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The Hamburger Princess

You Only Live Once

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This was no ordinary evening. It was the last evening when everything was normal and safe. The evening when everything changed. My life changed and Mom became a stranger. I remember every bit. We were watching horse and cat videos on YouTube until we fell asleep. I didn't know at that time that it was going to be the last evening when Sire was my friend. When we woke up in the morning, we realized that we'd fallen asleep on the sofa. It was completely silent, and there was nobody else in the house. We waited and waited for our moms to come back. I was sitting in the bathroom when I heard Sire's mother shouting in the entryway:

"Norá! Norá! Are you there?"

"No, Mom. It's just me and Máren here."

"Máren, Máren! Come quickly!" shouted Sire's mother and I hurried from the bathroom to her.

"Has your mother called?"

"She hasn't. Why?"

"I can't find her," said Sire's mother.

Sire's mother took us into the car which had heated up in the warm summer sun. We drove to my place, but Mom wasn't there. Sire's mother started calling people and asking where my mother might have gone. A message came with a short video. Frightened eyes looked at the phone screen. I didn't look at the video, but it was a video of Mom somewhere. With tears in our eyes, we drove off at full speed until we parked in the yard outside of a green house. Sire's mother told us to wait in the car and ran off in the direction of a neighboring house. We couldn't stand just waiting there and we ran after her. It wouldn't do to be scared this time, I thought, and the two of us entered the house as well.

"Norá! Where are you? Have you all seen Ellenora?" yelled Sire's mother.

The men pointed towards the house's innermost room. Sire and I peeked into the bedroom and saw a big, broad bed where my beautiful mother was lying completely naked. Her face was so beautiful; she was sleeping so beautifully.

"Norá, get up!" screamed Sire's mother, grabbing ahold of Mom and shaking her.

Mom's clothes were strewn across the room and bed. Sire and I found her leather jacket on the floor and spread it over her.

"Mom, wake up!" I whispered, caressing her long, blond hair.

"Which of you did this, which fucker is responsible" roared Sire's mother, but she didn't get an answer.

Sire's mother started dialing on her phone and it wasn't long before the police and an ambulance came for Mom. They covered my naked mother with a blanket before they lifted her into the ambulance. I didn't even understand at that time that the video where the men raped my mother one after the other was going to be found. I couldn't imagine that people were going to torment me with it when I got older, even ten years afterwards.

I followed Sire and her mother to their place. I didn't even have a chance to eat a meal before the child protection services came for me. One of them explained that my mother wasn't healthy and that she would be sent to the doctors in Romsa¹. Mom would need to be there for a long time, and in the meanwhile, I would need to live with some other family.

¹ This city called Tromsø in Norwegian.

I lived with that couple for an entire year. Inger was a doctor who had gotten married to some Norwegian doctor. They had moved here for work, and they were to care for me. I had a very good time at their place, and I liked living with them. But there was something that wasn't the same as at home. This wasn't my real home. They hadn't brought me into this world – Mom had. I was living with strangers, and that just wasn't the same as home. I missed Mom so much. I cried and longed for Mom's warmth, Mom's smile, and her beautiful singing voice. The memory of the day that Mom was sent to Romsa plagued me every day. Not a day went by that year when I didn't miss Mom and I didn't think about that event.

Midnight in the luxury hotel out on the tundra. Simon is playing YouTube videos on the TV from his phone. Máhtte and Brynjar are drinking beer, but none of us is too drunk. I'm drinking a cold bottle of Sprite, nibbling on some dried reindeer heart, and enjoying life.

Máhtte and Brynjar are talking about where the reindeer might have gone and where they'll probably be tomorrow. The reindeer need to be fed so that they don't starve to death now that the spring weather, with its days far enough above freezing to melt the top layer of snow and its nights cold enough to freeze it again, has formed a rock-hard crust of ice above the ground.

"What are the two of us going to do tomorrow?"

"Máhtte's going to drive, and you'll toss the hay to the reindeer. Since you're young and limber, you can do the throwing."

Brynjar is trying to make decisions for us as well.

"That'll be fun," I say.

“Yes, fun indeed. Not as awful and lazy as Simon. He barely moves. He’s like a prison inmate – afraid of getting up off his ass.”

“Hahaha,” Máhtte bursts out laughing.

Brynjar laughs. Simon doesn’t say anything. He just keeps typing on his phone.

“You have a proper girlfriend, Máhtte. Hard-working, beautiful, and good at dancing. Máren, what family are you from?”

A cloud comes over the happiness I’d been feeling. Over everything that had been peaceful and fun. This moment is a reminder that we’ve all been drinking, even if we’re not yet completely drunk, and that we’re just pretending that we all belong together.

“Máren is Ellenora’s daughter.”

“Yeah, I know Norá.”

I redirect the conversation towards the hotel. I ask Brynjar about it, and he proudly predicts their profits this Easter. Suddenly, the music stops and the only thing I hear is men talking. Máhtte is cut off in the middle of talking about the hunting store.

A loud mixing of voices starts playing on the TV, and I freeze up. I know what it is – I can feel it – and I don’t

even need to turn around to see it. I don't dare to look at the TV.

"Who the fuck put that on?" yells Máhtte.

I close my eyes.

"*Hahahaha*" the men on the TV laugh.

"*Harder! Give it to her!*" shout others.

"*Let everyone else have a turn,*" demands someone with a loud voice.

I don't know whether I'm going to faint, disappear, run away, or die. I've only ever heard about that video and listed to a bit of it once when they played it to torment me during middle school. I pretended not to hear, even though it burned a million holes into my heart.

"Simon, turn that off!" screams Brynjar. "Turn that off right now!"

"Mären, don't look." says Máhtte and tries to hold me so I don't turn around.

I can't stop myself from turning around. I don't want to, I don't have to, and I don't need to. My head doesn't obey. My fragile heart cracks and blackens. In the video is my mother. A dozen or so men are standing around her watching her get raped. Mom's naked body is lying there as if she's dead, unmoving, her eyes closed. She's being pushed

around, completely limp, all while they're insulting her. In the few seconds I manage to watch, I see someone I know.

"Simon, turn it off, turn it off!" shouts Máhtte.

The one who shouted "*Let everyone else have a turn*" is still just as thin, and is in the same room as me.

The video is turned off. Simon is almost smiling at me when our eyes meet.

I'm no longer frozen. My legs work. I run into the entryway, stuff on my boots, and start running. Running and running. I wade through the loose snow and feel how the hard crust cuts into my body. I run across the frozen lake along the snowmobile tracks all the way back to Máhtte's cabin. Outside it's completely dark. I come up the front steps and pull and pull at the front door, but it doesn't open. I realize that the door is locked. Máhtte put the key in the shed, and I run over there. When I open the door to the shed, I fall onto the floor. The tears won't let me continue and I'm just shaking and shaking. Inside of me, everything is burning up. Images of Mom, Mom's naked body, her pale body in that dark room being tossed about in every direction. The show never stops in the theater of my trauma. I feel my soul sinking through the floor of the shed into the world of the dead, away from here and away from this situation.

I had talked and danced with Brynjar. He offered me drinks. What did he think of me? He saw me dancing. Did he give Mom drinks as well? Why didn't he stop the men who were raping her? Was it his turn?

It's just my body in here. I look around myself, and it's completely dark. If I open the shed door, will I be able to see enough to look for the key? I don't feel the cold. I don't feel anything at all. I'm completely empty. Between the slats of the shed walls I see a light shining and hear the sound of a snowmobile.

"Brynjar, don't, just don't!"

"Máhtte, I can explain!"

"You don't need to explain anything. Go home, or do you want to end up on your back?"

Máhtte and Brynjar are outside. I don't make a noise. I barely dare to breathe. I don't even dare to look. The snowmobile lights are shining directly at the shed. The shed lights up. I look around me and see tools, lassoes, pelts, and saws. I don't see keys, not even one. Where did Máhtte hide the key? I look around and notice a hiding spot just before the snowmobile's lights shut off. Next to the shed door is one rubber boot. I wait until Máhtte has

chased Brynjar off to the other side of the lake. I stick my hand into the boot and rummage around. I feel a key.

This situation I'm in is so strange. I've often imagined that if somebody showed me the video again, that I'd kill myself, that I'd loose the will to live. That I'd want to disappear. But now, the only thing I want is to be alone, to live, to escape, in safety. Away from Brynjar, Simon, and Máhtte. Was Máhtte also in that video? Was Máhtte a part of it? Was he the one filming?

I run up the steps to the cabin and, hands shaking, stick the key into the keyhole and turn. The damn door won't open. It's stuck. The cold handle, covered in ice, chills me from my hand straight to my heart. I take a break. I fall against the door and scream in frustration. I turn back around towards the lake.

Máhtte is yelling and shouting, and then he hits Brynjar. Máhtte gets back on the snowmobile and drives back in my direction. I stand up, grab the handle with both my hands and, with all my strength, I pull the door open. I grab the key and hurry inside, locking the door after me.

Let everyone else have a turn – Hahahaha – What family are you from? – Simon, turn that off right now! – Let everyone else have a turn.

It plays even louder in my head when I hear Máhtte
banging and shouting on the other side of the front door,
as I lie down in the bunk bed.

“Máren, open the door! Open the door! Máren!”
I hear Máhtte shouting from outside. I smell a strange scent: old bedclothes and Máhtte’s scent here where I’m lying.

“Máren, don’t be crazy! Open the door!”

I sit up on the edge of the bed and wipe my wet hair away from my face. I dry my tears on my sleeve and walk to the kitchen. I find some paper towel there, blow my nose, and throw it into the garbage bag hanging from the the cabinet’s round doorknob.

Máhtte is banging and beating on the door.

“Máren, I’m freezing! Open the door! I’m alone, Brynjar isn’t here.”

I enter the chill of the entryway porch. I put my hand on the front door and I listen to how Máhtte’s hands are beating on it.

“Máren, are you in there?”

I draw a breath and clear my throat.

“Máhtte?”

“Máren?”

“Were you the one filming?”

“Huh? What? Me?”

“Yes, you! Were you the one filming while my mom was being raped?”

“No, it wasn’t me filming! Of course not!”

“Who was filming?”

“Someone from Leavdnja². I don’t remember his name.”

“Did you rape her too?” The only thing I hear is Máhtte breathing. It’s gone silent in here.

“Hello! Answer me! Did you also rape my mother?”

The door handle jiggles, twists, and Máhtte pulls at the door, but it barely moves.

“Máren, open the door!”

“Answer me, Máhtte! Completely honestly. Did you rape her too?”

“I didn’t rape her. I wasn’t there at that time.”

“Don’t lie!”

“I’m not lying. I was in Oslo at a conference. I have pictures.”

If we had our phones, I would have asked him to show me, but we left them in town.

² This town is called Lakselv in Norwegian.

“What fucking pictures? We don’t even have our phones!”

“You just need to trust me, Máren, darling. I wasn’t there. I’ve never raped anybody.”

Automatically, I trust Máhtte, but I can’t be dumb about this and trust him just because he says so.

“How did you know that it was someone from Leavdnja who was filming? You were there, you lying bastard!”

“Everybody knew about that video. People talk. I heard about it as well. And Brynjar told me a long time ago who filmed it. The police got involved and the guy who filmed it, and the guys who raped her, went to jail.”

“And why did you take me to Brynjar’s place?”

There were so many men in the video. Those men could be anybody’s brothers, fathers, uncles, cousins, or friends. I don’t want to know who all the others were. Who else has tortured my mother? Who else has seen that video? Is that video still being making the rounds on people’s phones? Do they watch it on the TV when they have nothing better to do? Do men have such ugly dreams? Do they have such ugly thoughts? Do they do such ugly things? Does this kind of thing still happen in our society? Could Máhtte be like that, since so many others are?

“Máren, darling, open the door. It’s cold out here!”

“Why did you take me there?” I cry out through the door at Máhtte.

“Forgive me. I was stupid. I wasn’t thinking about you. I’m just so used to it. I promised Brynjar a long time ago to forget about the whole thing for his sake. It’s ancient history, as if it never happened.”

“And what if there’s some people who never forgot? Not because they don’t want to have pleasant memories, but because they can’t stop thinking about it and being afraid? What if I’m one of them? What can you promise to people like me and my mom? That ancient history still hurts me now, right now. It has happened and it belongs to the now, to today. It was set in motion today, today, we’re here now because of it. Today! Now!”

“Forgive me, Máren, darling.”

Máhtte sits down with his back flat against the door and I hear him cry out.

I unlock the door. I hear Máhtte stand up and pull open the door with all his strength. Máhtte’s embrace gets warmer as he wraps his arms around me. Máhtte explains that he was in Oslo when it happened, and he begs for forgiveness again and again before I give in. We go to the bedroom and get in bed, still in our wool clothes. He holds me through the entire night, and I lie there awake for every

minute of it here in this bear's den. I see night's darkness
turn to light but I don't care to go see the dawn and just lie
there, between Máhtte's arms, taking no pleasure from it,
until he wakes.