



fusce

AND HER EYES WERE BLUE

*“If you imagine the
daughter of Bridget Jones
and Hercule Poirot on a
ghost hunt, this is the book.”*

BOKHUSET

L. HAGENSEN

AND HER EYES WERE BLUE

L. Hagensen

I

As I turned onto the exit to Olofsson's, I decided not to park my car in front of the house for all to see. After all, I was planning to break in there. Surely Helge had cleared a path into the forest with his forestry machinery? Yes, there it was. It was uneven and muddy, but I drove in anyway and stopped the car after a small curve. Back on the gravel road, I turned around to make sure my car was out of sight before heading down to the house, and after taking a discreet look at the lake and neighboring houses, I went up the stairs to the front door.

The key lay worn and blackened in my hand. I took a deep breath, put it in the lock and turned it. The door opened without a sound; Olofsson must have oiled it. I made a mental note to look for the jug of oil while I was at it, because my door really needed oiling, too.

The hallway was in darkness and the doorways to the other rooms were like pulled teeth in a dark mouth. Everything felt unreal. But I had every right to enter, I told myself. Olofsson had given me his key. He's dead, another voice said. You're an intruder. What was the punishment, I asked myself? How criminal was I? I tried to push the voices out of my head and realized I hadn't brought a flashlight. Luckily, I had a flashlight app on my iPhone and with slightly sweaty hands, I pulled out the phone, pressed the app and sighed with satisfaction when it worked.

Like the thief I was, I snuck into the kitchen with my phone as my only source of light. The kitchen table was empty except for the tablecloth and a sugar bowl. I didn't see the slightest crumb and no china, not even washed on the sink. Either Olofsson had suffered from an incredible urge to clean up before he drowned, or someone had been here tidying up. I was leaning toward the latter, but who? And why?

Next to the kitchen sofa was the door leading into the dining room. I peeked in, found it as clean and empty as the kitchen, and continued through the vaulted doorway into the living room. Shining the light on the bookshelf, I saw the photo albums standing side by side on the lowest shelf. I knelt down and pulled them out. On the shelf above was the beautiful velvet box along with some porcelain figurines depicting kneeling women with children and dogs. I considered taking the photo albums and the velvet box into the kitchen, but without proper light it was almost impossible to examine them properly (besides, it felt spooky and frightening to be alone in Olofsson's house), so I chose to put them in my backpack. But where was the old cardboard box? It had to be here somewhere, I knew I saw it when Olofsson and I were eating pancakes.

On the first floor there was only one other room, a small bathroom. Nearby was a staircase that disappeared up a curve, presumably to Olofsson's bedroom. I walked up carefully, jumping every time the steps creaked. My heartbeat was so fast I thought I was going to have a heart attack.

The upstairs consisted of two dark bedrooms and a bathroom. One bedroom was Olofsson's; there was an unmade single bed, a dresser and a chair with a shirt thrown over the back. I recognized it; Olofsson had worn it often, it was probably his favorite shirt. I picked it up and held it to my nose. It smelled like Olofsson. Not bad, just a hint of ground coffee, shaving cream and mint. My God, what had happened to him? I shoved the shirt into my backpack and turned toward a small door on one

short side of the room. It led into a built-in closet (the kind my Norwegian grandmother had called a *kott*). I fumbled with the clothes hanging on the rail, then shone my phone on the floor, looking for the cardboard box, but there was nothing, just dust bunnies and an old mousetrap - thankfully empty. It was pretty obvious no one had cleaned in here. In the second bedroom, there was a barely perceptible smell of apples in the air. Had Olofsson stored winter apples here? The beds, there were two of them, were against the walls and both mattresses and bedding were missing. Between them was a table with an old radio, and on the walls hung framed photos of people from times past and some embroidered Bible quotes. Olofsson's parents' room. Their *kott* was also full of clothes. Dresses and suits, white shirts and shoes. And there, behind the row of black shoes, I actually found the box with all the photos that were never pasted into an album. I carried the box into the bedroom, but realized it was too big to fit in the backpack, so I bundled up the photos as best I could and stuffed them on top of Olofsson's shirt. At the bottom of the box I found what I was actually looking for: the brown envelope with the negatives. I carefully placed it over the photos and zipped the pack up. Finally, I could go home.

Then I heard a noise. It sounded like the front door closing down there.

This can't be. I refused to believe it, but I couldn't think of a single horror movie I had seen (and believe me, they all ran in quick succession in my overheated brain) where a crazed killer *didn't* sneak into a quiet, abandoned house with a heroine inside.

"Don't overreact," I whispered. "Just close the door to the *kott* and go down the stairs and calmly ask what they are doing in Olofsson's house." While still talking to myself, I crawled backward into the *kott* and shut the door. I pulled out my iPhone and squeezed behind the shoes and a rolled-up rug with the flashlight on. I turned off the light and slid the phone into my pocket.

In a moment of panic, I realized it was not set to silent, but the next second I remembered I had no reception, so no one could call anyway.

The stairs creaked. Once. Someone had stopped in it. I felt my bowels loosen, the waiting was almost unbearable. It creaked again and fell silent. Soon they would be upstairs.

Holy fuck! The backpack!

The backpack was still on the other side of the door.

2

I couldn't sacrifice the backpack. The thought of someone sneaking into the bedroom, taking my backpack and sneaking back out of the house made me grind my teeth so hard my jaw hurt. No fucking way I was going to sacrifice my backpack.

As quietly as I could, I crept out from behind the rug and crawled on my hands and knees to the door. I listened, but could hear nothing. Slowly, ever so slowly, I pushed down the handle and opened the door. Sounds could be heard from the other bedroom. It sounded like someone was pulling out the drawers in Olofsson's dresser. Carefully, I reached for the backpack and realized how heavy it was as I lifted it into the kott, my arm aching. I didn't dare close the door behind me, but pulled it shut as best I could and crawled backward behind the rug, trying to make myself as small as possible.

Footsteps approached and there was a scratching on the floor. Whoever it was, was now in this bedroom. I held my breath.

A cone of light spread in the kott as the door opened. I crouched behind the rug and tried not to close my eyes. The cone of light partially disappeared as the silhouette of a head got in its way. Someone was peeking in.

An eternity passed. I was dying from lack of oxygen. My lungs ached and dots of light danced before my eyes, and when the door closed softly and the footsteps faded, I gasped greedily. Who had that been? It was impossible to see. Male or female,

I had no idea. Should I have pulled out my iPhone and lit up the person? It had to be Olofsson's killer. But if I had done that, surely I would have been murdered too? I closed my eyes and wished I had taken Ylva's advice and gone on vacation to Gran Canarias, then none of this would have happened.

So there I sat, huddled up behind the rug, not daring to move. I strained to listen, but I couldn't hear any creaking on the stairs. Was he still upstairs or had he (she?) gone back down?

"What if it was Staffan?" I whispered into the darkness. Of course it wasn't Staffan. Why would it be Staffan? "Because Olofsson warned me about him," I whispered in the dialogue with myself. "And he has a wife who is raving mad." Kennet had that too, I realized. Kennet and Staffan had been childhood friends. Did this have something to do with the past? Whatever *this* was?

My eyes began to sting. Even when I blinked and rubbed them with my knuckles, they continued to sting; I assumed it was the dust and mothballs taking their toll as I slowly crept to the door and pushed down the handle, but as soon as I opened it a crack, smoke poured into the kott. I slammed the door shut again and covered my face with my hands. The house was on fire. There was a fire in Olofsson's house.

You'll burn in the fire.

We'll be burned at the stake when we die.

I opened the door again and forced my way into the bedroom. The smoke was so thick that I couldn't see anything. I hid my face in the crook of my arm, but it was impossible to get any further. My eyes were stinging terribly and tears were flowing, snot too.

"Crawl," I called into my shirt sleeve. "You have to crawl when there's a fire." I threw myself to the floor and realized I had to leave my backpack. It would be impossible to crawl forward while holding it with one hand and shielding my face with the other. But I *didn't want* to sacrifice my backpack.

“Fuck, fuck, fuck,” I muttered as I tore off my shirt. The precious seconds passed at breakneck speed. I tied the shirt around my nose and mouth, grabbed my backpack again, and trudged forward. My outstretched hand touched the threshold and I crawled into the hallway. Down on the floor it was actually a little easier to breathe, but I still saw nothing but a gray wall of smoke. It crackled and rumbled from below as the fire consumed everything in its path, the heat increasing with every inch I approached the stairs. This wouldn’t work. The smoke was now pitch black and the heat hit me like a red-hot, evil locomotive. I wouldn’t make it down the stairs. Should I crawl back to the bedroom? I tried to remember what it looked like outside. Olofsson’s parents’ bedroom faced the Kullmans’ house, and the lawn sloped gently downward. Olofsson’s bedroom faced the gravel road; wasn’t the terrain higher there? A hedge grew below, tall and spreading. Would it spear me or catch me?

Suddenly I saw fiery red flames poking through the black smoke, groping for me. I jerked to the side and dragged the backpack down the hallway. This time I hit my chin on the threshold and cried out before a coughing fit made me forget the pain. I made my way across the threshold into Olofsson’s bedroom and something that seemed to be working in my brain made me pull the door shut behind me.

Coughing, I stood up and staggered to the window. It was hard to get up, but finally it swung open, and the fresh air rushing in felt like life itself. I ripped my shirt off my face, took a deep breath, and gulped the air until a strange crackling sound forced me to turn around. The new oxygen I had just let in had fanned the fire. The paint on the door bubbled and yellowed, and the cracks along the frame turned black, then red with fire.

I stuck my head out the window and looked down at the hedge. It looked dangerous. The fire raged behind me; I didn’t have much time. I grabbed the backpack, threw it out as far as I could, and watched it land in the grass behind the hedge.

Olofsson's bed was only a yard away; maybe the mattress could save me from being impaled by the sharp branches? With a jerk, I lifted it off the bed and pulled it toward the window.

A deadly roar echoed through the room as the door gave way to the fire. Desperately, I pressed the mattress against the window, but it was too big; I couldn't get it out through the opening. Panicking, I tried to pull it back into the room, but it sat like a cork in the window, not moving. Sweat poured down my face and body, my head throbbed, and the air became stuffy and impossible to breathe. No more fresh air was coming through the open window; the mattress was killing me. With a last cry of frustration, I managed to tear it loose and dragged it into the room. I took one look at the inferno behind me and climbed onto the window sill.

3

Two months earlier

Ylva and I strolled up Main Street on our way to the Town Hall Café. The sun was shining and it was the kind of summer day you always expect but rarely get.

Out of the corner of my eye, I could see Ylva glancing at me. She had been doing that off and on all day. I thought I knew what it was about.

“What?” I asked, hoping to put an end to the discussion.

“Huh?” said Ylva.

“You’re looking at me; what’s wrong?”

“I just think you should consider it. It’s still possible to snag a last-minute trip. Gran Canarias is perfect for you. Nice people to hang out with, some nightlife. That’s exactly what you need.”

It was Thursday, July 21, 2011, and my last week before vacation. Ylva had urged me to go to a sunny beach and have some fun, but no thanks Ylva, nothing would come of that. I needed peace and quiet, and since I had a cabin on a lake in Lövaren in the middle of absolutely nowhere, I knew I would get just that.

“Ylva, you know that’s not my thing. I’ve packed for a rainy summer on the West coast, which means warm socks and a big stack of books. I’ll be fine. Stop talking about Gran Canarias.”

“When are you leaving?” Ylva opened the door to the Town Hall Café, but stopped in the doorway and looked at me. I assumed she was worried that I would be lonely at the cabin.

“Tomorrow, right after work. Don’t worry about it. I’m going to have a great vacation. Come on, let’s go inside and order something with lots of cream.”

As I said, stupid of me. Of course I should have booked a last-minute trip to Gran Canarias.

Instead, I loaded up the car in the morning and was determined to drive to the cabin at the end of the workday. As the crow flies, it’s not far from Valludden to Lövaren, but once you leave the highway, it gets winding and narrow, and it takes a couple of hours to get there. It might have been wiser to leave early on Saturday morning, but I wanted to wake up in the cabin on my first day of vacation, I really did.

I was listening to the radio in my little car and singing along as a song I knew played. The sun was setting in the sky and low clouds obscured the landscape. It looked like my prediction of a rainy vacation was coming true.

Just as I turned off the E6 in Dingle, an excited newscaster began babbling completely surreal words. I looked at the radio and tried to understand what I was hearing. Someone had bombed the government quarter in Oslo. Oslo? I fumbled for my iPhone on the passenger seat, only to realize to my horror that I had no reception.

“Shit,” I muttered. I hadn’t had my iPhone long, but I was already hooked. “Don’t tell me I don’t have reception in Lövaren?”

As I rolled down the last gravel road to my cabin, I saw that the windows were lit up at the home of my closest neighbors, an elderly farming couple named Anders and Sara Hansson. I unloaded the car, made myself a sandwich, and walked over to their house. The Hanssons had a satellite dish on the top of a hill and an enormously long cable all the way down to the

house, so it was possible to watch more than just DVD movies at their place.

Sara greeted me at the door, hugged me, and pulled me into the kitchen. "Have you heard?" she whispered. "A crazy man is shooting children in Norway."

We sat together all evening, watching the report from Norway, talking and drinking coffee, trying to make sense of the terrible thing that had happened. For once, they didn't talk about my marital status. Being forty years old and single was apparently reprehensible. They had a thirty-five years old son with whom they tried to set me up from time to time, but that evening I was spared.

It was late when I returned to my cabin. A soft breeze was blowing from the lake and a light drizzle was in the air. It would have been so true to write that even then, as I approached my dark cabin - I had forgotten to light the lamps before going over to the Hanssons' - I had a premonition, an inexplicable fear of what was to come, but I didn't. I wasn't afraid of the dark at all and just trudged along the path with my thoughts.

I was thinking of evil.

Are you crazy when you are evil? Three gallons of crazy in a two-gallon bucket? Or is it the other way around? Do only sane people become evil? Is the madness that leads to evil involuntary?

I didn't know. I still don't know.

4

The next day I woke up to raindrops on the tin roof. A very peaceful sound, in my opinion, so I went back to sleep and woke up late in the morning. I got up, had breakfast and went to the Hanssons', coffee mug in hand, to find out what was happening in Norway. Staffan, their son, was there. I knew the Hanssons had told him I was single, working-wi'-something-wi'-computerings-or-wha'ever-she's-well-paid (actually, I'm a librarian, so I have no idea where they got that last from) and that he should ask-her-out-onna-date, but Staffan was five years younger, divorced, had two kids, and was handsome and slim. I was neither.

I took off my raincoat and sat down in the kitchen. Sara filled my mug (her coffee is so weak it makes my stomach hurt) and then we sat at the kitchen table and talked. Although the conversation was occasionally terrible, we had a good time. So normal. Sponge cake and a second cup and how is it in town and Staffan's youngest is doing so well in school and a little more Breivik.

"His poor mother," Sara said with feeling. "Can you imagine, his poor mother. How is she doing now? How can she continue to love her son? How will she be able to go out in public?"

"His father, too," Anders said. "It's the same with him."

"And his siblings," Staffan interjected. "If he has any. All those poor kids on that island, how messed up can you be?"

“Yes,” Sara said, “today is a day of mourning. I’ve been thinking half the night about what makes someone kill children. So many children”

There was a knock at the door. Sara flinched and looked confused for a moment, whereupon Staffan gently tapped her on the shoulder.

“It’s all right, Mama,” he said. “I’ll get it.” He got up and walked to the kitchen door, and before he opened it, I had a weird feeling, as if there was a monster or a policeman with an assault rifle on the other side.

“Yngve,” Sara called out, “is it just you? Come in, come in. Would you like a cup of coffee?”

It was Olofsson, a middle-aged man from one of the houses across the lake. I had met him a few times at Sara and Anders’s house, but we had never really spoken.

Olofsson nodded to me before hugging Sara and sitting down at the table.

“Yes, please,” he said. “I’d like a cup. How are you?”

We continued talking about Breivik and this and that, and I could see how much Olofsson liked Sara. But who didn’t like her? She was so cute with her dimples and funny comments, and you could tell she cared. Sara was probably the person you would go to when you were feeling bad, both physically and emotionally.

When we finished our coffee, Anders said that Sara and he were going to Gothenburg for a while and they asked if I wanted to feed their chickens. Staffan was there to pick up the dogs. They were to stay with him until they came home after a week or so. I said of course I would feed the chickens, but I was disappointed they were leaving; I had been looking forward to seeing them. They were my best neighbors, actually the only ones I hung out with, come to think of it. To get to my house, you had to take a detour down the country road. To get to the Hanssons and the other neighbors, you had to drive a few miles

further, and the path from my house only led to the Hanssons. The other neighbors lived on the other side of the lake. I could use some peace and quiet, I thought to myself. All spring and summer I had been busy at work. Now I could look forward to a long vacation, and the Hanssons would be back soon. "Just take the eggs," Sara said, "you know that." "I know that," I said.

So they left and I fiddled around in my cabin. I fed the chickens and ate fresh eggs every morning, walked in the woods and picked chanterelles to fry and eat on toast. I even swam in the lake, even though I'm so afraid of pike.

One morning I woke up early because a molar was hurting. I took Advil and tried to fight through it, but the next day I drove to the next town, which is really not close. Since I had no reception, I couldn't call ahead, but the woman at the front desk asked me to take a seat in the waiting room and she would try to find a hole when the dentist could see me.

The tooth had cracked to the pulp. "Pull it out," I said. It took a while and after that I was in pain. The dentist was nice and prescribed a couple of tubes of Cafcobud and told me not to take any pills until I got home. "Driving and stuff, you know." So I went shopping and home and had to put the pill in a glass of water as soon as I walked in the door. Damn, I was in pain.

I was lying on the couch half asleep when there was a knock on the door. That's when I got scared. There is never a knock on my door. The only people who visit me are the Hanssons, and they open up and yell "hello" when they come over.

I crawled off the couch and went to the door to open it. Olofsson was standing outside.

"Are you asleep?" he asked.

"Apparently not," I said. "Did something happen?"

"Anders called. There were some complications. They won't

be home for a while. They're asking about the chickens, if you can take care of them for a while longer?"

I looked at him questioningly. Complications? I realized I had no idea *why* the Hanssons went to Gothenburg.

"Complications?" I said.

"Yes, with the birth."

"The birth?"

Olofsson stared at me as if I were stupid.

I felt stupid.

"Their daughter is having a baby, that's why they're in Gothenburg, don't you know?"

Shit, I didn't even know they had a daughter.

"They didn't say why they left. I didn't know they had a daughter."

"She's married to one of those immigrants. An Arab. They're afraid he'll kidnap the child and take it to some Arab country."

"Hey," I said somberly. "The Hanssons aren't racists, we were sitting there talking about that fucking lunatic Breivik ... Are they in Gothenburg to prevent the father from seeing his child, is that what you're saying?"

The sun was shining and the birds were chirping. The lake glistened behind Olofsson and the roses on the gable were in full bloom, smelling heavy and wonderful. Reality became distorted, the picturesque became ridiculous. What was this?

"You're single, as they say ... How's your sex life?"

Olofsson scratched his crotch.

I slammed the door and threw myself on the couch, realizing that I needed to return to civilization and find a phone. But then I remembered that I only had the number to the Hanssons' landline, and no one would answer there.

"Damn," I muttered, looking out the window. Olofsson was still there, pulling at his curly hair and looking out at the lake. I opened the window and called out:

"What kind of complications, Olofsson?"

“They had to do an emergency C-section and she, the daughter, wasn’t in such good condition, but the baby made it. Will you keep feeding the chickens if they call and ask?”

“Yes. Of course I’ll feed the chickens. And stay the hell out of my sex life, Olofsson.”

I slammed the window shut and watched him grin as he walked to his car. Old bastard.

I spent the rest of the day in a sort of slumber, no doubt due to the pills I was taking for the pain. In other words: I was high as a kite.

5

My neighbors, or rather those who lived around the lake, were a rather odd collection. I sat in my hammock with my morning coffee and thought about them as I rocked back and forth. Olofsson was in his early fifties, had gray-brown curly hair, thick glasses, and a fat belly that hung over his belt. He lived alone in an old house, and I could imagine that it smelled of mold, mustiness, and old men's piss. Next to him were three slightly larger summer houses. I had never been there before and didn't know the people who lived there, although I could see them from my cabin. In the first house lived an elderly couple, the Kullmans, who looked like the British upper class and were always busy in their garden (I imagined). In the second house lived a family with children, the Almkvists, whom I always heard making noise across the lake and who often barbequed, and in the third house lived a couple called the Fritjofssons. They were seldom here, but the Hanssons sometimes talked about them (the Fritjofssons should put on a new roof, or the Fritjofssons' sewer system is apparently out of order, they should replace the septic tank with a three-chamber well, like everyone else around here). A little further away, on the other side of the lake, was a farm. The people who lived there were called Andersson and they had cattle and lots of woods. The Hanssons used to have dairy cows, but now they were retired and only had their chickens and two hunting dogs. They didn't even have a cat.

I was thinking of the Hanssons. The safe, stable Hanssons. Both of them tall, firm and gray-haired. Sara with dimples and Anders with his calm, kind eyes. They must have been a handsome couple when they were young. Staffan was unbearably handsome, with a straight nose and a dimple on his chin. But why hadn't they told me about their daughter? Were they ashamed because she was married to an immigrant? Were they closet racists? Or was it because I talked so much every time we met that they couldn't get a word in edgewise? I found it all strange.

I rocked back and forth. Sipped my coffee and looked out at the lake. Should I go over to Olofsson and ask him if he had heard anything new? I had never had much desire to go to the other side of the lake, but after almost a week without the Hanssons to talk to and no reception on my iPhone, I felt I probably needed some human contact - human contact with my mind, not my teeth, that is. I looked at the lake, at my cabin, and then at the lake again, got in the car and drove up the road. I thought I saw something fluttering in the woods behind the cabin, but thought no more about it, then.

Olofsson's house was really very nice. It was old, you could see that, but it was so nestled in lilac bushes and apple trees and other bushes and flowers that I have no idea what they are called, that it looked like a cottage in a fairy tale.

The door creaked as Olofsson opened it. It smelled musty, but not like old men's piss.

"Hey, Olofsson," I said. "Hmm ... I was just wondering if you've heard anything else from the Hanssons?"

"No."

"No? Um. It's pretty here."

"Yeah, it's nice. Do you want some coffee?"

"Yes, please," I hurried to say, because that was exactly what I wanted. Olofsson wasn't the person I would choose to hang out with, but he was the only one I knew besides the Hanssons, so I didn't really have a choice.

He set out coffee and cups with saucers and cookies on a rickety white cast iron table, with chairs, on the lawn. The coffee was good. Much tastier than the Hanssons'. I winced as the cookie touched the open wound where my tooth had been and dipped it into the coffee to soften it.

"What do you do for a living?" I asked.

"Nothing. I used to work in the woods, but my third slipped disc led to spinal fusion surgery and then I became a disabled retiree. Now I'm just here. I can't do much because my back still hurts. I'm thinking of getting a dog."

"Yeah, I'm sure there are worse places to live if you're a disabled retiree," I said, looking out at the lake.

"Yes. I could get a dog."

"A hunting dog like the Hanssons have? Do you hunt, too?"

Olofsson looked at me in confusion.

"I think I'm losing my mind," he said. "Because sometimes I remember a dog, but I don't have a dog."

"Maybe you had a dog when you were little," I suggested.

"Maybe your parents had a dog that you vaguely remember?"

"Yes. That could be," he muttered, but he didn't look convinced. He waved his finger at the other houses and said thoughtfully:

"Those Almkvists"

"You mean the family with the kids and the barbeque?"

"Yes, that's right. They had three kids, but now they only have two."

"Okay? What do you mean? Did they leave one at home?"

"I don't know. At the beginning of the summer, they had three. Three kids. Now they only have two, a girl and a boy."

"Maybe one of the kids wasn't theirs? Maybe it was a friend or relative who was there?" I suggested.

"Small. In a carriage."

I didn't know what to say. Was he crazy?

"I'd like a dog," he continued. "A Labrador. Andersson, the

farmer, has a couple of Labradors, really nice dogs. He likes them more than his old lady.”

“Does that say anything about Andersson or his old lady?”

“His wife is a grumpy hag, but the dogs are good. I’d like to have one. I’d like a lady, too,” he said, peering at me, “but not a hag, a good one.”

“Don’t look at me,” I said. “I’m enjoying my single life very much. The Hanssons are trying to set me up with their Staffan, I don’t understand, there must be more single women than me here?”

“You don’t want him. He beat his ex-wife. That’s why he’s divorced.”

I looked at Olofsson. “Are you kidding?”

“No. He has a temper. He’s had it since he was a boy.”

“But Sara and Anders are very calm ... Hey, they never told me they had a daughter. Why is that?”

“They don’t like that she married that black guy. It’s strange that they went back to see her in Gothenburg, I didn’t think they’d care.”

“Olofsson, that’s not right. I’ve always perceived the Hanssons as nice, pleasant people. Now you say they’re racist and obviously trying to set me up with an abusive man. It doesn’t make sense.”

“Well, there’s probably a lot that doesn’t make sense,” was his cryptic reply. “For my part, I do find the missing child thing odd.”

I got in the car and drove home. Luckily there were no deer on the road, or I probably would have run them over. My head was spinning from what Olofsson had said. Especially what he had said about the Hanssons. That they didn’t spend time with their daughter - except now - because she had married an immigrant. That their son was a wife beater. Was Olofsson a mythomaniac?

Then August came, and I had an undeservedly good time.

6

There is something enchanting about the August moon and the August evenings. The heat persisted even though it was past nine o'clock, and I sat in my garden munching on another chanterelle toast, waiting for the magic of dusk. What was I going to do with all those eggs? Maybe I should make pancakes and take them to Olofsson?

The next morning I stood on Olofsson's stairs. Since I had both hands busy with the pancake platter, I had to kick rather than knock on the front door, and after half an eternity he came and opened. His hair was fluffier than usual.

"I made pancakes with the Hanssons' eggs, are you hungry? Do you have any jam?"

"Come in," was all he said.

He led me into the kitchen. It was from the fifties, with cabinet doors painted blue and a gray laminate countertop full of scratches and stains. For a bachelor of Olofsson's caliber living there, it was still pretty neat.

The kitchen table was full of photos. Some were lying around loose, others were in a nice blue velvet-lined box, and under the table I caught sight of an uneven stack of more photos in a tattered brown cardboard box. The coffee was already on. Olofsson handed me a cup and I sat down on a kitchen chair, balancing the plate of pancakes - and jam - on one knee and the

coffee cup on the other. With no hand free to eat, I took a sip of coffee and looked at the mess on the kitchen table.

“Does it always look like this, or are you cataloging?”

Olofsson grumbled, pushing some photos aside with his arm so we had room for our plates and coffee cups.

“I’m looking through all the photos to find a picture of the dog. You said that maybe my parents had a dog when I was little. We have quite a few photos from that time, but I haven’t found a single one with a dog.”

“But you said it was just a faint memory,” I said, putting a piece of pancake in my mouth. With my other hand, I flipped through the photos. “It could have been a friend’s dog or a dream or whatever. Who’s that?”

“My father.”

“But it was taken here in front of the house. Have you lived here all your life?”

“Yes. Look here, my parents and I.” He showed me a black-and-white photo of a tall, handsome man, a slightly curvy woman in a black dress, and a small, curly towhead. They must have been older when they had their son, I thought, and looked at them as they stood on the lawn in front of the house, as one does when photographed. But no dog sat obediently at their feet.

In silent agreement, we ate our pancakes, drank our coffee, and flipped through the photos. I could trace Olofsson from a young boy to an enlisted soldier and lumberjack.

It’s strange what a difference it can make to see a picture of someone when they were a child. Suddenly I saw Olofsson with completely different eyes. He had once been a little boy, then a schoolboy and a teenager and grown man, he had had dreams and been happy and sad and scared and strong. He was a person with a story, not just an oddball to have coffee with when no one else was around.

“Aren’t there any later photos?” I asked, putting the last photos

back in the blue velvet box. "These seem to have been taken over twenty years ago."

"Hrrm," he muttered. "Maybe in some album. Check the floor."

I bent down under the kitchen table and looked. There was the brown box of photos and an old brown envelope. I looked in the envelope, but there were only negatives inside.

"That's Mama's old cardboard box. She never got around to putting the photos in an album and they didn't fit in her pretty box. But these photos are very old, if we had a dog I wouldn't remember it. Look in the album instead," Olofsson said, chewing on the last piece of pancake.

I bent down and looked again. There were two photo albums hidden under one of the chairs. I grabbed the bottom one and pulled them out. It squeaked as crumbs, grit and dust followed and I vaguely wondered when I had last vacuumed my cabin and opened the top one. It had to be Olofsson's parents' album, because it consisted almost entirely of sepia-toned photos of old-fashioned people and pictures of the houses by the lake - Olofsson's, the Hanssons', the Fritjofssons' and the Anderssons'. The Almkvists' and the Kullmans' properties seemed to be vegetable patches, and where my cabin is, there was only forest.

The second album was more promising. It seemed to be in chronological order, as if Olofsson had inserted the photos into the album as he developed them. I saw pictures of Olofsson with darker hair, sideburns and a half-beard, and others of him sitting with laughing friends in colorful paper hats, eating crayfish. There were photos from a vacation trip to Gotland that showed a little gray in his hair, and from Christmas parties and birthdays. He hadn't been as neat as his parents when he organized his album, because sometimes the series of pictures was interrupted by old photos from school days or winter vacations.

"Why didn't you ever get married, Olofsson? You look dashing and sociable in all these photos."

I almost said he looked *quite ordinary*.

“I had a lady friend once, but no. It didn’t work out.”

“That’s a shame.” I didn’t know what to say. “Maybe you should get a dog anyway. You can talk to Andersson and ask him if he’ll get puppies?”

“I think I should.”

I couldn’t help but like Olofsson a little.

7

I live by the motto *I'm better off alone*. However, I have not always lived alone. There is a reason why I want to live alone now, you might say.

I'm spent. That's what it feels like. I lived in a relationship with a man, Leif, for seven years and was, well, lulled into this false sense of security called safety. Of course he met someone else, what's new under the moon? Suddenly I stood there like a great open wound. The pain was raw and unrelenting. The wound is still there, but it no longer covers my whole body. Now it's small and itchy and when I poke it, it festers. I try not to poke it too often, but every once in a while I'm there, touching it. It makes me feel. Sometimes it's better to feel pain than nothing at all.

We never had children, Leif and I, but we had a cat. Or rather, Leif had a cat. He had her when we first met. Her name was Mirre and she was just a tabby, the kind most people have. When Leif left me for his skinny new one, he left Mirre too. The skinny new one was *allergic*, of course. Mirre was about seventeen years old and had started wetting the bed, so quite frankly I decided to put her to sleep. I wanted to ask the vet to hook me up to the killing fluid too, but it doesn't work that way. You keep struggling. You take it one day at a time. You go to work, buy food for one, realize you can't afford to stay in the house, sell it, rent a one-bedroom apartment in town and buy

a small cabin with the profits from the house sale and decide *never again*. Never again shall I be abandoned, never again shall I perish in such sorrow.

But I couldn't help but feel a little bad about the cat.

8

We were in the car, Olofsson and I, bumping along on a small dirt road.

“How can this be a shortcut?” I asked. “We’re not going forward, just upward and to the sides.”

“It’s probably six miles shorter if you take this route,” Olofsson said. “Otherwise, you have to go really far on the main road until you get to their exit.”

When we arrived at farmer Andersson’s house, I understood what he meant. Their house and a few meadows sloped down toward the lake, but that was the back of the farm. The front consisted of even more fields and fences, and there a larger road led to the main road, which was completely in the wrong direction from us.

Everything was very idyllic. Brown cows grazed in the tall green grass, a tractor hummed, and three black Labradors slept on the front steps. I saw something fluttering behind a curtain. A woman was looking out at us and I expected her to come and open, but she didn’t. The Labradors woke up and looked at us, but they didn’t bark. Good dogs.

Olofsson looked around. “We’ll go and see where Helge is,” he said. “Berit isn’t so easy.”

We found Helge on the tractor, a big, bright green John Deere, driving water to the cows. We stood and watched him

unload a large white tank from the tractor onto the pasture, then he drove over to us and climbed out.

“Well, if it isn’t Yngve. And who’s that pretty girl you have with you?”

I rushed forward and held out my hand.

“Hi, my name is Raili Rydell and I live in the cabin on the other side of the lake, right next to the Hanssons.”

He looked at me intently, took off his cap and nodded.

“I’m Helge. Nice to finally meet you.”

Helge seemed to be a man of contradictions. His gray hair stood straight up and he was tanned, weather-beaten and strong, but his handshake was limp and uncertain.

“So,” Helge said as he walked ahead of us toward the red house. “What brings such nice people to visit us? Would you like a cup of coffee?”

Olofsson straightened up and looked at me with a stiff expression. “Berit,” he mimed with a grimace. I have to admit that I was looking forward to meeting Berit the hag. I mean, how bad could it be?

Pretty bad, as it turned out.

9

The Hanssons came back.

One morning when I went to feed the chickens and let them out, their car was there, they must have come in the night. Wondering if I should dare knock or if they were still asleep, I rattled the buckets while filling the chickens' water and food bowls. As I closed the coop gate, I saw movement in the kitchen, so I went up the kitchen stairs and knocked. Sara opened just in her robe. That had *never* happened before.

"Good morning," I said, smiling. "Here are today's eggs." I held out my hands.

"Good morning Raili. Come on in."

I sat down at my usual place at the kitchen table. On the red and white checkered oilcloth lay a pen and a crossword puzzle. I took the pen and began to fill in some missing words. As I did so, I glanced at Sara, who was setting out breakfast, coffee cups, glasses, and deep and shallow plates. This kind of breakfast doesn't really exist. You only see them in movies. Boiled eggs, homemade bread, a big cheese in the middle of the table, a plate of fried bacon, coffee and milk in glasses, homemade jam, and a big bowl of oatmeal. I sat there wondering if Sara always prepared breakfast this way or if she was just pretending because I was there, when she said:

"I talked to Yngve. He said you were at the Anderssons'."

"Ha ha," I laughed dully before coming to my senses.

“Berit?” Sara asked.

“Are you kidding?” I looked at Sara. “What’s wrong with that woman?”

Before she could answer, Anders entered the kitchen. He rubbed his hands with pleasure when he saw that breakfast was ready. With a satisfied grin, he patted Sara’s bottom and kissed her on the cheek before sitting down at the table. It was so exactly the opposite of what I had experienced with the Anderssons that I almost winced. I poured coffee into my cup and milk into my glass and topped my plate with bacon and cheese sandwiches while I thought back to the fika at the farmhouse:

“Oh, well. It’s you, Yngve,” said a somewhat stocky, permed woman in a purple pantsuit as we entered the kitchen. “I suppose you want some coffee.” The woman didn’t ask, but said it in a voice so dry and matter of fact that it quenched any thirst for coffee. I immediately reached out to say hello, but in the middle of “My name is Raili, nice to meet another neighbor,” she turned and reached for the coffee pot. I waved my empty hand around, not knowing where to put it before I shoved it in my pocket out of sheer embarrassment. Olofsson peeked at me and shrugged.

“Berit, dear, this is Raili, she bought the cabin on the other side,” Helge said carefully.

“Oh, that’s something to buy, too,” Berit snorted. “No toilet, no shower.” She turned to me and held out the coffee pot. “I take it you’re not too particular about cleanliness.”

“I have a privy in the backyard, a very nice one, actually,” I said, exasperated. “And I have hot and cold water in the house. It’s perfectly possible to get by with hygiene. And I can borrow Sara’s and Anders’s shower whenever I want.”

Choke on that, why don’t ya? I wanted to add, but managed to keep quiet.

“Yeah, that’s what it sounds like when you know you’ve been screwed. Sugar or milk?”

“We both drink it black,” Olofsson answered quickly, though I knew he liked to put a sugar cube or two in his coffee.

I sat down next to Helge on the kitchen sofa and glanced at Olofsson, who sat down on the chair farthest from Berit, his eyes fixed on the tabletop. He looked terrified, poor fellow.

“Well, Helge,” I said when I realized that Olofsson wasn’t going to say anything, “Olofsson is thinking of getting a dog, and he is very fond of yours.”

“Yeah?” Berit snapped, pouring coffee into our cups. “It’s easy to be *fond* of something when you don’t have to vacuum up its fur every day.”

I understood why the dogs didn’t bark when we arrived. They were kept on a short leash by the lady in purple.

“And why do you need a dog, Yngve?” she continued, tossing a plate of crusts on the table.

Both Olofsson and Helge stared at her without answering.

“Now that Olofsson is no longer working, it’s getting a little lonely in the house,” I said as soberly as I could. “A dog is good company, and your Labradors are very nice.”

“Company? Heh. Because he could never find a wife? So the dog will be a substitute, you mean? He wants a bitch, right? Aren’t there laws against that kind of thing?”

I could feel my temper beginning to rise.

“That’s enough!”

Berit turned to me. She eyed me up and down, and my anger turned to jelly. I took a sip of coffee and tried to hide behind the cup.

“You are single too, I heard. Surely there’s no one who wants you. Maybe you should try losing ten pounds and do something with your hair? Red frills have never been considered attractive, have they?”

Olofsson bit into a crust with an unhappy face and half of it immediately fell onto the table in a cascade of crumbs. Berit

groaned loudly, picked up her coffee cup and strutted into the next room, pulling the door shut behind her. Helge sighed.

“She’s not quite herself,” he muttered. “It’s best to just leave her alone.”

“Thanks for the coffee,” I said. “We should go, Olofsson.”

“I’ll give you the breeder’s number, Yngve,” Helge said. “I’ll come by with it soon. I have it in the room where she went, see”

I felt someone grab me by the shoulders and winced violently. The next second I was back in the Hanssons’ kitchen. Sara took her hands away and looked at me questioningly.

“You’ve been sitting with that fork of bacon in front of your mouth for a few minutes now. Are you okay?”

“I was just thinking about the fika at the Anderssons’. I’ve never met anyone as nasty as that Berit in my life.”

“Ha ha,” Anders laughed. “He got that woman for his sins, Helge.”

“But she wasn’t always like that, Anders,” said Sara, who always tried to say something nice about everyone.

“She’s always been pompous and stuck-up, just because her father was a contractor and had the most money around here. She’s probably hopping mad because she didn’t marry money and a nice apartment in Gothenburg, but only got a farmer on the hook,” Anders muttered. “No, thank goodness for you, Sara. I won the lottery.”

“Just look at the breakfast you’re getting,” I smiled.

“I think breakfast like this is romantic,” Sara said, blushing.

What a wonderful couple they were. I chewed on my cheese sandwich, suddenly remembering what Olofsson had said about their daughter. Thoughtfully, I bit my lip and asked cautiously:

“Sara, Olofsson said that you were with your daughter who had a baby?”

“Yes, that’s true. It was hard for her, poor darling. The little boy had the umbilical cord around his neck and the heart sounds stopped, so they had to do an emergency C-section. But it went well, thank God, although Anita didn’t do so well after that.”

“Why didn’t you ever tell me about her? I thought you only had Staffan.”

Sara sighed. She put her hands, wrinkled peasant hands that looked much older than Sara, on the table in front of her and looked at them.

“It wasn’t so easy with Anita. It’s hard to talk about her, all the old stuff comes up and you don’t know what to say.”

“You don’t have to talk about her,” I hurried to say, but Sara continued:

“It’s okay, I’ll tell you. You’re good. We like you, you know.” She looked me in the eye.

No shit, Sherlock? After all, you are trying to set me up with your son, I didn’t say.

“Anita was hit by the school bus when she was fourteen. Before the accident, she was calm and safe, had her good friends she’d had all her life, and did well in school.”

I swallowed and waited.

“But then, when she got well ... At first we didn’t think she was going to get better, you know. It was a severe head injury, she was in the hospital for several months ... but after that, she wasn’t herself anymore.”

I heard a noise and looked up. Anders was standing in the doorway looking at us, his eyes blurred by tears. Sighing heavily, he left the kitchen.

“Anders is having a hard time talking about this,” Sara said, “You’ll have to excuse him.”

“Sara, I didn’t mean to pry. You really don’t have to ... Now I’ve ruined our wonderful breakfast,” I said unhappily.

“Shh, I’ll tell you the short version. Anita started seeing people she used to be afraid of. She ran away from home several times and when she was eighteen she moved away for good. First to Gothenburg and then to Copenhagen. She became addicted to heroin. She lived in such misery, and had a boyfriend who beat her. He was terrible. A gang leader, I think. He came from

somewhere in the Middle East and there is nothing bad about them, but *he* was a scumbag. He forced her to ... well, you know, to get money for drugs. We went to her several times and tried to take her home, but she refused. Finally, Staffan took matters into his own hands. He more or less lived in Copenhagen for a month before he managed to bring her home. She refused to come see us. After a while, he took her to a treatment clinic, but by then he had almost lost his job and his wife had had enough, and, well, now he's divorced."

Damn you, Olofsson, you son of a bitch.

"But Anita got off heroin and met a boy there at the treatment clinic, and she's living with him now, and oh, God bless her, how that's going to turn out, with a child and everything, I don't know. But when Anita called and wanted us to be there for the birth, we immediately said yes, because she wouldn't let us near her before and ... well, you understand Raili?"

"I understand Sara and I'm so sorry."

Sara got up and went into the drawing room. After a while she came back with a framed photo. It showed a cute, blonde, teenage girl with dimples and freckles and a lot of zest for life. Anita before the accident.

"I used to think that maybe it would have been better if she had died in the accident, and I have to live with that."

I went home, sat in the hammock and felt a headache coming up. What was wrong with Olofsson? At first I wanted to ask Sara if he was crazy, but I was afraid she would ask *why* I was wondering, and I really didn't want to tell her about all the horrible things he had said about her family. I rocked back and forth quite violently a few times, wondering what to do. But what the heck, I was on vacation.

IO

The meaning of vacation is to rest. That's what I think. I'm totally against always finding something to do, growing as a person, seeing new places, and stressing out like a Duracell bunny. In other words, six weeks in the countryside in a small cabin with a privy was exactly what I needed. It would have been even nicer, though, if I hadn't had such a bad headache.

I looked in the cabinet for Advil but found none, drank water if that was the reason, looked for the headphones for my iPhone and went down to the lake. The clouds slid by like cream puffs on a giant blue plate, and I lay there in a tank top and shorts, knowing no one was there to see my cellulite, thinking about life. The husky voice of Nina Simone was singing in my ears and all in all, I had to admit, life was actually quite okay.

But the headache was getting worse. I dragged the blanket into the cabin and wondered if I should make myself a salad or take the car to Hedum and buy a pizza. Finally, I curled up on the couch and felt sorry for myself until dark. The growling of my stomach made me get up to look for an Advil for dinner, but I still couldn't find any. Instead, I took a Cafcobud, knowing I would probably be out like a light.

It was hot and stuffy and completely silent. You don't notice

the birds not chirping until they really aren't chirping at all. I woke up wrapped in my sweaty sheets thinking about Olofsson's photo album. It was something I had dreamed. Olofsson had been at a crayfish party and then his dog, a black Labrador, had come running. Olofsson grabbed him by the collar and shouted *don't disappear, don't disappear, don't disappear*, and then a woman came up to him and - it was gone. The dream thinned and dissolved, as dreams are wont to do when you try to remember them.

I looked at the clock on my phone; it was only three-thirty. Surprised, I lay on my back and stared at the ceiling. I had been sure I would sleep like a rock on my Cafcobud. There was no point in staying in my sweaty bed. I went into the small kitchen area, put on some coffee, and walked around aimlessly and anxiously for a while before plopping down on the old chest by the window and waiting for the coffee to finish bubbling in the percolator. Something about Olofsson's photo album made me uncomfortable, but I couldn't figure out what it was. Was it the people at the crayfish party? I shook my head, poured the coffee into a mug, and sat down on the rough cushions of the hammock, not even damp from the night dew. Thunder rumbled in the distance, and I rocked back and forth, drinking my coffee and slowly finding a kind of inner peace. The lake became a thin strip as my eyelids fell shut, and a vague thought that I couldn't fall asleep here in the hammock and spill the coffee all over me tried to take hold.

Suddenly I sat up straight. What was that?

There was something in the forest behind me. I felt it rather than heard it. A moose? A human being? At least someone was watching me. The hairs on my arms stood up, and despite the warm night, a cold shiver ran down my skin. I didn't dare turn around, but tried to listen for sounds, for footsteps coming toward me, but I heard nothing. Sweat ran down my body, my muscles contracted as if in a spasm and I wanted to jump up

and run away, but my legs remained immobile and I squeezed the mug as if it were my only safety in the world.

It was very close now. Why didn't I hear anything? I felt it so clearly. A presence. Something that had a soul was watching me. Something with a consciousness. I began to tremble all over my body, but still couldn't move. With my eyes tightly closed, I muttered the only thing I could think of: a rhyme my mother had taught me when I was little and afraid of the dark at night:

"Lordwho loveus children watch over me and wherever i go let...." Finally, the paralysis subsided. I threw myself out of the hammock and looked behind me. Nothing. Just the trees and the thunder-dark sky and the fluttering gauzy white flowers at the edge of the forest. Fluttering? The air was still. Enough is enough. Hastily I poured the rest of the coffee on the lawn, rushed into the cabin and locked it. My escape was very timely accompanied by a sharp clap of thunder. *Bang* the door and *BANG* the thunder.

Safe in the cabin and with fresh coffee in my mug, I began to scold myself. "For God's sake, Raili, take a Cafcobud and have a weird dream that isn't even a nightmare, and then go out in the garden and make a drama. Stupid giant baby."

Of course, no one had been watching me from the forest. It was my forest, my safe mushroom forest where I loved to walk. Tomorrow I would go out and pick chantarelles again, I decided. No strange feeling would stop me from walking in my forest. I crawled back under the blanket and promised myself I would never take a Cafcobud ever again.

I woke up late. The headache was back, and as I looked out the window I saw the sky, black and threatening, pressing down on the forest. I put on my rubber boots, grabbed my mushroom basket, and walked among the trees as the storm clouds lurked

overhead. If I hadn't been afraid of the forest the night before, I would have turned around and gone back home. Now I had to keep walking. "*What* am I trying to prove and to *whom*?" I muttered as I trudged along an old tractor trail.

Suddenly the forest opened up and the tractor trailed to a small clearing. I realized I had never walked this far in this direction before, and I looked thoughtfully at the old cottage foundation, its crumbled stones barely visible among the raspberry bushes. With ripe raspberries on top. Satisfied, I pushed through the thickets and grass on my way to the foundation and was about to step into a large hole when, without warning, it appeared at my feet. It was an old well. My eyes roamed the clearing until I spotted some gray, cracked fence posts leaning against a tree. I picked one of them up and pushed it down next to the well opening so I wouldn't fall into the hole next time I walked by. I know myself.

Then I sat there on the old stone steps, eating sun-warmed raspberries and looking around. If I didn't look at the storm clouds, it was a beautiful day, the sun was shining and the flies were buzzing around. Still, something was bothering me, but I refused to think about it, just grabbed my basket and headed back to the tractor trail. I'll take a detour into the woods, I thought, to see if I can find some chantarelles. Just enough to make a mushroom toast, then I'll make my way home.

The clouds piled up faster than I expected, and it became uncomfortably dark and quiet. Something yellow loomed in the distance, and in my eagerness to gather the mushrooms and get out of there as quickly as possible, I didn't look and stumbled right into a bog. "Shit, shit, shit." I trudged through the bog and got back to solid ground. I was glad I had put on my rubber boots, gathered the mushrooms, and resolutely made my way home. This time, however, I didn't cross the bog, God alone knew what lived in the muddy morass. I found an almost invisible path leading in the right direction, quickened

my pace, and thought I would soon be back near the tractor trail. But I wasn't. The path meandered further and further into the woods and eventually I had completely lost my bearings. There was a small, warning rumble above my head and a single heavy raindrop landed on my nose.

When the first bolt of lightning went off, I cried out in surprise and my pumping legs dodged trees and jumped over blueberry bushes and brush. The next flash of lightning made the forest eerily clear and just barely prevented me from running right into a car.