

From *The Last Signs of Love*

(*De siste kjærtegn*)

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The list

Gudrun is dead. My best friend from childhood. I receive the news from my sister – who is still alive. Obviously. It gives me a lacklustre feeling for about three seconds, and then I think: I thought she died years ago. Oh well – but what a shame. Gudrun was good to have.

It's a good thing that death sets a limit for old age. Better a few years too early than one year too late. I cross Gudrun's name off my list of acquaintances – she was my last living friend. Then I sit there, shaking my head slightly, looking at all the crossed off names.

Scratches and scribbles. I remain this way for a minute or so.

Oh well.

Time is hard.

It doesn't exactly get any easier as the years go by.

Although it's quite convenient to be done with keeping track of everything – the greetings, the gifts, the deceptions, diseases and funerals. Still, as I crumple up the piece of paper, I catch myself speculating whether there's anyone left alive to whom I might send a simple Christmas card. It's hard to say. Is it possible that I've lost touch with someone, somewhere along the way? Somebody who now has a disability that restricts their interactions, or who doesn't have much money, or who might have made such a mediocre impression that they were never committed to memory? No, it seems not – but I still have my sister. Or rather, Elisabeth has me. We haven't visited each other in many years, not since our mother finally died. But enough about that.

Reasons not to travel

‘Dear Dr. Solheim’.

The New York–Presbyterian Hospital still sends me invitations. Standardised claptrap. Social time with needlework and blah, blah, blah. Sandwiches and sing-alongs and blah, blah, blah. Bridge, bingo – blah, blah, blah.

I never understood why MacDowell kept the contact between us going, but today I opened the post to find an excessively flattering invitation to give a Women’s Day presentation about the Solheim–Williams method of mitral valve repair. Apparently, lots of people are interested in hearing me talk about when Henry and I operated on various chests. He’s dead now, of course, but before he died it was always him who gave the seminars about our casuistry and methods.

It was better that way.

People pay closer attention when men speak.

Anyway, I’ve already politely declined – and will continue to do so. There are limits. To turn up with my archaic heart surgery techniques – they probably just want to see how old I am.

But I can still walk unaided, and speak clearly enough that an entire auditorium would understand what I was saying – although my mind isn’t as sharp as it once was, and my face is a world map of borders and craters. It takes two hours to do my make-up. At least. No wonder I prefer to stay at home.

The invitation obviously has a hidden agenda. The hospital is probably in need of some pioneer they can roll out to improve their humanistic reputation. All the first female surgeons they’ve used are dead. Duly honoured and buried with their medals for groundbreaking careers.

The thought of applause makes me feel unwell.

If I were to go there, after the presentation someone would quite likely start to dig around for reasons as to why I chose such a demanding specialisation. Were I to answer truthfully, I would have to say: I don’t know.

Audience members would come to me with their notions of working in a male-dominated environment – and I would affirm them all. But I had no time for such childishness – I concentrated on the work. Practically lived at the hospital for almost thirty-five years. It was demanding because it had to be. I could have chosen a more agreeable kind of life, but the heart is all-consuming.

The first floor

I often sit by the kitchen window in my most comfortable chair. I either sleep, or I look out onto the street. The small houses; washing hanging out to dry and green plants. On damp days, narrow streams of water run slowly along the sides of the road, the water carrying small clumps of earth from the flowerbeds with it. And dust. Apart from the seasons' various nuances of light and foliage, nothing much changes. Viewed like this, it's just as boring to live in Paris as it would be to live anywhere else in the world. For the most part, the Rue des Thermopyles is just as silent as my genital region.

That's just how it is.

Not that I miss having intercourse.

Yannick was my last.

He had such terribly ugly testicles. I think they might have been some of the worst things I've ever seen on a human being. But that was over fifty years ago. Every now and again I catch myself thinking that I should check myself with my fingers to see whether I've grown over down there, but of course I know that the vagina does no such thing.

Luckily, I have no health complaints.

But when I let men enter me I ended up with all kinds of problems. Urinary tract infections and bacterial vaginosis and the rest. In fact, most of the sessions were more like naked work-outs, and since it took me a long time to realise how selfish men are, I neither craved nor had an orgasm until I was well into my forties. The fact that I've been such a slow starter in this area is still quite inexplicable to me. Certain illusions are hard to shake.

My sister

‘What?’ my sister shouts at me from the screen.

‘I said I have to go,’ I shout back, ‘I have an appointment at the dentist.’

‘Wait a minute,’ she shouts, ‘I’ll turn up the volume.’

This is how she carries on every time I try to end a conversation.

‘Try again,’ she shouts, leaning forward, her biggest ear towards me. I take off my glasses. There are limits to what one can reasonably be asked to witness.

‘I have to say goodbye now,’ I shout.

‘Oh, right,’ she shouts back, ‘but have you managed to catch any of what I’ve said?’

‘I’m not an imbecile.’

‘Are you having your teeth whitened again?’

‘Yes,’ I shout, ‘and now I have to run.’

‘Run, you, as if – it looks like you’re still in bed. You’re not ill, are you, Bitty?’

‘My name is Birgitte,’ I mumble.

‘What?’ my sister shouts.

‘Nothing,’ I say.

‘We visited Mum and Dad’s grave yesterday. The gardener’s going to plant some new flowers next week.’

‘Okay,’ I say.

A quiet descends, and my sister’s face takes on its hurt expression. I don’t understand how she can be my sister – where does she get this sentimentality from?

‘You don’t care,’ she says.

‘People are never quite as sad at our passing as we think they’ll be,’ I say.

My sister looks even more gloomy.

‘Can’t you be a little more positive?’ she says. ‘It makes life that bit more pleasant.’

I yawn, then shrug my shoulders with a sigh, and look away.

‘Bitty?’ says my sister, ‘you should take a trip down to the seniors’ centre, or join some kind of ladies’ club. What about calligraphy? Or qigong?’

‘I don’t see the point,’ I say. ‘Going to the dentist satisfies my need for social interaction. Next week I’m going to the physiotherapist. And then I have appointments with the doctor, hairdresser, dermatologist and chiropractor. My calendar is full.’

‘I don’t know why I bother,’ says my sister.

‘Nor do I,’ I say.

Elisabeth just sits there, staring at me. With her intense eyes, she looks a bit like our mother. When I see that she wants to tell me something more, I cut her off:

‘They should have put me down ages ago.’

Expectations

I've been in contact with a man online. We've been writing to one another for a few months. He claims his name is Javiér, and that he's an architect. We're going to meet up at some point. He says that he's travelling at the moment, but I suspect that he's really in some kind of institution – a hospital or rehabilitation centre or something like that. I hope he isn't severely injured.

It wouldn't surprise me if he's a severe alcoholic.

It would be just typical, in fact.

Some of my most successful relationships have been with alcoholics – or, more specifically, alcoholics under the age of fifty. After that, such men become almost impossible to rein in. By that point they seem to have lost all control over their drinking. Not to mention the internal damage that manifests as uncontrollable tremors, involuntary farting and burping and hacking – and their appearance, their skin and its stink oozing from the wide-open pores, no, I really can't bear to think of it. But young alcoholics – they border on embodying the very definition of romance, swaggering down the boulevards, in no way marred by their addiction. Still, there's something appealing about being alone. Perhaps this is precisely why my relationships with alcoholics were my most lasting – because my boyfriend needed something else more than he needed me.

Colin

If I manage to get out and about, I eat at Chez Colin. It isn't too far to walk, and the waiters don't treat me like an imbecile. I take a seat at my regular table by the window, and without too much ado am served *ouefs en cocotte* with toast and *café léger*.

My stomach can still just about tolerate it.

If Colin is working, he'll have a chat with me – talk about the weather, football, his children, grandchildren and great-grandchildren.

Sometimes I wonder whether he's flirting with me or if he's just being polite, but if I turn up the charm he gets very confused. Whatever facial expression he's wearing suddenly stiffens, and he hardly dare say a word. Then I have to rescue us both from the situation by bringing up something mundane, such as the neighbour's noisy children, or the last heatwave or the next hurricane; something about decline, illness or death. I don't tell him about Javiér. As if I'm still keeping all my options open.

Potato chips

Today I've hardly managed to get out of bed. All I've done is take a few tedious trips to the bathroom. It occurred to me that I ought to find something to do, but the alternatives were bleak.

Nothing appeals to me.

I suck on a potato chip, simultaneously dreading and looking forward to the day I'll have to start wearing diapers. When no more salt remains, the chip eventually becomes so soggy that it breaks up. The consistency is like floury apples. The bag crackles as I pull out a new potato chip; slide it in and out of the crack between my lips.

You simply have to accept yourself, in the end.

Visions of the future

Mother once said that it would be me who'd find a man first. I remember how reassuring that was. Elisabeth had just knocked a glass of milk off the dining table on purpose. Mother ignored it, and started to speak to me about the future. About my husband, who would surely be a company director – my children, my house with its wide lawn. 'Would you like to have a dog?' my mother asked. Yes, I probably would like to have a dog – then Elisabeth could take it for walks, I added. My sister was delighted at the idea.

Qualities

Javiér writes to me; tells me he can't sleep.

Then he writes nothing further.

He could have just not bothered if he's going to be so brief. And predictable.

Everyone knows how light and disrupted is the sleep of the elderly – he probably has to keep getting up to go to the bathroom because of an enlarged prostate, too.

But of course I don't mention this.

The genitals of the elderly are far from romantic. On the whole, I prefer to avoid thinking of such things. So I ask him whether he's had a bad dream, perhaps? He says he's lying there thinking of an extension he once designed, and which he occasionally walks past with a sense of loathing. Now he's lying there annoyed at his poor handiwork. Then he tacks on a witticism.

It's not in the least bit funny.

It's a shame he has such a terrible sense of humour, but then neither that nor any other kind of charm are qualities I hold in high regard. It'll pass. Before I manage to reply with something polite, he sends me yet another message in which he apologises for his bad joke. Self-insight in men always comes as a pleasant surprise. Deep inside me, a little happiness stirs. How little it takes.

The shame

Some years ago, a series of break-ins occurred in the homes of older residents around Paris. Things were stolen; some acts of vandalism were committed, and sometimes acts of violence or rape. It was quite incomprehensible. Elderly individuals described the vandals on the news – they were two young boys. They gained access to seniors' apartments through various means, such as by posing as carers from the local council, or by saying they needed to read the electricity meter or wanted to share a religious message.

The story that made the greatest impression was when the boys were invited into the home of an old lady, under the pretence that they were from a school newspaper and wanted to interview her about the war. Beaten and bruised, on the news she described how at first she had been happy to have someone to talk to; to think that she might even still be of some use. Then she fell silent. All traces of emotion were erased from her face.

‘No, no,’ she said, before the tears began to fall.

She immediately hid her face in her hands.

And I hid mine.

Over the following days I was overcome by a tremendous sadness. I almost couldn't breathe. I remember how guarded I was, how wary I became of anyone who might want to come in, how afraid I was to go out – so afraid that I felt nauseous, preferred to stay inside behind locked doors. Withdrawn from the window I sat parked in my chair, imagining these young boys in their sportswear. Walking down a pavement with a spring in their step, full of hormones and trauma.

Windows

The weather is quite pleasant. I sit in the window seat and watch people coming and going. This is exactly what it's like, I think. Someone comes, and then they disappear. What's the point in making new friends when they die before we get to know each other? It's exhausting having to constantly clean my black outfit; to attend each funeral, more predictable than the last.

I throw a few crumbs from yesterday's baguette to the pigeons.

At some point I see that Colin is standing outside his restaurant. He waves to me. I wave back.

Saint Lucy

I remember when Mother cut her wedding dress into pieces. She told everyone this was because I was going to be Saint Lucy. I had little desire to be Saint Lucy – not that year nor any other – but Mother had ‘spoken nicely’ to the teacher, as she put it. There was nothing else to report about the procession. It ran its course with me at the front, and everyone was happy. Even my father. Every married couple has its fool.

The hairdresser

I dislike my hairdresser. He comes to my house every other Tuesday. Colin recommended this arrangement when his mother died and her hairdresser became available. One late breakfast at his restaurant I'd hinted that it was starting to become strenuous, getting out to have my hair done. I was really only moaning to give him the opportunity to say something nice about my new wig, but Colin interpreted my complaints as a sign that I was starting to have trouble walking – and he was right about that, too, for that matter, only I didn't want to admit it at the time. So now I'm stuck with this hairdresser, since I want to remain loyal to Colin – the hairdresser even has his own keys to my apartment.

But what I hate most about him is his incessant prattle about my hair. I don't want to hear about the pitiful locks in such detail, but my hairdresser gives them names. *The Last of the Mohicans* behind my left ear – an almost black, fairly thick and stiff solitary strand of hair growing out of a mole. The hairs at the very nape of my neck my hairdresser has named after his boyfriend – *Lorenzo, Lorenzo*. No, that's not true. He's actually named them after his boyfriend's pubic hair. I have no idea what his boyfriend's name is. My hairdresser fusses and coddles my neck – it's incomprehensible. When he curls my fringe, he stares dead-eyed into space, because it doesn't remind him of anything. He tried, for a while, to call the little wisps Colin, but as he said, Colin has more than twice the hair I do – and he has a bald spot. I always feel so shabby once I've had my hair done.

Far from ideal

‘Hello!’

My sister seems to be in a good mood. *Pfft*. She leans towards the screen – I can almost hear the creaking of her bones and joints.

‘*Bonjour*,’ I say. ‘*Ça va?*’

‘I went to see Doctor Storli this morning, and my blood pressure is that of an adolescent,’ she says. ‘Isn’t that wonderful, Birgitte?’

There’s something very grim about old people who brag about their health.

‘Good for you,’ I say.

‘Are you coming home for Christmas?’ she says. ‘It would be lovely to be able to celebrate together.’

The corners of my sister’s mouth jerk upwards. It looks fake. A feigned enthusiasm to unite us. *Pfft*.

She bares her teeth.

Her smile is best viewed from a reasonable distance.

‘Bitty?’ she says.

‘Can’t you put your wig on?’ I say.

She’s quiet for a few seconds, then closes her mouth and leans back, and I almost regret acting so childishly. But then Elisabeth shrugs her shoulders in a disgruntled, submissive gesture, and pulls a wig from the desk drawer. Sets it on her head.

‘Turn it a little to the left,’ I say.

She adjusts the wig; I wrinkle my nose.

‘Now pull it forward a bit. Some of your own is sticking out at your forehead.’

My sister does as I say, and then pushes the strands of hair under the wig with trembling hands. Both at her forehead and behind her ears.

‘Is that better?’ she asks.

‘They sell much nicer wigs in Paris,’ I say.

Now she smiles at me, somewhat duller and more authentic. I smile back at her. This is a nice moment, I have to admit, and the words almost slip from my mouth. But it’s probably just as well that it remains unsaid. She’d only misunderstand.

Morning mood

The first person I found dead was my father. It looked as if he'd fallen asleep in his armchair. His head hung at a slight angle, down to the left; on his shirt was a wet patch of drool. It was simultaneously alarming and serene. I said both 'good morning' and 'hello' several times before going all the way across to him.

My sister and I had got into the habit of keeping a certain distance. Over the course of a few years the changes in him had made us uneasy when he was around. He'd become overweight, and even more distant. If either of us came too close, he might startle or spontaneously hit out with one or both arms.

He rarely smiled.

Father's hands were cold. He didn't have a pulse. The book in his lap was open at an illustration of tadpoles. I found this undignified, and so turned the page to one featuring peacocks before I crept back to bed. I lay, there thinking of the mystery; shimmering dead flies between the double-glazed windowpanes in late summer.

A wretched circus

Humanity's collective IQ is apparently getting higher and higher – although it's hard to believe this when I'm surrounded by evidence of stupidity.

'Nobody gets everything they want in this life,' I tend to say loudly to the TV whenever uneducated people show their ignorance. These self-obsessed individuals ought to be silenced, like in the old days, but the media continuously gives their absolute drivel a platform. It's completely irresponsible.

The world is becoming ever more ridiculous, I just can't understand it. I have to protect myself, and so while I make sure to keep up with the evening news, that's about it – but you can't go anywhere without encountering a poster, or a billboard, or a screen, stripped of realistic or unifying content.

'You're not making the world a better place,' I say out loud. 'Try to make yourselves useful!'

At the same time, people are falling to their deaths while taking photographs of themselves.

Perhaps humanity is self-destructive.

Small hands

Once, my hands could save lives. They could save a tiny child. It was a sheer delight to meet the parents after those successful operations and say: ‘We’ve closed the hole in the heart. Everything looks fine.’

These days I can’t even pour myself a cup of coffee without spilling it. My hairdresser points out that my apartment is full of stains and crumbs. He’s probably right when he tells me I need more help, but I’d rather manage alone.

‘You’re like an obstinate child, Birgitte,’ my hairdresser says to me. People say that life is a cycle, but the comparison feels wrong. It’s as if something is missing.

Every time I look in the mirror, something is missing.

Every time I look at my hands, something is missing.

I know all too well what it is – it’s the future.

My niece

Because of the damp air that can sometimes stream across Paris in March, I take my winter coat from the closet. Brush it down, and hang it ready by the front door. I take a seat in the hallway and send Monica a text message with the address of Chez Colin. I also write that it's probably warm enough to sit outside. I sit there in the half-dark hallway as I wait for an answer, staring at the coat's old fur.

Two days ago, my sister informed me that her daughter was in Paris on a course, and that she'd love to see me. She gave me Monica's number and asked me to give her a call. Of course I was somewhat taken aback, and so protested, but Monica apparently had such a terribly strong desire to meet up.

I imagined this might involve a lunch at Colin's place, or perhaps even a nice dinner in Montmartre at a pleasant restaurant I've since completely forgotten the name of. Anyway – when I called, I could hardly hear my niece's voice. Surrounding her was a medley of chatter, the chinking of glasses and some vague music. Yes, she'd absolutely love to meet up with me, she shouted through the racket. We agreed to meet for a cup of coffee at Chez Colin – she probably wouldn't be able to manage much more than that this time, seeing as her course schedule was jam-packed.

I've spent much of the day getting ready. My hairdresser came early this morning; washed and set my hair. He helped me with my make-up. The morning I spent selecting appropriate clothes: pale nylon stockings, a beige pleated skirt, a light chiffon blouse and a blue wool cardigan.

Things take time.

There's nothing to be done about it.

I have no idea what I'll talk to Monica about. But I must remember to ask how her children are doing. Perhaps I'll tell her a story from New York – or even tell her about Javiér. And of course I must try to avoid going on about my ailing body. Nobody can stand that kind of talk in the long run.

I don't know how long I sit there in the dusk – I probably doze off for a bit – but at some point I hear that I've received a text. Monica writes that she's been taken ill, and has to cancel. She's so terribly sorry – she was so looking forward to spending some quality time with me.

Slowly, I get up. My body is stiff.

I hang my winter coat back in the closet.

A little bewildered, I make my way to my good chair.

There's a biscuit on the armrest, along with a prune.

The fact that I feel so abandoned simply doesn't make any sense. After all – who am I to Monica? We're not in regular contact. There's surely a hundred things she'd rather do here in Paris than sit and make small talk with her old aunt – she probably has enough of that with her mother, I would think. Why on earth did Elisabeth feel the need to instigate this plot between us? If her son had been on a course in Paris, she would never have expected him to keep me company. She wouldn't have inflicted a guilty conscience upon Espen, for having to find excuses and explanations and cancel on me. He would have been let off the hook. And simply shook his head at Elisabeth's suggestion, regardless.

I sit fairly quietly beside the window for the rest of the day.

In my Sunday best.

Oh well.

Enough about that.

No straight lines

Javiér writes that he's longing to return home to Ménilmontant. In his bedroom he's made himself a suitable drawing board, which he can set across his knees. When he sits with his sketches before him and pillows at his back, he writes, that's life at its very best. I imagine him there in bed, his grey hair sticking out all over the place above the duvet. I imagine the light of the graveyard lamps of the Cimetière du Père Lachaise, seeping in across the floorboards as he's described it. His hand holding the charcoal.

I ask where he is. He writes that he's in Vienna. 'I really wanted to walk around the Hundertwasserhaus one more time,' he writes. 'Hundertwasser and I had many of the same ideas. I have to admit that it irritates me a little – the fact that he became rich and famous because he was so charismatic and had such an uncomplicated message. I'm not complaining – I'm really not – but actually, I don't like him one bit. To be honest, I can't stand the guy, although I'm not sure why. Maybe I'm jealous. What nonsense.'

Then Javiér claims that he'll be returning to Paris in a few weeks' time – but there's no way to be sure that this is true. One mustn't contrive to believe everything people say. Just saying.

Unease

Colin is in the hospital. His family hasn't told me what's wrong. I'd like to know whether he'll be returning to work – and if so, when. Whether I need to send flowers to someone living, or a corpse. Breakfast isn't the same without Colin. The food lacks flavour, and the clattering of the cutlery around the restaurant is too great. Several glasses just smashed out in the kitchen. Someone should have called out 'MERDE!', but instead silence fell. This is precisely what getting old is like.

The nicest wig

I've been confined to my bed for several days. Nobody has stopped by. I have no idea what's going on out in the world – which forests are burning, which islands have gone under, what rifts are appearing in the mountains. I've slept, for the most part, or dozed beneath the duvet. At one point I thought I was about to fall asleep for good, and so I took the wig from my nightstand drawer and put it on.

As if to evade one final violation.

But I woke up again.

Such an easy, peaceful death is probably too much to hope for.

The rat

The bathroom drain is blocked. It's been five years since this last happened – back then I'd thought I'd never again have to mess around with such dead remnants of myself. I flip up the grate with a butter knife; unscrew the drain and lift it up. Pull out a slimy clump of hair and grease. Shuffle on my knees across to the lavatory with the repulsive muck; it plops heavily into the porcelain bowl, leaving behind it trickling, grey trails, like something half-perished. Like the dead rat in the flowerbed on the other side of the street. It's been there for at least a month – it's so repugnantly dead that not even the crows are interested in it. Some days it's almost covered by yellow leaves, others exposed by the wind. Ever more sunken between the ribs; increasingly withered. Like a terrifying reminder of what can happen if you fail to set aside funds for a dignified funeral.