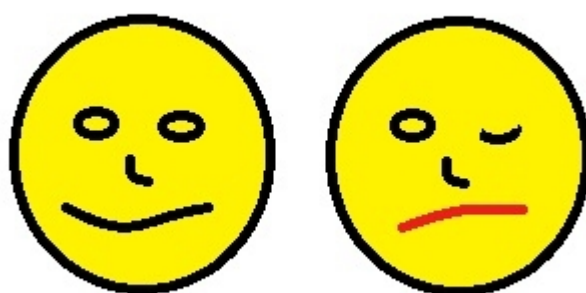


# Short stories



By

Mårten Steen, Erik and Gunnar Björing

Boksidan

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Translated from Swedish to Swedish English, by Google translator and Gunnar Björing.

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## Holiday memories

- But it's here! Look at that rock in the water, it is exactly the same and then the stairs there. But when the picture was taken to the catalogue, the beach was cleaned.

- It's not that, it does not feel the same, not as cosy.

He sighed loudly, so that she would actually hear it. Then, with obvious irritation:

- Okay, what's wrong then?

- It looked like one of those dream beaches, you said that too. It was the one who convinced us to go here.

A long pause, then a little smoother:

- Here we would lie on the chairs reading, sometimes go swimming, sometimes have a beer.

- Oh, and what do we do now? Where are we, you have a book in your hand and I have a beer.

His voice was sarcastic and to highlight what is said, or of pure thirst, he took a sip. The beer was warm.

Anna had her book lifted against his eyes. It did not look like she was reading, more like the book shaded her from the sun, and her eyes were almost closed, even though she was wearing sunglasses.

His face was still shadowed by the parasol, but not for long, soon the sun's rays would reach even him. Just as the sun began to appear alongside the parasol it was hidden behind a single cloud.

Anna stood up, fast to be her. She stood with her ass towards him and looked at the sea. With her right hand she pulled out the bikini panty that had fastened between her buttocks. Afterwards she caressed along her thigh. Sexy really, and this was the thigh that he, perhaps, would caress tonight. The mouth smiled, her eyes smiled, her whole person was beaming of happiness when she came out of the water. Afterwards the sun dried her on both sides, she turned toward him, caught his eyes and said:

- Cosy! No more, only that, but it was enough for him to know.

He tried to smile back, but it did not feel authentic.

Hot, thirsty, idle, with a boring book, the last holiday week that would be icing on the cake, which would provide memories to enjoy throughout the fall.

Anna saw that he was unhappy, or she was thirsty herself, her right hand caressed his upper arm, her mouth asked:

- Want a beer?

Now he smiled for real.

Another half-empty beer, the gas evaporated, warm. Not as it should taste, not even the first sip, a taste of metal. But still a beer by the sea, the sun and Anna alongside. Perhaps a dip would be nice, an ice cream and then perfection.

Regardless of how warm the thermometer said the water was, it still felt cold. Slowly the thighs got used to the cold, but the worst still remained, but he can't stand here forever, even a couple of older ladies had immersed themselves in the water while he did not even have water above the waist. One more step, something stabbed him in the big toe, but not worse than it was possible to move on. A few steps, he clenched and threw himself into the waves.

The small pain in the left big toe neither increased nor declined. Though the water felt good now, not too cold. It would probably be possible to stay in for a while, but why? A few strokes against a stone formation, the water got colder, he tried to stand, the pain in the toe the same. Around him the water, it was clear, but also unclean, as if someone had poured oil in it. That settled the discussion, he got up, limped ostentatiously, sat down on the bed and lifted the foot with both hands towards the face.

The toe looked pale in the strong sunlight. Some small dark streaks and ditto dots were clearly visible under the skin. With the discovery the toe began to throb. Anna looked at him, sat beside him and asked anxiously, but no more than that, about what had happened.

He responds with bitterness, pain and anxiety that something stung him, perhaps a sea urchin. Anna without panic, without suggesting either a doctor or hospital:

- Does it hurt?

- What the hell do you think? By the way, it can be dangerous. I know a guy whose whole foot got swollen, he had fever and everything for several months.

- Yes, but that was in Thailand. This is Croatia, here they are not so dangerous.

He got angry:

- What, do you suggest then? Should I live with this?

- No, of course not, lie still and I'll fix needle and tweezers. Would you like something to drink?

She caressed him, he replied the caressing and said:

- Maybe a beer.

It took an hour of waiting, blood, swearing and sometimes pain until there were no more black lines or dots, instead there were seven ripped holes. The toe was hurting, but in a different way, as if the contaminants were actually gone.

The lunch, another one of those weird hamburgers, with small sausages of minced meat between two slices of large soft hamburger buns. Besides, on the paper tray, a click of pepper sauce and another with onion pieces. The only tool, a toothpick, which was hopeless to use to disseminate the sauce and the onions over the sausages. This effort only to see how, at least, one third of the sausages fall out of the soft breads down on his stomach. He knew it would happen again, just like yesterday. But this was the only meal option in addition to pizza slices. Anna took a piece of pizza. Lucky she thought it was enough and she also said that she thought they were tasty.

He must have fallen asleep because he was surprised that Anna was anointing him on the back. She had come almost down to the swimming trunks. A little like massage, but it hurt when her hand rubbed against the skin.

- Hey, you have to protect yourself if you want to lie in the sun. You know that. You will be all red here.

- Damn, I must have fallen asleep, but isn't it too late to do now? Shouldn't we get into the shade instead?

Anna's good temper fell directly. She stopped.

Silence, the sun decided by disappearing behind the cliffs.

On the way to the hotel, Anna stayed and talked to a couple of English women. He a bit off, unnecessary, sat on a rock and waited. A good while later, they went on. Anna:

- They are very nice, they said they ate at a place yesterday called "Lasko Pivo", it is a bit behind our hotel.

- But what, it's a beer brand, that could mean any place.

They laughed, she lovingly.

Later that day, now into the evening, about half past seven, the sun remains in the sky, a lush courtyard. He and she on each side of a garden table made of cast iron. Around them: leaves and flowers, above them: leaves, on the table a plate in front of each one, flatware, cotton napkins, a carafe of red wine, wine glasses, a bottle of mineral water, water glasses, a bowl with bread, salt and pepper. On Tomas plate a big, juicy steak. Besides the steak: béarnaise sauce, on the other side: rosemary fragrant fried potatoes. The sun shining through the foliage above their heads making patterns on the table, glittering in the red wine. A moment, Anna is quiet, the smell of summer, food, lilac bushes, barbecue evenings. Without waiting for Anna he cuts a piece of his meat, the knife slips through. He chews, roach, as pate. A shudder throughout the body, now he is home, the trip, the summer vacation. One picture, it's enough, it is forever stored in his memory as the summer when they were in Croatia.

## Children

They were finished with dinner and coffee with mom's lemon meringue tart. Stig sat there with his dad and a glass of cognac. Mom, Stina and Anton had gone to bed. The everyday topics of their conversation began to run out.

- So how was I when I was a kid then?

- But you know that!

- Nah, I do not know how you found me, and moreover I don't remember a thing from when I was in Anton's age.

- You were a wonderful boy, sweet, cosy.

- Come on, not all the time, hah. I must have been mischievous and annoying too. Just like Anton. The father got up, asked if he wanted more brandy. He did not wait for answers, did not take the glasses, walked into the kitchen, came back with the bottle in one hand and a bag of pretzels in the other. Still without asking he poured into two glasses, quite a bit, did not smell on the liquid as he use to, drank.

- Anton is a good boy, I think, at least when he's here.

Stig hesitated. Talk about Anton or, for once, himself. The latter seemed more interesting, now that they for once were alone and on the verge to confidentiality, also eased in mind by the alcohol and the tasty dinner.

- Is he nicer than I was at his age?

- I do not know, I don't see him when he is at home. When we were visiting your grandparents, you were always very kind.

- Well, I was almost afraid of them. Then we were just there on Christmas, Easter and perhaps grandfather's birthday. By the way is a good child one of those kids who just shut up and never dare to do anything? Is not that a very subdued child? Can't we, by the way, stop calling them grandpa and grandma now. It becomes so confusing, it's you who is grandpa now.

They grinned, his father nodded, then he continued:

- You were not subdued, it had probably never been possible to subdue you.

- I was messy then? Thus I was not that very wonderful?

- No, you were like any other child.

- What do you know about it? I have no siblings and no cousins for that matter.

The father fidgeted, perhaps unconsciously. As if he felt guilty about it. As if it was his fault. To some extent, it was perhaps so, but Stig knew they tried to make siblings to him, but something went wrong when he was born. That his parents, in turn, did not make siblings to him was hardly his fault, but maybe he felt sad for that. It seemed like he was looking for answers, but did not find any. After a long while and a few sips, he replied, though not to the question:

- You were so cute when you're asleep. You lay between us and held my pyjama jacket, sometimes you hugged my arm.

- For how long did I sleep in your bed?

- Quite a long time, I think. You got your own bed when mom, I mean, Maud, finished breastfeeding. Although you refused to sleep in it until you were maybe five years.

- Refused? But that was just to let me lie there and scream for a while until I fell asleep. That's how do we do with Anton, it always works. He screams a bit, then he falls asleep.

- Ha, don't you think we tried with it huh? You just refused. If we put you in the crib, you could lie there and scream for hours. What do you think the neighbours would have thought about it?

- I thought you said it was cosy when I lay between you and held your pyjamas.

- Sure it was really cosy, about my finest memory from when you were little, as if I could give some security, or happiness perhaps.

- But still, you wanted me to sleep in my own bed?

- Well, you did get no siblings.

The father grinned, Stig tanned. Then, half seriously:

- Is that why? Actually, he knew the answer to that question.

- No, you know? Mom, I mean Maud, had some sort of enlargement on her heart when she gave birth to you, it was very serious.

Stig's thoughts returned to why his parents did not want him in bed even though it apparently was so cosy. Perhaps it was mom who did not want to have him there, maybe she was jealous that he always hugged dad. While he was thinking about this:

- Of course I do, sorry mom, but the question is left unanswered.

- You were kicking a lot. But you were very cute too, when you lay there. Sucking your thumb and holding in my pyjamas.

- I kicked you?

- Nah most mom actually, though I got it every now and then too.

- More then? Did I whine and made other noises, as Anton usually do?

- Whined, you screamed, had scary dreams I guess. Suddenly you could give up a giant scream without even waking up.

- But you woke up.

- And could not go back to sleep, of course.

- Did I sleep all night?

- No you woke up quite often, even when you were a bit bigger, after mother stopped feeding you.

- I cried?

- Sometimes, not very often.

- Sometime per night?

- More than that, I think, a couple of times at least.

- It is well very often, I think, compared to Anton. But what did you do then?

- You know, we tried to comfort you, do not really remember, after a while you fell asleep again.

- How did you stand it really, it sounds as if I was a complete pain in the ass.

- It was not your fault, you were so cute.

Stig began to be irritated. Sat quietly, took a big gulp, emptied the glass. Then he emptied the bowl of peanuts and with the batter in his mouth:

- So, I kicked you, held your arm so that you could not move it, cried, screamed and destroyed your sex life and you claim that it is among your finest memories of me as a child. I must thus have been terrible when I was awake.

The father laughed, seemingly heartfelt.

- Well, that is quickly forgotten, but your grip on my arm, that you do not forget.

## The winner

Saturday, mid-August, it's the fourth department of the horse races, Kalle is still on.

On the TV there is a lot of uninteresting small talk, then waits advertising. Kalle goes to the fridge for today's second, the weekly award, five cans of beer every Saturday and a horse gambling coupon. A system for like 400 SEK each week. It goes pretty well, not more than a few thousand back this year.

Soon time for the fifth race, a few sips of the newly opened beer. He has nailed the race, a sure winner. She leads quite clearly, but in the stretch she gets overtaken, becomes number two. The rest of the coupon went in. A decent, or even, exceptionally good result, but this week it only gave a little more than double the bet. Capital for a couple of Saturdays forward.

Next Saturday the same thing, five beers and a bit larger system for 600 SEK. He won the first four races but lost in number five and six. Then it was no fun to watch it any more. Hell, he had planned to go for both of the two horses who won. Damn, it was Thomas fault again. Next Saturday then? No Jack left, borrow from my mom? Hell, no, never, not for the horse races anyway. No lunch restaurants the next week? Bring my lunch box with type macaroni or noodles, damn. Risking scurvy just to play, hell no, that's the limit. What a fucking piss life, forced to choose between macaroni all week to get some fun in weekend or no fun in the weekend, but solid food a week.

It was Sunday, Kalle slept late, watched TV, went to mom, ate dinner, watched TV, went home, slept, the clock radio howled at six o'clock, a couple of snooze, up, shower, coffee and sandwich in a fast pace, in the car, motorway, of at the King's Curve, parked on one of the firm's parking lots, went in, changed clothing, checked the pile of work orders. With hesitation, he took the job that was on top, a 735 that was hit on the left front wing, replacing the screen, front grill and a lamp housing, may need to be adjusted. What made him doubtful was the adjustment. So easy that it got wrong, but OK, it was on top.

Lunch Monday, which meant pizza. One of the guys had got six races right last weekend, damn, damn lucky-Nisse. How the hell he could choose the right horse in the fifth, he who could barely tell the difference between a mare and a stallion.

The car was finished just after lunch, no adjustment, all parts correctly ordered and they sat like a glove. The job done on standard time, he celebrated with a chocolate ball to coffee. The others looked a bit, chocolate ball meant that you had something to celebrate. He said nothing and no one asked. Ridiculous to celebrate such a thing. In the afternoon he took an easy job, not the top one, which meant that he could go to the shower a little earlier. Then to the store, loaded supplies, home, yogurt and sandwiches, TV until eight, logged in on the game, sleepy at ten o'clock, logged off at eleven, fell asleep immediately.

On Friday it was a little extra, partying with Peter, beer at his place, down to the pizzeria, luxurious pizza with beef and béarnaise sauce. Thomas offers a round of shots. Kalle invite back, Peter don't need to, he invited them home. At eleven o'clock, pretty loaded, taxi to Snaps, almost stopped by the guards in the entrance. More beer in the bar, no girls, but anyway too drunk to pick up a chic. Black Jack instead, wins up to a beer that he did not need, wobbling to the subway.

The following week, on Tuesday, something special happens. A friend, whom he helped with the car, comes with a bottle of whiskey, great stuff, "Mac Allen" 12 year old, purchased at an airport. The event is celebrated in the evening with some steady ones and internet poker. He loose, of course, but what, buy-in cost 50 crowns.

Thursday, in the evening, private-job-evening at work, everyone is there. Kalle replaces the bass elements to his stereo, got a couple of really obese speakers from a friend as a thank you for a job. They fit almost, but almost is not a problem for a mechanics like Kalle. He saw a couple of short slits in the plate and bends it so nicely that it looks like the original. Borrows a little touch-up paint for the sawn surface, perfect!

Saturday, pizza with Thomas and a single coupon, lost.

Sunday, helping Thomas to replace his exhaust pipes.

Or helped, Thomas handled him tools and stuff, he did the job. The workshop as usual: OK's DIY facility in Farsta, cheap, well stocked with gadgets and never any problem getting time at the places with a car lift.

The others are just there to wash their car at one of the car wash stations. Except when it's time for tire replacement from summer to winter tires, then he keeps away.

Wednesday, mom's birthday, Kalle buys a bottle of sherry as usual. Mom pretends to be surprised. She offers pork Africana, Kalle pretends in turn to be surprised.

The Saturday after he wins a small amount on the racetrack, then he loose it and the rest of his cash on the Black Jack. But, no problem, salary on Monday, the money lasted almost all the way, food in the fridge.

Then, on Saturday, the seventh race, Kalle has picked out the right horses so far. A fairly large system, 600 SEK, though it is worth at least the double now. He has selected two horses in the last race, both are at the forefront. The second one is on the outside, but it can't keep up. Hell, it could have been a bang, but now only one million two hundred thousand crowns.

One million two hundred thousand, he starts to shake, checks the coupon again, check a third time and a fourth. Drops it on the floor, gets scared that it will break. He does not know what to do with it. Shit, its worth over a million. Otherwise, with the small winnings, it happens that he waves the ticket vouchers at the pub. Now he takes in it as if it was made of tissue paper or something. After much deliberation, he decides to hide it under the shirts in the wardrobe. Then he celebrates with a few whiskey sticks, but nothing more. You have to be cool now, wait until the money is on the account.

That night, of course, difficult to fall asleep, but in a positive way. What should he do with the money? Options popping up as the characters on the reels of the slot machines. New car: absolutely, maybe an M5: a or a Corvette, new TV also given, a big one, flat of course with HD quality, home cinema: granted, new casting rod, why not, ABU Ambassadeur, the top of the line, new watch, Rolex: perhaps, a submariner in stainless steel, not too showy, but it shows that he have money, clothes: Well maybe, nothing that turns him on, but it may well be good, new game console: of course. Then it gets worse, new apartment: why? This is good, close to the pals and a nice balcony, money in the bank: may well be good until he gets a better idea, shares: never, motorcycle: fun, but dangerous, almost got killed with the last one.

Two months later, in a traffic jam on the motorway, what happened? Kalle thinks back, like so many times before in the recent past. The guys at work understood when they saw the car and the watch. He had been on sick leave the whole first week, shopped and enjoyed life, but on the Monday after, when he stepped out of the M5, and with feigned nonchalance looked at the clock, the spare guy saw him, grasped directly, came up to him, said congratulations and demanded cake for the coffee brake, asked how much he won. Kalle had been thinking a lot about this, no idea to darken it, everyone knew exactly how much each weeks coupon gave. Six right then he would never have been able to afford this car, it was the truth that mattered. They seemed happy for him and also happy with a set of cakes. Sure some teasing, but not in an evil way. Most of them seemed genuinely happy for him actually.

The pals, however, seemed like they wanted a part of it. He offered a fine restaurant with a three-course dinner and all the drinks they asked for, but then when they went on, it was as if he had to pay anyway. The following weekend it was the same, they looked at him when it was time to pay, both Peter and Thomas. He did, but this time it did not feel as fun, later in the evening he said it, the atmosphere was cool, they parted, he took a taxi home, the others stayed.

The queue disappears, he releases the clutch and continues to the job, he would be late, of at the King's Curve, park at one of the firm's parking lots, in, change clothes, look in the pile of work orders. With hesitation, he takes the job that is on top of the pile, a 735 who had been hit on the left front wing, replacing the screen, front grill and lamp housing, may need to be adjusted. What makes him doubtful is the adjustment. So easy that it goes wrong, but OK, it is on top.

Lunch Monday, pizza, he takes the one with beef, someone laugh.

The car is ready soon after lunch, no adjustment, all parts correctly ordered and they fit like a glove. In the afternoon, he takes an easy job, not the top, so that he can go to the shower a little earlier.



Then the store, loading food, homes, yogurt and sandwiches, TV until eight, log in on the game, sleepy at ten o'clock, log out at eleven, fall asleep instantly.

On Friday it's a little extra, warming up with beer at Peter's home, down to the pizzeria, luxury pizza with beef and béarnaise sauce. Kalle offers a round of shots. At eleven o'clock, pretty packed, taxi to Snaps, he is almost stopped by the guards in the door. More beer in the bar, no girls, but too drunk to pick up a chic up anyway. Black Jack instead, win up to a beer that he did not need, wobbling to the taxi queue.

Thursday, in the evening, private-job-evening at work, everyone is there. Kalle installing a CD changer in the boot, it goes pretty well, but he happens to make a small scratch on one of the hinges to the door.

Saturday, pizza with Thomas and a small system on the horses, they lost.

Sunday, invites mom to a restaurant.

Monday, the clock radio howls as usual. Stays in bed for a while and wish away, goes up, showers.

Wednesday evening, rent a couple of movies, seeing one of them, gets tired of it, plays poker online, say no to a private-job for a friend's friend.

Thursday evening, pondered a bit of traveling somewhere over Christmas, search for it online, finds nothing, falls asleep early.

## The villa

In the beginning it was almost like Miriam imagined, or at least it seemed like it could turn out that way. They moved the first of May, the day the spring use to come there, that was at least what the seller said. Miriam had arranged it well, the move. Anders mate borrowed a real truck from his work. It was he Anders and two guys who carried the stuff. It was enough with one ride with the big truck. She and her two best friends stayed and cleaned. It went very well, just as planned. Lena vacuumed and wiped the floors, Belinda was cleaning the bathroom. She did the kitchen. Closets, windows and the balcony, she had already cleaned in advance. It took only a few hours and then they could pack the last things and go to her new home, the house in the country.

Bergshamra link, Norrtäljevägen, Brottbys junction, Älgeby, yet only names to her, but soon it would be her world. Already after the horrible concrete bunker in Täby, it was as if they left town. More green, the cars ran in a slower pace, and the air was clearer. They went on along the narrow, winding road to Älgeby. "As in Värmland," said Lena, and she should know because she was from there. In front of the car, a sharp curve, a sparkling lake and a house that looked abandoned. Later spread fields with cows grazing. Belinda pointed at the cows and said something. Lena teasingly corrected her and explained that it was called paddocks. All three laughed. Lena held a deliberately mannered lesson about life on the country side. Belinda pretended not to understand anything, she herself laughed almost hysterically, partly because it was funny, but mostly because she was nervous.

Lena turned onto a gravel road, she knew the way, since she and Miriam had been there to recognize. It seemed to have been a summer cottage area until not so long ago. Nowadays, an area of small houses, tidy gardens and craftsmen cars on the driveways. They saw a large meadow with a grazing horse, it felt right. They drove past some even smaller gravel roads. When they passed the fourth in order, she turned, drove a few metres and turned again. Beside the entrance was a red mailbox, their mailbox. The plot was lush, or rather mismanaged. Anders would have to take it down a bit. Miriam would paint the house, Anders would dig a gravel path, she would plant a hedge. Everything was clear, planned and written down. Along the dirt road was the truck. The rear doors were open and folded forward. It seemed to already be empty. When Miriam was halfway up the stairs to the porch, she understood that it must be more than that. Probably they were ready, since all four of them sat in a lounge chair with a beer in hand. She rushed to hug them and say something appreciative to each one. But really, she could barely bare herself from getting into the house and see what it looked like, empty but with their boxes and furniture. Lena and Belinda took it slower, chatted a bit with the guys and accepted the beers Anders offered them.

She noted with satisfaction that everything appeared to be in order. The house was clean enough, everything seemed to have come up with and the things were placed much like they had planned. She and Lena brought salads and breads from the car. Belinda stood on the porch with her beer. It was a pleasant afternoon, not much more was unpacked than toothbrushes and bedding, but who cares. They were both free from their work throughout the week, so they could quietly unpack and make a home later, all according to plan.

Miriam and Anders unpacked, fastened hooks, hung pictures, pondering, changing and discussing. They were both eager to get settled. Neither she nor Anders wanted to go to bed, so already on Wednesday the where no more boxes, the house looked inhabited and everything seemed as if it had stood there forever. They made a list of what was missing. Anders mostly counted up tools and paraphernalia to the shed. Miriam suggested miscellaneous furniture and housewares. Just as it would be in a family, according to their view. This they also stowed in and hung up. They were satisfied with their purchases. He with the tools she with what she believed belonged to her domains. It would be weekend, they were expecting visitors. Both their parents would come for inspection and dinner. They had met a few times before, though this would be the final test. Miriam and Anders would welcome them just as any family that came for a visit. It required a great deal of planning and purchasing.

She was nervous, just like she always was when she showed mom and dad up in public.

Would they make a fool of themselves, talking about how clumsy she was when she was a child, and start asking if children was included in their plans. What did they knew about their struggle in the bedroom. She would absolutely not talk about that with her parents. Talk to Mom and Dad about anything that had to do with sex, inconceivable. Moreover, with Anders parents as witnesses, certainly as keen on grandchildren. Especially since Anders was their only child. She tried to dismiss her thoughts by scrolling frantically in a cookbook with food from the Mediterranean.

The parents seemed to like the house and everyone said that the food was good. Anders parents had brought a large orange petrol thing with blades at the bottom. Anders said it was a trimmer. The parents seemed to have been talking together in some way, since her parents gave them a helmet and a pair of forest work pants that it said "Husqvarna" on. She had no idea that they had contact. Or was it perhaps that both his and her parents asked Anders whether it was something that was missing in the household. Why had they not asked her? When she heard of Anders what such things use to cost, and later saw what he did with it in the overgrown garden, it seemed, however, like a pretty good house settlement gift.

Later they got a hedge trimmer from another pair of visitors, further others gave them planting tools. Curiously, as if they had written on invitation cards that they needed gardening tools. The pair with the hedge trimmer came over and grilled the weekend after their parents had been there. There was a guy that Anders been friends with since high school and his new girlfriend, or maybe not yet girlfriend. They had just met in real life. On the net, they had known each other for a few months. She seemed nice until she got drunk and started pumping Miriam on information about Anders companion. Admittedly, she apologized before she left, but it had still been a bit uncomfortable.

A few weeks later, it was midsummer. The garden looked like a real garden now, with a lawn, some large firs, a lilac bush at the entrance. The lilac was completely studded with large purple flowers. On the lawn, Anders has set up and cross made from two nailed planks. Miriam had tried to conceal that it was planks by dressing them in green branches. Better, but still far from perfect. She had no time to think much more about this, as it was so much else to do. It was Friday morning, a few hours before the herring lunch must be prepared on the porch and there were not even a table big enough. Would it rain? Perhaps, it was midsummer. Anders felt it was worth taking a chance, so they chanced. By joint forces, they carried out the kitchen table and put it close to the desk that they had carried out beforehand. The porch table, which was circular, did not fit next to them. Maybe they would do without it, though it would be crowded. Anders had begun to carry out their chairs. He spread them too much. She made a remark about that, Anders defended himself with that there were not seats enough to put them more tightly together. Shit, it would not be enough chairs. The phone rang, it was Belinda she was coughing, she had got ill. Not much later called Malin, her daughter had become ill. The matter was solved. The party was very successful, even according to Miriam. She had fun, got moderately intoxicated. Some guest where very drunk, but nothing unpleasant happened. They had been sitting a long time there on the porch until it was night and then morning, which was very unusual for Miriam's part. For a while it was raining, then they went into the living room to dance. Late the midsummer day they started the cleaning. Anders walked around the garden with a garbage bag, picked beer cans and everything. Miriam, and one of the guests who stayed, cleared the tables. The kitchen table had certainly not sustained the rain. When she removed the paper tablecloth, she saw that the surface had become wavy in some strange way, as if the wood had swelled by water. Sadly, it was a nice table else, though it was the only thing that was destroyed from what she could see. Besides a plate Miriam happened to drop the whiskey bottle on when she served the avec to the coffee.

It was in her opinion still too cold in the water of the small lake, but several of the guests had gone swimming at some point during the night. Now Anders and his mate thought that they would take this year's first swim. Miriam followed, brought the swimsuit with her just in case. The sun was shining on the beach, some kids ran around naked, trying to catch tadpoles.

Miriam spread out a blanket in the grass. Anders and his mate swam. Miriam sunbathed, became warm and bathed too. The water felt pretty warm, probably because the lake was so small that the water got heated pretty fast.

There would be many swims that summer, when the sun came to shine several days, especially on their vacation. Besides a trip to a wedding on Gotland, they stayed in the house throughout the holiday. It just got better and better. Anders cut down a large tree and it made a huge difference. Suddenly the sun shined on the porch right from the morning. She had time to read many books. It was so wonderful. The nice porch, the sun, the beautiful sun lounger in teak, that you could almost sleep in if the backrest was dropped down. The beautiful soft pad with blue fabric and white buttons. She tanned with a good book and a soda. While Anders was in the shed, doing something. Often she did not know what, but it did not matter, he and she were happy. He said he didn't have the calmness to read. He preferred to work with the house, though he did not want any help. When she tried to help him it seemed mostly like he was pissed. So Miriam stayed on the porch, reading. Anders even made dinner, it was mostly a roast. He loved it, the barbeque. The sad thing was only that she was expected to do the accessories. Cut salad, boil the rice and everything like that, and it was so important to him that all the fittings were completed before he lifted the pieces of meat from the grill. It was like the crowning of the evening, the important thing, what would be discussed and analysed. The accessories, on the other hand, were completely uninteresting. But the meat, was it tender enough? Would they choose pork next time or maybe salmon?

So the holiday passed, it was August and time to start work again. They had just as long vacation, but since Miriam worked at a group home and he in a store, she had to get up much earlier. The three kilometres to the bus, which she originally walked with joy felt heavier now. Waiting beside the road had never been so tedious and the bus trip had never been bumpier. On the way home, it rained even though it looked so clear and fine in the morning. Miriam had not brought along some rain gear. The thin summer dress was soaked before she was home. The house was empty and she, for the first time, felt a bit desolate there, in contrast to all the joy that had filled it up until yesterday. The video store where Anders worked closed at nine, so he probably would not be home until after ten. She made some sandwiches, boiled tea, sat down in front of the TV. Nothing seemed exciting, whether it was the news or children's programs. They need to get more channels. Outside it was raining again.

The drops hit hard against the metal roof. It sounded like the worst downpour, but when she looked out, it seemed to be a meekly rain. She wanted to talk to someone. Miriam took the phone, started dialling Lena's number. She did not answer, not Belinda either. Mom responded, however, but had nothing to say, mostly the old standard phrases. Miriam must have fallen asleep on the couch, since all of a sudden she felt Anders hand against her cheek. He looked happy, asked if she wanted a sandwich, then he went to the kitchen. She shouted to him, he seemed not to hear. Miriam remained in the couch, made an effort to wake up, shouted again, still no answer. She probably wanted to have a sandwich, mostly for the company. When she came into the kitchen, he had already put everything back and his sandwiches were almost eaten.

- But I wanted to also have a sandwich.

- Well, why didn't you say that then?

- Yes, I did, but you didn't listen.

- I did not hear that you said you wanted a sandwich.

- That's right, you did not listen.

- But do a sandwich yourself then, you've had all evening. Here I come home from work and you are just waiting for me to make sandwiches for you.

He said nothing more, instead he put the last of the last sandwich in his mouth, drank the rest of the beer, picked one and went out. She knew where he was going. He would go to the garden shed, to his drum kit. Soon Miriam heard that she had guessed correctly.

The following day it rained in the morning. Miriam put on a thin raincoat that most looked like a large plastic bag. Soon it turned out that there were holes in it. The rain penetrated and chilled her. On the way home it was raining too. In addition, the journey was wobbly when the bag with groceries, which hung on the handlebars, was reeling.

A car passed her, close, it splashed water and the bag was tossing worse. Miriam fell. Back home, she showered for a long time, so long that it finally just came cold water out of the nozzle.

Anders could well come at ten, the only thing she had to look forward to was a cup of tea and egg sandwiches with caviar. The bag was on the table unpacked.

While the tea pot was on the stove, she began to empty it. The milk, caviar and mayonnaise, all was sticky from eggs. Two eggs were still unbroken, while four had burst and drained. It was getting a bit much now. She deserved something comforting, a candy bar or a whiskey. She took both, just in case. But it did not help much. She then felt not only lonesome, but also unhealthy and lightly intoxicated. The whiskey made her even sadder. Also this evening, she fell asleep on the couch. The difference this time was that she was awakened by the sound of a drum roll from the shed.

The days went by, it became darker and colder. Even indoors, it became colder. The house was certainly not well insulated. Miriam used to sleep with a thick quilt around her on the couch until Anders came home. Sometimes they talked a little bit, it happened that Anders took a movie home from the video store, but mostly he went directly into the shed. Her hope had been that it would be too cold there, so that he would be with her. Though he installed an electric radiator and spent more time there, even on weekends. No idea to do something in the house now in the winter. No need to go to town, it costs too much gasoline, he said. She protested, but what could she do. It was his car and Miriam did not even have a driving license. Take the bus, which on weekends only went a few times a day, it was too hard. One Saturday in November Lena came there, it was a highlight, then Christmas with her parents. But later, it would be May again and it would be July.

## To heaven

The man was breathing out through the nose, so heavily that it was heard. I do not know how a sigh sounds in real life, but I think you could call what he did was to sigh. Then he said, though the sigh lasted a good moment, before he spoke:

- I've seen an awful lot of deaths, when I have been involved in the actual moment of death.

Of course, I said nothing, for it was noticeable that he did not want to be interrupted. He continued in the same slow pace as before:

- Almost all people who ends up here have a huge anxiety. It's not as amazing, after all, is a hospice. People come here to die. We try to ensure that it is done with dignity and with minimal suffering.

The latter sounded almost as sales talk. But one has to accept that. It is certainly true. I understood that he wanted to get into something else, and after a moment, he continued:

- They have anxiety for the bad things they have done and the things that they have not had time to complete or never did. It's not so strange. When you look death in the face, it's a bit late to grab it, right?

I nodded.

- But the remarkable thing is when the end is near. When they have like that four-five days left. Then they get calm. It happens every time. Nowadays, I can feel it and when I do, I know that it is near.

I nodded, again without saying anything.

- Then they seem to be happy and at peace with what is to come. Many times it has seemed as if they feel that their loved ones, who have long been dead, are in the room. So it was with your grandmother. The day she died I walked past her room and suddenly I got an insight to go in to her. She sits up in bed and looks towards a point on the wall, she gestures and moves the lips. But there is no sound. She seems happy and excited. I ask her something. She is pointing at me to sit down. I sit down on the chair beside the bed. She continues as before. It seems as if she laughs. Then she lays down, closes her eyes and a few minutes later she is dead.

He is quiet for a moment, as if he wants what he said to sink in. It feels good that it's quiet, that it is right after such a testimony.

- Before I started this I did not believe in an afterlife. Now I don't know anymore. But you must excuse me, I have to work, goodbye.

He disappeared into the corridor, I did not even have time to thank him.

The conversation gave me an inner joy. The grief after grandmother remained, but weaker than before. Actually, she had never taken such a big place in my life and if she was alive or not did not make any difference. The conversation transformed my feelings into mostly grieving that I was not here when she died. I would have loved to have seen her that happy, as he described that she became. It may feel that way for me too, or does one have to be old and have cancer?

When people die in movies, they don't seem that very happy. But they are of course often hunted or something. Moreover, it is mostly the evil guys who die in the movies and they, of course, have nothing to look forward to after death.

She must have been talking to the Archangel Gabriel, that's it. Those who can get to heaven are happy like her.

Those who die in movies get to meet the devil, that's because they look so miserable, so it must be. Imagine that, just by praying a bit and be nice, maybe read a bit in the Bible too, one gets an eternal and wonderful life in heaven.

What if I die now, I have not prayed the least bit. I've barely read a word from the Bible, though I'm probably pretty good, or at least not evil. But on the other hand, I'm not exactly good either. I mean, I mostly do nice things for people so that they like me. I wonder if that counts? Please God, can't you tell me if I will get to heaven. But it may well be that one never know before one is dying.

Though those who were in the big ferry disaster and survived, I saw a program on TV about a guy who survived. He said that afterwards, he values small things much higher now than before, such as that the sun is shining or that the cheese is tasty or something. I think I have heard it from others who nearly died too. Perhaps it is because they have seen the pearly gate, so they know that heaven awaits them. So it must be. This great insight filled me while I walked between the hospice and the subway. There, when I was waiting for the train, an idea hit me. What if I fell in front of the train just as it comes, but someone saves me in the last moment, or if I am almost jumping, or if the bullet in the gun happens to be defective. Then I'll maybe get that feeling. Shortly afterwards came a train and I tried gently to stand closer to the edge than I usually do. It was probably too far away, since I felt nothing, a little wind in my hair and maybe a little tingling, but not so that I became a new person. Even less I saw the pearly gate. I stood just outside of the white line where you are not allowed to stand when a train arrives, but I probably have to stand closer. To really grasp it, instead of postponing it as I usually do, I went off at the next station. When I was just half a foot away from the platform edge, I got a lot more speed wind in my hair and pretty much butterflies in my stomach. But when the train stopped I felt nothing.

I boarded the train, and everything felt like usual. When I got home, I skipped eating even though the clock had passed my regular supper time. I even skipped to see the early news on TV. Instead, I looked, for all I was worth, after the old Bible that should be somewhere in the bookshelf. It was probably almost certainly there when I moved here. Maybe it's a rush. What if I die in a few hours and have not had time to pray a single time. For safety's sake I mumbled the little I know of the "Our Father" while I was looking. It was not on the shelf, not even in the rows of junk books behind the more exclusive books in front. I continue to look in the attic and the top of the closet. The profound searching makes me find the stamp collection, which I've been looking for earlier. Now I'm not even happy to find it. How can I care about something like that, now that I may die and are forced to suffer in hell for all eternity. My Bible must be gone. What if I tossed it.

Throwing a Bible away, then you must well be damned for all eternity, right? Probably best to buy a new one at once. But where is the nearest emergency open Bible dealer? Åhléns department store perhaps? Dare I take the subway there, or should I maybe take a taxi. Wondering what is the most dangerous? The word priest pops up in my head. The word is getting bigger and bigger. Beside the flashing word there is a new word. Absolutely amazing, it was as if my subconscious telling me that I should call the attending priest. So I did, I called "112" and asked for the attending priest. At first they did not understand what I meant. They just asked me if I was hurt. I said that I was not yet hurt, but wanted to be connected to the attending priest. She told me to call directory assistance and just call 112 if I was hurt or something. So I did as she said.

The on-call priest, who by the way was a woman, did not understand me at all. She went on about whether I felt bad.

I asked again about what would be the quickest possible way to assure a place in heaven before I die. She then asked if I was dying.

I said I was not sure about it, but it could be so. She did not understand. I tried to explain that it would be well fairly typical that I would die now when I just had realized that I have to pray a lot of times and do some nice things in order to enjoy the joys of heaven. When she finally seemed to understand what I meant, she was mostly annoyed. She told me not to worry, there is enough time for me to pray and live godly. I do not know if I was helping or not but in any case I hung up.

Then I took a chance and went with the subway to Åhléns. They actually had Bibles, it felt like another sign from above. In order not to waste time, I went straight to Big Burger and read a few randomly selected pages. When I read in about one hour I relaxed, closed my eyes and tried to feel if any inner peace had arrived. Though it felt just like normal, but when I sat there and closed my eyes I actually felt a sense. It came from the stomach. I was so overexcited that at first I did not recognize it. Then when I had felt it for a while, I knew what it was: hunger. Another sign from God. I was hungry, just when I was sitting in a hamburger restaurant.

Strengthened by the hamburger and warm in the body, especially in the belly, I feel ready to read more systematically in God's book.

I started on the first page and looked at each word. One after the other. Wonder how much I need to read to be a little safe. Dare I go back home before I read the whole thing.

I scrolled through the book. Carefully, so I would not damage the fragile pages. It's an enormous amount of pages in it. I will not have a chance to read them all before they close the restaurant. What if the restaurant closes when I'm in the middle of a sentence? I read feverishly. It came a waiter that took my tray. He looked hard at me. I continued reading. I read so fast that I only had time to look at the letters. It did not help, still it was an enormous number of pages remaining. I increased the pace and watched the whole pages at a time. Luckily, the restaurant was open for a good long time, but finally it closed. Someone came up to me and said, quite unpleasantly actually, that I must go. Then he said:

- This is actually no damn praying house.

He was pretty shitty, I think, though I could at least enjoy that he would definitely not be let into heaven. They even turned off the lights in the ceiling and it came some guards. The guards walked towards me. I stood up and walked to the exit. There, outside anything could happen, was I protected by God or not. Maybe I should, fast as hell, find someone homeless and give him money. Wonder if it would be enough? It had to be. It's said in the Bible that one can be reversed and all the reversed gets to heaven. Out there I saw a windswept individual, he was certainly in need of help. I went up to him and asked:

- Hello.

He looked at me in surprise.

- What do you want, are you a cop or something?

- No, I want to help you.

- What help?

- Yes, assist you.

- Okay give me Jack for the night shelter then.

I reached for my wallet, but then I hesitated, because I figured that since it was so late, the night shelters were probably already full. If the shelters are full, he would after all be forced to sleep outside even though he had money.

What if he froze to death then? Would I then be a bad person. So instead of giving him money, I said he could sleep at my place.

He looked even more suspicious, then he asked:

- Are you gay or what?

It came as a blow, me gay, who not feels sexual at all? I am struggling to avoid going to hell.

Should I even think about sex. He probably saw how surprised I got, because he said okay then. In order not to waste time between this moment and the moment when he would sleep on my couch, we took a taxi to my home.

There, in the taxi, he asked me what my problem was. I explain that I want to go to heaven when I die. Then he starts laughing.

- I can help you, so you really get to heaven.

I look terrified at him.

- But I do not want to die!

- What the hell is wrong with you then?

I flinched when I heard the profanity, but I still tried to explain. I described what the nurse had told me. That about that those who believe in God and almost dies will see the pearly gate. Then, when they come back to life, life is different. One enjoys the little things as well, those little things that my life is full of, in the lack of great things. Imagine that instead of having to do major things to be happy, I could get happy from the little things that my life constitutes.

- Calm down, I didn't mean that I will kill you. But I can help you so you can see heaven and then come back, just as you like.

I was filled with an immense fortune. Imagine this man is one of God's envoys. God sent him to me as a thank you because I grabbed his book and turned to him. I wanted to hug him, even though I have almost never hugged anyone.

But then I realized that then maybe he nevertheless thinks I'm gay. So I contented myself by thanking him several times. The guy nods and says:

- A thousand crowns, for a thousand crowns I'll fix it for you.



So wonderful, I can both give this poor individual money and he will help me get to heaven and back. I hasten to tell the taxi driver to stop at an ATM. The taxi driver didn't at first hear what I said. I said it again and he turned around. I saw how he laughed. He must also be satisfied with this amazing moment. The trip was so amazing, it was even so that the ATM worked and I could even choose between hundred crown bills and five hundred crown bills. Moreover I got a notice patch.

We hurried up to my apartment. He was just as excited as me, for he kept pace with me, even though I almost ran up the stairs. We sat on my couch and I looked at him expectantly.

He reaches for the shoulder bag he had put aside, opens it, roots a bit and takes out a syringe. From the bag he then takes a bag of cotton, a teaspoon, a lighter and a plastic bottle. He puts the spoon on the table. Puts his hand into his pocket, takes it out again. He has something in his hand, it looks like a small plastic bag. One of those small plastic bags with a plastic zipper. He holds it over the teaspoon and opens it. He pours very carefully the contents of the bag into the spoon.

Then he picks up a few grains that had fallen on the table.

Then he screws the lid of the plastic bottle. He holds up the spoon with the powder, pours the liquid into it, places the bottle back and takes the lighter on the table. He heats the spoon with the flame from the lighter so that the white powder dissolves in the liquid. Then he puts down the lighter and spoon and take out a piece of cotton from the bag.

He put cotton in the spoon and lets it absorb the liquid, he takes the syringe out of its disposable package, sticks the needle into the swab and soaks up the fluid the swab has absorbed. He looks at the syringe. Squeeze out a few drops out of it and turns to me.

- Which arm do you want it in. Are you right-handed?

He does not wait for an answer, he just grabs my left hand.

- You may deduct your sleeve, or take off your shirt, which do you choose?

I say nothing, instead I deduct my sleeve.

He grabs the arm with his left hand and looks at it. It looks like he's going to stick it in, but he changes his mind. Instead he puts it down on the table and begins again to dig in his bag. When he raises his hand it is holding a belt. He puts it around my left bicep and tightens it pretty well.

- Why are you doing?

- Wait, you see when I remove it, then devils!

He looks a bit at my elbow, stick in the needle, I jump a bit. He pulls it out, tries again, seems pleased, and injects the contents of the syringe.

I notice nothing, except a local pressure and also a local cooling. But, as he said, when he removes his belt then the good fortune came. It's as if I float away, but stays at the same time. Everything is so amazing, so beautiful and wonderful. I must have passed directly past Saint Peter, directly into the kingdom of heaven. Then after a while, I do not know how long, I'm back on earth. I still feel fantastic, but I am on earth, in my apartment. It may not have been so long, because he has not even had time to put down the syringe on the table. He sits and looks at me with it in his hand. He looks expectantly. I try to describe to him that I finally have seen heaven, but I've had the good fortune to come back to earth again. He smiles and answers:

- I know, nothing is like the first time.

## AT Explorer

- Captain, we found nothing there either, except some gold and probably some titanium.
- Did you bring any samples?
- No.
- Can it be worthwhile to make a deeper study of the place?
- Maybe, but if it's only titanium and gold, it has to be fairly high levels to be worth taking home, right?
- True, but we can't leave here until we can show that we have done a profound investigation.
- Do you want me to take samples there or should we drive around and scan?
- It is up to you, you are the geologist. If you think there may be better places to study, otherwise take samples where you were.

Carl mutters something and they separate. On the way to the bunk, Carl encounters Dean. None of them are particularly broad-shouldered, but since the corridor is narrow, one of them had to stand sideways so the other could pass. It was Carl. Even though they have spent many months together on the ship, not many words were exchanged between them. They were not in any way enemies, but it did just work between them. They went briefly and routinely through the day's discoveries with each other. At least Carl's statement was pretty unexciting. Dean's, however, was more colourful and vibrant. He thought he had come across something promising.

- Go there you too, the sooner we find something the quicker we can go home.

Carl nodded without saying anything. After dinner, he asked the captain for permission to change their search area, which he immediately accepted. The rest of the evening passed as usual. They looked at a couple of movies before bedtime. The next day also began as usual, with breakfast, exercise, lunch and preparation for today's spacewalk.

- How are you doing?
- We are on the site now captain. John is starting up the spectrum analyser, did you want something?
- Nah, I was just a little curious. But anyway, it's your night tonight. You know that, right? What do you think we should have for dinner?
- It does not matter. But if I must choose, I'll take shrimp cocktail of course, but besides that I do not know. Well I probably choose Russian cabbage stove, it's also a classic. Though probably I can't talk anymore now, must help John.

Carl waited until he heard the snap when the intercom was turned off before he leaned down to John, as if to help him. However, it was superfluous, since John had already activated the boot sequence and the blue background field in the analysis mode appeared at once on the screen. As soon as he touched the analysis-icon the screen was filled by different coloured bars. Totally awesome, he had never seen anything like it. Judging by John's reaction, he had not either. John poked at the screen again and the scale was adjusted so that the bars the heights of the bars were clearly visible.

The grey bar for astatine was well over the 20 grams / tonne, which in space mining contexts is considered worthwhile to extract. In addition, there were very high bars for both tantalum and copper, as well as fairly decent ditto for germanium, boron, gold and titanium. Carl would gladly have shouted from joy, but it feels so pointless to scream in space, it only accentuates the tremendous solitude. So he contented himself with making thumbs up to John. Then he took the portable analyser and started going to a small rock formation. He was soon stopped by that the safety line had rolled to its utmost position. He turned back to the vehicle.

Should he switch to the big roller rope sitting on the coil under the analyser, or would they take the vehicle. For a while he thought that he would actually ask John, but he changed his mind quickly. He was, after all, the most experienced, and it was expected that he would take such decisions alone. Did he not, he would never be head of analysis.

He chose the vehicle. They probably had to bring some samples back.

And it would be far too much to carry both stones and analyser.

Moreover, he had the safety line to consider.

First, he made a quick sweep with the analyser over the formation. It gave again fully equivalent values over the whole surface, which was a very good sign. It suggested that not only the content but also the amount of ore was abundant. Then he began to look for pieces that would be possible to pull off with the tools available. Once he decided to process a piece with the size of a fist. John was ready with the tools. John began to process the rock, but Carl stopped him and made a last check with the analyser pressed against the rock. The spectrum still resembled the spectrum they previously saw on the big screen. Then, when he felt satisfied with the analysis, he turned to John, so that he would understand that it was time for him. But John just stood there and watched him. He looked lethargic, Carl thought, though one can never know in space because the faces are completely hidden behind the reflective glass. Although Carl knew he could not see anything other than his own reflection, he looked to the point at John's glass behind which he guessed that his eyes were. At the same time he took a step to the right, which meant that the strong rays of the sun would hit John's visor. The dazzling effect was huge and so sudden that Carl's glare function did not catch up with it. For one moment he just saw a bunch of colours that went around on the retina. He had intended to say something to John, but changed his mind and said instead:

- Damn.

- Huh?

I said nothing, just became so blinded by you.

- Thank you, thank you.

- Don't take it as a compliment, I mean literally.

This chit-chat conversation was interrupted by the captain who wondered how it was going.

- Good Captain, we get fantastic values on the analyser. I think there is a chance that we can get a bonus for this.

- Awesome Carl, I guessed so since Dean said exactly the same thing.

- Did he, you mean that he used the same words as me or the same meaning?

- Does it matter or what?

- Nah, I was just in a little nonsense mood.

- Sounds like you have been in space for a long time.

- Oh, yeah, homesick as hell.

- Agree, getting tired even on shrimp cocktail. But you, back to work. Dean and Ivan are west of you beside coordinate W32N21. What do you think, can it be a mineral vein? Or do you think it is diffusely scattered ore?

- Do not know, we'll do a sweep with the car perhaps?

- Of course. Let me know when you start, so can I connect as well.

Carl nodded at John, who nodded back. None of them had any great desire to say something since they had not heard that the boss had turned off his intercom. John brought out some sample boxes from the storage space under the windshield.

The pattern on the screen varied quite significantly during the trip, but it never ceased to be very high values. Occasionally they heard encouraging announcements from the boss, such as:

- Go to the pit there, or: that formation seems exciting.

When they approached the mother ship, however, the bars were sharply reduced from fantastic values to values that most closely resemble those of standard rock.

They decided to celebrate in the evening with a package each of something called "space champagne." It tastes, however, nothing like champagne, and it's completely free from alcohol, but after all, it was quite popular. But Carl had once tasted a glass on a space exhibition in Houston. Then home on earth it had tasted absolutely disgusting.

The captain told them that the coordinator at the headquarters had sounded very excited when he got the test results. The coordinator had contacted him again just an hour later and ordered them to make an estimate of the total ore content and also a calculation of the comet's portability.

When the captain told the later he sounded much more worried. Carl of course knew why. Lifting from a small planet with a spaceship is always risky, but to circle around it at low altitude is even more risky. Everyone knew it, some of them even knew someone in the crew on the sister ship "Vintage Explorer" which crashed when it did what they would soon do.

The Accident Commission had guessed that the ship had come too close to the comet tail and that in a much too shallow angle. But you never know, maybe it was something else. No one had seen the remains of the ship. It had just the recorded communication in the cockpit to base the report on.

They departed already the same evening. Not that it was evening for real. It was actually never evening on this comet. But they called it evening, since it was a tradition within the company. All the space units followed the circadian rhythm at the head office in Boston. Well, Carl and John did get in such a hurry that they did not have time to analyse the samples. It wouldn't be possible because all the power was needed for the start procedure and it could definitely not be wasted on the analysing machine. During the time he was going through the cargo fastening in the forward store, he pondered a bit over the day. He had a routine to go through the day's events. Not that it mattered, but it suppressed all other thoughts. Thoughts on things that he longed for back home, beer, and the kids. More importantly, it was suppressing the unpleasant thoughts of things that worried him, like if he would survive the trip. He tried to remember where he did put the samples. Where they left in the car or did they put them in the material lock. If they remained in the car, where they in that case secured for take off? He must remember to check it, if he had time. However, he forgot it. But the ship took off without complications, despite that and perhaps many other small mistakes from each one in the crew. They sat all five in their respective seats in the cockpit and kept their fingers crossed. Carl saw that John even crossed his thumbs literally. So he had never done before. Not that Carl could remember anyway. The relative altimeter ticked upward in a steady but accelerating pace. When the ship was on a satellite orbiting distance from the comet, the boss changed over so that the big screen showed geological data instead of driving data. Their rotation time was about ten minutes. Each turn showed a similar pattern. The front part, seen in its direction of travel, had values indicating enormous concentrations of various minerals, but the rear dead as gangue. After a few laps the boss changed so that the big screen showed the GEOscan camera in parallel with the analysis data. Then it was, even clearer that the comet consisted of two distinct parts. The one in the rear was dead from a mineralogical point of view, but the front was very much alive. Dean who had the task to study images from the infrared camera, suddenly woke up from some kind of coma, and said:

- Hey boss, look at the thermal images in this section, it's really hot there. It's almost red.

The manager switched over so that thermal camera appeared on the big screen.

Then he flipped the files until the dividing line between the two parts of the comet was shown on all three tools simultaneously. The images from the infrared camera showed the dividing line even clearer than with the other instruments. It was like a red line. with the settings in the program, red meant that it was near zero degrees Celsius there.

Which of course was a huge difference to the environment, which was about as cold as much else in space, i.e. close to the absolute zero. Carl looked at Dean, so he would understand that he should explain what it meant. Admittedly Carl was also a space geologist, but Dean was definitely the cleverest one. The captain also looked at Dean, but he did not have to be ashamed about that he did not understand, because he had never taken a single course in space geology. He was so little ashamed that he even asked Dean about what it was that they saw. It looked like Dean enjoyed being asked. He lingered a bit with the answer, but it was obvious that he knew it:

- It means that the comet is composed of two parts. Two small celestial bodies that have merged together, but not completely. They rub against each other and what we see is the frictional heat.

- Damn it thought Carl, of course. I should have been able to figure it out myself. I even thought so.

The boss nods in satisfaction. Then he turns to John:

- How's it going, do you see any ice cubes?

- Yes lots, but we keep aside.

- Good, then we take the ship down again.

Carl, can you edit together a file with data from all three instruments, and send it to Boston?

- Sure, boss, now at once?

- No, let us land first. You have to keep track of places.

- Damn, Carl thought again. Of course I know my routines. He makes it sound as if I do not understand anything.

The landing went pretty well, and everything seemed to be in order.

Everyone went to bed except Carl, who completed a quick report to Boston.

It appeared as if Carl was the first to wake up. On the big screen in the cockpit appeared a message from Boston. He asked the ship to show it, but the computer voice proclaimed that it was sent to the captain and it could only be opened by him.

Carl was early, but he was so excited he could barely contain himself from waking up the boss. In order to have something to distract himself with, he ordered the breakfast bags. For the lunches and dinners they would all be eating the same thing, but for breakfast they all got what they wanted. Or rather, each one made a wish the day when they provisioned, which meant that Carl always ate fruit yoghurt and John had to eat a slimy mess that was called porridge.

The captain did not hide the message instead he opened it on the screen in the mess, while the entire crew had their breakfast.

The message was an order. They would separate the two halves of the comet and pull the front portion to earth. Before they entered the atmosphere, they would blow it up further so that each block had an appropriate size to survive slowdown against the earth without causing excessive waves upon landing in the sea. All this with the break into smaller pieces and the alignment of the parts against the Atlantic was well tried and more or less routine work for some of the crew, most of all for Carl and the boss. That with the separation, however, Carl had never heard of. Not that that in itself would be remarkable, but it would, after all, be something new for him.

None of the men in the crew had any objections against the order. It was quite expected. After all, it was the purpose of their mission. The first to comment the order was Ivan:

- It's good then we get home!

Dean agreed. So did Carl although quietly.

Dean, Carl, John and Ivan were ordered to carry out the blast. Dean exported data from the GEOScan camera to the blasting program. The program calculated the comet as a FEM model. Then it counted appropriate quantities explosives and points for the boreholes. They docked the drilling modules on the space vehicles and prepared the departure, ate lunch and went. Nothing special happened, everything went according to plan. A few days later they blew, with successful results, the comet apart into two halves. They fastened the towing hooks without problems and pulled away the giant rock. At an appropriate distance from Earth and at the appropriate time they blew it further, so that the comet now consisted of pieces that were smaller than cars. All the major pieces had orbits in line with their estimates. The small parts they did not need bother about. What they cared very much about was that John got sick. He hadn't done anything special and he had not been ill before. He just lay perfectly still. It was Carl who found him. Luckily, he looked through the view port before he went into the intake. He would routinely open the lock, when he saw John lying on the floor. Just as he had learned, he did not open, instead he shouts at John, no answer. He shouts again, still no answer.

He called the captain. The captain came and stood beside him and looked inside the intake. The pressure gauge on the side of the lock showed normal values. But none of them dared to take the chance that it is functioning correct. Besides, there could be something else in there, perhaps a bacteria or something.

They discussed quite excitedly different possible solutions. The rest of the crew joined. But no one insisted that they should open up and ask how he felt. Everyone knew that no one else would do it for them either. It was an important part of space missions. This is that the mission comes before the individual.

The entire group comes before a member and you never risk all to save one. Carl suggested they should look around the room by using the cameras on the space vehicles. The manager thought it was a good idea and so they did. They saw nothing special. The room was occupied mostly by the space vehicles. Beside the airlock there was a desk and beside it stood the mineral analysis machine. On the table lay a sample cartons. It was open. The sample could, however, not be seen anywhere. Probably it was in the analysis machine. Dean gave the computer the command to display the results of the analysis.

A number of bars that were similar to those previously seen, appeared on the screen.

- For Christ sake we have to help the guy. It was Ivan who said it. He continued:

- I can go in.

The manager shook his head:

- We must first find out if there is something dangerous in there, you know.

- Okay, but hurry up then.

They did a biological analysis, which did not say anything. Neither did the other analyses. Apart from that the room was radioactive. It was not particularly radioactive, just slightly higher than the general background radiation. They did a new spectral analysis, but the results were the same.

There were some uranium but no remarkable amounts.

Ivan looked very annoyed, he sounded annoyed also when he said:

- Damn it, the most likely is that he only had a regular heart attack. Then he has to get help fast.

Ivan picked the heart saving machine and went into the lock. He took the few steps up to John and touched him. No reaction. Ivan shook him. John did not react. Ivan felt the pulse. He found none.

- Dead, he is dead. In any case, he has no pulse.

- But then come out, come out fast. It was the boss who said it.

- Do you see anything, does it smell anything or so. Asked Dean.

- No, not a thing. Well the hatch is open to the mineral analyzer. He went against it.

- Do not touch it, the boss yelled. Come out quickly.

He quickly pulled his hand back. Perhaps he had touched the powdered mineral that should be there, maybe not. Ivan walked, despite the captains orders, quite calmly against the lock and entered through the outer door. The door closes and he goes against the inner door. Then he falls down on the floor. He shakes in convulsions, holds the stomach. Then maybe a minute later, all movement ceased. None of the others shows any desire to go in and help him. Incidentally, the manager had never allowed it. Instead, he calls the chief coordinator.

- What do you want?

- There has been a disaster.

His voice trembled. It was probably noticeable all the way to Earth that he was upset. Strange that he sounded as comprehensive as he did anyway, thought Carl. He had intended to say something to Dean, but he had not at all been able to get the words out. Perhaps it was lucky, he consoled himself with, because it was not making sense. And perhaps it should do, since everything they said would definitely be examined by the occupational accident investigators.

- What, has the ship wrecked?

- No, but one crewman is dead and another is perhaps death.

- What happened?

- We do not know, we found John dead in the garage less than an hour ago.

- Why?

The manager did not answer that question. How the hell should one respond, Carl thought. Did he asked why we found him or why he was dead. But of course, it's not so easy to ask the right questions in a situation like this. The boss continued on a slightly different track. It sounded a bit like he was thinking on the occupational accident investigation:

- We made all the reasonable measurements.

- Well, what happened then?

- Ivan demanded to go in to help him.

- And you let him?

The manager hesitated, perhaps it was played, then he replied quite ashamed:

- Yes.

- But it's against the routines, haven't you read the routines.

Carl saw that the boss eyes pulled together. Probably his did too. His heart was in all cases pounding worse. Would the boss show his anger and thus risk having his license revoked? No, he kept his calmness.

- I'm sorry, but he insisted and we were not able to see anything on the measurements, he could have had a regular heart attack. It would be surely the most likely.

- But what have happened then do you think?

- Don't know.

- Okay, make sure that we get all the data and we will put a team on analysing them. We keep the line open all the time now.

Carl had read about the teams, they used to be fast. Maybe it would not take more than a few hours. A few hours, he thought then, Ivan will be there for hours, maybe suffering. Dean seems paralyzed. Is there something he should do, he doesn't come up with anything. Neither Dean nor the boss makes any attempt to do something.

They just stands there as stone statues during like half an hour, maybe more. Sometimes, the coordinator says something. The boss responds terse.

The company's CEO shows up on the screen. It looks like a press conference. The boss requests that the volume should be increased. The CEO says something about a tragic accident. A picture of first John then Ivan shows up on the screen, then a picture of the garage. Afterwards the CEO is back in the picture. He asks something. It sounds as if his question is directed to their captain. It seems as if the captain doesn't understand. The CEO asks again. Dean pokes him discreetly in the side. His face appears on the screen.

Now they hear the CEO's question clearly:

- How are you?

Typically, the only time you are seen on television you have to answer such a silly question, Carl thought. What the hell does he think? The boss sounded quite coherent when he replied:

- Physically we feel good, but we are very worried.

- Don't worry, we do everything we can to help you.

Then a photo of their spaceship was shown and a news announcer appeared on the screen.

Just maybe ten minutes later one of the company's most famous scientists pops up on the screen. He looks very worried.

- Frank, I have bad news, very bad news.

Frank, Carl had almost forgotten that the captain's name was Frank. He had never called him anything other than boss or captain and no one else did either.

- Let's hear it.

- Frank, it's incredible, but we went through your spectrums. They were fantastic by the way. First, we found nothing except what you have already reported. But we realized that it was strange that it was so low levels of uranium. There ought to be more of that in these kinds of mineral combinations. We took more or less a chance and added spectral data for plutonium.

He paused, as if to let it sink in. Carl knew very well that he suggested that they had found plutonium in the mineral powder. Plutonium, it should be impossible, there is never plutonium in natural minerals. But well what we know about what this comet had gone through. It there is there plutonium in the dust, it is not strange that they are dead, as toxic as that is. Good thing then that they did not enter and luckily there is an airlock between them.

No one on the ship, however, said anything so the expert continued.

- You know that as far as we previously have thought, it does not exist naturally. In that way, this is really a sensation, but unfortunately a less funny one. You know how toxic it is. That one could poison the entire global ocean with a relatively small amount, if one succeeded in spreading it. Now, if we can use the concept of success in this context. He was still pretty calm. But now the president of the nation appeared in the picture. He was not calm, he almost shouted:

- God damn it, you should under no circumstances take down the comet parts to Earth.

The boss hesitated for quite a while. When he opened his mouth, it was like he stammered:

- But we have already targeted them. We can't change it now. It is managed by the Earth's gravity.

- Hell, we have to stop them, we must get them to burn. We fucking kill the Atlantic Ocean.

- But what could we do about it? Can't we send up fighters who shoot them into pieces? Now he did not stammered anymore, now he just sounded pissed.

The CEO did not answer, instead he turned to someone who did not appear in the picture and shouted:

- Make sure that they sends every fighter available immediately.

The defence did indeed shoot several clumps into such small pieces that they completely burned up, but unfortunately not all of them.

## Routines

Louise wakes up as usual, a few minutes before seven, without first knowing whether she really has woken up or not. Slowly the dream slides into a state of half-asleep half awake, in which the dream is mixed with new impressions. Reluctantly her brain instructs her eyelids to open and suddenly only fragments of the dream world remains. The dream appeared to have been about a dog. She never had a dog and did not want any either. Strange that dogs so often figured in her dreams, although she have never been a dog person. On the contrary, she has always disliked dogs. Maybe it started when that black dog that lived across the street was chasing her. She has time to lie awake quietly for a few minutes before the clock radio clicks and a horrible noise comes out of it. It is one of the pieces that competed in the recent Eurovision Song Contest. It's a pretty good piece really, it's just the clock radio that makes it bad. Could she do something about it, or would she even buy a better one. This had been the subject for many speculations, almost every weekday morning. These reflections had been going on for several years. Hans had never bothered about the clock radio even though he was so interested in technology gadgets. He did not hear it, because he used to get up long before her.

It's probably cold, at least it's cold in the room. The only part of the body that is not protected under the thick blanket is her face, and her cheeks feel cold. They are probably even a little colder than usual. Cautiously she tries to stretch the left leg so that the foot gets outside the blanket. Yes, it's cold. But she does not need to take care of Frida, so she can actually stay in bed a little longer. Though I have promised myself that I'll be extra early on the job they weeks when I do not have her, she thinks. But today it's cold outside, it will be easier in the spring. By the way, I have no early meeting today, so why not stay in bed a little, at least a couple of snooze's more. She stretches for the clock radio and gropes for the large button on the top. She slips into half slumber, probably just in time for the radio to start making noise again. Typically, now I'm even more tired than the first time I woke up. This tired I should not be. Especially since I yesterday went to bed earlier than usual. Just to come earlier to work today. My intention was to come sooner than the others in the room. Then I would sit there and work when they arrived. I would already have worked away the rest of the case I started to work on yesterday. Was it not that I even promised myself I would not keep on snoozing this morning. Okay, now I get up. By the way, it is still not so comfortable to remain, since there is pain in the bladder. She gets up resolutely and hurries into the bathroom.

Actually, it's probably a bit too cold to stand in the shower straight away. Don't I need something to warm me up with first. But I usually take a shower first and then warm myself with coffee and a cigarette. I certainly have extra much pee today. It usually is when it feels like this in the bladder. A slight, but not unpleasant, pain when the pressure is reduced.

The floor in the bathroom is cold. She tries to reach the small rug in front of the basin with her toes, but fails. Instead she sits with her heels against the cold ceramic tiles. She gets up from the toilet, studying the colour of her urine while she stretches down for flush button. Since it feels so cold she hurries to lower the toilet lid and pull off her panties and put them in the laundry basket. Then she goes directly into the shower without first checking her face in the mirror. She consoled herself that it did not feel as if there are any new pimples and she would anyway do her makeup later. Before she steps into the shower cabin, she stretches her arm towards the blender and lift up the lever so that the water starts flowing. Then she holds her hand under the beam to feel when the hot water comes.

Then she turns the knob slightly to the right so that the water gets a little warmer than normal, and then she passes the curtain. First she lets the water hit her head and then she detains the nozzle and directs the beam against her face. Afterwards she moves the nozzle along her body. When the procedure is completed she puts the nozzle back and stands with her back to the beam. Then she lubricates her hair with shampoo and her skin with soap. The soap she applies with the pink brush. After she have carefully washed away the shampoo and soap, she pulls away the shower curtain.



The cold air from the bathroom is flowing into the cabin, so she hurries to take the big blue bath towel. After the first drying she leaves the cabin for the rug and switches to the dry green bath towel. She wraps it tightly around her body. Around her hair she sweeps a similar towel like a turban. When this is done, she goes to the kitchen and the coffee maker.

She opens the cupboard above the fridge and takes out a pack of coffee filters and put it next to the coffee maker. Holds it with her left hand and opens the lid with the right one, releases her left hand and takes a filter as usual. She puts the filter on the bench, closes the container lid and sets the package back. Whereupon she turns out the coffee maker filter container and put in the filter. Before she puts in the filter she folds the paper seam in the filter bottom so that the filter would fit better. When the filter is in the container, she spreads it out with the fingers on her right hand. The same pattern is repeated in a similar way with the coffee jar. Though it is placed on the second shelf in the refrigerator. She measures four underlined spoons with coffee. Finally, she turns up the lever of the water blender on the sink and turns the knob completely to the right. When the water has run for a while, she folds, by pressing with her thumb on the back of the jug lid, up the same and lets the water flow into the decanter. After the water reaches what appears to be the third line, she puts the jug on the stainless steel sink. This is to check if the water reaches up to or above the third line. To be able to carry it out properly, she bends down so that her eyes are in level with the jug. No, the water reaches several millimetres above the line. She empties it a bit and checks again. The water reaches even a millimetre over the line, but it might do. Yes it will have to do, she decides as she pours the water in the container on the coffee machine. She pressed the button on the coffee machine and makes sure that the little lamp, inside the orange semi-transparent glass on the switch, is lit. Prior to proceeding with the next step she waits until the coffee maker starts to make noise. Then she goes to the cabinet with coffee cups to get her favourite one. She certainly has several favourite cups, but this one is the best for the morning coffee, this mainly because it is larger than the others and also pretty light. Finally, it is a little wider at the top, making the coffee cool down a little faster. She notes that she begins to run out of clean morning favourite coffee cups, and then it's almost time to start the dishwasher. Strange, I usually don't have to do that until Wednesdays, the week I don't have Frida. Well I may have accidentally taken my evening coffee in a morning cup. Anyway, I have no desire to think more about it.

She continues the procedure by putting the cup beside the stove. When it is at its usual place she goes to the fridge and takes out the milk carton. It stands on the same shelf as the jar with coffee, but to the right of the coffee. She bends down as she pours, in order to properly see the point, which is the maximum mark for milk. When the milk has been set back, she brings a kitchen chair and sits down next to the cup. Just when she had prepared for the lighting of a cigarette, by putting a cigarette lighter next to the cup, she hears that the coffee maker starts to snort. Which is the signal for that the coffee is ready. When the coffee cup is filled she lights a cigarette and leans back.

In the first puff, she sucks a little extra to really get the proper glow on the cigarette, then she smokes in a more relaxed way. She enjoys that the calming effect of the nicotine's is so noticeable. It's the best thing about the first cigarette in the morning, that the effect of nicotine is so strong. When she had taken four puffs, she takes the first small sip of the coffee. It tastes good, as well as the cigarette. When the glow is a centimetre from the beige part of the paper butt she extinguishes it and walks up to the TV. It stands on a small bench in a corner of the kitchen. She pressed the power button and takes the remote. Then she goes back to her chair and presses the button that is labelled with a four, while she directs the tip of the remote control towards the TV-set. She snaps on just in time to see how a man is pointing to a map of Sweden. She notes, before she hears him say it, that it is below zero throughout the country. Over Stockholm, where she lives, it says "-10". She shudders a bit and reaches for the cigarette package. While she smokes her second cigarette she usually thinks about Frida.

Had he waken her up yet? When she had her, she would wake Frida after she have had the coffee, dried her hair, made her makeup and dressed herself, but he started much earlier than her.

Although he use to come to work later the weeks when it was his turn to have their daughter.

When she had Frida, she would save time by just taking one cigarette in the morning. That was probably why she thought of Frida when she smoked the other one.

It was not just to win time that she just smoked a cigarette when she had Frida. It was indeed also to spare Frida from some of the smell of smoke when she ate breakfast. While she was sitting there thinking about it, she gets the feeling that something is wrong. It's something she had forgotten, something that she just shouldn't forget. Could it be the laundry maybe?

Had she washed last night, but forgot to take the laundry out of the dryer. No, it did not feel right. By the way she usually did the washing on Wednesdays while she runs the dishwasher. She usually books the common washing machine every Wednesday night, the week she doesn't have Frida. But for safety's sake she lays down the half-smoked cigarette in the ashtray and goes to the calendar on the refrigerator door to check. It could be that someone else has taken her usual time, so she had to choose yesterday evening.

She looks at the calendar and examines it, by looking at the date box on her wrist watch, what date it is. It is the twenty-first, which means it is week eight, which in turn means that it is an even week. Which in turn means, my God, it's on even weeks that she has Frida? Had she changed weeks with Hans? Nah, that she had no memory that. In addition, she had written that she would go with Frida to the dentist this afternoon. She had never done that if it was his week. How can this be possible? There must be something wrong. She must have changed week with Hans anyway. What did she do yesterday? Had she taken her from kindergarten, yes, she had. Then, she pushed her to the car and lifted her into her chair. Now she remembers clearly how it was. Sure, she had lifted Frida into her chair. But why wasn't she here then? She must have fallen asleep in the car. Sure she did. Why didn't she take her out of the car? She must have forgotten it, why? Was it perhaps because Sören rang just as she parked the car in the yard. Yes, so it must have been. He would never call on even weeks, then, he had his children, too. That's right, she had come out of her routines when he called. She falls in rampant tears.

## Irene, little Irene...

He got surprised when it was Irene who came ...

- Oh, it's you, 'he said, and let her in. Leaving school this early today, it was the worst. And then he went back to his desk again to continue calling around to the customers. While he gathered strength to call another customer, she entered the room. She hesitated for a moment, looking at him, then she said in a tone of collusion:

- I told them in school, I had a headache so that I could go home.

- Really?

He pretended not to understand what she meant, sat with his back to her without turning around and his heart was beating hard, and he felt that his penis was stiff. Damn, he thought, almost tearful with rage at himself, being horny on a little girl.

Irene sat down on the couch, which was standing behind him to the left and along with the desk, desk chair and a bookcase constituted the furniture in the room. She was silent for a minute and he said nothing either, just listened to his heart's rhythmic pounding. Suddenly she stretched out on the couch. He did not see it, because he did not dare turn around, he just heard it and he could with his mind's eye see how she lay there waiting for him.

God, what haven't that couch, that he had ever since boyhood, been through when it came to girls. Though in retrospect, he could ask if it really had been joyful. Why was everything still so desperately painful for him? Even eroticism. He had always had a certain amount of luck with girls especially since he got a little older. In his teens, he perhaps was too shy and inexperienced, moreover he looked a little too young. It happened still today, by the way, that people half-jokingly, half seriously wondered if he really was an adult. People almost always thought that he was much younger than what was, which sometimes hurt him, and certainly was a drawback as a businessman. But he really did not care anymore, they could believe whatever the hell they wanted. Girls liked his little weak, artistic appearance and his long eyelashes, a certain kind of girls. Other girls prefer big, rugged men with a lot of hair on the chest as they say. Sometimes he envied these tough Vikings would rather have been one of them. But with that said, he hardly lacked girls. They just got in his way.

Suddenly he heard something that sounded like a sigh from the couch and she said:

- Come and lie down beside me for a while ...

He hardly knew what to say, finally he got up:

- But Irene.

- Well, I want it, I want it, she insisted.

- But my God, I ...

Death and pain! He was torn between feelings and reason, couldn't make up his mind. Would he give in to the insistent almost irresistible urge to do exactly what he knew Irene expected him to do, or would he listen to the warning voice from inside, which reminded him that Irene was underage and not permitted?

And remember, by the way, if anyone found out what they were doing? Regardless of that Maria in a way was the cause of it all from the beginning ...

The minutes dragged through. He turned his head slightly and looked at her with one eye.

Didn't she seem unusual seductive today, where she lay on the couch in her neat blue school uniform with white collar and white cuffs and a skirt so short that it barely covered her buttocks? And they were alone too! If at least the phone could ring, putting an end to the pain.

Well, it had never happened something dangerous so far so why would the risk have to be bigger this time? After all, it was well indeed innocent, what they were doing, a little kiss and hug, she would not die from that. And he knew so well where the limit was, right?

So what was the point remain like this, might just get it over with, he couldn't escape anyway...

It felt like a strong argument and now the temptation became too overpowering. He pushed the chair away from the table, stood up, went to the couch and laid down next to her, she moved willingly in so that he could fit.

But he lay on his back with his arms firmly crossed over his chest and remained perfectly still, not so much as poked at her once, while he intensely tried to think of something else, such as phone calls with customers, which sales pitches he would use and so on. It was a sort of compromise. When Irene realized that he was not going to make any advances, at least not start them, she turned to the side so that her lips touched his right ear and he could feel her warm breath. He understood that she wanted him to kiss her.

- Play with me, 'she said.

He protested a bit lame.

- But it does no harm, does it, you can do it, she said.

He turned his head and kissed her lightly on the mouth. She smacked loudly, as she used to when they kissed. He had always thought that it sounded unspeakably silly, when she did it, the memory of the aversion he felt for her the first time he kissed her popped up, because Maria FORCED him to do it.

It happened shortly after he and Maria moved in together.

One Sunday morning, when they stayed in bed a little longer than usual, Irene came in and crawled under the covers in the wide double bed, so she came to be between him and Maria. He disliked it very much but kept a good face for Maria's sake.

Irene whispered something to Maria that she apparently did not want him to hear, they whispered for a while and suddenly Maria said:

- Irene think you're so cute, Dennis ... can't you give HER a kiss, it would make her so happy?

- No, why should I do it? He exclaimed spontaneously. I will not do that at all.

He had noticed that Irene swarmed for him and even though it flattered his vanity a little, he did not appreciate it as he felt a little embarrassed. Her pining admiration and that she was constantly following him, got on his nerves quite easily.

And now Maria demanded that he should kiss her.

Okay, if Maria wanted him to assume the role of some kind of substitute father to Irene, he was ready to do it, although he considered himself too young, intimacies, however, he would under no circumstances have anything to do with.

But Maria did not give up, she insisted that he would kiss Irene and meanwhile the girl was laying with her face upturned with her mouth slightly open waiting / she had polyps and always breathed with open mouth / and after a few minutes he began, unbelievably enough, to falter. Maria made him feel distorted and ungenerous. So horrible it couldn't be to kiss the girl if he thus gave her a little joy, she seemed to imply. And finally he gave in and let his lips brush against Irene's for a split second and Irene smacked so that it could be heard a long way, probably she thought that it was the way to do it.

Afterwards, he promised himself that he would never again allow himself to be persuaded to kiss Irene again, no matter what Maria said. Okay for this time, but then it's enough.

However, it was soon revealed that he had reckoned without values, after the first brief kiss Irene apparently felt that it from now on was free and at an increasing number of occasions she wanted a kiss and a hug as it was called and if he proved the least unwilling, Maria made him feel as if he was a real jerk. And if she was not happy with what he performed, and that she seldom were, he had to do it again.

- No, not like that, show her a little more, she kept on. You see how Irene is fond of you, do you really want to make her sad ... What is it? Are you AFRAID of her? It almost seems so ... HUG her then ... So yes, you can ...

It was a form of indoctrination. And it went on day after day. Now came a time when he became increasingly unsure of himself and how he really wanted it. He knew neither in nor out. And he eventually started to like to feel Irene's hard, lustful lips against his. Irene both invited him and stopped his desire at the same time.

Soon Maria did not need to coax him anymore, he himself took the initiative, but in the sly. And still he pretended that he kissed and hugged Irene of pure kindness, without experiencing something special, the girl was only twelve years old, small and undeveloped, he nearly thirty. Not even torture would have made him admitting that he was now enjoying the once forced situations.

This was a remarkable development, but he seemed to recognize the pattern. Most things in life are a matter of gradual habituation.

And that is especially true regarding eroticism. Hadn't, for example, the a few years older and very experienced Maria taught him to do well in bed? In the beginning, he had probably been a lousy lover in her eyes, but Maria had accustomed him to refined erotic games, which previously only brought him disgust, until he learned to appreciate them. And this with Irene was in fact a new sexual variant that Maria had invented. Yes, he gradually became utterly convinced that Maria was more than happy imagining that he did things with her underage daughter. It gave her love life an extra kick, so to speak.

That was probably not as strange and different as it seemed, when he thought about it. We are all sexual beings and sex can be expressed in any way whatsoever. And where is the boundary between the normal and the perverse?

Soft and gently he got Irene to lie on her back again. Then he rolled over and began to kiss her again and again. She whipped her tongue in his mouth as he had taught her.

So far he would go, but never longer, a little kissing, a little caressing, but only above the waist, no more. It was always very short pastoral moments.

But suddenly a thought struck him: If he were to test how Irene reacted on caressing BELOW the waist line? Just to try. She liked the kissing and was well in love with him in the way little girls are, but the question was if she really had any sexual feelings?

In this context, he recalled when he was a little kid, maybe six or seven years or so, when a young, attractive lady once was a bit intrusive, it felt nice and he even had an erection. But perhaps it was different with girls.

As if it was accidentally, he let his free hand brush against the inside of her left knee in a caressing motion. He moved his hand in a slow motion and all the time he was ready to immediately pull it off, if she showed the slightest sign of fear. But instead she parted willingly on her legs. For a moment he hesitated, so he let his hand slide further up in the short skirt and toward her womb. He caressed her butterfly easy. And indeed she reacted, shamelessly as well, straddled her legs even more and her breathing became heavier as if she enjoyed it.

After a while he became bolder and fondled her under her panties, but when he tried to gently penetrate with his finger, she became frightened and squeezed her knees. Then he refrained. Seconds after he had an orgasm, as he did everything in the world to hide, and then he had suddenly got enough, he rose quickly from the couch, stiff as a poker, and now completely cool, did a few laps in the room and thought about it, went into the bathroom, came back and sat behind the desk. Irene knew that the fun was over for this time, she had risen to sitting position in the couch. She seemed a little disappointed.

Now he did not even kiss her anymore and wanted her out of the room as quickly as possible. Everything nauseated him. He hated himself for what he had done. he hated Irene, Maria and the whole world. He would have liked to cry. The worst, however, was the remorse. He often thought that he could destroy Irene, he did not really know how, but for example, by awakening her dormant sexual needs too early.

## There's nothing to die for

The strange things begin already in the entrance. The girl in the hatch watches him curiously and says:

- You do not need to pay admission.

He believes that she confuses him with someone else, a more substantial person, and jokes:

- It was the worst, I'll get in for free, what if I took you seriously huh ...

And when she insists he becomes almost annoyed / he does not like to attract attention / snaps of her, pushes forward even money and passes. Actually he did not understand until later, too late, what was about to happen. He should have paid attention to her strange eyes without any trace of a joking mood.

Then followed the usual rush for a good place, which he is so familiar with. Together with hundreds of others he chases away along the grassy slope with a folding chair under his arm. When he had found an empty spot, he sits down and puts his briefcase with thermos and sandwiches next to him, takes out his binoculars, small inexpensive binoculars, most people have much more expensive ones and he begin to embark the surroundings.

He is a half old, flabby man with a big face, shy glance, looks a bit sad, the type of guy who always looks a bit sad, tormented, a little GRIEVED maybe. Now he is in all cases here, he has got a good place, can take it easy. He has plenty of time. He takes a sandwich out of the bag and begins to chew it. It's a nice Saturday in April and he thinks contentedly on what to expect later. A couple of days off, being at home doing whatever he wants, knowing that he have all the spring and summer to look forward to. And just to know that one's relatives are still alive, having friends, not many, but some, anyway, that you are not alone, not by yourself yet.

A car drives up, looks like a prison van with doors in the back. The driver and another gun armed uniformed man steps out of it, opens the back doors, folds down a small flight of stairs and out comes two men dignified and somewhat hesitantly but without that anyone finds any necessity to speed them up.

He is so close, that he could almost see the traits in their faces, yet he all the time keeps his little theatre binoculars against his eyes and stare at them breathlessly, oblivious of the surroundings and with that sucking anxiety feeling in the pit of his stomach, he always gets at such occasions. These would then die ... One is a little bald man while the other is pretty young. The younger one looks effortless and curiously around, as soon as he had stepped out of the car. His behaviour seems challenging casually and confidently and at a brisk pace, he goes right up to the gallows, where two soldiers tie him. Most likely, his courage is artificial but in any case, it can't fail to make an impression and a murmur of admiration from the audience. In fact, he over do it, probably he so strongly fears to lose control over his nerves, to break down, that he shows an almost distasteful arrogance about death.

The older man, however, shows very different manners, so to say, a more normal attitude in a situation like this. He seems apathetic, he has closed himself, staring at the ground, seems shrunken, when proceeding to his place at the empty pile.

He screws frantically on the binoculars to see the man's face, he must see his face. He gets the man so close in on himself in the binoculars, that he almost falls backwards. There is the usual: Limp expressionless features, blank stare, not a trace of either heroism or cowardice, just complete resignation. Within a minute I will lie lifeless on the pebbles, but the rest of you are still alive, you live and the sun is shining, life goes on without me. He looks at the man for a long time and he shudder, that's how a man without hope looks, he thinks.

He keeps binoculars persistently directed at the little bald man throughout the execution, and then he puts them away and takes another sandwich from the bag. So he always do, usually two men at a time dies with a half or one hour apart.

He chooses one of them as "his man" maybe the person he unconsciously identifies himself most with and keeps him under sedulous observation until the moment when he is hunched beneath the pile.

He hasn't chewed the sandwich for long until the next couple pops up: There are many who will die that day, so they increase the pace. When he had seen half a dozen die, he suddenly wanted to move for a while, takes the folding chair under his arm and loons away in search for a toilet. It is when he comes back from the toilet that it happens. He sees a car with the engine turned off, one of the usual gloomy prison cars, at one of the piles there is a man lashed and waiting in resignation to die, the other pile is empty, a strange calmness prevails, a metallic voice calling a name in a speaker, again and again, everything seems to wait, in tense anticipation. But he is not disturbed, he seeks the same grassy slope as before, notes with satisfaction that no one has encroached on it, unfolds the chair, sits down heavily and starts fumbling with his binoculars. For once, it's suspiciously calm, he with his perpetual anxiety, his premonitions of coming disasters, he should have understood. Suddenly someone stands in front of him and says, in a sharp tone:

- Well?

He takes down the binoculars and just stares, what do the man mean?

- NAAA? says the man again, he is some sort of officer, what will it be?

- How it will be? He answers surprised without understanding anything. I sit right here and watch, belonging to the audience and ... suddenly he is silenced in dismay, again he hears the metallic voice, that's his name which is called out in the loudspeaker, again and again.

- No, he says, while rising from the folding chair, white in the face, this is a mistake, a tremendous mistake, I belong to the audience, I have purchased a ticket, look here, and he digs in his pockets desperately to find the ticket.

- We doesn't commit mistakes, the officer responds coldly / he realizes now that it is the head of the firing squad standing there /. The mood among the crowd has now suddenly become irritable, people are whistling and stomping, he knows what that means: It will not be long until they drag him away by force, he has seen it happen before. He panics:

- But I have not been told, he shouts indignantly, this is unfair, I have not received any notice, any statement, it should well be ...

- Oh, do not try now, the officer interrupts him unkindly, you have been noticed just like everybody else, no exception is made for your part ...

The thoughts are stuck in his head: He makes spasmodic attempts to remember, maybe he has been told, maybe not, it was some hassle at the entrance, could it be ...? Anyway, he must gain time.

- I refuse to die, he exclaims desperately, I have not had time for any life yet, I am only twenty years!

- Only twenty years, mimics the officer mockingly, you are well at least the double.

Scattered laughter among the audience.

- Oh my God, he gasps and knows at the same moment that the man is right, on my God, and I was just was a little boy, I remember clearly ...

And annihilated he sinks into the chair again.

- The years just went, he said anxiously, you know how it is all of you, the years just goes and goes, you can't escape ...

But he faces no understanding anywhere, people stare at him without answering, some express disdain others indifference.

- Try to pull yourself together man, the officer says, because you do not want that we use force.

- A couple of years more I could have, a couple of years, it would not be an unreasonable request, he says breathlessly.

The officer:

- It's over now.

- Well, there's nothing to die for in a life like mine, he howls, it is full of disappointments, I've never lived.

- Yes, as they always say, answer the officer in fatigue, but for forty years ...

The moment he discovers his elderly father in the crowd, once a strong man. All is there suddenly, friends, enemies, to see him die. He regains some courage:

- Do something he gasps, prevent them ...

His fathers reply is not directed to him instead it's directed towards the audience:

- The boy, he begins in a vicious tone, but he stops, dark red in the face from anger. And then wait for me to .... I ... / the words are stacked in his throat/. No, certainly not, he says emphatically.

He turns to the officer:

- Please, Mr. Officer, I just get some rest, and I will come soon, just for a little while yet ....

And the officer, a humane man, deep down, really gives him some time, despite the audience's violent protests. He has quickly made himself unpopular, indignation is growing all around. An unknown man rises from his seat and shouts furiously:

- Your coward, I'd like to spit in your face your damn coward, your damn coward.

Now he have to use the little time he has left, he has to become the master of his bottomless horror, he does not want to die like a douche bag anyway, he wants to please. And so he chases in panic for something to hook up the courage on, first, he tries to pray, buttoning his fat little hands and saying:

- Dear God ... Then he stopped, can't find any more words, he is too tense, too terrified. Instead he tries takes the Lord's Prayer, somewhere he will have to start ...

- Our Father who art in heaven ...

But he knows that he will not get through, that he can't, so he tries again:

- Our Father, he croaks. Our Father who art in heaven ...

He tries again and again but all the time he feels that it's useless, he can't believe, finally he gives up.

- When I was a child, I prayed all the time, I prayed and prayed, I saw God everywhere I went, in the wallpaper pattern in the clouds in the sky. But now ...

So he tries another way, to find something that gave meaning to his life, something that can reconcile him with the idea of death, something to resort to at the very end.

And then he makes a flashover of all the years, the years can't have gone unnoticed anyway ...

But the time is running out, he can't think clearly, finally he shouts excitedly:

- Help me somebody, is there anybody who could help ... Then a man comes up, snakes his way through the crowd.

It is a tall, thin man whom he had never seen before with a little myopic look, perhaps a priest, no ordinary person in each case. The man puts his arm over his shoulders, speaks soothing and familiarly to him.

He is grateful to the priest, it is a human being who wants him to feel well, finally, in the consuming loneliness,

- You are wrong, the priest says mildly, in forty years, there must be something, you just have to find it, fear makes you blind, surely there is something valuable in your life, but you don't see it now, maybe never seen it.

It sounds so convincing, when the priest says it, he really wants to believe that it is true, so he tries again, nervously reciting aloud to reviving his thoughts.

- The work, perhaps ...? Asks the priest.

But just by mentioning the work he is even more filled with disgust. There, he was the one who never advanced.

- The work, he says, spitting the words out in hate, it was only a mean for livelihood, bearable, because I knew that many others had the same, not more. I always plagued by the total futility of everything. The days just went without ...

Nah, he interrupts himself then abruptly, there must be something else, something that really meant something, anything that could give comfort now, but what? What?

- Marriage, he says later as he looks the priest, perhaps? And he immediately becomes a little more hopeful, he was married once, he tells the priest. For sure, there were moments of tenderness, of sympathy. We were in all cases terribly in love in the beginning, he assures the priest confidingly, we were so similar, really, we understood each other, everything was so good, until ...

- But perhaps a reconciliation would ...?

Nah, he says then discouraged, but because he did not want to leave anything untried he shouts her name, first a little timidly:



- Monaa! And she's there, in the audience, but she does not hear him or do not want to hear, looks the other way, talking to her new husband.

- Monaa, he howls, I will die soon, and ...

Now she can't very well pretend like she did not hear him, but she still does not respond, just looks embarrassed.

- We were at least happy for a while at the beginning of our marriage, were we not? He tries. Were we not?

Finally she replies, hostile.

- But that's so long ago ...

He darkens.

- You have had a good time you and the new, he says accusingly, you seem to have made it, but I ...

- Yes, you've always been sorry for yourself.

He pretends not to hear, continues eagerly:

- I remember that you often said you would never forget me, that I would always have a place in your heart...

The wife becomes invisible in the crowd, he stares at the spot with empty eyes.

Then he sits a few moments as extinct, completely apathetic, but the priest doesn't give up, not yet:

- Remember when you were a child then, he urges, there's almost always something in childhood.

- No, there's nothing there either, he says flatly.

Among the spectators there is a growing impatience, he's excited by the conversation with his wife, and the noise around scares him up even more.

- Try to breathe calmly, the pastor said exhorting, out in, out in, so yes, deep breaths.

He obeyed like a child, tried to take deep breaths, out in, out in.

- You are a bit calmer now?

- Yes, he replies between his dry lips, but doesn't sound convinced, he just do not want to hurt this decent man. His stomach hurts, he loosens his belt.

- Strange that it always is in the stomach, he says, trying to smile at the priest, but the smile becomes a grimace only.

- By the way, I have always had problems with my stomach, I remember ... he cranks on, hysterically.

- Well, interrupts the priest, it tends to be so. Do not give up, not yet. What about childhood then, you can find your childhood? Remember when you were a child!

He searches his memory hard and remembers a feeling, a feeling of being well-liked and talented, the time when he came home with such good grades from school. His father and mother were proud, they bought a cake for him. He smiles shyly and it almost looks as if he has forgotten that he is going to die:

- I remember once ...

- Try to hold on to the memory, says the priest eagerly, well meaning as he is.

He makes a few spasmodic attempts but fails.

- Nah, I feel that it is impossible, he says dejectedly.

Suddenly, they stand in front of him as risen from the ground: two robust men, soldiers, and the humane officer.

- Sorry, the officer says, I deeply regret, but now ...

He is gripped by panic.

- Nah, I was going to get ...

- Sorry, the officer repeats, but we can't wait any longer.

- Well, there's nothing to die for in a life like mine.

No one wants to listen to him anymore, the priest has done his duty, the crowd have had enough. At a sign from the officer the two soldiers brutally snatches him up from the chair and forces him to move forward.

- There's nothing to die for a life like mine, he howls, there's nothing to die for ... help me

someone ...

He is lashed to the stake, finally the officer ties a blindfold on him, he sees a last glimpse of day light, then it's all black: They leaves him with quick steps, he is alone in the dark.

- There's nothing to die for a life like mine, he howls, nothing to die for ...

Then they shot.

## Lilacs for her

He pulled her towards him and kissed her, but then he immediately pushed her away. She did not turn away, remained completely passive. He avoided looking at her, and his heart pounded, it had begun even before he kissed her. Imagine if I could ...? He had suddenly thought and then the heart began pounding. He wondered if her heart pounded as well.

They sat in silence for a few seconds. So his hand, as if by accident, brushed against her leg below the knee, it was just an easy quick caress and not beyond the knee, where he pulled his hand away as if it was burned.

Still she did not move, sat still as a statue, did nothing to stop him. Actually, it was strange, he thought, that she never tried to stop his advances.

She just said, shortly after he touched her leg, in a gasp:

- If we were not siblings...

We could have each other. The last thing she did not said, but he understood that she meant it.

As always when their advances reached this point, his mind began to speak. He thought: She is as willing as ever. And now she is certainly no virgin, as then. Neither am I. We are bitter and cynical and unhappy. Then we were just unhappy, but at the same time children. Hysterically fearing the fiery sexuality that burned within, as soon as we got near each other. Now we are not afraid anymore, but bitter, unhappy, lost.

He leaned back and after a moment he was far away from eroticism. For a long time there were just the silence and the gloom, she was hesitant and motionless as before, he was completely absorbed by his thoughts. But suddenly he became aware of his sister's presence again. He discovered that she let her skirt slide up a bit above the knee, the knee he touched. He sat petrified, and a wave of sensuality washed over him. Again and again he thought: She must have done it wilfully, and knowingly. She provoked him.

He sat up quickly and looked at her furtively from side. She had leaned back against the sofa's back and when she saw him straighten his back and turn against her, she closed her eyes to avoid meeting his gaze. He sat and stared at her indecisive and tempted: Wanted, did not, did, did not. But she wanted, at least a little caressing.

Just when he decided to get up and leave the room in order to put an end to the pain, he stooped suddenly and kissed her again very easily. As usual, she did not move, not fight, but was not active.

So he said in a hoarse voice / he was always hoarse when he was excited /:

- Strangely, I've never really wanted to have someone other than you.

- Well Eivor, you wanted her didn't you, you was in love with her, she objected gently.

He made an irritated grimace.

- Yes I was probably in love with her, he responded while he thought: Why does she want to remind me of Eivor right now. She probably was jealous of Eivor, he had suspected that for a long time.

- I have in any case always felt an attraction to you, he finally decides to get away from the uncomfortable question.

- But I'm your sister, how can you feel that?

- So what? He said briskly and she said nothing.

Then he brought up the deserted island again. If two people were put ashore on a deserted island, when they are children, a boy and girl, sister and brother, do you think that they for some divine inspiration would choose not having anything to do with each other?

And by the way, in the literature, you will find lots of examples. And so he began with example after example.

In the past, she replied simply: What you know much, in a priceless naive tone, full of admiration. And she sounded so innocent, but she certainly wasn't more innocent than him. She wanted it as least as much as he. Now she interrupted him before he even had time to say half what he intended to say.

- You do not need convince me, 'she said bitterly, I want.

He abruptly ended operation persuasion, with confusion. Instead he for the first time discovered that he never really wanted anything more than to talk about it, wanted to break her resistance, if there ever had been any, but he had never wanted to go further than that. And still he wanted just to touch on the immense, not more.

And so he found her all prepared, what was he waiting for? You do not have to talk and talk. I'm in love with you, but you are my brother, I've been with other men and I am not afraid. And what do we have to lose? What can someone like me to lose? And he thought about how skinny she was.

It started one summer long ago ...

He remembered the childhood warmest summer with sweltering heat and a perennially blue sky. And her sister in shorts and a top whole day, the bare shoulders blackened by the sun.

In the past they could spend most of the school holidays playing, just like other kids with wealthy parents. But this summer the parents had decided that they should devote themselves to studies. Listless and bored they were writing and doing arithmetic's page up and page down during the best time of the day, while swimming and other funny things were scheduled for the late afternoon or evening. So they became isolated, excluded from the natural contact with other kids, to completely rely on each other.

Suddenly his eyes focused on her, as she sat in the grass and read, in shorts and a top. At once his situation seemed bearable: Here, he had within immediate reach what he anyway most of all pined for, missing, a girl. And his sister's thoughts probably went in the same direction, he thought since he felt that she was lonely, unhappy, shut out, let alone, that she had a limp to be ashamed of.

After all, he had reason to be grateful to their parents. If her sister had not kept away from all peers, he would not have had her all for himself. Increasingly, he began to spend time in his sister's room in the evenings. Then they sat for hours together, looking at old photographs or read aloud to each other from any book or just sat quietly. But he never did any substantial rapprochement, since as soon as he, driven by a natural desire, was on the way to touch her, he was seized by such a measureless anguish that he must abstain. And in solitude, he was tortured by violent remorse over the criminal inclination, promised himself holy and dearly never again ... but a new day with blazing sun and the sister in tight shorts his desire woke again.

His sister was the bolder, appeared challenging, exposed her slim body whenever she had the opportunity, dressed off in front of him, before he had to leave her room at night. One time he asked her bluntly if he could crawl into bed with her.

- Of course I'd like to, she replied.

The entire summer he played with the thoughts excitedly.

She made no resistance when he took her by the shoulders, she sort of fell together. And then when he tried:

- Can't you take off your skirt?

- Yes, she replied without hesitation. She did not move. But neither did she stop him.

Afterwards, he felt nothing but disgust for her, for himself. He dressed with awkward jerky movements, staring at the floor, blessed the darkness, wanted to run away, far, far away in shame, the agony, but he could not, did not. Fucking wench, he thought bitterly about his sister, it was you who persuaded me in the end, it was your fault. And when he did, he was confident, almost convinced that they would never have anyone else. In any case, it would take very long.

Several years went by, they left school, went to work, left home. He met her, not so much, just at the dinners with their parents. But he often thought about her, wondering how it was with her. It would really just be to call or visit her, but he persisted.

One day, however, he had an assignment near her residence. He received a whim, went there and rang the doorbell. She cried:

- Who is it? She sounded glad that it was him, opened wrapped in a bathrobe and ran right back to the bathroom.

He went into the living room and sat down. When he saw his sister in bathrobe, he had received a shock. He thought he would only have a coffee and talk a while in the kitchen. A while later his sister had arranged her hair, however she had not got dressed.

He had hoped, he thought, that she at least would get dressed after the bath, and preferably not the tight cute dress but something more decent than the bathrobe.

- Want some coffee? She said flatly.

- Yes please. But I got plenty of time. I have not taken any lunch and I told the manager that I would go a few errands for a client afterwards. Suddenly, he was less interested in drinking coffee. She made coffee and succumbed on the table in front of the couch in the living room, she did not want to sit in the kitchen, she said.

His sister sat crouched over the table and did nothing to attract or tempt him.

He stared at the bathrobe that drifted apart a bit at the top and her naked breasts were exposed as she leaned over the coffee cup. No one has so nice and firm breasts as she, he thought breathlessly. Eivor was not in any way as beautiful. Suddenly his heart pounded as on command, he was just dazed, his eyes flickered, the tongue glued to the mouth, he talked on about everything but without thinking about what he said, just to camouflage his mounting excitement ...

He nervously moved a bit closer to her. Now he could not longer hide what was the matter with him and he was terribly embarrassed, and although she had already been his once, he did not dare for death and torment lift his arm a few inches to touch her, simply could not, the arm was heavy as lead, he felt sick from excitement. Suddenly she turned her face towards him and looked with surprise. That moment he bent awkwardly forward and touched her with his hot face, breathing heavily and saying, hoarse and unnatural:

- I want you ...

He himself thought it sounded disgusting but he could not stop himself. And she straightened her back, leaned back against the sofa cushions looking quite calmly and at the same time passively at him. He bent over her and touched the bathrobe, she was naked underneath.

Then she grabbed him and said:

- Paul, you tremble, your whole body ...

- Yes, yes, he said, had wanted to cry suddenly. There was so much tenderness and warmth in her words, so much comfort ...

When he stood in the hall putting his overcoat on, she came after him. What she wanted now then, he thought. Never again would he set his foot here again. Why would she bother come out here in the hall? She looked at him, how he felt and suddenly she took his hand, pressed it lightly and said in an almost factual tone:

- Can't you try to forget that I am your sister?

- For my sake or for yours? He said nothing more, just stood in silence with his hat in hand, avoided looking at her and thought: Let me go then, let's put a end to the pain.

- For both, our sake, she said .. You have so often told me, that there is nothing strange in that ... why don't you do it now, Paul?

She wanted to be courted, having tenderness perhaps, he thought. She was sick, how sick he did not know, but ill, marked for life and she received treatments that no one wanted to talk loudly about. Suddenly she fell down and began to sob heartbreakingly. Cried with averted face, he was grateful that she had the good taste not to throw himself around his neck, as she would have done, if he had been a real lover.

- I can't live without you, you're all I have, she sobbed.

- Calm down, it's all right, he replied stupidly, as soon as you have become healthy again...

But she just shook her head again and again and continued to sob with averted face, in a crouching, not particularly beautiful position with the naked toes inward. Oh my God, so sad she seemed. And so lonely they were both, by the way, even together.

They could not overcome the feeling of mortal sin, of disgust, could not to come to each other AFTERWARDS. She maybe, but he never, for him it was just crude and vulgar.

He could not possibly defend himself from the roughness. And she begged for tenderness. So he went, lingering, found it difficult to close the door behind him, felt as though he abandoned a dying, a drowning.

Now I am betraying her, he thought, when she really needs me, but when I crave her then ...

He wanted to be like a brother, giving her courage, there was so much to point out, ways out, there were always.

But if he went back ... no it was best not to. In any case, he wanted to wait a while. He did not talk to her again. Several times he dialled the number to her apartment, heard the signals, but then he put back the handset again without waiting for an answer. What would he say, really? He who always had a kind of verbiage, now he was perplexed.

One day in late winter, he bought a large bouquet of lilacs for her. It was a sunny, almost warm early spring Saturday afternoon in late March, and despite the murderous bustle in town for the upcoming weekend, endless traffic jams in the city, crowds on the sidewalks and in the stores. It was joyous anticipation in the air: Spring was in the offing.

Naturally lilacs were expensive this time of year and the purchase took a deep grasp in his wallet. But suddenly he felt that he simply must find something to delight her sister with, when it finally was going to be spring and everyone was so happy.

He was seized by a violent lust for her. The memory of how she cried desperately, to seek solace in him, though she wanted more, needed as well, burned in him like an accusation. Here he had been away for months, taken revenge on her for having broken down, leaving her to manage on her own. He became hyper-anxious. Why had he not at least called her? He could well have talked to her on the phone, it wouldn't be to risk anything. She had no one but him. And he had no one but her. What if ...? What would he be then?

He would never ever dare to enter the threshold of other people's abode, remain alone forever. In the frenzy that he would come back, she had left him a key last. It was just to get on in this time. It struck him forthwith how quiet and desolate it seemed. He looked towards the hanger in the hall, well, her coat was hanging in there but ...

He stayed a few seconds in the hall with the bouquet with lilacs in hand without hanging off his coat. How surprised she would be, he thought. So he pushed his hat upwards on the forehead and stepping into. She lay on the bed in the bedroom, fully clothed but without shoes or slippers, her blond hair glistened in the pale March sun, she lay perfectly still ...

He stopped and hesitated in the doorway for a moment, so he walked up to her without saying a word, stood at the foot of the bed watching her for long. His sister lay on her back in bed stretched across its length. She was infinitely thin, pale, without colour, everything flowed together in the heat haze: The half-closed eyes, the lips, the hair. She was bone skinny, he thought, his hands were like claws, lips leather skinned, totally colourless, unappetising. He stood for a long time with the flowers in hand with the coat and hat saying nothing. Did not cry, would not run to the phone to call the doctor. Stuff like one normally should do. Instead he went into the kitchen and took a glass of water, sat a few minutes in a chair, thinking. There was nothing to do. He could not talk to her, all what he had planned on the way there. And not cuddle her for that matter. She was gone for good. So he went into the room again, where his sister was. Carefully he removed the paper on the white and blue lilacs and placed them gently on her breast: It looked a bit pathetic, little peculiar, especially as she held her arms stretched along the sides, but anyway ...

- They may wonder, and believe what they want, he said, half aloud to himself, and now the tears came. But it was at least for her sake I bought lilacs. And she will have them!

Then he left.

## Cohabitation

He wakes up a moment before her on the Saturday morning and stares listlessly out through the window, the sun glistens on a grey facade opposite. Somewhere in the house a toilet roars, a door is shut with a bang. She was still asleep, a light morning sleep. He can barely hear her breath. As if she was dead. Perhaps just as well if she was dead, he thinks. He almost didn't dare to move in bed not to wake her. I was uncomfortable to lay on his back watching her from the side. She has her face turned toward him with her mouth half open. You could think that she really was dead or just pretending to sleep, as quiet as she was. But probably she lives. All of a sudden she wakes and stares him straight in the face. And he is getting ready to look away in that moment. Or pretend to sleep. He don't dare to meet her gaze. Curiously, in all cases, we are actually enemies. Although we live in no open hostility, rarely quarrelling and last night was about as usual. As usual, but still not as usual, bored resignation on her part, not the heat, he begged and prayed for. They have lived together for a long time. It has gradually become a habit for both. But they are enemies. The atmosphere between them is tense, grumpy, annoyed, at the moment, she is the strongest. She has a real advantage and she lets him feel it. He rubs her back, does what she tells him to do and he appeal to her in a tone that he finds disgusting submissive. Oh God how he despises himself, and how he hates her for forcing him to despise himself. I could kill her, he speculates, when he is peering at her, desiring her, the tyrannical and cruel woman besides him. A decisive stranglehold and she would suffocate after a few minutes. He'd rather sees her dead than in another man's arms. Could not he have her no one else would have her either and killing her would probably be the only way to prevent this development. Hate. Hatred is love. Love is hate. And yet the moment she showed a little affection, he would be able to be burned for the stake of her. Now she wakes up, takes a deep breath. He has already turned away.

- Ah, make some coffee, she says.

He paws around with bare feet.

- Why don't you use your slippers? She snaps.

He does not answer, preparing a tray with cups and saucers.

- Are you sour?

There is something menacing in tone as he too well recognize. He gets scared. His silence could be interpreted as that he wants to be a rebellion and like nothing she could crush it. Then he would stand there like a wet dog, more wretched than ever, best to turn in time.

- No, not at all, he assures. And as if to demonstrate his good humour he puts on the radio. But she still has time to add:

- By the way, you are always sour.

Now it has happened. He feels as if he got a slap. Now he will not dare to meet her eyes all day.

She has stated that he is angry and he can't refute her claim. He remains silent and rubs himself in bitterness and self-pity. Her contempt is felt throughout the room.

At the coffee drinking and morning paper reading he does some awkward advances. Reads a chant from a causerie:

- That was quick, wasn't it?

She twitches in his neck and says in a bored tone the single word:

- Okay.

He makes an evil grimace behind the newspaper. Damn, what a wimp I am, he thinks.

Then she's in the bathroom filling the bathtub, humming, while he sits alone with his coffee. Now maybe she'll be on a better mood, he hopes. He gets dressed and does the bed. She comes from the bathroom.

The blue bathrobe, that it is blue, he has not thought of before. And it dresses her so, highlights the Nordic blond in her. She stands in front of the mirror, arranges her hair and smiles. He stares at her, follow her facial expressions in the mirror.

Now she smiles warmly, but not for him. She smiles at herself. Or is she in thoughts. What are her thoughts? Has she forgotten the room and him? Now only the mirror in front of her, and her thoughts.

He knows it all at once: There is someone she meets, someone who makes her smile, happy and in love at the same time. Someone who is not sour all the time. He is filled with an infinite self-pity. Why wouldn't he be mad really! Suddenly she saw him in the mirror. All the soft and beautiful expressions are at once erased, and her features become stiff and resistant as before. And she says without turning around, in a sharp tone:

- You know that the shop closes early today, and you have not been down already? Unfriendly, as if he was something annoying.

He's down in the store shopping. There are a lot of people to be dispatched before him. And it's only open one more hour. On a warm late-summer Saturday, most of them are going out to the country and thus they are in a hurry. He thinks about her, daydreams, hateful and jealous.

And he's trying to think why it suddenly become has like this between them. What are the secret forces that makes them do it. Is it's her fault, or his, or both. Or is it something that lacks them booth, something missing, something that should have been shared but never was, though they have lived together for so long.

When he comes back, the door is locked and there is silence. He walks around looking for her without taking off his shoes. He finds her on the bed, naked. She smiles, extends her arms towards him and says lovingly:

- I love you!



## The cake

Even before Thomas looked down into the pan with chocolate, he knew that he had burned it. Though he would not admit it, since there at the kitchen table sat his wife, looking at him. It felt as if she trusted his skills, so it had to look like he knew what he was doing. Moreover, he could not quite stop himself before he poured the burnt sauce over the cake. He did not think much more about it, since it was time to put the cake in the fridge and forget about it in favour for the starters. He had made it easy for himself when it came to the starters. They would consist of toasted bread with factory made shrimp salad with mayonnaise. It went smoothly and easily until he stood before the choice if he should have butter or oil on the butter paper. It was only twenty minutes left now before the guests would arrive. He must make a decision. Butter is definitely tastier than oil, he reasoned, but there are those who believe that one should have oil to everything but pancakes. It turned out that they had no butter, which settled the question. He takes the bottle of oil that is in the door of the refrigerator and bolts of the cork. His wife, Barbro, stops him.

- But Thomas, you're not going to have canola oil to that. That's not good. Take olive oil instead. Tomas said nothing, he was ashamed. Sure, he knew that there were different oils. And he had indeed used them both. Canola oil is neutral, olive oil may be better, but with the shrimp salad? To explain it to his wife, now that his head felt almost blocked. It was too much of everything. He can't even close the refrigerator door again until Barbro takes out the bottle of olive oil from the pantry. She doesn't give it to Tomas, instead she pours out a little on the butter paper. She stands looking when he starts adding bread pieces on the paper, but soon she stops him and asks:

- But Thomas, won't you smear out the oil first?

- Oops, sorry. I was about to forget it.

It went pretty well to toast the bread pieces, but then he almost constantly guarded them in the oven. They most outer bits were adapting the perfect light brown colour and the inner ones seemed also quite alright. He took out the plate and found, however, that the innermost had become a little burnt around the edges. It might be good anyway, he thought, and opened the lid on the box with shrimp salad. It did not seem like Barbro agreed with him, since while he retrieved a spoon, she cut out the dark parts. He let her continue. To avoid having to stand and wait for her, he fetched the pot with dill from the refrigerator. Barbro did not seem to trust him, so when she was done, he gave her the box and the spoon. It looked as if she was relieved when he gave it to her. He started cutting the finest twigs of the plant in the pot. Then the doorbell rang. Barbro looked like she'd love to finish what she had started, so he rinsed his hands and went to the hall.

The first guest was Barbro's colleague at the hospital, Rita. She had already become fifty, but it was not visible on her. Maybe it was due to make-up or something, Thomas did not know for sure. But she was certainly good looking. The dramatic neckline of course helped. It was hard to take the eyes off her chest. She smiled and said.

- Hi Thomas, I have come the right day, it is well her birthday today, huh?

It was one of these comments that you just say, thought Thomas, and he was trying to figure out a similar comment to reply with. He did not, however, get far in his thoughts since Barbro came in and shouted:

- But hello Rita! I am glad you could make it, welcome!

Tomas did not even have time to close the door until the next guest arrived, it was even two guests. Though Tomas almost counted them as one, since they had been together ever since they were children. His name is Bengt, and her is Maj-Lis. Bengt was originally a colleague to Thomas, but it was so long ago, so they saw each other as real friends. Maj-Lis and Barbro had found each other well. At least Barbro thought so.

Bengt got in first, so Thomas held out his hand to him.

He did it maybe a little too quickly for Bengt had not even gotten his body through the door.

Tomas realized this and was just giving orders to the arm to withdraw.

But before that Bengt had put his hand between Thomas fingers. It looked a little crowded there in the doorway. Additionally Barbro came behind him happily greeting Maj-Lis. Maj-Lis tried to look past Bengt to answer Barbro's greeting.

She held Bengt and it almost looked as if she tried to push him into the house. Thomas felt some light panic over the situation. He had immediately retreated into the hall unless Bengt had grabbed his hand with such force and now stood and shook it. Bengt smiled, probably it was because he was happy, but it could also be that he sneered at the situation. Well, finally Bengt released the grip and Thomas backed off. Then the next concern appeared, should he embrace Maj-Lis or not? He was not so fond of her. In particular, he was not so keen of greeting her, since it always felt like it was so false. She usually spreads out her arms, smiles a huge smile and then she croaks in her shrill voice, "but hey ...". What made it so false was that she did so to everyone she met. All she knew the slightest. But sometimes she did not lift up her arms instead she just said a simple "hello". Then on the other hand it did also not matter who it was she greeted either. Thomas guessed that she was in her positive mood and threw out his arms to her, despite the fact that he never use to do so. He did it mostly to avoid having to think more and to get over with the greeting ceremony. Maj-Lis returned his hug and supplemented with something flattering. Thomas said, however, nothing beyond a basic greeting. When he had finished the greeting procedure, he went quickly into the kitchen and leaved the guest with his wife.

Once in the kitchen, he got standing. Someone rings on the doorbell, it was Anders, Barbro's brother. Maybe he should go there and greet him, but there ought to be something important to do here now, however, his head was completely empty. Would they have appetizers perhaps? Definitely. What would it consist of? Maybe it was sparkling wine. As well it should be in the fridge. He opens the refrigerator. It was almost full of things, but there is no sparkling wine. He looks at the bench next to the fridge. Had he not placed the champagne glasses there after he had washed them in the dishwasher? Yes, he had enough, but there were no glass there now. He searched in panic around the kitchen for the bottles and the glasses. Someone opened the kitchen door. He tried to stop himself, so that the panic would not be visible. It was Barbro who stood in the doorway.

- But Thomas, come and have a toast with our guests?

- But where is our wine then, and the glasses?

- But you took out the glasses several hours ago, and I took there the Russian champagne just recently.

- But should we not have anything to the wine then?

- But, dear Thomas, you took crisps and pretzels out there at the same time with the glasses. Don't you remember? Come on! The others are waiting for you.

He followed her, thinking simultaneously about whether he would say something apologetic. Perhaps he would tell them the truth. He actually knew them pretty well and it was maybe a little funny after all. He decided the latter. When he did, nobody laughed or even nodded in recognition. Maybe he said it is too low. Had they heard what he said? All might just have assumed it was a general niceness. He left it at that and handed over all the talking to Barbro.

No one looked at him, yes Bengt nodded approvingly at him. It looked like he was going to say something. But he changed his mind, instead he brought his fist to his mouth and nibbled up the crisp crumbs with his lips that apparently had remained in his palm. It looked like when someone feeds a horse, though Thomas did not think much about it. His thoughts were at the food. There was no concrete thoughts, most words that spun around. The words were about anxiety, concerns about if the food was good or not. It spun words like chocolate, cayenne pepper and texture. The words chocolate and texture were most associated with the word chocolate cake, and words like cayenne pepper were linked to meat stew. He was almost sure it was not the other way around. But when he began to think of it, he was suddenly worried about that too. What if he had accidentally poured cayenne pepper on the cake. But it could surely not be possible and he could not ask Barbro either.

She was busy with important things such as to be nice to their guests.

they stood there for a while, exchanged pleasantries while looking at each other. Thomas suffered throughout the situation so he assumed that the others did too. Both the champagne and the snacks got finished and he took it as a sign that he was right. But for a while the thought struck him that the guests might have desperately tried to feed themselves on snacks because they had no confidence in the food.

Had it not been so, by the way, that after Barbro proclaimed that it indeed was Thomas who made the food, all provided themselves diligently from the bowls. Though it might be good, then they would, after all, not leave the dinner quite so hungry. Should he refill? Maybe it would be nice with cheese doodles for a change. His reflections were interrupted when Barbro's voice penetrated his involuntary audio filter. The key word that temporarily disconnected the filter was "please take a seat" or something like that, which she said as she opened the door to the dining room. Barbro went first and after her came the guests. All stood for a moment, silent and perplexed, looking at the dinner table. Had the hosts planned any special seating arrangements or not, probably was the unspoken question. It had been discussed, but their conclusion was that since the company was small and everyone knew each other, pre-planned seating would have been a little ridiculous. It was in any case what Barbro said. They seldom eat in the dining room, he and Barbro, so even they had no favourite seats. It made things easier, at least for Thomas. Had they been sitting in the kitchen, he had probably been a little annoyed if someone else used his usual seat in front of the window, but in the dining room it did not matter. The starters, were neatly laid out on small plates that rested on napkins, which in turn rested on the plates for the main course. Each click with shrimp salad was topped by fine dill sprigs and a slice of lemon. Barbro asked Thomas to get the white wine from the fridge. The dish seemed to be appreciated, since they were praised for their choice of wine. On a discrete command from Barbro he carried out the dish and returned with the pot with stew and its accessories.

Maj-Lis is watching it. She looks hesitantly, though she smiles a little. Doesn't she make a little grimace when Anders moves the spoon in her direction? But she still smiles. It seems like she wants to say something. Probably somewhat apologetically that she is not so hungry, perhaps because she had too much snacks. But now she takes at least a little. There was not much on the spoon, but she actually takes another one. She looks almost nervously on her plate, should she take more? No, she lifts the bowl so that it is between her and Bengt. He actually looks almost like he's hungry for stew. In addition, he takes a pretty hefty portion. At least three proper spoons, before he lifts the bowl further away on the table and directs the spoon towards me. It's only me who had not taken any of the stew yet. How should I do? I think I like it and also it would be nice if it would be emptied. But it may look strange if I take most of all.

Was it not a bit greedy perhaps with just stew? Barbro usually like to have a lot of vegetables too. Wonder if she thinks that a bowl with tomato wedges and another one with sliced cucumbers can be considered to be a satisfactory amount of vegetables. They seem not to run out anyway.

Maj-Lis took a lot of slices of cucumber but not so many tomato wedges. It should probably be at least three per person, but she took only two. Barbro took the more. I wonder if it was meant as a hint to me? Now, Bengt has the tomato bowl. He takes the spoon and drops it almost immediately without taking a single tomato wedge. He have at least some solidarity, or he may be thinks that one eat tomatoes only in the form of ketchup. Should I maybe ask if he wants ketchup? Though it won't work, Barbro would think it looks ugly if I put a ketchup bottle on the table. She usually even tells me to put it in the fridge when it's just her and me at the table. Damn that ketchup is no longer marketed in glass bottles, they were, after all, good looking, according to Barbro.

Now it feels as if everyone is looking at me. Maybe they do, by the way, but I do not dare to see. My wife definitely looks at me. Wondering if it's me who should say "enjoy your meal" or if it's her. It ought to be me because she is the one who is having her birthday. By the way it is I who cooked the food.

- Enjoy your meal! It was she who said it.

Stupid me, Thomas thought. Now I've made a fool of myself again. All just sat and waited for me to ask them to get started, strange that they all are so serious.

It looks as if they think it is a punishment to eat my food.

- It tastes delicious! It is Maj-Lis who says it.

But it does not sound very convincing. Several of the other guests agree with Maj-Lis praise, but they've barely tasted the food, especially not Maj-Lis.

Bengt at least eats properly, but he's not so fussy. He can even eat hot dogs raw. Rita also seems to eat, but she is from Finland and Finns probably tolerate everything.

My wife Barbro does not look so enthusiastic either, but she is perhaps mostly worried about if our guests are having a good time or not. You can really see how she wanders restlessly with his eyes.

- Barbro says that it is you who made the food, Thomas. It was Rita who said it.

- Oops, that's not bad, myself, I can only cook hot dogs. It was obviously Bengt's comment.

Thomas came on a little snide remark, he hesitated a bit, but in the end he squeezed it out before he saw Maj-Lis was about to open his mouth.

- What? Do you cook the sausage, I thought you usually eat them raw.

Bengt laughed and even his wife. The others were quiet.

Then followed a lot of standard questions and comments about getting fifty. Thomas did not listen so carefully. Instead, he thought more about the food.

I think I found the stew tasty, though I do not know. It usually takes quite a while for me to realize if something is tasty, when it is I who has done it. It's as if I wish so much that it shall be tasty that I do not feel that it tastes burnt, or that there is too much pepper, or any other failure. Maybe it's that I just do not want to throw away food so I eat whether it's good or not. Though it's not like that when I go to a restaurant. At Christmas, when the company offered a Christmas buffet, I neither finished the fried herrings or the pork pate since I found them not so good.

- Thomas sweetheart, Thomas, Thomas!

- Huh? I mean what did you say honey?

- Can you send around the stew, please!

Thomas lifts the stew without saying anything, and then he set it down again, and aligns the ladle against Rita.

Since she asks me to pass around the bowl again, she can't find it that disgusting, he thinks and feels a little happier. But perhaps Barbro does it just to please me. Rita, at least, did not want have any more. Thomas is observing the bowl as it passes between the hands of everyone around the table. Barbro and Maj-Lis hardly takes any. While both Anders and Bengt takes pretty generous portions and they look actually quite pleased when they see their new piles. Again Barbro calls on him but he doesn't hear it, even despite the fact that she started the sentence with his name. He who use to hear everything she says, even though he is, for example, in the bedroom and she is in the kitchen.

She repeats the sentence and he hears the word "wine" loud and clear. He does not need to hear more to get up and go into the kitchen.

While he served the wine he asks each one if he/she wants coffee. It feels great, as if he was a real waiter. Barbro seems not think it was so on stylish as she pulled down her mouth a bit, only very little, but in the way that Thomas seen so many times. First it the left side of her mouth was pulled down a bit, then came something acidic, like: "But Thomas do you think we should stop throwing away trash nowadays or what?" It used to be hard to come up with proper answers when she said things like that. Actually, it ought to be something to answer, but he just doesn't come up with it. Maybe because he has devoted all his power to block the fact that she actually ordered him to do something that they had agreed on that he would run as he pleased. Now he had indeed, after all, a bit of an advantage from this, since his thoughts spun around this, instead of the dessert. But soon he had to face the truth. With the coffee, he could offer brandy or punch, but then it was only the dessert on the agenda.

He was careful with the coffee, even more than what he used to be, although everybody always praised him for his good coffee. All but Barbro chooses brandy, he also. Punch was perhaps good, but it was Barbro's drink.

A pity that everyone wanted some from his bottle, since it probably was far to the next time they would go abroad and buy more.

He serves all of both coffee and avec before he sits beside his cup and his glass. The coffee tastes very good but he had not taken a mouthful until Barbro says:

- Shouldn't we have the dessert with the coffee, don't you think Thomas?

It is no question. He gets up immediately and goes into the kitchen. He was so nervous that he shakes when he puts the cake on the table. Along with a bucket whipped cream. To serve it to each one would have been impossible.

He puts it at Barbro and she takes solemnly quite a bit before she turns the cake spatula against Anders. She waits, seemingly, eagerly awaiting everyone to take their piece. Then all awaits equally eagerly for her to take the first spoonful. She has all eyes on her now. She puts the spoon in her mouth and it comes out blank. She does not make a face, but she says:  
- But oh! I had bought an ice cream cake that we would have. Tomas you may well bring it here and take this out.

## Mom and Annika

- Hey Annika, it's me.
- Hi mom, how are you?
- Ohh, as usual.

Then she said no more, but Annika waited a bit. She would surely say the usual chant if she waited a while. She did not expect to get any questions about how she felt herself, but it did not trouble her, because it did not seem as if the mother listened, the few times she had really asked how it was with her. Soon the expected chant came. It ended with that mom told something that Annika had not heard before. It was about one of her knees, but she was not sure what it was about. Annika was considering an appropriate ending phrase. Maybe she would say that she was about to cook. That was actually true, but right now there was really nothing she needed to do. The gratin was ready and it was in the oven. Maybe it was something more that mom wanted. Most often, it was not, but if was, she would save it for the end of her tirade.

- You Annika, I would love to have my Christmas decorations set, it's the only thing I have now.
- Yes, but put them up then. That's great. You don't need to bother that it's only November yet. It becomes a bit brighter and it needed after all. So just do it!
- Yes, but dear Annika You know I can't manage to put the star in the window anymore. I can't even take it out of the closet.

- No, I understand. But Peter then can't he help you?

- Dear Annika. You know that he is having so much to do. Well I can't disturb him with it.

It hurt in Annika when she heard it. She knew enough that it was how her mother was thinking. That Peter was more important than her. She had as much to do as him. Moreover, he lives closer to her. In addition, he has a car so it's much easier for him to visit her. She said, however, nothing of this to the mother, instead she said:

- Sure I will come, but I do not know when.
- Annika then. I need to have things set before the weekend, you know.
- Sure, I will come on Thursday evening then.
- It was nice of you, at what time will you come?
- I do not know, after work, about seven, I guess.
- Can't you come a little earlier, so we can have coffee together?
- Can't we drink coffee at seven, then?
- But we always drink coffee after dinner, you know well or have you forgotten that?
- It may well be, though I can't possibly take time off from work just so that you can have your coffee at the very same time as we always had when father was alive.
- But Annika then. Do you have to bring up dad now.
- Sorry, but I must be able to mention him, otherwise it will be a bit weird or what?
- Okay then. But bring something tasty to go with the coffee anyway? Or do you think I should buy it too?

Annika swallowed, breathed a few seconds and replied:

- Sure, Mom, I'll see you on Thursday then, bye!
- Oh yeah, bye Annika.
- Bye, Mom.

She squirm throughout the meeting, will they end in time? No, now Jonas talks again, it usually takes such long time for him to say anything. But also the manager and Ulla talks so much that the meeting has to be prolonged. So far, however, she still have time enough to get to mom before seven. Unfortunately the meeting continues even longer so there is no longer any chance for her to come in time. She has a letter that has to be written before she leaves for the day.

The manager said that she had to post it today, he even gave her a postage stamp, which clearly showed that he meant that she would post it herself and not leave it to the internal postal system. Now she had to call mom, that she doesn't look forward to. She waits for several minutes with her hand on the phone before she lifts it.

- Hi Mom, it's me, Annika.
- But hey Annika, you will come tonight as you promised?

- Sure mom, of course. How are you?
- It is as usual.
- How's the knee then?
- Yes, it is painful.
- Mom, I will be a little late.
- But Annika, you said you would surely come, you've promised it.
- Yes, I will, but I'm just a little late.
- Well, what can I say. One can certainly not trust anyone these days.
- But mom, I'm just a little late. About half an hour I believe.
- Well, what can I say. You know I usually drink coffee after dinner and not at night.
- Mom, I don't have time to talk more now. By the way, I bought saffron buns, its good isn't it? Bye!

She writes the letter, it goes a little faster than she had expected. But perhaps it is because she is more or less copying an old letter with similar spirit. Then she closes down the computer and turn off the desk lamp. But when she had sealed the envelope and put the stamp on it, she gets a bit worried that she might not have erased all traces of the old addressee. She waves away the worry and puts on her coat. But she can't let go of the anxiety, it just grows. So to get rid of it, she starts the computer again to check the letter. Then she finally leaves the room and the workplace. She takes a detour to the subway to pass one of the postal services blue mailboxes for local mail. The time is approximately a quarter past seven when she stands outside the front door of her childhood home. Mom opens the door as soon after she rang the bell, as if she stood behind it, waiting. Annika don't get time to say anything before the mother begins to speak. She starts talking before she even had opened the door so much that they could see each other.

- So you are finally here. The coffee is almost cold.
- But I'm just a few minutes late. When did you make the coffee anyway?
- Hurry up and come in so we get us some coffee!

Annika hangs off a bit sloppy, partly because she feels pretty stressed, and partly to show that she is trying to hurry up.

Inside the hall is the living room. In the middle of the far wall is an old plush couch. It is a coffee table in front of the couch. Beside the far corner of the coffee table, it was set with a saucer, a cup, a coffee spoon, a napkin and a dessert plate. It was her place, as it always had been. The mother's place was next to the other end of the couch. She sits there like she always has, but first she serves coffee. Annika put up a saffron bun on each dessert plate. Mom tops her cup with cream and then she handles the cream jar over to Annika. Annika pour in a dash and then glances at her mother. She, in turn, gently lifts her cup and Annika follow her example. They continue to cautiously drink their coffee. It was indeed pretty cool. No one says anything as long as there is coffee and saffron bun left in front of them.

When they do not eat or drink they stare ahead at the two empty chairs on the other side of the coffee table. When the mother has emptied her dessert plate and the cup she breaks the silence:

- It was a tasty saffron bun you bought Annika. It was probably my first one this year I think.
- That's nice to hear, but they're not nearly as good as them as you used to bake mom.
- Oh chatter, I just wish I had some gingerbread also. I think I have not even eaten some gingerbread this year.

Annika stands up and turns against the mother.

- Maybe I should start then.
- Oh, you are in such a hurry?

Annika doesn't answer, instead she goes to the closet where the big box with Christmas decorations usually was kept. The mother is obviously not there so often. There was a pretty good layer of white powder on most things inside. Maybe she should clean up?

She would gladly have done it, but she knew from experience that mom prefers to take the initiatives in her household. The longer she stayed in the closet, struggling to pull the box out of the corner, the more firmly she decided, however, that she would include this in the spring housecleaning, especially after she had a hefty sneeze attack. The mother stands in the doorway watching her, she says nothing, not even the traditional "God bless you" after the attack.

Annika pull out the box on the floor in the small hallway outside the closet and opens the lid. Topmost is the large poinsettia of orange cardboard that usually hang in the middle of the living room windows. It had always done that as long, as she could remember. It was frail now. When she lifts it up, it becomes a small crack in the board. It was not the first of its kind. In addition, this type of Christmas decorations is outdated since many years. Though mom thinks it's so fine, she knows, so she says nothing.

- That I want in the middle of the living room windows. But you must first make sure that the bulb is working Annika.

- I know mom, I do it every year.

It takes a while for her to remember how she used to hang it up, while she stands seemingly just staring at the ceiling for a while.

- What are you doing? You do know that it will hang there. The cord is supposed to hang on the kirsch rod. You should tape it, that you should well know.

- Sure, Mom, you're right, I'll get the tape.

The poinsettia looks really awful. At one time she thought it was beautiful, but it was long ago and now it was pale and broken. The light from the bulb is now making all the tears and other damages very visible. Quiet and irritated, she goes to the drawer where the crib will stand.

- But what will you do now Annika? You know it shall be an elf in the window too. Then I want you to put the geraniums in the pots with elves on. You can't just run ahead and start a little here and a little there. You will set up the pots will you, those that you like so much. They will probably be yours one day.

Annika shivered, both by the idea of inheriting the terrible outer pots and mother's allusion about her death. She goes to the box with Christmas decorations and begins to rummage for the pots. Of course, they are in the bottom. She could have emptied the box on the floor, but she refrains since they usually don't do it that way.

- But the main elf is supposed to be facing inwards Annika, you know it well.

Annika moans softly to herself.

- But, Mom, I'm not ready yet.

- Yes, but hurry up then.

Annika turns the pot without looking at it. She looks at her mother to see when she looked pleased, which she never is, so finally she checks on the pot. Strangely she hears no comment from the mother. Annika says nothing about the small pile of soil that fell on the floor when she lifted the flower out of the ordinary outer pot. Probably the mother didn't notice any of that, and Annika pretended like nothing had happened. Annika is actually a pretty precautious woman who normally would have fetched the broom and shovel immediately and swept up the soil. But now, out of pure vindictiveness, she doesn't.

The work continues with elves in all windows, the crib, an old worn poster with a motive from past times on the almost empty wall in the hall, and a set of electric candles in the kitchen window. All things in the box were now used, and they sit in their places on the couch and admire the work. Doesn't she look a bit pleased now anyway? It's hard to say, but maybe. Then maybe she would dare to take up what's been gnawing her:

- Mom I'm going to go with Elisabeth to Egypt for Christmas. We will swim in the red sea and see the pyramids. Funny huh!

- But, my dear. Do I have to be alone this Christmas Eve?

- But mom, I can come after Christmas, aren't you glad that I get to see a bit of the world?

- Yes, but what about me? It's not fun to sit here all alone all day.

- But Peter then? Can't he come then, he is never here at Christmas.

- So you try to put everything on your brother now.

- What to put everything on my brother? He's never here. He is never here to help you or visit you at all, even though he lives closer to you than I do. He could just as well as I put up all the Christmas things. He knows just as well where they shall be placed.

- Oh no, it must be ready today.

- Why is it so important then?

- But Annika, Peter will come on Sunday.



## Mom's new boyfriend

I stepped into the kitchen without even taking off my shoes, much less my jacket. Cool, but really with some shame, I threw up the gambling coupon on the table.

- Hey, Mom, I can buy pizza tonight?

- Hey, Göran, you have been gone a long time!

- But, Mom, I told you I was going to the gambling boutique to watch football.

Mom did not say anything more about that, instead, she pointed to the bathroom door. Out came a man I had never met. Mom introduced us to each other. When she told the man's name she placed one hand on his hip and smiled lovingly. The way she used to do to me when I was little and had drawn a sketch that I gave to her.

- This is Östen, he who I have told you so much about.

I had no recollection that she had ever mentioned him, but I tried to sound as if it was true.

When we had introduced ourselves, we stood silent for a moment as if we were thinking of a nice comment or so. I, at least, thought on it, but it was he who began to speak:

- So, Göran, I see that you've played, how did it go?

He picked up my coupon and looked at it a long time. You've been lucky, I see.

I looked a little surprised at him, either he knew nothing about football or he said that just to be nice.

- This is mighty lucky, this, he continued, waving the ticket in front of mom.

I said nothing, but I smiled at her. A coupon with a thousand rows that do not give more five hundred, is not particularly successful. It's almost rather unlucky.

Östen went on talking fearlessly, he said something about each of the teams. The more he said, the clearer it got that he did not know much about football, since what he said was stuff like "Arsenal that sounds English I must say." He went on with horse racing and lotto to really show how little he knew, though he did probably not notice it himself. I answered his questions, but I tried all the time to imply that I was in a hurry. The proposal to invite mom at the restaurant seemed no longer relevant, and I never brought it up again.

- Where is your brother? Mother asked.

- He's in his room surfing, I guess.

Östen stood up and said that he must leave. He looked pleadingly at mom. Mom looked even more pleadingly at him. She went to him and put her arms around his stomach.

- Why do not you come back later?

- Gladly, I will as soon as I can.

Then he kissed her on the cheek, greeted me and left the kitchen.

- Well, what do you think of him?

I hesitated to answer. Actually, I knew nothing about him. Besides, that it seemed as he wanted to ingratiate himself.

- Do not believe him, Mom, he's talking rubbish!

- Oh, so you say, he can be kind even though he is talkative.

- Believe me Mom, he is a bull shit talker that we are going to get stuck with, before we are free again.

- But it's a fine man you may believe. He believes in god, and he has certainly made me see that there is something else out there. Then he drinks nothing either. You should learn from him, instead of complaining.

- Yes, you do not want to believe what I say, but you'll see! And you will regret when it is too late!

- Yes Göran, you are like your father, never see anything good in people and ask for impossibilities.

- Well, I've seen enough. Of course I want you to meet someone mother, but he doesn't feel good.

- Well, Göran, you should be careful with your emotions.

- Oh yes, Mom, but you probably like having a bottle of wine on the table.

- Yes, a bottle of wine does not hurt but look at all the misery that alcohol caused. I want to get something else out of life, reach higher.

- And he will take you there you think?

Mom nodded without saying anything.

- Well, let him take you there then! I snapped her off and walked out of the kitchen.

Later that evening, I sat and watched TV together with mom and my brother. We had a good time as usual, with drinks and peanuts. After a few hours the doorbell rings. Mom shines up and almost rushes towards the door. Before she opens she stands for a moment in front of the mirror to check her appearance. She picks a few hairs from her blouse and opens the door. I look at my brother and he looks at me in surprise. There you go, we had never seen mother act like that before. I had expected that there would be a very drunk man. Just like Dad used to be when he came home on Saturday nights. But it was not the case. Östen was obviously completely sober. To show our hospitality, I went into the kitchen to fetch another glass. I chose the finest glass we have, the one that has a sticker that says "Orrefors". When Östen had hung off, he greeted me and my brother and sat next to mom on the couch, I asks him what kind of drink he wants. Would it be rum and Coke, gin and tonic or vodka with Coke. I felt actually a bit proud that we had so much to offer, far more than we usually have at home. Normally we had to do with only one kind of booze and only Coke. But my brother had got hold of a whole five litres container with moonshine at good price and I had bought both tonic and cola and even a lemon. He looks at our drinks with an air of disgust.

- No, I don't utilize these drinks of the devil.

- But Jesus drank wine too, then I guess you can have a drink too.

- Maybe so, but booze has caused it so much pain in our society, that I have chosen to abstain.

I see how my brother reaches for his glass, but at those words he stops himself and instead takes a few peanuts. However, I stretches, in pure protest, after my glass while I say:

- Praise God for the booze, cheers brother and mother.

I see that our mother is ashamed. She has not touched her glass since Östen came into the room. It looked like she did not even want to pretend that it was hers. I was a little ashamed of what I said. Maybe to penitence myself I asks Östen if it he would like to have some Coke.

Östen nods.

- You are so kind! If only I could be so kind as you. I thank both you and the Lord for the gifts he gives me.

Östen keeps the glass with cola in his hand, closes his eyes and says something very slowly and very low. I think I discern:

"And lead us not into temptation, but relieve us from evil, for the kingdom is yours and the power and the glory forever and ever, amen."

Then he drinks.

Mom barely touched her glass more that night. My brother takes some careful sips every now and then. But I take a drink of each kind in a fairly brisk pace. Östen says nothing but I see a grievance in his eyes every time I raise the glass.

On the TV it is bingo. I had bought us a coupon each. Mom's coupon was the best. But she did not seem to care about it. When I looked at her coupon, it turned out that she even missed several numbers. Mom seemed to mostly watch Östen and he mostly closed his eyes. Mom asked him which of the hosts he thought was best, the present one or the previous one called the Locomotive. Östen looked like he did not understand what she was talking about. He looked at mother for a short while, then he closed his eyes again.

I actually think he even shook his head. Mom knew enough that he did not want to talk about Bingo so she asked instead something about "Fort Boyard." Again he looked briefly at her just before he closed his eyes again. Then mom asked if he might want some nuts. My brother lifts the bowl and hands it to him.

- No thanks. I try to keep to the beneficial fruits from God's Pantry.

Mom looks a little sad. I think she was wondering if we might have some beneficial fruits from God's Pantry. It does not seem like she thought we had any. Instead she asks him if it was cold outside.

- Yes a bit. But I am dressed to cope with it, so I can't complain.

I asked him what he was working with.

- I live for the Lord and prepare the earth for the return of Jesus.

When I heard it, I obviously wanted to come up with some follow-up questions about what he meant by that.

But my mother hushed me with the explanation that I wouldn't understand anyway, so why ask. I wanted to tell him that we did not believe in God, but it felt cruel to attack something that was obviously very important to him. Finally, however, I said it:

- Well, here we are not believers, but it is up to each and every one to believe what they want.

- I see that and you have my respect for your choice. But I really wish I could help you out of the devil's claws and save you from eternal purgatory.

He looks at mom and smiles. She smiles back. I look at my brother. He looks suffering. I raise my glass in order to encourage him to drink more, but his arm remains still.

Mom says something completely incomprehensible, I think it was something like:

- Thanks Östen, we can't have it like this. Göran has always been a difficult child. You would then see all of his shenanigans with the food. I hope you do not become scared about the way we have it. You stays overnight, I hope?

- But is that alright?

Mom looks uncertainly at him. It is obvious that she does not know what to answer. It has never happened that men, whom she offered to sleep over, not immediately have accepted. Mom still looks pretty good, I must say, even though I am her son. I have seen how other men have glanced at her on the train or on the bus.

Since Mom doesn't say anything, Östen talks again. He nods seriously as he says that it would be a great honour for him. Maybe he could sleep on the couch here.

Mom looking disappointed, but she nods.

Östen looks at me and says:

- I am the good shepherd, I can help you along the way, you and your brother.

Mom nods in approval.

Östen continues, with the movement, trembling in his voice:

- The Evil One flee, yes, he flees and cares not for his sheep. I am the good shepherd, and I know my sheep.

Then he lowers his voice, looks away, as if he carry a deep sorrow for mankind's evilness and with a determined voice and sidelong glances:

- I have also evil sheep that are not of this sheepfold; them I shall take to it, and they shall hear my voice.

Then he said with a stronger and even more determined voice:

- And there shall be one sheepfold, and one shepherd.

- And one shepherd! Echoed mother, who actually seemed to watch the TV more than Östen.

We all sat in silence now. At least I did not dare to say anything. Since it seemed like for whatever I said he seemed to respond with some sort of sermon. Finally he stood up, looked at mom and asked if he might read a few words in the Bible. Mom nodded and he went away to the hall. He came back after a while with a big black book that looked old. He sat down again, flipped a moment back and forth in the book and began to read. I do not remember what he was reading and I did not listen either. Instead, I increased the sound on the TV. Mom looked hard at me. It seemed like she wanted to say to me that I would lower the sound without having to use words. My brother said nothing, he was petrified. I did not touch the remote, I stared fixedly on the TV. Mom got up and walked over to the TV and turned it off.

- But mom, I wanted to see this. We use to watch this program.

- Hey, we can hardly watch TV when we have guests. To top it all, we should not watch TV, when we hear the words from God.

I stands up to turn on the TV again, but then she pulls out the plug from the wall socket. So instead I takes my glass, pours in a hefty dash of gin and then I fills it to the brim with tonic. The glass is so full that I have to take a sip to bring down a slice of lemon. The tonic is warm and the ice is out, so I go into the kitchen for more. Once in the kitchen, I sit down at the kitchen table, sad about the situation.

From the living room I hear Östen's voice:

- Your son is probably a good worker, but he must be conquered from the devil's powerful influence and recovered to the right path.

I remain in the kitchen until the drink is emptied. Then I go out on the balcony. Östen and mom comes into the kitchen. Mom starts making coffee. Östen helps her.

It looks as if he knows our kitchen by heart. He picks up coffee filters, without any instructions from my mother about where they are located. Then he goes straight to the cupboard where we have coffee cups. Although we do not have them in the cupboard people tend to have cups in. Finally he picks up the tray located above the refrigerator. He puts the cups on the tray and carries it to the living room. Then I goes into the kitchen and asks Mom if it is so that he has been here before. Mom looks down, but she says nothing.

- But answer mother before he comes back. He will shortly, answer then!

She did not respond. Instead, she takes the coffee pot from the machine, even though there still are sputters of water flowing into the filter, and carries it out to the living room.

- Well, she finally took it up while she poured the coffee, we're going to church in the morning and I would like you to come with us. That you can do?

My brother said nothing. I thought frantically about what I would say, I dared not just say no. Instead, I tried to find any reason why I could not go there.

Since I'm not finding any answer, I goes to the toilet. I stayed a while longer than what I need to, for what I went there to do. When I come back, the table was cleaned except for my glass. Mom and Östen sit in the sofa holding hands. But my brother is not in place. I take my glass and goes into the kitchen to refill. There, next to the sink, I find my brother. He is currently in the process of emptying the container with alcohol in the sink. I rush forward to stop him, but he does not let go of it. I pull it my way and he pulls it the other. Which makes results in that it splashes booze on our clothes and onto the floor.

- What the hell is wrong with you? You're crazy!

- But he told me to pour out the booze.

- But you decide yourself. It's your booze.

- No, alcohol will only lead to destruction. See on dad. See how it went for him. I do not want to be like him.

- But you do not become an alcoholic just because we take a few drinks on a Saturday night.

- Well it's the beginning.

- Stop it, there are lots of people who have drinks on a Saturday night, but are fully normal anyway. By the way, it is normal to drink alcohol and abnormal not to do it.

- But it's a shame.

- What has gotten into you? Do you believe that shit he's talking about?

- It's not crap. He has shown me the right path.

- So you believe his bullshit?

- It's not bullshit and I've certainly heard him preach God's word. You would do it also, then you would probably understand.

- What, have you met him before?

- Yes, of course. He is pastor of the Church of Light.

- In what, you say?

- The Church of Light.

- Yes, but what. Have you been there or what?

- Yes, I have. Is there something wrong with that?

- Yes, it is. And why haven't you said it to me?

- But you would just think I am stupid.

- No I would not. We need to fucking stay together. You usually don't hide thing from me, or do you?

- But you seem really upset now.

- No, I am not.

- Yes you are, you are almost screaming.

- Well I maybe am pissed off then. But you've fooled me.

- I have not, I can do whatever I want.

For the first time in years I felt like I wanted to beat him. I tied my fist, but I don't raise it.

Not until he resumes the pouring. Then it is as if something exploded inside me and my fist moves against his stomach.

The door flies up and the others rushes into the kitchen. My brother is folded and holds around his belly. Mom walks up to him to comfort, just like she used to do when I beat him when we were kids. Östen stands between me and my brother. He stands with his face towards me. He looks sternly at me. As if he was my father. I wanted to ask him to go to hell, but I don't find the words. After we have been standing in the kitchen for a while my mother comes up to me and says that I'm drunk and should go to bed.

- Why don't you ask your brother for forgiveness, said Östen.

I say nothing. Instead, I start walking towards my room.

## The TV button

We sat and drank coffee, my son and I, when he, like many times in the past, pointed out my I his eyes stupid habit that I turned off the TV on the large button on the television set instead of using the remote control. He held the cup while he pointed at television set, and said:

- But Dad, why shut it off on the TV-se, use the remote control instead.

He did not wait for my answer and continued:

- TVs are not made to be shut off with the button, they can break then. By the way, there is a risk that they loses their memory. It happened to a TV I had that I did not use.

- But they can catch fire and it consumes energy.

- No, Daddy, they start to burn and in standby mode they consumes so little power that it does not cost you more than about a crown for a full year. You're old now; would not it be nice not having to walk up to the TV every time you want to watch it?

I said nothing and waited to turn off on the button until he had gone home. Although I enjoyed his visit, I felt some discouragement for the things he said. What if the TV would really break, what would I do then? The thought didn't leave me. Not even at night when I was resting my head on the pillow. For safety's sake, I went up and looked at the TV set; yes it was turned off as usual. But what if it was about to be destroyed. Carefully, so as not to wear it down more than necessary, I pressed the button. The TV flickered. Then I checked that the remote was in its usual place before I went to bed again. The thoughts continued to grind in my head. Think about it, what if the TV, despite my son's assertions, caught fire in the middle of the night. Would I wake up in time before the apartment was in flames? Again, I went up, now to make sure that there were nothing combustible in the TV's immediate vicinity. Oh yes, the TV stood nearby the curtain. With some hefty flames it would soon also be in flames. Gently I rolled the television set a bit further away from the window, though not so far away that it came close to the sofa, with the certainly very flammable cushions. Again I went to bed, somewhat calmer. But not calm enough, the thought that the TV could start a fire didn't leave me. I realized that maybe there was another smoke alarm in the cabinet above the fridge. The one I got from the landlord. Since all my smoke alarm was working properly, I had not bothered to ask my son to mount it. But now it might come in handy. If it was mounted very near the TV maybe it would alert me in time before the whole living room was in flames. So I went up again, this time to go into the kitchen. Sure enough, I found a new smoke alarm there in the cupboard above the fridge. It was not even unpacked and it was with quite a lot of effort I finally got it out of the hard plastic package. I detached it from the mounting bracket with its bracket intact and there was even a battery. It was wrapped in cellophane, which should have made it a lot easier to unpack it, compared with the hard plastic package that I just cut up, but with my weak eyesight and the dim light in the kitchen without the assistance of the sun, it became a battle involving both scissors and a pen knife. Ultimately, however, I could put the battery in place. I hurried out into the living room, placed the smoke alarm on the TV and pressed the red button meant for testing of the battery condition. Nothing happened. The smoke alarm did not give any signal indication that it was in working properly. I tried again, this time with a powerful press. It made no difference. My worries were larger now and like a lump in my stomach. What if it does not work and the TV starts to burn. Those smoke alarms' certainly are radioactive too. A fire that spreads radioactive stuff in the property and everything is my fault. But why should the television set start to burn right now? And by the way, maybe the smoke alarm works anyway. I tried to read the text in the enclosed operating manual, but the letters were so small that it was not even possible to determine whether the text was in Swedish or any other language. How about the TV then? Shouldn't such an important issue as whether it should be turned off with the remote control or with the button be described in its 'manual? That must be the case, I thought. One important thing they certainly should have devoted a whole chapter to, given how thick manuals usually are. Luckily I had saved the manuals for all the TV sets I have ever owned. For safety's sake, I sat in the TV chair so that it was under surveillance in case something happened, such as a fledgling fire. In the operating instructions there were indeed a piece about whether it should be turned off with the button or with the remote control. But for me this was no further guidance, since it said that it could be switched off with the remote control and it was

recommended as being the main alternative. Though, in a subparagraph, there was a warning that the TV should always be turned off with the button if there were a risk for fire. And if there was thunder in the air, it was obviously also even important to remove the plug from the wall socket. Do you have to do it too, I thought, and became even more worried. Here I thought I was safe just because I turned off the TV with the button. And the risk of fire, that's why I always turns it off with the button. What do they really mean with "risk for fire"? I was even more perplexed, worried and tired. It was five o'clock in the morning, soon it would maybe be okay to call my son to ask him about it. When does he use to get up? I realized that I never had asked him about it, in the moment, I did not even remember what it was he was working with. Had we been talking about it? Maybe, but that was long ago, he might have changed job since then? I left the TV unattended for a while to go to the phone. After a great many signals he replied, he seemed tired and perhaps annoyed

- Ove.

- Hey, it's me.

- But what the hell dad, its only half past five, has something happened?

- Yes the TV has been on all night.

- What, have you been watching TV all night?

- No, it has only been on, but it has not caught fire yet.

- What the hell have you had the TV on all night? Probably on a high volume as well, as usually, so you cannot do, you wake the neighbors. He said it so loud that he probably woke his neighbors.

- But, I said, there has not been any sound on it and no pictures either, for that matter.

- Why have you had it on then? If you did not to see or hear anything?

- Well it was not entirely on, just the button.

- But for the hell dad, if it creates such an anxiety for you if your TV is not turned off at night, then turn it off with that damn button then, it's not that important!

## Lena and love

She was in the dance joint for maybe the third time, as always with Eva and only after they had dined together. This time they had eaten at her home in Solna. The dinner was probably the best part of the evening, Lena thought as she stood at the bar with a beer in front of her and Eva opposite. So far nothing funny or exciting had happened, most of all it was messy and loads of drunk guys who made clumsy attempts to pick them up, with lines like "Hey what's your name" followed by "Do you want beer" or something similar. Moreover, they usually aimed their questions towards Eva, as if she were not there. At dinner, however, they had been talking intensely without even any background music. During the entree, Eva had told about a guy she was dating, and Lena had occasionally tabbed in with her experiences. During the main course, which consisted of fresh pasta topped by a sauce on grilled chicken, cream and cheese, Eva had questioned her more closely about her latest experience of that kind. Not in an annoying way like mom use to have, but encouraging and inquisitive. Lena had told about the guy at work who uses to come into her room without any real reason other than to talk. He seemed so happy all the time, but only when they were alone together. Well he was probably interested Eva thought, but when Eva asked if she was interested in him? She hesitated, should she admit that weight was pretty important to her. In particular, as she herself had been quite fat not long ago. She did not have to think so much more about the answer, since Eva asked how he looked, was he good-looking? Lena had replied by describing him, in particular his roundness. And they had laughed and joked about having fat guys on the belly.

At about eleven, some pretty fat guys, with eyes narrow as a pencils, pushed their way in between them. One of them, perhaps named Roger, turned to Lena. What he said then she could not understand, even though he tried several times, with his mouth next to her ear. She turned her head so that their eyes met.

- You seem very tired, shouldn't you go home to bed?

It seemed like he maybe had perceived the comment, since he turned his back to the bar and aimed towards the toilet. Lena's beer was nearly empty. The little that was left tasted lukewarm since she unknowingly warmed it with her hands. Or maybe it was to watch over it so that no one would get the idea to add some mysterious drug in it, which she had heard that some guys did. She needed more, turned to the bar and tried to catch the attention of one of the bartenders. There, on the other side of the bar, among all the boys and girls, was a tall man. He had not been there a moment ago, she thought. He is clearly longer than me and his eyes seemed to be pleased. It did not look like he wobbled or was falling asleep and he smiled, directed straight into the air, he seemed so happy. Lena answered the smile, though it probably was not directed to her. He seemed to sense her face, but he made no business out of it. Instead, he turned against the bartender who had just given him a moment's attention. Lena saw how the bartender pointed toward him with the whole hand, and he responded with a finger in the air, which probably meant that a big and strong, or with other words, a regular beer. Luckily, she thought, he had not ordered two, thus he didn't have a girl there in the joint. He stood at the bar and probably he had noticed her, since his gaze alternated between her and the bartender. She however altered between him and Eve. Eve had soon understood what her eyes were doing and in her ear she commented the tall bald headed man opposite them. Lena smiled at her question about if she was interested. They continued for a while to exchanged glances without any effort from him to leave his place on the other side of the bar, to come over to her. She said in Eve's ear that she would go over there to talk a little. Eva encouraged her and wished her luck. She noted how he twisted his body from the bar to make room for her next to him. She took the space, which meant that they ended up very close to each other. Her breasts, which were in level with his elbows, touched his shirt. She felt some of his warmth flow through his shirt and her jacket and blouse. "Hello," she said and smiled at him. He answered the short greeting, and asked about her name. But pretty soon the conversation got more enjoyable. He asked about her tattoo and said it was fine. Then he asked if she had other tattoos, if it had been painful to make them and everything else that had to do with tattoos. She responded cheerfully and hinted that there might tattoos on more private spots that she might show him sometime. He began to guess where they could be and how they could look. They laughed. He moved a bit closer to her



and she did not back off. He emptied his beer and looked at her glass. Would she like another one? Lena replied with smile and nodded. A few gulps of fresh cold beer and some cozy chat later Lena looked into his eyes, they were grey. His lips were quite narrow and around them grew a short beard with a mixture of gray and dark hairs. His lips were like magnets to hers. She moistened them and leaned upwards, while he leaned down and they met with lips and arms somewhere along the way. They continued to kiss for a while until she backed off just a little, to look him in the eyes and smile. He released her arms without releasing her with his eyes, groped his hand across the counter to find the beer. He did not see it, but she saw how he was taking someone else's glasses while his own risked to roll over them. So she stopped him with her hand. He turned to there and realized what was happening about at the same time with the man who was the owner of the beer in the glass he was holding. No problems when in the company of good friends, on a Friday night, such things happened. The man toasted smiled. They answered the toast and took a sip. Then her newfound acquaintance suggested that they should sit at one of the many vacant tables instead of standing there in the crowd. A good suggestion, and so they did. In the sofa more kisses, caresses and cute words, sometimes from him, and sometimes from her. He went to the bathroom and a little later, it was her turn. Further later, she suggested that they went home, maybe to her. He nodded, stood up and took her hand. They brought the jackets in the wardrobe, as far as possible with their hands intertwined, stopped a taxi, sat in the back seat and kissed until the taxi stopped outside her door in Solna.

Almost wordlessly, Lena led him into the apartment, via the hanger in the hall, to the bedroom. He politely commented her home and its furnishings. They took off their clothes with their eyes at each other and in the same pace, she jacket, he shirt, she pants, he the same. Soon he was naked and helped her with her panties. Thereafter they went to bed. A lovemaking that Lena described for Eva as wonderful. He stayed until the next day, they made coffee and succumbed the breakfast table together, as if they have known each other a long time, although she did not even remember his name. Lena thought about that thing with the name, but it was totally gone. Had he even said it? Is it worth asking again, would she like to see him again? Yes indeed, she thought. The night and morning had only confirmed her god choice, thus she had to ask about his name, so with one hand on his and with an embarrassed laugh:

- You what was your name really, did you say that?

He, with laughter:

- don't know, my name is Anders and your name ohh?

- Lena. She laughed too. It feels like I've been eating poop, do you want a toothbrush?

- Same here, a toothbrush would be great!

After oral hygiene and showers they went to bed again, with a newfound sense of freshness. More lovemaking and kisses, then a walk in Solna as far as to the central parts of Sundbyberg. Where Anders invited her to lunch. Now, perhaps, he says thank you and goodbye, she thought. Did she want it to happen: no. She would like to continue and walk the rest of the day, then maybe some wine and dinner. Still no signs of break-up from his side, instead more cozy questions about her life, what she did and what she thought, as if he cared about her. After coffee, he asked if they would continue, as if it was given. She nodded with a smile. Her legs got more and more tired, but still they went on. Just as she thought about saying that perhaps they had walked enough, regardless of how nice it was, Anders suggested that they had a beer somewhere, as if she had found a soul mate, someone who felt the in same rate and in the same direction as she. They went into the first tavern they met and stopped at the bar. The bartender looked at him, he looked at Lena.

- Wine, beer?

- Beer.

- Two beers, he said turning against the bartender.

After several beers, food and kisses, it was finally time to pay and move on. She dug for her wallet and he did the same. She wanted to pay and the same thing did he. The negotiation ended like such negotiations often do in Sweden, they shared the bill. Then another restaurant with more beer, and at nine o'clock home to her. The next day, Sunday, sunny and warm on her porch. They are chatting and making lunch together. In the evening, he set off to meet a friend. He does not seem

to be in a hurry and shows no tendency to escape. It feels good relaxed and warm, she's happy.

The switches phone numbers and separates at her doorstep with long kisses.

As soon as he is gone, she calls Eva to happily report about the events. She understands and seems happy for Lena's sake. Would they meet again?

- On Monday, he invited me home.

- Great, congratulations, good luck!

They continued talking and after a while Lena realized that she had actually never asked a thing about what happened to Eve, where had she disappeared, if she had disappeared at all? but nothing exciting has happened to her other than that she had fallen asleep on the train home, no guy, nothing.

Monday night: with the address, the door code, a silk dress and stay ups on the subway towards the city, towards Kungsholmen. The apartment was fine in itself, but the furniture seemed to be more or less randomly placed thing that he had got his hands on one way or another. No overall plan, no color matching, but in any case not over furnished and quite clean. The food however was delicious. A beef stew with rice, no salad and no dessert. Though she didn't mind, she was trying to hold back on food. Some red wine and she became warm, maybe even happy. After dinner some pictures from the past not so much that it became tedious just an album. He had asked and she had said "please", but wasn't it actually a bit strange? She would never show pictures from the past, for someone she just met. What would he think? The images from the past when she was much heavier than now, never, unthinkable. Was he perhaps a little ego-tripped? Though she on saw the pictures that he indeed also had been pretty big and when she pointed it out a little teasingly, he told a story which was about the same as hers. In addition, the images revealed nothing strange in any direction. They were not bragging in any way, but on the other hand they did not show any misery or strange inclinations either. It felt right, he was a definite no weird type, junkie, car maniac, braggart or anything like that she or any of her friends had encountered before. Later another night with gentle caresses, horniness, but with one slight problem: he always got so tired in the evening. She had to get up much earlier than him, but she had no desire to sleep, but what could he do when he is so tired that he almost slurs.

So a few weeks passed. They met frequently, usually at her place, because she needed to take the car to work and preferred to park in Solna compared to in the city. He did not mind even though she got up so early. Sure, he could stay in bed long as he liked, but he went up with her and they made breakfast together. A new habit for her, since in the weeks she used to start her stomach with coffee and a sandwich when she arrived at work. She was sure for at least a week back, and she had even told her colleagues. Lena was in love. But how was it with Anders, what does he feel? Eva thought it was obvious. In any case, he had almost never say no to her suggestions about when to meet next, which generally had been the same evening. So on Friday, after the wine, beer, fine cuts of meat and potato gratin at his place, she asked expectantly:

- You Anders, I think I'm in love with you!

He, lingering as if it was a little awkward:

- Mmm, sweetie!

She a bit worried, but still smiling:

- Mmm What do you mean, don't you feel anything?

- Yes, but perhaps not in that way.

She was about to say something but she couldn't, instead she took her coat and left the apartment.

## Pangs

I was born in the mid 20's as the second child in a peasant family, with a small farm on the plains north of Uppsala. My childhood probably was as they used to be for those in the same situation as me. We were better off than some, but worse than others. My father and mother were quite nice to us compared to parents in general, at that time, so in that respect I was lucky. There is not much to regret from that time, since the choices I was offered were few and insignificant. Elementary school, work, military service, all were choices by others or effects of the circumstances. Earlier in life I maybe had a different opinion about it, I blamed my parents for their lack of ambition to improve yield of the soil. Or their habit to always save as much as possible for worse times, without spending more than what was absolutely necessary on things that could have brightened our childhood a bit. Moreover, I have reproached our stern schoolmaster and the priest that admonished us every Sunday. But they are long since forgiven and their deeds accounted for as effects of their circumstances. What I cannot reconcile myself with is, however, my own choices, in the adolescence. Choices that never were the subject of any reassessments until it was too late. The first really important choice I faced was: Greta or not Greta, she was born the same year as me and she came from the same village, grew up on the farm with the big oak tree. I had talked to Greta about as little as with all the other girls in the class. She timidly and I equally timid, both completely unskilled in the art of love. Later I understood things like what a wistful glance means and once I even experienced the feeling of desire. A desire which, though never completed, gave me a warming secret. The look she gave me, Ellen, never shone in Greta's eyes, at least not to me. Perhaps it could have been different, at least for an evening, if she had ever let the Bible and the Church's exhortation aside, to instead enjoy a few glasses of wine at one of those occasions such luxuries were offered.

However, everything was not really in the hands of my own consideration or choice. The blame should also lie on my mother and father as well as Uncle Kåge. They chose for me, not due to evilness, rather the contrary! However, I'm the only one to blame for just continuing in the direction they pointed out for me.

Now at least sixty years later, with the letter in hand, these thoughts are surging over me. I remember nothing in detail, no images or movies pops-up from when Greta and her father visited us on the farm. I know, among other things, from what Greta used to tell our children about how this happened that our fathers went away together, after they had urged us two to take a trip with the boat. I nodded, apparently without looking either of them, neither Greta and she said she did the same. I dug up some worms for us to have a reason to take a boat trip on the lake, even though it was time for hay harvest. I rowed to the island and she let the hook drag after the boat. We didn't get any fish and not much else either. Although God let the sun shine on us and kept the wind away. In the evening, my father asked if the tour was enjoyable and if I wanted to make another the following Saturday. The choice was easy, thus we took a trip the following week also. This time the sun was even more generous, but with a little warm winds that caressed my naked torso. We even chatted a bit, she wanted to swim, something that we had very little time for, other than perhaps on Sundays or late in the evening after all the work had been completed. Thus an opportunity that one could not miss. And, of course, the chance to see Greta without clothes must have been tempting for who otherwise only saw my brothers when we got the opportunity to go swimming. I probably moored the boat at the same tree as usual and showed Greta to the smooth rock. What happened then I actually have in my own memory, how she pulled the dress over her head and stood there completely nude, watching the ground. I dared not to look at her because of the risk for embarrassing consequences, so I looked down, pulled off my pants and jumped into the water. She came soon after and we swam around, avoiding closer contact than a few meters. The sun dried us on the smooth rock, Greta on her back and I on my stomach. She smiled at me and I felt youthful desire, but not much more than that. Greta and her father came for another visit, we got more time with each other and became friends when we walked hand in hand to the harvest festival. Our community more or less was confirmed when we as a couple went to the mission of the church the next day.

I finished elementary school that summer and into the fall, I must have a proper job my father had

said, for the income from the farm was not big enough to feed another adult. Without me knowing it, he had apparently asked Uncle Kåge if there was room for me at the woodworking factory. And in early September, he took me there just as he had done with my older brother. We went in and I was standing there with my cap in hand in the large factory hall. All arrived and examined me, colleagues, the foreman and after a while even the director came down there to shake my hand. Welcome he said and nodded against the foreman as if I was approved. First I was an errand boy, carried boxes with nails, glue, planks and boards back and forth. Unloaded the wagon with wood from the sawing mill, loaded on finished woodwork, such as doors with frames, on the trucks that came to our loading dock. Ran, and later rode bicycle, home to eat breakfast and dinner. With time I learned all of the machines that were in the factory. When becoming 21 years old, I was married and the father of two boys, I was given responsibility over the planning machines. A pretty important job, which proved that the director was pleased with me. I stayed there the rest of my career and retired a decade ago, with all fingers almost completely intact and not much lung problems either. Furthermore, I was the proud owner of a house that I had built myself with the help of my brothers and my father, as well as second-rate goods from the factory. My brothers also built their own houses and they were all situated on land given to us by our father. From the porch we have a fine view over the lake and there we often sat in the summer evenings, I, my wife, and earlier even the boys. Now when our sons have their own houses since long ago and my wife no longer is alive, I sit there alone with my coffee and the radio. Furthermore, I own a red Saab in good condition, parked in a similarly self-built garage. With that my earthly existence might be considered to be summarized, though not quite. Somewhere during all the breaks at the factory, on the porch, at the dinner table, in bed, during the services, and when watching TV, I spent all that time that was my own. Then when I was younger, I barely knew one could have own time. It's probably a concept that has come pretty recently. But whatever these moments have been called they have always existed. The question that gnawed at me now in this moment was: What have I done with all my own time, the time when everything should be done that makes life worth living for those like me, who had no stimulating work to boast of as an alibi for an uneventful leisure time. Sure, I have made several trips, even some overseas and in the factory, I was, in this context, no worse than any other. And yes, I have both been skiing and skating in the winters and in the summers we went swimming with the kids. Not least, or perhaps most of all, I remembered all the fishing trips with the boys with joy. Besides that there were mostly short evenings with dinner and the news on the radio, in recent years, replaced with them on the TV, and the then bedtime. Weekends and holidays I mostly spent working for father on the farm, until the municipality expropriated it for the construction of a residential area. Except on Sundays, of course, my day for rest and recreation, which always consisted of bathing, shaving, dressing up in the Sunday suit, worship, refreshments in the parish yard walk home with my wife and brothers, rest and Sunday dinner. The latter always the highlight of the week, at least when it was not my elder brother's wife, who was the hostess. Me and my younger brother, however, was blessed with wives who could their job with pots and kitchen utensils but she was a sadness in comparison. For the sake of, in any case, my wife happiness our sons has followed the same path as us. I myself have nurtured some doubts about our mooring along the narrow road. While she always threatened with all the horrors that could occur at university or abroad. I wanted to discuss it, but without the strength to push. If I had dared to point out something about the possible advantages in trying a little more of what life might have to offer, for those who have chances we never got, I suspect how the outcome would have been and the intimidation I would have tasted. But now I am the master of my life, what I say and do. I no longer have to weigh my words. Sure the boys decides for their own now and what do they care about what I say and I probably cannot affect their lives now. But Patrick, my youngest grandson, he becomes twenty years old on Saturday with a whole life ahead of him. He has in confidence told me what he wants, and it's not that I do as his father's wishes and buys him a Sunday suit. However, if I do as he desires, how haven't I then betrayed the other grandsons and granddaughters who all got Sunday clothes on their 20:th birthday. I laid down my invitation to the party on the table in front, together with the note containing a description of the selected clothes, to look out over the lake, now with anguish.

## Memories

The therapist looked long at him and then he slowly said:

- You know our motto is that life is not the present, not the future, but the sum of memories from the past.

He responded almost immediately, as if he was prepared for that the therapist would say so.

- I know, and that's why it feels so heavy.

- Are you unhappy with your life?

- Yes, that's why I'm here.

- What are you unhappy about?

- Everything, my work is boring and I'm very tired of it. I have no family. I have hardly any friends. It feels like I haven't done anything funny. Just worked and now it's getting too late.

- How do you mean, too late?

- Yes, I feel too comfortable to meet someone and it's hard to change jobs or to travel somewhere.

- You said you have no family, but don't you have any siblings?

- I have a sister.

- Parents then?

- They are dead.

- What do you work with?

- I work at Brevéns, the mail order company you know. I pack what the customers have ordered.

- Is it fun?

- Nah.

- How long have you been doing that?

- For a long time, I started after I finished high school.

- Why haven't you changed job then?

The man was silent for a moment as if he was thinking. But actually he was not, since he knew the answer. It felt too uncomfortable to search for a new work. He had planned to do it several times, but each time he had found a reason not to. Finally he said:

- I do not know, now it feels too late. I think it would be too hard to start over with a clean slate and learn something new.

The therapist looked at him. Several minutes passed, finally the man said:

- I think we have it too good now compared to when we were kids, or even more so compared to our parents.

- When were you born?

- Nineteen eighty-five.

- So was I, thus it goes for me too. I agree with you, I think, but what do you really mean?

- We have a much higher standard. Nowadays, all that ordinary household work as washing and cooking takes no time at all. In addition, we work less, which of course means that we have more time. This gives us lot of time to spend on experiencing things, develop and stuff. I can't stand it.

- What do you want then?

- I would like to have had an exciting life with different girls, travel, a little adventure and different jobs.

- In the future, then?

- I don't know, live like now I guess, but at least I can look back on an exciting life. I guess I could fill up with more memories later.

- Should I interpret that as that you really think that life is pretty comfortable at the moment, but you are plagued by that you haven't done anything?

- Just so, right.

- That sounds good, because then you can actually be very helped by the kind of treatment that we can offer.

The man groaned but in a smug way. It seemed that this was where he wanted to come.

The therapist continued:

- But you know that it costs a lot of money and you can't get help from the society if it is not about to erase painful memories.
- Yes, I know, but I have some money tucked away and I do not know anything better to use them on.
- Good, but you may also know that it takes quite some time to create the memories you want. We have to schedule a lot of meetings to discuss this.
- Is there no standard package.
- No, yes, to some extent. We have a library of memories that you can borrow and watch. Most of it is about travel and sex. But you wanted that, so it will fit in well.
- Although I may not want to have exactly the same memories as others, I want it to feel real.
- It will feel just like the memories you have today. Some studies, however, show that the new memories are clearer and brighter, but it's not a disadvantage. Memories that are nearly erased by the ravages of time are not so valuable.
- How much does a memory cost and how long is it?
- A memory costs 1.000 Euro. But we do not measure the memory in time, instead we measure it in how many brain cells it covers. A memory can accommodate a maximum of 100 million brain cells. One can roughly say that it corresponds to a film scene of 100 Mb on a computer. Which may correspond to everything from ten minutes with very precise memories of things such as smells, sounds, images and feelings, to a period of several years, with scattered snapshots and audio memories.
- How does it work then?
- We create your memories in the computer, as if we made a film, then you get a time at the Karolinska hospital's memory burning station where the memories are burned into your brain.
- Burned into me?
- Yes it is called burning, but it has nothing to do with fire. They make a small incision in the skin on the neck, exposing a nerve and connect electrodes to it. Via the electrodes they send information to the brain with weak electrical pulses.
- Is it dangerous?
- Absolutely not, the pulses are as strong as those that your brain constantly sends out in your nerve fibres.
- I have saved 60.000 in the bank to use for this.
- 60.000 Euro you get 60 memories. If you want it to cover your entire life, we have to be careful with what memories we choose.
- When I think about it, I would probably also like to have a little money left, if it's possible.
- It doesn't make things easier, but we must try. Shall we start with the easiest, namely sex.
- Easy, I think it feels a little awkward.
- Yes, I understand, but it's easy in the sense that the memory sequences are quite short and easy to describe.

The therapist reached for a pile of memory cards placed on a bookshelf next to him. He took one of them, read the label and gave it to the man.

- Here, look through these memories until we meet next time and think about which memories that are the most attractive.

- What is it?

- Sex scenes, call it porn if you want.

They booked a time for the next meeting and parted.

The man rushed down the stairs. He wanted to get out of there. Partly because he was a little ashamed that his life was so miserable that he had to go to a memory therapist, but also because he needed something to make him calm down, like a beer or two.

The nearest place to get a beer was in the same house, but he chose to walk a bit until he saw a yellow advertising sign. The advertising sign said "Jamboree queen," it was therefore quite obviously a jamboree bar. A colleague had told him that jamboree bars were hot right now, so he went in. It seemed quite popular because it was very crowded in there, even though the clock was not more than five in the evening.

He forced his way to the bar and stared at the bartender to catch his attention. It did not work that well since several people who came after him, left the bar with their hands full before the bartender was prepared to take his order. When the bartender finally looked questioningly into his eyes, he did not know what to order, even though he had been there so long. The bartender had given him that little moment busy bartenders tend to give, and because he neither said anything nor pointed to one of the taps, the bartender turned his gaze to the man beside him. He ordered a beer. It hurt, he wanted to be seen a little longer than twenty seconds, but what could he do. On a screen in one corner of the room a football game was shown. He tried to see what was written at the top of the left hand corner, but the text was too small. He thought for a moment and realized that one of his colleagues had said he would watch a game in the European League and he asked if anyone wanted to join him at a football bar on Odenplan. Stockholm United would play against a Spanish team. He never watched football otherwise, but maybe it would help blocking the thoughts of what he had just been through. Moreover, it was as if he dared more now that he's finally taken a grip on his life. Thus, he decided to go to Odenplan. But before he left the jamboree bar, he walked closer to the display in the corner and read what the Spanish team was called. To further increase his knowledge, he asked a woman who was standing next to him, which team was Stockholm.

When she finally heard what he said, she looked at him in surprise.

- Stockholm, the have blue tops you know that?

He did not answer, since he did not find any reasonable thing to say. She gave him a few seconds and then she continued:

- You do not see much football do you?

This time it should be easier to come up with something but he did not do it, he just looked at her. She was holding a beer glass in his hand. She stretched out her arm with the glass so that it almost touched him.

- Hold! I need to go to the toilet. Drink if you like.

He did so. The beer was almost lukewarm. It really wasn't that tasty, but she was gone so long time that it got empty. He felt even braver now with some beer in his stomach.

So brave that he went to the bar took up one twenty Euro note and waved it. The bartender saw when he pointed to one of the taps while he held up two fingers. He managed to drink almost a third of the new beer before she came back. They looked at each other. Neither of them said anything. She reached her hand to the full beer glass and he gave it to her. She smiled. They looked at the display. The girls ran back and forth all the time. Sometimes all around him screamed desperate, so he did the same. Other times they shouted happily and then he also shouted happily. Just after she arrived with a new batch of beer, one of the girls in blue tops made a goal. Everybody screamed and howled a lot, he also. The match was over and she went with him a short distance away, where it was quieter.

- What is your name?

- Ibrahim, he replied.

- Linda.

She smiled and left.

The next meeting with the therapist began much like the previous, besides that they did not introduced themselves to each other. The therapist sat in an armchair and Ibrahim sat opposite to him.

- Well, we'll start with sex, have you figured out any memories?

- Yes, I would like to have had a "one night stand" that begin with that I see a football match on a jamboree bar. There I meet a woman. We do not talk much, but when the match is over, she takes my hand and we go home to her.

- It can be difficult because I do not have such a memory in the data base. The easiest would be if you went and watched a football game on a jamboree bar and then spoke to a woman. Then, it is just to top that memory with some sex.

Ibrahim smiled.

- I've already done it, just after I was here the first time.

- Hmm that's good, but how do we find that memory in your brain.

- Well, I do not know.

- Nah right. To find a memory you need to have a marker. The therapist turned to the bookshelf beside him and took one of the blue boxes that lay there. He opened the box and took out a small blue cylinder.

- Here is a marker transmitter. When you want the memory to start, hold it against the back of the head like this.

He demonstrated by putting the cylinder top to the back of his head as he turned his head so that Ibrahim could clearly see how he held it.

- Hold the latch with your thumb, think about what you see, and press the button with your index finger.

He gave Ibrahim the cylinder and pointed on the button and the safety latch.

- When you want us to splice on the sex part it's just that you do the same. Easy huh?

- Is not it dangerous, what happens if I accidentally press by mistake?

- Do not worry it's not worse than talking on the phone and it does not matter if you press by mistake. Just remove the marking. The therapist showed how it was to be done.

- You do not need to consider when you did the marking, since the marker can save it in several months. But if you want to make multiple selections, you must tell it which marker is what. The therapist also showed how this was done.

- Do you understand?

Ibrahim did not want to look stupid so he nodded. He could always listen to the manual later when he had come home.

- Then we have only to choose what sex memory you want to combine with it. Have you looked at the premade memories that you borrowed from me?

- Well, that was pure porn.

- Was there anything you liked?

The man blushed. To hide his embarrassment, he looked down at the floor. I did not help, but perhaps it gave a flattering look. He said quite mumbling:

- I think most of it was pretty good.

- The therapist laughed gently.

- I could imagine that, you would of course like to have all the memories.

Ibrahim laughed too. When they had laughed for a while, the therapist continued:

- You know that every memory will cost thousands of euros, so if you do not have very much money, you'll have to choose some.

- It will be difficult.

- Do you want to have had many partners, or would you have done many things with the same partner?

- Both, of course.

- One might think that people who have had sex with many partners must have experienced a lot. But it doesn't need to be true, because they might just have done the same thing over and over again, with different persons.

- Yes, it doesn't need to be that many, but in all case at least ten girls.

- Would you like it a little mixed, some "one night stands" and a few longer sex relations?

- Yes please. I'd also like to have had some wild girls, which I've done a lot with.

- There are studies showing that if you have made a lot of different things with the same partner, it is really just variations of the same theme. For instance, if you have done urine sex, it does not give so much extra to also have done shit sex.

The therapist waited for the man to start laughing then he laughed too.

- Yeah such extreme stuff I didn't have in mind, but some anal sex and maybe a little spanking would be nice.

- Do you want to spank or do you want to be spanked? No wait do not answer, I will start a query sequence that we have for this.



The therapist ordered with a high and firm voice the computer to bring out the sex question sequence. Then he said to the man:

- Answer these questions then we let the computer do a calculation of how an appropriate mix might look. But first, let me just say again that you should keep in mind that each memory costs quite a lot and twenty "one night stands" does not give much more than ten. We can't really hold that much more a ten complete memory sequences in our sex memory. In particular, those who have an untrained sex memory, which I understand that you have.

The therapist ordered the computer to start the sequence and went out of the room.

He went into the pantry and took a cup of coffee. Inside the treatment room, he heard the man's voice say things like "only women" and to questions that treated sex with children he responded, to the therapist's satisfaction, every time "no".

The therapist had finished his coffee before the voices from within the room was not heard any more.

The computer suggested a mix of six "one night stands" with women in different ages, in the form of memory 6, 19, 22, 34, 48 and 104. After that they together had looked at these proposals, the therapist asked about which one would be best, to combine with the experience at the jamboree bar.

- It does not matter to me, but perhaps the one with anal penetration.

The therapist nodded and said some commands to the computer.

In addition to these six one night stands, the computer suggested two longer relations. One of them had lasted less than a year and it was mostly of a sexual nature, with a woman the same age as him. She would be called Eva and she would be tall and cute with big breasts, with a very big interested in sex. The relationship would include ten memories. Seven of them would be about regular events when they, for example, had dinner, went to a movie and then had sex, or made an excursion and loved in the countryside. The other three would be two visits to group sex clubs and a sexual intercourse at his home along with Eve and another young woman who would be named Elin.

The second long relationship, he would have had with Åsa, a four year younger woman. They would have lived together for two years in her apartment on Östermalm in Stockholm. The computer suggested that he should have eight mixed everyday memories from this time. In addition to this four memories from a holiday in the sun, a Christmas Eve in a manor house in Dalarna and a New Year cruise to Riga. He thought it sounded pretty good, and then when the computer showed them, Ibrahim felt completely satisfied.

- Well then, we are at 30,000 Euros. You had 60,000 Euros so we will have 30,000 left for other things.

- Yes, though I'd love to have five thousand Euros left for the future.

- Of course, then we are done for today, you can take these memories home so that you can consider if it is anything that you want to change.

Ibrahim looked unsurely at the therapist while he nodded.

It was Thursday evening. Stockholm United would play against Arsenal. He went to the Jamboree bar. He got there a half hour before the game would start. There were many people there already then, more than the last time. He bought a beer and then pushed his way in among those who stood and watched on the big screen. He looked around properly, but he could not see Linda anywhere. Around the middle of his second beer, someone touched his shoulder. He turned around, it was Linda. She smiled and raised her glass, though she said nothing.

In the pause she stared him in the eyes as she asked:

- Where do you live?

He looked away then he replied:

- Stentorgsgatan.

- Is it far away?

- No, not really, only five stations. Now he looked at her again. She continued to look at him, while she asked:

- Do you have a double bed?

- No, not really.

- Do you have clean sheets?
- Yes quite, I changed on Saturday.
- Do you have condoms?
- No.

- It does not matter because I have. Do you like anal sex?

He was getting a little tired of all these weird questions. Why couldn't she ask common questions, like which hockey team he liked for example. So he asked:

- Which hockey team do you like most?

She looked as she got a little pissed.

- I have to go to the bathroom.

She vanished. Ibrahim stuck his hand into his pocket and felt the metal cylinder lying there. He grabbed it, took it out of his pocket and brought his hand up to the back of the head, released the latch and pressed the button. Then he put the marker back in his pocket and waited for the woman. He waited a long time, but she did not come. The second half started and ended. In the end, he went home. He was quite pleased with himself. He had actually succeeded. It was really quite good that she did not come back, so he did not have to answer any more weird questions.

The next visit to the therapist began with a discussion about the memories they had selected the last time. They agreed on some minor corrections. When Ibrahim appeared to be pleased, the therapist continued with the next topic:

- Should we pick out some trips for you, it's also quite simple, we have a lot of travel memories in our memory bank.

Ibrahim nodded and the therapist continued:

- What trips have you done in your life?

He looked down at the floor in embarrassment.

- I have hardly made any travelling. I've only been in Åre twice with my work and once in Spain with my parents. It was when I was little.

- Okay, then you want of course to add up to a normal level, and then you may be wondering what a normal level is.

Ibrahim was quiet and likewise the therapist. In the end, however, he replied:

- Normal level, I would like to have been in a lot of countries.

- I understand. One might think that if you have travelled to many places, you must have experienced a lot. But that's not really true, because it may very well just be that you've experienced the same thing on different places. To get the most out of your traveling experiences of you would probably instead have visited so disparate climatic zones as possible, used different means of transportation with various travel companions. Furthermore, you would have gone on long and short trips and you would of course have varied what you did during the trips. Thus, you should perhaps have been in a jungle and maybe a desert. Snow trips you've already been doing, so we can skip that. Then you should go on a luxury trip and perhaps you've been hitchhiking on another. Then we have the trips along with Åsa. Sound good?

- Yes, yes, won't that be very many memories?

- You mean expensive?

- Yes that's right, expensive.

- Yes, of course it will, but you're in luck because right now we have a special price on a package that is sponsored by a tour operator.

- Sponsored, how do you mean?

- Well if you choose to remember that you bought all the travels from "Action Travel" they will give you twenty extra travel memories for free, and the best part is that you will be very happy with all the trips. There are no bad memories in these packages.

- Travel kit. Does not that mean that everyone has exactly the same memories?

- Not at all, we can make an unique mix of the memories in our memory bank. It's just the scale that is standardized.

- How?

- Well, the package includes a trip by boat to any country in Europe, two weekends in major European cities, a flight to any country in South Asia or in Africa with a two-week train journey

and accommodation at various luxury hotels and visits to poor areas, then a two-week adventure trip such as riding in Morocco, a traditional trip to a holiday resort and a weekend to any major city in Asia. With these trips and the ones you already have, you would have seen both the snow-capped mountains, deserts and tropical areas. Furthermore, you would have experienced both simplicity and luxury and you would have a little adventure to brag about. Doesn't that sound good?

- But what would it cost then?

- Yes, it would actually not cost more than twelve thousand Euros.

- Okay then, how would these memories look then?

The therapist nodded and gave a number of orders to the computer. Then he left the room and went into the bathroom to pass the time with what he liked the most besides eating. When he was ready Ibrahim was also ready. He looked so pleased that the therapist realized that he had come up with a pleasing package.

- You look pleased!

- Yes, I think it was good. Do you want to see?

- Yes I would love to, but now we don't have time for that today, so we have to take it at the next meeting.

The therapist stared at Ibrahim and waited for him to say something. The only sound heard from him was the one generated when he ate at one of the pastries the therapist had served. The therapist noted to himself that he would never offer something to eat again, because it took so much time away from the conversation, which in turn meant that he had to spend more times with every idiot who got there. He used to think of them as idiots, though he had never told anyone. Actually, he did not mean that all who came to him were idiots, but it felt easier to squeeze a lot of money out of them if he thought of them as idiots.

Finally, Ibrahim said something:

- I would have had some other work too, something exciting.

- What do you think would be exciting then?

- I do not know, maybe bartender, diving instructor or fire fighter.

- Is that what you have dreamed of becoming?

- No, yes, maybe. Though I think I have a good job.

- Yes, although you probably always dream about other than what you have.

- Do you have some awesome work in stock?

- Yes a little, but it's mostly American memories. But I think I have one as a snowboarding instructor in Åre. It contains quite a lot of memories though it only cost € 5000 in total. It is sponsored by the ski resort Åre. Would you like to watch them?

The man looked at the memories and said yes immediately.

- What would you want more?

- I would like to have been through some different things, maybe some wild parties and perhaps some drugs. Then I would ... he went silent.

- What, then?

- I would like to have committed a crime, perhaps a burglary. Is it possible?

- Sure, it's okay. The police actually want us to add a little break in or something that you later feel very badly about. If you take the police burglary package, you can create entire three very own unique break ins for just 100 Euro, but then you have to accept take that you will be ashamed for it the rest of your life and that you have decided that you will never commit any crime again.

- That's no problem because I have already decided that anyway. And actually I guess I've never have committed any real crimes except in the traffic.

- I understand, agreed then. Next time we meet, you and the computer will create a small crime series for you. The thing with drugs and wild parties' maybe we can take then as well.

The therapist said loud in his usual computer command voice to the computer that the next time they met, it would produce memories of wild parties, drugs and crimes.

He turned to Ibrahim again:

- Have you had any depression at some point?

The man thought for a moment before he replied:

- No, not that I can think of. Of course I have been sad sometimes, mainly because I have had no girl. But I can't say I been really depressed.

- Did you know that it is healthy to have been depressed and all the girls of today expect that their partners at some point have been depressed?

- Do they?

- Yes indeed and I actually have a really nice depression sequence involving several memories. You can compose as you like. It will cost you only 1.000 Euro because it is sponsored by a pharmaceutical company. All they ask is that you remember that it was their antidepressant medication that took you out of the depression.

- I take it as well, but can't I get the opposite too. I mean memories of moments of happiness. The therapist twisted a little.

- Now no events aren't really that black and white when they happens. There is much research that shows that there are few times if any, when we are undivided happy while a sequence of events is going on. However, most of us have memories that we've been through it. It's all about how our memory works. But I can assure you that all of our memories, besides the depression and the crimes of course, will give you a very good taste in your mouth.

Ibrahim nodded and asked:

- How much I'm up to now then.

The therapist asked in a loud voice the computer how much they were up to. The computer responded that the bill was now up to between 49 and 52 thousand Euros, depending on which party and dope memories he chose.

- Then maybe I can afford something more, though I do not really know what, what do you think?

- Are there any new features that you want to have?

- How do you mean?

- Well, I think you might, for example, want to be a little funnier. Now do not get me wrong. I do not mean that you are boring, but it might be good to be a little funnier. We have a special offer with a humour packages sponsored by a media group. It contains a host of hilarious episodes. Some of them you have seen, others you have been told. It also included a couple of visits to concerts and many great memories from movies you've seen, and funny articles you have read.

- But isn't it a bit too standardized?

- Oh no. The computer randomly mixes among the memories in our memory bank. You get your own unique mix.

- How much?

- Two thousand Euro.

- Thanks, it is good, but then it might be enough.

- Yes probably, for you must have money to the fee at the Karolinska too, it is three thousand.

They did not agree on anything more at that meeting except how to set up the forthcoming meetings about the detailed design of the memories.

It was Saturday night. He warmed a cheese pie and thawed a tomato salad. Since it was Saturday, he succumbed thoroughly with a white paper towel and one of the fine porcelain plates which he inherited from grandmother. He put up his finest beer glass and behind the glass he placed two beers. Finally, he took the two brass candlesticks standing on the bookshelf in the room, put them on the table, put in new candles and lit them. But although he succumbed thoughtfully, ate slowly and sipped on the second beer after he had ate the food, it did not take more than about an hour in all. Thus, he had many hours left until he could go to bed without shame. He got another beer from the fridge and drank it in less than sips. Still it ended many hours before bedtime. But he was, after all, a bit more comfortable than before dinner, as well as energetic. It was probably due to the alcohol, he thought. He wanted more. Football evenings were fun. One could drink beer with people and it felt like to socialize without having to talk to anyone. It was enough to yell a bit at appropriate times. Unfortunately, no football in the higher divisions was shown on Saturdays. On Saturdays one would see hockey, preferably at an ice hockey bar, his colleague had explained to him.

Ibrahim was now really not interested in neither football nor hockey, so for him it was just the same, he might as well look at hockey. He knew an ice hockey bar on Borggatan, so he went there,

bought a beer and watched the game. Next to him stood an older man, who sometimes bumped into Ibrahim. He looked at Ibrahim and nodded each time. After a while the man began to comment the game. It was obvious that the comments were directed to Ibrahim. The man was holding a beer glass in his hand. He emptied it, but made no move to buy another one until Ibrahim had emptied his glass. Then he leaned against Ibrahim and asked if he could buy a round. Ibrahim was very surprised and could not think of anything to say, instead he nodded. The man went away and came back with two beers. They stood next to each other in the same way as before. The man continued to, every now and then, bump into Ibrahim and in between he came with little comments about what happened on the field. He offered several beers. He insisted all the time on that he would pay, and he declined when Ibrahim suggested that he would buy a round. After the match had ended, he offered a whiskey. He said he would go home, but that he first wanted to make a toast with Ibrahim. He stood opposite Ibrahim raised his glass and looked him straight in the eyes. While he raised his glass, he put the other hand on the back of his head. Ibrahim could make out that he held a small blue cylinder in it. He was embarrassed but somewhere he felt flattered.

The weeks went by and he visited the therapist five times more before all memories were designed and packed in a memory disk. As a bonus the therapist suggested a little extra offer:

- I have a new thing here for you. It is an offer made by a company that sell artist material, they offer memories with skills in painting, embroidery, watercolour or pastel painting. It is completely free. Don't you want it? It can be fun to have a hobby.

- Free of charge, you said.

- Yes.

- I'll take it.

A few weeks later, it was time for the actual burning. The therapist met him in the hospital's main entrance. He went ahead and showed the way to the memory burning chamber. Before the burning he met the chief physician in the department, who shook hands with him and said that everything would go well. Then he met a nurse who gave him a piece of paper to sign.

The paper said that he accepted that the hospital disclaimed all responsibility for whatever that could happen. Then he lay down on a bed with wheels on. The nurse put a blanket over him and she gave him a cup with a blue liquid.

- It's magnetic contrast fluid, she said. You have to take it so we can see how your brain reacts.

Then after a while you will get a sedative pill that makes you fall asleep. You must sleep, otherwise you will have too much activity in the brain that interferes with the process.

- Wait, said the therapist. You do not want to remember that you have received this treatment, right? So I have put up the memory of this so you will remember it like they removed a tumour on your head. And all visits to me will be erased from your memory. This means of course that you have to pay now or else we have to explain to you afterwards why you should pay 55.000 Euros, right? On the bill you get from here it will say that you paid for a surgery on your head, which is perfect because it can be a small scar on your scull, and you may have a little headache when you wake up.

- I know, Ibrahim said, and took out his credit card. Then he ate the tablet. He went to sleep in peace, and woke up after a while in the same bed. Opposite him sat a man. He tries to remember why he's there, but he can't. It's kind of dark in the head. He continues to try and then he remembers. He had a tumour his head. It hurt. He touches the back of his head, it feels very smooth. Now he remembered who the man is.

He looks at the man:

- Did it go okay?

- Yes it did!

- Thank you for your accompany and thanks for letting me borrow five thousand Euro, you will get them back as soon as I come to the bank.

The man smiled.

This book contains a selection of short stories by different writers, published by Boksidan.com. Some of them are about relations, others are about subjects such as betrayal and death, but foremost they deal with the nature of our memories.