From *Going Home*

(*På vei hjem*)

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**At the cabin**

We have hardly any luggage, and so we stop down by the road without driving up to the cabin first. Thale gets out and goes to unlock the front door while I park the car. The wind lifts her hair like a streamer as she rounds the corner, and that’s the last I see of her before she disappears. The path is muddy, the earth loose after the autumn rain. On one of the roadside snow poles hangs a hat, now falling apart. According to the weather forecast the temperature will remain above freezing, even through the night. The sun hangs low above Jotunheimen. I look over towards the Prestkampen peak – hiking to the top of it is the ultimate test of manhood among the members of Thale’s family. A trip that takes almost three hours each way. Her father walks it every winter in a battle with his own mortality. When they were growing up, Thale and her brother were forced to go along, but neither Georg nor I have been there. Now Georg is sixteen and goes to basketball practice five days a week, he’ll probably have to join the hike this winter. Thale’s relatives take a very strict approach to what it means to be part of the family.

The sheep have been brought in, but the neighbours haven’t yet taken down their enclosure fences – we’re first, for once. My father-in-law used to take care of the practical side of things, but now that Thale has the opportunity to take over she believes we have to show that we’re able to take care of the place. She’s still a child seeking praise. Maybe we all are.

There’s a lot we ought to talk about while we’re here, but I suddenly realise that it could go either way. After eleven years I still don’t know what constitutes Thale’s typical manner of reacting. Perhaps she’ll suggest we ought to try couples counselling again. I’m prepared to do most things – but not that. And I don’t agree with taking over this dark, damp cabin. Even when I’ve really made the effort, I’ve never felt at home here. Just because her brother’s given her the option of buying him out doesn’t mean we have to. And besides, the price he’s suggested is – as far as I can tell – way above the going rate for an old, damp, draughty cabin located 700 metres above sea level in Gausdal.

The dip in the terrain below the road holds the trunks of the trees felled by Thale’s father, so they’d have a view. Since the trees were on municipal land he’d technically needed a permit, but things like that have never concerned him. He built a shed, extended the hallway and installed a well water system, all without applying for permission. The sewage is discharged two metres below ground, twenty metres from the cabin. The flora there is an eczema-like rash across the forest floor.

I step around the mudholes in the path as I make my way up to the cabin. There’s a rail fence around the plot, the entrance a gate with the name ‘Solgløtt’ in letters made of dry twigs on the crossbeam. The gate consists of two parts, which have to be lifted off and stored behind the shed through the winter. My father-in-law sent Thale a message, asking her to tell me how both sides of the gate have to be lifted onto the hooks so that they’ll stay nice and dry until the season changes. She’d shrugged it off, saying that he doesn’t mean to overlook me – that he just messages her out of habit. I suck in the cold air.

‘Magnus!’

‘Her voice is private in the stillness. I’ve never liked my name. When shouted, it sounds like an order.

I walk across to her. The shadow cast by the cabin lies over us.

‘The key isn’t there! Where did you put it last time?’

She’s wearing a pair of tight jeans and there are tears in her eyes because of the wind. I have the sense that something is new. That I don’t know her. We’re far away from everything that usually defines us. Maybe it’s just that Georg has stayed in town. Now it’s only Thale and me.

‘It wasn’t me who locked up when we were last here,’ I say.

‘Yes it was – it must have been. I always put the key back in its place.’

She remembers everything we do and experience better than me. I carry no weight in the discussion.

‘Well then it’ll be up in the hatch to the right, where it always is.’

‘I’ve checked – it isn’t there. Where else might you have put it?’

She’s irritated now – it’s as if something inside her pulls taut. All her movements are quick, brief, the restraint disappearing from her voice and body. Kevin says that it’s the first thing that attracts us to someone that finally makes us leave them. We’re attracted by opposites, but once the initial fascination passes they become sources of irritation. He speaks in Instagram quotes more and more these days – but I think he’s wrong, regardless. It’s true that I was once attracted by the fact that Thale was fearless in discussions, that she spoke in a loud voice and could argue a point against anyone – and I still love that she’s smart, quick-witted and disrespectful in debates. Although I’ve never liked it when she’s stubborn and ruins the atmosphere when there’s no point. She can’t be bothered to discuss trivialities – but that’s because it’s she who defines what’s important and what’s trivial.

‘I’m sure we’ll find it,’ I say. ‘Clearly nobody can have taken it.’

‘We’ll find it if you remember where you put it.’

She moves away from me, as if we’re two negatively charged magnetic poles.

I set down the bags of groceries and my rucksack in front of the entrance before following after her. As I round the corner of the cabin I tread in a muddy puddle where the guttering has collapsed. The dirty water fills my shoe, the cold sinking its nails into me. Behind the cabin, ten metres closer to the neighbours, is the woodshed and outdoor toilet, and up under the ridge of this building’s roof is the hatch where we leave the key. My shoe leaves wet marks on the flagstones as I stretch up, feeling for the key with my fingers to both the right and the left. Thale leans against the wall of the shed without speaking. I try again. Then I silently walk across to the cabin and peek through the gaps between the living room curtains. Everything appears as it should be; a still life requiring extreme affection to be viewed as of any interest. Old, hard furniture. A corner fireplace with soot damage, because Thale’s brother once forgot to open the damper.

Thale stretches theatrically as she reaches up into the hatch, but moves aside when I return. I stand on tiptoe, shoving my arm even further in, afraid I might touch a dead mouse or put my hand into a hornets’ nest. I swipe my arm back and forth across the planks of wood, like a tongue. My shoulder hurts; the blood is disappearing from my arm.

‘I’ve told you we should keep an extra key in the car,’ says Thale behind me.

It was I who came up with the idea of finding somewhere to hide the key after the time we got all the way to the cabin only to discover we’d left the key back at home in town – a three-hour drive suddenly turned into one that lasted six. With a tired and grumpy Georg in the back seat, it had been an extremely unsuccessful Friday afternoon. I suddenly brush the key with the tip of my finger, simultaneously remembering that it was Georg who put the key back last time we were here. He’d forgotten his phone charger and had to let himself back in while we waited in the car. I stretch until it feels as if I’m about to pull my arm out of its socket, and manage to reach just far enough to grab the key. I pull it towards me and shake my arm to get the circulation going again. A weight has returned to Thale’s body. She stands with her back to me, looking into the forest.

**Earlier that day**

The Avave sign was white with red letters – Thale was a project manager there, and they’d just moved into bigger premises. The large, single-storey building was built at an angle, and Avave rented the largest unit, while a plumbers was located in the smaller one. Thale unironically referred to the store as a ‘showroom’, and said that they sold ‘bathroom garnitures’. One of the parking spaces outside was reserved for our registration number. Now the space wouldn’t be used for six months. I wondered whether she’d told her colleagues. Whether it would be natural to tell them about something like that, seeing as she was their manager.

As I was about to get out of the car my mobile rang; I sank back down into the seat and took out the phone. They’d told me I wouldn’t hear anything until after the weekend at the earliest, but I knew immediately that it must be them. There were three of us who had been invited to a third round of interviews. I heard my pulse in my ears as I answered.

‘Hello?’

Far too passive. I never answered the phone like that.

‘Hello, Magnus. I’m afraid I’m calling with bad news,’ the interviewer said. No *it was nice to see you again*. No chit-chat, no warm-up. Straight to the point. Straight to the rejection.

‘It was a really good interview, and it’s been a tough decision, but we’ve offered the position to one of the other applicants and they’ve accepted. I just wanted to let you know as soon as possible.’

I looked out across the car park. At all the vacant spaces, the cars out on the road. People on their way to somewhere or other.

‘Who got it?’ I asked.

‘I’d like to wait until the contract has been signed before disclosing that information, but it really was very close,’ she concluded. As if there was some comfort in knowing by how narrow a margin I’d been beaten. For some reason I thanked her before I hung up.

When I looked up, I saw Thale emerge from between the glass doors of the store, raising a hand in goodbye to those inside. This was how she was when she didn’t know that I was watching her – the person she was without me. Parts of her I could only see in brief glimpses. Like when I saw things she liked or commented on online. Or when I caught sight of her out of the window of our apartment. Tiny insights into her life that felt foreign and fine – that made me feel that everything wasn’t already said and done. I wished I could discover her all over again; that everything could be unknown once more. When she turned and saw me sitting in the car it was as if something slid away, and she became the Thale I knew. She got in, put her handbag between her feet, leaned over the handbrake and kissed me on the cheek. I felt a sudden urge to cry. Wanted to call myself ‘Eric with a c’ and start over.

‘Ready to head up into the mountains?’ I asked instead, handing her the coffee I’d bought.

She smiled and set the coffee in the holder in the centre console without tasting it.

‘I’m ready,’ she said. ‘But maybe we should come back tomorrow? There really isn’t very much we need to do up there.’

I patted her thigh in a gesture that could mean anything, started the car and drove out of the car park.

‘I’m sorry I’m so antisocial,’ she said as we passed the junction at Skedsmo. So far she’d mainly just sat there on her phone – the company seemed unable to manage without her. It was extremely rare that anyone called me in connection with work, but Thale was on her mobile constantly.

‘That’s okay,’ I answered. ‘Are things hectic at the moment?’

‘No more than usual. I’m done now.’

She put the phone in the handbag she’d used almost daily since I gave it to her for her birthday. I couldn’t bring myself to tell her that I hadn’t got the job. If I didn’t say anything, it seemed the news would just be left there in the car park outside Avave; that we could have two days away from the world. Two days in which things would be good again. If I told Thale about the job, the mood would be ruined before we’d even begun. I wanted the weekend to be about us – not just practicalities and trivialities.

‘Kevin told me about a good podcast,’ I said. ‘Fancy listening to it?’

‘Sure.’

Whenever I suggested something, I felt a responsibility to make sure it was a success. As if I was taking an exam, and there was no distinction between what we were listening to and me. So I was happy when, after a few minutes, she started to laugh.

‘How does Kevin find all this stuff?’ she asked. And then I regretted that I’d suggested the podcast with the qualification that Kevin had recommended it – because I could have attributed its discovery to me. *I* could have been the source of new things in her life. She didn’t wait for an answer, just leaned back and looked out of the window while occasionally laughing at what was said. Every now and again I laughed, too. Only after a while did I notice that we almost never laughed at the same time.

As we approached the downward slope towards Hamar, she suggested we turn the podcast off.

‘Maybe we can take a break? My head’s a bit fuzzy after working all day. And you could drive a bit faster – there’s quite a long queue building up behind you.’

I wish she’d just asked to turn the podcast off and left it at that. When she used her job as an excuse it was as if she was saying that she worked more – worked harder – than me; she should know how teaching can be extremely demanding. But I never used my work as an apology or justification for anything with Thale. No matter how tired I was, I prioritised us. If she wanted to do something, we did it, and then I’d stay up late into the night to finish whatever else I needed to get done. I reached forward and turned off the stereo without speaking.

Excavation works were being undertaken alongside the road, so the speed limit had been temporarily reduced – I made sure that the needle of the speedometer pointed precisely at the maximum speed. A couple of guys in work clothes and reflective vests followed us with their gazes as we passed; one was spinning a spanner around his finger. They were probably happy to see that I was one of the few people who actually respected the speed limit. In the rear-view mirror I could see the row of cars behind me. According to Thale, I was the only person in the world who stuck to the speed limit. Since she’d lost her licence, I’d hoped she might start to look at this differently.

‘They can overtake me when they get the chance.’

‘But there’s hardly anywhere to overtake,’ she said.

I lightly tapped the brake pedal three times to signal to the car behind to keep his distance, but instead he accelerated and overtook us, even though the road had a solid double centre line.

‘Idiot.’

‘I can understand him all too well,’ said Thale.

She turned the radio back on just as the intro to ‘Space Oddity’ was starting to play. We could have chosen to play pretty much any song in the world, but when a song we both liked came on linear radio, it was like drawing a winning raffle ticket. I turned up the volume without Thale protesting – on the contrary, she started to sing, turning the volume up even higher. I looked forward to reaching our destination; the disappointment at not getting the headmaster’s position no longer lay there like a film covering everything else. It may well end up working out for the best. And now Thale and I had two days to spend together, just the two of us. We wouldn’t talk about having children. I’d promised myself that.

It was a long time since I’d heard her sing. Her voice filled the car, bringing with it memories and the smell of pears, and I moved my mouth to pretend I was a part of it. We’d been in the car together for an hour and a half, and the mood was better than it had been in a long time. The weekend might just turn out to be a good one.

Excerpt, pp.26–36

**215 km from home**

I’m still sitting there drinking my wine when I hear the ringing in the hall, and then the sound of Thale speaking. Even though I can’t catch what she’s saying I immediately know that something is wrong. Her footsteps are quick, her voice unfamiliar. Then she calls out my name, as if I were the love of her life and about to disappear over the edge of a cliff.

‘MAGNUS!’

As I come out into the hallway I see her standing by the front door and looking out, as if she’s about to leave without shoes.

‘It’s Georg. We have to go. Now!’

Her movements are working against one another; she tries to open the door while simultaneously taking her scarf from its hook.

The stress is infectious, but I place my hands on her shoulders and try to hold her gaze.

‘It’s Georg,’ she repeats. ‘We have to go!’

‘What about Georg? What’s happened?’

I try to pull her to me but she tears herself loose, shoving her feet into her shoes without taking the time to put them on properly, using them like sandals.

‘What about Georg?’ I repeat.

She leans against the front door, covering her eyes with her hands so her fingers stick up into her fringe like thick grubs.

‘He blacked out at basketball practice. They’re taking him to the emergency clinic now.’

‘Okay,’ I say, trying to take in the information, comprehend its seriousness. The wine envelops my emotions like a membrane. ‘It’s not necessarily anything serious – who was it who called? Was it Georg?’

She nods. Lowers her hands, the urgency returning to her body. Goes out to the kitchen and blows out the candles.

‘But… Surely we don’t need to leave right now, do we? Shouldn’t we wait until we know a bit more? He’s probably just not had enough to eat or drink before training – he’s probably not eaten dinner. Or perhaps he got up too quickly. It’s pretty common to faint when you’re sixteen years old – lots of the students at school do it as a kind of game.’

I hope this gives me authority, the fact that I work with young people, but Thale has been a teacher herself – and there’s nothing that trumps being a mother.

‘Come on, we have to go,’ she says, squeezing past me. My movements are jerky and inelegant as I try to restrain her.

‘I’ve been drinking – neither of us is okay to drive. Can’t we just take a moment to think about this? I’m sure it isn’t anything serious. Surely we can at least wait until he’s spoken to a doctor? Maybe we should call Coach?’

She looks at me. The smell of marshland hangs in the walls around us.

‘Honestly…’

She says the word in such a way that it contains an entire novel.

‘Seriously, I’m not fit to drive right now,’ I repeat. ‘It’s completely out of the question.’

‘Then *I’ll* drive!’

She holds out her hand to take the car keys, or whatever else I might have to give her. She’s going to leave, and I’ll lose no matter what I do. Staying behind without a car isn’t an option, but I won’t drive while I’m over the limit. And Thale doesn’t get her license back for another three months. I try to remember how many glasses of red wine I’ve had.

‘You’ve lost your licence… Please, let’s just find out whether it’s really necessary to go home today.’

She doesn’t respond. Has put on her jacket.

‘There’s a train from Lillehammer,’ I continue. ‘I can drive there in a couple of hours.’

Neither of us likes the person I am in this moment.

‘Are you coming or are you staying here?’

She’s speaking to me in the way that she spoke to Georg whenever he was difficult as a child. And just as he knew that he had no choice, I too shake my head and get my bag. I go into the living room and put the fireguard before the fireplace; push the logs all the way in. Turn off the light, go back to the hallway. My right shoe is still soaked, so I put on my rubber boots instead. Check that the wood-burner door is closed and shut off the air supply. Sling my bag over my shoulder, car keys in one hand and my jacket in the other. Thale is waiting outside. She reaches out to take the car keys from me before disappearing off towards the parking area.

I lock the front door and am on my way to put the key back in its hiding place when I change my mind and follow Thale instead. As I turn back I see that we’ve forgotten to turn off the kitchen light. Down by the road, Thale starts the car. The headlights shine between the tree trunks.

I think about Georg. His lanky, insecure body when he wants to tell me something. The softness in his hugs. His nervousness in social situations. And how in some miraculous way he manages to make his entire gawky, ungainly body function perfectly when he gets out on the basketball court. His ball handling skills; his ability to jump. The precision. An assuredness he lacks elsewhere, and which I wish I possessed right now as I stumble down the muddy drive in the dark, trying to catch up with Thale before she drives away from me.

I’ve hardly got into the car and lifted my foot from the ground before she starts to drive off.

‘I think this is a really bad idea. And you should at least stick to the speed limit,’ I say.

‘I can’t believe you’re acting like this.’

The car lurches down the narrow gravel road between the dark trees. Thale leans forward, squinting above the steering wheel. Once, many years ago, we sat in Frognerparken eating lunch on a blanket in the sun. When I was about to walk over to the litter bin and throw away the empty plastic berry trays, Thale stood up and moved to stand behind me, covering my eyes with her hands.

‘I’ll direct you.’

Her hands were warm, smelled of a mixture of earth and strawberries.

‘You promise to keep your eyes closed?’

I nodded, and she let go. I stood there, eyes squeezed tightly shut, listening to her breathing. Smelling her. Trying to remember what the scene before me looked like; where I should walk, what the hill looked like, but I had no general overview in my mind. I felt her hands against my skin, even though she’d let go. Was at the mercy of her directions as to where I should walk.

‘Straight ahead,’ she said.

I followed her directions in detail. Thought that there was no one else in the whole world I trusted more than I trusted her. That I would walk *exactly* where she told me to, regardless. No matter where that might be.

‘I can’t get through to him,’ she says, rubbing condensation off the windscreen with the back of her hand. ‘Can you try to call Coach?’

Only then do I remember that my mobile is still plugged into its charger, back at the cabin.

**Four months earlier**

On the way home from an evening meeting in Kongsberg, Thale was caught driving at 138 km an hour in a 90 zone. This was a penalty she was long overdue, but it actually ended up being just as much mine as hers. The fine was paid from our joint bank account, and since she’d lost her licence for six months I became responsible for all the driving – including taking Georg to and from all his basketball training sessions, games and tournaments. Which in practice meant every single evening of the week.

‘Why can’t he take the tram?’ I asked Thale.

‘Nobody takes the tram. Everybody gets a lift,’ shouted Georg from his room.

‘You could cycle? You have a bike worth thousands of kroner just standing there in the storeroom. It’ll take you fifteen minutes max to cycle there – just think of it as an extra warm-up,’ I called back.

‘Nobody goes by bike. And anyway, it has a puncture.’

I thought all boys rebelled against their mother at some point, but Georg was yet to do so. Perhaps because there was nothing to rebel against – if he asked for something, he got it. Thale called this *showing confidence in him*, and said it was the main reason they had such a good relationship. When I tried to argue, she simply said ‘well, you never speak to your parents, so how well do you think your approach worked for your family?’

Thale and my mum had never really hit it off. They acknowledged each other’s existence, but most of the conversations that took place between them resulted in some kind of misunderstanding that I would subsequently have to clear up. Nor had my parents figured out exactly what kind of relationship they should have to Georg. It was as if they were waiting for something, but I never entirely understood what.

‘You can’t start raising him now,’ said Thale. ‘You had the opportunity ten years ago, but now it’s too late. You know he’s extremely fond of you. That’s why he feels such a need to make his mark – if he didn’t care about you, he’d simply ignore you. If there’s one thing you understand, after all, it’s what teenagers are like.’

One Saturday, Kevin came by to watch the Holmenkollstafetten Relay Race as it passed right below our balcony. As we sat there, he told stories from the institution at which he worked. Georg came out and sat with us, as he tended to do whenever Kevin came to visit.

‘I feel there are several stories there,’ said Kevin. ‘Some kind of interplay between that which happens on the inside, and that which happens out here in the world.’

He hadn’t yet published anything, but was still writing – or at least, he said he was. It was a long time since I’d read anything he’d written. There was something American about Kevin. He wasn’t ashamed to talk about his dream of being published; I myself felt that to articulate a goal was just the start of an inevitable defeat. If I told everyone I wanted children, I would have to explain why I hadn’t yet had them in every subsequent conversation. By talking about the fact that he wanted to get published, Kevin became *more* of an author. I didn’t become more of a father by talking about having children. But having Kevin over for a visit was a breath of something neutral. His stories were from a world of which neither Thale nor I were a part.

‘Have you noticed how the two of you no longer laugh at the same things?’ he asked suddenly.

At first I wasn’t sure who he was referring to, but then he turned to Georg to back him up.

‘Don’t you think? They always used to laugh at the same things, but now they laugh separately.’

Georg nodded; looked uncomfortable. A short time later he said that he was cold, and went inside.

**211 km from home**

I offer to call from her mobile, but Thale is so disappointed at the fact that I’ve forgotten mine that she dials the number while steering with one hand, looking alternately at the road and the phone. When Coach answers, I have to interpret the conversation as best I can based on the half of it I can hear.

‘Yes… Yes… But were you doing anything in particular? … Pardon?… Was he alone, did anyone see what happened?... Okay. Does he know first aid?… Oh yes, of course.… So now he’s there with him?… No, what do you mean *different*? I haven’t noticed anything different. Was he acting differently? Have you noticed anything?… Who went with him to the clinic?… Who’s dad?… Why didn’t you go with him?’

She listens for a while. I can just hear the male voice coming from her mobile, before they say goodbye and hang up. The road lies dark before us. The snow poles that line it are like tall reeds, and Thale drives well over the speed limit. The tyres rattle across the cattle grid by the local shop. When Georg was younger he’d call out ‘AAAAAAAAAH’ whenever we drove over it.

I wonder whether anyone has called me; whether my mobile is making a sound in the empty cabin. According to the newspapers it’s a fire hazard to leave your mobile plugged in over extensive periods, and now mine will be there for a long, long time. If it starts a fire at the cabin it’ll be sad, but it would also solve a lot of things. Thale’s grandfather built the majority of it; cleared the plot and erected the rail fence. Her father extended the cabin, built the shed and installed water and electricity – albeit illegally, for the most part. These are the two men to whom I am compared.

‘What did he say?’ I ask, but she holds up her index finger to indicate she’s in the middle of a new conversation.

Thale both impresses and frightens me. In this moment she’s breaking three laws: she’s driving too fast, she’s driving without a licence, and she’s speaking into a handheld mobile as she does so. She might also be over the legal blood alcohol limit, and yet she seems completely unperturbed. I close my eyes and listen to her speak to the man who drove Georg to the emergency clinic. He seems to be having a calming effect. She thanks him; asks him whether he’s sure.

‘It seems as if everything’s okay,’ she says, and it takes a couple of seconds before I realise that she’s talking to me. She holds the mobile away from her ear and smiles. ‘He’s in with the doctor. That’s why he’s not answering his phone.’

She has to let go of the steering wheel to change gear.

‘Could you ask him to call me when he gets out?’ she concludes, before putting her mobile in the central console. She throws a quick glance my way before placing both hands on the wheel and looking straight ahead.

I pat her thigh, feel the muscles moving beneath my palm. Imagine my hand growing roots, the two of us becoming a single organism. I have to tell her that I didn’t get the job. That I don’t want to take over the cabin. And that we need to do something to prevent us just carrying on, with things as they have been for the past few years. I want to say something about us having to choose each other again or just let it go, but don’t want to further upset her when she needs to focus on steering the car. Her cup of coffee from the drive up remains untouched in its holder.

Excerpt, pp. 85–96

**175 km from Ullevål Hospital**

Thale gets out and starts to walk towards me as I round the corner, but her legs seem withered and she stops after just a few metres, leaning on the central reservation. The cars around me rev up their engines and start to drive – it’s like an animal coming closer and closer. I run, my pulse pounding at the back of my head in quick, thumping beats; my rubber boots slapping against the tarmac. A man cheers at me as I pass the car in which he’s sitting, and for some reason I feel obligated to give him a smile. We know nothing about each other. Maybe he’s just lost his mother. Perhaps he once won Olympic gold.

‘They think he’s had a heart attack,’ sobs Thale when I reach her. She repeats the sentence as if checking that it’s grammatically correct; keeps adjusting it slightly. ‘They think he’s had a heart attack. They say they’re not completely certain, but that he’s being admitted for further tests.’

I pull her close. Feel her spine through her sweater.

‘It’s okay,’ I say, just to say something. Feel that I’m repeating myself.

**Two and a half years earlier**

As always, the doctor gave me the impression that he’d hoped for something more exciting. Every time I went to an appointment I had the feeling that I was disappointing him. He asked a couple of questions about my erection, previous illnesses, how long we’d been trying to get pregnant and so on as he checked off various items on a form.

‘For many people, involuntary childlessness is a temporary condition,’ he said. Then he referred me to a specialist. It was a prerequisite that Thale also participate in the process – although she’d been pregnant before, she was a critical part of the equation.

When I got home I didn’t know how to bring it up, but as always Thale was easy to talk to about difficult things and said that of course she’d be involved. We were in this together. And with that, the process was underway.

Thale took repeated blood tests and had a vaginal ultrasound. She had eggs, a healthy and fully functioning uterus, and in the doctor’s opinion ‘perfect’ fallopian tubes. I stood there like a cliché in a tiny room and produced a semen sample in a small plastic box. The results indicated normal sperm quality and normal testicles. Normal, normal, normal. Nothing to explain where things were failing. We were just two people who weren’t made to have children together.

According to the doctor, ten to twenty per cent of couples experienced unexplainable infertility, and so it wasn’t easy to get started with IVF. To be eligible for financial support we had to have a diagnosis, and the diagnosis was that we were *normal*. Even though we quite obviously weren’t. The doctor was a few years younger than us, but spoke in a monotonous tone of voice that indicated he was already tired of most of what life had offered him. As he spoke, he rubbed his hands together in a slow, rotating movement. I asked whether Thale should consider taking Clomiphene. He was visibly unimpressed at the question, and answered that it probably wouldn’t have the desired effect. And regardless, that wasn’t something the public health service could help us with. His gaze rested slightly down and to the right of me the entire time, so I continually checked to see whether there was something there. His level-headedness sucked all the oxygen out of the room.

Thale and I held hands on the way back to the car, and for once she drove fairly calmly all the way home. I showered while she helped Georg with his homework, which was to prepare dinner for the family. He was supposed to take responsibility for planning the meal, purchasing the ingredients and doing all the cooking, but for some reason or other Thale did most of the work for him. I wondered how many of my students’ parents did the same. Whether that’s simply how it was to be a parent. Whether things would have been different if Georg had been mine from the start.

**175 km from Ullevål Hospital**

Thale goes around to the passenger side and gets in; I stay standing. An hour hasn’t yet passed since my last drink. The anxiety pulls through me in long threads – I can’t drive. It’s no longer so important to me if I lose my licence if I’m stopped, but it isn’t justifiable. I don’t want to be a danger in the traffic.

The Taunus slowly glides away; the car behind us flashes its lights. I walk around to the passenger side and open the door. Thale has already put her seat belt on. I have to bend down to look her in the eye.

‘I can’t drive,’ I say. ‘I’ve said that since the beginning. I’ve been drinking wine, and it was you who insisted on driving instead of taking the train. You can’t put this on me now.’

I don’t mention that I also said we should wait until morning. The car behind us flashes its lights consecutively for a few seconds before starting to beep its horn.

‘Neither can I,’ says Thale. ‘I just can’t.’ She has to speak loudly to make herself heard over the car behind us. Her head hangs forwards, as if something in her neck has snapped.

‘So what do you think we should do?’ I ask. More cars start to beep. The road lies open before us. In my chest is a flock of birds – wings beating and beating; scraping beaks and claws. ‘You *have to* drive!’ I continue. ‘This is your responsibility!’

She reacts as if I’ve hit her, suddenly tense.

‘What do you mean this is *my responsibility*? Do you not have any interest in getting home as quickly as possible? Are you not a part of this? What do you mean? I’ve crashed twice and Georg is in hospital with a heart attack! *I can’t drive!*’

She’s shouting. The car horns honk like staccato alarms; the wind blows through my sweater. It’s dark and cold, and my words disappear. Panic lurks just beneath the thinnest skin of common sense. Maybe I could ask a passenger in one of the cars behind us to drive our car. Perhaps I can drive to a layby and figure out a solution when we’ve let the queue behind us pass. We could hitchhike. Maybe Thale will take over when she realises the alternative is to stay stuck right here. I want to scream, but end up emitting a pathetic little whimper I hope she doesn’t hear.

Someone leans on their horn to sound a single, blaring siren. I slap the roof of the car with the flat of my hand, but nowhere near hard enough for this to be of any consequence. Then I walk around the car, back to the driver’s side, and get in. Cling to the steering wheel and gear stick as I set the car in motion, concentrating on staying in the middle of the road. It’s an hour since we left. Four or five glasses of wine. Thale starts to speak, giving me an update as if the argument from a few seconds ago never happened.

‘They don’t know anything just yet, but say he’s lucky to be at Ullevål. They have the best cardiologists in the country.’

I wonder whether this is something they’ve said to calm her, or whether it’s true. What is the general competence level of cardiologists in Norway? Are they a joke by international standards, or are they the doctors everyone else is measured against?

‘What *is* a heart attack, actually?’ I ask. I’m angry and afraid. Have a million things I want to say.

‘They’re not certain that’s what’s happened to him,’ Thale answers, without actually answering.

We pass the layby where the trailer and rescue vehicle stand. I remember that the front of our car is damaged, and feel that we’re driving without protection.

**Almost three years earlier**

It was cold and dark outside. The newspapers reported that snow was on the way, but it never came. Thale kept an ovulation calendar and measured her body temperature so we could predict when she would ovulate – with intense precision, as if procreation were surgery. We were rats in a laboratory; had been trying for twelve months. In the 1600s, Moulay Ismail Ibn Sharif fathered 1,042 children. In the 1700s there was a woman who gave birth to sixty-nine.

My mum and dad had retired – they could finally drive their campervan around Europe for as often and as long as they wished. When we went over to their house for dinner, we had to look through hundreds of photos from the trip they’d just taken. Agnethe was there too, but was so uninterested in everything Mum and Dad said that I overcompensated, asking far too many follow-up questions. Agnethe had been receiving social benefits over the past few months; nobody asked her what she was doing any more. Thale chatted with her about TV series and films, but was always careful to stay on neutral ground. When we left, I felt an almost physical longing to be able to say that we were expecting a child. Perhaps because I needed a new nuclear family – but also because I wanted to make my mum and dad happy. With Agnethe seeming not to be moving in any direction at all, I felt as if they were cupping all their hope in their hands and holding it out to me, without me being able to do anything with it. I couldn’t remember the last time I had made them happy. Thale and I weren’t married, and I wasn’t Georg’s biological father. I occasionally saw us through my parents’ eyes, as we must appear to others, and it made me uncertain. Was I the luckiest man in the world to have found Thale and Georg? Or had I got myself stuck in an impossible situation?

The highlight of each week was Tuesday evening, when I would lecture in science education for trainee teachers. It was freeing to feel that I had both an opinion on and was skilled at teaching. And it was surprisingly uplifting to teach adults. It was never necessary to use techniques to get them to quieten down – on the contrary, we had good discussions about how to best create an effective learning environment and implement differentiated teaching techniques. Several of them had experience from working in schools, and although some were taking the teacher training course simply because it was mandatory for permanent employment, most of them were motivated to become better teachers. This meant that I also started to look at my own teaching from an outside perspective, and became a better teacher myself. *While we teach, we learn*, as the old teachers used to say.

Sitting one seat away from the door was a girl I noticed immediately. She had long, blonde hair and a high forehead. Her name was Veronica and she said little during the classes, but followed me with her gaze and smiled whenever I tried to be funny. One Friday in October I bumped into her randomly in town while on a night out with Kevin. First we just talked about the lectures and how she was enjoying her teacher training, but then we quickly started to talk about books we’d read, and it was almost absurd how similar our tastes were. At some point during the evening both Kevin and all the people Veronica was out with disappeared, but we stayed behind, sitting there chatting until closing time. And there was something about all the opportunities inherent in the evening that enabled me to stick it out with Thale. Because when they flashed the lights and turned off the music – when we had to look away from one another so as not to reveal too much in the harsh light – I knew there could have been something between Veronica and me. When we stood outside and said goodbye, I knew that everything was open – there were alternatives for me out there. And though I’d regret it for months and years afterwards, I simply gave Veronica a hug and went home to the apartment, sneaking in so as not to wake Thale, before I crept into the room where she no longer slept beside me and fell asleep in my clothes.

I was so unbelievably aware of how cliched all this was, but I needed to see myself through Veronica’s eyes, and not through Thale’s. Or actually, I probably just wanted Thale to look at me in the way that Veronica did.

**162 km from Ullevål Hospital**

I’m dizzy. We’re still driving in a kind of convoy alongside Mjøsa, past Biri and approaching the roundabout by the bridge. Although she’s sitting right next to me, Thale is far away, and I have a sense of déjà vu. We’ve sat in silence in the car on the way home from somewhere far too often. After going out to visit our friends and their families; after Thale suddenly reacted with an evasive, coy aloofness to a man who greeted her, and I knew with every bone in my body that this was someone she’d once been with. The tarmac is black and everything is surreal, as if I’m reliving a distant memory.

‘I mean it. I really don’t know what a heart attack actually *is*,’ I say, breaking the silence. ‘I’ve always just imagined that I know what one is. Isn’t it something that only happens to old men? How can a sixteen-year-old have one? It’s completely absurd.’

Thale takes out her mobile; taps on the screen. Then she reads aloud in a monotone voice: ‘A heart attack occurs when the heart receives too little oxygen, and consequently some of the muscle dies. The average age of heart attack victims is seventy.’

Neither of us says any more. Georg is a healthy, physically fit sixteen year old. Thale’s phone rings, its screen lighting up in her lap.

‘Hello?... Yes, it’s me… Sorry?... Yes… Yes… Is he awake?... Yes?... Really? Oh thank goodness!’

She turns towards me with the face of a child: ‘He’s awake!’

I respond by taking her hand in the air without her being prepared for it, and so we hold each other in an oddly awkward grip before I finally let go.

Thale listens for a while before she speaks again.

‘No, not that I know of. Not on my side. I don’t know much about his father’s family.’

This jerks something inside me – *his father’s family*. She says it so naturally – and it isn’t me she’s talking about. Yet it’s the quick glance she casts my way that’s the dagger in my side. There’s someone else she refers to as Georg’s father. That’s the shadow we’ll never be able to rid ourselves of.

‘That might be a little difficult. Is it really important?’ She turns away. Outside her window are only birch trees, the occasional farm behind large fields. On my side is the blackness of the water. ‘We’ll be there in an hour and a half to two hours,’ she concludes, and hangs up.

‘What did they say?’ I ask, a little too quickly. My timing is aggressive. Had I managed to wait a couple of seconds it would have been natural, but now it’s an attack. My blood feels electrically charged.

‘He’s in the emergency ward. They take heart problems in young people very seriously, but they know what they’re doing and have the situation under control. He’s awake and everything is normal, but they’re going to do a range of tests and won’t be releasing him until they’ve figured out what happened.’

The relief should be enough, but I can’t quite let it lie.

‘What did you say about *his father’s family*?’

Thale hesitates slightly before she responds.

‘Nothing.’

‘What do you mean, nothing? You just said you didn’t know much about *his father’s family*.’

‘When teenagers have heart problems it’s often something genetic.’

She could say more, but doesn’t. Her response isn’t an answer – it’s just a detour.

‘But what did you say about *his father’s family*?’ I turn to face her, articulating the words excessively. Speaking in a voice that’s far too high.

‘They asked whether either of his parents had any hereditary diseases in the family. I said I didn’t know of anything. What do *you* think I should have said?’

She’s still so relieved to hear that Georg is awake that she doesn’t have space for me – instead comes the usual attack. There’s never anything wrong with her actions – it’s always my reactions to them that are the problem.

‘I’m not saying that you should have answered differently, but why couldn’t you just tell me straight away? And why didn’t you just say that…’

I can’t think of a reasonable conclusion to this sentence and so stop talking. The low fuel indicator light comes on.

‘We never should have gone up there,’ Thale says. She looks out of the window.

I want to get out of the car. Think of the heart in Georg’s large body. Of how my heart is beating far too hard, while his is already worn out.