

THE ONE NEEDFUL THING
A NOVEL BY OLAUG NILSSEN
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English translation (sample) by Diane Oatley
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Email: gina.winje@gmail.com

Now it came to pass, as they went, that he entered into a certain village: and a certain woman named Martha received him into her house. And she had a sister called Mary, which also sat at Jesus' feet, and heard his word. But Martha was cumbered about much serving, and came to him, and said, Lord, dost thou not care that my sister hath left me to serve alone? bid her therefore that she help me. **And Jesus answered and said unto her, Martha, Martha, thou art careful and troubled about many things:** But one thing is needful: and Mary hath chosen that good part, which shall not be taken away from her (Luke 10:38-42).

PETTER – SUNDAY, DECEMBER 1

When we acquired the new ten-seater van, everyone was pleased, myself included. But I hadn't thought about how few of the staff are licensed to drive a minibus. So of course, I always ended up in charge of home transport. Not that it's necessarily such a big deal, but today in particular, I wish someone else could have done it. The roads are slippery and I am having difficulties concentrating, my thoughts keep sliding home to Katrine, whether she will still be there when I get home, or if she is serious about packing her things and leaving me once and for all. It is true that I "work too much!" and "bring my work home with me!" and she has said so often enough, but I don't like her very much when she makes these accusations. There is something so exceedingly self-centred about it that I can't accept. There *is* a difference between working in a clothing store and working with respite care services for children with intellectual disabilities. Children who are regularly thrown out of their homes by their parents, as a last resort, of course, but thrown out all the same and it isn't just painful for the parents; it is painful for the children as well, even though they can't speak in reflected and rational sentences. I can't seem to let go of my need to be there for them! *These children*. They never grow out of their own wild impulses and neither can they talk with a psychologist to work through how this makes them feel. And then there's Katrine, a grown woman with siblings, parents, and friends with whom she can have deep conversations about "relationship challenges": "ME!" I shake my head vehemently as I drive; it is that simple and simultaneously, not. I glance into the rear-view mirror and see Benjamin and Isaac each looking out the window in opposite directions, from seats in their respective rows. They are both calm now, two big boys headed into adolescence.

I don't want Katrine to leave. We've been fine, we *are* fine. And I *have* sent a message saying I will be leaving work early today, Anne Tove gave me permission after I told her how things are. "I'm afraid I'm losing Katrine. She thinks I work too much." I'd been at work all weekend, even though initially I had been given the time off. Børge's parents had cancelled his stay when his grandparents invited him to their cottage for the weekend and Anne Tove had perhaps suspected something, I don't know, at any rate she offered me the weekend off. And then, Katrine was pleased. We planned our own weekend getaway at our cottage. Katrine prepared menus for the meals we would have and did the grocery shopping, looking forward to every aspect of the trip: podcasts in the car, wine for dinner, sex in the shower, morning coffee in bed, skiing on the heath if there was snow. And so on. I looked forward to it too, it

wasn't that, but I was also feeling stressed about her expectations. She always becomes much happier about things than I do. And that in its own right should have led me to say no when Anne Tove, late on Wednesday evening, called me into work after all, since Benjamin had to be picked up for a last-minute stay the next morning, but I didn't. Immediately I began picturing Benjamin's routines and what they would involve and said yes. Katrine's reaction was more dramatic than I had anticipated, it was like she was completely devastated.

Lately when I have come home from work in the evening, she has been lying in bed holding her phone stiffly in front of her – no doubt it is overheated from conversations, both spoken and texted, with her girlfriends. I have been unable to reach her. I have laid down quietly on my side of the bed, listened to her sobbing, only to be pushed away when I extended my hand, too late. And I don't know if it is an extenuating or aggravating circumstance that Benjamin was unusually difficult this week-end, he created such a commotion both day and night that we had to put him in the ward office at the far end of the hallway to protect the others. But that didn't help matters any. Benjamin is one of the most routine-dependent charges we have, so changing his room is an invitation to disaster and in my defence in terms of Katrine, it must be said that I am the only one who really manages to handle this large, precious bundle of intense energy.

Along with Rakel. Benjamin does not live with his mother. Living with his aunt is a temporary arrangement. They were granted a full-time placement at a residential care facility when his mother had a breakdown. But now he has been living with Rakel for two years, so the municipality has presumably decided that she can manage it. At any rate, nothing is happening. I usually ask Rakel about this when I drop him off and it seems like she has stopped believing that Benjamin will ever be admitted, because the last few times I asked she just shook her head and waved the question away. I shouldn't see Rakel before going home to Katrine. Rakel has a unique way of reinforcing my feeling that Katrine is self-centred, that she has nothing to complain about, that she is one big "me". Rakel's deeply concentrated face, her no-nonsense clothing, her short hair. Katrine's long, polished nails, make-up, the skirts, the high heels. Yes, this is her work outfit, but then she must think that all social engagements are work, because this is how she dresses. But of course, I was looking forward to the trip to the cottage where it's all woollen underwear and skiwear, because then she drops the make-up and even complains that her nails get in the way when she vacuums before we leave.

I take the Bjølla turn-off and drive the van slowly down the last kilometre before Rakel's street. She lives in a two-storey semi-detached house, on the far end, with immediate access to a small grove of trees. Benjamin has a room facing the woods and when I was in the house on Thursday I pulled up the dark shades and saw that he could have jumped right out the window had it not been for the safety straps that prevented it from being opened any more than an inch or so. Judging from the visible wear and tear on the straps, he had tried to open the window more than once.

I drive all the way up to the front door so I can get out of the van with Benjamin without being too far away from Isaac; as long as he can see me through the window he won't try to undo his seatbelt and climb into the driver's seat. I ring the bell before opening the door and calling for Benjamin, it looks like it's going to be a struggle. He lies down on the floor as soon as I have unbuckled his seatbelt.

"Come on, Benjamin, you're home now, with your mum," I say and correct myself, although it doesn't make any difference to him.

"Home with your aunt Rakel."

He remains lying on the floor, with his face pressed down against the black floormat, probably to feel the grid pattern. I sigh and glance towards the front door to see whether Rakel is on her way out. The door remains shut. I look at my watch and see that I am a few minutes early and peer up the road, but had she been walking that way, I would have driven past her and she won't be driving up, her car was parked in the communal car park for the housing complex, wasn't it? I walk back up the road a bit to check and there's her little electric car, every bit as practical and easy to care for as everything else she has around her. A number of ornaments are hanging on the neighbour's front door, along with an elaborate ceramic name plate and in front of the house there are several large pots, which in the summertime contain plants and flowers. A layer of spruce branches now covers the soil. A couple of the pots are crowned by a tall cylinder of protective chicken wire. Every time I see this, it makes me laugh, since I know the reason. But it's not actually a laughing matter; these micro fences may well have been set up in an extreme act of passive or active aggression.

Again, I look at Rakel's door. The door contains a long, narrow windowpane which allows sort of a view of the hallway and now I can see that it is dark. I look up at the windows on the first floor. It is dark there as well. I glance towards the road again, nobody there. Benjamin is still lying on his stomach in the car, Isaac has begun waving his hands, which in his case is a sign of anxiety.

I retrieve my cell phones from the side pocket on the door beside the driver's seat, both my own and my work phone. My screen shows a message from Katrine. I open it and see that it reads "We have to talk", followed by a heart emoji. My own heart sinks, cold and warm at the same time, but I don't reply, I must drop these boys off first, must "leave my work at work", as she says. I scroll down in search of Rakel's number on the work phone and press call. No answer. I try again, while walking around the van. I look up towards the first floor, peer through the window in the front door, and from there I can see something flashing on the shoe rack in the hallway. It's her mobile phone. When I draw a little closer, on it I can make out the caller id: "Respite Care Services".

LEA – FRIDAY, NOVEMBER 15

So far today I have performed three tasks. I have showered, dressed, and emptied the dishwasher. I am supposed to articulate this, in addition to doing it, to remind myself that it is work. With time it will become automatic, the way it was before. Until then I am supposed to allow myself a brief rest later in the day. But if I am going to be honest, I can no longer tell whether I am tired or not. I don't know if there's something wrong with my body and my mind, or if I am just in such bad shape and am so out of practice that I can't bear to work or be a mother. For a while I knew beyond any doubt that the fatigue was real. I was unable to stand up. All my joints and muscles were so worn out that it was impossible. It felt as if the contents of my head just floated around, a little like when I was a student and had drunk too much whiskey at an after-party and the room wouldn't stop spinning, regardless of whether I closed my eyes or kept them open. I also had anxiety. The mere sight of Dad when he came to ask me if I would house sit for them while they were away was enough to make me stop breathing. Bring in the mail, water the plants, no, it was impossible! But of course, he didn't understand that the question gave me anxiety and that he had to take it back. No. Of course, he needed me to say the words, to say that no, I couldn't do it. He did leave the house when I was incapable of saying anything except that I had to go lie down, but when I awoke after having slept for a while, I found a message on my cell phone: "Could you stay at our house and water the plants and take in the mail while we are away?" I didn't have the energy to call or even to say "No, I can't," or to write it, this refusal to do them a simple favour. "All you do is lie there anyway," was the implicit message. I called Rakel and sobbed while I told her that Daddy was nagging me to stay in their house and take in the mail and water the flowers.

"Of course, you're not going to take in the mail and water the flowers," Rakel said and then it all worked out without my having to give it another thought. All the same, I received a package of liquorice when they came home. They had left it with Rakel along with a bottle of red wine for her and a kilo of chocolate for Benjamin. I got the red wine and the liquorice and half the chocolate. Rakel neither drinks nor eats sweets and she decides how many sweets Benjamin can eat. In fact, she decides how many sweets I am allowed to eat too, at least as long as she is doing the shopping. If I hadn't known her, I would have hated her. And maybe I do hate her, but not only and not because of her rigidity, it's not exactly like she takes pleasure in her asceticism; it is a product of necessity. Had we been normal, I would have certainly prepared rich, three-course meals with a different wine for each course, just to make her uncomfortable when she picked at the food and said no thank-you to the wine. Had we

been normal, I could have purposely invited friends over, who would have judged her for abstaining from life's pleasures and demonstrated as much through their body language and facial expressions at the dinner table. It would have been intentionally disagreeable. But we aren't normal and she no longer reacts to devious tricks, neither mine nor those of others. Rakel is a pure tightrope of duty, so tightly strung that it's impossible to play her.

When I was really exhausted, I was completely incapable of collaborating with other people. The voices of others grated in my ears, the joys of others pounded in my temples. My back ached and my breathing stopped. All I could do was lie there, I was unable to get out of bed except to go to the loo or to the kitchen to make a sandwich or slice up smoked sausage, which I brought back to bed with me in a saucer. It was Rakel who did the shopping for me, she drove up in her little electric car every Monday morning, as punctual as a municipal home help worker, all she was missing was the municipal logo on the side of her car. She cleaned the house, she changed the bedding when she saw I had wiped smoked sausage grease off my fingers on the duvet cover. Sometimes without a word, not because she was cross with me, but because I had requested it. I lay in bed with my computer on my stomach and headphones over my ears and watched television series and reality shows while she vacuumed under the bed. She did the dishes, paid the bills, sent in forms to the Labour and Welfare Organization. Prepared nutritious dinners that I ate, licking the plate clean. Refused to buy more than one chocolate bar and one bag of crisps a week, yes, I hate her a little, I do. But it's better now, I don't know whether I am *sick-sick* or simply completely out of practice.

I am not a mother. I don't go to work. But I'm better, I go out, I do things. At least one thing every day. Go to the store, to the post office, meet Rakel for lunch in Bjølla, a one-kilometre trip for each of us. Make tomato soup. Clean the toilet. A bag of crisps only as a reward for having performed a task, just a small one and sometimes not even that. I am also doing working life training. I manage an entire farm. I sow wheat and harvest it. Plant trees and pick apples. Gather honey and make candles. Carrying out these tasks gives me a special feeling of mastery, even though my hands don't exactly get dirty in actual soil. No. It's a game on my iPad, Hay Day. Before all I played was Candy Crush, but when Rakel discovered how much money I was spending on it, she deleted the game from my cell phone.

I downloaded it again, but damned if she didn't stop by every afternoon and delete it all over again. With good reason, of course, because she was actually supporting me financially at this time, I know that she paid the bills that my social security checks didn't

cover and I spent almost 200 kroner a day on Candy Crush. Yes, perhaps it sounds like a lot when you just say it like that. But when you start playing Candy Crush, completing the entire board gives you a great feeling of satisfaction. It is correspondingly frustrating when the puzzle can't be solved and then you must buy new boosters. An example of a booster in Candy Crush would be sweets with stripes. If you have a sweet with stripes, you can use it to claim an entire row on the board and then you've made it quite far. I had my phone set up so it vibrated a little for each booster I used and that was also satisfying, it buzzed like fizzy powder in my hand. But 200 kroner a day is more than 1000 kroner a week, as Rakel informed me and I couldn't afford that, as she added.

"1400 kroner a week, actually," I said.

But I didn't think about what I could and couldn't afford, when all I did was lie in bed with a duvet rolled up under my legs and another duvet on top of me. I said this to her as well and then she took the telephone out of my hands, typed in my password, and deleted the game. I changed the password so she wouldn't have access, but by the next day I had already forgotten the new password and Rakel had to help me figure this out and even now I don't have the strength to think about how she managed to fix it. Yes, it was humiliating. But we aren't normal. We got over it. We get over such things.

Finally, I had to give up Candy Crush altogether, or it wasn't all that simple either, it wasn't like "I quit there and then". I gave up I guess when I found out that I could play Hay Day instead. As I started getting used to Hay Day, I eventually forgot about Candy Crush. The farm grows and grows and the quicker I finish the chores, the more I produce and the greater my earnings on the sale of goods from boats, from stores in the city and from the truck. Not to mention the country store, where I can decide the price and sell my goods for an amount that is not exactly a bargain.

Rakel played with me for a while, enough to show me she acknowledged that I had switched games and that I was on the right path. She advanced quickly through the levels but then at one point she stopped abruptly, said it wasn't just an addictive game, it was also stressful, since you *must* invest so much in the game and *must* do so within a certain timeframe. If not, all your work would be in vain. Besides, she didn't like looking after the animals if she didn't have time to milk them or even worse – didn't have time to feed them. The pigs sat there gaping and pointing at their hungry mouths. The horses trotted around angrily, looking like they were going to attack something or someone at any moment, like the farmer, who in this case, was her. She also thought it was idiotic, yes, completely stupid, that

you like *harvested* bacon from the pigs. Milking the cows and goats was fine, and shearing the sheep and getting wool, but putting the pigs into pressure tanks so they sweated off bacon and then sat down hungrily on the ground and pointed at their mouths, no, that was just silly.

I did agree with her about that, but I also thought you had to consider the symbolic value, not the realism. Mobile and tablet games needn't be realistic, I thought and for her that argument was fine, the most important reason for giving it up was to escape the stress. Recreation, I parried. She inhaled through her nose, exhaled through her mouth, didn't say anything. Neither did I, I just rolled my eyes long enough so I was sure she would see it out of the corner of her eye. But she didn't delete Hay Day from my iPad. And I was on the right path, so now I managed to hide that I bought diamonds using real money to finance hiring the farmhand Tom, who could drive off and pick up things you needed, every other hour. In the meantime, he slept. And it has happened, I must admit, that I have synchronised my own bedtimes with Tom's sleep patterns, so I could exploit his capacity to the maximum. Up every other hour all night long, almost like when Benjamin was a baby. When he was a five-year-old, seven-year-old, and ten-year-old, too, for that matter. But when he was ten, he lived with Rakel.

But clearly, she's right about it being stressful and that a full-scale follow-up of the farm cannot be reconciled with other responsibilities and duties. I see that now, especially since I have passed the one hundredth level. The tasks become increasingly difficult and the fewer the number of friends who stick with the game, the fewer there are to help me manage it. I asked Rakel if I could take over her farm, if I could, like, have it on my mobile and my own farm on the iPad, so I could easily switch back and forth between the farms. Then I could go into her farm and start production of the feed that I need for my own farm, and then sell the feed for one kroner in the country store, to myself. But she said no. Not only did she say no, she said it in a passive-aggressive way. With an evidently hard-won calm. She inhales through her nose and releases all the air out of her mouth before she says: "No, I don't want to."

Then I said to her that she mustn't think that I don't notice it when she breathes in through her nose and releases the air out through her mouth and she mustn't think that I don't understand what that means, because I really understand what it means! After that, she stopped breathing in through her nose and out through her mouth when I could see it. Instead, she leaves the room for a while and then she comes back in and continues the conversation. And I accept it because hard-won calmness is calmness all the same.

I pick up the iPad from the night table and open Hay Day to find Rakel's farm and it's still there, she hasn't deleted it, but the level is the same as when she stopped playing. "Rakel's Sunshine Farm". The farm is well tended. The patches of fields are divided into fenced-in rectangles. Oats in one, soybeans in another, tomatoes in another. She kept playing long enough to plant sunflowers, and a golden, swaying crop awaits. Lovely flowerbeds. Rows of dog houses.

I can't say that my farm "Leasigh" is as pretty, although I have also organised the fields systematically and divided them up based on what I plant in the different squares, but I have been far more lax about decorating. A little gold here, a few pig statues there. Some singing harps, a record player. A snowman, some Easter eggs, a Halloween pumpkin. It doesn't matter. The most important thing is to complete the tasks successfully and win the neighbourhood derby.

It doesn't leave much time for other responsibilities and duties, that's true, she is of course right about that. But right now, I have no other responsibilities or duties. My responsibilities and duties involve taking care of myself and getting back on my feet. I went off the deep end. Rakel acknowledges that, unlike Dad and Mum. And unlike Linda. I think Rakel not only acknowledges but also accepts it, even though she undoubtedly thinks that I *could* have prevented all of this had I just behaved differently. And done everything right. The way she would have. Or Linda would have.

"Preparations, preparations, preparations," Linda says. She has repeated that for several years and illustrated how she and Rakel handle absolutely everything – and when I say that I mean, really, absolutely everything – when they are well prepared. Now it is Rakel who handles Benjamin. Linda could probably handle him too, although it's been a long time since the last time she tried. I can't handle him. That's the hard, cruel truth. I absolutely can't handle him. I have only to hear him in the doorway and I start hyperventilating. The sounds he makes produce reactions in my entire body, I get spasms in my back, while I automatically clench my fists. I get goose-bumps. I think it is PTSD. Post-traumatic stress syndrome. The doctor doesn't accept that, in the same way he refused to accept that I had CFS, something I advocated long and hard, through somewhat vile methods. For instance, I wrote a Facebook post about him one year ago that I had to take down when Linda said it wasn't difficult to identify him based on the information I had provided. It didn't help that I said she recognised him because she would soon be a doctor herself, she called every half hour and yelled until I took it down. There was no response whatsoever to the post anyway, neither in the form of

comments nor angry emojis. Rakel didn't believe I had CFS either and that's fine. I *don't* have CFS. But I claimed that I did, in no uncertain terms, so if I were to bug him about PTSD, he would just laugh it off, without listening to what I have to say. Linda listened to me for a while, with a nodding, doctor's face, about all manner of symptoms. But at one point she started asking whether I maybe had become overly focused on how I was feeling and whether I should perhaps spend a little more time outside, in nature, and see if maybe it passed. Rakel has never denied my symptoms, at least not to my face. But she is brutal all the same.

Yesterday she brought Benjamin here, she brought him into the room all the way up to my bed, even though I was hyperventilating. Seeing me made him agitated, he waved his hands furiously before deciding to smack one hand against the wall. Then he slapped his hands loudly a few times and I didn't understand why, but Rakel said it was self-harm, that the hard blows were painful. He did it because he was extremely agitated and off-balance. Then he hit himself in the head. Rakel took him out to the kitchen, where he calmed down by eating grapes and playing on an iPad. After a while she came into my room and asked if I felt up to seeing him now. I said yes, I had calmed down. Then he came in and she let him bring his iPad. She led him over to the bed and had him sit down beside me. He didn't look at me at all, but I looked at him. He was so big. Big ears. Big mouth. Big teeth. I can't say it in any other way, *big*. He'd grown away from me. Grown while I wasn't watching. And he was wearing a clean sweater and jeans, not a t-shirt and sweatpants from Tesco. There was no nappy sticking up out of his jeans, Rakel had told me that he was so good about using the toilet now that it was no longer necessary, except for at night. In many ways he looked like an ordinary boy, but when I looked down at the screen, I recognised the program he was using. It was called *autism trainer*, an app for practising fine motor skills. He pressed a tiny horse icon and was rewarded by a burst of colour on the screen.

I took out my mobile to take a selfie of the two of us. Then he looked away from his own screen and over at mine and he looked at us in the camera. Our faces are not wholly dissimilar, but when I saw us like this, side by side, it was easy to see that he was young and I was old. I have not yet turned forty, but my face looks grey, despite some red spots on both cheeks. I have gained a lot of weight so my eyes have receded slightly into my face. I have several chins now and my hair is shaggy.

“He has at least inherited his father's body,” I said to Rakel and laughed awkwardly.

“No,” she said, even though she doesn't know anything about how his father's body looks. “He looks like us.”

“Like me,” I said, loudly and sharply and Rakel didn’t say anything. No visible reaction. Nothing bothers her, it infuriates me!

I added cat ears and a cat nose to have a plausible reason for including a filter that would cover up my spotted skin and weight gain. Benjamin looked at the screen in irritation, reached out a finger and tried to wipe away the intervening ears. But I clicked several times and produced a picture in which neither of us looked angry or irritated and where we both had cat ears and a cat nose.

Rakel waited by the door the entire time.

“Is that enough now?” she asked and I replied yes before I realised that she was addressing Benjamin. Not that he understood the question or that it was directed to him, she had really only mumbled it to herself. And then we agreed that it was enough and that now it was all over. Rakel took Benjamin by the hand and led him out of the room again. She left him standing alone in the hallway for a few seconds, wearing his jacket and boots, when she stuck her head in and said to me:

“That went well.”

Yes, it had, more or less.

I studied the photo for a long time. It had been so long since he’d visited. Rakel sent me pictures now and then, after having asked me first if I wanted to see them, and I always said yes, whether I wanted to or not. Pictures from the classroom, where he sat at a table with two other autistic children, one of them more obviously so than the other, none of them looking at the camera, but each with a smiling assistant by their side, who sort of coincidentally happened to have an arm around the autistic child’s waist. Pictures from the kitchen table, pictures from the car. From the mountains. It was different seeing him in the picture with me. I had to admit that he looked more lost than in the pictures Rakel had sent. She was almost never in the pictures herself and she never posted anything on Facebook, except from an annual autism fundraiser on her birthday, where every year she collected far more than the modest 1750 kroner target. Everyone knew it. I think she sent the pictures to Mum and Dad as well, but nobody else. Not to Linda and her family, I had told her that wasn’t allowed and I know she did as I said; I was the one who ought to decide whether they should see anything. I had stopped going onto Instagram so I wouldn’t have to see the family photos she shared.

Afterwards I posted the photo of us on Facebook. I was very unsure about what I should write, everyone I know is aware that I had to give up custody and what that had done to me. It was not a pretty sight and still isn’t. One could read a lot into such a photo, so I

chose my words carefully. I ended up writing “A visit with my darling boy. Fun with a filter for mother and child.” It was not exactly true, all of it, but this could be the start of something new for all three of us and a commemoration was in order. This was allowed! It was! But as soon as I finished, I threw down the phone and went into my farm on my iPad to harvest oats. Once planted, the oats were ready for harvesting in two minutes, so I sowed and harvested several times trying to calm myself down. But this was a momentous and upsetting event, there was no getting around it, my entire body told me so and even though I walked back and forth across the kitchen floor and went into the bathroom several times to do my breathing exercises over the sink, after only a half hour I was back on my mobile to check.

By then several hearts had already appeared on the photo. Many more followers commented than usual, most of them with heart emojis or “sweet boy” or the like, as if nothing had happened or there was no back story. Mum wrote “Nice to see this, Lea. Love from Mum and Dad.” Linda had clicked the heart below the post and commented with a heart emoji. Immediately I planned to skip over it when later that evening I would go through and like the comments. Rakel had clicked the angry button shortly after Benjamin’s bedtime and not long after that a message arrived.

“I understand that it was nice that today went well, but I don’t think it was such a good idea to post the picture.”

I didn’t reply.

“This is going to take time,” she continued and I didn’t respond to that either, although I thought it was a wholly unnecessary comment, as if I didn’t know this myself!

“I can see that you see what I write,” she wrote, and then: “Do you feel you are strong enough?”

RAKEL – WEDNESDAY, NOVEMBER 27

I felt the first signs after dinner. I had eaten more than I should have, but not enough to cause indigestion. Nonetheless, I could feel grumblings of discomfort and even though it had been a long time since I'd had a tummy bug, I recognised the signs. Benjamin was sick yesterday, I wiped vomit off the floor and walls in the morning. He won't be learning that vomit is supposed to land in the toilet; he throws up far too seldom to develop a routine for it, so it will just have to be like this. I'm not even sure he finds nausea and vomiting unpleasant. He slept in his own vomit and when I woke him, he didn't seem to notice that his hair was sticky. On the other hand, he was happy to get in the shower right away and I left him standing in there alone for fifteen minutes, while I stripped the bed and took the bedding to the laundry room, cleaned up, and disinfected. He turned the hot water up but only enough so he emerged from the shower stall steaming and clean; he didn't burn himself.

The worst part about him getting sick is keeping him at home, away from his normal routines. He doesn't just lie listlessly in bed. When he has a tummy bug, he doesn't start by moaning first while staring at the ceiling and the walls, until he throws up and feels better and then begs for his iPad and the telly. No, he does what he always does. He gets out of bed, is showered, eats, vomits, and waits by the door for the taxi to come and pick him up. Making him understand that he must stay home is an enormous undertaking, so the best strategy is to tell him right away. A walk in the woods in Krosset is like our Saturday routine and he accepts that. Now we've had both Saturday and Sunday in the middle of the week and it has gone well, although he has thrown up from time to time. He spits out the vomit without any warning, and I unpack the washcloths from the bag, two washcloths I've prepared that are still warm in the plastic bag. Wipe and dry, no need to comfort him, because he doesn't understand comforting, but stop a minute, maybe, and let him decide when we will continue.

So today he didn't throw up. And today perhaps I got a bit carried away at the thought of some movement and activity. Dad usually says that Benjamin and I know the mountains and the woods of Krosset inside out, "like our own pockets." I have heard him say that when he tells others about Benjamin and me. "And then they go for walks in Krosset, long treks, they know the area inside out, like their own pockets." He is proud, I know that, but it irritates me and not just because it isn't sufficiently accurate. Fortunately, there are still many things left for us to discover there! The pocket metaphor is also bad, there are few people who really

know what they have in their pockets, not Dad either, I have experienced it personally when doing the laundry. Once when I turned his pockets inside out before stuffing the trousers into the washing machine, I found a tie bar he had been missing for several months. People don't know their pockets inside out. Pockets have mysterious depths into which objects can disappear, much like a junk drawer with many small compartments: things are put away there and forgotten.

The reason this irritates me is that in praising us like this, he covers up how little he helps. The more he boasts about what I achieve with Benjamin, the less he feels that he must do. Not that he is conscious of it, of course he isn't, but on those occasions when I have seen him hold us up as a glowing example for friends and relatives, I also see how he relaxes into it. "Those two there, they're a great duo, such a strong bond between them.» He *sees*. And tells others about it. And then it's like that's good enough.

No, he's not all *that* bad. It's worse with those who need praise not only for seeing, but also for seeing more than others. In the end I had to unfollow my colleague Marianne on Facebook, after a period when she shared many words of wisdom about caregiving, or posts about refugees and persons with intellectual disabilities, accompanied by comments along the lines of "something to think about..." or "I wish more people cared..." Yes, that was meaningful, Marianne, when was the last time you came to visit us?

But today I overdid it. We don't know Krosset inside out; it is a huge area with three small mountains and an abundance of spruce trees. The landowners have built service roads for lumbering purposes, an entire network, I can sit night after night looking at maps and aerial photos on the internet, to see both where we've been and what kinds of combinations are possible. Then there are the trails, which are of varying standards and not always visible on the map, but unexpected possibilities have often appeared when we've found a decent trail. There is a multitude of alternative routes and treks we have not yet explored. It sometimes gives me palpitations just thinking about it and not frightening palpitations, more like the kind of palpitations that give rise to the metaphor "my heart skipped a beat".

I didn't know anything about Krosset until I was made Benjamin's primary care provider. During the time when Torfinn and I were doing respite care, the focus was exclusively on organising visits, church, meetings, trips to the store and cafés and things like that. It's not that *that* wasn't difficult, it was like being a flock of geese at a fancy garden party in terms of both the noise and the turmoil. People think they're laid back and tolerant, brag about their dirty bathrooms and piles of unpaired socks, but even so, they don't like

children who lose control and tear down decorations so they can taste them, or jump on top of people on the couch. The dilemma was always whether to let it slide and Lea claimed that letting it slide would produce results with time. I stopped believing this and so did she, whether she was aware of it or not. It's not possible to expect a café or a church congregation to go along with a child being allowed to behave like a crazed drunk until such time when the child no longer does. Thank goodness Lea let me change strategies!

At first it was difficult getting him to come along on walks, there was a lot of stopping and a lot of struggling, and he would lie down in ditches and scream. Krosset is in a rural area, a twenty-minute drive from home, so the trails aren't as difficult as those closer to the city, but people do go walking there, they do, we aren't the only ones. When Dad says that we know the mountain like our own pockets, I try to tone it down by saying, yeah, yeah and whatever, and mainly we go walking there because there are so few other people. It's an area for horses and dogs, cyclists and autists. I say this essentially to everyone, and have kept doing it, even though people don't know how to react to the rhyme. Dad laughs hard and loud to signal that it's a really good joke, but nobody says anything.

I have nonetheless had to develop tunnel vision. Some passers-by look at the ground and walk straight past, but others comment openly. Once there was a woman who was relentless, even though I didn't respond. First, she pointed at Benjamin and said: "It looks like somebody needs to use the loo." I got angry and turned away, but I guess her companions objected to her remark by way of looks and gestures, because she continued, saying "What? I can see that he needs to use the loo," and then finally speaking to me directly: "He needs to use the loo." She said it three times, enunciating the words more and more clearly: "HE NEEDS TO USE THE LOO", and I didn't answer. Finally, she walked on, upset. I waited before checking Benjamin's nappy, didn't pull down his trousers until they had rounded the bend. "No, he doesn't need to use the loo, you bloody cow!" I muttered to myself under my breath. By then Benjamin's mood had changed and he laughed. Another time there was a horse that reared up, the girl on his back said he was sensitive to noises and I pulled Benjamin even further out into the ditch, holding my hand over his mouth until the horse had passed. I still have a scar on the back of my hand from where he bit me that day. I had already had a tetanus shot, because of course this wasn't the first time. But he doesn't bite me anymore, now he just bites himself if he becomes overly agitated, and that happens often enough that the backs of his hands *are* usually red.

Another time there was a woman who put her hand on my shoulder and left it there for a few seconds before walking on. “You’ll get there,” she said. Just thinking about it makes me touch my shoulder as if to grasp the hand that lay there and squeeze it in thanks. It was true!

Sometimes I was drenched in sweat after a one-kilometre walk and it wasn’t unusual that it took a whole hour, but I managed it in the end. Now we never walk less than five kilometres and usually more.

The secret is not a secret at all. We managed it because I gave him sweets. I led the way walking backwards, at least five meters in front of him and holding a package of alphabet cookies or a bag of “Saturday sweets” in plain sight, which is one of the phrases he has learned so well that he uses it. Benjamin is slim and fit, even though a one-kilometre walk at that time often involved several hundred grams of “Saturday sweets”. Now all I need are almonds or raisins in my pocket. Now he is happy every time he recognises one of the car parks in Krosset. He even shouts with joy when I park! Waves his hands and bounces in his seat. Yes, I got there. Even though he sometimes pounds hard on the car window and roars if we drive *past* one of these car parks. God knows whether he will one day be strong enough to smash a car. The more active we are, the stronger he becomes.

But it can all be a bit too much for me and sometimes I forget that – that not even this system is fool-proof. Like today, when I strayed off the gravel road because I noticed an overgrown trail hidden between the spruce trees. I was filled with a wonderful excitement when the trail took a somewhat unexpected turn leading to a well-maintained forest road. The fresh horse dung on the side of the road sent a clear message that we were not alone and I could feel the thrill of it buoying in my chest and I thought: This! This is the best! And more: If the day ever comes when I know this *entire* network of dirt roads and forest trails, we will have to move. Nothing beats this!

I didn’t notice that the hill was steep. Benjamin was ten meters behind me, as he usually is, both because of the method and because both he and I like being a little alone and as long as I know he is in sight if I turn around, then I keep my distance. I can also hear him easily. Some days because he is a walking foghorn, or because he walks along carrying a little tin lid and drums on it rhythmically with his fingertips. Other days just because I know his movements, am so familiar with the way he moves.

“Do you know the way?”

Did he really say that?

I laughed. I stopped, turned around and waited for him, didn't know whether it was my own thoughts or him I had heard, but at any rate I answered the question with: "No, I don't know the way, Benjamin, and it's wonderful, it's marvellous!"

"Live in a place where no one would believe," Benjamin sang.

And I sang back: "Anyone could live!"

Then he came closer and went from singing to making sounds again, and I pointed at the familiar gravel road that appeared between the spruce treetops below us, although I wasn't sure about whether or not it would reassure him:

"There's the road."

Benjamin reached for my jacket pocket and I stopped him, afraid he would snatch out the car keys and then I gave him a square of dark chocolate and stood waiting until he had devoured it. I wiped off his mouth with one of the two damp washcloths, it was cold, but not as unpleasant as being wiped with a moist towelette. No vomit today!

But it's not normal to be so indifferent to nausea, for my own part I experience nausea as a menacing growl: *you are going down*, I am powerless in the face of it. Benjamin does not let himself be overwhelmed. It's inconceivable, all you can do is accept it. He is raw nature. He needs food, drink, lodging, heat, sleep, sensory stimulation, and to be protected from sense impressions. I don't know if he needs love. But pretty soon he will need sex. It hasn't been more than a month since he made his first sexual advances. I thought I would be prepared, because we have discussed the topic among those of us on the disability services team, it has been discussed ever since he was ten, maybe even before that.

When he was ten, Lea still attended the meetings, she was no longer the primary care provider and in practice was never alone with Benjamin, but she took part in the meetings. She couldn't even bear to discuss the subject, she shut down completely and said she knew that it would not happen. "We have a bond," she said, something she said often and none of us said anything, even though any such "bond" naturally wasn't an argument against the possibility of an obtrusive sexuality. We just looked past the flustered expression on Lea's face and changed the subject. It is still hard to comprehend how irrational Lea can be about some things, or more precisely, about everything having to do with Benjamin. But it is in fact possible to be both rational and emotional, so I called the social educator from the team the next day to ask her about it. I took notes on the methods she advised and informed them of any potential signs of a nascent sexuality at all the subsequent meetings, while Lea stared stiffly in another direction and said: "He's not like that when he's with me."

The recommended methods were not especially different from the other routines in our life together, so I felt confident that I would manage this. They were sexual needs, that's all, we all have them, I even have them myself, even though I suppress them – or downplay them – as best I can. It's not strange that my female body affects him, although I am his primary caregiver and it's not even certain that is the reason for the advances. Anyway, I wasn't always fully dressed when the time came to wash and dress him in the morning and on this dark October day, I was wearing only a singlet and panties. I had gotten straight out of bed when I heard him come out of his bedroom and had not taken the time to throw on anything more. I was not particularly appetising as I sat wearily on the stool by the toilet and picked at the cracked skin between my toes, but he stood up and took hold of my shoulders. I saw that his little penis was erect and he pressed it against my thigh, humping against me.

“No,” I said, as planned, calmly and with authority, but I wasn't prepared for the seismic shift inside me and it was only afterwards, when he was dressed and had been handed over to the taxi and I was squatting outside the front door smoking a cigarette that I identified the feeling as a landslide. An internal landslide. Tumbling from my shoulders and down into my stomach, as if my shoulders just crumbled into sand and slid straight down. Children with rosy cheeks and wearing furry hats came out of the house next door, as I was sitting there with the cigarette, children who laughed a rippling laughter. I closed my eyes and thought about the mouths of children covered with chocolate. Thought about tightly held hands on the first day of school. Thought about children who sobbed and gasped under the covers after they'd been teased for the first time, with one hand outstretched, reaching for an adult. Oh yes, landslides could still occur. I could collapse like a house of cards. I could still feel the need for a cigarette in the morning. When I opened my eyes, I saw the neighbour smile, but simultaneously she pushed the children forward before they had the chance to comment. A simple way of learning social competence. Don't worry about the crazy lady with the cigarette, just walk past. Social competence is something Benjamin doesn't have and never will have. Benjamin is not, and will never be, normal. He doesn't have and never will have a normal emotional relationship to me. He reacts instinctively. I know that, but I don't know it.

“That's how it is,” I said to myself. “Purely instinctive. Pure nature. *One of the least of these brothers and sisters of mine,*” I added, to memorise it, repeat, repeat, understand, absorb it, and then I took a deep breath and exhaled, several times, before I felt another landslide, when I pictured Jesus who couldn't bear the clamouring lepers if there were too many of them. I squeezed my eyes shut and shook my head and then I dropped the cigarette into an empty can I had brought outside with me. It's not certain that Jesus had fully grasped all the

nuances of “one of the least”, I thought. I brought the can inside with me, and tossed it straight into the dustbin, inserted the lighter into the cigarette pack and put the cigarette pack all the way in the back of the bread box, behind the sweets I hid from Benjamin and only took out every Saturday.

But this too I got used to, these advances, if that is the right word for it. I never feel afraid when Benjamin presses up against me, I just feel a bit resigned, in the same way that I feel resigned every time I have to scrub the grooves between the tiles around the toilet with old toothbrushes to get rid of the stench of urine or in the same way as when I am resigned about having to wash the kitchen wall every time we have tomato soup for dinner. I got used to it. But it settled inside me. It settled inside me like a new hardness, a new grain of callousness. I often take it out on Marianne, the innocent victim.

Marianne is one of my younger colleagues and she has frequently told stories about Heine’s sexual overtures, who despite his leadership role as rector will still sometimes decide it’s a good idea to show up to have a beer with us on Friday evenings and not just that, he *stays*, he stays for a long time and he gets drunk and pushy, especially with the younger colleagues. He is recently divorced and I get it, but his behaviour is unacceptable, so I’ve said that Marianne and the others should take it up with the union. They haven’t. I don’t know if it’s because they don’t dare or if it’s because deep down, they don’t really think this unwanted sexual attention is all that serious. Nevertheless, I burst when yet again Marianne shared with me how Heine had held her hand under the table and put one of her hands on his crotch, so she could feel that he was hard.

“Then what did you do?” I asked.

“I pulled my hand away and went home.”

“You didn’t say anything?”

“I said that it was getting late and that I had to go home.”

“Why didn’t you say anything?”

“I don’t know, it’s not so easy.”

“Yes, it is,” I said. “It is easy.”

Marianne’s eyes widened.

“You say ‘no’,” I said and my voice was so loud and authoritative that the entire lunchroom fell silent. Even Heine turned and looked at me from the corner where he sat on the plum-red burlap sofa, holding half a liverwurst sandwich between his thumb and forefinger. A good-looking and fit man in his prime, was how I thought of him, not “old,

disgusting, and drunk” as the younger colleagues would say. He sat with legs far apart in a so-called manspread.

“No,” I repeated, in the same authoritative voice and Marianne looked around the room in embarrassment, met Heine’s eyes and when I performed my authoritative *NO* for the third time, he blushed and pulled his legs together. He placed the liverwurst sandwich carefully down on the grease paper. After a moment of silence, he cleared his throat and said loudly, “It’s no wonder that Rakel’s class is the most disciplined group in the school” and a few people chuckled, and little by little everyone resumed their conversations.

Afterwards Marianne said that it was easy for me when I had such a natural authority and wasn’t afraid of losing my job. And it was true, although not exactly accurate. Marianne needn’t fear losing her job but she could indeed be afraid of *failing* at her job. I didn’t have *natural* authority; I had an authority that I had developed over the years and it was easy for me, I wasn’t afraid of not succeeding at my job, I wasn’t actually afraid of anything. I was at the very least not afraid of the rector. I am a little taller than he is and better educated. I had been at the school longer and I had withdrawn my application for the rector position when I became Benjamin’s primary care provider. So Heine was appointed rector instead and that would have to do, I didn’t have time to fret about it, I had quickly understood that I would also have to reduce my hours, with everything involved in providing care not only for Benjamin, but eventually, also for Lea. I didn’t find it so strange that Heine tried to pick up women, but it was of course unacceptable that he chose the path of least resistance and showed up for Friday evening beer in Bjølla. I had no idea whether he understood that such behaviour was an abuse of power or if he was genuinely interested in Marianne – and the others – and that he believed his interest was reciprocated. Marianne thought he should understand her gestures of rejection as precisely rejections and I more or less agreed, but I didn’t understand why it was so difficult for Marianne to be clear.

“It shouldn’t be my responsibility,” Marianne said.

“Maybe not,” I mumbled and wondered what was the most insulting. To think about men as if they were all intellectually disabled and thereby unable to control their sexual instincts, or to expect them to understand that silent gestures meant the exact opposite of what they hoped they meant.

Later in the evening I felt sick to my stomach, but not enough to throw up. I put Benjamin to bed early and fortunately he fell asleep relatively quickly. I had already notified the school

that I would be staying home with a sick child, I am entitled to more such days than my colleagues due to Benjamin's diagnoses and I never feel guilty about calling in sick; my schedule is always clearly outlined and easy for the substitutes to find and carry out. I am good at preparations. I should get it over with before I turn in. Then I could sleep off the sickness, so I would be able to carry out Benjamin's morning routines and take him out on yet another walk midday tomorrow. After that he would be so tired that I could rest for an hour while he was absorbed with his iPad and then I could also manage the rest of the day and get a good night's sleep. Then he could go to school again, because by then forty-eight hours would have passed. But I have never managed to vomit on command, no matter how far down my throat I stuck my finger. I just had to give up and instead went to bed before the evening news.

I had only been asleep for a couple of hours when I was awakened by the first bout and I made it to the toilet just in time to retch into the bowl. While it was ongoing, I registered where the vomit landed and whether anything splattered onto the wall behind or the floor. Afterwards I disinfected the toilet, the floor, and the surrounding walls, before wiping my face with a washcloth and putting all the cleaning supplies that could be contagious in a bucket in the laundry room. Then I got dizzy again and staggered back to bed, writing a rudimentary message to Mum before I fell asleep. "Come and help. Sick. Benjamin too."

When I got back in bed after the next bout, I checked to see what Mum had answered but there was no reply. The tiny circle containing her profile picture showed that she had seen the message and there was a green dot at the top of the frame indicating she was online.

Three dots appeared in a chat bubble, but the bubble disappeared again. I went into Dad's family group, where the most recent post was a picture of Mum together with Linda's girls, they had also been in the forest, or more precisely in the park and Dad had written "Gram and the girls" under the photo. I went back to my message to Mum and the three dots were there again. While I waited for an answer, I went onto Lea's profile, where a selfie had been posted in her story just twenty minutes ago. "Too excited to go to bed..." it read, in bright pink, looping letters over a barely recognisable Lea face with cat ears, long eyelashes and whiskers on her nose. I grunted in irritation at the suggestive tone, which is so typical of Lea, she always has to beg people to ask more. "What are you so excited about?" one of her still-loyal colleagues from the ad agency was supposed to ask in response. "It's a secret!" Lea would reply. And probably she wasn't excited about anything but that she would advance another level in Hay Day over the course of the evening or that she won the neighbourhood

derby. “You’re almost forty, Lea!” I hissed as I lay in bed and went back to Mum’s three dots, which were still going. I went back to Linda’s profile, where the profile picture was a family photo with a banner above it: “Everyone needs a family doctor.” Linda’s most recent picture was the same picture Mum had posted in the family group, with the same text. “Gram and the girls.” Scrolling down the page, I found only pictures, here and there a few Op-Eds about vaccination and how the welfare state was under threat. Both Lea and I had unfollowed Linda on Facebook after she posted an Op-Ed written by a doctor colleague about how it did not bode well that people were staying home from work simply because they were *tired*. It was a veritable declaration of war on Linda’s part, yes, what can I say, that’s what it was. The doctor has spoken. “Tired” people are dipping straws into the social welfare reserves, to the detriment of *actual* hard-working people who become genuinely ill and experience a genuine need.

Back to Mum. There were still only the three dots and I tapped in her mobile number impatiently. All I heard was the phone ringing a few times and then a voice informing me that the line was busy. She’d sent my call to voice mail.

“Answer the phone!” I wrote in the message and the tiny head hopped down with a blip.

“Mum, I need help. I am throwing up and have a fever, I need you to help me. You need to come here and help me with Benjamin, I can’t manage it on my own when I am so sick.”

Blip, the head said and hopped down, but again there was no reply.

I could feel my head spinning, I had to get some sleep now, I couldn’t lie here getting all worked up, it was too much for me physically, my entire chest resisted the way my breathing intensified as the adrenaline kicked in, and my shoulders were begging to sink down into the pillow and relax. If I didn’t sleep now, I would never be able to manage Benjamin tomorrow.

“Mum!” I wrote, in a final, desperate attempt and then the dancing bubble appeared again, with the three dots, apparently every bit as mysterious as those which Lea had included in her story a half hour ago.

“I can’t!” it blipped back and the chat bubble danced on. “I promised to watch the girls for Linda. She is keeping them home from day-care because there’s a tummy bug going around.”

“Fuck,” I said loudly. “Fuck you, you spoiled brat!” I shouted, but I didn’t write it, because it was Linda I was referring to.

“They’re doctors, they can’t have a tummy bug in the house,” read the next message from Mum. I closed my eyes and took a few breaths, and she added: “I will catch it if I come to you now. It defeats the purpose.”

“Mum. You’ve been at Linda’s for days. Please come here at 8:00 a.m. at the latest. I will give you instructions.”

“I’ve already made a commitment.”

“Benjamin is also your grandchild!!” my adrenaline added.

“Why don’t you call Lea?”