FROM HERE TO HIROSHIMA by Sunniva Lye Axelsen

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An English Sample Translation

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Pages 9-23: We get to know Ingrid and her job

When the social educator caught fire, I was at home brushing my teeth. I mashed the brush hard against the gums so as to get rid of the rib residue and regretted having accepted the invite. I'd taken off the white blouse and kicked off the black trainers. I was about to leave the blouse on the floor, but since that simply isn't done, I picked it up and put it in the dirty clothes bin. I kept on regretting, the edges of my mouth specked with white foam. I pressed my nails into my left palm. No matter how hard I brushed, the smell wouldn't go away, lingering between me and the mirror like the smoke from a grill, a cloud of pork rinds and *gløgg* and fire as the scorching hot water cascaded down the drain.

As usual, the health and welfare office had pulled out all the stops. Every Christmas, they book the local pub by the roundabout, set out torches in the car park, and give each of us rib, lukewarm pork patties, pickles, two glasses of red wine and a thimbleful of aquavit. If we want

more drinks, we have to buy them ourselves, even though I've often observed the admin team surreptitiously using vouchers.

The tables are set with flickering tealights and chequered serviettes from Europris, but they splurge on the toothpicks, so when I go to the toilet for a moment alone, I don't have to find half a pig stuck in my teeth.

When it comes to us auxiliary nurses, we're always placed in the corner, halfway underneath the stairs. The acoustics there are poor, so after the speech none of us caught, we lifted our glasses to toast one another, raising a cheer for the municipal administration and those of us working in the trenches: this was the Christmas party.

One of the other auxiliary nurses asked me how it was going. Her upper lip was full of wrinkles.

"Much as usual," I said.

"Yes, I'd imagine so," she said, meaningfully glancing from side to side.

At this point, I noticed the others leaning forward, exuding aquavit breath, knowing something I didn't.

"You didn't hear?"

"What?"

"Cheers," said someone else.

"Heard what?" I repeated, but my voice was so low, my hands so still, and a soft whine in the microphone announced a new speech as everyone leaned back.

A little later in the evening the treasurer came over to our table. I knew him only as a stocky, quiet figure whose office was adjacent to Anne-Brith Jacobsen. He had a big, red face, the flabby cheeks full of small craters. Sometimes his door was open, but he never turned when I passed by, never reacted to footsteps. His hands forever lay still at the desk as he stared into the computer screen. I'd never seen him write anything, never seen him handle so much as an invoice. Now he parked his hands on the back of my chair and asked if any of the others wanted to dance.

Through pursed lips, everyone said no, one after the other: no, but thanks! The treasurer shook his head. My heart began pounding, it felt as if each and every beat reverberated in my fingertips, as if all could see, damned heart, I thought, the goddamned heart.

"Come on, one of you has got to dance," he yelled across the table. The old hags shook their heads again, stared into space, smoothed out their serviettes, the whole situation embarrassing, unendurable.

They sat there and turned him down. As though they could pick and choose. As though saying no was their right. Old hags with their double chins spilling over their scarves. Sows with regrowth and nicotine breath, one of them with a rose tattooed above the neckline. Twenty years ago, I estimated, nudging half a potato back and forth in the rib fat with my fork. Finally the treasurer had enough and left, his broad back careening toward the bar. I'd picked my serviette apart under the table and sat there with a few remaining strips.

Yet another occasion where I hadn't the least idea what was happening around me. I had it from a reliable source that the one with the rose on her chest had had several visits from the child welfare services after the latter had been tipped off about her alcoholism. Nevertheless, there she sat, several years later, prattling and toasting and not looking the least bit ashamed about anything. If it'd been me, I'd have hanged myself. I wanted to go home. Why should I

waste my free time at the Christmas party? This little shit municipality could've held it during normal working hours, they could've *paid* me to sit here, but no, of course not, we had to be all festive. A group of consultants from the welfare agency began the Macarena, as the other auxiliary nurses talked about their kids.

Yes, this *is* a shit municipality. I live here because this is where I live, and maybe also because I don't want to leave Erling, the only patient I can stand. Beyond that, the whole area can be used for bomb tests for all I care. A spruce forest. The town centre with a florist and skin care salon. A couple immigrants who've found their way here and opened a kebab stand, the agricultural cooperative that sells hammer drills and chainsaws and heavy, grey chains. Ten thousand useless residents, all of them knowing who I was, none of them leaving me alone.

The one who'd asked me how it was going had more to tell. The aquavit had evidently loosened her tongue. She had an artificially tanned neck and yellow teeth, red stripes in her bangs and multiple rings on each finger.

"So you really didn't hear?" she shouted above the music, which had become considerably louder.

"Heard what?" I asked for the third time.

"About the layoffs?"

"No," I said, a pine branch cracking and falling to the ground while my hands lay still on the tablecloth, right next to a flickering, small tealight.

The one who'd just spoken got up from her chair, which nearly turned over. She hugged someone who was trying to walk by her, and I remember how she swayed on crooked bootheels

as she held on to the other; despite the heels' inward slant, she didn't fall, since she was holding on so tight.

And people whooped and laughed. My throat felt constricted; the free wine lapped against the back of my throat and wouldn't go down. The old ladies shouted to one another with flakes of tobacco on the lower lip, securely sitting on a perch of time, rocking back and forth and chattering with their hoarse voices. No one needed to say it, since we all knew, everyone knew: work in Norway has nothing to do with achievement. It has to do with how long you've sustained a period of uninterrupted incompetence, so you can slap your seniority on the table. And they owed me nothing. I'd never taken a smoke break with them, stopped in the shop to chat, or gossiped about patients. I sat there while they huddled over their touchscreens, wrote #metoo on Facebook and liked one another's comments. I went to the toilet, got my jacket from the cloakroom. I wanted to go home.

There is a place you paid for yourself. A place where no one laughs. Where you aren't awakened by furniture turning over, crooked arrows in the dark, people forcing their way in with police escorts and thick stacks of paper. A place without plastic spruce sprigs, silver rain from the disco ball, the section manager Anne-Brith Jacobsen dancing with her back turned, the accounting assistants shoving in the queue to the loo, a deputy mayor throwing up in the dessert, psychiatric nurses who'd like to talk about your feelings, nor a recently-divorced social educator waving a bottle of lighter fluid and calling everyone out to the car park to watch a few fire-eating tricks he learned on holiday in Tunisia.

But I was home at last. I should never have gone to the Christmas party. I should've stayed behind the door I locked. I don't know who regretted more, me or the social educator, but it could hardly have been me he was thinking of when he fell over in the car park and his shirt buttons burned a row of small round holes down his abdomen. No one can make demands of the future. Therefore, as the social educator lay burning out in the snow, I spat in the sink, turned out the light, pulled the duvet aside, lay down on the grey jersey sheet, imagined how the other auxiliary nurses slid home on the ice patches, drunk beneath the cold stars, sparing nary a thought for the next day.

It was snowing. It wasn't even daybreak, still dark, but I was already dreading it. I had a hangover. I swung my legs over the edge of the bed and went down to start the coffee maker.

I'd been summoned into the municipal administrative office, which was in a concrete square in city centre. The square was still empty, but soon Anne-Brith Jacobsen would be at the office, the one who'd asked for a word with me. I thought about the layoffs. Today was going to be a shit day.

The pines appeared as indistinct stakes at the edge of the garden, and behind it was the wooded hillside with undulating strips of black and white, a frozen seabed of tree trunks and snow. I checked Facebook while the coffee maker hissed softly on the counter, and saw Anne-Brith Jacobsen in a skin-toned bra underneath the disco ball. You'd think that image might cheer me up, but it didn't, it merely confirmed all the things I didn't understand. How some people could get away with things. How some people made fools of themselves as if they were simply doing their duty, fulfilling expectations, and then showing up the next day at work and asking for

a word with you, expecting, *demanding*, to be taken seriously. I put cup and dish in the dishwasher and got ready to go to work.

In city centre the Christmas tree stood shining in the roundabout. The pub was closed, the party over, all traces left by the incinerated social educator hidden under the snow. There was no avoiding it. I had to go up to Anne-Brith Jacobsen to get her signature on the November time sheet, regardless. I was dreading it, but fortunately it wasn't until later, she was probably asleep, hopefully, but not necessarily, at home in her own bed.

It irritated me to no end that after fifteen years at this job I was still expected to show up with my time sheet in person, that I had to stand in front of Anne-Brith Jacobsen's desk as she slid a chipped nail down each line, stopping, requesting an explanation for the twenty minutes' overtime, sighing softly, signing, pushing the sheet back over the table without looking at me.

I drove slowly. I tried thinking about the fact that somewhere on earth, the sun was shining. It seemed unreasonable. It seemed like choosing to believe in God, an indistinct figure with vague powers, an absentminded middle manager who fiddled with His computer cables in a tower of clouds and fog. It had been some time since Anne-Brith Jacobsen had requested the meeting. I'd managed to delay it by making reference to the patients' needs, but she would budge no longer. I look forward to our chat, she wrote in the last email. I don't think I was supposed to reply. At the sawmill, the lumber was laid outside. Some green tarps lay halfway over the logs, as if someone had simply given up: I can't. Not now.

My house is a dark brown two-floor box with a covered veranda, flagstones by the front door and a square lawn I don't much bother with. I've lived here my whole life. The pines at the

end of the garden have grown enormous, and I've no idea what I'm going to do with them. Erling says that one day the wind will blow them down, and won't I be sorry.

He's offered to come chop them down for me. I said no.

Because what I remember best from childhood is the feeling I had a log running through my body. That all of me was built around a stake that was dark and hard and silent. That nothing would ever be any different—not now, not ever—and that time was one single, square point, a sign that announced, with tiny letters: It ends here.

I stood with my log-body and regarded the others out of the corner of my eye, and I knew, I *knew*, that inside them was nothing but feathers and butterflies and little gusts of wind whirling and wheeling about; sometimes they even sang.

But we don't have to sit here talking about lumber.

The snow lay heavy over the garden now, there were no decisions to be taken, no garden centres to avoid. I had no flowerbed, no pots, no fountains. Nor any birdfeeders bringing nothing but filth, the dry shells of sunflower seeds like grey explosions all over the snow. I have quite enough to think about without all that. Take for example the fucking gulls, why can't they just keep to the coast? They come here and line up along the veranda and stare, as if I were the intruder and they the ones paying the rent. Sometimes their shrieking wakes me up from my own nightmare. I dream about a figure walking across the field toward my house. It soon disappears among the trees, and then I hear the gulls. But when I wake up, I don't see them, as if they too were never here.

There'd never been any talk of layoffs. I dreaded coming to work every morning, but the job was all I had. Each day was glued to the next, a long chain of things I didn't want to do with people I didn't like. No two patients are alike, says Anne-Brith Jacobsen. She doesn't know what she's talking about. She's probably never had to touch a haemorrhoid.

It's not that I hadn't tried. Okay, maybe not very hard, but I made something like an effort when I was younger. I *enrolled* in university two years in a row. I *got* a flat in Oslo. I moved back home, but that's not the point. No one sits on their bed at sixteen and thinks: Now I know. Now I know what I want to use my life for. I want to slather grown men with zinc ointment for minimum wage.

It was what it was. After my second attempt at university I got a letter from the bank. I'll admit it lay on the chest of drawers in the hallway a few days. But on my 23rd birthday, after I'd opened the letter, I washed the entire house, before calling the municipal administrative office regarding an assistant nurse position they'd been trying to fill the past six months. Anne-Brith Jacobsen, her hips somewhat narrower then, her face a little smoother, didn't seem especially enthralled at the sight of me. But, like me, she had little choice in the matter.

"Any experience from the health services?" asked Anne-Brith Jacobsen.

"No."

"What do you think about working with people?"

"I don't understand the question."

"Do you have a driving licence?"

When I got home from the interview, it was as if the pines had grown. Not just taller, but closer together, just in those few hours. I went inside and sank into the sofa, which smelled

musty. Later that afternoon she called and offered me the job. At minimum wage. Years later, and I'm still on minimum wage. I could've been a physicist. I could've gone in for science, studying gasses and fluids and stardust. But as I've said: it's nobody's business.

"I've had a horrendous day," said Erling.

Each time he's had a horrendous day. I can relate, so usually I don't try to argue.

"I was at the Christmas party," I said instead.

"You left too early," said Erling, leaning over his dining table, pointing toward the easy chair with a pointy, pink nail, bursting with gossip.

Erling likes to dress up. I think he buys them on the internet: shiny polyester dressing gowns with lavish rose patterns, high-heeled slippers with fake-fur pompoms, a velvet turban and glistening knee-length socks. Once, he pulled down the chandelier in the dining room and made some fine crystal earrings.

Erling lives on a farm built in 1808 with a viper embedded under the threshold to ward off evil spirits. Everything is white now, but behind the shed, his ladder lies under thick layers of moss and snow, and in the spring, the snow melts to reveal old paint cans along the wall of the house, as well as a grey tractor, half buried in what used to be a potato field. He hasn't replaced any of his furniture since being widowed, which I'm glad for. The brown artificial leather sofa is easy to wipe off, and the low pine dining table I clean with soft soap. At the fireplace, which is never used, hangs an overhead photo of the farm, taken from a small plane in 1957.

I've known Erling since I was little. He was a lumberjack, with a long, narrow face and wool pullover from the military surplus, work boots and jeans that smelled of tobacco and machine oil. When his wife died of cancer, he took early retirement. People said he wore nail

polish at the funeral. He lost interest in the farm. The planks in the barn roof became loose. Old straw rotted on the floor of the cowshed. At one point someone from the Directorate for Cultural Heritage came to talk to him, but Erling wouldn't let them in. All they wanted was to offer to help with the maintenance. Such a majestic farm, important to preserve for future generations.

"You're welcome to maintain it once I'm dead," said Erling, slamming the kitchen window so hard one of his nails popped off.

Time passed. Someone had seen him at the co-op with yellow underwear visible underneath his lumberjack shirt. At the beginning, people were indulgent toward him. Loss can do so much to a man. But when Erling set up a video camera in the rushes down by the lake and filmed himself in a wedding gown, he was observed by a caseworker who was out jogging. The next day the municipality received a letter of concern.

"I won't have any more medicines, damn it," he said the first time I came over. He sat in his vest and blue velour joggers, above which a small gut was peeking out. I noticed his upper arms were thinner than the forearms.

"Right, right," I said.

"And Cultural Heritage can go to hell. They won't mend anything here, not if I can help it!"

"Nor is it necessary, I should think," I said.

"Sitting there whittling the fucking pitchforks," said Erling, the corners of his mouth twitching.

"Shall I empty the ashtray?" I asked.

"Go ahead," he said suspiciously.

He dried some tears with an index finger under each eye, fanned himself in front of his face like people do when trying to stop crying, took a deep breath and asked me to help him look for a jewellery box. He was the one who told me about the woman from the Christmas party who'd had a visit from child welfare. If I was any good at speaking for myself, I could've woven it into the conversation at the table, but fortunately, I know my limitations. It would've gone all to hell, just as it always does when I don't sit still.

Pages 74-82: Ingrid and Thomas become a couple and the trip is introduced

"I want us to be a couple," said Thomas.

Time fast forwarded at twice the speed. I sat on the stump outside the shed and thought maybe I'd heard wrong, but I hadn't. It's just that things started going by so fast. I don't know how others decide to be a couple. I imagine maybe it's the kind of thing people talk about before they decide. But everyone's different. So when Thomas drove down from Oslo with even more flowers, wanted to go on a skiing trip with me, and said he'd told his colleagues he'd got a girlfriend, I didn't think it was the time to protest.

"You're nice," said Thomas, even though I hadn't asked for some explanation. "You're stable. I need nice people in my life."

I fastened my skis, which I hadn't used in twenty-five years. When we came out through the little thicket and out along the hillsides, everything began to sparkle. I flailed about on my skis, which now and then slid out to the side, with the sky high and sharp. Thomas went in front me with the sled loaded with wood, beer, bread and cheese. He turned round, his skin red under his beard.

"I've missed having someone to go skiing with," he shouted. "I used to go with a friend."

"Where is he now?"

"Vanished in the Antarctic Ocean," said Thomas. "You probably saw it on the news."

I hardly ever watch TV. But I remembered it from the papers. "Not that one," said Carl when I started reading about the empty lifeboat that had been found on an ice floe. Thomas didn't say anything else about his friend. When he'd decided where we'd stop to rest, he lit a fire, set out a porous ground pad and gave me a can of light beer. After the first few sips, the smell of grilled cheese sandwiches wafted up, and I lifted my face to the sun.

"My girlfriend," said Thomas, and I dropped down on the ground pad, lay my chin on Thomas's shoulder, and felt his arm through the fabric of his anorak. He stirred the fire, the sparks cracking softly in the cold air.

Where would I find the time to know what I wanted out of life? I used to put on the rubber boots past midnight to check the car with my torch, and every time I came back into the hallway, I remembered a small corner of the bumper I'd forgot to investigate, and then I had to go out again. I often had mud on my knees after crawling under the car like an imbecile. What, for instance, was the little green blur I thought I'd seen at the left back tyre that August evening in 2009? Could it have been a little mitten?

Those were lost years. There was so much to clear up, so many bills to pay, so many people to avoid. Not to mention floors to be washed, sound recordings and eventually mobile videos to be reviewed, doors to be locked, by which time half your life was over. It was impossible to keep going the way I was going. Thomas wanted us to be a couple. He took my hand, rubbed his nose in my winter cap, and I hadn't the slightest idea what I was doing. It was just as if I was alone, with two people gliding in front of me in the ski track, the back of my own

anorak flashing red through the snowflakes. I lost sight of them behind hillcrests and stumps and hollow trunks, but I sped after, as fast I could, since this was what life was supposed to be about. That was us, my boyfriend and I, and this time, I was going to do everything right.

When we got home after skiing, and I'd drifted from room to room because I couldn't sit still, all the while pretending to be looking for my phone, which I knew very well was placed on its edge on the counter, Thomas suggested we meet in Oslo a few days later.

"I thought we could eat at Olivia," said Thomas as I was on my way up the stairs to look at myself in the bathroom mirror. I didn't know what Olivia was. My hair had gone flat under my cap. I yanked at it to get it to look different.

"And then we can go dancing," yelled Thomas from below in the living room. I lost my balance and had to hold on to the sink. Two red, almost square splotches spread over my cheeks.

I walked slowly down the stairs. Thomas sat with his hands in his lap, looking happy, as if knowing something no one else knew.

"You like dancing?" he asked.

"I don't know," I said.

"Shall we give it a try?" He got up and turned up the radio, which was playing a tango melody from 1920, and began walking toward the stairs with outstretched arms. I held the banister and did a half turn on the last step, so that I swung right out into the hallway instead of going to him in the living room.

"I think I forgot to fetch the mail," I said.

I stood outside a long time, but the frost, far from clearing up the red splotches in my cheeks, only became more entrenched, as if becoming welded with my blood. The pot of Easter lilies from Thomas stood on a stump at the front door. They tolerated the frost well, the sharp, yellow hue seeming clean and smooth over the grey stump.

"Thanks for being so nice to Carl," said Thomas when I came back in with a circular from the farmers' co-op.

"Just doing my job," I said, relieved the radio was turned back down.

Thomas smiled. I saw some yellow spots in his molars.

"You have gold teeth," I said.

"I like gold," said Thomas.

"Wasn't it very expensive?"

"I was single," said Thomas.

We moved over to the sofa. We sat close together and drank tea. I thought about the sterile laundry room at Carl's place, the dry washing machine, the unused sponges in neon stacks on the shelf. The TV was on, there was a program about train trips, dangerous train trips, mountain passages in Ecuador, the desert express through Namibia, overloaded freight trains over the steppes of Siberia. Wish me luck, said the host meaningfully, before he climbed on board a rickety carriage, wind and snow lashing his face.

"Nor do I have children," said Thomas. "As you know, a big expense."

"Yes," I said, congratulating myself that I hadn't dared ask him that very question.

"Is that something you might envision?" asked Thomas.

When you don't dare ask, nor do you dare answer. I felt like a misprogrammed traffic signal; in my head the light went from yellow to red and back to yellow again. I didn't know

what to say, as it wasn't unthinkable he just meant the train journey, whether I might ever see myself on the world's most dangerous train ride. Yes, I could, *yes*. I only had to be sure I understood the question. But he didn't ask again. I got up to get a cloth to dry the table, as I thought I'd seen a small, wet ring left by my cup.

"That's nothing to shed tears over," said a surprised Thomas when I came back with the cloth, and he stroked my head, my neck, down my back. I looked out the window, thought I heard sparrows shrieking in the darkness, even though it was winter, even though it was night.

I should probably have gone dancing. At that time, I should probably have gone dancing. If I'd said yes, not been so scared of stumbling, of blushing, showing how happy I was, maybe things would've been different.

For that day, in late winter, when we were planning to go to Olivia and maybe dancing after, Thomas waited on the platform with snow in the fur lining of his hood. He didn't hug me, only put his arms around my shoulders and looked at me through the whirling snow.

"What comes to mind when I say Hiroshima?" he asked.

"Burn wounds," I said.

"You're the best," said Thomas. "You're the absolute best."

Then I walked beside him up Karl Johan and onto Prinsens gate, followed him into a travel agency, and watched as he sat at the desk of a boy with bleached hair and said that next winter, in nine months, he wanted to travel around the world.

Afterward, I held on to the pain. I took it out time and again, clutching it by the hand, remembering how I waited for the laughter to begin. The laughter of everyone at the travel

agency, their shoulders shaking over their keyboards, the floor spattered with tears of laughter, as Thomas sat with his credit card in hand and smiled indulgently: Did you think this was real? Did you think I was going to stay here to stay with *you*? Did you really *believe* that?

But no one laughed. I stood behind his chair, my reflection a blurred shadow in the window pane.

"And I want you to be a part of it," said Thomas, and I had to turn away, I couldn't just let be, I had to see if anyone was standing behind me.

"It all comes down to finding a good convertible," said Thomas and pulled the chair out for me. I got a glass of red wine at once, an enormous vine covering the brick wall next to the table, growing up the beams of the lean-to, the outermost stalks hanging almost at eye-level.

We were at Olivia, just as he'd said, he'd kept all the promises he made, but I couldn't pay attention because it suddenly dawned on me: I should've had vines in the garden. Thomas was going on about how we'd drive a convertible in Hawaii, go on volcano excursions, and visit to the observatory to look through the telescope, I'd have a silk scarf in my hair and sunglasses, we can even have matching pullovers, shouted Thomas and laughed as I cursed my slowness, my walls were just as empty outside as in, I could've had clematis cascading around windows and doors in the summer, it would've been like living in a nest of soft colours, god damn it, I thought as I stroked Thomas by the hand. And at the same time I wished time would stand still, for I remembered the time Mum had tried to destroy the car's roof with an axe, Dad got her laid out on the pavement and stepped on her wrist, the axe trembling against the pavement, Dad said to get inside, and I wanted to be here and now, together with Thomas, I wanted it so bad I forgot

where I was. It wasn't real, it was still winter, but now violet flowers floated down over our table, falling from nowhere, as it were.

"It's a shame Hiroshima has got such a bad rap," said Thomas as he tapped on his iPad. "It's said to be a really nice place. Lots of trees, boulevards, cafes, great people. But everyone thinks of kids running about with their skin falling off. It's not fair."

"I'd like to go to Hiroshima," I said.

"I wonder whether we shouldn't spend New Year's there. What do you think? Instead of Tokyo?"

Maybe it wasn't too late. Maybe I still had the chance to make it right again. The house had been paid off. I owed no more debts to anyone. I needed to get to the plant nursery as fast as I could. I needed to plant clematis and pluck spruce sprigs to cover the ground since the roots are delicate, they don't tolerate light. I said I couldn't afford a round-the-world tour. Not a problem, he said. He'd pay for my ticket. He'd been saving for years, he said, I didn't know who to go with, but now I've enough for the both of us!

An hour passed, the food disappeared beneath my utensils, just like all the other hours I could've used becoming better acquainted with my boyfriend. I stared hard at Thomas, he didn't notice the unsteady hammerblows of suspicion landing on the tabletop between us. The pasta had been heavy and rich, the sauce was full of cream and truffle and flakes of smoked sea salt, I remembered nothing of what we'd been discussing. I didn't know salt could taste like this. I drank espresso, nibbled on small, hard almond biscuits, and tried to listen.

"I'm looking forward to riding the train with you in Japan," said Thomas.

"So am I."

"But first, Thailand. Start gradual! And *then* Japan."

"And then Hawaii," I said, making my voice flat so he wouldn't notice how my heart was pounding.

No one had ever bought a surprise for me. No one had celebrated my birthday or sent me flowers. No one outside of the health and welfare office had invited me out to a restaurant, and even then I had to buy my own drinks. It was as if I'd never before smiled. The face I used for speaking and laughing felt foreign, if anyone out there knows what I mean?

"There's nothing that says we *have* to bring in the New Year in Tokyo," said Thomas with a violent fit of coughing, upsetting his wine glass in his lifted hand.

Pages 183-197: The trip

We arrived at Gardermoen Airport at the same time. I'd combed over the regulations. No prohibited items in the hand luggage, no scalpel, lighter fluid or brass knuckles. Only wallet, mobile, notepad and a long, sharpened pencil. Thomas's back was in front of me the whole time, I don't remember what he was wearing, but Ida had on a grey dress, which resembled an expensive sack over her slender body.

The airport shops displayed silk scarves, blue leather wallets, boots with unlikely pointy toes, and everywhere there was the smell of perfume. I was shuttled inside together with all of it. Thomas was here, the past could stay outside feeling ashamed. Ida ignored the luxury goods, she wasn't visibly impressed. She said something about coffee. Bangkok still hadn't appeared on the list of departures. I wasn't in the air yet, lots could go wrong. I sat by a small round table and leaned against the hard back support. The voices around me were like the chirping of grasshoppers.

Thomas was keyed up, I recognised the tone of voice from all those evenings he'd read aloud from the travel guides. He'd been saving for this moment over many years. He kept trying to get her to speak, but she seemed distant, almost sullen, as if she was going on a boring trip for her job or meeting with the tax authorities. I'd caught a glimpse of her passport, which was covered with stamps and visas. Now they sat here each with a cup of espresso. Ida sipped with pursed lips. I recorded in my notepad that she was wearing sunglasses whose brand I couldn't discern; even the shadow covering her eyes seemed somehow upscale.

"Well, this is our holiday," said Thomas.

"In theory one could hijack the plane with this pencil," I spoke into the table top.

"Should we get a croissant?" said Thomas.

"Panic will probably break out." I said. "Hence necessitating an example to be made."

"Prices here are a little steep," said Thomas. "Not that that makes any difference," he hastened to add when Ida raised her eyebrows.

"You don't kill the one who's screaming loudest," I said.

"This is our holiday, regardless."

"You kill his friend."

"Airplane food, after all, is airplane food," Thomas decided.

I heard his chair scrape against the floor.

"You have to demand respect from the very first moment," I said, turning away. I crossed my legs and examined my new shoes. They were made of soft leather, the sole lined with tiny, round nails.

It was day, but it felt like night. We'd landed in Bangkok before sunrise for a stopover. I'd gone to the airport lounge, shown my business ticket to a lady with a pillbox hat and swan-like neck, and been let in without any questions. I sat in a wing chair and watched as Ida and Thomas drank beer and ate potato crisps from a low bowl.

Later, once we'd landed and took the bus to the hotel—a two-storey building with columns and archways built around a small pool surrounded by palm trees and bamboo partitions—I'd hoped to get a couple hours' sleep. I'd been first to board the plane. When Ida and Thomas came in to sit some rows in front, I bent my head down deep, as if bowing for them. I remembered little from the rest of the flight, hadn't eaten any of the food I was served, hadn't packed any blankets or sleep mask or cleansing water for my face. I didn't take in much of what was going on, apart from Ida's smooth hand with thin diamond rings on several fingers, it stuck out now and then over the armrest in front of me. I felt restrained in my own skin, compressed, strangled with my own bare hands, couldn't lean back in this luxurious seat. Her hand, I couldn't think of anything else than that hand, except that it should swell up, the diamonds dig into her skin until it finally occurred to her: She shouldn't be here.

But when we arrived at the hotel, and I'd waited until they'd gone up to the room before going down to the reception to check in, I became worried. When she was out of my field of vision, I couldn't envision her either. I ran up the broad stone steps to the second floor, an old hotel maid speeding after me, and a young boy in a bellboy cap carrying my big, new suitcase.

The door to their room was broad and dark and closed. I walked right past it, as slow as I could, the maid dragging her feet, bowing each time I turned my head. I heard nothing. No voices, no music, no cabinet doors being opened, no rustling among coat hangers.

When I opened the door to my room, it was even worse. The bellboy put down the suitcase, the maid bowed again, and then I was alone. The gossamer-thin mosquito netting above my bed was like a sticky spiderweb (and probably teeming with bacteria), there were wide gaps in the floor planks, and when I looked closer at the door handle, I found a big, greasy fingerprint on the underside.

Two hours later the room smelled strongly of rubbing alcohol. I'd gone over all surfaces with the disinfectant single-use wipes I'd bought at the chemist's. There'd been fifty in the package, and all the opened paper bags lay in a little heap on the bedspread. My fingers were burning, but I kept rubbing on the wall mirror, which was what I was most anxious for. The mirror was old, antique, framed in polished woodwork, and spindly patterns were spread across the glass, and I couldn't make out whether it was part of the decor or whether it was cracked, whether it was right or wrong, disgusting or wonderful, so I pushed the wipe hard against the mirror surface, pressed my fingers across the glass. Finally, once there was nothing else to rub off, I took all the empty bags, opened the door and walked carefully out on the covered veranda that belonged to all the rooms on this floor. The same maid, with deep furrows in her brow, hastened over and carefully took the packaging out of my hands while bowing deep, as if my rubbish were a favour. I thought about Erling and all the complaint letters from the city waste management. I watched her as she went. Below us lay the swimming pool, and I already knew it, they were there. Ida sat dillydallying with some sunscreen, dabbing it on her cheekbones, rubbing, massaging, she'd brought four different kinds, and her green bikini was held together by thin laces tied at her sides. Thomas lay sleeping open-mouthed, arms hanging down on either side of the sun lounger, and I turned and went back into my own room. I wasn't crying, and finally fell asleep.

"Wat Phra That Doi Kham," I said as I tried to fasten the broken seatbelt. The taxi driver didn't answer, just swung the car out from the edge of the sidewalk and began driving. In my heart, a parrot was squawking.

I lay my arm out the window. The sun burned down on my skin. My phone kept dinging, reminders from my calendar of all the things Thomas had intended to show me. Such a thorough boyfriend! Even the name of the restaurant was in it, with red thumbtacks on the light-green map. This evening, for instance, they'd be eating seafood. I'd already ordered a table.

The driver gasped. A moped swerved off the road in front of us and ran into a telephone pole, and we barely managed to swing around him. The rider flew in slow motion over the handlebars and landed in a ditch. He got up immediately—some hens flapped around his feet—brushed his legs off and bowed to all sides. I leaned back in the seat. Thomas wanted me to be here. I still had access to his plans. He'd blocked me, but forgot to change the most important setting of all: the activities saved in his Outlook calendar were still shared to my phone. No, you listen! It was he who'd given me access to the calendar, so I'd know when he had late shift in Oslo and wasn't coming over. That was his suggestion. And it was my place she'd taken. I was the one who should be sitting next to him in the taxi on the way to Wat Phra That Doi Kham. It was me he wanted to share mosquito netting with. It was me he wanted to eat seafood with. He knew I was there, I was quite sure of it, in a taxi to the Temple of the Golden Mountain, high above Chiang Mai.

I drank. I drank, and ate, and drank again. Layer upon layer of flavours enveloping the pain. Sediments of coral-red melon bites, sizzling chicken thighs, noodles with small seeds that

burned and corroded. I ate morning glory. I chewed on the green shoots as a Buddha statue flanked by two stone swans stared sternly at me. I hailed a rickshaw, inflatable figures waving their arms along the roadway. People I didn't know bowed deeply at me. Alcoholics Anonymous had their meeting space next to the hotel, with an enormous sign over the entrance, and the building had glass walls so all could see the anonymous alcoholics sitting in a circle and laughing at something or other.

A young boy was standing in the bar, wearing eyeliner and silk pants, and smiled at me. I bought drinks from him. Long drinks, short drinks, strong drinks, drinks topped with whipped cream and cherries. I fumbled with contorted straws and knocked over my glass; before I could even apologise someone was over to wipe up with a bow. I sat on the terrace of the hotel and forgot that I was me. I heard the voice of Thomas and threw myself into a bush with rubbery leaves, but it might not have been him after all. There were colours everywhere. Even the ice at the bottom of my drinks melted to yellow and turquoise and light, light blue. There was wind that didn't blow, birds that didn't sleep, rain that would never fall until spring.

My hands fished for soiled banknotes while a duck flapped about on a roof; as I was about to light a cigarette, I saw there were pictures of entrails on the package.

I followed them to a bar and tripped over a Doberman asleep in a pile of yellow streamers at the entrance. I stood outside a gilded temple while Thomas photographed Ida, her hair flaming in the reflected shine of the gilded sculptures.

I was drunk, and wept next to a smiling corpse, a mummified monk with grey skin and dark sunglasses. He sat completely still in his glass case, smiling to the passers-by, and I wept, though nobody paid me any attention.

I have a photo on my phone, taken on the terrace of Chiang Mai, of a young boy. He is sitting in an easy chair next to a stone column. Sunlight falls aslant over his face, enormous pots with palm trees surround the chair, and the ground is covered by large, sharp stones. I don't remember where it was taken, but I remember Thomas had gone out by himself and Ida was still lying by the pool. She was talking to Bendik on Skype, smoking a cigarette and smiling at the screen. My head was spinning, I had lain awake trying to listen through the valve in the AC unit.

The boy's name was William. In the picture he's stoned, as he was most of the time, probably from some kind of opioid. He was Norwegian-American, nineteen, and often sat on the terrace with a faraway look in his eyes. Nonetheless he looked like he wanted someone to talk to him. He had the expression I knew well from my job, the face of a person who won't live very long.

He careened back and forth between Norwegian and English, but it wasn't hard to follow him, since he enunciated slowly and clearly, as if to soften the jagged edges in his head. He had long hair dyed with violet and lemon yellow streaks, almond eyes, and pouty lips, a beautiful addict in Thailand with pinpoint pupils and white patches in his memory. In the picture William is looking past the camera. As if dreaming in the middle of the day, as if he believes something good is in store for him. The Thais bowed just as deep to him as to me, creeping past us, their backs hunched.

"It's so nice here," said William idly.

Yes, it was nice. Temples, rivers, juice stands, dead monks, living monks. But my phone was full of Ida. Ida drinking coffee, putting her key card in her bag, going into a toilet stall, with the tips of her shoes I could see under the gap amid the hissing and tinkling. What time she ate breakfast, how long she liked to shower, the email address to the investment firm that was about

to find out how things *actually* stood. It felt like having fever, the same thoughts rushing by, again and again. As soon as I could find out how things *actually* stood, everyone else would find out, too.

"Have you seen all the snakes?" asked William, nodding toward the empty, tiled terrace floor.

"It's hard to avoid," I said automatically.

There was clearly nobody home at William's. Only the light in the outer hall was on, just as it often is with the people I end up with.

Hot patches spread across my throat. I pinched myself on the back of the hand under the table and began thinking in punctuation. Large, slanted thoughts in italics. I was always ending up at the losers' table. What was it that caused all these insane people to seek me out, while the only person I *wanted* to talk to had blocked me on every conceivable platform? All the while Ida lay down there talking to her husband, as if travelling around the world with another person were some kind of *right*. She *took* my ticket. She *knew* what that did to me, had *absolutely* seen all my attempts to call Thomas, and *she'd gone and taken it anyway*.

I got up abruptly from my chair and took a step toward William, who sat biting his lip. I thought of the time Erling stopped taking the prescriptions Anne-Brith Jacobsen had got the municipal medical officer to write him. "There's something stuck in my field of vision," he complained, with lipstick on his teeth.

I bent down toward my bag, which was leaned against one of the potted palms.

"Do you want a coffee?" I asked, my voice sharper than normal. I didn't wait for an answer, just whipped around and walked resolutely toward the bar at the end of the terrace, didn't look around before throwing the big rock from the pot into the pool below us. I heard her

gasp when the water struck her skin, for the water in Chiang Mai is cold, they don't heat the pools. The sun's shining, the sun's shining, I whispered to myself while Ida tried to dry off her phone with a towel. I ordered two cappuccinos from the boy with the silk pants. He looked at me, his head askance, and when I got the cups, I saw that one of them had my face outlined with cinnamon in the foam.

When I came back to our table, William tore open the bag of sugar and emptied it in the cup. Then he put his index finger in the warm coffee and slowly stirred it. I stared. Red flames shot up along the skin, but he didn't even look at his hand. The sun was shining. The birds were talking. I heard rustling in some long strips of tissue paper in a tree.

"Can you tell me where I am?" asked William.

"Chiang Mai."

"What?"

"In Thailand."

"But I only took ten of them!"

I remembered how Hildegunn, during her blackout, had amused herself by gluing blister packs of medicine to the underside of the kitchen chairs, only to completely lose it when she couldn't find them later. Or the time she took too much Valium and fell out of her chair. She lay on the floor, drooling, as I picked up the cigarette butts from her singed rug.

"I only need to get hold of that invoice," she said.

I shrugged and vacuumed the rug around her.

And a long time ago, when Erling was sitting in his house and wanted to quit the medicines, his hands were all wet. He shook, but refused to cry ("I'll never give those assholes the pleasure," he said through clenched teeth).

"It'll probably be sunny tomorrow as well," I said.

"I stopped growing when I was sixteen," said William. "All that angel dust ruined my growth hormones."

"What's angel dust?" I asked.

"Something that makes you oblivious to pain."

"Is it fun?"

"I tried to kick down a door once. The next day I knew something was off. I'd broken my leg."

"Why'd you have to kick down the door?"

"I forgot it was locked."

I stared at him.

"Angel dust," he repeated.

"Right," I said.

"You can rip somebody's arm off. Clean off. They just go on like nothing's happened. But where am I now?"

"Chiang Mai," I repeated and tried to order more coffee.

"I checked my browser's history. And my passport. It says I was in Ecuador."

William glared with damp eyes.

"I spent 39 dollars only on coffee at the airport, and I don't know how I got here. I woke up this morning and was aching all over."

"I can imagine how that might've felt."

"And now I won't make Thanksgiving either," said William. Then he laughed, long and loud, lifted the burned hand in the air, and waved to the boy in the silk pants.

I couldn't hear through concrete floors. I sometimes misunderstood their plans. This resulted in some wasted trips. I spent a whole day wandering about in city centre with tears on my new eyelashes. I ran into empty restaurants, through side streets with grapefruit stands, into a shopping centre with many floors. I came back to the hotel with shopping bags made of thick, exclusive paper and a feeling I'd been thrown off track.

Then they were there. I ran right into them at the reception desk. Ida looked calmly at me while fishing for something in her bag. It was a short, flat glance, no trace of recognition. I couldn't move even when Thomas came up to her side and offered her a bottle of water. He didn't see me. He only saw Ida. When they'd gone, I remained standing with my shopping bags dangling heavily against my knee.