From *The Day that Nils Vik Died*

(*Den dagen Nils Vik døde*)

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At a quarter-past five in the morning Nils Vik opened his eyes, and the last day of his life began. He lay there somewhere between dreaming and waking, sure that he would slip back into sleep, as was his habit. But now this day was here. He turned over, becoming aware of the room, the clock radio, the cold drifting in through the open window. There were no bloodstains on the pillow today, as far as he could see. What had he been dreaming about? A hand through his hair, fingertips brushing his cheek, a voice that reached him through the darkness. *I’ll wait for you downstairs, sweetheart.*

He set his feet on the cold floor, went into the bathroom, pulled down his pyjama bottoms and emptied himself of the weight of the night’s piss, which poured into the toilet bowl in a single, long sigh. He began to do what had to be done. He was still capable of performing his morning ritual with efficient movements: get himself upright, find clothes, make coffee, eat breakfast, go down to the boat whatever the weather. These movements, drilled into him over the course of a long life.

In the shower he watched the water as it gushed over his pale skin. At the sink he dragged his razor across his cheeks and jaw, down his throat and over his Adam’s apple. His right hand was trembling slightly – he had to be careful. He didn’t want to cross the fjord with a plaster on his upper lip or a bloody scrap of toilet paper stuck to his chin. What else? Teeth? Hands? Pomade? He considered omitting the aftershave. But this day couldn’t be any different than yesterday, or the day before that, or any other day before that one.

The man in the mirror. A man of medium height, stocky and strong; hair once dark but now streaked with grey. A deeply furrowed face, high forehead, narrow eyes, brows that could do with a trim. Gravity had played its part – he would often joke that only his feet still looked like their full and true selves. He held his own gaze. The man in the mirror stared back at him, lowered his arms, attempted a smile. He was a man who liked to know everything about what went on around him: the weather, the wind, the tides. He was now looking at a man who no longer knew where he was going.

A stream of voices came rushing through the air and up the stairs. Nils made his way down to the kitchen, where one of the chairs caught his attention. There was a small indentation in the seat cushion, a depression he couldn’t remember having seen before, as if someone had broken in during the night and was now waiting for him. Otherwise, everything appeared as it always did. The humming of the refrigerator, the dirty plates in the sink.

A voice was prattling on, somewhere in the house. Nils turned, and followed the sound. The transistor radio stood in the hallway – he must have left it there with the volume turned up late last night. He took the radio back into the kitchen with him. What day was this? A peaceful, rainy day in November. The voice on the radio reported that the weather would clear up later – there might even be some sunshine. A deer had fallen onto a car travelling at speed beside the fjord. A missing boy had been found by the police in the city. A fire had broken out aboard a ferry.

Nils made coffee, poured himself a cup and stirred in two lumps of sugar. Still sleepy, he spread a slice of bread with syrup, but then sat there frowning at it. His stomach trouble meant that every meal now felt tedious and pointless. He stared into the living room as he chewed and swallowed each bite of bread, aided by small sips of coffee. The old furniture was heavy and dark, as if it would stand here for all time. Three generations had passed through these rooms, fluttering around like insects, filling each floor with the sounds of life and joy.

They were still on the walls and in the frames on the dresser, these photographs from baptisms and confirmations, weddings and other days that had passed before this last one. He had lived his whole life here, first with his mother, father and brother, later with his wife and two daughters. He didn’t know what would happen to the house after he was gone. He had spoken to Eli and Guro during the summer, had sat them down at the kitchen table and told them they’d have to agree on who would have what. He wanted no arguments about his childhood home after he was gone – he had seen far too many siblings exchange their parting words at a parent’s funeral. His daughters had laughed it off. They had joked and smirked, but they had promised there would be no arguing.

Nils turned, reached for the kitchen drawer and took out a pen and a postcard. The card featured an image of the fjord on a summer’s day, with sunshine and fine, white clouds above the mountains. In an unsteady hand, he wrote a brief greeting across the sky, then propped the card against his coffee cup. What would the girls think when they found it? Would they smile? Would they cry? *I have left this house, and I won’t be coming back. Take good care of each other. Dad.*

After listening to the news at six-thirty, he stood and said thanks for his meal. He had continued to do this even after his wife had died. Thank you, Marta, he said, and looked over at the kitchen chair that had once been hers. When she was alive, she would lean across the table after they had finished eating, place her hand over the back of his, give it a gentle rub and say you’re welcome.

He went outside to pick up the newspaper. His last newspaper. It was limp from lying out in the rain. *Rescued alive after an hour in the deep*, read the front page headline. There was also an image of a footballer under the heading: *Dream debut*. Should he sit down to read it? No, this last newspaper would remain unread. He went down into the cellar and set it atop one of the many piles. This was how it had to be – he had to do this right, make sure even the very last newspaper was in its proper place. People were surprised if they accompanied him down to the cellar and saw the bundles of newspapers there. All those days, all those years, all the lost time stacked here, all the way back to when he’d been given the job. He was once the man who delivered the newspaper to people along the fjord; he had brought them wars, fires, murders, weather forecasts, election results, football results, special offers on cars and suits and televisions.

We can’t have the cellar full of the past, Marta had said.

Can’t we?

No – and anyway, it’s a fire hazard.

Such is life, Marta.

She didn’t say it out loud, but Nils knew that Marta longed to get rid of the newspapers that landed on every chair and rug and tabletop before they eventually fluttered down to the cellar. She didn’t care for the printer’s ink that marked their tablecloths and clothes; she said that even the living room wallpaper had been dirtied by it. Nils had replied that it would have been lovely had the pattern on the wall been created by the great and small happenings out there in the world, but he was sure the marks were from his hair oil. If he was especially tired after a night out on the fjord, he might lean against the wall beside the door and sleep standing up, the way horses do. They had tried to remove the marks, but all the washing had only made them worse; they expanded, like maps of an unknown continent.

Nils considered whether there was more to do in the house. Were there things he should take with him? What do you take with you when you know you’re not coming back? He took the Omega from the corner cabinet and saw that its hands had stopped a little after ten on the nineteenth of some forgotten month. He wound up the watch and set the time. A quarter to seven? The eighteenth of November? The nineteenth? No, the *eighteenth*, of course. The watch had been a gift from Marta on their silver wedding anniversary. She had spent a lot of money on it, and she’d been hurt when he had continued to wear his old one every day. He had explained that he didn’t want to scratch the glass; his work didn’t permit him to wear such a nice watch.

He went back up to the bedroom, stripped the bed and heaped all the bedding into a loose pile. Then he lifted the mattress out of its frame and jostled the ancient thing over to the landing. He wrestled the mattress down the stairs and through the hallway before he put on his shoes, managed to open the front door, and shoved the mattress out onto the gravel. He had matches and paraffin at the ready, and he dragged the mattress a short distance from the wall of the house before he set it alight. Every six months, he and Marta had carried the old mattress out into the garden to remove the smell of sleep from it and breathe new life into its tired, worn fibres. When they put the mattress back in the frame, they made sure to always turn it over, so they would spend six months lying on each of its sides.

The mattress smouldered for a while before the flames took hold of its stained surfaces. Nils Vik stared at the dark rings of blood, yellow blooms of urine, breastmilk stains and decades of semen and sweat, fragments of skin and hair and nails, traces of jam and coffee and breakfasts in bed every birthday, hopes and joys he had forgotten and which would now go up in smoke. He even thought he glimpsed the imprint of her body, where she had lain like an S on her side of the bed, but it must have been his imagination. The mattress told the story of an entire life. It felt too private to allow other people – and even *complete strangers*, for all he knew – to deal with their past. Nils went back up the front steps, turned around, and saw the mattress ablaze on the gravel.

A little after seven, Nils Vik walked through the house for the very last time. The floorboards creaked beneath his feet; the handrail on the stairs felt cool against his palm. He put on a wool sweater, found his peacoat, picked up his cigarettes and took his skipper’s cap from the hook. He rummaged through his pockets for his keys, and eventually found them.

He went into the living room and sat down on the sofa. This was a habit he had acquired – the journey was always better, he felt, if he sat for a while before heading out. If he simply sat there, in the peace and quiet. Thinking things through. Clearing his head. This morning he was afraid he might remain sitting there, that he would lose the motivation to go down to the boat. He was ready to leave; he wanted to stay. He stood, and his heart began to pound. The last time he had been to see the doctor, he had been told that his heart was impaired. In a serious voice, the doctor had said that he was worried about Nils’s heart. What a parody, spending so much time on a diagnosis Nils himself could have made in minutes.

He stood outside on the front steps for a moment. From the house he could hear whispering and sighing, the low voices, the arguments, the radio with its fishing report. The footsteps and the humming, the flushing of the toilet. Marta playing cards with the girls, the gurgling of the coffee machine, doors being opened and closed. He took out his keys, about to lock up, but then went back inside to get the radio and his hip flask. Then he turned on the outdoor light he had just switched off. It was Marta who had insisted that a light be kept on, an outdoor light that would shine through the night. So Nils could navigate and find his way home should he run into problems out on the fjord. He had stuck to it. No reason to change it now. There would always be a light on in this house.

The day was yet to take on its colours. The grass was trampled flat and autumnally mottled, and it had stopped raining. He loved mornings like this, laden and untouched, with milky fog drifting down the mountainsides. To walk to the boat, stand at the wheel, light a cigarette and watch its ember flicking up and down. A shadow came into view down on the gravel road, and out of the dim, grey light came Luna. The dog jumped up at him, twisting and thrashing, whining and wagging.

Ahaha! Luna cried. Here I am! Down here! Here!

Nils couldn’t help but laugh. Where on earth had the dog come from? From the other side? From the next world? How many years had it been since she had run into the road only to be mown down by a passing truck? Twenty? Twenty-five? She used to sit patiently in the wheelhouse, staring out at the waves and the rain and the lights along the fjord. Then at some point the dog had started talking, commenting on people and events and the weather. What a guy! Luna might say. She’s not quite right in the head that one, Luna might say. Lovely day, though, isn’t it? Oh, the things the two of us have seen and done, Nils!

He soon found he could talk to Luna about anything and everything – about boats and planes and politics and football. Now she once again walked obediently at his feet, playful and happy, following every step he took towards the water and the boathouse, where he pushed the warped window closed from the outside before he opened the door. Hello? he called softly into the darkness, inhaling the scent of diesel and rotten fishing nets. He had thought she might be waiting here, but when he turned on the light, he saw that he was alone.

Nils went over to the window and secured the catches from the inside. He had received several offers to buy the boathouse – the entire plot, in fact – but he had told the estate agents and developers in no uncertain terms that it wasn’t for sale. Aren’t you going to sell, Nils? his neighbours had asked. All of them had sold. The valley was now full of cabin people, city people who forced their way all the way down to the water’s edge, the kind of people who would convert the building’s interior, secretly redecorate and then apply to the local council for a change of use. One fine day that roof’s going to come down on your head, Nils! people said. Just look how the water pours in when it rains! But his boathouse stood. Everything was getting older, everything was in decline, everything was made to fall apart. But his boathouse stood.

Their eldest daughter had been conceived here, over in the corner, under a roof that had rested heavily above their heads. He remembered the falling rain, he remembered his trousers around his knees and Marta giving a running commentary on the sperm cells swimming inside her only to seep out again. Do you think one of them will make it? she had asked. And that was how Eli was made. Had it really happened? Or was it simply something he clung to as part of the story of their lives? Yes, it had happened, but you can never know for certain with these kinds of things. He took a hammer and pliers from the tool shelf and removed two links from the Omega’s steel wristband. He must have got thinner since he last wore the watch, yes, he was now both wizened and more fragile. He found lubricant and his oilskins, prepared the slam-shut lock on the door, and heard how it shunted closed behind him for the very last time.

The tide was on the ebb this morning – it was a calm day, but not still, for the fjord is never still, it rumbles and rustles, it whispers and rushes, even on days with no wind. All the sounds he recognised, all the noise and hubbub he had learned to read and interpret. He climbed down the ladder and stepped over into the boat, his body weaker and stiffer now, yet still with enough agility to make it safely across. Luna lingered a little on the quay, turning several circles around herself and hopping lightly from foot to foot before she risked it and leapt over onto the deck.

Which boat was this? The MB *Marta*, of course – a boat that had served him well, a boat he had purchased just after the war, full of optimism and belief in the future. It was a boat that could handle the sea, which could withstand the wind and the waves. A boat made of oak, 36 feet long, 9 feet wide, painted white with red stripes on her hull and cabin. An elegant sailboat he had de-rigged to put in a 12-horsepower combustion engine. He had added the cabin and wheelhouse, and it had taken fourteen months to convert the sailboat into a ferryboat.

He turned the key in the ignition. The motor started on the first try, as it always did, no matter the weather. Pistons came to life; lightning flashed between distributor points. The distributor supplied cylinders with electricity. The smell of diesel rose from the engine bay, like aromas in a kitchen, and the wheel began to vibrate gently between his hands. He listened to the knocking and thudding, the most comforting sound in all the world. This heart, with its strong, ropy muscles, which for all these years had worked beneath him.

Over the fjord he goes. Over the fjord without hesitation. Over the fjord, like so many times before. Late and early, morning and evening. Through storm or stillness, to east and west. Only the gulls follow him: they mutter and complain, seeming unnaturally white as they hang there above the boat. The only human influences this morning are the light from the house and the headlamps of a car working its way down the fjord’s western side.

Nils Vik turns around. He thinks he can see a column of smoke rising up beside the house, the mattress must be consumed by now, reduced to ash. The house immediately slips out of sight. The next time he turns, he won’t be able to see it. All his minutes exist there, all his hours, all his days. After all these years he has learned that a good home is a fortification, a cocoon surrounding the body, a shelter that comes after skin and clothes. To be there, make food, make babies, sleep. To wake, to eat, to piss and shit and love.

It is almost seven-thirty. It’s morning, yet still night, the darkness retained within all the bedrooms, people sleeping with duvets pulled up around them. Soon they’ll make breakfast, soon they’ll head out to the barn to tend to the animals, soon they’ll start the milking machines, they’ll check nets and fish corrals, drive to football matches and family dinners. Bells will call congregations to church services, their blows trembling on the water’s surface. Time has outrun him. It’s been a matter of time for a good while already. It is always a matter of time. On this last day he will pull a thread through time, follow it backwards, see where time takes him. He will travel this fixed route, or rather the *scheduled routes*, for the very last time. He will trace what he has loved in life, lift it up, honour it. For if *he* doesn’t do this, who will?

Oh, Luna says, casting a glance at Nils.

She says *oh*, softly, a couple more times, little more than sighs in the wheelhouse. The boat sits steady in the water now, creating small bow waves as they sail across its dark and mysterious surface. Nils doesn’t turn, he doesn’t turn, doesn’t turn, stares only through the window.

Oh, Luna says again.

Shut it, Nils says.

Sayin’ nuffin, says the dog.

How does one know? The bloodstains that spot the pillow? The shade of pink in the toilet bowl? It is impossible to know. He’s just surprised that so far, this last day has been like all the others. He has risen from the same bed, has eaten his usual breakfast, has sauntered down to the old boat. Now he’s out on the same fjord, a tiny blip in the landscape, with everything about to stretch out before him.

Luna stares at him with eyes like two wet question marks.

What do you remember best, Nils? she asks.

I don’t know.

So much is lost to him, so much is gone, an absence that will soon encompass everything. He’ll have to check the logbooks, surely they’re still here somewhere? Yes, there they are. Small blue logbooks, one after the other, around twenty-five in total. How often he has stared off into space, deep in thought, before scribbling down a few lines. He’s even cut off the fingertips of his right glove to better grip his pen. What did he feel was worth noting? The weather, of course. Politics, geography. He’s drawn doodles and copied out quotations from the newspaper, created squad lineups and fixtures. He’s written down the fares he took, a small red ring encircling each amount.

He has created this little waiting room in time for people, and yes, he’s even transported sheep and goats across. All kinds of people have squeezed in here with him, for a few minutes, a few hours. Then they would step ashore and disappear, disperse, these people destined for so many different places. He got them to the city, to the doctor, the priest and the midwife, he got them to school and to funerals. Nils’s boat was a fragment of their existence, a brief pause in their daily routine. But to him the boat was much more, this boat that became a way of life. His boat tore along these waters, it hummed and sung and swayed. The boat was a satellite, a moon that orbited the fjord.

So what do *you* remember best? Nils asks.

Me? Luna replies, settling her snout atop her paws.

Our walks in the forest, she says, after pondering for a moment.

I don’t remember us walking in the forest that often.

Oh but we did. We loved being in the forest. Loved it.

But when were we in the forest?

All dogs like being in the forest. No matter whether we’ve been there or not. The pinecones! The sticks! Oh, the sweet smell of wet bark!

What does he remember best? Yes, now he knows. Coming home late at night or early in the morning, home to the house in Vika after having been out in the wind and the waves. Tiptoeing across the floor so as not to wake those who had long since fallen asleep. Turning off the light, leaving only the single outdoor lamp burning. Sitting in the darkness in the kitchen with a dram, looking down at his hands and thighs, looking at the tattoos on his forearms, at all the surfaces. Being somewhere between night and day, between dozing and waking. Being dead tired, being alive, having eyes that see only in monochrome after being open for so long. The nights when Marta hears his footsteps in the gravel, his boots crossing the frozen grass or tramping over the compacted snow – she’s such a light sleeper, on the nights he’s out on the fjord she sleeps so lightly, listening to the branches of the trees that move and scrape against the walls of the house, attuned to every sign of a change in the weather. The nights when she comes down to him, her cardigan over her shoulders. When she comes up behind him as he sits there, shot glass in hand. The nights when she puts her arms around him.

A sickly light settles over them now, giving definition to forms and shapes. Nils Vik grips the wheel and closes his eyes, then opens them again. Is it the dead coming through the openings in the forest? Yes, here they are. Here they come. The dead surge forth, just as the day is about to surge forth. The dead become clear, become manifest in the grey that reigns between eight and nine o’clock on a November morning.

Look, Nils says.

What? Luna asks.

There, Nils says, and points towards land.

The dead must have gathered in the forest, they must have found each other, these lonely souls who no longer belong to anyone, who have left everything they love behind. They come through the fields and down the mountainsides, they walk out onto steep cliffs, onto the smooth, coastal rock. Once there, they stand still.

Nils slows the boat and steers closer to the western side. The hum of the motor quietens, the boat almost scrapes against the shore. The dead are just metres away now, filled with the morning’s languidness. They stand apart, but they must have tainted each other, for they have almost become a single creature, one being. They stand silent and still, but they are alive. They belong to the past, but they exist here and now.

You can turn back, Nils – you do know that, don’t you? Luna asks.

No, he replies. No, I can’t go back.

Are you sure?

Yes, I can’t turn back now.

They are a hallucination, they must be, but Nils doesn’t know if he can leave them or shake them off. Have the dead come to him? Or have they come from him? Do they want to come aboard, do they wish to join him? Nils studies each and every one of the dead. Marta is not among them.

But here they come, yes, here they are. All his passengers – they ooze out of the logbooks, arise from his handwriting, grow out of his memory. They line the fjord, they are with him, they present themselves in the hope of being recognised. See us. Touch us. Speak of us.

Who were his very first paying passengers? That’s right – Synnve and Sverre Nesbø on the fifth of May 1948, a breezy Saturday with few clouds, a lovely spring day it says in the logbook. And did he not see the Nesbøs just now? Were they not there among the dead? Indeed – a man and wife who had ground each other down, as married couples often do, often reluctantly and with catastrophic results. Out on the fjord that day in May 1948, Nils Vik had realised that this couple were on their very first outing to the city together. As they approached the city fjord, Sverre Nesbø said straight out that he was against the whole trip, there was too much clearing, chopping, milking, shovelling and slaughtering that needed doing at home. His wife snorted, and said that the apple tree would most likely still be standing when they got back, and the cows, too – yes, even the house and the hay barn, the whole lot would still be there, guaranteed!

Once safely disembarked, the couple had made their way up the main thoroughfare, arm in arm, then vanished onto the city streets. Nils had sat out on the deck that day, smoking and enjoying a nip of whiskey as he studied the people who buzzed past. Sverre Nesbø returned quickly, declaring that city life wasn’t for him – he’d had to look four or five times just to cross the street, all kinds of people had bumped into him, he’d had not a moment’s peace. His wife, on the other hand – she wanted to try on clothes, she wanted to taste pastries and look in shop windows.

I gave her two hours, Sverre Nesbø said. If she isn’t back by four o’clock, then she’s made her choice.

And what choice is that? Nils asked.

Then she’s chosen city life.

The pair of them passed the time by playing cards, and Nils treated his passenger to a nip of whiskey. At around three-thirty, Sverre Nesbø asked Nils if he could bum a cigarette; he began to stride back and forth on the quay in his slightly shabby suit. At two minutes to four, Synnve Nesbø came back down the main thoroughfare, smiling and carrying a bouquet of roses. At that point Nils had been instructed to start the boat’s motor and put out.

You spent my money on *flowers*? Sverre Nesbø asked.

*Your* money? his wife asked in return.

Yes, mine.

What an idiot of a man I married, Synnve said, and jumped aboard.

This is how his last day begins. Standing at the wheel, listening to the past and listening to the radio, the November sky above him and the motor humming below, the logbooks open. At Kviene he passes a pleasure boat with its lanterns lit. Nils can’t see the other boatman very clearly, but he can make out a man and a dog. The guy waves and says hello as the boats pass each other. Nils doesn’t wave back. People who go around saying hello out on the fjord can’t be taken seriously. It’s as if they don’t know what can happen on the fjord or out at sea. They can’t possibly have seen a boat go down, or have heard the sound of one ship hitting another: *KRANNNG*. You have to keep a cool head, you have to concentrate. Nils has often thought that boatmen who go around saying hello to people must feel vulnerable and lonely; they must think it will help to stand there waving their arms. *Ahoy there! Here I am! Such an idiot!*

I have a good boat, he would say when Marta implored him to learn how to swim. He said that the most important thing was to have a boat you could trust, and he had such a boat. He couldn’t imagine what kind of weather it would take to get the better of this boat.

The beautiful thing about his boat was how everything worked. Indeed, the higher the waves rose, the safer he felt. You’re forgetting what happened to your father, Marta said. The fjord giveth and the fjord taketh away, he replied then. It was his nature – he was a man of the fjord, a ferryman. He had patiently explained how the word *ferje* – ferry – came from Old Norse. That ferry actually means *fare* – danger – if he drowned, that was just how it was. You fool, Marta had said. Not much to be done about it, had been his reply. Generations of seafarers had never learned to swim. If their boats went down, it was game over regardless. It was best to drown quickly – swimming only prolonged the suffering.

One winter morning, after Nils had made his way home in unusually rough waters, Marta was waiting for him down on the quay. She stood there, her hair whipping in the wind and with Nils’s coat wrapped around her, and as he hopped ashore he saw how swollen her face was. Nils had been about to pull her to him, to embrace her, but she grabbed hold of his peacoat and shook him with a strength he didn’t know she possessed. Then she swung at him with her clenched right fist. He was so surprised that at first he began to laugh, but then the pain shot through his skull, and he felt the blood running from his mouth and nose.

Marta hit him again. And then again. She began to pepper him with blows to his face and torso. Nils stumbled, almost losing his balance; like a boxer on the defence, he raised his hands to shield his face. Marta didn’t let up. He tried to pin her arms to her sides, but she wriggled free and kept swinging. In the end he fell to his knees, grabbed hold of the coat she was wearing and clung to it as he begged her to stop.

You have two daughters, you have me, you have an entire family, she said. You will learn how to swim.

The day is still swaddled in morning mist. As they pass Sandøy, it looks as if the island is about to free itself from the water and sail down the fjord. When was he last out there? Didn’t he go swimming on Sandøy this past summer? He went swimming there last summer at any rate. Last summer had been something truly special, one fine day after the next – good lord, there had been no choice but to throw yourself into the water to cool off. Yes, he had gone swimming there this past summer, too. He remembers taking the boat and swimming off the island on that last beautiful summer’s day.

At the time, he hadn’t known it would be the last day of summer, or that it would be his last swim. Only now can he say this with certainty. Perhaps his swimming trunks are still hanging from one of the island’s pine trees – he’s pretty sure he can recall forgetting them and considering going back. Over the years, he has learned to enjoy swimming. Marta had to force him into the water those first few times. It’s freezing cold, he complained. Yep, and it won’t get any warmer, she said. Marta had called him a wimp and a scaredy-cat and a chicken; she had teased him and coaxed him. Don’t let go of me, Nils said as he thrashed around, floundering. I won’t, she said. If you let go of me, I’ll kill you, he said. I won’t let go of you, she said. Just keep your head above water, relax your body. Slowly, he had begun to enjoy it. Jumping out into the water, feeling that cold shock, taking a few long strokes, permitting the slow movement to spread from his fingers all the way down to his toes. There was nothing lovelier than chugging out to Sandøy with Marta and the girls, on Sundays when the heat had settled over land and sea. Taking off his t-shirt and sandals, taking a deep breath and diving below the surface, swimming over to his girls’ shimmering legs, tickling them and then resurfacing, grinning, to hear their desperate shrieks. Swimming with his girls clinging to his neck and back, getting out and shaking off the water the way Luna used to, swimming and getting hungry before dinner and crossing the fjord to buy ice-cream from the store.

All these last times. The end is never as you imagine it, and the end is everything, is it not? There will be a last time you swing your daughter onto your shoulders and carry her through the forest. A last time you walk up the mountainside and gaze out across the landscape that is yours. A last time you go to the store to buy bread and milk and butter. A last summer. A last swim. He had floated on his back over there in August, looking up at a blue sky and the white clouds that had been chalked across it. He had sat on the warm, smooth rocks, closed his eyes, and listened to the gurgling of the fjord.