

From *The Enlightened* by Øystein Stene
Translated by Alison McCullough

Bogdan

Atanasia explains that the drive will take three hours, then it'll be two hours on foot. And then they'll be there. If they listen to her, follow the rules. Then everything will be fine.

And: it might seem airtight, but there are holes drilled in the roof so fresh air can get in.

She points up towards the metal, at the holes. They lift their heads.

I don't think they can see them, though. The light outside isn't quite strong enough. But they look anyway, to show they're paying attention.

When they look back at Atanasia she passes around travel sickness tablets and a bag containing bottles of water. The tablets are so old they probably won't have any effect, but they take them anyway.

'Are there any questions?'

She makes it sound as if we're running a travel agency. Bogdan the driver and Atanasia the guide.

Nobody says anything, they all just sit against the container wall. Take the offered tray of tablets and bottles of water in silence.

Their faces are clearer now that my eyes have adjusted to the dark. They're all adults. But no old people – there's nobody even of my age. Which is promising.

It's hard to tell just by looking at them. Who believes what, and why. None of them are old enough to remember.

I wish I could sit with them, here, in the dark. Tell them it's going to be fine, that they're going to make it. Cross the border, get to the other side.

I wish I could say it now. In a calm, steady voice. Tell them it won't be long, that they'll soon be there.

I slip out, pick up one of the crates of onions from just outside, carry it in and insert it into the empty space between the others. I slap the wall of crates with the flat of my hand and nod to Atanasia, then to them.

'What?' Atanasia asks.

Everyone looks at me, waits for me to speak. Fuck, Atanasia, can't you just say it yourself? I hold my breath for a moment. Then a little longer. Until the silence feels weird and uncomfortable.

'N-n-now we m-m-must block the en-en-en-entrance,' I stammer.

Atanasia gives a final nod. Collects up the remaining pills.

'Yes – and not a sound before we give the all clear.'

Then she turns, follows me out through the passage between the crates. She must be feeling guilty, because she helps me to stack the last of them. Lifts them up with me, pushes them in.

Until all we can see is stacks of crates of onions.

I thread cable ties through the outermost crates, pull them tight.

And then we slam the container doors. Lock them shut.

I go up front, get into the cab, start the truck – the idling rhythm is nice and steady. I rev the engine a couple of times so that they'll understand we're about to leave. Atanasia lifts the barrier. I slowly let out the clutch, and out we glide.

Outside the car park the street is deserted. The cold morning air blows in through the cracks in the windows.

In the mirror I watch Atanasia lower the barrier into place and jog alongside the container until she's level with the cab. She hops up onto the step, opens the door, clambers up and gets in. Slams the door shut after her.

'Okay,' she says once she's got her feet up on the dashboard.

I drive calmly through the streets, taking extra care at the turns. To give those in the back a chance to get used to it, all the tilting and bumps in the road.

In the street with all the shopping centres a streetlight has fallen since last time, its heavy bulk blocking our way. I put the trailer in reverse and a few pigeons flap up at the beeping of the alarm. One of them shits on the windscreen. Atanasia laughs.

I spray the windscreen with water and set the wipers going, but they just smear the shit across the glass. I leave them running until they've reduced the substance to a thin, transparent layer.

You can't get pissed off if they shit on your view every once in a while. The pigeons are pretty much the only things left here. Them and the dogs.

I take another road past the shopping centres. Past the last residential area, mostly overgrown villas, the forest on its gradual march towards the centre of town. I get out onto the main road, take the exit, gear up and put my foot down.

The road here is clear, nobody in sight. The ruins lacking inhabitants start to thin out, as does the coastal forest. We'll make good progress up towards the mountain pass.

It's here, like this and at this speed, that everything is calm. When the trailer hums off with exactly these revs, sending a sort of good vibration up my spine. My shoulders relax, as if all the buzzing chaos, every cause for concern, takes a break.

This is how it is, when the revs are just right, the motor steadily purring.

The only minor irritation is the jangling of the coupling. But it can keep up its chatter until I find a spare from a wreck to replace it with.

'Seriously, this is my last trip,' she says.

I nod.

Just as I've nodded on the last three trips she's said this to me.

'I *have* to move now.'

I say nothing. Let her prattle on. About how she can no longer stand the village, that she's sick of eating swede and potatoes.

'Isn't it sad,' she says.

'Mm?' I grunt.

I'd rather just sit in silence, maintain the speed at which the engine's vibrations massage my back and head. But Atanasia wants something different.

'That we're transporting people across for knick-knacks, seed potatoes and scraps of gold.'

'Everything they h-h-have,' I say.

She moves her feet from the dashboard down to the footwell. Finally she's quiet and I try to get back into my rhythm. But the road is getting steeper, the mountains higher. I gear down to third, but we continue to struggle. Second gear. We didn't pick up enough speed before we started up the hill.

That's when these things happen. When you lose focus.

I try not to let the engine rev too highly in the low gears. We have to save ethanol.

At the last of the hills I gear down into first. We creep up, until the terrain flattens out and we're finally up on the vast plateau.

I realise I've been holding my breath. It was close – we only just made it.

'I d-d-don't d-do it for the g-g-gold,' I say finally.

Atanasia gives me a long look, then snorts. I sense that she's irritated. She gets like that sometimes. Slightly irritated.

She doesn't mean anything by it.

She doesn't know it, but her mother was exactly the same when she was small. She'd snort, sort of irritated and sulky, whenever she didn't like or couldn't stand something.

But I don't say anything. I know Atanasia doesn't like it when I mention her mother. Or her father. Or anyone for that matter. She'd rather I act as if they never existed.

As if it's just been the two of us. Always. And nothing else has ever happened.

'I heard you talking about it,' she says suddenly.

'Mmm?' I say.

'About the light. To the kids in the village. You can't do that as long as we're doing *this*.'

I don't know what to say – it's not my fault if they come to me when I'm raking leaves or tilling the field. That nobody else wants to tell them. Or that there's almost nobody else that remembers. That they sit on the garden furniture and refuse to leave. Bogdan, Bogdan, tell us, tell us!

Somebody has to tell them. Someone who saw – and who still remembers.

'I just don't fucking understand it, why you don't stammer when you talk about it.'

Back to the good vibrations again, up in fifth.

I understand that she wants to hear it, wants to hear me speak like everyone else. But she doesn't want to hear about the light anymore. Not about her parents, the light, or anything else that happened, because she wants to look forward, to a different future filled with more than just memories and dreams and stories.

She liked it when she was little, when I told her stories without sounding like a sputtering carburettor. As if someone else was speaking. Another me.

And when I spoke to her it was just the two of us, and she would forget everyone who was gone. Forget how she longed for them.

I think I did that for her. Made her feel that she wasn't completely alone in the world.

'I'm almost thirty years old, I'm moving out when we get back,' she says.

If everything had stayed the same she probably wouldn't even have visited me.

Thought about me. Remembered me. Might have had a vague memory of me, perhaps – her uncle who stuttered so badly.

Nor would I have thought about her. Wouldn't have recalled much about her, had no idea how she learned to tie her shoelaces or how she'd sleep like a log after a glass of warm milk. Wouldn't have known that for every single day for a month she'd demand to be read a tattered old book about a boy who never stopped growing.

Relatives are like time. They get more important the fewer of them you have left.

I don't respond – we're at the highest point now. The road is poorly maintained on top of the mountains and I try to avoid the worst of the bumps. Not that I always manage it, and I feel for those in the back, every time. Think of how they're sitting there in the dark, knocking against one another. Hope that the ties around the crates hold.

'Seriously, I can't take living in that fucking gossipy town anymore,' she says.

I wonder what she thinks is worse – the thought that people know she has a relationship with a relative. Or that they associate her with an old fogey like me. I'd like to ask her, but I don't quite know how.

But that's okay. And anyway, she hasn't left. Not yet.

Most of the mountains are behind us now. The trees are thicker, and the road starts to slope downwards again, huddling against the rock face.

'What the fuck?'

She sits up – she's seen something. I hit the brakes.

‘What the fuck, there’s somebody down there.’

I crane my neck at the outer edge of the turn and yes, there’s someone down there, at the bottom of the valley.

The United Army. A roadblock.

It’s as if my head falls off and tumbles down into the footwell to wedge itself under the brake pedal so I can’t stop.

They won’t just check the load – they’ll turn the entire container upside down.

Atanasia straightens up, turns and looks behind us. Wonders whether it’s possible to turn around, back up.

‘Im-p-p-possible,’ I say.

I drive more slowly, as slowly as I can without arousing suspicion. They’ll be watching us through their binoculars, guaranteed. And with their laser sights.

‘Duck,’ I say.

She slides all the way down in her seat; looks at me.

‘We c-c-can’t get those in the b-b-b-back out, but you c-c-c-can.’

‘Fuck, Bogdan, it’s downright precipitous here.’

It’s true, but at least this way she has a chance. The military are on the lookout for border guides and faith refugees now – they’re looking for us.

Atanasia stays down in her seat, peeking above the edge of the door.

Like the time a blackbird landed in the field.

‘But Bogdan, what will you do?’

Yes, it’s just like the time we saw the blackbird. She was lying on the sofa, must have been about seven years old. I think it was the first blackbird she ever saw.

The bird hopped around, plucked up an insect or worm, then disappeared before returning a few minutes later. It continued like this for hours, probably feeding its young. And Atanasia lay there, murmuring and entranced, peeking out of the window.

The tight bends will make it less suspicious that I’m driving so slowly. On an inside bend when I know they’ll lose sight of me I brake hard and the trailer stops. The engine groans.

‘You have t-t-t-ten seconds!’

As we ate dinner, I explained to her how many birds there were before. Fewer insects, fewer mosquitos. Almost no caterpillars in the salad.

And she wanted to hear about how everything had changed. How the birds had dropped out of the sky and died in their millions, in just a few days. What it looked like if you happened upon a flock of several thousand.

Atanasia sits up. She looks first down the slope, then at me. I don’t know what to say, so I lean across her, open the door.

‘N-n-now!’

She hops down onto the step. Turns to look at me.

‘Bogdan, I...’

She’s trying to say something, but there’s no time. At least not if she ever wants to see another blackbird, and so I pull the door closed, forcing her to jump down onto the road to avoid getting stuck. I let out the brakes and the clutch; she disappears from the window as I roll away.

‘The birds lost their compass,’ I said.

‘What’s a compass, Uncle Bogdan?’

‘It’s what lets you know you’re going in the right direction.’

Stuff like that. Things people don’t usually say to a six-year-old girl.

I can see her in the mirror, looking after us. After me.

I clear my throat. Prepare to speak about the light. In a calm, steady voice.

Atanasia

throwing one foot in front of the other, godawful taste of blood in my mouth, my throat,
tongue swollen, blood pumping into new places, want to spit but can't,
can't,
mustn't be heard, seen, smelled,
can't tell whether it's my feet or head or throat that wants to give up,
just want to lie down, here, like when the sharks stopped swimming, like that, gone,
no strength to keep running but running anyway, don't know where I find the strength
but I run, throat feels about to split open, that that's the only way I'll get enough air, running
through the undergrowth, trying to keep to where the trees are taller than me,
trousers ripped, running through a meadow, halfway across realising there's stinging
nettles but feeling nothing, then back into the undergrowth,
just like the dream when I was small, in those first few months in the new house,
when there was frost on the ground and the whole world was silent, everything waiting and
waiting,
dogs snapping at my heels, waking in a sweat,
afraid to open my eyes, of what might be there, what might have followed me out of
my dream and into my room in the house I'd never lived in before, a house without Mum and
Dad,
now I'm in it, now I'm right in the thick of it, the dogs are real with gnashing jaws
and snuffling snouts, trying to run from my fear, just like back then,
waking to discover the fear that has paralysed me all my life,
running and paralysed at the same time,
I want to throw up, stop and spew, or die here unnoticed,
heart pounding, trying to breathe as quietly as I can, fresh twigs whipping against my
face, dry branches cracking underfoot, the dogs behind me still barking but the soldiers have
stopped shouting, stopped screaming that it's okay, I can just come back, it's all over now,
the undergrowth ends, the trees get taller, true forest, closing in on the border but I'm
not sure where I am, whether I'm close, don't know, running like fuck in a zig-zag so maybe
their first shot will miss and I'll get a second chance,
it takes time to sight and the first time they'll be too out of breath,
but it's as if I can feel the bullet already, homing in, just behind me, it first hits my
hair, metal against skin, the yielding skin, so fucking elastic, then bores into my brain, hot
steel that melts my thoughts before paralysis takes over and my legs finally stop,
running from bullets yet to be shot, through air they are yet to cut,
wind gusting between the branches, the forest panting with me, the leaves taking in
air, pulling it down to the roots,
if trees could inhale fear would there be any leaves left around here?
the sign!
fuck, a sign,
and another one,
a row of signs,
can't see the path, still don't recognise where I am, but it's no use, keep going, past
the warning signs, running slower, as if that will help, as if running into a minefield is safer
than running from a muzzle, hear them stop the dogs, call them back, even those fucking
mongrels aren't allowed in here, only the wild dogs,
keep going, trying to find the path,

starting to walk, slower, slower, knowing all too fucking well how densely packed they are, every step a fucking miracle, I could be hundreds of metres from the path, maybe even a kilometre or even two,

I've no idea how long it is since they spotted me, for how long I've been running, just like in the dream, as if everything out there has come in and the only thing to do is run from it,

what a fucking godawful day,

I tread more carefully, knowing that if I sense the metal right away there's hope, if I discover it there and then, don't put any real weight on it, know that around thirty kilos is needed to trigger them,

a foot weighs maybe one kilo,

a leg two,

four kilos for the thigh, at least,

and then there's the hip,

and the very speed of the foot has a weight of its own,

must tread fucking carefully, stay below thirty kilos,

but there!

now,

now she's standing there, the 'go-get girl',

emerging from behind a tree in front of me, wearing her white tunic, the one she was wearing last time, smiling,

where are the others?

she whispers, and I'm so fucking glad to see her, so fucking glad, she looks like an angel, I don't know how she manages to keep the tunic so clean, her eyes so open, what made her this way, I feel like crying but I don't, instead start to shake,

I should be so fucking dead right now,

but I whisper back,

how did you find me?

she just turns, starts to walk and so I follow her, in her footsteps, precisely in her footsteps, not a millimetre outside them, she walks barefoot holding her sandals in her hand and I follow her until we're out of the forest and the landscape opens up,

fog blanketing the plain, a thin layer spread across the ground to either side of us as far as I can see,

fog over clay, muck, mud, tufts of grass, swamp,

the land between lands, between the one and the other,

I recognise the tree, the old hollow trunk that's lost all its limbs,

and here it is, the meeting point, I was so close, I've been so close all this time without realising it, too intent on escape,

but something in me knew, something in my bones,

should we wait for any others?

she says as she looks around her, as if they're about to emerge from the forest, a long line moving as one, but they don't come, they're up there somewhere and the soldiers will have found them in the container, they'll be taken to a camp with Uncle, all of them, gone,

it's just me,

I say,

are you crossing over?

she asks,

I don't know whether I respond, whether I nod, I don't think I do although I know that I should,

do you surrender yourself to Him?

she asks,
it sounds an odd question coming from a girl of her age,
but I still don't answer, what the fuck can I say, what the fuck do I care about it, I'm
standing in a minefield with a troop of trigger-happy border soldiers and raging Alsatians
behind me, like what do you want me to say, you know I know the drill, what the fuck do you
want me to say,
they're after me, they'll shoot if they get the chance,
I say,
she stands there looking at me, listening for the dogs, it sounds like they're up on the
hillside, impossible to say whether anyone can see us,
we're easy targets,
I add,
she considers this, finally decides and turns, and we leave the edge of the forest, start
to head out across the plain into the fog, I follow in her tiny steps, knowing we can be seen
from many places now, that we're visible from the entire mountain behind us, but no shots
are fired, the dogs stop baying,
I don't turn around, don't look back, simply follow her,
watch her shiny heel tilt up each time she lifts her back foot, stretching it up and
forward before her toes gingerly meet the ground and she rolls the rest of her foot down until
the entire sole is flat against the earth, watch her feel the earth with her sole, as if pawing
some of the soil away, twice, feeling her way forward, before transferring all her weight to
her front foot to lift the back one again,
slowly into the fog, step by step,
sneaking into invisibility,
this is my last trip,
she says,
it sounds almost sad the way she says it and I look down at my legs, red from the
nettles and it's only now that I feel it, my feet sinking slightly deeper into the swamp with
every step,
it's my last trip, too,
I say,
not sad, something else, something I can't yet identify, but relieved, absolutely
relieved,
is your family in the Kingdom?
she asks,
and I wish I could answer her, tell her whether my family is in the Kingdom, where
my family is, what family is,
that sometimes, when I woke from my dreams, where the dogs and all kinds of things
were out to get me, it was as if there was something in the room, something that made me
afraid to move, I don't know, cold trickling down my spine, arms stiff, cheeks flat,
as if something evil was in the room, or something dead, I'm not entirely sure what
the difference is, evil or dead, but it seemed something was there, something that wouldn't go
away unless I remained completely still, and so I lay there immobile, unmoving, until I fell
asleep again, or until I could see the sun,
because the sun always rose, it always came up, even when I wasn't sure it would,
because how can you be sure of anything when nobody else is,
she turns, stops mid-step, looks at me with her large eyes, waiting for my answer, but
I can't tell her all this, it's too much, and so
I'm going to start over, all over again,
I say,

not knowing whether she'll associate anything with such an answer but she keeps going at least, the fog thickening, can't see more than twenty to thirty metres ahead, just muck and earth, her tiny feet starting to sink a little, too, and then she stops, looks around, at the puddles here and there,

because of God?

she asks,

but doesn't wait this time, expects no answer, seems almost as if she doesn't want an answer, just carefully presses her feet down into the wet earth, trying to keep to wherever there's a hint of grass or roots,

I can't talk about God, have nothing to say about God, other than that when I woke from my dreams and felt that something or someone was there, a cold power, and I curled up in the cold as if buried in frost, like something that would take thousands of years to thaw,

well if that was God I better run like fuck, back to where I came from,

even if I trigger every mine on the plain, if the dogs tear me to shreds, if every bullet shot from every automatic weapon bores through me,

she stops,

I stop,

she moves the sole of her foot back and forth, lightly, takes a step backwards, points, steps aside, and I see the slightly rusty green metal that's been lying here in wait, so fucking patiently, but not for us, not this time,

she takes a step around it, I follow, and she turns and looks at me, smiling,

God's protecting us,

and then she continues, as if she really believes it, as if this belief fills her skinny body, that she can walk here through the fog in complete safety, lead us through it, because something else is leading us in turn,

and I don't get it, just can't understand how it's possible to go around wearing a clean tunic, so open-eyed and with such a smile, how it happened, where it came from,

this must be why they want to cross over, everyone we've accompanied to the border, why they followed the girl across the fog-covered plain as I stood and watched them disappear, just like that,

but now I'm here, and I don't know, have no idea what to say, whether there is anything to say, just follow in her footsteps, as precisely as possible, the only place I can be sure of,

is it true that nobody over on your side believed in the light?

she asks suddenly,

laughing a little, as if she can't understand it, as if she has to laugh every time she thinks of it,

perhaps they just thought it didn't mean anything special,

I say,

explanatory, adult, as adult as I can manage, so she might understand that there's more here, more to explain and understand, something to be examined in detail,

do you know any old people – anyone who saw?

she says,

and I,

yes, my uncle saw, when he was small,

she turns again and I'm a little uneasy every time she does it, unsure whether she's paying attention, the fog is dense, it's impossible to see more than the ground around us,

did he believe?

she asks,

stopping but not turning around this time, simply waiting for me to answer her,

but I don't really know how to answer her because I don't know what he believed, believes, I don't know whether he believed or believes because I never asked him, I don't know why he never made this journey himself, why he never escaped to the Kingdom when he had the chance because he never had anything but the light on his mind, it was the only thing he ever really wanted to talk about when I moved in with him, when I asked about Mum and Dad and he didn't know how to answer me,

what answer can you give a kid – the sole survivor of a bombing – in a war where it's impossible to tell who the enemy is until after the fact,

maybe he thought someone was looking down on us,

I say,

and notice that she's craning her neck, has caught sight of something, and I straighten up too, see shadows and shapes up ahead but what they are I can't tell,

she starts to move again, I follow, and a few steps later the shapes become a forest, it looks like the forest we left, as if we've moved in a circle, but she's sure, walks straight ahead, and I understand that the forest only appears to be the one we came from, and then part of the forest moves,

Papa,

she says,

Sibel,

he says,

and it strikes me for the first time that she has a name, that those on the other side also have names, of course they do, and this girl is Sibel, and now I see his silhouette, he's standing quite still, only lifting an arm, and little by little he comes into view,

military garb but no distinctions, no markings, just worn military clothing, a black beard, a cap,

the corners of his eyes wrinkle as he smiles, deep crow's feet, and he opens his arms and she runs into them, he hugs her as he looks at me,

As-salamu alaykum,

he says,

and I lift my hand in greeting, a little late,

where's the rest?

he asks,

and I don't know what to say so I look back, for the first time I look back but see nothing, only fog, and when I look at him again he looks serious but the friendly creases around his eyes remain,

they've discovered the route,

I say,

unsure what kind of reaction I'll receive, but he only stares out across the plain,

we can move it slightly further south,

he says,

before placing a hand on the girl's shoulder, saying,

we should hide before the fog lifts,

and then turns, sets off uphill between the trees,

up a path through dense forest, up a steep bank, and he's right, the fog is lifting and so we make our way to the top of the bank where the forest opens into a small clearing, it looks like the end of a road, a rusty camper van is parked there and the man goes inside it but the girl remains outside, looking at me, smiling,

we made it, we're fine,

she says,

and the man comes out carrying a metal water bottle, he moves to hand it to me but then takes it back and screws off the lid before offering it to me again and I put it to my lips, feel the water in my mouth, around my tongue, down my throat,
like all the comfort in the world bestowed at once,
a lifetime's rest in a single moment,
you see, there is Boztas, up ahead,
he points between some trees, and I can just make out some buildings atop a hill, a cliff,
we'll take you into town where you'll be questioned, then given some proper clothes and a place to stay,
he says,
you're safe now,
she says,
and I look at them, Sibel who has walked across the plain strewn with mines and her father who so nervously waited for her – I look at them and see that they belong together,
and then I suddenly understand why my uncle never crossed the plain through the fog, why he never left, became invisible,
and I had to come all the way here to realise it,
that he only ever wanted to take care of me, the way a father cares for his child, and that there was never any other reason

II

Boztas

Sibel

It takes time, growing up. It doesn't happen overnight, like I used to think.

Papa's calling me, so I go into the living room. They're all sitting on the floor, Papa on one side of the room, the rest of the men on the other. But only Papa looks at me directly. Can you make us some coffee? he asks. The good stuff.

The other men look down at their hands. Five men, eight hands. The guy from the mosque doesn't have any, he was probably born that way. Some people are even born without feet. It's just how things are after the light in the sky. Or at least that's what Umut says.

The hands of most of the men who have them are strong – my teacher is the only one with small hands. Thin fingers. They look like twigs on a slightly withered tree, as if they'll snap if used. Maybe that's why he always tends to sit the way he does, with his hands folded in his lap.

My teacher finally looks up. He smiles and nods at me, but he doesn't speak. Just sits in silence, like the others.

Like mice, some would say. Even though mice aren't particularly quiet, at least not when they're gnawing away beneath the floorboards. Or in the beams between the stone walls that hold up the roof over the bedrooms.

I go through to the kitchen, take down the can from the shelf and open it. It smells like Friday. Papa tends to drink the good coffee when he returns home from prayers, no matter how late it is.

And then on Saturday he always complains he hasn't slept.

And then I say the coffee is strong, you know that. And he says yes, indeed it is my girl, but it was Friday.

It's things like this that make me so fond of my father. The fact that he does things he knows are stupid.

It would be much worse to have a father who believes he only ever does smart things. There's way too many kids with fathers who think they only do things that are smart.

But that's just my opinion – others might disagree. One shouldn't meddle in other people's business, as Umut says. She says she's too old for that sort of thing, anyway. So maybe age has something to do with it.

Umut must be around three times as old as Papa, so if she's not grown up then I don't know who is.

I don't think there's enough coffee for everyone. Maybe three or four cups' worth left in the can. But not six. Definitely not enough for six.

I pour water into the coffee pot. Try to light the gas hob with the lighter, which is irritatingly difficult to use, the wheel almost impossible to turn.

I decide that if the lighter doesn't produce a flame before my tenth attempt, it means the men in the living room are a bad thing.

The lighter catches on the tenth try. I'm not sure what that means, whether exactly ten tries is the same as before my tenth attempt.

The little lighter flame ignites the gas from the holes in the ceramic to become a hissing blue circle.

Then I hear Papa say something like she's not that old. He says it slightly dejectedly, a little too loud. The other men speak in quiet voices.

I carefully set the coffee pot on the flame. Move towards the living room door.

She's definitely not just a little kid anymore, the man from the mosque says. That's why she was removed from the collection service.

I understand it now. Why they have to use children to go collect those who want to cross the border. At first I thought it was because the mines wouldn't be set off by children, being so small and light, but Papa explained it to me when we stopped collecting. That the wild folk from the other side won't shoot if there's a child nearby. And that's why adults at the border always have to have a kid with them.

The wild folk never enter the minefield, so they're too far away to shoot properly. To be sure that they won't shoot a kid.

So they can't be completely wild, I thought then, and I still think I'm right about that. Regardless of what anybody else might say.

She's not even started to bleed, says Papa. One of the other men ask how he can be sure. She would have told me, says Papa. The others fall silent when he says this.

I tiptoe back to the hob, shake the coffee into the boiling water, then find the other coffee, the cheap stuff. It's in the cupboard over the sink. I sprinkle a bit of it into the pot so there'll be enough for everyone.

I know the boy who took over from me. Ahmed. He's two years below me at school.

Being a collector makes some kids crazy. And at such a young age. Ahmed acts as if the Prophet is his grandpa or something.

In the schoolyard he sells things he gets from the deserters. All kinds of weird stuff. Pens, matches, shoes. Things from the other side. He says the deserters give him gifts, to say thank you for rescuing them. But I know that's not how it works.

I sneak back to the door. I don't believe fathers should persist in asking those kinds of questions, says Papa. We've said we'll grant you a divorce, if you wish, says someone else. Then you could at least take a new wife, says the man from the mosque. Now it's Papa's turn to fall silent.

I think Papa is still waiting, and that's why he signed me up for the collection service. He probably imagined she'd come back the same way she left. Through the minefield. Across the border.

I don't think Mamma ran away from us. I think she just wanted something else. Or at least that's what Umut says. I think it sounds believable enough. And anyway, I remember that Mamma loved us.

But nobody ever talks about it. That some people go the other way too, to the wild ones. But the deserters are always celebrated. Every time. Across the entire town.

I once asked Umut what happens to them. They're allowed to decide where they want to go next, she said. Most make their way deeper into Ummah, into the Muslim regions, high in the mountains or all the way down by the sea. But some go even further, to the Christian areas. Or even further than that.

Umut says that in the Kingdom, everybody is safe.

Rarely does anyone stay in Boztas, although I don't know why not. I can't imagine anywhere nicer than this, here on top of the hill. The narrow streets with their stone houses and washing hanging between the windows, the smell of dinner. The people who greet you on your way home from school and ask you what you learned today.

And if you sneak up to the top of the minaret, you can see as much sky as you'd ever wish to see. Especially in winter when the air is cold and clear and all the stars decide to shine at once. That's when it's best. As long as you're not afraid of heights, of course.

Boztas has everything. Apart from Mamma.

I hear steps by the door so hurry back to the cooker. Lift the lid of the coffee pot and look down into the liquid.

Papa comes in, his movements impatient. Is the coffee nearly ready? he asks. Yes, I say, I think so. He comes over to me, takes the pot from the stove while I find six cups. I'll take it from here, he says. You go out and play.

He carries the coffee into the living room himself. I set the cups and sugar on the kitchen table, to make things easier for him. Then I slide my feet into my sandals and go outside.

I sit on the bench outside the living room window – it's open a crack. I can hear the chinking of the cups; coffee being poured.

When it sounds like everyone has been served, my teacher speaks. She's grown breasts, he says. Have you been looking at my daughter's breasts? asks Papa. He sounds angry. No, but I couldn't help but notice, says my teacher. What is it that you really want? Papa asks. She needs to start covering herself, it's time, says the man from the mosque. But she's just a girl, Papa says.

I remember the day before Mamma left, even though it's a long time ago now. What I remember most is the party for Auntie. She was getting married. There were no men present, and none of Auntie's friends or relatives. I was the only kid there, the only snotty-nosed brat. The only one not wearing a hijab.

Auntie sat on a chair, a red veil drawn across her face. The rest of us walked around her in a ring, singing and clapping. Auntie cried, but I don't think she was sad. I think she

was crying because you're supposed to cry on occasions like that. Or at least Mamma told me that if you don't cry when you're sat there wearing a veil with everyone else singing around you, you'll have bad luck.

Afterwards, Grandma painted a stain on Auntie's palm, placed a coin on the stain, and bound a scarf around Auntie's hand.

Grandma did the same to me, too. She smiled and said that the coin brings luck. For Auntie, in her marriage, and for the entire family. Did you sing like this for Mamma too, when she got married? I asked. Of course, Grandma said.

I remember the exact route we took home, Mamma and me. Under the arch by the baker's house, through the narrow passages by the old tower, up all the stone steps behind the mosque and alongside the old city wall.

That evening, Mamma tucked me in like she used to when I was tiny. She covered me with two blankets, one on top of the other, and then tucked them in around me, pushing all the edges in under my body. They tickled my back and toes. I almost couldn't move.

Do you still have the coin in your hand? she asked. Yes, I said. Good, it will bring you good dreams, she said. And then she kissed me, first on my forehead, then my cheek. My girl, you will always be my girl – remember that, she said. And then she closed the door.

I woke up disappointed the next morning because I couldn't remember having dreamed anything at all. It irritated me a little – in fact it irritated me a lot when I thought about it. I'd started to realise that adults say lots of things that aren't true.

Papa came in, without knocking or anything. Have you seen Mamma? he asked. I haven't even got up yet, I said. No, of course, so you haven't seen Mamma, he said. Not that I know of, and I haven't dreamed either, I said.

That was how it happened. Something like that.

Papa scurried about asking after Mamma for the rest of the day. He asked me several times what had happened the night before, and I had to tell him, over and over again. That's probably why I remember it so well.

It takes a lot of effort not get worried when your papa is hurrying around looking for your mamma. But what could I do? I tried to calm him. Made lunch. Swept the floors. Not that any of it helped all that much.

Umut comes out onto her balcony with a watering can. She waters the herbs she grows in pots hung on the railing, doesn't look at me until she's done. Oh, so you're sitting there, are you? she says.

I get up and go across the her, so the men won't hear me and know I've been right outside the window. Nope, now I'm standing *here*, I say when I'm directly below the balcony. I can almost reach it, if I stretch up as high as I can and stand on tiptoe.

Umut has some hairs growing on her chin. I'm not sure whether I should tell her – maybe she can't see them when she looks in the mirror.

I can't find my glasses, I've received a letter but I don't know where my glasses are, she says. Shall I help you look for them? I ask. If you would I'd be forever grateful, Umut says. How long is forever? I ask. It's all the time yet to come, she says.

I run up the stairs to the first floor, into her apartment. She's opened all the windows but they're quite small and few in number, so the apartment never gets much light. I start looking anyway. First in the bathroom. Beside the sink, on the shelves, along the edge of the bathtub. Then I keep looking in the kitchen, on the table and worktops, in the drawers of cutlery and among the shelves of plates, glasses and cups. Then I search the bookshelves in the hallway that stretch all the way from floor to ceiling. I have to use a chair to reach the highest shelves.

I find the glasses after much humming and hawing and I don't know where-ing – they're in the bedroom, under the bed. I give the glasses to Umut and she sets them on the tip of her nose and blinks. Well I never, did you ever see such a sight? she says. Yes, I say, and now so can you. I can indeed, she says.

Umut asks me whether I'd like a cup of hot chocolate. I wonder whether I ought to go back and sit outside the window again, but I'm not sure whether there's anything more I need to hear on that front. And so I say yes, please.

Umut pours a little milk into a saucepan, then breaks some pieces of dark chocolate into it. She lights the stove, sets the saucepan on it, and starts to stir the mixture with a spoon.

So what are you up to these days? she asks. I'm trying to understand how you know when you're grown up, I say. Umut lifts the spoon from the saucepan, allowing a little milk to drip from it, before she goes back to stirring again.

I'm not sure there's much to understand, Umut says. That's easy for you to say – you became a grown up at least an eternity ago, I say. Well, you're probably right about that, she says.

Mamma had left a note in a cupboard in the hallway. Papa found it a couple of days after she'd gone. I've thought about that a lot – why she left it in a cupboard in the hall. A cupboard we hardly ever used, filled with extra blankets and thick socks for cold nights.

I've come to the conclusion that she didn't want anyone to find the note until winter, but Papa went through everything – the whole house. Lifting objects, moving things, unpacking and packing and unpacking stuff, over and over. He was sure there must be some sign or clue as to where she'd gone. And then he found the note.

He was sitting there at the kitchen table, reading it, when I came home from school. He was crying like a kid. I mean like when someone's chin trembles and wobbles up and down, and it's sad and ugly and funny all at once.

When I asked Papa what the note said he just looked at me in silence. But he couldn't stop his chin from trembling. I made him a cup of coffee. Only much later that night did he tell me that Mamma had crossed the border.

Umut pours the hot chocolate into two tin cups and sets one down in front of me, the other on her side of the table.

You'll have to wait until it cools, otherwise you'll burn yourself, she says. What are you doing these days? I ask. I just got this letter, she says, placing her hand atop an envelope on the table.

Aren't you going to read it? I ask. Oh, yes, of course, I have to, says Umut. You're really weird, I say. Tell me something I don't know, Umut says.

I blow on the cup and try taking a sip – it's fine if I sip slowly and inhale air at the same time. I make a loud noise as I drink. Umut grimaces, but then does the same herself.

She opens the envelope, shaking slightly, her movements precise nonetheless. Then she takes out the letter and places it in front of her. She reads in silence without even moving her lips. When she's finished she takes off her glasses and sits there, looking strange.

You don't have to say anything, but I'm curious, I say. Umut smiles, in a sad sort of way, then takes a gulp of cocoa. My son is coming to visit, she says. I didn't know you had a son, I say. No, I wasn't so aware of it myself, she says.

We sit and slurp our cocoa without speaking. Until I ask whether he also crossed the border to the other side, and the wild ones. No, Umut says.

I want to ask more, but I'm not exactly sure what, or how. I think Umut can tell, but it looks like she has a lot to think about. Stuff from a long time ago.

From the kitchen window we see the men leaving my house. The street is so narrow that they have to walk in a line, two by two. They disappear around the corner, down the stone steps.

So you've had lots of visitors, says Umut. Yeah, they came to tell Papa I'm grown up now, I say. Oh? When did that happen? Umut asks. I'm not sure I like that God made me a girl, I say.

Umut folds up the letter from the son she didn't really know she had, or whatever she meant, and puts it on the kitchen worktop. Then she turns and looks at me.

Men have their advantages and disadvantages – but so do women, she says. You just have to learn how to use your advantages.

I thank Umut for the hot chocolate and run across the street, back to our house. Papa is in the kitchen, washing up the cups. What did those people want? I ask when I've taken off my sandals. Curious-girl or important-girl, says Papa. He says this whenever he wants to give me a choice. Either to be told what I want to hear, or to ask a question and be given an honest answer. Important-girl, I say.

Papa stops what he's doing and turns to face me, his expression serious. I tell him that I can start wearing the hijab, if it will make things easier for him. But on one condition. That he lets me read the note from Mamma.

Were you eavesdropping? Papa asks. It's hardly a surprise, is it? I say. I suppose not, he says, and returns to the washing up.

I stand there and watch him until he's washed all the cups. Then he dries them, one by one, and puts them away. So, what'll it be? I say.

Papa goes into his room and I hear him rummaging around in the closet. Then he comes back to me carrying a shoe box and sets it down on the kitchen table. The shoebox is filled with old photos and envelopes. He takes out a piece of paper and hands it to me, then disappears out into the garden.

The page is small, torn from a notebook. I sit there with it in my hand for a while. And then a little while longer. I wonder how many moments are needed to make up all the time yet to come.

It's almost impossible to imagine a time empty of moments.

I look down at the handwriting. It's quite messy, not like mine and Papa's. But it's not so messy that I can't read it.

'Darling. I know you believe, and I accept that. But as long as you won't accept that I don't believe, I can't stay here. You'll be able to find me on the other side, should you want to. Look after yourself, but most of all take care of Sibel. I'll be waiting for you. Yours forever.'

I sit there and read through the letter one more time, carefully, line by line. To see if there's anything more, something to explain that which isn't written there. She wanted us to go, too. For all of us to blend into the wild.

Papa is silent for a long time. You can run from anything, he says finally. Your city, your family, your people. But not from God.

Umut

The glare from the window panes, the strong evening sun. The final rays before they disappear, move on to another place. If God wills it so.

I recognise your gaze, know what you see: a world that must be changed. A world you are responsible for changing, now. As the young must incessantly change things now.

If I could only show you what happened to the gaze of the young in the time before ours. How it started with desire, tipped over into desperation and ended in apathy. Until no youth remained.

How the old faded away, into an old age filled with longing for that lost desire.

How the old did everything to appear young, act youthful.

How nothing of value was lasting until God revealed himself to us.

And how everything was different afterwards, changed for those of us who were left. We who are old age differently, the way the tides caress the rocks, rendering them pure and edgeless. Our hearts stopped burning and started waiting.

How beautiful it is when God's anger subsides.

'Tameez, I'm so grateful that you're here, so filled with thanks,' I try.

'Tamas, my name is Tamas now,' you say.

You're like me in so many ways – and in your impatience most of all. This quivering feeling in our arms and legs, as if it's vital to keep moving, do something, go out and act, destroy, rebuild.

Just as we wanted to destroy and rebuild, just as I wanted to – wrote pamphlets, painted banners, gathered people for demonstrations. To change everything, both from within and without.

To give women a voice.

That's what we said. That women should have a voice. I wanted a voice.

As if there is inherent value in speaking.

'Tamas, you're different, but also the same,' I say, and smile.

'I'm free in Christ now,' you say, looking out of the window.

Free. Freedom.

If you only knew how much I spoke of it.

How we could achieve greater freedom, take back the freedom robbed from us by men. We read the Qur'an and the hadiths through the lens of freedom, cut out the passages that suited us, glued them together in new ways.

We went to the mosques, the leaders, the editors. Forced them to listen to us, hear our speech about freedom.

See how the Prophet gave women freedom. Look at how the Prophet, peace be upon him, gave women new rights, more rights. The Prophet's intention was to make everyone equal. Regardless of gender, race or sexual orientation we are all equal before God.

This is how we spoke. As if God was our invention. As if we could decide what Allah meant – what He wanted.

If I could only show you how the fight for freedom seems to have no end. I can see it in the way you're sitting now. On the edge of your seat, so you can get up and leave whenever you wish. So you can do exactly what you need to do. So you won't have to hear anything other than what you tell yourself.

'Do you want to stay the night? Your room is ready,' I say.

'We're moving on tonight, when it's cool,' you say.

'Tonight,' I repeat.

'We have to be in Moriah by the end of the week,' you say.

Cities destroyed, nations turned to dust, generations lost. What stories can we tell, how can we tell them, we who were there? If our sons and our daughters don't know how to ask?

Why don't you want to know what God showed us, Tameez?

I wish I could say: It started at a time far into the drought when dense shadows covered the ground. It started at a time when nobody understood that everything is a miracle. It started at a time in which mouths and genitals were used constantly, but nobody took the opportunity to reach paradise.

I wish I could tell you: When it started, we tried to find logical reasons, scientific explanations. But then something else became important. When the satellites disappeared, planes fell from the sky, boats vanished, railways collapsed, cars stopped working and electricity ran out. Clouds gathered and storms began to rage.

We stopped talking. Instead we fled the cities, tried to find places to hide.

I came here, up in the mountains, away from the crowds and disease, the fighting and hunger. Up here hiding places could be found. In Boztas, the place God looked upon with mercy, the place around which He steered the storms.

‘It’s a long way to Moriah,’ I say.

I push the bowl of kofta over to your side of the table.

You finally take some; I place the salad bowl beside you. You sample both, then sit up straight in your chair, begin to eat properly. Just as you used to, elbows jutting out from your sides.

‘You could come with us,’ you say.

‘Oh, I can’t go anywhere,’ I laugh.

That moment, when the worst of the storms subsided. When those of us who remained could creep out from cellars, tunnels and caves. Most of us in Boztas were saved.

Tameez, it is this moment I so wish I could show you. After fleeing the war and the hunger, the wrath of God. After all kinds of suffering, after we had seen an entire world fall apart. When the world as we knew it was gone.

That, Tameez, that, there, is what I so wish to show you.

That I am still there. In that moment.

That it will never end.

I’d just met your father. I didn’t know him, but he’d given me shelter, along with some of the others who sought refuge here.

We left the house. I went first, closely followed by your father, the rest of the flock behind us.

The flames filled the firmament, Tameez.

It was the middle of the night, but the skies were lit like day. The angels danced above our heads, in all the colours of the world.

I turned back, looked at the others. They fell to their knees, each and every one of them. Your father, too.

I submitted, bowed down, for the very first time. Felt the cobblestones against my knees. As the entire population of Boztas fell to their knees for their maker.

For Allah, praise be to Him.

Someone said we must hide, that it wasn’t safe.

But it was too beautiful, too overwhelming. God had shown us his wrath, and now he showed us his greatness. God had saved us so we could look upon his miracle.

I no longer had any choice. That was when I understood that I had never had any choice. God had initiated us through the revelations of the Prophet.

God allowed us all to see through the Prophet’s eyes.

Here, in Boztas, I gave myself up. I finally stood, and remembered a sentence from the hadiths and so spoke it aloud: Glory be to God as much as the ink of His words. Praise be to the word as it is written.

It was your father who heard me say the words, Tameez. Your father, and your Lord.

‘It was your fault I had to find another God,’ you say suddenly.

You say this as you cut a piece of kofta and shove it into your mouth to join the one already there.

'My fault?'

'Or Dad's, when he married Vanna.'

I find my glasses, put them on. You continue to chew as if nothing has happened. You look older than I expected, wrinkles starting to appear across your forehead. And around your eyes, in the transition from your eyes to your temples.

You're the same age I was when I married. My only miracle. Everyone thought it was too late for me to have children, yes, too late to get married, I didn't even have anyone to negotiate my dowry. But I read the Scripture with new eyes, understood that the Lord wanted us to create families, that the ummah must be organised.

Especially then, when the world as we knew it had fallen apart.

And your father was there, ready to give me a home here in Boztas. In the small town where everyone fell to their knees.

'But Tameez, I mean Tamas, I, I agreed to it. Vanna needed someone to care for her, and I supported your father in the marriage.'

'Mum, you suffered. From the day she entered the house. Every time Dad slept in her room, you suffered.'

A time came in which we were all required to bend to His will, act as He decreed. So that the world could rise again, so new children could grow up, so peace and order could take root. The only way to achieve this was to submit ourselves to the Lord in all respects. So that he would once again grant us his mercy.

How can I explain it? That the greatest joy, the deepest satisfaction, only comes when all will is subject to the greatest will. That there is only one thing which is good, and that is Allah's will.

'Tamas,' I try.

Your name sounds harder, more formal this way.

'I remember how you always had dark circles under your eyes, how you stagnated, became distracted and afraid,' you say, stabbing at the air with your fork.

You stick the fork in the salad bowl, helping yourself to another serving.

When I had you, I understood what a gift everything was, all that had come into my hands. Everything that exists only exists because he permits it. Everything stems from his endless mercy. I sat on the doorstep and held you in my arms and felt the warm breeze against my cheeks. On one of the early days when the weather reminded me of yet earlier times.

I thought: The mild wind is a reminder of the wild storm He in his mercy is holding back.

'My dear son, one's own feelings are not always what's most important,' I say, straightening my glasses.

'How could I stay in a house where my mother was cast aside? A mother who was more widely read, more intelligent, than everyone else in Boztas put together?'

You seem angry, stop chewing and shake your head.

Your dark hair is greying at the temples. How light it was in those first months! The year trading started again and we could purchase things using silver and gold. We shaved off your hair, weighed it, and gave double its weight in gold to the poor.

Your father could afford it, he was the only man in Boztas who had the means to help the poor.

Your father helped those in need, just as Allah commands.

'I missed you when you went away, for a long time I didn't even know if you were alive,' I say.

I notice how important it feels that you believe me now. You stop chewing, look down at your plate.

‘I missed you, too. But I just couldn’t stand it, having to watch what was happening.’

‘I couldn’t forbid something that God made possible, and your father had enough money to take care of us all.’

You swallow. Look at me, set your fork down on the plate. I’m all you have, and yet you still can’t keep your ideas of freedom to yourself. Have to go out and fight, even against your own mother.

‘Christ will free you from your pain!’

You almost shout it. I look towards the window, check whether there’s anyone down on the street.

‘You can’t carry on like that in Ummah. Be careful, my dear.’

You lower your voice but continue with the same intensity.

‘But Mum, I’m not just your son, I’m here as a witness. I was freed when I travelled to Apostia, when I met the Christians and they told me of Christ.’

‘But I told you about Christ back then, explained that we honour all the prophets, all people of Scripture – that in the Kingdom we are friends with all faiths.’

‘Mum, Christ is God’s son.’

It was a long time before the men dyed their beards red again, a long time before anyone could set out on a pilgrimage. We spent years making the Kingdom safe, finding allies, making it possible to worship God as we were meant to. All of us who believed in God. Regardless of how we believed.

But Ummah is a place where we strive to submit ourselves to all aspects of God’s will. Where we are enslaved by his tiniest wish, whatever that may be. No matter how the body might long for all manner of unnatural freedoms.

How can I show you that the only freedom worth anything is the one that is given up?

‘My son, you are my son,’ I say.

Darkness is falling outside. I light the lamp on the table.

‘And you are my mother – but I’m trying to save your soul,’ you say.

I take off my glasses.

It is written: Do not speak much without mention of God, for it hardens the heart.

I look at you, no longer seeing the early wrinkles, the first grey hairs.

I smile. Fall silent.

I try to speak to you. With the silence.

And praise Allah, the one and only. With the breath.