

THE LOST COMEDIAN

(A Novel)

&

BEYOND THE LATTICED VIEW: TRANSLATING SELF, MEMORY AND PLACE IN A SECOND LANGUAGE

(Exegesis)

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Abstract

The thesis consists of two parts, a creative component and an accompanying exegesis.

My novel, *The Lost Comedian*, explores a young girl's struggle to find her own moral compass through a religious crisis, her relationships with her peers and with adults in positions of power. It is mainly set in Sweden in the 1960s and 70s, but also moves back to the 1930s. By the time of her father's death, the protagonist, Christina, is living a modest life in bay-side Melbourne. She returns to Sweden from Australia for her father's funeral, and is confronted with her past and memories of growing up in the religious community of Svenstorp. The novel entwines two themes: 1) Christina's development from a child with a strong sense of belonging and identity as a "Believer" to a teenage rebel, and the consequences of her rebellion; 2) Christina's recovery from a secret, deeply personal loss that she has encountered in Melbourne, and the ever-present temptations of surrendering to a sense of guilt, punishment and self-destruction as a consequence of the "pagan" way of life to which she surrendered as a teenager in Sweden.

The exegesis, "Beyond the Latticed View: Translating Self, Memory and Place in a Second Language," focuses on the linguistic and cultural translation processes when writing in a second language. Investigating gains and losses of this translation process, the exegesis explores the prospect of a "new" sense of self emerging in the "new" language. Specific Swedish social, literary and cultural influences that inform the novel are discussed in the context of its setting. The exegesis also examines the cultural translation processes that these influences instigate, and how writing from both a spatial and temporal distance when "translating" the past influences the novel. As well, practical translation issues when writing from an "other" culture and language are explored. While reflecting on the many challenges when writing in translation, the exegesis argues that translating "self, memory and place," ultimately creates a richly rewarding narrative.

I hereby declare that this thesis is an original piece of work, written by me. It contains no material which has been accepted for the award of any other degree or diploma in any university or other institution.

To the best of my knowledge the thesis contains no material previously published or written by any other person, except where due reference is made in the text of the thesis.

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NOVEL

THE LOST COMEDIAN

THE LOST COMEDIAN

CONTENTS

<i>Prologue</i>	3
PART ONE: HYMNS FROM SVENSTORP	
<i>An Aerial View</i>	5
<i>Svenstorp</i>	12
<i>My Mother's Longing</i>	14
<i>Hymn for Believers</i>	19
<i>Christmas Hymn</i>	28
<i>...and Sad Christmas Tale</i>	35
<i>Welcome Hymn</i>	42
<i>A Walk in the Past</i>	48
<i>Songs of Euphoria</i>	57
<i>Confirmation Tune</i>	69
<i>Hymn for a Special Occasion</i>	78
PART TWO: INFERNO	
<i>En Dåres Försvarstal / A Fool's Apology</i>	84
<i>Dance of Death</i>	87
<i>The Road to the Morgue</i>	91
<i>My Father's Grieving</i>	101
<i>On the Other Side</i>	106
<i>Bringing Home the Sheep</i>	118
<i>Saving Christina</i>	127
<i>Sodom and Gomorrah</i>	131
<i>Grievances</i>	137
<i>Practising Orienteering</i>	145
<i>Konrad's Tale</i>	151
<i>Comrades</i>	157
<i>A Dream Play</i>	160
<i>Christina's Going Away</i>	162
<i>Epilogue</i>	166
<i>Acknowledgements</i>	167

Prologue

As they carefully place her on a stretcher, pieces of glass sticking out of her belly, her big feet and tall limbs in yoga-like angles, she is trying to remember something, grasp an old fragment of sudden importance. When she finds it, lights flashing in the background, she smiles in relief, despite being unconscious. A memory rustling down Vasagatan in Gothenburg along with its baby-blue trams and pleasant view of eighteenth-century apartment buildings, where old widows patter on equally worn oriental rugs, the chandeliers attempting to cast a certain shimmer over the street's fading glory. It brushes past Vasaparken where drug deals are being made in the bushes among the scent of bird-cherry and lilacs. Wood anemones are sprouting beside the bike path—it must be spring—and there is the kiosk selling *The Gothenburg Post* and snowballs, and the small shops a few steps down advertising dance-wear or tobacco, and finally, when almost down at the Avenue, the old brick building with its crumbling front steps.

Behind the oak doors, past the overworked and somewhat irritable administration far down the corridor, there is a stage door and she has finally arrived at her destination: a memory of an exercise they once did—an improvisation, where they had to tell someone something important. Risky. Where something was at stake. This was a very important word at this acting school. That's why she fitted in so well. She never feared this word "stake." It came quite naturally to her. This time, she had intended to tell her parents something. Easy, she thought. Two of her fellow-students were chosen to play her parents and hastily filled in on some quickly drawn characteristics.

There they were, in a small space filled with students all dressed in fluorescent coloured leggings and, on stage, she and her newly put-together parents. Sitting around the familiar kitchen table, they seemed so soft all of a sudden, looking at her so helpless and confused.

And there she was, frozen in the doorway. Like a madly mute clown covering her mouth in silence. Kicking and slamming the doors on her way out.

Once again she stands—or, lies unconscious if you prefer—in front of slammed doors, hoping that behind one of them, they will sit. Patiently waiting. If she finds them, Siri, this time she'll tell them. Siri?

Part One:

HYMNS FROM SVENSTORP

An Aerial View

It appears to be evening in Småland as I fly over the treetops. Apart from a few specks of foreboding blue in the distance, revealing the lakes hidden in the forests, I can see nothing but fir and pine. Only tiny empty pockets create gaping holes where trees seem to have been ravaged. Not to worry, they'll plant new ones. Soon they too will stand in straight rows and salute their pointy tips towards the sky. Their shadows will join the others fawning across the twirling asphalt road and over the landscape that I am now returning to; a scenery engulfed in pine and darkness.

My arms flap effortlessly in the silky sky and my legs follow obediently as I soar through the dark landscape. The smell of pine is overwhelming. It is the familiar smell of scouting and outings and wearing gumboots in case of a snake. It is the fragrance of being forced on an orienteering expedition by the handsome Physical Education teacher Roland, and getting lost in the lingon-berry thickets, despite holding onto the eternally confusing compass. Pine is the anxious odour of wondering if there is a moose nearby while eating sweaty cheese sandwiches and drinking tepid lemonade, sitting on a cold flat stone and hoping it's time to go home soon. It is the exotic scent of motor racing and strangers on the track nearby.

Like a velvet rug below me, the bog-lands are covered in moss. Soft and slushy, no wonder there was a need for gumboots. Nothing could be built on this swampy wetness. But as I head closer to Svenstorp, I remember its people. A truce has long since grudgingly been declared between the moss and the inhabitants. The people of Svenstorp have tamed the bog-lands in their own peculiar ways. Tired of the ground's uselessness for farming but most of all of being poor, they thought carefully but daringly. Factories are now dotted everywhere in the landscape; inside, people have stubbornly worked the last century ignoring the odds of success. There is nothing that hard work and grim determination can't solve they believed, with the same faith they believed in Jesus their Saviour and the perils of drinking, gambling and dancing, and it seems they were right. See how well they've all done—well, almost everyone.

One visionary Svenstorper even decided to build a racing track on the moss. He was well known for two facts: one, he was not a Believer, two, he liked to smoke a cigar and

was commonly and rather affectionately it must be said, despite this sinfulness, known as the Cigar. When the Cigar bought a large chunk of moss just outside Svenstorp, he got it cheap, the owner shaking his head in amazement at such stupidity. The proof of the purchase is still here, the remnants of the old track that put the moss on the map in the early 1970s. Persuading the world to come to Svenstorp for a few glorious years was a breeze to the Cigar once he convinced the business community to get behind him, making them believe there might be a buck to be made. And thus it was born: Svenstorp Grand Motor Track, the host of two major events in alternate years: Svenstorp Formula One Grand Prix and The MC 250 CC World Championships. For a few weeks every year, the moss was covered in tents and people camping, kiosks, grill parties and shops on wheels; journalists from all over the place, and even a film crew from Swedish Television followed. Believe me, I was there.

Even His Majesty the King attended. It is true he was only a Crown-Prince then, but for a few glorious days he lived next door to my family while our neighbour moved out to make room for the prince and his security entourage. A shiny Porsche was waiting in the driveway next to our pavement. The moment our future king stepped outside to drive towards our moss, we swiftly assembled on the lawn opposite, applauding and cheering him as he reversed quickly out of the driveway, leaving his adoring subjects behind in a cloud of smoke.

My older cousin, Britt, who lived in a remote village, screamed on the phone in delight. She arrived just in time to watch the security man pull the blind down in our neighbour's bedroom, before the prince went to bed: the same time every night. A man of regular habits, our prince! We could watch it all from our back window, in the tiny bedroom that used to be a wardrobe, which suddenly had acquired the best view in Svenstorp, our heads close together, noses pressed against the cool glass, giggling excitedly. Once the blind was down, we lingered for a while, before we pulled down our own. It was a heady moment in our childhood: sleeping so close to our future king.

At night, everyone in Svenstorp would take their car for a drive to have a look at all the people; we weren't used to seeing that many all at once. Round and round the roads we went, as if participating in our own—but at a snail's pace— race. Slowly down Grand Street we made our way to the outskirts to have a peek at the campers with their beer cans and tents in the pine woods when the motorbike races were on, the smell of grilled sausages mingling with petrol and pine. When the start pistol for the more glamorous Formula One event was raised, we turned our attention to the more fancy

looking people taking over every hotel in the neighbourhood. Not many of the locals saw the races; some rented out their houses and went on holidays, muttering about getting some peace and quiet, but really, as their habit was, to not to let an opportunity to make some money pass them by. The rest of us could hear it from our backyards: the buzzing sound of the Big World, out there, on our moss.

My father made business like never before. Grand Prix Svenstorp 1971, his bags declared in shiny letters, his shop filling up with big city people, exclaiming in piercing, big-city accents, "Ja men Herre Gud, Oh, my God, it's so cheap! In Stockholm we pay double the amount!"

Except for the locals, who were mainly there to have a look at the Stockholmers, and after having a good peek, would take me aside in confidence: "See, that Father of yours, 'e always takes a bit off! Know 'im well, Konrad, used to go to school together see, and 'e always gives me a good price." "Five kronor, that's the best I can do," I'd smile back as cunningly as any Svenstorper, knowing full well they couldn't possibly all have gone to school in the small village of Kulla with my father. Everyone would know that; everyone knew my father.

The motor track looks deserted now. Many years have passed since it's been in use and the King goes to Monaco on his holidays now, I think. I've seen him inside glossy magazines, diving off his yacht in the turquoise Mediterranean Sea. Moss has once again taken over the track. Soon it will completely surrender; pine trees will obstruct the view of the desolate old track and no one will remember its heady televised days in the sun anymore.

It is getting lighter as I reluctantly fly in over Svenstorp. The immaculate colour schemes glow from the new apartment blocks next to the kiosk, even on the ugly brick walls of the National Dental Service. How small Grand Street seems from this angle, there's nothing to it. It's just a street, a few lights, a frozen pond. An old, gravelled road covered with asphalt and ideas of grandeur! It's hilarious. I circle around the monument in bronze, erected in the beginning of the street. Proudly outside the bank entrance it was raised, the purchase of the good businessmen of Svenstorp for the enjoyment of all: The Statue of Liberty. It looks exactly like the one in New York, except smaller and a bit chubbier somehow. As if to make up for its size, there is an added water feature in front of it. Perhaps it's meant to resemble the water surrounding the original. Perhaps someone went there once on a holiday, taking the boat out to Long Island thinking, that's a really nice-looking statue, why don't we build one in Svenstorp

too? It's not like we can't afford it! There is nothing the Svenstorpers can't afford. The cars bear witness to this fact; every car passing by is a Mercedes or Saab, only the occasional bashful Volvo. All in the latest models, all nice and shiny. Just like the houses. All nice and new. No one seems to care much for the dreary old past here, including me.

The water feature in front of the statue where I once fell in has fishes trapped inside it now. Cold bodies shimmer beneath the surface, their round fishy eyes blinking helplessly at me, before I'm hauled back onto the street.

A shiny white building further down seems to be heading towards me. It's the Mission Church, run by the Swedish Missionary Society for many a proud year. Listen to the sound of chirpy singing, the trumpeting from the pulpit and the beat of a drum set! The building where "Jesus Loves His Little Children" and the movements to "This Little Light of Mine" are known by all us blessed. Where every word on the pamphlet handed out when marching steadfastly through the entrance every Sunday is sincerely felt: "I was filled with joy when told to walk into the House of Our Lord."

There was no mention of how to feel on the way out.

The white building comes to a sudden halt. Behind it, the spire of the Lutheran State Church bashfully pokes out, surprisingly still there. Nothing much exciting—and therefore good for the business community—has ever taken place there: an old building, with old visitors, surrounded by the dead. Old graves ignoring the call of the modern world, looking like they always have. Watching. Waiting. The way I'm being watched.

Opposite is the old bathhouse where swim-coach Ralf ruled. Ready to swoop us up into his sturdy arms and throw the less brave of us into the deep end of the pool. Parents didn't react to his unorthodox swimming teaching methods. They seldom did in the 1960s. His wife worked there too. She didn't pay much attention to him either. She was too busy reading magazines and eating bananas. She must have liked them a lot: a pile of banana peels was always lying next to her deckchair by the end of year one's weekly session. At the end of Ralf's throwing antics, she would sigh and reluctantly stand up, in order to lead us into the sauna and the next part of the program, a task carried out by another staffer, the enormous Ruth. We sweltered in the tiny sauna, our naked bodies hotter than the hissing stones, and tried not to panic. Ruth would place her giant bottom at the door, you could see it through the glass window, and she wasn't

going to move it until it was time to push us firmly into the final ritual of hot and cold showers, muttering to the row of steaming, red-skinned seven-year-olds to hurry up.

When they built a modern pool near our school in year two, Ralf didn't follow, neither did his wife. There was talk about him having taken too much interest in certain activities, such as Ladies Only Tuesdays, where, rumour had it, he had been hiding on the small grandstand, peeping out at the ladies swimming around naked in the pool; this was Sweden, after all, where nakedness seemed a healthy and natural state to be, at the time.

The bathhouse went through a metamorphosis and began a new era as a rehearsal space for the school orchestra. We sat inside the old pool, the glazed tiles creating a strange echo, playing one popular hit after another under the Danish Maestro Jensen's conduction, who cheerfully wiggled his bottom, dancing and laughing away in, for us, a rather confusing manner at first, not behaving like the adults we were used to; too much life in him somehow. We put down his peculiar behaviour to him being Danish and got on with it: Minuet Allegro by Mozart, one, two, three.

I finally steer off Grand Street and turn right past the bust of the Cigar's head, his balding head shining in the morning sunshine. Svenstorp's only journalist, the tall and gangly Sören Svensson, is lying on the grass next to it, photographing what might be the first spring flower, or a potato in an unusual shape, which will no doubt make headlines in the local paper in days to come. I dip so close to the ground now that I can almost press his shutter before creating some rather nice strokes up Alley Road. I'm really getting the hang of this now, but it's been a long journey. I'm getting tired. I spot the pastor's wife, fru Herring, ahead of me. She is cycling with her usual boundless energy. Her feet in the pointy purple suede boots that I used to find so compellingly ugly are pedalling eagerly up the hill. She is probably on her way to our neighbour. Not the neighbour where our future king stayed, but the one on the other side. She has probably had another message from God to give to farbror Werner. His wife, tant Berta, one of the great Believers, had no such luck with her husband. He preferred to read books (profane) and hunt with his dogs that were locked up in a kennel at the back of their house, howling through the night. He was a bit frightening he was, Werner, he howled almost as much as his dogs; you have to admire fru Herring's tenacity and optimism.

Unless she falls off.

We were actually surrounded by non-Believers, which was quite remarkable in Svenstorp on such a nice street and all. Although old Harry across the street belonged

to the local branch of the temperance society, which was almost the same thing, he was even the chairman, and came to our school talking about the perils of alcohol and how that “leads you into Ruin.” Just one taste and you’d be hooked. I promised myself solemnly never to go near it. Not that there was much chance in our family, mind you.

Our neighbour across to the right, farbror George, also a non-Believer, even danced. He belonged to the local dance society, not in Svenstorp, of course—no such thing there—but in the very close and equally small town of Träby. There was only a moss in between us, but they might as well have lived on another planet. They didn’t start their own businesses there; instead they went to work at the enormous factory that poured out fumes as you passed by on your way to Jönköping. People from Träby swore and drank and probably even voted for Prime Minister Palme.

Worst of all, they also had this dance parlour where local dance bands performed. This is where our neighbour went. He even wore a T-shirt, in itself quite a radical step, with a slogan asking: “May I?” Oh yes, you may, George! My father didn’t say anything about George’s t-shirt; he relied on him too much for an abundance of talents he himself did not possess. The fridge was leaking? The oil-heater in the cellar was making a strange sound? You couldn’t flush the toilet? George could. Unburden my confused father, holding yet another electronic device that had given up. Patiently explain the water pipes and plumbing system, or the dishwasher’s intricate inner secrets after a desperate phone call: “You wouldn’t know how to change a fuse, would you, George?” Of course George did. All things considering, you would have to say a daring T-shirt suggesting what George got up to in his spare time paled into insignificance.

I decide to take a short cut across Werner’s dog kennel, but there are no dogs barking now. Fru Herring has parked her bike in front of their house and is pressing their doorbell. A heavy wind is blowing, and I start to feel giddy as I finally manage to reach the old fence separating us from Werner’s. Someone is laughing hysterically in the background and I try to make it stop. They’re everywhere now, one of them bending down behind the garage. I need to go faster, but my arms feel so heavy.

My mother and father are standing in the garden with outstretched arms, as if they know I’m coming: Hej, hej, hello! I gasp, but they just keep waving as someone gives me a final push and I tumble in a series of clumsy somersaults across the fence.

There’s the sound of a church bell. Everything suddenly feels frantic now: the tolling of the bell, the chill in the air, the flapping of my arms. I misjudge the landing onto our beautiful garden, which is blooming heavenly despite the season. I try to protest and

scream Nej! Nej, as I crash land into the potato patch, but no sound will come out. The coarse soil in my mouth, the bells ringing: Dong-dong-dong!

And then everything is darkness.

When I open my eyes, gulping for air, it's still dark. The air feels sticky, the smell of pine gone. I can still hear laughter; it seems to be coming from outside. Dazed, I listen to kookaburras laughing away in the early hours of the morning, or are they seagulls? Some jogger is breathing heavily on the path below, there's the distant sound of a dog barking. I'm lying on the floor, tangled up in damp sheets, in Sue's guest room in her flat by Port Phillip Bay, Melbourne, Australia. Caesar is snoring next to me. It's 4:59 am her digital alarm clock informs me, as I stumble back into bed. Bells are still ringing. I finally reach for the phone.

Miles and miles of wire have been dug up and down and telephone poles erected. Intricate systems connected above and below the ground have journeyed over many lands and rivers, climbed mountains and crossed the seas, to the other side of the world, to a different time and day and season so that I can hear a voice in a familiar tongue from as far away as Svenstorp now so close to me.

A voice of doom, slowly reaching my still drowsy brain: The voice of my older sister.

"You better come home," Anita says, "Dad's dead."

Svenstorp

My father's funeral is six days away when I arrive in winter darkness at the bottom of the steps on Alley Road.

"You're late!" Anita greets me as she grabs hold of my suitcase and leads the way in a disapproving march up the slippery steps into the familiar redbrick house.

I'm late because the bus from Gothenburg slid off the icy road just outside Träby and we had to wait for a replacement. As I got out into the shock of the cold night, surrounded by pine trees and a few passengers calmly discussing the timetable in heavy winter coats and dialect, I cursed myself. I should have waited and gone with Charlotta the following day, but when I landed at Landvetter Airport I had suddenly decided to get the bus instead, feeling that I had been waiting long enough at the stopover in Kuala Lumpur, endlessly circling duty-free shops, my tongue in strange coating. To be honest, I dreaded meeting Lotta more than Anita. At least with Anita you always know where you stand; a straightforward hit of disapproval heading towards you rather than a slyly served one, bouncing from an unexpected corner.

Inside, the clocks are dividing time like they always have: the precise and rather sharp ticking of the wooden wall-clock in the hallway and the muffled sound of the grandfather clock in the best room. Nothing much has changed; a few modern touches from IKEA, that's all.

Anita shows me to my old bedroom next to the kitchen, instantly making the foldout bed with great expertise. No one else is home. She gives me a long list of her husband Lars and children's whereabouts; they are all involved in church activities. Sitting down on the newly made bed for a moment, Anita looks a mixture of earth and heaven the way she always has, perhaps leaning more towards the former tonight. "Well," she says gloomily, "it's good that you were able to come. There is a lot to do."

For Anita, there is always a lot to do, commitments to fulfil, cakes to be baked, ovens to be scrubbed, church services to attend and lists to tick off, but especially now: there are meetings to arrange with the pastor and the solicitor too; there is advertising in the newspaper and talking to the bank; there are flowers to be ordered and the organising of cleaning out Dad's flat; and do I want to have a look at him, then she has to call the funeral director again. Anita's face is by now one concerned frown, and as

usual there isn't much I can do to ease her burden. On the contrary: I'm yet another landing on her shoulders.

I wake up with a jerk in the middle of the night, unknown shapes and familiar spectres surrounding me. I call on Caesar, trying to imagine his velvet eyes following me, as fumbling, I get up in the darkness, wrapped in a blanket like a mummy. Clocks are ticking away as fast as my heartbeat in every room of the house.

Outside the kitchen window, the branches of the barren old larch tree in the front yard are swaying in the wind. The streets are desolate. Ghostly dusts of snow are sweeping the streets.

In a sudden movement I bend over, like once in a blank corridor at the hospital in the middle of the night. One of the older nurses had seen me and come to give me a glass of water, giving me a little pat on my hair as she did. I didn't want her to stop. Disorientated and embarrassed, I had stumbled away from the concerned-looking nurse and disinfectant-smelling corridor and back to my hospital bed; they had given me a private room.

I take a sharp breath, leaning against the sink, my fingertips hard against the bench. I focus on my mother. She used to stand here too, by the kitchen window.

She is looking out, though not for me.

My Mother's Longing

My mother looks out on Alley Road down the deserted playground, past the larch trees and in the distance, the council-flats, their cheerful colours flaking.

She might see someone she vaguely recognises from the factory at the end of the road cycling past with their shopping or a young woman crossing the road with a pram. Returning to the job ahead of her, her movements are calm; she never hurries, her movements don't need to rush off anywhere, they are staying put. Calmly she butters the white bread on the silver tray in front of her and pats the lettuce dry on a paper towel. She peels the frozen prawns, pale nail polish shimmering on her well-cared-for hands, her one display of vanity. Squirting a snake-like trail of mayonnaise on top of the sliced eggs and prawns, she nods her head—the size of which has us all in helpless giggles when we enter a hat shop with her. Just like shoe-shop assistants' concerned frown upon inspecting my mother's feet; her large, roundish feet, which now step outside. At the tiny vegetable garden next to the impressive potato patch, she breaks off a stem of dill, in order to finish off her professional-looking sandwiches much admired by the ladies expected tonight.

She stands quietly, looking up into the sky, the wind blowing slightly in her thick shortly trimmed hair: a solitary figure with a stem of dill in her hand, on a quiet afternoon in Svenstorp in the late 1960s. Not a sound can be heard. Not the sound of violence and horror striking elsewhere in the world at this very moment, nor the sound of remembered excitement either: of travelling through Europe in her Volkswagen with her sister Gertrude, hands in gloves on the steering wheel, practising "*Oh welch belebende Höhenluft!*" in the Alps and "*Quanto per le pesche, per favore?*" at the Spanish Steps, with sweet grapes and peaches juicily abundant; of returning to the white stone building rising above everyone else's in the village of Åsa with a full view of the township of Svenstorp, her room filled with dreams crammed in with her poetry, art books and Strindberg; all is a distant memory. Sighing slightly, she is interrupted by the next-door neighbour's dogs barking.

Back in front of the kitchen window again, she never really notices me riding home from school, even though I put the wrong arm out when I turn and sing loudly

in pretend English. She will, however, always come to the door for our greeting ritual:

“What occurred in the woods today, my dear child?”

“An unfortunate cow went through the mire, Mama!”

We never tire of these lines from a school play a long time ago and we’ll do them with the same dramatic flair everyday. Unless she’s gone somewhere and a bowl of rosehip soup and a sandwich are waiting in the kitchen with a note next to the plate, usually signed in another language, depending on what evening course she is attending that year: “*Your Mother*,” “*Deine Mutter*,” “*La vostra Madre!*”

I will stand there, looking at my mother. I can tell that she isn’t really here on Alley Road with me; she has gone somewhere else. Her eyes are crossing the street, leaping above the neighbours’ houses, effortlessly moving beyond the park to somewhere much further than the township of Svenstorp. I want to go there too. I want to go wherever she is. This is what my mother gives me: her big nose and the ability to laugh at absurdities, but also eyes that wander far away.

Anita will admire her tact and manners, her ability to say the right thing, while trying in vain to teach my father to do the same. “My mother,” my older sister will say, “has class!”

This is after Anita has left the People of Jesus, of course, and stopped accusing our mother of being a conformist Believer, who should take in all the reformed alcoholics and drug addicts, if there were any in Svenstorp over Christmas, but most importantly, get rid of the TV: a capitalist, *bourgeois*, brainwashing invention. Looking at her thoughtfully, my mother would listen to my sister’s suggestions as if she found them most interesting and certainly worth considering, but perhaps not at the present moment, to the immense relief of both me and Charlotta, my younger sister, who don’t want to share our Christmas with someone who perhaps used to be a slave under the oak of alcohol, drowning their sorrows in *brännvin* spirits.

For Lotta the world is a dangerous, treacherous place, and my mother her haven. She will sit in her lap and play with her hands, which have been given names by my sister, with different characters: Sonja, the cheeky, tickly one, and Tonja, the soft stroker. My mother makes up games with Lotta no one else understands, and she will follow her mother around everywhere, she is the daughter all the ladies of Svenstorp wanted to cuddle: “Oh, look at the little one; just like a doll, eh?” they exclaim, and

then turn around to me, as if surprised at seeing me in the same company: "You must be so proud having such a pretty little sister!"

But I will catch my mother's longing. Only I seem to notice that a part of her is not present in our house in Svenstorp.

"Better to listen to a string that breaks than never to draw one's bow," she quotes to me, like a mantra, whatever the occasion.

It's a challenge she gives me, the awkward-looking one, and I will listen, I will not let her down. There'll be plenty of broken strings to hear around me.

I will stand in the doorway looking at my mother anxiously, thinking, "Wake up, Mum, The Ladies from the Sewing Circle will be here soon!"

One by one they will ring the doorbell and it will be my job to answer. My mother will briefly make an appearance from the kitchen, still in her apron.

"Grattis Lisa, Happy Birthday!" the ladies will exclaim.

They will hand me flowers for my mother. Sometimes they will give me a small bouquet too, since they know we share the same day: "And these flowers are for the *Other* little birthday child," they will laugh encouragingly, stumbling a bit before the word "little" since there is nothing very small about me at all.

They will step out of their walking shoes and into their best ones, brought in a special plastic bag in a bright flowery pattern with drawstrings, which has almost certainly been bought from my father at a special price. The next stop is the big mirror hanging in the hallway, where they will stand sighing, or alternatively, laughing, as if surprised finding their own image inside our mirror. They will tilt their heads and bring out a comb, carefully correcting their hair, which has all been in curlers and all look the same. Some will even bring out a lipstick, the most daring shade always brought out by the local Avon Lady, who doesn't-dress-her-age, according to my father, after once spotting her walking past his shop in a mini-skirt and knee-high socks, "giggling like a school-girl!"

I will stand in the hallway, watching the different shades of pink and orange lips being applied, wondering how I will manage.

After posing by their image, the ladies will venture into the best room, their chatter and laughter a distant sound all night in the midst of embroidery and knitting. It is a Ladies Night only, and the rest of us will eat in the kitchen, even my father, when he has closed up the shop for the night. We will be allowed in briefly, forming a little queue inside the glass doors, to receive a piece of the cake on the table, all

hoping our father won't say anything embarrassing—my older sister also having the additional worry of me suddenly deciding to be the clown or taking such a giant piece there won't be enough for everyone else, exclaiming: "Look at me! Look how much cake I can eat!" my sister snarling "as if anyone cares!" behind me.

My mother will be all charm and patience. Gracefully she will deal with anything unusual or unexpected that comes her way, usually in the shape of me or my father. The house will be filled with flowers. In the hallway, a row of summer coats and shoebags will be waiting for their owners. And soon it will be time for the reverse ritual. The ladies will reappear in the hallway, looking for their paraphernalia, all laughter, some of them with golden teeth fillings glimmering in the subdued light. I will curtsy and my father will try to say something witty, a hint of despair on my mother's face. The ladies from the sewing circle will find their light summer coats and finally depart into the night, the heavy door letting the cool breeze in as they leave.

Everything will be still again. My mother will be waving and smiling from the kitchen window where she once again will find herself, putting dishes away in the quiet night.

I will stand in the kitchen doorway, looking at my mother whisking cream.

She turns around now.

She is back again: My mother with the faraway face, and just a hint of flippancy.

I smile relieved.

The ladies will be here soon.

*

It's minus fifteen outside, the thermometer attached to the window informs me as I finish my water and put the glass in the gleaming sink. I find it hard to breathe. I feel as if I'm about to suffocate amongst Anita's perfectly ordered plates and cupboards. I used to think I was allergic as a child. I found it hard to breathe in so many rooms that my parents finally took me to a specialist, tiring of my constant running out of various rooms complaining about the smell of the wallpaper or furniture. The specialist told my parents that I was just making a fuss of myself, and the cough and constant clearing of my throat an act of conceit: yet another amusing anecdote to tell, which I provided so freely.

I tried to inhale deeply and not panic.

Counting slowly on the breath out, I move into the old best room. I sit down on the leather couch that has replaced the old velvet one, and once again watch the wall of blackness outside. My view is draped by heavy curtains that perfectly match the wallpaper in a pale peach. In Australia no one seems to use curtains. Anita would find that peculiar. So much brightness there, so much darkness here.

In the distance I make out the old council flats where the Greek boy, Aristotle, and his friend, Sven-Åke, used to live. Most of the children from the council flats despised us. In fact, most of the children who didn't belong to the church, the non-Believers, did. But no one hated us with such gusto as Sven-Åke, the boy with the golden voice.

Hymn for Believers

Thy clear sun rises once again!

“Bloody Jesus-Friends,” Sven-Åke teases as soon as *fröken* Inga-Britta leaves the classroom for a moment: “Teacher’s pets!”

Patiently, we smile back, we, the Jesus-Friends, the Believers: we know we are treated differently, we know we are the chosen ones, but what can we do? This is how the world works, and it seems to work in favour of us. We didn’t make up the rules! We just had the good fortune to have parents who at some stage received Jesus as their Saviour, that’s all. And if the non-Believers would steer into the righteous path, freed of sin, they could be as fortunate one day. It’d give them a hobby too. Or they might end up driving endlessly around the hot-dog stand at the market square in big American cars, drinking beers and throwing cans on the pavement, and that’s not much of a future prospect, creating all that litter, now is it?

When our teacher, *fröken* Inga-Britta, a fellow-Believer, returns to the classroom, I stare longingly as she sits down by her desk. Her bracelet with charms dangles cheerfully on her wrist, her hair neat in her well-combed short haircut. I’d like to be like our teacher when I grow up. Looking out over the classroom with a serene smile, I would like to dangle charms and write neat comments with exclamation marks with a bright red pen in the margin too. On Friday afternoons, when students perform endless sketches with reluctant friends like I do, I too will applaud with aplomb. I carefully study her pale freckles and the soft hair growing on her arms, and her ringless fingers. I know her favourite movie is *The Sound of Music*, a film she’s watched seven times, she once revealed to us, almost giggling, red in her face; once she even went to Austria on a special bus-tour, where they showed special sites from the film. One thing is bothering me, though. If I want to have *fröken* Inga-Britta’s glamorous life, I’d have to learn how to play the organ.

Thy clear sun rises once again / I thank Thee my Looord!

Every morning, we start our day by gathering around the organ in a corner of the classroom. The stale smell of wet wool and thick over-socks compete with the sound of the whiny organ and makes me giddy. I have to stand at the back, so as not to be in the way. Birgitta is at the front, of course, her hair in two perfectly straight and

shiny plaits, doing some tricky verses all by herself, the rest of us joining in the chorus. Ann, the local swimming champion, carefully turns the pages of the hymn book resting on the organ:

With strengthened courage, new-born hope / I raise the sound of joooy!

But then again, perhaps hymn singing is to come to an end now the government, in its socialist ways, has decided to cut Christianity as a subject and replace it with Religion. My father, together with the rest of our church, is outraged.

“As far as I know we are still a Christian country,” my father confers gloomily with our neighbour, *farbror* Werner’s wife *tant* Berta, who is known to speak in foreign tongues on special occasions, “or do they want us to become simple heathens again, perhaps?”

This is part of the de-christ-i-a-ni-sa-tion of Sweden, and our church has signed a petition and sent it to the government to protest about this matter. What will happen to us poor children of Sweden if we’re not taught good Christian values anymore, they would like to know? Not that they think Olof Palme will listen; he’s too superior and slippery, like the eel he is.

“Representing the workers,” my father scoffs, “everyone knows he’s from aristocratic stock, what would he know about being poor?”

But this Palme is now in charge of everything, it seems, even hymns. Shamefully I admit to myself that I don’t mind too much this possible aversion of his. The songs are all so old, the organ so squeaky, and I never get to do any solos anyway, they’re all given to Birgitta, occasionally even to Sven-Åke, even though he doesn’t sing in the church youth choir, and who, *fröken* Inga-Britta says, “sings like an angel, but speaks like the Flood’s pouring straight out of him!”

“A very ... imaginative story, Christina,” *fröken* Inga-Britta nods to me dismissively, as she hands back assignments in a flurry of dangling jewellery, “perhaps a bit exaggerated.”

I still receive a gold star and, satisfied, head back to my chair, as she chastises Sven-Åke and the new Greek boy for their spelling. She sighs a bit when they sit down—they always seem to move in a team those two. Frowning thoughtfully, she says, “Wouldn’t it be nice with something cheerful to end the day? Why don’t you sing us a spring song, Sven-Åke? Who knows, maybe spring will listen,” she smiles.

He seems a bit hesitant. Someone giggles as he walks up in front of us, but he just shrugs, and we soon settle down, listening to the familiar tune, even the Greek boy, looking surprised at Sven-Åke, peering out from his back row.

Sov du lilla videung / än så är det vinter,

Än så sova björk och ljung / ros och hyacinter.

I sit spellbound, listening to the sweet sounds about the bush of osier still sleeping, waiting for spring to come; such soothing words coming out of his tight little mouth, urging spring not to rush. Its time will soon come, he assures us with his pure, high voice, and I suddenly have an impulse to run up to him and squeeze him hard, to feel his soft curly hair and cheek, to hold his hand with the curiously short thumb; he seems almost edible. Outside spring is indeed not far away, and I feel so pleased that it's Sven-Åke and not any of the other usual soloists standing there: Roland, the pastor's son, or Birgitta, looking all perfect.

Perhaps I should invite Sven-Åke to the church choir, I could pick him up, show him the way; I've always wanted to see what the council flats looked like inside. Guarded by loud ladies in hair rollers and brightly coloured lips, smoking on the three rows of weeny balconies stacked on top of each other, they are the only high-rise buildings in Svenstorp. Then I imagine inviting him for Christmas, his mother being so sick "in her nerves" and all, which I've heard grown-ups say with that special low voice: "She hasn't got very strong nerves, poor woman, and the ways things are with the father ... You feel for the children, you do ... Lucky they got the sister ..." I sigh, realising the singing's stopped and I have to return to the classroom.

"What are you gaping at, you tall idiot," Sven-Åke sneers on his way past me, and I feel my cheeks burning, realising my mouth has been left open.

Outside, spring is not coming at all. In a few moments, greyness has taken over the sky, and snow is suddenly covering the ground once again; the wet, slushy snow that comes when it's not welcome anymore, when everyone wants to wear their new spring jackets. I have a brown corduroy one waiting at home. It always tricks us, that deceitful winter.

Nilla and I have started our walk home towards Alley Road, when an icy whip suddenly hits me on my neck. "Aj!" Nilla says angrily, although the snowball only hits her schoolbag. We turn around, where Sven-Åke and the new Greek boy, Aristotle, are standing at a distance, laughing.

“Stop it!” I hold out a protecting arm around Nilla, as if her personal bodyguard: “That really hurts, you know!”

“Oh, yeah?” Sven-Åke laughs, “like I care, Miss goody-gold-star Christina!” Then he smiles angelically, but he isn’t looking at me now, he’s looking at Nilla with her dimples and grace, a whole head shorter than me.

“Wanna play?” he suddenly asks: “My mate here wants to, don’t you?”

He gives Aristotle a friendly push in the side, prompting a muttered “*Ja, för fan*, bloody hell yes,” in broken Swedish, making me think about something my father said last night about all the workers coming all the way from Greece to work at the big factory in Träby. A few have also found their way to Svenstorp, resulting in a number of Greek children at our school, all looking so different in their dark hair, moving awkwardly across the icy schoolyard with no hats or gloves.

“They’re not afraid of hard work, the Greeks!” my father exclaimed as we were eating supper, “Not like Swedes! They all seem terrified of digging in nowadays, not like when I was young, no one was scared of hard work then, now they all expect to be looked after by the government. But the Greeks,” he continued, scooping up the last bit of potato on his plate and looking pleadingly at my mother, “they still know how to work!” Having warmed to his subject, my father turned around to me and my sister: “That’s why we’ve had to import them over here, you see, to keep things going.” His face lit up when my mother returned from the stove with some leftover potatoes.

Potatoes and lingon-berries in thick gravy is always his preference, and my mother attempts to introduce modern flavours, daringly subscribing to recipe cards called *Food around the World*, without much success. My father believes pasta is for children. Once, when she tried out a new dish called pizza, he sat speechless, looking with concern at my mother. Rice is acceptable in extreme circumstances, in years with bad potato crops and he would have to buy them; always the economical man, my father. Otherwise he is passionate about potatoes. He even has them for dessert, after having the main meal with plenty of potatoes minutes before. Taking the leftovers and placing them in a different bowl with some more lingon-berries and milk, he’ll hail my mother’s cooking. Sighing, she only brings out her recipe cards nowadays when he’s away.

That night he was able to finish off his favourite topic with his favourite dessert: “But the one thing I can’t understand is this: They don’t know how to speak Swedish when they come, but they all learn how to swear very quickly! Yes,” he nodded severely, “that seems to be a priority to teach them on the factory floor, isn’t that peculiar, you tell me!”

I look hesitantly at Nilla, but she just replies calmly, “Want to come to my place then?”

“Sure,” Sven-Åke answers nonchalantly, but it isn’t the answer he expected, and the closer we get to Nilla’s house the more hesitant he looks. I, on the other hand, am by now so excited I felt quite breathless: Sven-Åke, every girl’s favourite chasie in the school yard, plus the Greek boy, a real foreigner!

He is walking silently on the road, in a worn frayed jacket. His hair is so black and thick, his eyes so dark. He will soon become admired by the other boys for being the naughtiest boy in the class. Fearless, he will soon, in perfect Swedish, talk back to anyone who will try to pull him back into line, even the headmaster. There seems a calmness about him, an unfamiliar dignity beneath his cheeky laughter and hopeless spelling, and unlike the other Greek children, he will never get teased or bullied. Someone might just call him a bloody Greek now and then, which he laughingly shrugs off, his peppercorn coloured eyes scrunching back at the offender in a friendly, almost pityingly manner.

Smiling, Nilla’s mother, *tant* Gerd, opens the heavy door at the main entrance. We’re invited into the kitchen for cordial and homemade cinnamon buns. I’m looking at everything inside as if I’ve never been there before, taking personal pride in their large house and up-to-date interior. To have the boys there feels like such a special event, that I am almost shaking.

“*Jävla*, bloody stupid game!” Aristotle announces cheerfully after a confusing round of Monopoly upstairs.

“Let’s play Family instead.” Nilla’s blue eyes glitter, her laughter is heavenly: “I dare you!”

They both look at her like she's a precious piece of Princess-cake and giggle back. "Yeah," Sven-Åke says, "if you want to," leaning forward towards her over the table, spilling some of his cordial on the old silver token wheelbarrow. It's Nilla's father's old game that we always have to be so careful with, but she just wipes it up with her serviette and hands out pen and paper for a vote on what part to play.

"I don't mind," I say quickly, "I'll be a child." It turns out we still need to take a vote, both boys want to be the Dad now. We have to pull a name out of a hat to decide in the end. Sven-Åke wins.

"Children!" Nilla's mother is clapping her hands in the doorway, looking at the scene in front of her with a strange expression on her face: Aristotle and I crawling around, in between collapsing on the floor in laughter, then up again all excited, round and round the room; Nilla chasing after us, telling us to be good babies and behave ourselves; Sven-Åke exclaiming, "But Daaarling, a man needs some ice in his grog!" making us giggle even more. Nilla mother's sudden outburst makes me bump into Aristotle a bit clumsily, hitting his forehead with mine as we come to a halt.

I suddenly notice that the skin on his cheek has an almost green tinge to it, and that I can feel his breath, smelling so differently, like one of those spices my mother once used in one of her new recipes; a spice from far away. We are standing on all fours, perfectly still; he is looking at me a bit embarrassed now—when Nilla's mother firmly steps in.

"It's time to go home now, everyone!" she says in a rather sharp voice, clapping her hands again, "You have to go home and eat supper, Christina, your mother called. It's getting late and Nilla needs to practise her piano."

We snap out of the game instantly. Somehow we know we will never play that game again and that they will probably never come home with us again, the boys from across the park.

They are quickly out of the door, Sven-Åke and Aristotle. When I get out, I can see them far ahead of me, laughing and boxing each other as they run across the park. It's already dark. It's stopped snowing. Despite my boots being almost new they already feel too small and are leaking from the melting snow. I think of *fröken* Inga-Maja and her strained face from pressing down pedals on the organ. It seems an

awful lot of footwork, but I still hesitate a little before I reach out for my favourite thought as I walk through the darkness: Perhaps I could become an actress instead?

I often imagine myself in a Strindberg play, enthusiastically shouting, “*So you think I can’t stand the sight of blood? You think I’m so weak? How I’d I love to see your blood, and brains on a chopping block!*” to a pretend Jean into the midsummer night, like on TV. I practise the bracing words and the way I’ve watched them spat out “*I’d like to see your whole sex swimming in a sea of blood!*”—until my mother knocks on the door to my room telling me to keep it down, as the neighbours would wander what’s going on, like they always do in her mind. It’s a bit hard to outdo *farbror* Werner in shouting, but I will obey, until next time TV shows a play from Stockholm and I wish for a shawl to sweep around me and a long dress to trudge through the muddy streets to the sound of horse carriages. Unless my father is home. He dislikes TV—except for Hymn Sing-a-longs—as much as Anita, especially Strindberg, his reaction swinging between outrage and sympathy:

“Do they have to swear all the time on national television, I’m asking?” Or, “Strindberg, a very unhappy man, you know: a Seeker all his life, poor man.”

Somehow the thought doesn’t thrill me as much as usual. And there is The Question to consider, of course.

Is it possible to become an actress and still be a good Christian?

And maybe swear on National Television?

Deep down I know who’s tempting me. Leading me astray.

As I reach the steps to our house, I turn around, once again looking across the park, but it is too dark and they are long gone. Standing in the dark, still feeling him so close to me, his breath still next to mine, I breathe out slowly, looking at the silver trace in the air I’m creating in front of me, thinking: Aristotle, what would you like to become when you grow up?

*

The doona cover wrapped tightly around me, I suddenly feel how sweaty I am from the flight. The heating is always up too high in Sweden. Sue is in London now, in roughly the same time-zone as me. Mark is probably bouncing up from the bed I once shared with him in Newtown, ready to impress the world after a strong espresso under the palm tree in his backyard. I was so childish about that palm tree, I used to

pat it and wish it Good Morning. He used to laugh at me then. I read a review of one of his plays in the paper recently. “Innovative” and “bold” were part of the headline, but mainly it was commended for his inspired casting. His casting of me as a giant puppy was over quite some time ago. I’m free to think what I want again. I don’t have to check with him first. Next to the review, I childishly wrote, “Mark Denton’s new play unfortunately displays disturbingly shallow and pretentious qualities, rather like the megalomaniac man himself.” I learnt a lot of new words from him. Sue laughed when she saw my comments. “Good for you,” she generously said, although she was a friend of his long before she was mine.

I haven’t been back in Svenstorp since my mother’s funeral. I only stayed for four days that time. She died so unexpectedly and discreetly, never telling me she was ill. I only ever received cheerful letters, always starting in English with a *Dear Daughter, How are you?* What I remember most is how I dreaded telling Mark; ruining his tight schedule by having to travel in the middle of the rehearsal period of *My Big Chance*. In the end I was replaced. We both agreed it was the best thing to do.

When I arrived in Svenstorp it was summer and raining. My father still lived in our house on Alley Road then, and our backyard was shimmering in green, bushes of ripe currants in brilliant clusters of red and black by the back fence waiting to be picked.

At the Wake, my father introduced me to some new congregation members as “My daughter wasting her life overseas!” Clumsily spilling some coffee at the table for closest relatives, I turned to Lotta. “You have to understand him,” she said lightly, balancing her coffee cup delicately as she turned her face away from me: “After all you deserted us.”

Before the service, I had sneaked into the church early and lifted the lid of the coffin. My mother was dressed in her best clothes. Her big body seemed shrunken, her eyes closed, and her mouth was covered with a tissue but the tip of her fleshy nose was a familiar, reassuring sight.

In a sudden movement of tenderness, I leaned over to kiss it and nearly tipped the coffin over, when a shadow fell over the stage. He calmly adjusted the microphone at the podium, never looking my way.

I left in a strange daze straight after the funeral, leaving disapproving faces behind me. I often think of my mother on my walks with Caesar. How she would have loved the Australian beach and the foreign voices, her big feet splashing barefoot about by the shore, her face an ironic smile towards the sun.

Everything seems to have started slowly spinning around me: the 1970s leather lounge suite Anita bought when getting married; the old clock's beat in the corner; the dull, brown piano where I used to practise my lessons with the librarian's wife, her big bottom squished on the piano stool next to me, gently rocking to the rhythms of a Brahms lullaby. Closing my eyes, the homely smell of blown-out candles lingering, I'm transported backwards and forwards: to a time made of soft, green velvet couches, and then back to the present leather couch, the same clocks still ticking—tick-tock, tick-tock. My parents have both died while I've been busy making a fool of myself in Australia. The only one left of their generation seems to be Auntie Gertrude, the old bat.

A Christmas Hymn

When Christmas Morn is Dawning

In the early hours of the morning, we'd scramble into our winter outfits in the vestry to find our way out to early morning Christmas service on time. But where to, is always the question.

Auntie Gertrude's putting on her fur coat and elegant boots. Attired in a silk shawl, probably bought at NK, the department store where even the Crown-Prince buys his suits according to her, she no doubt she wants to head to the Lutheran Church, which she finds a suitably *refined* choice for a Christmas service. Auntie Gertrude does not like cheerful songs too early in the morning, and finds the Mission Church somewhat infantile, she informs us with the self-assured voice of someone living in the same block as the news presenter on Swedish Television. She has no problem telling us what she thinks about the state of Sweden, Svenstorp, or about us for that matter, especially not to my father, who seems to her terribly *provincial* in his views. She has seen the world; after all, she lives in the centre of it—Stockholm.

Every year, the day before Christmas Eve, my mother nervously inspects the guest room and my father grimly takes the car to the train station in Träby to pick up my Auntie, since the train doesn't stop in Svenstorp any more, to his further dismay. He, like most Svenstorpers, believes it would have been a far better choice to close down the station in Träby instead; how many people wanted to travel there, after all?

And then she is suddenly among us, as certain a sign of Christmas's imminent arrival as the nativity scene displayed on a window ledge. She gives a quick assessment of us to our mother who is standing meekly behind us, almost hiding, wearing a nervous smile and apron, temporarily leaving the kitchen where she's been spending all day making Christmas sausages.

"Isn't she rather *big*, Christina?" Auntie Gertrude exclaims: "I hope her jumper/pyjama/bathrobe will fit her! But you look so pale, child! Doesn't Charlotta eat enough vegetables, Lisa? Well, you've always spoiled her. Oh, there you are, Anita, what's this nonsense I hear about joining a commune?"

My mother offers an apologetic, defensive murmur, quickly excusing herself and heading back into the kitchen again.

At that stage my father has usually stumbled into the hallway with two enormous suitcases and we follow Auntie Gertrude into her room in the hope of catching a glimpse of the parcels from the Store she always brings: “I asked the girls at NK and they *assured* me this necklace/jumper/hairclip was the latest fashion and you do see them *everywhere* on young girls now.”

Everywhere does not include Svenstorp, of course, but she does her best to keep us up to date and not look like the simpletons she left behind when she took the train to Stockholm one day, and never looked back.

Our Auntie is an awe-inspiring, if somewhat frightening, trophy to show off to friends with the magic words, “This is my Auntie: She lives in Stockholm!”

“Well, hello there,” she will graciously wave from the velvet armchair in the best room, where she’ll be sitting reading the latest Nobel prize-winning book in literature, an elegant wonder of discreet perfume bought at her latest trip to Nice, ready to give out her expert opinion on anything that might come into her radar. She can give inside information on most actors and entertainers on TV; she’s seen them *live*, at the Royal Dramatic Theatre, where she’s got a subscription. “Yes, we saw him last year in Strindberg’s *Dance of Death*, but he was rather mediocre, we all agreed.”

“We” means the conservative paper *The Swedish Daily*, which she reads religiously every morning, after her brisk walk down to the kiosk on Grand Street, the only place in Svenstorp that sells such a publication. Opposite her on the velvet couch, my father will bravely sit with the local paper, ready for this morning’s battle. With his paper featuring headlines such as “*New Mail Box on Merchant Road*” and “*Potato Thieves in the Village: The Same Field Invaded Twice!*” he knows he doesn’t stand a chance, but he is determined to give it a try.

“Bridge is a card-game that requires great mathematical skills!” She looks at my father defiantly, “It says here in an interview with the Arch-Bishop of Lund that he finds it a great way to unwind. Indeed. Mind you, it is a talent that runs in our family. Our cousin won the Swedish championship some years ago.”

Leaning back in her chair, she awaits his reaction. She knows he believes card playing to be a great sin that leads to gambling, addiction and ruin, and that he will find it even more distressing that this is a vice that used to be tolerated, even encouraged, by his wife’s family.

The Swedish Daily brings more good news this morning. My father hasn't had a chance to respond before she finds another inspiring article:

"It says here, that wine might be good for your digestion. One glass of red wine a day is recommended, according to Professor von Heimer at Uppsala Medical Institute." She looks expectantly at my father, who knows fully well where she won't hesitate to take this sordid debate, if contradicted about the virtues of alcohol.

"Oh, but didn't Jesus himself drink? In fact, wasn't this one of his great miracles, turning water into wine?" Her eyes will be all innocence, although she would surely know there is no reason to drink wine anymore now when there are perfectly good alcohol-free varieties at Systembolaget, the state liquor shop in Träby, where no decent Svenstorper would set foot unless sacrificing himself. My father sometimes does, accepting the odious task of picking up the order of the sin-free variety for the church, so it is able to perform Holy Communion. So he gives up, replying, "*Tja*, well, if *The Swedish Daily* says it's true, it must be right, eh."

Looking relieved, he will then leave for his shop, and one of us children will take over, playing scrabble with Auntie, who for this occasion is armed with a killer instinct and *The Swedish Royal Academy's Dictionary*, the only dictionary to be trusted, according to her.

The only Auntie-free zone in the house at this time of the year is the kitchen. "Oh, you know where everything is," she tells my mother, vaguely waving at the cupboards behind her, leaving my mother to clear away dishes to listen to Charlotta playing on the piano, the only person in our house with some promise, musical or otherwise, according to Auntie.

My mother, on the other hand, is easily found by the sink most of Christmas. This Christmas morning she's so tired she won't even come to the early morning service, father informs us a bit nervously. He doesn't like her missing out on this important event, but understands her need for a small break.

"Tired?" Auntie Gertrude exclaims: "Well, I always say she doesn't get out of Svenstorp enough. Maybe she should come to Paris with me this spring." She looks accusingly in my father's direction. He knows she thinks my mother could have done much better than marrying him. My father, on the other hand, thinks Auntie is far too independent and opinionated to find anyone to marry, and now it's too late of course, but that's what happens when you live by yourself and have no one to look after: you become selfish, he once explained to us, almost pityingly.

Anita, standing in the vestry, her Palestine shawl wrapped around her, suddenly interrupts Auntie and ask her why she is going to church at all, if it has no deeper meaning for her than a ritual. Nervously my father tells Anita that everyone is welcome to the House of Lord, even Auntie Gertrude. But instead of getting angry, she laughs. “Oh you do have a bit of spirit, don’t you, Anita.” She is suddenly in a very good mood. We all look admiringly at Anita, who then mysteriously adds that she’s only going to the Mission Church for studying purposes this morning

“Oh, but you don’t have anything to learn, do you?” Auntie Gertrude replies with an acid smile.

It’s true that my big sister spends so much time with the People of Jesus she might as well live there. This alternative commune—also called the Jesus-Farmers or People of Nutters by some—lives deep in the woods, just outside the racing track on the moss. It’s run by a foreigner, an American! His name is Pastor Charles, and he holds his sermons in English, but they can all understand what he is saying, because they have an interpreter standing next to him when he preaches, repeating his words in Swedish. I know this, because Anita plays me the tapes that she buys of the different sermons. It’s all very exciting.

“We pray to you, Lord!” Pastor Charles shouts inside Anita’s tape recorder: “*Vi ber till dig, Herre!*” a lady repeats in a high-pitched voice. And do they pray! Mostly they pray for a revival throughout all of Svenstorp and Sweden, yes, throughout the Whole World—“*Genom hela världen!*” the lady repeats excitedly.

“Women, do not wear too much make-up before the eyes of our Lord Jesus!” he cries on another tape: “It deprives you of your natural beauty, created by God!” “Amen,” you can hear people shouting in the background; they sound so happy, such happy-sounding Amens ringing inside Anita’s bedroom! The American seems to have so much more fire in him than our old pastor, that’s for sure.

“Then he mustn’t have looked very closely at his wife,” Anita whispers to me, for once in a critical voice: Apparently Pastor Charles’ wife wears blue eyeshadow and high heels. I try to envisage a glamorous American lady in heels and heavy eyelids tripping along on our moss, among the natural-looking Swedes, who would— like Anita —mainly be equipped with clogs and very natural-looking, hairy legs, thinking it must have something to do with her being an American. All of Fred Astaire’s

dance partners, who I sometimes see twirling around on Sunday afternoon specials on TV, dress this way.

Anita tells me of all the people receiving the Lord as their Saviour thanks to Pastor Charles, but how some Svenstorpers are ruining things with vicious rumours of him having more than one wife, the moss more like a present-day Sodom and Gomorrah than a sanctuary of our Lord's. It's because Pastor Charles preaches against worldly possessions, that one shouldn't worship the materialistic side of life but live more in the Spirit of Jesus, which to most Svenstorpers confirms he is advocating communist propaganda.

Anita is such a trusted member she gets to help out with many important tasks after prayer meetings. Once she even washed his jeans—American Levis.

“Does he wear modern clothes?” I asked, surprised.

My parents are not too sure about The People of Jesus. They have a tendency to turn up unexpectedly to preach the gospel of the Lord: outside the shops in Svenstorp, next to the fish van and inside the bank; it's “Hallelujah” wherever they go and more singing and clapping than all sermons in the neighbourhood put together.

“It's in the spirit of Lord Jesus and his first disciples,” Anita explains, “to continue their work and save everyone to an eternal life.”

“It's just a bit much, sometimes” my mother tries. “People want to get on with their day and find it difficult with preaching going on everywhere. There is a time and place for everything,” she finishes a bit lamely.

“But that's exactly when they should communicate with Him!” Anita exclaims, “One should speak to Him all the time. No time is the wrong time: Pray when you sit on the toilet!”

My mother looks somewhat startled at this idea, for a moment it looks like she's going to laugh, but she ends up patting Anita's shoulder instead. At least she is not stealing anymore, I suppose my parents think. I'm not meant to know about that, but there was a terrible debacle behind closed doors once, I even heard my mother crying. She wagged school too, I heard them say. But then Anita decided to go to a Christian camp where she met God. When she came back, she apologised to all teachers concerned and suggested they too could find happiness in Jesus, which I suppose is a great thing and to be admired.

Not only does Anita want to get rid of the TV, this Christmas she didn't even want any gifts, which are all part of the commercialisation of Jesus, she explained. Surely we should be able to celebrate the birth of Jesus and suppress this terrible hunger for material wealth that constantly needed to be fed, which was all due to not having been satisfactorily filled with Him.

Thankfully my mother didn't listen, and that's why Lotta and I don't care we're being dragged out of bed at this early hour. As far as we're concerned, Christmas Eve has been and gone and we still glow from this glorious day.

We've inhaled the smell of Christmas in flower arrangements of hyacinth and Christmas roses delivered to our door by Sven-Åke, standing a bit embarrassed in worn-out clogs in the doorway, waiting for me to give him a krona in tip. We've eaten the chocolate stocked in our cellar that our father receives in an abundance of boxes from the kind factory owners who make the bags he sells. Eaten meatballs and ham with our relatives, and patiently seen our twin cousins tear around in our room, cycling down the cellar stairway with their new bikes without killing themselves. Watched *The Walt Disney Christmas Special* where Benjamin Cricket has wished us a *Very ... Merry ... Christmas*—a program everyone in our land watches, the only time such cartoons are seen on National television, which otherwise prefers educational puppet shows from Czechoslovakia and other such Eastern States. And finally, we have lit up the Christmas tree and waited for Tomten to arrive, while eating our Christmas porridge. I don't believe in him anymore, but I still get a wonderful knot in my stomach as he knocks on the door, wearing a mask so you can't see his face, and my father asking him if he's not very tired walking all the way from the forest, handing out parcels to everyone. Even Auntie Gertrude plays along, asking if Tomten would like to sit down and have a toffee. But she spoils it by turning around the next moment to my mother, asking loudly: "Does the child still believe in Tomten? I would have thought she's too big for that now!" not taking into account that Lotta is sitting next to her and is not deaf. But no one pretends to hear her, including Lotta, and then he leaves, the sack empty, and we all rip into the parcels and there are new books and a striped pyjama, size XL from NK.

And now we are finally leaving, after Auntie agrees to come with us to the Mission Church if Anita takes off her communist shawl. My father looks with begging eyes at Anita; she sighs, and complies, throwing her garment of contention

back on the hat shelf as nobly as if she were Strindberg's Siri, escaping husband and country with him.

My mother stays in bed. She's listening to the slam of our door, her large head resting on the pillow. For an hour or so, she doesn't have to pretend nor attend to her duties. Drifting, she can return to giants and their shadows, of frozen memories a long time ago.

... and Sad Christmas Tale

From Småland, anno 1935

As we march down Alley Road in darkness, I too turn to the Sad Christmas Tale, which has my mother in the lead. With great trepidation, I watch her, like in a black and white film, her head resting on a pillow a very long time ago, my mother, a girl named Lisa.

*

It's the stillness that wakes her up. There's no coughing. No shuffling downstairs. No muffled voices; there's only the unusual sound of silence. Lisa moves quietly out of her room, listening breathlessly at the stairway as she tries to make out the dark shapes surrounding her: the heavy rocking chair to her left, the table with the water carafe to her right. Relieved, she reaches her hiding place and curls up on the window ledge behind the heavy velvet curtain, looking out into the darkness and the smell of snow and wind; she is saved once again.

Soon there will be light. Soon she will see the skinny shape of Dora running down the slope from the woods towards them and there will be fresh milk and porridge. Dora will call her "my little helper," as they prepare breakfast and she will boil coffee for Father and bring it to his room, and he will smile towards her, if only briefly. Her mother will be standing withdrawn by the window, her soft body leaning into the window frame, looking out into the vastness, perhaps for signs of dawn.

From here, Lisa can see everything, even in darkness. The gravelled path leading down to the gate heavy with snow and the smaller houses clustered there; the barn in the distance where Emil and Uncle Petter will soon be heading, to tend to the animals; the woods embracing them on all sides. Later, she might see someone from the neighbourhood open the creaky gate and head towards the entrance to ask if they may use the telephone. On the rare occasion, an automobile will glide up the road and someone with too-thin city shoes will carefully place them outside the shiny door of the motor vehicle and request to talk to "Herr Directing Manager, if he is in his office."

On Sunday mornings, a troop of poor souls from the mossy bog-lands behind them can be seen making a fuss as they shuffle up the path, curtsying and bowing, hoping to be greeted by Lisa's mother in the doorway inviting them in to listen to the sermon on the wireless. Once inside the sitting room, they will sit down carefully on the imposing velvet chairs, hat in hands, big-eyed, like children, and solemnly await their turn to put the headset on. Sometimes Lisa will scuttle downstairs to have a peek at the gathering and their constant surprise upon hearing the unfamiliar dialect-voice pronouncing the Words of God from far away, addressing them personally as if it knew them. A soothing, or raging—depending on what season—Holy Voice, travelling straight into their earpiece from somewhere mysteriously unknown. Later, she will peer behind the curtain at the ritual performed by the faithfuls when they carefully retire to the dark woods again. “A God's miracle,” someone will exclaim upon leaving, or, “A new world, dear *fru* Nilsson, a new world,” mumbled along the gravelled path when bowing their way out.

There used to be the bath procession marching up the pathway on Sundays too. A queue of curious neighbours coming to have a look at the new invention *herr* Nilsson has had built into his new house on the hill, inside the indoor bathroom—also a first of its kind in the neighbourhood. Respectfully they would gather around the white, gleaming tub with its golden feet and wait for the moment when one of the Nilssons would turn the tap and water would mysteriously pour straight into the tub. Everyone who expressed a desire, would then be allowed a turn in the bath, the rest of them waiting in the sitting room where her mother would entertain, serving everyone coffee and cakes, as always enjoying a social gathering. Nowadays, and especially since her father's long spell at the sanatorium, the queue has dwindled away, the only bath procession left on occasion consisting of Annie with some of her ragged children.

Annie never seems to tire looking at the water pouring down the porcelain tub. “We can use the same,” she will say shyly, “we don't mind.” Almost glowingly, as if already cleansed by stepping into the shiny bathroom, she will wait for her children taking turns bathing, Lisa's mother muttering with a sweaty brow: “There might be water straight from the tap, but they don't realise I've still got to stoke a fire to keep it warm!” But then her mother will invite the now-clean children to the kitchen for warm milk, so Annie can let her worn-out body into the bathtub. Sometimes Annie will cry afterwards, her tears a gentle trickle compared to the tap's roaring sound.

She will be back for more, if she can get away from Him, the husband. Lisa knows, because she has watched from her hiding space in the night time too. The sight of Annie, with a few of the children in tow, running as if there was a bull coming after them, and then him in the distance, hurling words at Annie that Lisa has never heard before. Sometimes half-undressed, only a coat thrown over a thin nightgown, a glimpse of ghostly white flesh and limbs flashing in the wind, Annie will reach the entrance to the house; unless her mother has seen her from the window and is already waiting for her outside. Lisa will witness her mother grow into a giant, a forceful guard impossible to get past. Calmly, she will wait for him, Herman, to catch up with his blessedly fast-footed family, only to come to a standstill in front of the unbending wall on the path.

“He’ll go home now,” Mother will say calmly “and sleep it off. *Seså*, he knows it’s for the best. She’ll be back in the morning, when he is sober.”

He will shrink from a bull to a meek little calf and stumbling making his retreat. Never once will he raise his voice to Mother. Father sometimes calls her his Valkyrie, his tower of strength. “It’s like with dogs,” she will answer dryly, “you need to show a coward who the Master is.”

Through her favourite window upstairs behind the curtain, Lisa can even see the traces left behind by people who never turned up, but should have. The list of unkept promised visits is considerable by now. There are the missing marks of children dressed in their best clothes dancing up the pathway, their absent hands knocking on the entrance door to her sister Gertrude’s birthday party a few summers before. Lisa remembers it well: the apologetic voices on the telephone and her father taking them aside and explaining. About fear. How it makes people do hurtful things. She also remembers the only warming sight of that day, her Auntie Edit along with her three daughters determinedly walking up the hill for the entire village to see, looking around her as if to say: “See! There is nothing dangerous here. Her father might be ill, but a young girl still needs to celebrate her birthday!” She can still see the look on her mother’s face at the door, embracing each one of the few visitors, in an almost helpless gesture. But most of all the day stayed in Lisa’s memory because it is the only time she’s seen her sister cry, her sister, who is as unbending—but not as common—as a grey flat stone on a Småland field.

There are still traces left in the snow of the people making a detour away from their house before her father went to the sanatorium; sneaking around the woods,

trampling up new pathways, as far away from them as possible. Her father used to look out the window and mutter, “Poor stupid people, they think I can infect them from this distance,” and then laugh his big laughter. Mother did not find it funny. “Ignorant fools, that’s what they are!” she said as she slammed a few doors, eyeing a frightened-looking Dora in the kitchen.

And then her father went away. And they smoked out the rooms, and the doctor came and they were all safe again. When he returned a few years later, neighbours, once scurrying away at the sight of him, made a point of shaking his hand. To show him, the wealthy businessman on top of the hill—so carelessly caught by the dreaded disease when curing his cousin’s loneliness at the sanatorium—they know better now.

But inside the house, fear has taken over. Their house is creaking and sighing, then holding its breath, waiting: For the sound of coughing; for the sight of blood in a bucket; for it to stop, to end. He has chosen not to have surgery. It is too risky, he has decided, he wants his children to have a father for as long as possible. “They are so small,” she once overheard him say, “Ingmar is only two.” But he is not small, Lisa knows about her father by now, he is a giant like her mother; this is a house filled with giants and their shadows.

It is still early Christmas morning, it will be ten o’clock before daybreak comes, and it is very silent. Shivering by the draughty window, her weary eyes watch for Dora until she remembers what day it is and that she will not turn up on such a day at all. Instead, this is the day when Lisa’s mother will carry breakfast up the stairs, a single candle leading the way, and sing for each one of them. The Christmas tree will be lit downstairs and her father will bring out gifts from the shed. She knows he has ordered skis for her older sister and brother and even a gramophone with a shining horn for the whole family that she helped him pick from a catalogue. There will be the early walk to the Red Cross Christmas festivities for the needy that her mother helps to arrange, where she will be able to show off her new red dress the village dressmaker has made: one for her and one, in an almost-grownup cut, for Gertrude.

Lisa rests her head against the cool glass, waiting. She suddenly knows that the sounds that will come will not be the expected ones: The familiar sound of her father’s laughter coming from the downstairs office as he explains something to her sister about the bookkeeping he has taught her since she was barely thirteen; the serious tone of her sister’s voice answering; the expectant clinking of her mother

setting the table in the best room for the grand Christmas buffet; the door bell with merry relatives outside; the noisy games and running up and down the stairs; the rustling of paper from unwrapping toffee and gifts.

When she can finally hear her mother downstairs it is a new and frightening sound. A moan, like a trapped animal, like the minks at the farm her father is part owner of in the close-by village. She has only been there once, and was terrified of the stench and the screeching coming from the animals with their piercing eyes in the cages, and she clung to her father crying to go home. Lisa sits very still to find out whether her mother is going to sound so pitiful once again. Now there is the rustle of her mother's robe as she walks into the office. She can feel her mother's hand shaking when she dials the operator and asks to talk to her brother. Then she can't hear her mother anymore, because Gertrude is running down the stairs now, as if she has been waiting for this sound throughout the night and she soon drowns out all others: her sister is crying once again, for the second and last time that Lisa will know of.

Soon, she can make out the shape of Uncle Oskar slowly ploughing through the snow up the uncleared pathway; others will follow. There will be the horse sledge with Doctor Berg, laboriously handing over the reins to Uncle Petter's shrunken figure. When Auntie Edit appears outside the entrance with some black material hastily wrapped in paper, Lisa knows she will not wear her new red dress today and not for a long time, perhaps never. She will continue to look out through the window most of the day; when they eventually find her, they decide to let her be. Her brother is helping out downstairs with an important face, and upstairs Gertrude is sullenly left to look after Ingmar.

She will always remember this day; a frozen memory that she can thaw and bring back to life any time she wants to. It is as if she keeps a lookout all throughout her life, waiting. And she will learn that what her mother was looking for on those early mornings before dawn was the hope of life returning. She keeps one eye in the present, the other focused on the vastness outside.

A glass between her and daybreak. Between her and her father. Between me and my mother. Between us all.

I wipe tears away on my frozen face, in darkness down Alley Road way. It's snowing, just like it should be on this Holy morning. Listen to the silence of the falling softness and the sound of the creaking of our shoes against the snow; watch the white traces of footsteps on the ground where all is created new again! The snow is melting on my tongue, getting stuck on my eyelashes, settling on my woollen hat and mittens; this white starry fall everywhere. In front of me, I can barely make out the other people stumbling out of their houses. We are all marching towards the same goal, all walking quietly together until we reach Grand Street, when we will take off in two different directions, though our congregation is the largest, according to my father. He's walking in his galoshes, perhaps remembering how he used to go in a sleigh to church on Christmas morning when he was little, tucked in a big quilt, torches showing the way in the Holy Night, before his sad story had even started. And Auntie Gertrude, is she also thinking of that Christmas my mother once told me about as she sweeps her silk scarf tighter around her tiny frame? Anita probably contemplates Pastor Charles and his enormous red beard I have seen on photographs on her tapes. Lotta is giggling quietly, as she is pulled in her new toboggan by Anita. Personally—the sad Christmas film finished inside my head—I'm thinking about Africans.

The early morning service this year is a Christmas Spec-tac-ular: there are two missionaries visiting from the Congo, and they are real Africans! I have only met them once briefly at Nilla's house, where they're staying, and queued up with other curious children to sit on one of their laps. His hair was all coarse and curly, and I kept stroking it and looking at his hands, which were all pink inside, and he laughed, probably since he couldn't speak Swedish and there was nothing much else that he could do. I laughed back delighted, and didn't want to let go of him, but then Birgitta insisted it was her turn, and reluctantly I let go of his comforting lap and smile and haven't stopped thinking about him in all his colourfulness ever since.

Every day, Nilla comes with news. Her mother, who speaks a bit of English, asked one of the Africans about their teeth being so white and he said the best way was to clean them with ashes. This was a tradition in his country, he said. Ashes from open fireplaces are now being saved all around Svenstorp, teeth being thoroughly scrubbed in it.

I'm walking down Alley Road thinking that if I married one of the Africans when I grew up, I could live in Africa in a hut and learn to speak English and teach African children about God and have a great suntan and see palm trees every day.

We walk inside the church, my head filled with palm trees, and get seats next to one of the owners of the biggest factories in Svenstorp, and my Auntie is looking pleased, perhaps feeling she's come to the right place after all. There was even an article about this great capitalist in *The Swedish Daily* in the finance section not so long ago, she whispers to me excitedly.

Birgitta is sitting on stage, dressed as Mary. She's going to sing to the doll meant to represent baby Jesus; she did it last year too. She's holding a microphone in her hand, just like they do on TV, and I jealously wonder how it would feel to hold one in my hand. Next to the pastor, one of the missionaries from Africa is sitting, and I feel so nervous about the sermon suddenly, wondering if the Africans had ever seen a microphone before and hoping they'll find we are spreading the word of Jesus in an exciting, just more hi-tech manner, to what they might be used to.

*When Christmas morn is dawning / In faith I would repair
Unto the lowly manger / My Savior lieth there.*

Everything tingles inside me in the soft light, and I suddenly feel so happy that I belong to all of this: the singing, the candles, the African with the white teeth. Just the right kind of Believers, I think. Not too stiff like at the other church and not walking around singing everywhere like the People of Jesus: We got it just right, I'm thinking.

*How kind, O loving Savior / To come from heav'n above;
From sin and evil save us / And keep us in Thy love.*

There is even more exciting news after today's sermon. There's a new pastor coming next year! He is young with lots of new and interesting ideas in how to build the congregation, according to the chairman of the church and also the headmaster of our school, who is making the announcement. His name is Pastor Herring, he says and smiles. We all smile back, even Auntie Gertrude.

A Welcome Hymn

*From Thy hand today
For a shepherd we pray
That faithfully he may teach us
Thy command and grace.*

Our new pastor has black, smooth hair that's so long he often needs to brush strands of it back behind his ears as he stands in front of us—not in the pulpit, but on the floor in front of the altar—with a microphone in his hand, like a game-show host on TV. He is so modern he sometimes draws at mass. He's got a big Texta in his pocket and there is a stand with a flip chart close by. In the middle of his sermon he will suddenly sprint to the stand, pull out his Texta and draw a cartoon of Jesus or the Holy Spirit. He constantly surprises us, and everyone does what he tells them to; we can't help ourselves. There is a glow around everyone, as if we have all been invited to take part in a wonderful new experiment, and some ladies of the congregation have started to wear lipstick. The pulpits are filling up with people from everywhere, even from Träby and Svenstorp's old state church; they all come knocking on our door now. Everything feels new and inspiring; everyone is basking in the glow of our new pastor. Even small children are invited to come to mass; he wants every Sunday mass to be a Family Mass, he explains with his winning ways. He will joke with them. He will put his head on an angle, look at them pleadingly and then ask a question, as if they have all the answers instead of the other way around. The whole congregation laughs indulgently when they answer him about today's sermon in their innocent ways, but he nods carefully, making them shine with self-importance too.

And so clever! In one easy go, he fulfils the wishes of many a Svenstorper by removing a growing influence among our youth, a mission in which both the Motor Racing Committee and the local council have so far failed: he gets rid of the People of Jesus. It's all made possible through his generosity and kindness, without anyone getting hurt. First he explains to the congregation that there is room for everyone in Our Father's house; it takes all colours to create the wonderful rainbow that is His children on this earth. Then he invites the People of Jesus to hold a sermon for us.

On this legendary Sunday, the pews fill up, bursting with nervous and excited members, eyes almost popping out of our heads when the People of Jesus make their

entrance through the side door with our pastor. It's the first time I've seen Pastor Charles in real life. He seems much smaller than I have imagined. His red beard doesn't seem as impressive as on the photograph on the cassettes, and his wife doesn't look like the movie star I have pictured inside my head; she just looks plain old tired with her coarse-looking, unruly hair, flowery, faded blouse and pregnant belly. They both look pale and shrunken somehow, like they have been washed in a washing-machine on the wrong cycle. Somehow I feel responsible. What will our pastor think of them and of us all I can't help thinking, as if we all took part in planting them on our moss. But *he* doesn't look uncomfortable, he just smiles and asks us to make them welcome with a round of applause. We clap tentatively, listening to the unusual sound filling up the church.

When our pastor leaves them up there by themselves, there is an anxious silence for a moment. Somehow they look all wrong inside our church, lost outside the forest. They don't have an interpreter with them. It's all in Swedish, the musical Pastor Charles has written and which they now start performing. Stretching their arms upwards, they start singing a monotonous song about a camel: The one that will find it as hard to get through the eye of a needle as a rich man will find passing through the gates of The Kingdom of Heaven. I know it's in the Bible, but it might not be the world's best choice in front of our congregation, highlighting what a tough job some of us have ahead. I desperately wish they will save themselves and sing about Jesus' great love for us all instead—yellow, white, red or black, doesn't matter, He says; or the one about God being the King of the Jungle, something we can all agree on. But it only gets worse. The Camel's Song is replaced by a Nasty Rich Man's song, where a local member and a friend of Anita's (who's not participating but sitting next to me, looking at them with a slight frown) in a shaky voice starts berating Jesus (Pastor Charles in broken Swedish) shout-singing to him, "You can't tell me what to do!" telling Jesus he'll buy his way into heaven; he can't stop him! The song ends when the Nasty Man, as if regretting his own behaviour, hesitantly and very slowly throws some coins at Jesus.

Someone mutters "This is appalling!" behind me as the blessed coins finally hit the floor with a tentative rattle, and Nilla's father stands up and leaves. A few follow him, but mostly they just endure it stone-faced, the businessmen of Svenstorp and beyond.

The only one who seems comfortable by now is our pastor. He's sitting in the front row, nodding thoughtfully at the Nasty Man, who has gone violently red in his face. The bewildered congregation that is still left decide to take their guide lines from our pastor; can't go wrong then, I suppose we all think. It looks quite funny: one moment we look all cross and sweaty, the next we watch the People of Jesus with the kind of fascinated smile we usually save for a missionary back from Dark Africa to present a slideshow. We're really waiting for it to stop. But we are all confident that our pastor will see us through this unusual experiment of today. When Pastor Charles, in a final rhythmic outburst, shoves the Nasty Man down the stage, "Get ooout-of-my-father's-temple, *ut, ut!*" we even applaud in relief, showing him we can be modern too and that we understand the People of Jesus have probably done their best, most of them being aliens and all.

But somehow this turns out to be the beginning of the end for the People of Jesus in Svenstorp. It's their fault, really, we all agree. Next to our pastor, they shrank. Pastor Charles disciples' eyes have been opened too, and most of them stay behind when he leaves to form a new commune in Denmark. Everyone knows Danes are a bit different, so it'll probably work out really well for them there, we all agree. Even Anita sullenly joins our walk down Alley Road on Sundays again. And that's how our Pastor managed to unite so many Christian families of Svenstorp in spirit as well as on earth. At the end of the year, our church has forty new members; a record, the chairman of the church excitedly informs.

Our pastor easily explains the camel story away next Sunday. It would not just be hard, but in fact impossible, he says, for a camel to pass through the eye of a needle. Did Jesus then mean that the wealthy were not welcome to Our Father in Heaven? Of course not! There was, the pastor tells us, a very narrow gateway in Jerusalem which at the time of Jesus was called the Needle's Eye. It would have been tight, but not impossible for a camel to squeeze past; many, many camels made it through there, every single day of the year. And that was the point Jesus was trying to make, the pastor knows. If you are rich, special responsibilities are placed upon you. Be grateful for the extra burdens God has given: he really believes in you! Everyone seems happy with this explanation. I suppose it makes the rich feel chosen and the poor and newly recruits from the People of Jesus comforted, to know what an easier time God's given them, than for someone like Nilla's father, who owns half of Svenstorp, and so not to be envious.

But for me, this is where everything starts: with the camel. The Devil and the pastor's wife follow. It's all downhill from here.

Our old teacher, *fröken* Inga-Britta, used to tell us never to forget the old saying, "It begins with a pin, and ends with a silver box to keep it in." She was talking about stealing, of course, but maybe she should have warned us about spiritual tests too, because for some reason, I can't stop thinking about that camel walking through the gateway without too much effort. It keeps niggling at me. The more I think about it, the more difficult I want it to be for the camel to get past those gates of heaven, I don't know why. The next service, I find myself listening to Pastor Herring in a different way, like I'm trying to catch him out saying something else I don't approve.

My head's spinning with camels. I get even more anxious by one of Anita's books that I'm reading. *Fighting for God* is written by an American lady who was visited by the Devil one night. Quite unexpectedly. She opened her eyes and there *he* was, sitting by her bedside. In his charming and cunning ways, he convinced her how wonderful it would be to do his errands instead of God's. One visit was all it took, she explained, to find herself living a sordid and sinful life among drug-addicts and criminals. Now the American lady tries to warn everyone how easy it was for him to find her once she started questioning the teachings of God; it had been a sign for the Devil, and it would take many hard years before she recovered to a life in Christianity again.

I find it hard to go to sleep at night. When I close my eyes, I don't dare open them, in case he's sitting there, watching me, thinking I am ripe and ready for some sinfulness. Sometimes I can feel him. I can hear his evil thoughts. He whispers to me that if I open my eyes I will see that he looks just like the goggle-eyed ghost face in Ingmar Bergman's TV-series that I haven't been able to stop watching even though it terrifies me. I don't understand why that spectre-lady is turning up behind Liv Ullman in the mirror, or why I feel compelled to watch her scream in fear, in her funny Norwegian way. I try to make it stop; I try to look serene and peaceful as I listen to Pastor Herring at the sermons, apologising in secret to him, hoping my fears at night will vanish. I pray to God that could He please make me normal again, I don't want another visit from the Devil and preferably not from Himself either, but it doesn't seem to help; I lie tense, eyes closed, waiting to feel the breath of someone leaning over me again.

And in the service, when I should be listening to our pastor's words of wisdom I marvel about his wife instead. What in the name of God made him choose her? I ask myself. Was it from his goodness of his heart? Or does a truly good Christian like our pastor not care about the outside, only the inside? As handsome as Pastor Herring is, *fru* Herring is ugly. I know I shouldn't use that word, but it's the truth. Is it her enormous, pale-blue eyes that seem to protrude from her head like ping-pong balls; her tight little grey hair-curls that seem to stick on her like a furry helmet; her limping walk—she seems to lead from one hip, almost walking sideways? No, it's the smile, I decide. *Fru* Herring's pursed lips will unexpectedly part, her whole face stretching out as if she's seen something really surprising, like Mary and Joseph come running with the collection bags towards her; and suddenly there's a flash of crooked teeth and black fillings and she looks like she's about to swallow something; it gives me the creeps. I'm horrified by my thoughts, but I don't seem able to stop.

I tell myself that *fru* Herring can't help if she's not good-looking and that she has other, special talents. She might be ugly, but she has been chosen by God to deliver special messages from Him. All around Svenstorp she rides her rusty old bike, never tiring of the gifts God has given her to hand out to the unsuspecting. She also possesses musical talents, I remind myself; the moment she arrived she quickly took over the youth choir, suggesting to the grumpy old *fru* Berg, that *fru* Berg probably would want to take it a bit easier now, in her old age. The Pastor's wife loves conducting the choir. Her whole body moves frenetically to the beat, her ping-pong eyes lit up in joy. Herring's son plays loudly on his drums to accompany us, and we are all geared up with plenty of microphones and a new, modern sound. She likes modern, *fru* Herring; they're like pop-songs, the songs we now sing.

It might be fascinating to watch *fru* Herring's unusual conducting-style, I think ungratefully, but I'm still in the back row, being told to tone down my singing, and like everyone else, she adores Birgitta. She promotes Birgitta more forcefully than *fru* Berg, and she does so many solos now, there's hardly any point for her to leave the solo microphone in front of us at all. Birgitta sways delightfully in her pleated skirt, a silver cross dangling rhythmically over her silk top, as she beams about Jesus; you don't get more perfect. Not like me, who has trouble finding clothes that fit, being an early developer and all, as my mother and *tant* Gun in Svenstorp's Clothes for Ladies point out to each other in hushed voices when I'm in the change room.

As my sinfulness grows, so does my list of prayers at night. I'm so busy fending off the Devil, I find it hard to remember everything I must ask forgiveness for: My ugly thoughts, that I would rather watch "The Play of the Week" than listen to the Christian choir, The Light Crystals, on Sunday nights on TV, despite that one of its members grew up outside Svenstorp and many of the congregation know her parents. I know it's all wrong, but I'm not quite sure what to do about it. And it's only getting worse: I'm starting to get bored with our pastor's sermons. I'm starting to predict what he is going to draw and what the children are going to answer and his response to them. Worst of all: a part of me is strangely excited by it all. In the middle of the sermon, looking around at all the familiar faces, my head blown up in new and arrogant ways, I almost laugh to myself, thinking, you don't know my thoughts, they are all mine to think. No one will ever know.

Except for God. And the Devil, of course.

A Walk in the Past

“Mark?”

There are five days left to my father’s funeral when I wake up in darkness, my face wet and crumpled. My heart is beating warningly. There’s a fuzzy shape standing by the glass doors. It’s coming towards me now, as I try to shake off an unsettling dream. There was a glass belly, I remember. I was carrying it around. Sharp corners jutted out at odd angles. No one knew about my belly. It was going to be a surprise. I was about to pull up my jumper and reveal it when a voice had dramatically announced, “It will shatter. *Shatter.*”

My chest tightens as I try to sit up on the leather lounge. The face is floating above me, like a ghostly balloon. Then a familiar voice hisses: “Do you want to come for a walk? It’s the only way!”

Obediently, I get up and follow my sister into the hallway; I fumble with my shoes, my vision still blurred and heavy. *Shatter*, I think, *shatter*.

“Come on,” Anita says, “or I’ll be late for work.” She looks irritated at my flimsy jacket hanging in the vestry and without a word hands me a padded doona jacket and lined gloves.

As we tread carefully down the icy steps in the darkness, she grabs hold of me in an impatient gesture. “Every day,” she mutters as she lets go of me as abruptly, “every day I’ve been walking.” Continuing at a brisk pace down Alley Road, arms moving steadfastly, her words stream out in steady puffs. “Faster, we need to move faster! What’s the matter, aren’t you used to walking?”

Not in this weather anymore, the heavy wind coming at me, biting and whipping me as I try to move forward, the tips of my ears stinging from the cold, the toes going numb inside my too-thin shoes. I really am a very fast walker, though. Back in Melbourne I effortlessly cruised past endless streams of colourful pensioners on the promenade between Brighton and Elwood beach every day. I don’t say that; Anita seems mad enough as it is. “Are you all right?” I ask in my most placating voice instead, all little sister again.

She snorts, “Of course not! But I have to cope anyway, don’t I, I can’t just fall apart, how would that look? Who would look after things then? I don’t have time for

that sort of nonsense, and not for anyone else feeling precious either,” she adds warningly, “As long as I keep walking, I’m fine!”

Perhaps its jetlag, but to my horror I burst out laughing and then start coughing violently. Anita frowns, waiting impatiently for me to stop. Agitated, we face each other on the frozen pavement. I suddenly have an impulse to hit her, push her—or at least her big Russian-style fake-fur hat—to the ground, and get the smirk off her face. She hasn’t asked me about Mark once, I’ve noticed.

“Doomsday Anita,” I say instead, all smile and bland sweetness.

She too smiles a bit then. As we cross Grand Street and walk past the old red brick building of the library, the same old box in which to leave returned books is standing desolate at the entrance, Anita leans over me in an almost conspiratorial manner: “Let’s go to the cemetery! I always go there first. Lars thinks I’m obsessed.” She smiles again.

Inside the cemetery, there’s only a small lamppost casting a faint light over the stones. To my surprise, Anita pulls out a torch from her coat pocket, its brightness highlighting names and dates as we move along. Her movements are firm as she strides ahead on the frozen gravel, sniffing the air like a dog looking for a scent; no doubt she’s done this before. Now and then she stops abruptly in front of a stone, muttering some facts about some distant relative or a friend of a friend’s father, looking sharply at the person stumbling behind her unaccustomed to the cemetery and the darkness, as if annoyed, or surprised, by my presence.

She stops in front of the mortuary. “Do you know,” she says quietly, “that when there’s a body inside, they light up that lamp?” She points towards a lamppost standing next to the building. Its lights are out. Laughing a little, she adds, “isn’t it spooky?”

Almost cheerfully she continues, but when she reaches the grave, her posture changes, slumps. Her face crumbles in an almost childlike way as she shines the torch towards the empty space next to our mother’s name. We stand there quietly, looking at the stone of our forefathers, its imposing size making the surrounding stones look humble, creating an impression of servility against authority. A hint of moss creeping up on the faint inscription of our grandparents’ names underneath our mother’s, makes its damp letters barely readable. A weed, which has somehow survived the frozen earth, defiantly creates a small shadow across the stone. In a sudden movement, she bends down and pulls it up.

“Anita,” I say carefully, “Let’s go, I’m cold.”

As we continue down the frozen path, stamping the ground to get our feet moving again, I think of a simple cross in the graveyard of Träby; as we close the gate to the cemetery, of a deserted plaque in Botany Bay.

Inside the forest, my feet trampling over heather and moss, next to Anita, who’s growing chatty and cheerful beside me, it finds me. I want to take off. Escape like a hunted moose deep into the forest, but most of all I need a drink. Feel a cool, misty glass against my skin; cut it slowly down my cheeks. Pinching my eyes with the coarse texture of my borrowed gloves, I stride off, leaving Anita behind. I can feel her breath panting behind me through the soft branches sweeping across my face; she’s catching up on me, I think childishly, and increase the pace.

As I come out into a clearing, I cross the small dirt road and quickly make my way down to the tiny pier of the frozen lake of Åsa. The place of skating in winter, tottering around on sore ankles against the rough surface, and on long summer days diving into the brown and surprisingly tepid water, where the sewage from a close-by factory sometimes made me violently sick. I kick the rotten branch of a tree lying on the icy path over which someone has thrown gravel. Testing the ice with one of the branches, seeing how quickly it gives, the branch easily sinking into the murky water underneath, I once again stand nauseous by the lake.

I’m suddenly back in Australia, slipping about in the mud around the lakes of Daylesford. The blurry image of some hungry geese looking disturbed as they watch me fall, scurrying past towards someone’s generosity from a balcony nearby, past our brawling, me on the ground and Mark leaning over me, screaming at the figure beneath him: “I can’t take this any more! It’s not going to change anything; it’s not going to help! Just look at yourself, you need to look at yourself, you’re stuck! I’ve tried to help you, but you won’t listen! You got to move on, do you understand, to move on!”

“Yes,” I’m howling, “to move on, that’s a brilliant idea!”

Lying very still on the ground and feeling the brown dirt soaking through me, I didn’t move until an older, British-sounding couple walking around the main attraction started to look concerned every time they walked past me, I could hear them discussing me with their civilised voices as their footsteps died out and then returned. Perhaps I was ruining their holiday, ruining their view; perhaps they would

call the police. "There's a young woman lying in the way, Constable, on the nature strip, we fear she might not be all that well." So I stood up, all mud, sweat and tears, and slowly made my way back to the bed and breakfast. Mark had left. I knew he would. I fell asleep with my clothes still stuck onto me like an extra thick layer of skin and woke up freezing in the lakeside view room. In the tasteful set-up for romantic reunions with hearty breakfasts to follow, for nice and normal couples trying to get back on track, their sense of achievement gratefully acknowledged in the guestbook the day after. Couples who perhaps had been lucky and seen the truck before it hit them; who were somehow equal, not a master and a clown, a genius and a stupid girl. The gay-couple owners from London, so chatty and enthusiastic the day before, were looking at me with a mixture of sympathy and disgust as I was leaving. I tried to hold it together; I didn't tremble much at all.

Walking out on shaky legs into the brilliant autumn morning, red and yellow leaves everywhere, I determinedly made my way to the art exhibition which had been the reason for our visit. To inspire Mark. On the second floor, looking out through a tiny window, taking in the hills and light surrounding me I suddenly knew I had to try and save myself. A rare moment of compassion, of thinking: You must do a better job of looking after that poor character of Christina.

I was standing there, remembering the only support group meeting I had ever attended. Mark wouldn't come, of course: "What's the point, immersing yourself in all that misery with people you have nothing in common with?" I had finally gone by myself, swallowing nervously as I reached the end of the staircase, but the only woman who had arrived before me, waiting by the window, seemed as nervous as I was. She was a slight woman, and I remembered the feeling of towering over her as she, in an unexpected gesture, showed me the small tattoo she had engraved on her shoulder, her relatives wanting her to move on too, to forget as conveniently as possible: "Like I should be ashamed," she said quietly, covering up her arm again.

I won't need a tattoo, I thought. I'll remember.

I walked out of the gallery and, miraculously, I got hold of Sue who offered me move in with her. I've tried to leave the rest of my past behind ever since: Mark, the drinking, the theatre. The things that didn't matter in the end.

Looking out over the frozen lake, I suddenly think how ironic it is that I spent most of my time in Svenstorp longing to get as far away from it as possible, but having

arrived there, I now have to make my world small again, in order to survive. Instead of showing them all, I have of late become a colleague to the surely by-now-dead Gösta Persson. I can still see him in his worn cardigan, the librarian of Svenstorp, glasses pushed up on his balding grey head, his hands with three fingers missing, delicately stamping the books at the back before handing them back to me. Looking at me both concerned and pleased as I carted away the book load, he would hold up the heavy door for me; for me, the small town girl who shared his love of words.

“Coming?” It’s Anita, calling me back from a distance, casually leaning into a fir tree by the dirt road. She is looking at me curiously. For the first time since I arrived back home she seems hesitant. As she finally makes her way down to the pier, she stretches out her hand towards me. She takes a few steps closer before she changes her mind and looks at her watch, muttering that it’s time for breakfast. Relieved, I follow. It’s easier like this. I’m walking calmly now; I’m putting one step ahead of the next; I’m concentrating hard on Anita’s feisty encounters on the board for the church committee; I’m yielding to the centre of the universe in which Anita so effortlessly lives.

And I will not have a drink.

Not yet.

Wearing bright red cheeks from the walk, Anita, in a flurry of efficiency, gets cheese, butter, yoghurt and different sorts of milk out of the fridge, lining them up on the kitchen bench. She slices up bread, puts the percolator on and plates and jugs on the table. As if on cue, the rest of her family enter the kitchen from various parts of the house, greeting me politely, a brigade in colourful bathrobes and slippers, like bathers ready for a dip at Brighton pier.

Before leaving for work, Anita hands out careful instructions. She gives me the keys to Dad’s flat and informs me of where to start sorting first, the cleaning will be done later, when Lotta arrives: “She’ll need to do her share too,” Anita says firmly, “it needs to be fair.” As if she still believes the world works that way.

As I reluctantly cross the road towards his flat, I scream as I see my father standing in the window looking curiously at me. When Anita returns home from work, I have another funny story to tell her, to amuse her, to keep her spirits up: How

I frightened the living daylights out of Dad's older neighbour with my screaming, mistaking him for Dad.

Nothing much has changed. The person that is me across the world seems a distant figure, unreal, a shadow with carefully constructed words that have no meaning here. The blinking lanterns over the bay; the pier at the yacht club where I once dared to swim; coffee in the tiny courtyard at the back of the library; the smell of jasmine climbing up the wall this spring on the balcony; throwing sticks to Caesar on the beach; Sue who somehow decided to save me. It's all a dream. Only darkness follows everywhere.

In the evening, I go for a walk all by myself, without Anita's supervision and point of view. I walk down Grand Street, looking in the dark shop-windows. Everything seems closed, except for the old bakery, which has been replaced by a Thai Restaurant, according to the bright sign blinking unevenly on the wall. I stop, somewhat surprised by the seemingly new culinary winds blowing in Svenstorp. But as I lean a bit closer, I can see that the lone diner sitting by the window staring back at me has a big plate filled with potatoes, lingonberries and meatballs in front of him.

Maybe it's an old sign. Maybe they tried really hard and gave up, the Thai family I'm imagining arriving optimistically for a new life in Svenstorp, only to pack their suitcases shortly again, crying over the giant Svenstorpers' frozen, set ways. Or maybe they stayed, I tell myself; maybe they've been experimenting in new and wondrous ways, mixing tofu and coriander with pork and potatoes and thinking the tall Svenstorpers with their big noses and wallets are a real find.

To my surprise, I see two men waving to me at a table further back.

It's Aristotle and Sven-Åke, the grown-up versions. Once again they wave to me to come inside.

Hesitantly joining them, I'm relieved to find that not everything in Svenstorp's changed; it's not a licensed restaurant.

"Christina," Aristotle greets me cheerfully, "Such a celebrity in town!"

Sven-Åke just stares, "'Scuse me," he finally says, and stands up holding onto the table.

"They don't serve alcohol here," Aristotle says quietly, watching him leave, "he's just gone outside to tank the engine a bit, so to speak." He sighs slightly. "What can you do, eh?"

I watch the chubby, already slightly-balding man with glasses, trying to find the cheeky boy with peppercorn eyes.

I tell Aristotle about the reason for my visit: he already knows, of course.

“Guess who’s the big boss, Christina?” he then asks cheerfully. “Can you believe it? The bloody Greek owns a factory with nearly forty-five employees now! Assembling bloody handles for kitchen cupboards, a sub-contractor to IKEA: *Jävlars*, Bloody Hell, who would have thought it, eh?”

He suddenly looks at me tenderly; we seem to take a deep breath at the same time, perhaps both remembering a sweet, drunken moment in the park outside the Dance Parlour in Träby a long time ago.

“Christina,” he says softly, “do you want to see my beautiful children?” He opens his bulging wallet and proudly hands me a photograph: “You know, my boys are so naughty,” he says, pointing to two toddlers laughing in front of the camera. “Always into bloody trouble like me, but my wife, she’s brilliant, she sure knows to deal with them. I’m too bloody soft, aren’t I,” he chuckles, “but it’s Natasha who’s got the brains. Yes,” he says, changing his attention, looking at the image of a serious-looking girl around seven standing next to the boys, “she’s the smart one. Best in her class, you know, like you were in ours.” He smiles broadly.

“That’s lovely,” I say. “Excuse me,” I add, “I’ll be back in a moment.” I quickly make my way to the toilet. There is nothing to be upset about, I think, of his generous assessment, of his kindness. When I return, we both go outside to look for Sven-Åke. We find him further down Grand Street, standing under a barren tree opposite the Statue of Liberty. He has a bottle of Explorer vodka in his hand that he tries to hide in a plastic bag as he sees us approaching.

I suddenly remember Sven-Åke and I at the same spot, both having walked out of a party in Träby, in a flat stinking so badly of vomit, no, there was something else, a film shown, a fight turning ugly—I can’t remember, except for his surprise seeing me there and us sharing a taxi home. Standing in front of the statue in drizzling rain smilingly humming “Jesus loves his little children” he suddenly fell backwards into the fountain. I had grabbed hold of him and fallen in too, laughing drunkenly until I saw his face. But he hates me, I remember thinking, shocked. Sobered by the icy water, we stood in the fountain facing each other for a moment, before he heaved his way out, and with dripping clothes left me without a word.

This time, as Aristotle and I approach Sven Åke, he starts laughing: “Bloody hell, you’re bloody Christina, aren’t you! Listen,” he says almost accusingly, pointing a finger towards me, “someone said that old Mission Church Believer became an actress. And now they tell me you live in bloody Australia too. Hell, you’ve come a long way from here!” He makes a sweeping gesture, taking in the grey buildings surrounding us, the Statue of Liberty with its frozen fountain, the rest of Grand Street and the treetops above him: “But I,” he smiles sheepishly, “I’m still here. Still in the same old council flat, didn’t get very far, eh.” His face looking up at me is suddenly bitter. “Tell me, what bloody chance did I have? Eh? But you did, Christina and well done!”

“Well, I don’t know,” I mutter uneasily as we help him finally get him off the ground. We help him find one of his clogs behind the fountain and watch him, swaying, make his way down the street, a toneless muttering following him.

“I better make sure he’s all right,” Aristotle says apologetically. I watch him follow his old mate. Further down the street he’s caught up with him, a friendly arm guiding him on the slippery footpath.

A part of me wishes I could go with them. Join Sven-Åke beneath the tree again. Laugh myself silly from tepid liquid and cool bark rubbing against my backside, Anita finding me in a heap, frozen to death, later. Give in.

Instead I find myself in front of the Mission Church, which somehow has been the destination from the start. As if on cue, the doors with cross handles suddenly swing open, I almost get them in my face. Wildly I scramble for the steps, trying to turn around and take off when the voice from the doorway stops me:

“I’m so sorry,” a light voice exclaims, “I didn’t see you coming!”

Confused, I look at the woman standing in front of me, a white collar around her neck, looking at me with a glow of unmistakable enthusiasm. Instinctively, I take another step backwards, and would have fallen over the steps, if she hadn’t reached out.

“You must be Christina,” she says, “I’ve heard so much about you.”

I stumble in surprise.

“Yes, you don’t look like the usual kind of Svenstorper lurking around at night!” The female pastor looks at me playfully, her eyes scrunched up comically, as if we are sharing a joke, a secret. “I knew you were on your way, of course. Welcome

home, Christina! Such a sad, sad occasion, but it must be a great consolation to be back in Svenstorp with your loved ones!”

“Your Dad was always so proud of you, Christina,” she continues smiling, “always boasting about your adventures in Australia so much so that I feel I already know you.” She fires off another angelic smile. “I liked your father dearly,” she uses the word dearly although she can’t be more than twenty-five. “He shall be sorely missed by us all. So welcoming, inviting me for dinner when I first arrived and didn’t know anybody, cheering me on every Sunday. And such cooking skills: his Portuguese casserole is quite famous around Svenstorp!”

There must be a mistake somewhere.

“Cooking,” I mutter, “I didn’t know my Dad cooked.”

“Oh, yes,” she laughs, “no wonder he was quite a hit with the ladies, and so funny! He once told me that when he couldn’t go to sleep at night he used to count widows instead of sheep. Once he came to forty-three widows that he knew of in Svenstorp and he hadn’t even started on the neighbourhood!”

“I’m sorry,” she adds, quickly moving on before I have the chance to, “standing here talking, when you must be freezing in that thin coat. I suppose you’re not used to this kind of weather any more? Why don’t you go and warm up inside, I won’t disturb you. The organist usually comes a bit later to practise and he’ll do the locking up.” She looks at me with that beaming face of hers, adding, “It must be a great comfort for you, to share this time of grief with your sisters, you’re all so close from what Anita tells.”

She’s leaning in a bit closer now, and suddenly I panic that she has found out and that I won’t know how to stop her.

But she just gives me a friendly pat on the back and leaves. I sneak inside and sit down in one of the pews, my face still in a grimace. Such a beaming face, such a genuine person! It never changes, does it? I look around the space. Outside the windows a car is driving past, the headlights light up the platform and pulpit, the shadows in the corners. Drained, I close my eyes for a moment and listen to the organist practising familiar hymns. When I hear the sound of footsteps from downstairs I take off in the middle of “Jesus calling you.” I stand breathless in the foyer, ready to reach for the cross handles, and I breathe as deeply as I can.

Songs of Euphoria

*Jesus calling you,
Come to the well,
Come by my side,
I know you are thirsty,
You won't be denied!*

It is a time of change. The grocery store of Svenstorp is replaced by a big supermarket, and we grow too: Out of the Mission Church's scout patrols we go and into the new teenage group—Thank God it's Friday! Prayers and Fun: Everyone Welcome—run by the Herrings.

Yet another new initiative is announced by our energetic pastor: Saturday night meetings for the Christian youth of Svenstorp, together with other independent churches of the neighbourhood. Even the Pentecostalists from Vedstorp, with whom we've always been a bit wary of mixing—even the butt of a joke now and then—are welcome, our pastor cashing in on the growing hunger for spiritual nourishment among our youth everywhere.

All by myself I run down Alley Road in the dark to meetings that don't start until ten at night because of the biggest change of all: Nilla is not running next to me any more, and when I arrive to church it's not her but Birgitta who sits next to me in the pew.

Nilla hardly comes anywhere nowadays, she's having a break, she says, and looks at me with that new strange look of hers. Perhaps it's because of rumours that her father is in financial trouble and is spending most of his time in bed and might have to sell his business, perhaps she's all upset about that, but when I try to ask her about it she tells me that people are just gossips and to shut up, so I do. It doesn't seem to help. She even avoids walking with me to school nowadays and when she does, she's all angry at me, telling me I use words she doesn't understand, and that I'm trying to make myself important when I tell her poetry is an expression of human *euphoria* or my concern about Strindberg allegedly being a *male chauvinist*, which someone claimed on TV the other day. My words used not to worry her! First, I was all upset about it but now I think it's quite a good thing, because that's how I discovered Birgitta and that she is not really stuck up at all.

Birgitta doesn't mind me using words like *spirituality* and when I'm invited to her home, her whole family laughs at my jokes, although they manage to look, simultaneously, horrified by my ways. They especially laugh when I arrive in the style of *fru* Herring, walking through the entrance hall in her sideways, strange manner: an erupting force of sinful laughter following my way down the hallway.

There's no stopping me then.

Even Birgitta's mother, *tant* Eivor, smiles somewhat, and she really used to petrify me. Partly because I've been worried I'll end up with the size of her ginormous breasts if I keep growing at the current rate, but mainly because she always looks so stern if anyone does something out of the ordinary at a service, as if she's in charge of keeping order. Like when *tant* Berta stood up in the middle of service once and burst out in a foreign tongue, crying and carrying on in the middle of our old pastor's sermon, not stopping until the headmaster's wife awkwardly held out her hand and pulled her down rather forcefully, or when the People of Jesus did their camel-musical. When *tant* Eivor purses her mouth, her husband and daughters follow, the whole family ending up sitting with their heads tilted, wearing disapproving mouths. Nilla and I used to mimic her on our way home from church, pushing out our chests until we would nearly fall over, crying out, "I don't think it's quite appropriate, do you? Not for a Christian!" Once, *tant* Eivor aimed her lips at me, telling me off for taking too much cake at Birgitta's birthday party when I was just trying to show my appreciation. But now she even encourages my poetry citations, I read with such feeling she says, especially her favourite one I found in the local paper:

I saw a sight outside my window / a view that only God can give,

He coloured forests / and shaped lakes into a pattern

To make it beautiful here to live.

Thank You God for such a sight

A view of Svenstorp in Your light!

I finish dramatically. Lighthearted, I walk home from Birgitta, racking my brains, going through poems from my mother's bookshelf in my mind that might be claimed to contain a Christian spirit, planning my next visit to them.

And Birgitta! It's funny. You think you know somebody and it turns out they're as nervous and think as many strange thoughts as you do; well, perhaps not quite as many. She's still as perfect-looking though, Birgitta, can't get around that, I suppose.

She's got this shiny skin and black hair, like Snow-White. I'm not the only one who has noticed, a few of the pale-looking pimply boys from the Pentecostals in their dark gabardine trousers seem to make sure they end up close to us in church at every night-meeting, offering their hymns books to her, hands all sweaty.

From all around the neighbourhood they come nowadays, to listen to Pastor Herring: Christian youths from Träby and beyond, looking for worthy entertainment. They won't be disappointed as we gather once again tonight. There'll be a lot of singing and afterwards everyone will stand outside on the steps shivering in the cold, and that's where the real excitement starts. We will linger, hoping someone will invite us all for a cup of tea and a place next to someone good-looking, and stay up really late discussing spiritual matters. I usually end up impersonating someone from the service, and they'll laugh and look at me as kindly as *tant* Eivor. I might be a show-off, like Nilla tells me, but it's usually because I have a terrible crush on someone.

I just adore them, that's the truth of it. All those boys! I can't get enough. I can't get enough looking at the coarse texture around their chin and the soft silky looking thin line over their lips and the way their arms seem all wiry and muscular and the way they walk, legs all twisted outward, their coats flapping behind them. I wonder how it would feel to touch them, especially their hair, black, straight, curly, short, long or average brownish kind of hair, any kind, it doesn't matter. I like the sound of their names, which are all shortened and bounce off the tongue: Tolle, Bosse, Lasse, Pelle, or a hint of taste of something: Fudgy, Bicky, Sticky, Froggy. I love the way they call out to each other: "Pass the *puck or ball*, Groggy!" and hit each other on the back: "*Ace tackle*, Balsy!" How their hands look all clumsy suddenly when holding the Bible or something small or fluffy, their feet shuffling awkwardly, a look of helplessness. I wonder how it would feel to hold them then, to reassure, to support and steady them and sniff them, just a little bit, although some of them, like many a Swedish young man, use *snus*, the tobacco powder snuff they stuff under their lips, which looks rather disgusting when it starts dripping down their teeth, but for some reason is not a sin, not in Svenstorp at least, or anywhere that I'm aware of. All those adorable boys I entertain on late Saturday nights who, in turn, will sit *transfixed* looking at her, Birgitta, who'll be flashing her pretty smile, laughing like a little bird, like cooing or something. I will tell myself sternly not to be jealous and hope for a new boy turning up to fall in love with at the next night meeting, although not a

Pentecostal from Vedstorp, perhaps, then I might have to wear a skirt all the time — even in winter—and never watch TV.

I look at Birgitta, her head bowed down in prayer, sitting next to me. I feel all strange tonight. Not because there are no new boys present and not because I've noticed, to my surprise, that Nilla's come to the meeting tonight, sitting at the far end of the pews. It's because of the guest preacher, I think. Pastor Herring has invited Roland Persson, who's apparently lived in America for two years. He talks strangely, the special guest pastor, like he's forgotten Swedish or something. Sometimes he struggles for words and he keeps saying "ah" instead of pausing: "And the Lord—ah—wants you to—ah—feel His love—ah—for you—ah— tonight."

For some reason I find this really annoying, I feel like shouting: "Well, the Lord wants you to—ah—stop moaning tonight!" and that's not like me. I try so hard to be positive nowadays, but I can't really share my irritation with Birgitta, she's not like Nilla who would have squeezed my waist delightedly at any comic relief. When I lean towards Birgitta to whisper about the pastor's strange ah-ing, she turns around and makes a sign for me to hush; it's obvious she really wants to concentrate on what the pastor, who's toured with Billy Graham in the Southern states of America, has to say. Shamefacedly, I try to do the same.

He really is intense, guest Pastor Persson. His eyes are bulging and a red vein is throbbing on his forehead as he shouts about Jesus—ah—love, sweat pouring down his face. Suddenly he lowers his voice and starts whispering about the temptations of the Devil, and how vigilant we must be. Especially when we don't know when the final day will come, he reminds us. Pastor Herring showed us a film about it last week and it was terrible: families were torn apart, split in half when some of them were swept up in the sky by Jesus, the rest left stranded on earth crying, "Why, God?" in their American voices, regretting they hadn't prepared better for the big day.

Outside is darkness. All the candles throw shadows around the altar, and the Devil is waiting in every corner with his temptations. Behind me a man starts shouting in a strange language. I don't recognise what he's saying, more than "Jesus, Jesus," his words streaming down behind my back at a rapid speed. I know speaking in tongues is a gift from God but it scares me, it's not like when our neighbour did it, then it was funny and somehow sweet. But here it's all strangeness and there seem to be more and more voices now, even, to my surprise, from one of the car mechanic

Nilsson twins, who to my knowledge has so far never said a word; he is standing in one of the sideways pews all red in his face, looking a bit shocked himself by the words streaming out of him. My heart is racing from all the strange tongues. The pastors are surrounding us, urging us to stretch out our hands if we want to receive Jesus and people are standing up, their eyes closed, calling out and suddenly there's a long procession moving towards the altar. I find myself sitting down on my hands, so sinful but terrified of joining the queue. Some are crying and some laughing as the pastor who's toured with Billy Graham puts his hands on them and they fall down to the ground. I feel like crying, I don't know why, but most of all I feel like running as far away as I can; I can't breathe properly and my palms underneath me feel all cold and sweaty.

Birgitta suddenly stands up. Her eyes seem strangely glazed, as she looks past me towards somewhere I know I haven't been. Her hands are softly lifted and rounded, as if she holds something precious in her hands, like a glass jar that could easily break if she were to let it go. Her mouth opens slightly; she looks like she's listening to something, as if someone is whispering instructions to her. I look around to see whether anyone's noticed, I don't quite know what to do. Now she squeezes past me and floats, as if in trance, up on stage. She stops in front of the microphone and starts singing. The murmurs of prayers in the pews stop. Everything is calm. Everything and everyone, apart from the Birgitta's pure voice, have all gone so very quiet. We are all looking at her now. She looks like an angel. I can almost see a halo shining behind her as she softly sings to us that Jesus is calling: "Come, come to the well, come to me now," she urges, her eyes all welled up with tears. And I suddenly understand the word euphoria. That's what's surrounding me, I think; this is what it looks like, this is what it sounds like. People are humming along, but softly, we are all watching Birgitta, so softly. The people saved by Pastor Persson behind her on the stage are hugging, holding each other, looking at Birgitta too. I've never seen anything so beautiful. I want to join too; I want to join the beaming faces on stage. But I can't. My hands won't let me. They are holding me down. My hands tell me that they're a bunch of lunatics up there and if I join I can never leave Svenstorp and become an actress. I will marry Carlsson's son or someone else with unobtrusive glasses and pale, straight hair, and we will take our children here, and on and on it will go. And I know God must be disappointed in me and the Devil pleased. But there is nothing I can do about it, I suddenly know. I long for them, I long to stand

there belonging, holding on to Tolle or Fudgy and glow with them all, and that's why I'm crying. I'm crying for missing out on this certain life without fear and for Birgitta who's looking all holy and soft but somehow confused. Almost as if she's suddenly wondering how she ended up there in front of us all. I try to tell myself that I should at least go up there and make sure Birgitta's all right, but I can't.

As I watch Pastor Herring standing next to that other pastor, smiling, pleased with the response of Svenstorp's Christian youth and beyond, I remember something: something Charlotta's told me. It's kind of a secret.

Lotta has finally found a friend. Even better: she has become friends with the Herrings' daughter, you can't really top that. All the Svenstorpers smile when they see them together: Lotta and Rut. Despite her old and horrid name, Rut is as pretty as Lotta. She's got her looks from Pastor Herring, that's for sure. Her hair is as dark as Lotta's is fair. She's got long, dark eyelashes like his and as beautiful a smile. You sort of just melt when you see her and can't stop looking at her, that's how pretty she is. Everyone's saying how much Lotta's changed since she's become Rut's friend. She even has confidence to answer Herring at mass now and sometimes he winks at her.

We were sitting in the cellar watching TV. Lotta likes grownup shows as much as I do. Especially like the one that was on that night, where some famous entertainers told jokes about trying to get away from their wives and being drunk, and one blond girl who kept saying something stupid got a bucket of water over her head to make her quiet. We knew our father didn't like us watching this kind of entertainment, and if we heard footsteps we quickly turned off the TV.

Lotta laughs at my jokes and listens to everything I have to say. Sometimes I perform something for her or talk about God or Strindberg. She calls me "Cia" and I adore her.

As we watched the funny people from Stockholm on TV, Lotta told me about the last time she slept over at Rut's and how many prayers they all had to do around the dinner table, and we started giggling. We all say prayers, of course, but why so many, we laughed, surely God can hear them the first time? "Doesn't the food get cold," I asked Lotta, but, unlike me, she never eats much, so she couldn't say. And then Lotta told me about Pastor Herring blessing them before they went to bed and how they had to kneel in front of him so he could place his hands on their heads. We

laughed at this too. We were horrified by our wickedness, but then I told her that I thought *fru* Herring's got the world's ugliest clothes and how she's in such a hurry that she always looks like she's going to fall off her rusty old bike, and we just couldn't stop laughing at the mighty Herrings and we knew we should be ashamed of ourselves.

Then Lotta suddenly said, "And, you know when Pastor Herring goes to the toilet, he wants me and Rut to come with him!" She looked at me a bit embarrassed, adding: "Isn't that a bit silly, do you think Cia, that he wants me to see him wee and, you know, his ... thing?" She muttered the last bit.

"Yeah," I agreed, surprised: "that's disgusting!"

Well, I thought, it's probably all part of being natural and special like the Pastor, and he would know best, but I don't like the thought of little Lotta standing in the bathroom looking at him going to the toilet, why would he do that for?

There isn't much hope for me. As everyone else moves their head to the beat of Birgitta's song, I bow mine in shame. I avoid Herring and his glowing face and Pastor-friend from America, everyone else happy and saved. Everyone else walking out with their hands in the air now, Birgitta leading the way, all still singing and clapping while I'm left thinking: What do you want with my little sister, Pastor?

Outside on the steps, the crowd is waiting to see where this glorious night will continue. Everyone seems animated, all radiating my favourite words: euphoria; beauty; belonging.

Everyone, except for Nilla, that is. She's standing at the doors, fumbling with her woollen scarf. Now she turns around and smiles. Relieved, I smile back. But when we take a step closer towards each other, a hand comes down on my shoulder. It's a heavy hand and I don't dare to turn around. Someone's got on to me. Someone's realised I got unfinished business with God; someone who's seen me not praising Him properly, even though I had the privilege to sit next to the purest and Godliest of them all. When I finally turn around and look into her crazy, smiling face she has managed to get her other arm around Nilla. We are all so close now, I can smell her. It's a peculiar smell, musky and strong, like our neighbour *farbror* Werner's dogs before they go hunting. Her body seems to be vibrating with excitement, and there's almost the sound of moaning as the Pastor's wife stretches her face wide open and whispers: "Saved, are you, girls?"

I look into the ground and swallow, frozen to a spot between the hymnbook stand and the cross-handles of the entrance. A moment lasting forever. But finally I can hear Nilla muttering from a distance, “Yes, thank you, *fru* Herring.”

That’s the cue. We bolt for the door.

There are still people gathered on the church steps, reluctant to let go of this giddy night. Birgitta’s in the centre of the circle outside and as we run past I can hear her calling out for me, but we can’t stop now.

It starts snowing as we run up Alley Road; as we start giggling; as we make a little dance outside my house; as Nilla whispers, “Saved, are you, girl?”

As I shout, “Yes, thank you!” to the falling, white sky.

*

My father’s funeral is still five days away, and it’s very late when I walk out of the church and into the night. I stopped in the foyer for a long time, but I saw no one apart from the young organist, a skinny-looking vision of long hair and glasses from the 1970s, who emerged from the gallery and looked at me, surprised, on his way out, as I was standing as if frozen underneath the coat hangers.

Stopping for a moment on the steps to the entrance, I suddenly see a woman in a tightly wrapped woollen scarf and heavy winter coat, who looks vaguely familiar, leaving from the side entrance. Curiously, I wait as she walks to the back of the church. She soon emerges from the back with a bike that she must have parked there. I’m halfway down the steps, when she notices me.

“Christina, how wonderful to see you!” she exclaims and I stare at her blankly for a moment, until she adds with a hurt face: “Don’t you recognize me?”

It’s Birgitta, I realise too late to say, “Of course, don’t be silly!” Her shiny long hair is gone, replaced by a practical bob. She seems to have lost weight too; her face looks tight inside the scarf. She’s been downstairs to prepare for Sunday school, she tells me. “We used to have so much fun didn’t we Christina?” she says, adding with a tiny twist of a smile, “I hear you became an actress like you always wanted.”

“Well,” I mutter, “not really.” But then I start rambling. The more I carry on, the more boastful I become; I can’t stop myself. It’s a glorious tale about meeting an upcoming Australian director in Gothenburg and moving with him to Sydney. Of being cast in one of his plays. I start to wave my hands theatrically about in the damp

winter air, sharing my success of late. The only thing is it's not true, of course, or only a fraction of it.

Birgitta, in turn, tells me in an efficient monotone voice about an industrious life, a tale of working part time as a secretary in a small company, adding: "I had to give up on music. Remember how much I wanted to be a musician? The migraines put a stop to it in the end." She continues bitterly: "I only play violin now and then when I'm well enough, and not in a professional capacity, of course." I stare at my old friend. Ashamed, I realise I never paid much attention to her dreams. I had been so jealous about her singing I had failed to take notice of what she really had wanted. And I had forgotten about the migraines too, although I used to follow her into the toilets, handing her the strong medication when she'd finished vomiting. So this is the moment, I think to myself, I have finally put her in her place. I feel a sudden impulse to tell her the truth, but she seems to be in a rush all of sudden and I have finally learnt to distrust my impulses. She has to get home and cook dinner, she tells me, regaining some of her composure. "You're not married then?"

"No," I say lightly, "I'm not really into marriage."

"Of course," she says, her mouth tight, and takes off in a hurry, the bike sliding in the mushy, grey snow.

It's very still on Alley Road. Not a sound can be heard, apart from my wet boots sliding around the wet ice and a few lonely cars in the distance. I'm never going to do any acting again, I think, as I continue my way up the hill. Dad was right. It's not a job for a normal person.

Perhaps that's why I enjoyed it so much?

Apart from the one I nearly did with Mark, of course. My first and only play in Australia would have been a disaster. You don't get a good result when you're intimidated, not just by him but by a whole cast.

"For God's sake," he looked like he wanted to hiss, "it's meant to be funny!" And I'd look at his cruel face and think how angry he'd be when he'd found out about the jelly fish growing inside me. As bad, in timing, as the lines I produced. And I knew the rest of the cast was thinking I only got the part because of Mark, and wondered what he saw in me, an awkward, big girl with an accent. I knew he was wondering that himself by now. I wondered how I had found myself there, hiding in Mark's *retro* kitchen when his endless supply of friends were coming over.

Only a few years back I had finished my acting course in Gothenburg and started the uphill battle of getting paid for the few small roles I had been getting in the small theatre companies. I shared a flat and a third-hand contract with a waif of a girl called Pia. We didn't see each other much. She went out most nights, and I spent my time at home panicking when I didn't do night shifts at Mölndal hospital, watching over sick patients and panicking there too—about getting the blood pressure right and hoping they wouldn't have an emergency and die during my shift. Trying not to fall asleep, scared of the ghost stories gleefully told by older staff on breaks, alarms going off in rooms where someone had just died. My old classmates all seemed to make great headway performing all over Sweden in light summer-comedy entertainment in castles and parks while I lay on my bed on my days off, purging myself on a diet of glossy magazines and cakes. Then I moved on to wine instead, a nice familiar buzz hitting me as I dozed off in bed. When an upcoming Master's class one summer at my old acting school needed volunteers to help out, I jumped at the chance.

And there he was, one of the Masters, saving me from disaster. Swept me away as easily as a bunch of brittle larch leaves when he turned around on the steps to the acting school and fired off a winning smile my way, an attractive figure of casual ease, and I was once again left with my mouth open. We'd walk down the Avenue in Gothenburg, in the forever light summer night, listening to the merry sounds of trams and bikes as we walked home through Vasaparken. He was so light and beaming somehow, it was like walking next to the Sun. So energetic, as if sex was part of a funny and relaxing fitness regime—unlike my usual detached act of, shrill, performing show pony. So uncomplicated, as if confidence was a matter of moving forward in a well-drilled May parade, everyone around you waving cheerfully. For some remarkable reason he found me funny and sweet, and for a moment or two I imagined I was.

"You don't even know him," Pia said with a disapproving laugh, a hint of jealousy and new respect in her voice, when I told her I was going with Mark to Australia. My parents refused to believe me at first when we made a quick visit to Svenstorp before leaving. "Do what you want," my father finally said in a tired voice, looking startled at the alien with wild hair lying on his front lawn leisurely reading a book and to whom he couldn't speak. "You always do."

Sydney was a different universe. Sparkling. As carefree and cocky as Mark. I walked in an awestruck dream down by the harbour and Botanical gardens, watching the opera house and ferryboats; a wide-eyed girl from Svenstorp. In the inner-city Newtown, where Mark lived, King Street was filled with young people who looked equally laidback and effortless, filling up cafés with offerings of tarot readings and carrot cake, a mix of danger and grit and groovy, and graffiti-sprayed alleyways. Soon my wonder was tainted with a strange fear, as if a part of me knew I would never fit in here either, as if sensing an impending disaster.

A stream of fast-moving shadows in black clothes and pale faces made their way through his terrace to discuss projects or bringing drugs to his parties. At first he thought it was a joke when I showed my ignorance at men turning up by his door telling him Santa was delivering next Thursday. “She’s never even tried dope!” he laughed at first. At least I had the sense to stick to alcohol—albeit lots of it.

It became serious so soon, my Australian life.

Anita is still up, waiting as anxiously by the door as Dad used to when I’d roll home at four in the morning drunk, laughing at him.

“Sorry I’m late,” I say this time around, “I hope you didn’t wait up for me. I stopped at the church for a while. I met the new pastor, by the way.”

“Yeah, I know,” Anita says to my surprise, adding, “well, what did you think?”

“She seems all right, I suppose.” I shrug my shoulders.

“Dad thought she was the best pastor we’ve ever had. A true Samaritan he said, in contrast to that high-flown *fåne* fool we had before! That’s what he said, can you believe it?”

“Oh, you mean Herring?” I make my voice indifferent.

“He left a long time ago; there’s been another pastor in between!” Anita shakes her head at me, looking at me crankily: “Lotta just called to say she won’t be able to make it until Thursday now. Can’t take any time off work. As if she’s the only one with a job!”

“Oh well,” I say, “but she is the one with the talent, remember!”

“What do you mean?” Anita looks hurt.

“At least that’s what Auntie Gertrude always used to say.”

“Auntie Gertrude,” Anita frowns, “Now where am I going to place her, we’re running out of room. I might have to move you to the cellar, together with Lotta when she comes.”

“That’ll be fine.”

“Don’t forget I booked you in with the funeral director tomorrow to look at Dad. I don’t know,” she mutters, “how I’ll have time really, but I’ll come with you, in case you need some support. Yes, and then we can go and order the flowers afterwards.” She looks at her list in front of her and shakes her head.

“That’ll be fine,” I assure her once again, “that’ll be fine, Anita.”

When I turn off the lamp, I try to focus on my walks with Caesar on the promenade at Elwood beach. The palm trees that stick up between the concrete slabs of grand houses. The unexpected sound when someone on rollerblades comes up from behind. An old woman with a pink bathing cap having an early morning swim in the bay, the soft flesh on her upper arms fluttering gently in the wind.

But Pastor Herring, as usual, wins.

Confirmation Tune

*Give Him all for He demands it,
He who gave himself for you,
When He poor and despised,
Towards the cross He walked for you.*

His ankles are so slender and elegant.

His socks wear the pattern of the Swedish crown: golden-yellow crowns against a sky-blue background. His shoes are black and shiny, perfect calf leather—I know leather from my Dad’s shop. I watch his shoe-clad feet, fascinated; it saves me from watching him.

We’re in Pastor Herring’s office at the confirmation camp. I’m sitting in a soft pale-blue armchair; he’s in the one opposite. Outside, I can hear excited voices; people running around; the sound of clogs; songs of salvation. I know I could be out there too, in a flash. If I answered his question properly; if I didn’t mutter about, avoiding the answer he’s looking for. It’s not like I don’t know it. It’s a matter of routine. Pastor Herring has done his bit. He’s still smiling, although I can sense his irritation rising like a small odour from his socks. He probably wants to go outside too. I’m the last one in the row of otherwise obedient born-and-bred Believers, who until now has given him the correct answer. I feel sorry for him, coming to such an unexpected glitch at the last moment, at the end of such a successful camp, where new confirmation candidates from the Lutheran State Church have crossed over to our side, making this year’s group in Svenstorp’s Mission Church the biggest ever. Yet another success story of Herring’s. At the ceremony in a few weeks, surrounded by flowering birch trees, the promise of the coming summer, what better way to celebrate the greatest pastor of them all, than to increase the number of his flock even further? I understand perfectly. What I don’t understand is why I just can’t bring myself to say what I know I’m meant to say and get on with it, I really don’t. Neither does the Pastor.

“I don’t understand what the problem is” the owner of the Swedish blue and yellow crown socks now confirms, as if reading my thoughts.

Then we return to the silence of the last couple of minutes.

Yet it started so well, my confirmation year, Nilla and I running down Alley Road on Tuesday nights. Sometimes we would meet beforehand and experiment with the makeup kit she had bought duty-free on the big ferry to Germany the previous summer. She seemed so much happier nowadays; her Dad was much better. As if to celebrate, he even opened a new factory after the family came back from Southern Europe with big suntans and stories from the Mediterranean Sea.

With our study-material, *Happy News of Jesus*, and brightly coloured eyelids, trying to restrain from giggling, we would join the rest of the confirmation group. I even became a favourite student, he liked my spirit, he said. And I really was deeply interested in many of the questions facing Christian Youths of the day, and asked just the right kind of questions to Pastor Herring to get him going. Why was it a gift to talk in tongues, I wanted to know, wasn't Swedish good enough to talk to our Lord in? I even dared to suggest that if God didn't want to hear our prayers in our tongue maybe He would prefer if I spoke in English to Him? Pastor Herring thrived on this sort of questions, happily explaining that of course God heard our prayers in any language. "But," he added, looking solemn now, "sometimes people are touched by the Holy Spirit. To praise His Glory in a sacred language from the Holy Bible and perhaps from Jesus Christ himself; it's a gift which we should all be praying for."

And when Pastor Herring declared us ready to lead the service one Sunday, who was chosen to play his role? Despite *fru* Herring trying to insist that Birgitta would be most suited for this task the Pastor himself intervened in the selection process and said he thought Christina had all the qualities needed to perform all his duties, "apart from the sermon of course," he added, winking at me.

And I know I shouldn't boast, but I surprised even myself. From the moment I walked out through the side door with Pastor Herring. Everything was still and peaceful, as we glided, like a small Lucia train, one master and his pupil, towards the chairs next to the pulpit.

Like two equals we sat there until I, with a steady gaze, stood up and looked out at the congregation who were all filled with goodwill. Neighbours and teachers, parents and friends, all in front of me, ready to listen to me and obey my instructions. Solemnly I declared, "Let us pray!"

They all bent down their heads and prayed. When I told them what hymns to sing, they sang. When I made announcements for the coming week they were all ears. When I read the Bible text of the week and even added a personal reflection which

ended with the poem Birgitta's mum liked so much, I even saw a few tears. When I told them to sing the more upbeat "He's Got the Whole World in His Hand," you could hear my own voice booming through the tiny microphone at the pulpit, leading the way.

While I was leading the congregation in the Lord's Prayer, the rest of the confirmation group brought in the collection money and handed out hymn books. Afterwards they all congratulated me on my clear diction and well-sounding voice, of how confident I had been. I was a Natural, they all said. You must be so proud of your daughter, they mused to my beaming father. He didn't stop talking about it for weeks afterwards. Of what so and so said, and how the old Missionary believed I might have found my calling. He had heard every word, he told my father, usually the young ones all mutter nowadays; yes, it had all gone so well until now. In leaps and bounds.

It's very quiet inside the room. His foot is moving up and down, the golden crowns bopping away impatiently, his fingers tapping a side table lightly; waiting, the world is waiting for my answer and there is only one answer to give.

"Your friends are all joining, Christina," Pastor Herring now repeats, perhaps fearful I might not quite have understood him the first time. "Everyone else signed up. Gunilla," he adds, laughing a little, "or Nilla" as you prefer calling her. And Birgitta, of course."

"Of course."

"We are close to three hundred members now."

"That's really excellent," I say politely, I almost feel I should applaud him.

I don't know how to explain to him that taking that final step had come too soon. Become a fully-fledged member at the confirmation ceremony, as tradition has it. I haven't even spoken to Nilla about this. It's private, somehow. You can joke around, be a bit of a clown for awhile, but then you got to commit. Choose. You are either with your friends and your family or ... well ... with what?

I look up. I'm right. He is irritated; he is leaning forward now and I can't avoid his glare any longer.

"You believe in Jesus Christ as your Saviour, don't you?"

"Yes."

His eyes are suddenly flashing, his mouth a stretched line: “Well, what is it then?”

“I’m not quite sure.” My voice has shrunk.

“Do you know what I think, Christina? I think it’s time you stood up for your faith. I don’t believe God put us on this earth to bear witnesses to His love for us so that we can turn around and be cowards in return, do you?”

“No.”

“But that’s what you’re doing now, isn’t it? Acting as if you’re ashamed of being His child and being brought up in His faith.”

“I don’t mean to—”

His cheeks are churning, his face is close.

“Perhaps I just need little more time?”

“No one knows how much time there is: He is calling us today!”

The tip of his ears have gone red, his long fingers are greedily stretching towards the Bible next to me, as if ready to flip it open and prove the urgency of making a decision. There are probably lots of verses.

“I have to say I’m disappointed, I didn’t expect this from you.”

He grabs hold of my hands. They are so cool and he is so close and so concerned.

“You know, Christina, you’ve been a leader to the rest of the group, I’ve really enjoyed our vigorous discussions. The essay you wrote on the life of Jesus Christ was by far the best and I was actually planning to read it at the confirmation evening with the families! And now this! I am surprised.”

“S-sorry.”

“I’m only thinking of your spiritual welfare, it’s—and I’m sure your parents would agree with me—my duty to speak up as the shepherd of Svenstorp’s Mission Church.”

“Yes.”

“I need an answer, Christina.”

“Yes.”

“Is that a yes, then?” He lets go of my hands.

“I mean, can I think about it till tomorrow?”

“Nothing is really going to change between now and tomorrow, is it?”

“No, I just want to be sure—”

“What exactly is it you want to be sure about?” His voice is all sharp again.

“Well,” I blurt out, “I just want to make sure, you know—that this is the right church for me. In case I feel I should join another one—I mean, perhaps I’ll decide to join, like, the Salvation Army or something!”

For a moment I try to picture myself standing outside the big shops in Jönköping in a uniform, my hair pulled back in a tight bun, playing the guitar with a steady hand, leading the rest of the Army of frail old ladies and men, shaking the collection-tin and urging passers-by to keep the pot boiling.

He sneers a little.

“The Salvation Army?”

“Well, you know, or some other church.” I add a little laugh to show him that I don’t really mean that, of course I wouldn’t leave His church.

The Royal Swedish socks make a sudden jerk, not stopping until the Pastor has acquired a view by the window.

When he finally turns around he is furious.

“Do you think this is some kind of a joke?”

“No, of course not,” I mumble.

“Well, I’ve had quite enough, Christina.” He pauses for a moment while deciding what to do with the stubborn stupid girl shaking slightly in the nice blue armchair in front of him.

His answer is as grand as unexpected; I know I don’t deserve it: “Right. I give you until tomorrow as you’ve requested. But I need your answer by then so I can make all the arrangements. As you know confirmation is only a couple of weeks away.” His view is anchored by the window again.

“Of course,” I reply to his back. “Thank you, Pastor—I’ll definitely tell you tomorrow.”

The pine trees cast shadows on the path, where *fru* Herring’s purple gumboots lead the way into a denser part of the forest. Birgitta’s new-looking ones follow, her black hair and slim figure a speck in the distance. Nilla and I hesitantly follow. When our confirmation group was having a break in between Bible studies, lying on the grass, sunning ourselves in the spring sun, *fru* Herring came by, saying she wanted to have some special time with “a few of us girls.” The non-Believer girls who chose Svenstorp Mission church for their confirmation were not included in the invitation; it was only aimed at us, the three heiresses of faith. She probably wants to give us

some final hints to show the others the will of Jesus, our confirmation camp finishing tomorrow, but why she needs to drag us into the forest for this, I don't know. My head is still filled with my conversation with Pastor Herring earlier. I walk uneasily; we've done a lot of walking over the last couple of days for entertainment, lots of walking and campfire singing with the Herrings. We haven't seen much of the other confirmation groups. We've only caught glimpses of the boys from the neighbouring churches. I suggested to Birgitta and Nilla one night that we sneak up to their cottages, but I didn't get much of a response. Birgitta just sighed and told me I was obsessed. And in our group they're all hopeless. The pastor's son looks like he's ten and behaves like it, so do the other boys; immature and short, all of them.

We have come to a clearing when the marching purple boots come to a halt.

"I thought it would be good to have a heart-to-heart just between us girls." *Fru* Herring laughs. "I'm concerned," she says, her eyes gliding past me, "that the great joy of living a life with Jesus might have become overshadowed by other interests for some of you. I understand; it's only natural at your age. But believe me," she continues, as she leans forward, "It's time to make a lifelong commitment to Jesus and be ever so careful of temptations along the way." She steps a bit closer, lowering her voice, "Careful, are you, girls?"

I look at her outstretched face. I don't understand what she is on about; although somewhere I have a feeling she is aiming this at me.

"Well, I am really looking forward to join our church at confirmation," Birgitta replies in a shrill voice. "As a member I'll get all the guidance I need." She casts an eye in my direction. "So that I won't be tempted and fall." She sounds like she's reading some lines from a book.

She knows about my conversation this morning, I suddenly realise. They think it's about boys. Jesus Christ! I just like to look at them and joke about them. Birgitta and Nilla must have told the Herrings, they think I'm like Agneta in our class who rolls around on floors with them. She did it to both Benke and Henke at a party no Believer was invited to, but that we all heard about for weeks afterwards. For half an hour, they said: kissing non-stop. Jesus Christ! I don't want to roll around on floors; it's not like that! I know what can happen. I've read *The Christian Youth Guide* where there are clear instructions to wait until Holy Matrimony. And if you feel like you can't wait you need to get married as soon as possible. Once, the Herrings even confessed to us laughing that "We got married in a real hurry" at the Thank God it's

Friday Relationship Guide Night. I had been horrified. I also know no one, not even the congregation, is safe. *Fru* Nilsson got pregnant as a teenager Nilla once told me, and she had to stand up and apologise in front of the whole congregation. I often think about that when I see her sitting there, looking all ordinary, with *farbror* Tor-Björn who was kind enough to marry her, even though, Nilla says, he wasn't the father.

I look at *fru* Herring standing there in the clearing in front of me, and feel like she's scooped up a handful of dirt and slung it at me. I suddenly remember an illustration our old biology teacher, and member of the congregation, *herr* Pettersson, once showed us on a board, I suppose he had to as part of the new education policy. His face went bright red as the boys giggled and he showed us a drawing of a man and woman *naked*, holding each other strangely and the man's *organ*, as *herr* Pettersson referred to it—a gigantic stiff wiper snake, its wide mouth pointing to the woman—was so huge, I remember thinking that can't possibly be the right size, that's impossible! Thank God I don't have to deal with one of those for a while!

Shaken, I turn away from *fru* Herring and say, "And Nilla, what do you think? What is your priority in these trying teenager times? Are you being careful?"

She looks at me confused and then to *fru* Herring and says mildly, "I think we better get back, *fru* Herring, it's time for the next Bible class!"

We walk quietly, Nilla looking at me now and then, and when we finally manage to shake off *fru* Herring and Birgitta she says quietly: "Are you in some sort of trouble, Christina? What was all that about?"

"Oh, nothing," I mutter. I want to tell her. Ask her if she ever feels the same, but perhaps I better be careful of what I say to her or to anyone else from now on.

She sighs a bit. "Oh, Christina, you like to complicate things, don't you?" And I know I'm trying her patience again; creating drama out of something everyone else finds straightforward and natural.

At the Bible class, Pastor Herring talks about the sacrifices necessary for a life with Jesus.

Later in the afternoon, I'm walking on the small dirt road that brought us here nearly a week ago. In the distance, I can see a phone booth by the wayside. Suddenly I start

running; it feels like someone might stop me if I don't hurry up. Step out of the forest and yell: "Hang on! What do you think you're doing?" I sprint the last metres.

My mother answers the phone. "Everything all right?" she asks cheerfully.

I suddenly feel like crying. I watch a fly stuck inside the booth, making an irritating sound as it tries to find a way out, and I tell a few jokes about *fru* Herring. Then I take a deep breath, "And, you know, we've been asked to join the congregation now, Mum." When she doesn't answer I ramble on, "Yes, so I suppose that's what I'm thinking about, you know, whether now is a good time or whether it would be better to wait."

"Well," she finally says from far away, "that's your decision, Christina, that's up to you. Of course," she adds lightly, "we'd be very pleased if you did."

And that's it. My money is running out and she's not going to ask anything else anyway. She is not going to ask why I'm calling her about this now, she is not going to say why don't you wait for a while, if you're not sure, she's not even vaguely interested, she doesn't want to know. She's not here with me.

It's getting dark as I walk back to the camp. I think about Strindberg and how he fought *the establishment*. Easy for him, I think. Easy when you live in Stockholm and lived a long time ago.

They are ringing the bells as I turn the corner and I see a trail of people walking inside the little church for the last evening prayer of our camp. I spot Birgitta and Nilla walking together in the distance, blending in with the rest of the crowd.

Inside, it's peaceful. There are no warnings of being trapped in the nets of evil, no pastor urging us to raise our hands to save us from drowning. There's just goodness and candle wax gently dripping down from big, thick candles, embracing us with light from every corner on stage.

"Show us the way," Pastor Herring prays. "Show us the way."

The camp assistant Britta, who's been leading us in song every morning, sits down by the piano, her white-blonde angel hair framing her glowing face. She's been to America and sang on tours with Billy Graham. She's humble and beautiful and famous, all at once. The chords on the piano create a purposeful thunder. "*Jesus is my King*," she exclaims. Her singing is so warm and powerful, so filled with faith. It takes off and soars around the roof and we join her, glorious sound filling up and vibrating through the entire building. It's the music, I think. It's the music I can't live without.

I watch them in the front row, their heads close together, Nilla's blonde perfectly blow-dried hair mixing with Birgitta's Snow-White skull. When did that happen? When did they become so close?

If I don't join, I'll be sitting forever at a distance, watching them. Without music. Without a King.

"*Jesus is my Home*," Britta repeats, holding on to *hooome* in a warm vibrato as the last chord dies out. She nods slightly towards us, her face radiant as she steps down the stage to a thunderous applause and we walk out into the night.

Elsewhere in the world there are people who live in high-rise buildings in big cities and fall in love and speak foreign languages; here it is night time and the stars have come out, leading us the way to the small cabins by the lake at the Christian camp centre for the local district of Mission churches of Småland. I stop outside the cabin I share with Nilla and Birgitta and tell them I won't be long. They nod with bland faces. Oh well, I think, as I look into the plain juniper berry bushes surrounding me, an owl making a sound in the distance, the bushes rustling solemnly in the night: It's not like you know whether you can become an actress anyway.

The next morning I rush towards the main building in a great hurry. I find him in the main room getting breakfast.

"Pastor Herring," I yell. "I've decided!" I stand breathless in front of him as he slowly scoops a spoon of lingonberry jam on top of his porridge: "I'm going to join!"

I have disturbed his breakfast ritual. He turns around. "Good," he dismisses me with the hand that's not busy with the porridge. I had pictured him falling over with joy. But he doesn't seem all that interested any more, now that I've joined the herd. As if he knew all along, I think, disappointed.

The noise around me has suddenly died down. The staff in the kitchen, all busy with pots and pans around the serving table just a moment ago, have come to a halt. All of the students at the confirmation camp seem to have flooded the building and stand in clusters of frozen statues. Everyone's looking at me. I've been shouting. Made a fool of myself again. "Well," I mutter, as I walk backwards out of the room, my clogs creating a strong clatter, "just thought I'd better let you know."

Hymn for a Special Occasion

*For the moment has come
When I'm invited to your table.
Oh, that table to which you descend
Lovingly down from heaven,
Inviting salvation to those
Who give their hearts away.*

My mother is setting the table with the special silver in the best room. She unpacks cases with the old silver cutlery and brings out the good china from the cream-coloured cupboard standing next to the matching, Gustavian-style table. There are freshly picked flowers from the garden in the big vase on the white, starched tablecloth.

Later, she will bring out the silver tray with the special prawn sandwiches currently keeping fresh in the fridge. Beside the meringue-cake she knows I love. She has made her special chocolate squares and baked cinnamon buns. She has baked, cleaned, dusted all week, to make this day special.

After the confirmation service today, the members of the congregation will be doing the rounds to each one of us. They'll bring presents: a book with Bible quotes or suitable poems, an ornamental piece in porcelain, bouquets of flowers with cards congratulating me on my big day. From my parents I'll be getting my own cassette player that I have wished for.

My father is walking around excitedly admiring my mother's work, beaming at me, telling me how nice I look. I'm wearing the newly bought white skirt, shirt and shoes with wedge heels which make me even taller than usual. My hair has been cut in a grown up style. It turns out my new short hair is very curly and difficult to manage; it stands straight out in a peculiar manner. I try to flatten it, constantly pulling at it. Nilla had her cut in a similar style, but hers is beautifully straight and seems, unlike mine, to obey the hairdresser's intentions. I'm standing in the doorway, fidgeting with my new necklace with the silver cross, watching nervously; my mother finds it easier without my help. She doesn't want to risk her Persian rug or the very special hand-woven Swedish one underneath the table, and I always spill something sooner or later.

I wave to Lotta through the window; she is sitting outside on the swing in a lovely batik dress. She's not swinging; she is looking straight past me and doesn't wave back. I feel like running out to her, throwing off my wedge heels and swinging into the sky.

I stir uneasily when Anita comes out from the kitchen with a tray of crystal glasses; she came home last night from training college in Jönköping. We were eating supper, when she suddenly turned to me.

"So, why are you becoming a member, Christina?"

"Well," I stuttered, panicking, laughing into her face, "Well, you know—"

"Know what?" she asked sharply. "I'm surprised," she lectured my parents, "that you don't seem to have asked her. It's a very big decision. Christina, you need to know exactly what you're committing to; not just because it's the general view that this is a good time to do it! So tell me again, why are you joining the church?"

My mind was completely blank; as silent inside my head as around the table.

Anita waited calmly. Like God, she could see straight through me.

"Because Jesus died for my sins and that," I finally said, looking at my empty plate.

As I left the kitchen, I heard my mother saying, "Don't upset Christina, you know she's ... sensitive. There's nothing wrong with her wanting to belong to our church, is there?"

"Not as long as she knows what she's doing," my sister replied.

It'll be over soon, I think nervously: It won't change a thing.

Nilla and Birgitta are leading the procession. I'm last, together with the tallest boy of the group. Anders is wearing a tie and jacket and sweating, pimples shining. It's shimmering outside the church windows too. The organist starts playing and, led by Pastor Herring carrying the cross staff, we start marching. At the entrance there are two verdant birch trees forming an arch and we march through it. Like a wedding, I think to myself. The church is filled with smiling faces. On the side of each pew there are freshly picked flowers, creating a colourful blur as we glide past.

At the altar, we turn to face the congregation the way we have practised. Pastor Herring asks the congregation to pray for us: "Let us pray for our innocent young standing here in front of us on this special day," he smiles, "all instructed and armed

with the will of God. Let us also pray that we, as their guardians, will support them on their continuous path to Him.”

The elders of the congregation come solemnly towards us and hand us each a new Bible. Then there seems to be some sort of singing about a child receiving Jesus. I’m not quite sure; everything has started to spin around me. The floor in front of me makes wave-like patterns. My legs feel heavy. I’m starting to feel nauseous too. The pastor is talking and talking from the pulpit. I can’t understand what he’s saying. Just a little bit longer, I tell myself.

I feel like I’m standing inside a glass cage, like the ones they have on TV quiz shows, so you won’t hear the other contestants’ answers. Outside the glass, the others are standing confidently—without earphones. Birgitta and Nilla are so far away; unreachable. They all look unreal. Like puppets. Pastor Herring especially. I look confusedly at him. He doesn’t seem scary anymore; he looks ridiculous. His smile is not made of flesh either, I think. How could I have not seen that before? I look down at my own body; it looks unreal too.

The elders are coming towards us again. They hold little glasses in their hands, some hold trays; it’s our first communion. *Jesu kropp for dig utgjuten*. His body. Sacrificed himself. For us. I just have to stand here inside the glass and receive his body and drink his blood, that’s all. He knows I’m a big fat liar, of course; he knows I’m not for real. That I never received him; not like Birgitta. And that I’m going to lie again. Once you’ve started you have to continue. For the rest of your life. Be his representative on earth even though you don’t know what it means.

One of the Nilsson twins stretches out a glass towards me. One small little drink, that’s all it takes. He’s wearing a moustache, it’s almost red, I notice, as he leans forward to me and whispers, “Are you all right, you look pale, you’re not going to faint, are you?”

“Oh no,” I smile and swallow obediently. He pats me lightly, his hand easily reaching me through the glass cage. Nearly there, I think. I look out into the vast space of the Mission Church. Somewhere in the middle, I can spot my family. My father tilts his head the way he does when he’s pleased with something. My sisters are smiling. I smile back. Then I look at my mother.

She is not even looking. Her eyes have wandered to the side window. She’s looking out onto Grand Street and far beyond, and she’s looking somewhere I can’t even begin to understand or follow. “Hello there!” I want to shout: “Remember me?”

Do you still want me to draw a bow or should I just pretend and swallow the Holy blood of Jesus? Look at me Mum! I don't know what do!" My mother smiles a bit to herself, her eyes dreaming away.

Well, doesn't everything look different from up here, I think: My mother; the pastor; the organist's bent back leaning anxiously towards the music sheets. And me.

I can see now. I can see that my body has a will of its own and is mysteriously connected to me at the same time. My legs jerk and my broad feet jammed inside the wedge heels start moving. I catch a glimpse of Pastor Herring's surprised face from the pulpit as he stops mid-sentence; I hear the in-breath of the congregation as I calmly walk off stage.

The big blue carpet in the middle of the aisle receives me softly as I start running, floating past every pew along the way. I run past silence and disarray and quietly fascinated faces, surprised, wondering if this is some new initiative by the pastor. I leave disappointment and dreams and unsigned forms; my friends; my family; a whole community. But all I see is my mother. She can see me now. She is returning as I am leaving. She looks at me thoughtfully as I run past her and through the birch tree archway, and watch the cross-handle doors coming towards me. They are surprisingly easy to open, their cold coppery surface soothingly welcome.

Behind me, the doors make a slight banging sound.

I stand quietly for a moment.

Looking down at my hands. They are still holding the Bible.

I have no idea what do next.

*

It is four nights before my father's funeral when I wake up pressed tight against the bedpost and Anita's starched pillowcases. The hour of the wolf. That's what it is, the hour between three and four. At least that's what Ingmar Bergman calls it. All those mad people in black and white. I curse myself.

I wake up in a pathetic panic about Anita having seen my hands shaking. It's not because of drinking. It's something else. It started in Gothenburg already. It comes all of sudden, it happened in Sydney too. Takes over, surprises me. I focus on the hands so hard then, not to let it show. The more I stare, the more they shake. Anita's

probably seen it and discussed it in hushed tones and frowned brows with her husband Lars in bed at night.

As if she hasn't other things to think about! I feel ashamed, but that's not anything new. Nothing is, neither shame nor Bergman's wolf hour.

I open the window slightly ajar. There's no one hiding in here. I will not think about it, I will breathe.

Almost asleep again, a shadow is sitting in the chair at the end of the room, holding a bundle. When I turn on the night lamp again, it's gone. There is only the sound of a glass rolling on the floor that tipped over when I fumbled for the lamp. The water is dripping from the chair. I stretch out and find a T-shirt that I can mop it up with, without giving up my position and view from the bed.

At acting school we dreamed about being discovered by the Master, who was by then welcomed back from exile, while busy using words like my old drama teacher Svenne preferred instead. Progressive. Collective. My father once asked me if I didn't think I was too ugly to become an actress. He didn't mean it in a hurtful way, I told myself. He was thinking of glamorous movie stars. "Not at the theatre you don't," I told him. I'd be perfectly cast in one of Bergman's nightmares, though, except I'd probably shake like a leaf there too. Not a palm-leaf rustling with rosella-birds against the sharp sun, but a Swedish winter one, fallen, crumbled, disintegrated into nothing. It's all death, isn't it? Carefully surrounding you, cutting you into pieces.

I close my eyes and dare it to reappear. It doesn't.

Part Two:

INFERNO

En Dåres Försvarstal / A Fool's Apology

Pablo Picasso is dead and the Vietnam War ended. Henry Kissinger has won the Peace Prize and Abba the Eurovision Song Contest. In Svenstorp the World Famous Formula One Race was this year the most successful ever according to the Cigar, grinning winningly from the local paper. The evening papers reveal that the American president will have to resign because of a great scandal, and that a young girl has been murdered and cut to pieces in Norrland. A Träby student set fire to his parents' house on Lucia night and told the police the Devil told him to, and quite urgently too. Luckily a fire inspector living next door woke up and ran barefoot in the snow to alert the rest of the family; and he is now a local hero being interviewed on page 2: "*RESOURCEFUL FIREMAN DETECTS SMOKE.*" On the next page, children from the Rotary Club in Johanstorp are singing to pensioners, collecting money for a good deed, probably the local business community. And on one rainy evening in Grand Street—which I knew about before the paper, *the culprit* being a distant relative—a driver crashed into the back of a car while under the *influence*. It wasn't that the driver had been drinking that caused the biggest sensation but the fact that the car belonged to our hero of Svenstorp. Into the car of the Cigar he crashed, silly relative's son, and was promptly put in prison for a whole month, disgracing us all by *association*.

The Cigar had already bought a new Mercedes in which to inspect the races when the next big scandal took place, this time involving Sven-Åke's older brother and so crazy it made headlines not just in our local paper, but all around Sweden. We were really proud of our local paper then, because it was able to make a more sensational headline than the big papers from Stockholm. On the front page, in bold letters it declared: "*LOCAL BRIDE MARRIES IN SVENSTORP'S CHURCH UNDER POLICE ESCORT!*" Why? Sven-Åke's brother, that's why. It turned out that he had some sort of idea that the bride should have married him instead of the Italian immigrant pizza baker in the new restaurant that has opened in Träby serving the new sensation in the local area—which is now taking over sausage and mashed potatoes from the kiosk as preferred festive food. People flocked to the restaurant as if they'd been starving since the annual Christmas Smorgasbord Bash, as of course

did Pernilla, the unrequited love of Sven-Åke's brother, thus sealing her fate into history.

On the day of the wedding, Sven-Åke's brother kidnapped Pernilla into his car according to her, perhaps last-minute doubts, locals suggested: Could she really prefer a foreigner to a hardworking man from the great bogs of Svenstorp? And so on. But we all marvelled how lucky Pernilla was, kicking and screaming her way out of the car just outside Svenstorp on a small dirt track, where she promptly hitchhiked back with one of the elders from our congregation—the twin car mechanics' father, a farmer by the name of Börje and a sturdy man. Luckily he had been out in the woods making sure the lookout-towers were still standing and ready for the onslaught of businessmen playing hunters for the coming, annual week of moose hunting, hoping not to be shot at by mistake like last year. When Börje came thundering out of the bog discovering the girl standing there all upset *on her wedding day*, he made sure that not only did she make it to church on time, but he also called the police. With sirens blazing, the entire police-force arrived from Träby, all two of them—the police station next to the library in Svenstorp only being opened on Wednesdays and mainly for passports applications.

Sven-Åke's brother kept going. No one's seen him since. But if he ever were to return, I am sure someone will know someone who will give him a job. Even Börje thinks he deserves a second chance he was quoted as saying in an interview next to a blurry photo in our local paper—Sören being too shaken to focus the lens properly. Börje wasn't the slightest bit shaken; he looked as sturdy as ever in the photo, standing next to the lookout-tower with his rifle grimly pointing towards the place he found "the distraught bride." As Börje says, kidnapper or not, Sven-Åke's brother is a local son. Although the pizza baker has called Sven-Åke's mum and apparently told her what he will do if he ever turns up—and everyone knows how temperamental Italians are—so perhaps he'd better not.

I'm just saying—and I'm not referring to the local priest disgracing himself in the local sauna, because that is too slanderous to even contemplate. Considering all the events of late, was my walking out of church, and then into the Dance Parlour while I was at it, really such an enormous deal? The answer to my hopeful question from our congregation was a resounding Yes. So I had to keep going, what else could I do? I still don't understand what compelled me to choose the wrong side of the path of righteousness and by some mysterious force explore the unknown. My father

thinks TV has had a bad influence, giving me strange ideas from Stockholm, but there's no turning back now. Having once given in to temptation, I might as well keep going, ticking off the next big items on the List of Sins (except for card-playing, since I don't know the rules or where to go for such an event). I'm not saying it's a good defence. I just happened to see the new Strindberg's series on TV and the title made me think, that's all.

The Dance of Death

She comes towards me, bike shining and hair flying. The bike jolts as her front wheel stops so close to me that she would have run me over a breath later. She looks like she's being attacked by one of her migraines.

"Birgitta," I say smiling, "are you feeling well?"

There is something about the way she holds her head, chin up, eyes cast down from a great height, although I really am taller.

As always when feeling nervous, I start rambling. For some inexplicable reason I choose the most challenging tale I can find, a tale beating constantly inside me since last Saturday night that I now want to confess and receive her blessing. Perhaps I can't help myself, being, unlike most Svenstorpers, an optimist and believer of the powers of entertainment.

It's outside the library, my arms are heavy with bags filled to the brim. I haven't seen her all summer. I know people are talking, that's why my heart filled when I waved to her as she came down Grand Street and she suddenly made a decisive turn towards me. Although we're standing so close, she seems at a great distance, but she's hanging onto my every word as if taking notes. Her face grim and proper as I put down my bags and start my tale set in Träby in a new world of wonder, proclaiming: "You know, Birgitta, the Dance Parlour is just like our Midsummer dance in church!"

I try to sound convincing to the doubting face in front of me, but inside I know I'm exaggerating. The folkdances organised by my church once a year, when we dance around the May-pole—its giant flower balls dangling cheerfully from a great height—to the sound of cross-eyed Christian's accordion, really bears little comparison to Träby Dance Parlour last Saturday night where the heavy beat vibrated through the floor and sharp lights beamed from the ceiling, in a blast of colour and sound. But Birgitta has never been inside the venue, and stubbornly, I persist. I paint such a vivid picture for her I almost start believing in the comparison myself. I warm to the idea that I can somehow fuse profane dancing—that everyone knows is one of the great sins, along with drinking, swearing and card playing—with the innocent games of church summer activities. I try to picture the serious men from

the congregation with a new spirit and wildness in their step around the pole; the shriek of laughter louder among the movements to the traditional songs. I try to hold onto the fact that even *tant* Eivor and the elders will leap like frogs on the grass oval behind the church. The more I try, the more they turn stiff and stilted inside my head; it's like trying to compare the Salvation Army Band to Ballroom Blitz.

"I guess the music's different though," I admit reluctantly, my defence starting to unravel by the minute, Birgitta looking at me like I'm one of those Nazis trying to break into the monastery in *The Sound of Music*. In the tense silence that follows I add, "but I guess in terms of dancing styles, you'd have to say that in Träby there's a greater choice for the individual," sounding like a pamphlet for the Liberal Party my father regularly receives in the mail.

It's the truth. At the dance parlour you can dance anyway you want to! And you don't have to wait to be asked, you can just run to the dance floor and jump up and down, arms in air, and clumsily fall about, it doesn't matter. Only when it is a slow dance, I would sit down, trying to look like I needed a rest. Watching overweight and awkward-looking men transforming into soft giants, tenderly holding onto a woman in too-tight clothes and colourful heels, so garish a moment ago, now glowingly humming along, head resting on his shoulder. Couples who looked like they had practised since the parlour was built would make confident moves and unexpected twirls and steps; the rest just surrender to the slow rhythm, shuffling around, almost at a standstill. A few times I would feel a hand on my shoulder asking, "May I?" and it didn't matter what they looked like or if their hands were sweaty, when they led me onto the dance floor I would, swaying, be part of the rhythm. Surrender to the foreign bodies, smell of aftershave and something stronger reminding you of the musky smell hitting you when opening the garage door on a perfect summer day. You don't need to think or do anything—just be swallowed up by music, everyone twirling around you smiling. And while the music lasted we were all dignified; beautiful; together.

How hard I try to convince Birgitta that the few hours that I had spent in the forbidden palace of Träby, was not wasted in a place of evil, but a place of joy.

She still doesn't say a word.

So I try harder. I try to impress her with my new-found knowledge of how to flash an ID card and hold your thumb across the birth date past the security guard, and get a stamp on your hand. I show Birgitta the still-visible mark, explaining how

they give you a new colour each weekend so you can't go in twice on the same stamp.

"You're going again, then?"

Her voice is sharp, her nostrils flaring a little, as if breathing for the first time in a long time.

But I've saved a trump card. "Yes, and I might bring Nilla next week, she said she might come, she said she might!"

I shift my feet in front of the steely wired wheel. When Birgitta doesn't say anything, I suddenly think that she might feel excluded. Perhaps regretful that she would never in a million years dare to go, and hurt that I haven't confided in her before. So I lean forward and tell her: "You know I actually met someone!"

"You what?"

"You know, a boy! He kissed me!"

It was, it has to be said, unexpected. The last dance of the night. A tall boy in a suit and tie with a *snus*-box sticking out of the pocket. Halfway through the song, he had suddenly stuck his tongue inside my mouth and twirled it around. I was so surprised I didn't know what to do. He smelt of turpentine and it was all strangely hard and wet and over in a flash. When the dance was over, he let go of me without a word. But he left an ever-present print inside my mouth. I can feel it even now as I speak to Birgitta and I blush a little.

"You let a boy kiss you? And now you're going to persuade Nilla to come with you and destroy her too?"

Not until now do I realise what serious trouble I'm in.

"Well, maybe," I mutter, "She wasn't sure."

At least Nilla found it interesting to hear about the Dance Parlour, I think guiltily.

"You know my parents warned me about you. They always thought you were strange. Something not quite right about that girl they told me. But they also believe in being good Christians and setting a good example. So we put up with you. Always coming home to us and putting on a show, trying to be funny. So *exaggerated!* So *over the top* compared to normal people!"

Her breathing is heavy as she moves closer; her perfect nails shimmering firmly on the handles:

"You really take the cake, Christina! You know that? You run out in the middle of the confirmation ceremony, embarrassing everyone, not thinking for one moment

about anyone else but yourself, leaving us all distressed, my mother almost *cried* on the way home. Yet her main concern was for you. And your *poor, poor* family. You spoil the biggest day of our lives with your silly, stupid antics and now you think I want to hear about you and your ... *sordid* ... new life away from Jesus as if nothing's happened. Boasting about trying to ruin Nilla too! Well, I'm not going to stand around listening to your filth any longer!"

Gravel spurts up as she turns her bike and sets off, as I stand there frozen, looking at the whirling dust. I shouldn't have told her about the boy kissing me; I haven't got my head around that myself, really. I had been taken by surprise.

How quickly she is gone. How well she teaches me a lesson, hand delivered from her whole family.

It's not the lost friendship I mourn, as I slowly turn around from the sign with opening times at the library I've dumbly been staring at for the last minutes: It's the image of her parents laughing at my jokes around their dinner table; how eagerly I lapped it up.

As I finally start moving, making my way up the hill, my bags feel heavy, filled with too many books as usual. Exaggerated and over the top like the person carrying them, who, unlike most Svenstorpers, stupidly remains an open book, filled with anecdotes people pretend to find amusing.

The Road to the Morgue

It is three days to my father's funeral and pitch black as Anita and I once again start our early morning walk. This time we're both quiet as we make our way up a dirt road on the outskirts of Svenstorp, her Russian fur-hat a sombre outline ahead of me. Sometimes, Anita reminds me of Sue. Maybe it's their authority, the certainty with which they seem to move forward, with, or without, Jesus.

I don't know why Sue took me in. She was the only one of Mark's friends who ever spoke to me. Most of them were so busy with him, only giving me the occasional surprised and irritated glance now and then, as if an oversized child had somehow made its way into the room among the serious conversations about the state of the Australian film industry. Sue was from Melbourne, and would only occasionally come up to Sydney. But when she did, she would actually talk to me as I tried to make froth from the confusing cappuccino maker in the kitchen. Just ordinary things like the weather or about something she'd seen in a shop window in Newtown on her way over, but in a humorous way. She didn't make me feel silly or startled. I would even make a couple of jokes with her. She's a large woman, Sue, with big eyes and equally enormous pair of earrings usually dangling around her friendly face. We would have a bit of a chat, and it seemed to both amuse and annoy Mark. He'd pop his head in and ask Sue where she had disappeared to, as if he'd find it surprising that she'd stop by my hideout in the kitchen. She'd talk to him differently too. Without the usual fawning. Almost dismissive at times, like he was a little boy not to be taken too seriously. And he responded. Became less edgy, started to joke again, almost looking at me affectionately, the way he used to.

I remember once, Mark and his friends were sitting in the courtyard lazily spread out, some leaning against the palm tree, jasmine and smoke filling the air. They were discussing their future in the Arts, both grand and bitter visions, hidden behind a laid-back, laconic attitude of "we don't really care."

"What about you, what do you want?" Sue unexpectedly leaned towards me, smiling. A sharp silence descended. I suddenly remembered having listened to two girls walking down King Street ahead of me earlier that day. One of the girls had

been telling a story to the other one, who kept replying emphatically, “But that’s outrageous, outraaageous” in a lazy, long-drawn-out drawl. She sounded both admiring and impressed, as was I with this was new and a lovely word, and now shaped hesitantly in my mouth: “*Out-outraaageous*,” I said: “I’d like to live *out-rageous-ly*.” There was a sound of sneering around me as if I had said something breathtakingly stupid. But Mark looked at me across the courtyard, a look of softness across his face. *Tenderly*, I thought, trying out yet another new word inside me: *he’s looking at her tenderly*.

Sue is a screen writer and spends most of her time in a shared writers’ space in St. Kilda somewhere. Her current project is an intense probe into Australian identity. They are very into that, Australians: Who they really are, since they weren’t there first. She’s endlessly discussing film with her friends on the phone, about other peoples’ scripts and funding process, and how bad it’s all run anyway. Like Mark, she comes from a wealthy background. She writes episodes for the occasional “soap” to make money, she says. But you don’t own a flat like hers without some money behind you, I realise that.

It’s a bit of a blur, those first few days after Mark’s and my disastrous getaway to Daylesford. But somehow I found myself in Sue’s flat in Melbourne afterwards. I remember how she almost made it out that I was doing her a favour if I stayed for a couple of days at her place, looking after her dog Caesar while she was away at a conference in Brisbane. I loved her flat from the moment I stepped into it, it made me think of an icecream cone. So now she amusedly refers to it as the Cone too, the block of flats between Elwood and Brighton, down by the water. Most of the houses along the walk are extravagant grey concrete squares, but in between two of them a cream-coloured Art Deco building delightfully sticks up, a fluffy, curved cone in the middle, her two bedroom-flat the soft filling, I suppose.

When she came back from the conference she offered to let me stay. She had to leave for London for an extended period, and she would be so grateful if I could mind the flat and the dog and so on. I don’t know if Mark asked her to help me out. But on my third day in Sue’s flat, a suitcase with my clothes and belongings was waiting for me when I arrived back from the beach with Caesar.

Out of shape and breathless, I started walking Caesar between Elwood beach and Brighton Yacht Club every day. I usually don’t get much farther than that, only

occasionally reaching the colourful bathing boxes or towards the rise close to St Kilda. Overweight and annoyed with other dogs, Caesar reluctantly walks beside me until he has had enough, then he just lies down and won't budge. Sometimes I take him to the dog beach too, but not too often. He's not keen on swimming. And the friendly owners of the other dogs sometimes overwhelm me. Even though the warmth is directed at Caesar, I have found myself wanting to burst into tears. So we stick to the pathway mostly; we watch the shoreline far away and families fishing on the pier. Joggers huff and older ladies saunter past, equipped with big hats and husbands in shorts and knee-high socks. They stretch out their sun-freckled hands with all the time in the world to pat an old dog. Women with sunglasses and determined bodies discuss house extensions and absent friends. Children are everywhere, their soft bodies running towards mothers handing out sandwiches from the temporary beach tents, or shouting fathers with cricket bats. You hear many different languages. A lot of carefree-looking Europeans with too much sun on their faces and colourful T-shirts with humorous messages, as if surprised to find themselves here, on the other side of the world, away from grey skies and coats, huddling in the wind. I guess we are all surprised. Young Japanese couples giggling at all things strange take photos on the pier, sometimes they ask me to take a photo of them. We all seem to share a similar look of delight as if having been paid to take part in a commercial for the *Australian Way of Life*, or "*Best Country in the World, Mate!*" Now and then a familiar sound hurls its way through. The sound of Swedish usually comes with exclamation marks at the end too. And I walk on as if in secret, as if I belong.

When I got a bit stronger, Sue suddenly knew someone who needed someone at the library in Bentleigh, a few suburbs away. It was only part time, but it was just right, as if she knew the smell of books would help me. I realised I had stopped reading but now I started to fill up bags before returning home at night.

The work is easy; mainly shelving and helping serious-looking women find a certain book from the neighbouring libraries when there's a mad rush because it's been chosen by their book club. Otherwise the customers are mainly pensioners reading the papers and hassled mums running after their children down the aisles. I watch smiling, as I carefully put the books back on the shelves from the trolley, sometimes giving them an encouraging pat on the way—the books, not the

customers. They even have a few Swedish books. Detective stories with a social conscience mainly, set in grey winters where hideous crimes are committed.

In the afternoon I take the train and bus back to Elwood, and Caesar will be waiting at the door for me. He's lost weight since I moved in with Sue, his fur is shining, his tail wagging.

Sue had already left for London when I received the phone call from Anita about Dad dying. My first thought was, what about Caesar? As usual Sue received the news with her usual calmness. She guessed I didn't have the money for the fare either. As I, per instruction, took Caesar to her surprisingly small mother in Toorak after assuring Sue I'd be back in two weeks, her mother greeted me with a cheque. She took me in for a cup of tea in her enormous kitchen and talked about Sue as if she were a madcap artist living in "that little flat of hers." It was all a hoot for her, Sue's accessories: Caesar, the flat and me. She hugged me and called me Darling and I could feel the tears rising from all the friendly attention. I left as quickly as I could. After kisses on the cheek and promises to pop in for a cuppa when I came back, as if you'd randomly pass by her mansion-sized home now and then, when it in fact involves a bus, train and tram fare from Elwood. She made me promise I would come with her next year to "the absolutely gorgeous Annual Christmas bazaar in the Swedish Church, just down the road, Darling," before she let me go.

I walked by the beach by myself a final time that night and bumped into two of Mark's friends from Sydney. They knew that I was living with Sue but after a few embarrassed silences and attempts to conversation, they didn't seem very interested in my new career in Bentleigh. I did mention another new word—recovery—relieved, they continued down the walk after much exaggerated waving, sarongs swaying and sunglasses shining. I went upstairs and packed for Sweden after reading a card expressing *Our Deepest Sympathy* from the library and realised I hadn't had a drink in four months.

Anita and I have slowly walked a circle around Svenstorp, and now her Russian hat once again points towards the cemetery. Outside the morgue, the light is lit, as Anita said it would. The funeral director is pacing up and down to keep warm, looking irritated from a distance, but when he spots us coming towards him, he strikes a concerned pose and pulls in his not-insubstantial stomach. He shakes my hand thoroughly.

“*Hej*, Sven-Ingvar Svensson’s the name, *hej, hej!* Sorry about your loss,” he continues gravely, yet somehow enthusiastically. “Well, she’s certainly come a long way to bury her father,” he announces, “Trip all right?” He finally lets go of my hand and exclaims: “I’ve always wanted to go to Australia! Even as a young lad! What an adventure, eh? Better climate there than here I bet!” He sweeps his hand against the watery sky, and then takes a step closer, scrutinises me closely. “Look how much colour she’s got on her face, eh? Eh?” He turns to Anita for confirmation. “Shouldn’t be standing here chatting away,” he then rebukes himself, “anxious to see her ... father, eh? I took the ... liberty to light some candles inside.” He adds in confidence, “Put the Bible in there too in case she wants to ... say a few words to mark the occasion. *Ja, ja,*” he finally concludes, “off she goes then!”

“Do you want me to come inside?” Anita asks, “Unless you really need me to I won’t. I saw him the day he died, that’s enough for me.”

“No, that’s fine,” I nod to her, and leave the two of them outside eagerly discussing the funeral details.

“Excellent choice of hymn, if I may say so,” I hear Sven-Ingvar say before I close the door behind me, “eh, and so soothing!”

The coffin is tastefully chosen in a polished dark-brown finish. Inside, it’s silky white. He is dressed in a white robe. Like an angel, I think. His face is turned upward. There is an expression of surprise on him, as if he’s been caught unawares, as if he’s thinking, What, Now? Like this? His face looks eager to explain something to me, fighting with a childish triumphant look of “I knew it!”

I don’t think anyone else knows that we were just managing to get a little closer of late; we had taken to calling each other regularly. He seemed to be interested in all the small details of my life, things other people might find boring: of what I had eaten for dinner, my work schedule, how I had helped Sue paint one of the rooms in her flat. He never once asked me about Mark. He seemed almost relieved, in fact, especially that I’d finally got a “proper” job.

I don’t know what to say Dad, I think; I can hardly quote the Bible at you, can I? A memory of an old prayer from my childhood suddenly comes to me, a prayer he sometimes told me at night, when I had a nightmare or found it hard to breathe. I used to be able to picture it so clearly inside my head:

*Det går en ängel kring vårt hus / Han bär på två förgyllda ljus
En bok han bär uti sin hand / Nu somnar jag i Jesu namn*

The white-robed angel walking with his golden candles and white, feathery wings, carrying his book, protecting our house. Drowsily, I would follow him as he walked across our garden, around our swing, past the blackcurrant bushes and down the steps to Alley Road: "Amen," I say gently. But as I finish my prayer, I happen to rub against my father's arm. It's icy cold; his arm turned into a frozen bloc of ice. He is dead; I should be mourning him. But it's not of his death his cold arm reminds me; it's of a tiny hand deserted in another morgue.

"You see," I lean over and whisper, no, almost spit, down to my Angel-father: "I never held her, Dad, not once! They asked me at the hospital and I really wanted to, but the truth is I was too scared. And now it's too late."

My father's eyes are open as I stand there panting, like a bloody dog. Mysteriously he looks out into a space beyond me. Prepared now for the cold, I pat him awkwardly on the foot and leave him in his icy white environment.

"How very interesting," I hear Anita say as I step outside. Sven-Ingvar is eagerly nodding to her. "Another thing I couldn't help notice," she continues, "was the keyhole on the side of the coffin. Do you lock it?"

"Indeed we do," Sven-Ingvar replies, "we lock all our coffins. For security reasons," he adds importantly.

"Of course," Anita nods eagerly. "And, do you have different locks or does one key fit all?"

The latter was indeed the case, Sven-Ingvar admits. Sensing me, they turn around at the same time.

"All done," Anita asks me, surprisingly gently.

"All done," I answer.

"Well, I'd better pop inside and lock up then," Sven-Ingvar says, and swings his keys importantly. "You have to say, though," he adds to Anita, "if one could choose, you'd choose a death like your father's! Just like that, eh!" He looks at her wistfully.

"You know," Anita says as we leave the cemetery, "I think I'd make a good undertaker. Wouldn't that be fascinating? And I'd have the necessary people skills."

"You're offering your social skills to the dead?" I stir her.

"Oh, don't be silly!" she snaps.

Inside the flower shop, people look at us curiously from a distance, a few nodding in recognition to Anita, too shy to come forward, guessing my identity in my too-light coat and shoes, perhaps.

We need to decide what to put on the wreath.

“Since Lotta’s not here we’ll just have to do it ourselves,” Anita says firmly.

The flower shop proprietor—Sven-Åke’s old aunt—discreetly hands us a book with suggestions. “Sorry about you father,” she murmurs sincerely, “Such a wonderful man. But I have to say,” she adds in line with the general opinion, “what a way to go, eh, what a wonderful way to die.”

“We’re delirious,” I mutter.

There are many thoughtful suggestions in the book; message upon message; page after page, and after a while they all start to sound hollow, sickly. Anita suddenly points to the shortest message of them all in the book: “*Why?*” It says. “Why not,” I mutter irritated, shoving Anita in the side, adding an intense “eh?” close up to Anita’s face: “Better climate there than here I bet!” Pleased to catch her off-guard, we both start laughing so hysterically we have to walk out of the shop.

“I really miss Mum,” Anita says as we try to calm down outside. “I mean it’s very sad with Dad and everything. But Mum, you know, she was my best friend, always there for you.”

“She could be quite distant too, don’t you think?” I reply, surprised how defensive I sound, “always longing for something else, something that wasn’t us.”

For once Anita looks confused as if we are talking about two different people.

“Dad couldn’t believe his luck, though,” I add quickly. He once told me how he used to ride past Åsa on his way to the factory in Svenstorp and admire the beautiful house on top of the hill. “Little did I know,” he said, “that I would once be welcomed inside and marry one of the daughters. Can you believe my luck: to meet Lisa and that she would have me?”

“No,” Anita says, surprised, “he never told me that. A lucky guy it seems,” she adds, “in both life and death.”

We return calmly inside the shop and order flowers, choosing a simple message: *In grateful memory of our father: Anita, Christina and Charlotta, and families.*

Not that I have one, I think.

We spend the afternoon in Dad's flat, sorting out drawers from his chiffonier. Newspaper clippings from the local paper—almost as religiously read as the Bible around here—which he seems to have saved for many decades: the ones of significance to the church, him personally and the community, in that order. There are Sunday school celebrations where I can sometimes be spotted in the crowd, dancing around the Christmas tree, or in *fru* Herring's youth choir in the back row, my face unbearably eager, wearing a bold dress and short hair. I always liked colourful clothes but vainly dreamt of long hair, so I wouldn't, as sometimes happened, be mistaken for Lotta's strange-looking brother. Inaugurations of different pastors, including a grinning Pastor Herring; Lotta posing with a group of scouts, a skinny, sombre figure among smiling faces; the Crown Prince cutting the ribbon at The Svenstorp Grand Prix. There are family photographs too, all mixed together in no special order. Our father in a uniform during World War II at the Norwegian border, waiting for the Germans who mercifully never arrived, not unauthorised anyway, and then seemingly only to hand my father a multitude of stories to bore us silly with. The grim times leisurely defeated by our mother, dressed up in a bathing suit or pretty summer dress, laughing with friends. A few images of Dad's old home and farmlands with unknown relatives in tiny, merry dots on the veranda; all of them mixed together in a big bundle with no reference to time or place. The past presented and laid out to us in the shape of faded Kodak images in both colour and black and white—the good shots probably taken by Auntie Gertrude—and yellowing paper clippings.

I watch my sister scrutinizing the pictures. Her face looks soft and relaxed, as she holds up her own image which is constantly changing: Hippie-Anita photographed with the People of Jesus singing outside the grocery store, Political-Anita in Palestine shawl collecting money for some cause on Grand Street, Pious-Anita reading a Bible text at some meeting and further back in time propped up in a pram pushed by a smiling grandmother.

We have already cleaned out the wardrobe, which didn't take long. His clothes now lay neatly in piles on his old bed, some which will go straight into the bin: old underwear already in pieces, greying singlets beyond help and old mended socks. The rest, a few nice jumpers and shirts that he received on birthdays and old suits for church, is in the pile for giving away. His other belongings are modest; it won't take long to sort out the frugal lifestyle that was my father's, ever since Mum died. We've

worked effectively until now, helping ourselves to some leftover non-alcoholic cider from his fridge while indulging in memories, when our younger sister suddenly appears in the doorway.

I never know how to react to Lotta. If Anita makes me feel inadequate—a light piece of feather compared to a doona quilt on a properly aired and straightened out bed—it’s nothing compared to what Lotta does. I was starting to relax, yielding to Anita and her family’s rhythm, now I’m thrown once again, not sure where to stand or how. A part of me wants to protect her from everything harmful out there and hold her; but the other part wins: the one holding back and watching anxiously, determined to tread carefully, hoping not to upset her.

She always seems so fragile and yet she has taken it upon herself to carry the burdens of others, to be useful and take responsibility, while I have been running away as quickly as I possibly can at all such words— and once I stopped running, what a mess that turned out to be. She works as a social worker in one of the most vulnerable communities in a high-rise, ghostly ghetto. In a suburb of Gothenburg of the kind concerned inner-city citizens write angry letters about to the papers. High-rise buildings with refugees and other members not doing so great in the otherwise so proudly socially advanced society. “We need better *integration* policies,” already well-integrated citizens demand, officiously adding, “this is Sweden, after all!”

Meanwhile, Lotta and her colleagues go about their daily business, attending to horrors that I really don’t think she’s cut out for: child abuse, substance abuse, you name it, and she does, if she catches you, complain about trivialities. Hesitantly I stand at the edge of the couch, smiling. She’s looking thin and withdrawn. But I have learnt better than to give into my optimistic impulses and talk about change like I once did in eager phone calls across the seas. Follow your dreams, I might have even said once, but that was surely a long time ago. It is, as she pointed out, easy for me to say, who, like old Auntie Gertrude, never looked after any other people’s needs but my own.

To my surprise, when I finally stop procrastinating and manage a hello, she starts crying.

“It’s great to see you, Cia.” She hasn’t called me that in a long time.

Awkwardly I stand there, until Anita sternly reminds us of our duties and we resume our packing. But when she comes across a drawer with wedding photos we continue staring into our past. We laugh a little at our father in tails and longingly

sigh at our mother in a simple but elegantly cut wedding dress, emerging from the old Mission Church in the 1950s. Behind them, on the church steps, Gertrude's stern face can be seen, holding on to our grandmother Ester. In the photograph, Ester is smiling, but glancing sideways, as if looking at a parallel scene, unseen by the camera. We all agree how beautiful she looks in the photograph, how much she looks like Lotta. Apparently she had so many proposals after our grandfather's early death, according to Anita—she would have been quite a catch being a wealthy widow and with her looks, but she wouldn't have a bar of it, always saying that she could manage very well on her own thank you very much, and no one could ever replace their father by miles anyway.

Our own father is beaming solo in a top hat on the next photograph. It's a refreshing change. In photographs from his younger days he looks so unbearably sombre. The later ones, of the now quite-well-to-do shop owner and family man show off a still serious yet somewhat amused expression. Piercing eyes, which don't seem to miss anything, scrutinising us, but surprisingly kindly.

Anita turns to me and exclaims: "You look so much like him! Don't you think?" She turns to our sister.

Lotta looks at me thoughtfully, "Perhaps."

Then Anita decides it's finally time to call it a day. Obediently we follow her back to our old home. As I watch my step on the icy path, I think of how I always picture my father in his car, his face a disappointed shadow behind the glass as he used to wait for me outside the Dance Parlour.

My Father's Grieving

He drives between Svenstorp and Träby, dark pine trees and marsh-like bog surrounding him, in a proper woollen coat and firm face.

Approaching the outskirts of Träby, he solemnly looks at the variety of cars parked outside the rubber factory, the nightshift having started many hours ago. Smoke is industriously spurting out of the towering chimneys into the night.

He parks discreetly a few streets away from the main road, so that he has full view, but so that no one will notice him. His hands rest stiffly on the steering wheel for a moment, feeling the bleak dampness outside. Then he turns on the little radio inside the car and listens to late-night devotion. Am I to blame, he asks himself in the presence of the soothing voice from the radio: where did I go wrong? Sometimes he believes it's a test. So much good fortune has been handed to him undeservedly and now God wants to test his faith.

Unlike Abraham with Isaac, he held me at the altar and into the arms of God to protect, not to sacrifice. He has brought me up in His faith, but like a lost sheep, I have chosen to run away from His safe arms and gone astray in Träby, questioning the only thing that has sustained him while he, powerless, watches. But the Good Shepherd, he hopes, will eventually find me and I will come to my senses.

A Seeker, he thinks: Christina has become a Seeker. He has thus put me in the same category where so many others flounder. A Seeker includes anyone who questions the true word of the Lord spread from the pulpit every Sunday, or worse: their OWN idea about what life might be all about. They are many and that's what's wrong with Sweden, this new and modern Sweden where there's not much room for God among the increasing hunger for TV sets and other such worldly goods. But they are all searching, aren't they, these lost sheep of Sweden, and he feels both sad and annoyed with them by turn. He is an expert at spotting them; the TV is filled with them. It's astounding how much room they take up, although with the majority of them being from the Capital of Sin perhaps it shouldn't come as a surprise.

Palme's socialist treasurer sneers at the Moderates during the election debate: "Well, I'm not a religious man, but seeing your economic plans for the future of the workers of Sweden, one almost feels the urge to pray!"

“A Seeker!” he triumphantly cries from his armchair, adding bracingly: “Poor man! No worldly power, not even the mighty labour union, L.O., can save him on Judgement Day, you know!”

On the news, a famous actor looks soulfully into the camera before opening night at The Royal Theatre. “Strindberg is essentially, you know, confronting ... the terror of a godless, remorseless universe.”

Scoffing from the armchair, he gives his verdict.

The female gardener says on radio, replying to a letter from a concerned listener: “Well, I’m not a Believer, but when you see this special rose reborn after a good fertiliser, one almost feels as if the Creator himself had a hand in the end result!”

Patiently this time, as if talking about a child, my father beams at his family, “That lady is a Seeker, but she won’t find what she is looking for in her garden!”

All those Seekers, who in their state of ignorance express such ill-conceived views, are to be pitied, or condemned if arrogant. It’s better than being a Denier, though. My father doesn’t dare to think I might become one of them. A Seeker still has some hope. Because a Seeker is, of course, anyone who has not found yet; Jesus himself has told us so. A Seeker might just have been looking in the wrong direction for answers— such as a political party or some other kind of hollow entertainment— but as long as they keep looking they might eventually find true joy, the way he did, when going along to a revival meeting in the old Mission Church all those years ago. Luck then followed upon luck.

First he met my mother. At a festive gathering of the Swedish Missionary Society, the men were to pick a shoe from a big pile outside the door, and then find the matching pair and hence the lady to whom it belonged, and escort her to the table. “I picked the largest one I could find!” he would tell us children in a burst of light-heartedness that came upon him at unexpected moments: “It turned out to belong to your mother!” (How relieved we were: For a brief moment, we would imagine him picking *tant* Eivor’s sturdy beige shoe or some other terrifying prospect for a mother.) Not only was he invited home to the grandest house in the area, he discovered an ambition and daring he never knew he possessed when Lisa accepted his proposal. From painting metal beds in a factory, living with his sisters in the poky flat above the local government office the social services had provided, he became the owner of his own home and business.

He's not rich. He's not even successful by Svenstorp standards. But he has more than he ever expected: a decent and respectable life, a wife he loves and admires and— here he hesitates a little— three daughters to be proud of.

No son of course. Sometimes he likes to think of the child that never came to be, the lost one, as the son. Imagines how he would have taught him about the shop; shown him the ropes. After him, I came instead. Like me, he used to say, you're more like me than the others, adding, as if dispelling a curse: "But thankfully you have your mother's mind. You got such a good head for studies that you could become somebody important one day, like a teacher, or a pastor even!"

Gifts that were now dispersed so recklessly, along with opportunities he never had. But as the old revival song goes: "*Prövningar vi möta få*"—trials from the Good Lord is part of the deal. He has certainly sent him one now. One moment I'm leading the sermon on a Sunday, the next there are condolences from the congregation. He understands their concern, not only about my wellbeing, but also about the influence I might have over my peers. At the last elders' meeting he was excused before the final item on the agenda, "*Family matters among our congregation.*" He has always had to fight the urge to feel like the pauper. What's the Swedish saying? A cat amongst ermines, that's him. And now his humble pride in being part of the inner circle in the mighty church, even assisting with the Holy Sacrament, has increasingly become a burden and anxiety.

"It's probably easier for all involved if you leave, don't you think, Konrad? So we can discuss this delicate matter in a forthright manner," Pastor Herring had said, finishing off his dismissal with a dazzling smile: "But I can assure you, your family is very much in our prayers in these ... difficult and trying times."

Like somebody's died, he had thought. Humiliated he had left through the back door, sneaking out like a thief, fumbling with his coat down the stairs and out into the cold night.

I don't care much for Pastor Herring, he admits to himself in the darkness now: I find his sermons too fancy.

His faith is like that of a child's, and he prefers the tidings from God like that too, sincere but simple, without any fanfare: The comforting sound of hymns; the biblical stories about the Good Shepherd and the seeker quenching his thirst in the well; the consolation and miracle of being saved, which gives us all hope on Earth; and at this

moment, the particularly edifying message of the prodigal son returning back to his father's home once again.

One Sunday he found himself comparing Pastor Herring's sermon to the futile enterprise known as the theatre, thinking, "But he looks an actor in a show!" All the pastors before Herring he had trusted with all his might: A pastor, especially from the Mission Church, was the harbinger of truth. He has tried to erase those kinds of thoughts about his pastor, yet here they are again.

Maybe Pastor Herring is a test too.

All this and more he has time to think about when he sits in the bitterly cold night, and waits for me to finally tumble out of the parlour.

Out of the Palace of Sin I'll come, stinking of tobacco and spirits, just like his father once did. He will be parked further up; where he thinks no one can see him. By the time I reach the car I will be furious. At him. And his morose expression.

He will open the carefully locked door, reluctantly letting me and the chilly wind in with a look of "When I was your age I had to provide for my whole family, or what was left of it anyway." With a strange smile he will once again name the place where I have been: The Palace of the Devil.

"It's not, Dad," I'll protest, but I can feel it, his sorrow and my sordidness. I'll pretend it doesn't matter. I might even turn it into a joke for my new friends in school: "Guess what the old man calls the Dance Parlour?" And we will laugh, but I know it's not funny. Not for him, who never sleeps. Like a guard dog, he will wait for me in the doorway in his pyjamas and unyielding face when I come home in a taxi, trying to save him from having to pick me up. He will tell me that my mother can't sleep from all the worrying before he lets me in. And there is always that moment when I'm not sure whether he will.

My father is as predictable as the precious clocks he keeps winding up according to a special roster, as predictable as breakfast: two cups of coffee and two slices of coarse bread, one with liver paste, the other cheese, while he carefully attends to the local paper. Painfully slowly, occasionally stumbling over a difficult word, he'll share highlights, especially indignant letters to the editor on moral issues:

"Distasteful Propaganda in Local Café"

Upon visiting the café at the new indoor swimming pool facility in Träby for the first time, I was unfortunate enough to bear witness to the sight of the proprietor wearing an apron with the words "Beer Tastes Good!" printed across his chest.

One immediately wonders how the local council could permit such outrage. Surely, when it is more vital than ever to teach the youth of today the benefits of a temperate life style, a slogan of "Milk Tastes Good" or other such choice of the variety of non-alcoholic drinks available would send a more suitable message?

Signed "Friend of Temperance"

My father has worked so hard all his life; all the responsibilities he has had to carry. I should be grateful for all that has been given to me. Free of charge. Not frivolously throw away everything—and now he will repeat himself—he has worked so hard although I never asked him to. Life is not just about having fun, he informs me: *"Man kan inte ha roligt jämt!"*

I intend to prove him wrong.

*

The wind bites in the late evening as I remember how we drove home in silence; his frozen face.

Too late now.

On the Other Side

It is two days to my father's funeral when I find myself in a shop in Träby looking for a skirt to wear for the funeral. The shop assistant is handing out advice on the latest trends, as if Träby's the fashion capital of the world, tipping me about "a big frill at the hem being an absolute must the coming spring."

"I just need something warmer," I say, adding, "I left my skirts in Australia, too hot for woollen skirts there." She's not the least impressed, just looks irritated as I disappear behind the too-small curtain and break out into a sweat as always when trying things on, my body all wrong with frills in the wrong places, too much lifeless sack and elongated tree to squeeze into her trendy suggestions.

I'm already humiliated, having had to borrow money from Lotta who seems to disapprove of me more than Anita nowadays, the latter explaining I had to wear something decent for the funeral, and angry with myself for allowing them to set all the rules.

"Don't you have any money?" Lotta looked incredulously at me earlier this morning, eventually handing me a couple of hundred kronor after promises of sending them back to her, the flexi-teller card useless here.

"You will?" she asked, the smile of a superior. Yet, she doesn't look well, all pale and gloomy, too young to cope with both our parents dead, our old parents who had us all so late. The frill-skirt makes me look like a compressed cone, it's stretching over my thighs, overflowing with soft filling, but I take it anyway. I'll only wear it once, I think, furiously walking down the familiar main street of Träby towards the bus.

It's a grey winter's day, there's the smell of approaching rain in the blackening sky. Outside the Dance Parlour there are still promises posted of dance bands for coming weekends, but it also seems to serve as a restaurant and pub now, cheery lunch-specials printed on the noticeboard next to the entrance. I'm not after a meal though.

Lotta's never been a member of the church, I suddenly think bitterly, somehow she was free of this bind, free to criticise and blend in any way she apparently wanted to.

I remember something she said at Mum's Wake. A distant cousin, Johan, had turned up at the funeral. He was home temporarily from Spain, where he was living with a man, rumour had it—after he had been forced to leave his position as a youth leader for a close-by church due to his “inappropriate life style.” Lotta, observing the suntanned, anxiously smiling face at the Wake whispered to me, “How far do you need to travel to be able to be yourself?”

“Not far at all, Lotta,” I mutter to myself, tears suddenly about to hit me: only to bloody Träby, to become the person hiding in shame in Svenstorp.

I'm about to enter the Promised Land when a familiar figure makes his way towards the entrance. He seems too caught up in conversation to take any notice of the person standing beneath the notice board. I recognise him even though he looks so different, his face relaxed beneath the woollen hat displaying the local ice-hockey team logo, loudly discussing the suspension of the pram he's pushing with the woman folding up an umbrella next to him. There's no way I'm going in there now, I think, and sneak off to the parkland beside me. Saved by him! There's no smell of vomit or drunken teenagers now in the frozen park surrounding what was once the centre of my world: The Parlour—and him.

*

Inside the Dance Parlour in Träby or outside in the parking lot; behind the park or further away inside bog-lands and woods so close to Svenstorp, a new life has begun! Together with the high-status Träby youth ice-hockey team who are somehow able to get hold of a bottle of Explorer vodka or a home-stilled variety and share it with admiring fans. Since it isn't permitted to drink inside the Dance Parlour there are usually more people outside: men parked in cars or on the parking lot boasting and laughing to the rustle of plastic bags, and girls crying in bushes about some boy, sweet cherry wine being gulped down.

Some joker will have too much and lie down for a rest in the park: admiring the stars in the sky and the tar of the streets of Träby. Abruptly woken up by a sudden burst of rain or a dog with a sneering person at the other end of the leash—also carrying a plastic bag but for a different purpose. At last managing to stand up and throw up in one of the bushes, the new corduroy pants have mysterious new stains—following another sneer from the dog owner and mutterings about “bunching them

all together and sending them to bloody Soviet Union, *för fan*, bloody oath, and learning about hard labour, the snotty brats,” before taking off. By then it will be one in the morning and time to stumble inside the parlour to straighten up and clean the face in one of the busy toilets, as well as the mysterious stains, but not before having witnessed a much prettier friend kissing the star of the hockey team in a corner, and finally, reluctantly, head towards the car waiting further up the road.

Träby is a different universe. A sin-free, magic world of Musts instead of Must Nots! Drinking spreads a warm glow of confidence and hilarity in everyone, including me. Smoking is a Must too and makes the roof-tops spin. The only anxious Must—and here I feel like whispering like my mother when tiptoeing nervously around in the bathroom after hearing my calls for help, looking for a packet playfully hiding behind some towels which she finally, red-faced, handed to me with a whisper, “You’ve got your ... *period* ... Christina.” In Träby no one seems to have heard about the-you-Must-wait-til-you’re-married business, and I realise how completely behind the times I’ve been by living in Svenstorp. I suddenly have friends who have all DONE it and are already on the pill, the school nurse handing them out or *their mothers* taking them to the doctor saying, “I think my daughter needs to go on the pill.” Just like that. It just blows you away, these new winds from Träby. Our doctor, of course, belongs to the Mission Church. Such a learned man, according to my father—he’s so impressed, he gives him a kilo of the matured cheese he keeps in the cellar all autumn to be handed out to very special people at Christmas. Imagine my mother asking *him*, or any one else in the medical profession for that matter, for a packet of those *pills*! But if I want to be part of the in-crowd of Träby I can’t just hang around telling jokes in the long run. They all think I’m a bit of a novelty now, a kind of mascot from Svenstorp who doesn’t know anything about anything and how hilarious that is, but that can’t last for ever.

This is where Björn so handily turns up, seemingly ready to oblige with almost anything— except a conversation perhaps. The very same boy who so surprisingly kissed me on my first night at the Dance Parlour! Like a magic drink, he suddenly appears at a Before Party (a party before the Dance Parlour so you can get drunk in comfort of somebody’s home, and a really upbeat event in contrast to the After Party, which is usually a subdued and sleepy affair with sad songs and people crying, alternatively making out with someone left over). It turns out he is a defence player on the hockey team and probably used to dealing with things coming unexpectedly

his way. I don't see him at first; I'm busy sitting on the couch telling a hilarious story to two scary girls made up in the latest fashion. Lena, one of the most popular girls among the whole ice-hockey team's got so much foundation on, it looks like she's wearing a mask and I almost expect her to tear it off any minute and scream, "Surprise!" Instead she suddenly leans over very closely—her spiky hair so heavy with hairspray she looks like a startled hedgehog—and sneers: "Hey, Chris, it's Chris, isn't it? Somebody's *looking* at you!" When I, surprised, turn around to Lena's laughter, I recognise him straight away. With half a bottle of vodka inside me, I make the steps up to him dramatic and over the top, and am rewarded with another laugh from the couch.

He just stares at me when I make my move, his bulging lip stuffed with *snus* perhaps making him gape a bit wider. After an awkward minute, he nods as if suddenly remembering, and without a word escorts me back to the couch where he looks deep inside his plastic bag and brings out a bottle, offering me some. Then he's suddenly holding his arm around my shoulders, smelling more of Bacardi and Rum and getting friendlier as the night goes on. Almost like a pair. Perhaps we are: when the room starts spinning, he helps me into a bedroom to have a lie down, the ceiling moving in waves above me. He's suddenly lying on top of me. Squashed underneath, I fear I might be sick. A knock at the door and a voice of "It's time to go," to bursts of laughter saves me. Rather abruptly he helps me up from the squeaky bed; clumsily I collide with a bowl of potpourri next to it. Vast amounts of dried bits of purple spread all over the carpet as I awkwardly wave my goodbyes to the boy sitting on the bed, looking perplexed at his shoes, which are also covered in a matching purple.

I leave in a taxi, giddy and confused. There are different rules in Träby to Svenstorp, and I don't have an expert like Birgitta to ask about them now. They start teasing me about him in school, wanting to hear all the juicy details but every time I go past him, he just nods slightly and walks past. At the next Before Party a pattern seems to establish: after an hour or so, he will come up to me and squeeze my shoulder and grin at me, and, not wanting to spoil the festive mood, I will act as if this is part of a funny agreement between us. Everyone else certainly seems to think so. I marvel at the wonderful effects of drinking. Alcohol really is the best! Like a lovesick dog I'll smell his breath of spirits and learn that the stronger the breath the more affectionate he'll be.

When my parents receive an invitation to a birthday party, taking Lotta with them, for the following Friday night, I tell them, to their relief, that I'm going stay home that night. This is the opportunity I've been waiting for. Nervously I look for him all day; he is two years ahead of me in school. I finally spot him in the corridor.

"Feel like coming home to me tonight?" He turns around, surprised. "My parents are away," I add encouragingly—in case it would worry him to meet them so soon. He looks down on my shoes and then nods slowly to them.

"Round seven then?"

He nods. It seems to be his way of communication, lacking a party and a drink—not that I can recall him saying much there either—so I nod my head back too. Suddenly the corridor seems filled with people, curiously looking at our nodding heads, but I don't care. I haven't made a fool of myself: he actually, in his own way, said yes! Then I have to run after him again, having forgotten the note I have prepared in advance for him with my name and address on it; to make things easy for him.

He peers at the note and then at me. His eyes are very blue and look clearer than usual. They sit very close together, I notice now, like somebody forgot that there needed to be space for a nose in between them, which is all leaning to one side anyway, probably reshaped by a hockey-puck. He's not that good looking I suddenly catch myself thinking, and give him a really big smile to make up for it. He turns abruptly and walks away, my note in his pocket. I've done it: I can finally get to know my boyfriend.

I time everything carefully. I'm going to make melted cheese sandwiches. My mother helps to prepare them, saying how nice it is that I'm staying home for a change, and inviting a friend over. I haven't told her it's a boy, of course, not wanting to spoil our for-once festive mood.

First, we'll sit down and talk and eat for at least an hour: Get to know each other. Then I can show him things in my room he might be interested in, like my book collection, before the final event for the evening: down to the cellar and listen to some music which I imagine will inspire us to do some dancing.

I stand by the kitchen window, waiting. The big larch tree outside is barren, some left-over leaves filling up the carport, blowing around in the air. It's getting dark. I tap my fingers gently on the new kitchen bench. It's started to rain heavily and not many people are out and about, only our neighbour in his plumbing overalls, waving

cheerfully to me as he walks past. Every time I hear the sound of a car, my heart beats so fast I'm relieved when I realise it's not going to stop outside our house. I wander between my lookout post and the bathroom mirror and then back to the window again. Maybe he misunderstood the time, I think. I'm so hungry I don't know if I can wait to put the sandwiches in the oven any longer, but I don't want them to get cold for him and what would it look like if he came and I was sitting there stuffing myself with food so impolitely?

Seventeen minutes past eight a red car stops outside. I can see him jumping out of the car, talking and laughing to the driver before it takes off. I duck for cover, wondering for a moment whether I should run out with an umbrella to him so he won't get wet, but decide against it; I don't want to seem too eager. I'm feeling nauseous both from the nervous wait and hunger. I quickly put the oven on and put the tray inside before rushing to the door.

"*Hej,hej!*" He nods in reply, giving me a quick look before scrutinising the hangers in the hallway where he carefully hangs up his jacket, before turning his attention to his gigantic shoes, which he carefully places next to my father's garden clogs.

He sighs heavily before turning around to me again. I look at him encouragingly.

"My sister ... drove and that ... bit late." He shrugs his shoulders, his back turned, his view on the floor.

"Oh, that's all right, I didn't even realise." I smile soothingly.

Then it's quiet again. Words race around my head before I discard them. I don't know much about his hockey-team I suddenly realise, and I don't know if he shares my literary interests either. I escort him into the kitchen and fiddle a bit with the stove before finally saying, "Feel like eating? I'm making some sandwiches!"

"Nah, not hungry."

Panicking, I quickly get the half-melted cheese sandwiches out of the oven and scald a finger in the process. I decide to eat at least one, I'm so hungry.

"Some tea, perhaps?"

"Nah, don't like tea."

"Oh, well, I'll just have a quick bite then," I say apologetically.

I eat too quickly, tongue burning. He sits opposite me in silence, looking around the kitchen.

"We've just renovated," I say hopefully.

His mouth opens in a wide yawn.

Half-melted cheese strings, undecided whether to stay inside my mouth or cling to the sandwich, stretch out in front of me.

Björn picks up his *snus*-box, tapping it against our kitchen table and laboriously prepares a pinch. I hope he won't spill any. My father would sniff it a mile away. *Snus* might not be a sin the same way drinking is, but it's certainly frowned upon as an unhygienic device and dubious pastime, a leftover habit from the poor farmhands of the past, yet still so popular among young men in the district, especially the hockey team of Träby.

It's twenty seven past when I finish my sandwich.

"Do you want to have a look at my room?" This takes a minute, him literally having a look.

"Feel like some music?" I'm running out of things and he hasn't even been here for half an hour yet.

He nods.

Relieved, I show him down our cellar.

Looking at my records, his face suddenly becomes animated. "The record-industry is so *jävla*, bloody commercial!" he bursts out, "Sheer capitalism, if you ask me!"

Impressed with his vocabulary, I look at what's left of my record collection, discard old religious fare and *Bay City Rollers* to finally hand him *ELO: Electric Light Orchestra*.

"*Beatles*," he says, "got, you know, like a real message."

"Aha," I reply enthusiastically, imagining how we'll soon laugh at our shy silence upstairs.

He's sitting on the floor now, scrutinising the record cover, his eyes closer together than usual, looking concerned. Maybe *ELO* doesn't have a message either?

"Everything's so *jävla*, bloody commercial" he repeats again, almost to himself.

"Oh yes," I agree, although I really can't say I mind that much. In Svenstorp, we have always believed firmly in capitalism. We've taken pride in the hard-earned fruits of our impossible ideas and innovative minds—so good for the whole community—and Mercedes-Benz being more common than a Volvo and the Stockholm papers writing admiring articles about our "business spirit" and increasing wealth. On our remarkable resilience and literally having started with two

empty hands and going from the lands of misery and stony fields, to overflowing money boxes on Sundays and races on our moss, where even princes eagerly tread once a year. My father's distant relative has even started a pretend American Wild West on the bog-lands further afield, where you can watch cowboys shoot each other in front of The Salon, the big shop selling cowboy hats and other souvenirs. It's been a major tourist attraction for a few years now; people come from all over Sweden for a Wild West experience, even from Germany, they say. This year, they hired two Real Indians from America who wrote autographs all summer next to a totem pole wearing native costumes and feathers; they featured in a special edition of the local paper. People shake their heads and call it crazy, but that's just one small example of the business spirit of the local district, which somehow seems to have passed Träby by. Two different worlds so close geographically, separated by a piece of moss and the giant rubber industry, and a completely different mindset.

"Socialism is the only *jävla*, bloody, way."

A Träby local *and* a fan of Olof Palme, that's two minuses in one in Svenstorp.

"Not too wrong there," I nod sympathetically.

And finally he kisses me. Without a word he leads me to the couch. He stretches out leisurely and places my hand on his crotch. "Yeah," he says while unzipping his pants and shows me how to stroke him *down there*: "Yeah."

"That's good," he says, his eyes darting about, his lips pressed together, breathing strangely. This close, he looks disturbingly like someone who's gone temporarily insane. I suddenly imagine how he'll kidnap me like Sven-Åke's brother in a moment of madness. "Is that good?" he moans. I don't know what to say, I don't know what to think, it's all too strange: a mixture of revulsion, fear and wanting to laugh my head off. Suddenly it all spurts out of him.

At that moment I can hear the door unlocking upstairs. In panic, I run into the laundry and wash my hand under the shower and accidentally get my whole head sprayed in the process. My socks and jeans are wet too. I wipe myself off with an old towel the best I can and run back to Björn who's lying lethargically on the couch and throw it to him: "My parents," I hiss, and that gets him and his zipper up in a flash. But it turns out it's only Lotta, shouting from the top of the stairs: She's come home to watch *Kojak*, bless her.

He gets restless in front of the TV, Lotta giggling nervously at the sight of him. I take off my socks and put them on top of the heater and look closely at my hand. It's invisible. The traces of him have completely disappeared.

His sister picks him up shortly after Kojak, sucking on his lollipop, has solved the crime of the week. I tell Lotta sternly not to tell our parents about Björn being there and she promises excitedly. I throw away the towel in the garbage outside, not sure whether it'll come out in the wash or not.

The following Monday, I see him coming towards me in the corridor. He slides past me, lips bulging with *snus*, and nods as per usual.

It's Saturday night again and yet another After Party. Björn hasn't shown up and I'm just about to call for a taxi home. It hasn't been a great night. I don't seem able to get the usual buzz finishing off my bottle; I don't feel like any jokes or impersonating anyone. Everyone else seems to have a bad night too. Everywhere I look, people look miserable. Lena, the hedgehog girl, comes out from the toilet staring at me aggressively from behind her foundation mask. A thin line of brown is smeared on the collar of her jumper.

"What are you doing here?" she suddenly snarls at me.

"Who, me?"

"Yes, you! You don't really belong here; do you, Miss Bloody Mission Church Believer." She's looking triumphant, spitting out the words as if having discovered a shameful secret: My past.

People are looking up from their sunken postures expectantly, hoping for something to happen at last. Someone says, "Lay off, Lena, she's all right, she's harmless."

"Shut up!" she retorts and grabs hold of my shoulder. "Come," she says, and I follow her obediently, outside the door of the apartment where she sits down on the dusty steps, offering, to my surprise, a cigarette. I swallow nervously and say, "But I do belong, Lena, I love it here in Träby."

She laughs disdainfully: "Really?"

We sit there in silence and I lean my head against the cool wall, waiting. Lena's smoking her cigarette, staring into space. When she turns to me again her eyes are black, but somehow also a bit like my mother's when I was little and feeling unwell:

“Listen ... *helvete ochså*, bloody hell: You shouldn’t be drinking so much, that’s all!”

Stunned, I inhale a few puffs, waiting for the punch line.

“Look, Chris, it’s Chris, isn’t it? My Dad you know... *fan*, hell, what would you know, it’s different that’s all, different!” Her voice is slurring, almost drowsy: “I’ve been doing this since I was thirteen, fucking and drinking and having a bloody high time and I’m telling you ... get out ... you don’t belong here, believe me.”

Shocked, I watch her burst into tears.

“*Såja*, there, there,” I say and awkwardly lean in to her, and pat her hedgehog hair. It’s two o’clock in the morning and I’m sitting on a staircase and holding Lena and it’s absolutely surreal, like Strindberg’s *Dream Play*. Her blue mascara is running down her cheeks and the foundation has finally given up, a much paler shade of skin emerging from underneath. She’s sixteen and shaking so much I’m worried she’s going to fall down the stairs.

“Come on,” I say gently, and support her back into the flat and help her into the bathroom, determinedly walking past a queue of people yelling “Hang on, it’s my turn!” and “What’s she taken this time?” and “Look at the good Christian Svenstorper holding her hand!” and bursts of laughter.

I help her down on the toilet seat. Try to wash her face clean although she won’t stop crying, the thin rag covered by her sadness. Suddenly I start too. I don’t know what we’re crying about but I feel overwhelmed by her thin arms covered in goose bumps and bruises. And then we somehow collapse on the bathroom floor in helpless laughter. People are knocking on the door yelling “Hurry up, bloody Lesbos,” when Lena grabs hold of a red shower cap resting on the side of the bathtub and is violently sick in it. I help her, holding the cap, which is soon overflowing.

It’s over quickly. She moves to the sink and drinks greedily from the tap. When she turns around, she is back to her usual self and mutter, “Jesus Chris, you’re an idiot!” and marches past me out through the door. Two girls in shiny satin pants poke their heads in and look at me standing there with the shower cap full and squeal, “Oh, how disgusting!”

“Hang on,” I say as cheerfully as I can, “I just need to wash my hands!” deposing of the stinking cap in the small bin.

Björn’s waiting outside.

“What do you want?” I say wearily: “Another urgent conversation about the virtues of socialism or the corrupted cover designs of the capitalistic record industry?”

He looks at me surprised, then smiles: “Chris, you got vomit in your hair.” A bit softer he continues, “It doesn’t matter, come on,” and leads me to yet another bedroom belonging to somebody’s parents.

Another bed with frilly covers. A cheap bed in poor taste, I think to myself in my Svenstorp ways. He’s whispering in my ear that he wants to do a sixty-nine, a thin line of *snus* dripping down his chin. When I look at him dumbly he shows me a picture from a worn magazine he’s hauling up from his bag. It looks very *technical* and I’m so tired and surely it can’t be *hygienic* and are you really meant to take it in your mouth? Just the thought makes me gag. He’s lying on top of me, whining, and I can smell Lena’s vomit in my hair and he’s trying to push down my head, and suddenly we seem to be in some sort of wrestle. I’m trying to get him off me but it’s getting hard to breathe and he is so much stronger. A part of me is floating above the bed, looking down on the sweaty, crumbling heap that is us in a complete stranger’s bedroom, thinking, I might as well give in, when a great madness, a burst of fury overcomes me.

“But I don’t want to, Björn,” I hear my voice in a grunt joining me all the way to the ceiling,” I don’t want to do a sixty-nine or any other number either!”

Suddenly I’m free, or perhaps he lets me go. “You’re a *jävla*, bloody stuck-up Svenstorp bitch, aren’t you!”

We sit quietly on the frilly pine bed, one angry figure in each corner.

“I don’t think I want to be with you any more,” I finally say into the silence.

“Suits me.” He shrugs his shoulders.

And I realise we’ve been seeing each other for nearly six months but this is the first time we’re actually having any kind of conversation about us.

“Don’t want to tie myself up,” he mutters, as I button up my shirt. He adds to himself, almost as a comfort: “but I’m not picky when I’m horny.”

Lena has left, they inform me outside and someone giggles, “Jesus, you’ve been busy tonight, Chris!”

I stand by the window in an unknown flat and look at people leaving. It’s cold outside and people are shivering in their doona jackets, stumbling about in high heels; a subdued crowd with the occasional shrieking laughter escaping in the air. I

can still smell the faint smell of vomit through my hair. Well, it's certainly different to church, I think, where everyone smells of coffee and cake and candles. Then I think of Nilla and Birgitta, and of my father waiting for me. I think of Lotta and me watching telly and Anita and me listening to the People of Jesus tapes. I suddenly feel very old. That's when I feel a hand on my shoulder.

To my surprise it's Ulf, the hockey star— who was once almost drafted to some elite club in Sweden, even a Canadian *professional* team was after him, they say— looking adoringly into my eyes. Quickly he moves in and strokes my arms, muttering, “You're cute,” and kisses me. Then he smiles his blinding smile which is so sweet that I almost believe him. But it's not until he tells me that I smell nice too, and I look around to see that everyone else's gone home and I must be the only one left at the party that I finally say, “Excuse me, I have to go home and wash the vomit out of my hair, but I'm glad you liked it!” Like a perfect gentleman he escorts me to the door and says in a tired voice, “Then buzz off, kid, and stop wasting my time.”

Bringing Home the Sheep

We meet on Alley Road for a walk around the lake, through endless streets of neat houses or down the deserted railway track. On Grand Street, there's a new window display of the recently built hardware store.

Nilla brings me news from her world, I from mine. In the beginning, I have the edge. There's so much to tell. She doesn't meddle. She doesn't say but how could you; she just listens in a way that makes me feel normal, at times *aghast*, but never at me.

In turn, she tells me about what they are saying; some of it I already know. Lotta comes home from school upset, my father informs me. They're teasing her and I know she's lost Rut, the Herring's daughter, as her friend. Disgraced by *association*. Lotta doesn't say a word about it. Only once did she ask me what a *hypocrite* means: apparently I go dancing on Saturday nights and then to church on Sundays, praying, holier than thou. They don't like it, the Non-Believers. You'd think they'd feel happy about the new recruit. Instead it seems to disturb them as much as the Believers. It's not the order of things, it's not how it's meant to be. There shouldn't be any mixing up. They are meant to scoff at us, and for us meekly to look concerned for them. It's security. It's knowing your place. Carefully I explain to Lotta that I certainly don't mix dancing with church-praying. "You can tell them that from me!" I say, knowing she won't, hoping they'll lose interest in punishing her for my sins eventually.

I know the rules. This is what is so frustrating: That you hear things about you and know they aren't true. But who can I tell, apart from Nilla?

Sometimes I wish for my own spot in the local paper: Where I could list all the rumours under true or false and explain myself to the public. Instead, I do what I do best: I exaggerate. I serve them up a feast, confirming their worst suspicions. I parade down Grand Street, a long shawl draped around me, a skirt of grandma's sweeping the tiles of the supermarket, a bright red hat covering most of my face. I can almost hear the horse carriages if I ignore the placards declaring "*Special: Mince Meat 3.95!*" outside the entrance. It doesn't take much to get tongues wagging as I sweep past the ladies in curlers, down the freezer aisles in my father's old vest and

cap, grabbing a litre of milk on the way. I stick it up their shaking heads about my sojourns to Träby and laugh at what they are saying about me in Nilla's father's factory: that I am a pretend Christian on Sundays and hang out with *drug addicts* in Träby on Saturdays; that I've come to church drunk and they had to escort me out; somebody even knew from a confidential source that I'd been caught red-handed stealing the money box. The contempt is harder to take, but I do my best: I am so *märkvärdig*, so up myself: I've been spotted with criminals and other lowlife of the bog-lands and still think I'm better than all the hardworking people of Svenstorp put together. Look at me putting on airs while bringing the proud achievements of the god-fearing community into disrepute, all by myself. Nilla details everything to me. Together we are constantly amazed at what grown-ups can make up; even ones who have never met me have an opinion. Two Svenstorp girls laughing their way through autumn and winter, at the mysterious division of right and wrong, true or false.

Snow falls as we walk on the slippery moss. The pressure is mounting on Nilla; it's becoming costly to be my friend. She's looking pale, explaining they have asked her to work on me harder, to more firmly assure me of all the loving arms waiting to enfold me from the congregation, as they rescue me from evil. *Fru* Herring corners her in church, won't let her past, once she even cried about me. She's asked to have a special council with Nilla, but Nilla's parents put their foot down, saying it wasn't right to expect so much from such a young person. They own half of Svenstorp; they're not scared of anybody. As always, I feel protective about her too.

"They shouldn't put so much pressure on you. It's not your fault I go dancing!"

I grin anxiously at my friend as we slowly walk out on the main road, past factory after factory where industrious Believers and the odd Non-Believer work hard into the night. I tell Nilla everything too: about Björn—"How brave of you!"—and how the Before and After parties work. If she's shocked, she doesn't say. I haven't told her about Lena though. For some reason, I feel overwhelmed by an unbearable sadness every time I think about her. That I let her down, that she was trying to tell me something before the vomiting in the shower cap got in the way. I don't tell Nilla about the vomiting either. At least her parents haven't told her to stop seeing me, I think, not that I know of.

Coming to the turnoff at Grand Street, we see a familiar figure slipping about in a lonely dance by the fountain.

“Nilla,” he shouts, as he turns around, and sees us approaching, “Looking like a bloody angel, eh, come and give me a hug!” Sven-Åke looks like he wouldn’t be able to stand upright much longer. Gracefully, Nilla accepts his embrace, before we help, sliding him down on the frozen ground. He smiles sheepishly at Nilla, ignoring me and the memory of us falling down here, together, once before.

“Do you need help to get back inside?” Nilla asks, pointing to the council flats where music’s blaring from an open balcony door, a Monday party going on by the sounds of it.

“No, don’t want to see any of those *jävla*, bloody idiots again,” he whines, *snus* running down his chin.

“Hang on.” She scrambles in her bag and fishes up a tissue. Surprisingly gently she starts wiping his face: she’ll probably make a brilliant mother one day, our helping Angel of the Drunks, I think. For some reason this thought makes me feel sad too.

Sven-Åke finally lets us persuade him to help him get off the ground again, and in an almost straight line he makes his way back towards the music echoing in the night.

We head home thoughtfully on the icy path.

Before we part, I suddenly say: “Maybe I should come to church on Friday night, just, you know, to see the Pastor’s face.”

I don’t know whether she’s as surprised as I am. She just pats my hand with her woollen mitt: “Only if you want to, Christina.”

And so next Friday night I walk down Alley Road towards the old world where I haven’t been since last spring. I’m by myself: Nilla’s in charge of serving coffee and had to be there early. My stomach’s churning as I stand outside the familiar doors with cross handles. It’s hard to breathe in the damp air. They will all be there. Waiting. Nilla has probably warned them. I don’t have to. I could turn around. It’s just for a laugh. To show how little I care. About them. And their List of Sins: their unmodern ways.

Downstairs there’s already a queue for cake. The buzzing chatter dies down as I join the queue. They try not to stare, busying themselves with their plates and serviettes. No one says a word. No one nods me a greeting. Mutely united, armed with cake and cups of strongly brewed coffee they walk past me and into the hall

where the Herrings are waiting with their wisdom and perhaps an American movie of someone's saving before the final day. Nilla's looking at me nervously behind the counter as Birgitta sweeps past me. If I don't exist I might go away. I'm not meant to call the shots. It's their saving operation, I think; I can't just come down here and claim it by myself, that's quite understandable.

A sea of people parts in front of me as I step inside the hall. How frightened they all seem: of me, a girl in a too-big suit. This used to be my place and I knew it so well: the wooden panelled walls and polished floor, the small stage where a flustered *fru* Herring is arranging some music scores on a stand, the comings and goings, the rules of belonging. It's all gone. I'm invisible as they nervously await their orders.

I sit down by myself at a table, biting into a home-made bun baked by Nilla's mother, when someone finally approaches me: someone capable of handling a crisis. The relief is audible in the slight in-breath by the participants of the Friday Night Teenage Fun Night, as Pastor Herring puts his hand on my shoulder and laughs: "Christina, what a ... surprise!" He strokes his hands, looking around like a seasoned performer savouring the moment before delivering a well-rehearsed line: "The Dance Parlour must be closed then, I presume?"

Nervous laughter erupts around me.

"If you don't mind, Christina, I would like a word."

He escorts me away from the table before Nilla has time to join me. Nodding at *fru* Herring on the way out, she immediately bursts into an upbeat song of "*Your love fills me up!*" Sounds a bit like a Dance Parlour song—if you were to change Jesus for Sven.

Inside his office, Pastor Herring places himself strategically behind the desk. The door is shut. Above him, the cross with a sad-looking Jesus hangs in straight lines. A procession of photographs of previous pastors looks down on me solemnly from the wall. An imposing bible is placed on the middle of the desk among notes and prayer books.

"All right, what do you want, Christina?" He leans forward: "What are you after? Surely you must have some kind of decency left to realise you can't just waltz in here to our church and upset everyone like this. To laugh at the members of the congregation in their innocent faces! I won't tolerate—!"

I lift my eyes and look into his shimmering blue. To my surprise, I'm drowning in begging loneliness; it's infinite. Yes, we're in darkness. On a mountain. Poor Pastor

Herring is hanging over a cliff. He is about to fall and is clinging on to a tiny branch. He needs to be saved, I suddenly know. My arm is on its way, it's floating in the air now, stretching out towards him. We all do our best, I think eagerly. But suddenly he swings back. His body straightens; his face is closed; the frightened boy gone; my arm dangling mid-air shamefully retracts, and he is almighty and strong:

"You might think you can do whatever you please," he says in a low, beautifully controlled voice," but not in here you don't. You can roam around in Träby and live a life of sin and waste all you want, but in here I want people to feel safe."

I look at Pastor Herring. I take a step forward, as if to reach out to him, to show him I'm only made of flesh and blood like him.

But I have underestimated him; he's much faster than me. A step backwards, and then, almost as if flying, his shadow falls over me. Pinned against the wall, it is his words that kill.

As I fall into darkness, he's waiting there, in the shadow of the valley of death, where he lives.

I have been there ever since.

Afterwards, when I leave through the back door, there is a cosy murmur downstairs, a gathering together after a nasty shock.

A sense of restlessness takes over. I feel impatient if I don't get drunk quickly enough. I find myself waiting for a party to finish, for the Dance Parlour to close. I look around ice-hockey parties and know who's going to pick a fight and who's going to cry; I know who's going to come out red-faced from the bedrooms. I have stopped telling jokes, preferring to listen to others instead. I've become the judge and I'm not very kind. A cutting comment after a flat joke gives me a new kind of respect. Even Lena is unnerved, almost avoiding me, I imagine. She's got big circles under her eyes lately. Looking more like a raccoon than a hedgehog nowadays, I think coldly. I smile knowingly when I see her, thinking I know what you're really like underneath all that makeup. Crying like a baby!

One weekend my parents go away on church camp. Instead of reassuring promises of Nilla sleeping over, I throw a big party. Let Träby come to Svenstorp for a change! In a drunken stupor I watch people entering our house—even Björn turns up even though we never speak anymore, not that we did a copious amount previously either—touching our things, checking out our fridge, opening our

cupboards. Where do they all come from, I think, before I collapse inside our bathroom.

It's spinning around me, the familiar towels and toothbrushes, the yellow washing basket. I'm so tired, I just want to lie down and go to sleep; I want everybody to go home and leave me alone. I've had enough. A small silvertail fish is busily rushing past me on the floor. Somebody knocks on the door whispering that there's a mad woman, a moron in strange clothes at the door insisting she must talk to me, someone called *fru* Herring, "you know like the fish."

"Oh don't," I moan, vomiting the last bit of vodka into the toilet.

"It's all right," the voice whispers back, "we told her you were unavailable, that you were sick, I think we managed to get the witch away."

"You did?" I say, leaning my head against the toilet seat, surprised and grateful.

It turns out *fru* Herring has been quite helpful really, telling them that if they didn't leave the premises immediately, she would call the police; she was personally going to make sure of this. They have all decided to follow her command, Svenstorp being such a bore anyway, an inhabitable pine desert with too much money and religiously insane women in strange clothes occupying the lands.

Relieved, I stagger up and watch the leftover party stumble out into the night. Sneaking up to the window, I spot *fru* Herring, as usual with her bike, standing guard next to our mailbox, watching the youth ice-hockey team of Träby disappear into the night. Into cars which will take them back to the other side of the moss and a familiar set of standards. A thin figure beneath the window, a scarf wrapped tightly around her head, blowing in the wind, watching them all way. Suddenly she looks up and sees me. I wave quickly and move away, throwing myself on my parents' bed. Disappearing into blessed darkness and hazy dreamlike figures of the night, I can hear the doorbell ringing in the distance. Ignoring it, turning to sleep, I know there will be hell to pay tomorrow.

"Christina, what have you done?"

The glaring sun hits me from the bed, the blind having been left up last night, the sharp light intruding on my sleep. Moaning I sit up and face Anita.

It's her eyes. I follow them around the house and watch them take in the devastation. Without a word she rolls up her sleeves and starts cleaning. In the kitchen she puts bottles into bags. She airs all the rooms, straightens up photographs,

and puts the tablecloth from our best room with blotches of spilled drinks in the washing machine.

“I won’t say a word,” she tells me, adding, “Don’t kid yourself, it’s for their sake, not yours! I don’t know what you think you’re doing but maybe it’s time to understand that the world doesn’t revolve around you. Other people have feelings too! I didn’t realise things had fallen apart so badly. Do you know how worried Mum and Dad are?”

I try to help her, but scoffingly she rebuffs my clumsy efforts.

“Go and clean yourself up instead, that would be more useful! You stink, Christina, *stink!*”

She throws me a towel and almost shoves me in the shower. Her hands leading me there are furious against my skin. I can tell she wouldn’t be disobeyed at Rehov, the hospital in Jönköping where she is training to become a psychiatric nurse. My sister deals with completely deranged people on a daily basis. I know my parents are worried about her too. But somehow it doesn’t seem like the right moment to point this out to her.

And Anita herself exudes confidence in the matter. Of course, she’s never afraid, oh no: “I’ve got Jesus with me,” she reassures them: “I’m safe.”

They might have preferred someone on the hospital payroll to look after her safety, though. After all she plays cards with someone who chopped his wife into pieces and then minced her in a mincing machine. It’s all part of his rehabilitation—the card playing, not the mincing.

Anita knocks on the bathroom door, telling me I’ve got a visitor. This time I know I won’t get away.

Fru Herring asks to have a word with me in private and drags me into my parents’ bedroom, the blankets still in disarray from my drunken sleep.

“I was here last night,” she whispers, “and I saw!” She looks so happy, as if delivering a wonderful piece of news to me: “See, what did I see, Christina?”

“Well,” I mutter, “I know there was a bit of party—”

“The seeds of sin,” she interrupts me, holding out her hands as if expecting to catch them: “A Sodom and Gomorrah, here, in Svenstorp! And now it’s taking root, it’s spreading, it’s growing, the seeds of evil!” She squeezes my shoulder tight: “I have been sent to you, Christina!” Sitting down on the bed, she’s breathing strangely. Her boots are so small I suddenly notice, like a little doll’s, a little girl’s

boots, neatly laced up, purple and lacy. “Sodom and Gomorrah,” she repeats, looking at me sadly; her strangely bulging eyes welling up with tears.

“I didn’t mean to upset you,” I say awkwardly.

She’s crying louder now and I sit down on the bed next to her and pat her hand. I feel so sorry for her all of a sudden; it can’t be easy being her and having so much to attend to. And Him.

As if remembering why she is here, *fru* Herring’s back straightens up and she turns to me again, her mouth firm, like having settled something once and for all. “You’re not well, Christina. There’s a sickness inside you, a wickedness.” Her eyes light up. “But I am here, Christina, to give you some great news: God has given you a very special job, a difficult task, so that we can bear witness to what a life without Christ brings! I want you to know, Christina,” and here she starts crying again, “that I pray for you. I watch over you, Christina. I protect you, because, He says: *We are all His Children!* And He has sent *me* to guide and make you well. To wash your sins away.”

“OK,” I say quietly.

I’m sitting very still. There’s that strange smell coming from her that I’ve noticed before, when she leans over, her voice conspirational in my ear: “My husband thinks it’s too late. He thinks you’d never bow to the congregation and ask for forgiveness.” She smiles mischievously: “But I know this Pastor in Gunneboda who ... Yes, an expert ... you’ll see, Christina, you’ll see. God has plans for you: big plans!”

There’s a knock on the door and Anita suddenly walks in. Resolutely she leads a protesting *fru* Herring out into our hallway, reassuringly telling her she needs to have a word with me too. It only takes her a minute and *fru* Herring is out of the door.

“You know,” Anita says, as we watch her take off on her bike, “I’m starting to believe there’s something seriously wrong with the pastor’s wife. She seems unstable, overstrung somehow.” Anita looks at me. “I don’t think you should take too much notice of what she has to say, Christina. I think she might be suffering from some kind of ... illness.”

The words of comfort and salvation hang between us like a delicate row of beautifully threaded pearls.

“Well,” I whisper, “she seems to think that I am.”

Anita pats me lightly on the head and to my surprise laughs: “Don’t be silly, you just suffer from a bad case of being a teenager, I suspect.” She smells of cleaning detergent, I notice, as, for a moment, I rest my head on her shoulder. Saved, by her. For now, I’m saved.

Saving Christina

The world is moving like a giant carousel around me. Spread wide, my arms cover the whole parking lot outside the Dance Parlour, they swirl faster and faster. Headlights are beaming from cars, blinding me. I shake my fist to the stark rays of lights and dare them to wind their windows down so that I can lean in to their stupid faces and tell them straight: “*Dumma*, stupid Träby idiot! You don’t know anything and you don’t bother to learn, do you!”

Good-natured laughs follow: “What do you know then, you tall moron?” Other voices tell me to “Bugger off or we’ll teach you a thing or two.”

Swaying, I hold court. I’m going to kill them, that’s what I’m going to do.

The sky above me is changing directions, confusing me. It’s moving so fast now it falls on top of me and my hands fumble helplessly in the air. A thorny bush leaps at me. As my face brushes against the cold blades, I vomit all over it. Disgusting, pink mush covers the blades, dripping down on the ground.

I lean my heavy head against a park bench. Someone says, “Here.” To my surprise it’s a flask filled with water. I drink greedily and then rest my face against the bench again. The wood is painted green. Park-bench green, my head is spinning: rusting green. I receive a new offering, this time a piece of chewing gum. My mouth’s filled with spearmint; obediently I start chewing. There is a voice somewhere. “Yes, what is it?” I mutter, managing to bend my head towards the distant sound.

“Christina, you all right?”

It’s Aristotle, looking at me concerned. Haven’t seen *him* for a long time, I think surprised, and manage a smile towards his shoe. We don’t go in the same class any more. He’s in what they call the dummies course: for those who can’t wait to leave school and start working in the big rubber factory or a garage somewhere, for those without ambition.

“What’s up?” His peppercorn eyes are twinkling somewhere above the asphalt.

“Everything!” I manage before I start bawling. It’s coming down like the Flood. I’m crying so much that I can hardly sit up. I need to lean into him. I can feel his heart beating reassuringly beneath his chequered shirt: “They don’t care,” I whimper, “They carry on as if nothing’s happened, as if everything’s still the same; it just goes

on and on.” I suddenly feel sick again. “They don’t care and now she’s dead.” And then I vomit over the small bush again. The green blades are once again splattered with hideous odour.

“Who is?”

“The hedgehog girl.”

He hands me the flask again: “What are you talking about, Christina, what are you saying? Who’s the hedgehog girl?”

“Because of her hair. That’s what I thought; like a hedgehog, it was all kind of spiky, but then she turned into a racoon and I helped her vomit in a shower cap once and her name was Lena! And I think she was trying to tell me but I didn’t help her, and now they found her hanging from a rafter next to the window. The curtain—”

He strokes my hair. I look at him at him numbly, my head so heavy a moment ago now a fizzy balloon.

He helps me up on the bench and suddenly he starts crying too. “Sorry, but my father’s brother,” he explains, his black eyes overflowing, “went back to Greece last week. He’s sick, you know; wants to die at home!” He looks helplessly at me.

“Oh, no” I cry, “that’s no good,” and then it’s my turn to hold him.

Suddenly I find myself kissing Aristotle. We are sitting on a park bench outside Träby Dance Parlour and everything turns soft around me: His lips are soft, his eyes are soft, his hands too. So this is what a real kiss tastes like I think, made of cotton wool and soft air, a warm fire spreading in my belly. And I cry a bit more.

“Christina,” he says and pinches my cheek, but lightly: “The brightest girl in class, what on bloody earth are you doing here?” He makes a grand gesture, taking in the lot: the brick Dance Parlour building, the vast parking space with all the cars going round in circles, the empty parklands surrounding it.

“I don’t know,” I say, suddenly realising the taste in my mouth, “Sorry.”

He grins at me. “Look at us Christina, look at us sitting here, kissing and crying in Träby!” For some reason we start laughing. I can feel my skin raw from the bushes, my mouth soft from kissing, my breath’s decay, and I see that there is goodness: there’s a Greek boy. So I tell him a few jokes and we laugh some more. The wind has picked up and I sit close to him, I’m so cold. Everything is a mess, but for a moment there’s peace on earth.

“Is that bloody *svartskalle* Grease-head hassling you?”

A big, open American car has stopped next to us, inside five men in jeans vests are swaying to the accompaniment of Elvis and clicking beer cans.

“It’s all right, we’re just having a talk.” Aristotle’s voice is firm but friendly.

A chorus of voices from the crowded backseat of “bloody-foreigners-coming-here-stealing our birds” fills the starlit night. For a moment, I see a vision of a swarm of immigrants descending on Sweden sweeping up all the women into the sky, but then I think, no, hang on, that’s Jesus, isn’t it?

I look at the driver, worried I might start laughing again and land us into real trouble. He’s looking so pathetic, a large pinch of *snus* making his moustache protrude strangely ahead of him. Suddenly I recognise him: “Hey, aren’t you the hero from the paper? You know the one who put the fire out?”

“Yeah, that’s me,” he mutters embarrassed. An awkward silence descends upon us. The driver-fire inspector is looking a bit concerned as if he’s lost his standing in the community for a moment, but clicking cans and sound of beer guzzling down throats of his mates is somehow reassuringly orderly. He finally leans decisively across the car, the stale smell of old beer closing in on us and says a bit more kindly: “Well, I guess you’ll have to be grateful for what you can get.” He burps loudly, and suddenly they’re off to a spinning *vroom* and *Jailhouse Rock*.

“I’m sorry,” I say embarrassed.

“Don’t,” he shrugs. “I’m used to it.”

We sit in silence. There are people staggering about in the usual Saturday night fashion around us, screams and high-pitched voices intermingling with the clatter of expectant high heels.

“One day,” he says all of a sudden, “I’ll be in charge and they’ll come asking for my help.” He looks determinedly out into the black air. “You need a plan, and that’s mine.”

“That’s good,” I say, “a plan.”

“And you, Christina, are a good and decent person, remember that.”

“Not a lot of people would share your view.”

“You shouldn’t worry so much about what other people think,” Aristotle replies, “Chri-sti-na.” He says my name like that, slowly, with music: “Chri-sti-na. Look around you: it’s not you, is it? You don’t belong here, that’s all.”

“That’s what she said. Lena.”

“I still remember,” he continues, “how you put on plays in school when I first came to Sweden: You were so funny and different, you really stood out! They might not appreciate you around here,” he makes another sweeping grand gesture as if already the owner of the lands, “but there’ll be others who will.”

We look at each other and smile: The prophet from the high-rise lands of Svenstorp and a sad girl from Alley Road. A gentle breeze strokes my bruises. We sit once again in soothing silence, the ghost of a despairing girl between us.

“I know what I’m going to do,” I suddenly say.

He laughs, “Well, off you go then!”

I leave my rescuer behind on the bench, a street lamp shining on his black hair. I turn around in a sudden wave of gratitude. From a distance, he cuts a solitary figure despite waving back in an exaggerated gesture, shouting theatrically at me: “Bye, Angry Svenstorp girl of the night! Our roads shall thus part! *Yia Sou!*”

“*Yia Sou,*” I try. I can see my father’s car hiding further up the road as usual. For a moment I imagine my father finding me earlier in the night, and I turn around. “Do you need a lift?” I ask Aristotle.

To my surprise, my father not only—after brusquely inquiring about my scratches on my face—accepts Aristotle into the car, but is most cordial to him, chatting amicably all the way home to Svenstorp.

“A nice young man,” he comments after dropping him off outside the high-rise, “and so *sober* too!”

“Yes,” I agree, confiding: “He was a bit upset, you know. His uncle is dying and has gone back to Greece to die.”

To my surprise my father chuckles in reply.

“I can’t believe you fell for that old trick,” he says cheerfully. “I know for a fact his father is the only son, he often comes in to the shop and stops for a chat.”

And then another miracle occurs on Alley Road: Father and daughter are united in a giggle, two pale figures behind the glass smiling broadly. A short moment of relief provided once again by the *Svartskalle* Boy from the high-rise, the future King of the Bog-lands; he has the true Svenstorp spirit for it.

Sodom and Gomorrah

The notice has hung on the notice board next to the lockers for three weeks when I finally find the courage to knock on the staff-room door and ask to speak to Svenne.

Svenne is the Drama and Arts teacher in our school, and a *communist*. He really looks the way he's supposed to look, a vision of flannel and overalls, a beard covering most of his face. Svenne thinks Olof Palme is *conservative*, but Cuba is a *true* socialist country compared to ours pandering to the free market and in love with things American. I think China gets the go-ahead too, but not the Soviet Union, I'm not sure why—maybe because they cheat in the Olympics, their athletes not really being true amateurs and all; everyone knows.

I'm so busy now I don't have time to go to the Parlour. Not that I want to. The ice-hockey party team is moving right politically. The really trendy hold theme parties in honour of the Moderate Youth Party, with banners of seagulls against the blue sky as a symbol for the great freedom further down the road in a truly free market. But as Svenne says: "Freedom for whom?" He talks to me like I'm an adult, entitled to a view. Best of all: He gives me the lead in the new play we're going to perform in front of the whole school. And I beat Sofie to it, who's very pretty and who really wanted the part, but Svenne believes I have such *intensity* and *character*! I didn't even have to tell a joke. We take things quite seriously, Svenne and I.

It's a play about the exploitation of women in the pornography industry and I play a suppressed housewife. I get more lines than any other character, the *objective* of the play to show her depressing state due to capitalism. Luckily my husband—the suppressor, but also the victim of the free market—played by Alessandro, a Spanish immigrant, hasn't got much to say, because in all honesty he seems more interested in some of the girls in our theatre group, than in learning the lines. Most girls have to play men—there's a shady capitalist, a greedy lawyer and a ruthless men's magazine editor to name a few—because no other boys have joined our group. Svenne says it makes them feel threatened in their manhood. Svenne is not scared, of course: he's dealt with that garbage eons ago and believes an equal, gender-free society is necessary for a future socialist Sweden, which is fairly evident if you ask me.

As part of the research for the play we all study some pornography magazines in rehearsal that Alessandro is sent down to buy in the kiosk, which makes Björn's magazines look like Sunday School books. It even makes you wonder if *fru* Herring has a point after all and there really is a Sodom and Gomorrah descending upon earth. In one photo, a woman is chained in a prison cell, men lining up in uniform and there's a dog and that's all I'm going to say. It's a very *controversial* play. The Christian Prayer Group in school has put in a protest about "exposing students to deranged and dangerous material." We are called in to the headmaster, well, Svenne is, but in the name of solidarity we all go, where we explain that the play is against the pornography industry and exploitation of women. The headmaster looks at us thoughtfully, stroking his little beard and tells us we can go ahead: "It won't hurt some members of our school community to be exposed to the realities of this world and some other influences besides the Bible," he laughs, and we walk out of the office communally stronger than ever before.

My parents are really happy now I sit at home and learn lines instead of being drunk in Träby although I don't tell them what the play is about. My father doesn't like the theatre but if he has to choose between two evils he'll happily drive me past the Parlour any day, for a rehearsal at Svenne's home.

The first time I see Svenne's home I'm completely stunned: It's a newly built semi-detached yellow brick house on a normal suburban street. I don't know what I expected. A simple house like in Cuba or Harlem, perhaps, amid real proletarians, Svenne sharing the last bit of food in solidarity, revolutionary material on simple bookshelves, and the room heavy with smoke. I don't know why I thought that, Svenne's never talked about his home and I guess there's no matching Harlem in Träby, but still. Inside it's the same: plain old normal furniture, although the bookshelves do look kind of simple; it's the only part I got right.

I can't shake off the feeling of disappointment as we walk upstairs on his ordinary staircase. It turns out it's just me and him rehearsing. Alessandro was meant to come, but you know how it is with him, Svenne explains.

I practise throwing a pornography-magazine at an imaginary Alessandro.

"That's good," Svenne says intensely, from his common pine table: "Show the little pig!"

"Do you think Strindberg was a male chauvinist?" I suddenly ask.

“That old fogey,” he answers, and strokes his beard thoughtfully, “certainly was, and I’ll tell you why: He treated and depicted women with a real *patriarchal* contempt. I don’t give much for his tired old plays; they’re so bourgeois, you know? Strindberg could have done so much for the cause, he was a socialist in his youth but then he became more interested in all this internal crap, his *inferno* and all that, he sold out. And now his plays are just light entertainment for the middle classes of course, part of the *establishment*.” He adds seriously: “It’s important to make up your mind about what kind of audience you want to play for, Chris! The middle class who goes to the theatre for pure entertainment and falls asleep on their soft asses or to a *progressive* audience who are ready for radical change.”

Somehow this makes me feel really sad. Not just because he’s excluding almost everyone I know from the audience, but mostly because I suddenly feel—so childishly—that I’m betraying Strindberg by not standing up for him. That I should defend him, saying, “but he is so gloriously funny though, or so wonderfully mad all the time, or, but he wrote with such beauty!” I have the feeling Svenne doesn’t regard beauty very highly. After all, he gave me the lead. And to think of beauty is probably either bourgeois or antifeminist or both. I don’t know why I want Svenne to respect me so much, but I do. So I say, “Yes, that’s what I thought,” like the coward that I am.

I pick up my copy of the play off the floor and look at Svenne, ready to continue with a play that admittedly has no funny lines or beauty or startling insights. It does have a really good message though. I suddenly smile to myself, thinking of Björn: I wonder if he knows his well-read magazines are anti-socialist and part of the exploitation of a capitalist society?

“You’re a lovely actress to watch, do you know that? Just that moment, then, keep it in the play.”

“Oh,” I say, and smile, “I wasn’t acting, I just thought of something funny. I knew this boy—”

“What’s *your* view on sexual freedom, Christina?” Svenne interrupts.

“Well,” I say, “I don’t know really!” I laugh stupidly: “What do you think? I mean in terms of ... feminism?”

“Oh yes, definitely,” his voice is sombre. “Feminism is also about women being free to express their sexuality as much as men, without condemnation. Sex is such a *liberating* force, you know, when it’s equal!” His hands suddenly spread open wide,

like a giant round flower in front of me, he stares amazed at them as if he's just discovered this flower-ball in his palms. We both stare at his hands now as he exclaims: "Sexual attraction is an anti-capitalist desire!"

There is silence as we both ponder this statement.

"Do you have a wife?" I ask politely.

"Gunnel and I live in an open marriage; we are very aware of the political implications, of marriage as a bourgeois institution, so we're very anti-establishment in our stance, in our take on it: We are both free. That's very important for us both."

"Like a seagull," I mumble.

"Sorry?"

"Like the seagull the Moderates use in their pamphlets," I say and lift my arms and flap them about: "Free to soar, to fly without being wing-clipped by taxes and fall to the ground!"

Svenne is looking at me thoughtfully. His eyes are very blue; his mouth a thin serious line amid his jungle of hair. I look at the pine table and the chairs. I study the pattern of the rug beneath his feet. He's barefoot, I notice. His feet are so small, almost like a child's. Delicately carved, fine. Mine are big and clumsy. They would look very overwhelming next to his, I suddenly think, confused.

"I think you're a great teacher," I finally say.

"Christina," he says kindly, "I want you to look at me as an equal, a colleague, not so much a teacher."

Can he see that I'm walking through the shadow of the valley of death, and would he care for me? If I show him who I really am? He looks at me, and blinded, I look away.

Then, in a blink of a moment, bubbling away like a fizzy drink inside my head, I'm filled with words from other rehearsals: Take a risk! Throw yourself in!

His arms on my shoulders pushing me away are very long.

"Christina," he says gently, "I'm sorry, I should never have asked. You misunderstood."

He lets go of me. Long-windedly he starts to gather his rehearsal notes. In front of him, a Svenstorper without revolutionary sex appeal is backing away and laughing stupidly. The doorbell saves me.

Next to the mirror in the hallway I notice a small black-and-white photograph. It's of an almost naked man and woman standing cheekily side by side, facing the

camera. I stare at the woman's face. She is beautiful; she's wearing nylon stockings and high-heeled shoes but it's her look that grabs me. The man's head is slightly turned towards her, looking at her beggingly, adoringly. And she knows. Her painted lips are curved in triumph. In power. My cheeks hot, I look away.

I make sure I stand in front of the photograph when Svenne opens the door for my father.

"Strange clothes," he comments afterwards, having shaken Svenne's hand, "one of Palme's friends, I gather. Political, they say."

"But please, Dad," I say, "Palme! Svenne believes he's jumping in bed with the capitalist swine of Sweden all the time."

"And who are they, if I may ask?" my father smiles ironically.

"Oh, you know, the banks and ..." I answer vaguely, "Anyway, Svenne's a true socialist and votes for the communists."

"Fancy that, after what the Soviet's done to its people. Off to Siberia they go if they open their mouth! It's not easy for Finland being neighbour to the Big Bear, let me tell you!"

"Well," I say, "I don't think the Soviet got it right: not like a true revolution, like Cuba or China."

My father laughs. "Christina, you might think you know everything better than your father, but don't tell me about history. And that a learned man like your teacher would believe in that claptrap is beyond me!"

"He thinks I have talent," I say, suddenly angry. "He thinks I could become a professional actress if I wanted to."

"I only went to the theatre once," my father replies, "your mother insisted, what a waste of money that was! That people pay for that rubbish is beyond me. They screamed and carried on and talked so unnaturally the whole time, I had enough after half an hour. So over the top! And the swearing! And to top it off someone smoked on stage! No, that's definitely not a proper profession for a normal person." He shakes his head. "There are far more useful things to occupy oneself with. And it's not for real, you know," he adds. "It's all made up!"

*

Tall pine trees create a straight wall on each side of the bicycle track next to the main road between Träby and Svenstorp. Grey-green moss with patches of ice is spread across the ground surrounding the trees and ghostly silence. In fury, I have walked all the way back to Svenstorp. If I keep this up, I'll soon be as fit as Anita.

Grievances

I return from my skirt-buying expedition and long walk, still sober, and the pastor's voice is purring in Anita's living room.

"We are gathered here," she tiptoes, "to make some choices for your father's funeral. Dear God, *guide* Konrad's daughters in this difficult time of grief and *show* us the way for the service." Her eyes are softly closed, and so are Anita's, their hands peaceful in prayer.

I'm in a foul mood, I don't know why. An old sense of restlessness comes over me. I want to take off as I sit piously, hands clasped half-together, half-committed, but inside a complete fake.

"Amen," Pastor Inger finally ends.

She smiles at us all, although she's really directing her conversation to Anita. She is the one who knows Dad's favourite passages in the Bible, his favourite hymns, the prayers he liked to read, which Anita, together with the pastor, now paste together into a perfectly fine service. Lotta doesn't seem to care, she's looking tired, but the less we have to say, despite the pastor's attempts to include us, the more irritated I feel. How smug they look, Anita and Inger: snug and smug, the perfect representatives of God.

"We thought," the pastor suddenly beams at me, "that maybe you would like to read a hymn at the service: *Abide with me; fast falls the eventide*," his favourite apparently? Being an actor and all!" She smiles at me like at a child in need of a gold star.

"Not any more," I say, "I work in a library."

"Still," she says, "I think your father would have liked that, don't you think?"

"No," I reply stubbornly, "I don't think so."

"Come on," Anita looks at me, irritated, "it's not too much to ask, is it?"

"Well," the pastor's smile is even broader, "you shouldn't do anything you don't feel comfortable with, Christina, although," she adds, "it would be a real treat for us: A real treat!"

"Well, I don't feel up to it."

"Up to it?" Anita glares at me, "You don't have to feel up to it, it's just reading a

couple of verses, it's not like we're asking you to hold the funeral service!" She laughs, but I know her.

"Well, why don't you read it then Anita, you seem to know everything!" I say childishly.

Inger starts shuffling some papers in front of her in the tense silence that follows and finally says, "I might leave you to talk this over in peace and quiet. I know it's a hard time for you *all*," she laughs nervously, "and you *all* want to feel happy with the decisions we take."

"It's not like it really matters anyway," I say, "whatever verses we may or may not read, it won't really make a difference."

"Of course it will," Anita flares up, "not for you maybe, but for me and ... my family and for others who cared for Dad: It makes a great difference, and I know Dad would have agreed. He found funerals very important, he went to all of them; he never steered away!"

"I don't think your sister is implying that you don't care." Inger's smile reveals her horror at the turn of the conversation.

"That's actually exactly what she's doing, Pastor," I smile condescendingly.

"Well," the pastor says, "well. These are hard and trying ... I think ... yes, I might leave you with the ... in your ... capable hands. I'll give you a call later," she adds nervously to Anita. She can't wait to get away from the lovely sisters who are all so close, the third of whom has not said a word.

We watch the fleeing pastor through the window in silence. She likes her bike too. It's an old model: a real ladies bike with a basket hanging from the handlebars, her bible placed inside, the delicate pages turning in the wind as she takes off.

Anita is so angry she's almost shaking. "Now we have to make a new appointment with the pastor. She works so hard and you have just given her some more work. Do you know how little she gets paid?"

"If somebody could afford to pay a pastor properly, it's surely Svenstorp."

"For goodness sake," she raises her voice, "all I asked of you was to read a hymn! I thought you'd be pleased," she adds, "showing off your acting talents."

Abide with me. No one ever does.

"Look, I'll help in any other way I can," I finally offer.

It's not what she's after. Anita's obviously been saving up for a long time, she can't hear me any more: "You never help out, you never take any responsibility; you

just take off when it doesn't suit. You left us here dealing with Mum and Dad, and now I understand you left Mark too."

"Actually he left me."

"Always, when you're about to get somewhere, always you leave. You're so restless! When you finished that acting course we were all relieved and then you suddenly take off to *Australia!* It has to be so different; it has to be so special!"

"I met Mark," I point out.

"And who do you think had to go and pick up your bits and pieces in Gothenburg? Dad and I," she says, "We've always been sorting out your messes!"

"He left me because my drinking was getting out of hand." I sound almost triumphant, God help me.

It works. Anita looks stricken, like I hit her.

"What is it with you and alcohol?" she finally says, exasperated. "It's like you're still a star-struck teenager around a drink. No one else in the family finds it the least bit interesting. I remember one time—"

"Yes," I reply tired, "it was a mess, and you came and cleared it all up. Good for you."

"We just get worried for you. If you have a problem you must—"

"Well, I've stopped drinking now," I say with a raised voice.

"All I asked was for you to read a hymn in the service," she repeats like a parrot.

We stand exhausted in front of each other. And I know she's right. A part of me wants to say, Anita, let's just forget about it, we're both tired. I think you're fantastic, I really do and I'm sorry about all the pain. Sorry. Sorry!

"I can," Lotta suddenly says, "I'll read it."

We both turn to her in surprise.

"It's all right," she says, "I've learnt to read too."

"All right!" Anita is waving her hands as if to say, don't blame me if it all falls apart then.

"Don't be so condescending to Lotta," I say, appearing by her side, "that's great Lotta, if you're sure you feel up to it."

"Good God," Lotta says, "just look at yourselves."

"It's just," I turn to Lotta, "I can't stand up in front of the congregation and suddenly be all you know ... praying with them. It wouldn't feel right."

“Oh, stop being so pretentious!” Anita snaps, “I know you didn’t like the church when the Herrings were in charge, but you’re not the only one! Everyone agrees on how unsuitable they were for our congregation, but it was the times too. I was just talking to someone the other day—”

“Well, that’s not very helpful for me now, is it? Not a soul helped me then. I was fourteen!”

“I know,” she says a bit softer, “but things were different then, people didn’t dare to criticise their pastor then. He’s suffered too, you know. She died from cancer a few years ago, and he’s stopped working as a pastor now, I hear. There’s always been so much talk around him, such divided opinion. It can’t have been easy for him.”

“I’m pregnant,” Lotta suddenly says.

We turn around again.

“Oh, but that’s wonderful,” Anita exclaims.

It’s like a buzz; a tone deep down in my belly.

“Yeah,” I say, “that’s really—”

“I know I’m not the only one who suffered,” I then start to babble, “I know it was hard for you too, I know it was hard for you with people talking about me, I know you lost Rut as a friend because of me.”

“Rut used to wet her bed at night,” Lotta says, “I pitied her more than anything. Look, I know you think they were terrible, but *fru* Herring, or Siw as her name was, was actually a really wonderful mum.”

“I find that hard to believe.”

“She had such lovely imagination: she used to make these wonderful clothes for our dolls and have great picnics for them, talking to them as if they were real.”

“I bet she did!”

“I thought you of all people could appreciate someone who stuck out a bit, was a bit different.”

“Great,” I say, “now you compare me to *Fru* Psycho.”

“I think that’s quite cruel,” Lotta replies quietly.

I look at her. “What about Pastor Herring, was he a wonderful father too? Did he play with your dolls too?”

“What I’m trying to say is that you did me a favour when they didn’t want Rut to play with me; she seemed so anxious all the time, it made me nervous too. I know I

had troubles getting friends, I was terribly shy, but that's not all to do with you. This may come as a surprise," her voice is suddenly shrill, "but everything's not related to you."

"I know that!"

"Do you? It seems you're so caught up with how you feel you don't really see anyone else. Look at Anita, she's really tired, I am too. We have all lost our father!"

And here they come, the words I trapped in a cemetery in Botany Bay; the words that follow me on every walk in Elwood and echo over the bay each night; that cut like glass; a pathetic, bloody helpless whisper inside the best room in Svenstorp.

"But I lost Siri."

And then I have to leave. But there is nowhere, so I rush past Anita's husband Lars and nearly break the glasses on the tray he's holding and down to the cellar where I once tried to strike up a conversation with a boy called Björn. I feel like beating my head against the heater, smash it really hard. Make it shatter all over the floor. There.

And I fall down the dark hole that once again is inviting me in. Almost relieved, I curl into the familiar cave. It is very still and dark inside. Soft on the ground. Gradually I become aware of a sound somewhere. It takes me a while to realise where this awful pitiful sound is coming from: it's coming from me.

And someone somewhere is watching me.

"*Såja, såja*, there, there." His arms scoop me up and hold me tight. He is helping me to sit as I gasp for air. "It's all right," he says, "have a cry, *såja, såja*, there, there," like a lullaby.

And I give in, rocking, resting against him.

"I know," Lars says gently, letting go of me, "that Anita sounds harsh at times, but she doesn't mean it. She always comes out sharper than what she means to. I know she's been worried for you, it just comes out a bit clumsy, that's all."

"I know," I cry, "I know."

And then he says very quietly: "Who is Siri?"

I look out the tiny window, the darkness outside.

"A girl," I finally say. "I had a baby girl. We called her Siri."

"Siri." He says her name in real Svenstorp dialect. No rolling R's like the ones I learnt in acting school: a guttural sound, almost silent, as if to be used sparingly. "Siri."

“You know, like Strindberg’s wife. Mark thought it was very Swedish of me, but she was actually Finnish.”

We’re silent again. There’s just the sound of Lars’ breath, it’s almost like a sighing at the end of each little puff, as if it costs him too.

“And Mark?”

“No,” I shake my head, “well, he had to leave. It was too much. I mean, I was too much.”

I suddenly remember Mark’s mother phoning me, telling me how I had to understand how *traumatised* Mark was by it all. How I had pictured her standing there, looking out over the water in her three-storey home in Mosman, a house so deceptively small from the street where I was invited only once but how she straight away knew that I wouldn’t do for her youngest son. I didn’t fit in among in-laws in suits and women in heels and blow-dried hair, and real estate talk and professional flute-playing sisters entertaining us in the library boring us silly, and dressed-up neighbours with steely faces popping over for a pre-Christmas drink. “And this is Mark’s little friend from Sweden,” she had said, looking down at her festive mince tarts, as if delivering an amusing anecdote: “his latest leading lady.”

I only met her once, and then that phone call. And how I couldn’t say anything more to her clipped vowels of “He hasn’t been able to write for three months and get on and get over and not right” than “I See and Understand and Sorry.”

I’m sitting on the foldout bed in the cellar and my hands feel so cold when I hear another, very quiet, “I’m so sorry.”

He grabs hold of my hands. “I don’t think you realise,” he says slowly, “but it has always struck me that you’re a person much loved. Like John,” he continues a bit embarrassed, “like the apostle.”

I finally look at Lars. A middle-aged man with the beginning of a paunch and a good-natured smile, a constant next to Anita whom I’ve never paid much attention to, never really talked to before. It’s always been about practical things with Lars, like where to park the car or how to stack the dishwasher.

“You know, Lars,” I say, “You would actually make a really good pastor.”

“Oh I don’t know about that!” He’s suddenly looking a bit shy. Pushing up his glasses on the forehead, he’s looking thoughtfully ahead, as if he is considering my suggestion.

“You probably don’t believe it,” he finally says, “but I’m quite happy selling home insurances.” He takes off his glasses and slowly wipes them on his flannelette shirt.

“You know,” his voice is very quiet when it returns, “it might be a strange thing to say, but I can’t help think how right Konrad was about you. Yes,” he continues thoughtfully “your dad—and please don’t take it the wrong way, I know he meant it in the nicest way—always used to say, There’s always so much life around Christina!” He leans forward and gives me a pat on the cheek before leaving.

I lie back down on the foldout bed. I can see stars through the tiny window. The stars are not like in Australia, so clear and bright, always overwhelming me with their confident sparkle, lighting up the turned around moon. The colours are bleaker here, as if to be used sparingly, as if not certain how long they will last.

Across the globe somewhere is Mark.

To my surprise, he didn’t get angry when I told him. In fact, he loved it; he loved the idea of becoming a father. He slowed down, as if we suddenly had all the time in the world. Suddenly he spent as much time shopping in the supermarket as browsing imported magazines in the alternative bookstore. Cooking casseroles in the night, he fussed what fruits and vitamins I should take, boasting to his friends on the phone about how I was growing. He’d stroke my belly and we’d make love so softly—as if I, too, were a miracle. In the morning he would write, and I’d sit quietly beside him, still too intimidated to read anything but detective stories in case he’d ask for my opinion. But really I was watching him, not quite sure of what to make of this new, filled with *tenderness*, Mark.

I bought my books in Queen Victoria Building. I loved walking around there, the different levels of glamorous shops, the renovated stained-glass windows. I know it was considered too touristy by Mark. But the truth was I felt more at home there than in the trendy cafés and small alleyways of Newtown. As if it was a suitable place for a visitor. Sometimes I’d go to the library behind the cathedral and read the Swedish paper *Dagens Nyheter*, a week too old. “*Stockholm, -2 degrees*,” I’d read, contented, before walking out in the sharp sunlight to take the train back to Mark again. It was like a holiday. Sometimes I’d fantasise that they could see me at home and marvel at my lifestyle. The sun always seemed to be shining those months or if it was raining it was one of those exotic rains, a thunderous, tropical pouring.

And then Siri was born far too early and it was no one's fault, they explained. And we never sat quietly again.

In the dark room of the cellar, I fall asleep, thinking about my parents. When I wake up, they're sitting next to me.

"I didn't mean to upset anyone," I say. I address this to Jesus and the Devil standing in the shadows, too.

Next time I wake up they're gone. I have no idea what the time might be as I stumble up the stairs.

Anita and Lotta are sitting quietly together on the couch, looking through the *Songbook of Praise*, discussing in hushed tones.

"When are you having the baby?" I say from the doorway.

"In six months," she says, "and then we'll come for a visit. We were just saying," she continues, "Anita and I, how we've never visited you."

I'm amazed how Lotta seems to have taken over. I can see that Anita's been crying.

"It's all right," I turn to Anita. "I'll read the hymn."

"Too late," she answers, "we've just spoken to the pastor. Lotta will read."

In a sharp movement, Anita looks at me and adds abruptly, "little sister." She turns her head again, her chin a gentle tremble.

We all look out the window in silence. A wind is picking up, sweeping tiny particles of snow up in the air.

Abide with me; fast falls the eventide.

Practising Orienteering

It is my father's funeral, and his coffin is placed on the stage, surrounded by tasteful flowers. My mother would have approved. The church is filled with people. He would have liked that. They will miss him now, someone told me on the way in. Dear Konrad: Always so faithful, always sitting at the same pew, eagerly looking forward to hearing from God's messenger or a hymn to His glory.

And here we are. A coffin and three sisters. I glance at them sideways. Auntie Gertrude is sitting further to the side in the same pew, looking frail in a fur-lined coat, her younger sister already buried and now her sister's clumsy husband.

Further back is Nilla. I shyly greeted her outside the church before the service. After I left Svenstorp, she's been following me in dreams over the years, quietly observing as I fell down towers and jumped torrid rivers. A reminder of how my life could have looked like, on the path straight and narrow perhaps: to university straight after high school, then a move to Gothenburg and a nice job as a recruiter in Human Resources; a beautiful house close by the archipelago; married to a nice man from a neighbouring church, and already the mother of two children in suitable ages apart. I couldn't have followed Nilla's appearance though: petite with enormous blue eyes under a blonde fringe, discreetly well dressed, and still carrying that vulnerability about her that men often find so attractive. But although I was often compared to her by my parents and never to my advantage, it was always impossible to dislike her. She seemed genuinely delighted to see me. And me her, I realised. I can vividly remember going on our walks, then, completely out of our depth. Walking in the shade, close to abysses we didn't properly understand. But she never deserted me. And when I left, she was happy for me too, almost relieved.

I watch Anita holding Lars' hand, their children big-eyed and restless following the procedures on stage from our front pew, Lotta leaning into her newly arrived partner Per. I suddenly remember Lena's mother. At Lena's funeral in Träby state church, her mother sat by herself in the front pew: A small woman in a crumpled black dress and coat, holding onto a silly-looking patent-leather purse. I remember how she looked so lonely, and my impulse to join her. We were all sitting at the back, in the big and almost empty church. A much-whispered-about death, yet only a

few teachers and students turned up to listen to the priest's hollow words, somehow looking as if it was beneath him to talk about her: Lena. The hedgehog girl. Her mother didn't thank us for coming either. As we stood there, later on the church steps, the shawl around her face loosened and a tiny strand of hair landed on her cheek. At the grave, I focused on this piece of soft hair as she stared at us with contempt, as if she blamed us for being there. There was no father there. His job was done.

Once, before I left, I went to the grave. It was hard to find. A simple cross with only her first name and *Why?* carved into the flat stone.

She looks so young, the Mission church's new pastor. I look at her pouring ashes on my father's coffin. Listen to her softly spoken words and radiant faith in my father's ascension to somewhere heavenly.

As I listen to my father's glowing report card, I return to thoughts of Australia.

My temporary job at the library is soon coming to an end. And then there I am. Sue's expecting me back in Elwood in a few days. She called me yesterday from London to make sure. I have no doubt, that if I told her that I wasn't able to she would replace me in no time.

I'm probably the only person who would fly across the world to mind a flat and a dog, but it's all I've got. The thought of Caesar lit up the church.

And it's closer to Botany Bay.

Sue asked me if I'd heard from Mark. Apparently he was trying to get hold of me; apparently he was concerned to hear about my father. Apparently.

I look at my father's coffin shining by the candles when it strikes me that Mark didn't leave me because of Siri. It started much earlier. A disaster waiting to happen.

Once, I pretended I was a dog.

It was just before Mum died, and we were rehearsing that play and everything was tense and awful. Mark and I had had some sort of fight. And I had slammed the door to the bedroom really hard and was so upset I was shaking, as if I suddenly realised how loose our arrangement was—with me being there, under his roof, in his bed. It was getting dark and I was watching the man in the opposite terrace having a smoke and drinking a beer when I started to feel silly. I heard the door-bell ring. I could hear voices downstairs. There was sound of music and of the fridge opening

and closing, of laughing and carryings on. It sounded so great. Like there was this wonderful life going on downstairs just outside my reach and I was left, being too over the top to take part. As the man in the opposite terrace stood up and threw a butt over the railing and went inside, he turned off the lights and everything became dark all around me. Here I am, in a bedroom across the world and I don't know what to do, I thought. I don't know how to make it change. All I wanted was for Mark to knock on the door and say something light, to make it all go away, invite me downstairs. And I'd have a beer and everyone would say: Where were you? We missed you! With dear, kind faces. And when I was feeling the most pathetic I suddenly thought that maybe I did have the power to change it! If I did something really funny? Make such an entrance downstairs everyone would laugh themselves silly. Mark would laugh most of all.

Somehow, I decided the best way to achieve this was to play a dog.

Down the stairs, wagging my imaginary tail on all fours, I started to enjoy myself. I really found my character! A lovable rough-and-tumble kind of dog, with an eager kind of bark. I could hear they were in the kitchen. They seemed to be playing cards around the kitchen table where the laughter and jokes and teasing were drifting through the door towards me in a warm breeze. I got eager then, and barked louder. As I buffed my nose against the door and entered the kitchen it took me a while to realise it had become very quiet. There were only three of them; I recognised the heavy boots as belonging to Mark's acting friend Steve and the brown second-hand ones to his other close mate, Nick. Jumping towards Mark's R.M. Williams boots, I eagerly started sniffing them underneath the table and, panting, placed my adorable head in his lap. It was by then dead silent in the room. Suddenly there was a scraping of a chair and someone muttering something and then a louder, "Jesus fucking Christ!" and then a slam of a door; a hand pushing me away and a "bloody sick" echo in the hallway.

I didn't know what to do. So I just continued my way up the stairs again, still a dog—although a somewhat subdued and much saddened dog. I returned to the bedroom and lay down on the floor, tail between my legs. Realising that instead of entertainment, I had provided a sense of horror. Then I got frightened too.

Mark was suddenly standing in the doorway. His legs looked tired, his voice short. "All right," he said, "so what are you saying? That I treat you like a dog?" He slumped down on the floor. When I finally looked up from my paws it was almost

completely dark outside. I could just make out his face, his eyes a strange glimmer. To my surprise there were tears in them.

“It was meant to be a joke,” I finally said, “you know, to lighten up the mood a bit.”

“A joke,” he repeated dumbly, “it was meant to be a joke?”

“Yeah,” I said, “But I guess it didn’t work.”

Suddenly Mark grabbed me harshly around my shoulders and embraced me clumsily. “A joke,” he kept repeating and then he started to laugh, a strange, lonely, bewildered laughter. So I started laughing too, the same kind of laughter. Then we both got really drunk; we didn’t know what else to do.

I heard him later, smoking into the receiver of his beloved phone, striding confidently in the kitchen and making announcements about misunderstandings, laughing to his friends about Swedish sense of humour, the mad bastards, and Bergman and Strindberg and darkness and gloom.

When I bumped into Nick and Steve a few weeks later at a party, I took a deep breath. I strode up to them my confidence enhanced by several glasses of wine and said lightly, “Sorry guys. I didn’t mean to upset you the other night. It was meant to be a joke.”

Nick held up his hands in front of him the moment he saw me heading towards them as if protecting himself, muttering, “No worries, mate,” and took off. I was left with Steve in his motorbike leather jacket and sharp face. He suddenly leaned forward and said in his smooth acting voice, “Just promise me one thing.”

“Yeah, sure, what’s that?”

“Promise me you’ll never become a comedian.”

He slapped me awkwardly on my back and with an added, “You scared the shit out of me,” beneath his breath, he ventured back into a beaming circle of friends, all down-to-earth Australians relaxing with beer and some great amiable joke.

Sitting in a church pew at my father’s funeral, I finally find this memory hilarious: Their frightened faces, my stupid barking. To my horror I start giggling. I can’t stop, I’m laughing aloud now, despite Anita shoving me in the side. I take the tissue she provides, absolutely beside myself with laughter. I bury my face inside the tissue, shaking. I’m going to suffocate any moment now, I think. The world is a crazy, mad place, and I realise that I’m actually crying.

I blow my nose and try to focus on the surroundings. The podium. The tapestry. The cross. The inside of the church, with all its members, who never lifted a finger. You crushed me! I suddenly want to stand up and say: with your rules and self-righteousness. Look at what you've done! My congregation, my church, I want to shout: you used to be gigantic. Do you know that you're shrinking?

Yes, when did they turn into such a small cluster? Something strange is going on. The congregation seem to be completely disappearing now. The pastor vanishes through a hidden door on the podium. The pulpit is gone. The organ. Even *tant Eivor*. There is no movement. Only stillness.

Except for my father. He's rising up from the coffin, wearing, to my surprise, a green sports overall and holding up a compass like a person practising orienteering. Gone is the ice-cold angel outfit I saw him in last time. He moves swiftly towards me, smiling. I can tell he's in a good mood, like when I was a child and we would make jokes. Or when he told us about Seekers and the hard-working Greeks or the benefits of eating potatoes, and we all listened. It's a secret he confides: this newfound talent. It's a trick, and slowly he shows me too, how the members of the congregation are really still there. But they are so small, that's all. We hold the same fears as you, they whisper; we too were once children who were hurt. Our hands hold grievances and heavy loads of disappointment to carry. Injured birds that never took off, but inside here we feel safe. Secure. Part of a whole. And we are all part of each other. And sometimes you've got to be bigger than you feel. And we always forgave you, your mother and I, he explains, his compass still in his hand: What else is there?

And I tell him.

My father nods and holds up his compass towards the gallery; he leaves the church quietly in his soft, squeaking sneakers; the cross handles closing gently behind him.

Lotta stands up. As she walks up on stage the pews start growing again to a humming sound, but only a little. She has a hymn to read. The one Father loved. She is so beautiful, my sister. The girl who used to play with dolls on the Herring's lawn looks at me and nods. It seems a different hymn that she is reading. They must have changed it.

Be not afraid. There is a name, a secret token

That will protect you now as you leave.

Your solitude carries you shorewards towards the light.

Be not afraid. In the sand there are trails to retrieve.

And I suddenly find myself, like Aristotle once did, with a plan.

Eskil Emilsson doesn't stand up until it's all but over. There have been speeches at the Wake; there have been hymns. The pastor is just going to "finish off with a little devotion," when she's interrupted.

"Am I too late?" he says very loudly, the way people do when they themselves are hard of hearing. "What do you think, Pastor?"

She smiles her beautiful Christian smile at him as he gets to his feet and laboriously makes his way up the podium, wildly swinging his walking stick. As the pastor walks off stage to make room for the man in thick woollen socks rolled up over clogs and a colourful Norwegian cardigan with reindeers and snowflakes splashed in front—in sharp contrast to the other funeral guests in black—he scrounges through the big plastic bag he's brought with him with a supermarket chain printed on it, and a nervous silence descends upon the audience. It's something about how he holds himself up, as if he could fall any moment, even a suppressed giggle here and there can be heard; there is something wildly comical yet painfully vulnerable about my father's old friend Eskil. He finally gets hold of the sheets of paper he's looking for and looks confusedly at them. The papers are written with a thick felt pen in capital letters and there are many of them, all mixed up, and he scratches his head trying to work out where to start. It's going to be a long speech, we can sense. As he fumbles with his papers his eyes suddenly well up.

In a booming voice he announces, "You would have thought the banks with all their might could have been a bit more merciful, but money rules, yes money rules," he repeats. "And we asked ourselves: Will we ever see Konrad smile again? And we sawed some timber to make some seats. So the guests would have somewhere to sit at the Wake." He wipes his eyes. "*Ja*, yes, it was a terrible day."

As he continues fumbling with the sheets and dropping some of them to the floor we eventually realise the day he is talking about are in fact two. But Eskil Emilsson is right: both are indeed terrible days:

Konrad's Tale

From Småland, anno 1931

“In the meagre year of thirty-one, farmers lay awake, adding figures and scratching their heads. The banks, so sweet-tongued and mild just a few years ago were counting too. Old farms, having withstood famines for generations, were being auctioned out all around the neighbourhood. That miserable autumn it seemed our turn had come. Many good wives of Ängsby were struck down by illness, one after the other. Me mother too, was lying in bed, cancer eating her away. And at the opposite farm, Aron's wife was taken off to the Värnaved hospital. Despite me mother being unwell, she still had time to worry about Anna, the pious wife of the unreliable Aron and mother of three little ones. She sent me with some fresh liver from autumn slaughter; I even milked the cows. I didn't worry about the amusement caused from me doing women's chores.

You see, I liked that little boy of Aron's, Konrad, and, wherever I was, father yours followed. “One day I'll be the biggest farmer in the parish, wont I, Eskil?” he'd say, “I'll look after my mother and sisters then!” “Me little shadow,” I used to call him, I was rather fond of children, you see, and he was so eager, somehow, that little fellow!

I remember Disa, a neighbour's wife, serving a meal in the kitchen that day. The little one, Gerda, well you were only a baby then and sitting on Disa's lap, sucking your thumb, most of ye face buried in her stomach. Konrad's twin sister, Inga, I remember had a piece of cloth wrapped around your arm—you burnt it when trying to light the stove, you told me.

“Eskil,” Konrad was solemn, looking up from his plate, “have you ever been as far away as Värnaved?”

“Jo, yes,” I replied, “that's where we sell ours pigs and calves at the market!”

He pushed his plate aside, and pleaded with me to follow him outside.

It was early November and already darkening and I looked—What's that hymn again, you played?—I looked across the road towards my homestead, thinking of me mother—*Abide with me*. That's how I was thinking, that's what I was hoping, God help us all.

“How far is it, Eskil, how far is it to Värnaved?” Konrad asked. “When I was little,” he said, “I used to think Värnaved was just behind that roof,” and pointed to the roof of our neighbour Carlsson’s barn, a kilometre or so away. “I couldn’t imagine anything farther away. But it’s not, is it Eskil? It’s much farther away where mother mine is.”

“Yes,” I agreed, “it’s much farther. It’s farther away than Kulla and school yours. Maybe one day I’ll take you there, Konrad!”

“It is a pity, you can’t take me now, Eskil,” he replied so sombrely.

“Yes, Mother yours would have liked that.”

And then: a carriage approaching from far away. Aron, father his, jumped off at some distance. I remember there was something about the way he carried himself. How something so awful grabbed hold of me, squeezing me fifteen-year-old body tight. It has arrived, I thought, it is here now, it has come!

Then Konrad started running and suddenly his sisters were outside and running too. We watched their flight, Disa and I, their bare feet flying over the gravel in the cold November night.

They can say what they want about Aron and plenty did: that he had little judgement and sense. He liked his drink too much: A gambler and prankster, not capable of looking after his inheritance. This is true. But Aron loved his children.

Aron scooped them up in his arms and held them tight. He carried his children into the night; his hat fell on the road, a big pair of boots making its mark in the sand. Death had come to Ängsby. Come to the sound of girls crying, crying because of father theirs. The missing hits you much later. Inga was patting her father’s cheek, I remember this sight.

Only Konrad was silent, his face as bleak as the darkening evening.

I hid in the barn. I did the milking and feeding and was outside with two buckets of milk, dreading to take them into the house, when me father, Isak, found me.

“You’re a good boy, Eskil” he said brusquely, before Disa stood beside us.

“I’ve put them to bed,” she said. “Inga is trying to console the little one, but I don’t think she understands much. Father theirs—” she hesitated a little, as if looking for a word for the occasion, the misery born witness to: “*otröstelig*,” she finally settled for; “Aron is inconsolable.” She sighed. “I’ll make sure there’ll be enough cake for the wake. Anna should have no reason to feel ashamed; I’ll make sure of that.” She looked at us, two generations of men as bare-scraped as the earth around

us. It was always the forest that saved us; plenty of good wood keeping poverty away. Yet again the forest provided. My father went out the next day and cut down some fir trees for the coffin. Disa turned to the buckets. "I'll bring them inside," she said, "It's a pity if it goes to waste."

She walked away in the dark November night. In six months she'd be gone too. When death came to Ängsby it took as many as it could: strong, hardworking farmers' wives, mostly, my mother leaving this earth shortly after Disa. And a few men preferring the rope to leaving their land. We kept the banks away, though, each helping out the best they could, and things slowly turned for the better the following year. Except for Aron."

Eskil looks at his notes and suddenly goes quiet. As he fumbles with his papers, the pastor seizes the opportunity. She thanks him so sincerely and he stumbles down stage somehow managing to escape the rest; he is nowhere to be seen when we gather later for coffee and cake or shake the hands with all those who came. He leaves the other day of horror behind him, a day I see so clearly, although it was a day my father never spoke about.

It is set in the following spring and all around the world the news is still bleak. The oaks and larch trees are covered in green, the sky almost white, promising a summer to come as glorious as a Swedish summer can be. There is Isak sitting by the kitchen table looking through the accounts, and there is Aron, my grandfather, walking up towards the back entrance. He has been busy of late, desperately trying to get his bonds signed by someone still willing to believe in him. Isak knows, because he has been inside his home too. But they know they cannot help him any more without being reckless with what they have been given themselves.

Isak pities him. He believes him to be a decent man, just impractical, a dreamer not cut out for this life. Isak even went begging to Anna's brother, Johan, a wealthy unmarried man, with plenty of land. He went to him because he knew Aron could not bring himself. He pleaded with Johan for the sake of the children, "Anna's children," he reminded him.

"That fool," Johan replied, "that madman, put my sister in an early grave." A mean-spirited, tall man with big feet and matching sense of importance: "I will not do business with him, brother-in-law or not!"

I never saw you make any attempt to make your sister's life any easier, Johan-large-holder-of-land, Isak thought to himself. He left as empty-handed as he came, holding his cap tightly in his hands together with the reins of his horse, thinking how it was usually the ones who could make a difference that did nought.

There is Aron standing in front of his old friend, a piece of paper shaking in his hand. He throws it on the table in a sudden gesture: "*Ja nu ä ett gjort*, now it is done!"

And here is the day anticipated by the local paper yet never collected with the rest of my father's newspaper clippings despite it being printed on the front page: An announcement by the Savings Bank of Svenstorp, one among many others, that the farm and land, as well as most of the estate is going under the hammer—what is left of it. A day witnessed by the neighbours, who watch the once-proud farm being sold for a pittance by a businessman from Värnaved, quietly wondering what he might want the land for. It turns out he will later sell the house piece by piece, deal by deal, to the Träby local folklore society where someone wants to resurrect the once-imposing house to be saved for future generations. The parts will eventually rot away behind another house in the park, money and a war coming in between someone's grand vision. The businessman will sell off the forest too, and then move in with his maid for a few years in the small cottage next to where the big house once stood. Disliked by everyone, he will eventually move back to Värnaved, his time in Ängsby by then turned into an anecdote, a whim soon forgotten.

Aron is nowhere to be seen this day, but Konrad is. Patiently, he will stand there, watching everything. Someone tries to tempt him away with the promise of a meal, of a play, but he will not budge. When they start selling the pieces of furniture Aron has not yet sold off, Eskil walks up to him. They watch without a word the grandfather clock being carried off to a horse carriage. Not until Anna's old chiffonier jokingly and carelessly is being taken away by two burly men in suits, Eskil thinks he can detect a gasping sound from the boy. Konrad suddenly stumbles as if he's attempting a move forward when Eskil grabs hold of his arm.

"That's enough," Eskil says to Konrad, "we're going to have something to eat." Konrad follows Eskil obediently. He's seen enough. He knows what has been taken. He knows his plan as he walks away with his big friend Eskil.

It will be too late with the farm. But the clock shall one day tick inside his house again. The chiffonier will stand in the best room. A few memories he will give his

sisters. And every time he walks past the clock he will remember: That day, when he learnt so much about this world, his secret, his knowledge to keep.

This Sunday too shall come to a close, the evening bringing quiet to the village of Ängsby, apart from a few drunken farm-hands having returned from a swim in the lake, singing out of tune on the country road. Behind them walks Aron, slightly swaying. He makes his way up to the stable and comes back with Perla. She has been sold cheaply to Isak, but the horse has one more carriage to pull for him. It is loaded with the few belongings he has held onto. A rented cottage, cheap as they come, is waiting several miles away, further away than the children have ever been. Once more Aron looks over the land of his forefathers. A neighbour has taken the children to Sunday school in the Mission House today. There, Konrad and Inga received a Bible from the kind teacher. The little one has been snuggled and spoilt by the villagers the best they can. They have all been spoilt with treats today, and there is more waiting for them: a whole basket with newly made buns has been packed on the carriage, the children being terribly skinny of late. Inga and Konrad's attempts of house keeping have not been very successful. Aron can hardly stand looking at them any longer.

The village watch them quietly leave. Isak is taking them, Aron sitting on the carriage with little Gerda in his lap, who is excited by the unexpected ride and attention. But it is the sight of the two walking behind the carriage that will be remembered.

There is Eskil rushing out in the glorious summer night, a soft light still lingering over the village. It looks like a fairy tale, Ängsby, the soft green of the forest surrounding the meadows and flowers growing wild on the side of the gravel road where Perla is pulling the carriage. Behind them, Inga is walking with a tight grip of the newly acquired bible next to Konrad; he is holding nothing. Eskil tries to think of something to say, but the words get caught in his throat. There is nothing and the children have a long way to go into the night. As silent as the others, he let them pass.

Then he takes the bucket in his hand, walks to the barn and starts milking the cows for his father. He is, as Isak says, a good boy.

I see him, in the summer night, a boy called Konrad, walking in the quiet evening. He has already passed the big barn where he used to imagine the promise of the town

of Värnaved. At the edge of the forest, the moss is soothing against his feet. The pine trees are surrounding him, a line of needles following him all the way to a cold cottage where they will huddle together and watch their father's angry sleep. Above him, stars watch how far away the night is going to take him. New shapes and sounds surround him. They do not frighten him. All has already been lost.

Comrades

The day after the funeral, I follow Auntie Gertrude to an art exhibition in Träby, surprised by such a cultural establishment in Träby but mostly that she didn't scoff at going to such a small-town do; it was she who suggested it after reading about it in the local paper.

Anita was relieved to see us gone for a few hours. Lotta's gone back home with her partner and waiting needy families. Lawyer Sörensson, who is looking after Dad's estate, has been and gone too. As he was leaving, he turned around to me and said, "Your father, he didn't practise orienteering by any chance?"

I looked at him, stunned. "No," I finally managed, "he never practised any sport, why?"

"Oh, it was just something I used to think of when I saw him out and about: There was vigour in his step, especially at his age!"

Once again, I'm left with a vision of my father in a sport overall and compass pounding through the pine woods, stepping through wet moss on the bog-lands. It was somehow a comforting image; I let him stay.

It's a small exhibition hall with no big names apart from two glass sculptures from one of the Kosta Boda designers; but the white-washed walls and carefully lit paintings feel soothing, like being able to breathe again. I sense Auntie Gertrude feels the same. Her posture is relaxed, looking thoughtfully at some tiny bronzed figures raised on a barrel. I walk towards her, when something catches my eye across the hall.

It's a big painting with striking colours, almost taking up a wall by itself.

"Isn't it marvellous," I hear Auntie Gertrude's voice behind me, "so filled with life. And the girl, look at her beaming at you. The colours remind me of a Strindberg exhibition I saw at the National Art Gallery. I actually believe he was as good a painter as writer! And certainly ahead of his time in his palette—"

"Indeed," I agree indulgently, thinking she's probably read it in the *Swedish Daily*.

Auntie Gertrude suddenly turns to me sharply. “You’ve never thought of becoming a writer?”

I look at her.

“You always liked to read as a girl; you always loved your books!” She states this commandingly, as if this would be news to me.

And then I tell her.

She looks curiously at me, pursing her lips: “And what would you write about, may I ask?”

About grief and fear and bloody disaster, I think.

“About going away,” I finally say.

“Oh!” Auntie Gertrude looks at me doubtfully: “*surely* that can’t be material enough for a whole book?”

“Well, we’ll see,” I say, smiling, adding: “Can I ask you something, Auntie Gertrude? Why did you leave Svenstorp, it must have been quite unusual in your time?”

She returns her gaze to the painting again and self-consciously fishes up her glasses from her bag. “When my father died,” she says, a tone of bitterness to her voice, “I was only fourteen. He had trained me to take over since I was twelve: He recognised my business brain as he called it and thought I was quite capable despite my age. But it’s disgraceful how low some people stoop. His supposedly friend and business colleague spread the word that he was taking over my father’s contracts according to his wishes when he died, and the phone stopped ringing before he was even buried. It took some time to work all that out, and by then my uncle thought he and my brother were better equipped to take over. “It’s not a job for a chit of a girl!” Uncle said, and refused to let me have my share. So I took the train to Stockholm in 1937, and I never regretted it for one moment!” She inhales sharply and bites her lip, suddenly looking like a young schoolgirl. She shakes her head disapprovingly.

Composed now, she returns to me: “I’m meeting an old acquaintance for lunch, would you care to join us for a bite to eat? Or a glass of wine, perhaps?”

Slowly, I face the painting once again: The glory of the glowing girl in bright colours in the centre; the shadowy figure in the background, by the pine table. Well, the pine table is missing, but I know it’s there. Just like the delicate feet. I read on the little notice below. “*Rehearsal*,” it’s titled. It’s by the well-known local artist Svenne Janssen.

“No, thank you, Auntie,” I finally manage.

“Well, suit yourself,” she replies, adding, “I wish you well with your book.”

I watch her head towards the exit and nod slightly to her. I turn to the painting once more and wipe my face with my sleeve as discreetly as I am capable of before I too head towards the exit, and I breathe as deeply as I can.

A Dream Play

The play is a hit.

I look sharply at Sofie, who plays the capitalist swine and so nervous she's shaking in her suit and has started to laugh hysterically with the porn editor. Alessandro is busy putting out little notes everywhere on the set: next to the lamp where he's going to accuse me of not being any fun anymore, on the side table where he's going to pour himself a drink. He hasn't bothered to learn the lines of course. A wedding photo of us is hanging on the wall.

As the murmur of school-mates rises behind the curtain, Svenne talks reassuringly to us. Somehow he seems much older nowadays. I've started to find his talks about revolution a bit tedious. A part of me has removed myself from him and his curly soft hair. I listen, but not too much and not all of the time. I've decided I still like Strindberg. One day I'm going to look straight into his dark-blue eyes and tell him.

I try to breathe deeply the way Svenne has taught us. I'm not sure whether I want to give in to laughter or throw up or both. The other members of our play are looking as frightened. Alessandro, who has grown a kind of a moustache for the play keeps muttering, "*Helvete ochså*, bloody hell, what's my first line again?" He sits down on the armchair, looking fervently at the little note next to him.

Svenne is on his way out to the audience when he suddenly turns around to me. He gives me a superstitious kick and mutters, "Christina: I know you'll be great!"

Everything goes pitch black and he's gone before I have the chance to throw my arms violently around him and keep him there. Step onto his delicate feet with my big ones and make a dance. Or push him to the ground.

Sofia's shaking legs sweep past me; it's time to start the play.

The audience: I can hear them. A living breathing beast, filling up every corner of the building, on stage and behind it; a collective, horrified gasp; a laughing in-breath at Alessandro dressed up as a middle-aged frustrated Swede in a crocheted tie.

Behind the curtain, I am filled with something so wondrous and scary I start growing; growing so big it nearly knocks me out. Look at me overflowing! I am a

giant, I am up myself, and I am completely over the top! I am *euphoria*, I am power, I am anything I like: it's the power of disguise, isn't it!

I grab hold of my mother's old handbag, ready for my pretend life. I'll take as much time as I need hurling lines at my husband and waiting for him to find his reply under the newspaper or dirty magazine. If he can't find his words, I will. And it doesn't matter if some in the audience won't understand, just like Aristotle promised, there are others who will.

High on adrenalin, Christina, oppressed housewife, and powerful actor in a play enters, no runs, onto stage.

I am a clumsy stumble in front of Alessandro now, a roaring laughter filled with anti-capitalist desires, as I declare mid-air, "Do your own washing, I'm not your slave! I am my own person and I have rights too!"

There is a slight rustle of paper, a moustached panicky face in front of me.

"Stop ... nagging?" he repeats, reading, relieved, from my lips on the floor: "I'm busy!"

He looks kind of sweet.

Afterwards I think, I should have told him, Svenne, I should have told him: that I have finally learnt about the art, the power, of disguise.

Christina's Going Away

When it's time to leave, it has started to rain. There's not much snow left, only the occasional sluggish mountain of brown ice spread out here and there on the pathway down to the station. Anita poked her head in early morning, in her fake-fur hat, before leaving for work: "You know you're always welcome back," she said. To my surprise, she was crying.

I patted her clumsily on the back.

It's almost dark at the bus stop even though it's only late afternoon. There are only a few of us boarding the bus to Jönköping-Gothenburg. Endless rows of fir trees show the way ahead, the narrow country road covered in a damp fog.

Looking out over the dark, drizzling landscape, I suddenly remember what Sue once told me unexpectedly affectionately: "Mark was as bewildered and lost as you, you know."

And I remember when we found out it was a girl at the ultrasound. "I hope she'll look just like you," he said, his voice as soft as his grip around my arm.

A moment, that's all.

I think of when I left the last time. How it felt like all of Svenstorp was watching then. How I looked out of the window in the brilliant summer green and thought in my teenage way: Look at me leaving you all! In my bag I had a notice of being accepted into a prestigious acting course.

The only sight disturbing me had been Lotta unexpectedly turning up at the station. It was her first day of the school holidays and she made a pale and thin figure on the steps, her pink corduroy pants with an embroidered butterfly on her skinny hips needing a constant hitching up. As the bus turned into Grand Street, she started waving so sombrelly I could almost not bear to wave back. Further and further away the bus made its way towards Träby and she was still waving. But I quickly left her there and turned my thoughts towards my future. How I would do something so amazing they'd all, all of Svenstorp, regret it. Regret what, I wasn't exactly sure.

But the further away from Svenstorp I came, a thought started to grab hold of me: His will is done.

I was going away just like Pastor Herring had wanted me to. I was more than halfway there and I remember a sudden feeling of shame taking over. My triumph was a joke. The Svenstorpers all knew, they were really laughing at me instead; they were all pleased to be rid of me.

I will never go back again, I thought.

“Go away, Christina,” he had almost begged, choking almost pathetically that night when I tried to join the church again: “Please, just go away!”

And I felt a short moment of triumphant power before he took me into his darkness.

His hands, they were so small really. Feminine almost. Perfect nails on slender fingers that pinched and pressed so angrily against my arms, my head, my throat.

It hurts.

I can’t breathe.

His breath in my ear, “God doesn’t want you! God hates you, Christina, do you hear?”

I hear.

He used to say that he was like a father for his flock. But real fathers do not cover you in darkness, although they too might have struggled against forces more powerful than themselves.

I lean my head against the cool, damp window and watch the other passengers in their colourful, lined jackets, magazines with half-done crosswords on their laps. They rustle with the bags next to them that are filled with sweets and fruit. They look eagerly ahead, as if going on an adventure, their gravel-filled heavy boots creating a puddle beneath them as the sleet and snow melt in the comfortable heat of the bus.

There are words for men like the pastor now.

I didn’t have any then.

Instead, I changed my name. On the first day of acting school I introduced myself with my middle name. I never wanted to hear anyone whisper once more the dreaded Christina. She was gone, and I was born again.

Except in Svenstorp, of course.

I return to the shadows outside. The window is damp against my forehead. In the daytime, I imagine the desolate-looking forest to be filled with people running, inhaling the fresh smell of fir, treading the pine-needle paths in soft shoes, exclaiming for joy when finding yet another control point. Soon I'll be walking on Elwood Esplanade with Caesar. A stranger with newly bought sunglasses and colourful shorts. But I'll be safe.

And then there is a jolt and a swerving, and the bus starts dancing on the road. So sudden, and yet it is a dance so assured in its timing, as if waiting for the music to start; one step to the right, one to the left. The surprise of it all! The bus is dancing merrily to screaming breathy voices and swearing from the timid driver, and sharp car lights heading towards us in a foggy, wet mess. Like a wild moose facing its destiny from a lookout, blinded by lights from the road, it is starting to panic, skidding faster. And now the bus is heading for the pine trees waiting for us down the steep slope. The moss and fir trees are quietly preparing to receive us in their embrace. Softly, softly, the wheels turn over and we fall together, on the side; a slowing waltz in darkness now; a tuneless cheek-to-cheek to empty, turning wheels. And then, like sharp snowflakes, the glass, shattering above and on me, a warm gush, and the taste of blood.

I start running. I'm jumping over the bog-lands so easily, the soft moss giving me a sensation of flying. The smell of pine is soothing; I have so much energy I feel I could run forever. There's a clearing now leading down steep steps, towards, to my surprise, the sea. Caesar is running beside me, eagerly pulling at his leash. Forebodingly, the sea roars in the distance, crashing against the cliffs. It is hard to balance on this steep, winding path. I keep turning to see whether the shadows are following. They are running neatly behind me with big, sad eyes; behind, the imposing ghost trees are standing still. Forming neatly into a row, they shake their heads warningly. But ahead of me, someone clad in sports overall is striding with purpose. Further in, I can see a welcoming figure standing, like a wall of calmness, on the path. And then I think that what I have learnt from the words that live in darkness is that there is soothing to be found in the shade too. And how I would like to find a place to stay, and Abide with me; fast falls the eventide!

Across the shore, there's a pink dawn coming. It will thaw the frost-bitten grass on Alley road; it will rise on Lotta's face shivering by the tram stop in Gothenburg.

It will relieve our grandmother waiting by the window, and bring relief to a farmers' wife. There are breakfasts to be made, babies to be born, cows to be milked.

When I turn around again so as not to fall, further down by the shore, I make out a young girl standing. The girl is very thin. I recognise her although her hair is longer now, and there is not a trace of make-up or bruises. She's waving to me, holding something in her arms:

You.

Epilogue

As she tries to open her eyes, she hears voices, speaking in a familiar tongue; she feels crisp white coats smelling of disinfectant brushing against her as they lean over her; she's in pain, surrounded by sharp light, a shiny torch blinding her, but she thinks she might be alive.

“Christina?” she hears someone's saying.

“Yes,” she answers, her mouth like sandpaper, “that's the one.”

Acknowledgements:

Extracts from hymns in *The Lost Comedian* in order of appearance:

“Hymn for Believers”: “Thy clear sun rises once again!” (Orig. title, “Din klara sol går åter upp”) Lyrics by Johan Olof Wallin. Trans. by author. Hymn No. 420, “*Den svenska psalmboken/Melodipsalmbok 1940*, Project Runeberg. WEB. 21 April, 2007.

“Christmas Hymn” and “...and Sad Christmas Tale”: “When Christmas Morn is Dawning.”(Orig. title, “När juldagsmorgon glimmar”) Traditional. Translation from what is believed to be Abel Burckhardt’s German into Swedish by G. Berggren. English translation by Claude William Foss. Hymn No. 43, “*Den svenska psalmboken/Melodipsalmbok 1940*, Project Runeberg. WEB. 21 April, 2007.

”Welcome Hymn”: “From thy hand today...” (Orig. “Inför dig vår herde här...” Lyrics, S.Ch. G. Küster 1838) and Bengt Olof Lille (1868). Trans.by author. Hymn 245. WEB.10 January, 2011.

“Confirmation Tune”: “Give Him all...” (Orig. title, “Lev för Jesus, intet annat”) Lyrics by Lina Sandell-Berg. Translation by author. Hymn 528, second verse, “*Den svenska psalmboken/Melodipsalmbok 1940*, Project Runeberg WEB, 5 December, 2007.

“Songs of Euphoria”: “Jesus calling you.” Original title, “For those tears I died.”1969. (Title in Swedish, “Jesus kallar dig”) Lyrics by Marsha and Russ Stevens, Children of the Day. Trans. by author from the Swedish version. Arr: Nils Källström.*Halleluja del 2*. Lidköping: NYTT LIVs förlag, 1974. Print.

Hymn for a Special Occasion”: “For the moment has come.” (Orig. title, “Kom, o Jesu, väck mitt sinne”) Lyrics by Franzen. “Trans. by author. Hymn 227, “*Den svenska psalmboken/Melodipsalmbok 1940*, Project Runeberg WEB, 5 December, 2007.

“Grievances” (a recurring theme.): First line of “Abide with Me,” Abide with Me; fast falls the eventide. (Swedish title, Bliv kvar hos mig min Gud) Lyrics Henry Lyte, 1847. Hymns.me.uk. WEB, 7 November, 2008.

“Practising Orienteering.”: “Be not afraid.” Ylva Eggehorn,.” (Orig.title.“Var inte rädd”)1972. *Psalmer & Sånger*. Sec.ed. Tran.by author. Hymn 256. Örebro: Bokförlaget Libris, 1987. Print.

Editorial letter to local paper in “My Father was Grieving,” (104-105), signed “Friend of Temperance,” is loosely based on a letter published in the local paper of *Värnamo Nyheter* on the 1 September 1970, author unknown. Likewise, the poem Christina reads for *tant* Eivor (58), “I saw a sight outside my window...” is inspired by a poem by an unknown poet, read (fittingly by the window) as part of the evening entertainment at a pension where I was staying with my family as a child.

The lines Christina practises, “So you think I can’t stand the sight of blood? ...” (25), is from August Strindberg’s play, *Miss Julia. Three Plays: The Father / Miss Julia / Easter*. Trans. Peter Watts. 1958, Hammondsworth: Penguin Books, 1983. 112. Print.

The heading of Part Two and the following chapter titles of *The Lost Comedian* are borrowed from titles of Strindberg’s novels and plays: *Inferno*, *A Fool’s Apology*, *Dance of Death*, *Comrades*, and *A Dream Play*.

EXEGESIS

***BEYOND THE LATTICED VIEW: TRANSLATING SELF,
PLACE AND MEMORY IN A SECOND LANGUAGE***

You who never went out of your garden land...

*You who never went out of your garden land,
did you never stand at the latticed view
and longingly watch how on dreaming paths
the evening toned into blue?*

*Was that not a foretaste of unwept tears
that burned like a fire on your tongue,
when over ways you never went
a blood-red sun went down?*

— *Edith Södergran*

EXEGESIS

CONTENTS

<i>INTRODUCTION.....</i>	<i>4</i>
<i>CHAPTER ONE: Self-Translation: Seeking a New Self in a Second Language</i>	<i>13</i>
<i>CHAPTER TWO: Small-Town Longings and Nightmares: The Lost Comedian in the Cultural Context.....</i>	<i>30</i>
<i>CHAPTER THREE: A Walk in the Past: Memory and Creative Distance</i>	<i>47</i>
<i>CHAPTER FOUR: Practical Issues of Cultural Translation and Character Development.....</i>	<i>67</i>
<i>CONCLUSION.....</i>	<i>86</i>
<i>WORKS CITED.....</i>	<i>90</i>

INTRODUCTION

My father once sent me a book from Sweden, via a backpacker. I was somewhat surprised, since he was usually both perplexed and suspicious about fiction, a work of imagination. This hand-delivered novel is also the only book I have ever received from my father and was one of the few novels he owned. He preferred to fill his book shelf with layman biblical research, prayer books and the odd local history anthology. The novel was by the well-known Swedish writer Vilhelm Moberg and titled *A Time on Earth*. It is set in an allegorical 1960s California, where an old man reflects on his childhood in the region of Småland in Sweden, a past more real and closely felt than his present life. The protagonist might have reflected my father's position at the time—an aging man looking back on his past—but I am certain it was not for that reason that he sent the book to me.

To my surprise, after eight years of living in Australia, this novel filled me with such longing and sense of urgency that I moved back to Sweden with my family less than a year later. What was it about the novel that struck me so? Perhaps it tapped into a sense of longing and loss of which I was not even conscious. Return to your past and thus to who you truly are, it warned: one day it will be too late.

In my novel, *The Lost Comedian*, I am once again returning to the landscape of my childhood, albeit from a great distance, writing my thesis here in Australia, where I once again live after many years in Sweden. The novel is mainly set in Sweden during the 1960s and 1970s and is filled with both real characters from my past as well as imagined ones. They express themselves in a Swedish dialect of the province of Småland. Moreover, the characters speak from, and live within the context of, a culture coloured by its proud social politics in a rapidly changing society. It is, furthermore, a place shaped by its cultural heritage—by the likes of August Strindberg and Ingmar Bergman. In the novel, the progressive, larger community of Sweden is juxtaposed with the fictional and religious small-town of Svenstorp, a conservative society reluctantly embracing many of the changes taking place. The inhabitants are used to relying on their resilience, hard work and temperance and, above all, the Lord their Saviour.

When the protagonist, Christina, returns to her home in Sweden from Australia for her father's funeral, a sense of failure is hanging over her. She is consumed by a grief she cannot express, a sense of shame and lingering guilt which go back many years to when she was a teenager rebelling against her family and the traditions of Svenstorp's religious community. The refuge she sought then in small-town Träby, a place which stands as a contrast to the values of Svenstorp, was a damaging and still haunting experience.

Like my protagonist, I too return to memories from my past by writing this novel. In the process, I create and invent new recollections; it is very much a work of fiction.

Writing *The Lost Comedian* in English and from the distance of time and space posed challenging, at times confronting, but always engaging questions of translation. In this exegesis, I will look closely at some of these issues. I will also engage with the views and experiences of other writers who, like me, write in their second language.

A few of these concerns relate specifically to Swedish cultural contexts, but my overall objective is to examine how writing from a distance—not only in place and time, but also from the linguistic distance experienced when writing in a second language—might influence and interact with the narrative.

Self-translation

The notion of self-translation plays a significant part in my exegesis. Self-translation is often used to define a bilingual text “authored by a writer who can compose in different languages and who translates his or her texts from one language into another” (Jan Walsh Hokenson and Marcella Munson, 1). In my exegesis, however, I will use the term as the translation process that occurs when a bilingual writer chooses to write in a second or acquired language, translation thereby forming an integral part of the creative process. This involves multiple kinds of translation: of self, language, place, memory and culture. As Brian T. Fitch explains, “The bilingual writer is not merely aware of the existence of a multiplicity of tongues but lives in the continual presence of this awareness during the very act of writing” (Fitch, 158). The effects on language, identity and narrative when a writer “translates” him/herself by writing in a second language, and the presence of this sense of continuous duality,

are, therefore, my main concerns when employing and discussing the term “self-translation”.

In the first chapter of my exegesis, the experiences of both loss and gain in this translation process are the focus. I will examine the discourse of loss in translation and ask whether there is something also to be gained by writing in a second language. Here, I will look closely at the idea that while a first language can express a “true” self, a second language might be considered as a betrayal of this true self. This idea is discussed extensively in *Translating One’s Self* (Mary Besemeres, 2002), especially in the chapter devoted to Eva Hoffman’s autobiography *Lost in Translation* (1989). I will use Besemeres’ analysis of Hoffman, and compare my own experience of a second language to Hoffman’s, as starting points for looking at the ways in which language is bound up with the sense of identity. The varied responses of writers to their acquired language, I find, are often revealing. Through Besemeres and Hoffman I have developed an understanding of the critical process of looking at my own choices. These processes are the subject of my first chapter.

Though my first language is Swedish, I choose to write in English. As I will further explain in this chapter, this is an important distinction since some of the writers discussed in my exegesis, such as Hoffman, came to a second language in imposed, sometimes traumatic circumstances. My own circumstances are certainly different.

Nevertheless, novels or autobiographies written in a second language, for whatever reason or circumstance, have certain commonalities. The creative writing process in an acquired language raises some pragmatic and ideological issues, as not only the writing process, but subsequently also “the end product,” the actual narrative, is affected by the translation process. Writing in a second language, therefore, changes a narrative in numerous, and often unpredictable ways.

There are differences in the ways in which a bilingual writer and a monolingual writer approach language creatively. For instance, I would argue that often the self-translation and subsequent negotiation process between languages allows for a sense of freedom and experimentation in the use of language. At times it even enables a writer not just a unique approach to language, but also to subject matter, where issues too difficult and personal to speak of in a first language can find expression in a second language. I will discuss some of the possibilities inherent in this translation process with the support of writer Andrew Riemer, among others.

My argument is, therefore, that it is not only a first language that enables an expression of a true self; nor does writing in a second language necessarily mean loss: loss of language, culture, home, and by extension, identity. Writing in one's second language does not, I believe, suggest a rejection and escape, even a betrayal of the first language. Without underestimating the challenges and issues raised by the choice, I will examine the potential gain of writing in a second language as an innovative process where a new narrative, uniquely different to a first language narrative, may be created.

In the discussion of a second language writer's sense of identity in the first chapter, I will look at Dick von Hartog's examination of self-hood in *Dickens and Romantic Psychology: The Self in Time in Nineteenth-Century Literature*. I find Hartog's discourse of Romantic psychology—as further developed and used by Besemeres in order to explain Hoffman's reluctance with her new language—very adaptable and relatable to my own experiences of writing in a second language.

Hartog and Besemeres engage with the idea that either a “Wordsworthian” or “Byronic” sense of self is grounded in one's childhood. A “Wordsworthian” sense of identity is firmly attached to one's landscape of childhood, and, Besemeres means, an intrinsic part of this landscape is the language that was spoken in childhood. To remain close to the landscape and language of one's childhood is necessary in order to develop a secure sense of self, “an almost religious duty in maintaining fidelity to the personal past, of positively embracing it” (Hartog, 17). A “Byronic” idea of identity, on the other hand, is attached to a rebellious sense of self, developed from a challenge to, and an abandonment and subsequent leaving of, the secure place of childhood in order to develop (Besemeres, 38).

These concepts of looking at identity captured my imagination, and I eagerly and quickly—just like the protagonist in *The Lost Comedian*—identified with the “Byronic” position. My position stands in contrast to Hoffman's who has to maintain a sense of nostalgia towards the landscape of her childhood in order to develop and grow. I will explore this concept in the first chapter.

Paul Ricoeur's *On Translation* (2006), together with Richard Kearney's introduction to Ricoeur's philosophical essays, will form an important framework for my discussion of a writer's sense of self in translation. Kearney's introduction to Ricoeur's concept of “linguistic hospitality,” acknowledges a sense of mourning, followed by an acceptance of loss in translation as an important part of finding

“translation as a source of happiness” (Ricoeur, 10). This points to some important and complex aspects of translation. Ricoeur brings a curiosity and openness to translation, showing that inviting in “the foreign” might also invite a wider understanding, or “enlarged” sense of self. Some of these concepts will be discussed in Chapter One and serve as an analytical framework in which to place translation in a wider context.

Context and Swedish Influences

In Chapter Two, I will discuss the historical setting and important cultural influences in my novel. As I progressed with writing *The Lost Comedian*, I came to realise how significant the Swedish setting and cultural heritage is, not just for my novel, but also as a foundation and a source of inspiration for me as a writer.

This chapter will examine the parts of Swedish social history relevant to my novel. Christina’s old hometown, Svenstorp, is situated in the district of Småland which has changed from a poor farming community—where almost a quarter of the population emigrated to America in the 19th century—to an affluent, modernised, industrialised region. Svenstorp is thus an example of the material wealth that flowed from the enormous changes taking place in Swedish society after World War Two. Religious and temperance movements, vital in transforming the region in the 19th century, also play a significant role in the values of the small-town community of *The Lost Comedian*, and form another important cultural context of the novel.

Additionally, this chapter will investigate important cultural influences within Sweden, in particular playwright August Strindberg and filmmaker Ingmar Bergman, both of whom continue to influence and shape Swedish cultural values and identity. These two figures also play an important part in shaping Christina’s understanding of the world, especially in offering alternative viewpoints to those of the small-town society where she grows up. Strindberg and Bergman both hold significant fascination and inspiration for me, and will be discussed extensively in this chapter.

The films of Bergman, for example, provide an excellent guide to many of Sweden’s cultural concerns. They are full of moral conflicts, where the tension between the body and intellect is of special interest (Peter Cowie, 38-39). They also include many recurrent social motifs and the strong presence of the supernatural. As Cowie puts it, they expose a “belief in dreams as representing terror and aspiration” (39).

Many of the themes Strindberg and Bergman developed and explored through their writing and films are culturally specific to Sweden, and I believe some of these influences also inform my novel. Moral issues,—such as those associated with sex and alcohol to name but a couple— resonate in many of the characters in *The Lost Comedian*. The strongly religious undertone, such as “the idea of expiation through suffering” (Cowie, 39), is, for example, a concern that the protagonist grapples with throughout the novel. The rebellious spirit of Strindberg inspires the protagonist, and the nightmarish themes explored by Bergman play into the fears and the world of shadows surrounding Christina both as a child and an adult.

Reimagining from a Distance

The third chapter of my exegesis will explore the issues of translating the past, dealing with exile, memory and grief, and will focus on the protagonist’s new life in Australia.

In *The Lost Comedian*, I return to memories of my childhood and region, my old home and the place where I used to belong. These memories formed the basis of Christina’s childhood and adolescence in the novel. However, in the writing process, these memories were transformed into fiction: they developed and changed; they inspired and were re-invented. Thus, only fragments of true events—of “what really happened”—remain.

I will, therefore, start this chapter discussing the obvious but vital distinction between fiction and memoir, or life-narratives. For a reader, the often shady or blurred line between factual events in a writer’s life and those purely invented can engender a fascination and speculation about what is “real” and “truth.” The always controversial Strindberg will be an important to this part of the discussion.

I am also interested in “borrowed” memories. By this I mean a writer depicting the past of others who may not have any influence over whether aspects of their stories or characteristics are used and thus made public. Two chapters in my novel, “... and Sad Christmas Tale” and “Konrad’s Tale”, have caused me the greatest concern in this area. These chapters in *The Lost Comedian* remain the closest to real life even though they take place in the 1930s; both are close depictions of traumatic events in my parents’ childhood, yet at the same time completely re-fabricated. The question of how to find a balance between creatively “using” and yet still honouring a shared past is my main concern here.

Ideas linked to diaspora and exile can be traced throughout my exegesis and, in this chapter, I will use the ideas of Michael Ondaatje and Salman Rushdie to investigate what it means to write from a distance. Ondaatje's semi-autobiographical *Running in the Family* (1983) and Rushdie's insights in his seminal essay, "Imaginary Homelands," (1981) are drawn upon in this chapter, as I re-imagine a past Sweden, the landscape of my childhood. I believe this distance was vital when writing my novel: it changed the perspective. Had I been surrounded by my "old" landscape in Sweden, I am certain it would have appeared, and subsequently been portrayed, quite differently.

How does a writer's physical removal from a landscape influence his/her depiction of that landscape? Nature is of great importance here. The contrasting light and darkness of the seasons are central in the Swedish landscape, as is the almost obsessive nature of the romanticism and despair expressed about landscape in Nordic culture. I will draw on Scandinavian poets to explore this theme in my exegesis. In her poems, Edit Södergran¹ dreams of a life without constriction in the deep forests and small villages of Finland. Her poems resonate very strongly with some of the concerns of my protagonist. My own, perhaps nostalgic, preference for portraying Sweden in a frozen winter-landscape, contrasts with the landscape of Australia, and will also be discussed in this context.

Paradoxically, writing from a distance to both time and place might make the past feel closer and more accessible. I will here examine *A Time on Earth*—the novel my father once sent me—where this sense of intimacy is suggested and strongly present. Thus, just as writing about place in a different language changes a story, depicting place from a distance has a bearing on a narrative.

It is also worth noting that in the process of writing *The Lost Comedian*, I became very conscious of the fact that Christina's life in a new language was to some extent developing in contrast with my own very positive experience of my second language, as in Australia, the protagonist often seems "lost in translation". For the writer in me, this created a fruitful tension when writing both exegesis and novel.

¹ Edith Södergran (b.1892, d.1923) is recognised as one of the greatest and most influential poets of Scandinavia. She lived her short life, which was cut short by tuberculosis, in Finland, in the small village of Raviola. The village was colonised by Sweden and on the border to Russia. It later became part of Russia and The Soviet Empire. Born of Swedish-speaking parents and part of the Swedish-speaking community, Södergran's poems were mainly written in Swedish even though she never received any formal schooling in this language (See David McDuff's introduction to *Edith Södergran: Complete Poems*, 9-51).

Practical Challenges and Observations

In my fourth and final chapter, I will discuss practical issues of translation by examining some of the challenges I faced when writing my novel. I will recall *On Translation*, (Ricoeur) and will discuss *Post-Colonial Translation: Theory and Practice* (1999) by Susan Bassnett and Harish Trivedi, in particular, Maria Tymoczko's contribution, "Post-colonial writing and literary translation", as a frame work for looking at cultural translation and appropriation. How much, I ask, does a cross-cultural work need to accommodate a reader perhaps unfamiliar with the depicted cultural context?

Continuous translation challenges, such as translating humour, specific sayings and hymns, have been very much part of writing *The Lost Comedian*. It has made me reflect upon cultural differences. The emphasis on religious connotations in swearwords in Swedish—in contrast to the English language's more robust swearwords with their more sexual undertones—is one such example. In this chapter I will explore some of these differences and discuss the language and translation concerns of the novel, especially cultural translation.²

In *The Lost Comedian*, many of the characters speak not only in Swedish, but also in a very specific regional dialect. Birigitta Englund Dimitrova's article, "Translation and Dialect in Fictional Prose – Vilhelm Moberg in Russian and English as a Case in Point" (1996), investigates the issues of dialect and translation in Moberg's novel, *A Time on Earth*, which employs a similar dialect to the one spoken in my novel. Drawing from this article, I will discuss some of the choices I made in my novel in regards to translating dialect and its expression.

This chapter's focus on practical translation issues is especially concerned with character development. How do I make characters come alive in English when they speak so intimately in Swedish to me? Additional challenges, such as how to transform their expression into English without losing specific tones and character nuances also come into play.

² In this chapter I am indebted to Beryl Hill, who gave some generous feedback and editorial comments on some of these practical translation considerations, both linguistic and cultural, that needed attention in *The Lost Comedian*. Hill has had a long and distinguished career as an editor and was recently awarded a DE (IPed) Distinguished editor by the Institute of Professional Editors, where she is one of its Accreditation Assessors. She is the co-author of *The Australian Editing Handbook* (1994, 2003) which received an award for excellence in educational publishing.

I have furthermore come to realise that apart from English being my second language, my background as a trained actor also plays an important role in how I approach creative writing, especially when building character. Some practical discussion about how characters evolved in *The Lost Comedian* through acting exercises will therefore be included in this chapter.

In my exegesis I will explore the issues related to writing *The Lost Comedian*, a “Swedish” novel expressed and remembered in English from the other side of the world, in a new place and language. I aim to demonstrate the lightness and liberties I have found through writing in a second language, and to argue that distance to time and place brings its own redemption.

CHAPTER ONE

SELF-TRANSLATION: SEEKING A NEW SELF IN A NEW LANGUAGE³

A different linguistic self is a different thinking, social being who has different expressions, a different mode.

—Eva Sallis

In *After Babel*, George Steiner insists that “inside or between languages, human communication equals translation” (Steiner, 49). This suggests that any form of communication entails a process of translation in order to make this communication meaningful and understood. As Kearney explains in his introduction to Ricoeur’s essays in *On Translation*:

Translation ... [i]n the specific sense... signals the work of translating the meanings of one particular language into another. In the more generic sense, it indicates the everyday act of speaking as a way not only of translating oneself to oneself (inner to outer, private to public, unconscious to conscious, etc) but also and more explicitly of translating oneself to others. (Kearney, xiv-xv)

Writing in a second language is then a process of both specific and generic translation: a translation process where the writer translates both language and self.

This act of self-translation⁴ has been a constant part of my creative process in *The Lost Comedian*. In this chapter, I will explore what it might mean for a bilingual writer, who, as Fitch notes, is always living with, and subsequently writing with, an awareness of two or more languages (Fitch, 158). The consequences for language, and by extension for one’s identity, when a writer “translates” him/herself into a second or acquired language, and the accompanying sense of duality this produces, will be explored here.

How one relates to a new language, and how this manifests itself under different circumstances, are both intriguing and revealing, and in this chapter I will examine both my own, and other writers’ experiences of writing in a second language. I find the often deeply personal insights displayed by writers when reflecting upon the

³ An earlier version of this chapter, “Writing in Translation: Identity, Betrayal and the Creative Distance”, is to be published in the forthcoming *Self-translation: Brokering Originality in Hybrid Culture*, under contract by Continuum, UK, Translation Studies, 2011.

⁴ As noted in my Introduction, the term self-translation is often used in the context of a writer translating his or her own text from one language into another. Samuel Becket is one such example (See Hokenson and Munson, 1).

discourse of gain and/or loss in translation both illuminating and moving. I therefore hope this chapter will elucidate why writers feel so differently about their sense of self and the creative process when, for whatever reason, they express themselves in their “stepmother tongue,” as John Skinner so aptly names a second language (Skinner, 11).

Besemeres’ examination of the interconnection between language and selfhood in *Translating One’s Self* is a major focus of the first half of this chapter. I will discuss Besemeres’ argument for the importance of the first language and the risks for a writer’s sense of self when they have to translate themselves into a new language. For Besemeres, the translation process is seen mainly as one of loss: loss of self, place and subsequently a betrayal of the first language. This is not a unique point of view. As Hokenson and Munson point out, referring to the genre of language memoirs, bilingualism “is often introduced [by its editors] as a personal record of identity crisis, because they ... subscribe to the tacit premise that bilinguality threatens identity and creativity” (208). Exploring this loss and sense of threat to identity, the second half of this chapter will challenge some of these perceived notions of loss when writing in a second language by considering possible gains in the translation process—what can be found rather than lost when choosing to express oneself in a second language.

Firstly, I think it is important to note that many of the writers discussed in *Translating One’s Self* were, in contrast to myself, “forced to translate themselves” (Besemeres 278), and in that sense did not choose the challenges of a second language. Immigrating as children and subsequently having to adjust to a new language in sometimes painful and disempowering circumstances, the language change was often a traumatic and abrupt experience. Andrew Riemer, for example, depicts in his autobiography, *Inside, Outside*, how he was put into what was commonly referred to as the “Idiots” class upon arriving in Australia after World War Two. Believed to have low intellectual abilities due to his lack of English, he spent his first year in school knitting (Riemer, 93-95). On the other hand, I came to my second language mainly as an adult, and by choice. My experience of a second language is therefore vitally different to many of the writers mentioned in this chapter. I cannot compare my circumstances in this respect, but do acknowledge that the loss of self in translation Besemeres’ points to might partly come from this initial experience of displacement.

My aim, therefore, is not to deny or undermine the depth of loss experienced by some of the writers examined, such as Hoffman. Rather, I wish to contribute some further insights into the often complex relationship between writing in a second language and one's sense of identity, by comparing the often varied, conflicting accounts given by writers about self-translation—including my own.

Loss of Self in Translation: Besemeres and Hoffman

The greatest risk for writers “translating themselves” into a second language, according to Besemeres, is the threat to their identity, an identity formed in the first language and thus reliant on this language for a true expression of self. By pointing to the interrelation between selfhood and language, Besemeres believes bilinguals live inside conflicting versions of selves and that a choice seems necessary between these two selves/languages.⁵

The second language is seen by Besemeres as “the upstart” with a desire to take over, “to contest the first” (26), whereas one's native language is depicted as the true home of self, a home in need of protection. She quotes Alice Kaplan's claim (“On Language Memoir”, 63) “that the ‘emotional consequences’ of language change – ‘principally loss’ – testify that language is a ‘home, as surely as a roof over one's head is a home’ and that ‘to be without or between languages, is as miserable ... as to be without bread’ ” (Besemeres, 208).

This is a theme reiterated throughout Besemeres' study: translation is seen as a dangerous threat to self. For an adolescent changing languages, it may even, she warns, “threaten sanity; at least in the short term” (50), and at times, as the previous quote shows, translation equals starvation with the consequence of death of self. Yet the words chosen to depict translation and a new language—“death”, “starvation” and “threat”— emphasise only the sense of danger and risk in attempting this translation process.

If not death of self, self-translation at least poses the risk of the demise of one's “true” self, according to Kaplan, who in her memoir finds that there is a sense of performance, a “false” self expressing herself in a second language: “There was a time when I even spoke in a different register in French - higher and excited, I was

⁵ Many writers discuss this sense of having to make a choice between languages. Irene Ulman, for instance, writes in “Playgrounds and Battlegrounds: A Child's Experience of Migration” about the “dilemma in choosing one language over the other, especially with [her] children - a choice [she is] continually facing today” (Ulman, 46).

sliding up those notes in some kind of hyped-up theatrical world of my own making” (Kaplan, *French Lessons*, 216). The “old” self expressed in the old language thus seems to be the only way to remain truthful, where any attempt to translate oneself in a new language means to lose one’s “true” identity.

One of the main sources used in *Translating One’s Self* in testifying to this loss of self is Hoffman’s autobiography *Lost in Translation*. Hoffman’s deeply felt loss, even bereavement, in her new life and language is given great prominence and weight in Besemere’s study, thus emphasising that “having to “translate oneself” from one’s mother tongue into a foreign language and losing oneself in the process shows how deeply self is bound up with natural language” (Besemeres, 9).

Hoffman’s moving account of immigrating to Canada from Poland as a thirteen year old child with her family is an effective and intelligent depiction of harrowing displacement. Throughout her autobiography, Hoffman shows her deeply felt loss of sense of self and security when exiled and “pushed out of the happy, safe enclosures of Eden” (Hoffman, 5). Where she was once connected not only with place and culture but also language, the new language forced upon her is disconnected from her, an empty language, a “loss of living connection” (107), and it will take Hoffman more than twenty years to connect and reconcile with the alien English tongue. This sense of bereavement is also echoed by Andrea Witcomb. Her sense of loss of her first language, Portuguese, when immigrating to Australia is also a loss of an intrinsic part of her relationship with her father, who, after arriving in Australia, never spoke Portuguese to her again. Witcomb finds that “[t]here is no getting away from the fact that I have been robbed of growing up in my first language. I think that the effect of that is the feeling of being territorially lost” (Witcomb, 94).

Hoffman’s prolonged sense of loss might also be due to her belief that connecting with her second language would form an act of betrayal of her first language. Besemeres expresses the view that “something is owed in translation to the self who was “wrought’... in a native language and cultural environment” (279). This debt to one’s first language is conveyed very strongly by Hoffman in her autobiography; however this extends also to her almost sacred memories of Poland, where she spoke this language. Her childhood in Poland is depicted in the first part of her autobiography, called “Paradise”. A strong sense of nostalgia for her old language/place is depicted as an almost physically painful sensation, yet Hoffman feels it is vital to hang on to it, believing “nostalgia is a source of poetry, and a form

of fidelity” (Hoffman, 115). As pointed out by Besemeres, Hoffman’s rosy depiction of post war Poland has been questioned by Marianne Hirsch, amongst others, who argues that Hoffman is “denying and displacing the reality of war, of the anti-Semitism” in Poland at the time, finding “Hoffman’s denial ... painful”; she asks: “What does it take for Hoffman to consider this place paradise?” (Hirsch, 77). However, Hoffman’s depiction of Poland as an Eden seems an anchor for her; to let go of this image would mean letting go of the only sense of identity she has left.

Informed by Hartog’s discussion of Wordsworthian psychology, Besemeres uses two Romantic notions of self, “Wordsworthian” and “Byronic,” to explain further the importance for Hoffman of nostalgia for the old language/place. Simply put, whereas the “Wordsworthian insist[s] that the spiritually healthy self be ... rooted in a particular place” (Hartog, 88), the “Byronic” self is “committed to an expansive, revolutionary energy which, in breaking with the established order ... liberates the self” (Besemeres, 38). Moving languages and countries would thus require a “Byronic” gesture of Hoffman, a “readiness to cut herself free of roots” (41), according to Besemeres. She argues that Hoffman’s sense of self is more linked to the “Wordsworthian” tradition, where an “allegiance to one’s memories of childhood is seen as a potential source of stability and integrity for the self” (42). Hirsch also finds that Hoffman “locates herself more in [her] childhood image than in her adulthood” (Hirsch, 76). This would explain some of the resistance involved in letting go of this place/language; it is an integral part of Hoffman’s sense of identity, even as an adult.

My creative self, on the other hand, empathises with the “Byronic” tradition, a childhood self restlessly waiting to leave, relishing the challenges of a new language, where “home” is a springboard from where you leapt towards something new, not a place one is bound to remain, in order to be true to one’s true self.

Perhaps this is why the poem introducing my exegesis, Edith Södergran’s, *You who never went out of the garden land...*, although speaking of a different time and adhering to different cultural restrictions and values, resonates so strongly with me. The poem shows a young woman standing frozen and longing by “the latticed view”. I always have a great desire to exclaim “jump!” to the entrapped girl looking yearningly at the enticing path across the fence. Like Christina in *The Lost Comedian*, who runs off in the middle of the confirmation ceremony towards an

unknown future, I am aware that this impulse also has dangerous implications; however, as many a teenager would know, the risks are part of the attraction.

In contrast to Hoffman, I am also conscious of the fact that I have the advantage, and security, of being able to leave the familiar with the reassuring knowledge that I have the option of returning, if need be. Whether I am returning in a physical sense or in a dream, or through a new language, is perhaps beside the point:

It appears to be evening in Småland as I fly over the treetops ... I can see nothing but fir and pine. Only tiny empty pockets create gaping holes where trees seem to have been ravaged. Not to worry, they'll plant new ones. Soon they too will stand in straight rows and salute their pointy tips towards the sky. Their shadows will join the others bowing fawningly across the twirling asphalt road and over the landscape that I am now returning to; a scenery engulfed in pine and darkness. (The Lost Comedian, 5) ⁶

The vital point is that the choice of being able to return to one's old language/place plays an important role in whether one finds in a new language a "Byronic" challenge or a creeping nostalgia for a "Wordsworthian" haven.

Loss of Language, Loss of Meaning

Whereas the old, untranslated language holds a yearning full of significance and associations connected to her "real" home and identity for Hoffman, the new language is empty of substance. The first language, Hoffman explains in *Foreign Dialogues* "seems to be attached to identity with a kind of absoluteness ... words seem to stand for the things they describe" (Zournazi, 17). Thus, where the Polish word for river is for her "a vital sound, energized with the essence of riverhood, of ... being immersed in rivers, [r]iver in English is cold" (Hoffman, 106) and holds no meaning; it is an empty sign devoid of association and memory. Although Hoffman feels she has to make a choice between the two languages and in the end chooses English over Polish as a means of surviving in her new environment, she keeps her distance from the new language, a language to which she does not belong in the same way as to her first language. Irene Ulman writes that "being a migrant, a self-translator and a copycat has created a sense of suspension and self-conscious use of

⁶ References to *The Lost Comedian* will be denoted by *LC* from this point.

language ... It's as if I am asking myself: 'Is this expression mine to use?' " (Ulman, 52). For Hoffman it will take over twenty years to feel connected to her second language.

By comparison, I do not find the second language devoid of meaning, nor do I believe there must be a choice between the languages. As Ricoeur so simply states, "It is always possible *to say the same thing in another way*" (25). In my first language of Swedish, the word for "river" is "flod," which, indeed, gives me quite different associations and sensations to that of the river in English.⁷ "Flod" sounds denser, deeper, but also more endearing somehow, which might be due to the fact it makes me associate with another Swedish word, "flodhäst," its literal meaning being "river horse"— in English, hippopotamus. "Flod" thus conjures up images of thick fluid with an exotic "river horse" or two splashing about. The English word "river" on the other hand, gives me a quicker, lighter and more energetic, impression. However, one word/language does not exclude the other; there is no loss of self in the translation process between "river" and "flod", no contest between the languages; on the contrary, I find, both images enrich each other, perhaps even deepening and providing me with a more lateral understanding of what the word(s) signifies.

Moreover, I do not find words in English empty signs, even if I do not fully comprehend them. Instead they have attached feelings that might be unexpected and beyond my first language experience. Like music, they have the ability to sing; there are hidden rhythms and beats pulsating, unforeseen sounds and encounters to be found, a new language is waiting to be heard, located in a place for which I do not yet have the name. As Christina finds in Australia, words may even at times seem miraculous when formed and discovered from the distance of a second language: "this new and lovely word, [I] now shaped ... in my mouth: '*Out-outraaageous*,' I said: 'I'd like to live *out-rageous-ly*' " (LC, 92) .

For Hoffman, however, the second language signifies alienation and displacement. Hoffman's depiction of her teenage years in Canada seems to imply that the negative experiences that occur in her life are all due to her being a language

⁷ The similarity between the English word "flood" and Swedish "flod" is of course not a coincidence. The word "flood" was a variant of the word "flod" in the Middle Ages, a word which in turn derives from the Old English "flōd." This noun which has since transformed into different meanings and usages might thus have been imported by the Vikings and their Scandinavian languages, like many other English words deriving from this time (*Merriam Webster on-line dictionary*, September, 2007).

migrant. She is therefore not able to see that familiar feelings of teenage angst, feeling like an outsider mis-timing a joke in a group amongst peers, might have occurred even in the Polish language. Like Hirsch, commenting on Hoffman's depiction of her alienation: "[w]hen I'm with my peers, who come by ... lipstick, cars, and self-confidence naturally, my gestures show that I'm here provisionally ... that I don't rightfully belong" (Hoffman, 110), I too would like ask whether Hoffman really believes "this comes naturally for any teenage girl" (Hirsch, 74). Although acknowledging Hoffman's and her own "double displacement," Hirsch has learnt that her "awkwardness and alienation to [her] status as a "newcomer" made her at the time "unable to perceive the similar discomfort and alienation of [her] female peers" (Hirsch, 75).

In her autobiography, Hoffman also finds that she is unable to communicate, even love someone, unless they are of the same linguistic and cultural background. In Hoffman's experience, lovers with two different language backgrounds are unable to truly communicate: "We keep trying to travel the spaces between us. We keep talking strenuously ... hoping that we can translate ourselves for each other" (189), but "we don't speak exactly the same language" (190). For Hoffman, then, love cannot be found until perfect articulation and subsequent transparency have been achieved: "We speak my lover and I, until words tumble out without obstacle ... until they merge with our flesh" (246). She concludes that "perhaps you cannot love one person when you don't love the world surrounding him, the common sensibility that somehow expresses itself in each one of us" (245). Thus, unlike Steiner, communication does not equal translation in her view: "In order to translate a language, or a text, without changing its meaning, one would have to transport its audience as well" (Hoffman, 273).

However, by arguing that it is only the first language that can function as a means of communication, she suggests a sense of supremacy of one language/culture over another. Like Ricoeur, I believe such a view could subsequently lead "to extremes of nationalism and chauvinism" (Kearney 2006, xvi). Whether intended or not, it indicates a preference for a homogeneous society. It implies a world closing in on itself, a space where experimenting with one's voice by inviting other, foreign voices to reach out to one another without "perfect" translation is not only impossible, but also undesirable. Unlike Hoffman, I prefer—in a perhaps "Byronic" impulse—to throw the doors open and invite translation in. As Ricoeur states:

I am inclined to favour entry through the foreign door ... Have we not been set in motion by the fact of human plurality and by the double enigma of incommunicability between idioms and of translation in spite of everything ... [W]ithout the test of the foreign, would we be sensitive to the strangeness of our own language? Finally, without that test, would we not be in danger of shutting ourselves away in the sourness of monologues, alone with our books? Credit, then, to linguistic hospitality. (Ricoeur, 29)

In conclusion, even though Besemeres acknowledges “the value of a readiness to engage with a new language and, hence, with another way of “being in the world,” for her the possible gains of choosing to write in a second language do not compare favourably to “faithfulness to one’s native language and culture” (279). In a similar fashion to the “Wordsworthian” idea of selfhood, there is a lingering sense in both Besemeres’ study as well as in Hoffman’s autobiography of a devastating loss when attempting to translate the “original” self. The stakes and risks involved seem too high, and if there is a choice one would do better to stay at “home” in one’s language and not venture out, or risk losing one’s true self forever. However, this is not a position that I can endorse.

Gaining a New, Translated Self

In his moving account of coming to terms with two languages, Ariel Dorfman shows that even though many have been forced to switch language as a way of survival throughout history, many also actively choose and subsequently find a new identity as a bilingual:

[I]f you look more closely at those countless victims who were forced, in far more traumatic circumstances than mine, to learn the language of those who held power over them, you will remark how many of them decided to become bilingual ... They dared risk being double, the anxiety, the richness, the madness of being double. (Dorfman, 42)

For each perceived loss, I believe there is equally a number of possible gains for a bilingual writer, if one is willing to take the risk to write in one’s second language and subsequently engage in a process of self-translation. I too “cling, obstinately, to the notion that something can ... be gained” (Rushdie, 17), in the translation process.

In her memoir, *French Lessons*, Kaplan writes about the “privilege of living in translation” (140), which suggests that the loss claimed by some writers that occurs in translation belongs to those who never have had the “privilege” of having to confront such different aspects of self. In some language memoirs there is now also a “parallel and perhaps growing sense of more positive aspects of enrichment and adventure in the experience of bilinguality ... [with] writers stressing gain rather than loss” (Hokenson and Munson, 209).

This stress on gain in translation can be found in the translation study, *Post-colonial Translation: Theory and Practice*, where new ways of viewing the translation process are explored. In their introduction, Bassnett and Trivedi point out, that “[s]tudents of translation almost all start out with the assumption that something will be lost in translation, that the text will be diminished and rendered inferior. They rarely consider there might also be a process of gain” (4). One of the contributors, Sherry Simon, argues that in Nicole Brossard’s *Mouve Desert* both the narrator and by extension Brossard herself, “refuses to participate in an economy of loss, in the pathos of dislocation, the loss of spontaneous contact with one’s inner self ... which is so often associated with translation” (Simon, 67). In the next half of this chapter, I will point to some of the potential gains that ensue when confronting these different aspects of self in a second language.

Creativity and a New Language

In the Foreword to *Translation and Creativity* (Eugenia Loffredo and Manuela Perteghella, 2006), Theo Hermans highlights the editors’ linking of the restrictive quality of writing in a second language with creativity: “the emphasis must be on constraints *and* creativity, creativity *within* and *thanks to* constraints” (Hermans, x). Paradoxically, limiting factors, such as attempting complex translation processes with a smaller vocabulary, might produce a sense of being unrestricted and inventive when writing in a second language. As Besemeres rightly points out, there is often a refreshing sense of newness in language by bilingual writers: “A new sense of humour, particularly of irony, is often seen and manifested in the writing as gain in translation”(278). Even Hoffman’s writing benefits, Besemeres concedes, “show[ing] a certain detachment—both a playfulness and a cool speculative irony” (53).

The detachment found in a second language lends itself to a freedom to experiment. “People like us find it difficult to write ‘straight’; our attitude to

language ... must remain to a large extent provisional and jesting,” Riemer writes of bilingual writers (Riemer, 180). There is a sense of having a distance to one’s own writing, which creates flexibility and daring, as in his example of Georges Perec’s “outrageous liberties” with French, where Riemer finds the detachment both a violation and celebration of this language (179-180).

Although Riemer believes a learnt language never becomes “fully personal” (178) the way one’s first language does, he also shows how writers’ experiences of writing in an acquired language are often exhilarating: “We are attracted to the structures of that learnt language ... infatuated with its suppleness, its capacity to be twisted into surprising and unexpected configurations” (181). Sometimes it is a musical sense of the new language, an experience of rhythm and beat perhaps sometimes lost in one’s first language. In describing Ania Walwicz’s writing, “fraught with suggestion and insinuation, texts which are closer to music than to “normal writing””(179), Riemer alludes to this musicality sometimes heard and expressed in one’s second language more clearly than in one’s first:

She sings me a sing me a
lullabye mum does sin g a sing for me now sing me
lull lella lulla byes goo song to clam dell to lull me
lol do song me in my mouth in my voice she her hers
that die she sings me baby on dark stations singing me
(Walwicz, *Red roses*, 1)

This sense of playfulness and detachment gained from writing in a second language is also present in Chinese writer Xiaolu Guo’s novel *A Concise Chinese-English Dictionary For Lovers* (2007). Every chapter starts with an English word from the dictionary, which the Chinese narrator comments on as she learns its practical meaning. The language in the novel is written in deliberately “wrong” grammar and the syntax improves along with the narrator’s proficiency in English as the narrative progresses: “When I return ... from my tourism visiting, reception lady tell me: ‘Very cold today, isn’t it?’ But why she tell me? I know this information, and now is too late, because I finish my tourism visiting, and I wet and freezing” (Gou, 21).

In her novel, Gou shows, that learning a new language does not necessarily entail a threat to one’s old self; instead it can co-exist with new aspects of self, developed and found in this new language. The new language, therefore, does not erase one’s

sense of identity, but enhances it. Gou's protagonist, who is learning a new language/culture mainly through a developing love story with a man, deepens, through this language, her understanding of her "old" self and language.

In contrast to Hoffman, the protagonist not only finds it possible to love without perfect translation, but she also finds this sense of split self through two languages comforting. Her "old" identity from China is guiding her in a new and challenging environment, just like her "new" developing self emerging in the new language/culture enables her to make different decisions when she returns to China: "Maybe I not feeling lonely, because I always can talk to other 'me'. Is like seeing my two pieces of lips speaking in two languages at same time. Yes, I not lonely, because I with another me. Like Austin Power with his Mini Me" (38-39). The new language therefore does not need to replace the old; it can contribute to the old, by giving it both new identity and a new dimension.

New Language, New Perspectives

Even though cultural differences between languages make translation at times both complicated and perplexing, there is a double perspective to be gained from having access to two languages. Both these issues come across strongly in *Translating Lives* (Besemeres and Wierzbicka, 2007), in which all contributors had other language backgrounds before immigrating to Australia. In "East meets West, or does it really?" Jock Wong explains that "[c]ommon Anglo rules of politeness, which express respect for personal autonomy, simply did not exist" (in Cantonese), and an expression like "Thank You" was unusual, or "Sorry"... unheard of" (Wong, 74).

Kyn-Joo Yoon claims that a new language may even shape what, and how, she is able to experience and feel (Yoon, 119-121). Yoon describes how she found it impossible to explain some specific symptoms and pain of her stomach to a doctor in Australia. She believes that the reason was not just the language difficulty of finding the right translation, but that it was impossible to translate the symptom correctly, since the exact symptom did not even exist in English. She concludes that she "has come to understand that language shapes the way people think and feel, and vice versa" (119).

In the same study, Eva Sallis writes about how differently she expresses herself in her second language, Arabic. Although "Arabic is part of [her]," it also represents a

different part of her expression of herself, the differences being “deeper and more organic than role-playing.” She adds: “[e]ven when my fiction has nothing overtly Arab, it is about ideas that are born from the perceptions bilinguality has given me” (Sallis, 152). The new ideas “born” from her second language—what Sallis calls her “foster mother tongue”—thus emphasise the new perspectives gained from a second language.

Translating Lives is edited by Anna Wierzbicka, but also by her daughter Besemeres. In this volume, however, she takes a contrasting position to her previous work. The loss, she claims, belongs to persons (and cultures) of monolingual background, who are “lacking a comparative perspective”, rather than to those living within a richer bilingual perspective. “There is a world of human experience closed to speakers of only one language” (xv) the editors argue, and suggest “intercultural and cross-linguistic language training” (xvi) to make up for this loss in Australia. The unique double perspective of writers writing in a second language is thus an important asset in their view, just as being monolingual is a significant loss, not only for individuals, but for a society as a whole. Edward W. Said’s article “The Mind of Winter”—which in many ways de-romanticises the notion of the state of exile as heroic—also enunciates the idea of the double perspective as a plus: “Most people are aware of one culture, one setting, one home; exiles are aware of at least two, and this plurality of vision gives rise to an awareness of simultaneous dimensions, an awareness that – to borrow a phrase from music – is contrapuntal” (Said, 442). In addition, as Simon argues in her article on interlingual writing, “[w]riting across languages, writing through translation, becomes a particularly strong form of expression at a time when national cultures have themselves become diverse, inhabited by plurality”(Simon,72).

Apart from a double perspective, a second language might even allow a writer to speak about what is too difficult or impossible to express in one’s old language. Although “[e]very language’s struggle with the secret, the hidden, the mystery, the inexpressible is above else the most entrenched incommunicable” (Ricoeur, 33), the “inexpressible” might find an outlet in the distance of a new language. Anne Malena, in her comparison of Danticat and Hoffman’s relationship to language and self, explores this standpoint in her essay, “Found in Translation or Edwige Danticat’s Voyage of Recovery”(2003). Malena argues that writing fiction in her second language of English gave Danticat the space to work through not just her own

personal experiences in Haiti, but also the wider traumas experienced by Haitian society as a whole. In this way, Danticat is able to “reassemble the cultural fragments she brought into exile ... through the creation of characters who, travelling along the path of recovery and self-integration, end up finding themselves in translation” (Malena, 216-217).

Not only writers, but also fictional characters start to behave more independently in a second language. Maybe they would not be able to speak otherwise, of the secret, of the forbidden, of that which cannot be said. It may be easier to find fragments of memories hidden from view when in the safety of one’s first language. “[T]ranslation might then,’ as Malena notes, “find the obscured past ... to bring it closer and make it more familiar although it remains far away and largely unknown” (211).

Danticat also incorporates her old language as a postcolonial tool for resisting her adopted language, and in contrast to Hoffman, she “feels no need to let go of her native French and Creole but uses them ... to mark her language of adoption with their Caribbean accents” (Malena, 199). The new language can then become a way of exploring and recovering the past, without forgetting or betraying it. Instead, it is a past given a new voice, whilst marked by the old language.

The distance—sometimes geographical—that a second language and subsequent self-translation creates, can also give life to new narratives. Writing from this distance, a writer might find that not only new perspectives, but also the ability to create narratives which may not otherwise have found an expression. Swedish writer Linda Olsson, claims in the Author’s Note to *Let Me Sing You Gentle Songs* (2005), which is mostly set in Sweden, that “the process of writing this book has taken me to the other side of the world ... [b]ut this book could not have been written anywhere but here, in New Zealand. The distance was essential” (257). In my view, the benefits of this distance are expressed very clearly in Olsson’s novel. The depiction of Sweden, particularly the longing towards the landscape, would have been very difficult to encapsulate without this distance—both geographically and linguistically. When Astrid at the end of the novel leaves Veronica her house in Sweden so that she can come “home”, Astrid writes: “Soft grey pencil lines against the intensely blue sky, where the approaching evening is already deepening the colour by the minute ... This too, is your gift to me. The ability to take in the view. To see the beauty. And it is so very beautiful” (Olsson, *Let Me Sing You Gentle Songs*, 251). A yearning

description of Sweden is present throughout Olsson's novel, accentuated not only by a physical distance, but also, I suggest, by searching to express it through a distant language.

As Rushdie argues in his essay "Imaginary Homelands" when discussing the Indian diaspora, this distance is a fertile ground to explore for a writer: "If literature is in part the business of finding new angles at which to enter reality, then once again our distance, our long geographical perspective, may provide us with such angles. Or it may be that it is simply that we must think in order to do our work" (Rushdie, 15-16). The idea of beneficent distance, (which I will discuss further in Chapter Three) is also reiterated by Ondaatje who reflects that "I do feel I have been allowed the migrants' double perspective, in the way, say, someone like Gertrude Stein was "refocused" by Paris" (Ondaatje, qtd. in Spinks, 16).

Writing, as I am, a novel set within a Swedish cultural context with Swedish speaking characters expressing themselves in English, I find this distance to language (and place) appealing. It is as if the distance creates a new space, where the translation process in a new language enables a new kind of writing. In Swedish, I do not need to invite words, to search for them, to challenge or play with them. They are there, already arrived. Translation, then, enables me to "take leave of a too-familiar language" (Marshall, 15).

In his collection of essays, *Translation as Discovery*, Sujit Mukherjee also finds this discovery process as creating the potential for a new writing. He refers to a quote by George Steiner, who believes that from the act of translation something new emerges, a new, "third language". "At its best, the peculiar synthesis of conflict and complicity between a poem and its translation into another poem creates the impression of a "third language," of a medium of communicative energy which somehow reconciles both languages in a tongue deeper, more comprehensive than either" (Steiner, qtd. in Mukherjee, 83). This "third language" might have a parallel to the "third text" Ricoeur refers. "[I]n a good translation, the two texts, source and target, must be matched with another through a third non-existent text" (Ricoeur, 7).

To find this "third non-existent text" in a "third language" might be what I am searching for then, a voice which dares to speak of secret sorrows, but in what feels like a lighter tone and language. This sense of lightness enabled me to write my first novel, *The Stone Baby*, and thereby re-visit a personal trauma and find a creative and

imaginative expression for it, where the distance of English also offered me a sense of protection:

I revisit that staircase in Darlington and the shabby looking terrace in Chippendale with the distinct smell of the brewery drifting through the windows. I do not linger too long over the words of gurus or the fragrance of perfumes consultants. Perhaps I remember an unusual bus trip and a delegation of debt collectors instead. There is music and fire, a Chinese messenger to consider.

And friends, I do remember friends.

Most of all a scar so deep it keeps coming undone.

(The Stone Baby, 6)

Writing *The Lost Comedian* and returning to a well-trodden landscape with characters similarly steeped in their setting, speaking in the heavy Swedish dialect I share with them, I hear them in a different tone, as if for the very first time. Beneath their Swedish familiarity, they speak to me about new and different matters; they clarify and suggest possibilities and longings in our new language that I would not have heard otherwise. A sense of wonder and bewilderment takes place: Maybe this is what would have become of him/her if he/she had been allowed to take a step away from familiar soil? I listen to my mother and father more attentively; I find them in a new light. I watch them from a distance, where new sounds, opinions and emotions replace old and familiar tunes. Yet, I also imagine the sound of our common heritage, of what we all share behind the first language. It is, perhaps an idealised and romantic view of a second language, but it enables me to continue writing. Thus, like Kaplan, I am grateful for my new language “teaching me that there is more than one way to speak ... for being the home I’ve made from my own will and imagination” (*French Lessons*, 216).

In this chapter, I have looked at Besemeres’ argument about the important connection between the first language and identity, especially in her analysis of Hoffman. Hoffman’s autobiography *Lost in Translation* has also been discussed from this viewpoint. Since I find my experience of writing and expressing myself in a second language so vitally different to that of Hoffman, her text has served as an important sounding-board against which to consider my own standpoint and choice of “translating myself.” However, this does not mean that I discredit or deny Hoffman or any other of the writers discussed, who write, often with great insight,

very moving accounts of their sense of loss in translation. Rather it has been an attempt to understand how, or where, differences of experiences of a second language might emerge. I believe the tensions implicit in the “Wordsworthian and/or the “Byronic” sense of self, as discussed by Hartog and then Besemeres, have provided me a greater understanding of these variables.

However, since I would like to argue that there is more to gain than lose in translation, I have subsequently tried to point to some possible gains of writing in a second language, and how this does not have to mean loss of identity or betrayal of the “original” self. Rather, I have argued, it engenders a further exploration of different aspects of self, where the distance created from a learnt language lends itself to experimentation and a certain sense of freedom, sometimes allowing one to speak about the past in a way otherwise not possible, although this past might have been lived in a different language. The past, as Rushdie points out, “is a country from which we all have emigrated” (12).

In the following chapter, I will look more closely at this past setting, which is also the world of the protagonist Christina in *The Lost Comedian*. Examining Swedish influences and heritage, the cultural and historical context and setting in which *The Lost Comedian* operates, the next chapter also offers an exploration of the character’s longing and awakening, and a young girl’s questioning of the codes and understandings in which she has operated.

CHAPTER TWO

SMALL-TOWN LONGINGS AND NIGHTMARES: THE LOST COMEDIAN IN THE CULTURAL CONTEXT

*So I am alone,
in night and darkness,
where the trees sleep and the grass is weeping
from the cold when the sun has set.
But some beasts wake, although not all—
the bat is weaving his cabals,
the snake coils under poison plant,
the light-shy badger makes a move
after a day of sleep.
Alone! And why?
A traveller in another's land
is always stranger and alone.*

—August Strindberg, *The Great Highway*

Sweden of the 1960s and 1970s was a society in change. As pointed out by Steven Koblik in *Sweden's Development from Poverty to Affluence 1750-1970*, Sweden was by then seen in the Western world as “a symbol of the progressive welfare state, a model to be examined and in some cases copied” (332). For a small town community such as the fictional Svenstorp, however, which is not only deeply religious, but which had also borne witness to a previous impoverished community grow and prosper into a thriving small business community, it means that many of the changes imposed are met with reluctance and disapproval.

This is the cultural context and setting of *The Lost Comedian*, and this chapter attempts to examine in depth the ways in which the cultural background and heritage, colour and inform the novel.

Apart from the wider social and political context, a major focus of this chapter is also to explore two cultural icons of Sweden, August Strindberg and Ingmar Bergman, and their influence on the protagonist in the narrative. Their formidable impact on Swedish culture is multiple and far-reaching, but in the context of my thesis, I will mainly look at them as symbols and representations for the protagonist's desire and longing for an alternative world-view away from her childhood values: a world of rebellious excitement, imagination, danger and religious questioning. This chapter, therefore, also represents a progression of the discussion of childhood and sense of self from the first chapter, and develops

Hartog's definition in relation to Romantic psychology, where the two conflicting urges in the protagonist are keenly felt: the "Byronic" impulse of change and the "Wordsworthian" tradition of faithfulness to one's memory of childhood.

If the first chapter of my exegesis dealt with issues of self-translation, language and identity when writing in a second language, the following two chapters aim to explore a different kind of translation: translating place in its cultural context, and from a distance. Later, I will subsequently explore what has been lost by leaving, when the adult Christina returns to her childhood setting in the 1980s, bereft and broken. The protagonist's mourning and nostalgia, perhaps not even consciously acknowledged by her, raise issues that are inherent diasporic concerns, such as the inter-connection between landscape and belonging. From a creative point of view, the issues associated with revisiting one's past and how one negotiates and interacts with a society different to the one left behind are also relevant. Writing a novel set in a cultural context distant not only culturally and linguistically but also in time and place thus forms, I believe, an important aspect and has been of major significance when writing the creative component of my thesis.

Paradoxically, and forming a tension within the narrative, the protagonist in *The Lost Comedian* is in many ways the embodiment of a contrary attitude to my own views about the beneficial nature of translation. There is a sharp contrast between her experiences in her new life in a second language and the more positive potentialities which I have discussed in the previous chapter. The grown-up Christina seems, to paraphrase Hoffman, "lost in translation." She is an aimless wanderer, her new setting and language limiting, and in some ways her experiences echo those of Hoffman, where one is indeed unable to communicate or even love, in a different cultural context. In the narrative, Christina's move to Australia and her subsequent distance to her past only seems to augment the unresolved issues left behind. Moreover, her old life in Sweden is a constant shadow upon her return, where it is in many ways too late to reconcile with and confront her past: her parents have died, before any real reunion took place, the pastor has left town, and the society she left behind does not exist anymore. The characters and their society have changed and moved on.

Even so, I would argue that the protagonist gains from translation in the end. Firstly, by aiming to write her past, a story about "grief, fear and bloody disaster," (*LC*, 158) and thus finally realising in some ways the promise of her

adolescent/childhood self, when, in a Byronic gesture, she dramatically breaks free from the old order. Furthermore, she, literally reclaims her name and therefore identity on the final page. The protagonist may finally “find herself” in translation, in the manner Ricoeur suggests: “The idealist romantic self, sovereign master of itself and all it surveys, is replaced by an engaged self which only finds itself after it has traversed the field of foreignness and returned to itself again, this time altered and enlarged, ‘othered’” (Kerney, xix). Ultimately, should she not have attempted to break out of her confined life in small town Sweden, the damage to her would have been so much the greater.

In this she parallels me. As a writer, I believe the distance of time and place from the cultural context of the novel I depicted, has allowed me the space to explore different angles and perspectives. For me, the writing process has thus enabled me to explore in new and unrestricted ways what the character of Christina longs for: the freedom to translate the self.

The Social Context in The Lost Comedian:

Firstly, I will start examining the cultural and social background of the novel by briefly investigating Swedish society prior to the big social changes of post-war Sweden, especially in Småland, the district and part of Sweden where *The Lost Comedian* is set. In contrast to the wave of immigration occurring in the 1960s to Sweden, in the late nineteenth century Sweden was a country of emigration, the region of Småland in particular. According to Mats Forsberg in *The Evolution of Social Welfare Policy in Sweden*, “During the period 1860-1910, nearly 1,200,000 people—or about one fourth of the population—emigrated from Sweden, mainly to the United States” (Forsberg, 12).

Not only were the people of Småland extremely poor, partly due to the infertile, stony (or boggy) land they inhabited, but they were also (as were other parts of Sweden) adversely affected by major social problems, some connected to alcohol-abuse. Many grassroots organisations or movements were founded at this time and became a major part in the development of political democracy and social welfare in Sweden. Two of them, as highlighted by Forsberg, “the temperance movement and the non-conformist (“free”) church movement” (14), had a great impact on social change, especially for the lower classes. Where Sweden was once seen by some as the “main centre of drunkenness in the world ... [t]he situation improved somewhat

towards the end of the century, primarily through the efforts of the popular movements, especially the temperance organizations” (21).

A way of life with no alcohol, gambling or dancing, was therefore considered by many vital to the development of social welfare and well-being for the poor communities in Småland, where such organisations were particularly strong. In societies such as the one depicted in *The Lost Comedian*, the temperance movement together with the free-church movement, The Missionary Society, formed a vital part of the transformation from a society of poverty and social penury to one of devotion, temperance and subsequent prosperity.

Another important aspect of the social context of *The Lost Comedian* is the childhood of the protagonist’s parents in the depression of the 1930s. The references to this time highlight the vulnerability experienced in particular by Christina’s father, who was affected not only by the dire economic times but also by alcohol abuse within his family. His sense of security and stability is, therefore, built on the foundations of these two late nineteenth century movements: a life of temperance and, above all, a sense of identity and belonging centred around involvement in the “free” church in his small-town community.

The hardships and subsequent social movements from the nineteenth century to 1930s underpin the main setting of *The Lost Comedian* Sweden of the 1960s and 1970s, which was a society in transformation. The ruling Social Democratic Party’s dream of building “folkhemmet” (the people’s home), a society of equality and welfare for all, meant in practical terms Sweden had “since World War II embarked upon a series of major social reforms, including a radical transformation of the school system, a compulsory medical care program, and a vast new old-age pension scheme” (Koblik, 332).

A major change of Swedish legislation affecting a small-town community such as the one depicted in the novel, was the school reform of 1969. Part of the nation-wide reform, which made sweeping changes to the education system, was the move away from Biblical and Christian education in the curriculum, to the broader subject of religious studies, which was then incorporated into the more secular social studies. What is more, the new subject did not put any particular emphasis on the Christian faith, a move very distressing for parts of the community, such as the church-going Svenstorp in *The Lost Comedian*.

Overseeing the major school reforms of the 1960s was the Education Minister at the time, Olof Palme, dubbed by the media as “the crown-prince” of the Social Democratic Party, who would go on to become prime minister in the 1970s and 1980s. His great intellect was acknowledged by all sides of the political spectrum, but his radical views also made him a controversial figure for the conservative part of Swedish society, such as the one in fictional Svenstorp.

Strong reservations about this new and continuously evolving society of Sweden, alongside admiration about Sweden’s social reform program, thus divided public opinion. The juxtaposition and subsequent tension between these conflicting views are fairly evident when reading newspaper articles from this time, especially in regards to the charismatic Palme. He is not only referred to as “power-hungry” by the conservative papers, but even a social-democratic paper, *Aftonbladet*, warns in an editorial that his intelligence and intellectual vigour were so great, it was “creating anxiety and concern amongst several ... party members” (*Aftonbladet*, 31/1, 1965:2).⁸ This is also something I remember very strongly from my own childhood, where Palme was depicted as a dangerous radical intent on ruining Sweden, yet was reluctantly admired by the Swedish for his growing international reputation and fame. I have tried to reflect some of these views in the chapter, “Hymn for Believers”, where he is made responsible for the impending threat of removing the morning hymn.

Another great change impacting on the small-town community was the new arrivals to Swedish society. “Sweden ha[d] by now become a country of immigration ... and since the mid-1960s, large contingents ... immigrated to Sweden from Yugoslavia, Greece, Turkey and other European countries” (Forsberg, 13). The post-war affluence of Sweden needed an increasing number of immigrant workers for its industries, a fact also recognised by Christina’s father: “That’s why we’ve had to import them over here, you see, to keep things going” (*LC*, 32). Although Christina’s father acknowledges their value and necessity in building a prosperous Swedish society, it is a view not shared by all. Subsequently, prejudice and fear of immigrants were part of the social fabric of the time. This is illustrated in the novel through the depiction of the Greek boy, Aristotle:

⁸ Translation by the author

“It’s all right, we’re just hanging a talk.” Aristotle’s voice is firm but friendly.

A chorus of voices from the crowded backseat of “bloody-foreigners-coming- here-stealing our birds” fills the starlit night. For a moment, I see a vision of a swarm of immigrants descending on Sweden sweeping up all the women in the sky, but then I think, no, hang on, that’s Jesus, isn’t it? (*LC*, 129)

Overall, however, the generous social safety net being provided, together with the growing prosperity of post-war Sweden, mainly bring a sense of personal security and unprecedented material welfare to its citizens, including the inhabitants of Svenstorp. Being practical people, they grudgingly accept that the changing society is also good for business, whilst remaining convinced they are being rewarded for their hard work and sin-free lifestyle—the foundation, they believe, of their newfound wealth and the society in which they proudly live.

I have in the first part of the chapter, tried to elucidate the ways in which the social setting of the protagonist plays a major part in her upheaval. Had she been living in a less restrictive environment, where her desires and rebellious testing of the rules were tolerated, there would not having been the need for such drastic changes, for her “Byronic” leaving and subsequent down-fall. Her life in Australia is merely an aftermath to her life in Sweden. There is no new life waiting for her in Australia, only further confusion and grief, although as I stated earlier, there is a glimmer of movement towards a self-integration in the reclaiming of her past at the very end of the narrative.

Swedish Cultural Heritage and Television

This physical isolation leads inevitably to an isolation of the spirit. Their eye turns inward and speculates upon the soul; there is a preoccupation with self. Artists react to this climate of solitude either with anger at the social inadequacies that perpetuate it or with a fatalism blended with religious fervour that yields its most signal and imaginative surge of genius in the work of Strindberg and Bergman himself.

—Peter Cowie

When the protagonist, like many adolescents before her, starts to question some underlying binaries—citizen of Svenstorp or the close by Träby, owning a factory or working in one, Believer or Non-Believer—with which she has previously learnt to define herself in order to respect and be loyal to the social structures of Svenstorp,

she finds access to challenging discourses from a relatively new cultural outlet. The commercial free media of television provides her with different cultural values to the ones previously inherited and assumed.

Two influential artists reaching Christina through this medium are August Strindberg and Ingmar Bergman. Not only are Strindberg and Bergman's works regularly shown, but they are also prominent in the general public arena. Views about them are frequently aired in debates and news, and, although not everyone would actively read or watch their work, everyone had an opinion. Strindberg's plays and dramatised versions of his books and life, staged by a special "TV ensemble", and Bergman's films and TV series, often depicting tortured conflicts with religion, inspire and spur the protagonist's imagination and sense of rebellion. The works contain recognisable themes of hypocrisy, but also warnings of the alluring dangers of going astray, something the protagonist will experience herself when she leaves her secure belonging in the church and joins the alternative on offer in the close by town of Träby, a dangerous, shady, degrading and even fatal world. In this way, the protagonist in *The Lost Comedian*'s own world is challenged and reflected in the work of these famous cultural icons as she tries to navigate and translate this fictional world into her own.

In his critical biography of Ingmar Bergman (1982), Cowie locates four vital themes which run through Swedish film, which, I believe, point to important aspects and themes of Swedish culture overall. The first theme identified by Cowie concerns the landscape and its elements, the shortness and intensity of summer and the long and dark winter—a theme which I will return to in the next chapter. The second theme he points to is a moral one: the clash between indulgence on the one hand and reproof on the other, which is seen as the struggle between body and intellect; closely allied to this is "the idea of expiation through suffering." The third common factor he claims as a vital theme is "its appreciation of fantasy and the supernatural, the belief in dreams as representing terror and aspiration" (39). And finally, Cowie finds a social motif of importance. Pointing to Bergman's early films, in which "his bohemian protagonists rail against the established order and the smug paternalism of the community" (39), Cowie notes a peculiar form of social malaise: "Not the conventional social commitment of many other countries, but an awareness of society's basic dislike of the individual" (39). I believe many of these themes resonate strongly in *The Lost Comedian* as well, where, for instance, the religious

theme of expiation through suffering is of importance. This is also a theme that resonates with me on a personal level, where the religious idea of redemption and acceptance if one suffers strongly enough—or will be made to suffer as a punishment for a sinful life—is very much part of the upbringing and belief system I share with Christina. For the protagonist, the idea of suffering being good and necessary is an ingrained core value at the very centre of her being, and as such it is not easily dismissed.

Before discussing Strindberg and Bergman's influence on the protagonist more specifically, I will briefly compare these two artists and the potency of their heritage in Swedish culture. Bergman often acknowledged his great love of and debt to Strindberg, and directed many of Strindberg's plays on stage. According to Cowie, both Bergman and Strindberg "agree ... that mankind is condemned to suffering, or as the recurrent line in [Strindberg's] *A Dream Play* proclaims, 'it's a shame about human beings.' Man must journey on into the shadows ... in search of 'conversion, penitence and faith' " (Cowie, 45).

Although Cowie finds Strindberg and Bergman closely related in their outlook, there are also some major differences between them. "Bergman possesses none of the reformist zeal and political enthusiasm of his predecessor," he argues, because "Bergman is free of the fanatical misogyny that disfigures much of Strindberg's literature. He lacks the almost exhibitionistic masochism one is confronted with in Strindberg's autobiographical pieces." (41).⁹

However, I do not agree with Cowie's conclusion in regards to sense of humour, where he points to "a vein of mordant humour in Bergman" which he believes lacking in Strindberg (41). On the contrary, I believe mordant humour to be a particular talent of Strindberg's, especially when he turns his attention away from the women's movement and fearlessly attacks Swedish bureaucracy and establishment. One only has to read Strindberg's feisty letters to receive a great dose of his bracing humour, at times—perhaps regrettably—aimed at former friends and allies, such as in the following letter to Norwegian writer Björnson: "Your majesty! Am in receipt

⁹Interestingly, Bergman says in an interview that he believes Strindberg's infamous misogyny is ambivalent: "While he's an obsessive worshipper of women, he also persecutes them obsessively. He does both things at once. His psyche is fifty percent woman and fifty percent man. You can see this most clearly in *Miss Julie*, where the man and woman never stop swapping masks" (*Bergman on Bergman*, 18).

of your imperial edict and will be honoured to disregard it utterly” (qtd. in Lagercrantz, 134).

Another point Cowie raises in his biography on Bergman is that he believes both Bergman and Strindberg “see their role as dreamers on behalf of men and in their work endow the dream with a significance equal if not superior to the factual event” (45). Moreover, Bergman himself points to the isolation of a sparsely populated country which impacts on the work of not only himself and Strindberg, but Swedish artists and culture on the whole:

We’re such a huge country ... yet we are so few, so thinly scattered across it. The people have to spend their lives isolated on their farms—and isolated from one another in their homes. It’s terribly difficult for them, even when they come to the cities and live close to other people; it’s no help really. They don’t know how to get in touch, to communicate. (Cowie, 41)

I believe the works of these two hugely influential artists in many ways typify major Swedish cultural concerns, such as social isolation and the social and moral struggles with religion, where dreams (often nightmares) and fantasy are given as much attention and intensity as the “real world”.

The protagonist in *The Lost Comedian*, gains access to these ideas from some of Strindberg’s and Bergman’s works on television, and they often represent very different ideas from those expressed in her community. In this way, she receives an almost parallel education, Swedish television inspiring further reading and providing entrance to this new world of literature. This sometimes becomes a source of irritation for her friends:

[S]he’s all angry at me, telling me I use words she doesn’t understand, and that I’m trying to make myself important when I tell her poetry is an expression of human *euphoria* or my concern about Strindberg allegedly being a *male chauvinist*, which someone claimed on TV the other day. My words didn’t use to worry her! (LC, 57).

Swedish television, therefore, forms an unlikely ally in the protagonist’s developing questioning of inherited cultural values. I would now like to turn my attention to what Strindberg and Bergman mean more specifically for the protagonist in terms of supporting her attempts to transgress the carefully mapped out cultural binaries.

Christina and the Formidable Strindberg:

I was not ignorant of the fact that I had been excommunicated by the majority ... as a seducer of the young, and that fathers and mothers feared me as if I had been the Devil himself.

—Strindberg, *The Inferno*

It might seem ironic that Strindberg comes to represent radicalism for the young female protagonist. Apart from being dead well over sixty years and thus representing a pre-democratic, Sweden, he was famous for his anti-women's movement stance. A radical on many issues, one of his longest and fiercest battles, however, was against the movement for equal women's rights, which he based on his association with the naturalist movement. In his biography of Strindberg, Olof Lagercrantz shows that for a while Strindberg saw women as "evil creatures who ensnared man, the noble and strong, because they were able to wound him in his sexual being. Women were both criminal and insane, with brains like a kitchen clock compared to a man's barometer" (Lagercrantz, 169). In his depiction of his first wife, Siri von Essen, for example, in his short story collection, *Marrying, (Giftas)* she was portrayed variously as a "a painter of no talent, an alcoholic who neglected her children, as crude, heartless, cynical and lacking in the least trace of affection for the writer who was slaving away to keep the family."¹⁰ No wonder, Lagercrantz writes, "Strindberg's and Siri's friends were shaken" (168). This is in sharp contrast to Strindberg's contemporary playwright, Henrik Ibsen, one of Strindberg's fiercest rivals, who created the "new" woman Nora in the play *A Doll's House*.

Furthermore, in context of *The Lost Comedian*, although he was still discussed and debated fifty years after his demise, (a fact Strindberg himself would probably have approved of) Strindberg's work was, by then (the 1960s and 1970s), very much part of the cultural bourgeoisie establishment, something recognised and spurned by the protagonist's drama-teacher—the radical Svenne.

For Christina however, Strindberg remains a compelling provocateur, and she especially relates to his fascination with language, Strindberg's bracing language and way with words providing her with a sense of excitement and daring. She might not fully understand the context of Miss Julia's exclamation: "How I'd I love to see your

¹⁰ *Marrying* was prosecuted by the state, the book being seen in violation of the press law, "blasphemy against God or mockery of God's word or the sacraments" (Lagercrantz, 126), which marks the beginning of Strindberg's time in exile. He is later acquitted of the charge.

blood, and brains, on a chopping block! I'd like to see your whole sex swimming in a sea of blood!" (Strindberg, *Miss Julia*, 112), but she still finds the lines exhilarating as she practices them in her bedroom.

Strindberg's language, according to Birgitta Steene, is expressed by a "writer with the largest and most colorful vocabulary in the history of Swedish literature" (Steene, *The Greatest Fire*, 1). Yet tellingly, he also had an ambivalent, sometimes hostile, relationship to Swedish cultural life. It is worth noting that Strindberg's virtuoso handling of the Swedish language, did not prevent him from writing several of his works in both French and German in his years of exile, such as *Inferno*, and *A Fool's Apology*, which appeared first in its original French as *Le Plaidoyer d'un fou*.¹¹ He writes to his brother at the time: "That's the only way I can show those laggard Swedish pigskins! ... They thought they would kill me by silence or swinishness, but I can't die, because I was born to live and to—win!" (Lagercrantz, 118). Strindberg always seems keen to explore new ways of publishing his work, when unable to gain access to publication in Sweden or, as his letter shows, in his distrust of the, often hostile, Swedish reaction to his work. Self-translation in its many forms was therefore familiar territory for Strindberg.

Furthermore, one of the main reasons Strindberg holds such a fascination for the protagonist is the way he is widely proclaimed as being a "Seeker", that is, not a committed Christian believer. This view was shaped by his religious crisis, the *Inferno* period, a period Steene claims to be "no doubt the most crucial event in his personal and creative life" (*The Greatest Fire*, xi).

I had, until recently, presumed that my father's reference to Strindberg as a "Seeker" was his own personal musing—part of his conclusion that the famous Latin inscription on his grave stone: "O Crux Ave Spes Unica!" (O Cross, Be Greeted, Our Only Hope!), meant that even someone as disturbed as Strindberg had to acknowledge the power of God in the end. However, at the Strindberg museum in Stockholm, I found a significant number of newspaper articles in the archives referring to Strindberg similarly,¹² which makes me conclude that Strindberg "the

¹¹ Strindberg lived for fifteen years in exile, something Lagercrantz believes liberated him as an artist, although he concludes that "for this he[Strindberg] had to pay a steep price; so did Siri—apart from a small theatrical venture in Denmark ... her career as an actress was over" (Lagercrantz, 107).

¹² Examples of discussions and articles around Strindberg's religious beliefs or lack thereof in the Swedish newspapers are many, I have here just translated a few to give an idea of the interest in Strindberg's religious beliefs: "One would justifiably be able to claim, that he had by then become

Seeker” was a well-established concept for a long period. The newspaper *Nordvästran Skånes tidning* offers just one example of an attempt at exploring Strindberg’s religious leanings: “Was Strindberg Christian, atheist or a free-thinker? This is a question many of us ask ... for some of us it remains completely unanswered, we do not get a firm grip on his religious development” (Frans Christer, *Nordvästran Skånes tidning* 21/11, 1966:6).¹³

For Christina, Strindberg’s epithet as a Seeker is something she is not only able to empathise with, but also draw some comfort and inspiration from. Strindberg’s fearless stance strengthens the validity, for her, of questioning previously irrefutable values. No wonder, then, that when the gossip around her mounts, it is inside Strindberg’s world of horse carriages and long dresses that she imagines walking when confronting the daily routines of her small town. A quiet whisper of warning or summons, perhaps, from Strindberg’s traveller in *The Great Highway*, who laments to a stern God: “Bless me, whose deepest suffering, deepest of human suffering was this— I could not be the one I longed to be” (*Twelve Plays*, 689).

In this way, Strindberg, both as a public and literary icon, plays a part in shaping a small-town girl’s longings and desire for a different life and the freedom to question the values and lessons learnt from her upbringing.

Bergman: the Face of Sin and Hour of the Wolf

Opposite her bed in the changing, shadowless nocturnal light, she can make out a shapeless, grey, billowing mass. Now it takes form, rising, collecting itself. It is a large woman dressed in grey. One eye has been gouged out and the socket gapes blank. With excruciating slowness she turns her terrible face ... and gazes at her.

—Ingmar Bergman, *Face to Face*

If Strindberg is a catalyst for the protagonist’s developing radicalism, and an inspiration for her rebelliousness, Bergman inhabits the world of a more troubling aspect of her religious questioning: the nightmares, darkness and fear. He is symbolic of the cost of her departure from the familiar, expected path. She maintains an entrenched belief in the subsequent punishment for her sins, one of which may be losing her mind. Bergman has never been a political filmmaker; it is, rather, the

what in religious language is called a seeker”, theology student Bengt Ingmar Kilström is quoted as saying in *Svenska Dagbladet* (22nd of October, 1944:13). In ”Strindberg och religionen”, *Blekinge Läns Tidning*, (7th of August, 1971:4), Th. Cronqvist quotes Victor Svanberg as being of the opinion “that he (Strindberg) cannot be labeled a *wholly* Christian” (my emphasis).

¹³ Translation by the author

exploration of the human psyche and the strongly religious themes in many of his films which appeal to the protagonist. In an interview, Bergman acknowledges religious themes as being the most central to his filmmaking, especially in his early films:

[T]he salvation-damnation issue, for me, was never political. It was religious. For me ... the great question was: Does God exist? Or doesn't God exist? Can we, by an attitude of faith, attain to a sense of community and a better world? Or, if God doesn't exist, what do we do then? (*Bergman on Bergman*, 14).

There are only two references to Bergman in *The Lost Comedian*: the television series *Face to Face* and the film *Hour of the Wolf*. I will now examine these and their inter-related themes of punishment and insanity.

It might seem that the protagonist in *Face to Face*, a professional psychiatrist who has learnt to hide her inner turmoil with a professional and mature exterior, is a somewhat obscure character for the adolescent Christina to relate to. However, the television film explores a hidden terror beneath the surface of normality and the breakdown of an orderly and comprehensive world waiting for someone who is letting go of outward stability. On a personal level, viewing *Face to Face* as a young adolescent had such powerful impact on me that I almost dreaded returning to it almost thirty years later. What was it that frightened me so? "We are now going to make a film which, in a way, is about an attempted suicide," Bergman writes in a letter to his cast and crew before commencing filming (*Face to Face*, v). He continues by claiming that what he describes in *Face to Face* is an "admirable character's shockingly quick breakdown and agonizing rebirth" (vi). His vision of the film is of the first part being almost "pedantically realistic, tangible," whereas the second part is "elusive, intangible: the dreams are more real than the reality" (vii).

Face to Face therefore seems especially relevant in relation to Cowie's third theme of Swedish cinema: that of the supernatural and dreams representing terror. Cowie mentions the dream sequence of Liv Ullman's character, Jenny, dreaming of her own cremation as an example of this theme.¹⁴ It is in this elusive dream part, more than the breakdown and setting inside the psychiatric institution that I locate as

¹⁴ This scene is described by Steene the following way: "In still another nightmare, Jenny is watching her own dead self in a nailed white coffin. The corpse is revived; Jenny sets the coffin afire while the body inside cries desperately" (*Ingmar Bergman*, 311).

the answer to what was so frightening for an adolescent; and it is this fear I have used in the depiction of the protagonist in *The Lost Comedian*. Christina watches in horror Jenny's nightmares, where ghostly figures of the past are hounding her, where the sexually charged (and violent) undertones of one of the patients are frightening and confusing and further fuel Christina's vivid imagination.

However, it is the dark clad woman, a spectre with enormous, staring eyes, who is the most frightening image for the protagonist. The ghostly woman suddenly appears behind Jenny in a mirror and follows her both in dreams and when awake until she is driven to a suicide attempt. "For me," Bergman says, "hell has always been a most suggestive sort of place; but I never regarded it as being located anywhere else than on earth. Hell is created by human beings—on earth!" He then goes on to describe how he embodied evil in selected characters: "What I believed in those days ... was the existence of a virulent evil ... As a materialization of this virulent, indestructible ... evil ... I made it into a sort of private game to have a diabolic figure hanging around" (qtd in Cowie, 40). In her hallucinating form, appearing not only in Jenny's dreams but also in her apartment, the ghostly woman watching over Jenny revivifies Christina's long-held fear of the Devil, appearing unexpectedly by her bedside. Bergman's films thus speak to her visually on an emotionally charged level. The important reconciliation and integration of what the dark-clad woman represents to Ulman's character in a Bergman's film is beside the point for Christina; it is, instead, the strong images that pray on her mind.

When Christina leaves church and starts her journey into alcohol-fuelled degeneration and confusing sexuality in her new life in Träby, the image of the stern ghost in *Face to Face* gives her sense of sin and punishment a face. What she is confronted with, as she leaves her old way of life, is essentially her loneliness and her subsequent conclusion that the punishment for sin is a frightening solitude, where she will be left with only shadowy figures of the night. What is more, what follows and emerges from this darkness might even be madness.

Madness is a vividly explored theme in Bergman's work, present both in *Face to Face* and *Hour of the Wolf*; and it has a more powerful and immediate impact on the protagonist than Strindberg's closely observed *Inferno* crisis, which takes place in distant nineteenth-century Paris. Strindberg might have been referred to as mad, but, as Lagercrantz points out, although "[t]here is ample material available proving that Strindberg was insane, at least when he is being compared to the 'ordinary person' ...

his works suffer from incurable health” (209). Furthermore, Lagercrantz believes Strindberg’s “madness” was intrinsically linked to his writing, a way out of and/or controlling madness as well as deliberately bringing on extreme moods to aid his writing: “When he was writing, he was not only in control of imaginary destinies, but also of his own life, which provided the material for the writing” (210). For Christina, Strindberg does not evoke madness with the disturbing intensity of Bergman.

Through suggestive images and its isolated setting, Bergman’s black and white film *Hour of the Wolf* is a compelling example of his strongly felt exploration of madness, where dream and reality are constantly blurred. In the film, the artist Johan (Max von Sydow) arrives with his wife Alma (Liv Ullman) on an isolated island. As Steene explains, “Johan is possessed by images of haunting demons, which he draws in his sketchbook” (Steene, *Ingmar Bergman*, 276). Hence the artist’s great fear of falling asleep in the “hour of the wolf” when most nightmare visits appear, such as the woman, who, when taking off her hat, also peels off her face. Later, his wife will also be visited by these characters, and watching this film one is never certain of what is really taking place, or whether it is the man or his wife’s dream and/or reality. According to Cowie, Bergman wrote *Hour of the Wolf* after having deserted a film script “when the demons would come and wake me up, and they would stand there and talk to me” (41), inspiring him to write this film where “dream and reality merge in terrifying collusion” (242).¹⁵ The important theme of humiliation for Bergman grows more violent in *Hour of the Wolf*, and is part of the character’s expiation. In both *Face to Face* and *Hour of the Wolf*, sickness follows from this blurring of dream and reality. Fear of sleeping is therefore a natural progression, since in dreams you are not able to protect yourself from being invaded by both evil and mental illness.

Not surprisingly, then, it is the borrowed images of Bergman’s nightmares Christina fears when falling asleep both as a child and adult. In Bergman’s ambiguous world of nightmares, angst and humiliation, but also of imagination and magic, she recognises some of her own fears and desires. This is in sharp contrast to

¹⁵ According to Steene, the film received very mixed reviews at the time, especially in Sweden where, he was discussed as a narcissistic, Romantic artist “overestimating the importance of the artistic self, which was considered an obsolete theme in today’s world” (Steene, *Ingmar Bergman*, 278). Somewhat reflecting this response, the artist-figure in the film, finds himself “assailed by waves of humiliation, guilt and shame” (Cowie, 246).

what Christina meets in the outer world, where she seems surrounded by certainty, everyone else seemingly fitting in, both in the good community of Svenstorp and the sinful town of Träby.

The fluid line between madness and sanity found in both Strindberg's and Bergman's work is a close fitting reality for her, where she is constantly being judged as not being "quite right," too exaggerated as a person to fit in. Is there something wrong with me? is the question Christina carries with her constantly, a question the Pastor's wife, fru Herring, believes she knows the answer to: "You're not well, Christina. There's a sickness inside you, a wickedness" (*LC*, 125). Furthermore, her humiliation when pretending to be a dog in Australia as a misguided joke, renews anxieties of being perceived as being mad. The real punishment for her sins is revealed late in the narrative, however, where her grief has become so great she attempts to silence it, the sense of being punished so strong that she does not feel worthy of even acknowledging her devastation.

Finally, although Christina has a long way to go before she is able to reclaim her identity on the final page, her loneliness and her frightening odyssey are disrupted when, in a vision, she sees her father's ascension from his coffin at his funeral. His words of reconciliation allow her to hear the comfort in the hymn "Be not afraid." She might be alone, but her "solitude carries her shorewards towards the light," a promise made in the words of Swedish poet Ylva Eggerhorn. Just like the psychiatrist Jenny in *Face to Face*, there is then a religious context to her newfound knowledge that emerges from her breakdown. Bergman points to this context in his letter to the cast of *Face to Face*: "If ... she accepts her new knowledge, she lets herself be drawn farther and farther in toward the center of her universe, guided by the light of intuition, a voyage of discovery which at the same time opens her up to other people in an endless design" (*Face to Face*, viii).

In this chapter, I have discussed the great influence Swedish society, its literature and culture have over *The Lost Comedian*. The social setting of Sweden in a time of great social change, which was inspired in turn by its history of former poverty and alcohol abuse, shapes its characters and how they react to events depicted in the novel. Strindberg and Bergman, as two of the major literary and cultural icons of Sweden, are also weighty informants of the protagonist's world-view. The right to be a "Seeker" and ask questions, form your own opinion, and find your own way in the world is juxtaposed with the religiously inspired and highly punitive discourses of

sin and expiation, where evil creatures of the night are waiting in the darkness to lead the way to the punishment awaiting transgressors: loneliness and possible madness.

The inspired and rebellious protagonist, who starts so promisingly on her journey of liberation, must endure grief and exile, a great distance away from the place she both longs for, and fears: Sweden, and specifically, her old past in small-town Svenstorp. The exploration of these themes of exile, grief, distance and memory are the focus of the next chapter.

CHAPTER THREE

A WALK IN THE PAST: MEMORY AND CREATIVE DISTANCE

Nordic Spring

*All my castles of air have melted like snow,
all my dreams have run out like water,
of all that I loved I have only left
a blue sky and a few pale stars.
The wind moves softly among the trees.
The emptiness rests. The water is silent.
The old spruce tree stands awake and thinks
about the white cloud he kissed in a dream.*

—Edith Södergran

“A Walk in the Past”, is the title of one of the chapters in *The Lost Comedian*, in which Christina goes for a chilly early morning walk with her sister Anita. For her sister, the local cemetery seems the main attraction, the walks are her way of coping, for, as she says, “As long as I keep walking, I’m fine!” (LC, 49). “A Walk in the Past” is also the title of my article in Monash University’s postgraduate journal (*Compass*, Aug/Sep, 2008), in which I reflected on a research trip to Sweden. As Christina does in the novel, I spent a considerable amount of my time walking with my sister through the cemetery where our parents are buried, continuing through forests and mossy bog-lands in a winter bleak landscape.

Transforming and translating some of the experiences from this trip—and memories from my childhood—into fiction in Australia was a curious process; how I portrayed this landscape from afar was often a surprise to me. The memory of waking up on a dark winter morning was fresh in my mind, yet the imagined landscape depicted in *The Lost Comedian* bears, at times, very little resemblance to the real experience. Images were conjured up and emphasised which seemed unremarkable in Sweden; aspects I found important there, on the other hand, now seemed irrelevant. A new landscape of the past emerged, a fictional landscape with an intensity of focus which created its own physicality, its own reality. “Ghostly dusts of snow are sweeping the streets” (LC, 13) in Svenstorp. “Listen to the silence of the falling softness and the sound of the creaking of our shoes against the snow,” Christina exclaims, “watch the white traces of footsteps on the ground where all is created new again!” (LC, 40). Snow seems ever present; winter certainly seems the preferred season in *The Lost Comedian*. This is my internal landscape, then, how I

remember, and no doubt romanticise, and depict Sweden from a distance. Just as a writer's voice and characters may be affected by writing from a distant place and language, memories and landscape shift and change too.

Paradoxically, the past often seems closer from a distance. There is a sense of intimacy, of almost being physically present when writing about a place from the distance of time and place. I view my past with a heightened focus, the returning to and recalling of events somehow made easier from afar, as if the act of remembering needs a certain distance from which to relive certain events and then transform them; it is often an intensively emotional process.

Recalling this past physically far away from the internal landscape, does therefore at times, as Rushdie suggests, also create an acute sense of loss: "It may be that writers in my position, exiles or emigrants or expatriates, are haunted by some sense of loss, some urge to look back, even at the risk of being mutated into pillars of salt" (10). A sense of grief-filled longing associated with this disconnection is often present in emigrant narratives, a longing I have found myself unexpectedly sharing with Christina.

In this chapter I will look more closely at these, at times, conflicting forces of intimacy and distance, exploring grief and longing, exile and memory in *The Lost Comedian* and its juxtaposition of past and present, Sweden and Australia. The creative process of turning memory into a fictional narrative, together with the issues implicit in translating memories belonging to others—which in *The Lost Comedian* is exemplified by the two chapters set in the 1930s—will be discussed here. Re-visiting place and setting when writing from a distance will then be explored. Many of these ideas emerge from the discourses of diaspora, and I will engage with two influential diasporic writers, Ondaatje and Rushdie, to consider some of the tensions between grief and the potential transformative qualities elicited by distance to memory and place.

I am here also concerned with what Cowie specifically recognises as an important theme in Swedish culture, namely nature, and the longing for the landscape in exile. This chapter will therefore have a greater focus on Christina's new life in Australia. I will refer to poetry by some Scandinavian poets and other Swedish writers to illustrate this theme. I hope to show that the pain of disconnection when "being away" is, however, ultimately a gift to writing, where distance to place, language and memory serve a clarifying function, a translation process not only

leading the way back to a past landscape but also to a re-imagining of a new one: the “imaginary homeland” that Rushdie has spoken of so eloquently.

Creating Fiction out of “Real Life”

Going over in my mind what my life has been I wonder whether all the ... things I have experienced have been staged before my eyes to enable me to ... depict all mental states and all possible situations ... [I]f the course of my life had run smoothly, I should have had nothing to write about.

—Strindberg, From an Occult Diary

I will start by exploring what is often misunderstood, perhaps even mythologised, what is, in fact, a complex creative process: how writers use memory and transform factual events into a fictional narrative. Writers using “real life” events as a starting point for their stories are often criticized for being too literal. As writers Sue Wolfe and Kate Grenville explain in *Making Stories*, “The slippage between your own life and the characters’ lives is hard to describe. Many people who don’t write feel that it either happened to you or it didn’t” (8). Strindberg is an obvious example: a provocateur whose life has often been judged by his writing. I will therefore discuss his work in this context, together with the modern writer Ondaatje and his semi-autobiographical novel *Running in the Family*, to examine the process of translating memory, or “real life”, into fiction.

An important point to make here is that a writer creating a fictional story based on personal factual events may indeed use the same events as if he/she were to write an autobiography; however, the restrictions associated with the presentation of facts in autobiography do not apply to fiction. Sidonie Smith and Julia Watson note that a writer of an autobiography becomes “both the observing subject and the object of investigation, remembrance and contemplation” (1). One might argue that a fictional writer, basing his narrative on factual events, equally becomes both observer and object. Even when there is no intention of using personal memories in fiction, Graham Swift claims that although he avoids the autobiographical, “It’s true that in a fundamental sense all fiction writing is autobiographical, since where else does it come from but from within the author? Writing ... constantly brings you up against yourself and surprises you with the discovery of what you have inside.” However, he warns, “this often intensely personal process is very different from the notion that fiction is just a recycling of the contents of the writers’ life. I find it distasteful the idea that writers are on a permanent reconnaissance trip” (Swift, 1-2).

Although the use of one's personal past in fiction is a complex process, it does, however, give a writer greater freedom to deploy memories than in autobiography, which needs to take events outside the narrative into constant consideration. Novelists, as Smith and Watson remind us, "are bound only by the reader's expectation of internal consistency in the world of verisimilitude created within the novel ... not bound by rules of evidence that link the world of the narrative with a historical world outside the narrative." Life narrators, on the other hand, "inevitably refer to the world beyond the text, the world that is the ground of the narrator's lived experience" (Smith and Watson, 9). In other words, characters in a novel only need to operate within an internal logic consistent with the fictional world that has been created for them, and are not bound by external historical fact the way an autobiography is. Although all "facts" are open for interpretation, in autobiography, life events cannot be altered for the sake of character development or to heighten an event because it would suit the narrative.

Strindberg is an interesting case study here. Instead of being understood as autobiography, Strindberg's notorious use of his own life in fiction, in, for example, *Married* and *Inferno*, should rather be seen as part of a more complex creative process. According to Lagercrantz, Strindberg expected "his life experiences—particularly the painful ones—to pay dividends in terms of his writing" (228). However, in her article "Defining Strindberg's Prose Fiction," Lisa Teruel outlines how she came to "regard Strindberg as primarily 'a man of fiction'— and consequently define his so-called autobiographical works as 'prose fiction' "(Teruel, 59). By pointing to Strindberg's own remarks that "a story can be told in many different ways, it can be examined from many different angles, you can give colour to it or bleach it" (Teruel, 65), she finds him a writer "who is adapting facts for later fictional use" (Teruel, 60). Using the example of Strindberg's attendance at a fancy-dress ball for homosexual men and women in Berlin 1893, she then traces four different depictions of this event in his work and argues that it is "evident that they comprise four different versions whose working out is being determined by three main factors: the genre, the progress of the text and the position of the narrator" (64). Teruel further points out "that after these four varying accounts of the ball, a reader is still in limbo concerning the factual episode - what actually happened at the ball ... and how Strindberg felt about the whole thing" (65). She concludes that "[i]n

Strindberg the biographical material seems to establish a reality of its own which enables it to create an intertextuality of its own making” (65).

Michael Robinson takes this point even further, depicting the autobiographical events of a writer as part of a larger narrative of society as a whole. He argues:

If the author’s life lurks at the base of literary work, where it provides the deep structure of experience retailed in the text, then no more than literature as a whole is a simple reflection of the society of which it is part, does this underlying sequence of events appear in the text without refraction, distortion, addition and inevitably subtraction. (Robinson, 9-10)

Robinson believes that Strindberg’s text is “inserted into a circuit of communication where it is traversed by other forces, the demands and constraints of language and genre, and what Roland Barthes calls the ‘image-repertoire, which oversees, controls, purifies, banalizes, codifies, corrects [and] imposes the focus (and the vision) of a social communication’ ” (Robinson, 10). If we take this together with Swift’s belief that a novel “isn’t some specialized mental activity, but a thing that reflects and serves life” (Swift, 1-2), the relationship between the autobiographical events of a writer and the creation of a piece of fiction involves a complex interaction between a writer and the society in which he/she lives, the narrative choices made and the needs of the writer him/herself.

In his semi-autobiographical novel *Running in the Family*, Ondaatje shows that the desire to revisit and make sense of one’s past might be one such need, which has the potential to be transformed into something greater than a personal re-collection and narrative. Lee Spinks concurs in his monograph on Ondaatje, where he also finds that revisiting one’s past might at times be needed in order to make sense of both the present and future (Spinks, 113). What is fact or fiction in terms of Ondaatje’s personal history is not easy to distinguish. However, the narrative transgresses those boundaries and does not lend itself to easy categorisation. “The generic elusiveness” of *Running in the Family*, Spinks believes, transforms Ondaatje’s past, both his own, his family’s history as well as the nation, into something which is too elusive to call either fiction or nonfiction, where categories appear “too vague to explain the sheer stylistic diversity in Ondaatje’s literary performance” (111). Spinks points to the surreal and fantastic elements as an example, which he finds “perfectly attuned to the story of a revenant experiencing

the strangeness of his homeland as if for the first time” (11). Additionally, Jeffery Orr argues, there are also the chosen photographs from Ondaatje’s family history which add another important layer in his “fictionalized memoir”, where the photographs work with the written text to change the way in which we approach the past and images of the past (Orr, 31). Perhaps then, as Douglas Barbour suggests, “Documents, the given stories, are but springboards from which invention leaps into the ocean of story” (Barbour, 149) for Ondaatje, who himself defends the “fictional air” in the book by claiming “that in Sri Lanka a well-told lie is worth a thousand facts” (Ondaatje, 206).

Like Ondaatje, Brian Castro’s fictional autobiography “draws on memory, stories, photos, and family myths and secrets.” (*Shanghai Dancing*, back cover). In his acknowledgements, Castro emphasises, “This is a work of fiction. All characters are products of the author’s imagination and should not be identified with any persons” (Castro, 449). A reading of *Shanghai Dancing* certainly seems to support this point, as the narrative switches between different points of time and views of characters, some of the events even taking place in the seventeenth century. It seems personal history has merely inspired and fuelled Castro’s novel and, like Ondaatje, Castro has subsequently re-imagined the past and transformed it through the creative process into fiction.

The Lost Comedian has been through a similar creative process, where memories (and the needs of the writer) have been re-imagined, re-invented and translated to suit the narrative. It is true that I was brought up in a similar cultural environment to that of Christina. Certain events and characters are closely related to that of my own experience of growing up in Sweden. Equally, however, many events and characters depicted in the novel are not only fabricated but the ones based on fact, are unreliable and exaggerated. Christina warns of this in several places. I did, for example, share a similar religious crisis about my confirmation and experienced similar subsequent pressures to those depicted in the novel. (It was therefore, I have to admit, satisfying on a personal level, to have the protagonist fulfil a wish from a long time ago and run out of the confirmation ceremony!) The consequences of lost friendships and the sting of small-town gossip when crossing over to the “sinful” life on the other side of the moss in Träby are also based on vivid memories which surprised me in the detailed recall.

However, as I will discuss further in my final chapter, I deliberately made the grown up protagonist's life very removed from that of my personal circumstances. The creation of Christina, other characters and settings are consequently a mixture of fact and imagination. As with many autobiographical novels, *The Lost Comedian* has therefore been created from fragments of memories and feelings from the past and blended with imaginative longings and desires of the mind, viewed from a distance to both time and place. "It's all made up," Christina's father at one stage exclaims, irritated and suspicious about plays (*LC*, 135); and although I use my past extensively in my novel, I believe he could have been speaking about *The Lost Comedian* too.

Re-telling the Past of Others

Just a word before you become an author! There is no profession as crude, so devoid of sensitivity as this! If only you knew what life looks like afterwards to a writer, whose profession has forced him to strip off his clothes in a public place, or suck the blood of close friends or even that of his own kin, like a vampire! Ugh! And if one does not do those things, one is not a writer.

—Strindberg, in a letter to a friend (and budding writer)

To draw on very intimate and personal details from one's "real life" when writing is a personal choice. However, sometimes this involves personal and sensitive revelations about real people other than the writer. Using memories other than one's own and the "rights" of those portrayed is thus, I believe, a concern which needs consideration in this context. Those who, at least in part, form the basis of fictional characters may feel violated if they prefer to keep intimate exchanges private, or if they do not have the opportunity to respond or "answer back" for the public record. This is especially true in fiction, where characters are often a mixture of fact and imagination. The potential for fictional characters to be read as truthful portrayals of real people creates ethical problems for the writer of fiction.

For example, in her introduction to *Inferno*, Mary Sandbach, in an attempt to defend Strindberg and his behaviour in regards to his marriages, hits out at Strindberg's former wives in a rather subjective and personal way: "Strindberg is always blamed for the failure of his marriages, but anyone who looks objectively at the characters of his three wives will see that they were all difficult women to live with" (Sandbach, 30). If this view has been formed simply through reading Strindberg's writing, it would only seem fair to point out that in his work he could

depict his personal relationships in any fashion he wanted to; and he did. His works contain personal and vindictive portrayals of his wives, who, it must be noted, did not have the opportunities to respond. This illustrates a very unequal relationship, where Strindberg was responsible for forming public views about his personal relationships, yet those who had been depicted were often helpless to defend themselves or rectify public perceptions. As pointed out earlier, people who knew Strindberg personally were also often furious about his brutal and very intimate portrayals of his close relationships.

In Ondaatje's *Running in the Family*—although far more benevolent than Strindberg's portrayals—the writer not only depicts some of his personal history, but also that of his ancestors. A strong sense of compassion and humour are present in his moving portrayals of his parents, such as his father's drunken escapades on the railway, and the subsequently poignant moment when his mother is sent in to persuade her naked husband to come out of a train tunnel—preferably wearing the clothes she is carrying in her arms (Ondaatje, 149). His re-telling of his ancestors' history may be part of reclaiming his personal history. In the book's final pages he writes:

During certain hours, at certain years in our lives, we see ourselves as remnants from the earlier generations that were destroyed. So our job becomes to keep peace within enemy camps, eliminate the chaos at the end of Jacobean tragedies, and with “the mercy of distance” write the histories. (179)

However, as Spinks argues, the task of writing with “the mercy of distance requires a demanding self-scrutiny” (Spinks, 135).

I hope that this “demanding self-scrutiny,” from this “mercy of distance” has been applied to *The Lost Comedian*, which contains its most autobiographical and “real life” events in the two chapters set in the 1930s. These memories were not personally experienced; they are interpretations of events belonging to my late parents. In the novel, the two chapters depict the traumatic experiences of Christina's parents, which influence not only their adult lives, but their parenting and therefore the lives of the subsequent generations. In the story, Christina's mother loses her father on a Christmas morning and I—together with Christina in the story—imagine her spending this day curled up by the window, watching the day unfolding. As a child I always found harrowing, the story told by my mother of her receiving black material

for a funeral dress on a Christmas morning. Apart from the newspaper cuttings I found in the local paper's archives, I was also inspired by my aunt's memories of the circumstances around my grandfather dying. An old friend of my father's also shed light on the often hidden and hushed events of my father's childhood, a time my father always found difficult to talk about, perhaps feeling this would dishonour the memory of my grandfather. For me personally, hearing that story for the first time gave me a sense of who my elusive paternal grandfather was and what he might have been like.

The eagerness and seriousness with which these friends and family members undertook the task of bringing their pasts alive, speaks something of the great human desire to share one's story. However, it also evokes in me an uncomfortable sense of using precious memories and embellishing them for fictional purposes. Those chapters have, therefore, been one of my great concerns, since I use material based on some characters who have no say over whether they wanted their stories depicted in the narrative or how. Thus, Ondaatje's admission in reference to his aunts, "How I have used them" (110), resonates with some of my own anxieties about depicting events that do not belong to me. Ondaatje's relatives "knit their story together, each memory a wild thread in the sarong" (110), whereas my relatives provided me with memory-threads of woollen material for a funeral. I am, nonetheless, left with uneasy questions about memories and to whom they belong and how they should be used. I therefore have to acknowledge Strindberg's assessment of there being an element of ruthlessness inherent in writing. This applies to writers of autobiographies too, of course, and is a challenge all writers have to face and navigate. The self-scrutiny Spinks finds important when recalling the past remains, therefore, a vital element when writing fiction.

The innate unreliability of how one experiences, remembers and depicts events makes stories both fraught with sensitivity and danger, but it is also what makes them unique and is perhaps what makes us want to tell them in the first place. This might be especially true if the remembered places are spatially, as well as temporally, remote from the writer. In the next part of this chapter, I will examine loss, longing and closeness when remembering a landscape and place from a vast distance.

Remembering the Past from a Distance

Remembering and writing from a distance to a place and time, may, as I have previously argued, create a sense of intimacy and closeness to the depicted landscape. When translating my memories of the landscape of Småland into a fictional narrative from the distance of Australia, nature and the seasons of the landscape of my childhood return so strongly that I feel as if I am once again back inside this landscape. These powerful, sensory recollections serve as an inspiring creative source, but are also, at times, an illusion. The darkness of winter when remembering it, for instance, seems alluring in contrast to the endurance test it really is. I want, therefore, to examine this double sense of closeness/distance by looking at Swedish writer Moberg's novel *A Time on Earth*. This will be followed by a discussion of the depiction of the seasons in *The Lost Comedian*—both the darkness of Sweden and the contrast of light in Australia.

In *A Time on Earth*, Moberg returns to the landscape of his childhood, depicting a narrator for whom the past appears more vivid and real than the protagonist's present life. The novel shows an aging man, Albert Carlson, living out his old age in solitude in small-town California where, amidst walks by the ocean and day to day errands, he grieves and reflects on his past and childhood in Småland—also the region and setting of *The Lost Comedian*. The depiction of the narrator's landscape of Småland comes alive, I would argue, very vividly in *A Time on Earth*, whereas the setting of California seems ghostlike and devoid of life, merely a neutral background in which Albert remains focused on reliving his past. In a particularly strong scene, the protagonist recalls his late brother in intense detail, when he remembers how, upon returning home for his parents funeral, during a walk in the forest of his childhood, he felt his dead brother's presence at the place of his death: "He came toward me; I recognized his voice; I could not mistake it ... Afterward I wondered whether I had caught the echo of it - whether the echo of a voice could linger in a place and be heard fifty years later." (28). Even though the brother remains the same, "My brother was young, I was old," (28) the society where the protagonist grew up has rapidly changed, and the protagonist is now a stranger and no longer at home in Sweden.

However, Albert is able to return and "live in the place where [he] was born, not where he "dwell[s] in the physical sense" through his memories. "I cannot return to my origins like a ghost", he notes, "I cannot go back as an old man. But I can do it as

a child and youth” (45-46). If one is only able to return to a former landscape through memories, the remembered imagery arguably becomes even more potent.

By remembering events from a place where he is physically not present, Moberg’s protagonist is able to enter and walk into memories the way he remembers them; everything remains the same, frozen in time: “So I find my way to my beginnings, to another region of our earth ... Here I am an old man - but in another country I am still a child and a youth” (76). There is no present to disturb the imagery in the protagonist’s mind, to interfere with his memories of houses and buildings, the characters and places remain the same, there is no collision between the external and internal landscape. In this fictional depiction I find a resonance with my own experience, and an explanation for the ways in which my past appears closer and more intimate from a distance.

In this way, perhaps the past also becomes more easily recalled from a distance.¹⁶ As Rushdie finds, recollecting Bombay of the 1950s in his imagination when writing his novel *Midnight’s Children*, he is “genuinely amazed by how much came back to [him]” (11). I too have been surprised, when looking back at my upbringing in Sweden, about how many detailed conversations, scenes and expressions on people’s faces can be retrieved. It is as if time is somehow different, it has collapsed yet is more elastic and attenuated, and this creates a new kind of relationship to both the historical and fictional landscape. Hence, I find it is the distance from both time and place which Moberg has created *A Time on Earth* that makes the recalled past in the novel so strong, almost overwhelming. It is almost as if there is a special place where the body and mind collude to store memories which can be recalled only if one is very far away from the physical sensations of place; an imagined emergency outlet of remembered scents, sounds and images, perhaps. For me as a reader, the distance to Moberg’s portrayal of the landscape of Småland, depicted from America (and read by me from the other side of the world) accentuates my experience of it. The novel evokes a sensuous explosion of familiar smells and sounds, characters and scenery, and it creates a nostalgic longing for landscape and

¹⁶ Many writers also choose to write and live abroad where they feel able to write more freely about their homeland from another place, “because of the ideological pressure and censure—both implicit and explicit political constraint that they are subjected to within their native framework” (Tymoczko 24).

nature far more immediate than it would be were I reading *A Time on Earth* within landscape.

However, if a distance to one's past landscape has the ability to create a sense of closeness, it may also intensify and heighten a sense of loss. As Rushdie points out, the past might be particularly potent from a great distance: "I suggest that the writer who is out-of-country and even out-of language may experience this loss in an intensified form. It is made more concrete for him by the physical fact of discontinuity, of his present being in a different place from his past, of his being 'elsewhere'. (10)

Moreover, the ever-present memories of the past may also signify that one is not truly present in the new country and landscape. This is evident in many immigrant narratives, where, as for Moberg's narrator, the past has the power to overshadow one's new life. Instead of a sense of arriving at new possibilities, there is an awareness and grief about the life left behind. As Olsson's protagonist, Adam, in *Sonata for Miriam* (2008) laments when explaining about his new home of New Zealand: "There are many like [us] in the new world. Escapees from the old one. But we bring it with us. There is no escape. And sometimes it becomes the opposite of what you were hoping for. The distance accentuates the memory of what you were hoping to leave behind" (Olsson, *Sonata for Miriam*, 252). In Olsson's novel, Adam's yearning means that even a visit to a market in Sweden becomes an almost indulgent exercise in nostalgia:

There are no places quite like that where I live ... You can buy the freshest produce ... But it's different ... It's innocent. Without history. And you have to invest more of yourself to make it into tasty food. Here it feels as if everything comes already destined for specific dishes. With a concept attached ... They conjure up an entire cultural heritage. And somehow I feel as if I belong. (256)

For the "homeless" Adam, the past thus seems closer in terms of cultural belonging, but it is also worth remembering that the "innocent" food bought back in his new country does carry a history too, just a different one. This kind of exile bears the risk of becoming a constant a mourning process; it even reflects a kind of death. Strindberg's Indra, taking farewell and leaving this earth in his *A Dream Play*, in this way reflects similar themes of regret, where "one misses even what was once

disdained / and feels a guilt for wrongs that one did never do” (404), whether leaving this earth or the landscape from one’s past.

Furthermore, it is important to remember that the recalled landscape, as Rushdie famously points out, is an imagined one. What feels like an astonishingly detailed recall with accompanying sensory perceptions are for a writer, as he notes, in fact, “to deal in ‘broken mirrors’ some of whose fragments have been irretrievably lost.” (11) Appearing together with newly rediscovered and recalled memories are fictional ones, where memories of one’s past are blended with how one thinks they might or should have been; the landscape now looks the way one desires it to, or it has become mythologised from the distance of time and place. In other words, the “needs” of the writer, that I discussed previously, add to and subtract from this landscape, and the landscape of one’s past thus becomes a fictional one. In the next part of the chapter I will discuss some of these imagined landscapes in *The Lost Comedian*: the Swedish, as well as the contrasting Australian, landscape.

Swedish Darkness and the Bright Lights of Australia

*Winter Night
Sparkling creaking hard crust.
Lonely, lonely is the night sky over white roads.
I am filled with an angry thirst
for the winter sky.
Will you not soon leap up before my foot,
deep earth-cold water that sometimes chilled me,
O strong darkness that
My star conceals?*

–Karin Boye

As discussed in Chapter Two, Cowie has identified four vital cultural themes in the Swedish tradition, the first being the landscape and its elements. Though all writers use landscape in their work, the intensity often found in Swedish depictions of landscape may be due to the contrast between the shortness of the summer and the long winter. Cowie believes “Swedes enjoys a love-hate relationship with nature” (38-39), especially the dark season. This is certainly present in Bergman’s work where the lighter, more sensual summer films, often comedies, like *Smiles of a Summer Night*, are often thematically very different to films with winter settings such as *Winter Light*. This stark film from the early 1960s depicts a priest’s religious crisis and inability to help a parishioner, who, devoid of hope, commits suicide. A film which, according to Bergman, “swept his house clean”, freeing him from

inhibitions which had been part of his religious conscience of not “being good enough” (*Bergman on Bergman*, 219).¹⁷

With many Swedish expatriate writers, a poignant relationship between the lightness of summer and darkness of winter is often present, which concurs with Cowie’s thesis about the importance of the themes of nature and landscape in Swedish culture. In Olsson’s *Let Me Sing You Gentle Songs*, for instance, the narrative starts with the protagonist’s return to Sweden. As she is travelling on a dark road in winter darkness, the focus is on the weather: “There had been wind and drifting snow during her journey, but as darkness fell, the wind died and the snow settled” (9). As the friendship develops between the young protagonist, whose return home has been prompted by the loss of a loved one in New Zealand, and an older neighbour, Astrid, who seems frozen in time by bitter grief and memories, the snow melts as the hope is renewed for both women. The changing seasons as part of a metaphor for the developing friendship is also highlighted on the back cover: “As the icy winter gives way to spring, the two women are drawn together.”

The importance of seasons and the contrasts of darkness and light are, as mentioned earlier, by no means restricted to or monopolised by Scandinavian story tradition; however, the reason why Nordic winter/darkness is so frequently employed to reflect the inner landscape of fictional characters might be the sheer length of time which one has to endure this darkness. Spring, it seems, will never come. “Did you wonder how I live here during the long black winters,” a character asks the protagonist in Olsson’s second novel, when visiting her in Sweden: “In this world where the only light is the one you make yourself?” (*Sonata for Miriam*, 262). Bergman has been quoted as saying how “each morning during January ... [he] would wait anxiously for the tiny thread of light on the wall opposite his window to expand.” He continues: “This is what sustains me through the black and terrible winter: seeing that line of light growing as we get closer to spring” (Cowie, 39).

When spring finally arrives, it is, furthermore, often a painful process. One of Sweden’s most well-loved poems by Boye uses this process metaphorically, expressing the vulnerability of growing up. To walk into the light after a long time of

¹⁷ *Winter Light*, also harbours another theme Cowie identifies very strongly as part of a Swedish cultural heritage, that of expiation through suffering.

darkness can be a conflicting and anxious experience full of longing to remain in the dim and shadowy comfort of winter:

Yes, of course it hurts when buds are breaking.
Why else would the springtime falter?
Why would all our ardent longing
bind itself in frozen, bitter pallor? (Boye, 119).

When the snow begins to melt in the last chapter in *The Lost Comedian*, Christina is once more leaving Sweden, and the frailty and danger of the treacherous spring is highlighted by the accident on the slippery road and near death-experience. She does, however, survive, reclaiming her name, finally able to grow and become liberated from the past, just like the inherent promise of the triumph of spring in the last stanza of Boye's poem when "the tree's buds break as in rejoicing" and "forget their fear before the flight unfurled" (119).

It is, however, mainly a fascination with the winter landscape that captures both me, the writer, and Christina when re-imagining the landscape of the lost land of childhood, and it is therefore no co-incidence that the Swedish landscape in *The Lost Comedian* is filled with snow. The relationship between characters and the wintry landscape consists of both joy and despair. When poet Boye walks through her bitter cold winter landscape in "Winter Night" we feel the creak beneath our shoes and the painful road ahead. This kind of walk is present in *The Lost Comedian* too, often instigated by Anita, Christina's sister, who lives in this landscape without nostalgia. For her the bracing walks in winter darkness are rather part of a mourning ritual, an acknowledgement to the ones who walked the place before, a duty towards the dead in a landscape in which both she and they belong:

Her movements are firm as she strides ahead on the frozen gravel ...
Now and then she stops abruptly in front of a stone, muttering some
facts about some distant relative or a friend ... looking sharply at the
person stumbling behind her unaccustomed to the cemetery and the
darkness, as if annoyed, or surprised, by my presence. (*LC*, 49)

In contrast to Anita's winter, which belongs to the present, Christina's winter is mainly a season of the past. The bitter cold winter is at times a reflection of her inner landscape; a frozen adult, her grief a punishment, she is engulfed in the kind of darkness that the poet Tomas Tranströmer describes as a time experienced in the

early hours of the morning when, “that which was ‘I’/ is only a word / in the December dark’s mouth” (“Winter Formulae”, 77).

Christina’s winter landscape signifies not so much the darkness of the season, however, but mostly the yearning and remembrance of snow filled memories of purity and joy. It is the kind of snow which is part of recollected Christmas mornings, and which falls once she has been released from pastor Herrings’s wife. Snow also represents continuity and a part of Christina’s inheritance, when she imagines her mother as a child also watching a wintry landscape, albeit with “traces ... of the people making a detour away from their house before her father went to the sanatorium” (*LC*, 37). The winter landscape therefore encompasses both the darkness and despair of the season, the covering up of frozen ground, but also the purity and hope of “this white, starry fall” (*LC*, 40), and the chance of creating everything anew.

The darkening landscape that Christina flies across in a dream in the beginning of *The Lost Comedian*, which heralds a dark journey ahead, may be seen in sharp contrast to her new life in Australia. The extensive difference in landscape and light in Australia highlight its disparity with the Swedish darkness: “so much brightness there, so much darkness here” (*LC*, 18).

However, the desire of the newly arrived immigrant for a new, bright landscape corresponding to a much brighter future, one very different to her dark past, remains unrealised. Though bathed in light, the change of landscape does not correspond with a change of Christina’s internal landscape. The distance from Sweden only accentuates unresolved issues and creates new ones as Christina struggles to fit into a new place and culture.

As Adam in *Sonata for Miriam* also finds, a change of scenery alone does not have the capacity to change and heal the past; it stays with you. Adam, who has immigrated to New Zealand in order to create a new life, has had to make an impossible choice between leaving the woman he loves and abandoning their daughter. It is a choice he has had to confront daily, and when his daughter tragically dies in an accident, he returns to Europe in search of his identity. He finds a darker landscape and history, which stand in sharp contrast to New Zealand: “There are colours where I live. Bright colours. But they are not mine. I think that I chose the life around me there, the very colours, so that I wouldn’t have to make them myself. They have been a substitute for real colour. Real life” (Olsson, *Sonata for Miriam*,

252). His life in New Zealand has thus only served to accentuate and amplify the grief of what has been left behind. A grief, which Said claims, always overshadows any success stories about individuals in exile: “But these are no more than stories, efforts to overcome the crippling sorrow of estrangement. The achievements of any exile are permanently undermined by his or her sense of loss” (Said, 439). Exile, Said concludes, “is fundamentally a discontinuous state of being” (440).

Christina’s new life in Australia is, moreover, often an illusion; a life lived in relation to, and for the benefit of, an imagined audience from her past. The new landscape becomes part of a fantasy, and the distance serves to cover up any discrepancy between reality and story. It is almost as if Christina is acting out a part at times. She imagines herself being watched, “I’d fantasise that they could see me at home and marvel at my lifestyle” (*LC*, 143). In reality, she is at a loss in Australia. Unable to read the cultural codes, her instinctive mode of survival—to make a joke and make people laugh—thus turns into a horrific act of humiliation when she pretends to be a dog. Her relationship with Mark never really recovers from it, even though he tries his best to cover up, perhaps more to salvage his own image: “I heard him later ... making announcements about misunderstandings, laughing to his friends about Swedish sense of humour, the mad bastards, and Bergman and Strindberg and darkness and gloom” (*LC*, 148).

What is more, if the new life is a fantasy and its discrepancy with reality so pronounced, the past can be perceived as a threat. As in Tranströmer’s poem “Winter’s Gaze”, where winter is a constant reminder when enjoying the height of summer, “A sudden chill, from a great distance, meets me. / The moment blackens / and remains like an axe-cut in a tree trunk” (165), the chill of Christina’s past in Sweden, haunts her and steers many of her choices in Australia too. Her past, whether in Australia or in Sweden is a constant companion, with memories following her everywhere and taking on a nightmarish quality. “It’s all death, isn’t it? Carefully surrounding you, cutting you into pieces” (*LC*, 82). Shadows and “familiar spectres” (*LC*, 13) from the past observe her from an almost menacing distance; even death, it seems, watches over her. There is no escape, whatever the season, wherever she goes. Viewed from any distance, her past seems truly inescapable; her memories have “turned” on her: they are now watching and observing her, as in Tranströmer’s poem, “Memories Look at Me”:

They can't be seen, they merge completely into
the background, true chameleons.

They are so close that I can hear them breathe
though the birdsong is deafening. (165)

It might be necessary to return to the important theme of expiation through suffering to understand finally why Christina is staying in Australia. A sense of redemption through grief is a strongly religious theme in Swedish culture, and it is often linked to living in exile. As Said points out, "as an element in the Christian and humanistic tradition's idea of redemption through loss and suffering ... exile has played a consistent role" (Said, 441). For Christina, it is a self-imposed exile. Fittingly, she lives isolated for the most part, the dog Caesar her solitary companion on her walks. When she joins other, lost foreigners, she experiences only a sense of unreality and bafflement: "A lot of carefree-looking Europeans with too much sun on their faces and colourful T-shirts with humorous messages, as if surprised to find themselves here, on the other side of the world, away from grey skies and coats, huddling in the wind. I guess we are all surprised" (LC, 93).

Although Sue befriends her, they do not spend much time together, as Sue is constantly travelling. Instead, it is Christina's grief that follows her "on every walk in Elwood and echo[es] over the bay each night" (LC, 141); this is part of her punishment. As with Moberg's *A Time on Earth*, there is the undercurrent that she deserves to live far away, to be excluded. She has turned away from God, and by extension from her whole family and the society in which she was brought up. Thus, the idea of redemption through loss and suffering—not only the loss of her child but of her roots, language and belonging—is entrenched in her value system.

It might also be worth noting that when Christina is finally able to break her silence and speak of the tragic events that have taken place in Australia, and of her subsequent grief, she speaks in her first language:

"A girl," I finally say. "I had a baby girl. We called her Siri."

"Siri." He says her name in real Svenstorp dialect. No rolling R's
like the ones I learnt in acting school: a guttural sound, almost silent,
as if to be used sparingly. "Siri." (LC, 141)

We do not know whether Christina will return to Australia, but there is the acknowledgement that there is a sense of sanctuary, albeit a lonely one, connected to her life in Australia. In the end, we can only speculate that this acknowledgement,

together with her unexpected articulation of the cause of her grief, might finally allow Christina to move on.

Finally, I want to consider whether the longing for the old landscape and the attendant sense of dislocation, both from language and culture, present in *The Lost Comedian*, therefore support my own argument about the gains that come from living and writing in translation. As Hoffman writes in *Lost in Translation*: “After the immigrant’s dendrites stop standing on end from the vividness of first impression, comes this other, more elusive strangeness - the strangeness of glimpsing internal landscapes that are arranged in different formations as well” (265). Describing Christina’s life in Australia here, I seem to have come full circle in my argument about the necessity to re-translate in order to find a new “liberated” self. Instead, I find myself wedged in the “Wordsworthian” landscape of safety and nostalgia in which I placed Hoffman in the first chapter. Whereas I imagined myself roaming free, seeking new ventures in a “Byronic”, liberated way, I now find that such nostalgia has crept up on me.

The pain and grief experienced, the longing for a sense of home and belonging that Christina and Hoffman share, and from which I certainly am not immune, is, however, not the foremost issue. The central question still remains of how the translation process changes, not only one’s sense of self but also the creative writing process itself and thus by extension, the story. This is not to deny the traumatic experience of leaving one’s mother country. Instead, I would argue, it is in confronting these difficult emotions that the creative experience becomes richer.

A sense of longing seems as much part of this new landscape as the old one, and maybe it is this that ultimately connects us and binds us all together. This somewhat Romantic notion unites Christina and her mother, at least momentarily. Whether standing by the kitchen window watching the horizon like Christina’s mother, or walking an old dog on a beach in Australia, it is the tension between the “Seeker’s” hope of a new life dawning, and the grief for the old and remembered one that animates the creative process. Distance, whether in time, space, language or culture, breeds creative potency, and it is this that keeps the old landscape and language alive and vibrant.

My next chapter, the final one, will examine some of the practical translation challenges that I faced when writing *The Lost Comedian*, where processes, questions and choices in regards to developing character, dialect and culture were a vital and continuing part of the creative process.

CHAPTER FOUR

PRACTICAL ISSUES OF CULTURAL TRANSLATION AND CHARACTER

Linguistic hospitality calls us to forgo the lure of omnipotence; the illusion of a total translation which would provide a perfect replica of the original. Instead it asks us to respect the fact that the semantic and syntactic fields of two languages are not the same, or exactly reducible the one to the other. Connotations, contexts and cultural characteristics will always exceed any slide rule or neat equations between tongues.

—Richard Kearney

Ricoeur's phrase of "linguistic hospitality," and furthermore his discussion of "translation as happiness," might seem a somewhat abstract place to start a chapter on the practical experiences and translation challenges I experienced when writing *The Lost Comedian*. However, it works, in my view, as a counter to my own expectations of a flawless translation, by letting "the mourning for the absolute translation" be part of—and necessary to—the translation process (Ricoeur, 10). This acceptance, in turn, functions to reconcile the conflicting feelings of both grief and exhilaration that I have experienced in translating my Swedish setting for an English-speaking audience. Ricoeur believes that by "acknowledg[ing] the difference between adequacy and equivalence, equivalence without adequacy" whilst maintaining "the desire to translate" one can find the benefits of translation, and in this acceptance, he locates the secret of finding happiness in translation (10).

Strengthened by this notion of adequacy, I will explore some of the practical translation challenges I encountered when writing *The Lost Comedian* in a second language, and thus, in the words of Ricoeur, join those translators who "gave up the comfortable shelter of the equivalence of meaning, and ventured into hazardous areas where there would be some talk of tone, of savour, of rhythm, of spacing, of silence between the words, of metrics and of rhyme" (38).

Writing a story set in one language and cultural setting and then expressing it in a different language involves making many pragmatic and practical choices. Cultural translation issues, such as the question of cultural appropriation, require some attention, and in my case, cultural and religious issues especially play a vital part. How I deal with some of these culturally specific concerns in an English-speaking context has been a constant consideration. The cultural traditions of Sweden, such as Swedish Midsummer celebrations or the uniquely Swedish habit of using the tobacco

product of “snus”, are a couple of examples of culturally specific areas that needed some attention. I also wanted to create an impression of the community of Svenstorp being somewhat old-fashioned and conservative, and thus out of time with the “new” society of Sweden: how the children of Svenstorp should address grown-ups and people in positions of power and whether this difference needed to be conveyed to an English-speaking audience or not, was one such consideration.

Major translation issues obviously revolve around the language spoken in *The Lost Comedian*. For the purposes of my novel, Swedish-speaking characters have been translated into English and consequently do not speak in their native tongue. What is more, some of the characters also express themselves in a heavy, local dialect, contrasting with, for instance, the Swedish spoken by the population closer to Stockholm. Choices in regards to how best to convey this contrast in dialect into English, and how much this difference in dialect needed to be emphasised for a non-native speaker of Swedish, had to be made. Moreover, language and local dialect also evolve over time, which is another area that needed some consideration. Christina’s father’s friend Eskil, for instance, who speaks at her father’s funeral, talks in a colloquial language which is by then old-fashioned and seemingly out of place in the new and modern Svenstorp.

A vital interest for this chapter is also to examine how characters have been developed in *The Lost Comedian*, where my acting background influenced the practical application of this process. With some examples of how my characters were developed, and their special “needs,” this chapter will look closely at some of my translation concerns when giving voice to a character; however it will also discuss some of the strategies employed when building a character’s internal world and desires.

Questions asked in this “practical” chapter are thus varied in content and span a diversity of concerns; however, the focus is on how characters think, speak and develop and how this is conveyed in the novel.

Cultural Considerations about Svenstorp and Sweden

When writing in a second language about characters speaking a different language and living in a different cultural background, one undoubtedly needs to look at cultural translation and appropriation, and thus how best to “convey in a language that is not one’s own the spirit that is one’s own” (Rao, 276). The issue is whether to

“bring the reader to the author” or “bring the author to the reader” (Ricoeur, 34). Ricoeur traces this concept back to the German Romantics—whom he calls the great *desirers* of translation. By articulating the problem in this way, he aims to dispel “the anguish of serving two masters, the foreigner in his strangeness, the reader in his desire for appropriation” (34-35).

Translation of culture may involve ideological and political considerations, since “translation does not happen in a vacuum, but in a continuum; it is not an isolated act, it is part of an ongoing process of intercultural transfer” (Basnett and Trivedi, 2).¹⁸ Culture specific customs, social structures and relationships explicitly expressed or learnt and understood from the context of the narrative are all part of this intercultural transfer. As stated in *Post-colonial Translation*, “the act of translation always involves much more than language. Translations are always embedded in cultural and political systems and in history” (Basnett and Trivedi, 6).

Translating cultural customs in the text involves, furthermore, a negotiation between making a text richer for a reader, and over-explaining for a reader and thus underestimating him/her. Frequently elements of both—explanation and/or none—are incorporated into a text. As Tymoczko puts it: “Customs, beliefs and myths are frequently explained ... in translation,” (25) so the question becomes how “to handle features of the source culture (for example, objects, customs, historical and literary illusion) that are unfamiliar to the receiving audience” (22). She also notes that such “dilemmas influence the representation of the largest elements of the text (for example, genres, character types, plot materials) down to the smallest (phonemes, lexis, idiom, metaphor)” (30).

How best, and to what degree, should I adapt my own narrative for an audience not familiar with the culture and setting, has been one of the main concerns throughout my creative process, though the choices I have made have been more practical than ideological. Furthermore, as the translation process was part of my writing, I did have the advantage of being an author, (different to a translator, according to Tymoczko) and thus make choices from the very beginning in how to present cultural differences, such as whether to emphasise culturally specific elements or to highlight more universal themes. This means, Tymoczko believes,

¹⁸ As the title of their work, *Post-colonial Translation* suggests, Bassnett and Trivedi are specifically looking at the impact of colonialism on translation, which as they point out, went hand in hand (2).

that “it is easier to keep the text balanced, to manage the information load, and to avoid mystifying or repelling elements of the receiving audience with a different cultural framework” (21-22). I have also had the added advantage, I would argue, to translate a culture that is somewhat similar on many levels to that of the intended audience or target culture.

Nevertheless, there have still been many translation challenges in *The Lost Comedian*, some of which had to be pointed out to me, as at times I seemed blind to the fact that an understanding of both English and Swedish was required in certain places in order for the text to make perfect sense. On the whole, however, I found it easier to pinpoint specific language issues, whereas cultural details (including humour), and especially religious connotations, which might be lost for a non-speaker of this culture, were sometimes over-looked or harder to translate. As an example, in *The Lost Comedian*, Christina loses her best friend Birgitta after going to a dance. It seemed necessary to highlight that the bewildering custom of the once-a-year, pre-Christian dance around the phallic symbol of a maypole at Midsummer in Sweden, is seen as a harmless activity by the church community, whereas dancing at the Dance-Parlour in contrast, evokes horror and is seen as the epitome of sin. On the other hand, the risk of over-explaining this moment and thus taking away some of the tension between Christina and her friend in the scene was also evident. The need, however, to show the ridiculous hypocrisy of the stand of the church seemed greater, and more important for subsequent chapters, than the risk of overdoing the scene:

The folkdances organised by my church once a year, when we dance around the May-pole—its giant flower balls dangling cheerfully from a great height— ... really bears little comparison to Träby Dance Parlour ... But Birgitta has never been inside the venue, and stubbornly, I persist. I paint such a vivid picture for her I almost start believing in the comparison myself. I warm to the idea that I can somehow fuse profane dancing—that everyone knows is one of the great sins, along with drinking, swearing and card playing—with the innocent games of church summer activities. I try to picture the serious men from the congregation with a new spirit and wildness in their step around the pole; the shriek of laughter louder among the movements to the traditional songs. I try to hold onto the fact that even *tant* Eivor and the elders will leap like frogs on the grass oval

behind the church. The more I try, the more they turn stiff and stilted inside my head; it's like trying to compare the Salvation Army Band to Ballroom Blitz. (LC, 87-88)

As mentioned in my introduction, I am indebted to editor Beryl Hill for pointing out some cultural and linguistic translation issues in *The Lost Comedian*. Here I will discuss the translation of “snus”, swear-words, and “Aunt and Uncle”. In (Swedish) dictionaries, the Swedish word of “snus” is translated into “snuff”. This is also how I originally referred to the product. Snuff, however, is more an accurate description of a substance that used to be inhaled in earlier centuries, which is not the same product as “snus”. The product of “snus” is mainly a Swedish (and Norwegian) cultural phenomenon and is still a widely used tobacco product by (usually) men in Sweden. “Snus” is a moist powder tobacco product which is placed under the lip. Although it is presented in individual portion bags, this was not the case in the 1970s, hence the reference to “snus” sometimes running down the teeth (and chin) of persons consuming the product. After contemplation, I decided to explain what “snus” is in a few instances in the text and then call the product by its Swedish name.¹⁹ I have not only come to terms with the fact that translating “snus” into “snuff” would perhaps give the wrong impression, but it also made me aware of how much (almost obsessively), I referred to it, which subsequently resulted in a reduction of the number of instances it is mentioned in the novel.

Translation of swearwords was another area of deliberation, since swearwords have different connotations in English and Swedish, the Swedish ones often having religious references as opposed to English swearwords, at least the stronger ones, which often have sexual connotations.²⁰ Since swearing is often used in the novel to

¹⁹ It might be worth noting that the use of “snus” is illegal in the European Union, with the exemption of Sweden and Norway. This highlights the strong cultural and historical tradition (and popularity) of the use of this product in Sweden; to agree to a ban there would be inconceivable. Most of the sources discussing this ban also refer to the product by its Swedish name, thus somewhat vindicating my decision

²⁰ Although swearing has changed over time and many English slang words have made their way into Swedish today, this difference remains. As an example, Jenny Mattsson's conference paper “Linguistic Variation in Subtitling: The subtitling of swearwords and discourse markers on public television, commercial television and DVD,” (from as recently as 2006) shows there is still a marked difference in swearing in English compared to swearing in Swedish. Comparing translations of swearwords on three different Swedish TV channels of the film *Nurse Betty*, Mattson found that the majority of the swearwords in the ST (source text) came from “the ‘sex’ category, whereas, overwhelmingly, the TT (translation texts) swearwords consistently originated from the ‘Religion’ category” (Mattsson, 4).

distinguish the non-Believers from the Believers, this translation issue had a bearing on the novel. Swedish swear words are mostly variations on words relating to the devil or his dwellings: “fan”, “jävlar”, “helvete”. If translated into the English equivalent in terms of strength, the words would mainly have sexual connotations. On the other hand, if I translated the swear-words more literally into English, neither the cultural shock for Christina when hearing these words (frequently) from non-Believers, nor an understanding of her father’s intense disapproval of such words would be accomplished: they would simply not be strong enough. Initially, I simply used the Swedish words and left out an English translation. However, it was pointed out for me that an English speaker would not understand what the Swedish words meant and subsequently miss out on the fact that they were swear words. Somewhere along the way I had forgotten that words such as “fan” did not mean anything to an English speaker. My rethinking on this matter resulted in a compromise: I kept the Swedish swear-words in italics, but next to them, I usually placed an English translation, hoping that the double expression would create a stronger emphasis, while not depriving an English reader of connecting with the intended meaning.

Another area of concern was how to translate the Swedish words of “tant” (Aunt) and “farbror” (Uncle), reflecting a different era of how children addressed grownups in Sweden, especially in the somewhat old-fashioned and conservative society of Svenstorp. Initially I used the equivalent English titles, which Christina, as a child, uses for elders, such as “Uncle” and “Auntie”. However, in some instances these “Aunties and “Uncles” are related to Christina and at other times not. This needed some clarification. Since I find Auntie Gertrude, Christina’s mother’s sister, a very important and formidable character in the story, I felt it was important that she stood out and was differentiated from others who would, in English, be called “Auntie” as a show of politeness. Auntie Gertrude therefore kept her English title of “Auntie”. (By this stage it was also inconceivable to think of her in any other way, or by any other name). Instead I chose to give non-relatives their Swedish titles in italics, (*tant*, *farbror*, *herr* and *fru*) which in Swedish distinguish them from blood relatives. I felt the use of Swedish titles might also add some local flavour in English.

Having pointed to some cultural translation concerns I found when writing *The Lost Comedian*, I will now discuss the formation, development and translation of characters, beginning with how to translate the local dialect spoken in Svenstorp.

Translating Local Dialect

Developing characters in *The Lost Comedian* meant dealing with issues of translation on many levels. Apart from making the culture in which the characters lived both engaging and comprehensible, the language in which they expressed themselves was also a vital part of their character. For characters who are English native speakers in the novel, language expression was important too. Playing with words and sentence construction to produce the desired effect for a character can be, however, especially challenging when writing in a second language.

During the writing of *The Lost Comedian*, the characters, mostly, although not always, “talked” Swedish to me. Often in different dialects too, speaking about concerns that were sometimes culturally specific, creating a set of challenges that were all filtered through a translation process. Dialect was an especially important issue for me, since the dialect spoken in the novel is quite particular, often aiding in giving the locals certain characteristics—a cautious attitude distinguishing them from the charismatic Herrings or the sophisticated Stockholmers. Thus, choices in regards to dialect had to be made.

Birgitta Englund Dimitrova provided vital guidance and information when considering how to tackle dialect in my novel. Her article, which looks at Moberg’s, *A Time on Earth*, and in particular his use of dialect in this novel, was of great interest to me, especially since the dialect, “smålänska”,²¹ is close to the one spoken in *The Lost Comedian*.

According to Englund Dimitrova, “The function of dialect in fictional prose is usually one of characterization of the fictional character” (57). She suggests that “the basis for use of dialect as an artistic device is ... that it can be identified as such by the reader” and highlights the importance of deliberation for a writer when choosing “between available markers or creat[ing] appropriate markers, and then us[ing] them selectively” (52). Dimitrova finds that Moberg uses very few colloquialisms in his novel, and that he does so mainly when he wants to “mark a contrast in space and therefore also of time.” (58). A theme, she points out, that is of great importance in his novel.

Dimitrova further claims that “[d]ialect markers are most useful when identifying a character with a group on regional or social grounds, or towards distinguishing him

²¹“Smålänska”, spoken in the southern province of Småland in Sweden, is a dialect with characteristics such as no rolling, or even absent, “R: s.” There are, however, local differences.

from others as a unique individual” (58) and this was also how I tried to approach dialect in *The Lost Comedian*. The characters living in Svenstorp speak in a local dialect, which, as I pointed out earlier, stands in sharp contrast to how people from the city of Stockholm express themselves, indicating a difference in cultural sophistication and status. Whereas the dialect of Svenstorp suggests a “down-to-earth” and economical, thrifty attitude which is marked in their speech—people from this region are often jokingly referred to as being tight with money—Stockholmers’ accent, on the other hand, come across as very different, a freely expressive and opinionated tone, often projecting a sense of confidence and arrogance in their dealings with the local people of Svenstorp. This was something I wanted to capture on some level in the novel.

Apart from cultural differences in dialect, there were differences in age and time to take into consideration, part of the distinguishing of an individual that Dimitrova speaks about in her article. Thus, when an old friend speaks at the funeral of Christina’s father, it is again different to how most Svenstopers speak; it is a dying language with a different word-order and choice of words that come across as both old-fashioned and out of time, as well as more formal to the everyday language of the Svenstorp of today. These were some of the dialect considerations I needed to take into account when writing the local characters of my novel.

I was also aware that there are many traps when attempting to convey dialect in general; it can easily become tiresome reading, and adding too much local colour in speech may also cause it to become unintelligible and detract from the narrative. For translators conveying dialect into a different language, there are additional challenges and difficulties inherent. For example, there might not be a believable translation alternative for certain expressions of dialect, and sometimes translations could neutralise the story when, “removing it from the source culture and into the target culture” (Dimitrova, 62-64). Therefore, a cautious approach is mostly adopted by translators, Dimitrova concludes. This cautious approach is also endorsed by the translators of both the English and Russian version of Moberg’s novel, according to Dimitrova, since “they do not employ in the translation any linguistic markers that can be identified as belonging to a specific dialect, nor to some larger regional variety” (62).

When attempting to find a way of expressing dialect in *The Lost Comedian*, I decided to adopt a cautious approach too, prioritising readability over authenticity in

dialect. Therefore, there is only one instance where I use dialect to show differences between Svenstorp and city people in the final draft. This is in the first chapter, when there is a short glimpse of Stockholmers crowding Christina's father shop. Here, I thought it was important to differentiate dialects in order to highlight the cultural excitement and anxiety the locals feel about the Stockholmers showing up in their small town, and so I used what Dimitrova refers to as "generalized colloquial language" (62). Having established the difference in speech between locals and outsiders in this one instance, I did not find it necessary to mark this distinction again. I also let an unnamed local represent the community so there were no issues of consistency: "*See, that Father of yours, 'e always takes a bit off! Know 'im well, Konrad, used to go to school together see, and 'e always gives me a good price*" (LC, 7).

My other plans of indicating difference in dialect were reviewed and discarded. I was, for instance, initially keen to show the Herrings as outsiders by making them express themselves distinctively, but decided dialect-speech would only get in the way of more important differences. Furthermore, when Auntie Gertrude and Christina's father battle it out through their newspapers, the father initially responded in heavy dialect to Auntie Gertrude's challenges, but I later re-wrote this scene because it seemed an unnecessary and clumsy intrusion, the father's response in dialect not adding much to the conflict of the dialogue. Instead, Auntie Gertrude effectively and determinedly takes over the scene, the choice of newspapers and attitudes highlighting their differences more effectively than any dialect could have done in the end.

On the other hand, the different speech pattern and dialect of the father's friend, Eskil Emilsson, when he speaks at the funeral, seemed vital to include. His way of speaking is an intrinsic part of his identity; it shows that he belongs to an older generation while differentiating him from other locals. It also highlights Christina's father's cultural heritage. Even though the chapter recounting the mother's background is set in a different time, there is a class difference in these two chapters that comes into play. Whereas dialect does not play a big part in the mother's chapter, attitudes of servility between the wealthy parents of Christina's mother and the locals do, and this seemed more important to highlight.

For Eskil's speech in the father's childhood chapter, I improvised with different local dialect markers and abbreviations, but settled for a few expressions of

difference such as “me mother” and, in particular, word order, to point to a different time, a different way of speaking. Having no equivalent in English, I literally translated from memory this kind of speech-pattern straight onto the page. Expressions such as “father yours” instead of “your father”, in Sweden indicate both his dialect as well as his old fashioned, out of date, word order. It also gives him his own distinct rhythm and thought process. In order for this kind of phrasing not to get too predictable or longwinded, I simply interrupt his speech and give half of the chapter’s narration back to Christina by having her imagine her father leaving his home village.

In conclusion, I have tried to be economical in my responses to using dialect in *The Lost Comedian*, whilst highlighting local speech patterns a few times. With the help of a few other characters of my novel, I will now discuss some other devices I used when developing characters. Playing with a character’s expressions to make the Swedish characters work when speaking in English has at times been helpful in terms of their general development, and I will explore this with the example of *fru* Herring. I will also look at a few other devices I employed which have less to do with expression, and more to do with a character’s internal world.

Creating Characters in The Lost Comedian

You know you do that thing with a character where there’s a little ... osteopath’s click, and they can get up and walk around and you think, thank heavens, I believe!
—Peter Carey

David Lodge suggests that character “is arguably the most important single component of the novel” (Lodge, 67). This statement is echoed by Jewell Parker Rhodes, who states, “Character is the essence and foundation of fiction” (Parker Rhodes, 74). Creating characters in a fictional narrative set in a place, language and culture different to the language in which it is expressed might seem a daunting task, as the translation process, creates, not surprisingly, some additional problematics, such as the previously discussed issue of dialect.

Other than language expression, the inner world of a character, how they think and feel, what they desire, and, in a larger context, what role they play in the novel, are vital elements of creating and developing a character. As I mentioned in my introduction, my background as an actor partly informed my approach when developing the characters for novel. Some of the improvisation techniques I have

learnt over the years in acting were employed in practical ways when developing characters in *The Lost Comedian*.

Examining where some of the characters from my novel “arrived” from and how they made a place for themselves in my novel, I will begin by asking a very basic question: Where do characters come from? The simple answer is, of course, that they evolve from many different sources, real and imagined ones, often a combination of both. They might be inspired by history—public or private—a painting, a piece of music or someone one sees on a bus. A character might be very consciously, deliberately created, perhaps stirred from a memory, as often the case in *The Lost Comedian*. At other times, a character turns up unannounced, unknown and unplanned. “I often say that fiction springs from observation, memory and imagination” (8), Jessica Anderson notes, which to my mind aptly describes the formation of characters too. However a character takes shape, the developmental process creates for both writer and reader the possibility of “slip[ing] into another body and feel[ing] what it is like to live there, even if the living is chaotic” (Barbour, 137).

First of all, Christina is a mixture of self-portrait and complete fabrication, often depending on whether I am depicting her as a child or adult. She shares much of my childhood and adolescence, although in a heightened form, created perhaps from the desire and hope, in Rushdie’s beautiful words, “to restore the past to myself, not in faded greys of old family-album snapshots, but whole, in CinemaScope and glorious technicolour” (10).

The portrayal of the younger Christina, therefore, has some strong autobiographical content. The grown up Christina is, however, almost entirely fictional. Although we share the same religious upbringing and subsequent crisis, Christina, who lacked support, turned into an alcoholic and a drifting adult, something I had not planned when starting to write her. Managing the tensions between assimilation and separation of experience when developing this kind of “mixed” character can be a difficult process. For me, sometimes this involved having to delve into some long forgotten feelings of insecurity and pain to understand Christina’s development.

Mostly, however, developing a fictional protagonist meant very deliberately making the experiences of the grown up Christina very different from those of

myself. Inspired by the influential Stanislavskian²² method of acting and its central tenet of, “what if”, I wanted to create someone more vulnerable, more damaged by her life-experiences. What if, I asked myself, Christina were to be consumed by a grief and loss resembling that from my personal history, but, in contrast, had no support network in her life? Furthermore, what if she were haunted and severely damaged by her actions in challenging her small-town, religious upbringing, her attempt at self-liberation leading her into far more unstable circumstances than those of my own?

Although as a writer I was in many ways in control of the story, once I had dissociated her from my own experiences, I did not know how things would turn out for Christina. I cheered for her and did my best to make her survive, but was at times anxious and concerned for her well-being. At various stages through the writing of the novel, she was on the brink of giving in to drinking, even to suicide. At another time she was living in Tasmania, pregnant and happy in a new relationship. I subsequently wrote several different endings. However, it was not until I had an image of her running through the pine-forest on the moss, and another one of her being involved in an accident outside her control, that I could merge the several strands of the narrative to form a more satisfactory conclusion. In this way, I have tried to give Christina the space to develop freely from my initial ideas about her; it has been a process of letting go in a constant act of improvisation.

Other characters in *The Lost Comedian* seem to have decided to include themselves! There are a number of unexpected “guests” appearing in the novel. One is the Greek boy—who very early on seemed to settle for the name of Aristotle—who vaguely resembled a boy in my primary school in Sweden, and who turned up quite unexpectedly in one of the chapters as a side-kick to another character. Not only has he become a vital character, epitomising the small-town capitalist triumphing over diversity, he also inhabits the role of saviour and Samaritan, single handedly saving Christina from falling into complete darkness at one stage. In a larger context, he has also come to represent the new community of Southern

²² The exercises I describe mostly derive from the most modern influential acting method that Konstantin Stanislavski developed in the late 19th to early 20th century, which he called a spiritual-Realist approach and was closely connected to the staging of Anton Chechov’s plays. Stanislavski inspired and influenced a new way of thinking about acting with the emergence of realism and emotional truth as its core values. For further discussion on “The Magic If,” See Sonia Moore’s *The Stanislavski System: The Professional Training of an Actor*, 25-45.

European immigrants coming to work in the welfare state of Sweden in the 1960s and 1970s. Aristotle brings with him the ability to speak from the outside of the culture, and as one determined to become part of it.

Another character who plays a vital part in the narrative is entirely fictional: the tragic character of Lena. She also determinedly made her way into the novel, perhaps showing where Christina was heading in her downward spiral of alcohol abuse and eagerness to please. I found her one of the most unanticipated inclusions in my novel. She turned up unexpectedly, emerging from some kind of unconscious decision-making process, and soon it became apparent that she had a vital role to play.

When discussing where characters come from, it might also be worth considering where characters depart to, a form of speculation which flirts with the appealing idea that perhaps a writer only borrows her characters for a time. In an interview with Stephanie Bunbury in *Sydney Morning Herald*, Ondaatje “likens his characters as performing on a kind of stage. They walk on and off, revealing as much of themselves as they choose”. He adds: “I want my characters to continue existing, not just in my mind but in the reader's mind, so that at the end of the book we still ask ourselves what happens ... I don't want to slam the door at the end” (*SMH*, 5/5, 2007:2-3). I find this idea of a character having a life outside and beyond the span of the novel a very comforting and inspiring one. Somewhere, I imagine the characters of my novel still continuing to live, and I hope to one day return to them and see what has become of them. This is especially true for Christina. I do not feel, for instance, that she and Mark, her Australian ex-boyfriend, are quite finished with each other. I would also be curious to give him some more space to develop. As it stands in *The Lost Comedian*, I did not find that there was much scope for him in this narrative; it was very much Christina's story and her point of view.

These are just a few examples of how characters emerged or were developed in *The Lost Comedian*. I will now examine more closely the characters of the Herrings, to illustrate how both translation issues and improvisation tools played a central role when creating them.

One of the great translation challenges of the novel early on was to make the perplexing character of the Pastor's wife work—as she was a very important character for the protagonist's development. I found several difficulties in eliciting the Pastor's wife's speech, with translation often playing a vital part in these

concerns. I thought it important to find a way to make *fru* Herring both a ridiculous and frightening figure, at the same time as indicating a sense of vulnerability behind her fervent religious intensity.

A vital moment is the scene when, after a night meeting in church, the Pastor's wife sneaks up and whispers to Christina and her friends in Swedish, "*Är ni frälsta, flickor?*" (Are you saved, girls?) In Swedish, I find this sentence a terrifying, albeit ridiculous, question coming from an adult; it connotes the childish and manipulative nature of the Pastor's wife. Phonetically the Swedish works well here. The rolling of the letter "r" in the middle of the word "frälsta" creates a pause, yet also evokes excitement. However, the English translation, "Are you saved, girls?" does not connote the same sense of menace and soft terror. On the contrary, the word "saved" implies a willingness to help out, to reassure even, a reasonable question by a reasonable *fru* Herring, who seems to reach out and offer safety for Christina and her friend.

How could I translate this vital sentence into English and make it as frightening? Should I build the atmosphere of the setting and the tension between the characters differently to create the same impact? Would this Swedish sentence that so haunted me, perhaps not have the same impact on other readers of the text? Would I be able to find a different translation that was not as literal, or should I exclude it altogether, if the sentence was not able to serve the function in an English speaking narrative? I asked this very question at a postgraduate seminar,²³ where, one of the other doctoral candidates, poet Pooja Mittal, discussed this sentence in some detail, suggesting that I could play with the order of words for similar effect. She gave me, as an example, "Saved, are you, girls?" The two pauses created by the two commas and the emphasis and surprise of "saved" coming first, changed the dynamics of the sentence. It also highlighted the irony of the word used in the situation. I thought I now recognised the voice of the Pastor's wife: a highly strung tone underwritten with a sense of menace. Many drafts later, this is still how *fru* Herring utters this sentence, when Christina, and her friend Nilla are on their way out of a night service led by the charismatic Pastor Herring:

²³ Postgraduate Seminar, The Centre for Postcolonial Writing, Monash University, convened by Dr. Chandani Lokuge, December, 2007.

When I finally turn around and look into her crazy, smiling face she has managed to get her other arm around Nilla. We are all so close now, I can smell her. It's a peculiar smell, musky and strong, like our neighbour *farbror* Werner's dogs before they go hunting. Her body seems to be vibrating with excitement, and there's almost the sound of moaning as the Pastor's wife stretches her face wide open and whispers: "Saved, are you, girls?" (LC, 63).

Not only did I "steal" the suggestion for this sentence, it also became part of *fru* Herring's speech pattern. Consequently, the next sentence she utters as she leads the protagonist and friends into the pine-woods at confirmation camp to warn them off boys is: "Careful, are you, girls?" (LC, 74). Thus, what was for me initially a translation challenge, was adapted into a tool to develop character.

In terms of understanding *fru* Herring's internal world, I often experimented with her in a way that reminded me very much of how I approached characters as an actor. Although an actor creating a character would use some analytical skills to "find" their character, acting is—at least for me personally—mostly a very practical art, one of the most important features, I would argue, being the ability to play. Imagining and role-playing—inhabiting different roles—thus became an important part of discovering my characters' secret feelings and desires. As Parker Rhodes notes: "Characters can ... desire and dream about one thing only to discover they need something else" (69). Mentally "dressing up" as my characters, I discovered and uncovered revelations, where characters would realise what and who they truly desired to be.

However, other senses such as the visual, were important too. Training the visual eye to "see" details and tensions in a character from a distance is often an effective way of leaning about the relationship and interplay between the internal and physical manifestation of a character. I would often watch the characters of *The Lost Comedian* as if they were on a stage or in a film. Where did the characters stand in relation to each other? How did the different parts of their bodies react to other characters? What else was on stage in the form of props or in the frame of the film sequence, and how did certain objects impact on them? For instance, I pictured the characters in bed at night, tucked in and ready to go to sleep. What occupied their minds as they reached out to turn off the lamp? For Christina, I found it was the image of the Pastor (and the Devil) that kept haunting her:

When I turn off the lamp, I try to focus on my walks with Caesar on the promenade at Elwood beach. The palm trees that stick up between the concrete slabs of grand houses. The unexpected sound when someone on rollerblades comes up from behind. An old woman with a pink bathing cap having an early morning swim in the bay, the soft flesh on her upper arms fluttering gently in the wind.

But Pastor Herring, as usual, wins. (*LC*, 68)

A “postmodern” game I made up was to imagine them having a day off from the novel. This was how I discovered that *fru* Herring liked to spend her day off playing with dolls, an image I also incorporated into the novel. There are many playful ways to approach characters, here I have mentioned just a few which helped me look at the characters in a new light.

One of my most effective acting improvisations was advice I once received as an actor to help develop depth and complexity of my character: I was asked to find a moment on stage to surprise, to show a glimpse of something unexpected, and therefore to reveal another layer of the character to the audience. I once attended an English seminar about Derrida and deconstruction, where the lecturer asked us to pay attention to what was scribbled in the margin when you read a text, which strikes me as similar advice.²⁴ Writing my novel, I often observed this very simple device and examined characters to see whether they were able to have that moment on stage, so to speak, when there was a glimpse of something hidden, something “scribbled in the margin” and not really part of the main text, a small undercurrent.

Looking for this moment of difference for the character of *fru* Herring became helpful to me, since, apart from the language concerns, she was a risk early on of becoming a caricature. I knew I wanted to develop her frightening intensity, which she perhaps shares with Christina, neither fitting comfortably into the small-town conformity, and illustrate a sense of vulnerability. There was something rather childlike about her— hence the persistent image of her playing with dolls appearing in my mind. Her religious fanaticism was easy to build, her scene in the bedroom with Christina pointing to how vulnerable she really is, close up: “Sitting down on the bed, she’s breathing strangely. Her boots are so small I suddenly notice, like a little doll’s, a little girl’s boots, neatly laced up, purple and lacy. ‘Sodom and

²⁴ Gothenburg University, English D-course, literary specialisation, 2003.

Gomorrah,' she repeats, looking at me sadly; her strangely bulging eyes welling up with tears" (LC, 124-125).

As she developed, I came to conclude that, apart from being mentally frail, she also, in her own way, cares greatly for the protagonist. In one scene she stands guard outside Christina's house to protect her. By letting her unexpectedly come to Christina's aid in closing down a party, I wanted to show a different aspect of her character, a helpful, yet still vulnerable, even brave *fru* Herring:

Sneaking up to the window, I spot *fru* Herring, as usual with her bike, standing guard next to our mailbox, watching the youth ice-hockey team of Träby disappear into the night. Into cars which will bring them back to the other side of the moss and a familiar set of standards. A thin figure beneath the window, a scarf wrapped tightly around her head, blowing in the wind, watching them all way. (LC, 123)

Filled with compassion for her, I had to remind myself that *fru* Herring also damaged young Christina. When exploring this character's different sides to add complexity and richness, I tried to remain aware of *fru* Herring's purpose in the story. For Christina, she is foremost a frightening character in her highly charged emotional state, her irrational responses representing a side to religion that Christina fears the most.

Finally, I examined Parker Rhodes' advice to writers to "love all your characters" (62). Is this true? I asked myself. Did I really have to love a character like Pastor Herring, for instance? Developing this statement further, Parker-Rhodes argues that a writer needs to feel compassion for his/her characters in order to make readers care for them. Writers therefore need to approach characters as human beings and thus develop an understanding of the complexities in human behavior and by extension of each individual character. However, there is a difference, I would argue, between understanding and loving. By giving the charming, yet also dangerous, Pastor Herring a touch of vulnerability, I wanted to achieve a level of insight into a tortured soul behind his facade. I chose the scene where Christina attempts to return to the Church, where she has become an outcast, and he has just admonished her for her audacity to turn up:

I lift my eyes and look into his shimmering blue. To my surprise, I'm drowning in begging loneliness; it's infinite. Yes, we're in darkness. On a mountain. Poor Pastor Herring is hanging over a cliff. He is about to fall and is clinging on to a tiny branch. He needs to be saved, I suddenly know. (*LC*, 121-122)

As opposed to his wife, however, the more Pastor Herring reveals himself, the stronger the impression of his abuse of power. In his case, the moment of surprise, instead of evoking compassion, uncovers a beast.

The murky scenes with the Pastor also proved the most time consuming and difficult to write. As the scenes are pivotal to how both Christina and the whole novel develop, surprisingly they were the last ones I completed. Although key turning points, these scenes proved so confronting, that I hid from them, reluctant to find out what actually occurs. Again and again I was encouraged to take this scene further. When finally comprehending the need to clarify what takes place in the Pastor's study, I discovered that, yes, there is some level of physical abuse, although it did not need to be explicitly revealed; however, it is the mental, soul-destroying abuse which is far more important, and which ultimately haunts the character of Christina.

Finding a characters' moment of difference—as I have learnt from acting—can help to develop a crucial understanding, (although not necessarily love) of a character's inner motivations. Writing the novel, I learnt to look in the places I was reluctant to visit; I was reminded that it is the scene which burns, and glows, with danger that often contains the most creative potential, and helps focus the seminal issues of a play, character or novel. Revisiting the study of the Pastor again and again, each time revealing a little bit more, I found this to be the place where the shift of the novel takes place, where the heartbeat and pulse of *The Lost Comedian* lives:

His breath in my ear, "God doesn't want you! God hates you, Christina, do you hear?"

I hear. (*LC*, 163)

I have, in this last chapter, discussed how I approached some issues on a practical level when writing my novel. Looking at broad issues of cultural translation, I have explored how some of the Swedish cultural customs and norms were considered and then translated in my novel. How to translate Swedish characters and make them

speak English, and, more specifically, still show some of the local dialect, was then discussed. I have argued that although the translation issues were challenging at times, they also helped to inspire the development of characters speaking in a language not, strictly speaking, their own. I have also examined the ways in which thinking like an actor supported me when developing characters of *The Lost Comedian*. Stretching the acting analogy somewhat further, creating characters in my novel has not only dovetailed with my work as an actor, it has allowed me to be playwright, stage manager, designer and director as well.

CONCLUSION

Just as the novel that my father sent me once upon a time made me reflect on questions of identity and belonging, writing *The Lost Comedian* opened the door to a language and past, far away. Initially eager and perhaps naive, imagining myself to be a rebellious self in the spirit of Byron, I have found myself mourning a past landscape, in a nostalgic position not unlike my protagonist. The sense of intimacy and closeness to one's past, that I have claimed writing from afar brings, has therefore also brought unexpected grief; the writing process has at times been painful. Writing my thesis has not only given me time to immerse myself in the creative and academic process, it seems to have brought me closer to, and thus confronted me with, my past. Perhaps, in the words of Södergran, I am "a stranger in this land" now, and unexpected feelings of loss have accompanied me on my journey back. Yet also, perhaps in a "Byronic" gesture, I was excited and challenged by the sense of newness and discovery I found in that past. Writing from a distance, I created my novel from fragments of memories and with the aid of my imagination. Every step of the way, translation has been very much part of this process.

The main question I asked and wanted to explore in my exegesis was how the self-translation process and the temporal and spatial distance from my subject shaped and influenced my writing of *The Lost Comedian*. Within this question, many others were hidden and these emerged during my candidature. How does writing in a second language or being bilingual affect how you see the world or how you understand yourself and who you are? What does having a Swedish background and inherited cultural values mean to me and how do I translate some of these themes into a novel written in English? How does recalling certain events which took place a long time ago, or a particular landscape, change, when being remembered from a vast distance of both time and place? Layers of questions unfolded, and my initial thesis that there was more to gain than to lose from the translation process would be severely challenged. Although the challenges associated with translation have been at the centre of my exegesis, writing my "Swedish" novel in Australia has raised other questions that I did not anticipate before beginning my thesis. The difficult

answers were the hardest to accept; the creative process has proved more confronting than anticipated.

Starting my exegesis with Chapter One almost four years ago, I was filled with confidence and enthusiasm for what my research into translation issues would find. In this chapter I found answers which seemed to confirm my thesis: there was indeed much to gain in self-translation. Writing *The Lost Comedian* in English has given me a strong sense of freedom in the creative process; it has allowed me to experiment with words, to play with and rearrange events and characters and to transform a past into an invented story. However, revising this chapter, over the last few years, has produced some subtle changes in my thinking, which reflect a greater understanding on my part of the sense of loss in translation experienced by writers. For instance, the loss Hoffman describes at one stage, began to resemble my own increasingly turbulent feelings and frustrations when writing in a second language.

Chapter Two seems in many ways to reflect this emotional turbulence. This chapter was not planned at the beginning. It stemmed from a poignant moment during a writers' exchange in Arizona²⁵ when, upon spotting a translation of the Swedish poet Tomas Tranströmer's collection of poems, *The Great Enigma*, in a bookshop, I was deeply moved. The mixture of relief, belonging, safety, even national pride that overwhelmed me also surprised me. Contemplating and discussing this reaction with my supervisor, Dr. Chandani Lokuge, I decided to look into Swedish cultural influences for a newly devised chapter.

Returning to Swedish cultural icons like August Strindberg and Ingmar Bergman who both are referred to in the novel, resulted in the most emotionally draining time of my PhD candidature. Watching film after film of Bergman's dark explorations into the human psyche, together with reading Strindberg's increasingly paranoid *Inferno*—in winter darkness, a sluggish grey enfolding my house—a sense of isolation, an awareness of being the only one involved in this particular creative project, made me question previously conceived notions about my thesis and myself. This seemed to be a time without answers, only more and more questions. If there were answers, they seemed too difficult for me to decipher. Interestingly, this

²⁵ *Desert Nights, Rising Stars* international writers' conference, Virginia G. Piper Centre for Creative Writing, Arizona University, 2009: I was representing Monash University and Australia on a panel convened by Dr Chandani Lokuge, as well as a public reading from my creative writing at a team-taught panel/session on Australian Writing.

chapter now seems the clearest to me in terms of content, and the closest to me personally.

Having overcome this difficult time, Chapter Three reflects a time of a finding a renewed joy in writing and recalling my childhood, juxtaposed with a greater compassion for and awareness of the grief inherent in living in exile. This chapter negotiates the tensions between two possibly contradictory positions in relation to my writing of the past. Firstly, writing my novel from the distance of Australia created a freedom to explore certain events and characters without fear. The world I describe in my novel is not only remote in time, but the distance of both geography and language has given me a sense of security, an illusion that has allowed me to write, create and invent freely, exploring memories and certain themes and aspects of my upbringing, into which I would not have otherwise delved. This is also reflected in parts of my first chapter, where I discuss the possibilities which emerge from finding the ability to write about difficult subjects and secrets in a second language.

However, there have also been periods when distance has been a hindrance to my writing. Memories of home from a distance may create a sense of closeness and intimacy as I discuss in this chapter, but may equally create a sense of nostalgia, a shimmering, elusive and heightened version of memory, a past which does not exist anymore.

Looking back at the practical challenges of writing of my novel in Chapter Four, I find that the creative process often remains a mysterious one. Places and characters are not, as they are for a master like Nabokov, “my slaves”;²⁶ often I have been under the impression that I am theirs. Thus, although I planned the novel quite extensively before I started writing it, only a skeletal framework remains and it is a very different story to what I had imagined. Experience and trust in the imaginative process helps; I am by now grateful for my “past” life as an actor when tackling characters. It has also sustained a sense of joy and respect for the imaginary world I have tried to create in difficult times.

Overall, I still believe my initial thesis holds: there is much to be found and discovered in the translation process and in the double awareness of language, time, and place it produces. Although the “translated” writer will inevitably experience

²⁶ Nabokov’s famous line about his characters being his “galley slaves” is referred to in many articles, such as in Ellen Pifer’s “On Human Freedom and Inhuman Art: Nabokov” (54).

some difficult challenges in regards to translating language, culture, characters and his/her past, the narrative will also gain from the process. Even the grief experienced is part of this gain, I believe. As Södergran seems to suggest in her poem, “You who never went out of your garden land,” I believe that had I remained behind the “latticed view,” my main feeling would be regret. Emerging from the creative distance of a new language and place, I found a surprising, braver, deeper and perhaps more forgiving voice and narrative awaiting me. Once I closed the gate behind me, I found a story to be discovered, sometimes painfully, much, much further down the path.

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