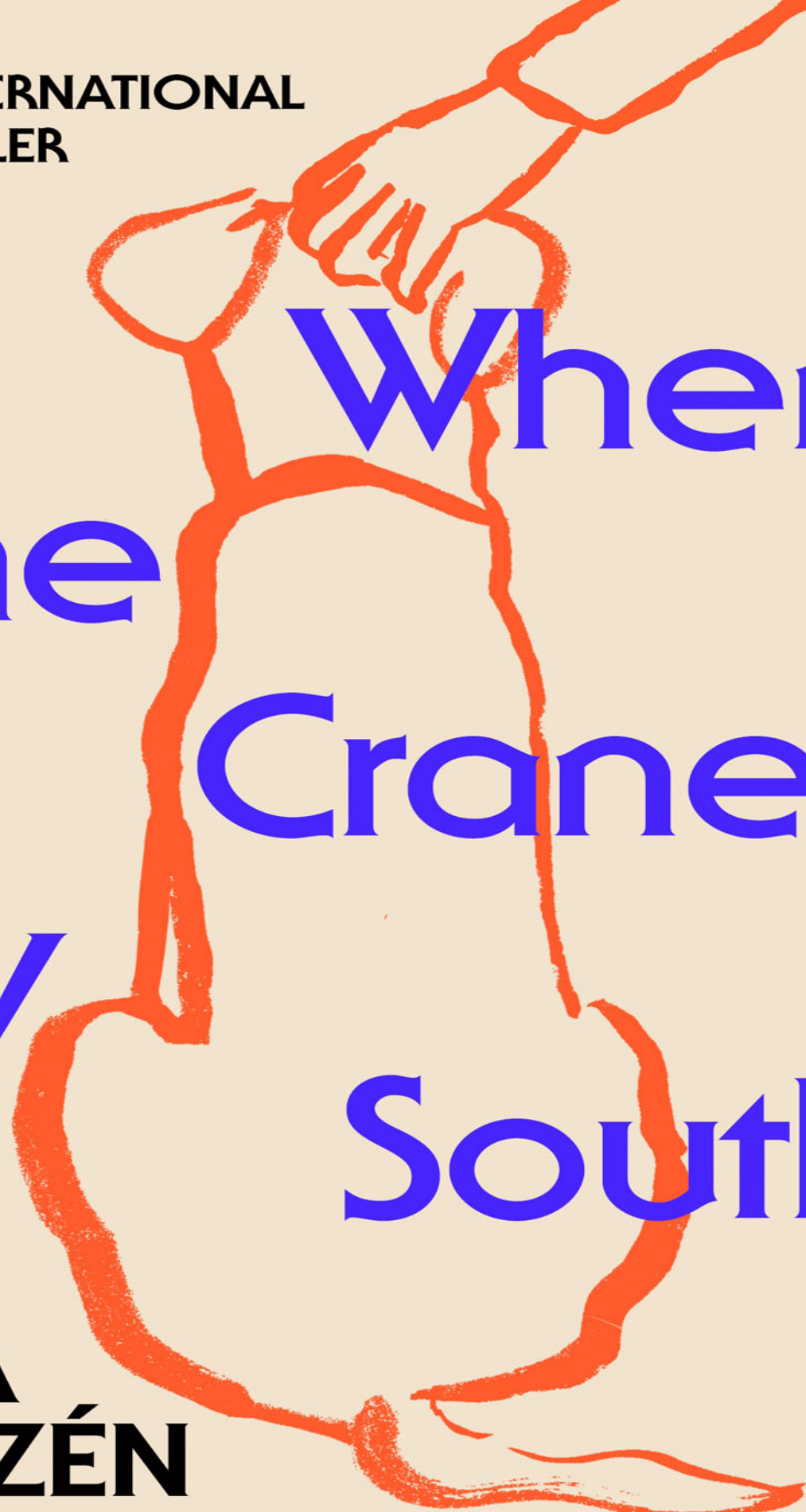


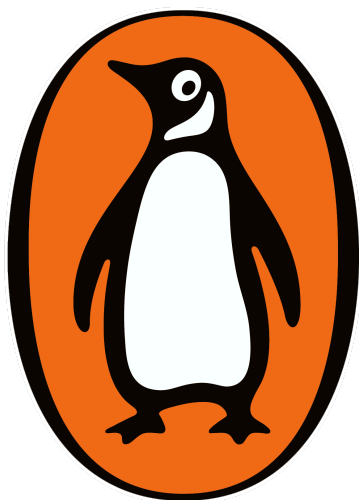
THE INTERNATIONAL
BESTSELLER



When The Cranes Fly South

LISA
RIDZÉN

'The kind of book you give to someone when you're
really trying to say "I've been thinking about you"
but don't know how' **Fredrik Backman**



About the Author

A NOTE ABOUT THE AUTHOR

The idea for Lisa Ridzén's heartrending debut *When the Cranes Fly South* came to her through the discovery of notes her grandfather's care team had left the family as he neared the end of his life. She was also inspired by her research into masculinity in the rural communities of the Swedish far north, where she herself was raised and now lives in a small village outside Östersund.

Lisa began penning the novel whilst attending Långholmen Writer's Academy. *When the Cranes Fly South* was a number one bestseller in Sweden, won the overall Swedish Book of the Year, and the Adlibris Prize both for Debut and Fiction of the Year – the first time in the awards' history that an author has won in two categories. Rights have sold in thirty-five languages around the world.

A NOTE ABOUT THE TRANSLATOR

Alice Menzies holds a Master of Art in Translation Theory and Practice from University College London, specializing in the Scandinavian languages. Her translations include works by Jonas Hassen Khemiri, Fredrik Backman, Tove Alsterdal, and Jens Liljestrand. She lives in London.

Lisa Ridzén

WHEN THE CRANES FLY SOUTH

Translated from Swedish by Alice Menzies



For Cameron

How lucky we are to have each other

Thursday 18 May

I FANTASIZE about cutting him out of my will, making sure he doesn't get a penny.

He claims it's as much for my sake as Sixten's that he wants to take him away. That old men like me shouldn't be trudging about in the woods, and that dogs like Sixten need longer walks than a quick stroll to the road and back.

I look down at Sixten, who is curled up beside me on the daybed. He lets out a big yawn and gets himself comfortable with his head on my belly. I dig my swollen fingers into his coat and shake my head. What does that idiot know, anyway? There's no chance in hell I'm going to let him get his own way.

At the kitchen table, Ingrid sighs.

'I can't promise anything, Bo, but I'll do my best. This isn't OK,' she says, scribbling away in the carers' log book.

I nod and give her a faint smile. If there's anyone who can help me with Sixten, it's Ingrid.

The fire crackles, and I struggle to tear my eyes away from the flames dancing around the birch logs. My thoughts drift back to the conversation I had with Hans this morning, and I feel myself getting worked up again. Who does he think he is, our son? It's not up to him to decide where Sixten should live.

I close my eyes for a moment, tired from all the anger. I listen to Ingrid's movements, and my breathing gradually slows as the rage subsides.

In its wake, I'm left with the same niggling feeling I've experienced quite often lately. A clawing that comes and goes in my chest. A sense that I should be doing things differently.

'God, you've become a real brooder,' Ture said on the phone recently, when I tried to explain.

He's probably right, I think now, lying here beside Sixten and listening to Ingrid pottering about.

Because in the void you left behind, Fredrika, I've started thinking about things I never paid much attention to. I've never been one to doubt myself, always known what I want and been able to tell right from wrong. I still can, but I've also started to wonder.

I've started to wonder why things worked out the way they did. To think about my mother and my old man in a way I never have before. But more than anything, I've been thinking about Hans. I don't want things between us to end up the way they did with my old man.

It's just that all his nagging about Sixten makes me so angry I don't know what to do with myself. I won't be able to fix a single bloody thing if he takes Sixten away.

'I'll go for a quick walk with him at lunch,' Ingrid says, as she firmly closes the log book.

Her little eyes flash. She has a dog of her own, and just the thought of Sixten being taken away upsets her. She runs a hand through her short grey hair and picks up my pill organizer. Checks that everything is right. For my heart and all the rest of it.

'Thank you,' I say, taking a sip of my tea.

If we'd had a daughter, I would have liked her to be like Ingrid. She was in the same year at school as Hans, and her grandfather worked at the sawmill in Ranviken at the same time as my old man.

She wasn't wearing a jacket when she arrived today, just the navy fleece with the home help company's logo on the chest, and I can't believe she's not cold. That sort of thing always surprises me nowadays, that no one ever seems to feel the cold. I used to go without socks for half the year, and I'd be in shorts from the start of May, but these days I'm freezing all the time. The doctors and carers tell me that's just what happens. That it's normal. It doesn't matter that the weather is getting warmer, I'm going to keep lighting the fire.

You've always been a nesh soul, Fredrika, shivering at the slightest chill. They usually have you wearing one of your old woollen cardigans whenever we come to visit.

Ingrid frowns, and I think I hear her mutter something about the pre-packaged pills. One day, she'll start shivering like an emaciated goat too.

She double checks the organizer one last time, then takes out her phone to see if anyone has called. It strikes me that I don't know whether she has a family of her own – or have I just forgotten? I've noticed from the way people reply to my questions that I'm getting forgetful. It really seems to bother Hans.

'You just asked me that,' he always snaps.

Ingrid never makes me feel foolish like that.

I study her as I shift my legs, stretched out on one of your old patchwork quilts. I'm sure she has beautiful children. Friendly and well raised.

I reach for the glass of rosehip soup she left on the table earlier and drink a big mouthful of the cool, thick liquid. Rosehip is one of the few flavours I still

enjoy. So many other things taste different nowadays. I can't eat cream cakes any more, for example, because they taste like mould, but Hans still insists on buying them.

'You're getting so thin,' he says. As though it's my fault my muscles are wasting away. As though I invented the ageing, useless body.

I set the glass back down on the table and use my lower lip to suck the soup from my moustache.

Ingrid goes over to the stove and adds a couple of logs. She knows what she's doing. She and that brother of hers have a firewood processor, the kind that can cut and split the wood. Twelve tonnes it weighs. I didn't know her parents, but I know who they were. Both died early, and Ingrid took over the family farm.

Some of the other carers have no idea how to light a fire, and they always put the birch bark at the bottom rather than building a stack and lighting it from the top. I used to correct them, but after a while I got sick of doing that. The young ones in particular feel like a lost cause. There's plenty I could say about my old man, but at least he taught me how to light a fire properly. Young people today, they don't think any further than tomorrow. They get everything served up to them on a platter, and they can't do any of the things we learned as kids. What would they do if something big happened? If the power went out, or the water supply failed? They'd collapse like a house of cards, the lot of them.

My gaze comes to rest on the fire again. I think I'd probably be able to last a good while on water from the stream, burning logs in the stove and eating the food stored in the basement. The flames nibble tentatively at the birch bark and quickly grow into a raging blaze. The flickering glow makes me think of Hans and the way he used to sit transfixed in front of the fire as a boy. Back when he still looked up to me and pricked his ears at everything I said.

'Hans says I should stop using the stove, too. He doesn't just want to take Sixten away; he wants to take my wood as well.' I chuckle, though the familiar clawing feeling in my chest is back. 'He thinks I should just turn the radiators up, that I can afford it.'

'I know,' Ingrid replies, rinsing off a plate. 'But it's from a place of concern, you know that. He's worried you might forget about the damper or fall while you're bringing in the wood, when you've been out with Sixten.'

Or maybe it's just selfishness and pig-headed idiocy, I think, though I bite my tongue.

'Don't worry about the wood, Bo. We're here so often that if you need anything, we'll realize soon enough.'

I reach up and touch my beard, mutter that Hans doesn't give two hoots about them being here, but Ingrid doesn't seem to hear.

'It'll be Eva-Lena this evening,' she says after a while.

I feel a rush of anger and nod with my eyes closed, but I know sleep will have me in its relaxing grip before long.

Eva-Lena started coming over when Ingrid slipped on the first ice and broke her foot. She was off work for weeks, which meant I had to put up with that stropky battle-axe instead – and as if that weren't enough, she's from Frösön.

They visit me four times a day, the home help. When Hans first broached the idea, about six months after you left, I thought it was ridiculous. I laughed in his face, in fact, though I did feel bad afterwards. He meant well, I suppose.

This was back when I was still in control of my own life.

I'm lucky I have Ture. He's been dealing with the carers for much longer than me. One of the doctors forced them on to him when he went to hospital after a fall. Some young whippersnapper who said he was worried that Ture lived alone and didn't have anyone to help with his shopping. It didn't matter that he'd spent most of his life living alone; Ture soon found himself with people running about the house every few hours.

The shower is one part of it he doesn't like. I don't really care about them seeing me naked, but Ture finds it uncomfortable. Says he feels sorry for anyone who has to look at his rickety old body.

No, what bothers me most is my lack of balance. If it was a bit better, taking Sixten for longer walks would be a piece of cake. There wouldn't be any fuss over him, and I wouldn't have to get so angry with Hans.

Aside from Ingrid, Johanna is my favourite. She's around Ellinor's age, from over Bölviken way. Big and loud, just like that mother of hers. You never know what might come out of her mouth, and she makes me laugh even though I don't have much to laugh about now. Ture seems to have different temps every other day, but if that were me I'd be straight on the damn phone to the head of the council. Is it too much to ask not to have complete strangers marching in and out of your house?

'I'll add a couple of logs before I go, so you can doze off if you want,' Ingrid tells me as she gets up from the kitchen table. I hadn't even noticed her sit down.

She clears away the plate and cutlery she used to cut my sandwich into bite-sized pieces. I have only two teeth left at the bottom, and it takes me a long time to eat unless she cuts things up. Hans has been nagging me to get a dental bridge fitted, but I don't see the point. A waste of money for such a

short period of time. Besides, the soft cheese they give me isn't too bad. Not quite as good as the firmer stuff, but we can't have everything.

Sixteen presses up against my leg, and I feel an ache in my chest. A sudden urge to talk to you. Not that we were ever people who talked a lot. You would say that of course I'm still capable of bringing in the wood and taking the dog for a walk, that it's enough to go over to the edge of the trees and let him do his business.

It's been over three years since you moved away, since you gave me that look of such complete confusion when our son came to get you. He said it was time to go and that you'd be better off there.

I could tell you didn't believe him. That you would rather stay here with me, where everything was familiar. I let you rest in my gaze for a moment, and I wanted nothing more than for you to stay. But then I took your hand, gave it a gentle squeeze, and said:

'Hans is right, you'll be much happier there.'

Every single fibre of me disagreed, but I knew I couldn't take care of you.

I cast a quick glance at the jar on the table and then at Ingrid. Can't open it myself; my fingers are too stiff and weak to grip the lid. My hands are still as big as hams, but the strength is gone and I can't bend my fingers properly.

'Sausage fingers are normal for someone your age and with your medical history,' the doctor told me the last time I was there.

Ingrid tried to find a jar that would be easier to open but still secure enough to stop your scent from disappearing, but I couldn't manage that either.

'Do you need help with the jar?' she asks with her back to me.

I quickly lower my eyes. She has helped me with it so many times, but it's still embarrassing. Keeping your dementia-addled wife's scarf in a jar just to be able to remember her scent is fundamentally pathetic, after all. That's why Ingrid is the only one who knows about it. I'd be embarrassed even in front of you. We weren't the kind of people to whisper sweet nothings in each other's ear. We never needed that sort of thing.

Ingrid opens the lid and hands the jar to me, then turns around and continues to wipe the worktop.

I inhale deeply through the fabric. Close my eyes and let my eyelids trap the burning sensation. No one has ever told me that it's normal for a person's eyes to well up so easily as they age, for the tears to find a foothold in virtually every memory.

You bought the scarf at a spring market in town, back when Hans was still too young to walk on his own. He was in the pushchair we'd inherited from the neighbours on the other side of the road. I remember its big wheels. Perfect for walking on gravel, you said. The scarf was dark red to begin with,

but over the years you mended it with lots of little multicoloured patches. Whenever it was cold, you would wrap it around your neck, and if it was warm you would tie it around your shoulders.

‘Don’t you want to take this?’ I asked as you were leaving the house for the last time, after Hans had helped you pack a bag for Brunkullagården.

You turned around, and for a split second I thought you were back with me, that you would say thank you and smile the way you always did when I remembered something you’d forgotten. But you just stared at me with a blank expression on your face, as though I were holding a foreign object in my hand.

I don’t dare keep the scarf out of the jar for too long, because I want the scent to last. You smell so different now that they’ve swapped your soaps and creams. Your brain isn’t the only thing the dementia has changed.

I shove the scarf into the jar and manage to screw the lid back into place. I then set it down on the table so that Ingrid can tighten it, and lean my head against the pillow.

The sound of her doing the dishes is like a lullaby, and I get lost in the fire, barely notice when she says goodbye and closes the door behind her.

The summer nights are starting to get brighter, but the kitchen is dark. There are only a couple of small windows in here, and the brown ceiling swallows any light that does manage to get in.

The fire is still crackling, Sixten breathing heavily. I scratch him behind the ear and on his neck. His fur there is as soft and downy as it was all over when he was a pup. You were sceptical when the Fredrikssons asked if we wanted a new puppy. He would be the seventh dog we had got from them. They must have bred at least a hundred elkhounds for helping with the hunt. You thought we were too old for another one, and Hans agreed. I thought the pair of you were ridiculous and called you both pessimists.

At dinner one day, I snapped and asked what the hell the point of life was if I was too old for a dog. Were we just supposed to sit around, waiting to die? A few days later, Hans gave us a ride over to the Fredrikssons’ place in Fåker, and when I lifted Sixten and put him into your arms, you changed your mind too. You even went down to the Larssons’ and got a bit of liver to dry, so we’d have something to train him with. That was almost exactly a year before we noticed the first symptoms.

I loosely grip Sixten’s ear, and he snores softly. The movement makes me think about just how stiff my fingers are. I had to stop taking my rheumatism medication when I first started taking the pills for my heart.

‘When it really comes down to it, it’s not a hard choice between your heart and your joints, is it?’ the locum doctor had asked with a smile.

Dying of a heart attack probably wouldn't be a bad way to go, I had time to think, before he interrupted my thoughts.

'Unless you have any other questions, I think we're done for today,' he said, turning to his screen.

The intensity of his fingers on the keyboard made it sound as if he was in a hurry, as if he had somewhere better to be. His thin grey hair was like an ugly shower cap on his round head. Had to be approaching retirement, I thought. I'd heard that locum doctors earn as much in one month as I did in a year at the sawmill. When I asked where my usual doctor was, this new one started telling me about himself, that his mother came from Jämtland. As though I cared.

I wanted to get up, to bring my cane down on the desk and ask how the hell it could be considered normal to have hands that can't even open the lid of a herring jar. To have to choose between that and dropping down dead. But the words I was looking for floated away, out of reach.

I wished that Hans would get up and say that we refused to accept this. That he could take me by the arm and fix everything – the way I did when the neighbour's lad was throwing pinecones at him by the bus stop. Grabbed the boy's sweater and shoved him in the ditch. But Hans just passed me my jacket and got to his feet, and then we drove home.

Sixteen snores loudly, and I squeeze his ear. I can still manage a pretty good grip between my thumb and fingers. Ingrid tells me I have a harder nip than most eighty-nine-year-olds, but your hands are tougher, Fredrika. The staff at Brunkullagården told me that. I should probably be ashamed, but it makes me happy to hear that you pinch them so hard your knuckles turn white.

1.30 p.m.

Bo wanted fish gratin for lunch, plus coffee with lots of sugar. Blew into the bottle to loosen the phlegm and talked about Sixten. Wants me to write that he's upset because certain people think he should be rehomed. Fire OK.

Ingrid

Saturday 20 May

12.30 p.m.

Grub o'clock: hash and beetroot. Bo's eyes bothering him, says they're going dark. Need to contact district nurse on Monday.

Kalle

I WAKE to a warm sensation spreading across my crotch. Dreamed I was using the toilet, like Hans used to when he was little. Not much came out, but it's enough to make me uncomfortable.

I cast a quick glance at the clock on the wall. The carer will be here to make lunch soon, but I probably have time to go to the bathroom to change my underpants and trousers. They tell me I should wear nappies around the clock, but I always take them off the minute they leave. They think it's because I forget, but the truth is I'd rather pee myself and get changed than wear something like that.

I take a deep breath and force myself up from the daybed in the kitchen. There is a cold cup of tea on the table in front of me. One of the cups we bought on a trip out east, to the High Coast. You thought they were so nice, and though you said it wasn't necessary, I bought them for you because we'd just had a pay rise and I was feeling flush.

That was the summer Hans threw a party while we were away. He was stupid enough to make so much noise that they heard it all the way over at Marita and Nejla's place, and they told us, of course. My god, I gave him an earful once we got back, but he barely apologized. He'd started high school by that point and was hanging out with those boys from town. They put all sorts of ideas into his head – especially the lad from Frösön. Hans started talking back and asking questions about politics, telling us what he thought about what we did and the decisions we'd made. Questioning the most normal, obvious things.

'This is just what happens at that age,' you said one day, after he stormed off to his room and slammed the door.

'And that means he has to be insufferable too, does it?' I said, wiping my mouth with the sheet of kitchen roll you'd left beside my plate.

Earlier that spring, we'd locked horns over a language exchange trip, as he called it. He wanted to go to England to learn English over the summer, and he thought I should foot the bill. The boy from Frösön was going, which meant Hans wanted to go too, but I told him the truth: we couldn't afford something like that.

'Robert's dad can,' he snorted, acting like the biggest spoiled brat I'd ever seen.

I was so angry that everything went black. There was no way in hell I'd raised a snot-nosed kid who thought I should be paying for a jaunt to England, and I told him as much. That I didn't want to waste my money on such snobbishness.

You cleared the table. Stacked the dishes in silence and carried them over to the sink.

‘You could try shouting and screaming a bit less yourself, you know,’ you said after a moment or two, as you brought me a piece of sponge cake from the day before. ‘And maybe that way he’d be less insufferable.’

I glared at you. Thought you should be taking my side.

Looking back now, I can see that you might have been right, but he just got me so bloody worked up. He knew exactly what to say to make me lose my head.

With a groan, I unbutton my jeans and let them drop to the bathroom floor, then study the wiry old man in the mirror. My eyes are stinging and I have trouble making out the details of my body. The figure in front of me looks more like an oil painting than anything, all crude brushstrokes, but my beard and long hair do stand out.

The sight makes me think of my old man. My face resembles his, though he was clean-shaven until the very end and never missed an opportunity to comment on my own lack of grooming.

‘What a scruff you are,’ he grunted one summer’s evening, right as we were about to sit down to eat. I had just started my holiday, and you and I had come back from Hissmofors for a few days to help out on the farm. Mother had cooked herring and new potatoes with fresh dill from the garden.

During lunch break a couple of weeks earlier, Åkesson had announced he was going to grow a summer beard. ‘A crate of beer to whoever comes back with the biggest one,’ he said, putting his arms around me and P-G and thumping us both on the back.

‘I’m in,’ P-G had said with a grin. ‘You’ve seen my dad, haven’t you?’

I spat and said yes, that I’d seen his father’s Santa beard.

‘I’m in too,’ I continued, thinking that you would probably complain about how scratchy it was.

That evening at the farm I had pulled out one of the garden chairs and sat down, studying my father without a word. You caught my eye from across the table and you held me there for a moment, allowing his grip over me to ease.

Mother served him a few spuds while you explained the bet I’d made with my workmates. He snorted something inaudible in reply and took a swig of beer while you turned to Mother and praised her food.

What he’d said about my beard was nothing but a throwaway remark, yet his words stayed with me. They always have. We sat quietly, my old man and me, looking down at our plates and eating Mother’s food. Listening to you ask her about the crops and the animals. I was fascinated by how easily you could make conversation; you didn’t seem to need to stop and think about

what to say at all. I sipped my beer and glanced in my old man's direction. My gaze kept slipping off his huge frame and no matter how hard I tried, I just couldn't bring myself to look him directly in the eye. I hated myself for that, for not being brave enough to speak up.

The stench of urine makes my nose sting as I drop my underpants to the floor. The carers have started leaving dry pants and trousers on the clothing rack in the corner, and I'm so grateful not to have to go into the bedroom to find fresh underwear. I haven't slept in there since you moved.

I reach for a pair of blue boxers and sit down on the toilet lid. Slowly bend forward and pull them over my left foot. The skin is mottled purple and blue, and my toes are crooked. My right foot is even stiffer than the left, but I manage to push it through the hole on the third attempt. I then grab a pair of trousers and start the whole process again. Tracksuit bottoms are easier than jeans, because they have more give. Hans must have bought me at least ten pairs from the Intersport in town.

I've just washed my hands and am about to turn off the tap when I hear the door open at the other end of the house. I find Kalle in the kitchen. He has already taken one of the ready meals out of the freezer, and he turns around as I come in. His clothes are too small for him, and his stomach peeps out whenever he moves. Behind him, I can see the note Hans put up above the worktop. REMEMBER TO EAT! I'll eat if I'm damn well hungry.

'How're we getting on today, then?' Kalle asks, stabbing holes in the plastic film over the ready meal. There's more food than I'd be able to eat in a year in the freezer, but Hans keeps buying more every week.

'Doing just fine, thanks,' I reply, wondering if he asks the same question to all the old folks he sees. It sounds a bit like a mantra.

'Thought I'd fix you up a bit of lunch. You hungry?'

I shrug and sit down beside Sixten on the daybed. Stroke his head.

Right then, the idea that something special is due to happen today pops into my head. I get up and shuffle over to the calendar Hans pinned up. A yellow Post-it note has been stuck on one of the squares, and my hunch was right: Hans is coming over to visit this evening. And I'm supposed to ring Ture tomorrow.

My eyes are sore, my vision hazier than usual, making it difficult to see Kalle. I blink a few times, but it makes no difference. I want to talk to him about Sixten. If I could just explain how idiotic it would be for them to take him away, I'm sure he would back me up.

Right then, I feel a warm sensation spreading across my crotch again, and I sigh.

'What's up?' Kalle asks, as he loads the food into the microwave.

I sigh again, can't bring myself to say anything. The words *I wet myself* leave a bad taste in my mouth, even though it's been happening more and more lately.

'Is something up?' Kalle repeats, turning around.

There was a lot of pee this time, and there's no missing the dark patch spreading across my trousers.

'Whoops. No bother, we can sort that out,' he says, closing the microwave door without starting it. 'Let's get you into a nappy and a fresh pair of trousers.'

I don't want to do this any more, that's what I think as I meet Kalle's eyes. I want to get up and walk away. But instead, I just nod.