

## 1

It was more comfortable than I could have imagined. A room of my own with a bathroom, or rather an apartment of my own, because there were two rooms: a bedroom and a living room with a kitchenette. It was light and spacious, furnished in a modern style and tastefully decorated in muted colors. True, the tiniest nook or cranny was monitored by cameras, and I would soon realize there were hidden microphones there too. But the cameras weren't hidden. There was one in each corner of the ceiling—small but perfectly visible—and in every corner and every hallway that wasn't visible from the ceiling; inside the closets, for example, and behind doors and protruding cabinets. Even under the bed and under the sink in the kitchenette. Anywhere a person might crawl in or curl up, there was a camera. Sometimes as

you moved through a room they followed you with their one-eyed stare. A faint humming noise gave away the fact that at that particular moment someone on the surveillance team was paying close attention to what you were doing. Even the bathroom was monitored. There were no fewer than three cameras within that small space, two on the ceiling and one underneath the washbasin. This meticulous surveillance applied not only to the private apartments, but also to the communal areas. And of course nothing less was to be expected. It was not the intention that those who lived here should be able to take their own lives or harm themselves in some other way. Not once you were here. You should have sorted that out beforehand, if you were thinking along those lines.

I was, for a while. I thought about hanging myself or jumping in front of a speeding train or doing a U-turn on the highway and driving toward the oncoming traffic at full speed. Or simply driving off the road. But I didn't have the courage. Instead I just obediently allowed myself to be picked up at the agreed time outside my house.

The first snowdrops had just appeared in my flowerbeds, which had been blazing with yellow winter aconite for several weeks now. It was a Saturday morning. I had lit the fire earlier. A transparent, quivering plume of smoke was still rising from the chimney as I stood waiting by the side of the road outside the gate. There wasn't a breath of wind, and the air was cold and clear.

The SUV was a metallic wine red, so shiny that it cast reflections of the sun as it slowly moved down the hill and through the village, then stopped in front of me. All the windows except the windshield and the front side windows were tinted black; apart from that the car was completely anonymous, with no logo or sticker to reveal where it had come from or where it was going. The driver, a woman in a black quilted jacket, climbed out and

greeted me with a nod and a friendly smile. She hoisted my large suitcase into the trunk and waved me into the back seat. I fastened my seat belt and placed my shoulder bag on my knee, my arms around it. The driver put the car in first gear, released the handbrake, and we moved off. There were only the two of us in the car. We didn't say anything to each other.

After a drive of about two hours, behind those windows that were so dark I would have found it difficult to follow our route even if I'd tried, or to work out in which direction I was being taken, we suddenly plunged downward and the sound of the engine and the tires changed and became muted and echoing at the same time, as if we were traveling through a tunnel. First it became darker, then lighter on the other side of the windows, then the car stopped and the engine was switched off. The door by the back seat where I was sitting was opened from the outside. I saw a man's face and a woman's face. The woman's face was smiling, her mouth open, and she said:

"Hi there, Dorrit! You've arrived."

I got out of the car and saw that I was in a parking lot, an underground one from the look of things. The man and the woman were both dressed in green shirts the color of linden flowers, with the logo of the unit in white on the breast pocket—I recognized it from the information packet that had been sent to me at home a few months earlier. The man and woman introduced themselves as Dick and Henrietta. Henrietta added:

"We're your section orderlies."

She went around the car, opened the trunk, lifted out my suitcase and set off toward a row of elevators at one end of the parking lot where some fifty cars were parked, most of them ordinary family cars, SUVs or minibuses, but I also saw a couple of ambulances. Dick picked up my shoulder bag from the concrete floor where I'd put it while I shook hands. I would have preferred to carry it myself, as it contained my most private possessions, but he insisted and I didn't want to make a scene, so I shrugged my

shoulders and let him take it. He gestured toward the elevators. I followed Henrietta empty-handed with him directly behind me.

The elevator went up only one floor. When we got out, Dick said:

“We’re on level K1 now. That’s the upper basement floor.”

We walked along a wide corridor with a red ceiling, floor, and walls until we reached another row of elevators. We got into one of them, went up several floors and came out into something that resembled an ordinary stairwell with two doors that looked like ordinary apartment doors, one at each end. Dick, who had less to carry of the two functionaries, went ahead and pushed open one of the doors labeled SECTION H3 and held it open for me. I walked into an open common room of the kind usually found in hospital wards or student corridors, a lounge really. On a sofa in the corner sat a woman with red frizzy hair, just starting to turn gray, reading a magazine. In front of her on the table was a steaming cup of tea. Judging by the aroma, it was peppermint. The woman looked up, smiling.

“This is Majken,” said Henrietta. “And this is Dorrit.”

I managed to croak something that was supposed to be hello, and noticed that my mouth was completely dry.

“I live two doors down from you,” said Majken. “If there’s anything you’re not sure about, or if you just want to talk—or not even that; if you want to be quiet in someone’s company, or anything at all—then I’m either here or in my room for the next few hours. It says Majken Ohlsson on my door.”

“Okay,” I managed to get out.

She looked at me, her gaze steady. Her eyes were flecked with green.

“Don’t hesitate,” she added. “You mustn’t feel you’re disturbing me. We always have time for each other here.”

“Okay,” I said again. Then I thought I ought to say something else, so I said: “Thanks.”

A hallway led off the lounge, with five doors along one side. On the second door was my name. Dick pushed down the door handle, opened the door, and we walked straight into the living room.

Henrietta put my suitcase down on the floor. Dick placed the shoulder bag on top of it, then turned to me and asked pleasantly:

“Would you like us to stay for a while?”

“No,” I replied, a fraction less pleasantly.

“In that case we’ll leave you in peace,” he said. “Just don’t forget the orientation meeting at two o’clock.”

He looked at me searchingly, as if to check that I could really manage all on my own until two o’clock. I couldn’t help snorting. Then they left, closing the door behind them.

So there I stood.

It was warm in the room; it must have been about seventy degrees. I wasn’t used to such a high temperature indoors, especially not at this time of year. I shrugged off my peacoat, untied my winter boots, took off my cardigan and finally my socks. For the time being I just left everything lying in a heap on the floor. I stood next to the heap, barefoot, contemplating a simple beechwood dining room set, a deep sofa and two armchairs upholstered in eggshell white; at the far side of the room in an alcove was a desk. To my left, the kitchenette, to my right, the bathroom door, and next to that the bedroom, with the door standing open. To my surprise I saw that there was a double bed in there. I’d never had a double bed in my entire life. I laughed, and that was when I heard the faint hum of one of the cameras for the first time, as it turned its little dark eye toward me and— or so I imagined—zoomed in on my face. I automatically looked away.

## 2

Yes, I did actually have a house. When I say that I was picked up outside my house, I don't just mean my home, my residence, but my actual house. Despite my very low and irregular income, I had managed to get a bank loan some eight years earlier, just before I turned forty-two, to buy a little place I'd been to look at several times, and one of my life's dreams had been fulfilled: a house of my own and a garden of my own on the open, rolling plain between the Romele Ridge and the south coast.

But I hadn't been able to afford to maintain the house. The bargeboards and the window frames were rotten, the paint was flaking, the roof leaked in at least two places, and new drainage was needed all the way around the house. My income just about covered the interest on the loan, paying it off in the smallest

possible installments; wood and electricity and maintenance costs, plus insurance, taxes, gas, and food for myself and my dog. And I don't think it could have made much difference to the state coffers when the confiscation authority sold the house at auction—that is if they managed to sell it at all in its present condition.

But despite the fact that I'd let the house get so run down, and despite the fact that it was old-fashioned and impractical, and cold and drafty in the winter and damp and stuffy in the summer, at least it was my very own home, my sanctuary, a place over which I and no one else had control, where my dog could run free and I could work in peace most of the time: no noisy neighbors on the other side of the wall, no footsteps clattering up and down an echoing stairwell, no squabbling kids in the shared courtyard, no communal outdoor spaces where families with children or friends could come along and sit down just as I was relaxing in the sun, noisily snacking or partying around me as if I didn't exist. I felt at home here, both indoors and outdoors; this was my domain, and if anyone—a neighbor or a friend who happened to be passing by—noticed that I was sitting in the garden, and stepped in through the gate for a chat or a cup of coffee, then at least it was me they wanted to talk to or drink coffee with. And if I didn't have the time or the inclination for a chat, then I had the right to tell them that, and they would have to go away.

It very rarely happened that I would ask someone to go. I didn't have very many friends, and not so many neighbors either, and if visitors turned up unannounced at an inconvenient moment, I usually let them stay for a little while anyway. If you live alone in the country you can't afford to push away your neighbors, or fall out with them. In fact, the way I see it, you can't afford to fall out with anyone at all if you live alone and no one needs you. Therefore I was friendly and welcoming from the very start each time someone turned up in my garden or at my door, even

those times when I was absorbed in my work and they really were disturbing me.

At that time, when I'd just moved in, I still regarded the future with optimism. I still believed and hoped that it wasn't too late to have a child. Or at least to start earning money from my profession and become financially secure, or find a partner, someone who would love me and want to live with me. Almost to the very end I had hopes, futile and desperate hopes, of Nils.

Nils was several years younger than me, tall and strong and with tremendous sexual vitality. We had the same secret desire. The same sexual fantasies. The same hopelessly politically incorrect attitude. We were like a hand in a glove. He was actually living with another woman already; they had a child together, a boy. He never said he loved me, but for him, as for me, the word "love" was a big thing to say. But he said he "almost loved me"—he said it many times—and for me that was wonderful to hear. To be almost loved is as close as you can get to being loved without actually being loved.

Perhaps it was because of this "almost loving" that as late as six weeks before my fiftieth birthday, in a final attempt at least to gain a dispensation with regard to the date, I turned to him and asked him to save me—yes, in my desperation I actually used that expression—by separating from his partner and becoming mine instead, and, regardless of whether it was true or not, supplying a written declaration to the authorities stating that he loved me. When I asked him this outright he became terribly upset. In fact, he cried. He sat there naked on the edge of my bed, and that was the first and last time I saw him cry. He sat there with his eyes glistening, sobbing, and he pulled a corner of the duvet over his penis, apparently unconsciously, and said:

"Dorrit, I think more of you than I've ever thought of any other woman, and it isn't just sexual feelings, you know that. I admire

you and respect you, I almost love you, and I would be more than happy to live with you and share my life with you. But for one thing, I want my son to grow up with both parents living in the same house. And for another, I can't actually say I love you, because I can't lie. I . . . I'm just not made that way. I can't say it to you, and I can't say it to the authorities; I can't put my name to something that isn't true. That would be perjury. I would be committing a crime. You have to understand this, Dorrit. I . . ."

He paused, took a deep breath, swallowed a few times, sniveled, rubbed his finger under his nose, and went on, virtually breathless, almost whispering:

"I'm so sorry, I'm so sorry. I . . . you know what you've meant . . . what you mean to me. I'll miss you so much, I . . ."

And he wept and wept. He put his arms around me, clung to me, howling like a child. I didn't cry. Not then.

I didn't cry until I said good-bye to Jock, my dog; we'd been so close for so many years. He's a Danish-Swedish farm dog, white with black and brown patches, brown eyes, and ears that are as soft as velvet, one black and one white. I gave him to a family I knew and trusted, not far from where I lived. Lisa and Sten and their three children. They've got a smallholding with horses and chickens, and they were very fond of Jock. The children loved him. I knew he liked them too, and that he'd have a good life there. But even so. He was mine, after all. And I was his. Between him and me you really could—without committing perjury—talk about love. The feeling was mutual, I'm convinced of that. But dogs don't count; a dog's dependence and devotion are not enough. And it was when I had left Jock at Sten and Lisa's and I was driving away that I wept.

Loving and leaving don't go together. They are two irreconcilable concepts, and when they are forced together by outside circumstances they require an explanation. But I was unable to give Jock that explanation. Because how do you explain something

like that—or anything at all—to a dog? Nils could at least explain to me why he couldn't be with me properly and make me a needed person, and I could understand that. But how will Jock, if he's still alive, ever be able to understand why I drove away without him that day? How will he ever be able to understand why I never came back?

### 3

The suitcase wasn't particularly heavy. All I had to do was get a good grip and swing it up onto the table. I opened it and started unpacking. It was mostly clothes, nothing out of the ordinary: sweaters, shirts and pants. A black jacket for festive and formal occasions. Clothes for exercising. Sneakers, walking shoes, sandals.

But at the last minute and after much deliberation, I had stuffed my little black dress into my shoulder bag, along with my blue skirt, my fitted white blouse, a push-up bra, a few pairs of stockings and my high heels. I had no idea if I would get the chance to wear them here. I didn't think so, but then they didn't take up much room. Besides which they were mine, after all, and they had been expensive and not all that easy to get hold of. And

I knew myself well enough to know that if I suddenly got the urge to feel feminine, I would be very unhappy if I didn't have the means to satisfy that urge.

I stood with my back to the surveillance camera on the ceiling, fumbling with the dress, skirt and blouse I'd just taken out of my bag, then opened the closet door to hang them up—and that was when I saw there was a camera in there too. It was pointing straight at me, and it made me feel as if I'd been caught red-handed. I could feel myself blushing. Then I got angry, gave the camera the finger, put my clothes resolutely on hangers and shut the door on them.

I had also packed a couple of books, and I put them on a side table in the living room for the time being; I placed my laptop on the desk in the alcove. I put my favorite pen, a notepad and an envelope containing some photographs in the drawer of the bedside table.

The envelope contained a photo of Jock, one of Nils, one of my house and one of my family from when I was a child. It was a Polaroid, taken on the sofa in my parents' house. Mom and Dad in the center, Mom with the baby, Ole, on her knee. Next to her Ida and me, and next to Dad the two eldest, Jens and Siv, sitting close together. We're all smiling. Ida and I are actually laughing. I was eight when the picture was taken by Mom's best friend; I remember I really liked her a lot. She loved kids but had none of her own, and she'd insisted on taking a photo of us all with her new Polaroid camera that day. It was actually the only photo of the whole family gathered together, so I was glad she'd got her way. Unfortunately, I can't remember her name.

My family was all over the place now, scattered to the winds like a dandelion clock. Both my parents had died a long time ago. If they had still been alive, I could probably have received a dispensation for a few years to look after them. Jens, Ida and Ole had families of their own, living and working in different

parts of Europe. My older sister Siv didn't exist anymore, at least I didn't think so. She had no children and was seven years older than me, so the probability that she might still be alive wasn't particularly great, that's if she had become dispensable—I didn't even know that much for certain.

I finished unpacking, pushed my suitcase, peacoat and winter boots into the top part of the closet, then began—indifferently at first, then restlessly, finally almost manically—wandering to and fro through the two rooms and into the bathroom; I turned on the faucets, flushed the toilet, opened drawers and cabinets, checked out the appliances in the kitchen, made sure the refrigerator and freezer were on and that the ice maker, ceramic cooktop, convection oven, microwave and kettle were all working. Went over to the alcove and sat down on the chair in front of the desk. It was a nice chair, made of molded wood, but it wasn't particularly comfortable. It didn't give support to the lower back, but higher up, just below the shoulder blades, and there were no arms. I knew from experience that if I sat and wrote for just a few hours a day on a chair of this quality, I would have an aching back and shoulders within a week. But I was sure I would get a better chair if I asked for one. From now on it was important that I was kept in good condition and good health in every way. That was the whole point, after all.

I got up from the chair and went over to the sofa to try that out. It was wonderful, both to sit on and to lie on. I settled down and picked up the remote from the coffee table, pointed it at the TV, pressed a button at random and the picture quickly appeared. It was a German channel broadcasting a talk show. I flipped here and there, established that there appeared to be lots and lots of channels, and that at least the world came here, even if I couldn't reach the outside from now on, not by mail, e-mail, text messages or telephone calls. From now

on the telephone existed for me only in the form of a fixed internal line, and as for the Internet, I was allowed to surf only under supervision, which meant an orderly or another member of staff sitting beside me, and I was not allowed to join chat forums, contribute to blogs, create or respond to advertisements, or vote in opinion polls.

After flipping at top speed through fifty or so channels, I switched off the television, got up from the sofa, stretched, then looked around the room. What should I do now? A glance at the clock on the DVD player under the TV told me there was still quite a while before the meeting at two o'clock. This was not good. I'd begun to get the creeps. Whether it was from anxiety or anger, I didn't know and I didn't want to know. If there had been a window I would have gone and stood by it to look out. That usually had a calming effect on me, standing by a window and looking out. But—I only realized it now—there were no windows, not anywhere. I had probably registered it subconsciously as soon as I was shown into the apartment, but it was only now that it struck me. No windows. And yet it was daylight in here. How could that be? Nor did the light appear to be coming from any kind of lamp. It didn't seem to be falling in a particular direction; it was more that the room seemed to be filled by it. I looked around the living room in confusion. The only light that was on was the bulb above the sink in the kitchenette. In a vain attempt to solve the mystery, I went over and switched it off, but it didn't make much difference. I gave up.

It wasn't until a couple of days later that I found out about the daylight. It was when I got on top of a chair to put a shelf above the alcove where the desk was. I happened to glance up at one of the rectangular air vents mounted in the walls, high up, close to the ceiling, a couple in each room. They turned out not to be air vents at all, because when I was standing on the chair looking diagonally through the upwardly angled slats—

roughly like Venetian blinds when you adjust them to let in the light, but not direct sunlight—I was dazzled by the harsh white glare of the diodes inside.

Because I couldn't go and stand by a window to calm myself down, and because the creepy feeling in my body was threatening to get out of hand and take over, I wondered about going to the lounge or maybe knocking on Majken's door. But when I thought about it, I didn't feel ready. I was also very tired, so I went into the bedroom and lay down on one side of the double bed. Lay there, looking up at the ceiling and trying not to think. Took deep breaths and concentrated on exhaling slowly. After a while I must have fallen asleep, because when a loudspeaker somewhere in the room suddenly crackled, I opened my eyes with a start. The crackling gave way to a friendly exhortation from a male voice:

“This is a message for today's new arrivals. We would like to remind you that the obligatory welcome and orientation meeting will be taking place in conference room D4 in ten minutes. You will find conference room D4 on staircase D on the fourth floor. The easiest way is to take the optional elevator down to level K1, follow the blue corridor then take elevator D up to the fourth floor. Welcome, everyone! End of message.”

## 4

There were eight of us. Only two were men, which wasn't that strange as the age limit for them is sixty. It's perfectly natural; after all, they produce viable sperm much later in life than we produce eggs. Even so, I had thought for a long time that the difference in age limits for men and women was unfair. That is until Nils informed me that there were lots of men—I think he even knew a few—who had been conned out of parenthood by women who just wanted free sperm.

“It's really only fair that men get more time, so stop moaning!”

I was very upset when he said that, not least because I felt found out. One of the reasons I had sex with Nils was that I secretly hoped the condom he so carefully slid over his penis before we had intercourse might split. I also made sure we got

together immediately before or during ovulation. But it was also his harsh words, and the hardness in his voice when he said them, that upset me, and from then on I never spoke to Nils about my anxiety as I approached my fiftieth birthday.

There was still a minute or so before the orientation began. We went around shaking hands and introducing ourselves. Everybody looked pale and serious. Resolute. I was feeling slightly unwell and just a little bit groggy and only half awake after my unintended nap. An orderly who had been by the door welcoming us and ticking us off on a list was now standing by a table up on the podium at the front of the room, arranging some papers, a bottle of water, a bottle opener and a glass. She gave an introverted impression, as if she were shy. But if you happened to meet her eye, she smiled warmly. Her legs were disproportionately short, and she must have been seven or eight months pregnant. When she had finished arranging everything on the table, she climbed down and moved with short, waddling steps to the other end of the room. The way she walked reminded me of a penguin, which made me feel a little better, and the next time she smiled at me, I smiled back.

There was something familiar about one of the other new arrivals, a tall slender woman with high cheekbones and slanting eyes who seemed to be looking at everything around her with narrow-eyed skepticism. I recognized the girl in her through all the layers of age, but at first I couldn't place her. When she introduced herself as Elsa Antonsson, I remembered.

"Elsa! It's Dorrit—Dorrit Weger."

"I can see that now," she said, smiling tentatively. "Elementary and middle school. We were in the same class."

"Time passes . . ." she added slowly, in a voice that was only just holding. She was noticeably moved.

"Yes," I said. "Time passes."



We sat down in a semicircle facing the podium. The director of the unit was now standing behind the table, neatly and impeccably dressed in a dark maroon suit and a gray shirt. She looked at us, allowing her gaze to rest on each person in turn. Made sure she met everyone's eyes. This made her appear extremely sincere. She smiled, unbuttoned her jacket, cleared her throat and took a deep breath, and as she breathed out she began to speak:

“My name is Petra Runhede, and I am the director here at the Second Reserve Bank Unit for biological material. First of all I want to welcome you here. I would also like to take the opportunity to congratulate you on your fiftieth or sixtieth birthdays. Congratulations! This evening we will be throwing a big party for you all. A combined welcome and birthday celebration. Everyone in the unit, residents as well as staff, is of course invited. If everyone attends there will be something in the region of three hundred people. There will be a dinner, entertainment, and dancing. Don't miss it! Our welcome parties are usually a lot of fun! We hold one each month, as you might be able to work out. Because those of you who are here, the eight of you, have certain things in common, including the fact that you were born in the same month. You are all February children.”

Petra paused and took a sip of water.

“You all know why you're here,” she went on, “so I won't bore you by going through all the whys and wherefores.”

She had tilted her head slightly to one side and was smiling now, confident but still immensely engaging.

“Or to put it more accurately: you know *the main reason* why you are here. But there is also something more positive for you in all of this.”

She paused again, for slightly longer this time, looking at us with a serious expression.

“I have no doubt,” she said slowly, once again allowing her gaze to move from one to another, stopping briefly on each of us, “you have found that people were often unsure of you, felt nervous in your company, sometimes seemed afraid, or behaved in a condescending or scornful way. Isn’t that the case? Do you recognize that kind of situation?”

Nobody replied. There was complete silence in the room, apart from a faint hum from the air-conditioning. I was staring like an idiot at Petra, and presumably the other seven were doing the same. After a while she continued:

“Is there anyone who doesn’t recognize that situation?”

We burst out laughing, grinning at each other in embarrassment, responding to her with a mumble of denial.

“Okay,” she said, “this is what I mean. For the majority of you it isn’t until you come to the reserve bank unit that you will experience the feeling of belonging, of being part of something with other people, which those of us who are needed often take for granted. And the icing on the cake, as explained in the information packet you’ve been given, is that you need never worry about your finances again. You have food on the table, a roof over your head, free access to medical care, dental care, physical therapy and so on, and it won’t cost you a thing. You may move around freely within the unit and make use of all its facilities. There is a large winter garden here, almost a park in fact, for recreation and the enjoyment of nature. There is a library, a cinema, a theater, an art gallery, a café and a restaurant. There is a huge sports complex. And you can pursue more or less any hobby or professional activity you wish: art, crafts, electronics, mechanics, botany, architecture, acting, film, animation, you name it—there are workshops and studios for most activities. But above all”—and now she leaned forward, supporting herself on her fingertips on the edge of the table as if to give her words additional emphasis. “But *above all*,” she repeated, “you have *each other*! And now it’s coffee time.”



I would venture to say that this welcome speech made us all feel better about things. It would be an exaggeration to say that there was a cheerful atmosphere during the coffee break, but the deathly pallor had left most people's faces, and as we drank coffee and ate homemade cinnamon buns in a cafélike room next door, the conversation was lively. We were starting to become interested in one another, asking questions about jobs and activities. Roy and Johanna were long-term unemployed; before that Johanna had delivered the mail and Roy had been some kind of consultant—I didn't understand what kind. Annie had been a hotel receptionist, Fredrik a mechanic in a truck factory, Boel was a violinist and Sofia had done lots of different things, including delivering newspapers and junk mail, proofreading, cleaning in a hotel and packing goods for a mail-order company. Elsa, finally, had worked in the same shoe store ever since she finished high school.

After coffee, the meeting continued with practical information about everything from the procedures surrounding research experiments and donations to finding our way around the unit. Staff from the residential department, the health center, the surgical department, the restaurant, the art gallery, the sports center, and the podiatry and massage clinics came along, one after another, introduced themselves and told us what they did.

When we were finished my head was spinning from all the information we'd been given during the afternoon, and I had to go and lie down again for a while so I'd be able to cope with the welcome party that evening.

## 5

I remember the debate and the referendum. I also remember that it wasn't really much of a debate to begin with, because the idea came originally from a newly formed party called the Capital Democrats, or something like that, and very few people took their proposal seriously.

I wasn't particularly interested in politics, and I was far too young to be able to identify with concepts like middle age. Every time the topic came up, in the media or with other people, I heaved a bored sigh and turned the page or switched channels or changed the topic of conversation. Social issues of this kind just had nothing to do with me, in my opinion, and when I got pregnant by accident during the first phase of the debate, I had an abortion. I was young, after all, I was in high school, I wanted

to travel, go to college, do some casual work here and there, paint, write, dance and enjoy myself. It was just as impossible to imagine myself as a mother as it was to imagine myself as middle-aged. But if I had known that at the very moment when I allowed myself to be anesthetized and scraped out I was throwing away the only chance of becoming a parent I would ever have, then things would probably not have been quite so clear cut. If I had been able to work out how things were going to be in the future, if I'd had the slightest idea, I would have given birth to my child. At least I would like to believe that's what I would have done.

The question came up again in different guises and different packaging, and somehow it had slipped into the manifestos of some of the bigger and more established parties, and when the referendum finally took place, opinion had shifted. At that stage I was already more or less a grown woman with my sights set on a career as a writer. As I got by with various odd jobs I was determinedly working on what was to be my debut book. Around that time I started to toy with the idea that I would probably like to have a child before too long. But as I was living just below the poverty line and without a partner or other adult who could share the responsibility and the expense with me, I never pursued the idea. And when the new law came into force, I was well over thirty. I was a complete person with my character fully established, and unfortunately stamped more by the spirit of the times I had grown up in than that of the present situation.

When I was a child and a teenager, the ethos of the day advocated that a person should acquire some life experience and some experience of working life; you should learn about what made people tick, look around the world and try out different things before settling on a way of life you enjoyed. Enjoyment was important. Self-realization was important. Earning lots of money

and buying lots of things was regarded as less important, in fact it was hardly of any importance at all. As long as you earned enough to get by. Getting by, coping, standing on your own two feet—financially, socially, mentally and emotionally—was important, and that was sufficient. Children and a family were something that could come later, or even something you could choose to do without. The ideal was first and foremost to find yourself, to develop your character, become a whole person who loved and respected yourself and who was not dependent on others. This was particularly important for women. It was extremely important not to become dependent on a man who would provide for us while we were with the children, looking after the house. At that time such a division of labor was actually still possible, and something my mother often warned my sisters and me about. From time to time she would gather the three of us together and give us a feminist talk. It started when Ida was just about three years old, and I was five. Siv was twelve, and the only one who had any idea what my mother was talking about for the first few years.

“Don’t you go having kids before you can stand on your own two feet,” Mom would say. “Don’t go letting some man support you, not financially, not intellectually, not emotionally. Don’t you get caught in that trap!”

Getting caught in a trap became my greatest fear. To begin with, it was a very concrete fear. I looked carefully for traps around me, and didn’t like to go into narrow passageways or enclosed spaces, for example elevators or airplanes—what if there was a man in there threatening to support me! I didn’t know what this supporting business actually was, but I was sure it would hurt a lot and that it might kill you. In stores, museums, cinemas, theaters and other large public indoor spaces I always wanted to stay near one of the doors, and the first thing I looked for when I went into an unfamiliar building was the emergency exits, the fire escapes, the escape routes.

When I got older and understood more clearly what my mother meant by children and men and supporting and traps, my fear of crowds and narrow spaces diminished somewhat. It no longer had such a concrete expression. But I was still—and would remain—afraid of getting caught. In every situation where there was a choice, I opted for the alternative that would give me the most freedom, even if that usually meant I was also opting for the alternative that was the least financially rewarding. For example, I have never had a permanent job with regular hours, a monthly salary, a pension and paid holidays. My jobs were always on an hourly or freelance basis so that, at least in theory, I could choose from day to day whether I wanted to work or not. Whenever I was forced to sign a contract—of whatever kind: a rental agreement, a book contract, a purchase agreement—I did so with great unease. I would sometimes get palpitations and break out in a cold sweat as I stood there with the pen in my hand, about to sign and therefore lock myself into something, irrevocably.

In my mind it was strictly taboo to be, or even to dream of being, emotionally or financially dependent on anyone, or to harbor even the tiniest secret desire to live in a symbiotic relationship with another person. And yet—or perhaps for that very reason—I have always felt a strong attraction to that kind of life. An attraction and a secret longing to be dependent and taken care of. That's right: to be taken care of, to be taken in hand—financially and emotionally and sexually, and preferably by a man.

I sometimes managed to live out this longing, which found its expression through daydreams and fantasies, in my sexual relationships. This would take the form of a kind of role-playing, where my partner and I would pretend we were an old-fashioned married couple: married man who is the provider comes home to housewife who has dinner on the table. And after dinner: active male subject services passive female sex object.

But, as I said, I only managed to live out these fantasies to a certain extent, because just as I have never had a permanent job, I have also never had a long-term relationship, only casual liaisons.

These days there is no trap of the kind that my mother talked about and warned my sisters and me about. First of all there was the law stating that parents must divide their parental leave from work equally between them during the child's first eighteen months. Then day care became compulsory for eight hours a day for all children aged between eighteen months and six years. The housewife and her male provider have not only been out of fashion for a long time, they have been eradicated. And children are no longer a drag, a hindrance, for anyone. There is no longer the risk of ending up as a dependent, or falling behind on the salary scale, or losing skills in the workplace. Not because of the children, at any rate. There is no longer any excuse not to have children. Nor is there any longer an excuse not to work when you have children.

## 6

The welcome party started off with a five-course Italian meal: Parma ham with melon, minestrone, pasta with pesto and chicken fillets, aged cheese with pears and grapes, and for dessert, *panna cotta*. Freshly baked white bread was served with the appetizer and main course. Only the wine was missing. During dinner I sat next to Majken, who told me she was an artist; Alice, a short, plump woman who had been a stagehand at the theater in Malmö, and Johannes, a fellow author I had often come across in literary circles, but had never really spoken to. I had always thought he seemed difficult and deliberately kept his distance. Now, however, he turned out to be quite the opposite—easy company and socially adept. He seemed to be in good form, despite the fact that he had been in the unit for more than three years.

But then so far he had only donated sperm to the sperm bank and one kidney to a father of five who was a primary school teacher. He had also taken part in various experiments.

“At the moment I’m involved in a completely safe psychological investigation to do with cooperation and trust and that kind of thing,” he said.

Then he told us about the time he took part in an experiment with a new kind of medication for depression and chronic exhaustion, and ended up so lively and talkative that they had to bring in extra staff working around the clock just to socialize and chat with him—or rather listen to him, since he was babbling nonstop—and to keep an eye on him so that he didn’t overexert himself or disturb his neighbors too much. He had been seized by an uncontrollable urge to make things and to renovate, and took the opportunity to convert his kitchenette and part of the living room into a proper little kitchen.

“I didn’t get much written at that time—I was way too restless and desperate for company—but I had a really good time,” he ended his story.

Majken had been in the unit for four years, Alice for four months. Majken had, among other things, donated eggs for stem-cell research, one kidney, and the auditory bone from her right ear. As she was now deaf in that ear, she always wanted people to be on her left, she explained.

“And in a few weeks,” she went on, “I’m going in to donate my pancreas to a student nurse with four kids. So I guess this will be my last welcome party.”

She was moving her spoon around in her dessert, a distracted movement, it seemed to me—as if she didn’t mind, as if it didn’t bother her, as if it were completely okay. All of a sudden I felt completely powerless. Majken stirred and stirred with her spoon and I followed her hand and the spoon with my eyes, and with every rotation it felt as if the air in the big room were becoming thinner and more difficult to breathe. My body grew heavy, my

arms ached, there was a thudding and rushing noise in my ears, I couldn't see properly. I broke out in a cold sweat, and through a black, flickering mist I saw Majken's hand stop its movement, let go of the spoon and grip my hand as it lay there in front of me next to my dish, limp and damp and cold. As if from far, far away, beyond the rushing in my ears, I heard her voice:

"Darling, you get used to it. Don't you, Alice?"

I couldn't see Alice. My field of vision had shrunk. I could only see Majken's hand resting on mine. Alice said something, she was talking, reassuring me, but I couldn't hear what she was saying because her voice was surging and fading, growing in turn stronger and weaker as if she were speaking in a strong wind, and only odd words were getting through. I opened my mouth, tried to say that I couldn't hear her properly, but there wasn't enough air. I couldn't get my breath. I couldn't focus. The dark flickering mist grew more dense and became a dark veil, a curtain. I could hardly see at all, and it felt as if the chair and the floor were about to give way beneath me, as if I were being sucked down into a hole. But then Alice was there too, stroking my arm with her hand, and now I could hear her. She was saying:

"It's okay, darling, it's okay . . ."

And Johannes, who was sitting beside me, put one arm around my shoulders. He placed his other hand on my forehead. As if I were a little child who might have a temperature. But it worked, it felt as if he were propping me up, keeping me there, stopping me from being sucked down into that hole or falling headfirst into the *panna cotta*. It felt as if they cared about me, all three of them, and I have always been calmed by the feeling that someone cares about me. Johannes said:

"There now . . . Take a deep breath. There. And breathe out slowly. Good. And again, Dorrit, nice and calm. That's it, there now . . ."

We sat like that for quite a while: Majken holding my hand, Alice stroking my forearm and Johannes stroking my back slowly,

and they all carried on murmuring “There now, it’s okay” until my senses and my breathing returned to normal. When Johannes finally took his hand away from my forehead, he did it by allowing it to slide down over my cheek, like a gentle caress.

There was entertainment. There was dancing. A rock band played. I danced with Johannes, Majken and Alice. And with Elsa and lots of other people. But I danced the most with Johannes. He had rhythm and feeling, and he knew proper ballroom dancing, with the right steps and everything. He could lead like a real old chauvinist, like an old-fashioned gentleman. At first I found it a bit difficult to keep up. Partly because I had never done this kind of dancing before, I’d only seen it in old films, partly because I felt a little bit exposed somehow, it almost felt dangerous, not being in charge of your own steps. But after a while I decided to ignore that feeling and just let myself be led and managed. And then it felt just wonderful, right up my alley.

It grew late. Elsa and I were standing at the bar, each with a pear drink. They served only nonalcoholic beverages, and if you didn’t want a soda there was only orange juice and a pear drink to choose from.

“Would you like to meet up tomorrow morning and have breakfast together?” I asked.

“Would you like to have breakfast tomorrow and then spend the next four days together?” Elsa asked.

As new arrivals we had four consecutive free days, Sunday to Wednesday. It was so we could make ourselves at home in the unit before the compulsory health check; after that we would be allocated to appropriate humane experiments or begin to donate. We were being given a gentle start. And when Elsa mentioned spending the next four days together I felt—to my

surprise—an enormous sense of relief, and it made me realize that I was afraid of those four free days. It made me realize that for the first time in my adult life, I was afraid of being alone. So I accepted her invitation. No, I didn't want to be alone. I didn't want to be alone in a building without windows, where there wasn't a living thing to fix your gaze on, not a thing to stop me from thinking about the fact that I would never again experience the feeling that flooded through me that morning in March each year when I opened my door and saw the first crocus of the year in bloom on my lawn. Or the first scilla or the first hepatica or the first scented violet. Or when I saw the cranes, trumpeting as they flew over in wide skeins on their way north to Lake Hornborga. And I didn't want to think about Nils and our times together, his hands on my body, his kisses, his penis, his words telling me how much I meant to him. Above all I didn't want to think about Jock, about the fact that we would never again run together in the forest or by the sea. Or take our walk along the tractor route to Ellström's farm to buy fresh eggs and vegetables for me and a pig's heart for him. I needed to erect a barrier of new experiences, a buffer zone between there and here, between then and now, before I had the courage to be alone with my thoughts again.

On the other hand, I wasn't so afraid of the night. I wasn't afraid to sleep without company. Since I wasn't used to sleeping with other people in the same room, or even in the same house, I actually preferred it that way. And to be on the safe side I'd made sure I got myself some sleeping pills. Of course they were the kind that can't send you off to sleep forever; they were the suicide-proof kind with a built-in antabuse effect: if you take more than two, you throw up.

When Elsa put her empty glass down on the bar and said she was tired and off to bed, I asked her if she wanted a sleeping pill.

She laughed.

“Thanks, but I’ve been to the doctor too and got myself some!”

We decided that whoever woke up first the next morning would ring the other, and after breakfast we would set off to explore the unit and make the most of everything being free. Then we hugged each other, said good night, and she left.

The last dance was a ballad. The singer stood in the middle of the stage, alone in the spotlight, the orchestra hidden in the darkness behind him. He sang: “This is for my girl, this is for my woman, for my world. Baby, baby, this is all for you . . .”

Johannes came over to me as I stood there with my lukewarm pear drink, swaying to the beat and humming along with the refrain. He bowed briefly and asked, very politely:

“May I have the pleasure?”

It was charming, I was charmed by his old-fashioned manner and his words, and without a second’s hesitation I put my glass on the bar, nodded graciously and held out my hand to him. He took it and placed his other arm quite formally around my waist. And we sailed out onto the dance floor. He led so confidently, in such a relaxed way and with such perfect timing that I didn’t even feel as if I couldn’t really dance like this. I almost fell into a trance, following him as easily as if I were a part of him, as if we were the same body.

“Thank you for the dance, Dorrit,” he said when the music ended. “And thank you for this evening.”

He took my hand, raised it to his lips, and just brushed it with them. I had read about this in novels, I had seen it in films and plays. I had dreamed about it. But this was the first time in my life that someone had actually kissed my hand.

## 7

I was just leaving the party when I heard hurrying footsteps behind me and turned around. It was Majken.

“I presume we’re heading in the same direction,” she said. “I can show you a nice detour. If you’re not too tired, of course.”

“No, I’m not particularly tired,” I said. Actually I was grateful to have some company for a while longer.

We took elevator B from K1 to the fifth floor. The doors slid open and we stepped out into a very wide and apparently endlessly long corridor, more like an indoor street or—I realized after taking a few steps—a running track. It had the same kind of surface as outdoor tracks usually have: with a little bit of give, and the ability to absorb sounds. On the other side of the track,

opposite the row of elevators, was a glass wall the height of a three- or four-story building, looking out over something that in the half-darkness looked like a real primeval forest.

“That’s the winter garden,” said Majken. “One of the wilder areas.”

Above us, high above, a glass dome covered both the winter garden and the broad track we were on. And up above the night sky curved over the dome, the infinite reality of space.

“This,” said Majken, gesturing toward the floor, “is the Atrium Walkway. It goes all the way around the winter garden, and measures 130 yards from corner to corner. A total of 520 yards. So if you jog around it ten times, you’ve done a good three miles.”

We followed the Atrium Walkway for fifty yards or so, until the forest on the other side of the glass wall gave way to a kind of galleria, with small glasshouses and orangeries, small shops that were closed, and workshops for drying flowers, arranging flowers, coloring plants, and so on, and a broad staircase curving upward to something that looked like a café.

“That’s the Terrace,” said Majken. “They serve breakfast and lunch every day. The rest of the time it’s an ordinary self-service café—you can make your own coffee or fruit drinks, make a sandwich and take any cakes you like, or anything you fancy from what’s there.”

“It looks really lovely,” I said.

“What?” she said, and I realized we’d somehow managed to swap places as we came around the corner into the galleria, so I was now on her right side, where she didn’t hear so well.

She stopped and turned her left ear toward me.

“It looks lovely,” I repeated.

She nodded. “It is. You can see almost the whole winter garden from up there. I always have lunch there on weekdays.”

At the far end of the galleria, where the high glass wall once again turned into a background of dense greenery, was a door.

Majken opened it and let me go ahead of her into a warm air lock, where she opened another door, and we stepped out into a nocturnal garden.

There was a fresh, slightly sweet smell of flowers and plants. The moon, which was almost full, was shining in through the glass ceiling from its winter night. But inside here, under here, it was already spring, almost early summer, and flowers in hundreds of colors and shades seemed to glow in the white moonlight.

There was a different climate in the winter garden from our northern European one. A network of paths meandered among palms, wild hibiscus, climbing vines, trailing bougainvillea, olive trees, stone pines, plane trees, citrus trees and cedars, leading over small paved patio areas with fountains and benches where you could sit and read or philosophize, continuing around a huge lawn—where you could lie and read or philosophize—and then back into a wilder, darker area, and finally to the area Majken really wanted to show me: an almost exact, if somewhat reduced, copy of Monet's garden at Giverny. The only thing that was really missing was the pink house where he lived with his family, and of course this replica wasn't as mature as the French original. The garden, which had been laid out by a group of gardening enthusiasts who were interested in art, was like an Impressionist painting: an explosion of colors, a perfect, conscious composition, dotted, its contours slightly blurred—at least that's how it appeared to me at this time of the night—but unequivocally clear in terms of the combinations and contrasts of the plants and the colors.

As we strolled in silence along the gravel paths through the flower garden and across the little wooden bridges in the water garden, the scents of flowers and herbs gave way to one another—violet, lavender, thyme, rosemary, sage, rose, apple blossom, peony—and all these scents and sights had a pleasantly anesthetizing effect on me.

When we reached the big pool, where the reflections of the moon glimmered between irregular rafts of water lilies just

beginning to flower in shades of yellow, blue, green and pink, we stopped and sat down on a wooden bench, painted green and damp with dew.

“I often come here,” said Majken after a while. “It’s as if this were real.”

I understood what she meant. It felt exactly as if we were outside, outdoors, in a normal garden down on the ground, not on the top of a windowless fortress, with earth that had been brought in, artificially constructed ponds and streams, beneath toughened glass that couldn’t be smashed and no doubt had some kind of alarm system built in.

“Those Impressionists,” she said, “they certainly knew about color. And about light and shade. Different kinds of shade: thinner shadows that let the light through, and heavier, denser ones. And it’s as if Monet made this garden to show the world how he saw colors. How he saw their power, their potential and their purpose. I think he wanted to show that the world is color. That life itself is color. That if we can just see the colors, really see them, life will be beautiful. And meaningful. Because beauty has a value of its own, that’s how I see it anyway.”

She looked at me, smiled. The moonlight made her lips appear dark red, like pomegranate, her eyes almost emerald green, her skin like ivory, her hair like gold and ash. I tried to smile back, but I couldn’t do it, there was a lump in my throat dragging the corners of my mouth down, and if she had said “life” one more time I wouldn’t have been able to hold back the feelings that were lying there whimpering and throbbing beneath the pleasantly numbing veil all these different impressions had wrapped around me. Fury, grief, fear, hatred—everything would have burst through the veil and surged up and come roaring out through all the orifices in my face: my eyes, my nose, my mouth. And I didn’t want that to happen—not because I was afraid of showing my feelings to Majken or to other people, not because I was particularly bothered about keeping up a facade of strength

and self-control, but just because I didn't want anything to disturb this period of stillness. I wanted to keep the stillness, intact, for as long as possible.

But she didn't say anything else for quite a while. We just sat there. And eventually we got up from the bench and set off again. Then we heard a faint mechanical humming somewhere in the bushes behind us—so sudden and so unlike the other faint sounds of rustling leaves and lapping waves that I jumped and turned around.

"It's nothing to worry about," said Majken. "It's just someone on the surveillance team wondering what we're doing out here in the middle of the night."

"Aren't we allowed out here at night?" I said.

"Oh yes, sure. It's just a little unusual for anyone to actually come here then."

The stillness had been disturbed, as if someone had drilled right through it and smashed it to pieces. All of a sudden I felt cold, frozen.