

THE HUM OF
CONCRETE

A NOVEL CONSTELLATION

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THE HUM OF CONCRETE

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Feeling Malmö

As you pull the blinds up and see the layer of powder covering the spidery limbs of the young beech outside your second storey bedroom window you know it will be a Sunday like no other. A quick glance at the thermometer confirms winter's sudden appearance and there is no time to lose. You know the city's winter is a fickle friend who would never think twice about leaving you wet and wondering in a pile of grey slush. You have to savour this day of crisp white and endless blue.

Breakfast is a quick affair. Convincing your friend to come along tobogganing doesn't take long. Finding stray gloves and beanies at the back of the wardrobe is another story all together. At least the toboggans are where you left them, jammed between a cupboard and the old sewing machine at the back of the attic. Instead of catching the lift, you almost run up the stairs. From this nine storey vantage the children playing down below look like colourful ants designing a mini city of their own. Their little feet have already made intricate patterns from doors to slides to swings.

Finally rugged up and ready to face the chill you enter the altered world outside. Squinting at the glare while adjusting the backpack, holding a thermos of hot chocolate and leftover homemade cinnamon scrolls from yesterday's family gathering, you venture across the expanse that was once the lawn. Your friend, who might just happen to be an anaesthetist with a great love of the outdoors, bombards you with loose snow balls and you laugh at each other's silly beanies.

The only people you meet are pensioners with dogs in tow or puffy-eyed parents chasing their offspring. They are all smiling and so are you. The first day of snow is too special not to enjoy.

It's a fair hike to Krogsbäcks *kullar* but the council workers in orange fluorescent vests have already sprinkled the footpath with gravel, making it passable.

You sing all the songs about snow that you can remember and make up new words for a few of them. When you pass a poor parent pulling a childful toboggan you create giggles as well as open-mouthed stares from the little ones. Your friend, who adores children, sticks her tongue out at them behind their parents' backs. One of the boys laughs so hard he almost falls off but is saved by his sister who grabs his overalls and pulls him back on board.

The sun tickles your face. You want to reach out and pick this feeling, keep it hidden forever safe from memory's corruption. There are still centimetres of snow covering the bushes and trees along the path. Two days from now it might all be melted and gone; two hours from now it will already look different, tainted and used. But right now it looks pristine. As if a star has sneezed.

When you reach the hills you realise your idea of tobogganing wasn't exactly original. Already miniature people in bright overalls are running up and sliding down all but the highest hills, screaming and laughing. So you head for the steepest hill with a light tremor in your bottom lip. Your friend looks at you curiously but you stride on, making foot holes in the deep snow. Once you reach the top, panting, you know why no one else has attempted this hill. Not that you have ever gone downhill skiing but this is kind of how you imagine it: like bungy jumping without being certain that the rope will support your weight. You take a couple of deep breaths, arrange the cushion to spare your sitting bone, glance at your friend who is getting ready next to you, pull your legs in and push off with both hands.

At first it's not as fast as you expected so you keep pushing with your hands but halfway down the toboggan picks up speed and by the time you reach the bottom you are screaming louder than any of the kids. You roll off the side and just lie there

listening to your own heartbeat, enjoying the sensation of crisp snow against your flushed cheek.

Your friend makes it over with a huge grin on her face. She slumps down on her back next to you and starts waving her arms and legs to make an angel. You turn over and do the same. When you stand up and admire your art you see two perfectly formed angels with wings just touching, as if holding hands.

Time and again you run up the two steepest hills and face your fears at the top. Once you hit a bump at high speed and the toboggan lifts off the ground. You have time to think that this can never end well, you're going to break your neck, then the toboggan lands right way up with you still desperately clutching the handles, laughing madly as it continues down the hill. A few times it does turn on its side and throws you off but the fall is always soft and most times you manage to catch the toboggan before it makes its way down the hill without you.

After what feels like hours of a strenuous workout at the gym, your stomach screams for cinnamon scrolls. Together with your friend you head for the back of one of the hills to get away from the bustle. You sit at the foot of the rise where long grass prevents tobogganing. The majestic shape of Hyllie water tower grows from the flat earth in front of you. You've always thought it resembles a space ship on a stick but your friend suggests an oversized mushroom. In the middle of a paddock which fills with poppies and daisies in summer it stands tall and proud, overlooking its city.

The sun caresses your face. You take off your gloves, your scarf and beanie and feel naked in the snow. As you close your eyes and bite into the doughy bun you smell a first whiff of the hot chocolate your friend pours into plastic cups and you know nothing else could ever taste as good as this moment.

I, BODIL

CLOUD WATCHING

It's such a beautiful day, I just want to run with my arms stretched out and scream like mad and embrace the world. Stefan laughs at me when I fall panting next to him. We lie on the lawn of his mum's house in Klagshamn sipping disgusting pina colodas Stefan has made without knowing how to.

We've been best friends for months, ever since we both sneaked a secret smoke behind the barracks at school and started talking. He's a great artist, comes up with all this new stuff. Sometimes I wish I had his imagination. I'm only good at doing things other people have taught me, things with clear rules like maths or physics. But it doesn't matter that we are different that way. We still have heaps of fun together. There's no tension between us. Ever. Not that there is between me and the guys at school either. Dad says I'm still too tall and skinny. I don't care. It's more important to have fun with friends, isn't it? Like today, the first day of the summer holidays. The first day of freedom.

Stefan points to the sky.

'Hey, look at that cloud! Looks like a boat, don't you think?'

I see what he means. Lying down like this the sky takes on a deeper shade of blue. The fluffy white patches resemble anything you want them to.

'Mmm. But now a huge dog comes from left field to gobble up the mighty ship.'

He takes another sip and turns to face me as he points straight up: 'Right. I reckon the one over there looks like me.'

The cloud looks like a woman with great big breasts.

I laugh. 'You're a stick insect.' I poke a finger into his protruding ribs. He's one of the thinnest guys I've ever met. 'Since when do you have boobs?'

'Maybe not that big.' He suddenly seems shy. 'But I do have them.'

'Yeah right. Come on, show us your tits!' I mock in a broad accent. We do that sometimes, pretend to be common.

When he starts pulling his t-shirt up I realise I don't want to know. Who cares what's in your best friend's pants or under his shirt as long as he can see ships in clouds and make disgusting pina coladas. It's like the first time you realise your parents actually have sex, not just once or twice but on a regular basis. You've always known it but the realisation is still a shock.

His long teenage fingers look alien against the red t-shirt. Small but fully rounded, a girl's breasts, they peek from his skinny hairless chest. The same size as mine. No, bigger. I can't believe I've never seen them before but I suppose I never looked for them. Never realised.

'Promise not to tell.'

'I promise.' Who could I tell? What would I tell them? 'But... what's...?'

'You mean, what's wrong with me? Don't know. There's nothing about guys with boobs in the Biology book, is there? I'm not a transvestite or a transsexual. I'm not gay...'

If the crowd at school found out, that's still what they would shout after him. My heart shrivels up at the thought of the taunts.

'Does your mum know?'

He frowns. 'Of course not. She'd think I was a freak.'

I can't help laughing at the absurdity of it all. 'So it's okay to tell me 'cause I already know that...'. The heavy air around us subsides as we smile at each other. 'Come here, you freak.'

We hug and dance around the garden, tipsy and dazzling in our youth. Whatever people around us think, we know that we are invincible. We'll never again be as perfect as we are right now. Clutching life and each other we tumble headlong into the pool.

Hours later, when we've dried off, eaten all the popcorn in the house and gulped another couple of drinks, Stefan suggests a ritual burning. He carts a cardboard box full of papers and photos to the back of the garden where we can't be seen from the street. I'm used to him doing unexpected things but I'm still curious about his intentions. Before he strikes a match I pull a handful of papers out.

'What's this?'

He looks at the pictures casually.

'Just some crap I did. Put them back, Bodil.'

There are photos of people from school with tears drawn from their eyes, pages torn from books, colourful collages. His art. Never quite good enough for himself. I throw it back in the box. Who am I to convince him not to burn it? I know him better than that.

But one single sheet of paper escapes the fold and falls on the grass. A simple drawing.

'That's me.'

I'm a bit shocked to meet my own eyes staring back at me from the page.

'Bodil, please. I'll do a better one for you, I promise.'

He throws a lit match in the box and tries to pull the drawing out of my hand. One corner is ripped off but the portrait is intact.

'It's good. Why can't I keep it?' I understand that he wants to cleanse himself and start anew but still...

He grins his Dr Evil grin and whispers, 'Cause it's mine.'

'For you to burn? No way. It's mine now.'

The mischievous light in his eyes dies down.

'I wanted to give you a better one. But you might as well take it.' He stares at the flames licking the inside of the box. 'I don't think I'll ever do another one.'

I look at the drawing. It really is quite good. My arched eyebrows, thin lips, high cheekbones, they are all there. Not pretty, but interesting, as Mum used to say when I was little.

‘Don’t be such a drama queen. It’s a nice picture but I’m sure you’ll draw another one when you’re ready.’

He just nods. I’ve lost him to the flames.

‘Stefan?’

‘Mmm?’

‘Do you want to talk?’

The pina coladas have made his moods so erratic I’m not sure whether I should expect him to laugh and give me a reply full of spark and wit or sit down with his head in his hands and cry. The wind catches a burning piece of paper carrying it over the fence to the manicured lawn next door. We watch it slowly die.

‘Let’s drink some more,’ he says and drags me to the verandah.

The sun has dipped behind the trees and there is a new chill in the air. I’m not sure that I should have any more to drink but at the same time I know I have to. We’re in this together. On the way to the toilet I pop the drawing in my bag. When I come back Stefan hands me another pina colada.

‘You know, you should learn how to make these properly.’

He looks surprised. ‘I didn’t think there’s anything wrong with them.’

We sip and look at each other. I wonder what it is that attracts friends to each other. We are so different yet we laugh at the same things. But now we’re not laughing any more. The boisterous, flippant mood of this afternoon is long gone. I’m not sure what to say next so I watch the fire and sip my drink.

‘Have you ever heard of people like me before?’

People like him? As I'm not sure what he wants to hear I shrug. 'What do you mean?'

'With breasts, I mean?'

I want to be honest. I want to say of course, what's unusual about that, but I can't. All I can do is mumble something about hermaphrodites, that some people just happen to be both female and male at the same time. 'I read in a book once...'

'I'm scared, Bodil.'

The hand holding his drink is shaking.

'Don't worry.' I reach out to hug him. 'I'll always love you.'

He looks at me for a long time, eyes black with fear and longing. In the end I have to avert my gaze.

'Not everybody's like you, Bodil.'

Of course he is right. I know bastards who wouldn't need an excuse like breasts on a guy to kick the shit out of him.

'But why? I mean...do you know what's happening to you?'

Stefan shakes his head. 'Not really. I feel like I've always known that I'm different. This has just proved it.'

The burning box and its contents are almost gone, a lonely glowing pile on the vast empty lawn.

'Let's go to town.'

Immediately, he perks up. The sparkle in his eyes returns.

'Good idea. Let's go!'

The Neighbourhood Watch person in me hasn't had enough drinks to ignore the embers so I hose the pile down before grabbing my jacket and another drink, which Stefan has cleverly poured into a coca-cola bottle for spill-free travelling. The taxi is already waiting.

We sing in the back seat. The national anthem, summer songs.

‘Let’s drive around for a while,’ Stefan says when we’re getting close to the city. ‘I’ll pay.’

‘Sure.’ My good mood has slipped back into my veins as smoothly as the alcohol.

We watch hordes of escaped students chase each other down the street. One girl’s long blonde hair makes patterns in the air behind her. I always wanted hair like that. Mine is the colour of vacuum cleaner fluff. A thin short mouse tail. But today I don’t care. Stefan drags me out of reveries by grabbing my arm.

‘I’ve got an idea.’

We’re going along Södra Förstadsgatan past Triangeln towards Möllevången.

‘Turn right here.’ He points. ‘Stop at Johanneskyrkan.’

In between the shopping centre and the school is an impressive church. Stefan pays the driver then walks over to a side door. It’s a nice church but I’m not quite sure what we’re doing here.

‘I have the key. Let’s take a look.’

I can’t believe it. ‘How come you have a key?’

He grins at me. ‘I’m a magic man.’

‘Right, but that doesn’t answer my question.’

With some difficulty due to the influence of pina coladas he puts the key in the lock and the door swings open.

‘Welcome to my humble abode,’ he says, stepping aside to let me in.

‘Honestly, Stefan?’

‘Honestly, Bodil...my granddad used to play the organ here. When he died no-one thought to ask for the key back. As simple as that.’

His triumphant look says it all. He's been here before. Warning bells are ringing in my chest but I decide to give in to the excitement of being in a forbidden space. The way it feels when you sneak into your grandparents' bedroom. Old, a bit hostile, smelling of used air. Quiet.

Stefan goes straight to the organ and starts playing.

'Are you crazy? People will hear us!'

'And? Why would that be so bad, Bodil?'

He keeps playing and I start wandering around, sipping my coke colada and touching the ornaments. Perhaps the music is only loud when you are actually in here. I really hope the police don't show up.

Just as suddenly as he started playing he leaves the organ behind and heads for a door at the back of the church. Without thinking, I follow. It leads to a narrow staircase winding its way up to the balcony and then further to the bell tower.

'Wow!' The view takes my breath away. Toy cars are parked along the roads on this patterned blanket that is Malmö. For the first time ever I see how cleverly constructed the city is. Like honeycomb, full of squares, havens where people live safely, surrounded by a network of streets, parks and squares. It could have been built with Lego.

'Look!' Stefan points to something undefined in the distance. 'My house.'

It's almost too dark to see things clearly.

'There's *kockumskranen*.' The gigantic landmark crane by the harbour stands out if you look the other way.

Patches of light start appearing as we watch. Street lights, star lights.

'Let's go out on the roof.'

I glance at him to see if he's joking. 'Why? The view is perfect from here.'

'Please, Bodil. Just for me.'

‘To save you from falling and breaking your neck, you mean?’

He grins. ‘That’s right.’

We wobble out on the roof, holding onto each other and the tower. It’s quite steep, falling away on both sides, covered in unsteady roof tiles. I start giggling. This must be one of the most stupid and fun things I’ve done in my entire life. I want to stretch my arms out and run and scream like mad and embrace the world just like this afternoon. Like before I knew about my best friend’s breasts and before I had too many pina coladas. Before I’d ever imagined looking down on Malmö from the roof of Johanneskyrkan. But I can’t run, only stand here and breathe the same air as my magical friend, forever joined in the memory of this summer night.

Stefan takes a few steps away from me and slips. Instinctively, I close my eyes. I don’t want to watch him die.

He doesn’t scream. Roof tiles rattle and the coke bottle bounces away as he slides. Then everything is quiet.

The alcohol haze between my real self and the one standing on the roof of a church in the middle of the night protects me from danger. In the second it takes for him to fall I have time to wonder why the haze doesn’t protect him too. I’m glad I rescued that drawing but ashamed that it suddenly crosses my mind.

Then I open my eyes and see that he is still alive, lying on his back looking up at the deep blue heavens. The clouds that were hours ago white cardboard cut-outs in the expanse of sky are now darker purple outlines surrounded by twinkling pin pricks.

Carefully, I slide down to lie next to him.

‘Put your head here,’ he says, patting his chest.

His heart beats as fast as a baby's. I can feel the curve of his breast against my ear. He smells of popcorn and alcohol. I want to hit him for scaring me but instead tears well up from deep inside. Stefan puts his arm around my shoulder.

'Life is so fucking unfair.'

I know I'm blubbering through my pina coladas, feeling sorry for myself as much as for him, but I can't help it.

'Look,' he says and points to a fluffy cloud that could be said to resemble absolutely anything. 'That one looks like me, don't you think?'

That second I know that I'll lose him.

Not tonight, not falling from the roof. Much more subtly than that.

But this moment will always remain ours. So we hold each other and smile at the boob-shaped clouds until Stefan suddenly needs to throw up his last pina colada and I can't help it but I just have to pull my pants down and pee. Afterwards we both laugh so hard at our blasphemous adventures we have to hold onto the tower not to fall.

'This is the best idea you've ever had, you know that?'

He nods. 'All things considered, I'm not that bad, am I?'

I look at him, pretending to be a judge at a Miss World contest. 'Maybe not,' I say. 'Pretty good over all. Breasts included.'

NASSRIN

LONEFALL

After the journey, the longing, the endless waiting for a smiling face. After the settling and resettling. The loneliness. The final official document arrives with a stamp of approval and a warm welcome to a cold, but new, country where—apart from this particular process—everything seems fast and efficient.

Nassrin looks at herself in the mirror. She looks different. Two years have passed since she kissed away her mother's tears one last time, since she held her baby brother in her arms and whispered blessings in his ear. Two years.

A neverending stream of days so much like one another you cannot be quite sure if a week or a month has gone by since you last made a statement or signed a declaration or were interviewed by the immigration department. The only constant in your life is the changing of the seasons. When you get up one morning the birch is flattened to the ground by the force of the wind and you know it is autumn. Three months or three weeks later you can hardly see the block of flats across the road through the milky white fog and you know it is winter. Spring arrives with snowdrops and crocus dotted along the footpaths. Summer an abundance of birdsong.

She steps closer to the mirror, almost touches her nose against its blurry image. Two years and her eyes seem deeper, her hair wavier, her eyebrows blacker. She traces the outline of her top lip, then the bottom. It makes her feel sensual. Always has.

She quickly washes her face with cold water and pats it dry with a towel. Two years. Her little brother Mustafa is a toddler now, Hicham a teenager, and she has her own little one on the way. Such a shame no one is here to share the good news. Nassrin walks across to the balcony, looking down at the playground between her eight-storey block of flats and the next. There is a fine layer of new snow on the railing which melts instantly when she places her hands on it. More big flakes land on

her cardigan and in her hair as she watches a group of children brave the weather. They chase each other, throwing snowballs, shouting and laughing. It's already April. The crocus have been replaced by daffodils. It should be spring but it seems she can't even count on the seasons to stay constant.

The crying of the kettle calls her back to the kitchen but she leaves the balcony door open to let fresh air trickle in. No need to worry about heat escaping. All is included in the rent, whether you like it or not, so Nassrin has the heating turned up high to get her money's worth.

Time to start preparing dinner. Mohammed will be home in a couple of hours and he is always famished even though she packs him a big lunch every day. She pours the tea and pats her rounded stomach. Just a few minutes of rest on the couch before the chopping and stirring begins.

The memory of her auntie's cooking wafts past as she closes her eyes and tries to push tiny legs away from her ribcage. The feasts she used to treat herself to in the kitchen when the others were all done eating. How the grease shone on her lips and she licked it off in front of the mirror with a tongue as pink as the next door neighbour's kitten's. Often she wishes she hadn't accompanied Mohammed to this place but when she reads her mother's letters she knows nothing has changed back home and starts hoping the rest of the family will join them here in this cold country instead.

Just as she feels the room slip away the brutal signal of the phone pulls her out of her brief dip in the sea of dreams. Rolling over on her right side she can reach the phone without having to swing her legs off the couch. 'I'm so heavy,' she thinks. 'How am I going to manage another month?'

She answers in Swedish. Can't be family on a Tuesday afternoon. The person on the other end of the line starts laughing, a gurgling laugh that Nassrin has heard a thousand times before.

'Hey cousin, what language is that? Sounds like you're singing.'

'Asha. Where are you?'

'I've moved to Australia.'

Nassrin takes a deep breath and tries to imagine what it would be like to be Asha. Always cuter, always faster to come up with excuses why she hadn't done her homework, always smiling.

'What's it like?'

'Oh, Nassrin, it's beautiful.' A slight pause. 'But I still want to go home.'

'When did you leave?'

'A week ago.' Asha doesn't sound like she is smiling any more.

'Perhaps you should give it some more time,' Nassrin suggests cautiously.

'What's it like where you are?' Asha asks in a small voice.

'Well...'. From the couch Nassrin can see through the open balcony door that it is still snowing. '...it's not bad.' She looks around the tastefully furnished flat and realises that, indeed, she likes it. It's her home. 'You'll learn to love your new country.'

'At least the weather is good,' Asha says, as if reading Nassrin's thoughts.

'How is Hamid?' she asks reluctantly as she traces the outline of her top lip with her index finger.

Asha was married six months ago to a successful businessman who also happens to be Nassrin's first love. Her mother sent her all the details of the wedding and even

a photo of the happy couple. She never mentioned Australia. Perhaps she didn't even know.

'He works all the time. I hardly see him.'

'He's a good breadwinner.' Nassrin tries hard to sound sympathetic, remembering his soft eyes along her body, the unspoken words of promise that could never be delivered. 'You love him, don't you?'

'Of course. But what is love, anyway?' Asha muses. 'If you mean am I sitting at home patiently waiting, then yes, I love him.'

Asha isn't one known for her patience. Nassrin decides to drop it.

'How is your mother?' she asks instead, even though she knows her aunt's condition is stable.

'She's much worse. I fear I'll have to go home and care for her soon.'

While they speak, Nassrin realises that she misses this lost person in her life but also that having Asha any closer than she currently is would probably drive her crazy. She can still hear the children shouting outside, grounding her in this reality.

'Aren't you going to hear the pitter-patter of little feet soon?' After six months of marriage this is a legitimate question. God knows Nassrin herself has been asked more times than she cares to remember.

There is an edible silence. Nassrin takes a bite and savours the fruity flavour of vindication.

'Nothing yet, cousin. I'm beginning to worry...' whispers Asha.

Fruity turns bitter. Nassrin doesn't want Asha's pain on her conscience.

'It's not up to you. You know that, cousin. These things take time. God willing you'll have a baby by this time next year.'

'God willing...' Asha echoes.

From the direction of the balcony there is a high pitched scream which makes Nassrin's big stomach jump.

'Look, Asha, I need to see...sounds like something's happened outside.'

'Do you know how much this...'

Nassrin ignores her cousin's stingy comment, puts the phone down on the table and waddles over to the balcony. Snowflakes get lost in her eyelashes as she peers out. The white expanse is deserted. No more happily moving figures, only one immobile body left lying face down in the middle of the white expanse. It reminds her of the film she watched last night where the murder victim was dumped on a frozen lake. The girl's face is dark brown but around it is an aura of blood matching her red jacket.

Without sparing a thought for Asha, Nassrin gathers her skirt and pushes her stomach in front of her as quickly as she can to the door, slipping her feet into thick soled shoes and wrapping her coat around her as she opens the double lock. For a second she considers waiting for the lift then she decides not to. It's heartbreakingly slow, if it's working at all. She breathes heavily as she descends the stairs. The baby wakes up and starts doing somersaults. The smell of fried pork from next door makes her gag. Two flights of stairs can feel like two hundred when you're carrying the extra weight of a fattened calf on your shoulders or an unborn child in your stomach.

Outside the air is wet and smooth against her cheeks. She squints into the yellow afternoon. The snow glows. On the football pitch there is nothing apart from a patch of red. When she realises that the girl is gone she is relieved but at the same time strangely saddened. She didn't get to help. When she reached out, faith had already turned its back. But she still walks across to where the girl had been, only minutes ago, to the bloodstained snow, to make sure she really was there, that Nassrin didn't

simply imagine her. Her stomach makes it awkward but she still bends down to feel the snow on her fingertips. Questions avalanche within, collecting the debris of her brain. Who was that girl? Where did she go? Nassrin remembers the little black face motionless. Why didn't I get here sooner?

Suddenly she remembers Asha on the phone and hurries back in. When she has finally fumbled her way through the lift and her front door and panted her way over to the phone she realises even before she has spoken that Asha will no longer be there. The phone is a silent hole. How could she keep her waiting like that? What right does she have to treat her cousin so badly when she is calling all the way from Australia? She hears her mother reprimand her the way she would have, had she been close enough to watch over her daughter's mistakes. But she isn't here. No one is here. No one to praise what Nassrin does well or to teach her better when she needs guidance. She sits down on the couch, resting her forehead in her hands.

Please God, forgive me.

She realises that she should start cooking to get everything ready for when Mohammed gets home from work but she can't stop staring at the green balcony door. The draught has turned cold. She drags herself over to close the door, stopping for a moment to rest her heavy thoughts on the light snow. The children haven't returned to the football field or the playground. The deepening twilight makes the red patch look like a bottomless lake. In the young birch tree by the sand pit sits a blackbird singing about long spring evenings full of laughter and tumbling children.

The phone buzzes on the stained-glass coffee table.

'Asha, is that you?' she answers in Arabic, guiltily and joyously expecting the abuse to come.

'It's me, Mohammed.'

‘Oh, sorry.’ She mustn’t sound too disappointed.

‘I’ll be late.’ He sounds like he is being chased by dogs, the way he always does when he calls from work. ‘Don’t worry about waiting for me. Just eat when you get hungry.’

‘But...’

‘I’m sorry, Nassrin. See you later. I have to go now.’

‘Bye...’

She cradles the phone like a newborn, whispering softly into its deaf ear. But what about me? Something happened to me today. I need to speak to you; I love you; I’m scared. Please come home to me.

How long are minutes when no one counts the seconds? Ravenous pregnancy hunger finally forces her to start chopping the vegies. She will eat alone again tonight but soon she won’t be lonely any more. She tells herself how lucky she is and strokes her stomach as tears flavour the simmering casserole.

The knock on the door is so unexpected she burns her tongue on the spoon she is about to lick. Who could be visiting on a Tuesday night without telling her first? She peeks through the little hole in the door. Two years ago she had thought that hole was the strangest thing she had ever seen. Now she never opens the door without looking through the hole. A lady with wild red hair and dangly gold earrings smiles at her.

Nassrin opens the door slowly. ‘Hello.’

‘Hi. I’m Lena.’ Her smile broadens and she points to someone hiding behind her legs. ‘This is Estella, my daughter. We live on the sixth.’ She points upward.

‘Hello.’ Nassrin repeats, not quite sure what to say.

Then she notices that the girl is the one she saw from the balcony, the mulatto one who was bleeding.

‘You okay?’

The girl nods. She has a big colourful plaster on her brown forehead beneath the cascade of frizzy hair.

‘I think she’ll be all right. They were having a snowball fight,’ Lena explains. ‘It’s so icy now, she fell and hit her head. Passed out for a little while.’

‘I see you. Come down. You gone.’ Nassrin says to the girl. Her words echo through the desolate stairway. ‘You come in?’ She steps aside to let them in.

‘No, no. We don’t want to bother you. Just came to thank you for caring. The lady next door saw you go out. Pregnant and all... it’s so kind.’ The strange woman called Lena pauses and smiles. ‘Just wanted to show you that Estella is fine now.’ She ruffles her daughter’s big hair. ‘I’m baking a cake to make her feel better.’

‘Come in.’ Nassrin tries again. ‘Dinner almost ready. You stay to eat?’

‘It smells great but...’

‘No but. Please.’

Nassrin can feel the tears well in her eyes again. She doesn’t want to eat alone. She doesn’t want to let this girl go without feeding her. That’s the least she can do. She closes the door behind them and ushers them into the kitchen.

‘What d’you say, sunshine? Suppose we’re only gonna open a tin anyway?’ She pats her stomach and smiles apologetically. ‘I know I should eat better but I just hate cooking.’ Only now does Nassrin notice the bump, only half the size of her own but still clearly visible at the same height as the little brown face.

Nassrin meets the girl’s eyes and for a long time they just look at each other the way strange creatures from different planets do when they meet for the first time. When Estella finally smiles Nassrin knows that she has made her first Swedish friend.

A little girl with a missing front tooth, frizzy hair and a heart big enough to include all kinds of strange creatures.

‘Right.’ Nassrin fills a plate with coriander chickpeas, chicken wings and so much happiness she simply has to share it.

‘Let’s eat.’

SUSANNA

THE RAIN

The rain that day was a gift; an unstoppable, thin veil of relief. She walked through the empty suburban streets relishing the sensation of wet hair flopping against her cheeks. Anyone who happened to see her would think she was either mad or in love the way she smiled toward the sky. She was neither. Or perhaps both, depending on how you define these things. Her sneakers were filthy puddles and her scarf a soaked rag but her eyes were polished black indigo and they shone.

The love of music was her high. Thumping on her Walkman were dance tracks making her feet move to the rhythm while blocks of flats filed past. There was no better connection with the moment than this, no aloneness more comfortable than the one she shared with the beat.

‘Hey, Susanna! Wait up!’

One of those hard-to-get-rid-of girls from school appeared from behind a hedge.

‘Whatya listening to?’ She was shouting to make herself heard.

‘Music.’ Susanna didn’t take her eyes off the footpath.

‘Right.’

Susanna turned a sharp left onto the bike path.

‘Where ya going? You know there’s this party at my place tonight? You coming?’

‘Not sure. Maybe.’

‘You know my brother really likes you.’

Susanna looked up quickly to see if the girl was bluffing. Bruno was two years older and one of the cool guys.

‘As if.’

‘Too true. He’ll be there tonight. You coming?’

‘I said maybe.’ Susanna gathered her step to shake off the garrulous leech.

‘Okay. See ya later.’

‘See ya.’

The tape stopped but she didn’t turn it over. The rain had faded to drizzle and she was only a couple of streets from home. Her lonely euphoria was all but replaced by an irritable feeling of having misplaced something.

She sighed. As usual she had mixed feelings about the party and the people she knew would be there. On the one hand she usually had fun, discussing Hitler with some neo-nazi or Molly Ringwald with anyone who had seen *The Breakfast Club*. On the other hand she didn’t like all the aggression that surfaced when people had too much to drink. But she knew she would be convinced; if Sinna wanted to go they would hit the party together.

‘Sussie!’

She spun around to see who was shouting. The chubby eleven-year old next door who wanted people to call her Star (‘that’s what Estella means, you know’) and who always had her nose in a book.

‘Yeah?’

‘Nothing.’ The child looked away.

She wanted attention. Seemed like she hadn’t made many friends even though she’d been there for months now.

‘Sure?’ Susanna tried to be nice. She knew there was something wrong with Star’s brother but she didn’t know what. No one knew. He seemed normal enough, but rumours usually carried quite a bit of truth around here.

The girl smiled shyly: ‘Why do you walk in the rain?’

‘Don’t know. Suppose I like it.’ Susanna flicked her wet fringe out of her eyes.
‘Why do you read in the rain?’

‘Suppose I like it too.’

Susanna smiled. ‘Guess we’ve got one thing in common then... Star. See ya!’

‘Bye Sussie!’ The girl waved, then went back to reading her book.

In the lift on the way up Susanna studied her own face in the mirror. One eye was definitely bigger than the other and the braces made her look like a grinning robot. But she had a cute straight nose. Her lips weren’t too bad either. If only she could keep them shut around the railway. The lift stopped on the sixth floor.

‘Hi. Anyone home?’

‘Hi honey.’ Mum emerged from the toilet where she’d smoke in secret and spray insufferable amounts of air freshener since Dad banned smoking in the house. ‘You’re soaked! Why have you been out walking in the rain again? You’ll end up with bronchitis. I’ll run you a bath.’ It was the doctor and mother in her combining in frightful unison.

‘If you say so.’ Susanna wouldn’t admit to herself, let alone to her mother, that she liked her doting.

The tub was deep and overflowing with bubbles. As she sank in she could feel all the muscles in her crotch tensing and the hairs at the back of her neck tingling in anticipation. The mound of foam closed around her. The contrast between the whipping gale and the soothing suds was exhilarating. She’d always been in favour of extremes. One day when she was old enough she’d jump out of a plane and perhaps fly one too. The scariest rides at Folkets park were never scary enough. That special ringing in your ears when you’re as high as you’ll ever get, on top of the world, looking down onto the little people in their little houses with their little worries about

their little kids their little dogs or little gardens or little jobs or little holidays. Susanna knew she'd never be like them. Never.

'Phone! It's Sinna.' Mum always entered without knocking, trailing the extension cord behind her. 'Don't be long, sweetie.'

'Don't worry. Just remember to close the door, okay?!' Susanna grimaced.

Sinna was her usual glumly animated self. 'Howz things?'

'Horizontal.'

'You sick or something?'

'Just in the bath.'

'Smartass.' Susanna could hear her smile. 'Listen to this. Pella just rang and said she's going to Bruno's party. You wanna go?' Sinna was always up for a party.

'Whatya reckon? Who else is going?'

'No idea. The usual crowd, I suppose.'

'Maybe we should just take it easy. Watch a video, maybe...'

The line went quiet. Then Sinna started yelling at the other end: 'Fuck off you little prick! Put the phone down or I'll kill you!' Her brother was a most annoying ten-year-old. Sometimes Susanna wondered whether people were born that way or they just developed certain talents for annoyance along the way.

'So you want me to pick you up?'

Susanna wasn't sure if Sinna hadn't heard the video suggestion or if she simply ignored it.

'Come whenever you like. I'll be here.'

Quite frequently Sinna would have dinner at Susanna's on a Saturday night, sleep over and leave late on the Sunday. She lived in the block of flats on the other side of

the playground. From her bedroom Susanna could see Sinna's kitchen. They met at school every day but it was never quite enough, there was always something else that needed to be said. So-and-so's parents had found out that they were smoking dope, so-and-so had been picked up by the police for shoplifting, so-and-so was seeing two guys at the same time.

'Hey, gorgeous!'

Sinna wrapped her arms around Susanna's thin frame. Susanna was fiddling with a tape at the stereo.

'This is great. Heard it today on Tracks.'

There was something haunting about the song. The room filled with grey air, too thick to breathe. Sinna swallowed hard. She wondered why the songs Susanna listened to were always sad.

Susanna's hair was still wet and it fell down her neck, leaving the slightest gap before her jumper started. She didn't turn to look at Sinna. Two voices singing in unison. Sinna reached for that gap, touched the olive skin.

'You know you've got a spot here.'

Susanna's hand flew up to her neck in horror. She had never had a spot on her neck before. But sure enough, she could feel it, a small but definite bulge.

'Fuck fuck fuck.'

'Don't worry about it. It's tiny,' Sinna tried. 'You can always wear a turtle neck.'

'I'm not going anywhere. Have fun at the party.'

Susanna kept a straight face to see Sinna's reaction. Perhaps it would turn into a video night after all.

‘Yeah, right.’ Sinna hesitated for a second, seeing the mischievous flicker in Susanna’s nostrils. ‘As if you’d care that much. Don’t you think I know you?’

‘Okay okay. So what are you wearing?’

They both laughed, relieved and perhaps a bit sad too. It wouldn’t always be like this. Somehow they felt as if they were using tightly regulated time, borrowed moments from what would later become their real lives – studies, love affairs, jobs, families.

This friendship was only a shard, a sorrowful refrain sung by two voices in unison.

On the way to Bruno’s, Susanna snuggled her arm under Sinna’s and they walked like that, pressed tightly together, cheeks shining in the dusk.

The speakers were blaring Guns n’ Roses and the party was well beyond its initial stages of shy boys drinking *hembränt* in a corner and worldly girls giggling behind a wall of smoke. There were already unlikely couplings forming in bedrooms and on couches. Bruno was nowhere to be seen but his little sister greeted them waving a coke bottle.

‘Rum and coke. Want some?’ A wide grin appeared before she wafted off toward the kitchen shouting behind her: ‘Don’t move. I’ll get glasses.’

Sinna and Susanna stood around waiting. Slumped on the couch next to them were a couple of guys, Niklas and Fredrik, known for their irrational behaviour and their more than occasional drug abuse. They were deeply engrossed in throwing ideas and taunts at each other, getting more animated by the second.

‘Baseball bats?’

‘Yeah. I’ve got a butterfly.’ Fredrik flashed his knife around with a proud, steady gesture.

‘Who’s in on it?’

Someone on the other side of the room turned the music up and Susanna lost the thread in a shuffle of bodies bouncing in from the kitchen toward the cleared space on the living room floor, to head bang to Metallica. A couple of rum and cokes were planted on the low bookshelf next to Susanna and Sinna. It wasn’t the sister but the host himself who delivered them.

‘Howz things?’ The question was addressed to them both but Bruno lingered that little bit longer with Susanna.

‘All right. Cool party,’ she screamed back.

‘A bit loud, isn’t it? Wanna go out on the balcony?’

Now he was only addressing Susanna. Sinna wasn’t sure which foot to stand on but she didn’t have to choose at all. Susanna came to her rescue.

‘I think I’d prefer to just have a drink and check out who’s here.’ She took Sinna’s hand. Bruno’s smile was made up of perfectly kissable lips and slightly crooked front teeth.

‘See ya later then.’

‘See ya.’ And as the girls walked toward the kitchen Susanna turned around to look at him again. ‘Thanks for the drinks.’

‘Any time,’ he mouthed.

The evening rolled over on its back to show a twinkling sea of starry eyes. People were kissing, dancing, drinking, spilling and shouting all over the flat. Their white teeth stood out in the dim light like rays of sunshine on an overcast day. Susanna drank slowly but Sinna was already off somewhere getting her third drink.

The air was filling with the familiar smell of young lust barely hidden by sweat and perfume. Someone touched Susanna's arm as he pushed past and she felt a tingling in her fingers. Something was about to happen but she wasn't sure if that was inside or outside her body's parameters.

There was a flurry at the door, a mass of bodies swaying in unified action in her direction. And past. They walked straight in without taking their boots or jackets off. In their down armour they reminded Susanna of inflatable chooks, like the one she had for her fifth birthday. It had even had a repertoire of chuckles which could be activated by pressing its stomach. For a second Susanna wondered, would these guys cackle if she pressed their inflated fronts? Smiling to herself, she followed them out onto the balcony where a small crowd was gathered.

Susanna recognised Fredrik and Niklas with their wild stares, Slim and Bruno were here too and a couple of girls she didn't know too well, smoking dramatically, taking long drags on short cigarettes. Then there were the chooks. One of them started talking and gesturing with his arms at the same time.

'Those mother fuckers are just begging for it. Come on guys, let's get them!'

This was bad news. It happened quite frequently that loosely assembled gangs from different parts of the city decided that they hated each other, simply to get the testosterone flowing and alleviate the boredom of male adolescence.

'I've got a bat,' this one said and pulled it out from under his jacket, just to make sure everyone knew he wasn't joking.

His name was Tony, short for Antonio. Susanna remembered now. He was from Chile and spoke with slightly off-centred vowels, having picked up and extended the Malmö dialect. He had authority. Bruno listened to him too and she wasn't sure whether she admired or despised the influence he exerted.

Men are scared, she suddenly thought. That's why they always try so hard to hide behind muscles and insults. What has really changed since they played war with water pistols when they were ten? What will change before they're in charge of countries, still aiming for the heart but expecting the enemy to get up smiling and shoot again? Because, after all, it's only a game.

Her anger was so sudden and unexpected that coloured specks danced before her eyes and she had to grab hold of the jacket closest to her, which happened to be Tony's.

'Don't be silly.' She said it out loud—not to herself but to them. Tony and the three other chooks-turned-bulls turned to see who the brave mouse was.

'Hey, Susanna.' One of the bulls turned out to be Sebastian from her home group. 'What do you mean? Do ya know what they've done?'

'Hi Sebe. No, I don't. And honestly, I don't give a shit. What's the point of this constant fighting anyway?'

Sebastian looked to his leader for guidance. Tony ran his fingers through his long black hair. His gaze burnt.

'Someone has to defend Söderkulla's honour.' He paused to look around at the others to make sure they were catching on. 'And it sure as hell ain't you, is it?'

Sebe looked at Susanna as if to say *sorry he is just drunk and wild and he is actually a lot of fun to be with when he doesn't get these ideas in his head.*

'Had enough of girl talk, guys? Let's go.'

Tony swept past her in regal fashion with his entourage in tow. Bruno stopped in front of her.

'Hey, Susanna, what's wrong? Aren't you having a good time?'

‘Sure.’ She tried to smile. ‘It’s a great party.’ He was about to walk away so she reached out for his arm. ‘You’re not going, are you?’

‘Course I am, babe.’

She hated it when people called her babe, no matter how kissable their lips were.

‘So you’re just gonna break up the party to go looking for a stupid fight?’

‘Why should I? My sister’ll stay here.’ He studied her face, then swiftly leant forward and brushed her lips. ‘We’ll be back soon.’

Susanna knew that staying wasn’t an option. She ran in to find Sinna. Fredrik and the others were still recruiting followers in the flat but most people were too comfy on couches with growths of the opposite sex attached to their faces. Sinna was not around. Both toilets were occupied and now Susanna realised that she’d needed to pee for a while. She banged on the door and shouted that she was busting and would they please mind fucking elsewhere. Sinna opened the door immediately, fully clothed but clearly flustered.

‘What’s wrong, Suss?’

‘I need to go.’ She turned to the guy sitting on the edge of the bathtub. ‘Do you mind?’

Sinna steered the poor guy out and locked the door behind him. When she finally sat down, Susanna felt as if there was no end to her relief.

‘Let’s go, Sinna.’

‘But...I’m having a good time.’

‘I noticed.’ Susanna’s tone was shorter and less jocular than she intended.

‘Come on. Don’t you think I deserve a little bit of fun? Why don’t you get it on with Bruno?’

‘I’m serious, Sinna. They’re off to pick a fight with Holma. We should come along.’

‘Why?’

‘To stop it, of course.’

Susanna washed her hands and looked at her friend in the mirror. Sinna’s face was mushy but a knowing grin seemed to have been glued on by the intense lip massage just interrupted.

‘But they won’t find anyone anyway. Do you really wanna go out and freeze your butt off for their sakes?’

Sinna had a point, of course. But once Susanna had made her mind up, that was it. She was going, whether her best friend came along or not. Sinna knew this much.

Suddenly, Susanna weakened and kissed her friend’s cheek. ‘Don’t do anything I wouldn’t do, okay?’ She was only half joking.

Sinna rolled her eyes. ‘What could that possibly be?’

They both laughed and their hug was that little bit longer and harder than usual.

On the landing, Susanna could hear shouting from the lift on its way down. That meant the gang hadn’t gone far. Outside in the chilly January night were assembled a defiant group of eight warriors and two flag bearers in the shape of the chain smoking Barbie dolls from the balcony. Tony appeared from behind a bush.

‘All here? Let’s move.’

They swelled, a black wave of Doc Martens through deserted playgrounds and quiet suburban neighbourhoods. Susanna pulled her coat tighter around her but she wasn’t actually cold. The adrenalin kick was setting in. There was no denying it; the

simple thought of something, anything, happening was lifting them all, making their fingers less numb and their thoughts more fluid.

Bruno put his arm around Susanna's shoulders. She didn't brush it off but she didn't look at him either. He smelt of rum and Hugo Boss, not a bad combination all things considered. Ahead of them, in the light from the underpass between Söderkulla and Kulladal, Susanna saw a lonely figure. A middle aged man, alone, walking his poodle close to midnight must be about as sad as you can get, she thought. Let me never turn into him. Fredrik and Niklas must have thought the same thing as they hurried to catch up with him and wasted no time hurling abuse at the poor man.

'You fucking cock-sucker. You out to get it up your arse, fucking fag? You've come to the wrong place.'

The man didn't answer, simply stared at them, scared but defiant. The junkies were just about to push him into the bushes when Susanna and Bruno caught up with them. Everyone else was just looking on, waiting to see what would happen next.

'What are you doing? Cut it out!' Susanna was short but there's more to authority than centimetres.

The junkies backed off with a laugh. 'Just joking, right.'

The lonely man's eyes spoke of both relief and disgust. She could feel that he hated and pitied them at the same time—and she felt the same for him. She pitied him for all that he symbolised but she hated him for pitying her. No-one had any reason to pity her.

'Come on guys, I thought we're going to Holma.' Tony regained his composure and waved the group on.

All through Kulladal they ambled unperturbed and by the time they reached the underpass to Holma, Tony's spirits were soaring. He was the king of Söderkulla and

he was gonna kick some arse, no matter what. Susanna wasn't worried that they would find the other gang but there was a real risk of this wild group unleashing their frustration and disappointment on someone else. Like a lonely trenchcoat and his dog. She wriggled out from beneath Bruno's arm and asked Sebe how he was feeling about it all.

'Don't know really. Cool, I guess.'

'What's cool about attacking a man with a dog?'

'We haven't hit anyone, have we?' He smiled at her.

'Not yet,' Susanna said, more convinced than ever that there was a good reason for her coming along on this insane excursion.

Without warning, Tony kicked hard in the direction of a Saab. The wing mirror crumbled and fell like glitter into the gutter. Susanna looked away and kept walking. How anyone could ever come up with such a stupid idea, not to mention the execution of it, was beyond her. She had heard stories of Tony breaking into Lindeborgsskolan, stealing computers and tools, but she wasn't sure if it was true or not. He had once told a crowd at school how the police had taken him out to Bokskogen, beaten him and left him to make his own way back to the city.

'That's it.' Tony pointed to a set of swings and a slide in bright plastic. 'This is where they usually hang.'

'There's no-one here!' Fredrik yelled, as if that was somehow a surprise.

'Really?' Susanna wasn't good at hiding sarcasm. 'I thought they were all hiding their heads in the sand, just waiting to attack us.'

Bruno narrowed his eyes as if to say: 'don't push it,' but it was already too late. The wild junkie had her by the collar.

'I reckon you better shut that railway trap of yours or...'

‘Or what?’ Even though her heart was prickly with fear she couldn’t back down. ‘I’d like to know what you’d do to me.’

His pupils were shrinking as he shook her. She could smell his anger. The other girls shied away from the scene, glad that it didn't involve them. Then, as quickly as Fredrik had grabbed her, he let go and she stumbled backward almost knocking Tony over in the process.

‘What the fuck do you think you’re doing?’

‘But...’ Tears of rage were building behind Susanna’s eyelids.

Then she realised that Tony wasn’t talking to her. Instead he was all over the much taller junkie.

‘You never touch a girl. You understand? Never!’

‘Get off me, man!’ Fredrik flung his arms out in an angry but hopeless gesture. ‘Right, okay. But she’s a fucking nuisance that one, you know that.’

‘If it doesn’t suit you that she is here you can just piss off.’

Fredrik kicked an invisible stone. ‘Sure. There’s no Holma to slaughter anyway.’

Niklas backed him up. ‘This sucks. Let’s grab some wheels and get outta here.’

Susanna had heard about joyrides before but she had never been in a stolen car and she had no intentions of going in one now. She would never let Fredrik take her home on the back of a pushbike in the state he was in, let alone drive her back to Söderkulla in a car he could hardly handle when straight. Her life was more precious than that. Yet the others seemed to think it was a good idea and they headed towards Stadiogatan. Bruno cast a quick glance at her but decided to follow the junkies. The only one who lingered was Tony.

The streetlights spread eerie yellow circles. From a flat on the third floor escaped laughs and Public Enemy. All stars were hiding.

Tony kicked one of the lights. It faded, then died. The lump of repressed anger in Susanna's chest fell into her legs. The impact when her boot hit the next pole reverberated through her but this time the light didn't last. It just died.

Tony nodded, bemused. 'Didn't know you were that kinda girl.'

'So what kind did you think I was?'

For some unknown reason she was beginning to like his irreverence. He did things his own way and never apologised. The others were far ahead of them now, heading straight for a lonely Corolla.

'Don't know. Prissy, suppose.'

'And now it's turned out I'm not?'

'You've got a pretty good kick going.'

Susanna laughed. His eyes were sparkling, black indigo like her own.

'I've got a brown belt so you better watch out.' She hit him playfully on his padded arm.

'Is that a threat or a promise?'

Her cheeks blazed and even though she tried to she couldn't help showing him the railway line. 'You're a walking cliché, you know that?'

Susanna and Tony reached the Corolla, which Niklas had managed to hot wire, and they were all piling in. Bruno beckoned Susanna to sit on his lap but when she declined one of the other girls jumped at the chance.

'Come on Tony,' Sebe shouted from the back.

'I'll walk. See ya tomorrow.'

Susanna protested. 'I don't need your protection if that's what you think.'

Before she had even finished the sentence Fredrik stepped on the accelerator and the car swayed onto the road with a shriek of pain and excitement.

‘Hope they make it back in one piece.’

Tony and Susanna stood there for a while, watching the Corolla navigate the dead straight road, saying nothing. For the first time ever it occurred to Susanna that they looked alike, that anyone who saw them together could easily mistake them for siblings. His black hair was hers, her tanned skin his. They shared the poetry of difference. Or perhaps the curse of similarity.

‘Let’s go,’ she said ‘before the rain comes.’

Hearing Malmö

As you turn off the cycle path and ride through the narrow cobblestone alleyway you see the placards and balloons congregated in the middle of the square. Stortorget is abuzz with communal endeavour. There are dozens of children chasing each other between the rows of people beginning to get ready to march, to shout their hearts' desires: 'Six hour day, eight hour pay! What do we want? Jobs for all! When do we want it? Now!'

After parking your bike you are sucked in by the crowd, looking around for familiar faces, and there they are. Your mother, if she happens to be one of them, clutching a banner and a wide smile. Now the procession moves in tentative waves towards the beginning of the pedestrianised mall. The human cloud fills most of the narrow space, parts for the art work of the walking orchestra planted in the middle, is reunited and keeps moving. Slogans echo between the old buildings as you turn left at Gustav Adolf's square to continue along the cordoned-off streets toward Folkets park.

Lining the route are thousands of onlookers, some hostile, some supportive, but you take little notice. You are in a bubble of hope, a place where marching for a better world isn't an empty gesture but a privilege. A place where solidarity isn't a dirty word.

The sun beats down to emphasise the heated cries from the megaphones. You are so hot from marching, shouting and holding the placard that you have to tie your thick woollen jumper around your waist. A fine trickle of sweat works its way down your temple. Memories come to you of childhood marches on your father's shoulders, of old hippies shouting about occupations of countries you've never heard of before: 'Soviet out of Afghanistan!' Most importantly you remember that same feeling of exhilaration and belonging.

Your mother, if it really is her walking next to you, has a strong voice and a smile full of teeth. She knows all the words of the songs, though she can't sing to save herself. As you walk along the roads you feel the steely lungs of the city breathing around you. Concrete, glass and bricks heaving in the unfamiliar heat.

Without warning the crowd along the footpath thickens, the shouts become more intense and the entrance to the park appears in front of you. It's like a last dash for the finishing line. You wave to a familiar face to the left and then you are through the portal. People disperse. You put your placard in a pile on the lawn and pull your mother along to the kiosk for an ice-cream before the speeches and the rides pollute your resolve.

On stage, in front of the greying old guard of Social Democrats, a famous male politician talks about today's economy. You wait for the charismatic young woman who is due on next. She'll be worth the wait. You stand with your mother at the back, licking ice-cream as smells of burnt sugar and doughnuts mingle with those of fresh beech leaves and newly mown lawns. Only last night there was a bonfire here to celebrate *valborgsmässoafton*, the end of winter, and now the sun caresses your neck as if it had never been weakened by months of grey cloud cover.

As you relax into the day, the young female politician starts talking about peace in the Middle East, about strategies to get long-term unemployed back to work and programmes to reduce youth suicide. She is much applauded and in your mind's eye you catch a glimpse of her as Prime Minister ten years from now.

Then you turn back to the park's delights. You walk past the winding queues to the ticket booths, past the bumper cars and the tombola where you can win a metre of chocolate or a teddy half your own size. Everywhere kids swoop around their parents begging for just one more ride. A little girl with tiny braids plastered to her scalp

gives you blue stares from her stroller. The bright headscarves of teenagers bob along in front of a group of cute boys and you enjoy watching their glances towards each other.

You have reached the playground round the back of the park where you wait for your mother while she goes to the toilet. In the sand pit right in front of you are the most adorable pair of chocolate coloured twins. The girl's pale curls touch her brother's dark ones as she reaches for a bucket and spade. The boy reminds you of your brother when he was two; when he would play peacefully at the beach one minute and throw sand at you the next. Same gurgling laugh. You realise that you miss him. Why isn't he here with you?

Your mother pulls you away from brooding with her cheerful chatter about the flowering garden beds along the water feature. Often the only people utilising these benches are winos but today every single bench hosts a family unpacking sandwiches. Or a tired old couple fussing over their King Charles Spaniel. Or a group of loud boys and girls in bright caps and shorts too large for their wiry frames.

Soon enough you round Moriskan, the magnificent old theatre with its golden dome reminding you of the palaces in *The Arabian Nights*, and you are back facing the ferris wheel. The view from the top must be something special but you have no desire to join the queue. All you want to do is keep walking, arm in arm with your mother, on this glorious first day of May.

You forget about your bike at Stortorget. It'll still be there tomorrow.

Together you walk through the sunny streets, talking and smiling all the way home.

ESTELLA

FORGING TIES

It was one of those days when the meaning of life was muddled but Estella couldn't care less because she was so happy to just be lying in the park listening to the early summer chatter of birds and babies.

Estella was sprawled on a bright rug in Slottsparken watching the clouds form in the treetops. A great big pile of books beside her displayed titles such as *How To Write That Unforgettable Song. A Beginners' Guide*, *Twentieth Century Love Poetry*, *Happy Plants, Healthy Gardens* and *Africa on a Shoe String* which she had picked up from the library. She was humming to herself. The wind caught a cloud and stretched it into a canoe. In a few weeks, she would be in Småland canoeing with her friends Tim and Pip and she was already fantasising about the bonfires they would have at night, the dough hardening on sticks over the fire, the bananas with melted chocolate centres appearing out of the embers like born again Christians.

Before the canoe trip she'd work as a postie to save up to go to Nigeria. She was hoping to catch up with her dad's family for the first time. They had to be somewhere. All she had ever seen of her dad was a studio portrait that Mum had framed for her. The man in the picture was wearing a little African hat that looked kind of silly but his smile was really warm and friendly. As if he could see her looking at him and was smiling back at her. He was a bastard, though. She knew that much. Leaving her and her mother behind when she was only a few weeks old. But she was prepared to give him a second chance. As long as he told her the truth. The truth was all that mattered.

Interrupting her thoughts was a sudden rain of peas.

'Ugly black fatso bitch. Go show your tits somewhere else!'

'Piss off you little white pricks!'

Three scrawny boys around eight were lined up a safe distance away, ready to blow more hard peas if Estella decided to attack.

‘You speak out of your arse, don’t you?’ She nodded to the boy in the middle whose skin was several shades darker than her own. ‘Get lost. Go pester someone else.’

She lay down again, on her stomach this time so she could keep an eye on the miniature gang. Just what she needed, little pests hanging around with nothing better to do. But a smile still crept to her lips. These kids reminded her of herself. Eight years ago she had done the same kind of thing. Once she had even had to pay out of her own pocket money for a vase she had broken by mistake when she had climbed from Bengtsson’s balcony to her own. It was fair enough. She shouldn’t have done it, but how could she have known that their horrible spoilt brat of a son was home from school with a cold that particular day and would dob her in.

‘Hey you! Get your smart little bums over here. Lemme have a look at ya.’

The boys shifted nervously.

‘We don’t take orders from no big mama.’

‘Just trying to be nice, that’s all. If it doesn’t suit you tough guys just run off and play somewhere else.’

She sat up again, pulled her top on and shooed them off with both hands.

‘Come on, Kalle. Let’s get outta here.’

The leader, a boy with black eyes and a fading fake tattoo on his forearm, started walking to see who would follow. The spiky blond did. But the one called Kalle didn’t even offer them a look.

‘See you guys later.’

There was something about this boy that had her hooked. Perhaps the skinny, scabbed legs, perhaps his ridiculous attempts at forming his fringe into dreadlocks, perhaps his curious, yet cautious look. Perhaps she saw her own future children in

him, forever stuck between black and white, always strangers even to themselves. At least that was how she had felt at his age. But at fifteen she reckoned she had pretty much worked out how to use her 'otherness' to her advantage and she felt at home in her own skin. Better than being a normal whitey anyway. Perhaps what she really saw was the boy her own brother could never be because of one stupid little extra X chromosome. Rean being different hurt her more than her own skin. At least she knew she wasn't alone in being black. All he had ever been told was that he was an anomaly, a medical curiosity, a freak and she knew that if you've been told that often enough, it ends up being a self-fulfilling prophecy. This cheeky little boy reminded her of who Rean could have been.

'What's your name?'

'Estella, Simone, Coke Svensson. Star to you.' She showed her big teeth. 'I have a feeling the drugs hadn't quite worn off when my mum named me.'

Kalle sat down at the edge of the rug, ready to bolt.

'I could help you make real ones if you like.' She leant in to touch his dreads.

Kalle grew defensive in an instant, leaning out of her reach 'There's nothing wrong with them.'

'Chill out. Just thought I could help. My mum used to be a hairdresser so I know a few tricks. I had dreads for a while.'

That wasn't quite true. Her brother had had neat strings of hair but hers had always resembled a bird's nest more than anything else. That was why she preferred it short now.

'Girls don't have dreads.'

'Says who?'

'My dad. He knows everything.' Kalle grinned to show the gap where his front teeth would one day grow back.

'Is that so?' Estella tried not to laugh but at the same time tweezers pinched at her heart. She had never really had a dad to admire. Rean's dad didn't count because he was totally useless and a spineless prick, at least according to her mum.

'I'd like to meet that dad of yours some time.'

'He's real busy.'

'I'm sure he is.' She shooed some geese which had come too close to pick at the peas in the surrounding grass. 'Most parents are.'

'Yeah, Mum works loads.'

She nodded and thought of her mother's piles of folders strewn around the flat. 'Mine too.'

'Like your nose stud.'

She had a tiny peace sign in her left nostril.

'Thanks. Mum said she's kill me if I got one but I did it anyway.' Her arms swung out. 'And look, I'm still here.'

The boy laughed. 'Don't you hate that? Parents never keep their promises.'

'Well, in this particular case I was quite happy about that. I like living. Don't you?'

Kalle picked up a pea from the lawn and threw it at the closest goose.

'Sometimes.'

Estella wasn't sure how to respond, if she should joke about it or keep serious and ask him more. In the end he was the one who continued without her having to choose.

‘Don’t you feel like you’d want to kill someone sometimes?’ He didn’t look at her.

People walking past on the footpath would see them together and think she was taking care of her younger brother for the day. How could they know that her real brother was in hospital having yet another operation? That she was going to visit him in a few hours and keep her cheery face on because if she didn’t no one would.

‘Maybe.’

She thought of the kids at school who used to call her poo-face and the ones who’d throw rocks at her when she went jogging to lose weight. They weren’t worth wasting her energy on, that’s what her mum had always said. But when people were hurting her brother... Prodding Rean with sharp instruments, telling him it would be over soon but keeping him in hospital for weeks. No, she hated the doctors but she didn’t want to kill them. She wasn’t the killing kind, whatever that meant, and she didn’t think Kalle was either.

‘What’re you reading?’

‘Nothing.’ She tried to sound serious. ‘Remember, I was interrupted.’

‘Sorry. You want me to go?’ He quickly got up to leave.

‘I’m only kidding. Want an ice-cream?’

He stood on one leg and thought for a second before nodding. ‘Sure.’

Estella stuffed the books in her bag, pulled on her batik skirt and folded the rug. Her nipples rubbed against the material of her top. They weren’t used to being free of bra restraint but she decided it was quite a cool feeling and slipped her bikini top in with the books.

On the way to the kiosk she got a couple of wolf whistles from a group of alcos under a tree. Kalle gave them the finger and they laughed.

‘Don’t worry about them. I don’t care.’

She didn’t see the point in getting angry with people who obviously had more personal problems than she did. Most of the time she felt sorry for people who drank. Sometimes she despised them. But she tried not to work up too much negative energy about them.

They bought their ice-creams and sat down at one of the tables. The smell of old hotdogs and stale water from the duck pond wafted past.

‘Do you have any brothers or sisters, Kalle?’

He nodded, the corners of his mouth coloured bright pink.

‘Two brothers and a sister. They’re older.’ He licked around the edge of the cone. ‘Like you.’

‘Really old. I see. Thanks...’ She wasn’t quite sure why she couldn’t let go of the subject. ‘Do you all have the same dad?’

He looked at her, horrified. ‘Of course not. My dad’s mine.’

There was something about the way that he screwed up his face when he smiled, his long eye lashes and the curve of his mouth that was strangely intimate. Almost as if she was looking at herself in the mirror.

‘Where’s he from, your dad?’

‘Where do you think?’ Kalle tapped his temple with his forefinger, showing her how unbelievably stupid the question was.

‘I mean, where in Africa?’

Kalle crunched the last bits of cone for a duck and her ducklings. He shook his head. ‘Somewhere in the middle I think. Why?’

‘Just curious. I wanna go to Africa next year. To find out more about my people. Maybe your dad could give me a few tips? Have you ever been?’

His eyes turned round. 'Do you think I'm made of money?'

She laughed at his adult expression. 'Of course not. I'm sorry.' She threw her napkin in the bin. 'But you want to go, don't you?'

He kicked the table with his swinging legs. 'Mum says Africa is full of thieves and murderers.'

She snorted. 'And what makes you think Sweden isn't? I know for a fact that there are eight-year-olds in gangs shooting peas at innocent people.'

Kalle grinned, showing the gap between his teeth. 'I'm only seven.'

'You get the idea, though.'

She knew they were connected. Something about those eyes and his wide smile, not just the colour of his skin. They sat at that table talking about nothing and everything as other customers came and went and the Arabic owners of the kiosk began to glare at them for taking up the space after their ice-creams were safely tucked away in their tummies. It was as if they had always lived in each other's back pockets and only now realised that this was the case. Once Kalle even whistled through his teeth the way Estella did when she got really excited. She'd never heard anyone else do that.

When they finally stood up and walked out of the shade the sun belted down and the city looked remarkably changed. Washed in positivity. Estella put her sunnies on but Kalle didn't seem to notice the dazzling light.

'Where do you live? You going home now?' he blurted out.

As he said it, Kalle looked almost vulnerable, like any seven year old about to be abandoned in the city without his gang.

'Söderkulla. Why? You wanna come?'

She wasn't quite sure why she'd invited him. Perhaps she never expected him to accept. Estella could tell he was torn between his cool city persona and the sweet suburban boy she'd been talking to at the kiosk.

'I'm from Rosengård.'

'Some other time then, eh?' She wasn't quite sure if she could hug him or if he would be too embarrassed by such physical intimacy so instead she held her hand out for him to hi-five. He did, then turned his back to her and started ambling towards the river; head high, kicking stones as he went.

'Hey, Kalle!'

She wished she knew what went on behind those black eyes of his. His cool street persona gave nothing away.

'I make a mean smoothie... Sure you don't wanna try it?'

The boy's serious face cracked along the edges to let his wide childish grin out.

'You mean, like, now?'

'No, I mean, like, in a hundred years when we are both dead.' She rolled her eyes at him. 'Of course I mean now.'

On the bus they were laughing themselves silly at nothing in particular. The bus was almost empty and they sprawled across the back row. Once Kalle fell off and landed on his bony bum, which made them laugh even more. Not until they stepped off the bus did Estella emerge from the embrace of this strange new friendship to see them as others might see them: a powerful teenage girl and a jittery little boy out-laughing each other. She almost regretted bringing him home.

The hallway was cool and full of light even though the blinds were drawn. The familiar smells of fried meat and her mother's pervasive sandalwood perfume

suddenly embarrassed her. When she was younger and went to the local shops with her mum, the kids in the neighbourhood would often sit on the wall and shout ‘nigger lover’ after them. Her mum had always ignored them and told her to do the same. Only once had she stomped over and grabbed a boy by his collar, lifting him to within an inch of her face. Calmly she had said, loud enough for all the boys to hear: ‘If I ever hear you say that again...’ No-one had shouted after that. Instead they had begun whispering behind their backs and sniggering as they walked past. Now, years later, standing in the hallway, she suddenly saw her mum the way those kids must have seen her, a mountain of white flesh covered by a tent of colourful African fabric, and she wondered if that was how Kalle would see her too.

She stepped through to the kitchen and started rummaging through the fridge and the freezer for ingredients. Kalle sat down at the table watching her efforts. He played with his sorry excuse for dreadlocks and she could not help smiling at him.

‘You really should do something about them, you know,’ she said as she carefully lifted the heavy glass blender from the top shelf.

Afterwards neither of them could recall what actually happened next. The only thing that was painfully clear to them both was that the blender lay scattered across the stone floor.

‘Shit.’ Kalle looked at her with big scared eyes.

‘Fuck fuck fuck.’ The little word became a mantra while she got the broom out and swept the floor, then hauled the vacuum cleaner from the cupboard and channelled all her frustration through the metal tube as memories of smoothies-that-would-never-be flashed before her eyes.

When it was all done, to her own surprise and to Kalle’s horror, she slid down to the floor and wept.

‘Is your mum gonna kill you?’ he whispered.

She managed to shake her head. No, it was not about that. Not about the blender at all really. She saw Rean hooked up to machines again, heard him screaming in pain when he woke up. But all she could mumble to Kalle through her tears was: ‘My brother is sick.’

He came over and sat next to her on the floor, putting one arm across her shoulders as he had no doubt seen adults do in movies. They sat in silence as the ice-cream melted on the kitchen bench.

‘Sorry.’ She finally gave him a weak smile. ‘Seems like we’re short in the smoothie department today.’

‘Don’t worry about it.’

She stood up, blew her nose, put the yoghurt back in the fridge and the ice-cream in the freezer.

‘Let’s just have strawberries instead.’

Kalle followed her into a small room behind the lounge where the walls were plastered with posters of Bob Marley and Jimmy Cliff but he hardly seemed to notice. Instead he made a bee line for the framed photo on Estella’s bedside table. At first he just stared at the portrait, then at her, than back at the portrait. Then he whispered: ‘That’s my dad.’

For some reason, maybe because the day had already been so full of joy and heartache, so full of unexpected connections and sudden breakages, of uncanny whistling habits and dimples at the corners of his eyes, whatever the reason she was not surprised. It was as if she had always known.

Kalle kept staring at her. ‘Does that mean that we are, you know...related?’

'I guess so.' She patted the bed, indicating for him to sit down. 'Who would have thought? A little pea blowing gangster for a brother...'

He grinned. 'Suppose I can't call you ugly black fatso bitch any more...'

She took a swipe at him. 'Come here you little prawn.'

Right this minute she did not care about the future. She did not think about what she would find out about her dad. About all the years that she had hated him and longed for him. Right this minute, all she cared about was this little scrawny brother of hers whom she held close. This brother whom she had never known existed.

There are days when your whole life changes. She had read about them. Days like today, when blenders fall on stone floors and break into a thousand pieces and it does not matter one bit. Days when you find one of the missing pieces to the puzzle that is your life and it makes you so happy that all you want to do is hang out with your newfound brother and sing and dance and smile forever.

Today was one of those days.

RHYME

RIPPLES

There were days when she didn't feel like doing anything, when her hair smelt like ash and she hardly recognised her own image staring back at her from pale blue holes of fear. Then there were days when she wanted to sing to the world, when that voice of hers ran like a stream down a mountain side, bouncing and pirouetting in the air long after she closed her mouth.

Some days she went to school. Other days she didn't. Not that it made a big difference whether she was there or not. She never put her hand up to answer questions on forgotten wars or conjugations of irregular English verbs. Most of the time she didn't even listen. She wasn't really there to listen. Instead she would float out of the window over the roof tops peering through curtains to see babies choking on their older siblings' pieces of Lego while their mothers were busy discussing their latest boyfriends over too many cups of coffee. Old people making love, slowly like turtles. If she had told anyone about what she saw they would have shaken their heads in disgust. Fortunately, there was no one to tell. Rhyme's only friend didn't go to school. And when they hung out they didn't talk much anyway. They just listened.

Tingle had constructed a device which magnified sound up to a hundred times. In the afternoons Rhyme and Tingle sat on his bed surrounded by the music of dripping taps two stories down, machine guns on a TV down the corridor, a dad reading about the Moomin trolls to his daughter. The amazing thing was that Tingle seemed to be able to choose what they would hear.

'Let's listen to some porn from upstairs,' he said and then they did.

'Wonder how Mrs Blue's budgies are doing today?' he said and, without flicking a switch, the jabber surrounded them. She could listen to them forever. They sounded so happy. As if they were constantly bantering. Bickering never came as a

surprise, like at her house when her mother lashed out at her sister Jade for no good reason, and they never raised their voices.

‘Rhyme! Did you hear what I said?’

The entire classroom turned to stare at her. She fell though the floor creating a drip in the classroom below, one that the cleaner could easily mop up and wash away.

‘Sorry.’

‘What is Australia known for?’

She realised that the teacher was trying to be nice to her, treating her like a slow child. She hated him.

Her shoulders rose in a shrug: ‘Don’t know.’

Then she sailed through the window leaving the class falling over themselves to see her graceful flight.

The lesson continued without her. Like the background hum of a fridge she heard them mention kangaroos and koalas, the Olympics in the year 2000, the Great Barrier Reef...

I know what I should have said, she thought on the way home, I should have said budgies.

The stench that greeted her when she opened the door was familiar: banana peel rotting in the lounge room, a half empty tin of cat food in the sink, years of ingrained smoke wafting from the limp beige curtains. She went straight to her room, opened the window wide and inhaled lungfuls of chilly six-storey air.

What if she made a start... What if she piled those magazines, put the CDs back in their covers, changed that light bulb? She would still only make a dent in the mess. So what was the point? And if she did make an effort; if she vacuumed, dusted and

changed the sheets, it's not as if anyone would thank her for it. They would hardly notice. Mum and Jade were too busy getting on with their own lives. So why bother?

Rhyme grabbed a stale roll and caught the lift down to Tingle's.

A woman with bulging eyes and hollow cheeks opened.

'Who are you?'

'Just a friend of Tingle's. Is he in?'

'Come in.'

From the bowels of the flat she picked up muffled voices and the smell of incense. The woman motioned her to sit down on a rickety kitchen chair. Rhyme could tell by the whole situation that it was bad news but she wasn't quite sure how to ask.

'My name's Ulla-Britt. I'm Rickard's aunt.'

Rhyme was the only one who called Tingle by his real name. Everybody else said Rickard. Even his parents.

The girl and the woman sat in silence, looking through each other. When the woman called Ulla-Britt rose it was to pick a glass out of the cupboard and offer Rhyme a drink. The phone rang. Someone in the lounge room answered and started wailing. Rhyme fiddled with a loose thread in her jumper. She knew she was going to make that almost invisible hole much bigger, big enough to swallow her.

After an eternity she asked: 'So he's not here then?'

'No, he's in hospital. The doctors haven't given us much hope. I suppose you know how sick he's been.'

'Sure.' She had always known. You have to be pretty crook not to have to go to school. But he always seemed well when they were together.

'Can I go and see him?'

'I don't think so. He's in intensive...'

Another woman appeared in the doorway with red-rimmed eyes.

'That was Lisbeth from the hospital. He's passed away.'

Ulla-Britt hugged the woman while she convulsed. Rhyme couldn't understand why she was so sad. Did she even know Tingle? Rhyme was his best friend, the same way that he was hers, she knew that. How could this woman think she knew anything about him?

'Thanks for the drink,' she said, but the women hardly noticed when she left.

She threw the glass from the sixth floor window. It shattered in a ring around an invisible centre. That glass was her heart.

Just as she stepped outside the building a bus ground to a halt so she got on. When your heart is gone it is better to be alone on a bus than in a stinky flat. She had no idea where she was going. The bus smelt of hairspray and flowery perfume. She spread herself out over the four seats in the very back. There were only five other passengers but she didn't want to risk anyone getting on later coming too close. The bus wound its way toward the city and she picked at a cuticle until it bled.

'Fuck,' she whispered. 'Fuck, fuck, fuck,' as she sucked her finger.

Two girls from 7a, in identical printed tops, stared at her for a second then started giggling. She turned away, pressing her forehead against the cool window.

Hours later she found herself in Burger King at Gustav Adolf's *torg*, picking at dry chips, dipping them one by one into a pile of peppered tomato sauce. No one took any notice of her, which was just the way she wanted it. A pack of older jackals were discussing Pamela Anderson's assets. Rhyme shivered. If Tingle had been here, he would have said: 'Let's listen to the Prime Minister. He lives just over there you know.' Now Tingle would never urge her to listen again. She pushed the tray away

with such force that leftover chips sprayed the floor. The boys looked at her curiously but she didn't notice as she was already on her way down the stairs to the square. The stalls with fresh fruit and bags of nuts which were usually there during the day had now vanished. Even Pressbyrån was closed so it must be past eight o'clock but the sun still rested like a cheese on the rooftops. It was that time of year when the light seems to infiltrate the city's every move. What could she do now? She wasn't ready to face the flat, or worse again, her mother's glare.

Rhyme crossed the square and slumped down on a bench beside the fountain. A stray pigeon strolled past, taking no notice of her swinging legs. It wasn't cold but the chill was creeping into her bones. She pulled her denim jacket tighter around her small frame and stopped swinging her legs. Perhaps she could become part of this bench if she just sat here long enough, if she let go of the cold, of all feelings, maybe the fountain would accept her as a neighbour and she could stay.

Sleep must have pushed her over because when the police woman gently shook her shoulder she was resting her head on dried pigeon droppings.

'This isn't a good place to sleep. Don't you want us to take you home instead?' The woman had big brown eyes and dimpled cheeks. Her colleague, a man, waited by the fountain.

'Okay,' Rhyme nodded. She had been away long enough. Perhaps Mum had even started worrying, although Rhyme had never seen that happen before. Her Mum was simply too busy working two shifts, cleaning offices day and night, to notice anything to do with her daughters. She saw the report cards from school but she didn't *see* them. She gave Rhyme money to buy new clothes but what she gave was never quite enough so Rhyme bought CDs instead. Rhyme knew deep inside that her mother

wouldn't have missed her, that she would have just assumed that Rhyme had stayed the night with one of the friends she didn't have.

But she returned home safely that night, and others after it. Somehow her mother had found out about Tingle's death. 'Bad news travels fast', as the senile old lady next door would whisper. A feeble attempt at hugging her, an extra note in the bread box, that's how she knew. But they never spoke about it.

Rhyme was left to create a buffer zone of emptiness around her.

Some days she went to school, others she caught the bus to town to wander the streets and sit on the benches dotted like invitations around the parks and squares. Soon she knew them all. Their dark green or unpainted wood, their graffiti, their pigeons and late night inhabitants wrapped in filthy blankets. She tried not to think. Not to feel. Sometimes she would make lines in her wrists with a knife, watching burgundy drops form on the surface. It always surprised her that it didn't hurt. Sometimes she wondered if she had died too.

As the late spring sun grew stronger, more people sought out the benches. Mature couples with their mature dogs needing to rest tired legs, younger couples licking each other's ice-creams. Never before had Rhyme noticed so clearly the positive influence the brightness and warmth had on everyone around her, even on herself. Perhaps the worst was over now. She couldn't really allow herself to think that way, but she did.

One day in May, two weeks before the end of the school year, when the sky was blue and the wind that normally haunts the streets of Malmö had fallen flat to the ground and it felt more like the first day of summer than the last day of spring, Rhyme decided it was time for a swim. Not at the beach but at Aq-va-kul, the city's famous adventure pool where they had artificial waves every hour, hot spas and saunas as

well as a gigantic pool that stretched all the way outdoors, where steam rose into the cold air in winter. Rhyme had been there with school but never on her own.

She managed to sneak in with a group of school kids her own age, the teacher looking straight past her. The others rushed through the changing rooms while she stayed behind, enjoying the warm water of the obligatory shower caressing her prickly skin. She watched the older women waddle to and from the sauna. Sagging breasts, wrinkled buttocks, layered stomachs. They looked real. Her own breasts tiny points, her buttocks not unlike two smooth Jonathon apples, her stomach nonexistent. She looked at her skinny arms and legs and imagined them fuller. How would she change as she grew older? Would she ever be real?

The heat of the sauna surprised her. She couldn't remember ever having been in one before. In the top corner sat two ladies talking about their grandchildren. The other top seat hosted a younger woman lying down with her eyes closed. Rhyme settled on the lower level with her legs scrunched up to fit on her small towel. Opposite her sat a thin woman with a funny little tattoo of a leaf just below the bikini line. She imagined that this was a kind of initiation ceremony where the older women of the tribe prepared her for passing into womanhood. Cleansing by heat and monotonous mumbling. Her nipples tingled at the thought of sensual hands guiding her. No one had ever touched her like that. Blood pulsated between her legs. Sweat began trickling down her neck. A girl her own age came in and sat down next to her. She imagined that the girl could read her thoughts, that they all could, and were laughing at her behind her back for being so pathetic. Then she wished she'd had Tingle's machine so she could listen to the men talking in their sauna. There were no windows for her to peek through here.

The woman lying down must be asleep. Or perhaps she was dead. Rhyme felt an urge to pinch her toes or scream at her. Laughter bubbled up through her throat yet all that escaped was a coughing sound which turned the heads of the two ladies. But the girl smiled at her. A friendly smile.

Without prior warning the dead woman sat up and stretched her arms above her head. She had the most perfect body Rhyme had ever seen. Dark nipples, muscular arms and rounded thighs. Her stomach showed signs of childbirth. As she brushed past and out the door Rhyme caught a whiff of sandalwood. It was impossible to imagine herself that age. The likelihood of her struggling past twenty seemed slim. How could she survive another two, three or fifteen years? At least she wouldn't have to go to school then. But her sister said work was even worse.

Sweat dribbled down her forehead. It was harder to breathe; hot air burnt the insides of her nostrils. Suddenly she couldn't take another second of it. She ran outside almost leaving the towel behind in the rush. Wonderful, wonderful water. She drank litres and showered again to rid herself of the burning in her skin.

Her bathers were too big. Hand-me-downs from her sister. It didn't bother her. Not today. She headed for the deep part to catch one of the floating sausages. A siren blared and a red light began rotating above. She had no idea what was going on until other kids jumped in all around her and the water began shifting beneath her. Artificial waves enveloped them. She was pulled under. It was all bubbles, kicking legs and muffled laughter. She didn't let go of the sausage, all she did was lie in the water overcome by joy. Perhaps she should stay here. They say drowning is the best way to die. But then someone kicked her, she lost the moment and came spluttering to the surface.

Rhyme tried the waterslide a couple of times but there was nothing much to it. Her eyes stung from the chlorinated water, yet she had no intention of leaving. Instead she swam round the back to the place where the water looked as if it was boiling. Tiny air bubbles constantly hitting the surface and massaging her back, almost like a spa, just bigger. She closed her eyes and floated, let the bubbles carry her away. Then Tingle was there next to her. His laughter in her ears, his hand in hers. It's nice here, he said. I can do whatever I like. Just look at me, I'm weightless. He did somersaults above and below. But I miss you, Rhyme. Won't you come visit me? She wanted to explain that she had been on her way but then someone shook her arm.

'Are you all right? You looked like you're about to drop off.' A woman with high cheek bones studied her.

'I'm fine, thanks.' Rhyme swallowed hard, wondering if she would ever see Tingle again.

The plastic curtain, which was keeping the heat in but was divided into strips to also let people out, parted as she swam into the bright summer's day. On the lawn overlooking the outdoor part of the pool were older couples already burnt to a crisp and mothers with toddlers in funny hats. A warm wind greeted her. It must be the hottest day of the year, so far. She stayed resting her arms on the ledge kicking her legs lazily behind, watching the mothers unpack sunscreen and boxed juices.

What was her own mother doing now? Rhyme couldn't remember ever having a picnic with Mum. They had caught the bus to Folkets park once. She had been excited about all the rides; so excited she hadn't been able to choose which ones to try. Then Jade had been sick in a bin after coming off the whirlwind and they'd had to take her home. The worst thing was that Rhyme had known that her mother was upset. She

had saved up to treat her girls and everything had gone wrong. They had never been back. Mum wasn't one for trying again.

The sun caressed her eyelids. She could almost feel freckles pop up on her nose. Perhaps she should have been born a seal. All they ever do is relax on boulders and eat the odd fish. She once saw a program on TV about seals and sea lions in Australia and she liked their way of life. Come to think of it, she could do with that odd fish right now.

She let go of the ledge, grabbed the floating sausage with both hands and kicked her way towards the mushroom-shaped fountain. Three boys were playing around it, trying to drag each other in under the streams of water. As she was about to turn right and swim back inside she noticed another sausage to the left. As she grabbed for it, there, underneath the surface, was another boy. He waved at her. She let go of the sausages and dove. The boy had blue eyes and a big head. They stared at each other. He stopped waving.

There was nothing to see. His eyes were marble.

A thin line of bubbles escaped his mouth and made its way to the surface.

He had done what she hadn't managed to do. She watched him slowly fall to the bottom. He smiled at her and she smiled back.

In the next instant pandemonium broke out. Arms and legs were everywhere; people's screams reached her through the water, muffled as if from a dream. They pulled the marble eyed boy out and grabbed her too, trying to drag her ashore but she fought so hard that in the end they had to let her go. She swam away as fast as she could. Behind she heard a woman wailing.

'Just breathe. Please just breathe.'

A cough and vomiting sounds from the lawn.

'Thank goodness, he's alive.'

Then she was past the curtain of plastic relief.

Her pulse pounded in her ears. It wasn't her fault. He'd wanted to do it. It wasn't her fault at all.

With his feet dangling over the edge of the kiddie pool sat Tingle, laughing himself silly at her.

I, NASSRIN

SECRET LONGING

Chestnuts always bring good luck.

On the way home from Jägersro I stop to pick colourful leaves from the grass around maples, oaks, lindens and beeches. I know the names of the trees because I have looked them up, both in Swedish and in Arabic. Some of them even in English. A chestnut tree in one of the gardens is reaching out over the footpath. Has dropped its prickly harvest for me to keep. I peel off the thick green skin to find a smooth brown centre. Still shiny, almost wet. Somehow erotic. Smells like autumn. I stick it in my jacket pocket next to the purse which is now full of notes thanks to number 7 Secret Life with the odds fifteen to one. I know it is a sin to gamble, forgive me God, but as long as I feed and clothe my family I think I am fulfilling my duties. The cleaning doesn't pay much and with three ravenous children, what else am I to do?

I could walk faster but I've come to enjoy this time for myself, once a week, without endless questions or demands. The sky is that deep blue that only happens in autumn when the sun is low and yellow dotted clouds are reflecting the fallen birch leaves. Many years it has taken me but I have learned to love this place. These seasons. The emptiness. The expanses of unused grass. At first I felt like we were the only people here but now I see children all around. Hiding behind bushes to get out of the wind, kicking balls, riding bikes in the car parks. Over there, unmistakable, proud in the baby blue MFF supporter jersey he got for his birthday, my eldest son. He doesn't notice me. Heading the ball demands concentration, I've learnt not to disturb him.

Coming in from the brilliant colours of the autumn day, the flat feels dark and dull. I put on a Natasha Atlas CD to liven the place up. Soon enough everyone will be home but now it's just me and the music. I sing along as I chop the beef and vegetables into chunks

and throw them in the big pot to stew, knead dough and set it to rest, put away the dishes. Wonder who did them? I should have time to sit down for a minute.

While dinner cooks itself I spread the colourful leaves on the kitchen table. Still smooth and supple. But there is one kind I don't recognise so I go searching for the book on trees that Hamid keeps in his room. Going through the motions I straighten the bedding on my way to his shelf. From deep within its inner sanctum, between the mattress and the bed something falls on the floor.

Something I never expected to see in my own house.

Something shameful. When I bend down to pick the magazine up, a naked woman squeezing her breasts greets me from beneath my son's bed. I shut my eyes and breathe deeply. Not in my house, it couldn't be. My son would never... Then again... He is like every other fifteen-year-old boy, in every other way, so why not in this way? I open my eyes and the woman stares back at me, defiantly. Oh, God, please help me. I quickly turn the page and hit my head on the bed frame as I try to get away from another spread with two men and one woman. I count to ten slowly as my mother once taught me, not quite sure what to do with myself. God help me, I've never seen anything even remotely resembling this before. My own son forgetting where he's from, forgetting that he's not a godless Swede. My own son dragging filth into our house. The men's bodies are bronzed and muscular. You never see their faces. It's the woman's face you see. Sucking with her eyes closed, then peering cheekily at the camera. I feel my nose wings burn but I can't pull my eyes away from the shame of it all. Sweat pours down my back.

In the distant inner workings of the building the lift rattles and I panic. Whatever I do will be the wrong thing. If I take the magazine and show his father, my son will never forgive me for finding it. I don't want to lose my son. The lift keeps moving up. If I don't take the magazine and show his father I have failed in my duties both as mother and wife.

Doing nothing is condoning. Condoning is failing in your duties to God. The lift stops on our level and I stop breathing. Two seconds, three seconds, then I hear through the thin walls how the woman next door greets her husband.

Breathe. Deeply. Slowly.

Later, over dinner that night, I think of the rolled up magazine hidden beneath piles of linen at the back of the walk-in robe and my palms moisten. Soon my son will know that something has happened. What can I do? Please help me merciful God. I try to smile at him but a naked grown man has stolen his place, clutching his organ, pointing it at me.

‘Mum. Are you all right?’

‘Yes, yes, Hamid. Eat.’

‘You look a bit pale,’ my only daughter says. A slight furrow creases Sophia’s otherwise perfect brow.

‘Didn’t you have a good day?’ Mohammed asks in Arabic.

‘Fine.’ I nod. ‘I think I need to lie down.’

I leave the others in the kitchen where they keep eating, not like ancient custom tells us but all together round the kitchen table like the Swedish family we have become.

Hamid pours me a tea and follows me into the bedroom. He puts it on my bedside table.

‘Anything else you need, Mum?’

His face is an adult’s, his voice has begun to crack. Yet, beneath the shadow of a moustache his mouth is still the same as the day he was born. Innocent.

A week later, after another walk home from the races, I pull the magazine out from its hiding place and lock myself in the bathroom in case someone comes home early. I'm not quite sure why but it is as if I feel a need to know my enemy. The first girl is blonde. She is smiling too brightly and hugging herself as if she needs someone to wrap her up in a warm coat. I sink to the floor, sit with my legs stretched out like a child, bracing myself for the onslaught of filth. Breathe. Slowly. Deeply. Then I turn the page.

There she is, staring back at me. Sophia, my own flesh and blood. My God forgive me for thinking so. It isn't my daughter but it could have been. Her eyes defiant 'why would I want to wear a veil, Mum?' and beckoning 'look at me, I don't wear a veil' at the same time. The girl is not much older than Sophia. Heavy curls flow down her naked back. Her lips are full and slightly parted. She is curvy and by all standards very beautiful. Why would she do such a thing to herself? How could she live with the shame? Her mother must be dead. Perhaps Sharon killed her. But it doesn't justify this. Nothing does.

My heart is ticking in my chest like a device strapped to a suicide bomber. Overly dramatic. My hands are shaking. On the opposite page the girl is on all fours like a goat sucking a faceless man's member. I can almost hear the slurping sound as he pushes her head in and out. He's holding her hair out of the way so the photo can be taken from the right angle. I want to close my eyes, throw the magazine from the balcony, hit Hamid for hiding it under his bed, but instead I turn the page.

The same black eyes looking straight at me. Knowing that I'm here, staring back at her. Her name is Alaya, it says at the top of the page. 'A student wanting to earn some money and have a bit of fun at the same time.' There are many small pictures on the spread, featuring Alaya in different positions with the faceless man and another man without body hair. They are all close-ups. Only in one picture can I see the girl's face, otherwise it is all genitals. I can feel my entire body pulsating. One man, two men. She is shaved between her

legs. God forgive me for having laid eyes on this magazine. How can I ever rid myself of the shame?

I keep turning the pages in a trance. Other girls appear. They do things with their bodies that I have never imagined one could do. One girl stands out because she does nothing. She simply faces the camera and pouts. Her hair is thin and blond, plaited, which makes her look very young. Too young. The way her eyes have clouded over I know she feels nothing, she is in a place where nothing can hurt her. I know that place. I have been there. After the massacre, when Yasir didn't come home, after I stopped searching the bloodied streets, I sat in the window looking for him. For three days and three nights, without eating, without sleeping. After that I only remember voices. My mother calling for God's help. My other brothers cursing Sharon. But Yasir never came back.

A month later Mohammed offered to care for me. He had seen me sitting in the window. I felt nothing. How could I refuse? He is a good man, has always supported me and the children. I don't think my life could have been any better. He helped disperse the cloud. Even though it is still there, at the back of my eyes, an ache sometimes, I'm happy now. I love them all so much and thank God every day for the fortune to live. I only wish Mohammed could agree with me... well... Leyla is nine already and I'm not getting any younger. It might soon be too late. If you have grown up with seven brothers and sisters, even if one of them never came back, you don't think three is quite enough. But I have faith in God, may His will guide me.

I wonder what made the girl in the magazine lose herself in that darkness. Her eyes are shimmering reflections of the hidden parts of my soul. She makes me cry. Dry tears from eyes wide shut.

Over the next couple of weeks I drop heavy hints which fall on hard tile floors. In desperation I confront Sophia over a boiling pot.

‘Do you know if Hamid is interested in girls?’

She looks at me, bemused and surprised.

‘Of course he is, Mum. You don’t think he is gay, do you?’

God forbid, the thought hadn’t even entered my mind.

I try again. ‘I mean, do you know if there is anyone special? I’m worried that he is being corrupted by girls at school.’

Why do I lie?

Sophia laughs, showing her perfect white teeth. She has called my bluff.

‘Get a grip, Mum.’

‘Don’t speak to your mother that way!’ I try to regain my composure.

She is still smiling. ‘Honestly, I’ve never heard him talk about anyone in particular. No need to worry, Mum.’ She looks around the kitchen as if seeing it for the first time. ‘I’d help you with dinner but I have basketball practice in ten minutes. See ya later.’

Her kiss is so fleeting, afterwards I wonder if I dreamt it. Since when am I just the boring person cooking my family’s meals?

Through the window I see her grab her bike, putting her head down to fight the wind as she rides towards the oval. Freer than I have ever been.

Mohammed is working late and the others are asleep in their rooms, I can’t help myself. I pull the magazine out. It’s as if a colony of ants have decided that I’m in their path and they need to walk straight through me. It’s itchy and tickly, painful and pleasurable at the same time. Towards the back there are letters, readers’ stories about their sexual encounters.

Against the better judgement of every fibre of my being, the Swedish words entice me to read on.

...her full length skirt was see-through in the street light and I noticed that she wasn't wearing any knickers...

...she said 'I love strong men' and urged me to carry her to the kitchen table, impaled on my throbbing cock...

...then I couldn't hold back any longer and pulled out just before shooting waves of spunk onto her smooth back...

...she forced my head between her legs and I worked my tongue hard around her clit. Next thing I knew she tensed up and screamed with pleasure as spasms ran through her body...

I wake up, as if from a dream, drenched in sweat. My heart beats as if it's trying to run away from a haunted house.

Breathe. Slowly. Deeply.

I try to speak to Hamid but his answers are always evasive.

'How is school?'

'Good.'

'You seem happy...'

'Mmm.'

My eldest son, who will always remain my pride and joy no matter what, pushes the last piece of bread into his mouth and chews frenetically before washing it down with a mouthful of milk. He is on his way to the sink with the glass when I finally get around to squeaking something about nice Arab girls in his class. He peers at me, clearly embarrassed.

‘Muuuummmmm.’

Off he goes to football practice and nothing more is said. I wonder if he has even noticed that the magazine is gone. Perhaps I am being overly sensitive about it, perhaps it is something he needs to go through to be able to reject it.

I wrap myself up in a warm scarf and head off to Rosenquist’s flat in the city because it’s Friday night and they have already left for the beach house. I’ll be able to clean without disruptions. The air is chilly and raw at the back of my throat. On the way to the bus stop I find a chestnut on the footpath, still in its prickly skin. I put it in my pocket, next to the one I found three weeks ago.

The warmth of the bus is welcome. Suburbs I have never known the names of march past in grey concrete uniforms adorned with white satellite buttons. I get off at Gustav Adolf’s square and walk along the cemetery to Slottsgatan. The view from the third storey flat makes my heart tick faster. Right below lies the sea of leaves that is Kungsparken, shifting in yellows and oranges. With a backdrop like that even cleaning becomes enjoyable work.

I sing when I dust the African statuettes and whistle along to the hum of the vacuum cleaner. I change the bedding, scrub the bathtub and straighten the piles of magazines. There are piles of books and papers all over Mr Rosenquist’s office and on his side of the bed but I’m under strict instructions not to disturb the piles or attempt to put order to chaos. All I do is straighten and dust.

I should really check the top of the wardrobe in the bedroom. I haven’t dusted up there before so it would feel good to get it done. I collect a kitchen chair to stand on and struggle to heave my few extra kilos up onto it only to be confronted with an offensive layer of dust. Can’t believe I haven’t done this earlier.

After wiping and wiping I'm so pleased with myself that when I step off the chair I forget about the pile of magazines next to it. I must step right on the spine because every single magazine slides off the one beneath it and they all spread out on the floor with me on top. Shocked and with an aching wrist I scramble to get up, making an even bigger mess of the pile in the process. There, next to my left foot, is a magazine quite unlike any other in the Rosenquist household.

Not *what's art* or *New Directions in Law* but *Girls On the Side*.

Girls and men. It is all the same as in Hamid's magazine but still different. Here the pictures seem to tell a story. Every photo has a caption telling me what is happening in case I hadn't quite understood. Three young men appear at a woman's door, fully clad but unhappy about their car breaking down. The woman invites them in for a cup of tea while they wait for the mechanic. For some unknown reason she starts stripping. They join her, pulling their own clothes off while touching her as she dances in front of them.

I feel droplets forming on my temples. Please God, save me from this sight. But I read on as if at gunpoint. The scene gets wilder and messier, my breathing heavier. For the first time since I found Hamid's magazine I let myself relax and look closely at every detail. The girl is very wet, almost dripping off the page. Her nipples are large and pointy. In one photo she has one man licking each nipple and one putting two fingers inside her. Her eyes are seductively half-closed. It looks as if she is really enjoying the attention. But then someone barges in through the front door. It is the mechanic, who also happens to be the girl's boyfriend, who has come to fix the car and decides to fix the girl at the same time. He has heard her moans and is coming to see what is going on. He pushes the other men aside to get to her.

I keep turning the pages manically, looking for something, I'm not quite sure what, a confirmation perhaps that there is a reason for my reading this. I find nothing. Just bare

skin, perfectly rounded breasts, eager hands searching for release. Not until the boyfriend has spent his seed do the others dare to return, continuing where he left off until they climax one by one and the girl reaches her orgasm with an open mouthed scream.

My hands shake so much I can't hold onto the magazine. I close my eyes but the pictures are even more vivid, played back to me like a home movie at the back of my eyelids. My nipples tingle and I find it harder and harder to breathe slowly. My hands have started wandering, tracing the outline of my lips, caressing my neck as if they were my husband's, making their way along my body. Thousands of tiny hair erections cover my arms and legs. I rest the back of my head on the bed and circle my navel with one finger. Lower and lower. My head slides slowly to rest on the floor, my back on the toppled pile of magazines. I can't think of anything but what those men were doing to the girl. My right hand takes on a life of its own sliding under the elastic waistband of my skirt while the left meanders up to fondle my hard nipples. My body is an alien that I have to tame to regain control of my life. The room starts swaying as my fingers move tentatively across the most hidden parts of my body. Places I know exist but have never visited, like London, or the moon. I am soft and wet. Suddenly I am that girl. I moan as I push a finger in. I wail in agony, shame and pleasure as I pull it out and gently rub the button of life until everything around me disappears and I cry and laugh and then cry again.

The light in the bathroom is harsh but all I can see is the sensual curve of my top lip, barely hiding a satisfied smile. There are parts of me I had almost forgotten about. After I wash my hands and face, I carefully restack the magazines to form a neat pile with the offending one almost at the bottom. The chair finds its place in the kitchen. Everything looks the same, yet different. To my surprise I notice through the window that night has approached

in silence, the streetlights are lit and Slottsgatan empty of traffic. I put away the duster, make sure I haven't forgotten anything, then lock the door behind me.

Chilly night air helps clear my head as I walk back to the square to catch the bus home. I try to ignore the uncomfortable wet patch between my legs. A girl pushes a pram nervously back and forth at one of the bus stops. The baby sleeps but the girl looks like she could use some rest herself. Her lips have a blue tinge. I feel like I know her, as if I have seen her somewhere. Those lips. And thin plaits. She is no more than a girl. Of course my imagination is running away with me. How could I know her? She is only one of several people waiting for a bus on a cold weeknight in early October. I hear her singing softly to her child before my bus finally arrives and I find a place in the middle looking at no one, stroking the sensual skin of my new chestnut all the way home.

Smelling Malmö

As you ride past Konserthuset, enjoying the rush of the underpass with its obscure painting, you suddenly pick up the steady hum of the opening night. The event of the year is just around the corner waiting for you to join it. You pedal faster into the warm summer evening to make it to the usual meeting place at the H&M corner on time. If you happen to have arranged a meeting there with your gourmand friend, she will be eagerly awaiting your arrival. Ready to grab you by the arm and zigzag her way through the crowd, sniffing out the best of Polish sausages, elk burgers and Thai spring rolls.

After hugging for a long time, you grab each other's hands not to lose the intimacy of this moment of two amongst thousands.

From one corner of Gustav Adolf's *torg* there is a Swedish variety of glam rock; from another, vague salsa tones chase an itch to your feet. You pass an entourage dressed up as Pippi Longstocking, proclaiming over beers held high to have won their heat in the dragon boat competition. You can't help but laugh. These middle-aged women and men paddling for their workplace team make a mockery of the myth about reserved Swedes.

The sky is turning an unusual velvet pink and you have a feeling the late clouds will help keep the heat of the day from escaping. You don't want it to rain but you're glad you brought your umbrella. Just in case.

The little red wooden booths hide goodies from around the world and you agree to share a few rather than settle for only one each. The price is permitting so before your stomach starts sending out a desperate SOS you join a shortish queue to buy a Croatian *pirog*, smelling of divine mince infused with plenty of herbs and spices. Your friend closes her eyes as she runs the bratwurst she has chosen beneath her expert nostrils. Then you eat. Then wander. Then stop to eat again.

As nightfall slowly lands on your shoulders you laugh your way down the pedestrianised part of Södra Förstadsgatan towards Triangeln. This year, like last year and the one before, a sign saying GIRLFRIEND WANTED takes pride of place outside one of the stalls selling deep-fried bananas. This year, like last year and the one before, you wonder which of the two sellers came up with the brilliant gimmick.

The street is full of people trying to make their way to this stall or that concert, chewing metre-long strips of liquorice or greasy donuts. No matter what the fashion gurus prescribe, you can count on Malmöfestivalen selling thousands of kitsch objects: glow-in-the-dark sticks, foam spray, bird whistles. As babies and their parents disappear, teenagers smelling of cheap perfume and stolen cigarettes seep out of the cracks between the cobblestones, carrying all of the above.

Inevitably you bump into people you know. Malmö is small but you never linger. This is a strangely intimate affair between you and your friend whose nose is spurring you on to find new culinary delights. After *langos*, prawn sambal and reindeer flatbread you stop in the information tent for a breather. There is a bowl of free condoms on one of the tables. Your friend, if she is still by your side, takes only one out of false modesty but you grab a handful and wink at her gasping expression. Sneaking away, giggling like school kids, you head back up towards Stortorget for the main attraction of the night, the local heroes Wilmer X singing their hits in the characteristic dialect *skånska*.

You stop to buy some pistachio nuts. To devour later, when night has finally secured its grip on the city and its drunken debaucherous people. At Malmöfestivalen the stalls with South American craft are always busy but you manage to squeeze in and get a good look. Clothes smelling of incense and foreign lands hang from the scaffolding. A young woman with soft features and black eyes smiles tentatively and

you smile back. One necklace stands out with its simple design around a clear green stone. Impulsively you crave it and reach for your last *hundralapp*. Every time you wear it, you will remember this glorious night.

If your friend hasn't already tired of waiting and hooked up with the banana fritter guy, she admires your purchase and shows you one of her own, a wooden hand-crafted butter knife with a Swedish flag printed on its handle. It's for her brother who has just moved to Australia, where apparently you can't find butter knives anywhere.

When you leave the stalls behind and try to cross Gustav Adolf's *torg* to get to *gågatan* you realise that the crowd has, if possible, thickened. A band plays funky jazz on a small stage to the right but there is no longer time to explore alternatives. You realise that the distance between the two squares which would normally take five minutes to walk will take at least half an hour now. The wave of bodies almost carries you along – but slowly, slowly.

Sweat, piss, perfume, puke, beer, lust - all the smells around you mingle to make up the inevitable festival odour. It's still so warm the first few drops of rain surprise you but it doesn't take long to get the umbrella up. Then you cruise like a ship down the stream of people heading in the same direction. You open the bag of pistachios while your friend holds the umbrella. Bend the shell open with your teeth. Savour the salty outer and creamy inner. The two halves like lady birds cradled in your hand. Then it is your friend's turn to crack and munch before throwing the shell in a slow bow above the heads in front of you. The street is so packed, there is no way you can tell if she's hit a target but the idea is so weird and wonderful you can't help but do the same. From beneath the shelter of your umbrella, you keep throwing shells discreetly between fits of giggles. Every now and then you overhear someone going in the opposite direction wondering what hit them and you just about fall over each other

with laughter. By the time you reach Stortorget the rain has stopped, the bag is empty and your jaws are sore from too much chewing and laughing.

On stage appears the band and even before they have played a single chord you know that this night will be forever etched in your memory as the best festival night Malmö could ever offer.

BODIL

DECISIONS

There is no green quite like the vulnerable lime of newly unfolded birch leaves. Bodil watches them grow from her unfamiliar window. There is no loneliness quite like the one that envelops you before a conference. Before the introductions, before the familiar faces appear out of the crowd. She'll never get used to it. So she spends the hours before in her room, meticulously preparing her session on the implications of medical intervention in intersex children, watching the green shades shift in the wind.

As usual, her speech generates a heated discussion which has to be cut short due to time constraints. But it finds a new lease of life at the banquet the following night.

How will the children cope with peer pressure?

When can a child be considered old enough to choose its sex?

Isn't it, ultimately, always easier for a child to be like other children? Why deny them this right?

She smiles and tries to answer courteously the curious questions hurled at her from all flanks. As if there is such a thing as an answer to these issues. Amidst the bombardment she notices that the man diagonally across the table doesn't ask any questions. He twirls his wine glass between forefinger and thumb as he watches her one-woman-show. When their eyes meet he raises his glass and they drink a silent toast.

Hours later they walk each other back to the hotel in silence. Bodil has had enough of talking. In her mind the conference is already over and she is back in her spacious two-bedroom flat overlooking the windswept sea off Malmö's coast. She hasn't always lived there but there is no other place where she has ever felt at home.

'What do you say to a night cap?'

She looks at him. Who is this man? Too young, too handsome, too brilliant for his own good. Definitely too young.

She nods, sure, why not?

When in Scotland, drink whisky and be merry. After one glass she realises that she likes his accent. The Australian diphthongs remind her of *malmöitiska*. After two glasses they laugh at the stuffy old farts who decide what is worth pursuing in medicine. She has forgotten his youth or perhaps some of her own age. The years retreat into the wrinkles they came from to let her play the game. They never get around to drinking a third glass.

The insistent bickering of birds outside is what wakes her. He is already awake, cheek resting in palm, watching her. She doesn't like being watched in her sleep, being so exposed to another's gaze. Suppose now he has realised just how old she is, what a mistake he has made.

'Sleep well?'

'Yes, thank you.' She gets out of bed and starts looking for her underwear. She feels exposed. Few people, apart from those who happen to shower with her at the pool, have seen her ridiculous leaf tattoo. But now this stranger has. 'I have to go. My plane leaves in a few hours and I haven't packed...'

He doesn't reply, simply watches her ridiculous struggle with a pair of torn tights. In the end she throws them in the bin.

'Let's at least have breakfast together.' His ice blue eyes shimmer with mirth dampened by a hint of contempt. 'We can go down separately if you prefer.'

Her head is throbbing. She needs coffee. It's not a big deal. She'd never miss a flight even if she tried. Why be childish and refuse when all this intriguing man is doing is trying to make her feel better about herself. About them.

She has never known how to handle the morning after but here she is, talking away over a piece of crispy toast and instant coffee as if there is nothing in the world she would rather do. There is something about him. Something that makes her relax. His irreverence perhaps. She has met other Aussies with a similar kind of humour but no one quite as self deprecating.

‘When I was at school I was always the clown. I’d fall over just to get the girls to laugh’

‘I can see that. I was the serious one on the fringe. I wouldn’t have laughed.’ She thinks back on those empty years, when all she did was study to get away from herself and the world.

‘So you’ve loosened up since.’ He smiles as he butters his toast but he never takes his eyes off her. Leans back on his chair like a schoolboy and whips his eyelashes about.

‘I’m not sure.’ She plays with one of her rings, relishing the hard metal against her soft skin, making him wait for an answer. ‘Perhaps if you tried falling over...’

She never expected one person’s fall to attract so much attention but delegates come running from across the room to ask if he’s all right, waiters wipe the coffee stains off his trousers and all she wants to do is hit him. Strike his face, his chest, his arms, and scream at him that he has no right to do this to her, to embarrass her in front of all her peers. No right to make her laugh. It has been so long. She averts her face in order not to show him she is crying as well as laughing.

In the end they exchange email addresses and vague promises concerning next year’s conference in Adelaide. It’s with sadness she realises they might never meet again.

‘Have a safe trip home.’ Is that all she can say? How trivial.

His handshake is firm and reassuring but the swift kiss on her cheek is unexpected. 'I'm sure we'll meet sooner than you think.'

The cool breeze of his smile soothes her burning cheek.

Within hours she is back in Malmö, reclaiming her territory. Within days she is planning a major study, unsure of course of any funding. Within months the handsome young Australian has faded along with the birches lining the bike path on her way to the hospital. Summer leaves only hazy memories.

Autumn passes in a familiar Malmö fog but the arrival of winter suddenly strikes her. One day she looks up from her desk with a view of Pildammsparken and sees thin branches bend in the wind, hats escape their owners and gushes of rain cover the street. A young couple huddle together, protecting each other against the onslaught of the weather. Bodil smiles to no one but herself. Those girls are only about fifteen. As if suddenly making the riskiest decision of their lives they kiss passionately then brave the downpour and run towards Triangeln. Their identical skirts trail behind like a pair of sodden flags. To her own astonishment a tear lands on the back of her hand. She looks at the small wet patch for a moment before massaging it into her tanned skin, blowing her nose and heading for the coffee machine.

Later, on her way to the bathroom to put the dripping umbrella in the bathtub, the insistent blinking of the answering machine catches her eye. Three messages. Most likely all from her mother who is slowly losing her grip on reality. To see this strong woman fade to confusion makes Bodil angry and frustrated. There is nothing she can do to stop it. Instead she has to listen to stories about the crazy man next door and vicious poodles trying to bite her legs on the way to the shops.

Later, Bodil thinks. She will ring her when she has had time to make an open sandwich with thick slices of cheese and cucumber. When she has sat down in her favourite leather swivel chair and put her feet up. Occasionally she falls asleep that way and the birds outside wake her just before dawn.

She is in the middle of spreading her sandwich when the phone rings. Her mother would know that she's home by now. If Bodil doesn't answer the old woman might get worried and call the police or something equally ridiculous.

'Hi, it's Ben. Remember me? We met at the conference in Edinburgh.'

'Oh, hello. Of course I remember. How are you?' She is guarded, doesn't quite know what to think.

'Great! But I must say autumn in Stockholm isn't quite what I expected.'

'So you're visiting.' Her body crumples at the thought of him. 'What brings you here?'

'I just thought I needed some time off, that's all.'

'Time off... I'm not sure that I'm familiar with that concept.'

He laughs. She listens to all the words they haven't said.

Finally she concedes defeat: 'Are you thinking of coming down to Malmö?'

'Well... hmm... now that you're asking – yes.'

'...of course you can stay with me if you like.'

What is she doing? She can't stop the proverbial Swedish frogs leaping out of her mouth. She's busier than ever at work but she's volunteered for the role as tour guide.

'I don't want to inconvenience you in any way...'

Of course he doesn't. That's why he is coming to stay with her for an unspecified amount of time. She's glad he can't see her cynical grimace.

‘Not at all. My pleasure. When will you be here?’

‘I thought perhaps Friday.’

She realises that her hand is shaking slightly when she puts the phone down. What does all this mean? So out of the blue. She has two days to clean and get the spare room set up. Few people have ever stayed with her. The block of flats was built only last year for the international living expo *Bo01* and actually boasts a communal flat which tenants can hire on a nightly basis. Makes things so much easier. She could check if it’s available, then pay the fee herself. To keep him at a safe distance. To make her heart slow down.

Thursday snails along. Of course she doesn’t ring about the other flat. She doesn’t even return her mother’s calls, which are getting more and more insistent. One minute she feels like a love-sick teenager waiting for her first sleepover, the next she laughs at her own irrationality. Even if something did happen, again, it wouldn’t necessarily mean anything. They are both adults, free to do as they please. Still, she finds herself continuously wiping her clammy hands on her lab coat. And it takes her hours to realise that the battery of her watch needs changing because she is getting used to the slowing of time. Writing her new paper is as impossible as walking on the moon without oxygen. Still, she tries. And ends up breathless.

That Friday there is a subtle change in the weather, the wind slows and the sun breaks through the thinning cloud cover. At work she stares at the fountain endlessly cascading in the middle of the dam at Pildammsparken. At three-thirty her mobile rings. He says he is catching a taxi to town, even though she has offered to pick him up, he is on his way, would she meet him at her place? Does she have a choice?

Yet, after all this initial tension, she calms down when they finally order the same meal at one of Saluhallen’s better restaurants and start talking the way they did

in Edinburgh. His hair is shorter and his eyes even more piercing than she remembered. She jokes about him not being a real Aussie as he hasn't brought his entourage of flies. He retorts that he was under the impression that real Swedes were shy and polite.

'In your dreams! Isn't that how all men secretly want women to be?'

'Touché. And, of course, we want you to clean and cook and produce babies too. You must have met some Neanderthals in your time.'

'You wouldn't believe me if I told you...'

He grins. 'Let me surprise you.'

Then she tells this stranger who is no longer a stranger but an attractive man niggling away at her core, who she wants to go home and have sex with again and again, about the man with a fear of pubic hair. The one who asked her to shave everything off.

'In his defence I must add that he was as smooth as the day he was born.'

He laughs and something clicks in place inside her chest.

'Then there was the one who used to suck my toes for hours. It was great in the beginning but I grew bored fairly quickly.'

He shakes his head as he takes another bite of the salmon fillet on a bed of dill potatoes. 'Surely you must have some good experiences?'

She sips her chardonnay. 'Of course there are some. But generally men run a mile when I make clear that I've no intention of ever getting married or having children.'

'I would have thought the opposite. People want to pursue their careers, get rich, be happy...'

She shakes her head slowly. 'At your age, perhaps. But when people approach the big four-o they re-evaluate their lives and end up realising that they want just what their parents had – or often didn't have – a happy marriage.'

'I'm not that young, you know.'

She smiles at him. She knows exactly how old he is. What else is Google for? On the net she has found his publications, his interest in contemporary Australian literature (citing Tim Winton as his favourite author), even an old school photo, where a chubby-cheeked ten-year old stares frankly into the lens. When she saw the photo she realised that she must care. Otherwise, why bother?

He leans back on the cane chair and twirls his glass as he watches her with wine sparkling eyes. 'Perhaps I'm younger than you but that doesn't mean that the people I've been with are any less colourful.'

As night settles over the square, the tables around them empty, they have dessert, then coffee and he tells her about the woman who only got turned on at the movies, the one who invited another woman to join them, the one who dumped him after two years and promptly married his brother, and Bodil can't stop laughing.

She is still giggling like a school girl when they walk home, holding hands, protecting each other from the chilly wind.

Her flat is warm and her bed an adventure. Ben has no fears or phobias. All he wants is to watch her naked grace, to touch the soft skin of her wrist where you can feel life flowing.

'You Swedes inhabit your bodies with pride. And so you should.'

All she wants to do is watch the muscles shift under his skin, to kiss his earlobes.

'You Aussies aren't too bad either.'

They haven't slept when her mother phones at eight.

'Thank God you're home.'

'Where else would I be at the crack of dawn on a Saturday morning?'

Sarcasm is completely wasted on her mother.

'I've been so worried. Why haven't you returned my calls?'

Ben saunters past wiggling his white bum seductively on his way to the bathroom.

'Mum, I haven't got time to talk right now. Can I call you back?' She manages to pull her eyes away from the curve of his back.

'My legs ache and I can feel a headache coming on,' her mother continues as if she hasn't heard a thing.

'Right. I'll ring you later, okay? Everything is fine. I just need to get some sleep.'

His grin wraps around her. 'You know you're not supposed to tell lies,' he says after she explains the heated exchange in Swedish. 'Especially not to your old and frail parents.'

She chortles. 'I'm so sorry. Let me ring her back and say "by the way I'm busy shagging this gorgeous young Aussie, that's why I can't talk". I'm sure that'd calm her down.'

She's never laughed with anyone else the way she laughs with Ben.

A week in the life of a butterfly is endless fluttering but a week in the life of two human beings who know they must part is shorter than the flight from one flower to the next. The following Friday Bodil takes the day off work so that they can spend it together. Ben pours coffee into a thermos and she packs cheese, ham and salad sourdough rolls at the bottom of the bag and on top a few fresh cinnamon scrolls from

the baker. The glorious winter day greets them dressed in a hundred shades of brown as they drive to Bokskogen, only twenty minutes from the city but with an altogether different flavour.

At first, as they wander amongst the beeches, she doesn't understand why she feels like crying. Ben's hand is soft in hers, the sun is so intense she has to take her jacket off, the forest smells of life that has been and of life to come. And then she realises. Life can be too perfect. A crow dives in front of them and caws.

'When will I see you again?'

She hasn't said a word. He's the one breaking their silent understanding never to mention the future beyond tomorrow.

'I don't know.' She doesn't have any time for lies (he isn't her mother). And she is too old for games. 'I'd love to spend more time with you...'

'...but you're not into long-distance relationships?'

'No. Are you? Is anyone?' She gets animated, starts waving her arms about. 'It's such a horrible thing to do. Waiting and waiting.' She searches for an adequate English word but can't find one. Instead she slumps down on a tree stump next to the path. A sigh. The destruction of the season infects them both, making their noses drip and their minds fumble in the fog of uncertainty.

A black slug makes its way towards her hand. It's the shiniest creature she has ever seen. What is life like for a slug? At least they don't have to worry about relationships, or about getting their bums wet from sitting on a stump. She smiles again and reaches out to give Ben an awkward sideways hug.

'Let's find a good place for a picnic.'

Nothing more is said. Not that day or the next when they kiss desperately one last time. Bodil stays on the observation deck long after the plane has disappeared into the clouds.

She rings him. Even though she finds phones awkward she can't help herself. Little things: one of his socks in the lamp shade, a slight advance in the peace process in the Middle East which she wants to discuss with Ben, a repeat of *Crocodile Dundee* on telly, an email about another conference – things that seem forever mysteriously linked with him. She misses having someone to laugh with. She realises how much she hates Christmas with all its connotations of happiness. Expensive presents won't relieve her loneliness but she sends them anyway, to friends and family. To Ben. She receives a few in return and opens them on Christmas Eve in bed with a glass of sherry.

She wonders if she's about to break. Then she goes to work.

Ben seems glad that she calls. They talk for hours at a time and she realises that she should buy one of those cheap phone cards from Möllevångstorget. But then her mother's seventy-fifth birthday appears out of nowhere and she has to deal with invitations, decorations and salutations. With her brother living in the US and her sister still in hospital after a hysterectomy, Bodil has to be in charge. No one could ever accuse her of not being organised but this isn't exactly her favourite kind of gathering. Going through the motions, ordering food and choosing a cake is exhausting.

A model of composure at work, she can't help crying when she hears Ben's voice.

'I don't know what's wrong with me.'

‘Could it be that you’re working too hard to please everybody? Remember that time your mother rang and you should’ve said you’re busy making love... Maybe you need some time off.’ He pauses. ‘Why don’t you come over, Bodil?’

It isn’t the first time he has proposed a visit but it is the first time it has seemed like a possible alternative. Perhaps she needs time away from work, away from her mother. Once this birthday business is over. Maybe. After they hang up she closes her eyes and visualises his crooked front tooth, the fine lines around his mouth, his stubbled cheek against hers in the morning. Then she drifts off to sleep in her chair.

Two days later, after slowly cycling home from work, exhausted, the knowledge descends on her like downpour in an open boat. She has nowhere to hide. Of course she should have read the signs clearly, if only she had considered the possibility. Until now, there have been plenty of missed pills and even more missed periods – just never a pregnancy.

Her breasts ache and she pants like an overheated dog, arms resting on the rim of the toilet bowl. She wishes Ben were next to her but at the same time she is slowly closing all the doors around her, realising that she can never see him again. He wants more from her than she can give. He wants honesty.

She slithers to the floor, resting her forehead on the cool tiles.

When she looks in the mirror the next morning her cheek is checked with tile imprints. Her stomach turns again and tears well up with the sheer force of her retching. Helplessness is a niggling feeling sneaking up on you when you’re busy trying to arrange for someone else’s birthday. She decides it can’t get much worse than this. A capillary in her eye bursts, she can’t stomach her breakfast even though she is starving and no matter how many times she brushes her teeth her breath still carries the smell of old vomit. But she doesn’t call in sick.

She needs to get away from herself.

That day a child with indefinable genitalia is born and Bodil is called to the ward. It happens every now and then, every two thousand births or so. The baby is fine limbed and silent. It tolerates the probing and poking without complaint and all the while Bodil stands there a rusty nail is slowly being pushed through her heart.

This could be her child. What would she do if she had an intersex baby? As a *doctor* she occasionally suggests treatment to minimize social harm to both baby and parents. Still, the physical and emotional scarring is often considerable. What would she do as a *mother*? Most parents don't want to choose their baby's sex. They are devastated, angry, traumatised. They want her to tell them what to do. If it happened to her child, would she wait? Would she let the child grow up being different in the most fundamental way of all? Without even being able to tick the easiest box on a form.

F or M? Neither. Both.

After finishing the examination, without being able to comfort the parents, she locks herself in her room and cries for a long time. This is why, after watching what happened to her best friend Stefan, she decided never to have children.

At three o'clock she is so worn out she walks into a door and ends up with a gash in her eyebrow. When she gets home from work she tries her mother a couple of times before falling into a dreamless sleep. Answering the phone at eight makes her realise that she has slept through her alarm for the first time ever and she knows that things are about to get worse.

'This is Bodil.'

'This is from the intensive care unit at Malmö *allmänna sjukhus*. Your mother just arrived.'

She shakes her head in disbelief. 'Did she have a fall?'

'Looks like a stroke, but it's too early to say. I think you should come in straight away.'

'Thank you. I'll be there as soon as I can.'

On the way to the hospital she has to jump off the bike to throw up in the bushes but she is still there in fifteen minutes.

Her mother is no longer her mother. This person in hospital whites resting her hands on the doona is a ghost only vaguely resembling the vibrant person she has always known to be her mother. Bodil has seen many people fade away but it's still a shock to see her own mother like this. The frailty of her eyelids. Every breath an endless ocean to swim through.

She sits next to the bed all day, holding the ghost's hand, whispering words of encouragement (more to herself than to her mother, whom she feels will never be back). All those phone calls she never returned. All those arguments she insisted on winning. All the resentment for no reason other than that this woman demanded her time, demanded her love like no one else. Her guilt wrestles with her grief and wins the first round.

She calls her brother, somehow managing to keep her voice steady and professional, he wouldn't want it any other way. He'll catch the next flight. Her sister is already on her way. She suddenly realises there will be no birthday party.

Outside the snow falls unexpectedly. The wet lumps melt before they hit the ground. Her mother doesn't move but sometimes mumbles in her sleep. The ghost is in a stable condition so Bodil's siblings urge her to go home and get some rest. All she wants to do is call Ben. Desperately. But the embryo rears its ugly head between

them. Her thoughts pinch each other's tails and sneer at her. She and Ben hardly know each other, he is eight years younger, they are both career people.

Bodil is a firm advocate for listening to intersex children, letting them choose their lives. But she has no intention of letting this lump of cells in her stomach, or their spokesperson Ben, choose anything. She doesn't even want to tell him there was ever a choice. Better to let it all fall slowly into past tense. What she isn't expecting is Ben's early morning insistence.

'What's wrong, Bodil.'

'I just told you. Mum's dying.'

'It's more than that.'

'What could be "more" than that?'

She chooses anger before sadness even though she knows attack is her worst defence.

'I'm sorry. I didn't mean it that way.'

The silence between them is so heavy to bear, he tries again.

'Look, Bodil, I understand that you have a lot to tend to right now, that you don't always have time to return my calls. But what I don't understand is why you seem to want to slam the phone down as soon as you hear my voice.'

'So typical of all men, to think the world revolves around them...'

The acid stings. Herself more than him.

'I don't know the person who said that. Who are you turning into, Bodil?'

After they hang up she can't move. Waves rage in the grey sea beneath her balcony. Öresundsbron is hardly visible through the mist. She limps outside, hanging on to the railing to roar at the storm but all she manages is a whimper. Her fists two

cannon balls on her icy chest, her throat a knot. Eyes blinded by the gale, the wind cries for her.

For the first time since childhood she craves her mother's arms around her.

She is insane. Not only is she about to throw away the life of her unborn child, she is also pushing away the most astonishing man she has ever loved. What does that count for? Nothing? Everything? All for the sake of one decision made many years ago when she was too naïve to know she would ever feel this way.

Bodil realises that her teeth are rattling so hard they sound like maracas, playing a lonely tune of their own. The chill has swept through her ribs and settled at the bottom of her lungs. She could end up in hospital next to her mother, fighting bronchitis or pneumonia, killing the baby... She knows it is a stupid thought. This isn't about her, her life or her choices. She is alive. But her mother is dying.

It may take months but now she knows it won't take years.

Bodil closes the balcony door firmly behind her, brews a strong cup of coffee and thaws out facing the wall-hanging from Guatemala, a place where little women and men go about their everyday lives. Building houses, selling crops, carrying children in slings on their backs. Burying their dead. The leaves on the trees surrounding them are a darker green than the vulnerable lime she remembers from the birch outside her window in Scotland so many months ago. The loneliness that accompanied the breaking of buds then has subsided. She sits in her comfy chair and feels a tapping from within, a little finger poking gently at a balloon, vying for attention and she knows there is so much she needs to do.

First of all there is a birthday party to organise. On the way to the hospital she'll buy a *prinsesstårta*, her mother's favourite, and they'll celebrate her birthday together. One last time. Without guests and elaborate table settings.

Celebrating life. The way birthdays were always meant to be celebrated.

I, RHYME

LONESHINE

I see the lights. A thousand eyes shimmering at me, me the carrier of messages. They wink. I wink back. We have an understanding. There are too many people running around without even noticing the lights. It's just one of those things.

The sky is a wee-stained blanket hanging low, dripping. I reach out to touch it. A woman with bags growing from her arms sniggers as she rushes past. A man with a twin pusher stops and looks up. I think he understands, perhaps the lights wink at him too. He speaks, perhaps to himself, perhaps to me.

‘Crazy, isn’t it, the way Christmas takes over.’

I look at him. I know he doesn’t understand at all but he seems to need consent so I nod. He looks down at his children, both asleep and whimpering. He shakes his head slowly.

‘Still young enough to know that love is all that matters. Sometimes I wish we could all stay that age.’

For a fleeting moment I imagine him as Father Christmas with a white beard and rosy cheeks, giving unconditional love to one and all. I smile. But he is too busy pulling down beanies and rearranging blankets to notice. I look back up at the lights.

‘Nice talking to you,’ he says when everything is re-straightened. ‘Merry Christmas!’

I nod, for a Merry Christmas it is, at least between the lights and me. The urge to laugh is overwhelming but I hold back. I know others wouldn’t understand; they would look confused, shy away from the lights. Who am I to scare them?

I sit down on a bench, hugging the coat tight, watching my hands grow blue. Not that it is cold, not really. But when you sit still for a long time the dampness seeps into your core. My shoes are wet, my hair is dripping, even my eyes dampen.

An old woman with a prune face slumps next to me. She has a tinge of pink in her hard perm but I'm sure she doesn't know it.

'You waiting for a taxi?'

What am I waiting for? I'm waiting for a miracle, for my sister to turn up with a mug of hot chocolate and a smile saying she's sorry, that it's all been a mistake, that I can stay with her. Not that I want to. But it would give me a chance to gracefully decline.

The woman continues talking, as if she has a compulsion to interrupt silences.

'It's so difficult to find a safe one these days. I can't carry all these bags home, mind you, I wish I could. There was a time when I could do anything, you know, when I was your age.'

She finally turns to gaze at me. Her left eyelid droops.

'Child, look at you. Your cheeks are burning. Do you have a fever?'

I shake my head. A taxi pulls in alongside and she forgets about me, waves to the driver and struggles to get off the bench. I watch the fat man help her with the bags. Before she gets in she swivels to face me.

'Are you sure you don't want to share a taxi?'

Then she is gone.

Nightfall crawls along the footpath like lava. Unrelentingly slowly, families drag their kids home and are replaced by lovers and thieves, young people far too busy to notice the lights. I could have turned out that way. But I never wanted to be like them. They don't even know they can choose to be like me.

A nymph with long boots and blonde plaits saunters past, stops, reverses.

'Hey, don't I know you from somewhere?'

In an ancient universe we went to school together. I know that she will never remember. How could she remember me? I was invisible then.

She studies my coat, my beanie, my face, but I look away. Finally, she concedes:

‘Sorry, I thought you were someone else.’

Isn’t that what they say; that we all have a doppelganger somewhere out there?

The girl’s eyes are blue slits of innocence.

‘Why don’t you go and sit in Gallerian instead? It’s nice and warm in there.’

Realising that she has overstepped an invisible divide, she quickly collects herself and smiles. ‘Of course, that’s none of my business. Okay, I’d better be off. Have a good Christmas!’

I nod. I will have a good one. What better Christmas than one under the guiding lights? Suppose one amongst them would be even better, if only I could get up there. Mum never liked me climbing trees. She was always terrified that I’d fall down and break my neck. I never did. Though I did break my little finger once. Only that wasn’t an accident. In my mind, my body was made of clay. Shaping and sculpting was the simplest of pleasures. Until the day that finger snapped. Sometimes in winter it aches as a reminder of the days when I thought I was pliable.

A choir of three assembles in the corner of Gustav Adolf’s square, carefully arranging their notes and faces before *Nu tändas tusen juleljus* floats towards the lights. In an instant a captive audience of teary eyes surround the singers, two girls and a boy, perhaps siblings. They remind me of what things might have been like if my brother hadn’t died from SIDS. Now they say it can be caused by the mother smoking during pregnancy. But at the time we didn’t know. We didn’t need to know. Mum blamed herself anyway.

She always blames herself. It wouldn't surprise me if she is sitting at the rickety kitchen table right this instant with her head in her hands, wondering what she did wrong to get a daughter like me. She doesn't understand. No one understands.

There is a lull in the singing; people disperse and the kids happily count their takings before setting off for Kaptensbron's kiosk. My stomach lets out a slight groan but I'm too used to it to take it seriously.

I must have nodded off because my back is sore and my neck stiffer than before. I used to be good at micro sleeps, ten minutes was all I needed to feel refreshed in between school and gymnastics, but now... my mouth feels like it's full of polystyrene. The kids have returned to entertain Burger King customers.

Stilla natt, heliga natt. Allt är frid, stjärnan blid.

Yet something makes my heart thump at my ribs; all isn't calm at all but I'm not quite sure why until I see him cross the road. That row of plastered teeth, those catlike movements. It's too late to move.

'Hi Rhyme. How's things?'

I stare at the kids behind him. He was never one to be ignored but he doesn't break into a rage. Not yet.

'Have you eaten today? Silly girl, you know you can come to me anytime.'

I know that all too well.

'Rhyme, look at me.'

I look up at the lights for comfort, wishing him gone. He grabs my shoulder and shakes it.

'Listen, little miss haughty. I know you need the money. Be at my place in an hour.'

I must look terrible because when I look back at him his face weakens at the seams.

‘Fifty *kronor*, Rhyme. Only a hand job, I promise. And a free feed.’

As he crosses the street I imagine a black hole growing from the back of his head, covering his entire body within minutes. In days all of Sweden has been swallowed by darkness, in weeks the earth is gone and I’m the only one who cares.

En liten tid vi leva här med mycket möda och stort besvär. Hej tomtegubbar slå I glasen och låt oss lustiga vara.

The kids must have earned a fortune by now. If I had ten kronor I’d buy a hot dog from the vendor. He looks nice, as if he might even understand. Then again, what is there to understand? Sometimes I wonder why I stay here when it would be so much easier to leave.

‘You wanna hot dog?’

Brown eyes beaming down at me from beneath a green beanie.

I nod.

‘Sauce? Mustard?’

He whips out a roll and a long thin pink dog and squirts generous lines of red and yellow. The smell is sickening, like wet socks, but it tastes exquisite.

Brown eyes sit down next to me and watch the choir, then me as I push the last piece of bread in, chewing frenetically.

‘You want another one?’

He sees my hesitation.

‘If it’s about money, don’t worry. I’ve got enough today. You know, most business people don’t wait for their change. They’re always off in a hurry.’

He hands me another hot dog and sits back down.

‘Once Göran Persson had one on his way home from the movies. You know, when he lived here. First I couldn’t believe it. Stopped and talked for a minute too. About the film. Not stuck up at all, like I thought he would be. Suppose Prime Ministers are people too.’

I look at him and smile, to show that I think I know what he means. He grins back.

‘Why are you sitting here anyway? You don’t look like you’re out Christmas shopping. Want me to take you home? I’m about to knock off now.’

Warmed from the inside by a couple of hot dogs, I know that I’ll make it through another night. I shake my head. Here with the lights is where I belong.

‘You don’t talk much, do you? Maybe next time, eh?’

When he reaches the square, he turns around and gives me an awkward wave.

Ice is forming on the puddles. The kids are being picked up by their parents. They aren’t siblings after all. Sleep comes from nowhere and attacks my right temple with a pounding ache. I don’t want to sleep. Not here. Not on this bench. My body has already forgotten the warmth of the hot dogs. My stomach is a balloon haphazardly attached to the front, filled not with helium but with lead. It makes me think of endless images of starving children in Africa, bloated stomachs and skinny arms.

I gather my stiffening coat and grab the lowest branch. It’s difficult to climb, much more difficult than I remember. The branches are too thick, too slippery, but the lights guide me. They have never been more alluring than tonight.

Just one more haul and I’m up but my foot slides and then I slide and my arms are too weak to hold my weight and I plunge to the frosty ground. The pain is so immediate I can’t stop a cry from escaping. I curl myself up into a little ball hugging

my belly. People gather around. I keep my eyes closed but I can hear them. A cacophony of voices.

‘What happened?’

‘She fell.’

‘Why was she climbing the tree?’

‘I don’t know. I just heard her scream.’

‘Has anyone called an ambulance yet?’

‘It’s on its way.’

‘Can you believe it? In her condition.’

‘She mustn’t be quite right...’

That’s when I realise that I can still feel it moving, tentatively kicking, and that I care. In the distance, I hear the ambulance careening down Slottsgatan. In a minute it’ll be here and tonight we’ll sleep in a warm bed.

Before they shut the back doors, I open my eyes to take one last look at the lights.

The Beginnings

The woman's scream is ancient. It is the scream of her mother and grandmother and others before them. It is agony, triumph, misery and ecstasy. She clenches her fists and pushes one last time.

Hilda catches the slippery creature covered in white vernix, sticks a finger in the baby's mouth to make sure the airways are clear, then gently lowers the little chocolate coloured girl onto her mother's bare chest and spreads a sheet on top of them both to keep them warm. The father is by their side with tears in his eyes forgetting to photograph it all, forgetting that there was ever a life before this moment.

Hilda turns her back to give them some privacy.

The whimpering of the newborn, then a sudden sucking as she finds the nipple. There is no hurry to cut the cord. Hilda stays in the room just in case but her thoughts wander as she looks out the window. Everything went well. It was a great team effort. The woman is young and fit, her partner supportive. Hilda secretly wishes this was always the case. All the way through, the gas had made the woman laugh like a kookaburra, just like in that silly song they used to sing at primary school. It had made the others laugh too.

Outside the silver autumn dusk brings forth the first star like a gift. The shadow of a leaf falls to the ground. Dew shimmers on the lawn and she wonders if she'll ever have children. She knows what it takes but she's not sure that she has it.

Putting the smile back in her cheeks, she turns around to the new parents.

'Now, who'd like to cut the cord?'

*

The girl's mouth trembles with each contraction. Finally this baby is ready to come out. The girl, no more than seventeen according to her journals, has been here for a fortnight.

Alone. No-one has come to visit her, no boyfriend, no family. She doesn't want them to contact anyone. Yet, this is her second child. Hilda wonders what happened to the first one. Was it adopted out? Did it die?

Hilda takes her pulse and checks her blood pressure. The girl has had strong Braxton Hicks contractions for over a week and seems relieved that it is finally happening. There is no fear in her eyes.

'Would you like a drink?' Hilda tries her mildest voice but the girl still jumps as if she never expected Hilda to address her.

'Yes,' she hesitates, then adds 'thank you'.

Hilda goes to the kitchen to fetch a glass of ice water. When she returns the girl is shuffling around the room tenderly stroking her belly as she sings Blinka lilla stjärna. She stops as if caught doing something she shouldn't when she hears Hilda putting the glass on the bedside table.

'That was beautiful. You can really sing.'

Hilda isn't sure why she tries so hard but there is something about this girl that makes her want to hug her and never let her go. She needs someone to take care of her, she's a mess, but instead she will soon be the one who is needed. How is she going to cope with a baby?

'Are you in pain?'

The girl shakes her head while still stroking her belly lovingly. Then the contraction sets in and doubles her over. Hilda tries to reach the bucket but she isn't fast enough so vomit sprays across the girl's front and creates pools at her feet. Hilda wipes her forehead with a damp cloth and gently helps her change hospital gowns and socks before mopping the floor.

The girl's big blue eyes are cloudy. There is a force within her that Hilda hasn't seen before.

Suddenly it becomes important to check how dilated she is. It would be easier on the bed but the girl is already leaning heavily on the back of a chair whimpering through the next contraction. Hilda holds her shoulders and waits for it to subside.

It'll be a quick labour. She has seen it happen before. The girl will have to push soon, she has no desire to go back to bed now. Hilda spreads sheets and pillows on the floor beneath the girl. She is ten centimetres dilated; the second phase has begun. It's hard to reach her now, she has retired into her own world but she pushes when Hilda asks her to. Another midwife appears. The girl hangs like a rag doll over the chair. Hilda is squatting on the floor ready to catch the child when it comes.

'Hold back! I can see the head now. Pant!'

The girl pants and squeezes the chair. Droplets form on her forehead and her bottom lip is bleeding where she has bitten it too hard.

'Would you like to see?' Hilda holds a mirror between the girl's legs so she can see the swirls of dark hair. The girl almost stops breathing, that's how unreal it all is. In a few minutes she will have a new baby. Life will never be the same again. Hilda doesn't know much about the girl's background, what she knows is what she can see here and now. And that is pure joy. The girl's face is lit up from within and for the first time in two weeks she smiles.

*

'What's that smell? It's not me is it?'

There is panic in her voice as she says it. Hilda can tell she is used to being in control but what's a little poo in the scheme of things? A good sign that the baby is on its way. Surely the woman should know that, she's a doctor, one of the famous ones too. Hilda has read about her in the paper, not just the local one, mind you.

'I've taken care of everything. Don't you worry.' Hilda sprays some air freshener to make the woman more at ease. She is concentrating very hard to push at the right time even though the epidural has made sure she feels nothing. After twenty hours she couldn't take any more. When the anaesthetist came in the woman looked like she wanted to kiss her. The relief must have been even greater than how it feels getting out of the wind on a freezing Malmö morning. And that says a lot. The shot gave her new strength to push and that is what she needs.

Her support person (her husband? He looks a bit younger) changes CDs to happy sounding classical music with violins. Hilda recognises it as film music but she can't remember which film it is from. If she ever has a baby she hopes it will be easier than this. When the baby is posterior, with its back against the mother's, the pain is excruciating. On top of that labour seems to go on forever. And now that it is finally happening the woman still can't push it out on her own.

The baby is too big. Hilda calls the doctor and after a quick explanation he tells the patient that they are going to have to cut.

'An episiotomy?' the woman says, dazed. 'I thought I was doing well.'

'You are but the baby has had enough now. It needs to come out.'

The woman nods, understanding. She is a doctor herself after all. But Hilda can see disappointment in the corners of her mouth. After all this time, all the pain, the pushing, the poos, she will still have to deliver with the help of a vacuum extractor.

The support person takes her hand and strokes it gently. There is so much loving in his voice as he leans over and half-whispers: 'I'm so proud of you.' She kisses his hand and the sparkle in her eyes returns. It doesn't really matter, does it, how the baby is born, Hilda thinks. What matters is that it arrives safe and sound and she'll make sure of that.

*

The worry in the woman's black eyes speaks more clearly than her broken Swedish.

'I can not feel kicking. Why has my baby stop kicking?'

Hilda takes her blood pressure and checks her pulse. Standard observations, standard results.

'I don't know. The baby is probably getting ready to come out. There isn't that much room to kick around any more.'

'But I already have three children. They all kick.'

Her husband stands by the window staring into the starlit sky murmuring something that sounds like prayer. The woman's eyes search Hilda's for an answer she cannot yet provide.

'Let me get a foetal monitor so we can make sure the baby's heartbeat is normal.'

Hilda fetches one from the storeroom and straps the pads onto the taut skin of the belly. The woman sinks back into her pillows and tries to relax. Instantly the crashing of waves on a deserted beach fills the room.

'There it is. Can you hear it? Sounds like a perfectly healthy little heart.'

'Thank God', the woman whispers.

The husband leaves the window and comes over to comfort his wife and thank Hilda.

The ticking of the heart reverberates between the bare walls.

*

'Something isn't quite right, doctor. Take a look at this.' Hilda points to the screen where a little squiggly line shows the baby's heartbeat. *'It's becoming irregular.'*

The doctor looks concerned. 'How long ago was she induced?'

'About an hour. The contractions are very strong now as you can see.'

The woman on the bed moans as her stomach ties itself into a knot. Her partner, a woman with short blonde hair and a large mole on her temple, wipes her brow with a cool damp cloth then hands her a cup of water before another contraction almost lifts her off the bed. She screams in agony.

'Is it meant to be this bad? Isn't there anything you can do?' She stares accusingly at Hilda and the doctor.

The foetal monitor starts beeping furiously. Something is seriously wrong and the woman's expression shifts from anger to fear.

'What's wrong? There's nothing wrong with my baby is there?' She almost cries it out.

The blonde woman tries to calm her but there is nothing she can do. The decision has already been made. Within seconds the woman is being wheeled along the corridor towards emergency. They have to get the baby out otherwise it might not live.

Hilda swears silently as she sees them go. It happens far too often when they induce but they still do it in good faith. She hopes they get there on time. The last thing she sees is the blonde woman turning away from her lover and wiping her eyes as they get in the lift. She won't be able to be there for the birth after all.

Over Pildammarna dawn colours the sky metallic blue. A young woman walks her dog without a leash under the yellowing trees. Hilda runs a finger across her eyelids and quenches a yawn as she watches the day grow. Five women, five babies. It is time for her to go home and embrace the new crisp autumn day in her own bed. Without contractions, without monitors and sudden vomiting. Without babies. The familiar lump of morning sadness treads on her bones. Next year they might go back to Bali. The island paradise could be the perfect place to make a baby. She might just be ready to try then.

As she looks up the last star blends with the milky sky.

ESTELLA

SEXING TIMES

‘Why doesn’t anyone write good sex these days?’ Estella threw the book across the bed. ‘It’s all about imagery or anatomy. Never enough tension.’

‘Perhaps you could do better?’ Olof teased from behind *Nöjesguiden*.

‘Sure could.’

He put the magazine down and smiled at her. Not a smug smile. A friendly, I-love-seeing-you-angry, it-turns-me-on smile.

‘Look, why don’t you write something for this.’ He pointed at an ad proclaiming thousands of *kronor*’s worth of prizes for the best short story set in Malmö.

‘Let me have a look.’

She grabbed for it but he was faster. ‘What’s it worth?’ His mouth in a pout, waiting to be kissed.

She wrestled him down and grabbed the magazine. ‘Maybe later.’ Then she rushed off, ignoring Olof’s dissatisfied grumbles, to read in peace in the loo.

Two weeks later she was obsessed. On the way to work she was constructing sentences, on the way home she was imagining scenarios. Sure, she had written many songs before, some of which had even been recorded by the band where she was the lead singer and Olof the bass player. But the only short stories she had ever written were of the kind you write at school: my holidays, embarrassing moments, favourite memories. That was before she met Olof, before the kids. In a different lifetime, when she was still the butt end of frizzy hair jokes and the target of icy snowballs. A lifetime when she was always defined by the colour of her skin. Not that she wasn’t still, for some people. One of the old ladies on her round always looked at her with disgust, as if her mail was delivered by a monkey.

Her thoughts went round in circles. How do you write a good short story? After work on the Thursday, when Miriam and Millie were staying the night with her mother to give the adults some time to themselves, Estella went to the library and borrowed piles of books on structure, plot, narrative, characterisation and she pored over them until she knew less than before. Where do you start?

Olof smirked at her. 'Admit it, it's not as easy as you thought.'

She licked his ear and purred before lightly scratching his cheek. 'Don't mock a tiger, boy.'

The curry cooled in the pot as she tried to tickle Olof off his chair. Eventually they both fell laughing in a heap on the floor. Sometimes it amazed her how well they had kept up the fun all these years. Through sleepless nights and endless nappy changes they had managed to stay together. Not just because they had to, for the kids' sake, but because they wanted to.

At work she tried to be her usual efficient self so no one would notice her preoccupation with how Sven's lips were really drawn, the way Nils moved his hips and the vibration of Per's voice. She'd worked with these men for years, bantered every day as they threw mail in the right pigeonholes. She'd listened to their marriage struggles, seen their holiday snaps and met their children but it was as if she saw them now for the first time. With a writer's eye.

The curve of Mats' back enticed her, the sound of letters hitting the back wall of Rasmus' sorting desk made her legs quiver and the sight of Anders' blond pony tail spurred her on. These three were of a younger generation. The ones who always made work a pleasure, who wriggled their pert bums without even knowing it. There were other women too, of course, but they played no part in her imagined writings. They

went about their business bundling mail, sorting fliers, reading other people's magazines and discussing the latest fashion statement by Kylie Minogue.

As Estella did her round, questions kept popping into her head. Did she really want to write about sex? Up one set of stairs, across the attic and down another. Five letters to Jönsson, a magazine to Ekblad. Open that slit in the door, stick it all in, keep running. Or did she actually want sexy writing without sex? That bloody cat scratching the mail to buggery. She got a fright every time, even though she knew it was there. She banged the letterbox shut secretly hoping to hit the offending paw. What is sexy anyway? Perhaps what she found sexy wouldn't turn Olof on in the slightest. Well, she was quite sure it would, but the question was still valid. Stupid dogs that started barking as soon as they heard her coming and kept yapping long after she had pushed the junk mail in their faces. Who was her intended audience? Readers of *Nöjesguiden*? Her mother? She cringed at the thought of her mother picking up a free magazine on the way home from work and flicking through on the bus only to find her daughter's name and the word *cunnilingus* on the same page. As much as she loved her mother... Song lyrics seemed more innocent somehow.

In one attic the lights went out. She stopped dead for a second, feeling her limbs tense, then she let the darkness embrace her. Her mother had taught her darkness was her friend. Or was it, perchance, her lover? It touched her the same way that watching a couple reach out for each other caresses your soul. Or the way that the long-lost scent of your first boyfriend, wafting from the man next to you on the train, makes you want to hug him.

As she felt her way along the wall toward the red dot that was the light switch, her fingers began to tingle. The scent of tobacco crept up on her along with the sound of creaking leather. She paused to listen. The only sound was the honking of a horn on

the street outside. As she once again began walking slowly, one hand on the wall, the other on the bag of mail, there it was, the sultry sound of a stranger right next to her, slow but steady breathing. She could hear it quite clearly but as soon as she stopped all she could hear were the waves in her own middle ear. Yet the smell of leather and aftershave lingered.

‘Anyone there?’ She wasn’t quite sure if she was scared or just curious.

No reply.

From nowhere a cold breeze caught the hairs on her arms. Goosebumps grew like a rash to cover not just her arms but also her legs. Her nipples stiffened. She told herself the attic was a sea of air where she was safe from every intruder apart from her own imagination. She smiled to no one in particular as she ran the last few steps towards the light switch next to the door. Just as she reached out to press it, the button was obscured. She gasped. It was a hand. A man’s hand, made transparent red by the back lighting. A shiver travelled up her back. In the second it took to realise that she hadn’t made it all up, that she’d been right all along, the hand had grabbed her arm and held her in a tight grip. There was no point in screaming, no one would hear her anyway. Her entire body went limp but the stranger’s arms were strong enough to still hold her upright. To her horror she felt her clitoris rub against her knickers making her trickle.

‘Please don’t hurt me,’ she whispered. ‘What do you want?’

Her eyes had adjusted to the dark and in the dim red light from the switch she could discern that the man holding her was tall and broad. He had long hair, pulled back from his face. Just like Anders at work.

The man laughed as he let her go. She recognised that roaring.

‘You bastard.’ She hit his arms and his chest. Sobbing and laughing at the same time. ‘I hate you.’

‘You didn’t seem that scared,’ Anders said as he pressed the red button and the attic flooded with a soft yellow light.

‘It was cruel, though, admit.’ Estella stared at him, eyes burning and cheeks flushed. Her heart was still racing.

‘Yeah, sorry.’ He sniggered. ‘But it sure as hell was fun.’

‘Not my kind of fun.’

Estella adjusted her bag, trying to ignore the wet patch in her knickers. Perhaps it was her kind of fun.

‘Anyway, I came over to see how you’re going.’ He didn’t move. His eyes were an unusual shade of grey. She’d never noticed before. ‘If you need some help, I mean.’

She laughed. ‘Why would I need help with my round?’ She was often the first one back.

‘I just thought... You’ve been a bit distracted lately.’ Front teeth biting down on his bottom lip in a nervous move.

‘Is that so...’ She wasn’t quite sure what to make of it. At work she would banter with the younger guys but never really talk about her private life. ‘Suppose you’re right.’

Anders hadn’t worked there for very long. He probably didn’t even know she had kids. Even though she was livid, she felt strangely flattered by his attention. She was still young, attractive, slightly chubby but with the curves in all the right places, pleased with herself.

Estella ran self-consciously down the stairs in front of him. She kept pushing the mail into slots in the doors as if nothing had happened, but that night, after gorging herself on Olof's yummy marinara sauce, reading bedtime stories and rejecting his advances, she thought she knew what she was doing and finally she sat down to write.

“One day, as Sara was doing her usual round as a postie, up and down the stairs in the neglected old blocks around Möllevångstorget, something happened. As she crossed what would normally be a deserted attic, the lights suddenly went out. She stopped dead for a second, feeling her limbs tense, then she let the darkness embrace her...”

‘Not bad for two weeks of thinking,’ Olof grinned over her shoulder.

‘Piss off! How will I ever be able to write anything with you hanging around like a bad smell?’

‘Tense, are we?’ He started massaging her shoulders.

‘Please, Olof, let me finish this. We’ll wake the kids...’ As she said it, she pulled her eyes away from the screen and turned around to kiss him. She knew she had already lost the inspiration anyway.

His fingers travelled along her neck in little circles. Whenever she questioned why they were still together, she remembered those fingers. Circling like this, along her neck, her arms, her legs as she sat paralysed on the chair, they made her burn and shiver.

‘What do you think you’re doing?’ she asked, pretending to still be preoccupied with the story even though she was already drowning in her knickers.

‘Wouldn’t you like to know?’ he answered, before slowly unbuttoning her shirt.

An involuntary moan escaped as his fingers slid across her nipples. She felt like she was attached to the chair, like the chair was an extension of her buttocks and

she'd never be able to part with it without help from a surgeon. Fortunately, Olof was a skilled people mover and before she knew it she was on the floor, relieved of all her duties to body parts like bums and chairs. Now she was ready to play the game.

She grabbed hold of the front of his pants where a familiar bulge was making itself known. Teasing it through the fabric, she felt not just the cock but Olof's entire body tense up, getting ready. She unzipped and pulled his pants down but left the jocks on, watching his keenness grow in the shape of a darker stain at the tip. Out of all the things she loved about him, the way his cock wept in anticipation for her was one of the most endearing. She stole his smell in long breaths. He twirled her hair and groaned.

'No more torture, pleeeeeease. Let me take this off.' He slid down opposite her and pulled the bra straps off her shoulders and unhooked her at the back.

Her large brown breasts lived a secluded life of their own during the day when Estella was at work, all tucked away, pretending to be shy, but now that they had been released, they were more than happy to greet Olof's eager hands. He circled one nipple with his tongue, then the other. Estella would often threaten that there'd be jealousy in the family if he didn't dedicate equal time and enthusiasm to them both. She closed her eyes to devote every fibre of her being to the signals of pure pleasure being sent in direct communications between her nipples and her throbbing crotch.

In agony from the build-up, she quickly pulled his t-shirt and socks off before gently pushing him flat on his back on the rug. She kissed him on the mouth and worked her way down to the wet patch, which was slowly getting bigger. Without pulling his Calvins down just yet she flicked her tongue around the tip. He liked being teased – and she enjoyed teasing him.

'You cruel woman...'

‘Oh, yeah? You just wait to see what I have in store for you...’

But in an unexpected move, he rolled her over, straddling her amazing shape with ease, pinning her arms to the floor.

‘Not so cocky, now, are we?’

It didn’t happen very often, but he knew it excited her when they played rough.

‘Please relieve me of my suffering,’ Estella begged, grinning from ear to ear.

‘First I want to see what I’m in for with this exotic beauty.’ Olof adopted the voice of a colonial explorer. ‘Looks like these are in the right places.’ He touched her breasts. ‘Let’s take a look further down.’ He pulled her pants and knickers off with a little help from Estella. ‘There is dark, curly hair.’

‘Just like on top. Funny that,’ Estella laughed. ‘Why don’t you have a taste?’

She pulled his head down between her legs and it didn’t take long for Olof to forget about his colonial persona and start making miracles with his tongue. Estella stroked his head as she floated around the room, looking down upon them with a strange feeling of pride mixed with pity. Perhaps she could never write a short story about sex. Perhaps she was destined to keep the secrets of the best to herself.

‘Don’t stop, I beg you!’ she cried as Olof came up for air.

If he wasn’t going to let her write about it, damned if she was going to let him stop now.

Her body shook as she climbed closer to the point where it no longer mattered what Olof did, the point where the autopilot took over and steered her safely to the bliss of one small death.

‘Come inside.’

She turned around and he slid in from behind, pushing together with the rhythm of hearts racing against time and love and life and it didn’t take long because they

were both so close and couldn't really hold back any longer and didn't want to either and in the end she came just before him and the squeezing of her muscles set him off and they fell in a heap on the rug, clutching to each other, sticky and content.

Before falling asleep, Olof pulled as close as he could get, snuggled into the crook of her neck and whispered, tongue firmly in cheek: 'Now, that's something to write about!'

She laughed and turned around to smother him with a pillow. 'You wouldn't be quite so cocky if you knew what happened to me today...'

Tasting Malmö

As you walk along Ystadsgatan with its bright Arabic signs and fruit stalls spilling out onto the street you feel the heightened atmosphere. Möllevångstorget is just around the corner. You have left the sleepy side streets and entered the cosmopolitan centre where Swedish is offered with a twist, where fruit stalls fill the square and the owners shout their wares, the way it's done in Jerusalem and Istanbul.

You wander along, amazed at this explosion of smells, colours and flavours as you're presented with a taste of the latest batch of nectarines or mandarins. Five *kronor* a kilo, three kilos for twelve. Extra special. Good bananas. Fresh melons – two for ten. Are these oranges pip free? No, no. No pips in oranges. Juicy sweet. You try.

You tread the fine line between quality and quantity and always end up with more than you need. If you are not alone on this adventure your friend spurs you on and together you plan on making the best fruit salad ever. Cherries, plums, apples, passionfruit, melons, kiwifruit, raspberries – here all seasons and all tastes are thrown in together with all the languages of the world and if your friend happens to know Spanish she chats with the South Americans and you end up with another box of peaches and plenty of friendly winks.

As midday approaches so do prams with curly haired children and their covered mothers. The children walk with a steady grip on the stroller frames as fruit boxes are piled high, precariously balanced on the padded seats. Twenty *kronor*? Too much, too much. You know how to haggle; to pay the right price is more than a game, it's a way of life. This is how you get close to your city, find your way to its stomach. You are recognised and appreciated even if you have only once bought a handful of tomatoes.

The aisles are filling up and the sun has come out from behind a fluffy summer cloud. The smell of warm bodies mixes with that of overripe strawberries and fresh dill. The stalls brimming with flowers and pot plants are a welcome break from the

onslaught of fruit before the vegies take over. Capsicum, the colours of the Ethiopian flag, piled high next to Brussels sprouts and more kinds of onion than you'll ever know the names of. Three for ten, Swedish cucumber. Extra fresh. Extra tasty.

The cobblestone square is slippery with lost produce crushed under the weight of bargain hunters. You tie your jumper around your waist and narrow your eyes against the glare as you walk around the statue towards the little cheese wagon parked beside the kiosk. If your friend is a cheese lover like yourself – and most likely she is – she suggests some tasting before buying. Cambozola, fresh garlic cheese, ambrosia, *svarta sara*. You imagine the soft texture and strong taste of the first one contrasted with warm Turkish bread, fresh from the friendly baker. Then another, lined with mould, combined with lightly salted biscuits. You could buy them all but settle for *lagom*, the most Swedish of all. *Lagom* many. *Lagom* strong. A word and a concept without equivalent in any other language. Meaning an ample sufficiency, just right (without being greedy), not too much - not too little.

So you round the kiosk with arms lengthening under the weight of delights, heading for the deli on the corner where salamis hang like stalactites from the ceiling and ten kinds of olives fight for your attention. You take your time, choose carefully between smoked and cured ham, pepper and garlic salami while your friend flirts lazily with the handsome Greek behind the counter.

Only the bread left. The heavenly smell of sesame seeds pulls you towards the Turkish baker where loaves of bread the size of single beds appear miraculously as fast as they are demanded by the patiently waiting crowd. You close your eyes and listen to the foreign buzz. On impulse, when your turn finally comes, you buy some halva too. An unbearably sweet appetizer to keep you going.

The clouds are creeping towards the horizon, leaving the sky a blanket of light. The only responsible thing to do is to embrace summer with a picnic in Pildammsparkern. After a careful selection process (cherries or strawberries? pineapple or mango juice?) in your friend's flat overlooking the square, you head for a green space. Walking down Smedjegatan, past Johanneskolan and Dekanen, which might one day harbour the secrets of a tube station in its brown underbelly, you remember playing *brännboll* there when you were in year 11.

If your friend has come along this far, by the time you cross Pildammsvägen your mouths and stomachs are singing to the tune of high school times and picnic longings. Dotted on the lawn to your left are bare breasted middle-aged women baking themselves the colour of gingerbread. A skinhead covered in tattoos throws a stick for his dog. Toddlers wearing only hats and nappies run around while parents take turns reading the paper.

The good old apple slide is still popular. A large red artwork full of holes and crevices for hiding and sliding. Somewhere in between the playground and the dam you spread the blanket, carefully avoiding lumps of green goose droppings, and lie down. Arms outstretched, head resting on your friend's thigh, eyes closed, you listen to the breathing of life.

Then your stomach grumbles again and you know you shouldn't wait any longer. As you start unpacking, you know this is already a picnic to remember.

I, SUSANNA

LISTENING

‘Come come come...’ I whisper so as not to ruin the illusion of mystery. Liliana beams towards me, her little finger like the letter I in front of her mouth.

‘Shhh...’

‘Yes, let’s be quiet. This is a special place.’

Her eyes widen. ‘Me first’ she whispers.

‘Okay, you go first.’

I help her lift the cloth and crawl in, making sure she doesn’t hit her head. The soft tunnel is dark red. I follow as closely as I can but she is the faster crawler. Liliana knows no fear, only wonder. Her life is a giant game where she writes the rules, then rewrites them, and I’m simply one of her pawns. Her breathing reminds me of a puppy’s.

The tunnel is a hollow snake around the room and we are getting sucked to its heart by curiosity. Liliana is so far ahead I can no longer see her but the smell of her skin lingers. As the cushion, cardboard and cloth tunnel opens up to an enclosed space I relive the moment of her birth; the red fabric hanging in folds from the ceiling becomes the blood pumping before my eyes, lighting the way it was planned but never happened, my first look at her hours later in a daze. I swallow hard.

On the other side of the crimson cave sits the storyteller. She has a journal in her hand and a child, our child, on her lap. She is disguised; wearing a wig and a crooked witch’s nose, she adopts a voice deep as the sea. Still, Liliana knows. Or at least she trusts the storyteller and waits calmly for me to make myself comfortable on one of the cushions. She whispers:

‘Gonna hear a story?’

‘Yes, darling. Listen very carefully. It’s a story just for you.’

My love starts reading: 'A long, long time ago in a faraway land lived a poor farmer and his wife. They had ten children who all worked very hard to help out.'

I see them before me, these emaciated faces squinting at the unrelenting sun, praying for rain. My father is one of them. The smallest but not the youngest.

'One of the boys was called Eduardo. When he turned twelve he decided he was old enough to seek his fortune in the city.'

Liliana listens with her mouth wide open, like one of those mechanical sideshow clowns at Tivoli.

'Eduardo bade his mother and father, whom he would never see again, farewell. Then the three-day trek to the city began.'

I imagine him walking through the arid land with his walking stick as his only companion. No more than a boy with skinny arms and legs.

'When he arrived he got a job running errands for one of the local doctors. He liked it because he met many interesting people who came to the clinic, not just as patients but as friends. The doctor also happened to have a beautiful twelve-year old daughter.'

'A girl,' Lili whispers. In her world most girls are sacred and magical beings who possess great powers to transform their surroundings. She takes pride in being a girl. I remember the grin on the midwife's face when she handed me this tiny creature: 'A perfectly healthy little girl.' The forbidden thought: I'm glad she's a girl. She is one of us.

My love looks at me as if she can read my smile. The smell of lavender incense is thick in the enclosed space. Liliana has slipped her left thumb into her mouth, sucking with the quiet lap of waves.

‘Eduardo and the doctor’s daughter, whose name was Isabella, weren’t able to play together the way children do here. They would only catch glimpses of each other in the garden or through doors left ajar by her unsuspecting father.’

The same way that I had peeked at her through the wooden bars of her cot; trying to restrain my touch but never wanting to leave.

‘Years passed and Isabella grew into a young woman, agile as a leopard, swift as a bird. Eduardo would find excuses to walk with her to the market, to make her laugh. But the doctor also noticed the change in his daughter and he forbade her to even speak to anyone outside her family. As you can imagine this made life very awkward for her. When she went to the market she had to write down her orders on pieces of paper to hand out to the grocer, the butcher or the tailor who couldn’t always read themselves.’

I see Isabella before me: waves of chestnut hair hugging her back, swaying from side to side as she darts from one stall to the next. There are no photos of my mother from this time. I just know from the way my father talks about her that she must have been stunning. Is that what my child will one day look like? I watch her in the orange light, twirling a lock of her already thick hair with one hand while the other is still connected to her mouth.

‘One day at the market when Eduardo accompanied Isabella in silence she suddenly grasped his hand. When she let go she left behind a small note on rose scented paper.’

My father always had a good memory for details. I wouldn’t know rose scent if it hit me on the head. Liliana is like him. When she says lavender or sandalwood I always trust her judgment. Those are her favourites.

‘When Eduardo felt Isabella’s hand in his and saw the sparkle in her eyes he blushed and stopped, letting her continue on alone. He fingered the note, scanning the indecipherable message. You see, Eduardo didn’t know how to read.’

Lili’s eyes widen in surprise. ‘I can read, Mummy, can’t I?’

‘Of course, grub. But we’ve helped you learn. Eduardo probably didn’t have any help.’

‘I’m only four,’ she says with pride, thumb to the side of her mouth.

‘Five today, grubby nose. Have you already forgotten that it is your birthday?’

‘It’s my birthday,’ she says with a happy sigh and sinks deeper into the storyteller’s lap.

‘Eduardo was helped by a wise old man who could read and write and see into the future. He said: “Run away tonight. When the first star lights up, meet your love at the bottom of the garden. If you do, you will be happy together in a land faraway. If you don’t you’ll never see her again.” Eduardo couldn’t thank the old man enough before hurrying home to pack a simple bag containing his few belongings and some food.’

I see Lili’s eyes glitter at the thought of food. She has chosen today’s menu herself. A mountain of mashed potato with patterns made from finger-sized frankfurts.

‘Eduardo waited for the first star. It appeared in the east, then a second and a third blinked above but Isabella didn’t come. Eduardo waited impatiently, shifting from one foot to the other. Then there was a scream from the house and he heard pots falling on the floor. Within seconds a shadow was breathing hard into his ear: ‘Let’s run!’’

The storyteller pauses for effect. Somewhere beyond this space the phone rings. I don't move. The answering machine can get it. My love and I exchange glances. We both know about the limited attention span of four year olds (which can't be that different for those who turn five). So far so good.

'The young couple ran into the night and never looked back. They managed to get aboard one of the big ships sailing to Europe, pretending to be cleaners. It wasn't that hard for Eduardo but Isabella was more interested in the piano music from the salons than the sloshing of a wet mop against a grimy floor.'

The phone rings again. Liliana looks at me with her dark eyes: 'Mummy, the phone. Maybe it's important.'

'It's okay. Nothing is as important as this. Story's almost finished now.'

The storyteller takes the hint and summarizes even quicker than I expected: 'Eduardo and Isabella's travels finally landed them in a country of cold plenty. They married and had three children. The youngest was a girl called Susanna, who in turn had another girl named Liliana...'

'My story,' Lili whispers.

'...but that is another story, which has to be told another time.'

We all sit in silence, surrounded by story and history. The red velvet wall of the cave shimmers in the dim light. Here we are protected from the outside world. If anyone wants to reach us they will have to crawl through the small opening, on all fours, like we did.

I am the one who breaks the spell. I mention the guests, the games, the food the day still has to offer and the slight sadness that has tinged Lili's cheeks vanishes.

'I'll race you to the kitchen,' I say, already behind by the time I mention racing.

Worming back through the tunnel feels like a reverse birth, from the unfamiliar and mystical to the ordinary life we know. The light in Lili's room is so bright I have to shade my eyes. Lili jumps out from behind the cushions to hug me as I stop to get my bearings. In the hallway the answering machine blinks insistently.

'Hello, Susanna. This is Mohammed Hussain. I wonder if you have time. Please, I need help. Nassrin not well. My number 611 21 32.' Then silence, before he whispers: 'Please hurry.' As if someone to whom he doesn't want to tell the truth is sitting too close.

Within minutes I'm on my way to Rosengård. Not because I feel obliged to. I was once Mohammed's teacher, but I now consider him a friend. Outside the eight-storey brick in which he shares a flat with his wife and five children, and other families with precious little space and money, a group of kids are playing basketball. One girl is much taller than the rest and she keeps pinching the ball and scoring three pointers. She is Mohammed's eldest daughter, Sophia, too involved in her game to notice me.

I take the lift even though last time I was here I promised myself that I would take the stairs from then on. Still have some baby flab to get rid of.

'Susanna. So sorry disturb you. I thank you from the bottom of my heart for coming.'

He takes me through the narrow hallway to the lounge where Nassrin sits hugging her legs in the corner of the couch. I know she's about forty-five but today she looks closer to sixty. Her scarf has slipped showing a tuft of grey strands. She doesn't acknowledge me.

‘Yesterday she cry. Today she not talking.’ Mohammed looks at me with expectation, as if I have all the answers and once I’ve told him what’s wrong he’ll be able to fix it in no time.

The baby starts whimpering in one of the bedrooms. Nassrin doesn’t even flinch, it’s as if she can’t hear it. Lili slips into my mind, preparing for her big day. The guests will be there soon. I repress a feeling to simply turn and walk away from the situation, back to my own family. There is nothing I can do here. Within seconds the whimper turns into a roar. Nassrin doesn’t move or even look in the direction of the noise. I take her hand and pat it awkwardly. It’s like a foccacia, heavy but soft. Never in all my years as a teacher have I experienced anything like this. Mohammed goes to pick up the baby while I try to reach Nassrin. She mumbles something but the words escape me. The baby is twice the size it was last time I saw it. A boy with black tufts of hair and clenched fists. He must be six months now. Nassrin puts him to the breast but her vacant expression doesn’t change. Her eyes don’t light up the way I have seen with her other children.

I take Mohammed aside: ‘How long has she been like this?’

‘Just today. Yesterday she cry.’ He runs a hand through his thinning hair.

‘Really she was different all month.’

‘I think we have to see a doctor.’

He nods slowly. He has known it all along but he needed me to confirm his fears. Why don’t I just call him a taxi? Isn’t it time for me to be with Lili on her birthday?

On the way to the local hospital Nassrin starts crying so hard Mohammed and I struggle to keep her standing. We left Sophia in charge hoping we wouldn’t be away for too long. It’s already the time of day that turns yellow leaves golden, when the air

is crisp and you wish you had brought your jacket. Lili and her friends will have finished eating their sausage art work by now. Klara will be orchestrating games. Perhaps she's let them into the cave. Wonder how well she manages to entertain six five-year olds as the storyteller. I don't envy her. But of course I do.

The small waiting room is almost full. A big Somali woman and three children sit quietly in one corner. We sink down next to them. The woman tries to offer sympathetic looks while Nassrin sobs into her hands. The wait is like labour; it seems to go on forever. I wonder what is happening to our health care system. We never had to wait when I was a kid – or did we? I find a Twix bar in my pocket and we all share the sweet stickiness.

When we finally get in I pretend to be the couple's private interpreter, even though their Swedish is fine, so the doctor won't ask me to leave. She is young and very thorough. After much poking and prodding and many questions which Mohammed and I struggle to answer she nods and scribbles something on a piece of paper.

Grey clouds are clinging to the top branches of the chestnuts lining the footpath. Nassrin walks in silence but Mohammed keeps talking. He seems relieved, not because Nassrin has stopped crying but because her silence and sobbing has a name, something tangible. She isn't going crazy.

'My love, why you didn't tell me you so sad inside? I'll help out more, I promise. I take the baby in the night. You rest.'

Nassrin looks down on the patterned concrete as she walks.

Back at the flat Sophia has assembled all the children and is dishing out a lamb casserole. My stomach gurgles. I imagine Lili sitting on the floor surrounded by all her presents, dishing out praise in the same consistent manner. All the other five-year

olds will have left by now. In big angry gulps I down the sweet tea Sofia hands me. No, I don't want to stay for dinner. I need to go, to run home, to scream at Nassrin to snap out of it, aren't we all a little sad sometimes and shouldn't I have been with my daughter on her birthday? I swallow hard as I squeeze Nassrin's hand, then Mohammed's and tell them I'll ring tomorrow. He is so overwhelmed with gratitude he isn't sure what to say, so he simply nods.

Outside, the dark skies have dispersed and left behind a magic twilight of pinks and purples. In the east the first star appears just like it did fifty years ago when my father waited to elope with my mother. It soothes me. The thought of being so small on this earth, so insignificant, but still being watched by the milky way. Wonder if this star is the same one that my father saw? Must remember to take Lili out to look at the stars one night. Away from the city lights. I see her little face before me, full of awe for every wonder the world has to offer. I hope she forgives me for being away most of her birthday.

Klara greets me with a big smile: 'Girl, am I glad to see you!'

'Five kids a bit much for you?' I sigh. 'Seems to be a bit much for Nassrin, anyway.'

'I think five of your own is slightly different to having them for the afternoon.'

'I know. I'm just sorry I missed it all.'

'You did the right thing.' Klara kisses my cheek. 'Look, here's the birthday girl.'

Lili comes running from her bedroom in her new Winnie the Pooh jumper, clutching a book half her size. When she reaches me she drops it on the floor and jumps into my arms. Klara laughs at our enthusiasm.

'Mummy, mummy, look who's here!'

Out of Lili's bedroom appear my Mum and Dad, smiling for ear to ear.

Klara laughs. 'I got some unexpected help. Otherwise I'd be a wet rag from all the running around.'

'We just couldn't stay away.' Mum comes over and hugs me. 'I know we should have rung. We know the adult party is tomorrow but we wanted to be here today too.'

'Mum...' I try to pretend to be upset. 'We've had this discussion before. Boundaries and all that...'

She doesn't listen. Waves my interruptions away. 'We're needed. Weren't we, Klara?'

'Granny and Granddad readed me this story.' Lili holds the huge book up for me to see.

On the cover there is a young woman sitting in a boat, surrounded by colourful animals. Inside, Lili explains, are stories from Latin America, in Swedish and Spanish. The pictures are vivid and detailed.

'I wanna read Spanish,' says Lili, without taking her eyes off the page.

'I'm sure Granny and Granddad would be happy to teach you.'

'Yes, yes, let's go read more.' She grabs Eduardo's hand and promptly walks back to her bedroom closely followed by Isabella.

Klara and I look at each other and smile. There is no one more eager and insistent, if she really wants something, than our daughter.

I can't help thinking of Nassrin's uncontrollable sobbing and her husband's confusion. The guilt about not staying with them lingers. Without saying a word, Klara hugs me. She understands. Sometimes I wonder how I could be so lucky as to have met her. A warmth spreads through me.

We are fortunate to be part of a bigger story. One that started a long time ago with a skinny boy walking to the city to seek his fortune. One that will continue long after we are gone and Lili has picked up a walking stick to wander off and explore the world all on her own.

RHYME

FINDING HOPE

When the birds began twittering outside her window Rhyme braced herself for the onslaught of the day. The early morning noises didn't wake her up. She hadn't been asleep. During the night both Kasper and Vera had woken up, crying for her. She had lain in bed listening to the muffled sounds of her mother's soothing voice at the other end of the corridor. Hugging her bony chest as tears trickled down her face. Why couldn't she comfort her own children in the dark?

The blackbird sang through the dark blind, reminding her of spring, even though summer had already been and gone. Kasper wriggled out of his bed and tip-toed over to hers.

'*Mamma.*' He had learnt how to whisper but was ruining the effect by pulling her arm at the same time.

'Mmmmm.' She pretended to be waking up to see the joy on his face. It was a new day now, a day when she'd be in control.

'I come in?'

'All right, petal. Just don't tell your Gran, okay?'

His little limbs embraced her, the warmth of his body enveloping hers. Her child. No one else's. Hers. She kissed his eyelids and stroked the unruly mass of dark hair. Within seconds he was asleep and she was yet again left to listen to the sounds of his breathing. The little snorts, the big mouthfuls of air, the endless silences. She steeled herself. When he was a baby, she'd thought he'd died at least once a night. In the end her mother had had to move him to the other bedroom. The nights had been too stressful for all three of them. Rhyme assumed that was why Vera had shared rooms with him, not with her, from the beginning.

Butter cookies, that's how the nape of his neck smelt, and stale smoke. Her mother had never managed to quit smoking so the smell was ingrained. Kasper

wouldn't be himself without it. From across the corridor there were tentative squeaks. Kasper mumbled in his sleep and kicked the doona off his side of the narrow bed. Rhyme wondered what he was dreaming: running along the beach on a hot summer's day, as he had only a month ago, or perhaps chasing the neighbours' cat to pull its tail. His features composed, straightened out like a newly ironed tablecloth in the dim light.

Then Vera started bawling.

Rhyme disentangled herself from her son's embrace. She had to hurry. She had to get there first. Otherwise she'd lose her baby for the day. Somehow that was an unwritten rule. There were many of those, and more had appeared every day since the company her mother had worked for had decided to downsize. No longer needing three cleaners they thanked the eldest two for their services by giving them reasonably generous pensions and aching backs.

Sharing a space meant compromising, but only for Rhyme, never for her mother. After all, Rhyme wasn't the one who did the hard yards at night.

'Come here, sweetie,' she breathed into Vera's neck as she picked her up. 'Shhh, don't wanna wake Gran up, do we?'

Vera intermittently snuggled into her armpit and pulled away to stare at her with round grey eyes. It wasn't often but occasionally Rhyme would, in the eyes of her children, catch a glimpse of the girl she had once been. Brooding clouds over a black sea. As she heated a bottle in the stained microwave she shivered in the draft from the window which was always ajar to let some of the cigarette smell escape. In late September the nights can be quite chilly. She'd have to talk to her mother about it. Maybe get her to open it wide while she smoked, then close it again. She chuckled. The idea was comical, Rhyme telling her mother what to do. She stroked Vera's blond

strands from her forehead, listening to her eager sucking before putting her in bed, then slipping in between her and Kasper. Finally, she could sleep too.

Many hours later, when she had given up trying to feed Vera anything but mushy fruit loops and watched Kasper dress himself in the same tartan pants and Hawaiian shirt as yesterday, and the day before, the three of them headed for the bus stop.

Rhyme saw her mother hanging out of the open window, taking long drags on her cigarette and blowing smoke to the right of her face the way she always did. She didn't wave.

'Let's go on an adventure. See where the bus can take us.'

Vera smiled so wide she dropped her dummy and Kasper ran ahead singing:

'Venture, venture.'

They didn't even have to wait. As the little family reached the shelter, the bus swung around the corner. Kasper jumped up and down with excitement.

'Buss, mamma, buss!'

Rhyme couldn't help but laugh at him, his excitement rubbing off on her, reminding her of what it had been like to catch a bus when she was little. The great escape.

'Look, a truck! An ambulance...'

The world looked different from this height. People were smaller and more insignificant. They could look down on everyone, like queens and kings from their thrones. Kasper stood on the seat and leaned his nose against the window while she held his waist. Vera made happy gurgling noises at an elderly gentleman in an old fashioned hat. Across from them was another mum with her little one. The mothers

smiled knowingly at each other. They were in a club to which only mothers could gain access.

‘Aren’t you a cutie. What’s your name?’

‘Her name is Vera.’

Rhyme shone with pride and forgot to ask for the other baby’s name but the mother told her anyway: ‘This one is Pernilla.’

The rose-coloured baby blinked at Rhyme.

‘They must be about the same age,’ Pernilla’s mum continued.

‘Vera is nine months.’

‘Pernilla is five months. I can’t believe how quickly it has all gone.’

Rhyme nodded, steadying Kasper as the bus turned a corner. She couldn’t believe he had already turned five. And Erik would have been six... She shook her head to herself. No sad thoughts today. The other mother smiled at her again and somehow she managed to arrange a face to meet hers. She was lucky, she knew that. Some people couldn’t have children at all and she had been able to keep two.

‘Wonderful, isn’t it?’ Rhyme gave the woman a shy smile.

‘Yes. Wonderful.’ The woman grimaced. ‘And frustrating. And tiring. Sleepless nights, endless nappy leaks. You name it, we have it.’ Then she laughed. ‘But I wouldn’t swap it for the world.’

The twenty-minute ride to Möllevångstorget passed quicker than they could put their jackets on and get organised to get off again. Rhyme would have liked to talk more but that wasn’t the way it was going to be.

Once they had scrambled into a heap on the footpath Rhyme made sure they hadn’t left anything behind and they all waved to the woman and her daughter.

‘Was that fun?’

‘Ohhh, *mamma*, the bus was sooooo cool.’ Kasper gave her a big hug from the side while she put Vera in her stroller. Vera was grinning at her, her one tooth sticking out of her gums like a small but proud lighthouse.

‘Let’s go then!’

But outside the first corner shop, Rhyme remembered that she still had to buy some bread for the ducks. She wasn’t sure if she could leave Kasper outside to mind his sister but he promised that he wouldn’t let go of the stroller so in the end Rhyme whizzed into the deli, grabbed a loaf, counted the change and came straight back out.

Both children were gone, so was the stroller but her back pack was left on the ground. It was as if someone had sneaked up from behind and put their knees into the back of hers, they just bent. The loaf landed on the footpath with a soft thud.

‘Are you all right?’

A friendly face in concerned blue.

‘My babies...’ The words were piling up in her throat.

‘Take it easy. Calm down,’ said the friendly face, a woman with two yappy dogs pulling at their leads. ‘Now, what happened?’

‘I just went in... for a second... get some bread... they’re gone.’

‘They won’t be far away. You stay here in case they appear and I’ll go looking for them.’

As she turned to leave, the stroller rolled out from the nearest entry hall. Kasper pushed it with confidence and pride.

‘*Mamma*, there’s a big dog. I pat. I pat.’ Then he lowered his voice, indicating his sleeping sister. ‘Vera ’fraid. I give her dummy. Shhh.’

The friendly woman stared at him with great amusement.

‘You’re a resourceful little fellow, aren’t you,’ she smiled before her eager dogs pulled her away.

Rhyme hugged him until he squirmed.

‘Don’t you ever do that again. When I ask you to stay I mean it, Kasper.’

‘But *mamma*, we’re here now.’

‘Right, but you shouldn’t have gone at all.’

‘Sorry, *mamma*. *Jag älskar dig!*’

She never had an answer to that one. Telling her he loved her was the easiest way for him to get out of trouble. She loved him back with such intensity, all she could do was tussle his hair and swallow the lump of worry.

‘Are we gonna feed the ducks or not?’

‘Feed duckies, feed duckies, feed duckies,’ he chanted until Vera woke up and glared at him with her wise eyes.

‘Let’s go then!’ Rhyme picked up her bag and the bread and started walking along Smedjegatan towards Pildammsparken. She needed to get away from that spot where her knees had bent. Today’s bad spot. There was always one bad spot or another but she never knew in advance where they would be. She was getting better at living through them.

‘Let’s sing the one about the crocodile, shall we?’

Kasper joined in and they sang all the way to the park. Vera got so excited by it all that she threw her dummy in the bushes while conducting. Fortunately, Kasper noticed and crawled in to retrieve it, singing all the while.

‘*Herr krokodil, fru krokodil och lille krokodille lille man...*’

They entered the park from the corner with the canal-like water feature, up the incline, onto the gravel path and were suddenly surrounded by ducks, geese and the odd swan. Both

children screamed with excitement and fear as a swan decided to lunge for the piece of bread Rhyme was handing Kasper.

‘Mamma, help! Go away!’ Kasper waved his arms in desperation but to no avail. By taking a swing at the swan with her jacket, Rhyme managed to make it hiss and back off. Pearls of sweat appeared on her upper lip.

‘Let’s move on.’

She reached for Kasper with one hand and pushed the stroller with the other. All along the edge of the lake there were people bending down, helping children throw handfuls of bread into the murky water.

When Rhyme felt safe again they stopped. Vera was kicking her legs and Kasper begged for more bread. Next to them, only a few metres away, were two black kids and their mother. She was almost completely covered by a large brimmed hat and sunglasses but Rhyme still noticed that she had a big friendly smile. Her children seemed to be about the same age as Kasper and kept coming back for more and more bread. Every time they came back they blew their mother a kiss as if it was a favourite ritual. Rhyme looked at her own children. What would become of them? Would they grow up to be like her? Kasper was throwing crusts at the birds instead of to them and Vera was happily giggling away in her stroller.

Then everything happened very quickly. From the dam there was a piercing scream. The younger sister’s face came up spluttering, gasping for air. Kasper was already reaching for the girl’s arms to pull her out. The mothers ran the few steps down but weren’t fast enough to catch Kasper before he slid on bird poo and landed on his hands and knees next to the girl he tried to save in the brown shallow water.

For a second life caught its breath. The four of them locked in a surprise bubble, looking bewildered at each other. Then the woman in the hat started laughing.

Kasper's expression changed from terror to utter delight and Rhyme felt the corners of her mouth turn upwards.

Eventually the kids managed to scramble out of the dam without much help. The older of the two black girls stood paralysed next to Vera's stroller, hanging on to it in case it started rolling down the hill to have a dip too.

'Do you live far from here?' The black woman looked through her dark sunnies straight at Rhyme. 'Anyway, my name is Estella.'

'I'm Rhyme. We don't live too far away.' She felt herself bowing her head, mumbling, waiting for the hat to lose interest in her. The three children ran past, chasing each other along the path, making sloppy wet sounds with each step.

'Well, it looks like the kids are having fun. Perhaps you'd like to come over for *fika* while they dry off. We live just there.' She motioned to one of the blocks of flats across the other side of Pildammsvägen.

The woman with the strange hat wasn't letting go. She insisted and finally Rhyme gave in, the way people give in to temptation, with a mixture of guilt and pleasure.

In Estella's flat they were offered thick slices of home-made bread with cheese, ham, *leverpastej*, sliced tomatoes and cucumber. But first of all Estella ordered the wet kids into the bathroom, stripped them of their clothes, hosed them down in the bath and got the washing machine going. Without her hat and sunnies, her face looked almost naked, her skin the colour of coffee with just a dash of milk. There was nothing wrong with the strength of her arms, you could tell she was used to hard work. While the kettle boiled, she picked out new clothes for the wet kids. Kasper was speechless when he was handed a Swedish football team jersey. Rhyme watched in awe as Estella joked with Miriam and Millie and they kept returning to the table to

blow her another kiss. The little things Rhyme worked so hard at every day came naturally to Estella.

‘Rhyme is an interesting name.’ Estella studied her above the rim of her teacup.

Rhyme nodded. Her mouth was too full of bread.

‘It’s nice.’ Estella smiled with her eyes.

Rhyme nodded again. ‘I’ve always liked it. As if it’s the only thing that belongs to me.’ She sipped her sweet tea. ‘Estella is nice too.’

‘It means Star.’ Estella looked out the window, her beautiful skin shimmering in the early afternoon light. ‘I was in a band once. Suppose I wanted to live up to my name but we never sold much.’ She flashed her wide smile at Rhyme. ‘Now I’m a counsellor so if you have any problems...’

Hours must have passed because suddenly the ping of the drier indicated that the clothes were ready and it was time for Rhyme to leave. With heavy steps she dragged herself and the children to the bus stop. The trip home was no adventure. Kasper fell asleep leaning against the window and Vera whinged in her stroller. It was still light but it was as if autumn had finally defeated summer once and for all. The birches glowed. Just outside their door, the chestnut had dropped its first fruit of the year. Kasper was too tired to even notice the spiky balls. Rhyme thought she must remember to show him tomorrow.

All the way up in the lift she clutched the small piece of paper which had Estella’s number scribbled on it. She would ring. Perhaps even tomorrow. Estella would help her, she’d said she would, working for the Social Services and all.

It was her mother’s bridge night so she left a note on the kitchen table: ‘We’re moving out.’ She envisaged tomorrow’s arguments but she knew what to say now.

She was nineteen, old enough to care for herself and her babies, wasn't she? She was well – at least she was taking her medication.

As she pulled mattresses onto the floor, she mumbled her defence. She got fresh linen out and placed the sleeping children closest to the wall so they wouldn't fall off. That night, for the first time in years, Rhyme reached out for her children in the dark. She soothed them when they woke. She sang to them, she held their little hands.

That night, for the first time ever, Rhyme fell asleep smiling.

NASSRIN

BREAKING WATER

The Little One whimpers in its sleep, mouth opening and closing the way fish do when they are about to die. Nassrin sits down on the dune, cradling her three-week

old baby, her sixth, watching people come and go on the wooden jetty. Mainly elderly couples arm in arm, the odd family, a young couple deeply engrossed in a discussion who suddenly stop to kiss. She watches the young man's long brown fingers work their way down the girl's back. Shame. In front of everybody, the entire beach staring. But no, it's just her. This is Malmö. Here no one stares. If anything, they smile knowingly. They used to kiss too, when they were young. Publicly.

Nassrin runs her fingers across her eyelids to rid herself of the sight. Somewhere deep inside, perhaps in her stomach, sits a niggling feeling that she is the one mistaken, that she wants to be caressed too, just like that girl, but is too shy to admit it.

In her arms The Little One starts squirming and making the weak noise which means 'please feed me'. Nassrin doesn't move. Twenty-five years she has lived in this grey city but today is the first time she feels Ribersborg's cool sand beneath her. She has never been this near the sea, never felt it envelop her. Gulp her up then spit the remains out. Her bones lying naked on the beach.

She stands up, moves a few steps closer to the water's edge. The Little One looks up at her with unfocused eyes. She takes another couple of steps, puts her right foot in the water. It only reaches her ankle.

Cold. Soothing.

She wades on, pushes through the clear soup until it licks her thighs. People on the jetty are looking but no one says anything. One minds one's own business. Strange customs these immigrants. Some kind of baptism, perhaps? But with a baby... They are so predictable these on-lookers, they always put everything down to culture. Honour killings, wife beatings, it's all from the strange cultures. She chuckles at the stupidity of it all then bites her tongue. There is nothing funny or honourable

about killing, she knows that. Everyone knows that. Swedish men kill their daughters too but no one would ever say it was a Swedish custom. If she laughs at their stupidity, why shouldn't they laugh at hers?

Perhaps she is inventing a new custom, bathing fully clad at Ribban. In a way it makes more sense than to take your clothes off to let the sun burn your skin to a ripe ginger. Not that she would ever burn, but they seem to think bronzed skin is the best, as long as your hair is still blonde.

Move on. Let the wind grip your body as well as your senses. Apart from her and The Little One there are only a few kids playing in the water by the jetty steps. Nassrin keeps walking. Soon the water reaches her waist. It doesn't feel cold any more, it feels like a part of her.

The Little One squeaks its please-give-me-food-soon-squeak. Face like a prune. She lifts the baby up and kisses its forehead to calm it down. It smells like jasmine drenched in milk. Through the bunny rug she can just discern the beating of its heart. Its warm breath against her chest. The let-down runs like tiny creeks through her breasts, there is nothing she can do about it. She stands still and feels the warm flow soak through her bra, through her dress. Isn't it time to turn back now? She should be sensible, go home, feed her baby, ask forgiveness. She would be forgiven, she always is. But by whom? Her husband? Her children? God? Can she forgive herself? This time everything is different.

Nassrin presses The Little One hard against her, above her leaking breasts, and takes another few steps. When the water reaches her nipples they stiffen and burn with the chill. Milk mingles with water. She pushes forward, the wet clothes making her body heavy, the bitter water numbing her legs.

Then everything happens. She stubs her toe on something. A rock? A piece of metal? The pain shoots through her limbs and she loses her balance, stumbles and sees the surface come crashing towards her face. Instinctively, she reaches her arms above her head, to protect the baby. For long seconds she struggles to find her footing in the slippery sand. When she emerges spluttering she hears wild cries from the jetty and four people are already swimming towards her. Funnily enough The Little One says nothing.

‘Are you okay?’ A man with intense blue eyes tries to catch her gaze. She looks away, the way she should.

‘Yes, yes. Fine.’

The Little One starts screaming its give-me-food-NOW-scream or perhaps it is actually an I’m-scared-and-I-want-to-be-safe-cry. Nassrin realises her arms are still above her head. The child is almost dry, only one corner of the bunny rug is a darker shade of yellow against her wet sleeve.

‘Thank you. I’ll be fine now.’ She doesn’t spare her well-wishers one glance, simply turns around and starts walking towards the shore, whispering soothing words in Arabic to her child.

One woman walks next to her all the way back to the shore. Tall and slim, somehow familiar, but Nassrin doesn’t take much notice. The baby’s desperate cries multiply in her head to form a throbbing barrier against the outside world. Why did she come here? She almost killed herself and the child. The greatest sin of all. An accident, but still. God is great.

Her shoes stand neatly next to each other the way she left them. She has no towel, never expected to get wet.

‘Please wait here. I’ll get my towel. It’s just over there.’ The stranger points to a pile of clothes and a bag halfway to the jetty. She runs over and returns with a conservatively patterned towel in deep green and brown, which she wraps around Nassrin’s shoulders. ‘Let me take you home. I can see your baby’s hungry.’

Nassrin nods. Suddenly she is exhausted. She recognises the feeling from the time after Mashmoud’s, her fifth child’s, birth. An unstoppable desire to do nothing but cry. But she is stronger now. And this is different, her sixth, different from all the others. The shame. Mashmoud was hard work, so little time to rest, but at least he was normal.

They cross the dunes to get to the car park. The skinny figure pushes the pram while Nassrin carries the baby. Wet clothes stick to her skin like Glad Wrap but the towel keeps her back warm. The woman looks strangely naked in her bathing suit with the bag flung across her shoulder. Nassrin’s breasts have stopped leaking. The Little One is quietly sucking her middle finger. People queuing up to buy ice-cream stare as they cross the railway line and head down the slope to the car.

The soft top Saab has a booster seat for an older child but no baby seat. Nassrin isn’t quite sure what to do so she waits while the woman puts the pram in the boot. The Little One starts whining again. Nassrin wishes she had a dummy but the baby has never liked them. She hugs the baby tight and puts her finger back in its mouth. It is awkward with the seat belt but the woman fastens it for her, for them.

‘Where do you live?’

‘Örtagården. Hårds väg.’

The woman drives in silence for a few minutes. Blocks of flats, parks, school kids meander past. Nassrin can feel her curious looks in the rear view mirror. Probably wondering what kind of loony she is helping home. Still almost naked, she

must be freezing. Nassrin feels a chill along her spine at the thought of it. At least she is still wearing all her clothes.

‘I know you from somewhere. Did I talk to you at the hospital after you had your baby?’

Nassrin doesn’t remember. It’s all a blur. There were so many doctors, checking and re-checking, taking blood, doing tests. They all said the baby was physically healthy. Apart from... The shame of it all. ‘What a beautiful baby’ people would say. ‘Boy or girl?’ Always the first question. Nassrin has tried to forget. Every single day she has tried and failed. She has five other children but this is the one who haunts her.

‘I think you should come and talk to me at the hospital.’ The woman speaks slowly as if to a wounded animal. ‘You don’t have to go through this alone. We can help... I know of a group. They meet once a month.’

They stop at a red light. The woman turns around to look at her. Nassrin wipes her face with a corner of the towel to avoid looking back. The streets are empty, the city deserted. People have fled to sunnier places, like Mallorca or the Greek isles. It doesn’t take more than fifteen minutes to travel through the entire city, from Ribban to Rosengård. From one world to another.

‘Turn right here, please.’

Blocks of concrete pretending to be dwellings, eight storeys to the left, twelve to the right. The woman drives slowly looking out for children playing on the footpath.

‘This is it.’

They stop by a three-storey block of flats the length of a football field. There are flowering bushes by the entrances. Nassrin doesn’t move. In the distance, on the lawn between this house and the next identical one, Nassrin sees her eldest daughter

skilfully dribble a football, her scarf making patterns in her wake. She is suddenly overwhelmed with love, the greatness of God.

From far away the woman's voice reaches her: '...only a chromosome's difference. You've got a beautiful, healthy child who needs you.'

'When can I see you, doctor?' Nassrin isn't quite sure why she asks. She still doesn't know her name. Perhaps she is ready to take it all in. Perhaps there is courage in facing the shame.

The woman helps them both out and assembles the pram before she answers. They stand facing each other. The doctor looks like she wants to reach out and touch her but refrains from doing so.

'Your child is special.' She smiles at The Little One, then looks back up at Nassrin. 'You can come any time. Just ask for Bodil Rosenstjärna.'

'Thank you... for everything.' Nassrin forgets to introduce herself.

'My pleasure.' The woman jumps in her car, still almost naked, what will the neighbours think, then winds down the window to say something else.

'Even if you decide not to visit me, please remember that whether your child chooses to be a girl or a boy – or neither, or both – it will always be your child to love.'

But Nassrin has already turned the pram and is walking away, blocking out the doctor's words along with The Little One's whining and the sloshing of her sodden skirt against the footpath.

Seeing Malmö

As you ride past Slagthuset with its multitude of glass and bricks, and you feel the atmosphere of days long gone when animals were taken here to slaughter, you know that you are getting close. You have left the shops and cafes behind, cycled past the

train station and taken a right turn after the solid old post office stretching its oxidized bronze spires towards the sky.

There is something pulling you but you are not quite sure what. The freedom of going where you have never been before makes your head sing. You don't know what to expect. It is just one of those days when you have decided to explore this multi-layered city of yours. The layer of people is peeling off as the buildings grow square and windowless and the fences too tall to climb in a hurry.

Ahead of you is an open gate bordered by signs warning that you should have a valid reason for entering, preferably be driving a delivery truck. The booth is empty so you ride on, feeling a tinge of guilt but not enough to make you turn back. Instead the excitement takes over. You race past possible security cameras. If you are not alone on this adventure, your friend spurs you on and together you marvel at the vastness of the area. Continuing along single train tracks to the left you are surrounded by Maersk freight containers. They are all empty and if your friend happens to be a theatre director she entertains ideas of possible productions inside their dark depths. It is not a bad idea.

Around the corner a row of storage sheds in green corrugated iron appears. The third one is open and you cycle in, around an area the size of a football field. In one end is piled grain and you wonder if this is the way it always is here, so open and inviting. You would love to throw yourself into the pile but then you hear voices outside. Three men in blue work shirts comment and laugh as you set off with your camera thumping against your back, the smell of grain still etched in your nose.

Something catches the lazy autumn rays, shimmering and tempting enough to make you push the pedals with extra fervour. A sea of glass lies before you. Individual, clear blue-green shards sculpted into a heap twice your height. You get the

urge to capture the immense fragility and stability of the mound. Glass piece upon piece of glass. The subtle shifts in colour and the way they catch the light delights you. You could stay here all day. But then your friend, if there is a friend, calls from the other side for you to see something even more amazing. You find it hard to believe yet realise that this exploration is set to be a journey of surprises.

So yes, beneath cranes stretching toward the sun you find heap upon heap of rusty metal remnants of cars, street signs, fences and scaffolding. The colours are a total harmony of reds and yellows rimmed with the perfect brown of growing rust. It is a cemetery, a place for worship, and if your friend is there she has already climbed on top of it all to retrieve a thin spiraling wire, waving it like a serpentine snake above your head.

You lie on the roof of an old Fiat, surrounded by the smell of dusty upholstery, watching the clouds catch on the crane above. The seagulls are screeching. Octagons of sunlight are dancing on the outskirts of your field of vision. You realise you want to get up there. Up and away.

Signs on the crane threaten prosecution for those attempting to climb without permission but somehow that doesn't apply to you. You reach the first landing and scan the horizon. There are no people dotted about on this industrial earth, there are only you and the gulls, above a flowering meadow of concrete and metal. But as you keep climbing you get a glimpse of the sea and there, on the other side of the harbour, stands the Kockums crane. In blinding white, rising ten times the height of your own, it is the most important reminder of the city's industrial past, when submarines were built and shipped to countries far away. The white crane is the city's gate, greeting every boat full of tax-free shoppers burdened with crates of cheap Danish beer.

You can see the white tips of waves and, in the far distance behind a layer of haze, a couple of pylons where Öresundsbron, the bridge to Denmark, is in the process of being built. The wind whips your eyes as you walk around to the south facing the city centre with its cobblestone streets and quaint squares. You wonder what it would be like to jump from here; whether you would have time to think or just feel. Would you die on impact or live and suffer horrible injuries, be a vegetable for the rest of your life? It is easy to think this way when you have no intention of ever finding out. You wave to your friend still down there, and to the rest of the world.

Back on steady ground you grab your bicycle and ride along the next path leading back the way you came. To your left is an inlet for cargo ships. A couple of intimidating metal monsters lie moored here. Further in, the boats get smaller and you get bolder. One of them is no bigger than a two-storey fishing boat and the rope holding it is just short enough to leave it vulnerable to intruders. The signs threatening prosecution are ignored even more easily the second time around.

You land safely on deck and, if your friend has come along this far, she will jump too and you will both dissolve into a knot of giggles. The boat moves slightly with the current; the thick rope stretches but the boat is safely tied and you go exploring. There is nothing much to see at the stern, metal boxes and drums in black and red, but from somewhere else on deck you hear a noise reminding you of a ghost crossing an empty attic. Your friend suggests that it might be the owners of the vessel who have come to set off on an import trip to Poland. Your heart starts racing. It is an ordinary Wednesday afternoon in September and your friend could very well be right. You have never been to Poland.

You hide behind the stairs as the noise continues. Is there really someone there or could it be a couple of gulls picking at entrails? Or simply the rusty hull rubbing

against the rubber tyres of the jetty? The whole situation is silly and fun and just crazy enough to be from an American B-grade film. You sneak around the stairs prepared to beg for pardon but everything looks exactly the same as when you jumped aboard. Apart from the ropes, which are now fully stretched.

The jetty seems distant even though it could be no more than a metre away, slightly above the deck. You laugh, what else can you do? Yet the innocent expedition is slowly turning into a fun ride spinning out of control and you want to get off before your lunch decides to evacuate your jittery tummy. In the gap between you and stable land is a fall and deep brown water ready to swallow you without a murmur. It is an impossible distance.

Jumping to safety here would be the same as throwing yourself from the Eiffel Tower and expecting not to feel the impact. All you can do is wait. And hope that the boat will eventually swing back.

It does, of course, after five minutes of nail-biting and wondering whether it would be possible to walk across the rope. You leap and stumble, relieved but outwardly nonchalant. It wasn't that hard, after all.

As you cycle through the gates leaving the outer harbour behind, you feel an urge to sing because life doesn't get much more alive than this.

I, ESTELLA

WISHING

‘Sometimes I wish I’d killed myself.’

‘Sometimes I feel like someone else has killed me.’

The room is almost full. I count ten people, including myself. All ages, all colours, all sexes. Next to me sits a middle-aged Arabic woman cradling a baby, next to her a young white woman with a shaved head. The conversation is developing between the woman and an angry guy on the other side of the table. I sit quietly in the soft couch in the corner, hardly daring to look up in case someone catches my eye and asks me to state my opinion. I don't want to talk. I'm not ready for that. Just listen. Learn from these people, get to know them so I can also get to know my brother. I don't want to be the usual funny, outspoken Star here. I want to listen to other people talk.

'Why're you two always so gloomy? Can't we start with the light chitchat for once? You might've noticed we've got a couple of new people here today.' I realise the voice must be talking about me and look up awkwardly. 'Don't you want to make a good impression?' she asks the others while winking at me.

'Bugger off, Saint. You'd do your best to get a bulldozer to smile.'

'Never considered it. Must try it next time I run into one.' Saint laughs and the others join in. The room lightens up a little.

The host, who I know as Sam from the chat room, offers everyone drinks. Without wasting many words we communicate our preferences. Five minutes later steaming mugs of chai arrive and the atmosphere is instantly less hostile. People lean back and relax. The spicy sweet tea has a calming influence, and so does Sam. There is something about the way she moves around, making sure everyone can reach the biscuits, saying a few words to each of us. I study the others closely from behind my designer mug, trying to work out who they are, if I know them online. I realise that I probably know them all. In a way, I probably know them all better than I know most

of my friends. I know for a fact that they all know me better than some of my friends, a thousand times better than my disappearing dog of a father will ever know me.

It is such a relief to be here. I have never been more scared.

‘Right. You all comfortable?’ Sam sits on a kitchen chair next to a thin woman with reading glasses. ‘This is Bodil, the doctor that I told you about. She is here to listen to your stories.’ Sam smiles as she looks around the room. ‘She might even be able to help you.’

There is a general murmur.

‘How about you start, Saint?’

‘Sure. Hi everybody. Some of you already know this but I’ll give you a quick rundown. I grew up as a girl. I never worried about anything that had to do with my genitals. Thinking back now, it’s hard to remember exactly how it happened but I think I must have slowly discovered that my clitoris had grown.’ Saint smiles faintly at the memory. ‘My mother was horrified one day when I was twelve and she saw me naked. The next day we were off to the doctor and soon my clitoris was chopped.’ Saint sips her tea slowly. ‘Not that they told me anything. I’ve only found out later what actually happened.’ The room breathes carefully, so as not to disturb the intimacy created by Saint’s story. ‘They removed my testes too.’

‘May I ask how long ago this was?’ It’s the doctor, taking notes, looking genuinely interested.

‘Fifteen years now, I suppose. Nineteen ninety-one. Saint shrugs. ‘I’ve lost count. So many operations, so few explanations.’ She takes a tissue out of her pocket and blows her nose delicately.

The doctor nods. ‘I understand. Were you ever diagnosed?’

‘No. It was all secrets and lies. I know now from my medical records that I have a 46 XY karyotype. I suspect I have Partial Androgen Insensitivity Syndrome.’

My heart races. No one says anything for a long time. Is this where I’m going to find answers to some of those questions that have haunted my family all these years? Will I be able to tell these strangers about Rean?

‘How about you, Mik? You want to tell your story?’

‘To this doctor?’ The guy called Mik turns from Sam to Bodil. ‘No offence, but why would I want to tell you anything? You and your kind have ruined my life.’ The statement is matter of fact. Cold, impenetrable.

The doctor reaches for her mug. ‘No one needs to tell me anything. I’m just trying to understand.’

‘You can never understand,’ Mik whispers. ‘You can’t even hope to be close.’

‘Perhaps I should explain why I’m here. I’m a specialist at Malmö Hospital. Head of the Unit for Intersex Conditions, in fact. Some of you know me already, of course.’

‘And?’ Mik says, pulling back his long hair from his face.

‘Well, I work with intersex on a daily basis. I’ve lobbied very hard for individual assessments, therapy and less medical intervention. I want people to be able to make informed decisions. And I want children to know about what is happening to their bodies.’

I wish you’d been there when Rean was born. I wish you could have told us that he was fine.

‘Doesn’t she sound like a saint? Perhaps she could take over your name?’ Mik turns towards Saint as sarcasm spills over into the laps of those around him. I know

that anger but I don't see why it's directed at Bodil. She seems to want to understand. Like me.

'So why don't you want to talk about yourself?' Bodil asks him, unfazed.

He just stares at her until Sam intervenes by asking Nassrin to tell her story.

The veiled woman next to me shuffles her feet nervously before speaking.

'My baby is not normal.'

Sam tries to help her: 'What do you mean, Nassrin? In what way?'

I try not to look at the shifting hand in her lap, catching glimpses of her immaculately painted nails making endless patterns on her black skirt.

'She knows.' Nassrin nods at Bodil. 'She was there.'

'Yes, I was there.' Bodil confirms. 'But I'd still like to hear what you're thinking.'

'My baby has... what do you call it?... ambiguous genitalia. Girl, boy, we don't know.'

'How did you feel when you found out?' Saint asks.

Nassrin looks around the room and sighs. 'Sad, very sad. Something inside of me breaking.' Nassrin moves her hand to her chest.

The baby stirs, a little squeak escapes the bundle but Nassrin rocks it gently and it soon resettles.

'How do you feel now?' Bodil asks.

'Still sad.' A single tear makes its way down her plump cheek. She doesn't even seem to notice but I want to reach out and wipe it for her, to pull her tight and hug her the way I hug Miriam and Millie. Unconditionally.

‘Do you regret your decision to refuse medical intervention?’ The doctor is picking at a particularly nasty scab, slowly she lifts the edges of the poor woman’s experience, letting the rest of us see the blood pulsating underneath.

Nassrin shakes her head. ‘God made the little one this way. God makes no mistakes.’ She sits up straight with the wrapped baby pressed to her chest. ‘One day we might understand why. But maybe not. People are small, we don’t understand everything.’

‘I used to believe in God,’ says the young woman with the shaved head, ‘but I just can’t any more. Not just because of the way I am, physically, but because of what is happening in the world. How could a God condone the way humans behave towards each other?’

Nassrin doesn’t answer.

‘But, Robin, every person has to come to a decision that’s right for them, don’t you think?’ tries Sam.

‘Of course.’ The young woman called Robin shakes her head. ‘I’m not saying everyone has to think the way I do. I’m just trying to explain that God wasn’t enough for me.’

‘So what do you believe in now?’ Bodil asks.

‘Nature. Chaos. Sometimes when I’ve had a bit too much to drink, even love.’ She has one of the most welcoming smiles I have ever seen. Her eyes shine with a strength that can only come from inner struggle. I could love her. One day I could probably love them all. I wish I could tell them how much they mean, that they make me feel real in a way that Olof and the girls could never do. My beautiful children have never been alone, excluded the way I have because I was fat and black, the way Rean still is because he is scarred and black. I wish I could tell the group that it is a

kind of blessing to be different together. But all that comes out is a little croak that no one notices.

‘What about you, Mattias?’

‘What I believe in? Or how I feel?’

‘Whichever.’

Mattias looks as ‘normal’ as anyone I’ve ever met. I would never have guessed that he was intersex if I didn’t know. By all standards he is good looking; tall and slim with short hair, a sensitive mouth and the same coloured skin as mine. The kind of guy white girls go gaga over.

‘I’m married. We have a wonderful pair of twins.’ He shakes his head, searching for the right words. ‘I have always known I was different, more feminine, I suppose, but I liked it. Women wanted to talk to me – and I liked talking to them. Still like talking to you,’ he says, grinning to the ones in the room who identify as women.

Sam’s cat sneaks around the couch looking for an inviting lap before choosing mine. I stroke the soft bundle and let my thoughts slide as Mattias’ words fade to a whisper in the background.

The walls are white, the light too bright, I try to get away but I can’t move. On the bed in front of me lies Rean, fighting in his sleep.

... I’m XXY... Mattias continues from far away, but I keep slipping.

Heads appear, my mother and Rean’s father, doctors speaking to me but I can’t hear them, don’t want to hear. Rean wants to sleep, never wake up, never feel this pain again, can’t you tell, I want to scream. Never having to walk the streets pretending to be someone he isn’t. Never having to find his lost body again. I can’t remember how many times he has woken up like this, how many times the surgery has been successful, how many times a failure. Right now I wish he hadn’t woken up.

Would have served them right. What would they tell their friends: we killed our child in our quest to make him right. I am so angry I want to hit them all but I know I won't, they are bigger than me, they will always have the power, they will always know what's best for him. Instead of kicking and screaming I smile with my lips and cry inside as the pain carries him away again.

'Are you all right?'

I open my eyes and realise everyone is looking at me.

'I'm sorry.' I quickly wipe my cheeks.

Sam passes me a box of tissues. 'Don't be. We're all glad you are here.'

'Thank you.'

I blow my nose and lean back into the soft couch. The people around me fiddle with their second cup of tea. Sam passes the biscuits around again. This time I take one, nibble it slowly as the others shift their focus away from me and start talking amongst themselves.

'I had my first operation when I was five days old. I think you are doing the right thing, Nassrin.' Mik's angry eyes have softened. He leans across the table to touch the baby's cheek. 'This little one will always be loved. You want what's best for your child.' As he sinks back you hear him whisper to himself: 'I wish my parents had thought of asking me.'

My heart aches with all the love that has gone unmentioned, all the thoughts unsaid, all my most precious secrets suddenly rendered useless. If only I had known that Rean was not alone. Tears well up again and this time I let them fall. Sam comes over and holds my hand.

For a long time the group talks about their families, their operations, the things people have said to them, the times they have been called freaks, the excuses not to go

swimming, the beatings, the unrelenting hatred from total strangers, the suicide attempts, the reasons to live, the reasons to die. I listen, not just with my ears but with my entire being. They are talking about Rean and yet I cannot comprehend that it is really happening. The words are real but somehow, once spoken, they are rendered false, just like my experience so many times before. When I thought my brother was my brother and then was told he was really something else.

Sam stays with me. Her warmth next to me gives me courage. One day I will tell her Rean's story. It is slowly falling to pieces at the same time as it is being built from the ground like a child's Lego castle. We will never know exactly what happened in the sixth week of our mother's second pregnancy. All we will ever know is that whatever happened made Rean different. He will never remember the surgery he had before he started school. But his medical records will help us restructure his history and build that castle. It will always be too small to live in, I realise that, but at least now I finally feel like putting one coloured piece on top of another and maybe one day I can even be proud of what I build instead of regretting never having tried.

The Sunday afternoon is coming to an end. Tea mugs are empty, streetlights outside the window shine like islands in a sea of yellow.

'Would you like a lift home? Sam said that you don't live far from me.' It is the woman they all called Saint 'My real name is Klara.' She presents a firm hand and I shake it, gratefully.

'Thank you.'

As I enter the street I look up to the window of the room I have just left and see Sam waving. Then Saint Klara surprises me by picking up a bunch of leaves and throwing them high above our heads. They trickle down around us like snow flakes, landing on cars, even on our shoulders.

'My daughter Lili loves this.' Klara looks at me, apologetically. 'It always makes me smile. The leaves are so beautiful when they die.'

I smile and nod. They are. I know exactly what she means.

She doesn't need to say any more.

SUSANNA

A WALK IN THE PARK

The memory of peach tree leaves moving in the breeze in bunches, like flowers, tickles her throat. Peach trees where she fell in love for the first time, in a strange country where there are no seasons but peaches still ripen and have to be picked by young travellers with tanned arms and singlets that little bit too tight. But Kirra was a true blue Aussie sheila. Shiny with pert nipples. Susanna could barely look at her for fear of blushing.

The memory makes her mouth water. The taste of those lips later in the shadows by the river, the smell of her skin a mixture of incense and rotting fruit behind a thin film of sweat. The humidity got them both. They agreed that at the end of the day when the others loaded their utes for the drive to the one-horse-and-twenty-orchard-town for a well earned VB (or five) the best thing to do was head in the opposite direction. The river sang of old paddle steamers and atrocities where settlers killed indigenous people for not being a part of their grand plan. Susanna didn't hear it at the time but in memory it's clearly there. That Australian summer's day in 1990 all she could hear was Kirra's laugh as she hit the murky water.

Later, when they shared a cone, wrapped together in Susanna's sarong, a goanna ambled past on its way somewhere. The heat faded as stars appeared. Neither of them knew any constellations and anyway they were too busy with other things to even consider looking for the Southern Cross.

'Mummy?'

'Mmmm.'

The interruption is almost the best part of her reverie. Never being able to live through the memory makes her want to revisit, to dream about those moments which make up a life. Over and over.

‘What is it, beansprout?’

Lili often asks questions that are impossible to answer, especially when her mother’s head is still half stuck in a daydream.

‘Will I die one day, like Uncle Lars?’

Susanna clears her throat. It’s the big one. She knew that question would come so she is prepared.

‘We’ll all die one day, bean. Hopefully not for many years.’

Susanna watches the precious features mould around the thoughts of life and death.

‘Mum, if it happens tomorrow, will you make sure I wear my new blue dress?’

‘I promise, Lili. But it won’t happen. Uncle Lars was very sick. He had cancer. You know we’ve talked about this before...’

The child is already out the door, singing happily to herself.

Susanna’s body is still warm and open, longing for her wife’s touch, but most likely Klara will already have boiled eggs, brewed coffee and decked the table with bread, cheese, cucumber, tomatoes, pickles, *leverpastej* and marmalade—the way she always does on a lazy Sunday morning. As Susanna slips into her dressing gown she listens to them talking in the kitchen. Liliana’s high pitched voice mingling with Klara’s steady hum. Her wife and their daughter. The loves of her life. The memory of Kirra slips into nothingness compared to this. This domestic bliss that she wouldn’t change for anything. Ordinary living that she used to heatedly despise before she knew how wonderful it could be. Now she is one of those people she swore she would never turn into – and she loves every minute of it.

‘Hey sleepy head. Thought I heard you stirring so I sent my spy in.’ Klara kisses her on the lips and so the day begins.

‘Can we go to church today?’ Lili looks hopeful in a way that is hard for Klara to take. Susanna softens her lover’s clenched fist under the table.

‘No, not today. The funeral isn’t until tomorrow.’

‘But I want to go today.’

Perhaps they should have taken her to church more often, demystified it.

Klara looks away and starts peeling an egg. Susanna knows she doesn’t want to talk about it, it just makes her cry. Lars had always been Klara’s favourite brother, the one who shared her sense of humour.

‘It’s like kindy, bean. There’s no kindy today so you can’t go there. There’s no funeral today so we can’t go to church.’

‘Other people go to church on Sundays.’

‘Yes, it’s because they believe in God. We don’t.’

‘I do.’ At first Lili looks incensed, then her face weakens. ‘What is God, Mummy?’

Susanna looks at Klara and they both start chuckling.

‘You’re our little peppercorn, that’s for sure.’ Klara takes the curly head between her hands and kisses Lili’s unwilling nose. Susanna butters a piece of sourdough bread.

‘But... but you haven’t answered my question!’

‘Liliana. Don’t shout, please.’ Klara tries to look stern.

‘That’s because we don’t know either, darling. Some people say God created this world, that God is love...’

‘What do you think?’

‘I think many people find comfort in God.’

‘What’s comfort, Mum?’

Susanna thinks for second. ‘You know, like when you’re in bed at night and we come to tuck you in.’ Even though she knows she has lost her to a piece of cucumber she keeps explaining. ‘When you feel calm and safe, it’s a comfort to you and to us.’

‘Mmm,’ says Lili as she pushes the slimy seeds out to make a delectable cucumber ring.

After doing the dishes, which Lili loves and Susanna secretly hates but pretends is fun for Liliana’s sake, they all get their jackets on and head for Pildammarna to feed the ducks.

It doesn’t take long for Lili to get bored. Two or three ducks eat their fill then she stuffs the rest of the bread in her own mouth. Next to them are a father and his twins, who must be a few years older than Lili and certainly are more curious about the birds. The girl keeps running back to her dad to ask what kind of goose or duck that particular one could be. Susanna can’t help but stare at her. She has the same chocolate-coloured skin as her brother but instead of being dark her hair is a mass of white curls. When Susanna realises that the father is looking at her she nods at him and he smiles back. She imagines that he must be used to people ogling his daughter. Klara and Lili are too busy chasing each other along the path to notice. By the time they finally stop for a pant the man and his twins have moved on.

Klara suggests they go to the flea market in Folkets park.

‘We haven’t been there for ages. I reckon Lili is old enough to enjoy it now.’

‘You could be right.’ Susanna doubts it but she doesn’t want to disappoint Klara today. ‘I’m happy to give it a go.’

Neither of them ever knows in advance what will be a success with Lili. It is very much a question of hit and miss, so they end up trying everything at least a dozen times. Just in case she changes her mind.

Lili soldiers on quite happily all the way to Möllevångstorget but there all the enthusiasm suddenly escapes her and she starts whingeing. Klara puts her on her shoulders and carries her the rest of the way.

In the park there are at least a hundred little shelters with tables full of old comics, vases, pre-loved clothes, exercise videos and homemade jam. There is even a stall selling hermit crabs, which acts as a magnet for Lili. She is fascinated by the small creatures and their shells, pokes at the glass to make them move and squeals in delight when they do.

Susanna and Klara look at each other. Their number one rule has always been “no pets” but it suddenly becomes obvious that if Lili asked for a crab now they couldn’t deny her the pleasure.

‘We really meant ‘no fur’, didn’t we, my love?’ Klara whispers.

‘We are just weaklings who spoil our baby, that’s what we are.’ Susanna laughs.

But Liliana surprises them both by grabbing their hands and pulling them along. ‘Mummy, look! There are rides too.’

The adults sigh with relief. Better two rides in the park than a crab in the house. So off they walk towards the ferris wheel, Liliana always half a step ahead. The winding queue doesn’t deter her one bit. She is happy to watch the wheel go round and chew her hair while Susanna buys the tickets.

As she turns to walk to the ticket box, out of the corner of her eye she catches a familiar face. Too familiar. He stands on the platform collecting tickets then turns his back to return to his control booth. It’s as if her limbs have gone numb. Her legs

won't obey the command to keep moving, her arms hang limp by her side. She realises her jaw has dropped and quickly closes her mouth and moistens her lips.

Still the best-looking man she has ever seen, Juan. Six years haven't made a big difference. The agile body, the angled face with high cheek bones and a two-day stubble. The thick shiny pony tail, the slightly open shirt showing no hair but a gold chain with a pair of hands reaching for each other. The burning eyes above are still the way she remembers them, not just from that day in a hotel room in Nyhavn but from years before when they first met as student and teacher.

Juan had been the fastest learner, the only one of her students who could joke in Swedish after only a few months in the country. He had reminded Susanna of her friend Tony at school. They used to laugh a lot together too. But Tony had always been like a brother to her. With Juan there was something more.

They had often gone for a coffee after class. A Swedish *fika* with prawn baguettes and brew so strong you could leave your spoon standing straight up in it – but they always spoke Spanish then. Juan would tell her funny stories accompanied by grand gestures. Susanna kept her cool and enjoyed the *fika* for what it was; the innocent meeting of minds in a public place. Once when she came home she asked Klara if she'd like to go to Argentina next summer and Klara laughed at her fidgeting hands and joked that she'd go anywhere with her as long as she promised not to look at anyone else. Susanna felt her cheeks burn and had to look away.

Yet nothing happened. He finished Swedish for Immigrants and they lost touch. Three years after his class had graduated they met again, by chance, when a Latin American band played at KB. They danced their way around the crowded room, hips moving in unison as their breathing grew heavy. Susanna thought of Klara, who was

probably already in bed reading one of her trashy crime novels, but she couldn't stop dancing. She didn't want to stop.

After the band finished playing, Juan had suggested they continue in Denmark, "where they have the best Latin clubs in all of Europe". That's when she should have said no. But she wanted to go. She even rang Klara and was encouraged to go. Klara trusted her.

They caught the train across the narrow straight and ended up in the middle of thriving Copenhagen in a festive mood. Christmas was lurching around the corner but Juan guided her away from the lights. He seemed to know all the back streets and their clubs intimately, the way a mother knows her child's birthmarks. Bouncers in thick black jackets greeted him with respect.

Back in the darkness and the heat, salsa hit them square on their feet. Rhythm grabbed them by the buttocks and pushed them together and they danced like courting birds, always touching but never too close.

The next afternoon when she woke up in a hotel overlooking Copenhagen's old harbour, her own detachment surprised her. It wasn't really Susanna's fingers touching Juan's warm brown skin, nor her lips kissing his fluttering eyelids.

When she looks at him now she sees familiarity, she sees stubbled cheeks, wiry arms and a hint of a smile. Perhaps a few grey hairs have appeared; she isn't close enough to see clearly and she is going no closer than this. He is looking at the wheel, not in her direction, but suddenly he turns to scan the crowd as if he's felt someone watching. She pretends to sneeze, hiding her face in her hand.

The morning's daydream comes back to her. Is this some kind of punishment for thinking about Kirra? Seeing him after all this time. Everything happens for a reason. She believes in karma and suspects hers must have hit rock bottom and shattered into

a thousand pieces today. She chews a chipped nail on her left index finger. If only she were still in bed, if only they hadn't gone to feed the ducks, if only Folkets park had never been mentioned. If only... She knows thinking in circles is pointless.

Susanna quickly turns away and walks over to the ticket box. The air is heavy with the smells of hot dogs and cinnamon doughnuts. A kid brushes past her carrying a tangle of fairy floss as big as himself. She thinks of what to say. How do you explain life?

The queue to the box isn't moving. An older gentleman in front is trying to return his tickets but the young girl serving him has no authority to take them back. Susanna sighs and tugs at the string of her jacket. What do you say? I was drunk, it was all a terrible mistake, that's why I never told you. Please don't be upset. See our beautiful daughter, she's over there with the woman I love. Or perhaps she should let him speak. A cold shiver runs across her chest.

The girl in the ticket box has to call twice before Susanna hears her. When she returns to Klara and Lili she sees them the way a stranger would: an excited little girl with her proud mother. There is no one missing, no father or mother lurking in the shadows of that lovely picture. If she walked away now and never came back they wouldn't miss her for long. Lili would forget what she looked like, Klara would meet someone else, Juan would never know.

Chilly spring air fills her lungs. What is the point in delaying the inevitable? In ten brisk steps she is with them again, squeezing Klara's hand and finally daring to glance towards the control booth. A short fat man with dimpled cheeks and a balding head smiles back at her.

'Have you got your tickets ready, ladies?'

Susanna closes her eyes for a moment. She knows she hasn't imagined him; you'd have to be blind to mistake this man for Juan. She clears her throat. Should she ask the bald man where Juan is? Does she want to know? He ushers them in, closes the gate and the moment is lost.

Slowly the carriage makes its way to the top, stopping and starting to let people get on and off on the way. Somehow she feels cheated. When she has finally decided to tell the truth, he hasn't stayed to listen. She looks at Klara. Strands of greying hair caressing her slender neck, the star-shaped mole on her temple so kissable. Oddly enough, Liliana has one that looks exactly the same. Their little girl with her thick black hair held back by a pink band. Olive skin and a couple of red lips planted exquisitely between her chubby cheeks. Behind Lili and Klara, Malmö is showing more and more of its intricate patterns of cobblestone streets, bike paths and alley ways. Above them the sky is high and clear. There couldn't have been a better day for a ride.

'What is it, Susanna?' Klara reaches out to touch her cheek.

'Oh, nothing. Don't worry.' She takes Klara's hand and places it in her lap, playing with her fingers. Lili joins them, flushed with excitement.

'Mummy, look! You can see all the way to the beach.'

'Isn't that amazing. And look, there's Hyllie *vattentorn*.'

'Can we go there one day?' Lili's eyes shine with anticipation as she looks at the mushroom-shaped water tower.

'Sure. Why not?' Susanna squeezes Klara's hand. 'Let's go next weekend so we all have something to look forward to.' As she says it, Susanna feels tears of disappointment and relief burn the corners of her eyes. Will she ever meet him again? Will he ever know?

Lili looks from Klara to Susanna and back. ‘Don’t cry, Mummy. Uncle Lars is in heaven now.’

The child reaches out to wipe their cheeks with her pudgy hands. She kisses them both on the mouth then wraps her little arms around their necks and that’s how the controller finds them later when he unlocks the gate to let them out. All together in one big bundle.

On the couch that evening, when Klara is washing Lili’s hair, the sentences in Susanna’s book seem elusive. Her thoughts wander. Back to the day dream about Kirra then to the real-life Juan. The two fuse and become one as the book slides to the floor. *Juan comes towards her but as he gets closer she realises that he is actually Kirra. Susanna reaches out for her. ‘Come closer, I want to tell you something.’ But as she touches her, Kirra morphs back into Juan, then begins to fade. Soon the only thing left of him is the gold chain around his neck, shimmering in the amber light.*

‘Wake up, Sussie. Lili wants to show you something.’

Susanna opens her eyes, greeted by Lili’s wide smile.

‘Look, Mummy, what I got. The man at the ferris wheel gave it to me.’

Susanna glances at Klara and feels her stomach churn.

‘He said he’d give it to the cutest girl in the park—and that was me.’ Lili shakes the little fist from which the familiar chain is dangling.

Susanna isn’t sure what to say. ‘That’s wonderful, bug, but you know you shouldn’t accept...’

Klara interrupts her: ‘Time for bed, Lili. Which story would you like?’

Liliana rushes off to look for her favourite book while Susanna and Klara remain seated on the couch.

‘It was him, wasn’t it?’ Klara bites her lip the way she always does when she is nervous.

Susanna wants to touch her but she can’t. The telly is announcing the seven o’clock news. Lili shouts from her room that she is ready for a story.

‘Yes,’ she whispers. ‘Juan.’

‘Mummy!’ Liliana cries. ‘I want Pippi Longstocking.’

Neither of them says anything for a long time.

When they finally move to read their daughter her favourite story she has already fallen asleep, picture book in one hand and gold chain tightly clenched in the other.

BODIL

FROZEN

Jellybaby children sail across the expanse of the frozen dam, making a mockery of her own wobbly knees and static feet. Bodil breathes in deeply, lets the cool air fill not just her lungs but her entire being, leaving a soft, frosty coating on her nerves.

She knows she can do it. She can do anything she really sets out to accomplish. Not that ice skating even remotely resembles the kind of things she would normally try but she knows she can do it. Her husband Ben and six-year old son Andy wave from the far end before pushing off, back towards her. The ice is thick and uneven, covered in a layer of the snowlike shavings that the skaters who practise quick and cool turns create. There aren't many of those young hoons at the moment, rather the opposite; all she can see are families linking chains or chasing each other. She should be a link in her family's chain but she has lost all contact with her squashed feet, encapsulated in layers of wool and hard plastic. They won't obey.

'Mummy, come on! Don't you want to skate with us?'

Bodil looks at her son and sees his father's enthusiasm and curiosity in deep blue eyes resembling her own. He is a perfect mix. Sometimes she thinks he is too good to be true.

'I'm trying. I think I might have forgotten how to do it.'

Andy looks at her, astonished.

'But Mum, it's like riding a bike. Once you know how to do it, you never forget.'

She smiles at her own words jumping like little frogs out of his toothless mouth.

'Maybe I never knew to begin with...'

The child slides next to her and slowly pushes off with his left foot, then his right, then turns around triumphant.

'Look at me, Mum. If I can do it, you can.'

She exchanges a loving glance with Ben as he offers her a hand hidden deep inside a woollen mitten she knitted in one of her weaker moments. The mittens resemble misshapen socks more than anything but he continues to wear them. He likes the way they make her slightly flustered from embarrassment.

‘Now, let’s try this slowly. Bend your knees. Slowly. Balance. One foot at a time. That’s it! You’re doing it.’

Considering he learnt to ice skate inside an artificial mountain in the southern hemisphere, he is not a bad teacher. With triumph in sight she doesn’t notice the little mulatto girl with a shock of white hair coming out of left field crossing her path at speeds she has never even dreamed of and before she has time to say ‘shoo baloo’ she is lying in a heap on the ice laughing herself silly. Andy falls on top of her and cries with laughter.

‘Mum, you looked soooooo funny!’

When did she start letting go? Since when is it fine, even desirable, for her child to laugh at her failures? She can’t remember but she is happy that it is so. She is the luckiest woman in the world.

The sun skates quickly across the yellow sky. When Ben asks if she’d like to pause for *fika* she realises it has been two hours since they arrived and her stomach is screaming for coffee and scrolls. Without falling a single time she skates across to the far side holding Andy’s steady little hand in hers. The backpack is where they left it and she unpacks foam seats, mugs and buns. Andy ends up with a sugary face and a chocolate moustache.

Bodil’s back aches. A dull, strangely soothing, pain. No more ice skating for her today she decides. She has done more than enough.

‘Yummy scrolls, Dad.’

She agrees. 'Yes, they're superb, my love.' She leans over to kiss Ben.

Andy turns away making a face. 'Do you have to do that? Yuck!'

Bodil and Ben laugh and try to kiss him too but he makes himself slippery and shoots off onto the ice.

'Be careful, Andy. I'll be with you in a minute,' Ben shouts after him in English.

As Bodil leans back on the slope the pain in her back spreads to her stomach. Like an anaconda which has decided to wind its body around hers and then squeeze, the pain has no intentions of letting go. She closes her eyes and breathes deeply. Her period pains aren't usually this strong.

'What is it, Bodil?'

'Nothing,' she replies. Too quickly.

He keeps looking at her, quizzingly.

'My back hurts. Probably just the ice skating. Or maybe my period... it isn't as regular as it used to be.'

He packs the thermos and the mugs without taking his eyes off Andy. Finally he turns to her with pinched cheeks and furrowed brow. 'Let's go home then. Looks like you need to lie down.'

'No no. I'm fine. I'll just stay here and watch the two of you.'

Later, this will be the moment he remembers. The moment where he sees the fear she tries to hide.

'Are you sure?'

Without warning the anaconda sticks a carving knife in her lower abdomen and her head falls forward between her legs. She breathes quickly, clenching her teeth. This is like childbirth. But how could she be in labour when she isn't pregnant? Hasn't been pregnant since they had Andy even though they tried for years. It just

never happened. She is too old. The ravenous hunger, the vomiting, the fatigue, none of that to indicate pregnancy. Her medical brain keeps ticking behind a screen of pain. Why now?

From very far away she hears Ben's voice trying to reach her but she has no strength to look up. Must breathe. She feels his hand on her shoulders and sweat running down her forehead. If only she could stand up the knife would have to pause before the next stab. Suddenly she is hotter than ever before. Flames are gushing from every pore of her body, a flood of lava between her legs.

'Bodil. Please, Bodil, speak to me.'

There is a pause. Then she hears him tell Andy not to look, to go around the other side, to wait, and she hears Ben whisper to God to make everything all right, something she's never heard before and she opens her eyes and all she can see is red and she knows this is how it feels to be dying.

'Can we have an ambulance to Pildammsparken. The ice skating rink. Now! I'm a doctor.' Ben's Swedish doesn't flow well when he is stressed.

His hands are shaking when he puts the mobile phone back in his pocket. The green gloves are on the ground next to the widening spread of red snow. How ugly those gloves are. If she survives this she'll knit a new pair, brown to match his eyes. She wants to laugh but all that comes out is a whimper. The heat is eating her up from the inside, she is burning to death.

'Don't worry, Andy. Mummy will be fine. We just need to get her to hospital as soon as we can.' Ben doesn't quite sound like he believes his own words.

Bodil hears her son's silence.

Did she wish for too much? Hadn't she given up hope of ever giving him a brother or sister? She wasn't supposed to have children at all. Yet Andy appeared like

a gift from a long lost self to another. But this little lump of cells pushing to get out will never be a baby.

As the blood escapes her body so does the heat. Her hands start shaking and she feels her face turn into a mask of ice. Every breath of air fills her lungs with crystals compressing into glaciers.

‘Bodil, please say something.’ Ben speaks English now, the smooth Australian accent melts some of the ice. ‘Speak to me. You need to stay awake.’

A small crowd has gathered a few metres away, she hears them mumbling. Her head is light and cold. The pain has subsided, exists only as a memory of life that could have been. She straightens up and searches for Andy’s face close behind Ben’s broad protective shoulders. He doesn’t look scared, only surprised. Somehow he seems to know that everything will be all right. Once this is over they will all go ice-skating together again.

‘Come here, my lovely child.’

Ben moves over to give Andy room, skilfully hiding the blood-stained snow with his coat, and they all hug. The pain has disappeared. Perhaps she should do some more skating now.

Ben’s eyes are cloudy but he manages a smile. Her eyes get tangled up in their love.

‘I want to go to work,’ she croaks.

He shakes his head in amazement. She is losing blood but not her quirky sense of humour.

‘Don’t worry, they are on their way. Once you are there you can work as much overtime as you like. But you need to get there first.’

Her nails are leaving imprints on the back of his hand. Again she looks at Andy, a shadow of his dad, right next to her. Without letting go of Ben's hand, she again reaches out for her son. She pulls him closer and snuggles her nose into the warm crook of his little neck. She breathes the sweet smell of his skin and she knows she's the luckiest woman in the world.

Knowing Malmö

As you walk through the park where the lawn is covered in little *skilla* greeting the spring sunshine, the library grows out of the trees before you. Walls of glass reflect the newly sprung leaves of beech and willow. The older building to the left, the Castle where fiction hides, stretches its spires to the light blue sky. You head towards the Cylinder, spinning through the revolving door to be left in the impressively bare entrance hall with its shadow clock covering the back wall. The air is light, filled with the scent of optimism. Students are chatting eagerly in the café, books and cappuccinos spilling out around them. You take note of the menu board proclaiming cucumber gazpacho soup and hope to return once you've satisfied an ever greater hunger elsewhere in the library.

To the right is a wide staircase leading up to the glass cube which somehow looks even more impressive from here. The trees outside seem to want to push their way in. You stand there for a long time, taking in the enormity of the space. Sounds are subdued yet magnified. Your steps are echoes of those who have come before you to search, to reach out over time and place, to learn. You are not alone. Even though you haven't invited your friends and family to accompany you their encouragement surrounds you.

Where do you start? Fingers along the spines, feeling your way across the book shelves. You pick one, at random. Flick through to be transported to Brazil. Colourful birds, a thick green canopy and smiling faces outside traditional huts. Then Australia with Aboriginal dancers in the desert, crocodiles and endless beaches. Clichés abound about all peoples being the same yet uniquely different. But you have no time for feel-good. You want cutting edge. You want inspiration, a deeper understanding. You want life flowing over the page, not frozen smiles in a coffee table book.

A red leather couch in the shape of a half moon sits invitingly in the middle of the space. You stifle the impulse to throw yourself on it. You'd give the young woman sitting there a heart attack. Every now and then she gently rocks the pram beside her. As you amble past you can't help but sneak a peek at the little life sleeping itself strong enough to meet the world. That you were once that tiny is impossible to imagine. Still you feel somehow connected to that child, to its mother. This library does that to people. It makes you feel related to the people surrounding you as together you enjoy the magnificence of words. It protects you from the outside world, yet encourages you to join it.

Along the back wall is a steep thin staircase which takes you up to scientific literature. Across a walkway, back to the magazines in the Cylinder overlooking the entrance hall. Now you know where you are headed. Deep down you always knew.

The Hjalmar Gullberg room, housing an extensive Malmö-collection, is through a doorway to the right. It is small, enclosed, so different from the cube of glass. Yet the light streams in, making patterns on the floor. Here it all is: the history of the city, its architecture, art and cultural diversity. But it is the literature you are after. Fiction that describes the place you know, the streets you have walked, the longing you understand. The belonging.

You pull books out in a steady stream, read their covers then slip most of them back. Yet the pile continues to grow as you find mentions of the suburbs you grew up in, or a story that entices you to read on. Isn't that the way it is, when it comes down to it? The writing is what matters. You want to get thrown in the deep end. You are happy to work hard to find that special spark of love for the characters but you want the words to guide you, to spur you on. You want to wish it would never end. Sometimes you want to cry when you read.

Can I help you at all? a thin-haired man with spectacles asks politely. You wonder where he came from, seconds ago you were alone. Perhaps he lives here, in a secret hole behind a bookshelf. You remember the magic door they used to have in the children's section before the library was rebuilt and re-named *Ljusets kalender*. How could you forget standing eagerly amongst the other children, waiting for the librarian to pull out the magic book which made the bookshelf swing open so you could all enter the secret cave of stories. Inside there were dark rows of seats facing a small stage with a painted mural. You don't remember the stories being read because in the end they didn't matter. What mattered was the fact that books could open secret doors.

No, thank you. You shake your head. The man smiles apologetically and leaves you to search in peace.

In the end there are five or six novels which get carried down the stairs to be checked out and, if you haven't abandoned the idea of gazpacho soup, you choose a table by the window, away from the other guests, savouring the soup almost as much as that precious moment before opening a new novel. Soon you long for the bench outside in the park where you plan to spend the afternoon in the weak sun clutching your city. Escaping and returning in the simple act of letting your eyes move for you. You know that once you are on that bench with the chosen book in your hands, life couldn't possibly be any more magical.