Sample translation

From *FAMILY VALUES*

(Familieverdier)

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**Part 1**

January – March

The chaos of dinner on Sundays at Mum’s house was enough to inspire fear in outsiders. Seated around the table, itself an heirloom that had served three generations, were mothers and fathers, step-fathers and step-father’s new wives, new wives’ ex-husbands and mothers’ new partners, nephews and nieces, whole siblings and half siblings and even step-siblings on occasion, plus the children they shared and the children of anyone else present. All asides from Storm’s father were invited to these dinners, a decision that Storm would have wholeheartedly supported had he ever actually been consulted on the matter. These dinners called for damask tablecloths, silverware and vases of fresh flowers. Chandeliers, fine wine and napkin rings. And, now that it was winter and a stone-cold Oslo lay submerged in darkness, the flicker of candlelight.

‘Hello! Everyone!’ Mum was in the process of climbing up onto her chair in spite of her seventy years. Her natural place was at the head of the table. ‘I think you’ll all find that it’s my turn to speak!’

These parties were events more than they ever were dinner parties, Storm thought to himself. A circus rolling through town.

‘Can everybody hear me?’ Mum asked, balancing on her chair. She had removed her heels. She held a glass of red wine in one hand. She had spent the thirty years leading up to her retirement as a controversial yet revered theatre director at various prominent venues throughout Europe.

Storm glanced apologetically at Margot across the table, but rather than looking back at him she simply sat there, oblivious to what was going on around her. She tended to throw herself into every conversation, but today it was very clear that she had turned up as required and was now waiting to be able to go home again.

It was his wife who had once proposed the term *the* *ensemble* to describe the extended family. It was her opinion that Storm and his sisters, and possibly even his mother’s various men throughout the years, functioned as his mother’s permanent cast of actors, those she returned to without fail given their willingness to do what she asked of them.

The prospect of another night on the sofa at home was a painful one. He cast a furtive glance at his children, the twins, though calling them children was a stretch now they’d both turned seventeen years. They were sitting in their usual spot beside one another, chatting away about something Storm hadn’t quite caught the beginning of.

Every last Sunday of the month – with the exception of June and July – the extended family met at his mother’s house in Bøler. His mother believed that it was mealtimes that brought people together, and she never missed an opportunity to express that belief. ‘Life is meals!’ she liked to say, and one might suspect that she thought herself humble paying tribute to such a simple notion, she who had committed her life to such infinite principles, after all. Sending one’s regrets for Mum’s traditional Sunday dinners took either courage or impressive imagination, and faced with the prospect of turning down his mother’s invitation, Storm found himself lacking in both respects. He was almost always present, usually with his whole family in tow. But on this occasion, he had considered coming up with a reason to excuse himself, well, not exactly *considered* it, but he had at the very least dared to entertain the notion, he’d felt that he had a slim chance of getting away with it given that this invitation broke with the usual tradition, it wasn’t actually the last Sunday in January but the first, after all. God knows they’d all seen plenty of each other over the Christmas and New Year holiday, but his mother had insisted that the fact it was Christmas was the very reason they ought to get together, and nobody had contradicted her. She hadn’t invited them over for their usual Sunday dinner in December, and so naturally she felt that a catch-up was in order. And so here they were, on the first Sunday of the new year, Sunday 3rd January, just a few days after they’d all gathered to mark a different tradition altogether, Mum’s New Year lunch at the restaurant by Frognerseteren. Storm still felt slightly groggy from the wine, the company, the stuffy room filled with family and lit by a burning hearth.

Quite how the conversation on this particular Sunday had meandered into the realms of legal sex and penises in womens’ changing rooms and trans-exclusionary radical feminists Storm couldn’t quite say, he was mostly dreading what awaited him the following morning in court, but these were the topics of conversation nonetheless, and as he sat there he recalled that he hadn’t initially put two and two together, the fact that trans-exclusionary radical feminist could be abbreviated to TERF, that this is what people had been referring to, his daughter and son had needed to spell it out to him.

‘Can everybody hear me?’ Mum asked.

‘Hard not to!’ her ex-husband HC replied, not Storm’s father, but his sisters’.

Leif, his mother’s current partner, burst out laughing as if to demonstrate his willingness to play along. ‘Come on, out with it, Mother!’ he cried, and Storm’s mother’s partner clinked glasses with Storm’s stepfather. Storm and his sisters, regardless of whose children they were, had all long since reached adulthood. Storm, who was the eldest and the only child from his mother’s first marriage, was now undeniably middle aged, which was the kind of thing you had to say once you’d turned fifty. And then there were his sisters, he never liked to call them half-sisters, *there’s no such thing as half a person*, he would often feel moved to say; in truth, the word *half* could only strictly be used to refer to him in this context, the other two were simply siblings, and sisters at that, so using the term half-sibling achieved nothing except to place himself on the periphery of his own family, and that was an unnecessary move in every respect. He had always felt quite lonely enough.

Cecilie had written a novel at the age of twenty-three, published to no great fanfare, but still sufficient that she felt it had left her with performance anxiety. She had just recently finished up a new degree, her third, having trained to become a sexologist. Petra was married to Tord. She was a sociologist working at Statistics Norway, and over the past decade, if Storm were to make a rough guess, his youngest sister had become swept up in the political crusade so fixated on tackling immigration. The family had no idea where this had come from, but once again, if Storm were to attempt to come up with an explanation, her contempt for ‘the Muslims’ — Petra’s expression of choice regardless of the context or number of individuals involved — or even more acutely, for the social democratic cover-up of the ‘truth’, began after her husband Tord was diagnosed with cancer. Something had taken root in his little sister’s mind, a sense of somehow having been cheated by life, and by society, for that matter. Tord, who worked in a DIY store, had survived the cancer and seemed to share Petra’s contempt for Islam, and somehow it seemed natural to Storm that they should feel obliged to present a united front after having made it through such a life-threatening illness, not necessarily that they should share in their racism, per se, but that they might feel a need to stand together through thick and thin, at least for a while afterwards. In their elation following the all clear, Petra and Tord had adopted two boys, Birger and Harald. The following year, the cancer had returned. Tord was still in and out of hospital having various treatments.

‘Family dinners!’ Mum shouted from her position at the head of the table. Wine glass in hand. ‘Let’s raise a toast! To meals!’

Here they were, gathered around the table at Mum’s house in Bøler, just as was the case every last Sunday of the month, though on this particular occasion on the first Sunday of the year.

Unlike the others, his mother wasn’t sitting; she was standing on a chair. ‘Now let me tell you, I know a little something about what it means to be a woman!’ she announced.

‘I’ll say,’ her partner Leif replied, sounding slightly sleazy as far as Storm was concerned, as if the fact she was a woman was somehow to his advantage, what with him being the one who *knew* her as a woman and all that. Storm wasn’t sure.

‘I’ve had three children!’ his mother declared, and Leif nodded in support. ‘But the idea that someone might wake up one day, perhaps feeling slightly shamefaced, as anyone can do of a morning…’ she continued. ‘To go from that to saying: no, do you know what, today I feel like a *woman*! And not just that, but if you’re going to respect me as an individual, today you all have to treat me as such,’ his mother continued. ‘Well, I mean, to *feel* like a woman? I don’t even know what that means!’

‘Well, Grandma,’ Storm’s daughter Juliette remarked, taking exception. ‘Maybe you just need to try a bit harder?’

His mother must have heard the insult, but it’s possible that it didn’t quite register with her, swept up as she was in offering her own take on things: ‘I mean, come on,’ she cried, and with that she launched into her own theatrical scene, the family playing the role of her audience; she hit a fictional alarm clock on an imagined bedside table and mimed rubbing sleep from her eyes. ‘Here we are, a new day, and *do you know*, today I don’t think I’m a man after all. No! Today, today I’m a *woman*.’ She lifted her gaze and looked out across her audience, all of whom remained seated. ‘Things just aren’t that simple! There are men and there are women, end of story.’

Petra chipped in. ‘I have to say, I take issue with all this too. The idea that someone can just…’ she began, and her eyes fell on Birger and Harald. She stopped in her tracks.

‘Well, speaking as a sexologist,’ Cecilie began, but she was interrupted by Leif, who was sitting with his bad ear to her and perhaps hadn’t realised that she had spoken. ‘Are we talking about transsexuals?’

‘What’s that now?’ Cecilie asked.

‘Transsexuals,’ Leif repeated.

‘Where is this all going?’ Margot interjected.

‘People don’t really use that term anymore,’ Cecilie said. ‘They say transgender. Or a trans person.’

‘Oh, blah blah blah,’ her mother interrupted. ‘I can’t be doing with all that nonsense. All these things we’re not supposed to say anymore.’

‘Hear, hear, let’s just call a spade a spade,’ Leif added supportively.

‘Negro,’ Petra said.

Everyone jumped, and at first there was only silence, as was always the case when Petra decided to say what she really meant, even if it was only ever in gradual, provocative dribs and drabs. Then Storm said: ‘Please, Petra, enough of that.’

‘But these transsexuals,’ his mother continued, ‘these *trans people*, why do they have to be so sensitive? Children, you younger folk, can you explain it? What about this book that’s come out, that young, annoyingly pretty thing… the well-known communist… the one who’s dared to be so bold as to state that sex is a biological fact.’ His mother spoke sarcastically now, a tone that Storm was only too familiar with from his own youth. ‘And then next thing you know she’s cancelled and cast out and an enemy to God and the people and who knows what else!’

‘That’s hardly true, Grandma,’ Storm’s son Claude replied.

‘Her book has been published by one of the country’s largest publishing houses,’ Margot interjected in her thick, French accent. It had been twenty years since she had learned Norwegian at record speed and she was still enthusiastically praised for her command of the language, though she had never quite been able to shake her accent, any *h* was silent and she often stressed the last syllable of any word. That was simply how things were.

‘Back in my day, nobody dared speak out about anything, nobody *came out*, as you all say nowadays,’ Storm’s mother continued. ‘You young people don’t understand that, and that’s your privilege, but I don’t understand why you’re all so afraid of a little debate.’

‘We’re not afraid,’ Juliette interjected.

‘They’re not afraid,’ Storm said, and he meant it wholeheartedly. If there was one thing that could be said for his children, it was that they were entirely unafraid of debate.

‘They’re right here,’ Margot said. ‘They’re sitting here with you.’

Storm glanced over at his wife, and in the hope that she might remember him for who he really was, he repeated her words. ‘They’re right here.’

‘But you can all be whatever you like!’ his mother cried. ‘What’s this willy fixation all about, hm?’

Storm could tell she enjoyed using the word *willy*. It almost felt as if this entire discussion had been engineered to allow her the opportunity.

‘Yes,’ Leif said. ‘Yes, why the willy fixation?’ He had barely uttered the words before an uncertainty seemed to dawn on him, as if he was afraid he’d just inadvertently suggested he had some sort of fascination with his own manhood. ‘The same is true when it comes to travelling,’ he continued. ‘Seeing other cultures in other parts of the world, can’t we just enjoy it without feeling ashamed of our… what do they call it… our carbon footprint?’

‘Sex is real!’ his mother cried.

‘Nobody disagrees with you there, Mum,’ Cecilie said.

‘God, I’m sick to death of this subject,’ Petra remarked.

Silence for a moment once again.

Then: ‘You know one of these transsexuals, don’t you?’ Storm’s mother said.

‘I don’t think that’s how Bengt would describe himself.’

‘Transvestite, then.’

‘He just likes to wear women’s clothes now and again.’

‘And you don’t find that odd?’

‘The first time, maybe. But no, not especially.’

‘Gosh, aren’t you liberal and open-minded!’ she remarked, sarcastic once again, but this time the rest of the family laughed along with her. She was on the brink of winning them over, as usual.

‘Maybe you’re just a little old-fashioned, Grandma,’ Juliette said, in an obvious attempt to defend him.

Storm felt embarrassed at having to be defended by his own daughter, he was ashamed of the way his children had started to view him, this poor soul relegated to the sofa in the study. He leaned forward and accidentally nudged the glass of wine in front of him; he grabbed it just in time to avoid a spill, and then, with what was intended to be a stern look at his mother but which had ended up looking somewhat bewildered following the debacle with his glass, which would have created commotion had it spilled everywhere, he said: ‘TERF.’

‘What was that, son?’

‘TERF. You’re a TERF.’

‘And what exactly is a TERF?’

‘A trans-exclusionary radical feminist.’

His mother laughed.

Storm felt his children’s eyes on him. They’d been so proud when they’d found out that their father had a friend who occasionally dressed as a woman. It was time for Storm to step up to the plate. Even Margot was waiting to see what her husband had to say.

Storm moved the glass out of reach. ‘Why is it,’ he began, ‘why is it that a feminist like you finds it *so* difficult to feel any sense of solidarity with women born in the wrong body?’ Storm said.

‘Born in the wrong body…’ his mother repeated. ‘Ha!’

‘Trans women.’

‘Trans *women*,’ his mother repeated.

‘How radical were you *really*?’ Storm asked. ‘Was it only for your own sakes that you all fought tooth and nail back in the day? All while other oppressed people…’

His mother interrupted him brusquely: ‘Oh, we were far more radical than any of you could ever dream of being.’ She climbed down from her chair, clearly felt the need to have her feet on terra firma for what was to follow. ‘But we were more concerned with the class system. Perhaps you’re familiar with the term, my little capitalist? You’ve all been brainwashed by market liberalism. You think every decision is yours to make and yours alone, any sense of solidarity, any resistance to individualism, it’s all been ground down to nothing. You only think in terms of customers and consumers – you even seem to think of our basic biology as some sort of commodity.’

It was hard for Storm to ignore the desire to retreat, as was so often the case for him. He had shown his hand, and he glanced past Margot and over at his children. He knew he ought to say something, but he didn’t know what.

After a brief moment of silence, Leif stood up: ‘I hoped you’ve all saved room for dessert.’ He turned to look at HC, Storm’s mother’s ex-husband and father to Storm’s two sisters, both of whom had remained silent along with his second wife, Nancy. ‘And what say you to a brandy, eh, HC? Only the best!’

‘Oh yes, a brandy is definitely in order,’ HC replied. ‘We need a drink. These days we need a drink just to get by.’

Ten minutes later, with glasses topped up and everyone tucking into their own slice of black forest gateau, his mother spoke once again: ‘So, Storm, you’re in court tomorrow, are you?’

It was hardly a secret. In light of his last bankruptcy, he had been called to a hearing in the district court, and the date of that hearing was tomorrow, the first Monday of the year, a year that was shaping up to be the worst of Storm’s life, which said a lot given that things hadn’t exactly been straightforward in the lead-up.

‘That’s right,’ Storm said, smiling.

‘And do you think you’ll be found guilty?’

‘No, no, I shouldn’t have thought so.’

‘No, of course.’ His mother flashed him a half-smile, perhaps it was a look of sympathy and concern, he couldn’t be sure, and Storm closed his eyes. When he opened them again, Leif was standing with his glass of brandy in one hand, intent on singing to his guests, a spot of light opera. It was the same at every one of these Sunday gatherings. He wasn’t a singer, his background was actually in tourism, but nonetheless he had always been the kind of man to break into song when people flocked together.

Leif was an accomplished tenor.

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Back at home, Storm fetched the tin of shoe polish from the cupboard. He stood at the desk in the study and polished his shoes. Margot popped in and asked if he wanted her to go with him, but Storm saw the turmoil involved even just in asking him and told her it wouldn’t be necessary. His suit was at the ready on its coat hanger, but he’d hung it up in the study, he didn’t want the children catching sight of it and mulling over what awaited their father when the night was over and the next day should begin.

He sat up until after the others had gone to bed. He didn’t want them to have to see him withdraw to the study, to linger for a moment in the narrow doorway after having changed into his pyjamas: ‘Well, sweet dreams, then.’ No, he waited until everyone had disappeared into their own rooms before turning off the television, making up the bed, getting changed behind the desk and climbing in between the sheets. The bedding was part of a set, and that fact alone made him sad. He thought about how he had almost knocked over his wine glass as everyone had watched on, all just as he was preparing to launch his attack on his mother. Storm lay there and stared up at the ceiling. The unfamiliar room felt strange at night; shadows floated by whenever anything happened on the street down below, menacing silhouettes.

What could he do but polish his shoes until they shone and pull on a freshly-laundered suit with trouser creases as sharp as any knife, how else could he possibly defend himself?

Storm’s hearing didn’t last long. After the evidence was given, the judge had a few questions.

‘Mr Sandberg has been declared bankrupt on a previous occasion?’

Storm wasn’t immediately sure if it was intended as a question given the way it had been formulated in the third person, something that caused the judge to utter a sigh:

‘Mr Sandberg has been declared bankrupt on a previous occasion?’

‘No,’ Storm replied, his voice clear.

‘No?’ the judge repeated, peering down at Storm in bewilderment before rifling through the papers in front of him. ‘You *haven’t* previously been declared bankrupt?’

‘Well, you see,’ Storm began. ‘I thought you… Your Honour…’ he said, correcting himself, but he was interrupted.

‘Yes, no? What exactly is the answer? Does Mr Sandberg know whether he’s previously been declared bankrupt or not?’

Storm gazed down at his shiny shoes. ‘I have, yes.’

‘Speak up, please.’

‘I have previously been declared bankrupt.’

The judge began flicking through his stack of paperwork. ‘Twice, by my understanding,’ he said after a moment. ‘Imported safety razors and… miniature furniture?’

‘Well, if I may, Your Honour,’ Storm began, and his solicitor cast a concerned look in his direction from where he sat just beside Storm. ‘These weren’t imported safety razors. These were safety razors designed in-house, so to speak, made right here in Norway. In many ways you could describe the whole venture as an exploration of industrial opportunity, but the competition with Gillette was too much for us to withstand. Norwegian supermarkets are all in the pocket of multinational companies who invite company directors on exclusive jaunts as long as they promise them a monopoly in their health and beauty departments. There’s an awful lot I could tell you on this subject.’

‘I don’t doubt that,’ the judge cut in.

‘And Mini Module Furnishings was a company that designed modular furniture suited to increasingly small living spaces. Sustainable pieces in their own right, and an invitation to consider smaller living spaces in the fight against climate change.’

‘But people didn’t take to the idea of smaller homes?’

‘Those already living in small homes weren’t interested in our furniture. Many are immigrants or hail from immigrant backgrounds, their tastes in interior design differed from our vision. People with wealth and the same taste still tend to live in larger homes. We were ahead of our time.’

‘And you believe the same to be true for…’ The judge appeared almost unwilling to utter the word. ‘Padel tennis? Is that spelled with one d, or two?’

Storm glanced up at the elderly man hunched over his desk. ‘That’s right, Your Honour. As I mentioned, it’s making waves in England, and elsewhere.’

‘And it’s some sort of beach sport, originally…?’

‘Well, no, I wouldn’t necessarily say that.’

‘But it originates in the Mediterranean, if I understand correctly. And it made its way to England via tourists visiting the Costa del Sol?’

Storm straightened himself up. ‘That’s right.’

‘And you erected a four hundred square meter hall out in the forest?’

‘That’s right, just up by Vinterbro Shopping Centre. One of the country’s busiest.’

‘*Four hundred* square meters?’

‘Four hundred and thirty, to be precise.’

‘Why so large? Might it not have been prudent to have started out on a smaller scale?’

‘I’m afraid I have to disagree with you there. In this business, it pays to think big. Volume is critical. With better coverage we could easily have reached a point that allowed us to repay our debts.’

‘Better coverage? In what sense, more players?’

‘Yes.’

The judge sighed once again before noting something down.

‘And it ought to be added,’ Storm began, ‘that the plot of land, it was extremely cheap, and construction costs were kept to a minimum, particularly when compared to the quality of the hall itself.’

‘So now there’s an enormous padel tennis hall in the middle of the forest by Vinterbro?’

‘That’s right.’

‘And can it be used for other purposes?’

‘Absolutely.’

‘Such as…?’

Storm thought for a moment. ‘Off the top of my head, I couldn’t say. But all sorts, I expect.’

‘Just not padel tennis?’

‘Well, that too, of course,’ Storm replied, confused.

‘But not under your direction?’

‘No, unfortunately not under my direction.’

The judge glanced up and peered through his spectacles at Storm. ‘I’m not sure that “unfortunately” is the word we’re looking for in this case. I tend to suspect the word is “luckily”.’

Storm considered making his objections known but he felt his solicitor’s eyes on him. The judge wearily began quoting paragraph 142 of the Insolvency Act and numerous other sub-paragraphs. Without any nuance in tone, he concluded. ‘Given the criminal conduct and negligence exhibited in this case, I disqualify you – Storm Sandberg – for a period of two years. This disqualification precludes you from establishing or running any form of business enterprise during that time.’

Storm stood up, gripped by a sudden sense of desperation. His solicitor tugged at his jacket to sit him back down again. ‘But I’m a businessman. It’s what I do. I can’t… I’ve explained everything. You haven’t been willing to listen.’ He shouted the last words.

Without turning around, the judge left the courtroom.

Outside the courthouse, his solicitor shifted his files from one arm to the other, clutching them close to his chest before shaking Storm’s hand. ‘That went as well as could be expected,’ he said. ‘Let’s hope the year ahead is better than the last. With any luck it’ll be a good year for you,’ the solicitor added before hurrying away. Glancing over his shoulder, he added: ‘Call me if anything else comes up.’

Storm stood and watched the pigeons as they pecked at the shimmering white frozen puddles, and it struck him that these creatures demanded nothing of the world; they waddled up and down the pavements and around town squares, sustained themselves on whatever they stumbled across on their way – the heel of a loaf of bread, the remains of a kebab, the carcass of a barbeque chicken – or found themselves wrestling with flyaway carrier bags, as was the case now, several of them yanking and tugging at the flimsy plastic.

‘Dad?’

Storm turned around, suddenly terrified. ‘Claude?’

His son, already ten centimetres taller than Storm, approached his father hesitantly.

‘What are you doing here, son?’

‘I didn’t want you to have to be here on your own.’

‘Me?’

‘Yeah.’

Storm’s outburst at the judge was still palpable, as if it were stuck fast somewhere in his body. ‘Were you in there?’

‘No, I’ve been waiting out here.’

Storm didn’t know what to say.

‘Shouldn’t you be at school?’

‘Did it go well?’

‘Yes, oh yes. Perfectly.’

‘You look upset.’

‘Do I?’