

DOWN TO THE DOGS

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1

I am searching for a good place to cry. It is not at all easy to find such a place. I have ridden around in a bus for several hours, now I'm sitting on a rickety bench, all the way out on the coast. There are no ferries here. Only a barge that hauls livestock back and forth to an uninhabited island.

I live in a suburban house with several windows facing the street. Maybe it would have helped to wash some of those windows. On the other hand, you can't see out for all the evergreens. Last summer was wet, they grew like hell. Now it is winter, and I won't be going home again. Usually at this time of day I'm napping on the sofa.

Bjørnvig is freezing a wart.

It's blowing hard. The wind smacked my face when I stepped off the bus with my wheeled suitcase. The sky over the ocean is dark gray. To the right, on the pathway down by the water, a man in coveralls is having great difficulty biking. He pitches himself forward toward the handlebars with every pedal stroke. I bike this way myself, that's why I don't bike. He stops and gets off. Scans the ocean, puts his hands on his hips. He knows I'm sitting here. I look down at my hands in my pigskin gloves.

He's back on his bicycle, continuing along the ocean. It is only a matter of time before he turns off the path and rides past the small shed, down toward me. He walks the bike on the final stretch here. His hair is dark and thin. But he isn't that old, he's a few years younger than me.

"You look all settled in," he says.

"Yes."

"You'll likely be sitting here quite a while."

"I noticed that," I say, from deep within my shawl.

We both glance at the sign with the bus schedule, then at the suitcase.

"Well, have a nice time then," he says, and climbs on his bicycle. He pedals off and lifts two fingers in a wave, up and down. The wind is at his back now, quickly he is gone.

I don't what I was thinking of with this chicken salad croissant. I eat with my gloves on, flakes of crust drift down onto the lap of my coat. I am forty-two years old and still I never seem to learn. I eat the croissant from the middle out, and I haven't brought along any napkins. I stand up and brush my coat off, get mayonnaise on both my arms. My legs are stiff. Sit myself down again. It's getting dark, the wind grabs at the roof of the shed.

He is coming back, this time with a woman, both of them on foot. Like him she is wearing coveralls. They hold hands, not letting go until they are right beside me.

"Hi," she says. "Did you know the next bus isn't until tomorrow? There's only one bus a day here."

"Yes. I saw that."

"Are you waiting for someone, maybe?"

"No, not really."

"You want to borrow a phone?"

"No, thank you, it's not necessary."

“We’re Putte and John,” she says. “You really can’t keep sitting here. There’s a storm on the way that’s practically a hurricane.”

“We can’t have that,” he says.

They lift me up, each taking an arm. He pulls the handle out on the suitcase and rolls it along behind us. The wheels make noise on the blacktop. They live in a small house without a front yard, the stucco looks newly finished. A hoop of ivy and an oil lamp in every window. She opens the front door. The hallway is narrow, with a pine stairway at the rear. They take their shoes off and we walk into the living room. A fire is burning in the woodstove. I stand in the middle of the floor. She walks out and comes back a little while later with a glass of water, which she hands me.

“Why are you both wearing coveralls?” I say.

“We just got back from the dogs,” she says.

She has turned on the tv, now she’s sitting on the sofa. The weather is on, she leans all the way forward.

“You think the fence will hold?” she says.

“Else we’ll figure something out,” he says, and then to me: “Sit down, sit.”

I drink my water while they chitchat. I don’t really hear what they say. Putte gets up to fetch the local paper. She flips through the pages with her feet up, her thighs are a bit stocky. John mumbles while he follows along from over her shoulder.

“They should have already got that done last year,” Putte says, and shakes her head.

“Yeah, but, you know,” John says.

“Anyway.”

They go through the entire paper this way. Then she folds it up and gives him a little slap on the knee with it: “What’s on the menu?”

“Con carne.”

John chops onions and snuffles out in the open kitchen, Putte unbuttons her coveralls and throws them over a chair. She has on leggings and a loose checkered shirt underneath. Ski socks outside the leggings. She takes a cigarette out of a pack lying on the shelving, lights it and walks over to John, sticks the cigarette in his mouth.

“There’ll be no crying now,” she says to me.

She sits down and watches tv. Yawns a bit. Stretches out halfway on the sofa, reaches for a throw and pulls it over herself. We watch the local news. She falls asleep. I study her face, she might only be half my age.

I fall asleep, too, in the chair. When I wake up John is setting the table. He sets out the salt and pepper and folds the napkins neatly in half. He wakens Putte by tapping two fingers on her forehead.

“Aren’t you going to take your overclothes off? That shawl, for instance,” he says to me.

“I suppose.”

I look down at myself; my coat has both a zipper and buttons. A few threads from the shawl’s fringe are caught in the zipper.

“May I also use your bathroom?”

“Go right ahead.”

He points over his shoulder to out behind the kitchen and makes a whistling sound with his teeth:

“Whhhht. That way.”

While we eat Putte tells a long story about her father, who apparently lives in Næstved. He has been to the doctor to get medicine for Putte’s brother without the brother’s knowledge, of course the doctor wouldn’t write a prescription under those circumstances, then her father had difficulty breathing and felt pins and needles in his fingers, he had to have a glass of cold water, but when the doctor also brought out a plastic sack from Lidl that her father was supposed to breathe in and out of, he slapped her hand away and said:

“Get that shit away from me!”

Putte’s father embarrasses her, she thinks he acts like a little kid. John defends him:

“But she knows Eskild.”

“Yeah, but anyway. It’s embarrassing to Ibber.”

Ibber is the brother, I see. Putte shakes her head and takes a sip of milk. John is drinking water, and so am I.

“Do you like this? You don’t need to eat it all,” she says to me, and a moment later:

“John is the cook of the house. Nobody around here can fix a pork roast like him.”

“Oh, I don’t know about that,” he says.

The bowl is empty. Putte scrapes it with an index finger and sticks the finger in her mouth. It doesn’t look like they are going to smoke after the meal. John gets up and puts the coffee on. Putte watches his back and plays around with her braid. I look at my hands, I don’t know what it is with these hands.

“We go to bed early,” Putte says. “The sofa is all yours. It’s good to lay on.”

“We’ll get the eiderdown out of the attic,” John says, from the kitchen. “We’ll let it hang for a while by the stove.”

“This is probably the right time to say that you shouldn’t be going to a lot of extra trouble,” I say.

Putte doesn’t bat an eye: “Oh, we don’t have a damn thing to do anyway. We just walk around here with our whiplash.”

“We’d like to have something else to get into,” John says, and they laugh heartily, both of them. John sets a cup in front of me, he puts a vanilla wafer on the napkin and another on top of it and another and another. Putte teases him:

“One more, John. So we can play tumbling towers.”

“I would like to go over to the island,” I say.

“What island?” Putte says, and takes the topmost vanilla wafer. “That one out there?”

“That little one right over there.”

“That’s the heifer island,” John says.

“Now?” says Putte.

“It’s used for grazing. Pilegård owns it.”

“There’s a small cottage behind the trees.”

John takes one vanilla wafer, then another, and talks with his mouth full of the cookies. "It's a nice little spot."

"Not when the heifers are grazing," Putte says.

"Would the cottage be for rent?" I say.

John laughs, granules spray from his mouth. "Pilegård would rent his mother out if he saw something in it for himself."

"Pilegård's money pouch is pure moleskin," Putte says, she's spraying cookie, too.

"Don't you want a cookie? You're something of a lady," John says.

"I'll go on up and find the eiderdown," Putte says, and stands up, her braid swinging in the air.

"No. Unfortunately I'm not. No thank you," I say.

"That's that, then," says John, and scratches his chest through his coveralls.

2

I lie on their corner sofa with my feet tucked into the corner. The wind blows hard, it whistles around the house. The light from the streetlamp moves erratically around the room. The eiderdown's cover smells of fabric softener. No sounds come from up above now. At first I heard their voices as being in two different keys, their words indistinguishable. They talked a long time. At one point they laughed. Gradually the pauses between sentences grew longer and longer. A sentence and an answer and a short answer. Pause. A short sentence. Pause. Answer.

I turn on the small lamp above the sofa and sit up. Reach down for my wheeled suitcase, pull it up to me and open it. I did pack my wool underwear, I thought I had. I've brought along some scarves, too. I don't recall putting five lint rollers in the suitcase, but I must have had my reasons. I linger over my knee socks. Four pairs. Also there is a pair of Bjørnvig's long socks, they're a bit grubby. He wears them inside his rubber boots, usually he walks around in white wooden shoes.

There are footsteps up in the bedroom. Then on the stairs, and then the living room door eases open. Putte is in her nightgown, her hair loose.

“How about a game of Uno?” she says. “We’re not getting any sleep in all this.”

She nods outdoors, the storm is crashing through the street.

“That sounds fine.”

I set the suitcase back down on the floor and sit up straight. Putte shoves the table against the sofa and lights up tea lights. The cards are just inside a large green trunk.

“This is where we keep our games,” Putte says. “We have seventy-two. There’s lots of jigsaw puzzles we’ve put together and torn apart, but we have lots of board games, too.”

“I don’t know how to play Uno.”

“You don’t have kids?”

“None myself, no.”

“You know any?”

“Any?”

“Yeah, kids.”

“A few.”

“Don’t they play games?”

“They sit around sometimes with something.”

“It’s Uno, got to be. It’s a real kid’s game.”

“They’re almost not kids anymore.”

“Oh. They’re big kids.”

“Yes.”

“Then they probably don’t play Uno.”

She explains the rules to me, but I can’t seem to get the hang of it. So we chat about my moves as we play:

“Now you can play a green or a six,” she says.

“Now you can play a blue, or you can switch to another color.”

Something is banging around outside. Putte says it’s the wine barrels they use to collect rainwater. One of them is almost empty and has a lid on it, it bangs against the

other one. The barrels come all the way from Hungary. A woman imports them, she runs a shop in an old gas station and sells practically everything, Putte works for her. At first they sold salami and smoked eel, but people thought they could taste engine oil. Now they sell things from all over the world and Fuglebjerg. Second-hand silverware and bedding. Elves all year round. Small tin things.

“It’s probably not anything you’re interested in,” she says.

“I do sort of like elves,” I say.

“We’re only open Friday-Saturday-Sunday this time of year. But now you know, just in case. It’s nine kilometers inland on the highway. The intersection after the roundabout.”

“I’ll remember.”

At one point I almost fall asleep while Putte shuffles the cards. She looks up at me and then at the wall clock, it’s a quarter past two.

“That’s it,” she says, and gathers the cards, puts them in the box and back in the trunk. “Time for some sleep. Let’s hope the house is still here tomorrow. Good night.”

“Good night.”

“Yeah, good night, then.”

“Good night.”

She lingers in the doorway, looking at me. Lifts her hand as a farewell gesture and shuts off the last lamp on the small extension table. I lie on my side and pull the eiderdown all the way over my head, the storm is a dim, far-off disturbance, my legs grow heavy.

So this is where I find myself. In a small, newly-stuccoed house with two kind people out by the coast on a corner sofa. Beside an old green trunk. One possibility would be to empty the trunk and plant your body inside until you stopped breathing, but on the other hand it would be a lot of work, all those games and cards. The roof is creaking from the storm. It’s not what I want to do, either. I turn over on the sofa. The strong odor of fabric softener. Friendly strangers. The possibility of stepping onto a bus and then later onto another. I won’t be any wiser later on, that’s to come.

When Bjørnvig concentrates he makes a small humming sound in his throat. Such as when he looks up a number in the telephone book or chooses a steak. I imagine the sound when he examines patients' growths and birthmarks. The clinic is behind the square and has two rooms. The waiting room and the examination room. In the waiting room, Anja sits behind the counter with her hair extensions. If she is sick, or when she has a day off, Gitte fills in. She has hair extensions, too. Both of them are twenty-nine and have suffered from stubborn foot warts. They were in the same class at school for ten years, after graduation Anja entered training at a printing house, but she had a reaction to printer's ink. So getting warts and meeting Bjørnvig was a blessing in disguise. She likes her job very much. She has a sunny voice, she is always cheerful on the phone. That's more than can be said about me. Sometimes I call to have Bjørnvig pick something up on the way home. Chocolate, or skin tonic. Cigarettes, back when I smoked.

Anja and Gitte have talked a lot about their upcoming thirtieth birthdays. They are part of a culture that includes disguising oil barrels as pepper mills, the traditional symbol for old maids. Neither of them are married. Gitte did have a boyfriend for eight years. She calculated the number of times they kissed each other, it came out to a little over five thousand. Bjørnvig reported this over sandwiches at the coffee table, less than two kisses per day on average. We both had a roast beef sandwich, his without fried onions, as always. He doesn't like the aftertaste, fried onions stay with you all day long, he says, unhappily.

I used a hair extension myself for a short while. It was of bleached human hair from India, I had it attached then taken off inside of a week. The price was almost four thousand kroner. At first I lay on the sofa several days like a mermaid with her hair down. Thursday, wearing my suit, I left for Fyn and gave a talk, but halfway through content and form I accidentally pulled out five hundred kroner's worth of Indian hair from the back of my head. Then we took a coffee break, the muffins were gummy.

Bjørnvig and I aren't married. Fortunately I didn't get my way on that subject, and also he still makes that humming sound in his throat. I can't stop doing something I have no control over, he said, the last time I complained. He had just come home with a present for me, a poetry collection from the eighties with pages joined in pairs, each to be opened like an envelope. He sat at the coffee table opening them, that way I wouldn't have that on my mind, I have so much else right now.

4

It's morning, the barrels crash like crazy. Up in their bedroom they listen to the news on radio. The room is cold now, the stove went out long ago. The house smells like coffee, I don't understand why until John appears in the doorway with a cup for me:

"We have an extra coffee maker in the bedroom. Here. To get your day off on the right foot."

"It's 'start' your day," Putte yells from above.

"The bus is cancelled until further notice from the storm," he says. "They even advise against going outside when it's not necessary. You want toast?"

"Is it that bad?"

He nods. He is wearing thermal clothing. He squats in front of the woodstove and starts a fire. Places two briquettes on end and sets one on top. Wads up three pages of newspaper in a ball and stuffs it in the space between the briquettes, strikes a match, opens the damper. The fire blazes up, the storm pulls at the flames. Then he stands up and brushes off his hands. The stubble on his face has grown in the night.

I hear scurrying footsteps down the stairs, Putte opens the door and walks over and sits beside my feet, she pulls the eiderdown over her and smiles:

"Good morning."

She gives herself a good shaking. She begins plaiting her hair, she has a rubber band around her wrist.

"What are your plans?" she says to me. "You won't likely be going anywhere for the time being."

"Plans, that might be exaggerating."

“About the island, we can try and get hold of Pilegård, but you can’t very well get over there in this weather.”

“We’ll have to find some way to heat that cottage up, too,” says John.

“I think there’s a stove of some kind. Don’t you remember, we saw smoke over there that once?”

“Could have just been a campfire.”

“I’m sure there’s a small stove,” Putte says.

We eat at the coffee table, Putte and I still halfway covered by the eiderdown. I’m wearing the dressing gown I slept in. I own two of them. I only brought one of them along, it used to be white. I wear a dressing gown quite a bit, I don’t know why it is so hard to get out of a dressing gown. Putte has an enormous appetite. She eats with a napkin under her chin, the crumbs sprinkle down on it:

“This way we save on plates.”

It’s toast. A long time has passed since I’ve eaten toast. Every other morning Bjørnvig goes out for a large loaf of light bread, no poppy seeds. It is so full of air that he can press it completely flat on the cutting board while slicing it. When I’m up I sit and watch. When he finishes slicing, it springs back to a normal-sized slice of bread. He eats the bread with a thick layer of apple jelly, I don’t know where it comes from. He shops a few times a week and comes home late in the afternoon with full grocery bags. He empties the bags and puts everything away. I can see him from my sofa. I love my sofa, even though the springs stick out underneath. Bjørnvig scratched himself when he was poking around for that cake spatula from our lord and lady in Slagelse. He breathed in under there, and afterwards he had to borrow somebody’s inhalator.

“A few times I’ve thrown the dirty dishes out,” I say.

They both continue eating, John’s teeth grate a bit. Not that the toast requires hard chewing, he even dips it in his coffee. Several crumbs float around in the coffee cup.

“That was smart,” he says, and laughs.

“Why is that?” Putte says.

“Well, she got out of washing dishes.”

He keeps laughing, and Putte laughs, too, she wads up the napkin and throws it over toward the woodstove, it lands in the basket with the briquettes. There is a strong dry heat in the room, a smell much like a sauna, the fire has taken off.

“You’re not supposed to say she about someone when she’s in the room,” Putte says.

“Oh, yeah. That’s right.”

“Really, it’s all right,” I say.

After we’ve cleaned the table off, John puts his coveralls on over his thermals. He pulls a leather hat with earflaps down over his head and makes a face. Putte thumps the top of his hat.

“I’m going with you,” she says, then to me:

“How about you? Would you like to borrow a stocking cap?”

“Where are we going?”

“Out to the dogs.”

“Then I’d like to borrow one.”

“Toss me that ski mask, John. Down there. Yeah, that one.”

She hands it to me, she studies my face while I look down at the stocking cap in my hands, then I pull it over my head.

5

“I know who you are,” John says, as we walk a short distance behind Putte down what has to be considered the main street. Five small houses without front yards. We battle our way forward. I’m not sure if I hear right, inside this stocking cap, so I just glance at him and then at Putte, who has stretched her arms out at her sides, the storm is practically holding her up. She turns and smiles back at us, I return the smile, think about my smile in the ski mask’s slit.

After we’ve struggled a little ways down the road, away from the sea, Putte turns down a dirt lane with fields on both sides. At the end of the lane is a stand of firs, and behind them sits a small cottage with a battered eternit roof and moss-covered

cobblestones in the courtyard. We can hear the dogs, they can't be barking at us. The barking is behind the storm, which whips at the branches. Putte unbolts one of the barn doors, the wind catches the door and smacks it back. John grabs it and closes it behind us when we're inside. It's surprisingly warm inside the barn. The dogs stop barking, they whine and grovel in the stall. There are two of them, two sleek, thin dogs. They curl their behinds under from sheer happiness. Putte goes in with them, they jump up on her until she sits down in some straw. Then they lick her face and hands and jump all over each other.

"Easy, guys," she says. "Easy now."

John has grabbed a whistle and hung it around his neck. He goes out a red door at the opposite end of the barn. I walk over to the window and look out, he wiggles one of the posts of the fence around the dogs' run, the fence gives a little but looks like it is holding up. I can see from his mouth that he is shouting something, the dogs hear and scramble outside through a sort of flap in their stall. He lets them out the run's gate and they dash around the firs and disappear. John follows them.

"Is the fence holding?" Putte says, from down on the floor.

"I think so."

"Good."

"Who is it you're taking care of the dogs for?"

"My uncle. He's in the hospital for a few days. We can't have them in the house, John is allergic to dog hair. But they're used to being here. My uncle hunts with them."

"Do all your family live around here?"

She looks up at me: "Oh no, only my uncle and Ibber. He lives two hundred eighty meters from us. You'll have to meet him, he's sort of a freewheeler, too."

"What do you mean?"

"A little like you."

"Like me?"

"Yeah, like you want to go out on a deserted island, right?"

"Well, yes."

"So it's good we have one," she says, and stands up, smiles at me:

“You look good in that.”

“Thanks.”

“You want to come along to get some dog food?”

The dogs run in one of the fields bordering the lane. We can see them from the window of the small room at one end of the barn. John walks out to the highway and back again while the dogs tumble around. Then he fights his way halfway over the field and sits under a large tree, it must be an oak, it doesn't give much with the wind.

The food is inside some large sacks on a table. Everything is organized in there. Three cases of pop grouped by color on the floor. Newspapers in neat stacks. A cardboard box with jars to be recycled, they look like they've been rinsed clean.

Putte opens a small refrigerator and hands me a box of chocolates.

“Take one. They're for us.”

I really don't want one, I take one anyway, a piece with a candy violet on top. It is ice cold and hard, almost tasteless.

“What's wrong with your uncle?”

“He's in to get his knee taken care of. It's been planned for a long time. He fell in a pothole in the asphalt outside Aldi. They got a fine.”

She has a hard time deciding. Points her finger at several pieces and chooses a piece with marzipan. Bites it in half. Studies the half she's holding between her fingers while she chews.

“Isn't it crazy, a hole like that? They stuck an upside-down beer case across it, but who notices something like that? Typical Aldi.”

“Where is he?”

“At Næstved.”

She puts the lid on the box and sets it in the refrigerator, scoops dog food from the sack into a bucket with her hands, brushes them off on her coveralls and goes back into the stall, where she empties the bucket into the food dishes.

John returns with the dogs and lets them in the run. They bolt into the stall and attack their food. Then John comes in through the red door. A fresh, cold air radiates

from both him and the dogs in the muggy barn. We stand and watch them eat. Putte walks over and leans her head on John's arm, he pats her cheek and smiles at me. I look down at a spot beside my foot, just in front of the boot with the pointed toe, fortunately without any heel to speak of.

6

On the way home the wind is at our backs. They walk a short distance in front of me and hold hands. They lean backwards from the waist, fighting the wind. Once in a while Putte has to jog a few steps, the earflaps on John's hat whip up and down.

He is a stocky man, much larger than her. She turns and tries to smile at me, the wind slaps at her face, she must be gasping for air. We can see the ocean at the main street's end now, there are tall waves everywhere, they seem to be coming from all different directions. But there isn't a hint of a smell of sea, any odor evident comes from behind us, from far inland, liquid manure or at least pigsties, in small doses between the storm's gusts.

They stop outside a small house of yellowing cement bricks. Two large windows facing the street have sashed curtains and sheers, and behind it all is a woman's face and a pale hand, waving us inside, I see this when I catch up to Putte and John.

The door is open. John steps in first, Putte follows, and I close the door behind us. The hallway is carpeted, we set our shoes and boots under the mirror and walk into the living room. I keep my ski mask on.

"Morning, Elly," Putte says, and walks over to the small woman, who stands smoking a cigarette beside the dining room table. Putte pats her cheek.

"So, you have visitors?" the woman says.

She looks up at me obliquely, her back is bowed and she can't lift her head all the way up, she sticks her thumb out toward her back.

"Osteoporosis, hell on earth," she says.

"This is Bente," Putte says, and looks at me.'

"Bente?" John says.

He stands with his hands in his pockets, it hits me now that he hasn't been wearing any gloves.

“Are you having liver?” Putte says. “The onions smell really good.”

“Yeah, leftovers from yesterday. It's warming up in the oven.”

“It's so good, liver.”

“Yes it is.”

Smoke rolls out of the woman's mouth, it exits her as part of her normal breathing, she doesn't blow it out. John clears his throat.

“Yeah, we've just come in from the dogs,” he says.

“You manage to keep your feet? This storm is something.”

“Yeah. The bus isn't running either.”

“When did Bente get here?”

“She came in yesterday.”

“I thought so, that someone got off.”

A strong heat radiates from under the table. She might have an electric stove down there. A stack of marked lottery coupons lie in the middle of the table, Putte nods at them:

“Would you like John to take those in for you Thursday?”

“Yes, thanks. If this weather ever lets up.”

“Surely by then,” says John.

“Else we're sunk.”

“I'm sure you've stocked up,” the woman says, and stabs out her cigarette with a force that doesn't match her other movements. When both hands are free she grabs the table top and leans forward a bit:

“When's he getting out down there?”

“They'll probably hold him a few extra days.”

“Any infection?”

“Not yet, knock on wood.”

“Mm. Well.”

She and the table both are creaking, she looks at me, her teeth are a bit too symmetrical.

“How long are you staying?”

“I'm not sure yet.”

“Bente is going to stay on the island,” Putte says.

“What island?”

“Heifer Island,” John says.

“It's a nice little spot,” Putte says.

“Is Pilegård renting that cottage out?”

“Yeah.”

“Well. It'll be tough getting back and forth. She know how to row?”

“She'll learn if she can't.”

“She'll work something out with John and me about supplies,” Putte says.

While we stand out on the main street again and wave at Elly, who has opened the curtain a bit and stands close to the window pane, her breath laying a small wreath of fog on the glass, John pulls his earflaps down firmly and looks at Putte and me:

“So, your name is Bente,” he says, and Putte laughs and starts coughing:

“I wished I had that name, it's such a good one.”

“Yeah, nobody knows your real name, either,” John says to her and smiles, he starts to pat her cheek but loses his grip on the lottery coupons.

“What are you doing?” Putte yells, as they scramble over each other to retrieve them. Luckily the storm blows them into the corner by the neighboring house's gable, except for one coupon that disappears under the fence. John fights his way underneath and returns shortly after, the coupon is covered with earth and is thoroughly wet. He crumples it up and sticks it in his coveralls pocket.

“Couldn't make the x's out anyway.”

“Everything's fine, don't worry,” Putte yells to Elly inside, and Elly's hand moves slowly side to side behind the big window.

We stay inside the rest of the day. The tv is on without interruption, Putte lies on one long side of the corner sofa, I lie on the other. John is upstairs listening to loud music,

the bass thunks through the house, it's some guitar rock band I don't recognize. Putte grabs the remote and adds subtitles to the tv:

"He has to have his music," she says. "He's crazy about that sound system."

After several songs the music stops.

"He's cleaning the pickup," she says. "It's an ancient turntable, my mother got it for her confirmation in seventy-four. Well."

She gets up and goes out into the kitchen, clatters around with some mixing bowls, opens and closes a cupboard door. She turns on the electric mixer, runs it for quite a while, yells in to me through the noise:

"Would you like oatmeal in your egg nog?"

"No thank you," I yell back, and then the electricity goes off, the tv flashes before going out, a short orange flicker, and Putte comes in with the mixer held upside-down:

"Okay, then," she says, her eyes wide. Egg drips from the mixer onto her forearm.

7

Gitte and Anja belong to a book club. Each month the members read a novel and meet in the library's old basement out by the viaduct. In heavy rains the meetings are cancelled. They take turns furnishing the drinks and making a short presentation about the book they've read. The atmosphere is pleasant, no one mistreats others to make themselves look good. It's a good way to get some books read. Gitte and Anja are quite a bit younger than the others. They joined because of Gitte's mother, who heads up the club. Her education was in social work, but for years she has been a secretary for a vet. She is unable to show emotions because of a form of paralysis in her facial muscles. When she cries, tears run in gentle rivulets down the sides of her nose. Gitte couldn't bring herself to say no when her mother offered them the two vacant spots in the club. Her mother has been alone for many years, she knows the names of every pet in the district. She opens the monthly meetings by tapping on her coffee cup and thanking everyone for the previous meeting, thereafter yielding the floor to the person giving the presentation.

When Gitte's turn came, she slept badly for several weeks before the presentation. She has a fear of public speaking, she was willing to do anything to get out of it. Anja offered to take a double turn, but that depressed Gitte's mother. For the sake of the group it was important that everyone contribute. Gitte lost several kilos before the fourteenth of March. Bjørnvig came home and told how she slouched around at the clinic. Every day she came by and sat. She couldn't be by herself, the anxiety was too much. She prepared a written draft and memorized it, Bjørnvig stood behind the examination room door and listened to her present it to Anja. The content was fine, but her voice sounded horribly tense. The day before the club meeting she felt ill and hit her forehead on the reception counter. Bjørnvig called her mother. Gitte was excused, her mother took over. Anja told how Gitte sat at one end of the half-circle during the meeting and stared blankly into the palm of her hand while her mother spoke quietly, with her head tilted to one side.

After the meeting, Gitte felt worse. She became a shadow of herself. She felt that she had humiliated her mother, who refused to talk about it. Then Anja took the initiative. She came up with an idea that Bjørnvig thought was brilliant. He sat at the coffee table and told me about it. By virtue of my connection to Gitte I was to offer to do a reading for the club. Ordinarily it was impossible to get writers to come, they had tried several times but all the good writers declined when they heard about the gift certificate. I was to call Gitte and offer to do it, whereafter Gitte could deliver the news to her mother. Who exactly according to plan became very excited and accepted Gitte back in her good graces.

The dry weather held on the day of my reading. Gitte's mother tapped her cup and cordially welcomed me. I read from my five-year-old novel. The first chapters. The room was absolutely still. It smelled musty. I stood there thinking of the word 'musty' and didn't hear what I was reading. Gitte's face was in front of me, directly over the spine of the book. It seemed to me as if she never blinked. I kept an eye on her between paragraphs. She was wearing some sort of strange cobalt blue. I missed a paragraph but nearly brought it off with a single parenthetical sentence. Gitte's mother sat at my side up front. I heard a sound, it might have come from her nose. When I finished I closed the book and bowed my head. The applause was sporadic.

Gitte's mother stood up. She wasn't going to ask a specific question, she would just like to express how pleased she was that a few writers still showed an interest in, to use a perhaps odd expression, the fragile-ego individual. It was her nose that whistled, now it whistled again. Possibly it's a bit static, she said. But those who do read it through to the end can't avoid being moved. A stout woman in a wrap-around dress praised my diction. The lone man in the book club gave an account of when he met a known entertainer on the now-defunct Great Belt ferry. They had held a small conversation at the buffet, now there was a man who knew how to speak his mind.

When the meeting was over Gitte and Anja waited for me outside the door, Gitte's mother had to gather her things and lock up. Gitte laid a cobalt-blue arm on mine and thanked me, Anja praised me to the heavens. I took the bus at the stop next to the viaduct, sat and looked out through the fogged-up windows, the late-afternoon light over the stores. Under the pretense of having fallen asleep I rode all the way to the end station and sat, waiting while the bus driver smoked a cigarette he'd rolled himself, tobacco sprinkled down out of it. Then I rode back. It was dark when I stepped off the bus, an odor of meat sauce hung over the suburban houses.

8

The storm has passed, but the electricity is still off.

I stand on the step leading to the small yard, it has a fence of spruce saplings. I can't see the stand of trees in the dark, but there is a lawn and what resembles a birch tree in the middle. Its trunk is a luminous white. Stars shine brightly. The clouds have all blown out of the sky. I think about how often I think about the weather when I'm sitting in the living room, behind the gray blanket I've hung in the window by the sofa. I pounded two nails in at the top of the window frame and clipped off the heads with tongs. The gray blanket settles the room in a pleasant dim, no matter what the weather. The evergreens in front of the windows facing the road do the rest of the work.

It must be below freezing, or at least close to it. My breath takes shape around me. Something rustles in the corner by the fence, maybe a mouse in dead leaves. I step

down and take a few steps in the opposite direction, through the pea gravel and out onto the solid grass. A plastic chair is overturned, I pick it up. Then light appears from behind me, I turn to see Putte's small silhouette in the big living room window, she stands inside with pillar candles in both hands, sets one on the window sill while holding the other under her face, opens her mouth as if she's screaming and throws her head back. I smile and make a sound out in the dark.

Now John's large silhouette appears in the window, too. His thumbs stick into his temples, he is moving his fingers. They perform a small play for me in there, the moose and the ghost. Pillar candles and tea lights sit on the sill. I wonder if they can even see me. But they can, for Putte opens the window and leans out over a candle:

"We're frying doughnut holes on the stove, ouch! damnit," she says, and walks out of sight.

I gather my shawl around me and blow a thin line of breath into the cold, then I walk inside.

After we've eaten and sat down on the corner sofa, all of us facing the stove, the telephone rings. It's Elly, she is freezing terribly. Her electric stove of course isn't working. Even though she has wrapped herself in several eiderdowns, she simply cannot get warm. Putte talks to her. John leans forward and brushes a bit of powdered sugar off the table and into his hand.

"Yeah. You can't go wrong with one of those," he says, and nods over at the stove.

"What's the temperature in there down to now?" Putte says on the phone, and a moment later with her hand over the receiver and face turned toward John:

"We have to go get her. She could lay there and croak on us."

"Let's do it."

"We're on our way," Putte says to Elly. "No, just bring one eiderdown along. No. No, we have our own. We don't know yet. You don't need to."

"Question is, if we aren't going to have to sleep in the living room, too," Putte says to John, after she hangs up.

"We'll see," John says. "It's probably getting nice and cool upstairs."

"We can go get the camping mats."

“I don’t need the sofa,” I say.

“So you think we’re going to kick you off on the floor, do you?” John says.

“We’re old scouts,” Putte says. “That’s how we met each other. John was my scout leader. We’ve slept on camping mats a thousand times.”

“At least,” John says, and stands up.

While they are gone to get Elly I carry the plates out to the kitchen and stack them in the sink. Putte has set small arrangements of candles all over, in hurricanes and flat candlesticks, tea lights in ovenproof dishes. The air feels close. I open the door to the hallway and then the front door, to let some cold fresh air into the house. Stay standing in the hallway and look over toward Elly’s house until I hear her door slam. Then I close the door and sit down on the sofa.

A long time goes by. At least ten minutes. I open the blinds a crack but I can’t see them over there, even though the moon is almost full. The house throws a shadow diagonally across the street. At the shadow’s very tip a streetlight pole casts its own shadow across the gable of a house. I walk out and open the front door again. Now I hear them, Elly’s groaning and John’s bass, they show up on the left like a small caravan. Putte in front, bearing the white, shiny eiderdown. Then John, carrying Elly. She hangs over his shoulder like a child. Suddenly they’re right in front of me, I step to the side and let John through first. Elly greets me from his shoulder, her teeth chattering:

“Good evening, Bente.”

Then she is laid carefully onto the sofa, Putte tucks the eiderdown around her.

“Oooh yes. Yes, yes. Warm, yes,” Elly chatters, and in the same breath:

“Still left over from Christmas?”

“I’ll make you a plate, powdered sugar or jam?” Putte says, and walks into the kitchen.

“We’ll need a cup of coffee to sleep on, too,” John says, and follows her, pours water into the kettle and comes back in, sets the kettle on the stove.

After we drink the coffee, John remembers the Ajungilak sleeping bags:

“They’re good down to twenty below.”

“Good, you’ll survive up there in the royal chambers, then,” Elly says.

She’s clearly excited about staying the night in the house. She sits on the sofa and blinks up and to the side with her small eyes, constantly smoking or with her hand fishing around in her bag for the next cigarette.

“Bente and I can lay in our corners here and do just fine,” she says. “We don’t take up much room.”

“No, it’s fine,” I say.

“Where’s the remote if a person can’t sleep? Oh wait, no,” Elly says.

“If a person can’t sleep they can play cards,” says Putte, and I look up at her, when Elly chatters again:

“What’s that you say, they can?”

“Nothing,” Putte says, and winks at me while she tosses her braid. It’s thick and yellow and shines in the candlelight’s gleam.

John sets up a pallet for Elly. First a quilt, then a blanket, then a sheet. Elly sits in the armchair, hands in her lap, while Putte is out in the shed for the sleeping bags. She comes in and rolls them out, holds them up alternately in front of the stove, shakes them.

“They haven’t been used since Ulvshale,” she says.

“Where’s she saying?”

“It’s on Møn,” John says, and punches Elly’s pillow:

“You okay with just one?”

“No, like I say I need to sit high up,” Elly says, and gets to her feet, finds her way to the bathroom by flashlight and claps the door shut. We hear the turn of the key.

“I hope you can get some sleep tonight,” Putte says, and settles in beside me on my section of the sofa.

“I think I can.”

“Are you okay?”

“Yes.”

“Just say, if there’s anything.”

“You’re both very kind and considerate.”

“Depends on the situation,” John says, yawning. Putte laughs:

“Depends on people.”

“There’s people and there’s people.”

“Could be you’re just be the kind of friend I’ve been needing,” Putte says, and raises her voice toward the bathroom:

“Everything okay in there?”

And to us: “She’s wrestling with her support hose.”

“There’s things you shouldn’t be saying out loud,” John says, while Elly makes a small sound out there, followed by a fit of coughing.

Elly takes an incredibly long time in the bathroom. We three in the living room end up nodding off. The wall clock ticks.

“Uhhhhh,” John says.

Putte straightens with a start:

“Ohh, I nearly fell off there.”

Finally Elly finishes, John and Putte go out and brush their teeth together, and I make up my end of the sofa and lie down at once, fall asleep before Elly has even begun to settle in. I don’t hear anything of John and Putte walking upstairs with their sleeping bags.

At one-thirty Elly’s moaning wakes me up. I light a candle and look at her, she is sitting halfway up in a deep sleep. Her eyelids protrude, they’re very white. The small trunk of her body shivers with every breath. Her cigarettes lie beside her on the coffee table, ready to be reached for, as soon as morning comes.

9

I sleep until late in the morning. When I awake Elly is sitting in the armchair, dressed and smoking. Putte is out with the dogs. The electricity is still out, and John is busy in the kitchen. He is emptying the refrigerator, putting everything into a cardboard

box, to be set outside the door in the cold. The deep freezer should be good for two days, he says.

“You think mine’s the same?” Elly says.

“Definitely.”

“Or else I’m in trouble. I’ve got doves and goose and gar.”

“You haven’t eaten them yet?”

“No, you never came over.”

“For gar?”

“Mmm.”

“How about that. I can’t remember.”

I go into the bathroom and look at myself in the mirror. My eyes are puffy and my hair sits flat against my scalp. It needs washing.

“Oh no,” I say, and in the same breath:

“Can’t believe this.”

I splash water onto my face and dry myself off with the yellow towel Putte has laid out for me. Grab my toilet bag from under the sink, rub cream on my face and a bit of foundation on top, then a neutral lipstick. Then I hear the back door open and Putte’s clear voice through the house:

“Hall-o.”

Followed by John’s bass and Elly’s smoky:

“Hall-o.”

“Hall-o.”

“Hall-o,” I say, and open the door right in front of her.

“Whoa, there you are,” she says, in a cloud of fresh air.

“Did you sleep well? You were sleeping like a little rock.”

For lunch, instead of something warm, we get herring and flatbread. John has also made a curry salad of thick buttermilk and chopped onions.

“If it was right there’d be apples in it,” he says, as we pull our chairs out and sit down.

“You could have taken some out in the garage,” Elly says.

“Ah what the hell. *Skål*,” John says, and we lift our glasses of flat cola. Elly is drinking coffee.

“And thank you,” I say, as I set the glass down. I dry the corners of my mouth with my fingers. It has been a long time since I’ve had flatbread.

“What do you have for Christmas?” Putte says to me, and cuts the herring on her plate.

“To eat?”

“Yes.”

“Sometimes turkey, fixed a certain way.”

“Roast turkey, you mean?” John says.

“Yes. Stuffed.”

“Now there’s a dry meal for you,” Elly says.

“Yes, it doesn’t taste all that good,” I say.

“What’s it stuffed with?”

“The same as in duck, I suppose,” I say.

“I don’t think you use prunes in a turkey,” John says.

“No. You’re probably right.”

“I think there’s some type of stuffing in it. And different herbs.”

“Aren’t you the one who makes it, then?” Putte says.

“No. It’s from a place.”

“Don’t you cook?”

“I make stuffed peppers. I used to be able to bake white bread.”

All three of them laugh.

“Hey, that can go a long ways,” Putte says.

We all become drowsy after we’ve eaten. We stay at the table, all leaning back in our chairs except for Elly. No one speaks. John sits and rubs his eyes, and Putte follows suit. I can feel it, I want them to talk. I clear my throat. I rub my eyes, too, and blink several times.

“Is your uncle doing better?”

John raises his eyebrows over his closed eyes.

“Yeah, he’s probably coming home Friday,” Putte says.

“You’re not getting out of helping with those dogs for a while yet,” Elly says, her eyes closed, too.

While they take an afternoon nap, I walk down to the bus stop and the bench, then farther down the path to the sea. Limbs and local newspapers and trash are scattered all over, jars and cans, possibly a trash container somewhere has blown over. The island lies about a hundred meters out in the fjord, it glows green despite the season, thanks to the grass and the firs that stand on a small embankment. The cottage must be on the far side.

I don’t stay long at the water’s edge. It feels as if I’m lacking something. I wander around and walk back. It might be my wheeled suitcase. I had it while sitting on the bench the day before yesterday. Now it is back home in John and Putte’s living room. They’re lying in their bedroom, sleeping under the eiderdown with their clothes on. In their living room Elly is taking a nap in front of the stove. My suitcase with its handle is what I’m holding onto, I can’t be anywhere without at the very least that. If not that, then John or Putte now, and not even two days have gone by.

10

I hurry back. From far away I see a man knocking on the front door. He is wearing a white down coat with a sweatshirt underneath, the hood is pulled up. I don’t want to startle him, I keep my distance until the door is open and Putte smiles sleepily, first at him and then over his shoulder, at me. He turns in his hiking boots and nods to me.

It’s Ibber. We go inside. He keeps his coat on and walks over to say hello to Elly, sits in the corner of the sofa. He spreads his arms along the back of the sofa. He is older than Putte, and he doesn’t resemble her. His hair is a lighter color and almost shaved off, his eyes are blue, but like hers they’re very lively. Putte has sleep lines on her cheek. She kicks his leg with her stocking feet, he flings his arm out in the air at her.

She walks out and fills the kettle with water, sets it on the stove. There are footsteps up in the bedroom, shortly after John comes down.

“Afternoon,” he says, and laughs.

He runs a hand through his hair, shakes his head. Rubs his face, slaps his cheeks.

“What are you doing sleeping when there’s guests here?” Ibber says.

“Bente, you mean,” John says.

“She’s not really like a guest,” Putte says.

She sets five mugs on the coffee table. Then she snatches Ibber’s mug from him and smacks it down in the middle of the table.

“Little brat,” he says, and pokes her. She grabs the arm of his coat and pulls on it, he tries to trip her. John shakes his head and goes out for a pack of tea biscuits and a yellow plate. He opens the pack and arranges the biscuits neatly in a ring around the plate’s edge, pushes it into the middle of the table. Putte grabs the Nescafé and pours water in the mugs. No one uses milk or sugar.

They talk about a large tree the storm has blown over. It lies across the path to the shore, behind Ibber’s house. Ibber wants to cut it up as quickly as possible. The district people will never notice. His sentences are very short. When he says something Putte looks at him with a feigned indifference. Once in a while she can’t hold it. She smiles and leans in toward him, she has to nudge or brush him constantly.

I hold my mug with both hands and take note of what’s going on, and of Ibber’s profile. The corners of his mouth are turned a bit down. I’m sitting to his left, on the sofa. His voice is deep and a bit nasal, without much of an accent. He reaches across the table and shakes a cigarette out of Elly’s pack, she shoves the lighter over to him, he draws in deeply, fiercely, lays his head back and blows out.

“There’s a few cubic meters, at least,” he says.

The others nod thoughtfully.

“Are you coming Friday, Ibber?” Putte says.

“Yeah, thanks. I was supposed to help Katrine with a cupboard. But she got called in on a shift.”

“How about you, are you going in this weekend?”

“Yeah, it’s my Saturday.”

“Ibber is a radio dj down in Vordingborg,” Putte tells me. “He has his own program, he plays all the golden oldies from the 90’s.”

“What does Katrine do?” I say.

They freeze for a second, Ibber holds his mug at his mouth.

“She’s a certified hospital nurse assistant,” he says. “At Næstved.”

“Where your uncle is,” I say to Putte, and she nods:

“Exactly. You’re catching on.”

“Hell of a long title,” John says

Just as Elly leans forward to grab a biscuit from the yellow plate, the lamp over the coffee table comes on. It startles her, as if she got a small electric shock, John jumps up and turns on all the lights:

“That’s a welcome sight.”

“Now we can get back to normal,” Putte says, and stands up, too. The first thing she does is turn on the tv, she stands in front of it and changes channels, punches up the teletext and chooses the news.

“A man has shot a man,” she says.

“He ought to be shot,” John says, as he takes the mugs and the rest of the biscuits out to the kitchen. He comes back and cleans off the coffee table, opens the trunk and pulls out a Ludo box:

“Time to see whose turn it is.”

“Oh yeah, it’s Wednesday,” Ibber says

John opens up the board on the sofa between himself and Putte. She gets the blue pieces. He takes the red. Apparently only the two of them are going to play. Putte throws a six, John gripes.

“You two need to get a life,” Ibber says. He follows the game closely. Leans forward and makes small outbursts. Putte sends John back to start again and again, the game is over quickly. John still has three pieces out when Putte finishes. She brushes her hands together and holds her hand out to John:

“The sweeper needs a new bag,” she says.

“See you Friday then,” Ibber says, and stands.

“Will you walk me over?” Elly says, and also rises out of her chair.

“Yes, that’d be great,” Putte says. “John can bring the eiderdown over later.”

“Sure,” Ibber says.

He turns and holds his hand out to me to shake:

“Bye. Or maybe we’ll see you Friday.”

“Yes, maybe.”

Putte has won the right to water the flowers and dust. John is to take care of the rest. They start in as soon as Elly and Ibber have gone. I am parked on a dining room chair with a crossword puzzle, my feet up on another chair, while Putte walks around with a dustcloth. She works from the top down, first the picture frames and the glass case and the top shelves of their shelf system, then the coffee table and window sills. She is thorough, she lifts up the potted plants and candlesticks and dusts underneath. She finishes quickly anyway. The rooms aren’t big, either. She disappears into the utility room, the door out to the yard opens and I see her shaking out the dustcloth on the steps. She comes back shortly with a copper watercan, starts in on the plants.

John finishes up in the bathroom and walks into the living room with the sweeper. An odor of scouring powder clings to him, his sleeves are rolled up above his elbows. Putte passes him with the watercan and pauses behind my back, looks over my shoulder.

“What’s that word, five letters, Muslim prince?” she says, but John turns the sweeper on and begins under the dining room table. Putte shakes her head at me and walks to the sill of the window facing the back yard. Snake Plant and Maltese Cross, those I know. Bjørnvig went through a period when occasionally, at this time of year, he came home with different types of bulbs, hyacinths and daffodils, that was before the school psychologist. I lay on the sofa all day surrounded by the sweet smell of rotting bulbs. I lay and gazed at the cobweb on the ceiling above the coffee table, it was black with soot from candles. Putte moves a chair from the table to the corner facing the yard, stands on it and begins to water the hanging flowers with the daubs in

the air above them. John sneaks up on her with the sweeper hose held high, pokes at her rear end with the nozzle, causing her to teeter. She turns to him with the watercan. Her eyes gleam. She is about to water his hair, he takes a step back and nearly trips over the sweeper. Putte hops down and walks menacingly toward him, he tosses away the sweeper hose and jumps behind her back, slips both arms around her. Shuts off the sweeper with his foot and squeezes her, she yells while holding the watercan in an outstretched arm. He takes it away from her and sets it down on the table beside me, hard enough that the water splashes.

“Time for a truce,” he says to her, pulling on her braid, and to me with a nod at the crossword puzzle:

“Ameer.”

“Sure, yeah, that’s it,” Putte says, she’s out of breath.

“I was thinking if there’s something or the other I could do for you,” I say.

“Not a thing,” Putte says, still with laughter in her voice.

“Time for a serious cup of coffee,” John says.

As we sit on the sofa holding our mugs, John has also set a sponge cake on the table, we hear the lumbering sound of a bus speeding up not far away. We turn our faces as one in the direction of the sound, the room darkens the moment the bus goes by. Then we turn back to the tv, no one speaks. Putte bites into a piece of cake.

11

I planted the evergreen trees myself. It was the first year I’d had a yard, before the country craze featuring sweet peas and peonies and red-topped sage. I didn’t like having too many colors, evergreen seemed to me to be the solution. I called the greenhouse and placed the order, to be delivered.

I bought thuja and yew and monkey puzzle tree, the latter fortunately expired first. The other small plants stood around the yard in their pots and died. The first day I placed the plants where I had thought to set them out. The next day I filled up the

large bed in front of the house, the earth was wet and heavy. I tracked mud walking back and forth in the driveway. The third day I lost interest, this at the beginning of the driest autumn anyone could remember. All the plants in pots died. But the bed in front of the house thrived that autumn, no doubt because the earth had been so wet.

Bjørnvg praised my bed. As for myself, I developed the habit of looking the other way while walking up the driveway. The house next door had white trim, in contrast to ours. I made Bjørnvg call the lord and lady and ask for permission to paint it white. Permission was granted. We dropped the idea. I went into a frenzy over Roman shades and cut up all of our tablecloths. Sent Bjørnvg to the lumber yard for trim and string. Lost interest. Later came up with the idea of hanging the gray blanket in front of the living room window every morning.

When Bjørnvg comes home from work he takes the blanket down. He sits at the coffee table with newspapers or advertisements, he has a weakness for travel catalogues. As a child he spent every summer on Næsset, a nearby peninsula, he played Yatzy by himself for seven weeks in an annex. Every other year now he wants more than anything else to sell everything and drive all over the world in an RV. Then I could sit in back and write in peace and quiet every morning. At lunch we would have a simple meal together with a view of mountains and water.

He asks if I've been working. It has been a long time since I've done any work, and a long time since I have answered him. I have granted myself an attitude, I rise up from the sofa with an air of melancholy and take two steps across the floor. I look out the window into thuja and yew and in April the forsythias' hideous flowering that fortunately is quickly over. A brisk little spring storm can do wonders here.

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