**Peter Sandström**

***Love is a Tame Animal
(Kärleken är ett tamdjur)***

**M**y wife took most colours with her the day she left home. Later, I would remember how she stood fingering her phone in the kitchen, wearing the green jacket she’d bought in Vancouver or Cleveland, her red velvet trousers, a yellow neckerchief at her throat. Black boots, mauve knapsack. On her face a smile in pink.
 Her eyes were brown. She wore an intent expression, as if she’d already been somewhere else, in a place where she’d longed to be: a meeting room, a beach, a cool crypt in a massive rock face.
 I tried not to say anything. My words would have been inadequate and cheap under the circumstances. I sat gazing at her. There were perhaps three metres between us. But the distance was far greater.
 I wanted to stretch out my hand towards her, but I couldn’t move. I was sitting on an old suitcase. I might just as well have been inside it, ready for transport. Just before opening the door she raised her eyes and gave me a look. It felt as if she could see me. Then her lips moved, almost imperceptibly. It might have been a kiss, or a silent curse.
 She went out to a car waiting in the street. It was a rather old model and very rusty. I had positioned myself at the window, pressing my nose against the pane, like a child watching something spectacular in the street, a circus parade perhaps, with white horses and clowns and jugglers. I could see a red car, a Lada or a Mitsubishi. It made no difference which, I thought. I couldn’t see my wife any longer now; the car was moving off slowly. By the time it reached the end of the block it wasn’t red any more.
 My father once said you should never leave a woman.
 What if you’ve got more than one? I asked.
 Not then neither, he said.
 That was a long time ago, when I was much younger. It sounded odd, I thought. Later I would more or less grasp what he’d been trying to tell me, and I would regard it as one of the few wise pieces of advice he had tried to pass on. It was too late to ask him about it now, anyhow: I would have to reach my own conclusions.
 I stood in what had once been our kitchen. Now it looked like a public space, a reception area for people suffering from a social phobia or motor disorder, a room awaiting demolition, a crime scene cordoned off pending forensic examination. There were still a few carnations in a vase on the table. The carnations were dark, the vase light-coloured. All that was red and green and blue had gone with my wife. I knew the rug had a mottled pattern, but now it looked as if it was all the same shade. The curtain was a dark colour.
 I ran into the living room. The cushions on the sofa were no longer red. The pictures blended into the wallpaper. Everything looked so plain.

For many years my wife held a part-time professorial post at a provincial university in Sweden. She was often away for several weeks in a row, but would come home from time to time. These felt like rather special occasions, I have to admit. She would come on the overnight ferry from Stockholm and I would go to meet her early in the morning. Even so, quite a bit of preparation was needed. My alarm clock would go off around five in the morning. I would breathe in the scent of her clothes, the ones I hadn’t got around to laundering. I could smell the scent of her in her tops and blouses, in her silk bandannas and cotton shirts. I would dust the kitchen, take out all the empty tins and bottles, sweep up a bit along the edges of the rugs and the settee legs. I’d put red roses in a vase on the table, have some coffee, eat a piece of fruit. I’d clean my shoes, comb my hair, adjust my belt. I’d shave and clip my nose hairs. I’d turn off the computer and gather up a pile of poems which I’d put away in the cleaning cupboard. I would tidy away newspapers and books into a box, put board games away on shelves, rub a stain out of the tablecloth. I would line our shoes up in rows in the hallway. Then I’d creep out through the door, and walk down towards the harbour and my love.
 I’d walk along the railway, which was the shortest route. If spring was well advanced there’d be flowers alongside the tracks. I didn’t know what they were called. Although my father had been a gardener, he’d made no effort to pass on any of his knowledge in that area to me. I simply saw the flowers as colours, and I would pick yellow and blue and purple, hold the delicate plants in my hand, a demure nosegay in the light of dawn. I hoped my wife had had a calm crossing. She was very fond of her sleep.
 I always arrived too early at the terminal. I’d take up my position, holding the flowers, and watch the ferry backing in alongside the quay. Engines hummed, lights flashed, phones rang and fell silent: I would often gaze at it all as if at a scene in a children’s picture book, like those I used to read to my children when they were cute little kids, first Neo, then Bonnie. I could see it before me: the workers mooring the ferry with thick cables were like bears. In the terminal, foxes sat at the cash desks. A grumpy boxer dog was in charge of keeping order. And then, once the boat was moored, all the other animals streamed out down the gangway: the geese, dogs, cats, stoats, horses, donkeys. A few tigers. The lion. And the little mouse.
 I’d often start to have doubts. Was it really this boat she was supposed to be on? The animals yapped and whined, pattering away to waiting cars and buses and cabs. The flow of passengers began to dwindle, and even though I knew she was prone to oversleeping, I would feel my heart starting to beat faster. Maybe she’d disappeared. Anything could happen at sea. So I closed my eyes and counted to ten. Opened them again. And there she was. She was walking slowly, scanning the ground in front of her, as if wary of holes and traps, but she came straight through the terminal, and when she raised her head I saw the light in her face, and she walked up to me and into my embrace, and she was my girl again.
 Hello, I said. Hello, she said. The flowers I was holding had wilted. I gave them to her anyway. Welcome home, I said.

We would walk home from the harbour. As we carried her luggage together alongside the railway, I often had the feeling we were on our way to something new that would change the course of our lives, as if we’d run away together, or simply left a home that had been demolished or burnt down, as if we had all our worldly goods with us and were determined to continue our lives elsewhere; and it seemed to me it was her warmth and loyalty that were leading us onward, that I myself would have been more likely to abandon everything and just sit down without any clear idea of how things could ever continue.
 And so we walked along the railway line, talking quietly about quiet things, the flowers along the path, the warmth in the air, the pot plants we wanted to buy. There was a natural companionability in all of that, the occasional words and the silence between them: it was understated and it went without saying, a love that needed no grand words or gestures to exist in the moment. Closing my eyes, I could hear the distant clamour from people at work in the harbour, unending labour, tasks performed again and again that would never be quite completed. I caught my wife’s light scent, and it was comforting to think that nothing would ever be completed, but that it hardly mattered as long as we could walk side by side along the unyielding metal of the railway line.
 A glimmer of light filtered through my eyelids. It wasn’t easy to keep to the path with my eyes closed. I let my wife lead, trusting her to pick her way carefully so we could both avoid stones and roots, tins and dog messes. Sometimes, on catching the sharp odour of the sleepers, I realised that she could have left me there, that she could have been walking with someone else; so it was a privilege to be able to walk at her side, with her bags and cases rubbing against my legs.
 When I opened my eyes again I saw that she was walking with her eyes closed as well. I wanted to ask her what she was thinking about, but instead I just said that we were nearly there. She nodded, without opening her eyes.
 We arrived home, and it wasn’t hard to imagine that our children were still asleep in their beds.
 She said nothing about our home. She didn’t say I’d made a good job of the cleaning. That didn’t matter. I knew what I’d done. She lay down on the settee and I spread a plaid over her. When I asked if she wanted some coffee, she didn’t reply; she’d fallen asleep with her glasses on. I removed them carefully and placed them on a book under the settee.
 I stayed next to her, quietly observing the room: maybe I was trying to tell whether it had changed now she was back. The bookshelves were still there, and the CD racks. The potted plants on the windowsill were still dead. I could hear my wife’s quiet breathing, see the corner of her mouth twitch.

While she was sleeping I went over to the sauna in the community building and booked a time slot. We were in the habit of taking a sauna together when she’d just arrived home. Maybe it was a way of scrubbing off what had built up on our skin while we’d been apart, of starting over from something clean and whole.
 I slipped out of the yard via the fence at the back that gave onto Arvidsgatan. The cobblestones glinted in the sunlight. I turned left towards Trädgårdsgatan, inhaling the fresh air, thinking how it was still the same morning, the morning she’d come home. I thought of her suitcases, still in the kitchen, untouched, as if she had completed a stage, reached a temporary destination until the journey continued. I walked towards the town centre, alone on empty pavements, a flâneur without any well-defined goal. The Crown had just opened for the day. I went in, walked up to the bar and gave the barman my order.
 There was something liberating about the morning. A few men were sitting at separate tables, talking to themselves. Someone was leafing through a newspaper. Maybe nothing would ever be any simpler than that.

Before going over to the sauna we drank tea in the kitchen. My wife talked about flowers: we should buy some pansies and put them in pots at the front door, we could have a geranium on the garden table outside the living room window. We lived in a former workers’ tenement comprising a number of small dwellings that had now been extended and enlarged. Our neighbours were decent people who raked up fallen leaves and kept the area around their steps tidy, barbecued vegetables and steaks, enjoyed wine and community life. Their garden tables were adorned with beautiful flowers. I, in contrast, had always been bad at keeping flowers alive, being inclined to over-water them. The thought of flowers made me nervous, as if I bore a great responsibility for their survival.
 Maybe we could try a palm tree or something instead, I said. A yucca plant or something similar.
 My wife looked at me. Really? she said.
 I thought it easier to have plants that didn’t need to produce flowers. They had the essentials, I felt: green leaves, a stem, a pot underneath. Nothing showy or affected.
 It’s a shame when flowers wilt and die, I said.
 My wife laughed and extended her hand over the table to pat mine. She drank her tea and ate a banana.
 We talked off and on about all the illnesses our children hadn’t had. Maybe that was an attempt to ward off anything that might yet happen. They didn’t even get colds when they were little, my wife said. And they didn’t suffer from many ear infections either.
 I thought that a peculiar thing to say. It sounded slightly desperate, as if she was expecting hard times ahead.
 Not wishing to think about that, I asked how her last few weeks had been. She started telling me about a new project she’d started, focusing on itinerant pedlars and social stigma. I looked into her eyes and nodded. She talked and talked. Her eyes were the same as ever, large and beautiful. She’d been so young when we met, barely more than a child. It struck me that there were fine lines around her eyes now. I liked lines in a face. I wondered how much time I’d spent in total gazing into her eyes, over all the years together: presumably a very long time, maybe longer than I could imagine. She talked and talked, gesticulating and nodding her head slightly. Eyeing the clock, I remarked that we were already overdue for our sauna slot.
 We crossed the courtyard in silence, greeting a few neighbours sitting outside. Some were playing cards, others arm-wrestling. In front of one of the doors, two grown men were wrestling, panting and laughing. Raising my face to the sky, I spotted a plane at high altitude. A football came rolling towards me from somewhere. Putting down my sauna bag, I stopped the ball with my right foot, flicked it up and began to juggle. I’d been a dab hand at that as a youngster. I used to be able to keep a ball in the air for half an hour or more. Now I dropped it after just ten flicks. A little girl came running through the lilac bushes and I passed the ball to her. *Kiitos*, she said, disappearing back into the bushes.
 The sauna changing room had a white, tiled floor and spotless walls. A small table, two chairs, a mirror on the wall. We’d been there many times before. It sometimes reminded me of an interrogation room or a temporary facility for slaughtering poultry and piglets. A floor drain, a rolled-up hose hanging on the wall. My wife started to undress, but I hesitated. It was as if I’d succumbed to a sudden attack of modesty. Maybe I was afraid that my body might swell up, that it might stink, bubble or take on abnormal proportions if I freed it of clothes: sweater, jeans, trainers.
 I’ve left the shampoo behind, I said. You go ahead.
 My wife stood with her back to me. She was humming, but didn’t turn round.
 I went out and sat on the veranda. I gazed at the courtyard: the bike shed, the washing lines, the miniature flowerbeds at people’s front doors. Everything looked the same as usual. A few rag rugs hung from the communal carpet rack. The mailboxes gleamed on the wall. This was where the good life was. Carpets were beaten in the early morning. Flower beds bloomed. Sheets dried, absorbing the fresh air. Every letter that was delivered brought good news. I felt my heart miss a beat. Then everything was just as usual again. The sun was shining. I got to my feet and went back inside.
 In the changing room my wife’s clothes lay on one of the chairs, neatly folded. I picked up her checked shirt, held it to my face, breathed in her scent: a hint of perspiration, a hint of perfume. I would have recognised that scent anywhere. I was convinced that I could have picked out the right shirt from among ten belonging to as many different people.
 I could hear the hissing of the stove as she ladled water onto it. I felt a warm glow in my chest. I started to undress.

Afterwards we sat together on the veranda outside the sauna. My wife had bought soft drinks and crisps. Reaching for one of the bottles, I drank straight from it. I remembered there’d once been a soft drink called Rally, black and very sweet, that I liked when I was younger. Now it no longer existed. I observed my wife’s feet. They looked the same as before, but I knew they were ageing. We often used to barbecue sausages when we were young, as people did then. My wife took a handful of crisps. She closed her eyes and munched, turning her face to the sun, which now reached us on the veranda. She smiled slightly. How vulnerable she looked. It would be wrong of me to tease her.
 We’d known each other for nearly forty years. I had held her hand in the dark. Together, we had travelled to far-away islands in the Atlantic. Her hair was long and thick. She held several doctorates. One of the theses she’d written dealt with the importance of barter in rural areas.
 Sometimes I’d imagine that our children were still little. Coming home in the evening, I’d call out, ‘Daddy’s home now.’ I knew no one would reply. Yet sometimes I fancied I could hear the children’s voices, Bonnie’s high-pitched ‘Hello, Daddy’ and Neo’s deeper ‘Hellooooo’. I would imagine I’d bought food on the way home. I used to buy macaroni and sausages and peppers and cucumbers. Even when I came back empty-handed to an empty home, I could feel the weight of my purchases in my hands and arms, like a phantom sensation from the years that had come and gone, never to return. Sometimes I would sit down at the kitchen table and wait for the moment to pass. The trembling in my hands after I’d carried in the non-existent bags full of fruit and juice and cheese and salami, a pack of ice-cream, a whole melon, a bag of pears. Empty-handed, I’d wait for the night.
 But now I had my wife to keep me company. My body was heavy and relaxed after the sauna. How about going out this evening, I suggested. Where to? she asked. Out to dinner, I said.
 Getting to her feet, she moved behind me. She hugged me from behind: a gentle hug, warm and slightly damp. Let’s go back now, she said.
 Her suitcases were in the kitchen. She didn’t touch them. She stood in the middle of the room. I went up to her. We kissed in the silent kitchen. First there was something unaccustomed in our kiss, then the embrace grew tighter; she gripped me as if fearing that I would slip away if she let go. She bit my lip. Then, letting go, she turned and began to pull out the drawers under the working surface, rummaging around as if looking for something she couldn’t do without at that precise moment. I didn’t know what to do, so I opened the door of one of the kitchen cupboards and stared at its contents: flour, macaroni, sugar, a bottle of vinegar. I heard her emptying one of the drawers onto the floor. Various bits and bobs rolled around: sellotape, a rolling pin, two partly burned candles. Look, she said. I turned.
 Smiling with her whole face, her eyes shining, she was holding a plastic container. How could finding so ordinary an object make her so happy? Opening the lid, she showed me what was inside. I saw that the box contained miniature candles, the ones we’d put on our children’s birthday cakes when they reached the ages of one and two and three and four and five. The candles were red and blue and yellow. They were all half-used, having been blown out to applause and picked off cakes that had been served under garlands and balloons.
 She would light those candles with such care. She was always so focused when striking a match, as if performing a task she’d only just learned. The match would flare, and she would cup her hand cautiously around the flame and light the candle waiting on the cake. Now she put the plastic container down on the kitchen table and carried on looking through the drawers.
 I took a saucepan out of the cupboard, filled it with water and put it on the stove. I took out a packet of macaroni and poured the contents into the pan. I could hear my wife still poking around in the drawers. I didn’t want to think about what she was looking for.
 In the evening we sat on the settee. I had lit the tile stove. There was no need, as it was quite warm in the house. But I liked to hear the crackling of the fire. My wife was dressed in black.
 There were boxes of children’s books on the floor. She had riffled through them and set some of them aside. Maybe she wanted to keep all of them. They were books we’d read aloud to the children when they were small. I knew some of them off by heart – *King Kong Plays Ping-Pong*, *Daddy Bear the Baby-Sitter*, and so on. I used to enjoy reading aloud from those books. I recalled the calm, steady voice in which I had read my way slowly through the stories, just as much for my own enjoyment as to lull the children to sleep.
 I said my wife’s name. I wanted to ask her if she remembered the same books as I did, but she didn’t reply. She had fallen asleep in a sitting position. I put a plaid over her and kissed her on the forehead.
 I should carry those boxfuls of books out, I thought. But I didn’t.
 A ray of evening sunlight fell on the sloping wall of our daughter’s room. The room looked even yellower than usual. The bed was unmade, as if her absence was merely temporary: as if she was in the shower, maybe, or out dancing in town. On the wall were some photos she’d taken herself: laughing young people, a magpie perched on a fence. Cats silhouetted against the light. I went over to her wardrobe and opened the door slowly, as if I had expected her to be hiding in there. Her clothes hung in neat rows. Shirts and blouses. Trousers. Bright colours predominated, green and yellow and red. I brushed them with my fingers. I fancied they had been arranged in a discernible order, but I couldn’t see what it was.
 She’d once asked me how a story came into being. I thought that a splendid question, but didn’t know what to answer. Stories existed in and of themselves, whole and complete, I said. What you had to do was feel them in your soul, absorb them, and reproduce them in as pure a form as possible. It couldn’t always be done, I said. So what do you do then? she asked. I don’t know, I said.
 Later it seemed to me that the soul itself was a single vast story that could be glimpsed only sporadically, and that everything one reproduced constituted mere fragments of something boundless and beyond comprehension, like a universe without beginning or end.
 Sometimes I would think of her as a six-year-old, smiling, minus her two front teeth. How we’d gone on bike rides together, her pedalling fast and tirelessly, glad to be engaged in such a simple act, rarely with any destination, but never without warmth. How utterly she’d relied on me then, hadn’t she: on my simple instructions, urgent imperatives like left, right, we can cross the road now.
 We’d stop for a break on out-of-the-way park benches. There’d be hot chocolate in a thermos flask, with ham, cheese and tomato sandwiches.
 Later on I would try to put it all into a story, but rarely came up with the right words. Eventually I realised you couldn’t describe these things in a way that would have seemed honest or genuine. There was no real drama that would have given a point to the story. I loved my daughter when she was drinking hot chocolate. It was as simple as that; it was as difficult as that. What else was there to say? Maybe she should have fallen off her bike or been hit by a tractor. Maybe she should have had to see me collapse, felled by a sudden medical crisis, grey-faced and gasping for breath. Maybe she should have had to see me fighting off some wino, shouting, hissing. Any such happenings would have lent more substance, more suspense, to the narrative, revealing all that lay, unexpected and poignant, beneath the surface. But the surface always bore my daughter and me. We cycled on contentedly. Her bike was mauve, with a little basket above the front wheel. She kept a black tin box in it. I asked what it contained. My stones, my lollipop, the limping monkey, and Jesus, and the ball, she said. It was as if she’d quoted unwritten poetry, straight from her heart.

**T**his should really have been called ‘The Soul of a Woman’, but it didn’t turn out that way.
 On the 3rdof June, I drove Darling and Bonnie to the airport. It was a glorious morning. The sun was rising, blood-red and bright; it was four a.m. or thereabouts. I was silent in the driving seat, like a sleepy cab driver called out for a job. There was no traffic to speak of, but I drove quite slowly anyway.
 They were so happy. They talked nineteen to the dozen, checking again and again that they had their passports, their tickets, their sunscreen and woolly hats and spare glasses. Their books, their maps, their two red scarves.
 Though there were no crowds in the terminal, there were still plenty of people taking the morning flight to Riga. I lounged against a balustrade while they checked in their black cases. Dressed in black, I too could have been placed on a conveyor belt, with a ticket attached giving my destination; I felt like a suitcase containing various scary objects of indeterminate value. There could be just about anything in a case: skipping ropes, beach balls, silver candlesticks. Books with dark pages, cuttings filched at night from a neighbour’s veranda. Love letters. Some remained, others mouldered away.
 They had dropped off their cases. Slowly they approached, first Bonnie, then Darling. It was going to be a long journey. They had comfortable clothes on. Bonnie hugged me: her hair smelled of fruit-scented shampoo. She said she’d forgotten her sunglasses. Ah well, I said. See you in Irkutsk? she said. ‘Spect so, I said.
 She was seventeen. I murmured something into her ear. What? she said. OK, I said. OK, time to go.
 She stepped aside, and there, immediately, was Darling. We hugged awkwardly, like old workmates or neighbours, two people who’d once spent a lot of time together, but who now met only sporadically. Time to go, I said, then I turned and walked towards the door.
 I sat in the car for a while, glaring at the terminal. I could have run in and said something, said things I couldn’t quite manage to put into words myself. They should have had a few words to accompany them on their journey, I thought. Then I turned the key and started the engine.
 I drove through sleepy industrial estates where storage buildings and road haulage firms would soon be opening for the day’s work. People would come to work, whether rested or worn out. It was a Monday like any other. They played classical music non-stop on the radio. I thought I’d go home and drink until everything came to a halt. There were little birds here and there on the tarmac, resting. The sun grew brighter all the time. I felt momentarily as if I was driving aimlessly, unsure of where I was heading, and it didn’t really matter; I could let the car roll on, taking me anywhere. But I knew that wasn’t really true.
 So I drove back to Turku and parked in Fredsgatan. I sat in the car for a while. The thought of going back into my apartment held no attraction. I felt like an uninvited guest, a burglar, an interloper in the wrong place.
 I got out of the car and looked up and down the street. I was entirely alone.
 The front door was brown and solid. I inserted the key in the lock and turned it. Entering without any difficulty, I went and stood in the middle of the kitchen. By force of habit, I shouted ‘Hello’ into the apartment, though I knew no one would reply. There were cups and glasses on the table from a hasty breakfast. They looked like evidence: glasses with fingerprints, cups with lip marks. Carefully, I began to clear up the crockery, stacking it on the working surface item by item.
 Then I left it all where it was. I had any amount of time.
 There was a wrapped loaf of bread on the table. I took a few slices, put them in the toaster and pressed the lever. The toaster radiated heat, and on sitting down to wait for the toast, I began to weep. There was no particular reason, but the tears welled up, like nausea when you can’t stop yourself vomiting. I sobbed like a child. Suddenly I felt terribly old. The toast popped up, I gazed at the golden-brown slices through my tears, realising that I was actually hungry, and I ate it up without any butter, cheese, salami or cucumber. There was a dish containing three tomatoes on the table, which I left untouched.

Surprisingly enough, I managed to sleep. I had had difficulty getting off to sleep for several years. I had even been prescribed sleeping pills once by an old doctor who wrote out the prescription on the *Daily News*. I had tried taking the pills, but had had to admit that the only impact they had was negative; I still had trouble sleeping, but the day after I’d be groggy, as if the pills had actually had some effect. I told the doctor as much the next time I saw him in the pub. He shrugged, then stood me a shandy.
 That morning I slept until ten o’clock. I realised the two of them would be in Moscow by now. But I was stuck here with myself. I ought to have cried more.
 My sister had texted me. She said there were three days left until Mother was to be sent home. She was a bit worried about that. Mother had had a mild stroke in early May and had been given a place at a convalescent home in Nykarleby. But she couldn’t stay there forever. That was understandable, I suppose. She was ninety-two. Her legs had supported her for a long time. She used to clamber up into the apple trees in spring and saw off any twigs that had run wild, anything that was out of place. Her trees bore hardly any fruit these days. But she tried to keep their offshoots tidy.
 I tried not to think about those trees any more.
 I really wanted to think about the future, about how much would happen once the apple trees were gone, and me with them.
 I sat at the computer, slowly browsing through my emails, without answering any of them.
 I’d been sent a link to a paper my son had written. I clicked on the link, without much hope of being able to understand any part of what was about to open on my screen.
 The title was ‘Preliminary Studies toward Trigger-Level Analysis with Protons in ATLAS’. That sounded impressive. I saw Neo’s name below the title. He was twenty-three. The text itself began with the words ‘Dark matter makes up most of the matter in the universe.’
 That might well have worked as the opening sentence of a novel, I thought. I understood nothing, of course, apart from the fact that the syntax was perfectly correct. I felt proud that my son was capable of writing such a phrase.
 I checked out the subject. Apparently it was about something called dark matter. A simple online search produced the following explanation: ‘Dark matter is a hypothesis about a hypothetical form of matter that neither radiates nor reflects electromagnetic radiation, meaning that it cannot be observed in the normal way. Dark matter can be detected only indirectly through its gravitational influence on ordinary matter or its weak interaction with matter.’
 These were things that reminded me of human love. I felt a warm glow in my chest. I had always thought well of my son. Maybe I myself was a form of dark material? The notion felt presumptuous. I was a simple person, an ex-editor, an ex-poet, neither more nor less.
 Earlier in the day I’d talked to Karhu on the phone. She wanted to know if I could come over and go walking with her in the area around Koli. I wasn’t an easy person to have a conversation with. Someone had once said I was like soap: physically present and touchable, but impossible to get a hold of. That sounded like a reasonable definition, I thought. I trickled away between various people’s fingers.
 I’d told Karhu I was fond of her. That ought to have been enough, it seemed to me. But she’d begun to expect all sorts of things.

In late May I had passed out on a train between Turku and Helsinki. Darling, who was at my side, called along the carriage for help. Apparently I had been unconscious for several minutes when I awoke, with a strange woman stroking my cheek. At first I thought I was at home again and that it was Mother waking me when I was feverish with a high temperature.
 Mam, I said.
 The woman asked how I was. She introduced herself as a nurse. I felt in safe hands. Darling was standing further back, shifting about impatiently. I could see her green coat. Everything’s normal, I thought. The nurse asked if I knew my name and where I was. I had drooled down my black shirt. I attempted to wipe the saliva off, as if that was the most important thing right then. I told her my son was studying particle physics abroad. The nurse wasn’t satisfied with my reply. She asked the ticket-collector to ring an ambulance. I want to go home, I said. The nurse shook her head. Maybe she thought I didn’t have a home to go to. She asked Darling if she knew me. He’s my husband, said Darling. That was true, I thought, but it didn’t necessarily mean she knew me. But at the same time I realised it wasn’t worth making that argument just then.
 Not wishing to be anyone’s patient, I got off the train at Karis on my own two feet. Someone helped Darling to lift our luggage down. On the platform, I shook hands with the ticket-collector and the nurse. It was Friday. I said I hoped they’d have a good weekend.
 An ambulance came down the slope towards the station. A man and a woman climbed out. They asked how I was feeling. I said I was well enough to travel back to Turku. They asked me to blow into a breathalyser. *Nolla pilkku seitsemän*, the driver said to his colleague. She shrugged. We’ll take him to A and E, she said. They talked about me as if I were a child or a mentally impaired adult, over my head, without looking me in the eye. Darling was pale. She shook her head, as if to signal disappointment at the state I was in.
 I’d often disappointed her. Not that I had any real reason to behave that way. But things happened, and I wasn’t always in the best of tempers.
 They attached me to a seat in the ambulance. I had on an orange tie that felt superfluous. I tore it from my neck and flung it on top of my suitcase.
 Darling had taken a seat at the front of the ambulance, next to the driver. I heard them talking to each other in a desultory fashion, as strangers talk when they’re seated next to each other by chance, on a train or a plane bound for a distant destination.
 I thought he was dead, said Darling.
 It’ll be all right, said the driver.
 Where are we going? asked Darling.
 Ekenäs, said the driver.
 Ekenäs, I thought. I’ve been there.
 The woman sitting at the back with me asked me a few routine questions. What was my address? Did I often suffer from dizziness? Had I drunk any alcohol that morning? I answered all her questions. Then I made a phone call to say I wouldn’t be able to make it to today’s programme in Helsinki. I said I’d had to get off the train. The reason I gave was ‘stress symptoms’, which sounded like a pretext.
 Burnout? asked the ambulance driver from the front seat.
 Yes, could be, said Darling.
 Once we reached Ekenäs I had to lie down in bed. They took blood samples and carried out an ECG. Then my bed was trundled into a room with an MRI scanner. They checked my brain. Then the bed was trundled back to the first room. I didn’t want to lie down. I got up and went out into the corridor, where I sat down on a bench. Darling sat on a bench opposite, typing something on her laptop. Got to wait now, I said. She nodded and carried on typing.
 I took out my own laptop and pretended to be working on something. I looked at old photos. Pictures of Bonnie. She was photogenic. I was hungry.
 I’d never really worried about my own death. When I was seventeen a doctor discovered a heart murmur. We were sitting in the nurse’s office in the basement of the grammar school in Nykarleby. I was shivering. The doctor moved the stethoscope back and forth over my white chest. I was skinny then, I felt like a doll cut out of paper, thin and easy to tear up or crumple into a ball. The doctor looked anxious. I was referred to the hospital in Jakobstad. When I told Mother, her face froze. Am I going to die now? I asked, more as a joke than anything else. Mother burst into tears. Don’t talk like that, she said.
 That was the first time I thought she looked old. It’s easy enough to work out that she must have been fifty-three at the time. Now I’d soon be reaching fifty-six.
 I remember they examined me in Jakobstad. They didn’t find anything wrong. The murmur came from a tiny congenital hole in the heart. Later on, I would regard that hole as a great asset. All the world’s unkindness could pass through it without leaving a trace within me. Sixteen years later, they would find a similar feature in my son’s heart. I was thankful when the report came.
 In 2001 I suffered impaired circulation in the brain. That was the second time death felt near. One morning in March I suddenly felt weak down the left side of my body. I took a taxi to work. Darling and Neo waved goodbye from the window. I remember thinking that that might be the last they ever saw of me.
 The company doctor referred me to the hospital, where I spent all day lying down. Gradually my condition improved. But they wanted to keep me in overnight for safety’s sake. I didn’t think I could cope with a night in hospital. I said I had to fetch my son from nursery before five o’clock. Doesn’t he have a mother? the doctor asked. She’s away at the moment, I said.
 They let me go. Later I was called up for two separate cardiac examinations, one to be carried out by gastroscopy, the other by ultrasound. I never went for either.
 But now I was in Ekenäs, a town I’d only otherwise visited in late autumn, for literary events. I’d got to get out of there alive, I thought. I said as much to Darling: let’s get out now. She shook her head.
 I want you to be happy, I said.
 What? said Darling, looking up questioningly from her laptop, as if I’d bothered her in the middle of something important.
 Oh, nothin’, I said.
 Then the doctor arrived, a man who smiled with his whole face. He looked like someone you could easily entrust your life to.
 We shook hands and he asked if Darling was my wife. Yes, she is, I said.
 Come with me, said the doctor. We went into a room where the lights were very strong, as if to emphasize a fact: only the truth was to be spoken here, nothing else.
 The doctor looked me straight in the eye. Just give it to me, I thought. His Swedish was slightly old-fashioned, but faultless and fluent. I realised that my own language would never attain such beauty. I felt worn-down and old, as if my language had been sand-blasted and eroded until all that remained were the basics, as if my ability to reason and engage in discussions had been reduced to two alternatives; whatever the statement, all I could answer was ‘yes’ or ‘no’. I felt like a man in monochrome with limited alternatives, always dressed in black. The doctor’s white coat dazzled me, I couldn’t take in everything he was saying, but apparently I hadn’t had either a stroke or a heart attack.
 You can go home now, said the doctor. Home? I said. Home, he said.
 Briefly I saw my old room in Nykarleby. The narrow bed, the desk, a green armchair, a bedside table, the two windows looking out over the street, a green ‘Peter’ brand alarm clock. I’ve got to wake up now, I thought. Sunshine flooded in through the window, I was still young and innocent. I heard Mother and Father talking in low voices, drinking tea in the kitchen. I could smell the scent of the tall poplars just north of the house. I was home.
 Mother had told me she’d thought I’d died back in the sixties. She had me with her in Purmo, and later she would say I’d been feverish and irritable. Holding me in her arms, she realised that I wasn’t moving and had gone cold. Her own mother, Emma, was a woman who could heal others with her hands. She was also a corpse washer.
 Emma took over my care in December 1963, when I wasn’t even half a year old. ’E’s dead now, said my mother. Emma took a calm look at me, then said, ‘No, ’e’s not.’
 I was granted another reprieve in Ekenäs. The doctor shook my hand and told me to make an appointment for more exhaustive tests in Turku. I laughed and said I’d do just that. Naturally I had no intention of doing any such thing. I just wanted a way out of my current situation.
 Darling was sitting on a brown chair. She looked relieved. Maybe she was thinking that I would carry on living despite everything. She had seen the foam at the corners of my mouth on the train, which must have been frightening.
 She pushed her glasses up with the middle finger on her right hand. Her hands were dainty and fine, like those of a person who does no heavy or dirty work.
 Suddenly I felt a tremendous desire for her. A desire that welled up in a room in a hospital in Ekenäs. Thanking the doctor, I wished he’d leave us be. At the same time, I realised my feelings at that moment were irrelevant; I couldn’t touch Darling. That seemed fitting somehow. I recalled the time when she was young, when I was young, and the world unfinished and wondrous before us. She was so shy to begin with. I was clumsy. It didn’t feel right, but often I would caress her, and she would sigh and ask me to be firmer, but I couldn’t, and those were strange times; essentially, I couldn’t believe that she could be together with me. I wasn’t good-looking, and I wasn’t particularly quick-witted either. Maybe it was my eyes she liked. Or my mouth.
 I had made many mistakes, but she was still with me. She had given birth to two children.
 Sitting in room No 7 of Ekenäs Hospital’s A and E department, I would have done anything to get my old life back. But it wasn’t that simple. Once the doctor had left the room, it was as if we were suddenly strangers again. She fiddled with her belongings. She had so many pretty handbags. She’d had her hair cut short again. She was very beautiful.
 I used to love watching her cycle. The last time was long ago now. She cycled quite awkwardly, as if she’d only just learned how. I often felt warm inside when I watched her pedalling slowly but correctly, concentrating hard so as not to fall, and I would always remember teaching our children to ride their bikes in the park in Turku’s Port Arthur – first Neo, then Bonnie – how impossible it often felt in the early stages, when the child’s whole body would list first this way, then that, and how unfeasible it seemed to find a balance. But later, once that balance was achieved, it was as if they’d learned to fly, and I was left behind on the tarmac, panting, while the child’s back receded into the distance.
 Darling fiddled with her belongings, and it was alright for us to leave Ekenäs, and she wanted us to take a cab to the train station, but I said I wanted to walk, and that’s what we did. I walked three paces ahead of her, wishing all the time that she would catch up and take my hand.

**T**he peonies Darling had bought before the two of them left had already wilted. I left them in the vase on the window sill looking out over the street. She said she’d bought them because she was afraid I would die. It wasn’t like her to say such things. My first thought was that she wasn’t worried about her own grief if I were to die, but was thinking more of Neo and Bonnie, who shouldn’t have to lose their father so early in life.
 Looking at the peonies, it seemed to me that she, too, might mourn me.
 One of the three buds hadn’t opened. It remained as stubbornly closed as a pursed mouth. It was a mute peony, scentless, unapproachable, and, perhaps, eternal for that reason.
 Karhu had rung earlier in the day. Her dog was barking in the background. I tried to talk to her calmly, asking her details about the dog: what food it ate, how it coped on its own during the day, what mood it was in of an evening – the kind of questions you ask in any normal conversation. But Karhu said her heart was breaking. I said she was a nice person. She said she’d bought a new tent for us to sleep in when we went to Koli. But you’ll never manage to get yourself over there, she said. I said nothing. She said it was humiliating to wait for me.
 Make your own plans for the summer just as you wish, I said. Then Karhu slammed the phone down.
 I was standing near the Market Square. My heart was pounding. I’d always found it hard to cope with women’s demands. Often they followed the same pattern: an initial consensus that there won’t be any demands, there’s no need to choose between one or the other. But then, at some point, they always emerge: you’ve got to make a choice, you’ve got to move on in your life, you’ve got to decide what’s going to happen. With us. They often referred to ‘us’, as if that were a unit established by the laws of nature that couldn’t be denied or resisted, like an avalanche or a rather awe-inspiring landslide.
 As I stood there with the mobile to my ear, it rang again. It was Darling calling from Moscow. I asked how Bonnie’s cold was. Darling didn’t answer, she laughed and talked about the weather, just as if she were putting on a public performance or standing in the midst of a crowd of people who were listening intently to everything she said on the phone and recording it. She asked if it was raining in Turku. No, I said. OK, she said, have to go now. Bye, I said.
 It was still Tuesday. It occurred to me that I ought to ring Jansson. He was the only person I could talk to about tricky matters. But I didn’t ring him. He was probably having a glass of wine with his beloved wife. I didn’t want to disturb them.
 Darling sent me a photo on Whatsapp. It looked like a Metro carriage. Darling and Bonnie were sitting on a long seat, surrounded by people.
 Karhu texted me. She’d been for a mammography and now she had to have some further tests. She wrote that she was depressed. We talked on the phone later that evening. I made promises I knew I wouldn’t be able to keep. I thought of my mother’s breasts, of how she’d told me she hadn’t had any milk when I was a baby. I’d been bottle-fed instead. I’d sometimes laugh at the thought; the idea that I’d got used to the bottle early in life struck me as being funny in a way. Karhu said I ought to stop drinking. Sure, I said.
 In the evening I carried some things out to the car. An old TV, a few boxes of books and a box full of soft toys, board games and china cups which the children had been given on various birthdays. I planned to store the stuff in Mother’s attic. I was going to head north the next day.
 I had bought a key safe in town, a device that locked and unlocked with a code. The idea was to fix it to the wall in Mother’s house so the carers could get in if she needed any help during the night. The safe cost €29.90, which I thought was a reasonable price under the circumstances. I put some clothes in my case, then looked at some of the CDs in my collection. I felt a deep sense of hopelessness. Why had I bought them? On reading my emails that evening, I saw that a state institution had awarded me a working grant for several years. The news meant nothing to me. Maybe I’d been hoping they’d turn me down.

**W**e set aside all the rugs in Mother’s house, rolling them up into loose sausages which I laid in a pile.
 My sister paraded around with a broom, sweeping in a rather random fashion. There were quantities of sand where the rugs had lain, as if someone had been in the habit of brushing dirt under them; it was all exposed now. My sister worked with an energy I lacked at the moment. She swept and swept in a way I found irritating; she took up far too much space, and the scent her body exuded was released in small bursts, until it permeated the air around us. But the floor was bare and naked. I asked if this was a Zimmer frame-friendly zone now. She shrugged. It’ll have to do, she said, pouring us out some wine.
 I ought really to have been working on a manuscript called ‘A Woman’s Soul’, a project that had come to a standstill on previous occasions, but which I’d planned to complete by September. It wasn’t looking promising.
 It was hot outdoors and far too bright. Perhaps I was now no longer used to the limpid air of this part of the country. I had driven all morning, with my foot down to begin with, but at a slower pace after Björneborg; it no longer seemed urgent, in fact I wasn’t at all looking forward to arriving this time. I filled the tank in Närpes and had a coffee. I recalled how warm it had still been here last autumn.
 Mother had woken me at eight. She stood next to my bed holding a red mug that smelt of apple juice and asked if I wanted to taste it.
 I took the mug, lifted it to my mouth and took a gulp of the fresh apple juice. Mother watched me expectantly, as if she had been expecting me to assess the quality of the juice. She looked somehow more childlike than usual. She was in the process of leaving her adult life behind now, on the way to becoming a child, ageing, shrinking, stubborn and defiant. What is a child before it exists? What is it later, when it no longer exists? Life was a temporary solution to who knows what.
 You aren’t planning on disappearing, I hope, I said to Mother.
 She asked how the juice tasted. I sat on the edge of the bed. My pyjama trousers were short and faded by washing. I had on an old Iron Maiden T-shirt that was tight over my belly. I felt warm and drowsy when sleeping in that T-shirt, which contained all the good things life had given me, all the friendship and love and joy, brief moments gathered together in the demented grin of the monster in the picture, an axe-wielding monster with glaring eyes.
 I got to my feet and followed Mother into the kitchen. She was at work on a fresh batch of apples. The scent filled the kitchen, intermingling with the heat from the wood-fired stove on which a saucepan of porridge stood bubbling away. I closed my eyes and breathed deeply, taking in the scene as a whole. All this would be taken away from me, I knew. I heard the various sounds so clearly with my eyes closed. The sound of the knife with which Mother cleaved the ripe fruits, chopped them into chunks and cored them. The sound of the fire crackling convivially in the stove. The low sputtering of the porridge pot, like the distrait call of a grumpy toad to its fellow.
 I wished all my books had remained unwritten. Nothing I had tried to convey had ever been as real as this: a kitchen with a creaky floor; a rag rug with faded fringes; the painted wall, covered in a layer of grease from all the food cooked on the stove; the sound of the old woman preparing the apples at the table, my mother, her light breathing; and a simple wall clock, a device that measured time without ever being able to show when it had come to an end.
 Opening my eyes, I saw Mother at the table, her back slightly bowed, but focused on her task. What could be purer than the liquid the apples contained, soon to be pressed out of them? The machine Mother was using looked like an over-sized toy. She was playing at making apple juice.
 Calm filled me as I stood there. Not that I was any less sensitive, but I had managed to rein in the temper that had afflicted me since childhood. My ability to control my impulses had always been limited, and minor incidents, such as bumping my head on a door frame, or being unable to shut a car door, could lead to outbursts of fury. Such situations, and various others, made me yell out loud: I had been known to throw objects around – newspapers, telephone directories, china teapots – some of which survived, while others broke. I had sometimes felt convinced that I was capable of killing someone. That was merely a statement of fact. Wisely, my wife had suggested that I should seek help. But nothing would help me, I thought. This was just something that had to be borne. And I had grown calmer over the years.
 I watched Mother at the kitchen table. She wasn’t the source of my temper. It had just come to me.
 Aren’t you going to sit down? Mother asked; her actual words, of course, were: ‘An’t you going to sit yerself down?’
 I drank my coffee standing up. Mother made more apple juice. She’d been sitting at the table all autumn operating the juice extractor.

Now summer was already here.
 Mother had trouble getting into my car. It looked as if she had been trying to mount an unruly pack animal. I supported her gently from the rear, steadying her. She flopped onto the seat with a deep sigh. She didn’t say much, but when she spoke her voice was reedier than usual, as if she’d been robbed of her normal speaking voice. She kept scratching her right arm with the little finger of her left hand. Her nails were untrimmed, but her hair was neat. She said someone had curled it for her. I had collected together her clothes at the convalescent home and stowed everything in a few cloth bags which my sister had provided.
 Then Mother was allowed to come home.
 The cat came running over as I was helping her out of the car and pushed against her legs. Leaning on a walking frame, Mother plodded through the dense grass.
 She went indoors and subsided onto a chair in the kitchen. She kept scratching her arm all the time. I wished she would stop, so I gave her today’s newspaper, thinking it might help if she focused on something other than the itching. She began to leaf through it. Each time she was about to turn the page, she put her index finger to her lips to moisten it. It looked like an inherited gesture. There was something very feminine about it. Darling, too, would moisten her finger when leafing through a book or newspaper.
 Mother reached the last page. Then she turned the newspaper around and started again from the beginning. She’d had a cataract operation recently, and I wondered if she could actually read the print. Perhaps she was just looking at the pictures.
 Time passed slowly. There was no urgency. Darling sent me a text message. They were in some place called Kazan now and were going to take the night train to Yekaterinburg. The place names sounded mysterious, I thought, like places in some fairy tale or ancient legend, passed on by word of mouth within certain tribes: the kind of story that would later be written down and illustrated and, in time, transformed into part of the universal cultural heritage.
 Mother continued to leaf through the paper as if that was the only activity she was capable of for the time being, something she did with intense concentration, as if looking for something specific in the paper, a message intended for her alone. I wondered if she would have the strength to cook for herself in future. She had always invested a lot of time and effort in food, and she had delighted in experimenting with new recipes. Fish jellies, prawns in hot sauce, Easter pasha, brightly coloured fruit desserts.
 I went out and did the shopping. I bought a packet of sausages, some macaroni and a few cans of ‘Long Drink’. Maybe that was just the way I felt at the time. Straightforward and unpretentious, someone who regarded food as just a basic necessity, like animal feed, a mishmash whose sole purpose was to sate hunger where necessary. I also bought some cream for a sauce.
 I’d often cheated in the kitchen, relying on semi-prepared foods and readymade dishes that could be heated up. I couldn’t get my head around recipes. The instructions and the order of the various steps in the process confused me; it felt like trying to read a map of the terrain in an unknown region. I just couldn’t picture how the dish was supposed to look, or how it was supposed to be prepared in real life.
 I made a simple sauce using the sausages and cream. I left the macaroni to boil for too long. Mother just pecked at her food, but that might have been merely because she had less of an appetite in general, rather than on account of my amateurish cooking.
 She fell asleep on the settee with her clothes on. Her breathing was irregular. At first I thought I could leave her to sleep there all night, but then I changed my mind and decided to try to wake her and help her into bed.
 It was about seven in the evening by then. She’d been asleep on the settee for well over an hour. I tried to wake her by giving her a shake. She barely opened her eyes. I spoke to her, articulating clearly, and asked if she knew who I was. She said, ‘Hello, Klas’, but Klas had been dead for seventy-seven years; he was her twin brother.
 I said my name wasn’t Klas. She smiled and stroked my hair.
 So you did get older then, she said, which I could understand. Her twin had died aged fifteen.
 She sat up, already back in the present, at least partly. Now she knew my name again.
 Where’s Klas, she asked.
 I smiled and shook my head. He’s left, I said.

She fell asleep again. Her bed was in the room at the back of the house. I sat and wrote for a while in the living room. Now and again I went to check on her. She was sleeping on her back with her mouth agape. She was breathing irregularly, as if her breathing was interrupted briefly every now and then. I would have to let her sleep like that, I thought; she was far too tired to be able to give any thought to her breathing. There was a rail fixed to the bedhead. She gripped it tightly in one hand, as if fearful of being swept overboard.