

© Forlaget Oktober 2009. Translated from the Norwegian by May-Brit Akerholt. No part may be published in book form or electronically or translated into any other language without a prior written agreement with Aschehoug Agency, P.O.Box 363 Sentrum, NO-0102 Oslo, Norway (epost@aschehougagency.no). Foreign rights available from Aschehoug Agency.

New Frontier Hotel

by Line Blikstad

[pp. 19-36]

II

1969

I HAVE LIVED

That is how she thought about it, as she stood behind the cash register at the café on the outskirts of the city and waited for the clock above the door to turn four so she could fetch the bucket and fill it with water and lift the chairs up on the tables and get the mop and wash the floor and tie the garbage bag and carry it out to the back steps.

It was the middle of July, and so hot that she had kicked off her pumps and unbuttoned her shirt beneath the fan, which hung in the hallway between the café and the back room.

She looked out over the café. On her right was the counter with biscuits and cookies and Danish pastry. On her left were the pale tables and chairs with seats that stuck to your thighs. And straight ahead, the door between the large windows. She stretched her arms up towards the ceiling, flapped her hands, and when she stood there she could see her reflection in the glass, but it was not very sharp - it was still too light outside, and she walked all the way over.

I have lived.

She became aware of her own breath, it smelled faintly of cardamom. Then she took a step back and smacked her hand into the glass, said: stop it!

But it was true. She had lived three different lives and borne three children: John, Liv and Otto, in just as many countries: Norway, America, Sweden. And if you drew a line between these names on a globe, they formed a sort of long and thin triangle, an arrow pointing west, but lacking a base - despite that being the shortest distance. A day's journey through the forest, that was all, and she would be home again, in Norway.

She had only been back three times after she left. The first time she had picked up John after she had married Evert and was on her way from America to Sweden.

The second time she had buried Karen.

It might look as if the third time had no particular purpose. During the day she prepared meals for Bror and sat at the desk in her old room and looked out on the river. At night she lay in the narrow bed and thought about the family she had left behind.

She walked back to the cash register and buttoned her shirt.

On her left ring finger she wore a thin gold ring. On her right she wore nothing, despite still being married to Evert - they had never become separated, they had just left each other one evening three years earlier, when he had put her down on the rug on the kitchen floor and pressed his hands against her throat, before he stumbled out of the house, leapt into the white Volvo and disappeared down the hill.

He had been fast. Suddenly he was standing behind her, up close. She never had time to react, she made no resistance, just thought: Now he'll kill me.

It was Evert who left. That is how the story would be told, and she had nothing against it - she preferred it like that. No one knows what goes on in a marriage, she would say. Still: It was Evert who left his family - Edith, John, Liv and Otto. She knew people talked about him, *the famous photographer*, after all, she did work in the café, but to sum up ten years of marriage in a couple of sentences - that was impossible, besides, there was nothing to say. It was a finished chapter. The End.

She had only seen him once since he disappeared. One Saturday afternoon he stood outside the back door of the café when she was locking up.

Edith.

She turned.

Evert, she said. You scared me -

Mum!

I've got to go, she said. That's John. He's waiting around the front. He's picking me up on his moped.

He took a step towards her.

No, she said and held up her hands. I must go now.

When Otto was at his worst, nagging about Daddy coming back home, she lifted the receiver once and called directory assistance, just to hear if he still existed somewhere out there, but replaced it before anyone answered.

No, she said to herself. It's a bad idea. What are you thinking?

It was a long time since Otto had spoken about Evert, but she still jumped when he suddenly said something that reminded her of him.

She sat down on the bench.

Now Evert had been in touch again.

She had just arrived at the café and put on her apron when the telephone rang.

Edith -

His voice was hazy, he was always in a hurry on the telephone. Her first thought: To put the receiver down, silently, as if she had never lifted it up. *Where are you? Abroad? Right here?*

She turned and looked out of the window, towards the road.

It's me, he said. Evert.

What do you want?

I want to come and get my photos.

Why?

I'm having an exhibition, in New York, he added, as if that made any difference. The exhibition was to be called Family Forgotten.

It's not my suggestion, he said. And I'm neither for nor against. It's just a title. It's just a title?

Yes.

Yes?

There was silence. Then he said:

Are you going to repeat everything I say?

She came to her senses, heard her own voice, thought: Pull yourself together.

No, she said. I don't want you to.

No? They're my photos.

But they're my children, she said. Most of them, at least.

I want my photos back, he said. I want everything back that's mine -

She put the receiver down.

The clock above the door crackled, twenty past three. She took the book out from her apron. A postcard peeped up between the pages, edges creased, it was of a beach with yellow parasols and *Greetings from California* written on the front. On the back it said:

Mum!

We've got a job, we're building a power station a few miles inland, I'll soon be welding up at a height of 110 meters! We've bought a VW each. Elvis is making a comeback in Las Vegas. We'll try to get there.

You probably won't hear from me for a while. Frank says hello!

John

She ran her finger over the stamp, the faded postmark, tried to decipher the postal address, the date, read the brief message one more time, despite knowing it by heart. *You probably won't hear from me for a while.*

She put the card back between the pages again.

It was five months since John emigrated.

It had been her idea. They were sitting in the kitchen. She had just bought a television set, and on the telly they said that the journey was free if you promised to stay for a least one year.

She had been enthusiastic, felt that he should go. Of course! she said. America! And she should know. She had emigrated herself.

But that was not something they talked about that night in the kitchen, while Liv and Otto dragged out the America-suitcase from under the stairs in the hallway, pulled out the clothes and dressed and undressed and did a show in the doorway.

She could see it now: They were sitting at the kitchen table drinking cognac from the small crystal glasses. John lit a cigarette. Jack sat at his feet and wagged his tail and begged for the booze, and she poured some in a saucer and put it down on the floor, then she too, lit a cigarette.

What are you thinking about? she wanted to ask him. About how good it would have been to be able to say something in English? About your fear of heights? About leaving me? No. He was leaning back in his chair, lifting his glass, saying: America, Mum! You'd never have thought that!

Without John, I would never have survived, she could say from behind the counter in the café. And I'm not talking about the years in America.

Then she would turn around and brush away cake crumbs between the shelves.

CRUMBS IN HER PUMPS, in her bra, in the pockets of her shirt. That was not what she had pictured when Evert went down on his knees just before they left America and said: *Let's get married!* When he promised to take her *home*, that is, to Sweden - to the white house a little outside the town, with a view over one of the country's largest lakes, which was so large that you could even imagine that it never ended over on the other side, that it was possible to keep rowing and suddenly finding yourself in another country, let's say America.

New Haven, California. A sanctuary. That is exactly what it was. Sharp light above straight streets, gurgling sounds from swimming pools, dusty palm leaves, a water sprinkler sizzling over a lawn.

She had hung the photo of John above her bed in the big room in the big house on the first night. Then she had taken it down again, saying: Sorry, John, but I can bear your looking at me like that.

She travelled with Uncle Ole on his business trips, diving straight into a beauty competition he was sponsoring when one of the participants failed to show.

She had seen him from the stage.

Evert Winter, photographer, he said afterwards and held out his hand.

Are you Swedish? she said.

Yes, he said and looked straight at her. If you give me your address, I'll send you a couple of photos.

I'm already taken, she told him later. I've got a child.

But he kept showing up.

What are you doing here? she said when he finally stood in front of her in Las Vegas.

She remembered the bar, the brown imitation-leather sofas, the dark wooden wall panels, the bottles on the counter looking like they contained gold.

Her eyes looked past him, out to the parking lot.

What did you say? she said, leaning towards him. No thanks, I don't drink.

He had waited for her, he said. And when he came driving back a couple of days later, she was sitting outside the hotel.

The heart is as big as a fist. And her fist was so little, almost like that of a child. She had tried to rearrange everything in there, move things around, people, but it didn't work, it was already full, it had never been possible, really, to find room for him.

However, the last thing that happened in America, just before they were boarding the plane to Sweden, was that Evert went down on his knees and proposed. It was not something he had planned, he confessed later, it was an impulse, a spur of the moment thing, as he explained to the air hostesses as they sat in their first-class seats.

The second last thing that happened was that she sat on her suitcase and looked up on the board above the street, where it said NEW YORK in illuminated letters, and put her hand on her stomach and whispered: Do you see that man standing over there - the one who's straightening his glasses? That's Evert. He's your Dad. And now we're going home with him.

She sat with her big stomach leaning against her knees, breathed deeply and pushed her hair back from her face. And Evert looked at her and thought: Edith. It was like a song he had had on his brain ever since that afternoon in front of the stage of Miss California. *Edith, Edith, Edith*, sang the tune in his head - he had told her that later.

And she watched him as he approached, sort of took a run-up and went down on his knees and said:

Let's get married!

And she laughed and shook her head, thinking: No. It's wrong. It's just not going to happen.

But then it happened anyway.

People gathered around them. They looked at Evert who was on his knees between the rows of chairs. They pointed and stuck their thumbs up, they shouted: Yes! Say yes before he changes his mind!

She shook her head, but it was too late, everyone was standing there shouting: Yes! Yes! Yes! Yes!

Until she put her arms around his neck and said: Okay. On one condition.

I was so young, she said afterwards. And to promise myself to someone, no, to Evert, for the rest of my life, it seemed like an eternity. I said that he could have me for ten years, then we would see.

She gave birth to Liv just after they landed in Sweden. They picked up John, moved into the white house. And four years later, Otto arrived.

She stood up from the bench behind the counter and looked out on the market square.

Otto would come soon on his Apache bike, park it outside the window and sneak up the stairs, before he pulled the door open and shouted: Hellooooo!

He was eight years old now, and every afternoon he trekked from the white house into town to meet her. But lately he had not come as often.

It's so hoooot! he groaned, leaning across one of the barstools at the window.

I knooooow! she said and went to stand in the door opening to the back room - the only place where the air didn't stand absolutely still - and stretched her arms up towards the ceiling. If you help me, we'll get away quicker.

I don't have the eeeenergy!

He walked around the stool, swinging his arms.

Why did you come then?

I'm hungry.

Have a biscuit.

He shook his head.

Okay, she said. Just joking.

I know, he said and climbed up on the counter. Aren't you going to start cleaning soon?

She opened the cash register and began to count the bank notes. She looked out over the market square, he ought to be here soon. Then she stood still.

On the other side of the square, Liv was cycling past, her long fringe blowing around her face, her red bag dangling from the handlebars. She looked as if she was in a hurry, the bike was jerking around on the footpath, her right foot searching for the pedal, but failing to find it and push it around.

Edith walked over to the door and was about to call out, but stopped herself just before she opened her mouth. She looked so determined, *I'm thirteen now!* as if she knew exactly where she was going, and she didn't want her to turn around on her red Kombi bike and wobble into the street.

Sometimes when she looked at Liv, she thought about America.

Mummy, I was made in America, wasn't I?

Yes.

I was almost born in America, wasn't I?

Yes.

Why did you move here then?

Well ... you tell me.

Sometimes when she looked at Liv, she just wanted to leave everything, again.

THE RED BAG was thumping against the wheel.

Liv rode towards the traffic lights and swung her bike out onto the road, put a chewing gum in her mouth and pushed her left foot down. No one knew where she had been - no one had seen her parking her bike and opening the door to the new blocks with balconies at the edge of the city centre.

ANDERS, said the note under the doorbell.

On the floor in the hallway were a pair of football shoes, on a hook under the hat rack hung a light-blue knitted jacket with embroidery around the neck.

She had gone through the rooms, swept her hand across the bookshelf with the trophies, the nubby sofa back, the green plants on the window sill. She looked around, heard her own breath. Then she stopped in front of the balcony door and turned towards him - he was still in the door opening with his hands in his pockets.

Don't you have any records? she said.

Yeah.

He nodded towards the bedroom, walked in front of her into the hallway and opened a door. His bed was unmade, he had just pulled up the duvet. On a table under the window stood a record player, spread out on the floor were a few record covers. The room smelled of shampoo.

Anders sat down on the bed and lifted the pickup.

She sat down next to him.

The loudspeakers crackled a bit, the record began to spin - and there was a kind of clown music: A woman and then a man who groaned and sang in another language.

Je t'aime je t'aime oh oui je t'aime

*Moi non plus
Oh mon amour
Comme la vague irrésolue*

She was silent.

What is it? she said.

It's *Je t'aime* ..., he said. I love you.

He turned down the volume and turned to her.

Did you get scared?

She shook her head.

No, she said. Did you?

SHE RODE PAST the school on her bike - past the empty bicycle racks, the bushes by the creek where she had hidden in the midday break after she came back from the hospital, the canteen smelling of linoleum and steam from the dishwashers. She was changing schools next autumn, she was not going to drag her leg behind her any longer. She was not going to lie huddled up with her arms covering her head while the whole Class 6A and a few in 6B were standing around and -

No.

That was her first thought when she saw Anders on the rock above the beach that day at the beginning of summer. She had been playing with Otto in the studio when she found Evert's old wallet and took out the paper money and wrote a HA HA HA note and put it where the coins were supposed to be.

Then she fastened a fishing hook in the leather and pulled out the line as far as it would go and left the wallet lying in the road while she ran in front of Otto into the forest behind the mailboxes. It was a just a game. Anyway, no one ever stopped.

But then it happened. A car applied the brakes, and a man came out and walked back on the road. He looked around, bent down and picked up the wallet. He pulled on the line which was fastened to her hand, as if he wanted to feel if there was someone there.

What's he doing? said Otto who was lying behind her back.

Shhhh, she said and crept forward a little.

Did he take it?

She pulled herself up on her elbows.

Yes, she said and watched him as he loosened the hook and walked over to the mailboxes, studied the names on the lids and returned to the car. He took it.

The following day he was sitting on the rock when she came walking through the forest. She walked all the way over to the edge and stood with her back to the rock and pulled off her shorts and singlet and panties without turning around, but she knew he was watching her.

I saw you yesterday, he said as she was walking down to the water.

What? she said and stopped.

You were swimming, with a little boy.

I'm always here, she said. I live up there.

He was wearing short blue trousers and had a million fair dots all over his body. He had powerful legs, hair on his chest and he was holding his hand in front of his eyes.

What's your name? he said.

Liv, she said.

Anders.

He looked at her, his eyes lingering on her scar.

What's happened to your leg?

She shrugged.

It was an accident.

He nodded and looked at his watch.

Oops, he said. I am meeting someone soon. I've got to go.

He said nothing about the wallet, and she said nothing either: It was me who got you on the hook.

Anders.

He had a tracksuit jacket which had 'football club' and something else written on it. He had a car and a one-bedroom flat in the new blocks at the edge of the city centre. He had cheese and liver paté and salami in the fridge. He had a light-blue sofa with soft cushions and a rug giving off fluff and a television set that flickered when you turned it on.

He had five records in the bedroom and three footballs in the wardrobe in the hall. He had a girlfriend called Kamilla with a K, it was written with a red marker in the calendar in the kitchen (her birthday had just been, she had turned twenty-one).

How old are you really? he had asked the first evening when she was leaving and stood in the hall holding her red leather bag. It was a grown-up bag and her shoulder hurt.

Thirteen, she said.

I'm twenty-four -

They looked at each other and laughed.

Are you coming back tonight? he said.

She shook her head.

I'm going to bingo.

You're joking?

No, she said and walked down the stairs, out to her bike, where she stopped and looked up to the balcony. I'm not joking. Why should I?

Anders, she said when she pedalled towards the white house. *Anders. Anders. Anders.* It meant man. That is what he said.

WHEN YOU CAME from the city, you passed two white houses on the hill on the left side of the road. On the right was the sea, but it was not easy to find it, because the forest was so dense that you had to be familiar with the place to know which path lead down to the beach or the rocks.

There were no signs explaining distances, no arrows pointing the way, no map describing how you should move around in the landscape. And neither were they needed. Almost no one had any reason to go to the white house.

At the intersection where the gravel road was leading up to the white houses, were two wooden mailboxes.

On the one on the right, four names were carved into the lid: Edith. John. Liv. And right at the edge: an O on its own, a T at an angle, and a T and an O right down in the corner.

On the lid there was also a mark where someone had carved back and forth several times with a knife. It looked totally arbitrary - as if someone had been standing on the roadside and become restless and started to whittle the dry, cracked wood. But if you went up close, if you leant over the mailbox and pulled a finger over the deep cuts, it was possible to feel yet another name underneath. Evert.

OTTO SAT ON the stairs to the white house. He had the carving knife on his lap, and a plastic bag with all the photos - he had just turned the boxes marked JUNK and PRIVATE upside down in the studio, and put everything in the bag, and now they were all in a big mess.

It was not easy to know what had happened first and what had happened afterwards.

He looked towards the mailboxes.

He was waiting for a white Volvo which was supposed to come driving up the hill and park in front of the picket fence. He threw a ball to Jack, who was lying on the grass with his head against his front paws, but he didn't react.

It's a quarter past three, he said and stood up.

Far away a car was coming towards him, it came from the city and was on its way towards the headland, but it was the wrong car - he could hear that long before he saw the flicker of red paint among the trees.

Red was the most common car colour, then blue, then white. John had told him that. And he knew everything about cars and motorbikes and mopeds and bicycles. He had built Otto's Apache bike all by himself, with parts he had stolen from some job. (Hah! That's easy, no one's checking!) But he knew most about cars, Volvo, for instance. There was PV, and Duett, and Amazon, and 140. But the most famous Volvo was P1800, because that was the one The Saint was driving in the television series. And the engine sounded totally different to the car rolling past on the road below - low and rumbling when it stole up the hill and idled in front of the picket fence.

He had said three thirty.

Otto looked at his watch. Then he got up and walked down the stairs.

Now it's a quarter to three.

Now it's ten to.

Now it's five past.

Actually, he should have been on his way to town now, swinging up in front of the café and standing outside the window and looking in at Edith who was sitting behind the counter and reading and believing that he didn't see her sliding the postcard from John between the pages of the book, which she then slipped into the pocket of her apron.

But he saw everything.