The Teacher's Song

(Norwegian title: ***Lærerinnens sang***)

A novel by

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Sample translation from the Norwegian

of pages 5 to 45 by Charlotte Barslund

In former times people would enter a monastery. Were these people stupid or possibly shallow? – When people have resorted to such means in order to live fully, the problem can't have been easy!

Ludwig Wittgenstein

PART I

Nothing would have happened unless it did.

And then it happened, all of it.

On 10 April 2016 Lotte Bøk walked from her house by the River Aker to the National Academy of the Arts where she worked, having no idea just how much the next few weeks would change her life. And all because of something which to other people might seem merely coincidental. She strolled down Blåmanngata and the sun was high in the blue April sky. She wore dungarees, a choice some might think overoptimistic for a woman of fifty-seven. But she was in good shape. She was light-footed and moved with ease, something she thought had to be more important than a few wrinkles on her forehead. To be able to turn around quickly or to run for a bus if you weren't as fortunate as Lotte Bøk who owned a house so centrally located that she rarely had to catch a bus. She could walk most places, including to work. She had a centrally located house and a brisk and carefree gait and the courage to wear dungarees, not unlike the ones worn by Meryl Streep in *Mamma Mia* when she spruces up her Greek boarding-house, not knowing that the love of her life is on his way.

We will follow fifty-seven-year-old Lotte Bøk in her dungarees down Blåmanngata. In the last few years she had adopted a slightly masculine wardrobe. So many women tried to

compensate for their lost youth by dressing in a luxurious style, outfits with matching shoes and handbags and scarves and jewellery, but it was expensive, time-consuming and more importantly; uncomfortable. Others just gave up, often women who had been married to the same husband all their lives, and focused purely on what was practical, short hair, square glasses, sensible shoes, all-weather jackets over increasingly chubby bodies. Lotte Bøk had chosen another path, a bold but not inelegant style. She had divorced ages ago; she had no boyfriend, but she did have an adult daughter, also divorced, and two grandchildren. They were her closest relatives, but they had moved to Sydney a few years ago when her daughter had been awarded grant to do a Ph.D. in Botany so Lotte didn't see them as often as she would have liked, and they no longer had their almost daily conversations about life's ups and downs. She missed them, of course she did, but she could manage, and was there really that much more to say about life's ups and downs as far as she was concerned? So she let her daughter decide the extent of their telephone and email contact, and her daughter would ring or write usually when she was rowing with her ex-husband and so angry and annoyed with him that the desire to send him an aggressive email was strong. Then she would call Lotte, who would placate her frustration and more importantly tone down the furious missives so they came across as more diplomatic and reasonable. She enjoyed that role; she was a

woman of language and usually felt content after such conversations. As you would expect; she was the mother.

She also had good friends, but didn't see them as often as she used to; it was as if meeting up with them demanded more energy than it gave back. She didn't know if it was because of them, her, or the stage of life they had reached. Not as much happened in their lives as before, there wasn't all that much to talk about, they knew where they stood politically and in other matters, no one ever changed their point of view on major issues so there was very little news to announce, and swapping stories about grandchildren was not her thing. But now it was spring and they could meet at a café as soon as it was warm enough to sit outside! Occasionally she would go out for dinner or to the theatre with a man, but it was a long time since she had shared her bed with one. Every now and then she wondered whether it might be nice to have a boyfriend, a man with whom she could share her, yes, she realised it, – impending old age, but she didn't feel any sense of urgency. The thought of yet again committing to the great effort required to get to know a new human being didn't appeal to her. To hear about their childhood, relationships, those that had dragged on for too long – "I should have left her ages ago", and those who still lived in in a fantasy world "she was the love of my life, if only I hadn't done XY and Z, we would still be together". And especially having to get to know a new body, and

yes, it would be an ageing body, she had no illusions, put her off. It needs a strong infatuation to go to such lengths and she hadn't been in love for years, she didn't think she was capable of falling in love again. Being with a younger man didn't tempt her either; it would only make her even more aware of her own ageing than she already was. However, today she isn't thinking about it. The sun is shining, she is walking down Blåmanngata on her way to work and she enjoys being at The National Academy of the Arts. She is a good teacher, engaging and lively she had often been told, and spring is in the air, the birds are singing and Lotte Bøk has just stopped at a coffee shop and bought herself a soy latte, which she carries in her hand. She feels great behind the new sunglasses bought at Retro in Kristiansand. True, the world is in a mess, but Lotte's mood is bright, and she thinks less of getting older and more about how happy she is not to be younger, happy that she has been lucky enough to have lived all of her life in a relatively non-demanding period, in a peaceful country. Or that's to say, she checks herself, for the last twenty years her country has taken part in several wars, but on foreign soil, and so not something that most Norwegians have had to deal with. It didn't feel as if her country, Norway, was at war. People knew that it was somehow, Lotte knew it very well indeed because she lectured regularly on the plays of Bertolt Brecht, and everyone who lectures on the plays of Bertolt Brecht knows that an expression such as humanitarian action to protect human rights

was often used to disguise the fact that what was really going on was a war. *Governments write peace treaties. Little man: write your will*. You can't remain naive towards international conflicts if you have lectured on Brecht for several years, but Lotte had no personal experience of war. She stopped and thought about it. No, she had no idea of what being at war meant. Would it change anything if she had personal experience? Probably not. But if many people, if hundreds of thousands of Norwegians had personal experiences of war, they might take to the streets and demand an immediate end to war, and with a different level of commitment, a different kind of desperation than the one she and a few of her students could summon up when they occasionally found themselves forced to protest against war in a letter to the editor or a May Day demo. If war was a personal matter. If war hurt the individual Norwegian. But it didn't. Lotte Bøk passed the homeless man who hung around outside The National Academy of the Arts; he was standing with his forehead against the wall and his trousers so far down his hips that she could see his bum crack and he was holding a can of Ringnes beer. Perhaps he had personal experiences of war. She was grateful that she was capable of feeling joy and that she had no personal experiences of war, although with some reluctance, she had to admit that was the case.

She passed the Romanian beggar who always sat outside the entrance to The National Academy of the Arts in the morning, dropped the change from the coffee shop into her paper cup, walked through the gate, past the bike rack and nodded to those she knew who were coming the other way, also holding cups of coffee, who had been to the refectory, but had decided to drink their coffee outside because the sun was shining and it was spring. The first day of spring. You could feel it everywhere. She went through the main entrance, smiling, because she had no idea that today was the beginning of the end of the life she knew as hers.

Lotte Bøk went to her office, grateful for feeling as joyful as she genuinely did. It didn't happen that often, she had had dark periods in her life as had many other people, but those who have experienced dark periods are the very people who feel gratitude when joy returns, as it so often does in spring. Her daughter was fine, her grandchildren were fine, she had a secure job, which she liked and which she was good at, several interesting directorships, no financial problems, surely she was allowed to feel content?

Today she was lecturing first year students on the acting course on Brecht's *The Good Person of Szechuan*, a play which they were likely to perform during their career. Her challenge was to

get them to appreciate its realism and relevance. Budding actors were terribly ambitious, almost aggressive in their ambition, and it was difficult to get them to care about social issues which at first sight would not to appear affect them personally. That was her aim, to get them to look beyond themselves, to see what kind of society they were a part of and thus identify their responsibility towards it. She was well-prepared, she took out her notes and was heading for the seminar room at the other end of the building when a young man came up to her and introduced himself. She didn't catch his name and couldn't remember having seen him before, but then again there were roughly five hundred students at the academy and she dealt mostly with those who studied acting. He was a student at The Academy of Fine Art, he said, working with video, and his latest project was on key teachers at The National Academy of the Arts. He wanted to film their teaching, but also, he hoped, their life outside the classroom and the academy because the premise of his research was that there had to be a strong link between life and teaching. He wanted to explore this. Would Lotte Bøk like to take part? He gave her a project description and his contact details; she took them and said that she would think about it before she continued onwards to the seminar room.

The academic staff at The National Academy of the Arts would go a long way to accommodate their students. A few got text

messages from them morning, noon and night. This made it an exciting but demanding place to teach. When you supervised a student working on a very personal project, something which many of them did, it was hard not to become emotionally involved. Something that could make supervision volatile, explosive even. Lotte hadn't experienced much of that yet, but it was a recurrent theme amongst the staff, particularly those who supervised students at The Academy of Fine Art, and especially fourth year students like him. He had made a favourable impression, awkward in an appealing way, not boastful and overconfident as so many of the male students at The Academy of Fine Art were. She had said that she would think about it. She thought about it. She lectured on the work of Bertolt Brecht while she thought about it. She recited to the best of her ability some of Brecht's best-known poems while she thought about it. She outlined the plot of *The Good Person of Szechuan* while she thought about it. Three gods come down to earth to see for themselves the state of mankind, and soon conclude that it is very bad indeed. Lotte imagined a young man at the end of the seminar table with a video recorder. People steal, betray, cheat and kill, and no one will offer the gods a place to stay. Apart from Shen Te, a prostitute, she is the good person. Shen Te offers the gods shelter and when the gods return to heaven, disillusioned on behalf of mankind, they give Shen Te a shop so she no longer has to prostitute herself. But Shen Te, the good

person, is too nice to run a business. The first year students lay slumped across their desks, some were typing on their laptops and Lotte suspected that it had nothing to do with Brecht. She had to hurry up and get to the cousin. She leaned forwards and raised her voice. Shen Te is far too nice to run a business, she said. Shen Te gives to those who can't pay, she said, and mimicked the mother begging and pleading for her hungry child, and responded in the voice of Shen Te who couldn't manage to resist the plea, who gave to the child without demanding payment. She acted the part of an old, dying man: Dear Shen Te, you're the only good person in our town, please will you give an old body a cup of rice so I won't have to die with a screaming stomach. And Shen Te doesn't have the heart to say no. Shen Te gives and the students are paying attention now, the camera would catch how the students are starting to understand that if Shen Te carries on like this, then she will lose her shop. They can imagine what will happen if you keep giving only too vividly. After all, they would often say to themselves that if they gave to the Romanian beggar outside the entrance to The National Academy of the Arts in the morning and to the one who sat on the corner of Blåmanngata and Thereselunden *and* the one outside Kiwi by the park, that if they gave like that, they would be broke before they reached their student halls in the city centre. Everyone wants to be nice to everybody else, but how to go about it?

The students were paying attention now because what will Shen Te do? What would they themselves do? We have reached the crunch point, Lotte said. Shen Te invents an evil cousin. Once a month she dresses up as the evil cousin, goes to the village and demands her money without mercy. *Good people can no longer bear to be good in our country. When poverty comes in at the door, love flies out of the window. Alas, what use are the gods' strict rules, when there is want all around.*

To be continued.

Before she headed home for the day, she knocked on her colleague Laila May's door. Laila May lectured in Colour Theory at The Academy of Fine Art. She knew immediately which student Lotte was talking about, his name was Tage Bast, a very promising, hard-working young man, a great talent, she said. Thirty-three years of age and rather old to be at The National Academy of the Arts, but the students at The Academy of Fine Art were on average older than other students. She encouraged Lotte to contribute, as she put it.

When Tage Bast texted Lotte that same afternoon to ask if she had thought about it, she replied that she would like to take part in the project, and when he asked if he could film her as early as tomorrow, she replied yes because the project description had emphasised that spontaneity was essential, the whole point was that nothing should be planned or rehearsed. And when he asked if he could also follow her home after teaching, she replied, after a few seconds of hesitation, also yes in the spirit of the project. But then she added that she had a dinner engagement that evening, although it wasn't true. He replied with a smiley.

She tidied her house. And while she did so, she wondered what she had let herself in for. The relationship between teaching and life? Of course they were connected somehow, but in subtle ways, not easy to explain, and definitely tricky to capture on camera. If, say, she used the example of the Romanian beggars. What was the link between lecturing on Brecht and her relationship to them? Sometimes she would give them money, at other times not, it depended on how her day was panning out, how busy she was, if she had any change on her, if it was easily accessible or if she had time to stop and look for it. If she was to be honest, something which she wasn't going to be with Tage Bast on this matter she decided, she preferred to be charitable when she was hoping for something in return, that her recent blood test wouldn't reveal anything serious, that her daughter would finish her Ph.D. on time. As if she could make herself deserving of good news by giving, by being merciful. That was the ugly truth. But she didn't have to share this with anyone. And when it came to Brecht, then he was likely to defend both the one who gave and the one who didn't, or gave in other ways, he said that pretty much explicitly in his poem *The Hostel*, with which she tended to conclude her Brecht lectures and which she would be happy to recite to Tage Bast and his camera. It was about a man who stands on a street corner in Manhattan every night, collecting money for the homeless under the railway bridge so they can have a bed at the hostel. It doesn't change the

world, the poem says. But some homeless people will have a bed at the hostel. The wind will be kept away from them for one whole night. The snow that would fall on them will fall on the street. But it doesn't change the world. *Reader, do not put down the book when you read this!* Some homeless people get a bed at the hostel. The wind is kept away from them for one whole night. The snow that would fall of them will fall on the street. It doesn't improve relationships between people. No, it doesn't. This poem tells us, Lotte would say to her students, that we need to have two strategies when we are confronted with suffering. We need to help the individual here and now, but more importantly we need to change the structures that produce suffering. Yes, she agreed with herself, that is to say, Brecht. And when it came to changing the structures that produced suffering, she could hold her head up high, she thought. She voted for parties that wanted to reduce inequality in the world, nationally and internationally. She signed all sorts of petitions, against nuclear weapons, for humane immigration policies. She was on the board of the Natural Food Collective. What more did Tage Bast want? In what other ways could Lotte Bøk's teaching mirror her life?

What did she do when she didn't teach? She planned tutorials. Read and commented on bachelor assignments and Ph.D. theses. Read papers prior to board meetings. Wrote towards a planned publication about theatre in the age of the internet and Netflix.

She spent a lot of time on her own. She liked being on her own, it gave her a feeling of control. She read. She followed the arts. She saw a lot of plays, of course, and all major art exhibitions. Though not so many as she used to, she had to admit to herself. There was, to be honest, not much that taught her anything new or moved her these days. But she didn't want to say that to a fourth year arts student. She didn't want to reveal that the arts no longer had the power to inspire her that they once had. Apart from the greats, of course, Brecht, Ibsen, Shakespeare. Most of the other stuff she found, well, she didn't want to use so strong an expression as irrelevant, but perhaps a waste of time. She had spent all of her professional life arguing for the vital role of the arts and had supported giving generous grants and an increasing in arts funding. She had protested against the closure of arts colleges. She was still of the same mind today, yes, she was as convinced of the crucial role of art and culture in society as always, only with a slightly more defensive argument: To create art wasn't a harmful or damaging activity– unlike a great many others. The effort which was wasted in the attempt to create important art wasn't the worst of all wasted efforts. And those who wasted their efforts trying to create important art were after all, working with themselves, they were forced continually to reflect on themselves and their motivation, indeed anyone seriously interested in the arts and culture developed self-awareness. She didn't know if this could be proven scientifically,

but it was her experience and she had by now accumulated quite a lot of experience. And expanding your self-awareness was a good thing. The lack of self-awareness explained why the world was going to hell in a handcart. People who sought power and got it, didn't seem to question themselves and their motives, they didn't seem to have the faintest idea of what truly drove them.

That was Lotte Bøk's train of thought while she cleaned the bathroom so that Tage Bast's film wouldn't show that she lived in a pigsty. But then she wondered whether it might have surprised him to find it messy and dirty. She realised that she wanted to surprise Tage Bast. And then she wondered whether the truth she had just decided not to reveal to the fourth year student – that she no longer believed in the arts in the same way as when she was young– was probably something he already suspected. And that was why he wanted to film the staff at The National Academy of the Arts while they taught, but especially when they were not teaching, to highlight the gap between teaching and life, to show how during seminars they would talk about the revolutionary significance of the arts before they went home to their discreet and tastefully furnished apartments and planned their next holidays to Berlin or Florida. And though they would pull up their socks when faced with Tage Bast and his video camera so as to appear passionate and fighting for the arts, the camera would capture the absence of passion, the restlessness

and the unease, indeed the very pain experienced by those who truly struggle in the attempt to create or disseminate art. And the camera was likely pick up and linger on the interior design magazines belonging to the sculpture tutor's wife in the sculpture tutor's hallway, unnoticed by the sculptor tutor who had allowed Tage Bast into his home, but very obvious to the audience of the finished film. How credible was all their talk about the transformative power of the arts ultimately? It was a trap, of course, it was, she realised, and was she now cleaning her bathroom in honour of the man who had set the trap?

She threw aside the cloth and regretted having said yes. She didn't want Tage Bast's critical video camera in her home. She sat on the lavatory lid for a few minutes, then she rang the chairman of the board of the Natural Food Collective and asked if anyone had seen wood sorrel this year yet. He suggested she tried Sognsvann.

She couldn’t sleep. She was worried. She felt relief at having seen through Tage Bast’s plan and that she had a plan of her own, but one thought kept nagging her: If there really was so big a gap between her life and her teaching that she didn’t dare let a fourth year student into her home, shouldn’t she do something about it?

She woke up to brilliant sunshine. She tried not to think about what to wear, but it was hard not to and she grew annoyed with herself. She put on yesterday's dungarees and underneath them a man's linen shirt which her last boyfriend had left behind, and a pair of trainers. Grabbing the old leather shoulder bag that went everywhere with her, she ventured out into the bright day also carrying a basket full of pictures from various productions of *The Good Person of Szechuan,* but not in honour of Tage Bast. She always concluded her series of Brecht lectures on *The Good Person of Szechuan* by showing the students, photographs from various productions of the play; the novelty was that she carried them in a basket. She bought a soy latte from the coffee shop and walked on to the gate of The National Academy of the Arts where the homeless man was slumped over a rubbish bin to her left with his usual can of beer. On the other side sat the Romanian beggar with her paper cup into which Lotte dropped the change from the coffee shop. Then she carried on through the gate and was heading for the main entrance when Tage Bast came rushing up behind her and apologised for being late. His plan had been to film her as she entered through the gate, he said, but he had missed his bus because and then followed a long story about his morning's travails which ended up with him asking her if she

would go back to the gate and then walk up to the main entrance on his cue. Only she shouldn't do it *as if* it was the second time this morning, he said. Do it *as if* it wasn't the second time? But it was the second time this morning, was that how he worked, *as if*? She was tempted to say that if he was too late to record his own film, a film which would furthermore be passed off as a kind of documentary, if she had understood him correctly, then he couldn't ask her to act *as if*. But she let it pass in order not to ruin the mood and sour their budding relationship, given that she had already agreed to take part and because it might come back to bite her in the form of camera angles and cuts, he already had the upper hand, she realised. And understood also, suddenly and now from personal experience, how many people who had participated in what was sold as a documentary might also have felt. Frightened of ruining the mood, their relationship to the director, indeed the whole film crew, they would say yes to all kinds of *as if* ideas, and without knowing it they became pawns in the director's game and helped him fulfil his vision. That was what she was thinking and yet she did as Tage Bast had asked, she went back to the gate and waited while she saw him look for the video camera in his bag and watched him so that she would see him give her her cue to start walking from the gate to the main entrance as if it were the first time this morning. She was therefore forced to stand nearer the bin which the homeless man was leaning over than she would have liked. Tage Bast finally

found his camera. Perhaps he was related to the sculptor Ørnulf Bast, she thought, while she waited impatiently and checked her watch, except that he was so dark, practically Mediterranean. As she looked up, the homeless man raised his head and stared at her with swimming eyes that seemed to jump when they met hers, then Tage Bast cued her and she walked as casually as she could through the gate, across the square to the main entrance, *as if*. Just carry on, Tage Bast whispered as she opened the door and she carried on and walked to her office to set down her things. Just carry on, Tage Bast whispered again, and if she were to do what she usually did, she would have gone to the lavatory, had a pee and washed her hands and looked at herself in the mirror, but she didn't do that, there had to be a limit. Of course she would like to discover how her teaching was related to her life, but she hadn't expected it to happen by her surrendering to Tage Bast's project one hundred per cent. She found her notes and took from her basket the box of photographs from more than twenty different productions of *The Good Person of Szechuan*. She would distribute them and ask the students to study them when she had finished her lecture so that they would understand that Lotte's version was but one of several possible interpretations, and get an idea of how many different visual expressions the play invited. In other words: They had to read it themselves. She suspected the students of not reading the plays she lectured on, that they thought it enough to listen to her. Carry

on, Tage Bast insisted, and Lotte walked to yesterday's seminar room. The students were in place with coffee and laptops and mobiles. Do what you would usually do, Tage Bast whispered when she hesitated on the threshold. All right, if you must, she thought, but said nothing because of this thing about the mood and the relationship. She walked up to the table which acted as a lectern and put down her bag and the box. This is Tage Bast, she said, nodding towards him. He's a fourth year student at The Academy of Fine Art, and his new project involves filming some of the tutors here, probably to document how useless they are. She smiled. Is that all right with you? If there's anyone here who doesn't want to be filmed, please let me know and we'll stop. No one objected. Perhaps she should have obtained written permissions in advance, it occurred to her now, it wouldn't be easy for an individual student to raise their hand now, after all, the camera was already rolling. On the other hand: Had they known that they would be filmed, it would have affected them, they would have spent time thinking about what to wear, how to act and what to say because to be captured on film by a possible future star in the arts sky could be important for their career. Besides, the students here were generally keen to participate in their fellow students' often bizarre projects. They took the arts very seriously. It was rare for anyone to laugh.

Tage Bast had withdrawn to the back of the room.

Shen Te has invented a wicked cousin. Once a month she dresses up as him, goes to the village and collects her money without mercy. Lotte reached out to her students as the wicked cousin, his brusque words and commanding hands. Shen Te ends up disguising herself as her cousin more and more often, she said, and the villagers miss Shen Te, what has happened to her, the good person, whom they used to exploit? The cousin leaves with the money without giving them an answer. But then Shen Te falls pregnant, Lotte said, and mimed a pregnant belly on herself with her hand. Shen Te's stomach grows under her jacket and eventually she is forced to take off the cousin mask.

> 'Shen Te, is that you?'
>
> 'Yes, it's me. Shui Ta and Shen Te, I'm both of them. I cannot tell what occurred: goodness to others
>
> And to myself could not both be achieved.
>
> To serve both self and others I found too hard.
>
> Oh, your world is arduous! Such need, such desperation!
>
> He who helps the lost is lost for his own part!
>
> Something is wrong with this world of yours. Why is wickedness so rewarded, and why is so much suffering reserved for the good?

The gods return for a brief visit and a desperate Shen Te puts her questions to them, pleading with them not to leave without

giving her advice and guidance, but they merely shake their heads and disappear back to heaven. Shen Te's last word is: Help!

Lotte let Shen Te's *help* linger in the air for quite some time. She scanned her students to see if they appeared to have recognised themselves in this *help*. Some looked as if they had, fortunately, and she looked at them as she went on: But then something happens, a popular device in the plays of Bertolt Brecht. A narrator enters the stage, breaks the illusion and shows us that this is theatre. The narrator, Lotte said, switching to Swedish, because she thought the Swedish translation was better than the Norwegian:

> Ladies and gentlemen, don't feel let down:
> We know this ending makes some people frown.
> What sort of measures would you recommend
> To help good people to a happy end?
> Ladies and gentlemen, in you we trust:
> There must be happy endings, must, must, must!

As she uttered the last line, she pointed at them. You decide when you leave! She lowered her voice and repeated it in a slightly different way, pausing between each word. It's up to you to decide the ending. The ending is open. The ending isn't given,

she said. We decide the ending. The ending is our responsibility. When we, when you, leave this room, today, right now, each of you, through the sum of your daily activities, help decide how the ending will be.

They were grandiose words. But they were true somehow, she meant what she said. And they were effective words because she said, indirectly, that what they did, how they lived, impacted on the state of the world, so in a way the message was also hopeful. But hard to live up to, of course. She became aware at this point that she was standing with her mouth slightly open, leaning forwards with both hands on the table in front of her, staring into the wall without seeing anything, for how long had she been standing like this? The students looked at her more expectantly than she had seen them before, she thought, and it had nothing to do with Brecht, was her impression. She tried to shake off the feeling and thought she managed it pretty well, then she handed out the photographs of the various productions of *The Good Person of Szechuan*. Tage Bast was still filming, she noticed him now, she had completely forgotten he was there. He indicated that she should do what she usually did, although she had just done something she had never done before, wool gathering, where does that expression came from? She picked up her notes, the photographs and her bag and left the room with a: See you next week! Then she returned to her office the same way she had

come, with Tage Bast at her heels. When she had put down her things, he turned off the camera. That was great, he said. She smiled. Then he said that he would give her the rest of the working day off, he himself had other plans, but wondered when she was going home. She said that she wasn’t going home this afternoon because the wood sorrel had come to Sognsvann, she pointed to the basket. She was going to Sognsvann to pick wood sorrel, but he was welcome to come with her. He looked astonished, then slightly disappointed, but soon appeared to cheer up.

They took the metro to escape the rush-hour traffic on the roads. The carriage was fairly crowded so he didn't film, fortunately. For that reason they didn't speak either. When they reached the final station, Sognsvann, he ran out as soon as the doors opened so that he could film her getting off as one of the last passengers with her basket on her arm. He asked how far they would be walking. Just a few kilometres, she replied; he looked as if he thought that was a very long way, his arm with the video camera sank and he turned it off. They didn't say much, but walked along the lake, her one step ahead of him as the guide while joggers passed them in both directions. Soon she turned off onto the path to Blankvann and after two or three hundred metres, she left the path and walked across the heather under the trees and soon the feeling of being in the forest came back to her, the darkness of the forest itself and the light penetrating the heavy spruce. She had wondered if she would enjoy being in the forest when she wasn't alone, when she was accompanied by someone else, a stranger, but she found she did. The calm of the tall trees, the smell of heather and soil, it was as if everything that grew there almost in secret wasn't seen until she came to see it. She forgot about Tage Bast. After just twenty minutes, she came across a blanket of wood sorrel between the spruce trees and felt

the joy she always experienced when she found what she was looking for. She stopped and waited for him, five metres behind her with his camera recording. She said shhh, she didn't know why. The birds were singing. She pointed so that he could film the blanket of wood sorrel and he filmed it. He asked, whispering in awe, she thought, what it was. Wood sorrel, she whispered, then she picked and ate some, and smiled. She passed him a few, he hesitated, but popped them into his mouth and munched them while he thought about it, then he nodded, pleasantly surprised, it would appear. They're so fresh, he said, bending down and picking a few more of the small, clover-like leaves, heart waffle leaves, and studied the tiny white five leaf flowers decorated with fine, purple lines, put them in his mouth and chewed. And what did she do with them? Mix them into salads, into sour cream dressings, sprinkle them onto fish, make cordial. He filmed the small flowers and filmed Lotte sitting down and filling her basket as the silence descended upon them. There was a smell of earth and mulch and fortunately he didn't say anything while she picked them so she could hear the birds accompany her fingers and the wind, too, listened in. More than that she didn't want to know. Not knowing was easy. When she had finished, she got up and he turned off the camera, then they walked in silence and in the spring evening light back to the station, caught the metro and got off at different stations.

It lay away from the traffic and bordered the River Aker, her small brick house whose windows faced the trees along the river; it had two big brick fireplaces, one in the living room and one in the kitchen, big wooden beams in the walls and the roof, and she had got it relatively cheaply because it had been empty for years and was now owned by a bank in Sør-Trøndelag, which hadn't seen it, and because twenty years ago the address hadn't been as desirable as it was today. She had come across it halfway through her divorce; from time to time she had thought that it must be fate. She had never seen the original plans, been told the year it was built or given any other information except that the previous owner had gone bankrupt and killed himself in a psychiatric hospital. Quite a few of his things had been left in the house and she had had to sort them out, including an old-fashioned safe, which she had kept. There might be something valuable inside it, she tended to say in jest. She was overcome by a rush of gratitude as she turned the corner of Tovegata and saw the house behind the trees, bathed in the golden evening sunlight that made the roof tiles glow. As she let herself in, her mobile beeped. It was a text message from Tage Bast: Thank you for our evening in the forest. It was magical. Hope I get to taste wood sorrel cordial soon. I have read on the Internet that it cleanses the blood, and I need my blood cleansed. How about a date next week?

The blood rushed to her head, but when she read his message again, she realised that it said a day out next week, and that was a completely different thing.

And yet.

When she had showered and was sitting in her pyjamas in front of the fireplace with a glass of red wine, she replied: Yes.

She would like to check what more the earth had produced by then. Spring is a good time.

In the days that followed she had fewer lessons, but more administrative work, planning meetings, report writing and supervision sessions. She sat on her own or in meetings with other staff members, but caught a glimpse of Tage Bast on two occasions. The first time she was in the refectory, having helped herself to the dish of the day, chilli con carne, when he came in filming a relatively newly appointed ballet tutor. He backed into the refectory in front of the woman who walked effortlessly with the characteristic gait of a ballet dancer with her toes pointing outwards; she was wearing workout clothes. All the dancers at the academy wore workout clothes, of course, a leotard or flowing garments, this tutor wore a leotard. Lotte took her chilli con carne back to her office.

A few days later she saw him as she was heading home. He was sitting on the bench on the far side of the cobbled square with someone she took to be a fellow student and showing him something on his mobile, which made them both roar with laughter. She got the feeling that it was about her, that they were laughing at her on his mobile, then felt ashamed at her arrogance. When she talked about her work she would often say how enriching and refreshing it was to be with young people because

they were growing and in motion, and thus contributed to her own growth and movement, that young people prevented her from growing stale. Now she had the horrifying thought that being with them induced in her a kind of regression. That they infected her with their youthful narcissism.

She concluded that she had had many young and stupid emotions the last few days.

Most nights, between eleven and twelve when she sat in front of her fireplace with a book and a glass, she would get a text message from Tage Bast. He wrote, with small variations, that he was looking forward to, was anticipating, was excited about filming the next Brecht lecture, but especially to go with her to the forest. He also mentioned something about harvesting and sap and the darkness of the forest.

He was waiting at the main entrance to The National Academy of the Arts as they had agreed when she turned up. Not in her dungarees, but in a pair of grey men's trousers with a waistline far down her hips and side pockets into which she had stuffed her hands, over the trousers she wore a loose, white, fine woven linen shirt, her hair was down. Her leather bag was across her chest as always. She had left home feeling relatively cheerful, she was looking forward to lecturing on *Mother Courage*, perhaps Brecht's most important play, to get the acting students to appreciate how incredibly relevant it was, the extent to which it told us something important about ourselves and the world right now. She looked forward to explaining to her students that the societal and human mechanisms which are acted out in the play, also take place between people, us, now. In addition, she had some ideas about what edibles she might find in Maridalen, which was where she wanted to take Tage Bast that afternoon. The weather was lovely, much warmer than just one week ago, it was definitely spring. She passed the bus stop in Tovegata and registered that the homeless man, who usually hung around outside The National Academy of the Arts, was lying on a bench there. As she walked past him, he looked up and said her name in questioning voice, Lotte Bøk? She jumped and rushed on,

feeling terribly anxious now, but why? At that moment a cloud covered the sun and all noises disappeared as during an eclipse when the birds stop singing, except that the cars and the tram seemed to stop too; fortunately the moment soon passed, the sun began to shine again and the cars and the tram went back to making their usual noises. Yet her unease lasted all the way down Tovegata to the junction with the church. Then it dawned on her that he must have found a copy of The National Academy of the Arts prospectus which was everywhere in the neighbourhood and where all staff were introduced with a name and a picture. She reached the Romanian beggar who sat in her usual spot, but was so flustered at having been addressed by the homeless man at the bus stop that she hadn't bought her usual soy latte and therefore had no change to give her. She thought about explaining the situation to her, but it all became too much so instead she hurried up and avoided catching her eye, something she did every day as it happened, she realised that now, but it hadn't feel like a problem as long as she gave her some money. So was that why she gave the beggar money, so that she wouldn't have to look her in the eye, ultimately it was for her own benefit? She thought about going back and looking the beggar in the eye and giving her a hundred kroner, but that would also be the wrong thing to do. By now she was halfway across the square because her legs had carried on walking despite her quandary, and the inexplicable shame she had felt when the

homeless man had called out her name came back and she knew that she was now at risk of a double portion of shame that would haunt her for the rest of the day, and that it would become obvious on Tage Bast's film. At that moment she spotted him at the main entrance with his camera. What if he had been filming her all the time? He had written that he would be by the main entrance at 8.50 and now the time was 8.54, and four minutes is a long time on film.

She went through the door and on to her office while he filmed her from behind. She noticed she slammed down her things hard on her desk. If he hadn't been there, she would have sat down and buried her face in her hands and taken a moment to collect herself. Touched base. She sat down and rested her head in her hands in order to be true to herself, but it felt like a performance. She got up and went to the seminar room with Tage Bast at her heels. She needed half a minute of silence before she began, she thought. No, it would just look affected. It would come across as vanity, as if she took herself so very seriously. But didn't she take her teaching seriously? Why would she be ashamed of that? It was her work, her life, what should she take seriously, if not that? Yes, but not like that. She decided to put her things on the table in the seminar room and then say she needed the lavatory. He wouldn't follow her there. That wasn't the kind of project he was going for, the type of intrusiveness he was interested in. She entered the room where the students were

slumped over their desks, put down her things and said she needed the lavatory. He had no objections, of course not. Once in the ladies, she washed her hands in cold water, closed her eyes and took a few deep breaths. Remember what's important, she said to herself. Remember what it is you want to say, she said, about what war does to people. Focus on what matters, she said, then she returned to the seminar room. Tage Bast was standing at the back, leaning against the wall with the camera dangling from his right hand. His presence didn't need to be explained, the students were the same as the last time, and rumours of Tage Bast's project on tutors, teaching and life had gone round the academy. Lotte registered that the students looked more attentive and eager than usual; it was for the benefit of the camera.

She began by telling them about the Thirty Years' War because Brecht had set *Mother Courage* during it. Why had he done that? The Thirty Years' War lasted, as they knew, she said, although she presumed that what she was about to say was completely unknown to them, from 1618 to 1648. Thirty years. Thirty years of war. Imagine that, she said, but it didn't look as if her students were trying to imagine it, they continued to look at Tage Bast. Nor could Lotte imagine thirty years of war under these circumstances, but she carried on as per her lecture plan, as she had always done.

When a war lasts thirty years, she said, then war becomes the new normal, the everyday, it's no longer a state of emergency. People have to adapt to survive a war. And how do they do that? That's what *Mother Courage* explores, she said. The students had started to look at their mobiles and Lotte felt forced to raise her voice.

The Thirty Years' War has been viewed as a religious war between Protestant and Catholic countries, she said, but it's better understood as a clash between an alliance dominated by the Habsburg emperor and the French king. Even the most dutiful students were now gazing out of the windows at the birch leaves that danced bashfully in the warm wind; she had to hurry up and make it more relevant. In reality, she said, raising her voice yet another notch, it was a fight for power and resources. It usually is, she added. War is usually fought over power and resources, not religion or democracy or human rights, she said, and hoped that her students would make the connection to what the media today presented as an existential war between Islam and the West, but it didn't look like they were thinking along those lines, they were all looking at the many clocks. She lowered her voice, leaned forwards and attempted a kind of professional sincerity: The Thirty Years' War and the epidemics and famine that followed in its wake led to the population in the German-speaking areas being almost halved. Halved, she repeated, and yet they looked unmoved, how could she get them

to understand the magnitude? Did she herself understand the magnitude? Was it even possible to understand it? No, so how could she make the past come alive? Presumably not even stories from the Second World War would rouse these young people's emotions unless they were cast in a film from that period, say, a movie based on the books of Max Manus. If they were offered a role in such a movie, they might well try to imagine it. But she didn't want them to try to *imagine* it, she stopped herself. But then what did she want? She wanted, she thought, but she mustn't think about that now, she must keep going, not gather wool. She put up a map of 17th Century Europe where she had coloured Norway in bright yellow with black dots indicating where the students came from; most of them came from Oslo, but two were from Bergen, one from Halden and one from Kongsvinger, so they could see how close their own homes were to the ravages of war, although Norway hadn't been directly involved. Next to it she put up a map showing Mother Courage's journey through the play. It started in the spring of 1624, in Dalarna in Sweden, that's a country that borders ours, she said in an attempt to bring them closer to the dramatic events of the past, and we follow her for sixteen years until she is outside the German town of Halle.

The students had tuned out. The maps and the 17th Century hadn't taken them back to the 17th Century, but to geography and

history lessons at school, Tage Bast's camera was bored. She had to get to the plot and the leading role which the female students might one day act, *a dream part*. One of the most demanding stage roles ever written. The young women woke up when she said it. And given the way the theatre is going, she went on, it's possible that a male actor may one day be asked to play Mother Courage. At this the boys woke up as well and looked at her with renewed interest. Yes, someone definitely ought to make a film of the play, she said, and when she saw their reaction, she added that she had heard rumours that someone was doing just that in Norway. But she regretted her spontaneity immediately because Tage Bast's camera must have caught how Lotte Bøk had given into the temptation to play to the gallery, to play on the students' most basic instincts in order to get their attention.

We're in Skåne, in Sweden, Lotte said, and pointed to the map. And Mother Courage is pulling a kind of cart when she is stopped by a sergeant and a recruiting officer who want to see her papers, and when she shows them, they ask what she is doing in Skåne, given that she is from Bamberg in Bavaria, and she replies that she can't wait for the war to come to Bamberg! She depends on the war, we understand from her very first line, and in the exchange which follows, we learn that she has three adult children by three different, absent men, so that we also understand that Mother Courage isn't bound by traditional

morality, but that she is a sole provider. And that's tough, Lotte said, because she knew that one of the students was a single mother, and noticed how she nodded. Through the opening lines of the play, Brecht provides us with crucial information, she said, they show what a skilled dramatist he is, she added, because it irritated her that Brecht didn't enjoy the same status at The National Academy of the Arts as, say, Ibsen. Then she continued her summary of the plot. Mother Courage has an old cart with goods, shoes, sausages, schnapps, that she buys as cheaply as she can and sells as expensively as she can to soldiers and others, the whole barrage of field chaplains and recruiting officers and cooks who follow the various regiments. She makes a living out of the war. And many people do, Lotte said, also out of today's wars, she said, which is why we have the term *war profiteer*, she said, but felt that she lost the students every time she moved from the human dilemma to the social.

Can't she think of something else to do, asked the lone parent student, and Lotte was delighted. That's a good question, she said, does Mother Courage have a choice? She doesn't own a farm or a tavern to support her. She owns nothing but the cart. There is no welfare state. She is too old to prostitute herself, which is the usual solution for young women during a war. Incidentally, there is a prostitute in the play, she added, that's also an interesting role, it's an alcoholic whore. The students

woke up briefly when she said it, they might not have thought that there were alcoholic whores in the 17th Century; they thought the 17th Century was boring. The alcoholic whore, Lotte said again and felt that she liked saying it, the alcoholic whore says at one point: *No good our sort being proud. Eat shit, that's what you got to do.* So what do young people who have nothing do in those circumstances? Take Mother Courage's older son, Eilif. The recruiting officer wants to recruit him because he will earn himself a fee. Why do you travel on a cart with your mother, he asks Eilif scornfully, rather than join up, see some action and have adventures with the boys, become a hero and get all the girls?

Are you wanting to take him off to the slaughterhouse, Mother Courage asks because she knows what happens to soldiers in a war. And how much will you get paid for recruiting him, she asks, but the recruiting officer replies that she herself profits from the war and depends on the war, and how can the war, on which she depends, carry on without soldiers?

Perhaps you're scared of war, the recruiting officer taunts Eilif, and Eilif replies that he is not scared of any war, and Mother Courage comments on the scene with a line that lingers: *Let's both go fishing, said the angler to the worm*, as if the worm won't die during the undertaking. Isn't that a great line, Lotte asked her students, but they didn't seem to think so. Lotte feared that they quite simply didn't understand it. Yet the next moment,

Lotte carried on gamely because what else could she do, Mother Courage is busy haggling to get a good price for a bucket the sergeant has shown an interest in, and when the bucket is gone, so is Eilif. He has been recruited as a soldier.

Lotte had hoped that the students would be horrified at this, but they seemed neither horrified nor sad, and Lotte felt the need to explain the tragic element of the scene. Mother Courage is so obsessed with money, she said, that she doesn't notice her son is being recruited. That's what happens when people only care about money, she said, and besides, can we blame Eilif for letting himself be recruited? What are Eilif's options, she asked, hoping the students might be reminded of today's Syria fighters, but they didn't seem to have any associations in that direction or any other, they were furtively tapping on their mobiles. To travel with an old cart and your mother, year in year out, what kind of life is that? Whereas war offers excitement and adventure and the chance to become a hero. What would you have done, she asked them, if you were in Eilif's shoes? But the students didn't seem to care about the inner life of a minor character such as Eilif. They slumped over their desks and Tage Bast filmed them slumped over their desks. And Mother Courage, Lotte went on pluckily, rolls on with her cart but without her oldest son. Imagine what that must feel like, she wanted to say, as she usually said, but refrained this time because it was impossible to

imagine, she suddenly realised, and perhaps that was because of Tage Bast?

Instead she indicated that they were free to leave. It was only a vague gesture, but they got up because they followed the time on their mobiles, on their laptops and on their wristwatches. To be continued, she called out after them, because she couldn't get through all of *Mother Courage* in forty-five minutes.

When the last student had gone and Tage Bast had followed him with his camera, she made a decision. She knew that Tage Bast would soon point the camera at her and signal that she should do what she usually did, and indeed he did, but she didn't do what she usually did, she didn't leave after the last student and head to the refectory to get a cup of coffee. Instead she looked into the camera and said that it was challenging to teach material which she believed to be fiercely relevant when there was so little response from the students. The world is on fire, she said to the camera, and *Mother Courage* is about what happens to people when the world is on fire, young people should show an interest! What kind of age are we living in, she said quoting Brecht and completed the sentence in her own words, when young people don't seem to care? But perhaps it's my fault, she added, because she was aware that her outburst could be interpreted as if she was blaming the students rather than focusing on her own potential shortcomings. But she

repented that immediately as well because she had asked the question as if she was expecting Tage Bast to reply, as if she was hoping for Tage Bast to say: No, you're a great lecturer, there's nothing wrong with your teaching. The whole situation was humiliating! Oh, she groaned and stormed out, slamming the door behind her.