

**IS MUM DEAD**

A novel by

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Sample pages 1 - 16 translated from the Norwegian by  
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She would contact me if mum died. She has to, hasn't she?

I called mum one evening. It was in the spring, I know that because the next day I went for a walk round Borøya with Fred, and it was warm enough for us to sit on the bench by Osesund and eat our sandwiches. I had barely slept because of that phone call and I was glad to be seeing someone that morning and that that someone was Fred, I was still shaking. I was ashamed to have called mum. It was against the rules and yet I'd done it. I'd promised myself to not to, and they wouldn't want me to anyway. Nor did she pick up the phone. The engaged signal started the moment she declined the call. And yet I called her back. Why? I don't know. What was I hoping for? I don't know. And why this paralysing shame?

Luckily I was going for a walk with Fred round Borøya the next day, I couldn't wait, my inner trembling would lessen once I had talked to Fred. I picked him up from the station and the moment he got into the car I told him what I had done, called mum, I offloaded on Fred all the way to the car park, all the way round Borøya, but he didn't think it was strange that I had called mum. *I don't think it's strange that you want to talk to your mum.* I was still ashamed, but it eased my trembling. But I've nothing to say to her, I said. I don't know what I would have said if she had picked up the phone, I said. Perhaps I had hoped that something would spring to mind if she had answered her phone and said: Hello? In her own voice.

The situation was of my own making. I had chosen to leave my marriage, my family, my country almost three decades ago, although it hadn't felt as if I'd had a choice. I had left my marriage and my family for a man they regarded as suspect and a vocation they regarded offensive, exhibiting paintings they found humiliating, I didn't come home when dad fell ill, when

dad died, when he was buried, what were they to make of that? They thought it was awful, that I was awful, for them what was awful was that I left, humiliated them, failed to turn up for dad's funeral, for me things had gone wrong long before that. They didn't understand or they refused to understand, we didn't understand one another and yet I had called mum. I had called mum as if it was an OK thing to do. No wonder she hadn't picked up. What was I thinking? What had I expected? That she would pick up the phone as if it was an OK thing to do. Who did I think I was, did I think I mattered in any way, that she would be pleased? Real life isn't like the Bible where the return of the prodigal son is celebrated with a feast. I was ashamed to have broken my vow and to have revealed to mum and Ruth, whom mum would definitely have told about the call, that I was unable to stick to it, while they, my mum and my sister, kept their vow and wouldn't dream of calling me. They must have heard that I was back in the country. They probably googled me regularly, they had found out that a retrospective of my work would be taking place, that I had a Norwegian phone number now, otherwise mum would have answered the phone. They were strong and steadfast while I was weak, a child, and I felt and acted like a child. Besides, they didn't *feel* like talking to me. But did I *feel* like talking to mum? No! But then again I was the one who had called! I was ashamed that something in me *wanted* to talk to her and that by calling I showed her that something in me *wanted* to, did I need something from her? What would that be? Forgiveness? Perhaps that was what she told herself. But I hadn't had a choice! But then why did I call, what did I *want*? I don't know! Mum and Ruth thought I had called because I repented, they hoped I had repented and was hurting, that I missed them and wanted to make amends, but mum didn't pick up the phone because it wasn't going to be that easy, that the moment I was back in Norway and wanted to get in touch with them, they were ready to welcome me with open arms, oh no. I was to fully

experience my choice and repent it. But I didn't repent! To them it looked as if I had made a choice, and that irritated me, but irritation is easy to bear, irritation is nothing compared to shame, why this paralysing shame? Talking to Fred helped. We walked on the shale paths that slope towards the sea where ducks and swans were swimming, in the bend by Osesund I picked a coltsfoot, I told myself it meant good luck. Once I got back I put it in water in an egg cup, but it soon wilted. Now it's autumn, September 1. My first Norwegian autumn for thirty years.

I had been drinking when I called, not a lot, a few glasses of wine, but I had been drinking or I wouldn't have called. I found her number on [www.1881.no](http://www.1881.no) and entered it with trembling fingers. Had I thought rationally, I wouldn't have called. If prior to that, I had made myself think clearly, imagine the most likely scenarios should mum answer her phone, I wouldn't have called, I would have understood it wouldn't lead to anything other than distress for both of us. It was an unrealistic, irrational phone call. Nor was it picked up. My mum and my sister were rational human beings, I was irrational, was that why I felt shame? If I had been a rational human being, I would have realised that if mum had answered the phone, it wouldn't have led to anything that could be called a conversation anyway. A conversation between mum and me had become impossible. But that didn't curb my irrational impulse, I didn't want to think clearly, I wanted to follow this sudden and for me surprisingly strong impulse, from what depths did it come. That's what I'm trying to find out.

I hadn't had anything that could be called a conversation with mum for thirty years, perhaps I never had. I met Mark, applied in secret to the Institute in Utah where he taught and was accepted, I travelled with him across the sea, away from my marriage, my family, it all happened during one hot summer. It's true, as they say, that one look is all it takes, one glance, and I burned with an inextinguishable flame, it was seen as betrayal and a slap in the face. I wrote them a long letter at the time to explain why I had done what I had done, I poured out my heart in that letter, but the short reply I received was as if I hadn't written to them in the first place. A short, blunt reply with threats of ostracism, but stating that if I "*came to my senses*" and returned home immediately, I might be forgiven. They wrote as if I were a child and they my guardians. They reeled off what it had cost them financially and mentally to bring me up, I owed them quite a lot. They meant it, I understood, that I was literally indebted to them. They seriously believed that I would give up my love and my work because they had paid for tennis lessons when I was a teenager. They didn't take me seriously, they didn't try to understand me, instead they made threats. Perhaps their own parents had had such power over them once, perhaps they had themselves trembled on encountering their parents' words, especially the written ones, that they thought their own would have just as strong an impact on me. I wrote another long letter explaining what the art course meant to me and who Mark was, again they replied as if I hadn't written, as if they hadn't read my letter, they reeled off how much money they had spent buying me a flat so I could live near the University while I studied and paying for my wedding, which by my immature behaviour I had now made a mockery for all the world to see, betrayed a newly-minted husband and leaving his family humiliated and incredulous. I had to get "*these thoughts which this M*" had

planted in me out of my head. Only a few chosen individuals ever succeeded in making a living from the arts, and reading between the lines it was clear I wouldn't be one of them. It hurt me as did the notion that they genuinely appeared to believe that such language would make me give up my new life, travel home to debt, mould myself to fit their expectations even though it would mean harming myself. I didn't reply to that letter, towards Christmas I sent them a Christmas card and included a friendly but guarded letter about the little town where we lived, our house, the patch of land where we grew tomatoes, the changing of the seasons in Utah, I wrote as if their last letter hadn't been written, I did to them what they had done to me, Merry Christmas! I had a similar card back, short but guarded, happy New Year! From time to time I would send them an exhibition catalogue or a postcard from a trip, I wrote to them when John was born and sent them a photo. He got a letter back, Dear John, welcome to the world, love Grannie, Grandad, Aunt Ruth. When he turned one, he got a silver cup in the post, best wishes Grannie, when he turned two, a silver spoon, when he turned three, a fork. During the first few years my sister would send me short messages about mum and dad's health, if there was anything special, a kidney stone operation, a slip on the ice, there was no salutation, no questions, just a line about my parents' physical condition, Ruth. As they were in fairly good health, these messages were rare. The implication was that she was to be pitied for having to take care of them on her own, that I was selfish, having gone off seemingly without caring. I believed she only wrote them to make me feel bad, but perhaps I took it that way because something inside me did feel bad? I replied: Get well soon. But after the triptychs *Child and mother 1* and *Child and mother 2* were exhibited in Oslo, my city, in one of its most prestigious galleries, well-attended and with extensive media coverage, Ruth's occasional messages and mum's seasonal greetings ceased. In a roundabout way, through Mina, whose



mum still lived in the neighbourhood, I learned that they found my paintings distressing, that I brought shame on my family, on mum especially. John continued to get birthday cards, but the words were less warm, apart from that there was silence. I knew nothing about my parents' daily life. I assumed that it was routine, as it is for most older and comfortably-off people, they still lived in the house they had moved to when I was a teenager, in a smarter part of the city than the house which belonged to my childhood, I hadn't heard anything to the contrary. I would have known if they had downsized and decided to give Ruth and me an advance on our inheritance, they were honest people when it came to money. It would be easy to imagine them in the rooms in the house where I myself had lived, but I didn't. About fifteen years ago I was working in a borrowed studio in SoHo, New York, Mark was at Presbyterian Hospital, when I had a message from Ruth telling me that dad had had a stroke and was in hospital, that was all it said, she didn't ask me to come. During the next three weeks she wrote several short messages about dad's condition, using partly inexplicable medical terminology, there was nothing inviting in the words, no salutation, not my name, just short bulletins she felt obliged to send, I didn't think she wanted me to come. My presence would seem intrusive. I had no part to play, it would only make things awkward for everyone, I felt awkward just thinking about it, and I wished dad a speedy recovery. On November 20 she wrote that he had died, that surprised me, at that moment I was also in the studio in SoHo, Mark was still at Presbyterian, I didn't go, I didn't even think of travelling back or going to the funeral. Nor did they ask me, Ruth wrote that he would be buried at such and such time and place, and that was it. The day after the funeral I got a message sent from her phone, but it was from both of them, it said *we*, it was signed *mum and Ruth*, a goodbye message. Mum had taken it very hard that I hadn't come back to dad's sickbed, to dad's funeral, it had nearly killed her, it said, in a way I had

killed her symbolically, that was how they phrased it, as far as I recall, I didn't save the message, I deleted it immediately, I regret that now, it would have been interesting to relive the moment, I mean, to read it today, now, in September. I saw it as an excuse to reject me for good and blame the *finality* on me.

The birthday letters to John ceased.

We were no longer merely not “on speaking terms”, but actual enemies, I realised, it didn't bother me, I worked, I looked after Mark, after John. The house was sold, Mum bought a flat, I received a set of accounts, my inheritance from dad and a formal letter from a solicitor, no mention of mum's new address, but so what. When we happened to make a brief visit to Norway we never told them, when Mark died I didn't tell them, they had never met him and had never expressed any wish to meet him. When John moved to Europe, to Copenhagen, four years ago, I didn't tell them, why should I, they had never met him. I talked to Mina, I talked to Fred. But when Skogum Art Museum decided to put on a major retrospective of my work in two years' time, the city of my childhood started haunting me in my dreams. As my conversations with the curator about which works to include became more frequent, it also started to haunt me during the day. I had promised to contribute at least one new work, but I was unable to produce anything, I stood in front of various canvases for days, but my strokes were indifferent. On further reflection I realised that I hadn't painted anything significant since the manic rapture that followed Mark's death, the years I spent in the studio, processing my grief at losing him. Now it had eased, was that why, and because I was now living alone in everything that was once ours? I decided to move back home, I still called it home, initially just for a while, until the opening of the exhibition. I didn't tell them, why should I. I let the house in Utah and with the rental income and my widow's pension after Mark, I was able to rent a modern flat in a new part of Oslo by

the fjord with a conservatory which could double up as my studio. Now I live in the same city as mum, four and a half kilometres from her, I've looked up her new address on 1881, she lives in Arne Bruns gate number 22, closer to the city centre than the houses where I grew up, I also found her phone number on 1881.

I spent the first few months mainly indoors, I didn't recognise the city anymore and felt like a stranger, besides it was late winter. Grey fog drifted across the partly iced over fjord, the mountaintops in the horizon looked like sleeping Dalmatians, the pavements were covered with compacted snow and ice. On the rare occasions I ventured outside, I would sometimes be aware of mum's presence four and a half kilometres away. In contrast to the past thirty years, there was now a real chance that I might bump into her. Then again, she was unlikely to be outdoors in this weather, in this cold, with snow on the icy pavements and risk breaking her hip. Old women are scared of breaking their hips. She had to be well into her eighties by now. I was standing by the ticket machine at the station one February afternoon when an old woman asked me if I could help her buy a ticket. I had just learned how to do it myself and I helped her, she stood close to me and I was moved by how trusting she was, her bag open, her purse open. Once she got her ticket, she asked me if I could help her up the stairs, I couldn't say no. She grabbed my arm with one hand, the handrail with the other, her bag hanging around her neck, dangling with every step, she was so slow that I feared I would miss my train, but of course I couldn't let go. I counted the steps in order to calm myself down, there were twenty-two. On the platform she thanked me profusely, I said it was nothing, she was going to visit her daughter, she said, and I felt embarrassed.

Had I called mum to get to know her again? To see who she is now? To talk to mum as if she weren't my mum, but an ordinary human being, a random woman at a railway station. That's impossible. Not because she isn't an ordinary human being with all its flaws, but because a mother can never be an ordinary human being to her children, and I am one of her children. Even if she has discovered new interests, learned new skills, changed her personality, she will always be the mother from the past to me. Perhaps she hates that's how it is, being a mother is a cross to bear. Mum is fed up with being a mum, with being my mum, and in a way she isn't now, but as long as her daughter is alive, she can't be safe. I wonder if mum always felt that being my mum was incompatible with being herself. Perhaps right from when I was born, mum had a wish not to be my mum. But there was no escape for her, no matter how hard she tried. Or she has succeeded, perhaps she has forgotten that she is my mum during my long absence, and then I call to remind her of it. To her, it must seem to have come out of the blue.

She'll say she has changed. It's understandable that parents, once they are older and wiser, want their children to look at them afresh. But no one can expect or demand of the children that they forget the image of their mother as they experienced her in their childhood, no one can demand of them that they erase the image of their mother created over the first thirty years of their life, to see her objectively as a seventy or eighty-year-old.

It's easier for people who see their parents regularly. Most of my friends who see their parents regularly, view their parents more kindly than they used to because their parents' rough edges have been smoothed by life's ups and downs, they have become more indulgent and likeable, and some have experienced their parents explaining the reason for their mistakes, a few have received an apology. Perhaps Ruth has experienced mum growing warmer and wiser, that must be good for both Ruth and mum. Slowly the old image is replaced with a new one, or the image of the young and the old meld and the image produced by this fusion is easier to live with. Someone who is in regular contact with their mother and who talk about the past with her, help recreate the past, together they make history. That's probably what happens. Ruth probably remembers it now the way mum wants her to remember it.

But I've also heard stories of how those traits in the mother, which were worst for the child during childhood, have intensified during her life to the extent that they ultimately dominate her personality. Mina's mother nagged and picked on Mina day in day out year in year out, and she still does except now more harshly, more mercilessly. Mina visits her in the nursing home every day with rissoles and soup and is met with accusations and barbs, why does Mina bother? Because if she were to lose her temper and accuse her mother of being

unreasonable, her mother would have her beliefs about life in general and Mina in particular confirmed, Mina says, and she is not going to give her the satisfaction. The fact that her mother's words appear to have no effect on Mina, is Mina's way of punishing her mother. Child and mother.

Once I had decided to move back, my work improved, I started a painting I felt was promising, it came with me across the sea, but when the practicalities relating to my move were completed and I was supposed to go back to work, nothing happened. I started another picture, a spring-like painting, then I called mum, then my inspiration dried up. I had intended to visit museums and galleries as I usually do when I'm stuck, but became aware of a fear of public spaces I hadn't experienced before. Was it because I had been on my own so much after Mark's death that I had become a recluse, or was it because I no longer knew the city or because mum lived in it and I feared bumping into her? Once outdoors, I noticed all the old women. They board trains slowly and hunched. They grip handles, lean against walls and doors, get up laboriously when the train approaches, check the contents of their old-fashioned handbags to make sure everything is there, purse, glasses, keys, I had started doing it myself, where are my glasses? At the chemist they sit on the few chairs with introverted faces, they don't read a newspaper, they don't check their phones, they turn away from the world, or the opposite, they turn to the most immediate, the number on the ticket between their lightly trembling fingers, the board where new red numbers keep flashing up, everything happens so quickly, anxious that the number might change again before they have had time to get up and walk to the counter to get their vital medication. Old bodies ail. Does mum's body ail? Why do I want to know that? Does mum have a hearing aid? Why do I want to know that? I wonder. Information we can't access is especially tantalising. In the absence of information, I invent her. What is it that I want to know? I wonder how she is. Not because I care about her, not in that sense, but: How have you experienced it all? How was it for you? And how do you see the



situation now, the existential one which we share, what do you think about our situation. Will I never know? Will she never know what it has been like, what it is like for me? She must wonder about it, surely. About what I think, about how I am, no matter how angry, how resentful she is, she must wonder about it because in spite of everything I am her nearly sixty-year-old child.

An **extended sample translation** is available upon request to  
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