda found a couple of interviews from the 80s where Lina had been presented as a botanical expert in evening news segments.

Oda had also been surprised to find out that Lina was the woman she remembered from the children's TV show *What About the Future, Sjonkel Rolf?*, who, across several appearances, told the

puppet character and the children watching what would happen to the plants and flowers if we didn't take care of our planet.

Oda also found a profile on *Never on Saturday*, the popular newsmagazine. The host, Erik Bye, introduced the segment with a sly smile, promising viewers a peek inside Lina Ebbel's "laboratory"—a meadow blooming with flowers. The little woman stood in it, radiating charm and presenting different flowers. Her passion for the subject, and her light blue eyes, shone on the camera. She owed all her success to these little ones, she said. She named each flower while adding the Linné product line it was used in, at a prime viewing hour on Norway's sole public broadcaster. The kind of publicity money can't buy anymore, Oda thought, impressed.

Moving into the 90s, Lina adopted a decidedly more political attitude. The otherwise subdued millionaire took a stance when it came to what she called "poisonous products." In an editorial for *Aftenposten*, she laid into the authorities for being asleep at their posts, being duped by expensive ad campaigns into allowing products that were clearly toxic.

Oda uncovered an episode on the sensationalized and therefore popular debate program, *Holmgang*. In the studio, Lina showed products from the French behemoth L'Oréal, a brand that was literally on everyone's lips at the time. She gave L'Oréal's Norwegian press officer a gleefully snide look as she spit his own company's slogan directly in his face.

Because you're worth it, she said.

Worth the cancer, you mean?

Turning next to the Norwegian health minister, Gudmund Hernes, who was in the studio, she informed him that the toxins in these products were proven carcinogens. And should a wave of breast cancer arrive in ten to fifteen years, it would be his cross to bear.

If you don't put a stop to the madness pronto, then you ought to be shunned, Gudmund! she hissed before a giggling studio audience, thus gifting the health minister's critics a potent battle cry that would follow him throughout his long political career.

Hernes was furious. L'Oréal was too, and took Lina Ebbel to court. Over the next few years, the coverage centered on the lawsuit and rivalry between the companies. The target market for Linné came

into sharper focus, and luckily for Lina, it consisted primarily of highly vocal middle-class women. They stood up for her and the company in newspapers and on the air. In an almost proselytizing tone, they defended Lina's philosophy of the real, simple, and true.

The pure, natural ingredients and the short, unvarnished list of what the products contained were clearly better for our bodies, the women opined, and because of who they were, the French adversary's products were soon derided as inferior. It didn't help that those products were being hawked by a long line of increasingly beautiful actresses and models who whispered into the camera: *Parce que vous le méritez, Because you're worth it.*

Cancer, reduced fertility, early menopause, added the middle-class women in the movie theatres, at home in their living rooms, in the editorials they penned. These were products for the ignorant, hoodwinked class. Products for those who didn't belong to the right book clubs and didn't have books like *Food: The Medicine You Need* on their bookshelves. In this way, the women in the target market became even more closely tied to Linné's products as a marker of their identity, as objects you had to have in your bathroom cabinet and your purse, just like designer chairs and expensive artworks on the walls of your living room.

The legal proceedings ended in a settlement in 1997. At the same time, Lina Ebbel disappeared from the headlines, from children's television, from the magazines and editorial pages. Oda looked far and wide, but it appeared her subject had all but dropped off the radar from that time onward, up to the present day. It had been nearly three decades. In other words, the rest of the story would have to come from Lina Ebbel herself.

Oda had to go to Koster.

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Koster, August 2026. Anyone who has ever played tag with the waves, the game where you follow the breath of the sea, running back and forth toward the shore while keeping your feet dry, knows that every so often a wave comes along that contains a little more than innocent play. Something deeper, darker. One that lures you further out, past the point where the other waves turn into the actual sea. When that wave breaks, you have to run much faster, further up the sand. The sea roars, spreads across, and buries what a moment ago was land, turning into seabed in an instant. Almost as if it's proving it can, if it wants to, and it'll do the same to you if you're not fast enough.

This was the sort of wave that was hurtling toward the beautiful Bohuslän coast, or more precisely, Ekenäs Harbor on South Koster, where the ferry from Strömstad was coming in to dock. The boat thumped against the dock, nearly causing Oda Bakken to lose her balance as she disembarked at what would be her temporary home.

On land, she put down her bag and looked around. The sight that met her was overwhelming. The whole dock was full of children holding beautiful bunches of flowers from the meadow. It was an old tradition on the Koster Islands, a myth that throwing a bunch of flowers from the ferry as it departed would ensure you made it back. Back to the beaches, back to the smooth rocks, the smells, the crabs, the plants, the mystique. Back to these islands, so full of summer you can spend a whole life yearning for them.

Cowslip and windflower, cat's foot and violet...

Soon, the flowers would be loosed and float across the Bohuslänian landscape, with its soft, welcoming curves the waiting crowd would soon be leaving for autumn, work, school, routine.

A sturdy man in his 50s also stood on the ferry landing. Sverker Johansson had been living on the island since he was a little boy himself, and worked as a sort of jack-of-all-trades for residents and summer people on South Koster. He was there to help Oda get settled. She would have a whole house to herself on Lina's property. A house that hadn't been used in a long time, but had now been tidied up. Sverker had fair, curly hair that had thinned, an earring, light brown work shorts, and kind blue eyes that smiled at her as he shook her hand. He took her bag and put it on the front flatbed of the moped next to him. He told her to hop on.

The thought of how much the new outfit she was wearing had cost made her hesitate. By now she'd realized she was badly overdressed. The other passengers from the boat wore big smiles, their legs already tanned. Short, beige linen trousers, gauzy floral summer dresses, and straw hats. Clothes that made time pass more slowly, made the muscles easier to carry. Oda was dressed for autumn. For stress. For efficiency. Black pants, leather sneakers, and a dark-blue shirt with the Kenzo tiger on the back. She dressed like the mainland. The now.

Come along, Bakken, said Sverker. Almost no one had ever called Oda only by her surname. Oda felt uneasy about it, without quite knowing why. It struck her that this was the sort of thing some men did

around each other, including in her industry, but never toward the women. It was either too formal or too familiar.

No cars around here, so it's this or on foot, said Sverker. His voice was dark, but soft. That's how we do things around here—look for yourself, he said, nodding toward the landing in front of them. Young and old people were jumping onto wagons and wheelbarrows, moped beds, bike trailers, and the backs of golf carts.

Oda gave in and climbed up. The boards beneath her creaked. Sverker kick-started the moped, and soon they were cruising up Hamnvägen, past people hauling bags and food. On their backs, in bike trailers, in the carts belonging to the cabins. The mopeds flying by on the gravel path stirred little dust clouds that danced and glittered in the blazing sun.

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Koster is one of those places you go to because not only is it a different place, but also a different time. And while Sverker and Oda drove further into the island, they also drove back in time. Back to a simpler time. The fifties or sixties. The postwar upswing. Soda pop. Girls everywhere. Island life. The cabins lined the gravel road. People were out weeding their gardens, plucking raspberries, watering flowers, leaning against the handlebars while chatting with their neighbor in the road junction. All were wearing light clothes. Linen and terry cloth. *Call this the land of the angels*, sang a voice on Swedish radio. Yellow on blue. Baked goodies on the beach. A trip to the kiosk to buy *glass*. Flower crowns on people's heads as they danced the little frog dance around the maypole. *Sommar, sommar, sommar*, Monica Zetterlund, and swimming temperatures on repeat for sixty years. The naivety of it all. *May they live, beautiful as they are*.

Sverker pointed out different things along the way. Here was the hotel, there was the kiosk, over there the aquarium. Plenty of places closed after August, but not the shop over in that direction, and that church there, if you required that sort of thing.

They turned off the road and drove further down a small trail. A median strip of tall grass bowed under the flatbed. They saw fewer people, fewer cabins. The forest came in closer, the air became damper, colder. Mushrooms poked up along the side of the road, the big snail shells covered the ground. Then Sverker drove off to the side and switched off the motor. From here they would walk.

Sverker slung her large bag over his shoulder. Oda looked at the t-shirt in front of her that was glued to the big, sweaty back. A list of tour dates from 2001 for a metal band whose name she couldn't make out climbed over a rocky rise and down onto a new trail and she followed. They walked through a small woods. It smelled of damp earth. A signpost in front of them read: *Private property*.

The right to roam applies on Koster just like everywhere else, of course, said Sverker, but these signs are all over the place anyway. The residents and cabin owners didn't like having tourists walk through their gardens, he said. This garden in particular made people quite curious. And you'll probably see why now, said Sverker when they had passed through the woods. A croft opened out before them.

Lina Ebbel's talents in gardening were certainly beyond dispute. Things were growing everywhere. Colors from flowers, herbs, berries, and fruit exploded wherever you looked. One fresh scent competed with the next — the sweet, the tart, the pungent, the heavy.

Out toward the sea lay smooth rocks that swathed the area in a snug cove, and the landscape opened up further out, receiving the sea. At the edge of the yard was a small beach, and on the right side of the beach was an old pier where a little boat bobbed up and down. Further up, a large yellow villa with a *säteri* roof, a porch, white cornices, and wavy fretwork along the trim. Oda stopped and looked up toward the house. It was a romantic Swedish summer dream of a house. A cliché.

Sverker nodded up toward the house.

Well, that's where she lives, the old woman. Nice, huh? Then he pointed toward a little cabin on the far end of the grounds, partially hidden by a violent snarl of rose bushes.

This is where you'll live, he said. Most of the roses were already fading, but the hips were ready to burst, a fiery red like that of the wall of the little cabin where the paint hadn't yet flaked off.

Sverker dug a key out of his huge pockets, unlocked the door and welcomed her in. He coughed as he said sure, it wasn't much, but quite pleasant all the same, right?

The cabin had two rooms. A living room with a daybed, an easy chair, a coffee table, and a bookshelf full of books. In front of the bookshelf was a little portable television. The living room also held a kitchenette with a stove, burners, and a couple of cabinets. That *was* pleasant, thought Oda. It

smelled old, but clean. On the kitchen table was a little vase with fresh flowers from the meadow.
Harebells and linden and chamomile blossoming.

Oda looked at the large hands that had picked the flowers that day. Those small, fragile plants, one by one. Those same hands now went to the kitchenette and turned the stove on and off to check that it worked.

She glanced into the little bedroom. A twin bed and a little night table. A wall-mounted reading lamp over the bed, along with the light in the ceiling.

Sverker walked her through it all. There was electricity here, so that was something at least. She could get water from the kitchen tap or from the garden hose outside to do her dishes and shower, but she needed to be mindful of how much water she used since the island had no fresh water of its own.

Only shower when it rains, said Sverker. Not a bad rule here on the islands.

He pointed out the door toward the yard. There stood an old outdoor privy. Lina had indoor plumbing, but it was probably best for Oda to use the outside toilet for the time being, anyway.

She nodded in the direction of the house.

What's she like?

The old woman? You'll find out soon enough, said Sverker.

Oda studied the man, the worn work clothes and the round body.

He was one of the ones who'd had most contact with Lina the past few years, doing jobs for her as he did. It was Christine who'd originally hired him, as well.

Sverker and Lina had their own way of communicating. The old woman had been skeptical of him at first, unsure why her daughter would foist a chubby lump of a man with big hands on her. She hardly looked at him when he came to haul the boat out for the first time. Only asked how much he cost when he came to put it back in.

Lina thought she could drag it to land herself, against doctors' orders—something about the blood pressure, the heart. The old woman thought it was all over the top. But after the summer, when she

twisted her ankle, she'd started to take to Sverker, letting him fetch groceries and cut her grass when her health wouldn't cooperate.

Oda looked at Sverker as if still waiting on his answer.

He hesitated.

She goes on a lot of walks on the islands, he said finally. She often goes on the little cable ferry which takes you across to North Koster. Oda could see his embarrassment; it was clear he'd rather not talk about Lina. Oda was curious why, but didn't pry. Instead she pointed at the little boat that was tied to the pier.

And what about that?

She goes out on it sometimes, said Sverker.

He coughed. I mean, when there isn't too much wind, he said while looking at her, hoping she'd fill the silence with another question. Oda just looked at him. Sverker pretended to swat a mosquito on the back of his neck to cover his discomfort.

Not sure what else there is to say, he said finally. She's her own person, that's for sure. He turned to go back into the lush garden. Oda followed. Those overwhelming colors and aromas. The sun stood scorching directly overhead.

Heaven on earth, if you will.

Sverker put the key inside the door, but told her that no one locked their doors around here. The only thing you have to look out for on Koster is ticks, jellyfish, and falling into the sea if you've had one too many, he said. He gave her a grateful look when she finally responded with a little smile.

The large man wiped his brow with the back of his hand. Pulled a piece of paper out of his pocket. Lina's thin cursive was of the classic style, beautiful. It went with the house. Only one thing was left on the list. A bike. Oda had to have a bike, naturally. She could pop down to Nils at the bike rental at the port afterward and get one. He'd tell Nils to expect her.

They said goodbye, and Oda started walking toward the big house. Sverker stopped her.

The old woman didn't exactly like people beating a path to her door, he said. It would probably be best if Oda put off visiting her, he said. Oda nodded and followed the broad back a little ways. A peeling leather belt was visible as he climbed over the rock rise. Up there, they were able to look out over the sea and down at his moped. Sverker walked the last bit of the way by himself. She looked at him as he worked loose a Patagonia hat from the moped's handlebars and put it on. He immediately looked more modern: like an everyday 50-year-old from the present. Then he waved, kickstarted the moped, and sped off in a cloud of dust.

All was still in the windows of the great house. Was Lina at home? Oda walked over the grass, back to the cabin. Lay down on the daybed. Closed her eyes, inhaling the aroma of old house, sun-dried wood, flowers, the sea.

Oda thought of all the loose linen clothing on the ferry landing. Clothes that never chafed or bothered anyone. She opened her bag and changed into a pair of pants made of lighter material, which she rolled up at the ankles. Then she got everything unpacked, put her clothes on the shelves, hung up a few shirts in the closet, and laid the books she'd taken on the table. Three of them were ones she'd written herself.

She was relieved to find the privy quite clean, as clean as an outdoor privy can be. The floor was gloss-painted concrete. On the wall hung portraits of both the Norwegian and Swedish royal couples. The Swedish king and queen were still young: Carl Gustaf, with his black curls lying flat against his scalp, contrasting with Silvia's piled-up hair, on which a tiara was placed. The picture was fading, with water stains in the corners. The picture of Harald and Sonja, on the other hand, was more recent. Norway's king was no young man when he'd assumed the throne. The queen's threads had a discernibly 90s sheen, and the king's hair was already thin. Oda took some bark from the bucket, and immediately it seemed like something shone out from the portrait. She looked at it again; something didn't seem right. Hadn't the queen's dress been violet? The light outside must have changed. The dress was obviously blue. Oda put the lid down and went back to the cabin.

She waited for an hour, went for a walk in the garden, smelled and touched the flowers and plants, ate some raspberries and currants straight from the bushes, while glancing now and then at the house. It was completely still. Finally, she went in and took out a swimsuit and towel, putting them in a small bag along with a pen and notebook.

She left the door unlocked, but just as she set off walking, she thought of the new MacBook, changed her mind, and went back and locked the door. She walked across the ground, over the rocks, and stood looking out across the island. This had once been Norway too. The king who lost this landscape lost some of the best land we ever had.

*

Nils Karlsson had just turned 17. He stood now with a set of keys in one hand, a tin of snus in the other, and the feeling of an unfinished education in the pit of his stomach. An autumn with no plans was fast approaching. He'd worked on Koster each summer since he was 13, and if he took over the business, he'd be the third generation of Karlssons to rent out bikes. The boy may not have looked convincingly motivated, but handled both friendly small-talk with customers and minor fixes to the bikes capably enough.

He took out a helmet and asked Oda whether she wanted it. She shook her head. Nils looked at her.

By the time you regret it, it's usually too late, he said. Oh yes, indeed. Nils hadn't just taken on a job. He'd also inherited the hackneyed sayings, the old-man turns of phrase.

Ekenäs Bike Rental offers two kinds of bikes. The old romantic, heavy kind with balloon tires you pedal slowly to the beach and back with your dress flapping about, and a more modern variant with gears. Without asking, Nils took out one with the gears. He took visual measure of Oda, adjusted the seat, and gave her the bike. Oda got on to test it out.

I'll be closed at some point in August, he said, spitting out his snus and putting another pouch in. He'd give her a code for the container lock and she could put it back inside when she no longer needed it. They'd sort it out, didn't she think? He squinted at her. Oda nodded.

What are you doing here this time of year, really? he asked. Oda told him she was writing a book.

About the old woman who lives in Sjeviken, she said. Do you know her? The somewhat languid, heavy eyelids on the youthful face opened wider. This was the first time she got a proper look at his eyes. A hazel contrasting with the fair, almost white hair. The yellow teeth that showed when he grinned.

The old wi...Nils stopped himself, but the word was already out there.

That was what they called her. The old witch. He and his father, probably many others on the islands. Of course they'd seen her going around with all those branches and herbs she cooked up in huge iron pots in her garden. That's how that nickname had come about, along with a rumor that she wasn't quite right in the head, that the old woman went around imagining herself to be some kind of sorceress.

Oda looked at him. His youthful body. The stooped posture. Was she seeing right, or were those gray hairs growing in his nose?

You know she's quite rich? she asked to see if she could get more out of him, more ages surfacing in that strange face.

He grinned, took out his snus tin and opened it, but remembered he'd just put in a fresh pouch a moment ago. Of course he'd heard rumors, he said, but they were hard to believe when you saw the woman. Even though that property of hers was clearly worth a small fortune.

Oda sat on the bike and took it for a little test spin. The seat was just the right height, she said.

Good, said Nils, with a thoughtful look.

I wouldn't pay it any mind, that business about the old witch, he said. It's just island chatter. Everyone gets a name around here. Including you, he said, and clapped a hand to his forehead at his latest slip.

I mean, it's a nice nickname. Lucky for you, Göran Thunström is no longer with us, God rest his soul.

God rest his soul? asked Oda. This kid talked just like an old man.

Did she not know Göran Thunström was dead? The nickname is available. She should only be too pleased. Otherwise the islanders would have had to find something else about Oda to latch onto and make her nickname.

Oda was confused. What was her nickname?

The author, Nils said softly.

So you already knew why I was here, then, said Oda. Nils shrugged. There were rumors, he said.

Oda asked the way to the grocer. Nils pointed, they said goodbye. Then he flung himself down on a plastic chair and picked up his phone, just like any other 17-year-old.

*

Seven. As in the number of days it took God to create the world, as in the seven seas and seven heavens. We have seven days in the week, seven colors in the rainbow, seven notes in an octave, and seven deadly sins.

If you stand by the sea and count the waves rolling in, you will also arrive at the number seven. Every seventh wave, every seventh breath the sea takes is deeper, stronger and carries more force. Just such a wave was now driving toward Rörvik Beach on South Koster, and it was that wave Oda Bakken decided to throw herself into, ducking her head under.

The sea felt clean. She swam as far out as she dared. The coldness down by her toes. The warmth at her chest. The sun on the crown of her head. Ahead of her she could see Hvaler, Østfold, Norway. The same smooth rocks, flowers, waves, mosquito bites; but not the same summer.

Oda turned and swam back toward Sweden. Toward the blue and yellow, toward the People's Home, *Kids' Sports Roundup* and *Björne's Storeroom*. Toward Volvo semis which, with their lane assist feature, were practically glued to the road, so steady within their lane that Jean-Claude Van Damme could once stand with his feet straddling two parallel speeding trucks in the Epic Split, the all-time best maneuver of its kind and the best stunt ever to appear in an ad. The ultimate proof that making ads is a craft. Was a craft. AI has rendered it obsolete, thought Oda. No one in their right mind is going to fork out ungodly sums to make something real which everyone will believe to be fake. All those great ideas, the entire basis for the creative element in the marketing industry, were being hollowed out. The skill to make something like that happen in the ideas room, to get the client to say yes, to get Jean-Claude Van Damme to actually do that split between two speeding semis and cause people all over the world to enthusiastically hit the "share" button, had been rubbished.

Maybe now was the time to get out of the creative industry anyway. Oda came up out of the water. The marram grass tickled the soles of her bare feet. She looked at them and realized she needed a pair of sandals. And a pedicure.

*

Huge sale bins stood out by the entrance of Koster's only grocer. The summer's beach toys, towels, and flipflops were on sale before school started. Oda looked at the plastic sandals. Straps across the feet in navy shades. They were certainly very cheap, but she couldn't imagine herself ever actually wearing them.

Inside, it was total chaos. The building was far too small to hold all the summer necessities and it seemed like the owners had given up trying to follow any system. Dry goods, hair ties, kitchen scissors, and fishing gear were all jumbled together. No one could find what they needed; the customers swarmed about like flies at a hot windowsill.

The employees consisted mostly of the proprietor's children who stood around in impressively unstrategic places, representing yet another challenge to the flow of customers as they pretended to be tidying up or restocking the shelves. It was apparent to all that they were far off in the world of their phones. They knew that people on the island came here regardless, which they'd tried explaining to their mother, the person working the register. She, in contrast, was a little powerhouse of a human being. The middle-aged woman scanned the items while greeting, talking, and laughing with each customer at breakneck speed. It looked as though her arms were completely disconnected from the head, two systems running on two different modes of autopilot. *Hej*, Lars, how's the stomach. Would you like a bag. Need your receipt. *Hej*, dearie. How's the cat. How long will you all be here this year and did you bring the kids this time and are you a grandmother yet.

When Oda reached the front of the line, she tried to draw as little attention to herself as possible. She was uniquely unskilled when it came to jovial small talk. The game, the emptiness made her feel unwell. She never knew what to say to the needless questioning. The lady at the register looked at her as she scanned each item. Oda kept her gaze at the cashier's hands. White gloves. Like a fencer.

Bip. Bip.

Say hello to the old woman, said the cashier as Oda was leaving. Oda tried to mutter a *tack* and *hej*, but the words got stuck in her throat.

She parked her bike by the trail and carried her bags over the rock rise. Past the sign. *Private property*. She thought she saw someone moving about in that big house. Perhaps the old woman actually thought it was strange of her not to have knocked on her door and introduced herself already.

Oda walked slowly up the steps to the porch whose white coat of paint glistened in the sun. She prepared herself for the conversation ahead. Just wanted to introduce myself, she thought about saying. I'd better put away my groceries, but just wanted to say hi and I look forward to starting soon.

She heard sounds in the house. A toilet flushing? She waited. Straightened her shirt. Saw a little spot and tried to rub it out. No one came to the door. Maybe she just didn't hear the knock? Oda tried again. Rubbed the spot on her shirt some more. Still nothing.

She gave up and turned to leave. Just then, she heard a window open. She turned around, put on a smile, but all the windows were still shut.

In the cabin she put the milk and juice in the refrigerator and eggs on the counter, a habit she'd taken up after an extended stay in Berlin, where nobody kept eggs cold. Flour and yeast went in the cabinet. She found a bowl for the tomatoes and set the fruit on a ceramic plate next to the little bunch of flowers from Sverker.

The coffee filters inside a holder on the wall had yellowed. She replaced them with new ones and took out the coffee she'd brought with her from Java in Oslo.

Oda could put up with simple living conditions, but drew the line at bad coffee.

With the coffeemaker gurgling, Oda took her bathing suit outside to hang it somewhere. One fresh flower scent was constantly being replaced by another as she crossed the yard and found a drying rack behind the main house. A little vegetable garden had also been planted there, with a greenhouse to go with it. At this time of year, the vegetables seemed ready to burst, almost bulging over with ripeness. Big, juicy tomatoes hung heavy as an old woman's breasts, and at the slightest touch, the peppers would give a crisp crack as the juices spurted out.

Oda hung the last towel on the clothesline and glanced up at the windows of the house. She thought she could see a figure standing there in the dark. She flinched and nearly kicked a cat that suddenly brushed against her leg. Yellow and white as the house it belonged to. She crouched down to scratch its head when the phone in her pocket started ringing. Another leap forward into the present. What's the word you use when something's the opposite of anachronistic, she thought. The same AI that had taken her job would probably know the answer. It was Christine.

Oda told her she'd arrived and everything had gone smoothly, but she hadn't met the old woman yet.

Christine said her mother wasn't expecting a visit from Oda until tomorrow.

They both paused. Christine hesitated.

She didn't know how to say what she was about to say, she said. Another pause.

She can be a bit...nasty.

Nasty?

For lack of a better word, said Christine. But yeah. She ought to know that her mother, Lina Ebbel, had a bit of a reputation, or, as Christine of course knew quite well, could be quite temperamental if she was in a bad mood. But Christine was sure Oda could handle this, which could have been one reason why she'd asked her to take this one.

Not to mention you're Norway's best copywriter, she added quickly. For the agency to let you go is a minor scandal.

*

Oda opened a bottle of wine and set some bread dough to rise in the little kitchen at the cabin. She looked up synonyms of nasty. Devilish. Petty. Malicious.

Lina was over 80, after all. It wouldn't be that strange if she was a bit eccentric and had to take things at her own speed, thought Oda. She hadn't expected otherwise, in fact.

Oda cleared her books off the table and placed them on the bookshelves, which contained several volumes by Norway's leading poets of the 60s and 70s. Cheap, worn paperbacks that had clearly been well perused. She took out a book by André Bjerke. Thumbed through it, reading the pages that had been dogeared and underlined. On one page, she read a poem she immediately recognized. She'd totally forgotten it, but when she saw it, she remembered it quite well from when she was younger and dabbled in poetry herself. She read through to the last and most famous verse. *Grow, grow, little seed. Life is a*

dream. The darkness on our island murmurs: Maybe we shall never die. Everyone is alone. The last two lines had thick pencil underlining.

Oda put the book back on the shelf. Kept browsing. Local history, Swedish history. A long row of books on botany, including an old copy of Carl von Linné's *Flora of Sweden*. The sight of the books she'd written herself made her cringe with embarrassment.

She brushed her teeth at the kitchen sink and got into bed.

Outside, another summer day on Koster had come to an end. The fog rose slowly over Lina Ebbel's garden, leaving droplets on the rhubarb leaves which brought back memories from everybody's childhood, happy or unhappy, of those paper cones with sugar inside that you dipped the stalks in to suck on. Quickly, quickly—before Midsummer Night, when the children would place seven (there again, seven) different flowers under their pillow. Because then they'd dream of the one they would one day join in a blissful marriage, before it—just like the rhubarb on that Midsummer night—grew toxic.

*

The dawn streamed through the bright curtains, causing Oda to wake early. Would she try to knock on the door again today? Or just wait until Lina Ebbel came over herself?

She ate breakfast, bathed, and brushed her teeth at the kitchen sink. In the hall stood a pair of the plastic sandals she'd seen in the shop. She looked at her own lace-ups. Oda sighed, slipped the sandals on and went outside to the privy. Queen Sonja's dress was still blue. On the wall next to Carl Gustaf and Silvia was a small shelf with a selection of Linné products in the Wood Anemone line. Oda opened the box of diffuser sticks and put them into the bottle of scent that came with them. They gave off a fresh scent. Sweet, but not nauseatingly so. She spread a thin layer of face lotion on her cheeks and forehead before walking out.

What are you doing here?

As she rounded the corner of the cabin, Oda saw an old woman standing at the door.

The lady was small of stature and wore colorful clothes of loose-fitting materials. A blouse in crinkled muslin with an asymmetric cut at the waist, and trousers that came to mid-calf. Bare feet in a pair of leather sandals. Oda felt she recognized her from all the newspaper clippings, the TV interviews,

the kids' show appearances. This had to be Lina Ebbel, and yet she wasn't totally sure. The last interview with Lina Oda had found was from 1997, right before the court battle with L'Oréal. The successful businesswoman was older now, of course.

The furrows on her face resembled bark and the skin was a ruddy brown. Her shoulder-length hair was white, cut straight, with straight bangs. She was holding the yellow and white cat. The eyes were of such a luminous blue that they almost looked artificial, bordering on white.

This is my husband's house, said the old woman, sizing Oda up.

As for the guest, she stood there in short shorts many would say didn't suit a woman of her age. Accompanying the shorts was a threadbare Samsøe top. In her defense, it should of course be added that her outfit functioned as a set of pajamas and she hadn't managed to dress to meet people just yet. She had no idea what to say.

The old woman stared at the feet of the younger one. My goodness, if she wasn't one to take liberties. Were these not the old flipflops that had once been her dead husband's? And why did she just stand there saying nothing? Was she hard of hearing?

No, said Oda. For she really wasn't. Oda was, quite simply, seized with panic. Had she come to the wrong place? Her thoughts were spinning. What if this wasn't Lina Ebbel? Sverker had been consistent in calling her host the old woman. Could this be some other old lady? Perhaps she'd just stayed in a house she shouldn't have been in in the first place. Put fruit on the wrong counter, her clothes in the wrong closet.

Or was Lina Ebbel senile?

Did they not say anything? Oda managed to say, finally.

Who's they? said Lina.

Oda felt the sweat run down her back. The woman kept staring at Oda. Without warning or any trace of shyness, she walked right up to her face.

Then the old woman laughed. Her breath carried a sweet smell.

I'm just messing with you, she said.

Oda didn't know what to think, but the laughter that tumbled out of that little body was infectious and soon she too was laughing, albeit a bit nervously.

The women shook hands and introduced themselves. Lina invited Oda over to her big house. Oda hurried over to the cabin, changed into trousers, and brought a notebook, the MacBook, and some pens. When she came back out, Lina had already gone back inside, but left the door open. Oda ran across the yard. Her feet got wet from the dew in the grass.

The old woman stood in the kitchen, pouring a cloudy liquid from a pot through a funnel into a glass bottle. To Oda she looked like a little chemistry teacher dressed for art class. A combination she found she quite liked.

So you're Oda Bakken, said Lina, without looking at her. The author? Oda nodded.

Lina said she'd actually seen Oda before, on Christine's computer screen in a meeting with the folks who did all their marketing. She picked up a teapot, placed a big strainer inside. Because wasn't it the case that Oda worked in the ad agency Christine had chosen right after her own retirement from Linné?

Oda confirmed that she did. Lina kept talking while straining the liquid from the glass bottle into the teapot. During the pandemic, she'd heard Oda's voice many times in her living room, where her daughter sat working all day.

Christine and the boys had come here after remote work and school were mandated. They'd come from Hvaler on a borrowed cabin cruiser, and in that sense they'd basically fled here since the borders were officially closed. The idea was that it was better for the boys to be here than in Oslo. Here, they could play, ride bikes, kick around a football, and go swimming when the water finally got warm enough. The result was that the boys sat on the couch or lay around in hammocks with their phones all day. Those gadgets were constantly making noise and not once did the kids offer to help their soon-to-be-80-year-old grandmother. They groaned and barely managed to drag themselves out of the way long enough for her to cut the grass or vacuum the rug around their lazy butts.

She handed Oda a cup and told her to sit over in the living room. It was crammed with furniture, in a style that was nothing if not eclectic. There was a plump velvet armchair, a leather wingback, a seventies sofa that looked too hard, an eighties sofa that looked too soft, pine bookshelves, and books everywhere. Cluttered, but cozy—*trevligt*. The cat lay on the couch. Oda sat beside it, petting the soft fur. His name is Oskar, Lina shouted from the kitchen. Just like my late husband.

Those were his flipflops Oda wore earlier, and he'd built the cabin she was staying in, said the old woman. She came to the living room and poured the yellow liquid from the teapot into their cups. Sat down in the velvet armchair.

Oda apologized for just having made herself at home, but the old woman just shrugged.

They looked at one another. I thought you had some good ideas in those meetings back then, Lina said after a while. Oda thanked her.

But I was not especially impressed with the rest of that agency, said Lina. Oda gave a polite laugh and said there could be a fair amount of chatter for chatter's sake in those meetings. Then the two of them were silent for a bit. They heard the waves outside, the leisure boats chugging on by. A bee knocked against a window.

Lina nodded toward the tea.

Taste it, she said. That was a linden tea. She was ever so eager to know whether it had dried enough, or whether it needed to sit a while longer. Oda took a small sip. It burned on the tongue. The taste was a little bitter and a little sweet. Like fresh-cut grass.

It's good, said Oda.

Lina tasted from her own cup. She shook her head before putting it down, abruptly and hard.

Put that down, she said. She had to apologize. This was far from good enough to serve. Imagine serving this sort of thing to guests.

The rapid shift in the old body before her surprised Oda. She assured Lina that as far as she was concerned, Lina had nothing to apologize for, it tasted fine to her, she said. The old woman shook her head.

I cannot abide mediocrity. You might as well learn that right now.

Oda nodded. Thought about Christine's warning the day before. It was no worse than she'd imagined. Old people have no time to be imprecise; that wasn't nastiness, it was practical. Christine herself was getting to be that way, with her straight talk and clear feedback. She could manage, thought Oda.

She searched for words that could lighten the mood again, but thought of nothing except petting the cat and commenting on the color of its fur with an overblown remark about the similarity with the house and the rocks outside.

The old woman looked skeptically at her. Again, the silence invited the summer sounds inside the living room.

Oda looked at Lina. Was this the woman in the archived videos? She recognized something. The features. The gestures. The shining eyes.

Oda opened her laptop.

So here's what I've done so far, she said. She told Lina about the work she'd already done, her findings in the archives. About the news report from the flowery meadow, the newspaper clippings, the debate with Gudmund Hernes, and the material around the L'Oréal affair. Lina chuckled at the first few items, but looked more embarrassed as the chronology went up through the 90s. At one point she leaped up from her chair as if she were going to comment on what Oda was saying, but just stood there a moment looking at Oda before sitting down again.

Oda put her laptop away.

And yet, she said. There's almost nothing about *you* in any of this.

Lina didn't understand. Oda had just put forward a mountain of material; she'd been a national figure at one time!

But it's impossible to know the real you from any of it, said Oda. There was nothing about Lina's background, her family, daughter, spouse, nothing that really revealed who she was. And that's what we need to use this time together to find out, said Oda. Would Lina be comfortable with that?

The old woman wrinkled her nose slightly.

I'll be honest with you, she said. For my part, I've been trying all summer to get my daughter to forget this book project. I don't think it's a great idea.

The information caught Oda off guard. Did she hear that right?

Lina went on.

The way she saw it, this is just another of her daughter's rash marketing ideas for the company. Lina had to admit she'd cringed at more than a few of them. They no longer felt like the brand she'd created. She hoped Oda wasn't hurt by her frankness, but the truth was that she'd thought the ad campaigns felt tacked on, pretentious, smug.

Oda tried putting on a polite smile, but her body could not hide the stress she was feeling. She kept shifting in her seat, crossing one leg over the other and back.

And if there was something her daughter wanted to know about her mother, she could always just ask, said the old woman.

Oda didn't understand. Hadn't it been settled that they were writing the book after all? She tried to explain to the old woman about the anniversary, that it was in that connection, that it would be an appropriate way to celebrate the company's place in Norwegian commerce over the past 50 years. An important history for this company, which could live for many more years to come, for all its future employees, partners, and especially for young entrepreneurs, especially for women, just think of—

Lina cut her off.

Alright, alright, I've heard it all before. But hadn't they celebrated the 30th and 40th anniversaries without her having to go and spill her guts? Autobiographies? Why, isn't that just a pastime for narcissists? she spat out.

Oda could see her pay slipping out of her fingers. She thought about how much money she could ask for if she went home empty-handed. It would be so little as to be almost humiliating to ask for. It would barely cover what she'd charged to the new credit card. She thought about the shoes in the entryway of the cabin. They'd cost nearly five thousand kroner, if she remembered right.

I think I'll just go get some water, said Oda.

Oh, calm down, said the old woman. I'll get it. She went to the kitchen again as she spoke. She had agreed to this, after all—otherwise Oda wouldn't be here. That had to be obvious, right?

She returned to the living room with a couple of glasses and a carafe.

But I thought it'd be okay for you to know that it's my daughter and the company who want this book, said Lina. Not me.

Okay, said Oda.

Lina leaned back in the leather chair and looked inquisitively at Oda, as if she wanted some kind of answer from her. Oda looked back at her, questioningly.

You don't have any questions? said Lina. Now that that's settled, we might as well get underway right now, no?

Oda shook her head and nodded with one and the same movement, emptied her water glass in two gulps, and opened her notebook. She looked at the question she had written down. Banal, thought Oda as she heard herself ask it anyway.

Would Lina like to tell her a bit about her childhood?

(pages 71-73 in original)

It was back when my husband and I bought a pig from the farmers in North Koster. A live pig. That year, we'd decided to invite people over for Christmas, and we would spare no expense.

The pig would live, eat, and be cozy on the farm up until the day it was slaughtered to become our Christmas feast. This sort of thing has become modern nowadays, but at that time our families thought it was some kind of hippie nonsense, especially given that you could finally buy Christmas pork at the supermarket.

A few things ended up happening that spring. I threw up at work, went to the doctor, and was told I was pregnant. Over the Pentecost holiday, we traveled down to North Koster to visit the farmers and buy the pig. It was a nice pig. A young pig that snorted in the mud and poked its nose up at my hand. I gave it a little hazelnut I'd found in the woods and the animal swallowed it whole. I laughed at it, and I dare say it laughed back.

Afterwards, we sat in the farmyard and drank coffee with the farmers, Ivar and Agnes. Ivar said the pig was eating well; she was a happy pig.

Agnes served big pieces of cake and the farmer got out the bottle to give us a little something extra, an aquavit he'd made himself. If that was to our liking, he'd be happy to give us a bottle from next year's batch. He'd make sure to send it with the pig for Christmas. He proudly served it in small glasses; I saw the doubt on my husband's face, presumably because of the drive back.

It'll just sharpen the senses before we go home, I assured him.

When it came to my own situation, I allowed myself a sip from a small glass. I knew from the books I'd read that you shouldn't drink hard liquor in pregnancy, but since at that time no one saw it as problematic, and if I remember right, a couple glasses of wine was even recommended, I accepted what was offered.

My husband was in particularly good spirits. He praised the aquavit to the skies and asked Ivar if he could see the potato field it had come from. The men went out to the little patch. Agnes had gone in with the empty cake dish. I leaned back, relished the sun and quiet alone for a moment.

Suddenly I heard a squeal from the pigsty. It was a horrible squeal, drilling into my ears. At the same time I felt a rising pain in my belly. It felt like something pressing up into my womb, as if a branch from the log I was sitting on were growing out of the wood and into me. The sharp branches grabbed hold of something inside me and gave it a twist. I doubled over. The farmer looked at me. He yelled that it was nothing to worry about, the pigs were just teasing each other. I heard my husband laugh. The pain only got worse.

Then the pig shrieked again. I looked toward the pigsty. The sound was coming from our pig. Then the pain came the other way. I screamed. Louder than the pig. It was like something inside me was trying to get out. I saw blood on my dress, ran toward the outdoor privy by the house. Threw the latch,

lifted my dress, looked down to see my legs covered with blood. I heard Agnes come running out of the house and yell they'd just gotten a bathroom installed, but it was too late.

I sat looking at King Olav over the hole on the wood bench, when something came out of me with tremendous force. I had no control over my body anymore. It was impossible to hold it inside. It surged out of me. Then it all stopped. The pain and the blood. I regained my breath. Looked around me, at the king. The widower. I met his gaze. At that moment, we shared an unending loneliness.

Sun-bleached magazines in a basket. The bloody dress. After a while I heard their voices outside. My husband telling the farmers about my pregnancy. Agnes remarking that these things happened, unfortunately. That was life. That it just had to run its course now, and then we could try again. As young as we were, we'd surely be expecting again in no time. I heard her come up to the door of the privy, heard her say she'd get some towels and something for me to change into, heard her leave.

I took the towels, couldn't speak, closed the door, took my clothes off. Wiped myself down while naked. Felt a new wave of pain shooting out from my navel and shutting down all feeling in my legs. As I fell into the dust and the grime from the farmyard that covered the floor, I saw I'd forgotten to fasten the hook on the door. The pig screamed. I screamed. The clump came out onto the floor and lay there along with the pain and the screams. It was over.

Agnes opened the door, picked up the clump, threw it down the hole and scattered sawdust over it. She stood still for a moment, looking down into the hole, before shaking her head and crossing herself before putting down the lid.

She helped me get washed and put on a dress she said I could just have, it had belonged to her sister, was patterned with blue and yellow flowers and cut in an old style. It was baggy on me, but comfortable. She gave me a pair of underwear.

It's brand new, said Agnes. I bought it in Strömstad last week.

I put the underwear on and was given a thick pad to line it with.

They followed us out to the gate.

It'll make good fertilizer, anyway, said the farmer. His wife pinched him in the thigh. My husband put his arm around me, picked up my bag and his backpack. We hadn't gone far before we heard the

intense squealing again. The pig had gotten through the fence and was running full speed toward the privy.

It was far away, but I could clearly see the pig burrowing down behind the little shed. The farmer pulling and yanking at the animal. Agnes running over to help. The pig's snout covered in blood when they managed to pull it back. My husband standing totally still as he watched the spectacle before turning, grabbing my hand, and pulling me away.

That's one strong pig, he said. Bet it'll be good.

Summer came and went. Then it was autumn.

Then Christmas.

The pig was slaughtered and sent to us. My husband decided not to make pork rib and headcheese with it after all; he'd found a recipe for a slow-roasted whole pig that he was keen to try. With glaze, an apple in the mouth, the whole thing, he said.

The guests came the day before Christmas Eve and we decorated the tree together. On Christmas morning we all got up, my husband put the pig in the oven, and soon it was time to get ready for church. We stood with our coats on, my mother-in-law had her hand on the door handle, and the bells were ringing when we heard that squeal I knew so painfully well. This time it was coming from the oven.

It got louder and louder.

It's unbearable, said his sister.

Make it stop, yelled my mother-in-law. With each squeal I felt a sharp tug in my belly, only this time it wasn't pain, but a longing, a pull, a knowledge of what had to be done. My husband looked at me, terrified, when I yanked the oven door open and took out the dinner. I turned it on its back, caught the smell of sweaty skin, and plunged the knife into the sow's belly. It screamed again. I split the belly open and delivered the human child. I saw it right away.

That child was mine.