

Linda Skomakerstuen
Without Material Errors and Omissions

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More than thirty years have gone by, but I remember it clearly. Especially the sounds, they're etched into my memory like the grooves on a record. The peal of the church bells. The notes of the pipe organ. The psalms that rose and sank beneath the ceiling, and the priest who sang in a different key than the rest of the congregation. I'd even claim to remember the snaps of the birch trees bursting into leaf outside the stained glass windows.

Granted, it could be my memory playing tricks, but there's one thing I know for sure: I remember his words.

We were standing on the church steps. The others hurried off to family gatherings, but we took our sweet time. Dad and I. We were going to Stranden Café to eat a Sunday roast with sauerkraut and dessert, and the day sparkled. The flag waved on its pole, the white walls were ablaze with sunlight, and the air smelled of melting snow. If I were to complain about anything, it would have to be my wool socks, they itched, and my skirt was stifling. I don't think Dad's clothes were any better; his face was shiny and red.

'Yes, yes, Elvira.' He sighed and wiped his sleeve across his forehead. 'It's a big day,' he said, his voice ceremonious this time. 'Your confirmation day. I think it would be appropriate with a few words of wisdom.' He took a firm grip on my shoulders and cleared his throat. 'It's easy to get messed up in things. The difficult part is getting out of them again. Remember that. If you stay the course and look straight ahead, you'll make it across the finish line.'

That was it. He lit the cigarette that had been tucked behind his ear throughout the sermon and spat tobacco onto his newly polished shoes.

What can I say? Coming from Dad, it wasn't too bad, but I still have to admit that I had hoped for something more. Maybe a few sentences about the meaning of life or about all the possibilities that lay ahead of me. A wish of good luck for the future wouldn't have hurt, either. After all, I was entering adulthood.

It wasn't until many years later, lying on the wet forest floor and about to die for reasons that were anything but natural, that the memory from the church steps resurfaced, and I saw it in a completely new light. I had got entangled in others' business and ended up in a mess I couldn't get out of. And suddenly, it became clear to me: the wisdom of his words.

Monday, 17th October

The invoice is addressed to Wrol's Computer Service Ltd. and deducted under Miscellaneous Operating Expenses. Front bumper, back bumper and side skirts, 6,000 kroner plus VAT.

What does he take me for? An idiot?

Wrol has driven around in the same old wreck for as long as I can remember, Wrol's Royce, a beat up Golf of an indeterminable colour. It appears the Royce is now getting facelift, but it's not going to happen with a deduction from his business income. *Private expenses*, I write and fling the invoice onto the pile of cases in need of follow-up.

Then I yawn so wide my jaws creak.

It's not that I don't like my job. To the contrary, I find my work meaningful. Without reliable accounting information, the societal machine would break down.

Obviously, it's not as though the earth would stop spinning if Hilda from the yarn shop overvalues her inventory by a few kroner. Or if Bo at the Harbour Pub doesn't punch in every single half pint at the cash register, but still. The small cogs are also part of the machine, and I'd argue that the importance of a small town auditor's work is underrated. Because what would happen if people did their accounts as they pleased? I'm just asking, and I'd be happy to answer. It would turn out wrong, and there are several reasons why. Reluctance to pay taxes is one, ignorance and incompetence are another. Not to mention sloppiness, laziness, forgetfulness and useless accountants. I have yet to audit two accounts in a row without finding a mistake, and I've audited a lot. Had I printed them out, I could have cut and glued them together into a paper chain that stretched around the equator. Twice.

I tug at the cord hanging from the blinds and watch it swing until my eyes cross. Yes indeed, I have plenty of reasons to be happy. I'm free like the blue tit pecking at seeds between the cobblestones outside the office window. If he wants to fly, he flies, but if he wants to stay, he stays. Not a care in the world. There you have me.

I could wander out the door of the Auditor's Yard this very moment, stroll up Kragsgata to the bus station, board the first bus to Oslo Airport and disappear into the blue. I could go anywhere. To Bangkok or Sydney, or perhaps Moscow, never to return, and no one would suffer. Except Wrol, maybe, who wants his accounts back fully audited sometime this week.

'Life is an adventure,' I say, but the words drown in the music pounding out from Håkon's office.

Today it's Abba, 'The Winner Takes It All'. He's singing, too, shrilly and with intense passion during the chorus. As far as I can tell, it's Bodil who's moving about on the other side of the wall, her chair scraping over the pine floorboards and feet stomping across the floor.

'There's never a moment of peace!' she shouts out into the hallway. Then she slams the door. I look at my wristwatch and count down. I give her five seconds, and sure enough, there goes the door again.

'You'll wake the dead! Think about that, young man, next time you take the shortcut through the cemetery.'

The bang that follows makes the coffee quake in the cup in front of me.

Thorvald is tactful as usual, no exclamations, no complaints, just a quiet sigh as the door to the vault closes. Yes, his office is in a vault. An honest-to-god vault that could withstand a world war if such a thing were ever to break out around us. The Norwegian Credit Bank, spell the letters engraved in the door. It's been a few years since there was a bank here, but the offices have retained the look. High ceilings with crown moulding and large windows with a view across the harbour. Two of them are empty but no thank you, Thorvald prefers the vault.

'Life is an adventure,' I repeat.

That's how it is and that's how it will be, right until the day I fall off my chair and stay there, on my back with my legs in the air. There's not a chance of it ending in any other way. How could it?

The trill of the phone throws my thoughts overboard, and I sigh and take a sip of lukewarm coffee before answering. 'The Auditor's Yard, Elvira Antonsen speaking.'

The person at the other end of the line is panting. 'Something terrible has happened,' she says.

I recognise the voice. It's Jasmina, the sole employee and shareholder of Truth and Tans Ltd., local provider of fortunes and UV rays, who lives in the ramshackle mansion across the street from me.

'Did your old sun bed explode?' I ask, giving the cord another tug.

'It's serious, Elvira,' Jasmina says. 'Mathilda's left us. For good.'

I adjust my seat and sit up straight. 'Are you trying to tell me that Mathilda is dead?'

'Yes, exactly,' she replies, a bit calmer now.

'You must be kidding,' I say with a laugh, but the sound doesn't come out like it's supposed to. 'It's only been a few hours since I last saw her, and she was alive and kicking then.'

When I walked to work, Mathilda had been sitting in the same spot between the lace curtains and waved with her coffee cup, exactly as she always did, with her glasses on the tip of her nose and a soft smile on her lips. And now she was supposedly dead? Impossible.

'If this is a joke, Jasmina...' I say.

'You must know I wouldn't joke about something like this,' she says. 'And people are alive until the moment they die, you know.'

I freeze on the chair. She has a point.

'What happened?' I ask, my voice thick and unrecognisable.

'Oh, can't you come? I have no clue what to do. Her dog is here, running around ...' I slam the laptop shut, throw my bag over my shoulder and stride over the binders strewn across the floor.

'I'm going home,' I shout down the hallway – to deaf ears, mind you.

Home is a little white house behind a dilapidated fence and four gnarled apple trees. The house is at the end of Lille Trappegata right next to Mathilda's, just a stone's throw from Risør's centre. When I run, it takes no more than ten minutes from the moment the office door slams behind me until I'm standing at my front door. This time, I run. Down Solsiden and across the square, pigeons soar up in every direction as Mrs. Evensen shakes her fist at me, clenching a bag of bread. I continue through town, past bookseller Lindstøl, who's stacking books in a

basket outside his shop, and the Brasserie chef, who's chain smoking on the pavement in front of the empty café. As I round the curve up to Lille Trappegata, I see Jasmina. She's spinning around like a compass needle, her mouth opening and closing, but not a sound comes out. The sight is reassuring. It's not impossible that Jasmina has simply gone mad and is now spreading made-up death notices.

'Oh, Elvira, it's so sad,' she says and throws herself around my neck.

I could have done without that and stand stiff as pole with my arms firmly by my sides. 'What happened?' I ask, even though I don't want to know the answer.

'I've just been waiting for something to happen to her.' Jasmina wails and pulls a tissue out of her coat sleeve. 'I've sensed it in my body for days,' she declares and blows so hard the tissue stands out horizontally in the air. 'My hips have ached and my stomach has been in knots.'

'For god's sake,' I say. 'Can't you just tell me what's happened?'

Jasmine purses her lips and wraps her coat more closely around her. For a moment, she appears to have frozen up. 'I was out of coffee,' she mumbles. 'Mathilda didn't open up when I knocked, so I walked inside, and there she was, stretched out on the kitchen floor, babbling. It almost sounded like she was speaking in tongues,' Jasmina shakes her head dismally. 'I realised something was wrong, so I called an ambulance. How it happened, I'm not sure, but I followed along in the car and...'

'Yes?' I interrupt.

'That was it.' Jasmina throws out her arms. 'It was stroke, they said, a vein that burst in her head, or maybe it was several.' She rubs her temples vigorously.

'So it's over,' I whisper.

She left without saying goodbye? I can't believe it. Mathilda was the one who brought me into this world with her steady midwife hands. She's been there on the other side of the fence ever since, all 48 years. I've never known anything else. There aren't many people I like, but I liked Mathilda – everyone did. Mathilda was a soft sea breeze, gently blowing across everyone she met on her way. Who could have anything against a person like that?

Jasmina wipes her coat sleeve under her nose and looks at me questioningly. 'What do we do now?' Her face is ashen, and that's not normal for a person who eats her lunch in a sun bed.

'We have to check that everything's okay in the house before we lock up,' I say from somewhere outside myself.

The gravel path that goes through the garden wobbles beneath my feet, the kitchen window is black, the curtains unmoving. I can hardly breathe.

'What on earth should we do about that?' Jasmina points at something shaggy peeking out from behind a currant bush.

It's the pathetic powder puff that Mathilda took in a few years back.

'I'm allergic to fur,' Jasmina declares and collapses onto the white bench on the porch.

I plunk down next to her. To be honest, I have no desire to enter the empty house. 'I'll take the dog to the vet and get it put to sleep,' I say. 'It's the least I can do.'

'The least you can do?' Jasmina looks at me with big eyes. 'You're going to kill Milly before Mathilda's even been laid in her grave? That dog was her child.'

The dog creeps out from its hiding. It slinks up the steps to the porch, sits down at our feet and stares up, dumb as an anthill.

'Fine,' I say reluctantly. 'I'll try and get it foisted on some idiot.'

Here we are, two miserable figures with our flags at half-mast and a dumb little anthill. The afternoon sun is white, the wind rustles through the leaves scattered under the moss-covered plum tree, and the little birds peck at the feeder in front of the kitchen window. There's nothing to suggest that death has just sauntered down the street and snatched an unaware soul drinking her morning coffee.

'It sure happened fast,' Jasmina eventually says.

'Couldn't you understand any of what she was saying?' I ask.

'I don't really know.' Jasmina reconsiders. 'I think she might have been talking about the Russian Revolution.'

'The Russian Revolution? That surely can't be right.'

'You have to think of something as life runs out,' Jasmina replies and strokes her chin. 'The Russian Revolution is as good as anything.'

I shrug and push away my fringe, which has blown over my eyes. A mild draught passes through the air, as if someone has opened the door to a warm room, but only for a moment; then it's over.

Mathilda's house has always been an oasis for the senses. The smell of fried mackerel and fresh vanilla waffles filled the kitchen. The coffee pot whistled on the stove. The rocking chair rocked and Mathilda hummed. Everything took place at half speed but lasted double as long. You risked feeling peaceful in such a place. I usually did, at least, but it must have been a different house, because I don't recognise this place.

The blue wall panel above the utility sink bulges, resembling the belly of a stranded whale, about to explode. I hadn't noticed it until now. Or how the floors are worn to shreds. A path has been trodden along the kitchen counter and around the table. The paint is blistering on the windowsill, right where her cup used to stand, but the birdfeeder outside is empty. Not a crumb, not a sparrow.

Jasmina stops in the doorway to the kitchen and looks around.

'Bloody hell,' she says and pulls her coat together at her neck. 'It's completely empty in here.'

I glance over at the stove. The hotplates are turned off.

'Had you expected something else?' I ask and move my gaze to the sink. The taps are closed. I bend down and feel the radiator. It's cold.

'It usually takes a few hours,' Jasmina says. 'To check into the afterlife. You know how it is. Old acquaintances want to say hi and there are formalities to be taken care of, but she should be back now. This is where her soul belongs.'

I don't reply, I just walk into the living room, to the crocheted pillows and bowls with dusty lemon drops.

The windows are closed, the hasps are locked, the lights turned off. There's some knitting lying on the sofa. A jumper. White and grey, soft between my hands, the body is nearly finished. My size. I drop the knitting back down on the sofa and turn away.

Then I notice it. The glass figurine on the folding table in the corner. Virgin Mary is looking at the child she's cradling in her arms and smiling. It looks

as though she's always stood there admiring her baby, but she hasn't. She's been lying in the box in the cupboard behind the bedroom, wrapped in tissue paper with a bow around the middle.

'How strange,' I mumble and walk over to the folding table.

'That's exactly what I'm saying.' Jasmina is standing on the middle of the living room floor with her hands planted at her sides. 'She should be here by now.'

'I'm talking about Virgin Mary,' I say and sigh.

Mathilda showed me the figure once when I was helping her clear the attic. She said that she had bought the figurine the day the Germans marched into town. It had stood on her nightstand during the war, and each evening, she would pray for peace. Right up until the day in May of 1945 when she hoisted the flag and packed Mary away.

'I told her she should set it out,' I continue. 'But she didn't want to. She wouldn't hear of it. She didn't have anything to pray for anymore, nothing that mattered. The figurine wouldn't come out of the box unless she had something important to ask God for.'

Jasmina stands next to me and stares at the figurine. 'Elvira,' she says. 'This can only mean one thing.'

'What?' I ask, turning towards her.

'Something terrible must have happened. Something gruesome. Something comparable to World War Two.'

'Oh, come on,' I reply. 'What would that be?'

Jasmina takes a step to the side and crosses her arms. 'That figurine has been lying in the attic for over seventy years,' she says decidedly. 'Why would Mathilda take it out on a completely normal October day if she didn't have any reason to do so? She even made an altar.'

A bowl with burnt tea lights is standing on the folding table and next to it is the Bible.

Jasmina picks up the figurine and holds it out towards me. 'Take it with you home,' she says. 'And think about it. I don't like this.'

I look at the figurine for a few seconds, and then I accept it and put it under my coat. The coldness of the glass seeps through my jumper.

'Let's go,' I say.

The dog doesn't want to come with me home. I tug at the leash, but it's like pulling a sled with rusty runners. She ploughs through my overgrown lawn, her nose the only thing sticking out of the wilderness.

'Come here,' I say and pat my thighs. The anthill has grown roots and looks defiantly at me. I try to holler but can't do it. I feel like lying down on the grass and raging against the sky because Mathilda's green rocking chair is empty, but I don't have the energy. The empty house has sucked the sap out of me. I've wilted.

'You nitwit' I mumble and pick the dog up under my arm.

I've got better things to do than drag some dog around. For god's sake. I can't take care of anything. I don't even have potted plants – none that are still alive, at least. I shut the dog in the kitchen and walk into the living room. I place the glass figurine on top of the bookshelf.

'Say hi from me' I whisper.

Dad is smiling on the wall, behind a greasy glass in a dusty frame. He's standing rigidly at attention with his arm around my shoulder. It's a ridiculous picture. I can't believe that he couldn't find something better to hang up and that I haven't managed to take it down. We're a sorry sight, standing there on the church steps on a bright May day. I'm drowning in the white gown and curly perm, and dad is bulging out of his narrow suit. I think it's the same suit he wore to his own confirmation. He wore it the day he was laid in the ground, in any case.

I walk over to the window and place my forehead against the glass. Mathilda's house is staring out lifelessly from the other side of the fence. The gate is closed and deadbolt is locked. I close the curtains with a yank.