**What she’s complaining about when she’s complaining about the housework**

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*Pages 5-29 in original*

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 Vigdis stands by the bedroom window, staring out into the autumn darkness, thinking about the words she should choose when she tells Rune, her husband for more than twenty-two years, that she’s leaving him.

 There are a lot of other things she could be thinking about instead. The bed linens (how long since they’ve been washed), the Christmas shift (if she’ll have to work Christmas Eve, and whom in that case she can try to trade with), or the bags of odds and ends on the floor in her bedroom closet: scrunchies, keychains, milled soaps, animal-shaped erasers, glow-in-the-dark slime; four shopping bags filled with utterly superfluous items that she will carefully wrap into seventy-two presents to divide among the children’s Christmas calendars. Vigdis was secretly hoping she could wind down this tradition, in any case when it comes to Magnus, but when she brought it up in a text last week, he—who usually takes a day to get back to her—shot back immediately: Just because you’ve moved out of the house doesn’t mean you don’t want Christmas calendars anymore!

 The shower’s running in the bathroom; Rune is singing “Strangers in the Night.” He’s getting ready for a business dinner. The Food Safety Authority, he wrote in the text message from work earlier in the day. In an unusually voluble text, he claimed he’d forgot all about it, forgot even to write it on the family calendar on the fridge. It was likely to go late, he explained, it’s one of the new clients, and it was important to show some initiative since they’d just won the tender!

 She answered *ok*. No full stop. If she felt anything, it was relief. One less Friday evening on opposite sides of the couch, or on different floors of the house, with nothing to say to one another. A quiet evening with the kids, thought Vigdis, or maybe just alone, if the kids found a way to occupy themselves, since this was earlier, several hours before she realized that it was *now*—this very evening—that she had to leave him.

 The thought, however, isn’t new. In fact, Vigdis has thought of almost nothing else the last few weeks, months, years, the idea that something had to give, that there may simply be no other way out.

 There is an unending stream of considerations as she rides her electric bike to the hospital each morning, as she packs the children’s lunch boxes with bread and antioxidants, as she pays each month’s bills (she always panics, anticipating her meagre finances if she’s alone), or when the spinning instructor yells breathlessly at the end of the hour into the mic at the end of the last interval: Final push of the hour! Reach the goal that *you* set for *yourself*! (At which point Vigdis feels ashamed; only now does she realize she forgot to even set a goal.)

 These insistent and recurring thoughts are inevitably followed by equally vigorous attempts to push them away, to cling to that small hint of hope that arises when life together feels manageable, when something of what had once been still exists, something reminiscent of love. On those occasions, she recalls what the ladies at her wine club are always saying: Everyone goes through ups and downs. Anyone who says they’re happy all the time is lying.

 Up to now, Vigdis has always resolved to try a little more, or in any case to delay the matter, until after Christmas, until after Easter, until after the summer and the already-paid-for trip to Portugal, to wait until Magnus has moved out of the house (and preferably still longer, to avoid one major life change following another), to try and wait until after Alva’s confirmation, or until Jakob has finished primary school (and preferably lower secondary as well, which will be three hard years for him, both emotionally and in terms of school). Up until this afternoon—when she stood inside the disabled loo at the Shell station and looked at herself in the mirror, seeing what she’d become—Vigdis had thought it might be avoidable, or in any case possible to delay, just a little longer.

 In the bathroom Rune is on to the next tune: “It’s Now or Never.” He doesn’t know she’s home. She was supposed to still be out delivering the rolls of toilet paper with the children. The November darkness is close by the bedroom window. All Vigdis can see is the weak outline of the hedge out by the road and the illuminated, yellow patch on the pavement below the streetlamp. And of course, the garish flashing lights on the sledge in the garden of the house opposite, the same sledge they put out every year, early November to late January.

 It was here they had stood with Alva when she was 18 months old, right before Christmas. Nine below and the window was wide open, and the small, fever-warm body was wrapped up in a blanket, the knitted cap pulled down under her ears. Don’t cry, Rune said to Vigdis, it’s no use crying, you too. But Alva was having these horrible fits of coughing, it was heartbreaking to watch. She gasped for air, the mist coming out of her little mouth in spasms, while in the double bed behind Magnus lay sleeping, having just come in an hour earlier with wet pyjama bottoms and still trembling after his nightmare. Now he lay perpendicular on the mattress, tossing and turning. Vigdis thought: How am I going to take care of my children—tonight, and every night, and every day in the future?

 But then, a merciful change occurred. Just as the nurse at the emergency room had predicted over the phone: as Alva drew in the cold air, her breath calmed and the coughing stopped. Just a case of false croup, nothing to worry about, only unpleasant. Alva’s gaze landed upon the flashing sleigh outside the detached house on the other side of the road. She drew her hands up from the blanket, smiled for the first time in two days, and said her very first word. *Light*, said Alva. *Liiiiight!* And now, as they drove round delivering the toilet paper rolls, they’d passed the sleigh flashing in the late afternoon dusk. Mum, isn’t it stupid, said Alva, to waste resources like that? How many kilowatts do you think they’re burning in just one day?

 No one else knows her plans. When Vigdis dropped the kids off with her mother a half hour ago, she didn’t mention the real reason she suddenly needed babysitting was that she was going home to end her marriage. She and her mother don’t have that kind of relationship. Vigdis has never been one to confide in her friends either, though she has come close. Whenever the eternal marriage complaints begin at the wine club, she sometimes stays quiet, sometimes plays along. She’s listened whenever someone speaks of the husband who *forgets every family outing* (even though every single one is entered into Outlook), she’s laughed at someone else’s husband who *steps over* the rubbish bags by the front door without even *noticing* them. All the while, she keeps hoping the conversation will turn to a new topic, moving beyond the rubbish bags, beyond the breadcrumbs on the counter, beyond the endless handball championship matches at the crack of dawn Sunday, and into the truth, into the darkness, that someone one evening will put down their wine glass and say: Is it really possible to live in a family, in a marriage, without losing yourself? Is there anyone else here who has felt how all your joy and energy—and even your very breath—sapping away when you open the door to what is supposed to be *home*? Am I the only one who has to lock themselves in the bathroom at work or at home or in a random public loo because I have to cry, because the feeling of choking, disappearing, is just *that* paralyzing?

After Christmas, she went to a therapist. She sat alone in the hospital office one quiet night at the start of January. A few hours earlier she’d helped deliver premature twins who were now in neonatal intensive care. Vigdis sat on one of the sofas in the office and searched for a therapist on her mobile, finding at an online form that asked, *Describe what it is you need*. I need help! Vigdis wrote. I feel like I can’t breathe! She got an appointment a week later.

 She arrived very early, having been afraid she wouldn’t be able to find the place. The door at the address she’d been given had two doorbells, one for the therapist, another for a physiotherapy clinic. A man on crutches exited as she stood there. There were still forty minutes until her appointment, and there was small shopping centre on the other side of the street. Vigdis walked over and bought a new slalom helmet for Jakob (something that had long been on her list) and a pair of ankle boots Alva had wanted for Christmas, but didn’t receive. It felt better to burn 1500 kroner on herself, she thought, if she bought something for the kids first.

 When she rang the doorbell (now only six minutes before the appointment), her hands were full. The waiting room was obviously shared between the therapist and physiotherapy clinic. Illustrations of muscles and skeletons adorned the walls. A woman of Vigdis’s age sat on a chair and rotated her head from side to side as she flipped through a magazine. Vigdis thought, do I look like someone who needs a physical therapist or a psychologist?

 The woman was called in by a man in ergonomic shoes and loose-fitting clothes. Vigdis put the bags on the floor next to the coat rack. As she took off her coat, the therapist came out of the door to her office. She looked like a normal, adult lady, one whom you might encounter at the bank counter. She smiled and said, Feel free to hang your things there! Vigdis felt self-conscious as she hurried to take off her ankle boots and flung her scarf over the coat with an attempt at nonchalance, but ended up putting it neatly on the coat hook. Bit of a clumsy entrance, said Vigdis as she followed her therapist into the little office, her hands full with the bags. I’m carrying a bit too much, she said, for too many people. She thought she might punctuate this with a quick, ironic laugh, but instead the tears welled up unexpectedly to her eyes. The therapist held her gaze and asked, And who’s carrying you?

 The shame over everything unleashed by this one question stayed with her for several weeks: the tears, her lack of a filter, the way she babbled on and on about *herself*. Should I leave, she asked, all cried out at the end of the session, do you think I ought to divorce him? The therapist looked at her from her wing chair. I would never say, she said, neither to you nor to anyone, that they ought to leave their partner. Oh, said Vigdis. She looked down at the damp, mascara-covered Kleenex in her hand, feeling pathetic. But if you look, said the therapist, if you look deep down inside yourself, you might find the answer.

 Vigdis didn’t return for another appointment. On the way out, while putting on her coat and scarf, she said casually over her shoulder that she’d check her calendar and get back to her about a possible time. But she never got back to her. Once, about six months later, she ran into the therapist in the foyer when she was at a theatre with the wine club. Their eyes met above the heads of other people, before the therapist looked elsewhere. At first, Vigdis felt relieved that the psychologist acted professionally in not acknowledging her, but afterwards, during the play, she thought that maybe the therapist hadn’t actually recognized her. That one session might not have been enough to leave an impression, perhaps Vigdis was just one of many to her, forgettable; and that thought upset her. She couldn’t follow the play, even though it had gotten rave reviews (harrowing and unforgettable, one newspaper said). During the intermission, Vigdis looked for her, taken an extra stroll by the bar, gone to the loo twice, but didn’t see the therapist again.

 Now she’s sure of it. She has to leave. In the shower, Rune is still singing (“I Was Made for Loving You, Baby”), unaware of what’s about to happen, his mind on the coming dinner with the folks from the Food Safety Authority. I have to be perfectly clear, matter-of-fact, Vigdis resolves. He has to know this is for real, that there is no going back.

 The first time she met him, that evening at the business school, he was wearing a Kiss t-shirt. The next day, she went to the CD store at the mall and bought Kiss’s greatest hits album, listened through it several times, and while poring through the lyrics, felt that she was discovering something true, something secret about who he really was. When they met the next weekend after, two days after he’d called and asked whether she’d come to a party in his shared house, he was dressed in a light-blue pique shirt. Only much later, once they were together, did she learn that the Kiss shirt has been borrowed off a friend in the house. I needed a clean shirt that day, Rune laughed. So I go and borrow a fucking band t-shirt!

 She decided this afternoon, as she stood in the disabled loo at the Shell station after driving the kids around to drop off all the toilet paper. This was part of Alva’s class project—to fund a trip to Berlin on White Busses—that had been going for six months. So far, they’d sold bamboo socks and first-aid kits, held a Christmas market and baked goods raffle. Each student had to collect over 5000 kroner, but you weren’t saving for yourself alone. Instead, it was a bottomless pit of over 600,000 kroner in which everyone was collecting on behalf of everyone else.

 This, Rune had said without a trace of irony, is the essence of volunteer work—everyone works for the benefit of everyone else! In reality, it was Vigdis who had to drive around delivering 36 bags, each with 56 rolls. Each had already been paid for after Alva, very reluctantly, went door to door through the neighbourhood. Of course, most of the purchases came after Vigdis and Rune posted about the toilet paper sale on their respective Facebook pages, a measure that Vigdis had strongly opposed (since was not *this* the true essence of the volunteer work: the parents organizing and carrying out what should be the kids’ job?). But after several days of Alva’s endless whining (*everyone else’s parents are doing it!*) and Rune’s convincing arguments (*my boss even put out a thing for her kid’s graduation bus on the intranet at work*), and not least, the toilet paper that now took up the entire basement, Vigdis relented.

 Now it’s our turn, she wrote in a half-ironic Facebook post. Toilet paper for sale—three layers, virgin fibre, extra soft, eco-labelled—to raise money for Alva’s Cold War, Berlin War and Holocaust class trip—get it while supplies last!

 I really shouldn’t be doing this today, said Alva when they left around five. I’m having the worst period *ever*. Jakob snickered quietly in the backseat, but Alva was unfazed. She wasn’t embarrassed by anything, least of all bodily functions. Last week, she asked Vigdis to come in and tell whether one of her labia was abnormally large. Are you sure you want me to come in and look at that? Vigdis asked, and Alva answered, Jesus, what’s all the fuss, bodies are bodies, no?

 As they backed out of the garage, Vigdis thought about her closeness to the children, light-years ahead of what she had with her own mother growing up, not only physically, but emotionally; her children shared everything they thought, feared, dreamed of with her, even Magnus, half a year after moving out. And Alva’s right of course—bodies *are* bodies. Hardly anything would give her more pleasure than if her child—unlike her—could maintain that relaxed and natural relationship to her own body throughout her teenage years. Nonetheless, something about this openness bothered her, the lack of a need to keep some things to oneself. But as soon as Vigdis thought that, the shame came rushing in. Shouldn’t she see that openness as a gift? Other mothers complained about how their children shut out their parents completely. An unbridgeable distance, as one of the children’s nurses at work had put it when it came to her seventeen-year-old daughter. Vigdis had nodded knowingly while thinking: At what age does this distance begin to set in?

 They drove into the side road just below the school. Vigdis stopped the car in front of the white detached house of Greta Frantzen. Alva looked at the list and sighed: Two bags. Sooo heavy. Huh, two bags, said Vigdis, I thought their sons had moved out. People don’t shit any less after their sons have moved out, Mum, Alva said. Jakob snickered in the backseat again. Alva got out of the car, groaning loudly for no reason while she took the toilet paper bags out of the boot. I’ll post to Facebook, I’ll drive you around, but you have to drop off the bags yourself, Vigdis had told her.

 She watched from inside the car as Greta Frantzen opened the door, waving at Alva with a smile. It must have been ten years since her husband had moved out. A shock, Greta told her over the apples at the supermarket one day, like falling into the deepest abyss. Vigdis didn’t know what to say to this candidness; they didn’t know each other that well. As she filled a bag with apples, but still looking at Vigdis, Greta told her how her husband had moved in with a woman fifteen years younger. *Fifteen years*, Greta repeated, not noticing the apple that slipped onto the floor to strike the wheel on another customer’s trolley. Vigdis had heard gossip to the effect that she’d only barely managed to hold on to her house.

 There, said Alva. Only 34 more bags to go. She flopped onto the front seat and slammed the door shut. Grete backed into the doorway while dragging the toilet paper over the threshold. Vigdis thought, If only there could have been someone else! An affair would have been seen as a betrayal, but nevertheless, there’s no arguing over feelings. If she had been in love with someone else and tried to resist before finally—after a long and painful battle—having to admit to the world that she loved someone else, then leaving could have been understandable, even noble.

 But there was no other romance, no one else to compare Rune to. If she left, Rune wouldn’t be replaced with another man—he’d be replaced with nothing. And wouldn’t that be the most undignified part of it, thought Vigdis, that *nothing* was better than him?

 Hey, said Alva, are we going, today, or what? Excuse me, said Vigdis, turning on her indicator and pulling off the side of the road, just as she saw Greta closing the door. Where did they move? asked Jakob from the backseat. Who? said Alva as she took out her mobile. The sons, said Jakob, the sons of the lady just now. They moved out of the house, said Vigdis, that’s normal when you grow up. I’ll never move out, said Jakob in a low voice. Vigdis glanced in the rearview, but it was too dark to make out his expression. That’s what I said too, said Vigdis, to your grandma. But you moved out, said Jakob. Absolutely I did, said Vigdis, once you turn eighteen, nineteen, you think of nothing else. Maybe, said Jakob, sounding unconvinced. Just like Magnus, said Vigdis, he moved right out after his A-levels. Alva looked up from her mobile. But that was because he just *had* to study in Bergen, she said. No one said he *had* to move so far away for university. True, said Vigdis. A car came towards them with its brights on, which flashed in their eyes as it passed. Many people live at home while they’re at uni, said Alva, that’s normal. There’s normal, and then there’s normal, said Vigdis. No, said Alva, it’s definitely normal. And think of all the money you save, you don’t even have to take out student loans.

 When they were little, they would hardly let go of her. Rune became resigned to having the kids in bed with them, but Vigdis loved sleeping with her arms around the children, waking up next to a young, small body. She watched sadly as they grew into ever bigger clothing sizes, out of their cradles and cots; she wanted to stop time, hold them back, never let go.

 Jakob shifted in the backseat. So maybe it’s better, then, he said, to just live at home while you’re at uni. It’s cheaper, anyway, said Alva. Vigdis’s grip tightened on the steering wheel. She began to calculate. If she waited until the children were older, then how much older? And how many years could she risk having them live at home? Perhaps Magnus would have children before Jakob managed to move out at the end of his studies; it might even happen before Jakob was done with primary school. Magnus was only 21, and as far as she knew he’d only had the one girlfriend he’d talked about this summer, but things could change quickly at that age. She knew that being a student often didn’t stop anyone from having kids these days. I couldn’t leave then, thought Vigdis. I can’t leave Rune just as we’re going to be grandparents.

 *If* I go to uni, that is, said Alva. If I even manage to get in anywhere at all. She scrolled through the news feed on her mobile. But of course you’ll get in. said Vigdis. How do you know? said Alva. Do you know the grades you need to get into vet school? Vet school? said Vigdis. Is that what you’re thinking of going into? Alva shrugged without taking her eyes off the mobile, saying only: You have to keep all your options open, anyway.

 A couple dressed in dark clothes stepped out into the pedestrian walkway by the convenience store. It was near impossible to see them without reflectors. You’re only in the ninth grade, said Vigdis. You shouldn’t worry about that now. But I have to, said Alva, you have to think about what grades you need if you want to get into the right upper secondary school. I’d better start thinking about it *now*.

 Vigdis detected a faint body odour as Alva raised her hands to tighten her ponytail. This wasn’t the first time, either. She’d smelled it when Alva got too close to her, and in the clothes she threw into the laundry; it lingered in the armpits of her shirts, a strong odour mixed with the scent of deodorant. Vigdis couldn’t bring herself to say anything—how could you bring that up gently?— fearing that Alva might develop a complex of some kind; Vigdis recalled the horror story she read in *A-Magazine* a few years back about kids with an obsessive handwashing compulsion. She thought: Better to leave it alone.

 That’s easy for you to say, said Alva. You had such good grades you could’ve been a doctor. Vigdis turned towards her daughter. The high forehead, big eyes, the curve to her nose: all of it came from Rune’s side of the family. She was beautiful.

 Who told you that? said Vigdis. Grandma, said Alva. A doctor? said Jakob. Were you going to be a doctor, mum? No, said Vigdis, absolutely not. But you could have been one, said Alva, you could have, that’s what’s important, the fact that you could have. Fair enough, said Vigdis. Alva turned toward the backseat. Mum started studying medicine in Bergen but quit after a few years, even though she had some of the highest grades coming in.

 A car turned out in front of them. Vigdis’s seat belt dug into her shoulder as she braked hard. Best grades in the whole class? asked Jakob. Your grandmother likes to exaggerate, said Vigdis. Alva turned toward the backseat again. It’s actually true, she said, Mum was so good she got a prize from the rector. Woah, said Jakob. Was it a trophy? Stop it, said Vigdis. But then Mum quit, said Alva, still turned round towards her brother, even though she could’ve earned a lot more money, much more than as a midwife. Really? said Jakob. Is that true, Mum?

 Here we are, said Vigdis. She slowed the car down in front of a semi-detached house. In the dark it looked brownish, though she seemed to remember it as red. This was where one of Rune’s colleagues lived, and they’d been here for dinner a couple years previous. Rune had probably bought firestarters and organic bamboo socks from the colleague’s kid previously to raise money for the skiing club. This is *also* what’s great about volunteering (as Rune said when his colleague said he would buy some toilet paper via a comment on Rune’s Facebook post)—it appeals to people’s sense of community, of helping each other out; everybody supports everyone else’s children.

 Alva unfastened her seat belt. No offence, Mum, but your backstory puts enormous pressure on me. Vigdis put the car in neutral and pulled up the handbrake. Alva, dear, she said, I’ll be happy with whatever you choose to be. You don’t mean that. Yes, I do, said Vigdis. I absolutely mean that. Do whatever you want as long as it makes you happy.

 Alva turned her head quickly towards her; a whiff of shampoo, fortunately, thought Vigdis. But that’s so unfair, Mum! What are you talking about? said Vigdis. Telling me I have to be happy, said Alva. Vigdis shook her head. That’s not what I’m saying. But that’s exactly what you said, said Alva, you said, do whatever you want as long as it makes you happy.

 Vigdis moved her hands around the steering wheel. Ever since she got the text from Rune, she’d felt like something was pressing against her collarbone. a tension that seemed now to be tightening under the strap of her bra. Talk about *no* pressure! said Alva. Being happy is probably the hardest thing for anyone! That wasn’t what I meant, said Vigdis, and you know it. She tried to make eye contact with Alva, but Alva turned away, leaned her body against the door and pushed it open as Vigdis felt the cold draft against her knees.

 Look, said Jakob, look at all the lights, Mum! He pointed toward the house on the opposite side of the street. A veranda extended along the entire length of one side of the house, and yellow lights were wound round the railing. Can we get some, too? said Jakob. Vigdis undid the seatbelt, but the tension didn’t go away. She thought about everything that had to be done before Christmas, but also the festivities themselves, the long days and evenings and hours at home together. What if she went in and asked for some extra shifts? Volunteer for some of the least popular ones? The head midwife was always trying to accommodate those with small children when it came to holiday scheduling; everyone was aware of this, including Rune.

 Last Christmas had been excruciating. The claustrophobic feeling of being trapped between the walls, accompanied by intense shame because she was unable to go along with everything, enjoy all the wonderful festivities. In the evening of Boxing Day, she’d gone for a long walk by herself. If I go back to the house, she thought, I have to be able to believe that something might change!

 But had anything changed? Sure, she’d seen a therapist, but that had been it. Had anything happened at all? What had she come to realize or learn—what had she and Rune arrived at together—that could give her some hope things would be different this Christmas?

 Can we, Mum, said Jakob, can we have lights like that? Alva was only a sliver of a shadow as she trudged up the steps with the rolls in her arms. She’ll turn against me, Vigdis thought. Alva will definitely side with her father. Jakob and Magnus, maybe not, but with Alva there was no question. And even if Rune would agree to coordinate the messaging (the decision was mutual, we merely grew apart from one another, we’re still best friends), Alva would see right through it. She’ll demand answers, thought Vigdis, and I won’t be able to lie.

 Answer me, Mum, said Jakob, as Vigdis felt her hair being tugged from his hands gripping the headrest. Can we have lights like that this year? Yes, said Vigdis, or no, I don’t know, ask your father! So that’s what she’d become, someone who spoke of the kids’ father, her husband, as *your father*. It was like listening to her own mother in the years after she’d been left, or rather *betrayed*, to use her mother’s preferred term. Vigdis thought, now I’m turning into my mother, except I wasn’t betrayed by anyone.

 I’m sorry, said Vigdis. Jakob didn’t answer. She turned round, but Jakob had sat back down and was looking out the window. I’m sorry, I didn’t mean it like that, it came out wrong, I’m sorry! Jakob turned and looked at her, confused. Huh? he said.

 Forget it, she said. Jakob blinked. Forget what? Vigdis shook her head.

 Look, said Jakob, pointing his finger up against the glass, look at that old guy there. A man with a walker was coming down the pavement on the other side of the road. He had reflectors wrapped around his wrists and ankles and was walking with short, clipped steps. What if he falls flat on his face, said Jakob. Oh, dear, said Vigdis. Jakob put his palm against the glass and said, At least he’s got reflectors on.

 Old age, thought Vigdis. I’ll be glad to be separated then. In a little over a year she’d be fifty, and it would be all downhill from there: the aches and pains, the defects, starting out innocuously enough, but foreshadowing what was in store. And if she fell ill? If she’d got a serious diagnosis, she would no doubt hold on tight to Rune and their day-to-day routine. She’d stop getting so wrapped up in such trivialities as being unseen and taken for granted. And Rune would have the chance to reveal new aspects of himself. Together, they’d face life’s challenges with fresh eyes. Both she and Rune would realize the value of everything they did have together (*Breast cancer was my wake-up call!* as Vigdis had recently seen it on the cover of a magazine), embracing every minute of it.

 But she isn’t ill. The GP, gynaecologist, and the overpriced private-practice neurologist she saw during a time she was convinced *something* was wrong with her neck, had unanimously come to the same happy conclusion: You’re perfectly healthy!

 They drove on, past the chiropractor’s, which according to Ingebjørg at work was easy to get into but impossible to leave. She had joked about it at the summer party last year, about how she’d got entangled in their net when she visited the clinic with a stiff neck. Without asking, the physical therapist set up new appointments and referrals to a massage therapist and acupuncturist—and it was only when one of the practitioners had implied that her symptoms were perhaps rooted in *emotional tension* and added that they happened to have a psychologist in the clinic that Ingebjørg had managed to get away, at least 10,000 kroner poorer, she claimed, and with a neck no less stiff as before.

 The sign shone dully in the light from the streetlamp: WE ARE HERE FOR YOU! Then it really started to well up: the pressure under her collarbone radiated towards her throat, tightened, making it hard for her to breathe. Vigdis turned sharply to the left without indicating and a car behind them honked as she turned into the Shell station. Hello? What’s going on? said Alva, glancing up from her mobile.

 But I’m right here, Rune said. They’d been so close at one time, they had to have been, she was the mother to his children, after all. But now they lay together in bed in the dark (a year ago? three years ago?) and Vigdis said, it just feels like you’re so far away. Rune reached for his mobile on the night table to set the alarm; he had to get up early in the morning and it was already late. But I’m right here, he said. He was, of course, and she felt as if she’d become the clingy woman, but of course that wasn’t her. It’s like I miss you anyway, she said. But Jesus, Vigdis, said Rune, are we going there *now*? He put his phone back on the table as Vigdis thought: I need to stop bringing things up at the wrong time. Choose my words better. Then Jakob stood in the doorway, with the skeleton pyjamas he’d really outgrown but wouldn’t give up, white bones that glowed in the dark against black cloth. I had a bad dream again, he whimpered. Rune gave a low moan and turned towards the wall. Vigdis lifted the duvet as the glowing skeleton walked across the room and climbed into bed with them, his cold feet against her legs as she stroked his hair and felt the sweat on the back of his neck. But I’m right here, she whispered in his ear, I am.

 Are we stopping for petrol? said Jakob. Diesel, Alva corrected him, and by the way, it’s embarrassing that it’s 2018 and here we are driving *diesel*. I have to pee, said Vigdis, wait here. Both of them started talking, some quibbling back-and-forth with each other. Vigdis pretended not to hear as she shut the door and rushed toward the entrance. By the steps there was a pallet of windshield washer fluid, along with a stack of torches—yet another thing to buy before Christmas.

 There was a log on the wall in the disabled loo where the initials for inspection were scrawled in every other hour, all day, seven days a week. Vigdis sank down on the toilet seat lid and imagined the whole routine: how the employees came in again and again to check the toilet paper and paper towel supply, refill the soap dispenser, empty the rubbish bin, pick up a hot dog wrapper or a used sachet of snus that had been thrown in the sink or on the floor in the corner, these eternally recurring tasks and obligations, seven days a week. Just like my own life, thought Vigdis, only I don’t record it in a log.

 And again this shame, since after all, what did she really have to complain about? Everyone has a right to feel overwhelmed by their obligations every now and then, she thought. People complain, but they do what they have to do, they do their work, they don’t lock themselves in the disabled loo at a petrol station with two kids and a pallet of toilet paper waiting in the car outside.

 Someone grabbed the door handle. Vigdis jumped up from the lid, walked over to the sink and turned on the faucet. Pull yourself together, she said, you’re a *stayer*! That’s what everyone had always said about her. Her first year at med school they’d even dubbed her *Stayer of the Year* because she was always the last to leave the reading room at the library; they must have assumed she was there studying. Her mobile buzzed. Alva: How long does it take to pee? And soon after, Jakob: Can we have ice cream? Pleeease? Just a little?

 You have to think of the children, thought Vigdis. It was always the children her mother invoked when she heard of people getting a divorce. They aren’t thinking of the children! she said. The fact that she had herself been divorced didn’t matter, since *she* had never wanted to end the marriage, she was *the* *one* *betrayed*, a designator which, for a time, had composed her entire identity.

 Vigdis *was* thinking of the children. She’d thought of nothing else as long as she could remember, but as she stood in front of the running faucet, it was almost as if everything lost all its force: all those thoughts about the house they’d have to sell, the friendships ending, finances in worse shape—none of this was new, she’d gone over all of it again and again. It stung, but everything—even the children—lost its force, since she no longer had any choice, the way she saw it now: there was no other way.

 Her phone buzzed again. Rune: Have you seen my blue blazer?

 She had stopped saying things like, for instance, that he was so distant, that she missed him. Of late it had all blended into a colourless fog of resignation. Only now and then could she feel the contempt welling up like heartburn, as she did now.

 Vigdis typed, Am I your mother? before deleting it and writing: You’re fifty years old, damn it. She deleted that too, thinking, This is not me! She looked down at the water she was wasting from the faucet, then raised her eyes to look at herself in the mirror, her face garishly illuminated by the strong fluorescent lighting. The lifelessness in her face, the lines of discouragement and contempt along the wing of the nose, the greying hair facing the wall where someone had written CUNT with a Sharpie.

 I have to stop saying I’m not like that, thought Vigdis. This is me. This is what I’ve become. I have to save myself, thought Vigdis. This insight was cold, clear. Her throat relaxed a little. She turned off the faucet, replied to Rune: Check the drying cabinet. Then she called her mother.

 While talking to her she filled a bag with sweets. She lodged the mobile between her ear and shoulder while picking out the kids’ favourites: crocodiles, fried eggs, crème drops, liquorice chalk. This evening, said her mother, *right now*, you mean? I know it’s short notice, said Vigdis. Rune and I got double-booked with work by accident. Work, said her mother, you two work far, far too much. Vigdis took a scoop of the gummy red berries, not caring to contradict her or admit she was right. The kids are dying to see you, said Vigdis. I could have put them up with the neighbours, but they wouldn’t hear of it. Oh? said her mother. Yes, said Vigdis, they won’t hear of anyone but you. Jakob said it had been so long since he’d been spoiled by his grandma. It almost sounded true, like something he could’ve said. Her mother laughed. Flattery was her Achilles’ heel. Well, she said, their jammies and toothbrushes are all here. Right? said Vigdis. I can come get them in the morning if you have plans. No plans at all, said her mother. Tomorrow can just be a lazy Saturday, baking. Alva usually enjoys baking, too. Thanks, said Vigdis, thank you so much, Mum.

 And now she’s standing here, by the bedroom window. The sleigh on the other side of the road is blinking. A lorry drives by. And in the bathroom the shower is turned off. She should have thought through all the details. Rented a place. What if Rune gets caught up in the practicalities—that would be so like him. She can offer to move out. Tomorrow, if he wants. Surely she can find an Airbnb for now, something available immediately. She wouldn’t need much—a bed, a small refrigerator, kitchenette. She’ll be assured and steady. We’re adults, she’ll say. We want what’s best for each other.

 Her phone buzzes. Jakob and Alva are each holding a rolling pin toward the camera, Jakob wielding his like a sword, her mother writes: *Some people were ready to bake tonight!* Vigdis is about to reply, something about gratitude, that her mother is exceptional, one of a kind—but then her phone buzzes again. It’s Rune, and he writes: *I’m not the only one looking forward to seeing you, Linn!*

 Linn, thinks Vigdis, that must be the new colleague, the new girl, newlywed. Vigdis said hi to her at the summer party in June. The husband had walked one step behind her the entire evening, and when she was in the bathroom, he stood outside holding her bag, a royal blue clutch. Or no, that was Lina, Vigdis remembers now. So who’s Linn?

 Another buzz from her mobile, Rune again, this time with a photo. The penis fills the entire display, an erect, slightly curved, decidedly average penis. The bathroom door opens. Vigdis lifts her head. Rune walks out of the bathroom. His hair’s wet and he has a towel around his waist and is holding his mobile in one hand. He jerks backward slightly when he sees her, in a way that almost seems cartoonish.

 “You’re home already?” says Rune.

 “Yes.”

 “But...the kids? The toilet paper?”

 He looks at her while he clasping his hands round his mobile, holding them in front of his crotch, over the towel.

 “Who is she?”

 “What?” says Rune.

 He draws his face backward, forming a double chin. Vigdis lifts her phone with the penis on the screen, turns it toward him. And it’s as if his whole face dissolves, as if every little part of it becomes loose and slides downward.

 “Shit,” says Rune, shutting his eyes. “Shit.”

 *Pages 59-99 in original*

 **(June 2018)**

It happens again today, on the way to the nursery school. Three different men pass right by her without making any sign of turning round. The first one is tall, with greying hair. Linn looks right at him while they walk towards each other on the footpath, but his eyes are on his phone, his coat stretched over his stomach. He’s too old in any case. The next one is accompanied by a woman pushing a pram. She speaks in a polished Northern Norwegian dialect, plaintively and without interruption.

 “I just don’t understand why they have to go on and on about that growth chart,” she says. “He’s gained so much weight, after all.”

 The new father walks with his hands dug down into his pants pockets. His gaze passes distractedly over the trees and benches along the path, before landing on Linn. Almost imperceptibly, she straightens her back, pushes her chest forward in the bright, close-fitting top, but his attention is already elsewhere.

 “Is he too packed in,” he says, nodding toward the pram, “with the wool cap and everything?”

 The June sky is grey. It’s drizzling. Linn is wearing the short, brown skirt and the new ankle boots. She’s too early. It’s better to come later, preferably right before the nursery school closes. If Billie’s being uncooperative, she can use the old *if you don’t come right now, you can stay here all night* argument as a last resort. Besides. if you come right before they close, most of the kids have been picked up already. If Billie makes a scene, at least she doesn’t have to stand in some hot, overcrowded cloakroom with the expectation of small talk, never Linn’s strong suit.

 She encounters the last guy by the apartment complex in front of the nursery school. He looks Middle Eastern, around thirty perhaps, and is unloading some cardboard boxes in front of an open van.

 “Okay if I walk here?” she asks.

 The cord from a floor lamp lies across the pavement, but there’s a broad pathway between the boxes, nothing to stop her from walking by. The moving man turns round. The red logo on the van is the same as on his black t-shirt, stretched taut over his chest and biceps. The man looks at her blankly.

 “Huh?”

 Once, a whole crew of road workers had stopped working as she walked by on the other side of the road. The cacophony of their drills halted. She could hear whistles long after she had turned the corner into the next block.

 “Okay if I walk here?” she repeats.

 The moving guy shrugs his shoulders limply.

 “Sure, geez,” he says.

 Linn steps over the lamp cord on the pavement. It’s pathetic the way she walks around thinking of that episode with the road workers, embarrassing that she even remembers it, and what’s worse, to this day she remembers the unofficial title that was taped up in the back of the boys’ smoking area, *the school’s longest legs*, a designation that it was said had never gone to the same girl who won *sexiest lips* and *hottest ass of the year*.

 Her hair swings from side to side and the skirt tightens round her hips with each step. As she’s about to round the corner toward the nursery school, she stops and bends down, feeling the skirt press against her ass, the quickening of her loins as she places her bag in front of her and fiddles with her shoe. Is he watching her now? Standing next to the van and staring at her? Then she notices the hairs: thin, light leg hairs peeking out over the edge of her ankle boots. Linn stands back up. When was the last time she waxed her legs? She clutches her bag and throws a look over her shoulder. The moving man is still standing in front of the van, looking at what might be a cable he’s coiling in his hands.

 Amalie is standing by the front gate, her back leaned against the inside of the fence where the laminated sign is fastened with wire: *Keep this gate closed. We don’t want to lose any children!* She turns around as Linn opens the gate.

 “Billie’s in the pillow room!”

 The remnants of what looks like a tiger face painting are still on her. Her dress has a faded Elsa and Anna image on the chest.

 “Ah, right,” says Linn.

 “Yes,” says Amalie. “in the pillow room with Albert and them.”

 Amalie’s mother walks up behind her with a pram, from which Linn hears a low grunt. The mother smiles and searches Linn’s face. *This* is the look she gets nowadays: the mother-to-mother look.

 “They sure know how to keep track of everyone’s whereabouts,” she says.

 “Right?” says Linn.

 “It really is astonishing what they pick up on.”

 She laughs and wraps her fingers around the handle. I cannot fathom, thinks Linn, how you can manage a baby when you’ve already got a four-year-old.

 “They’re having a pillow fight,” says Amalie.

 “Really?” says her mother. “A *pillow fight*?”

 She opens her eyes wide and acts shocked, but ends up only looking ridiculous.

 “Yes,” says Amalie, “but it’s just pretend.”

 Her mother laughs again. Her clothes are colourless, lacking figure. Her breast pads are crooked, visible through her sweater.

 “Could you please open the gate for me,” she says to Linn.

 Linn opens the gate, steps aside to make room. The laminated sign presses against her bag. That sign brought out a compulsion in Niklas when Billie first began at the nursery school. Even though he knew the text of the sign by heart, he had to read it to himself every morning after dropping her off, before shutting the gate tight three times to make *absolutely* sure it was closed. He laughed at himself when he told Linn about it. And I’m really not the neurotic type, he said.

 The mother wriggles her way through the gate with the pram.

 “Wide load,” she says, rolling her eyes cheerfully.

 Linn is supposed to say something in return—a nimble, self-deprecating comment that underscores their shared experience. She knows, too, that she should crouch in front of Amalie and actually talk to her, ask about the tiger pattern on her face, for instance, or say: Maybe you’d like to come home with Billie one day and we can all bake something?

 Amalie’s mother thanks her and stops outside the gate. She pushes down the brake on the pram as she takes hold of the front of her sweater, pulling it back and forth rapidly, at which point Linn first notices the visible beads of sweat along her temple.

 “Mummy, can we go now?” says Amalie.

 She tries to push the pram, but it doesn’t move and the grunting from the pram turns into a thin cry, Linn’s breasts tingle; she remembers the claustrophobic heat that first winter with Billie, shut inside the apartment, her aching, leaky breasts, her aching, leaky crotch, the overwhelming sense of being captive forever, while Benedikte came to visit, bringing both presents and her own experiences to share, laughing as she said, Jesus, Linn, relax—this will pass!

 “There,” says Amalie’s mother, letting go of her sweater and kicking up the brake. “*Now* we can go home, Amalie!”

 The scooters are lined up along the wall. Little helmets, pink and blue and black, hang from the handlebars, each one appropriately labelled with a name and phone number. She hears her phone ding in her bag. She slows down, fishes out her phone. It’s Benedikte: We have GOT to get together soon, ladies! Wine evening?? Nina answers immediately: Yesss! followed by three hearts. Over by the climbing frame, a father dressed in a suit waves a yellow Fjällräven backpack.

 “No, Molly, get back here!”

 And the little girl, who’s wearing a tutu, says on her way to a puddle:

 “But I have my boots on!”

 There’s another message on her phone, Niklas, from twenty minutes ago: *Got groceries, making dinner, forgot coriander, can you pick some up?*

 The girl screeches in the puddle. The father groans. “Will you listen to me, Molly?”

 Billie is impossible at the store. If there’s any shopping to be done after nursery school, it’s a nightmare. Anne Mari writes: Sure, but preferably not Tuesday or Thursday. Julia’s been chosen for the cheerleading team and someone has been appointed team assistant...

 A colourful invitation to the summer party is taped up by the door, right beneath the sign that has always been there: *Turn off your mobile—get ready for the most important meeting of the day!*

The unmistakable smell of liver pâté and nappies hits Linn as she opens the door. She hears laughter from the break room, elsewhere a child screaming. She stands a moment and listens, but it’s not Billie; for now, at least, it’s someone else. Linn drops her phone in her bag, picks up a couple of blue plastic covers from the basket and pulls them over her ankle boots. She takes a deep breath and opens the door. The most important meeting of the day.

 When Linn realized that men no longer turned to look at her on the street, it had blindsided her like a bolt of lightning clear out of the blue. She hated that expression, *clear out of the blue*, and tried to avoid it, but when she thought back to that moment of realization—that evening almost two years ago when she was out with her girlfriends—there was no other way of putting it: like suddenly being jolted out of a sunny, carefree day by a thunderstorm.

 They had gone out to celebrate Benedikte’s 38th birthday. Nina was going on about an older colleague—who was basically quite beautiful—but who had spoken about *what a shock* it had been the day she realized men no longer turned to look at her. My God, said Benedikte, so superficial. I know, said Nina, I was surprised, because she’s doesn’t really strike me as a shallow type. Just be thankful, said Anne Mari, that your identity isn’t tied up with being pretty. She pulled her chin towards her neck as she laughed, the light from the ceiling lamp hitting her in an unfavourable way. Basically quite beautiful, Linn thought: what was that supposed to mean?

The waiter came to take their order. He was young, had thinning hair, and had been openly flirting with Linn when she came to the restaurant a little later than the others. When he had pulled out the chair for her, she had noticed his gaze on her ass.

“What can you tell me about this,” said Benedikte, pointing to the menu, “hake.”

The waiter launched into a description of the fish and the side dishes, lentil stew and gremolata. Definitely my personal favourite, said the waiter. Linn tried to catch his eye again, but wasn’t successful this time. His eyes grazed her—but it was professional, no more at her than at any of the others. Had it just been her imagination, his flirting with her? Was his look something she had taken for granted out of habit?

“If you don’t like the hake,” said the waiter, “I’ll personally summon the cook from the kitchen and read him the riot act.”

The other three laughed. Linn stared at the waiter. She felt like she’d been taken for a fool, felt enraged at this waiter, whose receding hairline was obvious through the thinning hair, his cheeks pockmarked with acne scars. He was hardly some great catch himself, damn it.

“Well,” said Benedikte as she closed the menu. “You’ve convinced me, anyway.”

When they lived together, Nina had once said, It’s no fun walking down the street with you, Linn, the way men are always turning round. No fun? said Anne Mari. I think it’s great! Linn had brushed the both of them aside, but half-heartedly. She knew what they said was true.

But on the way home after that dinner almost two years ago, she realized that something had changed. Men didn’t notice her like they used to. How long had it been? When had the change occurred?

Linn knew it had somehow to do with Billie. Nowadays Linn came across as mature and maternal, and that erased whatever had once been irresistible about her. It was one thing when she had been pregnant, or a new mother, but it had been a long time since she last smelled of spit-up or walked around with milk stains on her chest. From vigorous exercise, the flabby belly had become tighter now than it had ever been. So what was this invisible motherly aspect that she could not shake and which made men not look at her as before?

Niklas was sitting in the living room with a beer when she came home. He cleared away Billie’s puzzles, sorted the pieces into the right boxes. Already? he said, looking at his watch. She saw herself in the mirror in the hallway, the dissatisfied look on her face. And the wrinkles: two new ones sloping down from the corner of the mouth—when had they materialized? Didn’t you have a good time? asked Niklas. I’m just tired, Linn said, I need to sleep, good night.

The cloakroom is empty. Linn starts clearing Billie’s place, folds up the fleece sweater lying inside-out on the shoes, puts the empty lunch box in the backpack, finds the rain pants in the drying cabinet and hangs it back on the coat rack reserved for rainwear—all these simple activities that feel so insurmountable when the wardrobe is full of people, when Billie lies on the floor and refuses to get dressed, when the sweat runs under her bra, when a mother leans against Linn—unaffected by the roaring child sitting on her lap—and asks: And what about you, then, what are your plans for the summer holiday?

She hears singing from the common room. Linn opens the sliding door. The red-haired substitute, sits on a pillow with the guitar on his lap. The kids jump around him, hanging on every word when he gets to the chorus: Rock ’n roll, fish balls, meatballs and mutton!

She can never remember his name, and he’s been there too long now for her to ask him. Niklas remembers everything: the name of all the children there, which parents they belong to. He can come home with Billie and say: We went with Liv to the store today, she was getting ready to have her grandchildren over this weekend. And she said, Liv? He replied, Yes, the one who actually works at Maurtua Nursery, but often visits Solstua in the morning. You know who Liv is, don’t you?

Billie slips out from behind the bookshelf. She dances across the floor with her arms rotating, while a younger, white-haired girl tries to imitate her movements. Linn can still be dumbstruck by seeing her like that, engrossed in everyday life and the games she shares with someone other than Niklas and her. The white-haired girl sticks her tongue out between her lips as she concentrates on rotating her arms, before her gaze lands on Linn at the door.

“Billie,” she shouts, “your Mum’s here!”

Billie turns round and her face lights up.

“Mummy!”

She flies across the floor, past the wall with the kids’ drawings of what they imagine themselves and their parents to be, past the shelf unit with egg cartons filled with cotton and garden cress, past the box on the floor with sixteen different water bottles, all of them with name tags, and throws herself at Linn, wraps her arms round her neck, her legs around her hips, such bodily abandon. Linn has to balance herself against the wall.

The substitute sees them and smiles, putting down the guitar.

“Okay, kids!” he yells. “Time to clear up!”

Billie talks nonstop as she walks in front of Linn to the cloakroom; a disjointed recount of the trip today, something about a squirrel that turned out not to be a squirrel. Linn manages to slip the new light-up shoes on her as she talks, pulls her cotton jacket over her arms, and buttons it without Billie protesting.

“There,” says Linn. “Now all that’s left is the backpack.”

She lifts the red backpack off the hooks, the Moomin reflector dangling from the zipper. Linn holds it towards Billie, but she just shakes her head.

“You carry it,” says Billie.

The door out to the hallway opens. A father enters. Linn can’t remember if she’s seen him before, but he smiles, first to her, then to Billie.

“Hi, Billie,” he says.

“Julian’s in there making Perler Beads,” says Billie.

The father laughs.

“My God,” he says, looking at Linn. “The things they catch on to.”

His eyebrows are close together, almost a unibrow; he looks like the man from the couple whose home Linn was at earlier today. The woman told Linn they had just moved into a new two-bedroom apartment, it had recently been renovated by the previous owners, but she and her husband still wanted to *do something different with the place*. As she showed Linn around, the man with the almost-unibrow stood silently by the window, his arms crossed. When he finally opened his mouth, he looked at Linn and said: What do you think is *in* nowadays?

Linn answered as she usually does, that she couldn’t care less about what is *in*, that she’s more concerned with what they like, what they want to see. The woman said: We need a proper dining table here, at least! It turned out that they wanted to fill up most of the open kitchen with a dining table, the bigger, the better. When Linn said, Do you often have visitors? Do you often have parties of twelve around the table? they grew silent. Linn thought, they’re turning against me. Sometimes, people welcomed her into their home believing that she would *fix everything*, lift them out of their humdrum existence, save them, in a way, but when she asked questions they didn’t like, they began to turn against her. Maybe we could have a smaller table here, the man said, and an extra table in the store room? He was visibly proud when Linn said that was smart. He laughed and lifted his almost-unibrow, and afterwards, he agreed with her about moving the large closet to a different wall to improve the line of sight through the apartment. We’re on the same wavelength, he grinned at Linn, but now, the woman stood over by the wall with *her* arms crossed. Always remember: balance, Linn said to herself, don’t take one side or the other! Like a fucking marriage counsellor, she thought. This is how I operate.

The father places his laptop bag in the space marked Julian, the name clipped out of orange and black cardboard in a tiger pattern. The father opens the door and goes into the common room.

Linn holds the red backpack up to Billie again.

“No,” says Billie.

“Yes, Billie,” says Linn. “You carry your own bag. We agreed.”

In truth, she cannot recall any such agreement, but Billie doesn’t care about such details. She simply refuses to carry the bag.

“I won’t,” she says.

“Stop it,” says Linn. “Come on, now.”

“No,” yells Billie. “I don’t want to!”

Choose your battles, Anne Mari is always saying. She has three daughters, all of them obedient and slightly overweight, not that anyone speaks openly about that.

“It’s not fair!” yells Billie, stamping her foot in a comic-book sort of way. Linn feels her stomach rumble. Lunch was a long while ago, and it’ll be a while yet until dinner; she can’t handle a scene right now.

“Not fair?” says Linn. “How is it unfair to carry your own bag? Look at the big bag I’m carrying. If I have to carry your bag too, that means I’m carrying two things while don’t carry anything. Don’t you think *that’s* unfair?”

It sounds hollow. Billie looks at her blankly.

“I think your mum’s right,” says the substitute.

He’s standing behind them, leaning against the door frame with his hands in his pockets, looking at Billie.

“Right,” Billie imitates him. “Right a smite.”

“Right all night,” says the substitute. “Right in flight!”

Billie laughs.

“But naturally,” says the substitute, “if you’re *unable* to carry your own bag, if it’s too *heavy* for you, well *of course*, Mummy’ll have to carry it for you.”

He takes a step into the cloakroom, crouches down and picks up a sock from the floor.

“Me, for instance, I’ve had to carry lots of bags today, since of course the *littlest* ones can’t be expected to handle such a big load all by themselves.”

Billie sucks her lips inside her mouth while staring up at him with big, green eyes. Then she turns to Linn:

“Give me the bag, Mummy!”

Linn wants to thank him, or at least give him a knowing smile, but he’s not looking at her, just gives Billie a high five before leaning forward and putting a hand up to her ear.

“And if you hurry out,” he whispers loudly, “you won’t have to stick around and help clean up.”

Billie hurries to fasten the loop of the backpack on her chest. The substitute goes back into the common room.

“But hello,” he yells, “has *no one* started cleaning up just yet?”

Billie giggles softly and gives her hand to Linn.

“Come on, Mummy,” she says. “Let’s go!”

The palpable sense of relief each time they leave the cloakroom, out to the hallway, without too much fuss, when neither her nor Billie lose their composure.

“Nice work,” says Linn.

Then she remembers how Anne Mari was saying you shouldn’t say things like *nice work*. It’s no wonder we have a generation so racked with performance anxiety and perfectionism, she said, when the highest compliment they receive growing up is *nice work*!

A tied-up white bag is on the floor by the exit, probably full of nappies.

“Look!” says Linn, pointing. “What if there’s poopie in there?”

She’s trying to keep up the tone of the substitute. That is, appealing to Billie’s sense of being a *big girl*, in contrast to what she’s outgrown. But Billie’s not listening to her because she hears something else. She stops, turns, and looks down the hallway leading to the two toddler rooms.

“Yay!” she says. “It’s crash mat time!”

Before Linn can react, Billie’s let go of her hand. She dashes back past the door into her own cloakroom and on down the hallway. The soles of her shoes flash as she rounds the corner.

“Billie!” Linn shouts, but she’s already out of sight.

The big, blue crash mat is pulled out from the pillow room and laid down on the floor in the hallway, in front of the wall bars. Three kids from the toddler room are queued up neatly, queued up a metre away from the mat. A mother and father wait patiently with their jackets over their arm while a young assistant directs the kids.

“Isa,” she says, “now it’s your turn.”

The first girl waddles over to the crash mat. She’s around two, has cute curls and a sunflower hair slide. She hops onto the crash mat, landing on her knees. Her parents clap exaggeratedly while squealing: *Oooooh!*

“Beautiful, Isa,” says the mother. “What a beautiful jump!”

“Nice work, Isa!” says the father.

Billie climbs onto the crash mat before the other girl has a chance to come down. She’s wearing her backpack and her shoes flash as her feet sink down into the soft foam.

“Billie!” Linn yells as she rushes over. “Get down from there!”

The father sees Linn as he lifts his daughter from the crash mat with a protective hand behind her back. The assistant smiles at Billie; it seems like they know each other.

“You may also have a turn, Billie,” she says. “But you have to take off your shoes, and you have to wait your turn.”

“We were just on our way out, actually,” says Linn, but her words are drowned out by Billie in her glee.

“Yay! Jumping!”

“One jump, and that’s it,” says Linn. “One jump!”

Billie jumps down from the crash mat, throws off her backpack, kicks off her shoes, hurries over to stand behind the other two who are queued up.

Her stomach rumbles. It’s so hot in here. One sweats like nowhere else, picking a kid up from nursery school. It’s Billie’s turn. She takes a few steps backward to pick up maximum speed, runs forward and leaps, landing on her belly on the edge of the mat.

“Wow,” says the assistant.

“Okay, let’s go,” says Linn.

She feels the sweat trickling down her bra. She should really take off her jacket, but no, that would signal that they can stay even longer. Linn tries to catch Billie’s eye, but she scrambles off the crash mat and heads to the queue again.

“No!” says Linn. “Billie, come on!”

Billie doesn’t listen. She positions herself neatly at the back of the queue.

 “Just one more jump, okay?” says Linn. “Are you listening to me, Billie?”

She’s aware of the father watching her, his daughter still on his arm, the mother standing close by. This excessive parenting: always has to be the *both* of them coming to get their kid. Why can’t they just grab the sunflower kid and head home?

A little boy starts to cry after falling flat on his nose, the assistant rushes over, and then it’s Billie’s turn. She takes a big jump, turns backward in midair, and lands on her back, raising her arms to the ceiling in triumph.

“Great,” says Linn. “Now let’s go.”

Billie turns over on her belly and props her head on her hands while she squints at Linn.

“Let’s go,” says Linn.

Billie sits up calmly, before promptly jumping down from the mat and returning to the back of the queue.

“No,” Linn yells. “No, Billie!”

She walks after her, almost tripping over the light-up shoes on the floor. Billie screams as she seeks cover behind the two others, who also begin screaming happily at what they perceive to be a big game.

The sweat keeps dripping down the small of her back, reaching the edge of her skirt. Linn stretches her arms toward Billie, but she slips away.

“Hey, listen!” Linn yells.

The little boy on the assistant’s arm stops crying and looks at Linn fearfully. The assistant, too, looks at her, as do the parents. Linn gets hold of Billie’s arm, but she manages to wriggle free and throw herself against the mat out of turn, not that it matters at this point since there’s no queue and everyone is just looking at them. Linn chases her, sinking down to her knees while stretching across the mat, Billie screeches and pulls up her legs, Linn just manages to get hold of one leg, pulling her across the mat with a swishing sound as Billie is dragged over the plastic cover, but Billie just laughs, laughs in her face like a rude teenage daughter, Linn tightens her grip and feels her nails dig into Billie’s tights as the whine turns into a scream, and Billie’s eyes turn damp. Linn lets go.

“Mummy,” Billie whimpers. “You pinched me!”

Linn’s voice is strong and ostensibly steady as she lifts Billie up.

“You’re a big girl now. You need to learn to listen.”

The father has to get out of the way to let them pass. He strokes the sunflower kid’s back constantly while looking at them. Billie lies limp, wailing over her shoulder. Linn almost loses her balance as she bends over to pick up the backpack and the shoes.

“Thanks for today, everyone!” yells Linn as she hurries to the door. Billie kicks her feet, trying uselessly to get free. Linn feels everyone’s eyes boring into her back.

Just as Linn can pinpoint the exact moment she realized she was losing her beauty, she knows exactly where she was when she discovered that she had it. It was the summer right before lower secondary. They were at the campsite in the south of Sweden, where they had vacationed every year for as long as Linn could remember. Everything was like it was before; the same rented caravan, the same lemonade powder, salt liquorice, gummy cars at the kiosk, the same cold water in the showers, even the weather was the same as always; unpredictable, but nice enough that your shoulders got sunburned, and for Mayliss, Linn’s mother, to pull down the edge of the neon pink bikini bottom and show off her tan lines.

What was it that made this summer seem so different? In the beginning, there were only small differences, new discoveries that only she knew about. Linn noticed it the very first night, lying with her little brother in the narrow bunk, her head at the top of the bed and his head at the foot, the way they always lay there. What’s that smell, she whispered, because there was a faint odour of mould from the upholstered wall. It smells the same as always, mumbled Stian, nearly asleep already. She could hear her parents’ voices from the drive-away awning as they sat smoking with other holiday-makers, the bottles of *stärköl* clinking. Linn listened to her mother’s laughter and thought, was it always that shrill?

The next day, as they ate breakfast, she sat staring at her father’s hands. Workingman’s hands, he used to call them with a peculiar pride, big, rough clobberers with black streaks under the nails that never went away, no matter how long he stood and scrubbed. It’s not dirt, whatever Leif has under his nails, his mother once said when Linn asked. Those are the hands of a real, hardworking mechanic! His father grinned proudly as he held out his hands. Listen to your mother, Linn, he said, your mother is always right. Linn had also felt proud at the time, on behalf of her father. Now, she looked at those hands helping themselves to yet another fried egg, the thick, blunt fingers squeezing the tube of caviar, poking a hole in the yolk of the egg before drenching it in ketchup, and she felt something akin to disgust.

Kenneth, her brother who was four years her senior, rented a moped and left with some new Swedish friends. When he returned, it was almost night, and Linn was awake inside the caravan, hearing their voices out in the awning. Is that liquor on your breath, Kenneth? said her mother. Her father said, Leave the boy alone, Mayliss! Restless and hot, Linn kicked off the quilt and sat up on the bunk. It was then she saw the stain in the bed. It was time. It was a week until she turned thirteen.

On her birthday, they went out to eat at a new restaurant down by the harbour. The menu was only in English, annoying her father, who lifted the beer glass with his black-stained hands and said, What kind of fucking vanity is this, getting even angrier when Kenneth offered to translate straight down the menu, dish by dish. The waiter was also speaking English. He was in his mid-twenties, with a white shirt and clean hands. When he heard it was Linn’s birthday, he brought a rose and placed it behind her ear. It tingled, all the way from her neck down to her ass, as his hand slid over her hair. Alright then, said her father, that’s enough, mister. The waiter smiled at Linn as he pulled his hands together. Happy birthday to a beautiful lady, he said. The father leaned over the table and said, in his best English, She is not a lady, she is twelve! Thirteen, said Linn.

She walked past the restaurant every day for the rest of the trip. Once she even went in and asked if she could use the toilet. But she never saw that waiter again. She believed he had seen something in her that no one else could ever see. When they returned from summer vacation and school was starting up again, none of her pants fit. This won’t be cheap, her mother sighed, eyeing Linn from head to toe, taking in the body that only a moment ago had been gangly and flat. We better go to the store, said Mayliss. You’ll need a bra, too.

They all turned after her when she entered the schoolyard the first day of school that year, in her slender 501s and in a mint green top with neon print, *Treat ‘em like boys. They’re only boys*. Everyone stared: the girls in envy, the boys in lust. She’s one of those who can choose from the top shelf, the mother remarked to her father that autumn. They didn’t know Linn was at home; she stood on the stairs and listened, trying to interpret her mother’s tone, whether it was irritation or pride, perhaps envy. Top shelf, Mayliss repeated, standing with her back turned, peeling potatoes by the sink. Leif put his arms around her. Linn watched through the railing as Leif laughed and stroked his huge hands up and down Mayliss’s apron. She takes after her mother, he said.

Once they have left the nursery school and crossed the parking lot in the direction of the store, it’s as if nothing has happened. Billie walks calmly next to her with the backpack on her back, being led without protest. At first she is quiet, with an inscrutable gaze that seems somehow turned inward, then she begins to hum. It begins as a low chant, before turning into song; Billie jumps beside her, waving her free hand while howling at the top of her lungs: Norway in red, white and blue—for me and you!

And it is this, Linn thinks—the fact that her state of mind can turn so quickly, from a seemingly bottomless despair into such lightness—it’s this that makes everything so confusing, and why it is difficult to take her outbursts seriously.

“Mummy,” says Billie. “I know where my voice lives.”

She lets go of Linn’s hand and stops, puts her fingers over her voice box, says aaaa.

“There,” she says. “That’s where it lives.”

“Nice,” says Linn, “but we have to go.”

“Do you have one too, Mummy?”

“Everybody has one.”

“Everybody?”

“We have to go to the store. Daddy forgot to get something.”

Linn expects a protest. In a way she’s almost hoping for one, an opportunity to set her in opposition to him: *It was your father who forgot to buy something, it’s his fault*. Or something she can use against Niklas later: *You should’ve seen the way she protested, it was a nightmare*. But Billie just nods and slips her hand into Linn’s, skipping beside her on the pavement.

“Mummy?”

“Yes.”

“Are trolls real?”

“You know they aren’t.”

“But are they pretend?”

“Pretend?”

“Yeah?”

“Well, I suppose they are.”

“And there are other people named Billie.”

“Yes.”

“Where do they live?”

“There’s no way I can know that.”

“Why not?”

She feels a tug on her arm when Billie stops. She stares up at Linn, her eyes so dramatically wide it almost seems affected, but it isn’t. At this age, every expression is real. When does that start, thinks Linn; when do they start putting on airs and being self-conscious?

“Look,” says Linn, “a flag.”

She points towards the apartment block behind them, where a flag has been planted in a window box on a balcony.

“Woah!” yells Billie, “a flag!”

She is so easily diverted, so easily excited. One day this will all change, too. Billie leans her head backward while she smiles up at the flag, before taking a deep breath and launching into the national anthem, or the Norway Song as she’s called it ever since the nursery school ran through the whole repertoire of patriotic songs during the month of May.

A red van comes cruising down the hill. It’s not going very fast, and Linn can see that the eyes of the driver—a young man—are fixed upon Billie. Nonetheless, she cries, “Here comes a van!”

Billie cuts the song short and leaps toward the edge of the road. She has Niklas’s body type. Every day Linn sees him in her daughter, especially the way she moves—her agility, energy, quickness— along with the obvious, the eyes, the curly hair. She doesn’t see herself in Billie at all.

“You watch out, too, Mummy,” says Billie, pulling Linn towards herself so that they’re almost standing in the ditch. “We’re safe here,” says Billie, her eyes glued to the red van.

When Billie was born, all everyone could talk about was how much she resembled Niklas. The midwives, his mother, Benedikte and all the others who came to visit after she gave birth. Niklas said it purely biological. He spoke of the animal kingdom; something about the male needing visible signs in order to recognize the traces of himself in the offspring. He would talk about that every time she cried during those first months. He found an item on the Internet too, while she sat trying to breastfeed. It says here, he said, pointing to the screen, it says it’s a matter of biology, so don’t stress. She yelled, I’m sitting on a fucking inner tube, with bleeding nipples, and you think *that’s* why I’m stressed?

The van goes past them slowly. The driver looks at Billie. She stands still, following the van with her eyes while scratching her elbow.

“See, Mummy,” she says. “Now we won’t be run over.”

Linn had been so relieved when she found out it would be a girl. Although he hadn’t said so, she suspected that Niklas had been hoping the same. He already had Isaac. A boy would make Linn another woman who bore him a son. Instead, she could be the woman who would give him a daughter. Ridiculous, of course, but that’s how she reasoned. Besides, the thought of a son seemed so strange. She was convinced that a daughter would feel more natural than a son, would be easier to love.

“Mummy,” says Linn, “would you be sad if I died?”

She steps out of the ditch, looking after the van as it turns the corner down by the rubbish bins.

“Of course,” says Linn. “Why do you have to ask that?”

“So sad you would cry?”

“Of course I’d cry.”

Billie turns toward her, her green eyes glittering. Niklas’s look; the way he had looked at her.

“But I won’t die.”

“No, thank goodness.”

“But when I’m old I’ll die. But by then I’ll probably be so tired.”

A lady, well past her prime, wearing a loose-fitting khaki dress under an open fleece jacket, comes towards them. She looks first at Billie and then at Linn with a knowing look, signifying the universal community of parents that crosses generations and national borders.

A few weeks ago, Linn passed a homeless woman on the street. She was sitting on a folded newspaper outside a kiosk, jingling a few coins in a paper cup, and on the ground in front of her lay a blurry photograph of some children. *Mama*, shouted the woman when she saw of Linn, holding the picture of the kids up to Linn: *Mama, please, mama*!

Had she taken a wild guess that Linn was a mother? Or was Linn’s motherhood so obvious that she revealed it even without the visible evidence of a child in her arms or a pram or a bag of nappies? And is it, Linn thought, that motherhood makes me easier prey, a more generous giver? The thought that *we mothers support each other*; was this not an insult to the childless, the child-free, and their capacity for charity?

The fleece lady stops in front of Billie, bending forward while resting her hands on her knees.

“My goodness, look at those shoes!”

Billie looks at her feet.

“They flash.”

She starts hopping up and down. The fleece lady laughs. Her own shoes are broad, brown sandals that reveal far too much. Pale folds of skin bulging out of the leather straps, prominent toenails, calluses.

“Look!” yells Billie as she jumps up and down with her legs pressed together. “Look now!”

The lights flash all along the soles of her shoes: yellow, orange, red. The fleece lady claps her hands enthusiastically.

“Just magical,” she says. “Do you think they make those in my size too?”

Her khaki dress reaches just below the knees, right where the legs have the most flesh on them. Her figure resembles nothing so much as a burlap sack, wide and amorphous, the breasts sagging under the fabric, heavy and shapeless. Is it really true, Linn thinks, that at some point you simply stop trying to accentuate anything good about your appearance, you just let go and give up?

Long ago, in the shared flat, after they’d suffered through three weeks on weight-loss formula—choking down these nauseating cocoa drinks three times a day while constantly fantasizing about food, all in order to get into some skin-tight sequin dresses for New Year’s Eve—Nina said: When I turn seventy, I’m gonna throw in the towel; just lie down and watch TV and eat exactly what I want, all day. Just imagine how fucking great that’ll be.

She needs to get her legs waxed. Once you start letting go in one area, that’s when decay sets in. Once time, standing by the grill at the cabin, Niklas’s know-it-all brother was going on about some mayor of New York who had introduced a zero tolerance policy for vandalism and violence. The basic idea in the broken windows theory, he said, gesturing with the spatula while laying out the slabs of meat, is that once you start letting something as insignificant as a broken window slide, things get out of control.

Linn had sat in the shade under an umbrella and listened, on the hottest day of the hottest summer, six weeks until she was due. If you let things slide in one area, his brother said, that’s when you’re in for total decay. Linn had looked down at her swollen feet, barely visible under the huge belly where the stretch marks spread out like lakes on a map. It’s me he’s talking about, she thought.

“Time to go, Billie,” says Linn.

“Yes, listen to your Mummy,” says the fleece lady.

She winks at Linn; *between us mothers*. Billie waves to her, waving both hands as she shuffles backwards after Linn. She has an ability all her own to connect with people, to talk to everyone, to open up, so different from the way Linn was as a child. But it’s always temporary, never lasting. Last summer, when they were in Sicily, Billie had taken a liking to a Swedish girl the same age as her. They played together every single day, called each other besties, cried when they were had to go home to Norway in a heartbreaking scene with tears and everything. Linn had asked for her mother’s number—as she thought she ought to—but when they got home and she asked if Billie might want to call Tessan, Billie had looked at her in astonishment. Tessan? What for?

Her stomach rumbles. She shouldn’t go so long without eating. Billie shouldn’t either, since that’s the one thing she’s inherited from Linn: an unpredictable mood when running low on blood sugar.

“Come on,” says Linn. “Hold my hand, we’re crossing the street.”

But Billie’s made a discovery in the grass.

“Look!” she yells, falling to her knees. “An ant!”

She sticks her fingers in the grass, leans all the way forward on her knees.

“Billie,” says Linn. “I’m not joking.”

But Billie’s not listening. She bends her head and studies the insect in her hand, her hair falling down either side of her face, her neck like a narrow pillar up from the collar of her cotton jacket. It is important to be firm, not indulgent, Anne Mari once said as they talked about raising kids. It’s no wonder they never listen when the adults are so weak and ready to give in. Billie is sitting there, just a meter away, but what is she supposed to resort to now? Cajolement? Threats? Or brute force—just pick her up and carry her off under her arm?

“Billie,” says Linn, but it comes off limply, half-hearted, she can hear it in her own voice.

That sense of freedom in dropping her off in the morning, of carefully closing the gate behind her, being able to leave, knowing full well that Billie will be fine, and that now many hours await her, a whole day, free. Few other situations in life have given her that sense of freedom. Maybe one other time, when she first came to Oslo at nineteen; the irrepressible exuberance when she got off the train at Oslo S with two large suitcases and a belief in everything that could happen, everything that was about to begin. That was just before she crash-landed in a cramped and smelly dorm room in Sogn Student Village and walked around, painfully lonely, for three months at the Blindern Campus, until the day when Benedikte and the others came to her rescue with the shared flat on Collett Street.

Or when she had just got with Niklas and they went to New York. You’ve never been to New York? he said, shocked, but not in a judgmental way. Just a few weeks earlier, she had finally been introduced to his son as *Dad’s girlfriend*. They had all eaten spaghetti and meatballs around the table in Niklas’s apartment that Saturday, just like any normal family. The next day she had gone with them to the airport when Niklas was to walk with Isak to the plane taking him back to Petra in Stockholm. She sat in the car and watched them enter the large revolving door to departures, one large back next to a small back, a suitcase rolling between them, while she thought: Maybe I can be a part of this.

Well, now we have to go to New York, Niklas said, just the two of us. Three weeks later they were on the plane. He put his hand on her arm as they took off. She never got tired of looking at his hands; clean, strong, there was a calmness to them, a warmth all their own. You’re going to look good on that town, Niklas said, squeezing her arm. She felt so free. She had thought she might be able to accomplish what everyone else did: going on a city break with a boyfriend without feeling claustrophobic, able to stay in a proper relationship, as she sat in the dark, quiet cabin somewhere above the Atlantic and drank red wine with Niklas sleeping beside her. Then, for the very first time, she imagined she might be someone who could have children as well.

“Look!” Billie shouts, “it’s a whole family of ants!”

She laughs as she leans even further forward on her knees, the backpack slides down over her neck and comes to rest on the back of her head.

“Look, Mummy!” shouts Billie, “It’s *crawling* with them!”

Her enthusiasm is absolute. According to Niklas, it’s also contagious. Last week they were lying on the lawn together, she saw them from the balcony on the third floor, wriggling on their stomachs beside each other on the grass. They had been shadowing a worm, she was told afterwards. Niklas and Billie talked about it all through supper and bedtime: where the worm was now, who it liked to play with, how many kids it had. Linn hasn’t the patience for things like that, it feels fake if she tries, like when she was little and talked to her dolls in a loud, piercing voice, with the with thin l’s of an Oslo dialect.

“I’m leaving,” says Linn. She knows she shouldn’t say that, but she says it anyway. “I’m hungry, so you can just stay here with the ants, I’m leaving.”

Billie turns.

“Are you hungry, Mummy?”

“Yes.”

“Me too,” says Billie, suddenly accommodating again. She gets up and wipes her hands on the front of her dress, black earth staining the floral fabric. Linn doesn’t bother to comment on it. Her stomach rumbles. She’ll have to get a couple of bananas at the store.

When Nina’s youngest went into nursery school, she posted an update on Facebook: *Note to self: never pick up your kids on low blood sugar!* She received an avalanche of likes and hearts and smile emojis in the triple digits, and a long thread of affirmations: *I know EXACTLY how you feel!* Nina’s big sister, who stayed at home after they got number three, and who always used the term “mum’s heart” when she commented on posts, no matter what they were about, wrote: *Mum’s heart just had a good laugh!* A comment that got three hearts in different colours from Nina.

Linn had almost cancelled her dinner plans with Nina and Jon the weekend after, just because of that post. But she went anyway, arrived in a red dress and was placed across the table from a man she didn’t know. Niklas, he said, extending a hand across the table. While they ate, she could not stop looking at his hands. That’ll be six years ago this autumn.

They cut a diagonal across the road toward the store. The area in front of the entrance is lined with oblong stone slabs, and without letting go of Linn’s hand, Billie starts hopping from stone to stone.

“No stepping on cracks!”

A man in a jersey and cycling shoes is bent over, unlocking a bike. His legs are muscular, his long, curly hair hanging down in front of his face. Once she slept with a guy who had smoother legs than herself. He got upset when she laughed at him, explained that he was a cyclist and it had something to do with air resistance.

“You stepped on a crack, Mummy,” says Billie. “It’s not allowed.”

“Surely it’s not that dangerous.”

Billie takes on a contemplative look.

“No,” she says. “But getting a flagpole in your head, *that’s* dangerous.”

At the bike rack, the man straightens up. He’s younger than she thought, perhaps in his twenties. There’s a low click as one of his shoes clips into the pedal, and while he glides by them he throws the other leg over the top tube. He’s looking at her, Linn’s sure of it; he holds her gaze just a little too long.

“Isn’t it dangerous, Mummy,” says Billie, “to get a flagpole in your head?” He passes so close she can feel the air move, his eyes sliding down her breasts, her hips, her legs, all the way to her feet.

“Mummy?” says Billie.

The heat begins to spread throughout her hips. In the corner of her eye she notices how the young man looks at her over his shoulder, and hears the sound of the bicycle as he brakes.

“Yes,” says Linn, “it’s dangerous.” She stops. As she bends down to Billie, she feels her skirt tightening against her butt, the hottest ass of the year, the school’s longest legs, it’s so damn pathetic and she knows it, but the heat is radiating through her hips now, and she doesn’t need to turn round to know he’s staring at her.

“What is it, Mummy,” Billie says.

She looks up at her with her mouth open, her breath smelling faintly of liver pate, suddenly frightened. Linn smiles secretively, leaning closer to Billie.

“What do you say,” whispers Linn. “What if we just buy ourselves an ice cream?”

The store is large and hard to navigate. On the way to what she thinks is the produce section, they suddenly find themselves in front of the sweets; a huge installation of transparent plastic containers filled with sweets in all possible colours and with all manner of artificial flavours. A boy Billie’s age stands alone in front of one of the boxes, slips his hand under a lid, and grins as he pulls out an orange crocodile, but his mother swoops in with a shopping basket on her arm and grabs his wrist.

“Elliot, what are you *doing*?”

Billie stares silently at the boy as they pass. The crocodile is hanging by the tail between his fingers, only a few centimetres from the boy’s open mouth, but the mother holds on tight to his wrist.

“I want, I want,” says the boy’s open mouth, just before his tongue touches the crocodile’s head.

“It’s Monday,” his mother hisses, “and now you’re *stealing*!”

Linn watches as she tightens her grip on his wrist. The boy bellows, the mother stares helplessly at the dangling crocodile. What is she supposed to do? Put it back in the plastic box? Eat it herself? Put it in a paper bag and pay for it and throw it in the rubbish, right in front of her son’s nose to teach him a lesson?

Billie keeps her eyes on the boy while Linn pulls her away; both their arms are stretched out completely. They round one set of shelves and then another, before finally reaching the ice cream counter.

“Look,” says Linn, “look at all the ice cream!”

Billie looks up at her.

“Did that boy just steal?”

Her voice is low and meek.

 “No,” says Linn, “he’s just a little mischievous, don’t you think?”

She smiles. Billie does not answer. Linn points to the ice cream counter, and Billie’s eyes widen. Then she says, hesitantly:

“Well, it’s Monday.”

A young man walks up behind her. He has a six-pack in his hand, a hipster beard and striped Fred Perry polo. He looks straight at Linn, and his eyes linger a little too long before he lets them slide down, all the way down, then quickly up again with a little smile. She feels hot between her legs and all the way to her ass as he walks by.

“But we can talk like it’s Saturday,” says Linn. “Just for pretend.”

Billie chooses the biggest ice cream. Linn also gets an ice cream, finds the coriander plus a beer for Niklas on the way to the checkout, a ridiculously expensive little bottle with a fancy logo. An overwhelming generosity comes over her now; it has been a long time since she last felt it.

On the way to the checkout, they pass the sweets again. The boy and the mother are still standing there, the mother with an open paper bag in her hand, the boy eagerly scooping red fish into it.

“Not too much, now,” says the mother, “five or six, maximum, do you hear?”

Niklas thinks Linn is too inconsistent. He doesn’t say it directly, but she knows that’s what he thinks. All her empty threats, the unpredictability, it’s no good. Billie puts the ice cream on the conveyor belt at checkout. There is something solemn, almost tense to her movements.

“Thank you, Mummy,” she says. “You’re the best mummy in the whole wide world.”

She puts her arms around Linn, boring her face and the dirty dress into her skirt, stretching her fingers out, dirty nails and all. All that devotion, Linn thinks, and the power that entails. How do you hold back, resist the urge to give in, to just give them everything they want?

“Alright,” says Linn, pushing her away. “I have to pay now.”

As they walk home, Billie starts to sing again. They hold hands and eat their ice cream. Billie beams at Linn when she joins in the singing. “See My Dress,” “Long Long Row.” The clouds have cleared and a luminous expanse opens up in the sky above the apartment blocks as they pass. From an open window they hear loud music, Depeche Mode, “Just Can’t Get Enough”.

“Do you know this song?” Billie says in astonishment when Linn sings the chorus. “How do you know that, Mummy?”

Sixteen hours and thirty-five minutes. She had held out longer than anyone at the year 9 dance marathon at the Club. No one had realized the endurance she possessed, which enabled her to beat out both the handball girls and the track and field boys who were in peak condition. But it wasn’t endurance that made her continue, song after song, hour after hour. It was the looks she got. From those who had given up, from the many who came to the Club to watch, from that cute photographer from the local paper who came to take pictures. And the looks from the DJs, the three boys from upper secondary who alternated (since no one could play music for sixteen hours straight). But *she* endured, she danced, while everyone lay sprawled out in the corners, exhausted and sore, some of them groaning, others asleep. In the end she was the last one standing, the big dance floor and everyone’s eyes all to herself.

Billie squeezes her hand.

“That means: I love you.”

“Does it?”

Billie nods seriously. Linn squeezes back. Billie smiles straight ahead as she gnaws at her ice cream cone.

“Good,” she says.

“Now it’s gone,” Billie says, “the ice cream’s gone.”

She holds up her empty hand, spreads her fingers.

“You have some around your mouth,” says Linn, “Wait, I’ll get you a tissue.”

She stops to look in her purse.

“No,” says Billie, “I *have* a tissue!”

Her little tongue slides eagerly up and down the corners of her mouth, picking up every last remnant of chocolate. Linn laughs.

“Is your tongue a serviette?”

“Yes,” says Billie, and she laughs, too.

A food delivery guy looks at Linn as he passes on his bike, turns his head and looks over his shoulder. It looks like he’s smiling. She feels a tingling beneath her ribs, reminiscent of the feeling when she and the girls walked howling down Collett Street on their way to some party, tipsy and arm in arm, confident, invincible, convinced that the evening or life could bring them anything.

“There,” Billie says, pulling her tongue into her mouth again. “*Now* it’s all gone.“

The radio is on loud in the kitchen. The dinner is cooking, it smells like something Indian. Billie drops the backpack on the floor and goes inside the apartment.

“Your shoes,” Linn shouts, but Billie’s not listening. The radio is turned off, and Linn hears their voices from the kitchen.

“Millie!”

“My name’s not Millie!”

“No? Pillie, then.”

“No!”

“Silly?”

“Daddeee!”

Billie gasps for breath, she’s laughing so hard. Niklas always manages to make her laugh. Even in her worst moments of defiance and rage, he can find the words that suddenly turn everything round and make her laugh.

“I’m Billie!”

“Oh, so it’s *Billie*.”

Now they both laugh. Linn puts the keys in the jar on the shelf. A light bulb in the ceiling has gone out. Dim light brings out one’s beauty, she knows. She leans toward the mirror, lifts her chin, pulls in her cheeks slightly. She’s still pretty.

“Did you have ice cream?” asks Niklas.

“No?”

“You smell like ice cream.”

Billie giggles. Damn, Linn thinks.

“Linn,” says Niklas.

He comes out of the kitchen. It always looks so natural, the way Billie sits on his arm, like an extra body part. Billie presses her face against the hollow of his throat, the hair in the back of her head is tangled, like matted wool.

“Hey,” says Niklas.

“Hey,” says Linn.

He smiles. He has the nice blue shirt on.

“I just…” He points to Billie, lowers his voice, “Ice cream before dinner?”

“Just a little,” says Linn.

Billie nods into her father’s throat.

“Just a little Giant.”

“Giant?” says Niklas. “You ate a whole Giant?”

Billie pulls her lips into her mouth, trying to hold in the laughter, before it begins sputtering out.

“There was a situation beforehand,” says Linn, giving him a knowing glance. “Can we talk about it later?”

Niklas nods. She knows he won’t want to follow it up. He smiles quickly, looking at her head to toe as he puts Billie on the floor.

“Nice skirt,” he says.

Billie heads back to the kitchen. Linn turns to the coat rack, standing on tiptoe to hang up her jacket, tries to remember when they last slept with each other.

“What about your shoes,” says Niklas.

She turns to him. Niklas looks at her feet, smiles. Then she sees them. The blue plastic shoe covers.

“Did you walk all the way home like that?” says Niklas.

The covers are worn thin underneath, full of small holes, but the elastic is tight around the ankles. How could she not have noticed? Why didn’t anyone say anything?

“You must have got quite a few looks,” says Niklas, smiling, “walking around in those?”

Billie peeks out of the kitchen, holding naan bread in her hand.

“Nam, nam, naaan!” she shouts, laughing with her mouth full of crumbs.

“Hey,” says Niklas, pretending anger, “are you stealing? Do you *steal* food?”

Billie screeches and runs back into the kitchen. Niklas backs away after her while keeping his eyes on Linn.

“Sorry you had to go to the store—the food’s ready, at least.”

He slips back into the kitchen. Linn tears the blue plastic covers off her shoes, crumples them up. When she meets her own gaze in the mirror over the sideboard, it’s as if the wrinkles have become sharper along the mouth: two dark lines pulling the lips downward.