

Nina Wähä
TESTAMENT

Norstedts, 2019, 433 pages
Sample translation of pages 5-44, Marlaine Delargy

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This is nothing more than the story of a murder. Actually, that's not true; it's much more than that.

But I don't want to mislead anyone, or hide something so central to this narrative.

Someone is going to die. And someone will be to blame. We must try to find out who. And who. And why.

Unfortunately you will have to get to know them all, because they are all connected to the story in one way or another. Just like in the song, they are different, many are tall, hard to catch, many are invisible but still exist.

Maybe you will pause several times during the journey and think something along the lines of 'what's the point of this?', but trust me. Place your life in my hands and I will lead you through the darkness and the light.

Okay. Let us begin.

This is the story of the Toimi family and a series of events that had a significant effect on their lives, and by the Toimi family I am referring to the mother and father in the drama, Siri and Pentti, and I am referring to all their children, those who were alive at the time of this series of events, and I am also referring to the children who were no longer alive. And in addition I am referring to those children as yet unborn. And those children who would come after.

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A few points on which to reflect:

Toimi is a funny name for a family. If its meaning has passed you by, it's 'functioning'. It would be a funny name for many a family. Especially this one. Or including this one.

We will be spending most of our time out in the wilds. In Finnish Tornedalen, to be more precise.

That's more or less all you need to know. Plus that the Toimi family are farmers, it's the early 1980s, it's almost Christmas, and there are a lot of children in this family, more than I would wish for us to have to keep in our minds, but there you go, it is what it is.

Okay! Nous allons mes amis!

MAIN CHARACTERS:

ANNIE – the oldest surviving sister, lives in Stockholm, pregnant.

ALEX – the father of Annie’s unborn child.

LAURI – the homosexual brother who followed Annie to Stockholm, later moved to Copenhagen.

ESKO – the oldest living brother, buying the farm from his parents.

SEIJA – Esko’s wife.

TATU / RINNE – the fifth son whose face is scarred from burns. Recently released from prison.

SINIKKA – Tatu’s wife. Pregnant?

HELMI – the middle sister. Her name means pearl. Always in need of money.

PASI – Helmi’s husband.

LITTLE PASI – Helmi’s son.

ONNI – the youngest son. His name means happiness.

ARTO – the second youngest son, scarred after falling into a copper of boiling water. *(But you don’t know anything about this yet.)*

SIRI – the mother.

PENTTI – the father.

TARMO – the homosexual son who has moved to Helsinki to study.

LAHJA – the youngest sister. Her name means gift.

MAIRE – Lahja’s friend.

VALO – the handsome brother. His name means light.

HIRVO – the brother who can talk to animals. His name means neither elk (Hirvi) nor terrible (Hirveä), but inevitably makes one think of both.

VOITTO – the brother whose name means profit or gain. Whose gain?

RIIKO – the first son, dead at the age of two.

ELINA – the firstborn, dead at the age of five.

PART 1

THE CAST, THE SCENERY

ANNIE GOES HOME

Annie is coming home. The drama unfolds. We are introduced to the area and the characters. Characters? No, people!

Someone ends up in hospital. Someone else is notable by his absence.

But nothing's happened yet, has it?

There's something special about going home. Either you like it or you don't, but you can never be indifferent. In Annie's case it always aroused mixed emotions.

Negative – because she was always a little, tiny bit afraid that home would somehow sink its claws into her when she returned, that she would suddenly be trapped, stuck, back. Physically incapable of leaving, getting away. It was a feeling she'd had since she was a teenager, that it was a matter of urgency, she had to hurry, otherwise the place, this place, would seize her, her feet would take root and grow deep into the ground. Which was why she had left when she was only sixteen.

Positive – because several of her siblings (most of them, in fact) were still at home. The bond between them was strong, sometimes it almost felt physical. As if they were linked by, if not umbilical cords, then something else, other, invisible, powerful bonds. Like a rat king, their tails inextricably entwined, bound together against their will. And so they lived their lives, side by side, never alone, always united.

But today, on this occasion, Annie's anxiety was focused on something other than coming home. Her dress felt tight and she'd had to buy a new coat this winter, the old one didn't fit her any more. She ran her hands over her stomach, which had now started to show significantly on her skinny body. Every evening she could feel a new life in there, faintly at first, and maybe it was her imagination, but as everyone knows it would get stronger and stronger. A child she hadn't planned, but a child she couldn't say no to.

She had already had an abortion, and she was only twenty-seven, and it was 1981, and it's not a good idea to have more abortions, not then, not now, perhaps not ever. For Annie it had been a painful scrape, and because of the scars on her womb the doctors had recommended that she didn't undergo any further procedures if she wanted to have children one day, and now a child had begun to grow inside her, who was she to say no, when it might well be her last (and only) child?

It would have been impossible for her to keep the first child, the man, the father (his name was Hassan) was a ticket to nowhere. A dead end. An immigrant worker, just like her, but from a non-European country. A country to which he wanted to return,

a country where women's rights and the struggle for those rights had got nowhere near as far as in Scandinavia. A land that Annie would never be able to live in, or wish to live in. She had bigger ambitions than that.

The father of this child – well, the jury was still out as far as he was concerned. Annie wasn't in love, she knew that. She never had been. She sometimes thought she was emotionally disturbed, probably because of her childhood, all those years without love or, as it often seemed, without parents, but it wasn't something she liked to dwell on, she just shrugged her shoulders. Made a note of it and moved on.

Life was hers and only hers, she had no intention of wasting it on anyone or anything.

But a child.

With Alex. Alex from work. Alex with the dangerous dark eyes. The curly hair. The hairy chest. The deep, hoarse voice. The crooked smile. Alex who'd simply been there, and continued to be there, asking, being attentive, nagging. Alex who had shown her his oil paintings late one night in Lappkärsberget over a bottle of Chianti. Who had shown her how to mix colours. Who had listened when she told him about her dreams of travelling to Pompeii, of excavating the city from the lava. Of gently brushing off those faces, distorted with fear, and archiving, documenting, logging the smallest parts, meticulously adding them together to make a whole picture.

There was something compelling about trying to bring order to a disaster that had already happened a long time ago, actually it's probably the words 'a long time ago' that are the key here, Annie's emotions would not be involved, she would be able to observe the world with clinical detachment, that was the aspect of archaeology that appealed to her.

And Alex had understood, not everything, but at least some of what she told him. He had cupped her face in his generous hands and kissed her, over and over again, until she kissed him back, reluctantly at first, then not reluctantly at all. And now he had implanted a child inside her. He had big plans, dreams even, about their future and life together. A Bohemian life where they painted at night (regardless of whether Annie wanted to paint or not), demonstrated during the day, made love in the afternoon and drank wine in the evenings.

'And what about the baby?' Annie wondered.

'The baby, our baby, will be a genius. I come from a family of geniuses, this baby, our son, will take over the world one day,' Alex said.

'This baby will become the third part of our unit,' Alex said.

'No problem,' Alex said.

Annie wanted to believe him.

They were going to call him Oskar. They had reached that decision together. More or less together. After one of the former kings of the country they now lived in,

Oscar II. A king who had been a poet and an author, who had promoted literature and its practitioners, and who also shared the same sceptical attitude as Alex himself towards August Strindberg, Sweden's national poet.

Annie really wanted to believe Alex. Believe him when he sang to her, Alex is the man, Alex understands. But deep down, a nagging anxiety, all these plans and dreams, are they really ours, mine, and if so, how do I fit into them?

Because she was going to travel.

Let me rephrase that.

She IS going to travel.

There was no alternative.

It may be that this person in her belly might make it more difficult, or cause her to postpone her plans for a little while, but as soon as Oskar was old enough, Annie was off. Oskar could be with his daddy. And if that wasn't possible, he could be with Siri.

Grandma Siri.

Fifty-four years old and already a grandmother several times over. She would soon find out that her eldest daughter was expecting her first child. In the summer. Her eldest surviving daughter, Annie.

She could have called. She could have explained over the phone, she had spoken to them regularly during the autumn, if not to Siri then to her siblings, those who still lived at home and the others who lived nearby, in Torneå or Karunki or Keminmaa or some other backwater up there, it was home, or close enough to pass for home.

But she hadn't been able to bring herself to say it. Because it wasn't just saying it. It wouldn't stop there. It was an enormous portal being flung open, questions giving rise to more questions, more and more, and Annie had no desire to answer these questions. She didn't want to have to justify herself to Siri, and especially not to Pentti (if he even cared), and when she thought about it she realised she didn't actually want to talk to anyone about her pregnancy. She would rather pretend it wasn't happening, forever and ever amen, but as we all know, children come with a deadline.

To go home. To leave the flatness, all the bridges, all the concrete, the bare, treeless expanses, to see the landscape change, watch the forests appear, nature rise up before her. Nature evokes respect in Norrland, it is something to be reckoned with. The trees are where they are, they do not apologise. During the summer months the forest is a magical place, the white birches in the endless light, it is almost sacred, or it can be, even for a non-believer. Then comes midsummer and with it the blackflies, and with the blackflies comes the first hint of decay, an

awareness that we have once again turned towards the darkness, the long night when even the white bark of the birches will not protect us.

It was December 18, absolute zero, it wouldn't get any darker than this. Before long the days would begin to fight for their rights, and although it's a lengthy process, it is important in a spiritual sense for the people cowering in the darkness. To know, to feel secure in the knowledge that the year has turned. Even if we can hardly see it at the moment, the light is on its way back.

It was still dark when the Tapanis bus pulled into the depot in Torneå. Everyone's breath emerged from their mouths like smoke.

The bus was a little early, she would have to wait for at least quarter of an hour before someone arrived to pick her up.

Who would it be? She had no idea. It was just after six o'clock in the morning; nobody was going to want to get up and drive into town, a hundred kilometres, at this hour on a Saturday.

Annie fumbled in her pocket for her cigarettes.

Apparently smoking wasn't good for the baby, and she'd almost stopped.

It was only sometimes that she felt the need. And if *she* felt good, then surely the child in her belly would feel good too? So if a couple of drags now and again made her feel better, then surely that would make Oskar feel better too, rather than having a mummy who was suffering?

Mummy. It was strange to think of the word just like that.

Annie lit a cigarette and inhaled.

Mummy – was that her, could it be her?

Mummy was Siri, a mummy wore an apron and had chapped hands, a mummy told you off if you did something wrong, a mummy took care of you, looked after you, a mummy got the sauna going, peeled potatoes, always had a child on her hip and several more around her feet, a mummy who had never been to school, never done any of the things she'd dreamed of, hey, never even had a dream, a mummy was so many things, none of which applied to Annie.

I'm going places, even though right now I'm going home. Back to where it all started.

In Stockholm the temperature had fallen to zero, people were stressed and smartly dressed, with their ridiculous high heels and carefully styled hair. Up here the snow already lay thick on the ground, the men and women all looked much older, the few who were out and about at this early hour, the cars were dated, dirty and battered, rusty and dented, didn't people actually look more unhappy up here? Was it because they had no purpose, no meaning to their lives? Was it possible to find a meaning to life up here? Without the subway, without bars, without the NK

department store, without an apartment, loneliness, feeling trapped? If no one saw your day-to-day life, did it even exist? Had you lived, existed?

Annie saw a black Merc skid across the tarmac of the bus depot before approaching her. She might not have recognised the car, but there was no mistaking the style of driving. It was as distinctive as a fingerprint.

Tatu – she hadn't expected that. He must have been released. The last she'd heard he was serving twelve months in prison in Keminmaa.

He had, to use his own words, taken the bend a bit too sharply and he'd probably been driving a bit too fast as well and fuck me suddenly there they were like two scarecrows, the old women. He hadn't done it on purpose, honestly. (Nobody thought he had.)

But death takes no notice of such details.

And there he was in the front seat, her little brother, one of nine, with a cigarette dangling from the corner of his mouth and that crooked smile, still charming, not toothless. The left side with the familiar scars, the scars that had generated his nickname, Rinne, *hill*, because according to Lauri, who had come up with the name which quickly stuck, he now looked like a hill with ups and downs, his silhouette changed forever following the garage fire in 1976 (but more of that later). Annie still hadn't got used to his new name, it felt unnatural in her mouth, she couldn't cope with what so many members of her family were so good at, taking control of the past, of things that were painful and turning them into a curiosity, a strength, a humorous incident, something to joke about.

'Have you done a runner?'

He laughed, an odd sound somewhere between a cough and a hiccup.

'They let me out early. Because I'm such a good boy.'

She must have looked taken aback, because he went on:

'I'm just as surprised as the rest of you. Except Mum.'

Mum, of course. Siri had never been able to think badly of her little Tatu. She never used the nickname, the abusive term. Annie wondered if other mothers loved their children equally selectively, a different amount of love for each one, and if so, did they show it equally clearly?

'I see you've put some weight on,' Tatu said as she sank down beside him. 'Been eating a lot of cakes in Sweden, have you?'

Annie didn't want to talk about it, not to her little brother, not to anyone, but she realised he wasn't the only one who was going to wonder. She'd just have to get used to it. She shrugged.

'I've got a bun in the oven, as they say. Due around midsummer. So are you living at home now?'

She was careful to keep her tone as neutral as possible, that's what she had to do with her siblings. If they picked up the least hint of anxiety, they would be straight in there. She could feel Tatu looking at her before he answered.

'Yes... well, my stuff's at home, but I usually spend the night somewhere else.'

He picked up speed, Annie could feel it, the danger had passed. Tatu had moved on.

'I've met someone too – her name's Sinikka. Veli-Pekka's kid sister, do you remember him? He had that red EPA tractor and they lived in Karunki.'

Annie nodded, she remembered. Not the kid sister, but the EPA tractor.

Typical Tatu, he read between the lines, saw what he wanted to see of the world, didn't need to know any more. He spent the rest of the drive talking about his own life. About the girl he had more or less moved in with, bit by bit, the farm her parents owned, her sick father, the jailbirds he'd met while he was inside, his future plans, the farm back home, the fact that Siri and Pentti were quarrelling more and more these days, and Annie could relax.

She was glad it was Tatu who'd come to fetch her. He was always fully occupied with his own affairs, there were no searching looks, no critical looks, no questioning looks, no speculation. She half-dozed, listening to her brother as you listen to the radio, her eyes resting on the forest all around them, these narrow roads she knew like the back of her hand, roads on which she'd spent large parts of her life, on foot, on bikes, mopeds, in cars and tractors.

But that was then, and this was now, now she was a visitor, a temporary guest. She could hear the forest whispering her name, come home, it said, but she didn't want to listen to it, pretended she hadn't heard.

She saw her reflection in the windscreen, the serious eyes, pale, Finnish, diluted, her hairstyle, the hair she'd dyed to make it darker, framing her face, emphasising her pallor, her narrow mouth, her straight nose. Annie was beautiful, not stunning, not turning-heads-in-the-street beautiful, but she had high cheekbones, a direct gaze, she was still young enough to be beautiful. In a few years, five ten twenty who could say, there was no blueprint when it came to ageing, certain people, like Alex, he was good-looking in a way that would age well, so would Tatu she thought as she glanced at her little brother in the driving seat, she couldn't see his scars from this side. He was an adult now, or at least teetering on the brink, he was dark, Walloon or Sami heritage or a mixture of both, like some of their siblings, dark. Not Annie, she was fair, but Tatu would improve with age, at least as far as one side of his face was concerned, he had the potential. Just like Pentti.

There were a lot of things Annie could have said about her father, but he had always looked good, wild and handsome.

It was funny, because most of the children had inherited either their mother's or their father's appearance. It was really only Lauri who was a blend of both, with his dark hair and pale eyes. What Riiko and Elina would have been like if they'd lived no one knew, of course. The two first-born children who hadn't survived the early years of their childhood, one because of pneumonia, the other because of the heart problem, the murmur she'd been born with.

Annie stroked her belly. She remembered her siblings as blurred images in yellowing photographs. The existence of those pictures had always been somehow unpleasant, the fact that they were up on the wall in her parents' bedroom. The first family portrait. A different family. A functioning family, perhaps. For a little while.

Was it possible to divide the children by their temperament, also inherited from their parents? One sunny, relaxed and easygoing. The other fiery, unpredictable, morose. That was the spread. Several were a combination of both, perhaps some were their own person.

That unlikely mixture, the deep rage from her father and the almost Russian optimism and faith in the future from her mother.

What kind of person would Annie's baby be? A combination of her and Alex, or someone else entirely, a pre-ordained person, independent of the two of them and the mistakes that now lay before them on the road of parenthood? And what were they like, Annie and Alex?

Different, very different. He was dark, but only in terms of appearance, because he moved through life lightly, like a dancer. Like the cheerful younger brother he was, one of two siblings. Annie wasn't like Alex, not in appearance or temperament.

Certain people are beautiful in the same way as diamonds, or marble perhaps. Their features need time, they need resistance to become polished, to allow their beauty to emerge. Annie couldn't be sure, but she suspected that her attractiveness would come to an end. That her features would fade, that her face would become puffy, like a bloated corpse that's lain in the water for too long. Then again, her looks had never been particularly important to her. She appreciated beauty, of course she did, but she didn't stand or fall by it. Unlike some of her siblings, enchanted by their own reflection, or by those of others.

By the time the car turned into the yard an hour later, the sun had begun to rise. There were lights on in both the house and the barn, and Annie took a deep breath before she climbed out.

'I think Mum will be really pleased. When she's got over the initial shock.'

Tatu gave her a hug, then lit a fresh cigarette before strolling off towards the garage, completely uninterested in the reaction Annie's arrival would provoke indoors. His narrow shoulders in the too-thin leather jacket, the collar turned up

around his ears, his feet that seemed to move a couple of centimetres above the ground, feather-light, he too danced, across the yard, through life.

Siri seemed most concerned about the fact that Annie hadn't married and had no plans to do so. Otherwise she didn't appear to find it all that strange that her daughter had pitched up almost four months gone. Siri came from a different time, and rarely had the gap between the generations been wider than it was here and now.

For Siri there had never been an alternative; she'd been forced to marry in order to survive. Being young in the 1940s in Karelia and being young in the 1980s in Stockholm – the two worlds couldn't have been further apart. Annie said nothing, she merely shrugged. Siri wouldn't understand anyway. And her mother probably realised that there were things she couldn't understand, and therefore chose not to pursue the discussion.

Annie's little brothers and sisters flocked around her as usual, curious not only about the exciting and exotic Christmas presents in her bag, but also about her rounded belly, and before long she felt her shoulders drop, she was able to acknowledge her anxiety now it was gone. She settled down on the kitchen sofa, her tummy full after breakfast, rye bread, coffee boiled up on the stove, the familiar flavours that were part of her DNA, what she was made of, her entire being, flavours she didn't know she'd missed in the city until she tasted them here once more. You can get a lot of things in Stockholm, but not Siri's rye bread.

She lay there gazing around the room, her home, still a part of her, she knew every floorboard, every creaking stair on the way to the upper floor, built the year Annie turned nine, the year Hirvo was born.

She remembered how it had felt to creep up those stairs, up to her parents' bedroom, where Siri lay with Hirvo at her breast, her hair loose, her expression gentle, open, happy, yes, happy. Most memories were tinged with melancholy or something else, something darker, but Siri had always looked unreachable when she had just given birth. It was as if life became heightened during the child's first year. And there were many first years in the Toimi family.

The two smallest brothers were playing on the floor, Arto and the even smaller Onni, they were the only ones who hadn't yet started school, the others left straight after breakfast, already busy getting on with their own lives (Hirvo, out in the forest, what he did there nobody knew), doing their jobs (Lahja), so that they could go to the library afterwards (Lahja again), travelling to Torneå (Valo), and the house was now quiet, quieter.

The wood-burning stove crackled, Onni and Arto played with their cars, otherwise everything was quiet.

Too quiet.

Quieter than usual.

It took a while, but eventually Annie realised what was different.

Her mother.

Her mother was quiet. That was the difference. Under normal circumstances she never shut up, she was either talking to whoever happened to be on the radio, telling them off, commenting or joking about what the presenters had said, she did the same with her children, admonishing them, scolding them, murmuring, humming, singing, singing along, filling the house with life and sound. But now, quiet.

When Siri was quiet it was as if she could be *seen* more clearly.

Under normal circumstances there was so much else in the way, but now Annie could see that she'd aged.

Since when?

She didn't know.

When had Annie last been home?

Time passes everywhere, not just where we happen to be.

Siri was kneading dough, her upper body working rhythmically, her mousy hair tied up in a scarf, her face so naked. She hadn't always been beautiful, Siri, it was only when she was a grown woman that her features had come into their own. She had the typically Karelian appearance, which some called Russian – watery eyes, moist, washed out, the translucent skin stretched over the high cheekbones, all the things Annie had inherited from her mother, the features if not yet the attributes, which had always been so proud and taut. Now Annie could see how the skin on Siri's face had begun to slacken, how the ageing process was catching up with her. Crows' feet around her eyes, the narrow mouth a straight line, the lips bloodless, white. Annie thought her face looked as if it had been punctured.

She wanted to reach out and touch her, stroke her cheeks before it was too late, but she didn't do it.

Instead she stayed where she was on the sofa, caressing her belly. Just as pregnant women have done for thousands of years, unconsciously, a reflex action, to protect the unborn perhaps, or to console it. A prayer for forgiveness, in advance.

She still hadn't seen her father. Nobody had even mentioned him. Joked about him as they usually did, to take the sting out of the dark side, the side that hurt and chafed and frightened them.

'So how's it going with the farm?' she asked after a while.

Siri stopped in mid-movement, in the middle of her kneading, only for a second, it was hardly noticeable but Annie saw it, saw her stiffen before she carried on.

'Oh, you know.'

Back in the spring, when Annie was last home, when Tarmo, her hyper-intelligent younger brother graduated from high school a year early (but that's

another story which we'll get to later), her parents had argued a great deal about money. Finances were tight and the state was placing increasingly high demands on the monitoring of milk production, which meant investing in increasingly expensive equipment. Pentti was not only uninterested in any of this but totally opposed the changes, and for many years Annie's oldest brother Esko had tried to influence their father, make him understand that there was only one way to survive as a farmer today, and that was by developing.

Judging by Siri's reaction, the arguments had continued. Annie was very familiar with the very particular kind of terror that Pentti was capable of spreading around him. It went on and on, gradually wearing down any opposition.

A part of him must enjoy it. That was the only possible explanation. Had to be the only explanation.

'Aren't you going to sell part of it to Esko? Given that he really wants it? So that he can implement his ideas on modernisation?'

Annie's brother, who still lived in the same place, more or less, in the same village or parish anyway, only ten kilometres away, married now with children of his own, dreaming about his childhood home, dreaming that the farm would flourish, again or at some point, that he would be able to give his wife and children a secure future. He had talked about it from time to time, almost in passing, said he was the only member of the family who really loved this farm, *even this place*.

Siri shrugged, still with her back to Annie, her whole being conveying the fact that this conversation was in no way more important than life, than what she was busy doing right now.

'I'd happily sell him the whole farm if it was up to me. Stop working so hard. Concentrate on enjoying life. But Annie, it doesn't work that way.'

'There's a thing called divorce.'

'In Stockholm, maybe.'

That was how the conversation went, as always when that little word was mentioned. Annie wanted her mother to have a second chance in life, even though she knew it was never going to happen.

But it *ought* to happen.

She deserved a rest, a rest from watchful eyes that never sleep.

*

The snowball effect.

A life becomes so clear in retrospect. When you're living it, when you're right in the middle of it, it seems as if things, events, words, actions, they simply happen, one after another or in parallel, and it's hard to understand how they hang together. But

what is difficult now will become then, a distant then that neither hurts nor even chafes any longer, and it is then, when you are no longer at the beginning or in the middle of it all that you can understand how it hangs together. How something that seemed so small, or irrelevant, or detached from the whole, still played a significant role in something bigger, even though you weren't aware of it at the time.

It is Monday morning, December 21 1981, it will be Christmas Eve on Thursday. Annie woke early, or so she thought, but when she checked her watch on the bedside table she saw that it was nearly seven thirty. Last one up. She still hadn't seen any sign of her father.

She loved her home, her Stockholm, but she hadn't got used to life in a building occupied by several families and individuals, all those unfamiliar footsteps making themselves heard through the concrete, she was easily woken back there, but here, here she slept a deep, dreamless, secure, heavy sleep.

The way you sleep at home.

She heard noises from the kitchen, all the activity necessary in order to catch the school bus on this last day before the Christmas holiday, have breakfast, brush your hair, it just went on and on, Siri who, apart from the endless daily grind and all the tasks she needed to get through, had her own agenda, the pre-Christmas laundry, she had been out and heated up the sauna, it was normally only lit in the evenings or on special days, not an ordinary Monday, but today was different, and out in the yard Onni was running around, Arto was wobbling along on his kick sled, usually falling off after a few kicks, Annie watched them through the window as she drank her morning coffee. Only a little morning sickness now, and only occasionally.

The big copper had been dragged out, the one the children bathed in during the summer, the one Siri used to do the laundry in December.

She began with the curtains, then the bedlinens, and finally the rugs. Always the same order, the correct order.

First what could be seen, then what could be felt, and finally the foundation, the things that everyone stood on, rested on, trusted.

Steam was rising from the copper as Siri laboriously carried bucket after bucket of water, boiling water, always the same, and Annie thought it was nice to know that some things never changed.

It was a strange feeling, sitting safe and warm on the kitchen sofa and watching what was going on in the yard, watching her mother tip two more buckets of boiling water into the copper, watching her little brothers play, seeing Siri turn her back, seeing Arto get up some speed on the kick sled, seeing him skid and lose control, what little he had, he didn't jump off, why didn't he jump off, he was six years old now, surely he ought to have some concept of consequences? But the sled rammed into the copper and his little body flew up in the air and over the edge, he landed in

the boiling water, Annie saw it happen, it didn't make any difference, she knew it was going to happen a second before it did, and she watched the film, the silent film, Onni slipped and fell, he was a little boy who didn't understand what had just happened, but the scream when he banged his elbow, his knee made Siri turned around in the doorway of the sauna and she saw Arto, and she understood.

When Annie saw her mother react it was as if she herself was woken from her trance, she realised this was happening now, and that it was real.

She opened the door and the noise rushed towards her, Onni's sobbing, Siri's screams. Annie raced out into the yard and saw the lifeless little body, she lifted Arto out of the water, tore off his clothes, shouted to her mother.

'Call the ambulance Mum, now!'

Annie wasn't sure of the right thing to do in a situation like this, but as she removed his clothes she hoped her instincts would prove sound.

Siri ran indoors, taking Onni with her as Annie held her little brother. She rocked him, soothed him, suddenly it didn't seem at all odd that she was going to be a mother, hold her own baby in her arms.

The skinny body, the pale skin turning an angry red, the dark hair and long eyelashes, he'd inherited his father's dark colouring, including his dark eyes, invisible now because they were closed. She could see a pulse beating in his throat, just beneath the thin skin. Annie scooped up a handful of snow from the step below, bathed his body with it, watched the whiteness melt on his ribs, his stomach, arms, legs.

How long did she sit there like that?

The door opened, Onni peered out and Annie beckoned him over. The two brothers were close in age, and Onni looked up to his big brother, always wanted to be wherever Arto was. Annie showed him how to bathe the body with snow, and Onni embarked upon the task with great seriousness.

'Look at you, you're like a proper nurse! Arto's so lucky to have you as his brother.'

The shadow of a smile flitted across Onni's face as he continued to bathe Arto with snow.

'Not on my willie, it's too cold.'

Arto's voice was faint but clear.

Big snowflakes hovered in the air around them, they seemed to stand still, as if the moment was frozen in time. Annie and Onni burst out laughing, and their laughter grew in intensity, they saw Arto smile, his eyelids flickered, Annie felt the tears burning her eyes, but took care to hide her emotion from the two little boys.

All the time they were waiting for the ambulance, it took about half an hour (or maybe more, she wasn't wearing her watch, and even if she had been it would

probably have been the last thing on her mind), she saw no sign of Pentti. Nor of Siri, but she assumed her mother was making the necessary calls or sorting out what needed to be organised.

She sat on the steps outside the sauna with Arto in her arms and Onni beside her, and she knew he was in the barn across the yard, she knew her father must have heard the screams. But he didn't emerge.

She sat there with one little brother in her arms and another by her side and she told them a story, the one about the three kings who travelled far across the world in search of the answer to the mystery of life. Arto was no longer unconscious, but his eyes were glazed and he seemed far, far away. Suddenly his body jerked, became stiff, motionless, then immediately relaxed again. Annie was on full alert, she was making a huge effort not to show it, but inside she felt as if she had no skeleton left, as if only her skin was holding her together, her skin and the foetus, the child.

Hirvo appeared from the forest by the barn, he had presumably been out on one of his rounds. What he did in the forest no one really knew, he wouldn't tell them even if they asked, and they'd stopped asking long ago. The very special brother who'd turned eighteen just the other Monday, and the only thing he did all day every day was disappear into the forest. He still lived at home but he was detached from the others, sailing his own boat on his own sea.

He glanced at Annie and his brothers and she knew there was nothing he could do to help, but it still hurt her that he didn't even try. She didn't see his hesitation, no one could.

But she knew Hirvo was hurting too. Arto was the sibling he cared about the most, felt closest to. He looked at them with an impenetrable gaze, closed, shut down, then he turned and scuttled towards the barn, went inside, came back out just as quickly, headed back to the forest, slowly at first and then faster, and by the time the trees swallowed him up he was moving at speed, rushing along, gone. No Siri, no Pentti.

Esko arrived before the ambulance. Siri must have called him. He lived nearby, and the sawmill where he worked was only four kilometres away, on calm days you could hear the whine of the saws. He skidded into the yard and stopped the car right by the sauna, he could see from the expression on Annie's face that this was serious.

This wasn't good.

He seemed so helpless now, the big brother who always had an answer to everything, who was always willing and able to fix whatever was broken.

'He slipped, he was on his kick sled and it slipped.'

Esko nodded, his face set. This was how he looked when he was upset, angry, actually this was how he looked most of the time.

'Where's Pentti?'

Annie nodded in the direction of the barn and shrugged.

Esko fished a cigarette out of his pocket and headed over there.

Esko. With his blond hair, it had got a little longer lately, and did he have a moustache? He was still stylish. Older, but still. So tall and reassuring, and in many ways a real big brother. He'd done everything right, everything one could wish. In spite of that he wasn't loved, not by his mother, not by his wife, possibly by his father, if Pentti was capable of feeling love.

If not love, then respect.

The other siblings had always teased Esko. He lacked a quality that most of them had, a kind of wickedness. He had a clear, direct gaze, a desire to always do his absolute best in any situation. There was no devil living inside him. Certain people seem to go through life untouched by evil. They hover a few centimetres above the ground, surrounded by light, completely naked and unprotected by the world. No negative emotions populate their minds. They get upset, they might even get angry, but there is nothing bad within them. That was what Esko was like. He was misunderstood by his family, and maybe that was what they sensed but couldn't put into words, this lack of wickedness within him. A wickedness they recognised so clearly in themselves, in their heritage, in their very DNA.

When Esko emerged from the barn after a very short time, something in his eyes stopped Annie from asking what had happened. She simply switched off, didn't want to know what their father had said or done. With Pentti there was no point in trying to understand. Their father marched to the beat of his own drum, he always had done, and any tacit agreement on what it meant to be a human being was set aside in his case.

Learning to be a human being, that was what Siri had taught them.

It was hard to say what Pentti had taught them, maybe how not to be a human being?

Some of the siblings had been influenced more by their father.

Or perhaps it was inherited?

Or simply a consequence of growing up in a home with so many mouths to feed, hearts to love, or not (love). There was a lack of understanding when it came to emotions, and at the same time those emotions were totally devoured. He was in many ways a walking paradox, their father. But no doubt his influence had always been felt.

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She had done the right thing in taking off his clothes. The snow was good too. The best thing would have been to sluice him in cold water, one part of his body at a time.

But on the whole she'd done the right thing. Her instinct had worked, her maternal instinct, her love for her brother.

Esko called from the hospital, he had followed in the car, Siri had been allowed to travel in the ambulance. Her pale cheeks were even paler, if that were possible. Her eyes were glassy, she clutched her handbag tightly, she'd taken off her scarf and Annie could see that she'd tried to comb back her hair, a few stubborn strands refused to co-operate and were sticking up. Siri knew she was going to encounter the outside world, a town, she'd made an effort, she hadn't changed but she'd put on her best coat over her jeans, it would end up smelling of sauna smoke, but that didn't matter, not now.

Annie stayed behind, somebody had to. She carried on with the Christmas laundry on shaky legs, never took her eyes off Onni, not that it was necessary, he clung to her skirt as she trudged back and forth with water and heavy, wet washing. She diluted the boiling water with snow, things might not be quite as clean but they would just have to do, and Annie's hands couldn't tolerate the hot water anyway. Siri's hands were hardened by a long life of washing rugs and curtains.

She worked all morning and into the afternoon, and then, when she started to feel faint, she took her youngest brother into the house and made him something to eat, fried the potatoes left over from yesterday's supper, warmed up sausages and let him dip them in as much mustard as he wanted, he went through half the jar, while she smoked a cigarette and drank a cup of black coffee. Then Esko called and said she'd done the right thing, more or less.

'What happens now?'

Annie was almost holding her breath, wanting to know, wanting to know everything and nothing, because she knew, I'm the one who's going to have to tell the others, the rest of them. The eternal balancing act between protecting her siblings and forcing them to face up to the reality of adulthood.

'They've sedated him, he was in so much pain, screaming, and they had to move some skin.'

'Move some skin?'

'Oh Annie, I don't know, they explained but Siri was so upset, I couldn't concentrate.'

Annie listened to her brother, his uneven breathing, the sound of the glow of his cigarette on the other end of the line. She saw skin in her mind's eye, anonymous and smooth, like great expanses on a map. Like fresh, virgin snow.

'I've never seen her like that before. Not even then.'

Esko fell silent and Annie didn't say anything. They were both thinking about their brother Riiko's death, which they alone shared because they were the only ones who'd been alive at the time, or rather during the years that followed. And then

as their thoughts followed a well-trodden path, the garage fire, and Tatu, the last time their mother had kept vigil by a hospital bed.

'Not even then, never.'

A hissing sound as Esko's saliva met the glow of the cigarette and put it out.

'Have you seen Pentti?'

'No.'

'We need to talk, but she's refusing to leave. She's going to stay here until Arto's allowed to come home.'

'Well, if she's made up her mind, that's that.'

Annie remained sitting there with the receiver in her hand after they'd ended the call, she could see the barn on the other side of the yard, covered in snow, a snowball that had begun to roll, but she didn't know anything about that yet.

In the afternoon her siblings came home from school and she told them what had happened. Lahja shook her cropped head when Annie explained, then she opened and closed her mouth a few times. Annie was struck by how quiet her sister had become since her last visit, and tall, and how misplaced she looked now that Tarmo was no longer by her side.

A misfit in her childhood home.

Then again, they all were, each in their own way. Lahja didn't say anything, but Annie could see that she was upset. Arto was loved. Lahja wasn't one to dwell on such feelings, she just put her head down and carried on. She shrugged, sat down and started peeling potatoes. Valo took Onni out into the yard and pushed him around on the kick sled in the gathering twilight, which gave Annie the chance to ring her other siblings and tell them about Arto.

Hirvo shambled in, his ears glowing bright red, like two funnels on either side of his head, his cropped hair reinforcing his inbred features. Protruding ears, eyes close together, only the extra fingers on each hand were missing, but in spite of everything he wasn't stupid, something else perhaps, but not stupid. He still lived at home but nobody really took any notice of him, sometimes it was difficult to know how much he understood of the world and what was going on around him.

His eyes, impossible to meet. In the past his stammer had also created a kind of nervousness about him, something a little jerky, but the stammer had improved, or maybe it was just that he spoke less, anyway he preferred to sail along in his very own boat, beside the others. He had completed a two-year course back in the spring and these days he mostly did contract work in the forestry industry, but there was a shortage of jobs at the moment, apart from selling Christmas trees in Torneå, which he only did at the weekends. His Swedish wasn't good enough for him to venture into Luleå, and the Swedes bought more Christmas trees than the Finns, so he didn't

have much to do. He could disappear into the forest for days on end, and he came and went without telling anyone.

When he heard from his siblings what had happened, rather than just seeing it from a distance, he seemed almost unmoved. He mumbled something inaudible then sat down on the kitchen sofa and started sharpening his knife with firm strokes and an untroubled expression, but Annie knew he was terrified, scared of what might happen. In Arto he saw a practical bent that they both shared, a kinship, and he would sometimes take the boy into the forest with him. He looked straight at his big sister with something tortured in his eyes, but instead of speaking he lowered his gaze and carried on sharpening. Annie had never understood Hirvo, but it was a long time since she'd stopped teasing him. Now they were more like two separate entities each following their own orbit, and their paths seldom crossed.

Helmi shrieked down the phone and said she'd come straight over with Little Pasi. They still hadn't managed to meet up, even though Helmi had of course called as soon as she heard about her older sister's condition. Annie didn't ask anything about her Pasi (Big Pasi), but she assumed he was either working or in the middle of one of his drinking binges. Helmi liked a drink too, although she didn't get quite as carried away as her husband. She also had to take care of Little Pasi, and so far that had held her back to a certain extent. As far as Annie was aware. But what did she know – they were usually 1200 kilometres apart.

Annie was very well aware of the lack of boundaries within her younger sister, and she knew it was only a matter of time before she sank deeper into the sump in which her husband already spent much of his waking life at the age of only twenty-five. The time when he wasn't... working, you couldn't really call it working but you had to call it something, and that was probably the closest designation. However, laundering Swedish money on the Swedish side of the border, and signing off on dodgy car insurance claims still wasn't a job. Hard work, definitely, but not a job.

Maybe Helmi could have used her energy to make something of her life, but her judgement was poor, she always thought with what was between her shoulder blades and her legs, and events took their inevitable course, and there she was, pregnant by a guy like Pasi Alaniva. Helmi had always led the way when they were growing up, always unafraid, always on the hunt for something that would make her heart beat faster.

Tatu called by and offered to go and pick up Tarmo, who was travelling to Torneå from Helsinki. His Christmas break had just started. It was Lahja who had reminded Annie and asked if she could maybe check with Rinne (to most of them Tatu was never anything but Rinne nowadays), as she was phoning anyway. And they all knew you could always rely on Rinne, if someone needed a lift he'd be there, no matter how far he had to go or what time of day it might be.

Annie rang her own number in Stockholm, trying to get hold of Lauri, but there was no answer. She assumed her brother was out, or had taken an extra shift on the boat, or was simply sleeping.

Alex still hadn't moved in, not because he didn't want to, but because Annie was waiting for something. She didn't know what it was, but she was waiting for something.

Many things would change if they moved in together. Lauri would have to find somewhere else to live, and Annie would no longer be alone, she would be co-habiting with someone, the father of her unborn child, chained together, connected forever and ever, with no escape.

After a while they started ambling in, one after the other. Helmi with her three-year-old under her arm, Helmi with the characteristic warmth that she spread everywhere she went, then Tarmo.

Tarmo, the black sheep, whose brain had become far too big for their little farm at an early stage.

Valo and Onni came indoors eventually, and when they were all gathered Lahja said the food was ready if anyone wanted something to eat, and she set everything out on the stove and everyone lined up while Annie, the tallest and eldest, doled out portions of mince sauce with potatoes. The sauce they had all grown up with – not a tomato in sight, and pools of grease floating on the surface, grease into which everyone could dip their dry rye bread. Then they gathered around the kitchen table and ate.

It was all so strangely familiar, sounds and tastes and feelings. Everything was just the same as usual, yet diametrically different.

Annie looked around. Here they were, not all of them, but many of her siblings. Only four were missing. (Or six, depending on how you counted.)

The rat king was assembled.

They ate in silence, all worried about Arto, but they were not unprepared for death, not one of them.

The oldest remembered the sibling who'd died, the younger ones had grown up with the tales of their memories, and on a farm animals die all the time. Even if death is frightening, it isn't unfamiliar, but a natural occurrence. Like an elderly relative with whom everyone has their own relationship, in some way. After they'd eaten they all helped to clear away and wash up, and Onni was bathed in the sink, to the accompaniment of his loud protests. Once he had his pyjamas on he fell asleep on the kitchen sofa next to Little Pasi, as soon as his head landed on Helmi's lap.

The rest of the evening passed, and a calmness had spread over the farm after the turbulent morning, a Christmas peace you could call it, the kind of calmness that can only follow a disaster that has been averted. Because nobody had actually died

(not yet). Some of the siblings sat in the living room watching TV, while the others stayed in the kitchen, they agreed to set to work on the Christmas baking, which Siri would no doubt have been doing if she hadn't been stuck at the hospital. Christmas stars and a selection of biscuits and saffron buns. They were in full swing when the kitchen door opened and Pentti came in.

The atmosphere in the house changed, the temperature dropped, not only because it was freezing outside, but because he instilled fear in almost all his children, that was his distinguishing feature.

'A full house, I see,' he said as he contemplated his children, with their rosy, floury cheeks. Their happiness, which seemed to irritate him.

Annie served him up a plate of potatoes with meat sauce and he took it without saying a word. He sat down in his chair, in his usual place at the head of the table, from which he could see the whole kitchen. He blew through his lips.

'Spoon,' he said, and Lahja, who was the nearest, opened the drawer and passed him one.

There was silence in the kitchen, they could hear voices from the TV in the other room. And the sound of Pentti chewing.

He was remarkable, this man. So short, no more than five foot five, black eyes, black hair, not a single strand of grey, fourteen children he had fathered and not one grey hair, I know it's genetic but it's also symbolic, you have to agree with me on that.

There was Sami blood in Pentti's family, not that anyone was willing to admit to that, it certainly wasn't talked about, but it was unmistakable. Same blood and something else, something deeper, the holy rage (and madness) came from a religious seat of honour, there was no possible alternative. It was Catholic blood that flowed through their veins, no doubt about it.

'Buttermilk,' he said into the silence. Helmi was sitting on the sofa, closest to him, and Annie saw her give a start, then leap to her feet and quickly pour him a glass.

Her movements were rapid and precise, but Pentti still managed to grab her by the wrist. His reflexes. Still like lightning, unchanged by age.

'Have you got the family with you?'

He spoke without looking at her, keeping his eyes fixed on Annie instead.

'Only Little Pasi.'

'Just as well. You're eating me out of house and home as it is, but what can I do, you're flesh and blood. Flesh and blood. But that's the end of it.'

They'd heard it all before. They heard it every time they brought home members of their family or friends, and it was nothing to be afraid of. Just another of Pentti's monologues.

Better than the alternative.

His brain was like a minefield. To an outsider there was no logic, but his children, who had grown up and been raised within this context, knew exactly how he would react in any given situation.

Well, not in every situation, of course. That was the frightening part. Just when you thought you'd understood, worked out the system, it changed. He didn't usually look at them. He stared into space rather than looking them in the eye. He rarely looked them in the eye. But now he was looking straight at his oldest daughter. Annie thought his expression was cheerful. You might almost imagine that he knew nothing about what had happened earlier today.

'I see you're baking.'

'Well, it's Christmas in a few days.'

Annie felt compelled to answer. She was the oldest sibling present, and she was usually pretty good at navigating her way around the black, tangled knots in Pentti's brain. She still carried the memory of how things used to be. Or rather the memory of a memory, because she didn't remember a time when she hadn't been afraid of her father and his temperament. But sometimes a kind of tenderness came over her, in the middle of all the rage, in the middle of all the other emotions, an impulse to reach out and stroke his cheeks, her little daddy. The child he had once been. However, the moment quickly passed, because these days he was if not impossible, then extremely difficult to love. He snorted as he shovelled down his food.

'I don't need reminding of that, thank you very much. We're bleeding money in this household, but I'm the only one who pays any attention. And now with one kid in hospital and the housekeeper out of action, the work stops. I'm going to have to do everything myself.'

This was the first time he'd mentioned Arto. He was no longer looking at Annie.

'Oh, so you know about that,' she said.

'There was a hell of a racket out there earlier on – I had a job to get anything done with all the running around.'

Pentti finished his meal in silence. He seemed to appreciate it, because he smacked his lips a couple of times and picked up his plate to slurp down the last few drops of sauce, and when he'd finished he went into the living room and sat down in the armchair in front of the television. His children let out a long breath and one by one the siblings drifted into the kitchen, drawn to the warmth from the wood-burning stove or driven out by the sudden chill in the other room.

'So, Annie,' Tatu said. 'Welcome home, for fuck's sake!'

He was doing his best Pentti-imitation, his voice deep with a restrained vibrato, exaggerating the Tornedalen lilt. The siblings were united in laughter, as they often were. Laughter as a precondition for inherent evil? The evil their eldest brother

lacked, maybe that was what they were reacting to, the thing that made him fundamentally different from them? A burst of laughter echoed around the kitchen, relieving the tension.

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Annie didn't recall Siri ever having talked to her about childbirth, nor about the female body. No, she'd never spoken about anything that could be regarded as embarrassing, it wasn't something that her generation did, but maybe it was mainly down to her own disposition. Because Annie knew that her friends' mothers had prepared their daughters much better than Siri had prepared her.

She would never forget the winter when she got her first period. She was eleven and a half years old, and it was February. The winter was at its most severe, with frost so deep in the ground that it reached halfway to China, and darkness that had yet to loosen its grip. Valo was newborn, taking up all of Siri's time with his colic, and Annie had to help out even more than usual. She remembered feeling tired, so tired all the time, she had grown almost five centimetres since the previous summer and that's exhausting, she was woken in the early hours by an indefinable ache in her body, growing pains but something else as well, dull, almost animalistic. When she went to the toilet, installed the year before, she saw it, the blood in her knickers.

Her body went rigid.

She looked around nervously, worried that someone might see her, in the middle of the night, in the middle of winter.

What was going on? Splashes of red glowed bright against the porcelain, they became so real there in the white toilet bowl. She had to flush, even though Pentti insisted they mustn't flush if they absolutely had to piss in the toilet, they couldn't waste water on that kind of thing, but she did it anyway, she didn't care if the noise woke anyone.

This was a matter of life and death.

She stood up. Suddenly felt dizzy, everything went dark before her eyes, the taste of blood in her mouth. She didn't know why she was being punished, but at that moment she was absolutely certain that it was a punishment. She didn't live in a religious home, as Pentti's many brothers did, but maybe that was exactly why she often felt as if God was watching her, and that his hand either did or did not rest on certain people.

And right now he had definitely moved his hand away from her.

In a panic she grabbed her clothes in the darkness, as quietly as she possibly could, and when she'd got dressed without waking any of her siblings who slept in the same room (Helmi, Lauri, Voitto), she glided silently down the stairs and out into

the February dawn. She pulled on her ski suit and skis, didn't bother taking any food because there wouldn't be time to eat anyway, then she sped away, heading north east.

She glanced back at the house one last time, at the yard, the barn, everything that felt like home, and it wasn't sorrow she felt.

It was anger.

Was this all there was? Was this pathetic, run-down, poor, ugly place – was this all she would ever see, experience in her life?

She skied until the sweat was pouring down her back, she could feel it in the gap between her body and her woolly jumper. She kicked off her skis and slumped down against a tree. Her pulse was pounding in her ears, and she could taste the blood as if there was an open wound in her throat, and her heart was beating wildly in her chest. She sat there for a long time, until the sky grew light. Until her body no longer felt as if it was about to explode. Until she actually felt both cold and hungry.

She was alive.

The time was, well, she didn't know, but a couple of hours must have passed. She had been so sure she was going to die, but now it seemed as if she might survive. It took a while for her to process the idea that life wasn't over. She still didn't know what had happened, but she wasn't afraid any more. Just cold and hungry. She stood up, her legs unsteady, and slowly began to ski towards home. Her knickers were cold and stiff with dried blood, and with every movement of her skis she could feel fresh blood seeping out of her, little by little.

She arrived back just after nine. Everyone had had breakfast and gone to school. The little ones were still at home – Lauri, Tatu and Hirvo, plus Valo of course.

Pentti was in the barn, Siri was washing up. She looked surprised when Annie walked in, but not especially worried. After you've produced a certain number of children, maybe you don't worry about them any more. Or perhaps the amount of worry is constant, and spread among so many, the quantity per child is very low.

'There you are.'

Annie's expression was rebellious, she didn't know why, but she was still filled with the anger that had overwhelmed her earlier.

'I'm sick, I'm not going to school today.'

Her mother didn't look up, she simply began drying the bowls and spoons and putting them away.

'What's wrong with you?'

'I don't know, but I'm bleeding.'

'You're bleeding?'

When Annie didn't answer, Siri remained silent for a little while as she wiped the draining board, then she let out a bark of laughter.

'You're not sick, little one – it means you've become a woman.'

She smiled at Annie, gave her a look that could mean so many things, maybe it was tenderness, relief at the fact that her first (still living) daughter had actually survived, that she'd fulfilled her duty as a mother, or maybe it was amusement because she didn't understand how her daughter could have failed to understand this change from girl to woman, the change that would affect every member of her sex, or maybe it was something else, a third, unknown possibility, but Annie's eleven-year-old self felt no warmth of maternal love, only betrayal, a sense of having been dropped in an alien world, in her new body, with no help or forewarning.

Annie shrugged.

'Oh yes? Well, I'm going to bed.'

'You can do that today because it's your first time, but this is going to happen to you every single month until you're old, so you can't just take to your bed and laze around.'

Annie went upstairs and got into bed, she pulled the covers over her and closed her eyes. After a while Siri appeared.

'Here,' she said, dropping something by Annie's feet. 'You'll need to wash them when you've used them.'

They were old hand towels, so thin and worn that they were in holes, the kind you saved and used to polish everything from copper to windows. A little pile of them.

And that was the only conversation Annie ever had with her mother about menstruation.

The following day in school she talked to her girlfriends, several of them had older sisters, and with their help she managed to gather enough information, to the point where she was even able to laugh at herself, taking off on her skis like a lunatic, heading into the forest in the darkness, convinced that she was dying. After that she'd made sure she educated her younger sisters so they wouldn't have to experience what she'd gone through. And the image of her home in the early hours of the morning never left her, it lay over her existence like a thick blanket, but it also aroused a very real yearning in her breast, a conviction that she had to get away from here, that she would get away, couldn't stay here and become like her mother, anything else, but not that.

Following that incident she stopped thinking about things like gods and punishment, and if the image of a huge paternal hand up in heaven came into her mind, she quickly pushed it aside, that kind of thing is for little children, not for women.

Washing old bloodstained towels wasn't something that either Annie or Helmi (who got her first period two years later) particularly wanted to do, it was easier to

use old newspaper, crumple it up and tuck it into their knickers when it was that time of the month. In the little hallway there was a gap in the wood by the stairs, just outside Annie and Helmi's room, and into that gap between the wall and the stairs they pushed their dried, bloody, homemade sanitary towels, rusty-brown old news, the space was meant to be used for insulation, but like so many other things (in life) it hadn't happened.

This air gap, lined with bloody newspapers, would play a key role in the rapid destruction of the house. To put it briefly, it provided an excellent corridor for the flow of oxygen, an important element in a fire. But more of that later.

You know what you've got but not what you're going to get. And they always say that you never regret a child you've given birth to, but Annie had often wondered how Siri felt about all her children. She didn't even think about Pentti, okay, so they were his children too, but at the same time they weren't. He took no emotional responsibility for them. But Siri – did she regret any of them, one or more, and if so which?

Annie loved her siblings to different degrees, she knew that, and she knew that Siri had favourites, children who got away with things the others would never be allowed to do, the consequences would have been a clip round the ear or a spanking or a telling off. But she couldn't imagine maternal love, unconditional love. And she didn't regret her abortion. Not one thing about it. She hadn't even thought about it until she fell pregnant again.

When the seed was planted in her body she felt it almost right away, a physical change, and not for the better. She felt as if she'd been invaded, as if something alien had entered her and partly taken over, she was filled with emotions, thoughts, thoughts she didn't recognise, thoughts that weren't hers, she often wept, felt sick and was tormented by irrational emotional storms, all those classic female traits that fortunately weren't part of her make-up, either because of genetics or because she'd actively worked against that kind of thing for the whole of her life, but now she was overwhelmed.

She saw her father, recognised him in her actions, irrational and driven by emotions (not only that, there was an element of calculation as well, of course), and she was not her father, never wanted to be, was determined not to be. When she woke up after the procedure she felt many things, as you do when you've been sedated, but grief wasn't one of them, it was as if a veil had been lifted from her eyes, she could think again, she could shut off her emotions again, and this, combined with who the child's father was, made her absolutely certain that she'd made the right decision on that occasion.

This time was different. This pregnancy. She felt better now, wasn't troubled by those emotional storms, and she had also made the decision at an early stage that

she was going to keep the child, but on her own terms. If Alex wanted to be involved, then that was fine by her. But she could do it without him too. She had never dreamed of being part of a couple, never been so in love with someone that she would put his needs before her own, or hardly even compromise.

That was why she had carried on smoking and done so almost entirely without any sense of guilt.

That was why she found it so difficult to contemplate living with Alex, even though she knew that was what he wanted, that it was perhaps the only thing he wanted right now.

When Alex found out that Annie was pregnant, he had proposed on the spot. Got down on one knee right there in the middle of the café, Annie was so embarrassed she didn't know where to look.

'No, no,' she said, 'are you crazy, I'm never going to get married. No. Get up.'

At first he looked hurt, but then, when he realised that she wanted to keep the child, he'd picked her up and whirled her around in the air. People had stared and laughed.

'I'm going to be a daddy! A daddy! A daddy!'

Then he'd turned to Annie and said, with a wry smile:

'This isn't over, little one. Just you wait. I'm a patient man. My love will break down your resistance. Just you wait.'

And Annie had laughed and kissed him, but deep down she was just the same as always, nothing special, neutral.

When Hassan came to the hospital after the abortion, after he'd managed to find out where Annie was, he was furious. Abortion was a mortal sin. You just didn't do that kind of thing. Didn't she realise what she'd exposed herself and the foetus to?

He couldn't accept it at all. He sat there beside her bed, his face flushed bright red, he wept, wept for what she'd done, for his unborn child, wept because their love, her love, wasn't strong enough, and all Annie felt was a faint distaste and perhaps a little embarrassment because he was making a scene, and she hoped he would leave soon. It's obvious to anyone that you can't build a relationship or a family on those feelings.

Apart from that, she'd enjoyed being with him. She liked the fact that he was straight, clear, she liked his olive-coloured skin and his black hair, which covered almost his entire body like fur, she liked the fact that he took her out on adventures, to fancy bars and secret night clubs, she liked the way he made love to her, harsh and uncompromising, without really bothering about her needs. He liked to pull her hair when he mounted her, and she liked feeling helpless and vulnerable.

But she had never imagined a future with him. Annie saw only one person in her future, and that was Annie. And trailing along behind somewhere, forever attached, all her siblings. They would always be united, like it or not.

Before Lauri moved down to join her, Annie's friends knew nothing about her background. They knew she was from northern Finland and that she'd grown up on a farm in the middle of nowhere, but she had skilfully avoided mentioning all those brothers and sisters, Pentti, Siri, everything that had made up her life.

Because most people just want to be seen.

They just want to be listened to. And have fun, of course. Annie was careful to surround herself with friends who shared this attitude. And when you worked in a bar, you automatically met like-minded individuals. People who loved to laugh and have fun, who weren't obsessed with dwelling on the past, who lived for today and enjoyed a good party, whatever day of the week it might be.

She'd met Hassan late one night on the way home from a party. He drove her cab, and they'd chatted and laughed a lot. Annie invited him in for a cup of tea and they slept together as it began to grow light outside. From then on they saw each other on a fairly regular basis, but always at her place, which suited Annie very well.

Nothing permanent.

Until that little pregnancy came along and messed things up. And then he sat there by her hospital bed and wept and finished with her. Annie was quite pleased. Admittedly she sometimes missed him when she was in bed with Alex, Alex who always insisted on satisfying her first before he could simply have sex with her, but it was only a physical pang, she would never have allowed herself to feel, or at least admit to feeling, anything else, to herself, to him, to anyone.

She saw Hassan with his family. It was just before she travelled home, only a few days ago. She had been Christmas shopping in the NK department store, her coat open, her belly clearly visible, contrasting with her skinny body. She was on her way up the escalator, he was on his way down. With a fat wife who had a moustache, and two children who looked about the same age as Onni and Arto, six and four. The wife and children were busy chatting, Hassan was a couple of steps behind them and their eyes met. Then they passed each other, Annie didn't turn around, but she was sure that Hassan had glanced over his shoulder. That was the only time she'd seen him in his other life, his real life. She'd had to sit down among the toys for a moment, but the assistant smiled and gave her a glass of water and said something reassuring about her growing bump so Annie played along, and after a little while she was back to her old self once more.

Nina Wähä about TESTAMENT

I was born and raised in Sweden, a so-called second-generation immigrant. My mother is Finnish and my father Bulgarian. Never belonging anywhere, always on the margins. It has been a long personal process to realise that my voice is also worth listening to, that it has just as much reason to exist and be heard. That it might even be important.

When I started writing *Testament* my grandmother was seriously ill with Alzheimers. She confused her children with her parents, forgot to eat and wash herself, everything that the illness involves. The familiar suddenly becoming unfamiliar. My grandmother who was born in the 1920's, in a little cottage without heating or running water, who never went to school, who was taught how to read by her older brother – the only one of the seven children who was allowed to go to school. The war came and the family was forced to escape. Karelia was no longer Finnish, the only choice was to pack up and leave.

My grandmother, a refugee of war and an illiterate, has a grand-daughter who grows up in a capital city, who attends school for not just nine or twelve years but for however longs she wants to, and still it is only two generations away. It is easy to forget that there are other skills and experiences outside the present world you're living in. But without my grandmother I would never have existed. And when she dies, all her experiences die with her. It will be as if she never existed.

The world is full of books about white academic men walking around cities with an undisputed right to be there. In a hundred years time, when people look back on the literature of this day and age, will they think that the world only consisted of these kinds of men? It is my responsibility to broaden the fictive historiography, to shed light on another reality, even if it never existed. That is our responsibility to our future generations. That is why I wrote *Testament*. Because it is a testimonial, and because it tells a story that is relevant to many a family, and also because the prose brought me there.

I'm completely convinced that my voice is special and different and unique and that it is essential that readers shall be able to listen to it.

(Besides writing I have worked as an actress, translator, written movie scripts, written song lyrics and recorded albums, toured Europe with indie band Lacrosse and much, much more that I won't elaborate on).