

# YOU DISAPPEAR

a novel

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Translated from the Danish by  
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NAN A. TALESE | DOUBLEDAY

*New York London Toronto Sydney Auckland*



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[www.nanatalese.com](http://www.nanatalese.com)

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*Book design by [to come]*  
*Jacket design by [to come]*

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Jungersen, Christian.  
[Du forsvinder. English]  
You disappear : a novel / Christian Jungersen ; Translated from the Danish by Misha Hoekstra.  
pages cm.  
Originally published in Denmark as *Du forsvinder* by Gyldendal A/S, Copenhagen, in 2012.  
1. Psychological fiction. 2. Medical fiction. I. Hoekstra, Misha. translator.  
II. Title.  
PT8176.2.U47D813 2014  
839.81'38—dc23 2013029148

ISBN 978-0-385-53725-4

MANUFACTURED IN THE UNITED STATES OF AMERICA

1 3 5 7 9 10 8 6 4 2

First United States Edition

YOU DISAPPEAR



# 1

We whoosh down between dark rock-faces, through hairpin turns, down and around past dry scrub, silver-pale trees and back up, then over a ridge where the car nearly leaves ground and Niklas and I whoop as our entrails become weightless.

The hot Mediterranean air buffets our faces, for all four windows are open. Frederik takes a curve so fast that I grab my headrest. The sea beneath us keeps switching left and right.

Normally Frederik's never brave behind the wheel, so I try not to be afraid. And the heat makes the rocks steeper, darker, the lemon groves prickling even more tartly in my nose, the sea shining blue like I've never seen it before.

Around yet another rock outcrop and suddenly we're engulfed by cyclists. I scream. A swamp of neon-pink cycling jerseys. I look out the back window: no one's fallen, but they've dismounted from their bikes; clenched fists, open mouths. We round the next curve.

"Frederik, it's not funny anymore!"

He doesn't answer.

"Frederik!"

He lets out a small sigh and maintains his speed.

I observe his long slender fingers wrapped around the wheel. They don't belong to this way of driving. Once I found them erotic, like miniature versions of his body—tall and thin, a swaying, relaxed body. Not a speed demon's.

And is it the speed that makes his eyes look deeper? Black-violet massifs. He seems strange, though I can't say where the difference lies.

Another hard bump and again all three of us rise into the air.

"Stop, Frederik, stop!" I yell.

Niklas has had his head out the window. Now he pulls it back in. "Mom, just leave off."

"I'm supposed to leave off? I'm supposed to leave off? Your father's driving like a complete madman! He'll kill us! Is that what you want?"

It's the speed, the colors, the heat, and all the outrageous Majorcan beauty. Niklas sighs with precisely the same sibilance as his father and again leans his head out the window.

"Niklas, keep your head inside. It's dangerous."

He acts as if he doesn't hear me.

"Keep your head in, I say. It's dangerous!"

Still he doesn't. I don't care if he's sixteen now; I turn around and pull him in myself, I use some force, and then he stays in his seat.

The Mediterranean shines so brightly it's impossible to look at it straight on. It floats up through the terrain and calls us. Like the tunnel of light the dying see: *Come, become one with my beauty and eternity*. A nudge to Frederik's hand and we'd swerve over the berm and all become weightless again, and then we'd be lifted out of the landscape too.

I want to say *Stop, stop* again. Instead I look at our son; *he's* having fun. Am I just a killjoy?

An oncoming driver lays on his horn. Frederik keeps his eyes fixed on the road before us.

"They drive like total madmen down here," he says.

"Will you please drive more slowly?" I ask again.

Niklas and Frederik laugh.

The road twists. And then we're back in shadow and close to the rock wall. An oncoming truck suddenly fills the space in front of us. Frederik swings our car up against the rock-face. Granite grates against the panels with a sound like we've been tossed in a metal grinder. And then we are past.

Frederik says, "We took out full coverage. The rental agency'll cover it all." He doesn't slow down.

Now Niklas pulls on the back of Frederik's seat. "Dad, stop! Stop!"

And I join in. “Stop the car *now!*”

But he doesn't lift his gaze from the road. He sighs like before. I pull back on the hand brake as we drive. He laughs and releases it again.

“Frederik, look at me. Won't you at least do that?”

He keeps looking straight ahead as he speaks, and as always, his voice projects reason and calm. “I need to keep my eyes on the road.”

...

Five days ago, on the day we were to fly to Majorca, I stopped on my run along the wooded path beside Lake Farum, and I gave myself some time to think about how good my life really is. I walked out on one of the short piers, and the breeze chilled the sweat beneath my top. I thought about what has made these years so different from my life a few years ago.

Out on the lake the water rose in small swells that weren't actual waves, and the woods on the opposite bank looked like they'd gone deeper into autumn than the trees above and behind me. I have a lovely son and good friends, meaningful work, a house we are fond of. But I had all of that three years ago too. The difference—the major, critical difference—is that now I feel loved.

How many people can say that, that they really feel loved? It's something I should relish. Finally, I thought, everything's fallen into place. And then I continued my run, down the path through the woods.

Farum is a peaceful place, a suburb you move to only when you have two kids, or in any case have plans for number two. Between the charming medieval village and the lake lies an older neighborhood with large houses, the neighborhood where we are so lucky as to live. From this original core, Farum grew more than fourfold in the '60s and '70s. In the fields east of the village, miles of new streets were laid out with yellow-brick single-family homes, schools, kindergartens, and then more single-family homes, another school, a few more kindergartens. All connected by a vast network of car-free bike paths surrounded by grass, so that kids can bike from school to the rec center and from soccer to a friend's house without crossing a single street, while their parents take the train or the freeway home from work in Copenhagen.

We were trying to have a second child when we moved here, not yet

knowing that it would never happen. And not yet knowing how Frederik would succeed so unbelievably well in his career, for we were mistaken in that too—we thought there'd only be a couple of years when he'd have to spend all his evenings and weekends at work as he glided from one success to the next.

In one of his many speeches to the children, parents, and staff at his school, Frederik said that he became a teacher and later a headmaster “because helping a child through difficulty is the most meaningful thing you can do with your life.”

Big words, and sometimes I've wondered if they weren't too big. Yet no one can doubt that Frederik could have earned a lot more money if he'd been the leader of almost anything but a school. As for me, I studied to be an architect for a year before I transferred to a teachers' college. While I was in architecture school, I made a bit of money as a tennis instructor, and the difference I made in the lives of my young tennis students—especially when we talked about something besides tennis—soon came to mean more to me than my studies. Changing schools was an unavoidable outcome of thinking about what mattered in life.

From the lake, I ran a few hundred yards on the path along the railway and soon reached home. On my way up to shower, I knocked on Niklas's door. He was sitting in front of his computer.

“Have you started to pack?” I asked.

He didn't answer.

“Have you started to pack?”

“Yeah yeah, I heard you.”

His best friend in gymnasium, Mathias, was going to have his house to himself for the fall vacation, and we'd had a hard time getting Niklas to join us, away from the week's approaching party madness. Mathias composes electronic music, and Niklas spends a lot of energy making music videos for him. They'd planned to stay together at Mathias's the whole week.

“You'll be really happy you came, as soon as we get down there,” I said.

My cell phone rang in our bedroom, and I ran in to answer it.

It was Frederik, saying that he would be home later than planned. He apologized profusely, but he had to take care of something with the school's bank.



“That’s okay, Frederik. Really.”

“But it might make it hard for me to get all packed.”

“I’ll pack for you too. I’m looking forward to seeing you.”

It was the sort of thing that would have once made me angry and unhappy. *The day we’re going on vacation, and you can’t even . . . !* But now it’s fine, because our relationship is fundamentally in order—and because Frederik no longer does it every time.

Sometimes it’s hard to be married to an idealist. You feel rejected while at the same time feeling like a huge egotist, just because you think that school kids shouldn’t rob you of your family life.

Fortunately, that’s all behind us. Frederik has made us more of a priority, and the two of us have never had it better.

...

Frederik turns off sharply onto one of the small gravel roads, low drystone walls on either side, and we skid in the gravel and scream, strike a stone wall, are flung to the other side of the road, hit that wall too, skid. Stop.

I turn toward Niklas. I want to be beside him in the backseat, clutch his head to my breast to protect him. But the car’s already come to rest. It’s too late.

“Are you okay?”

But I know he hasn’t been hurt. It was only a couple of minor collisions; we’re extremely lucky. I close my eyes for a moment and exhale. My pulse is throbbing in my temples.

“Are you okay?” I repeat.

“Yeah. How about you?”

“I think so.”

I look through the windshield. Frederik is already out front. He kicks the car with a resentful expression, squats to examine something by one of the fenders.

I yell, “Aren’t you even going to see if we’re all right?”

He doesn’t answer.

“Don’t you even care?”

“Well, I can *see* you’re doing fine.”

I jump out of the car. And for the first time in our twenty years together, I hit him so hard that it's not just a game. He falls to the gravel and I shout, "What the hell, what the fucking hell? Have you gone stark raving mad?"

Sweat drips off of me and my fists are clenched, my pulse still pounding in my temples. He gets up staggering but unconcerned, as if he hasn't noticed my blow, and takes a few steps.

"I don't think I can get it to run."

"*That's* a stroke of luck, you big idiot. Maybe we won't die today after all."

"Mom!" Niklas's voice calls from inside the car.

I breathe deeply, several times. For my son's sake, I need to be the reasonable one here. And so I manage to pull myself together.

"What should we do?" I ask in a somewhat calm voice.

Frederik doesn't answer. He climbs up on the stone wall and stands there, surveying the landscape.

Niklas gets out of the car too. His hair lights up in the sun. It's lighter than mine, almost white. After cultivating a grunge look all summer, he resembles a sixteen-year-old Kurt Cobain.

"It says in the guide that you should ring 112," he says.

I glance up at Frederik on the wall.

"What's *with* you? Why are you doing this?"

"What's with *me*?" At last he looks me in the eye. "*You're* the one who's been after me without a break on this trip! First I drive too fast, then I talk too loud in the restaurant, then I eat too much. Whatever I do, you say I'm doing it wrong!"

I look up at him and it seems he's swinging his arms too much. The wildness of his gestures feels contrived.

"But I only say those things because you've been acting strange," I say.

"I have *not*! But you're after me all the time. And then you say I'm happy at the wrong time, and then you say I sleep too late."

I can see what he means. It's been a lovely vacation, but I've also been oddly irritated. And we've argued a lot.

"I promise to stop criticizing you," I say. "Okay? Will you come down now?"

"It's that way back home too. And why can't I stand up here, if that's what I want?"

“Look. You’ve just driven our car into a wall, so maybe I have a right to—”

“Now you’re doing it again. I can’t stand it! Look at Niklas. *He’s* not riding me the whole time. So it *is* possible.”

“Do we really have to go through all of this now, Frederik?”

“And I love Niklas too. He and I . . . we’re . . . he can really . . .” Frederik begins to cry.

I look over at Niklas, who appears moved. I sense that his sideways glance at me isn’t completely friendly.

I step closer to my husband.

“Are you going to weep now about how much you and Niklas like each other? Do you have heatstroke, or what?”

“And now I’m not even allowed to love our son anymore . . .”

“Of course you are. It’s just that—”

Frederik starts waving his arms around even more wildly.

“You piece of shit, Mia! You big fat piece of shit!”

And then he falls.

We run over to the wall. See him tumble down the mountainside, strike his head against a tree, and stop, caught lifeless at its foot, five yards away.

“Frederik! Frederik!”

“Dad!”

But he doesn’t move.

The mountain drops away just past the tree. We call 112, stare down at him, wait. And worry that he’ll start stirring and roll free.

## 2

I bat my tennis racket against the black chair leg in front of me in the emergency room at the Hospital Universitario in Palma de Mallorca. Eight hours, and Frederik still hasn't regained consciousness. Then I bat it against the other leg. Maybe he'll end up in a wheelchair. Could he continue as headmaster then?

I see before me the last day of school at Saxtorph. The headmaster rolls his wheelchair up a ramp to the podium. He's clad in an elegant suit, the students and teachers prouder of him than ever. A triumphant look lights up his face. I feel proud too; he's a hero. But then other images arise. At home: Do I change his diaper? Do I lift him into bed? Do we . . . sex?

And then maybe not. Early retirement. What if he's not well enough to stay on as headmaster? He sits in his wheelchair while I spoon him soup. I am his nurse and wife three years from now, in ten and twenty, thirty. I am the old woman who drives around the suburban streets of Farum with a paralyzed husband. Thus our marriage; thus our life. I press my face against his loose hanging jowls and we weep, rubbing noses and foreheads and cheeks together. That's what we'll be doing in three years, in ten and twenty, thirty.

There are tennis courts in the mountains of Majorca. An odd notion, bringing my racket in the car. Of course I'd never use it. What was I thinking? I bat the racket against the first chair leg again. Look at the clock. It's now eleven.

The emergency room isn't like Danish emergency rooms. Cheap metal chairs with vinyl seats arranged in long rows. There's room for at least

seventy people to wait for their number to appear on the big red LED over the receptionist's glass cage. Like the waiting room in a rundown bus station abroad.

We were supposed to fly home the day after tomorrow. Now I see Frederik's funeral. His parents, his friends, all of us in black. Hundreds of bouquets and wreaths from school parents and teachers. I see how broken up I am. My hero, my beloved, my husband. The casket is lifted into the hearse. Niklas is a pallbearer, dignified and pale.

I'll get on Niklas's nerves soon if I don't stop batting my racket against the chair. Thock, thock, thock. In a minute he'll say, *Stop it! It's driving me crazy*. I know. I hit the chair legs again, harder, harder.

I raise my head and glance at him. Thock, thock, thock. Isn't he going to tell me to stop? No, he's playing some game on his cell phone. He has the earphones in and doesn't hear a thing.

I poke his leg.

"What?" He pauses his game.

"Don't you think it's getting cold?"

It's dark outside. He's in shorts and a T-shirt, while I wear a cream-colored top with lace trim and a pair of army shorts.

"Yeah."

"Should I ask if they have a couple blankets we can borrow?"

He mutters something to express indifference and starts his game again.

"I think I'll ask for some blankets. Or perhaps a couple sweaters from the lost and found," I say. He can't hear me. "Or some pants. If we can fit them."

Thock, thock, thock: the sound drives *me* up the wall. I set down the racket.

"Pants or sweaters," I say. "Maybe both."

The funeral reception, our weeping friends, the neighbors who come to the burial—just like when the woman across the street got breast cancer. Would her husband find a new wife and move on? That's what we all wondered then.

No, he's grown strange. Keeps to himself, acts aggressive. A tragedy. He isn't recovering.

Me. Niklas. I see myself six months from now, making him elderberry cordial and baking him rolls. It's evening, and we're still living in Farum.

*We're going to try to get our lives together, I'll say. You know I'll always be there for you and support you any way I can.* We'll sit on the sofa and talk, cry, sip the hot cordial.

But that's not the way it'll be. Niklas doesn't want to sit on the sofa with me. Other images: I shop alone, let myself into a cold dark house, go up the stairs knowing that Frederik will never go up the stairs with me; I lie on the bedspread of our bed, entertaining a desperate desire to see his ghost.

A bell rings. I look up at the red number: it's ours. My throat is dry.

I want to poke Niklas, but he's already packing up his earphones; he wasn't so lost in his own world after all.

My legs are numb when I stand. From the counter, a nurse brings us to a small room with bare pastel-green walls. A dark young man in a smock is waiting for us. Under his eyes the skin is almost black. I'm freezing, I should have asked for a sweater after all. And something about the fluorescent lights in here hurts my eyes.

We sit down on plastic seats. Dr. González, it says on the man's name tag, and he addresses us in English.

"Frederik has been scanned. I am very sorry to say . . ."

Blood drains from my head. I feel faint and grab my son's hand. "Oh no. A skull fracture?"

"Yes. He has a brain tumor. I am very sorry."

"The fracture, will it paralyze him? Will he be able to talk? Will he die?"

"The fracture?" The doctor looks at me curiously.

"Yes, he fell . . . The fracture."

"There is no fracture."

"You just said . . ."

"He has a brain tumor. It has been exerting pressure, and it triggered an epileptic seizure. Fortunately, there was no serious blow to the head."

"You said there was a fracture!" I find myself shouting. "You said, 'Yes.' I heard you!"

I know my behavior is totally inappropriate. I'm going to stop. I hold my tongue and lean back in the flimsy chair with such force that it almost falls over.

"Sorry," I say. "I'm sorry."

Niklas takes over, with a tone that is the complete opposite of mine. “He’s got a tumor?”

“Yes.” The doctor adopts a mournful air and nods his head a little too much. “Unfortunately, I cannot say much more. We are transferring him to the neurological ward. The experts there will examine him tomorrow morning.”

I grasp my seat with both hands. “Is it cancer?”

“We cannot say. The neurologists will examine him tomorrow morning.”

“But then it *isn’t* cancer?”

“Unfortunately, we cannot say that yet.”

“But it’s *probable* that it isn’t cancer?”

“The neurologists will be able to say a great deal more tomorrow.”

The peculiar light in here is getting to me: cloudy as pus, sharp as the scalpel that cuts an inflamed area away.

“What is it if it isn’t cancer? Would it also—”

“It is much too soon to say anything. But the neurologists tomorrow will—”

“Can you do something about this light? It hurts my eyes.”

“In the neurological department I am sure they will do everything they can.”

Niklas and I hold hands as we walk slowly back to the waiting room. We are quiet. He doesn’t play any more games on his cell, and I no longer fumble with my racket.

Just quiet.

I have no idea what time it is when a nurse comes out to us. “You’re free to go home now. Nothing else is going to happen tonight. And then you’ll be more rested tomorrow when you go to the neurological department.”

From the taxi windows we look out on the streets: rose-pink houses with green shutters, palm trees and narrow lanes, small idyllic plazas with ice-cream stands and oversize parasols. Everything is dark and abandoned. And meanwhile I know I need to be the rock that Niklas can lean upon. I can hardly make my voice heard in the taxi. “He’s going to make it, Niklas. Dad is so strong.”

We drive down an avenue of tall palms, toward the hotel strip along

the beach. A little while later Niklas tells me the same thing. And I repeat it back to him.

“He’s going to make it. Dad is so strong.”

...

I met Frederik twenty years ago, and soon I knew he’d be the love of my life.

I was twenty-two and a student at Blaagaard Teachers’ Training College, majoring in math and PE. In my second year, I started my student teaching at Trørød Elementary in Søllerød, where Frederik was a teacher. There were more than sixty teachers at the school, and in the beginning there was no reason for me to speak to him. But I knew who he was because people talked about him.

During a meeting with my supervisor in a corner of the teachers’ library, she mentioned that Frederik had no doubt set his sights on becoming a headmaster, just like his father, who led the conservative, well-respected North Coast Private Grammar School. Frederik was only twenty-eight and had already been elected chair of our school’s Danish committee. He’d also organized a joint project with three other schools to develop a continuing-ed course for Danish teachers in creative writing for children.

At the time, it didn’t occur to me that my supervisor might’ve easily been annoyed by such an untried teacher trying to outshine her. Instead, she spoke with gentleness and pride, and only later did I learn that that was typical of the way people around Frederik reacted to him.

Then they packed us off to school camp, five classes and twelve teachers for a week together in a small group of log cabins, deep in a Swedish forest.

Our departure was delayed, of course, and the buses had to stop several times en route because of carsick kids. After I’d been on the bus five hours, the stench of puke was stinging my nostrils and I was exhausted from the constant shouting, hooting, laughter, and tears—and by a massive drop in blood sugar from the banana bread we’d shared two hours earlier.

We finally reached the cabins. It was still early afternoon, but the clouds and rain were so heavy and low that, hours before sunset, they lent the day an air of twilight. We got the kids in their rubber boots and rain gear, and



the teachers who'd been there before led them down to the ocean. I went last to make sure no one was left behind on the path through the pine forest.

The raindrops weren't falling close together, but each one was large and fat and crashed against the hood of my raincoat. I lagged behind the group more than I needed to, and when I finally made it out of the trees, I found myself alone.

The beach was endless and deserted except for the children, who were already a fair distance away. Not a single plant, not a patch of light in the sky, and the sand beneath my rubber boots was sodden and monochromatic lead-grey, only a shade darker than the sky.

In the distance, the teachers and children in their flame-colored rain suits became a bag of bright candy that someone had dropped in the clumpy sand and kicked open. The cold wet wind tore at my face. Then one colored blob detached itself from the others. A little later he stood before me, raindrops dripping from his nose.

He didn't move, just looked at me inquiringly. And I looked at him.

"Maybe I shouldn't become a teacher at all," I said.

He didn't answer. I looked into his eyes, which were wide open under his rain hood.

We talked, and walked down toward the water's edge, and gradually the monotonous rumbling of the water gave way to the rhythmic boom of each individual wave. No stars, sun, or moon. No ground beneath us. And yet that sound. The world still uncreated. No light or darkness, time or children. Just a roaring snore from the waves, from some creature who rests before the world is to be formed.

I don't know how it happened, but I started telling him about my good friend who'd died two months earlier. Her boyfriend had been unfaithful for months with one of our mutual friends, and finally he moved out from my one friend and in with the other. And Hanne leapt from a high-rise.

"The weird thing is, I have the sense that she's still here," I said. "She floats beneath the ceiling of the rooms I enter. And she's out here in the rain. She's following me."

Frederik stood with his back to the waves, the white edges crashing behind him. "Does she say you'll be glad you became a teacher?"

"Just a moment . . ." I closed my eyes for a few seconds. "Yes. She does."

"Do you think she's right?"

I paused again to consider. “Yes.”

“And maybe she knows why you started to doubt that?”

“She knows,” I said. “It’s because I’m so unhappy. Because I miss her.”

Already then I felt a desire to push my arm under his, so we could walk linked together back to the other teachers.

As we approached the others, with a suitable gap between us, I said, “I don’t really believe in ghosts, of course. You don’t know me, but I’m not crazy.”

“I didn’t think so.”

That evening we took a flashlight and snuck back down the forest path to the beach, which was now pitch-dark. It was no longer raining, but there were still no stars or moon.

“What then?” I remember him asking. “Do you think we have a soul that lives on when we die?”

It ended up being a lovely school camp. Frederik had unusually bright pale-brown eyes with a fine dark ring around the outside of each iris and a long thin nose. There was something cultivated, something elegant about him. On two evenings we slipped out into the forest, Hanne’s ghost vanished, and I became more convinced than ever that teaching was the right job for me.

When we returned home, we tried to keep our relationship secret at the school. We didn’t succeed, of course, and some of our female colleagues became annoyed, with Frederik and especially with me.

Exactly as predicted, Frederik became headmaster of another primary school four years later. He was appointed to a seat on the Ministry of Education’s Curriculum Committee, and he threw himself into writing a series of textbooks that sought to introduce philosophy as an independent subject in the higher grades.

When he was thirty-five, he was headhunted to lead Saxtorph—the private elementary school in Copenhagen where he’s been ever since, and where in the course of thirteen years, he’s almost doubled enrollment.

...

When Niklas and I walk through the enormous hotel lobby with its furnishings from the ’80s, three Danish tourists yell after us. We talked with

them earlier by the pool, though they're people we'd never have been friends with back home. From a distance, we can tell they're drunk.

"Well, it's been a late evening, eh Mia? Have you guys had fun? Where'd you go?"

Neither Niklas nor I reply. We make a beeline for the long, ugly corridor going to our rooms. I stop in front of his door.

"Come over to my room if you don't want to be alone tonight."

A moment's hesitation, perhaps. Then he looks at me.

"You should knock on mine too, if you . . ."

He's never said anything like that before. Then again, no one knows whether tonight he'll become the only man in the family.

The gilded wall lamps, the landscape windows facing the Mediterranean. A faint breeze through the nearly closed sliding doors to the balcony. Frederik's trousers lie on a chair, and on the floor are three magazines he bought on a sudden whim at the kiosk, as well as his snorkel and belt and a T-shirt too. On the table are his towel and sandals.

He didn't use to be messy. It's one of the things we argued about—also during the last few weeks back home.

I walk out on the balcony in a T-shirt and panties. I feel the wind, listen to the suck of the sea, watch the water the few places it's lit by the hotel lights. I stood here last night with Frederik and we held each other, we kissed, we thought we were healthy. It's as if I feel him now at my side, his armpit against my shoulder, his lips and breath against my cheek. For a second I wonder if this is the instant of his death, at the hospital. Is that what I feel? Is he visiting me?

They said it was safe for us to go home tonight, that nothing would happen.

I have to try not to think too much. Tomorrow's going to be a hard day. I have to empty my head of thoughts and lie down.

I don't manage to stay very long in bed. My gut rumbles, it is tense, churning. I run out to the bathroom at the last moment. There I start feeling nauseous, my body contracts and I lose control at both ends. My skin glistens with sweat.

Shaking, I collapse on the toilet, and there I die of food poisoning from the lunch we had at that small restaurant in the mountains. My soul flies out relieved, suspended beneath the ceiling and watching the next morn-

ing when Niklas gets the hotel staff to unlock the door and they find my cold stiff body. The stench of caustic toilet cleaner, of my feces, my death.

Or.

I do survive the food poisoning during the night, but I have a brain tumor. I die quickly all the same; Frederik's infected me, and in half a year, a doctor administers the final morphine in a hospice after weeks of pain, seizures, and nonsensical ranting.

Or.

It's not me who dies, it's Niklas. Tomorrow morning there's no answer to my knock on his door. I run down to reception, and the clerk and I find him dead in the bathroom.

He's lying like I am now: the stench of the cleaning agents and feces, his death and my despair. All families are one body. The tumor has long tentacles, red filaments, it resembles an octopus, a red jellyfish, it spreads from Niklas to me to Frederik. It grows from Frederik and Niklas to me.

I wake up with my head on the toilet seat, thinking I've slept only a few minutes, but the nausea is almost gone. I get up, bent over on wobbly legs. Rinse my mouth, drink water, rinse my face and look in the mirror.

I have to find out how Niklas is doing. Perhaps he has food poisoning too. It must be those little fried fish, I think.

In a white hotel bathrobe I walk out into the hallway. I knock, but he doesn't answer.

I knock again. Harder. Should I go down and get someone?

The door opens. His face isn't swollen in the least, not by sleep or heat or grief. It's untouched, as young people's faces are.

I ask, "Are you sick?"

"No."

"I thought there might have been something you ate."

"I'm not sick."

He looks at me and wakes up a bit.

"What's wrong? Other than, of course . . . Dad."

A few years ago, after a harrowing day like this, it would have been only natural for him to crawl into my bed, or for me to get into his. There wouldn't have been the least thing odd about it: falling asleep as I embraced my son. A few years ago.

# 3

“Mia. We talked to him.”

Immediately I’m awake, and I recognize the voice of Thorkild, my father-in-law, on the telephone.

“Talked to him?”

“Yes, on the phone here in Denmark. He seems lively enough. And cheerful! We called the hospital, but now they’re going to run some tests.”

Half an hour later, Niklas and I are sitting in a taxi on the way to the hospital. Yesterday I called my in-laws from the emergency room. Now I try the hospital one more time, in vain, before calling Thorkild again—just to hear him repeat the last thing he said. “Frederik seems to be in good spirits. He doesn’t have any pain or paralysis or speech difficulties, and he feels well. I think we’ve been lucky—this time around.”

The neurology department is in a cubic metal-clad addition to the old hospital. It is more modern and better maintained than many Danish hospital wards, and the contrast with the emergency room in which we spent yesterday is striking.

On the other hand, not everyone here can speak English. We present first Frederik’s passport and then our own, and at last a smiling nurse’s aide leads us into Frederik’s room without us understanding what she’s saying.

There’s an empty place where Frederik’s bed must have stood, and once again, there’s nothing for us to do but sit and wait. We try not to stare too much at the patient next to us, but it is hard. He’s a thin man in his early thirties with a white bandage wrapped around the upper part

of his head. A square rack of steel pipes presses against the bandage from several directions, probably to immobilize his head, yet it looks as if big metal bolts are screwed directly into his skull on every side. He can blink, but his face registers no expression. He stares up at the ceiling while his cheeks hang loose. Doors open and shut, nurses talk in the corridor, two nursing students come in and drag out some large apparatus—he reacts to nothing.

In the distance, a man is shouting unintelligibly in Spanish, his angry voice resounding down the halls.

Niklas and I walk out of the room. And from the farthest end of the corridor we see an orderly approach with Frederik, sitting up in a bed.

“Frederik!”

We run toward him, and he smiles broadly when he discovers us.

“Whew! It’s good you came! Such a fright,” he booms. “Good thing *that’s* over now.”

The orderly begins shouting again, just as angry as before. It’s clear he wants Frederik to lie down while he wheels the bed along, but Frederik doesn’t care.

I don’t know if I’m allowed to stop the bed in order to kiss him, or to lean over and embrace him.

“It’s all over?”

“Yes, they’re going to give me some medicine and discharge me today.”

We follow the bed at a half run. “That’s fantastic!”

Niklas and I hug each other while we timidly watch Frederik, who’s grinning broadly.

“But what about the tumor?” Niklas asks. “Doesn’t it have to be removed?”

“Not for the time being.”

“Great. But . . . how are you doing?”

“I’m doing super! They say they can discharge me in a little while, and that’s good. For if we’re going to make it to the dripstone caves, it’s going to have to be today.”

“Do you really think . . .”

It seems crazy, but Frederik wants to keep to our itinerary. And after the orderly has parked the bed and left, we tentatively let Frederik’s opti-

mism rub off on us. I call Thorkild and Vibeke and turn my cell on speakerphone so we can all talk together.

“We have awakened from a nightmare,” Thorkild says.

“You’re right,” I say. “That’s *exactly* what we’ve done.”

I hand the telephone to Niklas and lie with my chest against Frederik’s, I close my eyes so I can shut out the sight of the man with the bolts coming out of his head.

“I got so scared, Frederik,” I whisper. “I got so terribly, terribly scared.”

“So did I,” he says.

But he doesn’t lower his voice, even though I’m lying right next to him. He speaks in the same cheerful, almost shouting voice as when he came riding toward us in the hallway, the same voice as when he stood on the stone wall yesterday.

I know. I know right now that this man is not my real Frederik. But he can become him again, I think. Of course he can.

I nestle against him, pressing my face into his long white hospital gown. I don’t want to have diarrhea and nausea again, I don’t want to wake weeping in the hotel room tonight, I don’t want to be afraid.

He is half shouting. “We’ll have to rent a new car straightaway if we’re going to make it to the dripstone caves today.”

“Yes, Frederik,” I say. “We’ll have to.”

...

Last year we decided to hold a big birthday party for Frederik, even though he wasn’t entering a new decade or anything. There were so many other years when we hadn’t had time to celebrate, so now it was time.

We invited thirty-eight friends, and almost every one of them could make it, so there was no way we could seat all of them at a table. And we agreed that that would be okay. It would make the party more festive if some folks had to sit on folding chairs spread about the rooms and others had to eat standing, or sitting on a sofa armrest or the stairs or wherever they could find a place.

Several of our friends had known us only at Saxtorph, and I could see that our home took them by surprise. During the long years when Frederik

essentially left Niklas and me to our own devices, I became obsessed with buying and selling furniture as a hobby—especially Danish design classics from the '50s and '60s. On numerous weekends, I took my trailer to check out bargains I found in a weekly classified-ad paper, and from scratch I slowly traded my way up to quite an exclusive collection. But while our house and furnishings were beautiful, I also knew that I squeezed too many pieces into a place that was too small.

From the moment the first guests arrived, the mood was exceptional. Niklas had compiled a mix of lounge music he thought we might like, and it worked like a charm. My best friend, Helena, and I had made a bunch of salads that we had put a lot of effort into, and then we had a butcher deliver some grilled free-range chickens and meatballs.

Early in the course of the dinner, Laust Saxtorph, the diminutive chairman of the school board, stood up on a chair to make a speech, and the guests crowded in the doorways to listen.

“Frederik, you have a secret,” he began, pausing for effect. “Somehow or other, you get the rest of us to suggest doing what *you* want us to do.”

Half of our guests worked at Saxtorph, and they laughed out loud.

“And as headmaster, you use this talent every single day—for both raising children and raising teachers . . . and the chairman of your board!”

The guests laughed again.

Before Laust became chairman, his father had held the post, as had his grandfather and great-grandfather, the school's founder, the renowned educator Gustav Saxtorph. Besides chairing the school board, they'd also been headmasters, and in the old days the headmasters had lived at the school. So that Laust, just like his father and grandfather, had his childhood home in rooms that are now used for after-school activities.

Ever since Laust hired Frederik, the two of them have been on the phone to each other pretty much every day, like a pair of fast-talking teenage boys. Laust lets the school take up a lot more space in his life than he ought to, given his wife and his position as section chief in the Ministry of Education. And it's safe to say that Frederik's boss has also become his best friend.

Laust sketched a series of amusing minor incidents from school life, describing how he and Frederik had responded to them together. But then, late in the speech, he grew serious.



Some years ago, a girl at the school had become quite introverted, and her PE teacher had noticed bruises on her. The girl said she'd gotten them from climbing trees, but Frederik called her mother and stepfather in for a meeting anyway. They said that they would *never* hit her.

But Frederik went with his gut. Though the school had hundreds of students, he kept on the case. He arranged further meetings, and at last the stepfather admitted that he couldn't govern his temper, and the couple elected to go into therapy.

"Frederik," said Laust from up on his chair, "what makes this story so typical is that at no point did the parents become angry with you. Nor did they, once they owned up to their problems, feel too humiliated to let their daughter keep attending our school. On the contrary—they thanked you for your help, and they became even more involved in school activities than before."

Laust must have also known the girl and her parents; he paused to take a sip of his red wine. There was something delicate in his pale skin and thin hair. He caught Frederik's eye and was ready to go on.

"If they hadn't understood before why your abilities as headmaster were so highly respected, they understood now. You made a difference in that girl's life forever, Frederik. And she is only one of many. Very very many! And you've made a difference in parents' lives, and in the lives of the people who work at the school. And you've made an even greater difference in the lives of those of us gathered here—we who are lucky enough to be counted your friends."

He got down and we toasted, shouted *hurrah!* and applauded, and Frederik went over and gave him a hug.

There were other speeches and songs. A friend from when Frederik worked at Trørød Elementary told about when we met. "Frederik got the young, fair-haired tennis girl that every man wanted," he said. Later another old friend said, "And then he snagged the hot babe, Mia," and again people laughed.

Niklas changed the music, a couple of his friends joining him; we pushed the chairs back against the walls and some people danced, we opened the door to the yard even though it was November, and people stood on the back stairs and smoked. Frederik and I danced too, the light uneven on the dance floor, I flung my arms around his waist, more wine,

a shelf toppled over and so what, the clock struck two, there was noise and then the music grew more mellow.

Frederik and I were sweaty from dancing. He pulled me out the back door, down the stairs, and out into the yard, so far from the windows that we were standing in darkness. He kissed me under the black branches of the apple tree.

It was much too cold, but we picked our way across the black lawn toward the white steel skeleton of our hanging sofa where it caught the light in the shadows. There were no cushions, and the seat's dark springs shaded into the space and the grass beneath them. We sat down, and with the alcohol and dancing in our blood it was as if we were hovering suspended in the cold night.

Hell, the price Niklas and I paid that Frederik might merit such a collection of speeches. It hadn't been my vision of a marriage, to endure so many years essentially in solitude while my husband lavished his attention upon anyone connected to Saxtorph—and too much attention upon a couple of female teachers and board members in particular.

Ever since, I've tried to forget how lonely I was during all those years. No one except my girlfriends and Niklas to look me in the eye, no one else to hear my trivial asides and understand how I felt just from the tone of my voice. The longing for another kind of marriage and my despairing wonder about why I stayed with Frederik. What had he done to me? Why didn't I go out and seek the marriage I'd always dreamt of?

A few years ago he finally came back to us. It'd been a hard struggle, but I thought I succeeded in swallowing my bitterness. And now it felt as if we'd really only been with each other the last couple of years, as if our relationship were still brand spanking new and full of possibility. A joyful feeling that his betrayal belonged to another world than this.

There was almost nothing in the yard we could see. So it was more a sound, or a sense that something was moving in the apple branches. As if a bird were taking flight, or a dried-up winter apple were letting go of its stem.

“Frederik, the others praise you for so many marvelous things. And I'm so proud of you. So very proud to have a man who's so clever and so good with people.”

I pressed myself against him, and there in the hanging sofa, in the night, in the cold, I felt in my trembling body that he and I belonged together.

“But this is what I love you for.”

...

Another nurse enters Frederik’s hospital room. We can’t understand what she’s saying, but with gestures she makes us understand that Frederik and I are to follow her to see somebody else—perhaps another doctor.

Frederik gets up from the bed as if it were the most natural thing in the world. Niklas remains behind, and Frederik and I are led into a large corner office where we sit across from an older doctor with an immense mustache. The exaggerated rectitude of his bearing gives me the impression that he’s been a military doctor most of his life. He speaks excellent English with great pride, an old-fashioned, British boarding-school English.

“I can say with almost complete certitude that it is not cancer,” he says. “That means that my colleagues in Denmark can probably remove the tumor completely. Before the operation, however, no one will be able to say precisely the extent of the procedure they will be required to perform. Perhaps afterwards you will be completely as you were accustomed to being before; perhaps you will find yourself changed.”

Frederik doesn’t say anything, so I ask for him. “Changed?”

“Yes, for you must have already experienced changes recently. Am I correct?”

I try to think, but my thoughts lead nowhere. I have no idea what the doctor is talking about, and yet I hear myself saying, “Yes.”

“What you must be particularly prepared for is for your husband to lose all empathy for you and how you are doing,” the doctor says. “He will have a harder time restraining his more primitive impulses. He may have sudden fits of anger and deny every suggestion that he is unwell. Those are the most typical symptoms when there is pressure on the orbitofrontal region of the brain.”

I stare at Frederik, still not knowing what the doctor is talking about. The doctor folds his sunburned hands on the desktop and looks into my eyes probingly.

“But to judge by the size of his tumor, you know all about these orbito-frontal symptoms already, do you not?”

In my head I hear myself asking *Do I?* but I answer, “Yes.”

“Good. Frederik, we shall give you corticotropin to reduce the swelling in your brain, as well as some anticonvulsants so that you do not risk another epileptic seizure like the one you experienced yesterday . . . Frederik?”

“Yes,” he says.

“You may return to your hotel today. And you may fly back to Denmark in a couple days. If everything goes well, they should be able to operate on you in Denmark in one month’s time.”

Frederik appears to be chiefly interested in some red and yellow files with tables and diagrams that lie on the desk in front of us.

“That long?” I ask. “But what if it’s cancer?”

“They must ensure that they remove the entire tumor, but also that they do not remove more than is necessary. They can accomplish that best if they wait until the swelling of the brain itself has disappeared.”

“Is it a dangerous operation?” I ask.

He turns calmly to Frederik.

“Will you be so kind as to replace those papers where they were?”

Only now do I see that Frederik has been intently riffling through one of the doctor’s files.

“Frederik! I do hope you’re not reading the doctor’s papers!”

“No, pardon me.” He smiles his disarming smile and returns the folder to the desktop.

“You must really excuse him,” I say.

“Well, yes.” The doctor makes a deprecating wave of his hand. “I know how it is—diminished inhibition of impulses, eh?”

Based on his examination, the doctor evidently thinks I’ve been living with a series of obvious changes in Frederik’s brain for a long time. But have I?

Yes, I suppose he *has* been different in recent weeks. More self-centered, disorganized, hotheaded. But is he any worse than Helena’s husband, or my other friends’ husbands? I really don’t think so.

The doctor gets to his feet and gives me his hand in parting. He squeezes hard.

“You must be prepared for the corticotropin to make his personality

changes gradually less pronounced in the coming weeks. On the other hand, the treatment may induce manic tendencies as a side effect. Which make it critical for you to take away his car keys. He must not drive before the operation.”

“Yes. Thank you,” I say. “I will.” And meanwhile I wonder if Frederik is so intelligent that the pressure from the tumor might not have resulted in the usual symptoms, but merely brought him down to the level of other men.

But how can I ask the doctor, without it sounding as if I have an inflated image of my husband?