

Siss and Unn

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[pp.7-10]

IT IS THE TIME OF THE YEAR when the snow falls over all roads, villages, and every house looks the same. In this landscape live two girls, Siss and Unn, each with their mother, and in Siss' case, her father as well.

Tonight Siss and Unn are skiing through the floodlit forest with strong double strokes. There is a cross country skiing competition, Siss is dressed in her silver race-suit, her skis are running smoothly and her style is faultless. Unn has burst like a balloon, but she has one rule: she never breaks a race. What was it her father said once: The first time you give up, is the first of many.

Siss' Dad works in the main office of Statkraft, the state-owned electricity company, the cornerstone industry here between the mountains, innermost in the secluded west. There he sits in his control room day or night, depending on his shifts, while Mum walks around the house folding table-cloths, doing the washing and dusting the furniture. And she says to herself at least once a day: I'm the mother of the most wonderful girl in the whole world, who is the spitting image of her Dad.

Mummy Big is the queen, and it is just the two of them, she and her daughter Unn, after he, Unn's father, disappeared one night. What drove him away from his own ancestral farm, no one in possession of all their senses can answer, hand on heart. In any event: suddenly, and without warning or even the smallest of hints, he turned the key in the white Volvo station wagon and drove off.

The reality is irrefutable: he left behind a wife, a daughter, and a particularly impractical farm to run. No, nothing is given or promised in this our earthly life: He

failed to return. The first year passed in its way, but it was too heavy, the sheep were sent to slaughter as soon as Christmas had passed. When spring arrived, a man with a motor-saw and a desire to secure additional land, took the reins. He is now the conscientious tenant who mows the lawns on the farm and reminds Mummy Big and Unn with each vigorous toss of the pitchfork, each turn of the shovel and blow of the hammer, about the time that was. He is a hero, oh yes, but he does not replace the man who once was Unn's father and Mummy Big's husband in a marriage of more than twenty years.

Now it is already the second year. The snow is falling on the tenanted farm. In the middle of the yard stands the tree that is more than a century old, snow covering its sprawling, leafless branches, a silent witness of those times that soon shall be sawn off, once and for all. At first, Mummy Big will enjoy the extra light, but later she will regret chopping it down, when the flooding rainwater, first in spring, and then in autumn, slowly but surely seeps into the porous cracks in the concrete foundation wall.

Long before that, a night will turn into a snow-soggy, bright morning. Mummy Big will, like so many nights before, stand in the window, keeping vigil, waiting for the white Volvo's yellow long-distance head-lamps, her eyes glued to every snow-covered S-bend in the road. But before the snow-plough comes roaring at five in the morning, she will once more have stared her eyes big and wet in the futile expectation of something that can only be summed up as a desperate and prolonged absence. Mummy Big knows it, deep inside; he is not coming back, yet she stands there, night after night.

And how do you run a farm where there is nothing left any longer of what used to be well-defined operational routines? Yes, how do you continue to live in a time that has long since ceased to exist? Much can be tenanted away here in life, but the responsibilities of motherhood are shackles you can never throw off.

Undoubtedly, there will be periods of both calm and stormy weather when Mummy Big and Unn in turn will feel that they have been revived again, but for now, in this time of vacuum, let us linger with those who can, or who have no choice, in the home where things past have been locked away.

Yes: On the wall the clock keeps ticking, stroke by stroke, as if nothing has happened, and the refrigerator is humming with a rhythm beyond all clockwork, but then one day in late spring Auntie comes with her white coat and firm hand to look after both her sister, Mummy Big, and her niece in the dirty yellow house.

Because when a mother loses her so-called quintessence, there is not much life left for the daughter. Just as reliably as Siss' Mum puts makeup on her eyes and lips, Auntie spreads the embroidered tablecloth over the coffee table and puts five long-stemmed daffodils in the narrow, glass-blown vase. And in one of her two suitcases, Auntie has brought oranges and grapes from the local supermarket, and she puts the fruit in the clear crystal dish Mummy Big got for her 40th birthday from her faithful husband. And as Unn, after school and a rissole dinner, pops a much too sweet grape into her mouth, Auntie says: From now on, everything will be better.

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[pp. 41-68]

HOW MANY FRIENDS did Siss have in the Swedish suburb, during her first year at school? If truth be told: not many. She walked to and from school with two girls, Cecilia and Charlotte. In the breaks she played softball and football with the others, and every Tuesday she had ballet classes from five to half past six. Siss had friends, but no one special she could talk to about absolutely everything. Cecilia and Charlotte were girls she just hung out with, basically. But Who Cares Anymore, here in the Norwegian valley there are three boys and four girls in her class: Bjarte, Knut-Ole and Kjartan, and Olaug, Kjersti, Marte and Unn. Siss likes them all, and they like Siss, but no, she does not have a best friend in this place. And at the ballet classes? No, Diana quickly got tired of tying Siss' hair in high ponytails. Maybe not for any particular reason, but Siss might already have been too much her own person or at least living in her own world? Siss neither misses life in the suburb, nor feels quite at home here in the valley. Everyone is friendly and pleasant, she cannot complain, but she often feels a little left out at school nevertheless. Tomorrow, Siss thinks, on the school bus, I'll ask if I can sit next to her.

When Unn walks across the bridge to the gate that separates her and Mummy Big from the tenant's fields, which is locked in spring and autumn because of the sheep husbandry, it is exactly half a kilometre down to the sealed lay-by where the bus waits. Unn's house is twenty metres from the bridge, beneath the steep ravine which further down widens slightly where the river runs past the yard where Siss and her family now lives.

At night the bus is parked in the sealed lay-by, because the bus driver lives nearby, in a fenced-in garden with an always immaculately mown lawn. In winter, from the first to the last fall of snow, he shovels the road from his house and down to the lay-by where the school bus is parked. At 06.45 he walks down to the bus and turns on the engine. When Unn, at 07.38, comes walking through the last bend before the bridge, Siss has already been sitting in the heated bus for five minutes. Unn is late again, but readily greets the driver, whose answer is to point to the clock above his head. Unn walks calmly through the bus to her regular seat, Siss has removed her schoolbag and made room for Unn, but Unn just nods briefly as she walks past, and sits down in her usual seat. Only when she has sat down does Unn think about the

look in Siss' eyes, how secure and firm it is, and that there is nothing she would rather do than sit next to Siss.

When Siss closes her eyes she can see her: Unn waiting in the rain. Her fair fringe is dripping, and her face seems to be lit up from inside.

IN THE NEW HOUSE Siss has the room with the pink wallpaper, opposite the bathroom, with white-painted skirting boards along floor and ceiling. Siss has been staring into the ceiling for some time now, as she lies on her back in her bed and beats the hollow wall in a meditative rhythm with a closed fist. On her chest of drawers stands the jewellery box her Mum gave her, the kind of box with a ballerina who pops up to the loveliest music when you open the lid. When she dances the ballet, it is only in the middle of the leaps that Siss feels whole, as soon as the music dies down, she pulls away and joins the others in the line. Yes, it is true; it never pays to act up, you only stand out in a negative way then. It begins to hurt, so Siss stops beating the wall. The back of her right hand is growing red, and starting to swell up, tomorrow her hand will be blue.

At the barre, aligned with the others, she straightens up and is once more her usual self. Her face closes, and although her back is ramrod straight, it looks as if she stoops over the barre, like a willowy bird. Siss puts her right foot over the barre and pushes her upper body slowly forwards towards her toes, all the way down.

And there, in her bed, after she has fallen asleep from the shooting pain at the back of her right hand, Siss dreams the same dream again. Siss sits in the boat with Mum and Dad and their unborn children. Mum is rowing with firm strokes, keeping a steady course. She sits silently on the thwart like a dark solid rock, just staring stiffly out across the fjord, past Dad and the whole flock of children. The boat is in the middle of the fjord when Mum pulls in the oars and stands up, pushing herself up with her heels. In a clear voice, fixing Dad with a rigid stare, Mum commands: Throw the son on the right overboard! And Dad does as Mum says, and throws one son and one daughter after the other into the deep, clear water. Siss can see that Dad is scared, that he does not dare to disobey Mum's instructions. Siss looks into Dad's desperate eyes when he comes towards her with his big hands. She can feel him trembling as he grips her tightly around the waist, before he lifts her up and overboard.

The draught seeps into the bedroom from the air vent above the window and merges with the dream about the shadow at the dark-deep bottom and the distorted luminosity between the ferns, down there.

UNN COMES DOWN from the loft, and in the kitchen she finds Mummy Big with the phone in her hand as usual and with Auntie on the other end. No, nothing new really, Mummy Big dithers, before she tentatively picks up the thread again. Unn? She's writing an essay. No, I don't know, the subject's Norwegian. She's started these ballet classes. It's in the gym hall at school. What can I do? She never tells me anything. No, I don't know. The tree? It's still there, but I'm going to ask the tenant to cut it down.

To Unn, life in the yellow house with Mummy Big have been the prison where the key is on the inside of the door. Oh yes, denial is the best medicine when it comes to *this fundamental question, to be or not to be*; to get out of bed or to stay in it and toss and turn all morning. However, once on her feet with a goal for the day, Mummy Big often collapses again. Either at the kitchen table, or on the sofa in front of the television. At least that is the way it is now: Mummy Big forgot a long time ago where and why she is going, but cannot see the point of falling down on her knees or staying in bed all day for that reason. Habit has replaced life, a new month is solemnly marked with a new bottle of shampoo in the shower.

It rains cats and dogs over the murky forest lake, and up on the loft Unn is thinking that now it rains more than ditches and roots are able to absorb.

TOWARDS THE END of every ballet class, Anna lets the girls compose their own dance. Listen to the piano! Is the music slow or tutti-frutti-fast? Are we happy or sad? (...) We are happy, Anna shouts and claps her hands. The girls spread themselves around the room to give each other space. Small and controlled movements, Anna instructs, and she told them as early as the warm-up: Ballet is about telling your story without words.

All the old and new things Siss has learnt, she now puts together. She makes faces when she thinks about what her old Swedish ballet teacher Rebecca said: The eyes, the mouth and the main position form the very picture that reveals your feelings to the audience. Unn stands shyly at the barre and looks at the other girls dancing their improvised, but delicate dances. In the mirror she sees Siss galloping across the floor in large, wild leaps. ARRA! Siss' dance can belong to no one else. (Siss t o t a l l y ignores what Rebecca said about the dance being a gift for the enjoyment of family and friends.) Dégage-de ga SHAY - and whoopee, Siss stretches her foot along the floor, out to the side, back and forth to prepare a half knee-bend; de-Mpli-ÉE. She is beautiful, Unn thinks, and incredibly tough.

But my dear girl, your posture's all wrong! You're not a banana, you know, Anna laughs and straightens Unn's back. First position, please! Arms out in front of you and pretend you're embracing a large beach ball! Heels together, remember what I told you? Good! And now you turn your feet out to each side as far as you can. Better, Unn! Much better! Hold it in! Hold it in! In!

The piano music has come to an end, the girls stopped dancing a while ago. In the mirror Unn watches the girls standing in a white-pink ring. She lets go of the barre and turns around, and that is the moment she meets Siss' eyes for the first time, in one big and red wave. Images flicker in front of Unn's eyes: white light, stars across water, and Unn thinks: For your sake I shall nail myself to the barre for all eternity.

Everything that touched Siss and Unn tore them both to pieces, in one shot of the arrow in this second where one face could not be distinguished from the other.

UNN STANDS BEHIND SISS and looks at her beautiful back, where the pink ballet suit is crossed like the wings of a scarlet admiral butterfly. Unn has never seen a more beautiful back, for even if Siss is slender, her whole being is filled with equal parts of life and tamed force. Unn herself is ashamed of her half-developed body, and always stands with her neck bent and her back curved, half twisted away from the others, in the darkest corner of the big girls' shower.

After the shower, Siss and Unn are alone in the dressing room. They are busy with the tasks at hand; drying themselves, dressing, and folding their ballet suits carefully into their bags. Neither Siss nor Unn can think of anything to say, before Siss finally breaks the silence: I thought you were very clever in there! Siss walks towards Unn where she stands bent over her bag, her face is serious, and she sits down on the bench, on the right side of Unn's ballet bag. Siss' hair is washed and combed, and on an impulse she pulls Unn down and close to her. Siss takes Unn's hands in hers, and says: It's bad luck to compare hands, did you know that? She laughs and asks: Would you like to come back to my place?

Unn tears herself loose from Siss, her hand is hot and sweaty, because Unn cannot come back to anybody's place. Mummy Big has, with all her exploitative passivity, managed to impose a strict daily ritual. The last thing she said when Unn dashed out of the door with her ballet bag dangling from her shoulder was: You'll come straight home after ballet, won't you? And Unn does not disappoint her mother who is already so miserable, no, Unn is, as always, the dutiful daughter, the friendly face against the wall-paper in the house where Mummy Big sits and stares like a swollen grapefruit.

There is a wildness in Siss' body, which may erupt and overflow at any time. At least that is what it looks like to Unn, that between spontaneous moments and concentrated body control, stretches a circuit of live wires.

MUM, THE MOTHER OF SISS, had just turned twenty-one when she fell pregnant. Siss' father, Dad, was four years older than Mum. They were lustfully, carnally, in love, and they bounced happily through doors and up and down stairs. They walked hand in hand through the park beneath cherry-trees in pink bloom.

But: The landscape changed, one way of life replaces another, and one fine day the Swedish suburb was replaced with family life in the Norwegian valley. Now the blue Volvo is parked in the yard which Mum after four months is beginning to call hers. And here, in the yard, when spring arrives, Mum at long last reveals: I actually enjoy getting my hands dirty. She has, little by little, with crowbar and pickaxe, and ample help from Dad, managed to turn the soil in the long overgrown flowerbed. Here I'll grow hundreds of plants, Mum laughs beneath the tallest fruit tree, as the mouldy water runs in a brown stream from the faintly sloping garden plot, and she asks: Can you come and give me a hand, Siss?

The kitchen garden is supposed to be Mum's alternative cosmetics shelf, where only the rarest flowers will finally sprout and grow from their seeds. And the garden, of course, is known as the perfect place to cultivate the fecund relationship between mother, father and child, isn't it?

Later, in the second or third year, Mum will set off on a journey by herself, to places she has never been. Dad and Siss will stay at home and dutifully tend to the kitchen garden until Mum comes back and solemnly swears that now she shall stay at home. She will return like a rehabilitated bird of passage. Her eyes will once more drill through the kitchen window on a futile search for all the things she failed to find out there on her journey. Outside, the seasons will drift into each other in one and the same tree, without Mum noticing to any great extent.

Undoubtedly, women who change their own fate are rare, but is it in water or in sand it is written that those with a capital W at some insufferable point or other in life must bury their crying heads down in their own pillows?

THE HOUSE IS COLD and the fog is draped over the mountains. In the kitchen Mummy Big clears the table. Unn was not very hungry and was allowed to go back to her room to finish her essay after a glass of milk and half a sandwich. Unn writes: We had social sciences in the last class, then the bell rang and all the way home I thought about the lamb in the cardboard box. If the lamb survived the day, the lamb would survive anything. I counted yes-no tunnels all the way home. There are thirteen road tunnels between school and home. And in the middle of her essay, beyond all logic and argumentation, Unn writes with a blue fountain pen: *I am a loved child.*

Auntie has come for a visit, and today she travelled four hours on the Haukelie Express before Mummy Big picked her up at the bus stop across from the shop. Now Auntie and Mummy Big sit and talk in low voices in the kitchen. My own daughter, Mummy Big says in her motherly-heart-to-heart-voice (and this look you get when you have lived a little and have learnt a few things, more or less). Yes, this is how it goes: Mummy Big confides in her own sister that she no longer understands her own daughter who never tells her anything and even refuses to answer when she, Mummy Big, asks if something is up. No, why? Unn might retort once in a blue moon, giving her mother this stare which clearly signals to Mummy Big, it's none of her business.

Up in her room, Unn sits with her discursive fountain pen. As usual, she is listening to the radio, but in the middle of the loudest song she turns down the volume: Can she hear Auntie and her silent footsteps moving up the stairs on their squeaky-shuffling tour of surveillance?

Auntie used to come regularly once every autumn, one week in October, to help with the sheep branding, sorting and weighing and the cooking. Everything was different when the farm was operative. They were together then: Mummy Big, he and Unn, like a little integrated circle in a larger society. But: Now as then, every nook and cranny is tidied and cleaned. Auntie is an indefatigable machine, the refrigerator is emptied for everything past its use-by date, congealed jam and rancid gravy remains. And when Unn is about to tidy her room or do her homework, you can be sure that Auntie is there, looking over Unn's shoulder. Auntie listens, and Auntie looks. Unn feels at the same time monitored and important. It is Auntie who asks to see her study plan, her reading and writing timetable. Now it is Auntie who puts two cheese

sandwiches and a carrot in her red lunch box and leaves it ready in the fridge the night before.

Time has choked in its own drain, and on the loft, Unn has more or less barricaded herself.

THERE IS A DOOR. And it is locked.

It was locked a long time ago.

There is a tree. And it is rotten.

In the middle of the yard stands the tree which Mummy Big wants to cut down.

Go ahead then! Do it!

You, Mummy Big, with your traditional hand-knitted eight-petal roses between chest and shoulders, manifested in this century-old yard tree where ancient branches intertwine with new branches, choking the healthy ones, while the strongest branch, oh! the daddy of them all, has given up the ghost.

And is it the mother or the daughter who now stands in front of the large tree in the middle of the yard, after lightning has just struck, and thinks: my god how short this life is!

So cut! Chop!

Come on, do it!

For neither Mummy Big nor Auntie will ever cry openly over a man again. It is Unn who will stand in front of the tree, or what is left of the tree after it has been cut down, and there, in front of the stump, find plenty of time to cry over them both, her absent father and her steadily deteriorating Mummy Big.

So what is happening to Mummy Big? She complains about her cold that won't go away, and a few times it looks as if she has a dizzy spell as she hurriedly leans against a bench, a chest of drawers or a kitchen chair. How old had Unn become then? Unn was too young to remember, too old to forget, and with Mummy Big sitting in her Bohus-designed armchair in front of the television every single day and night, it was never any easier to let one day follow another as if nothing had happened. Behind a door, up the squeaking wooden stairs, locked in her room, at the end of a sentence, halfway through her essay workbook, Unn has become the young girl with the adult face.

No matter what Mummy Big does, Auntie will support her because of a principle of sisterly loyalty. Mummy Big can gobble up and swallow everything she comes across, but will always feel a gnawing hunger inside.

MUM STANDS NAKED in front of the bathroom mirror, before she puts on her fluffy dressing-gown. She notices a few loose terry-towelling threads before she takes the breadknife out of the drawer, finds the cutting board and begins to slice the homemade bread with firm, surgical incisions. Mum wants to swallow the whole bread, a nausea has settled at the top of her throat, but she will not complain. This lady puts up, and shuts up. Take for instance the months after the Siss-birth, a tough period of adjustment: In the kitchen, at home in the suburb, as soon as Mum went to pick up the breadknife, she froze. She was sure that the knife would slip and fly out of her hand with a swoosh, and then: zap, impale little Siss who sat there on the floor. Of course Mum pulled herself together most of the time. Now she walks belatedly up the stairs and knocks on her daughter's door with this message: You've got to get up, darling. It's morning.

The silence in the house after Siss has left to walk up the hills to the waiting school bus at the lay-by is painful at first, then wonderful, and therefore much too brief. And: Just as Mum has got used to being alone in the house, and sits and looks out the window through the spring rain, Siss arrives home from school again.

It sinks. All the rotten foliage, dead insects and drowned cobwebs sink to the bottom. It is so silent, so glassy across the forest lakes at twilight.

UNN GETS UP at the crack of dawn. She pulls the curtains, and in the early morning, Unn sees the animated darkness from the sky on the white, hoar-frosted fields. And almost every day and night Unn thinks: To be silent is the thing when you know too much and cannot forgive.

Is it the father, who drove off, Unn cannot forgive?

Is it Mummy Big Unn cannot forgive, who, since Unn's father left, has been sitting there in the same rigid sofa-position?

No, it is her a u t h o r i a l fate Unn cannot stomach, the o m n i s c i e n t life-fate which day by day squeezes her shoulders more firmly, leaving her unable to a r t l c u l a t e any vigorous and n u l l i f y i n g protest.

But: Unn remembers Siss' hands, there on the bench in the dressing room, and thinks about how it must feel to be lifted up by her. She is strong, Unn has seen it with her own eyes and says to herself: Fully and wholly, all the way up, *pas de deux*, I trust you. Then Unn makes herself a packed lunch, two wholemeal sandwiches, grabs her knitted hat and mittens, tosses her red bag over her shoulder, but does not kiss her mother goodbye, Mummy Big, who, this morning like all other mornings, stands on the doorstep and waves good-bye to her daughter on her way to school.

Too late as usual, Unn comes walking through the exhaust fumes in the lay-by and says good morning to the bus driver. In a fit of irritation, the driver has moved the bus ten-fifteen metres forwards in the lay-by, up towards the start of the hill, and his only answer to Unn is a nod at the round clock on the upper front wall of the bus. On her way down the aisle she stares straight ahead, because Unn has long ago adopted a look she refuses to surrender. Hi, do you want to sit next to me? Siss asks from her seat, her leather school bag on her lap, when Unn is alongside. OK, Unn says and sits down next to her. Did you finish your essay? a curious Siss asks Unn, who is far from having finished her essay, which is due today. She hasn't got energy, and doesn't really want to, either. Siss never understands any of this: because the form teacher is the brother of the bus driver and the bus driver is the cousin of the man with the motor-saw. And what on earth would a dutiful girl write or say about something which could hurt her own mother? Unn is not like that. No, I haven't, she

says out loud, and Siss smiles back and says: I'm sure it'll be okay. Siss is happy. Finally she dared to ask Unn and Unn said yes. Now they always sit next to each other on the bus, usually at the back.

The world is not going to end today either, Unn knows that, as she sits in the aisle seat staring straight ahead of her with a pale face.

TO GET EN EGG you must have a hen, but to get a hen, you must have an egg. It is all about walking backwards in one's own footsteps, about getting out of the house, to and inside the supermarket, and smiling confidently and warmly to all and sundry in there between the marmalade and the tinned food. Mum holds onto what she knows: the weather, the kitchen, sandwiches, espresso and tea. She tries to remember how it was, life in the suburb, her responsibilities being balanced fifty-fifty between family happiness and exhaustion. Is there a diagnosis for those who mis-love? For those of us who failed to love sufficiently, and suddenly stood there in the middle of marriage, pregnancy and breast-feeding? Ave Maria and Jesus Christ, what are these stupid-morbid thoughts, Mum scolds herself, before she puts on an old record after she has turned the electric heater up two notches. Mum has forgotten to put firewood in the oven. Dad always lights the fire before he drives to work at Statkraft, so when Mum and Siss get up an hour later the house is nice and warm, but after Siss has gone out the door, it does not take long before the cold surges through Mum's arms and shoulders.

Later, after his post-dinner coffee, Dad, still sitting in his chair (his daughter Siss has gone out on her regular early-evening walk) clears his throat and says lovingly: You really need to enjoy yourself more. Let's buy a new kitchen, perhaps that will make you feel better. Sissela?

Dad stands behind Mum, who sits in one of the deep armchairs, he massages her neck and when he comes to the shoulders, he says: God, you are tense.

So sleep your insides out! For the map of your insides covers the tree-lines, the tall mountains and the oceans. Sleep and dream for so long that doubt becomes oblivion and all grey zones dry out. And whatever stands in your way, in the door opening, you just walk straight through it or right past it.

MUM'S EYES are two black voids. Mum has stared into wasted possibility after wasted possibility for so long that when Dad is about to turn off the bed-lamp, she grabs his hand which now lies heavily over the switch, and says: I have found the core of both my knowledge and my personality. I can't stay here at home any longer, I must have a job.

Dad places a light kiss on Mum's neck, and turns off the bed-lamp before he asks: When was the last time you came across a job you found remotely interesting?

Yes, now it is just before the mountains on both sides of the valley make a vault over Mum as she walks around the house with her lipstick-thoughts about the job she used to have in the suburb's perfumery. Mum knows full well that if she is to endure daily life, she simply must have a job.

THE CLASS HAD TRAVELLED forty kilometres on the bus to the neighbouring county's large swimming-pool, and everyone in the class wore a swim cap. The water came up to Unn's shoulders, her chin, but Unn closed her eyes, pressed her lips together and took longer steps. It was Siss who came behind Unn and held her head between her hands. It was Siss who put Unn's head on her own chest and swam towards the shallow end with Unn on top of her.

Everyone had seen Unn walk towards the deep end, but only Siss had realised that Unn was unable to turn around. Afterwards the form teacher asked Unn, as she was shivering under Siss' arm in fits of chlorine-sobs, if she had not seen the Deep End sign, and if she thought the pool was shallower at the other end? It was Siss who saved Unn (who had never been in a swimming pool before) from drowning (and felt stupid for ever after).

Oh! How many times shall Unn count the steps to Siss' heart. Oh! How many times shall Unn look at Siss' face in the mirror and wish that she could melt into this face once and for all.

UNN TRIES TO TWIST out of the yellow water-wings while the form teacher holds a hand under each foot, and she hangs on to the pool-edge for dear life when the form teacher asks her to bring her heels together as if her feet were closing a book of hymns. Siss is hanging in the same row, her back straight, her feet stretched, wearing a swim cap. For a fleeting moment Unn looks at Siss and thinks about her Mum and how beautiful she is. She smells so nice, totally different from Mummy Big. Siss swims so easily, so effortlessly, and Unn thinks: I want to become just as strong as you. One day it'll be the two of us who swim lap after lap alongside each other.

It is from this point on, where water and chlorine becomes pool-water, and sob after sob is expelled, Unn will feel that Siss' embrace is far stronger than she ever thought possible.

UNN STORMED INTO the dressing-room, locked the door and showered in her swimsuit. They shouted and called, but she refused to answer. Later, on the way home from the swimming pool, the bus driver asked if they had all finished washing themselves. The driver laughed and said they had to be squeaky clean by now. Unn sat next to Siss, with her red lunch box, when the form teacher (oh so jovially and with this guardian-sympathetic smile) said: I suppose you're the cleanest one on the bus today, aren't you, and then added (in a more serious tone): I'm glad you unlocked the door, Unn.

Unn thought to herself: What difference does it make? If someone unlocks a door that snapped shut loudly and clearly a long time ago? True love is miles of under-water swimming, and those who believe diving masks were distributed to all and sundry had to think again.

Siss had seen Unn, no doubt about that, and finally Unn had taken off her blue, chlorine-sticky swimsuit. Unn remembered Siss in the dressing-room, in the shower, beautiful Siss soaping herself. The thick vapour-hood of shampoo and strawberry conditioner, the water over her head, a crown of cascading water from above. The jet-rays formed a wreath, as you stood leaning forwards, hair streaming. When you turned around you said nothing, but our eyes met when you hit the shower-tap with a flat hand, five more minutes of running water, and I quickly did the same, five more minutes, like that, each under her own hot jet-stream, close together. You saved me, Siss. You walked behind me out of the shower with your white towel wrapped twice around you. Steam rose from your body. You looked like a swan.

Unn got dressed, back to normal, in full control. The smell in the dressing-room of strawberry conditioner and ultra-hold-hairspray was pungent. Unn thought to herself: lie down, beneath all the jet-rays, because whatever happens, will happen in the middle of this open petal.

Siss' eyes, an open hand that let all the water run through, crystal-clear. Her eyes melted in droplets, which leaked out and down before they dried up in hollows Unn hardly knew existed.

IN THE FORM TEACHER'S office, which is not an office, actually, just a row of contact-teacher-desks, Unn sits on the red plastic student chair when the form teacher gavels the day's agenda: Perhaps we should have a chat about this thing of open and closed doors? You, Unn, are in many ways a closed door, but I, and I have many with me, know that there are thousands of thoughts, and the courage of conviction behind that very door. The form teacher points to Unn's heart, which beats much too fast, before he continues, perhaps a touch more strained this time: I notice it in your essays, yes, which you surprisingly often hand in far too late. Because you reveal something there, don't you? Your description of a fundamental experience of family grief is terribly strong, Unn!

The office is silent for a long time before the form teacher once again takes the floor: Does Mummy Big help her with her homework like she used to? He looks at Unn like a benevolent question mark, and Unn, blushing embarrassed, offers him a half-apologetic smile, but is still unwavering in her silence. Her form teacher continues: Is everything alright at home? Does Mummy Big feel lonely? Do they stick together, the two of them, in their own little cluster, which of course also constitutes a perfectly good family unit? (But Unn is somewhere else, she is sitting on the sofa with Mummy Big, and the sunken mother-face exudes lethargy. Unn thinks about her father, and reflects that her form teacher should just have asked about him instead of pussy-footing around the topic.) And I hear that you're taking ballet classes now? Have you and Siss become friends, after what happened in the swimming pool? Perhaps Siss doesn't have many other friends either? Unn?

Unn's form teacher jerks her out of her thoughts. Unn answers yes in a loud voice, knowing that she cannot say anything anymore before everything falls apart. Yes, Unn shouts, yes I want to, yes, before she gets up from her chair, her eyes staring at the door. Standing like that, without being able to move an inch, Unn tries once more to keep silent about what has been burning up inside her for so long.

Like a rotten apple, or perhaps more like a slowly rotting branch in the ravine, is how Unn feels every time she tries to rearrange her young face.

SISS AND UNN stand in front of the lake and stare at the night-flying moths foundering on the water. The lake lies in a hollow in the forest, sheltered from the wind. Now and then the odd gust of air from the undergrowth still sweeps over the waterlilies where they float on the surface in a yellow-white blanket. Where the lake is at its shallowest, the vegetation covers both the surface and the bottom, but how deep it is, no one knows. It is a rich lake, full of life, and with a sloping bottom. The night-flying moths buzz around in circles, causing a flurry of ripples on the dark water-mirror. They toil to get up with all their fluttering strength, but time after time they fall back into the water, exhausted and motionless. They are powerless, they've given up, Siss tells Unn. The mist has settled over the fish-empty lake, night is falling. But: Look at the water-skater, how he leaps without sinking! Siss is animated, but Unn only sees the foliage and the water-vegetation piling up on the bottom in a greenish-brown pulp, and thinks: It'll take a long time before everything has decomposed.

Aspen, alder and pollard: Each decomposition takes its own time. Siss and Unn can finally close their eyes, for when they open them again, nothing has happened, the bottom is the same, pulp-like.