My Catalogue of Men

by Helene Uri

<Sverre D. Ecker>

<Oslo>

Mom was going to get a new heart. And its name was Kristian.

Of course, I wasn’t supposed to know that. The anonymity is sacred. The donor’s identity is kept strictly confidential. But I learned what I wasn’t supposed to know, by chance. I walked out of Mom’s hospital room. She had just been informed that one was finally available for her. Doctor P. was standing a little way down the hall. He was facing away from me, but I recognized him, his broad, slightly stooped back, his wavy, white hair that Mom said looked like an old-fashioned ad for Brylcreem. I saw the face of the person he was talking to, a young, blond woman in her twenties, maybe a few years older than me, spic and span, with no makeup on her face. She spoke loudly and matter-of-factly, and some of the words she said slipped into my ear canals.

It was so simple. I pulled out my phone. A few quick searches, and he was looking right at me, narrow eyes, short hair. *Tragic Car Accident* the headline read. He worked in the tech sector, it said. He had had a place in the world and a whole life. We were born the same year, but he wouldn’t live to see any more. He had played soccer. Just like me, just like any boy growing up in Norway. Maybe we had played against each other in the Norway Cup tournament. I put my phone back in my pocket and pushed open the door.

It was dark outside as I emerged from the hospital. The October sky was black with a thin layer of skim milk over it. It was windy and my wrists and forearms were freezing.

<Gunnar. A Lover>

<Oslo>

There’s a picture of Margrete in the newspaper today. That’s not so unusual. Even so, it catches me off guard. My heart starts beating faster, reminding me that she still dwells there, in my heart. “‘Gallery Eckers hopes to continue providing a window to the Nordic countries’ experimental visual arts, a main artery to the most innovative artists of our time for those members of the public wishing to be exposed to something they have never experienced before,’ said gallery owner Margrete Ecker (52).” The journalist had probably written exactly what Margrete had stipulated.

At one time she had meant everything to me. Carefully I set down my espresso cup and permit myself a little jaunt into Margreteland.

I will never have her, and I will never forget her. I can live with that just fine. So can my current partner. She just doesn’t know it. Benedicte doesn’t know that every time I see a heart, I think of Margrete. I’ve been down that road again and again. The link between seeing a heart and the thought of Margrete has become a wide freeway in my brain. I see a heart, and I *have* to go down that road. The synapses are stronger than I am. And hearts are everywhere.

There is no symbol more cliché than a red heart, but they *are* well intentioned. They appear on congratulations cards and toilet paper, as garish holiday decorations, as emoji in practically every other message, as earrings, and tacky snack-mix bowls. My students should be too old for that kind of thing, but some of them decorate their tests and homework with hearts, just the girls, of course. At that age they’re more mature than the boys, but they throw around hearts. The way Margrete has always done. Margrete juggles hearts. She tosses them up into the air and catches them again or lets them fall on the ground.

I have to tell Benedicte about Margrete. It’s not right for me to hide an important part of myself.

“Benedicte?”

“Hmm?” Benedicte probably would have responded, in that way that’s so typically her, the hmm beginning deep in her throat and then rising, in that questioning intonation that makes me want to talk to her, confide, tell her everything. Well, maybe not everything.

“Have I ever told you about Margrete?”

“Margrete Ecker?” Benedicte might have said. “Yes, you dated her, right?”

I would nod.

Then I would say, “We lived together. We were going to have a baby.”

“You never told me that. Did she lose it?”

“Margrete had an abortion.”

Sometimes I look at my students and think about that baby who was never born. I could have been the father of a high school student now. I look at the boys, the tough ones, the even tougher ones, the politically savvy ones with their answers ready to go, the poet, the one staring out the window and not paying attention. Which one of them would our son have been? Or would the baby have been a girl? Would she have looked like that one with the short hair who always did her homework? Or the one who always knitted in class and kept yawning. Sometimes one of the students in a class will stand out and I’ll choose that one as mine, one who touches something in me. Maybe there’s something about them that reminds me of myself. Or of Margrete. A naked look, the angle of the eyebrows on the forehead, an unexpected enthusiasm that bubbles forth. She or he doesn’t know it, and I’m completely certain that no one else notices it either. I glance at the chosen one in secret, think what if that had been our son, think of eating breakfast with the girl with the messy bun on top of her head. I haven’t fallen in love very many times, but on the occasions when I did, I was in love for a long time. Quiet, maybe, but strong.

Benedicte and I will never have children. We found each other rather late in life, and perhaps we weren’t meant to be parents.

“When was this?” Benedicte might have asked.

“It was in 2002,” I respond. Benedicte puts her hand on top of mine and says:

“And when did you meet her?”

“In February 2000.”

It’s possible that it was on Valentine’s Day, also called All Hearts’ Day here in Scandinavia. No one used to celebrate that holiday in Norway back then, and especially not forty-year-old teachers who had had plenty of women but had lost their faith in love.

“At work? Did you work together?” Benedicte asks.

“No, no. We met by chance. At a restaurant.”

Dry snow crunched like starch beneath my soles, and I had forgotten my hat. My ears tingled from the cold, and what I was carrying was also heavy. I was coming straight from school and my shoulder bag was full of tests I needed to grade. It couldn’t have been any later than four, but the Scandinavian winter sun had already set. As I passed the brasserie on my way to the bus, I felt like having some French onion soup. I had been to that restaurant with coworkers several times before after late meetings and I turned around now, went back, and opened the door. There was only one other customer in there besides me.

“Sometimes when I see a heart I think about Margrete,” I tell Benedicte.

“Because you were so in love with her?”

“No, not really,” I say. “Mostly because she had a heart condition.”

“Really?” Benedicte says. “I didn’t know that. I don’t think you’ve ever mentioned that. Was it serious?”

“Quite,” I might have replied.

It was serious. Margrete didn’t talk much about her condition. She pulled the topic out and waved it around when she wanted to achieve something, but otherwise we both pretended that nothing was wrong with her, for a long as we could. I was reading St. Augustine back then, and I told Margrete that she was suffering from *cor inquietum*, a restless heart.

The medical diagnosis was *cardiomyopathy*, a type that caused the size of one of Margrete’s heart chambers to gradually increase. St. Augustine’s *cor inquietum* suited Margrete better. Margrete’s heart wasn’t empty; it was restless.

I learned from Margrete that Ken Follett was his wife’s fourth husband.

When I met Margrete, she was married. For the second time. I moved into her apartment before her husband at the time had moved out. During the week that we overlapped, I was scared of running into him during the night, on my way to the bathroom or back. It wasn’t until much later that I was willing to see the brutality of what Margrete had done. There was also a five-year-old boy living in the apartment, whom neither one of us was father to. I had even hardly said hello to Sverre before I stood there with my suitcase and toothbrush.

Margrete’s health deteriorated during that period. Her legs swelled and sometimes her lips were a leaden blue beneath her makeup. She was still suffering from the lingering aftereffects of a respiratory infection, and it was so bad one night that she had to sleep practically sitting up, propped up on a stack of pillows. She always was a light sleeper, would sit up abruptly, gasping for breath. I tried to wake up when she woke up. My senses were finely attuned to react to the slightest anomaly from her, a change in her breathing, a movement, a sigh. Being in love made me a jittery sleeper, like a mother with a newborn. I comforted her and held her. Her pacemaker was underneath the skin above her left breast. It took me a while before I discovered it, even though it was easy to feel and see, a hard lump the size of four squares of milk chocolate. I rested my hand on it, where it lay sacrosanct, untouchable, watching over the woman I loved.

I liked her weakness. A vulnerable Margrete would need my strength.

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In the beginning, the first year after it was over, I mostly thought about everything that could have been. I would see a couple where the woman was wearing the same jacket as Margrete, and I would glare at them. That could have been Margrete and me, I would think. Why should those two idiots be so happy? What did they do to deserve that love? I would read a book, watch a movie, taste a new type of olive, and the whole time I would wonder what Margrete would have thought of it. And by doing so, I would ruin a reading experience, a movie I otherwise would have enjoyed, or the kalamata olives with smoked chili. And the baby. I thought about our baby. I would see a random woman with a baby carriage and imagine that she was Margrete, and that that was our baby lying in the carriage.

Because I wanted to have a baby with Margrete. I wanted to penetrate her, crawl in under her skin and stay there. I wanted to plant myself in her. She was my territory, and I wanted everyone to be able to see that. Plus, I needed something that could tie her down, and I suppose I thought a thick umbilical cord would keep her from bolting. I wanted to lie next to her for the rest of my life, inhaling the scent of her, moving my index finger from mole to mole, talking quietly about baroque music and future long weekends in Copenhagen. I wanted to feel the weight of her breasts, make her nipples stiffen. I didn’t want any other men to have her thighs around their hips. Those girlish dimples in the small of her back were *my* property. *I* was the king of Margreteland. I always wanted to bind my fingers up in her hair, tracing circles on her scalp at her temples where her hair was downy, a light hazelnut color. And I was the one, and no one else, that she should abuse and call a useless nitwit.

We had been happy together, planned together. We had even looked at baby carriages and picked out a dark green one with a checkered lining.

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“Do you want to see her?” Benedicte asks. Of course she would have asked that.

“Would you be opposed to that?”

“No,” Benedicte responds. “But do you *want* to?”

“No,” I respond.

“Haven’t you seen her since it ended?” Benedicte asks. “Oslo’s not exactly a megacity.”

“No, never, just in the newspaper.”

But that’s not true. I have seen her a few times. We ran into each other once at the security checkpoint at Oslo’s Gardermoen Airport. It was a Friday afternoon and there was a long line. I was maybe ten yards behind her. The line snaked its way along like plowed furrows, over to one end, turn around, and come back. The passengers moved slowly forward in boustrophedon formation, and I stood face to face with Margrete three times before she reached the scanners. We were only a foot away from each other. I couldn’t make myself say anything. I smiled at her each time, and she smiled back. But she smiled the way people smile at strangers, and she didn’t look me in the eye. Her face was emotionless and stiff, and yet that expression caused a nauseating twinge in my stomach and an uneasiness in my chest. I followed her with my eyes as she took off her coat and placed it in a gray plastic bin. She was still slim. She pulled a nice laptop out of her bag and set it in another bin. She stood on one foot and took off one boot and then the other, sinking by four inches. She placed her boots in a third bin, along with a Ziplock bag of toiletries. She took her time, but she didn’t turn back toward me. And I was shuffled along, to one of the conveyor belts farther down. I looked for her once I got through security. I had planned to—nonchalantly, as if it had just occurred to me on the spot—invite her to have a glass of white wine, but I couldn’t find her. On the other hand, that encounter could have gone south pretty quickly, turning out differently from what I had pictured. I knew that face and that body language all too well.

<The Heart>

<Lillehammer>

I didn’t want to subscribe to GD, the local newspaper. There’s nothing interesting in it anyway, but Kristina gave me a six-month subscription. For my 25th birthday. You’re a grownup, Kristina said, you need to read the paper. I read the paper, I retorted. Because I visit the papers’ online sites several times a day. And I read about Kristina when an article in GD said she was dreaming of opening her own salon and had the concept ready to go. It’s important to support local journalism, Kristina said. Perhaps you’re right, I thought. She was usually right. Anyway she said, Happy birthday, Kristian! And then we kissed, and I put my hands on her ass and whispered that I was expecting more birthday presents. I got them. Kristina delivered the goods. And now I read the local paper everyday over breakfast. Even on days when Kristina doesn’t spend the night. It’s actually pretty nice. There are pictures of my old soccer team. Some of the guys are still playing. And interviews with that shitty mayor who fired my mom claiming she was redundant. I’m sure he’s forgotten about the whole thing. There are women with white curls turning seventy and eighty. They look into the camera, and all have light blue eyes and glasses with nearly invisible frames. Boys with no front teeth and girls with pigtails, and they’re turning four or five or eight. Completely ordinary people who have been asked about gas prices, what they eat for Christmas dinner, or what they think about the hospital lobby’s decorations. “Lobby Decorations”! Great that it looks nice when you’re sick, or have to visit someone who’s sick, Kristina said when I pointed and said that I didn’t understand why they had to spend money on that kind of thing. In the local paper, the man on the street is important. And every once in a while it’s someone I know, a classmate or someone I worked with. One time, one of the biggest jerks from my high school was interviewed about whether he preferred to shop at the mall or the stores in town. I didn’t bother to read his response, just glared at his ugly mug and turned the page. That morning I wished that Kristina had spent the night.

Today there was a story about a guy who had caught a rodent in the parking lot at the mall. It had taken him a long time, almost an hour, the story said. He finally nabbed it and took it to the pet store. I captured an escaped guinea pig, he proudly announced, presenting the poor animal to the clerk. But it was no guinea pig. It was a lemming. He had to slink back out to the parking lot and let the lemming go again. I read the entire article out loud. What an idiot, I say. That could have been you, Kristina says to me. She’s smiling. What do you mean? I ask. Just that you’re so kindhearted and you love animals so much, Kristina responds. She’s so pretty. Especially in the mornings when we sit across the kitchen table from each other. Yes, perhaps I am particularly fond of animals? I’ve never really thought about it, but she knows me so well, and I don’t even understand how she does it. She sees things I don’t see. But I think sometimes that’s how it is, that other people see you more clearly than you see yourself. At any rate, I don’t have an answer key to myself.

There’s a saying that what doesn’t kill you makes you stronger. That’s true for me. I’ve become strong. Not that I’ve had a completely miserable life, but there have been some downs. But now I’m practically living with Kristina, who draws hearts on my toast with the tube of shrimp and cheese spread. I’m going to fucking propose to her. If I do that over the loudspeaker at the next home game, that will surely make it into the paper. So I won’t do that. Or maybe she would like that?

“More coffee?” I ask.

“Yes, thanks,” Kristina says. “But you’re not going to make it. You have to go now.”

I look at the time. She’s right, of course.

“Remember we’re having dinner with your parents tonight,” Kristina says.

“That’s right,” I say. Then I say, “you’re the world’s best woman.”

“So are you,” Kristina says.

“I’m not a woman,” I say.

“You know what I mean.”

I do know what she means.

“I’ll pick you up a little after four,” I say.

“Forever yours,” Kristina says. It’s almost our shtick, that we say that.

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Are you guys coming over right after work? Do you think you’ll be here by five? my mother asked. She called me just as I was finishing lunch. Yes, I replied, but I have to hang up now. I ended the call and then said *goodbye* to the young man. I put my cell phone in my pocket and got in the car.

I bet she’ll make meatballs and stewed cabbage. That’s still my favorite, and my mother is usually pretty open to requests. I just say, the world’s best meatballs. And she responds, for the world’s best son. You only have the one, I point out. That just shows you how lucky I am, to get the world’s best, she always says then. Her voice is amenable and then I know that I’ve scored myself some meatballs.

I like to bring Kristina when I go places. She makes me more fun than I actually am, and having her there makes me feel completely calm. Not that I’m afraid to eat dinner with my parents. That’s not stressful, but it’s nice to have Kristina there anyway.

The first time I came inside a woman, I was so happy right afterwards that I could have just died then and there. Of sheer joy. Or maybe pride. I don’t know. In middle school a friend told me that there’s a saying or something about how all animals feel sad after sex. I remember us laughing, but neither of us had tried it, so what did we know. But now I know. For me, it just makes me happy. Every time. I think it’s like that for Kristina, too.

I told my mother we would be there by five. Kristina is done at the salon at four today, and I just need to go out to one little company out on the point. I sold them a network solution last week, and nothing is working the way it should. They only have two employees, and they’re married to each other. I wonder what that’s like? I can just fit this job in before four, and then I can go pick up Kristina. I’m looking forward to it. To my mother’s meatballs, because I’m starting to get really hungry now. And to picking up my girl.

If you switch around the last two letters in my name, I become Kristina. And vice versa. She becomes me. My mother calls. Again. My phone is on the passenger’s seat. The stupid picture of her in the red Santa hat lights up the display. She is grinning up at me. I know exactly what she’s going to say. Hello, son, she’ll say. And then she’ll ask if we’re going to make it. Again. When should I put the potatoes on, Kristian? Will you make it by five, Kristian? I’ll make it, I say out loud, but I don’t answer the phone. The phone isn’t connected to the hands-free, and I know that I’ll make it to dinner. I don’t need to say it one more time. She knows it, too. I’ll be on time, but first I have to do my job. I press on the gas pedal. I don’t have that much time. There won’t be so much small talk with Mr. and Mrs. business owner today. I’ve been here before. They live out on the point, with a yard that runs all the way down to the water. That’s the way to live. I’ll bring Kristina out here one day. She should have been here right now. Because today is one of those days where it’s impossible not to notice how beautiful everything is. They sky is a crazy-vivid blue, just like that boxy ‘80s Ford we had when I was little. The sun is so bright on the roof of the church that it hurts my eyes. There’s a thin layer of ice on the roads. Everything seems new and clean and crisp.

The ringing has stopped. Of course my mother knows that I’m never late. I press on the gas pedal. The engine hums, and the rpms rev up before falling again. As soon as I round that turn up there, the row of houses will come into view between the pine trees. I’m almost there. Soon I’ll be done with the job. Soon I’ll pick up Kristina. Soon there will be meatballs. I turn the wheel, have good speed going into the turn. I bank my torso with the car, as if I were sitting on a big, beefy motorcycle. My phone rings again. I look down at it. My mother is not giving up. The picture from last Christmas. The red Santa hat. The big grin that

<Kristian’s Father>

<Lillehammer>

The door handle was pushed down several times, but I had locked the door. I saw the handle moving down, then back up to horizontal, and then down again before it was released. She didn’t say anything from the other side of the door. I didn’t say anything. For a short time, I thought she had given up, and I remember that it felt like a victory, a moronic triumph. But instead she started knocking on the door. No, Ann didn’t knock: She pounded.

But memory can’t be trusted. Maybe the pounding was only in my head. Maybe I’m remembering wrong. Even though Ann and I didn’t talk about much else those October days. We don’t talk so much anymore now.

People grieve so differently. Some clam up. Some bury the painful memories and never dig them up again. Ann wanted to do it differently, so we talked. We dug down into the painful memories. We followed the same roads, the same paths, again and again. Like a river that digs its way down into the ground and leaves behind an ever-deepening channel. Ann said, do you remember the stuffed yellow cow? And I said, Yes, Kristian took it everywhere with him. Ann said, in the end she only had one eye and no tail left. And then one of us said something about how he used to suck on both its horns and its teats, and the other one smiles. Or maybe Ann said: It was so quiet that night in the hospital, and maybe I replied: All those people dressed in white, working, and yet almost complete silence. Ann said something about the coffee, we smile a little, and I said something about Kristina. A lovely girl, the other one replied then. But I never say that it smelled like meatballs in the bathroom. No one says anything about the abrasions on Kristian’s cheek. No one says anything about eyelids quivering or that we never got to see his blue eyes.

Because every time I call up a memory, then that specific version of the memory takes even firmer hold. But when I go to clothe the memories in the garb of language, it changes them and makes them new all the same. They twist and turn and refuse to wear the words. None of the words fit. They’re too small or way too big. They’re too stiff and solemn. They’re frivolous and shameless. There are no words that can describe those days in October. I can’t find them anyway, despite my searching. But I kept on thinking, almost wordlessly, in the same rutted tracks. The memories come, such as I’ve constructed them now. The way it maybe was or maybe wasn’t. Sometimes I still discover something new. One time I remembered that the coffee carafe in the lounge was red. Another time I remembered how I had felt the side seem of Ann’s pants under my fingers.

When I was sitting locked in the bathroom late at night on October 12th, it smelled like meatballs. The whole house smelled like dinner. I remember that, and that smell was one of the worst things. Even in the bathroom it smelled like grease and frying meatballs, right through the smells of soap, shampoo, and toothpaste. Even through the scent of Ann’s purple, lavender-scented candle. I had told Ann five hours earlier that nothing beat the scent of her homemade meatballs. I had. Five hours earlier I hadn’t known anything about losing a child. I had left work before four. I had a lot of overtime that I needed to use. Ann said she couldn’t get ahold of Kristian, but that she was going to go ahead and put the potatoes on anyway. Right? She added. Kristian’s never late, I said. Ann nodded, Kristian’s never late. She put aluminum foil over the frying pan with the meatballs in it. I’ll start on the cabbage, she said. Everything was as it should be. Then my phone rang. I had never seen the number before.

Ann stopped pounding on the door. I sat with my back against the tiled wall. The position was uncomfortable, but I didn’t move. My back ached, and I had to pee. My bladder was ready to burst. I let it happen. It poured warmly between my legs, right onto the floor. I looked at the yellow liquid that was one stream at first before it spread out across the floor and settled in the grout seams. The slope of the floor was perfect. I had made it myself. With Kristian, three years ago, while he was still living at home. Ann began to cry outside the door, very quietly, but I heard her just fine. I wanted to scream at her to shut up. Shut up and stop that crying! He’s still alive, Ann! But I didn’t say anything. I just sat and looked at my piss running along the grout channels between the white tiles.

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It had happened like this: The car was split in two. Someone had heard the crash and called the police. Who? I need to know the name. Why didn’t I ask about that? Why didn’t anyone say the name? Was it a man or a woman, old or young? I want to picture it. I needed all the pieces. The police, the fire department, and the ambulance had all arrived on the scene of the accident shortly thereafter. What does shortly thereafter mean? How many minutes did it take? Someone must know that, right? Could the ambulance have gotten there any sooner? Kristian had to be cut free. He wasn’t breathing. They did everything they could. Bandaged him, intubated him. But how do I know that was really everything? Everything, absolutely everything, that could be done? Can someone promise me that? The police called me. He was being airlifted; the helicopter had been in Vågå. It came as soon as possible and transported him to Ullevål Hospital in Oslo.

The policewoman said that I should take it easy, that it was serious, but that our son was being helped now, the best help he could receive. Do you have a car? she asked. Yes, I said. I passed the phone to Ann, locked myself in the bathroom, peed on the floor, and refused to come out.

When I finally came out, Ann was sitting on a chair in the hall. The chair just inside the front door that we usually sit on to take off our shoes or boots. Over her head was the hook where Kristian always hung up his coat. Ann had packed an overnight bag with a change of clothes for each of us. We have to go, she said. I talked to Kristina. She’s borrowing her mother’s car and driving there on her own.

Ann and I took turns driving. Vingrom, Biri, Brumunddal, Hamar, Tangen, Minnesund, Jessheim, Kløfta, Lillestrøm, Oslo. Neither of us said a word. Not even a mention of how we had never made such good time on this route. I was driving when we reached the hospital campus. Ann jumped out of the car before I had parked properly, and darted in under the awning where it said Emergency Room in white capital letters. When I walked in the sliding doors, she said, this man is coming with us. We’re going to Neurointensive Care, INT3.

<Ullevål Hospital>

A woman our age stood bent over a machine. She turned and greeted us nicely but seriously. He’s just arrived, she explained. Kristian lay on his back in an open hospital gown. He was covered from the waist down by a sheet. There was a white fishnet stocking around his head, a bit like a hijab secured under his chin. A black cord ran from the top of his head to a screen.

That’s what I saw first. Then I saw everything else. There was a kind of valve with a thin plastic tube taped on the back of one of his hands. Another plastic thing with several outlets, each with a dark blue cap, was by the base of his throat. There were three white, plastic pads stuck on his chest. They each had a metal button with colorful wires that ran to the two big machines by the bed. A bag of clear liquid hung from a stand. The room was semi dark and muddled, like in a dream, but I think I’m remembering correctly. He didn’t look like a young man, lying there, but rather a little boy. Maybe that was why the hum and all the wires and machines reminded me of *Charlie and the Chocolate Factory.* That was one of Kristian’s favorites when he was a kid. I read that book out loud so many times that I had long passages from it memorized. Kristian would lie in bed, on his back, looking up at me and he always wanted me to read one more chapter, just one, Papa. His face was so little and his eyes were so big. Now they were closed.

The doctor will be right here, the nurse said. It’ll be OK, Ann said. I don’t know if she was saying that to the nurse or to me. Or to Kristian.

I got coffee for Ann and me, first one cup, then right away another one. I downed mine. Ann thanked me and set the full cup right next to her first cup, which was just as full as the new one. I brought coffee all night long. We talked a lot about those coffee cups. We laughed at them, too.

The doctor had big, kind eyes, freckles and dirty blond hair in a long ponytail. She nodded to the nurse and greeted us confidently, and I understood that she was a doctor before she even said it. I’m the attending on duty, she explained. Then she walked over to Kristian, giving one of his shoulders a quick touch. She gazed for a long time at one of the screens covered in glowing curves like schools of fish. Ann grabbed my hand. But her hand was clammy and unfamiliar, and I stepped to the side before I realized what it was. I moved away from Ann. I remember that. A clear image in a hazy stream of events. I immediately put my arm loosely around her, feeling the side seem of her jeans, and hoped she hadn’t noticed my sidestep. Ann repeated: It’ll be OK. This time, right to the doctor.

“This is serious,” said the doctor with the dirty blond hair. Then she said, “Let’s step out into the hall for a moment.”

We followed her like obedient children.

Kristian had lost a lot of blood, so he was given a blood transfusion in the helicopter. We nodded. He was put into a medically induced coma. We nodded again and had no idea why we were nodding. And the head wound? Just a cut. Ann said: But it’ll be OK?

“He has major injuries,” the doctor said. “We did a CT scan when he was admitted.”

We nodded. Because we didn’t know what else to do. She said they had removed an epidural hematoma, bleeding that had been pressing on his brain.

“And we have determined that no further operations are warranted.”

“Why not?” I asked.

“It’s going to be OK, right?” Ann asked.

“Kristian’s injuries are substantial.”

I think we nodded.

“We have inserted a pressure monitor into his brain. You probably noticed it, a black thing right on the middle of his head?”

“Yes,” said Ann.

“There is increased pressure in Kristian’s head. The ICP monitor allows us to track that.”

“We understand,” I said, but I didn’t. I didn’t understand anything.

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Subdued seriousness. I don’t know any more if I thought it then, but when I think back to those days, these two words fit. Maybe that’s some kind of cliché, I don’t know, but I can’t not think of it that way. All the patients were in private rooms with their doors half open. In each room, in each white cube, a person in a bed. Employees dressed in white sat by the bedside or puttered about industriously. In some of the rooms, parents, children, and siblings kept watch over the patient. Girlfriends and boyfriends and spouses sat bent over the beds. A few crept restlessly around in the hallways, the way I did. No one looked me in the eye, and I didn’t look at them either. It was so quiet that when a man, probably someone’s husband or a son, sobbed loudly in one of the rooms, it didn’t feel real but rather like some sound effect from a movie. On my trips to fetch coffee I passed a station where nurses were sitting around and whispering. A few of them looked up and nodded at me as I walked by. I didn’t recognize any of them from one trip to the next. Maybe they were constantly new. What did I know? They stood up and sat down, came and went, flowing like white shadows from the nurses’ station, into and out of rooms. They were faceless, friendly and efficient, fast and silent. They glided over the floor, down the corridors in white uniforms on rubber soles, with name tags on their chests and pens in their chest pockets. I had to rely on them, because they were all we had now. I smiled at them as much as I could. I wasn’t taking any chances.

Twice, an alarm on Kristian’s monitoring screen went off, and both times Ann jumped and stared at me, as if I could do something about it. One of the people dressed in white put a hand on Ann’s shoulder, pushed a button so the sound went away, reattached a clip that had come loose from Kristian’s index finger, and looked at the numbers on the screen. Then they smiled. This was everyday life to them. Every single day they worked with people who had been in accidents, who lay in white beds and would maybe survive, would maybe die. To them we’re interchangeable. We’re just extras who get swapped out every day by other extras. The people in the beds are the most important to someone, but never to them. To us, Kristian was the center of the world. To them he was just a new patient. They were so calm, so steadfast that they made me believe things would end well, that this would be over soon, and life could go on like before. I stood up, was going to grab one of the paper cups of lukewarm coffee that Ann hadn’t touched. I wanted to tidy up, one step on the road back toward normalcy. At least I think I was thinking something along those lines. Then I saw that beneath the white net stocking, his head was partially shaved. And I can’t explain why exactly that that made me want to cry. It was just unbearable, the line of full coffee cups and our son’s half bald head.

I think that is the exact moment when I understood. This wasn’t going to be OK at all. I’m going to go get coffee, I told Ann.

Time behaved differently, and I thought we had been there for hours.

When I returned with the coffee, Kristina was standing by the bed. She greeted us politely, the way she always did. We hadn’t met her very many times at that point. She and Kristian hadn’t been seeing each other for very long. Kristian had told us that she was very shy. But she’ll warm up after she gets to know you, he explained. Kristina is the best thing that’s ever happened to me, he said. Big words coming from Kristian. He didn’t say any more than that, but that made both Ann and me think of our high school years. We discussed it after Kristian went home that night. He deserves a little happiness, Ann said. Do you think we’ll be grandparents soon? It’s a little soon for that, I replied. Well, I hope so anyway! Ann said. When Ann talked to him on the phone a few days after that, Kristian told her about Kristina making the heart for him out of shrimp cheese. Ann laughed as she told me about that. Three months later we were standing around his hospital bed, Ann, Kristina, and I.

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We received a room of our own. It’s for the family, the nurse said, so you can relax. Relax? She fetched us blankets and pillows so that we could try to sleep. Sleep? But the night was long, and we took turns sitting at his bedside, Ann, Kristina, and I. I drew up a rotation plan for us, so that someone would always be in with Kristian along with a nurse. The other two wrapped themselves in blankets and tried to get some rest. But we got our turns mixed up, and we couldn’t relax even though we had been given a room in which to do just that.

Kristina was sitting with him now. Kristian was asleep and looked like himself. His chest was smooth, and his nipples were small and almost pink. He looked like a kid dressed up as an astronaut who had fallen asleep from it all. Kristina sat in the chair by the bed, with her eyes closed and her face white. An astronaut and an angel who had run away from costume ball.

The ward was even quieter in the middle of the night. I asked if Kristina wanted any coffee, but she said no thanks. I brought some for Ann and me. The doctor stopped by, asked how it was going. We didn’t know what to say.

Morning slowly came. It grew lighter outside and inside the nurses spoke in louder voices. One of them stuck his head in the door, said hello, and asked if Ann and I wanted to join him for a conversation with the doctor. Ann nodded. She looked almost a little uplifted, as if for a few seconds she were allowing herself to hope that the doctor would say that a miracle had occurred, and that Kristian could go home tomorrow, completely unharmed, and as healthy as ever.

The room we were supposed to be in was furnished with short conversations in mind. A varnished, oval table with four chairs around it. Typical institutional chairs of some light variety of wood with red wool upholstery on the seats and backrests. Just have a seat and the doctor will be right with you, said the man who had brought us here. He stood. We sat down without saying anything. Ann still had an optimistic look on her face. I couldn’t bear to look at her. Instead I concentrated on staring at the door, to speed along the doctor we were waiting for. It helped.

The doctor with the freckles opened the door. She nodded, said that we had spoken earlier, and that she really wanted to talk to us before her shift ended. Ann sat with her back as straight as a ruler and the beginning of a smile. I wanted to kick her.

“How are you doing?” the doctor asked.

“We’re a little tired,” Ann replied. Or was I the one who said that?

“Yes, that’s understandable,” the doctor said. “Unfortunately, the bleeding in Kristian’s brain has progressed.”

“Exactly,” Ann said, as if she had been expecting that news.

“We ordered a new CT scan.”

“Exactly,” Ann said again.

“And there is no blood flow to Kristian’s brain. There’s nothing more to be done.”

“Exactly.”

“First, we’d like to hear how you’re feeling about the situation,” the doctor continued.

Ann looked at me before she responded, hesitantly, as if there was a right answer, it was only a matter of finding it:

“Um, I guess we think this isn’t so easy, right?”

“No, I can certainly understand that,” the doctor said. “But it’s important to us, how you’re experiencing the situation and what you have absorbed from the information we’ve provided.”

“But you’re the ones with the information,” Ann objected, “not us!”

The doctor nodded.

“Hmm,” she agreed.

The nurse moved to stand behind me, coming closer to my chair.

“No!” Ann said.

“Then you understand that there’s nothing more we can do for Kristian now.”

“No,” Ann said again.

“We took another set of images of his head,” the doctor said. “And there is significant swelling, which is stopping Kristian’s brain from getting any more blood. We confirmed this with a CT angiogram.”

“Yes,” one of us said. I don’t know which of us. I don’t remember very much of this conversation, but I know the doctor said something about Kristian’s injuries being so extensive that he wouldn’t benefit from treatment. Ann reacted to the word *benefit*.

“Benefit?” she repeated.

“Yes, be helped by.”

“I know what it means,” Ann said.

“We appreciate that this is difficult,” the doctor said. “Have you understood that…”

“No,” Ann interrupted her. “We have not understood.”

“I see that,” the doctor said.

“No,” Ann yelled, “you don’t.”

“We’re so sorry,” the nurse said quietly.

“What does that mean?” I asked. My voice sounded shrill in my head and surely to everyone in whole room as well.

“He’s not going to wake up again,” the doctor said.

“Does he have brain damage?” I asked.

The doctor nodded. She looked down, and her blond eyelashes were stuck together with wetness. The nurse put a hand on my shoulder.

“Kristian is no longer with us,” the doctor said. “The person he was is gone.”

I nodded and nodded. I think I had a notion that holding onto normalcy was important, that as long as I was polite and under control then the world wouldn’t fall apart.

“There is no activity in his brain,” the doctor said.

I kept moving my head up and down, up and down.

“But he’s breathing, right?” Ann said far too loudly. “He’s just sleeping.”

“His heart is pumping,” the doctor said. “But there’s a machine breathing for him. If we remove the tube that goes down into his lungs, then won’t be breathing anymore.”

“So, he’s breathing,” Ann repeated.

“With the help of a machine,” the doctor said.

“He needs help from a machine right now,” Ann said.

“The rest of his organs are receiving blood and are functioning,” the doctor said. I realized then where she was headed. Ann didn’t.

“That’s great,” Ann said. “That’s excellent.”

“Kristian is no longer with us,” the doctor said once again.

Ann looked at her. Then she gave me a helpless look, as if she wanted to ask me to explain to the doctor, who was finding it so difficult to grasp, that Kristian was going to recover.

“Ann,” I said, and I probably put my hand on hers if we weren’t holding hands already.

“He’s never going to…” Ann said. Now she understood.

“No,” I replied. “He won’t.”

The nurse made a sound, a choked back sob, maybe. Ann stiffened, turned around, and looked at him.

“We’re very sorry,” the nurse said. His neck was flushed a mottled red.

“Yes, but that’s how it is,” Ann said. Her voice was calm and comforting, and she turned back around and looked at me again. Her pupils were so big that they almost covered the blue.

“He’s dead,” the doctor said. As if that word needed to be spoken out loud. “There is no circulation to his brain.”

We found Kristina at Kristian’s bedside. She was sitting with her legs stretched out and her chin on her chest, asleep. She had one arm on Kristian’s naked chest. I have no idea what words we used, or which one of us told Kristina. But I remember that we hugged, all three of us.

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The decision shouldn’t have been ours. It should have been Kristian’s. But he couldn’t be asked, because he was no longer with us. The person he was is gone, the doctor had said. She had said the sentence as if she had memorized it in medical school. Kristina had also been asked, and she had answered that she thought Kristian probably would have wanted to help someone. But Ann didn’t to.

“Do you know if Kristian would have wanted to donate his organs?” the doctor asked, unpacking her words one by one, slowly and cautiously.