

A NINA BORG NOVEL

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DEATH

OF A

NIGHTINGALE

NEW YORK TIMES BESTSELLING AUTHORS OF
THE BOY IN THE SUITCASE

LENE KAABERBØL

AND

AGNETE FRIIS

Also by Lene Kaaberbøl and Agnete Friis

The Boy in the Suitcase

Invisible Murder

DEATH

— OF A —

NIGHTINGALE

LENE KAABERBØL

AND

AGNETE FRIIS

Translated from the Danish by Elisabeth Dyssegaard

**SOHO
CRIME**

Published by
Soho Press, Inc.
853 Broadway
New York, NY 10003

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Kaaberbøl, Lene.
[Nattergalens Doed. English]
Death of a nightingale / Lene Kaaberbøl & Agnete Friis;
Translated from
the Danish by Elisabeth Dyssegaard.

p cm

Originally published as Nattergalens Doed, in Danish.

eISBN: 978-1-61695-305-8

I. Friis, Agnete, author. II. Dyssegaard, Elisabeth Kallick, translator.

III. Title.

PT8177.21.A24N3713 2013

2013016761

v3.1

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Acknowledgments

Audio file #83: Nightingale

“Go on,” says a man’s voice.

“I’m tired,” an older woman answers, clearly uncomfortable and dismissive.

“But it’s so exciting.”

“Exciting?” There’s a lash of bitterness in her reaction. “A bit of Saturday entertainment? that what this is for you?”

“No, I didn’t mean it like that.”

They are both speaking Ukrainian, he quickly and informally, she more hesitantly. In the background, occasional beeps from an electronic game can be heard.

“It’s important for posterity.”

The old woman laughs now, a hard and unhappy laughter. “Posterity,” she says. “Do you mean the child? Isn’t she better off not knowing?”

“If that’s how you see it. We should be getting home anyway.”

“No.” The word is abrupt. “Not yet. Surely you can stay a little longer.”

“You said you were tired,” says the man.

“No. Not ... that tired.”

“I don’t mean to press you.”

“No, I know that. You just thought it was exciting.”

“Forget I said that. It was stupid.”

“No, no. Children like exciting stories. Fairy tales.”

“I was thinking more along the lines of something real. Something you experienced yourself.”

Another short pause. Then, “No, let me tell you a story,” the old woman says suddenly. “A fairy tale. A little fairy tale from Stalin Land. A suitable bedtime story for the little one. Are you listening, my sweet?”

Beep, beep, beep-beep. Unclear mumbling from the child. Obviously, her attention is mostly on the game, but that doesn’t stop the old woman.

“Once upon a time, there were two sisters,” she begins clearly, as if reciting. “Two sisters who both sang so beautifully that the nightingale had to stop singing when it heard them. First one sister sang for the emperor himself, and thus was the undoing of a great many people. Then the other sister, in her resentment, began to sing too.”

“Who are you talking about?” the man asks. “Is it you? Is it someone we know?”

The old woman ignores him. There’s a harshness to her voice, as if she’s using the story to punish him.

“When the emperor heard the other sister, his heart grew inflamed, and he had to own her,” she continued. “‘Come to me,’ he begged. Oh, you can be sure he begged. ‘Come to me and be my nightingale. I’ll give you gold and beautiful clothes and servants at your beck and call.’ ”

Here the old woman stops. It’s as if she doesn’t really feel like going on, and the man no longer pressures her. But the story has its own relentless logic, and she has to finish it.

“At first she refused. She rejected the emperor. But he persisted. ‘What should I give you

then?’ he asked, because he had learned that everything has a price. ‘I will not come to you said the other sister, ‘before you give me my evil sister’s head on a platter.’ ”

In the background, the beeping sounds from the child’s game have ceased. Now there is only an attentive silence.

“When the emperor saw that a heart as black as sin hid behind the beautiful song,” the old woman continues, still using her fairy-tale voice, “he not only killed the first sister, but also the nightingale’s father and mother and grandfather and grandmother and whole family.” “That’s what you get for your jealousy,’ he said and threw the other sister out.”

The child utters a sound, a frightened squeak. The old woman doesn’t seem to notice.

“Tell me,” she whispers. “Which of them is me?”

“You’re both alive,” says the man. “So something in the story must be a lie.”

“In Stalin Land, Stalin decides what is true and what is a lie,” says the old woman. “And I have said that it was a Stalin fairy tale.”

“Daddy,” says the child, “I want to go home now.”

“Gum?”

Natasha started; she had been sitting silently, looking out the window of the patrol car as Copenhagen glided by in frozen shades of winter grey. Dirty house fronts, dirty snow and low and dirty sky in which the sun had barely managed to rise above the rooftops in the course of the day. The car’s tires hissed in the soap-like mixture of snow, ice and salt that covered the asphalt. None of it had anything to do with her, and she noted it all without really seeing it.

“You do speak Danish, don’t you?”

The policeman in the passenger seat had turned toward her and offered her a little blue and white pack. She nodded and took a piece. Said thank you. He smiled at her and turned back into his seat.

This wasn’t the “bus,” as they called it—the usual transport from Vestre Prison to the court—that Natasha had been on before. It was an ordinary black-and-white; the police were ordinary Danish policemen. The youngest one, the one who had given her the gum, was thirty at the most. The other was old and fat and seemed nice enough too. Danish policemen had kind eyes. Even that time with Michael and the knife, they had spoken calmly and kindly to her as if she hadn’t been a criminal they were arresting but rather a patient going to the hospital.

One day, before too long, two of these kind men would put Katerina and her on a flight back to Ukraine, but that was not what was happening today. Not yet. It couldn’t be. Her asylum case had not yet been decided, and Katerina was not with her. Besides, you didn’t need to go through Copenhagen to get to the airport, that much she knew. This was the way to Central Police Headquarters.

Natasha placed her hands on her light blue jeans, rubbed them hard back and forth across the rough fabric, opened and closed them quickly. Finally, she made an effort to let her fingers rest on her knees while she looked out at Copenhagen and tried to figure out if the trip into the city brought her closer to or farther from Katerina. During the last months, the walls and the physical distance that separated them had become an obsession. She was closer to her daughter when she ate in the cafeteria than when she was in her cell. The trip to the yard was also several meters in the wrong direction, but it still felt soothing because it was as if she were breathing the same air as Katerina. On the library computer Natasha had found Google Street View and dragged the flat little man to the parking lot in front of the prison, farther along Copenhagen’s streets and up the entrance ramp to the highway leading through the woods that sprawled north of the city’s outer reaches. It was as if she could walk next to him the whole way and see houses and storefronts and trees and cars, but when he reached the Coal-House Camp, he couldn’t go any farther. Here she had to make do with the grubby satellite image of the camp’s flat barrack roofs. She had stared at the pictures until she was nearly insane. She had imagined that one of the tiny dots was Katerina. Had dreamed of getting closer. From the prison, it was twenty-three kilometers to the Coal-House Camp. From the center of Copenhagen it was probably a few kilometers more, but on the other hand, there were neither walls nor barbed wire between the camp and her right now. The

was only the thin steel shell of the police car, air and wind, kilometers of asphalt. And later the fields and the wet forest floor.

She knew it wouldn't do any good, but she reached out to touch the young policeman's shoulder all the same. "You still don't know anything?" she asked in English.

His eyes met hers in the rearview mirror. His gaze was apologetic but basically indifferent. He shook his head. "We're just the chauffeurs," he said. "We aren't usually told stuff like that."

She leaned back in her seat and again began to rub her palms against her jeans. Opened and closed her hands. Neither of the two policemen knew why she was going to police headquarters. They had nothing for her except chewing gum.

The court case over the thing with Michael was long finished, so that probably wasn't what it was about, and her plea for asylum had never required interviews or interrogations anywhere but the Coal-House Camp.

Fear made her stomach contract, and she felt the urge to shit and pee at the same time. Only she could have had Katerina with her. If only they could have been together. At night in the prison, she had the most terrible nightmares about Katerina alone in the children's barrack, surrounded by flames.

Or Katerina making her way alone into the swamp behind the camp.

It was unnatural for a mother not to be able to reach out and touch her child. Natasha knew she was behaving exactly like cows after their calves were taken from them in the fall when they stood, their shrill bellowing lasting for hours, without knowing which way to direct their sorrow. She had tried to relieve her restlessness with cold logic. They were not separated forever, she told herself. Katerina came to visit once in a while with Nina, the lady from the Coal-House Camp, who reassured Natasha every time that she would personally take care of Katerina. Rina, the Danes called her. They thought that was her name because that was what the papers said. But Rina wasn't even a name. It was what was left when an overpaid little forger in Lublin had done what he could to disguise the original text.

Maybe that was why she was here? Had they discovered what the man in Lublin had done?

Her dread of the future rose like the tide. Her jaw muscles tightened painfully, and when she crushed the compact piece of gum between her teeth, everything in her mouth felt sticky and metallic.

The policeman at the wheel slowed down, gave a low, triumphant whistle and slid the car in between two other cars in a perfect parking maneuver. Through the front window, Natasha could see the grey, fortress-like headquarters of the Danish police. Why were there thick bars in front of some of the windows? As far as she knew, it wasn't here by the entrance that they locked up thieves and murderers. It seemed as if the bars were just there as a signal—warning about what awaited when the interrogations with the nice Danish policemen were over.

The fat cop opened the door for her. "This is as far as we go, young lady."

She climbed out of the car and buried her hands in the pockets of her down jacket. The cold hit her, biting at her nose and cheeks, and she realized that she had brought neither hat nor gloves. When you were in prison, the weather wasn't something that really mattered. She had barely registered the snow the day before.

The older policeman pulled a smoke out of his uniform jacket and lit it, gave an expectant

cough. The young cop, who already had a hand on Natasha's arm, sighed impatiently.

"Just two minutes," said the heavysset one and leaned against the car. "We've got plenty of time."

The young one shrugged. "You really should stop that, pal. It's going to kill both you and me. I'm freezing my ass off here."

The old one laughed good-naturedly and drew smoke deep into his lungs. Natasha wasn't freezing, but her legs felt weak, and she noticed again that she needed to pee. Soon. But she didn't want to say anything, didn't want the policemen to rush. She looked up at the massive squat building as if it could tell her why she was here. Relaxed uniformed and non-uniformed employees wandered in and out among the pillars in the wide entrance area. If they were planning to seal the fate of a young Ukrainian woman today, you couldn't tell, and for the moment, Natasha felt calmer.

This was Copenhagen, not Kiev.

Both she and Katerina were safe. She was still in Copenhagen. Still Copenhagen. Across the rooftops a bit farther away, she could see the frozen and silent amusement rides in Tivoli closed for the season. The tower ride from which she and Michael and Katerina had let themselves fall, secure in their little seats, on a warm summer night almost two years ago.

The big guy stubbed out his cigarette against a stone island in the parking lot and nodded at Natasha. "Well, shall we?"

She began to move but then remained standing as if frozen in place. The sounds of the city reached her with a sudden violence. The rising and falling song of car motors and tires on the road, the weak vibration in the asphalt under her when a truck rumbled by, the voices and slamming car doors. She was searching for something definite in the babble. She focused her consciousness to its utmost and found it. Again.

"*Ni. Sohodni. Rozumiyete?*"

Natasha locked her gaze on two men who had parked their car some distance away—one of them wearing an impeccable black suit and overcoat, the other more casual in dark jeans and a light brown suede jacket.

"Did someone nail your feet to the pavement?" the young cop said, in a friendly enough fashion. "Let's keep moving." His hand pressed harder around her elbow, pushing her forward a little.

"I'm sorry," she said. She took one more step and another. Looked down at the slush on the black asphalt and felt the fear rise in her in its purest and darkest form.

They worked their way sideways around a small row of dug-up parking spaces cordoned off with red-and-white construction tape. Long orange plastic tubes snaked their way up from the bottom of the deserted pit. Next to it was a small, neat pile of cobbles half covered by snow.

Natasha slowed down. Gently. Avoided any sudden movements.

The old guy looked back just as she bent down to pick up the top cobble. She smiled at him. Or tried to, at least.

"I'm just ..."

He was two steps away, but the younger one was closer, and she hit *him*, hard and fast and without thinking. She felt the impact shoot up through the stone and into her hand and close her eyes for an instant. She knew that the young cop fell in front of the old one, blocking her way, because she could hear them both curse and scrabble in the soap-like slush. But she

didn't see it.

She just ran.

Nina woke slowly, with some kind of murky nightmare rumbling at the bottom of her consciousness. There had been a refugee camp that looked like Dadaab, the flies and the heat and that smell you never completely escape from, the stench of atomized human misery. But the children lying before her on the ground with starved faces and protruding bellies were Anton and Ida.

She rolled over onto her side and tried to escape the dream. 9:02, announced the large digital wall clock that had been the first thing she hung on the wall when she moved in. A pale anemic February sun was streaming unimpeded through the window; the shades she had bought at IKEA on a rushed afternoon in August were still lying in their packaging on the radiator almost six months later. Luckily, there were no neighbors. Outside lay Grøndal Parkvej, and on the other side of it the park and the railroad embankment, the reason she had bought the apartment. Centrally located yet still a quiet neighborhood, the realtor had said, a really good parental buy—did she have a son or daughter starting college, perhaps? When he had realized that she was going to be living there herself, he had adjusted his expectations noticeably. Divorced mothers were difficult clients, it seemed, confused and unrealistic and with no perspective on their own budget.

The cell phone rang. It must be what had woken her, even though she hadn't really registered it, since it wasn't her ringtone. She poked Magnus in the ribs.

"It's yours," she said.

A groggy sound emanated from the fallen Swedish giant. He lay on his stomach, his head buried so deep in the pillow, it was amazing that he could breathe. His broad, naked shoulders were covered with short golden hair, and he smelled of semidigested beer. She nudged him again.

Finally, he lifted his head.

"Oh, my God," he said in his distinct Swedish accent. "What time is it?"

"It's Saturday," she said, since that was more to the point.

He reached for the cell phone, which was lying on the floor next to the bed along with his wallet and keys. Neat little bedside tables, his and hers, were not part of the apartment's inventory. The only place where she had made an effort was in Anton's and Ida's rooms, and they still hadn't turned out right. Everything was too tidy. It lacked the clutter of toys and discarded clothing, the scratches on the wall from hockey sticks and lightsabers, the remnants of stickers that wouldn't quite come off, odd splotches from overturned soda cans and soap bubble experiments. Quite simply, it lacked *children*. She hadn't managed to make it more than a temporary refuge. Home was still the apartment in Fejøgade, and that was where they had their life.

She got up and headed for the bathroom. A small bathtub that permitted only sit-up bathing, yellowing white tiles from the '50s, and if you insisted on having a washing machine in there you had to accept that you were going to bang your knees against it every time you sat on the toilet. But to sit in a Laundromat at an ungodly hour to have clean clothes for the next day ... No, thank you. "Been there, done that," as Ida would have said.

After peeing, Nina gargled with chlorhexidine. She was susceptible to thrush and other

mouth infections after her attack of radiation illness the year before. All in all, her resistance was not what it had been, she noted dryly. Otherwise Magnus probably wouldn't be lying in her bed now. The doctor and the nurse. Damn. How much more clichéd could you get?

He had just been through a divorce. So had she. They were both consenting adults and a that. But she knew perfectly well that it wasn't because they were adults. It was because they were both so unbearably lonely that any kind of intimacy was better than nothing.

Through the bathroom door she could hear his voice change from Saturday grogginess to professional clarity, and a rush of alarm raced through her. She spat out the petroleum-based mouthwash into the sink, plucked yesterday's T-shirt from the dirty laundry basket and pulled it on, then opened the door.

He was getting dressed, the cell phone still pressed to his ear.

"Okay," he said. "No, don't give her any more. I'm on my way."

"Is it Rina?" she asked with an odd kind of pseudomaternal instinct. There were around 200 females at the Coal-House Camp, yet Rina was the first one she thought of.

"They've given her several doses of Bricanyl," he said. "But they can still hear crackling on auscultation, and she's hyperventilating."

Sweet Jesus, it *was* Rina.

"What happened?"

"Everything," he said. "Come on."

Natasha had ended up on the wrong side of the lake, and there was only one way to deal with that. She had to get hold of a car.

The realization had been gnawing at her since the previous evening, or rather the previous night, because at that point it had been almost 2 A.M., and even if she had dared take a train or bus, they weren't running any longer, at least not to where she was going.

She had been so tired that her bones hurt. In particular her knees and the small of her back ached from the many freezing kilometers, and she knew that she couldn't walk much farther without resting.

Most of the houses on the quiet street lay dark and closed behind the snowy hedges. But she could hear music and party noises and beery shouts, and when she got to the next street corner, she saw three young men peeing into a hedge outside a whitewashed house that was alight with boozey festivities. She stopped, half sheltered by the fence of the corner lot, leaning for a moment against the cold tar-black planks.

"Laa, la-laa, la-laa ..." roared one of the peeing men, loudly and in no key known to man. "Laa, la-aa, la-laaa ... Come on!"

The two others joined in, which didn't make it any more tuneful.

"We are the champions, my friend ..."

She realized that they were celebrating some kind of sports victory. Presumably basketball—she suddenly saw how alike they were physically: broad shouldered, yes, but primarily tall and younger than she had thought at first; she had been fooled by their height.

Yet another young boy emerged from the house. He seemed more low-key than his peeing buddies, just as tall but a little skinnier, a little more awkward. His dark hair looked damp and spiky, and he wore glasses. A girl tottered after him in high heels she could barely manage, the strap of her pink blouse falling halfway off one shoulder.

"Robbie, don't go yet!" she shouted shrilly.

"I need to get home," he said.

"Why? Dammit, Robbie ... You can't just ... Robbie, come onnnn!"

One of the three at the hedge quickly zipped up and tried with similarly incoherent arguments to convince Robbie to stay, but he shook them off.

"I'll see you guys," he said and started walking with long, fairly controlled steps down the street in the direction of Natasha. The girl stood looking after him, her arms folded across her chest.

"Robbie," she wailed, but one of the guys by the hedge put an arm around her and pulled her along with him back into the house. Robbie continued down the sidewalk as if he hadn't heard her.

Natasha was about to back up so that he wouldn't notice her, but he didn't go all the way to her corner. Instead, he stopped at a dark blue car not far from her.

"Whoo-hoo," one of the remaining party boys commented. "Does Daddy know you're driving his Audi?"

"They're skiing," said Robbie. "They won't be home until Thursday."

He remained standing with the keys in his hand as if he didn't feel like getting in which

they were looking on. Not until they had followed their friend and the girl into the house did he unlock the car.

He was so tall. There was no way she'd be able to hit him and get away with it, and she no longer had a cobble or any other weapon. But he had a car key. And a car.

Without a car, she couldn't reach Katerina. Without a car, they couldn't get away, and they had to. In her mind, she once again heard the voices from the parking lot outside police headquarters. There was nothing recognizable about them, and what they had said wasn't alarming in itself. "It has to be today. Understand?" Ordinary words, not threatening—broken spoken in Ukrainian. She felt a fresh rush of panic just thinking about it.

She glided up behind the rangy young man and placed her hand on his, the hand in which he held the keys.

"Not good," she said in English. "Not good to drive after drink."

A good guess—the short delay in his reaction revealed that he had been drinking. Not as much as the others but probably still quite a bit. He stared at her as if he was trying to remember how they knew each other. She took the keys out of his hand, opened the door quickly and got in.

"Hey, wait ..." He stuck his leg in so she couldn't close the door and quickly grabbed the wheel. "What are you doing?"

Driving, she told herself silently. Driving to Katerina. But clearly he wasn't planning to just let her do so.

"Robbie," she said again in English. "Bad for you to drive. Let me. I take you home."

He looked at her through slightly foggy glasses. Using his name had had an effect. He thought they knew each other even though he wasn't sure how. And he was drunk. More than it had appeared at first.

"Okay," he said slowly. "You drive, er ..."

"Katerina," she said with her most dazzling smile. "Don't you remember? It's Katerina."

HE DIDN'T FALL asleep in the car as she had hoped. Instead he directed her through the suburban streets, closer to the lake that separated her from Katerina, and finally got her to turn into a drive and park in front of a garage and a yellow brick house with old ivy growing all the way to the roof. The branches from the large silver birch at the entrance were weighted so heavily with snow that they brushed across the car's roof. She turned off the engine and tried to leave the key in the ignition, but he was still too much on guard and pulled it out himself.

"Thank you," he said. And then apparently was struck by a thought beyond getting to his own front door. "What about you?" he asked. "How will you get home?"

She forced herself to look away from the car keys in his hand and into his eyes.

"Maybe you ask me to stay?" she said.

She felt anything but attractive. Her hair had been wet with snow several times, and the shirt under the down jacket was stiff and sticky with old sweat. She only had a little bit of mascara on, if it wasn't smeared under her eyes by now, and she knew she was very, very far from the beautiful Natasha that Pavel had once shown off to selective friends as "my lovely wife."

He sucked in air, making a sharp, startled sound. But somewhere a surprising degree of

sophistication appeared from beneath the boyish awkwardness.

“You are very welcome,” he said. “This way, madame.”

“Katerina,” she corrected him gently. “Or you make me feel like an old woman.”

SHE WOKE UP abruptly many hours later with a feeling of panic racing through her veins. Her head hurt, and she was once again sticky with sweat. The clean comforter that lay so light across her naked body had never been anywhere near a prison laundry, but it wasn't Michael lying next to her; it couldn't be, not anymore. The panic subsided.

It had grown light outside. Grubby grey winter light fell on piles of clothing, basketball shoes, a desk that had almost disappeared under heaps of books and paper, a green carpet marked with white lines like a basketball court. She hadn't intended to fall asleep, but the velvety blackness of her own unexpected orgasm had swept her into unconsciousness.

She felt a sudden tenderness for the overgrown boy who lay snoring with his face deep in the pillow—even more lost to the world than she herself had been. To be touched by another person. A person who hadn't pulled on clear plastic gloves to examine her body. A person who wanted to bring her desire, not pain. When was the last time she had experienced that? Not since Pavel.

She hadn't needed to sleep with him. He had left the car keys on a little table in the foyer. There had been several chances, but she hadn't seized them. Instead she had drunk shots and beer with him, and they had kissed on the sofa with way too much tongue, as if she were a teenager again. As if she were seventeen and had just met Pavel. And now she lay here in her bed, staring up at a huge poster of a towering black American basketball player who apparently was called Magic. Recalled the pressure of his hip against her stomach, the slippery feeling of sweaty skin against sweaty skin, his eager, choppy rhythm, a little too sharp, a little too hard and fast, yet still enough to give her that surprising dark release that had carried her into sleep.

He didn't move when she wriggled free of him and slid out of the bed. She stood for a moment, naked and dizzy on the green carpet, and felt so exhausted that she wanted just to crawl back into the nothingness with a heavy, warm body at her side.

“That won't do, my girl,” she whispered, and it wasn't her own voice she heard, but Anna's. Neighbor Anna, Katerina called her, even though they hadn't always been neighbors. “Sometimes you just have to go on. One foot in front of the other. Without thinking too much about it.”

She listened, but Anna-in-her-head didn't have anything else to say this time. And the reason Anna was probably sleeping safe at home in the yellow farmhouse next door to Michael's.

Natasha pulled on her jeans even though they were stiff with dried road salt all the way up to the knees. The shirt she couldn't bear. She bunched it up and stuffed it into the pocket of her jacket and instead stole a T-shirt and a grey hoodie from Robbie's closet. The sweatshirt sleeves were about a foot too long, but she rolled them up and put on her down jacket before they could unroll again.

There was a saucy drumroll from somewhere on the other side of the bed, and Natasha gave a start as Freddy Mercury's voice suddenly erupted into the same triumphant refrain she had heard the victory-drunk players bawl out at the party the night before. It was Robbie's cell phone. It was lying with his pants on the floor by the desk.

She picked it up and pressed the OFF button frantically. Robbie hadn't moved. Luckily, would take more than that to wake the sleeping warrior. She stuffed the cell phone in her own pants pocket, wrote a message on a pad that was lying on the desk and placed it next to his pillow. Then she went downstairs.

The car keys were still lying on the foyer table. She took them. In the kitchen she opened the refrigerator and drank a pint of milk without taking the carton from her mouth. She quickly examined the shelves, nabbed a package of rye bread and a big box of chocolate wafers for sandwiches, stuffing four or five pieces in her mouth right away. The sweet explosion of melted milk chocolate went directly to her empty energy deposits. The rest she carefully wrapped in foil again for Katerina.

She glanced at the clock over the sink. It was after ten, and it was high time she got going. Katerina was waiting right on the other side of the lake. And now Natasha had a car.

She took a knife from the kitchen drawer before she left.

“Don’t take that one. It isn’t ripe.”

Olga glowered at Oxana, who had followed her into the garden and now drew herself up in a wide-legged stance, with an annoyingly grown-up frown on her face. It was so typical of Oxana to interfere just when Olga had gotten permission to go pick a melon for tea, if she could find one that was ready. Olga was the one who had helped Mother dig and turn the earth and place the small brown seeds in the ground one by one. Shouldn’t she also be the one who decided when the first melon was ripe? Oxana might be two years older, but that didn’t make her any wiser. No way was this going to be her decision!

To prove that she was right, Olga quickly bent down and rapped hard with her knuckles on the biggest melon, just like Mother usually did. The sound was muffled and hollow, and Olga felt as if she could almost see the red fruit through the rind, heavy and sweet and juicy. Her mouth began to water.

“What about the other side?”

Oxana pushed Olga lightly and hit the melon on its yellow, dirt-covered bottom, making a flat, wooden crack.

“See for yourself,” said Oxana seriously. “It won’t be completely ripe for a few more days.”

“I don’t give a fart,” Olga said sourly. “We can eat it today, and it’ll be perfectly fine—anyway, I’m the one who gets to decide.”

Oxana frowned again. “Speak properly,” she said. “You’re starting to sound just like the boys. It’s better to wait until that melon tastes right. It’s only dogs and boys—little boys—who can’t help eating whatever is in front of their noses. Anyone with half a brain waits until they dig up the potatoes until they are big and leaves the apples on the tree while they are small and green and sour.”

Olga shook her head and suddenly couldn’t help thinking about Mashka, who had had a litter of puppies last year and had scrounged around the compost heap for food until October. Mother had once slapped Olga because she had snuck a piece of rye bread out to the dog, and after that Mashka had had to manage on her own with whatever mice and rats she could catch. Mashka hadn’t had time to wait for the potatoes to get big, or for the mice to get fatter, for that matter. Right after Christmas both she and the puppies had disappeared from the back shed, and it wasn’t hard to figure out who had taken her, because at that same time a group of Former Human Beings had drifted down the village’s main street, reaching out with their skeletal fingers for anything edible on their way. The bark had been peeled from the trees, sparrows shot out of the sky; they had even eaten dirt.

Olga shuddered.

Poor Mashka. She herself had looked like a dead dog in the end, so perhaps it had been for the best that she had been freed from her suffering. But still. It wasn’t nice of Oxana to speak so badly of dogs in that way. They just did what they had to do to survive. Just like everyone else.

Olga grabbed hold of the watermelon and twisted it defiantly so that it let go of the vine with a small, crunchy snap. “It’s ripe.”

Oxana sighed in the way that meant that Olga was so childish, and Oxana herself so much more grown-up. But she nonetheless quickly followed Olga around to the covered veranda.

where Mother had already heated water in the samovar. Mother took the melon, split it in half on the cutting board with the largest knife they had and didn't say a word about it not being ripe.

Olga looked triumphantly at Oxana. But Oxana just laughed and gave Olga's braid a friendly tug. It was odd. Sometimes Oxana pretended to be grown-up even though she wasn't. Other times she was just Oxana, like now, when she lifted little Kolja up from the rough planks on the veranda and danced around with him in her arms, as if there were a balalaika orchestra in her head. Kolja twisted his skinny little four-year-old body to get loose. He was a serious boy; even when he laughed, he somehow looked serious, as if he didn't believe that anything could be all that funny. Oxana's smile, on the other hand, shone like a sun, and she was beautiful, Olga thought, even now when she had just lost a tooth in both sides of her lower jaw and the new ones were growing in a little bit crooked. She was ten years old and a hand's breadth taller than Olga, but her teeth still looked too big for her narrow face. Her eyes were as blue as cornflowers.

Mother pulled off Kolja's shirt and vest so he could eat the first piece of watermelon without smearing the juice all over his clothes. Olga got the next piece and was just about to take a bite when she realized something was wrong.

"Shouldn't we wait for Father?"

"If he's not home in time for tea, there's not much we can do about it," said Mother. Her mouth had gotten small even though she was still smiling. "He'll be here soon enough."

"But ..." Oxana had also stopped now, one hand hovering about the platter. "I can run down to the office and get him."

"No, never mind," said Mother. She pulled her blouse out and fanned it back and forth to get a little air against her skin. "He'll probably be here soon."

This was wrong.

As long as Olga could remember, they had eaten the first watermelon together—all of them. When they lived in town, it had been a day of celebration, when Father cut the pieces and said funny things when he handed them out. "To my most highborn princess" or "to the most beautiful flower in the field."

Olga shifted uneasily in her seat, but she didn't say anything. It was one of the hottest summer days so far. Clothes felt sticky and itchy on the body, rubbing at the lice bites that had kept Olga and little Kolja awake all night. Mother had changed the straw in the mattresses, boiled the sheets and rubbed petroleum on the sleeping shelf, but the lice still bit in the heat and darkness until Olga was about to go mad. For some reason they weren't interested in Oxana.

Olga scratched her neck and looked uncertainly at her big sister. It would have been best if Father was there too, but the large, sweet watermelon pieces lay in front of her, and it was unbearable. Oxana was right about that. She was no good at waiting.

She reached across the platter and took a thick slice. It was so juicy that the water dripped from her fingers, and when she took the first bite, it was wonderfully sweet and immediately pushed away her bad conscience. Mother could keep her rye bread, pickles and thyme tea today, and Oxana could stare at her as sourly as she liked. Olga took another piece.

"You're such a baby," Oxana said, outraged. "I'm waiting for Father."

Olga stuck out her tongue and kicked at Oxana under the table, but for once Mother didn't

say anything. She had taken a piece of melon herself, bending her head over the table and carefully spitting out the black, mature seeds onto a piece of newspaper to be dried and saved for next year's crop. Then she pushed the plate of pickles toward Oxana. "Eat."

Oxana shook her head and glanced up the road.

Something was wrong. Olga could feel it all the way in the pit of her stomach. A kind of dark energy shone out of Mother now. It was like the wind that suddenly arrived and stirred up the dust in the road before a thundershower. From the Pretrenkos' house on the other side of the cabbage patch, Olga could hear laughter and Vladimir shouting something or other to Jana. Other than that, everything was quiet in the oppressive afternoon heat.

"Do you want to spoil the food?" Mother asked. She was pale with anger now. "Eat, or I guarantee that you will go to bed without food. Your father is drinking his tea someplace else today."

Oxana looked frightened. Mother rarely got angry, but when she did, she sometimes struck them. Mother's hands were hard and dry as wood. Now she got up abruptly and began shoving the food off the table with angry gestures. Kolja reached out fast, grabbed two more pieces of melon and raced down to the bottom of the garden with his prize. Olga remained petrified, looking at her mother. A kind of hidden knowledge began to bubble up to the surface.

The arguments had woken her in the night several times in the first months of spring. When Mother and Father argued, they whispered instead of shouting, so that it sounded like an excited hissing in the dark. Mother had never hidden the fact that she would have preferred to stay in Kharkiv, where Father had been a factory manager and a highly respected member of the Party. Even in the great hunger year, they had had bread and also a little sugar, salt and vegetables. To return to the village was suicide, she had said, but even though she cried, Father insisted.

It was the Party that had asked him to take over the management of the collective because he was known in the village and had a bit of experience with farming from his boyhood. And the Party was greater than Mother's tears, that much Olga knew. Father loved his Party and his country and would do everything possible to ensure that everyone would be better off. He would build a better future with his own hands. Olga had been on Mother's side, but of course Oxana had been on Father's, as she always was. And he was the one who got what he wanted in the end. Mother had dried her eyes, packed their things in silence and had followed him to the village where they had both grown up.

They had arrived in Mykolayevka in the fall right after the harvest, and Olga had hated the place instantly. Half the village's houses stood empty, with rattling shutters and broken planks and beams. Most of the trees along the main street had been chopped down, and the few that were left had been stripped of their bark and were as dead as the houses around them. Just two poplars remained by the house of the village soviet, their silver leaves rustling in the wind. The few people in the street were thin and starved and dressed in layers upon layer of rags and coats full of holes. Even Father had looked frightened, Olga thought, but then he said that this year, the harvest was already safe. The horror stories of the great hunger year would soon be only that: stories. They would see; it would soon get better. Oxana believed him, but Olga's stomach hurt, and she tried to hide her face against Mother's chest.

The first winter had been just as terrible as Mother had feared. Even though Father was the foreman for the kolkhoz, and the harvest was better than the previous year, the bread rations were meager. Father would not take more for his family than the ordinary workers received, Oxana reported proudly. Just once, he had brought home a load of potatoes and a barrel of rancid salt pork that he had bought on the open market, and that had lasted a whole month.

It had not been enough. Not even the salt pork had staved off the hunger altogether and silenced the hollow ache under the ribs. And spring had been the worst. While everything bloomed around them, hunger had gnawed at their stomachs worse than ever.

It wasn't Father's fault, that much Olga understood. And it had gotten better in the course of the first warm summer months. But Mother still cried and scolded all the time and was thin and tired and grey even though the sun was shining and they had been able to collect the first potatoes in the garden over a month ago. She had lost two teeth in her lower jaw, which now gaped as emptily as Oxana's.

But it occurred to Olga now that the whispered arguments in the night throughout the spring had not been just about Mother's longing for Kharkiv and her fear of cold and starvation.

Father drank his tea someplace else.

A picture of Father down by the sawmill in the company of a smiling, full-figured woman whirled through Olga's head, followed by the laughing mug of Sergej from school. Sergej had lice and stank, like the little pig he was.

"What do you think of the widow Svetlova?" he had asked.

"What do you mean?"

"Do you like her?"

Olga shrugged. She had no interest in talking with Sergej, who was seven and disgusting to look at, with large pox scars on his forehead.

"Your father does," he said and pulled his index finger quickly back and forth through the circle he made of the index finger and thumb on his other hand. It was deeply disquieting even though Olga didn't understand what it meant.

The realization hit her now like a spurt of blood, burning her cheeks and her stomach.

The widow Svetlova had made it through the winter in a better state than Mother. She had no children and was younger. Much younger, with round cheeks and broad white teeth without a single gap.

Oxana sat with her head lowered and picked at the splinters in the table. She was probably pouting because she hadn't gotten any melon, but she didn't deserve any better.

"Now look what you've done," hissed Olga. "You've made Mother sad."

Oxana shrugged. She scowled, eyes full of tears.

"You're such a baby," was all she said. "You wouldn't be able to wait for anything if your life depended on it."

“Magnus, damn it,” snapped Nina, but Magnus was driving twenty-five meters in front of her and couldn’t hear her clenched exclamation. The winding forest road to the Coal-House Camp was not at the top of the municipality’s list of priorities as far as plowing went, and with every snowfall the road got narrower and the snowbanks on both sides got higher. Magnus was driving close to the speed limit, with Volvo steadiness on authorized winter tires, while her middle-aged Nissan Micra skated around the turns as if it had never heard the word “traction.”

The Micra was an emergency solution. It was almost fifteen years old, the door handle on the passenger side had broken off and the gearshift suffered from a reluctance to return to the middle position unless you gave it a sharp whack. Someone had painted green racing stripes on its curry-green door, most likely in a desperate attempt to give it a bit of personality. It was not the dream car; it was the “what I can afford?” car. She couldn’t do without it. The public transportation’s tenuous connection to the Coal-House Camp, more officially known as the Red Cross Center Furesø, ceased completely at 9 P.M., and night shifts were an unavoidable part of the job of nurse.

The Micra’s front wheels spun without effect on the black ice, and Nina had to fight a deep-seated urge to step on the brakes. The car sailed sideways into the curve and only fell into the track again seconds before it would have collided with the snow. She shifted down and waited for it to slow. Ahead of her, the back of Magnus’s Volvo disappeared around the next turn. Perhaps she should have come in the Volvo with him. But then there was the problem of getting home again, and they hadn’t exactly announced their ... affair sounded completely wrong, relationship even worse—their mutual loneliness relief to the world. Maybe not arriving at the same time was a good move. But the adrenaline made her stomach burn, and the slow driving necessary on the slippery roads felt completely counterintuitive.

Natasha had escaped custody. As unbelievable as it sounded, it was true. The authorities had concluded that she might try to get hold of Rina and had therefore sent police out to the Coal-House Camp, which was, Nina thought, not something she could really object to, except that they had apparently managed to provoke one of the worst anxiety and asthma attacks Rina had experienced in all the time she’d been in the camp. Nina understood why Magnus was rushing and cursed the Micra’s insufficiencies both mentally and out loud. “Damn it, damn it, damn it.”

When she finally rolled into the parking lot in front of the camp’s main entrance, she instantly spotted two almost identical dark blue Mondeo station cars. Two cars. Presumably at least four people. Apparently there was no lack of resources when the object was to catch single mothers with a foreign background found guilty of attempted murder, Nina thought dryly. It didn’t say POLICE on the side, but it might as well have. Did they really think Natasha was stupid enough to wander into the camp as long as they were parked there? The police had errands at the camp fairly regularly, and Natasha knew just as well as the rest of the camp’s current and former residents which car makes she should be on the lookout for.

On the other hand, it wasn’t particularly intelligent to attack two policemen with a cobbler. Nina had a hard time recognizing Natasha in the hurried description of events that Magnus

had given her on their way to the cars. Of course, Natasha could be pushed to act violently, probably almost everyone could. But when she stabbed her fiancé with a hunting knife, hadn't been because he had physically abused her for months; it wasn't until she caught him with his fingers in Rina's panties that she had counterattacked. During all the time she had spent in Vestre Prison, she had been almost alarmingly silent and passive.

Until now.

"What the hell were you thinking?" Nina muttered to herself as she made her way up the barely shoveled walkway in the direction of the camp's little clinic. Something or other had clearly brought this on, but what?

She stomped the snow off her boots on the grate by the clinic's main entrance. Weeks worth of frosty slush was packed in the metal grid so that it had become like trying to dry your feet on an enormous ice cube tray. As she opened the door, though, the heat hit her like a hammer. Magnus consistently ignored all energy-saving suggestions on that point. "The people who come here are sick, depressed and hurt," he had said when the chair of the camp's conservation committee had protested. "I'll be damned if I'm going to let them freeze as well!"

Rina was half sitting, half lying on a cot in one of the two examination rooms. In the corner between the closet and the wall sat an aggressively clean-shaven young man in a hoodie that on him looked more like workout clothes than weekend wear. He had placed himself in such a way that he couldn't be seen from the window, and Nina concluded that he had to be a member of the Mondeo brigade. There had been a moment of heightened alertness as she came in, but now he relaxed back into a waiting position, apparently convinced solely by her age and appearance that she posed no danger.

"Hello, sweetie," Nina said, squeezed Rina's hand, which was limp and a little too cool. "What are we going to do with you?"

There was something about the slight, eight-year-old body and the narrow face that reminded Nina of the eastern European little girl gymnasts of the 1970s—Olga Korbut, Nadia Comaneci and whatever they were called. Not the smiling medal photos, but the serious, too-old-for-their-age concentration before the routine, the shadows under their eyes, the contrast between the cheerful ponytails and the hollow-cheeked, pain-etched faces. Rina's hair was blond like her mother's, thick, straight dark blonde hair without even the suggestion of curl or wave. Right now that hair was pulled back with a light blue Alice band, but even though you could occasionally sense that Rina felt she had fallen through a rabbit hole to an alternate universe, there clearly wasn't much Wonderland about it. Her breathing was still terribly labored. Tiny pinpoint blood effusions around her half-closed eyes revealed how hard she had to fight to get enough oxygen into her tormented bronchial tubes. Yet it wasn't Rina's physical condition that made Nina's own heart contract as if it were something more than a pumping muscle.

"Sweetie," she said, sitting down next to the child and pulling her close. Even on good days, anxiety lay like permafrost just beneath Rina's thin crust of childish trust. Now the trust was gone. There was no wish for contact in the slight body; she just let herself be moved with an arbitrary shift in her weight that had nothing to do with intimacy.

Having changed quickly, Magnus entered, stethoscope in hand. Pernille, who had had the night shift, followed on his heels.

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