

STONE SCHUNNESSON

Days

and Days

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Dagarna, dagarna, dagarna
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WHEN I WALKED into my medium's office, the summer after my first reality TV show was a hit, she glanced at me and said that I looked different. "Skinny?" I asked hopefully, and Marite replied: "No, established." For three years I'd transferred her ten large every twelve weeks for unlimited access to her services in person or on the phone, if I called after four. "You've lost yourself in the sauce," was one of the last things she said to me, years later, when the knuckles on my right hand were raw from having punched the door to our building on Slip Street. Baby was supposed to come with me to some whisky event when out of nowhere he'd decided that it was ridiculous. The static started one street down from our apartment when the homeless woman on Reimersholme Island approached us like a wraith. "Could you spare a cigarette?" she asked. I clutched the pack in my fist and gave her my back. "I can pay," she said. *Okay, so that'll be two hundred, then,* I said, avoiding eye contact, eager to continue the fight—the fight that was the only thing that could get my Baby to stay. Baby said, *for Christ's sake, Bibbs.* "Give her a cigarette," and without thinking I turned around and threw the pack in her face. Baby looked at me and said *you crazy bitch.* The cigarettes tumbled out and rolled across the wet asphalt. It was the

last day of the year that the trees would still have their leaves, and in but a few hours the barren months would begin their reign. Baby entered the code and when the building door slammed shut on me, with Baby on the other side, I whacked it. It took a moment before my hand started bleeding, slowly, as though the wound were hesitating. *Got a light?*, the woman asked, and I rooted around in my bag, knuckles burning. I thought I had punched the door out of rage, but really it was an appeal to return to myself. Yes, I was getting lost in the sauce, I can't explain it any better than that. I had hoped to be in possession of a stronger character. Don't we all. Us weak of character have all at some point fantasized about such strength.

My time with Marite changed me, but I stopped visiting her in Årsta after she said that I'd lost myself in the sauce and because she was sinking all of her income, savings too, into building an app no one would pay for. The app let you shoot slow motion videos. Marite wore an amber necklace, and when she told me about the idea I didn't want to hurt her feelings, so I didn't mention that everyone could already do this. Everyone but Marite, with her burner phone and solo fiftieth birthday celebration in Peru. After launching the app she started calling me more often than I was calling her, and with mounting desperation. She owed the team in Poland a mint, and instead of paying her debt she kept giving them more work each week. It was adding up. "Bibbs," she said when she called hoping to sell me on more psychic hours, "There's no such

thing as investing too much in your health.” *Wait, how did you find those people in Poland*, I wanted to know, and she told me that she’d typed into a box that had popped up while she was googling. *Got it*, I said, but I was out of money. *Maybe you could promote the app?* she’d ask more than once during each phone call. I didn’t want to promote the app. The app would link me with failure in a far too obvious way.

My visits to Marite were something I’d afforded myself in a year when the money was basically rolling in on its own. But my lucky streak ran out, and Marite became an expense among others once she started seeing me with a clarity that I could live without. I stopped taking all of her calls and stopped calling without saying why. No way could I tell her that I’d been shooting slow motion videos for years and that her feeling bad was making me feel worse. Also I couldn’t afford her. I didn’t have the heart to say that everything had seemed so brilliant, until it wasn’t anymore.

I WILL NEVER FORGIVE myself for not realizing that Baby was about to leave me. Looking back I can see the signs, but they were hard to interpret before I knew what I know now. He was being unusually critical of me while I was packing for one of my work trips but I didn't care, as I so often didn't care about him.

“So, you're off on a glorified bar tour, just like a reality TV star.”

I'd defended myself absent-mindedly. It wasn't a bar tour. Were there even bar tours anymore? The performance happened to be in a bar, and I was going to be interviewed about linear television.

“Just you?”

“Not sure.” But it wasn't just me. It was a former Eurodisco singer, the man who brought pointers to Sweden, and a porn star who'd turned fifty.

“And some art school student put it together?”

“No, not a student, well, it's his final degree project.”

“Don't be all like 'degree project,' Bibbs, as if getting wasted with has-beens is some sort of science.”

“I'm sorry.” Baby didn't have a degree and hadn't gone to university, but each month he was paid the same salary at the same

time, even if he'd been sick. This afforded him a certain authority that was hard for me to beat.

My invoice would be for ten grand, because the student was collaborating with a credit service. Travel and accommodation were paid for. The appearance was at a bar in Göteborg, and I would be staying at Hôtel Eggers. When we were in Göteborg Baby loved staying at Eggers, a hotel with a distinguished heritage decked out in heavy blue fabrics and old cabinets. Maybe this was why he was sulking, I'd thought. He hated when I went away and liked to pick fights with me beforehand so I wouldn't be able to leave him behind, not really. I'd carry him around like a manic thought, even after I arrived at my destination. Baby loved staying in hotels, but hated paying for them. I gladly footed the bill to make him happy, but because it was an expense that I stood for we hadn't been able to in a while.

I always packed several changes of clothes because my outfit was always a comment on what I was doing, whatever I was doing. Before Baby came home from work I'd put on my everyday face and change into my at-home clothes; one of the things that had first attracted me to Baby was how considered his clothing always was. A couple of years into the relationship he started wearing sweatpants at home, and I teased him until he stopped. In spite of his comparatively low income he had expensive turtlenecks and limited-edition shoes. Baby took good, too good, care of his clothes

which led him to point out every run in my stockings in winter, and in the evenings he got his kicks de-pilling his coats. Most of the expensive items in my wardrobe were freebies and so I wasn't particularly attached to them, unsure if I would have bought them in the first place had I been given the chance, like I was unsure if I (had it been a choice) would have used the moisturizers on my shelf or gotten the haircut my hairdresser gave me in exchange for photos. Baby would follow me around like an anxious maid, picking up dresses from the damp bathroom floor and hanging them on hangers. "Four thousand," he'd say. "This one costs four thousand."

A week ago Saturday I came home from the glorified bar tour not thinking about Baby's objection to the gig. I felt light and happy. I'd basked in the attention in Göteborg and had avoided carbs for two days. When I came into the bedroom, Baby was sitting up straight on the bed and wearing a long-sleeved white T-shirt and a pair of mid-thigh-length Thom Browne shorts, which I'd bought for him the summer we stayed at Soho House in Berlin. Before I had a chance to kiss him, he said: *I'm leaving you.*

His leaving came as a surprise. It still surprises me now. I never thought he'd have the guts, and that he'd want a quick exit, no drama. His conversational tone suggested our days were numbered. This leaving was different to how I usually left him, wound-up and loud, like the finalé of a fight. I would hear him behind me begging me to stay as I slammed the door in a rage.

“It’s time, Bibbs.” For the first time in a long time I liked the way he looked. Long-limbed, a gold hoop in one ear. How many times hadn’t we left each other, hysterical. Okay, he wasn’t usually the one who left the apartment, but leaving has countless manifestations. When I cut up his good shirt right in front of him and he slapped the scissors out of my hand and the tip scratched me, hadn’t he left me then? But in a situation like that it’s impossible for either party to actually leave. Or the time the police approached us on the street and asked how we were doing after I’d thrown my key ring at him—we’d clung to each other, loyal to the end. But now Baby was saying that this was it. I was standing in front of him, unsure of what to do. I’d wanted to take a nap on the bed, but now wasn’t the time. Out of habit I started counting in my head, like I counted whenever I was faced with a large expense. I couldn’t afford to be left. Baby’s thighs looked yellowish tan in those white shorts. I knew the muscle above his knee contracting and relaxing was considered desirable. Neither could I afford to admit to Baby that I couldn’t afford to be left. “Give me one good reason why you should leave,” I said, instead of lying down on the bed. “One single reason.”

We don’t have any mutual interests

(But you don’t even have interests)

You do nothing during the day

(And this bothers you why, you’re at work anyway)

You lie about everything

(No, I don't)

Our fights are too violent

(I thought you liked that)

You don't want to have children with me

(But I don't want to have children with ANYONE)

Baby rubbed his face with his hands, which he thought were too small. He was freshly shaven, like he was on every special occasion. He had a complex about his hands. But he thought he was great at oral sex. In fact he wasn't, and I'd never mentioned it, to compensate for, or to equal out, the hand thing. When we first met he would tell me stories about the women he'd gone down on, how much they'd enjoyed it. Sometimes when I walked around at home and entered the meditative state that comes with repetitive everyday tasks I'd catch myself thinking about those women, wondering what noises they made. The images I had of Baby with other women were as strong as the image of Baby, the moment he came inside me.

“Okay, Bibbs, so maybe I don't have a better reason than not wanting to take care of you anymore.”

I went hard inside and sensed the opening for a discussion closing up. I wanted to take my bag, get out of there, and redo my arrival. Redo my trip. Redo whatever it was that had pushed Baby over the edge. The pleasure I was taking in his appearance disappeared. The landscape we stood in was barren.

“You can’t say that to me,” I said.

“I know, you don’t want to hear it. But that’s the way it is. There you go. I don’t have it in me anymore.”

How could I have been so stupid as to not understand that his help was conditional? Was this some form of, well, I don’t know. Oppression? I’d kept explaining to him that things would turn around soon, I’d turn myself around soon. I was easier to live with than I’d made myself out to be.

“I’m going to be raking it in again soon.”

“Dammit Bibbs, this isn’t about the money.”

Of course it was about the money. Everything was about the money, between friends or ex-lovers. Trying to buy time, I started searching the wardrobe for a crisp white shirt, my back to him. There is nothing to weigh up against the money, no answer as good as that one. Behind me I heard Baby getting up from the bed, where he’d been sitting since my homecoming.

“Where are you going?” I asked.

“What do you mean?”

“I thought you were leaving.”

In a voice that belonged to another time, a loving, loving time, Baby said:

“No. I’m not going anywhere.”

I heard him sit back down, but I didn’t want to turn around. If I did, he’d catch sight of something I didn’t want to reveal.

“It’s not about the money. You haven’t had money for years, Bibbs.”

“Sure, but I do have a little money saved.”

I had kept up this lie ever since we'd gotten to know each other four years ago, so Baby would understand that I was an independent creature and could go where I wanted when I wanted. Unfortunately I hadn't actually saved any money, which is something I'd bring up with my mother after a few glasses of wine until she said: “You're middle-aged, Bibbs, you're supposed to have your own savings.” But I had always hated starting at zero, whatever the case. Baby thought, unlike me, that maintaining the lie was silly but he didn't have the language with which to confront it. So we let it sit there between us, like a half-truth. The first time I issued the lie, several years ago, it hadn't been a lie. It had been an intention. I was going to start saving any day now, I thought, and then the lie would dissolve into truth. The mention of these savings never failed to make us uncomfortable, and we couldn't bring ourselves to broach the subject. Like, he *could* help me out, I'd think, he could've said, *I know you don't have any money*, or started saving on my behalf. On certain days I thought: “Bibbs, if only you'd started saving the first time you thought about it you'd have had a considerable sum by now.”

“Okay, so since you have savings, isn't it a little strange you haven't dipped into them this entire spring, leaving me to pay for almost all of our fixed expenses myself?”

No lie. Baby had paid the rent by himself. But I had selected each piece of furniture and each artwork in the apartment, because

before I met him I had closed my eyes every night and visualized myself so hard my whole face tensed up. When it was time to realize my fantasy, I was ready. The Art Deco mirror in the hall. The velvet sofa. Marble coasters, the silver tray, which we would do coke off of one night when we returned from a lush wedding and wanted to keep being awake, keep on talking, no *conversing*, excited, curious. I did up the interiors exactly as they were in my mind, and sometimes when I took a break from scrolling through porn on the sofa and looked around the room, at the decor, I considered the importance of differentiating between fantasy and desire. You don't *have* to do everything you fantasize about.

The glass coffee table, on which the silver tray was placed, I'd had to buy twice because Baby had stumbled over the first one and it shattered into thousands of pieces. The blood mixed with the glass mixed with his dizzy drunken words. Did I leave him then? No, I didn't leave him any of those times, and this was how I paid my share of the rent. The smudge stick in the window was my idea, too, and I lit the dried sage whenever I wanted to drive out a lingering hangover. After the table incident I bought incense, too, and stuck it in the expensive cactus.

Now Baby was leaning against the doorframe, looking into the bedroom, which I had done up like a hotel room. I sat down in the lambswool-clad chair. We were both silent, which diverged from our usual leaving protocol. That face I had looked at so many times. Had I ever met another man with the same self-annihilating vanity? No, impossible. I choked up. How many hours had I spent

looking at him as we sat across from each other on a train or on all those nights he was asleep and I was awake. My sleeplessness had never bothered Baby, which hurt me but he said it shouldn't. His throat was red and blotchy where he'd just rubbed his hand. It got that way from alcohol and stress. I didn't know if he'd been drinking. Maybe I didn't have to care either way.

Baby would usually say I was scatterbrained about money but when we moved in together I'd gotten into a mode of working hard and handling my expenses accordingly. Every morning I refreshed the auction pages to see what had come in during the night and I comparison-shopped what was going to be bought new. I bought the sofa interest-free (for the first year) on Baby's credit card, because by then my three credit cards were already maxed out. I had also decorated each room for the erotic. Naïvely so, because Baby would never fuck me in the kitchen. Baby could only spontaneously fuck me when we were still strangers to each other; he still fucked me like he was someone else, and I was yet another female vessel, filled with what he wanted me to be filled with. That's when he could allow his fantasy to mingle with his desire; my desire wasn't a threat to his idealized image of me.

After living together for a while our sexuality went missing. "Come up, come up," he'd said, stressed out, as I sucked him off in the darkness. "What, was it bad?" I asked. "I don't like the clucking sound, it feels disrespectful," he replied and fended off my kiss with a peck. Obviously his impotence bored me, but his pathological Madonna-whore complex did make me feel like the most important

person in the world. I was his good little wife. Wherever he got that insane idea from, it amused me.

“We aren’t even sleeping together,” Baby said.

“You’re the one who doesn’t want to.”

Baby said it doesn’t matter who wants to and who doesn’t.

“But we did it the other week,” I said. “We can do it now,” I begged.

The bedroom had heard this discussion many times.

“I’ll help you out until you’re on your feet,” Baby said instead of approaching me with desirous hands, “and you can live here until you find something else.”

This was almost more incomprehensible than him leaving.

“What you mean ‘until I find something else’? Isn’t this my apartment?”

Overhead the neighbor slamming his door made our bedroom walls shake, and we heard him call out to someone that he was home. We had no idea where he had been. Baby ran his hand over his head, a habit from when he still had hair. He was five years my senior. His thick hair was legendary, tales of which were told so as never to be forgotten, and Baby had shown me many pictures from when he still had it. What if this was the last time I saw him. I reached for him, then changed my mind.

“Beautiful men and ugly women,” this is how I started my speech on his fortieth birthday and Baby had laughed, as did his friends. So

I guess I really was ugly, I thought, because the laughter acknowledged that it was funny because it was true. Of course Baby's friends had known who I was and because many of them didn't live in Stockholm I was the only person they knew who was on television. One of them had seen me on the cover of his girlfriend's magazine but I'd looked so different then, he said, he could hardly tell it was me.

Baby's face was wonderful, even if with time I'd tired of the beauty that made it possible for him to smugly assert that he hadn't been unfaithful. "This is the first time I've been faithful," he'd said over and over again, a threat masquerading as a complement. His largess was always hanging over me, which meant that I never allowed myself to put on the same ugly sweatpants he'd waltz around in. Beauty, I wanted to tell him, just *is*. You haven't earned it. You can't parade it around like a trophy. And if you can parade it around like a trophy, then it's a trophy you're going to lose. The loss was already well underway. Baby was far from the man he used to be, and when I noticed the wrinkles around his eyes I knew they were the reason he wanted to leave me. It was about the money and his fading beauty, because Baby had caught wind of the loss. Baby's only capital was eros. He wasn't talented, rich, or well-educated. He wasn't particularly funny, sporty, or nice. Baby was erotic and women wanted to lie down next to him, and he was heading towards bankruptcy.

Baby's name was on the apartment contract, but we were both registered to the address and I was the one who'd found it.

This life of contacts and shortcuts had never belonged to him, and I suppose I could let him leave but then he'd go back to where he came from. To ordinary life, an ordinary person's life. There was no way he'd be able to keep what was mine *and* get rid of me.

“Sure, Bibbs, you hooked up the apartment, but without me we wouldn't have been able to keep it.”

The tone had become antagonistic, and Baby was following me around as I searched for something. His was the impossible face. I felt combative.

“How long have you been planning this?”

“Bibbs, don't start. I don't have the energy for yet another fight. You can stay here until you find something else and I'll help you look. Anyway the rent is too high for you on your own.”

“The rent isn't 'too high for me,' you idiot. I have savings.”

Baby, who had picked up the day's newspaper from the doormat, hurled it at the wall behind me.

“Okay, fine, Bibbs, since you have so much money all of a sudden, buy me out of the contract.”

“That's not legal,” I said, picked up the newspaper and carried it to the kitchen.

“Here's a solution for you. You have money. Use it. For 100,000 I'll sign the contract over to you and move out.”

I chewed the inside of my cheek and searched for another subject to fight about, but I was out of ideas. The day had come when there weren't any other quarrels left to dredge up. Only this

last one. Who would leave who. Baby said, *My God. My God just admit you don't have a single krona saved.*

“You’ll have the money in a week,” I said and passed him on my way to the bathroom. His arm brushed against mine. I wanted to press myself against him. Instead I locked the bathroom door and turned on the faucet like Baby had done each time he went to the bathroom during our four years together. As soon as I said “one week” I wanted to take it back. One week was tight, but I had set my own deadline and Baby was already doubting me. Taking it back was unthinkable. If there was money, as I claimed, there was no reason to wait. One week was long enough, even if transfers from funds might take time. I couldn’t get out of this. The lie needed to be dissolved into truth. I tried to think and rinsed my face with so much water that two of the fake eyelashes I’d applied fell off and stuck to my cheek. Okay, he could leave me and he could take Slip Street but he would never get me to admit that I didn’t have a way out. I wasn’t about to let him play the hero, when he was the one destroying everything.

On the eve of Baby’s fortieth birthday we’d rejoiced and it was one of those countless nights on which he’d started drinking again. We lit a dozen candles in the middle of the table, and the trickling wax left enigmatic patterns on the white tablecloth. Now outside the locked bathroom door he wasn’t rejoicing anymore. At least I’d succeeded at this, I thought with *schadenfreude*. There he stood with his lumpy nose, his tan bordering on sunburned, crow’s feet

deepening, and shoulders narrower than when we'd met, back when he was still fighting for youthful vitality. But his mouth hadn't lost its fullness. Red. Lusty. I carefully dried my face so as not to ruin more eyelashes. I wanted him to hurt where I hurt. I wanted to take my headache and give it to his head. I wanted to tell him that I'd never said anything of consequence to him, that even if I had written 1,000 emails I'd never have expected a reply. I wanted to confess that beauty had never been his trophy. It had been mine, and it was beauty that excused his impotence, his self-pitying way, his low-paying job, his drinking. I also wanted to say: "I anticipate your thoughts before you're even on your way to thinking them." But I decided against it, because I hadn't anticipated him leaving me.

Lined up in plexiglass boxes all in a row, above the sink, were my lipsticks. Their casings were of black, gold, or rose-colored metal. Taunting me next to the casings were glass bottles with pipettes and plastic tubes with screw tops, and all the routines I'd embarked on, which were beyond my means. Routines, as if I were the beautiful one. Or perhaps the routines confirmed my never having been. The wind whined in the haunted drain and I looked at my armpits, mottled with a fading spray tan. I'd assumed I'd be the one to leave him.

He was standing so close to the bathroom door I almost hit him when I opened it. The surprise of Baby breaking up with me seemed to make the contours of his body sharper, sexier. My

resistance yielded. I didn't want to provoke him. I wanted him to take pity on me and take off his sweater and lie down on the sofa. When Baby got angry he clenched his jaw and fists.

When he got caught in a lie his eyebrows shot up into the air. When he put his cock in my pussy for the first time he said: "I'm flipping out." When he hit his own sculpted face he would hit the left cheekbone, but I didn't know what he looked like then because I'd always turn away.

"If you're wondering why I'm so surprised," I said, the sobs draining from my throat into my stomach and seeping through my arms and legs, "it's because I'm much better than you and everybody knows it." He dropped his arms, which he had reached out, ready for an embrace. I gathered a few things that didn't belong together and shoved them in the Louis Vuitton bag I'd bought in Hong Kong.

"Bibbs, come on. Don't be such a fucking child."

"Don't say my name. You'll have your money next weekend at the latest. I'll be in touch."

The cross breeze picked up right as I was about to slam the door, ruining the dramatic effect. Instead the door knocked up against the cushion of air and nipped at me like an angry mouth. The door made me think of our first happy summer together when I'd left all the windows and doors open, waiting for a cross breeze that never came. That summer was windless and welcoming, just like this summer, but now without the welcoming part.

YES, I HAD LEFT the apartment in a rush and was standing outside the entrance to Slip Street, holding my LV, crestfallen. I was used to being the one who caved and went back, but this time turning back wasn't advantageous. A younger girl walked by holding a pizza box, and she did a double take when she saw me. The smell of pizza reminded me of being young one summer a long time ago, when friendships were more intertwined. I had put on my comfy sandals and was walking to Västerbro Square, over the difficult bridge with the self-righteous cyclists. People came walking from Rålambshov Park, scantily clad and chilled out, some in high spirits and slurring, swept away by the heat and tipsy on only one glass of wine. As happens. Boys out and about in sweatpants and nothing on top, and girls whose under-eye concealer was too light.

I took the bus to Oden Square. A woman gave me a thumbs up and I thanked her and smiled. Grateful as hell. When I got off the bus I thought for a while about which way to go before I started walking slowly down Oden Street so as to give someone in an outdoor seating area a chance to recognize me. Tonight it needed to be their treat, but everyone seemed busy with their own thing. At the Italian restaurant there was no one I knew, and no one who knew me.

Same at the Irish and at the Indian. By the roadside, patrons stood smoking, still not drunk enough to shout my name. I tried to figure out where I was going. The lie about my savings had gone on for so long it felt true, but however I twisted it, it wasn't. It's not like I hadn't had one hundred K, more than once even. I just hadn't saved it.

When no one at Wasahof tried to catch my eye, I turned back and thought about big jobs I'd done and wondered how those jobs had come so easily. Outside Tennstopet's patio I opened the calculator on my phone. I had eight on a credit card. I typed in 8,000. I had a think. Okay, eight. I put the phone in the back pocket of my shorts. Eight on credit and no Baby. I had a job on Tuesday. For that I'd invoice ten, but I didn't need the calculator to add those numbers up. I hadn't smoked for months, but as soon as I smelled that sweetness I knew it was time to pick the habit back up. It would be hard to resist, and this crisis demanded all of my energy. Sometimes you might as well start smoking again or eating or drinking, because the obsessive thoughts about giving in or not giving in were a virus that infected the brain and clouded your thinking. Instating bans and reversing them had occupied me for years. I asked a man who was smoking at the crosswalk for a cigarette, and he lit it for me without applying for further conversation.

The white shirt I had put on before I left Slip Street smelled faintly of an oil-based Italian perfume. When I thought about how much

the perfume had cost, my stomach sank, and the weight mixed with the smoke. I blew it out through my nose, the cigarette snug between my fingers. It hadn't been months since my last cigarette. I'd had one the week before. I thought about the perfume again. In business the most important thing is to break even, and I wanted to rationalize away my anxiety over the perfume with my savings tactic. I had polished my savings tactic to perfection. If a perfume had cost me 3,000, I worked hard to get each krona back. Yesterday I bought a bra at 25 percent off and saved 200 kronor. I could subtract those 200 from the perfume and so now it had cost 2,800 kronor. I continued listing my recent expenses. Hadn't I taken the bus here, to Tennstopet? So I'd saved on cab fare, which would have cost at least 200. This meant the perfume was now down to 2,600 kronor.

I thought about the invoice for 800,000 the year of that happy summer and I still clung to the sum like a lodestar for how good we could be. Our happy summer had played itself out in the illegal sublet in Haga Park—a large yellow stone house with a leafy garden—and when the rain stopped in July we strode into the garden and could hardly believe our eyes. Peaches were growing along the wall. At night field mice scurried beneath the wooden planks, and Baby told me not to be afraid, so I wasn't afraid; I fell back asleep, dreamed I was breathing through a ventilator in my throat, and woke up gasping for air. Before he moved in, I'd never set foot in the garden. He got me to do lots of things I hadn't done

before. I had just turned thirty-five and was wondering if I should get pregnant. When we slept together I could feel my biology drawing him further in, and when he came inside me it felt like the orgasm was mine. His hot cum ran down my thighs when I went to the kitchen to make him a sandwich. The days were insanely hot and I felt like stabbing anyone who threatened him, and we took walks in the nature around the house in the evenings, each with a stick in our hand, shouting rhymes at each other from his childhood.

“May I call you ‘brother?’” I whispered on the jetty at Brunsviken, and the gnats were buzzing in the reeds like something you were supposed to remember but hadn’t bothered to write down. “It’ll be a happy summer if you let me call you ‘brother.’” Baby didn’t get it and said, *Don’t say ‘brother.’ Say ‘darling,’* and I wanted to give him everything so I said: *Okay, darling. Okay.*

I didn’t work hard for my money, and we never thought this happiness would end. Instead of counting on the fact that it would, we conjured grand fantasies of a shared future in Los Angeles and Berlin. Baby referred to himself as my wife, and I knew I could be whoever I wanted to be if I saw myself the way he saw me. He offered me an irresistible stability. I was still blogging our first year together, posting five times a week, every other post was about what I had bought and every other post about how you didn’t need to buy anything. During the spring, the show I had appeared on the year before was broadcast—eight half-famous participants eating dinner around a table. The show’s concept was to create intimacy

between the viewers and peripheral public figures; of these eight my star shone the brightest and my free and easy way came across on screen. If you didn't know who I was before, you were finding out now. I was a size 40 and didn't pay for anything and I had managed to do my lips without it showing. It had recently been an election year and I managed to seize upon some sort of national virtue because I had put a racist cast member in their place. I had never been political before but times had changed, civil courage was being demanded of all who lay claim to space. In the *Aftonbladet* evening paper a television column ran saying that apparently even a silly format like this one could contain something of value. The column was about me.

During that time we would walk into the city center a couple nights a week to see if the places we had abandoned for each other still existed. Baby hated those middle-class haunts, but I'd walk through the door with one hand on his neck, and a knife in the other. No one was going to say a word about my Baby, and I told him not to be afraid, and he said he wasn't, but sometimes I could tell that he was. I loved us more then. We got drunk in love, and strangers interrupted our embraces just to say they worshiped me. Baby's eyes lit up as if they were talking about him.

Baby was on an hourly contract and barely worked that first year so that he could go everywhere with me and laze around with me in bed in the mornings. Shoes and winter coats arrived by courier with chummy handwritten notes from PR-agencies. Baby

took pictures of me in the garden, wearing the shoes, and he took as many as I liked. The greenery was so green it shone like a white light and I sat on the garden furniture, relaxed. He never tired of seeing me on screen. *Here*, I said and handed him the most expensive of the garments, *for your sister*. Overwhelmed he French kissed me, his tongue so deep I couldn't breathe, as though he were trying to fish something out of my throat. Afterwards he said he had never done anything like that with anyone else.

The money was coming in so easily then that, when left to my own devices, I felt like a joke. Like I was selling something out of stock. But I was rarely left alone. Baby took care of the practicalities for me and I handled the magic for him. Unfortunately my accountant wasn't aware of this arrangement, and his emails telling me to stop using the money that was supposed to go into my tax account were sent in vain.

In the fall, when we could still trick ourselves into thinking that summer would resurge with one last twitch, I was given the opportunity to rent Slip Street because the landlord's daughter had been following me for years. I decided to leave the house in Haga Park in order to become a woman with Baby. Because I had several demerits with the Swedish Enforcement Authority he was the one to sign the contract, but we told each other that it belonged to the both of us. The heart of our very first home together was a king-size bed I gave Baby as a seven-month anniversary present. The bed was almost two meters wide and cost fifty K. At night we slept so tightly interlaced it might as well have been half a meter.

Right as I had decided to head back towards Slip Street someone finally called my name. On the patio sat Nina, an actress from Örkelljunga who had moved to Stockholm after her first hit. Her success was a mystery to me. Who achieved success and who had to do without, the older I got, seemed increasingly contingent on something that preceded adulthood, decided long before we had a chance to perform. Nina was dressed in ditzy florals because she was invested in a pornographic countryside nostalgia, directed at those keen to criticize her. During the spring she'd had the lead role in a web series on Swedish Television, and she would write to tell me that I was brave, a kind of pioneer, and my blog (when it existed) was a light in the darkness of low self-esteem. We were both fat. This is why Nina wanted us to be friends and me to be friendly. Being overweight suited her, as it suits all women under thirty. Me, I'm not into being fat, I'm always trying to get skinny, but these are different times. Nowadays we're supposed to wear our shortcomings like merits, as though we'd gone out and bought them ourselves. Nina got up and said a breathless, garbled hello.

“Bibbs, you're here?” Yes, Nina, I am, and I thought about the pizza that had walked past me outside of Slip Street and how clear-cut calling my friends used to be. Her breasts rested in the low neckline of her dress, unconcerned.

“Is it okay if I join you?”

Her friend was just leaving and Nina ordered me a vodka soda, and French fries, even though I'd said no thank you. I

dutifully ate a fistful. We sat on the corner of Oden Street and Dala Street with nothing to talk about. The crosswalk was making its noise and Nina was saying something about the legacy of a feminist comic book artist who had killed herself. Because Nina's worldview was impeccable and her opinions streamlined it was easy for me to drift into my own thoughts, and I turned around on my chair when I heard new guests arriving, searching for a better option than Nina. My glass was already empty, and Nina looked embarrassed when the waiters, who were well-dressed but rude, walked past her raised hand for the third time without taking her order. The ice was the cheap kind that melted as you drank and ended up as chips at the bottom of the empty glass. Her face had changed. I couldn't say how. You never can. One day the face just looks less like the person it belongs to and more like a general face, a collective ageless face, available to all women who can afford it. Maybe it was the cheekbones, like two fish sticks under her eyes or the exaggerated point of her chin. Three strangers came up to her and none to me. She was twenty-nine. It didn't matter. She could have them. I'd already had them. I knew all about them. One of the strangers turned to me and said: "You look familiar," drawn out, as though we actually knew each other and not just him me.

Nina had a perverse fantasy about us being similar, or that a similarity would arise if we claimed it was there. Gauche city jeeps drove past as she desperately tried find a subject that would engage me. Baby used to ask me to take pictures of him in front of vehicles

that weren't his. Sunken into myself I heard Nina once again bring up how similar we were. I told her, *I'm supposed to say things like that to you, not the other way around.* In the pictures I took, Baby was crouched down in front of large tires and I came to think of the muscles in his thighs, at work in the same rhythm as the signal clicking at the crosswalk. Or was it more slowly? The memory was already fading, and now he was on his way out, along with the pain.

"We're sisters," she said, "like all women are sisters." I had another drink. Even though she was at the start of her success, and I at the end of mine, I was the important one, which she freely acknowledged. This explained her nervousness. Nina said she'd read my blog "religiously" when I was still blogging, and that I was so good on TV. I didn't like hearing it. I didn't like hearing anything anyone had to say to me about me.

"You're so natural, you know. Unafraid." My glass was empty again and the waiter with the glasses at the end of his nose took my order. The cars drove past more slowly the later it got, as though they were looking for someone who was sitting here. Nina said, "I read it religiously," again, wobbling.

"Don't you want kids?" I helped myself to a snus from the tin on the table and shrugged. *Maybe at some point in the future.* She asked me how old I was and I reluctantly replied that I was turning thirty-nine on Thursday.

"If I got pregnant today I'd keep it," she said wistfully, "I've always dreamt of being a young mother, even if it's already too late. Would you judge me if I had a baby now?" Everything she said was

so incomprehensible, but yes of course I would judge her. I didn't say a word; I took another sip of my drink. She had contracted herpes, she said, leaning over the round café table, almost tipping it over. All of a sudden she had crossed the line between agreeably tipsy and annoying. I didn't mention my herpes and let her go on about hers. I didn't need to give them everything. My herpes was mostly in my ass and on my butt cheeks. She'd only had the one outbreak and found out what it was today. But don't tell anyone, she said. No, of course I won't. It's one of those things you'd never feel ashamed of, she said. Nope, I said. Probably not. Where are you headed? she asked, as though the answer were of no interest to her. I said:

“I was out for a walk and then you caught sight of me.” What luck. What luck. A pearl necklace was strung around her neck and when she caught me looking she covered it with her hand.

“It was a graduation gift from my mother.” The hand was to protect the pearls, but I wasn't about to yank them off her. She was faded. Faded little Nina in the wet night who had left the day behind her without a thought. Baby's gold signet ring on his wedding ring finger. The jewelry people were given by those who loved them.

“Bibbs, I really want to work with you. And not let all that shit come between us. I've always wanted to work with you... Maybe you can write something for me sometime. A series.”

I didn't know how, but how hard could it be to dream up a story and tell it? It was hard for me to show Nina, but it made me

happy. Somebody was thinking of me. She knocked her glass over, and I snatched my phone from the table and wiped it dry on my jean shorts. My jean shorts. I really liked the series she had done on Swedish Television, which seemed to have nothing to do with this person here. Which must mean that she was a talented actress. Even if she were at the peak of her success on this evening, there would be something left afterwards, a series and a script with her name in front of the lines. My peak came and went with me. The alcohol had weighed my body down instead of lightening it up, as sometimes happens, my mind as well.

“Of course I’ll write something for you,” I said, and started fantasizing.

“You haven’t really ever dug your heels in with anything, have you?” she said. Her wet telephone lay on the table next to the bill.

The patio at Tennstopet was flushed with infrared heat as were Nina’s cheeks. I went to the toilet. My stomach felt queasy, but all I did was pee. The staircase’s green steps reminded me of a kind of man I longed for, who I had seen on television. A Brit. I stumbled the last steps. Once back with Nina I inhaled the rest of the French fries. When the waiter came out for last orders she made me promise to go back to her place for another drink. She grabbed hold of my arm. Her nails were bare. “You can’t go yet, Bibbs,” she said, not slurring, but sharp, a sober voice pushing through the drunkenness. As though I had no choice. “We still have a lot to talk

about.” I promised to go with her, and it was one of the simpler promises I had made. But like everything else, I’d come to regret it.

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