



THE TRUTH ABOUT
WHAT HAPPENED IS INSIDE
HER HEAD

THE **THERAPIST**

HELENE FLOOD

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*Translated from the Norwegian by
Alison McCullough*



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Friday, March 6: The message

It was dark outside when he left. I woke as he leaned over me and kissed me on the forehead.

“I’m going now,” he whispered.

Still half-asleep, I turned. He was wearing his coat, had his bag slung over his shoulder.

“O.K.,” I mumbled.

“Just go back to sleep,” he said.

I heard his footsteps on the stairs, but must have been asleep before the door clicked shut behind him.

When I wake I’m alone in the bed. There’s a gap between the blind and windowsill that admits a weak shaft of sunlight, which hits me in the eyes and stirs me. It’s 7.30 a.m. – not a bad time to get up.

I pad barefoot to the bathroom in defiance of the wall-to-wall carpet of chipboard tiles in the hall, the wet wooden pallets that cover the clay floor in the bathroom. We don’t have a ceiling light in here, but Sigurd set up a work lamp when he was pulling up the tiles and it’s still standing there, disconcertingly permanent. Luckily, it’s light enough that I don’t need to use the lamp. It’s starkly functional, in the way that work lamps are, and gives off a hard white light that makes me feel as if I’m showering in the revealing brightness of a secondary school changing room. I turn on the water, let it warm up as I take off my nightgown.

The boiler needs changing, but Sigurd showers quickly and I don't plan on washing my hair today, so it'll do.

The shower cabinet is plastic – this, too, was meant to be temporary. Sigurd has designed a shower for us, a brick cubicle with glass doors and tiny blue-flecked and white tiles. In all the half-finished rooms in the house, the standstill is most obvious in the bathroom. The old tiles are gone, the new ones not yet laid. We have no lights, no proper curtains to speak of, pallets to walk on so we don't damage the floor, a hole in the wall where the water runs out, and this provisional shower cabinet, an ancient relic from Sigurd's grandfather. I once saw the house as it would be when it was finished as I walked through this abandoned building site: the blue-flecked tiles, the shining glass bricks, the recessed lights – would feel the heated tiles beneath the soles of my feet, the hot water perfectly metered out from a modern showerhead with several settings. Now all I can see is just how much time it's all going to take. As I stick my hand into the stream of water, feeling it begin to warm up, it occurs to me that I've somehow stopped believing the house will ever be finished.

Under the hot water I wake up – it's cold in here; the temperature is O.K. in the bedroom, but the bathroom is freezing. The winter has been a long one, and every morning I've stood here naked and waited for the heat with a hand in the stream of water. Now the season is slowly moving into spring. The shower does me good as it hammers against my cold, goose-pimpled skin. I collect water in my palms and dip my face in it; feel it jerk me fully from the night, feel the day taking hold.

Friday. Three patients – the usual Friday gang. First Vera, then Christoffer, and finally Trygve. It's a bad idea to see Trygve last thing on a Friday, but it's so tempting to just schedule the same time next week at the end of our sessions together. I gather

another handful of water, dip my face into it, rub my hands along my cheeks. Sigurd will be at his friend's cabin in Norefjell until Sunday. I'll be alone all weekend.

Unable to stand the cold bathroom for a second longer than necessary I go back into the bedroom to get dressed. The sheets lie in a crumpled heap on the bed. The air is dense with the smell of sleep – mine, at least – and perhaps his, too. I didn't see what time it was when he left, it could be several hours ago already. We don't have any wardrobes, but between the chimney and the wall Sigurd has installed a metal rail where we keep our clothes. Sigurd's hang there messily, any old way, while my dresses, shirts and jackets are arranged by colour in a neat row. Looking at Sigurd's clothes it seems there may be some missing, but then he is supposed to be going straight to the mountains. The bag that was on the floor is gone, and now I remember he had it over his shoulder when he left. I put on a soft, pigeon-blue shirt and trousers, a smart, neutral outfit for the day, thinking that it's only a matter of hours before I can come up here again and grab some workout clothes should I decide to go to the gym, or put on my pyjama bottoms and an oversized T-shirt if not. Only three patients first.

Actually, three patients is too few. I need to have four every day, and at least a day or two every week with five. Those were the figures I had calculated when I started freelancing. "There's less paperwork in private practice," I said to Sigurd as we made our plans, sitting in the kitchen of our old apartment by Torshovparken and drawing up a budget on an Excel spreadsheet. "I can manage four patients a day, possibly five. Five, most days. Or one day a week, anyway – although a little extra money wouldn't hurt." We laughed.

"Don't work yourself to death now," Sigurd said.

"Says you," I said.

Sigurd started working for himself at the same time, had plotted his own calculations on the same Excel spreadsheet. A minimum of eight clients simultaneously, preferably ten. He'd help the other partners when they needed it; every hour would count.

"There'll be some overtime," we said to each other, "but we'll make good money, put a little extra in the piggy bank." So far I only have three patients on most days, and very rarely five. Why did it turn out this way? It's more difficult to find patients than I expected, and the younger ones often cancel, but that's only part of the reason. I do up the last of my shirt buttons, all neatly, decently closed. I'd forgotten to include one important thing when I sat there in the kitchen in Torshov, Sigurd's old desk lamp providing the light above my computer and the sheets of paper on which we'd scribbled our notes. The human factor. I enjoy my own company, but even I need others. I had erased my colleagues with the stroke of a pen, never guessing that I would feel so lonely. That it would make me passive. A year ago, if anyone had told me how difficult it would feel to advertise for and pull in more patients – how I would shrink from it – I wouldn't have believed them.

Breakfast is the best meal of the day, in my opinion. I sit at our kitchen island with the newspaper, a slice of bread and a cup of coffee. I prefer to eat alone. Sigurd always leaves early after downing his coffee while standing beside the kitchen counter, but I like to take my time. Read the *Aftenposten* opinion pieces, the film reviews. Contemplate the day.

Sigurd has left his cup on the counter beside the sink. The kitchen surfaces are one of the few things about the house that are more or less finished, and the counter is so shiny that I can

see the semicircle of coffee beneath the cup all the way from where I'm sitting. *Of course.* Perhaps it's a biological difference between men and women, this ability to see a ring of coffee beneath a cup, crumbs under the toaster, stray drops of water along the worktop. Sigurd wants everything to be done properly, is planning the house in detail, painstakingly making drawings and impressive visualisations – but he falls short when it comes to the little things. Putting his cup in the dishwasher. Wiping down the worktop. Packing up his laptop for the evening. These things are no big deal, so why do I go on about them, let them irritate me? On the other hand, they only take a few seconds – so why can't he just do them?

This is as far as I've got when I glance towards the hook on the wall where Sigurd usually hangs his document holder – the hard grey plastic tube with a black shoulder strap attached to each end which he uses to carry drawings to and from work. It always hangs there on the same hook if he's home. I frown as I consider the empty hook. Wasn't he supposed to be driving straight to Thomas' place to pick him up? Did he not explicitly say so? And wasn't the document tube hanging there on the wall yesterday evening?

I have always found it difficult to shrug off inconsistencies, although I know some people can, and I envy them for it. He wasn't supposed to be going into work – but no, maybe I misunderstood. I thought he said he was going straight to Thomas' place – well, perhaps I heard wrong, maybe he was going to call in at the office first. Maybe he left the document tube at work, and when I think I can remember it hanging here yesterday, I'm actually thinking of the day before. It would be much easier to be able to shrug it off. Those with poorer memories seem much less suspicious of the world, less argumentative. To take the current example: I remember, without a shadow of a doubt,

that Sigurd and I spoke about his plans yesterday, how I got up from our sofa in the corner and went across to the kitchen nook to empty the dregs of my tea into the sink, threw the used teabag in the bin and put my cup in the dishwasher; remember how I turned when standing perhaps a metre from the kitchen island where I'm sitting now, and said to Sigurd, "So, when are you leaving tomorrow?" And I remember Sigurd so clearly – as if I'm looking at a photograph of him, one with an extraordinary resolution, billions of megapixels, every impurity of his skin rendered in detail. I remember the worn-out jumper and ripped trousers he often wears in the evening; that he ran a hand through his dishevelled curls and looked at me with narrow, tired eyes, as if I was waking him, and said:

"Oh. I'm leaving early. I want to be at Thomas' by six-thirty."

And I said:

"Six-thirty?"

And he said:

"Yes. So we'll make it up there by mid-morning, get a full day on the slopes."

Then maybe he forgot and acted out of habit, taking the document tube with him. Maybe he decided he'd do a bit of work from the cabin. Perhaps he changed his mind and went into the office at the last minute.

My memory is too detailed. I remember all too clearly the way he looked when we spoke about this; how he was wearing the beige, ill-fitting jumper with the black collar that looks like something his mother might have bought him – which in fact it is – he told me it was she who had bought it for him before he met me, when I first dared to point out how hair-raisingly awful it is. It's an insignificant detail, not something I need to be able to recall. At least, it isn't important to remember that I said, "O.K.," and turned away, and that by the time I had put

down my teacup and looked back at the sofa he was already sitting with his laptop open on his knees, his eyes squinting at the screen, eyebrows drawn together, mouth half-open, and that I suppressed the urge to say, “Turn a light on, you’re ruining your eyes, and take that computer off your lap, it’ll ruin the quality of your sperm and we might need your sperm to be in tip-top condition some day, and don’t sit there on the sofa with your neck bent like that, you’ll get a bad back.” Instead, all I said was:

“I’m going up to bed. Night.”

All this is trivial. What’s important is to be able to distinguish the important details from the rest. If you remember everything, it’s harder to recall the significant things – the things you *have to* remember.

From the bathroom window I can see my first patient of the day walking up the path to my office above the garage. Vera bows her head a little as she walks, which gives her a distinctive gait that’s easy to recognise – the gait of a teenage girl who hasn’t yet grown into her adult body. Were you to ask her, though, she’d tell you she’s mature enough. I take a deep breath, down into my diaphragm, following her with my gaze as she opens the door to the office. Three patients, that’s all – then the weekend. I feel tired, even though I’ve only just got up.

I brush my teeth in the bathroom, balancing on one of the pallets Sigurd brought back from a construction site he’d visited and then used to cover our bathroom floor. The basin belonged to Sigurd’s old Grandpa Torp, as did the shower cabinet, which means it was fitted before 1970 and hasn’t been updated since, apart from the few modifications Old Torp carried out himself. The tap has one round handle for cold water and one for hot, and when I look at them I can almost see Old Torp’s crooked,

arthritic hands turning them. Sigurd's grandfather didn't believe in worldly goods. According to him, it was inevitable that Norway would soon be taken over by the communists – although he must have been disappointed that it was taking so long, because he'd been waiting for this to happen since the 1950s. By the time he drew his last breath, in his command centre in the loft, his convictions had remained rock solid through the fall of the Soviet Union and the rise of China as a global economy. Still, the sly old fox must have been dispirited when his health began to decline, just as the world's communist states were succumbing to capitalistic ideas. The Cold War had been his heyday, and he was palpably proud to tell anyone who would listen – generally Sigurd's mother, or Sigurd and me – that the intelligence service had kept a file on him throughout the '70s. But last year was his final over and out, and now all that remain are the souvenirs of this house: the old radiators and taps, and the command centre, so far untouched, with its shelf upon shelf of reading matter, membership magazines from the Communist Party and Workers' Communist Party, its wall maps with small drawing pins marking locations Old Torp regarded as significant targets, and the old, rusty revolver, thought to have been owned by someone who had fought in the Russian Revolution, and which Old Torp had acquired in the '70s to protect himself – or to give the secret service a reason to keep tabs on him.

Old Torp's death gave Sigurd and me the opportunity to achieve our dream of owning a house. In the 1950s Nordberg was an area of the city like any other, but over the years it has gone up in the world. In 2014 it was utterly impossible for a hopeful young couple like us to raise enough capital to buy a house up here. On the way back to the station after visiting the old wreck, we'd sigh to each other and say, but just look at *the view*, and it's so close to *the countryside*, and just a short T-banen

ride from the city, and you can see *the sea* from here. But there was no point saying anything further. A terraced house in an outer suburb without any kind of view was all that was on the cards for us. But two days after the old man was found, declared dead and sent off to a funeral parlour for the necessary preparations, Margrethe, Sigurd's mother, had called.

"Listen," she had said. "Wouldn't Grandpa's house in Kongeveien be perfect for you?" Margrethe is an only child, and lives in a modern house in Røa. Sigurd's brother Harald lives in San Diego and has no need for a house in Oslo. Sigurd's late father's cabin in Krokskogen had already been given to Harald, who had promised not to sell it before his mother became too old to use it, and one day would also be the beneficiary when Margrethe's house was sold. So Old Torp's house was given to us.

But an uncomfortable fact about Old Torp's death is that almost three weeks passed before he was found. That is, he died in his command centre in the loft, above the bedroom Sigurd and I now share, as he sat there with a flask of coffee, poring over a wallchart from a time when there was still an East and a West Germany. It was his heart that gave out – no surprise really, the man was almost ninety. Nor was he a very social person, so he had no visitors other than immediate family. Margrethe was on one of her two-month jaunts to warmer climes when it happened; Sigurd and I were supposed to visit Old Torp once a week to ensure that everything was O.K. But we were busy with work and our own lives; we skipped a week here and a week there. When we finally turned up, two weeks late, we sensed the silence from the moment Sigurd turned the key in the lock.

"Grandpa?" Sigurd called.

We had looked at each other with apologetic smiles, feeling guilty for leaving the old communist alone so long, and when I think of Sigurd's expression now I can see the tension in it, as

if he had used safety pins at the corners of his mouth to pitch it up. I'm tempted to say that we already knew, although that's too dramatic. But perhaps our guilty consciences made us suspect something was wrong.

"Grandpa?"

In the end, I was the one to find him; he lay there with his face on the map. His skin was grey and rugged, dry as leather and just as lifeless, and mottled with haematomas in the way that long-dead human bodies often are. It's an image I wish I could unsee. The yellow nails that looked as if they might drop off; the vertebrae of the neck about to pierce the dead, parchment-like skin. The heavy, stifling smell of decomposing flesh. I've hardly been in the command centre since. Perhaps the distressing circumstances of his death were in part what made Margrethe decide to give us the house.

We wanted to renovate the property as soon as possible; peel the old man off the walls, empty the house of him and make it our own. Sigurd created drawings; I drew up a budget. Our new-found financial freedom gave us opportunities. Some of Sigurd's former student friends wanted to open their own architectural firm, and had invited Sigurd to join them. We no longer had a mortgage or service charge to pay, and the sale of our apartment provided the sum Sigurd needed to buy himself into the firm. I was unhappy in my job in the health service, working with young people suffering from mental illness; we now had enough space to create an office for me at home. The house was the start of something new for us. Four days before we moved in we went down to the courthouse in Oslo and got married, eating cake at the local bakery afterwards with my sister and Sigurd's two best friends and their partners. It didn't change anything – we'd still be us – but we wanted to have the paperwork in order. On our first night in the house we slept on an air mattress in the

living room. We toasted ourselves with glasses of prosecco, and told each other, “The rest of our lives starts now.”

But Old Torp would prove harder to get rid of than we’d imagined. The renovations took time, as did getting started at our new respective workplaces. Sigurd was working a lot of overtime, and our plan to redecorate primarily required him – his expertise, his practical hands. We had set out overenthusiastic and full of energy, ripping off the wallpaper in strips, tearing up the tiles in the bathroom. We managed to get some things done, such as fitting a new kitchen and creating a home office for me above the garage. Then we started to lose momentum. Sigurd took on more clients, worked longer days, sat bent over his drawing board. Winter came, the days becoming colder and darker, draining us of energy. When we got home from work we could no longer be bothered to paint; to go to Maxbo to look at showerheads or taps or to find tiles. We failed to mix any filler, failed to pull off the last strips of wallpaper, instead dropping onto the old sofa we had brought with us from Torshov and watching T.V. Sigurd often didn’t get home until late in the evening, stooped and tired, with the document tube dangling from his shoulder.

“In the summer,” we said. “We’ll spend the summer holidays doing up the house.” That’s around three months away, and the fact that I’ve lost faith worries me. Something else is bound to happen, and then we’ll say “in the autumn”, and then the weather will turn cold and we’ll have yet another long winter in which I tiptoe around barefoot, my feet stiff and heavy as frozen clubs on the pallets on the bathroom floor.

I run my practice from the floor above the garage, where I have a tiny waiting room containing a shoe rack, a straight-backed

chair and a minuscule table with magazines, and then a door that leads into my office. Vera is sitting on the straight-backed chair, a magazine open in her lap, but I suspect she isn't reading it. She looks up as I enter.

"Hello, Doctor," she says. She looks refreshed, and is sporting a new haircut.

"Hello," I say. "Just a moment, and then I'll . . . I'll come out and call you."

"Alright," she says obligingly, one eyebrow arched in the expression I most often see her wearing – it complements the touch of sarcasm she adds to most of her remarks.

I go into my office and close the door behind me to prevent Vera's gaze from following me, from tainting everything I do.

Sigurd has done a great job with the office. It isn't very big, and the sloping ceiling made the optimal use of space the main concern. He knocked out one of the shorter walls, the one facing the driveway, and replaced it with glass. My two chairs are set there – two fine Arne Jacobsen armchairs, with a small table between them. When we sit there, my patients and I, we sit in the brightest part of the room. In the ceiling above us, Sigurd has installed a Velux window, so that natural light can enter through the ceiling, too. A couple of lamps make the nook cosy and welcoming, regardless of the autumn storms and freezer-box winters. Against the other short wall, the one that separates my office from the waiting room, Sigurd has placed my little white desk, and hung shelves along the walls all the way up to the ceiling on either side of the door to create plenty of space for my books and ring binders. The short wall and floor are panelled in pale, warm wood; the two taller walls are painted white, and the overall effect is so modern, so friendly. I've positioned a couple of plants where the sloped ceiling nears the floor, and although it's admittedly difficult to keep them alive – it gets cold

in here when I turn off the electric heater for the day – they provide a certain atmosphere. “You can breathe in here,” the room says. “In here, you can be yourself. Nothing you say in this room will be judged, repeated or ridiculed.” That’s what I had wanted – an office that would invite my patients in. And that’s exactly what Sigurd gave me. I have to give him that.

But now Vera is sitting out there waiting for me and a tiredness starts to squeeze around the base of my throat. I don’t want to invite her into my office. I sit down at my desk, turn on the computer – I’ll read my notes from her last visit, although strictly speaking I don’t need to, I remember what we talked about during the session. I’m playing for time – want to delay the moment at which I have to go out and tell her she can come in. Why am I doing this? I’m not sure – or perhaps I don’t want to think about it. Therapists care about their patients, and I care about Vera, but there’s no escaping the fact that our conversations are hard work.

Difficulties with parents, say my notes from our last session. *Difficulties with boyfriend*. Vera’s problems are relational. She started coming to see me just after Christmas for help with a depressive reaction. She’s of well above average intelligence – perhaps even gifted – so everything bores her. “I’m just so tired of everything,” Vera said in our first session when I asked her to tell me why she had come to see me, “it just seems as if nothing matters or means anything anymore.” Her boyfriend, it turns out, is a married man. Her parents are researchers who are trying to solve a mathematical theorem only a handful of people in the world are familiar with – they’re always at work and often away. Her siblings are grown-up and have long since left home, and Vera, eighteen and wise beyond her years, says that the family was already complete when she arrived. Her parents had not wanted more children. She was an accident.

There's a lot to unpack here – there is real pain in Vera's life. But it's such tough material to work with.

I check my e-mails, killing time before I let her in. Mostly advertising, nothing personal. For the briefest moment I want to call Sigurd, but that's silly, it's five to nine, he'll still be in the car with his friends. I take a deep breath. Three patients, and then it will be the weekend. The entire evening alone. Lunch with my sister on Sunday, otherwise no plans. Except to go to the gym, perhaps.

"Ready, Doctor?" Vera asks when I go out to tell her she can come in.

This calling me "Doctor" is something Vera started doing in our second session. She asked me about the difference between a psychologist and a psychiatrist, and I told her that I'm a psychologist, not a doctor – that I specialise in how the whole person functions, not just the pathology – but she got hung up on this and said, "So you're not a real doctor, then?" Irritatingly, I let this bother me, let the remark prod at an inferiority complex I didn't think I had, because I answered – a little defensively – that I knew as much as any doctor about what goes on in people's heads, at which she laughed, and said, "That's O.K., I'll call you 'Doctor'." I feel a stab of discomfort every time she says it: a prickling feeling at the back of my throat that tells me I've revealed too much. Sometimes I ask myself whether she understands that it bothers me – whether it's a passive-aggressive move on her part – but she seems genuine enough. Just playful.

I let her into the room ahead of me. Vera is a little taller than average, slim, with straight hips. Her hands are quite large, hanging there like pendulums at her sides, and I look at her and ask myself – as women always do when they meet other women – is she pretty? Yes, averagely sweet. Young. But there's

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also something peculiar about her; her round little face, her long body.

“Well,” Vera says as she takes a seat. “I’ve had a fight with Mamma and Pappa. And argued with Lars.”

“I see,” I say, settling into my chair. “Tell me what happened.”

The waking sun is visible in the Velux window as Vera speaks, illuminating her hair and making it halo-like, all the hundreds of curly, flyaway hairs that have broken free from her otherwise slicked-back hairstyle. All girls have these kinds of unruly, flyaway hairs, I think. I have plenty of them myself – more than Vera has.

The pattern in what she’s telling me is straightforward: Vera feels rejected by her parents, who have so many important things to do that they don’t have time for her. Since she’s unable to tell them how upset she is, nothing is more satisfying than a confrontation with them – afterwards, feeling even more rejected, Vera calls her boyfriend and starts another argument. The married boyfriend goes home to his wife after they hang up regardless of what happens, so in the unprovoked argument there’s no doubt that Vera will be rejected – this is how Vera takes the intolerable feeling of not being prioritised by her parents and reframes it within more tolerable limits with her boyfriend. Half an hour into our session I share this observation with her.

“I don’t know,” Vera says, wrinkling her nose. “Isn’t that a bit easy? Like, a bit Freudian or something?”

“So is it correct to say that you don’t think that’s the case?”

She looks over at my bookcase, as if trying out my interpretation. Her fingers pluck at the bracelet on her wrist, a thin silver bracelet with a single pearl dangling from it. She rolls the pearl around between her index finger and thumb. The piece of jewellery is too grown-up for her, I think. The girls who come to see

me often wear jewellery bearing letters; they adorn themselves with words like LOVE or TRUST or ETERNITY. This bracelet might belong to a middle-aged woman.

“I don’t know. I hope not. I really don’t think I called Lars just because I wanted to feel bad. I think I *did* feel bad, and wanted to feel better.”

“I understand,” I say. “And so you ended up feeling even worse than you already did.”

“Yeah,” she says, and sighs deeply. “So it wasn’t such a good strategy, you might say.”

“What might have been a good strategy, do you think?”

“To help me feel better? I don’t know. I only ever come up with bad strategies.”

“Such as?”

“Self-harm,” she says. “Isn’t that the classic one? There’s a girl in my class who does it. She blogs about it, too – takes pictures of her wounds and posts them online, it’s *crazy*. But that’s not my style. Unless you count Lars as self-harming, I suppose.”

This last reflection is an invitation, but I let it lie. She wants to talk about her boyfriend, needs to discuss the relationship with someone and has nobody else in whom she can confide. But he is not the cause of her pain. As I see it, the boyfriend is a symptom, while the cause of Vera’s depression lies deeper, in the things she doesn’t want to talk about. Those are the things we have to explore. My body still feels sleepy; I fight the urge to stretch in my chair. Through the window behind Vera I can see that the mist is lifting – it’s going to be a nice day.

“You were upset after the fight with your parents,” I say. “You wanted to feel better, so instead of self-harming or doing something similarly stupid, you chose to do something that *could* have been effective – you reached out for support from some-

one. The problem is that you chose someone you knew would reject you. So what I'm wondering is, what if you'd tried to reach out to someone else?"

"Like who?"

"I don't know. Someone you can trust. A friend, for example."

"A friend," Vera says, her voice heavy.

"Do you have any friends, Vera?"

She looks at me – is she weighing me up? A kind of challenge suddenly flashes in her eyes.

"I have lots of friends. God, I've got tons of them – more than I need. But do you know what the problem is?"

"No," I say. "What is the problem?"

"They're idiots. Every last one of them."

"I see," I say, thinking for a moment, reflecting this back.

"Then they don't sound like very good friends."

She inhales, her face softening.

"O.K., maybe not idiots, exactly. But they just don't understand. The girls in my class – you have no idea. They read beauty blogs and plan end-of-year parties and think the world's most important skill is to be able to pluck your eyebrows just so. Y'know? If you ask them about love they start going on about that one guy in the other class they messed around with at a party. What kind of help would I get from them?"

"It sounds as if, although you have plenty of people around you, you don't have very many you can turn to for support," I say.

"I have Lars."

"Yes. But Lars is something other than a friend. It sounds a little lonely, in a way?"

She doesn't like this perspective, I can tell. Vera wants Lars to be enough. She feels that she's above her classmates, but doesn't want me to pity her for it.

“But do we all have to get so fucking *personal* with each other all the time?” she says.

“I think everyone needs someone they can have a personal conversation with.”

She doesn’t like this, either.

“Well, do *you* have friends you can talk to?” she asks, and now there’s something mean, something caustic in her tone, a stinging slap, and I feel it in my stomach, the discomfort at being subjected to an attack. “Do you even have any friends at all?”

She raises an eyebrow again. So many of the girls who come to me tell me about this fight for survival in the schoolyard, the brutal strategies used to claw one’s way up the pecking order of this dog-eat-dog world. Vera considers me like this – in the way that the queen of the class looks down her nose at the quietest girl in the back row.

“Yes, I do,” I say, perhaps too quickly. “Not that we talk about deep, personal things all the time, but I have people I can confide in. I think everyone needs that.”

We look at one another, sizing each other up, and I’m already sensing that my tactics have failed.

“And you can work to build those kinds of relationships,” I say, trying to steer the conversation in a more constructive direction.

There’s an element of something I can’t decipher in her eyes – she’s assessing me. But then it’s as if she loses interest.

“Yeah, well,” she says, glancing down at the pearl she’s fiddling with on her bracelet. “Maybe you need it, but it’s not like that for me.”

That was the wrong approach, I realise. She got angry. Threw her anger at me, as young people do. I didn’t quite manage to steer it, didn’t give her what she needed. Ended up defending myself instead. Vera runs her hands through her hair, a tired,

grown-up gesture. But when she lets her hands fall and looks over at me again, she seems younger than her eighteen years.

“I don’t need anyone to confide in,” she says. “All I need is love.”

Her tone is that of an obstinate child – I almost want to cup her cheek with my hand. This is Vera’s blind spot. She’s convinced that she’s so clever, so much older and wiser than her friends, that she has no idea of the extent of all she has yet to experience. Maybe it’s my job to help her understand this. But I’m tired. It’s Friday – and anyway, the session is almost over.

I glance at the clock, and Vera sees me do it.

“Time to give up, Doctor?” she asks.

I scribble down some quick keywords for my notes, which I’ll write up later. *Argument with parents*, I write, *argument with boyfriend*. *Feels rejected by her parents, provokes argument with boyfriend*. I read over the words. Cross out “provokes”. Write: *starts an argument with boyfriend*. *Assessment*, I write, and consider – how should I assess Vera? *Fear of rejection; topic of loneliness is a sore point*. *Intervention: interpretation, attempt to increase reflection around own reactions*. *Follow up feeling of not having anything in common with those around her*.”

Outside I see Christoffer’s mother’s B.M.W. already parked at the side of the road. I set a full stop at the end of my notes and stretch and twist my body in the chair, in preparation.

When I emerge from my office Christoffer is sitting in the waiting room, confident and with his legs spread.

“Hi, Sara, how’s it going?” he asks as he gets up and enters the room, sauntering across to his chosen chair without hesitation.

This is a litmus test for a patient's first session, and I use the same routine with all my new patients. I let them into the room first. Most young adults wait for me to ask them to sit down – wait for me to signal that one of the chairs is for them. This is natural – the room is mine, they are guests. Some ask me, "Where should I sit?" Some, like Christoffer, pick one. In our first session he stopped for a moment and considered the two chairs, then decided on the one on the left, dropped into it, slung one leg over the other, and looked as if he owned the place.

I take the other chair. As it happens, Christoffer and Vera like to sit in different chairs, so now I'm sitting in the chair that's still warm from Vera's body.

"Right," Christoffer says, with a grin so broad it shows all his white teeth, from the molars on one side to those on the other. "I'm ready. Let's go."

He could almost have winked at me. He doesn't, but it wouldn't have surprised me if he had.

"How are you, Christoffer?" I say. I'm aiming for neutral: friendly, but restrained. Trying not to be taken in by his grin.

"Yeah," he says, "I'm just marvellous."

The face that surrounds his huge row of teeth is unshaven; his fringe, parted at the centre, falls almost to his chin. His hair is dyed black, and around his neck is a row of studs I can only describe as looking somewhat like a dog collar. Christoffer has taken off his leather jacket and sits there in his T-shirt, the tattoos on his arms visible and with similar studded belts around his waist and wrists. I wonder whether anyone has ever tried to hug him. He's an attractive, likeable boy, only in this outsider position because he's chosen it for himself, and I assume that girls, if not swarming around him, are at the very least interested. But to hug him, with all the spikes?

"School?" I say.

“Yeah. I’m kinda scraping the bottom of the barrel, haha. But I’m not failing anything. Thumbs up, right, Sara?”

“And at home?”

Christoffer’s grin broadens further still to reveal the spaces where his wisdom teeth will erupt in a few years’ time.

“Brilliant. Pappa’s in Brazil and doesn’t want to come home, and Mamma’s trembling with fear because of all *this*.”

He taps one of the spikes of his collar with a knuckle.

“You should hear her.” He puts on a falsetto, his face becoming that of an animated fool, the corners of his mouth drawn down in a comical expression. “*Christoffer Alexander, are you really going to go to school with that around your neck? You look like a common whore.*”

I suppress a smile. Christoffer throws back his head and laughs heartily.

“And that pleases you?” I say.

“Of course it does,” he says, his voice smug.

“Listen,” I say. “It’s not that I don’t appreciate all the effort you put into your personal style. But don’t you think you could find a way to irritate your mum that’s a little less associated with, you know, self-harm?”

Yet more laughter escapes Christoffer’s throat.

“That’s what I like about you, Sara, I must say. *All the effort* I put into it, yeah, you could say that. I suppose that’s true. But I have never self-harmed.”

“I know,” I say, looking at him, serious now. His grin has reduced by a third. “But there’s a hint of it in the very style itself.”

“On that I think we’ll just have to agree to disagree,” he says.

Christoffer sometimes lapses into adult ways of speaking. He has looked like a devil-worshipper for the six months I’ve known him, but right below the surface is a polite young boy waiting to break free. The first time we met he shook my hand, gave me his

name, and said it was nice to meet me. Christoffer is in therapy because his mother thinks it's necessary. His parents divorced with teary-eyed, door-slapping, resounding drama a couple of years earlier, and this clothing and music style, along with a certain insolence and a sharp drop in his grades, shook his mother out of her post-divorce stupor with a jolt. She called me in hysterics, and explained that her son was in need of immediate help.

This is a qualified truth – since our very first session I have been convinced that Christoffer will be just fine. He will continue with his rebellion for as long as it upsets his mother, and perhaps in the hope that it may worry his father so much that he'll return home from Brazil in sheer astonishment. But one day in the not-too-distant future, and well before his final exams, Christoffer will throw out his black clothes and studded belts and chains, put on ordinary clothes, go to school as if nothing has happened and make up for lost time. He'll leave secondary school with grades good enough to enable him to do whatever he wants in life, and he'll be absolutely fine. I know this, and Christoffer knows it, too.

The only person who doesn't know it is Christoffer's mother, and therein lies the dilemma. If Christoffer doesn't really need therapy, isn't it unethical of me to give it to him, week after week? On the other hand, I need all the patients I can get. Christoffer, for his part, is happy to come. We have a good rapport, and I would hazard a guess that being in therapy appeals to him – fortifies, in a way, the style he's trying out. Christoffer's mother, waiting outside in her B.M.W., no doubt sleeps better at night knowing that he's being "taken care of", as she puts it, by me. Is this not then an arrangement that benefits everyone involved?

I did once attempt to end the treatment, if not as resolutely as I should have. But Christoffer's mother called me in tears that same evening.

“Sara,” she wailed, “you mustn’t give up on him. You’re our only hope.”

This was just before Christmas. It was snowing, and sitting in the chair Christoffer is sitting in now I looked out into the darkness and thought: if I keep him as a patient – what harm will it do? I applied professional terms to it, for myself – there was no-one else to justify it to. I’m offering him an “emotional corrective”, I said to myself. I’m a “safe adult” with whom he can explore his identity. These are the kinds of things I wrote in Christoffer’s notes, consoling myself with the fact that, since I operate privately, I’m not using taxpayers’ money but rather that of Christoffer’s wealthy father. And from what I’ve understood from telephone conversations with Christoffer’s mother, taking that asshole’s money is nothing to feel guilty about.

Sigurd has called me. He left a message on my answering machine when I was halfway through my session with Vera. I’m now in the kitchen eating lunch: a tuna sandwich and apple juice. I play his message on speakerphone, the mobile on the kitchen worktop beside me, and listen as I eat.

“Hey, love,” he says in his typical Sigurd way; the warm, melodic sound of him. “We’ve made it to Thomas’ cabin. Here it’s, oh, it’s good to be here, I . . .”

The telephone crackles, and I hear the grin in his voice, a couple of bubbly stutters.

“It’s just Jan Erik, he’s messing around with some firewood, he looks like a total idiot, I . . . I should probably go now. I just wanted to let you know we’re here, and, yeah, I’ll call you later. Be safe. O.K. Bye.”

I have almost finished the sandwich. I sit there with the final crust in my hands as my husband speaks and feel something

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push against my diaphragm: I miss him. What a stupid thought – he's only been gone for a few hours. I'm actually quite happy being alone. Going to the gym; eating food he doesn't like. Watching films he thinks are stupid. Drinking white wine – which, according to Sigurd, is only for bridesmaids and old ladies. Going to bed early. Getting plenty done with my days.

It's only his voice on the answering machine. I'll call him after work. I eat the last of the crust, wash it down with water. My next patient is Trygve. I have time for a coffee while I read his notes.

Trygve comes at two o'clock on the dot, always on time, never a second too early. But unlike Christoffer he makes it absolutely clear that he does not want to be here. He doesn't sit down in the waiting room but stands with his back to the front door, folding his hands across his chest when I open the door to let him into the office.

“Come in,” I say.

He walks past me, wearing a severe expression, lips clamped together so that they're almost invisible.

Trygve always chooses the same chair as Vera, but never sits down before I invite him to. When he does take a seat he doesn't settle back into the chair but remains sitting upright at its edge, ready to get up at the slightest provocation.

“So,” I say. “How has your week been?”

“Fine,” Trygve says in a flat voice.

“Your schoolwork?”

“Fine.”

“Have you done what you're supposed to do?”

“Yep.”

“Have you been gaming at all?”

“A bit.”

“Have you been gaming more than within the times we agreed on?”

Now he looks at me. He has sandy hair and brown eyes, straight features, nothing unusual – he actually looks conspicuously inconspicuous, if I can put it like that. His facial expressions are eerily controlled, and only very rarely, if he becomes irritated enough, for example, does a non-calculated movement escape censorship. When I first met him, I thought it wouldn’t surprise me if he turned out to be a serial killer.

But Trygve isn’t coming to me because he has murderous aspirations, or because he’s too controlling or because he finds life meaningless. He’s in treatment because he’s addicted to playing “World of Warcraft”, or, more precisely, because his parents made his getting treatment a condition of his continuing to live at home. He’s twenty, older than most of my patients, and dropped out of school seven months before his final exams because it was getting in the way of his gaming. Trygve’s parents are worried, and they have good reason to be. We have agreed that I will call them if Trygve doesn’t show up for treatment. Trygve himself has also agreed to this – only, I imagine, because it would take too much time away from his gaming should his parents throw him out and he be forced to find a job to keep a roof over his head.

“I’ve almost stuck to the quotas,” he says.

“When have you not kept to them?”

He suppresses a snort, like someone trying not to sneeze.

“Two nights. Sunday and Thursday. Otherwise perfect.”

His mouth is straight and stiff, his jaw tense, and there’s something about his reluctance that makes me tired, that makes me want to throw in the towel and say, “Wonderful, almost perfect, shall we leave it at that for today, then?”

“So, how much time did you run over by on those days?”
I say.

“A little.”

I sigh. With Trygve, I know that I have to be specific.

“Let’s see. On Sunday you can game from seven until ten.
When did you start?”

“Seven.”

“And when did you stop?”

A pause. A muscle bulges along his jaw – that’s how hard he’s clenching his teeth. His jaw is strangely rectangular – that, perhaps, is a little conspicuously inconspicuous. I’ve read that men with a broad jaw are often regarded as attractive, but on Trygve such a strong jawline only adds to the impenetrable impression. Normal, perhaps, but even this expression – his grey, flat, ten-a-penny expression – seems calculated. It isn’t impossible that Trygve has grand plans for his life, but if anything is certain it’s that not a soul in the real world knows what on earth they might be.

“After midnight.”

A blatant euphemism.

“How long after midnight?”

A new bulge at his jawline.

“Three.”

“O.K., three, and on Thursday, that is, yesterday – on Thursdays you can game from seven until eleven. How long did you game for?”

Another pause.

“Until three.”

“O.K., I understand. So by my calculations you’ve gamed for, let’s see, eight hours more than agreed this week.”

He’s silent, his expression closed.

“What do you think about that?”

Trygve shrugs.

“Is it a good thing, do you think?”

He shrugs again, looks at his watch, places his hand back on the armrest, then looks at his watch once more. There’s no way around it with Trygve – all I can do is push back with force against force, steering us into the discomfort he creates for us.

“Because I noticed you used the word ‘perfect’ when you first came in here, Trygve.”

“I said ‘almost perfect’.”

“Yes, I remember. I’m wondering what made you choose that word?”

He exhales, quickly and loudly – not really a sigh, more in the way that a steam engine releases steam.

“I don’t know, Sara,” he says, and now he’s seething, just below the surface. “Maybe I chose that word because I don’t think it’s much fucking fun to sit here every week and have to lay out all my private habits for you.”

And there it is, his irritation – I realise that it’s more explicit today than it usually is. Perhaps this thought occurs to him, too, because it’s as if he recollects himself – he stops, his expression with its frowning brow and twisted mouth hanging there in thin air for a moment. Then it’s as if he erases it, replaces it with neutral mode.

“Yes, I agree,” I say hastily – perhaps I can reach him before he clams up again – “I think that you find our sessions very uncomfortable. Can you say a little more about how you relate to that discomfort during the week, when you’re not here?”

Another shrug.

“Dunno. I don’t really think about it.”

“Let’s take an example,” I say, trying to be specific again. “Yesterday evening, at eleven o’clock, when you should have stopped gaming, what did you think then?”

“How did you feel?” is what I should have said – I have to

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avoid falling into the trap of becoming reason-focused.

“Dunno. Nothing.”

“Because you knew I’d ask you about it today.”

“Didn’t think about it.”

“I’m wondering, Trygve, whether you’re really motivated to try to keep to the schedule we’ve set up?”

“Dunno. Well, yeah. I’m trying.”

“Because I don’t think I can force you to stop gaming – and nor can your parents, for that matter. You have to want to stop for yourself.”

“Yeah. I do want to.”

The morning’s weariness rolls over me again, a hundred times stronger than when Vera triggered it. It’s right that if Trygve’s going to change he has to do it himself, and it’s glaringly obvious he can’t be bothered to. *Patients who end up in therapy always have a motivation, or ambivalence*, the textbooks say, and I know what they advise – get a hold on what’s there, Trygve wants to keep his home, build on that – but my toolbox feels empty and useless. Maybe the problem is that Trygve’s desire is so instrumental: not to maintain the relationship with his parents, not to stay at home because it’s safe, but simply to keep a roof over his head, an electricity supply for his computer. And if I’m being honest, I’m not sure what will help Trygve. Many gamers play away years of their lives, just as Trygve seems determined to do. He’s carved in stone, and part of me thinks that as long as this is what he wants, there’s not much that can be done about it.

But it’s Friday afternoon. I don’t have it in me, another pseudo-conversation in which Trygve says whatever he needs to say in order to follow our agreement.

“O.K.,” I say, “but what do you think you need to do in order to stick to our agreed times next week?”

“I’ll try harder,” Trygve says through clenched teeth.

“Good,” I say. “Then we’ll try that. Shall we say the same time next Friday?”

Before I go to the gym I call Sigurd, but he doesn’t pick up.

I’m on the T-banen on my way home when my mobile rings. The train winds its way up from Ullevål, its couplings clattering. It’s dark outside, the light in the carriage yellow, the seats occupied by tired businessmen and women with briefcases and smartphones, the odd skiing fanatic wanting to get the most out of the winter heading to the countryside. Otherwise, there’s just me, my sweaty body causing the windowpane beside me to fog up. The mood is sullen and silent apart from the jangling of the carriage. The humming vibration of the telephone in my bag breaks the silence, Jan Erik’s name lighting up the screen.

“Hello?” I say in a questioning tone, as if I don’t know who it is.

“Oh hello, Sara, it’s Jan Erik.”

His voice is unstable, flippant, as slithering as the carriage in which I sit. I stifle a sigh. Are they drunk already? Have they sunk to an even lower level of childishness than usual – are they making prank calls?

“Yes,” I say, sharply, as in “get to the point”.

“Yeah, we just . . . Thomas and I are wondering whether you’ve heard from Sigurd?”

“What do you mean?”

Outside, the ascent becomes steeper – we’re approaching Berg, only two more stations before mine. The houses are like models, black lumps with illuminated rectangles on them. They don’t look real – I can’t believe that people live in them.

“No, we just . . . We were just wondering . . .”

He clears his throat, and I think this is unusually idiotic, even for him.

“What are you wondering about, Jan Erik?”

“Just . . . when he’s coming.”

“When he’s coming?”

There’s a pounding at my temples – first Trygve, then my spinning class and now Jan Erik. All I want is a shower, a glass of white wine and my chicken salad.

“Yeah. I mean, he said he’d be here around five, and now it’s after seven, and we just, we can’t get hold of him, so, haha, well, we didn’t know – but we thought you might? Know, I mean? Or have heard from him?”

There’s a mumbling behind him – Thomas’ voice. I straighten up in my seat.

“Yeah, I’m sure there’s nothing wrong,” Jan Erik says now, almost shrilly, it seems to me. “We just wanted to check.”

Thomas is more sensible than Jan Erik. I’m not sure whether I like Thomas, but I certainly prefer him to Jan Erik.

“Listen,” I say, in a low voice so the rest of the train won’t hear me but loud enough that Jan Erik will, “Sigurd called me at around nine-thirty this morning and said that you were all there already. I haven’t heard from him since.”

Silence on the other end of the line. Then there’s more mumbling – I can’t make out what they’re saying, but they’re talking between themselves, I can hear them both, their almost-whispering.

“What are you saying?” I say, loud enough now that those sitting around me evidently get the gist of the conversation. “I can’t hear what you’re saying.”

Silence again. Then Thomas mumbles something, and Jan Erik says:

“I’m not sure I understand, Sara, because Thomas and I only got here around one. Sigurd said he was going to drive up here himself, later.”

My forehead tightens; a headache, thick and burning.

“He called at around nine-thirty, ten,” I say, exhausted, tired of them and the train and this entire day. “He said that you were there already, he said . . .”

I think back: Jan Erik, the firewood.

“He said you were messing around with some logs for the fire.”

Total silence descends. Even the train, now on a straight stretch, stops its noise.

“But Thomas and I only left Oslo at ten,” Jan Erik says.

People’s stories often contain inconsistencies, small untruths – not really lies, more shortcuts – which means that one person at different times, or several people at the same time, may tell stories that don’t add up. Someone took the bus somewhere, even though the T-banen would have been easier. Someone was on their summer holiday in Denmark, but had to explain themselves in German in a pharmacy. If you don’t take these things too literally it isn’t a problem. Perhaps you heard wrong, perhaps it wasn’t the café by the train station but one with a similar name, next to a bus stop. Perhaps they weren’t taking the ferry to Denmark but to Kiel. There are usually plausible explanations. No, we *were* in Denmark, but took a day trip to Germany. It was just easier not to tell the whole story.

But fundamentally different stories – mutually exclusive descriptions of the facts – these are not so common. Even in the world of therapy it usually goes something like, “Yeah, Mamma says I was drunk, but I’d only had a couple of beers, I was just so tired, my speech was slurred – I agree about that – but I wasn’t blind drunk.” People stretch out the truth, embellish the story. Pull it in different directions. But people don’t usually say A when B is true and B excludes A. Nobody says, “I was in the car at Sinsen,” if in fact they were standing outside a cabin in

Norefjell with a pile of logs in their arms. You don't say, "Jan Erik is just crossing the yard," if in fact you're staring at an abandoned, empty yard – if Jan Erik isn't even in the same county.

Such contradictions are not plausible – are not the result of a misunderstanding or inconsistency. Only one of two options is possible: Jan Erik was at Norefjell a little after nine-thirty, and is now lying, or Jan Erik was in the car driving out of Oslo at ten o'clock, and Sigurd lied in his voicemail message.

But I don't have the energy to think about it; can only believe that Jan Erik is playing a joke on me. I have never understood his sense of humour. He once laughed so hard that beer came out of his nose because he had tricked Sigurd into taking a bite of a chilli pepper by telling him it was a sweet one. When I hang up, he'll be doubled up on the cabin floor, crying with laughter because he's tricked me, and Sigurd will come in from the outside toilet, look at him and smile, not understanding, and say: "What's so funny?"

"I'm sure there's a reasonable explanation," I say. "Listen, I'm on the train on the way home from the gym. Can't we just... Can't we just try to call him again? Both of us? O.K.? And then speak a little later on this evening when we've managed to get hold of him?"

"Yeah, O.K.," Jan Erik says, almost too eager. "Yeah, let's do that, haha, I'm sure it's just a misunderstanding. But. Yeah. We just wanted to let you know."

"O.K., speak to you soon, then. Say hi to Thomas from me."

We hang up. I call Sigurd, letting the telephone ring until the answering machine kicks in. The train pulls into Berg station. I look out of the window, see my reflection in the glass, still red-faced after my spinning class, and think, well, that was weird.

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Only when I'm standing in Old Torp's shower cubicle under the stream of hot water from the hole in the wall does the illogical nature of the situation truly dawn on me. There's no other possibility than that one of them is lying, either Jan Erik or Sigurd. Jan Erik has a warped sense of humour, but this seems too much, even for him. And Sigurd is a good guy, he's my husband – he doesn't lie.

But let's just say that what Jan Erik says is true. That Sigurd is lying for some reason or other, something understandable – a surprise, for example, what do I know? Just supposing. But then why hasn't he arrived at the cabin?

Only then do I feel the fear growing cold and hard in my stomach. Where is Sigurd now? I try to assuage it: don't be stupid, Sara, there must be a good reason, he's lost his mobile or it's out of battery, he's probably on his way up there right now, I bet he called from Jan Erik's mobile while I was in the shower. It helps, makes my fear less sharp, wraps it in cotton wool to turn it into a murmuring ball of worry instead. I rinse the shampoo from my hair and turn off the water; step out of the shower, trembling and naked on the wooden pallets as I quickly dry myself and unhook my dressing gown from a pallet leant up against the wall. I wrap a towel around my hair, pull on the dressing gown, rub my arms to warm myself and hurry out of the bathroom, down the stairs and into the kitchen.

But my mobile shows no missed calls. When I pick it up the screen is illuminated by a photograph, Sigurd and me with Theo, my sister's eldest son. We have wedges of orange in our mouths, all three of us; we're grinning, orange everywhere. Sigurd's eyes are narrow with laughter, almost invisible, nothing but folds of skin with small, dark pearls inside. His smile, with the skin of the orange covering his teeth, is enormous.

A corner of the swaddled fear in my stomach pokes itself free.

I open my voicemail and replay Sigurd's message.

"Hey, love. We've made it to Thomas' cabin. Here it's, oh, it's good to be here, I . . . It's just Jan Erik, he's messing around with some firewood, he looks like a total idiot, I . . . I should probably go now. I just wanted to let you know we're here, and, yeah, I'll call you later. Be safe. O.K. Bye."

I play it again; Sigurd's voice. "Hey, love." Just as he always says it. Nothing strange. Not a cough, not the slightest tremor in his voice. The crackling as Jan Erik approaches doesn't sound like anything in particular; the hesitation before he continues seems genuine.

"Be safe." Just like he always says. "Bye."

I play the recording for a third time, more focused now. Is he indoors or outside, for example? We went to Thomas' cabin at Norefjell a few years ago, so I know the layout. Just a moment ago I imagined Sigurd standing in the doorway, Jan Erik crossing the yard with an armful of logs, trying not to drop them – that Sigurd had to hang up to help him carry them inside. But can I be certain about that? Might they just as easily be inside, Jan Erik joking around with some logs from beside the fire, lifting them up to his head to give himself big ears, for example, or raising one above his head and pretending to hunt Sigurd around the room? So Sigurd has to hang up in order to run?

"He looks like a total idiot" – is that because he's about to fall, or because he's fooling around? And would it even be typical of Sigurd to use such an expression? With a sigh I think that no, back when I first met him Sigurd would never have said that anyone looked like an idiot. This is the influence of his childhood friends – especially Jan Erik. Not the Sigurd I met in Bergen four years ago.

The fourth time I play the recording I decide that he's outside. Indoors the sounds of Jan Erik joking around would

have been reflected by the walls – I would have heard him. Sound travels further outdoors. Unless Jan Erik is outside, and Sigurd's watching him through the window.

If Jan Erik is even there at all. Another sharp corner of the fear in my stomach jabs at me.

I call Sigurd again. The mobile rings and rings. “Hi, you’ve reached Sigurd Torp. Sorry I can’t come to the phone right now, but leave me a message and I’ll get back to you.” A beep.

“Hi, love, it’s me. Can you call me?”

I hesitate, waiting. Why don’t I just hang up?

“Be safe, O.K.? Call me. Bye.”

“Hi, love.” We’ve talked about this. “Sweetie” is too childish. “Darling” too serious, unless you’re saying it ironically, in which case it becomes alienating. “Baby” is for teenagers. “Honey” is too gooey. But “love” – “love” is cosy without being too sweet. From the verb “to love”, and therefore also descriptive. Exactly the way we feel about each other but can’t bring ourselves to say every time we speak on the phone. Sigurd and I aren’t the kind of couple who say “I love you” on a daily basis. We save that phrase for special occasions, whisper it to one another with a sincere intensity when it feels as if our chests are about to burst. “Hi, love” is code.

I call Thomas. He answers immediately.

“Have you heard from him?” I say. Thomas clears his throat, says no.

“Thomas,” I say, “what’s going on? Are you kidding around with me?”

“No,” Thomas says, sounding hurt that I could possibly think something like that. “No,” he says, “we’d never do that.”

“I just, I just don’t understand,” I say.

“Neither do we,” Thomas says. “We don’t know what to think. There were no footprints in the snow outside when we

arrived. I can't see how he could have been here – I mean, are you sure that's what he said?"

My stomach contracts. Thomas' voice isn't as wavering as Jan Erik's. He's speaking coherently – they're not drunk. Thomas isn't mean, not really. He has a normal sense of humour – he laughs at Monty Python and stand-up comedy on T.V.

"He left me a voicemail," I say. "I've listened to it four times since I last spoke to you – I know what he said."

"O.K.," Thomas says. "Then I don't know. He must've been joking, then. Maybe he was supposed to . . . No, I don't know."

He takes a deep breath. Behind him, Jan Erik says something. I hold my breath on my end of the line.

"So what do we do now?" Thomas says.

We agree to wait and see, because what else can we do? "Just go on with whatever you planned to do," Thomas says to me, so I make a chicken salad. I open the bottle of white wine. I think, this is ridiculous. I think, it'll turn out there's an explanation for everything, Sigurd and I will laugh about it later. I imagine myself telling him about exactly this moment, the way I stood here, making a chicken salad and not knowing what to believe. But oh, you poor thing, didn't you realise that I'd just slept over at the office? No, it never even occurred to me, I didn't understand why you hadn't called – but that was just because, because, because. But, "love". Were you worried? I'm so sorry, I didn't mean to scare you – didn't mean to ruin your evening, the dinner and film you were so looking forward to. No, it doesn't matter, of course not. Just as long as everything's O.K.

The lump in my stomach struggles against the layer in which I've wrapped it. I pour myself another glass of wine. So Sigurd has lied to me. Or Jan Erik and Thomas are lying, though I don't

think so. But why do I trust them more than I trust my own husband?

Because they're here right now. Because they're talking to me. Because Sigurd hasn't turned up to tell me his side of the story. That's what it comes down to. Why don't you, Sigurd? Can't you just show up and tell your side of the story? Tell me what that voicemail means?

I call him again. The ringing tone drones on and on, that aggressive sound, no answer, and then the tiny click as the answering machine kicks in, the moment of hope – is he picking up? – but it's the tape. "Hi, you've reached Sigurd Torp . . ."

The food is unsatisfying – I've lost my appetite. I've found a chick flick on Netflix, "Sense and Sensibility"; women in bonnets and long dresses, men with fine manners who suppress all their feelings. A film Sigurd would never agree to watch.

So he lied. So what? I might say that he doesn't lie, but then what do I know? If men do lie, isn't it first and foremost to their wives? Are there not thousands of reasons for us to lie to those closest to us?

I have lied myself – I probably lie often, even to Sigurd. *Especially* to Sigurd. I tell him that my practice is going well, that it's a little difficult to find patients now that it's winter, but that things will pick up. I say nothing about the fact that I feel lonely out there in the office above the garage – although I had so looked forward to quitting my job and leaving behind all my complaining, arguing, gossiping colleagues. I don't mention that I'm not advertising my services, that I haven't put an ad on Google, even though the guy from the year above me at university who also runs his own practice says that's the way to get patients. I say nothing of the fact that I haven't told everyone I know that I've started working for myself, don't say that I haven't created a Facebook page, that I'm not doing my best to find more work.

I say only this – that things will pick up. In fact, now I come to think of it, I lie even more than this. I say that the guy I know also thinks it's difficult in the winter – although he's never said anything of the sort, only that his first month was a little on the quiet side, before he started advertising. I turn his words around; embellish them, deduct from them. So that Sigurd won't nag me. He's mentioned it a couple of times: "You said you'd earn more – I don't mean to pressure you, but we need money for the renovations." He tends to say this whenever I bug him about the fact that work on the house has ground to a halt. Old Torp is still living in the walls – he must be rubbing his hands with glee. "I have so much to do," Sigurd says then – but is that true?

"Atkinson," Sigurd says. Atkinson is an English shipping magnate who lives in an apartment in St Hanshaugen and who Sigurd has been working for – preparing the drawings for the conversion of his cellar. Fru Atkinson in particular has presented problems – she was trouble from the start, and has only got worse as the project has progressed. No, the stairs were not supposed to be like *that*, that's not what we agreed at all, Fru Atkinson says. She had imagined there would be "much more light" when the window was installed. Sigurd had to be friendly, understand that she was disappointed, explain, go back to the drawing board. She also quibbles about the bill. "I'm not paying for this," she says, "that's not what we agreed."

"Atkinson," Sigurd says when he comes home late and slumps down on the sofa in front of the T.V. "She's been on the phone all day, I had to go down there and look at the fucking stairs, which don't 'open up the room' as she'd envisaged." It's implied that he can't be bothered to work tonight – not on the bathroom, not on the bedroom, and especially not on any of the stairs in this old shack. He wants to put his feet up, watch a

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reality T.V. show about a group of Americans trying to survive thirty days alone in the wilderness as he fiddles about with his laptop. Is he not due this, at least? When he's been forced to appease Fru Atkinson all day?

Or has he? Or is this just like when I tell him about how it's been hard to find patients?

While the people in the film just about manage to exude a polite joy at their hearts being broken, it hits me. The missing document tube.

Maybe he had planned to work from the cabin. Perhaps it's logical that he took the document holder with him. But did he really call from the cabin in Norefjell, when there were no tracks leading up to the front door by the time Jan Erik and Thomas arrived? Maybe he did see Jan Erik with the logs. But then why are his two friends not telling the truth about it now?

He lied. He must have done. Or maybe everyone is lying, at least a little. But Sigurd lied about where he was. About who he was with. I listen to the voicemail message again, know it off by heart by now. But that's not it. What is it I can hear?

“Hey, love. We've made it to Thomas' cabin.”

Is there a hint of deception in his voice?

“Here it's, oh, it's good to be here.”

Now was that necessary, if it was all a lie? And with a sigh, no less! “Oh, it's good to be here.” Well, you know what, Sigurd? It's not so good to be *here*, in Kongleveien, in this old house where your old grandfather lived and died – here, with the empty hook where your document tube should be, with your voice on the answering machine and your friends calling me, telling me things I don't understand.

Crackle, crackle.

“It’s just Jan Erik, he’s messing around with some firewood.”

My stomach starts to boil, hot and violent, melting away the fear and unease – angry and strong and freeing. So it’s Jan Erik, you say? Wrong! You’ve made it, you say? Lie! You want me to stay safe? You asshole.

Infuriated, I delete the message – wanting to be done with it, not wanting anything more to do with it, as if I could delete the memory of it at the same time. As if the whole problem will cease to exist now that the message is gone.

I put the chicken salad in the fridge; turn off the film, turn off the T.V. Set the mouth of the bottle to my lips and empty the rest of the wine down my throat.

Before I fall asleep, as I lie there with Sigurd’s side of the duvet around me, trying to make the room stop spinning, I think: perhaps that wasn’t such a good idea. Deleting the message. It might have been good to have the option to play it again.

Breathe, breathe. I flounder, wake with my head under Sigurd’s pillow. Was something there – did I hear a sound? I listen. I hear nothing but silence.

Has he called? The telephone is blank. It’s 3.46 a.m. His space is empty; his side of the bed cold.

“Sigurd?”

I say it softly, repeat it. Get up, open the door, call out, go down the stairs to the living room and kitchen.

“Sigurd?”

It was as if I heard something – as if I was startled awake. But now I can hear nothing. I go back to bed.

Sitting beside me on the sofa is a history student, prattling on and on. She has her face turned towards me, is drowning me in her words, pouring and spraying and spewing them over me so they splash around in my ears. I look over at the veranda door, which is open, and beyond it can see my friend Ronja standing there speaking to a guy she's interested in. It's Ronja who dragged me here. We were at home in our apartment drinking Sambuca from shot glasses decorated with cheaply printed religious symbols which she'd bought for me in Peru over the summer – we'd laughed until we cried when I opened them – and Ronja said, "If I drink up first we're going to that party You Know Who is going to, and if you drink up first, we'll go to your friend's place in Gyldenpris like we said we would." Ronja was the faster drinker, so here we are.

"So what do you do?" the history student asked me when I sat down on the sofa.

"I'm studying psychology," I said.

"Are you really?" she said.

"Yes," I said. I knew where this was going.

"So then maybe you can help me with something," the history student said. "You see, my dad's just got remarried, my parents divorced when I was ten, and his new wife, well, if I were to describe her in a single word? – she's a bitch."

And so it goes on. My eyes search the room for someone I know, but the party's been organised by a friend of Ronja's would-be boyfriend. He's an architecture student and sitting in the kitchen – I saw him when I put our beers in the fridge. He was in the middle of

telling a girl with a face full of piercings about how he intended to “reinvent the kitchen”. There are some girls sitting on the sofa across from us, deep in discussion, but they’re friends – the first of them has an arm around the second; the third slaps the first one on the thigh as she speaks. It suggests a kind of intimacy I’m not party to – I can’t just barge in on their conversation. Then there’s the drunk guys eating salted pretzels at the dining table, and then there’s the guy standing there leaning against the door frame.

Him. He’s alone. He doesn’t seem to be bothered by this, but of course that might be affected. He squints at the air in front of him, thinking about something, perhaps. The beer bottle in his hand has had its label torn off. His hands are covered in flecks of paint, they’re fine, the fingers crooked, as hands should be. He’s bitten his nails all the way down to the quick.

I watch him, seeing all this – his destroyed nails, his soft eyes, the dishevelled hair – but mainly I see that he’s standing alone. He doesn’t look desperate, but he’s standing alone, and I just know that he’s waiting to meet someone. Someone funny and smart and passably attractive. Someone like me.

“Excuse me,” I say to the history student, and get up.

I go over to him.

“Hey,” I say, “it’s you.”

I put my arms around his neck and whisper, just beside his tiny, round ear: “Pretend you know me.”

“Hi,” he says.

I look at him. He has a mole under his left eye; it stretches when he smiles.

“It’s been a while,” I say. “I haven’t seen you since that day in Berlin.”

“Yeah, Berlin,” he says, “that must be a few years ago now.”

“Did you go to France, like you said you would?” I say.

“No,” he says. He smiles more, the mole stretching thinner,

longer. “I ended up going to Australia. Studied at a Panda school for two years. Became a panda-ologist.”

I laugh. O.K., so he’s playing along. But it was me who started it. I’m funnier.

“What a coincidence,” I say, “because my panda’s actually sick at the moment.”

“Sick in what way?”

“A bit under the weather. Hacking and coughing. Can you help?”

“Unfortunately not,” he says. “I no longer dabble in panda medicine. I teach.”

We grin at each other – that’s enough. He glances around, leans towards me and says, his voice lower:

“Why are we pretending that we know each other?”

“I’m trying to get away from the girl on the sofa.”

He leans his head past mine to look and I observe his neck, a strong, healthy sinew in the middle of it, and I think, I like that, sinewy men.

“She looks about one metre sixty, fifty kilos maybe,” he says. “I reckon you can take her.”

Now he’s trying to be too funny, I think, he must have something to prove – and anyway, it’s not nice to comment on people’s weight, although it is true that I’m almost twenty centimetres taller than she is.

“I think your name is Harald,” I say.

“Wrong,” he says.

“Are you sure? You look like a Harald. Well, anyway, Harald, this party isn’t all it’s cracked up to be. What do you say we go grab a burger?”

“I’m in,” he says. “But call me Sigurd. Harald’s my brother.”

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Because he was standing alone. Because boys like him stand there at parties looking for girls like me. Because I was tipsy and twenty-five years old. Because my friend was out on the veranda, talking to some boy. Because I felt so safe out and about with her, with the other girls I knew at the time, that it didn't matter to me whether he said yes or no.