Trude Teige

Mormor danset i regnet – Grandma used to dance in the rain

Sample translation from the Original Norwegian

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1

I tossed my backpack down into the old wooden boat. Alfred caught it, and I jumped in as well.

'So you'll be spending some time on the island?' he asked, starting the motor.

I nodded, not in the mood to talk.

'It's lovely there now, nice and quiet,' he continued. 'For now at least. Time flies. The summer visitors will start arriving in a couple months.'

I sat up front, pulled the zip of my jacket up all the way and my hood down over my forehead. The waves got bigger when we got out into the open water, water spraying over the side, and Alfred slowed down.

I'd taken the bus from Drammen to Kragerø, and I'd planned on taking a taxi boat out to the island. But then I'd run into Alfred on the quayside.

The rocking of the boat was soothing. Thoughts and worries slowly loosened their grip on me like they were being swept away on the wind. I slowly slid down lower in the boat, rested my head against my bag and fell asleep.

I woke up when he pulled up alongside the jetty. He moored the stern to a buoy, clambered ashore and tied the rope from the bow around a post in a half hitch.

'There's nothing like sleeping in a boat,' he said with a smile, wiping his hands on his thighs.

We walked along the jetty, past the row of boathouses, and turned onto the gravel road up to the houses. We passed the big meadow where we used to play football when I was little, the mouldering smell of the withered grass strong after all the rain. The sky was almost cloudless now, and the sun was on its way down behind the ridge on the mainland. We were walking against the cold north wind, seagulls screeching hoarsely as they rode the air current over our heads. Then I noticed that Alfred was limping slightly.

‘Have you hurt your foot?’ I asked.

‘It’s a cut that won’t heal,’ he said. ‘That’s why I was in town. I had to go to the doctor’s to get the dressing changed.’

‘I don’t expect district nurses make it out here,’ I said. ‘Is it on your calf?’

‘Yes.’

‘I can change the dressing for you,’ I said.

His face lit up for a moment. ‘I was forgetting you’re a nurse.’ But then he added: ‘But you’re on holiday, Juni. Don’t worry about it.’

‘I don’t mind. You can get supplies next time you see the doctor.’

We walked in silence for a few moments until Alfred said: ‘It’s a shame what happened to Lilla. It was so quick.’

‘There wasn’t anything they could do for her.’

‘Are you staying long?’

‘I’m not sure. A while.’

‘I thought you’d turn up sooner or later. I suppose the house is yours now?’ he asked as we stopped in front of the gate.

‘Yes.’

Lilla had lived in the house since Grandma and Granddad died three years ago. Alfred was her neighbour.

‘It needs painting,’ he said.

I opened the gate. ‘Thanks for the lift. Talk to you later.’

‘Yep. Just let me know if you need help with anything.’

I watched his big, stocky frame limp down the road. Alfred had been widowed at a young age and had two sons who lived on the mainland. He had been a shrimp fisher all his life until a shoulder injury had forced him to retire ten years ago. In the summer, when we children used to swim by the jetty in the afternoons, he would give us each a fistful of shrimps if he had any left when he got home, and we would sit on the jetty, eating and throwing the shells to the seagulls.

He was in his late sixties now and the only person who still lived on the island all year round. Why did I offer to change his dressing? I thought, walking through the gate. I wanted to be alone.

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I'd visited my own doctor in Drammen that same morning.

'I think you need signed off sick,' she said, giving me a stern look. 'And I'm not talking about a week or two. You need time to rest. For at least three weeks.'

The need to cry had been like a pressure in my ribcage when I explained why I'd made an appointment. I was having trouble sleeping, and when I finally fell asleep, I woke up almost instantly with my pulse racing and my heart pounding. I also felt unwell, nauseous and feeble.

'How's work?' she asked.

'I'm having trouble concentrating.'

'But you enjoy it?'

I nodded. It was true. I love my job as a nurse. 'It's nothing to do with work,' I said.

'Then what is it?'

'It's …' I swallowed and swallowed, but eventually got it out: 'My husband.'

'Oh?' She leaned back and waited.

'He doesn't know where I am.'

'Okay.'

'We've been on a sailing trip for a few days. We were going to spend all of Easter sailing down the Swedish coast. But then I left.'

'Today?'

'No, last night. We moored in Strømstad, and … when Jahn drinks, he sometimes … he sometimes loses control.'

'And then what happens?'

'Then …' The words stuck in my throat.

'Does he hit you?' She gave me a tissue from a box on her desk.

I nodded and blew my nose. 'I went ashore yesterday, to get away from him for a bit, and when I came back, I couldn't get back on board. I wandered around for a bit and … I hadn't planned on leaving, but then I took the bus to Oslo, and last night I stayed in a hotel. I didn't dare go home in case he came after me.'

She wrote me a sick note. 'I can recommend a good counsellor …'

'Later,' I said. 'Not now.'

She filled out a form, handed it to me and asked me to go to the laboratory for blood tests. When she waved me back in again, I could tell they'd found something.

‘You’re pregnant,’ she said.

I gawped at her. ‘Pregnant? No …’

‘There’s no doubt about it,’ she said, looking at the lab results on the desk. She was still looking at it when she asked: ‘How do you feel about that?’

‘I … don’t know. I don’t think I want … to keep it.’

‘When was your last period?’

I thought back. ‘Just over five weeks ago.’

‘Then you have time to think about it. I think that would be wise.’

‘But …’

‘You’re not in any fit state to make a decision right now,’ she said firmly. ‘Give it some time. The cut-off point is week twelve. We can talk about it again in a week or two.’

2

The brick steps were filthy and overgrown with weeds. The railing had a green tinge to it as well. I stood looking up at the white façade. The skipper’s house had been built in the early twentieth century. There was a dormer window over the entrance. That was Lilla’s room. The latticed windows had decorative borders. They looked like lace edging. Alfred was right – the house needed painting. I put my bag down on the chair by the front door. Granddad’s wicker chair. He used to sit there and read the newspaper in the summer. That had been worn grey by time and the weather now as well.

In the hall I was met by the smell of old, empty house. A sweet, mouldering, stuffy smell like you get in old houses with no one living in them. And it smelled of Lilla, a faint odour of nicotine that lingered in the walls.

The shelf in the hall was covered in hats. Lilla’s hats. I hadn’t seen her wear them in years. Her outerwear hung on the hooks, summer jackets and winter coats, layered on top of each other. Shoes and boots were piled on the floor in front of the cellar door. I took off my anorak and chucked it over the banister, went into the kitchen, turned on the stove under the window, let the water run for a bit and put the coffee on. The kitchen had been modernised just before Grandma got sick. It had wall cabinets all the way up to the ceiling, with shiny white fronts, granite worktops and a modern cooker and hob. A lamp by Danish designer Poul Henningsen hung over the table.

When Lilla was hospitalised six months ago, I came over to get clothes for her. I emptied the ashtrays and the fridge, got rid of the empty bottles, took out the bins and turned off the heating while the taxi boat sat by the jetty waiting for me.

All the cushions on the light-coloured sofa had been piled together at one end, as if Lilla had just been lying there. The coffee table was strewn with old magazines and newspapers. Granddad's bed was still in one corner. It was made up with a knitted patchwork blanket in bright colours, and it had been like that ever since he'd moved into the nursing home four years ago, a year before he died.

It used to be warm and lush in the conservatory when I was little, like a small jungle. Now the big pots on the tile floor were empty, and the shelves beneath the latticed windows were piled high with small, black plastic pots. Grandma and Granddad's dark blue armchairs sat against the pale blue inner wall, a small brass table between them.

I opened the door out onto the garden steps. The swing still hung from the big birch tree, old and weatherworn. Granddad had made it. He had drilled two holes in a plank, threaded ropes through and tied them to a sturdy branch.

I slowly walked down and sat on it, swaying back and forth gently. Then I gripped the ropes, pushed off properly, leaned back and lifted my legs.

It started to rain, a light drizzle, but I stayed where I was, my head leaning against the rope.

Rain is life's applause, Grandma used to say.

The memories came to me in sharp relief: Grandma here in the garden, in the rain in the evening, in one of her red dresses. She never wore trousers, always dresses with simple cuts, often red, on both ordinary days and festive occasions. She loved colours, and I never saw her in black, not even at Granddad's funeral.

'She's crazy,' Lilla said whenever she danced slowly in the warm summer rain.

'No, she's not crazy,' Granddad replied. 'She's happy.'

I never saw Grandma as carefree as when she danced in the rain in the garden. I closed my eyes, remembering her smell, the smell of Grandma when she was happy.

She smelled different on other days.

'Why is Grandma dancing in the rain?' I asked Granddad one day. I must have been eight or nine.

'Because it makes her happy and helps her feel strong,' he said.

Once Grandma had finished dancing, she would curtsy deeply, as if she were being applauded, and come inside, soaked to the skin. Granddad would be waiting for her with her dressing gown, and she would undress and step into it, leaning against him, and he would put his arms around her, and she would say: 'I love you. You know that, right?' He would smile into her hair. 'I know, Tekla. We're the best thing that ever happened to us.' Then he would pour two glasses of port, always port, and usher her towards the two chairs.

'Well, Konrad,' Grandma said. 'Let's talk. Talking to you does me good.'

I would lie in my room over the living room. Granddad's voice was a faint rumble, Grandma's more of a hum.

What are they talking about? I'd wonder as the sound of their voices became a lullaby that rose and fell beneath my bed, carrying me into sleep.

3

Lilla worked in town and came home at the weekends. I've always called her Lilla, not Mum, not Mama. The atmosphere was often different when Lilla was home. It was as if the pulse of the house increased.

'Why do you work?' I once asked. 'All the other mums on the island stay home.'

'Because I can't stand it here,' she said. 'I like town better. It's easier to breathe there.'

It was a strange answer, because I thought the air was much fresher here than in town. Then I thought it might have something to do with me, that she didn't want to be around me all the time.

I lived with Grandma and Granddad on the island until I started upper secondary school and moved in with Lilla in town. My entire childhood I would stand waiting for her on the jetty, sometimes on Friday evenings, other times on Saturday afternoon. She worked at Torkildsen's dry goods store and was able to buy discounted clothes. I was always excited to see what she was wearing. A new suit, a dress, trousers. Something nice, I was sure. No one had clothes as modern as Lilla's. To me she was like a model straight out of the women's magazines. And she smelled wonderful, because she wore perfumes called Red Door, Rive Gauche, Anaïs Anaïs. I liked Charlie best. The bottle had a picture of a woman with long fair hair walking barefoot on a beach at sunset. Gentle waves rolled in

behind her, and she had a white trouser suit and equally white teeth. The text printed across her legs declared ‘Gives you the time of your life!’

I could tell what mood Lilla was in when she waved from the ferry, long before it arrived at the jetty. Sometimes she seemed preoccupied, barely saying a word as we walked home together, and she preferred to be left alone in her room. But if she seemed in the mood and happy to see me, I could ask her whether she would paint my nails, do my hair, do my makeup, and I was allowed to go into her room and sit on her bed. When she was done, she’d look at me and say: you’re the most beautiful girl I’ve ever seen, and stroke my cheek. I’d get butterflies in my stomach, and I believed her, because she knew about these things, this beautiful, elegant woman who smelled of Charlie.

Sometimes Lilla and I built snow lanterns in the garden during the winter. We made snowballs and stacked them on top of each other before putting candles inside. One time we made fifteen of them and the whole garden was illuminated. I remember Grandma laughing as she walked along the path that Granddad had cleared to the annex where her studio was. She said it looked like we were getting ready for a Catholic mass.

There was rarely much snow on the island during the winter, almost never enough to dig snow caves, for example. The climate here was too mild and changeable for that. But one winter, which Grandma thought was the snowiest on record, Lilla decided we should jump into the snow from the balcony on the first floor. We were at it for ages, gathering snow and making a big drift of it we could land in. I climbed over the railing, clung to the corner post and looked down. Lilla stood next to me.

‘You can do it,’ she said.

‘I can’t,’ I said, and she took my hand.

‘Of course you can. It’s like landing in cotton.’

I looked down, looked at Lilla.

‘Just imagine you can fly,’ she said.

I can fly, I told myself, I can fly. I wanted her to be proud of me, wanted her to think I was brave and clever. I don’t know what scared me most: jumping or disappointing her. I closed my eyes and jumped. All the air was knocked from my lungs, I had snow in my mouth and nose, I wailed and gasped for breath.

Lilla was suddenly next to me, she must have jumped too, she pulled me up out of the snow and held me close. ‘Are you okay? Are you hurt?’ She sounded scared. ‘Where does it hurt?’

I thought about it. No, I hadn’t hurt myself. But I was still crying. She slowly rocked me to and fro, I sobbed and breathed in her scent, a mixture of cold and Charlie. I cried for a long time so she wouldn’t let me go.

Grandma often listened to music while she was painting in the annex.

‘Chopin,’ she said, taking out an LP and putting it on the old record player before standing back and waiting for the music to start. When it flowed out into the room, she moved to stand by her easel. ‘Chopin,’ she said again. ‘The most beautiful piano music I’ve ever heard. With orchestra. Conducted by Herbert von Karajan. He was a member of the Nazi Party,’ she added, as if talking to herself.

‘What’s the Nazi Party?’ I asked.

‘You’ll learn about it when you start school.’

She mixed the colours with deft movements. ‘But it’s strange how the past can stick to someone,’ she continued as she considered her canvas. ‘Karajan found that, even though he later married a woman who was a quarter Jewish and left the party.’

‘What does a quarter Jewish mean?’

‘Someone whose grandmother or grandfather is Jewish is a quarter Jewish,’ she told me. Then she closed her eyes for a few seconds, and I didn’t dare ask anything else. She breathed in through her nose, her chest heaving. ‘Ah! Piano concerto number one in E minor. Now I can paint.’

I found it odd that this Chopin inspired her, because when she played his music I could see the melancholy in her face. Well, I call it melancholy when I think about it today, I didn’t know words like that back then, but I saw something come over her. I liked listening to Chopin too, sitting still for a long time and watching the painting slowly emerge on the canvas. I was only allowed to be in the studio with Grandma if I sat still and didn’t speak.

The door out to the garden was usually left open in the summer, and in the afternoons the sun would slowly creep closer to her until it hit her face, shining like golden ribbons in her hair. When she hadn’t been to the hairdresser for a while, the sun highlighted the grey at her roots. The light gave her wrinkles shadows, deepening the strong lines

fanning out from her eyes, the horizontal furrows in her forehead and the long scar stretching from nostril to ear across her cheek. I once asked her how she'd got it, but she said she didn't remember, it had happened so long ago.

She was beautiful in a different way to Lilla. I now think there was a beauty to her that only age can bequeath.

When she painted, she sometimes smiled softly, incessantly. But often she painted quickly and intensely, as if she was short on time, and then she looked determined.

Once I was foolish enough to ask whether she was angry about something. She replied gruffly that if I couldn't be quiet I'd have to leave. Then I went to Granddad, crying, because Grandma was angry with me. He took my hand and said: 'She's not angry with you, she's just in a world of her own and doesn't like to be disturbed. Come on, let's go for a walk down to the sea.'

We used to go out to the east side of the island, Granddad and I, where there was a rock ledge sheltered from wind from both the north and the west. In the summer I picked long, heavy-eared grass, making bouquets with pink sea thrift and purple loosestrife. In the winter the puddles were covered by a layer of ice, delicate as thin glass. They made a nice cracking sound when I stepped on them. Granddad smiled and said that Lilla had done exactly the same when she was little, and that made me think that maybe I was like her and could be just as beautiful when I grew up.

Granddad was a seaman during the war. He never talked about what he had experienced, just about the time that followed, when he'd worked on big ships before coming back ashore and starting to work at a shipping company in Kragerø.

When we were sitting on the rock looking at the sea, he told me about foreign ports, just like he'd told Lilla about them when she was little. New York, Buenos Aires, Honolulu, Madras, Bremerhaven. They were strange names that rolled around on the tongue.

'Why did you stop working at sea?' I asked.

'I didn't like being away from your grandmother for so long at a time.'

I still remember some of the stories: about the steward who lost his job because he drank, about the seaman who was so full of longing for his girlfriend at home in Norway that he lay crying like child in his berth, about the engineer who was left behind in Cape Town. But of everything he told me, this is what I remember best: that he couldn't stand being away from Grandma.

As an adult, I could see the tenderness and closeness between them. They couldn't cope without each other, and they didn't.

When Granddad was eighty-seven, he had a stroke. He was bedridden and no longer able to speak. Grandma cared for him. She didn't want anyone else looking after him, and that was that. She always got her way. She remained the picture of vigour until she realised Granddad would have to move into a nursing home. Then she seemed to gradually collapse in on herself, as if all her strength had been used up. Despite her own poor health, Grandma went into town to visit him every day, no matter the weather. But she wasn't the same without him. She went from always being so full of life and light on her feet to being slow and lumbering. I don't know whether she painted anything at all in the final year of her life.

Three days after Granddad's funeral, in the spring, she went out into the rain and danced. I stood in the conservatory and smiled at her, watching her petite frame move around slowly.

She seemed to just lie down calmly in the grass.

Heart failure, the doctor said.

Heartbreak, I thought.

4

The soldiers on the bus sang at the top of their lungs: *Ein Wanderbursch, mit dem Stab in der Hand, kommt wieder heim aus dem fremden Land*. A baby started to cry and the soldiers stopped singing. Tekla watched its mother trying to calm it. She undid her blouse, brought it to her breast and covered both herself and its tiny head with the kerchief she'd had covering her hair. Her short, choppy hair.

Tekla pulled her own kerchief further down over her forehead. I'm one of them now, she thought. Jerrybag. Whore. Traitor. But I can't change my mind, leave, go to Aunt Amalie in Oslo. Endure the shame and humiliation.

Otto took her hand as if reading her mind. Tekla laid her head on his shoulder, still watching the other people on the overcrowded bus. Most of them were German soldiers, but there were some Norwegian girls as well. Some of them had children. She made eye contact with a small boy. He was sitting quietly, his face grave, eyes anxious. It was just him and his mother. She had her arm around him and was looking out the

window. He glanced up at her every now and then. He had a little red car in his hand, but he wasn't playing with it.

The driver shifted gear as they started going uphill and the gearbox made a horrible grinding noise. One of the Norwegian soldiers who were there to guard them was standing by the door. He laughed as he momentarily lost his balance when the bus lurched.

The air was thick and smelled of sweat, leather and wet wool. The windows were fogged up, and the rain had adhered to it like a film. Tekla watched people and buildings slide past, and then they were suddenly surrounded by fields and trees.

All she knew was that they were going to some kind of camp in Mandal. She didn't know how long they'd be staying there before they were taken by ship to Germany.

'Are you feeling unwell?'

'No, I'm just tired,' she replied, slipping her hand under his uniform jacket.

****

Two days after the liberation, her father woke her early in the morning.

He always used to look in on her before going to work. Good morning, the sun's shining for you, he might say, always something about the weather, and he used to tickle her feet if she didn't reply.

But now he just stood in the doorway with a stern look on his face and said: 'Come downstairs at once, Tekla.'

She threw her dressing gown over her shoulders and followed him. Down in the hall he gripped her arm, steered her outside and pointed. Someone had painted *Jerrybag* in big letters on the wall by the door. He pushed her ahead of him into the living room, where her mother was alternating between pacing back and forth, straightening the cushions on the sofa and plucking withered leaves from a plant. Her brother, Henrik, who was five years older than her, was sitting in a chair by the window. She could tell he was furious.

'Is it true?' he asked. Tekla had rarely seen him so angry. 'Answer me!' he barked when she couldn't get a word out.

'I … I only saw Otto now and then. He helped me with the horse,' she said.

It wasn't true. For the last six months they'd been seeing each other several times a week, but never with other people around, and she'd been sure that no one had seen them.

‘A likely story,’ Henrik said. ‘How could you?’ He raised his voice another notch. ‘This is unbelievable!’

He gestured at the morning newspaper lying on the table. For a moment she thought it said something about her. She went over to the table and read the headline. *Most jerrybags mentally retarded,* it said.

‘You’re a decent and intelligent girl, Tekla,’ her father said. ‘Do you have any idea what you’ve done?’

‘But … but how do they … who …’ she stuttered.

‘Clearly someone saw you. How could you be so thoughtless, so … so immoral and stupid? We raised you well, didn’t we?’

‘What will people say about us now?’ her mother asked, pressing a handkerchief to her mouth.

Tekla watched her in silence, feeling chilled to her marrow. As always, her mother only cared what other people thought of them. Her brother would never understand. And she’d gone behind her father’s back, she’d promised him that she wouldn’t have anything to do with Otto after he helped her calm the nervous new horse.

‘Otto didn’t like Hitler, he—‘

‘Didn’t like Hitler?’ Henrik interrupted her. ‘You’re more naïve than I thought. You’ve disgraced yourself, disgraced the whole family.’

Her father paced angrily. Then he stopped in front of her.

‘Your own brother was almost killed fighting for a free Norway,’ he said, pointing at Henrik. ‘He risked his life. We’re respectable people, and now you’ve—’

‘Otto’s never killed anyone,’ she interrupted.

Her brother snorted in disgust. ‘You can’t know that.’

‘But he’s not like that.’

‘Not like that? He’s a soldier, he’s one of the enemy, one of the people who have killed and tortured good Norwegians to death.’

Tekla didn’t reply. What was there to say?

‘You have to understand that you can’t just fall in love with whoever you want,’ her mother sniffled.

‘Otto is a good person,’ Tekla said meekly. ‘He’s kind.’

‘Kind?’ her mother said. ‘There’s no such thing as kind Germans.’

‘You’ve put yourself before everything, before your own country,’ her father said. ‘You’re never seeing that German again. Not as long as I live!’

Tekla met Henrik’s gaze. The disgust in his eyes stabbed her like needles. He walked past her and slammed the door behind him.

Her mother raised a hand to her forehead, closed her eyes and grimaced in pain.

‘I can’t take this anymore,’ she said. ‘The war’s finally over and we should be celebrating, but instead you’re causing us more trouble. I’m going to lie down. My head hurts.’

Tekla’s father forbade her from leaving the house. He thought it might be dangerous for her. You didn’t know what might happen, people were furious with anyone who’d had anything to do with the Germans.

Late in the afternoon she went out to the stable, restless, afraid, upset. Maybe she could go riding, that always cheered her up, and she wouldn’t meet anyone on the forest paths.

She kept their speed up all the way, but let the horse slow down and recover as she approached the yard again.

There were some boys sitting in the copse behind the stable, smoking. She looked straight ahead, sitting tall so they wouldn’t see that she was afraid. But they ran over as she drew level with them, and before she knew what was happening, one of them had grabbed the reins. The others pulled her down onto the ground.

‘How can you dare to be seen out among decent folk?’ one asked.

Tekla tried to tear herself away, but they laughed and formed a circle around her.

‘Let me through,’ she said, trying to brush them aside.

‘Oh shit, the jerrybag pushed me!’ The tallest boy hit her in the chest, and she had to take a few steps back to stop herself from falling. She stumbled into one of the others, who grabbed her. ‘Snip, snip, snip, snip,’ he said. The others joined in: ‘Snip, snip, snip, snip!’

One of them took out a pair of scissors. She wrapped her arms around her head, trying to protect herself, but they pushed her to the ground, grabbed her arms and held her legs. The boy with the scissors pulled her hair. She screamed. It was like being in a vice. She couldn’t move. There was no point resisting. She sobbed as she heard the sound of the scissors, felt them cutting close to her scalp.

They shouted in unison: ‘German whore, German whore, snip, snip, snip!’

Her hair fell to the ground, onto her shoulders, stuck to her jacket. When they let her go, she lay there with her face in her hands.

'Come on,' she heard one of them say. 'Now she won't be able to go anywhere without people seeing her for what she is.' He leaned over her: 'We'll never forget what you've done, you German whore!'

Then he spat on her.

Tekla lay still, listening to the sound of feet running away. She ran her fingers over her head, brushed away the hair as she got up. Then she walked slowly to the stable with the horse.

Tekla's mother tidied up her hair, trying to even out the ugly cut without much success. After that, Tekla covered her head with a kerchief.

'I told you to stay home,' her father said.

'But I only went for a ride in the forest.'

'You're going to your Aunt Amalie's in Oslo,' he said, turning away. 'Fewer people know you there.' His voice was thick. He coughed hard into his fist.

Later that evening, after Tekla had gone to bed, she heard the sound of gravel on the window. She quickly got dressed and snuck downstairs and out through the kitchen. She'd wondered whether she'd ever see Otto again, whether he'd already left, because no one had seen any Germans in days. Would this be the last time she saw him?

They went to the stable and sat down on his coat. Otto held her close, aghast at what had happened to her.

'When are you leaving?' she asked.

'The day after tomorrow.'

Tekla started to cry.

'I'll come back,' he said , trying to console her. 'I promise.'

'How will you ever be able to come back here? We're never going to see each other again. Germans and Norwegians are still enemies even though the war's over.'

'But we're not enemies, us two,' he whispered into her hair. 'And if it weren't for the war, I'd never have met you. *Ich liebe dich.* Things will get better, life will get back to normal. Then I'll come back and get you.' He pressed his cheek to hers. 'Or …' He hesitated slightly before continuing: 'You could come with me?'

To Germany? Leave everything behind? No, she couldn't do that. Could she?

She turned to face him, pressed her lips hard against his, heard his breath hitch. He smelled of leather and wool, and his mouth tasted of peppermint chewing gum. She trembled as he kissed her on the collarbone, moving down, unbuttoning her blouse, caressing her stomach. She whimpered with longing, but he made her wait. A muffled groan escaped them both when he entered her. She was lifted on a wave that rose up higher and higher as he whispered her name as softly as only he could.

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Tekla wiped condensation from the bus window and looked out at the small white houses of Mandal. Shortly afterwards, they arrived in Kleven. The camp was on the outskirts of the town. Everyone craned their necks when they stopped. A soldier was standing by the barrier, in front of a guardhouse that looked like a glorified wooden box. Tekla and Otto were sitting at the front of the bus, and she could see right into the camp area through the windshield. But the view was minimal in the downpour. A large building was illuminated by bright floodlights. Along a barbed wire fence she glimpsed more watchtowers manned by armed soldiers.

This isn't a camp, it's a prison, she thought. We're going to be locked in.

She saw how the faces of the other women fell when they realised what they'd come to. For a brief moment she found herself thinking it still wasn't too late, she could back out, tell Otto she couldn't leave after all.

'We've finally reached our first stop,' he said, squeezing her hand.

She gave him a weak smile.

The passengers were cleared, the barrier was raised and they drove in. One of the Norwegian soldiers on the bus had told them that Kleven had been a German camp and airfield during the war. Now it had been taken over by British troops, Milorg, a Norwegian parachute company and the Swedish KP2.

A sign read *To the sausage machine.* Beneath the drawing of a sausage there was a red arrow pointing towards the big illuminated building, which turned out to be a hangar. Tekla could see small chicken wire enclosures outside. All of them had signs. She craned her neck as the bus continued across the airfield. Bergen-Belsen, Dachau and Auschwitz, she read.

Tekla and Otto were shown to a room in a long barracks. The room had two beds, a couple chairs, a small table by the window and a wardrobe. The walls were unpainted, the floor dirty, no rugs, no curtains. The mattresses were stained and smelled foul.
She went over to the window. Otto joined her. 'There's got to be thousands of soldiers here,' he said, wrapping his arms around her waist. 'We might be here a while before it's our turn to get on a ship.'
Tekla extricated herself from his grasp and busied herself with unpacking what few things they'd brought with them. She hung the clothes in the wardrobe and her white crocheted woollen shawl over the back of one of the chairs. She put her sketchbook and box of pencils on the table. As soon as everything was in its place, she would draw, do something normal. Otto went out, and she opened the window to get rid of the smell of the previous inhabitants. Tomorrow she would give the entire room a good clean.
Suddenly she felt like she was being watched. A small round woman with thick glasses was standing in the doorway. She introduced herself as Sonja and smiled like she didn't have a care in the world. She lived in the room next door with her husband, Stephan, she explained.
'There's another barracks not far from here that's empty at the moment. It has curtains on the windows. I can come with you to get some.'
'Are we allowed to just help ourselves?' Tekla asked uncertainly.
'Of course, we just need to make sure no one sees us,' she said, smiling. 'I've done it before. We arrived the day before yesterday.
In the empty barracks, Tekla and Sonja took down the curtains and shoved them under their coats before sneaking back. The orange fabric was faded, but it would still make their room nicer and shut out the morning sun, which shone right through the window.
While Tekla was hanging up the curtains, Otto came in with a bouquet of wild flowers and an old tin he'd found. Tekla washed the tin, filled it with water and put it on the table by the window. Oxeye daisies and harebells leaned against the edges.
'Have you ever seen such beautiful flowers in such an ugly vase?' Otto said brightly.
Tekla thought about the crystal vase in the living room at home. It usually sat in the middle of the dining table with holly from the garden at Christmas and lilacs in the early summer, keeping both rooms fragrant. At breakfast on the eighth of May, when father had told them that the Germans had signed the instrument of surrender with the allies'

commander-in-chief in France, her mother had dug out two small Norwegian flags, which she put in the vase together with new-leaved birch rods.
Tekla sighed. There was no point thinking about that sort of thing, it just made it worse.
'It's bordering on the luxurious in here now,' she said.
'Call the maid, won't you?' Otto sat down and knocked impatiently on the table. 'What's happened to our roast lamb, pommes dauphinois and buttered carrots?'
He reached out to Tekla, pulled her down onto his lap and silenced her laughter with a kiss.

5

Just after I arrived at the house I woke up in the middle of the night, as usual. I lay waiting for the unease that usually gripped me. But nothing happened, my skin didn't crawl, my pulse was normal. I put my hands on my stomach. No, I didn't have the energy to think about that now. I threw the duvet off, got up and pulled on my dressing gown, which had been lying on a chair by the window.
When Granddad and I went out in the boat, he taught me to steer and read maps. He said that people think it's easy to steer a boat: you hold the wheel and turn it in the direction you want to go. But that's not how it works. It's only once you've experienced rough seas from astern that you find out what you're good for, he said. The waves from behind carry the boat along, taking it in a different direction to the one you're steering in. That means you can't keep a straight course, and you move from side to side. To avoid this, you have to turn just *before* the waves hit the boat and knock it off course. That means just looking ahead is no good. You need to look back, watch for the next waves coming, and turn sharply to counter the waves. Life's a bit like that too, Granddad said. People say you shouldn't look back, but they're wrong. You need to look back *a bit* to know who you are and where you come from. Only then can you be good at steering.
I hadn't seen the waves, the ones that meant I was unable to steer straight.
I walked around the living room looking at objects that brought memories from my childhood rushing back, stopping in front of the wall with all the family pictures. I stood looking at Grandma and Granddad's hand-coloured wedding picture. Their unnaturally pink cheeks, the pale green background.

How had they met each other? There was so much I didn't know. And it was too late to ask now.

In one picture, Lilla sat between her two little brothers, Ove and Oskar. She had her arms around them in a protective embrace and was smiling with her mouth open. She looked around six or seven years old, the brothers around two. They were twins.

I hadn't seen my uncles in three years, not since Grandma died. They didn't come to Lilla's funeral. They were probably abroad.

Her confirmation photo was there as well. She had long, loose, dark, almost black hair and brown, somewhat narrow eyes. My hair and my eyes. She didn't look like Grandma or Granddad, apart from the brown eyes – those were Granddad's.

She was looking right at the camera, her gaze direct, self-assured. That's what she'd been like once upon a time: beautiful and sure of herself.

Another picture was of her and me when I was around eight years old. She was my age when the picture was taken: in her early thirties. There was something introspective about her expression. She was wearing a blue tunic with a white blouse underneath. One of her arms was around me, with the back of her other hand against my cheek as if she were caressing it. How did she feel, what did she think when she had me? Why did she refuse to tell me who my father was?

There wasn't anyone left for me to ask. No one who could tell me about everything that had happened to them, what they had experienced, thought, felt and dreamt about. No one to talk, laugh, cry – or dance.

I sat down in Grandma's chair in the conservatory and wrapped myself in her blanket. There were several empty wine bottles on the floor under the window. I used to visit Lilla once or twice a month, to clean and tidy for her. She never commented on it, never thanked me. I don't think she cared.

Six months ago, she was admitted to hospital with a high fever and breathing difficulties. It turned out that she had metastatic lung cancer. Even right at the end, when all she could do was lie in bed, she refused to tell me who my father was, no matter how I pleaded.

Was she ashamed? Was she trying to protect me from something terrible? I'd thought about this a lot over the years. Was she raped? Was it a one-night stand? Did she

remember him? Had she been sleeping with several people at the same time and not known which of them it was?

'You *have* to tell me who he was,' I told her indignantly one of the final few days she lived. 'I want to know who *I* am. And what if I have children one day and someone needs to know about genetic conditions or something?'

The woman in the bed was skin and bone; she didn't have the strength to eat, to talk. But she managed to lift her hand, clench her fist. She hit out twice when I said: 'I have the right to know.'

The morning light was pushing against the curtains when I woke up. Some of it had found its way through a gap and woken me. It was seven o'clock.

I lay where I was, stroking my stomach with one hand.

Jahn's child.

I don't want Jahn's child.

I got up. Took a couple slices of bread out into the conservatory and put my phone on charge. In the soft morning sun I could see how overgrown the garden was, how grey the white picket fence was.

After a couple minutes I unlocked my phone. Ten missed calls and seven messages. All of them were from Jahn: 'Where are you? I'm worried about you. Give me some sign of life!' The tone got harsher with each message: 'Why aren't you answering? I need to know where you are. For fuck's sake, Juni!' I could picture the angry look on his face. 'How could you just leave? I'll call the police and report you missing if you don't tell me where you are!'

I sat there for a long time, fighting tears, before replying: 'I need a break. I'm in Italy. I'll be away for four weeks. I'll talk to you when I get back.'

A breeze blew through the living room when I opened the windows. Why did I tell him I'd talk to him?

I never want to see him again.

Maybe I should start saying what I really mean?

The breeze made the white lace curtains flutter and carried the oppressive scent of emptiness. I went upstairs, into Grandma and Granddad's bedroom. Their clothes still hung in the big wardrobe. I took out one of the red dresses. It was long and ensconced in a silky fabric. I lifted it to my nose and breathed in. I thought it smelled of Chanel No.

5, the perfume Grandma wore every day. She said she didn't feel dressed until she'd put her perfume on. Granddad's suits and shirts hung next the dresses. They smelled faintly of tobacco, and there was a packet of rolling tobacco in the inside pocket of one of the jackets. Clothes without the people who wear them are reminders of what will never happen again, what has passed, everything that is too late.

There was another closet filled with clothes in Lilla's room, in the dormer window. Did her clothes smell of everything that had been as well? I needed to tidy, clear out the house, get rid of all the old junk that wasn't worth keeping.

Later, when I feel more up to it, not now.

Some lace handkerchiefs, a bible and an old cigar box with a locket on top of it sat on Grandma's bedside table. The gold chain was broken, torn apart by the looks of it. There were two photos inside it, of a man and a woman, two grave faces. They looked like the photos of Grandma's parents that were hanging in the living room.

There was another photo at the bottom of the box. Granddad was holding Lilla by the arm. She had a big ribbon in her hair and was squinting into the sun; he was wearing a hat and coat. Grandma was wearing a light suit and a pillbox hat. I could see the Royal Palace in the background, and when I turned the photo over, I saw someone had written *Oslo, 3 May 1948.* Lilla was almost eighteen months old.

Grandma and Granddad's wedding certificate lay underneath the photo. I gave it a cursory glance and was about to put it back when something caught my eye. The date. 20 September 1947.

Lilla was born in late December 1946.

I didn't know they'd had her before they got married.

Chapter 8 and 23 - Translated by Sarah Osa

8

The vase I made when I was in the third grade still stood on the window sill in the kitchen. I had rolled long, thin clay sausages, formed them into rings and placed them on top of one another. It was crooked and uneven, painted white and dark blue, lacquered on the outside.

I remember the day I came home with it. I stood in the hallway, and had taken it out of my bag to show it, when I heard angry voices from the kitchen. I went to stand behind the door to listen.

-There´s nothing more to tell, said Grandmother. Her voice was calm.

-All this concealment, all these secrets, said Lilla. -What´s it good for?

Grandmother didn´t reply.

-There is something wrong with you. Lilla´s voice was loud and indignant.

-You´re not quite normal! She started crying.

-I want to know! Why can´t you tell me more about him?

I leaned forwards and peered at them through the crack in the doorway. Lilla stood in the middle of the floor, she resembled a dishevelled, small sparrow. Comfort her, Grandmother, I prayed silently. Please, Grandmother, do it. She is upset.

-I don´t want to talk about it, said Grandmother, and turned her back on Lilla.

-I have put all that behind me.

I must make them stop, I thought, and took a step forward.

-Look what I have made.

They both looked at me. Lilla opened her mouth, but closed it again, drew a breath with a sob. Then she ran crying up to her room.

Grandmother hurriedly took the vase.

-How nice, it can stand here. She placed it on the window sill and walked past me.

She doesn´t like the vase, I thought. Neither does Lilla. I stood swallowing for a while before I followed Grandmother, leaning forwards in the doorway to the winter garden. Her face softened when she noticed me.

-Why do you always argue? I asked and listened to her breathing. I always listened to Grandmother´s breathing when she had argued with Lilla.

-Come here and sit on my lap, she said, and stretched out an arm towards me. She hugged me gently, stroked my hair with slow movements. After a while her breathing fell in time with mine.

-One day I will explain everything to you, she said.

-What?

-Not now, when you are older, grown up enough to understand.

-Understand what?

-How it´s all connected.

-Is it a kind of secret?

-Yes, in a way. Occasionally it can be something which is inherited, even if you don´t know that it exists.

-Like what?

-Sorrow. And shame. Well, and also loving the rain, she said, and smiled.

-You´ve inherited that too.

-What is shame? I asked.

She hugged me, close and hard. I didn´t understand a thing.

When Grandfather died, I took time off work and stayed with Grandmother. Lilla still lived in town, she didn´t move back to the island until Grandmother passed away and she inherited the house, although several years had passed since she had stopped working.

The day after Grandfather´s funeral, Grandmother lay on the sofa, ate little, and said almost nothing. At times it seemed as if she drifted away completely, her gaze disappeared inwards, and when I talked to her, she didn´t answer. I sat down next to her, stroked her hair, as she had done with me when I was little.

Suddenly she clung to me. -Now they are coming, she whispered. -We have to be completely silent.

-Who is coming?

-The Russians. She shivered. -But they won´t find us. We are safe here, don´t you think?

We sat like that for a good while, but she didn´t say any more, and in the end she fell asleep.

On the third day she got up. I asked her if she remembered what she had said. She shook her head. -I say so many strange things, she said with a small laugh.

-You said that the Russians were coming. What did you mean by that?

She got up, walked with short steps towards the winter garden without looking at me. The scent of her perfume drifted behind her, and I wondered at the fact that she had remembered to apply it, although she was so distant.

-Did I really say that? she whispered, barely audible.

She remained standing in the doorway, with her back to me, leaning her shoulder against the doorframe. There was something vulnerable about the line of the bow of her

neck under the done-up hair, and her back was so narrow, her whole form had become smaller.

I had never thought of Grandmother as being vulnerable before.

-Do you remember when I was small, I said. -That you said there was something you were once going to tell me?

She nodded, still without turning around.

-Yes, today you and I are going to talk, Juni, she said. -Talk and drink port. But listen, it´s starting to rain. I have to go out and take a bow first.

She passed through the door to the garden steps.

It was that evening Grandmother collapsed.

[....]

23

They had set off early in the morning. It rained most of the time, but when they were nearing Demmin on this day at the beginning of August, the sun broke through the clouds, and the wet landscape glittered.

Otto walked faster, Tekla struggled to keep up with him.

-We are turning left over there at the crossing, he said, pointing.

-Soon we will see the bridge over to Demmin.

She was both excited and nervous before the meeting with Otto´s family. But when they turned the corner, they stopped and stood there, staring. Only a small part of the bridge´s structure remained on both sides, the steel girders looked like broken matchsticks.

-No, no, he whispered.

Tekla grabbed Otto´s arm. Her head ached, she had a cramp in her stomach from hunger, her feet were swollen. They hadn´t had anything but water in the last eight or nine hours.

She didn´t know how long they stood like that, silently, for an eternity, or perhaps it was only a few seconds. Otto stroked his face hastily. It was as if he was no longer aware of her when he carried on walking. Just before the road ended in nowhere, he branched out and started walking along the river.

-Otto? She said questioningly.

He merely continued.

-Otto! She ran after him.

Then he stopped, turned and waited for her. -This river winds around almost the whole of Demmin, he explained. -But there is another bridge.

After a couple of hundred metres they met a young man. Otto asked him if the other bridge was still passable. He shook his head.

Then Tekla sunk down into the grass, and Otto sat down silently next to her. After a while he lay down on his back and looked up at the sky. Tekla folded her coat into a pillow and lay down close to him.

When she woke, she hoisted herself up on her elbow. On the ground surrounding them, wild flowers grew, a large patch was covered with reddish- pink willow herb. It smelled of sun-warmed earth and succulent grass.

She gazed at Otto, who was still sleeping. His face was smoothed out, like a child´s, free of worry. He had grown thinner recently, his features had become more prominent, and he didn´t succeed in masking his anxiety as well as before. Something tense had descended on him since they had left Hamburg.

She spied a man who went down to the river on the other side and boarded a small wooden boat.

-Otto, she said and nudged his arm. -Look! He can row us across.

Otto walked down to the riverbank and shouted to him, and he waved back.

-Otto Adler? he said when he docked the boat. -Is it really you?

The man spoke quickly and incoherently, Tekla could only grasp parts of what he said, something about Tragödie and schrecklich. Otto asked if he knew anything about Klaushagen, and how his family were doing.

The man shook his head. -You´d better speak to your father, he said, evasively.

Otto´s eyebrows contracted, the wrinkle by the root of his nose deepened, his eyes narrowed. It looked as if he felt a sudden pain somewhere.

They walked hand in hand along a straight bit of road in towards the centre. Otto held her hand so hard it hurt. Everywhere there were fire ruins, blackened walls and remaining pipework, and a heavy smell of burned material hung in the air.

From time to time, Otto glanced at her, as if he wanted to assure himself that she was still there. When they passed a church, they spotted a ragged white piece of cloth hanging out of a window in the spire.

-Demmin surrendered when the Russians came, said Otto. -They destroyed the city anyway.

He brushed his hand across the stubble on his chin, then he turned his face away, he straightened his back, brought his shoulders back slightly, before he again took hold of her hand firmly without looking at her. With their eyes fixed on the end of the road they walked silently onwards.

Demmin was a skeleton of a town, and the people who should have filled the streets, clearing and resurrecting it, were nowhere to be seen. Nobody sold their goods in the market square, nobody was shopping, no children cycled and ran about, only a couple of military vehicles passed them.

Shards of glass crackled under their feet. Outside a burned-out liquor shop lay a huge pile of empty bottles. Shop signs lay like gravestones under plaster and dust on the pavements, indicating that there had once been a butcher or flower shop there. On the wall of what had once been a fruit and vegetable shop, a sign hung: Looting will be punishable by death, and slightly further away someone had written in childish handwriting: Dear Father! We have gone to Auntie in Lübeck.

When they got to the row of linden trees, Tekla smoothed her coat with her hand, it was creased and full of stains. She combed her fingers through her hair, it was a long time since she had washed it. Sonja had cut it for her, evened out the jagged edges as it had grown out, but it wasn´t pretty, she looked like a boy. The hat she had intended to wear, the silk stockings and the dress she had worn on her wedding day, lay in the suitcase. What would Otto´s family think of her?

-I look terrible, she sighed.

-You look nice, Otto replied absently.

They could see a bit of the house at the end of the road, between the trees. So it´s still standing, thought Tekla, relieved. It´s probably only in the centre of town that the Russians have set fire to buildings.

-I want to put on some other clothes, she said.

Her fingers felt numb as she opened the suitcase. She glanced around, didn´t see anyone, but still went over to a hedge and removed her blouse, put her dress on outside her skirt before taking it off. Then she tied the silk scarf she was given by Henrik for Christmas around her head like a turban, before she spread a thin layer of lipstick on her lips. It had lain untouched in her toilet bag since they got married. I smell bad, she thought, and applied some of her perfume on the front of her shoulders, by the armpits. Otto was still standing and looking down the road, towards the house.

-What are you thinking Otto?

-I don´t want to think, he said, and gripped her hand. -I want to know.