

Billie & Seb

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An extract

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The rifle was a relief. On Christmas Eve, caught in the hazy glow of candlelight, the father and the mother watched in suspense as Seb picked up the weapon for the first time. His fingers touched the darkly shimmering metal and slid slowly across the smooth wood of the stock. Seb's little sister, Liza, sat on the floor playing with the bubble wrap the weapon had been packed in. Curt, fiery pops bounced into the room. Seb clutched the rifle to his chest with both arms, closed his eyes, and gently rocked it like a baby.

The father said, 'Look at that. A 17-year old, looking as if he's been given a puppy.' He nudged the mother, who began to giggle.

Outside, the rain was streaming down the windows. As often in those days, winter proved to be never-ending autumn. In the distance the sea was roaring, inland pastures and fields were afloat. Gorse, dwelling place of the Stevens family, lay immersed on a tapered peninsula stretching out for miles, and on days like these, the village appeared to be even further away from the bustling inland than it actually was.

The first weeks of the new year and the rain just kept falling down. Seb lay on his bed for hours on end, eyes open, or he walked around his room in circles, slowly, like a sleepwalker while pointing the rifle at imaginary targets. Spread across the sand-coloured carpet were various pieces of clothing belonging to people he'd eliminated unexpectedly and soundlessly. Their flesh and bones had dissolved and all that remained was the clothing, laid out in the final, unnatural positions their fallen bodies had taken. Every pellet hit the exact spots and body parts Seb wanted to strike. He revelled in the sensation of partaking in something larger than himself, just like someone glowing at the thought of some deep and unfulfilled desire.

The smell of simmering meat and potato croquettes that had been drifting from the kitchen into the living room for some time now was suddenly joined by a chilly draught. Even the men at the table shivered briefly, rapidly raising and lowering their left, then right, shoulders, and pressing

their backs tightly into the padded backs of their chairs. The mother entered the room as if she were chasing the chill. She nodded to the father and the uncle, holding index and middle finger to her pursed lips. 'He's going outside. For a smoke.'

'So, how are things?' the uncle asked straight away.

'Fine,' the father said.

'Is he doing anything? Going to school? Does he have any plans?'

'He's got a rifle now,' the mother said cheerfully. She pulled up her chair and winked at each of the members of the party enjoying the pumpkin soup. It was the end of January, and the weather had finally turned. As was proper, the Christmas tree was still up, shiny and glowing proudly. Only in February or March would it end up in the front yard, bare. These were the days of blissful living, as she'd put it into words in her own mind. To the mother, nothing was more pleasing than a good hike through the fields of gorse the village owed its name to, leading spontaneously to dinner at their place with friends and family, cheeks still tingling with the glowing briskness of such a classic sunny winter's day. Soup. Wine.

'A rifle?' the uncle asked.

'His mates all have rifles,' the father said. He straightened himself and passed the bread with one smooth, seasoned move of his hand.

'A Sniper,' the mother said.

'Seb? A sniper?'

'No, the rifle,' the mother said. Then, a bit louder, 'more soup, anyone?'

'Are you sure that's a good idea?' the uncle said.

'Oh, you know,' the mother said. 'Really? Nobody?'

'I mean...,' the uncle said. 'Considering... what's her name again? Billie?'

'What happened to Billie was coincidence,' the father said. 'An incident. That's all.'

'Coincidence,' the uncle said. 'An underappreciated factor in the lives of all of us, hard to believe in, perhaps because it actually exists.'

'Poor child,' the mother said.

'You might even wonder just *who* the real victim is here,' the father said.

'I see,' the uncle said. 'But the impact...'

'Yes, impact, finally, impact. That's the right word for it.'

He smiled, looking around the table. Chair legs were shuffling across the wooden floor as though attempting to sneak out of the room unnoticed.

'How is she doing anyway?' the uncle asked. 'How long has it been now?'

'Almost four months,' the father said. 'It was at the end of September.'

'No change. I called Marian yesterday,' the mother said.

'Imagine this happening to you, as parents. Still, either way you look at it, there's still life in there, so there's hope.'

'Listen up,' the father said. 'We'll be glad enough just to see Seb go outside now and then – and I don't mean circling around the lamppost in front of the house with Jamal and his mates.'

'God help us all,' the mother said.

'Things happen in life. You mourn, then you move on,' the father said. 'Right? We've all been there. As for Billie...

We're here too, you know, and Liza. His mates.'

'And they've got rifles,' the uncle said.

'They all do.' Once again, the uncle noticed the firm and casual tone used by his brother, leaving him with the uncomfortable sensation of missing out on something considered to be common knowledge.

'He can't become isolated,' the mother said. 'All he does is smoke and lie in his room. Sometimes he won't even come downstairs when Sam comes around. We'll just be sitting here with the kid. We give him a cup of coffee and wait.

That can't be normal, right?'

'No, no,' the uncle said. He sat with his back to the Christmas tree, shrouded in colourful backlight, endowing his hair and face with an awe-inspiring glow. The eyes of the parents reflected a powerless sense of hope, flickering in sync with the images displayed on the television screen in the corner of the room. On the floor in front of the TV, Liza sat playing with Duplo blocks. She hummed softly as she piled one brick onto the next, gradually erecting a capricious tower. The faint sound of explosions came through, blown in from a distant past. A nervous voice provided commentary. Liza kept on building in concentration. The rest of the party didn't seem to notice anything either. The conversation between the uncle, the father, and the mother was like an island.

'Well,' the uncle said. 'I presume this is the price we have to pay for the goddamned peace that's been pestering the Western world for over half a century.' He looked around the room with a weary grin on his face. The father nodded earnestly. The mother looked over her shoulder in the direction of the kitchen, then sought eye contact with the other guests, making gestures alternately meaning 'You okay?' or 'The main dish will be right up!'

'Those mates of his. What do they shoot at?' the uncle asked.

'Oh, each other,' the mother said.

'Each other?'

'I know, it sounds a bit odd,' the father said. 'But, well. What is the good of not trusting them? They go to that farm near the railway, where Urbain used to live. It's been deserted for some years.'

The uncle nodded. A barely discernible shiver of light slid across the table: the room got a fright. The uncle looked up, studying the ceiling lamps.

'Does he ever go to see this, eh... Billie?'

'She's not allowed to have any visitors,' the mother said.

'And even if she were, he couldn't. Not if we can help it,' the father added.

'He knows *exactly* what will happen if he goes anyway,' the mother spoke firmly. 'He's not even 18 yet. You know, boys like Seb need calm and balance.' The uncle nodded remorsefully, like a recidivist.

'So now we've given him this rifle,' the mother said. 'For Christmas. He hasn't had much fun with it yet, with the weather and all. But soon they'll come to pick him up.'

'For Christmas. The celebration of peace,' the uncle said.

'Ha,' the father said with a wink. 'Touché.'

The mother got up, giggled, and said: 'We're not religious people. Say, you're not leaving me with all this soup, are you?' With a radiant smile, she collected a couple of empty bowls and walked towards the warmth of the kitchen, dragging the chill along.

The hospital was a long way off the coast where the peninsula was at its widest. The highway leading from inland to this remote corner ceased to exist right at the five dark towers that made up the facility, merging into a meager streak of asphalt dragging itself through the eerily flat landscape before eventually reaching Gorse.

Four of the five towers stood in pairs, like the corners of a square, the fifth standing before them as though leading the formation. Billie, a 14-year-old girl of Asian descent, lay on the seventh floor of this fifth tower in a room facing west. The twilight was restful. Steady curves in green, red, and blue showed on a monitor placed on a trolley at her bedside; the monitor was also the starting point for a tangle of plastic tubes connected to an infusion, oxygen mask, or branching out in other directions, forcing their way into her body. Her skin, which would radiate a bronze glow in the sunlight in better times now appeared to be made of dull yellow curdled oil. Her nostrils shivered imperceptibly, her eyelids were motionless.

'Hi, I'm Billie. I'm a ghost.' Those were the first words she'd spoken to Seb. She'd noticed him in the schoolyard one morning. He stood alone, his eyes tracking something in the sky that other pupils can't see. A skinny boy looking sick, not in a pathetic way but by conviction. A thick head of messily draped black hair made him look like he'd just come out of bed after a long dreamless sleep, his skin bearing an intense pallor, causing Billie to suspect all of his blood and energy had withdrawn into the depths of him and was now dancing and splattering fiercely around his heart as if they couldn't see why they should be residing anywhere else in his body, let alone add colour to his skin. Clouds sped by, the sun switched on and off, illuminating and obscuring his face, and Billie walked up to him and said: 'Hi, I am Billie, a ghost. What are you?'

'I am Seb,' Seb said.

'But *what* are you?' she asked.

'Seb,' he repeated. 'Just Seb.'

After that, they spent a number of elemental weeks together. They often went to Billie's place, bouncing on the trampoline in the garden for hours on end. Or they grabbed their bicycles to wander through the area, as youngsters from Gorse had always done. They sauntered through the endless pastures, lolled about at Urbain's abandoned farm, or wandered through the golden blooming gorse fields as far as the rocks and the sea. Billie felt like she recognized something within Seb: she'd ended up in Gorse as a 4-year-old, adopted by people who'd spent years trying unsuccessfully to conceive. Even though she had no recollection of her early childhood in Asia, she'd always felt like she wandered around in an impenetrable cocoon, preventing her from really belonging to the world. Seb too seemed to be abide elsewhere all the time. Speaking in short, frail phrases, words crawling out on all fours, squinting against the sunlight. Except when he heard something meant figuratively, its exact literal meaning being different. For example, if someone told him not to throw in the towel. When he hadn't thrown anything, and there was no towel to be seen. In moments like these, the quiet frail phrases could explode like barrel bombs, and he'd scream his feeble vocal chords to bits with short, explosive yelps after which his words would hurry back inside. Billie recognized this rage, too, but she and Seb were untouchable together. Everybody had their opinions: they were weird, sweet, meant for each other. They interacted as though sharing a secret. Before, when Seb sauntered across the playground by himself, solitary, he'd seemed weird and ominous, and when he was in one of those moods even his best friends wouldn't know what to do. The moment Billie walked alongside him, everybody could see how carefully and slowly he put one foot before the other, as though tightrope walking across a chasm a hundred yards deep. In these moments, he'd carry himself with the invincible posture of someone pulling off something amazing with astonishing ease, a childlike smile playing on his lips, and it was clear for everyone to see it was Billie bringing out something in him, anchoring him within reality.

'Is Seb crazy?' other pupils asked.

'Only Seb knows,' Billie said and giggled.

Thus, during these heavenly days and weeks, the two of them dwelled in a bubble of clear air and ideas, and the faintest hint of suspicion seemed ridiculous to them. The best thing about these two was they'd never gotten the chance to grow accustomed to each other – they hadn't known each other that long. Maybe that's why they missed each other so badly, because they knew exactly what the other was like. After all, the one moment people can really know each other is the moment they first meet. Everything else was habituation, and the second it set in, from all the thousands of possibilities life contained, they could just be one person: the person the others thought them to be.

That late September Saturday, deemed fateful by others as if the *day* could help it, had been a remarkable late summer's day. The kind of day that tends to be etched in people's memories, the kind on which the sluggish warmth and the absence of wind slow down time. Billie stood on the trampoline in her garden. Seb lay next to her on the bounce mat. Everything around them shimmered with heat. Billie waggled up and down a bit, hoping the friction of her body with the air would create a cooling breeze. The trampoline was a large one, encircled by a safety net.

'Look, Seb! High as the sky!' Billie shouted. Seb looked up, and then something occurred which Billie had noticed before: he got stuck inside his own perception. Others would call it wonder or amazement. It wasn't. It simply was an image or act striking and paralyzing him. For when Seb saw someone like this, the world would come to a brief standstill as well. It didn't require anything spectacular. A ball rolling down the street. A seagull on a rock at the sea side. He could keep staring at it for minutes on end. It always made Billie laugh her head off, and after he'd returned to earth, she'd want to know exactly what he'd seen. Seb would then tell her how the seagull grew each time he blinked or turned his head slightly, and how it got facial expressions and how its beak got lips and it had snapped incomprehensible things at him, how he'd been locked inside that moment for minutes, like a second eternally expanding into space without the subsequent second arriving. It would only stop when he wanted to approach the seagull or do anything requiring movement on his part.

On that Saturday it had been Billie herself, suspended in midair, eyes wide open, arms and legs spread wide. She jumped, and she laughed, and she could tell from Seb's eyes that he was disappearing into himself. Suddenly it seemed like someone pushed her just as her feet left the bounce mat. Her body tilted in the air, glided down the safety net, and Billie landed with her head on the edge of the steel frame. A hard, dry thump. During a split second, everything within her was illuminated, so dazzling and sudden it turned the air into glass – Billie could touch it. Something hard got stuck in her windpipe, keeping her from breathing, and she could feel something floating out of her body, detaching itself from her. She couldn't tell what it was. It fluttered up into the air while she herself was slowly lowered down in a deep, dark flight, and she knew she was dead. Well, she thought she knew. It wasn't that bad. A pretty good way to vanish actually, swaying feathery on ethereal waves, a leaf on a breezeless autumn night. She didn't end up anywhere. She kept floating, and instead of continuing to descend and eventually landing in absolute nothingness, she simply stayed suspended somewhere, above or below something, without going forwards or backwards, and she heaved a sigh, and she was back, in some way.

She'd been lying there in that room ever since, on the seventh floor of the fifth tower, in a state no one would officially deem alive or dead. She could finally have said it: I am a ghost.

The next morning, four boys stood awaiting Seb in front of the house. John, Sam, Ferdi, and Dennis. They talked lazily and flatly, fiddling with their phones, leaning over their bicycle handlebars as though they'd been doing so for hours and intended to spend the rest of the day like that. When Seb appeared in the doorway, they still wouldn't bother looking up although they hadn't seen him in four weeks. They knew full well what had been going on in the meantime, but they didn't have a clue what to make of it. In the short period of time Billie and Seb had known each other, they'd formed a separate entity, invoking a certain jealousy in people who saw it, precisely because it was so unattainable and unimaginable in the eyes of regular boys and girls having regular notions about friendship and affection. Everybody said it had a sort of beauty to it, and it did. This was true beauty: it couldn't be spoiled by a human being, any more than it could be analysed. But boys their age couldn't care less about that stuff.

Seb stepped outside and put down the case containing the rifle. Looking at his friends, he lit a cigarette. They'd assured him it was real, what they were doing over there at the farm, and he'd made them promise. The day after Christmas Seb had called John right away.

'Ah,' he'd said. 'A Sniper.'

'No,' Seb said. 'It's a 6mm ProShop Custom Long Range Airsoft AEG Sniper Rifle Long Barrel.'

'Yeah,' John said. 'A Sniper. The Volkswagen Golf of airsoft guns.' Of course, Seb knew people often didn't say what they really meant, but it was disappointing anyway. A Volkswagen Golf. A puppy. It was a rifle.

'Hold on, son,' the mother said. Her hand rested on his shoulder, soft and pressing. He turned around and she held a tinfoil package to his stomach. Seb took hold of it. She didn't let go. Her hand slid over his. Her skin felt dry. There were bare spots where the flesh had been exposed to the air, as if someone had done a sloppy job peeling these hands.

'Thanks,' Seb said. He pressed his lips to her cheek, distantly tasting the foundation cream she used to fill the time-induced furrows in her face. She let go. He put the cigarette between his lips, picked up the case, exhaled the smoke, and clamped the package under his arm.

'You'll squash 'em like that,' the mother said. 'Sure you don't want a thermos of coffee? It's cold out there.' Seb shook his head. The mother took his chin in her hand and gently tilted his head back, the cigarette pointing almost straight up; a tiny chimney, venting the fumes of what burned within his head. She briefly studied the acne that had gathered around his nose, let go of his face, stuck her hand up and said, louder now: 'Bye, Sam! Bye, fellows! You be careful!'

Seb turned and nodded to the others.

'Hiya Seb-dude, everything okeydokey? They give you some slack?'

Dennis was the kind of guy who used his online chat language in real life. Seb nodded.

'Looking good, duderello, looking good,' Dennis said.

'You'll squash 'em, Seb,' Ferdi sang.

Seb shrugged.

'Are there any chocolate spread sandwiches in there, Seb?' Sam asked.

'I don't know,' Seb said. 'See for yourself.' He handed Sam the package. Dennis chuckled. Sam waved at Seb's mother, still standing in the doorway. She waved back.

'Say ladies, can't you ask her to fill the thermos with hot cocoa?' Ferdi said.

'We don't have any,' Seb said. He turned around. 'Mom?'

'Do we have cocoa?' The mother shook her head.

'That's what I thought,' Seb said. 'Sorry.'

He got on his bike and slid his hand across the handlebar, fidgeting with the tiny purple fabric scrap attached to it. Soft. A subtle relief, barely tangible to those unfamiliar with this kind of fabric. Superfluous. A superfluous scrap of fabric.

‘Whisky, then?’ Ferdi said. While he said it, he eyed Dennis with raised eyebrows and the beginnings of what might become a smile played on his lips, and precisely these were the tacit glances that were the hardest on Seb.

‘He’s only joking, son,’ the mother said.

Seb let go of the fabric, saying, ‘I know.’

‘Very well, jokesters. We’re off,’ John said.

‘When will you be back?’ the mother asked.

Liza’s small head came peeping through the mother’s legs. She turned her right hand into a gun and shouted, ‘Pang! Pang!’ Seb made a fist as well, folding out thumb and index finger pointing at her, and winked.

Five boys on bicycles. Everything was fine. The asphalt still wet from the night, drops splashing up unto their backs. They were laughing, shoving. They breathed in, they breathed out – the misty whiff s dissolving into a faint breeze. Five boys on their way to music lessons or soccer training. They rode landwards, exactly the same route Billie and Seb took in the days of bliss. The houses on either side of the road watched them go, brick spectators superglued to each other as tightly as possible. Seb steered his bicycle towards the middle of the group: John ahead, Ferdi behind him. The case on his luggage carrier resembled a stiff tail. The road made a bend, and the skies became wider and higher, expanding across the horizon where the suggestion of freedom dawned. The houses seemed to be aware of it too, longing after it, granting each other more and more space, taking in deep breaths of air.

Seb kept fidgeting with the purple fabric scrap tied to his handlebar. It had been in the pocket of Billie’s jacket when they cycled home from the farm one day. They’d been wandering through the surrounding pastures for hours, all the way to the rocks, the sea, and Hell’s Hole. When they were about to leave, Billie had tied the scrap to his handlebar. Just like that. He’d gazed at her as if she had bashed his bicycle right in front of him. Billie had burst into laughter, saying, ‘Now I’ll be with you all the time.’ She could have known he’d actually believe it.

Billie & Seb #1

In the midst of everything. They look down at the ground. The flattened grass at their feet displays the shape of their bodies, and it's hard to tell where one ends and the other begins. The thin blades lay flattened, unharmed and smooth, as if they're simply reclining out of fatigue, merely wishing to take a nap among the thicker, snapped weed stalks and wheat sheaves that attempt to raise themselves in vain. The sun burns their necks. They have no idea how long they've been lying there.

A couple of hundred yards on, the gorse fields lie awaiting them, fiery and blooming thickly. A minute before, these had been but a thin golden piping on the horizon. The pastures stretch out behind them. The farm has disappeared from view.

'Look,' Billie says. She points at the grass, but Seb looks up and around, straight into the sun, immediately averting his face again. 'We look just like a head,' Billie says. 'In profile. See? My elbow is the nose and my knee the tongue, your right leg the back of the head, and where you were wiggling your right arm makes it look like he's got a tail or something.'

'Who?' Seb squints, focuses on his sneakers, closes then opens his eyes once more and looks at Billie. Her entire body is covered with spots.

'The monster. Remember? From Hell's Hole?' Billie says.

Seb nods. A little farther, past the Gorse fields, at the peninsula's far end – barely a hundred yards wide, water all around except behind you – a partly dug in war shelter stands towering high over the sea. Yards below, the waves crash onto the rocks, the water gushing in and out of the so-called Hell's Hole, a cave which is said to stretch underground for another kilometre, after which the tunnel branches out into a labyrinth spreading underneath the entire surrounding area way past the village. The monster supposedly has a human head, bloated, gourd-shaped, big and round, a moonlike face, two gaping notches shaped like anchor fairleads, blinking eyelids with shells like ulcers grown onto them, and bloodshot eyes. Naughty or stubborn children should expect a visit from the beast that sneaks its way into Gorse through the underground tunnels, invading their houses and bedrooms, snatching the little souls from their bodies unnoticed, after which these are served as appetizers at the parties the creature throws in Hell's Hole for the waves and the current, thus hoping to regain its innocence.

Billie makes her hands into claws, growling as though she plans to scare a small child. 'See, our heads are the two horns, like a devil. Wait. Did he have any?' Seb shrugged. 'It's not real.' 'Everything you can imagine is real,' Billie says. She looks at him provocatively. The part of her Seb likes most is her eyes which are expressionless in contrast with her extremely lively face. Every minuscule muscle in her face seems to have a direct connection to every possible emotion she might experience or express and moves and keeps moving accordingly. A constant wriggling of wrinkles, lips, dimples to the rhythm of every word, every syllable. Sometimes her mouth will spit out words for minutes on end, with thick lips and big, slightly protruding teeth, sometimes making Seb think she wants to bite him. In the midst of this unbearable chaos are her eyes, fixed on him, entirely still and motionless. Narrow, tiny eye sockets harbouring large, dark pupils showing hardly any white. Deep dark puddles Seb likes to focus on, even though over the years he's learnt to focus on an invisible point to the left and above people's heads, as he keeps getting the feeling their eyes could burn a hole in his soul, and he's staring into the face of an alien. Sometimes if he focuses on

this point too intently— there, left above his conversation partner’s head—he’ll see the same multi-coloured triangles and circles as when he squints really hard.

They run across the pastures towards the gorse fields. One by one, the solar spots in Seb’s eyes disappear except for one tiny, unruly cloud shaped like a butterfly, which fluorescently moves along with his left eye. This cloud lingers on Billie’s back. It stands out against the black of the wafer-thin, fitted shirt covering her hips.

‘There’s a butterfly on your back,’ Seb says.

‘If I reincarnate, I want to return as a butterfly,’ Billie says, extending her arms and slowly moving them up and down.

‘Can butterflies fly through rain?’ Seb asks.

‘Or as a cloud,’ Billie says. ‘Clouds produce rain, water makes plants grow, and everything will keep living thanks to me, and so will I.’

She pants blissfully and speeds up her running, faster than her legs can carry her, as though she has an aura that looks just like her but detached from her body and constantly on the move: a little ahead, a little behind. Something inside Seb begins to flow, something he can’t put his finger on, for it doesn’t tally with his self-image.

Seb decided to change position. He descended from the berm and laid himself down a bit further away against a slight slope on the grounds that lay glowing in the amber light of the setting sun. There, the waiting resumed. Of the five young gunmen, he was the most patient. Seb lay, slept, and crept assiduously. He’d slither past walls without a sound, jump ditches unpredictable as a shadow. He could spend hours kneeling behind a bush or tree waiting for his prey to get impatient until his calves and feet had become numb, and he wouldn’t have been surprised if they’d broken off the rest of his body with a dry snap, like pieces of dead wood. Seb aimed and waited, longing for the dry smell of gunpowder that would never come. The reticle of his gunsight moved slowly across the shed, the house, and the yard. The fabric of his balaclava heated up against the stock. His gaze was fixed and empty. After a while, Sam appeared, trotting along the wall of the house, his weapon at the ready. He wore a blue overall covered with nifty pockets and buckles. A red hoodie underneath. ‘He looks just like a gardener,’ John had told Seb. It was true. A gardener with a machine gun. Sam’s build was completely normal for a boy his age, but his face displayed the traces of the chubby child he’d once been. Perhaps it was the high concentration of freckles on and around his nose, spreading over the rest of his body like a battalion of infantrymen. His soft fluffy hair played a role as well, hair that wouldn’t be put into any shape with any kind of wax or gel and thus eased itself onto his head in a barely noticeable side part.

Seb zoomed in. Focused on the point where the trajectories of pellets and sight should intersect. There it was, suspended in the air between Sam and himself, invisible and indispensable for every shooter wishing to hit someone. Without losing sight of his victim, he took in his surroundings: the gentle rustling of nature, the air around him slowly turning cool and moist.

Sam briefly looked in Seb’s direction, a skittish animal sensing the hunter’s concentration, and Seb pulled the trigger. He bit his lower lip. He always expected a blow, the recoil following the shot. As always, nothing happened. He didn’t smell a thing. Just the air. The smell of placid air sliced by pellets. Everything went quiet. He didn’t even hear Sam, who was clutching his face. The gardener

lay on the ground, squirming like a girl in a silent movie while the pellets kept hitting him. Seb kept pulling the trigger doggedly as though trying to extract something from the Sniper. A faster, tougher salvo, a sharper sound, shock waves. He pressed the rifle closer to his chest, hoping the weapon would finally get the message, and Sam just lay there, hands shielding his face, mouth open wide, the sounds he produced fading away before they could even reach Seb. Only when Seb noticed the blood from where he lay was the volume cranked up and he heard the screams. The others came walking over too, yelling loudly. Seb pulled the trigger as he tilted the Sniper slightly upward and away from Sam; the final pellet carved a star in the small window next to the farmhouse's front door.

Seb sat up and rested the barrel of his rifle on his shoulder the way a hunter would. Along with the motionless buildings and trees, he observed the panicky writhing in the dusty yard. Small humans, tiny humans with tiny voices, scared birds chirping in the moist air, and he was amazed at the harsh, intense blue of the sky against which everything happened. The final rays of sun struck his back.

Sam still lay on the ground. Ferdi tapped his forehead with his index finger while gesturing to Seb with his other hand. John slowly came walking up to them. He scratched his temple and looked at him in silence for a few seconds.

'Listen up, Seb,' he said. 'When someone is down on the ground squirming like a hurt cat, you really should stop shooting. Those pellets can hurt like hell.'

He put his arm around Seb, and they walked over to Sam together. The others recoiled. Sam looked up. Where his right front tooth had been, there was a hole with blood running from it, across his chin and down his chest. It came to Seb that Sam didn't look anything like a cat. They weren't even real bullets. You could never kill a cat with them. At the same time, he thought of the shattered enamel and the power with which the pellet had removed the root from the tooth's neck, the tearing of the nerves. The speed at which it had happened, and at the same time, the relentless, blissful slowness of the experience. The simplicity. Although he was aware that Sam was his friend, he took pleasure in it in a way he couldn't possibly have done if Sam had been a cat and Seb had shot and killed him. Wiping his mouth on his sleeve, Sam stared at Seb, then at the blood on his sleeve, dark red on red, his expression a mixture of bewilderment and shame.

'Why didn't you just say 'Hit!''? Seb asked.

'You shot at my mouth,' Sam said.

'After that, they all got safety glasses and helmets,' the father said.

'I see,' the uncle said.

'All of them. Except Seb,' the mother said. She put a wooden cutting board with a sponge cake and a knife on it on the table.

'Ah,' the uncle said.

'He doesn't want glasses or a helmet,' the mother said.

She shrugged shyly.

‘Nope, not Seb,’ the father said. ‘How did he put it again, mother? “What’s the use in hitting someone if...”’

‘... if the other won’t get hurt,’ the mother finished. ‘Or something to that effect. There’s no thrill if you can’t get hurt. Something like that. He had a better way to say it.’

‘Yeah, our Seb doesn’t say much, but sometimes he’ll come up with things... Isn’t that right, mother?’ The father took a gulp of his beer. In the corner of the room the television spewed explosions. Rain and wet snow were beating against the windows. The light flickered, the room made a brief, indistinct motion. The uncle jumped up, spreading his arms out wide, palms down, as if to settle the space.

‘There you go,’ the uncle said. ‘What’s this? The weather?’

‘Low voltage,’ the father said. ‘I have no idea. Ever since the construction works.’

‘I’ve been looking up some things,’ said the uncle, sitting down again and leaning back. ‘Did you know Airsoft is a recognized sport? It requires control and composition.

Discipline. Focus. The truly aggressive will miss.’

‘A sport?’ the father said. ‘Really?’

‘Yes, sir,’ the uncle said. ‘Only recently, but still. It’s a skill. You shoot or you don’t shoot. You play soccer or hockey. It’s not a matter of ethics. He’ll be Olympic material before you know it!’

‘And in the great outdoors!’ the mother said. She laughed with relief while carefully slicing the cake. The knife’s blade and handle were made of stainless steel, sharp and shining silver.

‘Some knife you’ve got there!’ the uncle said.

‘It’s really a sushi knife,’ the mother said. ‘But it slices cake pretty well too. Or vegetables. Actually, I use it for all kinds of things.’

‘There you go,’ the uncle said.

‘It’s not like we’re not getting any comments on it,’ the mother said. ‘People always think about violence or war whenever guns are mentioned. These days.’

‘These boys are on their own territory,’ the uncle said.

‘They express themselves in their own way. We don’t have to get it. We just have to grant it to them. A hideaway from the world.’

‘There’s plenty of swearing and kicking going on at soccer fields as well,’ the father said.

‘Exactly,’ the uncle said.

‘Of course I do feel sorry for Sam, but Seb has to be able to express himself, that’s the way it is, that’s what we were always told,’ the mother said. ‘I always say, you’ve got to try and see *through* it.’

He may seem a bit typical... special. Anyway, we think he's doing a bit better. One step at a time. Also, he's sweet to Liza. Cake, anyone?

'That's nice, very nice,' the uncle said. The television showed photos of young men. First they were standing on a terrace wearing T-shirts, laughing in the sunshine. The following photos showed them wearing dark uniforms, or posing with machine guns, the same teeth cheerfully gleaming inside their mouths, the same dark sunglasses looking down at their victims, kneeling before them, staring straight into the camera, seized by an incomprehensible, chilling calm. An analyst explained how these boys just wanted to be seen. The uncle figured they'd clearly succeeded in just that. And it was true. These days, people had eyes for hardly anything or anyone, let alone themselves.

'Looks like the games have begun again,' the father said. 'We're just fine here, on our island.'

'Is this the normal kind of weather for this time of year?' the mother wondered. She held the knife upright before her and looked out the window. A flurry of wet snow shimmered in the headlights of a passing van, after which the darkness covered the storm up again.

'Nature's going crazy,' the father said. 'All right. A sport, huh? Well, well.'

'You could see it as some sort of role play,' the uncle said.

'They can learn a lot from it.'

'You know what our dad would say,' the father said. 'Instead of playing, they should have something *real* to fight for. A proper war!'

'Like those boys,' the mother said, pointing the knife in the direction of the television set. 'Those boys think they have to fight. Would you like your son to turn out like that?'

The father sulkily fell silent. The uncle observed the parents carefully. There was a silence during which certain thoughts hesitantly made their way through his brain.

'There's a lot you could say about it,' he eventually said in a gentle, deliberate tone. 'It can't be denied they are... how to put it... fanatical. They believe in something, you know? They see a light that remains hidden from us.'

'Say what?' the father said.

'Looking at it from a distance, I mean,' the uncle quickly added. 'Of course, *our* boys have no reason to... well, you know what I mean.'

'Luckily they don't,' the mother said.

'Oh, well, our kids don't have a clue about what might be at stake in a lifetime,' the father said.

'Luckily they don't,' the mother repeated.

'Do you?' the uncle asked. The father pouted his lips and shifted on his chair.

'As a matter of fact, I have escaped death a number of times in my life.'

The mother eyed him. Not the stairs. Not again. The way he was sitting there. Holding his beer bottle with four fingers at the base. An actor, spilling his character's secrets by overacting. A parody of the peace and calm she had fallen for. Her stare plied rapidly between the father and the uncle. Back in the day, she'd been fed up with doubters, invoking their complex inner emotional world like a joker in a card game they couldn't understand. The father had given her the impression of mastering every situation. Lately, she thought she could see the occasional crack in his self-determined facial expression, running straight through his skin like a poorly plastered wall.

The father got up and said, 'Once when I was 4 years old and suddenly ran into the street. You don't remember? You were there. The car came to a halt just inches away from me.' He used the beer bottle in his hand to measure out the distance between the bumper and his life.

The uncle nodded.

'And once...' the father began.

'Not the stairs,' the mother said. The father turned to face her. She stood right in front of him, holding him at knifepoint. They looked each other straight in the eye, and the uncle could see the mother was in earnest. For a second, he was reminded of how they'd met, during a karaoke night at high school. The glitter leggings. The hair dancing on her head. Her small ears, smoothed against her skull. Her beauty an indisputable argument. He didn't remember which song she'd sung, but it had been obvious that she was in earnest, back then, too.

There was something in the look of people who were in earnest, actual earnest. Most people never got to see this look, their lives being a concatenation of false pretenses because everything they said and felt was covered with a thin layer of varnish called civilization. People who were in earnest, *truly* in earnest, broke through this layer without effort, displayed themselves with a realness both brutal and dauntless. Most people were unaware of it but *became* aware of it as soon as they encountered it, and they were scared to death by the purity: the otherworldly, the in-human as in: not belonging to *their* humanity, not the way *they* viewed humanity. Many people called this look animalistic. It wasn't animalistic. Animals weren't in earnest about anything; they simply existed, unaware there was nothing they could do about it.

The mother was in earnest, that much was clear. The uncle figured this would be the greatest possible way to die: to be killed at the hands of the woman you love. Meaningless life itself, ended by the most meaningful life had to offer.

She was still standing facing the father, the knife in her hand, sticking the tip of the blade in between two of his shirt buttons near his belly button. The father looked down cautiously and spread his arms. In a rapid, unexpectedly deft upward motion, the mother cut through the thread of one of the buttons and it rolled across the wooden floor. The father flinched. The mother took a step forward. The uncle got up and stepped halfway in between them. He kept a close eye on them both, slightly bent forward: a referee in the boxing ring.

'Shht,' the uncle said. He carefully raised his right hand, the palm turned toward the mother, and she stared at it as though she could read the future in the lines on his hand. At that moment, the father jumped aside and sat back down on his chair, while he snorted and said: 'And one time. When I. Fell. From the. *Stairs!*'

He slammed his bottle onto the tabletop with a spiteful bang. Foam came hissing out of the bottleneck. The uncle winked at the mother, pursing his lips. He sat down slowly, as though showing how, and the mother followed his example. Defeated, she put the knife down on the table. The men burst into laughter. That's how they sat there, like at the end of a terrific joke, the mother rigidly staring into the distance as if she'd been the one telling it for the umpteenth time.

'What else?' the uncle asked, still whinnying with laughter.

'Got cancer a couple of times, of course,' the father said.

'I didn't know that.'

'Yeah, just last week. This time, it went away all by itself.' Once again, the two men squinted, hands on their bellies, mouths open wide and the mother managed to put on a laborious smile too. She'd known them both for the same length of time, and though they undeniably differed from each other, she'd noticed before how both of them couldn't handle change. Women were better equipped to deal with pain. They were willing enough to accept everything was continually changing, all the time. It just didn't mean they were able to do something about it, just like it didn't mean anything would change the second they actually *did* do something.

The father and the uncle were like two boys who could always have fun, no matter what was going on around them, and she sometimes wished she could tap into this talent for a bit, just like Seb sometimes went over to Billie's to jump on her trampoline in the garden and calm down, although you could say that's exactly where the misery had started. The mother stared into the amorphous space in which indistinct silhouettes moved around. The sky murky and grey. The laughter around her petered out, and her silence forced the conversation back in line.

'Sometimes,' the uncle said. 'Sometimes you almost wish it was true. I mean... that they knew what was at stake, that they believed in something. In some way. Purely hypothetical, of course.'

'Now you're really starting to sound like dad,' the father said.

The uncle got up and stood in a posture clearly meant to represent something or somebody. He cleared his throat and shouted in an oddly cracking voice, 'The resistance taught me everything about myself!'

The father slammed his fist onto the table, got up, and yelled, 'He was a hero! I'll be damned if he wasn't!' He gazed at the uncle in rage, both his fists clenched to his breast. A number of motionless seconds went by without anything or anyone stirring. Then the father burst into laughter and sat down again. The mother looked at the uncle with relief, and urged on, he kept going. He raised one arm and let his fist tremble in the light.

'We created the world anew, and better!'

The father covered his mouth with his hands, bending over in his chair, roaring with laughter. The mother surrendered as well. She laughed as if a piece from her youth had retraced its footsteps and briefly landed on her face. She stood chuckling, holding her belly with one hand and picking up her plate with the other. She walked to the kitchen.

'Today's youth is lonesome, wandering around Lalaland aimlessly!' the uncle shouted after her.