

I fantasised about killing my mother when I was twelve. I would push her down onto the tracks as the train pulled into the station in Stavanger. Just a little shove. She would fall down, end up under the wheels, and then I would finally get away.

Thirty years later, I'm sat at her funeral wondering what my life would have been like had I actually pushed her. If I'd had siblings, or if mother had had a boyfriend when she died, I wouldn't even have been here. So many boyfriends over the last few years, yet she couldn't have one right when I needed it most.

I spot my father and his wife five rows behind me. They don't have to be here, but it's nice that they came. I'm not without feelings – I do appreciate it. I wonder how she managed to get him to come.

I'm not going to talk to him.

I'm an adult. I've exchanged one family for another. My own.

The chapel is bright, the sun is shining in through large panes of glass in the walls. Outside, the oak trees are calm in the late afternoon. Not one gust of wind for many days, not a drop of rain. The soil back home is bone dry. I have to remember to water the garden, maybe put some fertiliser around the redcurrant bushes. And if the dry weather continues, I have to paint the two walls I didn't manage last year, preferably before Constitution Day, because when May is over the air will get more humid, the woodwork never completely dry.

So much to think about.

So little time.

I picture her. Who is she? Who was she? I picture her, standing by the kitchen window in the semi-detached house where I grew up, with a bag containing two slices of buttered bread with sugar in her hand, folded up and ready to be thrown down to me. Slices of bread with sugar. In a plastic bag. That's the way I picture her.

Stine holds my hand, but I can't stand her sweating. Even after all these years, I've never managed to like the feeling of drowning in that hand. I pull my own towards me, feel her shoulders shake. I don't look at her, but I know that she's crying. She is weak, just like mother was weak.

I find our six-year-old's hand, squeeze it in mine, feel her nails – which she bites – scrape against my palm.

“Pia,” I say, “are you okay?”

“Yes, Daddy,” she replies.

“I am as well, Dad,” whispers Sofie. She's four years older than Pia.

I look from her to Stine, to the mother of my children, and all I feel is a strange kind of fear. Fear of that which I don't understand. After ten years together, she's still a stranger. She smiles carefully, dries a tear, straightens up on the pew.

I really want to love her.

Weak. She is so fucking weak.

And suddenly the priest is hovering over me. He stretches out a small hand, gesturing that it's time to carry the coffin. I haven't thought about that. Who is going to carry mother out of the chapel? I'm not going to fucking carry her. Christ. But who is going to do it then? Fuck. I walk up, grab hold. My

uncle and his sons come afterwards, grab hold, and we walk out. I loosen my grip, act like I'm carrying it, but I can't bear to make any last effort for this person.

Enough, now. Fucking enough.

Outside, the sun is shining. We shove the coffin into the car, which drives away to the crematorium. And she is gone, forever. What we have left is a life without her. And that feels really liberating.

Someone carries flowers and wreaths up to the marked-out place where her urn will be buried. The place is marked with a white wooden cross – I haven't got around to getting a stone yet. But it's beautiful, under the huge oak trees by Mosvannet lake – the sun slips through them, and you hear the songs of chaffinches, thrushes, blue tits and robins. I love birds. It's a beautiful cemetery. She chose it herself in the weeks before she died of a ruptured aneurysm in Haukeland hospital.

She got sick in Stavanger, but had to go to Bergen to die. They phoned for me, but I didn't manage to get up there in time. I stood in the large garage, in the light of a hospital kiosk, and wondered who I should phone. I phoned Stine. She cried. I hung up, stuffed my mobile into my pocket, and waited for the airport express bus.

We had our finest days together in the weeks before that. She lay in Stavanger University Hospital, and I knew she was going to die while she believed she would survive. My expectations and her hopes gave us a focus, something to lean towards when the conversation dried up every five minutes. Then I could ask questions like:

*What's the first thing you'll do when you get discharged?*

And she could reply:

*I want to go to the Mediterranean. Do you want to come with me?*

And it was easy to lie then, easy to say *yes*, as long as I knew that it was never going to happen.

What was left of the Thorstensen family gathers in the Scandic hotel, just across from the cemetery. Uncle Stein is the one who arranged it. He is mother's only brother, her one sibling. He gets a company discount, and also he knows someone who works there.

"We'll be well looked after," he said when he phoned to inform me about the plans.

"I don't know if I'm coming," I replied.

"Of course you are, Phillip," he said. "Lydia was your mother. You were her only child."

I eat two shrimp sandwiches and one with gravlax. I see my girls, happy to get cake and soft drinks. I see Stine talking to Aunt Astrid.

"Aunt Astrid says they have a pool here," Stine says.

"Aunt? She's not *your* aunt," I say.

"Astrid says they have a pool here."

"Pool? A swimming pool?"

"A heated pool," says Aunt Astrid.

"Aren't all pools in Norway heated?" I ask.

"Not as warm as this, Phillip. It's heated to thirty-three degrees," Aunt Astrid replies. "It's a therapeutic pool. I used to go there with my women's group. It's good for those of us with arthritis."

"But Aunt Astrid, Gamlingen pool is right across the road," I reply, pointing towards the outdoor facility.

“Gamlingen is outdoors,” she replies.

“But the water is twenty-seven degrees year-round, and it’s a proper swimming pool.”

Aunt Astrid looks away from me, towards Stine, towards Uncle Stein.

“Don’t start now, Phillip,” whispers Stine.

“Don’t start what?” I ask.

“Don’t start anything.”

I reach across the table, cut a slice of success tart and pour sparkling water into my glass. Tonight I’m going to sit in my corner of the living room, drink Pinot Noir while listening to Bowie, and quietly celebrate that there is one less difficult person in my life.

The hotel will soon be demolished. Something new will be built here as well, the way this city is always in flux, always on the hunt for itself. It transformed with the wealth from the canning industry – the city’s visionaries tore down the old houses and the old train station, and with the arrival of international oil industry, the bricks were replaced with aluminium and glass. The fact that this city had money was made visible. But what will the city do now that oil is the enemy?

“Phillip,” says Aunt Astrid, “what have you thought about doing with the house in Forus?”

“I don’t know,” I say. But of course I know. I’ve known for many years. I will sell mother’s suburban semi-detached and buy a flat in Cannes La Bocca. For me and the girls.

“The housing market is bad at the moment, what with all the dismissals in the oil industry,” she continues.

“Those jobs will come back,” says Uncle Stein. “They’ll come back. We need oil like never before, we’re just swept up in a trend because of this climate hysteria.”

That’s all it takes for my aunt to throw herself over him and forget all about the house in Forus, the rest of my inheritance, and how I’ll take care of it.

I look for the girls, but they’re not here. I glance towards Stine. She’s busy with one of my cousins. She has placed a hand on his shoulder and is laughing at something he’s saying. It seems genuine, but there’s a lot about Stine that seems genuine without necessarily being so.

I stand up and glance around the otherwise empty space. The girls are gone. Through the window, the road is glistening in a sudden torrential downpour. On the other side is the graveyard, the oak trees, the campsite, Gamlingen swimming pool.

I wade through the thick 1980s carpet, exit the room and arrive in a narrow hallway with mirrors running the length of the wall. I avoid looking at myself and find a spiral staircase at the other end. I walk downstairs and into a dark room. The girls can take care of themselves, I know that, but it’s dark here and they often get scared of the dark. At least, I think they do. I used to be scared of the dark. I hated the dark. I still hate the dark, so I hurry towards the light. I find them there. They’re standing beside a glass wall, peeking at the pool, the warm pool. It’s empty. Not big, but still a pool. The blue tiles have cracked in a couple of places. The plastic plants and rattan furniture are from another era.

“Daddy,” says Pia, “can we swim?”

Sofia glances at me, as if she knows that going swimming now is an impossibility, but at the same time, there is still a glimmer of hope because grandma is dead and Dad is in a good mood.

“Daddy,” Pia says again.

“Dad?” asks Sofie.

“Of course you can,” I reply, opening the door. We go in. The girls take their clothes off, fold them neatly and place them in a pile, the way I’ve taught them. Or did Stine teach them that? I don’t know. They jump in. Water splashes over the sides, making my shoes wet.

It doesn’t matter.

Nothing matters today.

Sofie is swimming. Long, clean breast strokes. She's getting better and better. I picture her in Cannes La Boca, in the pool, on the beach. We'll swim together, every day, during all our holidays, get better and better, safer and safer in the water. Pia isn't trying to swim. She jumps in from the edge again and again and the ground around the pool is saturated, but it doesn't matter. There is nothing that can ruin this situation.

"Come on, Daddy, join us," shouts Pia.

"No, not today," I say.

"Oh come on, Daddy."

"No," I reply. "Daddy is quite tired, and anyway we can't swim for a long time – we have to leave soon."

"We don't want to leave," shouts Pia, jumping in again.

"No," I say. "Not just now."

So pure. They are so real. Nobody has ruined them, and nobody will ever ruin them either. Not these two. Not my two.

I see her coming, her legs beneath the curtain on the glass wall. Long, black tights. She opens the door and takes a step into the room. She looks like she's from Somalia. Maybe Eritrea. She is tall, slender, pretty. She isn't wearing a hijab – her hair hangs free. She must be a student at the university, or maybe she just works here.

"You can't swim just now," she says without a hint of an accent.

"What do you mean?" I ask.

"We want to swim more," shouts Pia, jumping into the water.

"Stop swimming," she says. "The pool is closed."

She just looks at me.

"You have to book swimming time in advance," she says, "and pay. The pool is open every afternoon and also on weekend mornings, but it's closed just now. And you have to wear swimming costumes and swimming caps."

"We're guests here," I say. "We're with Thorstensen, upstairs."

"That doesn't actually matter," she says, and I think fuck, you're so gorgeous, I'd fancy having a swim with you, both of us down here, a couple of pints on the edge of the pool. I'd pull your swimming costume to the side, let my hands glide over your nipples.

"You have to leave," she says.

"Come on, now," I say. "Just let them swim for a few more minutes."

"It's closed. You can come back another day. And anyway, as I mentioned, they're not wearing swimming caps."

I've had enough. I want to reply calmly, I really want to, more than anything else. More than anything, I want to show my girls that I'm handling the situation in a grown-up way, but I can't, I can't hold it back. I look at her long hair, her narrow shoulders, her pink lips.

"Fucking hell," I say, "their grandmother has just died. We've come straight from the bloody funeral, right across the road. We've eaten and we're going to pay good money."

"Dad," says Sofie, "it's okay."

"No," I say, "it's not okay." I'm replying to Sofie, but I don't take my eyes off the person who wants to ruin this day for us.

"You can't..." she starts to say.

“Yes, I can. It’s you that bloody well ‘can’t’. They’ve just sent their grandma off to the crematorium. All they wanted was to swim a little, you know, think about something else, and then you come, then you fucking come and ruin it.”

She doesn’t answer, doesn’t move. My fury is surprising. Just as surprising as my calm tone when I turn towards the girls again and say:

“Come on, girls, we’re leaving. We can swim as much as we want when we’ve sold grandma’s house and bought an apartment in France.”

Two photos are pinned to the partition wall. One is of Stine and the children, and the other is of the beach in Cannes La Bocca. We were there three years ago. We got married in the embassy in Paris, took the train to Provence and had our summer holiday in an apartment hotel right by the beach. In the photo, Stine and the children are each sitting on a horse on a carousel by Sacré-Cœur. It was the day after the wedding, the day before we travelled south on the train from Gare de Lyon. The other photo has no people in it, just sand and stones and ocean. One of Stine's friends recommended Cannes and Nice. She'd been there with her husband. La Bocca is just outside of Cannes itself – ten minutes by bus. It's a calm suburb with a couple of shops and apartment complexes for retired people.

On the other side of the partition wall sits ward leader Turid Mikkelsen. She is a thirty-year-old nurse with red, mid-length hair. She is thin, with small breasts and nipples which always strain against the t-shirts she wears. Today, she's wearing a Coldplay tour shirt. Everyone must know that she has been to a concert, everyone should know that deep down she, despite leading a staff group of over sixty nurses, assistants, doctors, consultants and psychologists, is a bit of a party animal.

As assisting ward nurse for the same gang, I only have to refer to the fact that I've worked in the psychiatric hospital for twenty of my forty years. That's enough. They respect that. I deal with self-harm, suicide attempts and restraining of manic substance abusers. I know the ethical boundaries of seclusion, isolation and use of power. I know those paragraphs better than any fresh-faced junior doctor. In an emergency situation, I can sew up a slit wrist.

"Did the funeral go alright?" asks Turid.

"Yes, but it was sad, of course," I reply without looking at her.

"Do you need to use some of your annual leave?"

"No," I reply, thinking that I want to save my holidays, save what I can of my time off in lieu, until I've bought the flat in Cannes La Boca.

"What's your plan now?"

"I'll head to the house and check it after work today. Plan a little. See what has to be cleaned and fixed before it goes up for sale."

"Is it your childhood home?"

"Yes, in Forus. Semi-detached house from the eighties. Three bedrooms, living room, kitchen, bathroom. A small garden. Groups of houses that look exactly the same. Interested?"

She smiles, shaking her head.

"I guess the prices in Forus aren't the same anymore, now that the oil jobs are hanging by a thin thread?"

"No, unfortunately, but people do have to live somewhere regardless," I reply.

In the photo of the beach, the sea rolls in small waves across the sand. If I touch the photo, I can feel the warmth, taste the tang of salt.

An alarm goes off. It's in the seclusion ward, where the sickest lie in rooms cut off from the world around them. They lie there, in a daze, removed from our collective reality. I run in along with four others, hearing their feet come running from other wards.

Even before I go in, I know who has gone bananas. He's standing pressed into a corner, hands in front of his face, ready to lash out at the first person to come into the room. I clench my fists in my pockets and stare at him until he looks away. He is hissing, just like he hissed when we walked to school together, just like he hissed when I ran past him in the two thousand-metres, just like he hissed when I accidentally crushed the Lego he'd built in my room one morning before school started.

“Not you,” he roars.

Everyone looks at me, waiting for my move.

“Yes,” I say. “It’s me.”

Turid isn’t here – she’s gone off and hidden in the toilet. I’m the boss here. I’m the one they’re waiting on.

“What’s actually going on?” I ask, closing the door again from the outside.

“He keeps trying to kick the door open,” says the nurse in charge of seclusion. She is a young, red-haired girl with thick thighs and arms. She has drops of sweat on her forehead and the sour smell of anxiety about her.

“Has he said why he wants to go out?”

“Well, he says he wants to go home.”

“So, he wants to go home, does he?”

“Yes. That’s what he says.”

A crash comes from inside the room, then another.

“He’s breaking the sink,” says the nurse.

I glance around me. Twelve employees came when the alarm went off. Seven women, three of them over fifty years old, and five men, two of them skinny, pitiful students.

“He’s going for the pipe beneath the sink,” I say. “He’s done it before. He tears it off and uses it as a hammer against the window.”

I point at the three women over fifty.

“You can go back to where you came from. Thanks for coming.”

“What do you mean?” asks one of them.

“I mean that you’re not needed.”

“Because we’re women?”

“Because you’re too old,” I say. Some people laugh, others look down at the ground. The three women walk with faltering steps away from the situation. They stop by the exit of the seclusion ward, looking uncertainly at me.

“Thanks for your efforts,” I say as I hear the sink fall onto the patient’s bathroom floor.

They stay there. I give up and turn back to the nine I need to remain.

“I know him,” I say, “so I’ll go in and distract him. Men, you come in behind me and, as he attacks me, throw him hard onto the ground. Girls, go get the restraint bed from the office.”

I open the door slightly and a piece of sink comes flying out of the crack. I go in and see him standing in a corner behind his chair, with the sink pipe in both hands. The room is furnished only with a mattress, a desk, a heavy chair. There is nothing other than the sink pipe he can use to harm me. Behind him, the window is hanging on its hinges, with a diagonal crack across the glass. The crack crosses the red bars on the outside. I look past it, down to the atrium. From the windows on the other side, a crowd of curious faces stare back at me. I wait until I hear the heavy wheels of the restraint bed roll into place in the corridor outside before I start speaking.

“Truls,” I say, “it’s time to stop with this nonsense.”

“Nonsense?” he roars.

“Nonsense, yes. Where do you think you’re going?”

“Fillip...”

“You’re not going anywhere, Truls. You’ve been sectioned. It’s been decided that you’ll stay here for a while. Just a short while – not the rest of your life, not even the year, probably not even the end of the month.”

It works. Truls gets confused. He doesn’t know what month it is. He loses focus.

“Truls,” I repeat, “let go of the pipe and sit down on the bed.”

“Fillip,” is all he says. “Fillip.”

“Sit down, Truls.”

“But Fillip,” he repeats, and I already know I’ve won.

Truls sits down on the edge of the bed, placing the sink pipe in his lap. I sit down beside him and place a hand on his back.

“Truls, it’s okay,” I say.

“You were always such a coward, Fillip,” he says. “Such a damn coward.”

I don’t answer.

“Do you remember that class trip, Fillip? Do you remember Lysebotn in year seven?”

“Yes,” I say.

“All the way into the fjord.”

“I remember we told ghost stories,” I say, and at the same time I hear that those waiting by the door are getting restless. If something is going to happen, they want it to happen now. I remember the feeling from when I was a rookie myself. It’s the waiting that’s the worst. The patient always loses in the end anyway, but he often wins the waiting game, when the anxiety and the trembling take you as you try to imagine what he’s going to do. It’s easier with women and girls. They go straight for you and try to claw your eyes out as soon as you open the door, jumping on you – you just have to smash them to the ground. The men bide their time more, are more calculating.

Of course, it’s great if we can avoid injuring him. It’s great if we can avoid putting him in restraints. The best thing would be if he lay down on the restraint bed himself.

“But Fillip, don’t you remember when we went up to Kjerag?”

“I do,” I say, aware that I’m hesitating, that I’m drawing out the words, not wanting to hear what comes next.

“It was a nice trip,” says Truls.

“Really nice. Four hours each way?”

But Truls ignores me. He has the upper hand again.

“Kjerag,” he says. “A thousand metres above the fjord. A thousand metres straight down. And that stone we stood on while the teachers photographed us. A thousand metres down. A kilometre down to the ground. Right down into the fjord.”

“Kjeragbolten?” I ask, and my thoughts drift from the situation. I want to get away from this conversation. I want to go to Cannes La Bocca. To the waves, the French red wine, the pool outside Villa Maupassant, the apartment hotel. I have to get away from here. Have mother’s house sold, buy the flat in France. Get away, get away, get away. I can’t stand any more of these psychotic people.

“I remember,” whispers Truls, “that you were the only one who didn’t dare go out onto Kjergbolten. The only one in the class who didn’t get a photo of himself from that trip.”

I glance from Truls to the assistants in the door opening. I see the contours of the restraint bed behind them, see the nurse waiting for a signal, and behind her the three old women, each holding a bolt and ready to fasten Truls to the bed.

“What did you say?” I ask.

And this time he doesn’t whisper it, but shouts it aloud:

“In year seven we went on a class trip to Kjerag, and you were the only one who didn’t dare go out on the boulder. You were always so damn cowardly. Remember the conversation with...”

I grab hold of him and force him down onto the floor. Before I get help, he frees one of his arms and swings the sink pipe into my thigh, so hard that I have to be supported out of the room and into my



office. On the way, I hear him shout words like *coward*, *wimp* and the only one I actually register, *mummy's boy*.

In the office, I massage my thigh while I stare at the photo of Cannes La Bocca and try to remember what happened on that trip Truls was talking about. And little by little, it comes back to me. I woke up in Forus one time or another at the end of the eighties. At that time, Forus was Stavanger's *twilight zone*, where there was a boundary between housing co-operatives, which had cable TV, and self-owned houses, which were still dependent on installing antennas and dishes in order to receive unclear signals of TV entertainment. We had cable TV from 1982, with Pat Sharp and The Fun Factory on the Sky Channel every Saturday and Sunday, and the DJ Kat Show in the afternoons, while on the other side of the road they had to wait in their big houses until children's TV programmes started at six o'clock.

We took the bus from Gausel school to Stavanger, and from there we took a boat into Lysebotn. That was how it was. It was cold, it was wet, and we were going to the mountains. We were going to Kjerag after having spent a night in an attic in a cabin at the end of the fjord.

We played football outside, surrounded by steep rock faces.

I scored against Truls and he called me *pussy homo*. That's what I remember.

I didn't understand the words, but I remember that they stung.

And that word stayed with me the next day when we walked across the mountainside with our rucksacks, Thermos flasks and packed lunches.

When we arrived at Kjeragbolten, the teacher asked if we dared to go out onto the stone. He was going to take photos, develop them and send them home with us the following week.

One pupil after another climbed out onto the stone.

I lay down on the edge of the plateau where we were waiting, looked out, saw the boulders a thousand metres below me, the green edge of grass against the dark fjord. If there had been anyone down there, it would have been impossible to see them. We were so high up that even the eagles were flying below us.

It was just us two left when Truls started nudging me. He was the last one in the queue, and when I didn't dare, he nudged me to the side.

"Fucking mummy's boy," he said.

But I got him in the end. "He'll stay in restraints for the rest of the day," I say to the nurse. "I'll take care of the protocol and phone the doctor on duty."

When I come to work the next day, he's hanged himself in the shower, been resuscitated and admitted to the emergency room at Stavanger University Hospital. He had gone so long without oxygen that nobody knows if he'll wake up again.

Our semi-detached house was built in 1980 to take care of the oil adventure's less important people, like cleaning ladies, receptionists, janitors, the ones who would look after the oil workers' children, and other unfortunate poor people in this part of the country, where the standard for what could be considered an acceptable life rose faster than the houses on offer indicated. I was eight years old when we moved in. 1986. We already lived in Forus, since my father worked for the national oil company Statoil, and when he found out he wanted to divorce my mother and try his luck in Houston, she had to downgrade our standard of living, and therefore we moved from a detached house on the proper side of Ulsbergbakken's winding border to the other side, to the side where all the houses looked exactly the same, spread over three sizes.

We exchanged a double garage, sauna and second living room in the basement for cable-TV and a shorter walk to school; a fence for a hedge; a fireplace and tiled floor for linoleum and cracked plastic knobs on the kitchen cupboard; family dinners for packet food; a cleaning lady for pocket money; holidays to the Mediterranean for trips to the local beach.

I didn't hear anything from my father for many years. He settled down afresh over there, didn't send letters, didn't phone, didn't send money.

Mother was alone in the living room and I was alone in my room, or out in the street with other boys. The new house was just a few minutes away from the old one, but nevertheless a world away. I had to go to my friends' houses, but it was fine. They still had basement living rooms, attic rooms, video games and Commodore 64. I had the Sky Channel, Super Channel and MTV, but kept that to myself. I didn't want to share cable-TV with the others, or maybe I was just ashamed that my new bedroom had cracked wallpaper.

I push the keys into the lock, one by one, until I find one that works. I turn the key and step into a world I haven't seen for many years. The first thing that hits me is the smell, of the house, of her in the house. Cheap perfume, cheap fabric softener. I hang my coat in the hall beside hers, the one with the black and white squares, like a chessboard. As if she were waiting for someone to make a move in her direction. The hall is how it was in the eighties and nineties. The old linoleum floor with the cork pattern, the wallpaper, white with small pink dots. I open the door to the toilet and bath, run water through the sink pipes, flush the toilet.

In the living room, time has almost stood still. The white and burgundy corner sofa, the large pinewood dining table with burn marks from cigarette butts, the chairs with upholstered seats. I pull open the curtains and look out into the garden. Of course the lawn has to be mowed. In her bedroom, I open a window and air the space. I do the same thing in the kitchen. The breeze catches hold of the cigarette smell and moves it from room to room. I empty the ashtrays in the kitchen, in the living room and on her bedside table into a bag which I take out to the bin. From there, I walk around the garden, pick up some plastic, jump over the hedge and follow the path through the forest to the shop. This was the corner shop when I was growing up. We called it Birkeland, after the shopkeeper. Now it's a supermarket chained called Rema, which has also consumed the space previously occupied by the little bank branch and local post office.

I walk along the aisles full of familiar foodstuffs, but I don't want any of the food. I buy beer, crisps and milk chocolate and walk back through the forest. When I reach the garden, I stop and stare at the house. It needs painting, but otherwise it looks all right. From here, the garden is a green square, a quadrangle of scattered grass blades and berry bushes which never amounted to anything. On the terrace,

Mother has planted flowers in pots so cracked after last winter that they ought to be put down on the spot. A rose bush grows against the wall.

I open a beer and sit down at the kitchen table. It's almost three o'clock. Stine will soon pick Pia up from nursery and prepare food. She has put me off food. She alternates between three recipes. Spaghetti, salmon and rice, and sausages and mashed potatoes. Instant mashed potatoes, of course. I'm mostly the one who prepares food at home. That wasn't how I'd imagine it. Not that I'd expected to be waited on. I don't need someone to run the bath for me, portion out the soap and make sure I don't scold myself as I slide into the bubbles. But it would be nice to have a hint of traditional division of labour.

I don't know what to do, have no idea where to begin. I find a piece of paper in the drawer under the cutlery and try to make a cleaning plan, but it doesn't work.

I think I'll stay here today, tomorrow and Friday, then Stine and the girls can come on Saturday morning and help me. Three days. To do what?

I can't bring myself to go to work after all. I send a text message to Turid. The reply comes immediately: Of course, take a few days off.

I search through mother's cassettes and find nothing I like apart from a mixtape I made for her birthday. To mother, 1986, it says on it. I put it on and it starts right in the middle of *Love Will Tear Us Apart* by Joy Division. After that, it's The Rolling Stones and *Paint It Black*. I drink another beer and when I stand up to do something, I feel my head swimming a little.

This is good intoxication. It feels nice being tipsy in my mother's house.

I remember the small bottles of spirit I smuggled in with me.

I remember her cigarette butts which I lit when she was at work at her care worker job, which I sucked until sour spit coated my tongue and I almost threw up.

I was so fucking disappointed. I thought cigarettes would taste amazing..

I open a drawer full of papers, take out the stack and start carefully flipping through them. Old bills, outdated insurance certificates. I throw the stack into the recycling bin without looking through the last of it. In the next drawer I find sewing threads, needles, repair kits. I throw those away as well. In the last one are some old photographs, some of her, others of me. The last one is of me and her together. We're on a ferry going to Newcastle. It must have been taken before we moved. Dad must have taken the photo. I remember us being in Newcastle a couple of times, but I don't remember that picture. I'm wearing a pink shirt and a cap. We're playing billiards. On the wall behind us is a sign saying *Color Line* and *MS Venus*. I throw the photos away and open another beer.

What am I doing here? I should pay someone to get rid of everything. There's nothing here I want to keep.

Nothing, I think, looking around me. The old furniture stinks of smoke. It's not even retro. It's from a different, more uncool era. Nevertheless, I have to tidy in order to sell the house. And I have to sell in order to be able to buy.

Cannes La Boca.

Waves.

Beach.

Red wine.

Meaning.

My room is like a cross between a museum of who I once was and a neutral guestroom. The bed is no longer mine – I took that with me when I moved out. She has put in a guest bed. My posters of Public Enemy, Michael Jordan and Gary Lineker are gone. She's given away the boxes full of old toys.

He-man.

Transformers.

Star Wars.

M.A.S.K.

Toys I could have sold to collectors on e-Bay for several thousands.

But my writing desk is still here, beneath the window. I sit down, open the curtains – which are also new – and look out onto the garden. It's green from here as well, but it seems smaller than I remember it. Behind the garden is the bike path, behind the path is the forest.

I sometimes dreamt about moving into the forest, living in a tent under the trees.

I'm pulled out of my thoughts by a low murmuring, a base line thumping through the wall from the other side of the house. I'd forgotten how loud it was. I can't make out the song, but it reminds me of something like Underworld's *Born Slippy*, repetitive, irritating bass, electric drums and a relentless monotone voice moaning away.

It's now eight o'clock. It's evening.

Evening in Ulsberget, Forus.

Evening in Suburbia.

Waiting time in the Universe.

There are no pictures hanging on the walls. No photographs. Where is the childhood photo of me with the plaster on my forehead? Where is my confirmation photo, where I had spots on my cheeks? Where is my graduation photo from Kongsgård upper secondary?

A cheap reproduction of a painting by Paul Gauguin hangs over the sofa, the edges nicotine-yellow. Beside this hangs a painting mother did one time in the eighties, when she got it into her head that she was going to start a new hobby. It's not easy to guess, but I know it is supposed to depict a pack of wolves attacking a little lamb. The lamb is injured, bleeding from bite wounds.

Mother used real blood, which she mixed into the painting.

She pricked her finger with a sewing needle. The hard skin around her smoking fingers turned red. I remember that. Those cracked, nicotine-yellow fingernails. I remember them.

The lamb's blood. Her blood.

When I mentioned this one time to Aunt Astrid – perhaps on Christmas Day – Mother denied what she'd done and slapped me playfully over the back of her head with her palm. She smiled nervously, and her horrible teeth had the same colour as her skin, as the reproduction, as the sun seen through a filter of *whatever*.

I drink yet another beer, place my feet on the sofa, and it's only now I see that I've not taken my shoes off. It doesn't mean anything. I'm lying on the sofa with my shoes on, beneath a picture I'm going to destroy tomorrow, beneath a ceiling which is also nicotine-yellow, in a house in this corner of the world God forgot, and where people were free to carry on as they pleased, without artistic or ethical guidance.

My ringing phone wakes me. I must have dozed off. It's gotten darker outside. The beer has started to take effect, and I'm at the point where I either need to have more or go to bed.

I wiggle my phone out of my pocket, see that it's Stine, see that it's nine o'clock.

"Hi Phillip, are you alright?"

"Yes," I reply. "I've gone through a fair bit, planned a bit."

"Are you sleeping there or coming home?"

"I've had a few beers," I say.

“Then you can just sleep over and continue tomorrow? And we can come on Saturday to help you out?”

“I don’t know,” I reply. The back of my head is starting to ache. I need paracetamol, ibuprofen. More beer, maybe. I don’t know, I say again.

“But you can’t drive now?”

I’m quiet. I look around the living room, this unfamiliar hole I grew up in, and feel like I’m not able to be here anymore. It feels like hundreds of snakes are approaching from all corners, as if something is pushing me out, hissing at me, as if the whole house is a huge dog baring its teeth.

“Fillip?”

“Can’t you come and get me?”

“Now?”

“Yes, I can’t be here. I can’t fucking stand being here,” I say with pretend sadness in my voice. Poor fucking me, I think.

“But what about the girls?”

“Just take them with you.”

“But they’ve gone to bed, Fillip.”

“So wake them. They can sleep in the car,” I say, hearing myself being unreasonable. They can’t be woken up to sleep in the car, half an hour from Hommersåk, half an hour each way.

“They have school tomorrow,” Fillip.

“Yes, I know that.”

“Can’t you just sleep over?”

“I don’t know if I can take it.”

“Can’t you catch a bus?”

“The bus? I’ll have to first take the bus to Sandnes, then change to Hommersåk,” I say, leaving out the most important thing: I’ll get so bloody carsick after all the drinking.

“I don’t know,” she says.

But she knows. Of course she knows.

“Just leave it, then,” I say and hang up.

I get up, pull down the painting of the pack of wolves and fling it against the wall before going into the kitchen, finding a knife and slicing up the canvas, cut after cut, until both the wolves, the sheep and Mother’s DNA no longer make sense.

I lie down in the bed that’s no longer my own, open the window and smell the scent of the forest, of pinecones and birch trees, of the garden and the path and all the other smells I never thought I’d have missed. I like a room cold when I sleep, but it’s warm outside, a warm spring. My head thumps when I lie down, but I can never fall asleep without reading, no matter how tired I am. I get up and go into the living room again. It’s dark now. I can see the moon through the big window above the sofa, hanging lazily in the night sky. When I was young, I wanted to be an astronaut. I wanted to go there, to the moon, and beyond. I often stood here at night, looking out at the moon. It was often the case that I couldn’t sleep. I could fall asleep and wake up with my heart hammering away. It felt as though my main artery was thumping against my breastbone and I’d soon burst. I would then get up, tiptoe up here and look out into the darkness.

I look at the sparse bookshelf with her books from book clubs in the eighties, the five-volume encyclopaedia, and an atlas which has been showing the wrong country borders for around two decades now. I prefer thin novels, books which give you hope of getting through them in a reasonably short time,

but there are no books like that here. I take Gabriel Garcia Marques' *One Hundred Years of Solitude* with me.

The little bedside lamp lights up the pages, but I can't find the rhythm, even though I've read the book before. My eyes glide from the words to the ceiling, the old pine panel on the sloping roof over the bed, to the window where the light from the streetlamp by the bike path seeps in. There are no books left in my room. I took them with me when I moved in 1997, to a student flat in Blåsenborg in the centre of Stavanger. I open the drawer in the bedside table, recognise my rubber bouncy ball, my blown gun I'd spit dried peas through, which I hung out of the window with, shooting at people who were coming from the shop with bags in both hands.

There's something else here as well.

A book.

My diary.

My thoughts from the years 1988 until 1993, written down in 1999, the year I came back from studying journalism in London, with a head full of dreams of becoming some kind of Jack Kerouac, Dylan Thomas or Sigbjørn Obstfelder.

Five years of pretentious thoughts remembered many years later and turned into cheap poetry.

I open it at the last page:

I live in a little room on the ground floor with a window looking onto the garden.

Behind the garden is the bike path, which nobody uses, and behind the bike path is the forest.

In many ways, this is the outline of my world, and it has been a good world, a safe hiding place.

But a hiding place is just a place.

The truth is that I'm not enjoying myself in reality.

Reality often feels way too big.

Way too big for little me.

I close my eyes, I listen to the house. But the only thing I can hear is my heart, pounding away, main artery thumping against my breastbone, which is threatening to burst and let the blood run into my chest, down into my belly. Stroke after stroke, swoosh swoosh swoosh, until my veins are empty.