

Cappelen Damm Agency *Fall 2019*



Never, Ever, Ever

«I am 35 years old. I do not want children. This is not something that I talk about with others. It is something that I am ashamed of, a topic I avoid; vocally take the long way around. When my friends talk about having kids, I change the topic. I do not want to be overly certain or blunt, because I might after all wake up one day and find that I have become one of them, a normal woman in her 30's wanting to get pregnant, wanting a family, wanting to expand my life, my body and my heart to make space for more than myself. You are allowed to change your mind.»

The main character in Linn Strømsborg's novel *Never, ever, ever* has never wanted children. She has been living with Philip for eight years, and they have agreed on not having children - up until now. Because maybe Philip might want to become a dad after all? And while her two best friends are expecting their first child, and her mother is constantly nagging about grandchildren, and her everyday life is full of parents with toddlers and births and the struggle of others to have enough time for it all, she is firm in her life and her choice about not having children.

Never, ever, ever is a novel about why we have children, and why we do not have children. It is the story about choosing something other than what is expected of you, but at the same time wanting a normal life.

"Strømsborg explores the mother role through the relationship the first-person narrator has with her own mother and her grandparents, as well as the mother's relationship with her parents. She offers interesting perspectives on the father role versus the mother role, writes beautifully about growing up, and well about the way friendship changes when people have children. The book is never navel-gazing, but is driven forward by good dialogue and plotting. The story is elegantly composed, at times almost cinematic. VG, 5/6

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Linn Strømsborg (b. 1986)

Linn Strømsborg made her debut in 2009 with the novel **Roskilde**, a story of a group of young people at a music festival in Denmark, and followed up with the chapbook **Øya** the same year. In the novels **Suburbia** (2012) and **You're Not Gonna Die** (2016) we meet the same main character Eva during different stages of her life.

Her fourth novel **Never, Ever, Ever** was published in August 2019, and was quickly pre-empted by DuMont Buchverlag (Germany) and Turbine (Denmark).

Linn Strømsborg is one of the most interesting young voices in contemporary Norwegian fiction today.



SYNOPSIS

The narrator of *Never, ever, ever* is a 35 year old woman who has never wanted children. At the beginning of the novel, we meet her and Philip, her partner of eight years. Both have agreed that they do not want or need children of their own to be happy – until now. Soon, the narrator discovers that she is pregnant. This results in a conversation about pros and cons on whether to have the baby or not. She does not want it. But maybe he does? Before they can agree on anything, she suffers an early miscarriage. After this, things change between them. They ultimately break up, even though they still love each other.

Meanwhile, their best friends Anniken and Alex are happily expecting their first child together, and the narrator's mother never misses an opportunity to complain about not being a grandmother. It seems like everyone is suddenly having children, friends are becoming pregnant, and people who once swore that they never wanted to be mothers, are now having their third baby. The families are growing bigger, their lives are ever expanding. But the narrator is still the same, still sure about this one thing: She has never wanted to become a mother, and she does not expect to wake up one day soon wanting to become one, either.

After the break up, we follow the narrator through her life as a 30-something woman who has to defend her choices, wherever she goes. Is she selfish for not wanting a baby? *Why don't you want to become a mother, you are healthy, you would probably be good at it, you will regret it if you don't, time is running out, it is the meaning of life to become a parent, to raise someone, to bring a child into this world, why do you not want what everybody else on the planet wants?* These questions are posed by friends and stranger alike, directly and indirectly. Throughout the novel, the narrator ponders these questions and claims, in conversations with friends and through her inner monologue.

When Anniken gives birth, the narrator forms a tight bond to newborn Ella and the new, both stressed out and happy, little family. She helps them by visiting with take-out, dropping by when they need a break, and taking care of both the new mother Anniken and baby Ella. The narrator and Anniken have been best friends since they were kids, but a distance forms between them now that Anniken has become a mother. As that distance increases, their friendship reaches a point of confrontation – can they still be friends when Anniken is a mother, and the narrator never wants to be one? Is it possible to stay friends, now that their lives are so different?

The narrator also struggles with missing Philip, who still visits her and has a hard time letting go of their past relationship. She struggles with her mom, who is a lonely widow and will never be a grandmother because of her. She struggles with her choice, and all the things that she can't have in her life because of it. Still, she does not want to compromise. Becoming a mother will change you forever, she says: You will miss something if you chose the other, there are consequences to every choice you make.

Near the end of the novel, the narrator babysits Ella after a long period of not speaking to Anniken. There has been a death in the family, and together with Philip, the narrator watches Ella for a night. In spite of

still not agreeing on having children, the narrator and Philip decide to try again. The novel ends with an epilogue ten years later. Philip is now a father – and the Narrator is still not a mother. But she is happy. Very happy.

This is a story about wanting something different than what is expected of you, and why someone might not want to have children. But it is also a story about having children, and why some of us wants to become parents.

SAMPLE TRANSLATION

by Matt Bagguley

Mom was nineteen when she had me. She met Dad at high-school. They found out they were pregnant right in the middle of their exams, my Dad took Mom home to Grandma and Grandpa, and told them what had happened. Grandpa stood up and paced around, Grandma took Mom's hand and promised that they would take care of her. And me. Mom worked as a secretary when she was pregnant, took the bus into town each morning while her stomach expanded under her clothes and I grew in her tummy. Dad worked as a bicycle courier and when they called to say that the contractions had started he was on his way across town with a parcel that he never managed to deliver. It came with him to the hospital where he staggered into the waiting room and enquired about my mom. He passed out just before I was born, but was conscious again when they lifted me out and up to Mom's breast and told him that he'd become a father. I was born at ten to four, I had ten fingers and ten toes, Dad's nose and Mom's eyes. Grandma was the first to visit us at the hospital. She had been knitting baby clothes since she first heard that I was on the way, and Grandpa had rented Mom and Dad an apartment, the keys to which he gave them when they returned home, with me, from the hospital. "You can't live in this little bedsit anymore," he said, unlocking the door and asking my dad to step inside.

It was a two-roomed flat in East-Oslo, with a sloped ceiling and a cracked window, but there was room for three; and it was closer to both my mom's job, and the one my dad got after he quit being a bicycle courier, and just a short subway ride from Grandma and Grandpa.

I don't remember a thing about the apartment because we moved out before I turned four, but Mom has shown me where it was. I live 200 meters from it now and often look up at the windows and think, that it was there, there that Mom, Dad and I had lived. They were just twenty years old, and

worked constantly to make ends meet, and I went from being 51cm long to being almost a meter. Grandpa died just a couple of years after my birth, Dad was at the hospital with him every day until there was no-longer anyone there to visit. I remember his funeral, it was winter and everybody was sad. I drew a picture for Dad to cheer him up, it still hangs on the wall at Mom's house. Dad died when I was twenty, and no-one could have drawn a picture to cheer me up. No-one has tried either.

Mom now lives alone in the house where I grew up, and has been knitting baby clothes since I was nineteen.

Had I got pregnant when Mom did, I would have a fifteen year old now. He or she would have lived in East-Oslo as well for the first year perhaps, had a grandma that knitted clothes and chased around after him, who told stories about me when from I was little, just as Grandpa told me stories about Dad from when he was little.

“When you become a mother, it is until you die,” says my Mom. “You never stop being a mother. From the day you were born until the day I die, I’ll always be your mom.”

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I am thirty-five years old. I do not want children.

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The first boyfriend to say he wanted to have children with me, got angry when I said I didn't want to. "Are you sure?" he said at first. "I'm sure," I replied. "You can't already know for sure," he said. "You're not mature enough," he shouted. "You don't know what you're going to miss out on," he cried. We broke up a few months later. We rounded off the quarrel with him asking me to think about it, and I said I would think about it, but I didn't think a great deal about it. I knew that I didn't want children. Not with him, not with anyone, especially not with myself. Sometimes when I'm walking in the forest near to where he lives I worry that I might run into him. He is a father now. I imagine him coming towards me pushing his son or daughter in buggy, and I imagine him walking past without seeing me, or I imagine him stopping for a chat, that we smile to each other and perhaps give each other a hug, that I will look at the child, as you do, look at the child and say "Aw, so cute," or "He's got so big." "It's a girl," he would have replied. Then we would wave to each other and I would continue on my way, alone, him wheeling his child along happily. "She's lonely," he will think. "She regrets it," he will think, and "I'm glad it wasn't her." I would be thinking that he looked really tired, but that he seemed happy.

And you are just as lonely as me when you lie there unable to sleep at night. It just isn't quiet all night.

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There's not much that I am certain of in life. I change my opinions constantly, just like everyone else. I am not the same now, as I was when I was younger, and would rather not be the way I am now in ten years time. But there is one thing I have known all along: I do not want children. I have never wanted children. I have never understood why we humans have children.

I mean, I understand that it's how our species continues, that we wouldn't be here today if nobody got pregnant and started families that took care of each other, that the flock was our protection from the rest of the world. I understand that we have sex to further the human species.

I see more and more of my friends becoming parents, because we are getting older, because they do what everyone does, what's expected of them, but most importantly: They do it because they want to. They meet someone, they fall in love, they get pregnant, they have children. First they become two instead of one, then three instead of two. We are meant to multiply, we are not meant to be alone.

I have waited my whole life for my opinion to change, to wake up one day and be a different person to the one I was the day before and the year before and when I was a child, teenager and young adult. I have waited, to want the same as you. But I don't want it. It's just as natural for me as it is natural for those of my friends who've wanted children all their lives. What they have known since they were small, I have felt too, only the opposite.

I am nobody's mother, I don't want to be anybody's mother. It's enough just being me. Since the day I was born until the day I die I will live with myself, that's enough for me.

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It's not something I talk to other people about. It is something I'm ashamed of, something I avoid, take long verbal detours to avoid. When friends talk about having children, I change the subject. I don't want to be too certain or unbending, because I might suddenly wake up one day and have become one of them, an ordinary woman in her thirties who wants to get pregnant, who wants to start a family and expand my life, my body, my heart, to make room for more than myself. You are allowed to change your mind.

I look for childless role-models in popular culture. It's not as easy as you might think. Jane Austen didn't have children. Geoff Dyer doesn't have children. Stevie Nicks has no children, but she does have a step-son. Frances McDormand has an adopted son. If there are books or films about women who have consciously chosen not to have children, then I haven't seen or read them.

Samantha in *Sex and the City* is the first person I think of when we talk about TV-shows. Carrie Bradshaw is number two. But the woman I admire most in this series is Miranda, who is ambivalent until the very end, she is diagnosed with a "lazy ovary" in season 2 leaving her suddenly with just one functioning ovary so her body only produces one egg every second month instead of every month. When she gets pregnant it is unintentional, but she keeps the child. And it all works out fine for her. She becomes a mother, with a live-in nanny. She works and goes out with the other girls, she continues dating until she gets married and all in all it seems almost like the only thing that changes for her is that there is a new person for her to give love to in her life, who she also brings up. I can't imagine it would be quite so easy if I had children. I couldn't afford to have someone living with me to take care of the child. It would be me and Philip. And one child. Besides, *Sex and the City* is fiction, the show isn't actually about children and reality, but mainly about sex and friendship. Carrie is never asked about why she is childless. I am asked all the time.

I ask Anniken if she can think of any childless role-models. She thinks about it for a while, before replying: Mother Theresa.

Anniken and I grew up together. We grew up in the same apartment block, we attended the same school, then the same high-school, then we went to University, studying different subjects. While we were students we lived together in a flat-share, and for a good while after. We still live in the same part of town, but no-longer together. Alex and Anniken, they still live together. Alex grew up with us, and ended up in the same flat-share as me and Anniken while we were studying. I now live with Philip, we've lived together for eight years. A small eternity.

I have never wanted a large house, a car or a garden. I have never wanted a job that paid more than the average salary, money to do everything I desire, a holiday home or a boat. I have never looked forward to being an adult in the way I saw adults when I was younger. So when friends of mine, one after the other, move out of town, to bigger houses than the tiny apartments they had rented, when they bought cars so they could avoid taking the train, when they found partners and moved in together and got married and eventually had children, I didn't envy them. I don't want the same things in my life. But I miss them, my friends, who were once a part of my daily life, but who now, if I am lucky, are there, now and then at least. Far too many of them are not even there now and then. They have disappeared, one by one, into a bubble of houses and gardens, where the busses go just once an hour; they scrape the frost from their cars in the morning, they have small children which they take to kindergarten, school, or after-school activities and they spend their evenings with their families in their warm houses. There's no room for me in their big houses, like there was room for me in their tiny apartments. And that's fine, it has to be fine, it is me that has chosen something different.

Philip and I live in the city, in a shabby two-room flat just big enough for the two of us, walking distance from work if I can be bothered to walk instead of taking the bus, with Alex and Anniken in an equally tiny flat not far away and no plans whatsoever of acquiring a cabin or a car. I don't even have a driving license. Dad was so disappointed that I wasn't interested in driving lessons as a 16 year old. "You have to get a driving license," he said exasperatedly. "I'm going to live in town," I said stubbornly, "I don't need a driving license. There are always busses or trams or trains running." "But one day you won't live in town any more," said my Dad. "One day you'll have children too and then you'll need a car." "I don't want a driving license," I said, and my Dad said that I would definitely change my mind. I haven't changed my mind. I save my money so that I can travel, so that I can eat out and make food myself, so that I can drink beer at my local bar and play board games while it snows, and buy strawberries in the summer and eat them in the park. I live a little life in the big city, and it's a life I have chosen. This is the life I have wanted all along, and I am waiting for my father to be right, to change my mind and want something different. And if so, I'll just have to learn to drive without him.

Anniken has invited us to dinner. We have brought wine and Scrabble. While we are eating Anniken and Alex are a little giggly, happy, they smile secretively to each other and when I ask if neither of them are drinking wine, a huge smile breaks out on Anniken's face on the opposite side of the table.

"We're pregnant!" she says.

"Shit," I say.

"The baby's due in May."

"Shit," I say again.

"You're going to be an aunty!" says Alex, and I smile, at least I think I smile, but it feels strained and weird. I shake my head and open the wine, pour myself a glass and take a sip. Philip clears his throat and says "congratulations," and declines the bottle I offer him.

"How far gone are you?" I ask.

"Four months almost," says Anniken.

"We didn't dare say anything before now," says Alex.

"No," I say. "Shall we play Scrabble?"

On the way home Philip is quiet. I try to walk at the same pace as him but he races off up the hill and I struggle to keep up. I stop and ask him to wait for me, and he turns round in front, looks at me and shakes his head, but stands there until I catch up with him.

“Your best friend tells you that she’s going to have a baby, and you say ‘shit’?” he says.

“What should I have said?”

“It’s normal to say congratulations,” he says.

“I was just surprised,” I say.

“Well, you’re allowed that, but you could have congratulated her *after* you’d been surprised.”

“I still *am* surprised,” I say.

“You should call her tomorrow and congratulate her.”

“I’m not sure if I’ll be over the surprise then either,” I say.

We walk home without saying anything else.

Anniken and I have talked a lot about having children, at least, we've talked a lot about how everyone else has children. We've talked about how we are not going to be like *them* – all those we once knew and who we no-longer know – that we both fear and look down on those who fill their lives with children and forget everything they were once interested with.

“I'll at least never be one of those mothers who doesn't care about anything other than what her children have done lately,” Anniken has said, and it strikes me that she has never said: “I will never be a mother.” What she has said is that she would never be that *type* of mother. There's a difference between the two statements. A huge difference, actually, and I haven't realized this until now. She has never promised me anything, yet I feel betrayed nevertheless. Now Anniken is going to be a mom, and maybe she won't be like those we once knew, but she will be a mom, and neither of us actually knows what that will entail.

It feels like we have played the we're-never-going-to-have-children game, but that everyone playing knew that it was exactly that – a game – and that they would soon begin their real lives, be adults, multiply, become moms and dads, while I'm left behind, alone, the only one who actually doesn't get children. I thought there was so many of us. I thought we had all agreed. I thought we meant what we said. I didn't know you were all just playing. Acting tough. Arguing the case for childlessness for the sake of the environment, talking loudly about how idiotic those with small children behave at parties, or when they blog on and on about how wonderful it is to be able to fly to Los Angeles and drink Cava in the middle of the day instead of having to plan their routine round children and family logistics. Those who shouted loudest about not having children, are now mothers. I have never liked talking about it, but soon I will be the only one left who actually has not become a mom. But I needed those of you who shouted loudly around me, to stop me feeling so alone, so left out, so abnormal. And now that you have stopped shouting about how wonderful it is to be childless, and started shouting about how wonderful family-life is, about motherly love and how big your hearts grow because of these little people, then I no longer understand why I compare myself to you. You were never my people. You are nothing like me. I am nothing like you. I am left here, completely alone, with a voice inside me shouting: "I will never have children. Never, ever, ever. And I mean it, even if I don't dare say it out loud. I am the one left. You are the ones who lost. Not in life, but this game that you played with me, I won that. The last woman standing. All alone.

Carolina who was going to end up single and childless forever

Carolina and I were colleagues where I last worked. She is almost ten years older than me, single and liked partying when we first met, so we were at the same stage in our lives. Whenever she tried organizing after-work drinks, almost nobody came, so in the end it was only ever she and I that went out, drank cocktails and talked about work – and men. She had three lovers, but none of them were boyfriend material.

“I’m bound to end up single and childless forever,” she often said, sometimes laughing sometimes crying, depending on what time of night the topic came up. If it was early, she would be jubilant. If it was late, and the bar had closed or we were on our way home, she would be subdued and with tears running down her powdered cheeks. But on the other occasions we talked about children she would scoff at the idea, saying they were noisy and too much responsibility, and that she had other things to think about than bringing up kids. “Life has so much to offer,” she said, usually when concluding a lengthy tirade about her friends and all the children they had.

When I got a new job, we went out for one last pay-day beer, just the two of us, and she kept hugging me all evening saying that she was going to miss me; and I told her I wasn’t vanishing from the face of the earth, I was just changing jobs.

“It’s almost the same thing,” she said. “We’re only friends because we work together.”

“That’s not true,” I said. But the months went by and I saw less and less of Carolina. Finally, after months of trying to make a date with her after I’d quit, we met for lunch at a café, and Carolina told me she had met the man of her life.

“He’s divorced, with two kids from before, and now we’re moving in together. We’ve already started trying,” she said.

“Trying what?”

“For a baby!”

“Oh wow,” I said. “But you’ve not been together all that long?”

“I’ve got no time to lose,” she said. “I might *look* pretty hot, but my eggs are almost past their sell-by date.”

“I hope it works out for you,” I said. “Was that what changed your mind?”

“Changed my mind?”

“I just thought you didn’t want children,” I said.

“I never said that I didn’t want children,” she replied, looking right at me.

“OK, maybe not, but didn’t you always say that life has so much more to offer than bringing up children?”

“That doesn’t sound like me,” she said, stirring her lemonade.

“No, I’m looking forward to it, actually” she continued after taking a sip.

I nodded, while she looked at me from across the table, then leaned forward slightly and said: “It’ll just be really nice to focus on something other than myself. Being childless can make you so self-centred, as though you’re the most important person on earth. It’s egotistical. And it makes me feel quite sick when I meet people who say they don’t want to have children. Jørn thinks so too.”

“Jørn?”

“My boyfriend!”

“Oh,” I said.

“You ought to think about it too, you’re not that much younger than me.” She nodded at me while raising her eyebrows.

“I’ll think about it,” I said, and then we spent the rest of our lunch talking about her new boyfriend.

That was the last time we met, but we’re friends on Facebook and one year after that final meeting in the café she had a baby. When I think about Carolina I can still hear her saying how life has so much more to offer than just bringing up children; but I hope she found that life as a mother has a lot to offer too. It’s been a long time since she posted any photos of herself; only photos of her son, but he looks happy. I hope she is happy too.

Ola who has a little version of himself

“The best thing about having children,” said Ola, a colleague of mine, the day after his son turned six, “is watching them become little versions of you. You can shape them,” he said, lifting his hands and pretending to mould an invisible lump of clay between them.

I believe you are born the way you are. There are many things that influence who you become, and your upbringing and environment is of course a large part of that, but some people are introverted and some are extroverted, some people are sick, some people are good, some people are quiet, some people are loud, some people become bullies, some become victims of bullying.

There’s no guarantee that your children will turn out the way you want.

“You should have one too,” he said while holding out a photo of his son for me to look at; a beaming six year old with a crown on his little head and cake around his mouth.

Margrethe who thinks everything will turn out fine whether you have children or not

“I think that whatever happens, things will be fine,” says Margrethe, buying another round. We’ve talked about Anniken having children, and about being in a relationship that has lasted long enough for people to start asking questions. About children. Anniken had dropped by with Ella, and had since gone home. But before she left, we had talked about her pregnancy and how she’d been afraid of what might happen not just before the baby came but after Ella’s birth and all that might now happen. Margrethe was reassuring as only Margrethe can be, and concluded with her usual phrase; that everything would be fine.

“But it’s terrible really,” says Margrethe, handing me a beer and sitting down again. “I don’t ask people about their innermost secrets, especially when I’ve only just met them! But when it comes to having children, it’s fine to poke your nose into that – any of it in fact. I mean, it’s my uterus, **INSIDE MY BODY!** So next time a guy asks me if I want children, I’ll ask him if he’s been screened for prostate cancer lately.”

“Children and cancer are quite different things though, surely,” I say.

“Yes, but uteruses and prostates are on the same level. They’re in the same place even. Almost.”

I wrinkle my nose and she laughs her loud laugh. Margrethe has long, blonde hair and her lips are perpetually scarlet, and she swears in nearly every sentence, which she blames on her north-Norwegian ancestry, although that must be many generations back because we grew up in the same place and I know her grandparents, and none of them are from the north.

“Don’t you think you might change your mind?” I ask her.

“About wanting kids?”

“Yeah. Aren’t you afraid you might change your mind when it’s too late?”

“No, are you?”

I take a swig of beer and nod.

“I don’t want any right now of course, I’ve never wanted kids, but what if I wake up in my late thirties or early forties and realize that all I really want is to be a mother. And that it’s maybe too late?”

“I know what you mean, but I think that you’ll find peace with the choices you’ve made. Right now, you don’t want children. So you can’t just have one because you’re afraid you’ll want one in ten or fifteen years – but!” she says, holding her finger in the air and clearing her throat. “I don’t think you’d regret it if you *did* have children either.”

“So you think that whatever happens...”

“You’d be totally fucking fine.” she concludes.

“It’s a nice thought,” I say. “I’m just terrified of winding up bitter.”

“I don’t think you’re capable of that,” she says.

“Being bitter?”

“I think you might feel a sense of loss, if things end up how you’re fearing. I mean, if you’re sat there, old and barren, with nothing to show for your years, except for a beard perhaps and maybe we’ll both have one of those when we’re old and grey. But you’ll just have to remember all the reasons you chose not to have children.”

“What are your reasons?” I ask.

“When was your last smear test?” she replies. We laugh and Margrethe shakes her head.

“But seriously, there are so many reasons. I just hope that all those who do have children, have just as many reasons for wanting them. I’ve simply never wanted to have kids. At least, I’ve never met anyone I wanted to have kids with. Do you remember Jørgen?”

I shake my head.

“Lucky for you,” she says. “He was completely useless. I mean, it was nice while it lasted, but if we’d had children? I would have ended up being a mother for him *and* the child.”

“Don’t you think he would have changed if he’d become a father, just as you’d change if you became a mother?”

“The guy couldn’t wash his own clothes! He was living solely on orange juice, frozen pizza and cracker-bread when we met. He left his clothes stewing in the washing machine for so fucking long there was a permanent stink of mould around him; and I still fell for him. But the thought of living my life with him, sharing an apartment and combining genes to make a new person that he, with his underdeveloped nurturing skills, would have to look after...” Margrethe shudders.

“When was it you were together?”

“Probably four years ago now.”

“Why did you split up?”

“He met the woman of his life,” she says while doing air quotes.

“Happens to the best of us,” I say.

As I arrive home, I get a message from her. She has found Jørgen’s profile page on Facebook. He has become a dad.

Alexander who loves going for walks and is an only child

Alexander and I meet up for a walk. We are old friends from university, but we rarely see each other. He says that going for walks is important. I don't want to be someone who goes walking. I prefer being at home.

"I don't need to leave the house to feel like I've accomplished something," I say, even though he has persuaded me to come out and we are already on our way into the forest.

"Fresh air is good for you," he says.

"Yes," I say, "I never said it wasn't. But isn't it nice to be at home too? You can watch a film or read a book."

"I feel like my brain is shrinking if I stay indoors," he says. I don't reply, so we just walk side by side for a few hundred meters. Then he asks if I'm not going to have children soon.

"Excuse me?"

"It's a perfectly valid question for someone your age," he says.

"I guess so," I say without replying.

"When you have children, it's important to get out. They have to be stimulated from the start, you can't just let them turn into couch potatoes, never experiencing anything new because they're indoors all the time. They become unintelligent. Late developers," he says.

"Is that right," I say.

"Yes," he says running out of breath; we're walking up a long, steep path. "And you have to have more than one of course, so you really should get a move on. Statistically, an only child is more egotistical and prone to mental issues than a child with siblings."

"But *you're* an only child," I say.

"Race you to the top," he says, and starts running.

Charlotte who said that swimming is like flying

Charlotte is a friend of mine from high school. We weren't close at the time, but we became close friends afterwards. We had shown up at the same workplaces, and the same bars; and hung out enough times here and there, that we decided to meet up properly, since it had always been so nice when we just ran into each other. I could tell I liked her when we were swimming with our class one day and she swam a whole length underwater, then broke the surface, puffed loudly with a huge grin on her face, and said: "My theory is that swimming is a bit like flying." I don't remember how I responded, but I remember thinking, *yes, that's absolutely true*, and so we both swam underwater for as long as we could – she swam twice as far as me.

Now I'm spending the weekend with Charlotte and her boyfriend at their cabin. They have a three year old daughter who is outside playing on the terrace after eating dinner. It's her bedtime soon although, as they say, it's the weekend, so she can stay up a bit longer. Their daughter is called Anna and can name all sorts of fruits and vegetables. When we made dinner, she sat in a high chair beside us pointing at whatever we used: Fennel, lettuce, tomato, pomegranate. Or as Anna says: Pomegannet. She was allowed to taste the food and nodded approvingly to everything while pointing at the bowl and saying: "that, that."

"I never liked pomegranate when I was little," I tell Charlotte.

"Nor did I," she says. "That's why we've started eating so much of it since we had Anna. I want her to like it from an early age."

Anna's favorites are *broccoli* and *gucumber*. She likes greens. She tries everything the grown-ups eat, pushing the little broccoli florettes into her tiny mouth with her hands like a mini-dinosaur. Out on the terrace she uses one of the tables as a small kitchen worktop.

"Mommy, I'm making *vood*," she says while stirring a pretend-saucepan.

"What are you making?" asks Charlotte.

"Tomato soup. You can have some," she says before toddling over to Charlotte, reaching out her hand, which is a ladle. "Mmm," says Charlotte, "perhaps it need a bit more salt."

"Salt!" says Anna before running back to the cooker, adding salt to the soup, tasting it, and smacking her lips.

"Maybe she'll become a chef," I say.

"Are you going to become a chef, Anna?" asks Zahid, her father. "I'm a chef now," replies Anna, and the adults nod: "Yes, you are."

When Anna goes to bed, we open a bottle of wine and sit outside where Anna had just cooked her pretend meal and for a split second I imagine everything I think she had imagined: a little cooking station on the table, pots and pans and cups and jars, over-flowing with ingredients and a perfectly-salted tomato soup on the table.

"So how's the single life going?" Charlotte asks.

"Nothing special to report," I reply.

"But you're alright?"

"Sure."

“No-one new in sight?”

“No-one new. Someone old though,” I say.

“You should give Tinder a try,” Zahid says.

“Zahid’s sad because he never got to try Tinder,” Charlotte says. They met before it came along.

“He’s allowed to swipe for his buddies sometimes though.”

“Do you get any matches?” I ask.

“I got Espen a match, and they're still together,” he says.

We download Tinder to my phone and create a profile together. “I’ll choose the pictures,” Zahid says, and I allow him to compose a bio as well.

Woman, 35, Oslo.

“What are you looking for in a man?” asks Zahid.

“A sense of humor,” I say.

“Bullshit,” he says.

“Oh no?”

“Sure, everyone wants a funny guy, but you don’t just want some ugly guy who makes you laugh, do you?”

“I’d rather have an ugly guy who makes me laugh than a handsome guy that doesn’t.”

“That’s what all the women say, but as a rule you’d write off the ugly guys.”

“No-one who is funny is ugly,” I say, while Charlotte nods in support.

“Seth Rogen’s not exactly handsome,” says Zahid.

“Yes he is!” say Charlotte and I simultaneously.

“OK, a sense of humor, then” says Zahid. “What else?”

“He needs to be kind, and like drinking beer. But not too much. He needs to like traveling. But not going for walks.”

“So, you prefer round the world to round the park?”

“Yes.”

“OK: Prefers funny to a handsome face. Prefers round the world to round the park. Prefers a couple of beers to a lot of beers. Prefers breakfast to lunch.”

“That’s OK,” I say. And we’re off.

“It’s a bit stupid searching for people who live near your cabin though, I don’t actually live here.”

“That’s true,” says Zahid, “but what if Mr. Right is sat in the cabin next door, and then lives in a flat near you normally. If we’re here now, he could be here now, too.”

“Let’s try,” says Charlotte, leaning over my cellphone with Zahid.

“Match!” They shout almost immediately, and in unison.

Håkon, 33, Oslo, is wearing a hat on all his photos and has a snowboard attached to his feet or under his arm on three of them.

“No,” I say.

“Because?”

“Because I don’t like winter,” I say.

Zahid adds “I prefer summer to winter” to my profile text.

“Match,” they say again, five minutes later.

Aron, 35, Drammen, looks nice, and so does his dog, but I shake my head.

“What’s wrong with him?” says Zahid raising his eyebrows and looking at the photo again. “He looks like a nice guy?”

“I prefer cats to dogs,” I say, and he updates my profile text once again. Then swipes.

A little while passes without any matches, then suddenly we’ve gone through all the search results.

“But it’s better in Oslo,” says Charlotte.

“For sure,” I say.

When I go to bed, I check my Tinder profile and add one more thing; the music video for John Grant’s “GFM”. I watch it twice before falling asleep.

When I wake up I have two matches, but I don’t check them, I just turn the phone over on my tummy while lying on my back in bed listening to Anna and Charlotte who are talking out on the terrace. They are looking at the view, while Anna tells Charlotte about everything she can see. “There’s a seagull, it’s hungry,” she says. “That’s where the fish live,” she says pointing at the sea. “That’s where the bear lives with all its babies,” she says pointing at the forest. “When does the bear get up?” she asks. “Very early I expect,” says Charlotte. “Like me?” “Maybe as early as you, yes” “When does your friend get up?” “Not as early as you,” says Charlotte, and I smile. Then I get up.

We make breakfast. Anna has already eaten, but sits at the table with us munching on fruit while the rest of us eat bacon and eggs.

“Found your dream man yet?” asks Zahid.

“I got two matches during the night, but I don’t think they’re any good for me.”

“I expect a full report from the first date,” says Zahid before clearing the table.

“I think you should calm down a notch,” says Charlotte.

“I’m just excited! I’m living my life through you now,” he says to me while filling the sink with hot water.

“You’re living in the here and now,” says Charlotte lifting Anna out of her chair and following her into the lounge where a new day full of fun and games awaits.

“Yeah,” says Zahid, “that’s what I’m doing.”

“Do you need help washing up?” I ask. “No, it’s alright. Go out and live your life!” he says.

I watch Anna spilling all the food while she eats, unable to control her fingers properly, holding the cutlery as best she can, albeit clumsily. The fork, made of thick, colored plastic, doesn’t do what she wants it to do, it won’t pierce the tortellini, the food just falls off when she angles the fork incorrectly on its way to her mouth; but she gradually learns, and gets better and older with each day. I remember how frustrating it was; spilling food everywhere when I did something as simple as eating. I hated my hands and mouth getting sticky, and I would try and wipe my mouth on my t-shirt or the sleeve of my jumper. I remember that we ate ice-cream sandwiches at Grandma’s, and how I looked at the adults, Mom, Dad, and Grandma, who had all managed to eat theirs without making a mess; but my ice-cream had melted between the two soft biscuit layers; it trickled along my fingers, bulged out the sides because I was squeezing it too tightly, oozed from the corners of my mouth because I’d bitten it too hard. It all went

everywhere and I was ashamed for not being able to do it. “Don’t get it all over your dress,” my Mom would say, while trying to clean it off, holding a paper-towel under the ice-cream as it ran down my fingers and arms, towards my elbow, and the dress. “It can be washed,” said my grandmother who smiled at me, then took the ice-cream from between my fingers, turned it round, and told me to eat from the other side where it had melted the most. “Quickly,” she said, putting her last half in her mouth all at once. I stuffed as much as I could into my own mouth, it was so full of ice-cream, but I did it in two mouthfuls. Grandma took a wet cloth and wiped the rest from my arms, mouth, and a little drop that was on my neck. “I make such a mess,” I said. “Don’t worry,” said Grandma. I don’t remember when I stopped spilling my food, and I’m not sure if the relief was greater than the frustration. I can still feel the frustration; of being in a little body that’s new; and of seeing everyone else managing to do it. Anna smacks her lips, with ketchup all over her face, and Charlotte cleans it all off while Anna closes her eyes, rubbing her face against the cloth in Charlotte’s hands. “Was that nice?” “Mmm,” she nods to me, undaunted by her sticky face and hands. “That was nice,” I say.

Alex calls and asks if I'll invite Anniken out.

"She needs a little break," he says. "It's such amazing weather out, maybe you'd both like to go for a glass of wine somewhere, just like you used to. It doesn't need to be all night, just a couple of hours, you know?"

"Sure, anytime," I say, and then he asks me to send her a message immediately, so I send a message asking if she'll meet me at six o'clock. "Rosé wine and evening sun in the backyard. Bring the baby-call, I read that they have quite a long range." She doesn't reply. When it gets closer to six, I call her on my way out of the wine shop.

"Hello?"

"Hi, did you get my message?"

"Oh, yeah." She sounds tired. "But I can't just come and meet you, I have to get a babysitter and the only thing I had planned for tonight was tidying up, and I was gonna read a book I've borrowed from the library which I have to return soon otherwise I'll get a fine, and.." I interrupt her.

"Alex will of course look after Ella and tidy up while you and I go for a glass of wine. One hour, two at the most. Just you and me."

Anniken takes a deep breath.

"Please?"

"Yes, OK, an hour. At what time?"

"At mine, six o'clock. That's just over an hour, so you can read until then. Or bring the book if you want, and we can both read if you like."

We hang up and I cycle home quickly, put the bottle of wine in the fridge, check that I have ice-cubes, re-heat the leftovers from yesterday's dinner and wolf it down while standing at the cooker. I look forward to having Anniken over. To speak to her again. Over the last few weeks she has either been sleeping or breastfeeding or talking about how tired she is whenever I've been there. I hope that she might relax with me tonight, let go a little. She'd return home to her new life soon enough.

The buzzer rings just after six, and I pick up the intercom to say that I'll be right down. Then I bundle the wine bottle into a net bag, grab two glasses and poke ice-cubes into each of them before jogging down the stairs and out into the backyard where Anniken is stood waiting.

"Are we going to be outside?"

"Yeah, it's so nice out."

"But I don't have any suncream," says Anniken,

"It's OK, there's plenty of shade here, we can sit under a tree."

She looks at the tree I'm pointing at, and then asks if it might be too cold.

"Cold?" It's over 25 degrees in the shade!"

She looks at me, then folds her arms and strokes her fingers along them. "If it gets too cold, we'll just go inside, I promise."

She nods.

We've had tropical nights ever since Ella was born; the warmest summer I can remember. It's hot and humid wherever you go, but it's like Anniken hasn't quite noticed the weeks getting warmer and warmer as they passed by; that the lilacs flowered and then flowered again; that the cherry blossom blew

away when Ella took her first breath outside Anniken; that the asphalt burned your feet and the sea temperature increased every day.

“Here,” I say, handing Anniken a glass, unscrewing the bottle top and pouring wine for us both.

“Cheers.” We clink our glasses and Anniken puts hers down without tasting it. I take a sip from mine and ask her how things are going.

“I’m doing fine.”

“Is it very different to what you’d imagined?”

“Of course, it’s very different,” she says.

“Oh yeah?”

“You can never properly imagine it, or put yourself in that situation. It’s like I’ve acquired a new sense; one I never knew existed until it came.”

“Sounds nice,” I say, but I notice the tone in her voice. She sounds like one of those mothers we used to talk about. The ones who said, in not so many words, that life finally gained some meaning once they had children. I look at Anniken across the table; at her face and hair that hasn’t been washed for some time and looks thinner; at the sweater she’s wearing that’s all baggy and loose and looks like it could be wool, wool in this heat. I lean forward and touch the fabric, she gives me a strange look and retracts her arm.

“Isn’t it a bit too warm for that sweater?” I ask.

“No.”

“Should we go inside?” I ask, drying the sweat from the side of my face, almost demonstratively.

“No, I’m OK. I’ll let you know if it gets worse.”

“What book were you going to read?”

“Hm?”

“The book you said you needed to return to the library. What was it?”

Anniken looks a little unsure, before brushing it aside, sipping her wine and then choking.

“Are you alright?”

“It just went down the wrong hole.”

“Can you believe that you’re a Mom,” I say, after a long silence, while holding my glass out for a toast. Anniken smiles cautiously for the first time since she arrived, and clinks her glass against mine. “I wake up some mornings thinking it was all a dream,” she says. “If Ella is still asleep or Alex has taken her out, it now takes me a few seconds to I realize who I am.”

“I’m sure it’ll pass.”

“What will?”

“If you’re a bit lost or something,” I’m just trying to comfort her, but Anniken becomes defensive. “I’m fine. Even if I don’t get as much sleep as I used to.”

“Sure, of course, you’re clearly doing fine. Ella is lovely and you and Alex look like you’re tackling your new life well.”

“Didn’t you think we would?”

“Anniken,” I say, giving her a chance to calm down.

“That’s not what I said,” I continue carefully.

“You can’t know what we’ve been through.”

“No,” I say. “But, like they say on planes when they’re demonstrating the safety on board: You have to put on your own oxygen mask before helping anyone else. And I think you perhaps forgot your own oxygen mask after Ella was born.”

“We’re not talking about a plane crash, it’s my life,” says Anniken.

“Yes, I know,” I say.

“Absolutely everything gets turned upside down. Things that were important before are now just gone,” she continues. “I can’t remember who I was before Ella.”

“Do you feel like someone else?”

She takes a sip of her wine and looks at me, then leans back in her chair while gazing upwards. The sun flickering between the leaves at the top, makes it look like they’re sparkling. Then she looks at me and says:

“Both yes, and no. It’s almost like I’ve become a better version of myself.” And then she starts to cry.

“Oh Anniken,” I say, standing up and going to give her a hug. She presses her face into her wool sweater and sobs, clinging onto me while I stroke her back which feels clammy under her sweater.

“I’m sure it’ll get better soon,” I say.

“But it’s better *now*,” she says. “Ella is healthy and Alex is so good with her and…” She stops mid-sentence and I nod. I take her hand and hold it.

“You’re allowed to be sad, even though you’re happy,” I say after a while.

“But it could have been far worse of course. What if something happened to Ella or Alex, or me. What if we do everything wrong, what if she stops breathing or becomes sick or doesn’t understand that we love her.”

“She understands that,” I say.

“And what if Alex leaves me,” says Anniken, before bursting into tears again. A family has come into the backyard, intending to barbecue just behind us. I stand up while still holding Anniken’s hand.

“Let’s go inside,” I say and I lead her in, holding the glasses in my other hand and spilling a little wine on the ground as we walk, since I’m holding both glasses at an angle. Anniken walks behind me sniffing, until we’re finally back in the flat where I open the windows in the kitchen and the lounge before putting a few cushions on the floor and asking her to sit down. The floor beneath the lounge window is the coolest place to sit.

“Here,” I say while stroking the floor beside me. Anniken does as she’s told, and after putting her wine glass down beside her, I take her hand again.

“You’re all going to be fine,” I say, despite how empty the words sound. “What you’re doing right now is totally crazy, and it’ll take time before it stops feeling scary or difficult.”

“I know all that,” she says. “But at the same time, it’s as though I don’t know it.”

“I understand.”

“No, you don’t. You can’t.”

“Sure, OK, I don’t understand anything, but I can listen to you,” I say, and Anniken nods. She takes a deep breath, and her shoulders move up and down. Then she dries her tears.

“Alex asked you to invite me out didn’t he?”

“Yes,” I say.

“He’s been nagging me about it ever since Ella was born, telling me to relax, but it’s like I become more stressed when he tells me to relax, you know?”

I nod.

“I’ve become a mom,” she says. “I’ve become a mom, and it’s as though that’s *all* I am now; that I’m no longer breathing for my own benefit, but for Ella; that I’m trying to look after her and protect her from everything, from everything in the world, and all that I might do wrong and all that he might do wrong; and being away from her is physically painful, and I know that if it continues like this Alex will give up on me; and we just quarrel all the time and I try to tell myself that he’s having a rough time too, except that he’s just such a...JERK!”

“I think he’s just worried about you,” I say.

“I know he is. *Really*,” she says.

“He’s become a father too, just as you’ve become a mom,” I say. “After having Ella, I’ve understood my dad more, but I’ve also been more angry with him than ever,” says Anniken suddenly. Her father left her mother just before Anniken was born. They’re no longer in touch, even though he tried to be a weekend-dad when Anniken was little.

“In what way?”

“I understand that he was scared,” she says. “I understand that he was terrified, and that he didn’t want to be a dad. But at the same time I don’t understand how he wasn’t able to be one when he had become one. Like I wasn’t enough. I look at Ella, and she is the scariest and most beautiful thing that ever happened to me. So it’s OK to be scared, but at the same time it’s not OK, if you know what I mean.”

“Alex is not going to leave you,” I say.

“I hope not.”

“Do you fancy another glass?” I point at the now empty wineglass in her hand. She looks down at it, surprised.

“I haven’t drunk wine since I got pregnant. I told Alex I wasn’t going to drink tonight either, even though he practically ordered me to have at least one glass. I didn’t think I’d want to.”

“I’m not going to force you to drink any more if you don’t want to,” I say withdrawing the bottle I was holding out for her.

“Yes, please do. Pour me another glass, and can we please talk about you now?”

I pour more wine and run off to get some ice, and that’s where we stay, sitting on the floor, while dusk falls. Ella sleeps easily without Anniken being there, Alex goes in constantly to check that she’s still breathing and is OK. At ten thirty he sends Anniken a message asking if she’s having a nice time, and she says that she’ll be going home soon. I walk with her through the backyard and give her a big hug, holding her tightly before she ambles home to her little family. I watch as she walks off with her oversized wool sweater and disheveled hair. She turns to wave at me before turning back and skipping along the sidewalk towards home. When she gets home, she lies beside Alex on the couch and asks if he is OK. “I’m fine,” he says, and she gives him a big hug. Then she asks if he fancies going on a date with her one day soon, and that her mom can babysit Ella. “I’d love that,” says Alex, and then he asks if they should go to bed.

“If the world ends tomorrow,” whispers Anniken while leaning over Ella sleeping in her cradle,
“I’m so glad we had you.”

“Are you coming to bed?” asks Alex pulling the quilt aside.

When Philip and I talked about what it would be like if we had children, I said that I'd probably be a good dad.

Philip laughed and asked if I'd perhaps meant to say mom?

"No, I meant dad," I said.

And it was all about the expectation of what a good mother is and what a good father is. A mother is everything, a mother has to be wise and warm, strict and fair, present and all-knowing. A father has to go to work primarily, and therefore cannot cope with much when he gets home. A father has to be able to light the barbecue, drive the car, read the newspaper, and know where Mom has hidden the chocolate. I believe in shared parental leave, and I like soft men – I'd chosen Philip as my life-partner after all, and he is the gentlest and nicest man I've ever met – I'm all for redefining what a mother and a father is. But I also know that were I to actually become a mother, I would want to do everything myself and buckle from the stress and sleep deprivation. I would never have admitted that I needed help, and I would never have been able to accept the help I was offered. I would have been someone who screamed at the father, angry and irritated by everything he did wrong. We're not using *that* lunchbox today, we're not packing *that* bodysuit in the diaper bag, and it wasn't *that* car seat we'd agreed to buy. Don't you listen to anything? Does it all go in one ear and out the other? What are you thinking? I've been home all day cleaning and tidying; and I was up all night because you had to get your sleep; and you go to work and talk to adults while I just push a buggy around while my brain turns to mush. *I could stay at home, too?* But you'd only do everything wrong and I'd be at work, missing home, and wondering if you are doing things right, because there's so much that can go wrong. There is *so much*, all the time that can go wrong. *Do you not trust me?* No.

When I think about being a parent, I don't think about the nice things. I think about gastric flu and sleep deprivation; about a child hanging from me when I'm tired and want to be alone, or throwing a tantrum in the shop; about a house that is never, *never* tidy; about utility bills and early dinners; about waking up in the middle of the night and running into the child's bedroom to check if it's still alive; about the first time the child has a fever or when something's not as it should be. But it's not only those things. I understand that. That there's so much more to it, and that it will all feel worth it when the baby comes, this person you'll love like never before. It will open a door to a room within you that you never knew existed, and that room will be infinitely huge; something eternal within a body that will die, a love that will live on, even after I am dead and buried. But I can choose to never open that door, and avoid all that comes with it, all that I am afraid of. All these things that I fear, which are the first things I think about when someone asks if I want to have children; a stream of horrifying thoughts and a giant "no" that fills my mouth, which I swallow however and reply quite diplomatically that I don't want children right now, or that it's not a good time, or that I don't know what might happen in a year or two. I leave it open, to avoid more questions. Anniken told me that all my thoughts and fears about having children could be compared to someone being afraid of falling in love, because they are always afraid that it will end. But it's not the same. I am not afraid it will end, I am afraid of being locked in a painful relationship. You can break up with a partner, you can divorce, you can leave each other and never speak again. But you can never leave a child. You will always be a mom. It is the most beautiful thing Anniken knows. And the thing that terrifies me the most.