

I love you. We say it to each other all the time. We say it instead of saying something else. What would that something else be? You: I'm dying. Us: Don't leave me. Me: I don't know what to do. Before: I don't know what I'll do without you. When you're not here any more. Now: I don't know what to do with these days, all this time, in which death is the most obvious of all things. I love you. You say it in the night when you wake up in pain, or between dreams, and reach out for me. I say it to you when my hand finds your skull, which has become small and round in my palm now that your hair is almost gone, or when I stroke you gently to get you to turn over and stop snoring. I love you. Once, I would reach out in the night to touch your skin, to place my hand on your back, your stomach, your thigh, anywhere at all, and there'd be connection, contact. And in that feeling of skin and warmth, something small and without language, something perhaps undeveloped in me, a newborn part, could sink down to sense the base of night, return home, or arrive. I love you. But you are no longer in your body, I don't know where you are. Awash in morphine, you drift in and out of sleep or languor, and we do not talk about death, I love you, you say to

me instead, and reach out for me from the bed on which you lie through the days, fully dressed, writing on your phone, writing a novel on that little screen, two or three lines at a time before you drift into sleep again, and I let go of the door frame and step towards you and take your hand and look at you and say: I love you too.

*'Language difficulties'*

*The relationship to reality is what matters,*

wrote Birgitta Trotzig in the mid seventies when I was six or seven years old. I saw her one autumn at the book fair in Gothenburg, it must be ten years ago now, probably more; we were both on our way from the Stadsbiblioteket to the main site, she on the opposite pavement in a long black skirt, limping slightly, from hip troubles, perhaps. A year or two later, I read that she was dead.

*When it comes to what really happens to me, in life, I'm struck into silence. Silence! Stop sign – zone border! It becomes almost physically impossible for me to as much as register facts, dates – at least periodically. The real-life event hits me, massively burdensome and complicated, overwhelmingly intangible – and transforms all speech, any form of direct articulation, into an unreal rustling of leaves.*

When did it all start? When did you actually become ill? Were you already ill that January we were in Venice, nearly two years ago, and you vomited and pulled out of your business dinner and the talk you were supposed to give? Three days later, we went to India. Were your cells already then frenetically dividing as we sat in the darkness, in a rowing

boat on the river, and watched the funeral pyres on the ghats of Varanasi?

Were you already ill then, in January 2018? The next time was June. I'd been at the book festival in Aarhus and we met up in Copenhagen. We'd rented an Airbnb on Islands Brygge, with a pull-out couch and the tiniest of bathrooms, a second-floor flat with a little balcony from where we could see the mouth of the harbour, the canal on the right. We met up on the Saturday. I came in on the train, you'd taken a flight and were already checked in when I got there, you'd picked up the key from the host, who'd told us to say we were friends of hers if anyone asked. She was a singer, and we made up stories in which we were Norwegian and Italian musicians, I a cellist, you a violinist. But we didn't see anyone. The next day, we went out early and just walked, through the city centre, into the northern quarters beyond the city lakes, streets we'd never walked before, we veered left into Vesterbro, and then suddenly, as we got to Kødbyen, the old meat-packing district, you had to stop and hold on to the corner of a building. You couldn't walk another step. It was impossible to tell if you were exhausted or in pain, you were almost angry with yourself. We took a taxi back to the flat.

We ate outside on the balcony all three nights. You hadn't the strength to go out looking for somewhere. It was nice, we both thought so. In bed you sat up, bent double in the night, such was the pain in your back. I'm not sure how much you slept, if you could even sleep like that. I kept waking up and you'd be sitting there next to me, bent double. Only now



I remember you were poorly before that as well, two weeks before, at that wine festival in Bordeaux. You'd been there years ago with a friend and so much wanted to go back again, with me, to amble about with a wine glass in a holder around your neck, pausing at the various tasting stations, trying the different wines and rinsing your glass in the little fountain before moving on to the next. We went to Bordeaux before I was due at the book festival in Denmark. We'd booked a room at a little two-star hotel, there were windows on two sides, one facing out on to a park, French windows extending to the floor, and we didn't eat out in Bordeaux either, despite you being so fond of eating out, we stayed in the room with wine and cheese, bread and couscous salad from the supermarket. You hadn't the energy. And in the night you were in pain. You hardly mentioned it.



From my point of view, something happened during the spring of 2018. It was as if the flame began to dwindle. The energy went out of you, and I thought it was to do with us. That we'd gone into a slide and that living with you, my whole reason for uprooting to Milan, was now going to tail away, until there was nothing left but a bare minimum of energy, a minimum of intensity.

I was jealous of your pain, which mounted over the summer. You'd wander about at night in our dark, roomy apartment, moaning and whimpering. It never occurred to me that you could be seriously ill. I reasoned the pain was

from keeping something inside, that you weren't happy with me any more and didn't want the life we were living, only you couldn't bring yourself to acknowledge it and tell me. That was what I thought. Sometimes I wondered if there was someone else, and would convince myself of it, that some other woman had become the object of your desires. For you were giving so little away, the signals you sent me were so unclear.

When we went to Venice again that August, to stay in the apartment the publishing house leases in Giudecca, you were in such pain the first night that it frightened both of us. When morning came, I phoned my father in Oslo. He used to be a medical worker and told us we should go to the hospital and get it checked. It was what we needed to hear, and we left at once. I remember the terror we felt as we clung to each other on the vaporetto, how we jumped ashore at the Zattere and hurried over to the Accademia, crossing the long, arching bridge that spans the Grand Canal, scuttling through the streets, past the church of Santa Maria dei Miracoli to the Campo Santi Giovanni e Paolo and the Fondamenta Nove where the hospital lies, surely the most beautiful in the world. Weak with trepidation, we searched the corridors for A & E, the building consuming us. We passed through an atrium with plants and trees and cats, until at last we found the waiting room with its blue plastic chairs and take-a-number dispenser, and when you came out again after registering and we looked up at the electronic board, there was a red dot

beside your number. Only a few were red, most were green or yellow, and it took only a moment to realise they were the ones who would have to wait the longest. We understood that red was for alarm and emergency.

They called you in and made me wait outside. What did I do for all those hours? I remember the sharp divisions between light and shadow, the heat, and the lions on the walls, emerging out of their painted fields of perspective, an illusion of depth where in fact there is none, only flat, bare stone. I hung about in the shade outside the entrance, went inside, came back out again. The square where the hospital is situated was a place I knew well, I'd crossed it so many times over the years, in all seasons, ever since I first started staying at the publishing house's apartment in the nearby Castello district. I remembered all the times I'd passed by those lions, marvelled at the illusion, but never gone inside. And now suddenly that Venetian hospital had become so acutely relevant to me. It was where they were going to find out what was wrong with you. You, with whom I belong. You, who make the night and the darkness our own, in our big bed, a place where I can touch you, sense that you exist, and feel secure. You, who are home to me, my sky. I clutch my phone. How long can this take? Hours without a word. There was no coverage in there, you tell me later. I don't know what I did with myself in all those hours, they come over like shards of images that don't belong together, a cobblestone, a door frame, a cat crossing the lawn in the heat, and everything too close up.