

From *The One Who Loves You Most*
(*Den som elsker deg høyt*)
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1

Her back was pushed against the seat as they drove up the narrow, winding roads.

Fie saw the contours of the olive trees on the steep mountainsides; glimpsed the lake far down below. She felt slightly nauseous and so straightened up a little, turning her gaze to the windscreen. The hares, like fast flecks across the road – or something else? Simon’s foot, testing the brakes, but by then they were already gone.

She glanced at Lukas in the rearview mirror. He was sleeping, the back of his head against the car seat, his mouth half open. His hair curled around his ears, like soft snail shells.

She leaned back again, looked up towards the top of the mountain. *Fuentes de Cesna*. An erratic collection of luminous dots. Their car wound its way up through the bends – at times the road was so steep that they came to a complete stop. Simon cursed under his breath and hit the gas pedal, revving the motor, the smell of petrol seeping into the car. They rolled back slightly, before jerking ahead again.

And the further they made it up the mountain, the more often the red triangles appeared.

Curvas peligrosas.

Hazardous bends.

*

Lukas ran across to the stairs the moment they walked through the door.

‘Look, Mummy! They’ve put out some teddy bears for me!’

‘And a bottle of red wine,’ added Simon as he walked into the kitchen.

Fie moved slowly, looking around. Antique white walls – the smell of paint still hung in the air. In the little living room, which the front door opened straight into, were a small sofa and two chairs, all upholstered in brown leather. The glass cabinet opposite the sofa had space for several dozen bottles of wine. She’d slipped Susana fifty euros to fill up the top two shelves. Then she’d put a few bottles in the bottom of her bag, too.

She walked into the kitchen. Marine blue and white stone countertops set across rustic brick columns. Flowery plastic curtains hung down from the countertops, hiding the frying pans, pots, plates, gas cylinder, knives. Outside the kitchen was a little patio with a fireplace, some dark wooden furniture, a laundry drying rack. A square had been cut out of the corrugated roof, providing a glimpse of the sky. It looked as if someone had clipped a dark blue piece of cloth with pinking shears. A tiny bathroom had been created in a nook.

She made her way back towards the living room. A flight of stairs led up to the bedrooms, divided in two by a landing. Her hands passed over the cool wrought iron railing as she walked up the staircase, her trainers rocking softly against the stone steps. She passed Lukas, who was sitting on the landing with the stuffed toys. His voice below her, his gesticulating hands as he played, *you shouldn’t be here, no, you shouldn’t be here, now you’ll see which one of us is strongest, bang, smash, crash – you’re dead!*

She continued up the stairs until she reached the top. Two small bedrooms on the left; on the other side the bedroom she and Simon would share, wall to wall with a tiny bathroom. The bathtub was small and deep, with a large, square window above it. Beside the toilet was a sink, and on the wall above hung a mirrored cabinet with sliding doors. One of the mirrors was cracked, a black stripe stretching from the top right-hand corner and down towards the left.

She looked at herself in the mirror; brushed her hair away from her face. Smoothed away the lines in her forehead with her fingertips. Let them return. Pulled them smooth again. Let them return.

As she entered Lukas’s room she heard Simon’s voice from downstairs: *Fie, are you coming?* His voice, all the time, in the weeks he was with them, before he went away for just

as long. Hot. Cold. Hot. Cold. Their relationship felt like a shower with a defective temperature gauge.

‘Coming,’ she said, glancing at the image of the Virgin Mary over Lukas’s bed. It hung there lopsided, tilting down to the right. The picture had faded in the sun, its other colours now almost indistinguishable from the white of the headscarf. Fie stepped up onto the bed to straighten the picture. As she nudged it, she caught sight of some lines behind it; lifting the picture from the wall, she saw them clearly. Two long lines were scored into the brick to form an inverted Latin cross. They must have been etched with great force, or a sharp knife, because the lines were deep and jagged. She stood there looking at them, and felt something cool against her arm. A draught from the window.

Had they forgotten to paint behind the picture? she wondered. Then the sound of Simon’s voice again: *Fie, what are you doing up there?*

She re-hung the picture and got down from the bed, the slats creaking loudly. She knew he’d have already opened the bottle of wine and filled two glasses.

She made her way down the stairs, and as she came to the landing one of Lukas’s stuffed animals collided with her foot. A yellow rabbit with round, blue eyes and a red felt smile.

‘He did a back flip onto you!’ said Lukas, laughing. ‘First he killed the dog, and now I just commanded him to get your foot. So he did!’

She smiled. He still thought cuddly toys were great fun to play with, even though he was almost eight. She grabbed hold of him and turned him upside down – to feel a flash of joy run through her body at the fact that he was still small. And at the fact that she finally had the energy to do such things again.

‘You little hooligan,’ she said, her words drowned out by his shrieks. His curls swept against the grey-white stone as she carried him down the stairs.

Soon the three of them were in the kitchen together. Lukas’s laughter, Simon’s smile, their bodies jostling each other, warm and soft, seemingly by chance. *This has to work out,* she thought. *A new start. Just the three of us.*

Two wine glasses had been set out on the kitchen table; both were filled three-quarters to the brim.

‘It’s okay to have a glass today,’ said Simon, looking straight at her. ‘It’s the weekend.’

A drop of wine had run down the label to spread across the paper. The blood-red stain made the letters run, and soon everything was unreadable.

*

She felt how her back was pushed down against the mattress. He lay atop her for a few seconds, heavy and warm, before rolling off. She drew a deep breath. It felt like coming out of a sauna.

He lay on his side with his arm across her chest, stroking her cheek with his thumb.

‘There are so many people who envy the life we’re going to have now – the real Spanish village life. You know that?’

She looked up at the ceiling. Nothing in her body moved. The silent moments between them – previously bubbles of expectation that continually burst to form new ones – had become an unbearable vacuum.

‘I’m looking forward to spending time here with you,’ she said. ‘Even though you’ll be leaving again soon.’

Simon didn’t respond. He got out of bed and moved to stand beside her feet; lifted them and propped them up on the duvet. This had touched her, before. Now it made her feel like a cripple. He made his way down the side of the bed, tucking the duvet in around her body, until it was almost impossible to breathe. Then he lay down beside her with an expression that seemed to indicate she was something he had fixed.

‘It’ll be good for you to be here while I’m gone,’ he said. ‘I get the impression that people help each other in places like this. They pay close attention, take care of one another. You’ll get your strength back, and then we’ll try again. It’s still possible – or at least, I hope so? I mean, it isn’t as if anything’s broken in there, is it?’

His thumb again, back and forth across her cheek, rough and questioning. She closed her eyes and held her breath. Was this what it was like to lie in a coffin? Stiff-backed, with your hands folded across your stomach. People looking at you, stroking your skin, remembering you as you once were.

She thought of Lucia, the young woman who had lived here before her, and who had died in this room. She tried to imagine her face. Had she, too, lay here beside her husband like this, feeling that something was fundamentally wrong?

Simon’s voice, right up against her ear:

‘Fie?’

She opened her eyes; let out her breath.

‘No,’ she said. ‘Nothing’s broken.’

He rolled over onto his back.

‘Have you found out anything more about what caused it?’ he asked.

Something began to stir in her chest. A thin layer of plastic film covered the ceiling. Out of the corner of her eye she saw him turn towards her. One of his hands wriggled beneath the duvet to squeeze her thigh.

‘I know it’s hard,’ he said. ‘I’m only asking because I just wonder whether there’s anything we can do to prevent it happening again.’

The subject was like a boomerang. Every time she thought she’d cast it from her a little time passed and then it came back again, the same question and answer.

‘You’ve asked me several times already,’ she said. ‘There’s nothing you can do to prevent it.’

His hand slid from her thigh.

‘I just think it would be nice for Lukas to have a sibling,’ said Simon. ‘Before there’s an entire generation between them, I mean.’

It was getting hot under the duvet. She lifted her feet and pulled it down from her chest.

‘You can’t just order a child like that,’ she said. ‘And anyway, it isn’t you who has to carry it for nine months, breastfeed, get up in the middle of the night, make sure that Lukas doesn’t get jealous – all that stuff.’

‘I could try to get myself a job on land? It isn’t easy for me either, spending so much time away from you both.’

She noticed how her body tensed at the thought of them being together all the time. When he was home, he made sure that she didn’t drink too much; ensured she worked on her content marketing articles and kept to her deadlines. Made sure that everything was okay with Lukas – that he ate fish three times a week, went to bed before eight o’clock, had a bath every day, did his homework. Everything was under control, as Simon put it – and she felt like one of the crew members on his ship.

‘You look you irritated,’ he said.

Before she could defend herself, he added:

‘And that’s absolutely fine – it’s tough. But although the thought of another child is overwhelming, you start to imagine what that child might be like, you know?’

She nodded, mostly to avoid speaking, and turned to face the wall.

‘I have to try to get some sleep now,’ she said.

A few seconds passed. Then he lifted the duvet and crept beneath it, wriggling close to her. His arm around her waist. She became one with his stomach, knees, breath – heavy

waves that tried to force her into sleep. She lay there open-eyed, refusing to surrender. The rhythm of his breathing changed to that of sleep, and she pushed him away with her backside. The withdrawal of his sweaty stomach felt like pulling off a plaster.

She lay all the way at the edge of the bed, shoving the duvet even further away. The air was cool, and smelled faintly of paint and ammonia. Trails of cracks intersected each other as they crossed the wall. Someone had tried to paint over them, but they showed through.

You can scrub and paint and clean until your nose stings, thought Fie. But it'll still be under there somewhere.

Nothing disappears completely. Everything surfaces in the end.

2

'It's okay, Mum. I'll see you in a few hours. It'll be fine – I promise.'

It was almost worse when Lucas behaved like this – as if he was the adult and she the child.

'You'll be able to speak Spanish,' she said, her thighs burning after squatting down on her haunches for so long. 'And you're bound to have made yourself some friends by the end of the first break. That's just how you are, Lukas.'

He smiled and gave her a hug.

'See you later, Mum.'

As Lukas walked towards the classroom she saw that his rucksack was too small, even though she'd let the straps all the way out. He'd grown so much over the past six months. She'd been there the whole time, and yet it still felt as if she had missed it.

She thought of their first summer in Benalmádena, having left everything in Norway behind after weeks of packing. Their entire life in moving boxes, they had flown across the water to something new – albeit something familiar to her. The sun shone from morning to night, and Lukas acted as if nothing had happened. For a while she thought it was simply that easy – that she could fly him from one life to another, just like that. They spent long days on the beach, and she could hardly get him to go home. He played in his room as if it had always been his room; made houses out of shoeboxes for his soft toys under the bed. He even learned some Spanish words – *hola, hasta luego, gracias* – and said them spontaneously when he met people in the street, or when they ate out at restaurants. He was four years old – a world champion in resilience, able to tear himself free from everything without pain. But the first

day she dropped him off at the Spanish kindergarten, and he cried and clutched at her legs, she understood that this wasn't quite true. He wanted to go back to the kindergarten in Norway. *Lillefot*, he said. *I want to go to Lillefot.*

Then some arms appeared and grabbed Lukas; a brief smile was cast her way – *he'll be fine* – and the door was closed. The cartoon squirrels on the door smiled indefatigably at her with their black, lifeless eyes. She stood outside until she heard Lukas's voice. His laughter. Only then did she turn and leave.

In the hours she had to fill until she returned to collect Lukas, she sat at home and produced articles, spoke with various sources, investigated and wrote. But she had never managed to solve the greatest mystery – the one she'd lived with since she was thirteen years old. First for all those years with her mother's insistent statement: 'He's your father, Fie.' Even though she'd sensed that something wasn't quite right. And then, just after she became a teenager: 'No, it isn't him. I don't know who your father is. You'll just have to try to forget about it. It's so long ago, I simply don't know. But we've managed just fine, just the two of us, haven't we?'

She had no father. But luckily Lukas did. Lukas had a wonderful dad.

Simon made packed lunches; loaded and unloaded the dishwasher. Sorted Lukas's clothes, helped him with his homework and brushing his teeth, read to him in bed. That gentle authoritarian voice – *because I said so*. With a smile. *Open wide now, Lukas. Tell me where we got to in the book. No, you're not having anything sweet in your sandwich today. Let's try the five times table again.* She thought of his arms, just as purposeful and productive as when he steered his ship across the North Sea. And every time she was sick, or tired, or just wanted to lie down – like after the surgery – he was like a machine running ever faster, performing his work ever more efficiently. At certain moments she even felt that he liked her being dependent on him, and then she didn't know who she despised most – him or herself.

The light dazzled her as she exited the school; she put on her sunglasses and walked back towards the house. Past the bakery with its oval wooden sign – *La Panaderia* – hanging above the door; the stalls with their rusty doors no longer able to stand upright and so sagging down on one side; the garden with the chickens and the lemon tree weighted with fruit. Its lowest branches hung down towards the ground, as if in silent torture beneath the sun.

She rounded the corner and began to walk up Calle Malaga. White terraced houses lined either side of the narrow road. Sounds from behind the curtains that hung before the thin doors – Spanish rhythms, monotone newscasts, the meows of cats, a hand drill, the chinking of glasses, a plastic bucket being moved.

Fie thought back to the day she had heard about the suicide. She'd been lying there dozing in bed, still not quite herself because of the complications that had followed the abortion. Susana was cleaning the bedroom around her, the purple cloth picking up grey streaks of dust as she spoke about the tragedy.

Susana told Fie about Lucia, who had been so happy to discover she was pregnant. It had been a longed-for child. And she and Leo had seemed so in love – they were doing up the house, looking forward to moving out to the finca. Then, at some point, the rumours had started about Lucia having had an affair with a man in the village. Others said she was hearing voices in her head; that she was losing her mind. Many noticed that she kept more and more to herself – that she seemed anxious and nervous. And then the suicide happened, on the day her baby was due.

'Perhaps it isn't so strange that she took her own life,' said Fie. 'If she was unstable and filled with anxiety, I mean?'

Susana hesitated a moment before she turned to Fie.

'But isn't there something unnatural about taking the life of your own child?'

Fie felt her cheeks grow hot. She turned towards the window and placed her hands atop the duvet, her stomach still feeling sore and hollow.

'Anyway, you know what they say,' said Susana. 'No smoke without fire. Those rumours...'

Then she fell silent. Fie propped herself up on her elbows and looked at her.

'What do you mean?'

Susana's shoulder blades moved beneath her white t-shirt. They looked like wings that refused to open.

'What do you mean?' Fie repeated.

Susana wiped more quickly with the cloth, the purple fabric sweeping across the chests of drawers and wardrobe doors.

'Lucia was an interloper,' she said finally. 'And women in the village don't like interlopers. Especially not young, beautiful women from the city. And if they found out that she'd had an affair with one of their husbands...'

'But wasn't it investigated?' asked Fie. 'If the suicide seemed suspicious?'

Susana snorted.

'Investigated? They have their own brand of justice up there. And if they've decided that nobody should go digging around, well – nobody will go digging around.'

Fie lay back in the bed again and looked up at the ceiling. She'd heard about how many unsolved cases there were in these kinds of places. Murders and other crimes that would never be solved because there were neither the funds nor the capacity to investigate them. Nor the desire to.

There had been a case in Fuentes de Cesna some years ago, too, involving a Norwegian woman. She was on holiday in Spain with her husband, and disappeared from the village after having visited a friend. Fie hadn't been able to stop herself from digging around to find out more – she'd lived in Benalmádena, and in any case she'd had her editor at the *Dagbladet* breathing down her neck. Afterwards the police officer, Verner, had praised her skills as an investigator. That's what he had called her. Not a journalist – an *investigator*.

The day after the conversation with Susana she had sent an email to the *Dagbladet* editorial team. *I have an exciting cold case*, she wrote. *I want to go up there and start investigating it right away*. She had written about everything Susana had told her; had exaggerated a little, too. Then she'd deleted the email from her *Sent* folder – just in case. If Simon had discovered the real reason she wanted to move to the village, he would have put a stop to the project there and then.

Afterwards, everything had happened so quickly. Susana had helped her brother-in-law to paint the walls and clean the house, and now here Fie was. Wandering among the olive trees, high up in Granada's mountains, without knowing a single soul – and thinking that the whole thing was absurd. If only she'd had a *real* story – but all she had were Susana's vague words. And anyway, what help would it be if it turned out there was something to the rumours and she discovered the truth about what had happened? Lucia was dead, and so was the child.

Perhaps it was more about a yearning to understand. If it was so hard to remove a clump of cells – if that caused such repercussions – then what was it like to choose to end a life right before it took its first breath, that first streak of light, and you could hold it against your breast?

A man was coming down the road on the opposite side of the pavement. He was short, and walked with a rolling gait. On his head was a blue cap, pulled down over his ears. As Fie passed him, he called out to her:

'Adonde va?'

She stopped and looked at him; he stood there, looking back at her. Then he cut diagonally across the road, and the closer he came, the stronger she could smell the spirits on him, the intense odour of old marzipan.

‘*Adonde va?*’ he repeated. Fie pointed to the houses in the street above.

‘Calle Sevilla,’ she said. ‘We moved in on Saturday. I’m Fie.’

She held out her hand. He looked at it as if it were an animal she had pulled from her pocket.

‘I know very well who you are,’ he said. ‘I’m asking you where you’re *going*.’

He looked at her, breathing heavily through his nose. One eye looked off to the side, while the other looked straight at her.

A woman came down the street then, her footsteps quick.

‘*Alfredo*,’ she said in a sharp voice. Then she walked over to Fie and smiled apologetically.

‘I’m sorry,’ she said, pulling Fie with her as she moved up the street. ‘You mustn’t mind Alfredo. He’s...’

She released Fie’s arm to make a circling motion with a finger at her temple.

‘You know what they say about villages? There are three things you’ll always find there – a church, a bar and a *tonto*. And that back there was the local oddball – but he’s harmless, really. The only mischief he gets up to is drinking too much and stumbling around.’

The woman laughed and held out her hand.

‘Maria,’ she said. ‘Maria Alvarez.’

Her hand was thin – almost frail – but with a surprisingly firm grip.

‘*Me encantada*,’ said Fie.

‘*Igualmente*.’

Maria had a deep, pleasant voice. She was probably in her late thirties and slim, with long black hair, dark-blue eyes and pale skin. A black scarf was draped softly at her neck above her red training jacket.

‘You’ve moved into José’s house, haven’t you?’

Fie nodded.

‘It’s nice to have new people around,’ said Maria. ‘It doesn’t happen very often, to put it mildly.’

She laughed a little before she continued.

‘Would you like to take a walk with me? I always take a walk on Wednesdays after I’ve dropped my stepdaughter, Felicia, off at school.’

Fie smiled. ‘*Claro!*’

*

They walked along the road that led to the neighbouring town of Iznahar. The air was warm. A cock crowed somewhere in the distance, above the drone of a tractor.

‘I love to walk,’ said Maria.

Fie glanced down the valley; the olive trees were like half-dry cabbages. The road twisted down towards the turquoise lake like a worn rope. Above the brown and green fields were the mountains, the snow-covered Sierra Nevada at their centre. Sharp and white, it made the clouds seem no more than a greyish theatrical backdrop.

‘Me too,’ Fie lied.

She’d always found it meaningless, this kind of aimless traipsing around – it was one of the reasons she didn’t want to go back to Norway. The skiing trips, the mountain hikes, the sailing expeditions. All the outdoorsy things you had to do – almost desperately – the moment the sun appeared in the sky.

‘Do you like it here?’ asked Maria.

Fie nodded.

‘Yes, we’re having a nice time so far. The place feels real – I was so tired of all the tourists on the Costa del Sol. I lived there with my parents when I was a little girl, and there were a lot of tourists even back then. When I moved back with Simon and Lukas four years ago, it felt as if there were more Scandinavians and Brits than Spanish residents. *Drunk* Scandinavians – and even drunker Brits.’

Maria smiled and shook her head.

‘I can imagine. But we almost never get tourists here. Apart from in the summer, when the occasional bus might turn up. People wandering around the streets, snapping photos and looking at us as if we’re an endangered species. Perhaps we are. So how come you ended up in precisely *this* little village?’

‘Susana was our cleaner in Benalmádena. She told us that her brother-in-law, José, owned a little terraced house up here, just when we were looking to get away from the coast. She said it had been empty for over a year – after tragic incident involving a woman who lived there?’

Maria nodded.

‘Lucia. She lived there with her husband, Leo. They were renting José’s house while they were in a transitional phase – were just supposed to live there until the baby was born and Leo had finished the finca where they were going to live. When he wasn’t in Rute, the

neighbouring town, working at the auto repair shop, he spent every free moment he had working on the finca.’

Silence fell for a moment. Fie heard their steps, out of sync with one another, on the asphalt.

‘The whole thing was *fatal*,’ said Maria.

They continued to walk for a time, their steps offbeat, before Maria spoke again.

‘During her pregnancy, Lucia fell ill. She started to hear voices. It might have been something that was triggered by the pregnancy hormones. My husband Mario tried to treat her. Yes – he’s the village doctor, and I’m the local nurse and his assistant. We work together – which isn’t always easy.’

Maria laughed and rolled her eyes. Fie nodded to indicate for Maria to go on, afraid she’d lose the thread of her tale.

‘There was nothing we could do. The medicines we gave her didn’t help, and it was no use hospitalising her. She got worse and worse, and unfortunately things ended badly for both her and the unborn child. The very same day she was due to give birth, she took her own life. Hung herself in the bedroom.’

Fie jumped at the sudden sound of dogs barking. She glanced at Maria, who simply kept walking at the same pace. The howling was coming from one of the fincas surrounded by dry olive trees. There were several dogs there, chained to metal stakes in the dirt. A huge, brown dog reared up on its hind legs, straining at its rope and barking incessantly. A smaller, black one ran around and around in circles. Several of them were so thin that rows of ribs were visible at their chests.

Beside the house was a man with a long stick, who seemed to be trying to reach something up in a tree. A cigarette butt was jammed into the corner of his mouth; a tattoo that looked like colourless flames covered half his neck. He cast a brief glance at Fie and Maria before he turned to continue poking around in the tree with the stick. Fie caught a glimpse of someone in the kitchen window, a figure with black hair.

‘Who’s that?’ Fie asked when they had moved some distance away and the barking was fainter. ‘Do they run a kennel?’

Maria shook her head.

‘No, they probably use the dogs for hunting hares. Or they’re small-scale olive farmers – like most of the other farms around here. That’s the finca where Lucia and her husband were going to live, by the way. That couple took over the house straight after the tragedy.’

Fie turned, wanting to take another look at the house, but Maria stopped and gripped her arm.

‘There’ll be *sevillanas* at the church tonight. Will you come?’

Sevillanas, thought Fie. What in the world was *sevillanas*?

‘Then you can get to know the other women, too,’ Maria continued. ‘They’re looking forward to meeting you!’

Fie looked at her quizzically.

‘How do they know that I’m coming?’

Maria smiled. Her hand slipped from Fie’s arm.

‘I lied when I said that new people rarely come up here. Actually, new people *never* come up here.’

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