

The Longest Road

Gunhild Walde Mikkelsen

The Longest Road

Translated from Norwegian by
Kristoffer Mikkelsen Miracco

© 2020 Gunhild Walde Mikkelsen
Cover art: Ida Bryn Høgheim
ISBN

Preface

This book is based on my many meetings with youths throughout the years and the realization that today's youth culture is deeply affected by issues relating to negative self-image and mental health. I'm mainly concerned with what we ourselves can do in our own lives. In our part of the world, we have the opportunity and responsibility to shape our own lives. How we think about our own lives, appears to be a deciding factor for how we handle the challenges we meet, both large and small.

I find myself in the middle of my life, with a vantage point towards both directions.

To life's beginning.

To life's end.

And everything in between.

From this overlook, I've created a world which I hope can stimulate new thoughts and inspire you to reflect.

If you'd asked me one year and one day ago, how my life would turn out – never in a million years would I have guessed how it turned out to be. 17th of April 2017 seemed like any other ordinary day. It all started with a phone call from my daughter's school.

London 17th of April 2017

What incredibly bad timing! School called and our only daughter had fallen ill and had to be picked up. Her father is stuck at work, hours away, and I just don't have the time for this. I storm inside the school, thinking that I just might reach my meeting in time if I hurry and catch the tube. I'll just give her something for the fever and let her wait in my office. I find Sofia sitting quietly on a chair outside the classroom on the third floor. Her eyes are wet, her face red and feverish. I feel a pang of remorse, thinking about having to drag her with me to work and not home to rest.

"Hi Sofia! How are you holding up?"

"I'm tired and aching," Sofia looks at me with glazed eyes.

"You're coming with me to work, just for a little while, and then we'll go home."

"Can't we just head straight home?"

"No, sorry. Mommy has to hold a very important presentation for some very important clients at work, but we'll head straight home after I'm done."

Sofia doesn't say anything, her pale body deflating at the news. It's not the first time that she has to wait. She's often the last to be picked up after school. I shake off any feelings

of guilt and together we start running towards the closest Underground station.

It's odd how the city has almost two separate worlds. One above and one below. When you're on the surface, you tend to think it's all there is, but when hurrying down the stairs and escalators, one realizes that there is an entire and separate world below. When I was Sofia's age I often thought of the city as a living being; like a human body, with its veins and neural pathways. I used to think of myself flying through these pathways in the carriages of the underground. I used to think a lot in those days.

"If we hurry, we might catch that train over there! If we do, mommy will get to her meeting on time too! Run!"

The people we hurry by take on the form of markers that we must pass as quickly as possible, like poles in a slalom race. High heels sure don't make for easy running!

We pass through the closing train doors in the nick of time and collapse on the nearest seats, gasping for air. Sofia immediately starts coughing intensely and looks even more exhausted than before. She curls up into her seat and lies down in my lap. Tired. Feverish. I glance at my watch and realize that I'll get to the meeting in time. Thank God! I catch my breath and look up from Sofia and let my gaze wander discreetly around the train car. Another ordinary day on the Underground, except there's less people than there are during rush hour. The other passengers' gazes are empty and elsewhere; occupied by their own thoughts. Simply wanting to get to their destination.

London has a multitude of different people of varying status, color, orientation and creed. On the surface, everyone seems to get along. Maybe because they don't care. Like right

now, in the train carriage. My gaze continues to wander, stopping discreetly at the young boy on the far side of the carriage. Or is it a girl? Dark grey hoodie, black, low-hanging pants, blue hair, pale, piercings and oversized headphones blocking out the outside world. She reaches up to adjust her headphones, briefly exposing her forearm. I catch myself staring at the multitude of scars criss-crossing her skin before looking away. Thank God she's not my daughter!

Trying to shake off the unease, I look elsewhere. A young boy, maybe 18-19 years old, intently studying a London travel guide, trying to make sense of the subway map. He's of average height with brown hair and a friendly face. Maybe from the south of Europe.

An elderly man sits across from me and Sofia, and by his side, a young woman. Father and daughter? He has Asian features and a short stature, probably no more than 1.5 meters tall. He's wearing what I can only guess are traditional clothes from his home country and a beret, tilted to one side. He's looking straight at Sofia. Obviously, he hasn't gotten the memo that you don't simply stare at people on the underground, or anywhere else for that matter. His many wrinkles and sunken cheeks frame a pair of kindly eyes. The woman next to him looks to be family, but has foregone the traditional clothing of her counterpart. Four bags of groceries are placed by their feet. A couple of seats over, a young woman wearing traditional Iranian or Afghan clothes is sitting. The clothes look a bit like an Indian Punjabi suit, though not as colorful, going all the way down to her knees with matching grey pants underneath. A black hijab covers her hair and frame a pair of slightly tilted and severe eyes. Her hands tightly grip a purse. Beside her is a large bag of groceries.

At the other end of the carriage, I see yet another young girl. Her hair is long, blonde and expertly made up. Her make-up is impeccable. Her narrow trousers and blazer hugs her slender body perfectly. She's also wearing a brand name purse that would put a strain on most household budgets! Shouldn't she be in school anyway?

A boy in jeans and hoodie is sitting a couple of seats over, earbuds in and phone out. His blonde hair unkempt. Further on the next person to catch my eye is a young man with a white cane. Could he be blind? He's all alone, but the white cane is a dead giveaway – he must be blind. His eyes look normal like any other pair of eyes, but he's staring into nothing. Not that his empty gaze is any different from the other passengers. It's the sort of gaze every traveler has on the underground in London. Just staring, never actually seeing. The boy looks friendly enough. He looks relaxed and carefree. The voice over the speakers announces the first stop. We're off on the next. The boy with the white cane is listening intently but remains seated. Not there yet.

I look down at Sofia. She's fast asleep, poor thing. Sick and exhausted. My conscience is getting to me, but I push the feeling down, focusing on the presentation I'm about to deliver. My mind wanders to the news report I heard earlier. I always leave the news on in the background while scrambling to get ready in the morning.

The report was, as usual, dominated by the refugee crisis in Europe, war and suffering in the Middle East, but there was also some news about a new trade deal that directly affects my company. All the more reason for me to get to the meeting on time. They also talked about a new security system being tested out on the underground the next couple of weeks. I

didn't notice anything on the way in – as long as it doesn't cause any delays.

A young woman, about 30 years old, enters the train. She has a serious look on her face, clothed in jeans, a down jacket and scarf. She has a backpack on. A man in paint-stained work overalls lunges in just as the doors are about to close.

“Lucky!” he exclaims and collapses into a nearby seat, whistling a cheery tune. Everyone tries their best to ignore him. He is, after all, breaking the unwritten codes of conduct on the underground. He has a small cage in his hand. He looks around the carriage and explains:

“This is Miss Kitty, 20 years old. She's headed to the vet. Only woman that's been able to stand me for this long!” He looks around, winking at the other passengers before returning his affection to an obviously deeply loved cat. The train pulls out of the station. No one in our car exited and only the woman and the painter entered. It can be pretty quiet on the underground compared to rush hour, when it feels like you're being pushed around by an endless wave of people. Without free will or the ability to choose your own direction in the throng. Only heading downwards.

Suddenly, a violent and metallic noise jolts me awake. The train comes crashing to a halt amid a loud screeching. Bags, people are thrown around the carriage. People screaming in fright. Shock and chaos, then darkness.

In darkness

The silence after is deafening. After a while I can make out people moving around in the darkness, some sobbing. I lift my head.

“Sofia!” I shout her name. Two emergency lights above the train doors light up weakly. My eyes are still adjusting to the dark interior of the train. Halfway under one of the seats I spot her small frame.

“Sofia!” I crawl over and try to shake her awake. The fear grips me – she can’t be hurt!

Slowly, she turns her head and her arms reach out to me. Thank God, she’s alive. I drag her out from under the seat and lift her up, holding her in my arms.

“Can you speak, Sofia?”

I hear a faint “yes”.

“Do you hurt anywhere?”

“No, I don’t think so.” Her voice is weak, but I relax slightly at the confirmation. It could have been so much worse.

“Mommy, you have to help the others,” Sofia urges.

“Yes, of course.”

I look around the train car. My eyes adjust to the darkness. The girl with the blue hair is crawling towards the corner where she was previously sitting. Alive and apparently well enough. She doesn’t need my help just yet. I squint my eyes and spot the old man, lying motionless on the floor. His daughter is beside him, barely moving herself.

I carefully lay Sofia down on the seats and rise to help the old man just as his daughter starts screaming. She’s

conscious and has discovered that her father is lying lifeless on the floor.

I reach the old man and lift his head up into my lap. I gently slap his cheeks to try and wake him but there's no reaction. His daughter is up on her feet and has found a water bottle. She pours water on his face causing him to stir awake. He's alive. She pours some water into his mouth and his eyes open, looking around. Confused, as if he doesn't entirely know where he is. His daughter talks to him, partly in English, partly some other language. He's alright.

I look around in the train car and can just make out a figure on the floor. The blind, young man. He's moving. I walk over to him and can't help but think how terrible it must be to be blind and in this situation. His frame of reference is gone completely.

Chaos reigns in the carriage. Makeup accessories and groceries litter the floor in between the bodies. I decide to help the blind kid and kneel beside him, carefully shaking his shoulder.

"Can you hear me?"

I hear a faint "yes".

"Can you speak?"

"Yes."

"Do you hurt anywhere?"

"Yes, a little. My foot," he replies. I notice his left foot is twisted awkwardly. What do I do now?

I take a deep breath and decide to first explain what happened.

"You're in the underground, in a train car. We crashed. I think maybe because of an explosion. You, me and everyone were thrown about and ended up on the floor. I think maybe

your leg is broken. We have to stabilize it before I can help you up.”

He uses his arm to lift himself up from the floor and nods. I look around, squinting, trying to find something to use for his leg. The only thing I can find is his white cane, which I carefully use to support his leg. I grab my new scarf and wrap it tightly around the young man’s leg. He winces and sweat starts to form on his forehead. It’s painful, but he’s being brave. I grab hold of him and carefully lift him up into a seat, placing his foot across the neighboring seats. He leans back and sighs in relief.

I examine his leg and my gaze stops at my new scarf. The scarf I bought to wear to my meeting. The meeting! I won’t be able to make the meeting! My heart skips a beat at the thought, but I quickly push the feeling away. It’s meaningless in a situation like this. I should be happy to be alive and focus on helping the others.

The girl in the hijab is on her feet, helping the girl with the Gucci bag up and into a seat while she bleeds heavily from a cut on her forehead. She takes off her hijab and tears it up, wrapping it around the wound like a bandage. She seems to know first-aid well and the blonde-haired girl doesn’t protest. If I can find my purse in all this chaos, I can give both the girl and blind boy some painkillers.

“Has anyone seen a big, brown purse somewhere?” I query the darkness.

“Yes, I think it’s here,” the tourist answers in broken English. He’s also gotten up and looks to be more or less unhurt. He navigates the mess of groceries, cat cage, bags and clothes and approaches me with my purse.

“Are you all right?” I ask.

“Yes, I think I’m OK.”

I take the purse and quickly find the painkillers. I give one to Sofia and two to the blind kid. He’s pale and seems to be in a lot of pain. He’s not complaining, though, and gladly accepts the painkillers.

I sit down, between Sofia and the blind young man, hugging Sofia with one arm and resting my other arm on the broken leg to let him know I’m there. I lift my gaze and look around the train car. Everything’s still a mess, but everyone seems to have found their seats again, some sitting upright others like the blind kid lying down. Everyone sitting up seems to be alright, except for Gucci girl with her bandaged forehead. The girl from Afghanistan sits beside her. I notice her long, beautiful hair now that her hijab has come off.

Those who are conscious appear to be stable and out of danger. Everything seems, under the circumstances, to be under control. The passengers look around, some with confused and frightened eyes, others calmly surveying the situation. The blue-haired girl is showing no signs of emotion. She’s back in her corner, shielded behind her headphones.

“What happened?” Gucci girl asks, seemingly lucid again.

“Was it a bomb?”

“It was an explosion, no doubt!” a voice in the dark answers.

“What do we do?”

“We have to get out!”

The girl with the long, blonde hair runs to the carriage doors and tries to pull them open, but they won’t budge. She runs to the opposite side and starts banging on the doors there. They won’t open either.

“I can’t get them open!” she yells.

The Southern European boy comes over to help, but no doors or windows will open.

The girl is panicking.

“I don’t want to die down here!” she cries.

“I’m too young, my life hasn’t even started yet!”

Others look out the windows. Black. Darkness or soot? The reality of the situation is starting to dawn on the passengers. We’re stuck underground with no way of getting out. People are getting restless and panic is setting in.

“This is obviously the work of terrorists” the blonde-haired girl yells.

“People from your country!” she points towards the girl from Afghanistan.

“This is what we get for allowing you people into this country. See what happens! We’re nice and welcoming and this is the thanks we get!”

The girl from Afghanistan looks at her but doesn’t say anything. The blond-haired girl collapses into a seat and starts sobbing.

“I know!” the man in the overalls agrees. “This would never have happened if we didn’t allow your kind into the country.”

He’s just gotten to his feet and found his Miss Kitty who is howling with fright. He calms his voice and starts soothing the cat.

The Afghan girl sits quietly, staring at the floor.

Everyone has been watching the commotion and the fear lies heavily in the air.

“Could it be the new security measures that failed? They were talking about it on the news this morning.”

“Yeah, I heard that as well,” the blind boy says. “I heard they were testing out some new, fire-proof train cars on some of the lines. There was this report on them. Fire-proof and air-tight. If there’s a fire, every door and window gets locked and no air is supposed to get in from the outside. There’s even an automatic oxygen supply that’s supposed to last for three days. Supposedly they’re very expensive and the outer structure is hardened against explosions. They’re still being tested and only two of them are actually in use. If we’re lucky, we’re in one of them now.”

The passengers continued talking amongst themselves, but the mood was still uneasy and restless. Only three people were quiet. The girl with the blue hair and headphones in the corner, the old man and the blind boy. The boy was still in pain but sat quietly and listened. The old man was also sitting quietly and observing. His strength was beginning to come back and he could see fear, panic and resignation among his fellow passengers.

“We have to call the emergency services,” Gucci girl had pulled out her phone.

“I haven’t got a signal! Do you?”

The other passengers pulled out their phones and tried to make a call.

“No signal here either,” the boy from Southern Europe said.

The others tried to but had no more luck. Someone approached the blue-haired girl in the corner and snapped her out of her stupor.

“Can you check to see if you have a signal and try to call the emergency services?”

She nodded, turned down her music and tried making a call but failed to get a signal.

“What do we do now? Do we just sit here until someone finds us?”

There was nothing else to do. Some began cleaning up the debris on the floor. Collecting half-empty bags and their contents. The groceries were picked up and gathered into three shopping bags. Two belonging to the old man and his daughter and one belonging to the Afghan girl. There was nothing to do but wait. Some listened to music on their phones. The blue-haired girl had large headphones and I could hear the heavy thumping of the music. Others played games on their phones, trying to relax with something familiar amid all the chaos and fear. Some tried to check their messages and email, but there was still no signal.

Time passed slowly. At least it felt like it. In the faint light of my phone I could see that it had been six or seven hours since the explosion. Sofia had fallen asleep in my lap and it felt like her fever had died down. Probably because of the painkillers.

Time passed slowly.

I felt a change in the train car. The loud thumping of music from the blue-haired girl had stopped. She was restless, turning in her seat and constantly shifting. Beads of sweat were forming on her forehead and her breath was getting shorter and shorter. Suddenly, she fell over, hitting the floor, gasping with eyes wide open.

“What’s happening?” yelled Gucci girl.

The daughter of the old man got to her feet and ran over to her.

“I think it’s a panic attack. She’s breathing too fast and getting too much oxygen into her lungs.”

She pulls a bag out and places it over her nose and mouth, speaking softly to her, trying to get her to calm down. After 6-7 minutes the girl calms down. Looking confused, she retreats to her corner and curls up into a ball, pulling the hood of her baggy sweater down over her face. Her headphones still on her head, but silent.

Everyone is unsettled by the display. The old man’s daughter said she was a nurse and knew a thing or two about anxiety.

“Anxiety is really a good thing that’s designed to protect you against danger. It can even save your life. But it becomes a problem when it happens when there’s no danger and can be a big problem for some people.”

She explains the situation for us, letting us understand what’s going on.

Time passes slowly. One phone after the other turns black, until everyone’s out of battery. What do we do now? People start looking up from their phones, looking at each other with uncertainty. It’s the first time that we really *see* one another.

The anonymous, hard and unexpressive masks we were wearing are exchanged for vulnerable and questioning faces. We continue to look at each other, making sure everyone is okay. The situation is stable, as they would say in the news.

The hours pass and the situation changes from chaos and panic to fear and apathy. The old man seems to be regaining his strength. He gets up and walks quietly around the train. Stretching his short and knuckled body, letting his gaze

wander over his fellow passengers. He sees fear, contained panic, anxiety and resignation.

“My name’s Tam. I was born in Burma in 1946. I’ve lived in London since 1979 with my daughter. We’re here in the underground in a difficult situation and it looks like all we can do is wait. How can we make the wait less painful? I have a suggestion that I hope you will approve of. I challenge you to tell a story about an episode in your life that tells us more about who you really are.”

He looks around at his fellow passengers and nods carefully. What else is there to do?

He lifts his gaze and looks at the girl with the blue hair. “What’s your name? Can you tell us something about yourself?”

Amy

“No way in hell I’m telling you anything.” I can’t say it, they wouldn’t understand. There’s a reason I’ve distanced myself from everyone, and I didn’t exactly invite all these strangers to share my life’s story.

But the question sends her several years back in time. To when it all started. The living hell. Mom introduced me to yet another stepdad and I was only remotely interested. Every time I got a new stepdad, mom would disappear, like she didn’t have time for me anymore.

“What’s your name? Tell me about yourself!”

“Amy, seven years old. I like animals, especially my dog, Raggen.”

Mom’s new boyfriend looked at me and said I was a pretty girl and that we would fast become friends. I could see that mom was happy. Finally, a guy that would get along well with her daughter too!

Days passed. My new stepdad seemed kinder than the others. He praised everything I did, told me how pretty I was and gave me candy when mom wasn’t looking. He liked to have me on his lap while reading for me. Sometimes I caught him staring at me. He stared more at me than mom, really.

It happened one night after I had gotten in bed. The thing I can’t talk about. Mom was at the cinema with her friends. Stepdad was supposed to read for me, and he did. Afterwards he crept into my bed and my whole world came tumbling down. Pain, anxiety and fear entered my world that night, as did my trust in adults. Raggen and mom would die if I told anyone.

But it was only the beginning. He encouraged mom to attend evening classes. Three nights a week she would be at school. I cried and begged her to stay home. But she said that I was so lucky to have a dad that could look after me when she was gone. I had no reason to cry and complain. Mom's friends would say she'd made a real scoop this time, he was a keeper.

I figured out ways of surviving. Every time mom was going to her classes and stepdad came for his evening ritual, I exited my body and my thoughts went somewhere only I could reach. Where everything was good, beautiful and nothing could hurt me. When he left, I returned to the real world. It was painful both physically and mentally. As the years progressed, I found ways of dealing with the pain. Self-harm worked the best – arms and legs – for a while. I hid the scars under sweaters and long, baggy pants.

When I got into my teens, I was seen as “difficult” both at home and at school. While the other girls in class started developing and wearing hip and fashionable clothes, celebrating their youth, I went the opposite way. I couldn't get baggy enough clothes to hide my body. I cut my own hair to be ugly and dyed it blue. You could safely say that I stood out among my classmates. I never undressed in front of the others in gym class and wore clothes that covered my arms and legs.

I mostly kept to myself, didn't dare anything else. What if I got questions I couldn't answer? I wasn't interested in boys, which seemed to be the only thing the girls were talking about.

At home I was always getting into trouble. No one understood anything. Kind and obedient Amy had become an intolerable monster. The only good thing was that my step

dad seemed to be losing interest as I was getting into my teens.

Then Raggen died. He passed away in my lap at the vet. Cancer. Nothing to do about it, the vet said. I was broken by grief. My only friend, who I could tell anything to was gone. There was only one thing to do. I had to become even tougher to survive. I was 15 years old and understood that stepdad couldn't kill mom. Not without going to jail for life, anyway. He wouldn't dare. So I decided to tell mom about what he'd done all these years.

Mom went pale but didn't react like I had expected. She was angry. At me. Furious. I wouldn't be allowed to destroy her life with my lies. I was shaking, paralyzed. She said that after all the trouble I had caused, and how intolerable I was all the time, she didn't believe my lies. And now she'd reached her limit. I was to pack my bags and get out.

The shock of this second betrayal, that my own mother didn't believe me, was too much to bear. I quickly packed my things and got out. I was disappointed by my mother, but relieved to get away from my stepdad.

I ran towards the underground. Where could I go? Who could I turn to for help? I thought of my tutor at school. She was a woman with kindly eyes that often paused at Amy when no one was watching. Amy had seen it, and hid. She had tried several times to talk to Amy. Asking if everything was alright, if she wanted to talk about it. But everything was always fine. She remembered the last time she'd stopped her in the hallway at school.

"You know you can tell me about difficult stuff, right? Maybe we can find a solution together."

"I can't talk about it!"

It was the closest she had come to admitting that something was wrong.”

But she couldn’t.

“How are you really doing, Amy?”

“Fine!”

~

I gently run my fingers through Sofia’s hair while observing the interaction before me. Tam, the old man from Burma, looks with kind eyes at the blue-haired girl. He’s still waiting to see if the girl will tell her story.

“No way in hell I’m telling you anything!”

He looks at her and asks again, “How are you really?”

“Fine!”

Amy withdraws into her shell again but the music in her headphones is gone, and she cannot avoid listening to what’s happening all around her. Her headphones are still shielding her somewhat from the outside world. To think that she would get stuck here with all these idiots when she was finally about to speak to the school tutor. Maybe she would know where she could go?

The old man looks around to find someone else willing to tell their story. The first round didn’t go very well, who should he ask next?

“I can tell a story!” Sofia is standing up in her seat and looking intently at the old man from Burma.

“My name’s Sofia, by the way.”

Sofia

My name is Sofia and it's my birthday soon. I will turn nine on Thursday. In my class almost everyone is nice, except one who is mean. He likes to tease and bother everyone else, but then he gets in trouble with the teacher. She's very kind. To everyone. Even Oscar. When she tells him off, he leaves us alone for a while.

What I like to do best is to walk home with Mariell to her place. They have a dog, a cat, a guinea pig and a big sister and two younger brothers. I love animals! Mariel sometimes grows tired of them, her brothers that is, but I think she's lucky. At home I'm all alone.

At Mariell's place there's always something going on. They joke around, laugh and fight, but they always become friends again. Mariell's mom and dad are kind and like to play with us. They even have time to talk with us. They talk to me too. And to each other.

The best thing about Mariell's house is when they eat dinner. They have a big table with six chairs around. One chair everyone. They've even found an extra chair – for me! When they eat dinner, they talk about things that has happened at school, fun things and stupid things. They laugh and joke around. Everyone is allowed to speak, and everyone listens. PC, TV or phones are not allowed when they're eating. I think that's great!

Something funny that happens when they eat dinner, is that all the animals come to the table as well. I mean, that guinea pig is in its cage, but the dog and cat always join us. They find their places, on the floor of course, but at each

corner of the table, so that they help create a large ring around the table. Then we're nine at the table in total. Nine!

It's my birthday soon. I think I know what mom and dad will get me. The others in class are always jealous because I always get the latest video games and SingStar. It's so that I have something to do when I'm home. A new version has just come out, so I'm certain I'll get it. They're jealous of my birthday parties as well. We always have them at Fun Land with pizza and ice cream. I think it's probably expensive, but then they don't have to do it all at home.

Teacher says that if I'm going to invite people from class, everyone should be invited. Otherwise someone might get sad. I think so too, even if that means Oscar has to come. But he won't get nicer if he never gets to come. One time it was a birthday and a really angry man came to get him. I think it was Oscar's dad. Poor Oscar!

I love Mariell's birthdays. Her birthday is in June, just before the summer break. It's always sunny and warm when it's her birthday. That's why we always have a party in her garden. We line up all the tables and put balloons in the trees. Mariell's parents always find lots of fun stuff for us to do. Everyone loves her birthdays!

I don't know if I can tell mom and dad what I want most for my birthday. I have enough video games and computer stuff. I can tell you now, because it's dark and stuff. I wish for us to eat dinner together, all three of us – not alone, one and one and one. Without the laptops and phones. I wish we could talk about our day, like at Mariell's. And I wish for a dog and a brother! It's my birthday soon!

~

I felt my heart beating and tears welling up in my eyes as Sofia, sitting with my arm around her, finished her story. Without knowing, she had cast a harsh and revealing light on our life, or marriage and, not least, our priorities. I was taken aback. I never knew she had such thoughts. I guess I had never bothered to find out. I thought about my important presentation, but it seemed to have lost all its importance. How blind could you get?

I lift my gaze from Sofia, shamefully, appreciating the darkness of the train. The old man is looking at Sofia, smiling.

“Thank you so much for your story, Sofia. I enjoyed it a lot! I think everyone here now feels that they know you a bit better now.”

If only you’d known, I think and look down again. When the shock has lifted, I look up again and see that something’s different. From chaos and fear, Sofia’s story has changed the mood in the train. Sofia’s lighthearted story has restored some normalcy to the situation, seemingly calming everyone down. The old man seems to know what he’s doing.

He looks around the train again. Don’t pick me, I’m not ready after that bombshell, I think. He seems to understand and skips me to look at the blind young man. The painkillers seem to have had an effect on both Sofia and the young man – they’re looking visibly better.

“Would you like to tell a story,” he asks the young man.

“Yes, I can. My name’s David, by the way!”

David

I'm seven years old. I've just gotten back from playing football with my buddies. I storm into the hall, kick my shoes off and run towards the kitchen. Hungry as a wolf. Hope there's more cereal left!

Mom and dad are sitting at the kitchen table, their faces serious. I suddenly feel afraid. They're almost always happy.

"Can I get some cereal? I'm really hungry!"

I want them to be like normal; happy! Mom gets up and finds the cereal. She's quiet and her eyes are red. I get anxious. Mom shouldn't cry. Grown-ups don't cry.

"I'm going to be a professional footballer when I grow up!" I say, trying to change the mood. I mean it as well. I want to be a professional footballer. For Manchester United or Barcelona!

Dad stares at the kitchen table, and suddenly looks even sadder. What's going on? Dad clears his throat, trying to make his voice sound normal. It doesn't.

"Do you remember when we went to the doctor and to the hospital to do those tests?" His voice sounds shaky.

I remember. A long time ago, maybe one or two months. I had to go to the doctor because I had started tripping over and walking into things, I also had difficulty reading letters on the blackboard at school. Even when playing football was a bit more difficult. I often got hit by the ball because I didn't see it coming. Nowadays I was often the goalkeeper because I kept missing the ball when trying to score goals. It just meant I had to practice more. I was going to be a footballer after all!

"Yes, I remember," I said between mouthfuls of cereal and milk.

Dad cleared his throat again and looked at me with sad eyes that made me anxious and stop eating.

“We got the results from those tests today. The doctor called; we’re going to see him tomorrow.”

“What did he say?”

He steeled himself.

“He said that you have a rare eye condition that they can’t fix. It means that your eyesight will get worse.”

“Well, he’s wrong. I can see just fine, and I have to get back to the pitch, they’re waiting for me!”

I got up so fast that the chair fell backwards on the floor and ran out the door in a flash. That doctor was just plain wrong. How stupid it was to scare mom and dad that way when I can see just fine. Nothing’s wrong with my eyes!

After the visit to the doctor the following day, I slowly started to realize that I was wrong. Something was not right. The doctor explained at great length about the condition, but the only thing I remembered was him saying that I would be completely blind within a year. I couldn’t believe it. I stopped playing football, didn’t want to hang out with my friends, didn’t want to go to school. My life was over! I slowly slipped into the same darkness that my parents were already in.

But when I was down, they got up. They suddenly got superpowers, rolled up their sleeves and became Supermom and Superdad. They said that at least no one was going to die and that there were worse things than being blind after all. If I was going blind, they would make sure that I had a good life, blind or not. I couldn’t see (yes, see) that happening.

They studied and learnt everything about my diagnosis, about being blind, about what kind of aides I could use. I had to attend courses, against my will, with other children with the

same condition. Together we learnt Braille and mobility – how we could navigate on our own when blind. I learn all this to better be able to handle myself when alone.

After a year, I was blind. I had gotten a new life, new friends, new skills and did surprisingly well. My old friends were still my friends, but I was not part of the team anymore. I was, however, their biggest fan. When people asked me what I wanted to become when I grew up, I said:

“My name’s David and I’m not going to become a professional footballer, but mom and dad said anything’s possible, as long as I work hard at it!”

~

“I would simply have died if that happened to me!”
Gucci-girl burst out.

“How did you survive that?”

“I have to admit, I grieved over the loss of my eyesight for a long time, but I was just a kid and adjusted quite quickly to it. When you lose a sense, the others get heightened. You try to compensate with your other senses. Another thing was that my parents made a game out of teaching me stuff like Braille, mobility and computer programs for blind people. Right now, I’m waiting to get a new guide dog. A Golden Retriever. I always liked animals, just like you, Sofia!”

He turns towards Sofia, but Gucci is not done with her questions quite yet.

“How are you doing now? Do you live with your parents?”

“No, I don’t live with my parents. I moved out after high school and started studying social sciences and politics here in

England. I lived in the dorms with the other students. I also studied a year in Stockholm, focusing on developed and developing countries and how we can work to reduce poverty in the world. Now, I'm a journalist for a big newspaper here in London, writing about politics."

"Do you have friends?"

David smiles and turns towards Gucci. "Yes, I've always had friends. Classmates, fellow students and others blind like me."

"I don't think I could even leave the house if I had gone blind!" Gucci says.

"No matter what happens in life, you always have a choice. You can choose to do like you suggest, and never leave the house. Then you've chosen to become a victim. Or you can choose the best possible outcome of the situation you're in!"

"It's not that easy! I could never do what you've done!"

"You have to decide to overcome it. If you don't believe you can do it, you have to get help; inspiration and motivation from others to help you do it. How do you think my life would be today if I had chosen to become a victim?"

"Probably just like I thought you lived because I didn't know better. That you lived with your parents and that they did everything for you."

"And what would I do when they're not around anymore, then?"

"Well, someone else would have to look after you, I guess?"

"When you consider those options, choosing to become the victim or taking control of your own life, which is the better option?"

“I think what you ended up doing is best, but I’m not sure I could have done the same.”

“I’ll tell you something about being blind, that many people don’t seem to understand. Becoming blind was not something I chose. I took me off the highway that most people follow in life and led me down a different road. I discovered new landscapes that I would have missed had I stayed on the highway. Beautiful landscapes. Better than the highway where everything flies by at such a speed that you can’t really take in your experiences fully before it has all passed you by.”

Gucci looks thoughtful and David continues.

“I’ve met people that are more blind than me. People who are so concerned about their appearance and material goals that life passes them by in a haze. Maybe they do it because they think they’ll be better liked, get more friends or something. All this superficial information is lost on me, which I think is one of the best things about being blind.”

Gucci looks distraught; he carries on.

“You’re probably shocked to hear it, but I mean it. When I meet another person, it’s easier for me to understand who that person really is, because I don’t see the mask or the show they put on. I can more easily see behind the mask and look inside. My other senses are strengthened, even my intuition. What I’ve discovered is that many people don’t really know who they are because they try so hard to copy someone else. They try to become someone that they’re not in their pursuit of happiness, which they will never find as long as they’re not who they’re meant to be! They’re not an authentic being, happy to be the unique person they really are. They don’t use their own talents and abilities because they’re too hung up on copying someone else! Therefore, they never spread their

beautiful wings, and no one gets to see their beautiful colors. I see with my heart.”

Gucci’s mask is gone, naked in a way, staring at David with wonder and her mouth agape. She doesn’t know what to say. She’s gone mute with thought.

I hold Sofia’s hand in mine as I listen to their conversation. My impression of David is the same as Gucci. I’m impressed with him, ashamed of myself. Something he said about being superficial, putting on a show for others, not knowing who you truly are. I have to admit that I’m more blind than this young man and I have to respect his attitude. The old man has been listening intently to David’s story. He smiles and thanks him for his story that made everyone forget – if only for just a moment – where they were. His eyes wander again and stop on Gucci.

“Are you ready to tell us a story from your life?”

“Not sure if I’m ready, and normally I wouldn’t, but everything’s different today so I’ll try.

“My name is Karen.”

Karen

The phone's buzz. I hear it from far, far away. How I wish I could sleep for a whole week! I'm exhausted, but I have to get up. I open one eye and glance at the clock, it's 05:31. The bus leaves at 07:30. Two hours to get ready, shower and put on makeup. Don't have time for breakfast. Don't want any either; don't want to get fat.

I stretch out and get up to go to the bathroom and shower. Walking past the mirror, I catch a reflection of myself and shudder. I see a pale, old woman with empty, lifeless eyes. Hair all over the place after an uneasy night's sleep. I'll need at least two hours to get everything I see in order. I know that many people at school admire my looks. The long, blonde hair and the perfectly styled exterior. I also notice the looks I get from the boys. If only they'd known how I look before I get ready in the morning!

While putting on my makeup, the thoughts start churning. I *have* to get an A on the test today, or everything will fall apart. I've used all my free time after school for studying. I had a break for half an hour a couple of days ago but started feeling bad and had to continue. When I'm not studying, I'm running. One hour each day, then it's back to studying.

It's difficult being in the last year of school, because there's less time for everything else I have to do. I usually have excuses for missing parties, but sometimes I still have to go. From outside, it probably looks like everything's great, that I'm in control. Perfect. On the inside I feel alone, afraid of not being successful, stressed out and so exhausted I feel like an old woman. I can't tell this to anyone, not even my parents. They think I obsess a bit about having to do

everything but are proud of everything I've accomplished. I demand a lot from myself. I *am* going to get into law studies in fall!

My parents tell me to calm down, but they don't understand that perfection requires a lot of hard work. It probably wasn't like this when they were growing up. I can't let up for a second or I'll get left behind.

Dad's nice. His wallet is always open, so that I always have the latest fashion and a new Gucci bag. He wondered why a bag should cost thousands and why I couldn't just get a regular bag. He doesn't understand it would be social suicide. I *have* to have the right brand, that's just the way it is!

But there's one thing I've spent a long time convincing him of. Implants. Bigger breasts. Dad says he can't see what's wrong with what I have. To him I look like a normal girl, over average looking, certainly not anyone who needs implants. He thinks it's crazy and sad. I've tried convincing him for a long time. I know what to say to get him to give in.

"I'll never be happy without implants."

He's gradually let up and now he's caved in. Today is the day. After the test, which is in the first class of the day, I'll take the train to the clinic and get the procedure done. Mom won't know until after, or she would have convinced dad not to pay for it.

I don't really have time to be gone from school to get it done, but this was the only time they could slot me in. All my friends think I'm having some normal operation. Between the lines I let them know that when I said I'd be gone for a couple of days, then I quickly changed the subject. So, I have a reason to not be social for the next couple of days and can concentrate on studying while staying at home. The school has

arranged for me to take the tests when I'm ready. And I will be ready!

I barely catch the bus to school, run inside and do the test. It went okay, which means I'll probably get top marks. Afterwards, I hurry out and into the underground, catching the first train. I look around with some disdain as the other passengers are not exactly up to date on the latest fashion. Except maybe the lady with the small sickly-looking girl. She looks successful, based on her age anyway. The others could stand to do something about how they look!

The train stops at a station. A workman with a cat in a cage gets on. It's pretty quiet in the middle of the day, which means I'll have ample time to get to the clinic for my procedure.

Then the explosion happens. The train comes to a sudden stop. Everything gets thrown around. Chaos. Darkness. Silence.

I won't be able to make my appointment at the clinic!

~

Karen looks down after finishing her story. We know she's been more honest with us than anyone ever before. Down here in the dark with strangers. It's quiet for a long time. David is the first to break the silence.

"Do you know that everything you've spent so much time striving for are things I can't see or don't care about?"

"Yes, I got that when you were telling us about your life, which made it even harder to tell my story."

"It doesn't mean I don't think you're an interesting person or that I think it's wrong to have ambitions and take care

of yourself. I'm just curious about who you *really* are. Deep inside. When you don't do all your must-do things. I usually have a strong intuition or feeling about who people really are, but I can't really make sense of you."

I use all my time to meet the expectations I think everyone else has of me, expectations I have of myself. I think that when I'm done with school, I'll have the time to relax and find out who I am. I'll have time to live, but not yet. I need to complete my final exams first.

"I don't think I really know who I am myself."

"Do you think things will be different when you get into law school?"

"When I think about it, it will probably be the same as now. I don't know how to stop. How to live differently. How to begin to live. Everything's just a never-ending series of demands. When something's done, there's always the next thing."

"You seem like one of those puppets in a puppet theater, being controlled by someone else pulling your strings. A puppet without a will of her own."

"Yeah, that's probably a good comparison," Karen says thoughtfully.

"What would you do differently if you could decide for yourself?"

"Get a life!"

"Then you should probably find out who you really are and be the main actor in your own life?" David said quietly, as if talking to himself.

Me and Sofia sat facing Gucci. No, Karen – and listened attentively. I caught myself thinking that this girl was rapidly becoming like me! Did I have a life? I thought so until I got

stuck here underground. I viewed myself as successful. I had a husband, a child. We both had important jobs that demanded a lot, even outside regular working hours.

Sofia seemed to be doing alright. She often played quietly by herself after school, so that us adults could continue working from home. Because our jobs occupied most of our time, we didn't have much time left over for intimate and philosophical talks. It didn't matter to us, because we both got more time to focus on what was most important, our jobs.

After listening to Sofia and the two others, I started to doubt myself and my priorities. Up until now, I'd thought that I was irreplaceable at work, but I realized that there were many others happy to replace me. If I were to quit or never got out of this underground, they'd miss me for a couple of days, but then everything would be back to normal. Without me. The thought shocked me. That everything I'd worked so hard for over the years could be so easily replaced. My thoughts went to Sofia. If I were to vanish from her life, the consequences would stay with her for the rest of her life. Strangely enough. After having neglected her like I had done.

The old man interrupted my train of thought and spoke again. He suggested we gather all five grocery bags and empty their contents. It appeared we would be stuck here for a while.

Milk, juice, vegetables, bread, canned food. Everything was gathered in one place and divided up into rations. One ration was shared among the passengers. Something to drink and a bit to eat. Everyone sat quietly and waited to get their ration. The stories had had some calming effect on the passengers. Even Amy sat quietly in her little corner, took off her headphones and accepted her part of the ration.

We really had gotten quite hungry. The shock combined with all sense of time being gone had led to us forgetting all about food. It must have been a full day since the explosion happened, surely?

Then the old man finished eating, he stood up.

“Karen, you said at the end of your story that you didn’t know how to get a life. I’d like to tell you a story. Not because I think that I have the answer but because it is how I see the world. Amy and I have our reasons for not telling about our own lives, but I can tell you about my life’s art.”

Tam's art of life

I choose to see life as a gift. Like winning the lottery. Yes, like an even bigger miracle than winning the lottery. Biologically speaking, there's an amazing number of things that have to go right for you to exist. That woman has to meet that man and that egg cell has to meet that sperm. Not only that. These things had to happen in every generation all the way back to the beginning of time. It humbles you to think about it. In other words, you're unique, only one of you exists and therefore you are very valuable. This goes for every single person on the earth.

I choose to believe we all come from one big love. We are born on this earth and return to the big love when life here is over. In our innermost core, we have a seed from this love that contains everything we need to become who we were meant to be. Our only task on this earth is to make life better than it was before we were here. In family, friendship, in societies, nations and the world.

The challenge we face, as I see it, is that some obscure their path through life, lose it and get lost. We are born with unique genes and talents. Deep inside yourself is where you find who you really are. The environment you grow up in, will at best encourage you to develop all your talent to create a good life for yourself and for others. To become the best version of yourself. Others may grow up in environments where they become repressed, abused and hurt. Their path back to where they're supposed to be is longer. Just like a dandelion pushes through the asphalt in spring, many of these children push through despite the adversity. I call them dandelion kids in my thoughts.

I've seen that all people have a different perception of what we call reality. Just imagine a courtroom. People who have experienced the same thing have wildly different retellings of what really happened.

We experience reality through our senses, our past experiences and our thoughts. We can say, then, that we *are* what we think and that we *become* what we think. We create out our own reality.

Many people don't even realize that we have what we call an "inner dialogue". We talk using different words about ourselves all the time, all day, night, yes, all through life. What do we tell ourselves? Are you your own worst critic or are you your own best friend? If we indeed are what we think, what we think matters a great deal.

I'll explain by telling you an Indian fable.

Two wolves.

An Indian sat talking to his grandchild.

He said: In all people there lives two wolves, fighting.

One is evil. It is anger, fear, envy, jealousy, greed, arrogance, self-pity, lies and selfishness.

The other is good. It is happiness, peace, love, hope, calm, humility, goodwill, empathy, truth and trust.

"Which wolf wins?" asked the grandchild.

"The one you feed," the grandfather answered.

Which wolf do you feed? I see that many people try to drown out their inner voice by always doing something, always being entertained, afraid of silence and being alone. They're afraid to be left alone with their own thoughts. Other people spend their time feeding the evil wolf, often

subconsciously and lose their happiness and joy of life. A big misunderstanding is that external confirmation is the measure of our success. It can become an everlasting pursuit of status, power and feeling valuable. We use money we don't have on things we don't need, to impress people we don't care about.

If you are completely yourself, the authentic you, the one you were meant to be, then you don't need anyone's acceptance to pursue what is important to you and others. You do it because you have your own, inner conviction that this is the right path to tread. Here you can use your talents. You are your own authority. If you don't know who you are, you can spend your time chasing external demands and confirmation. It can become a prison and will make it harder for you to find your true self.

Your thoughts can make your day good or bad. You can lie down on the rocks by the ocean on a beautiful summer's day with flowers growing out of the cracks of the rock, thinking that life's good. You can listen to the soothing sound of the waves and gulls crying overhead, a mild breeze over tanned skin. Peaceful. Calm thoughts. Happiness.

Or you can lie on the rocks without seeing the flowers, thinking of everything you have to get done tomorrow or getting frustrated over people not doing what you want. Your inner thoughts destroying any happiness in the moment. One person has a good day, while the other subconsciously has chosen to not live in the now and with their thoughts have darkened the moment. I think that life is a kind of school where we can grow to be the best version of ourselves if we are in touch with our inner selves. Every experience, good or bad can help us grow.

An important question will be:

How can you turn every experience and every situation, good or bad, into a positive result for yourself and others?

You create your own life according to how you think and the decisions you take based on your own thoughts. You have the freedom to choose.

Do you choose to play the victim or the main character in your own life? If you are controlled by the need for external confirmation, you can easily blame others and get sympathy from others when you're unhappy. Then it's easy to go from being a victim to marinate in your own self-pity. It doesn't provide you with mastery of your own life. If you become the main character in your own life, you will see that when you blame others you also lose the ability to choose the path forward yourself. When you're the main character, you search for the best possible solution based on every new situation that occurs. It is also in your power to create positive situations for yourself and for others. You are a positive actor in your own life.

I see that many are willing to go far to become copies of other people. It's a pity because everyone came to this world to be themselves, an original with their own talents. In our innermost selves we can find who we were meant to be.

If the fog is thick and you no longer know who you were meant to be, you can go back to your childhood and find what you loved to do then. You can go back to when you were at school, which subjects were your favorite, what hobbies you enjoyed. This can help you to find yourself again. Break the bad habits and start doing things you enjoy, and you will eventually find who you are. Get inspired.

I see that when people are in conflict, many people think that if the other person changes then my own problem will be

solved. Wrong mindset! You can only change yourself, not others. It also matters how you *perceive* the situation. You can put on new glasses and choose to focus on how you want to handle the situation in a way that benefits you. You can deal with the situation through your thoughts so that others cannot hurt you. You can choose if you want to be affected by these negative ways of treating people. You can choose to not get affected.

Imagine that you have a camera and you're about to take a picture of a landscape. You have a million things you can choose to focus on, to make sharp. You have to choose. When you have chosen, the rest of the image will be blurry and the things that are in focus will stand out. Just like in real life. You can choose to focus on the negative things and drag yourself down, or you can focus on the positives in life and get a boost of energy to do the things that you want to do. Sometimes we have to practice on the thoughts and feelings that create progress for ourselves and the world at large. The qualities we have to develop are the qualities of the good wolf in the Indian fable. One must focus on these qualities every day to create change.

I see that many young people here in the west are their own worst enemies. They don't think they're good enough. They think that no one likes them, they're ugly, they're not good enough. This eventually becomes truth. They get depressed and don't know how to move on. They have become their thoughts.

How can these people become their own best friend? First, I have to explain what it means to be one's own best friend. It means that you are a person that you want to be around. To be alone with yourself is something to enjoy and

look forward to. When you enjoy your own company, enjoy your own inner dialogue, other people will also enjoy your company.

So, how does one go from being one's own worst critic to becoming your own best friend? By changing your mode of thought. By thinking new thoughts about yourself and turning it into your new reality. You may think that it is impossibly hard, and yes, it is hard. It's like starting to lift weights at the gym studio. You have to work out every day by substituting negative thoughts for positive ones. It's your brain at the gym, lifting weights to create new, more positive tracks that will give you a better life. Everything you need to accomplish it is already inside you, but you have to work for it.

They say we have about 70 000 different thoughts every day, most of them subconsciously. So, it's easy to see that if all these are criticizing yourself, you will over time lose faith in yourself, break yourself down and spiral out of control. You can get mentally ill.

The goal is for everyone to be good enough. We are good enough when we enter this world, but we may tear ourselves down or let others do it. You can decide if you want to let this happen. If you want to tear yourself down or if you will allow others to do it.

If you protect your inner self and strengthen it, no one can hurt you. You are your own authority and can decide what and who you will listen to and only absorb what leads to growth for yourself.

I see that many people behave like a pinball machine, like we had in the old days. You shoot a ball inside a box and the ball goes hurtling, hitting obstacles that send it every which way. The people I see are so preoccupied with external

recognition that they try to satisfy everyone in the pursuit of being praised and liked. You see it in social media, where there often is a focus on superficial, external things. This inevitably causes frustration. If you find your inner self and purpose in life, you only need to worry about your own happiness. It is enough. It is freedom.

I see that the worst prison is one's own. Where you hold yourself captive. In your thoughts, hindering positive actions both for yourself and others. Set yourself free through the positive qualities of the good wolf in the fable!

The longest road a person has to go, is the road from one's own ego that focuses on oneself, the pursuit of more stuff, that strives for external gratification, to be liked and valued for one's own heart. You inner self.

The longest road a person has to go, is about 30 centimeters. From the brain to the heart. From focusing on the external to focusing on the internal. There you will find your inner self that reflects who we really are. What talents, interests and resources we have and how we can best use them for ourselves and for others.

A Danish philosopher, Knud Løgstrup, once said that we can never live our lives without touching another person. A gaze is also a touch. A gaze can be warm, cold, encouraging, controlling or dismissive. It can make your day better or worse. Small pieces that together create the history of your life. With your gaze, you're part of creating the story of other people's lives. The ones you meet. One second can touch another human being, the next second, you're holding a small piece of their lives in your hands. A gaze can make something in you come alive or wither away. Sofia told of being seen at the dinner table. It's the same thing.

I can see that you have material wealth here in the west, but spiritual poverty. You may not notice it yourselves, but I can see it in the younger generation. They are the symptom. Many find themselves alone in an ocean of other people. Like a small drop of water in an ocean, without purpose. They lack purpose, direction, motivation, mastery, hope and goals. They see others successful, strive to be copies and lose themselves, their inner power and are unable to act, to take charge of their own lives. They try to fix the outside to dull the pain on the inside. They're like birds unable to fly. They need help to learn how to use their wings. When they can't fly themselves, be their wings until they can make it on their own.

Your purpose in life is to make a positive difference in the world. For your family, for your society. The world should be better because you are in it. Give hope to your fellow man. Take care of yourself and each other. We are all in the same boat. Think good thoughts of yourself and of others.

Mahatma Gandhi said: You have to be the change you wish to see in the world. I agree wholeheartedly! The world needs who you are, not a copy, to become a better place.

~

I stared at the old man, as I had been doing throughout his story. At first, I'd wondered why he wouldn't talk about his own life, but I soon forgot when he started telling us about his life's art. In the corner of my eye, I could see that the others had the same reaction I did. I could see wonder, awe and reflection over new thoughts about how a life could be lived. Never judge a book by its cover, I thought. The

smallest and most diminutive of us had grown way above our heads after sharing his wisdom. No one said anything.

The old man seemed to have finished his story. The whole time he had been standing, leaning against one of the railings. Now he walked unsteadily back to his seat beside his daughter. We could see that he was very tired as he sank into his seat and closed his eyes. His daughter was there right away, supporting him and handing him a bottle of water. The silence stretched on.

Finally, Karen became restless and brought up a topic we had been avoiding talking about. We had been here a long time, and certain needs were beginning to become urgent, like going to the bathroom.

“I *really* have to go! What do I do?”

She wasn’t the only one, and we started discussing possible solutions. Finally, the young European tourist proposed a solution.

“I suggest that we empty my suitcase and use it as a toilet! We can just close it when we’re done.”

We placed the suitcase in the corner opposite of Amy’s. When the young man had emptied the contents of his suitcase and placed it in the corner, he said that Karen would get the honor of consecrating the new toilet while he told his story. Karen shuddered but she didn’t have much choice. At least she would get to be the first.

The young man sat up straight in his seat and began telling his story.

Marco

My name's Marco and I come from a little place just outside Florence in Italy. My story mostly revolves around a large garden behind a big house with lots of people with big hearts. The earliest thing I can remember is being in that garden with my mother, father, aunt and grandparents. It's early autumn and we're harvesting the grapes that we will turn into wine in our great cellar beneath the house. I'm helping pick grapes but get distracted by a butterfly that I decide I have to catch. The butterfly flies gently through the great garden and I follow with little steps, passing flowers, rows and rows of grapes and under old olive trees until the butterfly lands on a beautiful, blooming plant, snaking its way up the trunk of an orange tree. It's landed high up so I just can't reach it, but close enough that I can study its beautiful colors. Brown and orange with white spots on its wings. It's beautiful and I stare at it for a long time until I eventually get tired and lie down in the grass under the tree, not losing the butterfly from my sight. I can see the rays of sunlight through the green leaves and notice how some leaves turn bright green and transparent when the sun shines through them. I'm safe, happy and sleepy, lying in my own paradise. My eyelids grow heavy and I fall asleep.

This paradise is where I grew up. Always knowing that I was deeply loved. I thought everyone had it like this and that no one ever had to fear for anything. That's why I always was curious about the world and wanted to explore and see all that it had to offer. I traveled around the world, but always returned home to the garden behind the house.

Florence is not far from our house, with its famous Uffizi gallery, known for its collection of renaissance art. Every

child in Florence learns about the great artists and their works. We also get to try our hand at painting, creating, being creative. Those were the most enjoyable times at school. To draw is to see. To paint is to see. It is to see the world in new ways. We don't understand this until we get older.

Leonardo da Vinci was an expert at this. He painted the Feast of the Annunciation in a very clever way. Maria is sitting on her terrace, embroidering, and looks up from her work, as if someone is speaking to her and causing her to pause. She looks up and sees the angel that tells her that she is to become the mother of Jesus.

If you look at this painting from above, the arm that's doing the embroidering won't look right, it's proportions all wrong. How could Leonardo, the master of perspective and proportions make Maria's arm deformed?

It's because he was smart enough to know where the painting would be displayed, that it's viewers would stand to the right, looking up at the painting diagonally from below. When the painting was mounted in place, the arm looked perfect. He was a genius!

I caught myself thinking about this when Tam was talking about thought patterns and how we choose to see the world, which perspectives we choose. If we're smart, we'll choose the perspective that gets us through the challenges we face. It's smart to practice this every day, so that it becomes a sort of guideline through our lives. To be curious towards life and the world, to always look for opportunities and be thankful for everything that turns out well is a good way to start. When a door closes, the challenge is to look for new doors that opens up to new and positive experiences.

In my family I got this perspective “for free” because I learnt it from the others in my family. As an adult, I know that not everyone experiences the world like this. They have to practice it as a way of thinking. My family taught me to live in the here and now. The family dinners in the cool warmth of evening, on the terrace between beautiful flowers was a time when we just were. Here and now. It lasted a long time, and everything was good.

As a child, I often fell asleep on a lap. Happy. As an adult I loved laughter, happy faces and the conversations about things large and small. Politics were the only thing that could cause the conversation to get loud. We loved it!

When the explosion happened here on the underground, I was on my way to the airport and home. They’re probably worried about me now.

~

Tam gets up from his seat, unsteady, and thanks Marco for sharing his story.

“You are very privileged to have gotten such a start to life!”

Marco nods in agreement.

“When you told us about the garden you grew up in, Marco, I thought that those that are not so lucky as yourself can create their own garden on the inside, in their thoughts. Create a beautiful place inside that with time will affect your outer life in a positive way. That’s a good way of getting a perspective on things.”

Marco smiles and nods in agreement again.

Old Tam looks around and nods to the boy in the hoodie with the blonde hair. He looks up and understands that it's his turn to tell his story.

“My name is Mark and I was on my way to school, at least two hours late. I was going to deliver my final reports because I've been absent too much. Then came the bang and now I'm stuck here. This is a day in my life.

Mark

Click.

Power's on.

Waiting.

Type in the password.

Choose the game.

Connect with the others and formulate a strategy.

Then we're off!

I'm inside a world where everything can happen. A fantasy world with different characters where the right weapons give me magical powers. In the beginning of the game we each choose who we want to be, then it's all about fighting the opposition to get ahead. It's about making smart choices, choosing the right weapons and thinking strategically. This world is both exciting and dramatic. My choices decide where I go. I fight enemies in my way. I've gotten pretty good at it too. Good at choosing the right weapons and fighting my way ahead. I *have* to win over the bad guys, because after this round I get to advance to the next level.

I've been playing for quite a while now. It takes up all my free time, especially at night, when I meet friends from other time zones, like buddies from China and Australia, they're my best mates.

Mom doesn't understand. I almost go crazy when she calls out for dinner in the middle of a game. I can't just leave in the middle of a battle. I won't be able to beat the level and I'll let down everyone on my team. It's just not happening! She *has* to understand!

When we're gaming, I don't really notice what time it is. A single level can take hours. We can pause to go to the toilet

or to eat, but only during certain times in the game, and only after everyone's agreed.

What I love about gaming, is that I am a superhero. I'm always fighting and pushing forward. I've gotten quite good at it; everyone wants to be on my team! I'm an expert in choosing the right weapons to overcome any obstacle and any enemies in my way.

Tonight, we got further than usual, and I levelled up twice. Awesome! I received a lot of praise for my efforts and I feel proud for what I've accomplished.

Rrrriiiiiing!

Oh, crap! The alarm. Is it seven already? Time to go to school. We've just finished the game and I get up to go to the bathroom. This is when I realize how tired I am. I haven't slept all night. I look into the mirror. Hair in disarray, pale skin and eyes that look like a sleep-deprived Donald Duck. Red and veiny. I feel exhausted. School. Think I'll stay home today – have to get some sleep. At the same time, I feel bad, it's not the first time I skip school because of gaming all night. I'm falling behind on tests and assignments and have too many absences. I'm so far behind, I can't bear to think about it. If only I could get a weapon that would save me in real life like in the game!

I look around. There's no weapons here. Nothing to help level up in the real world. I look away from my reflection and head back to my room. I turn off the lights and crawl under sheets.

~

Mark finishes his story and stares at the floor. Everyone's quiet until Karen breaks the silence.

"What are you going to do now then? Not being able to go to school?" she looks shocked.

"I guess more gaming in my room. More time for what I enjoy best."

Sofia looks at him.

"I think playing video games for long is boring. I'd rather play with my friends."

"But I am playing with my friends, but they're in other countries. That's why I have to meet them online, and then we game – it's fun and exciting.

The man in the stained overalls turns to Mark.

"You better get a haircut and a job! On second thought, you wouldn't have gotten a job with us – you can't even get up in the morning!"

Tam stands up to defuse the situation.

"Thank you for being so honest with your story. I respect that a great deal! Is gaming something you feel you have to do every day?"

"Yeah, there's not a day goes by that I'm not gaming."

"Do you think you're addicted to your games?"

"No, I don't think so."

"Do you see yourself going a whole day without gaming?"

"No, absolutely not!"

"Well, that sounds like addiction to me!"

Fatima looks at them and says: "I know that there's treatments for gaming addiction. You have to see a psychologist and maybe to another place to get proper treatment."

“I’m not having any treatment! I don’t want to quit. Wouldn’t know what else to do. It’s my entire life. It’s where I get stuff done!”

Tam looks at his outburst, says that this is not the place to solve these challenges. In any case, Mark would have to want to deal with it for treatment to work.

David listens intently.

“I’ve interviewed a doctor from Canada who has some novel thoughts about addiction. He says that addiction is like self-medicating to dull negative emotions. That denial of pain is the basis of the addiction. It can be the feeling of rejection, of not being loved, to not belong, to not feel that one has value and not feeling that you can accomplish things. He says it can feel like a trauma from the past which hasn’t been addressed and is painful. If you get addicted, drugs, gaming, shopping, bad relationships and a host of other things may become the medicine.

This doctor says that you cannot treat the addiction with the traditional ten-step model, but that you must treat the underlying trauma that’s the cause of it. I don’t know if it is the right thing for you, Mark, or others, but it sounds logical to me.”

Mark shrugs and doesn’t seem to have an opinion on the matter.

Tam turns to the man in the stained overalls, his big arms holding the cage containing Miss Kitty. She looks safe in his arms, even down here in the dark.

“Would you like to continue with your story?”

“If there’s something I’m good at it’s telling stories!” he says and gets up, placing Miss Kitty on the seat next to him.

“The name’s Joe!”

Joe

My name's Joe and I'm the direct result of a traveling pop group from the early sixties. My mother worked at the pub where they were playing one night. My father continued onwards, and my mother stayed behind at the pub. When I was little, I worked there as well. My job was to gather all the used glasses. I saw a lot of strange people and I was good at imitating them. I used this to my advantage at school. I was the tough guy in class, always clowning around and always getting in trouble with the teacher. It didn't matter as long as everyone else loved what I did. When I turned 15, I'd had enough. Enough getting yelled at by teachers. To get a job and earn a living was what I wanted, and what I've been doing ever since.

You guys think a lot! My life's always been an adventure. When a new job appears, I take it. Then there's often a new woman. I take her too. Then I get thrown out and move on. I can't rightly say that this method always has been successful, but it works for me. After three marriages and seven kids, I haven't had all that much money for myself, but just enough to enjoy some quality time down at the pub with the mates. It's probably the only stable thing in my life. Child support sucks, which is why I mostly do work off the books. Money right in my pocket!

So, the pub. It's where I meet my mates after a long day's work. We're in full agreement that if we ran this country, everything would be much better! The government is too lax. Out of the EU, I say! England for the English and jobs for all is what we'd prioritize.

When we meet on the weekends, it's the football that matters. We love our football pub. We know better than the

incompetent managers of the clubs. They get so much wrong! Sometimes they do get it right – when our team wins!

A lot of my mates have brought home wives from abroad. They're not as spoiled as the English women. And they cook. Good food from their country. They don't crave long conversations about feeling and stuff like that either. No, it's more straight to the point, which we guys prefer!

I'm not quite there yet. Can't well afford any trips abroad with these never-ending child support payments, can I?

Anyway, only two of them are under 18 years old now. The others are all grown up and can provide for themselves, luckily! I don't get to see them that often, what with the work and seeing my mates.

People sometimes ask me what my goals in life are. I say – what? Goals? I tell them I don't have any! Life begins every morning and takes me to unknown places before I know it. New women, new apartments, new jobs. Who plans ahead when things just happen, anyway?

My life is like when I was conceived. It's nice! It just happens!

~

"I can't understand how someone can live like that," Karen says. "I'd panic if I didn't have any plans!"

"Maybe it would do you some good staying with me for a while and I'll teach you," Joe winks at her.

"No thanks, not happening!"

"There are some things you said that puzzles me," Marco says. "You say that your friends have got wives from abroad, how can you then be against immigration?"

“I’m not against the women, only the terrorists! All the others. Those who don’t want to live like us. The criminals!”

David listens, “when I heard what Tam said about his life’s art, I thought about how people who commit terrorist acts have been fooled by people with a need for power. In addition, they haven’t discovered who they really are. They haven’t found their inner self. They’re not the authentic person they’re meant to be. An authentic person can’t hurt another person! I think they must be hurting inside.”

“All the more to boycott people from those countries!” Joe raises his voice in excitement.

“I disagree!” Marco answers. “For example, I disagree that those who cannot behave are denied entry into the Olympics. It is, after all, an arena where people can meet as friends and build bridges between people and cultures. Save the politics for other arenas. But at least we’ll have some more knowledge about each other when we deal with the difficult issues!”

“What’s the Olympics?” Sofie says, joining the conversation.

“It’s a huge tournament where people from all over the world meet to celebrate sports and compete in different areas,” Marco answers, smiling at her.

“Kind of like a birthday, then?”

“Yeah, I guess you could say that.”

“Then I agree with Marco!” Sofia’s mind is made up.

“What did you call it when people are not allowed to play?”

“You mean boycott?”

“Yeah! You grown-ups are so funny. You say that everyone should play with everyone and that everyone has to come

to birthdays, or they'll get sad and even more mean, like Oscar. He's much nicer when he gets invited! Won't the countries that don't get to play, become meaner? It's weird that those who decide stuff can't see that."

I looked down at my daughter that had just shown a level of involvement, I'd never experienced from her before. I was surprised to learn that she had such strong opinions, and that she could draw parallels from her world to the adult world.

Marco smiled and nodded, "I couldn't have said it better myself!" he winked at her and she smiled back.

"That's not possible when we have idiots ruling in some other countries!" Joe raised his voice again.

But Sofia was ready, "Yeah, that's why the mean ones need to learn from the kind ones. How will they know to be kind if they never meet anyone kind? Like Oscar, he'd be even meaner if he didn't get to hang out with us!"

"I still agree with Sofia," Marco said, looking at her. "Build bridges between nations in peacetime and use those bridges to have peaceful conversations when things escalate. I also think that all the people who live in these countries have to be alert when those in power break human rights. People have to let them know!"

Tam gets up again and nods, "I couldn't agree more with you Marco and Sofia!"

"But let us continue to live in peace down here, despite our different views and backgrounds. Can you continue with your story?" he nods towards the modest girl who has yet to say anything.

Annie

Morning. Christmas Day. All my friends are looking forward to it. Not me. I walk silently on my toes out of bed. Don't want to wake anyone. Not my parents and not my brother. Breakfast usually goes well, but as the day goes by it gets worse. I have to be quiet. I sneak into the kitchen. I know all the hiding places. I look inside the cupboard. There, behind the cereal is one of the bottles, half-empty. I empty it into the sink. Not all of it, or he'll notice it missing. Then I check under the sink. Behind the trash. And I find another bottle. I repeat the procedure. Bathroom next. In one of the corners behind the bathtub, I find another one. I empty it into the toilet, but not all of it. He mustn't see that someone has emptied its contents. He mustn't know that we know.

The basement and the garage are also regular hiding places for bottles. I'm pretty sure I know where they're all hidden, but sometimes I find new hiding places. I finish my rounds and hope Christmas is saved.

The weekdays are usually okay, but the weekends are the worst. It begins on Friday and lasts until Sunday. The worst part is how dad changes. During the week, he is happy and normal, but during the weekends he can't talk straight, shouts a lot and gets into arguments. My happy dad disappears, and a new, mean person takes his place. I hate it. My dad is two people, one nice, one mean.

Things got even worse when he and mom got divorced. She was sad and had to go to the hospital, they said. Dad had to take care of me and my brother. I've had to take care of my brother ever since he was born. I was seven and mom wouldn't get up when he was crying. I lifted him up out of the

cradle and changed his diaper and fed him from a bottle. He's very dependent on me and does everything I say. On the weekends, when we're home, he listens to me when I say we have to stay quiet in our room, so that dad can't hear us. It's usually fine, then. We can hear them arguing, him and the new woman. We hear noises that we don't like and we're afraid.

One time, we were hiding in the hallway by the stairs. An old woman came walking by, at least 50 years old. She stopped, said hi, and told us that she'd just moved in two floors above us. She wondered if we wanted to come with her and see her new apartment.

We followed her silently, carefully. Mustn't make any noise or the adults get mad. But she welcomed us in, and I could see that her eyes were kind and easy to look into. Warm, smiling.

Would we like some hot chocolate with cream? We could only stare at the floor. Embarrassed and silent. She made some anyway and we drank it all. That's how we got to know her. She said she was not working anymore, so we could come visit whenever we wanted to.

Every day after school we would visit. We called her grandma. Then, we would go back to dad when he came home from work. During the weekends, we would sneak out and stay with her. She had two beds in her guest room. We slept there often. We've known her now for many years. I'm 15 and my brother is 8. We're alright now because of grandma.

I can hear someone stirring now. I've done everything I can to make Christmas great. If not, at least we have grandma.

~

“How nice that you have a grandma!” Tam’s daughter had been listening intently.

“Yes, we wouldn’t have been doing so well if not for her.”

“I’ve heard that as long as you have at least one person that cares about you, that’s enough.”

The daughter of the old man covers him in her coat and gets up. She looks around and starts talking perfect English with just a hint of an Asian accent.

“My name is Carina and I want to tell you about an important event in my life.”

Carina

I'm between sleep and waking. I feel a constant thumping and shaking, lulling me back to sleep and my dream.

I'm in my grandparents' house. They're warm and caring, even if I sometimes miss having a mom and dad like my friends. Grandma puts my lunch in my backpack every morning. Then it's off, walking to the village school with my friends. We line up outside and march into the classroom. I like learning new stuff and always do my homework. It's good to do your homework, because if you don't you get beaten for being lazy. I don't like that at all and have to turn away.

My friends have stopped asking where my parents are. I've told them that mom died giving birth to me and that dad never came home from the war. A lot of the kids at school don't have a dad, so I'm not the only one. They didn't return from the war either.

When the school day is over, I run home, and grandma's arms hug me tightly. Afterwards, I'm free to play. My favorite place is a big magical tree not far from our house. We can see it from our windows. By the tree I can play alone or with my friends. We pass the time under the leaves and climb the dense branches, happy in our corner of the universe.

I have a special reason for playing under the tree. Grandma tells me that mom used to play there when she was a kid and that it's where she met my dad who was from the neighboring village. I think it's kind of strange and nice to think about. I feel closer to them when I'm there.

The shaking increases in intensity and drowns out the dream. I open my eyes. It's dark. I look around and as my eyes adjust to the darkness, I can see that I'm in an ox cart together

with several other strangers. The cart's rough passage over the bumpy road is what woke me.

A man is holding my hand. I quickly pull my hand away. Now I remember. This man came to our house late one night. We'd gone to bed but had not fallen asleep. My grandparents were apprehensive at first, but then they hugged the stranger and I could see tears running down their cheeks. I was afraid, but they said they were tears of joy. The strange man was my father, who I had never met before in my life. But I was still afraid and held on tightly to grandma. Sitting in her lap, I examined him closely.

I'd seen pictures of my parents when they were young and before they'd had me. They were young, happy and smiling at each other. This man looked old and sad. He couldn't be my dad! He did not look like that in my dreams!

In the morning, the man was gone. I didn't have school that day. Grandma and grandpa's faces were serious, and they said they wanted to talk to me. I had to promise not to tell anyone that my dad had visited us. He had escaped from a prison camp and would be sent back if he was captured. It was very important that I never told anyone. Did I understand? Yes, I understood. Say nothing to no one. Not even my best friend. I would see him again soon, after he had taken care of some business.

In the days after the strange visit, my grandparents were acting strange. They hugged me more than usual, and sometimes I would catch grandma wiping away a tear when she thought I wasn't looking. They often looked at me and I could see a sadness in their eyes. I asked if everything was alright and they said everything was fine, I should go out and play. I

was eight years old and didn't know much about life outside our village.

But why am I here on this ox cart in the middle of the night? I'm afraid and the man tries to comfort me. He says we have to be very quiet. He tells me that we have to get out of Vietnam because it's not a good place for me to grow up. He can't stay here either because those who run the country want to put him in jail and maybe even execute him.

"But I was fine staying with grandma and grandpa!" I say choking back tears. "I don't know you! Are they coming with us?" I ask, looking around the cart.

"No." he answers, his eyes sad. "They had to stay behind."

"When will I see them again?" I shout.

My father tells me to be quiet and says that they're old and won't always be around to take care of me. He's my father and he will take care of me. There's no future for me there anymore.

I feel my heart breaking and I cry. My dad tries to comfort me, but I shake him off. Someone in the cart hands my father a pill and a bottle of water and says I have to take it. I don't want to, but I have no choice. My head soon feels heavy and my thoughts muddy. The last thing I remember before falling asleep is the hay bales on the cart, the people hidden under and beside them. Some sleeping, some staring empty ahead.

When I wake, the sounds of the cart have been replaced by a gentle rolling. Up and down, up and down. I hear someone being sick, others crying. Someone shouts in alarm or cries. I look up to see that I'm in a small fishing boat, joined by many scared people.

Then I see my father. He's holding me tight on his lap. This time I don't try to get away. I stare down at myself and see that I'm dressed in dirty boy's clothes! My hand reaches for my long hair and it's gone!

"Why am I dressed as a boy and why is my hair gone!?" I shout at my dad, but before he can answer a wave the size of a mountain crashes over the boat. People are screaming and we hold on as tightly as we can to avoid being washed overboard. I see people hanging over the edge of the boat, but they're quickly pulled back in.

There are too many people for a boat this size, women, men, children. I realize that survival is more important than how I look. I hug my father tightly and he gives me a new pill. This time I don't protest and fall asleep quickly.

The next time I wake, I hear screaming and shouting again. The sea is calm, and another boat has come alongside ours. At first, I think that we're being saved, but the mood is all wrong, so I pretend to sleep, peering out through half-closed eyes.

The people in the other boat are not nice. They have guns and are forcing the adults to give them their money, jewelry and weapons. They beat those who don't do what they say. One man refuses to hand over his money. Bang! Dead! Overboard!

His wife and kids scream and cry and the others start doing as they're told. Father gives them everything he has that's valuable, without protest. I'm lying perfectly still, almost not daring to breathe. I can hear my heart pounding. Hope they don't hear it too! Then it happens. Two of the bad men enter our boat and start picking up the young girls, pulling them over and into their boat. The girls are screaming, their parents

too. I cover my ears, close my eyes and wish for it to be a bad dream.

It's not a bad dream. They took the girls! The sound of their mother's screaming is something I can hear every time I close my eyes. Now I understand why I've been made to look like a boy. My dad didn't want to lose me. I hold on to him tight. The only person I have in this world. He gives me another pill and I go to sleep.

The next time I wake, the sea is still calm, but something was happening on the other side of our boat. I turned around and looked straight into a wall of metal. Staring upwards, I saw the biggest boat I'd ever seen. They said it was a ship. The people on the boat were cheering wildly, happy to be rescued. I only felt tired and others in the boat were sick, and some people just lay there.

Everyone was brought up and into the ship. These people were nice. They gave us food and water and a place to lay down and sleep. Then they gave us medicine and bandages to those that needed it. We were exhausted, but safe. The next time I awoke, we were in a refugee camp in Thailand.

Because my father was in an especially difficult situation, we were among the first to be relocated to a new country. We went to England because dad had worked for the English before the war and because the ship that picked us up was English.

That's how I ended up in London.

~

"How dramatic! How do you even survive something like that?" Marco says, staring at Carina.

“You start over. All over. You have to decide to have a good life. It’s more challenging for us because you have to learn the language and culture. You’re an alien until you get new friends, understand the culture and go to school and eventually get a job.”

“But you didn’t know anyone! Not even your father? That’s crazy!” Karen looks shocked.

“No, I didn’t know anyone. Not even my father. I was angry and distraught to begin with and grieving over the loss of my grandparents. My life. Then my father gave me a letter that they had written to me. They wrote that they couldn’t tell me that I was going to escape with my father. It was too risky. They couldn’t even say goodbye. But I had to know that they came into my room and kissed me several times a night while I slept. They wrote that they loved me and didn’t want me to leave, but they understood that they couldn’t take care of me forever and I would get a better shot at a happy life in another country with my dad. They wrote that he was a good man and that I should be happy that he wanted to start a new life with me. He had a very difficult time, so I had to be grateful and nice to him. They promised to always be with me in my heart and I promised the same when I read their letter. I understood then that I had to do my best in this new country. I got to know a person with a beautiful soul that I’m proud to call my dad.”

Carina looked down at her father who was partly sitting, partly lying down on his seat. He returned her gentle smile.

“His name is Dihn van Tam, by the way. Tam is his first name.”

Everyone fell silent with their own thoughts. To think that I’ve rushed through the underground every day on the

way to work without looking around. I've seen that London is a colorful city, but I've never stopped to think about what hides behind the masks people wear when they stand right next to each other, every day on their way to work. My only focus has been to get Sofia to school quickly so I could get to work.

Tam stood up. "Between the first and second time I came to your grandparents' house, I was working with some others to get the fishing boat ready and to plan our escape. I know it was hard for you, Carina, but there was no other way. We were afraid that you would accidentally tell someone about the escape. Your grandparents agreed, but were, of course, very sad. We all knew that we wouldn't see each other again. We started our life here in this new country. You went to school and I went to work for Amnesty. A job that was very meaningful for me. We chose to take the best parts of our culture and combine it with the best parts of this new culture, and together we created our new life. Hour after hour, day after day. Until one day I discovered that the days went by without effort. We started putting down roots. We missed a great many things, but the longing gradually passed, and we were better able to focus on life here and now and on the future. We grew very close, and I knew you had many suitors that you always turned down. I'm afraid you saw it as your duty to take care of me, even if I wished for you to start a family of your own."

"I know what it's like to long for something," Sofia suddenly said. "I miss my mom and dad every day. Even when they're around, they're not really there. They disappear inside the world of the computers. They don't look like they're having fun and they don't look like they're in the same world

either. I just keep quiet and play by myself to not bother them. And I miss us having fun together, I miss them looking at me when we talk.”

Sofia got up and went over to Carina, giving her a big hug. She put her small arms around her neck and didn’t let go. She’d gotten a new friend. And I, Sofia’s mother, had gotten some more to think about.

Old Tam nodded and looked inquisitively over at the woman with the hijab. She met his gaze and nodded.

“My name is Fatima, and this is my story.”

Fatima

“Fatimaaa!”

Mom is calling me from inside the house. I’ve just fed our chicken and petted our baby goats. It’s my responsibility to look after the animals. I’m the oldest out of five siblings, so a lot of the responsibility falls on me. Cooking, cleaning and washing is what I do best. It’s very hard to grow anything on this land. It’s too dry and high up. Dad makes do anyway. We borrow the neighbor’s oxen and dad steers it, plowing the earth. We depend on what the earth provides to get through the winter.

We live in a small village without electricity out in the country, so everything takes a long time to do. Cooking, washing clothes and farming the land. Our heat comes from a simple wood-fired oven. We use it to cook food and wash clothes.

“Fatimaaa!” I’m pulled away from my thoughts by the sound of my mother’s voice.

“I’m coming!” New chores, I think as I start up towards our house.

Mom and dad are sitting on a bench just outside the entrance. They ask me to join them. That’s weird, I think.

“You’re turning thirteen this year and so we’ve spoken to a family from the neighboring village. They have a son who lives in England. We’ve made a deal with his parents and promised you to him.”

I stare at them.

“But I want to stay here! With you! With my family! With everything I know!”

“The time has come,” dad says and stands up.

Mom turns away and wipes away a tear but says that she agrees with dad.

I storm down the hill and toward our flock of goats. I can tell them everything. They comfort me and look like they understand. Their wool dried my warm tears, running down my cheeks. I'm going to miss my goats.

Dad later told me it was about honor, money and respect. I didn't have a choice. Two months later I got married to Amir. One year later my plane landed at Heathrow in London. A new and strange life lay before me.

~

"Wow!" Joe exclaims. "I can't believe you just accepted that! We decide our own lives!"

"Yes, here in the west it's like that, but if you want to be an honorable woman from my country, this is the only way."

"I would have died!" Karen looks shocked.

Fatima turns to look at Karen and the others. "There is one thing you have to understand about this way of doing things. It's called and *arranged* marriage and means that both parties are in agreement, even under pressure. I also finally agreed. The other way is forced marriage, which is a marriage that you do not wish for yourself."

"I would never have agreed to that!" Karen's eyes are wide, and she almost looks angry.

"Another thing you must know about our culture, is that marriages are an alliance you enter into with other strong families. It is our social system, our law system and means economic safety for the whole family. Old and young alike are taken care of by the family. We are protected by the family

and can send back money to those who do not have much to live on. It was just like this here in the old days. You could not choose then either.”

“But how did you manage when you came to England?” David had been listening to the conversation and was sitting facing Fatima.

“I entered the plane in Kabul one year after my marriage. Fourteen years old. As I see it, I entered the plane, leaving a society in Afghanistan that could be compared to Europe in the 19th century. When I exited the plane in London, I was in the 21st century. A journey measured in hours and hundreds of years!

“I had to learn to use all the modern appliances that run on electricity. I had to learn about the digital world, which governs almost every aspect of this society. I had to learn a new language, a new alphabet, and new social norms. I had to grow up fast. I was fourteen and a fast learner.

“My husband was kind, but not overly interested, because he had also been talked into the arrangement. I later learned that he had had to give up his English girlfriend, because his Afghan family did not accept her. He encouraged me to go to school, learn English and get an education. He understood that this was important for me to start my new life in this new country. Now I work as a nurse in a retirement home.

“Not everyone in my situation was as lucky. In my English classes I learned that some were treated as slaves by their husbands and their families. They had no rights and didn’t know that the way they were treated was illegal. I know several of them escaped and got help.”

“Typical of immigrants,” Joe interjects.

Fatima looks at and says: “I have to say that those who do not treat their wife and family well are not good Muslims. We have a patriarchal system which means that the man in the family has certain duties. He is responsible for the greater family, for the income and for ensuring that everyone’s doing well. Those who hurt their families, do so based on their own need for power and control. It’s not the right practice of Islam.”

“Well, there you see how it goes when you can’t choose for yourself!” Joe continues.

Fatima looks at him angrily and responds: “It doesn’t sound like you were very successful when choosing a partner, Joe! Was it three wives you’ve had so far? Are you certain that your way is better than mine?”

Joe mumbled something incomprehensible.

“In my culture we have this story about love in the east and west. Love is compared to a cauldron of boiling water. In the west you fall in love and the water boils. You marry and the water slowly cools, and you get divorced. In the east, the water is cold at first. No falling in love, but you gradually become friends who care for and respect one another. The water heats up gradually. Instead of falling in love, maybe you could say you learn to love?”

An interesting perspective, I think and look down at Sofia who is fast asleep on my lap. “Don’t you miss your family?” I ask.

“Yes, very much. We only have each other after all, so we do get lonely. We’re used to a great big family where we’re from. But I have the kind people at the retirement home. At first, they were quite rude and concerned with me being an immigrant, but when they got to know me, they said they

began looking forward to my shifts. It makes me happy to know I have a meaningful job. They sort of become family to me.”

“When I was talking about terrorists earlier, I wasn’t talking about you!” Joe says. Karen nods in agreement, mumbling that she’s sorry.

“I was talking about those I don’t know who are Muslims, not you!” Joe explains, looking at Fatima.

“I don’t really know anyone else, but you’re so kind and nice and good that I’d marry you right here and now!”

Everyone bursts out laughing at the absurdity of the situation. We laugh and laugh and feel that the mood brightens, and we feel lighter and more at ease. Even Amy looks up from underneath her hoodie, a faint smile on her lips.

“Joe! Here’s a business idea for you: lessons in how to go from racist to friend in under three days. I think it would be an important lesson that would attract a lot of people!” David turns to Joe and smiles.

“Surely I can’t hold lessons just minutes after becoming friends with a Muslim?”

Fatima laughs.

Joe looks at her and says: “You’re a good person, Fatima!”

“You are as well, Joe,” she smiles back at him. “Deep inside!”

We sit in silence for a long while, each in their own thoughts. It seems that everyone got something to think about after our masks fell off and we’re left without the armor our superficial exteriors gave us. But we’re not alone.

There's the sound of a muffled thumping, like metal against rock. Far away. Everyone straightens up and listens. David is the first one to break the silence.

"I think help's coming. I've heard it for a while but wasn't certain until now!"

I thought about his senses, more acute than ours.

The mood grows anxious and uneasy. This is what we've been waiting for, but it's strange thinking that we'll finally be able to leave. In only a few days we've grown accustomed to life here in the dark, to each other and how we've touched one another. I find myself thinking that it will be sad to see everyone go their separate ways. I've grown fond of them. When the façade and perfectionism disappeared, I was happy with what I saw.

The sharp noise of metal on rock disrupts my thinking. It's getting closer. We could even hear voices. Shouting. We started shouting back, but it didn't seem like they could hear us. But then we saw the first ray of light. Flashlights. They blinded us, but we could hear loud shouting that told us that our train had been found. We shouted back.

All we felt was joy. And hope! We shouted and banged on the windows of the train. They had figured out that we were alive and doubled their efforts in removing the rocks and gravel.

And suddenly they were through one of the windows and a man in dirty overalls and a hard hat smiled when he saw that we were alive. He was a professional; we could see.

"Everyone alive?"

"Yes!"

"Anyone hurt?"

"Yes!"

“Alright, we’ll start the evacuation. Wounded first.”

Our savior was professional and authoritative. Our shoulders lowered, knowing we were safe at last. We waited our turn. We knew we were going to get up to the surface. A new chance.

David and Tam were the first to be carried out on stretchers. Then Karen and Amy. Joe turned out to be a real gentleman and insisted everyone else go before he and Miss Kitty exited the train.

When we got to the surface, we heard shouting, talking and people clapping their hands.

“I can’t see anything!” said Sofia.

“Me neither,” I said, clutching her hand.

The sunlight was overwhelming! It was so bright that we struggled to adjust our eyes to the life and light of the surface. Slowly our eyesight came back. I could see ambulances with blinking blue lights. We were all laid on stretchers and carried into the cars. I held on tightly to Sofia, ensuring that we went in the same ambulance. We were saved!

Part 2

Vietnam 17th of April 2018

Two hours before dinner! It will be exciting to meet everyone again! I put on the dress that has been hanging ready in my hotel room for several days now. Sofia, Sofia's father, Carina and I arrived at the hotel three days ago. The plane ride was long, and we had a day to relax after our trip before spending the next two days sightseeing in the town of Ho Chi Min, formerly Saigon.

We wandered around as if we've arrived in another world. Took in all the sights, sounds and smells and stored them in our hearts. It was strange to watch Carina. She was like a little child again, constantly remembering things from her childhood. Smells and tastes. Language and culture. Music, clothes and colors. The life of the people. All of it opened forgotten and hidden doors within her. She was like a beautiful flower, turning her petals towards the sun after a long, harsh winter.

It was strange to think that it had been a year since the terrorist attack on the underground in London. It felt like it happened yesterday while at the same time it seemed like a lifetime ago. Three days in the dark and the world would never be the same again.

We were all driven to the hospital. Most of us were only lightly wounded and were released from the hospital the following day. Tam was the only one who had to stay for longer. Sofia insisted that we visit him at the hospital and that we should also invite Carina to come visit seeing as she was all

alone when her dad was sick. Sofia and Carina had a special kind of relationship. Sometimes I wondered what it was and how I could get a similar relationship with my own daughter. But they included me in their little fellowship and soon I was a part of it.

Carina visited her father at the hospital every day. We were there every other day. One day, two weeks after we had been rescued, Tam fell asleep for the last time. Carina was there when it happened and was heartbroken when we met her that same night. She'd lost her only family in this world and was inconsolable for several days. She neither slept nor ate.

The same day that Tam died, we brought Carina home with us. Sofia insisted. She took the guest room. We both heard and saw her sorrow. The only one who managed to comfort her was Sofia. She cared a great deal for Carina and could even get her to smile and laugh in her darkest hours. Carina went back to work after about a month. She stayed at our place half of the time, and one day Sofia asked Carina if she wanted to be her grandmother. Carina's eyes welled up with tears and she looked at us parents questioningly. We nodded and waited anxiously.

"Of course I want to, Sofia!" she answered, smiling and teary-eyed.

"Welcome to our family," Sofia said, beaming. "Everything's better when you're around!"

Us parents exchanged shameful glances but agreed.

"Are you just about ready?" my husband, Peter, called out to me, interrupting my train of thought.

"Yes, I'll be right there!"

Peter

17th of April is a day he would not soon forget. He was at work when he heard about the terrorist attack on the news. Everyone in the city was shocked by the news, but he thought that Sofia and I were at school and that I was going to have the super important presentation at work. He therefore didn't worry too much about it. He was wrong! Because of Sofia getting sick, we were in the middle of the madness. But he didn't know that.

He arrived home late, as always, and unlocked the door to our penthouse. No one home. Unusual. He tried calling me. No answer. He tried calling Sofia. No answer. He got anxious and tried again. And again. And again. The anxiousness turned into panic. He called the police, the hospital. No one could give him an answer.

Suddenly, it occurred to him that he could try calling Sofia's teacher. She could confirm that Sofia had fallen ill and that her mother had picked her up just before the explosion happened. The world stopped. An ice-cold fear paralyzed his body. He only vaguely remembers calling work and told them he had to stay at the crisis center for the next few days. They understood.

He sat with other people whose loved ones were missing at a hotel. The hours went by slowly, turned into days. Ice-cold fear and little hope. A lot of thoughts of days that could have been.

Why didn't I spend more time with them?

What do I do if I get them back?

His work, which previously had been the most important thing in his life, was now completely forgotten.

After two days of digging through collapsed tunnels, the rescue crew started to make progress, but it didn't exactly fill Peter with optimism. Dead bodies were transported to the surface. One by one. A lot. Carriage after carriage. They were laid out in rows with white sheets covering them.

Peter went from body to body, searching. Ice-cold fear went with him. He was looking but couldn't find us. He looked through 87 dead bodies and hope almost left him, but he had to know.

Peter was still waiting on news about us. The number of people at the hotel was gradually decreasing, disappearing one by one as their loved ones were found. After three days, only about 20 people were left waiting. Pale. Quiet. As if all hope was lost.

A person came running in. It was the morning of day three, he would know later. The last carriage had been found and the people inside were alive!

Peter and the others didn't believe it at first, but it was true. A new hope was lit, but faint, not daring to believe until they could see it for themselves.

Peter went over to the rescue crew and looked on as one after the other the survivors were extracted and carried to the ambulances to go to the hospital. He saw us just as we were exiting the dark. Covered in dust, shivering and glad to have a second chance at life.

He broke completely, tears streaming down his face. I had never seen him this vulnerable. He was always in control, but now it had left him. He managed to hug us before we were hurried into an ambulance. Peter followed and managed to squeeze in as well.

After two days of intravenous fluids, full physical check-ups, and psychological counseling, we were finally allowed to return home.

Carina and Tam were at the same hospital as us, just down the hall. Peter was allowed to sleep in our room. Sofia went to Carina and Tam as often as she was allowed to by the nurses. In these moments I told Peter about our days down in the dark. He listened intently, a huge contrast to the mumbling behind computer screens all those nights. His phone and computer, which was almost as an extension of his body, were nowhere to be seen.

I told him about the time underground. About the people's stories. He listened. When I told him Sofia's story, he was shaken and touched. He didn't know about his daughter's wisdom either. Without saying anything, we both knew that this had changed everything, but how we could not say.

Carina was strong, but Tam was weak. The doctors said that they would both make it, but I could see something overbearing and mystifying in his gaze, like he knew something. I shook it off. I was not, after all, very good at reading people and observing life around me.

Peter and I had many enjoyable visits to Carina and Tam. Peter got to know them both. He observed Sofia as a child with her heart wide open towards the people from a faraway country. He looked on in wonder, with new eyes, at his daughter. He had never understood how wise their daughter was, or how big of a heart she had.

Peter observed how she held the old man's hand. How the contact between all three of them was without obstacles and how Carina was part of it.

After two days, everyone was released except Tam. He had to stay a while longer. Carina visited him every day and we visited him every other day. Peter understood that Tam had become an important part of our lives in a very short time.

“Are you coming?”

“Yes, I’m coming!”

The present caught up with me again. Sofia and her father stand ready by the door to the hotel room, waiting for me. Well dressed. Sofia in a dress and Peter in a short-sleeved shirt and pants. I have a long dress with thin straps over my shoulders. I look at myself in the mirror. Not bad! A bit tight across the stomach, but besides that pretty good.

We walk down the corridor to Carina’s room. She is ready. We walk together to the restaurant area. Early, but Carina was the host, arriving early was expected. It was an important night. The butterflies in our stomachs tell us we are all excited and looking forward to seeing everyone again. We have booked a table some distance apart from the rest of the restaurant. The temperature is perfect for sitting outside among the exotic plants and palm trees. How beautiful it is here, Carina says, smiling.

The hotel garden is amazing. In England, we are used to beautiful gardens, but this is something else. Narrow, stone walkways snaking through a green abundance of plants and trees. Many have beautiful and exotic flowers that we have never seen in England, except for perhaps in Kew Garden outside London, where exotic greenery was collected and planted during the colonial times. Many of them still there. But back to this garden. The stones trace a pathway between plants and trees until suddenly revealing beautiful, small lakes

with waterfalls and ledges for sunbathing and meditation. There are a lot of different basins and water tables to find during the walk through the garden.

Our table lies a fair distance from the hotel's restaurant, but not too far away. Lights and torches are lit, and the atmosphere is magical, like in an exotic fairytale. The best thing was to sit there under the stars in the warmth and look at the surroundings and get to meet all the beautiful people that we had a special connection to.

We found our seats and talked amongst ourselves while looking excitedly towards the stone-path where the rest of our groups would come from. Some of the younger people had created a group for us survivors in social media. Here we could communicate and keep in touch through the last year. It was a shock for everyone that old Tam died. Especially for Carina. He who took charge and made the best out of our stay underground. That brought the best out in us all, without us really understanding it there and then.

Everyone showed up to his funeral three weeks after we had been rescued. It was a sad, but beautiful ceremony that ended with his cremation. Carina decided that she would return to Vietnam, where she was born, and spread the ashes of her father under the large tree, not far from her grandparents' house. It had been an important part of her grandparents' lives as well as for her parents.

When we heard about her plans, we decided to join her on her journey. She was very touched and grateful, saying she did not feel alone because of us. We were to meet the others tonight at eight. We were the first to arrive and waited anxiously for the others.

Even though we had the online group, we didn't know exactly how the others were doing. Most had had enough trying to get their lives together again, so the group had not seen much use. But we had kept in touch, and we all felt a need to meet again to honor old Tam and to support Carina. We were looking forward to meeting again. One year later.

A waiter showed us to the table. Carina, Sofia, Peter and I sat down. We talked about our experiences that day and were excited to meet the others. Suddenly Sofia said: "everything's so much better after the accident. I'm almost happy it happened!"

I look at her, shocked, and ask her what she means.

"I'm sad that Tam died, Carina, but I'm happy about everything else!"

"What do you mean?" I ask.

"That Carina is my grandma. That we moved to the country. That we have two dogs, a horse, chickens and a cat. And that I'm going to be a big sister! That you and dad talk to each other and to me. And that Mariell is coming to visit. And that Carina lives next door."

Yes, I had to admit that our life had taken a complete turn, become different, but not for worse. Peter worked in the same office in London but commuted by train an hour there and back. Perfect, because he could work on his computer on the train and was done by the time he got home. There, he could play with Sofia, tend to the animals and have a long dinner with me, Sofia and Carina. His girls. He had become more *alive* after the disaster. Laughed more. Showed more happiness in the moment. He was more present.

The birthday gift to Sofia was also coming now, although a bit delayed. A little brother was to arrive just after Sofia's

second birthday after the long stay in the dark. A gift I had never considered or had time for before the disaster happened.

I tried returning to work, but it all seemed so meaningless after all that had happened. My important meeting and presentation had easily been handled by someone else. I burned out and had to take a sick leave, get psychological counseling and help to find out who I was after all that had happened. My view of how the world functioned, of what was important in life and not, had been shaken to its core. I had been listening to other people's stories and understood that there were many ways to understand the world and live one's life. I had concluded that my way was not very impressive. My daughter had shown far more wisdom than myself.

My road back to recovery consisted of counseling with a psychologist, thinking of the things that I loved as a child and youth. Before work, obligations and the grind of the everyday clouded my way. I had always liked nature and animals, especially horses. In my youth I had been quite a good rider and participated in many equestrian events.

We started to think anew. Peter had also been shaken out of his routines and was ready for anything, as long as we did it together. We check properties for sale in the countryside of London. We finally settled on a property an hour southeast of London. Our dream home. A small farm with a house and adjoining cabin, probably used for the workers. A small barn for the animals, outhouse and henhouse. There was also 12 acres of farm area let out to the neighbors.

Carina stayed with us a lot after her father died, so when we moved, we wanted her to come along and live with us at the farm. Thus, she would have a place of her own that was

close to her new family. Sofia loved the new place and the fact that her grandma would be staying with us.

“Someone’s coming!” Sofia said looking at two people walking towards our table.

I follow her gaze and see a young girl and a young man at her side. Karen and David!

We get up and embrace each other for a long time. We can see tears in the eyes of everyone. A powerful meeting with powerful emotions.

“So good to see you again!” Carina looked at them and laughed. “I’m so glad to see you here!”

Sofia jumps excitedly around our first guests. She shows them the drawings she has made of all the strange things she has seen in the streets of the city. She finds the drawings with Karen and David’s name on them and they sit down with Sofia on David’s lap. It appears the three of them have a lot to talk about!

Then we saw two others approaching our table.

“It’s Marco!” Sofia said and ran to meet him. They embraced for a long time and greeted the beautiful woman at his side.

“Did you bring your girlfriend?” Sofia asked.

They were both a bit taken aback, but Marco said they were not boyfriend and girlfriend. Yet. The beautiful woman smiled and shook her head. She was tall, slim and had dark, long hair. Her dress was made of turquoise silk with long turquoise trousers underneath. She was dressed just like the waiters were, in traditional Vietnamese clothing. Marco looked down at Sofia and said. “You know this woman, Sofia!”

Sofia studied her for a long time and said that she did not. The others did too and arrived at the same conclusion.

“I’m Amy, the girl in the hoodie in the train. I didn’t talk much then, so no wonder you don’t recognize me. But I remember all of you. Very well, in fact!” Their reunion had brought tears to her eyes as well and started a new round of hugs. We had to stare at her. She was so different! Amy smiled carefully at everyone and found a seat at the table between David and Marco.

“You have such a pretty dress!” Sofia said.

“Yes, I think so too! I bought it here in Vietnam. The silk dresses they have here are so beautiful that I just had to buy one. I like it even more than the dress I brought with me from England, so choose to wear it here tonight.”

We talked about our travels and the new country and strange country that was so different to England.

We saw four people heading for our table. Two women, a man and a young boy. One of the women wore a hijab. It was Fatima, Annie and Mark!

The man who had accompanied them turned out to be Amir, Fatima’s husband. Sofia bolted out of her chair in excitement. She leapt up to hug them before we even had a chance to say hello. The women were easy to recognize, but not so with Mark. He had also gotten out of his hoodie and smiled at the reunion.

Sofia hugged them all and showed them to their seats. She and Carina had been out to decorate the table earlier in the day. Sofia had made a welcome drawing for everyone and written each of their names. The drawings were new and strange things she had seen on her visit to Vietnam. She’d placed these drawings beside each plate on the beautifully set table.

They had chosen a large round table with room for everyone. Carina did not anticipate that Miss Kitty would join them. Sofia had placed herself on the left side of Carina. She was her hero and she always kept close. From her I sat then Peter, Mark, Annie, Joe, Fatima, Amir, Amy, Marco, Karen and David. They wanted everyone to be able to see one another.

Embraces and tears again. And then everyone was there. Almost everyone. We didn't really think Miss Kitty would be allowed to come along, but Joe certainly was to be there? A waiter came to our table and asked for Carina. He delivered a letter and she stood up to read.

Carina

“It’s a letter from Joe, dated one week ago. He writes that he is in Bangkok and was supposed to meet us here. But he writes that he met someone and that he is staying there. He says he’s sorry, but he had to seize the opportunity. He says hi to everyone and wishes that he could have been here.”

She looks up from the letter, smiles and shakes her head.

“We’d like to have him here, but it’s his choice. Welcome to everybody else! I’m touched and happy that you all wish to see my father back in Vietnam. To the place where all his memories lie. To my village, which we will visit tomorrow. Where I grew up. The last few days have meant a lot to me. I and Sofia’s family have been here for four days already. Sounds and smells have sent me back to my childhood. I’ve remembered things long forgotten and met people that knew me and my family. It has been very enjoyable and also a bit sad. That’s what memories do to us.

“Two weeks after we were rescued, my father died. It was a huge shock. He tried to prepare me for it, but I wouldn’t listen. The doctors said that everything would be fine, but it was as if he knew something we didn’t. And I wouldn’t listen. It was therefore a great shock to me when he died. He was the only one I had. It was just the two of us.

“In my time in the hospital, I got to know Sofia and her family even better. Sofia has been amazing. The littlest of us turned out to have the biggest heart. She chose me to be her grandma and we haven’t lost sight of each other since.”

Everyone around the table applauded and looked at Sofia who smiled back. Carina looked down at her and smiled.

“Sofia and her family invited me to live with them, so that I wouldn’t be completely alone in my father’s apartment. It made a huge difference. I had some rough days, but they were also filled with happiness. The grief washed over in big, overpowering waves. I was lost and crying, but then suddenly I would feel a small hand stroking my cheek. Sofia. She sat close to me. When the wave passed, I could feel a burst of joy to have her in my life. She wanted me to read for her and sat on my lap. It gave me a break from my grief, at least until the next wave hit. The waves were big and came often in the beginning, but after a time the distance between them began to grow. The breaks were longer, and it felt good. It is hard to grieve the loss of someone, but necessary for us to grow. To find a new viewpoint in life and a new meaning. To become whole again. I had to trust that life wished me well, and I had to look for doors to new futures.

“Sofia and her family eventually decided to move out of London. Sofia’s mother, Linda, found no joy in her work anymore, where younger people had taken over her job and done it effortlessly. I hope it’s okay for me to be telling this, Linda?”

Carina looked at me and I nodded and smiled back. She continued.

“Sofia and her family bought a small farm an hour south of London. Linda remembered that she loved to ride horses when she was young. She felt that it would be great to open an equestrian center on the farm. The good news for me was that Sofia refused to move without me coming along. There were lots of little houses on the farm. One of them was a small house where older generations had lived in earlier times. I was offered to stay, and I did.

“Then there was a period of renovating several of the houses and buildings there. The stable was fixed, and two horses moved in. My house was renovated and me and my cat moved in. The henhouse was fixed, and five chickens moved in. But the best news is that Sofia is getting her birthday wish fulfilled. She’s getting a little baby brother this summer!

“Everything that went on with the renovating, moving and the new family, moved my focus away from the overwhelming sorrow. Gradually it dissipated in intensity and strength. A chapter of my life was over, and a new chapter was just starting. This was the new door that was opening. The new didn’t replace the old, but it filled my days with new things. Good things. Different things. I was still in the world. I could be of use. I got a new job as a nurse during the weekends, which meant that I was free during the week. I had lots of time to be with Sofia and help out with the animals. I could never have foreseen that this door would open for me before the disaster on the train!

“But there is something important that I have to tell you. I went to my father’s bank after he died, to close his accounts. I figured that he was not a wealthy man, but there would be some money there. It wasn’t that important. The bank employee looked at his computer and told me that there was a safe deposit box to be delivered to me if Tam, my father, were to die. I was confused but waited patiently as he left to get the contents of the box. I got even more confused when he handed me two letters. One long and one short. I accepted them and went home to read them. I have the letters with me here today. You have become an extended family to me, and I want to share them with you tonight and tomorrow. It’s as if

my father is with us through these letters. I will read the first letter later tonight.

“I wish to hear from you tonight, how you have been the last year. I figure it has left its mark on us, but first we have to eat! I look forward to sharing Vietnamese food traditions with you all and hope you like it. There’s a lot of courses to go through, so the evening will be long, which I’m happy for!”

Carina nodded at one of the waiters who then signaled the kitchen. First came the appetizers. The women who served the food were dressed in the national garb of Vietnam. Silk trousers with long dresses with a high cut on one side. None of the dresses were the same colors. It was an explosion of color. Blue, purple, orange, green, single-colored and patterned.

The first appetizer were Vietnamese spring rolls. We had tasted spring rolls before, but not quite like these. They were sweeter and were filled with chicken and shrimp. Unusual but good tastes. Everyone was talking and enjoying themselves.

We were done with the appetizer when Carina asked if anyone wanted to share how their life had been after the explosion. She looked at Mark.

Mark

Mark sat up in his chair and the waiters retreated to the kitchen. He was different from before. He had lost the hoodie, which he previously used to hide from the world. His huddled figure in the train carriage had been transformed into a tall, blonde and confident man. He folded his napkin and started telling his story.

“I was, as you know, on my way to school. At least two hours late. I was going to drop out. I was stuck in my virtual world. I still would be if it hadn’t happened.

“When we were rescued, I was taken in an ambulance to a hospital in London. I was committed and examined. I had no physical injuries, but they started asking about my life. I said that I was going to drop out of school. They soon discovered that my world revolved around computer games. I was sent to a place where they treat computer addiction. I thought it was nonsense because I wasn’t addicted. I was really very negative and annoyed. I just wanted to be left in peace! I got stressed out that all my friends, my allies in the game, couldn’t get a hold of me for several days! I was so far ahead in the game that I couldn’t afford to miss out! It was social suicide to miss the game!

“Eventually I gave up and sat there, naked, that is to say without a computer, in front of a therapist. He looked at me with kind eyes and asked me what I enjoyed about gaming.”

“Now I was interested! He was asking me about stuff I was good at! I talked about skills, levels and how I could win by buying different aids to get further in the game. He was interested and listened.

“He asked what I would do if I got a virus on my computer. I answered that I would then have to reset the computer and all the software. He listened and nodded. He asked me what I would do if I did something wrong. I answered delete, erase. He nodded and asked if I thought I was addicted to gaming. I didn’t think so. I was in control. I answered a bunch of questions and the results said that I had an addiction. I was extremely frustrated, but deep inside I knew he was right. During the time after, I was very angry and anxious, but it went away after a while.

“My therapist told me that addiction often appeared from trying to cover up fear and emotional pain. The consequences of addiction would often lead to further pain. One could become addicted to anything, he said. Alcohol, games, food, social media, sex, coffee, drugs and love. And many other things.

“What was causing fear and pain in my life? He asked and I had no idea! I was perfectly fine as long as I got to come home and meet my online friends. As long as I wasn’t stuck here!

“He continued talking about there being stuff in life that you could not control. Emotions. Strong emotions. The only way of beating the addiction was to find the cause of them. To go to the root of what the addiction was trying to camouflage. It can be the pain from a divorce or a someone dying, a lost childhood, the feeling of not being loved. But the deepest pain of all is the pain of not being able to deal with life itself. The pain of wanting to belong, but not belonging. The pain of wanting to love, without being able to. The pain of wanting to be loved, without being loved. The pain of feeling broken, without knowing how to fix it. The pain of no one wanting to

be one's friend if they knew the true you. The pain of not feeling important. Addiction covers up all these things.”

~

“What is your fear, Mark? What is your pain?” he looked at me and I was angry. Pissed off! How could he say such things? I had never thought about stuff like that. At the same time, it struck a chord within me. I could feel tears welling up. What was happening?

He sat looking at me, calmly. “You’ve never thought about it, but your subconscious recognizes what I’m saying. What is it, Mark? What are you afraid of? What’s your pain?”

My thoughts went backwards in time. I started remembering things from when I grew up. When all the dads were standing at the sidelines and cheering on the team and I didn’t have anyone. Why did he leave me? What was wrong with me that caused my dad to not want to be with me? I turned from football to computer games. I was angry at mom. My kind mother who was always there.

Then I said, loudly: “My dad didn’t want me!”

It was as if all the air left me. I broke down and cried a lot. I didn’t know this had been such a huge thing in my life, but it had.

I had gotten to the root of the problem, and from there the only way was up. The treatment started and I learned to better understand the different aspects of my life.

They talked to me in my language, the language of the online world, to get me to understand. My self-image was poor and every time I had a negative thought I was to think DELETE and RESET. Replace it with a new, alternative and

positive thought. It was a tall order, but I worked hard at it and soon started seeing results. After a month I had gotten better at it and after three months this mode of thought had become ingrained in me. I had created new and better thought patterns in my brain. Mom often came to visit, and our relationship improved a great deal. That was good. She had been terrified and didn't think she would see me again!

So, one day my therapist asked if maybe I would try to look for my father. My first reaction was that I didn't want to see that bastard ever again! I felt fear and anger. He asked me what I had to lose, and I thought it over for days and days. I discussed it with my mother and eventually decided to do it.

My mom and the therapist found my dad. He was married. He had kids that were both younger and older than me. But he wanted to see me. I was terrified. I wanted to cancel the whole thing, but my therapist calmed me down. He would be there with me.

Then the day came. A tall and grey-haired man in his forties came walking towards me. He reached out a hand in greeting. I took it. Let go. My hands were clammy. Sweating. My heart was racing. We sat down and I looked at him. He could have been anyone. Maybe I had walked past him on the street any number of times.

"I'm pleased to meet you," he said. "I've been thinking of you all this time. More and more as the years have passed. I was a coward. Young. I already had two children from before. Didn't want to destroy my family. I pretended for a long time that you didn't exist. I'm sorry about that. I got two more children and the days became a blur. When the terrorist attack happened and your name came up on the television screen, I was struck by an indescribable sorrow. I broke down and told

my wife everything. She said that if you survived, she would like to meet you. My kids wanted that as well. This is all my fault. You're not to blame for us not having a relationship. I hope you can give me a new chance."

That's how a fragile and careful relationship started with my father. He's alright. Owns a computer business where I'll be able to work when I'm ready. I have a good relationship with my step siblings, but it'll take a while to get there with my father. We have to take it slow.

If it hadn't been for the terrorist attack, I wouldn't have gotten the help I needed. I didn't know I needed it! I had to start my life anew! From the inside out.

I've started believing that I am good enough, and everything I need is in me. That I have resources to draw from and that I can get help if I need it. The most important job is mental training I've done to change my thoughts and how I see myself. The stories from my computer games have, in a sense, been transferred to the real world. I found my skills inside myself and I find tools to aid me in the real world like a job, people that love me and cheer me on. I can think positive thoughts about myself. I can see a future for myself and be able to figure out how to get there.

I still game, but in a more controlled fashion. I can do it as a hobby and keep in touch with my online friends. The difference is that I have a life now and that gaming is just one of my hobbies. I am the main person in my own life, not just when gaming. It feels good.

This trip to Vietnam is like an adventure into another world. My life has a lot of good in store for me, I think! Old Tam was right about a lot of things when he told us about his art of living. I've started to understand that now. You have,

without knowing, affected my life in a positive way. I'm glad to be here with you all!

~

Mark finished his story to spontaneous applause. Everyone wanted to tell him how proud they were of what he had accomplished in just one year. We were cheering for him!

Carina nodded at the waiters that came bringing even more appetizers. Food in a variety of colors and shapes that most of us had never seen before. It was fun to test out new food! We ate and talked for a while.

Then someone tapped their glass and Marco and Amy got up.

I see two beautiful youths standing up at the table. Marco I can easily recognize, but Amy looks to be a completely new person. Like she has come out from under her shell. Like a butterfly emerged from her cocoon, her wings fragile, trying to spread them out. Not quite ready yet to fly, but their colors visible for all to see. Marco stands steady as a mountain by her side. Handsome, tall and safe. Sofia takes my hand and we are ready to hear how their year has been. Marco starts telling their story.

Marco and Amy

“When we were rescued, we were all brought to different hospitals. Amy and I went to the same one, where we stayed in rooms next to each other. When I got to my feet the second day, I went to visit her. She turned away from me and didn’t want to see me, but I went to her anyway. After a few days, she understood that I wasn’t giving up, so she started looking at me more. We were released from the hospital and I continued visiting her. Now at her teacher’s place, who had become her foster mother. She was a kind and happy woman who welcomed me as Amy’s friend.

“I did the talking. Amy only answered in short sentences and seemed to look straight through me. Lost in her own thoughts. But I discovered that something was gradually opening up in her. She could look at me for longer and I caught glimpses of a smile every now and then.”

Amy looked at him and smiled. Marco continued.

“Already when we were stuck underground, I understood that she must have had a difficult time of it. She was hiding inside a shell. At the hospital, they found out about her situation and placed her in a foster home with her teacher. This teacher was the only person that Amy allowed to visit in the hospital. As well as myself, of course. She couldn’t get me to leave.

“Amy’s days consist of half and half therapy and school. I’ve known her for a year now, and she’s become a completely different person. She’s careful when meeting others, but more comfortable with herself. She’s working on healing her emotional wounds, but maybe she’ll tell you more about this herself.”

“But I was on holiday in England and London when the attack happened. My parents in Florence were very worried when I didn’t come home when I said I would. They’d shown up at the airport to pick me up, but I never got on the plane. They tried calling me but got no answer. Again and again. They had seen the news about the attack but had thought that neither they nor I could have been that unlucky.

“They called the crisis center from Italy but found it difficult to travel all the way from Italy without knowing if I was missing or not. I could be in a place without coverage after all. They followed the developments in London closely via the news and by keeping in touch with the crisis center. After three days they got a call from the police in London that I had been rescued. It was as great a day as the day I had been born they would tell me afterwards. They travelled to London straight away and visited me in the hospital for a week. They wanted me to come home with them, but I wanted to stay. Because of Amy. They were disappointed but helped me find a place to stay. Close to Amy’s new family. I promised to come home in the summer.

“I found a job in a store close by and applied for a course in art history in London while thinking of what I wanted to do with my life. Art had always been one of my great interests. Maybe because of my childhood in the cradle of the renaissance, close to the Uffizi museum. But enough about me, over to Amy!”

Amy lifted her gaze carefully and looked around the table.

“That day on the train when the explosion happened was a very dark day for me. I had decided to run away from home. Enough was enough and I didn’t want to go in detail about

my childhood, but abuse and neglect are words that describe it well enough. I crawled into myself, isolated myself from the world and was always aggressive towards anyone that approached me. I didn't trust anyone.

"That's why it was very hard for me when Marco came to visit every day. I didn't respond to him and hoped that he would go away. I used my hoodie as a shield against the outside world. But he didn't give up and at the same time everything changed. I got to live with my teacher and went to therapy. Everywhere I went I met people who were patient and kind. My icy exterior slowly, but surely, started to melt.

"In June, two months after the explosion, Marco invited me to his home in Florence. I was not sure I should go, but my teacher and therapist said I should go. They knew Marco well at this point and trusted him. I had started to trust him too. I took the chance.

"It was just as beautiful as Marco had described it in his story. I did actually listen to your stories, even if it didn't seem like it! I fell in love with his garden and his family. They welcomed me in a way no one had ever done before. Like a daughter! They included me in their life in a natural way. I got chores like having to go gather eggs early in the morning. I loved to get up early and wander the garden, observing how everything came to life to greet the new day. The birds. The plants. The animals. Their dog followed like a shadow and reminded me of Raggen. I felt a joy in my heart! It was an overwhelming feeling that I had previously only felt with Raggen. And now it was coming back.

"I helped out around the house and with the guests, but I had a lot of spare time as well. Marco would show me around Florence and the rest of Tuscany. It was so beautiful! I could

walk along the streets of Florence and listen to Marco tell about the history of the place and how art had changed through the years, without noticing the time fly by.

“We often spoke about Tam when walking through the streets, and how so much had happened in such a short while. Marco was good at making me see things in new ways. One thing I remember especially, was that he compared the thoughts we choose to the tools we need to paint on the canvas that is our life. We can choose brushes and colors with which we want to paint and decide to use light or dark thoughts to create the life we want. Gratitude over the good things in life are thoughts that can give life a new direction. This I learned from Marco’s family as well.

“I could see that they were there for each other and went about their day doing the usual, often boring chores, with enthusiasm. Doing the dishes was something you just had to do, and you could do it happily. When a glass was half-empty, they insisted it was half-full. In any case you could always fill it to be full. I practiced smiling in the mirror every morning and thought about what I was happy about in my life. The list of things that made me happy were growing! When I practiced being happy and looked people in the eye with a smile, something good happened. Almost everyone smiled back. Smiling is contagious! I chose happiness and found it in people, in nature, in art and in the animals on Marco’s family farm. These were good days where I was trying to find myself. I felt myself becoming stronger and the shadows of my past did not catch up to me as often as they used to.

“I was inspired by Marco’s joy of art and he convinced me to take a local course in painting. It was scary, but I met good people that wanted me to succeed and that helped me

along. I learned to paint and new techniques. I was able to shift the focus away from myself for long moments at a time. I went into a bubble of painting. A flow-like state. It felt good. My shoulders lowered and I just was. No fear or anxiety.

“I got praise from the teacher and my fellow students. I discovered new sides of myself. What I created wasn’t half-bad! I returned home to Marco and his family with my first painting. They were as proud as I was and hung the picture in the kitchen where we were always gathering. It felt good. I was doing alright.

“But the summer came to an end and Marco and I traveled back to London. I went back to my teacher and therapy sessions and him to his art classes. We continued to meet several times a week. We were good friends.

“My time in Florence helped me a lot, but there are still many things I have to work on. I remember Tam talking about thought patterns. My thought patterns were a disaster but had only just started changing through meeting so many good people. I didn’t think there was a place for me in the world, but new doors were now starting to open up. I could choose my thoughts and I could gradually change how I did things. I chose to think about my life like a book with different chapters. Chapter one was pitch black, but the good news was that that chapter was over. It ended in the Underground. Chapter two started in the Underground. It wasn’t pretty at first, but after a while doors began to open. I struggled to walk through them, into the unknown, but eventually saw that these doors opened into light, not darkness.

“I had to decide that my first chapter was not going to ruin the rest of the book of my life. It wasn’t easy. The thoughts came all the time. Little things like sounds or smells

would set me off. The fight or flight mechanism in my body. I learned relaxation techniques and to stop the negative thoughts and replace them with new, good thoughts about myself and others. I'm always working at it to ensure that the next chapters turn out as good as possible. I chose to let go and move on. I chose to not give my abuser my thoughts, not now or in the future. He had to stay in chapter one.

“One important thing that I gradually discovered was that my potential was greater than my problems. That other people, and I were stronger than they themselves thought. I couldn't see it earlier because I was stuck inside a heavy fog. There were no visible paths for me to take. I started to make out new paths in the Underground, through your stories. Everything that happened afterwards helped me move on. Good people.

“People talk about the health services as systems and system levels. I didn't meet a system. I met only good people. They helped me to discover that I was playing the role of the victim. I *was* a victim, but I didn't have to stay one. If I wasn't able to change my focus, I would continue to give my abuser power over my own life. I certainly didn't want that! He had taken enough from me! I played the role of the victim with good reason, but it kept me from moving on with my life. Uncovering my own talents and resources, meeting good people, discovering new countries and landscapes changed something inside me. The new gradually replaced the fury, anger and pain. I spent less time on this and more time on discovering my own talents and abilities. I discovered the good aspects of the world and new opportunities for myself.

“I could choose to continue to react with fear, hate and anger or I could choose to practice appreciating myself and

others. I could train myself to make room for love, something that previously had been dangerous. Marco's family didn't know it, but they taught me a lot about this. I observed them and their happiness secretly. Marco is my friend and teaches me something new every time we meet. You don't even know it, you're just you, but you teach me so much about happiness!"

Amy looked at Marco carefully and he smiled back at her.

"I don't know what I want to be. I'm just working on becoming a human again. It's a slow process. I am, like all of you, very happy to be here in Vietnam with you all. Especially you, Carina, who lost your dad. I've given a lot of thought about what he said to us underground. It hit me hard and I practice changing my thought patterns every day. A lot of people are concerned about the natural environment, but I've realized that it's important to recognize the environment inside us as well. In our thoughts. I can choose to think about all the crap earlier in my life and ruin my next chapters or I can use my thoughts constructively to back myself up. I can choose to wallow in the abuse, or I can focus on positive inspiration around me like painting, inspiring things that strengthen people. I can choose."

"I think that's everything from me. It's good to be here and get to know you again!"

Marco smiled, nodded and winked to her while they sat down. Everyone applauded the brave girl and her friend, Marco.

There's certainly been a change in the blue-haired girl in the hoodie, I thought. A wonderful girl had been revealed when she came out of the fog, as she had put it. I was suddenly embarrassed, thinking back, how I had been glad that

she was not my daughter. Behind the masks we people carry, are often vulnerable souls putting on a much harder front for the world to see.

I looked down at Sofia who was smiling at Amy and applauding the girl who had just shared her story. Sofia met everyone with an open and non-judgmental mind. I caught myself thinking that I hope she never loses that.

The waiters were professionals and as soon as those speaking were finished, they came carrying new, exciting dishes. They probably thought we were a happy family celebrating a birthday or something. Except for the fact that we were from many different countries and cultures, we were much like a big family. A family where biology was secondary to the feeling of community.

A tall, tan man in a Hawaii-shirt and shorts, came running between the waiters. He looked to be in a hurry and almost tripped over the waiters walking towards our table. Now I could see who it was! It was Joe!

“Hi! I just about caught you!” He was struggling for breath and wiped away his sweat before walking over to Carina and apologized for being late, but now he was here. Carina smiled, hugged and welcomed him. Joe looked around and waved at everyone.

“I didn’t think you’d come based on the letter you sent,” Carina looked over at him.

“I had a bad experience in the capitol. First good, then bad. My love took off with all my valuables, money passport and credit cards and disappeared from my life! I had to get help from the embassy to get here, but here I am. Good as new and ready for new adventures with you guys!”

Everyone applauded and wished him welcome. The waiters served him multiple dishes at the same time, so he could catch up with the others. He soon caught up. He probably had not eaten for quite a while.

Then Fatima stood up.

Fatima

“My husband Amir and I are very happy to be here with you all. I told him all about our days underground and about each of you, about your stories and how they affected me. He’s been looking forward to meeting you and now we’re finally here!

“Carina, you challenged us to tell you about how the last year has been. It’s been very strange, to be honest. I’ll start with telling about Amir and how his fear grew when he figured that I may have been trapped or even killed in the explosion. As others here have already told, he got in touch with the crisis center. He looked through the dead without finding me. He was filled with panic and grief. He thought about all the years we had shared as friends under the same roof and discovered that he missed me very much. Everything else disappeared in this extreme situation, but he found some comfort in the company of the others waiting for news of their loved ones.

“They missed me at the nursing home. The old people asked for me and missed me. My colleagues started noticing more and more everything I had been doing there. When things were being done quietly, without whining about it, it didn’t really get noticed. But when these tasks were no longer being done by me, they did notice. This was fine by me as long as everyone was taken care of and as long as I knew that I was doing a good job. In my country, it’s very important to treat old people with respect. I really enjoy being responsible for them. They were very worried about me and missed me more than they had expected.

“When I was rescued from the train alive, Amir was overjoyed and thankful. He sat by my hospital bed for days, never leaving my side. He slept in a chair by my bed. We talked a lot, more than we had done in years. You may remember how I compared love to a cauldron of water being heated up; it slowly started to warm. We discovered that we were more fond of each other than we had previously thought and started talking about our future together.

“When I was released from the hospital, I soon began working again. Everyone was happy to see me again and I was happy to see them. I shared with them some, but not all, of your stories. They live in my heart. My colleagues have become much nicer. Previously they didn’t really see me. They would do fun stuff together without including me. They probably thought that because I wear a hijab, I was oppressed and not allowed to go out. That’s not the case for me, but for some it is. They started asking if I wanted to go out for dinner with them. I wanted that very much. They were mostly very nice and kind. I learned from them and they learned from me. We righted quite a few prejudices by meeting in this way.

“My private life has also changed. Amir is very attentive and can’t do enough for me. I am a happier person and feel that London has become more of a home for me than Afghanistan. I still miss my family, but I have started putting down roots in my new home country.

“There’s something I’ve been thinking about a lot, that I have to tell you all. I was very sad when I heard that the cause of the explosion was a terror attack executed by people born close to my home country. I wish to apologize!”

“My dear, you have nothing to apologize for! You were a victim of that act just as we all were!” David spontaneously

erupted. He had been listening intently and we everyone nodded in agreement.

She smiled at him and continued: “Thank you, David! Before I was sent to England to get married, I was told that I was going to a country of infidels. I mustn’t become like them. I was scared of going but met a lot of good people that helped me understand this new society. There was a lot to learn, but after a while I could look upon both the old and the new with a fresh perspective. The main reason for this was that I got an education and started to think more of my own thoughts. But not everything was great in this new country. Not a day went by without people staring or talking angrily about me because I wore a hijab.

“But I still learned a lot at school about taking care of old and helpless people. I learned that everyone has an infinite value just because they’re born and no matter where they come from. I liked these values a lot, and I thought about how people acted in my old country and in this new one. I could find faults in both countries, but if everyone has an infinite value, then the solution for our problems can’t be to bomb people, like the west does, or commit terror attacks like people from my country and others do?

“I’ve thought about how we only have *one* world to share, so shouldn’t we be able to live in peace? Even if our culture, religion and languages are different? Getting to know you and becoming friends with different people, has shown me that we must dare to cross borders in our own lives to better understand and get to know *the others*. The others are dangerous as long as we are strangers to one another. We are afraid of each other until we get to know one another. We have to tear down the walls between people and keep the dream of peace

alive. I think to myself: what can I do to keep the seed of peace alive? What we're doing here is a good start, even if we are really here for Tam and Carina. I think old Tam would be happy to see us now!"

Joe had been listening for a long time but said: "I like Muslims now that I've gotten to know you and Carina!"

"Well, I'm not exactly a Muslim," Carina smiled.

"You're immigrants and I like you!"

"That's good, Joe!" Carina looks at Joe and says: "I came to England as a child, so surely I have to be considered English now? Even so, you're the immigrant here today!" Carina smiled wryly at Joe.

"That's different. I'm on holiday, not an immigrant! Considering it, you're probably English now, Carina. I'm just saying I've taken a liking to people from other countries."

"You were welcomed as a foreigner here, except for the person who stole your stuff." Marco winked at him.

"That's completely different. I expect to be treated well when I am a visitor in another country." Joe looks at Marco.

"Like you treat those who come to your country?" Marco responds.

Fatima interrupts the argument and says that she's not done telling her story. Everyone turns to her.

"I have some very good news. In September we will be receiving a fantastic gift. A little girl is on the way. I just had to tell you all, you're like family! Everything I've spoken about values and peace has gained even more importance now that we have this gift coming. Innocent children have the right to grow up in a world at peace. Outer peace and inner peace. I wish that everyone who has lost their dream of peace shall be given new hope."

Sofia shot up from her chair and screamed excitedly, she ran around the table and hugged Fatima. Everyone applauded and Amir had tears in his eyes. Everyone around the table shared in Fatima and Amir's joy. Sofia returned to her seat and Fatima continued.

"Rather than losing me, as he feared, Amir will now have two women in the house! I am so excited and think a lot about all the joy that's in store for us. I want to bring the baby to the nursing home. I think they need to see new people. Children. To not only be with other old people. In my culture it's what we do. I've heard of young mothers taking their babies with them to nursing homes. They call themselves the baby bunch! The old people are so happy to meet them. I think that they understand that all children are important and that no one is born in vain. Everyone has a life and a mission to fulfill, just like old Tam told us about. He taught me a lot and I'm grateful to be here to remember him together with you all!"

Fatima looked around at everyone, smiling and, nodding at Carina, she sat down. Everyone applauded again. Amir smiled at her and held his arm around her.

New dishes were being served. I had lost count, but there had to be at least seven or eight dishes now. Carina must have read my thoughts and said that we were just starting on the desserts.

"There will be three different desserts to try from my country. I hope that's alright. There's not a huge amount on every plate after all, but I can see that you are all getting full. I'm just happy to be able to share so many of the dishes from my childhood."

I smiled back and nodded at her. I looked at my husband, Peter, who appeared to be just as stuffed as I was.

“Let’s do it!” He smiled back at me.

I nodded and the dessert came, and we got to experience new tastes and spices. None of which we were accustomed to, but it was delicious!

Carina turned to Joe who it appeared was not eating as enthusiastically as was common for him. He takes a thoughtful break and says: “I’m the same as I ever was. Straight up from the Underground, to the hospital and then odd jobs after that. Don’t have time to think! If you keep busy, you don’t need to think much. But I am happy that Miss Kitty made it! Couldn’t have carried on without her. She’s so happy when I return from work at night. She doesn’t fuss about feelings and all that. She likes to watch the news with me and has a special interest in foreign affairs. We’re always in agreement when it comes to politics and about which channel to watch.”

“I’m completely new, by the way! Paid for by the foreign ministry!” He looks down at himself. The Hawaii shirt, shorts and sandals. The big golden chain that he usually wore beneath a buttoned-down shirt was gone. No doubt stolen along with his other valuables.

Carina nodded and smiled at him. I, Peter and Sofia knew that there was more to Joe than he let on. He was, after all, a frequent guest of Carina. Joe and Miss Kitty had visited both us and Carina for many weekends and we had noticed that his restlessness was decreasing. He was very handy and helped us out a lot on the farm. He was also good at getting himself into trouble on short notice, but he always got back up again.

Carina looked in the direction of Annie, the shy sixteen-year-old girl that you could mistake for a young woman. Both on the inside and outside. She looked more like twenty and behaved like she was forty. Quiet and invisible but with a ready smile and sparkle in her eyes.

“How have you been the last year, Annie?”

Annie was a bit embarrassed, but quickly composed herself and started telling her story.

Annie

“Like for you, there was quite the commotion when our family discovered that we were stuck underground. Our grandmother, who lives two floors up, was the first to find out. And, of course, my brother. He moved in with grandma and my father tried to keep in touch with the crisis center, but he used alcohol to deal with the anxiety and so grandma was the one in charge.

“I was sent to the same hospital as Fatima and Mark. I got to know them better and we’ve kept in touch this last year. In the hospital they soon found out – like with you, Mark – that there were some troubles at home. Child protective services got involved and our father agreed that grandma would be our foster mother. We live with her now and visit dad when he’s sober and able.

“I got a lot of help from the therapist at the hospital and don’t feel like I have to be responsible for everything anymore. At home, grandma is in charge and I can tell both her and my therapist about how I’ve been and how I am. I thought a lot about what Tam said and discussed it with my therapist. I came to the conclusion that my childhood, before the explosion, is an experience that I can learn from. I’ve experienced how to *not* live my life. I couldn’t affect my parents’ choices, but I can decide my own.

“My therapist taught me that my childhood is a blueprint for my adult life and that I don’t make conscious choices. I risk repeating the choices my parents made. It’s this way of living that is our only experience when becoming adults, and it’s easy to repeat it. If you’ve grown up in a safe family, it’s

good to repeat it, but if your childhood has been filled with negativity, you have to do better.

“The good news is that we can change these patterns in our own lives, the therapist told me. We have to be very conscious of learning anew how we want to live our lives as adults. What did we dream of when we were growing up? What did we miss? This is a good base for doing things differently. We had to learn to solve our problems and challenges in different ways than our parents had done. I practice this with my grandma, my therapist and with my friends. We talk it out instead of trying to hide or forget it.

“What I thought I would never be able to do was to forgive my parents for my lost childhood. But I think I’ve managed to do that now. It’s not about forgetting about it or saying that it’s okay what happened, it’s about being able to get the weight off of one’s shoulders. Be free and move on. If I spend my time being angry, I will ruin my present. I don’t want my past to get in the way of my present or my future! I’ve had enough problems and responsibilities and I want to be free. When I choose to forgive my father, it means that I recognize that he has had such a difficult life that he has not been able to be a good father for us. He had a difficult childhood himself and never managed to change. He’s repeated what he himself experienced. I won’t!

“I want to use my experiences to change my life as an adult. I practice having good days with my grandmother and brother. It gives me experience relating to how one can live together under one roof. I relish feeling safe and not bearing all the responsibility of my brother. I’ve made friends that I can invite back home, and I’ve taken up hobbies that I enjoy. I’m very fond of music and am learning how to play the

guitar. I've also started taking swimming lessons with my friends. Sometimes we watch movies together. Mark and I are friends and he helps me and grandma with computer stuff. He's really good at it!"

She looks over at Mark and he looks down at his plate.

"I enjoy visiting you! Your grandmother always makes the best hot chocolate with cream. It's my favorite!"

"We love it when you come over! Your mother and grandma have also gotten to be good friends. They needed someone to talk to about their experiences when we were missing underground.

"I'm doing a lot better now and am happy to be here. I have never been abroad before, so this has been an adventure from the first moment I stepped onboard the plane. Meeting you has helped me to forgive. Because I see that there are so many people with difficult pasts. In social media, everything looks perfect, but real life is not like that. Life isn't fair and it's up to chance if our parents are good or bad. It's up to us to make the best out of the life we have.

"You grew up with grandparents for most of your life, Carina." Annie looks over at her and smiles, "I think I'm done talking about myself now."

Everyone applauded her. We saw a girl that was more visible and in the process of taking her place on the stage of life. We cheered for her!

Karen

“Carina challenged us to tell about what’s been happening in our life since we were last together. My answer is: everything!

“Little did I know, when waking up that morning, that the world I knew would be gone after that stay underground. When I got back to the surface, the world looked *different*. I think the visible world was the same, but what had changed was how I looked at it. I was very confused. Everything I had thought and believed about myself and my life had been turned on its head down there in the dark. I had heard your stories and they had hit me right in my heart. Everything I had believed seemed less important compared to be giving a new chance at life. The foundation had been blown away right under my feet.

“I had discovered that many of you had led very difficult lives. My expectations of life had been constructed inside my head. How you viewed and thought about life fascinated me. David and Tam’s ways of thinking were completely new to me. I didn’t know that it was possible to view the world in new and different ways. I thought my way was the *right* way, but I discovered that it was just *my* reality. My focus had been on what others thought of me. I had never tried to sit down and listen to other people’s inner life.

“I had tried to be perfect because I believed that was what the world around me, the others, wanted me to be. Why did I do this? When I went to the root of these thoughts, I found out that it was because I wanted to be loved and admired. When I saw how you, Carina, loved old Tam, who was frail and wrinkled, I understood that love is about being fond of who’s on the inside. In one’s self and in other people.

When I tried shifting my perspective, I saw that it had to be very difficult to live with someone as selfish as myself. Who were only interested in appearances and used all her time on exactly that. It was way more interesting to spend time with another person who was interesting on the inside. Like David and Tam, for instance. I could forget myself for long periods at a time when listening to their thoughts about life and the world.

“When we were rescued from the train, I held on tightly to David’s arm. I think he helped me more than I helped him. I was his eyes coming out. And he was mine! We got in the same ambulance and went to the same hospital. We even shared the same room because I was so afraid. He was not! He lived every day in the dark and this day was not that unlike any other. During the stay at the hospital and in the time afterwards, we were together almost all the time. It’s incredible he didn’t get sick of me! He had something that I wanted to understand and find myself. Something on the inside that I was very fascinated by. Something that was not shrouded in darkness. A sense of calm, security and wisdom that I had never encountered before. Maybe he had the key to a better life.

“David said he enjoyed being with me. It was exciting for him to search for the diamond inside me. Together, we had to dig through many layers of earth and bedrock to find it. The change is painful. The diamond had to endure heat, pain and be *refined*. I had lost my old identity and control over myself and my life. I was in a no man’s land searching for solid footing. This led to many long talks, but we had time. In the hospital and afterwards.

“Our families had been sick with worry. They had also been at the crisis center along with the others and had started to lose hope that we would be found alive. They had looked on as the rescue crew had brought out one lifeless body after another. They had looked through the dead to find us. Now they were only waiting for our bodies to be brought up.

“They were ecstatic when they found a carriage with people alive. It was as if we were given the gift of life anew! Both for our families and ourselves. They visited us at the hospital every day and got to know each other. When they came to visit, we shared in our joy. When they left, David and I started talking and philosophizing. He was the best therapist I could have asked for. He asked questions, challenged me and turned everything I knew on its head. It was exhausting, but I was determined to understand.

“Come May I completed my exams as planned. I didn’t get top marks this time, but they were good enough. I practiced good enough. It was difficult and stressful to begin with. I went to therapy and worked on myself. I declined my spot in law school. I wanted to fall into place and understand myself first. This last year I worked as an assistant at an activity center for people with intellectual disabilities. I’ve grown very fond of them. They are delightfully imperfect and have the biggest hearts! Just like I want to become! They were excited to meet me whether I’d put on make-up or not. They were happy anyway! They didn’t care if I had put on a pound or two. They’ve taught me a lot about what’s important in life. The same goes for David and, of course, Tam, who we’re here to remember today.

“My parents look at me, puzzled. I can see it out of the corner of my eyes when they don’t think I’m looking. The girl

who went out down into the Underground that day is not the same one that came back up. We have more time for each other now and talk more. They look like they're happy with the change.

“The most important thing I’ve learnt this past year is that I have to let go of all the things I previously *had* to do and replace them with things that are good for me. David and my job working with youth with intellectual disabilities. I am experiencing a happiness that I haven’t felt for a long time. A weight has been lifted off my shoulders and I practice drinking my coffee alone or with others, without worrying about all the things I have to do.

“I think law school is still what I want to do, but I look at it in a different way from before. My motivation before was to feel accomplished and successful. Now I want to do it to contribute to society and help people who may not afford legal aid. My focus has shifted to helping other people. It’s been good for me to be able to shift my focus away from myself, something David and his passion for other people have contributed to. I think that’s everything about me.”

Karen sat down and we applauded her and commented on how she had developed the last year. She smiled and said we had all contributed to it.

David got up and wanted to be the next to tell his story.

David

“I’m so happy to *see* all of you again! You have all had an impact on my life and I’ve been excited to learn how you all have been doing! As you no doubt learned from Karen’s story, she’s the one I’ve been keeping most in touch with this last year. She has been through a personal transformation that’s been very inspiring to follow. Now I can *see* who she is, and I like what I *see*! Myself, I’m not that different from before, but the experience gave me many thoughts to consider. Since I’m very concerned with societal issues, I’ve been asking myself some big questions, like: why do young people imprison themselves in countries where they have great personal and economic freedoms? Why do some people commit acts of terrorism?

“After the Second World War people came together to fight poverty and to rebuild Europe. We ensured that everyone had work as well as adequate housing and education for everyone. In the 60s and 70s we fought for women’s rights, sexual liberation and equal pay for equal work. During all this, people worked together as a community. In the workplace, in the housing cooperative and in different organizations. You belonged to a community of people who all fought for something bigger than themselves. Young people today got all this for free but feel miserable and alone. Many crawl into their shell and stay there.

“What happened? Can great freedom feel like loneliness? It’s up to *me* whether I succeed or fail in life. It’s *dangerous* to make choices. The fear of choosing wrong and not being successful leads to inaction. To choose one thing means not choosing something else. In addition, social media presents a

perfect image of people that many young people interpret as truth and feel that they can never live up to.

“I think that seeing that everyone else is perfect leads to one feeling like a failure. You create two lives. One life with a fragile self-image which is only visible behind closed doors and one life online where you’re always posing for the camera. But I also read blogs that remind me a lot of what people used to write in their private diaries that were locked away in drawers. Now, our deepest secrets lie open and at the same time creates demands on us on how life should be lived.

“A paradox is that in a time where we have all these ways of communicating with each other, people have never felt more alone. You can find groups of depressed people congregating online, marinating in their own misery. They forget that when you spend time focusing on something, you create more of it. So, when these kinds of groups are not focused on finding solutions, they only serve to make things worse. This artificial image of the world makes normal people feel like losers. What they think parents, friends, school and society expects of them become unachievable demands that lead to many people just giving up. They become depressed. The parents’ role is to be a counterweight to the external demands of perfectionism and to love them for who they *are*, not what they do. We are human beings, not human doings.

“What does it say about our society when half of a group of friends have mental health issues? What changes have happened in our society to affect young people in this way?

“From being an industrial society, we’ve progressed to a knowledge-based society, where the whole world is instantly accessible. The amount of knowledge available is staggering and it’s easy to get lost in it all. There will always be someone

smarter, more handsome and cooler. The curse of comparison is an easy trap to fall into. We must encourage technological developments, and there's as many positives with new technology as there are downsides. Just the same, we need people, politicians, that have the spine to put the human first and to let technology and economics be tools for the people's lives and communities."

David barely paused to catch his breath before continuing on.

"What abilities do we need to meet the demands of this new kind of society? Technological societies, knowledge-based societies, human capital. I would like to tell you about the myth of the Roman goddess Minerva. Minerva was the guardian of knowledge and served as a reminder of how knowledge could be a double-edged sword. Minerva's owl always took flight at dusk, after the day's work had been done. When all is quiet, she provides insight, creating a sudden understanding of things that were said or done during the day. It is in these quiet hours that knowledge can be transformed into wisdom and all the pieces fall into place."

Marco listened closely and said: "In Rome, a few hours from where I live, there's a piazza, an open square that's called Piazza della Minerva! There's a strange Egyptian obelisk held up by an elephant in the middle of the square. I think it was made by Bernini in the 17th century."

"That's right. It was made to show the weight of knowledge. Carrying knowledge requires a strong back. The elephant is carrying the knowledge in this instance and on the obelisk there is inscribed the phrase *robustae mentis* meaning a robust mind. So, to carry knowledge requires a strong and *insightful* mind. Knowledge can be a blessing or a curse. Just

imagine the invention of dynamite. Great for construction but dreadful in war. That's why we have the Nobel Peace Prize, by the way. Alfred Nobel discovered that his inventions could have catastrophic consequences in the wrong hands.

"The story of Minerva and the obelisk with the elephant tells us that knowledge is important, but not without wisdom and ethics, used for the betterment of mankind. Technological and knowledge-based societies, yes, please, but not without leaders and governments that have the necessary insight and that chooses to use it for good.

"The economic management model, new public management, that has been embraced in large parts of the western world, opens the doors for market liberalism and trade across borders. A model that may have contributed to wealth in the west but also one that views the human as a product. Adam Smith, the founder of this model laid down as a prerequisite for this model a foundation based on ethical thinking. Without this foundation, the system would not work. Could it be that in the race for profits, that we have forgotten all about this foundation? Are we using the model to make people's lives better?

"I'm just wondering what it does to us when humans are the product. It's wrong from the start. No people are alike. People are measured on their monetary worth. It is ethically dangerous. When do I become too costly? When can I no longer be afforded? Is it when I'm retired? When I get sick? Or if I get handicapped? Are children too expensive? Old people? Then, surely, we can't have these groupings anymore. When economics becomes the measure of man, the ethical values are set aside. This is knowledge without insight, when people have created a game of economics that leads to people

no longer fitting in anymore. I guess that was quite a long lecture.”

“I think it’s very exciting to listen to what you think about people and the society we live in!” Karen looks up at David and smiles. We nod and applaud the young man.

“I don’t understand how you can have so many thoughts in your head at the same time!” Joe has taken a break from eating.

“I can barely get from one thing to the next, taking one day at a time! My only worry right now is how Miss Kitty is doing back home!”

Everyone laughs at Joe’s comments.

We continue talking amongst ourselves and eating. Mostly talking, less so eating. The mood is great. Some discuss David’s lecture and others discuss other things around the table.

The last dessert is served, and Carina taps her glass to get our attention.

“We’ve been together all night and enjoyed a lot of good food and even better conversations. I am *so* happy that you’re here and now the time has come for me to share the first letter from my father with you. As you know, there were three of us in the Underground that didn’t tell their story at the time. One was Amy, who has told us about herself tonight, the other was Linda, Sofia’s mother who also told us her story tonight. The third was my father, Tam, who I thought I knew. I did know him well enough, but I didn’t know his whole story. I learned about it in the first letter that I opened when I had been in the bank to close his accounts. Now I want to share with you, my new family, my father’s story.”

The first letter

If you're reading this letter, I'm not in the physical world anymore. I wanted you to know more about my background, which you know I couldn't tell you about when you were growing up. You asked me several times before you gave up. You saw that it made me sad and quiet. I laid a lid on everything to survive. Parts of the story you're about to read are very beautiful but other parts are so dark that I'm having trouble writing this letter to you. But you have to know.

I don't think you know that I'm originally from Burma, or Myanmar as it was called back then. I was born there in 1938, two years before World War II broke out. Back then, Myanmar was an English colony and many Englishmen were stationed there. My parents worked for the English. My mother was a maid and my father an office worker that wrote letters and documents, delivered the mail and acted as a sort of cultural link between the English and the Myanmar culture. I came to know that he enjoyed a great deal of trust from the English.

I had a care-free childhood with one foot in the culture of our country and the other in the culture of the English. Early each morning I would get up and go to the local school which was run by Buddhist monks. In the beginning I thought they were strange. Shaven heads and orange clothes. After a while I learned to appreciate them and our local school. I ran to school with my friends from the village.

School was out early in the day, but when I came home, the classes in the English school was just starting. You have to understand, Carina, that our schools were not like in England. Because of the heat, there were no walls, only pillars holding up a thin roof. It meant that I could climb to the top of my favorite tree and spy on the English school. I had a good memory and it didn't take long for me to learn the English language. When I mastered the language, it didn't take long for me to teach myself all the strange subjects at this peculiar school. So you could say that I

attended two schools. One local and one English. In the afternoon I played with both English and local children from the village.

These years were care-free and very good for me. I didn't understand what colonialism was, or what war was, and I didn't know what my future would bring.

I overheard the adults talking about war in Europe and after some time we were at war with Japan, but the base where the Englishmen lived, where I grew up, was not affected.

In Myanmar, a lot of people worked for independence. An important man, general Aung San, was murdered the previous year while working to form the Burmese union. The pressure on England to grant us independence came to a head in 1948 and the English withdrew. I was ten years old and everything changed.

We had to move to our family in the countryside. Here, my father got work farming the rice paddies. I missed life in the village where I grew up, but at least we had each other. In the morning I would go to the local Buddhist school and afterwards I would help my father with his work.

In 1956 I got to travel to the capital of Rangoon, now called Nay Pyi Taw, about 300 kilometers north of Yangon, to attend the university. I was to study social studies, politics and journalism. I lived there for four years before getting a job in a newspaper that supported Aung San's work for a free and independent Burma. The country was characterized by unrest due to there not being anyone to bring the country together after the death of Aung San. I wrote many articles and features that were on print both in Burma (Myanmar) and abroad, especially in England. In 1962 the military had had enough of the unrest and disagreements and staged a military coup. Now the darkest chapter in Burma's history, and mine, started.

It was a time of surveillance, forced labor, executions without trials, ethnic cleansing and the forced relocation of entire peoples. Me and my parents were some of the first to be taken. My parents had been working

for the English, and was executed without a trial. I had exposed myself as a dissident through my articles and was to be shot as well, but I was young and healthy and was sent to do hard labor instead.

I was 24 years old and had been sent to a death camp, where the conditions were just like the concentration camps of World War II, which I know you've read about. Long days, almost no food, torture, lashings and murder. Every day I was greeted with death. Every night I felt relieved to still be alive. Every morning I felt grief for the loss of human value and compassion.

There were, however, some flashes of light in the dark. The man sharing his small ration of food with a sick prisoner, the stories we told about the good old times. We did not talk about the future. We didn't think we had a place in it. All the same, there was a small seed of hope. A seed that refused to let the harshness of winter win. Our thoughts were free, even if our bodies were held prisoner. An inner world that our captors could not control. This world kept me going. Those who didn't consider this world soon lost the battle.

I understood that there was only one way of surviving. I had to escape, no matter how impossible it might seem. After two years I got my chance.

A riot broke out while we were working. Our guards had to help stop the uprising. I felt that it was now or never. I was just skin and bones and managed to crawl under the barbed-wire fence and disappeared into the jungle.

I was not the only one to seize the opportunity and soon a large manhunt with dogs was underway. Those found were shot immediately. I heard the sounds behind me and found the strength to carry on. What eventually saved me was a river. There, I found a large branch full of leaves. I dragged it out into the river, got on top and covered myself with branches. Thus, I floated down the river. Exhausted, hurt, but free. The tree hid me just like when I was a child and spied on the English school

from the branches. I could hear the guards with their dogs by the river, but I was safe. I quietly floated downstream towards freedom.

I had no energy left and just lay there with my eyes closed while the river took me away. After a while, my thoughts returned to me and I started figuring out where I was. I had a vague idea of where I was being held captive. If I was not mistaken, I was heading down the river Salween. At some point the river would take me to the border between Burma and Thailand. I had to watch the riverbeds closely and figure out when to go ashore — on the correct side!

After two days I finally crawled ashore on the riverbank on the Thailand side. I promptly fell asleep. Exhausted.

When I woke up, I was inside a house. Someone had found me and taken me to their home. I had dry clothes and lay on a sleeping mat. They gave me some food, but I threw it up. My stomach couldn't handle it. They tried soup. Little by little. Gradually I recovered. After five months I was strong enough to work and I started thinking about my future.

The rest of my travels weren't as exciting. The short story is that I crisscrossed across Thailand. I worked, traveled, worked and traveled. Eventually I ended up in Vietnam. In the neighboring village to where you grew up. I got a job there and was thinking of moving on again like the restless soul I had become.

After work one afternoon I was strolling along the rice paddies between the villages. I saw a huge, beautiful tree and walked towards it. Just when I was coming up to it, I stopped. There was someone there.

The most beautiful girl I had ever seen. She was sitting, leaning into the trunk of the tree and reading a book. Sometimes she smiled as she read and other times her face was serious. I studied her shifting expressions and it was almost as if I could read the book through her face.

I don't know how long I had been standing there when she suddenly looked up and saw me. The strange thing was that she was not afraid.

She smiled at me and asked me where I was from. She hadn't seen me before. I was usually a fast talker but found myself stuttering as if I hadn't talked in weeks. After a while I managed to explain that I was working in the rice paddies of the neighboring village but that I was originally from Burma. Her eyes turned serious like she intuitively understood my suffering. She asked if I wanted to sit with her, she was just about to eat some food she'd brought. Did I want to join her? We sat there under the tree the entire afternoon. That afternoon and every following afternoon after work.

That's how I got to know you mother, Carina. After almost two years, your grandparents allowed us to get married. It was a simple village wedding without many guests. I didn't have any relatives after all, and your mother only had two siblings that were younger than her. We lived in a room of your grandparents' house. They were good people and we enjoyed our time with them. Those two years with your mother were the best years of my life.

Some months after we got married, we discovered that your mother was expecting. We were overjoyed and excited. At night we would dream of you and how our life was going to be. We knew that the war was going on, but the fighting was far away from where we lived, so we thought ourselves safe and that it would pass. It didn't go that way.

Two months before you were born, I was conscripted. Because I was living in Vietnam, I had to do my duty for the country. A new hell began for me and the other soldiers. This is the other chapter of my life that I cannot talk about in detail. Death and suffering once more became my life. The battles were hard, and we had to stay hidden in the jungle for long periods at a time. There we had an advantage over our enemy, who didn't know the jungle like we did with all its dangers, hiding places and what could be safely eaten. This knowledge saved the lives of many of us.

Still I was captured. The conditions were slightly better than in Burma, but far from good. What kept me going was the thought of you

and your mother. I wanted to meet my child and I wanted to get back to your mother. The war went on and didn't exactly lessen in its intensity. I realized that if I were to ever see you again, I would have to escape.

Once again, I was on the run in the cover of darkness. I knew that if I were to be captured, I would be shot for desertion. Therefore, I had to leave the country. I had previously heard about people escaping by boat. That was to be our solution as well.

I arrived in the village late at night. We met then, but you, of course, didn't recognize me. I was overjoyed to meet you but devastated when I learned that your mother had died during childbirth. I had to stay hidden to plan our escape and to get over the shock of losing your mother.

The rest of the story you already know. They called us boat refugees. A fresh start in a new country. The challenge for you was learning a new language, getting to know the new society and getting a job was mine. We were strangers in a strange land. These challenges brought us closer together. You gradually accepted me as your father and life went on. We were still outsiders, you and I. You preferred my company in your spare time and only seldom went out with your friends. I understood that making new friends was hard and you kept to yourself. You no doubt grieved over the loss of your grandparents and over the loss of your childhood paradise. Even so, you were dutiful at school and I was very proud of you when you became a nurse.

I hope the missing pieces in the story of us fall into place as you read this letter. You are the most important person in my life, and I have had some good years in England together with you.

Love you!

Dad.

~

Carina looked up from the letter and regarded the rest of us sitting at the table. We just sat there. Quiet. For a long time. My heart wept for old Tam and his experiences. We had to wait for the lumps in our throats to go away before any one of us could speak. Carina had read the letter many times and just sat there quietly. She didn't have any more tears.

"Wow, what a story!" David was the first to speak up. "I admired old Tam down there, but now I am overwhelmed with the fact that you can recover from something like that! I don't know what else to say. A fantastic gift to you, Carina!"

"Yes, it was both nice and sad to read. I reacted much the same way as you did, David. I had to read it little by little, taking breaks before diving into it again."

"I would think such experiences would destroy you if you were not able to turn them into wisdom and insight. Tam certainly managed it, even if he wasn't able to talk about all the horrible things he experienced." Marco said, looking over at Carina.

"I'm shocked by your father's story, Carina!" Karen looked at Carina and continued: "I'm sorry for all the painful things he experienced, and a bit embarrassed over what I saw as a huge problem in my own life before meeting him. Despite that, he understood me. One sentence from his letter stuck with me. I went like this: the body was imprisoned but the mind was free. In my case, it was the opposite: my body was free, but my thoughts were imprisoned. In a prison of my own making, that I had placed myself in. Tam talked about this. I listened and only partly understood. Now I understand fully what he meant!"

Everyone nodded but sat quietly. Even Joe was at a loss of words.

“Poor Tam! I’m glad that he was my friend and that I visited him nearly every day at the hospital!” Sofia had gotten up from her seat.

We had forgotten that the letter probably was not suitable for a child, but she didn’t seem to mind.

“You are my family, Carina. I will look after you and always help you remember your dad!”

Sofia took Carina’s hand. They smiled at each other.

“Can I sleep with Carina tonight?”

Sofia looked over at her parents.

“You’ll have to ask Carina.” I said.

Carina gave Sofia a big hug and said that she would love to. Especially tonight!

We were finished with our last dessert and almost painfully full. The pensive mood that had taken over the gathering made the party come to a natural end. It was almost midnight, and some had traveled far and were getting tired. Carina once again thanked everyone for coming and said that they would have an important, sad and happy day to look forward to tomorrow. Sad because it was a last goodbye and happy because they were all there with her.

“I would like for us to meet in the lobby tomorrow at four. There will be a van to take us to my village and to the great tree that my father told about. The tree where he met my mother and where I played as a child. I look forward to showing you this place and spreading his ashes. I think he would have wanted it this way. I appreciate you wanting to do this with me. I can’t thank you enough for that. We will be at the tree just before sunset. The sky is usually beautiful with color then and it will be a good time to spread his ashes.

Maybe Minerva's owl will fly past?" She turns to David and smiles. As if he knows, he nods back at her.

"Thanks everyone and goodnight!"

The party breaks up and everyone goes to their rooms. The night is warm and soft as velvet, filled with mysterious noises. Everyone thinks about the next day and what it might bring as they fall asleep.

The day after. By the tree. To spread the ashes.

We're here. By the tree on the hill where Carina grew up.

The mood in the van is just like it was at the end of the party last night. Quiet reflection. Only Sofia is able to break the silence with her little outbursts seeing all the strange sights by the roadside. Funny animals, funny people, funny houses and funny cars with way too many people and animals in and on them. A moped drives by with a live pig tied to its passenger seat. Sofia points and laughs.

It was good to have a child displaying these cheerful outbursts while heading to Tam's last resting place. It showed us that life goes on even when someone you love has left you. Tam was ready for his last journey. He had been a positive influence in the world, gotten old and frail. He wanted to move on and see again those who he had missed so dearly.

Carina wanted us to stand in a circle around the tree. The sky in the west was beginning to display the beautiful colors she had spoken about the night before. The colors she remembered from her childhood with her grandparents. We were to hold hands, and we did as she asked. Joe was slightly uncomfortable, but he would do anything for Carina and did as he was asked.

Carina repeated how happy she was that we were all there and said that she would read the second letter from her dad. After that, she would spread his ashes. We stood quietly and waited for her to read aloud.

The second letter

Dear Carina!

When I'm writing this letter, I'm in the hospital after the explosion in the Underground. I can feel my strength fading and I know that my time will soon be up, just as many from my home country are able to. The nurses here are optimistic, but I know that they are wrong.

When you read this letter, I assume you have already read the other letter which I wrote to you many years ago. I told you my story. Now, when I know my time is running out and I still have some strength left in me, I have some more to tell you, dear Carina. You were, and still are, the light of my life, you must always remember that.

The days underground and meeting all those people have given me a lot to think about.

As you know, I was in a physical prison. As was Nelson Mandela and the survivors of the holocaust and many others around the world. We know how it feels to be mistreated and go without food. The only place we could escape to was into ourselves. There we could create beautiful dreams. We saw what kind of society we did not want and were in a way refined on the inside. Like a rock grinded into a diamond.

A lot of young people today are trapped in a mental prison. They have everything they could want, materially speaking, but they are unhappy and are lacking in strength and have no direction in their lives. They have all of the opportunities but become paralyzed. They try to fix their body to lessen the pain they feel inside.

The longest road wasn't the road we traveled to get to the west. It is the road every person takes in their own lives, escaping from their own prison, from rigid thought patterns to their inner selves, where the key and the seed of who you were meant to be can be found. Only you can solve the mystery of your own life. Discover the resources and the opportunities.

Lift your gaze and look out over your own world. Create change for a better life for yourself and other people.

We come to this world alone and we depart it alone. I'm confident in myself and not afraid of what comes next. There is a quiet line of people exiting this life. Now I will join them.

Can you picture the kindergarten that we see from our window? I have had plenty of time to watch them play, being delivered by their parents and being picked up. It looks as if they take great pleasure in being the first to be picked up. The other kids shout "You're getting picked up, Peter!" And the boy runs as fast as he can with a big smile on his face and throws himself into the arms of a parent.

Dear Carina! That's how I want to meet death. Tired but happy after a long day – to give myself over to the unknown. I can tell you; I hope to see your mother again. It's been a long time. My body feels weak. It's like I'm stuck to it. Like a butterfly trying to escape its cocoon. I look forward to spreading my wings and flying to this new place. Where there's only love. Where I was before I was born.

In my home country, Burma, we like to think that we carry the dead person with us in some form or another, in our hearts. Then that person is with us always. It could be helpful to you to think like that when I'm not around anymore. You can even speak to me if you want to. I can't promise I'll answer, but I'd like to look after you if I can. I'm slightly worried that you'll be all alone when I'm gone. Usually, your family is related by blood, but family doesn't have to be. You can choose your own family. There are many people in the world who need someone. Who needs you. Way down under the ground I saw a little girl choosing her family. Sofia needs you and you need her.

This is goodbye, my dear. It is hard, but I'll leave you with this:

*May the long time sun
Shine upon you*

*And all love surround you
And pure light within you
Guide your way on
Guide your way home*

~

Just up the road, on a small field, a farmer stopped in his work, ploughing the earth. He lifted his gaze, wiped away the sweat from his forehead and saw a strange sight under the old tree. People in different colors, gathered in a circle. One of them was emptying a jar. He saw a cloud of dust whirling up and into the branches of the great tree. The circle of people were gathered in two groups, supporting each other and watching the dust cloud until it dissolved and disappeared. They stood there a while longer until they slowly started down from the hill, still with their arms around each other, until they disappeared over the horizon.

Night was falling and the owl that had made her nest in the great tree, flew away in search of food, as it always did. A bit delayed because of the unexpected visitors. The day was coming to an end and the farmer untied the ox from its yoke and went home.