

Helena von Zweigbergk

Total Loss

Norstedts, 2018, 304 pages

Sample translation of pages 7-73, Kate Lambert

Norstedts Agency

linda.altrovberg@norstedts.se

catherine.mork@norstedts.se

Part 1

I see five dead hares and try to smile.

“Urgh, that’s awful. So many.”

Xavier doesn’t look proud or happy, although it was him who shot them. In fact his beautiful smile has something distorted about it. He has never killed an animal before and I think it has unsettled him. His smiling mouth droops, like the wings of a wounded bird.

“Mm,” he says, not looking me in the eye. “But now I’m going to have a hot bath. I’ve never felt so frozen in my life.”

The forest means everything to Xavier. For thirty years, ever since he came to Sweden from Argentina, he has monitored the condition of the forest for his job at the Swedish University of Agricultural Sciences. Every summer he travels from Skåne in the south to Lapland in the north looking for changes, noting how the trees are doing, studying leaves and bark and rings. He takes samples and sends them for analysis. I don’t ever go with him on these trips but I know he walks long distances with a tent and a camping stove and I can picture him chatting, unguardedly open and engaged in a way he rarely is at home. As if he’d put a comforting arm around his own shoulders and taken himself off to a sheltered spot. Out there, under the spruce branches and canopies of pine trees, he tells himself over and over again that he is safe.

Xavier is a man who carries a life-long sorrow in his soul that he mostly keeps dormant. But he says the forest understands. The forest understands sadness, understands love. The forest has courage, the forest knows consolation. The silence of the forest speaks better to him than any human can. At the start of our long marriage I used to be jealous, feeling I wasn't enough for him. Now I think it's both of us, the forest and me, who hold him in our arms and hold him up together. And that I couldn't have managed it on my own if the forest hadn't offered him its embrace.

Xavier's colleagues at the University can hardly have understood him deep down when they gave him a hunting licence course as a retirement present. They probably didn't mean to be unkind. They like Xavier and his quiet, slightly dry style, a lot.

'You can't just wander about aimlessly,' they told him. 'You have to conquer the forest. Get out there and grab what it has to give.' Xavier came home from his leaving do with the course paid for, high green boots, a folding stool and a pair of binoculars.

He was going to go out and shoot things now.

When I tentatively wondered whether he really wanted to do that, he got cross with me.

It was nice of them. They meant well. They wanted him to still be part of the gang. Why did I have to ask questions and ruin everything? They were right. He was going to learn about the forest in a new way now.

I think his colleagues wanted to challenge Xavier's gentleness and see him unearth a more brutal side to his character. His younger colleague Johan, who offered to take him out hunting hares, probably thought it would be funny seeing Xavier with a rifle in his hands. They called him Professor Calculus. Professor Calculus is going hunting, take cover!

While Xavier is in the bathroom, cleaning himself up and getting warm, Molly, our two-year-old Border terrier, and I stand on our own in the garage examining the hares. Their bodies are long and narrow and stretched out. Their coats are slightly tousled as if the hairs don't know what to do now there is no life beneath the skin. Molly's nose twitches and her trembling excitement makes her seem more of an animal than usual. She sniffs at the hares and licks her nose. I pluck up the courage to cautiously touch one, as if the hares could be roused back to life again any second and claw themselves loose, kicking their way out with their powerful hind legs. But they lie there motionless and silent on the workbench; close together as if they were trying to keep each other warm. There is a strong smell.

Poor little things. Did you stretch out your ears listening for Xavier and Johan? Did you quickly turn your heads trying to locate where the sound was coming from? Did you suspect it coming? Their fur is soft when I warily stroke it with a couple of fingers. Their claws are long and sharp. When I find I am looking into the unseeing eye of a hare, I turn away.

I drag Molly away with me. At first she resists, but then gives in.

“We have to leave them alone, Molly. Let them be.”

It's so cold that my fingers start to hurt and my cheeks sting in the mere thirty seconds it takes to get from the garage to the house. The door is locked. I stand in my cardigan and swear out loud because it's hard to get the key in the lock when your hands have gone numb with cold.

Xavier comes out of the bathroom drying his hair with the energetic movements of someone trying to shake off a hat stuck to their head.

“You're supposed to gut them straight away, really,” he says. “But I'm too tired. We left at six this morning. It won't matter, will it?”

I have no idea and I tell him so, adding reassuringly that it will probably be fine.

“Since when are you a hunting expert?”

“What? I never said I was.”

“Sounds like it.”

“I thought it sounded like you were asking me. Fine, I’ll just keep my mouth shut then shall I?”

Xavier has been touchy recently. I understand that it has to do with his having retired. It’s a life crisis that seems to grow bigger with every day he spends pacing around the house on his own. He doesn’t do very well without structure. He’s started walking about with his hands in the air in front of him, as if they’re ready to get stuck into something – or someone. In my strictest internal voice I tell myself to be patient. Be there. But one day, one evening, one night – there are so many moments to be focused. Moment, moment, moment. It’s impossible to be in control of all of them.

I say nothing and go into the kitchen feeling hurt. Xavier follows me and opens the fridge.

“You’re supposed to slice them open and take the guts out and put twigs in there instead. Then they have to hang for a few days.”

“Nice,” I say.

Xavier spreads butter on a piece of bread. Plenty of butter and two slices of sausage. He sits opposite me at the table, eating while looking out at the patterns of frost against the winter sky as it turns to blue. He runs a hand through his hair. It has got thinner at the temples but it’s still thick and curls at his neck. And I can still be stunned by how beautiful he is. His big, elegant nose, bent like that of a large, arrogant, preening macaw, the broad knuckles with the sensitive long fingers, the inquiring look in his green

eyes, his strong, healthy ivory teeth. His angular profile is so gorgeous that it's embarrassing, almost banal. So many times in our years together I've had to rein myself in so as not to look far too smug. I've tried to seem unmoved, as I stand there secretly gloating next to my eye-catching trophy, even if my scalp is greyer and more worn than before. There are fourteen years between us.

But still.

I stretch out a hand.

"Have you eaten hare before?"

"No, just rabbit. When I was little I used to stroke them and feed them leaves before they became Sunday's stew. I always felt sorry for them because their back legs were tied together. Carmen, who cooked for us, used to laugh at me sitting there comforting them and feeding them. When I asked her to take the string off their legs, she said if we did that, they would claw holes in my stomach when we ate them... What strange things people say to children. Oh, well. But they were plump and tender. Those skinny things in the garage have probably been scurrying around, afraid and hungry."

"I haven't eaten hare before either."

"It might taste foul. Which would mean I shot them for no reason."

"No it won't. Isn't hare said to be a delicacy?"

"Yes, like pickled herring."

"Hmm. It's still just meat. If you turn them into ordinary manageable chunks of meat, I promise I'll cook them. Just as long as I don't have to skin them and butcher them."

"Leave it to the executioner why don't you?"

"Oh Xavier," I sigh. "OK. I'll help you. I think it's revolting but what the hell. We have it easy eating meat without asking where it comes from."

Xavier swallows the last of his sandwich and smiles vaguely.

“Yeah.”

“We’ll have game for dinner,” I say, suddenly reckless. “We’ll make a stew and invite our friends.”

The idea instantly starts to take hold. Come round to ours, a Saturday night in the middle of a freezing February. Game, red wine, baked potatoes. That kind of thing. Because we’d like to see you. Celebrate Xavier’s new life of freedom. Celebrate spring being on the way although it’s not as if there’s any sign of it. Have you ever eaten hare? *Really?* Ah, well now’s your chance then. They’ve been hanging in our garage and Xavier shot them and we butchered and skinned them all by ourselves.

No-one is going to believe me capable of it, or Xavier come to that. Imagine. Getting to overturn our friends’ assumptions about us at our age. That alone will make the evening a celebration. A gentle tilt to the way you thought things were.

We decide to ring round some friends. Xavier agrees, says it’s a good idea, but his vague smile has disappeared.

There is something missing. I think about it as I stand on the steps smoking my evening cigarette. It’s the only one I treat myself to a day, but it feels vitally important. Xavier hates me smoking and I love smoking. But I don’t want to die prematurely or have a husband who turns away from me, so I just have the one. The smoke sharpens my mind. That moment on the steps with a cigarette, looking at the tops of the trees and the sky. It’s mine alone. I’ve done it ever since the children were little. As soon as they had gone to sleep, I’d come out here, light a cigarette and with every puff it was as if my responsibilities and my role as a parent floated away. Not that I found

motherhood a burden, truly not, quite the opposite. But I needed to say hello to a more original me.

There's something missing now between Xavier and me. There's an unspoken emptiness between us that I talk over with cheerful ideas that Xavier probably goes along with because he doesn't know what to do otherwise.

He goes along with it. But isn't really engaged.

The emptiness hasn't always been there; it's come about and grown as the children moved out. It isn't just the silence they left behind that has crept in. It's between us too. Both of us are, or I would say were, hot-tempered and I don't know how many times I've stood there with tears running down my cheeks shouting that this was the last time and if it's going to be like this, he can go to hell. And I don't know how many times Xavier has mangled and stumbled over the Swedish words that he otherwise speaks perfectly and used the Spanish ones in cascades of fizzing sparks instead. There were reconciliations too. Not because the argument had got us anywhere. But we'd get tired, we'd start longing for each other. A hand, a smile, an embrace. And then we were so happy to see each other again that we just laughed at whatever we had been fighting about.

Until the next time. And then it would all blow up again. These days I don't really see what on earth I could have got so horrifically angry about. Probably I was mostly scared. Thought I had lost my grip, that Xavier was sliding away. I think that Xavier, with the tragedy of his life behind him, carries a burden of guilt and so was easily provoked when I made demands of him.

Over the years our combativeness faded away and since the children moved out we might have the odd little spat from time to time, but the idea of starting a fight feels almost absurd. We live by a tacit agreement that the

fights are over. Things are allowed to pass. Peace is calm and comfortable and not something we really want to question. Not me anyway. At the same time, I realise that it comes at a price. After more than twenty years together the structure we built has become stable out of habit, familiarity, developed tolerance. We can lie on the sofa each with a laptop on our knees and each wearing headphones without feeling nervous about what has become of us. We don't need to question where we are going like we used to, because we are sitting here now. And we don't really have anything to complain about.

Still there are moments when I detect a brittleness in the stability. As if a fissure could spread deep in a different way from before, growing into a thunderous cracking noise, something irreparable. Or that hairline fractures were spreading while we powerlessly looked on. No-one would rush to help us. It's just us and the silence.

Sometimes I wonder if I am afraid of Xavier getting old. Fourteen years is still fourteen years. On the one hand, with every year that passes I grow more secure in my conviction that I will be able to keep him. Now he is more mine than ever before. On the other hand, I feel a growing need to point out that we really aren't the same age.

I see the old man take shape in him and I think: not me too.

I light a new cigarette straight after the first. Xavier won't notice and I need to think for a bit longer. These steps, in the whole world, they have become mine. These steps to the house on Lidingö, with its front plastered the colour of burned sugar, with Xavier, our twins Hanna and Astrid and Xavier's daughter Maria, eight years older. This is the place where I've stood with the house often boiling over with everyone's differing wants behind my back and with my sky and the tops of my pine trees in front of

me. I have blown the smoke of my cigarettes out into space as jettisoned ballast. I have leant against the front door blocking off the moment before drawing a deep breath and going in again. If any of the children were up and awake, they took on Xavier's loud-voiced revulsion at the smell of smoke. When they were little they used to run away, flapping their hands in front of their noses, shouting that I smelled of yucky smoke and I know that I smiled and felt like someone reeking of the embers of all my fired off thoughts, of the remains of the rocket blasted into the sky. But that was the price to be able to go in again, liberated.

What is it we are losing?

The second cigarette is nearly finished too. I stub it out in the tin I've hidden behind a big planter where I usually grow cress and marigolds in the spring. Is it the sadness over all the years that have passed that has edged everything happening now in mourning black?

Bloody hares. This is going to be a *happy* party.

I brush my teeth carefully and wash my hands and face with jasmine-scented soap. Pad into the bedroom and curl up behind Xavier, who is facing away from me. I put my mouth close to his ear but Xavier groans and shrugs me away. Why can't he ever stop these ridiculous protests?

I lie on my back and stare out into the dark.

"Why can't we be a bit more casual about the blasted hares?"

"What do you mean?" Xavier mumbles from the depths of his pillow.

"Why do we have to be oppressed by the hares? Can't we just think it's exciting and fun?"

"You're the one who can barely look at them. You even tried to get out of dealing with them altogether."

"Yes, I know. Sorry. I just thought it sounded like hard work."

"Well you're the one who ought to be more casual about it then."

Xavier sounds insulted. He is weighed down by a yoke of melancholy. Sometimes it's felt as though Xavier sees the twins and I merely as an afterthought. We are what happened next. Xavier came to Sweden with three-year-old Maria after his wife Ana was murdered by the police in Argentina. Xavier and Ana had both been active in the resistance movement against the military junta. Old enmities lived on and festered even in more recent years and Ana was murdered by a police officer who had claimed she was acting in a threatening manner. The murder remained unsolved but Xavier said he knew it was an act of revenge. She was a well-known journalist who stubbornly continued to unearth what had happened to students who had disappeared. The wounds from the country's past combined with social unrest to create a nervous and volatile society. After Ana's death he packed up a few possessions and decided never to set foot in the country again.

He and his daughter had been robbed of a family life and a beloved wife and mother, and he had been condemned to walk the earth with lead in his shoes. On the other hand, Xavier had a heightened awareness of, and a respect for, the good in life. He had an appreciation of its transitory nature, an understanding that everything you have can be taken away. So many times in our years together he has urged us to revere the moment.

At the table, in the moment. We are sitting here. I love you all. We love each other. Raise your glasses to love. To us being there for each other. To peace, to caring, to solidarity.

Once the twins were in their teens and Maria had left home, they sometimes rolled their eyes and showed signs of boredom or irony as they repeated "To life and love." Few things could make Xavier's eyes turn so black.

"And here's to your innocent stupidity," he said once. "Here's to your spoilt ignorance."

“We’ll have a really fun hare party,” I say pressing close to him again, one hand tracing the hairs on his stomach downwards. “It will be great. We’ll invite our closest friends and we’ll all drink too much and I’ll set the table beautifully and we’ll try, just... you know... to laugh and be silly and have fun like we used to...”

Why am I talking in this childish voice? I hate it when I sound like this. Xavier shifts slightly so I can’t continue caressing him.

“Yes,” he says, “I’ve never said anything different.”

“You’ll be the hero of the evening. A proper hero. Macho Latino from the primeval forests of Sweden.”

“Stop being childish, please.”

I fall silent and don’t know why. I turn away from him but then turn back again and put my hand on his back.

“Good night.”

“Good night.”

“Xavier?”

“Mm.”

“I love you.”

He mumbles something affirmative.

“But I mean it, Xavier. I really do love you!”

I say it straight out. He finally turns round and gives me a kiss. It lands on my forehead.

I take a deep breath and look up at the ceiling. I hear how it sounds like a scared sigh and I tingle with nerves because I’m so used to telling Xavier everything. And this is something he mustn’t know. He mustn’t know about my feelings for Hasse.

The next time I see the hares, they are hanging from the ceiling. They dangle from snares with twigs and pine needles sticking out of their stomachs. Xavier has taken their guts out and filled the empty space with forest. It's Saturday and they have to hang for a week now, condemned for the pot. They have to age.

Hang and age.

I poke one of the hares and it swings slightly backwards and forwards. Their death feels more finished now. Life seems to have left them completely and it's a relief to see it.

Xavier has taken Molly with him to the recycling point. I know he likes it. He likes squashing the boxes down flat, preferably stamping on them and flinging away the newspapers with all the world's misery and violence. He is always in a more cheerful mood when he comes back again.

I stand staring at the hares for a moment before hurrying back to the house. Since Xavier retired, my times with the house to myself have grown short. I love my home. My love for it is most intense when I am there on my own. That's when it gets all my attention. Otherwise, someone else's gaze is constantly forcing its way into my vision, into my experience of it.

I love the home it has become. It tells a story of our past. The big kitchen table with its hardwearing wooden top. I stroke its surface, let my fingers walk over the frame of one of the chairs. So much that has been wiped off, so many sticky handprints, so many elbows, big and small, that

rubbed against the table and were outlawed. Mostly by Xavier who came from a strict middle-class family and had rules about table manners.

Hanna and Astrid often squabbled when they were little but they could just as easily collapse in attacks of giggles that made the milk or the food spray out between the gaps in their baby teeth. And then there was Maria with her thick shining mane of hair, her dark, perfectly formed eyebrows, Xavier's beautiful eyes, and clearly embodying an unfamiliar woman; her mother who had been brutally robbed of her right to be there, and so took up extra space by virtue of her absence. Maria is filled to the brim with this woman I have never met but whose essence is always with us. And I know that Ana is recalled like a painful splinter every time Xavier looks at his daughter.

A painful splinter of love and loss.

Hanna and Astrid admired their big sister and grew up respecting her past as if Maria were on a higher plane, had sprung from a different realm, imbued with mystery. When Maria laughed, they laughed too, except louder. When Maria sometimes tired of her little sisters' quarrelling or giggling, she slammed the palm of her hand on the table and shouted at them to shut up.

"I can't stand you all! I can't stand this home!"

She tossed her long, straight hair and banged the kitchen door. The twins were instantly quiet and developed a habit of peering at their father from under their fringes. They knew that he might produce an uncontrolled reaction, and that he found it difficult to handle the situation when Maria chose to walk out. He might roar that the two of them had to go and apologise and fetch their big sister back. Hanna and Astrid slid down from their chairs and quickly disappeared.

And then they were gone. They rarely came back to finish their meal. Instead Xavier and I sat on alone, chewing down the rest of our dinner. I chewed in anger. Swallowed my question of whether these kinds of outbursts were really necessary. Hoped that he sensed that I was asking it anyway when I darted angry looks at him from time to time. It wasn't worth saying anything. Xavier tended to be explosive in such situations.

He usually finished eating with jaw and nostrils tense, gazing deeply into his plate. Only when he was standing by the dishwasher loading the plates would there come a mutter.

“They have to learn some time. Couldn't we have just one evening? Just because you are young, you don't get to behave any way you like.”

I didn't usually answer. I would walk off and leave him there, my heels banging hard against the floor. That was the tactic from my side. If he didn't have me to oppose, he would be forced to answer his own questions. He was left there alone with his tender conscience and I knew that soon he would seek out all three of his daughters and kiss them on the top of the head.

He or I usually found them all together, all three of them, on the sofa in front of the TV. The twins on either side of their big sister, each trying to own part of her. On the one side Astrid plaiting and fiddling with Maria's hair with Hanna leaning against Maria's arm on the other side telling Astrid to be quiet because she tended to talk to herself as she plaited and fiddled.

We've changed the sofa they used to sit on since they moved out. We've replaced it with an expensive one with what they call a divan section, big enough for us to lie next to each other while we're watching television. It's a cool storm-grey, and a little overstuffed. The sofa is our sign of freedom, or that's how I think of it. Xavier doesn't like me talking like that.

“Freedom from our children?” he asks, frowning. “How can you think like that?”

But I think I am allowed to think like that. I am allowed to think about freedom and time for myself and no more slices of bread landing fish paste-side-down on the sofa. I love the signs of the life that has been led here and I love the signs that it isn't like that any longer.

“Why can't you see what I mean?” I answer Xavier with a question of my own. “It would be unhealthy to have adult children at home all the time. We can love our children in their own right, as they move through their own lives, as is only natural.”

Xavier doesn't answer to that and I leave him be. I know that it's really about his sudden experience of emptiness, feeling that it's all been one blow after another.

His children, his job, his meaning, gone. It has never been his aim in life to lie on the divan section of a storm-coloured sofa watching TV debates or dramas with his wife.

I love my home. I love how it has grown and how it reflects the time that has passed. The things, the ideas, the long-pondered, well thought-through decisions. The colours, the shapes. New things chosen by my older, more refined, self. And then the things inherited from my parents; that I fought for in a hard battle with my two older brothers. Like the chandelier, so big that there's something ironic about it hanging in ostentatious style above the coffee table.

My modest image of myself took a beating when I fought for the chandelier. It was a victory, although it demanded sacrifices in the form of other items we inherited. I look at it, turning my head backwards and forwards to catch the light of the winter sun, fractured by its prisms. Xavier has a weakness for it too. It reminds him of his childhood home. We both

agreed to furnish our home in simple, Scandinavian style, after having grown up in the cluttered houses of the haute bourgeoisie, so the chandelier stands out. In contrast to our modern, easy-going furniture, it seems both flashy and stuck-up. At special celebrations, birthdays, Christmas, Easter, we always light all ten of its candles. In that way it has also become an important feature for everyone in the family.

Xavier is still away and I conjure up the memory of Hasse and the emotions that flared up at his touch. Like an infection, it has wormed its way into my brain, the tips of my fingers have been dipped in poison, the palms of my hands want to scrub off the plague of longing for his body. I want to touch him and I don't really understand why. Is it just because of the feeling that he wants me? Am I so starved of invitations that a man, any man, it doesn't matter who, only needs to show his attraction and I'll fall slap bang, my heart fluttering want, want, want?

It all started a few days ago. The staff room was empty and smelled of orange peel and coffee. I was digging in my bag for the key to my locker but couldn't find it. Or I was so tired that I was rooting around without any idea of what I was actually looking for.

Hasse came into the room. He teaches maths, he's ten years younger than me and I've always liked him. He's a bit mysterious, bohemian and always friendly. He loves numbers, is fascinated by them as if they can reveal secret connections to him. His enthusiasm rubs off on the students. His blond hair is tied in a pony tail at the neck and he usually wears a tight-fitting sweatshirt. He is slightly overweight, with soft, rounded curves. He always smells good, of aftershave and soap.

“Damn. There's no coffee left.”

Hasse groaned loudly, saying he was going to be sitting there for a while doing some marking and he would need some “fuel”. And just as he said it, I found not just my keys but also an unopened chocolate bar in my bag.

“Have this,” I said.

He took it with a charmed smile. He was so happy that I felt embarrassed and for a brief moment his smile made him beautiful.

I leaned forwards and accepted the hug he offered in thanks. He was so much body at once and his hand on my shoulder felt as if it wanted something. I was not remotely prepared for what happened. My attraction flared up with a strength that made me short of breath. Disconcerted, I looked into Hasse’s broad, smiling face. When he met my confused eyes, the look on his face changed too. He pressed me into him and someone I don’t know climbed out of my everyday self and wanted greedily and eagerly to smell, touch, feel. But the person I more easily recognise as me disentangled herself and said that she had to rush.

I sat waiting for the metro and let a train go by without getting on. I lit a cigarette, something I never usually do there.

I ought to be done with this kind of thing. I am 56. I sucked the cigarette and looked at the railway tracks and the banks of snow and felt that I was actually angry with both Xavier and myself. We have wasted our desire. We have closed off our bodies to the present. We have turned into lazy, apathetic people who lie down in the road and let old age run us over.

Every time I’ve come home in the last few days, I’ve wandered around the house with restless steps at the memory of the moment in the staff room as if the embarrassment can’t catch up with me as long as I don’t stand still. When I’ve been in the staff room ever since it’s been with fumbling, nervous movements. I’ve found it hard to concentrate on the chat of other

colleagues, seemed absent-minded and scanned the room, looking for Hasse. It was not until yesterday afternoon that he suddenly came through the door and I was rendered totally speechless. He didn't seem to see me at first. He just stood there flicking through a newspaper on the bench by the kitchenette.

"Did you survive?" I managed to get the words out as I made my way towards the coffee pot with an artificially nonchalant expression. He looked up from the newspaper and met my eyes with an amused smile.

"My saviour in my hour of need! Yes it went very well, thanks to you."

"Not a sugar daddy, but something else."

What had I said? It sounded so stupid that my mouth went completely dry.

"Sugar lady, then," Hasse answered. "Sister Morphine."

"Always at your service."

"Oh, that was worse!"

That was when I did it. The embarrassment makes me feel sick whenever I think of it. During our banter I'd been holding a cup of coffee. And when Hasse smiled after saying "That was worse," I poured it out again as if it was the last drips before putting the cup in the dishwasher.

"What am I doing?"

I tried to laugh off my confusion, shook my head and felt the blush spreading like a red cloak over my face.

"Too much sugar perhaps?"

Did he say it to make me feel better? I don't know what I mumbled, my hands fluttered, I tried to smile but smirked like a fawning dog, the embarrassment floored me. I wanted to lie on my back, bare myself, admit my idiocy and my unworthiness and be pardoned and patted on the head.

Hasse continued to smile as he passed me, patted me on the arm, did he even give the top of my arm a gentle pinch? I couldn't really tell.

Then I didn't see him the rest of the day.

What if I've exaggerated Hasse's interest in me? So many layers of embarrassment in this story. Is it just fuelled by boredom? A lack of romance in my own life? A final flaming spark of life from a kind of existence that is inexorably slipping away from me?

I have friends who think that flirting at work brightens things up. Nothing that disturbs anything, nothing that means anything more than whistling and humming gently through the course of the day. I've never flirted at work. I've never encountered anyone to flirt with. I haven't even thought of it. And so it creeps up on me from behind with a force that makes my knees give way. And I'm not even sure it makes me happy really. It mostly makes me worried and when I pace up and down and see Xavier's cardigan draped over a chair, I pick it up and press it against me in an attack of guilt and sadness.

I love you, I think, and tears come to my eyes. I love you, keep me here, please.

The front door opens and I hear Xavier puffing and blowing as he bends down to take off Molly's lead and untie his shoelaces. I go to meet him, filled with tenderness and possibly sentimentality. His cheeks are red and his glasses are misted up.

"Hello darling."

Xavier hugs me back but looks slightly bewildered.

"Has something happened?"

"What? No, I was just thinking that I love you so much. That I'm so grateful that I met you and that we have this family together. It just struck me, that's all."

“Have you been talking to my doctor? Am I dying?”

“Ha ha. I’m serious.”

Xavier hugs me quickly, he brings the cold from outside with him. I shiver in my thin top. He stamps the snow off his feet and gets a handkerchief out of his pocket and uses it to wipe his glasses.

“I talked to Maria on the way home,” Xavier says. “She’s coming to Stockholm next week so I invited her to the hare dinner too.”

“Ah?”

I don’t want her to come. The impulse travels through my mind like a black arrow. This is my party, our dinner.

“Isn’t she staying long? We could invite her the next night, couldn’t we?”

“I don’t know. It’s a good thing if she comes isn’t it? She’ll bring Eddy with her.”

“Shall we invite Hanna and Astrid too?”

“No, we don’t have to do that, do we? It’s just that Maria isn’t here that often and it might be nice for her to meet our friends. Fredrik, for example. She can’t have seen him in ten years.”

“OK. I just thought it was an adult event.”

“Maria is an adult.”

“I just meant that I wouldn’t assume that we’d invite our children when we’re having friends at our own age round for dinner. They don’t either, the children I mean, when they...”

“Yes, yes well I’ve done it now anyway.”

Xavier is instantly riled and his eyes flash, like scissors in angry hands. I understand. I don’t even agree with myself. My reaction comes from the darker corners of my soul. Something is insistently nagging at me and it’s stronger than I first wanted to pretend. It is just that whenever Maria is in

our home, everything, naturally, has to revolve around her. I become more sunk in gloom as I picture the evening in front of me. Xavier with eyes only for his beloved first-born daughter. His guilt at having brought her to a country far from her mother's grave. His guilt that he was the one who survived, not Ana. It sits within him like bedrock. He doesn't see that the years are passing, that Maria herself is moving on, further and further away from his ponderous walk of sorrow and guilt.

I understand. But I love Xavier through all my ages. I have chosen him with my rational brain and my irrational emotions.

I picture how Maria's five year-old son Eddy will immediately make sticky marks on the linen table cloth before the guests have even arrived. And how I don't want to be that woman who hates children's finger marks but how I will be her anyway. How I won't manage to hide her, however much I put on a cheery laugh and say it doesn't matter at all.

Xavier and Maria will exchange amused glances when I take away some ugly bowl that they have put out, they will be entertained witnesses to the effort I put in to keep everything looking beautiful and well planned. I swear they know how it makes my skin crawl, at least Maria does, when people put things out on the table in their ugly packaging, how that at the same time I am ashamed for caring so much about the way things look.

Maria knows how I'm torn between wanting to look casually tasteful on the one hand, like someone who just happens to have a beautiful home, and on the other hand put in so much work to make it look that way. She grew up with me for half of her childhood, she has seen the effort and the theatre alike up close.

And, and this is even harder to admit, I will feel jealous of the interest that Maria and Eddy will attract from the guests. Oh, Maria, how lovely to see you. Where are you living now, what are you doing, what a lovely little

boy you have, think how clever of you to get onto a journalism course, the way you've changed track like that, you've always found things easy, haven't you? Don't get me wrong, you've had to struggle too. And a single mum to Eddy. You've worked so hard.

And Maria will glow and toss her hair. Eddy will clamber over her demanding attention and my smile will become more and more rigid. I know that's what it will be like. Xavier will gaze at Maria with unfeigned pride, his heart swells and throbs for Maria who always just laps it up.

And then, when she leaves the house, the shine goes out of Xavier's eyes and the powerlessness sneaks back into his voice. There's something about Xavier and Maria that never cools. When it comes to Hanna and Astrid, I think he and I both have a more relaxed relationship. We can talk about their faults and deficiencies together without it ever becoming a sensitive topic. We know that we love them anyway.

When it comes to Maria, everything is more delicate. In Xavier's eyes she can do no wrong, he defends her heatedly and vigorously even when we're talking about times when she has clearly been lazy or when she has simply done something stupid.

Should I ask Hanna and Astrid to come too?

As if they would want to!

No. I know I'd wind up in the mum role when what I actually want to do is drink one glass too many and laugh loudly without disapproving glances from my daughters.

Anger at what Xavier has done snarls my thoughts like black threads. I can neither find the way out or in, they are stuck and all I can think is that I want it to be just us and our friends. We ought to find a more relaxed way to socialise, now that we are free to just be ourselves. I observe Xavier looking forcedly unconcerned with his smartphone in his hand and his

reading glasses balanced on the tip of his nose. From time to time he glares defiantly back at me.

“I won’t ask Hanna and Astrid,” I say. “The dinner was for us and our friends. That was all. Now it will be something different.”

Xavier pulls off his glasses and stares straight at me.

“Our children are more important than our friends, surely! If I have to choose between Maria and your friend Sara and that insufferable person she’s married to, I’ll choose ...”

“... Maria over them every time. I know. You’ll choose Maria over everyone, there’s no doubt about that and there never has been.”

“Ah, we’re back to that again.”

“Stop making a fool of yourself Xavier, and just try to see what I mean. The party was supposed to be for us and our adult friends. But let Maria come, by all means, it’s fine.”

“Let her come? Am I supposed to be grateful that my own daughter is allowed to come here and eat some hares that I shot myself? When did we decide that we’re not allowed to invite the people we’d most like to see?”

“That’s exactly how I’d put it. No-one is allowed to invite the people they’d most like to see,” I repeat sarcastically. “Why are you going on like this? You know what I mean, I know you do!”

“I know that our friends like seeing her and that they won’t be bothered by anything as conventional or daft as the fact that we’re different ages ...”

“But it’s not about that!”

“What is it about then!”

We’re standing there shouting at each other. We haven’t done this for years now. I’m shouting because really I’ve got a guilty conscience about my attraction to another man and my desire to exclude Maria for reasons I can hardly defend. Xavier always was a powder keg when I displayed jealous

tendencies towards his oldest daughter. He knows he has an overheated relationship with her that he finds difficult to handle and that he is ashamed of really.

“It’s just about me thinking we could have an evening for just you and me and our friends! We were going to celebrate our lives being different, and that we’ve started to build something new.”

“And our children aren’t allowed to be part of this new thing we’re building, is that what you’re saying? You know what, that’s it for me.”

I gasp for air and find I’m shaking with every breath I take.

“OK. Then maybe that’s it as far as I’m concerned too!”

I go out into the hall and shove my feet into my winter boots. But as soon as I’ve got the first foot in, I sit down on the hall bench and my urge to walk out into the snow starts to fade. It’s so ridiculous to slam out through the door when it’s this cold. It will feel infantile to go back and hunt out an extra jumper, scarf, gloves, hat...

“Maria is welcome,” I say with a slightly subdued voice.

“Thank you, my dear wife,” Xavier replies snidely. “Your indulgence is noted.”

I don’t answer, I just glare at him darkly. Molly comes to lie at my feet. She usually does this when she senses something isn’t right. I don’t know if she does it to guard me from Xavier or the reverse, to keep an eye on me so that I don’t attack him. Now she lies there casting nervous looks in his direction.

Xavier’s shoulders sink and he throws out one hand as if about to give a speech.

“I just want Maria to feel welcome...”

“But she is! Always! It was just this time...”

“Yes, but she’s coming now and that’s that.”

“Yes, and there’s nothing else to talk about then, is there?”

I kick the shoe off and go upstairs to our bedroom instead. Flop flat out on top of the bed and listen for Xavier’s steps but they don’t come. I call for Molly with a quiet voice so only she will hear but she doesn’t come either.

Everything I bore. Everything I tried. We can adapt so quickly to something we struggled with before, something we have now put aside, something we consigned to the attic. Maria was six when I met Xavier. Straight-fringed, long brown-black hair, Xavier’s broad teeth, a serious mouth that often seemed red and swollen as if she were in the habit of biting it. And then that piercing gaze that was not Xavier’s but must have been Ana’s.

To start with she made me feel uncertain, I might even say afraid. She carried my sentence and my fate in her scrutinising child’s face. She held all the power over the man I was so shatteringly in love with, who I could not live without, and I would not be admitted into his heart without her approval.

Xavier guarded Ana’s memory by making it clear to me that Maria had a mother who could never be replaced. This also meant my hands were tied. Every time Maria sat next to me, laid her head on my shoulder and let me read to her, I could sense Xavier growing warm and happy, but still – and I

really don't think that was what he wanted to reveal – there was wariness there.

Don't think you can ever be her mother.

We've argued about this so many times. Over and over again over the years I've thought he's shut me out, he's stood in the way of my developing into the mother I should have been to her. I never think Xavier has been so angry as the time when I lost it and yelled why couldn't he realise that she didn't have a mother anymore?

Xavier came right up close to me and shouted in my face that yes she did. She was called Ana and she was murdered because she was too good for this world.

I went into our bathroom and threw up of pure distress. It's never happened before nor since. Then I went to my friend Susanne's and stayed with her for several days. The twins weren't born then.

It took five days. Then Xavier was standing waiting for me outside work and apologised and said I was the most important person in the whole world to him and Maria. And soon the twins were on their way.

But year out and year in Xavier would bring up the fact that I was really jealous of Maria, which of course was true, and that it was low to begrudge a motherless girl her father's love.

And I felt low. The lowest of the low. I feel low. I get up off the bed and look for Xavier. I find him in his work room. The door is ajar and I knock on the frame.

Xavier looks up behind the door.

“Sorry,” I say. “It will be nice if Maria comes.”

“I know.”

“It's just that ...”

“Don't start again now.”

“I don’t know what got into me.”

“I said we’d look after Eddy on Friday night too. Maria wants to get together with some of her mates.”

“The evening before the party, when we’re setting the table and making hare stew?”

“I’ll look after him.”

“I’m usually the one that does that.”

“I’m saying I’ll do it.”

“We could have decided this together. There’s quite a lot to do that night. It will be hard to get it all done with Eddy there too.”

I feel like I could cry. Xavier is staring intensely at his computer and doesn’t meet my eyes.

“Well that’s how it is,” he says after a while, his eyes still on the screen. “He’s my grandchild. There’s nothing in the world more important to me.”

“I thought that was Maria?”

I can’t leave it alone. Xavier looks up and gives me a dark look. Those black eyes with sharp points that always puncture my tear ducts. We had stopped doing this. I open and close my mouth, swallow and swallow, *won’t* cry, I am past it, we are old and beyond that. But I can only powerlessly see the tears running down my cheeks and the intensifying blackness in Xavier’s eyes. He feels guilty, I know, and he is mobilising his defences. He thinks I want him to feel guilty, and perhaps I do. His eyes are chilly space, nothing can be heard or felt there, in the black cold.

He makes himself inaccessible and I have stood outside banging on the door all these years.

But no longer. Not again. That time is over. I’m not doing that again.

“I’m not doing this anymore, by the way. It’s too stupid.”

That’s what I say and I leave.

And there we leave it. The weekend and the first part of the week pass by in restrained civility, with wine and the TV. At work I've started to get used to flirting. My anger at Xavier makes me bolder. I think about what I'm going to wear, blow-dry my hair and take care over my make-up. I think I notice Hasse responding to my smiles and my attempts to approach him but the bare suspicion of the opposite is so intolerably embarrassing that my stomach churns at the mere thought of it.

Do people know when they're being ridiculous? All those older people's blithely hopeless attempts to flirt with younger people. Should I be able to tell that I've become one of them now? It's true that Hasse is only ten years younger, but still.

Don't I get that I'm a laughable outcast on the dating market? And I'm not even in love. I just want Hasse and me to touch each other.

It's Thursday and the hung hares need to be skinned. I've finished work early and I'm home by two. I've brought two marzipan buns with me to defrost the atmosphere between Xavier and me. I regret promising to be there for the butchering part of the process. I wish I'd grovelled with a kind of assumed feminine privilege – you do your bit while I go and put on my apron. And then I'd have been able to get in a secret smoke on the steps and plan how I'd show my appreciation once he had done it all.

We eat the marzipan buns and are ready, teeth gritted. I think that it can't be much more difficult than carving a chicken.

“Do you know what to do?”

Xavier shrugs.

“Sort of. I looked on YouTube this morning.”

“YouTube? Didn't they teach you that on the course?”

“Not really. Well this is going to be a learning experience.”

“Can’t we just hand them in somewhere? Aren’t there places like that? Where you get them back in little vacuum packs with sticky labels on?”

I try to laugh, a vain hope. Xavier does not pick up on it and I sigh deeply. Now we’re just going to have to go through with it.

“Well let’s do it then. It will be an experience, as you say. And if there’s a war, at least we’ll know how to joint a hare.”

Xavier nods thoughtfully.

“Mm. I’ve got the tools we need.”

He pulls out a bag and lines five different implements out in front of us on the table. It looks like they belong to an axe murderer or a professional torturer. He picks up something that looks like a pair of secateurs and snips them in the air a bit. I jump backwards automatically and he makes more slicing movements in my direction. And then he laughs and it makes me so happy when he does. We are like two old walkie-talkies suddenly crackling into life and making contact. We crackle and giggle and when we are calm we are disarmed, both of us. In phase. Agreed.

Xavier gives me the big pincers and I hardly dare take them. I glance at Molly, who is lying on the floor looking bored. Snip, how easy is it? Or how hard? A dog’s neck? A rose bush? How is this going to go? Will the whole garage be drenched in blood?

“Shall we do it then?” I ask, standing up resolutely. We put on some warmer clothes and go out to the garage with Molly following, wagging her tail.

I stop at the pungent smell. Xavier has already been out there and has lined the bodies up on the bench. They look more rumpled than they did a few days ago. Their coat has lost its organic purpose, it is just loose hairs on soon dry skin.

Something in the smell of the garage bears the traces of decay.

“Why do they need to hang for so long? Shouldn’t meat be as fresh as possible?”

“Meat has to be aged,” says Xavier, straightening one of the hares which isn’t quite in line. “They have twigs inside so they don’t start to go rotten.”

“Are you sure it’s worked? I think it smells a bit off.”

“Yes. Don’t start going on about it.”

We look at each other on either side of the bench. Once more we laugh, both of us.

“How the hell do you do this?”

Xavier shrugs his shoulders and puts on his gardening gloves. I find myself a pair too. Xavier grabs one of the hares with a determined hand.

“You have to take the paws and the head off,” he says, as if to himself. He puts on his glasses, pushes them up onto his forehead and pulls them down again as if he doesn’t know how to relate to his body. And I don’t know what I’m supposed to be doing. I give him the tool that looks like a strong pair of pincers.

“If you hold the paws up, I’ll snip them off,” says Xavier.

“Wouldn’t it be easier if you...”

“Are you going to help or not?”

“Yes, I am, I just thought if you put it...”

“OK, but then you might as well...”

“I’ll hold it, bloody hell...”

As Xavier comes nearer with the pincers, I look away and close my eyes too, for safety’s sake.

“Hold it properly! Hold it straight!” Xavier snaps. “And higher up. I have to cut it above the joint.”

I try to bring myself to hold the paw so Xavier can reach it but I can’t watch at the same time. I feel a sense of panic in my chest. When I feel

Xavier gripping the animal's body and hear a snipping, crunching sound, I let go of the hare without thinking. It lands on the floor.

“Watch what you're bloody doing!”

Xavier's voice is hard. I look down at the bench and see a lone paw. Xavier's eyelids flicker the way they do when he is stressed.

“I find it difficult,” I say, my voice thin.

“And you think I find it easy?”

“I thought you'd share it with me. I thought we'd help each other.”

“I will!”

We stare at each other with hatred. Then I pick up the hare again and stretch out its other paw towards Xavier.

“Chop it off then.”

After that, we grit our teeth and tackle the legs. Without saying anything more to each other, we untie each paw, one after the other. I try to avoid looking at the animals as much as I can and stare at Xavier instead. He looks as if he is concentrating and there is a kind of quivering movement above his mouth when he snips through the bone. It seems to be easy, like pruning a branch. The hares don't bleed but there's a pungent, ferrous smell. When we have a pile of paws in front of us on the bench, Xavier wipes his nose on his shoulder and mumbles that we have to take off the skin and their heads as well.

“We should probably get rid of these bits first.”

He means the paws. I nod in response and go up to the kitchen to fetch a carrier bag. My heart is beating fast. Although I tried to avoid looking at the animals, I caught sight of one of the bodies and it looked helplessly mutilated. My immediate thought was stupid and painful.

It can't run any more now.

In the kitchen I forget for thirty seconds what I had gone there to get. It's so peaceful in there. Outside it has got dark. The lamp above the kitchen table casts a warm glow over the green china vase with the acid-orange tulips. There's a stark contrast between this in the cosy atmosphere of the kitchen and the naked strip lighting in the garage with its pungent smell.

I take a deep breath and remember that what I am there for is to find a plastic bag to put twenty hares' paws in. Now all we have to do is take their heads and their fur off and then they will go into a pan and become meat and ordinary food and this entire extravaganza, thank heaven, is not what we would call our thing. Xavier will never be a hunter and to the extent that we continue eating meat after this, we will stand together by the supermarket meat counter pointing at things and avoid this part. Instantly, the idea makes everything seem easier. I am already turning it into an experience that I can add to the list of experiences that is my life. This is something I can transform into an anecdote to bring out from time to time, a detail that shows that I have lived and done brave things, but not something to repeat.

When I come out into the garage and shake out the plastic bag, I realise it's from Lidl, which doesn't seem very respectful. I hold it open to Xavier who scoops the paws into it. One of them falls onto the floor and I shout loudly at Molly who is looking interestedly in its direction.

"Don't you dare! Get off!"

His voice carefully under control, Xavier tells me that he is now going to make a cut with a knife across the bodies and then pull off the skin. You chop their heads off at the same time as you pull the fur off their fronts.

"Shall I hold it steady?"

"No, I think I'll manage."

I abandon asking whether it's OK for me to leave. I realise the importance of us being there together, side by side.

"I found a recipe that looks really good," I say to Xavier in a placatory voice. He has pushed the knife in between the skin and the flesh and sliced it in two. He mumbles something in response while the bodies of the hares swing backwards and forwards with the stumps of legs they have left.

"It had juniper berries and crème fraiche. You had to braise it in a casserole. We've got that enormous one, you know, the iron one. There'll be enough room for them in that, won't there? You had to brown them first."

"Can you just stop talking for a minute, I have to concentrate..."

Xavier's neck and cheeks are flaming red. It takes effort to pull off the skin and now some blood is seeping out of the bodies onto the top of the bench. Xavier yanks and pulls and needs the help of the knife to separate the skin from the hares' increasingly bared flesh. While he pulls off the skin on the lower part of the back, I fix my eyes on the head and the ears.

Xavier's efforts are bringing them to life.

"There."

Xavier has got the back part of the skin off.

"That's that done. There's not that much left now."

Xavier seems suddenly relieved and puts the bits of skin in the carrier bag.

He picks up the knife again and cuts into the fur around the neck. He looks up at me and I don't really understand what he wants. And then I realise that he needs the pincers.

Xavier sighs deeply and then cuts off the vertebrae at the neck. There is a growing fury in the way he struggles and pulls. When finally there is only a little bluish-red naked body left, we both look at each other relieved.

“Now there are just the others left.”

Xavier looks at the remaining four hares. I breathe in deeply.

“Oh, I’d sort of forgotten them.”

However could I have done that? But we’ve been quite a while in the freezing cold garage. Absorbed in slicing and flaying.

“Forgotten?”

“I don’t know. . . . I’d probably repressed the fact that we have to do them as well.”

“Can’t you go and get some coffee while I start on the others?”

I feel light, and almost euphoric. I kiss Xavier on the cheek and joke, in a high falsetto, that I’d be delighted to be his coffee girl. With light steps I hurry out of the garage and feel how fast my heart is beating. Warm feelings flow through me, I think how I love Xavier, that he is a fine man, that he tries to be strong but at the same time completely clearly also has a warm, beating heart for animals and living life.

Hasse, yes well, he. . .

A flirtation, that’s what he is. Xavier has had one too, I’m convinced of that. I decide to smoke for a bit on the steps. It smells so revolting in the garage after the hares that Xavier probably won’t notice if I grab a quick cigarette while the coffee maker starts going.

Has the winter ever been so cold? It bites angrily wherever it can reach, the slightest gap is attacked.

While I let the smoke circulate through my lungs, I go through the schedule for the next few days in my head. Tonight the hares need to go into a marinade. Tomorrow Xavier will pick up Eddy at two o’clock at the railway station when he and Maria arrive by train from Gothenburg. Eat dinner and then make the hare casserole while Xavier and Eddy do something else. They need to keep out of the way because I need to be

focused. And then on Saturday do the last bits of shopping, tidy the house, set the table. Change and put on my make-up and stand with a welcoming smile in the hall.

Suddenly it's as if all the air has gone out of me. All the things you do in one life. All the preparations, efforts, actions. I've done so much of this kind of thing. I've spent so many hours, managed so many events, brought them all into port and smeared my stamp on them. Made a package of all our lives, the whole family, and made sure that everybody liked it.

Is it Maria and Eddie's coming visit that sees me wind up indulging in trains of thought that are so drenched in self-pity? I seem to want to bring out the sad, brooding image of myself and stick it under the nose of the rest of humanity, pointing out that all my efforts weighed so interminably more than the results they produced. It's a long time since I last got stuck in bitter spiralling thoughts like these, but the bitterness is suddenly making itself felt again now.

Could Hasse alleviate it?

Is that his function in my life? Is that what desire does? Throws out a shoot towards another human body, a new sort of soil, transplanting itself from a root-bound existence? When you feel your growth has become so stunted that the only answer is a total change of setting?

Who is tying me to the steps in the cold of February, who is tying me to the meagre cigarette consumption, to the sense of shame at trawling forbidden waters with my eyes?

Where did it come from, my sudden sense that everything that is mine has become shackles? And why is this longing, if not to say urge, to break them growing even stronger?

After a few urgent puffs, I stub the cigarette out unusually hard against the plaster of the house, creating a rapidly flaming cascade of sparks,

extinguished instantly by the cold white snow. I go in and make a couple of cups of coffee. With the hot drink spilling over my hands I make my way out to the cold in Xavier's very own slaughterhouse. I put the mugs down on the bench, which is now covered in piles of pieces of skin and disembodied heads. Three headless flayed bodies lie ready to be butchered into smaller pieces.

"I could probably chop those up," I say to Xavier. "It can't be that difficult."

He stares back at me and for a brief second I think he looks completely mad. As if he didn't know who I was. His hair is tousled, his gloves are stained with red, his eyes are unfocused. Then he takes the hares and slaps them down in a line on the bench.

"We'll help each other," he says.

Xavier takes out a little axe. It's new and there's a price tag on it that he first seems to ignore. When he notices it's in the way he pulls it off with violent force. We work together silently, like a surgeon and a nurse. The saddle, the strong thighs. The pink flesh. I take one thigh in my hand and bend it slightly forwards and backwards. The muscle fibres are still working.

"Stop being grotesque," says Xavier.

"What do you mean?"

"You're playing with them like a child."

"No I'm not! Why would you say that?"

"It looks revolting. Stop it."

I put the thigh down, deeply wounded. As if I were some sort of pervert!

"I just thought it was beautiful, seeing how it works when ..."

Xavier has brought out a large stainless steel bowl and puts the pieces of meat in it.

“You have no respect,” he says. “Like a little kid. Stop messing around with the poor hares and go away!”

I don't believe my ears. Xavier avoids my eyes. He rubs his nose on his shoulder several times and goes over to the hosepipe and rinses his hands.

I walk over to the garage door and slam it hard behind me. When I hold my hands under the tap in the kitchen I can see that they are shaking, I'm so angry that my hands are shaking. As usual, I take off my wedding ring to wash my hands, but this time I wrench it off me and drop it on the floor. My first impulse is to pick it up but then I just push it out of the way with my foot, in towards the sink. It may as well stay there, as if I couldn't find it...

Xavier comes in with the stainless steel bowl under his arm, opens the fridge, but realises immediately that there isn't room for it. Secretly I watch him ineptly staring into the fridge, as if he hopes that looking at it will make it bigger. I secretly enjoy how lost he is, while pretending not to notice his plight at the same time. Xavier takes freezer bags out of the box, pulling them off the roll with force, stuffing bits of hare into one bag after the other.

I say nothing about the marinade they need to sit in, I think absolutely nothing, just let him stand there with the bags feeling like the idiot he is currently being. When he leaves the kitchen without even glancing at me, I pick up my wedding ring and put it on the kitchen windowsill. It can sit there for a while. I don't particularly feel like wearing it at the moment.

I scroll on my iPad and find the marinade recipe that I googled yesterday. So puffed up with sentimentality over my own self-sacrificing perfection I could burst, I make the marinade smug in my own competence.

Who's the child now? Who's the mature one? Who takes responsibility for everything?

And what had got into him?

When he told me off in the garage, it was in the brusque voice that always emerges when he's really upset. It's something that's happened since he retired. And now, it must have to do with the hares and death and the forest, it must have awoken something deeply painful within him. It has always been difficult for him to show that he is sad or in need. Instead came the threatening, dark look, the harsh accent, the contempt for my naivety or my "typical Swedish self obsession".

Why have I put up with it?

My background can never live up to his when it comes to pain and drama. Everything that was my life before ranks as anecdotal and trivial. In the two courses of talking therapy I have completed there was one question that came up over and over again: what did I get out of it? Have I used Xavier's life to hide behind? Did freedom lie in becoming inviable beside him? He was always the heavyweight, the seriousness. My experience never counted.

Recently I've been thinking back over my life, before I met Xavier. As if I was correcting myself and wanting to rewrite my own story. Take up space. Become something more to Xavier who usually looked at me with tenderness, but who also could be patronising and even ironically superior.

When it comes to our daughters, Xavier's life has become their origin, the thing that has left the clearest mark on who they are. His life is the framework for their ultimate identity. Hanna and Astrid speak at least as good Spanish as Maria, and we tried to speak Spanish all day every Sunday to keep it up. And the one who got it wrong, much to everyone's amusement, was always me.

In the dim light of the bedroom I can only see Molly's small bushy face at the end of the bed. She sticks out between the covers like a little tamarin monkey with a mandarin beard. Xavier is facing away from me and I can see that the drawer of his bedside table is half open. It's where he keeps photographs of Ana from the brief time they had together. I've seen them. Xavier showed them to me once at the start of our relationship and then there was a period when I was obsessed with looking at them secretly when he was out. Xavier never seemed keen to show them to me again, as if the power they hold would be drained the more I saw them.

Why has he left the drawer half open? Is it unconscious or does he want to show that he has gone to another time now that I have got so stupid and difficult?

I go to my side of the bed and roll myself up in my quilt. The ferrous smell comes sneakily into my nostrils. Our bloody task is persistent. I can't settle. However I lie, I feel forced to move again immediately. Because every time I move, the bed rocks, and I want it to. I want it to sway around me, I want him to understand that I am bobbing away, that I'm lurching about in a storm while he's lying there hugging his past. Xavier sighs loudly, and pointedly, but I don't care. Quite the reverse, I kick off the bottom half of the cover that has got all tangled up.

"What's the matter with you?"

First I pretend not to hear. I lie there dead still listening to Xavier's irritated breathing.

"What is it? What's the matter with you?" he says again.

"With me? What's the matter with you?"

Xavier doesn't answer, he just pulls the cover far up over his ears. I sit up in bed and wait him out. Not a sound from Xavier. I can just make out his silvery hair in the dim light, the way it falls over the edge of the quilt.

“What? Hello, Xavier? I help you and deal with the bloody dead hares and then you attack me and call me...”

I can't manage to say the word “childish” because it would make the argument sound undignified.

“So please Xavier, could you kindly tell me what this is really all about? Because I don't recognise you!”

He remains silent. Molly's eyes shine as she observes her mistress vibrating with anger. I put my socks on. My feet got cold spending so much time in the garage.

“Or should I start guessing? Is that what you want?”

“Can't we just sleep now? We can deal with this in the morning. Can you please stop shuffling around in bed so I stand some chance of getting to sleep tonight?”

“I'm not shuffling around in bed, I'm finding it hard to relax because you're being so unfair and stupid. What's the matter with you? Why can't you just tell me?”

“I don't know.”

Xavier sounds resigned. He is still facing away from me. He sounds wretched, but I can't change track now.

“I think you've been so irritated and moody recently. Moaned at me all the time, which is bloody unfair.”

“It doesn't always have to be about you, you know.”

“That's not what I said. But it's me you moan at.”

“Oh you have such a hard time.”

Xavier mumbles into the pillow, almost to himself. I hardly believe I'm hearing it right.

“What did you say?”

I abandon the rhetorical argument and even I think I sound feeble, as if I'm begging. Something about the situation suddenly feels frightening, as if it's a strange man lying beside me.

“Sorry, Agneta. Can't we sleep now? Can't we talk about it in the morning?”

I don't answer. I curl up. I lie there with my eyes open, watching out for demons that might want to sneak in. Because something is trying to get in. Sitting in the corner and nibbling at our comfortable relationship. Sucking up the atmosphere of calm and security that we built up through the years. When I finally close my eyes, I see the blind eyes of the hares and think it's their unconsecrated souls refusing to give us back our peace.

I am still feeling dissatisfied the next morning when I travel to the school which is in a run-down outer suburb – the blue Metro line towards the unique mixture of desolation and community, of abandonment and energy. When I change trains at T-Centralen I see Hasse's back. He is standing waiting for the same train as me. I recognise his tousled hair and his tight-fitting coat on his overweight body. Once more I am overcome by a desire to touch him. Tenderness and desire are interwoven with the need of the palms of my hands to be scrubbed against his skin. It's a nagging longing that can only be soothed by his body and no one else's. It feels strange to stand behind him with a desire to lean my head against his back, let my hands steal beneath his top like secret animals in the night and hungrily and passionately cling to him.

Hasse suddenly quickly turns round as if he can feel my eyes on him.

“Hey, it's you standing there.”

“Yes, that's me, standing here stalking you.”

I blush instantly because I'm telling the truth when I thought I was joking.

“I'm glad that my stalker is you,” says Hasse, smiling, and I realise that his smile is one of the reasons that he gets to me the way he does. He sees things when he's smiling, I think. It looks as though he wants to come in, as if he's proposing an opening. Opening a door, inviting you in.

“Yes...”

What am I going to say? Ideally I'd like to abolish words like when you sweep your arm across a board game because you got tired of the rules and the pieces.

"Friday at last," says Hasse.

"At last," I say.

"Are you doing anything special at the weekend?"

I tell him about the hares and the dinner we're having. I tell him about Maria and her Eddy, I tell him I would rather they weren't coming, I even say something about Xavier and I not getting on.

"I don't know, but I'd have thought butchering hares would be something that would bring people together," says Hasse. "Knives and meat axes. It's quite intimate really isn't it?"

I can't tell if he's joking or not. He looks very happy, happy with a streak of expectation, he wants me to accept it with a confirming laugh or smile. I smile, but it must have looked confused because Hasse leans towards me and says:

"Joking!"

I laugh and to my ears it sounds like a cry for help. Hasse's face becomes more serious when he says that he actually has experiences similar to mine. That he and his ex-wife never disagreed as much as the time they went on a hunting course together.

"I don't know what we'd been expecting. Sitting cosily together in the forest and having a reason to be quiet that would make the silence between us less painful. But I didn't feel at all close to nature, like everyone said I would. I felt like a trespasser."

"I understand."

And silence. And silence again. Our eyes connect, search...

"Agneta, I..."

The train rolls into the station, pressing the air out of the tunnel, as the wind makes the hairs on our foreheads dance.

I suddenly feel his hand in mine. Fingers moving like antenna in my direction and mine nudging back.

Our hands find their own way and interlink. The moment when they meet is brief but now we both know that there is something going on. Another colleague comes to join us and we talk about work and weekend plans for the rest of the journey.

When I get home late the same afternoon, I'm in a much better mood than when I left in the morning. I've bought flowers, candles and the things we need for the casserole. I have decided that we will order pizza for tonight. I'm not going to cook dinner when I'll be preparing the hare casserole later in the evening. Xavier will be sure to suggest making something himself but if he does, I'll say I don't want him to do that either.

I want to have peace and quiet and a clean kitchen when I'm cooking the hares.

It's half past four by the time I open the front door and Eddy rushes to meet me. He is irresistibly sweet with his black curls and the gaps where his new front teeth have started to show. The pupils in his lively eyes, buzzing like insects against a glass window, show his eagerness to take in the world, to see and to join in.

He calls me Grandma Agneta to mark that he has another, proper, biological grandmother even though she is dead. It is Maria who always calls me "Grandma Agneta," who has taught him to call me that.

"Grandma Agneta, what have you bought? Can we eat sweets later? Or make chocolate balls? Can we play cards?"

The questions come thick and fast and Xavier stands in the background with a lacklustre smile. The sight of them both makes my heart beat a couple of extra warm beats. The feeling of Hasse's tentative hand in mine has unleashed warm feelings in general. When it comes to love, I am almost overflowing and I bend down and hug Eddy and can't see why having this small, lively person in our home would be a problem at all.

Eddy flings himself on me, grabbing my neck like a wrestler so that we are both about to tumble onto the hall floor and Molly barks. She is always on her guard with Eddy, tolerant and well-behaved but still keen to point out when she thinks things are about to go over the top.

"Eddy, be careful with Grandma Agneta," says Xavier, gently grabbing him under his arms and lifting him off. I get up and kiss Xavier on the mouth.

He's showing that he's prepared to take the hits tonight.

I take the carrier bags and go into the kitchen with Molly, Eddy and Xavier close on my heels. Eddy jumps about while Molly and Xavier amble behind at a more restrained pace. As I unpack I say what everything is out loud and ask what they think about the different things, the colours of these candles, these little bits of bacon will go into the casserole, do you think it will taste nice, and here is a box of sweets for you Eddy, but you'll have that later, and imagine that we're going to be eating hare tomorrow, won't that be exciting...

I stop mid-cascade of words and look at them, and their three pairs of eyes following me, and I burst out laughing, yet at the same time I'm a bit tired, with constant impulses to run away. My cigarette on the steps has never seemed more attractive than when I'm standing here giving this performance.

“Where are the hares? I want to see the hares,” says Eddy jumping up and down. I tell him that they won’t look like ordinary hares, but Eddie wants to see them anyway. I show him the plastic bags with pieces of meat in the marinade and he is quite rightly disappointed.

“But they’re just meat.”

Xavier explains to him, with teacherly expertise, that all meat was an animal to begin with, but Eddy still looks dissatisfied and pokes the plastic bags saying that there’s nothing there, he can’t see any ears or eyes or anything.

“It’s probably not all that exciting really,” I say, and can see from the corner of my eyes that Xavier has pulled the newspaper towards him across the kitchen table. Well he can forget reading a single line of that. He’s looking after Eddy tonight.

When I say that we’re going to order pizza, Eddy bounces up and down with excitement. He determinedly rejects Xavier’s suggestion that we buy two and share them between the three of us. Eddy wants to have one on his own.

Xavier takes Eddy out in the car with him to go and fetch the pizzas. After they have closed the front door I can still hear Eddy’s voice through the window, all the way to the car. As soon as they have driven off, I am outside with a packet of cigarettes. I don’t usually do this but I have to now. I stand in the cold, looking down at my hand in front of me, fingers shaking with cold holding the smoking cigarette, the same fingers that for a brief moment laced themselves with those of a colleague. When I stand there on the steps greedily inhaling the smoke I can’t for the life of me understand what I think I’m doing.

Xavier – I visualise him in front of me standing there now at the pizzeria while Eddy’s little mouth moves uninterrupted, early summer

prattle, newly woken, exploring. Last time we were there, the pizzeria owner gave him a lollipop, possibly to get a moment's peace. That time it was Eddy and me and I let it happen. But Xavier is sure to attempt a lame protest, shouldn't they save it until after dinner?

But then he'll give it to Eddy anyway, he probably doesn't think anyone will notice when he's inconsistent and lax and Eddy will calm down again, but – and here I laugh out loud to myself – he'll soon see the way Eddy wanders about with a lollipop in his mouth and that's another worry to deal with. A little boy climbing around and jumping about with a lollipop in his mouth poses a different kind of danger.

Both Xavier and Eddy feels so close to me now, as I look down at my adventurous hand, as I close my eyes and recollect my hand's encounter earlier in the day, it's the two at the pizzeria I see despite the fact that my body has completely different ideas. Another greedy puff later I feel completely dizzy and tumble back into the warmth of the house. I go into the bathroom and brush my teeth, wash my hands with perfumed soap and set the table for us in front of the TV.

I also have time to go upstairs and change into more comfortable clothes and dab on a little perfume. I know we have some videos that Eddy likes watching every time he comes to visit. Xavier and I can settle down on the sofa and put up with the film and have quite a good evening. And then I think about Hasse and how that is something I ought to do, be unfaithful, just once. Have a secret. Enjoy the fact that it's banal, wrong and ridiculous. It would just be mine, and when I look back at my life it's as if that's what I've been lacking. Something that is just mine.

When they come back with the pizzas, all three of us sit down on the sofa and Eddy stands up all the way through *The Little Mermaid* and rocks from side to side, talking to himself sometimes and eating pizza

throughout. I sink down next to Xavier and realise how tired I am. I realise it's been a long day. And that perhaps we shouldn't have had a glass of wine each with the pizza because soon I have to get up and start making the casserole and it suddenly feels insurmountable.

I wake up to Xavier saying no, Eddy can watch the other film early tomorrow morning. And Eddy accepts that.

“Then you have to carry me up,” says Eddy, stretching his arms out to Xavier who lifts him with a heavy groan.

“How much pizza did you eat? You weigh as much as a hippopotamus,” says Xavier, and Eddy laughs and makes himself even heavier in his arms.

I blink and think I'll need to put on some music out there in the kitchen to wake myself up properly. I see Eddy laying his head on Xavier's shoulder and sticking his forefinger and middle finger in his mouth like he does when he is tired. I get up, give both of them a kiss and go into the kitchen. I stretch and hear Xavier's deep voice and the creaking of the wooden stairs. Xavier always puts Eddy to bed and in some unspoken way this has to do with the fact that he is the biological grandfather. He reads the same children's books in Spanish that he read to Maria and Eddy understands them.

I also know that they are now lying in our bed and that Eddy will sleep there. We have stopped making up a separate bed for Eddy because he always sneaks in in the night and goes to sleep between us.

I go out into the kitchen and take the meat out and stand there studying the bags as if they could give me an answer. The hind legs are in one bag, the saddles in another and then the sides with the ribs in a third. I take all the bits out and line them up on the kitchen island. Once again I pick up one of the thighs and bend it backwards and forwards but it's difficult. The

cold of the fridge has made them even stiffer; they are catatonically rigid now. I rinse the marinade off my fingers and get out our big iron casserole dish. It holds ten litres and it takes quite a bit of effort to get it onto the stove. I turn on the hob and squirt in quite a large amount of a butter and oil blend. First I have to brown the ribs to flavour the sauce and the stock. I've read up on this. I curse myself for having decided on such a complicated recipe.

While I'm waiting for the butter to start bubbling and turn brown, I put on the radio. There is far too much laughing and I turn it off again. In the moment of complete silence I catch my own reflection in the dark of the window.

What I see is only the contours of my head. I see my light hair as a kind of woolly halo around it. Who am I? I used to stand like this when I was younger, with my face in the mirror and the vain question buzzing in my head.

Who am I? What do I want?

I lean forwards and my nose and eyes emerge from the gloom.

Who am I?

Is anyone expected to know that?

So many years have gone by since I last asked myself that question. Xavier and I have even talked about it, how our society has been characterised by a constant obsession about who we really are. That there is a masquerade around the depiction of the true self as a kind of all-knowing guru that everyone has inside them and that they can dedicate their whole lives to trying to find.

And that the only ones who benefit from it are the people who are trying to sell things. Buy this thing that is so you, that suits your unique personality.

As we say the word “unique” we usually raise our eyebrows ironically. All the people who have to look identically unique. Where did the fixation on recreating yourself over and over again and believing that you are more genuine and unique every time come from?

Xavier and I usually agree that people are made up of different elements that are activated in different kinds of situations depending on who you meet or what you have been through.

On top of that we usually joke about how much we love each other. If we’re feeling really in agreement, we usually wind up at ninety-eight percent and the bit that is missing is “the lazy whatsit who never unloads the dishwasher” or that kind of thing.

So I haven’t asked myself who I really am since I was a young adult.

But when I stand there staring at the reflected gleam of my own eyes, I can’t help wondering. Who is it inside me who is enticed out when Hasse reaches out his hand? Is there some aspect of my personality hiding down there in my darker corners that hasn’t been brave enough to emerge yet?

What does that aspect of me want? And what does he want?

Suddenly I realise there’s a smell of burning coming from the casserole. I quickly take it off the hob and turn off the ring but the butter keeps on smoking in the hot iron pan. I take the largest pieces of hare, the sides, and put them on the bottom of the pan thinking that they will cool the hot butter and oil down. I stand and wait a reasonable amount of time until the butter seems to have cooled. It mustn’t turn black and taste burnt.

Bloody hell, have I already started to ruin everything?

I put the pan back on the hob again when everything seems to have cooled down. I stand leaning over the pan. Not a single bubble. I turn up the heat. Our cooker is old and slow to heat up and it will take a while.

Two puffs on the steps. I look down at the pan again. I've got time for two puffs.

I hurry to the front door, hurriedly putting my feet in my clogs, put on my down jacket and stand on the steps managing to get my cigarette lit quicker than usual. It's an icy, clear night, so fresh and beautiful after the buttery smoke in the kitchen. Xavier won't notice this extra cigarette. My thoughts need the nicotine the way tangled hair needs a comb. The first deep breath of smoke burns in my throat and I think there's another sort of stinging I feel at the same time. The pain that comes with the realisation that time is not endless. That life sets out a row of trip wires that might be lying there in plain sight but that you risk falling over anyway.

My life is in my hands like a bowl filled to the brim and the sadness that stings is about me never being able to move forwards without losing something along the way.

Everything is the moment, life moves on, life has to move on all the time. That is the whole point of life before it stops and there is nothing left anymore.

You can see a football pitch from our steps. In the winter they cover it in water to turn it into a skating rink. It is down there in front of me, shining white, untouched ground. Suddenly I see an animal moving diagonally across the square of ice. A fox! So beautiful! It moves like a dark arrow with crouching, hunting steps. Somewhere in the middle it stops to sense danger. Or is it a promise it senses with its sniffing nose? Of prey? Or a fellow creature?

The fox continues its bent-kneed, stealthy progress. I gaze after it, thinking that it seems to be driven so hard by its internal conviction. As if it has a compass and just needs a fleeting moment of sensitivity to know where the compass needle is pointing.

I stare at the fox but suddenly hear a high, shrill sound. Confused I quickly stamp out the cigarette and open the door to the house. I smell smoke and hear that it's the smoke alarm that's bleeping. I run into the kitchen to see flames coming from the pan on the hob. There are clouds of smoke and the alarm is deafening.

Without thinking, I first grab the casserole with bare hands but burn myself. While I dig out the pot holders, half a second of unreality is unleashed. I can't take in that this is happening. But with the help of the pot holders and all the effort I can muster, I manage to get the iron pot off the hob and it slides diagonally into the sink with a loud crash. It's smoking so much that I start to cough and tears come to my eyes. With shaking hands, I reach for the tap and run water straight down into the pan. The fire flares up at first but then the flames die down leaving a revolting smell and I sniff when I see the black remains lying glued to the bottom.

It smells totally disgusting.

Two things are on my mind. The first is that I've still got the rest of the meat. I was mostly browning these bits to flavour the sauce. Now I'll have to use stock cubes or something else.

Not the end of the world.

The second is that I have got to stop the beeping smoke alarm before it wakes Eddy. Where is it anyway?

But I barely manage to formulate that thought before the smoke alarm is turned off and I hear Xavier roaring what the hell I think I'm doing. Through the smoke I see him, his hair is ruffled and it's as if I was dreaming and he's standing there shouting to wake me up.

“Hey! Are you trying to burn the house down? What are you doing?”

He's shouting and I open my mouth but I can't say anything. The only thing I manage to stammer out is that it started burning, as is blindingly

obvious. Xavier opens the window and my head starts to clear in the fresh air. I start to move more quickly; establish that the pan is no longer a risk, I wave the smoke away and get out a cloth to wipe the black marks off the hob. I want to get rid of every trace of my idiotic behaviour quickly, quickly, and I ask Xavier if Eddy is still asleep.

“It would be a miracle if he was with all this bloody racket going on,” Xavier retorts and I think he is being cruel and mean. I am still ashamed of course. When I rub the cloth over the hob and wave away the smoke I notice something completely horrific. The extractor fan is glowing. I turn it off quickly but it has now taken on a flaming life of its own.

“It’s burning!” I scream to Xavier. “Quick, quick, get the fire extinguisher! It’s burning!”

Xavier doesn’t understand at first.

“Hurry up, damn you! The fan is on fire!”

He runs to the utility room behind the kitchen. There’s a fire extinguisher there that we bought for some reason a long time ago. In his methodical way Xavier takes it out and leans it against a lamp.

“Hurry up!” I yell, because the fire in the fan is flickering and the flames are more intense than before.

“I’ve got to read the bloody instructions!”

Xavier manages to get the powder extinguisher working and sprays it straight up into the fan. I stand beside him hyperventilating. I look at my arms and hands. They are black and sooty. I try to look for Molly but can’t see her.

Xavier stops spraying and stares up at the fan. I do the same and also get out a knife that I manage to use to prise off the front of the fan. It falls down onto the hob and the stench of the burnt plastic makes me bury my nose in my arm.

Xavier continues spraying upwards and the white foam has a chemical, toxic smell. The white stuff is all over the hob and all around us. It covers everything, it's taking over everything. As if nothing can breathe any more.

It will take me quite a while to clear up. I look at the clock and see it's gone ten. I make a quick estimate in my head. Clean the kitchen, at least an hour. Finish making the casserole with the remaining meat, at least another two hours.

It's going to be very late before I'm finished.

We look at the devastation. Xavier looks very angry. Tears are running down my cheeks. I can't stop them. They only increase. I think it's the smoke stinging and I wipe them with my hand but can see from Xavier's eyes that it makes me look even blacker.

"Go and wash all that off," he says. "You look ridiculous."

I go into the bathroom and attempt, terrified, to breathe. I've rubbed soot into my tears and when I wash my face, there's a layer of grease that won't go away. It's as if I've been impregnated by the accident; it is attached to me like a tragedy mask.

I wash as much as I can and go out into the kitchen again.

Xavier is standing there scraping the bottom of the casserole with something sharp.

"How did it get like this?" He repeats when he sees me. "What on earth were you thinking?"

"I was just having my evening cigarette," I say in a thin voice. And Xavier looks back at me with icy contempt. He hates the whole cigarette business and might hate me because I persist with it. The cigarette has always been there as a point of irritation, but we don't talk about it any longer. We have dropped that conflict.

But now here it is between us again.

“You and your bloody smoking.”

“Yeah, yeah. But go upstairs now, I’ll sort this.”

“Your bloody smoking could have killed a lot of us, think about that.”

“Now you’re exaggerating, it was just . . .”

I look at the kitchen, the black carbonated chunks in the pan, the white foam all over the extractor fan and the hob and I realise that we probably won’t be able to use the stove until the extractor fan has been cleaned too.

I’m overwhelmed by hopelessness and the tears well up again. I was so afraid; my legs are now like jelly.

“If you can’t say anything more sympathetic, you’d better just get out!”

Xavier stands up, does he possibly have a tiny bit of a guilty conscience? But then he turns on his heel and stomps angrily up the stairs.

“I need to open the windows up there. Eddy might be suffocating in all this dust.”

Xavier coughs and so do I, the white powder dust is settling in our airways, irritating them.

I still want to go out on the steps and have a cigarette just to calm down. But I immediately banish the impulse. There’s enough smoke about the place already. It’s filled the kitchen with fog. I open all the windows. The severe cold fills the room and the smell of winter and carbonated hare produces an ominous feel. I go and fetch my down jacket and sit on one of the kitchen chairs. My breath turns to vapour in the cold. I sit there like a defeated dragon.

Then I hear Xavier shout from upstairs.

“Agneta, come here! Come quickly!”

Sighing, I get up and close the windows.

“What is it?” I yell over my shoulder. “What are you shouting about?”

I'm still upset about the way Xavier has treated me. He should have understood that it was a horrific experience for me too.

“Agneta! Fire extinguisher!”

Fire extinguisher?

It takes a few seconds before I even understand what he means. The fire extinguisher? Upstairs?

I pick it up from the floor and go towards the stairs. In the hall mirror I meet someone who is no longer myself. I come from the wilderness, from the fire, from the soot. My legs can barely carry me. I don't feel very well. I take off my down jacket and hang it up in the hall.

Xavier comes clumping down the stairs looking hysterical.

“Hurry up!”

I wake up and take a few rapid steps towards him. Xavier grabs the fire extinguisher and runs upstairs and I follow him. He goes to a door in the panelling, to a space that is full of bags of things, a storage space between the roof and the upstairs wall, full of sawdust and insulation materials and lots of old stuff.

Xavier points to the door. I can see smoke seeping out and can't for the life of me imagine how any fire has managed to spread that far. Xavier stands ready with the fire extinguisher and I pull open the door. Flames burst out like mad raging spirits determined to devour everything in their path. A burning hot blast sweeps over my face and I can smell burnt hair. Lightning fast, Xavier slams the door shut again. He presses a foot hard against it.

“Bloody hell!”

More smoke puffs out around the sides of the door and we look at each other our eyes filled with terror. As I listen to Xavier phoning the fire

brigade, I run into the bedroom where Eddy is sitting in the middle of the bed crying and rubbing his eyes.

“It stings grandad! My eyes are stinging!”

I bend forwards and lift him up in my arms. He pushes me away and I don't know whether it's panic or that he wants Xavier instead. I hold his body close to mine and fling myself out of the bedroom. Outside the door the smoke is so thick that I can hardly see. I just feel Xavier grab Eddy out of my arms. Eddy is now screaming loudly. And Xavier shouts at me to run and we make our way, coughing, down the stairs.

“Molly!”

Xavier doesn't answer but grabs his coat, stands helplessly for a moment and then goes into the living room and grabs the blanket from the sofa which he wraps round Eddy. I can't bear the thought of Molly burning to death indoors. When Xavier gestures that I should follow him out of the house, I scream it out loud.

“I'm not going anywhere without Molly!”

I search desperately through the ground floor, calling until I'm hoarse. I call threateningly, I call pleadingly. Please Molly, come out. Bloody dog, come out before I kill you. Please just come.

But no dog. It is so unlike her not to be right there when she notices we're on our way out.

I stare up the stairs. The smoke is very thick now.

Outside I hear the sound of sirens. Vehicles stopping at our house. Our house. Sirens. It's for our house. Sirens. When the front door is pushed open, I'm blinded by blue lights and large dark figures stomping in in boots.

Suddenly a furious Molly appears. Presumably she hid herself somewhere when the fire started, but she has no intention of letting in such

strange trespassers as the firemen. She barks and barks and the first of the firemen shouts in my ear that if I have anything nearby that I want to take with me, I need to take it now, otherwise I need to leave the house immediately.

I grab hold of Molly and wander about with her under my arm, barking and wriggling. Photos, isn't that what everyone says you're supposed to take? Photos! But the computer and the albums are upstairs and I'm not going up there.

I circle around the living room, shouting at Molly to keep calm while I look through the bookshelf with shaking fingers, surely there ought to be an album or two here somewhere, but I don't find anything and new people come tramping in and Molly barks again and suddenly there's another person in front of me saying that she is from OKAB or something like that, they're going to try and save what can be saved and is there anything special that I particularly care about?

"I don't know. Pictures."

That's all I can manage. Molly struggles but I hold her so tightly that she suddenly whimpers, a really unhappy whimper that cuts through the shock that's making me just stand there.

I see one fireman after another pouring in through the door.

Someone shouts at me that I really must leave the house. It's dangerous to stay.

How could it be dangerous? The fire brigade are here now.

I try to order myself to remain calm and sensible in a strict internal voice. The fire brigade are just going to spray some water on the fire, it's going to be fine, they will have put it out soon, they've brought in their

hoses, they're so competent and concentrating and how lucky it is that Xavier phoned them so quickly.

Am I talking to myself out loud? One of the many dark-clad people looks strange as he stands completely still in front of me and I can hear him shouting that now I really do have to leave the location. Do I understand what he's saying?

The location?

My home?

I go straight out through the front door. As soon as we got outside, I let Molly go. She runs away, away from me, like a dark shadow over the snow and the cold is so intense that it bites at my wet cheeks. I'm only wearing a thin jumper and a sticky apron and turn my head in every direction. I count seven fire engines, all with their blue lights on. Someone shouts something, gesticulates and points and I look over to the house on the other side of the road. Is that Xavier standing and waving?

I move confusedly in that direction and when I come in through the door, Xavier is standing there with Bosse and Lilian, our kind, pensioner neighbours. We all try to squeeze into their hall. They are staring at me and my teeth are chattering so hard that I can't get a single word out. I can't stop. Over and over again I try to manage something, but my lips can't shape the words because my teeth and my jaws won't stop juddering and colliding.

I hear Bosse tell Lilian that I'm in shock and that they will make tea, and I feel

Xavier putting his arms round me and I want to say that I'm not in shock, it's just so bloody cold, I shall just wait here a moment until they've sorted out the smoke up there and then I'll go back, all this fuss with tea is completely unnecessary but of course it might be a good idea.

Xavier leads me into their living room and tells me to sit down. I do this with great reluctance, it feels as though I should be prepared and for that it would be better if I was standing up. When Xavier pushes me down into an armchair, I get angry and push his hand away, but then I see Bosse looking worriedly at me and I sink down into something floral and far too soft. Then I see Eddy on the sofa beside me. He is wrapped up in a blanket and he has blank, terrified eyes. When he sees me, his face distorts with tears and then I start coughing in a kind of weeping and Eddy turns away from me, Xavier sits down next to him and takes him in his arms. Lilian comes in with a steaming cup of tea and then she does something, and I can't understand how she could do something so stupid – she lights a fire.

“So we get you a bit of heat in here,” she says, and when I smell the smoke I'm filled with such revulsion that I start retching again.

Lilian puts a blanket round my shoulders. I can't manage to say that the crackling from the fireplace does not feel soothing in the slightest or that the fire is only making me nervous. I reach out for the cup of tea. My shaky, sooty hands can't hold it properly, everything keeps spilling. Lilian tells me not to worry, she'll wipe it up. I can't hold a cup. That's just how it is. I get up and go over to look at our house. I want them to be finished soon. I want to go home.

There's a bang at the door and I hear it's Maria.

She burst into the living room and throws herself on Eddy.

“My darling boy, oh my God what's happened, he could have died, what happened, the whole house is burning...”

Her words come like blows, it's burning, he could have died, isn't she exaggerating rather?

I shade my eyes with my hand to see properly. The light is reflected in the window. I can hear agitated voices from over there, crashing and

banging and something heavy falling to the ground. Some of the firemen are trying to get onto the roof. Bosse is standing next to me looking out too. He's chewing energetically on something and his jaws bulge and I think the brief looks he gives me contain a dash of recrimination. What have we done to the neighbourhood?

What have we done to the neighbourhood?

There's a bang and now I see large flames leaping up from the house. That's when I realise. Our home is burning down. The sickest thing is the fragments of songs that run through my head. Now our home is burning down, my fair lady, Ladybird ladybird fly away home, your house is on fire and your children are gone.

"Oh hell," says Bosse.

I feel Xavier's arm on my shoulder but I shake it off. I don't know why. I don't want anyone to touch me. I breathe hard on the windowpane, it gets foggier and foggier. I wipe it with my sleeve so I can see again.

"I'm driving Eddy and Maria to Astrid's," Xavier says grimly in my ear and I don't understand what he means. Is he running away?

"Are you going away with them?"

"Well they've got to go somewhere."

Does he sound fierce?

I try to swallow a hard lump in my throat, something big and abrasive. I can hardly manage it. There is nothing I can say to Xavier, everything I ought to say is as impossible as the lump that I'm trying so desperately to swallow. Continue staring at the house that is burning down, burning down.

Perhaps they will be finished with the firefighting work soon. There's all the things left inside. I have to sort it all out. Not everything can be burnt can it? How long will I have to stand here?

Xavier comes back into the room and says, with a voice firmly under control, that he can't take the car because the keys are still in the house.

"It doesn't look like we'll be driving for a while," he says and I glower, blank-eyed, or am I dry-eyed? There's something the matter with my eyes, I don't think I've ever seen Xavier like this before, there's something in his voice when he says we won't be driving for a while. I want to yell OK, OK, I know, put that on me as well why don't you, and how can he, really, *how can he* spread that millimetre of poison in my already poisoned mind?

"I'll have to arrange a taxi for Maria and Eddy instead. I don't want them to see any more of this."

I don't want to look at any of them. I think Xavier is talking too much, going on and on, does he have to tell me everything he is going to do? Can't he just go and do it?

Maria is looking at me. I know she is. She and Eddy are looking at me and I don't intend to turn round. I am going to stand here watching the fire. I'm going to watch what happens once I've set fire to a house and let it burn. I know what I've done. They don't need to stand there being outraged and wondering how in the world could I and didn't I realise what might happen and what was I thinking.

I don't want anyone to look at me. I don't want anyone to come near me. I'm grateful for the blanket that Lilian gave me, I am. I look round for the teacup because perhaps the lump in my throat will go away if I drink something. I see it and take a lurching step towards it. I'm still shaking but I manage to get some of it down me at least.

"Eddy and Maria are going now, anyway," says Xavier and I just nod without looking at him. I look sideways towards Maria but she's not looking at anything other than the child she is carrying in her arms.

He still has a blanket round him and I smell how it stinks of smoke and wonder whether the smell will go away if we send it for dry cleaning.

I feel relieved that they are going, that they're not staying to witness any more of the disaster. I want to be alone with it. I want it to be just my disaster. It would be a consolation if it was just my disaster and I hate all the eyes that say it's theirs as well.

Through the window I see Maria, Eddy and Xavier going down the steps outside. They are walking the way people walk when they are afraid of slipping, along the path to a taxi that is barely visible among all the emergency vehicles.

Maria and Eddy can escape to freedom at least, while I remain in the disaster zone. I make a feeble waving gesture towards them in the window but none of them see it and will the lump in my throat ever get smaller?

Bosse leaves the window. He does it abruptly as if he can't stand seeing the destruction any longer. He's making a point. No misery. And once more he looks at me. What does he mean by it? I can't interpret it, but I think it contains suspicious or at least perplexed questions.

Lilian appears next to me.

"Shouldn't you sit down for a minute, Agneta? You can't just stand here, you have to rest a little."

I'm prepared to go with her to the sofa and pull the blanket over me for a moment, but then the front door opens and ice-cold air streams in and it's Xavier and he's back and he's saying something about now at least they've gone and they're going to Astrid's to sleep there.

Astrid! My beloved daughter Astrid! And Hanna!

His words go straight into my body which becomes stiff and unbending, the whole of my innermost core a steel corset and I won't be able to sit down ever again now. I'll stand there and keep standing there. Xavier's

presence fills me with something – I don't know what it is. In front of him I have to retain control, I can't sit down and collapse on the sofa.

I frown and look out through the window again. The work out there is going on and on, I can't understand it, can't they just spray water on that miserable fire and then go away, let me go back in and pick through all the things and rescue what can be rescued and brush away soot and sew things up and wash up and wash down and put it back together, can't we just put it back together again, once more I feel Xavier's blasted hand and I brush it away, I don't want it, can't you understand that? I think I hear someone say that I'm probably just in shock.

But I want to stand by the bloody window and I think it's a bit hard to breathe. I hear the doorbell. And I'll never forget Hanna's face when she looks at me. She comes from the outside world with freshness in her clothes and hair, she comes with all the shades and tones of friendly light and she says: "But mommy. But mommy – what happened? What have you done?"