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I swear upon my honour that in my work as a physician I shall strive to serve my fellow man with humanity and respect for life as a guiding principle. My goal shall be to preserve and promote health, to prevent illness, and to cure the sick and alleviate their suffering.

She had failed. The man who would soon die sat in the chair facing her, completely calm and still, with his aged hands resting in his lap. She sat with her eyes lowered to his voluminous file. Almost two years had passed since his first visit. Her assiduous attempts to cure him had amounted to nothing, and today she was forced to admit her defeat. To give him the news. It always felt like this. It was never a question of age or the fact that the disease was incurable, or that the lack of medical advances in research was not her personal failure. It was a question of life. Life, which she had not been skilful enough to save.

He gave her a friendly smile.

‘You mustn’t take it so personally. We all have to die one day, and this time it’s my turn.’

She felt ashamed. It wasn’t his job to console her, really it wasn’t, but in some way he had clearly managed to see straight into her thoughts.

‘I’m old and you’re young, think of that. I’ve lived a long life and lately I’ve actually started feeling quite satisfied. At my age, you know, there are so many people who have already passed on that it starts to get quite lonely down here.’

He fidgeted with a well-worn wedding ring on his left hand. It was easy to move it around; his sinewy fingers had grown gaunt over the years since the day it was slipped on.

It was always the hands that attracted her gaze in these situations. How strange it was that all the experience and knowledge that had been infused into them through all the stages of life would soon be lost.

Forever.

‘But sometimes I wonder what He was actually thinking, I mean everything else is so ingeniously worked out, but this dismantling you’re forced to go through, He should have done it a little differently. First you have to be born and grow up and learn, and then when you start to get into the swing of things it’s all taken away from you again, one thing after another. It starts with your eyesight and it just goes downhill after that. Finally you’re back just about where you started.’

He fell silent, as though pondering what he had just said.

‘But that’s what’s so clever about it all, when you think about it. Because when nothing works the way it should anymore, then it doesn’t seem so important in the big picture. You start to feel that maybe it’s not such a stupid idea to die after all, and finally have a chance to rest a little.’

He smiled again.

‘It’s just a shame that it goes on for so long, all that dismantling.’

She had no reply, no suitable words to offer to his musings. The only thing she knew was that the dismantling didn’t apply to everyone. Some were snatched away in mid-stride, even before the assembling was finished. And there was no rhyme nor reason to who was selected.

Whom the gods love die young.

There was no consolation in those words.

In that case, God must hate the ones who were left behind. Why else would God think that His own well-being justified the devastation that death left in its wake?

She didn’t want to be hated by God. Even though she didn’t believe in Him.

‘But you know what’s the best of all? Now I’m going to go home and pour myself a glass of really good wine, since I haven’t been able to drink anything for such a long time. I have a bottle I’ve been saving for a special occasion, and I suppose today could be considered one.’

He winked at her.

‘So, every cloud has a silver lining.’

She tried to return his smile but wasn’t sure she really succeeded. When he made a move to stand up she sprang out of her chair to give him a helping hand.

‘Thank you for everything you’ve done. I know that you put up a good fight.’

She closed the door behind him and tried to take a deep breath. The air in the room felt stale. She saw by the clock that there was a little time left before she had to leave. Some papers on her desk were out of order, and she went over to tidy things up. Her hands

flew across the desk, and when everything was in neat piles she hung up her white coat and put on her overcoat. She was annoyed to see that there was still plenty of time, but she'd rather be on her way than spend any more time here.

Because it was impossible to run fast enough when what you were running from came from inside.

'Hi, it's Mamma. Just wondering what time you're going to pick me up. Call me as soon as you get this.'

The message was on her voicemail when she turned on her mobile phone on the way to the parking lot. It was ten past five, and she had agreed to pick her up twenty minutes from now. Why she had to call and agree on the time again was a mystery to her, but not doing so would be a bad choice in this situation.

'Yes, hi, it's me.'

'When are you coming?'

'I'm on my way, I'll be there in fifteen minutes.'

'I have to stop by Konsum and buy some new candles.'

'I can do it on the way if you want.'

'All right, but buy the 110-hour ones this time. The last ones you bought burned down too quickly.'

If her mother had even the tiniest clue about how these constant visits to the cemetery tortured her, she wouldn't pretend that it was because of some kind of stinginess that the candles she bought didn't last as long as promised. She would gladly buy candles that burnt for a whole lifetime if anyone made them. But they didn't. The 110-hour candles were the most you could get. And since her mother had sold her car because she didn't dare drive anymore, it was Monika's eternal

assignment to ferry her to the cemetery and light new candles as soon as the old ones had burnt out.

Twenty-three years ago. He had already been dead longer than he had been alive. And yet he was the one who took up the most room.

Who took up all the room.

There were a couple of cars in the lot but the cemetery seemed to be deserted.

My beloved son
Lars
1965–1982

She never got used to it. His name on a tombstone. His name belonged at the top of the list of results from some sports competition. In some newspaper article about the most promising young hockey players. When she couldn't impress someone any other way, she could always mention that she was Lasse Lundvall's little sister. He would have been forty this year, but to her he was still her big brother, two years older, the one his pals looked up to, the one the girls all chased, who was always successful in everything he tried.

His mother's pride and joy.

She wondered how things would have turned out if their father had stayed and lived with them all those years. If he hadn't already left the family while Monika was in her mother's belly, and her mother had been spared all those years of loneliness. Monika had never met him. Sometime during her teenage years she had written him a letter and received a brief, impersonal reply, but their plans to meet had fizzled out. She had

wanted him to be more eager, wanted him to be the one to urge them to meet. But he hadn't done it, and then his pride took over. She certainly didn't want to make a fuss. And then the years passed and he slipped back out to the periphery.

The candle, as expected, had burnt out, and she saw her mother's displeasure at the thought that it had stood there extinguished on the grave. She quickly took the matches from her pocket, cupped her hand to protect the flame, and lit another candle. So many times Monika had stood here and seen her mother's hands lighting the match, watched the flame growing stronger in the plastic holder until finally it found its way to the wick. Hadn't her mother ever been struck by this thought? That it had all started with just such a little flame? That it had been the cause of all the destruction? And yet she had to keep coming here and re-light the flame as soon as it went out. It would burn here on the grave in triumph over its victim.

They headed back to the car. With one last sigh her mother had turned her back to the grave and started walking. Monika had stood there a moment, read his name for the millionth time and felt the familiar helplessness. What does a sibling do who gets the chance to live her life, when the one who seemed to have the best prospects has lost his? What did she have to accomplish to deserve this chance? To justify the fact that she was still alive?

'You'll come over and have a bite to eat, won't you?'
'I can't today.'

‘What else do you have to do?’

‘I’m just going to meet a friend for dinner.’

‘Again? I get the feeling you’re always out these days. It can’t be possible to do your job properly if you’re out running around like that in the middle of the week.’

She dreamed about it sometimes. Sometimes she was awake when she imagined it. A high fence, completely white with a black, wrought-iron gate. A locked gate that would only open when she gave permission.

‘Who are you going to meet?’

‘Nobody you know.’

‘I see.’

She closed her eyes for a second when she climbed into the driver’s seat. She hadn’t yet said anything about the course she had to go to next week, and now it was too late, now that her mother was already in a bad mood. No candles would be lit on the grave unless her mother took the bus out there, and this was no sort of news to give her when she was already in a bad mood.

Monika put on the indicator and drove off. Her mother sat with her face turned away, looking out the side window.

Monika gave her a quick glance.

‘I’m giving a lecture at the library on the twenty-third, about the welfare fund we have at the clinic. You’re welcome to come if you like, I can give you a ride.’

A brief silence, as she possibly considered . . .

Imagine if she, just once . . .

Just one time.

‘Oh, I don’t know.’

Just once.

They sat in silence for the rest of the ride. Monika slowed down and stopped with the engine running in front of the driveway. Her mother opened the door and got out.

‘And I bought chicken for dinner.’

Monika watched her back disappear through the front door. She leaned her head back against the neck rest and tried to see Thomas’s face before her. Thank God he existed, that he was the one she had found. His sincere eyes, that looked at her with an expression that she had never seen before. His hands, which were the only things that ever made her come close to anything that might resemble calm. He had no idea how important he was to her, and why would he? She had never really used the right words.

The truth was that he had become essential.

But the mere thought of how important she had allowed him to become filled her with utter terror.

It was pure coincidence that she noticed it, and that was actually thanks to Saba. The post basket on the door underneath the letter-box had been screwed on by one of those people from home care; why they had bothered to take the time and effort was completely beyond her. She realised of course that it was so that she would be able to reach her mail, but since she never got any it was a sheer waste of taxpayers' money. Especially the way they were scrimping on everything these days. Occasionally a notice would arrive from the bank or somewhere, but since it wasn't so urgent for her to read that type of correspondence, it didn't justify the expense. Nor was she interested in any daily newspaper; there was enough misery on the TV news in the evenings. She would rather save her disability pension for something else. For something she could eat.

But now there was a letter lying there.

A letter in a white envelope with handwriting on the front.

Saba had sat down by the door with her tongue hanging out and looked at the white intruder; maybe it had an odour that was only apparent to her superior senses.

Her glasses were on the table in the living room, and she wondered whether it was worth sitting down

in the easy chair. With all the weight she had put on in recent years it had become so hard to get out of it that she avoided sitting down unnecessarily, especially if she knew that time was limited.

‘Do you want to go out for a bit before I sit down?’

Saba turned her head to look at her but showed no great desire. Maj-Britt moved the easy chair closer to the balcony door and made sure the picker-upper was within reach. That way she would be able to open the door without getting up. They had fixed things so that Saba could go out by herself for a while on the lawn. The home help had helped her unscrew one of the bars in the balcony railing, and she lived on the ground floor. But soon they would have to unscrew another one to make the opening bigger.

With a grimace she sank into the easy chair. Whenever her knees had to bear her entire weight for a few seconds they always gave in. Soon she would have to get herself a new easy chair, a higher model. The sofa was already impossible to use. The last time she sat on it they had to send for reinforcements from Security to get her up. Two hefty young men.

They had taken hold of her, and she was forced to submit.

She didn't intend to allow that kind of humiliation again. It was disgusting when anyone touched her body. The loathing she felt at the mere thought made it easy to stay away from the sofa. It was bad enough that she had to let all those little people into her flat at all, but since the alternative was to go out herself, she had no choice. To tell the truth, she was dependent on them, no matter how repugnant it was to admit it.

They would come storming into her flat, one after the other. Always new faces that she never bothered to put names to, but they all had their own key. A quick ring of the doorbell which she never managed to answer and then the door would pop open. They had probably never heard of personal privacy. Then they would invade the flat with their vacuum cleaners and buckets and fill up the refrigerator with their reproachful looks.

Have you already gobbled up everything we bought for you yesterday?

It was remarkable how obvious it was, the way people's attitude changed with each added pound. As if her intelligence decreased at the same rate as her physical bulk increased. Overweight people had slightly less intellectual prowess than thin ones, that seemed to be the prevalent belief. She never refuted them but instead ruthlessly exploited their stupidity to gain advantage, knowing precisely how to act to make them do what she wanted. She was fat, after all! Handicapped by obesity. She couldn't help acting the way she did, she didn't know any better. That was the message they projected every second they spent in her vicinity.

Fifteen years ago they had tried to talk her into moving to sheltered housing. So it would be easier for her to get out. Who said she wanted to go out? Not her, at any rate. She had refused and demanded that instead they adapt her flat to her size. Take out the bathtub and put in a roomy shower, since they were always nagging her about how important hygiene was. As if she were a little girl.

The letter had no return address. She turned it over and read the front. 'Please forward.' Who in the world

would address a letter to her childhood home? She felt a pang of conscience when she saw the address. The house up there that was falling apart. The garden that would probably be impenetrable by now. The pride and joy of her parents. That was where they had spent any spare time they had after their devoted commitments to the Congregation.

How she missed them. To think it was possible to leave behind such a void.

‘I tell you, Saba. You would have liked my parents, you would. It’s a shame you never got a chance to meet them.’

She hadn’t been able to go back there. Couldn’t face the shame of showing herself up there, not the way she looked, so the house would have to stay the way it was. There was probably no hope of getting much for it, way out there in the sticks. It must have been the Hedmans who forwarded the letter. They had stopped writing to ask whether she intended to sell the house or at least do something about the furniture, but she assumed that they still looked in at regular intervals. Maybe mostly for their own sake. It might not be very pleasant living next door to a dilapidated and deserted house. Or else they had cleared it out on their own initiative and had stopped communicating because they had a guilty conscience. You couldn’t trust anybody nowadays.

She looked around for something to cut open the envelope with. She couldn’t possibly wedge her finger into that tiny gap. But the claw on her picker-upper worked just fine, as usual.

The letter was hand-written on lined paper with

holes down one side and looked like it came from a college notebook.

Hi Majsan!

Majsan? That was a bit familiar.

She swallowed hard. Deep in the convolutions of her brain a tiny scrap of memory detached itself.

She instantly felt a desire to stuff something in her mouth, the need to swallow something. She looked around but there was nothing within reach.

She resisted the temptation to turn over the sheet of paper to see who had written it; or maybe it was just the opposite, maybe she really preferred not to know.

So many years since she had last heard that nickname.

Who had travelled down through the years, uninvited, and forced themselves in through her letterbox?

I know you must be wondering why I'm writing to you after all these years. To be honest, I have to admit I was a little hesitant to sit down and write this letter, but now at least I've decided to do it. The explanation will probably sound even more peculiar to you, but I might as well tell you the truth. I had such a strange dream a few nights ago. It made a big impression, and it was about you, and when I woke up there was something inside me that told me to write this letter. I have learned (at long last and after hard lessons) to listen to strong impulses. Well, so much for that . . .

I don't know how much you know about me and how my life has turned out. But I can imagine that people talked about it a good deal back home, and I understand perfectly if you don't want to have any contact with me. I'm not in touch with anyone in my

family or anyone else from back home. As you can tell, I have plenty of time to think about things here, and I think a lot about when we were growing up and everything we took with us from those years, and how much it affected us later in life. That's why I'm so curious to hear how you're doing these days! I sincerely hope that everything worked out and you're doing well. Since I don't know where you are now or what your married name is (for the life of me I can't remember Göran's last name!) I'm going to send this letter to your childhood home. If it's meant to reach you I'm sure it will. Otherwise it will just circulate around for a while and keep the post office busy which I'm sure would be a good thing since I hear they're having hard times.

In any case . . .

I hope with all my heart that in spite of your difficult years growing up your life has turned out well. I never fully understood until I was grown up what an awful time you must have had. I wish you all the best!

Drop me a line if you feel like it.

*Your old best friend,
Vanja Tyrén*

She heaved herself up out of the chair. The sudden burst of anger gave her an extra push. What sort of nonsense was this?

In spite of your difficult years growing up?

She'd rarely seen the like of such impudence. Who did she think she was, really, assuming she had the right to send her such condescending statements? She picked up the letter and read the address written at

the bottom of the page, and her gaze fixed on the words: Vireberg Institution.

She could hardly remember this person, who clearly was locked up in Vireberg, but who still thought she had the right to sit in judgement over her childhood and thus by extension her parents.

She went to the kitchen and yanked open the refrigerator door. The cocoa package was already on the kitchen worktop, and she quickly cut off a chunk of butter and dipped it in the brown powder.

She closed her eyes as the butter melted in her mouth, soothing her.

Her parents had done everything for her. Loved her! Who knew that better than she did?

She crumpled up the paper. It ought to be against the law to send letters to people who don't want to get any mail. It was impossible to tell what that person was after, but to let her insult stand unchallenged was more than she could bear. She was going to have to reply in her parents' defence. The mere thought of having to communicate with someone outside the walls of the flat without choosing to do so herself made her cut off another chunk of butter. The letter was an attack. A blatant assault. After all these years in voluntary isolation someone had suddenly clawed their way through her arduously erected barriers.

Vanja.

She could remember so little.

If she made a real effort she could call up some scattered images. She recalled that they had hung out together a bit, but no real details surfaced. She could vaguely remember a messy house and the fact that

sometimes the yard outside looked like a junkyard. Nowhere near as neat as her own home had been. She also thought she could recall that her parents hadn't approved of their friendship; and there, you see, for once it turned out that they were right! How they had struggled. She got a huge lump in her throat when she thought about them. She hadn't been an easy child but they refused to give up on her; they did their best to help her get on in life even though she was so difficult and caused them so much worry. And then this person comes along more than thirty years later, wondering how *they* had been affected by their upbringing, as if she were looking for an accomplice in her own failure, someone to blame for it. But who was the one sitting in prison? What nerve to come here with her veiled insinuations and accusations when she was the one who was locked up. She could only imagine the reason why.

She braced herself against the worktop when the pain in her lower back started up again. A sudden stab that almost made her black out.

Yet she really didn't want to know anything. She wanted to let Vanja remain buried in the past and let the dust she was stirring up settle again.

She glanced at the kitchen clock. Not because they ever bothered to be punctual, but they should be coming in an hour or two. She opened the refrigerator again. It was always stronger when something she didn't want to acknowledge was attempting to intrude on her consciousness.

The compulsion to stuff herself in order to shut up what was screaming inside.