

The Happiness Index

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'Time passing and her life': making sense and other life skills in *The Happiness Index*

In her 1965 collection, *Questions of Travel*, Elizabeth Bishop places and displaces her speakers who are 'here or there'¹ within a poetic world where 'little is known and much is puzzling'.² As Colm Tóibín has persuasively argued, the constant questioning of truths in Bishop's work, coupled with the omission of the large and focus on the small, invite us to think of her speakers as temporary, isolated and inherently lonely. In this world with 'no detail too small'³, her speakers are barely there, observing the relation between things without being necessarily at the centre of events, like 'the state that floats in brackish water, / held together by mangrove roots'⁴ or the 'tremendous fish' held 'beside the boat, / half out of water'⁵.

Taking as its epithet the closing lines of Bishop's 'Questions of Travel', *The Happiness Index* takes up these themes of wandering and relative uncertainty. I have attempted to press questions rather than supply ready answers. Is conformity safer than rejection of societal values? What are those values? And how do we go about defining, let alone rejecting, these norms by which we live? The following essay aims at offering an insight into the decisions behind the novel's structure, style and themes.

My intention was for the reader to recognise as normal Vibekke's sense of unhappiness and disillusion; an understandable response to overprotective partners, depressed parents, discounted dinners, and the incredible, seamless marketing of such packages of family, work, and life as something to aspire to. The novel tells of Vibekke, one of the six unhappiest people in Denmark. However absurd that sounds, it is. *The Happiness Index* makes much of banal labels, drawing attention to the strange nature of the language we use to represent human connections and activity. Put forward by her

¹ Elizabeth Bishop, *Bishop: Poems, Prose and Letters*, Questions of Travel from the collection Questions of Travel (New York: The Library of America, 2008), p.75.

² Colm Tóibín, *On Elizabeth Bishop* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2015) p.1.

³ Elizabeth Bishop, *Bishop: Poems, Prose and Letters*, Sandpiper from the collection Questions of Travel: Elsewhere (New York: The Library of America, 2008), p.125.

⁴ Elizabeth Bishop, *Bishop: Poems, Prose and Letters*, Florida from the collection North & South (New York: The Library of America, 2008), p.24.

⁵ Elizabeth Bishop, *Bishop: Poems, Prose and Letters*, The Fish from the collection North & South (New York: The Library of America, 2008), p.33.

eccentric father to take part in an international happiness study that measures and compares her to other Danes (and in turn other States' populations), Vibekke struggles to find a purpose, to picture herself in the ways others around her seem to do, as part of family, individual, and professional understandings of herself go. Things change, or at least her context does, when a marketing agency sends her to an isolated Costa Rican beach to look after sea turtles - alone with a cameraman, a dog named Bono, and three other miserable people. As real a scene as reality TV can come up with. Throughout the plot, I have attempted to record Vibekke's struggle to lead a life that is not empty, and to join up these facts of existence into a reality in which she recognizes herself as herself.

'A stranger to myself and to the world'⁶

It seems to Vibekke's mother and to Mia, her partner, that life passes her by, that she is unable or uninterested in changing course: *'I know when the sink taps time passes. I know when morning comes and it's a new square on the wall calendar.'*⁷ I have used the concept of passing as a leitmotif throughout the novel: trains pass, days pass, water passes under the kayak as Vibekke is out at sea with her father, who she thinks of as 'Jens/dad'. With this constant movement, I wanted to illustrate Vibekke's relative stillness, and position as an outsider within her own life: by choosing to remain uninvolved, Vibekke allows for events to happen of their own accord rather than to be influenced or wished for by her, thus shifting responsibility away from herself. Others initiate things that happen to her, she doesn't readily take responsibility for her actions. However, Vibekke is hardly ever, if ever, interested in blaming others for her unhappiness. She finds herself crying in the shower one afternoon at her girlfriend's but this is as unremarkable to her, it seems, as the toast she just ate or the next waitressing job she'll work. Vibekke allows for 'time to carry' her.⁸ *'I know things kind of just happened. They always do. Right in the middle of everything. You could be having breakfast or sitting on top of dead turtles, and suddenly, everything changes.'*⁹

Perhaps the most striking manifestation of this is found in Vibekke's denial of societal norms of adulthood and refusal to strive for indicators of success such as owning property, having a stable career, and being in a committed relationship.

⁶ Albert Camus, *The Myth of Sisyphus*, (Middlesex: Penguin Books, 1979) pp. 25.

⁷ See pp. 147 of this Submission.

⁸ Albert Camus, *The Myth of Sisyphus*, (Middlesex: Penguin Books, 1979) pp. 25.

⁹ See pp. 140 of this Submission.

Undeniable as these positions are, it is not that Vibekke articulates a political stance or even a conscious life choice. She is no activist or hippy, she hasn't 'dropped out' for conscious reasons of conscience as such. This speaks of Vibekke's existentialist outlook as much as her sense of lost independence in a world that does not really allow it because of the desires and expectations of others. Denmark or Costa Rica, Mia or Ali, breakfast or dinner. Circumstances of Vibekke's life begin to take on the structure of choices to be made and decisions to be followed through, whether or not Vibekke realises them as such. Is Vibekke depressed or protesting? Is her life brave or futile? Through the process of redrafting what was originally a coming-of-age/coming-out story, I have now left these questions unanswered, with the implication that they may be unanswerable in a poetic world in which we can recognise ourselves only through our representations of ourselves to others, or in reflections of ourselves by others' reactions to our actions. This is not only a striking effect of marketing and TV reality, but also arguably a condition of how we come to understand the world relative to ourselves through language, as we process the world around us by organising random events into cause and effect sequences, or narratives.¹⁰

Circumstance and uncertainty

Circumstances are always contingent: Vibekke cannot effect her own situation or escape her emptiness. She feels out of control as the nothingness she feels is so overpowering that nothing matters. As Vibekke is forced to make decisions, the outcome of these leaves her unchanged. When she chooses to have an affair, the Vibekke who leaves behind long-term partner Mia is the same Vibekke who wakes up in bed with Ali. Nothing has changed. In the same way that the novel opens during '*winter-like spring*'¹¹ – a spring that is not really spring but only resembles one, it ends with similar uncertainty on which Vibekke comments: '*[m]aybe not knowing is OK.*'¹²

The many 'maybes' Vibekke is surrounded by open up the number of possibilities and increase the pressure of having to make a choice - a responsibility, which Vibekke finds exhausting. When asked about why she is different, Vibekke

¹⁰ As Paul Ricoeur reads Aristotle's Poetics, '[t]o make up a plot is already to make the intelligible spring from the accidental, the universal from the singular, the necessary or the probable from the episodic'. *Time and Narrative*, Volume 1, trans. Kathleen McLaughlin and David Pellauer (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1984), pp. 41.

¹¹ See pp. 147 of this Submission.

¹² See pp. 144 of this Submission.

responds:

Maybe it's because I woke up one morning and the sun was shining and nothing mattered. Maybe it's because I was having coffee with Jens/dad and we were silent and I looked through the window and the harbour wasn't like it was yesterday and I realised everything changes. Maybe it's because one day he got sad and the sadness didn't go and we didn't go kayaking anymore and I'm waiting for my own sadness to not go. Maybe it's because it's hard to want things. Maybe that makes you vulnerable. Maybe it's because everything is achievable and nothing is achievable. Maybe it's because I could've been anyone. Maybe it's because there's too much choice. Maybe it's because little turtles die in their eggs and it's a disaster. Maybe it's because I'm fucked up.

When 'everything is achievable and nothing is achievable', Vibekke chooses not to try to achieve. For the organisers of the 'happiness' camp, this is a sign of unhappiness, especially when compared to the collective ideal of happiness. For Vibekke, non-achieving is a choice, and happiness is a fleeting feeling that cannot be measured or graded, and therefore can hardly be verified as 'true' or 'real'.

Throughout the novel, the reader is invited to search for the reasons behind Vibekke's self-described sadness, and there are clues in the small details Vibekke meticulously describes. One of the challenges I faced during the writing process was ensuring that this passive style of narration was still exciting, and still highlighting passivity itself. Vibekke's observations, told in first person present tense, are an immediate reaction to a world that is '*spinning, spinning*'¹³ beyond her control. The choice of tense highlights the character's introverted nature by putting Vibekke at the centre, and establishing an unsettling mood of time proximity. The reader is told of Vibekke's immediate world via Vibekke's immediate impressions of it; there has been no time for her to process the information she experiences and she is forced to react and adapt to it as it comes instead.

*I kiss her where her ear meets her jaw. I kiss her on the temple, the width of an eggshell. Her hair on my face, strands brush my cheeks. Under our bodies, dreamy turtles rest in their shells, like magic.*¹⁴

¹³ See pp. 19 of this Submission.

¹⁴ See pp. 42 of this Submission

Colours, shapes, movements and smells build up Vibekke's physical world and paint a picture of it, while her internal environment remains distanced and stagnant. Whether Vibekke is in rainy Denmark where *'the air smells of cinnamon and fish'*¹⁵ or on a tropical beach in Central America, her character experiences almost no changes, no transformations. The singular storytelling viewpoint highlights the claustrophobic feeling that the world around Vibekke is somehow staged without her input. She is trapped within it, at the same time as being detached from it. This is also highlighted by the additional TV crew perspective. By outlining details of the curious in the everyday, Vibekke's observations illustrate the one-sided sense of loneliness she experiences and the meaning she finds (or does not find) in the things and people around her.

Memory and representation

Stylistically, there are no interruptions in the form of chapters or sections throughout the novel. Asterisks separate time and place as the story develops: memory merges with the present as we are given narrative fragments illustrating past events, such as Vibekke's first date with Mia and memories of Jens/dad *'before the sadness came'*¹⁶. Vibekke is a product of her past, and the experience of remembering is as important as reacting to the now; the two are comparable, and a result of each other.

*I try to remember things. Childhood things. Fishing for crabs with Jens/dad, barefoot with my jeans rolled up to my knees. The sea dark and vibrant and full of creatures and possibilities. [...] I don't know if I'd like to relive these moments. They're nice to think about before you go to bed or when you take the train or when you're in the shower but I don't know if they're good for anything else. They exist in vacuum – and if I didn't exist, neither would they. If they didn't exist – neither would I.*¹⁷

Memory also bridges the gaps in the history of Vibekke's complex relationship with Jens/dad. Jens/dad has not been a steady figure in Vibekke's life – even the way she thinks of him refers to his instability in relation to her as well as his own life. The name Jens/dad signifies two separate people: Jens – the stranger, the individual (who *'could've*

¹⁵ See pp. 149 of this Submission.

¹⁶ See pp. 68 of this Submission.

¹⁷ See pp. 165 of this Submission.

*been anyone*¹⁸), and/or Dad – the role model, the supporter, the constant. Jens/dad is both those things at the same time. Vibekke does not judge Jens/dad for his failings; instead she analyses their relationship through the process of remembering: cooking together, kayaking together, Jens/dad's deterioration into solitude and depression. Memories draw parallels between the two characters in their seeming lack of ambition and carelessness about the future – confirmed, in Jens/dad's case, and unconfirmed in Vibekke's.

As well as memory, the novel also toys with the idea of the thing versus its representation: in attempting to quantify happiness and use it as a consumer marketing tool, the trip's organisers inevitably transform 'happiness' into a staged version of itself.¹⁹ Vibekke and the rest of the study participants are filmed and interviewed about their experiences in Costa Rica - the footage used in a documentary, the final product of the marketing project. As the participants speak about happiness while in a situation artificially designed to make them happier, in a documentary about happiness, the concept of 'happiness' itself becomes diluted and loses its original meaning. I avoid the conclusion that this is a straightforward consequence of over-marketing and a failed contemporary project of social media communication by drawing parallels between marketing things – ideas, people, events – and representing things to each other and to ourselves in order to make sense of them – thoughts, characters, plots. Narrating and staging are necessarily involved in realising something and so it becomes unclear what things are real (such as 'true' happiness) and what are representations (people seeming happy on TV which in turn alters our perception of what true happiness is). 'The movement of signification adds something, which results in the fact that there is always more, but this addition is a floating one because it comes to perform a vicarious function, to supplement a lack on the part of the signified'.²⁰ Despite its plot and title, the novel does not directly question what it means to be happy but rather explores how choice and outlook influence one's content.

¹⁸ See pp. 68 of this Submission.

¹⁹ This follows Derrida's concept of '*supplementarity*', that each representation of a thing necessarily becomes a thing in its own right, because we come to recognise that first representation as the thing being referred to (or rather differentiated from), and so on and so on. Citing Montaigne ('[W]e need to interpret interpretations more than to interpret things'), Derrida argues that '[o]ne cannot determine the center and exhaust totalization because the sign which replaces the center, which supplements it, taking the center's place in its absence...is added, occurs as a surplus, as a *supplement*'. Jacques Derrida, *Writing and Difference*, trans. Alan Bass (London and New York: Routledge, 1978), pp. 365.

²⁰ Derrida, *Writing and Difference*, pp. 365-66.

Making choices, representing things to each other, and the juxtaposition between movement and stagnation, are themes that make *The Happiness Index* a novel not so much about happiness but about finding meaning. Uneasy with taking responsibility and unwilling to take part in constructing her life, Vibekke remains the same despite choice and circumstance. Much like Bishop's speakers, she is a protagonist in a state of constant dislocation, caught in an existential cycle of wondering, wandering, and decision-making often leading to nothing. In the end, '[t]he sink taps. It's spring'²¹.

²¹ See pp. 144 of this Submission.

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The Happiness Index

A novel about happiness in which no-one is happy

N.B Please note the opening section of the novel can be found on pp. 145, Appendix One (previous academic submission).

Mia isn't like me or Jens/dad. She doesn't know she's all alone in all dimensions and possibilities and that's the only way she could ever be. She goes to work and the screen lights up and there's purpose. She wakes up in the morning and it's raining and it's a bit annoying but she'll take her umbrella. The duvet won't feel heavy on her chest. The rain tapping against the window won't be measuring time passing and her life going away with it. But I like that. I like her unawareness. Or her denial of Those Things that are overwhelming to think about. Her obsession with doing things and doing them right. Her neat ways add some order to my own life. Each pair of ironed socks in her drawer compensates an hour of my life, spent in front of the TV or staring into the garden like Monkey does.

Mia likes her job and likes the people in the office. She has a desk plant that she mists the leaves of. She goes to drinks after work and uses the company gym (the same one where Anne Mette goes and my mum aspires to go). Mia puts effort and care into everything she does: each brochure she designs, each stock photo she alters. It's always the right shade of green, always the perfect amount of white space. Am I stereotyping her? Being too harsh? Is she a subject to change like everyone and everything? Would her attitude towards the universe change?

She doesn't have an attitude towards the universe. She doesn't talk about the grand things. She's never small in her world. Could I try to tell her what I mean? Would she understand my meaning? Would she consider that meaning could exist in plural? Mia's life is within the grids of InDesign and that's who she is. And I love her. I love how she organises things for us and makes me feel like an adult. I'm impressed she remembers things like paying the council tax and her credit card and the dates of her relatives' birthdays and buying cards and writing inside them and giving people a phone call when she says she would. Maybe some of it will rub off on me one day.

I'm not unhappy with how things are, whatever my Happiness Index score might say. I've always been like this; always at the same level, chin above the surface. Is there anything more I could be? Anything more I could feel? I feel joy when I should feel joy. I feel angry when someone tries to cut in the line at the airport. I feel empathy for the characters in the TV shows I watch. I feel empty when I listen to the sounds of the traffic at four in the afternoon. What else is there to feel? Who else is there for me to grow into?

I wonder if Mia is in denial about who I am like she's in denial that Those Things don't exist or aren't worth thinking about. I wonder if she thinks I will iron my socks one day just like she does. I wonder if she knows this person I'm meant to grow into. I

wonder if it's the same person as her. I wonder if she really doesn't wake up in the middle of the night and look at the darkness until she can see the contours of the IKEA furniture around her and realise how fundamentally sad it is that this moment is forever gone.

Jens/Dad is passing me the jar of pickles. The gherkins float in their glass confinement, like embryos without umbilical cords. Strings of dill. Black pepper. The founding elements of the pickle universe. The sausages are still in the oven (grill option, 180 degrees, top shelf) but we've set the table already. Coffee mug stains. Yellow mash. The bread rolls have been cut in the middle. The French mustard is next to the American mustard, which is next to the roasted onions greased up against each other in the roasted onions bowl. Four bottles of *Harboe* on the bottom shelf of the fridge. The TV is on, the volume just loud enough for Jens/Dad to hear the news in the kitchen while he does the dishes. A calendar - *Jakob's Builders* - hanging on the wall next to him, with my name by today's date, written in small black letters.

Jens/Dad still thinks sausages are my favourite food, and I still let him. He always buys the good kind and I always compliment them: the quality of the meat, the saltiness of the outside, how good they taste when you mix the mayo and mustard.

'They'll be ready any minute now.' The weather comes on and Jens/Dad makes a sign for me to be quiet with his index finger by his nose. He points the remote towards the screen and presses the volume button until it's all I can hear. More rain tomorrow. Unusual for this time of year. Joke about umbrellas.

'I guess you won't be needing any of those over there?' I hadn't really thought about the fact it will be hot in Costa Rica. I mean, I knew it would be hot. It's just hard to imagine. Like when it's December and it's difficult to believe that you would ever go outside in a t-shirt or take off your clothes on the beach again. It's not that I'll miss the cold. I'll just forget about it. There are unopened letters on the corner shelf. Unusual for Jens/Dad not to open his mail. Like this weather is unusual for April.

'Hey *far*. You have some letters here.' I go through them. All from the same sender. There's a printed logo in the top right corner. *Hundested Kommune*. He looks at me for a moment, then takes the sausages out of the oven, places them on top of the stove and pokes one with a fork to check if it's cooked through.

'Yeah. I know. Don't worry, I'll have a read later. I didn't have time today.' He didn't have time? If anything, time is all he has. What else would he be doing? Re-arranging his porcelain plates? Taking the small Netto bags out of the large Netto bag, refolding them and putting them back in? Going to the shop to buy bread and coming home one hour and forty-five minutes later, to stuff marzipan bars with the 'reduced to clear' stickers in the freezer? He walks around the kitchen counter, takes the letters and arranges them with his hands so the edges align. He takes them back with him and puts them on top of the brochures and catalogues he's saved. Discounted chicken breasts, 50% off on Nike trainers, an unbeatable offer on wood planks, half-priced stationary this Saturday only.

'I think they're looking pretty ready.' He piles the sausages on a plate. Most have split at the skin. Brown oozing out of brown.

We eat in silence. Gunshots from the TV and the sound of teeth on teeth. Mustard on Jens/Dad's moustache. Dripping from the kitchen sink. Jens/Dad finishes his beer, wipes his moustache with his thumb and gets up.

'Schnapps?' He's heading to the glass shelf where he keeps his booze before I have the chance to answer. Polish vodka with dark raspberries sunk at the bottom of the bottle, three quarters of a Jim Beam, an unopened Aquavit. Not an impressive collection. He takes the Aquavit and comes back to the table with two little glasses, the kind only people over sixty would have. The kind that you inherit from your great aunt Sidsel. I'd like to call them shot glasses but it doesn't sound right. Jens/Dad overfills mine.

'*Skål*.' I close my eyes, squeeze the liquid down my throat and when I open them again Jens/Dad is pouring me another.

'I told my friend Janis about Costa Rica.'

'How is he?'

'Good. Good.' He's playing with the little glass. 'He's been doing a lot of reading since his wife died.'

'I thought she died like thirty years ago?'

'A lot of reading since then.' Jens/Dad thinks about this for a moment, looks towards his porcelain figurines and pours himself another schnapps.

'One more?'

'Sure. Why not.' We down our shots at the same time. It burns my lips. I look at my watch.

'Those letters you saw. The ones from the *Kommune*.'

'Yeah.'

'They've been sending them for a while. They want to relocate me.' He taps the saltshaker and pushes it towards the pepper grinder. 'They want me to move to another house.'

He pauses.

'Move you? But why? They can't just move you?'

'They say this place is too big for just one person. They say in the current financial situation they can't afford to have me in accommodation where a whole family could live. A whole family.'

He makes a 'pff' sound. Takes out a packet of Kings from his pocket.

'Can you imagine that? A whole family. As if a family could fit in here. What if they had two children, not one? Where would the second one sleep? And the kitchen? The kitchen is too small. You can't fit more than two people in it. You can't cook a family dinner. You can't fit a tray of lasagne in this oven, good luck with that. I don't know. It doesn't make sense to me. And I have to take all my stuff by myself. I bet it's all those asylum seekers.'

He stretches to get the matches from the middle of the table by the candles and lights a cigarette. Exhales. The smoke rises against the ceiling and floats around the bare bulb above our heads like the ghost of great aunt Sidsel.

'Do you have a say in all of this?'

'Do I have a say in all of this? Of course not. They're treating me like a child. Like I wouldn't understand things. I'd understand everything, if only they told me. If only they explained.'

'Where are they moving you to? Is it far?'

'They've found me a house down *Duevej*.'

He pours us another shot and downs his.

'Down this *Duevej*? You mean the street next to this one?'

'Yeah. What's the point, seriously? Why move me if it's only next-door? The bungalow couldn't possibly be that much bigger?'

I down my drink. At least he'll still be in the same area. He never goes far. The bakery. The Netto. The beach, on a good day. Up the hill. I imagine him as a potato forgotten in the ground, slowly sinking further down the layers of the soil, the speed earth moves.

'When are you moving?'

'In a few weeks' time. Need to start packing. Janis and the guys will come down and help me with the move.' He reaches for my plate, scoops my leftover mash onto his plate and takes them both to the sink. I get the ketchup and the gherkins to help him.

'I can help you pack if you want? Before my trip?' He doesn't say anything. 'I can help you wrap the plates in newspapers so they don't break?'

'That would be nice.'

He starts the tap.

Nothing this upsetting has happened to Jens/Dad, apart from the time his TV started flickering and turning itself on and off and he missed the Big Brother finale. I was on the phone with him for an hour, summarising what was happening on the screen ('now he's speaking to the girl with the red hair...no, I don't think she likes him ...the one with the Mohawk...Mohawk, dad, the punk hair, you know that, the spiky one, yes...she's making a sandwich...egg and cress I think, wait maybe it's cheese and onion.')

He's doing the dishes in silence. I light one of his Kings. The smoke gets stuck inside my chest as if it has solidified. I cough. Poor Jens/Dad. I won't tell mum for as long as I can. I don't want her glowing in his misery; her criticism shining on Jens/Dad's life like a projector on an empty wall. I look at my watch again. The train leaves in half an hour.

Jens/dad and I sit in the tall grass and watch the ferries at the harbour. When one approaches the terminal and people inside hurry to pay for their liquorice Haribos and tax-free red Marlboros before taking the stairs down to their locked cars, another one leaves. Every twenty minutes, between Denmark and Sweden. They leave trails in the sea, like comets. The white smoke from the chimneys in the Helsingborg skyline merges with the clouds. We dip *rugbroed* in tuna salad. Creamy and salty and grey. Seagulls fly

over the castle behind us. My feet dangle over the edge of the fence, wrapped in pink and glitter. My mum bought me the same trainers every year until I was thirteen. She thought the other girls would like them; the other girls thought I was weird. I don't know what happened after my thirteenth birthday. Maybe she started agreeing with them in the end.

'There's a bit more of the tuna left.'

I follow the corners of the plastic box with the bread crust. Salt mayonnaise on tongue. Sun through white. Another ferry disembarks.

'Do you think I'd be a good sailor?'

'A good sailor? Is that what you want to be now?'

'I'm not sure. Either that or an astronaut.'

'You'd be good at both, I think.'

Jens/dad's face is serious so I believe him. Dig the ground with the heel of my sparkling shoe. Imagine pressing red buttons and reading values off Russian screens on the inside of the MIR while floating around without gravity. Gripping ropes and cables alongside the walls to give myself a sense of direction. Spitting water and watching it in midair.

'What did you want to be when you were little?'

He's still looking ahead at the sea as if he hasn't heard me. His large (yet seemingly dysfunctional) ears poking out from under his hat.

'I don't remember. It was a long time ago.'

'But you must remember something. How could you not?'

'I don't know. Things change a lot. When you're seven years old each day can be a new lifetime. You don't feel like it now but it's true. I probably wanted to be this or that. A fisherman and an optician. A chemist and a toyshop owner. But you move on from these dreams quickly. The next day it's something else.'

Why would anyone want to be an optician? Is this a thing people dream about? How passionate can you be about lenses and rims? Or maybe you don't dream about these jobs, you just become them. One thing follows another, and there you are. Behind a polished counter, selling eye drops.

'I think I'll always want to be an astronaut. And a sailor.'

'They're kind of similar if you think about it.'

I think about it. He continues.

'They're both to do with exploration – either space or the ocean. And navigation – you have to find a way to come home.'

'Not unless you find a new home in a new galaxy somewhere. Then you could make your home there. It'd take a while to get used to wearing your space suit I guess. But I bet it would feel normal eventually. Or you could make a home in the same galaxy but a different dimension. Or if you were a sailor, and if you found your own private uninhabited island and decided to live there and eat dinosaur food off the bushes, then you wouldn't need to come home.'

'That's true.'

'Do you think they'll ask me about what I want to be when I grow up?'

I watch his face.

'I think they're more interested in who you are right now. But I don't really know what they'll ask.'

Who I am right now. Would I not still be the same in twenty years? I would be me. Maybe I'd think differently. And know different things. But I'd still be me. He's looking ahead again. It's strange to think that there are things he doesn't know. That each day has been a lifetime many times and his ears have grown, a millimetre per year perhaps, until they are the size they are now, and yet there are still things that are unknown to him. Like, would he know how to calculate the trajectory of a comet if it was burning its way towards Earth? Would he know how to explore the ocean if he was asked to? Is he not the same person he was forty years ago? What person will I be? He arranges his hat.

'Don't be worried. It'll be okay. It'll be fun.'

I'm not worried.

The psychology unit is at the other side of the hospital. The lights are bright. We walk hand in hand along the corridor. We don't pass much. A radiator bolted into the wall. A

plant's leaves hanging down towards the tiles. A painting. Our steps echo. We stay quiet and follow the directions. Just walk, until it makes sense. Until we reach the room.

'I think this is it.'

The door opens. Shapes and colours behind the woman's back. Blue cubes. Red balls. White walls. The woman bends down. Her face at the level of my face. Tea breath and chunks of mascara clotted in her eyelashes.

'It's very nice to meet you.'

She hands me her hand and I shake it. I feel important, like an adult. I walk in without turning around. There are two other adults there. With white teeth and notepads.

'Have a seat anywhere you like.'

I turn around. Jens/dad is waving.

'Let's talk about your favourite things in the world.'

I tell them about Jens/dad. I tell them about my snail farm. I tell them about the little puppy my mum got.

Meat twists on its hook behind the counter. Spinning, spinning, spinning. Kebabs in tinfoil. Ketchup on chips. The market is empty and the stalls have been collapsed. Fake gold lighters with marijuana leaves engraved on them have been boxed away. Skull-shaped bongos and metal pipes have been covered in bubble wrap. 'Adihash' t-shirts folded and put in the back of a van, to be driven back here tomorrow morning. Night clouds hang low above hippies and dealers drinking beer by the fires. Dogs without collars greet each other, their eyes glistening in the dark like a battery torch dropped from a cruise liner sinking towards the bottom of the ocean. I don't know where I'm going. And neither does Mia.

'Let's stay close.'

Mia is wearing her leather jacket. She pulls me closer to her. I feel the muscles in her arm under the sleeve. Hard and stretched, like cooked chicken. She's looking straight ahead, avoiding eye contact with the group of teens laughing as they pass by and the guys in hoodies waiting in the corner. Someone's playing a guitar and the sounds of Christiania merge together: the laughter, Bob Dylan songs, the bar conversations (about

pee and the police and the government), the crunching gravel under the feet of potheads and office workers, the accelerating cars in the distance, the sirens. I haven't been here for years. How has it been this long?

'What would your mum say if she knew I was taking you to Christiania?'

'Can you stop worrying? We're both adults, this is OK.'

'This is illegal.'

'Where's your sense of adventure?'

'Gone with the rest of my sanity, apparently.'

'I'm going in two days. I thought you wanted to do something special?'

'Yes – something special – not get high like a couple of teenagers.'

'We haven't done this in ages. It'll be fun.'

She doesn't say anything.

'What about this guy?'

'He looks scary.'

'How does he look scary? He looks like your average street dealer.'

'He just does. And he definitely doesn't look average.'

'Is it the hat?'

'It is.'

We keep walking.

'You know we still need to talk about what happened at the beach, right?'

'Nothing happened at the beach.'

'You really worried me.'

'I'm sorry, I didn't mean to.'

'First, you go into the sea in the middle of the storm – naked, without a life jacket or anything – then you want to get high. Are you OK?'

'How are these signs of me being not OK? These are perfectly normal activities.'

'Maybe if you're fifteen. But you're not.'

'So I'm immature now?'

'I didn't say that. I'm just worried.'

'This guy looks decent, don't you think?'

'I don't know, he still looks a bit scary.'

I unlock my arm from hers and approach the low table laid out with blocks of hash and weed. In this light, everything looks the same colour. I can't see the honey-glaze of the Moroccan hash. Or the dark green 'organic Danish' buds. I squint my eyes to read the labels in the dark. I feel Mia's body behind me. A flashlight illuminates the table and blinds me for a moment.

'Are you looking for anything in particular, ladies?' The dealer is smiling behind the frames of his glasses as if he was selling us discounted holiday insurance. He puts his book and the torch down. It's 'Crime and Punishment', the same edition as I have at home. How appropriate.

'We're just looking. I mean, we are looking for some weed rather than hash but apart from that, we don't know what we're looking for.' Mia pokes me in the back from behind. She means: stop telling him stuff; he'll screw us over. Or give us roofies. Or something.

'No one knows what they're looking for these days.' He's looking at me. 'There's too much choice sometimes. Not a regular smoker I take it?'

'No, not really.'

Another poke from behind.

'May I recommend "Strawberry Fields"? It's not too strong, organically grown in a German farm. And yes – as the name suggests – it comes with a hint of strawberries. Smell for yourselves.' His long fingers lift the little wooden box and I come closer to sniff it. It's almost like candy at the cinema. He smiles at Mia and offers her the box.

'What do you think?' His blue eyes look white in the dark, as if he were an ancient prophet. An ancient prophet who reads Russian literature and looks like he'd be selling discounted holiday insurance but is instead selling weed that smells of strawberries.

'It's nice. I'm not sure I want anything infused though. Maybe just some normal weed?'

'My apologies – I presumed you might not like the taste of weed if you don't often smoke it. How about this one?' What a polite drug dealer. Mia comes closer this time. Good manners do go a long way.

'It's nothing special; it won't blow you off your feet or anything. But it'll get you nice and high.'

'What do you think?' I turn my face towards Mia's face.

'Looks good. Let's just buy it and leave.'

Sirens start off again somewhere in the distance.

I hand my Prophet a 100 *kroner* bill; he brings his palms together as if he were about to pray and gives us a little bow with a smile.

'Enjoy.'

When I turn back, he's reading his book, flashing the pages with his torch.

Nearly all the tables outside are full. We sit opposite the empty stage. It looks like a giant clam with its mouth open. Lights from lighters and mobile phones around us – modern day bioluminescence. Lamp posts instead of forests. Samsung phones instead of fireflies. Bottles clink and mouths exhale smoke.

'I'll go get us drinks. Will you be OK here?' She looks around scanning people's faces and movements for signs of dangerous behaviour.

'I'm fine, don't worry about me.'

Laughter from the table next to ours.

'What do you want to drink?'

'I'll just have a beer, I think.'

Mia disappears in between the benches and shadows and I look at the night sky above the stage and the silhouettes of tree branches. No stars. Ancient prophets, vast seas, insured cruise liners, sailors looking at the blackness above for direction, nautical

almanacs, sharp edges of an uneasy Davis' quadrant, octants, hands clasped together, giant whales, three-hearted octopuses, dark.

'Vibekke?'

Ali. Back hunched. Rucksack over the shoulder.

'Ali. Hey.'

She leans and kisses me on the cheek.

'What are you doing here?'

'I'm just getting a drink.'

'I hear this place does amazing cocktails.'

'Does it?'

'No, it's a shit hole.' She laughs. 'I'm only joking.'

She takes a seat opposite me with her legs spread over the bench. The stage behind her lights up. I look back in the direction of the bar.

'So?'

'So?'

She lights a cigarette.

'Excited?'

'About Costa Rica? Or about being so unhappy I've been rewarded for it?'

'Hey, you're not the only one.'

She exhales and hands over the packet.

'I don't smoke.'

'You look like you do.'

I smile and take one. Ali holds out her lighter and I lean over the table to reach the flame. She watches me inhale. One arm spread along the length of the table, leaning back. She looks at something behind me. Mia touches my shoulder.

'Hi.'

'Hi.'

'Mia – this is Ali. Ali is one of the other unhappy people.'

'Excellent quote for my gravestone, don't you think? "One of the other unhappy people".'

Mia doesn't smile. Ali stretches her arm over the bottles and shakes Mia's hand. Mia sits down and kisses me on the cheek near where Ali had kissed me hello. She notices my cigarette but doesn't say anything.

Later. Mia is on top of me. She smells of beer and kebab meat and sweat. I think about the night as she bites my earlobe. I think about Jens/Dad and how sad he'll be to wrap his plates in newspapers and take down the calendar and the pictures of distant relatives off the wall. Leaving nothing but nicotine marks and yellow wallpaper. I think about Ali. I don't want to, but I do. About the way her hair touched my face when we said goodbye. About how she looked at me smoke one of her cigarettes.

I think about the night bus home. Mia's accusations and the smell of vomit from under the seat. The world passing by outside the steamed windows with its lights and its indifference. The nausea when the bus turns. The night air coming through the doors when we stop. Mia's questions about my feelings and my plans and my commitment. Then her silence.

She fingers me, and I'm hungry.

Monkey jumps on the bedside table and watches Mia kissing my jaw and pulling my hair. I close my eyes. Mia notices Monkey and tries to shoo her away. Monkey steps back and sits down again. I raise myself up.

'She's not a dog, you know, you can't just shoo her.'

'What am I supposed to do? She was staring.' Mia's face is red, sweat on her forehead where her hair starts, like little droplets of Monkey drool.

'She's a cat, that's what they do. Watch things.'

'I feel weird with her watching.'

'Imagine how she feels.'

Mia kisses my collarbone, then my breast. She stops. Monkey tilts her head and meows.

'I just can't do it with the cat here.'

'Do you want to make a snack?'

'What?'

'A snack.'

'We're in the middle of sex, what are you talking about?'

'You said you couldn't do it with Monkey here.'

'Yes; my solution to that wasn't to stop everything and get food, it was to get rid of the cat.'

'I can't just "get rid" of her. This is her home too.'

'Are you still high?'

'Maybe.'

'Jesus. I knew it. Why did you have to smoke so much?'

Mia sits next to me and pulls the covers over her.

'What now?'

'You don't seem into it. And you're high.'

'You're the one who stopped, not me.'

Monkey meows again.

'Bloody hell.'

She gets out of bed.

'Where are you going?'

'I thought you said you wanted food?'

'Wait, I'm coming. Quiet though, I don't want to wake my mum up.'

We sit on the kitchen floor naked.

'You're disgusting.'

'How is that disgusting?'

I pull another anchovy out of the tin and let it sit on my tongue as I absorb the saltiness. Monkey is crunching her food by the fridge.

'You need to do some shopping. Or tell your mum to.' Mia looks around as if the emptiness of the cupboards has spread out to the rest of the kitchen.

'I'm about to go away for two weeks. I'll be in charge of groceries when I'm back.'

Mia splits the piece of toast she's holding into two but doesn't eat it.

'Don't remind me.'

'Of what?'

'That you're going.'

'*Skat*, it's really not that long.'

'I know. It's just. Yeah.'

'I'll be fine.'

'I know. I guess. If anything happens to you, I won't be there. It's so far away. I'm just afraid I'll lose you.'

'You won't lose me.'

'And that Ali woman.' She breaks the toast into another two. 'I don't like her.'

'I know, I know.' I come closer to her and kiss her on the inner arm near her breast. She pretends to sulk. I know she's not really mad because she moves closer to me.

'You like her jaw, and you two clearly get on well – agreeing with each other and whatever, and you'll be alone in Costa Rica together.'

'Mia, we've talked about this. There's nothing going on.'

Monkey sits between us and sniffs the anchovies. Sneezes.

'I don't want you to worry. You need to trust me more.'

I move the tin away.

'I do trust you. I just don't like the idea of you being so far away.'

'I'll be OK. We're OK.'

I hold her hand and she lets me. I kiss her on the shoulder.

'Stop it, you'll make me stink of fish.'

She laughs and scrubs the spot where I kissed her.

'Shh, we have to be more quiet.'

Monkey makes use of the commotion to steal an anchovy. She runs off towards the living room before I can stop her.

'She's not meant to eat those.'

'Now you two smell the same.'

'Do you really mind?'

'No.'

She kisses me on the lips and pushes the plate with the toast away. I can feel her skin on my skin, soft and warm. My back almost arches away from the cold floor tiles. Her stomach is resting against my knees. She leans down with her hands by my face and pushes my knees open with her hips. I can feel her cunt mound. She moves and we kiss. I kick the tin of anchovies and my foot gets covered in oil.

We fuck in the anchovies and breadcrumbs.

The windscreen wiper blades move left and right, left and right, left and right. By the time they travel back to their previous position, raindrops have already splashed on the glass again. It's inevitable. The passenger window is steamed up. The engine is on, breathing its hard breath, coughing on occasion like Jens/dad does under the bare bulb in the kitchen. Cars pull out and others take their place within the painted slots in the car park. Dark clouds gather on top of Copenhagen Airport. The radio was playing but now it's off. Mia is looking ahead of the wheel. I hold her hand across the stick.

'Come on, don't be like this. I'll be back in no time, you know.'

'I know.'

She frowns. Rain taps on the roof on top of our heads. Each drop is a tiny explosion, irregular and finite. Like heart attacks.

'I'll write you the second I get there.'

'Do you promise?'

'I promise.'

She looks in my eyes with her eyes. Checking if I really mean it. Checking if anything's changed since the last time she's looked into them.

'I don't like being away from you.'

'I don't like it either.'

'Yet you're going.'

Here we go.

'Mia, come on, you wanted me to go, you said so yourself.'

'I know. And I do, I do want you to go.'

She places her hands together and sighs. I reach and hold her arm. The pine air freshener hangs and twists on its green string, left and right.

'It's only two weeks. I'll be back in no time.'

'Is it even safe? The more I think about it, the crazier it sounds.'

'It's safe; of course it's safe. They wouldn't let us go otherwise. Plus, Karoline will be there to pick us up. She's already in Costa Rica.'

'I wish I could come with you.'

'I wish so too.'

We both look out the window where a car is parking.

'Oh, I almost forgot. I got you this.'

She takes a packet out from the side of the door. It's soft on my lap.

'What is it?'

'Just something for your time there.'

I unfold the papers and the cellophane. It's something in khaki.

'What is it?'

'It's a money pouch. See.'

She takes it from me and takes it out of the wrapping. It's one of those 90s things you wrap around your waist to carry your things in.

'You can put your money and your passport in there and then have it under your shirt. Under your trousers even. I read there were pickpockets in San Jose especially. Best to be safe. Promise me you'll wear it all the time.'

I look at the money pouch again. I don't know if I'll ever get myself to have something khaki on my body. Especially not a money pouch.

'Mia, that's very thoughtful...'

'Promise me you'll wear it.'

'Fine, OK, I promise. It's just not the most eye-pleasing object.'

'Vi, for god's sake, no one is going to see it; that's the point. Just promise to wear it under your shirt. Do you know how difficult it would be to get you a new passport if this one gets stolen? Have you even checked if there's a Danish embassy or consular service there? And what if you lose all your money and your phone? Who would you call? What would you do?'

'OK, you've made your point. I'll wear the bloody thing.'

'Good. And let's hope "the bloody thing" does happen to save all your stuff when you're stopped at knife point in a corner by a bin somewhere on the other side of the world.'

'Yeah. Let's hope for that.'

'Oh, and something else.'

Great. A hair net? A chastity belt?

'Your mum gave it to me to give to you.'

She reaches for her handbag on the backseat behind her. Passes me something plastic the size of a pear.

'What is this?'

I turn it around in my hand. No buttons. No text.

'Careful, careful. You'll make it go off.'

'Go off?'

'It's a rape alarm.'

Jesus Christ.

'You squeeze the two ends here – like this – and it starts beeping really loud. Hopefully enough for the rapist to panic and for a passer-by to hear it. Or it could be a burglar not a rapist you use it against, I guess.'

'What is my mum thinking? I bet she was sitting on the couch with Pluto one evening watching TV, when she started thinking of my rape and how she could help.'

'Oh, come on – it's sweet of her.'

I'm not sure giving someone a rape alarm is sweet. But I don't say that.

'I guess.'

I put it in my rucksack by my feet. Hopefully it won't go off on the plane. Hopefully I won't get stopped by security and asked to explain what it is. I look at my phone.

'We should go in.'

'If we have to.'

Mia makes a sign for me to run towards the shelter of the building while she locks the car. She takes the big rucksack out of the boot and runs with it towards me. We're both drenched by the time we're at the rotating doors and the smokers. The smell of rain and cigarettes is familiar, like home.

'Do you think the rain is good luck?'

'Well, it definitely is a sign you won't miss home when you're over there lying in the sand by the ocean.'

'I will miss you.'

'I will miss you too.'

The doors spin empty.

'Let's go now. As much as I'd like you to miss your flight, I don't want it to be my fault.'

I bend to get my rucksack.

'Let me carry that for you.'

We walk towards check-in. Times flash on screens. The world summarised on electronic boards. Hong Kong. Paris. New York. Oceans and countries history and culture compressed in a single announcement. Suitcases and guidebooks. Headphones and passports. Beginnings and ends.

'You're over here.'

We queue in silence. Mia is still carrying my bag and holding my hand. She doesn't let go until it's our turn at the desk.

'Passports, please.'

On the plane. Heads and aircon. I'm in an aisle seat and no one has taken the other two seats yet. Hopefully no one will. And I can lie down and watch action movies guilt-free and stretch my legs, and use my jacket as a little pillow all the way to New York for the connection flight. People stuff bags. Seatbelts click. Lights shine bright. Outside, it's grey. The flight attendants are walking up and down as if they have something important to do. It's strange that I'm here, and that the next moment, I won't be. It's strange that soon it won't be grey outside. I look up. Ali.

'Why hello there, neighbour. Think I'm in the seat next to you.'

Pupils are weird. Like craters of extinct Martian volcanoes only they're not extinct but shutter and expand and constrict and grow and squeeze depending on the light. Like they're their own little beings. You can almost feel them if you really try. OK, not really. I move my eyes as fast as I can. One warehouse, two warehouse, three. Buildings pass and I'll never see them again. Ali's temple bounces on my shoulder when the bus swirls to make a turn or overtake. I read somewhere that the human temple is twice the width of an eggshell. It's also prone to skin cancer. I look at Ali's. The bone above her eye curves and leads to little hairs near her ear, thin and light like space dust. No signs of skin cancer for now. Outside, rusted tin roofs and Coca Cola billboards. Blues and reds and greens. Oranges like the middle of a fried egg. Ali's head bumps into my arm again. She opens her eyes. A chunk of eyelash forest lifts itself like an UFO returning to the cosmos.

Her pupils contract and tighten. She pulls herself up on her seat and looks through the window covered in the dead dermis of unwashed heads that had rested against it.

'How long was I asleep for?'

'About forty minutes I guess.'

She yawns.

'I really thought we'd be there by now. Any news from Karoline?'

'Nothing since the last message.'

The bus stops. A Motorway Snacks Salesman gets on, balancing plastic bags in both hands. When the engines start again, he makes his way down the bus offering samosa-like pastries and receiving coins in return. When he reaches us, he doesn't say anything but shakes the bags and shows us what's inside. The skin where his fingernails start is yellow like glazed dough. I shake my head. Ali makes a sign with her hands: no, no, go away. You never know where these were baked. When he's gone up and down the aisle twice, the driver pulls off onto the hard shoulder and lets him off. Heads turn to watch Motorway Snack Salesman put his bags on the asphalt and light a cigarette. He disappears behind us, probably waiting for the next bus, and then the one after that. His life measured in buses and patties. What is mine measured in?

'This is it. She better be there when we get off.'

BIENVENIDOS SAN JOSE in the middle of a roundabout. Shacks and markets and people walking and standing and talking and holding hands. The bus makes a left and we're at a concrete circular terminal. The driver parks in between two other buses and we're out.

'Girls – here you are, thank god. I'm so sorry about this miscommunication, what a mess. I'm so glad you're here.' Sure you are. You'd be in trouble if you lost half the people in the campaign. I look up. The sun must be somewhere behind the smog. It's hot and sticky and I wish I was back on the bus with Ali's head resting against me. Karoline looks odd without makeup, in her shorts and tank top. She gives Ali a hug and steps towards me.

'I was given the wrong itinerary – it's the new guy in admin, he doesn't know what he's doing. He had the wrong flight number. Bless him, he's only twenty-one.' She's gone in Karoline mode. 'But you made it here, I knew you would, that's what I said to Johnny, didn't I, Johnny? Johnny is one of the local guys who'll be helping out.'

She hugs me too. Ali is looking at Johnny, standing by Karoline's freckled side. He starts nodding when he hears his name.

'And this is the other film guy; he works with me in Copenhagen. You might have met Rasmus already, Ali?'

They shake hands anyway. Rasmus' tall body comes towards me and he introduces himself, camera in his arm, sweat patches on the Abercrombie & Fitch t-shirt where his armpits are.

'Rasmus specialises in documentaries. He'll be following you around and conducting some of the interviews. Should we get them getting off the bus, by the way, Rasmus?'

'We could, yeah.'

Rasmus flicks buttons on the camera and arranges the lense opposite the bus. It reflects the sun and my eyes tear.

'Girls, can we get you to quickly go back in and then out? Johnny, can you ask him if it's OK?'

Johnny explains something to the driver. Fat fingers clamped together indicate it's OK for us to go inside. Hot. Sticky. Empty. I follow Ali out down the stairs. Rasmus is on one knee filming us as we repeat our exit.

'Brilliant. Got it.'

Karoline taps him on the shoulder with two fingers in approval.

'That's great. Shall we head out? You must be exhausted, come, come. Welcome to San Jose.' She tilts her head towards our rucksacks and Johnny approaches Ali.

'I'm OK with mine, thanks.' He takes a step back. She squeezes her shoulders under each strap, bends her knees under the weight on her back and walks towards Karoline without turning back. Johnny mumbles something to himself and offers to take mine. I don't want Ali to think I'm weak. But if I don't let him take my rucksack maybe it will seem like I'm imitating her. Time passes. I need to make a decision. Ali turns around just as Johnny lifts my rucksack from the ground. I walk behind her. It's strange to think that sometimes if you wanted to go home, you couldn't.

'I'm Johnny.' He stretches his arm towards me. 'What's your name?'

'Vibekke.' His palms are as sweaty as mine.

'Vibekke. Never heard of anyone called that before. So what do you think so far?' He looks around. The terminal is full of people queuing (for the toilets, for the bus, to get their bags, to buy a packet of Marlboros, to reserve a ticket, to order a sandwich). There are boxes and cages and various animals within the cages. It smells of chicken shit and gasoline. I couldn't go home if I wanted to. This is what I think so far.

'It's nice. Really nice.' He seems pleased and we walk outside.

'Oi, Karoline, the jeep is parked over here, did you forget?' Johnny waves by an old model Ford.

'Oh, right. Dear me, I'm so bad with directions, aren't I.' Karoline walks pass me and opens the front door. I guess this means Ali and I should take the back with Rasmus, who squeezes himself between us.

Johnny puts the keys in the starter and the jeep takes a few tries until its engine makes the trrrrrrrrr sound. We're off, until the next lights. Karoline's khaki shorts have lifted as she sat down, revealing chowder-white legs with red freckles. I hope I don't get a sun rash. Johnny is holding the wheel with one (hairy) hand, showing the screen of his Motorola phone to Karoline with the other.

'And this is me and my cousin, yes – this is us in Nicoya, when I fell off the bike, I think I told you about it – it was a funny story actually.' He tells the funny story and Karoline laughs – her chowder legs crossed near the stick. His fingers brush her kneecap when he changes gear. Ali doesn't seem to have noticed. Her own kneecaps are pressed tight against the back of the passenger seat. She's looking out the window as we pass houses and shops and people selling pineapples off the back of a truck. I look at her temple again. Double the width of an eggshell. Does that mean you can pierce it with a needle? I guess that's what doctors must do when the brain swells and they have to drain off the blood or water or whatever to allow it to go back to normal. Or is the actual brain much further back in the head? I should look this up. I imagine what Ali would look like with blood pouring out of her temple, covering the little hairs with thick bodily lava. The hairs on Rasmus' arm rub against the skin on my arm. I shiver.

The jeep stops and Ali is the first one out. The corners of her mouth look pale.

'This is us. Hop off, ladies.' We're already off. The Ford is parked on a slope above San Jose. Or it must be San Jose.

'It's this way.' Johnny's picked up my rucksack already. He's walking towards a house that's the same as the house next to it and the one next to that one: bright yellow

walls, ornaments, palm trees. Two human-sized cactuses guard the gates. They're not doing a good job – a lizard the size of a skateboard is waiting on the other side of the metal bars. Rasmus has removed his lens cap and is zooming in at its face.

'Dear god.' Karoline stops. Johnny laughs.

'It's OK, it's OK, *chaparrita*. It's just a ctenosaur. They're everywhere – as common as gringos, eh.'

He laughs. The lizard is looking at me. Its eyes are the same colour as its pupils.

'Completely harmless, not to worry. They hide in the pipes sometimes. The outdoor pipes I mean.' He unlocks the gates and walks past the lizard. It doesn't seem bothered by us. It just stays there, staring with its black holes. It's so bizarre that it almost feels normal that there would be a massive lizard welcoming us. I can't wait to tell Jens/Dad. He might not believe me. Or he might think I was exaggerating the size of it. Or he might have looked it up already and knows all about them. He'll tell me their average life span and natural habitat (here). He'll tell me about their diet and their phylum and class and order and genus and I'll nod and try to remember if the phylum comes before the genus and order and I'll massage my temple but that won't help me recall the exact order (why would it, it was such a long time ago that I read about these things and anyway massaging your temple is in no way related to your memory, no proven way at least) and I won't remember any of the facts Jens/Dad tells me from then on.

'Do you want to see your bedroom?' Johnny's voice comes from the darkness in the back. Karoline waits for Ali to make her way before following us towards the bedroom. Rasmus is walking behind everyone, filming. Two pairs of bunk beds. Sheets in one of those colours you forget as soon as you look away. Blankets folded at the foot of the beds. Johnny spreads the curtains open: a view of a concrete patio with a grill and a wooden bench by it.

'This is it. Bathroom is just next-door. Pretty self-explanatory stuff. The shower might take a few minutes if you want the hot water. It's cold here in the mornings so just bear that in mind.' Johnny is orbiting the room.

'That's the smoking area.' Johnny nods towards Ali. 'There's an ashtray by the grill.'

'I don't smoke.' Why did she lie?

'No use for the ashtray for you then.' He shows his white teeth.

'No.'

'Right. Well. Karoline – shall we go?'

'Ladies, get some rest. Big trip tomorrow – better get some sleep. Johnny and I will be here at 8 in the morning. We have the tickets for the bus.'

More buses.

'We should be at the camp a bit after noon. The boys arrived two days ago. I thought you were on the same flight.'

Johnny dangles his keys. He's probably dropping Rasmus off somewhere for him to get a bite to eat and then driving to Karoline's hotel where he'll make a joke with the receptionist and press the greasy 'up' button on the elevator and lean on the wall while Karoline swipes her key card and he'll head to the fridge (he already knows where it is, this isn't the first time he's been in her room) and get two bottles of *Imperial* and hold them in one hand while he fingers his keychain for the opener and pops them open and hands Karoline hers who takes a small sip as it would be un-lady-like to gulp it down like he is doing even though this is what she feels like doing as it's really hot and then he'll show her his white teeth and push her down on the bed touching his penis through the shorts while taking another sip of beer and she'll smile and undo his fly and he'll give her a nod – 'I approve' and she'll start sucking him off before he makes a sign for her to stop and turn around and take off her khaki shorts and slap her on the sun rash and fuck her from behind until he spunks inside her and takes another sip of beer.

'I almost forgot. I've left some food for you in the fridge and in the cupboard in case you're hungry. There's a microwave by the kettle. There's also bottled water in the fridge – remember to hydrate.'

Ali isn't looking at Karoline any more. I try to read her mind: travelling across the world to eat a meal out of the fucking microwave – taking two weeks' worth of holiday to sleep in a bunk bed – agreeing to take part in this absurd project to be told to hydrate and get some rest. Is there thumping in her temples? Is her brain swelling? Keys jangle.

'Bye then, ladies, see you tomorrow morning!'

Rasmus waves and the door closes.

Ali looks at me. What should I say? Should I tell her about my Johnny-and-Karoline-fucking theory? Maybe I'll ask her if she wants some water. The clock in the kitchen makes its fidgety sounds and there's nothing else can be heard apart from time passing. Ali gets up.

'Shall we see what culinary delights Karoline's left us?'

Outside, the jeep makes its trrrrrrrr sounds. Ham and cucumbers block the light from the fridge illuminating Ali's face.

'We've got...ham and tomatoes...and cucumbers...and pepperoni pizza. Can't believe Karoline – pepperoni pizza. What's in the cupboard – can you check?' The wooden door creaks when I open it. My mum would be disappointed if I told her they made us stay in an empty hostel.

'Sliced bread...instant coffee. That's it.'

'That's it?'

'That's it.'

'Screw this. Let's go and find something proper to eat?' She closes the fridge. 'What do you say, Vibekke?'

'Let's go.'

There's nothing out here. Where the hell has Karoline put us up? My phone doesn't have signal – I wonder if Mia's tried texting or calling. She must be worried as I promised to write when we landed. This was now what – four, five hours ago? She'll be worried. Then pissed off. She's probably placed her phone so that it rests against her screen at work – she'll see the message as soon as it comes and then text me back something like 'thank god, I was getting worried. Why didn't you write sooner? Are you OK?' and I wouldn't write back because it's too long of a story to tell or not really but I wouldn't want to write everything that's happened so far in a message as it'd be boring plus she doesn't know I ended up flying alone with Ali and that might trigger an entire new investigation ('why didn't you tell me earlier?' and 'do you like her?'), just after we finished the old one.

Houses here aren't like the houses back home. Right now I'd be having a *Tuborg* or a snack, not walking for hours, creating an ecosystem under my money pouch,

looking for food in a godforsaken residential area as if I were in a zombie apocalypse film. Houses here have columns outside. And open porches. And gravel in the driveway and cactuses and palm trees. Ali is marching a few steps ahead of me. Each time we reach a new street she speeds up towards the corner and looks around for clues.

‘How is this possible? How can there be literally nothing here?’ She’s sat down on the pavement and I follow suit. Blood in my thighs thumps like if you had a gum infection and could feel pulsing in your entire jaw. But in your legs.

‘There should be something soon. At least a 7/11 or a kiosk of any kind.’

‘Yeah – or a bar, or restaurant...’ She looks around. There’s no way there’s a bar or a restaurant here. I may not have travelled that much but it’s obvious. ‘Let’s try two more blocks and go back. We might have to accept pepperoni it is.’ She doesn’t smile when she says this. Two boys run pass us. They’re holding ice-creams. Ice-creams. Those triangular ones that look like slices of watermelon and taste of strawberries.

‘The pepperoni will have to wait.’ She gets up and we walk in the direction they came from. The rows of villas make space for a car park, surrounded by a white metal fence. We go in. The air condition system is circulating the smell of meat and plastic. My shoulder twitches from the changes in temperature. I wish Jens/Dad was here for this. So many new things to look at: pasta sauce brands he’d never have even heard of, fruit he wouldn’t know the names of, chocolate bars that’d leave him wondering where to begin. Ali picks a basket, places it on her forearm and we take the first aisle. She’s taller than the mums reaching for crisps and the mums foraging for the best carton of soup. She’s taller than the man with his head buried in radishes and the man pointing at the Marlboro Reds behind the counter.

She moves fast – as if she’s already been here. I follow her. I don’t care what we get, I wish we could spend as much time in here as possible. It’s cool and full of strange items. Maybe I am more like Jens/Dad than I realise. Ali is sneaking an apple under her shirt. She sees me looking. Nods towards the packets of nuts in front of me. I shake my head. What is she doing? She doesn’t move until I stuff pistachios in my money pouch.

We’re by the tills. The cashier takes our things out of the basket and places them in plastic bags without looking at us. Says something. I look at the till. 1500 *colones*. How much was that again in *kroner*? I don’t remember the rates.

‘Do you have money on you actually? I think I was momentarily blinded by hunger – I forgot my wallet.’ Crap. I need to reach for my money pouch. It’s all over.

'Sure.' The cashier is looking at me. Ali is looking at me. A baby in a pram and the rest of the fucking world is looking at me. I lift my shirt and unzip the money compartment, careful not to disturb the pistachios and make them rattle. I take two 1,000 *colones* notes and hand them to the cashier. He takes the money and gives me the change. We're out.

'Nice money pouch.'

'Yeah. Mia bought it for me. Apparently there are quite a few pickpockets around San Jose.'

'I see.'

We walk back in the direction we came from. Ali takes out her apple, rubs it on her shirt and takes a bite.

'So tell me about Mia.'

'What about her?'

'How did she end up being the one to buy you money pouches?'

'She's been travelling more than me; she knows about these things I guess.'

'I meant how did you two meet?'

'We met through my mum actually.'

'Through your mum? Really?'

'Yeah – well, kind of. They work in the same office. I was going to meet my mum for lunch one day but she was running late so I waited for her at reception. Mia was just going for lunch herself and passed by the waiting room where I was sitting. It was a random coincidence really, you know how these things happen.'

'Sure it was.'

'What do you mean?'

'She clearly chatted you up. Maybe your mum was late on purpose. Maybe she walked past you on purpose.'

'No – you think?' Does that mean she thinks I'm someone worth being chatted up?

'Definitely. Come on, - it's obvious.'

'I don't know. Maybe.' She stubs her cigarettes with her sandal. 'You two look like a cute couple.'

'Thanks.'

'Let's sit here.'

I take the pistachios out.

'I haven't done this since I was at school.'

'It tastes better when you don't pay for it, doesn't it?'

She throws the apple core and lights a cigarette. My turn to ask questions.

'Why did you tell Johnny you don't smoke?'

'I don't like people knowing things about me.' Fair enough. 'Especially the ones I don't like.'

'You didn't like him?'

'Did you?'

She rumbles in the plastic bag and takes the bottle of tequila out. She places it on the bench between us and digs for the lemon and salt. When she finds them, she lifts them to eye level in her hands.

'A-ha. Gotcha. Let's get this happy camp started.'

'We don't have a knife though.'

'A knife? What for?'

'The lemon.'

'We'll manage, I think.'

She places the bottle in her lap and unscrews it. I hope this isn't one of those cases when tourists in foreign countries are sold counterfeit alcohol, which is just flavoured medicinal alcohol, and then you wake up after drinking it and you're blind. I read about that somewhere. Or was it one of mum's warnings? Don't drink the tap water, don't eat anything with meat in it as it might have tiny, miniscule maggots, remember to put sun cream on your earlobes – everyone always forgets the earlobes and it can really hurt - wash after you go in the sea. It may well be.

Ali licks the skin connecting her thumb with the rest of her hand and sprinkles salt on the wet patch. Her tongue is the colour of fresh steak. Maybe we should've eaten before starting on the tequila.

'Ready?' I'm not. I wet my hand with my lips and let her do the salt pouring. I wonder if my tongue is as pink as hers. She's watching me.

'What about the lemon?'

'Just suck on it. It'll be fine.' She licks the salt, takes a swig from the bottle and pierces the lemon's peel with her teeth, squeezing her eyes tight as she sucks on the juice inside. 'Amazing. Exactly what I needed.'

I look around me. Two old women are walking down the road with their arms crossed, bags full of shopping on each side. Just our luck – I would've killed to see a single person before and ask them for directions (with the help of the phrase book squished in my money pouch) and now that we're public drinking, they show up. I wonder if there are laws about this here. I can just see myself trying to convince a chubby prison guard to let me make an international call and reaching my mum and telling her I'm in prison and she just wouldn't believe it. I'll be like that girl in Orange Is the New Black only I'd never choose the guy from American Pie over Alex. And yeah, also, I'd be in a Central American prison with a mortality rate as high as unemployment levels in Eastern Europe circa 2008. Jens/Dad told me. I wonder if he'll visit me in prison. That would mean he'd need to leave his living room for at least a week. And speak to many strangers. And renew his passport. He'd be happy to see the supermarkets though.

'Are you having any?' I forgot I'm still holding the bottle. She lights a new cigarette.

'Yes. Yes, I am. Sorry.' The salt burns my tongue. The tequila burns my throat and the lemon makes my eyes tear. It all makes sense though. Sitting on this bench in this place that I couldn't leave with the sun hidden somewhere above and the past hidden like it's never existed. Sucking on a lemon together with Ali. The tequila settles in my belly.

'What were you thinking about?'

'That I was feeling happy.'

'Just don't tell Karoline. And definitely don't do it on camera.'

Another swig of tequila. Another cigarette end stubbed under the sandals. A lizard zig-zags its way onto a rock, stares at us, and disappears.

'I always feel ecstatic when I just arrive in a new place – the world almost seems more possible, more open. Then the brain acclimatises and it's back to normal.'

She hands me the bottle and I take it.

'And what's back to normal for you?'

'You know – the usual.'

I don't really know. My usual is most likely very different from hers. Unless her usual also involves spending a good chunk of time deciding on whether she wants coffee before her shower or shower before coffee or staying in bed and dreading phoning the staffing agency and asking them for work or having nothing to do for five hours at a time and waiting for Mia to come home from work. It all seems far away now. I don't say anything. She continues:

'People are the same everywhere is what I mean. It's disappointing. And boring.'

Her nostrils flare – a signal I shouldn't ask more? Also, I'm pretty boring. I wonder when she'll realise if she hasn't already.

'Makes sense.' She nods.

'And you? What's your normal like?' Here we go. Prepare to be disappointed.

'I don't really know. I do wish my normal was different though.'

'Me too. And that couldn't be a good sign.' She laughs.

It's many hours later and the world is turning. The tequila bottle is by the rock where the lizard was. No sign of him or her now. The sun is setting and the sky is the colour of a Fanta can. We're by the front gates. Ali hands me the plastic bags and searches for the key in her pocket. The colours of the evening are changing faster than they should be. Fanta cans, turquoise, bottom of the sea. The lock clicks and we're in. Ali flicks the lights by the door.

'Hello, home.'

'Hello, hello.'

I throw the bags on the couch and she laughs when an orange rolls off under the couch.

'A gift. For the next inhabitants of the Happiness Hostel.'

She makes a bow. I split open the pouch with the stolen pistachios and throw them in the air like confetti. 'Now what do we have to eat? I'm ravenous.'

'Did you just say "ravenous"?'

'I did indeed say "ravenous".' We laugh at the word. 'Hell – voracious.'

I sink between the plastic bags and the cushions and Ali rests her chin on my shoulder peeking in. We've bought way too many things. I can feel the warmth of her head on my ear.

'We've got: oranges – minus one, pineapple, some kind of salsa sauce, steaks – I really don't think we should have the steaks at this point, they've been in the sun for quite some time now – baguette...' She reaches over my tummy and my money pouch and grabs the baguette. She speaks with her mouth full.

'And what else, what else?'

'We've also got: Haribos, avocados, and a packet of Marlboro Lights.' She smacks the baguette on the table.

'Fuck this. You know what I feel like?'

'What?'

'Pepperoni pizza.'

'You have to be kidding me.'

She's already by the fridge.

'How does this work, I don't get it. Oh wait, it's fine, it's on.' She places the pizza in the oven and slams the door. 'Karoline, you win.'

Dark. There are sounds coming from the bathroom. I can't close my eyes. Nausea is already building inside and I imagine strange insects crawling under the bottom bunk where I'm lying. The switch in the bathroom clicks.

'For fuck's sake.' Ali must've hurt her knee when she was coming in. I'm on my side facing the wall – the only position that makes me feel the least sick. I set my alarm before bed. Still no signal. Still no contact with Mia or mum or Jens/Dad. Not that I want to be updating them all the time. But I know they'll worry.

Something's shaking. My stomach really can't take this right now. Ali's collapsed behind me. Hot alcohol breath on the nape of my neck. Pelvic bone digging. Did she get so drunk as to not realise what she's doing? Should I move? If I don't move and she doesn't realise what she's doing and wakes up in the middle of the night she'll wonder why I let her in my bed. If I do move and she's not drunk this would be as big a rejection as it can get, this entire trip would be uncomfortable. Her arm moves over my side and holds me where the money pouch ecosystem was. Her face is in my hair. I don't move.

The waiting room is sticky with July sun. A fan nailed to the ceiling circles air in between its plastic blades. The receptionist is staring at the screen in front of him, his forehead covered in droplets of sweat like a condensed window. I try not to move. Today's *Berlingske*. Two issues of *The Economist*. One issue of *National Geographic*. 'Our air-conditioning system is currently out of order. We apologise for the inconvenience. An engineer has been sent for.' How does it help me to know that an engineer has been sent for, how does that affect my situation? The backs of my calves are wet from where they were touching the leather chair. The table is right next to the large windows and the sun shines above the roof of the building opposite. I fan my face with the *National Geographic*. It helps.

'Your mother's just pinged me on the chat. She's running late in a meeting. She apologises.'

He goes back to his *Solitaire* or whatever it is receptionists do. Heat radiates from my body and merges with the heat around me.

'Is there anywhere else I could wait? Or are there any blinds or anything like that?'

'I'm afraid not. She shouldn't be very long at all.'

Fine. Fine. My stomach rumbles with the force of two slices of toast five hours ago. A shadow blocks the light. A woman stands in front of the window.

'*Hej*, I'm sorry to bother you– but have we met before?'

I look up and shade my eyes with my hand. She has the slightest accent. Sun behind her silhouette. Tailored trousers and Converse sneakers is all I can see.

'Hej, I don't think we have, no.'

'I could've sworn I'd seen you before.'

I shake my head, my hand still across my eyebrows. I'm annoyed by the heat. I'm annoyed by the questioning.

'Not that I recall, sorry.'

She stands above me with her hands in her pockets without moving.

'Ah, now I know. You're Pernille's daughter, aren't you? She has pictures of you on her desk.'

I look at the woman again.

'God, does she?'

I wonder which ones. Me with boy-short hair climbing the Christmas tree when I was seven. Me naked on the beach. Me with my hair parted. Me with a choker on my neck and an Aqua t-shirt on.

'No, nothing embarrassing.'

She seems to have guessed what I was thinking.

'They're quite sweet, actually. Cute.'

I don't know what to say to that.

'Thanks.'

She looks as if she's about to leave but instead takes her hand out of her pocket and offers it to me. It's cold and soft and hard. I can only imagine how mine must feel. The opposite, pretty much.

'I'm Mia.'

'Vibekke. Nice to meet you.'

'Ah, yes, now I even remember your name. Your mum talks about you, you know.'

'I'm sure she does.'

We both laugh. The receptionist clicks his mouse and sighs. The fan squeaks on every three spins. Onetwothree. Squeak. Onetwothree. Squeak. Onetwothree. Squeak.

'It's really hot today, huh.'

'Yeah. I was just thinking perhaps it wasn't the best day for a visit.'

'With the air-con and all.'

'Yeah.'

'Listen, why don't you come to the canteen with me? I was just getting lunch. There's air-conditioning there.'

There's nothing in the world I'd rather do than get food and cold air right now.

'I don't know. I'm meant to be meeting my mum for lunch.'

'Pernille is in a meeting with Mads who just came back from Germany. They're not going to be done for a while, trust me.'

Screw it. It's not like I have anything else to do but be here.

'Why not, in that case.'

'Come, I'll get you a pass.'

I get up and try to wipe my palms on my shorts so she doesn't see. We stand by the receptionist's desk until he prints a sticker with my name on it. 'Escort required at all times.' She's taller than me and her hands are veiny on the counter. She sees me looking and smiles. The receptionist's movements are delayed somehow. Maybe he wanted me to suffer together with him through the Great Waiting Room Heat. Maybe his lunch break is due soon but the girl from the next shift is taking ages changing and he's starving. Maybe there isn't another move for him to make with his cards and there just isn't anywhere he could place that queen of hearts.

'Thanks.'

Sticker on my chest, I walk next to Mia towards the canteen through bright lights and wide window doors.

'Wow, there are a lot of people here today.'

'Yeah. It's some kind of Corp day. All these people from the US office have come. We can get a quiet spot over there. Let's get some food first.'

She touches my elbow and smiles. White teeth on pink lips. She has a small beauty mark by her lip. Freckles.

'I'm starving.'

'Me too. Water?'

She pours me a glass while we queue. Bones and veins when she lifts the jug.

'Have you been here before?'

'I have, yes. I visit sometimes.'

'I haven't seen you before. Apart from in your mum's photos, of course.'

'Of course.'

'I should stop saying that, I guess. At what point does it become freaky?'

'We haven't reached that point yet.'

'Good. There's time then.'

I laugh. I get what she gets. Chicken breast and salad. Diet coke.

'I always get this on Tuesdays.'

I follow her to a hidden table behind a plant.

'Ta-da.'

Through the window, I see the pointed roofs of Copenhagen, sweaty and blurry in the heat. Copenhagen's architecture is designed purely for winter. It looks best then.

'That's a nice view.'

'It is, isn't it?'

'So. Tell me about yourself. Tell me about the girl with the short hair climbing a Christmas tree.'

'Jesus, does she have that one on there? For the record, I was decorating the tree. Not climbing it.'

'Sure.'

She laughs again and her eyes grow small and wrinkly like half-moons when she does.

'Whatever the reason, you are on that tree.'

'I am. It's true.'

'So what else do you do apart from climbing trees? Or is that a habit of the past.'

'It is. Yes. And not much, to be honest. Nothing more than what my mum's been telling your office.'

'Tell me anyway.'

'OK...I have a cat. She's called Monkey.'

'Monkey? Wow.'

'Yeah. She's a special one.'

Is it too awkward to show her a picture?

'Do you have a picture of her?'

'I do, actually.'

I take my phone from my bag and show her the screen. Mia moves my hand closer to her and squints a bit.

'She's adorable.'

She leaves her hand on my hand a tad longer.

'Well. Adorable and naughty.'

'OK. So: tree climber slash decorator, adorable and naughty cat owner...what else.'

'Amateur kayaker.'

She nods her head and repeats it under her breath as if she's continuing the list.

'I don't know. Playlist maker?'

She laughs.

'Playlist maker, I like that.'

'What about you?'

'Me. I'm not that interesting.'

'Really? Compared to the cat owner and tree decorator?'

She laughs with her half-moons again.

'Believe it or not, no. Let's see. Office worker? Corporate designer? Paella master?'

'Paella master?'

'Well, I'm known for my paella, apparently. My friends swear it's the best thing they've ever had. I don't trust them one bit.'

'Sounds like they might mean it. I'm sure it's delicious.'

She smiles a low smile looking at the table.

'You should try it sometime.'

'Sure. If your friends ever leave any leftovers, and you're willing to send a Tupperware sample via my mum...'

'How about we cut the middle man – or woman, in this case – let me cook for you sometime.'

Did she just ask me out? Or does she mean it in a friendly kind of way. She's looking at me waiting for my reply with Copenhagen behind her.

'Sounds good. I'd love to try your paella.'

She laughs. God, did I just make some kind of god-awful innuendo?

'Excellent. How about Friday?'

'Friday sounds great.'

'Great.'

Half-moons. She cuts a piece of chicken.

'Do you cook?'

It's still dark. I'm not at home and I couldn't go there even if I wanted to. My eyes feel swollen like poached pears and it takes the nausea about 4.7 seconds to kick in. Ali's

even breaths count the passing minutes behind my ear. One in, one out. I let my eyelids close over my eye-pears. Her hand is still holding me, clammy and soft.

When I wake up again, Ali's hand isn't there anymore. The whole of Ali is missing. There are voices. I raise myself up. The inside of my mouth and throat itches with thirst. A group of wolf skin-wearing berserkers march through the tundra of my brain – thumping and shouting and poking my cranium with spears and knives and fists, delusional and violent. I'm sticky on my armpits. Karoline's voice muffles the sounds of the (tequila) war:

'We need to leave right now, I'm afraid – or we'll miss the bus.' Someone's pacing on the wooden floor. More talking. Someone's coming nearer. It's Ali.

'Johnny and Karoline are here to pick us up.' Her voice is deep with tar stuck on the cilia in her throat from the packet of cigarettes she smoked yesterday.

'Crap. OK. Coming.' When did she get up? Were they knocking on the door? Does she remember she fell asleep on my bed with her hand on my waist? I can't tell by her expression. She coughs. The cilia are attempting to free themselves.

Ali picks her clothes and her towel from the floor and stuffs them in the top bit of her rucksack. She presses it down with her knee to be able to close it again. Little bones and muscles respond by her kneecap. I start gathering my things: a shirt, my phone by the pillow (I thought I'd set the alarm?), my shorts. I tuck the shirt in the side pocket of my bag, put on the jeans and look for my bra. The berserkers roar.

Fuck off, bersekers. Where is the bra? My other one is somewhere at the bottom of my things. There's a knock on the door.

'May I come in?'

Karoline. Great. There's way too much happening right now. She comes in without waiting for a reply. She looks at me and Ali. Her hair is still wet.

'Morning, Vibekke – are you ready?'

I try to reply but my throat is dry. I cough.

'Almost.'

'Great – as we need to get going soon. Like now, more like it. Was there a problem with your alarm? Ali mentioned.'

'Yeah – I think it must still be on Danish time or something. I don't know.' I lift the blanket – no bra.

'These things were in the living room – thought they must belong to one of you.' She holds up my bra and my money pouch, pinching each with two fingers. My cheeks feel warm. Ali turns around and I can see she's trying to hide her smile. The memory of me explaining to her that I'd enjoy my pizza slice more without a bra. Oh god. What else have I said? And does Karoline think something's happened? Does it matter?

'Oh – yeah – these are mine. I must've forgotten them in the living room.' We must both also stink of booze. Karoline stares at me for a while.

'No worries – is that everything?'

'I think so.'

More staring. I need to put on my bra but Karoline doesn't seem to get the message.

'Well, then. I'll be in the jeep with Johnny and Rasmus. The coach leaves in 15 minutes.'

The door doesn't fully close behind her. Ali smiles at me. I'm still sitting on the edge of the bed.

'What a morning, huh.'

'Yeah.'

She lifts her rucksack and heads to the door without looking at me.

I put my bra on and push my elbows behind my back to work the straps, spread roll-on deodorant on my armpits and squeeze my head through the same tank top as I wore yesterday. I don't have time to look for a new one right now. Plus, who can tell: it doesn't smell and it's black.

I run out the door. Everyone's in the car already.

'Can you lock up?'

I turn the key over until it makes the right noise.

Ali hasn't mentioned last night. Maybe she's as hungover as I am and doesn't feel like talking. Maybe it's because Karoline is here. She's sitting in the seat in front of us, playing *Candy Crush Saga*. I can see her pale thumbs popping virtual candies across the

screen through the crack between the two seats. Ali is staring at the passing scenery. I don't know what to think about last night. Or I do but I don't want to. I liked eating pizza with her. I liked the warmth of her body behind me. I liked how her breath left my earlobe condensed. I liked the softness of her hand on my lower stomach.

Ali looks at the screen of her iPhone and flicks something with her thumb. I wonder if my messages from back home are coming through. Fuck. My phone. I pat my thighs where my pockets are. I check every compartment of my small rucksack. I lift myself up to see if I've been sitting on it. It's not here. Ali turns to me.

'Everything OK?'

'I think I might have left my phone back at the hostel.'

'You sure? Maybe you put it in your rucksack?'

'I don't think so. Maybe. I don't know.'

Karoline's freckled face pops in the gap in front of us.

'What's happening?'

'Vi's left her phone at the hostel.'

'Are you sure? You checked everywhere?'

'Well, I can't check the big rucksack until we've stopped. It could be there. Although I'm pretty sure I left it on the pillow.'

'OK, OK. Let's not panic. We'll wait until we reach Samara and if it's not there, we'll call Johnny. I'm sure he wouldn't mind popping back and checking for it.' Pause. 'Plus, it's not that you'll have any reception at the camp anyway. So it's not that you need it necessarily.'

Thanks, Karoline.

I wonder when I'll be able to contact Mia and Jens/Dad and mum. I wonder if Ali is going to bring up last night. I wonder if my phone will turn up. I wonder where we are and where we're going. I wonder when the headache will stop.

My phone wasn't in the big rucksack either. I knew it. Hopefully it's still in that bed and Johnny will find it. A new Johnny is waiting for us in his jeep by the road where the bus dropped us off. Although I haven't experienced much happiness on this happifying trip

so far (anxiety and hangover mainly), they have managed to organise the most complex route for us. The new Johnny introduces himself to us.

'It will only take about 10 minutes, it's very near.'

New Johnny starts the jeep and we drive through Samara. Villas that are hotels. Market. Ocean. Topless men and women in bikinis walking up and down. Greens and yellows and reds. The sun shines on top of us no longer obstructed by clouds or smog. When we exit the village, we drive on a mud road surrounded by jungle on one side and farms on the other. Vegetation I'm not used to. Sounds I'm not used to. Rasmus has his window down and films as we drive. The jeep stops. We're on the bank of a river. Or something. Sand dunes and cyan sky on the other side.

'They'll pick you up here.'

Who's they? And where are we going?

Ali comes out of the jeep and sits on a rock. Lights a cigarette. Karoline is pacing near her.

'I thought you didn't smoke?' Karoline is shading her squinting eyes with her hand.

'Oh you did?' Ali exhales a grey cloud that disperses in the air. 'I smoke sometimes.'

New Johnny watches this exchange resting against the front of the jeep. He takes a packet of Marlboro Reds and lights one himself. Catches me looking at him.

'Want one?' He hands me the open pack and I take one.

Karoline shakes her head at this and pretends to be typing on her phone, she's not moving her thumbs fast enough to be texting. The road from where we came is shaded by tall trees and bushes. Rasmus is ankle deep in the water, slowly turning around to film the scenery. He stops and looks at the film; the world repeated in the screen.

'Here he is.' New Johnny takes a quick drag before stepping on the cigarette end and heading towards the water. On the opposite side, another guy waves at us. There's something pink and long by his feet. A kayak. They yell at each other something in Spanish. New Johnny laughs and Kayak Man pushes the kayak in the water, bends down and jumps on it while balancing it with both arms. A paddle is attached to the kayak on a

string and Kayak Man pushes himself into the deep of the river with it. We all watch him paddle in silence. A minute passes and New Johnny is ankle-deep in the water, helping Kayak Man out. They shake hands and joke. Kayak Man looks in our direction.

'Hello. I'm Fabian.' He approaches me and stretches his arm for me to shake his hand.

'Hi, I'm Vibekke.'

'Ah – Vibekke – Morten and Tommy told me about you.'

He doesn't say what they've said.

'And you must be Ali.'

'That's me.'

Ali gets up from her rock and shakes his hand, her cigarette between her lips.

'These are bad for you, you know.' He smiles when he says it but I can still tell it annoys her.

'Right.'

'And you remember Rasmus?'

'Nice ride.'

Fabian laughs.

'You'll get to try it out for yourself in a minute.'

We'll be crossing the river. Via a pink kayak made of plastic steered by a man called Fabian.

'OK. How many bags do we have?' He walks towards the back of the jeep and takes our rucksacks – one in each arm. His muscles resemble an old marathon-runner's.

'I'll take these to the other side first. I can probably fit one person as well.' He looks at me.

'Oh. OK. Sure.'

Before I've even taken a step, Karoline's white body is coming towards me and I'm embraced by freckles and the smell of figs and milk.

'Have a wonderful time – don't worry about your phone, we'll sort it out. We'll be in touch via Fabian.' She hugs me again. 'Enjoy it, enjoy it.'

Ali is watching us from behind Karoline's back.

'All ready.' Fabian's placed the rucksacks in the middle of the kayak and is waiting for me to hop in.

'Hop in.'

He's holding the bow and I sit at the rear facing the bank with my back to the sand dunes. He pushes the kayak and jumps on it, facing me. Starts paddling. Ali is looking at me and I look back as we float further and further away.

'Almost there – see.' I twitch my neck to turn around. 'We keep a calendar with the tides. This is the deepest it'll get. It's as shallow as up to your knees depending on which hour of the day you go. Easier to spot the crocodiles.' The stern behind me pierces itself into the sand with a shake and a tsssstthhh-sound.

'Are there crocodiles in this river?' I try to sound as neutral about this as I can. He smiles.

'There are, yes. Crocodiles are some of the dangers we have to protect the turtle eggs from. Poachers are the main trouble though.' He frowns but doesn't elaborate. Jumps out and holds the kayak. 'This is one of the beaches famous for its turtle population. The mother turtles lay their eggs here every year. And every year, these get sold on the black market. Watch your step.'

I balance myself and look at the other side. Ali and Karoline are saying goodbye. I pretend to look for something in my bag.

'I'll be right back.' He goes back on the pink kayak. 'Can you give me a little push?' I push him into the deep. Drag my big rucksack a bit further away from the water. No crocodiles as of yet. I climb the sand dune. The delta of the crocodile river foams and bubbles itself into the ocean. There are rocks that grow into a cliff to the left. Ocean and beach everywhere else. I'm sticky and hot. By the time I'm down from the dune again, Ali is getting off the kayak. Fabian is telling her something as I approach.

'...I hope I can do that in the US. They have the best course at UCLA. That's the dream, kind of.'

She rolls her eyes when he's not looking.

Karoline is making signs at us from the other side. Probably about my phone or when we're going to talk next. She waves before getting in the jeep with New Johnny. I wave back this time. The jeep reverses and they're gone. When he's back with Rasmus, Fabian lifts the kayak on his back. He looks like a giant turtle. The skin on his arms is the same tone as Mia's. My chest feels heavy as if I've smoked a packet of Marlboro Reds. Heat on my forehead and my arms and my ears and behind my knees.

'Shall we? It's not far at all.'

The lights in Fabian's tree cabin are out and we're whispering, our voices just loud enough to reach the faces around the fire. Creatures are squeaking in the trees behind the hut, waves are crashing beyond the dune and branches snap and crack from the heat of the flames. I inspect my legs – I can't tell what's a mosquito bite and what's a shadow. Ali's thigh is next to my thigh on the bench and I feel the warmth from her body like a human atomic reactor. It's strange to think that something is always moving inside us – that blood is pumping, that hearts are thumping, that slimy dark organs are producing slimy dark liquids that catalyse and break things down and speed things up and equilibrate other things, everything gradually slowing when you die, in slow motion, solidifying. Maybe once everything else has shut down a tiny forgotten organ still continues to secrete something, powered by its own secret stash of blood. Or does it happen all at once? Ali stirs, her leg almost touching mine.

'Can't believe we don't have marshmallows.'

Morten nods to himself opposite us.

'And chocolate, for smores.'

I'm not quite sure what smores are but Ali is nodding this time. I never got why everyone's so obsessed with marshmallows. Melting them. Putting them in hot chocolate. Eating them as they are. They don't taste of anything.

'See, I think this is why we've been sent here.' Thomas pokes the flames with a stick. 'Is it normal that we're in this beautiful place under more stars than I've ever seen in my life and we have nothing else in the world to worry about apart from getting up and saving some turtles, yet we've still identified something that's missing? Something we want?'

Sparks fly into the night like the beaks of miniature red birds. 'Does everyone have that or is it just us, the Unhappy Ones?'

We all stay silent and watch the flames. Rasmus is in the shadows behind us with his camera. A fluffy microphone hangs over our heads, recording the conversation below. I try to distinguish each sound around me: the cries from the jungle, the shells and the rocks summoned back into the sea, the movements that you can feel but not hear or see, like the ghosts of prehistoric humanoids lurking in the darkness.

'It's normal, I think. To want more. We started out in tribes, in groups, we conquered territories to get more food and resources. Those who expanded and moved on survived. Those who didn't – they were left behind. Wanting more is how we made it in the first place.'

Ali also stirs the fire with her charred branch. Where did everyone get the sticks? I don't know what to do with my hands. I didn't want marshmallows to begin with so this whole conversation seems a bit pointless. I mean, yeah, sure. We all want what we can't have, no need to have a discussion about it. I hear Rasmus. Soon, the camera is pointing in my direction. Ali looks different in the night. I don't know. Older, maybe. Unreal. I don't move. I hope he moves on.

'I agree. But we don't need to do that anymore. To expand in order to survive. Are we genetically tuned to be discontented?'

'We always want marshmallows.' Maybe this made more sense in my head.

'What?'

'We always want marshmallows – we always do want more. Whether it's drilling for oil in the Arctic or buying soil from China to dump it in the sea and build houses on top of it. It's all the same. Marshmallows. Nothing's changed.'

No one says anything back. Loud screeches come from somewhere in the forest. Maybe a tropical bird is attacking another. Maybe a monkey is starting a family. Our hut is only a few metres away but it might as well not exist. It might as well be a black hole in the cosmos and the whole world is sucked into its vacuum and we don't know it and just continue our business as usual chatting about wanting melted sugar and feeling the heat from the fire and the body of the person next to us and thinking our thoughts and blinking our eyes and thumping, thumping, thumping.

'I don't know if I buy the whole "survival of the fittest" thing. When it comes to society at least. I don't think that's what drives us.'

'What drives us then?'

'Affection. Love. Emotion.'

Thomas thinks about this answer.

'But what about psychopaths? What drives them if they can't feel those things?'

'And ambition?'

'I'm not saying this is universal. But I think the majority of people want to be acknowledged by another human. To be made to feel like the world is what they imagine it to be by allowing this other person to share it and make the illusion real.'

Tiny muscles in Morten's face flinch and move. Or maybe it's an illusion from the fire, like my mosquito bites. I wonder why he's here. Why he is unhappy. I wonder if that friend he talked about, the one he bunked school with, I wonder if that was the person that he wanted to share the illusion of his world with. Is Mia my person? Am I hers? Maybe I need to establish my own illusion of the world before starting to look for a person to share that with. Or do we all have that illusion ingrained? Morten continues.

'It's when you carry the burden of your illusion alone that you start wishing for things. Or people. But they're a substitute for the real thing. They can't help you. And so you go on searching until one day you stop.'

We stay silent. I can feel Ali moving her hand by her thigh (and my thigh) but I'm afraid to look, even with my peripheral vision. I'm afraid it might mean something. I'm afraid it might not. I'm afraid it might be on camera. I can feel the blood in my neck. I can feel the weight of the atmosphere pressing against my chest. The heat from the day trapped inside the earth beneath my sandals. All the emotions I've ever felt emerging and banging and wanting to get out and race around my head in chaos like space debris or tribal dancers. I turn my chin towards Ali. She's watching me. She knows.

Morning. Sunlight through branches and mosquito nets. The sheet is damp with sweat. It smells of fried eggs and dirt and sunscreen. I get up and poke my legs outside the net. Everyone's gone already. Unrolled sleeping bags. iPods. Paperbacks. I walk up to the

open balcony where the water tank is. Blue ocean and blue sky behind the turtle nests. Palm trees. Slight breeze. Nothing else. I stretch.

I balance myself as I go down the steep stairs. When I reach the bottom, I'm greeted by a chubby short woman shaking a pan. She smiles when she sees me but doesn't say anything.

'Ah, Vibekke, good morning, good morning.' Fabian is sitting on a chair under the stairs, petting a little dog in his lap.

'Hi – good morning.'

'This is Estelle – she's our cook. She travels here from the village.'

'Estelle – hello.'

She smiles back but doesn't say anything again.

'You best improve your Spanish if you want a chat – she doesn't speak much English. How did you sleep?'

'Well, I slept well.'

'Top or bottom?'

'Excuse me?'

'Bunk. Top or bottom?'

'Oh. Bottom. The one in the middle.'

'Bottoms are better. Say hi to Bono. I got him to guard the camp.'

Bono yelps and squeaks, trying to release his tiny sausage body from Fabian's grip. I walk around the wall separating the kitchen area and the common area. Morten and Thomas are sitting at the corner of the table playing cards. How long was I asleep for?

'There she is. Good morning.' They cheer when they see me. So glad I didn't have brothers. I don't know if I could handle the constant noise. Rasmus and Ali are nowhere to be seen.

'What time is it? How long was I asleep for?'

Thomas looks somewhere above me.

'It is now 11am. We let you sleep. We thought you must be suffering from some serious jet lag.'

'Thanks.' I guess. 'Are we only having breakfast now?'

'Breakfast?' Thomas smiles. 'Estelle is making us lunch. Breakfast was at 7.'

'At 7?'

'Life starts early here. Ahead of the heat of the day. That's what Fabian says.'

They give each other a look but I don't ask. I sit down by Morten.

'Where's Ali?'

'She's gone exploring. Should be back soon.'

'And Rasmus?'

'Stalking her, I imagine.'

Fabian pops from around the corner.

'When Ali's back, we'll go through the turtle stuff.'

'Sounds good.'

I take a breath and inhale the heavy heat and fry. I get up and walk around the drying towels and the bench to get to the sink where my toothbrush is. The sharp bottoms of wasps poke out from inside the sinkhole. They buzz away in anger when I start the water. The place looks different from yesterday. Maybe I was too tired to notice anything properly. To the left, opposite the shower room and toilet, is an open field with nothing growing on it with a single cow, her skin stretched on her ribs. She looks at me before going back to munching on what looks like watermelon crust. Beyond the field, jungle. On the other side, palm trees and turtle nests surrounded by wire. Sand dunes and vegetation hiding the ocean. I gargle.

'How did you sleep?'

Ali appears from behind me just when I'm spitting toothpaste foam in the basin. She's wrapped in a towel, all freckles and droplets of water reflecting the sun.

'Good. Really good. I didn't wake up in the night or anything.'

'Do you usually?'

I want to tell her of the times my eyes would just open in the middle of the night already adjusted to the darkness, how I'd be nauseous from the speed of my heart beat, how the panic would paralyse my fingers and my forearms and my shoulders and my toes, how I'd stare at the ceiling and think of still waters and pastel colours in order to calm down, how I'd be alone.

'No. But you know, being in a new place and everything.'

She squeezes her hair dry. She has a mole on the tendon where her arm connects to her chest.

'I'm going upstairs to change. I think Fabian wanted to brief us after lunch. The water is amazing by the way.'

She's gone and I wash the corners of my mouth from the toothpaste.

'Almuerzo.'

Estelle is carrying a plate in each hand. Thomas brings cutlery and cups – plastic ones in different colours, like the ones you'd get at a six-year-old's birthday party at McDonalds.

'Finally, I'm starving.'

Morten puts the cards away and I sit next to him.

'Grab a plate.'

I pick the one nearest to me just when Ali sits down. Fried egg and rice and beans. Goopy squash in the corner. Tiny red ants are crawling along the wood on the table.

'Eat fast before the ants get there.'

Morten was watching me watch the ants.

'This must be a local speciality.' Ali smiles as she pulls her plate in front of her. I can still see her tendon mole. Fabian sits down next to her.

'Have you met Bono yet?'

He barks when he hears his name.

'He's a bit on edge, I think he has worms.'

'This is the volleyball court. Very popular when we have more volunteers at the camp. We've even held tournaments. It's a lot of hard work, looking after the turtles, and there isn't a hell lot to do around here. A team sport always brings everyone together.'

Fabian is pointing at the net strung on two wooden poles in the sand. Rasmus follows the movements of his arm with the camera.

'Although we don't have an actual volleyball here, they do sell them in town if you wanted to have a go.'

He walks up the dune and we follow him. Ocean and sand and driftwood in front of us.

'We walked here from over there yesterday.' He points to the left. 'Where we crossed with the kayak. This beach is surrounded by the river, same on the other side.'

We look at the other side. Large cliff in the distance.

'The beach stretches from where we were yesterday to that cliff over there.'

Great. So the only way out is through the crocodile infested river.

'No one comes here, really. Only locals looking to escape the tourists sometimes. But they know about the ocean here; there are very strong currents. Other than that, it's just us. And the poachers.'

The sun burns my ears. Ali is looking ahead at the water, her hair already dry and waving in the breeze.

'I can take you on a tour later, show you where the best spots for swimming are.' He's talking to Ali.

'I already did a little exploration of my own. But thanks.'

Fabian frowns and shades his eyes from the sun with his hand. He's combed his hair backwards for the camera.

'Right. And here are the nests.'

There is a gate in the wired fence. Why the wire?

'Why the wire?'

'It's to keep predators away. And the turtles in.'

'In?'

Predators?

'When they hatch, they'll disperse. Start crawling everywhere. Trying to find the ocean. That's why we monitor every fifteen minutes. They can die in less than that time if they hatch and don't get to the water immediately.'

'Does it happen often?'

'What?'

'Them dying.'

'You know, sometimes. Sometimes people forget to check on them. Playing cards or having lunch or whatever. By the time they come, the little turtles would have died out in the sun. We find them half-crawled up on the fence, having tried to reach the water – they feel it, they feel the ocean, they know which way to go. It's their innate feeling. They dry out like dates, their little feet hanging. It's sad, very sad.'

I imagine the bodies of the turtles stuck in the wire, yellow and rough like sand. Much like what my ears must be at this point. I should've put sunscreen on them. Ali moves a step closer to me, her arms crossed on her chest.

'But let's not think about that. If we do catch them on time, this is what you do. You call me. You take gloves and a bucket from the shed next to the kitchen. And the notepad with the pen. You run to the ocean. Get some water in the bucket, maybe three-four fingers deep, make sure you get all the turtles in, then check the number on the pole by the nest where they hatched from – you see the numbers – this one is nineteen. Get the bucket and run down the beach – there are wooden poles with numbers – go to the area with the nest number and release them there. This is where they were born. They have to be brought to that same place. Go near the water, near it, not in it, and tip the bucket. They'll make their way into the water. It's very important you don't help them. Even if you see one struggling to walk or one that keeps getting washed up back on shore. If you help them, they'll die in the ocean. They have to do this on their own. You count how many ended up in the water, and write it down in the journal.'

Ali and I stay silent. The camera turns towards us. Rasmus is seeking our reactions. How does it feel not to be able to help? Or to be helped?

'Most will make it though, don't worry. Oh, and another thing – no mosquito spray when it's your turn to mind them. It's bad for them. You can look for discarded

wasp nests by the palm trunks and burn them – keeps the mosquitoes away. Any questions?’

Fabian didn’t mention this part. I dig the sand like the sand digs under my nails: slowly, painfully. The hole is already knee-deep and I scoop the cold earth one handful at a time. We spoke earlier but now we’re silent. Just digging. Thomas and Ali lie flat on their bellies as if they were swimming. I’m crouched by the hole, my ankles hurting from the weight of my body being in the same position for so long. I try to rest on my knees but the sand digs in the skin and itches. The sheet above our heads shades our temples from the sun but there’s no breeze, only sticky air.

It’s eight a.m. and we’re digging for dead turtles.

‘Anything?’ Fabian is standing above me, the black hairs on his toes half-buried in the sand.

‘Nothing yet.’

‘Almost there now. Call me when you get to them.’

He leaves through the small gate. Soon, the sound of machete on bark scares off two birds and Morten. Thomas stops digging.

‘Why is he not helping us?’

He looks in the direction of the yard. Ali throws sand in the pile she’s made next to her body.

‘That’s what he has us for. Why would he?’

‘I very much doubt this is a part of the project.’

‘The whole thing is bullshit anyway. Let’s just get this over with so we can get on with our day.’

We’ve created a rhythm of scooping. Thomas, Morten, Ali, me. Thomas, Morten, Ali, me. Thomas, Morten, Ali, me. Ali, me. Our hands touch from time to time.

‘Why are we using our hands? This would’ve taken no time with a shovel.’

Thomas isn’t letting it go. He lets his hands hang over the hole. Ali continues digging.

'He said it's in case we damage the turtles.'

'But that's the thing – how can we damage them? I thought they were dead?'

Ali doesn't respond. Little insects are stuck on Thomas' ears. He shakes them off with his fingers.

'I feel something.' Morten's shoulder disappears inside the hole. 'This is it.'

We don't do anything. Ali lifts herself up and sits on her knees. Thomas yells Fabian's name. Rasmus comes closer.

'Did you reach them?' Fabian's still holding the machete, resting it against the fence wires.

'Yes.'

'About half a metre deep – that sounds right. OK, let me get a bag.' He disappears in the direction of the hut.

We sit around the hole like it was a shrine or like an alien ship was about to fly off it up into space. I put my hand in and feel what's inside. When I take it out, I'm holding a cracked egg, the size and shape of a ping-pong ball. It moves.

'It's moving.'

Little feet press against the shell, its belly revealed. It moves slowly, like an old man taking a bath. Its instincts ignoring the reality of it dying, it's trying to walk towards the ocean. Move forward, move on, disappear into the depths. Instead, it wiggles on my palm, each limb movement looks weaker than the one before. Death on a palm. Dying in the hand of a human because another human was trying to save you from yet other humans and their appetite and their disposal of plastic into the ocean and their tuna nets as large as a football field. It waves its leg and it stops moving. Ali tears. Thomas and Morten are staring.

'There are more in there. I could feel them.'

'Here's the bag.' Fabian is back, the same as he was before, untouched by this tiny tragedy. The same hairy toes and the same white teeth and the same smile in the corner of his lips. He's holding a black bin bag.

'Fabian, are you sure about this? They look very much alive.'

Thomas is standing up now, almost guarding the hole, blocking Fabian from approaching it.

'I know they seem this way but they failed to hatch. They needed to have come out two weeks ago. They didn't. We had to excavate them.'

'But why are they alive?'

'They may well be alive but they're not healthy. They need to make their way up the sand themselves, else they don't stand a chance.'

I imagine blind turtles digging their way upwards in the dark with their little paddles, being summoned by Life itself.

'But they're still alive now. Can we not just take them to the ocean and see if they make their way to the water?'

'No, no. They will die. Very shortly, they will die. We need to put them in here.' He points at the bin bag.

'Are you serious? Like they're trash?'

Fabian doesn't say anything. Thomas walks out the gate and climbs up the dune towards the beach. The Costa Rican flag is waving on a pole above his head under the sky, white and blue and red. Fabian takes his spot. He puts his arm inside the hole and when it re-emerges, his hand is holding a few eggs, the same as the one I had. He places them inside the bag with care, as if they were crystals or family relics or the ashes of your dead mother. He does the same again. We don't move and he doesn't say anything.

I place the egg next to my knee and start feeling up the wet earth for more. I hand them to Fabian each time, as if it was a ceremony. Morten is watching without a clear expression on his face. I submerge my hand until it reaches the bottom. I can feel them moving under the shells, rough with sand, massaging the tips of my fingers with their feet. I take two and put them in the bag on top of the other ones. A moving mass of shells and flesh. I feel cold sweat running down the nape of my neck. I feel the heat diffuse into my skin. I feel my chest weighing me down, like if someone had stuck a funnel down my trachea and was filling in the hollows and creases of my body with sand. I feel I can't move faster than the little feet move inside their plastic grave. I want to scream. Produce an inhuman sound in my thorax. Louder than the crashing waves. Louder than the creaks of earth moving. Louder than the eruption of sub-oceanic

volcanoes. Louder than anything that ever was or will be. The dying turtles wiggle inside the bag without a sound, like magic.

Night time. Stars shine in the black sky like the souls of dead Samaritans. Fluorescent creatures are washed up in the foam, illuminating the beach in blue hue. Ali is walking right through them, her feet under the water, lights around her ankles. We don't speak. The silhouettes of palm trees and bushes twist in the breeze, and birds scream. We're walking towards the end of the beach, looking for turtle trails. Mother turtles trek through the ocean to find this beach and bury their eggs deep into its sands. We stop by bunches seaweed and braches to inspect them. It's strange to be so far away from anything human – buildings and noises and lights.

'Let's turn around. No birthing turtles up here.'

We turn back when we reach the delta. Flecks of light glisten by the banks of the river. I turn to see if anything is following us. We walk slowly. I wonder what Ali's thinking. Is it the baby turtles? Is it someone back home? Is it me? My stomach jolts at the thought. We pass by the numbered poles hammered into the ground. We're by the dune guarding the nests and the hut behind them. A few more minutes and we'd be back in our bunks, falling asleep to the sounds of screeching monkeys and creaking branches.

'Can we stop for a bit?'

We sit down at the bottom. Ali takes out a packet of cigarettes and lights one.

'He told me I was only allowed to smoke in the Smoking Area. The Smoking Area. It's a massive, desolate beach, who cares about the Smoking Area?'

So she's mad with Fabian for today.

'Can I have one?'

She opens the packet and I take a cigarette. The smoke looks white in the dark, like mist.

'What are we doing here, Vibekke?' She tilts her neck towards me, her hair almost touching my shoulder. She's looking ahead – at the sky maybe, maybe at the black horizon of the sea, blacker the further you look.

'We're doing what we would be doing anywhere. Breathing. Being.'

She exhales and looks at me; the features of her face illuminated from the stars and fluorescent sea foam. She's smiling.

'Are you always so deep?'

I laugh.

'I'm just being honest.'

She watches me take a drag.

'I know. It's refreshing to meet someone like you. There's too much bullshit these days. You have to sieve through it to find a person's real intentions or thoughts – their Real Self. But not with you.'

I imagine Ali shaking flour off a giant Bullshit Sieve, exclaiming from time to time when something doesn't get filtered through and lies in the metal bottom, ready to be picked, examined and analysed.

'How come?'

'How come what?'

'How come you're different?'

Maybe it's because I woke up one morning and the sun was shining and nothing mattered. Maybe it's because I was having coffee with Jens/dad and we were silent and I looked through the window and the harbour wasn't like it was yesterday and I realised everything changes. Maybe it's because one day he got sad and the sadness didn't go and we didn't go kayaking anymore and I'm waiting for my own sadness to not go. Maybe it's because it's hard to want things. Maybe that makes you vulnerable. Maybe it's because everything is achievable and nothing is achievable. Maybe it's because I could've been anyone. Maybe it's because there's too much choice. Maybe it's because little turtles die in their eggs and it's a disaster. Maybe it's because I'm fucked up.

'I don't know.'

We're silent. The waves crash.

'And you?'

'And me what?'

'It takes one to know one.'

She laughs.

'I don't think I'm different. And that's my tragedy.'

'I don't think that's true.'

'Yeah?'

She smiles again and takes a drag of her cigarette from the corner of her mouth. It should look crooked, unwomanly, rude. But she makes it elegant. Natural. The way her teeth look in the dark is sexy.

'I think you know you're different. And that's fine. Different is fine.'

'See – again – you're so deep.'

The sound of old wood cracking. We stop laughing and look back at the jungle.

'I wonder if the others are up.'

'I doubt it; everyone was pretty shook up after today. The dead bodies, then carrying those bags of sand to refill the nest. Thomas didn't seem to take it very well. He didn't say much at dinner.'

'I kind of thought he was a sensitive guy. He's trying to seem all cool and manly and open and excited about money and stuff but you can tell there's much more to him than all that.'

'I don't know if I'd call him "sensitive". I thought he was more upset by the unfairness of the situation – the feeling of helplessness maybe. Maybe he thought he could fix it but couldn't. All we could do was pour that sand over their nest grave.'

'You might be right about Thomas. And you? Are you OK?'

She looks beautiful. Her face in starlight, her hair undone, her cigarette burning in her mouth.

'I'm OK.'

'Good.'

She gets up.

'Shall we?'

We pick the cigarette butts with our hands as if they were forest berries and walk up the dune where we walked up and down, up and down earlier, with bags of sand on our backs. The sounds of the jungle merge with the sounds from the sea with only us and the sky as witnesses to the symphony. Ali stops by the nest gate.

'I just want to check on the other nest.'

I follow her through the little gate, under the canopy. It's quiet, as if the sheet above our heads is hiding us from the rest of the world where things screech and ruffle and schsss and tttttttttt. There is no night breeze. The light from the stars can't penetrate the cotton. Ali moves close to the ground, inspecting the sand for any signs of emerging turtles, feeling the surface with her fingers. Nothing. Still earth. The turtles are asleep in their shells half a metre underground. Or wait to be excavated and put in a plastic bag. Ali sits near the fence and I join her.

'Do you think we'll actually get to save any turtles?'

'Who knows.'

We look ahead at the sand, almost expecting it move; almost expecting to see a little baby turtle head poke through like the first snowdrop in spring.

'Can I tell you something?'

'Sure.'

'I do know that I'm different. And I don't have a clue what to do.'

'Why do you need to do anything?'

'Because I don't know how much longer I can pretend not to be different. Or to care about things like jobs or wealth. All I want to do, every day, is start over. But I never do. I wake up and go to work. I make jokes in the canteen. I date people. I want to throw it all away.'

She's about to say more but stops and looks ahead at the blackness beyond the fence.

'That makes sense.'

'So how do I do that? And how do I make it mean something?'

'I think you have the wrong person to ask.'

'I think I have exactly the right person to ask.'

I don't know what to say.

'It's good you've identified what you want. That's already more than most.'

I want to tell her: you'll be fine, you're beautiful, you have a stunning jaw, everything will be OK. Things turn out OK when you have a nice jaw. When there isn't self-doubt but self-belief. She plays with the sand, moving her fingers along the outline of her thigh, her legs stretched. Her toes move near the nest/grave of the dead turtles.

'I know things need to change. I need to change. But I'm not sure who I want to be in the end.'

'You can't decide that; it's out of your control. It's the experience that'll change you; the choices you make. Not your intention.'

She is quiet.

'I was never very good at not worrying about things out of my control. If anything, it's what I worry most about.'

'Not being in control can be freeing.'

'It's also scary. Like being lost in space, knowing your oxygen will run out any second. Maybe that's how those turtles had felt, slowly dying in their broken shells underground.'

She's looking in the direction of the nest/grave. I hold her hand in my hand. I feel the sand in her palm. I wait for the oxygen to run out.

She looks at me. Her eyes shine under the canopy. She blinks, and we kiss, and it's like kayaking deep into the sea. When I next open my eyes, her body is next to my body and I can feel the places where she's soft and the places she's hard and the places she's warm. I feel the cartilage in her nose against my face. Her breath is hot like chai on an autumn evening. I kiss her on the hollow of her collarbone where she tastes salty. I kiss her where her ear meets her jaw. I kiss her on the temple, the width of an eggshell. Her hair on my face, strands brush my cheeks. Under our bodies, dreamy turtles rest in their shells, like magic.

<from: Mia Parejo>

V,

I miss you. I know you don't have access to the Internet and won't get to see this email for a while but I wanted to let you know I miss you and I'm thinking about you. Nothing is the same without you here – I keep looking at my phone and wanting to see a message from you, saying anything – what the weather is like, what you're having for lunch, what you've dreamt last night - but Karoline wrote to tell me about your phone. I worry about you. How is it over there? How is the living space? And are the turtles really cute? Have you seen any snakes?

Everything is OK at home. Nothing on the news, as usual – as you always say. I wanted to distract myself from missing you and I started a little home renovation project – I went to IKEA on Saturday and bought the materials I needed – I'm not telling you what it is though, it's a surprise for when you come home. You'll love it! My mum's been helping me (and Pluto has been trying to help). I think your mum is worried about me – she saw me watching that Wes Anderson movie and crying – she thought I was serious and gave me a list of movies that make her happy. Basically Meg Ryan's complete oeuvre. She said she misses you too – your mum that is, not Meg Ryan. I imagine there will be an email or five from her in your Inbox and maybe a warning about my mental health and my ability to cope with separation.

It's weird that you're away – I keep thinking you're at home, watching TV or playing with Monkey or doing the dishes but I know you're not.

Monkey is OK although quite unimpressed with me; I tried to feed her her breakfast while I was there - she didn't even come to see what I was doing, she just stood on the kitchen table staring at me, most likely thinking: what are you doing with my food and where's the other one? I stayed and waited until she sniffed it and ate. I tried to play with the pink ribbon but she didn't seem amused. I'll keep trying though, she seems to improve her image of me with time – who knows, maybe I'll go crazy today and try to lure her into playing with Mousy the Second. But she's OK otherwise, she's eating and drinking her water and your mum cleans her sand in the evening and it all looks fine.

What else – things at work are fine. Your mum's department have been after me about this pamphlet with tips on online safety – a pamphlet! Surely, information about online safety should be...online? I don't think it's your mum's doing but I haven't told her what I think about it so please don't mention anything to her. She's been working on the copy and I think it's big for her, as she's been wanting to get into the digital side of things. I'll do it, I have to do it. It's a bit boring but hopefully a more exciting project is coming next week. I'll keep you posted. Also, someone at work stole my cereal – who would steal

from the workplace? I was really annoyed. It was the Banana Weetabix. This is yet another reason why I prefer to work from home.

I cooked really good spaghetti yesterday; you would've loved them. With salmon and cream and cracked black pepper and asparagus. Not the healthiest portion of food, admittedly, but it was so good. I'll make it for you when you come back. I was thinking we could light some candles, have some wine, play some Norah Jones and dim the lights and, you know. Or I was also planning a surprise although I haven't finalised it yet.

I went down to the kayak club on Sunday – it was good weather and I went out at sea. It wasn't the same without you though. And I almost tipped! This hasn't happened to me before, it was quite a traumatic experience. It wasn't my fault really, I was steering to turn back just when a giant wave came and almost flipped me. How is the sea over there? Are there any kayaks? Please don't go alone if you do go – I'm really worried for you. I read there are strong currents in the Atlantic Ocean. And sharks.

Karoline tells me it's only you four, the camera guy and some guy who lives out there? Is it safe? Who is the guy? It's a bit creepy he's just living alone in the wild, does he seem quite normal to you? Sounds like a bit of a nightmare: no electricity, no phone connection, no other people. What were they thinking? What kind of holiday is this? As I said before, I don't quite know what you're doing there – you're not depressed, you're not one of those unhappy people, it's crazy they've sent you. Although it's a good opportunity, I guess – to experience something different and help the turtles. I just wish I was there with you and we were doing this together! How much fun would that have been? This whole thing has got me thinking: we really need a holiday, just you and me. Maybe Spain? Or Portugal? We could get a villa somewhere – don't worry, we can find a cheap one – and wake up with olive branches poking through the window and the sun shining. We could have fresh fruit and bread for breakfast, read in the garden or go to the beach, have local seafood and wine for lunch, snuggle up after dinner. What do you think? I've started looking at some potential areas that look good and I've made a Dropbox folder for you to check out when you come back. I'm really excited about this; I think we should totally do it.

Please write me when you can – I worry about you. And I want to know everything; it kills me not to know where you are and how you're feeling. I just can't wait to pick you up from the airport!

I miss you.

Love,

Mia

<from: *Mor*>

Hola chica!

How's my daughter? How are all the cocktails and smoothies and water yoga classes they'll be having you do to become happier going? I'm so jealous, I know, I know it's wrong – you shouldn't be jealous of your own child, but I am! I wish we were there together, wouldn't that be nice – a nice mother-daughter time under the sun with a couple of piña coladas in our hands and a bunch of macho Spaniards serving us fresh pineapple. I know, I know – the macho Spaniards aren't your thing – but I could just have them all for myself! Maybe don't mention to Mia I've said this in the first place, I don't want her to think I don't totally support you two. My beautiful girls!

Speaking of Mia, she looks really lonely since you left. She's walking around the office all gloomy – very unlike her. She laughs when people joke, of course, she has great manners and such professionalism, but I can tell she's hurting. I can tell. The poor thing, she loves you so much!

Tell me everything! Have you been out dancing yet? How are the other people? Remember to wash regularly – it's the only way to avoid getting thrash or a urinary tract infection. Mette's daughter did. I always thought she wasn't a clean-looking girl. She doesn't look it, does she? Are you drinking the water there? Is it safe? If you're buying bottled water make sure it's an international brand and the cap is fully screwed – I've heard of people just putting tap water inside Evian bottles and tourists getting e.coli and other tummy bugs. What's the hospital situation there? Do you know where to go in case of an emergency? I feel this whole trip isn't very well organised. You should feed that back to that Karoline woman.

Be safe! Don't go out at night. Did you take the rape alarm I bought you? I gave it to Mia to give to you. Let's hope you won't have to use it though, knock on wood. Are the locals nice? I hope they speak English. Have you come across other Danes?

Love,

<from: Jens>

Dear *datter*,

I hope all is well and you haven't gone down with a tropical disease or food poisoning or something of that nature. One of the guys told me there's an area in Costa Rica that does have malaria so don't go there. I forgot the name. I'll ask Ole and let you know. Just try to avoid all jungles maybe. For now. How is the food?

I'm well. Things I've been doing in the last few days:

- bought vacuum bags (it took bloody ages to find decent ones after reading all the reviews about the ones that only work for a few hours until they deflate – what a rip off)
- put all the duvets in the vacuum bags (yes, even the guest ones from the cupboard that you say smell like books)
- bubble wrapped the slow cooker (hope it will survive the journey, a broken slow cooker is the last thing I need right now)
- cellar-taped the lids on the spice jars (although I have a feeling that the ten-spice you bought me might make everything smell of Chinese, even the cinnamon)
- went shopping for some candy, I was really craving candy, when I saw a really good offer on frozen peas – 7kr per bag, can you believe that – and I got 6 bags and I was at the checkout when I realised I can't stock them up in the freezer anymore as I need to defrost it and maybe I should just hope the offer is still available after I move to the new place although I doubt it.
- Went to Jannis' to play cards with the boys (that's when Ole told me about the malaria and I told him I'll write you about it and he says best of luck and that he hopes for the best). They're all really shocked by what's happening to me, especially Jannis. He says he's been paying so much taxes all these years – as a business owner at that, not just your average employee like your mum or Mia or Ole – and for what? To see his friend thrown out of his own state-owned home. He says it's a travesty and I agree! We went a bit heavy on the schnapps that evening – my head hurt so much the next morning. I had 2 aspirins and some OJ but it didn't help and just made my stomach hurt so I thought I'd check the symptoms online in case it was an ulcer or something nasty like that, on the

lining of the stomach or something, and I rang the GP to make an appointment but then I had a cheese sandwich for lunch and the pain stopped and I cancelled the appointment and that was that. You should watch out on those spicy things you eat, reading about ulcers made me reconsider the extra chilli in my Thursday kebab.

- I had my Thursday kebab with extra garlic sauce instead of extra chilli sauce and I did, I did feel better. It's the small things as the poet says.
- I saw that film with the guy from Titanic and there was a cheese fondue at the reception and I spent 25kr in Netto on a Camembert and I put it in the oven and it got really nice and melty and I dipped a baguette in it and it was just like what the fondue looked to taste like. I'll make it for you when you come to visit. Are you still helping me with the move? I do need help with the plates.
- I was cleaning the leaves on the plants – they say plants are like children; it's not good to unroot them from their home. I think they know already in a way, their plant way, that something is happening or is about to happen.

I haven't taken the pictures off the walls yet. It would seem so bare without them, like I was never here. You need to sort out some of your old things and see if you want to take anything back to yours. Else I'll need to wrap them and take them with me. Also your room. I don't know what you want to do with the sheets and the covers but I was just going to pack everything. Maybe we can make you a corner in the new living room where you can have your books and your CDs and your sleeping things? I wouldn't mind. I'm going to the flea market tomorrow and I'll see if anyone is selling any Japanese screens or anything like that that we can use for a makeshift wall. Maybe some plants? An IKEA shelf? That could work. It won't be the same as your old room exactly but it can be done nicely.

I've taken pictures of your room already so we can reconstruct it. I've taken pictures of all the rooms and the bookshelves and the cupboards. In case I wanted to look at them at the new place. Or if I wanted to arrange something and it didn't look right and then I could just look at the pictures and have it exactly how it was. That would be nice. Can you show me how to put the photos on the computer again? I don't know where to plug in the other end of the cable, there are four docks and it doesn't fit anywhere. I've made the folder already. *HJEM*.

I'll send the name of that malaria region in a bit.

Love,

The air outside the Internet café heats up my body again as fast as you'd type 'google'. We're surrounded by Others. Seeing faces that don't belong to Thomas, Fabian, Morten, Rasmus or Ali is almost overwhelming. I've forgotten that other expressions exist; that there are plump noses and flat noses and straight eyebrows and curvy eyebrows and low eyebrows. Inside the turtle camp cocoon, it's easy to forget the *world spins madly on*. Being among people who live with electricity and constant supply of running water has also made me realise I'm not sure whether my legs are tanned or just covered in a layer of dirt. Black under my nails. Mosquito bites on my thighs. Sun rash. Sweat on my forehead.

We're on Samara's main street, and no one is looking at us from the stalls selling handmade bracelets and t-shirts, from the surfer shops with their wetsuits and Bilabong shorts, from the bars full of backpackers and Americans, from the pavements where men sit and blow smoke, from the corners where trucks are parked, loaded with pineapples and coconuts and mangoes.

Poor Jens/dad and his Japanese screens and bubble wrap and bags of frozen peas. I hope he doesn't wither with the move as his plants already have. And Mia. Reading my emails was like reading fiction, as if Jens/dad and my mum and Mia were characters in a book I once read and still revisit from time to time, opening it where the pages are folded at the top corner, reading the notes in the margins and the bits of the text I'd previously underlined with a pencil, with little asterisks around it – this text means something.

Ali walks close to me, our hands brushing against one another as if by accident. An electric incident. The shocking fuzz travels from the tips of my fingers, through the synapses of my nerves up my spine and straight to my head where it dissolves like bath salts. We walk through the dust and the sky is blue.

'This is where the main bar area starts.'

We stop at a junction with no cars. Morten is looking over Thomas' shoulder at the map. Rasmus isn't around for once, taking footage of the market.

'And the beach is right over there. Shall we walk along there and just see what we fancy? Before Rasmus comes back?'

'Let's go.'

The beach isn't like the beach at the turtle camp. It isn't quiet and wild and desolate. Mother turtles don't come here in the middle of the night. Pale children are plopping down in the muddy shallows like fat birds. Groups of people are jumping on and off surfboards in the sand, getting ready to repeat the movement in the water. Restaurants and bars with tables right on the sand, shaded by tall palm trees. Songs clash and waiters yell. Sunbathers. Horseback riders. Red bellies and beach balls. It all seems like a dream. A dream, in which Ali's hand touches mine from time to time and it's the best thing that's ever happened.

'We should buy a ball so we can start using the volleyball net.'

'Good idea.'

Thomas is walking ahead. He's slicked his hair backwards as if licked by a giant cat. He's put on a purple Lacoste t-shirt and his Ray Bans. He looks tanned, not dirt-tanned but really tanned. When did he manage that? I look at the red blotches on my arms. Morten walks next to me and Ali.

'This place looks good. And there are many people which is always a good sign.'

We follow him. I'm hungry for anything that isn't rice and beans so I don't care. Thomas takes the seat next to me and Ali takes the only chair left, opposite him. She smiles at me from above the menu card. A secret smile, just for me.

'God, it's amazing how good a chilli dog can look after you've only eaten beans for so long.' Morten is reading the menu, his index finger following the lines of letters and numbers.

'It hasn't even been that long. But I do think we've had beans with every single meal so far. I love Estelle, she's a great cook, but I swear to god, I'll literally take her by the shoulders and shake her really hard if I see another bean on my plate.' Thomas takes off his sunglasses to illustrate the seriousness of his statement.

'What is everyone getting?'

'I'm getting the meatiest thing I can find on here.'

'Guys, I just realised.' Morten pauses. 'Drinks will be refrigerated. Beer will be cold.' We clap a unified clap. The family on the next table turn their heads to observe the commotion.

'Is everyone ready?'

I hadn't even started looking. Thomas waves at the waitress.

'We'll have four Imperials – you all want beer, right? Yes, four Imperials and I'll have the steak burrito.'

She clicks her pen. Six U2 songs later, we're swallowing chunks of spiced meat in silence. Ali cuts the beef between the sesame buns in small pieces. She's only half way through her burger when Thomas leans back and takes a sip from his bottle.

'That was so good, oh my god.' He looks around the table looking at our plates.

'Wow. Just wow.' Morten rests against the back of his chair.

'How are you patient enough to cut your burger? I inhaled that fajita.'

Ali takes a bite from her fork.

'I think they're starving us into happiness.'

Morten looks at me while playing with the label on his bottle, peeling the edges off and rolling the wet paper into little balls. Thomas leans back in his chair and looks around.

'Maybe it'd be nice to meet some new people, who aren't you three. No offence.'

'None taken.' Ali's laughing. 'Right back at ya.'

'What do you say, Morten? Shall we hit the bars down the street and maybe chat to some local girls?'

Morten looks at me and Ali. I don't think he wanted to meet new people. He nods in the end.

'Sure.'

'So it's just Vibekke and I you're tired of?'

'Hey, I was joking. I just want to meet some girls maybe, and this already looks like a double date.'

It's half a double date but Thomas doesn't know that.

'Fine, fine. In that case, Vibekke and I will go exploring on our own. Shall we meet back at the junction?'

'Let's do it. We need to be back by four so let's say we meet at three. I want to pick up some treats from the supermarket on the way back.'

Thomas and Morten get up and I watch their figures disappear down the beach, Thomas' waving arms explaining something to a hunched Morten. Stories from a stag in Mallorca. Food poisoning in Thailand. Girls in Pennsylvania. Morten looks back in our direction before they take a turn. Ali gets up and sits in Thomas' chair. She takes the arm of mine and pulls it over, closer to hers. Her hand on my face, she moves hair behind my ear and kisses me on the revealed skin. I turn towards her and she kisses me on the mouth. The electric incident again. She smiles. The American family are looking. The music has stopped and the waitress walks towards the CD player by the bar. The U2 album starts again.

'Let's get out of here, shall we?'

Ali swims up and down along the length of the pool and I watch as her body goes under the water and turns into a mosaic-like version of itself. Unclear, fractured, undefined. When her head comes above the surface again, the million droplets on her face reflect the sun above the pool. A vacuum is going behind one of the doors from the balconies. The fan by the receptionist's desk is counting time with the clicking of its blades. The radio is playing from somewhere, reggaeton rhythm travelling through space. I rest with my elbows on the edge of the pool, the tips of my fingers almost touching the water.

'They should've just brought us here. They should've told us: "here, stay in this quiet little hotel, have some cocktails and go for swim when you feel like it." I would've been much happier with that.'

Ali's been complaining about the strong currents by the camp since the first time she tried going for a swim. The waves are tall and the water is deep. You'd need to go far into the ocean but by the time you looked back, you'd be 200m away from the place where you were and swimming back would be a bitch. Ali pulls herself up and walks to the shade where our things are. She lights a cigarette with her hands still wet and sits with her knees by my ears, toes in the water. My mosquito bites look bigger and redder in the water.

'This is so nice.'

'It really is.'

She splashes water with her feet on me and I push her knees.

'Stop it.'

I go in front of her and rest my body against her legs. I watch her smile with the sky above her.

'Blue suits you.'

I press my nose on her kneecaps, one at a time and kiss the droplets of water trapped in invisible hairs.

'How much more time do you think we have?'

'I don't know. I have no idea.'

Ali looks towards the sun, her jaw stretched on top of her neck.

'Judging by the position of the sun...I'd say we have enough time.'

I laugh and pull myself up the side of the pool.

'What do you know about the position of the sun?'

When we get inside the room, it's dark and I shiver. The door closes behind us. She pulls me close to her and drags my towel down with one hand. The blinds are down and they make sounds like waves, triggered by the fan on the ceiling. Ali undoes the knot on my bikini bottoms. Mia bought me these. She said I couldn't keep on going with the same bikini I had when I was sixteen. I said why not. She said, you just can't. Then she picked these. I said they seemed a bit too girly, I don't wear things with bows. She said I'd look good - really sexy - and she'd like to imagine taking them off me, slow. She kissed me. They are around my ankles now. Ali grabs my ass and pulls me to her. She tastes like the pool. Like jumping from the diving board with your arms around your knees. Like picking out stationary that smells of strawberries or going in the sea for the first time after winter. The fan keeps on going in circles but time stops.

'What makes you happy?'

I see my reflection in the lens. Me looking at me. Me inverted inside the lenses. My body upside down, against the rules of gravity. Like the Me pressing buttons on the screen of the MIR space station. Like the Me floating without direction.

'What makes me happy? I don't know, it depends on the scale of the question.'

'Let's start small.'

'Small. It makes me happy to sit at the front of the metro and watch the dark tunnel. It makes me happy to go on a long walk by myself. It makes me happy not to be expected to do things.'

'Because of the pressure that comes with the expectation?'

'Because it'd feel like it wasn't my choice. Like my life was separate from who I am.'

'And who are you?'

'I've been asked that question ever since I joined the Happiness Index. Like identity is intertwined with happiness. I remember the first time I spoke to the psychologists when I was seven years old, they asked me that same question. I said: I am me. My actions and my choices make me me. Maybe not in those words. I was seven.'

'But you're not satisfied with the actions and choices you've made. Otherwise, you wouldn't be here.'

'I'm not dissatisfied with them either. Maybe that's the problem.'

'What is?'

'Not caring.'

'Not caring for the meaning and consequence of your actions?'

'Not believing in that meaning in the first place.'

'Do you think other people find meaning in the choices they make?'

'I think other people are able to find meaning in more things than me full stop. And I don't really know how to change that or whether I should.'

'What about the Happiness Index?'

'What about it?'

'Has it made you look at the world differently?'

'Differently to what? I've been a part of it since I can remember. I don't know how not to self-analyse or compare myself to others.'

'And how does that make you feel?'

'I think self-reflection is important.'

'Do you feel empty?'

'Empty? How?'

'Is the place where meaning should be, empty?'

'That wouldn't mean I was empty. I know for the sake of this campaign you want me to give clear answers and quotable explanations. But I genuinely don't know if I am any more unhappy than anyone else. I think we're all a little bit sad – that's our status quo – and we get little waves of euphoria from time to time and that's it. That's life. Like the sea behind me.'

'Surely that's a pessimistic way to look at things. What would you say to someone who claims their status quo is that of being content with the occasional dip to the unhappy side.'

'I'd say I envy their illusion.'

An ice cube cracks in the glass. Rasmus makes a sign with his hand: we're still rolling.

'So what's happening with you and Ali?'

Morten picks up a bottle cap from the sand and puts it in his plastic bag. It's seven a.m. and we're on beach cleaning duty. The only time when it's not too hot to be outside for this long. When you can walk barefoot without burning the soles of your feet.

'What do you mean?'

How does he know? Sweat is already forming above my eyebrows. I should really have followed that fucking item list and bought a sun hat. Mia said I should. But I thought it would seem silly. I can't believe I said no to that but yes to a money pouch.

'You two seem close. So I thought I'd ask.'

He bends and collects a piece of coloured glass – dark green emerald from a beer bottle. It joins the paper and lids and other pieces of glass and plastic, washed off on the beach overnight like little treasures. I can still see him smiling to himself.

'We get along, sure. I like Ali.'

I like the way she smokes cigarettes from the corner of her mouth. I like the way her arms move when she swims. I like how she cuts her food and how her lips feel. I like kissing her on the knees. I like her hands on my hands. I like how her voice sounds in the night under the canopy. I like her body on my body. I like how she fucks me.

Morten doesn't say anything. We walk further down and I splash water in the shallows with my feet like Ali did the night we patrolled the beach, her ankles illuminated with organisms.

'Why are you asking?'

'I don't know. No real reason.'

He definitely has a reason. Was it because we were late to meet with Rasmus at the junction? He couldn't know why we were late. It made sense we'd lose track of time, it happens. Maybe he knows but wants me to admit it rather than force it out. Maybe he saw us go into the hotel. But if he'd seen us, then Thomas must've seen us too. The sun is in my eyes.

'Morten?'

'Yeah.'

'Can I ask you something?'

'Sure.'

He doesn't look at me but continues to scan the heating sand for objects that don't belong there.

'You know what you said the other day, when we were sitting by the fire, about finding someone to share the illusion of your world with, what exactly did you mean by that?'

We keep walking and the sun keeps rising.

'I meant just that. Having someone to share your version of the world validates that version. Things become possible suddenly.'

A bit like maths.

'Have you had a person like that in your life?'

He picks another piece of glass.

'Yes. Yes, I had someone.' I wait for him to continue. Maybe he won't. 'But that was another lifetime ago. I was someone else then. I believed in different things. Believed, full stop.'

What did he believe in? And what's made him stop? I want to ask him but his eyebrows are lowered down to his eyes in a frown. Maybe he doesn't know the answers to these questions. I wouldn't know the answers if someone asked me. Or, I would, but it would be too simple to be true. Prosaic.

'You're right, by the way.'

'About what?'

'About me and Ali.'

Our eyes meet but he doesn't say anything. He lifts a branch and picks up a piece of metal from underneath it. He holds it close to his face and smiles.

'From a tin can. What do you think?'

He hands me the metal. It doesn't shine in the sun. It just sits between my fingers, unwanted and unreflective.

'Looks like it's from a tin.' I hand it back.

'I think you make a cute couple.'

He walks in front of me. I'm happy that Morten knows. It's like his 'person' theory. Now I have a witness to what's happening, now it's more real. I want to tell him about how I like it when she makes eye contact with me from behind the menu card, about how strong her arms are, how her skin feels against my face.

I walk in the water trying not to make a sound. See how far I can go in complete silence.

'Morten?'

'Yeah.'

He doesn't turn around again.

'Have you told Thomas?'

'Thomas? No, of course I haven't told Thomas. It's just something I thought.'

'You're good at this.'

'At what?'

'At people.'

He smiles.

'It's funny you say that.'

'How come?'

'I was brought up in a family of psychologists. My mum, my dad, my brother, my uncle, my granddad. No joke.'

'That's intense. Although I imagine you have pretty fun conversations around the dinner table.'

'My dad used to have some issues. With anxiety, maybe depression. I don't know, he never saw anyone about it. I used to read theory in bed, trying to explain things to myself. Trying to add meaning to his behaviour.'

'Did it work?'

'No.'

We walk in silence.

'My dad actually has a giant poster of Freud in his home office. Next to one of Kafka. He has a thing for Czechs.'

'Charming.'

I thought Freud was Austrian.

'That's one way to describe it.'

I want to ask the obvious.

'And you didn't enter the family trade?'

'I'm not that interested in twentieth century Czech thinkers, no.'

We reach the part where the shallows stretch far into the sea and we walk towards it.

'I don't know. I guess I wanted to be like them when I was little. I mean, whose dad isn't their hero?'

I think of Jens/dad and his Moving Crisis. I think of him wrapping plates in newspapers. I think of the bare bulb above the kitchen table. I think of the pen hanging by the wall calendar.

'But then I hit my teens. My brother and I took different paths. I wanted to be different. I wanted my world to be different to theirs. And look at me now, sent on a therapeutic holiday organised by psychologists. I haven't told my parents.'

'You haven't told them you're in Costa Rica?'

'No, I did tell them I was here. I just skipped the bit about me being so unhappy someone thought they should make a documentary out of it. My parents think I'm on holiday.'

'I guess they'll find out when they see us on TV or wherever they're posting this footage.'

'I guess so.'

The water is now a bit above our ankles and we stop. I look at my feet nested in the sand together with shells and rocks and crabs and little worms. Like it's the most natural place for feet to be.

'It's getting really hot.'

'It is.'

'What do you think we'll have for breakfast?'

'Is that a rhetorical question?'

'It is.'

We're in the middle of the sea and it's odd. He turns towards me.

'You and Ali.'

'Yeah.'

'Is it just sex or?'

'I don't know. I really don't know what's happening.'

'Not knowing can be a good thing.'

Can it?

'That's true.'

'There are more possibilities in not knowing.'

'I'm not sure having more possibilities is something I want.'

'What do you want?'

'Are you serious?'

'Yeah.'

I want to go kayaking with Jens/dad again, like we did before his Sadness. I want to read books about the past and believe people were different then. I want to wake up one morning and have a plan. I want to be in love.

'That's too hard a question.'

'It is. I'm not sure I know the answer myself.'

'I'd be scared if you did.'

'Scared? Why?'

'You'd be the first person ever to know exactly and accurately what they want.'

We're quiet. I listen to the jungle and the waves.

'You shouldn't feel bad, by the way.'

'Bad? Feel bad about what?'

'About telling me. It's bad to carry secrets by yourself. You get exhausted. It's self-destructive.'

Is this what happened to him? I don't say that. I imagine him hunched down and walking on the beach, balancing a giant pile of recycling treasures, bulging in their plastic enclosure, on his back like a turtle.

'Is this something you learned from your parents?'

He laughs.

'No. Although I wish I had.'

He turns around.

'Let's go back.'

When we reach the camp, we're welcomed by Bono and the sounds of breakfast being made. Metal on metal. The hissing of the gas stove. Estelle's humming to the song on the radio. Plastic on ceramic. Ali comes down the stairs and stretches. It's as if I haven't seen her for years and missed her every day. Like meeting a character from a book you loved as a child. She smiles when she sees me. Morten sits down and smiles to himself.

'Let me guess. Rice and beans?'

'Rice and beans.'

'Morning, gang.'

Fabian joins us at the far end of the table, clean-shaven. Bono jumps up and down by his legs and he pats his head.

'Morning, Ali. Can you pass me a plate?'

Ali picks a plate and hands it to Morten who hands it to Fabian. Thomas is already halfway through his.

'So what are we up to today, Fabian?'

'Well, these two have already done their fair share this morning.' He nods towards me and Morten. 'They've been clearing the beach since sunrise. Your turn now.'

Your turn now? Does this mean he'll split us from Thomas and Ali?

'Morten and Vibekke, you're on turtle duty until the afternoon. Thomas and Ali – you come with me to collect wood from down the road. We have a delivery.'

I want to revolt, scream at him, tell him how stupid this is, smash my plate against the wall. Tell him I want to be with Ali. When you're in a place so far away from everything else, small things can mean disaster. Like forgetting your iPod on the other side of the beach. Or losing your watch somewhere and you need to set up an alarm for the turtles. Or having Ali taken away to pick up a delivery. I take a bite with my fork.

'What should we do if the turtles hatch while you're away?'

'You've been given instructions. You'll be fine. Don't worry, Morten.'

Mor-ten. He pronounces the 'e' sound like in 'end'. Mor-ten.

'I doubt they'll hatch today anyway. Give them a couple of days, eh?'

The turtles pop out one after the other. Crawling out of the sand from deep within the earth. Walking on top of each other's heads. Going in all directions like manic-depressives on a high at 11:38 at night. Or like those toy motorcars that you wind up and put on the wooden floor and their wheels keep spinning everywhere until they hit the wall or the leg of the table. How many of them are there? Morten is behind the little gate with the bucket and the notebook.

'I forgot the pen, I forgot the pen.'

He runs back out. I put on the gloves from inside the bucket and try to collect them. The water. We need seawater in the bucket.

'Morten, can you fill this with seawater? Hurry, they might die.'

Sweat inside the latex on my hands. I'm on all fours trying to stop the turtles from going towards the fence where they'd hang trying to squeeze their heads through the metal wires. They can feel the ocean behind the fence and the sand dune, calling them in its primitive language. The more time passes, the more I imagine Morten finding me on my knees, surrounded by the tiny corpses of dead turtles.

'Here, here.'

Morten puts on his gloves and we both take the turtles one by one and put them in the pink bucket. They walk on each other's shells still trying to get to the ocean. Tiny Sisyphuses.

'Did you count them?'

'No, no I didn't.'

'That's why I gave you the notebook and the pen.'

'I didn't count them, OK. Let's just get them to the ocean as soon as possible. We'll count them together then.'

'Do you think there are any more down there?'

We look at the spot where they came from. Nothing moves in the sand as if nothing ever had done.

'I really hope not. Screw it, let's get these ones down the beach.'

'What's the number?'

'The number for what?'

'Don't we need to know the number of the beach section?'

'You're right. It's seventeen.'

We close the gate behind us.

'Try not to shake the bucket too much.'

'I'm trying.'

I'd have thought turtles made sounds. Little squeaks maybe. Grunts. Like miniature old men who've been woken up for dinner. But they're eerily quiet, moving their limbs in silence in their pointless attempt to move on and float on. We run along the ocean and look at the poles hammered between the bushes and trees on the side. Thirteen, fourteen, fifteen, sixteen. Seventeen is the section of the beach where they were born and where they need to be released.

'It's here.'

We look at each other. I know what to do and I don't. The sun shines straight on my temple.

'How far away from the water do we need to be?'

'Not too far. Maybe over here. They need to make the walk themselves, that's what Fabian said.'

'OK. Are we ready?'

'Yeah.'

We tip the plastic bucket on its side and the turtles pad away. Morten counts them and writes in the notebook.

'It says here there should be ten more. I'll run back to the nests.'

'Here, take this.'

I hand him the bucket. He runs in the direction of the sun. A few of the turtles have already made their way down to the water. Three in. Two of them disappear but one keeps getting washed back up in the foam of the wave. More turtles make it down. There's one that doesn't seem to be walking at the same rate as the others. It's near my foot and it seems to be struggling to walk. I want to pick it up. Help it make it to the

water. Surely the chance of it failing in the ocean because of me helping it is better than it just dying by my foot? The turtle that kept getting washed up is now gone. No one knows what sea turtles do in their youth. Scientists have been trying to figure it out. Tagging them, marking them. They just disappear for ten years or so, during teenagehood. Until they're back on the radar as adults. Screw it.

I pick it up in my palm and its belly shivers like I shivered when I was in the room with Ali with the curtains drawn. I place it where the sand is already wet and take a few steps back. The cold sand seems to revive it and it flaps away towards the ocean. It's in the water. A wave comes, and it's near my foot again. It's on its shell, moving its limbs trying to flip. Should I help it again?

'We should've waited.'

Morten stands by me.

'Six didn't hatch at all, and the other four didn't make it in the heat. I was too late.'

Another wave goes over it and the turtle flips.

'Fuck.'

'Yeah. Have all of them made it in?'

'Almost all.'

I look at the turtle limping towards the water again; his left side dragging in the sand.

'He doesn't look too confident.'

This is my fault. His left-side paralysis. I shouldn't have touched him.

'Yeah. I don't know if he'll make it.'

'He might. At least he's still moving.'

Morten sits down and I join him. We stretch our legs so our toes are in the water and watch the turtle try to survive. I close my eyes and let the sun go on my eyelids. When I open them next, the turtle has stopped moving, his immobile body floating in the seaweed near my feet.

'Poor fellow.'

'What should we do with him you think?'

'I don't know. Let him float I guess. That's what would happen in nature, right?'

'I guess.'

I look at the horizon and after a while I forget about what's right in front of me. Jens/dad and the view outside the window in my room. The ships in the background that never seem to move. The roofs of the buildings grey against the grey sky. Everything is blue here, and everything is the same.

'Fabian shouldn't have left us on our own. Maybe more would've made it.'

'It's not our fault. We couldn't be in two places at once.'

'One of us should've stayed back.'

I get up.

'Let's go back.'

The sun burns my neck as we pass the numbered poles. We're approaching the camp when I see the silhouettes of Fabian, Morten, Rasmus and Ali in the opposite direction. I climb the dune.

'I didn't know what to do with them. So I left them.'

I turn towards Morten. Behind him, little bodies hang on the fence between the leaves blown by the wind at night, brown and displaced. I walk towards them. Their bodies look drained of all water, like mutated raisins – crooked and creased. One of them twitches.

'Is it still alive?'

'I don't think so.'

Fabian's voice comes. Thomas and Ali are placing a large piece of wood on the sand at the bottom of the dune. Fabian waves for me to go down.

'Can you help? We transported the planks across the river but need to drag them over here now.'

I nod. I don't know why I don't tell him straight away about the turtles. Ali's face is covered in red dust from the wood bark, like rust. I look at her to tell her what's

happened. Fabian goes in front of her to arrange the wood. My eye signals have been terminated.

'Can you get Morten too? We need all hands on deck, so to speak.' He touches Ali on the elbow and the three of them turn their backs and walk towards the river.

I go to get Morten. He's sitting under the canopy where the turtles were born and where Ali and I had sex. He's looking at the corpses.

'Fabian wants us to go help them move the wood. By the river.'

'Did you tell him about the turtles?'

'No.'

He gets up. The dead turtles watch us disappear behind the dune. The elbow is a significant place to touch someone.

'Morten knows.'

'You told him?'

'No, he guessed. I confirmed.'

'He guessed?'

'Yeah. He didn't say how.'

'Wow. He's good.'

'That's what I said.'

I hold Ali's tummy.

'Does Thomas know?'

'Not that I know. Morten said he hadn't told him.'

Is she ashamed to say what we've been doing? Does she think Thomas wouldn't approve? My elbows are dry in the sand.

'I don't care even if he has. I just hope that creep Fabian doesn't find out. I don't want him jerking off to the thought of us making out in our bikinis.'

'Why would you even think of that? That's disgusting.'

She laughs. Her chest expands and the muscles on her stomach tighten and relax under my palm.

'I don't know. He's a creep. That's what creeps do, right?'

She kisses me on the forehead. Her chin wrinkles. The elbow is a significant place to touch someone.

'Also, I'm pretty sure we're not meant to hook up with our fellow Unhappies.'

'You think?'

'You didn't read the bundle?'

'I did. Well, not all of it.'

'Evidently.'

She kneels, her knees either side of my hips.

'If I recall correctly – from what I've read – we're not meant to be doing this.'

She kisses me on the lips.

'Or this.'

She moves her hand away.

'Definitely not this.'

She kisses my ear and parts my lips with her fingers where I'm wet.

'And absolutely not this.'

I lift my chin to kiss her.

'And what do you think you're doing exactly?'

She smiles, shaking her head.

The flat of her fingers on the fleshy bit in between. A little erotic divider made of puffiness. I close my eyes and the sun shines through my eyelids in mandarin pink. She kisses me on the neck before taking both my arms and stretching them out against the sand. She holds my wrists together with one hand. A bouquet of limbs. She tightens her grip and I can't feel my fingers. I open my eyes. Try to kiss her again. She ignores this and is inside me, deeper. I feel the muscles in my stomach tighten. I feel blood in my ankles. I spread my legs further and her body is almost my body, only sweat and sand in

between skin. She fucks me and the sun shines. It's as primitive as the ocean calling the baby turtles with its prehistoric voice. Inviting them to get lost in the deep until they're old enough to be found again.

The crab that lives in the drain is out when I start the shower. There's a knock on the door.

'It's taken.'

'It's me. Let me in.'

I move the latch and Ali is quick. Dark and mosquitoes. She takes off her top and bikini bottoms.

'Room for one more?'

'What are you doing? They'll hear us.'

'They won't. Rasmus is by the beach. Morten is by the nests and I saw Thomas upstairs with his headphones on.'

'How does he still have power in that thing?'

'He charged it at the Internet café.'

She stands with me under the water and wets her hair until it sticks to her scalp.

'I see the crab is out.'

'He is. He knows when someone's in.'

Outside, the sky is dark in the crack above the door. The jungle is loud. The crab moves away from Ali's feet. She rubs shampoo into her hair. *'The shooting stars in your black hair / in bright formation / are flocking where'*.

'You're totally stealing my water time. And I thought you came in here for something else.'

She smiles with her eyes tight closed. Foam on her forehead. Lichens on the wall.

'I still need to do my hair.'

She nearly hits me in the face with her elbow when she turns around, her hands still in her hair. I duck down. The shower room is a tiny shack of a building near the field with the cow that eats watermelon.

'Watch it.'

'One second, I can't see.'

She faces the stream of water and thin foam runs down her back. I go behind her. Touch the outline of her body where it curves. The crab moves further away towards the door. Pissed off by the showering lesbians interrupting his nap or whatever he was doing down in the darkness of the plug. I touch her where the water's touched her. I follow its course down her spine with its little vertebrae like walnuts. Creaking from the trees. A bird calls. Another answers. Crickets chatter. Water taps. Night is coming. I touch her where's she's soft. She faces me. Water from her forehead drips onto her nose and lips. I kiss her on the corner of the mouth. I kiss her on the eyelids and near the temple, the width of an eggshell, while the water runs and the sky is black.

There's a loud smack and the walls shake. And again.

'What the hell are you doing?'

'What's going on?'

'Stay here.'

'What the hell do you think you're doing?'

There's another smack. I wrap myself in the towel.

'Was that Fabian?'

Ali unhooks the metal lock. Outside, Morten is sitting on Fabian's chest, with Thomas dragging him away from behind.

'What's happening?'

Thomas pulls Morten away and Fabian gets up.

'This...creep was looking at you in the shower.'

'I wasn't. I wasn't doing that.'

Fabian's voice is a higher pitch than usual.

'I saw you, you creep. I saw you jerk off looking at them.'

'What? Are you serious?'

I'm not sure how I feel. My hair is wet, and I'm wet and now we're all here discussing Fabian's penis. Ali moves towards him. I take her arm.

'No, Ali.'

'Fabian, this is so disgusting.'

'So disgusting? You know what's disgusting? Not this.' He points at his penis.

'Did he just point at his penis? Are you pointing at your penis?'

Ali is looking from face to face as if that could change anything. Drops of water on her stomach.

'What you were doing in there is what's disgusting. You two. In fact, this is ridiculous. Get out. All of you. Get the hell out of the camp.'

Rasmus comes running at this point.

'What's going on?'

No one pays him any attention.

'You can't do that. You can't kick us – it's all been paid for.'

Morten has been released from Thomas' grip and he's back yelling close to Fabian's face.

'I don't care. I manage this place and I don't want you around here. Get out.'

He's speaking to Rasmus now.

'Rasmus, tell Karoline I don't want these violent people here. Get out.'

'What is happening? What is he talking about?'

'Pack your stuff. You know the way to town.'

Something squeals in the forest. Screw this.

'Let's just leave.'

I hold Ali's hand and we walk towards the stairs of the cabin. Heads shake. Wood creaks. Pockets zip. When we come down, Fabian isn't there. The only thing is a burning wasps' nest. We pass by his tree hut and the fences. He's put all the candles out.

We walk up the dune. Morten starts laughing.

'Have you lost it, Morten?'

Thomas hasn't said anything this whole time. Morten laughs harder.

'No, no. It's just. I can't believe we were kicked out of Happy Camp.'

We all start laughing. We walk along the ocean crashing against the sky and the shore, like we are about to get lost and not found in the night.

'God, Fabian really turned out to be a creep, huh?'

Morten's headlamp illuminates the sand in front of us.

'I always thought he was a creep.'

I really did.

'You did? I thought he seemed nice. He was so into the whole turtle conservation thing.'

'You could be into turtle conservation and be a creep.'

'That's true.'

The surface of the ocean reflects the moon shining against its black depths.

'I still quite can't believe we're not in bed but about to cross a river in the middle of the night. It's insane. Actually insane.'

'And what about the crocodiles?'

'Let's just stick together. We'll be fine. Lift your rucksacks over your heads, the tide is high.'

We've reached the river. White moon above the rucksacks above our heads. Monkeys chatter in the trees. Something screams like a pig about to be slaughtered. The river flows into the ocean through its wide and rocky delta. I feel the stones under my feet, sharp and cold under the fast water.

'As long as you guys don't blame us, right?'

She's joking but the guys don't answer, testing the water with their feet, their black silhouettes in the black of the water. Ali's the last one in the line. Morten's voice

travels in the night, across the little waves, across the mosquitoes dipping their line-thin legs through the surface.

'Don't be silly. Of course not. I'm just really happy for you guys. Watch out, there's a hole here.'

Thomas doesn't say anything. We all move to the left to avoid the hole. I feel something slime by my ankle with invisible fins or legs or flesh or tail.

'Jesus, something touched me. Something touched my foot. Something just touched my foot.'

'Don't panic. It probably wasn't a crocodile, or you'd know.'

'Thanks. How comforting.'

We continue our midnight trek through the water. We're in the middle, and it's as high as my chest. I feel like I can't breathe. The weight of the water and the black of the sky press on my chest. I imagine the blind organisms living on the bottom where my feet disturb their seaweed beds. They cling on blades and rocks to stick at the same place and not be drawn into the ocean with the current.

'We're almost there. Just a little bit to go. Watch your step, there are rocks here.'

'It's so inconsiderate of Fabian. We could die. We should definitely complain. I wonder what Karoline will say about all of this.'

Would she be jealous? Pissed off?

'Can we please not talk about dying? Something did just touch me.'

'Also, complaining won't do anyone any good if one of us did die.'

'Or all of us.'

'Good point, Ali.'

'Crap.'

'What? What's happening?'

'Think my knife fell in the water.'

'You have a knife?'

'Had a knife.'

'Why do you carry a knife around?'

'It's just a small knife.'

'That's still a knife.'

'I don't have it anymore, so can we not talk about it? It's bad enough it fell.'

Thomas hurries ahead. The water is down to my waist now. I just want to be out of here. Out of the water, out of this country. I wish I was in my bed in Jens/dad's house. Where it smells of cigarettes and where I know how my sheets feel against my skin and where I know the view I'll wake up to in the morning. What will Fabian say to Karoline? Would she call my mum to tell her I'm coming home early? Would she say why? I haven't felt this alone in a long time. What am I doing here, in the middle of a river in the middle of the night? Ali comes up to me and holds my hand.

'Are you OK?'

'Yeah. I'm OK. Just a bit freaked out.'

'About the crocodiles?'

'Yeah. And you know, everything.'

I mean Mia. I mean my life. She holds my hand tighter.

'It'll be fine. You'll be fine. Things sort themselves out, always.'

We're on the bank. It's freezing. My shorts are stuck to my body.

'Pneumonia and Denmark, here we come.'

'You don't think there are some of those Amazon insects here, do you? The ones that go into your penis when you pee?'

'Did you pee in the water, Thomas?'

I imagine a golden spot dispersing in the dark water behind him, like a reverse oil spill.

'No.'

'Then no.'

'Let's get out of here.'

'What are these insects?'

'They can swim upstream. So as long as you create a stream in the water, these little fish can swim up into your urethra. And sort of just live in your penis.'

'I've never heard of that.'

'Have you not? I thought it was a well-known thing.'

Shivering, we take the path back towards Samara, watched by the invisible creatures in the darkness of the trees. Their ears perked and their eyes shining. Ali doesn't let go of my hand. Maybe it is OK. Maybe it's even romantic to be walking down a dust road without communication with the outside world, like the adventurers of the past. Just us and the stars and the eggwhite moon (and Thomas and Morten and Rasmus). Maybe it's OK not to be at home. Maybe it's fine not to know what the view outside the window will be tomorrow morning. To not know if there's something under the surface of the water. To not have a plan.

'So what's the plan?'

Morten is asking all of us, his head torch bright in my eyes. Thomas is holding both straps of his rucksack with two hands, walking a bit in front of everyone else. We stop, but he continues.

'Let's keep walking until we reach Samara. I'm sure we'll find a place that has available rooms. We'll call Karoline in the morning. Explain what's happened. Then take it from there.'

'Explain what's happened? That should be fun.'

'Maybe we should've just camped further down the beach until she sends someone for us.'

'And what? Wait around for that psychopath to find us?'

'He's harmless. I mean, what could he do to us?'

'I'd rather not find out.'

'Plus, I'm not convinced he's harmless. He was masturbating while watching us.'

Something screeches in the forest.

'Let's hurry up.'

Branches hang low, heavy with age and exotic fruit. Soon, we reach a farm and a lit road.

Thomas presses the bell again. A dog somewhere barks but no one answers. Morten waves at the CCTV in the corner.

'Hello, CCTV – hello, Morten.'

Thomas presses the button again, ignoring Morten's conversation with the camera. No one is on the other side of the little speaker.

'Surely someone has to be awake?'

'Maybe they've had too much wine with dinner and have fallen asleep. Looks like a family owned place.'

Thomas gives Ali an annoyed look. She raises her eyebrows at me when he isn't looking.

'Let's just try the next place, I guess. Morten, are you coming?'

Morten was just inviting me for a dance in front of the camera. He's definitely lost it tonight. Thomas combs his fingers through his hair and puts on his rucksack again.

'That's a hotel down there, isn't it?'

He's pointing at the hotel with the pool.

'I think it is.'

Ali nudges me in the ribs.

The front desk is lit.

'I don't think I've ever been this happy to see another human being.'

Thomas hurries through the same glass doors Ali and I hurried to just the other day. Time passes differently when you're away from home. When there's no reception. It feels like I've spent a lifetime with Ali, and also that a lifetime has passed since we were last here. The fan spins evening air in the German lady's face. She's progressed with her book; she's almost done judging by where her thumb is now. I'd love to wake up in Ali's arms and spend the day reading by the pool.

'How can I help you?'

She doesn't mean it in a nice 'how can I help' way. She means: 'what do you think you're doing here in the middle of the night freaking me out and interrupting my time with Thomas Mann'.

'Good evening, we're here to see if there are any rooms available for tonight?'

Thomas glides his hair backwards again but the locks keep falling out of place.

'Rooms? For tonight?'

She's shaking her head but it's not clear whether this means there are no rooms or whether she disapproves of the request. She looks at Thomas' hand on the counter. The dirt under his fingernails. He takes it down.

'Yes, for tonight.'

She scans our faces.

'Ah, it's you two again. From the turtle camp.'

'Hi.'

'Hello.'

'Wait – you've been here?'

'Briefly.'

'When?'

'I'll explain later.'

Morten shakes his head and smiles at the floor. Thomas' hand is back on the desk.

'Listen, we've had a long night. A long, shitty night. We need to find accommodation for tonight as soon as possible. We're tired. Do you have any available rooms or not?'

She gives him a long look then opens the yellow notebook in front of her. Squares and names. Circles and underlines. Dates and crosses.

'Yes, I have two rooms – you OK to share?'

She looks at me and Ali. I feel my cheeks growing hotter.

'Yes, we're OK to share, I think.'

Morten answers from behind Thomas. I think he's finding the whole thing very entertaining.

'It'll cost you extra though, they're both with a view.'

'It's pitch black outside and we're leaving in the morning. Can we have regular rooms? We don't need the view.'

'No other rooms. If you want a room, it's one with a view.'

'Thomas – let's just take it.'

'Fine – we'll take the rooms with the view.'

'Good choice. You won't regret it tomorrow morning; the view is spectacular. Do you want air con? Air con is extra.'

The German lady is toying with the computer mouse until the screen lights up. What's the point of her yellow book with the names and the dates and the crosses if she has a functioning computer?

'Cash or card?'

Thomas takes a credit card out of his wallet.

'Debit only.'

Our room is at the very end of the corridor overlooking the courtyard. The surface of the pool shines in the white moonlight. Its reflections glowing on the walls in broken shapes.

'Enjoy, ladies.'

She opens the door and gives us a wink. When she closes it, Ali turns on the lights.

'Did she just wink at you?'

'She did.'

We start laughing. The unfinished shower, the absurd conversation with Fabian, getting kicked out of Happy Camp, walking through the crocodile river, looking for another human being to pay to let us stay in a room only for it to be the German lady again who winks at us. Tonight has been one of those nights. Ali collapses backwards on

the bed with her arms spread like a snow angel, only one covered in dirt and mud and insect bites.

'I'm going to take a shower. A real shower where the water pressure is enough to wash the shampoo out of your hair.'

'Crazy talk. I'll be here, enjoying the air-con. Thank you, Thomas.'

Brown grains of sand by the drain. No crab coming out. Maybe I'll miss Happy Camp. I'll miss patrolling the beach and splashing my feet in the shallows. I'll miss sitting on the hammock and looking at the ocean (while also looking out for snakes). I'll miss the baby gekkos falling on your head from the ceiling. I'll miss the smell of the burning wasp nests. I'll miss sitting by an open fire. I'll miss not being able to call anybody or for anybody to call me. When I come out, Ali is asleep on her back, her chin facing the spinning blades of the fan in the ceiling. Onetwothree. Onetwothree. Onetwothree.

She wakes up before I touch her on the arm. Breathes in and folds her leg at the knee. Stretches.

'You smell nice.'

I kiss her on the shoulder.

'And you don't.'

She grabs my arm and tries to pin me on the bed.

'Hey, I just showered. You'll get me all stinky again.'

She laughs.

'It was inevitable you'd get dirty again.'

I lie on her arm and smell her where it's spicy and salty. My hair is wet on my back. She kisses my forehead.

'Ali.'

'Yeah.'

'I'll miss this.'

She doesn't say anything and kisses my forehead again.

'Enjoy it now. This is the problem with holidays. They do tend to end eventually.'

I extend my arm over her chest. I meant I'd miss her.

'Yeah.'

'You'll get back into your routine soon enough. You'll see.'

'I hope so. And Ali.'

'What?'

She's halfway out the bed.

'I don't know if I can go back to the routine.'

I don't know if I can go back to Mia. I don't know if I can be Previous Vibekke.

'Do you sometimes wish you were still a child and didn't have any responsibility for your own life?'

'All the time.'

She laughs and kisses me.

'I'm going to take a shower also. Stay right here.'

I stay right there, looking at the fan spinning.

The sky is white with low clouds. Their speed is nauseating if you look at them for too long. As if someone's recorded a time-lapse video of clouds moving and projected it above the fjords to save time. It's Saturday in Hundested. Dog walkers. Hoodies. Coffee shops. Prams. Plastic bags. Boats. Bike horns and pedestrians. Sausages and cigarette smoke. People pass by. I walk along the beach towards Jens/dad's house. The sea is still, like a postcard of a sea. Two kayaks split the grey of the water. I speed up my step.

He's not in the garden when I reach the gate. He's not in his chair on the porch. He's not by the rosebush. He's not by the deck. He's not doing the recycling. He's not behind the window waving. A bird flies off a pine tree. I press down on the handle and push the door with my shoulder – it's always been a bit dodgy. A bit faulty. It's locked. I knock. Onetwothree. Onetwothree.

'Dad?'

Onetwothree. Onetwothree.

I hear steps from the back. The door opens. Jens/dad's bald head in the crack between the outside and the inside. The rest of him in a bathrobe. I come in. Hug him. Cigarettes and cologne.

'Why are you not ready? It's Saturday.'

He doesn't say anything and walks down towards the dark of the kitchen. I follow him. Dishes in the sink. My name circled on each Saturday on the wall calendar. The other boxes are empty. The pen hangs on the string.

'Are you not feeling well? We can go another time if you want.'

He takes a packet of King's out of his bathrobe pocket and lights one. The smoke rises above our heads like clouds.

'We can go. Yes. In a bit.'

He sits down and exhales. I sit on the chair opposite.

'Are you sure you're OK?'

'I'm OK.'

He ashes on top of the cigarette butts in the cup.

'What happened to that ashtray I bought you?'

'It's dirty.'

He chews on the skin by the nail on his ring finger. Stares at the squares on the tablecloth. The same size as the fields on the wall calendar. Stains. Red stains. Brown stains. Round black holes from a cigarette or flying ash. Fruit bowl with two bananas. Blackening along the base.

'Do you want a banana?'

'I'm OK.'

He nods. Rubs his cheeks with his hand. Stubble the colour of ash.

'I brought my things.' I lift the rucksack by the leg of the chair. 'Even the camera.'

'That's nice.'

Water taps in the basin. Onetwothree. Onetwothree.

'We could take pictures of the old house – you said it'd be nice to have a photo of it last time. To remember it.'

He ashes. Nods. Remembers.

'The sky is a good colour today. It'd be a nice background to the yellow house, I can tell.'

He turns around and looks in the direction of the sink. Above the tap, the curtains on the window block the midday light.

'I went to the new club yesterday. I was a bit nervous. I didn't know how the people would be.'

I pause but he doesn't ask questions.

'But it went fine. They asked me why I was moving. The girls seemed nice. They all seemed nice.'

He clicks the lighter three times before the flame comes. He inhales from the end of the cigarette, the old one still smoking on top of the pile, squished and forgotten.

'They did the measurements and got really excited about my arms – long proportionate to my height. They seemed impressed.'

I want him to say something. Anything. Maybe not so much as a 'I'm so proud of you for having such long arms, so long in fact that they impress professional kayakers.' Maybe something simple, something I'd expect from him. Like, 'that's good' or 'I've always said about your arms' or even just a nod and a grunt. The drips from the sink measure time as it passes. I don't say anything more. Let him process everything at his own speed. If he's thinking about it at all. I look at the bones in his wrists. The blue veins on top of his hands. The red flesh by his nails. The yellow on his moustache.

'I'm sorry, Vibekke.'

He's still looking at the bananas.

'I'm sorry.'

'What do you mean? What are you sorry about?'

A car starts outside. The sounds of its engine travel through the vacuum inside the kitchen where smoke stands still and water taps and the curtain is down.

'You know. About the kayaking. I don't think I can come today.'

White chest hairs stick out from under his bathrobe like cat whiskers. His earlobes heavy on the side of his face, like fleshy flower buds. I wonder how long it takes to know someone before you really start to notice the shape of their ears.

'That's OK. Don't worry about it. You don't look too well.'

'I'm not sick. I just need some time. Some time for myself.'

I look around the room. The yellow wallpaper. The embroideries. And the plates – plates everywhere. On the wall, in the cupboards, on the shelves. Plates made of china. Plates with flags on them. Plates with hand-drawn motifs around the edges. Asian plates. Small plates and average sized plates. Serving plates and trophy plates. Plates with the names of places on them. Mallorca. Malta. Madrid. Places Jens/dad has never been. Plates that have been wrapped in newspaper in the bottom of the chest since the early 90s. What does he have if not time?

'I'm sorry.'

'You don't have to apologise. I understand.'

'You do?'

'I think so.'

He looks away again. Thinks his thoughts. Ashes. Touches the stubble on his chin. His pupils moving up and down across the table, as if it was a world of its own.

'Maybe you should speak to someone. Someone who can help you.'

He snaps out of it.

'Help with what?'

'Needing time. And dealing with things, I guess.'

'I don't need help. Just need time. I'll be fine.'

He gets up, stubs out the cigarette and walks toward the couch. The TV is on mute. Images flicker. Colours change.

'What are you watching?'

'Nothing, really. Just like to have it on.'

He has the plate with the golden edges on the coffee table. The one I once thought was a puppy or a lie detector or a time machine or a stamp collection like the one the boy in the book had.

'We can go another time. Out at sea. I'll go and get something from my room now.'

He doesn't say anything and I leave the kitchen.

I open the door and the room is just as I left it last time I came. There's no sunshine for the crystal owls to hold in their bellies. I pull the curtains and let the white light in. I breathe in the dust and the cigarette smoke and Jens/dad's sadness. I breathe in the dirty dishes and the emptiness in the calendar. I breathe in the plates on the walls and the pages of the TV guide. I breathe in the loneliness and sit down on the edge of the bed.

Across continents and oceans and longitudes and meridians, Mia is waiting for me. She's there, through the white clouds and grey clouds and blue skies and scrambled eggs served on a plastic plate. She's there past air pressures and turbulence patches and seats that don't go backwards. She's there waiting outside Arrivals, checking the time on the electronic board above the gates and the time on her phone. As if discrepancies made it move faster. She's there, unaware that the dead turtles and the luminous sea anemone and the sky the colour of a Fanta exist somewhere.

I walk pass the duty-free perfumes and champagne bottles. Pass the Marlboro Light cartons and M&M tubes the size of infants. My rucksack feels light, despite the extra weight of the gifts. A fridge magnet shaped like a gekko. A tub of *Lizano* hot salsa. Tin box with Costa Rican coffee. Tablecloth with the words '*pura vida*' on it. Bottle of wine with pictures of turtles on the label. There was no time for meaningful presents. Just the airport selection. Ali is walking somewhere behind me together with Thomas. I look back but she's not looking. We reach the 'no re-entry beyond this point' sign. Point of no return. I press the metal bars down and the doors open. We'd said our goodbyes earlier.

Heads and coughs and laughter and bright light and the smell of Burger King and cleaning chemicals on the other side. The pressure inside my inner ear is still a bit off and the sounds of the airport merge in their incomprehensible way. Buzzing and twisting like a dying fly in a glass. Mia comes jogging towards me through the faces and

noise. Her arms around my neck. White flowers in her hands. Her smell (shower gel, lotion, conditioner, perfume, detergent, cleanliness, cinnamon). She holds my face and the leaves from the bouquet touch my cheeks. It feels rough. Irritating. Mia kisses me. I kiss her back and it's unusual. She looks at me for a moment. She felt it too. The distance of continents and oceans and longitudes and meridians. It feels familiar and odd to be kissing her.

'I can't believe you're here. I can't believe it's you.'

I'm here. It's me. She looks at me again. Holds my hand. Her eyes shine under the artificial lights above our heads.

'Come, your mum is just over there. Do you want me to take your rucksack? It looks really heavy.'

I shake my head. Let my arm stretch as Mia walks through shoulders and sleeves and bags. I turn around. Ali is standing still outside the gates looking at me leave, her rucksack on the floor by her feet. A moment (an eternity?) passes. Then she disappears behind backs and napes and jackets, standing under the electronic board.

'Vibekke, oh my god, you're so brown.'

My mum's scarf smells of Chanel and French fries. She's done her hair and smiles under her fresh dyed fringe.

'Seriously, I've never seen you this tanned in my life.'

She touches my cheeks as if to check if I was really tanned. It could be dirt. I don't say that. Smile. Is Ali still there, outside the gates? Or if she's gone, which direction did she take? I forgot to say bye to Morten. Mia is looking at me, the heads of the flowers pointed down towards the whiteness of the floor.

'Shall we go? We're parked over there.'

I know what I need to do. I need to pull Mia aside by the 7 Eleven. Wait for the couple holding hands to pass by. Tell her I need to speak to her. And no, it can't wait. I need to look at her and tell her with my eyes first. I need to make her understand. I need to tell her how I don't know how it happened even though I do know. I need to tell her not to organise any more surprises for me. I need to tell her what I didn't tell her in my email. How I let go of Control and almost got lost in the night. How I love her but I might love someone else also. How I'm not sure I'm the same and I'm the same at the same

time. How I wanted to stand still outside the gates. I need to tell her, and then I need to find Ali.

We start walking, Mia's arm over my shoulders.

'Are you sure I can't take your rucksack?'

We stop and I take it off. It feels strange not to have the weight of it on. It feels strange to see it on someone else's back. It's become a part of my body over the last day. Seeing Mia with it is like seeing your eyes on someone else's face. Mum is walking in front of us.

'Are you OK?'

No, no I am not.

'I'm OK. Just a bit jetlagged.'

'You must be.'

She squeezes my shoulder tighter and we exit through the rotating doors, spinning, spinning, spinning.

'I've made us some lunch.'

Mum unlocks the front door. Mia is holding me on the lower back, between the two dimples Ali kissed under a starry sky in another time across continents and oceans and longitude and meridians. I come in after my mum. Pluto is already on the other side. I can hear his nails tap on the tiles like tiny wooden shoes. He jumps up, trying to lick my face. His nails and his paw on my arms. I pet his head and scratch him behind the ear. He jumps again.

'Aw, look – he's missed you.'

Mia is down on her knees and he tries to sit on her as she pets him. Monkey comes from the direction of my room. She rubs herself on my legs for a bit and then loses interest.

'Are you hungry? I hope you're hungry.'

I walk across the kitchen towards the living room. 'Welcome home' banner above the TV and the dining table. Everything looks the same. The TV opposite the couch. The crime novels on the shelves. The white curtains and the white light.

'Sit, sit.'

I sit while my mum and Mia bring plates and pots covered in cling film. Rye bread. Potato sausage. Tomatoes. Philadelphia. Boiled eggs. Butter. Mayonnaise. Dill from the garden. Ham. Brie. *Riberhus*. Pickles. Grapes. Mackerel. Mustard. Orange juice. Beer. It's different from the rice and beans. Mia sits on the chair next to me and reaches across me to get the bread. She leaves a slice on my plate and puts one on hers. She holds my knee, smiling. She's missed me, and I haven't.

'I'm so happy you're back. You have no idea.'

I smile.

'Butter?'

'Sure.'

My inner ear buzzes and I'm hollow inside my head. I spread a layer on the bread. I don't know what to pick for the top. Sausage or ham? Brie or cheddar? Egg or tomato? The choice seems as hard as telling Mia what's happened. As impossible. She's watching me.

'You should try the sausage. You won't regret it, trust me.'

I pierce a slice with my fork. It lies on top of the bread with its little deposits of fat; sweaty and dead on the craters of the rye. Mum is already building a second *smoerrebrod*. She moves the hair from her eyes with an oily hand behind her ear.

'Did you take lots of pictures? I hope you've taken lots of pictures.' Bite.

'Not really, to be honest. There are some.'

Ali lying flat in the sand. Ali swimming towards me in the pool. Ali in the hammock, the waves crashing behind her against the cyan sky.

'Let's see them after lunch, if you're not too tired that is.' Bite.

I don't say anything.

'So did you just kind of sit around and get interviewed from time to time?'

'Pretty much.'

'I thought you were meant to do team building exercises and stuff like that.'

'I guess us looking after the turtle nests was the team building.'

'Not hungry?'

Mia has stopped eating, looking at me with concern. I feel ill with the pressure of what I have to do. More buzzing and thumping. Like the dying fly inside a glass bumping against the transparent surface, pushing it as hard as it can with its little feet and spread out wings as thin as sketching paper.

'I think it's the jetlag. Feel a bit nauseous.'

'You poor thing, it's such a long flight, isn't it? You must be exhausted.'

She rubs her hand from my knee up and down my thigh. Her hand feels cold, even through the material. Mum is still eating her way through the sandwich. A pickle falls on her plate. Pluto lays his wet mouth on my other knee.

'He wants your sausage.'

Mia and my mum laugh and Pluto wags his tail in response. I pet him between his brows where his skin is wrinkled like a blanket.

'I'm really feeling a bit too tired. I might head to bed in a bit.'

'But you haven't even told us anything. Or eaten anything.'

Mum's hair is in her eyes again. This isn't the most user-friendly haircut.

'I know. I'm sorry. I just need to rest.'

'I'll come with you.'

Mia takes a bite of her egg and mayonnaise *smoerrebrod*. All I want is to be alone and think. The last twenty-four hours don't feel like they belong to me. It was as if someone had placed me in a situation and told me my lines and didn't tell me my lines at the same time so I don't know if what I did was right and will never know. Mia finishes her bread.

'I am really tired, I just want to collapse.'

'Will you come for lunch tomorrow at mine then? I want to know everything.'

'I'll stop by tomorrow. I'm sorry, I feel so tired. Plus, there really isn't that much to tell.'

I cheated on you. I might have fallen in love. I made a friend. There were dead turtles.

'Just tell me the truth.'

Cold drops drip on my shoulders where the sun freckles are. The tips of my hair feel frozen. Buzzing in my head. Light in my eyes. I don't know what to say.

'This is the least you can do.'

Mia is still sitting on the edge of the bed. I'm wrapped in my unfamiliar-smelling towel and watching her flick through photos on the camera with her thumb. Tiny coloured captures of time and secrets flash on the small screen in front of her eyes, and I don't know what she's looking at or what she's seeing. I should've told her back at the airport. Back at the 7/11, after the couple had walked past. Now, it's too late to speak.

'I don't know what you want me to say.'

'I want you to be honest.'

She doesn't look at me. The room is quiet apart from the clicking of the plastic 'next' arrow button being pressed. Click, click, click. Sunbathing. Walking. Shoulder. Mouth. Stuff from my rucksack is piled on the floor by the leg of the bed. Towels. Sheet. Socks.

'Is it that hard for you? To tell the fucking truth?'

Would it be inappropriate if I dried my hair? I'm freezing. Click, click, click. Palm tree. Lizard. Pebbles. Feet. A car passes.

'Who even are you?'

I am Previous Me, and Current Me and the Me who made choices and the Me who didn't.

'Say something, for god's sake.'

She throws the camera on the rug at the bottom of the bed.

'You'll break the camera.'

My voice doesn't sound like my own.

'This is all you can fucking talk about? Your camera? What's wrong with you?'

Let's see. I'm indecisive. Unaware of what I want. Selfish. Sad. Disappointed that there's no Karlsson who lives on the roof. Disappointed that I could've become an astronaut if I'd wanted to. Disappointed I quit the kayak club. Disappointed I couldn't help Jens/dad keep his bungalow. Disappointed there was nothing I could do and there never is except when there is and I do nothing. Disappointed that there was never anything I wanted enough. Disappointed in myself for not telling Mia sooner. Disappointed I didn't stay with Ali under the electronic board measuring time passing. Disappointed in Mia for going through my stuff and the photos on the camera. Disappointed by my reaction right now. I don't know what to say. What is there to say? I'm sorry?

'Seriously? Are you seriously going to just stay quiet? This is fucked up, Vibekke.'

She gets up and walks towards me.

'Do you have nothing to say for yourself?'

She takes my towel and it falls at my feet, damp and used. My breasts are white against the tanned skin stretched on my ribs. She watches me. I'm cold. Mia pushes me against the wall. My shoulder blades bump up against the frame of the print with the yellow house by the fjords against a grey sky. It digs into the flesh like a seatbelt would dig into your side if it was true. Mia's eyes are red as she looks into mine. She wants us to speak with our eyes. Communicate by sight. Like people do. Like lovers do. I don't know what to say. She holds my shoulder with her forearm pressing over my chest. I can feel the tendons and muscles on my collarbone. Her jeans rub against my naked legs, the fabric rough like the leaves on the plants in the bouquet she brought me. I can feel her breath on my mouth. Incoherent, hot. She doesn't kiss me. She holds me in silence pressed against the wall like a pinned insect, needled against a white page. Vibekke, printed and underlined twice with an ink line under it. I can't move. Mia holds my head by the hair, wet and tangled. She pulls it. My mouth convulses. She turns me around. Slowly, like time passing. Pulls more with her fingers knotted in locks of hair until my chin is facing the ceiling. White breasts pressed on white wall. White light through the window. My face turned on its side, my cheek against the print with the yellow house. Condensation on the glass from breath and sweat. Mia is pressing my body with her forearm from the back. She spreads my legs with her knee where the bruise is. Each movement sharp and singular. She puts her hand on my thigh. Then between my legs. Her hand is in my body and my cheek moves up the glass of the frame from the motion. Her head on my head. Mia's breath next to my breath on the yellow house. Her hand

again and I feel my mouth twitch. Her mouth on my ear. She bites my earlobe and doesn't release it. My body tries to jerk. She's still holding me tight so nothing happens. She presses my face harder against the frame so it's on my jaw.

Mia fucks me against the wall in the white light. Cars pass. Time passes. She stops. Cries on the floor, her head on my legs, her hand on my feet. I don't move. She leaves. The door closes. I lie in bed and fall asleep to the sound of the buzzing.

Jens/dad is cutting the sausages. The fat still frying even though they're on the board.

'Can I just have the skins?'

Crisp and brown and salty.

'You know you can't. I'm making the tomato sauce now; you have to have the whole thing. It'll be ready in a minute.'

'But nobody makes sausages with spaghetti anyway.'

'What do you mean "nobody"? I do.'

'But it's weird.'

'So? Does it taste good?'

'Yeah, it tastes good.'

'Well, then that's that.'

He opens a tin of tomatoes and adds it to the garlic and onions. Stirs the mixture and licks the end of the spoon. Opens the spaghetti jar and puts a whole bunch in another pot. A pinch of salt.

'Sausages go last.'

Breeze moves the curtains above the sink.

'Will we go deep into the sea today?'

'As deep as you want. But remember we need to come back.'

'I'll remember.'

'Wash your hands before lunch.'

I turn the tap on and soap my palms. Between the fingers. On the thumbs. Look up. Through the window, the sky is blue.

'Want an end? It's basically just skin anyway.'

Jens/dad hands me a fork with a round piece of sausage stuck on it. I let it sit on my tongue before I chew it.

'Salty.'

'Yes. Very salty. This is why you can't have the skin only.'

'That doesn't make any sense.'

'What do you mean it doesn't make sense?'

He pushes the rings of sausage down the boiling tomato mixture with the blunt end of the knife. They float on the surface before disappearing into the moving redness on the flame. I feel its heat on my cheeks until Jens/dad moves me away from the stove.

'Dry your hands.'

'It doesn't make sense because the salty bits are my favourite. And if you like something very, very much, you should do it all the time, right?'

'Well, ideally. If it doesn't interfere with your long-term well being. Too much of anything can make you sick. Too much salt can make you sick, for example.'

'Sick how?'

'Salt sick.'

I think about that while running my tongue along the edges of my teeth. Does it mean that you gradually become built of salt? Your hands, your fingers, your blood? And eventually, would that mean that one day when it's windy – maybe in October or November- you'd just fall apart in a million billion salt grains that fly through the streets of Hundested and no one can put them back together?

'I don't believe you.'

'That's your prerogative.'

Jens/dad drains the spaghetti down the sink. His face in steam.

'What does "prerogative" mean?'

prærogativ: it's a word from the thirteenth century. It means a special right or privilege.'

'And do we all have it?'

'We do. In different contexts.'

'How is it special then?'

'It's special because it gives you choice. Come on, let's eat now. Did you want parmesan? It's nice with parmesan.'

'I'll think about it.'

We sit down. The bowl steams and the curtains move with the breeze. It's summer and I'll be spending three days with Jens/dad.

Later. It's just me and Jens/dad and the sea and nothing else. We're further than we'd ever been before. My lifejacket squeaks when I move my arms to paddle. The plastic edge on my armpit irritates the skin.

'When can I go without a lifejacket?'

'Maybe when you grow up.'

'Why maybe?'

'Because you might choose to wear a lifejacket even though you'd have the freedom not to.'

'It would be my prerogative to decide.'

'That's right. But it'd be safer to always wear one.'

'I think I wouldn't want to be safe when I grow up. Isn't it boring?'

'I don't know. Maybe for some people. Everyone's different.'

Jens/dad's lifejacket reflects the sun. The surface of the water is still like the clouds; there are no waves out here. I think of my body becoming salt. I think about safety. You can't see what's under the water. You don't know how deep it is or if there's a fish swimming right under your kayak. You don't know whether if you flipped, you'd make it – even with a lifejacket. You don't know how long it will be until another person

comes – maybe on a boat or a kayak. You don't know if they'd see you and the belly of your kayak, dark like water. You just don't know.

I paddle behind Jens/dad until we reach the fjords and the yellow house.

'Isn't this a nice house?'

'It is.'

We float in the water looking at the house, casting the sunlight out with our lifejackets.

'Let's go back.'

We go back.

Ash falls on the couch like chunks of fluff from the bottom of the pocket in your winter coat. Grey dissolves on grey.

'Crap, I'm so sorry. It's all over the cushion.'

I blow, and its particles fly in the air then on the floor.

'That's fine, that's fine. Don't worry about it. See – burn mark here, burn mark over there.'

Morten points with impatience at the arm of the sofa and then at the cushion and goes back to rolling. I watch more ash form around the red tip of the joint in my hand. I lean towards the ashtray and try to make it symmetrical.

'You're really good at rolling, you know that?'

'Thank you. It's one of my many gifts.'

Sun strips on the floor through the blinds.

'For all it's worth, I think you need to call Ali. Immediately.'

He leans forward nearer to me. We're back on that.

'I want to. But I don't want to screw things over.'

He takes the joint from my hand and holds it between his thumb and index finger.

'How will you be screwing things over by calling her?'

Inhale.

'I don't know. I just have a feeling this might happen.'

Feelings are strong things.

'Listen, she's expecting you to call her. She couldn't call you. Not while you were with Mia. This is your call, pardon the pun.'

'This is a terrible pun. Is it even a pun?'

'I just don't know anymore.'

White smoke comes out from his mouth as he laughs. I stick a finger between two blinds and look out at the roofs and sunlight. Inside, dust and smoke are static near the ceiling. Incense is burning by the TV and the room smells of pines, smoke and hemp.

'All I'm saying is, you have to take responsibility for your happiness. Do what you have to do.'

'But I don't know what to do, that's the problem. I don't have like a goal or aim or whatever the fuck people have.'

'Of course you do. Everyone does. All of us.'

'OK, Yoda, pass me that.'

'The way I see it is: you like Ali. You both had an incredible time back at Happy Camp. Nothing to stop you from having the same incredible time back here.'

He takes a drag and nods to himself.

'But I don't know if she wants to.'

'So? Find out. The problem isn't that you don't know what you want. You're afraid to pursue what you want because of what she might want. This is messed up. Your choice shouldn't depend on her choice. Or anyone else's choice actually.'

The skin on Morten's face is rough from the sun.

'Here, here. It's just easier said than done.'

'Believe me, I know.'

'You know?'

'I know.'

His fingers follow the edge of the ashtray. The sounds of engines and horns and movement. Inside, it's us and the quiet burning of incense.

'You know when we had that ridiculous team exercise. When they made us pretend we were animals.'

'That kind of thing is hard to forget.'

I think of the bottom of the sea. How I was a fish. How the air entered my mouth and dried it: first, the tip of my tongue, then the corners of my lips, then the inside of my lower gums. Morten smirks and looks at the bookcase for a moment. Bars of light static on the covers. Camus. Kierkegaard. Sartre. It's little wonder Morten was in Happy Camp. Or are these presents from his Freaky Freudian Father?

'They were asking us to think of the happiest time in our lives. And I said about eating ice cream on the beach with my friend – how we didn't have school, and how there was nothing in the world to worry about.'

'Yeah, I remember.'

I knew it. I knew they weren't just friends.

'Well, I was in love with my friend. Like, in love in love in love. As in love as it gets. Borderline obsessive. Actually, truly obsessive. And at that time, it felt like he was in love with me too. Because he knew how I felt – kind of, not to the full extent. And he encouraged it, I think. And I knew it wasn't true; it wasn't real. Even then – what I'd call "the happiest moment of my life" – wasn't sincere because I was aware it wasn't authentic. He was straight. He always was. But that's besides the point.'

Is it? He exhales and continues without looking at me, his eyes fixated somewhere on the floor. Unknown radian of wood like the mysterious dark seas ahead of fifteen-century sailors.

'It was an illusion, an illusion of happiness – like all happiness - but I had him to share it with so it felt like it was real and like it was something that could develop; something that could be more. I don't know, does that make sense?'

'Yes, it does.'

I take a sip of my beer. Point at his but he shakes his head. The edges of the joint burn in the silence of the room.

'Even though he didn't know it, he was a participant in the illusion, and that felt like enough.'

'Felt like? But it wasn't?'

'Not in the end, no. The "something" I'd thought would develop never did. It became harder to believe in what wasn't real. One day, I was walking home. It was August. It was so hot, you wouldn't believe it.'

He makes a swooshing movement with his arm from one end of the couch to the other, as if to illustrate the extensive coverage of the sun over Denmark on that day in August. It makes me giggle but I suppress it. Try to find that point on the floor he had found earlier. Listen, listen. Listen to the story. Listen to the traffic. Listen to the paper burning and the blinds moving and time passing.

'We'd just met up the previous day. We'd smoked weed on the beach with a beer or had a bonfire, just the two of us, or something like that. I don't remember. It's weird, how these moments merge and you can't tell one from the other. They definitely happened, I just don't know how much time had passed in between them.'

He looks at me to see if I'm following the story and I nod.

'I was walking and thinking – you know, like the Modernist Man only I'm more post-post-modern but you know what I mean.'

I don't.

'Anyway, I was walking down the street remembering the night before – even though I can't remember it now – and the sun was in my eyes and my forehead and there was a primary school nearby and children were playing. It was that kind of day, like they have it in the movies.'

He's smiling as he speaks and it's contagious.

'I felt hungry and stopped to buy a hotdog. Even that tasted fucking amazing, it was absurd how perfect this day was. French dressing, soft white bread roll, crispy bacon around a meaty sausage – god, I can't believe I remember more details about the sausage than about what had happened the night before that had made me feel so light and happy.'

'Sausages are important.'

I wouldn't mind having one right now.

'But they are. They are. Anyway. I'd taken a bite, just one bite, and I was thinking pretty much what I told you now – "this is amazing" – when my phone vibrated in my pocket. It said I had a message. It was one of those old Nokia phones, you could only see you had a message, you couldn't tell what the message was or who it was from until you actually unlocked it and opened it.'

'And sometimes you'd be out of space so couldn't even open it unless you deleted other ones.'

'Exactly, exactly. And then you had to be selective of which messages you wanted to keep as some would have sentimental value, maybe.'

We laugh at how mobile phone storage has progressed over the years.

'I had a feeling it'd be from him, I just knew it as I was unlocking it, still chewing. I even stopped walking so I could take in the message, whatever it was – I was just so happy he'd write me. It's pathetic when I think about it now.'

'What – no, come on. It's not pathetic.'

'I think it is. Anyway. It was from him - go me and my psychic powers.'

He mimics applause to himself and I can't keep the giggles this time. He seems encouraged. Maybe he wanted to add a lighter tone to the story. He's been procrastinating telling me the end, talking about sausages and messages instead. Maybe he's changed his mind and doesn't want to share it anymore. Maybe it reminds him of when he was sad. Maybe he's sad all the time. When he makes a sandwich. When he waits for the train. When he's in the shower. When he's on his couch getting high.

'It said, "Morten, you won't believe it. J and I did the hanky panky last night after I walked her home." Those exact words. I couldn't swallow the food in my mouth. The saltiness of the bacon was sickening. The sun in my eyes became nauseating. I felt dizzy. My ears were buzzing. The asphalt was radiating heat. My eyes were watering. The world had ended there on the street in August while I was having a hot dog. I knew that was it. And it was absurd. The stupid phrase, my stupid illusion, my stupid excitement when I saw I'd got a text, the stupid hope it'd be from him. My stupid refusal to see this was always bound to happen. It was the biggest – most significant and insignificant – anticlimax I'd ever experienced. And it was awful. It changed me. I took the train back home and cried the whole way back, my head against the window. I cried in the afternoon. I cried in the evening. I cried in the morning. Then I didn't cry anymore.'

Morten is frowning at the floor. I hadn't realised but my eyes were now tearing.

'This is really awful, Morten. I'm sorry that happened to you.'

I don't know what else to say. There's nothing to say, maybe.

'No, don't be. I learned from it. A lot. What I had done – done to myself, at that – was building the incorrect assumption that he saw what I saw. Or that he wanted what I wanted. He didn't, in short. You and Ali, on the other hand. It sounds like you both want the same thing. See what the other one sees. There's no doubt about that. Just act on it. Don't be afraid. Even if your world ends, it will end and you won't be able to swallow and one day you won't cry anymore. And that's a worst case scenario.'

He smiles and puts his arm around my shoulder.

'There are so many things that aren't real. But love or attraction or whatever it is – it's one of those rare things that are an illusion until they're not.'

His face is almost glowing in the dimmed light. The smoke makes my eyes tear. Or maybe it's the truth of his words. Or just the emotion from the weed.

'And this is why we should smoke together more often.'

He clasps his hands on his knees, gets up, pulls the blinds and opens the windows. Fresh air and bright light flood the room like a tsunami: singularly and majestically. Morten sits with his knees on the couch and watches out. I follow suit. Rest on my elbows. Opposite us, balconies and windows and laundry and sky. Our arms touch, brown on brown. I blink against the sun.

'It's a beautiful day.'

'It's a beautiful day to get high.'

He passes me his packet of Kings but I shake my head.

'My throat hurts from the weed already.'

'Amateur.'

'Hey.'

I nudge him with my elbow. He lights a cigarette and waves it over the edge of the window, his arm spread and blue with veins, above the street and walkers and shoppers and cyclists.

'So tell me about Mia.'

'What about Mia?'

'I don't know. Everything. What did you say? What did she say?'

'Since when are you such a gossip?'

'I'm not a gossip. Just curious.'

'Just looking for more high quality drama.'

'That's not fair.'

I laugh.

'OK, OK. I was in the shower.'

'All good stories start this way.'

'This isn't a good story, trust me.'

'Go on.'

'I was in the shower and when I came out, she was going through the photos on my camera.'

'Please don't tell me you had photos of you and Ali on there. That would be truly amateur.'

'No, nothing like that. Nothing intimate in any way, I wouldn't think.'

'Well, clearly she thought so.'

'She did, yes. And what do you mean "truly amateur"? I don't think of myself as some kind of serial cheater.'

'This is how these things start.'

He's smiling but maybe he's right. I take the cigarette from between his fingers and take a drag. Blow the smoke towards the clouds. Grey on white on blue.

'No but seriously – is that how she found out? What were the pictures of?'

'The photos were of normal stuff really – I mean, you were there; you know what I took photos of. The beach, Samara, dinner, Bono, palm trees, lizards – that kind of thing. I guess there were quite a few of Ali in the mix.'

'Ah, now we're getting closer.'

'Well, again – nothing incriminating. Maybe some of her sunbathing. Some of her feet and my feet.'

'And Mia guessed it from that?'

'She's just good at this kind of thing, I guess.'

'What? Guessing when her girlfriend is cheating on her?'

'Hey, that's not nice. Plus, she never liked Ali for that reason. She thought I had a thing for her.'

'OK, so she is good. So, what happened?'

'Nothing really. I came out the shower. Took one look at her going through those photos and I knew it wasn't going to be good.'

'But why didn't you tell her before? I thought you wanted to come clean?'

'I did, I really did. I was just so tired after the flight and the insane day we'd had leaving the camp in the middle of the night and travelling and I didn't sleep... and it didn't feel like the right time. At all.'

'There's never a right time for these things.'

'Well, that certainly wasn't it.'

'Was it Karoline maybe? Had she hinted or said anything?'

'At first I thought the same thing but I don't think that was it. Both Mia and my mum were acting really normal in the car. My mum said Karoline had given her a call but didn't specify what was said so I assumed it wasn't of significance.'

'Curious to find out what she did say.'

'Yeah. Same. And the rest is history – here I am telling you about it.'

'How did Mia take it?'

'Badly.'

I skip the part about Mia fucking me against the wall and holding me so I couldn't move. He wouldn't understand. Or maybe he would.

'She was trying to get me to tell her everything but I just felt unable to speak almost. She left. I haven't heard from her. I've been avoiding my mum. I know what she'd say.'

'And you haven't spoken to Ali at all since we've been back?'

'No. Everything just...happened. I haven't even had the chance to process it all. I don't think I have her phone number; the whole thing is so ridiculous. And I don't know what to say.'

'Just ask her to meet you. The longer you wait to call her, the weirder it would feel. Once you meet her face to face, you'd know what to say. But you've got to start the process.'

I sit back on the couch. Feel the breeze from the outside on the temple of my head. It's as if I'm ten years old and Jens/dad is in the kitchen making spaghetti and the curtains above the sink are blowing. Morten's apartment has a calming effect with its smells and colours and textures. Morten's weed has a calming effect. He sits next to me.

'I think you should call Ali.'

'And say what?'

'Say you want to meet her.'

'I don't know.'

'You'll regret it if you don't do it.'

He takes his phone out of his pocket. The sun shines on my skin. It's almost too bright to see the screen. I press 'call'. It rings. It rings. It rings. The space-time between each ring is as wide as the horizon in a Dali painting. Broad and long and unreachable. I shouldn't have smoked weed before calling her.

'Hello.'

'Ali. Hey. It's me.'

She's silent for just a fraction of time. Hesitation?

'Hey. How are you?'

'I'm good. I'm with Morten.'

Why does that matter? Why say this?

'I can see that.'

'You can?'

'You're calling me from his number.'

Laughter on the line.

'Oh. Yes. That's right. I still don't have a phone.'

Now we're both silent.

'So, what are you guys doing?'

'Just hanging out really.'

'Thanks for the invite.'

'No, it wasn't like that. It sort of just happened.'

Like you happened.

'Can we meet?'

'Now?'

'No, I mean soon.'

She's quiet. I shouldn't have called.

'OK.'

'Ali?'

'Yeah?'

'I've missed you.'

Below the fence, the traffic lights are on red. Fumes. Engines. The sounds and smells of Copenhagen at four o'clock.

The train cuts through fields of linden-green. Houses. Farms. Dark woodlands. Small stations no one can remember the names of. The train driver beeps the horn from time to time to scare off crossing deer. I sit facing backwards and watch the world pass in past tense. That's what Ali said to me when we were on the bus on the way to the airport: you live in your past; you let your memories build the present. How could I not?

These actions of the past, these choices I've made – they still affect me. And the ones I make today, they will influence where I will be tomorrow or next week or when I'm forty-seven. It's hard to choose when so much depends on the choice. Or does it? Would I feel any different had I decided to go to university and got a desk job and pinned pictures of the places I'd been on the board behind the screen and started an office romance that everyone gossiped about that then resulted in a good match and a nautical-themed wedding? Had I made savings or travelled through Asia. Had I taken extra shifts and quit my job and took the trans-Siberian rail. Had I learned to drive and fixed my back molar before it was too late, and it had rotted down to the gum and it had to be taken out. Had I not slept with Ali on top of the dead turtles' nest. Would I be happier right now in this moment? Right now, when the sun is shining over the crops outside and a single grey cloud approaches from the east? Maybe Ali is right. Maybe I've made choice into something heavier than it really is. More important. Maybe it's fine to be here or there. Maybe it's as fine to be on this train, as it would to be in the Siberian tundra.

*And here, or there...No. Should we have stayed at home
wherever that may be?*

Naeste station: Hundested

The train stops and I'm off. I feel dizzy when my feet touch the asphalt – I've been facing the opposite direction for too long. Hundested is the same as always. The kebab guy is just outside the stand, fitting the metal poles supporting the tin roof. Getting ready for business. Soon, the meat will start twisting and the Coke bottles will be sweaty with ice. The ketchup and the garlic sauce and the French dressing sauce and the mustard will be placed on the counter by the serviettes. People with full Netto bags are walking to their cars. Tourists are looking at the map by the car park, pointing at drawn museums and trails. The grey cloud is coming. I walk on the road by the beach. The sea is calm.

Jens/dad's house looks different. There are boxes outside by the bins. Black garbage bags. The buds on the rosebush are browning. The living room cupboard is on the porch. The 'Gone Fishing' sign is static above it. I close the gate behind me. I knock three times. Onetwothree. Onetwothree. Onetwothree.

'Come in, come in. I'm at the back.'

Inside the corridor, piles of yellowing *Se og Hoer* issues from the 90s. Jars and jugs. Boxes with pans. Winter coats and duvets.

'Jesus, what a mess.'

I come in the kitchen where Jens/dad is unscrewing the light bulb in his beige working outfit he's had since I was little. Painting the fence? Beige working outfit. Clearing the gutter? Beige working outfit.

'What are you doing?'

'Hello, hello. What do you think I'm doing? I'm unscrewing the light bulb.'

'OK...why are you unscrewing the light bulb?'

'I've paid for this light bulb. It's my light bulb. I'm taking it to the new house. What's the point of buying a new light bulb when this one is perfectly functional? *For helvede.*'

He makes a hissing sound with his lips when he gets an electric shock. The same sound Monkey makes if you tried to pick her up from the grass when she's playing in the garden and isn't ready to be brought in. Wasps to kill. Nothings to stare at.

'I'm guessing you didn't turn off the electricity from the circuit.'

'You're guessing right. It should've been enough to just have the switch off. Maybe it's good I'm moving. This house is a wreck.'

He gets down from the table and hugs me. Tree bark, dust, Kings and hand soup. Every surface in the kitchen is covered by something. There are fruit bowls and baskets in the sink. Folded linen on the chair. Pots and plants in a box by the door. How much stuff does Jens/dad actually have?

'I haven't done your room yet. I thought you might want to do it yourself. There are some bin bags in the corner by the sewing machine and some flat pack boxes on the porch.'

I didn't even know he owned a sewing machine. He seems in a much better mood than I had expected.

'Sure. I thought the guys were coming to help too?'

'They are. With the moving, not with the packing. I didn't want them looking at all my things. And you never know if someone might take a liking to a plate or a painting or a tapestry and next thing you know, it's lost in the move.'

'You've known these people for how many years now? They're not going to steal from you.' And you own a tapestry?

'I wouldn't call it stealing exactly. But if I saw something I really liked and thought: no one will miss this, I might as well take it. Look after it.'

'Well, it looks like you've definitely looked after a lot of things.'

I want to say 'a lot of junk' but I know this would offend him. He could easily provide enough stock for four consecutive flea markets if he wanted.

'This is what happens when you've lived for more than fifty years. You collect things.'

You hoard them. I take the bin bags and try not to knock over the vases and the tiny glass bottles. Why does he have tiny glass bottles? What would he put in them? Tiny flowers? Three and a half teaspoons of water? A suitcase is blocking the door to my bedroom and I try to find a place for my foot to balance myself and open the door. Inside, it's the same. The petals on the wallpaper. Teenage Vibekke looking at me from the collage (of herself) on the wall. The glass owls aligned on the windowsill like the roofs are aligned outside it. I don't know where to start. Jens/dad jumps over the suitcase.

'I forgot to tell you – before you start – can you take a few photos? Try to get as many angles as you can. For the memory. Or if you wanted to look at the photos for inspiration for later. For when you arrange your new space in the new house.'

He hands me his camera and I take it. Sweet, sweet Jens/dad.

'Maybe take some of the details too. In case.'

I nod and put my wrist through the string hanging from the corner of the camera like Jens/dad likes it. It's safer, in case your hands are slippery and you drop the camera and the digital display screen cracks, or worse, the entire mechanism breaks and Jens/dad wouldn't know when he would be able to afford a new one. He leaves and I move close to the door, trying to get the whole room in. Shelves. Wardrobe. Bed. Cupboard. Rug. Mirror. I zoom in on the way ten-year-old toiletries are ordered. Empty perfume boxes. Empty tub of Elizabeth Arden face cream. I zoom in on the pillows on

top of one another. I zoom in on the book covers and magazines. On the glitter on top of the shoebox I decorated when I thought I was going to be a craftswoman and open a little shop by Hundested Harbour and sell beads and homemade boxes and necklaces and watercolour drawings to rich old ladies and German tourists. I zoom in on the pinned photos by the mirror of Italian bread factory lines and family-owned pizzerias with stone ovens. I cut those out from 70s magazines I found at a flea market with Jens/dad. 10kr for the bunch – what a great deal. As the scissors cut through the paper I could see myself in my restaurant – over a pot of boiling pasta or flipping dough in the air or making Manhattans for retired men with golden crosses over white-haired chests. I could've been anything. I could've been anyone.

I turn to take a photo of the door and the bracelets around the doorknob. Yellow and red and green. Mia is there watching me.

'Hey.'

'Hey.'

'I didn't mean to scare you.'

'No, it's fine. You didn't scare me.'

I'm still holding the beads of the bracelet.

'May I come in?'

'Sure.'

'What are you doing?'

'Taking photos around the room.'

'Jens?'

'The one and only.'

She nods and looks around the room.

'It'll be weird this won't be here anymore. We've had some good times at your dad's.'

It's weird the house will still be there. And this room will still be there. But my things and Jens/dad's things won't be there.

'Yeah. We have.'

'Remember when he walked in on us holding a pan with frying eggs?'

'God, he nearly burnt us all when he jumped.'

'Who walks around with a hot pan in their hands?'

'Exactly.'

We laugh. Not like we used to laugh. But we laugh. Mia walks across the room and sits on the edge of the bed, the owls behind her. She bounces a bit on the mattress.

'I'd put down Jens' moving date in my calendar. So I thought I'd find you here.'

I take the string off my wrist and put the camera on the shelf.

'Here I am.'

'You're probably wondering why I came. Or maybe you know.'

I go on my knees and start building a box.

'I just want answers, Vi. Any answers.'

She comes on the floor too, the box in between us.

'Don't you think I deserve answers? After all this time?'

'I'm not sure I have any.'

'You don't have any explanation? Any reasoning?'

'Sometimes things just happen.'

'Don't go all philosophical on me. Things happen for a reason. There are actions and reactions. Decisions and consequences.'

I get up and start picking the magazines. She gets up too and follows me.

'Even if you don't think you know the answer right now, there is an answer. There was something you were looking for that either I didn't give you or you rejected.'

NME. Rolling Stones. Spin. Down at the bottom of the box. Mia comes around and holds me by the arm.

'I deserve to know, Vi. You owe me that.'

She holds me and it's quiet.

'I know how it must seem, Mia. But it genuinely just happened.'

'I know it's happened. I'm more than aware of it. I'm asking you why it's happened. Were you unhappy with me? With our relationship?'

'It's not about happiness.'

'If it's not about happiness, then what is it about? You go on some kind of happifying holiday, you come back and you've been with someone else. You must've realised something in Costa Rica. Jesus, or did it happen earlier? Were you already cheating on me when we saw her in Christiania?'

'No, it happened at Turtle Camp.'

'So... what happened?'

'Mia, I don't think you want to know the details. Maybe it's best if we talk another time.'

'Oh, I'm sorry, is it inconvenient for you to have to explain why you've ruined our relationship? Why I've wasted three years of my life? I thought we had the real deal, Vi.'

There is never a 'real deal'.

'I don't know what to say.'

'You need to say something. Anything.'

Her eyes tear. I think of the times we woke up together on the bed behind her. I think of the way the hollow in her shoulders moves when she breathes in her sleep. I think of the mole in the shape of Beirut or a red kidney bean. I think of Ali's body on my body.

'Fine. Fine. You know what, when I was travelling on the train over here I was thinking: I should think of the future. I should give Vibekke the opportunity for both of us to leave the past behind us. We can make it work. We're strong. Love doesn't just disappear in the arms of another woman. Love stays in the corner of the room. On top of the kitchen counter. Love stays on the cushion of the couch where we used to make out. Love stays in the bedroom mirror. On the tiles of the bathroom. Love doesn't just go away. But clearly I was wrong. About you, about us. About me. About love. You can't even be bothered to give me an explanation. You don't care.'

She walks towards the door.

'I really thought you were better than this.'

Better than what? What have I done that's so immoral? I fell for someone else. I made myself happy. Isn't that what we're all supposed to be doing? Isn't that what they teach you at Human School?

'Mia.'

Our eyes meet but there are no words there.

'I'm sorry.'

She turns around and leaves. The door is open behind her. I hear Jens/dad pottering around the house. I hear papers brushing. Glass clinking. Thumping, thumping, thumping.

'Did Mia leave?'

'Yes, she left.'

'She didn't even say bye.'

'She didn't say bye to me either.'

'Are you in trouble?'

'With her? Yeah. Big time.'

'I hope things work out.'

He looks at me and then at the floor.

'I don't think they will. But it's OK. I'm OK.'

'That's fine then. Everything passes, remember.'

'I remember.'

He leaves and I pick up the mustard-yellow shoebox box with dried leaves glued to it. I would've made an excellent craftswoman. I would've been happy. Maybe. For a while, at least.

Lichens grow on the side of the cemented waterfront, rust-red. The top of the opera house cuts into the sky with its flat black angles. I wait for Ali and watch the boats pass. They slow down opposite the opera, its engines off, and cameras start clicking, taking the same shot over and over. Steel, brick and sea in front of me. People walk together on

both sides of the canal. There aren't any clouds but the sun is behind the white screen of the sky. I take off my shoes and my socks and dip my feet into the dark water. Seaweed on the top of my feet, slimy and green.

'Going for a swim?'

I turn around. I've forgotten what Ali looks like in clothes that aren't shorts and a tank top. She smiles and I get up.

'It's freezing in there.'

'Quite different from the Pacific ocean.'

'Quite.'

'Hey.'

She comes close to me and kisses me on the corner of my mouth. She looks at me for a moment – eyes speaking, eyes asking. Then she looks away.

'How did you find this place? I never knew it existed and I've even lived in Christiansborg at one point.'

'I was kayaking along here once when I saw it. I thought it's a great view, with the opera house and the red brick buildings. It's a bit like a painting.'

'It is, you're right. It is a bit like a painting. Good find.'

'Yeah.'

I don't really know what to say. Nothing more to say about the surroundings, at least. Her movements seem different in this Other environment. I wonder if I seem different. I wonder if I am.

'I got you something. Well, it's something that was yours already. You forgot that magnet you bought at the airport.'

She hands me the brown paper bag from a lifetime ago. I open it. The little wooden turtle I'd bought for the fridge is light in my palm, almost like there was nothing there. It's strange to think it was there, in the sterile air of the San Jose airport and now here, under the white sky. That Previous Me bought it and Current Me is looking at it outside the Copenhagen Opera House.

'How is Morten?'

'OK. He's finally told his parents the real reason behind the holiday.'

'That's good.'

'Yeah. He's thinking about opening his own cheese shop.'

'When did that happen?'

'I think he's always wanted to do that.'

We're silent. A boat passes and tourists wave at us.

'Why do people do that? I never understood it. Why would adults wave at strangers?'

She waves back anyway.

'And Thomas? Heard from him?'

'Me? God no.'

'God no?'

'We weren't that close. And I think he kind of blames me for ruining his holiday.'

'He blames both of us.'

'But at least you and him are friends.'

'Not really. But I do get him.'

The white of the sky disperses like scum on top of boiling rice. The sun shines over us, triumphant. Ali looks up. Her tanned face illuminated.

'It doesn't have to be weird, Vi. I'm not here with demands or requests. It's good to see you again.'

She touches my arm with her hand and leaves it there. I let her. I remember all the places she's touched me. On my thigh, on my inner arm, on my cheek, on my ribs. I remember the electric waves through my body.

'It's good to see you too.'

She smiles and her hair shines. Salt breeze travels on the surface of the sea.

'I'm sorry I didn't call sooner. I wanted to. But I didn't know what to say.'

'Meeting you here is a pretty good start.'

'The start to what though?'

'We don't need to know right now, do we? I mean, how can we?'

Not knowing is hard. Not knowing leaves a knot in your throat and a knot in your stomach. Not knowing makes you wake up in the middle of the night and not go back to sleep until four a.m. Not knowing makes you not feel like your breakfast. Not knowing makes your wrinkle between the eyebrows crease deeper. Not knowing is paddling towards a rock on autopilot.

'I know things kind of just happened. They always do. Right in the middle of everything. You could be having breakfast or sitting on top of dead turtles, and suddenly, everything changes.'

'You eat a hotdog and the world ends.'

'What's that?'

'Nothing. Just something Morten had said. You reminded me of it.'

'Odd. You two are weird.'

'I know.'

'I like it though.'

'Good.'

She looks at the sea. Little waves swell and then disappear back into the darkness of the water. Ali turns to me again.

'What I was saying is: things happen. And we happened to each other. That's how I see it.'

'That's how I see it too.'

'Good.'

'Good.'

'So you don't have to break up with Mia if you don't want to.'

What?

'What do you mean?'

'I know you've been together for some time. And I know you love her.'

But I love you also, I think. I don't say that. I play with the soft tips of the lichens, like Christmas sweaters.

'So don't throw away your relationship. Not because of me.'

Is she trying to be noble? Or get rid of me? Does she not care?

'I don't really know what this means. Do you not want me to break up with Mia?'

Because it's a bit late for that.

'I don't want you think of what I want when it comes down to it. If it comes down to it. It should be about what you want. It's your life.'

I kind of want it to be our life. But is it too soon?

'Don't look sad, I don't mean this in a bad way.'

'No, I know.'

'You do?'

'I do.'

I don't.

'Do you want to get something to eat?'

I'm fifteen and the sun is setting. The water is dark under the kayak. I don't know where I'm going. I row further into the sea. Until I'm exhausted. Until my arms can't go on. Until there's only sea and no me. Until I'm so small that I couldn't even see myself. A black dot on a black map. I row and things disappear. The dinner cooking in my mum's house. The lights inside the microwave, spinning, spinning, spinning. The lights from the cars. The lights from inside the windows of shops and homes and restaurants. The lights from TV screens and laptop monitors. The lights from the harbour guiding your way back. Back where? Back to who? Back why? I row and the edges of the world grow rounder, washed smooth with pre-historic water and the passage of time. Onetwothree. Onetwothree. Onetwothree. Until Jens/dad and his bathrobe and his scratchy face become a passing shadow under the belly of the kayak. Like a whale sighting. Until The Burberry Girls and The Fake Burberry girls from my class thin themselves into seaweed. Green and black and blue. Until I look up and there isn't sun anymore. Only the moving mass of water.

360 degrees beach shot.

Waving Costa Rican flag against blue sky.

Show 'Tortugas' sign.

5-second footage of Vibekke in café.

VIBEKKE: I am me. My actions and my choices make me me.

INTERVIEWER: What makes you happy?

5-second footage of Morten on beach. Sun setting.

MORTEN: I'm not really sure anymore. I used to know once.

Zoom in on hands playing with sand.

5-second footage of Thomas on beach.

THOMAS: Things that make me happy...the same things like everyone else. I guess.

5-second footage of Ali on the table.

Zoom in on coffee cup. Zoom in on face. Takes a sip.

Music starts. Show people walking along Nyhavn. Focus on people laughing and eating.

Show group of schoolgirls.

Show narrator holding a cup of tea while walking along Hellerup beach. Music fades out but still plays in the background.

NARRATOR: What happens when you're unhappy in the happiest place on earth?

Narrator walks towards camera.

NARRATOR: In this documentary, we look at the four lowest scoring participants in the Happiness Index. It is despite their scores that Denmark has won the title 'happiest place on earth' for another consecutive year. Let's give them some credit - in the happiest place on earth, we care for everyone. This is why we sent them on a holiday to Costa Rica. A time to relax and reflect.

Show four participants walking down palm-aligned street. Shot from back.

NARRATOR VOICEOVER: We spoke to specialists trying to devise the perfect holiday for them. Maybe one that could make them happier in the longer term.

Psychologist footage in office. Show books in the background.

PSYCHOLOGIST: Feeling included. Spending time outdoors. Being active. Staying away from screens. These simple rules can greatly benefit a person's happiness. And this is the kind of programme we've devised for our unhappy ones: we hope that the two weeks we've prepared for them will affect them positively.

The sheet is stretched over me, the shape of my knee under the cotton. I hold the ashtray in my lap. The room is stuffy with smoke and sex. Ali lies on her stomach with her feet in the air, taking drags of her cigarette and looking at me. She ashes from time to time, and hands me the cigarette. I blow smoke against the ceiling. I lie back down on the pillow. It smells of Ali and something earthy, like mushrooms and unwashed heads.

'I can see myself in your eyes. Right there.'

She moves her index finger close to my eye.

'It's so weird to see your own reflection in an eye.'

'Let me see if I can see me.'

I look into her eyes. Yellow and green and grey. There I am, stretched along the shape of her iris. She raises herself up on her elbows.

'Do you have your phone? Mine's dead.'

'In my bag.'

She turns on her belly and lies across my shins, her head over the edge of the bed, her long arms stretched to check the contents of the bag on the floor.

'Dare I ask how long this gum's been there?'

'I wouldn't have it if I were you. It's kind of a permanent member of my bag, like an entourage.'

Ali laughs.

'Gross.'

She comes back on the bed, holding my book.

'I didn't know you were into poetry.'

'Not all poetry. But I like this.'

She lights another cigarette and reads the back of the book.

'I always carry it with me.'

'Like your gum.'

'Exactly.'

Ali lies on my tummy, the cigarette between her teeth. She opens the book and starts reading. She looks beautiful in the white of the sheets. Her eyes follow the lines of the poems. Veins and tiny muscles on her arm twitch when she turns a page. She sees me looking and smiles. Maybe not knowing is OK.

The sink taps. It's spring.

Appendix One*

* The following Appendix includes the opening section of *The Happiness Index*. Parts of the below have been previously submitted for my University of Kent MA Creative Writing dissertation in 2013.

Continent, city, country, society:

the choice is never wide and never free.

And here, or there...No. Should we have stayed at

home, wherever that may be?

- Elizabeth Bishop, *Questions of Travel*

Jens/dad wasn't always Jens/dad. This was when things existed like Karlsson-on-the-roof and guilt-free cinnamon pastries for breakfast and places you couldn't find on Google Maps. This was before the walls in the kitchen became yellow with cigarette smoke and fry. Before I met Mia (long before I met Mia). Before I knew I couldn't cross the ocean in my kayak. Before I couldn't be anyone or anything if I wanted and before it didn't make a difference. I know when the sink taps time passes. I know when morning comes and it's a new square on the wall calendar. I know if I wait long enough at Hillerød station, another train will come.

Winter-like spring. I let the alarm ring until buzzing is the only sound in the universe. Sunshine and dust and floral wallpaper when I open my eyes. The crystal owls on the windowsill hold white light in their bellies. It flickers on the whitewashed wood as if it was alive. I tap the head of the clock and it stops – like it had never started in the first place. Mia's body next to my body. Her chest expanding and contracting. Onetwothree. Onetwothree. Onetwothree.

'Vibekke, we need to go. Are you two up?'

Something breaks and Jens/dad swears. I imagine him behind the door; beyond the corridor in the kitchen. The invisible porcelain molecules floating around the mole on his right ankle as he picks up the larger pieces. Bending down to check if he's missed any under the table, holding his hip with his arm when he raises up, coughing, walking towards the cupboard to get another plate, remembering the cheese (he always forgets the cheese), opening the drawer under the sink to get a teaspoon for the jam, realising they're all dirty. I close my eyes again. Mia's elbow is in my ribcage twisted backwards in her sleep.

'For helvede, Vi, are you coming or not? I don't want to make her wait for us.'

'I'm coming.'

Mia stretches her arm. I look out. Roofs are aligned against the sky; you can't tell one from another. Grey on blue on grey. Something else breaks. The world seems far away from the duvet and the nightstand and the sock with the hole lying flat on the Turkish rug and my old room in Jens/dad's bungalow. It's not that far. It only takes an hour on the train to get home to my mum's house in Hillerød and another hour to central Copenhagen, where Life Happens. Whatever that means. I touch Mia in the hollow between her shoulders. She flinches and turns her face sideways into the pillow.

Freckles. Sleep in her eye, fragile and delicate on her lashes. Sun strip on her cheek. I kiss her on the shoulder where she's warm and salty.

'I'm going to go. Will you be OK here?'

She makes a sound (mnhhaakm) and turns towards the wall, the sheet halfway down her back.

The window in the kitchen is wide open and Jens/dad is exhaling smoke in the cold morning air. Our two kayaks rest against the shed outside. He's wearing his beige 'special occasions' trousers.

'Ah, there you are, finally. What – you're still in your pyjamas? Where's Mia?'

'Jesus, dad, it's freezing.'

I wrap the bathrobe tighter around me and sit with my feet up on the chair, chin on my knees. Carton of full-fat milk, pumpkin seed bread rolls, unopened packets of *Riberhus* and Brie, potato sausage, turkey ham, butter, water glasses, raspberry jam with black seeds like the eyes of extinct fish.

'Coffee?'

I nod and he brings over the pot. Passes me the milk.

'We have half an hour.'

I take a sip and nod. Fine, fine. Jens/dad has already cut his bread into two, maneuvering around the edges while distributing butter over craters and bumps.

'Take some cheese – I got it on offer at Netto.'

As if discounted dairy tastes better. I don't say that and pierce a slice with my fork instead.

'Is she still sleeping?'

'She's tired. She needs to finish the *Nordea* leaflet today.'

'Leave her a note about the cheese.'

'I will.'

We take the shortcut by the beach. *Maersk* container ships in the background, like forgotten laundry. Seagulls scream and other seagulls answer in their awful voices. Waves crash and withdraw, taking rocks and shells and seaweed with them. Grey. The air smells of cinnamon and salt. Sand and rocks and shells and dry weeds under our boots. Ikch ikch ikch.

The bell above the door announces our arrival. Hushed conversations between Hundested's elderly elite about immigrants and illnesses and remedies for illnesses over a cup of chamomile tea and a butter croissant. Heads turn and nod towards us. Jens/dad nods back. Eyes and cataracts on my face. 'Is that his daughter? I haven't seen her in ages. She should spend more time in the sun – so pale, like a drug addict.'

Where is Karoline?

'*Hej*, you must be Vibekke.'

'Hi. Karoline? Nice to finally meet you. Sorry we're late.'

Hair the colour of liver-pâté and a ringed hand.

'This is my father, Jens. He's the one who first signed me up to the Index.'

'Jens – pleasure to meet you.'

'*Hej*. Yes, my pleasure.'

She gives him a look. That look. Maybe she can sense he's not like her. Or like anybody. Maybe she can tell from the way his shoulders point downwards and the way his pupils move across the bakery, as if he's surrounded. Or from the way he doesn't keep eye contact for too long. You can't change how things are. Only sometimes and only maybe.

'I've got us a table just over here. Lovely view, isn't it? Shall we get you a coffee before we start? Have you had breakfast?'

Karoline starts talking about her journey here and mortgages and her boyfriend Jonas who works at *Danske Bank* and taking her niece to Tivoli this weekend and the last time she's been there (which was a long time ago). Bars in Mallorca and restaurants in Copenhagen. Do I know the Vietnamese one with the open kitchen? Or the one just off Nørrebrogade with the amazing cocktails and the heartthrob bartender? I bet she buys designer underwear. *L'agent* and *Elle Macpherson* and *Myla*. And sends her old ones to Africa. And makes a monthly contribution to *Save the Children* and *Amnesty*

International. And joins causes on Facebook (*Stop Putin's War*). And goes out for dinners with her 'bubbly' *veninder* and they flirt with the waiter (who looks down on them for their excessive drinking but wouldn't mind a blonde girlfriend) and talk about people they know from school and their marketing jobs, while barely eating organic handmade pho noodles, which aren't really organic or handmade but cost as much as if they were.

How long will she talk about herself? I want to scream like a Neanderthal and tip the table over and grab a mug from the floor and smack her on the eyebrow until thick blood pours down her eyes until she can't open them anymore and everyone watches shocked and confused as she tries to feel for her phone in her bag to call the police but can't find it and panics and I stand over her still holding the handle of the cup, watching her cry on the floor. I give her a smile and she smiles back.

The window looks out at the harbour. White boats. Fishermen. Crates of herring and cockles. Rust and drizzle. 25 *kroner* for a cup of Americano. Jens/dad doesn't say anything but I know what he's thinking.

'Thank you again for coming. And Jens – it's great you've come along.'

She pauses. He's silent. Maybe he's thinking about receiving a letter in the mail twenty-six years ago. A white envelope between the Netto weekly offers and overdue electricity bills. Logo on the top corner he doesn't recognise. His newborn has been selected at random to participate in the most detailed human happiness study ever conducted. Most countries in the world are participating. Would he like to sign her up? There would only be one hundred Danish case studies, and she would be one of them. I spill and the wood swells. Karoline stares at the spot.

'It's always better to meet with people face-to-face, don't you think?'

Sending an email would've been fine also. I could've stayed in bed with Mia. I could've kissed her between the shoulders. She would've twitched from the touch of my lips and my tongue. She would've smiled but I wouldn't have seen it as her cheek would've been against the pillow. I would've traced the curve of her back with my fingers. We could've seen the morning news on DR 1. I could've gone kayaking across the grey waves.

'As I mentioned in my email, my agency's pitch was selected to promote this year's fantastic Happiness Index results. Denmark has won the title "the happiest place on earth" and we intend to make the most of it. Make the world know. We're in charge of

everything in marketing terms: the press and TV outreach, campaign messaging, digital, Out of Home, social media promotion, creatives.'

She takes a sip of coffee. Jens/dad is done with his. He swirls his mug, frowning at the black liquid on the bottom as if he was trying to tell the future or what Out of Home could mean.

'We've proposed something that's never been done before.'

She pauses and looks at my face.

'And this is why I wanted to meet with you.'

The bell rings and more people come in shaking their umbrellas and taking off their coats and phooing and joking about the weather and stomping their feet on the mat by the door. Someone slams the door.

'You are one of the six unhappiest people in the study. You're perfect.'

She smiles and hands me an envelope. VIBEKKE printed in the middle and underlined twice. This is you. This is definitely you.

I walk under Jens/dad's umbrella. Netto. We look at things and touch things and shake things and don't really intend to buy things. Jens/dad stops by the yellow price tags, comparing the value per kilo versus the value per item. He holds two packets of pork loins in each hand and reads the labels. When are they best to use by, where are they from, how much they weigh. Enough time for me to check the cooking instructions on three different kinds of frozen paella. Mia was telling me something about saffron and the village where her grandparents grew up. She claims Mediterraneans have superior palates. She says I don't add enough salt to my food, I tell her she has a tongue like a cow. She says Danish people don't understand flavour, I tell her she doesn't understand Danish people. She kisses me. Pulls down my jeans. Makes a 'moo' sound. Jens/dad is by the checkouts with beefsteaks. Best before: today.

When we get in the bungalow, I almost expect her still to be there. I'll check my phone later. Jens/dad talks about dishes while doing the dishes.

'I bought this one from a gypsy.'

He lifts a soapy plate with a twisted green ornament in the middle. I chop radishes for the salad. Duotone circles, pink and white like a child's mouth.

'I don't think you're meant to call them that.'

'But he was a gypsy, I don't know what else to call him.'

'A person? A guy? I don't know. I just know it's not the right term.'

'Anyway, and this one I got from Irma.'

He's on to the next one. I know more about his dishes than about his past with my mother. Steam from the sink. Sky the colour of December ocean (that I couldn't cross in my kayak even if I tried). The bare bulb above the table flickers. The steaks fry in their fat on the blue flame. I mix the salad and keep an eye on the TV. Jens/dad carries the plates in each hand. Columbo is on.

'Shame Mia didn't stay for dinner.'

'Yeah.'

'She would've liked the steaks, I think.'

He cuts a triangle of meat and pierces it on his fork.

After dinner, Jens/dad walks me to the train station. We take the same route as always: under the bridge, past the house with the yearlong Christmas decorations. It's comforting to know some things are always the same. The lights flutter. I like talking about the Index with Jens/dad. It's something different. It isn't the Columbo murder or the *smørrebrød* with pickled herring and boiled eggs we had for lunch or the women's handball score. But it also isn't feeling lonely and living on your own and how strange it feels to be expected to be something or do something and how easy it is not to. What's the point of talking about the serious stuff? I tell him I'll see him soon; he says *godt*, we hug and I'm on the train. I put on my *TrainRide* playlist on *and I ride/and I ride*.

At the other end, my mum's Honda is parked by the closed *pølse* stand. She flicks the lights when she sees me and I push my way in to get kissed on the cheek. *Givenchy* and red wine.

'You really need to do something about that door, Mum.'

'Hello to you too. And thanks for the call.'

'I'm sorry I didn't call.'

'You don't have to be sorry, it just would've been nice. Have you heard from the catering agency for shifts yet?'

We sit in silence. The windscreens move along the glass: one swipe, two swipe, three. Bruce Springsteen is playing on the radio and I hum along in my head without knowing the lyrics. As the song progresses from one key change to the next, I hear about Anne-Mette and her affair with a car dealer from Valby; about Mads and how he thought my mum was late with her part of the report that they were sending to Corp when in reality she wasn't – she was never meant to do that section anyway but everyone just assumed so given her previous job role and so she ended up staying late on Monday and doing it and didn't even get any recognition from the team or Corp; about the *Salesforce* conference she's going to in Malmö – Mia is going too, and am I coming along to take advantage of the free accommodation – there's a complimentary continental breakfast buffet included. But I should watch my weight, if I'm anything like her.

'Thanks, mum.'

The engines stops and the headlights are off. We're outside the door and mum is looking for the keys in her handbag. The rain taps above our heads. I hear Pluto's breaths on the other side; the nails on his paws against the wood. When she clicks the key, he jumps up on his good legs and licks me. He sniffs my shoes and clacks away towards mum who is pouring herself a glass of wine.

'Do you want one?'

She reaches for a glass from the top of the cupboard on her toes; the skin around her ankles wrinkling under the weight of her body. I look at the shape of my toes through the socks.

'Mia was in the office today. We had tea.'

She takes a sip and waits for me to enquire. Fine.

'Oh yeah?'

'Yeah. She told me Jens had come along to that meeting about the Index.' Another sip. He's a bit desperate, don't you think?'

I pet Pluto on the head.

'Mia also said there might be a surprise coming your way.'

She waits for my reaction again. The white in her eyes sparkles with the excitement of the secret and half a bottle of Merlot. It's probably one of Mia's 'surprises' again. Like when she booked flights to Madrid without asking me and my passport had expired and we couldn't go or get a refund. Or when she organised dinner on the ferry to Sweden and we both got food poisoning from the prawns and couldn't leave the hotel the whole weekend. This is what you get when you eat things that come in a cocktail glass. This is what you get when your girlfriend is trying to make you happy.

'How was it at Jens? What did you get up to?' She doesn't say 'your father'.

'It was fine. The usual.'

'What did you have to eat?'

She puts some peanuts in her mouth from the cup by the letter rack. Pluto is airing his belly on the floor, his three paws sticking in the air like faulty antennae. He barks at the raindrops against the windows. Monkey walks from my bedroom and sniffs his paws before moving on towards her bowl.

'Just stuff.'

'What kind of stuff?'

'We had steaks and salad today, *frikadeller* and *fløde kartofler* for dinner yesterday.'

She takes a sip of wine. I know where she's going.

'Did he make them himself?'

'The *frikadeller*? No, he'd bought them, I think.'

'I thought so. I thought so.'

She doesn't elaborate on what she's thought. My cheeks grow warmer from the wine.

'Too lazy to cook from scratch.'

'He cooks from scratch all the time. He must've seen them on offer or something. He's not lazy.'

'Oh please, don't be like him. You know what I mean. You can't spend your life watching 80s detective shows and looking up people's addresses on Google Maps. I wish

you'd never showed him how to do that, by the way. It's creepy. What is his ambition? What does he dream of? He doesn't even care about what he puts in his mouth.'

Pluto wails and curls his back on the tiles.

'He's happy right now. He leaves the house often. He shaves. He pulls the curtains in the morning. That's what matters.'

'I'd be happy too if I lived off the back of the taxpayer and my only worry in the world was finding the lighter and adding a suitable plate to my collection.'

She has purple lips from the wine. She'll be scrubbing them with salt in the bathroom before bed. I wonder what my life would've been if Jens/Dad had raised me. Who I would be. Every time Pluto's eyes close, he opens them again, afraid not to miss anything. I pet him on the back of his head again. Monkey meows behind me.

Mum moves to the couch with the wine and a packet of sour cherry Harribos. An Italian western has just started on DR 1. Pluto follows her and lies on the blanket, his front paw on her thigh.

When I'm in my room, I unbutton my jeans, take my top off and head to the bedroom. Put my phone on charge.

'Hej skat, did you get my message? Tried calling. Pancakes at mine tmr? Kys'

Monkey walks through the door to check on me after she's done with her dinner. She chatters and then jumps on the duvet. Sneezes. She doesn't like the smell of Pluto on my skin. It's still raining.

'It sounds like glaciers moving in the Arctic. You know, separating and bumping into each other and creaking, all in slow motion.'

Dark curls on my tummy. Mia is pressing her right ear below my belly button.

'Or actually. Maybe it's more like a prehistoric whale singing from the bottom of the ocean.'

'What is it singing about? Is it confused by all the noise pollution from the container ships? I saw a documentary about them mistaking human-made noises for other whales.'

She presses harder.

'No – I don't think that's it. It's an ancient whale, remember? This is all happening pre- Maersk. Pre-cargo and same-day shipping. There are no sounds apart from its song and the creaks of the water in the darkness.'

'Is it a love song?'

'It is.'

'What does it say?'

'I think it's saying...that it wants some breakfast.'

She kisses me on the place where her ear was, laughs and climbs on top of me. Balances herself on her arms. Her inner forearm is by my face and I kiss it. Veins and shea butter.

'I think you might be right. I'm starving. I thought I was coming for pancakes. I feel cheated.'

'Pancakes is code word for sex, didn't you know?'

'I must've missed that.'

'You certainly did. Wait here. I'll make us some food.'

Her hair brushes my face when she gets up. Shadows of the branches outside the window play on her lower back as she opens the drawer and unfolds an H&M t-shirt to put on. One of those I always borrow and never return until she comes over to mine and finds Monkey asleep on it by the laundry basket. She gets mad but not really.

'Don't move.'

She turns around and smiles at me before walking out the door. I stretch my arms. Issues of i-D magazine are stacked at the corner of her desk next to an iMac and a closed Moleskine notebook. My clothes are in a pile on the floor but I can't see hers – when did she manage to put them away? There are two framed posters on the wall: one is a reproduction of Matisse's paper cut-outs, the other is of a red chair with the name of the designer in the corner. She doesn't have much else in here. A wardrobe. A mirror. Bedside table with my glass of water and nothing else. My thighs stick with sex.

'Pancakes or toast?'

Her voice comes from the kitchen.

'I don't know.'

My stomach rumbles.

'What do you mean you don't know?'

'I'm so hungry, I can't decide.'

Mia's head is back in the doorframe. She doesn't say anything.

'Fine, fine. Toast.'

'Coming up.'

I stretch. Moments later, she walks in with a tray.

'Et voila.'

I pull the duvet over me, enough to cover my breasts, and sit cross-legged, balancing the plate on my knee.

'Here, have some jam.'

'I'm OK for jam, I think.'

'It's really good, you should try it.'

I spread a layer on the crust.

'It's good, isn't it?'

'It's really good.'

She nods and takes a bite of her own toast.

'So I was hoping to take you away this weekend.'

Pause.

'Oh yeah?'

'Yeah. I promise there will be no prawns involved.'

Smile.

'Good.'

'Do you want to know where?'

Maybe this time things will go smoothly. Maybe I should pack some Imodium in case.

'Where?'

'You'll have to wait and see.'

'Tease.'

She puts her plate at the foot of the bed and moves close to me. Takes my leftovers away and places it on the bedside table. Kisses me. Raspberry jam and butter. I still have crumbs on my lips. She presses her mouth into mine until my head is on the pillow. Pulls the duvet off me and looks at my face. Holds my knee to the side with one hand and moves her other hand down my stomach as she presses my jaw with her mouth open. I know her movements as I know the history behind Jens/dad's plates. Which one is OK to use for breakfast. Which one is for plating the cheese. Which one is for birthdays and Easter.

She takes her t-shirt off. I look for the mole in the shape of Beirut on her left shoulder. I told her what it reminded me of once. She went to the mirror and used her fingers to stretch the skin around it to determine its correct comparison. She said it looked more like a red kidney bean than a war-stricken capital. Her breasts on my breasts. She wraps her arm around my neck. Clit on skin until she comes. In stages: 1. Her body freezes like a still in film, in which the action is paused for the narrator to explain something to the viewer about the scene. 2. I can feel the muscles on her thighs and her tummy tighten as if they were made of tiny knots. 3. Her lower back straightens. 4. Her body arches up. 5. Her open mouth convulses like a mackerel just caught and held in the hands of its capturer, who is posing for a photo on the boat. 6. The knots untighten and she collapses on top of me. 7. Rolls off me and lies on her back. These are the stages of Mia coming.

I kiss her on the corner of the mouth.

'I'm going to take a shower and then I'll let you work. Are you still doing the *Nordea* stuff?'

The tiles in the bathroom are cold – a winter field with a showerhead in the middle. I let the water fall free on my body. Without protest, I accept its course and watch it disappear in the drain between my feet. Shower gels foam by my toes. I lean my shoulder blades against the wall. It all flows from my belly with the stream of water, running down my thighs, my knees, my calves, my ankles. I feel like crying.

When I'm out, Mia is already sitting in a bathrobe at her desk. She turns around when she hears my bare feet on the wooden floor as I come through the door.

'Got an email from your mum's department; *Nordea* sent their feedback and I have to go through the amendments. Apparently the woman from the stock image didn't have white enough teeth for someone looking to switch their current account.'

I hold her shoulders and look at the zoomed-in tooth of the smiling office worker on the screen.

'I'll let you work.'

I put my clothes on. The room is quiet apart from the clicking of Mia's wireless mouse as she's scrolling through the feedback email. She's made the bed already.

'I'll be off now.'

She turns around. Gets up.

'Thanks for a great morning.' She puts her hands on my back, locks them and pulls me towards her. 'I'll text you about this weekend, OK?'

'OK.'

'And let me know how it goes tomorrow.'

'Will do.'

There are no clouds in the sky and the cold travels uninterrupted, like sound or light travel in space, or the songs of prehistoric whales creak through an empty ocean. Mia's house isn't far from my mum's – it's where the town ends and the fields start. There used to be a path through the forest but I have to walk by the road now since they started building the new houses. I see families come and look at the plots they've put an advanced deposit on. They point at the nothingness and explain where things in the new house will be to each other. A pile of mud will be the dining table. The sofa is a piece of wood. The bare foundations divide Mikkel's room from Frederik's. The bricks are the TV. I could imagine wanting those things too. The family dinners and watching Eurovision and holidays to the Algarve and staying up late to finish a presentation for work that's due the day after and booking appointments with the dental hygienist not just for myself but for little Mikkel and Frederik also and inviting colleagues for a barbeque when it's sunny and getting promotions and caring about them and saving the extra income in an ISA account and voting and paying taxes and complaining about how

much they are and owning a lawn mower and Reiss jackets and different shoes for different occasions. But then what's next?

A car flicks its lights at me to cross.

Morning again. The duvet is heavy like body of water on top of my body. The blinds are down and the world rocks in the darkness as if it's about to end. Or begin. I wait until my pupils adjust and expand. The white of the radiator by the wall and the white of Monkey's eyes. The dress hanging from the door. I get up and disrupt the End/Beginning of Time. Pull the blinds. Branches and rain.

I just about make the train. Heads inside are turned in my direction, watching me run and balancing my bag and stretching my arm to press the blinking 'open' button before it stops blinking and the train makes the 'eee eee eeeee' sound and screeches down the tracks. I go to the Silent carriage and Platform 3 at Hillerød station disappears. We pass Allerød with its golf course and no golfers. We pass the yellow farmhouse. Crops outside are covered in frost; the insignificant moment of their death caught in the dew on the window.

The grey of the fields against the grey of the sky, the train breaking through them like a tuna through a fish swarm. Mia thinks that I'm like her. That I want the same things as she does. Maybe we do, to a certain extent. But I can't help the feeling. There is something different. Something more, maybe. My head tilted, on the window, watching the world pass from the E-train towards Copenhagen. Half an hour goes by and I'm at *Københavns Hovedbanegård* with its lights and its burger joints and noodle pots and heroin users and 7 Elevens. Screens with timetables and Swedes. My phone beeps. Mia.

'Let me know how it goes – let's have dinner later. Good luck! Kys'

Outside, the street smells of metal and roasted almonds. Cars and bicycles swoosh on the cement, their tyres leaving no mark on the wet ground. Pharmacies and baked goods. Bread rolls and beggars. Families queue to go into the Hard Rock Café by Tivoli. I walk in the opposite direction. The city's blues and greys are watered down by the rain. The hotel stands tall compared to the traditional buildings around it, and its glassy exterior reflects the pastel colours of the cityscape across the canal almost with arrogance. Who cares that you've been around since Christian IV's time, Old Building? You're only a reflection now (but a shadow). I go through the automatic doors and

(automatically) the receptionist lifts her tight-bunned-head from the screen to look in my direction.

There's a woman by the lifts. She presses the red button a few times. The elevator seems to be stuck somewhere between the seventh and eighth floor. I'm holding my visitors pass and she's staring at it.

'Are you one of the unhappy ones?'

'Excuse me?'

'Are you here for the Happiness Index campaign briefing?'

'Yes, yes I am.'

'I am too. Ali – nice to meet you.'

She looks at me, and I look at her. She nods her head and I nod mine. The doors open. A Japanese family are standing with their backs to us, staring at the world behind in the mirrors. They look surreal in their sunhats and trekking gear. I smile at the woman but she just continues looking without moving. Like a family of turtles watching the Birth of the Universe, they ignore us when we reach the sixth floor and get out. Have I entered a Murakami novel? I wish.

Ali leaves the lift first and I follow her down the corridor. She looks at the letters and numbers engraved on rectangular golden plates nailed to the walls and is quick to find her way around. I'm impressed. I'd have to stop and think if H comes before K or if P is before O.

'I'm always late for these things.'

'So am I.'

'Here we are. I think this is us.'

The door is half open. I hope they don't make us do one of those group introductions. Sweat in my palms. I'm faced by a panoramic view of *Christiansborg* through the windows, a group of heads and Karoline's freckled face. She smiles and touches my shoulder to point to my (appointed) seat among the heads. Hello, Fellow Case Studies. Ali kisses Karoline on the cheek. I like her jaw. Straight and fatless: the kind of jaw you'd draw if you were good at drawing jaws. They must've met before. When I sit down, the guy next to me twitches and moves further back in his seat.

There is a programme in front of me. This really is formal. Where are the goody bags though? I could do with a free USB stick or a notepad or a pen. You can never have too many USBs or pens. It would've been nice to take a souvenir for Jens/dad; he would like that. He'd use the pen to circle the offers in the newspaper or he would save it in the kitchen drawer and attach it to the string by the wall calendar once the ink in the pen he has now runs out. And every time he looks at it, he'd think about me and about the project and it'd be something to do. The woman takes the empty chair next to me and smiles.

'Now that we're all here, let's start.' Karoline closes the door.

'Please help yourselves to coffee and cake.'

She points at the pastries covered in cellophane in the middle of the table as if she'd ever eat anything that has a 50:50 dough:butter ratio. I'm almost certain I see her flinch.

'Our agency has been working with the government-owned VisitDenmark to create a sustainable marketing strategy that incorporates the vision of Danes as happy within the wider international tourism promotional campaign.'

I think of Jens/dad opening that very first letter. How special he must've felt. How this was something he could do with his daughter. How he'd be a good dad and a good citizen even if he was unemployed. Karoline is looking at the woman next to me nodding her head.

'We've been fortunate enough to win the title 'happiest place on earth' again. It was a close call this year – Costa Rica nearly beat us.'

She pauses. I imagine happy Latinos running shirtless under the sun with kittens and puppies and unicorns rolling in the white sand where the waves crash and dissolve into miniature Haribos.

'But we don't want to publicise doing the same old thing from a marketing point of view. You know, the posters with smiling blond people. Bringing up numbers and percentages about our happy country. We want to do something different.'

She paces near the window. It starts raining again.

'We want to do the opposite of what we're expected to do. We want to create a campaign based on you: the worst performing individuals in the study.'

The rain taps as she looks from face to face. The guy opposite me starts clapping and soon we all are. One clammy hand against the other, we salute our failure to contribute to the Index. I catch Ali's eye. She's been watching me.

'We want to show that in the happiest place on earth, we care for people. And we're not afraid to say: "look, no one's perfect, but we're great at accommodating everyone, especially those who need us most".'

Karoline is pacing behind me like a math teacher during a class exam on functions. Or something. I feel my cheeks reddening.

'We want to make a case study of our unhappy case studies in the form of a short video ad and some print and digital. This would be, with your permission, of course, telling your story of being participants in the Happiness Index, your perceptions of Denmark. The style would be like a documentary. There'll be interviews with your families, a few shots around your homes.'

She's at the top of the table, knuckles down on the surface.

'Now for the fun part.'

She pauses and waits for us to stir in our seats.

'We want to take you to Costa Rica, our happy rival. We want you to go to a turtle conservation program and live on the beach for two weeks with your fellow case studies and work on your sense of wellbeing via team building and handling animals. We will be sending a film crew to record some of your adventures to be included in the final film.'

This sounds like Big Brother to me. And I'd hate to have my face unevenly glued on a billboard on the Parisian metro for thirteen year olds to draw penises by my Photoshopped mouth. I'd like to go to Costa Rica though. Mum would be so jealous. Jens/dad would be proud. He'd Google Earth the turtle conservation place and send me screenshots. He'd look up cheap supermarkets where I could get most for my money. He'd set up TV watching shifts so he could see me in the ads. He'd download the video and send it to the guys he plays bridge with.

'Now breathe.'

I'm a fish. The air enters my mouth and dries it: first, the tip of my tongue, then the corners of my lips, then the inside of my lower gums.

‘Think about your animal. Become your animal. Exhale.’

Collective ‘pfoo’ in the room. I open my eyes.

‘Keep your eyes closed.’

The Consultant is pacing near me, looking down at us as we inhale and exhale air-conditioned air. I try to see through my eyelashes, cheat the system, whatever. I can see Morten’s bony knee. His little hands flat on his jeans. Thomas’ puffed up chest under his t-shirt; his bikram yoga stomach. Ali’s wrists resting on her thighs. My own crossed legs. My foot is starting to fall asleep.

‘How does your animal move? Does it run through a night forest, slick and elegant – avoiding branches and roots in the moonlight? Or does it lay still in the darkness, springing to life only when prey approaches or danger arises? Think about it. Feel the movements in your own body. The stretching of your ligaments.’ I hear him walking behind me. A ‘night forest’? Really? Also, do fish even have ligaments?

‘Breathe out.’

More ‘pfoo’-ing. The weird banjo music is running in the background like the sound of road works in the middle of the night. Constant. Unstoppable. You can't do anything about it.

‘Open your eyes.’

He’s standing by the window and pulls the blinds open again. I blink until my eyes readjust to the brightness.

‘How did it feel?’

I stare at my shoe so I look like I’m thinking about it. It felt like sitting in the dark on the floor of a hotel conference room with your eyes closed pretending to be a fish and wondering if fish have ligaments. The Consultant waits for us to answer. Ali leans back. How many more of these would we have to do? I’m hungry.

‘Now let’s try something different. You may get up.’ I unlock my legs and stretch the one with the sleeping foot before I stand up. It’s a weird sensation, not to be able to feel the ground but trusting that you are on it.

‘Let’s arrange ourselves into a circle.’ He waits for us to arrange ourselves into a circle. ‘Get closer – yes – even closer.’ We get closer and – yes - even closer. I’m between

Morten and Ali. I feel the warmth of her body. I try to breathe as quietly as I can. The Consultant walks around our circle with his leather-bound notepad.

‘Now, consider the best moment of your life.’

My calf muscle contracts. I’m getting a cramp. It travels from my foot through the ankle bone to where the flesh is. I try not to twitch. Not to move at all in the tight proximity of bodies so near my body.

‘This could be anything: a professional success, a past adventure, an evening spent with your family, going out for dinner with your first love...’

Someone’s stomach rumbles. The pacing stops. This must be a sign for us to start thinking. Time passes and it’s quiet. I can hear Morten breathing. Quietly, like a wasp whistling to another wasp.

‘Imagine you only had 30 seconds left of your life and you were given the chance to relive any one moment. What would it be?’

I try to remember things. Childhood things. Fishing for crabs with Jens/dad, barefoot with my jeans rolled up to my knees. The sea dark and vibrant and full of creatures and possibilities. Buying stationary for the new academic year, third grade. Pencils and transparent rulers and pear-shaped rubbers and purple jelly pens and things that smell of strawberries and have glitter in them. Perfumed prints of Disney characters. Pocahontas and Bambi and the two dogs sucking on spaghetti under the streetlights. Eating banana cake with my hands, sitting cross-legged on the grass lawn outside the little library. I don’t know if I’d like to relive these moments. They’re nice to think about before you go to bed or when you take the train or when you’re in the shower but I don’t know if they’re good for anything else. They exist in vacuum – and if I didn’t exist, neither would they. If they didn’t exist – neither would I. The floor creaks like unused bones.

‘Now let’s share with the group.’ The Consultant sits back in his chair at the back of the room. I’m not ready.

‘Ali, let’s start with you.’

‘OK. Yeah.’ Her voice echoes in the corners of the ceiling. Everything else is silent, even Morten’s waspy breaths. Thomas is looking serious now, sitting with his legs crossed. All eyes on Ali.

‘For me, it might be just after my family moved from England to our new home here. We’d literally just moved in, fresh from the flight, and I took a bicycle that was left in the garage by the previous owners and cycled around. First, down the street where our house was, then past an antiques shop, a bike shop, a pharmacy, a supermarket. I had no idea what would pop up around the corner. I cycled like this without a watch or direction, without even knowing how to get back to this new house that was now my home; taking everything in: the wide streets, the architecture, the shapes of the hedges, people’s coats. It was so different. And I felt I could do things.’ She goes silent. I don’t think she was finished but I also don’t think she’ll continue.

‘And why do you think you chose this moment?’ I can almost feel the weight of the Consultant’s pen, leaning down towards the white page, ready to write down the answer for later reference and analysis and comparison.

‘I don’t think there is much deep meaning in it: I was excited to be starting fresh.’ Thomas nods to himself but the Consultant doesn’t give up.

‘Like the previous you didn’t exist before that – you could be a new you if you wanted and no one would know. No one would know who you were before.’

‘I guess.’

‘Interesting. Interesting choice.’

The leather cover of his notebook squeaks on his lap as he scribbles.

‘Good. Very good. Thank you, Ali. Morten?’

Anti-clockwise. I don’t know what story to tell. Picking books from the school’s library (the choice, all the choice), walking in the sun after a long rain spell, kissing Anne Mette’s daughter for the first time. Morten straightens his back.

‘It was the summer holiday when we didn’t have school. Or maybe school was still on but we’d bunked off.’ His voice breaks and he stops for a moment to clear his throat. When he speaks again, it’s much louder. The fingers on his little hands play with the hem of his jeans.

‘My best friend and I had taken our bikes and cycled down the beach path in Hellerup. It was sunny and the sea was blue. We cycled further than we’d ever done before – way past Klampenborg.’

He pauses here and I nod my head in politeness. Way pass Klampenborg does sound like a long way to go.

'We stopped to get ice cream from a kiosk on the way, left our bikes on the beach, and ate it sitting on the hot rocks where the waves crashed. It was warm and there was melting cream running everywhere. Wasps. I had nothing to do apart from just that. Sit there, and eat my ice cream and look at the sea. I didn't feel guilty I wasn't doing homework. I was with my best friend and I didn't feel pressured to speak or make jokes or impress. There was breeze and my skin looked tanned in the sun. Nothing special. It was just very peaceful. Complete tranquility.'

Morten smiles to himself.

'Another cycling story. Interesting, very interesting. Lots of movement in both stories. Indicates a dislike of staying static. Or being stuck. Vibekke, let's do you next.'

Summer holidays, walking Pluto in the forest, pencil cases, the way Thomas stretches his legs, walking by the beach with Jens/dad. Faces facing me. Ali

'I guess,' eyes looking at my eyes, 'it could be having dinner with my parents when I was little.' Silence. They want the full story. Beginning, middle and end.

'They were never married and currently don't have the best relationship.' More silence. Morten is playing with his shoelace.

'My mum talks about my dad all the time – how he's a loser, how he's not doing anything with his life. It's always been like that. Well, almost always. That time when we had dinner is probably my last good memory of the three of us together. It wasn't anything special at all – we had sausages, the TV was on, it was dark outside although it couldn't have been that late. They were still together, it must've been shortly before they split up. They were joking with each other, commenting on what was happening on the show, nudging me to eat another sausage, teasing me to put extra mustard on it like an adult. It felt nice, everything seemed to be right.'

Silence again. Should I be saying more? I don't know if that's the moment I'd want to relive but it's a good one. The Consultant writes things. Ali is still looking.

When I get home I open the fridge. Three radishes, tub of mustard, half a jar of pickled herring, two cans of *Tuborg*, something wrapped in tin foil. When could it be from? Tuesday? I open my mum's drinking cabinet and tip out the last of a gin bottle into a

tumbler and add tonic water to the top. Monkey is smacking the keys hanging from the lock with her paws, and I open the front door to let her out. She jumps outside and lies low in the grass, looking for enemy cats and bumblebees. She gives me a look from time to time to see if I'm watching as she hunts insects.

I breathe the afternoon air and listen to the sounds of the road and the birds.

I breathe the afternoon air and listen to the sounds of the road and the birds. The yard is bright with light. Trees. Branches. Hedges. Rose bushes. Twisted stems and hanging buds. Everything is crayon green. Blades of grass on my bare feet. Soil and dirt. My jeans rolled up to the knees, still cold from the sea. White salt traces under brown scabs to be picked later. Vertical scratches to be irritated and itched with the tip of my finger until they bleed again. Hot hot blood drying down. Round insect bites. Black under the pink of my nails.

'Vibekke, come here, I want to show you something.'

I leave the stick next to the shallow hole I've dug (it's a mine for the snails from the snail farm to go and work during the daytime – they need something to do after all; something to go to when they wake up), and walk towards dad's voice. He was only a dad then. A dad people called Jens. Before I knew people mean different things to different people.

'Where's mum?'

'She's gone upstairs to take a shower. Something you should do too judging by the state of your feet.'

We both look at my toes wiggling.

'But I need to go back and work on my snail farm. So what's the point of washing only to get dirty again?'

'Maybe you can work on it tomorrow instead. That way you won't get dirty after your bath.'

'But I don't want to. I want to do it today.'

'Fine, fine. Come here for now.'

He's sitting on a chair by the kitchen table and I can't see what's in front of him. I think of all kinds of things that could be on the table: a machine that makes drawings come to life, spy gadgets, lie detector, stamp collection (like the boy in that book has), purple light bulbs, aquarium with two golden fish and a sunk ship in it, a basketball net to be installed on the garage wall, a survivor pack with ropes and a pocket knife and a pan and a plant encyclopedia so I can go roaming in the wilderness of the forest like Robinson Crusoe. Anything at all could be on the surface of our dining table. The possibilities are endless. Dad lifts me up and puts me on his knee. As easy as if I don't weigh anything. As if I was as light as Netto plastic bags inside a Netto plastic bag. My feet dangle in the air.

'It just got delivered while you were playing in the backyard.'

'I wasn't playing, dad, I was building a mine for my snails.'

'I'm sorry. That's what I meant.'

He looks really serious in his apology so I forgive him. It's an honest mistake to make. In front of me, there's an open box full of shreds of paper.

'Why has someone torn paper and put it inside this box?'

'On purpose. So the contents inside don't break.'

'Isn't it better just to be really careful? Instead of wasting time to tear all this paper?'

'Yes, but the person who wrapped it wasn't the same person who brought it here. Anything could have happened to it on the way.'

The possibilities are endless.

'Do you want to see what's inside?'

Laser swords. Marbles. Colouring books. Time machine with a red button on it. Lego. I nod. Dad's hands disappear inside the box, nothing to be seen apart from his wrists. When he pulls his hands out again, he's holding a plate.

'What is it?'

Could it just be a plate?

'It's a plate. A rare plate.' He frowns as he inspects the edges. 'See.'

He brings it closer to me. It looks like an ordinary plate you'd get from IKEA but with shiny golden edges. And the shape is odd. It's not very even. It's not very big.

'What do you need this plate for? We have loads of plates already.'

'This one is special.'

Dad lifts it and looks at it from underneath, where there's writing. He squints his eyes to read the text.

'What does it say?'

'Just where it's made. And when.'

'I thought it'd be a puppy.'

He twists the plate from side to side without looking at me. His blue eyes bluer.

'A puppy? Where?'

'Inside the box.'

He looks at me.

'You thought someone would deliver a living puppy inside this box?'

'Yes.'

I slide down his knees and run through the French doors back into the yard. Why would he call me just to show me his plate? It doesn't make sense. I go back to my mine. I haven't established what it is the snails will be mining but I guess they'll only find out once they're in. Gold. Diamonds. Roots of magical plants. Salt. I dig until the sky grows dark like a switched off TV and my mum calls me in.

'Vibekke, dinner time.'

The windows above the sink are wide open. Dark blue sky through the curtains and the smell of fields and sausages. Steaming water streams on my hands and brown mud drips on the plates and cups inside the tin basin. I keep my hands there until they wrinkle. The TV is on in the living room, its unintelligible sounds in the corners of the ceiling like a lullaby. Meat sizzles on the stove and dad is watching the sausages shrink and crack in the pan. I wonder if anyone would notice if I snuck out a sausage to feed my snails. I imagine them crawling on the surface of the meat-skin in moonlight, sucking on the flesh with their toothless mouths under the stars.

Dad still has hair but it's already paling. Like a yellow watercolour sky with too much water in the paint. Uncolour. He's trying to see the TV from behind the kitchen counter. He whistles a tune from Tom & Jerry and wipes his hands on his apron from time to time. I sit on the kitchen table and watch him. His thin fringe. The wrinkles above his nose and between his eyebrows. He could lift me like I was lightness itself. He could order whatever he wanted over the phone and someone would deliver it in a box full of shredded paper. He could read the text under the plate and it would make perfect sense.

'Vibekke, did you wash your hands?'

Mum's hair is wrapped in a towel. I see its black roots above the forehead.

'I did. See.'

I spread my fingers as wide as they'd go.

'Very good.'

Mum walks around the counter and holds dad with both arms around the waist above the straps of his apron. She kisses him on the cheek where he has stubble. Does she also feel as light as Netto bags inside a Netto bag? Does she know he could make anything happen? She does. I think she does. They look at each other. A sausage cracks and oil burns mum on the arm. Dad puts the tongs to the side and hurries her towards the sink. Puts the cold tap on. Places her arm under the water. Hugs her with her head on his chest. I move the saltshaker nearer to the pepper grinder.

When they come back, dad is holding the platter with sausages and onions and mum is carrying the bread rolls, a wet towel on her arm.

'What's that on your arm?'

'Don't worry, sweetheart, I'm OK. It's nothing. See.'

She moves the towel to show me her arm. It's red with a single blister on it, like a white-sand island that no one has discovered yet.

'Let's eat now.'

She smiles at me and dad is smiling at her. Something happens on the screen and they both look.

'I don't get it, is he the murderer?'

Dad is putting lettuce on my plate with his eyes on the screen. Leaves on the table.

'No, he's not – that's the point. Careful, you're spilling everywhere.'

'What's a murderer?'

'Someone bad.'

I know what it is but I want them to tell me anyway. See if their explanation matches what I'd heard about the axes.

'Here, have your salad. I'll make you your hotdog now.'

'Can I eat hotdogs all the time?'

'Sweetheart, you do eat hotdogs all the time.'

'No, but I mean all the time all the time. For breakfast. For lunch. For snacking. For dinner. For dessert.'

'Don't you think you'd get bored of that? If you only ate hotdogs?'

'No.'

I pierce a lettuce leaf with my nails. I wonder how my snails are doing.

'Here it is.'

Dad passes me the bread roll with a sausage and ketchup on it.

'Can I have mustard?'

'We've talked about it. Mustard isn't for children.'

'But I like mustard. And I'm not a child.'

'You know you don't like it. Remember what happened last time you had it?'

'No.'

'Oh my god, he is the killer.'

'I knew it.'

'I want mustard.'

'Fine, fine – pass me your bread roll.'

'Jens – only a little.'

'I know.'

Dad takes the jar of mustard and dips a teaspoon in it. When he takes it out, it's yellow on the edges, like dad's new plate is yellow on the edges.

'There isn't even anything on it, I want more.'

'I think this is enough. Just like an adult.'

I'm pleased with being compared to an adult so I don't argue with the amount of mustard.

'Here you go.'

I try to open my mouth as much as it can go so I can take a bite of both sides of the bread and the middle where the sausage and sauces are. I only manage a bread corner. Disappointing. Both mum and dad are watching the TV. I try to take another sausage from the platter. For my snails.

'Hey hey hey, what do you think you're doing?'

'Nothing.'

'You already have a sausage.'

'Fine.'

Best not to reveal the feeding plan but to wait for a better opportunity. I take another bite. The mustard burns my lips.

'*Oev, oev, oev.* Burns.'

I don't want to cry but my eyes do anyway. Dad gets up from his seat and hugs me.

'What is happening today? Both my girls getting burned.'

Mum joins us, kneeling on the floor. I hope this doesn't mean I'm not considered an adult anymore.

'Are you OK, sweetheart? Was it the mustard?'

I nod my head and feel my nose run.

'It's OK, it's OK. Let's just make you a new one. It'll pass. Everything passes.'

They both hug me again. Mum passes me my glass with blackcurrant squash. I take a sip and the taste is gone. She's right.

Mia is kissing my shoulder, her fingers moving along the length of my collarbone. I like how soft they are. I like how smooth they travel across my skin. It's still raining and Monkey is asleep at the foot of the bed. Condensation on the window. The room smells of pizza and sex. Mia stirs in the covers and Monkey jumps off.

'Sorry, Monkey, didn't mean to kick you.'

Monkey doesn't accept the apology. She meows and walks out of the room, tail high. The sound of her crunching her food comes from the kitchen shortly.

'Tell me about the others. How were they?'

'They seemed OK. One of the guys has really tiny hands.'

'That's all you can say about him? That he had really tiny hands?'

She laughs. The white of her eyes shining with tease. I laugh too.

'But he did. It was so odd. You should've seen the coffee cup in proportion to his fingers while he was holding it. It was just uncanny. It was like someone had squeezed his real hands inside these hollow little hand-gloves and made him wear them all the time as some kind of cruel punishment.'

'Jesus, that's disgusting. A hollow strap-on for hands?'

'OK, now that's disgusting. Although yeah, I'm sure there are people who are into that kind of stuff? There have to be.'

'Poor guy though.'

'Maybe he has a nice girlfriend who has a fetish for his tiny hands.'

'Maybe.'

She moves her index and middle fingers up along my neck until she reaches my mouth. She runs them along my lower lip and watches the flesh squish. I bite the tips where the nails are hard. Where it's salty.

'What about the others? Any more bodily abnormalities?'

'It wasn't an abnormality, just really disproportionate to the rest of him.'

'Fine, fine. Visible fetishes then?'

'You really need to work on your bedroom talk, you know that?'

'I'm only teasing.'

'I know. Anyway. The others seemed normal.'

'So apart from people's limbs, what else did you think of them?'

'I don't know. They seemed nice.'

'Nice is good. Given you'll be living with them for two weeks.'

'Yeah.'

'Let's hope the guy with the tiny hands keeps them to himself. Better yet, inside his pockets.'

'Pockets must be a weird thing for him. Like a handbag on the inside of his trousers.'

'Can we stop talking about him now?'

'You started it.'

She laughs and watches me wait for her fingers to continue. A journey across my mouth. Her hand is holding my stomach under the duvet and the t-shirt, and she's playing with the little hairs below my belly button.

'To answer your question, the others seemed to have normal body parts, from what I could see. The woman had a very nice jaw.'

'A nice jaw, huh?'

'Yeah.'

'What's her name?'

'Ali.'

'Ali? That's not very Danish.'

'Says you.' I smile but she doesn't respond to the joke so I continue. 'She's from England, originally. Her family moved here when she was young.'

'Did you all tell each other your life stories?'

'Well, we kind of had to. With all the pseudo psychology crap they made us do in the afternoon.'

I ignore her tone. Mia sits up and arranges the pillow behind her back.

'You should really get new pillows.'

'I know.'

I lie on her side of the bed but she doesn't hold me.

'What is it?' I know what it is.

'Nothing.'

'We both know it's not "nothing".'

'Then why are you asking?'

I get up too. Lift the duvet off.

'Wait, stay.'

'Why?'

'I'm sorry. It hurts me when you are attracted to other people.'

'I'm not attracted to other people. I commented on her jaw. Objectively, it was a nice jaw.'

'But why were you looking at her jaw?'

'What do you mean why? You know I'm not happy with my jaw, that's why I noticed.'

She moves towards me and holds my face with both hands.

'Your jaw is beautiful.'

'It's really not.'

I laugh. We kiss.

'So what happens next?'

'Next, they'll send me the trip itinerary. And off I go.'

'Why do you have to sound so excited about this? I mean, I'm happy you get to go away. But the reasons behind it aren't at all that great.'

'Oh, come on – how amazing would it be though? Live on the beach. Pet the turtles. No electricity. Just the ocean and the sun.'

'Yeah. Amazing.'

I get up. Monkey is awake watching us. Mia is looking at the crossed hands on her lap. The fingers intertwined in between each other. You can't tell which is which.

Mia pulls a kayak from the middle of the rack and places it on her shoulder.

'Help me with this one first; we'll come back for yours.'

I balance it on my right. The plastic edge digs into my skin like cat teeth. Spider webs in my eyes. It smells of plastic and sea. Like weekends at Jens/dad's.

'Ready?'

'Ready.'

We exit the darkness of the shed and walk towards the beach. The harbour is almost empty and the weather is almost warm enough. Mia is almost smiling to herself. The breeze blows sand dust and the smell of rotting trash from the bins by the cycle path. Sea on wood. Pale sky on dark water. Seaweed on brown. We place the kayak on the ground and go back to get the other one. Seagulls. A single kite in the sky.

'We were lucky with the weather, don't you think?'

She's walking ahead of me. Sand and rocks under our feet. Bicycle horns are going somewhere beyond the docks and the road and the gardens and the sausage stand and the ice cream shop. We take the second kayak and breathe in the dampness inside

the shed. Mould and salt in my bronchioli, coiling and fusing with the chemicals inside the tissue of my lungs.

After we carry it and align it with the other one, Mia pulls me towards her, holds my waist and locks her hands on my lower back. I can feel the warmth from her abdomen pressing against mine. The wetsuit makes the touch seem distant, like an almost-touch or a touch that's already happened in the past or like the feeling when you know there's ground beneath you but you can't feel it because your foot is asleep. She never used to kayak until I told her of my trips with Jens/dad. She moves hair away from my eyes behind my ear.

'I have a surprise for you on the other end.'

She kisses me. Wet lips on my lips.

We row along the coast on top of the current. Mia turns around from time to time to check on me. She's leading the way as we row parallel to rocks and beaches and private gardens stretching in front of white houses. There's silence, apart from the splashing of water and the paddles hitting the sides of the kayaks. I stop to listen.

I know water is meant to carry sound much further than air but when I speak it feels as if I'm the only one in the world who can hear it. I whisper my name. Vibekke, Vibekke, Vibekke. What if I undid my life jacket and threw it to the side as far as I can? Bright yellow and useless in the water. What if I threw the paddle in the opposite direction with all my strength? What if I dived in, head first, and swam deep into the darkness until I looked up and there was no more light and air bubbles surfaced on the water and no one heard my last gurgles of life as I lay on the bottom of the sea, arms spread wide open, my head nested in the sand? Like I was never on the surface in the first place. The only thing left there would be the kayak, floating without direction or purpose.

'Are you OK?'

The sun is shining behind her. Her silhouetted head looks tiny in the life jacket.

'I'm fine. Just having a little break.'

'Let's row a bit further north. I've prepared something for us.'

We row a bit further north. Clouds start to gather and the sea changes colour. As my paddle enters the waters I imagine the creatures beneath me: small and slimy and grey. Expanding gills and three-hearted octopuses. Black eyes looking into blackness. Crabs collecting shells. Fish manoeuvring through a forest of seaweed, green and blue and red, their shallow roots anchored at the sea floor like the ghosts of submerged ships.

‘We’re almost there.’ Mia’s voice travels with the breeze. ‘A couple of more beaches and that’ll be us.’

I paddle – left arm, right arm – and the waves come one after the other like trains in a busy station. There’s always another one if you missed this one. You just have to wait a bit longer.

Mia is stirring towards the shore.

‘Here it is, over here.’

I start stirring to the left – right arm, right arm, right arm. Mia is pulling her kayak up the beach and comes towards me, knee deep in the water where the waves crash and little rocks and shells get pulled up and down in the sand, unable to control their destiny in the face of the foaming waves.

‘You ready? I’ve got you.’

She pulls my kayak for me. It’s a sand beach squeezed hidden from the rest of the world by cliffs on both sides. Yellows and greens and greys from the rocks.

‘Well?’

‘How did you even find this place?’

Mia is grinning to herself. I hate the way the word ‘grin’ sounds. Like hammers on bodies.

‘Rasmus from work. From your mum’s team. His parents live somewhere around here. I know, right? I was telling him I wanted to do something special and he told me about this place.’ She’s looking around like a farmer evaluating the quality of this year’s potato harvest.

‘Come this way.’

She grabs my hand and springs towards a sand dune covered in dry plants and dry dark greens. I slip in the sand as we go towards the top. My wetsuit squeaks. The sky is growing darker and the waves louder.

‘What do you think?’

Underneath the sand dune, fairy lights are tangled in the bushes, like trapped luminous birds. There’s a chequered blanket blown to the side by the wind, held down by a picnic bag and a wine cooler, tilted at opposite corners. There’s an arch with a sheet between the three poles, stretched above the blanket. It contracts when the wind blows, the white fabric shuddering.

‘Wait. Something’s wrong.’

She hurries down the slope. I follow. As we approach the blanket, I notice items scattered in the sand. Tin foil. Paper cups. Bread crust. Grapes. Chewed up blocks of what looks to have once been candlesticks.

'I can't believe it.' Mia is looking around all the little objects. She starts picking things from the ground. 'I think maybe it was someone's dog?' I see a path by the cliffs – someone must've been walking their dogs down here. I start picking stuff too. A napkin by my foot. A plastic box by the bush. The dogs must've felt like it was canine Christmas, finding all the stuff here. I remember when Pluto could run before he lost his leg. His tongue on the side of his mouth. The muscles in his thigh contracting like the waving sheet. Free. Strong. Unstoppable.

'Everything is ruined.'

Mia sits down next to the blanket and looks around her, holding the remains of a sandwich in her lap. The crusts have been cut off already.

'No, it's OK. This is really sweet – I can't believe you've organised all of this for us.' I don't know what else to say. I sit by her and place my hand on her wetsuited knee. She doesn't move.

'Well it doesn't matter that I've organised it. It's ruined now.'

'Come on, it's not all ruined. And it was so nice to kayak together.' She looks at me. Maybe she's hoping my words can change the reality of the situation. She opens the sandwich and throws one of the bread slices ahead of her.

'We still have the lights – very romantic – and the picnic blanket...' I'm about to continue listing what we have when a raindrop falls on my temple. Mia looks at her arm.

'Was that a raindrop just now?'

'I don't know. I didn't feel anything.'

'I can't believe it. What a fucking disaster.'

'It's not a disaster.' A lightning flashes somewhere at sea tearing the horizon for a moment. When did it get so dark? 'It's funny.' The thunder follows. Nature's deep baritone – earth splitting.

'Funny? How is this funny?' She's still holding the other half of the sandwich. Is that cheese? I'm hungry.

'You know, it's a funny situation, that's all.'

'A funny situation? I drove up here at six this morning to lay it all out.' The rain is falling hard and she's almost yelling.

'I'm sorry, I didn't mean it like that. It's a great surprise, seriously. I can't believe you thought of that.' I can't believe you've had food out here since six o'clock and expected it all to be OK.

'What difference does it make? Fuck, I'm getting so fucking wet.'

'It's good thing you have a wetsuit on.' I smile but maybe she couldn't see from the wall of rain. She runs up the dune.

'Are you coming?'

Where is she going? I hope she's not expecting me to agree to row back in this weather.

'Where are you going?' She's already on the other side. 'I don't want to go back in the storm.'

She's running towards the water.

'Are you going to help me or what?'

She drags the red kayak away from the sea, its waves punctured by rain. I get the other one.

'Vibekke – come under here.' Mia is balancing the kayak on top of her head. I go under it and everything is illuminated by a blood orange hue from the plastic: Mia's cheekbones, her high forehead, the muscles in her arms, holding the weight of the vessel above us. She's frowning.

'But we're already wet.'

'No point getting wetter, is there?' Her wet curls fall on her face. Maybe she's got over the ruined picnic. If it weren't for the dog/s, the rain would've destroyed it anyway. Nothing to be done. The rain taps on top of our heads. The sound is irregular but frequent, like an arrhythmic heart. 'Let's sit down.'

We rest our backs against the dune and Mia arranges the kayak so that she only has to hold it with one arm. We face the sea and the storm, our feet poking outside in the rain. I wiggle my toes. We don't say anything. My stomach rumbles.

'Was that a cheese sandwich you had earlier?'

'What? This?'

'Can I have it?'

'Are you insane? It's probably covered in dog saliva and sand by now.'

'It looks alright to me.'

'Suit yourself.' She hands me the sandwich and watches me arrange the blocks of cheese on top of the buttery bread. My hands are wet and the bread absorbs the moisture. I take a bite. Grains, Gouda and sand. I crunch through it. Mia laughs.

'You're disgusting. I can't believe you're eating this.'

'Then why did you save it and leave everything else behind?' I take another bite. No sand this time.

'I forgot I even had it when it started raining.'

'Want some?' I hand her what I have left in my hand.

'No, thanks.' She laughs again. Good. She's got over it.

'It's kind of romantic, you know.' I watch the red hue move across her face when she turns towards me. 'Sitting here just us. Watching the storm. Having a sandy sandwich and our feet rained on.' I come closer to her. She stretches her free arm and holds my hand.

'So you don't think this was a complete failure?' She has the expression of a little girl who was just informed that she couldn't have the strawberry-coloured glitter pen only to be told a minute after that she can after all.

'No, not at all. I'm having a good time.' Compared to the food poisoning of the last of her surprises, this is much better. Although I don't know what the consequences of eating that sandwich might be. I don't say that. My toes are getting cold and I bury them in the wet sand. Little lost fleshy treasure.

'I'm glad. That's all I wanted.' She tries to come closer to kiss me but the kayak slips and falls on our shoulders.

'For fuck's sake.'

I laugh.

'Come on.' I go out from underneath. Another lightning. One second, two seconds, three. Ten seconds pass and the thud comes. The lightning must've struck about two miles away. The rain falls heavy and thick. I face the sky and let the raindrops fall on my face. I'm like the sea and the earth. I am the sea and the earth. I start taking off my wetsuit.

'What are you doing?'

Mia is shouting from underneath the kayak. I try to release my foot from the wetsuit.

'I'm going for a swim.' I yell back but I don't know if she can hear me.

'You're going for a swim? What did you say? What are you talking about? Come back.'

My body shivers and I spread my arms as if I'm lying on the seabed, reds and blues and greens floating above me, my head nested in the sand.

'Vibekke?'

What does a name mean when you're naked in the rain? When it feels like there's no one else. I run towards the water. The sea is the same temperature as the rain. Three steps in and the water is deep enough to swim. I dive in. Open my eyes. It's quiet beneath the surface. The rain doesn't tap anymore. The storm doesn't exist underwater. Mia doesn't exist underwater. Or my life on the surface. Just silence and dark blue, shifting, shifting. I emerge and lie on my back, my face towards the grey sky. Water on top of my stomach. The waves moving my body up and down, up and down. I don't know

if Mia is calling my name or if I'm far from the shore or how much time has passed or how much time is left. I only exist now, and then I'm gone forever.

Something touches my foot. Mia's head appears in between the waves. She pulls my toe.

'What is wrong with you? Let's go back now.' She spits out water. She's in her wetsuit. I turn around and feel the sea under my belly. We swim back together in silence.

By the time we're back at the beach, the rain has almost stopped. I walk out from the water, seaweed stuck on my thighs and my ankles.

'Seriously, Vibekke, what the hell was that about? Are you crazy?' Mia is waving her arms. She holds me by the elbow when I don't reply.

'It just felt right. It felt amazing.' I want to tell her about how I only existed then and was gone forever. How it felt like time had stopped. How I was the sea. How the storm didn't exist underwater. I don't say anything.

'You could've died out there. And you must be freezing, Jesus, your knees are basically black with hypothermia.'

I look down at my body.

The cold has left patches on my skin. Red and blue and green.

Raw prawns swell in a bowl, their transparent bodies like crystals in water, pink and black and yellow. Sliced red chorizo curled on a chopping board. A cup of peas defrosting by the stove; sweaty with steam. Mia is dicing onions on the counter, an apron with the Pisa tower on it over her black dress. Fresh-water pearls lie on the tendons of her neck, small and uneven and brown. I take a sip of wine. The pan is heating on top of the blue flames of the gas.

'What do you think?'

Mia smiles at me even though her eyes are tearing from the onions.

'It's delicious. Are you sure you don't want me to help with anything?'

'No, please, I've got this. Just relax.'

She walks away from the chopping board and stands by me. Rosemary and thyme plants in pots on the table. There's a white moon on the wine label. She sees me looking.

'It's Spanish. The vineyard isn't far from the village where my grandparents live. It really does look like the picture here.'

She comes close enough for me to smell her perfume.

'I used to go there when I was little. Stay with them in the backyard under the pagoda and the stars long after dinner. They'd tell me stories and later, after my grandmother would tuck me into bed, I'd dream of what they'd told me.'

'What were the stories?'

She spins the bottle by the neck.

'All kinds of stories. Stories from the village. Stories from their youth. How they went to school together and what their parents had said when everyone had seen them kissing outside the schoolyard. Stories about the people they'd met in their life together. Crazy uncles and extravagant cousins. Stories about food and summer. Cross-dressing aunt. That kind of thing.'

'It sounds really idyll.' I want to ask about the cross-dressing aunt but maybe it's too soon.

'It was. Idyll. That's a good word to describe it.'

I take another sip of wine. The glass is one of those expensive IKEA ones; the ones I always look at when I go there to buy candles and never find enough justification to buy. The ones with the nice shape and the right weight. My mum doesn't care about the type of wine she has or the type of glasses she has it in. I like that Mia likes my word. Maybe I should've worn a dress too. I look at the silver chain between each pearl on her neck, reflecting the LED lights screwed in the ceiling. The wine looks black in the glass. She smiles at me and goes back to her onions. This is a good first date so far.

'And you? Do you have grandparents?'

'Not anymore, no. All four of them died when I was quite young. So I never had a real relationship with any of them.'

'That's a shame.'

She adds olive oil to the pan and tips in the onions. Lowers the heat.

'It is.'

The oil splashes but she doesn't move away from the stove.

'I would've liked to have known my *mormor* though. She sounds like she was a pretty interesting woman.'

'Oh yeah? What was she like?'

Mia fills the kettle with water and turns the switch on. Her movements around the kitchen are quick and elegant. She's not even looking at a recipe.

'She was very clever. Worked as an architect – she designed the house where my mum was born. It was sold a few years after though, I think they ran into some money trouble. It was a beautiful house in the woods. Shaded by linden trees.'

'Linden trees? Really? I didn't even know linden grew here.'

The kettle is steaming and Mia takes a bowl from the cupboard. Fills it with boiling water.

'It did there. The house was really bright, with huge windows. There was a small pond on the other side of it. My mum talks about it sometimes. I think she would've loved to have spent her childhood there.'

'It sounds pretty...idyll. Who wouldn't?'

I laugh.

'Yeah.'

'And you? Where did you spend your childhood?'

She takes two tomatoes off the vine and washes them under the sink. Rubs their red smoothness with her thumbs. Submerges them in the hot water bowl.

'Not far from here, really. It was kind of split between here and Hundested where my dad lives.'

'Hundested is so nice. I love the seaside there.'

'Me too.'

She uses a spoon to take the tomatoes out on a kitchen towel. She pokes one with her finger and starts peeling it. The skin is so thin, you could see through it like you could see through a transparent raw prawn if you tried.

'Is that where you became an amateur kayaker?'

'You remember that, huh?'

'How could I not? Playlist maker. Amateur kayaker.'

'You forget strange cat owner.'

'Of course. Strange cat owner.'

She chops the tomatoes in chunks on the same board as before and tips them in with the onions. Stirs.

'But yeah. It is where I started kayaking. My dad got me into it.'

Mia takes a new wine glass out of the cupboard.

'He's not that into it now. But I still go, by myself.'

'Maybe you could take me sometime.'

She smiles with her half-moons.

'That'd be nice. I think you'd like it.'

'How was it to grow up like that? With two homes?'

'It felt normal. I didn't know what the alternative really meant. I knew what it meant from a day-to-day point of view: speaking with my classmates and whatever. I knew they'd go on family holidays and bowling and shopping at the mall altogether. I

always found it a bit unpractical. How do you know which parent to ask for permission to go to the school party?’

Not that I went to many of those.

‘Good point.’

Mia laughs. I take a sip of wine. It’s comfortable talking to her.

‘But I didn’t really understand it as a concept. I didn’t see living with two parents instead of with one as an advantage or anything like that. I used to enjoy my weekend and summer holiday trips to my dad’s house. It made me feel independent travelling on the train with my rucksack and my headphones. Plus, Jens/dad wasn’t very good at rules. If anything, it was me bringing some structure to his life in a way. We never really did much. He never took me on any vacations or anything like that. We were close to going to Berlin once. He wanted to stock up on cigarettes from the ferry; I wanted to see the Wall. I was in my Pink Floyd stage at that point. But nothing came of it. We’d mainly have walks by the beach or go kayaking or cook or watch TV together. He’d show me how to make hats out of newspapers, I’d show him how to use a computer. That kind of stuff.’

‘He sounds like an interesting guy.’

‘He’s a weird guy.’

‘How come you call him Jens/dad? And not just “dad” or just “Jens”?’

‘I have been for many years. I don’t know, I think at some point I realised he wasn’t only my dad but also a Jens to the rest of the world. Like two different people but one. He had two functions. And it kind of stuck.’

‘I’m not going to pretend I understand that one. Also, you’re going to have to tell me about your Pink Floyd stage and the other stages. I presume there were other stages?’

‘There were. My Nirvana phase. Bright Eyes phase. Classical music phase. Everyone has those.’

She laughs and fiddles with the knobs. The flames grow smaller.

‘What about you? How were your parents?’

‘Before answering, may I just point out how very lesbian this date is. Dinner isn’t even cooked yet and we’ve moved onto family history and subtle psychoanalysis.’

‘That’s true.’

I smile. She fills a wine glass with Arborio rice.

‘My childhood was...different. From yours, certainly, but from others’ too. My mum always wanted me to fit in; she was worried kids would pick on me. I was a quiet child – moving over here made me go completely silent for a year. I know, right, me. I

got out of it but I think it freaked my parents out. The not speaking. They were afraid I'd never talk again. Took it to heart – blamed themselves. When I was in *gymnasium* and started having friends over, my mum would get overexcited and cook these elaborate dishes like veal and pecorino cheese and gazpacho. Seriously, she did. She'd spend hours in the kitchen, her entire afternoon sometimes. She wanted people to like me; she was so afraid I'd be picked on. Kids just wanted some frozen pizza, like what they get in other houses. She didn't get that she was contributing to my "weirdness" and I never told her. We'd be watching a film in my bedroom, a rom com or a scary film or whatever, and she'd come in covered in flour with a plate of homemade croquettes.'

'She sounds so sweet.'

'She is, she is. But it always made me feel guilty – like, I was weird already. Not because of her or because we were foreign or anything like that, but because of me. She tried so hard and it never worked but she never realised it didn't work...I don't know, it's sad. My dad was the same – he'd try to be friends with other kids' dads at summer gatherings and events like that and they'd kind of just give each other looks when he wasn't looking: "why is he talking so much, what's wrong with him" kind of thing. We were a family of weirdos, in short.'

'Isn't everyone, though?'

'That's what I think.'

She smiles. Stirs the rice in with the tomatoes and onions. She seems to know what she's doing. I like that the cooking is a part of the date. Like being backstage or on the set of a film. I would've liked to help maybe, it's a bit strange just to sit and watch her. She seems to enjoy it. I should definitely invest in a black dress like hers one day. She sees me looking. Half-moons.

Dark wine, the smell of saffron and onions in the air. She's good at dates.

'Who's taught you how to cook?'

'My mum. And myself. I like food way too much not to learn how to make it myself.'

I think of the pizza in my fridge. My spices wrack with two-year old jars that I got from my mum for Christmas. My mum's not any better even if she says she is. I tried using the tikka powder the other day to sprinkle on the oven chips like I've seen they do in Germany but I never got to try it as it was completely solid. A block of tikka. I used the back of a spoon to break it into chunks. In the end, it didn't taste of anything. Mia adds a glass of white wine to the pot.

'Just enough to cover it. More wine?'

'Are you trying to get me drunk?'

I make a pin-up pose with my hips to the side. She squints her eyes and frowns with her eyebrows together. Coughs and when she speaks, her voice is deep.

'I certainly am.'

We both laugh when she coughs again.

Candles and a vase with chrysanthemums on the table. Colour: unknown. It's almost too dark to see what I'm eating. I chew on something salty from time to time. Must be the fried chorizo.

'What do you think?'

'It's delicious.'

Her eyes shine in the dark opposite the table. Half-moons, I imagine.

'More salad?'

'I'm OK, thanks.'

I have no idea if I still have some on my plate or not.

'So. Time for those kinds of questions. Do you date much?'

Crunch, crunch, crunch. Darkness, darkness, darkness.

'Not really, no. But I'm not that bothered about it.'

This might have come out wrong.

'In what way?'

'I don't know. I just haven't met that many people. So I guess I've kind of accepted it.'

'That makes sense. Quality over quantity, right?'

'Precisely.'

We eat in silence. The candle flames reflected in the blackness of the windows to the side.

'What about you? Do you date a lot?'

'I'm more like you. I wait until there's someone I feel is right.'

Am I right? I don't know if she's looking at me or not.

'I was in a long-term relationship until last year. So I'm still getting back into dating and all that.'

Is it rude to ask about what happened? Why is it that humans are always interested in storytelling? Why is it I'm not satisfied with the outcome but want the reasons as well? The drama of it. I almost hope there is a lot of drama. I move closer to the edge of the table.

'My ex and I had a pretty bad breakup.'

So she wants me to ask her.

‘What happened – if you don’t mind me asking?’

‘No, no, it’s OK. Ask away.’

Sounds from her side of the table. Maybe she’s rested back against her chair. Maybe she’s done eating and she’s put the napkin on the plate. She tops up my glass with wine without asking. How can she see anything?

‘She’d met someone else on a train ride in Sweden, of all places. She was Swedish, she was going home to her mum’s house in Gothenburg. They were sitting next to each other, and she felt immediately attracted to the other person, in her words. She said nothing had happened yet but she wanted it to. The other person was interested in her too. Later I found out they’d had an affair long before she’d told me.’

‘That’s pretty shitty. Sounds like it was tough.’

‘It was. It’s hard to know your partner has chosen someone else over you. A stranger, at that.’

I was going more for ‘it’s hard to lose someone you love’ but sure.

‘Are you two still in touch?’

‘God no. Once I found out she’d lied, I didn’t want to see her anymore. The lie was even worse than the fact that she was with someone else now. Anyway, the two of them live together now and have a pet ferret called Alfred. A mutual friend saw it on her profile.’

‘Wow. A pet ferret, really? And all of this happened in the last one year?’

Alfred is such a good name for a ferret. I don’t say that. I’d quite like to own a ferret. Build him a maze in the basement, if mum’s house had a basement. Play tag. Crawl around the floor together. Monkey would hate him. Or she’d think the ferret was a toy for her and kill him one night when I’m asleep. I’d wake up and there’d be traces of blood from under the bed where the ferret would sleep in his box and I’d follow the blood trail and get a bit of it on my feet and when I get to the kitchen, I’d see Monkey sitting by a mass of red flesh, her white belly bloodied and her paws rolling the ferret’s right eyeball on the tiles.

‘Yeah. Well, their affair had started earlier than that. Plenty of time to reach the “we own a pet together” stage behind my back.’

‘Right.’

Maybe I shouldn’t have asked anything.

‘I’m sorry.’

‘Thanks. Nothing to be really sorry about though. It turned out she was just not a very nice person.’ We sit in silence for a while. ‘Dessert?’

She gets up from her seat and walks towards the kitchen. I follow her. I have to blink a lot to get my eyes re-adjusted to the light.

'I didn't have time to make it myself, I'm afraid. I hope you like lemons.'

'Looks amazing.'

She takes the two pots back towards the back of the living room. We sit on our chairs opposite each other and eat parfait in darkness.

'I saw your mum earlier. Told her we were having dinner tonight. Hope you don't mind.'

I laugh.

'Is that why she's been sending me text messages all day? She didn't mention anything, she was writing me stuff like "the weather tonight is looking pretty good" and "hope you have a good evening, *datter*".'

Mia's turn to laugh.

'Smooth.'

'I hope you don't mind me having told her.'

'No, of course not. I mean, it's just a dinner, right?'

'Right.'

'Anyway, your mum is a lot like my mum when it comes to these things, I guess. It'll be strange to see her in the office tomorrow.'

'Are your desks close?'

'Quite. I'm not there all the time though, I work from home a lot.'

'That's really nice.'

'It is. My parents just don't get it. They think unless you go to an office 9-5, you're unemployed.'

'I wonder what they'd say of a freelance waitress.'

'Oh, I think they'll love you.'

Not 'would'? I'm finished with the parfait.

'Delicious, thank you.'

'You're very welcome. Come, let me show you something.'

I follow her towards the back of the house.

'Here - take this.'

She passes me a blanket.

'It's this way.'

She opens the door. Outside, lights in the tree branches and torches in the ground illuminate the grass in green. There's a swing in the middle and an ice bucket by it. A bottle's neck sticks out.

'Come, sit down.'

I look up from the swing. Stars and sky, like if you perforated a black sheet and lifted it against the light. Mia unscrews the wire around the cork. A loud pop and birds fly off the tree. Their sounds the only sound in the night.

'Think you pissed them off.'

'I think so too. They'll come back though. Champagne?'

She passes me a flute and I take it. She sits next to me and we both look up.

'It's beautiful, isn't it?'

'It really is.'

'Cheers.'

'Cheers.'

We look at the sky in silence.

'You're really good at dates, you know that?'

'Why, thank you.'

Her turn to make a pin-up pose with her arm on her hip.

I laugh.

'No, but really. You are. This is amazing.'

She looks at me. Half-moons.

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