

A photograph of a mannequin torso. The mannequin is covered in a white, textured paper that is slightly worn and has some creases. A red heart-shaped paper cutout is pinned to the center of the chest with two pins. The background is a plain, light-colored wall.

*Beautiful
Affliction*

A Memoir

Lene Fogelberg

Praise for
BEAUTIFUL AFFLICTION: A MEMOIR

“*Beautiful Affliction* is a deeply moving and important memoir about a young woman fighting for her life against all odds. It’s a suspenseful page-turner and also the work of a poet. Fogelberg’s physical heart is shutting down even as her emotional heart is filled to bursting with love—for her husband and two little girls, for her whole world that may vanish in an instant. Her breathtaking odyssey will remind the reader of the beauty, fragility, and ephemerality of life. I absolutely love this book. It was an inspiration to read, and it will stay with me for a long time.”

—ALICE EVE COHEN, award-winning author of *The Year My Mother Came Back* and *What I Thought I Knew*

“Brilliantly paced, weaving glimpses of the author’s past into an ever-tightening noose that engulfs Fogelberg and her young family in adulthood, this memoir left me as breathless as if I’d read a thriller about an unstoppable killer circling its victim. *Beautiful Affliction* grips the reader and won’t let go until the very last page.”

—RITA M. GARDNER, author of the award-winning memoir *The Coconut Latitudes*

“In her breathtaking memoir, *Beautiful Affliction*, Lene Fogelberg elegantly unites the savagery and raw beauty of the natural world with the wisdom and poignant insight of a young wife and mother for whom each moment, whether or not she realizes it, may be her last. Exquisite imagery and poetic prose pulse through this powerful, emotionally gripping story. With *Beautiful Affliction*, Lene Fogelberg gives us a gorgeously written story to savor and share, while adding her shimmering, deeply intelligent voice to the literary pantheon.”

—TERRI GIULIANO LONG, author of *USA Today* bestseller *In Leah’s Wake*

“Lene Fogelberg’s story is breathtaking in all the right ways—delicately and skillfully told—and a powerful reminder that life is fragile and can only be lived one breath at a time.”

—CAROL LYNN PEARSON, best-selling author, poet, and playwright

“Lene Fogelberg’s memoir will have even the most doubtful believing in miracles. Honest, unapologetic, inspiring, *Beautiful Affliction* is ultimately a testament to the sustaining power of love.”

—ASHLEY WARNER, author of the award-winning memoir *The Year After*

“Heartrending and suspense-filled, Fogelberg’s *Beautiful Affliction* is a graceful meditation on love, marriage, motherhood, and the quotidian, precious moments that make a life with young children. Fogelberg’s miraculous story is a gift to readers, both for its exquisite prose and for its humble reminder: Life is short; love deeply.”

—LAURA NICOLE DIAMOND, author of *Shelter Us*

“Gripping, powerful, touching, beautiful. A memoir about a woman who fights to remain alive because of her daughters and her husband. A story everyone can relate to and will want to read to the inspiring end.”

—METTE IVIE HARRISON, author of *Ironmom* and *The Bishop’s Wife*

“*Beautiful Affliction* is an important and beautiful book about the ways in which our health impacts our lives, and the courage, strength, and healing that can result with persistence. A wonderfully honest and sincere memoir.”

—LAURA PRITCHETT, author of *Stars Go Blue* and winner of the PEN USA Award

“*Beautiful Affliction* is a singular story told with honesty and grace. Drawn into an existence where the next breath isn’t promised, you wonder if your resilience could match Fogelberg’s: Could you chase a riddle halfway around the world, and ultimately, into your own heart? As we root for Fogelberg, we root for ourselves.”

—TRÉ MILLER RODRÍGUEZ, author of *Splitting the Difference: A Heart-Shaped Memoir*

“Lene Fogelberg’s memoir of living with an undiagnosed malfunctioning heart since childhood is a testament to the power of love. She allows us, the lucky reader, access to her innermost fears and guilts, offering up her story with such beautiful prose that one is enticed to linger over each word.”

—ROSSANDRA WHITE, award-winning author of *Loveyoubye*

“In *Beautiful Affliction* Lene Fogelberg takes us on a heart-wrenching roller coaster ride as we follow her journey into marriage, motherhood, and across the world with the shadow of death as a constant companion. A poignant and poetic testament to love and the will to live, it reminds us to listen to the whispers of our hearts and to never, ever give up on what we desire the most.”

—LONE MØRCH, author of *Seeing Red: A Woman’s Quest for Truth, Power and the Sacred*

“Lene Fogelberg’s inspiring memoir of life with a literal broken heart teaches us to recognize beauty amidst our own pain and suffering. Having also experienced complicated heart issues and a lifetime of surgeries, I found myself reliving my own sacred experience.”

—PAUL CARDALL, #1 Billboard Pianist & Steinway Artist

OceanofPDF.com

Beautiful *Affliction*

OceanofPDF.com

Copyright © 2015 by Lene Fogelberg

All rights reserved. No part of this publication may be reproduced, distributed, or transmitted in any form or by any means, including photocopying, recording, digital scanning, or other electronic or mechanical methods, without the prior written permission of the publisher, except in the case of brief quotations embodied in critical reviews and certain other noncommercial uses permitted by copyright law. For permission requests, please address She Writes Press.

Published 2015

Printed in the United States of America

ISBN: 978-1-63152-985-6

e-ISBN: 978-1-63152-986-3

Library of Congress Control Number: 2015934959

Book design by Stacey Aaronson

For information, address:

She Writes Press

1563 Solano Ave #546

Berkeley, CA 94707

She Writes Press is a division of SparkPoint Studio, LLC.

Although this is a true story, many names have been changed for privacy. Poems by Edith Södergran are translated by David McDuff and used with permission.

OceanofPDF.com

Beautiful
Affliction

A Memoir



Lene Fogelberg



SHE WRITES PRESS

OceanofPDF.com

*For Anders,
and our girls*

OceanofPDF.com

*When night comes
I stand on the stairway and listen,
the stars are swarming in the garden
and I am standing in the dark.
Listen, a star fell with a tinkle!
Do not go out on the grass with bare feet;
my garden is full of splinters.*

—Edith Södergran, 1916

OceanofPDF.com

PROLOGUE

Click.

Silence.

The cell phone heavy in my hand.

“I *knew* it was something!” My voice is like somebody else’s. I close my eyes, shut out the sky and trees of our backyard that seem to come tumbling down over me, struggle to find myself in this small, dark space. “I *knew* it.”

And then the tears. I am *not* crazy. I have *not* been out of my mind, all these years. My heart cowers in my chest: what does it mean? It’s a new kind of darkness, empty and strange.

“What did he tell you, Lene?” he whispers. “What did you find out?”

But he must know. He stood listening beside me during the phone call, as best he could. I could barely make out the voice at the other end myself, over the buzzing of the cicadas in the trees. The voice. The verdict. The eternal buzzing in the trees.

There is no shade here at the back of our house, only the burning summer heat. I gasp for the hot air, smelling of dry grass.

“What did he say? What did he tell you, Lene?”

CHAPTER 1

The Photograph

There was this photograph, a small piece of paper, which disappeared a long time ago, maybe hiding in a box in my parents' attic or some old forgotten album.

I don't know why my mother brought the camera. Maybe she thought to herself: this might be an important moment. One we will need to remember.

Closing my eyes I can still see the photograph's faded colors, square shape, thin white border. I can see my strawberry blonde hair around my pale face and my blue eyes looking right back at me. I'm six years old, lying on a narrow bed covered with a strip of hygiene paper. Chin to my chest, I'm smiling at my mother, who holds the camera. My thick winter coverall has been pulled down to my feet, like a molten skin above my heavy boots. My chest is naked. White cords run crisscross over me and onto a machine. The machine is measuring something, I don't know what, only that I need to lie still.

"That's good . . . And a big smile!"

I smile as wide as I can and the camera flash lights up the small examination room. Blinking away the stars in my eyes, I can see Mom putting the camera back in her purse.

"Okay, we're done with these." A nurse removes the cords from my chest. They are attached with stickers, pinching my skin. I don't complain. If I'm good, I will get to choose something from the toy store downtown. Maybe even the white teddy bear I saw in the shop window, the one with the fluffy fur and the black, almost-real eyes.

A doctor comes into the room. "I'm just going to listen," he says, "if you can sit up." He presses something cold as ice to my chest. I know what that is, it's a stethoscope, my mom told me earlier. I'm sitting with my legs over

the edge of the gurney, dangling my heavy boots and shivering from the cold. And then I remember. I need to be good. Be still.

He listens and listens, leaning over me. The stethoscope wanders across my chest. He sighs. The stethoscope climbs onto my back.

“Breathe heavily,” he says.

I do. I inhale as heavily as I can. Hea-vi-ly.

“And again.”

I-i-in and out.

“One more time.”

I do as he tells me. I am a good girl.

“Yes, she has a distinct heart murmur,” he says. And then he is silent and listens again. I can see Mom is holding her breath, I don’t think I have ever seen her do that.

I’m just as still as the white teddy bear in the shop window. Later I will be walking through the store, looking at all the dolls and the toys, making up my mind. But it will be the white teddy bear with the black, almost-real eyes. I know it. If only the doctor could be done. He has come here especially for me, from a big hospital, maybe even the biggest in all of Sweden.

My feet are getting warm in the boots. I accidentally squirm and my coverall rustles.

“Shhh,” Mom says.

And then she is silent. Everything is silent. I stay completely still so that the doctor can hear better.

“Okay, we’re done.” He removes the stethoscope from my chest, turning to Mom. “You’ll never have to worry about this ever again. It’s a harmless heart murmur.” He smiles and looks into my eyes. “Just like your mother’s.”

The words grow and linger in the room, in my mother’s smile, in the sounds of the doctor’s steps toward the door.

You will never have to worry about this ever again.

Ever again.

The opinion of a specialist. A dismissal. I can still feel my mother’s relief, as I examine the photograph in my mind.

You will never have to worry about this ever again.

OceanofPDF.com

CHAPTER 2

*T*his will be your job,” the guy says, coming toward me carrying a stack of paper and a black marker. He wears the same white collared shirt and blue trousers as the others, and adjusts a red Phillies cap over his dark hair. I don’t catch his name, but it’s clear he’s the boss.

“Okay.” I would like to say something more, but the strange sounds are still new to my mouth. I studied English in school, like all Swedes, but it’s not the same as speaking it in America. Now I will have to get used to hearing the awkwardness of my own voice, pronouncing the words a little askew.

“It will be best if you stand here.” The boss spreads out the sheets on the black granite of the kitchen island.

On them are listed numbers, 1 through 367. The other guys are already coming in, hollering the numbers of the boxes as they walk past me.

“Twentyseven!”

“Twohundredandfiftyfour!”

“Onehundredandfive!”

I grab the marker; it’s all happening so fast, the numbers in a strange language: I need to check them off before the other guys come through the back door.

The boss guy has gone outside to make sure everything runs smoothly by the trucks. Two huge trucks hold everything we own, packed in cardboard boxes and big shapeless packages, even the furniture, the framed pictures, the beds, the bikes, the lawn mower. White, taped packages that have been shipped in a container for two months across the Atlantic. It’s strange to think about: all these objects, the symbols of our lives, in containers among hundreds of other containers, a gigantic multicolored pile of building blocks to our story, on a bobbing ship in the middle of the blue ocean.

“Five!”

“Threehundredandone!”

I only get one chance to hear the number, find it on the lists, and check it off, before the guys disappear up the stairs. Anders is up there somewhere, showing them what goes where. They are all muscular guys, about twenty-five years old, and extremely polite.

“Sorry, ma’am.”

I move to the side; this box is so big that two of the guys need to carry it. It looks like it’s one of our armchairs, packed up like an odd-shaped huge birthday present.

“Thank you, ma’am.”

Bright laughter comes through the open doors, along with the buzzing of the cicadas, those odd insects whose sounds enfold our whole house, day and night. The girls stay outdoors like we asked them to, sitting on the front porch playing with their dolls, occasionally peeking in: giggles and light hair, Stina’s curled wheat and Ingrid’s golden red, that disappear the moment I turn around.

Anders comes into the kitchen.

“Are you all right?” he asks. “Is it too much?”

“I’m fine,” I say and smile at him. “We’re here now. Can you believe it?”

“This is it! It’s happening, Lene!” He starts dancing that dance of his, a cross between belly dancing and disco, and I have to laugh.

“Oh yeah, oh yeah,” he sings and his smile brings out all those wonderful wrinkles around his eyes behind his glasses. His dance is a victory dance. We are finally here. It all worked out; he landed his job at SKF North America and we found the house in Radnor available for rent just in time, as well as a school for the girls close by.

“Threehundredandtwo!”

“Ninetysix!”

The guys pass between Anders and me, carrying the boxes, saying, sorry sir, sorry ma’am, and leaving a smell of sweat and dry cardboard. What did they say? I search the lists, the marker in my trembling hand—is it really mine, it seems so far away? The numbers slowly drift away from me. Anders comes close, puts his warm hand over mine, and together we check off the numbers. There and there.

“You’re doing good, Lene.”

“Thanks.” I close my eyes and hold on to his arm, my heart swelling with gratitude for this ability of his to show up when I need him and help me without a word, even with the smallest tasks. It’s like a dance, the way we synchronize our movements: giving and receiving, my weakness for his strength.

“We’re here,” he says, rocking me gently. “We did it. We’re gonna be all right.”

He moves my hair to the side and kisses my neck. “You and me,” he whispers.

“Always,” I say, and I can feel his smile on my neck.

“Sir!” The boss calls from the stairs and Anders lets go of me. He pauses in the hallway and smiles again at me before walking up the stairs.

I hear small steps behind me and turn around. The girls are standing by the swinging door to the dining room.

“Mamma, there’s someone here to see you.”

“Oh?”

Ingrid’s eyes become big, “Yeah, Mamma, you know, the owner.”

“Oh, the *landlady*, Mrs. Mack,” I tell them. “It’s called *landlady* in English.” My brave girls, they’re learning English at rocket speed these days. “Does she want to come in?”

“No, she just sat down and said something,” Ingrid says. “I didn’t understand.”

“Maybe she’s thirsty. Could you girls please bring her some water?”

“I’ll do it!” Stina grabs a bottle of water from the kitchen counter and is out the door, but Ingrid hesitates.

“You have to come, Mamma.” My big nine-year-old. Big and small at the same time.

“Fortyfive!” The guy walks past me carefully, steering blindly behind the big box.

Forty-five. Check. The black V’s are starting to line up at the edges of the paper sheets. They remind me of the migratory birds I used to see every spring and fall back in Sweden. Ingrid is still waiting for my response.

“I can’t leave the kitchen. I have to be here, it’s my job to check off the boxes. Mrs. Mack will understand. Let her sit and rest for a while on the front porch.”

“But Mamma—” Ingrid protests but interrupts herself as the swinging door opens and Stina is back, holding Mrs. Mack’s hand.

“I can see you’re busy.” Mrs. Mack smiles with her white teeth. “I’ll come back tomorrow. I just wanted to make sure everything’s all right.”

“Thanks, yeah, we love the house!” I say, wondering at how all Americans seem to have such perfect teeth.

“I’m happy to hear it,” Mrs. Mack says. “This house was built to hear the laughter of children. After I bought it, during the renovation, I used to imagine a family just like yours living here. You remind me of my daughter.”

“Lucky for us you didn’t sell it.”

“Well, that was the plan, but with the economy going down the drain I thought I’d better rent it out, until things get better. Only in this neighborhood I’ve already seen four houses up for sale.”

Another guy comes through the back door.

“This one is number seven!”

“Well.” Mrs. Mack raises her hand in a see-you-later gesture. “If you need anything, just let me know, you know I live just down the street.”

“Okay, thank you, I’ll do that,” I say.

Mrs. Mack smiles and walks out the same way she came in, through the dining room, tossing her blonde hair as she walks through the swinging door. They never cease to amaze me, these American women in their fifties looking half their age.

Number seven. I mustn’t forget to check it off. There, on the first page. I notice the girls are still in the kitchen.

“Ingrid, will you please bring Stina back to the porch,” I say. My heart is beating fast. “Please, I’m afraid you’ll get hurt if one of the guys trips over you.”

“Come on, Stina,” Ingrid says and pulls her little sister to the swinging door, but Stina pauses in the doorway and holds up her doll, the soft one with dangling legs.

“Look, Mamma, how happy she is!”

“Oh?”

“She’s invited to the party!” The doll dances in her hand and the swinging door closes behind them. Stina’s small voice skips through the house, *because soon it’s myyy birthday.*

“Fortysix and fortyseven!”

Check and check. Black birds.

There is nowhere to sit. My heart beats fast, like it’s trying to say something important. I feel the darkness closing in.

I have to pull myself together. I can’t faint now. I’m just standing here, while all the others are carrying and sweating and running up and down the stairs. I have to do this small job assigned to me. I’m not much older than the guys but I feel like I’m ninety. I close my eyes, hold on to the black granite countertop, the stone cold in my hand. I have to beat the darkness.

Like so many times before.

More and more often, lately.

“Twentyeight!”

“Thirty.”

I need to open my eyes, push through the darkness, find the numbers, keep standing.

Check. And check.

The sweat is running down the guys’ faces. The stairs are narrow and steep, the wooden floors wonderfully creaky and crooked, *Original from 1909, can you believe it*—I can still hear Mrs. Mack’s voice, how proud she was about the restoration—the walls newly painted in beige and light green, the white kitchen brand new, powdery sawdust still in the corners of the cabinets. Every now and then comes the faint smell of ashes from the ornate fireplace in the living room, caught in the summer breeze between our open doors and windows. All the rooms have tall windows to the garden that is filled with the sounds of chirping, buzzing, laughing. The birds, the cicadas, the girls. Maybe I should check on them, in case they’re up to something, like that time they tied themselves to the chairs with their jump ropes. That was in the hotel, where we lived in the weeks before we got access to the house. Now they will have a huge garden and a whole house to fill with laughter, like Mrs. Mack said.

“Fortyeight and fifty!”

“Fiftyone!”

I find the numbers at the bottom of the first page. Check, check, check. Three more migratory birds bringing me closer to finishing this small task that shouldn’t be that hard. The guys walk past me, grunting under the

weight of the boxes. I must focus on this; being here, standing here, not give in to the darkness.

“There’s water here if you need it!” I shout to their backs.

“Thank you, ma’am.” They disappear up the stairs.

I’m actually starting to get used to this new language. Somehow my brain translates immediately, without me having to think about it. It’s only when I’m supposed to say something that it’s hard at times.

One of the guys comes down the stairs and enters the kitchen. He’s black and tall with a friendly face.

“Do you happen to have a Band-Aid, ma’am?” He holds up his hand. “I accidentally cut myself.” He lifts the red-stained tissue and shows me: a red line on his index finger with the blood welling up. Must be the knife they’re using to open the boxes.

“I’m sorry,” I say. “Does it hurt?”

“Not too bad. I’m just afraid it might stain your stuff.”

“It’s supposed to be here somewhere,” I say and open the closest drawer. I quickly find the tin box I prepared back home with Band-Aids, tweezers, painkillers, allergy tablets.

Anders is on his way into the kitchen but turns and leans on the wall, his hand pressing his forehead.

“Wait a little, Anders,” I say. “We’ll be done soon.”

“I’m sorry. I can’t help it. It’s the blood.” He is all white, looking like he is going to faint. He takes off his glasses, rubs his temples, and straightens up. “I’ll come back later,” he says and leaves the kitchen.

I can only find pink Band-Aids with Disney princesses on them.

“I’m sorry, these are the only ones I have.” I try not to laugh, but it’s impossible not to.

“Thank you, ma’am.” He also laughs while his big hands unfold the pink package and he wraps Sleeping Beauty around his finger. “I hope Mr. Fogelberg is all right.”

“Yeah, sure, he’ll be fine,” I say. “He just can’t stand the sight of blood.” I’m still laughing. “I’m sorry, I can’t help it . . . it’s just . . . you . . . and that.” Laughing and joking like this make me feel like a normal person, I can almost forget the fatigue.

“Yeah.” He laughs, raising his hand, decorated in pink and yellow. “Well, thanks again, ma’am,” he says and goes out the back door to

continue to carry boxes. I can hear his deep voice as he shows the others: *Look what I got, ha, ha, ha*, and I smile.

But then I have to grab the countertop again. Not faint. Keep standing up.

I should start unpacking. Frying pans, pots, kitchen knives, plates, cutlery—everything needs to find a new home in these cupboards and drawers. It shouldn't be a problem fitting it all in this huge kitchen, twice the size of our kitchen back home. I can picture the girls doing homework on the table by the window and me making pancakes on the wide stainless steel gas stove.

But here comes the nausea again, and the exhaustion, and the darkness creeping closer: there is nothing else for me to do but hold on to the countertop. Hold on and smile at the obscure figures walking past me in the fog. "Ninetyfive."

I can barely see anything, but I need to focus, need to catch the birds, check off, smile, stand up.

"Threehundred."

Keep standing, check off, smile.

"Twohundredandtwenty."

Keep standing.

CHAPTER 3

The Land That Is Not

The wheels roll, cold air against my face, making my eyes fill with tears. My bike is still a bit too big for me. It's for grownups, bought secondhand last summer, white, although I wanted a red one. I can reach down to the pedals, but stopping is harder and I tip, bike and all—until my feet find the ground.

I have lost Edith among the yellow leaves by the side of the road. I must find her and secure her on the rack again. It's a crowd back there on the rack, the trip home from the library always unsteady: Edith Södergran, Alexandre Dumas, Selma Lagerlöf, Louisa May Alcott.

Where is she? Oh, I mustn't lose them, especially Edith, I must not lose Edith.

There she is, a square blue flower in the brown grass. She is wet and I wipe her with my jacket sleeve before putting her back with the others. I climb back up on my bike and it's wobbly at first, but I only need to pedal faster down the street to regain my balance. The sky is gray, the air damp and heavy. The books mustn't get wet; I should have brought a plastic bag.

I wonder what it feels like to know that one will die? Well, everyone is supposed to die, but to know that it's close, that it's soon? Edith was only thirty-one when she died of tuberculosis, after fighting the disease for most of her life.

I focus on the wheels spinning through the puddles, pieces of gray sky fallen to the ground, and then I think of Miss Margareta. That time she came to sit next to me at recess.

"How are you doing, Lene?" she asked in her deep voice.

"I'm fine."

“Are you sure?” She looked at me with that little wrinkle between her eyes.

A bubble of silence lingered between us in the noise of the corridor, the shouting boys, the slamming doors.

That’s when it came.

Her question spoke the answer, which was also a question, a riddle, which I couldn’t explain to Miss Margareta. Will I die young. A question without its question mark.

Miss Margareta continued, hesitantly.

“Well . . . I’ve noticed your eyes are often very sad.” I could smell the scent of mint and faint perfume as she leaned closer. “Is there something on your mind? Is something bothering you?”

How could I have answered? Maybe I could have borrowed Edith’s words:

*I long for the land that is not,
for I am weary of desiring all things that are.*

Edith could have explained. But all I could say was “Everything’s fine.”

Miss Margareta didn’t say anything, just looked at me, nodded, and got up, leaving me on the bench.

I have to remind myself to look more cheerful. To smile often. So nobody asks me again.

If no one asks me, maybe the riddle will disappear.

“Everything’s fine,” I whisper to myself, breathless from pedaling down the cobblestone streets in the cold.

I’m at the curved bridge across the river and the uphill makes me gasp for the raw ocean air. And then downhill: the wheels spinning on their own, my bike like a boat, on its way out to sea. I love how my small hometown Kungsbacka has it all: woods, fields, river, ocean. Its location, where the river meets the ocean, means a lot of rain and seagulls. But for now the sky rests, gray and heavy on the treetops, shaking the branches and blowing off the golden leaves that tumble in the air, on the ground, some poor ones still clinging to the trees’ stiff fingers. The windows are dark on both sides of the tree-lined street, silent houses standing in line, shoulder to shoulder.

I knew it, it's starting to rain. My bike slips in the leaves, but I manage to keep my balance. I must hurry; the books are getting wet. My fingers are cold and white on the handlebars.

I'll be at my house soon; I just have to put the bike in the shed at the far end of the backyard. The stepping-stones on the lawn seem overgrown: hard small islands that make the bike bounce. The hasp on the shed door is difficult to reach, I have to lean over the handlebars to open it. I drag the bike with me, heavy and stubborn, as though leading a skinny cow to her stall.

I grab the books from the rack, bending over as I hurry across the lawn to protect them from the rain. I glance up at our house. It looks weathered, the sand-colored paint on the wooden siding grayish and worn by the salty ocean wind.

The house is quiet, a small break in the constant chatter that makes a family. I hang my jacket and bring in the books. They aren't too wet. Mom sits at the kitchen table, reading the newspaper, her hair hiding her face like a curtain. She has told me she used to be red-haired like me in her youth, but now her hair has darkened into auburn with strands of copper.

"Hi, Mom."

"Hello, sweetheart." Her eyes behind the glasses give me a smile before they look back down. PATRIK SJÖBERG WINS BRONZE IN SEOUL. GORBACHEV NEW HEAD OF STATE—

"Out of the way, Leneee!"

Viktor comes running, his small head even more ginger than mine, chased by his buddy: two four-year-olds on a journey through space. I can hear Cecilia strike a chord on the piano in the living room. The notes accompany the boys' space battle: a stilted Mozart mixed with wretched roaring.

"Is Petra home yet?" I ask, still breathless from the bike ride.

"She's in her room." Mom turns the page.

I hesitate for a moment, the riddle in my chest longing to come out, but Mom doesn't look back up at me and maybe I'd better leave. She seems tired.

Petra is sitting by her desk, absorbed in one of her craft projects. I can see her dark curls in the opening between the bookshelves that divide the room we are sharing. Viktor rushes in, with an intergalactic death roar.

“Aaaaaaargh, I’m Luke Skywalker and you’re dead!”

I smile at him and he strikes me with his cardboard light saber.

“Aaah, you got me!” I say, and Luke Skywalker smiles and continues to the kitchen where I can hear him attack his little buddy.

Cecilia, the oldest, has a room of her own, a door to close. But you two, Lene and Petra, Mom says, who are nearly the same age, can share the dining room. “Maybe,” Mom said when I asked, “maybe we can fix it in the spring, Dad might find time to finish your rooms in the attic. When you turn twelve, Lene, you might have your own room.”

I put the books down on my bed and curl up beside them. This is the best part of the day. My breathing calms as the black letters on the pages eat up both the sounds and the silence: Mozart, space battles, Petra’s humming as she uses the scissors, Mom’s tiredness in the kitchen as she reads the newspaper—the one left for her every morning in the bundle, Göteborgs-Posten’s bonus to their employees.

It’s not strange that Mom is tired. She and Dad each have a route, hundreds of newspapers to deliver before dawn. They get up at four in the morning and come home just before I leave for school. When Dad comes home in the evening from his day job at Ericsson he is also tired and doesn’t say much. He watches TV, eating milk and cereal out of a big beer glass, and doesn’t want to be disturbed.

Sometimes I feel like we are living on different planets, six people in the same house, the same family, but . . . no, I’m the one living on my own planet. I should have thicker skin on my nose, says Mom. But no one says how to get thicker skin on one’s nose. Maybe one has to fall and bleed again and again, making the skin grow harder every time?

These thoughts are dangerous. They circle around the question, getting closer and closer to the answer. Will I d—, will I die—

If nobody asks, maybe the riddle will disappear.

There isn’t enough room on the nightstand. I put the books in a pile on the floor.

I pull my white teddy bear close—I know I’m getting too big for him, but I don’t care, I’ll keep him forever. All my friends secretly have cuddly toys in bed, my sisters too, even Cecilia.

I have the blue book in my lap and my back against the wall, and finally Edith comes, putting her comforting arms around me.

*The moon tells me in silver runes
about the land that is not.*

*The land where all our wishes are wondrously fulfilled,
the land where all our chains fall away,
the land where we cool our gashed foreheads
in the moon's dew.*

*Edith understands. Forehead to forehead, we can close our eyes and long
for the land that is not.*

OceanofPDF.com

CHAPTER 4

*T*he buzzing.

It's so loud I can't sleep.

But I must have been sleeping, if only for short moments, tossing and turning. The sheets are twisted around me, and Anders's old T-shirt is wet and sticky against my chest. Even my pillow is damp, and my hair sticks to my cheek.

The windows, wide open, let the entire night into the bedroom: buzzing, black shadows of tree trunks. I can see our neighbors' house, dark and silent, and a lone car driving on the street behind the trees.

This pressure. On my chest.

I sit up and gasp for air.

Breathe, just breathe.

Where is Anders?

I pull myself up and walk carefully in the dark with my arms outstretched, not yet used to the nooks and corners of this house. My hands find the door to the landing and the handrail leading down. The old stairs creak under my bare feet. I can see light downstairs.

Anders is bent over his laptop at the kitchen table, surrounded by stacks of paper. He has been absorbed since we moved in, wants to take care of everything at once: insurance, new Social Security numbers, school paperwork, new bank account.

At least the furniture is all in place. It didn't take more than two days. It's strange, the same things as in our town-house in Göteborg, everything the same, and yet not: a home that has changed walls, shed its old skin and grown a new one.

Anders hasn't noticed me yet, standing in the doorway looking at him.

"Anders?" I'm still breathless. "Aren't you coming to bed?"

"I have to do this." He doesn't even look up. "It's the health insurance."

“Can’t it wait until tomorrow?”

“I’ll be up soon, just a few more minutes.”

There’s something lonely about him and I walk over to give him a hug. As I bend over him, my arms around his shoulders and my cheek against his, he takes off his glasses and rubs his eyes. I let my hand find his hair, thick and bleached by the sun, and I press him closer, his shoulders against my chest.

“You’re doing good,” I say to his ear. He raises his arm and holds me, the chair still between us. It reminds me of the first time we met at the party: him fourteen and me twelve years old; how I held his shoulders with trembling hands in that silly game. I remember wanting to pull him close, feel the warmth of his skin against my cheek. Like now. And then I notice he has made a mistake on the form on the table in front of him.

“I’m thirty-one years old,” I say. “Not thirty.”

“That’s right.” He laughs. “I must be tired.”

He crosses it out and changes it.

“I’m coming soon, I just need to—”

There is a sudden clatter coming from the other side of the kitchen door. Anders looks up at me.

“What was that?”

“I’ve no idea,” I say and take a step back so he can push back his chair and get up.

“Shh,” he says and moves slowly toward the door. The rattling and clonking from outside is growing louder and Anders turns to me, waving. “Turn out the light!”

I press the light switch and the kitchen turns into blue shadows in the faint light from his laptop. There really is someone on the other side of the door, pushing and dragging something heavy, and the images from a hundred different scary movies turn into a heavy lump in my stomach. Anders is leaning toward the window in the door, trying to peek out at the small strip of the yard at the side of our house.

“Careful,” I say. “Don’t let them see you.”

But he laughs.

“Come here, Lene.” He reaches for me and pulls me close. “Yep, some burglars—there!” A sudden movement in the dark, a tail, black fur, and it’s gone. Anders reaches for the light switch and I laugh.

“Look at this mess,” I say. The garbage cans lie on the ground beside plastic bags ripped apart and their contents spread out, pieces of old lettuce and tissue paper and apple peels.

“I’ll pick it up, you go back to bed.”

“But let me help you—”

“I’ll do it,” he says in his voice that won’t listen to arguments. “It won’t take long. I’ll be up in a minute.”

I climb back up the stairs, which don’t seem quite as dark as before, nor the bedroom as empty—there’s a promise crawling into bed with me, *I’m coming soon*. And then he does; I hear a creaking at the landing and the door opens like a wing in the dark. I can feel the bed shifting under the weight of him and then his arm is around me.

“What was that?” I whisper.

“I don’t know. Raccoons maybe. Or squirrels.” He yawns. “Gotta do something about that.”

And then he falls asleep in an instant. I’ve always been jealous of that: as soon as his head hits the pillow, he is asleep. His arm is heavy on my ribs and his breath warm against my neck. I can feel his chest rise and fall, rise and fall, soothing waves against my back.

The buzzing continues to echo in the night, like a secret language I cannot understand. I wondered about that sound the first time I heard it. We had just arrived in Philadelphia, staying at the hotel in Wayne, before we gained access to the house. I had never heard anything like it. It sounded like someone was sawing down the trees, or like a prop plane, which started, whirred, and then stopped, only to start immediately again. I remember looking up at the trees lining the streets and the electric cables hanging between the posts: What *is* that sound? The buzzing? What can it be?

The sound fills the bedroom, not at all like the faint kri-kri-kri of the grasshoppers back home in Sweden.

As soon as I met Mrs. Mack, I had to ask her about it. Ah. Cicadas. It was a relief to finally know. No bigger than a thumb and still they fill the air, the night, my dreams.

THE SURFACE IS RIGHT ABOVE ME, SHINING SMOOTH LIKE A mirror. I can see the dark sky and black trees and myself sinking, my pale face dropping into the

emptiness, the darkness closing in. I can't breathe, I'm a stone in the water, my blood turning cold.

I reach out. My hand a white water lily breaking the surface. The mirror a thousand pieces.

I have to reach down, pick the lily, pull myself up. Slowly, heavily. Up, up, I'm sitting up in bed. My heart is beating so fast I can barely breathe. The air doesn't fit into my lungs. *Breathe, I must breathe*, get out of bed to the open window, *take hold of the night air, force it in*, sink down to the floor, *breathe now, breathe*.

The riddle closes in. I can hear its heavy footsteps, echoing in my ears. The dark brings out that which the day hides.

The answer to the question.

I have known for a couple of months.

Breathe—air, darkness, night, buzzing—I need it all to go down to my lungs, to my blood.

I don't have much time left.

Anders knows it too, though he doesn't say anything. We don't talk about it; the doctors can't find anything. He *has* to know, the way he takes care of the dishes, laundry, grocery shopping; the way he goes to work, takes care of the girls, loses sleep over the paperwork, fighting it all, fighting reality.

You need to rest, he says, *besides, you take care of the girls when they come home from school*. Always covering up, when our friends back in Sweden extended invitations he would tell them he had a lot of work, we would have to meet another time, soon, *of course*. Friends and family were starting to get suspicious, always disappointed, *So you're not joining us to celebrate midsummer this year either*. They know I'm weak, but how do you tell people *I'm dying*? How do you *know* you're dying and not just crazy?

Even in his sleep Anders's face looks like it's carved out of a rock. In the dim light coming through the window I can see the traces of his constant struggle, the lines in his forehead, his clenched jaws. If I reached out I could caress his cheek, his sharp stubble, touch his sensitive upper lip. I could put my finger in the dimple of his chin. But he is asleep and he can't see me; no one can see me on the floor by the window. No matter how he fights, in the end it's just me and the darkness.

What is the name of the monster that is slowly eating me from the inside? How am I supposed to fight it when I have never seen its face?

In the light of day I play my part: woman, mother, wife. But here in the dark I'm nameless. In the darkness I belong to the monster, I can feel him releasing his long tentacles, reaching through my body that is no longer mine, no longer *me*. My body is betraying me, falling apart, *dying*, though I'm still in it. The dizziness, the nausea, the constant migraines and crippling fatigue. In the mornings when I wake up I'm so exhausted I can barely pull myself out of bed. I look at my pale hands with their blue veins, and ask them: You have survived yet another night, but what will you accomplish today? I tell them, command them: You'll be there for my girls, make them something to eat, gently stroke their soft hair, but more than that would be too much.

The buzzing of the cicadas makes the night rotate around me, I have to support my head in my hands. Dry my tears. The morning is approaching. But I can stay here a little while longer. I can stay here in the dark, on the floor by the window.

Sit and breathe.

Just sit.

Breathe.

This pressure on my chest. The monster has found a place to rest, curl up, lean his heavy head. I can feel his weary pounding against my ribs. There, there, little monster. And suddenly, I realize, he is tired too. He longs to get out, to be free from this bony cage.

There, there.

It won't be too long.

CHAPTER 5

Something New

My lip gloss tastes like candy and my stomach tingles. We will soon be there. I feel like I want to laugh, like a laugh is bursting to get out. The August evening is bright outside the car window and the sky blue over the treetops.

Mom has become silent. She has already given her instructions: I'll pick you up at half past ten, have fun now, and Lene, don't cover your mouth with your hand while you're laughing, no one thinks about your braces anyway.

Cecilia is looking pretty next to me in the backseat, her blonde bangs sprayed, lips in a pink smile.

Mom is talking to herself: "Not here, I think it's the next street." And then the tense silence. It took more than half an hour to get to Göteborg, driving past the forests and the fields with their red-and-white farmhouses and the sweeping moorlands of Sandsjöbacka Nature Reserve, purple with heather blossoms glowing under the sinking sun. We have been searching for a while now, looking at every mailbox and house number next to the doors.

"There it is!" Cecilia points to a house. "Number five."

"Yes, it must be here." Mom sounds relieved. She drives up to the sidewalk and stops the car.

The house is made of white brick, a square villa among green trees on a small hill.

"Have a good time now," Mom says and it's all very quick, getting out of the car, bye Mom, bye girls, Mom waving and waiting in the car to make sure we're at the right house.

We walk up the driveway and stop at the front door.

“You do it,” I whisper and Cecilia rings the doorbell.

The summer evening is warm. Cecilia and I smile at each other. My hair is wavy, and Cecilia is wearing her light blue sweater that no one may borrow.

I can't believe we're here. The boy who called last Sunday, Anders, we don't really know him, other than that he's a friend of Anette, Cecilia's friend, and that he has an older brother, maybe a year older than Cecilia. Anders told me he noticed us at the scout camp last May. I can still hear his voice on the telephone: Would you like to come to our party, you and your sister, this Friday at our place? Hearing his voice was like discovering a new color; I had to close my eyes to find the words to respond. Yes, we would love to come. Good, he said, then we'll see each other. Yes, I said, and then the click and a silence full of promises.

Cecilia presses the button again and whispers:

“I hope we're at the right—”

The door opens.

“Welcome.”

She must be the mother, wearing a striped apron and a smile inviting us in.

There is a large mirror on the wall and I check my hair while I take off my denim jacket. Last night Mom helped me braid my hair while it was still wet, so it would look nice for the party. I'm not used to having my hair like this, the braids now undone, long waves all the way down to my waist.

“Let me take your jacket,” the mother says, smiling. “You look very nice.”

“Thank you.” My voice is small. I have to speak up, like Miss Margareta told me, so that people can hear what I say. I try, in the classroom; I speak so loud it echoes in my ears, but still Miss Margareta says the same thing: you have to stop whispering, Lene, or we can't hear you.

The mother has dark hair and gentle eyes behind her glasses, the kind that draw you in.

“How old are you?”

I'm twelve,” I say and I think I managed to speak up. The mother smiles again and turns to Cecilia. Cecilia answers politely, yes, she's the oldest, she's fourteen, about to start eighth grade.

Voices and laughter are close by and the mother directs us to a large room where the others are already in the middle of some sort of a game. Some are on a couch, others on chairs, sitting in a circle. They're pushing each other and laughing, trying to get to the couch. Some of them seem to be at least fifteen years old.

A boy turns around and sees us standing in the doorway. He looks at me with his blue eyes behind glasses, and then he smiles. He is looking at me like I'm the most beautiful and curious thing he has ever seen. I have never before felt as interesting, as wonderful. The tingling in my stomach grows as he says hello, waves us to come in, and invites me to sit on the chair next to him.

I can't help but look at him. He is tanned and has blond hair, thick and straight, except for the slight curves behind his ears. He is wearing an old T-shirt and a pair of worn jeans. He looks like he has never felt the need to impress, like he just grabbed whatever clothes happened to be closest. His eyebrows are light and a bit slanted, and when he looks at me I feel like I'm going to fall off the chair. I clutch the seat. My heart is beating like crazy. He is Anders, he tells us. The other ones are also telling us their names and soon it will be my turn. Cecilia gives me a comforting smile.

"I'm Cecilia," she says. "And this is my sister Lene."

I smile at her but I barely dare look at the others. Anders's big brother is called Richard. He is a lot like Anders: he also wears glasses, only his hair is even more blond and curly.

Richard gets up from the couch.

"Let's do this game." He starts to explain and the others go, "Yeah, let's do that one." They seem to know how it's done.

The boys get up and Anders quickly positions himself behind me. All the girls have a boy behind their backs; only Richard is standing behind an empty chair. He looks around and winks at me, real subtle—was it for real? Yes, he winks again and I squirm, not exactly sure what is expected of me. Suddenly I can feel Anders's hands on my shoulders, pressing me to the chair, and the touch of his hands sends lightning through my body, down to my stomach, my toes.

So this is how the game is played.

Suddenly Anette jumps up and sits down in front of Richard; the boy with a green shirt behind her was too slow to catch her. Now it's green shirt's

turn. He winks—is it at me? Anders’s hands are back again on my shoulders, though I’ve barely moved. That same lightning again through my body.

“No cheating,” shouts Richard. “Hands behind your back, or it’s too easy.” Anders’s hands are off my shoulders but the lightning has left me with a tingling feeling all over and I can hear his every breath behind me.

A girl on the couch, I think her name is Lotta, jumps up and lands in the chair.

The tall boy behind the couch winks at Cecilia, who is grabbed fiercely by her guardian. The tall boy then winks at me, and this time Anders is too slow as I jump up. Everyone is laughing. My shoulders remember his hands, that burning sensation, and then I sink into the couch, which almost swallows me up with its soft cushions.

Anders winks at me, but another girl is quick to get to his chair. It’s no longer his turn, but he still seeks my eyes. He smiles and his teeth are straight and shiny, his jawline well defined. He looks like he can be determined, if he wants. His smile is beautiful, not like my metallic mouth. I remember Mom’s words: Lene, no one thinks about your braces anyway.

Besides, I have to laugh. We all laugh; we can’t stop. Our laughter seems to bounce off the ceiling and the walls filled with shelves of toys belonging to Anders and Richard’s younger siblings. In the middle of it all is Anders. His blue eyes. His smile. His chair, empty again. He winks at me. The boy behind me tries to grab me but I manage to get up. And I’m back in the chair in front of Anders.

The boys are trying anything to keep the girls. The next time I try to get up I feel a pull at my neck. Anders has tied my hair to the chair! He is laughing and I feel the same thrill as when his hands were on my shoulders. Amidst laughter and shouting (I got you, ha, ha; no you didn’t, ha, ha, ha) my entire body feels for his voice, his hands, his slanting eyebrows, the small curves behind his ears.

“Time to switch places!” Richard announces.

I almost have to wake myself up. Standing up I nearly fall, suddenly dizzy. On his way past me, Anders happens to touch my arm. It’s very quick, but it feels like it has left a mark on my skin.

The boys sit down. The girls stand behind them. Anders is in front of me. And suddenly he is gone.

Now it's my turn. Everyone's looking at me. The boys are smiling, sitting on the edges of their chairs, prepared to jump up. It shouldn't be difficult; I just have to wink at someone. Anyone. But I can't help it, my eyes fill with tears and I have to force myself to keep smiling.

All these eyes staring at me.

And then Anders is back. Everyone is laughing. Me too, a laughter that opens up my tight chest. He came back to me. The skin of his neck looks smooth. His T-shirt is white and a little wrinkled. I'm not supposed to look up, I'm just supposed to look at his neck. He moves and I make it in time, holding him. I feel his shoulder muscles under the T-shirt. Maybe he was slow on purpose. So that he wouldn't have to leave. I don't want to let go, I want to keep holding him. But I have to.

Anders's mom comes into the room.

"It's all ready now!" she says. "Please, if you'll follow me."

Anders stands up and smiles.

"Come." He raises his hand as if he is about to take my hand, but stops himself, and in my hand I can feel a new kind of emptiness that I haven't felt before.

I follow him to the next room. A long table is set. Anders pulls out a chair for me but doesn't say anything, looking shy all of a sudden. I sit down as he waves another boy to come sit next to us.

We're having hamburgers. Anders holds up the plate for me.

"Thank you," I say and I remember too late: I must speak up, maybe he didn't hear me.

I look around. Everyone has started to eat. I take a small bite, feeling the metal with my tongue, chewing carefully. At least I don't have to say anything, since Anders is doing the talking.

"Did you hear the one about the Norwegians who arrived at their mountain cabin?" he asks.

I shake my head.

"It was pitch black in there and one of them said: 'Wow, it must have been a very long time since there was light in here!'"

I can't help but cover my mouth when I laugh: what if there's food stuck in my braces? Anders is also laughing, his eyes seeking mine.

"Do you know . . ." He can hardly speak for laughter. "Do you know what happened when there was a power failure in Oslo?"

I shake my head.

“Thousands of people had to wait for help when they got stuck on the escalators!” He’s laughing so hard the table shakes. “They got stuck!”

Anders’s mom enters with a pitcher of lemonade, and makes a face showing discontent, but still smiles.

Anette leans across the table. “Solveig is Norwegian.”

“Solveig?” I ask.

“Yeah, Anders’s mom!” Anette says, laughing. “He’s half Norwegian himself!”

Anders is still laughing. “Wait, wait, here’s another one. Do you know why the library in Oslo is closed?”

“Um, no,” I say.

“Because someone borrowed the book!”

I can’t help it, I’m laughing so hard it feels like my stomach is going to cramp. It’s not just the jokes, it’s also hearing Anders laugh till he can barely breathe, shouting: “The book, the book!” and his eyes, the way he keeps looking at me. His mother jokingly slaps him on his head. I taste the hamburger: onion, lettuce, bread, ketchup, and meat. I hear the murmur around us, the chatter and laughter, and catch a glimpse of Cecilia’s smile from across the table. The night descends, turning the windows into dark squares.

It’s all about to end, but somehow this is not the end. Something new started tonight, I’m not sure what, but I can feel it moving in my chest like a seed bursting open and hesitantly feeling the earth around it with a trembling sprout.

CHAPTER 6

*L*ook, Mamma!”

Ingrid starts running toward the playground and Stina lets go of my hand. “Last one is a rotten fish!” she yells and follows her sister.

The schoolyard is huge, wide open, with bouncing light. I squint. I can smell the asphalt, fuming with heat.

I need shade. I can barely breathe; I need to sit down. There are a couple of benches a few steps away, under the trees next to the swing set. Finally I can sink down, catch my breath. I need to drink some water, but my hands are shaking so hard I have trouble opening the bottle. The shade and the cool water should make the dizziness go away. My heart beats so hard I can hear it echo in my ears.

Except for us, the playground is deserted. I guess all the Americans had the sense to stay home in this August heat. Only the crazy Swedes, always craving sunshine and warmth, after months and months of darkness and cold, would think of going to the playground in ninety-five degrees.

It wasn't far, but a bit complicated getting here since there were no sidewalks along the way. We had to take the stairs to the platform of the train station, go down the tunnel under the tracks, walk across a parking lot and then a bridge over a busy street to finally reach the school, sweaty and thirsty.

The girls are swinging and laughing, their shining hair fluttering against the blue sky. The chains squeak, back and forth in the sun. Watching them, I can feel it, I can almost touch it: the glass wall between me and my girls. Their laughter bounces off the glass, away from me. I can't reach them, even their words are bouncing, falling to the ground behind their backs.

“Look at me, Mamma!”

“Mamma! See how high up I am?”

Water, I need more water. The bottle trembles in my hand. If there were no monster, no glass wall, I would have been there with them. They would

have asked me to push and I would have pushed and caught and pushed again. Felt their weight, made them laugh: *I'm going to catch you!*

I have to close my eyes, rub my temples, straighten up. Am I going crazy?

There is no glass wall.

And no monster either. Sorry, little fellow.

I have to think normal thoughts.

I'm here now. I'm here with my girls, their small voices, their laughter.

So this is the school the girls will start next month. The schoolyard is full of swing sets, jungle gyms, tunnels, bridges, ladders, slides, huts, and lianas chained to the ground, which is covered in wood chips. There are three basketball hoops and beyond them a glimpse of a green soccer field. On the asphalt there are painted mazes and squares for ball games and a map of the United States, probably thirty feet wide, each state in a different color.

The redbrick school building, two stories high, is to the side of the schoolyard. In the windows I can see stacks of chairs.

There is a truck by the doors under the sign that says GYMNASIUM and a man unloading something. He must be the janitor. Maybe I could ask him to help me: bring us back home in his truck. Wait, what am I thinking? Normal thoughts.

The girls are laughing on the swings. Ingrid's pale legs, two sticks with sharp knees, point straight out. Stina has always been softer, rounder, and was heavy to carry when she was little. Ingrid was easy to carry, instinctively helpful, holding on even as a baby, her thin legs around my waist.

"Mammaaa!" Stina shouts. "This is the best day of my entire liiiiife!" I remember her glittering eyes this morning as we entered her room singing *Happy birthday to you, happy birthday to you . . .* Her tousled hair and her small voice: *Finally you're coming, I've been waiting and waiting.* Her smile as she sat up in bed, received her presents, admired the Swedish flag on the breakfast tray and started bouncing up and down on her bed: *Is it for me, is it really for me?* when Anders pulled out the balloon in the shape of a pink flower.

"I'm thirsty." Stina sits down on the bench beside me. Her curls are wet at her forehead.

"Here, birthday girl." I give her a juice pack out of my bag.

“Can you help me?” she asks and I pull out the tiny straw and put it in place.

Stina sways her legs while the juice rises in the straw and then she draws her breath.

“Mamma, am I a big girl now that I’m seven years old?” She looks intensely into my eyes with a new kind of worry. “Can’t I sit in your lap anymore?”

“Of course you can sit in my lap.” The words burn in my mouth. Must be because of the heat. I gently pull her hair from her forehead, feeling her soft skin and wet curls. “You’ll always be my baby.”

“Always!” She sucks the juice and inhales. “But when I’m old? When I’m fifteen, can I still sit in your lap?”

“Oh, sweetheart, of course, even when you’re a hundred years old. But then I’ll be a hundred and twenty-four and I’m sure that would be a funny thing to see: an old lady sitting in the lap of another old lady, ha, ha.”

My laughter is heavy in my chest, hard to get out into this hot air. I’m lying to my own child. But there’s nothing else to do. The riddle, the monster—they belong to the night. Here in the daylight . . . No, my girls mustn’t know. Not even suspect. Until the moment I’m no longer breathing, they are going to live in the security of having their mamma with them forever.

Ingrid turns her swing to us. “What are you laughing at?”

“Come, Ingrid, you also need to drink something,” I say.

“The sky is so bluuue!” She leans back in her swing, looking up.

“Mamma?” Stina carefully places the juice box next to her on the bench. “How long are we going to be here?”

“I think we’ll need to go back soon. It’s very hot.”

“No, I meant *here*. In the USA.”

“Oh, I don’t know exactly. Maybe a couple of years.”

“But the language is so hard,” Ingrid says, standing beside me. “I don’t understand what people are saying.”

“It was much better in Sweden,” Stina agrees. “There, I knew what I was saying.”

“I don’t know what I’m saying either.” Ingrid giggles, takes a sip of her juice, and sits down close to me on the bench.

“I understand it’s hard. It’s difficult for me too sometimes,” I say. “But you’re doing incredibly good. And soon you’ll start school where they’ll help you. I promise, in a couple of months you’ll speak better English than me, even better than Pappa.”

“That’s because our brains are new and fresh!” Stina says and we all laugh.

“Oh, I brought cookies too . . . ” I find them in my bag. “Here, chocolate chip.”

The girls grab a cookie each.

“My favorite!” Ingrid says and Stina echoes her:

“My favorite too.”

I succeed in distracting them from the homesickness. It’s always there, lurking in the background, bringing tears to Stina’s eyes in an instant. When Ingrid is sad, her eyes become shiny and red at the edges, holding back the tears. She doesn’t want to cry, maybe for my sake. Oh, Ingrid. Those thin shoulders, pale arms sticking out of the T-shirt. Ingrid willingly carries too much, sometimes we have to help her be a child. “How much did we pay for the car?” she asked this morning, her eyes big and worried so that Anders had to calm her: “It’s okay, we didn’t pay everything at once, and we need to have a car.” And then, the child again: “That’s good, Pappa. I really like the color, blue, my favorite.”

Maybe Ingrid remembers the dark years, even though I tried so hard to hide the darkness away from them.

“When is Pappa coming home?” Stina grabs another cookie.

“He said he’d try to come home early today.”

“Because today is *my* birthday!” Stina sighs and puts her little arm behind me on the bench, a happy sigh, a happy arm around Mamma, and this time it’s me with tears in my eyes. Her little arm, just like that, ever so gently pushing through the glass wall. Stina on one side and Ingrid on the other, close beside me. Ingrid straightens up, swinging her legs.

“Are we supposed to walk to school?” she asks. “Like we did today?”

“No, you’re taking the school bus.”

“That short distance?” She laughs.

“That’s how they do it here.”

“But the school is much closer to home here than back in Sweden, and in Sweden we still walked to school!”

“I know,” I say. “But there are almost no sidewalks here and I think they just want to make sure you arrive safely.”

“Mamma, you’ll be going with us, right?” Stina looks up at me with her worried eyes. “In the bus.”

“I don’t think I’m allowed.”

“Why not?”

The homesickness stumbles close again, trembling in her voice.

“Aren’t you going to play, girls?”

“Mamma? Can you play with us?” Stina’s eyes are pleading, and it’s her special day.

“I’m sorry. I’m too tired.”

“You’re always tired,” Ingrid says. I can see the hardness being shaped into her small face by these constant rejections. *I’m too tired to help with your homework. I’m too tired to read you a story. No, not now, too tired.*

The glass wall settles in again, my chest pounds: tired, I’m always tired, I’m tired of being tired! The sun is shining, we have the entire schoolyard to ourselves, and it’s Stina’s birthday. I’ve had water, I’ve been resting in the shade. If I were a normal mom I’d be running around playing tag or swinging with my kids.

“Come on, Mamma!” Stina is already at the jungle gym.

Ingrid pulls at my arm. “Come, Mamma, please, play with us.” Her eyes, pale blue, remind me of Anders’s. “Please, Mamma, please, pleaaase.” She makes her spaghetti legs, dancing in a circle with her knees all wobbly, and I have to laugh.

“Oh, stop it, I told you, I’m too tired.”

“I’m not stopping!”

“Okay, then.”

“Yaaay, Mamma is gonna play with us!” Ingrid pulls me up. “You are the shark and you’ll try to catch us, but up here you can’t!” Ingrid runs up the bridge leading into the jungle gym.

The girls scream as I reach for them.

“Nooooo!”

“Not meee!”

“I’ll catch you!” I shout, breathless. “Just you wait!”

It doesn't matter, I don't care: the fatigue, this pressure on my chest, my breaths coming too late, never catching up, the riddle, the damn riddle. I have carried it my entire life. *No, she's coming, watch out, Stina; come over here, she's coming this way.* I will let their voices lead me through the dizziness and the darkness.

The world spins.

The cicadas buzz.

The sun shines.

Watch out, Ingrid, she's coming!

Everything spinning, spinning.

"I'm sorry . . . I'm sorry, but I can't." I have to sit down. On the bench. In the shade. Sit and breathe, hot air stiff in my throat.

"Are you tired again?"

"But you were supposed to chase us."

Breathe.

I have to breathe.

I can hear them again, far away now, beyond the darkness. *Let's go to the swings instead.* Their small voices.

It would be the simplest thing in the world to hate it all. This damn bench, this ground, these trees, the cicadas, the blue sky. *I hate it, I hate it all.* But what kind of a mother would that make me? If I hated the life I brought them into? No matter how I tried to hide it, it would leak out, in the way I looked at them, talked to them, treated them.

Through the darkness I can hear my girls laughing.

There is a whole world beyond the glass wall.

The sunshine, playing in my girl's hair.

The sky, blue above the treetops.

The cicadas buzzing in the heat.

CHAPTER 7

Let It Happen

I have not yet told Miss Liz. It can wait until after class. “Once more.” Her voice, soft and lingering, floats against the floor, the walls, the ceiling of the gym. The tranquil music surrounds the waves of our movements while we bow down to the floor and slowly roll up again.

“And stretch.”

I do my best, my arms reaching toward the ceiling, toes seeking support against the cold floor. Stretch, stretch. I can see someone wobble in the corner of my eye. I need to concentrate, or I may lose my balance.

“That’s good. Hold the position. Hold it. Feel the line through your body, feel how it stretches, stretches to the sky.”

Dancing is like poetry written by our bodies: our outstretched arms our words of longing.

“And now pli  .”

Bend and stretch. Bend and stretch. Oh, how I will miss this!

“Demi-pli  .”

I can feel my thighs stretch, keeping the position. I will miss my dancing friends, my body’s methodical, predictable movements, and even the dry smell of the gym. No riddles. Just me and my body, in harmony. My body doing what I tell it to.

“Grand pli  .”

But now the riddle has begun to intrude everywhere. In PE I’m the useless one. My gym teacher, Mr. Larsson, thinks I’m lazy. When we do laps on the trail in the woods, four kilometers, I end up last, even though I push myself so hard I can feel the taste of blood. It’s strange, as if there is a limit when I breathe, as if I can’t pull down enough air into my lungs. I’m never

again going to make the mistake of telling my friends. Their voices, I can still hear them: “Come on now, get a grip, don’t be a wimp!”

Miss Liz claps her hands and tells us to gather up in the corner, the same routine as always.

“Pas de bourrée!”

Dance class is not like gym class at all. To run across the floor, small steps, my arms writing a V to the left and to the right, as if I’m swimming to the music. This is something I’m able to do.

For now.

But soon the riddle will take this away from me. I will stumble, lose my balance. I will see the disappointment growing in Miss Liz’s eyes. Until now, dancing has made me forget about the riddle, and also the shyness, which otherwise follows me everywhere. I can’t believe Anders has not given up on me, since I never dare speak more than five words to him. I have seen him at a couple of parties these past years, at Anette’s house and at his house, and also the scout camps in May and at some other district scout activities. Anette once gave me a picture of him smiling, blue eyes behind his glasses.

If I weren’t this shy. Things might have happened. Things I barely dare to think about.

Maybe they are about to happen.

On Saturday I’m going to meet him. I remember every word he said on the phone: I can come visit, this Saturday if you want me to.

Yes, I’d like you to come. The excitement in my stomach and in my heart and then the sudden shyness, the silence.

Him again: Okay, I’ll see you then.

Yes.

Bye.

Four years ago, something did happen, and I can feel it touching ground softly in my chest. Four years of glances and shy smiles. Four years of seeking him, his eyes, and the sudden fear of finding him. The voice of the riddle growing louder, telling me what I have always known, that there is a clock ticking in my chest, counting down, and that I cannot tell anyone about it or they will think I’m crazy. The thought of his blue eyes in the picture, turning away.

The music stops and dance class is already over. The other girls run past me to the door and Miss Liz bends to pick up her sweater from the floor.

I have to do this. This is how it must be.

“Yes, Lene, what is it?” Miss Liz asks as I approach her.

“I’m sorry, I . . .” I need to speak up, show her I already made up my mind. “I won’t be coming back. I’m quitting.”

“I thought you wanted to pursue dancing, make it a profession.”

“Yeah, I did. I mean, I wanted to. But not anymore.”

“I see.” Miss Liz stretches her neck and stops to look at me. “Are you sure?”

“Thank you for everything.”

“But I really thought . . .” She looks at me with her pale blue eyes and wipes a strand of hair from her cheek. “I thought . . .”

“Yeah, me too,” I say. “I’ll never forget you. Thanks for everything.” I turn to walk away and I can hear her exhale behind me like she wants to say something else, but this is how it must be and I continue to the locker room where I hug my friends and it is exactly the way I pictured it. Their puzzled looks and their goodbyes sounding like questions.

With the dance bag on my shoulder, I walk home in the bright early summer evening, the last time. I can feel the riddle inside me telling me something. Telling me not to be afraid. Telling me not to resist it. Telling me to let it happen.

CHAPTER 8

A beautiful day peeks in through the kitchen window: nuances of green trees against a blue sky reflected in the screen of my laptop.

I'm resting my elbows on the kitchen table, heels of my hands on the laptop, fingers searching among the keys. Picturing Mom and Dad as I finish the e-mail, their smiling eyes as I tell them about the girls. *You should have seen them, their new backpacks so big they almost toppled over.* Mom and Dad will laugh and tell each other, *Soon we'll be there to see it.*

The sunshine leaps between the walls, tempting me to get out of the house: *Catch me if you can!* Maybe I should. Maybe try the new running shoes Anders made me buy. Maybe the doctors are right, maybe it's all in my head. I need to think positive.

Going jogging. That's normal. That's positive. That's what you do on a Saturday while your husband has taken the kids grocery shopping. I wanted to come with them, but Anders made me stay. "You need your rest, we'll manage." And me laughing: "Yeah, I'm sure you will, eating chocolate cookies in the car! I am onto you!" The girls giggled and jumped up and down, no wonder they like grocery shopping with Pappa.

My small girls, soon they will start school in this strange country full of chocolate chip cookies and fireflies glowing in the evening and poison ivy I have told them to stay away from in the garden. *Don't worry, Mamma, Ingrid said, we'll only play on the grass.*

I can see the bus stop through the kitchen window, cars glistening in the opening between our neighbor's bushes and the fence next to the road. A squirrel climbs the tree just outside the window. Jumpy movements, gray-brown bushy tail, black shiny eyes.

"Sorry, pal," I tell him. Anders has put heavy rocks on the lids of the garbage cans to keep the squirrels out.

And then I remember. That woman Mia told me about a trail, apparently close to our house. Meeting Mia was a happy surprise; Mrs. Mack had

stopped herself midsentence while showing us the house for the first time, exclaiming: “Wait a minute! I know another Swede! She lives in Bryn Mawr with her family, not far from here. I’ll have to tell her about you!”

Mia often goes for walks on Radnor Trail. It’s absolutely beautiful, she told me, that afternoon she came down to the hotel to give us an introduction to western Philadelphia. The sunshine keeps tempting me: *Come on, you can’t sit on a chair for the rest of your life!*

The squirrel has disappeared.

IT ISN’T FAR, I ONLY HAVE TO CROSS RADNOR CHESTER Road behind the back of our house, follow the road down to Lancaster Avenue, cross it, go a bit farther to where Radnor Trail starts, in a long sloping descent.

Mia was right. It’s a beautiful trail, situated where the old train tracks used to be. Now there is asphalt on top of the gravel and wooden benches made out of big logs. On one side is the forest and on the other side the backyards of houses barely visible behind the wooden fences.

Some of the backyards don’t have a fence and I can see red-white-blue signs on their lawns. JOHN MCCAIN. BARACK OBAMA. Stars and stripes telling of the upcoming election.

My new running shoes feel good: light against the smooth pavement. The trees on each side of the trail are huge. Are those lianas hanging from the branches? The heat, the vegetation, the cicadas: it all makes me feel a thousand miles away from the white birches and dense fir trees along the winding trail back home.

The water bottle is heavy in my hand.

Maybe I should start jogging.

Slowly. I’m not used to it.

I have to walk again.

Two women, urban amazons, run past me, leaving behind the scent of a sweet perfume. They look fit and strong, running seemingly without effort. Two mothers with strollers are coming toward me, walking fast, busy in conversation. They remind me of my sisters, the way they talk and laugh, like they have known each other for ages, and I feel a pang of homesickness. The children are about the same age as my youngest nieces, and one of the girls smiles at me and waves her blanket. I smile back as they pass me. I remember Cecilia hugging me at the airport when we left,

our giggles as I attempted to reach around her big baby bump. I wonder how she's doing; I will never forget the heaviness and the fatigue of my pregnancies and how I used to think: how do women survive this? But Cecilia seems to be doing well, sewing tiny clothes for the baby with the energy I have always marveled at.

Sunshine filters through the trees, in patterns of irregular shadows on the ground. I hear children's laughter from behind a fence and squirrels scratching on tree trunks.

I try jogging again, telling myself: *Ignore it, ignore it*—my body refusing to obey me, the darkness closing in on me and my breathing never deep enough; I have to slow down.

An elderly lady with blue hair—she must be over eighty—comes toward me with a bounce in her step. My heart is racing, I can barely breathe; it must be the heat, I'm not used to it. Maybe if I drink some water and try again.

I drink half the bottle, but no, I can't run any more, the dizziness is getting worse.

There's a bench only a few steps away.

Finally, I can sit down.

Could it really be just my imagination?

The monster, the long tentacles, sucking my oxygen, my blood, my thoughts, my movements.

I am not supposed to think like this. Cancer. Or a bacteria that has taken my body. A virus. A parasite. Something invisible that can't be found.

It's all in my head, the doctors say. *You can do anything you want.*

I have to try again. Get up. It's as if I'm back in gym class: *Come on now, get a grip, don't be a wimp!*

Positive thinking: *I love to go jogging. Love it.*

A sign in a backyard: YES WE CAN. Even Obama is rooting for me.

I am going to do this. This is what normal people do, Saturday mornings when the weather is nice.

Breathe, breathe, move your legs forward, don't lie down, don't die here on the trail, *breathe, breathe*. Would they stop, would they wonder who I was, the young mothers, the eighty-year-old, the amazons? *Breathe*, I have no identification on me, how would they know who to tell, how would they find Anders? *Breathe, breathe*, I cannot die, I need to go home.

But first, rest. There's another bench.

Sit down. Drink water.

The monster pounds, wrestles inside, refuses to let go. It extends its ugly head, breathes my air, steals it out of my throat, my lungs.

The eighty-year-old lady turns at the end of the trail and is already on her way back.

How can it be hypochondria, if blue-haired little ladies are walking faster than me? The monster squeezes my heart.

I have to get home.

Stand up.

In front of my eyes: black.

Water bottle: empty.

Cicadas.

Buzzing, buzzing.

I must not lie down. Not on the ground. I need to get up the hill. Back to Lancaster Avenue.

One step.

One more.

I must get home alive: that's positive thinking.

I push the button at the pedestrian crossing and wait while the cars go by: flashes of light through my eyelids.

Don't fall down.

Keep standing.

That ticking sound: I have to cross the road.

Follow the sound.

I follow Radnor Chester Road. Dragging my body, commanding my body. Soon now, it's time to cross. There is no button to push, no sound to follow. I just have to listen and wait for the cars to pass. Finally no cars: I can cross and I am right at the back wall, just a few more steps around it, and the key from my pocket, *breathe*, the key in the lock, *breathe*, open the door.

Finally.

I sink to the floor.

Quiet. Cool.

Water. Crawl. Breathe. Sit. My back against. The fridge. Something.
Wrong. That's not. Positive. Thinking.

OceanofPDF.com

CHAPTER 9

Water Lilies

Anders is walking beside me, casual in his checked shirt and black jeans. His hair is even more blond than I remember. He's not wearing his glasses. That smile of his.

I almost faint every time.

We pass the town square and head across the small bridge over the creek. The birch trees bend over us, dipping their green veils into the water.

We continue toward the low, flat buildings.

"I can't believe we managed to break your mother's food processor." He laughs and runs his hand through his hair, looking embarrassed. It was his suggestion to make a double batch of pie dough, enough for the whole family. But we didn't expect the food processor to fail, coughing and fuming.

"It's okay," I say. "It was old. Mom said it's nothing."

"But still." He laughs again.

It was wonderful: to sit out in the garden, eating quiche Lorraine under the blossoming apple trees, his smile so close, just on the other side of the table. He answered my mother's questions politely and calmly. Yes, he is in his senior year. Yes, he is going to university, but first he might want to travel a bit, to take a look at the world. And then he glanced at me, like he was seeking my approval of his responses. After finishing the quiches, we decided to go for a walk.

"So this is where you go to school," he says, looking at the barracks as if they're a circus attraction.

"It's undergoing construction and they have projects everywhere . . ." I try to explain. "That's why it looks so . . . unfinished."

He laughs again and I want to eat his laughter, be nourished by it, feel it in my blood.

We turn and head back. Across the small bridge, the town square, the bridge across the river. Slowly, no rush. Every now and then we happen to touch each other, his shirt against my bare arm.

He tells me about his school in Göteborg, about his principal with the curly mustache, making me laugh. He is about to run the Stockholm Marathon. He wants to become a journalist, or something else. He wants to travel the world, see it all, live in foreign countries. He wants to have his own company. Actually he is about to start his own business, together with a friend. When I ask what kind of business, he becomes eager: they are going to sell market research about youths' attitudes regarding different brands. It will only last for a couple of years, as long as he and his friend are still young themselves, that's sort of the point of the business model, but in the future he wants to do something that isn't just about the money, but is also good, something good for other people, do I know what he means?

Yes, I know what he means. It's sort of like my writing. I want to write something about beauty. The kind that shows up in unexpected places, like the coltsfoot, those small yellow flowers by the side of the road in the spring. The beautiful stuff found where you least expect it. That you miss if you don't stop and look carefully.

He asks me to recite a poem I have written and I refuse: I'm not going to recite any poem! He laughs and we are quiet. Outside my house, we stop.

"Do you want to continue?" I ask.

He nods.

"Yeah, let's do that."

It's a beautiful afternoon. Unusually hot. Our footsteps echo in the tunnel under the road. I can already smell the pine needles and moss. On the other side it's cooler in the shade.

"Here's the Bismark stone." I say this mostly to have something to say. Just minutes ago it was easy to talk; suddenly it's become difficult.

He looks up at the big boulder. I do too. IN REMEMBRANCE OF F. G. BISMARCK WHO GAVE US THE KUNGSBACKA FOREST. The silence is becoming embarrassing. Don't I have something more interesting to show him, now that he has come all the way from Göteborg?

“He was the guy who planted this forest,” I explain. “He took care of the seedlings as if they were his own babies. Running around pouring water out of his hat and stuff like that. That’s at least what they told us in school, ha, ha. And over there is the little crofter cottage. From the eighteenth century. Or something like that.”

The cottage with its grass roof looks a little slumped in the middle.

Silence again.

“I can show you my secret places,” I say, and then I laugh. That sounded more dramatic than I intended.

“You have secret places?” He laughs too and we start following the track into the forest.

“Yeah, I mean, I grew up here, close to these woods. Well, we moved here when I was five years old.”

“Where did you live before?”

“In Eskilstuna. That’s pretty close to Stockholm.”

“I’m glad you moved here, or we might not have met.”

I have to look away. It’s suddenly too much, what can I say in response?

At the side of the track is a long slope.

“We used to roll down, Cecilia and Petra and me, there wasn’t as much brushwood back then.” We laugh and I have a feeling it’s not so much what I said, but the situation, us walking here, trying to find things to say.

“If we continue along the track, we will end up by the lily pond,” I say.

We can see it glitter behind the trees. The water lilies like stars on the dark surface. The birch trees around the pond. The small bridge to the island with the bench.

We cross the bridge in silence. When we sit down on the bench, I feel like something is breaking inside.

“I want to write about water lilies,” I suddenly say.

He looks at me, inquiring.

“Growing in the dark muddy water,” I continue. “About the light against the dark.”

He smiles.

I have never said things like this to anyone. I didn’t even know I had such words inside me until now, sitting on this bench next to him, by the pond. It’s

like I know myself better when I'm with him. Like I can see myself more clearly.

The sun is sinking behind the trees. I start to shiver.

"Are you cold?" he asks.

"No, I'm fine."

"But aren't you cold? You can borrow my shirt."

"It's okay. I'm all right."

"I can see you're freezing." He takes off his shirt. He is wearing a white T-shirt underneath. He wraps the shirt around my legs, bare below my cutoff jeans, and it's soft against my skin.

"Thank you," I whisper.

He smiles, stretches a little, and leans back on the bench, looking up into the treetops.

The track is quite close to the pond. Someone might come and see us.

"I have another secret place," I say. "A real secret place."

"Oh?" He smiles. "Take me there."

I get up and hand him his shirt, but he raises his hand:

"You can keep it on, it's pretty chilly."

So I put it on over my T-shirt and we walk into the shadows that grow longer as the sun sets. We follow the track past the pond and turn into a path that is barely visible and for a moment I'm afraid I have forgotten the way, but there it is: the small path into the forest that you wouldn't notice if you didn't already know it was there.

Anders follows me, helping me down a rock slippery with moss, and his hands are burning on my waist.

The forest opens to a clearing.

"Wow," he says.

There it is. In the middle of the clearing, my tower made of uneven stones, like it's straight out of a storybook.

"Sometimes I come here to be alone. You know, to be able to think. With two sisters and a little brother it can be difficult finding peace at home."

"I know what you mean," he says, turning to me. He also has three siblings. We are both number two out of four. He smiles and his teeth shine white in the dusk.

"So, do you want to go up?" I say.

He smiles. "Yeah."

The stone blocks are cracked and crooked.

"Careful," he says and reaches for me, but I'm already up. There are old wooden boards for benches and an iron bar protecting us from falling down. The tower isn't very tall, maybe ten feet. We sit down in the corner, facing each other.

"It's a nice secret place," he says.

"Yeah, I like it."

Up here, we can see the sun again. It's weaving strands of gold into his hair. We sit close to each other. He could put his arm around me. I could reach for his hand. We could lean in, it wouldn't take much, and kiss each other.

"Do you have more secret places?" He looks at me like he's a little embarrassed by his own question.

"Maybe." I can't tell him about the riddle. I don't talk to anyone about it. And with him everything seems so easy and uncomplicated, I don't want to spoil things and besides: maybe I only imagined it. Here, in the tower, with the last rays of the setting sun in my eyes, everything seems lighter than before: the stones are made of papier-mâché and the fir trees cut from paper. My entire body feels like I'm floating ten feet above the ground.

We smile at each other and he comes in close. I can smell his aftershave, like pine trees by the ocean. My heart tells me, let it happen, let it happen. But he hesitates and then he pulls away, why is he pulling away? He presses his hands to his eyes and groans.

"What is it?" I ask. "Does it hurt?"

"It's the lenses. Feels like gravel in my eyes."

"Oh, I'm sorry."

"I think we better get out of the forest."

We climb down from the tower and I can tell that he is hurting badly, but he doesn't want me to know it. He walks quickly and I lead the way back to the track.

"I should go home," he says. "It's late."

"Is there something wrong with them?" I ask. "The contact lenses."

"I think it's because of my hay fever," he says.

When we're out of the forest I notice the sun is still up. It's not as cold as in the shadows and I give him back his shirt. He puts it on and he doesn't

look at me, but I can see that his eyes are red. We walk quickly, but it's a ten-minute walk back to the town square and the train station where the buses leave.

Anders is in pain. I wish so badly I could do something. The only thing I can do is help him get home. And that is also a pain. A new kind. To know that he is anxious to get away from me. That he doesn't want to talk to me.

A bus waits at the station. The engine is running; it's about to leave any minute.

"Okay, I'll see you," he says and smiles, but his eyes are still red.

"Yes," I say.

He gives me a quick hug, turns, and gets on the bus.

The door closes, and the bus leaves.

I cross the town square, walking in my own shadow. The pavement is painted orange by the twilight. But somehow we are still sitting in the tower, just before the kiss that didn't happen.

CHAPTER 10

I've seen every kind of examination room, and they're all alike, with minor variations. Two chairs, an examination table, a desk, a couple of cabinets for shiny instruments, and jars filled with wooden sticks and cotton balls. A computer filled with stories of illness compressed into names and dates and numbers and passages of doctors' opinions.

Dr. Lauren Baine is in her thirties, with dark, flowing hair and a warm smile. Her fingers dance on the keyboard as I answer her questions: name, new Social Security number, address, insurance company. Anders has filled out the forms and made the phone calls. "We finally have it all sorted out," I tell her.

Dr. Baine laughs. "Yes, it can be overwhelming."

She doesn't wear a white coat, just a white blouse and a brown, knee-length skirt, skin-colored pantyhose, and red, flat shoes. There's a small hole in her pantyhose, at the back of her leg. She doesn't seem to have noticed.

"I thought I would meet Anders today." She turns to me.

"Yes, he booked this appointment for himself, but this morning he thought I should go instead. I have an appointment next week, but he said he'll take that one instead."

"I see." Dr. Baine continues to type on the keyboard.

It's hard to breathe, hard to push the words out of my lungs. Must be because of the walk. I felt unusually good this morning, was up early, and Anders persuaded me to go instead of him. "I think we should take this opportunity, now that you're doing well. And you're more important than me," he said.

"Why am I more important?" I argued. "You're just as important!"

But he wouldn't give in. "It is really close, it will do you good to go for a little walk."

Radnor Family Practice turned out to be not far from the school, just like he said. I could walk slowly in the increasing heat.

Dr. Baine turns to me again. “Just a regular physical, then.”

“Yeah, because of the driving license. Apparently it’s mandatory here, to have a physical. We need American driving licenses eventually, although our Swedish ones are fine for a couple of months.” Saying this feels like a joke. I haven’t driven a car in six months, not since I almost collapsed alone in the car, my heart beating like crazy in my chest.

“Let’s begin. Can you stand here, please? We’ll see how tall you are.”

“Should I take off my shoes?”

“If you want to. Heels to the wall.”

I kick off my sandals.

Dr. Baine measures carefully, pressing the gauge lightly to my head. “Sixty-eight inches.” She turns around. “Come here, please.”

I step onto the old-fashioned scale. The indicator sways as Dr. Baine pushes it.

“One hundred and twenty-one pounds. I’ll figure out your BMI.” She returns to the computer. “Eighteen point four. It’s a little low, but you needn’t worry.” Dr. Baine gets up again.

“Please, sit down.” She points to the exam table. “I suppose you have done this before.”

“Not really.” The protective paper rustles as I sit down. “Actually I have never done this before.”

“Really?”

“No. In Sweden we don’t have to have a physical before getting the driving license. I don’t think we have this kind of preventive care back home. I have never heard of it.”

“Oh yeah?” Dr. Baine doesn’t know it, but she has stumbled upon a sensitive subject.

“In Sweden you can only get hold of a doctor if it’s urgent; well, you’d have to wait for eight hours at the emergency, or you can make an appointment if you have a specific problem. But you can only ask about one thing at that appointment, or the doctor gets angry. Believe me, I know. If you have two questions, you’ll have to make two different appointments.”

While I talk, Dr. Baine performs the examination. Checking my reflexes with a small rubber hammer to my knees, feeling my neck and the back of

my head, looking into my ears with a lamp as small as a pen, and into my eyes. She looks like a miner, the lamp in her hand, searching for a splash, a clue, a vein.

“Open your mouth, please.” She examines my throat, putting a wooden stick on my tongue.

It’s getting hard to speak.

“In Schwe . . .”

“Say ah.”

“Aaah.”

“Thank you.”

“In Sweden it is almost impossible to get an appointment. You have to wait for one or two weeks and by then you’re already well! At best that is . . .”

Saying these things feels like betraying my own country but Dr. Baine looks at me and laughs. “I can see how that can be problematic.” She is diplomatic and easy to like. And I realize that one’s homeland is much like your family: you can whine about it all you want, but you would not like it if someone other than family did the same. Dr. Baine says nothing about Sweden or government health care. “We’re going to measure your blood pressure.” She pulls out the cuff and starts putting it on my arm. “If I may. You have very thin arms.”

“Well, thanks.” I smile.

“I didn’t mean it like that.” Dr. Baine also smiles. “You’re a little too thin. How are you, in general? This might get tight.” She pumps up the cuff, which squeezes my arm tightly.

“I’m . . .” What am I to say? I can’t tell her about the monster, the glass wall, my heart shrinking with fear just at the thought of the girls: of them one day finding me, pale and still and stiff. I don’t want this new doctor to think I am a hypochondriac from day one. I have to tread carefully. “I am often very tired.”

“I can imagine it must be tiring to move to a new country.”

“Yes,” I say and for a moment I am tempted to tell her everything, but I can see she is concentrating.

The stethoscope is cool against my arm and Dr. Baine puts slight pressure on it while listening. She is completely still, somewhat bent over

me, her forehead wrinkled. And then there is a shiver through her body, as if she wanted to get out of this small examination room.

Dr. Baine pulls up the stethoscope that has slid down a bit.

The cuff is very tight. My arm hurts and tingles. It starts to get red. Is it supposed to hurt like this?

Dr. Baine loosens the cuff.

“Your blood pressure is normal.” She’s looking at me and there’s something in her face that wasn’t there before, a small wrinkle between her eyes. “I need to listen to your heart.”

There’s a gentle knock at the door. “Dr. Baine, excuse me.” A nurse opens the door. “Could I have just a minute?”

Dr. Baine leaves me and closes the door.

There are no windows in the room. I wonder what this room might have been used for in 1742, which is when the building was built according to the cast-iron sign on the facade. But I guess the house has been remodeled several times through the years. Walls knocked down and others put up. Doors closed for good and new ones put in. *I need to listen to your heart*, she said, and I feel like the walls are closing in, please I need a window, can someone put a window in this room for me? Please, I can’t breathe. No, I need to think positive, the wrinkle between her eyes, the slight tremble in her voice, it was nothing.

Dr. Baine comes back, closing the door behind her.

“I’m sorry.” She puts the stethoscope to her ears. “Your heart.”

“Do I need to take off my T-shirt?”

“No, it’s all right.”

Dr. Baine presses the stethoscope against my chest.

“Could you pull up? In the back?”

I pull up my T-shirt and the stethoscope is cold on my shoulders.

“Would you please breathe in, deeply?”

I do it.

“Again.”

I breathe in slowly and hold my breath.

“One more time.”

Dr. Baine presses the stethoscope to my chest again. The wrinkle between her eyes has deepened. She pulls the stethoscope out of her ears

and sits down in her chair. She seems to confer with herself for a moment, rubbing her temple with her finger.

“It doesn’t sound quite . . . normal.”

“Oh, it’s my old, what do you call it . . . ?”

Dr. Baine leans closer.

“So you know about it? Your heart murmur.”

“Heart murmur. Yes. I was born with it.”

“And?”

“That’s all I know. Apparently it was checked when I was six years old. My mother has told me. It’s nothing. My mother has it too.”

Dr. Baine still has that wrinkle between her eyes.

“It’s a very loud heart murmur.” She turns to the computer and starts writing.

“You need an ultrasound. I’ll give you a referral.”

“Do you really think so?” I say. “I was checked by some specialist and he said it was nothing to worry about. That it was a harmless murmur. It’s supposed to be pretty common.”

Dr. Baine looks at me suspiciously.

“May I ask, are you often cold?”

“How did you know? In Sweden I was freezing all the time, summer and winter, especially my hands.” I stretch out my hands and suddenly feel a bit silly, like she could see the cold there. “But here it’s so hot, ha, ha, I think it would be impossible to be cold.”

The telephone rings. Dr. Baine answers, and starts nodding.

“Chicken!” She hangs up. “I strongly recommend that you have an ultrasound. It’s a very loud heart murmur. Very loud.”

“Okay.”

“Good.” Dr. Baine gives me a brochure. “Here and here . . .” She makes circles with a pen. “I’ve marked the nearest places where you can have an ultrasound. You just call them and make an appointment.” She gives me two more pieces of paper. “Here is the referral and here . . .” She takes one of them back to sign it. “Here is the certificate for the driver’s license.”

“Thank you.”

Dr. Baine smiles.

“Good luck passing the test!”

“Ha, ha, thanks.”

We shake hands.

ANDERS IS SITTING AT THE KITCHEN TABLE, HUNCHED OVER his laptop. There is a sudden warmth in my chest, seeing him sitting there waiting for me, working from home instead of going to the office, taking care of the girls so I could have my physical. I feel unusually strong and excited after the short walk back.

“How’s it going?” I ask. “Have you figured out a grand strategy yet to sell more roller bearings in North America?”

He looks up and laughs. “It’s not just bearings. It’s also seals and power transmission.”

He gets up and pulls me closer. “And service and maintenance.” He kisses my neck. It tickles and I laugh.

“Finally you’re home,” he says.

“Where are the girls?”

“Up in the playroom. They are fine, don’t worry.”

I can hear the cicadas through the walls. The buzzing reminds me of an alarm clock, of time pushing forward, of the girls who’ll be hungry for lunch, of meals I have to prepare, of the strength that I need to save.

“Aren’t you going to the office?”

“There’s no hurry.”

His hands are inside my T-shirt, eager, warm on my waist and on my back.

“Wait, I’m supposed to tell you something . . .”

He is suddenly still, his hands on my back.

“How did the physical go?”

“It went well. Only, yeah, that’s what I was about to tell you, I need an ultrasound of my heart. Dr. Baine said my heart murmur was a bit loud.”

He sighs.

“I guess it will take at least eight months to get an appointment. Like it always does. If not a full year.”

“I know, but that’s what she said. She strongly recommended it, even though I said that my old heart murmur is nothing to worry about.”

I give him the small stack of papers that I brought home and he starts looking through the brochure.

“I guess I’ll have to call them.” He puts the papers down on the counter and holds me again, as he whispers in my ear. “But it can’t be that urgent, since we’ll wait a year for that appointment, I mean . . .”

The cicadas’ buzzing fades away, everything becoming quiet, except for the beating of my heart: I have all the time in the world and I have no time but now. My hands are on his neck, I can feel the curves in his hair, his cheek a little rough against mine.

“You’re right,” I say and smile.

OceanofPDF.com

CHAPTER 11

George Friedric Handel, Water Music—*Alla Hornpipe*

The music comes roaring in from the other side of the door. My dad, handsome in his dark suit, smiles at me, fumbles a little, takes my hand and holds it in a light grip. I can tell he is nervous.

I check my dress one last time—white, rustling silk, bouquet of white roses, long veil.

The doors open. I feel dizzy—the music, the smell of roses, the happy faces. There’s no turning back. My dad looks at me and his eyes ask: Are you ready? Yes, I nod.

We go together.

But the riddle is screaming in my chest. What are you doing? You’re lying to Anders. He thinks you have a full life to give him. You haven’t told him.

Be quiet.

I do have a life.

And I love him.

He is standing there, beyond the expectant faces, and I have to resist the impulse to rush up and bury my face in his neck. When I’m close to him, the riddle is quiet. His eyes tell me: Lene, you are mine and I won’t let you go.

The music is deafening. I can’t help but begin to cry—this is more than I dared dream of. He wants me, though I made it hard for him, pushing him away, doubts crawling in between us. I didn’t mean to be cruel, but it was impossible: having him and not having him, saying yes and no at the same time, never making up my mind. He used to laugh at me: You really have a hard time deciding things. Lene, eventually you have to make a decision

and let go of everything else. Otherwise you'll end up in front of a lot of closed doors. You must choose one and open it.

I have chosen. Opened the door. Entered, my dad at my side, Anders waiting. There is no other way. I can't bear losing him. I've tried, but every time he came back, refusing to give up. I think he even tried to forget about me, going abroad, first to the United States to study and then to Italy, where he moved around, never staying more than a couple of months at the same place. Chopping wood with the sheep farmers in Sardinia, volunteer teaching English in Rome. All those projects he pulled together that he told me about in his letters. Lene, he wrote, you would love these people, they all send their love and tell you to wait for this pazzo who left you. He didn't make a salary—the opposite—used up all his savings. And suddenly he came back. Tanned and muscular, no longer boyish looking, but quite grown up. More resolved than ever. I could feel the fork in the road coming closer. I was about to lose him. He was getting impatient.

“Do you want to marry me or not?”

I laughed, thinking it was a joke.

“You didn't even kneel down. It doesn't count.”

We were sitting on my bed. He got up and slowly sank to his knees.

“Lene.” He took my hands. “I have loved you since I was a boy. You were my first love and I want you to be my last. Will you marry me?”

I could see in his eyes that he meant it. I could feel the room fall apart around us, the walls opening up. My desk, my dresser, my clothes, my things, my books, even the bookshelf with the white teddy bear, still sitting on the top shelf, which I always thought I would save for my own kids, if I had any. And there it was, the riddle hiding in the silence, my heart sinking in my chest. Would it be lying if I didn't tell him?

“I have to think about it.”

“For how long?”

“A week.”

“Ha, ha! I know you'll say yes.” He got up and sat down beside me on the bed.

“No, you don't!”

He laughed. “Yeah, you will say yes.”

“You don't know that! How could you know that?”

“Otherwise you wouldn’t have written me all those letters. You wouldn’t have waited for me.”

“Why are you smiling like that?” I grabbed a pillow and punched it into his stomach.

“This is such a relief! Finally we can start planning our life together.”

“But I didn’t say yes yet!”

“You will.” That smile again.

“You can’t know for sure! Maybe I want to go away too. Study French in Paris. And you’ll have to wait for me and see how that feels!”

The darkness of January hung in the window behind him. I had stood so many times by that very window, my eyes following the melting snow, blossoming trees, leaves falling . . . Wondering: what is he doing this very moment? I carried that question alongside the riddle while I walked the corridors of the university, on the bike to the train station, the morning air chilly in my lungs, the silence chalky and dusty in the classrooms.

I said yes. After exactly one week.

Now he can’t leave me like that again.

But the riddle refuses to be silent. You’re lying to him, it whispers. Lying. I hold on to my dad and don’t take my eyes off Anders. Lying, you are lying.

No, I love him.

One step at a time. The music is like a tidal wave, I feel like it could carry us past the faces and out the window.

Slowly. One step. One more. Just like we practiced. It’s like dancing. My dad had been hesitant—interrogated Anders for two hours. Asked about future plans and prospects. I can see it now too, in a couple of faces in the pews: What is she doing? She’s so young! Only twenty! They’re all here—parents, siblings, friends, cousins, even the Norwegian part of Anders’s family who traveled here from Oslo.

They don’t understand. I don’t have a lot of time.

I love him, I have loved him since our eyes met that late-summer evening eight years ago—me only twelve years old and he only fourteen.

My dad smiles when I look up at him. Another step.

I will never forget the day Anders said goodbye. The kisses that tasted of salt. My heart about to break. He held up a small, rectangular package.

“Open it at home.” More tears.

And then I was alone in my room, trembling hands, slowly ripping off the paper. Would it be some kind of jewelry? A ring? I laughed. It was a cassette tape. A message, surely, I thought. My heart beat as I played it. But it wasn't his voice. "Welcome to the audio version of Stephen Covey's Seven Habits of Highly Effective People . . ." Was this a joke? I laughed and played forward. Still that strange deep voice speaking. I played forward a little bit more. It was no joke. I couldn't stop laughing. And crying. He was no charmer. He didn't use worn-out gestures or clichés. It was so typical of him—the best gift he could think of: a pop psychology cassette tape.

When he realized his blunder of a goodbye gift, he arranged to have flowers sent to me. Eighteen white roses on my birthday. They were delivered to my classroom, my last year in high school. The rumor spread all over the school: Lene has a Rose Cavalier. Now he's standing here, my Rose Cavalier, with a single white rose on his jacket.

If he knew the truth, would he stay with me? Would he want me? The questions had kept me awake all night. The doubts. All the doors closing. This definite decision. The last twilight of my childhood. And the riddle: Lying, you are lying. You have not told him. But what would I say? I have a question in my heart and there are no words to explain it.

One more step.

We stop at the sound of the last long note. My dad lets go of my hand and takes a step back.

Anders is beside me.

Our hands meet.

The long note disappears into the air and then: silence.

He will forgive me.

He will understand that I couldn't let the end dictate the beginning. That I couldn't bring myself to leave him because of the pain to come. That I'm constantly wrestling with my destiny, with myself, with the riddle, with death, with God. That the outcome of the wrestling match has already been decided and I'm still trying to fight it.

I look up at him and he smiles at me, that reassuring smile of his, that says everything will be all right.

CHAPTER 12

WÄLKOMEN GRANMA and GRANDPA frÅn SWEDEN. VELKOMEN MORMOR OCH MORFAR. The colorful pieces of paper, attached to the ends of a stick and a broom, are bobbing behind the bushes like puppets. The girls have been waiting with their signs in front of the house on our small street, Radnor Way, for almost an hour. I have been watching them through the glass in our front door to make sure they are all right.

So today my parents will come to visit, and I am looking forward to seeing them, but there is also a worry I can't shake. We have just learned the strange dance, my mother and I, of giving and receiving, but surely we will continue to step on each other's toes. It is a relief, after years of near silence between us, to finally, if still hesitantly, be able to do this awkward dance. I watch the girls playfully bonk each other on the head with the signs. I need to go out and tell them it will take a while longer.

Stina stomps her rubber boots in the gravel. "I can't wait any longer!" She insists on wearing her boots in spite of the beautiful summer day.

Ingrid is stomping too. "They have to come soon! They have to!"

"It's no use standing here," I say. "Come in for a while."

Reluctantly, they give in. Walking back through the garden, I feel a small hand in mine—it's Ingrid, looking up at me with a smile.

"Mamma, aren't you glad Cecilia's baby decided to come out before Grandma left to come here?"

"I sure am," I say. I can picture Cecilia at the hospital with a small cooing bundle in her arms. I wish I could visit them.

"Me too," Ingrid says. "Or Grandma might not have come."

Stina leaps up the few steps to the porch. "One more girl, how many grandkids do they have now, Mamma?"

"You two, plus Cecilia's three kids, plus Petra's two, how many does that make?"

"Seven!" Stina pulls the door open. "And only girls! Girls are the best!"

As soon as we're inside, we hear a car coming up the street. The girls rush out the door again.

"It's them!" Stina shouts.

"Oh no!" Ingrid yells back at me. "We waited so long!"

They rush to the car, waving the signs, and I follow.

There they are, my mom and dad, stretching as they emerge from the brown, shiny rental car.

Kristina is all smiles. "I'm so happy to see you all again!" She gathers the girls in her arms.

Roland hugs me. "Hello, Lene." His cardigan has his familiar dad smell.

"Hello, Dad. I hope the trip was okay?"

"It was long, but no problems." He has never been a man of many words, and that voice of his could easily come across as gruff, but he is really a big teddy bear.

"Hello, Mom," I say and we hug too, but the awkwardness remains. We are still trying to repair the broken bridge between us, and I think that is partly why they came, not just to help with the house and the girls but to tinker with unseen things that still need to be fixed. Maybe they feel this sense of urgency, since they're visiting so soon after we moved in. Before it's too late. I can see it in her smile and her eyes. My mother with her auburn hair and brown clothes, her black-frame glasses and flat, purple shoes, her soft laughter and bosom against my chest, holding on to me a moment longer, after I begin to let go.

Anders comes over and Mom hugs him too. Dad asks how everything's going, and Anders can't hold it in anymore. "It's too much, all the time. I'm glad you're here; one more thing and I think I wouldn't make it!" He laughs and we all laugh. But he is genuinely relieved, I can tell, to be getting help these three weeks that Mom and Dad are staying with us. Kristina can't wait to see the house, but Roland pauses on our way through the garden, looking up to the sky.

"What is *that sound*?"

"What?" I ask.

"The humming?" He seems almost frightened.

"Oh!" I laugh. "The cicadas! It's the cicadas."

"Are you sure?"

“Yes, I’m sure.” I have to laugh again. “That’s how they sound. I was just as surprised as you in the beginning. I thought it came from the power lines.”

He looks up at the trees like he can hardly believe it. My dad. His hair is gray at the temples and his cardigan bulges over his stomach, but he is as straight-backed as always.

“You’ll have your own suite!” Anders says, carrying their suitcases. “On the third floor. Well, one room is a playroom for the girls, but you’ll have your own bathroom next to your bedroom.”

On our way up the stairs, Kristina squeezes my shoulder.

“This is a beautiful house. And you are all settled already.”

“Yeah, we worked hard,” I say. “But the movers did most of it. I unpacked most of the boxes though.”

“You know her!” Anders shouts back at us. “She wouldn’t stop until it was all done!”

They all laugh and it’s like I’m playing the lead role in a play. It’s typical of Anders to push me out on the stage like that: look what Lene did, everything is as it should be.

In the guest room Mom turns to me.

“It’s lovely,” she says. “You did really good. I know it can’t be easy—”

“We bought the beds at Ikea,” I interrupt. “They were out of the softest mattress but we’re hoping this will be all right.”

Kristina sits down on one of the beds.

“This will be just fine,” she says.

My heart swells in my chest: Here they are, my mom and my dad, looking at the room, the closets, and the view of the treetops from the windows, my mom laughingly reminding us of her fear of heights. She will avoid looking out the window or her toes will start to tingle. I wonder why I lost the moment talking about the beds from Ikea, breathless from walking up the stairs, when really what I wanted to say was: At last, you’re here. I will not be able to do this much longer, please, promise that you will be here for the girls and for Anders, when I have to leave, you have to promise. But that would be crazy to say, crazy to think even. I have to keep thinking positive: nothing is wrong, it’s only in my imagination.

Stina is pulling my arm.

“Mamma, aren’t we gonna have the doughnut competition?”

“Ha, ha, yeah, we bought lots of doughnuts,” I start explaining and Anders continues:

“We started this at the breakfast buffet in the hotel. So this is how it’s done: you give points to each doughnut, higher score the better you think it tastes, but you only have a total of ten points to give.” Anders is totally into this and we have to laugh. But it’s more than the doughnut contest. It’s the girls getting a bit of Sweden through their grandparents, it’s Mom and Dad’s relief to be here after their long journey, and it’s Anders’s relief for having helping hands. On our way back to the stairs, he opens a closet and teases his mother-in-law:

“Here’s the broom closet, Kristina,” he jokes.

“How often do you vacuum?” she asks, and her voice has a serious tone that translates to: how often do you want me to vacuum?

Anders laughs and puts his elbow lightly in her side.

“Let’s have the doughnuts,” he says. “Vacuuming can wait.”

They don’t want me to hear it. They make plans as if I don’t count and can’t do anything to help at all. I could choose to be sad, but there’s something else here too, the consideration they show me, to be happy about. That’s the way I have to see it, to not be resentful.

Ingrid, Stina, Mom, Dad, and Anders all walk down the stairs ahead of me: I can hear Anders’s voice at the end of the stairs.

If I stayed here, between these two steps, if I didn’t go any farther, if I disappeared, would they notice? Would they set the table like nothing happened? My mother who doesn’t want to talk about things that can’t easily be laughed about, my father who can’t find the words, looking at his hands like he’s lost something, the girls with their small bodies full of laughter and play—their eyes and hearts wide open to everything new—making little homes for stinkbugs in matchboxes filled with green leaves and miniature lace cushions.

If I suddenly didn’t take another step, if I tripped and fell out of my body
...

I realize I have stopped in the middle of the stairs, watching the sunshine coming through the window. It is running down the wall, the carpet, the railing, everything is suddenly running down as I wipe my eyes, my hand across my cheek. But this isn’t something that can be easily wiped away,

this is something I swallow and force down: Stay, stay, I tell myself, this is a happy moment. I blink and smile and continue down the stairs.

Follow their voices.

The pattern of sunshine, like stepping-stones, shows the way.

But the monster turns, heavy in my chest, forcing me to grab the hand railing. I walk down carefully, my eyes closed, into the dark.

OceanofPDF.com

CHAPTER 13

Whispering

The window blinds slice up the light, making everything striped: the crumpled sheets, the wallpaper, the closet doors.

I can hear his heart beating close to my ear, rhythmical, like a drum. I hear the tiny sounds of his hand caressing my forehead. When I turn up my face, his eyes are there to catch me. It's like falling, a moment of vertigo, and then I touch ground in his dark pupils.

"Lene?" he asks.

"Yes?"

We whisper, as if it's all a dream, a floating bubble that might burst at the edges of sharp words.

"I just wanted to say your name. Lene. Lene."

I smile.

"Anders. Anders."

"Lene."

"Anders."

He laughs quietly and kisses me. Our movements are like waves, back and forth, sand and water, water and wind, the universe nodding its head: yes, yes, yes.

This is where the paths led. To this small apartment in the western part of Göteborg. The center of the universe.

The sunlight wanders across the room. The waves have calmed.

"Lene?"

"Mmm."

"What do you think about . . ."

"What?"

“What do you think about . . . kids?”

“Ha, ha. I like them.”

He laughs. “Yeah, well, you know what I mean.”

“Yeah.”

“We said we’d wait. And you’re the one deciding this. When you’re ready.” His breath is hot against my cheek. “I just wanted to ask you, we do want kids, right? I mean, I’ve just always imagined a bunch of kids in a messy kitchen, maybe I’m being silly, I know, I just thought that we should discuss it and I feel . . . well, how you’re feeling is more important, but I feel that we should go for the important stuff in life first, because the chance might not always be there and then it’s too late. . . . Do I make any sense at all?”

“Yes.”

“And for me, you are the most important thing, you and . . . and this small family that is us, you know what I mean?”

“Yes.”

“And—”

I’m laughing now. “I said yes already.”

“Do you really mean it?”

“Yes.”

I can feel his grip tighten. His arms around me. His skin, his scent, his smile against my hair. The important stuff first. That’s how I live. He gave me the words. If I wait it will be too late. It might already be too late. But I have this morning. I have his arms around me and his hand on my forehead. I have our dreams lingering in the silence. I too want children, a bunch of them in a messy kitchen. He strokes my forehead, and it’s like he is erasing the riddle with every soft stroke. His shoulders are strong and his hands are gentle. He will carry me, riddle and all. Yes. Let it happen.

CHAPTER 14

Anders is about to make the phone call, scheduling the appointment for my ultrasound. He has become the family administrator since we moved to the US. That's what he says, pretending he hasn't already played that role for a long time, in Sweden too. He took over contacting the doctors and the health centers when I couldn't anymore, when I was too tired and too crushed to stand up to their label of me as a hypochondriac. I remember the Swedish saying "You have to be healthy to be able to be sick."

We sit at the kitchen table. Through the window I can see our neighbor digging in his yard. Looks like he's building a pond. His white hair makes a spot of light in the shadow of the house.

The girls are upstairs with Grandma and Grandpa and the house is so large I can't hear them. It's hard to get used to—in the townhouse in Göteborg we lived close to one another and I used to think it was crowded. But now I miss it, having my girls near.

Anders calls one of the places in the brochure Dr. Baine gave me.

"You don't have to sit right next to me," he says. "I'll call on you when I'm past the waiting—"

"Good morning." It's the voice of a woman, slightly nasal. I can hear her even though Anders has the phone to his ear.

Anders nods to me, surprised, pointing to the phone.

"Good morning. My name is Anders Fogelberg. I'm calling on behalf of my wife."

"I see. Her name is?"

I can tell he is bracing himself. It's now he mustn't give in, when they won't let him speak on my behalf, when they won't let him schedule an appointment for me or even ask a question in my name.

"Lene Fogelberg."

"Yes?"

“She needs to schedule an appointment for an ultrasound of her heart. We have a referral from our family doctor.”

“When?”

“When?” He looks perplexed, seeking my eyes. “That’s what I’m asking you.”

“You’re asking me? You need to book a time that is convenient for you.”

“What do you mean, ‘book a time’? What openings do you have?”

“You need to tell me when your wife can come and I’ll check the appointment schedule.”

“But I wouldn’t know this far in advance. If you give us a date and a time we will make sure to plan for it. Or maybe you have had someone cancel an appointment and we can come in two weeks?”

“You want to come in two weeks? That’s fine, just a moment . . .”
There’s a crackling noise in the phone.

“Maybe there’s an earlier time?” I whisper.

Anders raises his hand; he has already thought of the same thing.

“Is that the earliest time available?”

“The earliest? Oh, she can come this afternoon. Or tomorrow, if that suits her better.”

“Are you saying that . . . you have time *this afternoon*? Don’t you have a waiting list?”

“Waiting list?” The woman laughs. “No, your wife can come whenever it suits her.”

We look at each other in astonishment. In Sweden we would probably still have been waiting on a telephone queue. After several phone calls and some yelling on Anders’s part, we would have been given a date and a time eight months to a year from now. They would not have asked about what time was convenient for us. They would certainly not tell us to come whenever it suited us.

“Hello? Are you still there?”

Anders collects himself.

“We can . . . we can come tomorrow. In the morning, before noon suits us best.”

“What time?”

I can’t help it, I put my hand over my mouth as I start laughing.

He looks at me. "What time?"

"Don't forget," I whisper. "We already made plans with my parents to go to Hershey Park, so in the morning . . ."

He nods.

"We can come around eight," he says, and I have to laugh again. Is this really happening?

Our neighbor is still struggling in his yard, pushing a heavy wheelbarrow. Two squirrels are playing in the tree just outside the window. They disappear on the other side of the trunk and then I see them again, farther up.

"She is welcome tomorrow at half past eight. Lene Fogelberg, is that correct?"

"Yes, that's her name. Thank you."

"Have a nice day."

Click.

Anders stares for a moment at the phone and then he looks up at me and we burst into laughter.

CHAPTER 15

Seagulls

*P*regnancy is not a disease.” The doctor, a gray-haired man in his fifties, looks at me with disdain.

“But . . .” I want to explain.

“There is nothing more to it. I cannot sign for sick leave because of pregnancy. It’s not a disease, it’s as simple as that.” He turns to his desk. “Time’s up.”

Outside the clinic the sky is high and blue. The wind tastes of salt from the ocean and snow melting in the gutter. I turn my face toward the sun, its warmth bouncing off the brick walls of the buildings as I pass them.

It’s because of the wind, I pretend, drying my tears so no one will see.

The seagulls are high up, small arches that wobble, float, cry like babies. Do they see me, from up there? Me, a small dot on the pedestrian bridge over the highway and the flowing river of cars under me, the high-rises at the end of the bridge, the naked treetops turning in the wind, and beyond it all the ocean—great, glittering, calm. I stop to catch my breath in front of the automatic doors to the mall, and my reflection in the glass is cut in half every time the doors open and close, open and close. I am late for work, again, but the buses come less frequently at noon. A persistent cold wind from the ocean makes me shiver. I’d better wait inside.

In the mall, Frölunda Torg, it becomes easier to hold back the tears. Among people my body reacts instinctively. Look happy. Or at least indifferent, like the shop assistants with their smiles and the teenage girls stick thin in their tight jeans.

The murmur is coming from everywhere. All these signs.

SALE.

EVERYTHING MUST GO.

COFFEE AND CAKE 15 KRONOR.

BUY ONE GET ONE FREE.

Pregnancy is not a disease. I get that. But is it supposed to be like this? Is it like this for everyone? A pregnant woman walks by, proud and beautiful, her baby bump showing clearly under her winter jacket. How about her? Is she so tired in the morning that she can't get out of bed? So tired that she has to be carried into the shower, where she wakes up, slowly, aching all over, water running down her face, hands pressed to her eyes to shut out the piercing light?

It hurts to walk. My red blood cell count has dropped so low that I have to come three times a week to the clinic to get iron injections. If I didn't, I would need blood transfusions at the delivery, I am told. The injections are painful. Syringes into the side of my thighs, leaving dark bruises that take several days to heal and make it hard to sleep at night.

The sudden pains scurry from my hips and up my back. I have to stop and grab a railing. Stand still and make sure my body is holding up, that my legs are still attached to my hips. Beneath me the mall opens up like a well to the underworld. A sparkling, roaring, flowing well.

The exhaustion is so overwhelming that I usually arrive at the office ready to faint. But I must keep up appearances. Be effective. I am an executive assistant at Volvo. Which means taking notes at meetings, but mostly working at my desk, making spreadsheets, gazing out the windows to the water while the office barrack rattles its teeth in the sharp sea winds. The cold comes creeping in from everywhere, howling in the dark of winter afternoons, the blue twilight settling in after lunch and the sun gone at three. This is not what I dreamed of, but at least it's a job that supports us while Anders is studying at the university. My boss is an understanding woman who lets me come in at ten and leave at four. "It's better to have you here every day than you staying home a couple of days a week." She has two kids of her own and remembers being pregnant. But her compassion has its limits.

I have to get to the office. No sick leave. If I don't show up I will lose my job and then I will lose the parental benefit from the government as well as the social security listing, and if I lose the government social security listing I will lose my right to paid sick leave, unemployment benefits, and even pension. My hands are pale, still holding on to the railing. I have to let go, take control of my body, my steps, my thoughts. Pregnancy is not a disease.

I see the bright red bookstore sign beyond the escalators. I fainted there once, standing in line, waiting to pay. The darkness gathered quickly and I only remember stammering: “I think I . . . I think . . . ,” before sinking down on a chair, which a kind woman put there just in time. After that I don’t recall what happened. Only the plastic cup of water, shaking in my hand, which I must have received from that same kind woman. I remember the taste of the water and the world slowly sinking into place, the books climbing back onto their shelves, the voice of the understanding woman: You just sit here for a while now. I felt strangely at home, surrounded by the books. Like I was with friends, back in my room, the pile of books by my bed, the scent of a book open in my lap. Edith. I miss her sometimes.

I have to sit down. I find a bench next to the bakery. There is an overwhelming smell of sugar and butter, which induces nausea and hunger at the same time.

It took more than a year for me to become pregnant. I wondered if it would be possible. When it happened, it was like a victory over the riddle. I remember Anders’s dancing in the tiny kitchen of our apartment, his hands playing the air guitar and then catching me and pulling me close, holding me carefully. How we laughed and came up with crazy names for the baby: Galax, Komet, Blåbär, Golfboll.

But no one told me it would be like this.

Two mothers approach, pushing their baby carriages—how did they survive pregnancy and childbirth? They’re talking and laughing, only a meter away. I see the little girl in the carriage leaning out to look at me with big, dark eyes. If I reach out I could caress her cheek. We smile at each other, before she is lost in the crowd.

A little foot, or a little arm, pushes at me from the inside. My child pushing at my ribs. Like she wants to tell me: You can’t sit here all day, Mamma. It’s heavy getting up. Still three months to go. The baby is growing inside me, but the pregnancy hardly shows.

The kicking continues, fluttering against my ribs. I have to smile: I’m carrying a secret.

I exit the mall and I’m at the bus stop. The sign says I am right on time, there will be a bus soon. The wind plays with my hair, carrying the remains of salt from January storms.

The seagulls are still up there in the sky and over there by a trash can, flapping their wings, crying. A bus approaches from the other side of the parking lot.

Another kick to my ribs.

And another.

The bus slows down and stops in front of me, sighing, hissing, opening its doors. I step on, pay the ticket, find an empty seat. The bus starts, pulling me back in the seat. As the bus follows Västerleden, I look out the window and get a glimpse of the glittering ocean under the Älvsborg Bridge. Behind the bridge piers the seagulls are playing hide-and-seek in the sky. I open my jacket and put my hand on my belly and the baby kicks again, right into my hand, making me smile.

OceanofPDF.com

CHAPTER 16

The technician is a young woman of Korean background with dark kind eyes and a white coat that seems a little too big for her, flapping around her slender wrists.

“Can you lie down on your side, please?” she asks. “Left side, like that, yes. This will not take long.”

I need to hold the hospital robe in place or it will gape open, showing my naked chest. The pillow smells of antiseptic. The stickers sting a little, holding the wires in place. There are at least ten of them spread across my chest and neck.

The young woman turns off the lights and the room darkens.

“Oh, sorry,” she says. “Is it okay?” She turns to Anders who is sitting on the chair in the corner, with his book open.

“Of course, it’s fine,” he says and smiles at me.

“This might be a little cold.” The technician squeezes a transparent gel out of a tube onto the probe and bends over me. “Okay, let’s begin.”

She lowers the probe onto my chest, making me shiver. She pulls it up toward my neck and pulls it down again. It’s like being licked by a huge, wet tongue. Every now and then she stops and presses a couple of buttons on the computer keyboard, until there is a beep. I have had ultrasounds only twice before; in each of my pregnancies in week seventeen, same for every pregnant woman in Sweden, but never for my heart. I feel oddly mischievous, lying here on the examination table, like I am cheating the system, making them waste resources on me. The old Swedish precept *Jantelagen* comes to mind: *Don’t think you’re any special.*

The room is suddenly filled with a loud, pulsating sound. It sounds like the beating of a heart magnified over a loudspeaker, but muffled, like it’s underwater.

“Is that my heartbeat?” I ask.

“No, it’s the machine,” she answers.

The sound is gone and the room is silent again.

I cannot see the images, which the probe is retrieving from inside of me, since I am lying with my back to the screen, facing Anders. He looks up, smiles at me, and bends down over the book again, trying to read through the thin light.

The table is hard and the protective paper rustles at the smallest movement. The woman is silent. She seems so young. I wonder what paths brought her here to become an expert in ultrasound, a machine showing black-and-white images only for the initiated to interpret? What is she thinking, standing silently behind my back? Who is she? What does she see? What does she find? The other Lene, the one I was supposed to be? The darkness, all that could have been? Does she see the monster with its long tentacles, slowly eating me, the tears at night? No. I'm just getting the old heart murmur checked, the same that my mom has. It's nothing, really. Just a routine examination, because Dr. Baine insisted.

I can feel the room vibrate to the pulse of the machine. It makes me sleepy.

"Are you all right?" Anders looks up from his book.

"Yeah."

Then silence again. Just the beeping of the machine and the technician pressing the buttons. The probe licking my chest, up and down, up and down. The table pressing at my ribs. Has Anders fallen asleep in his chair? He must be tired. Always a lot on his mind: the move, the paperwork, his new job, the girls.

I MUST HAVE BEEN SLEEPING. WHAT TIME IS IT? I CAN SEE Anders still in his chair. The room is silent. The probe presses hard on my ribs, that must be what woke me up.

"I'm sorry, does it hurt?" the technician asks.

"It's okay."

"I need a good image." The woman bends closer and rubs the probe hard, pressing it between my ribs. Harder. Beep. Harder. Beep.

"Could you hold your breath?" she asks, pressing even harder.

I hold my breath.

Beep.

"Thank you. Again."

I do as she says.

Beep.

“Could you breathe slowly?” She holds the probe still, deep between my ribs, and I breathe as slowly as I can, even though it hurts.

“Thank you. Could you turn over so that you lie on your back?” She puts her hand on my arm, helping me to turn. And then the probe is back again, on my chest, up on my neck. Beep. All the way down to my umbilicus. Beep.

Shouldn't we be done soon? Didn't she say this wouldn't take long? I must have been lying here for more than an hour. Anders is slumped in his chair, chin in hand, his book on his knees. Suddenly he jerks and looks up.

“Oh.” He takes off his glasses and rubs his eyes. “Hi.”

“You were asleep.” I smile.

“What . . . ?” He smiles back at me. “Oh.”

“I'm sorry, you need to keep still, but we'll soon be done,” the woman says and puts more gel on the probe. “Could you turn back on your side, please?” The probe comes again, hard, between my ribs. She presses harder and harder.

“There. We're done,” she says and finally the probe is off my chest.

Suddenly the room is bright and both Anders and I are blinking and squinting. The technician doesn't say anything, just pulls away the stickers with the cords, carefully, one by one.

“You can sit up,” she says.

I hold the robe in place and my hand gets wet with gel, my chest is full of it. Is it just me or has the woman suddenly become quiet? She seems only to say the necessary things.

Anders gets up from the chair and stretches.

“How did it look?” he asks the technician.

“I'm sorry, I can't discuss the result of the ultrasound with you, but I will send it to our best cardiologist for evaluation.”

“Oh yeah? Thank you.” I can hear the worry in his voice.

The woman's eyes wander between us.

“But you two have kids, right?”

We only mentioned it in the small talk before the examination; she must have a great memory.

“Yes,” I say. “Two girls.”

“Did you *give birth* to two children? How old are they?”

“Seven and nine.”

She looks at me for a moment.

“If you survived two deliveries, I don’t think you need to worry.”

I can tell that Anders is thinking the same thing: *survived* two deliveries?

The woman looks as if she thinks she has said too much and almost pushes us out of the examination room.

“You can find your way back to the changing room? You turn right and then right again.”

“Thank you,” I say and am about to turn when the woman stops me.

“I will give the result to our best cardiologist. The best one we’ve got here at Bryn Mawr Hospital.”

“I’ll wait here.” Anders points to the reception area.

I turn right and right again and find my way back to the small changing room. I open the locker containing my clothes and take off the robe. My chest is all wet and sticky and I try to get the gel off with the robe, crumpled in my hands. My hands are shaking and the gel gets everywhere. I put the robe in the laundry basket in the corner.

And then I see myself in the mirror, realizing that I have been avoiding looking at myself. I am gray, almost purple under the lamp in the ceiling, and my skin is red where the probe was pressed into my side. Blue shadows paint the contours of my breasts. Cold and shivering, I reach for the Kleenex on a shelf by the lockers and slowly wipe away the gel from my chest. My eyes are big, my face pale. I can see my ribs, like the bars of a cage under my skin.

I survived.

I don’t have to worry.

I feel my heart pounding against the cage.

CHAPTER 17

Shards

The streetlights shine through the window, scattering shards of light in the darkness: on the walls, on the bed, on my baby's small cheek. She cries, wants to be nursed again. My nipples are bloody and sore. She wants more, all the time. I rock her and I lull her, but it doesn't help. My arms are tired, my whole body is tired. I am barely more than an aching, bleeding heap of flesh and bones. The bleeding that won't stop, the tears from my eyes, the milk that comes out of my bursting breasts: I'm leaking in all directions.

The hospital bed is narrow. I must not drop her. I must not fall asleep from exhaustion with her in my arms. I have tried putting her in the plastic box on wheels beside my bed, but as soon as she is alone she starts crying.

She is a miracle. Her small nose, her eyes, her small hands. Her tiny fingers and even tinier fingernails. Her hair red behind her small ears. The dream has become a body, a little girl that lies warm and heavy in my arms. She bleats like a lamb, a soft cry, not shrill.

I cannot bear to hear her cry any longer. Finding the nipple she sucks in, hard, and I must stop myself from crying out of pain. Through the open door I can hear voices, far away in the corridor.

I will not be able to do this much longer.

She reluctantly lets go and begins to cry again. My little lamb. I can barely get out of bed. My body remembers the delivery with every movement. Careful now, careful, I must not awaken the other woman and her baby sleeping behind the curtain. The corridor, dimly lit, echoes with my shuffling steps and my baby's weeping. At the end of it, light spills out from the staff room together with sounds of chatter and laughter.

My baby is strangely heavy in my arms, but I will not drop her, not as long as I am conscious.

The chatter and the laughter is interrupted when I show up in the doorway.

“I thought . . .” I reach for the words in the darkness that is closing in.

The nurses, they are three, look up as if they are surprised to see me. They sit, legs crossed, in white uniforms, coffee cups in hand.

“She wants to be nursed all the time,” I say. “Or else she cries. I thought maybe someone could . . . Someone could help me. Hold her for a while.”

“We’re having our coffee break, as you can see.” The nurse, older than the other two, seems to be the one in charge. The table is full of sandwiches and magazines.

“Oh,” I say.

“Yes.” She seems to be annoyed at me for bothering them.

“But . . .” The words are heavy, my baby is heavy, I myself am heavy. “But she’s crying all the time. I haven’t slept in three nights. Not since the delivery.”

“Well, you might as well get used to being a mother.” The nurse who is in charge turns back to the others and says something more, but I can’t hear it, I only hear the buzzing in my ears, the darkness closing in. There isn’t much left in me, it’s a struggle just to stand up. I need to get back to bed.

It feels as though my baby is carrying me; she is the core, the heart that keeps me going. I am only arms and legs shuffling, a shell around this small, heavy dream. The walls of the corridor reach out their hands, supporting my elbows, all the way back, careful now, careful across the shards of light on the floor, and then I sink into my bed, my baby the core and me the shell, this is how it is, the shell must crack and bleed to let the kernel out. That it would hurt was somehow always obvious to me, but no one told me that it would be this lonely, that Anders would be sent home while I was put in this narrow bed night after night while my baby is crying and sucking. I barely knew anything three days ago when the contractions increased until there was no doubt about it, and Anders called for a taxi and the pains took hold of me, wave after wave of pain, and in the delivery room the midwife put a soft belt on my belly. “We will listen to the baby’s heartbeat,” and soon after that she said: “The baby’s heartbeats are stressed, I am getting worried here.” And then I didn’t think about the pain anymore, all that mattered was the baby and I started singing to her, gently stroking my belly, the song I had been singing for months: “When you came

to earth, the birds of May were singing, and mamma said it was, for you the sun was shining . . .” And the heartbeats immediately calmed down: I had lulled my baby with my song while she was still inside me! Anders massaged my lower back. The midwife told me: “Part your legs.” Giving birth is not for the timid: hands digging inside, “You are dilated eight centimeters.” And Anders: “I’m getting sore hands, I don’t know how long I can continue massaging.” And the midwife laughing: “YOUR hands are getting sore, are they? Ha, ha.” Anders’s care and attention: “Do you want a chocolate bar for energy?” No. “Do you want me to put on some relaxing music?” No. The midwife’s voice like a lifeline: “It is time to push, you need to do it at the same time as the contraction, you’ll know when it’s time.” The impulse, irresistible, to push, a primal force, urgent and demanding, but the midwife: “Wait, wait for the next contraction, I can see the head, but I’ll have to cut, it’s better than you rupturing.” NOW! I had to reach into the pain and push my baby, push, push, the weight, suddenly falling out of me, and the emptiness and the silence, just for a short moment, the fear, and then the cry, my little lamb on my chest. The relief and then the shock: the contractions that continued, almost worse than before, the placenta that was on its way, the blood flowing out of me and the midwife telling me: “This is normal, everything is fine.” And then: “I’ll make some stitches, because of the cut, but it will be all right.”

A voice in the dark pulls me back to the night and the silence and the pain of my baby sucking at my breast. A nurse is standing by my bed, one of the younger ones. I can see the outlines of her face in the dark.

“I wanted to check that you’re all right.”

Silence.

“We don’t want to be mean, but it’s important that you learn to care for your child on your own.”

Silence.

“Try to get some sleep.”

“Wait.” I am too weak, the words barely make it out of my mouth. “What if something’s wrong?”

“Don’t worry, nothing is wrong.” The nurse pats me on my shoulder and leaves, finally, so that I can let out the tears. Milk, blood, tears.

As soon as the day breaks I will take off this hospital robe and put on my own clothes. I will pack my things no matter the pain. I will go home. I will

not stay any longer in this place where they send away the one person who would help you and then make you do everything on your own, trembling and shaking, lift the baby, change the diapers, bathe the baby, breast-feed the baby, carry the baby to the canteen and then sit on a chair and try to eat, exhausted to the point of fainting. After the delivery the midwife told Anders: "Okay, you need to go home now. You may come back during visiting hours." And turning to me: "You need to get out of that bed so we can change the sheets." When Anders comes he does everything, holds the baby, changes the diapers. But he cannot bring me meals from the canteen. It is not allowed.

I remember him lying down next to me and pulling up his shirt so that our baby could lie on his stomach, directly against his skin. She stops crying to the sound of his heartbeat. That image is what will carry me through this night. In the midst of the pain and the darkness: a shard of light. The memory of her small face safely squeezed against his chest. The weight of him next to me on the narrow bed. The wonder: we are three now. And the gratitude: I am having this moment. Thank you. Thank you. The riddle didn't rob me of this.

I look at my baby sleeping in my arms and the realization comes to me, all over my aching body, that the most painful moments can also be the most beautiful ones.

CHAPTER 18

*H*ershey is like a fairy tale,” Ingrid tells me as we stand at the entrance. “I can hardly believe it, a whole city built around a chocolate factory!” She is holding my hand and looking up at me with those pale blue eyes, making me laugh.

It took a couple of hours to get here, passing field after field of swaying corn, tall green walls on each side of the car, doors of blue sky opening to the small Amish villages in Lancaster.

“Where do we start?” Anders unfolds the Hersheypark map.

“The Chocolate Factory!” the girls shout, and Roland and Kristina laugh and agree.

A small train takes us through the tunnels that smell of warm, melted chocolate, past the rotating machinery, sacks of cocoa beans, and assembly lines with chocolate bars. Just seeing Ingrid and Stina like this is worth the trip—pointing and laughing, their small hands, their wide eyes.

“Mamma!” Stina turns around, sitting next to Grandma in the carriage in front of me. “It’s just like *Charlie and the Chocolate Factory!*”

“Yeah, it really is!” I shout back.

The train wobbles and Ingrid, sitting next to me, holds on to the railing.

“Mamma?” she asks, “is this really where they make all the chocolate?”

“Ha, ha, you’re not easily fooled,” I say. “You’re right, this is not the actual factory, but sort of an exhibition for the tourists.”

“I knew it!”

“Let’s not tell Stina,” I say. We can both hear her little voice talking to Grandma: *Can you see any Oompa Loompas? Me neither, but maybe we’ll meet Willy Wonka, he’s sooo scary but funny too.*

Closing my eyes I almost feel like a normal mom at an amusement park, in a chocolate factory, where the music makers and the dreamers of dreams are. Maybe, just maybe, when I get off this train, I will be a normal mother with a whole life ahead of me, maybe I will be running between the

carousels, my children's small hands in mine, shouting, *Let's go, girls*, and laughing without having to press out the laughter, heavy and stiff in my chest.

"Come on, Mamma!" Ingrid's little elbow bumps into my side as the train stops. The tour is over and we are poured into a crowded candy store filled with Hershey kisses of all sizes, T-shirts, mugs, jewelry, lots and lots of chocolate, and everywhere tourists like us. The girls are running around—I almost lose sight of them, their blonde hair between the shelves. There are so many people, talking, shouting, shoving me, so much noise and such loud music, my head is spinning. I have to lean against Anders, who understands and gathers our little flock; *All right, let's go, girls, Roland, and Kristina*.

Outdoors it's hot. Anders carries the bag with the girls' bathing suits and towels, walking ahead so that everyone follows him. I walk behind Mom and Dad and the girls.

I've gotten used to being last, but this place is unfamiliar and there are so many people. I have not yet bought a new cell phone and if I lose them, how will I find them? I don't have the strength to call out, it's heavy enough just to breathe in this heat.

As long as I can see them.

Keep walking.

Be a normal mother.

Zigzag between strollers, youngsters, kids, melting ice-cream cones, pink candy floss.

They've stopped to discuss something, and as I come closer I can see that Mom and Dad are waiting for me as Anders and the girls walk away.

"Anders wanted to make sure that the water park is open, apparently it closes earlier this late in the season," Mom tells me.

"There's a bench," Dad says and points ahead. They give me that look that says: Lene needs to rest, she doesn't have as much strength as the rest of us.

The bench is in the sun. It's unbearably hot, but I have my water bottle, still half full. Anders and the girls are back already.

"It was closed!" Ingrid sits down next to me.

"Well, it's closing in half an hour," Anders says. "But there's no point, we'll barely have time to change into swimwear . . ."

“I want to go swimming!” Stina clings to Anders, who is studying the map.

“Look, there’s a zoo, come on, that will be fun,” he says and pulls me up. Anders makes sure to walk behind the others, next to me.

“How are you doing?” he asks. “Do you need something to eat?”

“I’m fine. I’ve got water. Really I’m okay.”

He smiles and releases one hand from the bag to put around me, whispering *You are wonderful*. He gives me the map and walks up to the others who have reached the entrance.

ZOO AMERICA

NORTH AMERICAN WILDLIFE PARK

The zoo is calmer than the amusement park. There is shade under tall trees. Not so many people. The girls are skipping from fence to fence: *What’s that animal? What’s it called?* I’m able to find the animals on the map and point them out for the girls. Gray wolf, American bison, porcupine, Canada lynx. The animals hardly notice us, grazing calmly, resting on rocks, or rooting in the soil. They occasionally raise their heads when the girls imitate their cries.

Ingrid growls.

Stina meows.

My dad laughs. “It doesn’t meow.”

“Yeah, it does,” says Stina. “Don’t you know it’s a cat?”

“A lynx,” he corrects, and for a moment I feel like I am watching my own childhood in retrospect, my own little hand against the fence. But my dad nods:

“Yeah, it is sort of a cat,” and he smiles, looking down at Stina, who is speckled with light and shadow under the trees and meows so loudly that the cat yawns and licks its mouth with a pink tongue.

White-tailed deer, black bear, American elk. Then we are at the bird cages. Eastern wild turkey, long-eared owl, red-tailed hawk, bald eagle, black-billed magpie.

The others have gone ahead. The lone magpie in its cage meets my gaze mournfully, with black, shining eyes. We had magpies in the garden in Göteborg, flapping, croaking, hopping into bushes. Here it is, an attraction, a small, shaggy, black-and-white magpie. Suddenly it all seems absurd. It's like the magpie is telling me something with its gaze and its silence. But the girls are back, pulling at me.

“Mamma, there are parrots!”

And we're standing in front of the colorful, yelling birds. The girls are pointing to the different birds and all I can think about is the magpie. There can't be many people who stop to look at the lone magpie, with these fireworks of birds nearby. I suddenly get the urge to go back to the little shaggy bird and ask it if it wants to come home with me, but it is just too ridiculous. Besides, the others seem done with the zoo; they want to go back to the amusement park to buy ice cream and maybe go for a ride.

The roller coasters are huge. The girls cling to us, wide eyed—they don't dare to go. It's too big and too high up, too many loops. Not Roland either, nor Kristina, no one wants to go for a ride, except Anders, who I think gladly would have joined the screaming fifteen-year-old boys. He pretends that he's not attracted to the speed and the height, responsibly carrying the heavy bag, the girls pulling at him, his parents-in-law following two steps behind. But I am ten steps behind them all, and I can still see him, the fourteen-year-old boy telling Norwegian jokes at the party to impress me. He would try every roller coaster in the park.

Anders stops, waits for me to catch up, and points upward.

“This one, Lene, you could try this one, you and the girls!” He turns to Mom. “And you, Kristina!”

“Yeah, maybe . . .,” I say.

“Let's do it, Mamma!” Stina is jumping up and down.

“Well, I'll do it if you do it,” says Mom.

It's one of the smaller roller coasters, small carriages, high up on a winding trail. It doesn't look too bad, even though it's called Wild Mouse. A normal mother. Anders hates waiting in line and pushes us to the entrance to not waste any time, *It will be fun, don't chicken out, Kristina, have fun, girls.*

We are to sit two persons in each carriage. Stina wants to be next to me. Ingrid sits next to Grandma. Anders and Roland stand below us, smiling

and waving.

There is a pull and we are on our way. My back is pressed to the seat. A normal mother. This isn't too bad. We can see the whole park from here and above us the blue sky. Then the carriage turns, falls over the edge, tumbles through the air, no, the carriage is still clinging to the track, metal claws turning, clinging, screaming; it's Stina, I can't even make a sound, barely breathe. I'm stuck in this carriage, my arm around Stina, her small shoulder under my hand, I can't do anything but sit here, fighting the nausea and the dizziness but also something more: this feeling of breaking, the height, the jerky turns tearing at my body, isn't it going to be over soon, one more lap. The carriages turn and scream, thud, thud, and Anders down there, like a shadow in a fog. It's all foggy, the ground, the sky, the people, not more than dots. This will never end, I will always be in this carriage, clinging to Stina, looking up at the blue and puzzled sky that asks me: *What are you doing in that carriage, you should know better, the riddle warned you but you didn't listen*, and me explaining: I just wanted to be a normal mother, the mother who takes her girls on a ride when Anders asks her, not the one constantly saying no, I cannot, it's too much and too difficult.

Thud, thud.

Metal screeching against metal.

A normal mother.

Stina screaming. No, laughing.

I must reach for the laughter and hold on to it, must not break, must not burst out of my body, not leave Stina alone in the carriage and float away above them all into the sky.

A pull, a thud, and everything is still.

“That was fun; come on, Mamma!” Stina's little hand is pulling me.

I must not show them. The nausea, the dizziness. I am a normal mother. I am laughing together with my mom: *Oh, that was awful even though it looked so innocent.*

Right at the exit, next to the entrance, is a sign. None of us saw it before. Wild Mouse is graded a five, the highest. *Aggressive thrill ride*. But it looked so small! We're all laughing. My mom sighs with relief: finally ground under her feet, and she is so afraid of heights! Anders reads the sign carefully. NOT ADVISED FOR PEOPLE WITH HEART PROBLEMS OR SERIOUS MEDICAL CONDITIONS. And then he looks at me.

“I’m so sorry, Lene, I didn’t know,” he says.

“But it doesn’t apply to me,” I say, fighting the tears. “It shouldn’t. I mean she said I don’t have to worry.” His arms are around me and I’m still dizzy, whispering in his ear: “I survived two deliveries.”

“I’m sorry,” he says again.

He doesn’t let go and the riddle is squirming in my chest.

No need to worry.

I survived.

I look up at the sign. The picture of the bright red heart, crossed out.

OceanofPDF.com

CHAPTER 19

Snow in Vallendar

The air is cold and I inhale deeply as I turn to lock the door. Anders puts Ingrid in the stroller.

“There, baby, let’s go for a walk. You comfy, baby?”

I love to hear him talk to her and watch her look up at him with her pale blue eyes, the same shade as his. I make sure her hat covers her ears and grab the stroller, but Anders gently pushes me aside.

“Okay,” he says. “You warm enough?”

“It’s really cold,” I say. “Let’s not go far.”

“Where do you want to go?”

“I thought we might buy some turkey for dinner,” I say. “It’s just down at the Burgplatz.”

Anders raises his arm and points downhill in a dramatic gesture:

“To the Turkey Van we shall go!”

I laugh and the warm air from my mouth lingers in front of me. I know Anders really likes the roasted turkey two local brothers sell out of a van by the town square.

As we walk down the driveway and turn out on the sidewalk of Humboldtstraße, I grab his arm and he turns to smile at me. His smile has that special softness in his eyes that is only there when he is looking at me. I would follow him to the end of the world. Anders had hesitated about going abroad to study once we had baby Ingrid, though going abroad was part of the curriculum. Of course we’ll go, I told him, it will be an adventure. I want all his dreams to come true, I cannot bear the thought of us being his shackles, nor the thought of him leaving us in Göteborg, of me and Ingrid being far from him.

Göteborg School of Business assigned Anders a place at the WHU Otto Beisheim School of Management in Vallendar, a small village in Germany, and here we are. Among the half-timbered seventeenth-century houses and the modern concrete facades. The medieval castle ruins and the shining steel bridges over the river Rhein. The magical woods and the autobahn cutting through the landscape.

My hands are cold and I realize I have forgotten my mittens.

“I’ll get them,” Anders says, and I grab the stroller as he runs back up the hill. He is always like that. One step ahead of me. I make sure Ingrid is comfortable in the stroller, that her hands are warm, and then I take in the spectacular view of the home of the Müller family, whose basement we’re renting. The valley sloping down, rooftop after rooftop; the gray river Rhein, where the fields are sleeping on the island Niederwerth; and above it all: a gray January sky, carrying a promise of snow.

Anders is coming back. “Here,” he says, giving me my mittens, and I put them on.

We follow the street winding down; past the high wall to the convent, the small house with the sign on the mailbox, ZUM VERKAUF: HONIG, and the little park with the stream. Anders tells me all about his week in school, his projects, his assignments. I love to hear him talk. It makes the loneliness of my days dissolve, just like the clouds of warm air dissolve in front of our faces as we speak.

“But tell me more about your week,” he says.

“It was good,” I say and smile, ignoring the voice inside telling me I am lying. “Ingrid is better.” We have often been sick this winter. My sweet baby alternately sucking desperately and crying when breast-feeding, pulling for air, her little nose clogged.

“That’s a relief,” Anders says and looks at me like he is searching for something.

But I will not tell him of the loneliness and the fatigue and the strange darkness that is somehow constantly surrounding me, making the days and the nights alike . . . except for days that we are together.

“I love our Saturday walks,” I say and he smiles.

We have reached Marienburg Castle, in which Anders’s school is situated, where apparantly Goethe once lived. There is a bench in the small park beside the stone wall.

“Do you want to rest?” he asks.

“Sure,” I say and shrug, sitting down. Actually I am breathless, but he doesn’t need to know. I don’t even have the strength to speak. It’s because of the walk, I tell myself.

“Here we go.” Anders lifts Ingrid out of the stroller and puts her in my lap. She is already eight months old and wiggles to point at something; the pattern of frost on the wooden bench.

“Is it all right if I just run inside real quick to check my test results?” Anders says.

“Okay,” I say, and he waves at Ingrid before turning around the corner.

Ingrid is cooing and laughing and pointing; her small index finger has slipped out of her baby mitten, following the lines of the bench, and I marvel at her eye for details. It is wonderful to hear her laugh, to feel the weight of her in the coverall, her small legs, her little body—it’s like she has always been here with me.

The first three months she had colic, cried and cried for hours. We took turns, Anders and me, to rock and lull and comfort her through the nights. This past summer is a fog to me: breast-feeding, tiredness, crying. And then we moved here. We have been here for five months. In a couple of months we are going home again, but we had to let go of our small rented apartment. Hopefully we’ll find something. Anders’s parents told us about a place, a townhouse we might be able to rent when the owners move to Moscow. Solveig sounded enthusiastic on the phone: it’s close to the woods and the meadows of Fjällbo, beautiful nature, and the best part: it’s really close to us!

It seems so far away: Sweden, Mom and Dad, Cecilia, Petra, and Viktor. My childhood in Kungsbacka, summers by the sea, the seagulls, the cold salty water, the golden sand burning my feet . . . The students here are from all over the world, filling the small village, sitting at the cafés, walking across the Burgplatz.

Ingrid is getting restless and I lift her up as I stand up, close to the high stone wall of the castle.

“Look here, baby,” I say. “Look at this.” I point at the green moss in a crack. Her small hands grab for the stones and I wonder what the castle was like in the days of Goethe. I can almost feel it, here in this small park outside of the castle wall, the wind shaking the trees, the heaviness of the

towers on the other side of the wall. Putting my cheek against the cold stone I can hear the question that is not a question rising inside of me and I am tempted to ask Mr. Goethe: "What about this? Do you have an answer to this?" And him answering: "Everything has been thought of before, the problem is to think of it again," and I am wondering about that, listening to the silence of the stones in the wall, in case he says something more, but my feet are getting cold and Ingrid is wriggling to get back into the stroller, impatient to get going again.

"Nope, no results yet." Anders is back. "Next week, they said."

I smile at him as I bend over to put Ingrid in the stroller.

"Turkey Van, here we come," Anders says.

And then I can feel that familiar softness touch my cheek and I turn my face up to the white sky. Yes. It really is.

"It's snowing!" I shout and my stomach has the same bubbly feeling as when I was a kid.

Anders also turns his face up. "Yes, it is!"

I inhale it all, the sky, the whiteness, the light, making the darkness and the heaviness seem far away. I crouch down next to Ingrid in the stroller.

"Look, baby, it's snowing!"

She sticks out her tongue and squints as a snowflake lands in her eyelashes and I feel I have never seen anything more beautiful.

CHAPTER 20

I enter the kitchen and the others are already there. The kitchen table is full of milk and juice cartons like skyscrapers in a miniature city made of cereals, bread, jam, butter. A package of ham glistens in the sun like the surface of a lake.

There is no hurry, school doesn't start until Tuesday. Stina spills milk on the table. Ingrid leans against her grandma. Anders's hair is still wet from his shower. We are starting to find a routine in this new country. My parents too, Dad eating grapes from Florida, saying, *Oj oj oj, I could eat this every day for the rest of my life*, making everyone laugh—he usually doesn't burst out in songs of praise, or even in so many words.

My body gratefully receives it all—the laughter, the sound of my father's voice, the sunshine—after another night of darkness and difficult breathing, my lungs still aching, chest heavy as stone.

“Did you sleep well?” Anders asks, coming close to hug me. His hair smells of shampoo.

“Mm. And you?”

“Well, I guess we're all a bit tired after yesterday.”

“Yeah, we got home late. It was far too late for these little troll kids.” The girls laugh as I ruffle their hair.

“If we're troll kids, then you're trolls too! Troll-mamma. Troll-pappa.” Ingrid, my little philosopher, bites into her ham sandwich.

Stina catches on. “Troll-*mormor!* Troll-*morfar!*”

My mom laughs. “Well, I might look like a troll.” She runs her hand through her hair. “But I have to say, I can hardly believe that we went on that roller coaster yesterday. Graded a five!”

Dad gets up. “Lene, I was thinking I could start putting up some curtain rods today.”

“Thanks, Dad,” I say, and he starts to explore the wall surrounding the kitchen window, tapping and listening.

“Do you have a power drill?” he asks.

“Yes, but we need to check if it works here in the US, because of the voltage,” I say. “I think we need a transformer, right, Anders?”

Anders nods, bent over his laptop on the kitchen counter. My dad continues to tap the wall leading to the dining room while talking to himself, *Here’s a beam, here the wall is wood, but here it’s drywall.*

I sit down next to Stina. At the other side of the table Ingrid is looking at me laughing—they have been joking about something, my mom and the kids.

Stina gets up, her bowl half empty.

“Stina, aren’t you going to finish it?” I ask as I pour myself some juice.

“Must I?”

“Please try some more.”

Stina sighs and sits down again.

Anders closes his laptop and turn to us. “See you tonight. Good luck with the curtain rods.”

My mom collects the dirty plates to put in the dishwasher and receives a grateful look from Anders.

Everything is wonderfully normal. Stina scraping her bowl with the spoon. Anders trying to fit his laptop in his bag full of documents. Ingrid finishing her sandwich. The sound of my dad tapping the wall in the dining room, which has become the kids’ room, the table full of drawings, crayons, scissors, colored pencils.

The glass of juice in my hand is strangely heavy.

Pineapple. Yellow and sweet.

Stina gets up; she has finished her cereal.

The sunshine bounces off the glass in my hand, into the kitchen, shining on Anders, Mom, Ingrid, Stina. Their hair, their eyes, their mouths saying words I am not hearing. It’s like I’m in a bubble, not quite in this kitchen, in this body, but not outside either, my hand sinking, the glass of juice hitting the table unnecessarily hard, the hand holding the glass not quite mine.

The phone is ringing.

It has been ringing for a while but I haven’t noticed. Shrill, impatient signals.

My dad is still tapping the wall behind me. I’m watching and listening from inside my bubble. The girls washing their hands in the kitchen sink,

the sticky strawberry jam, the water running, their small hands, the phone ringing.

Anders, already on his way out the door, turns back. The phone is lying on the counter. *Hello. Good morning. Yes, she's here.* He looks pale, turns to me.

But I am still not quite here, floating above it all, looking down at Anders, his broad shoulders, his hand sinking, holding the phone.

Lene, it's for you.

Come on, come on now.

His hand gently pulls me up, across the floor, through the back door. The cicadas buzzing. The heat. The phone pressed to my ear, piercing the bubble.

“Yes? This is Lene.”

CHAPTER 21

A Civilized Society

You have to call someone,” I beg him. “If you’re going away, you must ask someone to help me. It’s only been a week. I can barely get out of bed.”

“I’ll ask someone to come,” he says.

“Do you really have to go?” I plead.

“I’m sorry,” he says, “I have to. It’s an important meeting. They’ll finally tell us what’s happening with the layoffs. You know that I’d be among the first to go, I’ve only been with the company six months. I have to go to Stockholm.”

He comes into the bedroom, ties his tie, bends down to kiss me swiftly, tells me “see you tonight,” and is gone. I hear the sound of the front door closing, that familiar thud, and then I’m alone.

The minutes pass slowly. The hours.

Ingrid and baby Stina are sleeping on each side of me.

Dare I move? Will the bleeding ever subside?

Outside the birds are chirping. A flap of green wallpaper hangs loose in the corner by the bed. Stina’s small face is close to mine, I can feel her warm breaths on my lips. Her eyelids tremble and I wonder what she is dreaming about.

My beautiful baby girl.

I had just started university again. Ingrid was a year and a half; we thought we would be able to make it work, putting the pieces of the puzzle in place, Anders’s job, my studies, and Ingrid. Until I became pregnant. The same week I took the pregnancy test, the immense fatigue was back again. To ride the bus to the university, attend lectures, ride the bus back again, I just couldn’t do it. I had to drop out.

I remember the weight of her on my chest after the delivery, the warmth, the dark hair on her small head. But the hospital bed was narrow and I couldn't move my arms.

"I . . . I can't . . ." I tried to say. "Hold her . . ."

The midwife gave me a glance.

"You can't hold your own baby?"

"I . . . please . . ."

My baby started to slide down, slippery with the blood and the vernix. And my arms, my damn arms, they didn't obey me, I couldn't even lift them from the bed.

"Anders, you have to . . ."

She was sliding.

"Take her!"

Anders was quickly beside me, lifting her up, wrapping her in a blanket. I couldn't even hold my own baby. My arms, what was wrong with them? My whole body shaking.

Now, it's just me and my girls.

It's hot in the bedroom. We are all sweaty, lying close to each other.

How long have we been doing this?

I don't even have a phone within reach.

There's a knock at the front door. Two floors down.

The slightest movement and the blood gushes out of me. There are no signs of it subsiding.

The knocking continues. Who can it be? Solveig maybe.

I can't make it down the stairs, open the door. I can't even get out of bed.

"Help me," I cry.

"Please help me."

The knocking ceases.

"Please."

Silence.

Anders had told me he went to Stockholm for the sake of our family. But still the thought of him has a bitter taste, the memory of him in his suit, preparing to go to Landvetter Airport, telling me, "See you tonight," as if I weren't begging him to stay. He has been traveling for work Monday through Friday for most of the summer, leaving me to care for Ingrid on my

own. To give Ingrid some small adventures I walked for endless slow strolls with her, looking at butterflies, helping her climb her favorite tree in the forest, bending slowly over my growing belly, avoiding lifting her when helping her up.

If I lie completely still, maybe the bleeding will stop.

I am too weak to get up anyway.

How much blood have I lost?

There must be something wrong. Or is it like this for all women who have recently given birth? Is it just me who is weak, sensitive, useless? God, what am I to do? My heart races in my chest. I need to calm down, think logically. It's probably best if I just lie still. Give it a chance to subside.

My tears flow over my cheeks, making my hair and the pillow wet. Ingrid whimpers in her sleep, she is probably hungry. I think she had some biscuits in the kitchen earlier. I could hear her pull a chair across the floor to reach the cupboard.

I can feel my body getting weaker, like I'm becoming transparent.

Maybe I'm not here.

Maybe this is a nightmare.

The window paints a bright square on the wall. A dark light. I turn to the shadows in the corners, where the darkness is honest, the darkness is darkness, not pretending to be anything else.

Somewhere out there is Anders, three hundred miles away, in Stockholm, at the meeting with his colleagues.

I can hear voices just outside the window, the neighbors: Cheers, welcome, what a lovely evening.

You are not supposed to resent your own husband. You are not supposed to bleed to death in your own bed, not in a civilized society. You need to be up and about, get a grip, don't be a wimp, have thick skin. The nurses' words come back to me: You might as well get used to being a mother. You can't hold your own baby?

Maybe if I try to sit up, carefully, carefully . . . The blood starts flowing again, I can feel it, big lumps. I ought to change . . . I ought to put something beneath me, a towel or something. I ought to pull myself up, carefully, no, the dizziness, I can't.

I fall back.

OceanofPDF.com

CHAPTER 22

I press the phone to my ear. The man's voice sounds far away over the buzzing of the cicadas. Anders is standing next to me, listening as closely as he can.

"My name is Dr. Howard. I got the results of your ultrasound this morning. Actually, I'm on vacation, on my boat." He laughs, a nervous laugh, short and cut off, as if reminding himself: this is no time for laughter. I can hear seagulls squawking in the background. "But I had to call you immediately."

Silence. He is waiting for me. I have to find something in this dry throat of mine to say.

"Yes . . . ?"

"Well, as a matter of fact . . . your ultrasound shows . . ."

I have to press the phone harder to my ear to be able to hear him. Anders is so close I can feel his cheek against my hand.

". . . Actually, it's very abnormal. We'll have to fix this. We'll have to meet at my office after the weekend and talk about this. It is very abnormal. Your heart. We have to fix this. Soon, very soon." I can hear him trying to suppress emotion. Abnormal. We have to fix this. It's abnormal. *Abnormal.*

He's waiting for me again. A word from this desert that is my throat.

"Okay."

"My secretary will call you after we have spoken. She knows about you. You need to come on Tuesday, immediately after the Labor Day weekend. We'll talk more then."

I can hear the seagulls screeching behind him.

The cars behind our back wall.

The cicadas buzzing in the trees.

And the silence again. Dr. Howard waiting for me.

"Okay. Thank you," I manage to say.

“Take care now,” he says.

“Thank you.”

“Take care.”

“Yes.”

“Bye, then.”

Click.

Silence.

The cell phone heavy in my hand.

“I *knew* it was something!” My voice is like somebody else’s. “I *knew* it.”

And then the tears. I am *not* crazy. I have *not* been out of my mind, all these years.

“What did he tell you, Lene?” he whispers. “What did you find out?”

But he must know, the way he listened beside me during the phone call, as best he could.

“What did he say? What did he tell you, Lene?”

He holds me and I bury my face at his neck, my tears disappearing into the fabric of his shirt.

“He said there’s something wrong with me! Something serious! *Abnormal*, he said. I knew it!” All these years I have been wondering. Wondering and knowing at the same time, without ever getting answers. “He said we need to fix this! What do you think he meant by that?” I can hardly speak through the tears.

“I don’t know.”

The scent of his skin, like the ocean air back home, salt and water. His strong shoulders.

The cicadas buzzing.

It’s like falling: a glass to the ground, my whole life in pieces: everything filtered through that small word *abnormal*. And yet it is a relief to be shattered, to finally be let out of the dark. To be held in the sunlight.

“Lene, we have to go back inside,” he says. “Your parents are wondering.”

I can see glimpses of my dad through the glass in the back door.

“But the girls?” I ask. “What about them?”

“Let’s wait to tell them. We need to find out more. Wait here.”

Anders goes inside, leaving me alone. He opens the door again.

“The girls are up in the playroom.”

We go back in together.

I CAN HEAR THEIR VOICES, RISING THROUGH THE HOUSE, A stream of murmur and silence.

The desktop is old and worn, rough under my fingers.

I wouldn't have been able to imagine a moment like this, sitting here repeating Dr. Howard's words in my mind, the day we moved in—was it only a couple of weeks ago? This corner of the bedroom became my own little place with my desk, chair, and bookcase full of my old books stacked to fill every shelf to the last centimeter.

My tears drip down on the smooth surface of my closed laptop.

Abnormal. Fix. Soon.

What did he mean? Fix? How do you “fix” your heart? The word *fix* makes me think of men working with tools, dressed in coveralls and bending over an open engine, black oil and grease up to their elbows.

After the phone call we asked my parents to join us in the living room. We asked them to sit down and then we told them. There wasn't really much to tell. We all had more questions than answers. Dad became suspicious, telling us to get a second opinion before deciding anything. He was firm on that point: what if it was some sort of a con artist at work here, who wanted to squeeze money out of the gullible foreigners!

Closing my eyes I remember Dr. Howard's voice. The seagulls in the background. His short nervous laughter. He is not trying to con me, I'm sure of it. But my dad is right too; I need a second opinion.

Mom didn't say much, sitting on the couch next to Dad, but I could see the worry in her eyes. My mother is silent when she faces conflict, pain, sorrow. It's like she becomes mute. When I was growing up, her silence often confused me.

Mamma, why do I feel different, is something wrong with me? Why am I not like the other kids?

Silence.

Mamma, why do you tell me I am lazy, when I'm trying to help out as much as I can?

Silence.

Eventually the questions dry up. The silence put a lid on them.
Is there no one I can talk to?
There is someone.
I write an e-mail.

Hi Mia,

I need to write to you and tell you that I am very worried. I don't have anyone else to turn to. I just received a phone call from a cardiologist at Bryn Mawr Hospital. Yesterday I had an ultrasound of my heart and he told me that there is a serious issue. He said that my heart is very abnormal and that it needs to be fixed. What did he mean by that, do you think? He called from his vacation on his boat, but his secretary called us immediately after he did and made an appointment after the weekend. I feel very small and sad and scared.

Lene

This is not something I would normally do—open up like this to a stranger. I don't know much about Mia except that she is Swedish and lives with her husband and three teenage kids in Bryn Mawr, which happens to be the neighborhood next to Radnor.

I hesitate, moving the small arrow across the button on the screen. *Send.*

Out the window cars disappear behind our back wall, on Radnor Chester Road, sending flashes of light. I can see our neighbor turning out of his driveway in his silver car. Life goes on, like nothing has happened. Thinking of the girls, my tears resurface. Up in the playroom are two little girls playing with their dolls who don't know that I'm trying to imagine them growing up, their faces, their way of walking and talking, trying to imagine how their days and their dreams and their knowledge of the world abruptly might have to change. My little girls.

I can still hear the mumbling from downstairs. Repeating *abnormal, fix it, abnormal . . .* The words feel contagious, as if the words themselves create my abnormal heart. Maybe it's the same reason my mother becomes mute in front of pain. The feeling that the words create reality. That without words, there would be nothing.

“Lene!” It’s Anders, shouting from downstairs. “Lene, Mia is on the phone!”

Already?

He meets me at the foot of the stairs and gives me the phone.

“Hello, Mia,” I say, reaching for Anders, but he has already turned back to the kitchen.

“Lene, I called as soon as I saw your e-mail!” she shouts into my ear. “You shouldn’t do anything, *anything*, until you have spoken with my husband! He is a professor of cardiac diagnostics and he will know exactly what needs to be done.” She speaks quickly, not waiting for an answer. “Now, this is what you need to do: you need to call Bryn Mawr Hospital and ask them to give you the result of the ultrasound, one paper copy and one CD. You have the right to ask for it. And as soon as you get it you need to come over to our place so that my husband, Sami, can look at it. Don’t forget, one paper copy and one CD. They might fuss a little about giving you a CD, but they’ll have to give it to you when you ask for it.”

“Okay,” I say and I can barely believe what she is saying, her husband being a cardiac professor, it is just too amazing. I feel faint and sit down on the stairs.

“Call as soon as you have the copies.”

“We’ll do that,” I say and I have a hard time holding back my tears. “Thank you, Mia!”

“It might take a day for them to prepare the copies, so call them immediately and when you have them, come directly to us,” she says.

“Thank you.”

“We’ll see you soon, then.”

We hang up. One e-mail and everything changes! I hurry to the others in the kitchen.

“Incredible!” I barely know how to tell them. “Mia’s husband is a professor in cardiac diagnostics and we didn’t know it!”

They look at me, Anders, Mom, and Dad, all wide eyed and silent, and I exhale and lean against the wall and then Mom comes to hold me. It is happening so fast. All my secrets are coming out in the open. My mother holds me against her soft bosom, not saying a word.

CHAPTER 23

Where Are You Going?

A bag, I need a bag, the dark blue sports bag from the storage room in the basement. There it is, among the mess of paint buckets and brushes and tools. My thoughts are heavy, my body heavy, the bag heavy. The girls are playing in Stina's room, they mustn't see me, no one must see me, carrying the sports bag up the stairs. Clothes, I need to pack some clothes, what do I need? I don't even know where to go; a pair of jeans, a sweater, socks, underwear, that should do it, my wallet, so I can buy a bus ticket.

Anders and Arne are in front of the house—they see me leaving.

“What's the matter, Lene?” Anders asks, looking up from the pile of stones, but I am already past them, on my way down the sidewalk. The puzzled look on Arne's face: he must think I'm crazy, but he doesn't understand. He lives on the same planet as all normal people; my father-in-law is soft spoken and kind, he would never slam the front door leaving, the bang echoing through the neighborhood.

He's helping Anders put stones in the ground in front of our small townhouse, but it doesn't help no matter what we do, this house will always be an unfinished, crumbling shack. It's from the forties, the old electric wires hanging dangerously from the ceiling in the basement, the house cold as ice in the wintertime, water trickling from the taps. There was nowhere else to go when we came back from Germany. The housing market was dead, there weren't even any small rental apartments to be found in all of Göteborg, especially not for two poor students with a baby. We had no choice but to rent the townhouse from that family Solveig had spoken about, who were moving to Moscow. After a year that family decided they would not move back and wanted to sell, and suddenly we had nowhere to go. Anders was offered the job with the consulting firm in Stockholm at the last

minute so that we could get a loan at the bank and buy the house ourselves right before Stina was born.

Thud, thud, thud, my sneakers beat against the sidewalk and my heart pounds in my chest.

I reach the bus stop. There's no one else here and I sit down on the bench, the bag by my side. The sky is cloudy and gray, the neighborhood quiet. Everyone else seem to be on vacation, eating ice cream somewhere on a beach, while Anders and Arne are putting stones in front of our house that will never be finished. Anders rejects the suggestions I make: We can't afford it, we don't have the time, it's too difficult.

Mamma, where are you going? I was too upset, too heartbroken, I didn't catch the words, until now.

Ingrid's small voice.

Mamma, where are you going?

I don't even know where I'm going, I don't know what I am doing, I only know that something is breaking inside of me. I don't even want to leave. These past two years are a mess in my mind, of colic nights rocking and lulling Stina, of constant renovations, keeping the girls away from the tools and the dust and the paint, and at the same time Anders's job searching, since he lost the job at the consulting firm all the same, not even a month after Stina was born. I was sitting on the couch in the living room, nursing Stina, when Anders came into the room and grabbed the remote, saying we have to turn on the TV, and there they were, the towers, the smoke rising into the sky, my tears, my baby close to my chest, the weight of her in my arms, the smell of sour milk, and the people jumping trying to save themselves and suddenly, no, no, no, not another one, the clouds of fire and smoke, time that refused to turn back, that rushed forward, rushed and fell and collapsed, dust and debris and Anders whispering: I'll lose my job now, there's no doubt about it anymore, all our big clients were right there. But the screen showed only dust and rubble and in a few moments the earth had become so small it could be held in one hand, in one breath, in one heartbeat.

For six months Anders worked as a low-paid traveling salesman before he got the job at SKF, Svenska Kullagerfabriken. Now he's not just traveling to Stockholm or the small towns around Göteborg anymore; he travels all over the world, for weeks at a time. I feel so lonely, doing it all by myself:

laundry, diapers, potty training, feeding, averting the fights, walking the kids back and forth from the daycare center where they play for a couple of hours three days a week . . .

I am grateful. I am.

The job at SKF was the best thing that could have happened to us. We would have had to move out of the house that very same month had Anders not gotten it. It took six months to pay off the money we had borrowed from Solveig and Arne, just to be able to keep the house.

Anders works hard, trying his best.

It's me who is wrong.

I have to try harder, smile and be happy, for my girls' sake, but it's exhausting, I am always exhausted, but they're just innocent children, I can't draw them into the darkness, let it creep into their glittering eyes. The darkness is mine, I have to carry it alone.

Ingrid's small voice, my little four-year-old: Mamma, where are you going?

The bus is coming; I can see it on the crest of the hill.

Why am I doing this? Where am I going?

The bus stops in front of me and the doors open. The driver is looking at me. Does it show that I've been crying? I look away.

Mamma, where are you going?

Mamma?

I remain on the bench.

The doors close. The bus drives off.

I knew it all along. It's not possible. To stay and leave at the same time. My girls, they are part of me, on a cellular level. Wherever I go, they will follow me, two invisible threads: Ingrid and Stina, the questions I am always asking myself: What are they doing? Are they all right? But the darkness insists: The girls would be better off without you. Anders would find someone new and they would become a perfect little family with a new perfect mamma who would make cinnamon rolls and meatballs while laughing and playing with the girls all day long.

I feel I can never be enough. Do enough.

The tears are back.

Anders is coming down the street, looking worried. I turn away, but he stops in front of me. His shadow is black on the asphalt.

“Lene, what’s wrong?”

I can’t find anything to say. The words are so many and so hard to find, tumbling around in the dark.

“Come, Lene.” Anders lifts the bag. “Come, Lene, please. Ingrid is crying, wondering where you went.”

Anders knows exactly what to say.

There is nothing else to do. And it is a pain and relief at the same time.

I get up and follow him back home.

OceanofPDF.com

CHAPTER 24

*T*he houses in Bryn Mawr have vast yards filled with high trees and green bushes. I pull myself out of the car. There is no sidewalk; I step right into the grass, which tickles my ankles.

Mia was right: it took a day to get the copies of the ultrasound result, but now I have them, the documents and the CD, in a brown envelope pressed to my chest. Anders comes around the car and closes the door behind me.

“Are you sure this is it?” I ask.

“Yeah, pretty sure.” Anders points to the number painted on the mailbox. “Twenty-five.”

The driveway leading up to the house is full of cars. We pass a dark blue Volvo station wagon, a silver minivan, and a red sports car.

“Are they throwing a party?” I ask.

“I think it’s their cars.”

“*Three* cars?”

“Well, they do have teenagers. Sami told us to come straight to the backyard. He’s fixing the pool.”

Anders opens a small gate and we follow the path of stones in the grass along the side of the house. Suddenly there is a man in front of us, wearing yellow swimming trunks. I barely dare to look at him, but he is completely unabashed in his almost nakedness, smiling at us with shining white teeth.

“Hi, I heard you coming!” Sami’s Swedish is round and rolling after many years in the US. We shake hands and I can’t help but notice that the hair on his head is as thick and curly as that on his chest. He receives the brown envelope and immediately opens it, pulling out the documents—large black-and-white pictures, gray and blurred with tiny numbers at the edges.

“Let’s see.” He studies them for a second. “Yes,” he says, looking up from the pictures. “You need open-heart surgery. This is very serious.”

The words *open-heart surgery* hang between us like they're out to dry, bulging in the heat, white sheets that no one wants to claim, collect, and fold. We are silent. The sound of the cicadas comes from the trees, buzzing louder, louder, louder. I feel dizzy and grab Anders's arm.

"Can we sit down somewhere?" Anders asks, looking pale.

Sami turns to me. "How are you feeling, are you all right?"

"I'm always ready to faint." Finally. It is such a relief to be able to tell the truth, not having to pretend: *Everything is fine, I'm fine.*

"Come," Sami says. "Let's go inside and I'll tell you more."

We follow him to the back door and step into the living room.

"Please, sit down," Sami says and motions to one of the big couches. The brown leather is cool against the back of my legs. A ceiling fan lifts a couple of strands of my hair that gently caress my cheek. Anders is still pale, sitting close beside me, holding my hand in a tight grip. I am close to it now: the answer to the riddle. It is sitting on the couch opposite me, wearing yellow swimming trunks. Sami is studying the ultrasound pictures with a frown, his elbows leaning against his knees.

Mia comes in from the kitchen. "So, what do you think, Sami?"

"She definitely needs open-heart surgery." He doesn't look up from the pictures.

"Surgery?" Anders leans forward. "Open heart? Why? What is wrong?"

"I'll explain." Sami catches the T-shirt that Mia throws at him. "The heart has four valves. The pulmonary, the mitral, the tricuspid, and the aortic."

Mia sits down next to him as he puts on his T-shirt and continues.

"The heart pumps the blood into the aorta through the aortic valve." He turns to me. "What you have is a congenital heart disease, an abnormal aortic valve." He puts up his hands, showing me with his fingers. "A normal aortic valve has three cusps, opening and closing, like this, but you only have two. You have a bicuspid aortic valve, instead of a tricuspid. In addition, the valve has developed calcific stenosis, which further impairs the function of the two cusps." He looks at the pictures again. "Now your aortic valve only opens six millimeters. In every heartbeat."

"Six millimeters?" Anders is squeezing my hand so tightly it hurts. "How much should it open?"

“Well, normally it should open about two to two and a half centimeters.” Sami forms a ring out of his thumb and index finger. “This is how much it ought to open. But now, only like this.” His fingers are forming a small hole. “Like the size of a pencil. You need surgery. Soon.”

Anders is moaning, leaning his head in his hands. I can’t help but stroke his hair; the gesture is automatic after all these years, the instinct to try to console him. Mia and Sami start to laugh.

“One might think Anders is the one having surgery!” Sami says. “But Lene, you’re not saying anything—how are you feeling, haven’t you noticed anything all these years?”

“I haven’t been feeling well for a long, long time. I’ve had this constant pressure on my chest and difficulty breathing. And terrible fatigue.” Sami is nodding, like everything I say makes sense, like I am giving him the right answers. “But no doctors in Sweden believed me,” I say. “They told me I was a hypochondriac. That I needed to think positive.”

“But didn’t they hear it,” Mia asks, “when they listened to your heart?”

“No one listened to my heart.”

“But when you were pregnant?” Mia asks, frowning.

“No,” I say.

“Not even during childbirth?”

“No.”

Mia, being a nurse herself, shakes her head in disbelief.

“How is it done?” Anders asks, and I can tell he is struggling to sound calm.

“The chest is opened and the heart connected to a heart-lung machine . . .” Sami interrupts himself, since Anders has started to rock back and forth, moaning again. “Anders, I . . .” he hesitates and continues. “I know one of the best thoracic surgeons. I’ll contact him. He will put in a new valve. The question is whether to choose a metal or a tissue valve.”

“A metal or a . . .” I struggle to find the word.

“Tissue,” Sami says.

“A metal or a tissue,” I repeat. “What’s the difference?”

“The metal valve will probably last longer,” Sami says. “Which is better, of course. But you’ll have to take blood thinners every day for the rest of your life. You’ll never be able to have any more children. The tissue valve doesn’t require you to be on blood thinners and you’ll be able to have

children, but it will need to be changed, in ten, fifteen years approximately, since it will wear out. It's made out of porcine or calf tissue. I would recommend a tissue valve for a young woman like you."

"So the tissue valve is better for me?" My voice trembles but I need to know more.

"Yes. I would say that. The blood thinners must be given in very exact doses, meaning that you'd have to go to a clinic once a week to give a blood sample and adjust the dosage accordingly. You'd not be able to travel as easily and also . . . Well, let's just say it's complicated when dealing with a young woman. The metal valve suits elderly women better."

I try to take all this in, tell myself to remember what Sami is saying; making a list in my mind: tissue valve, not metal, no blood thinners.

"Are you absolutely sure she needs this surgery?" Anders asks.

"Yes."

"What if . . ." Anders hesitates. "What if she didn't?"

Sami is silent, looking at us. Mia doesn't say anything either. The cicadas continue buzzing outside the open back door.

Anders lets his head sink into his hand.

I can feel the monster move in my chest, leaning his head, listening to the silence, knowing what it means.

Sami lifts the CD, tapping it:

"I'll bring this to work and let my colleagues take a look at it as well."

Mia smiles at him and I can see her wiping away a tear, even though she doesn't want anyone to notice. They are a beautiful couple, sitting next to each other on the couch, both in their late forties, Mia with blonde hair touching her shoulders and Sami with his black curls. Someone is walking past in the kitchen, it must be one of their teenage kids, a shadow that disappears again.

"One more thing." Sami turns to Anders. "It's very dangerous for Lene to faint. If she does faint you must call for an ambulance immediately. She might die."

There, he said it. It's the first time any of us has said it. Tears are welling up in my eyes. Anders holds my hand so hard his knuckles are getting white. I can barely feel my fingers. The ceiling fan is spinning. I can see a cat pawing through the grass in the backyard. All those times I felt faint,

struggling to keep the darkness away, to keep standing and not faint. If I had given up, let go, fallen to the ground: would it have meant my death?

“And also . . .” Sami is looking worried. “You aren’t pregnant, are you?”

“No, I’m not pregnant,” I say.

“If you become pregnant, you’ll die. Your heart would never be able to pump the extra amount of blood. The amount of blood increases by approximately two liters during pregnancy. If you had been living here and your heart disease had been known, you would have had a surgeon prepared during your deliveries. Were your deliveries difficult?”

I don’t have the chance to answer before he continues. “There are cases where this heart disease has been discovered during pregnancy. There are even cases where they have performed open-heart surgery and a cesarean at the same time. But you must not become pregnant. Absolutely not. You will die for sure. You have been very lucky, surviving childbirth.”

Now, when it has been said, the word isn’t shy anymore. It crawls into their sentences, their eyes, the way they are looking at me. *You will die. Death. To die.*

NOT UNTIL I AM IN THE CAR, ON OUR WAY BACK HOME AGAIN, do I remember.

“Anders, but there was this one doctor who listened to my heart! Do you remember? Six months ago? Back in Göteborg.”

Yes, he remembers. Of course he remembers.

We had sought help, one last time, at the health center. We explained to the doctor about my fatigue and the pressure on my chest. We usually met a new doctor every time we went there. This time the doctor was a young guy, from Eastern Europe, judging by his name. He hardly said anything. We doubted that he understood what we were trying to say. In the end he pulled out his stethoscope to listen. He became pale.

“That sound . . . It’s . . .”

I was tired of doctors, tired of everything, and I said:

“It’s my old heart murmur. I’ve had it since I was born.”

The young doctor, still pale, looked puzzled.

“Pneumonia,” he said finally.

“But I don’t think so.”

“Yes, pneumonia. You wait. Will get better on its own.”

And Anders, shaking his head:

“Pneumonia, really?”

“Yes. Pneumonia.”

That was the last time we tried to find a doctor to help me.

OceanofPDF.com

CHAPTER 25

The Hook

The meatballs. Focus on the meatballs in the frying pan, don't glance toward the hook in the ceiling above the kitchen window.

There is no lamp hanging from the hook. We have never gotten around to putting one up. It is dark in the kitchen window. Dark outside. Dark inside.

Always dark.

The hook is like a question mark upside down, forced into the white-painted drywall and hard wooden beams. Trapped, wedged so tight it can barely move.

It is difficult to control my thoughts. Several times a day I want to find a string or a rope or whatever . . . pull up a chair and test the hook to see how tight it sits, see if it could withstand the weight.

I have forgotten to turn on the kitchen fan.

Must stir the macaroni.

It hurts to think. It hurts not to think. The heavy darkness presses me to the floor. It is difficult to press back, my head against the sinking ceiling.

The darkness.

But my girls.

They would be crushed. If I let the ceiling come crashing in. If I tried the question mark.

My girls. It is difficult to distinguish them in the dark. I have to search for them, pull them close, hold them tight, stroke their soft hair. Ingrid's thin body, her sharp arms and knees. Stina soft and heavy, clinging to my leg.

The smell of burning. The meatballs.

I have to let them go.

The girls are hungry, asking, "Where's Pappa?"

Where is he?

That's right, Australia.

Plates, cutlery, glasses, a pitcher of water.

Ketchup.

A glass of water tips over.

I get the dishcloth.

Every movement a pain.

Water is dripping onto the floor. I crawl under the table to wipe it up.

Something is sizzling on the stove. The macaroni. I pull the pot from the heat. Pour out the boiling water. The steam is hot, burning my hand, but it's nice. A caress compared to the darkness.

The girls' voices. What are they saying? They want ice cream. Yes, they can get a Popsicle each from the freezer, when they've finished eating. They want to go out to the backyard. Yeah, they can bring the Popsicles, if the weather is nice. Oh, the sun is shining, I didn't notice.

They have already finished.

They have eaten their dinner, chosen their Popsicle flavors, gone out the back door. Their light voices echo from the yard into the kitchen.

The hook in the ceiling cries. But what about me? WHAT ABOUT ME? ME? ME? ME? ME?

A chair. To the window. It is heavy to pull. Just one step up, and then: lightness. The chair wobbles under my weight, making me sway. The kitchen is different from up here. The mess on the kitchen table, the girls' toys, the floor so far away.

ME? ME? ME?

The hook sits tight.

It could withstand my weight.

ME? ME? ME?

The belt in my jeans. That might work.

Someone would see me from the street right outside the window, someone would come, take care of my girls.

The chair wobbles. I close my eyes, this urge in my stomach, it is so strong, this longing to fall.

YES, YES, YES, the hook cries.

It is a strange love story you can have with a hook. You can cheat on your entire family with a piece of curved steel. But my arms do not want this. The hook does not want this. It is scratching and biting the burned skin in my hand. Round and round.

BUT WHAT ABOUT ME?

Please, it has to end.

Twisting, turning.

Please, please.

A little more.

Just a little.

BUT WHAT ABOUT—

The hook is curled up and quiet in my hand.

I hear the girls' voices. I hide the hook in my pocket.

“Mamma, can you please come with us to the playground?”

The chair wobbles.

A small, black eye is staring down at me from the ceiling.

CHAPTER 26

I pull down my sweater and sit up. The nurse is already on her way out the door, pushing the big ECG machine on wheels in front of her.

“Dr. Howard will be with you shortly.”

There is not much to say and we are silent, Anders on the chair opposite me in the small examination room. He did not bring a book this time and his hands are restless, his thumb rubbing the back of his hand. He is looking at me, smiling, but it is a tired smile that falls to the floor somewhere at my knees.

“Do you think the girls are okay?” I say, trying to make him think of something else. “Wow, first day of school.”

“They are brave girls.” He smiles. “They will be all right.”

Thinking of the girls sends a shiver to my heart: their small faces looking up at me and Stina’s hand that wouldn’t let go, as if the bus were a yellow dragon about to swallow her. Me telling her: *You have to go, go on, get on the bus.* And she obeying, hesitantly. Ingrid already on, trying to be a good girl, a big girl. And the bus pulling away, their small faces pale behind the glass.

The door opens and a tall, dark-haired man in his thirties comes in. He has sensitive eyes that reveal a softness, despite the hard grip greeting me and Anders.

“Hello. My name is Dr. Howard.” He turns to me. “Yeah, we already spoke last Friday, right? How are you feeling?”

“Yeah, well . . .” I don’t know what to say.

Anders cuts in:

“We have a friend who’s working with cardiac diagnosis. He’s a professor at University of Pennsylvania.”

“Oh yeah?” Dr. Howard sits down on the other chair and it seems too small for him, his tall legs trying to fit the tiny room, his knee touching the small desk between him and Anders.

“He has taken a look at the ultrasound.” Anders pauses and looks down at his hands, his thumb still rubbing his knuckles. “He told us about the surgery.” He looks up again.

“So you already know?” Dr. Howard’s relief, it’s like the whole room is stretching itself, the chair creaking under him.

“Yes,” I say.

Dr. Howard turns to me. “You know that you must choose between a metal valve and a tissue valve? Have you decided?”

“Our friend, Dr. Anwar, recommends a tissue valve,” Anders says. “We would like to hear your opinion as well.”

Anders discusses valves with Dr. Howard so that I don’t have to. I can focus on sitting up on the exam table, trying to push away the darkness, black flies swarming in the corners of my eyes, no matter how I try to blink them away. Dr. Howard confirms everything Sami said. Yes, a tissue valve is better. Then there is also the question of when to have the surgery. His brown eyes search me like the answer could be found somewhere on my body.

“It’s always better with a planned and prepared surgery than an emergency surgery. Fortunately, we can plan this.” He is quiet, looking at me. Then he turns to Anders, shaking his head. “But if she were my wife, I wouldn’t wait.” His eyes are back on me. “Where will you have it done? I mean, you can have it done here at Bryn Mawr Hospital, if you want to.”

“We’re waiting for an answer from Dr. Anwar,” Anders says. “He promised he would contact one of the surgeons he knows.”

“I see.”

The room is quiet. Dr. Howard is still looking at me.

Suddenly his hands are up, almost touching the ceiling, like he has scored a goal in soccer.

“This is amazing! A thirty-one-year-old woman! This is the reason I became a cardiologist!” His hands are pounding the air and we all have to laugh. “I can hardly believe it! Discovering a congenital heart disease in a young woman like you! How is it possible that it has gone undetected all these years?”

“I don’t know,” I say. “In Sweden we don’t have regular medical checkups. There was one doctor who listened to my heart when I was six,

but he said we would never have to worry about it again. But I'm wondering why they didn't perform an ultrasound?"

"When you were six, let's see . . . that must have been . . . 1983? The first ultrasound devices didn't come until 1984 and I'm not sure they would have helped anyway, they were very unclear, you could barely discern anything."

"Oh, I see. I have been wondering about that."

"But you must have noticed something? I mean, you've had this all your life and it has gradually been getting worse, you must be exhausted? Frankly, I have never seen anyone with an aortic valve this narrow."

"Yes, I am exhausted. It's been awful. I've been to a lot of doctors back in Sweden. But no one found it."

"Unbelievable."

Dr. Howard gets up from his chair.

"You'll stay in touch? Please, let me know what happens. And any questions at all, just call me."

"Yes. Thank you," I say. "We'll stay in touch."

For a second he looks shy. "Okay, then. Take care, both of you."

Dr. Howard's grip is softer this time and his brown eyes seem like there is something more he wants to tell me, but then he smiles, nods, and looks away. Anders and I walk back through the long corridor under the fluorescent light.

AT HOME THERE IS AN E-MAIL WAITING FOR ME FROM SAMI.

Fwd. Re: bicuspid aortic valve and significant gradient of 47 mmhg (mean) and 83 mmhg peak.

Dear Dr. Anwar,

I'd be delighted to.

I'll call her tomorrow.

Regards,

Dr. Jacob Holstein

Re: bicuspid aortic valve and significant gradient of 47 mmhg (mean) and 83 mmhg peak.

Dear Dr. Holstein,

Would you like to take on this 31-year-old female, mother of two small children?

Regards,

Dr. S. Anwar

Anders is standing close to me as we lean over the laptop. We read the messages over and over again. Are we getting this right? The surgeon is going to call *us*? Is he really saying that *he* will call *us*?

Anders's arms are around me, letting me sob into his shirt. I let it all out. The girls will soon be home from school, they will need something to eat, and we need to think about how to tell them back in Sweden, my sisters, my brother, Solveig and Arne, everyone.

"It can wait," he whispers, and his hand is gentle in my hair. "We can deal with it when we know more."

But I have more to say through the tears. We need to discuss things with Mom and Dad, who have offered to have Mom stay for as long as she is needed, to help out with the girls. Dad has to go home to work. And we need to talk about what to tell the kids . . .

"Shhh." Anders's fingers gently, gently comb my hair.

I close my eyes, his strong arms around me, rocking me silently, saying: *Everything is going to be fine.*

The cicadas are so loud I can hear them through the closed windows. It's September, but summer is still in full swing. No chill in the air, no falling leaves. I can feel it, my heart beating, beating, beating against my chest and against his chest, beating telling me no no no and at the same time the answer to the riddle, making me shrink with fear, yes, I will die young.

CHAPTER 27

Tenderness

Anders doesn't get it. It's not about him being late. He stands there defending himself.

"I have to travel, it's part of the job."

It's dark outside and I have been waiting for hours. I managed to get the girls to stay in bed, after they jumped in and out shouting "We wanna wait for Pappa!" But the flight was delayed and the road from Landvetter was almost blocked by snow. It's not Anders's fault that he comes home late at night. It's never his fault. It's always me.

"Why are you giving me this crap," he says, taking off his jacket. "I'm only doing it for our sake."

"Yeah, that's right, I forgot, you are the hero and I'm the ungrateful nagging wife."

"That's not what I meant—"

"You meant that it's a huge sacrifice on your part to stay in a hotel and have everything ready at your fingertips." Part of me wants to take back these words, start over, but it's like I have become someone else—who is this person?

He carries the suitcase up the stairs into the living room. I can tell it's heavy, bumping against the floor.

"Be careful," I say and I don't just mean the wooden floor. I want to tell him: I mean you, be careful, you might hurt your back, but he is already speaking again.

"It's not as fun to travel as everyone seems to think. Sitting in a crowded airplane, trying to sleep."

"I don't think it's fun. That's not what I'm saying."

“Believe me, there’s nothing glamorous about brushing your teeth over a small plastic cup and sharing a tiny bathroom with hundreds of strangers.”

The darkness is crawling in through the windows. Anders looks pale and tired under the one lamp in the ceiling. I want to reach out and pull away the shadows from his face, but that’s how he always tricks me! First tenderness and then he is gone on his next trip. Leaving me alone with the kids.

“I don’t want to hear it,” I say. “You make everything about you! I’m just trying . . . I’m trying . . .”

“I just don’t want you to think that I’m enjoying myself. I never stay a minute longer than I have to!”

“Schh, don’t wake the kids,” I say. I can’t bear the thought of them being dragged into our fights. I try so hard during the days: play with them, smile at them, protect them from the darkness that seems to swallow me.

“Everyone else stayed an extra day to go sightseeing—” he continues.

“My hero!” I barely recognize my own voice.

“Now you’re being sarcastic.”

“Oh, I’m so sorry, your Royal Highness. I’m sorry for not having your dinner warm and ready at the table and—”

“Lene, stop.” He sits down on the couch, pulling his hand through his hair. “We’ve done this so many times. Please stop—”

“Why am I the one who’s supposed to stop—”

“Lene—”

“You don’t know how hard it is when you’re away. I can’t do it all on my own!” I can’t help shouting.

“You’re doing a great job with the kids. I’ll take them to daycare tomorrow so that you can rest—”

“I don’t want to rest! I want to DO something! I want to—”

“I think you really need to rest. You seem to be—”

“Don’t tell me what to do!”

“I’m only trying to help . . .”

“Don’t!” The darkness is red. I can barely see him. “Don’t help me! Actually, it would have been better if you didn’t come home at all! If I hadn’t been waiting for you, I’d have been asleep and then I wouldn’t need your help tomorrow taking the girls to daycare so that you needn’t worry about stopping on your way to your IMPORTANT meetings—”

“That’s not fair. You know I take them when I’m not traveling,” he says. Like I don’t do anything.

“Oh, amazing! Thank you for your enormous generosity.”

“I want to help you.”

“Help me? HELP ME? Ha, ha.” That’s how he always says it. Always HIM helping ME. Doing what I should do, but don’t, since he is HELPING me.

“Do you hear yourself?” He gets up from the couch.

The dark is redder.

“How do I sound? Please tell me! How?”

“So angry. I’m getting scared.”

Redder.

“Oh, you don’t like it when I sound angry? When I’m no longer the cute little Lene that you married? Do you miss her?”

“I just . . . I just . . .” The way he is standing there, always being right.

Red, red, red. Darkness.

“You can go to hell! Take your suitcase and leave! Get out! Find somewhere else to stay, go to your mom and dad, you can stay with them!”

“Lene . . .”

I’m drowning. Falling down a well, trying to get hold of the slippery stones. I can’t breathe.

“I don’t want to see you ever again! I can’t stand looking at you!”

“Lene, please . . .”

“Go! Leave! You’re always leaving me anyway! In fact, it would be easier for me if you just didn’t come back!”

“Please, Lene . . .”

“Don’t be so . . . so . . . patronizing! Like I don’t know anything! Just because you’re the one with a university degree. You’re treating me like a child!”

“But you’re acting like a child.”

The darkness. The well. My fingers against the walls. The small piece of bright sky up there in the ceiling.

“Get out! Get out of here! I can’t take it anymore!”

“Lene . . .”

The bottom. My feet sinking in the clay. My heart a stone in my chest.

“Just leave.”

He is silent.

“Leave already! Here, take your suitcase!” I bend to pick it up, shove it to him, but it’s heavy.

“Careful, you’re hurting yourself,” he says, bending to take it himself. “I am not leaving.”

The bottom. My chin barely above the water. The darkness of the well. If he leaves it will all change. Then maybe I’ll . . .

“Leave! Just go! I’m releasing you of your burden of a wife. You can travel the world and never come home again!”

“I would never leave you.”

No bottom. Still sinking.

“Get out of here!”

Anders is just standing there, his face pale, his arms hanging at his sides.

“No. I’m not leaving. You can’t make me.”

The darkness, the darkness.

“You never listen! I don’t want you here, do you understand me?”

I can’t even see the lamp in the ceiling any longer. It is all dark. The well is infinite.

“You don’t know what you’re saying.”

“I never knew anything this much. Leave.”

He is standing still, not moving a muscle.

“I’m not leaving.”

His face pale in the dark.

This fire in my eyes; if he doesn’t leave soon, he will see me cry.

“Please, leave.”

“No.”

“Please, please, just go.”

“I’m not leaving.”

“Please.”

“No.”

So it’s me. Always me. Up the stairs. My footsteps echoing. The bedroom door. Slam.

Finally. Quiet. My arms, my hands, my face, my tears, disappearing into the shadows. Everything except my heart. Beating, beating, beating. Thump, thump, thump, a hand against the door. No. I will not let him in. I will not answer. That's how it always is. Tenderness and then he is gone.

Thump, thump, thump. "Lene, answer me. Answer me, Lene."

The sound of his footsteps down the stairs.

The darkness soft. The duvet tight around me. My hand hard against my cheek. The pillow wet. My heart beating. The tears, hot, burning my eyes.

The darkness red.

The window closed behind the blinds. It's a long way to the ground. A second of soaring and then the ground the stones the ice the snow and darkness and nothing at all.

But in the darkness. Two flames of glowing light. The girls, sleeping on the other side of the wall. On the other side of the shouting and the dark. Small heavy breaths locking me to this bed, this darkness, this pain in my chest.

I need to calm myself.

Collect my thoughts like fragile threads to be pulled out of the dark.

My girls. They mustn't know, they must never know. I must protect their happy childhood no matter the pain. Their laughter, their bright voices, their small bodies so full of life; with them the choice is not even a choice: I must find strength for one more day, and one more, and one more.

There is someone at the door; I can hear it opening and closing in the dark and then steps coming toward me. I turn around, smile already in place, ready to hold and comfort and kiss away a bad dream. And then I remember I slammed the door. Maybe that woke them up. But it is Anders. He is standing in the dark, hesitating.

"I am sorry," he says. "Please let me hold you."

And the stone in my chest somehow disappears. I move over, turning my back to him, and I can feel him crawl into bed. He puts his arm around me and pulls me close, without saying a word. His warm breaths caress my cheek, as if they are wiping away the tears.

"Maybe we need to seek help," he says. "You seem . . ." he hesitates. "Unhappy."

"Genius." I say and let out a laugh that is no more than an exhale.

I can feel him smiling against my cheek and I pull his arm even tighter around me.

OceanofPDF.com

CHAPTER 28

I rest my head against the wall and my elbows against the armrests of the padded chair, eyes closed, listening to Oprah, her deep voice:

Breathe.

Let go.

And remind yourself that this very moment is the only one you know you have for sure.

I open my eyes. I want to see it, feel it. This moment.

The brown envelope rests in my lap, rough against my fingers.

In the waiting room, hunched and white-haired patients hold newspapers in their blue-veined hands, sitting in pairs or in groups, watching the TV and talking to each other in low voices.

Anders is at the counter, reasoning with one of the receptionists, for the third or fourth time, I have lost count. He returns to me.

“I told her we’ve been waiting for hours.” Anders sits down next to me and squeezes my hand. “She said she was sorry, but there’s nothing she can do.”

I return his smile. I want to save his smile forever.

“But it’s a good sign,” he nods toward the other patients, “that so many people are coming to see Dr. Holstein.”

I have to laugh. “This is a first, waiting in line because the doctor is so popular!”

It’s a large room; we must be at least fifty people waiting. I have never seen anything like it, never *felt* anything like it. I can see it in the others too—not the usual resignation and silence, but something else, low-voltage electricity tingling through our bodies, like we are about to meet a rock star: Dr. Jacob Holstein. The man behind the name engraved in brass at the entrance.

“It’s a good sign,” Anders repeats. “Three receptionists for one surgeon.”

I notice the couple sitting to our left. The man helps the woman put on a hand-knitted sweater with pink flowers on it, and in every movement are at least fifty years of movements like these. Love that has become a habit.

“I want us to become like them,” I whisper to Anders and he smiles at me and nods.

“We will.” He squeezes my hand. “But I might have to learn how to knit,” he whispers and I laugh.

“Yeah, those flowers look complicated.”

One of the receptionists signals to Anders, raising her arm, and he jumps up to talk to her. Coming back, he reaches out to help me up.

“It won’t be long now, she said, but first there are more forms we need to fill out.”

He takes the brown envelope and escorts me to a chair by a small table in the corner, where the receptionist has put a stack of papers. I sit down, but everything is suddenly black. I push the chair back, bend over, put my head between my knees, my hands shaking.

“How are you? Wait right there . . .” Anders’s voice is coming from far away. “Miss, can you help us, she’s not feeling well . . .”

Their voices, Anders’s and the receptionist’s, are coming from the other side of the darkness, my heart is beating, beating, beating, the nausea. I hold on to the chair, the entire waiting room tumbling out in space.

I have to keep my head down, concentrate on my breathing, inhale slowly, deeply. I have to push away the darkness. I must not faint. If I do I will die. My hands grip the seat, hold on tight, cold metal.

“Here, have some water.” Anders’s hand is heavy on my shoulder. “No, lean forward again.”

“Has she eaten anything?” It’s the receptionist.

“We had lunch in the cafeteria. She had a hamburger, well, at least half of it.”

The darkness is clearing away. The room finally begins to land, everything settling: the floor, the walls, the ceiling, the people in their chairs. I try to sit up and Anders holds the cup of water to my lips.

“That’s good,” he says, his hand still on my shoulder.

The water helps, its coldness in my throat clearing away the nausea. Anders gives me the cup and it is shaking in my hand, the water against the

white plastic walls of the cup. I try to focus on it, to hold the cup still and to sit up straight, while Anders finishes the forms.

“You’re all right? Come, let’s go.” He helps me up and leads me through a door and into a corridor, careful steps, I am still dizzy. We enter a small room where a smiling man in a white doctor’s coat greets us.

“Welcome. I’m Dr. Murray. You’ll soon meet Dr. Holstein. But first, I’ll discuss a few things with you. Please, sit down, you look pale, are you all right? I was told you felt faint?” He points to the exam table.

“Yeah, thanks, I’m all right, it happens all the time.” Sitting on the table, my legs dangling, I feel like I’m a six-year-old visiting the doctor.

Anders gives the brown envelope to Dr. Murray and he pulls out the pictures from the ultrasound.

“Ah yes. We have already received this from Dr. Anwar.” He pauses to look at me with his kind eyes, dark like his hair. “This is amazing! I have never met anyone with this heart disease progressed this far. And you being so tall! I mean; the taller the patient, the harder the heart has to work in order to maintain the blood flow with this condition. I met one patient, a woman, with an aortic valve almost as narrow as yours, but she was only fifty-five inches tall.” He puts his hand to his chin and laughs. “Even shorter than me. She was a small Asian woman.” He sits down at the table, smiling. “But this is something we can fix! We *can* fix it!” Something in his voice tells me that he has seen many other patients where he had to give them a different kind of news. “Dr. Holstein will be here soon. He is one of the best, if not *the* best. Have you decided between metal or tissue valve?”

“They all . . .” I am still shaky and have to struggle to find the words. “I mean everyone recommends tissue valve.”

Anders helps me. “Both Dr. Anwar and Dr. Howard, our cardiologist at Bryn Mawr Hospital, say the same thing.”

“Yes, I agree,” says Dr. Murray. “You being a young woman. Tissue valve it is then.” He turns to the keyboard, typing with swift fingers. He looks up at me again. “I’ll see if Dr. Holstein is ready.” He gets up and closes the door behind him.

I look at Anders. He smiles at me and is about to say something, but Dr. Murray is already back.

“He’ll be here in a minute. I’m sorry you had to wait. We’re doing our best, but there are always waiting lines to Dr. Holstein.” I can sense the

pride in his eyes, to be working with this supposedly great man.

The door opens and a man walks in. I can't help but stare at him at this point, after all the anticipation, his brown tweed jacket, hazel eyes, well-groomed beard, and silvery hair. He doesn't wear a doctor's coat; the stethoscope around his neck is the only evidence of his profession. His handshake is firm, greeting me first and then Anders.

"I'm so sorry you had to wait." Dr. Holstein looks around the room and, seeing that every chair is taken, he jumps up to sit on the gray waste bin next to the door.

"So you're Mrs. Fogelberg," he says, smiling.

I nod.

His tall legs are dangling and he too looks like a small child, sitting up there on the bin.

"We have agreed on a tissue valve," says Dr. Murray, giving the stack of paper to Dr. Holstein.

"Tissue valve it is, of course." Dr. Holstein glances at the documents and jumps down from the bin.

"She needs to have an MRI or a CAT scan, and clearance from a dentist."

Dr. Murray types at the keyboard. "Yes, I will go through it with her."

"We may also need to go down with a camera through the esophagus to get a better image of her heart, but let's await the results of the CAT scan. I think we'll go for the CAT scan."

"Okay." Dr. Murray's fingers are typing.

"Good." Dr. Holstein slaps me on my knee, as if we've known each other all our lives. "You'll feel so good after the surgery! Now you're like a ninety-year-old woman!"

"That's exactly what I've been thinking!" I have to hold back the tears. "That I'm like a ninety-year-old!" This is amazing, his using the exact same words as in my mind! I take a deep breath, still holding back the tears brought by my confidence in this man and the hope it brings. He is living up to his hype.

"I'm not surprised," he continues. "It's like you're running a marathon all of the time. Your heart is actually working four times harder than normal, compensating for the narrow valve, trying to force out as much blood as possible in every heartbeat. The blood is like a jet stream, that's

why we need the CAT scan, or computed tomography, to make sure that the aorta isn't affected. There may be abrasions, or malformations, a coarctation—simply put, it's like a waist on the aorta making it weak or dilated. We might have to replace part of your aorta as well."

"My aorta? How is that done?"

"We have these great new materials, they're like Gore-Tex—" He interrupts himself, seeing my alarm. "I'm pretty sure we won't have to do that, but we might as well make sure, before going in."

This is a lot to take in at the same time.

Like a marathon.

Like a ninety-year-old.

Yes.

Exactly.

He points to my chest. "May I listen?" And then he pauses. "Are you sure you want to have it done here, the surgery? Or do you want to go back to Sweden?" He hesitates. "To wait in line?"

Is he joking?

"Here! I don't want to go back home! I want you to do it!"

"You know about the waiting lines?" Anders asks.

"Well, yeah . . ." He laughs, but is serious again. "I would advise you to do it here. I'm not even sure you'd be allowed on an airplane in your condition. But the Sahlgrenska University Hospital in Göteborg also has a good cardiothoracic department. I've been there and lectured."

"You've been in Sweden to lecture?" Anders asks.

"Yes, all over Europe." Suddenly he looks shy, pointing to my sweater. "I'm sorry, but could you . . . ?"

"Oh, I see, yes, of course." I pull off my sweater and the air conditioner blows a cold current against my skin.

"Give it to me." Anders reaches for the bundle that is my sweater.

I sit there on the table watching the eyes of the three men, all staring at my chest, my pale skin, gray against the white lace of my bra. Dr. Holstein puts the stethoscope to my skin and I shiver. He listens. Leans closer and puts the stethoscope on my back. Listens again. Then back to my chest.

"Do you have trouble breathing?" he asks.

"Yes, often."

He nods.

“Especially at night and in the morning,” I say. “And if I exert myself, that is, walking up the stairs or something like that. Actually, there is always this pressure on my chest. But that’s when it’s at its worst.”

“A typical symptom. It gets worse by lying down. Are you often cold?”

“Yes, all the time in Sweden. But here it’s warm.” There are goose bumps on my arms and I feel like I need to explain myself. “At least it’s warm outdoors.”

Both Dr. Murray and Dr. Holstein laugh.

“Excuse me.” Dr. Holstein bends over to pull up the cuff of my jeans and then he puts the stethoscope to my ankle. He listens and mumbles something inaudible. Then he gets up.

“I’ll tell it like it is.” His brown eyes are serious. “There is this limit. If the aortic valve gets too narrow the heart can stop at any moment.” He pauses. “I have never seen a woman as tall as you with an aortic valve this narrow.” He is silent again, giving us a chance to process what he is saying. “We have to operate very soon. At this stage it can suddenly get worse, with no warning.”

“How is . . .” Anders hesitates. “How is it done?”

Dr. Holstein becomes enthusiastic, pulling a pen from the pocket of his jacket, pointing to my chest.

“I will enter here, on your right side.” He draws a curved line in the air, underlining my bra, all the way up to my armpit. “I have done this surgery many times. The cut will be very discreet between your ribs; you’ll be able to wear a bikini on the beach without the scar showing!” Then he frowns. “If we don’t have to fix the aorta. In that case there is no choice.” He draws a straight line. The pen like a scalpel. An invisible line across my sternum.

“How is that possible? Between the ribs?” Anders looks pale under the fluorescent lamp in the ceiling.

“The ribs are like bucket handles, really, you can pry them open, like this.” His fists open up a hole in the air and his elbow bumps into me, barely, but enough to make my bra strap fall down over my shoulder. Dr. Holstein pauses and puts it up again. The strap falls back down and he fumbles to make it stay up. His hand on my shoulder brings an image to my mind, of his hand not fumbling with the strap of my bra but prying my ribs open. And it becomes real to me, there will come a moment when I am

lying on the operating table and he cuts me open and stops my heart. I realize he is my slayer or my savior. The one or the other. I don't know whether to resent his touch or welcome it. But his kind eyes unmask the man behind the medical titles and the trips to Europe and the lectures. He *sees* me, the woman, not just the patient. He clears his throat: "Thank you. You can get dressed again."

Anders gives me my sweater and Dr. Holstein and Dr. Murray turn away, which is pretty funny, since they have already seen me without it. The urge to laugh rises within me, but the laughter turns to a pain in my chest. I pull my sweater down.

Dr. Holstein turns back to me.

"I need to tell you that going in through the ribs is actually much more painful than opening the sternum. The recovery is longer and more painful. But I still think it would be advisable in your case, since we can save the sternum for the next surgery down the line. It is always better to avoid going in twice at the same place."

I nod. "Because of the scars?"

"Yes," Dr. Holstein says. "Scar tissue and the general wear in the area that a surgery inflicts." He glances at Dr. Murray and back at me. "There is no opening in my schedule until November." He pauses to look at me. Does not say anything. Just looks at me. I who usually am shy cannot look away. Our eyes are having a conversation that the others cannot hear: Please, please, help me, it is all so very heavy, heavy to breathe, heavy to live, heavy to drag my body around.

The room is quiet.

"Just a moment." Dr. Holstein steps out into the hallway and the door doesn't close all the way behind him. I try to listen but all I can hear are muffled voices. Next to me Dr. Murray is discussing something with Anders, but I am trying to make out what they're saying in the hallway, Dr. Holstein, his deep voice, and someone else, a woman.

Dr. Holstein is back. "I have spoken with my secretary. October. The eighth. That will give us time for the CAT scan and the dentist's clearance. And it's much better to have a planned surgery than an emergency."

"An emergency?" Anders asks.

"That is only if she passes out. Or if there's a major turn for the worse. Then you'll have to call for an ambulance."

Anders takes a deep breath. "I understand."

"Well, I'll see you around." Dr. Holstein laughs and reaches out to squeeze my hand.

"Thank you," I say and it sounds too thin, but I guess there are no words suitable for a moment like this. "Yeah, see you around," I say and laugh again, trying not to think of his warm hand that will cut me open the next time we meet.

Dr. Holstein smiles at me, turns to shake hands with Anders, and leaves in a hurry.

Dr. Murray closes the door. "If you have any questions I will happily answer them. I'll give you my phone number. Actually, we might just as well start with the paperwork. Please . . ." Dr. Murray pulls out the chair by the small desk. I get up from the table and Dr. Murray hands me a pen as I sit down. He hunches over the stacks of paper on the desk, pulling out documents as he explains. There is a risk of stroke during the surgery. When the malformed aortic valve is removed, at that moment, small pieces might break loose and follow the blood to the brain. I may become blind. I might need a blood transfusion during the surgery. They need a written statement that I understand these risks and still allow them to go ahead with the surgery.

I need to sign document after document. In multiple copies. *Lene Fogelberg*. But all I can think is: This is unreal. Is this really me? That name on the dotted line, those letters, that hand holding the pen?

"The last." Dr. Murray puts a document in front of me. "This is never fun. But we must have your signature."

I hereby declare that I have been informed that the surgery I will undergo has a mortality rate of 2%. I undergo the surgery entirely by my own choice. I take full responsibility for all consequences of the surgery.

Two patients out of one hundred.

CHAPTER 29

Psychiatric Emergency Room Göteborg East Hospital

Anders is holding my elbow, as if I would try to escape. The woman in reception appears surprised to see us. Anders tries to explain. However one explains. One would think that she of all people would get it, sitting there in her white coat, her nametag reading Miss Mighty Important, in this gray building that looks like a prison. Here's something for her to ponder: would anyone, in their right mind, actually want to come here on a Friday night?

Anders pulls me by the arm into the waiting room.

A big room. Empty chairs. A small lamp in the corner putting up a tent of light in the dark.

I have to laugh. "Really. We are supposed to wait."

Anders makes me sit and pulls the chair next to mine even closer before sitting down.

"There are people waiting," he says. "Not just us."

"Yeah? Who? I can't see anyone."

"Maybe they're already with the doctor."

No. There. I see her. Sitting in the corner. Her face half eaten by the dark, her clothes like shadows clinging to her frail body. Looking at me with the eyes of an animal, ready to leap.

It is a strange comfort. Our eyes meeting. You and I, two fellow citizens of the darkness.

No, wait.

It's a mirror.

I should have known. The darkness is a land of the lonely. Everyone living in their own wasteland. There are no fellow citizens.

The silence, the clock ticking on the wall—I can't stand it.

"It's quite ironic, actually," I say. "A waiting line in an emergency room."

"Your sense of humor is wonderful when you're like this." He laughs. There is something desperate about his laughter. Bouncing on top of the darkness.

"Always glad to amuse you," I say.

He smiles, pretending not to hear the bitterness in my voice.

My body is heavy, I feel like I'm going to throw up, I can't breathe. Look at her in the mirror, that pathetic creature, thinking there's a place for her in this world.

"Let's forget about it," I tell Anders. "I'd be better off at home, cutting my wrists, like all the sane insane."

He laughs again. His laughter bounces against my skin. It hurts. I have to make him laugh again.

"Well, this is inspiring."

"How so?" he asks.

"It makes you want to end it, rather than sitting here. And they can cross another name off the waiting list. Very clever."

"Ha, ha, very effective."

"Maybe that's the thinking here. This is a sorting room. The weak can just go home and finish it. A way to cut the costs."

"Exactly." Again, the laughter.

He is always on my side. Annoyingly always on my side.

"How long have we been here?" I ask.

Anders leans forward to check the clock on the wall.

"One hour."

"Ah, now we're onto them. They want to bore us to death."

"Precisely." He puts his arm around me.

"Stop it. We can't sit here and cuddle. I have to look depressed."

"Ha, ha. Impossible. You look great. That's why they won't believe us. I had to convince her that you really need help."

"I don't want your fake compliments, trying to make me feel better."

"No, I mean it."

“Better like this?” I hunch and frown, trying to play the part convincingly.

“Ha, ha, now you look crazy. But great all the same.”

Suddenly a nurse is standing before me, leaning forward, putting her hand on my knee.

“How’s it going, are you completely under the water here, or . . . ?”

“Eh, no, or what . . . ?”

“We have kind of a busy night, is it okay to wait?”

“Yeah, sure, okay,” I say.

“Thanks.”

She turns and disappears down the hallway.

I can’t help but mimic her: her worried eyes, the crease in her forehead, the typical signs of concern. Anders’s laughter cuts through the dark.

“Shhh!” I say.

“Kind of a busy night,” he repeats. “Yeah, kind of a lot of cinnamon rolls to eat in the break room. It’s not easy to chew as well as swallow.”

My turn to laugh. It’s strange how it hurts. Even more than his laughter.

“I can’t believe we have to come here,” he says. “That we couldn’t get any help at the health center, even though we tried for months. How can they not have any psychiatrists?”

I nod and look at him, but I don’t say what I am thinking. I can’t believe I have to come to this strange place when I have tried so hard and for so long to beat the darkness. And I realize this is why I am telling all these jokes. To cover up my shame. Shame for not being stronger, better, happier. Shame for my sadness and my anger. Shame for my fatigue and my failures. I feel like I have come to know every aspect possible of being a failure.

The waiting again.

The silence.

The clock ticking, ticking, ticking.

Something is happening. Sudden movements at the door. Voices. A stretcher being rolled into the room. A doctor, nurses, paramedics. On the stretcher a woman. Small, thin, a shadow in the blanket. Finally, a fellow citizen of the darkness. The tubes. The gray arm, thin hand, fingers.

Twitching.

I feel nauseous.

*The room empty again. The voices moving down the hallway.
Tick-tock.
Tick-tock.
Dry rivers on my cheeks.
“How long have we been here?” I ask.
Anders gets up from the chair.
“Three hours.”
This waiting. Anders wandering around the room. Coming back to sit
beside me. Getting up again.
“How long—”
“Soon four hours.”
There is something taking shape in the dark.
A No.
Written on the backs of the empty chairs, on the walls, in the shadows of
the dim light.
No.
It is a promise.
It will never be me lying in a stretcher like that.
Never.
“Anders, we can go home.”
“Are you sure?” He comes back to sit beside me.
“Yes. Let’s go home.”
“I don’t know—”
“Please, I’m okay, I just want to go home.”
“Well—”
“Please, please.”
“Okay then.” He puts his arm around me, helping me to get up.
The woman from reception is gone. Nobody sees us leave.
I carry the No with me, in my heavy heart. It is fragile, but I will make it
grow. I will make my body obey me. These hands, these feet, they will go
where I tell them to go, they will follow my command. My thoughts will
follow the paths I make.
I will find a way through the darkness.*

CHAPTER 30

*N*ot my girls.

It makes my chest hurt, my eyes burn, my body tremble, much worse than at the thought of me being sick.

“Dad?” No answer. I feel like a little girl walking up the stairs, the floor creaking under my feet on the landing.

Dad is sitting on the floor of Anders’s and my bedroom, assembling a chest of drawers from Ikea, methodically, without a word, the parts of the drawers scattered around him. He looks up, nods at me, and reaches for the next piece. Next he will install a TV on top of the chest of drawers; it was his idea, so I can watch my favorite shows during my recovery.

Afterward.

My dad keeps his silent tenderness in his hands. In the things he makes. Just like when I was a kid and he was working on some project that made him smell of sawdust and turpentine. Now there is something desperate about him. His silence, his efficiency. He is flying home tomorrow. He needs to leave something behind. Words or a chest of drawers—it’s the same thing. Maybe he remembers the moments he does not want to remember. The words he would rather forget. *Lene, you have to mow the lawn, it’s your turn, you are fifteen years old, don’t tell me it’s too heavy . . .*

This heaviness in my chest, I have to lie down, but not here. The room is filling up with Dad’s unspoken, wooden words.

I have not seen Mom since breakfast. She is probably up in the guest room, packing the suitcase for Dad. With her own silence.

My girls, my girls. I don’t know what to do, where to bring this aching body. Down the stairs, to the kitchen. The silence is everywhere.

The family room.

The living room.

Not my girls.

Not Ingrid.

Damn words. I did not want to hear them as I listened to the voices behind the door, Dr. Holstein convincing his secretary to find an earlier date for my surgery.

Dr. Murray and Anders were sitting right next to me. But I pushed the words away. Anders's deep, serious voice:

"We will see to it."

"You have to. Right away. This kind of congenital heart disease is most commonly found in a direct line. But if your daughters do not have it, there is no increased risk for their children. But you'll have to check them. Go see your family doctor, Dr. Baine. She'll listen for a heart murmur."

Stina was acquitted. Dr. Baine couldn't detect any heart murmur.

But Ingrid.

Ingrid!

Why is it taking them so long? Shouldn't they be home soon—Anders, Ingrid, and Stina—from the ultrasound examination?

Stina is having the examination too, to be sure.

This damn heart beating in my chest, a clock counting down, not just for me, but maybe also my girls.

I am back in the silence of the kitchen, but I can't do this any longer, go round and round the house in the silence.

At least the cicadas are saying *something*.

Yes, out on the porch, the screen door slamming behind me, the sounds of cars on Radnor Chester Road, the buzzing of the cicadas. I can sit here, in the roof's shadow.

Not my baby Ingrid. Her strawberry blonde hair, her pale blue eyes, her sharp knees. Pale, *so pale*, all the time. So thin when she was a toddler that the nurses at the clinic ordered butter in her food, in everything, whatever she ate, a large pat of butter. And often cold, blue lips and shivering, oh, the sight of her, by the lake back home, her hands pulling the towel tighter around her small body.

The buzzing of the cicadas gets louder and louder.

Ingrid often talks about God. Mamma, if everything was created, what was there *before*, when there was *nothing*, what was there then?

Damn cicadas! Be quiet, stop this buzzing of yours. Let the image of Ingrid emerge in the silence and darkness of my closed eyes. Ingrid in the

hospital bed, the probe on her small pale chest, her golden hair on the pillow.

My Ingrid.

It was bearable, as long as it was just me, but please dear God, not Ingrid, please please please.

I can hear the screen door close and it's Dad, coming to sit beside me. He doesn't say anything, just sighs and drinks from the glass of water, small in his big hands. Then he clears his throat and pulls one hand over the gray stubble on his chin.

"I googled them," he says and his voice is softer than I expected. He looks at the glass of water and lifts it to drink again.

I close my eyes. These long silences of my childhood. I have learned to wait.

"I googled them and it was actually very interesting. Did you know that they spend almost all of their lives underground?" he says. "Where they feed on the sap of tree roots."

Silence again.

But he continues. "They're called nymphs, and for years they live underground, until they dig a tunnel up to the ground, climb up a tree, and crawl out of their skins. They become cicadas." He is looking at me now, his light blue eyes under bushy eyebrows. "Then they sit in the trees singing. Some species sing in such a high key that we humans can't even hear it. They sing the loudest at midday, the hottest part of the day."

"Oh," I say, not sure why he is telling me all this.

"Look." He points to the corner of the porch. "There."

The buzzing grows louder and louder. I see it sitting on a leaf. It's the first time I see one, the body glimmering black and green, wings translucent. It's much bigger than I thought it would be—as big as my thumb, at least.

Dad squirms as if he is about to put his arm around me, but Mrs. Mack is coming up the garden path.

"Hello!" she hollers, waving. "Did you find a solution?"

How can she possibly know?

"The garbage cans?" she says. "Do you still have problems with the squirrels?"

“Ah,” I say. “Well, Anders puts rocks on the lids of the garbage cans, but I’m not sure . . . I’m not sure if it will be . . .” Is that the sound of a car at the other side of the house?

“Good!” Mrs. Mack bends over to pull a weed. “Tell me if you need any help.” She rubs the soil off her hands, nods to my dad, and turns to walk through the backyard.

It is a car.

“Anders?” I take one step down the stone stairs and turn the corner of the house, my heart beating. “Anders?”

“Lene?”

Anders turn to me. They are already at the back door. The sun in the girls’ hair.

“Lene, it’s all right,” he says. “They went through everything, many times to be sure. Looked at everything. She doesn’t have it. None of them have it.”

But the tears are coming all the same.

“Are you sure?”

“Yes, completely sure. They showed me everything.”

He catches me and the girls are also there. I feel their arms around my waist.

“Mamma, we don’t have it.”

“We don’t, Mamma, it’s all right.”

Oh, these girls. Eager to comfort me, even though no one has told them what it is that they do not have.

“Mamma, I got a sticker!” Stina looks up at me with her round eyes and I have to laugh through the tears.

This is how it is these days. Laughter and tears. Everything concentrated. The girls’ voices, their hands, their soft, warm skin, the faint smell of shampoo in their hair. The sticker in the palm of Stina’s hand, a spotted giraffe.

Anders’s shoulders, his arms holding me up. The curls behind his ears.

Everything that was small before is suddenly important.

Stina’s feet, in her pink summer sandals with butterflies, walking through the back door. Ingrid’s elbows, sharp and pale and beautiful. Anders calling for Roland and Kristina, his voice echoing through the house.

The cicadas. I can still hear them after I close the door behind us.

OceanofPDF.com

CHAPTER 31

Footprints in the Snow

*U*phill. My heart beating. The ground icy and slippery under the snow. How many times have I walked this trail, bent these branches to the side, inhaled this cold air?

The girls are at daycare. Anders at his office. Still they are with me, their faces, following me through the woods.

I walk the girls to kindergarten in the morning and after dropping them off, I take the trail through the woods home.

There is a silence among the trees that points to the sky.

The birch tree trunks surround me, pale against the snow, among the dark silhouettes of the oaks and pines. To my right, behind the green moss-covered boulders, the stone wall rises up to the sky, small trees clinging to crevices, crooked and desperate. Lace ribbons of icicles adorn the stone. In the summer, the stone wall attracts mountaineers from all of Sweden, filling the woods with their voices, but now it is quiet.

The twigs and the branches, aiming upward, give me a taste of lightness. But afterward I always pay the price. I can hardly stand up, walk the stairs, sort through my thoughts. My body heavy as iron. There is nothing to do but rest. Until it is time to pick the girls up again. Every day the same. In the afternoon, heating frozen meatballs or fish sticks or lasagna for the girls' dinner. I can barely lift the fork, sitting dizzy with exhaustion at the table. Afterward I have to rest again, until it's time to put the girls to bed.

I have walked this very trail for years—the same forest, the same sky—and I'm not getting anywhere. I have prayed and pleaded and cried and yelled it is not fair it is not fair and if there is a God, if you are up there you are no friend of mine.

My girls are still small and my life has barely begun and I have been miserable for so long, I cannot even remember what it feels like to be happy.

God, what is wrong with me? A patch of ice—too late—the ground hits my back hard. The pain shoots up through my body. I can see the sky floating above the treetops, thin, almost translucent.

God, are you up there?

Do you listen to prayers?

The snow, white powder whirling in the air, makes me squint.

I should get up.

Carefully. The ice lurks under the snow, the air cold in my lungs, branches turning away from me.

In the woods I can think. Walking among the trees that don't argue or tell me I'm crazy.

The trees point upward with their rheumatic fingers. The sky is pale over the treetops. Silent. Snow falls, rustling from a branch. My breath lingers in the air, white clouds following me.

A flock of pigeons startles me, flapping between the trees, frightened by my approach. Black against the snow, they write the poem about the flock, the girls who need their mamma.

I am not giving up. I will fight to the end, for the sake of my girls, I will find the answer to the riddle, which is no riddle anymore, because I know what it's saying.

And Anders's eyes, he knows it, he smiles and holds me and pretends he doesn't know, but there, at the moment he turns away, there is a vulnerability, hanging over his forehead, his temples, saying please don't leave me.

And my children . . . Their small hands, their cheeks soft against mine, hugging me good night. Stina who falls asleep in just a couple of minutes, but Ingrid who is often worried, her voice in the dark: Don't go, Mamma, stay a little while longer, don't go.

My knees are in the snow and my jeans are wet. The sound of a moped finds its way through the trees from far away.

A dog is barking.

God, what is wrong?

Will I live to be thirty-five? Thirty? Twenty-nine?

Please, please.

Just tell me what I need to do. I don't even have to know why. I don't even have to know what is wrong with me. God, I don't even know what to ask for, I don't know the words, I don't speak the language. But if there are words, if there is a language out there somewhere, if there is a prayer that would give me my life back, I am offering that prayer right now.

This is my prayer.

My tears and my heart and my love for my children and for Anders. My sorrow and my shame and my faults and my yearning and my knees in the snow and my anger and regrets and my longing.

The sky is gray and empty and quiet.

A closed door.

Snow falls from the trees, rustling to the ground, writing punctuation marks. There. There. There.

And there is not much else to do but to get up, my legs stiff and cold, and follow the trail back home, dragging my body, my thoughts, my breaths, as if behind me, as if I am already transparent, everything falling out of me, my hope, my will, my joy. I am walking home, following my own footprints in the snow, and they look like letters on a page in a foreign language I cannot understand. I feel like I am walking in my own incomprehensible story, only in the middle of the story there is a black punctuation mark, and after that? What comes after that?

CHAPTER 32

*T*he CAT scan machine looks like a giant doughnut sticking out its tongue: a narrow bed with a flat pillow.

“You can sit here,” the technologist says, showing me the bed.

It is slightly cup shaped, poking the hollow of my knees.

We must be about the same age, the technician and I. I cannot take my eyes off her hair, red and curly, cascading down her shoulders. Her voice is soft and her smile friendly, but something in her eyes reveals pain, and I have a strange urge to console her.

“Your hair is amazingly beautiful,” I say.

She stops and smiles.

“Thank you.” Looking at my file, she stops herself again. “You are way too young to have heart surgery. You shouldn’t have to go through that.”

“Thanks,” I say, and her eyes make me continue. “My daughter also has red hair; well, I think you call it strawberry blonde here. I love that. In Swedish we just say red. She’s my oldest. My youngest is blonde. But she was born with dark hair. Was your hair always like this?”

“Ha, ha. I used to be bald.”

“Yeah, me too, as a child, like until I was two.”

“No, I mean, a couple of years ago. I had cancer.”

What do you say when someone suddenly rips off the ordinariness of life like a Band-Aid, showing you the wound, saying: I had cancer? I’m silent.

“You can lie down now,” she says.

The bed is hard and narrow; I have to keep my arms close to my body.

“Are you all right?” she asks.

“Yes.”

“I’m going to give you the contrast dye. You’ll feel like you’re wetting yourself. You won’t, but it will feel like it.” The woman smiles at me and turns to the cabinets. Her purple uniform rustles in her movements.

She comes to sit beside me.

“Sounds nice.”

“Ha, ha. You’ll be fine.” Her hands, dressed in silicone gloves, are resting on my arm. “It may sting a little.”

Her grip tightens.

The needle bites into my arm and I can’t help but glance down. A large container, about one cup in size, pushes the fluid into my blood, milliliter after milliliter.

“Are you all right?”

“Yeah.”

“There.” The woman tapes a cotton pad on my arm with quick movements, the tape pulling my skin hard. “It’s important that you lie still. And close your eyes. As still as you can.”

The machine starts to pull back its tongue, humming a deep note as the bed vibrates under me. The light changes. The white, curved walls enclose me.

Close my eyes; I was supposed to close my eyes.

At first I feel nothing. Then it comes. The rushing, the heat, in all my blood vessels, large, small, arteries, veins, rushing, rushing, a waterfall in my body. In my head, my brain, someone creeping into my brain paths, a small electrician pulling wires, everywhere at the same time, the heat, the rushing, in my eyes, my neck, my arms, stomach, legs, feet, and I wet myself, I can’t help it.

The voice of the technician comes out of a speaker:

“It’s all right, you’re not wetting yourself.”

The rushing is over.

The machine vibrates and hums. There is a distant beep somewhere in the room.

I am to lie still.

Still.

Behind my closed eyes the technician steps out of the dark, her head bald, her face pale. Leaning forward, she wraps a shawl around her head, tying a knot at her neck. All done, she looks up at me. Those eyes. The pain. Even though the illness is defeated, there is still something left. Her body has waged a battle and the traces of it have healed: her hair has grown back, the shawl has been put away or maybe thrown out, but her eyes! I

should have said something. Maybe *I am sorry you had cancer*. But those are difficult words, you do not want them to contain a lot of unspoken ballast, like words tend to do; *What kind of cancer did you have, how was it, are you really healthy now*, you do not want to tear the wound. Making the woman feel obligated to answer personal questions, it might be deep sorrows, children never to be born, illness that might come back anytime, life that has been pushed over an edge and never will climb back up again. Maybe the woman is clinging to a cliff, still holding on for her life, maybe she is one of those who has to make a home on the cold rock wall, waking up in the morning, hands white from the effort to just hang on.

The machine hums and vibrates. More beeping, somewhere in the room. The woman is out there, pushing buttons. And actually, I have not thought about it, but she taught me how it is done. *You are way too young to have heart surgery. You shouldn't have to go through that*. So simple.

More humming. And beeping.

Anders is waiting in the reception area. But I can almost hear his voice. *Lie still. It will soon be over, Lene*. And his hand gently stroking my forehead.

The machine vibrates and starts to push me out again.

The technician is there, as if to catch me, like I'm a baby being born out of the machine.

"How are you?" she asks. "Are you all right? If you're feeling dizzy you can lie down for a while."

I try to sit up, but the dizziness pushes me back.

"It's okay," she says. "Take it easy."

My body is tired and heavy, but I have something to say, something to do. I need to get up before the woman leaves and the examination is over. I manage to pull myself up, my feet sinking to the floor for support. The woman smiles at me, with her sad eyes, that tiredness behind her smiles. And I find the words that she taught me.

"I'm so sorry you had cancer."

She nods, just a small movement, and smiles again.

"Thank you."

And it is strange. Her eyes becoming a mirror. I didn't see it before, but now I do. What I see in her eyes, she sees in mine.

OceanofPDF.com

CHAPTER 33

A Little While Longer

Light through the window. Birds chirping. The girls' voices coming from the backyard. The trees, green through the window glass.

Anders's bed is empty. He is downstairs.

I should.

Should get out of bed.

But. Heavy. It is all so heavy.

The ceiling. The walls. The birds.

The covering, pressing me down, heavy on my chest.

My hand is pale, the veins blue.

The lines dark in the palm of my hand.

I hear footsteps coming up the stairs.

It's Anders.

"Are you awake, honey?"

"Anders, come."

Even the words are heavy in my mouth.

The air heavy in my lungs.

"What is it, Lene?"

He sits beside me on my bed and takes my hand. The warmth of his palm.

I must make him understand.

He will not want to. Understand. But I have to.

"Anders, you have to help me."

The deepness of his eyes. The weight of his hand.

"Anders, I can't . . . I can't any longer. You have to help me."

His eyes. Maybe it is the light of the summer morning. Maybe the girls' voices coming from the backyard. Their laughter. Maybe my voice. The way

I am saying it.

“I can’t anymore, Anders, I just can’t.”

The words don’t bounce back like so many times before.

“Please, Anders, you have to help me.”

“Wait, Lene. Wait here.”

And his footsteps down the stairs.

His voice echoing through the house. He is talking to someone on the phone.

The ceiling white.

The walls green.

I close my eyes.

The birds chirping.

The girls’ voices.

Anders’s voice.

And then silence.

Anders’s voice again, the melody of his words floating through the house, rising and falling.

He is coming back, footsteps on the stairs.

He is standing beside me.

“I called around to some friends, I’m sorry it took a while, but I managed to get a private number to a chief physician for psychiatry. I will go get the medicine today. Lene, it will work out. I’m gonna get you something to eat and then I’ll go get the antidepressants. It will be all right. You just need to hang on for a little while longer.”

His eyes.

His warm hand pressing mine.

The voices of the girls.

CHAPTER 34

The disinfectant comes yellow and thin out of the bottle. But it lathers into white foam when I rub it on my skin. It has a strong smell that stings my nose.

Every morning and evening, they said. For three days prior to the surgery.

The water is warm. The white foam runs down my body, across the white tiles to the drain, splashes onto the glass, painting clouds that slowly sink down the walls.

Thoroughly, they told me, at the navel, the nose, the genital area, the feet. And the hair: twice.

My hands are heavy but I have to. Rub my arms, my elbows, my shoulders. Carefully, they said, everywhere. Take your time, be thorough. Don't miss a spot.

"The height of luxury," Mom said when I showed her, "to have a bathroom connected to the bedroom. They will all be jealous back home when I tell them." And then we laughed, at the opulence of it, two sinks, one for him, one for her, marble flooring, a bathtub and a shower.

It all looks so different now, through the water running down my face, Anders's razor by his sink, his toothbrush leaning against mine in the glass. The bench that we bought and put in front of the tub so I would have something to sit on, brushing my teeth, wrapping myself in a towel shivering after the shower—a place to rest, elbows against my knees, tired after the heavy movements.

Three days left.

My chest: most thoroughly of all. My nipples. The disinfectant stings. Soft movements, work it into foam.

Two days left.

They have all been done, all the examinations. The dentist. Done. There is nothing that hinders, nothing loose, which could be carried with the

respirator into my lungs.

Soft circles, the foam following my hands across my pale, bluish skin.

CAT scan. Done. We got the results telling us my aorta is enlarged. But they don't know if it needs to be fixed this time around. Maybe later on, they say, it is not an exact science.

My chest is a map where the borders are drawn anew, again and again. Vertical or horizontal, straight or curved. They don't know. It depends.

The water is warm on my face. Maybe if I hold my breath, it will all go away, maybe this nightmare will disintegrate and I can leave this glass cage, whole and healthy and clean with all of my life still ahead of me, like a string, all the way to eighty, ninety, one hundred, no knot in the thread of life, no mark where the scissors will cut, those hungry jaws of steel.

Anders had called Sahlgrenska Hospital in Göteborg. He sent them the results of the ultrasound and the CAT scan. But they were not sure either regarding the aorta. They had to get together, all the cardiac surgeons, to discuss. They had a meeting just about my case. And then they came back with an answer. That they still couldn't say. I will in any case need to replace the tissue valve, in maybe ten or fifteen years. Maybe the aorta can wait until then? But the surgery is inevitable. I need to have open-heart surgery to replace my aortic valve. Very soon.

White foam. I need to rub hard. Harder. My ribs, hips, thighs, calves, feet. Harder, harder, harder.

This body, which has carried me, contained me, betrayed me, fought me, enclosed me, which is slipping away from me.

The disinfectant is low. Will it be enough?

Two more times. Tonight and tomorrow, in the morning.

The girls still do not know. It's impossible to tell them.

Their bright eyes. Their laughter as they tell us about school and their new friends and the strange food in the canteen, macaroni and cheese—it is sticky, according to Stina. And stringy—Ingrid shows with her hands, pulling at the air with her small fingers. I laugh thinking about it, and the taste of the disinfectant is pungent, mixed with the water, and it washes away my smile. Someday I will laugh together with the girls and my laughter will not be heavy and it will not be painful and I will not have to press it out of my chest, but it will come running like water out of a faucet and it will be like when I was a child. Like when we sat on the couch

watching our favorite TV show, *MacGyver*, and I snuggled up to my mom and every time she laughed I laughed too, even though I didn't understand the jokes.

That is how it will be.

Yes.

Afterward.

But now.

White lather. Work it up, rub it, work it.

My skin is starting to become stiff and brittle, like paper, because of the strong liquid.

My chest.

Thoroughly, carefully.

Rub it, wash it, rub it.

The water running warm against my skin.

I HAVE BEEN THINKING ABOUT IT FOR A WHILE, BUT TIME IS running out now.

I want to do it. I need to do it.

My hair is still wet, sending small brooks of water down my neck and back, painting crooked stripes on my T-shirt. But this can't wait.

The words find me, my fingers moving slowly across the keyboard, and I can hear the others downstairs, getting ready for supper. The tears find me too, but I fight them: this is *not* my last evening, my last words, my final goodbye. *Not my last*. This is what my head tells me, but in my heart I know this is what I need to do. So that they will remember me. So my girls will have something to read that is in my voice and is written especially for them.

Every breath I take has to be hauled in, forced down, but I'm going to do this, my body is not going to stop me.

CHAPTER 35

Maybe

This is more than I ever could have imagined. My girls, giggling and squinting in the sun by the shallow pool, sitting at the edge with their towels wrapped around them like little ladies. I can hear them talking to each other in that wonderful language of a six-year-old and a four-year-old. But I notice Ingrid's lips getting blue.

"Do you want more shadow?" Anders gets up. "I can move the parasol." He starts to fuss with the stand.

"I'm all right," I tell him.

"But wait, if I just—" He puts the shade over me, like a blanket and fastens the beach umbrella again. I close my eyes and I can hear him getting back into his chaise longue.

"You rest now, I'll watch the girls," he says.

Behind us the sea whispers into the ears of the yellow cliffs of Malta. It whispers white foam and green seaweed. It whispers Africa and the hulls of ships covered in acorn barnacles. The wind has something to say too. It has seen sails and seagulls sway at the horizon. The umbrella nearly tips over in the eager wind. But Anders is already up, catching it.

"Whoa, it almost hit you," he says.

A concierge comes from the hotel, waving his arms and shouting.

"Close! Close! Too much wind!"

"Yes. Okay." Anders closes the umbrella.

"It's October," the concierge shouts from across the kids' pool, closing the umbrellas one by one. "Can be very windy. Much wind."

"Okay. Thank you." Anders sits and turns to me. "Maybe we should go back inside?"

"Yeah, I think it's time. Ingrid is looking cold."

“They need something to eat, and you too.” He gathers our stuff and I hand him the book I have been reading. He is always quicker than me. Before I’ve even sat up, he has everything ready.

“Come on girls, let’s go.” Anders puts the bag on his shoulder and takes the girls’ hands. I notice the lines of his arm muscles and they send a shiver through my body. I have always loved the way his arms move, the touch of his hands, the smell of his skin. Tonight it will smell of salt, wind, and blue skies. I remember seeing him at the scout camp when I was fourteen, his unruly hair and his wrinkled blue scout shirt with the badges sewed on crookedly, sleeves folded so I could see his tanned forearms. When he tried to talk to me I ran away, too shy. If only I had known then what I know now. That I would see him walking like this with our girls’ small hands in his.

The wind is cool, but walking in the sun feels like summer, even though it is the end of the season. I can see Anders’s happiness in the way he walks. A full week at this resort, the airplane tickets, the hotel, all expenses covered by travel points. It is in his every step: finally, he can give us something that is for us, something good from all his travels for work. He has visited more than sixty countries, but this time we are visiting this island as a family, just us, and no business meetings. The only daily dilemma is the food, since the restaurant at the resort is way too expensive. I call to him:

“Anders?”

“Hang on, girls, we can’t leave Mamma behind.” They slow down, waiting for me.

“What do you . . . think?” I ask him, short of breath. “McDonald’s again?”

“It’s too long a walk for you, Lene, with those hills. No, it’s better if I take the girls so you can rest. What do you want me to bring back for you?”

“Same as yesterday is fine.”

“Okay.” Somehow he manages to hold the door for me, a girl at each hand, while carrying the bag and the towels that the girls have dropped on the way.

“Thank you, Anders.”

I can see in his eyes that he understands, but I say it again.

“Thank you.” I want him to know what it means to me, not just all he does to help me, but also the way he is doing it. Without making me feel bad.

“Be sure to rest after we’ve left,” he says. His smile is wonderful, those blue eyes, sun-kissed hair, tousled by the wind. The wrinkles at the corners of his eyes are deeper than they used to be, and also the creases at his forehead. “We are still young, Lene,” he whispered in my ear last night, and he is right. I am just twenty-eight, that is really not very old, even though I cannot climb the hills of Malta.

Anders stops at the small souvenir shop next to the reception.

“Come,” he says, pulling the girls with him through the door.

I follow them, laughing. Did he see me yesterday looking at the necklace in the window? The long one, with shimmering freshwater pearls?

“You have to have something. A keepsake. So you’ll always remember this.” He smiles and does not want to hear my questions, can we afford it, should we really, you really don’t need to . . .

“You have to pick something,” he says. “We’re not leaving until you pick something.”

“Well, this is very beautiful, but maybe a little expensive.”

The girl in the shop hands me the necklace and it is immediately speaking to my fingers. The colors, white, purple, pink, seamlessly blending with each other. It reminds me of the sea, and a kind of beauty that you have to catch and pry open.

Anders does not hesitate for a moment. He grabs the necklace from me and carries it like a trophy to the checkout girl, making me laugh.

The girls are right next to me, looking at key chains. Ingrid holds up a blue plastic dolphin.

“Mamma, look, there are seashells inside of it!”

Stina has found a purple one.

“Oh, Mamma, this is soooo beautiful.”

They are not expensive.

“Anders?”

“Thank your mother, girls.”

And two small voices:

“Thank you, Mamma!”

“Thanks, Mamma!”

Anders’s smile often carries those unspoken words these days: You did good, Lene, the girls will remember that those gifts are from you, not that

everything comes from Pappa, just because I happen to be the one traveling and bringing home presents. No, his smile tells me, it is not just me working hard, bringing in the money, we are in this together, both our efforts makes it possible.

I have been able to go back to my studies, taking a literature course at the University of Göteborg that I've always wanted to take. It took two weeks, not more, after I got the antidepressants, for the light to break forth. Light! After years in darkness. It was like stepping out of a cave, right out into the sun, dazzling, intoxicating. The smells, the tastes, the colors, green not only green but emerald, olive, lime . . . Not just black.

Anders receives the package from the cashier and turns to me, teasing, holding the package out of reach.

"You'll have to wait until tonight . . ."

"Ha, ha, you want to see me try it on?"

He pulls me close, on the doorstep out of the shop.

"Only that, and nothing else . . ." His kiss tastes of the sea, like I knew it would.

"I'm glad the kids are too small to know what we're say—"

He interrupts me with another kiss.

In front of us Stina skips through the lobby, her small legs, her blonde curls bouncing on her head, and I have to laugh. Anders also starts to skip along with Stina, big, clumsy, wonderful steps under the huge crystal chandelier, and then Ingrid starts too. My three happy ones, my little flock, laughing, swinging their arms, Anders holding the girls' hands.

The receptionists in their uniforms behind the counter are also laughing.

Soft winds, taste of the sea, yellow cliffs, green ocean. The girls skipping through the hotel corridor. Anders slowing down to take my hand. Everything seems possible on this enchanted island.

Maybe, maybe.

Do I dare think it?

It has been four years.

Four years and two months actually.

Maybe.

Maybe it would work.

One more who would skip next to Ingrid and Stina.

I can almost see him.

Or her.

Small legs, small hands, curls bobbing against a small head. The weight of that bundle again in my arms. That special smell of a new life.

Yes, maybe.

OceanofPDF.com

CHAPTER 36

I hear my girls on the other side of my bedroom door, brushing their teeth.

Those familiar sounds, talking and fussing and laughing, maybe for the last time.

Tears run down my temples into my pillow.

They are still small. Only seven and nine.

Will they remember me?

They still do not know much of what is about to happen. Only that Mamma is going to the hospital to “have a shot.” That Mamma will be away for a couple of days, maybe a week. It is impossible to tell them: *Mamma might never return.*

I can hear Mom also, helping them. Is this how it will be without me, Kristina a grandma and a mother at the same time? Stina who still needs help, she keeps forgetting her front teeth, only does up and down. Your front teeth, Stina, I want to tell her, don’t forget.

It is impossible to tell Ingrid and Stina, *Mamma is going to have heart surgery, or else I would die.*

The air, I have to get it in, I have to calm down, I must not think about them opening my chest and stopping my heart, cutting it open to pull something out and put something in, I must not think about the risks, breathe, I must breathe, only I cannot,

I cannot,

cannot,

not, even though I pull,

I pull,

pull,

pull at the air but it does not reach all the way in there is something in the way.

“And . . . ers . . .”

That was my last,
but he is here,
he is right here,
lifting me out of bed,
me in his arms,
sinking to the floor.
I am pulling at the air,
but it won't come.
I am suffocating,
tears streaming down,
his eyes, his hands, his heart beating close to my ear.

Dr. Holstein said I had crossed the line, that I could die any moment, but it would still be better with a planned surgery than an emergency, deciding on the eighth of October, which is tomorrow, but what are we to do now?

What are we to do?

Is this it?

I cannot breathe, should we call for an ambulance, is this how it will end, on the floor of our bedroom, the night before?

Anders's hand is on my forehead, stroking me, he is saying something, telling me to stay please stay please stay and his hand on my forehead is everything.

The air finds new ways into my lungs, clear streams of flowing life. Drinking it, gasping, I find the words, this one important thing I have to say.

“You have to . . . make sure . . . that I stay . . . here!”

He knows what I mean, rocking me and stroking my forehead.

I must not die the night before.

I simply must not.

CHAPTER 37

Red

*B*leedings may occur, particularly in the first trimester. That's at least what it says in the family medical guide. And I am in week twelve. The beginning of the fourth month.

Was.

I was in week twelve.

First a lump of blood. Then a bigger one.

The pain telling me something was wrong. The hope telling me this is normal, surely everything is all right.

Now there is no doubt.

Maybe I should wake him up, but this mess in the bathroom, the blood on the floor and in the shower, it would sicken him, make him nauseous and what could he do anyway, it is too late.

The pain again, again, again, these are real contractions, is this how it's supposed to be, all this blood, should it be this much, the pain, the blood gushing out of me, I need to get up, big lumps are falling out of me, I feel dizzy, maybe I should call for Anders after all, but I do not think I have the strength and there is too much pain and besides he won't hear me through the walls, yet more blood, how much can you lose before it gets critical, more contractions, coming harder, harder, harder and something heavy falling out of me, was that . . . ? Was that . . . ? There is red everywhere, red and more red, nothing else, it is already gone, I did not even get to see it, but there is more coming, the pains again, harder, harder, how long have I been in here, how long is this going to last, I think I have to lie down, I have to crawl to the shower, curl up on the floor, my head on my arm, I do not know how much longer I can do this.

This smell of blood.

Wet and sticky. My clothes, the floor, my hair.

Red, red.

This was the child who would sit and play in the baby bathtub, bubbles of soap on its tiny neck, in its hair, soft baby skin rubbing against the plastic of the tub. This was the child who would . . . I must not think like this, I must not . . . The pains are coming back, not more, I do not think I can take it, the blood and the lumps gushing out, the contractions harder and harder.

I should get up, I should find a couple of towels to wipe it up, change these bloody clothes, clean away this mess . . . But the pains and this strange weakness and the weariness and the light coming from under the door. I should get up. Just one more minute, I can rest one minute more, here on this warm cliff and the sun in my face and the seagulls in the sky, their shrill voices, telling me, Lene, why didn't you say something, come here, I'll help you . . .

After getting dressed, weak and trembling, I am supposed to come out. Push aside the curtain and come out to sit down. Movements. They have never before been this heavy. Movements. It is the movements that push time ahead, without movements there would be stillness, rest, the universe holding its breath. I could be standing here forever, my face close to the curtain, the smell of the fabric, the voices on the other side. But I know now there is no fooling time. My body knows it. I step out.

"May Anders come in?" My voice is so weak it is barely a whisper.

"I'll get him." The nurse's movements are effective.

The doctor is typing at the keyboard, looking into the computer screen. I sit down at the chair in front of his desk but my body does not want to sit down, it does not want to stand up, it does not want to be here in this dimly lit room in the middle of the night. I am shivering. What is he writing, this young doctor the same age as me, his jaw clenched and his delicate hands pressing the keys? Words that are only words, like black carvings in white stone, sterile, clean, words that do not bleed, red and full of black lumps, for three days, until I was too weak to even get out of bed. I begged Anders, please don't make me go, but I knew I had to. The usual waiting in the emergency room. Hours that my body counted slowly, leaning against Anders. But he could not follow me into the examination room. One might wonder what a young doctor is thinking when his hands are fumbling,

feeling one's vagina, when he is scraping with cold metal instruments in one's uterus to remove the last traces.

Anders comes. He does not say anything, just sits down in the chair next to me and puts his arm around me, carefully, like I am not already broken.

The doctor looks up from the screen.

"I'll give you medication that will help the uterus to contract. It will speed up your recovery."

"Thank you." I can barely hear my own voice.

"You are still young. There is nothing stopping you." The doctor puts on a happy face, but his jaws are still tense and the curls in his dark hair are a little too perfect. "You can try again next month."

"Don't we need to wait longer than that?" Anders asks.

"No, it shouldn't be necessary. In a month you may be pregnant again." The doctor smiles and his teeth are terrifyingly perfect.

It is dark outside the car window. The night in January is so long it swallows up the thin gray light at midday, making it nothing more than a parenthesis, an excuse, a pretext.

Anders is silent. I am also silent. But I have to say it.

"Anders, we have to wait."

"I think you're right."

"I can't explain it. I feel like I would die if I became pregnant again."

"It's your body and no one can tell you how to feel. I agree. What was he thinking? Next month?" Anders snorts and his hands are holding the steering wheel so tight his knuckles are white.

I can see his profile in the dark, his jaws tightening, his messy hair. My hand finds his neck, the curls behind his ears.

"Thank you."

And this gratefulness is like a vibrating force in the dark. Anders who listens to me, who believes me. Who held me when I cried, when I wriggled in pain and told him what had happened, who came with food for me to eat in bed, who told the girls Mamma needs to rest, who fetched the girls so I could see them and listen to their voices, who told them when I got weary, Mamma needs to rest again, who stroked my forehead and stayed silent in the dark, his warm body next to mine and the rhythm of his breathing.

The streets are empty. The snow banks are colored orange by the streetlights. The clock on the dashboard shows one forty.

I am still caressing his neck, but the pains are getting worse and I let my hand sink and I concentrate on looking ahead. The road disappears in the night. Black sky. Orange snow. The pains. I never even told anyone about the pregnancy, except for Anders. It is like nothing happened. The pains again, shooting up from my abdomen. Like nothing happened. Those are strange words. They always mean something did happen. Something that changes things. Even if it doesn't show at first, something happened, and I have a feeling this will not be a speedy recovery. I have a feeling this will be something I will have to carry, that there is a residue still somewhere inside me, which the doctor could not reach.

OceanofPDF.com

CHAPTER 38

*T*he last time.

The words burn like fire in my head, all the time, like a fire I can't put out, in the shower, the disinfectant almost finished, there was just enough. For the last time.

My hair wet, I hurry down the stairs to the girls. They are already by the door, backpacks on their backs, with my mom who will walk them to the school bus.

I need to hold them tight.

Ingrid, thin and bony. Stina, still small, still that baby softness.

The last time. Their hair, soft against my lips. They are laughing, not used to this many kisses.

Ingrid breaks free. "You've got to let go, Mom, or we'll miss the bus." Her small voice.

I am losing them and they don't know, they can't feel the words burning in my head. They are turning and waving at me, standing in the yard, the morning sun making their hair glow.

"Bye, Mom!"

"Bye, Mamma!"

And my heart breaks. I can't say it.

Bye, Ingrid.

Bye, Stina.

The heaviness in my chest shifts and hurts, goodbye, goodbye, this moment, please do not let it end, but they are turning and walking through the yard, backpacks bobbing on their backs, disappearing behind the bushes, their hair glimmering. I can still see glimpses of them in the pattern of the branches. For the last time.

No.

Not the last time.

Not the last time I climb the stairs. Heavy breaths. The floor creaking on the landing.

No jewelry, they told me. My wedding band, my engagement ring, I leave them in the drawer of my nightstand and my hand feels strangely naked.

Also no breakfast. Nothing to eat or drink since last night.

It's almost time to go.

What am I bringing? Not much, a change of clothes in a sports bag, the same kind I am wearing, soft sweats that are kind to my body.

Anders smells good, coming into the bedroom, his hair still wet from the shower.

"Well," he says. "Well, Lene." He does not want to say: It's time to go now, he does not want to ask: Are you ready, Lene. He says "well" and clenches his jaws after the word, as if he is angry that it slipped out.

There is a bang downstairs from the door.

"You didn't leave already?" Mom cries and I hear it in her voice, the panic, the fear of silence.

"No, we're still here," Anders says.

"Oh," Mom says, relieved and at the same time not.

Anders carries the blue sports bag down the stairs.

I carry myself.

"There you are," Mom says, but she is not smiling like she usually does.

"Well," Anders says.

Then she smiles. My mom. You have to smile, saying goodbye.

Not for the last time.

An embrace. This is my mom. If my dad carries his gentleness in his hands, in the things that he builds, my mom carries it in her arms, in her bosom, in her body soft and apologetic. Forgive me, the embrace says, forgive that I was not there for you when the darkness ate you, I didn't know, I didn't understand, I didn't dare ask. I inherited the silence from your grandma, who was sent from home to work as a maid as an eleven-year-old in the deep forests of Jämtland. I thought it best if I stayed away, like Grandma did, I didn't think I could make a difference.

That talk had been a fork in the road. Found by the light, suddenly, among the flowers of last summer, on that path in the meadow by the sea.

And me letting go of the pride and the anger: But I need you, Mom, we need you, the girls and I and Anders also.

I remember her trembling voice: And here I was thinking you liked it better if I stayed away.

Liked it better?

Yes, I didn't understand.

You didn't think that we'd need you.

Those words were painful, but not as painful as the silence had been during the years of darkness, a pain growing out of the disappointment and the anger and the letting go and the forgiveness and the reaching for a second chance.

It is all in this embrace.

"Well." Anders is saying that we have to let go.

My mom smiles, but it is kind of crooked. Now that we have found each other, that we have started down this new road together, we have to say goodbye. At least we had the chance to do this. The girls got closer to their grandma. And at the same time, slowly, the northern silence and the hugs sharp with the stubble from his cheeks, to their grandpa.

We walk through the kitchen, Anders first, still silent. Outside the air smells of summer and of the asphalt heating up.

Mom stands in the back doorway, waving. It is supposed to be waving, but her hand is still.

Inside the car Anders says, "Well." Pauses for a moment. Starts the engine. I can see Mom standing there, through the rear window, getting smaller and smaller, and then we turn to Radnor Chester Road and she disappears behind the back wall. Still her hand raised, like she wanted to say something.

Anders stops the car at the lights at the intersection. Then he turns to King of Prussia Road.

Not for the last time.

CHAPTER 39

Fairy Tales

I glance across the pages of the book; my eyes are arms and legs and pointed toes, doing the leaps and jumps that my body cannot. The words, black against the page, create my world, my alibi, my moment to forget. Still it is exhausting. My heart beating, my breathing getting heavier, the dizziness making my head spin. I am sitting by my desk in the smallest room of our basement; my own place of refuge, filled with bookshelves from floor to ceiling, books waiting on every shelf to be asked to dance. It has been four months since the miscarriage, but my body still remembers it.

The early-summer evening seeps through the small basement window and whispers of the new green. I used to go out for walks, breathing the golden air of twilight. I used to dance, stretch my arms to the ceiling, a line going through me to the sky. Now it's just words, dancing across the page.

I turn the page and there she is. Edith Södergran, my old friend, how have you been?

The colors' longing is the blood's. If you thirst after beauty you must close your eyes and look into your own heart.

Yet beauty fears the daylight and too many looks,

There's someone at the door. It's Anders.

"Here, Lene," he says, placing a teacup on the desk. "I thought you might get hungry." He's holding a plate with sandwiches, my favorites, grain bread with apricot jam.

"Yeah, I am, actually. Thanks, that's nice."

"You okay?" He moves a pile of paper to make room for the plate. I laugh. "Are YOU okay? I can hear the girls through the ceiling."

He sighs and pulls his hand through his hair.

“I’m trying to quiet them down not to disturb you. After supper I guess it will be easier.”

“No, I didn’t mean it like that. You’re doing great.”

I pull him close, feel his warmth, his shirt against my cheek. He puts his arms around me and I can hear his heart beating.

He looks down at me.

“The contractor called. He’s been going through the numbers and says he may start in June with the bathroom.”

“Oh yeah?” I say, but my thoughts are already back with Edith.

“Oh, sorry, I forgot.” He lets go of me. “This is your time.”

“It’s all right.”

He leaves, and the door squeaks behind him. I notice the texture of the door, colored in at least thirty different shades, a pattern of nail holes from removed Masonite boards, and a big hole down at the floor. One may wonder why someone would make a big hole in a door, even if it’s in the basement. Apparently it was the children of the first owners of the house who started renovating after their parents passed away. To save money they did it all themselves and in the process almost destroyed the house until they realized their mistake and sold it. The house still bears the traces of their rampage. But we have updated the electricity, dug around the house to put in drainage pipes, built a new entryway. We have put stones in front of the house, instead of all that mud, expanded the parking area by digging and pulling away bushes to make a car fit. We have built a stone wall supporting the slope of the yard to our neighbor. The bathrooms are next.

yet beauty will not suffer noise or all too many movements—

I smile; it’s like Edith is teasing me.

“Hi, Mamma!” It’s Stina, sticking her head through the hole in the door.

“Hi, sweetie.”

She crawls through and runs up to me. I lift her up, but she doesn’t want to be caught, her small body struggling in my arms to be free again. She is too restless, always has been. I have to let her go. Even as a baby she tried to get away from me, her tiny body wriggling in my arms, unlike Ingrid who

let herself be carried, hiding her head at my neck. Stina wants to play peekaboo through the hole in the door.

“Hi, Mamma!”

“Hello, Stina.”

She crawls back out again.

“Now you don’t see me!”

“Where are you? Where is Stina?”

“HERE!” And her wonderful laughter, as her head comes through the hole again, those bouncing golden curls.

“Hi, Mamma!”

“Hello, Stina.”

Stina’s love is loud, full of movements, consuming. She wants to play, give wet kisses and hard hugs, punches in my stomach, elbows in my ribs, wrestling. Where am I to find that kind of strength? My body always slow and heavy, my thoughts thin and fragile. I glance down at the page.

you must not bring your heart to your lips.

Stina is peeking through the hole in the door again.

“Hi, Mamma! Mamma?”

“Hello, Stina! There you are!”

Her face crumples and she goes from all laughter to all tears in an instant.

“Nooo,” she whines.

“Come here, honey.” It’s Anders, pulling her from the other side.

“I don’t wannaaa!”

But Anders is pulling her out. I can only see her fighting arms in the hole.

“I’m sorry, Lene, I was doing the dishes. I didn’t know she’d go downstairs,” he shouts, to make himself heard above the wailing.

“It’s okay,” I say. “You can leave her.”

“No, this is your only time to yourself.” I can hear the sounds of his footsteps climbing the stairs, along with Stina’s protests.

“I don’t wannaaaa! Nooo! No bedtime story!”

I sip the tea.

Chamomile.

I return to Edith.

we should not disturb the noble rings of silence and solitude,

She makes me smile, listening to Stina's noooooo echoing through the house.

And then it is like Edith is looking directly at me.

what is greater to meet than an unsolved riddle with strange features?

I feel like the moment stretches and enfolds me, sitting here in the basement.

Stina is still screaming. I should go help Anders. Be with Ingrid. Comfort Stina. Read them bedtime stories while the birds chirp in the sky and the evening turns blue.

But I can feel my heart beating in my chest, so hard it hurts. It's the riddle squirming and breaking and something leaking out of it. Words, written in my heart.

If it continues like this, I will not live to see them grow up.

What am I thinking? I'm not even thirty years old, I'm only twenty-nine and I should not—No, I won't be able to do it. If it continues like this.

Stina has stopped screaming.

The house is silent.

Edith is whispering from the page.

Among gray stones

lies your white body and grieves

over the days that come and go.

The fairy tales you heard as a child

sob in your heart.

CHAPTER 40

An eagle circles up in the vast blue, a black speck disappearing outside the square of the car window.

We have done this so many times. Anders at the wheel, me in the passenger seat, watching his hands. It has changed, lately, the way he touches me. Carefully, like I am broken, split by an invisible crack.

I have to see this, feel this, everything, the vibrations of the car, the sounds of the engine, the seat belt pressing on my chest, the road, the white lines disappearing under our blue Mazda, the roadwork slowing us down, the men in orange vests, the signs, cars, trees, houses, colors.

It's all so beautiful.

Anders's profile, his straight nose, clenched jaws, high brow, his hair that is never fully tamed. He is beautiful.

"Lene, if you look in the glove compartment."

"Yeah?"

There is something there. Among the stacks of paper, the pens, and the parking coins.

"What is this?" I pick up the small package, wrapped in paper.

"Open it."

I unwrap it and it's a box, white and smooth, opening with a click.

A heart. In gold. A small diamond glittering in the middle.

"Thank you, Anders," I whisper. "Thank you."

He looks at me for a second, smiling, and there is something glimmering in the corner of his eye.

The gold heart already in my hands, I remember:

"I'm not supposed to wear any jewelry."

"You can put it back," he says. "You can wear it afterward."

He is not smiling anymore. Afterward. I can wear it afterward.

The heart of gold is about the size of my thumbnail, the chain playfully running through my fingers. Not yet. I don't have to put it back just yet. The diamond glitters like a teardrop. Like a heart valve, the new one I'm getting. Like hope for an afterward.

Anders gazes ahead at the road.

There's a lot of traffic in the morning. All the people commuting to Philadelphia for work.

But we left with a good margin. We will make it in time. We will arrive and find a place to park at the hospital and walk through the huge glass doors. We will find our way to the right floor and it will be in perfect time. But now we are having this moment in the car.

The road disappearing below us.

The houses, trees, sky, all strangely transparent, as if they are about to let go, as if they would fly away were they not attached to the ground with thin translucent threads. It's all so very fragile, it could all go at any moment. If I put my hand out I could press through the concrete blocks of the highway, caress the fluffy treetops, playfully flick the houses standing side by side like dominoes. I could crawl up on one of the white clouds and look down at Ingrid and Stina sitting in their classrooms. I could whisper *I love you* and blow kisses to their small necks and peek over their shoulders at the wonderfully crooked letters they are shaping. I could go back and see my mom standing in the kitchen drying her tears—I have almost never seen her cry. I could hug my dad, sitting at work back in Sweden, constantly checking the clock on his desk—they are all checking their watches, Solveig and Arne, Cecilia, Petra, Viktor, and the others, my small nieces and nephews.

The minutes drag by, seconds, days, years, people, memories, moments.

The sun climbs its blue ladder and the heart of gold glitters in my hand.

CHAPTER 41

To Listen

Come on, Lene, we must hurry.” Anders almost pulls me out of the car.

“I know,” I say and let him help me up.

The summer morning tastes like a fresh apple, every breath a crisp bite into the blue sky and the trees a little yellow at the edges. The health-care center is located right by the canal, and the air smells of the sea, a salty breeze from Kattegat.

I follow Anders up the stone stairs.

“I think we’ll make it.” He holds the door for me. “It’s only twenty to eight.”

Anders takes a ticket from the machine and glances at the counting board to check the number.

“You can sit down,” he says.

I sink into a chair while Anders circles the waiting room. On the wall in front of me is one of those public pieces of art, a green canvas with a blue line across it, cautious in its aesthetics: no one can be offended.

There’s a beep and it’s our turn. I’m close enough to hear Anders talking to the lady behind the glass.

“Good morning,” he says.

She doesn’t look up, apparently preoccupied with something. He tries again.

“Good morning.”

Now she looks at him, pulling her glasses to the tip of her nose.

“Yes? Do you have an appointment?”

“No, we’re here to make one.” He glances at his watch.

“Well, now you can only book by the phone. Between seven and eight, Monday through Thursday.”

“I know that. I’ve been calling between seven and eight o’clock for a week. Also last week. But no one takes my calls. All I do is wait in line, day after day. That’s why I thought it best to come down here and make an appointment in person.”

The lady sighs and shakes her head.

“I told you, it’s only possible to book an appointment by phone.” She makes a gesture toward the other woman behind the desk, talking on the phone.

“But I’m here now. You have the booking schedule right in front of you.” She shrugs. “These are the routines.”

“So I have to call you?”

“Yes, but we’re about to close, it’s ten to eight. You can try again after the weekend.”

“What about tomorrow?”

“I told you, Fridays there’s no booking.”

“Okay, then.” He walks back to me and throws himself into the chair next to me. He pulls out his mobile phone, presses the buttons, and looks at me. I can hear it too, the signal telling us the line is busy. He presses the buttons again. Busy. Again. Busy. Again. Busy. Again. A signal!

“Hello?” Anders shouts.

We can hear the lady answering with two voices: one in the phone and one in the reception area.

“Good morning, what can I do for you?”

“I want to make an appointment!”

The lady behind the desk gives us a glance.

“Well, you’re lucky. I just had a cancellation. There’s a time free right now, if you’re able to come.”

Anders laughs.

“Yes, we can come now.”

“Your name is?”

“Lene Fogelberg. I’m calling on behalf of my wife.”

“Actually, I need to talk to her in that case.”

“Okay.” He gives me his phone.

“Hello.” I cannot help but smile and wave at her, but she doesn’t seem to appreciate the joke.

“You’re welcome,” she says into the phone and hangs up.

Dr. Johan Bengtsson receives us in his small office, full of folders and binders. He gets up to shake our hands and sits down again at the desk, adjusting his white doctor’s coat over his crossed legs. There are two chairs beside the desk and he asks us to sit down with a gesture.

“Please. So what can I do for you?”

“I would like to discuss my health,” I say as I sit down, trying not to sound desperate.

Dr. Bengtsson smiles and pulls his hand across his bald head.

“Ah, yes. How are you doing?”

“Not very good, actually. I have this constant pressure on my chest. I am always short of breath. And dizzy. Feeling like I’m going to faint.” I pause, but Anders’s eyes seem to encourage me to continue. “I can barely read anymore,” I say. “The letters just . . . Well, they seem to move around, I can’t follow the sentences.”

“And she’s always tired,” Anders adds.

“Yeah, exhausted,” I say.

While I have been speaking, Dr. Bengtsson has turned to his computer screen and I realize that he is reading my medical history in the database. He can see all the other times I have been to a doctor saying these very things. He reads the notes from the doctor who took some blood and never called us back. The other doctor who told me to think positive. About now Dr. Bengtsson will know that I have been on antidepressants. It is about now he will turn to me and tell me I’m a hypochondriac.

Dr. Bengtsson looks up at me.

“I think you’re stressed.”

“But I’m often in pain,” I try to explain. “In my chest. Sometimes so bad it’s hard to breathe.”

“It can feel like that. You need to rest. And think positive.”

Aha! He was reading my medical file.

“But I do,” I say. “I do think positive. I tell myself I am healthy and I tell myself not to faint. I close my eyes until the dizziness goes away.”

“You need to rest. It’s quite common for parents of young children to feel stressed.”

“Yeah, well, it’s pretty exhausting,” I agree. “But I do rest a lot. Several times a day. Several hours.”

“Is there nothing to be done?” Anders leans forward. “Some sort of examination, some kind of test?”

Dr. Bengtsson smiles a crooked smile and fiddles with the stethoscope around his neck.

“What would that be?” he asks.

“Well, I don’t know!” Anders raises his arms. “Something. An x-ray or a scan or something. She may have a brain tumor.”

Dr. Bengtsson sighs, or possibly it is a short laugh.

“No, I think not.”

Anders leans back, like he doesn’t know what to say. I don’t know what to say either, and Dr. Bengtsson is also silent. We just sit there looking at one another.

It seems pointless, but I still have to ask.

“I thought . . . I was wondering . . . about sick benefit.”

Dr. Bengtsson is looking at the screen again.

“Are you working?”

“Well, no, I am listed as unemployed, since my parental benefits ended.”

“There is no diagnosis I can give you. Without diagnosis I cannot justify listing you as sick in the files of the Social Insurance Agency.”

“We know all that,” Anders says.

And then the silence again. It says it all, the silence. Dr. Bengtsson thinks we are after the money. That we are trying to benefit from the system.

“Well.” Dr. Bengtsson gets up, which is the signal that our time is up. “Good luck then. Finding a job.”

“Thanks.” I cannot think of anything else to say.

Anders doesn’t say anything. He rushes through the corridor and I have to run to keep up, past the waiting room, out through the doors, down the stone stairs.

When we get to the car he explodes.

“He didn’t even listen to us!”

“He didn’t hear a word I said.” I get into the car and turn to him. “He just read my file and decided that I’m a hypochondriac.”

“They’re all the same!” Anders slams the car door and starts the engine. “All of them!”

I put my hand on his arm.

“You’re different, Anders. You listen.”

He stops before pulling out of the parking lot and looks at me. Just looks at me. Those small wrinkles around the blue sky that is his eyes. And I see it. It makes my chest hurt and my eyes fill with tears. He really does believe me. And he’s the only one.

OceanofPDF.com

CHAPTER 42

*T*here is a TV on the gray wall. Flat faces and chattering voices in a square of glass. There are some plants. A row of windows that looks onto a high-rise reflecting the words of the sign HOSPITAL OF THE UNIVERSITY OF PENNSYLVANIA. There is a smell of disinfectant coming from the floor and the monochromatic furniture.

Anders has placed the beeper on the table in front of us. It will buzz and flash and we will get up and then the waiting will be over.

It's a new kind of waiting that doesn't dare look forward but rather looks back, counting the years that have been instead of the minutes ahead. A waiting that I don't want to end. I can feel my body growing weaker, drained by hunger and thirst.

Anders has his arms around me. My legs are curled up under me, leaning against him on the sofa, his shoulder against my cheek. He is stroking my hair.

We have been here almost two hours. "It may take time," they said at the reception, while I signed the last documents. "We'll call you on the beeper when everything's ready."

We are not in a hurry.

We can sit here forever.

The familiar smell of Anders's shirt, his calm breathing, his arms around me, please hold me, please never let me go, please, please.

People move around us, sit down, get up again, come and go, talk in muffled voices.

Here we are, Anders and me, in a gleaming silver tower. No, we are in our tower in the woods, the stone tower in the twilight of the summer evening. I reach for his hand and he leans forward seeking my lips and we kiss each other through all the ages and throughout the universe. And if we miss one another, if there will be long years of sorrow, we can always meet again in this kiss, our secret place, the stone tower in the forest.

The buzzing.

The red flashing of the beeper.

Anders doesn't move. Then slowly he lets go of me, reaching for the beeper. He gets up and turns to me, his hand outstretched.

"It's us now."

I have to take his hand and get up carefully through the dizziness. He holds me, doesn't let go, as we climb down from our stone tower and walk back to the reception area.

OceanofPDF.com

CHAPTER 43

Crushed

The trees have lost their leaves. They are twisting in the wind, trying to hide their nakedness. Tree after tree, between the metal signs and the graffiti walls of the bus shelters. Anders pulls hard on the gear lever and turns carelessly, so that I am pressed against the car door.

“Hey, careful,” I say.

“Okay, okay.” He starts hitting the steering wheel. “A damn joke, that’s what it is!”

“But a relief also, I think. To finally be free of Big Brother.”

“Big Brother?”

“Yeah, like in Nineteen Eighty-Four. You know, Orwell.”

“Right,” he laughs. “Exactly. Big Brother.”

A yellow plastic bag is stuck in a tree. It flutters in the wind, empty and full of holes. You can’t mend a plastic bag. You can’t save it with an old-fashioned darning needle and some yarn. There will come a day when the wind carries it up into a tree and no one reaches it anymore. Closer to heaven than earth.

How many doctors have I seen? I cannot keep count anymore. The doctors at the health-care center and the emergency room. And that homeopath who stared into my eyes and told me that my liver is the problem and that I should stop eating any kind of dairy products. I have stopped eating milk, butter, cream, cheese, sugar, bread, any kind of carbohydrates, not even fruit or potatoes or carrots or corn: maybe it’s a fungal infection in my body, feeding on sugar and carbohydrates, making me exhausted? For six weeks I swallowed fungus killers in giant capsules that a young doctor prescribed for me. I have taken four different homeopathic remedies for more than six months, and more natural herbs and vitamins and potions

than I can remember: dried nettles and chalk powder and silver water. I have lost so much weight that I am merely skin and bone.

Anders hits the brakes late in the traffic rotary and the man on the bike, a gentleman with white hair sprouting from his head in the wind, slows down and scowls at us.

“Careful, Anders,” I repeat.

“Yeah, okay, I know.”

It’s not like him driving like this.

“Don’t forget that we’re picking up Stina from kindergarten,” I remind him.

“If you were a man you’d have been on a disability pension ages ago.” He hits the steering wheel again. “I’m sorry it had to come to this,” he says, mimicking the lady and making me laugh. “Regrettably we have to delete you from our files since your days of unemployment insurance have elapsed. It was your responsibility to find a job before this.”

My laughter gets caught in my throat, as I remember the shame. The feeling of me shrinking and the chair growing, until there was nothing left of me. The stare of this lady and all other ladies behind their proper desks in their proper clothes in their proper gray buildings.

“Don’t worry, Lene,” Anders says. “She doesn’t know anything. She’s been in that box all her life. She should be let out more often.”

“Now the government insurance agency will write me off as well. I will not be in any files anymore. Not anywhere in the system.”

“No sick benefits, no parental benefits, no pension, no unemployment insurance, nothing!” Anders says.

“Like I don’t exist anymore.”

“It’s like Kafka. All these people in their little boxes telling you what you can and can’t do. We can’t even choose our own doctor! And I’ve seen how you’ve tried! I mean, you even went looking for work when you were seven months pregnant with Stina and they laughed in your face during the interview, and all because the unemployment agency demanded it.”

He carries the anger that is too heavy for me. Maybe he can’t stand to see me defeated like this. Even though we have known for a long time that this day had to come. When I worried, he reassured me: It’s okay, Lene, we’ll be all right, you supported me when I finished my studies, now it’s my time to support you. You’re not alone. We’re in this together.

I turn and look at him and, as if he could read my thoughts, he turns to me:

“You and me, Lene. You and me.”

“Always,” I say.

Outside the window there is a smashed bus shelter, shards of glass lying all over the sidewalk.

“Look over there, Anders, they knew what they were doing,” I say and laugh.

He glances to the side.

“The ones who smashed the bus stop? Yep, they’ve got it all figured out.” He is not laughing.

It starts to rain, small drops all over the windshield.

“We should also do it,” Anders says. “Tonight, when it’s dark.”

“I think so! Let’s do it!”

“It can’t be that hard.”

I suddenly remember. “We forgot about Stina!”

Anders hits the brakes and turns onto a side street to make a U-turn.

“But tonight, Lene . . .” He looks at me, smiling.

“Yes.” I laugh again.

He also starts to laugh and it is our laughter and the rain against the windshield.

“I can pick up Ingrid also, when she finishes school.” Anders says. “So you won’t have to walk in the rain.”

“Thank you.”

It’s like he can feel it. My exhaustion. The dizziness. He knows that the visit to the government unemployment agency is all I will be able to do today.

“I’ll fix dinner,” he says. “But I’ll have to show up at the office, after I’ve picked up Ingrid.”

“Okay.”

“Maybe we can order pizza.”

“Can we afford it?” I ask. “Today again.”

“I think we need to celebrate!” he says. “Finally we got rid of Big Brother!”

I laugh. “Well, yeah, that is something to celebrate.”

We have arrived at the daycare center, the low yellow building with green shutters on top of the hill. The parking lot in the middle of the slope makes our Volvo tilt. Anders gets out of the car and pauses.

“You’d better stay.” He bends over to smile at me. “You need to rest. Save your strength for tonight.”

I laugh. “Yeah, tonight,” I say.

He closes the car door, carrying our secret in his smile. Halfway up the hill he turns and swings an invisible bat.

We could do it.

We could sneak out of our beds, put on our darkest clothes, leave the girls behind sleeping in their rooms. We could lock the door, chase each other down the street, giggling, serious, silent, expectant, to the bus shelter where I once sat with my blue sports bag in full despair and wanted to leave and stay at the same time.

We could make it there without being seen in the dark, me with the bat and he with the crowbar: bang, bang, bang, smash and crash and crush. Give back to the system what it has given us: a kick in the side, a stroke on the back, a blow to the head as we lie down.

I can feel the anger rise inside of me. We could do it, we could show them that we are free no matter how they try to bend us, that we can make our own decisions, that it’s not the government or an agency or a political party that is to decide when we’re to have children, go to school, work, be sick or be healthy. We could show them they have no right to punish or reward us with their benefits taken out of our salaries that we work so hard to earn, shooing us back in line like we’re one giant flock of sheep, trying to make us follow their political agenda under the pretext of taking care of the weak, because when you really are weak they throw you out—you are of no use to the system if you don’t pay taxes. Then you’re nothing, worse than nothing, a burden to the rest and you’re to be ashamed of yourself every day of your life.

But we are not ashamed and we are not sheep—we are humans, individuals. We will reach for whatever freedom we can find and they won’t decide whether we will crush the windows of a bus shelter or run back home intoxicated with the thrill to make love in the night, tenderly picking shards of glass out of each other’s hair.

CHAPTER 44

A nurse meets us at reception. She's young, with dark hair up in a casual ponytail. Her coat is green—surgery green.

“Good morning, my name's Nina,” she says, shaking our hands and turning to me. “How are you doing?”

“Well . . .”

She smiles and nods and her dark eyes understand that there is not much else to say. I can see her switch from compassion to effectiveness. “Please, follow me,” she says, and her professionalism is comforting.

We follow her green back and swinging ponytail through corridor after corridor.

Anders's hand, clinging to mine, is cool and hot at the same time.

The nurse is silent, and I'm grateful.

Another corridor. Yet another. We reach a small waiting room. Nurse Nina turns to Anders.

“You can wait here.”

“What, is this . . . ?”

Anders clings harder to my hand and we look at each other and at the nurse.

“But . . . but he . . .” I struggle to find the words, my heart beating no, no, no.

“It's all right, you'll see each other soon,” Nina says and smiles.

“Oh, okay,” I say.

“I'll be right there.” Anders squeezes my hand. “Oh, wait.” He hands me the sports bag.

Before I follow Nina through the wide swinging doors, I turn to look at Anders and he smiles, those blue eyes that remind me of a summer sky, and I smile back.

We enter a large room with beds along the walls. There are people in them, lying still, looking extremely pale. It's unreal. I can't take my eyes off them. Their blue lips, their gray skin. They look like giant porcelain dolls. But suddenly I understand: they are under anesthesia. This is a surgical recovery room. The people sitting on chairs next to them are relatives waiting for them to wake up. Nurse Nina brings me to a bed.

"You can sit down if you want." She closes a blue curtain around the bed and leaves me.

I put the sports bag on the floor next to the bed and sit down.

Nurse Nina opens the curtain.

"I'll be right back," she says and the curtain falls back again. There is a gap in the curtain and I can see across the room a woman, pale as snow, in her bed. Her foot is in a bandage and her stillness makes me sick; she looks like . . . like—no, I don't want to think it.

I need to lie down.

Breathe.

Nurse Nina is back.

"This is a hairnet." She holds up a blue wrinkly cloth. "You can save it for later. And here is your robe. I'll show you where you can change." She helps me out of bed. "Careful now."

I bring the sports bag and the folded hospital robe and follow Nurse Nina, but the nausea hits me again. I have to ask her:

"Will I . . . will I be like them?" I glance at the sleeping patients. "Will I lie here like this?"

"No, no, not you," she says, and I don't know whether that's a comfort or not, but I don't have time to think about it, since she is pulling me away. "Come with me."

She takes me to the end of the room where there is a restroom. At the door she turns to me.

"You need to put on the robe. And take off everything else."

"Everything?"

"Everything. You're not wearing any jewelry, are you?"

"No, I left it at home like I was told."

"Good. Only the robe. Not even your shoes."

"Okay," I say.

She smiles and it's a smile she has probably used a hundred times before, finding its place on her face in an instant.

IT IS A SMALL ROOM. A TOILET. A SINK. A SOAP AND DISIN-fectant dispenser on the wall. A single lamp over the mirror. A pale face. Is this me? These eyes, small blood vessels, black pupils dilated. I have nowhere to run. The door is locked and there is no window where I could crawl out, and even if there had been one, I would force myself to stay.

Everything. She said everything.

My shoes. Into the bag. Sweatpants. On top of my shoes. Sweater next. Fold. Into the bag. I'm getting dizzy bending over and getting up, but I have to do this. Slowly. T-shirt. Bra. Underpants. Socks.

Who will open this bag, take out these clothes, unfold them?

The floor is cold under my feet.

No jewelry. No rings, no necklace. Nothing to keep my hair from my face.

Just skin.

The girl in the mirror is shaking and fighting back tears and her eyes tell me: Do not look away do not dare look away you have to see this. Her chest swelling and shrinking, narrow shoulders, purple nipples, bluish skin stretched over her ribs.

It was all just pretend, she says, the roles you played, the costumes you wore. This is the real you.

Here is my body. Which I have fought and pleaded with and commanded and cared for and decorated and dressed and undressed and loved and hated. Here it is. Pale and thin. And yet it has been heavy, so heavy to carry. In a way it would be a relief to finally step out of it, fold it, and put it in a coffin.

But in these eyes I can see Ingrid and Stina dancing, and in these hands I can feel Anders's touch, and on this forehead I can feel him stroking me gently, and in this scalp I can feel the pull of my mother braiding my hair, and on these shoulders I can feel the weight of my dad's arm telling me he loves me without using words. They are all there; my body remembers them, all the memories written on my skin and in every movement.

There. My skin is soft under my fingers, will be soft under the scalpel. But my ribs are hard, resisting the line I'm drawing, the curve, showing the way to my heart.

Is this how it will end?

I have done everything they told me. Followed the instructions. But this is the point where that's not enough. It has to be my own decision. It has to be me reaching for the robe. Me putting it on. Me reaching for the bag. Me looking into the mirror one last time.

The girl in the mirror is staring at me, pleading, please don't make me.

Is this really happening? Or am I down in the corner, my head in my hands, refusing to make this decision? Crying that it is not fair, it is not fair.

Please, please, don't make me.

There, there.

Please, don't.

There is no other way. You know it.

And the girl in the mirror is silent. And she looks away.

The doorknob is cold in my hand.

Click.

Push.

I open the door.

CHAPTER 45

A Note Under the Door

I hold the phone away from my ear.

“I’m on my way home!” Anders yells. “I’ll be there in five minutes!”

“Already?” I say, struggling to untangle the cord.

“I’ve got something to tell you, something important we have to discuss!”

“Sounds exciting!” I say and give up my struggle; I already know the cord isn’t long enough to stretch to the kitchen. “Anders, I’ve got to go, I’m making pancakes.”

“Okay, I’ll be right there!”

I run to the stove and make it just in time to turn the pancake. It’s lying dark brown in the pan, and I can sit down again. The girls wanted pancakes so badly: “Mamma, yours are the best!” I have found a technique that makes it possible, by pulling a chair to the stove so I can sit down between turning the pancakes. Getting up I feel faint and can barely see for the darkness closing in, but I don’t need to see. I know this kitchen, every millimeter of it, know how to move about without hitting my head on the stainless steel hood of the kitchen fan.

The pancake is ready. I lift it to the steaming pile on the plate, pour batter into the pan, lift the pan to even it out. The pan is incredibly heavy; I use both hands to return it to the stove. I sit down, trembling with exhaustion. I like making pancakes for my girls. Even though it means I will have to rest all afternoon afterward.

“Mamma, can we come now? Are they ready?” Ingrid is in the doorway, looking at me with her expectant eyes.

“Yeah, at least there’s enough for you to start.”

“I am a gummy bear, I am a gummy bear . . .” Stina comes singing down the stairs. “Pancakes, yaaaay!” She hugs me, her blonde head hitting my stomach and continues to sing. “I am a gummy bear . . .”

“Mamma, tell her to stop!” Ingrid yells. “She never stops!”

Stina sings louder. “I am a gummy bear . . .”

“You can eat now, girls,” I say, struggling to stand up to help them get their plates from the cupboard. My head is spinning. So many movements, words, wishes. I am a gummy bear. Tell her to stop. The pancake almost burning in the pan. Mamma, can I have sugar on mine. Mamma, I don’t like strawberry jam, I want raspberry. Stina, can you stop singing that stupid song. Nah, because I feel like it . . .

The pancake. Golden in the pan. If I focus on it when everything else is spinning, focus on the batter turning brown and the memory of Anders’s voice: something important to discuss.

“Mamma, Mamma!” Stina reaches for the sugar on the shelf.

“Ingrid, can you help her?” I ask, almost breathless by now.

“Nope, I can’t,” Ingrid says, standing right next to Stina.

“Please, Ingrid, I need you to help her,” I say.

Ingrid lowers the jar of jam, biting her lip. She reaches for the sugar.

“Here you are, you gummy bear!”

And they laugh.

“Thank you,” I say.

Giggling and pushing each other, they spill sugar and jam all over the kitchen counter.

The front door slams open.

“Hey you! I’m home!” Anders comes running through the door.

“Pancakes! I also want some! Save some for me!” He sees me on the chair by the stove. “Let me.” He pulls the spatula out of my hand and starts wrecking the pancake in the pan.

“Nooo, not Pappa’s pancakes!” the girls yell from the kitchen table. “We want Mamma’s!”

But he still tries to save the poor pancake, pulling and pounding on it with the spatula.

“Anders, I want to do it,” I say. “Please, let me.”

“Okay then, well, this is not going very well anyway.” He gives the spatula back to me. “I don’t know how you do it.”

“I’m sorry, there is nothing I can do for this little fellow,” I say, trying to turn the burnt lump of batter, but Anders has already grabbed a plate.

“I’ll take it.” He scoops it up. “I actually like them that way.”

“Ha, ha, nobody likes them that way,” I say, pouring batter in the pan and sitting down on the chair again. He laughs and bends over to kiss me, tasting of sugar.

“What was it you wanted to tell me?” I suddenly remember.

“It’s unbelievable!” he says, swallowing the last lump of pancake. “One of my bosses, you know the one who is president of the division I’m in, he wants me to take a job in the US. He called me today, out of the blue, telling me I’m the guy for the job and that it can’t wait. We’ll have to move this summer. What do you think Lene, move to the US.? This is what I’ve always wanted, a chance to go abroad, what do you say?”

There is a smell of burning. I have forgotten the pancake in the pan. I get up from the chair and turn it, trying to grasp what he just told me.

“Where in the US?” I ask.

“It would be Pennsylvania, outside of Philadelphia, on the East Coast.”

His eyes behind his glasses are radiant. I have not seen him like this for a long time.

“But what about the girls?” I whisper. They are talking about something over at the kitchen table and don’t seem to be listening to what we are saying. I have to turn the pancake, no, I have to grab hold of the counter, no, I have to sit down.

Anders turns off the stove and grabs my shoulder.

“Lene, do you think you can make it?”

“It’s okay, I’m all right, oh, you mean moving—”

Suddenly, in my heart, there is a voice: This is what you are supposed to do. Among the pancakes and the girls’ chatter and Anders’s eyes and my dizziness, again: This is it. But how will I manage? I can hardly stand up to make pancakes for my kids, I can hardly do anything, how will I be able to move to another continent? I have never even been to the US, and the children, what about them? To change schools and leave their friends and our small house that they love so much and that I have also learned to love

through all the renovations, the new bathrooms, which we worked so hard for and paid so much for and—

This is what you are supposed to do. I know these words, where they are coming from, it's the riddle, cracked open, like a note being pushed under a closed door. I pick up the note, unfold it, and read the words: This is what you are supposed to do.

Anders's voice drags me back to the kitchen. "Lene, a moving company will pack everything, we will not have to do much, really, can you imagine?" He is still holding my shoulder, shaking me like an impatient child. "This is our big chance!"

"What about the house?" I ask. "Can we keep it?"

"Yeah, sure, we can rent it out. Or not, whatever you want, it's no problem."

"But the girls?"

"They'll learn English! While they're young! They will be fluent!"

"I don't . . . I don't know how I will cope."

"But I will do everything. You can just . . . sort of . . . tag along."

"Okay," I say. "If I can just tag along. If you do everything so that I can just tag along."

Anders raises his arms and starts to dance. That dance of his always makes me laugh. His rolling hips and unruly hair and his office shirt and his pants sprinkled with sugar. The girls are also laughing, their mouths full of pancakes. I close my eyes and listen to this wonderful mess, and even though the rug has just been pulled from under my feet and the roof from over my head, and everything that I know has been taken away from me in an instant, I know that this is what I am supposed to do.

CHAPTER 46

Nurse Nina is nowhere to be seen. Only the pale porcelain dolls in their beds and their loved ones beside them, reading books and magazines or half asleep in their chairs. Nobody raises their head, no one sees me closing the door behind me.

The floor is cold against my feet and I hurry across the room, feeling like a little girl. I put the sports bag next to my bed before lying down. I'm wearing the cotton robe, nothing else, and I have started to tremble but I'm not cold, wait, I'm freezing, shivering. Nina is suddenly beside me, with a blanket.

"Here, you seem cold."

The blanket must have been heated in a warming cupboard, but I'm still trembling.

"I can get your husband now, if you want me to," Nina says, tucking me in.

"Yes . . . yes, please," I manage to say, between my rattling teeth.

Nina closes the curtain and I'm alone, but not really. Behind the drapes I can hear someone mumbling and the clang of metal.

I pull the blanket up under my chin.

Finally, I hear Nina's voice.

"Here she is."

The curtain is pulled aside and Anders enters, looking pale. He doesn't say anything, only smiles at me and sits down on the chair to the left of my bed. His hand finds mine under the blanket and I cling to his warm palm, feel his knuckles' rough skin.

Voices are coming closer and a woman in a green doctor's coat steps through the curtain.

"Hello." She shakes my hand, smiling. "My name is Dr. Vance and I'm your anesthesiologist." She turns to Anders, who lets go of my hand to greet her. "Nice to meet you both," she says, and her smile reminds me of Mom,

small wrinkles in all the right places, and I have to struggle not to let out the tears.

Nurse Nina comes with a cart full of medical equipment.

“May I . . .?” Dr. Vance asks, as she sits down to my right and reaches for my arm.

“Yeah . . . sure,” I say, because that is the only answer. I pull out my arm from under the blanket.

“This shouldn’t sting much.” Dr. Vance strokes my arm. “You can look away if you want to.”

I look at Anders and he takes my hand again and at the same time there is a sting in my arm and suddenly it is for real, this is really happening, and the doctor says, “There, there, keep still,” holding my arm in a firm grip, “All done,” and in my arm there is something made of plastic that will make it easier for Dr. Vance to connect tubes to my body.

I cannot hold back the tears anymore.

“I don’t want to do this anymore,” I cry. “I have changed my mind.” My legs are shaking.

“You can go home,” Dr. Vance says. “But it would not be in your best interest. Would you like something to calm you down?” Her voice tells me it is not really a question.

They are treating me like an adult and I have to answer like an adult. “Yes, please,” but my legs are shaking and I just want to get up and leave. I can see the nurse’s hand inside the curtain pulling it tight so there is no gap. They don’t want people on the outside to hear me.

“I want to go home,” I say. I can’t help it. “I want to go home. I have changed my mind.”

Dr. Vance has already given me the sedative; it was over in an instant, just a couple of swift movements by my arm.

I am not shaking anymore, but I can’t stop my tears.

“Please, I just want to go home.”

A large man, also dressed in green, walks in through the curtain.

“Hello, I’m Nurse McKinley.” He stops at the foot of my bed and his gray eyes, although smiling, let me know there is no escape.

Another man walks in.

“Good morning, my name is Dr. Patel.” He is quite young and looks small next to Nurse McKinley. “I will be the assisting surgeon during your

surgery,” he says. “There are some things I would like to discuss with you.”

It is touching, this politeness, the nurses, the doctors, how they ask questions and want to discuss things, even though they clearly already decided what to do.

“We will not fix the aorta now, in this operation,” Dr. Patel continues. “We think it’s better to wait. Therefore we can enter through your side; that is, if nothing comes up that we’re not aware of. Sometimes things don’t go exactly as planned. Sometimes things come up that didn’t show in the preparatory stage. But this is the plan. Does it sound good to you?”

“Yes, it . . .” Anders clears his throat. “Sounds good.”

They are all looking at me. Anders, Dr. Vance, Nurse McKinley, Dr. Patel. I just want to go home. I don’t want to be here, in this bed, this room, this body, this world, but I have to answer if it sounds good to me to be cut open, my ribs pried open, and my heart stopped.

“Yes,” I force myself to say.

“Okay, good.” Dr. Patel smiles and his brown eyes are contagiously calm. “I will tell Dr. Holstein we have agreed.”

Dr. Patel leaves through the curtain, but Nurse McKinley stays. The sedative must have taken effect. I no longer feel the impulse to get out of bed, but the tears are back, running down my cheeks, and my time is about to run out, I can see it in their faces.

“Well, then.” Dr. Vance nods to McKinley and turns to me. “It can be overwhelming to enter the operation room, bright lights and lots of people, but that’s as it should be.”

McKinley grabs the end of my bed. Anders gets up. Nurse Nina pulls away the curtains. The bed starts rolling. McKinley comes up to my end; the bed is rolling, rolling, past the sleeping porcelain dolls. Anders walks beside me, still holding my hand. We leave through the swinging doors and enter a wide corridor. Anders almost has to run to keep up, through another swinging door. The corridors are changing, the walls are pale, and there is nothing to calm the eye. My bed is rolling. Rolling.

It is approaching.

I don’t want to.

I cling to Anders’s hands. How am I supposed to say goodbye?

“You have to let go.” Nurse McKinley’s voice is above my head.

The bed keeps rolling, but then he speaks again, to Anders: “You have to stop here. You can’t go farther.”

And Anders lets go of me.

Anders’s eyes and his smile don’t belong together; they are telling me opposite things. His smile tells me all he should say, he wants to say, but his eyes tells me all he mustn’t, cannot say.

No matter how I try to look back, my eyes clinging to the corridor walls, searching for something, anything to help me stay, I keep rolling forward. Reaching for the bare walls. The slippery floor. Trying to not let go, my eyes holding on to his eyes.

“You and me,” I whisper through the tears.

“Always,” he says.

And he is gone behind the corner.

The wheels are rolling.

And my bed hits the swinging doors of the operating room.

THE LIGHTS STARE AT ME FROM THE CEILING, MAKING ME squint as I roll closer. Their stiff metal necks are bent over the operating table.

Closer, closer.

The operating room is bright and noisy: green movements, gleaming steel, white walls, emptiness, the rattling of instruments, the sound of the bed’s wheels against the floor, the voices.

It’s Anders. The emptiness. His not being beside me.

It’s just me now.

My body.

My heart.

The bed slows down and stops.

“There, if you’ll just let me . . .” McKinley helps me with the hairnet. His big hands fumble, trying to catch all my red hair within the blue paper, soft as silk. He checks the rubber band behind my ears, over my forehead, the back of my head, and he laughs, looking at me with his gray eyes.

“There now, you look real pretty.”

And I also have to laugh, through the tears.

He rolls me to the operating table. It’s much higher up than my bed and McKinley pushes a button so the bed starts to hum and rise to the level of

the table.

“There,” he says. “You need to pull yourself over. Make sure nothing gets stuck under you.”

He means the robe. Because they will pull it off.

My body is slow from the sedative. Are these my arms, my legs that I drag over to the operating table?

Slowly, carefully, McKinley’s hand on my shoulder.

The operating table is not a table. I’m sinking into claws that hold me at the back of my head, my waist, my legs. My naked body under the robe spread over me.

“Can you come a little bit farther up?” McKinley helps me. “There. Good.”

The claws grip me around my neck. I can hear Dr. Vance’s voice.

“Are you all right?”

“Yes,” I whisper.

Two guys, not older than me, are suddenly beside me, reaching for my hand and smiling.

“Hello, my name is Williams.”

“My name is Gonzales, nice to meet you.”

“Hello,” I say, wondering what to do with these names, where to put them. Operation Nurse Williams: will it be he who parts my legs and inserts the catheter, after I have been given the general anesthetic? Operation Nurse Gonzales: will he be the one pulling off my robe, gluing the surgical sheet to my naked chest?

They linger a moment by my side, smiling at me, like they are not going to pull off anything, not insert anything, like we are just becoming friends and this may not be the only time we meet.

McKinley is pulling at my robe, making sure it’s not stuck anywhere. He puts my arms under me, so that they are locked under my weight.

The claws have me by the neck.

My arms are stuck behind my back.

It’s too late now.

The lights are blinding me. They will continue to stare as my robe is pulled off, my body prepared and put in the right position, my skin cut into a bleeding smile, my ribs pried open uncovering my beating heart. They

will stare as the machine is connected, and my blood enters the tubes outside of my body; the lights will not even flinch as my heart stops and is cut open.

Any moment now, I know they will not warn me, but wait, please, I feel like I have something to say, like there is too much I have left unspoken, wait, before it's too late, before these claws drag me down and swallow me.

“Would you like something to calm you down?” Dr. Vance’s voice is somewhere above me.

“Yes, please.”

The lights are yellow eyes in the dark.

OceanofPDF.com

CHAPTER 47

My Dearest Anders

I hope you will never read this. But I need you to find it, which is why this will be the first thing you see when you open my laptop: one letter for you, one for Ingrid, and one for Stina.

There are things I need to tell you. First, I want to say thank you. Thank you for the laughter and the tears, the words and the silence, all in their right time. Thank you for being the only one. For standing by my side when everyone else looked away. I want you to carry this with you. That you did everything right. Your love is what pulled me through.

I know you would protest, but I also need to ask for your forgiveness. I know I didn't make things easy for you at times. There are many things I regret, things I said, things I did. But I promise you now; I will do everything in my power to stay with you.

How I have loved you! Your laughter, your arms, your hands, your kind heart, your eyes, your crazy dancing in the kitchen. And how I have loved our girls! Thank you for them.

Thank you for everything. This life, it was very short, but it was all worth it.

If I have to go, if there is no way I can stay, I will be waiting for the moment when we meet again.

You and me.

Always.

Your Lene

CHAPTER 48

I'm not breathing.

Someone, something is breathing for me.

A soft voice. "You have woken up."

Something beeping.

"The surgery went well."

The wheezing. My lungs being filled and emptied.

Darkness.

OceanofPDF.com

CHAPTER 49

My Darling Ingrid

How I wish I didn't have to say goodbye! There is nothing I want more than to be there for you as you grow up. I want to laugh with you, cry with you, hold you in my arms, tell you a bedtime story every night.

You are more wonderful than I could ever have imagined. I am constantly amazed at your wisdom, your sincerity, your curiosity, your thoughtfulness, your deep thoughts, your kindness. I love to hear your voice and your laughter, to see your smile and your eyes light up the way only yours do. I love everything about you, to me it is a miracle happening every time you step into the room.

There will be many voices in your life. People telling you who you are and who you are not. You need to listen to your heart, trust your heart, follow your heart. There you will find your true voice. I don't know what it will say, I only know that it is a soft, mild voice that will whisper to you and guide you and help you, if you will let it.

I wish with all my heart that you will experience the same happiness I have felt getting to know you. Life can be very, very difficult, but I want you to remember that your mother loves you. You will find your way, I am sure of it. Never give up. Never stop finding the beauty, the joy, and the love in this world. Others will be inspired by your light as you share it.

Forgive me for leaving too soon.

I love you. Never forget that.

Your mother, Lene

CHAPTER 50

Oh my God!!!”

The voice. The nurse. “My God, my God!”

My heart beating beating beating

Footsteps

beating beating

Rattling

beating beating

Beeping

my heart beating beating beating pounding pounding like it wants to come in like it wants to come out like it doesn't want to wait by the door any longer pounding pounding against my ribs

The voices. No no no God no she needs transfusion now now come here help me there there she is conscious—

Closer, a woman:

“Are you in pain?”

If I say yes they will put me under anesthesia, maybe they don't think I understand, but I do understand, if I say yes they will give it to me and then it will be over, it doesn't help anymore thinking this can't be the last time, not the last moment, because this is it. The last. My heart beating beating and it will not be able to do this much longer, my chest is going to explode, my heart will break in every heartbeat, every heartbeat my last, my last, my last

“Are you in pain?”

The respirator pulling air down my lungs, my heart beating beating beating, I need to turn my head, just a little, *No, I am not in pain, you may not put me under*, this is my last moment and I need to cling to it, I have promised Anders, but there is a door opening and my heart is pushing me closer to the door it is just one small step and on the threshold time stops it

is simply not relevant anymore but I did promise Anders and I cling to the frame of the door, no I don't want to go, I am not letting go, this is the moment my whole life has been pushing me toward and I have to stop but I don't have to turn around because I am transparent and I can see it all lying scattered behind me and it is strange some things have shrunk they are barely even visible, the home renovations, the furniture I never could afford, the degree I never got from the university, the laundry, the dishes, the bills, and the quarrels, the only things that matter are Anders and Ingrid and Stina and on the other side of the door someone else, someone I have known my whole life, someone I have hated and yelled at and wondered where he was and now he is coming closer and he doesn't say anything he just waits for me and lets me know everything is all right and I don't have to be ashamed and I don't have to be scared because everything is all right and he knows that I don't want to go and he knows that I am not ready but he still reaches for me, please, please, it was a mistake when I wanted to die, because now I want to live, please, please, I want to live, and it is breathtaking, to balance on the threshold with all the blackness of the universe below me, and time standing still so that I am everywhere and always, I am stepping down the ladder and I raise my closed fist and I have a dream and I am crying in the burning tower that is falling apart beneath me and I am hesitating to jump and I am walking across a field listening to the wind in the trees that is not wind but ten thousand soldiers with bayonets and I am peeking out from behind the tree and I am so close I could lean forward to touch his shoulder and I am hurrying up the mountain following the old man and his boy carrying the firewood and I hit the nails wham wham wham and I can feel the spear coming into my side, everything at the same time and he asks me do you understand and yes, I do understand, and I knew this was going to happen, I knew it the whole time, but I still don't want to go, because most of all I am with Anders in the waiting room, his face in his hands and his unruly hair, and Dr. Patel comes to tell him, we are trying our best, but you need to prepare yourself for the worst, and Anders is crawling into a corner of the couch and I am with Ingrid and Stina, their soft hair against my cheek for the last time and their laughter and their steps through the garden and into the blackness jumping from star to star and the threshold is swinging and I have to hold on because if I let go the door will close behind me and there is nothing like this abyss anywhere on earth, the threshold a tiny bridge between endless worlds and

the darkness closing in, I have to turn toward the light, the outstretched hand I have to take, you already know, Lene, yes, I know but I was thinking nothing is impossible and I love so very much but now my heart beats for the last time, the last the last the last the last

“Are you in pain?”

No

the last the last

Anders telling me Lene, you always try to make it on your own but you need to let them help you, you need to tell them it hurts when they ask you, you'll have to let go, but they will put me under and then it will be over, yes but you have to

It is time, Lene

I don't want to

but you have to

let

go

the last

“Are you in pain?”

you have to

the last

the last

“Are you in pain?”

a small nod

my chin down

the last

yes

CHAPTER 51

Stina, My Sweetheart

Oh, Stina, my baby, my little one, I wish I could have become more than a hundred years old and still have you sit in my lap, like you asked me to. You will always be my baby, no matter how old you get.

I love you so much, everything about you, your little arms around me, your eyes laughing into mine, the way your eyebrows crinkle when you are pondering something. I wish I could have been there for you growing up. Please forgive me for leaving too soon. I am amazed at everything about you, your willpower, your kind heart, your passion, your empathy. To hear your laughter and to see your smile was the greatest gift of every day. When you are quiet you will hear a voice whispering in your heart, a soft-spoken, mild voice, and the more you follow it you will learn to trust it. Follow your heart. I wish you happiness and, what's more important, a full life. There will be tears at times. Life can be very difficult, but remember that your mother loves you.

You have a loving heart that will be a light to those around you. Also cherish the love others will give you, it will help you to keep going when the road seems steep or even difficult to find. Never give up, my baby. The world might at times seem like a harsh place, but there is also much beauty, love, and joy.

I love you.

Never forget that, my baby.

Your mother, Lene

CHAPTER 52

*T*he hand.

On my forehead.

The warmth. The small caressing movements.

Fingertips.

Softly.

Somewhere a wheezing.

Everything transparent: my body, the room, the darkness.

Everything floating, hovering, a daze.

Only the hand on my forehead. The warmth, back and forth, the laughter of my girls, whisperings in the morning, striped wallpaper, light and darkness, the answer to the riddle, this is what you are supposed to do, the hand on my forehead, the water lilies white against the dark pond, the hand collecting the shards one by one, taking down the hook from the ceiling, helping me up from the cold snow, the hand that wipes away tears and blood, helps me put on the robe, opens the door, reaches for me on the threshold.

His hand.

Back and forth.

Back and forth.

Slowly.

The swing creaking, chains squeaking, sun blinding me, making me squint.

The cicadas buzzing, louder, louder, louder.

His hand.

On my forehead. Telling me this is all right this is the way it should be this is what you are supposed to do.

CHAPTER 53

*L*ene. You're awake."

My lungs suddenly fill and then slowly empty. I am lying completely still. A wheezing sound.

My mouth completely dry, my throat, I cannot swallow, there is something in the way. Puff. My lungs are filled. Then emptied, slowly, wheezing.

I am here.

My body . . . heavy and light at the same time. I don't have to do anything. I haven't even opened my eyes.

His hand on my forehead. I would recognize his touch anywhere, anytime.

Anders.

I feel like he is gluing me together, gently stroking my forehead.

How I long to see him. Open my eyes. My eyelids are heavy, I have to concentrate all my willpower: up, up, open.

Nothing.

Just a fog.

But Anders's hand catches me even before the fears, *Am I blind, will I ever be able to see again*, his hand tells me: It doesn't matter, you are here with me, you are here, that is most important.

Puff, wheeze.

His voice.

"Everything is all right. You're awake."

Was it just a dream? But something happened, my body remembers it; the feeling of passing through the ages of man like walking through a garden. I want to ask Anders, but I can't, the tube in my throat is in the way.

"It's half past five or so. In the afternoon. On October ninth," he says, continually stroking my forehead. If I could say something it would be

Don't stop, but I don't have to say it.

It's like returning home after a long voyage and not being able to tell anything about the trip. The tube in my throat steals my words, grounds them into air, and pushes them into my lungs.

There is someone else in the room. I don't have to see her to know it's the nurse, the one with the soft, deep voice. She has been here the whole time. Was it just a dream? *My God, my God*, it was her voice, *no no no God no*, it can't have been a dream, the nurse is here, the energy coming from her warm body and her smiles: is this what it is like, being blind; you know what is happening without actually seeing it?

"You're awake." Anders repeats it, like he can barely believe it. Something did happen, but he doesn't want to tell me, thinking I may not be ready, he doesn't want to worry me, he doesn't know I already know. Smiles flash across the room, between him and the nurse. The nurse is relieved. Her movements are full of tenderness, and she is caring for me like a mother for her newborn baby. And the door is not quite closed yet, there are words leaking out: they are coming to you now, all the things that were taken from you, the things that you so dearly wanted to give and the things that you did not get when you needed them most and now is not the time to make it on your own, now, says the universe, is the time to receive, to rest, to recover, even your breathing is taken care of.

Puff, my lungs are filled.

And then the wheezing as they are emptied.

Anders is still caressing my forehead.

The fog turns into darkness.

CHAPTER 54

*P*uff. Wheeze.

Parched.

Puff. Wheeze.

Water. Please. Someone.

My mouth, this tearing at my tongue, my throat, my lips, the tube wheezing, wheezing and my eyes, no, nothing, just the fog and the voices, please, someone.

Dry.

So dry.

I can't hear what they are saying and I have no voice to tell them, thirsty, I'm thirsty.

Just the puff and wheeze and no words, please, please, can you please give me water.

I can't move, I'm chained to this cliff in the desert; the sun nailing me down, snakes wheezing all around me, biting me, crawling inside me, my throat, my lungs, my chest, please, please.

I am no longer eyes, heart, hands, blood, body: I am thirst.

My breaths rise and lower my thirst, the snakes drink my red thirst, the sun chains my heavy thirst. This fog, this sand in my burning throat, this snake crawling and wheezing and drinking from my chest, please, can you pull the snake out, can you give me water?

One drop!

Just one!

Puff.

The snake wheezes and crawls inside of me.

"Really, I shouldn't." The nurse's voice is right beside me. "But I'll show you something."

Anders's hand disappears from my forehead.

“Like this,” the nurse says in her deep voice. “You suck it up with the sponge, here. Can you hold the cup, please, I’ll show you.” The voice is coming closer. “She must not swallow any of it. It may get to her lungs and cause pneumonia, and in her condition that would be very serious. Not one drop. Only on her lips.”

And there it is, on my lips. Cool, running down my chin.

“I can do it,” Anders says.

“Here.” The voice of the nurse is farther away again, echoing. “Make sure that she doesn’t swallow any.”

Again. On my lips. Small gentle caresses. Cool, wet, running.

I have to smile.

“I thought you’d like that.” Anders’s voice is also smiling. “But you mustn’t swallow any.”

The water runs inside my lips. Cooling my tongue. My throat, no, I must not, this is a trust they have given me, I have to spit it out, small movements, push it back out, over my lips, my chin.

“That’s good, Lene.”

And there it is again, the sponge on my lips.

“You can continue,” the nurse says. “She will not swallow. Normally we never do this. It has happened that patients pull at the sponge and drink the water. But I thought . . .” The nurse is silent and her deep voice is full of the smile and the words still lingering around her, *no no no God no*. She is on my other side now, overseeing the machines and monitors, constantly wheezing and beeping.

“Good, Lene.” Anders caresses my lips with the sponge. The water, cool, running, wonderful. Wonderful, but I have to push it out. Drop by drop.

Everything is still in a fog. Will my eyesight ever return? I blink and blink but it doesn’t help. It’s heavy. Blinking. Pushing out the water, the snake wheezing in my throat. Anders says something but the darkness is too heavy and dense, the words don’t make it through.

CHAPTER 55

*T*he nurse steps out of the dark and she is on a mission, pulling cords and putting something in the palm of my right hand.

Anders is next to me, on my left side, where he always is.

“There.” The nurse touches my hand. “I’ve given you a button to push, whenever you need more morphine. Until now you’ve gotten it via the IV, but maybe we can lower the dose a bit like this.” There is a pause. “You just push the button.”

There is some sort of expectation in the room.

“You can push the button now,” the nurse says.

Push the button. She is talking about the thing in my hand in which there is a hollow for the tip of my thumb to fit in.

“There. You need to press the button now, so I can see that you’ve understood.”

I have to make my finger move, command my body, my muscles, my bones, and my brain, all working together in a test of strength: push the button.

“Lene, you need to push the button.” Anders’s voice is close to my ear.

I’m trying! I’m trying! I’m gathering all that I have to my thumb, make it move, make it push, push the button, obey the command coming from my brain: Push, push, push!

Nothing. My thumb doesn’t move.

“She can’t do it,” Anders says. “Can’t we push for her?”

“We’re not supposed to do that. She needs to do it herself.”

“But she can’t! She needs the morphine!”

“Lene,” the nurse says. “Push the button.”

My brain pushes and pushes. My whole body pushes. That small button under my thumb. Push! Push!

Still nothing. Like I am floating, not quite attached to my body lying heavy in the bed below me.

“I’ll do it,” the nurse says. “I’ll push.”

And her hand is warm against mine, her thumb over mine, pressing down.

“She needs morphine at least every two hours,” she says.

“Yes. Every two hours,” Anders answers.

And the morphine comes carrying the dark that is freedom from the thirst and the pain and the heaviness of this strange body that doesn’t really fit me and my eyesight that still has not . . .

A MELODY IN THE DARK. SOMEONE HUMMING. A DEEP VOICE, running down the notes with no effort.

Anders is not beside me.

It’s not him.

It’s the nurse. I can feel her strong hands on my forehead, pulling at my hair. A gentle pull at my scalp.

Puff. My lungs fill, empty slowly, wheezing, and the melody comes flowing down over me.

The darkness, the humming, puff, and the wheezing.

This pulling at my hair, I recognize it from when I was little.

The nurse is braiding my hair.

I am not only wounds and tubes and thirst and morphine and pain and weakness and darkness and fog. I am also a woman, I have long red hair that the nurse is braiding while humming, maybe a tune that her mamma taught her, which her mamma learned from her own mamma braiding her hair . . . And this comfort, this strength, this heritage, flowing down over me, this gift from woman to woman, braids and notes hummed in the night, they tell me: I see you. Beyond the tubes and the cords, I see you, you are here.

You are here.

Her warm hands stroking my hair.

Puff, wheeze, hum.

I see you.

You are here.

OceanofPDF.com

CHAPTER 56

Something is happening. In the room. Movements.

“Maybe you . . .” It’s the nurse’s voice. “Maybe you can wait outside, Mr. Fogelberg.”

“Yeah, okay, I’ll be in the waiting room.”

The sponge comes to my lips again, gently, and I push out the water, running down my chin.

“I’ll be back soon, Lene,” Anders says. “In a little while.”

The sponge disappears, the wonderful water.

Why is he leaving? What is happening?

The nurse is beside me rattling and sloshing. And then her warm hands, unfolding the sheets and my robe, leaving my skin naked. And then something wet, a big sponge or a cloth, licking my legs. The nurse all the while humming and mumbling, *We need to get you cleaned up, such a mess, we need to make you look pretty for your husband, well, Lene, that husband of yours . . .* More unfolding, more licking, my belly, my arms, my shoulders, lying heavily, I still cannot move. Not even my hands, not even a finger. And I am too weak to feel ashamed. This nurse with her warm hands and her humming and her mumbling makes me feel like a child in the arms of her mamma. *That man, I have never seen anything like it, the cloth is wet against my neck and face, gentle caresses, he simply refuses to go home, he never leaves your side, he even sleeps on the couch in the waiting room, his legs sticking out in the funniest way, but only for an hour at a time, mostly he’s in here, watching the machines and making sure we change the batteries or the bags even before the signal goes.* And then the humming. The slow melody and the wet cloth on my forehead. *Visiting hours end at eight o’clock but nah-a, not for Mr. Fogelberg, he stays day and night . . . Mm mm . . .* The humming and the wiping, gently on my face, the drops of water like soft tears on my cheeks, I treated him badly I do not deserve him, but the door is still open and the words leak out, it’s all right you need to

rest in that love of his you were sick you were treated badly yourself and now you need to forgive yourself you need to love yourself darkness and light you need to learn from him, he can show you how it's done.

"There." The nurse puts the sheet back. "You're respectable again." Wheels are rattling across the floor toward the door. "I'll tell Mr. Fogelberg that we're done."

Anders comes. He sits down next to me and there is the warmth of his hand on my forehead.

"You look nice," he says, and I can hear the relief in his voice. "Now I recognize you . . . without all the . . . the blood."

His face close to mine. I can feel his gentle breaths and I smile to him, as best I can around the respirator.

"You are beautiful, Lene." There is a smile in his voice.

I miss him, my hand misses him, to hold him, and suddenly I have moved it, my left hand and Anders sees it and he's there in an instant, his warm hand on mine. I can feel him, his skin, the small irregularities of his knuckles, and the darkness cannot scare me, because Anders is holding me, he will not leave me as the darkness and the fog pull me away.

ANDERS IS ON MY RIGHT SIDE, PUTTING SOMETHING IN MY HAND. A pen. And he is holding a piece of paper, folded several times into a square. How am I going to be able to write without seeing? One word, or possibly two, which words could hold all this in them? Could carry all my questions and my longing and my fears?

Girls

It is painfully slow, my hand writing in the dark, without support from my eyes. Will he understand?

"Everything is all right with the girls, at home with Kristina." Anders strokes my forehead. "Everything is all right."

Thir

My hand is already tired; I can barely hold the pen.

sty

The button, I have to find the button, there, push it, I need more morphine.

"Wait." Anders comes to my left side. "Here." And there is the sponge with the water, cool, running on my lips.

Spit out. Always spit it out.
But my throat is so dry, if I swallow a little, just a little, just one drop.
The sponge again and the water. No, push it out, with my tongue, I
mustn't swallow.
They trust me not to swallow.
The darkness.

I AM ALONE. THIS FOG. SOMEWHERE A DIM LIGHT IN THE darkness. Where am
I? What happened? Why can't I move?

My heart beating, this darkness, maybe this is all a dream, a last memory
playing in my brain before . . .

The darkness, the loneliness, my body heavy and still, terribly still.

But my hand, I can move my hand. This is my only language. My hand
beating against the bed. Someone! Is there someone there?

"What is it, Lene?" It's the nurse.

But I can't answer her. All I have is the puff and the wheezing and my
hand beating against the bed.

"What is it? I don't understand."

The nurse brings the pen and the folded piece of paper, no, not that,
something else, I need something else. Something!

"What do you need?"

I don't know! But something to lift me out of this well of darkness,
something to tell me I am not alone. And there is the hand of the nurse,
holding mine, her warm hand telling me exactly that.

I am not alone. My body is darkness and fog and heaviness and pains but
here is a rope that ties me to all that I love. The nurse's hand, holding me in
the dark, tells me: You are not alone, I am here watching over you and I
won't let you slip away without a word because you are mine and I won't
let you go. There, I've got you.

Come, darkness, come emptiness, I am not alone.

CHAPTER 57

*B*reathe!” Anders’s voice is right by my ear. “Breathe, Lene!”

“No, we’ll have to raise the frequency again,” the nurse says. “She can’t do it.”

“You have to breathe,” Anders says.

Puff, wheeze, puff, wheeze. I would like to say I am doing my best, I am really trying, but again, puff, wheeze.

Anders is stroking my hand.

My eyesight is finally starting to return, gradually. Everything is blurry, and it’s exhausting, so many impressions, the walls, the ceiling, the machines, the round clock on the wall, it’s too much, I need to close my eyes.

But Anders, I want to see him, his eyes, the stubble on his cheeks and chin, his hair more unruly than ever. How many days has he spent like this, sleeping on the couch in the waiting room and watching over me?

“I know it’s hard, but you need to start breathing on your own.” Anders presses my hand. “We’ll try again later.” He says *we* and I can tell that he has formed a team with the doctors and the nurses.

“It came close to . . .” He takes off his glasses, pulls his hand over his face and coughs. “They had to operate on you a second time. You were about to bleed to . . .” He pauses. “Well, something went wrong, your heart went crazy, it was pumping blood out, near two hundred heartbeats per minute, right into your chest, into the tubes, that’s how the nurse noticed, she came to you right when it happened.” It’s like a confession. Him finally choosing to tell me. “But it came close to, well . . . Dr. Holstein thought that you wouldn’t . . . He thought that . . .” He strokes my forehead and I can feel him coming closer. “You have to breathe, Lene. We’ll pull through together, right? You and me. Now that we’ve made it this far.”

I *knew* it. It was not a dream. It really happened. My eyes are too tired, I have to close them, and there is the threshold again and the door not quite

closed, and there is so much I misunderstood, so much I would have done differently if I had known. But at the same time not: it was my life and it was so short, it only lasted for an instant and I was not supposed to live it any other way, I was only supposed to live. Sometimes you can misunderstand and still get it right. Sometimes the answer is resting right in the middle of the question. The solution inside its riddle. The end curled up in the beginning. The darkness carrying the light on striped sheets. Sometimes you know that you are destined to die, but somehow you are given a parenthesis after the punctuation mark: more years, more time that wasn't meant for you but still was meant for you, a bridge stretching out into the stars, a confidence built of invisible threads, a miracle that started in a crazy dance in a kitchen, no, in a prayer without words, no even before that, I can't remember.

The nurse is next to me, but I can barely see her in the fog.

"I need to clean the respirator," she says. "This might tickle a little."

She is close with her warm hands and her deep voice. "It might be uncomfortable, but I'll be careful."

Ah. It's a bottle brush, the same kind I used for the bottles when the girls were small, but wait, it is down in my lungs, tickling, soft brushes poking inside me. If I could I would laugh and pull away, but the respirator has me locked to the bed and also something else I have not noticed before, but I am attached to the machines, tubes and cords coming out of me under the blanket.

"You're doing great." Anders keeps stroking my forehead.

The respirator fills my lungs, puff, while the brush is still inside of me, but now she is ready, pulling it out.

Breathe; I need to breathe on my own. It's heavy, I never knew air could be this heavy, but breathe, I am going to do it, fill my lungs, puff, the respirator beats me to it, in the middle of my breath. I need to be quicker.

"I think we can try again." Anders must have noticed my effort. "We can pull down the frequency. Give her time in between to breathe."

"Okay. Let's try," the nurse says.

Everything is wonderfully quiet and still.

"Breathe, Lene!" Anders says into my ear.

Right.

In: in, I am going to do this, the air, pull it down into my lungs, it's like drinking mud, down with it, fill my chest, my lungs like sacks, I am to harvest the air and put in the sacks by myself, no wheezing, just me, and there, puff, the respirator again.

But I did it!

“Well done! Wonderful!” Anders laughs and sighs and laughs again. “Again now.”

It's hard work. My body is a machine that is supposed to hiss and tick and not stop, tick tick, my man-made aortic valve, open and close, letting my blood out into the aorta, like a waterfall, no a bloodfall, tick tick, as long as I am breathing, tick tick, and I wonder if I am less human now that a small piece of me is metal and tissue put together in a lab, now that my heart has been still for hours, now that a machine is what is keeping me alive, and another machine is what kept me alive while Dr. Holstein pried my ribs open and cut into my heart, I am wondering . . . This is a strange century, a strange tower to look out over the ages from. Everything a big Now. There is the Aztec priest, in his feathers and jewels, holding the obsidian knife and the heart high above the altar, up toward the sun, the blood running down his arms . . . And there she is, the woman from every age who knew the ending long before it began, before closing her eyes in pain, before her unborn child stopped kicking in her womb . . .

“Breathe, Lene! You mustn't forget.”

I have to harvest the air, fill the sacks. It's a strange harvest, which disappears into thin air. No matter how I work, the sacks are never full. I am never done. Again. And again. There is no end. And there is finally the answer to the riddle. No beginning. No end.

THE NURSE'S HANDS ARE RIGHT ABOVE MY FACE. THE PLASTIC makes a creaking noise, as if she is breaking the snake's neck, the wheezing snake, finally beaten by the nurse and pulled out of me.

I can breathe on my own. This is at least what they are saying, Anders and the nurse, but I am not so sure. It's all shaky and uncertain, like riding a bike for the first time, every breath a searching for air: will it be there this time too?

The air: in with it, down into my lungs, aching after the snake was pulled out, even though I pushed the button for morphine like they told me to.

Anders holds out something, a plastic cup, with a straw, bent to help me drink.

Yes! Please!

I cannot speak, but Anders understands and holds the cup close to put the straw between my parched lips.

It's liquid gold, sweet, so sweet, it must be apple, the most wonderful juice in the whole world. If it was poured out for free in every war zone, all the conflicts in the world would be resolved and people would cheer and drink to good health and fortune and the streets would turn to gold and the cities would be new Eldorados. The children would bathe in gleaming rivers and the women would wash their clothes in gold and the land mines would all be washed away. I can't believe no one ever thought of this. The solution to all the world's problems can be found in a plastic cup of apple juice, coming through a small straw.

Breathe. I must stop drinking to breathe. And drink again. Small sips. Drink and breathe.

"You look like you're in heaven," Anders says and laughs. He holds up the cup, at the right angle, so the apple juice can make it through the straw.

I smile back at him but only real quick since I am busy drinking. And breathing.

It's strange, both at the same time, the thirst and the relief, the dry and the cool, they are one and the same, and all I can think about is the apple juice coming through the straw, and that I have to stop to gasp for air, and drink again, until the cup is emptied and I can focus on breathing again, just breathing.

CHAPTER 58

*T*he humming. The nurse is sitting on my right side.

“Did you push the button?”

I push the button and manage to nod.

The nurse’s hands are methodical and calm. “It’s time to change and it’s better if I do it than the nurses downstairs.”

There is a pull in my arm. I can feel the needle biting me, despite the morphine.

“You are . . .” The nurse is a shadow in the fog, I can barely see her, bent over my arm. “You’re leaving the intensive care unit today.”

She is silent but her hands are still lying warm on my arm.

“It’s time for the nursing ward to take over.” Her voice makes me think of apologies, or regret even. But that is not something you speak about with your patient, you do not even think it, but I can still hear it, between the words.

“You can breathe on your own now!” The nurse smiles and continues to fasten the needle in my arm.

And the humming again.

I want to ask her: Do I really have to leave you, your gentle hands, your songs, your smiles, but I don’t have any words to fit the question in. No sounds come out of my throat. The words sink below like stones.

I never even got to see her properly. She is always by the machines, her back turned to me, or by my arm checking the needles, or by my hands, pricking them to check my blood count. The nurse is hands and humming and braids. My scalp has started to hurt, not used to the tight rows of braids. I don’t have a face to remember her, not even a name. But without her . . . maybe I would not have . . . *my God, my God*, I still remember her words, *Oh my God!!!*, I will never forget her voice in the darkness.

I can’t even say thank-you. I can’t gather the air and make it into words.

The nurse switches to Anders's empty chair. The needle in my left wrist also needs changing. The nurse is careful and meticulous, her movements gentle, her hands soft in the silicone gloves. But the needle is sharp and the plastic hard. The tape, the pulling and pushing.

The humming.

I must try to remember this, her voice, the song. The comfort of her deep notes in the dark, her way of saying you'll be all right, there are no monsters in the dark, I am here, you are here, everything is all right. Her humming, I know it, has won many battles, has maybe lost some, has loved and comforted and told stories and changed many needles in many veins.

"There." She is done.

She smiles, I can see it through the fog.

I smile back at her.

Thank you so so so much. I want to tell her. Thank you.

But as we share this smile I can tell she knows. She knows what she means to me.

"I'll get your husband." The nurse disappears out the door.

In my arm and wrist I have her parting gifts, the needles in my veins and her soft touch on my skin.

CHAPTER 59

*T*he corridors, the wide doors, and the elevators, I can't keep track, all I can see are the ceilings and the walls. My bed is rolling like a small vessel in a giant maze. Somewhere is Anders, I can hear his voice behind me as I roll around a corner, slow down, stop.

"You're okay?" The nurse, a young guy, pushes my bed up to the wall.

I try to whisper yes, but no sound comes from my throat.

He smiles, locks the wheels on my bed, and comes up to me.

"Here." He puts a remote control in my hand. "This button is for raising the bed, the head end, and with this one you lower it. And this is the same, only the foot end. Okay?"

Yes, I nod.

"If you need help you push this button and a nurse will come, okay?"

I nod again.

He smiles, nods back to me, and leaves the room.

There is a window. The sunlight, the way it falls on the wall, it's like a golden painting. I can feel my heart swell in my chest, I can see it, *I* can see it.

Anders comes through the door. The sunlight brings out the lines in his face, his eyes swollen and red.

"Lene, I think I need to go home." He pulls his hand over his cheek, dark with the stubble. He laughs. "Man, I stink, I need to take a shower." He is serious again. "I don't want to leave you, but I feel like I'm coming down with something unless I get some sleep, and I wouldn't be of much use to you then, would I?" He smiles and the sunlight glimmers in his glasses.

He is right, I don't want to admit it, but he is right.

I have to let him go.

"Well . . ." He lingers in the doorway. "I guess I'm going." But he is still standing there. "Are you comfortable?"

I nod. I'm okay.

"I'll come back as soon as I can."

I smile to him and it's like my smile is what finally sets him free.

"Bye, Lene." He smiles back, takes a deep breath, like he's jumping into cold water, and walks away.

On the wall in front of me there is a TV. I can see the room reflected in the dark screen: a closed door to my right, the window, an armchair. To my left is the door to the corridor, with a curtain hanging against the wall from a rod above the door. Next to the door are two large bins, one gray and one red. And of course, next to me and behind me and on me, the tubes and the machines and the IV.

I try the remote control and there is a faint hum as my bed rises.

My feet are so swollen they look grotesque, also my arms and my hands. Completely swollen. My forearms are blue and purple. I have needles and something made of plastic taped to me on my arm and wrist and even on my left index finger. In every small movement I can feel a pull at my neck, yes, there is a large bandage on the side of my neck, my chest is so stiff I can barely move and also my right groin, yes, there is a large bandage there too. No one told me it would be like this: bandages and tubes and cords everywhere! Even my fingertips are completely blue, all of them, full of marks from the pinpricks. *No rings, no jewelry.* Of course.

Voices are coming closer down the corridor and two young nurses enter my room. They are each other's opposites: one of them tall and blonde and the other one short and dark-haired. The only thing they have in common is their dark blue uniform. They introduce themselves, but so quickly that I cannot make out their names. The blonde is called Jane or Jenna and the dark-haired something starting with T.

"You don't need this anymore." Jane/Jenna grabs a tube and pulls it and I can feel it leaving my urethra before I understand that she was talking about the catheter and that she was going to pull it, just like that.

I didn't notice, but at the same time T evidently grabbed the remote and she has already raised the head end of my bed so that it is almost at a right angle.

"YOU'RE GONNA GET UP NOW!"

Why is she shouting?

“COME ON, NO MORE LYING IN BED!” T pushes my legs over the edge of the bed and the pains, the pains. “YOU’RE GETTING UP NOW, OR DO YOU WANT TO SPEND THE REST OF YOUR LIFE IN BED?” T is squatting in front of me, shouting into my ear. “WE DON’T HAVE ALL DAY!” The shouting, in my face, the words, they are like punches. “CAN YOU HEAR ME?” Blow after blow. “YOU ARE GETTING UP NOW, DO YOU UNDERSTAND?” My whole body is shaking, my feet against the floor, they should be there somewhere, but I can’t feel them and I look to JaneJenna to see if she can help me but she is just standing there while T is playing football coach. “DO YOU WANT TO BECOME A VEGETABLE, DO YOU? DO YOU?”

I want to say please, please, I need kind words, I need silence, I need a gentle hand on my shoulder and a smile, nothing more, but I don’t even have the strength to try to whisper.

“COME ON, GET UP!”

T doesn’t understand. She has never been there. On the swaying threshold among the stars. If she had, she would not throw the words like stones in my face. She would know that every moment lasts forever.

I must be patient.

I must get up, trembling, clinging to nurse T, pulling my body up, ignoring the words that she is throwing at me. I must carry my own silence.

“THERE. AND A STEP FORWARD!”

Behind me JaneJenna grabs the sheets.

My legs. They are supposed to carry my body. My feet are supposed to work against the floor, lift me up. The pains, the tubes, the bandages, the robe hanging from me, the air fighting against my lungs, the uncertainty and the unsteadiness, T’s hands pulling me up and it is clear to me that her hands would never find my hand in the dark or braid my hair. If Anders had been here he would hold me gently and everything would have been different. My whole body misses him.

But I have to do it. One step. Shuffling, wobbling.

“COME HERE, YOU CAN SIT DOWN WHILE WE CHANGE THE SHEETS.”

The armchair embraces me while T follows me with the tubes and the cords. I am like some sort of control center where everything is connected. My robe has an opening, where three plastic tubes are sticking out, coming

from my right side. They all gather in a plastic box, which Nurse T puts down beside me. In my arm and on my wrist are the needles that the ICU nurse put there and suddenly it seems quite clear what she meant saying: It's better I do it than the nurses downstairs.

“YOU CAN COME BACK NOW.” I have no choice but to get up, with the help of Nurse T, and stagger back to the bed. What are these tubes sticking out of me? I can't ask, since I still have no voice.

The nurses are discussing something.

“I know, can you believe it, but I told her—”

“Do you really think she meant it, I mean otherwise she . . .”

Finally. They have left the room, their voices echoing down the corridor. The silence.

The pains. But I should wait a little longer before pressing the button again.

The sunshine. If my girls were here the light would make their hair glow, Stina's curled wheat and Ingrid's golden red. Soon Anders will be home with them, to hold them and to see their smiles. Their little voices *Pappa*, *Pappa* and their arms around his neck.

There is a knock at the door.

“Good morning.” It is the anesthesiologist, Dr. Vance.

To see her is like suddenly being given a bridge home, to *before*.

“How are you?” she asks.

I nod and smile.

“Good.” She smiles back at me. “From now on you'll get better and better. The worst is behind you.”

Dr. Vance sits down to my right and I notice she has one of those smiles that have moved in permanently on her face. I wonder what her children are like, how old they are. Her auburn hair reminds me of Mom.

Dr. Vance checks the IV and the tubes and the cords.

“Do you know what this is?” She points to the plastic tubes from my side and I notice that they contain a fluid colored light red or yellow or orange, I cannot really tell.

“Oh, no one told you?” Dr. Vance pauses to look at me. “These are the drainage tubes, leading out the pus and the blood from your chest as it heals.” She hesitates. “That's how . . . Well the ICU nurse found them full

of blood since your heart reacted to the surgery . . . Didn't anyone tell you this?"

I nod.

"I thought so."

Voices echo in the corridor and disappear again.

"May I take a look?" Dr. Vance lifts the sheet and then my robe. "What happened was that your heart revolted to the treatment and started beating faster and faster. And then, well, you can say that there was a plug where the heart-lung machine had been attached, and when the heart speeded the plug was pushed out so the blood was pumped out right into your chest and your heart speeded even more and, well . . . it was a matter of minutes."

Dr. Vance examines me carefully, her hands soft and warm. "The paradox in cases like this is that the longer the patient is awake, the better the chances are of surviving, since after the anesthesia is administered the blood pressure sinks and, well—" She puts the sheet and the blanket back over me. "It's all looking good." She is still, looking at me. "But it went well!" She smiles. "It went well." Her eyes are calm and they make me think of blue skies that have seen all kinds of storms. Suddenly she seems to remember something. "I'll be right back."

The sunlight has crept further on the wall and the golden piece of art has shrunk. *Oh my God!!!*, I will never forget the voice of the nurse, *my God, my God*. And then, I remember now, the voice of Dr. Vance: *Are you in pain? Are you in pain?* The repetition, the equilibrium, the balancing on the threshold, the seconds, the minutes, the years, the centuries.

Dr. Vance comes through the door and she is carrying something in her hand.

"This is a spirometer." She sits down next to me again. "You need to use it as often as possible. To exercise your lungs." Dr. Vance shows me the tip of the plastic container. "You need to inhale as hard as you can. These numbers show how much air you manage to pull in. Give it a go, as hard as you can now."

She gives me the spirometer and I hesitatingly put it to my mouth. But she smiles and nods and I inhale as deeply as I can, in, in, more, in, in. The spirometer wheezes as an indicator floats past the numbers, in, in, up, a little bit more . . .

I exhale.

“Good!” Dr. Vance smiles. “For being your first time. But this is what we’re aiming for, eventually.” She points to the number 4,000 on the container, more than twice as much as what I just managed. It seems impossible.

“You’ll make it!” Dr. Vance laughs. “You’ll see! But you need to practice as often as you can. The lungs are like sacks, all sticky on the inside.” She puts her hands together to show me. “They sort of get stuck together if they aren’t filled for a while. The more you exercise them, the better. Several times an hour, at least.”

She pauses and we smile at one another.

“Soon you’ll be able to talk again. That will make you feel better. The respirator went down between the vocal cords, which is why you can’t talk yet. It takes a while.” Dr. Vance smiles again and her smile makes me feel like anything is possible: talk, walk, inhale all the way to 4,000.

“I’ll let you rest now.” She gets up. “Don’t worry about the morphine. Press the button as often as you need to.” She pauses on the doorstep. “You get well now, you hear me?”

We smile at each other and she leaves me.

She told me I could press the button as often as I need to. And I need to, these pains, they are cutting through my chest, I really need to. I find the button and my thumb knows what to do, a small push and the morphine comes through the tubes, along with the wonderful darkness that doesn’t let anything stand in its way, not the voices from the corridor, not even the nurse, JaneJenna or T or someone else, who comes to prick my finger, and I don’t feel a thing because everything is dissolving in this beautiful tidal wave of darkness that rolls in and carries me and my bed and my pains and my longing and the emptiness of Anders and the girls and Mom, the loneliness, the darkness takes it all away.

THE DARKNESS OPENS UP AND I AM STILL HERE.

There are voices coming from the corridor. People talking and laughing.

The sun has taken down its artwork from the wall, coiled it, and put it in the windowsill.

On the small table next to my bed there is a plastic cup. My hand, is it really mine, trembling carrying the cup? Water. Ah, it is almost as good as apple juice, but only almost.

Half my arms are completely blue. Like I'm about to shed my skin, like I am coming out, a blue creature inside of this pale skin of mine.

I need to take an inventory of my body.

The bandage on my neck is making it difficult to turn my head. I have to feel with my swollen hands. Why is there a bandage on my neck? I will have to ask Dr. Vance. And also the bandage on my groin: another question. And of course: on my chest, a large bandage covering half of my torso. The three plastic tubes, the drainage tubes that Dr. Vance told me about, go under the bandage, each in its own hole into my chest, right through my skin. The fluid colors the tubes yellow and down by the box on the floor where it gathers, light red. I try not to look at them.

There is also something else, by my right armpit, one, two, three, *four* cords sticking out of me. What are those? They don't seem to lead anywhere, they are just hanging out, about a decimeter. I turn my head slowly to get a glimpse of them. They're gray and look like electrical cords. So many questions. Also white cords glued all over my chest, maybe a dozen of them, and a screen over my bed showing numbers, they must be my heartbeats, as well as the IV still in my arm. I am completely chained to this bed.

There is someone knocking at the door. A man sticks his head into my room and smiles seeing that I'm awake.

"Here's your breakfast!" He laughs and his teeth are glistening white against his dark skin. "Well, it's more like lunchtime; let's call it brunch." He laughs again. He pulls the bedside table closer and it's a special hospital table with an arm to stretch over my bed. "There." He puts the tray in front of me. "Bon appétit!" I can feel his kindness, he has carried it with him for at least fifty years so that it has made marks around his eyes and on his cheeks. He nods and smiles back at me, before leaving, his deep voice echoing in the corridor on his way to the next room.

I look down at the tray. There is a plate of fruit cut in small pieces. A bowl of oatmeal. A plastic cup of apple juice.

I raise my hand, and the tray seems so far away, but the apple juice, yes, trembling, floating through the air, the taste, golden and sweet, it will always be something new to me, something different than before. Freedom to breathe, victory over the darkness, the snake beaten, and my heart finally my own.

Now the food. Those colorful pieces on the plate and the gray mass in the bowl. I really don't know what to do with this. To put it in my mouth, that seems just as strange as if I would start chewing on the furniture or the flowers by the window. Oh, someone put flowers in here, I didn't notice before. The colors glow in the sunlight: green, white, red, pink, blue.

The food. Right. My thoughts are so slow I cannot seem to get hold of them. Maybe I should try some oatmeal. My hand: around the spoon, lift the spoon, dip it in the oatmeal and then up, up, to my lips. It's in my mouth, this woody, gluey mass, and my hand, I am so exhausted, I can't hold the spoon any longer. But I'm not done yet, swallow, I have to swallow.

There.

I have to fall back, close my eyes. Breathe. Lift the spoon again, no way. Impossible. These pains, everywhere. I forgot. The button. There. Under my thumb. Now press. I should have. Earlier. Now rest.

Voices. From the corridor.

A faint beeping, from somewhere.

CHAPTER 60

*H*ello, Lene.”

Anders! Coming through the door.

He has shaved and put on new clothes and smells like I remember, leaning over me to caress my hair. I want to say his name, Anders, Anders, but I can't even whisper yet. He laughs and there is a new shade of blue in his eyes, which I have not seen before, a shade of sleeping on the couch in the waiting room, of guarding the machines so nothing goes wrong, of not listening when the nurses say the visiting hours are over, of saying, I am Mr. Fogelberg and I am not going anywhere.

He carries flowers in a vase and something more, a stack of paper that he puts on the bedside table.

“Kristina told me to buy flowers,” he says. “You know me, I never think of that.” He laughs and puts the flowers next to the others in the window. His are red and orange and pink, glowing in the evening light, and my eyes embrace them, the sheer petals and the lucid stems and the rustling leaves. I *see* them, and my eyes are grateful, remembering the fog and the darkness.

“Oh, these are from my boss.” He holds a small card, sticking out from the other bouquet of flowers. “That’s nice. By the way, he told me not to worry about work. Take care of your wife, he said, make sure she gets well, that’s most important.”

He comes to sit down on the chair next to me.

“Kristina is home with the girls, but tomorrow I thought she might come here with me, when the kids are in school. If you want to, that is, if you feel up for it.”

I manage to nod, the bandage pulling at my neck, yes, I would like Mom to come visit.

He takes my hand and I can see he’s trying to avoid looking at the tubes coming out of my side.

“The girls told me to say hi. Stina cried when I left; well, Ingrid was sad too, but you know how she is, she kind of hides it.” He grabs the stack of paper. “The girls’ classes made drawings for you. Check this out.”

He holds it up for me to see and it’s a drawing of a dinosaur holding flowers under crooked letters. *Get well soon Mrs. Fogelberg, from your friend Matthew.* He holds up another one with big round letters. *I’m thinking of you, Love from Katrina.* Around the words are floating hearts and birds, carefully colored with crayons. I can see her, little Katrina, her small hands working with the crayons: this must be a beautiful drawing for Mrs. Fogelberg in the hospital. I have to smile. Anders is also smiling.

Where are Ingrid’s and Stina’s? I reach for the drawings, but Anders understands.

“Wait, let me see . . . Here.”

He holds it up. Ingrid’s drawing.

My eyes fill with tears.

It is Ingrid and me, holding hands, walking on a summer meadow, our eyes big and round, the way she always draws people. *It will be better when it’s all over. Then you’ll be pig.* I must not laugh, I cannot. She spelled it wrong, the Swedish word for alert and healthy: *pigg*. Anders is laughing.

“You’ll be pig!”

I smile and I cannot take my eyes off the big red heart in the drawing, floating in the air between us. Like Ingrid knows, like her small fingers knew, painting the picture, even though no one has told her.

“Here’s Stina’s.”

He holds it up.

She has painted a picture of our family, holding hands, the girls in between me and Anders. Above us she has written *iloveju mamma, from Stina.* And around us: rainbows, flowers, butterflies, hearts.

It’s too much, I have to lean back, close my eyes. In the dark I can still see the drawings, the crooked letters, the wobbly lines, and the colors. I can see their small hands, their hair like a curtain over their faces, their small necks bent over their desks. I can hear the rustling of paper in the classrooms, smell the crayon and the chalk.

I can hear Anders turn over the drawings and the soft sound of him exhaling tells me every time he smiles.

I have tried for a while not to think about it, but I can't push away the thought any longer. I need to go. Though I don't know how. But first: press the button. It will require morphine.

"Hey, hey." Anders looks up as I try to sit up.

Oh, these pains. And the stiffness and the tubes and the cords, I can barely move.

"Wait, let me help you, what is it?"

I point to the small door next to the TV.

"Ah, okay, just wait a little." He pushes back his chair and moves the box for the tubes and the IV, so that I will have room to stand up. My legs . . . They are so swollen, I pull them over the edge of my bed and Anders is there to catch me. His strong arms hold me as I pull myself up, the tubes biting at my side.

"You can do it, there now." His gentle voice and his strong arms make me somehow trust this wobbly body to take a small step.

"Good job! You're doing it!" Anders lifts the plastic box and drags the IV while carrying my weight as I lean on him, step by step toward the door. Every step is a pain but having Anders hold me, his arms, his chin on my head, helps me focus on my feet, drag them, pull them, shuffle across the floor.

Anders bends his knees to put down the box while I still cling to him. He reaches to open the door and now it's getting really tricky. The bathroom, it turns out, is barely more than a cubicle.

"Let's see," Anders says, coming into the bathroom with me and the IV and the tubes and the plastic box. There is the basin, in perfect height for me to hold on to and I let go of Anders but we are still sort of entangled in tubes and cords. For a moment Anders hesitates, but then he closes the door, still inside, and turns to face the door.

"Is it okay?" he asks. "I don't want to leave you. What if you fall and can't say anything? I promise not to peek."

It's all right, he can stay. I want to laugh although I can't, he is such a gentleman, turning toward the door, his forehead literally against the door. No, I mustn't laugh, these pains, even worse when I sit down holding up my robe at the same time. But that is some knight, following his lady to the WC! And it's so typical of him, to turn toward the door, like he has not

already seen every part of me, his way of saying that I am his lady, no matter what happens.

I have to grab the basin and pull myself up again, but that face in the mirror, I don't want to see it. I try to focus on washing my swollen hands without pulling at the needles and the tubes, but I can't help it. In the corner of my eye I see glimpses of a swollen face and a white bandage, the one on my neck even bigger than I thought.

Anders has opened the door.

"I've got you, there." He carries everything: the plastic box, the IV, me hanging around his neck, step by step. I can barely cling to him anymore, but he holds me up.

By the bed he lowers me slowly and helps me pull my legs up. He puts the sheet and the blanket over me and strokes my forehead.

"There, you did good."

A nurse, not JaneJenna or T, comes through the door.

"How's it going in here? Did she go to the bathroom? You should have called, she was supposed to use this, so that we can measure." She holds up a basin in metal. "Press the button for help the next time."

"Okay, we'll do that," Anders says and she leaves.

"Never mind her." He continues to caress my forehead. "You did good."

"What's this?" He lifts the spirometer.

Even though I'm tired, I manage to hold it to my mouth and inhale, so that the indicator struggles past a couple of numbers.

"Ah. For your lungs. Okay."

He leans back in the chair and pulls his hand over his face.

The spirometer, it's too heavy, I have to let my hand sink. I don't want to fall asleep, maybe he will leave while I sleep. I want to be with him, hear everything he says. But the darkness. It's coming. Anders leans forward and starts stroking my forehead again.

Don't fall asleep.

Don't.

Anders is saying something. Ah, he brought the camera.

"I just thought we might as well take some pictures." He gets up and takes the few steps back to the window. "You can smile if you want to, but of course, you don't have to."

The moment I smile, the moment he takes the picture, I remember another photograph, another room, another bed, other white cords covering my naked chest. A missing photograph, which I have not seen in a long time. Mom has briefly told me about it: the specialist, the relief, *You never have to worry about this ever again.*

Anders has turned toward the flowers in the window.

“We have to get some pictures of these as well. And these.” He sorts through the children’s drawings, taking picture after picture.

It is getting dark. There is no golden artwork on the wall anymore. Anders is putting the girls’ drawings against the vases for me to see, but I reach out: no, I want them close to me, on the table, so that if I wake up during the night when he is not here, I can reach for the drawings and pull them close.

“Ah, okay, you want them here.” Anders puts the drawings next to the spirometer and sits down next to me again.

I close my eyes and I can hear the small beeps as Anders goes through the pictures on the digital camera.

I can’t fight it any longer. The darkness. The beeping. The smile on that small face. The blue eyes looking at me. Through the years and the pains and the riddle. My strawberry blonde hair curly around my face. The winter coverall down by my heavy winter boots. And the machine. The beeping. The cords, crisscross over my chest. The white cords.

CHAPTER 61

*T*he corridor is not what I imagined, not empty and echoing, but with doors and artwork and sofas, and it opens up to the nurses' station, which is a long desk with a wall of screens behind it. The screens are full of numbers and I realize they are heartbeats. Somewhere are mine, the same as on the screen above my bed, and I want to find them, but my body is wobbling and I have to focus: I need to stay up, hold on to the walker, my hands around the handles and my arms resting on the black sticky leather. My hands and my arms are still blue, but the swelling has finally started to recede. Under me there is a big tube of something fastened to the walker, is it oxygen?

The wheels are rolling slowly across the floor.

One step.

One more.

Rest.

Inhale. Fill my lungs. Exhale.

Another step.

Anders pulls the IV and carries the plastic box for the drainage tubes.

"I'm sorry Kristina couldn't come today either, she should have seen you now!" he says. "But she needs to be home when the girls come back from school."

I am too exhausted to try to whisper an answer so I smile instead, but I don't think he sees it, following closely behind me.

One step.

Another one.

Below my robe I can see my feet moving slowly. They are still swollen, in the hospital socks and slippers. But the hardest part is breathing.

Inhale.

Exhale. My chest is stiff with the bandage and the tubes.

I will. Not. Be able to. Do this. Much longer. Must whisper.

“I . . . can’t . . .”

“You want to go back?” Anders turns to my physiotherapist, who is chattering with the nurses at the nurses’ station. “Can we turn back?”

“It’s okay. Let’s go back.” Nurse Kelly smiles and comes up to me, her black hair shining against her white coat. She is small and young, of Korean background, I think.

“Aww, you’re doing good; come here.” Nurse Kelly helps me push the heavy walker around. “Aww, look how far you’ve come!”

She is right. I have passed two doors. Now I just need to make it back to my room. Nurse Kelly is beside me and Anders is behind me, following every step. I cannot help but look into the room next to mine. There is a woman lying in the bed, her gray hair spread over her pillow and her face still, eyes closed. I recognize it, the pain that makes you climb inside and shut the world out.

“You must be homesick for your children, you have two, am I right?” Nurse Kelly asks.

“Girls,” I whisper.

Though it’s hard to speak, the words chafing in my throat, it’s also a relief. To finally make myself understood. To not just nod, but also say *girls*, that beautiful word, my voice thin and brittle.

“Aww, two girls, how wonderful. I also want two girls,” Nurse Kelly says. “One day.”

I can picture her, teaching a one-year-old to walk, the small head with the black tousled hair and the dark laughing eyes and the wobbly steps across the floor.

But this moment: me. Through the door. Back into my room. It somehow looks different now that I have walked through the corridor. It looks smaller.

I let go of the walker and Anders helps me to the armchair. Always these tubes and cords and plastic box to consider.

Nurse Kelly writes in her documents and looks up to smile at me.

“You did really good! Soon you’ll be going home! To your daughters!” She notices the drawings on my bedside table. “Aww, did they make these?” I nod and she touches the drawings gently and smiles on her way to the door. “I’ll be back tomorrow,” she says, pausing on the doorstep. “See you then!”

“Are you tired?” Anders asks me.

“Yes.” My voice is so different I can barely recognize it.

“Of course, you must be exhausted, you should rest now.”

But there is a rattling noise in the corridor and through the door comes Nurse Jones pushing her trolley.

“Here I am!” she says, like she stepped out of a magician’s box in her white-and-pink uniform. Her dark eyes are lively behind her glasses, younger than the wrinkles in her skin.

“Oh no, not you again!” Anders gets up from his chair.

“Not me!” Nurse Jones pauses. “Not me again!” But we can tell she appreciates the joke in the way she ushers Anders toward the door. “You get out now! Get, get!”

“Okay, okay, ha, ha, I’m leaving.” Anders closes the door behind him.

“And how are you today?”

“Bet . . . ter,” I whisper, trying to get up from the armchair.

“It’s all right, you can stay there.” Nurse Jones puts her hand on my shoulder. “There, I’m just gonna . . .” She fills a bowl with water in the bathroom and comes back to me, and there is something comforting about her. She is one of these women who always carries a home with her, wherever she is. Her rough hands are surprisingly tender. “If you just . . . Let’s see . . .” She lifts my robe and she uses the sponge to wash me and the towel to dry me and it is impossible to be embarrassed in front of Nurse Jones; her resolute hands and her matter-of-fact movements.

“Okay, almost done.” Nurse Jones brings fresh water from the bathroom and gives me a clean towel. “This is for your face, I’m thinking you’d prefer to do that yourself.”

“Yes.” The water in the bowl smells of soap. *Yes, I can do this myself.* I wet the towel and rub it across my face and at the same time I can feel the hands of Nurse Jones, rubbing in my neck and behind my ears with a towel.

“Well, I guess we’re done,” Nurse Jones mutters and grunts. “Can’t do anything about those bandages. When they’re off it will be easier to clean you up.”

She drags her trolley full of soap bottles and bowls and sponges out the door.

“We’re done, you can come back now!” she yells down the corridor and turns to smile at me before she walks away.

Anders is still laughing, coming through the door.

“She’s just wonderful.” He turns his chair to face me and sits down. “I called a couple of people at work. They’re all asking about you.” He smiles. “People back home can’t understand how this could not be detected in Sweden.” He laughs again. “I can barely understand it myself. I even got mail from the head office, one of the directors says that he is almost becoming religious on account of this.” He leans forward, his elbows on his knees. “I found out that we were supposed to go through a physical examination, every one of us, before coming here, that it is mandatory, company policy, but they said: What the heck, they’re so young, let’s skip that.” He becomes serious. “If your heart disease had been detected, they would of course not have let us go. I mean we couldn’t have. I don’t even know if you would have been allowed on an airplane.” He looks like he has something more he wants to say, but instead he searches the room, as if he is hoping to find the right words or at least a place to start.

“What . . .” I whisper, trying to make him look at me. “What is it?”

He suddenly looks tired. “When Dr. Holstein came out after the first surgery, he told me . . .” He swallows and looks down. “He told me it had been an extremely difficult operation. Much more difficult than anticipated. It took more than twice as long as normal. He told me he had to use all his imagination to be able to make it.” He looks up at me and his eyes are deep blue in the light from the window. “I’ve been thinking about it. What if we’d had another heart surgeon, a less experienced . . . I mean, Dr. Holstein is counted among the best in the world.”

I can almost hear my heart pounding in my chest, as I remember the gray sky above the naked treetops, silent like a closed door, the tears cold on my cheeks and my wet jeans in the snow, *Just tell me what I need to do. I don’t even have to know why. I don’t even have to know what is wrong with me. God, I don’t even know what to ask for, I don’t know the words, I don’t speak the language. But if there are words, if there is a language out there somewhere, if there is a prayer that would give me my life back, I am offering that prayer right now. This is my prayer.*

“And the second operation . . .” Anders is still looking at me. “Dr. Patel told me what Dr. Holstein said.” He pulls his hand across his face. “He said: ‘This is too bad, she was a young woman.’ ” He pauses and looks down at his hands. “He said: ‘I’m truly sorry, she was a young mother.’ ”

He pulls his hand over his forehead, his eyebrows, his cheeks, and he wipes away a tear but he doesn't want me to notice. He is still looking down and I want to stroke his hair and his warm neck but he is too far away and I still have all the needles and the tubes tying me down.

She was a young mother. I can feel my heart swell in my chest. *She was.* Maybe the girls saved me. Maybe they were the ones who made the surgeons try again and again. Maybe they came before them, in the operating room, two small girls saying: Please, please, this is our mamma.

I feel like I have to laugh, like I have to cry, like my chest cannot contain all this, my heart pounding, pounding and I am suddenly exhausted.

“Oh,” is all I can whisper.

Anders looks up at me, his eyes with all their shades of blue. He smiles and it's like an open window that has been closed for a long time, the sky bluer, the air easier to breathe. He sighs and pulls his phone from his pocket.

“It's work. I'll be right back.” He gets up and pauses on the doorstep. “You rest now.” His voice echoes in the corridor. “Yes, Anders speaking . . .”

My head is heavy; I have to lean back, my neck against the edge of the armchair. What is the logic behind it all? The more answers, the more questions I have. Life is like a book, opening to new stories all the time, new pages, new words written in invisible ink, questions whispered around the corner of every sentence. Maybe there is an invisible world working behind our own, maybe words in the silence, maybe movements in what looks completely still. When every door is closed, maybe doors are opening that can't be seen.

My heart is beating so fast it hurts. I am not strong enough, still partly transparent, my eyes still not used to the crudeness of this world. And that is just it, maybe these things only come to the weak, because in strength the body only knows itself, is full of itself, its movements, its words, but in weakness is the invisible and the whisperings. In the moment before the darkness falls, there is the answer to the riddle, with a finger over its lips: *Shhh, don't say anything, just listen*, but what am I supposed to say? How could I explain the inexplicable? Point to the invisible? This is a fine joke I have been pulled into, yes, the universe is laughing: You never saw this

coming, the pieces were already placed on the board, we were just waiting for your next move.

“What are you laughing at?” Anders is back.

I can't help it, the tears are coming, and Anders pulls his chair close and takes my hand. He doesn't say anything, just caresses me, carefully between the needles and the bandages where needles used to be, over my blue-yellow-purple skin.

“I know,” he says and he truly does.

There you go, the universe says, you are always scolding and arguing, you think you have to manage everything on your own, and I cannot help but argue: This is not a joke, people do die, people are hurt in this business of living, but the universe is still smiling, telling me everything is a joke and also deadly serious, but I still have to argue, but all these people, mothers and fathers and daughters and sons who are *not* saved, what about them? And the universe kind of pulls itself together, yeah, okay, you're right, but you don't know them, you don't know their miracles, all the doors we are opening, and by the way, we don't need to argue about this because we are both right. You should have learned this by now, we will always both win.

“You should rest now,” Anders says and I can feel the soft caresses on my hand. “Rest, I am here with you, you can rest.”

CHAPTER 62

*L*ike a fish. Harpooned, struck at the heart. I need to lie still, inhale, exhale, fight the reflexes that tell my body to jump over the edge and swim away.

These hands holding me, am I supposed to trust them? I barely know if I'm fighting or clinging to them, if they're caressing me or pulling the barb out of my heart. The fishhook of steel, I can feel it pulling at my heart, the tissues holding on to it, the rupture and the hook being pulled through my chest and the sound—is it me?—*aaah*, a sound that delivers babies, has a spear thrust into the side, a fishing hook pulled from the heart.

“That’s one,” Dr. Vance says. “Three to go.”

No no no

She told me about them when I asked, the four electric cords put in there, just in case my heart stopped after the surgeries, so they could make it start again with electric shocks. Four gray wires hooked to my pericardium with steel barbs.

No

No no no

“Hold her hand.” She is talking to Anders. He is pale, looking like he is about to faint, about to throw up.

Dr. Vance is bent over me like a sea captain over her catch.

The barb in my heart, the pulling, I can feel it, the tissues breaking and the pains, breathe, I have to breathe, I just don't know how, breathe, I have to cling to Anders's hands, his eyes, *Is it going to hurt?* I asked her only minutes ago. I should have known by the small pause before her answer, *No no, like a bee sting.*

I should have known when Dr. Vance told Anders to hold me, I should have realized from her frown: *Did you take the morphine?*

“They're out,” Dr. Vance says. “Let's go on. Better to have it all done.”

Anders is pressing my hand, leaning close to me, his face close to mine, his breath reminding me to inhale, and I can feel the snake wriggle in my chest, pulled out through my side, between my ribs.

“There. That’s one.”

I can’t breathe, I can’t say anything, but in the corner of my eye I can see Dr. Vance hold up the plastic tube, at least thirty centimeters long. I never realized, has it been in my chest this whole time?

“Okay. The next.” Dr. Vance pulls again.

The pain, twisting through me, it’s like vomiting, like giving birth through my side, my ribs, my chest, everything creaking, making way for this alien baby, dripping pus and blood.

“The last one.”

The pain locks me to my bed. I can’t cry, can’t scream, can’t utter a single word, not even a sound. I can’t breathe, even though the tube is already out. I can only squeeze Anders’s hand and listen to the sound of someone moaning far away, is it Anders?

Dr. Vance is already working with the needle.

“You have to lie still. Breathe.”

I don’t know how. Small gasps. Anders is crying, or maybe it’s me. The needle is biting me. Four holes in my side that need to be closed. I’m going home. I just need a little mending. A couple of new bandages. My body is tired of pain. Not more, it says, as the needle goes up and down and up and down, but I know I have to.

I can only lie still on the bed and gasp for air and feel the thread being pulled through my skin. Air, into my lungs, that is the only thing. Breathe. Tiny little breaths. Not too much, not too little, just enough to not let the pain take over.

Tiny little breaths. Air into my lungs, into my body, this living thing, stitched and glued together, free from drainage tubes and barbs of steel and IV and needles. Only the wires left on my chest, fastened with stickers.

Tiny little breaths.

I am free.

CHAPTER 63

*T*he cicadas buzzing in the trees. The fragrant breeze that has touched the trees and the earth and the warm stone walls of our house. My heart swells and takes it all in: the sounds and the tastes of the summer-like autumn day, I almost forgot about this in the sterile and air-conditioned rooms of the hospital.

My body sits carefully on the bench just outside the back door. The roughness of the wood, my fingers recognize it, and the small slant of the edge of the bench. Only a couple of weeks ago Anders bought the bench and put it here, telling me we needed somewhere to unload the groceries while we unlocked the door, and also a place for me to sit and rest coming in from the car. I was so weak, I was dying, although we didn't know it.

Yes, we knew it.

This time it's different, to sit here on the bench, the sun in my face, the dry smell of grass and hot asphalt, the Mazda glittering and shooting beams of light. I close my eyes. I can still feel it: the sky high above, not a white ceiling, my entire body is feeling it, no walls, no door, no window, but everything, everything, the trees, the cicadas, the houses, the sky, and me, *I am a part of it all*, I am sitting here on the bench. Everything is somehow new to me, as if I were newborn.

I have to be careful with my body. Sudden pains cut through it as it remembers the movements of this morning: to carefully walk up and down the small stairway in the rehabilitation room, showing Nurse Kelly I could do it before she agreed to send me home, to be pushed in the wheelchair through the corridors, the elevators, the parking lot, Anders helping me to the car—no seat belt—they had told me not to use it and Anders to drive carefully. But still, the pains cut my chest in half at every bump in the road, until the exhaustion took over—must have been the morphine—and I could barely hold my head up and fell asleep to the sound of the engine.

Suddenly I woke up and we were home. Anders helped me out of the car to the bench. I am still half asleep, half awake, in pain, exhausted, maybe dreaming. The sun in my face. The sky above. Birds chirping. The cicadas. The muffled voices on the other side of the door: Anders, my girls, Mom.

Anders seems to keep them away, telling them to wait, she needs to rest. But the girls cannot wait, *We want to see Mamma, you'll meet her soon, please just go up and play for a little while . . .* Oh, to hear the girls say *Mamma*, Ingrid and Stina, to belong to them, to be their mamma, even though there is a door between us, to always be their mamma. But soon. I will get up. Soon.

It feels a little strange to be out of the hospital robe. I am wearing the set of clothes I brought to the hospital—was it only a week ago? I must have lost weight, the sweater is hanging and my arms are like blue sticks coming out of it and my knees are sharp under my sweatpants. The swelling is almost gone.

This, to sit on the bench, my face turned to the sun, the warmth making my skin tingle and the light making patterns come and go in the dark of my closed eyes, it is . . . It is indescribable. The cars disappearing behind the back wall, the hum of the engines, the sudden flashes of light from Radnor Chester Road. The rustling of a squirrel in the shrubbery, on the tree trunk, along the power line, high up in the treetop.

I am sitting here on the bench.

Oh, the memory, I will never forget it, just as Anders turned my wheelchair out the door of my room, before he started pushing me down the corridor, the glimpse I got from the room next to mine. The woman with the silvery hair, I only saw her for a second, but every part of it is right here, in the darkness of my closed eyes, in the patterns of the sun. The white doctor's coat. The raised arm. The grown children, the bent man, all of them bent and silent and still. Everything still, except for the doctor's hand, that small movement, closing her eyes.

Only a second, and then the corridor and the smiles and the thank-yous and the goodbyes and the jokes, hope we won't see you again anytime soon, and all the time that picture in my mind, the silver hair on the pillow, the pale woman, terribly pale, who never got to go home.

The cicadas. Their buzzing, it's so loud it feels like I am rotating along with the sound, floating, flying.

What was it my dad told me? They live in the ground for several years as nymphs, before they climb up a tree, shed their skin, become a cicada, and sing. Maybe this is how they feel, the moment after they have cast off their old skin: a new being, trembling and pulsating, every nerve on edge, every millimeter of the new skin registering the breeze and the temperature and the height and the buzzing all around. Gasping. Breathing. Searching for the song inside, the one that is supposed to be there, although no one told them where or how or why. What do they do all those years in the ground, besides eating—what are they thinking about, dreaming about? Do they dream of the sky, of the sunlight shining through the leaves, of things they have never seen but still somehow feel are there?

Where is she now, the woman with the silvery hair?

The back door opens. It is Anders.

“I’ve asked the girls to wait, to not run up to you the moment you walk in. They’re up in Stina’s room. You can come inside now.” He helps me up and holds me as I walk, small, small steps, up the only step and into the family room. Everything is the same, the green couch, the girls’ jump ropes in a mess by the door, their small summer sandals.

“Wait.” Anders bends down to help me take off my shoes. “There.” We continue, small, small steps, into the kitchen. There is Mom and she is about to hug me, but pauses.

“Oh no, I don’t know . . .” Mom has a smile that has been pulled from a field of worries, and she takes a step back to let me and Anders through the door to the hallway.

My dear mother. I smile at her and hold on to Anders. I have to concentrate, small, small steps.

The sun shines into the hallway through the glass of the front door, touching the floor of the living room, making it glow, the wooden floor Mrs. Mack so proudly explained how she renovated. By the door are the girls’ backpacks, their sweaters and jackets and shoes, their wonderful, wonderful mess.

From the living room comes the sweet scent of cinnamon and pumpkin: it’s the scented candle I bought an eternity ago, or a couple of weeks ago, or a moment ago.

And we are standing in front of the real challenge: the stairs.

“Do you want to sit and rest for a while?” Anders asks.

I shake my head, I need to lie down, need to get to my bed. We continue, Anders holding me around my waist. One step, one more, slowly, slowly. Like Nurse Kelly showed me, one foot, rest, then the next, then rest again, shifting my weight equally.

I can barely stand up, soon, soon, here is the creaking on the landing, just a couple more steps. I sink down and Anders holds me and lowers me slowly onto the bed, making sure that I don't touch anything with my right side and that my chest is as still as possible.

Mom has been behind us all the time, trying to help, pulling a pillow out of the way.

"There, are you comfy?" she asks, but I am too tired to answer, I can only nod and smile. Behind Mom is the chest of drawers that Dad bought for me and put together, saying Welcome, my girl, welcome home.

Breathe, I need to breathe, pull the air down into my lungs, even though it hurts, but I have gotten used to the pain.

Here come the girls. *Mamma! Mamma!* They have made signs, like they used to, big hearts and crooked letters: VÄLkOmMEn heM. Ingrid comes dancing over, her funny spaghetti dance with dangling knees, round eyes, and her big smile. I want to laugh but it is impossible, the pain, the exhaustion, all I can do is smile. All the others are laughing, but Anders asks her to stop, he can see that I am hurting.

Stina comes crawling up to me in my bed and Anders urges her:

"Careful now; careful, Stina."

She is close to me, as close as she can be without touching me.

"Did the shot hurt, Mamma?" And I have to laugh again, but the pains, it is simply impossible.

"Here, Mamma." Stina has brought a teddy bear from her room that she puts close to me. "You can borrow him, Mamma, now that you need him." It's the white one I had as a girl, with black, almost-real eyes, only now his fur is gray and tousled. He has come back to me after years in boxes and wandering between the girls' rooms, and I want to say, Thank you, Stina, thank you, but the words escape as I breathe.

"Mamma needs to rest, girls," Anders says. "Come with me. Look at those signs you made, that's nice of you." He brings them out of our bedroom, gently herding them in front of him. I would have wanted them to stay, but he is right, I need to rest. Just the breathing is hard enough.

I can hear Ingrid's voice. "Do we have to leave?"

"You can come back in a little while." Their voices fade as they walk away.

Mom is still here. She pulls the chair from beside my desk to come and sit next to me.

"Mia called and asked if she could come visit," she says. "I told her let's see how things go, maybe in a few days."

I have used all my strength; can only smile back at her. She is silent and looks down at her hands. Then she looks up at me.

"We have received so much food! You wouldn't believe it! The neighbors brought dinner and the landlady and Mia also, several times, until I told them our freezer's full. I mean, it was just the girls and me, and the girls don't eat that much." She laughs.

Then silence again. And the cicadas.

"Dad sends his love. And Cecilia and Petra. And Solveig and Arne, well, everyone."

She looks at me and I smile again but she doesn't smile.

"We were really worried."

She says *we* and inside of it there is an *I*. *I* was really worried.

"Anders called early in the morning and said the surgery went well, and then he said he had to go, but that he'd be in touch, but . . ." She pauses. "But he didn't call again. I waited and waited. I walked the girls to the school bus and I waited, but he never called."

She looks down and swallows.

"The whole day went by and he didn't call." Her voice, I can hear it tremble. "I knew something was wrong. I didn't want to think it, but the hours went by, I waited and waited but he didn't call."

I can feel her hand, warm and soft, on my arm. She has broken the silence and run out of words and this is why she uses her hand now, gentle strokes on my arm. The strokes and the words, they are the same thing, telling me I waited and waited, it mattered to me, oh, it mattered, my daughter, whether you lived or died, whether I would see you again, whether we would have a moment like this ever again.

My mother.

The cicadas buzzing, I can hear them through the window. Buzzing louder and louder. Just like the night I sat by the window in the dark,

gasping for air, feeling the riddle wriggling in my chest, hearing the monster's heavy footsteps in my ears. And suddenly I know. What they do all those years living in the ground. The nymphs who are to become cicadas. Maybe they don't know it themselves, but they are writing their song. Collecting the notes in the dark earth. The song rising to the sky, this is how it is, this is how it always is. The song floating toward the sky comes from the underworld.

OceanofPDF.com

CHAPTER 64

*D*r. Murray comes through the door and after him Dr. Holstein, hurrying toward me with open arms:

“I’m so happy to see you! I thought I’d lost you!”

“I’m so happy to see *you!*” I say and surprise myself by reaching out for him.

I’m sitting on the examination table, and he walks up to me but stiffens and stops and then I have to do the same. Dr. Holstein turns to Anders and reaches to greet him and shake his hand instead.

Nothing needs to be said. I understand what came between us, at least I think I do; it was the threat of misunderstandings and lawsuits and lawyer bills.

But I wanted that hug.

I wanted to curl up in his arms and whisper against his broad chest: *Thank you so very very much.* It has been two weeks since I last saw him, and that time it was only my body; my heart meeting his hands. It’s strange, this tall man knows me even more intimately than Anders.

He is standing right next to me and he is slapping me jokingly on my knee, just like he did the first time we met, with a smile in his brown eyes.

“You’re looking great!”

He stiffens again and I can see him turning into Dr. Holstein, the surgeon.

“It was a very difficult operation. My plan was to give you a twenty-one-millimeter valve, but your aortic root was too narrow.” He says it like he is apologizing. “Extremely narrow. It just wasn’t possible. I had to make it a nineteen-millimeter valve instead. We had prepared for a twenty-one-millimeter; it didn’t show in the CAT scan or the x-ray that your root was that narrow.” He looks at Anders and Dr. Murray and back at me. “And even with the nineteen-millimeter valve it was difficult. But you’ll be able to live a normal life again. Well, you cannot run marathons,” he says and

laughs. “And you should avoid climbing mountains, but that’s about it. You shouldn’t have any restraints in your daily life. But it might take up to a year before you feel recovered. These things take time.” He looks at Dr. Murray, who nods.

“Well, to be honest,” Dr. Holstein continues, “we can never be sure, we have never seen anybody go as far as you without surgery. But there’s no reason for you not to become eighty, ninety years old!” His hand brushes against my knee again. “No reason at all!”

“You’re a part of our family now!” Dr. Murray says. “Don’t worry about the next surgery. There is so much going on in this area, lots of new stuff coming up. The next time we might be able to operate on you through the groin, when it’s time to replace the valve.” Dr. Murray smiles. “So it won’t be as big a deal.”

“How long will it last?” Anders asks, leaning forward on the chair next to Dr. Murray. “Before it needs to be replaced?”

Dr. Holstein strokes his bearded chin. “I’d say about ten, fifteen years. Maybe even twenty. It depends on the rate of the wear; we’ll just have to see. But next time will be completely different. The next operation you won’t be as far down the road, no, no, much earlier, so you will not be in as bad shape as this time.” He looks into my eyes. “Are you planning to have more children?”

“Well,” I say, searching for the right words. “Right now, I feel like I can’t take any more pain.”

“I can understand that,” Dr. Holstein says. “But if you change your mind, it is possible, with this tissue valve that you’ve got. My advice would be that you wait at least a year, and I would strongly recommend a cesarean, so as not to burden your heart during delivery. And you would need to have the pregnancy carefully monitored by your cardiologist. You do have a cardiologist?”

“Yes,” I say. “Dr. Howard, who first discovered my bicuspid aortic valve, on the results of the ultrasound.” Always when I think of Dr. Howard I can hear the sounds of seagulls through a telephone, it’s somehow connected to his name: Dr. Howard—screeching seagulls.

“May I listen?” Dr. Holstein asks.

“Yes, of course,” I whisper and the words make me short of breath. This is exhausting, to sit up on the exam table; my body longs for my bed. Dr.

Holstein puts the stethoscope on my chest and I remember Dr. Howard's words. It was only two days ago I was there for follow-up and he asked me: *Did you really meet him? What was he like?* I remember Dr. Howard's laughter when I told him how Dr. Holstein jumped up to sit on the trash can by the door, the first time we met. Dr. Howard nodded and listened silently when I told him I didn't even see Dr. Holstein before the surgery, or afterward. *He is a busy man*, Dr. Howard said. *In the fields of medicine there are many experts. Very seldom can one be singled out as the best, but in his case, Dr. Holstein, I actually think he is the best; in cardio-thoracic surgery, he is like a rock star.* Dr. Howard was wide eyed like a boy talking about his greatest hero.

"There is still a murmur, but that is normal after the surgery." Dr. Holstein pauses. "Can I . . . Can I take a look at the scars?"

Dr. Holstein is like an artist, asking permission to look at his own work, and I smile and lift my sweater. This should be embarrassing, but somehow it is not. I know that Dr. Holstein has seen a lot more of me, deeper than my skin; he has peered down the alleys of my heart.

"Look here, this is good," Dr. Holstein says, showing Dr. Murray. Dr. Holstein's hands are touching me, and it is a strange feeling to see his fingers but not feel anything on my skin.

Not even when I close my eyes.

Nothing.

"Does it hurt?" Anders asks and Dr. Holstein is still.

"No," I say. "Well, it doesn't hurt, or yeah, it does hurt, but I can't feel it . . . Does that make any sense at all? Here, on my chest, my right side, I can't feel anything, and it's the same thing on my right thigh, although it hurts inside."

"It's because the nerves have been cut," Dr. Holstein says. "The nerve endings are good at finding their way back to each other and they will in all probability do that. But it might take time. Several months."

Dr. Holstein examines the scars where the black threads of the stitches are still sticking out.

"This looks really good," he says. "The stitches can be removed soon. You can ask your family doctor to do it in a couple of days."

Dr. Holstein is done and I can pull down my sweater.

The follow-up is close to its end. Soon Dr. Holstein will shake our hands and walk out the door. Yes, he nods to Dr. Murray, the signal that he will take over, do the paperwork and give us the final restraints. Dr. Holstein shakes our hands, mine and Anders's, and I whisper *Thank you*, thin small words that never could cover all I feel. His brown eyes rest on me for a moment before he smiles and walks out the door with his long hurried steps and for a second I want to run after him and try to explain what I meant with my thank-you, I want to claim my hug, I want to tell him what he means to me. Wait, wait, I want to say, you saved me and I think I understand now, I have seen what is in your deep brown eyes; you are an artist, a sculptor working in flesh and bone, a poet who touches people's hearts, but this isn't something you run after your heart surgeon to say. You stay on the table and pull the sweater down a little bit more because of the cold air coming from the AC, and you try to breathe with shallow breaths so it won't be so painful.

Anders smiles at me from his chair in the corner and the exhaustion makes me so roaring tired my thoughts are chopped off in the middle and I have to hold on to that smile of his.

Dr. Murray is planning the next follow-up and telling me I cannot lift things heavier than a carton of milk for at least a month. He hands me a card that I always have to carry in my wallet where it says what kind of implant I have (BOVINE TISSUE VALVE 19 mm AORTIC). I nod and say thank-you, but the only thing keeping me up is Anders's smile and his voice talking with Dr. Murray and his touch as he gently helps me down, carefully, carefully, stiff movements, the pains shooting forth and above it all: Anders's smile, just like that time when I was twelve years old and stepped into the room, nervous by Cecilia's side, my wavy hair falling over my face, tickling my cheek, and Anders turning around, looking at me with his blue eyes and his smile.

Yes, exactly the same.

ANDERS. ALL THE WAY HOME AND HALF THE NIGHT HE HAS BEEN joking about heart surgeons, joking and at the same time not: *They are all sadists, how can they cut people like that, they must be psychopaths, complete psychopaths, yeah, all surgeons. By the way, what are they thinking when they open people up?* Well, I have to agree, but at the same time it is

fortunate that there are people who can stand doing what they do, it is lucky we're not all the same, or . . .

He sits down next to me on the bed.

"I wonder how long your scars would measure if they were added together."

"Yeah, me too," I manage to whisper.

"The girls are asleep and Kristina is up in her room. No one will disturb us."

"I mean, I don't know . . . They are not very . . ."

"I think they look cool," he says and smiles. "They are sexy." He becomes serious. "You are always beautiful."

"I'm tired . . ." I say, but he is already on his way to the door.

On the doorstep he turns to me. "Wait here."

I smile at him; like I was going anywhere.

I can hear him walk down the stairs to the kitchen. When he comes back he is holding a measuring tape and he sits down beside me again.

"Let's start with the big one." His hands pull up my T-shirt ever so gently and they are beautiful, I have always loved his hands.

The scar is black. No stitches, just a black line where my skin was glued together. The black is dried blood that will fall off, they told us, and then a white scar will take its place, which will hardly show. An arch under my right breast, cut with a steady hand, even though the line itself is a little shaky, as if drawn by a child. Anders measures carefully and it's strange: I cannot get used to it, not sensing his fingers touching my skin, my right breast entirely without feeling—on the outside. Inside, the pain is an animal that has taken the monster's place and built itself a nest between my ribs. Sometimes it gets up and walks around, shaking its cage, making it hard for me to breathe, usually when it's approaching the third hour—every four hours, at least, I need to take the morphine tablets to soothe it.

Anders's breath; I cannot even feel that, nor the measuring tape that he is bending to follow the scar.

"Twenty-three centimeters."

He moves on to the scars where the drainage tubes entered my chest, measuring carefully.

"This is two centimeters and this is also two; well, let's say they are all two centimeters, that's six centimeters, which makes twenty-nine in all."

He bends closer to measure the scar where the electric wires went through my skin, coming from my heart. I still cannot feel his fingers and I miss them terribly.

“One centimeter.” He comes closer and raises the measuring tape to my neck, to the small scar where Dr. Vance told me they went down with a camera to my heart through a vein. Here I can feel them. His hands. Brushing against my neck, making me shiver even though they are warm.

“Let’s say one centimeter here too, it’s kind of hard to tell.”

He shifts his weight on the bed, preparing to measure the scar on my hip.

“Wait, do we have to?” I say and he pauses, looking up at me.

“Well . . . why not?”

“It’s so . . . It’s so ugly.”

“You are always beautiful, Lene.” Carefully, carefully, he pulls down my sweatpants and then, even more carefully, my underpants. Apparently they went up to my heart this way too, and the incision cut the nerves. I cannot feel the entire inside of my right thigh except deep inside where it hurts.

“Careful,” I say.

“Sorry.” He holds the measuring tape in midair above my scar, which is black and still swollen. “Nine, or maybe ten, yeah, let’s say ten centimeters.”

He lies down carefully beside me. “I hardly dare touch you. There are scars all over you.”

I thought he would be sick at the sight of them, the dry blood and the swelling, but he is not sick, he is coming close to kiss me.

Suddenly I don’t know why, and I can’t help it, the tears are streaming down my face and he whispers *I know, I know*, and his cheek is so close to mine I don’t know if the tears are his or mine and his hands tell me I am beautiful, even though my shoulders cannot quite let go of the worry: what is he thinking, he always feels faint at the sight of blood? His hands hesitate and wonder, but I am no longer afraid of pain, I can forget about myself, forget my exhaustion, my scars, my anxiety, my pain and hold on to him, his beating heart close to my ear.

CHAPTER 65

*T*he sky is gray. The leaves outside the windows are falling down, gathering on the lawn like glimmering gold coins in the tired green. I move slowly through the hallway, but the worst is behind me; I have already walked down the stairs.

The house smells of pot roast; a smell from my childhood, of sitting for hours at the table, laughing about silly things in the blue twilight. A smell of snow outside and a warm fire in the tiled stove, of Christmases and birthdays and Sundays.

Ingrid and Stina are cleaning the last of the mess off the dining room table, the mountain of drawings and crayons, scissors, glitter, and glue sticks. They are fluttering around like butterflies, *Look, Mamma, look!*

I smile at them and sink down into a chair, completely breathless. It's the first time since the surgery that I manage to come down for dinner. Anders comes through the swinging door from the kitchen.

"Oh, you're here already!" He helps me push the chair closer to the table. "This you'll never forget! Just you wait!"

"Thank you," I whisper, and he kisses the top of my head, making me feel like a small girl, before he disappears back into the kitchen.

Without the morphine, the animal in my chest is restless; treading around without warning. Now he has lifted his head, his ears angled outward; the scars in my chest make every breath heavy to pull and I try to make every movement as small as possible. The painkillers calm the animal with light strokes on his head, not as decisively as the morphine. But at least I don't have the nightmares that the morphine evoked, and the fake memories; the horror of not being able to trust my own brain; did it really happen or not? Did Anders sit by the table yesterday evening crying?

Ahh, the animal gets up and stretches against my ribs, I have to stop breathing for a moment. Maybe I stopped taking the morphine too soon.

Mom smiles every time she walks through the swinging door, carrying the bowl of steaming potatoes, the stack of plates and silverware, two bottles of sparkling apple cider. I can hear her voice. *Ingrid, can you help set the table? Stina, can you get the pot mats? Anders, would you please take out the roast from the oven? Lene, I am so glad you managed to come down!*

I will miss her, after she has gone back to Sweden. I will miss the short walks with her by my side; at first to the mailbox, and then out on our small street in front of the house, like my physiotherapist ordered me to, the young woman who comes once a week to see how I am doing. I will miss Mom helping me with my shoes, walking me up and down the stairs, smiling and talking about the girls' progress in school: *To think that they are already speaking English, it's amazing, and everything still new to them, they really are brave troopers. Look how beautiful, the sun shining through the red leaves, the fall lasts much longer here in Pennsylvania than back home where it's over in just a couple of weeks. Can you believe Anders is already working again, and you already going for walks. It's all coming together now, you're gonna be all right, sweetie pie.* I will miss her, but her visa is about to expire; she has been here three months already.

Solveig has promised to come: You still need help, she told me, cooking for the girls, not to mention the cleaning and the laundry and getting the girls ready for school in the mornings, and homework and everything. No, you can't do it all on your own, I have already asked for a leave of absence until mid-January and told everyone at the office. Solveig's voice had been firm on the phone, telling me how her boss at the Social Services had agreed, telling her to go, now, when her daughter-in-law and her grandkids needed her.

"I wanna sit next to Mamma." Ingrid pulls her chair closer and smiles with her pale blue eyes.

"Me too! I wanna sit by Mamma too!" Stina sits down on my other side and her light eyebrows are wrinkled as she looks up at me.

"Look at this! Just look at it!" Anders comes through the door carrying the roast, steaming on a platter. I smile at him and he laughs and nods to Mom. "It's Kristina who did this, but now she has taught me all her secrets!"

"Oh, it's my mother's recipe, she's the one who taught me." Mom turns to the girls. "Your great-grandmother Ingrid, you remember?"

Stina clatters her cutlery against her plate and looks up.

“Yeah, I remember, she’s the one who lived before she died.”

Mom laughs and Anders laughs and everyone laughs, even Stina all confused until Anders explains, everyone lives before they die, and both Stina and Ingrid exclaim Oooh, and everyone laughs again, except for me, I am already exhausted from coming down the stairs and sitting up. And something more, something the others cannot see: the fragility of it all. My mother is already on her way home, boarding the airplane, rolling her bag behind her, Mamma, I want to say before I forget, you have to promise to check on your heart when you get back to Sweden, even though Dr. Murray said that in all likelihood you shouldn’t have it, that it would have shown symptoms much earlier, but still, you must promise, Cecilia, Petra, and Viktor, they must all have their hearts checked to make sure, you must promise. And Ingrid and Stina, they are growing up while sitting in their chairs beside me. They have already moved away from home, making their own ways in the world, too big to hold their mamma’s hand, and I have still not allowed myself to think the unthinkable, but my body knows it, my body is no longer fooled, it knows that the unthinkable suddenly happens and the ones you love are pulled away from you, Mamma, you have to promise, those who live die and there is nothing that can be done about it. One second you are sitting together eating potatoes and gravy and pot roast, telling jokes and laughing, and the next second you are lying helpless while life is flowing out of you; it is all so very brittle, it can break any moment. Everything is made out of thin paper and there is a light shining from the other side and there are shadows wandering and the table, the food, the floor, the walls, the house is floating around me and in the gaps I can see the light and it is never flickering or shrinking, just shining, shining. Mom and Anders are helping the girls cut the meat on their plates into smaller pieces, and they tell the girls to at least try the Brussels sprouts and the green balls are floating a moment between the platter and the plates as Mom pushes them over the edge.

The fork and the knife are heavy in my hands; I have to put them down and support my head in my hand.

I can hear Anders’s voice, coming from afar.

“How’s it going, Lene?”

“I’m . . .” My voice is thin. “I’m just . . . tired.”

“Do you want me to help you back upstairs?”

“No,” I say. “A little while longer.”

I want to sit with them. An eternity of a little while I want to be with them.

I manage to raise my fork. Potato. Gravy. Thinly sliced pot roast. Brussels sprouts. It is all strangely heavy on my fork. Heavy in my mouth even. But they have told me I will get better. Slowly. Better.

My glass is also heavy. Sparkling apple cider. One sip at a time. Swallow. Slowly. This is how it is now. One small moment at a time. I can hear the girls’ voices. Talking about homesickness. About how they have a lot of homework.

“And in English!” Stina pushes around her Brussels sprouts on her plate.

“But a lot of things are also good here,” Anders says. “The doughnuts, for example!”

“Yeaah!” Ingrid shouts. “And the ice cream!”

“And Starburst!” Stina agrees. “M&Ms! Skittles!”

“All you think about are candies and sweets!” Mom laughs. “I think the orange juice from Florida is just amazing, and the fresh pineapple and the honeydew and the grapes that Roland loved so much.” I can tell she misses him, even though she never says it out loud. My mom and dad, they have not seen each other for two and a half months.

If I had the strength I would say that I love the cicadas, the sound of them in the hot summer afternoons, the heat and the tall trees. Maybe I could whisper it, but Anders cuts in.

“You’ve learned to speak English. I would have wanted to learn that as a child. You’re already better than me.” He turns toward me with a smile. “And best of all, it was good we came here so that Mamma could have her heart surgery, or she would’ve died.”

Silence.

I close my eyes. Hold my breath.

A small voice.

“Would . . . Would Mamma . . . have died if she didn’t . . . ?” The words drown in her tears. My baby Stina.

Anders forgot.

I look at him, his blue eyes; they are looking at Stina and at me and I can tell something just broke in him.

Stina didn't know.

Nor did Ingrid.

"Come here, come here," I say and pull them close. Ingrid sits slumped in her chair, her arms still under the table, her head bowed and her tears dripping silently into her lap, while Stina is crying right out, her tears flowing, her body trembling.

My girls, my dear girls, I hold on to them, whispering, "There, there."
Oh, Ingrid and Stina!

I don't know how to comfort them. I don't know the words, but I have my arms, my hands, and I have Anders's arms and hands, he has come to hold us and we are just a big knot of arms and hands and tears. There, there, we're all right, Mamma didn't die, yeah I didn't die, but this is why Mamma is always tired and why Grandma has been here to help. This is why Grandma Solveig is coming. There, there, forgive us for not telling you, we're sorry, we are so so sorry.

My chest is aching, the animal is up and moving about, but I need to hold my girls, I need to stroke their hair and their cheeks and dry their tears. I need to draw my breaths deep, get the air down into my lungs. But it is difficult to comfort the girls; they do not want it. They want to cry. There's no easy way. I can't say: Mamma could have died, but let's have ice cream.

Our food is getting cold on our plates.

We have to let them cry, even though my chest hurts from watching them. Mom has walked out into the kitchen; I guess she cannot stand it, or maybe she is crying herself, alone in the kitchen.

When the knot of arms is untied I find myself sitting close to Ingrid, our chairs edge to edge. Anders has Stina in his lap.

Ingrid's hair is lying in damp strands over her face. Her eyelashes are wet, smeared together. Just like Stina's.

They are starting to calm down, only every now and then pulling a deep sob from within, making them shiver. Ingrid is carefully leaning against me, her thin arm behind my back.

I don't have much strength left. To whisper, It went well, there, there, we have each other. Soon I will have to get up and walk, stiff and bent, slowly up the stairs and lie down in my bed, gasping for air, exhausted.

This is how it is. The moment passes. Time goes on. But where everything is a big Now we will always have each other. On that swaying

threshold I have everything and everyone, but mostly I have Anders and Ingrid and Stina.

Them and me.

Always.

OceanofPDF.com

CHAPTER 66

The colors from the TV are reflected in the girls' faces; the Disney characters in blue, red, green, yellow, purple. A rainbow in their glittering eyes.

I really should tell them to go to bed. But just a little while longer.

Their laughter.

To have them near me.

Stina leaning against me, taking up half the couch.

The light touch of Ingrid's foot against my thigh.

I have not really thought about it, but I cannot laugh anymore. I somehow lost the ability after the surgeries. I can smile, but not laugh. In the beginning it was simply too painful, but now it has been more than three months. It's no longer the pain, but something else, something in my chest that is stuck and cannot seem to come loose.

"Here you are." Anders comes through the door, carrying bowls with round scoops of vanilla ice cream for the girls and raspberry sorbet for me, my favorite.

"Thank you," I say and the girls are just seconds after me.

"Thanks!"

"Thanks, Pappa!"

Anders and I smile at one another.

He turns back to the kitchen, but his smile lingers in the room.

Ingrid is leaning against me, carefully, holding her bowl so it is cold against my arm.

Ingrid to my left. Stina to my right. Leaning heavily against me, careful not to cause Mamma pain.

Ingrid's long hair, tickling my hand.

Stina's small hand, warm and sticky, brushing against me.

The TV painting modern art on the walls.

The girls' laughter.

Oh, this!

This!

This sound! Beads of my children's voices put on a string into necklaces, clinking against one another.

I am sitting here on the couch between them, the raspberry sorbet smooth in my mouth, the coldness melting on my tongue, the sounds of Anders doing the dishes in the kitchen. It could all have been different. I can feel it, how it could have been, the emptiness between the girls, an emptiness in the shape of me.

But I am here.

It's a funny movie.

I have to laugh, it has to get out, my chest is full, so full it hurts, but it's impossible, I cannot push it out, the scars are in the way, this stiff chest, I cannot fill my lungs and push the air out, not let it fall down the stairs of laughter. But I have to! Or I will explode! The only thing I have is the word instead of the laughter.

“HA! HA! HA!”

The girls look at me wide eyed.

“HA! HA!” I say again and they start to mimic me, in their light voices.

“HAAA! HAAA!”

“HA! HA! HAAA!”

Anders sticks his head through the doorway.

“What's happening?”

“Mamma's laughing!” Stina gets up and starts jumping up and down.

We do it together. Everyone. Laughing. Shouting HA, HA, HAAA! Even the TV in the corner does it, the characters chasing each other and falling into holes in the street and running into brick walls without getting a scratch.

It's a school night and the girls should really go to bed, but somehow it doesn't matter; this moment holds an eternity, the girls bouncing up and down on the couch and Anders laughing and collecting the empty bowls.

The only sounds now are the ones from the TV.

There is something missing.

Ah, the cicadas.

It is January. The windows are dark squares. Naked branches and white strokes of snow. Cold wind whispering against the glass. But down by the roots in the dark, I can feel them, the nymphs of the cicadas waiting for the warmth to come trickling through the cold earth to wake them, to urge them, to tell them: It is time.

OceanofPDF.com

EPILOGUE

*T*he fog hangs between the naked trees, sheet after sheet, bulging in the cool air. I inhale deeply, let it fill my lungs, the air tasting of earth and trees. Exhale, slowly, smiling to Anders walking beside me, his hair tossing in the wind, his eyes smiling back at me, his hand squeezing mine.

“Do you want to go all the way up?” he asks, and the words hang for a second in the air, a milky cloud of his warm breath meeting the cold.

“Sure,” I say and let go of him. “Last one up is a rotten fish.” I laugh and run but Anders is gaining on me, not that it is much of a challenge. He has already passed me on the trail and I watch him run, his dark blue jacket over his shoulders.

I laugh and I run. “Hey, I’m gonna . . . I’m gonna beat you!”

He doesn’t look back, doesn’t worry, and my heart beats faster seeing him climb the stone stairs and bend to support himself not to slip in the wet leaves. I inhale and I exhale and my heart is free, my rib cage empty of monsters and riddles and I have to laugh as I run. I am struck by the peculiarity of it: an artificial heart valve. I have an artificial heart valve ticking in my chest.

It is strange to think about: the events leading up to it, like an invisible path on a map I never saw, but somehow followed anyway. These thoughts are crazy, maybe, but how should I think about it?

It has been three years.

Three miraculous years.

A year after moving to Radnor, we got a call from the head office in Göteborg. They wanted Anders back. He came in from the porch to tell me and I began to cry. I dropped the spatula and didn’t care if the chicken nuggets got burned. I had braced myself for so long, decided to create a life for us in the US. I didn’t even want to mention to Anders my homesickness, my missing my little nieces and nephews, my sisters and my brother, my mom and dad, everyone. Mixed with my love for the new country, the

gratefulness, our new friends, the cicadas buzzing outside the kitchen window. He turned off the stove and held me, saying let's go home, Lene, let's go home. We only needed to look at each other, not saying anything: It's as if we were only meant to come here for the surgery. Like it was predetermined, that we would just come and then go back.

Back to our small townhouse in Göteborg.

Everything the same as before and yet not.

Anders slows down and turns to me, smiling.

"I love our Saturday walks, Lene." He takes my hand again and brushes off a dry leaf from my hair. And then he pulls me close and kisses me right there on the trail and he is warm, his hands, his cheek close to mine. We hear someone coming and I push him away. A jogger, one of our neighbors, we often see him exercising in the woods. He nods to us and steps carefully between the roots sticking up in the ground and as soon as he is past us we can't contain the laughter anymore.

"Do you think he saw us?" I ask.

"Who cares?" Anders says and pulls me back. He kisses me again and then we continue up between the huge boulders leading up to the top.

"I've been thinking," Anders says. "You should write it down. Our story, I mean." He takes a deep breath. "Your story."

"Are you kidding?" I say. "I wouldn't know how to do that. And who would want to read it?"

"I'd read it. I think you could make it into something . . ." He helps me up the last boulder and I step carefully on the moss between the water running in small streams down the stone.

We are at the top of the mountain, looking out over the treetops rustling in the wind.

"It's impossible," I say. "I could never describe you so that people would really see how incredibly good looking you are."

He laughs. "Yeah, that is a problem."

Then we just stand there and take in the view of Göteborg beneath us. The small houses look like Legos and the streets and the cars and the jagged horizon of the forest all around except for a small crevice where there's a narrow strip of ocean. Over it all a pale sky, telling of snow.

I breathe and lift my face and let my eyes lose themselves in the whiteness. A flock of late migratory birds write a V across the sky, and I

smile and breathe as they disappear.

OceanofPDF.com

NOTE FROM THE AUTHOR

On the twenty-fourth of October 2008, the Minister for Social Affairs, Göran Hägglund, of the two-year-old Alliance government in Sweden, presented a highly controversial health-care reform.

From now on the Alliance would support both public and private practitioners, overturning the former Social Democratic government's longstanding health-care monopoly.

Equally important, the reform finally gave the patient the freedom to choose what clinic and which doctor to go to.

In the following years, hundreds of private practitioners started to give competition to the government health-care centers. Waiting lists were dramatically shortened. Overall, services and patient treatments were significantly improved.

Sadly, for many patients the reform came too late.

In my case, the reform was presented two weeks after my life was saved in the US.

I will be forever grateful to the country of which I will always carry a piece in my heart.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

I am grateful for the teachers who inspired me to express myself in writing: Margareta Tegnander, Roland Mattsson, Maja Lindfors, Inga-Lina Lindqvist, and Erik Grundström.

Thank you, Ann Ljungberg, for your excitement for my story and cheering me on.

My friend Daniel Paul: thank you, Dan, for plowing through the first draft in English and believing in me.

A special thank-you to my wonderful editors Hila Ratzabi and Anne Dubuisson for your encouragement and kind words.

Thank you, Brooke Warner and the team at She Writes Press, for bringing my story into a tangible book, which is no less than a miracle to me.

I would also like to thank Mom and Dad and extended family, who have encouraged me and repeatedly been inquiring about this book.

Anders and our girls: thank you for everything. I can't tell you enough how much you mean to me.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR



Photo credit: Anders Fogelberg

*L*ene Fogelberg is an award-winning poet and double open-heart surgery survivor. Born in Sweden, she currently lives with her family in Indonesia, where she is working on a novel that takes place in Jakarta. Learn more at www.lenefogelberg.com.

OceanofPDF.com

SELECTED TITLES FROM SHE WRITES PRESS

She Writes Press is an independent publishing company founded to serve women writers everywhere.

Visit us at www.shewritespress.com.

Splitting the Difference: A Heart-Shaped Memoir by Tré Miller-Rodríguez. \$19.95, 978-1-938314-20-9. When 34-year-old Tré Miller-Rodríguez's husband dies suddenly from a heart attack, her grief sends her on an unexpected journey that culminates in a reunion with the biological daughter she gave up at 18.

Fire Season: A Memoir by Hollye Dexter. \$16.95, 978-1-63152-974-0. After she loses everything in a fire, Hollye Dexter's life spirals downward and she begins to unravel—but when she finds herself at the brink of losing her husband, she is forced to dig within herself for the strength to keep her family together.

Renewable: One Woman's Search for Simplicity, Faithfulness, and Hope by Eileen Flanagan. \$16.95, 978-1-63152-968-9. At age forty-nine, Eileen Flanagan had an aching feeling that she wasn't living up to her youthful ideals or potential, so she started trying to change the world—and in doing so, she found the courage to change her life.

Where Have I Been All My Life? A Journey Toward Love and Wholeness by Cheryl Rice. \$16.95, 978-1-63152-917-7. Rice's universally relatable story of how her mother's sudden death launched her on a journey into the deepest parts of grief—and, ultimately, toward love and wholeness.

Her Beautiful Brain: A Memoir by Ann Hedreen. \$16.95, 978-1-938314-92-6. The heartbreaking story of a daughter's experiences as her beautiful, brainy mother begins to lose her mind to an unforgiving disease: Alzheimer's.

Breathe: A Memoir of Motherhood, Grief, and Family Conflict by Kelly Kittel. \$16.95, 978-1-938314-78-0. A mother's heartbreaking account of losing two sons in the span of nine months—and learning, despite all the obstacles in her way, to find joy in life again.

OceanofPDF.com