

**Erlend Kaasa**

***BUT NOT MARIA (MEN IKKJE MARIA)***

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(...)

I wolfed down the half-eaten slice of cake on Gro's plate, then balanced the coffee cup set on top of its tray and carried it through to the kitchen, before I walked back into the living room to blow out the candles on the table. The music made an imploding sound as I switched off the blue tooth speakers. I gathered up the remains of wrapping paper from the floor and piled them into a bin bag. Something white fell like a feather out of the paper basket and landed at my feet. A serviette. On one of its corners I could make out a little red blotch. It looked like blood, but when I picked it up I realised it was an imprint of Gro's lipstick. The impression was extremely detailed, a precise reproduction of her lips. Two full arcs that were so elegant, yet marred by a mish-mash of little scratches, as if they had burst, or had been made out of granite. The red imprint on the white serviette, a monochrome lino-print, crafted according to the one-of-a-kind DNA regulations that constituted her, Gro, the only person like her - quickly trembling, quickly gone - the leaf, the snowflake, the wind rolling over the plains. I folded the serviette. As I pushed it into my pocket, I felt dizzy.

On my way out into the hall, I stopped outside our bedroom. I eased open the door. Dagne was asleep together with Gro. It had been far too late for her. She had been so happy and excited that we didn't have the heart to put her to sleep at her normal bedtime. She peaked when Santa arrived. We had expected her to be sceptical or scared by it, but instead she reacted with sheer ecstasy. She had even sat in Santa's lap, and when she pulled off his beard, it was enough to bring tears to the eyes behind the mask. Now they were both sleeping like logs, Dagne and Gro. My girls. For some reason, it always moved me to see them asleep together.

I soundlessly pushed the door shut, and carried the bin bag out into the hallway. As I shuffled on my trainers, I shot myself a quick glance in the mirror. My

tie was loose. My fringe dangled over my forehead. I looked better than I had for a long time. Overcome with childish complacency, I clicked my fingers and winked at my reflection. As I did so, I tripped and managed to kick over Dagne's balance bike, which was leaning against the shoe rack. It all happened so quickly that I couldn't catch ahold before it toppled to the floor with an almighty crash. I held my breath. Ten seconds. Twenty. No sounds could be heard from the bedroom. Dagne hadn't stirred. Gro hadn't, either. I hoisted up the bin bag, opened the back door and crept out.

The air was surprisingly fresh and cool. My shirt clung to my skin and my nipples poked out, almost chafing against the fabric. I hauled the bag over the paving stones to the garage, and put it next to the storeroom door. When I left the darkness of the garage again, I was struck by just how *silent* everything was around me. From morning to evening, there was usually a constant thrum in the air - a neverending humming from the highway on the other side of the fjord. But not tonight. The world was at rest. No cars. No planes. The yard felt clean and clear. Even our house was emitting a feeling of satisfied calm. The only sign of anything out of order was the Christmas star in the living room window, which was hanging a little wonky. I potted back to the house, but instead of going up the steps I headed to the right down the gravel path - to the studio flat. The curtains were shut. A fake laurel wreath had been fastened to the door. I gave a tentative knock. Maria opened up almost immediately. She was wearing a red dress and earrings. I had never seen her wearing earrings before.

"Merry Christmas," I whispered.

We didn't start kissing until I had come into the hallway and the door had swung shut behind me. She tasted of wine. I swept the wine from her mouth with my tongue, and she led me into the bedroom. There wasn't time for anything else. Only the reading light on the bed was left on. A few tealights were left burning on the windowsill. They gave off a warm, flickering light. She undressed me - my tie, my trousers, my socks, everything - and then it was finally my turn. My turn to do what I had been looking forward to throughout this entire, unbearably long day. To open the best gift I could have imagined. To unwrap Maria.

I slowly unzipped on the back of her dress. The dress slid off her, fell to the ground, and lay like a scallop shell around her feet.

I was woken up by my head being shoved hard into the pillow, so hard that I could scarcely breathe. It took a few seconds before it dawned on me that Dagne must have sat on my neck. Her nappy was rubbing against my ears. I twisted my head loose, lifted up the duvet and tried to get her to lie down next to me. Instead, her whole body seemed to brim with resistance and she began to whine, like she was hurting somewhere.

“Could you take care of her?” Gro groaned from the other side of the bed.

I didn’t respond, but lifted Dagne up and took her into the bathroom. After washing her and changing her nappy, she seemed a lot happier. The dress she had worn the night before looked almost good as new. I decided to risk it being clean enough to use for another day. Her tights, on the other hand, were covered in strawberry and chocolate stains. I needed to find a new pair. For myself I chose out a freshly washed, white shirt. Dropped the tie. It just got in the way when I didn’t have the buttons of a suit jacket to hold it down.

I carried Dagne into the living room to play with the garden of toys she had been given the previous night. She got stuck in right away. I sat on the floor with her. We built towers and railroads. We puzzled over the new jigsaw. I plopped her on top of the balance bike. We set off on an hour-long journey into the activities book about New York.

“Good morning.”

Gro stood there in the doorway, already dressed and wearing makeup. I hadn’t even noticed her getting up.

“Good morning,” I said.

“So how long have you been up, then?”

“Dunno. A while.”

Dagne got up from my lap and toddled towards her mother. Gro crouched down and stretched out her arms.

“Good morning, cutie.”

She squeezed Dagne tight and tousled with her hair.

“Is she wearing the same dress as yesterday?”

“Yes,” I replied. “It was clean.

“But I had put out a new one.”

“Well, this one was just as good.”

“Just as good? There’s a massive stain right here. Look.”

Gro pointed out a dark blotch on one sleeve that I hadn’t noticed.

“Oh. Sorry,” I said. “I didn’t see that.”

“So typical of you to just pick the easiest solution.”

“Sorry, Gro. I’ll go change her right away. Will you get breakfast ready while I do it?”

Gro’s face hardened. She looked about to say something, but held her tongue. I lifted up Dagne, and carried her to the bathroom.

“And put on your tie, too,” Gro added when my back was turned. “It’s Christmas day, after all.”

I said nothing in response and kept walking. Once I was in the bathroom, I closed the door behind me. I sat Dagne down on the floor and picked up the unused dress, which had been neatly folded on the stool next to the shower cabinet. My palms were glistening with sweat. I took some deep breaths, and felt blood hammering away in my temples. Gro’s control freak side was something I had taught myself to live with, but that commanding tone had really got on my nerves. And the tie comment was simply ridiculous. I might have understood if we had guests coming. Or if we were going out to visit someone. But it was only going to be us three. So why did it have to be so formal? Gro had never been particularly obsessed with dress codes. During our first years together, she almost didn’t give a damn what clothes I had on, regardless of the social context. There were only a handful of occasions when she pointed out that I was wearing a jarring outfit, and even then, it tended to be more about her finding it funny than her feeling ashamed of me. Later on she did go through a phase of thinking that I was dressing too square, though. So she filled my wardrobe with vintage clothes from FRETTEX and other obscure second-hand or charity shops. There were earthy slim-fit shirts, stylish velvet trousers, turtleneck jumpers, knitted sweaters and blazers. So around the time when *The Trouble* broke out, I looked like a character from a 1960s Lindsay Anderson film. In recent years, she had (for obvious reasons), wanted me to go back to looking square again. One grey February morning, I awoke to find all my vintage clothing lying in a heap in the garden. Gro demanded I set fire to them. A bonfire of clothing. She had picked up the idea from a documentary she had watched about people like me.

I pulled the dress over Dagne’s head. When I put on her new one, she screamed in protest. I opened the door and she crawled out into the living room,

howling. I closed the door and removed the tie from the pocket of my suit jacket, which I had hung on the doorknob the night before. I straightened the shirt collar, ran the tie around my neck, positioned myself in front of the mirror and started tying the knot. Every time I stood like this, it made me think of Dad. It was the only thing I can ever remember him teaching me. How to tie a tie. I was only eight. It was the last Christmas he had celebrated together with us. We had stood there in the bathroom, shoulder to shoulder, wearing white, freshly-ironed shirts. I could see the resemblance between us in the mirror. It made me proud. He had shaved and combed back his hair. In his fancy outfit, it looked like he was someone who had made it in life. And maybe he felt like it, too. In any case, he decided to spend time passing on something he seemed to think I would find useful. Right there and then, I realised that we were both experiencing a moment that was in a way greater than itself; a moment which encompassed something neither of us had the words to describe.

This realisation became even clearer to me when I was studying pedagogy many years later, and was introduced to socio-cultural learning theory. Vygotsky. Bandura. Bruner. The zone of proximal development. Motivation and self-efficacy. The idea that a teacher should become a scaffolding around their pupils. A *scaffolding*. That was exactly what I felt standing in front of the bathroom mirror with Dad. That he was a *scaffolding*, something I could lean on, rest against, cling onto as I was steered through the various phases of tying a tie. A step-by-step *Windsor*, the master and apprentice, united in this pendulaic swinging between modelling and imitation, an *initiation*, and socio-cultural learning in the best case of the word. Once we were finished, we swaggered into the living room, each with our own newly-tied Windsor-knot, and got Mum to take a picture of us. We stood in front of a lavishly decorated Christmas tree and put our arms around each other affectionately. Me and my scaffolding. A few months later he was gone. How long I fantasised about him coming back, I don't remember. But little by little, the feelings of yearning that flowed through me eased up until eventually the flow had stopped altogether and just lay there, still and stagnant. Then it slowly hardened and solidified, until finally it had become a tough, impenetrable fabric, a suit of armour made out of anything but love, maybe even hate.

Mum and I never spoke about Dad. Not until she was on her deathbed. And then, she was the one who brought it up, although she never mentioned his name.

She knew that the end was nigh, and presumably felt a need to settle up her account, as it were. She started to count off everything she was grateful for. Her faith in God. Our house. The fruit trees in her garden. Not to mention all of the wonderful people who had been part of her life. She named them one by one. Neighbours. Colleagues. Friends. Family. Her parents. Her siblings. And at last: me. Naturally, I had assumed that it would end there. That I was at the top of this hierarchy. But after she had confessed how wonderful it had been to become a mother, to *be* a mother, for a fid like me, she turned to gaze out of the window and muttered something to herself under her breath.

“Did you say something, Mum?” I asked.

She swallowed.

“Yes.”

“What did you say, then?”

She turned to face me again.

“I said...”

Her voice was so feeble that I had to lean my ear towards her lips to hear.

“I said...”

She paused for a moment to collect herself. Tears were streaming down her cheeks. It was clear that whatever she was about to tell me didn't just require physical strength, but courage too. I took her hands in mine, as if leading her down a stairway. I could feel her knuckles through the palms of her hands. She stared at me with a look that seemed to sparkle through the veil of anaesthetic. Then, with what was about to become one of her last breaths, she said.

“But love was the greatest of all.”

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My Dad left us one October evening in heavy rain. It was the same day that the radio declared a Soviet submarine had run aground off the Swedish archipelago. *See you* were the only words he came out with, before closing the door he was never to open again. That was it. I waited a long time for him to call. Or send a letter. Maybe a postcard? But eventually I just gave up. I had to come to terms with the truth. That Dad had left our lives for good. If other kids asked about him, I just replied by saying he was dead. Because that's how it felt. He *was* dead, or he might as well have been, since we were dead to him.

From the day he left, I was convinced that he had found someone else. That was usually what people said. If a man ran away from his wife, it had to be because of another woman. But when Mum died and I had to move to Denmark to live with Dad, I finally learned that it was indeed love that had driven him out of our home. Not the love of another woman, though. Dad drank himself to death, only 47 years old.

Dad had been struggling for as long as he could remember. It was the classic story, the one about a boy neglected and rejected, in this case by his war-traumatised father. About a mother who tries to compensate for the distant father, pampering and mollycoddling, not knowing what good she can do to get through to her son because absolutely *nothing* was getting through, it just bounces off his chainmail armour of accumulated neglect, bounces off over and over until he eventually discovers a magical potion that opens his pores to the world and to the people who are reaching out to him, and for the first time he feels happy, or at least he *thinks* he's happy, because his life, which up until now has only whizzed past him as though he were a stone in a river, flowing through him, and then he realises there is no way to back, just like when he was at the age of seven riding his bike towards a thorny thicket only to discover that his brakes weren't working, and he is zooming towards it, the thicket, bracing himself and squinting his eyes, because there really is no way back, even if there might be a tiny window of time when a few things could be set right again, maybe after he moves to Norway and starts over, when he gets married and his son is born, but unfortunately this window doesn't stay open for long, or at least not long enough, and soon he is back on this road that only goes one way, and it's steeper now, and each day becomes more and more like all the others, the years crumble away between his fingertips, until soon it's all gone, all his allotted time, so soon, so soon, but before he gets there, before he finally goes to sleep for good, he manages to tell all of this to me, his son, his only child, as if he is suspecting there might be a lesson to learn from it all, for me as well.

I didn't wind up on the wrong side of the tracks until I was in my twenty-eighth year. Until then I had trodden carefully. Throughout my childhood I toiled away like Cinderella. I went to the gym. Read. Didn't touch cigarettes. Stayed away from alcohol. Met Gro. Finished my studies. Got a job. A car, and a house. Against all odds, I had turned out alright. Yet somewhat ironically, it wasn't until I had worked up this firm footing that everything seemed to slip and slide away from me. Luckily, I had finally managed to make it right again. I had put The Trouble behind me, found my

way back to who I was before. And now Gro had found her way back too. To me. I had to call it off with Maria. We couldn't go on. Not anymore. I just had to find the right timing.

Gro opened the door.

"Well, have a nice day then."

She kissed me tenderly.

"Are you going to say goodbye to Mummy?"

"Ma," said Dagne and waved.

"You two, honestly." Gro smiled.

She blew us a kiss and closed the door behind her.

I carried Dagne into the kitchen. Sat her in her high chair. I crushed up half a banana. Smearred it over a slice of bread, before cutting the bread into small slices. Dagne had grown up to be a big girl. She was managing to feed herself every mouthful. I walked over to the kitchen counter and poured myself a cup of coffee. Stood there watching her. She was so determined, working hard to get hold of each little morsel of bread. It was a demanding task, steering those clumsy hands up to her mouth, which was dangling open like a giant pit. She made a lovely image. I had to laugh. She laughed back. The washing machine hummed on in the background. I heard the door in the hallway open, then:

"Hello?"

Dagne looked up.

"Who's that?" I asked her. "Who's that coming?"

"Ma," Dagne replied.

I heard footsteps approaching.

"Is that Ma?" I asked.

"Ma!" Dagne cried out.

Maria stuck her head through the doorway.

"Dagne?"

Dagne beamed. "Ma!"

"*I dashur!*" Maria replied, in Albanian.

She walked straight over to Dagne and threw her arms around her. Dagne flailed around her sticky hands enthusiastically. Maria laughed.

Maria glanced up at me. "Good morning," she said in English.

"Good morning."

I put my coffee cup down on the counter and looked at the clock. It was little more than an hour until my first teaching session started.

“Are you done?” Maria asked.

She dried off Dagne with a kitchen towel and lifted her out of the highchair. Dagne walked over to the toy basket in the living room. Maria stayed behind in the kitchen.

“So?” she asked. “New day?”

“New day,” I replied.

She walked over to me and stroked my cheek with her finger.

“Everything OK?”

“Everything’s OK.” How about you?”

“I am fine. But I am missing you. Why you no come last night?”

What could I say? I should, of course, have taken her hand and asked her to sit down. I should have said that there was something we needed to discuss.

But instead, I came out with:

“Something came up, I’m sorry.”

“No, Palle. Is OK. I just tell you I miss you.”

Then she leaned in and whispered:

“You know. I long for your...”

She put her hand behind my neck.

“...love.”

She kissed me. A long and passionate kiss, full of tongue, grabbed a hold of my hand and placed it on her hips. Slowly drew it downwards. Down, down, under the hem of her skirt and up along the inside of her thigh. She wasn’t wearing any underwear. I realised it was too late to say anything. The timing was all off. It would have to wait until next time. I took a deep breath. She glanced over her shoulder. Dagne had started playing with her railway set. Maria pulled me away from the door, zipped open my trousers, hiked up her skirt and sat up on the kitchen counter. Her buttocks slid over the laminated counter surface like bulging dough.

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