

MAJGULL  
AXELSSON

CANCELLED TRIP  
TO SABARMATI

INSTÄLLD RESA TILL SABARMATI

Norstedts, 2020, 379 pages

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[I, pp. 11–59]

*A mother who isn't a mother*

SHE FLOPS INTO THE RATTAN easy chair with a thump that makes the wickerwork creak in protest. Daisy's still out in the cloakroom, her eyes in a fixed stare, panting heavily with jaws agape till she too sinks down, lowering herself to the floor with her head between her paws, whimpering softly.

'Are you hurt?' Lykke says, but then, conscious of a slight quaver in her voice, she quickly clears her throat and falls silent. If everything had been normal, she'd have ticked Daisy off for lowering her wet, dirty belly onto the pretty Finnish rag rug, but right now that would be deeply unfair. Daisy saved her barely half an hour ago. And if Daisy's hurt, Daisy's hurt. Besides, she's no spring chicken any longer. Lykke smiles slightly at her own thought, so consoling in its banality this extraordinary afternoon, but then stops abruptly.

*Ouch!*

Smiling hurts. And frankly, other places hurt as well. Her head, of course, though she chooses to ignore that because she's always chosen to ignore headaches, but her trousers are torn and when she inserts two fingers into the hole above her right knee to widen the tear, she sees she's still bleeding. There's a sizeable flap

hanging loose over the gash, revealing the underside of her skin. Dark pink with tiny white patches. She glances down at her palms. Dirt. Gravel. Long grazes. A shudder runs through her body and suddenly it's as if she can see the house, her house, the home she loves and that's all hers, metamorphosing into a gigantic matchbox, while somebody – God, or the Devil (or maybe one of his demons) – makes it expand in some mysterious way so that the sitting room she's in lengthens till she can hardly see the doorway into the kitchen: but that only lasts for a moment. *Snap!* There's a loud twang as if someone's released a stretched rubber band, and an instant later the room returns to its normal proportions.

Lykke makes a jerky movement, bitterly convinced all of a sudden that she must be losing her marbles for good this time, then sets the thought aside, tucks it away in the Great Chest of Shame (which she always pictures as a large brown 1940s-style linen chest, lodged in the furthest recesses of her brain), locks the chest and draws a curtain across it. She's tempted to yield to a fantasy in which she throws away the key, but controls herself in the nick of time. She can't let herself throw away the key to the Chest of Shame. There'll be more to be locked away and concealed in future, she knows, though she won't let herself think about that now. The whole point of the Great Chest of Shame is to avoid having to think, and when it's shut and locked and hidden behind a black velvet curtain in her head, she's the most rational of all rational people. Even though the imaginary key is in the pocket of her imaginary trousers. End of.

Unfortunately, we (you, the readers and I, the writer) will have to pause briefly here, give each other a suitably courteous nod, and agree once and for all that Lykke isn't mad, whatever we may think of her and her imaginings. Mildly eccentric, maybe. A bit of an oddball. But certainly not psychotic or anything of that sort. It's just that her mind doesn't work like other people's. It's always been that way, though the difference seems to have become more pronounced this afternoon. That might be because of the blows to the head she's just suffered. Her thoughts flutter here and there, but at the same time she's descending heavily and deliberately towards the earth's surface, towards what she calls everyday life and reality, even though what's just happened is far removed from everyday life and reality. Nonetheless, she pictures herself kneeling on her frosty lawn, desperately grasping a few yellowy-brownish blades of grass, just so she can hold on tight, really tight, to the earth.

Lykke inhales and takes a firm grip on the chair's armrest, resolutely ignoring the inner trembling still running through her whole body. Hoisting herself to her feet, she sways momentarily before propping herself against the wall and gingerly edging down the two steps to the cloakroom, where she switches on the ceiling light and turns towards the mirror. She hardly dares look, but does so anyway.

It's as bad as she thought. Not that she's ever been particularly happy with her looks – she's too stout, too florid, her

eyes are too wishy-washy a shade of blue, and, as if that weren't bad enough, her head is shaped like an egg with the pointy end uppermost, just to mention the first few items on the list of her aesthetic shortcomings. Now, though, her appearance is nothing short of pitiable, though she'd never say so out loud. She'd say she's not looking her best, perhaps mainly because she hasn't yet managed to clean herself up after the mugging. That wouldn't be true though. While she might be able to wash off the bits of gravel embedded in the cut running through her right eyebrow and wipe off the broad stripe of blood under her nose, she also has a blackened and swollen right eye, a split lower lip, and a shadowy bruise on her chin.

That was where he hit her first. That was where his fist landed, in a blow that floored her in the middle of Erkaövägen... A wave of nausea wells up when she recalls his eyes at that instant, how they glinted in the street lights, how he scanned his surroundings rapidly before raising his fist and then looked straight at her through the slit in his balaclava. There was so much in his eyes. Fury. Hatred. Fear. Shame. And she recalls how startled she felt in the second it took her to fall to the ground, then the pounding pain when her head hit the kerb, her jaws clacking shut of their own accord, and how all she wanted was to lie still, halt time's oscillations and stay there for ever: but the feeling vanished the moment she heard Daisy barking, marvellous, wonderful Daisy, sounding like a Rottweiler, as she sometimes does even though she's just a glen terrier, until she opened her black jaws wide and bit one

of the other young men in the leg. He cried out behind his black balaclava. Lykke made an attempt to get up and grab the dog's lead, but in the same instant someone booted her in the back, sending her sprawling headlong, while a third drove his heavy shoe right into her head, and everything went white, a livid, glaring white, and for several seconds she fell through a hole in time, dispatched suddenly to a no-man's-land, but through the whiteness she could also hear Daisy's barking turning into a howl, and that pulled her back. The bastard was kicking her dog! Hard! She'd give him a bloody good hi...

But no. It was over now. The sound of their boots on the tarmac, a car starting. She opened the eye she was still able to open, suddenly afraid of being run over, but immediately saw that the rear lights were receding. For a moment she disappeared into her white no-man's-land, but then, hearing Daisy's wild, confused barking, she pulled herself together through sheer force of will, got laboriously to her knees, fumbled for the dog's lead again and got a grip on it. At the same time, she felt the pain in her head escalate from a dull ache in her right temple to a thumping agony that encased her entire head like a helmet, but she knew she had to ignore it if she was to get to her feet and start stumbling back towards her house. Yes, her house. She actually owns a house. She can never quite believe that: it still fills her with wonder and amazement, even though she's owned and lived in it for nearly twenty years.

Daisy suddenly whimpers again from her resting place on the rug, and now it finally dawns on Lykke that she has to do something: take her mobile out of her jacket pocket, look up Lena Holmgren's phone number, ring her.

So that's what she does.

'Good grief,' says Lena, opening the door to the reception area and seeing Lykke's face. 'Whatever's happened? Shouldn't you be going to the doctor's too?'

'That's next,' says Lykke, 'but Daisy looks worse off than me. Do you think she might have an internal haemorrhage?'

Taking a careful hold of Daisy, cradling her in her arms, Lena lays the dog on her back. Daisy's breathing in short bursts now, panting.

'Let's have a look. I'll need to do an X-ray, but I'll give her something for the pain first...'

She lays Daisy on an examination table and turns towards a wall cabinet.

'Now you'll have to be my assistant for a moment,' she says over her shoulder, and Lykke nods mutely. Empty of thoughts, she sees and observes without really being present. Lena raises a syringe and presses the plunger a few times, Daisy whimpers again, and Lykke suddenly feels desperate on her behalf, feels tears welling up in her eyes, strokes her dog and sniffs:

'There, there, sweetie! There, there...'

Lena pinches the skin in the nape of Daisy's neck and slides the syringe in. Daisy doesn't react at all, just closes her eyes. In the few seconds' silence that follow, it's as if Lykke can sense Daisy relaxing. Lena straightens up.

'There we are,' she says. 'Now I'll take care of your dog. And you'd better ring Rosmarie so she can drive you to the hospital in Eksjö...'

Suddenly Lykke's head is pounding again, pounding so loudly that she can scarcely hear what Lena's saying. She leans against the wall, as the floor has begun to heave.

'Rosmarie's away in the Canaries. In rehab.'

Lena frowns.

'Alright then, I'll call you a cab. You've got to get to A and E right away.'

'But... ' says Lykke.

'No buts,' says Lena. 'I'm ringing them now.'

The taxi driver might be an old pupil of hers. She reckons he is. An old pupil with red hair. What's his name? Samuel? Simon? She's not sure. Not that he's betrayed recognition either through his expression or through a single word he's uttered, but that's how it goes in Nässjö. Greeting your old teachers, distant relatives or casual acquaintances might just give them the notion that they're a Somebody, or, heaven forbid, that you take yourself for a Somebody, and that's strictly forbidden. It must be covered by a special paragraph in the local bylaws.



The air around her has started to quiver, and suddenly she senses that a small bubble of something has formed in her throat. A sure sign. She looks around her at the back seat. Though that's quivering too, she can see it's spick and span, the car can't be more than a few months old, and Samuel or Simon must have hoovered it thoroughly after each trip. Everything looks shiny and new. That means she must be quite circumspect, so, closing her eyes as the bubble rises ever higher, she swiftly unzips her handbag, removes her wallet and mobile, keys and lipstick, places them next to her on the seat, and makes a last desperate attempt to save her hairbrush, but too late. Her gorge is rising now, and all she can do is bend forward and throw up into her bag.

'Shit!' Samuel or Simon expectorates from the seat in front.  
'You puking up?'

She would have liked to explain that she hasn't spilt any sick at all on his nice clean back seat, but only manages to utter a few vowel sounds (*Eeaauuh!*) before the next wave of vomit cuts her off. Suddenly the bag weighs heavily on her knees, her fingers clasp the leather, which is beginning to become warm and soft on the outside, and somewhere at the back of her mind it dawns on her that the bag is losing its shape, that it's become broader at the base than it ever was before, and then she's sick again, emptying the last dregs of her stomach contents into her smart navy leather bag from Marimekko. Then it's over, she retches a few times as Eksjö's first few street lights shine into the car, and stares at her own, what should she call it, *vomit* in some surprise, as there's a whole chanterelle

mushroom floating in the brown mess. Didn't she chew the fried chanterelles in the omelette she had for lunch?

'You're gonna to have to pay for the cleaning,' says Samuel or Simon. 'Depend on it - every last frigging penny. Plus my lost earnings.'

She leans back and closes her eyes. Why does he sound so angry? Oh well. It doesn't matter, she hasn't the strength to say a word in her own defence anyway.

'Fuck me, what a stink,' says Samuel or Simon, pressing a button to wind down both back seat windows. As the November darkness creeps in, a light drizzle caresses her face all of a sudden.

It's a sweet sensation.

She must have got into A and E and been looked after, though she can't recall that now. All she can remember is: it was about then that the door of the Great Chest of Shame swung wide open of its own accord, exposing a day in her past.

It's not a memory, it never feels like just a memory, it's more that wormholes in time form and she falls through them; something that happened once happens again, and this time it fills her with a mixture of both shame and triumph.

Suddenly she's gone back twelve years – she knows the exact year and date – and she's standing in front of a class, with Samuel or Simon right at the back, demonstratively leaning backwards and rocking his chair to and fro. He pulls a face at her, gurning in contempt, his lips a stark red in a very white face, and it strikes her

for the first time that his nose is an odd shape. Broad and flat, as if someone punched it when he was still in the womb. Maybe he was born with a cleft palate. Yes, that's how it looks. On top of that, he has flaming red hair. A boy with flaming red hair sneaked off round the corner a week ago when she came upon a band of bullies who'd just ganged up on Fatima. That must have been him. Yes, she's sure it was him. So she looks him straight in the eye and smiles. She beams broadly in response to his grimace. Today's topic is ideal.

'So,' she says, 'all human beings except Africans have some Neanderthal roots, but some of us have a bit more Neanderthal DNA than others. Does anyone know what Neanderthals looked like?'

Charlotta Nilsson's arm twitches, she wants to raise her hand because she thinks she knows the answer, as usual, but bother at breaktimes has finally taught her that there are moments when it's best to keep quiet. This is one of those moments. So she lowers both her right arm and her eyes, looks down dumbly at her desk and raises her shoulders almost imperceptibly in self-defence. But she's not the one in need of self-defence right now.

'Doesn't anyone know?' asks Lykke, scanning the room. The class is utterly silent. The silence of anticipation. She smiles again.

'Apparently they were red-haired,' she says, singling out Samuel or Simon with her gaze, 'and they're believed to have had extremely flat, broad noses...'

The class roars with laughter fit to shatter the window panes.

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A man's hand against her cheek. A very warm hand. The hand of someone with very good circulation. For a moment she wants to lean against that hand, rest the whole weight of her head against it, but she doesn't. Maybe she could, but she can't.

'Hi there,' says someone. She opens her eyes. The sun shines in, dazzling her; she has to raise her right hand to shield her eyes. It's hard to focus for a moment, then that passes. A grey-haired man is leaning over her bed. He's wearing white cotton trousers and a blue V-necked tunic. A doctor or nurse, then. A confident smile. So he's a doctor.

'Hello, Lykke,' he says. 'Remember me?'

She nods dumbly, not because she really does remember him, more to show willing.

'What's my name then?'

There's still a dull pounding in her head, yet to her surprise she sees a name float by. She does her best to grasp it.

'Martin?'

He smiles again.

'Yes, that's right. Martin. But without that question mark I heard in your voice at the end.'

She tries to return the smile.

'Do we know each other?'

'You could say that...'

'How?'

‘We were classmates once upon a time. Forty-odd years ago...’

Ah, that’s who he is. *That* Martin. She nods, trying to smile. So Martin Ängebo’s become a doctor, despite everything. Kudos to his mum, though she must be dead by now. Lykke closes her eyes again, not because she doesn’t want to see him, but because the light is too intense. He places a warm hand on her arm.

‘What happened to you?’

Good question. What exactly did happen to her? She doesn’t really know, but tries to pull herself together and responds:

‘How’s Daisy?’

A woman’s voice replies:

‘Who’s that?’

‘What?’

‘Who’s Daisy? Your friend? Or your daughter?’

‘Can’t you pull the blinds down? The light’s too bright...’

‘No, it’s dark outside, and there’s only one light on. But who’s Daisy?’

Lykke opens her eyes again. She’s startled. It really is dark outside. How did that come about? There’s a woman in her forties standing next to her bed. Dark hair and dark eyes. A nurse, of course. She too places a warm hand on Lykke’s arm.

‘Try and stay awake. Who’s Daisy?’

Lykke makes an attempt to sit up. That doesn’t go too well. So she tries to clear her throat a little instead. That doesn’t go too

well either. Her voice emerges as a feeble croak, though it's more or less intelligible.

'Daisy's my dog.'

The nurse relaxes her shoulders slightly, clearly relieved.

'Ah, I see, your dog. So what's the matter with her?'

Lykke blinks.

'Dunno. She's hurt. I left her with Lena Holmgren. The vet. She never usually...'

She hears herself fall silent. It's hard to speak, she's too weak to complete the sentence.

'Hallo there! Don't drift off again...'

But Lykke doesn't care any longer, she just closes her eyes and falls through another hole in time.

Where was she? In her own house and her own bed. It was very early one morning, thirteen years and three months ago. There was a ring at the door, an angry signal that made her leap out of bed although she wasn't really awake. Her eyes were scratchy and her brain felt like a bowl of cold porridge as she braced herself against the armchair in her bedroom. She was still blinking and trying to wake up properly when another angry ring on the doorbell resounded through the house, accompanied by a loud banging on the front door. That finally alerted her to the hysterical barking of Muddle, her dog at that time.

Reaching for the dressing gown draped over the armrest, she pulled it on while she padded out barefoot into the small sitting

room and down the two steps to the cloakroom. Then she stopped in front of the door and drew breath. Muddle, a rather timid little white Westie, was still up in the sitting room, growling at a low pitch.

‘Who’s there?’ said Lykke loudly, gripping the knob of the lock with one hand and the door handle with the other. The person outside clearly couldn’t hear, the doorbell rang again and someone yelled out something unintelligible. That person was clearly extremely angry. So Lykke took a deep breath in and drew herself up before opening the door a narrow slit.

Henrik. Of course it was Henrik at her door that morning. In full clergyman’s attire, with his black shirt and dog collar under his jacket. And behind him was Fatima, biting her lower lip, her head a dark silhouette against the light greyish-pink clouds. Henrik took an unsteady step backwards.

‘Why the hell won’t you open the door?’

He must have been drinking or he’d never have used bad language; when sober, he was absurdly conscious of his dignity as a clergyman. Lykke opened the door wide and made a quick sign to Fatima. The girl hesitated for an instant before lowering her eyes, but then took a few rapid steps towards the house and slipped inside. Muddle was beside herself with joy, and Lykke suspected Fatima had picked her up and hugged her, though she couldn’t see what was going on. Henrik propped himself against the doorpost with his right hand, apparently trying to pull himself together.

‘I’ve been ringing your doorbell for nearly a quarter of an hour, you know!’

Of course he had. Three minutes were always a quarter of an hour in Henrik’s book. Lykke pulled the belt of her dressing gown a little tighter before replying.

‘It’s Saturday, and it’s half past five in the morning. I was fast asleep in bed.’

Henrik pulled a face.

‘Oh, you were asleep. I haven’t been able to sleep for four months. Not since Magdalena...’

He sniffed.

‘Really,’ said Lykke. ‘Then maybe we ought to call an ambulance.’

Henrik’s eyes darted here and there, then, putting his arm down, he drew himself up, suddenly quite the dignified clergyman.

‘Don’t be daft.’

‘But if you haven’t slept for four months you must be in need of medical care. I mean it. Insomnia is lethal. At the very least, you should donate your body to science as soon as possible. Nobody can survive without sleep for four months, so there’s quite a risk you’ll fall off your perch pretty soon – in fact, you should already have ...’

Taking a small step back, Henrik lifted his chin, interrupting her:

‘There’s really no call to make fun of me. I’ve lost my wife and ...’

‘Magdalena wasn’t your wife. She was your ex-wife.’



‘What God hath joined together let not man put asunder.’

The mealy-mouthed sod! Lykke had to draw a deep breath to stop herself from slapping him, but nonetheless managed to keep her gaze and her voice steady.

‘You’ve got a nerve.’

There was a moment’s silence. Now powerless to withstand his drunken state any longer, he sank down a little and propped himself up against the doorpost again. Lykke raised her eyebrows.

‘And what brings you here at half past five on a Saturday morning?’

‘Well, it’s ... er .... Fatima ...’

He fell silent, blinking rapidly. Lykke waited, arms akimbo.

‘Go on.’

‘I can’t carry on like this. And the thing is, there’s a post I can get in Gothenburg ... And Ingeborg ...’

Lykke’s impatience grew. What was all this about Gothenburg? And who was this Ingeborg?

‘Are you moving to Gothenburg?’

Henrik lowered his eyes.

‘Yes. Yes, I am. But Fatima refuses to come... and maybe that’s just as well.’

Lykke tilted her head so he couldn’t see she was holding back a smile. What was it he’d said when he’d forced Fatima to come and live with him? Not that she was about to bring that up again, she wasn’t dim in that way. Henrik still had official custody of Fatima, even though the paternal affection that had flamed up after

Magdalena's funeral had burned itself out in barely three months. It would be quite unnecessary to provoke him at a sensitive moment like this. He was avoiding her eyes again now.

'The thing is, now Ingeborg's living ...'

'Excuse me, but who's this Ingeborg?'

Turning slightly, Henrik gestured over his shoulder with his thumb. Only now did Lykke see that there was a silver car in the street; it was barely visible in the early morning mist. There was someone at the wheel. Ingeborg, presumably. Good. Excellent. If this Ingeborg was prepared to drag Henrik off to Gothenburg, it would make life infinitely more straightforward for both Lykke and Fatima. Suddenly she was wide awake.

'I see,' she said, even managing a little smile. 'Your new lady friend? Okay. So now you'd like Fatima to move back here, to my place?'

Henrik's lower lip quivered.

'The thing is, she ...'

Couldn't he stop saying *the thing is*? Irritation ran down Lykke's spine like a shooting pain, but she didn't let him glimpse that. Right now she had a slight advantage, and she didn't want to lose it. So she tried to smile again.

'You know Fatima's always welcome here. It's been her home for several years, and it'll continue to be her home for as long as she wants.'

Now he was wringing his hands. Literally. One white hand slid over the other, again and again. He had very long fingers.

‘The thing is, we’re leaving today – right now, I mean – but of course I’ll stay in touch...’

Of course he would. Lykke swallowed, holding back a sharp retort. Naturally Henrik had always been exemplary about staying in touch with his daughter; in fact, he’d seen her at least three times during the year after he and Magdalena divorced. He’d even taken her out to a restaurant on one occasion. It wasn’t until after the funeral that he’d suddenly become an incredibly zealous parent. The role seemed to appeal to him. The single dad with a thirteen-year-old adopted daughter. The grieving widower, or whatever one was supposed to call him as a divorcee. Noble and deeply dutiful. He was extremely upset when Fatima turned out to be less than keen to live with him, but soon it became apparent that her wishes counted for nothing. For him to be able to put on his big performance, the girl would have to accept her insignificant but absolutely indispensable walk-on part. Lykke was cast as the witch in the gingerbread house, a nasty old woman if ever there was one. It didn’t matter. In a way, that was a pretty appropriate role as far as she was concerned. In Henrik’s vicinity she’d always turned into a witch; she recalled how she’d had actually sensed her canine teeth growing the moment she shook his hand for the first time. He had a very limp handshake. She wished she could say that it was also cold and damp, but it wasn’t. Dry, warm and limp. That’s how it was.

‘The thing is, I’m not really sure when we’ll be back in Nässjö again, so ...’

‘No problem. Come when you come. Her room is just as she left it, and the new term starts in just a few weeks’ time.’

‘The thing is, her clothes ...’

He nodded towards the car and straight away Lykke looked around for her shoes, found them and slipped them onto her bare feet, then hurried over to the car. Suddenly she was happy, very happy. Fatima had come home to her again! So she gave Ingeborg a happy, open smile, even opened the door on the passenger side and stretched out a hand towards her:

‘Hello, my name’s Lykke ...’

It took a few seconds for Ingeborg to return the smile, and for that moment her gaze was cool and slightly contemptuous. It became only marginally warmer when she extended her hand and took Lykke’s. She looked slightly washed-out. Ash blonde and beige, as if someone had put her on to wash at too high a temperature. And she was definitely somewhat older than Henrik. Quite a lot older, in fact.

‘Ah,’ said Ingeborg, but let her gaze slip past Lykke, looking at something in the distance instead. ‘So you’re Henrik’s cousin.’

‘Well no, not really. Magdalena, his ex-wife, was my cousin, but ...’

Ingeborg shrugged with such a studiedly indifferent air that Lykke stopped short.

‘Oh, I see. But we’re in rather a hurry right now, so ...’

The cow had snubbed her! For the first time in many years, someone had made Lykke go red. Hastily she stood up and closed

the car door, then turned to Henrik, who was clutching a bundle of clothes. He nodded towards the open boot of the car.

‘Can you take the rest?’

All that was left was underwear, lying in an untidy heap next to three neatly packed suitcases, two new ones and a very old leather case. As she began to gather Fatima’s knickers together, Lykke glanced at the leather case. It bore a small brass monogram under the handle: VvF. That meant nothing to her to begin with, but then she raised her eyebrows slightly. Could that be Ingeborg’s suitcase? And did that mean that Ingeborg belonged to that aristocratic family of rather ill repute in Eksjö, the one that still refused to accept that the Second World War had ended the way it had? Lykke shuddered. What would have happened to Fatima if Ingeborg had had the opportunity to ...

She doesn’t manage to think that thought through to its conclusion. Now she’s sinking. Into deep unconsciousness.

The memory of Henrik and Ingeborg dissolves and dissipates. Fatima becomes a shadow at the back of her mind, Muddle a feeble, faraway bark. A red cloud drifts by, then everything’s gone.

What was somewhere just now becomes nowhere.

What was something just now becomes nothing.

What happens is neither slow nor fast. Neither light nor dark. Neither warm nor cold.

Just nothing. Utterly empty. Apart from Lykke herself, who is floating outside time, only vaguely conscious of her own existence.

But we can see her. Even if it's only at a distance.

## *A young man with a nickname*

THAT FUCKING COW!

He stares angrily at his face in the bathroom mirror. It's bespattered with watery white toothpaste, but he doesn't care; nursing his hatred takes all his attention. That sodding nose of his! That minging red hair! And that fucking bitch he had to drive to Eksjö this evening! Fucking hell!

It's all her fault. It was her that gave him that nickname, the one without which he'd have had a totally different life. Ellinor wouldn't have dumped him. The girls wouldn't have turned their backs on him in unison, quivering with muffled giggles. The lads wouldn't have sneered at him on the quiet and given him sidelong glances when one or other of them had had a few too many.

He'd have married Ellinor. That's what he'd wanted, even at fifteen. They'd have had a baby by now, perhaps even be expecting their second, he'd have bought a house for his little family, and they'd have had a trampoline in their garden for the kids and a great big inflatable pool. Coming from a long line of canny Småland folk, he's always been as careful with money as his father and grandfather, so he'd already have been able to afford just about any small house in Nässjö. But what does he have now? A two-roomed

flat in Professorn, the part of town next to the old churchyard which he already despised as a child. The rent's so high that he feels almost sick each time he has to pay, because naturally he knows it's a waste of money. A small detached house, or a terraced house, would cost far less per month, and you could see it as an investment too, but buying a house just for himself would naturally mean even more sneers and titters. Anyhow, he doesn't deserve it. He's too ugly, too much of a misfit, and too repulsive to have a house and a family – that's why all that's left is work, work and more work. Plus a shitty two-room flat in Professorn.

And all that because of a single sentence. A sentence that branded him forever. A sentence that drove him from being a very ordinary boy among other boys to becoming something else. A monster. Worse than that, a stupid monster, a creature who, though born deformed and with a harelip, had thought that didn't matter because the only visible reminder after the operation was a small white scar. An idiot who refused to grasp that that sodding nose of his signified a lot more than he'd ever imagined.

He should have reported that fucking cunt! Reported her to the Head. Or lain in wait one dark evening and smashed her nose in so she could see what it was like to go round with a misshapen face...

At that thought he steps back from the mirror, staring thunderstruck at his reflection. Fine, we can step back too and answer Lykke's question about his real name. Samuel or Simon?



We know the answer. He's Samuel. We don't need to mention his nickname, it's already lurking at the back of our minds. Let's just add that unkind nicknames are a local speciality in Nässjö. Sometimes they're even passed on. The town has everything from *Lame Olsson* and his son *Lame Junior* (who isn't at all lame), *Fury* (who has quite a temper on her) and *Fury's Daughter* (who's almost ridiculously amiable and accommodating), to more vaguely evocative monikers like the *Gamlarp Comet*, *Hi-There*, or the *General* and his younger brother, the *Major*.

The locals' inventive wit is remarkable, maybe even commensurate with the shame that afflicts its targets - if they ever find out what the others call them. Mostly they only suspect it, though the suspicion is accompanied by so many half-hidden sneers that it thoroughly sours their existence.

Samuel continues to gawp wide-eyed at his reflection until a smile gradually spreads across his face. Someone's actually done it! Someone really has beaten up that frigging bitch... Maybe he's not the only one, maybe there are others like him, poor tormented sods who've finally got their own back! She'd been messed up pretty badly, the cow, so messed up that she couldn't even stand up when he stopped outside Eksjö's A and E. He'd had to drag her out of the car and pull her along for a few metres before some bright spark inside the hospital had spotted him and come rushing out with a stretcher. He didn't help lay her down on the stretcher, just let go when the hospital staff took over, then turned and went to check

the back seat of his Volvo. She'd puked up in the car, after all, and he was expecting the worst, but in fact she hadn't puked over the leather upholstery or the rubber floor mat. It took him a few seconds to realise that she'd thrown up in her own handbag. She'd taken out her wallet and mobile, they were still on the back seat, but the handbag lay bloated and stinking on the floor, zipped shut. How very thoughtful of her! Grabbing hold of everything, he raced after the stretcher and placed the wallet, the mobile and the handbag full of sick on her stomach just as the doors to A and E slid open, then turned and ran back to the car. It was only when he was half-way back to Nässjö that he realised he'd forgotten to ask for the fare. Bloody hell! He'd never forgotten the fare before!

Yet now he's smiling even more broadly at his reflection. Screw the money! That cow had had to pay this evening all right, she'd had to pay dearly...

Somewhere, in a flat above Samuel's, there's a sudden burst of booming electric guitars and gravelly voices, but it's over in a few seconds; someone turns the volume down, though not so much that you can avoid hearing the bass, along with the rhythmic thumping that always accompanies that kind of music. He recognises it as one of Pluton Svea's old hits. The Victory March.

*Men of Sweden, march, don't sleep*

*We're no sacrificial sheep!*

*On to battle we must stride*

*Sure of victory, full of pride!*

He'd stomped around to its beat himself, but only for a short while after Ellinor had left him. The stomping hadn't helped, and besides, the emblems on his black sweatshirts had upset his mum. Samuel had never liked to see his mum upset, so he stopped, even though he didn't go as far as letting her talk him into joining her church. But mightn't that have been better? Maybe it would. Not that free church people are necessarily any nicer than the rest, but at least they have the sense to keep their meanness under wraps a bit.

Oh well. What's done is done. Heaving a sigh, he switches off the bathroom light, then wanders into the living room and looks around. His own old stereo isn't exactly tiny either, and at times he's switched it on and turned the volume up so high that it nearly drowned out the neighbour's, but he's stopped that now. The guy on the floor above has started wearing a hoodie with a *Sons of Odin* logo, and a week or so ago Samuel spotted a whole gang in a similar get-up out in the yard, which put a bit of a dampener on his desire to get even. In fact, it pushed him into putting a security chain on the outside door, though the pretext he'd given for that was all the thieving foreign scum in that part of town.

The old stereo has huge Bluetooth loudspeakers, plus record and CD players, but his new TV is even bigger. Seventy-five inches! He could sit down on his black leather sofa and watch a film on Netflix or HBO, but he doesn't, just hangs around in the doorway, leaning against the frame. Musing involuntarily. What's wrong?

Why can't this room ever become a real living room? What can't this flat ever become a real home?

He sighs again and shrugs. Because he knows the answer. Just as we do.

\*

Afterwards he doesn't really know if this is a dream or reality, if he's gone stark raving mad or if he's only doing what any sensible person would do. All he knows is that he's suddenly standing outside with rather cold ears, his fists thrust deep into the pockets of his quilted jacket, and that he's gripping the keys in his right hand.

He'd forgotten her keys. Crazy but true. We know how that happened, but he doesn't. He'd found the bunch of keys and lipstick on the floor at the back of the car when he parked, he'd picked them up and shoved them into his jacket pocket, but he hadn't allowed himself to register what he was doing. He'd just stuffed the small metal keyring with its three keys and the small leather tag marked L.A. into his pocket, followed by the shiny gold-coloured sheath of the lipstick, then pulled out the rubber mats and shaken them out in the parking area. It wasn't till half past two in the morning, when he was half-asleep in bed, in a state between dreaming and thinking, that the memory returned, making him sit bolt upright in bed. Wide awake. *What the actual fuck?* How could he have forgotten that there'd been a bunch of keys on the floor at the back? Had he completely lost the plot?

So now he's out here at three o'clock in the morning, in deep silence, beneath a black sky, a sky without a single star, and he doesn't really know why. What should he do? Walk over to the parking area and put the keys and lipstick in the car, then hand them in at the taxi exchange tomorrow? As you're meant to do if you play by the rules. Or should he go to that old bag's house – they must be her things, damn it – and leave them in her letterbox?

He'll play by the rules. That goes without saying. Samuel always plays by the rules. Provided, of course, that...

His feet start to move, but they're not taking him towards the parking area. Moving of their own volition, they're heading in the opposite direction. Over the lawn. Out towards Trädgårdsgatan and the churchyard. Making him turn first right, then left. Propelling him, unresisting, towards the block of detached houses where she lives.

It's a wonderful night. Despite the chill, it really is a wonderful night. Even though the cold is nipping his ears, it feels bloody great to draw the cool air into his lungs, almost drinking it, to feel it displacing all that's old and musty.

'Young again,' he whispers to himself, breaking into a grin. After all, he knows he's still young and will be for many years to come. Then he suddenly realises that he feels no shame. The revelation is so stunning that he stops on the spot and stands motionless for nearly half a minute. Ha! He was talking to himself without any sense of shame! *Fan-fucking-tastic!*

‘Maybe I’m a night person,’ he says tentatively. Although his voice is even quieter now, the words still make him nod solemnly to himself. Yes, that must be it. He’s a night person, rather like the monster in that film Ellinor once made him watch, a creature so hideous that it couldn’t come out during the day, though it was perfectly at ease under cover of darkness. That’s true of him too. The night makes him feel free. Secure. Almost someone that another person could like.

Now he’s among the small bungalows that stand back to back along two parallel streets. He’s been inside one of the smallest, which only had three rooms, but that was many years ago, and he thinks the old bitch lives in a slightly bigger house. Since he’s not sure which one it is, he stops and goes up to one of the letterboxes, a large green object set in concrete. He bends over to check the name. Carlsson. No, it’s not hers. He goes on to the next plot, the one next to the street light. The letterbox is set in concrete here too, but this one’s red and shiny, just the type he would have bought and set in concrete outside his house if he’d been able to marry Ellinor...

Of course it’s hers. She’s even painted her name on it in big white letters. Lykke Andersson. What a bloody stupid name. Lykke!

So this is where she lives, the fucking bitch, with her ugly little dog, her old lady’s dog, the one he’s seen her about town with over the last few years. It looks like an unmade bed: it’s overweight and shaggy, with a black mouth and ridiculous little legs. Even

worse, it sounds like a hellhound when it barks, he heard it once in the main square when the old woman was yanking its leash to stop it gobbling up a Pekinese. It was actually a pretty funny sight; the mutt seemed to be stronger than her, so she had a lot of trouble keeping hold of it. Serve her right.

But what if the dog's still in the house, all alone? Without any food or water? That would be too awful, it's not the poor mutt's fault it's ended up with that old bag, and it can't know its mistress is in hospital. It's true he picked the old cow up at Lena Holmgren's, so maybe the dog's at the vet's, but he can't be sure. He grips the keys in his pocket harder. Yes. He's got to check. Just got to.

A shudder runs through his body when he steps onto her plot, and he can't stop himself looking round quickly. We're watching him closely. Will he really dare to do what he's planning to do? He's taking small, guilty steps up the paved path leading to Lykke's front door, silent now, listening. There's no dog barking indoors, but – so he tells himself, articulating the thought in words – that doesn't necessarily mean anything. It could be asleep, couldn't it? Maybe it's been howling and whining for its mistress for hours, and maybe it's collapsed out of sheer exhaustion. No, he's got to go in. Just got to.

Though the decision makes him feel slightly weak at the knees, he doesn't betray that. He might be hideously ugly and a bit lost or out of his mind, or whatever the hell you want to call it, but he's not the type to go weak at the knees. No fucking way! So he pulls the keys out of his pocket and selects the largest of the three

door keys. It fits the lock perfectly, but he still stands motionless, turning his head again just to check that no one can see him. Looks like the coast's clear. The street's dark and deserted, the next-door neighbour has lowered the blinds and pulled them shut, the house opposite is completely dark, and the light from the street lamp doesn't quite reach the door where he's standing. He turns the key and pulls the door slightly open. Slips inside. Pulls the door silently to behind him. Then stands stock-still, frozen to the spot in Lykke Andersson's dark hallway.

He's there. In her house. In that bitch's house.

Two sensations sweep through him. First fear: has he just broken in? Would he end up in prison if the door opened behind him and the police rushed in? Then triumph: he's broken in! He's got into the old bag's house and nobody knows about it, least of all the police. He can do whatever the hell he likes here. Piss in her bed, for instance, though he'd never do that, not being the type to piss in someone's bed. But he could. If he wasn't such a nice guy he could do just that!

His hand shakes slightly as he fumbles for the mobile in his pocket, but he pays no attention, just pulls out the mobile and fiddles with it for a moment before locating the torch app and switching it on. The light is so sharp that he shields it for a few seconds, then turns the mobile round and runs the beam around the hallway. There's her coat. There's a door that probably leads into the bathroom. And on his left there are two very wide steps up to a room whose purpose he can't really guess. An extension of the



hallway? No, too big. A living room? No, too small. A dining room? Maybe. There's a dining table in there, though it's a pretty small one. Apart from that there's a great big wickerwork chair in there with an intricately plaited back. She'll be dippy about that, the old cow.

Taking a breath, he lowers the mobile, running the beam over the floor while he walks up the two steps, then stops in the middle of the room and tries to get his bearings. A small kitchen on the left, so small there's not even room for a kitchen table, but with a wall hatch through to the room where he's standing. Glass doors leading into the living room straight ahead. Closed. Three open doors leading into three smaller rooms, one next to the living room, the other two on the right. That's all. And no dog in sight anywhere.

'Good,' he says out loud, though he knows full well he's lying to himself. He couldn't care less about that dog, but he definitely doesn't feel the same about Lykke Andersson's house. He wants to look around it. And that's not all. He wants to own it. Make it his. That's the truth. This is just the kind of house he and Ellinor would have had, at least to start off with. It's just the right size for a couple of newly-weds expecting their first child. The only problem is the two steps down to the hall, which the kid could easily fall down, but it's not such a big problem that it can't be solved. He could easily make a gate, in fact he could make a really nice gate in white wood, in two sections, with an ingenious locking device that he's constructing in his head right now. Easy for adults to open, but quite beyond a kid... perfect!

He smiles, then, turning, realises that the light from the mobile is too bright and could easily be spotted if anyone were to go down the street at this time of night, so he switches it off and stands motionless until his eyes have got used to the dark. He blinks. Yes. Just as he thought, there's a little light from the street light outside. That's enough. He can look around without the torch.

He starts with a peek into the kitchen. Not much you can say about that, it's clean and tidy, with a single manky pot plant on the windowsill. No curtains. Typical of that old cow, naturally curtains in a kitchen are quite beyond the pale. He does have curtains in his kitchen, curtains covered in blue flowers, which his mum made, because she thinks curtains in a kitchen are one of life's necessities, and because he's finally grasped that there's a certain pleasure to be had from smiling patronisingly just like his dad, but still falling in with women's little notions. It's just a pity there's no one else he can give a patronising smile. Like Ellinor.

Ah well. He goes back into the small sitting room. No curtains here either, but some sort of potted climbing plant encircling the whole window. Mm-hm. A pepper mill, a salt cellar and a fruit bowl on the table. Three clementines and a pear. Very boring. He peeps into the living room through the glass doors. Sofa. Coffee table. Piano. And – *yes!* – curtains. White ones, of course, monochrome and entirely plain, but at least they're curtains. The old bag thinks they're *naice*, of course, but actually they're about as dull as you can get. Same thing in the bedroom. White walls, white bedspread, white chest of drawers, a white-framed mirror and – *of*

*course!* – white curtains. The only dash of colour here is a neatly folded blanket draped over the end of the bed. Probably blue, though it's hard to tell in this darkness. It could be black. Or brown. Or green. And an armchair upholstered in what looks like checked fabric, possibly blue and white. Not to mention the real dash of colour on the chest of drawers. Even before he gets there he knows who it is. That girl in the class below his. The one with the pitch-black hair. The wog. The half-monkey.

His anger pours out like fiery lava. The girl who went about with her nose in the air at school, flaunting her pert arse day after day, till a gang of lads decided it was time to squeeze her tits, just to show her who was boss. Not that they talked about it much, but he's sure the other lads knew that was the idea, or they'd never have surrounded her the way they did, without any instructions, and...

And then that frigging little scrubber squealed like a pig, and the old cow arrived, and they all scattered, and a few days later she said that sentence in class – and then he died! Yes, that's what happened. He died. Ellinor didn't break up with him till half a year later, but he died anyway, on the spot. As soon as he heard the class laughing fit to bust he knew his life was finished. He'd never be like other people. He'd always be red-haired and ugly. He'd always have a flat nose. He'd never have a wife and children and a house of his own with a trampoline for the kids and a great big inflatable pool in the garden...

And now he's in the murderess's own bedroom, staring at that picture. The monkey girl, damn her. She's smiling, but it's not

a particularly convincing smile, it doesn't quite reach her eyes. That's how she always looked on the rare occasions that she smiled. He didn't see her smile with her eyes once, not even when she got to sing in church when they finished school. Presumably she was too *naice* for that too. The vicar's adopted daughter. All the teachers' little favourite. That old cow's little pet.

He spits.

This even startles him, and he twitches. Did he really spit just now? On the photo? Has he completely lost the plot? Hasn't he seen enough thrillers about people leaving traces of DNA on things? Doesn't he know he's finished if the old cow realises someone's been in her house and if she notices, or suspects, that someone's spat on the photo? She'll suspect him. Of course she will. And then the police will turn up at his flat and stick a frigging great big swab into the inside of his cheek, and the results will arrive, showing he's guilty, and he'll be sent to prison, and his mum will have a massive heart attack and die on the spot when they lock him up, and Ellinor will roll her eyes and thank her lucky stars she had the sense to dump him...

Everything about him sways, so much so that he can hardly keep his balance. He sinks onto the bed momentarily, then gets to his feet and smooths out the rumpled bedspread. Christ alive! What's he even doing here? He's got to get out! Straight away, pronto, now! And that DNA trace has got to go.

He takes out a balled-up pair of gloves from a jacket pocket, pulls them on and picks up the photo, stuffs it inside his jacket and

holds it tight, with his left forearm pressed against his body, then slips out into the small sitting room, looks around, identifies one of the other bedrooms as her study, there are bookshelves in there, white bookshelves all the way up to the ceiling, chock full of books and files, plus a large dark wooden desk in the middle of the room. He blinks, but doesn't reflect before taking the next step and peeping into the adjoining bedroom, realises it must have been the monkey girl's room, it's a bit girly and silly-looking, with a four-poster bed and an old-fashioned writing-desk with turned legs, but he doesn't let himself stop, just goes on towards the steps and the hall, realising at the same time that he's daft to be tiptoeing around, it's frigging ridiculous, no one can hear him, it's late at night and this is a detached house, but even so he can't put his feet down fully, instead he carries on tiptoeing all the way to the front door. He opens it very quietly, but stays hidden in the dark while he checks his surroundings, sees the street is empty and deserted, slips out and closes the door cautiously behind him, locks it carefully, clears the garden path in four strides, drops the lipstick into the letterbox, then he's out in the street and starts running towards the churchyard and there, finally, thank God, there's a storm drain that's not under a street light, but in the middle of a dark patch between two of them. Pulling out the old bag's keys, he lets them slip down between two bars, holds his breath for a few seconds before letting go, hears the little splash when they hit the water, then stands up and smiles into the darkness. Then he pulls out the photo, turns the frame over and bends the little hooks up, loosens

the back and pushes it down into the drain as well, puts the glass pane – contaminated with his own DNA – on the bars and stamps on it hard, once, twice, three times, then sweeps the shards of glass into the drain with his foot, they clink slightly, but only very slightly, then pushes the frame down after them, folds the photo, once, twice, and stuffs it into his pocket. He'll burn it in the washbasin when he gets home. It doesn't exist. It's never existed.

Then he turns, zips his jacket up to the neck and thrusts both hands into his pockets. Starts to run. Runs with loping strides through the darkness, towards the home that isn't a home.

We'll leave him to run. Soon we won't see him any longer.

## *Flora Ferm*

THE MOBILITY SERVICE MINIBUS is rattling in a worrying fashion, but Rosmarie is doing her best to ignore the racket. The driver does seem reliable, and her wheelchair is properly attached, there's little risk that her vision of impending doom will become reality, with the brakes suddenly giving way and the wheelchair starting to slip back, banging into the folded ramp and the double doors at the rear and tipping her out, helpless, into the road. She can picture the scene in her mind's eye, see exactly how it would be, with her lying half-dead on the tarmac, underneath the wheelchair, and the minibus continuing its journey towards Nässjö. The open rear door would flap back and forth as the minibus receded into the distance, of course, but would she actually see it? Maybe it would be too dark. And maybe the impact of the tarmac would have knocked her unconscious. So she'd be lying there all on her own, abandoned under the black sky, on the black tarmac, between the black firs lining the road on either side.

Hmmph. Rosmarie shakes off the thought. Stuff and nonsense! It hasn't happened, has it? And it won't, either. But if it had, how long would she have had to lie there in the road? How long would it be before another vehicle came along? And how long

would it be before a car came along and actually stopped? She knows there are people who'd drive by without stopping. Mind you, there are plenty of missionary society people in Nässjö, and they'd definitely stop, of that she's equally sure. Though she does wonder what they'd be doing out on the road from Jönköping in the middle of the night... Rosmarie likes missionary society people, although as a physics teacher she can't really be doing with their view of creation. She knows too much about how the world really works, both as part of the universe and at sub-atomic level. Besides, she's the daughter of a man who called himself the proletarians' proletarian and the niece of an elderly lady who speaks in tongues, so maybe she should direct her sympathies more towards the Pentecostal Church...

She can't hold back a little giggle, which escapes unbidden from the corner of her mouth, causing the driver to glance in the rear-view mirror. His name's Amir, as she's already noted from the small ID card on the dashboard. Though he has a slight accent, it's really very faint; maybe he's been in Sweden for many years. She's not about to ask him where he's from, suspecting he's been asked that too often already, but she can't refrain from pulling a slight face when she sees what's dangling from the rear-view mirror. The Hand of Fatima. So familiar. Lykke's Fatima used to wear a hand just like that on a silver chain around her neck. Of course the driver's amulet has nothing whatsoever to do with her, but it reminds Rosmarie of Lykke's Fatima anyway, and she doesn't want to be reminded. Lykke's spent far too much time over the last few



years worrying about Fatima and wondering what happened to her, and Rosmarie doesn't want to suffer the same fate. Though that's fairly unlikely anyway. Lykke was Fatima's foster mother, so she has her reasons, of course. Rosmarie was a foster aunt at most. Or something like that. Honorary aunt might be a better title. Honorary aunt and neighbour. Quite straightforward, and worry-free into the bargain.

'Excuse me, Miss,' says Amir, 'now you'll have to tell me the way...'

They're in Nässjö now. The silent street lamps spread their light, and despite the rattling of the minibus, Rosmarie knows the town is very quiet. It's always very quiet in Nässjö at night. She likes that.

Amir parks outside Rosmarie's house and wheels her out of the minibus. We can see she's pale with exhaustion after the long journey home, but even so we know she's feeling much better than when she left, a month ago. The black shadows under her eyes vanished within a week, her right hand no longer trembles, and she's actually indulged herself as far as to apply lipstick and mascara. In fact, she even gives Amir a smile as he carries her case up to the front door. That's new. Before the journey, she hadn't had the energy to smile at anyone for at least three months. The warm climate has really helped, making her a little more approachable.

‘Thank you,’ she said, inserting the key in the lock. ‘Would you mind carrying my case up to the bedroom? And putting it on the bed? That would be awfully helpful.’

Amir smiles in reply.

‘No problem.’

He holds the door open and politely waits for her to enter the house before him, then stops in the hall. There’s not much room, as Rosmarie took the precaution of parking her electric mobility scooter indoors before leaving. It’s red and shiny and nearly new, and the sight of it brings a smile to Rosmarie’s face. Amir clears his throat.

‘Where’s your bedroom?’

Rosmarie points.

‘Right at the end. Through the living room. You can put the overhead light on...’

Watching him, she starts to take off her jacket, but stops in mid-movement. The leaves of the tall hibiscus plant in front of the big living-room window, her pride and joy, tended for over a decade, are brown, dry and withered. And the three smaller hibiscus plants standing on the windowsill are equally shrivelled.

‘No,’ she says out loud. ‘No, no, no...’

Dropping her jacket on the floor, she wheels herself into the living room and sticks a finger into the largest pot. The soil’s as hard as concrete.

‘But...’ she says out loud, then, realising that she’s talking to herself, bites her lower lip and falls silent. Amir is just on his way out of the bedroom.

‘What’s happened?’

Rosmarie shrugs exaggeratedly, expressing incomprehension.

‘My friend was going to water them... But she...’

Gripping the waistband of his trousers, Amir pulls it up over his pot-belly.

‘That’s a pity,’ he says, glancing at the dead hibiscus plants, but then eyeing his watch. ‘It’s a real shame. But I’m afraid I’ll have to be on my way now.’

Rosmarie blinks, trying to be her normal self again.

‘Yes, of course. It’s just that...’

‘What?’

Rosmarie raises her right hand in a deprecatory gesture.

‘Oh, nothing. Sorry. Thank you for helping me.’

Then she wheels herself out into the hall and closes the door behind him before hanging up her jacket with meticulous care.

Something must have happened to Lykke. But what? Rosmarie wheels herself into the bedroom, over to the window, and raises the blinds in a swift movement that makes the two desiccated orchids on the windowsill drop their papery blooms. She glances briefly at them before sweeping the debris onto the floor, frowning as she peers over at Lykke’s house, though she knows it’s quite pointless. It’s nearly two o’clock in the morning, after all, and it goes without

saying that the lights are off, that Lykke's in bed asleep at this time of night. It's just odd that the blinds aren't drawn in the bedroom. Lykke is usually most particular about drawing the blinds when she goes to bed, since she doesn't share Rosmarie's fondness for letting the moonlight form shadows in her bedroom. Mind you, the blinds might be drawn – maybe the black, empty appearance of Lykke's window is just an illusion?

Straightening up, Rosmarie tries to collect her thoughts. Maybe Lykke's gone off somewhere, maybe to one of those cities she's always on about, the ones she imagines Fatima was as obsessed by as she was. Mumbai. New Delhi. Or maybe even Ahmedabad, Fatima's birthplace. Yes, that's a possibility. Lykke might have had a sudden flash of inspiration and decided to fly south. She might have left her overfed Daisy at the nearest kennels and handed in her notice at school, completely forgetting Rosmarie's big hibiscus plant. How very irresponsible.

But no, she knows that can't have happened. Lykke would never do that. She'd have waited till Rosmarie came home. Or made sure that someone else got the key to the house and carried on watering the plants...

What if she's dead? What if Lykke's gone and died during Rosmarie's rehab on Tenerife... No. That can't have happened. It *mustn't* have happened! Rosmarie has to die first, that's what she's always thought, even without being entirely aware of it. She hasn't even grasped just how much her friendship with Lykke means to her, what a consolation her friend has been to her through all the

years of misery – even if she can be pretty irritating at times. It’s always been that way. When they spotted each other in the staffroom that morning nearly thirty years ago, a shock ran through Rosmarie, the memory of Lykke’s icy demeanour during their school-leaving exams flitted through her mind, and she realised that she was suddenly both pleased and uneasy, happy and scared. She didn’t show her feelings, of course. Instead, she just stood there looking just as startled as Lykke.

‘Goodness me,’ she said, unable to stop herself, ‘it’s you!’

Lykke held out her arms, as if she’d forgotten that they hadn’t spoken to each other for over seven years, or even sent each other as much as a postcard. It looked as if she was about to hug Rosmarie, who hastily stepped back, proffering her hand. But Lykke, not to be put off, just closed the gap and put her arm round Rosmarie.

‘Good grief, I haven’t seen you since our final exams at school! Rosmarie Nilsson!’

Rosmarie cautiously patted Lykke on the back, extricated herself and stepped back once more, murmuring sotto voce:

‘My surname isn’t Nilsson any more, it’s Ferm.’

Lykke lowered her voice too. ‘Ferm?’

‘Yes. And my pupils call me Flora. Because some smart aleck discovered my second name’s Viola. And to cap it all I’m married to a florist.’

Lykke tried to repress a giggle, but didn’t quite succeed. Rosmarie glanced around swiftly – could she see an arched eyebrow or a smirk anywhere? No. But Lars-Olof, her colleague from the

maths department, pivoted hastily on his swivel chair and turned his back on them, apparently gazing at something in the empty school playground. It seemed to be very absorbing, albeit invisible to the rest of humanity.

‘Flora Ferm?’

Smiling, Lykke laced arms with Rosmarie and began pulling her over to the sofa in the corner. Rosmarie submitted, sighing slightly.

‘Yep. Flora Ferm, that’s me...’

They sat down beside each other, then remained silent for a moment, eyeing the other teachers. The autumn term was due to start in a week, so now there was a get-together with coffee and biscuits before all the meetings and preparations. Presently Lykke turned towards Rosmarie and said, in the same low voice as before:

‘So you stayed in Nässjö?’

Rosmarie smoothed her skirt.

‘Well, I was away for a few years. Went to university in Växjö. Worked at an upper secondary school in Vetlanda after that. But Dad fell ill, so... What about you? Did you make it to Uppsala?’

Lykke nodded.

‘Yep. Spent three years there. And then I went on to Stockholm. How’s your dad doing now?’

Rosmarie grimaced slightly.

‘He died a few years ago.’

Lykke’s smile faded.

‘Oh,’ she said, ‘sorry to hear that.’

‘How about your mum?’

Shaking her head, Lykke briefly mirrored Rosmarie’s grimace.

‘She died last winter.’

There was a moment’s silence; neither of them needed to explain why they hadn’t hurried back. Lykke lowered her voice even more.

‘Why’s your surname Ferm?’

Rosmarie gave Lykke a quick pat on the hand.

‘Because I’ve got married. To Bengt Ferm.’

Lykke took a breath.

‘Blimey! You’re married to Bengt Ferm?’

Rosmarie burst out laughing, and suddenly they were friends again.

\*

Bengt Ferm was rather a special case. He entered puberty very late. While the other boys in his class were suddenly starting to grow at a tremendous rate (short arms and legs would lengthen in a day, leaving a long torso too short overnight, in a constantly confusing alternation of growth spurts), he continued to look as if he was about twelve for nearly another three years. His white-blond hair curled gently in the nape of his neck, his cheeks remained peachy-soft, his shoulders narrow and slightly sloping. His facial expressions were the only thing that changed. The childlike

openness of his smile disappeared, he lowered his once frank gaze, and the corners of his mouth drooped slightly. No wonder. Suddenly he was surrounded by young men and women the same age as him who'd acquired bumps and hollows in surprising places, while he himself stayed like a yard of pump water, as if still a little boy.

Nothing happened until the autumn term of his fifth year in secondary school, but then everything happened at once. He shot up nearly twenty centimetres in eighteen months, developed broad shoulders and a very deep voice, and suddenly he was a hit with the girls and made sure to catch up on all the experiences he'd missed so far.

And it was he Rosmarie had married. Now, many years and many harsh experiences later, she can't avoid grimacing slightly at herself. What had she been thinking? What had her feelings been? Honestly? Had she really been fond of him, or was it just the constant longing to get rid of the mark her childhood had branded her with that had persuaded her? Had she thought she'd avoid being known everywhere as the daughter of the drunks' drunk and the proletarians' proletarian if she married a man who'd inherited two flower shops from his parents just a few years after leaving school, one in Nässjö and the other in Eksjö?

Unfortunately, he was also the sole heir of his parents' home and all the flowery furniture in it. His mother must have adored rose-patterned chintz, but apparently her son hadn't inherited her obsession, so most of the furniture was palmed off on Rosmarie



after their divorce, though possibly Bengt Ferm had had twinges of conscience, and with good reason. For it was he who had been driving when they had the accident, but he'd got off with no more than a broken arm. His arm healed perfectly, unlike Rosmarie's pelvis and spine. And yet, as if by pure coincidence, he chanced to fall passionately in love with his vigorous physiotherapist just after Rosmarie had been told that she would be spending the rest of her life in a wheelchair. And who can withstand love? Not a florist from Nässjö, anyway. By the time Rosmarie came home from hospital, Bengt Ferm had already handed in the divorce papers at the district court, but like the conscientious soul he was, he'd also bought a little three-room bungalow that was suitable for a disabled person, behind Lykke's rather less disability-friendly four-room house, and installed the most flowery items of furniture there. His physiotherapist had even been kind enough to arrange the furniture and put up curtains. Second-hand flowery curtains, of course. They were already in place when Lykke came over on the first evening.

'I've tried to pull them down,' said Rosmarie glumly, 'but I haven't succeeded...'

Lykke stuck her hands into her trouser pockets.

'Do you want me to take them down?'

Rosmarie nodded silently. Lykke went out into the kitchen and fetched a chair, climbed onto it and started unhooking the curtains. When she'd finished, she started to fold them up, but Rosmarie rolled forward and took one of them.

‘Bin them,’ she said. Her lower lip was trembling slightly. ‘Don’t fold them up. Just chuck them!’

‘Good decision,’ said Lykke, avoiding her eyes. ‘Want to do it yourself?’

Shaking her head, Rosmarie swivelled her wheelchair, went over to the front window and sat there with her lips pressed together while Lykke went out to the dustbin. When she came in again Rosmarie drew her right hand through her fringe and gave Lykke a rueful smile.

‘I told them to go to hell, you know. Both of them. Was that awful of me, do you think?’

Lykke hesitated momentarily. Had Rosmarie sworn at her florist ex and his physiotherapist? Odd. Rosmarie had always been wary of anything that might be thought lower-class, far more than she was. And swearing was definitely lower-class in Rosmarie’s world. But not in Lykke’s. So she smiled.

‘Not at all. In fact, they asked for it. How about a cuppa before we take down the rest of the curtains?’

\*

Looking out into the night, Rosmarie snuffles, then wipes her nose on her right hand like a little child. Yes, that’s what she feels like. An abandoned little child.

‘Dear Lykke,’ she says, half-aloud. ‘Please don’t be dead...’

But we know Lykke can’t hear her. So she can’t reply either.

She can't sleep, of course. It doesn't help that the full moon is shining into the bedroom, casting sharply defined shadows, nor does the fact that she put clean sheets on the bed before leaving for the Canary Islands, or that they're still precisely as cool and smooth as she likes them. Nothing helps.

She lies on her back with one arm above her head, despite having recently read a book by a fairly serious science journalist who claimed that one way to prevent Alzheimer's is to sleep on your right side. That supposedly allows plaque to drain off more easily, which might otherwise seep into the nooks and crannies of the brain, transforming its owner first into a muddled little child and later into a being without any remaining thoughts or faculties. Although Rosmarie wants to avoid that, she wouldn't be able to look out through the window if she lay on her right side, and tonight she wants to look out through the window. Though the November moon is pale and distant in Sweden compared with the moon she saw from her room on Tenerife, it's still her moon. Silvery-white and shimmering. Cool and reserved.

Peering up at it, she thinks she can glimpse, on the left and at the top, the shadows that form *Mare Frigoris*, the Sea of Cold, and for an instant she lets herself create an entirely unscientific vision of the Sea. Endless icy plains with crevasses of a deep, shimmering turquoise, towering white icebergs allowing her to glimpse a bright blue, translucent subconscious below the surface, a world of white and pale blue that melts sporadically into the overarching sky

before it darkens into turquoise... Then she blinks and returns to real life. The Sea of Cold, as well she knows, contains neither water nor ice. Those dark shadows on the full moon are basalt lava, which is black, though with an uncanny silvery shimmer. That's how she pictures it, at any rate, based on the experience of having once held a lump of terrestrial basalt in her hand. But she knows she cannot know, and never will, what the moon's Sea of Cold really looks like. For no one has ever seen it at close quarters. Maybe the basalt lava has been pulverised. Maybe it's changed colour. But one thing is clear, at least: the lunar sky is neither blue nor turquoise, we know that from...

Rosmarie sighs: no, it's no good. We have to agree. She's wide awake and won't be able to get to sleep; every second thought is prompted by anxiety about Lykke, which won't give way, no matter how hard she tries to distract herself. She might as well get up. Switching on the bedside lamp, she sits up in bed, pushes her legs over the edge and leans over to the wheelchair, pulls it towards her and crawls laboriously into it. In the living room, she switches the light on and looks around her. Should she do some dusting? Or drag the Hoover out of the cleaning cupboard? No, that can wait till tomorrow. She needs to go round to Lykke's house now to set her mind at rest.

Wheeling herself out into the hall, she stretches up for her honey-coloured quilted coat and pulls it on over her nightdress, but doesn't bother with a woolly hat or mittens. After all, the winter isn't that far advanced yet. With some difficulty, she manoeuvres

herself onto her mobility scooter, pushing her wheelchair aside with such force that it rolls into the living room, arranges a rug over her bare legs and feet, then finally opens the key cabinet. And there they are – the keys to Lykke’s house.

She’s ready. Yet she pauses and draws a deep breath before opening the door and gliding out into the dark on her scooter.

It’s cold, much colder than it was just an hour or so ago, and the street is dark between the street lights. Should she turn left or right? It makes no difference really, her house is in the middle of the street, while Lykke’s is in the middle of the street parallel to hers, but she decides after just a few seconds’ hesitation. She doesn’t want to go to Erkabovägen, but doesn’t know why, just follows her impulse and turns left, up towards the churchyard, sticking so close to her neighbour’s privet hedge that it feels as if someone’s stretching out bony fingers towards her. She shudders, but shakes off her discomfort immediately. There’s nothing to be afraid of, is there? The most terrible thing that can happen has already happened. Besides, she knows that privet hedges hardly ever turn into dead people’s fingers.

Lykke’s dustbin is empty, which shows she’s been away for over a week, but her capacious letterbox seems to be brimming over. It’s as red and shiny as Rosmarie’s scooter, and suddenly she recalls how she snorted in contempt when Lykke bought it. Why on earth did Lykke think she needed a large, lockable letterbox to be set in concrete outside her house? Did she think the Beagle Boys were

hiding behind the neighbour's hedge, planning to pinch her unimportant post? It took a while for her to realise that what Lykke feared was something quite different: she was afraid that the postcard would go missing. The postcard from New Delhi, Mumbai or Ahmedabad that Fatima was bound to send sooner or later, the postcard that would finally explain, once and for all, what had happened to her and why she hadn't been in touch for so many years...

Sighing, Rosmarie unlocks the letterbox and starts removing its contents. Two weekend editions of *Dagens Nyheter*. Thirteen copies of *Smålands Dagblad*. Plus several window envelopes and an even larger quantity of advertising material in red, green and yellow, even though she herself had got Lykke to put a small plastic sign on her letterbox to say that advertising wasn't welcome here, in this particular letterbox. However, the advertising is quite welcome right now, even though Rosmarie would never admit that even to herself. The thing is, it gives her an opportunity to convert her anxiety into irritation, even if only for an instant. *Can't they even learn to read, those snotty-nosed kids who hand out flyers!*

Memories beset her straight away. Nearly forty-five years ago she herself was a snotty-nosed kid just like them, and her job on the side kept the social services at a safe distance. She had enough to eat. She was more or less clean and healthy. And both Aunt Linnea and Lykke's mum were kind enough to reassure the ladies from social services that they were willing to take her in each time her dad was drying out somewhere. That's how she avoided being sent

to a foster family. She remains grateful to her resourceful younger self for that. Rosmarie has never really had any confidence in foster families. Not for herself, at any rate.

The newspapers and post form a wobbly pile on her knees, a pile that nearly tumbles over when she sticks her hand down into the letterbox and fumbles around to make sure there aren't any letters or postcards lying hidden and forgotten down there. There aren't. However, there is a small metal object rolling around at the bottom, and she has to stretch down even further to grab hold of it. She blinks in surprise once she's taken it out. A lipstick. Lykke's Dior lipstick. What on earth is that doing in the letterbox?

Wincing slightly, Rosmarie straightens the part of her back she's still able to straighten, grasps the lipstick in her left hand, then places it protectively on top of the pile of post and newspapers. Steering the scooter with just her right hand, she trundles very slowly and carefully up to Lykke's door, but doesn't bother to ring the bell, just inserts the key in the lock and opens the door, then bends forward slightly and sniffs. Lykke's house smells slightly musty, but that's all. Even so, she pauses on the paved path outside and hears herself call out in a low voice:

'Lykke! Are you there? Lykke?'

There's no reply, of course, and for a second she just wants to cry, before recalling that that's an actual impossibility. She's incapable of crying. Did she cry when her mum died? No. Only a few strangled, oddly gurgling sounds issued from her throat on that occasion. When the lady from the child protection institute came

and wanted to take her away to a children's home? No. When Lykke ignored her during their school-leaving exams? No. When she was told that she would never walk again? No. When Bengt Ferm told her he wanted a divorce? No. She did have tears in her eyes when Lykke stuffed her mother-in-law's curtains into the bin, but that was over quickly, and there weren't enough tears to run down her cheeks. And there aren't now either, as she sits in Lykke's hallway with an envelope from a travel agency in her hand. All she does is sniffle and blink a few times before she decides that she doesn't give a damn about Lykke's right to privacy. This is an emergency, a clear case of an emergency, so she sticks her thumb under the flap and starts tearing the envelope open.

It's a letter confirming a booking. Plus a ticket. The agency also hopes she enjoys her flight from Copenhagen to Mumbai on 28 December. Holy Innocents' Day. Rosmarie sighs deeply.

'Idiot,' she says in a muted voice. 'You bloody idiot!'





[II, pp. 107–134]

*The woman once known as Fatima*

THEY BOB UP AND DOWN in the waves. A groundswell glides in towards the beach, lifting them, then letting them sink slightly before lifting them again. It plays with them, so lightly and gently that she doesn't wake up until the fourth contraction. But then she wakes completely. Opens her eyes and stares into the darkness. The very dark darkness. The impenetrable darkness.

It's started. It's happening now.

'Baldur!'

Her voice sounds quite wimpy, to use the word of choice back home in Nässjö. There are others that cover nearly the same ground. Soft, cry-babyish, put-on. Here they'd have used different expressions. Her voice would have been described as tentative, unassuming or even gentle, however that's expressed in the language they speak here, which sometimes eludes her still.

It's happening again. Another swell is rolling in towards the shore, but now it's less playful. We'll withdraw quickly; we don't necessarily want to feel what Meera's experiencing at the moment. Now she understands why these are called birth pangs. Her voice becomes slightly shrill.

'Baldur!'

He doesn't reply, and it's a few minutes before she remembers why. He's not here, he drove off four hours ago. His mother's brother has just turned seventy, and it was absolutely essential for him and his parents to turn up at the reception. Anything else was out of the question. In fact, it was almost unforgivable that Meera couldn't go, but when she pointed demonstratively at her swollen legs, even her father-in-law heaved a sigh and gave in. After all, she does have a pre-eclampsia diagnosis. She's due to go to hospital on Monday for a C-section, even though she's only eight months into her pregnancy. But now that's not going to happen. The birth is already under way. A perfectly standard vaginal delivery...

The neighbour was supposed to be checking on her. That's what her mother-in-law said before they left, her touch warm against Meera's cheek, and their neighbour did look in on her. She left just before Meera floated off to sleep, and judging by the luminescent figures on the alarm clock standing on the bedside table, that was just half an hour ago. She won't be back for another one and a half hours. Unless Meera rings her.

Yes, of course! She can ring her.

Her arm is as heavy as lead, but Meera is strong, and even if she can't lift it, she can at least move her hand over the glossy surface of the coverlet in search of the mobile: there, yes, there it is... But in mid-movement a new contraction suddenly rolls in, her hand twitches and clenches, and despite the pain she hears the sound with perfect clarity, the unmistakable smack of a mobile phone landing on the floor.

Bugger it, as she'd have said back home in Nässjö. These days Meera hardly ever swears, not even *in extremis*, having dropped the phone that could save her on the floor. She hasn't done so since she got married, as Baldur is very well brought up. Maybe even a little too well brought up.

Can she shuffle up into a sitting position?

No. Another contraction puts paid to that.

Can she turn over onto her side?

Yes. But it's very hard. She has to close her eyes afterwards and rest, but just a minute or so later there's another contraction, an agonising, hellish bastard of a contraction that pushes her onto her back again.

Mum, she would have cried if she'd had a mother to cry for, but she doesn't, she never has. So instead she moans a name, the name of the woman who isn't her mother, but who must nonetheless be regarded as such to all intents and purposes. A name she hasn't uttered for several years.

'Lykke!' she cries as the pain floods through her. 'Come and help me!'

But Lykke can't hear her, and the darkness engulfs her words, just before it engulfs Meera herself.

\*

Now we're no longer in either the north-west or the south-east. Now we've finally reached the country where Lykke has been lying

for some weeks. No Man's Land. It's dark and desolate here, both time and thought are non-existent, yet the clocks continue to tick and we continue to think. Very curious.

Yet that's less curious than our apparent ability to see through the darkness, and the fact that what we can see has quite sharp outlines. A room. A bed with bars along its sides. White hospital sheets. Lykke's expressionless face. And what's even stranger is that at the same time we can see another bed in another room, containing another body with a near-identical blank expression. It takes a few seconds for us to understand. It's them. Three people in one body, two of whom came into being when Meera and Baldur were a single body.

Cautiously laying an invisible hand on Meera's abdomen, we can feel her womb contract; in fact, it's as if we can see the babies inside. A boy and a girl. Brage, who wants to be born with his eyes closed, Astrid with her open gaze. He pushes hard against the exit, her flawlessly chiselled tiny hand brushes his feet. Then the pain becomes overwhelming, a groan pierces the silence, a groan that rises into a muffled howl, rising in turn into a furious roar.

What we can hear is Meera's pain. Lykke is still silent and pale, lying far away in Eksjö. Maybe the memories of her life have started to fan out before her, but let's hope not. Not yet. She's certainly well into middle age, but at this time and in this part of the world she's still too young to die. Admittedly, things don't look particularly good inside her head. Far too much blood has trickled down far too many neural pathways in her cerebral cortex, tearing

them apart. That's not good. Nonetheless, her brain is still in better shape than those of many others on her ward. No one has drawn a scalpel through her central temporal lobes, and there's no cyst next to her pituitary gland, so she should still be able to read and write, and her field of vision should still be intact. Provided that she wakes up.

So let's hope she'll wake, just as we hope and pray, with equal intensity, that Meera too will survive. She hasn't lived her life yet, far from it, and her children haven't even begun theirs, she doesn't even know who they are...

But there's something she does know. There's a place on earth where no one wishes her harm. True, her father-in-law gave her mother-in-law a quick look when Baldur introduced them, and for an instant Meera froze with an old, familiar fear, but that was it. After that her mother-in-law smiled, opening her arms wide.

Welcome, Meera, she said. We're so happy to welcome you here.

That was a great consolation.

Reality sways again and time slowly loosens its joints. The world is as dark and impenetrable as it was an hour ago, and yet it seems we can see the landscape surrounding Meera quite clearly. Mountain after mountain. Melting glacier after melting glacier. A rectangular church tower against a dark grey sky. The single tiny lamp in the window of one of the little white houses a few hundred metres from the family home, lit to ward off the Hidden People while the

professor emeritus is away celebrating his brother-in-law's seventieth birthday, together with his wife and son. All the lights in the neighbouring house. That's where the neighbour lives who's agreed to look in on Meera. And a little further away there's a lava field, with a clump of knotty dwarf birches clinging to a riverbank. Mighty waterfalls colour the river a deep turquoise, and suddenly we're there, suddenly the torrent is tearing at us, pushing us against stones large and small, but in the same instant we can see a group of doctors and nurses gathering around Lykke's bed, far away. Their rapid movements. Their wrinkled brows. The words tumbling over their lips.

Bad.

Immediately.

Urgent.

Lykke herself knows nothing of this. She can't see what we see; she's still floating about in her own no man's land. That must be quite pleasant. Sadly, we know it won't last forever, as no man's land always gives way to a specific place. Sooner or later. We can't escape. Not even by dying.

Maybe that's what's happening to Lykke. If so, three young men from Nässjö are about to become murderers. Three young men, once pupils at Lykke's school, who loathe her deeply and intensely for her very obvious contempt for their fantasies of national honour and white supremacy. Three young men who got a very audible ticking-off from her in the town centre just a week or so ago for bullying a Roma girl who'd been begging outside the

Co-op. They'd been mimicking the girl. Mocking her. Shoving her. She'd reacted by lowering her head and burying her face in her hands. It was bad. And what made it even worse was that we recognised that gesture.

There was a time when Meera too lowered her head and buried her face in her hands.

But when? And where? And why? We don't quite recall. Or maybe it's more that we don't want to.

Oh. We were there a moment ago. Then we weren't. Now we're here. Again. Meera is gripped by another contraction, and this one is still more powerful, making all three of them quake from head to foot just before it squeezes something out between her legs. In no time she grasps what's happening.

Her waters. Her waters have broken.

The following contraction rolls in, now we'll forget the past, now all we see is that Meera's waters have broken, she's all alone, and the coverlet, that glossy white coverlet, is ruined.

So she yells again. Yells as never before. *Help me! Help me, someone, help me, help me, help me...*

\*

'My dear, *elskan mín*... oh, dear me...'

The overhead light dazzles Meera, forcing her to close her eyes, but with them shut the pain just worsens, someone's pulling a



flaming torch through her womb, she's exploding, and she has to open her eyes again, a vague figure appears in the middle of the light, but she can't see who it is, has to shut her eyes, has to cry out, has to open her eyes again, and the figure acquires a clearer outline and a face. Yes! Her prayers have been answered. Someone has come.

Gunhildur. The neighbour. She's here, though it's only an hour since the last time. Meera is no longer alone.

'Dear me,' Gunhildur repeats, just as the contraction is ebbing away, allowing Meera to rest for a moment. 'Dear me, oh dear me...'

Meera lacks the strength to respond, but she meets Gunhildur's eyes and grimaces slightly, then spreads her legs further so Gunhildur will understand how close she is to giving birth. Brage has already got through the first gateway and is half way to the second; he's tiny, but even so he's far too big, and he's more exhausted than his mother. Astrid stretches after him with one hand, grasping at his heel, misses, yet smiles slightly at the same time, as if happy about the space suddenly opening up around her. Then Meera's womb contracts again, more strongly now, and she has to push, propelling Brage forward, and...

'She's giving birth now,' Gunhildur yells into her mobile. 'Come quickly! She's giving birth!'

Then she flings the mobile onto the bed, gets onto the foot end, and kneels there.

\*

There's a sudden eddy, and suddenly we're no longer in Reykholt, and not in no man's land either. The past spreads out before us, just as we feared it might before Lykke, but this is happening to Meera – suddenly both she and we can see her whole life, every day, every hour, every minute and second. This ought to frighten her, but she isn't particularly afraid, even though she's been tormented by the fear of death throughout her pregnancy. She doesn't want Brage and Astrid to be motherless in their earliest years, as she knows that does something to you; it hurts you, eats away at you, and destroys all the pathways to the person you would otherwise have become. But she's secure in the thought that her children can never be abandoned. There's Baldur, for one thing, and Baldur's mother and father. And somewhere, a long way away, there's Lykke too, and she'll continue to exist, she *must* continue to exist, and as long as she exists no one will ever be abandoned. Lykke is the one who never leaves. She's the one who's always there, and who promised, wordlessly, to be there forever. Even when Meera abandoned her.

Yes, that's what happened. Meera abandoned Lykke. Changed her name, went on her way, and never got in touch again. Took revenge on Lykke for nothing at all – or for living in Nässjö.

And now we see a very young Meera, still pretending her name's Fatima, as she walks alongside the stone wall of the old churchyard back in Nässjö, with her thumbs stuck through the straps of her rucksack. She's slightly worried that her new trainers

are a bit tight around the heels, which might give her blood blisters, but she does have some plasters in the right outside pocket of her rucksack; she saw Lykke putting a whole packet in, despite her own protests. She'll take it out once she's boarded the train, but till then she won't betray the stinging pain in her heel either through her expression or through her tone of voice – not even if she ends up lame as a result.

Yes, she seems bitter. More bitter than she should be. That's not nice and does her no credit, of course, but she couldn't give a damn, being about to go on her way and free herself from herself. Now she can stop being half-Swedish and half-Asian, a proper coconut, *ha ha ha*, dark on the outside and white on the inside, a person who can never belong and who, since the very first day of her life, has always been someone who could be abandoned and dumped on a river bank. So now she's the one doing the abandoning. She's going to rid herself of all the voices and opinions that have dogged her, she's going to put this town behind her, along with all those memories of insipidly pale boys making monkey noises and scratching the back of their knees as soon as they saw her, and dark-eyed youths who called her a 'fucking *suedi*', and their veiled sisters who called her a whore under their breath, while a few whey-faced, sickeningly ingratiating girls looked askance and moaned about how racist they were. As if they'd forgotten what they used to shout after her as recently as the first year of secondary school. The same girls who'd had no qualms about stroking her hair, giggling about how coarse it felt and offering her advice on how to

make it softer, while sighing and wishing they could have more attractive noses – maybe not quite the same as Fatima’s, which is very slightly bent, almost aristocratic, but all the same. And how wonderful it would be not to get sunburn every summer, to be naturally brown – though maybe not quite as brown as Fatima, but all the same...

All of them had made her feel ugly.

But she isn’t ugly. She just feels ugly. And there’s absolutely no need. That’s what Lykke’s always said, and night after night Fatima has tried to convince herself that she’s right by creeping out of bed when she ought to be asleep, undressing and scrutinising every part of her body in the bedroom mirror. And sometimes she can actually see she’s not particularly ugly. A bit, maybe, but not very. She has a slender waist. Conical breasts. A magnificently shaped head. She’s not even black, although some youths call her a nignog. She’s brown. Golden brown. And those that have scorned her most aren’t white. They’re pink. Piggy pink. The whole lot of them. That’s ugly. The ugliest of all ugly colours in the whole world.

Lykke’s walking alongside her, straight-backed and for once completely silent. She’s run out of arguments and finally yielded to facts. The daughter who isn’t her daughter is really going off on an interrail trip. On her own. No one can go with her.

Now Lykke slows down slightly, clearing her throat in a quite uncharacteristic way. As if she’s nervous. Almost scared.

‘I know you don’t want...’

Here we go. Same old stuff as yesterday. Money, money, money. Fatima doesn't reply. Lykke clears her throat again.

'I know you don't want it, but it's essential you have some cash in reserve, since you've decided to go travelling on your own... And I've saved some for you. It's your money, it was never meant for anyone else.'

Fatima presses her lips together. Lykke knows what she thinks, and she should accept it. But of course she doesn't, she just goes on.

'It's great that you've saved up so carefully yourself, but you have to understand...'

Blah, blah, blah. Lykke just doesn't get it, does she, and she hasn't a clue that Fatima's not heading for Copenhagen, as she thinks. Fatima's going to Gothenburg. The money she inherited from Magdalena is waiting there, and it must be quite a bit, at least a hundred thousand kronor. At least. Maybe even half a million. And Henrik *has to* give her the money now, because she's turned eighteen and passed her school-leaving exams with flying colours.

It's her money. Hers alone. Even though Henrik has been in charge of it, as the person with official custody, despite never once having put in an appearance. The fact is that Fatima has taken care of herself ever since she was tiny, albeit with some help from Lykke since she was nine. The problem is just that Lykke was never granted formal custody and that she came into Fatima's life too late. By that stage, Fatima had already learned not to rely on anyone but herself. But now she's grown-up, now she can be totally and utterly

self-reliant, now she can and will demand her rights. Always assuming that she can get hold of the old bastard.

Yes, that's how she thinks of him. The old lush.

He hasn't rung for over four years, and he didn't come for her final exams, even though Lykke actually managed to invite him. He never replied when Lykke or Fatima rang his mobile, but when Lykke managed to find out via the internet which church he was working for and rang him during office hours, she did get hold of him. But it was an extremely brief exchange.

'Bloody stuck-up git,' said Lykke when the call was over. 'Sorry, I know he's your dad, but...'

There was absolutely no need for her to apologise. Henrik had never been Fatima's dad and never would be. All he'd been was the holder of arbitrary power.

'I've saved all your maintenance money,' Lykke says now. 'Every penny. You know that. And now I've changed the account to your name. There's a bank card in your rucksack, too, right at the bottom in a white envelope. And I do hope you're going to use it, because it's your money...'

Fatima closes her eyes, refusing to answer. But her silence doesn't silence Lykke, who just carries on talking.

'...and there's an insurance paper in the same envelope. So you've got travel insurance. And a few cards in different languages with my address and phone number. And a list of the addresses of Swedish embassies and consulates all over Europe. I hope you'll...'

Now they've reached the Esplanade. There, at the end of its sweep, is the yellow station building. The gateway to freedom. This is the moment when everything changes. Here. Fatima isn't Fatima any more – from now on she'll only answer to her Indian name. Now she's Meera, now she's taking a step back into her own history, smiling slightly at the realisation that this is a step into the future too. Lykke can see something's happening, but doesn't understand what, and for the first time in her life she grips Meera's upper arm with both hands, as if she wanted to hold on to her and force her to stay, but that only delays Meera for a second, then she pulls her arm back, tilting her head.

'This is where we say goodbye,' she says. 'There's no need for you to come all the way down to the platform with me.'

She feels a pang on seeing how hurt Lykke is. The mother who isn't her mother suddenly looks completely defenceless. She's silent now too, having finally said all she had to say. Meera straightens her rucksack.

'I'll ring you,' she says.

That's an out-and-out lie. Because she has no intention of ringing Lykke.

So she doesn't board the train to Copenhagen. She boards the Gothenburg train, takes a seat facing forward to avoid getting travel sick, and smiles to herself on realising that she's done just what Lykke advised. This is actually the first time she's ever been on a train going further than Jönköping, and that was always a local

train. She looks around curiously now. Not quite as old-fashioned as she'd thought it would be. Her seat has a high back and it's quite comfortable. And it's next to the window too.

None of the other passengers takes the seat next to her, and at the back of her mind she hears Lykke assuring her that that really doesn't have to mean they're prejudiced, not at all, it's because there are plenty of seats free in this carriage. But Meera knows what she knows, and she's happy to be sitting on her own. She has quite a lot to do, after all.

First she undoes the delicate chain around her neck and lets the silver pendant in the shape of Fatima's hand slip off, before putting it into the small plastic bag under the window that serves as a waste paper basket. Then she lifts the rucksack off the floor and puts it on the seat, and sticks a so-called skin-coloured plaster on her sore heel. After that she rummages around in search of the envelope Lykke said she'd put at the bottom. It's quite hard to find it; Lykke helped her pack the rucksack despite all her protests, rolling every pair of trousers and every sweater into a hard little sausage done up with a rubber band, and now Meera has to pull everything out to get at the envelope. Finally she locates it. She lays it on the table in front of her, then packs the rucksack again with some difficulty. By the time she finally manages to zip it up, the train is on its way. That brings a smile to her face.

Goodbye, Nässjö. Farewell, Fatima. *Adiós. Adieu.* I hope we never meet again.



Lykke has put an account statement in the envelope, of course, so Meera can see that the maintenance money from Henrik has arrived every month and that Lykke has never taken a penny out. She's the one who's paid for everything Meera's had over the last five years. Five quilted jackets, a parka, nine pairs of jeans, every single blouse, bra and sweater. And much, much more. As a result, there's a very considerable sum in the account, about four times as much as what she managed to put aside from her summer jobs.

Her shoulders relax. She'll be all right. For a long time. And once she has access to the money she inherited from Magdalena, she'll even be well-off.

She can travel wherever she wants. All over the world. And that's just what she plans to do.

\*

It's raining in Gothenburg. Pouring. The sky is leaden and grey above the city, and you can hardly see out through the window of the tram. Not that there seems to be that much to see. Light grey buildings. Dark grey buildings. Red brick buildings. Buildings, buildings and more buildings.

The tram trundles up a last slope and Meera, guided by intuition rather than certainty that this is where she needs to get off, presses the red button and heaves the rucksack onto her back while the tram slows down. Now, suddenly, she's out in the street, looking around.

The area looks so-so. Not exactly smart, and not exactly down-at-heel either. Featureless, if anything. The house fronts are yellow. Plain, undivided windows. Built in the 1950s, then. The lights are on in many of the apartments, even though it's June and still only afternoon. That's because of the rain, of course.

Meera isn't bothered by the rain. The droplets will just settle like crystals in her hair, maybe they'll flatten her page cut a little, but that doesn't matter. Shaking her head so that some of the glittering droplets fly off, she makes her way over to the yellow buildings. 44 C. That's the number she wants.

It takes a while for her to find the right entrance, but there it is at last. Teak and glass. And – of course – a neat grey keypad with a set of black buttons next to the door. Suddenly she feels very tired. The entrance code, of course. Obviously you need the entrance code to get in. Why didn't she think of that? She's about to lean her forehead against the glass of the door and heave a deep sigh when the light goes on in the staircase and she hears someone running down the stairs. The footsteps are those of a young person, light and swift, and soon a pair of legs in skinny jeans with a fashionable rip over the left knee appear, followed a second later by a girl with curly blonde hair.

'Hi,' she says, opening the door. 'Still raining, is it?'

Meera nods silently. The girl pulls a face.

'Shit, what a pain,' she says, leaning against the open door while she adjusts her hoodie, covering her head. 'You going in?'

Meera only manages a low mumble, but scurries indoors. She turns to say thank you, but the girl's already gone.

It seems Henrik lives on the second floor, to judge from the white plastic letters on a dark blue velvety nameplate. And apparently he's still together with Ingeborg. He's made sure her *von* is there, and that her name comes first. Why don't they have the same surname? Haven't they ever married? And if not, what are Henrik's employer's views on that?

Well, it hardly matters. We'll slip along a little nervously behind Meera as she pulls herself slowly up the stairs, gripping the flat metal handrail. We know she's at pains to repress her fear, but that may not be going too well. Stepping on a small cone-shaped fossil embedded in a stair, she fleetingly recalls that someone, Lykke perhaps, once taught her that the presence of a fossil means the staircase is probably not made of marble but of limestone, since nearly all fossils are consumed and destroyed by the process of marble formation. She goes on to count every fossil in the entire staircase, observing that there are six of them, which helps her control the nervous tension that threatens to spread from her stomach to her heart and then to her head. She doesn't mean to let herself get as nervous as she really is. Not on your life. So when she reaches the second floor she doesn't stop, but stretches out her hand and rings at the door while still taking her last step.

R-r-r-r-r, goes the buzzer. It's an odd sound for a buzzer, muffled and almost secretive. Drawing herself up, Meera runs a

hand over her hair and feels that the rain has flattened it. Swiftly banishing the lurking shame of that realisation, she grimaces slightly to warm up her facial muscles, and tries to put on a poker face that's as controlled as she can possibly manage.

She listens intently for any sounds from inside the apartment. Nothing happens. The whole building is utterly silent.

Meera buzzes at the door again, a little longer now. Then she steps back and waits.

Was that something she heard? A bump from somewhere inside? Breathing in, she extends her finger again, presses again, but now more purposefully and assertively.

‘What on earth is going on?’

Though Meera hasn't heard that voice for many years, recognition is instantaneous. Ingeborg. The lovely Ingeborg from that lovely family in Eksjö. The lock rattles, clearly it's hard to unlock the door, but in the end it yields. The door opens very slightly, a silvery glint revealing that the safety chain is on, and behind it she glimpses Ingeborg's grey eyes. She hasn't got any more colourful since moving to Gothenburg; she's still completely beige. Beige complexion, beige lips, beige hair. She's wearing a white blouse ironed in such a way as to create tiny folds in the collar, running parallel to the seam. That might have conveyed an impression of meticulous care and innocence, if someone else had been wearing the blouse.

‘Yes?’ she says, wincing in distaste. ‘What's it about?’

Meera starts. Doesn't Ingeborg recognise her?

‘Sorry,’ she says, hearing her voice tremble, while yelling at herself internally. Why is she saying sorry? Is there any reason for that at all? No. So she holds herself erect.

‘Is Henrik at home?’

Ingeborg curls her upper lip, perhaps to show her utter contempt.

‘No.’

Nothing else. No apology, no information about when he might be expected to turn up, no offer to take a message. Meera tries to straighten her already straight back.

‘Do you know when he’ll be back?’

‘No.’

‘Do you know where he is?’

‘No.’

‘Can you ask him to ring me?’

‘No.’

Meera is so taken-aback that her jaw drops, literally.

‘But...’ she says, and no sooner has the door been slammed in her face than there’s a rattling sound and it opens again a second later, wide this time. The safety chain is off, and there’s Ingeborg in full battle mode, her chin jutting, dressed in a frilly apron with a pattern of pink flowers over a pleated dark blue dress. She looks like something straight out of a 1940s magazine. The good spouse and housewife. An upright woman. It’s a clever disguise.

‘Fuck off,’ she says. Her eyes have narrowed and her expression is venomous.

Meera blinks.

‘What?’

‘I said, fuck off! That means you’re to go. So go! Leave! Fuck off!’

Waving her right hand, Ingeborg takes a threatening step forward, but stops with one foot on the staircase and the other still in the apartment.

‘Are you hard of hearing?’

The limestone floor under Meera buckles, she can’t believe this is happening.

‘But Henrik is my ...’

Ingeborg steps right out onto the stair and stands close to Meera, breathing heavily through her nose.

‘Henrik isn’t *your* anything!’

Meera backs involuntarily, so flabbergasted that she forgets to be afraid.

‘Calm down! I only want my money...’

Ingeborg thrusts her head forward still more, pulling her eyebrows together in fury. Her breath smells bitter.

‘What money? What?’

Meera bites her lower lip to remind herself that she must stand her ground, that she mustn’t under any circumstances take another step back.

‘My inheritance from Magdalena. I’m eighteen now, I’m an adult and I want my money...’

Ingeborg snorts.

‘There’s no money here! You can forget that!’

But Meera has found her resistance, so now she leans forward, unconsciously registering that she is at least ten centimetres taller than Ingeborg.

‘I’m Magdalena’s heir! The only one! And Henrik has been managing my money as my guardian. But now I’m an adult and I want it. Do you understand that? You stupid old woman!’

Now Ingeborg’s jaw drops. It quivers slightly for the few seconds it takes her to recover from the affront, then she closes her mouth.

‘Get out,’ she says in a very calm, low voice. ‘You are the biggest mistake Henrik ever made and he knows that, he’s finally grasped that fact. People like you shouldn’t be in this country. He’s finally understood that. So just get out! Fuck off! We don’t want anything to do with you. Do you understand that?’

An immense fatigue descends on Meera. She would like to sink down on the spot, just sit down and sink through the limestone, turn into a little fossil among other fossils and lie concealed for millennium after millennium. But since that isn’t an option, she forces herself to raise her head and look Ingeborg straight in the eye. And now her fury awakens in earnest. Without a thought she swiftly seizes Ingeborg’s index finger and bends it back, hard and fast. Ingeborg breathes hard – hopefully it’s painful, very painful. But Meera isn’t about to let go, she presses even harder and hears something cracking inside the finger, then she raises her other hand and grabs Ingeborg’s hair, which feels stiff and rather

sticky with hairspray. Perhaps Ingeborg screams, but Meera doesn't hear her.

'You horrible old woman,' she breathes in a hoarse whisper. 'You vile ...'

Then she turns her back on Ingeborg and runs down the stairs.

\*

A cry. High-pitched. Slightly wheezy.

Meera recognises it. Or at least thinks she does. Opening her eyes, she looks around, glimpsing slightly yellowed grass on the riverbank next to her, grass growing on dry, naked, dusty earth, hears herself utter that cry again...

No. That's not how it is. It's not even a memory. It's just something someone told her a long time ago, so she blinks abruptly, dazzled again by the overhead light, and hears that little cry again as Gunhildur speaks, her voice tearful:

'The first one's out now... And he's crying, but the umbilical cord...'

There's a reply from the mobile phone, which, apparently, is lying on the bloodstained coverlet with the loudspeaker on, but Meera can't hear what's being said.

'Please will you all hurry up!' Gunhildur cries. 'Please, she seems to be quite unconscious...'



And she's right. Meera is totally unconscious, falling again through time's expanses.

\*

'Hiya,' says a young male voice. 'Where you from, then?'

Meera doesn't reply, having vowed never to answer that idiotic question again, particularly when it comes from another dim and probably racist young man, so she just bows her head lower where's she's sitting and raises her hands. Buries her face in them. But she still glimpses the floor between her fingers. Grey paving slabs. Feet hurrying past, feet in trainers, sandals, smart lace-ups and considerably less smart high-heeled court shoes. It's the rush hour, and Gothenburg Central is heaving with people, they're all rushing past, all on their way somewhere. Most of them are on their way home, of course, as most of them naturally have a home to go to. In fact, all of them have a home to go to. All of them but her. For a moment the tears well up inside her and she feels angry at herself for her self-pity and manages to think that yes, she does actually have a home to go to and a mum who isn't really her mum, but still is to all intents and purposes, and that while Nässjö has its downsides, there are some decent people there too, school friends like Susanne and Lotta, for example, and some others, both boys and girls, who've never said a nasty word to her, but who've giggled and gossiped and laughed just as much with her as with others, and even tried to get her to see that Aron with the sticking-out ears was

really in love with her – and now, at this moment, she knows it was true. Aron was in love with her, but she never let him kiss her, even though she knew she could fall just as much in love with him, for if that happened he could leave her, and she couldn't bear yet another loss, so instead she got together with Jonatan, who, though an absolute shit and a closet racist, was someone she could drop once she'd got rid of her damned virginity, which, although it was fairly low down on the list of her humiliations, was nonetheless on that list...

‘Oi! Why won't you answer?’

Lowering her hands slightly, Meera glimpses a pair of hands clasped in front of a zipped fly, then looks down at the floor again. Yeah. A typical nailbiter who just has to show he's got some balls. So what? Is she supposed to be trembling with fear now? Or to break into a tap dance so he'll deign to give her a little attention?

‘Don't you understand Swedish?’

A higher voice breaks in.

‘Give it a rest, Mackan! She just doesn't want to talk to you.’

Unable to resist the impulse to lift her head and look at the girl in front of her, Meera takes a startled breath. It's the blonde girl who let her into the building where Henrik lives. And the girl is equally surprised. She flops onto the bench next to Meera.

‘It's you,’ she says.

Meera grimaces slightly.

‘Yeah.’

‘We met earlier today...’

‘Yeah, I know.’

‘And now we’re here.’

The girl leans against the backrest and stretches her legs out. The lad in front of them spots a few other youths some distance away, calls out to them and thrusts his hands into his pockets with exaggerated nonchalance. Then, shrugging, he disappears. Meera’s gaze follows him. The girl beside her clears her throat slightly.

‘I’m Josefin.’

Meera hesitates momentarily; now she has to decide whether she really has changed her name or not. Taking a shallow breath, she says:

‘I’m Meera.’

‘Me what?’

‘Meera. It’s an Indian name.’

Josefin nods slowly.

‘Ah, you’re Indian. But your Swedish is bloody brilliant.’

‘No big deal. I’m adopted.’

‘Lucky you.’

‘What?’

‘Lucky you for being adopted. Wish someone had adopted me.’

Meera blinks.

‘No, really?’

‘Yeah, I do. It would’ve been better. For me and for Mum.’

‘Why’s that?’

‘Didn’t want to have me, did she, but she couldn’t make up her mind to have an abortion... She’s a druggie, you see. Can’t make up her mind to do anything. Apart from getting blasted, of course. Got any money?’

Meera’s back straightens and she quickly wraps her legs around the rucksack on the ground in front of her.

‘Why?’

Josefin gives Meera a sharp look and starts to get up.

‘No need to worry. I’m not gonna pinch your money. I’m not a bloody thief, just so’s you know.’

Meera’s cheeks flame.

‘I didn’t mean that...’

Pushing aside a lock of hair from one cheek, Josefin slicks it behind her ear.

‘I don’t give a fuck what you meant...’

Then she turned and went on her way.

Abandoned. Left. Alone.

Again.

Well, what had she expected would happen today? That Josefin would have wanted to be her best friend? Or that Ingeborg would have asked her in for afternoon tea? That Henrik would have rushed home from work just to welcome her and hand over an extremely well-filled bank account and a school-leaving gift, a gold bracelet more beautiful than all the gold bracelets the other girls in her class had shown off? And why should she want to have a gold

bracelet as a gift from Henrik anyway? She already has one, Lykke's ugly old Bismarck link bracelet which she was given when she turned eighteen. It's nearly two centimetres wide and it's lying in an inside pocket of her rucksack, where it can stay until her money runs out, then she can sell it. But it should take a while until that day comes; the money in her bank account should last for a year or more, depending on how far she decides to travel and where she chooses to stay... Not to mention the money Magdalena left her, which will come to her no matter how difficult Henrik and Ingeborg mean to be. So she'll be all right. Of course she will. Meera is always all right, endures everything, survives everything.

Two trains have already left for Copenhagen, and there's a third in half an hour. Maybe she should get up, shoulder her rucksack and head off to the ticket office. Book a seat. But then she'd get in to Copenhagen pretty late in the evening, and for a moment she pictures herself on a platform ringed in by a bunch of unusually nasty Danes, racists who won't believe her assurances that she's actually Swedish, who won't hesitate to rough her up because the colour of her skin isn't like theirs, and who might shove her onto the tracks so that a train on its way into the station hits her as she falls, tossing her into the air and then onto the track so that her neck lands on the rails, breaking something at the back of her neck and immobilising her, yet she won't lose consciousness, but instead, in the last ten seconds of her life, she'll see the solid metal wheels approaching, just before they devour her throat, her life and her future...

Hmmm. Although that's just a figment of the imagination, perhaps she won't go on to Copenhagen tonight anyway. Maybe she'll stop over in Gothenburg. Go to a youth hostel. Or even a hotel.

Pulling her mobile out, she looks at it gloomily. Four missed calls, all from Lykke. It's a good thing she put it on silent so she didn't answer automatically. That might well have happened, and it would have made her disappearance far less definitive than it is now. She deletes the list of calls, googles youth hostels in Gothenburg and immediately finds three, no, four names. One of them seems to be somewhere near here in the city centre. She gets to her feet and shoulders her rucksack, feeling hunger stir in the pit of her stomach for the first time in a long while. Of course. She hasn't had anything to eat. Nothing all day, and it's been a long day. Oh well, she'll have to think about that later, she's got to go and find the youth hostel now.

'Look at me, girl,' says someone, laying a hand on her shoulder just as she takes the first couple of steps. She turns her head swiftly, gripping the straps of her rucksack tightly. There's Mackan behind her, the youth Josefin sent packing, with three others. They all look deadly serious and they've all adopted the same stance, feet wide apart and arms crossed. Meera raises her eyebrows.

'What is it?'

'There are rules,' says Mackan. 'You know that.'

Meera stands with her feet wide apart too.

'I see.'

‘And one of the rules is, you have to show people respect when they’re talking to you.’

Letting go of the rucksack straps, Meera crosses her arms in an unconscious parody of the youths’ body language. This gang reminds her of those youths in Nässjö who called her a *suedi* and a coconut. That’s why she finds them irritating, incredibly irritating. She smiles a slightly sceptical smile.

‘Seriously?’

‘Yeah. Seriously.’

‘So how do I show you respect?’

‘You say hi when someone says hi to you. And you answer when someone speaks to you.’

Meera’s mouth straightens somewhat.

‘I see. And how do you guys show me respect?’

Mackan, already straight-backed, draws himself up further.

‘By protecting you.’

Meera raises her eyebrows again.

‘From what?’

‘Rapists and guys like that...’

Smiling slightly, Meera takes hold of her rucksack straps again.

‘Thanks for the offer, but there’s no need.’

She turns, and is about to go on her way when Mackan reaches out and grabs her upper arm.

‘You’re a fucking cunt! D’you know that? A fucking stuck-up cunt!’

Meera tries to pull her arm back, but can't. Glancing around rapidly, she sees the station's crowded, but everyone's hurrying past, unseeing and indifferent. For a second she longs for Lykke and her constant protection, her almost magical ability to appear whenever she's most needed, thanks to which no one – not even Ellinor's boyfriend, that red-haired Neanderthal bastard – dared set on her in the school corridors.

But now she's not in school, she's in Gothenburg Central Station, surrounded by four youths who, though rather short and skinny, are stronger than her. Especially when they're together. But then, out of the blue, someone shoves her, which loosens Mackan's grip on her upper arm.

'Fucking hell, Mackan – pack it in, will ya!'

It takes Meera a few seconds to realise what's happening, and in that time Josefin pushes in between her and Mackan.

'Leave the kid alone!' Josefin yells. 'You got that? Just piss off! Fuck off!'

And the miracle happens: first Mackan steps back, pushing his hands into the pockets of his jeans, then he assumes an extremely haughty expression before turning and walking off. His three companions repeat his gestures with such precision that their movements appear to be choreographed.

Meera feels her muscles relaxing, especially at the back of her neck.

'Thanks,' she says, closing her eyes for a second and deciding to try and make up for everything. 'Fancy a hamburger?'



Josefin beams.

‘You betcha,’ she says. ‘But you’ll have to treat me, ‘cause I’m skint.’

\* \* \*