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***Grown-ups***

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English sample translation

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by Rosie Hedger

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Other people’s children, always, everywhere. It’s always worse on the bus, when I can’t get away. My back is sweaty and I’m feeling irritable. The sun pierces the dirty windows, the bus has been full since we left Drammen, and more people pile on in Kopstad and Tønsberg and Fokserød, they’re forced to stand in the aisle, swaying as they hold on tight, in spite of the supposed guarantee of a seat for every passenger. In the seat behind me, a father sits with his child, a boy of about three, maybe, he’s watching videos on an iPad with the sound turned up, lively children’s animations. The music is tinny and piercing, his father tries to turn the volume down every so often but the boy howls crossly and turns it back up again.

I feel queasy after trying to read my book, and the battery on my phone is almost dead, so I can’t listen to a podcast either, all I can hear are the plinky-plonks of the metallic-sounding melodies. As we approach the Telemark tunnel, I can no longer hold my tongue and turn to face the father, he’s a young hipster sort with a beard and a stupid little man-bun, and I flash him a wide smile and ask if he could turn the sound down just slightly, please. I can hear the snappiness in my tone, he can tell that part of me is relishing this, but they can’t sit there on a full express bus in July with the sound blaring like that, they just can’t.

‘Uh, sure,’ the hipster dad says, then rubs his neck. ‘I mean, is it bothering you?’

He speaks with a broad Stavanger accent.

‘It’s a bit loud,’ I reply, still smiling.

He snatches the iPad from his child’s hands with a surly look on his face and the boy starts wailing at the top of his lungs, surprised and furious, and the old couple sitting in front of me turn around and give me a resigned look, not the child and his father, but me.

‘That’s what happens when you won’t let me turn the sound down,’ his father says. ‘It’s bothering the lady, you can’t watch anymore.’

The bus turns into the petrol station, where it’s scheduled to stop for a comfort break and coffee stop, and the boy lies across the seats wailing as I pick up my bag and hurry down the aisle leaving the sound of bawling behind me.

Kristoffer and Olea are waiting for me at Vinterkjær. Marthe isn’t with them. Kristoffer is so tall, Olea so short. She’s due to start school in the autumn, I think she looks far too little for that, slim and delicate.

‘It’s good to see you,’ Kristoffer says. He gives me a long hug, wrapping his arms around me and squeezing me tight.

‘You too,’ I say. ‘Look how long your hair is now, Olea,’ I say, tugging gently on her ponytail.

‘Olea learned to swim yesterday,’ Kristoffer says.

Olea grins, revealing a gap where four top teeth had once been.

‘I swam without Daddy holding onto me,’ she says.

‘Wow,’ I say, ‘did you really? That’s brilliant.’

‘Marthe took a picture,’ Olea says. ‘You can see it when we get back.’

‘I’m guessing that Marthe was lounging around by the water’s edge,’ I say, placing my bag in the boot of the car.

‘Yes,’ Olea says, looking delighted in the backseat. ‘She was being really, really lazy.’

‘We don’t say things like that, Olea,’ Kristoffer says, starting the engine. ‘You know that.’

I turn to look at Olea and wink, whispering to her:

‘Marthe *is* a bit lazy.’

Kristoffer clears his throat.

‘I’m allowed to say it,’ I say. ‘I’ve got special permission to make jokes about that sort of thing.’

It’s so tempting, it does Marthe good to be given a kick up the bum every now and then, and it’s so nice to wink at Olea, to make her giggle and watch as her eyes grow wide with glee at how funny I am. We drive along the coastal road, and I tell Kristoffer about the hipster dad and the boy with the iPad at full blast.

‘And people got annoyed with *me*,’ I say. ‘I wasn’t the one making the racket. The boy’s dad was really grumpy about it.’

Kristoffer has a familiar scent, it’s the cabin, paint, saltwater, body.

‘It’s not always easy to calm them down, you know,’ he says.

‘But you didn’t let three-year-old Olea sit on a packed bus with an iPad at full volume,’ I say.

‘Well, no,’ Kristoffer replies. ‘But people get so annoyed at kids, they don’t know what it’s like. You have to let kids be kids.’

Kristoffer is always saying things like that, let kids be kids, it’s important to listen to your body, things like that.

‘But there’s a difference between crying and having the volume turned right up,’ I say.

I realise I’m trying too hard; I’m exposing myself now, revealing the fact that this is something I don’t understand, and Kristoffer shrugs and flashes a smile.

‘Having the volume turned right up on a *full bus*,’ I repeat.

‘Breathe into your belly, Ida,’ he says, patting my thigh.

I open my mouth to speak, but I stop myself, he’ll never get it anyway. I can tell Marthe, she tends to agree with me about things like that, it annoys her when Olea makes a racket. There’s something else I’ve been meaning to tell her too, not as soon as we arrive, but tonight, after we’ve both had a few glasses of wine and Kristoffer is out of the way, busy putting Olea to bed, then I’ll tell her.

I was in Gothenburg two weeks ago, I took the train there alone and stayed in a hotel and walked a few blocks to a fertility clinic the next morning. It looked like any other doctor’s office, only more pleasant, brighter, with yucca plants in large pots and tranquil-looking images of mothers and babies or eggs and birds on the walls. The doctor’s name was Ljungstedt, and a gym across the street lay in full view of his office, I found myself staring directly at people running on the treadmill and lifting weights. He pronounced my name the Swedish way, not like ee-dah, but more like ooh-dah, the first syllable lingering at the back of the throat as he tapped away at his computer keyboard without looking at me. He made his way through the process quickly, at what point in my cycle I’d start hormone treatment, how they’d remove the eggs, the fact that today he’d just be running a few blood tests and carrying out a gynaecological examination.

‘Oh yes, freezing one’s eggs has become *ever so* popular,’ he said, as if he were selling me something, but I was already there.

‘So I gather,’ I replied with a chuckle.

Everything felt open, summer holidays were just around the corner, it was nice and warm in Gothenburg and I’d reserved a table somewhere to savour a nice lunch and some expensive white wine, to toast the fact I’d be spending my savings on having my eggs removed and banked, on opening an egg account.

‘It’s an *ever so* lovely opportunity,’ he said. ‘If you don’t have a boyfriend or don’t want children quite yet.’

‘Precisely,’ I said. ‘I was thinking about going ahead with things after the holidays.’

‘Perhaps you’ll be back with your next boyfriend in a few years from now, you could use them when you’re forty-two or forty-three,’ he said, tapping away on his keyboard. ‘That would be *ever so* lovely.’

I try to picture this boyfriend, envisage a tall man with a beard standing there in the office with me in a few years from now, I can’t picture his facial expressions, but I imagine him putting his arm around me in the lift on the way out, *we’re going to be parents, Ida*. One day, I thought as I lay there in the gynaecology chair, one day things have to work out, one day, after a long line of married and otherwise committed and uninterested and uninteresting men, things have to work out, just lying there made me believe both man and child might materialise, just the fact that I was there and actually *doing it* was a promise that there was more to come, one day.

The doctor and I looked at my uterus on the ultrasound screen, he asked what I did for a living and I told him I was an architect.

‘You must draw some lovely houses,’ he said.

‘Well, yes,’ I said. ‘It’s a pretty big company, we mostly work on public buildings and that kind of thing, town planning,’ but I stopped myself, I was meandering into a lengthy explanation of who designed what, but it felt pointless as I lay there, legs spread, apparatus inside me. As I was on my way out the door to have blood tests done, still slimy and cold down below from the ultrasound jelly he’d used, he said that he’d speak to me again in two weeks’ time, once the results were in, and that we’d make a plan about when to begin, when everything would begin.

I check my phone, no missed calls from any Swedish numbers. Kristoffer takes the bends at high speed, I feel slightly queasy and try to avert my gaze from a half-full bottle of Fanta and an empty crisp packet lying at my feet. He’s grown stouter, his cheeks rounder, I wonder if he and Olea sit in the car and secretly make their way through snacks and soft drinks together when Marthe isn’t around. His arms are tanned. Marthe told me they had a few nice days to begin with, they’d ventured out to the little islands and had been swimming on several occasions, but it’s been changeable since then, so I’ve packed both my swimsuit and my wool jumper.

‘When are Mum and Stein coming?’ I ask.

‘Tomorrow,’ he says. ‘It’ll be nice to have an evening to ourselves tonight. Marthe’s not quite herself.’

‘Oh joy,’ I reply.

‘You know how it is,’ Kristoffer says, scratching at his beard. ‘*Hormones*.’

He says it in a way that suggests I understand, *you know how it is*; he knows fine well that I’ve got no idea what it’s like, but still I nod, *sure, I get it*.

‘Poor Marthe,’ I say, crossing my arms in such a way that my fingertips reach my sweaty armpits, I try to work out if I smell.

They’ve been trying for three years straight, ever since they got together. Marthe has had two miscarriages. She can’t keep it to herself, I know as much as she does about the whole thing, when she’s on her period, when she’s ovulating. It’s all we talk about whenever we’re together, whenever we see Mum, Marthe talking and crying, telling us she can’t take it anymore, that she doesn’t just want to be a stepmother, but nobody says *stepmother* anymore, Marthe, Mum says, stroking her back, you’re part of a bonus family, that’s what they call it these days, bonus family, Marthe repeats, where’s *my* bonus, it’ll work itself out eventually, I say, stroking her back too, Mum and I both telling her it’ll work itself out eventually, the same every time, but *when* exactly, Marthe shouts.

Occasionally I chat to my colleagues over lunch about my younger sister stressing out about becoming pregnant, I tell them that I don’t know how she can do it, there must be other things to spend your days thinking about, rather than just endlessly trying to make it happen.

When we pull up outside the cabin, I sit upright in my seat.

‘Have you two been painting?’ I ask.

‘Yep,’ Kristoffer replies. ‘Well, mostly me, to be honest. It looks nice, right?’

‘It does,’ I reply. ‘Really nice.’

They’ve painted the cabin white. It’s always been yellow, the yellow cabin, it’s what I’ve always told people, we’re the ones with the yellow cabin. Now it looks like every other cabin around here, ordinary.

Kristoffer takes my bag. I tell him I can carry it myself, I’m not like Marthe, who wants Kristoffer to help her with every little thing, but Kristoffer says *it’s fine* and takes it anyway. Olea runs ahead of us, over the gravel and up the garden path, stone slabs flanking the hedge. She runs all over, as if some great amusement awaits her somewhere up ahead. When I was younger, the hedge was a thick, dense cedar, but Mum swapped it out with mock orange a few years ago, she’d wanted something a bit more delicate.

Marthe walks out onto the steps, she looks tired and rubs her face. I smirk .

‘Have you been to collect Aunt Ida, eh?’ she asks, ruffling Olea’s hair. Olea steps away, wriggling free from Marthe’s grasp and running away. Marthe knows that I don’t like to be called *Aunt Ida*, but she says it anyway. I picture the illustrations from Elsa Beskow’s children’s stories, the Swedish classics about Aunt Green, Aunt Brown and Aunt Lavender, imagine something shrivelled up, creaky.

We hug.

‘Hi,’ Marthe says.

‘Hey, old friend,’ I say. ‘It’s good to see you.’

Marthe smells nice, familiar, it’s almost as if it were my own scent I’m smelling. Her hair is lighter in colour, it doesn’t look completely natural, and it’s been cut in a style that I remember being in fashion a few years ago.

‘This is nice,’ I say, lifting it up as I run my fingers through it.

‘Do you think so?’ Marthe asks. ‘I think the colour is a little bit too light.’

‘Not at all, you look pretty,’ I tell her.

People think I’m prettier than Marthe, they always have, and Marthe has a complex about her nose and her boobs, so she looks pleased when I tell her she’s pretty. It’s easy to make Marthe happy, you just have to drop in a few comments to that effect.

Kristoffer follows Olea around behind the cabin, Marthe and I go inside. The door creaks slightly, it has the same familiar scent, summers long past, old woodwork.

‘Ready for the big day?’ she asks as I haul my bag into the tiny bedroom, the one I always sleep in.

‘Yes and no,’ I reply. ‘Ready for some wine, in any case.’

‘Do we have to say anything?’ Marthe asks, sitting on my bed. ‘Give a speech or anything?’

‘Doubt it,’ I say. ‘But I’ve prepared something, just in case.’

‘Super-daughter,’ Marthe says with a smile, the corners of her mouth drooping downwards slightly. ‘I haven’t had the energy to face the task.’

I take off my shoes, my feet are sweaty. I feel a pang when she calls me super-daughter, it shouldn’t feel that way, she’s just envious.

‘But I don’t know if I should say anything to her *and* Stein,’ I tell her. ‘She won’t be expecting it, surely? Should I be talking on your behalf, too?’

‘A toast to Mum and *Franken*stein, Marthe says, raising a hand as if holding a glass.

‘Stein’s nice, Marthe,’ I reply, laughing.

Marthe chuckles.

‘To Mum and *Ein*stein,’ I say.

We’re due to celebrate Mum’s 65th birthday tomorrow evening, Marthe and Kristoffer and Olea and me and Mum and Stein, we’re all going to eat prawns and drink wine. Mum said it could double up as a celebration for my 40th too, I told her that wasn’t necessary, it’s three months too late for it anyway. I didn’t do much to celebrate on the day, just went out with a few friends, we had a three-course dinner and a few glasses of wine and that was that, most of them had to get home to their kids. When Mum turned 40 at some point back in the nineties, she received a card that said ‘Life begins at forty!’. I remember it to this day, it was decorated with rockets and shooting stars. Mum liked it and found it amusing, she held onto that phrase all that year, *life begins at forty!* she would say, and her friends would raise a glass. I remember them as ladies of a certain age, women with dry lipstick and school-age children, and when they got together, they would call it a girl’s night. When I turned 40, I felt the same as I always had, I had no sense that *this* would be when life began. On my birthday, a friend told me that I looked good, as if it were some kind of consolation; immediately after she had said how nice it must be to be alone, because it allowed one to really get to know oneself, and I remember thinking to myself that it might be nice to get to know someone else, too.

Stein and Mum have been together for six years now. Whenever he’s due to join us somewhere, I still wish he’d stay at home, that it might just be us. He doesn’t have any children of his own, I can’t picture him ever having wanted it any other way either, and it’s as if he doesn’t really understand how old Marthe and I are, he talks to us as if we’re teenagers. Mum says that she and Stein are *late bloomers*. Marthe and I flinch whenever she says it. It’s not even true, she was twenty when she married Dad, and look at how that turned out. I often want to ask if she’d rather have ended up as I have, ended up, I think to myself, I can’t think about myself as *ending up* one way or another, as if everything’s over and done with, nothing is over and done with, you have to tell yourself that the best is yet to come, but at times I think that’s how Stein and Marthe and Kristoffer see me. They don’t know anything, I think to myself, I’ve got a plan, I’ve got a secret. I make up my mind to tell Marthe now, not to wait until this evening, I can tell her now, I’m going to freeze my eggs in Sweden, she’ll look at me wide-eyed and say *wow*.

‘So, what if I were to tell you I had some big news?’ Marthe says.

There’s something new in her expression, something solemn beneath her smile, something quivers there. I look at her for a few seconds, don’t get it, but then I do.

‘Really?’ I ask.

‘Really,’ Marthe says, she’s smiling now, her eyes widen, teary.

‘Wow,’ I say, sitting down on the bed beside her. ‘Really.’

I try to remember everything I’ve ever said to her as she’s sat there, waiting to say the words, every stupid thing I’ve said, blabbing away about nights out and Stein and Mum. I quickly embrace her, she sobs gently, I hear a squeaking sound that seems to come from deep within her.

‘Fifteen weeks,’ she says without me asking, she sits up straight and dabs at her eyes. ‘I didn’t dare say anything before we could be absolutely sure.’

‘Shit,’ I say.

I don’t know what else to say. I’m so used to consoling her, hugging her and stroking her back and telling her everything will work itself out, taking her out to a bar every so often and treating her to a few glasses of wine so she can think about something else, we have to take advantage of the fact you can still have a drink, Marthe, and Kristoffer and Mum are always saying how good I am at talking Marthe around, looking after her. But this.

‘Things could still go wrong.’

Marthe looks at me and snorts with surprise.

‘Fifteen weeks, it’s not that far along,’ I say. ‘If you think about it, I mean.’

‘Sure, but we can relax a little bit,’ she says, sharply.

‘I’m just saying,’ I tell her. ‘So you don’t feel disappointed.’

‘I *know*,’ Marthe says.

‘My God, though, that’s amazing news,’ I tell her eventually, serving up a wide smile and hugging her once more to be on the safe side. ‘To think, it all worked itself out.’

‘It did,’ Marthe says, laughing, she wants to be happy, not to argue. ‘We were just about to go the test-tube route again, and then *poof*.’

‘*Poof*,’ I repeat. ‘The old-fashioned way, you mean?’

‘Yep,’ Marthe says. ‘Can’t beat it,’ she says, clenching a fist and punching the air in triumph.

I laugh.

‘My God,’ I say again.

‘Don’t you think the cabin looks good painted white,’ Marthe says on her way out of the room. ‘Much better than the yellow, I think. More like the ones you see down south.’

I pretend not to hear her and close the door leading to the hallway.

I remove my sweaty t-shirt and lie back on the bed, it’s already been made up for me, then gaze up at the ceiling, listen to the sounds drifting in from outside; the window is open, gulls screech in the distance and Olea shouts at Kristoffer to watch something or other that she’s doing, she shouts until her pleas start to sound cross, *DA-ddy!*, and he shouts *I’m watching!* in a tone that gives away the fact he’s looking at his phone. I can hear a boat out on the water, it’s going fast, the sky has clouded over, it’s cold lying here in nothing but my bra. I don’t cry. It always smells a little stale in here, and the sheets are soft and slightly threadbare and smell like fresh linen straight off the line, the mattress is old foam rubber, just as it should be, I’ve lain in this bed every summer since I was a child. And now I’m here. With Marthe. With her husband and their unborn baby and Olea.

I hadn’t believed it, not really. My friends have all passed me by, each and every one of them, but now Marthe, her too, somewhere inside I had always just believed that nothing would come of it, that things wouldn’t ever change, that Marthe would always be there in need of consolation, that she wouldn’t ever pass me by.

She can’t pass me by.

I wrap my arms around myself; my skin feels withered and dry, my body is a nonentity, no one wants anything to do with me these days, it’s as if I’ve ceased to exist. I’ve never brought anyone with me to the cabin, nothing has ever lasted long enough for that. Marthe has cosied up here with boyfriends since she was fifteen years old and always took the biggest bedroom, listless, apathetic boys that Mum and I have rolled our eyes at, until she finally settled down with Kristoffer and gained Olea into the bargain. And me? What do I have?

It’s so long since I was last touched by someone, anyone. I try to recall what it’s like, hands, skin, their breath at my neck, and as I imagine it, that breath, it all comes back to me, what it’s like to have someone come up behind me, hold me, breath at my neck, it’s so vivid, so real. To have someone as close to me as it’s possible to be, their breath at my throat, tracing their fingers from between my legs and up towards my breasts. I don’t want to think about it. There’s no point. I stand up and pull on a clean jumper, then perch on the narrow bed, this tiny room, will I ever make it out of here. Things will get better, I tell myself, everything will get better, I’ll freeze my eggs in Sweden, I’ll become something else, there’s something else for me, the best is yet to come, I’m not the type to give up. I stand in front of the mirror and see that I’ve maintained a good weight, I’ll go for a run in the morning, or out rowing, perhaps even both.

Marthe sticks her head in the door and asks if I fancy a swim, she doesn’t bother knocking, and I jump, cover myself even though I’m fully clothed, as if she’d caught me in the act of doing something I shouldn’t be doing. She doesn’t apologise, she’s used to it, thinks of it as her cabin. The idea is that we both have equal stakes in terms of the time we spend here, but she and Kristoffer are here most often. They’re the ones who do the painting and cut the grass and drive to the nearest town along the coast to buy fresh prawns that they eat in the garden in the evenings, and they pull up the weeds along the path down to the jetty, or rather, Kristoffer does, I’m sure it’s him, Marthe might do half an hour’s work before getting too tired and saying she needs a lie down on the sofa. But even then, she’s a grown-up here, she washes up the crockery with the naturalness of someone who owns it, buys cushions she thinks would look nice here, whilst I never quite get around to doing the same myself. I’ve thought about spending some time here by myself once or twice, just me, I’ll clean and treat the timber decking and weed the garden just as they do, take ownership; I make up my mind to spend a few days here when neither Marthe nor Kristoffer nor Mum nor Stein are around. But it’s so much trouble, hiring a car when I can barely remember how to drive, and then there’s the thought of not seeing anyone all day every day, plus, I take the boat out so infrequently that I’ve almost forgotten how to remove the hood and fill the tank with petrol, always moor it with a strange take on a double knot because I can’t ever remember how to do any others and end up getting told off by Mum afterwards. I’d find myself reading old comic books, Donald Duck and Asterix, and drinking beer in the late afternoon instead of painting walls, alone and restless and in need of a few Imovane when night falls because I’d be terrified, and by the morning I’d just want to go back to the city, with a sense that I’d been trying to achieve something that’s beyond me.

I find my swimming costume and towel and go outside to wait in the garden. The grass is short and dry, yellow in patches, and there are croquet hoops stuck in the ground here and there, I almost trip over one. The cherry trees droop with dense clusters of unripe fruit, a pale, reddish-yellow in colour. I pluck a few and stick them in my mouth, they taste sour and tart, I spit out the stones, firing them as far as I can into the air. Kristoffer is busy trying to hang the hammock up between two pine trees. He looks different now, he was Kristoffer in the car, now he’s the father of Marthe’s baby, a grown-up.

‘Congratulations are in order, I hear,’ I say.

‘Thanks,’ he replies. ‘I wasn’t sure I was allowed to say anything in the car.’

‘Lovely news,’ I say.

‘Why are you saying congratulations,’ Olea asks, she’s sitting and heaving her weight back and forth in the swing to pick up speed.

‘Because Marthe and Kristoffer are going to have a baby,’ I say.

‘Oh, that,’ Olea says, sounding disappointed.

I stand behind her and pull the swing back before letting her go.

‘Higher,’ she says over and over again, ‘higher, higher,’ and eventually she’s happy with the speed she’s picked up and giggles as she reaches the highest point of each swing.

‘Look at me, Daddy,’ she shouts, looking back at Kristoffer, ‘look at how high up I am!’

‘I can see that,’ Kristoffer says, as he ties the second hammock tightly around a tree trunk. He sits inside it and tests it under his weight, he hasn’t tied it tightly enough and his bum sinks to the ground below, we laugh. Olea flies back and forth with the wind in her hair as her legs dangle below her, her mouth half-open, I recall the feeling in your stomach when you reach the highest point, the swing dropping from the sky and swooping down, so totally and utterly in flight that you almost believe that you might soar up and away, then the way the ground hits you when you land, always surprisingly hard.

Kristoffer wraps the fabric of the hammock around himself, as if he were concealed inside a cocoon.

‘Do you think Marthe will see him when she comes out?’ I ask Olea.

‘No,’ Olea replies.

‘Kristoffer,’ Marthe shouts from inside, as if on cue, then she comes out onto the decking and shouts again. ‘Kristoffer?’

‘Don’t say anything,’ I mumble, and Kristoffer giggles inside the sausage-shaped hammock.

‘Have you seen him?’ Marthe asks me, swaying from side to side and rubbing her belly.

‘No, I don’t know where he is,’ I reply loudly, and Kristoffer starts shaking with laughter inside his cocoon. Olea giggles on the swing.

‘Come on,’ Marthe says, standing with her arms by her sides. ‘I’m not in the mood for games.’

‘I don’t know,’ I tell her. ‘Haven’t seen him. Have you seen him anywhere, Olea?’

‘Enough now, come on,’ Marthe says, genuinely cross all of a sudden. ‘This isn’t funny anymore. Tell me where he is.’

I say nothing. Olea slinks down onto the ground, I can see that she’s a little apprehensive now, and Kristoffer unfurls himself and rolls out onto the grass.

‘Wow, I can’t believe we didn’t see you there,’ I say. ‘Were you really in there *all* that time?’

‘Don’t be cross, Marthe,’ Kristoffer says. ‘We were only messing around.’

‘I know,’ Marthe says, and I can see that she’s forcing herself to smile. ‘I know that.’

The path down to the bathing spot is imprinted on my body, no matter how long I spend away from here. I know the thorny bush you need to look out for and the smooth coastal rocks you need to slide across on your bum before hopping off, I know the prickling pine needles piled up under the pine trees that filter the sunlight, I know where we have to stamp our feet because there might be adders underfoot; it has that warm, dry, vaguely acidic forest aroma, and Marthe’s back is dappled with patches of sunlight. My feet become child’s feet, my short legs preparing to leap from ledges, I remember being scared of falling here, I think about thistles in my sandals, smooth rocks scuffing the bum of my shorts. Down by the large juniper bush further along the way I am twelve years old, I’ve got braces that hurt in my mouth and I’m wearing a new strappy dress, the straps criss-cross at the back, Mum doesn’t like me wearing it because it shows off so much skin, she never used to care about things like that, and I bump into Vegard on the way down, he’s older than me and stays in the cabin along the road, he’s been swimming with his dad and he sees me for the first time that day, or at least I think he does, he smiles differently, or at least I think he does, and he says hello, he says hello to my strappy dress and I scurry along the final stretch of path leading to the bathing spot on tiptoes, repeat his one-word greeting aloud and feel compelled to leap little leaps with my arms wrapped around me because Vegard from the cabin along the road thinks I’m a grown-up in my strappy dress, and Marthe comes running after me and giggles and says *you look weird, what are you doing*, even though she’s the one who’s chubby and short and always crying about something or other.

Marthe’s skin goes goosepimply in the breeze as we undress in our usual spot. Her stomach is pale and distended. She might be mistaken for having simply put on a little weight when fully clothed, but without anything on it’s clear to see that it’s not just any ordinary weight gain. I kick off from the rock by the water’s edge, the cold closes in around me, I gasp and splutter, spit out saltwater. Marthe still hasn’t come in, she’s standing there with water and seaweed up to her knees, swaying gently with her arms wrapped around herself.

‘You just have to go for it,’ I tell her.

‘I’m not as tough as you are,’ Marthe says, sounding a little sarcastic. It’s always the same, every summer, I’m quick to get into the water while Marthe takes her time, and then we each make digs about which approach is best.

Sitting beside one another on the smooth rocks by the water’s edge, our towels wrapped around us and our blood pumping through our bodies as the sun warms us, she pats her stomach and tells me it’s not easy, all this.

‘No, I get that,’ I tell her.

I don’t want to hear it. I want her to be quiet, I wish I hadn’t come, hadn’t heard about it. Now I can’t tell her about Sweden, it all just seems so pathetic.

‘No,’ Marthe says. ‘I’ve always thought to myself that if it happened, I’d just be over the moon.’

She squeezes her hair and the water runs down her arms, she shivers. A gull dips up and down on the waves not far from land, gazing at us with those vacant, angry eyes they have, gulls are so ugly.

‘I’m just afraid that things will go wrong all over again,’ she says eventually. ‘I’m hyper-aware of everything, all the time.’

She smiles briefly, feebly, her lips tremble. I should hug her at this point, it looks as if she’s expecting it, expecting me to stroke her and pat her and tell her everything will be fine, just as I always do, but I don’t want to anymore.

‘And we’re hardly ever having sex lately,’ she says. ‘At first I couldn’t face it, and now he doesn’t want to.’

‘Oh, I see,’ I reply.

She looks at me from where she sits beside me, my arms are wrapped around my knees; I say nothing. Marthe picks at one of her toenails, pulling at it until something comes loose, then flicks it away, *eugh*, I say.

‘I can see why he’s lost interest when you insist on doing things like that,’ I say, I want her to laugh but she doesn’t.

‘Plus, Olea is being so difficult lately,’ Marthe says, her tone is impatient now, she can’t conceal her need for sympathy, why can’t I give her what she wants.

‘It can’t be easy for her,’ I say.

‘Sure, but she has to get used to the idea that someone else is going to be joining the family,’ Marthe says. ‘Do you know what she said before we left?’

‘No,’ I reply, standing up. ‘Shall we head back?’

‘She said, *Marthe, you’re lazy, aren’t you?* Just like that, out of nowhere.’

I follow her back up the path, my feet are freezing and I can feel my bikini bottoms, wet and cold under my shorts, my bikini top leaving large, damp patches on my t-shirt, I can see Marthe’s vest top clinging to her bikini in the same way. She has Kristoffer, and soon she’ll have a baby of her own and still she complains, that’s just what she’s like, always expecting people to put things straight for her. Marthe can go around and be herself, she can do an admin job that she likes well enough and which I don’t think she’s particularly good at, she can say daft things and laugh at all the wrong moments and not even think about it, she can stuff herself with crisps and chocolate when she’s feeling down, give up on exercising, say she can’t be bothered with it all, there’s always someone there to talk her round.

Just before we make it back, where the path gets steeper, Marthe stops in front of me and closes her eyes.

‘I just need a minute,’ she says.

‘Are you in pain, is it your stomach?’ I ask, and she nods.

I stand behind her in silence and wait. I don’t want to ask her how she’s feeling, I clench my fist as tight as I can. It’s something that happens every now and then, when I talk to Mum on the phone and she tells me she feels sorry for Marthe, trying so hard to get pregnant, and it’s like a blow to the chest, to the head, so forceful and hot that I have to clench my fists, sometimes I pick up a pillow or something soft and throw it at a wall as I carry on our conversation with the same old murmurs, *mmm* and *uh-huh* and *yeah*, but it’s never quite enough, after I hang up I chuck something harder, something that lands with a clatter, like a shoe or even my phone, if I’m not thinking. Always Marthe. Always. Always Marthe.

Marthe almost always has pain in her stomach, she has Crohn’s disease. They removed a section of her bowel ten years ago, but not so much that she needed a stoma. She went in for surgery on my thirtieth birthday, I’d booked a bistro with two friends celebrating their birthdays too, and when we’d got wind of the date of Marthe’s operation, Mum wanted me to cancel, surely we could have a party at a later date, what if something were to happen in surgery and I was drunk or they couldn’t get through to me? Could you ever forgive yourself? Mum asked me. It hit home, but I didn’t want to cancel, I didn’t want to shift the date of the party for Marthe’s sake, it wasn’t a risky operation, and I didn’t want to spend hours on end in some waiting room leafing through interior design magazines and drinking hot chocolate from a vending machine as I consoled Mum, I wanted to drink wine, I wanted to be with the others. Even so, I couldn’t shake what Mum had said about forgiving myself, and even though I’d bought a new dress and had enjoyed so much bubbly that I was drunk by ten o’clock, I checked my phone constantly, all night long. No messages came through to tell me how things had gone, the operation should have been over and done with long ago. I knew that Mum was punishing me, but still my palms felt clammy, I tried calling her but she wouldn’t pick up, and I felt certain that something had gone wrong after all, that they hadn’t had a chance to call me, that there was no signal wherever they were, I went outside and tried calling from there, stood on the pavement not far from my friends, who were smoking, and felt as if the ground was collapsing beneath my feet, and I stood there, drunk, sobbing, Mum not picking up, until eventually I hung up. I pictured Marthe on the operating table in an oxygen mask, blood and peeping sounds, desperate doctors crowding around her, that it was this operation that would distinguish itself from the others, the one that almost always goes to plan, and that Mum wouldn’t call me because I’d chosen not to be there, I’d chosen to go out drinking instead, to do stupid things. I reached out a hand to hail a taxi, it was a light summer evening and I left the party, not to go to the hospital, I couldn’t go there now, not drunk like I was, but home, where I curled up under the covers after throwing up, shaking, black inside. I woke the next day to a message from Mum to say everything had gone well, and another from my friend asking why I’d left so early without my coat.

‘Are you alright?’ I ask eventually.

Marthe takes a deep breath, her eyes are half-open. A gull screeches somewhere, caaaw caaaw caaaw. My jaw is stiff, she looks so stupid, she looks so fucking stupid standing there like that, I can’t even look at her.

Kristoffer takes some raw meat out of the fridge and chops some herbs for a marinade. Over the past year or so he’s started making sausages from scratch and complicated casseroles that cook for hours and sourdough starters that stink out the fridge, and back at home he has enormous kitchen appliances and a meat grinder and a sous vide machine that dominates the kitchen worktop, Marthe says she’s got no idea what you’re supposed to do with any of his fancy bits of equipment. He brewed his own beer once too, but nobody thought much of it.

‘I need some help from one of you,’ he said.

‘Ida can do it,’ Marthe says, stretching her legs. ‘I think I’m going to chill out for a bit.’

There’s something about their tone when they speak to one another, their words sound rehearsed.

‘Is that OK?’ Kristoffer asks, looking at me.

‘Sure,’ I reply.

I don’t need to rest, nobody needs to feel sorry for me, and I like spending time alone with Kristoffer anyway, doing something or other as we chat. I grab a knife and slice potatoes into wedges, he admires how quickly I work. The cabin kitchen is small. I used to know where everything was kept, but Kristoffer and Marthe have moved things around, the spices and salt are in the cupboard rather than on the shelf above the hob. They’ve painted the walls here too, they used to be green, now they’re a deep blue, very contemporary, they change all sorts without ever checking with me first. The windows are the same as ever, the glass panes are old and make the world outside appear warped and wavy, with the odd dead winter fly on the windowsill.

‘How did it go with that guy you were going to meet?’ Kristoffer asks as I tip the wedges into a roasting tin.

‘Who?’ I ask him. ‘Oh, him. That was just a Tinder date; nothing came of it.’

‘You should check out whether there are any hunks in the neighbourhood while you’re here,’ he says.

I smile, can’t face it, can’t face this conversation, being optimistic and ready to meet ‘hunks’, my arms feel weak and heavy at the thought. Swiping left and right, Petter 42, Thomas 36, Steven 45, a beer in a pub where there’s no risk you might bump into someone you actually know, that weird shyness when I realise which of the men there is him, he looked different in his pictures. Probing conversations as I drink more quickly than I ought to, stressing out at the prospect of conversation drying up, and so I smile more than usual, speak more quickly, gesticulate, scared that he might start to feel bored, and somewhere inside I think *calm down, don’t do that*. Do you watch Game of Thrones, I ask, do you watch anything else, what season are you on, is your job very hectic, how many people are there in your department, why aren’t I better at this, I’m not usually this stupid. He can see how much more I want, he can tell that I’ve never had a proper boyfriend. Eventually the point arrives when I ask if we should have another pint and he tells me he’s got an early start tomorrow, and my heart sinks, we might walk a block together before one of us turns off, and I stand there on tiptoes as we make small talk, I know that my eyes are too wide, my smile too broad. I hope that he’ll tell me he wants to see me again, I hope it even though I might have been bored stiff all night, but then he just says that it’s been nice, have a good evening, then *maybe speak to you again sometime*, and I lift my arms halfway in some attempt at a hug, but he steps back and my arms sink, and then I say *bye for now*, and I lift my hand stupidly in something resembling a wave instead, walk to the bus with my stupid arms hanging down by my stupid sides, sit on the bus alone with my stupid arms, people all around me, make my way inside my flat with my stupid, useless hands.

‘Make the most of it while you can,’ Kristoffer says, wiping his brow, he’s melting butter in a pan and adding flour. ‘Before you know it, you’ll have a husband and kids and find yourself dreaming about how things used to be.’

‘Do *you* dream about how things used to be?’ I ask him.

‘Sometimes, maybe,’ Kristoffer says, laughing.

‘I’ll tell Marthe that,’ I say.

‘Don’t do that,’ Kristoffer says, laughing louder. ‘Please. That’d make her miserable. But all that online dating stuff,’ he says, shaking his head. ‘I don’t think I could be bothered with all that. It seems like a right fucking ordeal.’

I say nothing, it’s easy for him to say, what would he do if he were me, and he looks up from the pan and in my direction.

‘That’s easy for me to say, of course,’ he adds, patting my shoulder.

‘It’ll be alright,’ I say, wasting no time in following up with a laugh.

I chop fennel and carrots. He’s nice, Kristoffer, I think to myself. He’s a nice guy. As I slide the vegetables into the oven with the potato wedges, I hear a thump, then Olea, wailing from the bathroom. She comes running into the kitchen and throws herself into Kristoffer’s arms. Just behind her is Marthe, looking red-faced.

‘She slammed the door on my head,’ Olea shouts.

‘I was on the loo, and she just barged in,’ Marthe says. ‘I was only trying to close it, Olea, you know that.’

‘Couldn’t you be a bit more careful,’ Kristoffer says, loud and angry. ‘Fucking hell.’

He lifts Olea up with one arm, as if she were much smaller than she is. Olea hides her face, nuzzling against his shoulder and sobbing, loud and over-the-top as he strokes the back of her head. It’s embarrassing but also not entirely unpleasant hearing her cry like that, Marthe rolls her eyes at me, but I don’t return the look. I pick up the knife and rinse it under the tap just to give myself something to do, my pulse is racing.

‘You’re stupid,’ Olea says, throwing a hand out in Marthe’s direction.

Marthe opens her mouth and closes it again, she rubs her belly, barely there.

‘Olea,’ Kristoffer says. ‘Stop that. We don’t say things like that.’

‘I didn’t mean it,’ Marthe says. ‘Olea.’

‘Could you say sorry,’ Kristoffer says, I can’t tell initially whether he’s talking to Marthe or Olea. Olea shakes her head.

‘How about if Marthe does the same?’ Kristoffer suggests. Marthe looks at him.

‘But it was an accident,’ she says.

‘I know, but still,’ Kristoffer says, gesturing at Olea’s back.

I place the knife down and move over to Olea, stroking her back.

‘Want to come out into the garden, Olea?’ I ask. ‘You and I can find something to do outside.’

I feel a flicker of delight when Olea nods and slides out of Kristoffer’s arms, taking my hand, sullen and stand-offish as she continues to refuse to look at Marthe. Kristoffer looks grateful. As I close the door behind us, I hear raised voices once again in the wake of the brief silence.

Olea and I sit inside the playhouse, the one Marthe and I used to fight over when we were young, chasing each other out of it and crying to Mummy that the other was being unfair. It has also been painted white, it used to be red and inside there are two small benches and an old foam rubber mattress in the centre, a box of sparkly dressing-up clothes and a few books and games lying around. Drawings have been pinned to the walls. I used to have a box of things I’d found in here, empty snail shells that smelled of salt and old seaweed, pretty stones that felt smooth and round against a cheek, Marthe and I would take it in turns using them to stroke the other’s cheeks, plus a picture of Princess Diana that I’d cut out of some magazine or other, a few nice napkins, I think I can remember the pattern on one of them, purple and pink, glossy and soft. Marthe had found the box a few years ago, I’d texted her permission to chuck it out.

‘You can sleep in here, you know,’ I said. ‘I’ve done it once before.’

‘*Did* you?’ Olea asks. ‘Why?’

‘I used to come here when I was younger, too,’ I tell her, sitting on one of the benches as Olea plonks her bum down on the mattress and starts brushing the rainbow-coloured hair of an old pink My Little Pony toy, there are several lying beside it. I remember what the pony smelled like when I first got it, fresh, supple plastic, its rainbow-coloured mane smooth and shiny. Now its nylon hair is thin, the plastic is peeling and discoloured, all of the ponies should really have been thrown out by now, the plastic is probably toxic. One of them is missing a leg, it looks as if it’s been gnawed at by a mouse.

‘The cabin belongs to Marthe and me, you know,’ I tell her.

‘Does it,’ Olea says, carrying on with her brushing.

What did she think, that I was just some sort of guest? I sit and look at her, her pink jumper, her fair hair. She has dark, even eyebrows, she doesn’t look like any of us, not even like Kristoffer, he says she takes after her mother.

‘You’re going to be pretty when you grow up,’ I say.

She casts the briefest of glances up at me before looking back down at her pony.

‘How old are you?’ I ask.

‘Six,’ Olea says.

‘Are you looking forward to starting school?’ I ask her.

‘Yes,’ Olea replies. ‘How old are you?’ she asks after a pause.

‘Forty,’ I say.

‘Woah,’ she says. ‘That’s a lot.’

‘Are you excited about become a big sister?’ I ask.

She looks at me with hard eyes and says nothing, just keeps brushing.

‘It’s OK not to be,’ I say.

Olea passes me two horses and starts telling me all about them, they all have names, one likes to fly. I’m bored by it all, I want to find a magazine to leaf through, a beer, there’s a smell of mildew in here. A long time passes before Kristoffer knocks on the open playhouse door to say that it’s bedtime.

‘Maybe you’d like to read her a book while she’s having her dinner,’ he says.

‘Of course,’ I say. ‘Let’s read something together, eh Olea?’

‘Are you and Aunt Ida good friends now, Olea?’ he asks.

Olea says nothing, I can see that she’s thinking about something else, but I feel proud, I understand children, I know what you’re supposed to do.

I make up a voice for Karsten and another for Petra as Olea sits in my lap in her pyjamas, she’s eating a sandwich from one of the old buttercup-patterned plates. Marthe is lying in a hammock with a magazine, I hear her giggling all of a sudden.

‘What is it?’ I ask.

‘That doesn’t come very naturally to you, does it?’ she says.

‘What do you mean?’ I ask her.

‘You’re a bit OTT. *Lion Cub and Miss Rabbit can come along too!*’ she says mockingly, imitating my intonation, making a thing of it.

My cheeks grow warm and I stop reading.

‘You don’t have to stop for my benefit,’ Marthe says.

She lies there, rubbing her belly in lazy circular motions. I look at her, want to say something mean, but I just smile, I’m not going to let her get to me. I speak again, using my normal voice, doing my best to maintain it until Marthe goes back inside. Olea stops following along after just a few pages anyway, her body grows tired and feels heavier and heavier against my own, and something good and warm and calm filters through me as she sinks back. It’s unfamiliar having someone so close to me, her tiny body against mine, the warmth of her head and her stomach, so soft; it makes me wrap my arms around her and cuddle her tight.

‘Ouch,’ she says.

‘Sorry,’ I reply, but she doesn’t leave my lap, and I place the book down and rock her and sing quietly as the sun moves and we find ourselves sitting in the shade. Across the fjord, the sun is still out, Mum always says it’d be nice to have a cabin across the water.

Is this it. Is this when I’ll feel that shift inside of me, is this when I’ll know it’s *this*, this is what I can’t miss out on, *this* is too great a miracle to put off any longer, it’s not enough just to have eggs in a freezer somewhere, is it *now* that a sense of absolute certainty will force its way to the forefront, so much so that I put Olea down and go inside and find my phone and book an appointment at Stork in Denmark and set off at once to be inseminated with the product of some Dane having a wank in a room somewhere, telling people afterwards: *I just knew I had to do it*? Someone at work had done it last year, a woman in accounts, she’d looked ancient for years and it wasn’t difficult to imagine her being a single mother. She turned up at work with a pram and showed off her baby and skilfully laid the infant over her shoulder for winding, she didn’t look as if she needed anyone else. I can’t imagine being alone and pregnant and proud and lonesome as I meander through the city, to work, around my flat, giving birth with Mum or Marthe or a friend by my side, never missing the company of a man, it being enough simply to be that child’s mother, just them and me, always, the greatest thing of all.

It was only in the past year that it really started to feel late. Just before my fortieth I started waking up with an anxiety that shook me from within, *not long now*, it said, *not long now before it’s too late*. Those around me have two or three children, some won’t be having any more, they sit up all night breastfeeding, they’re exhausted. Others struggle to have another, but it all works itself out eventually, after numerous test tube attempts and unimaginable frustration, and the new baby wails endlessly and they talk about how much more tiring it is having two than it was having just the one, without realising how obvious it sounds. They do drop-offs and pick-ups every day, and the morning routine goes on and on, they never have any problems finding things to do in the holidays because there are grandparents and aunts and uncles to visit, and the need for time alone as a family too, meaning a trip up into the mountains or a camping holiday or a visit to a cabin somewhere or other, just my friends and their children, it’s one of their favourite things, they tell me, just having a bit of time *to ourselves*. They move into bigger apartments or terraced houses with gardens, and sure, they said they’d never move out of the city, but *just think, the kids can run outside and play*, they buy all the things they previously mocked, end up with a garage and two cars and a Weber barbecue that’s so big that they feel slightly ashamed at the size of it, but it’s nice to have a big barbecue when there are lots of them or when they’ve got family visiting; life is porridge and burping and stains and wee and poo and snot and lack of sleep, so little sleep, and screaming and endless rounds of chickenpox and tummy bugs and colds for everyone, then a fresh bout of tummy bugs all over again. And every morning they eat breakfast together, three or four or five of them, every evening they fall asleep next to someone, cuddled up side by side, every night they are woken by a child who wants to sleep in their bed, a child to cuddle, a child of their own.

Life for me is the same as it was five years ago, ten, even; I have a slightly larger apartment, a slightly bigger mortgage, slightly more projects to juggle at work, slightly duller skin, a few more grey hairs that I pay my hairdresser two thousand kroner every three months to make disappear. I sleep alone and I wake up alone and I’m alone when I go to work and alone when I get back home, I won’t moan about it, you don’t want to become one of those people who moans on and on about things. But being alone is a circle that only ever expands, and if a boyfriend doesn’t turn up, if no one turns up with whom I can use the eggs in the bank, it might be five or ten or twenty or thirty years just like this, the same from here on in.

And yet I sit here in my chair with Olea in my lap, nothing shifts within me, nothing stirs, the wind gathers pace and the trees rumble and I look down at Olea’s slender back in her pink vest and pick at a little insect that’s landed in her hair.

‘You can read me another book tomorrow,’ Olea says.

‘Thank you,’ I say, then glance over at Marthe in the hammock and whisper to Olea: ‘It was clumsy of Marthe to hit you on the head earlier, wasn’t it?’

Olea sniggers and turns around.

‘I’m not allowed to say that,’ she whispers.

‘I give you permission,’ I whisper back, and we steal a glance at Marthe in the hammock. Marthe is wearing sunglasses and we can’t tell what she’s looking at, one hand is resting on her stomach. Why does she touch her stomach so much when it’s so tiny, has she consciously assumed this sort of pregnant body language, has she sat and studied the gestures on YouTube, the way you’re supposed to sway back and forth and rest a hand high up on your stomach?

‘We’re only joking,’ I say.

‘Yes,’ Olea whispers, she claps a hand over her mouth to prevent herself from giggling aloud.

‘When you’ve got a baby in your tummy, you end up looking like this,’ I whisper, pulling my head back to create a double chin and puffing out my cheeks.

Olea’s eyes grow wide, glee and horror rolled into one at being allowed to do and say these things, and with Marthe only a few feet away.

‘Marthe says things like this,’ she whispers. ‘*Ohhh, I’m sooo tired*.’

I laugh.

‘We don’t say things like that,’ I say, and then I wink at her.

‘What are you two whispering about,’ Marthe asks. She takes off her sunglasses, as if she’s caught us looking in her direction.

‘We’re just chatting,’ I say.

‘It’s time for Olea to go to bed,’ Marthe says, swinging her legs round and out of the hammock. She’s wearing a nice pair of sandals; I feel the urge to see if they might fit me too.

‘Are you coming, Olea?’

‘I want to stay up,’ Olea whinges.

‘Come on, don’t mess about now,’ Marthe says. ‘We had an agreement that you could read for a while, then it would be time for bed.’

‘I want Ida to do it,’ Olea says, she’s holding my hand and swinging it back and forth like a pendulum.

Marthe stands there with her hands on her hips, looking at Olea and then at me.

‘Uh-huh,’ she says. ‘Do you want to?’

‘Sure,’ I say. ‘You and me, eh Olea?’

‘Yeah!’ Olea cries.

‘You two it is, then,’ Marthe says.

Olea sleeps in the little box room next to mine, where Marthe used to sleep when we were young. She has to show me all of her books and cuddly toys and clothes before she goes to bed, she clambers up and down on a chair, pulling things out of drawers. Kristoffer sticks his head in and tells her that’s enough messing about now.

I lie down beside her, Olea under the covers and me on top. The room has dark, thick curtains to help her sleep even though the sun is still out. We look one another in the eye in the half-darkness until we start to giggle, as if I were a child, too.

‘Ida,’ Olea says. ‘Can I tell you a secret?’

‘Of course,’ I say.

‘You can’t tell anybody,’ Olea says.

‘You can tell me anything,’ I say, placing a hand on the back of her neck.

*I wish that you were my mum. I wish it was you, not Marthe.*

‘I…’ Olea begins, ‘I’ve crocheted a present for Grandma.’

‘Have you?’ I reply.

‘It’s the longest thing I’ve ever finger-crocheted,’ Olea says.

She chatters for a while longer, about finger-crochet and swimming the next day, tells me I have to go with her.

‘I will,’ I tell her, I’m bored of listening to her now, I want to go back out to the others, ‘but you need to go to sleep now,’ I tell her, and then I sing her a lullaby. It’s a hard one, high and low, my voice crackles and squeaks and Olea twists and turns in bed as I sing. I carry on until I realise that she’s not going to fall asleep with me lying there beside her, and in the end, I bid her goodnight and get up, like Kristoffer and Marthe have told me to do. Olea hugs me, her arms wrapped tight around my neck for a moment, then she drops back down onto the bed, I think I’ve done everything right.

I can hear Kristoffer busying himself in the kitchen, glasses clinking and something frying in a pan, Marthe must be out in the garden. I go into Marthe and Kristoffer’s bedroom, don’t make a sound, stand by their bed, motionless. They have the parents’ room, Mum and Stein will sleep in the largest of the children’s’ bedrooms when they come. It smells of Marthe in here, it smells of Kristoffer, their scents are well-defined even with the window open. The bed hasn’t been made, there are clothes and children’s books and a tube of sun cream on the floor. I pick up a green dress I haven’t seen before, it smells sweaty. An inside-out t-shirt is lying on the bed, the stripy one Kristoffer was wearing when he came to pick me up earlier, I take a peek inside the wardrobe, several more of Marthe’s dresses and jumpers, some of which I recognise and others that I don’t, vast expanses of cheap, loose-fitting fabric. Kristoffer’s shirts and t-shirts, a hoodie. A pair of large sandals have been left lying on the floor. I slip my feet inside them; they look like child’s feet in grown-up shoes. I sit on the bed, on what must be Marthe’s side, try on a pair of glasses that have been left on the bedside table. They’re a stronger prescription than I’d anticipated. I open the drawer of the bedside table, don’t know what I’m looking for, find a few old weeklies, look inside the bag on the floor. I lie on the bed, listening for movement in the kitchen and garden all the while, pull the covers up over me and smell them. It’s a better bed than the one I sleep in. They should change their sheets, they smell used and unwashed, bodies, I wonder if they’ve had sex whilst they’ve been here, if I can smell that too, or if they’ve just been tired and lain side by side while Marthe has talked about how hard it is to be pregnant. Maybe they spoon one another, Kristoffer holding her from behind, maybe he rests a hand on her stomach, her lower abdomen. I turn to face Kristoffer’s side, stare at his empty pillow, try to imagine that it’s me lying here with him, that every evening we come and lie down here together, the window open, spooning, Olea can sleep in my room, and the new baby can go in a cot in our room, and Marthe, Marthe isn’t here. Goodnight, Kristoffer, I say. Goodnight, Ida, I reply.

I could fall asleep here, but I mustn’t, imagine if Kristoffer were to walk in on his way to fetch something, imagine Marthe were to come in to get changed, I stand up, realise that I’m freezing, I just want to lie back down again.

‘I can’t face sitting outside,’ Marthe says. ‘It’s too chilly.’

I pretend not to hear her, take three plates out of the cupboard and carry them out to the garden table. It’s a common topic of conversation whenever we’re here, and Marthe always tends to be the one to get her way, especially if Mum’s here with us, Marthe has a headache or stomach ache or any other number of other aches and pains, and Mum says we have to take that into account, obviously we do. I feel a little giddy doing the opposite, taking a superior tone: ‘No, let’s sit outside, Kristoffer and I both want to sit outside.’ Marthe leaves the table three times over dinner, first to fetch a coat and then a pair of wool socks and eventually a blanket that she wraps herself up in, sitting in her garden chair with her arms crossed, determined to make a point.

‘It’s not *that* cold, Marthe,’ I say.

‘You’ve got no idea how cold I am,’ Marthe says.

The meat is a little overdone, Kristoffer isn’t totally happy with it even though Marthe and I tell him that it’s great, Marthe says she needs her meat to be well done anyway, he knows that; Kristoffer tops up his wine glass three times while we’re eating.

‘Take it easy,’ Marthe says.

‘I am taking it easy,’ Kristoffer says. ‘This is how you take it easy on holiday.’

He still drinks more than Marthe would like, but not as much as he used to. When they’d just moved in together, Kristoffer once passed out at an after-party and forgot to let her know, and a few times he stumbled home at around five in the morning, so drunk that he fell over in the hallway. Marthe was quiet whenever she called me to tell me these things. I could tell that she wanted to hear me say that it would all blow over, that she wasn’t staking everything on the wrong man.

‘You can’t put up with that,’ I told her, I gave her nothing, even though I liked Kristoffer more than any other boyfriends she’d had.

‘Think about when you have children, imagine him carrying on like that,’ I said, I felt hot and spoke louder and quicker than usual. ‘It’s unacceptable, Marthe.’

‘*You* don’t need to get so bloody worked up about it,’ Marthe said.

‘I’m getting worked up on your behalf,’ I said. ‘You can’t let him treat you that way. I’d have walked out. Then and there.’

‘It’s not that simple,’ Marthe said, louder now. ‘You’d know that if you’d ever been in a proper relationship yourself, that you have to take people other than yourself into consideration.’

‘Don’t I have proper relationships?’ I asked her.

‘You don’t, Ida,’ Marthe replied.

Whenever I talk about someone new I’m seeing, as I tend to put it, my friends and Marthe groan; yet another man who’s spoken for, I have to stop seeing men with wives and girlfriends, they tell me, it’s no good for their family. I act as if I feel guilty, *pfff, I know*, but it only serves to make me feel defiant, the idea that I should go around taking partners I don’t know into consideration, children I’ve never laid eyes on, that I should be the one to take responsibility for holding back. Should I resist the temptation to reply when I receive a message in the middle of the night telling me that I’m hot or lovely or cool or asking what I’m doing right now, if it’s convenient for them to come round, should it be me who reminds them that they’re spoken for, should I use my best flirtatious-yet-strict tone to tell them *no, you’re taking things too far, think of your wife and children*, when what I really want is for them not to give a single damn about their wives or children? To go to bed all alone with nothing but my upstanding principles for company, to embrace myself in bed and think long and hard about just how much self-respect I have? Being good, being decent, it leaves me with nothing. It’s not as if leaving things alone, remaining pure and ignoring those messages, will ensure that a much better man will pop up all of a sudden, someone true, someone unattached *who values you for the incredible woman you are*, as my friends once put it. It’ll happen when I least expect it, they tell me, always when I least expect it, like a reward wrapped up in a bow, something I’ll receive for having held out on my own for so long, a gold medal for long and faithful service. It’s not my responsibility, when it comes down to it, I tell them, I’m not the one being unfaithful, and sometimes people in relationships fall in love with someone else, I want to add, feelings can crop up even if you’re spoken for, but I don’t dare air that opinion around anyone else, I know how it will make me sound, poor Ida, going around in the hope that he’ll leave his girlfriend for her, use your head.

I tell them I’ll do the washing up if someone gives me a hand, and Marthe very quickly replies that she and Kristoffer will do it, I can stay where I am, I’m a guest here after all. I borrow her blanket and wrap myself up to prevent the mosquitoes from getting at me, only my hands are poking out. It could be nice sitting like this, I could enjoy it. If everything were different, I could be content here; the half-breeze of a summer evening at the cabin, wrapped up in a blanket, dinner and wine with my sister and her boyfriend, Mum due to arrive tomorrow.

I don’t want it. I feel a constriction of my airways, I don’t want it to take so little to make me feel so happy, it’s not fair, that I should have to make do with this. I see them through the window. The kitchen is half in darkness; the small lamp mounted on the wall shines a ring of light on the worktop. I can see Marthe washing up while Kristoffer dries, since he’s tall and can reach the highest shelves. She looks up at him and says something before smiling, and he looks at her and smiles back, stroking her hair with one hand, something inside me plummets, something like disappointment. I turn away and pour myself more wine.

It’s not right. That it should be so easy for others and so hard for me, I don’t get it, if there’s some sort of formula, a code that others are familiar with, one that they’ve known since they were young but which I’ve never quite grasped.

Kristoffer and I have some more wine afterwards, Marthe drinks apple juice, we recline the garden chairs and fetch more blankets, it’s almost dark now and we watch the boats out on the fjord.

‘Mum will be moaning about all the people from Bærum who’ve come to ruin the peace and quiet with their noisy speedboats tomorrow,’ Marthe says.

‘And Stein will tell her that lots of people from Bærum are perfectly lovely people,’ I reply.

‘Oh, do you know what,’ Marthe says, looking at me, clapping her hands. ‘I’ve learned to drive the big boat. I thought I’d surprise Mum with a trip tomorrow.’

‘Have you?’ I ask her.

The big boat isn’t really all that big, twenty feet, maybe, but we still call it that since it’s bigger than the rowboat we use for fishing trips. Mum and Kristoffer and I can drive it, but Marthe has never shown any interest, she’s always chosen to stay by the bathing spot or in the garden, reading a magazine.

‘She’s good,’ Kristoffer says. ‘A natural.’

‘I felt like I ought to be able to do it,’ Marthe says. ‘It gives you a certain number of grown-up points.’

Kristoffer’s eyes are shining, as they often do when he’s been drinking, and his expression is kind when he glances over at me, serious in the same way it was when we were in the kitchen together earlier. I look back at him and can’t bring myself to smile, so I take a quick gulp of my wine, and he briefly squeezes both eyes shut while looking over at me. I go to the loo and almost miss the mark, I look at myself, my cheeks almost drooping, my face bloated. I straighten up, smile at myself, suck my cheeks in, there. When it’s Marthe’s turn to use the loo, Kristoffer tells me I needn’t look so down in the dumps.

‘Come here and have a hug,’ he says.

‘What?’ I reply, laughing, he wraps his arms around me and squeezes.

My cheek is against his, it’s unshaven; such sudden intimacy, my chest hurts, and when Marthe comes back to say she’s going to bed and Kristoffer tells me that tomorrow is another day, I feel so despondent and I don’t know why, there’s nothing worth staying up for. I sit alone and drink up as I scroll up and down my Messenger contacts, eventually sending a message to a guy I was involved with two years ago now, I can’t even remember how it ended, it just drifted over into being something else, and then I send the same message to someone I had a thing with even longer ago than that, someone I really ought not to contact, he wasn’t all that special. ‘Hi! How are things?’ I write to them both. ‘At the cabin. Thinking of you.’

No reply. I’m always doing things like that, I don’t know why, I’m not thinking about either of them, yet still I paw and claw at people in the hope that just one of them might think about me, respond to me. I lie in bed and stare at my phone. The smell of the bedsheets. My hand on my naked flesh. The knots in the ceiling planks. I’ve been thirteen in this bed, sixteen, twenty-five, thirty-five.

I drift off, the darkness begins to stir around me; I hear a gull in the distance, the sounds generate wider and wider circles, and the door opens slowly, and something is moving in the room, lifting my bedcovers, and I shuffle over to make room, then we’re lying on our sides, I’m naked and a hand slides up towards my breasts, I wake up and the bed is empty and I’m wet and it’s silent in the cabin, the light is grey, it’s early, I masturbate without thinking and lie there wide awake. I don’t know who I’m thinking about, there’s nobody *to* think about.

When I sleep with someone, on the rare occasion that I do, I’m like a hungry dog; I undress hurriedly, want the whole lot in one bite, chin chafing against stubble, tongue at throat, hard fingers inside me, smooth skin, the warmth, I want to wrap myself up in all that skin. Afterwards, I inch my way towards them and ask them to hold me, drape a heavy arm around myself as I prepare to sleep, but they don’t want to, they only want to sleep, and I can’t help but ask, beg. One doesn’t even want to lie in the bed with me afterwards, instead running to the bathroom two seconds after coming then sitting on the living room sofa half-dressed, waiting for me to get dressed and leave, even though his girlfriend is away for the weekend. I try making things better for myself, ask him sympathetically if he’s feeling paranoid, maybe it was a step too far, but yes, that’s it, he says, and I don’t believe him, but I can go along with it, I even give him a reassuring hug before allowing myself to be sent packing, straight out of the front door, tripping onto the pavement in the middle of the night to find myself a taxi home. Another one grunts quietly, good-naturedly, as I do my best to sidle up as close to him as possible, God, give a man a break, and pressed up against my bum I feel his penis shrink, and I can’t sleep, the air has that same staleness to it that it always does after people have been fucking, and I get up because I need to shit. I sit in the bathroom for a long while, my arse stinging and my armpits pungent with the smell of sweat, my pussy sticky and sore and with that horrible whiff of rubber and dried-up desire; I glance inside the bin where he’s tossed two condoms, each tied in a knot, I see some blood on one and think that it’s too early for that, and I shower and return to bed clean and warm, move my damp underwear and the empty condom box from where they’ve been left on the bed, then lie down beside him, in the warmth, take his arm and wrap it around me again, now I can sleep, and he snores in my ear and doesn’t awaken and I lie there, unable to drift off.

I wake before the others. It’s silent in the cabin, six o’clock, and I’m so tired, my head feels laden and heavy after last night’s drinks, but I can’t get back to sleep. Eventually I get up and take a run along the narrow path down by the jetties; my legs are heavy, but I manage it. I only see one other jogger out and about, we nod at one another, I’m pleased with my pace. I run faster now than I did when I was thirty, not faster than when I was twenty, obviously, but I’m one of the fastest among us when our office puts a team forward for the relay race at Holmenkollen each year. Lots of us are fast runners, *age is no excuse for idleness*, my boss always says, *you just have to make it a priority*. Marthe has tried jogging with me on a few occasions, but she had to throw in the towel after just a few minutes, nobody can keep up with me, speedy Ida. *Do it, do it, do it, do it*, I tell myself as I run uphill, just as I always do, pushing until my sides burn. I shower afterwards and fetch the keys for the big boat before making my way down to the jetty. I unclip the hood and fumble for a long while when it comes to starting the engine because I can’t quite remember what position the levers need to be in and which of the switches I’m supposed to flick, but eventually I get there, then I untie the mooring lines and push off. The sun lands brightly on the surface of the water and everything is as clear as glass and there is nobody out here, it’s beautiful.

I chug out past Storholmen and Neset and Tangen, the waves knocking against the bow. A gull follows the boat, a huge bomber plane, it flaps after me as I pick up speed and feel the wind in my hair, I start to feel cold, should really have brought a coat. I bat a hand in the gull’s direction and it flaps its wings and soars away.

‘A natural,’ I say aloud, then feel embarrassed.

I drive until I think there’s very little petrol left, past jetties, red and white and yellow cabins, moored up traditional fishing boats, buoys, gulls, the occasional person passing me by, we wave at a distance, then I take the boat out of gear and breathe, out in the middle of the fjord, lie still and allow the boat to be rocked by the waves. I could have carried on, through the inlet and out to sea. Could be doing it right now. I could have forged ahead, on and on until I could no longer see land, until I grew smaller and smaller, until I eventually dissolved, turned to water, until I became shell and seaweed and stone. They wouldn’t notice. Where’s Ida? I don’t know. She was here not long ago, wasn’t she? She’ll be back. While they shout for Olea, stick a plaster on her knee, clap because she’s learned how to turn cartwheels, while Marthe strokes her belly and reads a magazine. What happened to Ida? Things didn’t go too well for her in the end. Well, they went the way they had to go. It’s unfortunate. Yes, it was a sad affair. Where’s Olea, can you put her to bed tonight, I can’t face it, let’s go inside, what shall we have for dinner tomorrow night, who’s going to do the supermarket run, how do I look, is my stomach getting big?

I feel movement below the boat, underneath it, as if it’s the sea pulling me down, I don’t cry, there’s nothing to cry about. Do I think that I’m a child, too? I’m not a child. I dip my hand in the water, spread my fingers wide, draw them though loose clumps of bladderwrack and something slimy and green, another type of seaweed, rinse my hand clean again. I’m here, I think to myself, I’m here, I’m here. I’m here, I’m not going to die, I’m not going to disappear, I’m here.

We’re eating lunch outside the cabin when Kristoffer sees Stein’s car coming along the road. Marthe has been in a bad mood all morning, she says she’s having stomach pains, and is short with Olea whenever she asks for something, *no, you can’t have ice cream, not now, I don’t know if we’re going to go out in the boat, ask Daddy*.

‘You said *Daddy*,’ Olea retorts with a smirk.

‘That’s right,’ Marthe says. ‘He *is* your daddy.’

‘But he’s not *your* daddy,’ Olea says.

‘Doesn’t your mummy call Kristoffer Daddy?’ I ask, taking a sip of my coffee.

‘Yes,’ Olea says.

‘But Marthe can’t?’ I ask.

Olea shakes her head and smiles; she has one finger in her mouth and is wobbling a loose tooth.

‘Why not?’ I ask. ‘Tell me, come on.’

Marthe looks at me.

‘Can you just…’ she begins, tailing off.

‘What?’

‘Just drop it,’ she says.

‘Eat your sandwich, Olea,’ Kristoffer says. ‘You’ve barely had a thing all day.’

Marthe looks past us, up to the bend in the road where the car appears. Shortly afterwards I hear the thud of a car door and Mum shouting hello.

‘Hi,’ Marthe and I reply in chorus, like before, like always.

‘I see we’ve caught you in the middle of your lunch,’ Mum says, coming around the corner.

Stein is wearing khaki shorts and clip-on sunglasses over his normal frames, but now he has them flipped up, making him look like an insect. Mum bends down and hugs Olea first, she’s talked a lot about wanting to treat Olea *as if she were her own granddaughter*, and every time she looks at us as if we ought to be bowled over by her generosity.

‘Nice to have visitors, isn’t it Olea?’ Marthe says.

Is this the kind of thing people do when they’re with children, say totally unnecessary things? It’s as if she were talking to a dog, she and Kristoffer both do it all the time, *wasn’t that lovely? Isn’t it nice to get our pyjamas on? Did you feel sad when that happened?*

‘Well, we’ve had quite a trip,’ Mum says.

‘I’ve been fishing,’ Olea says, looking up at her.

‘Ooh, did you catch anything?’ Mum asks, clapping her hands. ‘Wow. What was I going to say? We’ve been stuck in traffic virtually all the way from Sande. We left this morning.’

‘We had to stop at Rugtvedt for a hot dog,’ Stein says.

‘Stein likes his hot dogs with prawn mayonnaise,’ Mum says, pulling a face. ‘That was quite something, learning that after six years,’ she says teasingly.

‘I didn’t see that coming from you, Stein,’ Kristoffer says.

‘And then there was a diversion just outside of Risør and we got stuck at the lights,’ Stein says.

Marthe and I lock eyes and raise our eyebrows.

He shakes his head. ‘Unbelievable. Sometimes you can’t help but realise you’re in a very different part of the country.’

‘Well, you’re here now,’ Marthe and I say, practically in chorus.

‘You could probably do with a coffee,’ Kristoffer says, going inside. Stein ambles in after him.

‘And you two, my girls, have you been having a lovely time in this warm weather?’ Mum asks, patting my cheek and ruffling my hair, then turning to Marthe and stroking her all too fair hair and gently touching her stomach, why would she be touching Marthe’s stomach already.

‘Are you tired, my girl?’ she asks Marthe. ‘You look exhausted.’

‘Yes,’ Marthe says, leaning in to her.

She doesn’t have any problem giving Mum a long hug, sinking into her embrace and resting there in her arms, and I pat Marthe’s shoulder, perplexed, we’re like a sculpture with Marthe at the heart.

‘It’s going to be fine,’ Mum says, stroking Marthe’s cheeks. ‘You’ll be a wonderful mum, you know.’

I don’t want to have to listen to this. You’ll be a wonderful mum. It’s a blow to the eardrums, behind my eyes, like holding back a sneeze. Slowly they wander over to the garden table, Mum with an arm around Marthe’s waist. Kristoffer has set out cups and pours coffee from a thermos flask.

‘Now then, isn’t this lovely,’ Mum says. ‘So, how many fish did you catch, Olea?’

‘Three,’ Olea says, picking her nose.

‘Olea, you caught one fish,’ Marthe says. ‘You caught one, and I caught two.’

‘Leave her be,’ I say, smiling at Marthe, a strained smile, one that she doesn’t return.

I spill coffee on the table as I pick up my cup, and I move the liquid with my fingertip, across the woodwork, smooth it out. These are new cups that Marthe and Kristoffer have bought, the table is different from the one we used to have too, I think it’s too big, it doesn’t work in the space.

‘Where did you get the table?’ I ask.

‘I think it’s Bauhaus,’ Marthe says. ‘Isn’t that right?’

‘That’s the one,’ Kristoffer says. ‘Picked it up last year, thirty per cent off.’

‘You could ask before buying new things for the cabin,’ I say. ‘There are several of us who come here, you know.’

‘You want us to ask you before we buy a new table, when the old one is falling to pieces?’ Marthe says.

‘Or before you do any painting,’ I say.

‘You said you thought it looked nice,’ Marthe says.

‘I thought it looked nicer before,’ I say, taking a sip of my coffee. It’s hotter than I thought, I swallow quickly to avoid burning my tongue, but instead it grates at my throat and chest, scorching hot.

‘It’s a pretty big decision, whether the cabin should be white or yellow,’ I say.

‘But you’re hardly ever here,’ Marthe says.

‘It’s not my fault that I don’t have anyone to come with,’ I retort.

‘No, but that’s not our fault either,’ Marthe says. ‘You could spend more time here if you wanted to, you visit us once a summer, but you’re here, there and everywhere the rest of the time.’

‘Marthe,’ Kristoffer says.

‘What?’ Marthe says. ‘I’m just saying.’

‘I used to enjoy coming here alone, you know, before I met Stein,’ Mum says. ‘I’d potter about, do some semi-nude gardening. It was lovely.’

‘Certainly sounds lovely,’ Stein says, kissing her.

‘Mum,’ Marthe says.

I say nothing, I drink my coffee and feel sorry for myself, I think about what it was like sitting at the table eating a sandwich from a buttercup-patterned plate while reading Donald Duck comic books, the one with the square eggs, and the plastic parasol base that needed filling with water, dark-brown plastic that burned the soles of my feet whenever I stood on it, and the glass of milk that I often forgot to move into the shade while reading, which left it tasting vile, sunkissed milk, Daddy would call it, and the yellow of the walls, the yellow they’ve painted over. I’m on the verge of tears just thinking about it, it’s ridiculous, I can’t sit here dwelling on how things used to be, cliched childhood obsessions, oh, the yellow walls, oh, the glass of milk, oh, childhood, oh, parents in love; it’s as if a yellowed, sixties-style filter descends on my thoughts, I wear myself out just thinking about it, I wasn’t even born in the sixties, I can’t be carrying on like this.

‘And how about work, Ida,’ Mum says, patting my knee. ‘Still chipping away at things, eh?’

‘Yep, same as always,’ I reply.

‘Anything exciting?’ Mum asks, scratching her leg. ‘I think I’ve been bitten already, you know.’

‘There’s no end of mosquitoes here this year,’ Kristoffer says.

‘I’m going to be managing a new project in the autumn,’ I said. ‘A high school in Groruddalen we won the bid for.’

‘Oh, wow!’ Mum exclaims.

I feel the same mixture of pride and irritation that I always do when she makes out that I’m a good girl. Stein nods and raises his coffee cup in a toast, he still hasn’t removed his sunglasses.

‘Very impressive, Ida,’ Stein says.

‘Am *I* not impressive?’ Marthe asks, she’s smiling, posing the question in a feigned, childish tone, but the angry heat in me rises all the same.

‘Oh, aren’t you getting enough attention, my girl,’ Mum says, wrapping an arm around Marthe and planting a sloppy kiss on her forehead. ‘What are you planning for dinner tonight?’

‘I was thinking duck confit this evening, then prawns for tomorrow’s birthday dinner,’ Kristoffer says.

‘Ida’s planning a speech, of course,’ Marthe says, smirking.

‘I didn’t say I was going to make a speech,’ I say, getting up, starting to stack the plates. ‘I just said I’d prepared a few words.’

‘You don’t need to tidy up yet, Ida,’ Mum says.