Rebecca Wexelsen. *Hotel Montebello*

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I've completed three rounds of chemotherapy. Tore and I have sat through the treatments together, each in our own big black leather armchair, the clear bags of poison dangling above our heads. After the treatments we're asked to rank the pain on a scale from one to ten. *Please circle the number that best describes the way you feel right now*. I'm queasy and have little appetite; my hair has fallen out in great clumps and my skin is becoming increasingly fragile and transparent. I don't know where to rank this body on a scale from *no tiredness* to *worst tiredness imaginable*; from *no fear* to *worst fear imaginable*, when I can hardly remember the healthy body to which I'm supposed to compare this sick one.

But it seems as if the medication has an even worse effect on Tore, who has large sores on his hands and face. When he speaks his tongue is like a dry slug that lies there, large and unwilling, in his mouth. He gapes, retching and cursing as his flaccid tongue gets in the way of everything he tries to say.

After my final round of chemo we sit next to each other outside the treatment room, drinking orange squash that's far too concentrated. Tore has stopped in the middle of a story about what happened after he woke up naked on a beach in Pattaya, but he keeps losing the thread of his narrative.

'Ah, shit – who cares,' he mumbles, waving his arm so orange squash sloshes over the edge of his plastic cup.

'These treatments give me such fucking chemo brain – I can't remember a bloody thing these days. When I get out of here I'm going to go back to Thailand, find me a cute little filly and never come home again. Now that'll be nice – don't you think?'

'Yeah,' I say, 'I'm sure it'll be great.'

When Tore gets out of here, I think, it'll be in an unpainted chipboard coffin.

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Mum is sitting on the edge of my bed in my room, crying. Even though I'd hoped that for as long as possible she'd be my next of kin on paper only, I knew it was only a matter of time before The Prettiest One would call her. She's brought along a pile of assorted lifestyle magazines containing special features on cancer.

Mum has never been able to handle being in hospital – her reasoning is that it makes you sick. She's afraid of antibiotic-resistant bacteria; of never waking up from general anaesthetic; of doctors who don't wash their hands between patients. But now she's sitting here regardless, slightly dizzy with the smell of hand sanitiser from the dispenser – which she's managed to empty since she arrived – and her mascara drying into two black rivers down her cheeks.

'Why didn't you call me?' she sobs.

'I just haven't had the energy,' I say.

This is true, but I fail to add that it's mostly because of her demanding personality – not because I've felt too unwell for visitors.

'Have you spoken to your dad?' she asks with a sniffle.

'No,' I say.

But this is only partly true. I speak to my dad every other week. It's become a tacit agreement between us in recent years: he calls, we each say our hellos, *awkward silence*, he tells me where in the world he is and which sporting activity his current trip revolves around, *awkward silence*. Then he gives me a summary of what he's done earlier in the day, while simultaneously trying to avoid mentioning the fact that he's done all these things with a woman who's almost as young as I am, so that everything he says sounds strange and unnatural: *I've eaten a lovely breakfast on the balcony, I've taken a stroll along the waterfront, I saw a koala bear*. I'm unable to visualise the things he tells me – the more he struggles to avoid painting a picture of the two of them together, the more clearly I imagine my dad taking his new girlfriend from behind in the hotel bed as they watch themselves in the mirror with open, gaping mouths. Then we generally slide into repetitions of various versions of the same conversation. It's as if we're rehearsing for a play, trying out different ways of saying nothing:

And otherwise?

Yeah, you know.

Anything new?

Not really.

And your mum?

Yeah, good, I think.

Have you found any new planets recently?

I'm still on the lookout. And you?

Me too. Remember to look up to the stars and not down at your feet.

I haven't managed to break out of our usual pattern of conversation and tell him I'm ill. Maybe it's just as well. With the well-rehearsed lines we both continue to recite whenever he calls, we at least think we know where we are with each other.

Mum has got up from the edge of the bed and crossed the room to stand beside the window. I look at her stiff neck, the tendons stretching up from her shoulders to disappear into her dark hair, which is gathered into a seemingly casual low bun. Although I'm watching her back I'm almost certain of how her face must look: the lips pulled so tightly into her mouth that they're almost invisible, just a line beneath her nose; the narrow-eyed gaze that doesn't move from whatever she's fixed it on outside the window – a leaf, a branch, a cloud above the trees. She stays standing like this for a long time.

Then she turns, and to my surprise her face has taken on a gentle expression. Her eyes are shining; she smiles weakly. I can't remember ever having seen her like this before.

'Poor Nina,' she says. 'My poor little Nina.'

When I was a child, there was a long period in which I went around thinking I was adopted. It started with me fantasising about this for fun – the thought of being an abandoned child picked out by my new parents at a dirty, strict orphanage. Of being chosen from among the masses – of how happy my new parents were to find precisely me. I studied this fable of my false history, the fantasy becoming so entrenched that I started to believe it. When Mum found out that I'd told everyone at school she wasn't my real mother, she was deeply hurt. To think that I could come up with such a spiteful lie about my parents. Did I have no shame? She warned me we must never speak of it to my father.

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As I walk past the pool room after breakfast I see a group of patients standing there chatting in low voices, their heads bent in towards a central point. I have to go all the way up to them

to see what they're looking at – it's Berit. She's standing in the middle of the circle with a typewritten sheet of paper in her hands.

'We're holding a council meeting,' she says when she sees me. There are red roses in her cheeks. 'About the future of the pool.'

I'd completely forgotten the email about this. I look around me for someone I know and catch sight of Tore, Ivar and Alf, standing together on the fringes of the group. Tore seems to be trying to attract Ivar's attention with something he's holding in his hand. Ivar discreetly shakes his head, but Tore just continues to prod at him, nodding at what is probably a batch of sedatives he wants Ivar to buy off him for cheap. Alf looks uneasy.

'Isn't there legionella in the pool?' I say.

'Yes. But we want to get it reopened. Didn't you get the email?'

'No,' I lie. 'Or, maybe. I haven't checked my email for a while.'

Berit takes both my hands in hers and looks deep into my eyes for a long time. There's something about her enthusiasm that frightens me.

'It's important that we stick together now,' she says.

'Thank you,' I say.

'I mean regarding the pool,' she says. 'The pool needs us.'

'Yes,' I say. 'But I have a lot to think about at the moment.'

'I understand how you feel,' says Berit.

'I'm not so sure about that,' I say.

'Of course I do,' says Berit, nodding so that her red feather earrings swing back and forth. 'Trust me. I know how you feel, all of you.'

Her chin starts to wobble, as if she's trying to hold something back – I've learned that it can go either way when her chin starts to tremble like this. Berit never seems to know whether to laugh or cry, but as a general rule the outcome is always that she feels the need to tell us her story, yet again.

Just after Berit took early retirement she found a lump in her lower leg. She'd spent her entire working life as a secretary at a lower secondary school just outside the city, but she had no children herself – this was something she'd decided to avoid early on. According to Berit, this wasn't the source of any bitterness between her and her husband, but nor was it something they tended to talk about – neither with friends, nor with each other. Berit regarded her marriage as a successful one. An example of this success was that they could commute to work together, since Berit's husband was the foreman at an aluminium factory located just next door to the school. They rarely argued (she put this down to their childlessness), and

every summer they took a holiday abroad – to any old country, it didn't really matter where, because they did more or less the same things wherever they went. They ate breakfast together, he showered first, and then she showered, dried her hair and put it up in curlers. This took most of an hour. In the meantime, he packed a picnic consisting of bottles of water, something to read and some fruit. Then they would walk for as long as they could be bothered before sitting down in a convenient place to read in silence, eat the fruit and drink the water, and then saunter back the way they came. Before dinner they both napped for an hour, and every evening they would find a new tavern, or café, or restaurant, or just a pub, where they would eat a simple meal, each sipping on a glass of something until one of them started to yawn – whereupon the other would suggest that they call it a night.

When it turned out that the lump in Berit's leg was benign and easily removed, she took it for granted that nothing would change between them. But when they were in the car on the way home from the hospital after her operation, she noticed that everything wasn't as it should be. Not that her husband said anything in particular – he tended not to talk at all while he was driving – and she didn't say much, either. But still, there was something. Something about the way he was breathing. As if there wasn't enough space in his nasal passages for all the air that needed to come out.

It was after the removal of the benign tumour that Berit signed up for the role of *patient liaison volunteer* at the Norwegian Radium Hospital. As a patient liaison volunteer, she could contribute her personal experience to help people currently in the midst of one of life's toughest crises. It was also a good way for her to process all she'd been through – her body, after all, had housed a tumour.

'A tumour is a tumour,' said Berit when her husband gently pointed out that perhaps it wasn't necessary for her to go to *all* the meetings arranged by the Norwegian Cancer Society, or to participate quite so heavily in cancer-related threads in online forums, or to plaster stickers featuring the Norwegian Cancer Society logo across every single one of the household's all-weather jackets and rucksacks.

After two months he could take it no longer. At first, Berit hadn't believed him when her husband said he wanted to leave her. He'd said it with his mouth full of food, in the middle of the dinner she'd prepared just before he got home from work so it wouldn't get cold before they managed to eat it. Today they were having lamb steak, and she'd taken her time preparing it. If there was one thing Berit was good at, it was cooking. There wasn't much that she felt she had truly mastered, and so the few things she felt she was good at she did

thoroughly and with great care. To the extent that she and her husband did speak, this tended to happen at mealtimes. Their conversations had got shorter and more infrequent as time went by, and they had eventually become content to save up everything they had to say to each other during the day for the dinner table, and occasionally for suppertime, and for breakfast only on exceptionally rare occasions. It had become too much for him, he'd explained. The tumour and all. Or, as Berit likes to say: *he was too much of a coward for the disease* – which she insisted the tumour *had* been. After all, she'd had to have it removed. What he had meant by 'and all' was simply incomprehensible to her.

'I didn't know whether to laugh or cry. But I triumphed over them both. Now he's probably just sitting in an armchair and farting while I'm here with all of you, living a meaningful and worthwhile life,' she often says, throwing her arms wide like the image of a middle-aged, female crucifix, before leaving to spend fifteen minutes in the sensory room.

After Berit has handed out a task list intended to help both the pool and our individual mental and social health, Alf and I sneak away and slip into the lift without her noticing. I glance down at the list in my hand. *At the heart of this treatment centre, the pool shall be resurrected as a sanctuary, free from illness and worry*, it says at the top in an ornate, bold font. Below this, Berit has drawn up two columns, in which we can write our name to the left, and suggested actions to save the pool to the right.

She must have taken great pains with all this.

'Suggestions?' says Alf.

I shrug.

'I've never been very keen on swimming,' I say.

I tended to skive off swimming lessons at school. Not because I didn't like to swim – it was what happened directly before and after the swimming that was unbearable. In the changing rooms, in the shower, in front of the mirrors: the scrutinising, judgemental gaze of the other girls. It was probably the same for everyone – we all cast glances at each other – but I always felt as if the looks thrown my way were particularly critical. I was the skinniest, palest, shortest girl in the class.

I look at Alf in the lift mirror. He's smiling slightly. I wonder whether he can see it on me – the fact that I've never had a single real friend, and that he might be the first, along with Ivar and Tore. Or maybe we're all neutralised in here. Maybe it doesn't matter what we've hauled in here with us from the outside world. In here, we're all weightless astronauts aboard a space station.

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I've been summoned to an appointment in The Cellar.

It's like a labyrinth down here. All the doors are heavy and shiny, and all the rooms behind them are identical in appearance. A sole poster hangs on the corridor wall. It features a photograph of an elderly lady in bright green training tights. She's in the middle of a movement, as if she's about to squat – the way you do when you're a woman and need to pee but find yourself far from the nearest toilet. The image is faded. Beneath it, in bold, italic text, are the words: *If you don't have time to exercise now, you'll have to set aside time for illness later*.

The office, which is at the far end of The Cellar, is the heart of the treatment centre. After every CT, PET scan or blood test it's where I'm handed prescriptions for medications and painkillers, along with envelopes containing documents I have to hand in at reception. It is in this room that I'm told all I need to know to keep me alive for as long as possible. It's where the time I have left is meted out.

I try not to be scared. So far, I haven't even managed to think the thought all the way through to its conclusion – the ultimate consequences of what it means to be here. It still feels like something distant and abstract, the fact that my body is trying to annihilate itself. Death still doesn't seem so frightening to me. It's more of a slightly peculiar, absurd idea. Most of the time I've had enough to deal with just trying to get through the nausea, trying to get down the minimum of what I should eat each day – haven't looked further ahead than to the next meal, the next round of chemo, the next time I'll shower, sleep, get up and then do it all again. And the medications often make me so tired that my thoughts slip away, even when I've tried to make them stick. I occasionally even forget why I'm really here. And yet every time I think of it, the thought flushes through me as a wave of absurd realisation. Cancer. Cancer. I have cancer.

It generally only lasts for a couple of minutes before it passes. I've waited for the really big reaction – the one like a bolt from the blue, the one like a storm that will capsize me. I've heard it can happen, but so far I've only ever experienced these big, calm waves that surge through me before withdrawing again. I feel it now, how they come rolling over me, stronger this time. I have to crouch down and take several deep breaths before I'm able to get up again and continue making my way towards the office where the doctor is already sitting, waiting with a result, a message, a new strategy.

As I come in, The Prettiest One gets up from her office chair and asks me to take a seat. I sit down in the plastic chair beside her desk. She stays standing, looks me right in the eyes, her gaze unwavering. She must have been practising since last time.

'How are you doing?' she asks.

'Good,' I say.

'Good,' she repeats.

She hasn't blinked once since I entered the room. Her gaze clings to mine.

'Life has no guarantees,' she says.

I'm not sure whether I'm supposed to respond to this.

'If you want guarantees, you'd be better off buying a toaster.'

A sudden, tiny sound escapes from her mouth – it sounds like a trumpet that isn't quite in tune. It's clearly supposed to be funny, this thing about the toaster. When I don't laugh, her eyes quiver. She clears her throat and sits down. Then she leans towards me, as if she's about to tell me something no one must overhear.

'You've been given the all clear,' she says.

'I'm sorry?'

'We've carefully reviewed all your test results and can find no trace of cancer in you. You're cancer free.'

'I'm not going to die?'

'Well, of course you are,' she says. 'But not yet. You've survived. We'll gather the latest analyses into a report, and then you'll be able to go home.'

I don't know what to say.

'Aren't you happy?' she asks

'It's just all very sudden.'

'But you've beaten cancer. You'll be able to leave here soon – you can start looking forward to all the things you'll be able to do. Study. Work. Go out. Meet healthy people. What do you like to do?'

'I'm not sure.'

'Well, I'm sure you'll figure it out.'

She gets up and holds out her hand. It's a solemn, almost ceremonial moment. I take her hand. It's clammy.

'Congratulations,' she says.

Her eyes are brimming with tears. Whether this is because she's moved, or because she hasn't blinked for almost ten minutes, I'm not sure.

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I've packed up all my things. I've folded my clothes and put them in four symmetrical piles on the bed; my books are stacked on the floor.

The studio flat in Jacob Aalls gate is waiting for me – waiting for me to put the books back on the shelves, put clean sheets on the bed, air out the rooms and make coffee that I'll drink on the step in the back garden as I listen to the faint traffic noise from Kirkeveien. I know that my textbooks will still be open at the page I'd got to. I even know what it says on one of these pages: *from small clumps of ice and stone, comets develop into immense, active cores enveloped in a gaseous nebula. They threaten our existence. A single strike may be catastrophic*.

That was as far as I'd read when the hospital called me to tell me that the lump in my neck wasn't a fatty deposit and that I needed to come in as soon as possible to hear more about its true characteristics and intentions.

My medical notes are gathered in a transparent pink plastic wallet, which also contains a memo that confirms what the test results indicate. I am no longer ill. I am in good health. The folder also contains fifteen stickers featuring the Norwegian Cancer Society's logo and the inscription *Fighting cancer!* as well as several brochures advertising the benefits of joining. On the brochure's front page is a woman who, with the assistance of a dominating speech bubble that forces its way out of her half-open mouth, can claim that she's got her life back. I throw the brochures and stickers in the bin below the mirror in the bathroom and then sit down on the bed.

I can check out of here whenever I like. The key to my room lies on the desk. All I need to do is call a taxi, take my belongings with me, and go. I can sign up to retake my exam – maybe it's not too late, I'm sure I can manage to get back up to speed with the material.

I go down to the common room to say goodbye to the others, but only Ivar is there. He's sitting on the worn plush sofa in the corner of the room and reading *I Love Waffles: The book for everyone who thinks life is better with waffles*. He holds the book aloft like a goblet and smiles broadly.

'Forty recipes!' he says enthusiastically. 'With sugar, sugar-free, everyday waffles, dessert waffles, party waffles!'

He looks comical sitting there on the sofa. It's far too low for him – his bum has sunk deep into the sofa cushions while his long, thin legs sprawl out on each side like those of a grasshopper. I wonder whether he's lonely beyond these walls. Probably – otherwise he wouldn't stay here after his work day is over. Every day, he stays for several hours before he goes home. It seems that for a brief time Ivar had a girlfriend in here – according to Tore, she wasn't quite right in the head. He once passed her in the reception area, sitting there in nothing but her underwear, talking to the potted plants. A short time later she was transferred to another department. It may well have been the psychiatric ward.

When she disappeared, Ivar made more waffles than ever as he pretended that nothing had changed. Apparently he then slept in the sensory room for twenty-seven hours straight, and then everything was back to normal.

I want to thank Ivar for being here – and what I want to do most of all is give him a hug. But I do neither of these things. As I'm about to say goodbye and wish him well, I suddenly find that I can't do it.

'How did the check-up go? he asks.

I slowly and dramatically shake my head.

Ivar wrinkles his brow.

'What did the doctor say?'

'Bad news,' I say. 'It's spread.'

This isn't what I'd planned to say, but it feels so right to say exactly this. *It's spread*. The words feel so good in my mouth. A calm falls over me as I look at Ivar's face, how he cocks his head slightly while also shaking it slowly, all the while considering me with genuine compassion.

He takes hold of me, a hand on each shoulder. His hands are enormous – he could probably scratch my lower back with a couple of his longest fingers without moving his palms from where they are. He pulls me as close to him as the boundaries of his personal space permit: close enough that I can smell the scent of margarine from his clothes, but not close enough that you could actually call it a hug. We stay standing like this for much longer than either of us finds natural.

'Would you like a waffle?' he says finally.

'Please,' I answer.

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I'd only just started to get used to death. A kind of friendship had developed between us – or at least the kind of relationship I imagine you might have with an irritating flatmate in a flat share. The kind of guy who makes you notice that you're actually not alone. It's Death that makes you aware that you will henceforth never be left in peace, that someone else's rules apply, how uncomfortable it can feel not to be master of your own house. Death. Who never turns out the light when he leaves the room, who always forgets to put the lid back on the tube of toothpaste, who never buys toilet paper – he doesn't even take off the cardboard tube that remains when the roll is empty, just leaves it hanging there on the holder so that it's this – when you're sitting on the loo and realise there's no paper left – you're forced to use to wipe yourself with. You curse Death, who scrounges food from *your* shelf in the fridge, who plays loud music – bad music – during the night; who brings over his shady friends without asking you first and who never, *ever*, asks you how you're really doing.

But when he suddenly and without warning packs up all his belongings and moves out, leaving only dirty footprints in the hall and hair in the drain – and even though he runs off without paying his share of the last month's rent – it's suddenly so curiously quiet without him.

Then you have to get used to life again. I'm not sure whether I'm ready for it yet.

I take the lift down to The Cellar to double-check my latest test results. Just to be sure. Sitting behind the laboratory reception desk is a plump nurse speaking on the phone. Her back is to me, the plastic window in front of her pushed closed. I knock carefully on the windowpane. She turns and makes a jerking motion with her head, to show me that she's busy. I wait. When she finally hangs up, she swivels in her chair a quarter turn and looks at me with tired eyes. Then she slowly gets up, reaches up to the plastic window and pushes it open with a demonstratively laborious movement.

'Yes?'

'I'd like to know my test results,' I say.

She blinks so slowly it looks as if she's been asleep.

'I'm not permitted to give you your test results here, just like that,' she says. 'You have to telephone for your results between one and three if you can't wait until your appointment with the doctor.'

'I've already had my appointment with the doctor,' I say. 'I just want to hear the results for myself. And anyway, it's always impossible to get through on the phone.'

‘I’m about to start manning the phone now,’ she yawns. ‘So I actually don’t have time to stand here talking to you.’

She pushes the little plastic window closed again and sits back down in her chair. She turns her back to me, then lifts the telephone receiver to her ear, even though it hasn’t rung once.

I look at the clock. It’s 12.59. On the plastic window is a handwritten note featuring telephone numbers and telephone opening hours. It’s written in such tiny letters that it’s clear nobody is supposed to catch sight of what it says. I tap the phone number into my mobile and wait. Busy signal. I can see that she’s not speaking to anyone – she’s just holding the receiver between her shoulder and ear as she scrolls through the front page news on the computer in front of her. I hang up and try again. Busy. I try again. After almost a quarter of an hour I get through.

‘How can I help you?’

Her voice reaches me in peculiar stereo, both from my mobile and from where she’s sitting, just three metres away from me.

‘I’d like the results of my last blood tests,’ I say.

‘What’s your personal ID number?’

I give it to her.

‘One moment please.’

I watch her set the telephone receiver on the desk, close the news site she’s looking at, open a new window and click through to what must be my electronic medical records. Then she lifts the receiver in a slow movement – I can see that she inhales deeply. Her shoulders lift slightly before her entire body slumps down again. She rattles off a number of values and abbreviations. I have no idea what they mean, but I pretend as if this is all telling me a great deal about my health.

‘Right,’ I say. ‘Hmm.’

It’s clear that her patience is starting to wear thin. She sighs heavily into the receiver. From where I’m standing, I hear her chair creaking as she uneasily shifts her weight in it.

‘Was there anything else?’

‘No,’ I say. ‘That was everything. Thank you very much.’

Afterwards I spend almost an hour lying down in the sensory room.

When I get back to the common room, Berit and Tore are sitting on the sofa and discussing something in loud voices. He’s leaning back, half his stomach oozing out between

his waistband and his sweater. It's clear that Berit's trying to refrain from looking at it. She's sitting on the very edge of the sofa, half turned away from Tore. She has large sweat patches under her arms and is speaking at an unnaturally high volume.

'This is supposed to be a meeting place with activities that promote quality of life and well-being, and which encourages people to conquer their disease,' says Berit.

'That's exactly why we should go do up the *pub* instead,' says Tore, rolling his eyes behind Berit's back.

When he catches my eye, he pulls a grimace that can only be interpreted as a silent cry for help.

'What do you think, Nina?' says Berit. 'I'm sure you'd like to support the important work to re-open our pool?'

I'd prefer not to have to take a position on Berit's pool ambitions, and consider whether I should tell them that I've been given the all clear, gather up my things and just go home to Jacob Aalls gate. But behind Berit and Tore I catch a glance of Ivar's head through the smoke from the waffle iron. He smiles valiantly and gives me the thumbs up with both hands. I don't have the heart to take back my lie that the cancer has spread. Instead, I try to look as pale as I can.

'I'm sorry, Berit,' I say. 'I'm really not feeling too good today – I'll have to talk to you about it another time. I think I need to go to my room for a lie down.'

Then I turn and walk slowly towards the door, convinced that I can feel Berit's eyes boring into my back.