

1

There's a quarter landing halfway up, where the stairs change angle. Erik has fed one of his ropes round the banister upstairs, and is now standing on the ground floor, holding both ends.

His mother watches him with a wine glass in her hand.

'What are you doing?'

She's drunk and her tone is accusing.

'You can't climb here, the banister won't hold you.'

Erik doesn't answer.

'Did you hear what I said? You're too heavy.'

'I wasn't intending to climb.'

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‘Take the rope down then. Erik, darling, listen to me for once.’

He ties a loop at one end.

‘Take it down immediately.’

Erik looks up and then tests it with his body weight.

‘You’ll damage the banister.’

His mother puts down her wine glass and comes towards him.

‘Do what I tell you,’ she snaps, and puts out her hand to take the rope.

Erik grabs her arm and twists it up behind her back.

‘Ow, what are you doing? Let me go!’

He puts the loop over his mother’s head and pulls her up into the air. She struggles to loosen the noose. When she doesn’t manage, she kicks and tries to get her feet on to the balustrade in order to take the weight off her body. Erik holds on to her calves and pulls her down while he holds the rope taut.

‘How old was I the first time?’ he demands.

His mother can’t possibly answer. Her eyes are bulging out of their sockets and her face is swollen and red.

‘Fifteen,’ he tells her. ‘You’ve been doing this for ten years.’

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There's a loud crack. It's difficult to tell if it's her neck or the banister that has given way.

His mother's arms and legs spasm as her body lets go. She hangs freely, swinging silently with no resistance, like a pendulum. Erik holds the rope taut as he goes up the stairs, where he ties the end round the banister. Then he sits down on the sofa and watches TV. When the programme has finished, he calls the police and says that his mother has hanged herself. He finds a knife and cuts her down. He sits down on the floor with her lifeless body in his arms. When the police arrive, he's crying.

2

Anna looked at her daughter, who was sitting at the kitchen table, her nose buried in a book, a half-eaten slice of bread in her hand.

‘Please can you get a move on, sweetie? Daddy’s giving me a lift to Mölle and I don’t want to be late.’

Hedda tore her eyes away from the book and looked over at the clock on the wall.

‘But then I’ll be too early.’

‘No, you won’t.’

‘Yes, I will.’

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'Max ten minutes,' Anna insisted. 'That's not a problem, is it? You can look over your homework again.'

'I've already done that,' Hedda retorted.

'Well, if you want a lift, you'll have to fit in with us. That's the way it is.'

'I'd rather cycle then.'

'Fair enough.'

'Hello, I can't cycle when there's practically no air in my tyres.'

Magnus came out of the bedroom. He was buttoning up a shirt that strained over his belly.

'What's up?' he asked.

Anna shook her head.

'Nothing. But if Hedda wants a lift she's going to have to move it.'

'We're not in so much of a rush. It only takes fifteen minutes.'

'Exactly,' agreed his daughter, who had no idea.

'It takes half an hour, at least,' Anna said.

Magnus pulled his chin in.

'Does it?'

'It certainly does. It's fifteen minutes just to Höganäs.'

Magnus relented. In the mornings, he was the one who

smoothed over the ruffles and backed down. In the evening, it was the other way round. Yet another reason why they worked so well together.

‘Okay,’ he said, turning to their daughter. ‘Poppet, listen to your mother.’

‘But . . .’

Hedda gave a theatrical sigh and got down from the table with the slice of bread still in her hand. Ten minutes later they dropped her off outside school.

‘See you tomorrow then,’ Anna said.

‘What? Are you staying there overnight?’

‘Just the one night. I’ll be home again tomorrow. You and Daddy can do something nice together tonight.’

‘Okay. Bye then.’

‘I’ll phone to say good night.’

Hedda closed the car door and walked towards the main building. They watched her with an amused look, until Magnus slipped into first gear and pulled out.

There wasn’t much traffic. Most cars were going in the opposite direction, from the residential areas along the northern shore in towards Helsingborg. Anna changed the radio station and turned to look at the sea that opened out at Christinelund. The view was wasted today. A greyish-

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white sky, dull brown fields. The colourless Skåne winter in November, a month that seemed to last for ever.

'Is the whole editorial team going?' Magnus asked.

'No, just Trude and Sissela.'

'And how is she?'

'Who? Sissela? Fine. Why?'

'Is she still in love?'

Anna had no idea what he was talking about.

'Didn't she meet someone new?'

'That was actually a year ago. And it's over now.'

'Fancy that,' Magnus said, ironically.

He didn't have much time for his wife's boss, who he thought was disturbingly self-centred.

'So she's single again?' he asked, trying not to sound disparaging.

Anna shook her head.

'No, she got back together with her husband.'

'That was quick.'

'A few slamming doors, but not much more.'

'Jesus,' Magnus sighed.

Anna looked at him.

'What do you mean?'

'Well, she could have kept quiet about it. I mean, if it

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was nothing, just a little something. Why upset her husband? All I'm saying is that the one who strays has to deal with the crap themselves. Why burden the poor sod who's been betrayed with all that rubbish? It's not fair.'

'No,' Anna hesitated. 'Maybe not.'

'Shameless,' Magnus maintained. 'But then she's the boss.'

'I think she's just restless, has to have something happening all the time. She creates drama for the sake of it.'

'If you decide to stray, I don't want to know.'

'No risk of that. It all seems so messy.'

Magnus laughed.

'Messy?'

'So complicated and tedious. Yuck, no, not my thing. And in any case, you smell too good.'

'Well, there you go, a quality as good as any other. I'll have to update my CV.'

'Oof, there's this new guy in sales,' Anna continued, with a shiver. 'And his breath smells like a dog. Pure ammonia. And he always invades your personal space when he talks to you. Touching noses, almost, I swear. And he's so happy and nice. All you can do really is smile and keep your distance.'

'You should say something.'

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'Right,' Anna said.

They took the new road past Viken and didn't have to slow down until they came to Höganäs, where they passed the old publishing house. The business had been bought out many years ago and the new owner soon realised that you couldn't get the best people to relocate here, so he moved the whole operation to Malmö. Anna wondered whether it still existed.

'The car,' Magnus said, interrupting her thoughts.

Anna gave him a blank look and he shrugged.

'I don't know, maybe it's time to get a new one.'

'Why?'

'This one's driven over eight thousand kilometres. It'll start needing repairs soon. I just think it might be wise.'

'And the roof?' Anna asked.

Magnus moved in his seat.

'There's no rush.'

'There isn't?'

'We patched it up. And it hasn't rained since then.'

'The felting is over twenty years old. Magnus, please don't start.'

'Our car is the oldest one on the street,' he said, and sent her an accusing look.

‘So?’

Anna looked at him with raised eyebrows.

‘Just saying,’ Magnus muttered.

‘Saying what? That you think we should forget about the roof so we don’t need to be ashamed of a car that’s only four years old?’

‘That’s not what I said.’

‘We can’t do both.’

‘I just said there wasn’t any rush. The roof is okay.’

‘For the moment.’

‘We repaired it last summer,’ Magnus reminded her. ‘It’s not likely to leak again.’

Anna filled her lungs and closed her eyes.

‘What?’ Magnus said, sheepishly.

‘The car is working fine, there’s—’

‘For the moment.’

‘—absolutely no reason to get a new one just to keep up with the neighbours. I’m so sick and tired of all that nonsense.’

Magnus didn’t say anything. Anna prayed that he wouldn’t, that he’d understand it wasn’t worth pushing it. She was hoping for too much.

‘It’s still working fine because it’s relatively new,’ he

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objected. 'And that's why we can still get a good price for it, if we trade it in. If we wait, it will lose value. So we're losing money by keeping it.'

'How come?'

'What do you mean, how come? That's the way it works. If you want to get anything for anything you trade in. It can't be too old, that's all.'

'Would you just listen to yourself?'

'You don't get it,' Magnus said, and changed gear with force. 'You think it makes financial sense to fix and save. But sometimes it doesn't. Sometimes you actually have to . . .'

'The car is running fine. So please explain to me how we can save money by buying a new one, go on. Convince me that it's smarter to trade in a car that works than to repair the roof over our heads, which, by the way, is over twenty years old.'

Magnus shook his head.

'You're not listening,' he snapped.

'Magnus, I am listening. But I'm not going to let you . . .'

They sat in silence.

'So, how's Trude then?' Magnus tried, as they passed the Krapperup Estate.

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'She's fine.'

'She has to be the second most beautiful woman in the world.'

Anna looked at her husband. Never mind that they argued sometimes, it didn't take long before they made it up again.

'Sweetie,' she said, and put her hand between his legs. *The second most beautiful.*

'Darling, not while I'm driving.'

'Okay.'

She studied him, amused.

'Thought you liked it when I touched you.'

'Yes, but there's a time and a place for teenage groping. Now, if I was turn off and stop . . .'

'Absolutely,' Anna said, 'if we had the time.'

She looked out of the window to the side.

'It's strange with Trude, you know,' she mused. 'So beautiful and so smart, and yet she doesn't believe it. I guess it's like they say.'

'What?'

'The wrong people doubt their own abilities. The arrogant rule the world.'

'Yes, maybe it is.'

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They sat in silence the rest of the way.

'Nearly half an hour,' Anna confirmed, looking at her watch, when Magnus pulled up outside the hotel.

'Have fun then, darling.'

She leaned forwards and kissed him on the lips.

'You too. Speak to you this evening.'