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The People Before Us

Novel

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After two weeks, it finally happened. All day long, Marlene had watched men in expensive leisurewear walking in and out. In the early evening, they disappeared, and as Marlene was walking past the smokehouse on her way home, the front door swung open. Janne was standing in the entrance, the handle still in her hand. “What about our meal?”, she yelled.

Marlene stopped still, a bolt of excitement shot through her body. “Oh yeah”, she said, “true.”

Janne asked her if she still felt like it, and Marlene glanced at her quickly from the other side of the street, her sweaty strands of hair, her hands wet from washing dishes or mopping up, and said, “Yeah, yeah of course”. Janne seemed to be genuinely pleased. They threw days of the week back and forth until they found one that worked for both of them: this Tuesday.

“Cool”, said Marlene.

“Yeah, cool”, said Janne, and they both looked at each other a little longer than necessary before waving each other goodbye.

The weekend flew by like magic. Marlene worked, did the shopping, washed her private clothes, ate slices of bread with cheese and tomato paste, standing up and lying down, dropped off her blouses to be washed with the costumes and picked them up from the laundry

the following day. On Saturday night she heard Dascha and Zappo in the room next door again and tried to ignore the sense of unease that the noises triggered in her, or perhaps more a feeling of anticipation that she instantly forbade herself. On Sunday night, just to be safe, she arranged to play Canasta in the kitchen with Barbara, who made no effort to hide her resentment towards Zappo, slamming her cards down on the table. On Monday morning, she woke up with an electric charge running through her and was the first one in the washroom. On Monday afternoon she took a coffee break with Janne, and they acted as if they had never even spoken about meeting up, until, as she was leaving, Janne said, "I'll pick you up from work tomorrow", and Marlene nodded her head, as if that had already happened a thousand times before. On Monday night she felt sluggish, and she decided not to have dinner, but drank a shot of brown liquor with Barbara and her friends, and lay awake until late at night. On Tuesday morning she woke up late, feeling like she'd been hit by a bus. She realised she had no time to shower, so just threw on her clothes from the day before. When she looked at herself in the mirror in Arno's bathroom, she realised that she absolutely had to go home before meeting Janne. A little before midday, Marlene walked out of the shop.

"I'm not going to have lunch today", she said over the little garden fence. Arno turned around and leant on his shovel with a surprised look.

"Okay", he said.

Marlene fixed up her bonnet and said she wanted to have a lie down, and Arno asked if she was feeling sick, and she said, "No, just knackered, you know", and he said, "Yep, sure do."

He stomped on a patch of dirt with his boot. "You can also take a nap here. We've got a guest bedroom upstairs, you can just lie down on the sofa."

Marlene said, "Thanks, but", and Arno said, "Yeah never mind, never mind". Then he stuck the shovel back in the ground in front of him.

Marlene would have quite liked to lie down on the sofa in the guest bedroom. Instead, she rode her bike back to the barracks. The washrooms were empty, and they were freezing as she got undressed. She hurriedly washed her hair and clipped her fingernails. Back in her room, she moisturised her face, her hands, and the rough patches on her elbows, threw on a black top under her blouse and took a pair of jeans with her. For a moment, she considered putting

some make-up in her bag, but she felt most confident when you couldn't see the effort she'd put in.

She still had another twenty minutes, but she headed back, riding slow enough to not sweat in her fresh clothes. On the short trip through the village, she made an effort to look out into the distance, in the hope that the open spaces would relieve her anxiety. Normally, before a date, she would feel a pleasant nervousness that warmed her from within with a tingling sensation. But this thing with Janne was so unclear that she couldn't ascribe it a feeling.

"You look brand new", said Arno when she walked back into the shop. Marlene ran her hands nervously through her damp hair, happy to receive the compliment. Back home, she rarely left her apartment without Robert commenting on her appearance, which was fine, because his remarks were always positive, as if she always got about in haute couture.

"Do you have plans later?", Arno asked as he filled up the sweets jar.

"I'm meeting up with a friend."

Arno looked at her intently; it occurred to Marlene that she may have underestimated him.

"With Janne", she added quickly.

Arno threw his eyebrows up and turned back round to the jars.

"What?"

"Nothing."

"Oh, come on."

"No, it's great", he said, "really, that's really nice. I'm just surprised because – well, she normally keeps to herself."

That whole afternoon, the shop was full, the till didn't stop ringing, the customers were standing shoulder to shoulder in front of the shelves. As he was bringing over some new honey jars, Arno pointed at the chaos with his chin and said, "That's how it is in summer", and Marlene asked, "Always", and Arno said, "Pretty much".

In the brief moments when she wasn't ringing up a sale, she would shoot a sideward glance over at the window, which was slightly ajar, trying to get a hasty glimpse of the

smokehouse. When Janne actually did appear in the window, Marlene was serving some customers, and she was secretly happy that she looked so busy. Janne knocked on the glass and stuck her head into the room, and the people were delighted by the authentic village life. Marlene said hello with her eyes, but when the queue didn't get any shorter, Janne mouthed a few words that Marlene didn't understand, and then she disappeared.

Right before closing time, the shop emptied out. Marlene went to the bathroom once more, but avoided looking in the mirror, so as not to dampen her spirits. Then she walked out onto the street. Janne was standing just to the left of the door. Marlene jumped when she saw her and Janne let out a laugh.

“Have you been waiting long?” asked Marlene.

“Not at all.”

They scuffed their feet indecisively until Marlene suggested that they grab their bikes. Janne's bike was not a historical number but a sleek trekking bike with an oddly unfitting basket on the handlebars. They walked side by side, pushing their bikes until they reached the end of the village, then Janne hopped on her bike and said that they needed to ride for a few minutes, “Is that okay?”, and Marlene said, “Yeah, of course”, and tried to get onto her bike as casually as possible. She was afraid Janne would ride off ahead of her, but that's not how it was: she rode around in slow-motion arcs until Marlene caught up with her, and then stuck right next to her. They soon reached the neatly paved road that led from the harbour to the embankment. There wasn't a car in sight, just a fishing boat on a trailer in the parking lot opposite. Marlene remarked that she had never been to this part of the island before, that she didn't know where the street went. Dascha had often spoken about the camping ground on the other side, about the windsurfers, the scattered farms between the fields with their rented rooms.

“Where are we going?”, she asked.

“It's a surprise”, said Janne, and blinked across at her.

Marlene squinted her eyes. On the right was the start of a field of canola whose brightness blinded her, then an empty meadow, cut through by water channels. On the embankment that loomed on the left, a flock of birds were standing motionless. The milky sky was strung up above it; the sun slowly moving toward the horizon, ready to plummet into the sea.

“We’re almost there”, said Janne.

After a few hundred metres, she braked carefully and stopped at an inconspicuous set of stairs leading to the top of the embankment, its wooden treads looked like they had grown into the grass. They left their bikes by the fence, and Janne opened the gate to the steps. She clambered up the uneven steps with a routine that showed that she walked this route every day. Marlene’s heart was beating hard and fast in her chest. She saw the wind in Janne’s hair, before it enveloped her too. She’d been told there was a good reason that people lived in the centre of the island, protected by the levees, behind which the nothingness unfurled. When they reached to top, they stopped still. In front of them lay a lush marsh riven by furrows that was so vast they could hardly make out the sea behind it.

“What’s that?”

“Salt marsh”, said Janne, and then she held out her hand. There was a small path leading through the fields, a makeshift bridge spanning a channel of water. In the middle of the green, a little shack stood on stilts.

“That’s where you live?” asked Marlene, and Janne nodded. Her cheeks were flushed, and for the first time it occurred to Marlene that Janne might be nervous too. They walked down the slope together. What seemed like a dense carpet from above turned out to be a thicket of countless plants when they got up close; Marlene didn’t know the name of a single one of them. She heard twittering in the grass, the birds hidden among the tufts. Janne carefully placed one foot in front of the other. Every few steps, she would turn around and warn Marlene about a bump or a hole in the ground. The ditches were filled to the top with water, framed by grass edges with pink flowers, the path was muddy and pitted with puddles. They carefully walked along the wooden planks that served as a bridge. Janne went first and watched intently as Marlene did the same.

They arrived at the ladder that led up to the elevated veranda of the shack; Marlene was still speechless. Everything here felt so surreal and magical, as if they were in some place that didn’t really exist. Janne gestured sheepishly at the rungs and said, “You first”, then took a step back.

The view from the veranda was stunning. They stood next to each other, their hands on the wooden railing. Marlene felt the familiar impulse to make Janne laugh, but there was nothing to crack a joke about, so she maintained a reverent silence.

“Cool, hey”, said Janne, her gaze drifting out into the distance, before fishing a key from her pocket and opening the door.

Marlene asked about the shack. Janne answered from inside, “An ornithological station, the old one, before they built the new observatory”, and Marlene said, “No kidding”, took another look at the surroundings and stepped inside.

There was just one room, the floor, the walls, the ceiling all made of wood. A small table under the window, a kitchenette beside it, a narrow bed against the back wall. At the foot of the bed there was a stove, with a pipe coming out of it that disappeared into the wall.

“It’s so beautiful here”, said Marlene.

Janne stuck her hands back in her pockets. “Yeah”, she said, and then, “it *is* pretty beautiful.”

She had never seen Janne like this, in her home, in a white, woollen jumper which, like all her clothes, could be old but also might not be. Marlene imagined her eating at the table, maybe with the window open, how she woke up here every morning. Until a second ago, she hadn’t known how she did those things, and now she was standing in the middle of her bedroom, and while this circumstance had always amused her on online dates, here it felt strangely binding and intimate.

Janne offered Marlene a spot at the table and started to take out various things from the small overhead cupboard. On the countertop were two jars with plants in them that resembled coral.

“I can only make you something simple here, I’m afraid”, she said.

“Hey, simple is great”, said Marlene. Under the table, she flicked off her shoes and slipped into the jeans she’d brought with her, then she took off her skirt and her blouse. She ran her fingers along the window frame and observed Janne from the side, who told her about her day in the smokehouse while she chopped up an onion. The knife glided through it quickly, almost silently; when she peeled a clove of garlic, it looked like she was coaxing it out of a coat.

“You really know how to cook”, Marlene said abruptly, and Janne laughed and paused for a moment, the naked garlic sitting in her hand.

“A little.”

“Come on, be honest”, said Marlene, “you never told me that. Where did you learn?”

Janne diced the garlic finely on the board in front of her and stayed silent for a moment. Then she said, “I started to get into it in Peru”, and Marlene repeated, “In Peru”, and Janne lowered the knife and sprinkled some salt on the garlic and said, “My father works as a chef there. My Spanish is really bad, but cooking – that’s something we always did together. I go there every few years.”

Janne hadn’t yet mentioned her father. Marlene was afraid she might not like to talk about him and stopped herself from trying to dig deeper.

“Can I help?”, she asked instead.

“I’m fine”, said Janne. She peeled a few potatoes and cut them into thin slices. “But you can grab two beers from the shed for us.”

She explained how to get there and lit the gas stove with a crackle. Marlene walked out onto the veranda, past the window and around the shack. The toilet seemed to be in a little wooden outhouse, with an outdoor shower attached to it. The storeroom was narrow and dim, lit only by a few lightbulbs on the side wall. Next to the tiny door were two crates of drinks. Marlene grabbed two small, room-temperature beers out of the top one. Only then did she look around her.

There were shelves on the walls all around her packed with objects that Marlene slowly recognised in the darkness. She stepped closer. There were broken vases and stove tiles, pieces of bowls, of plates, tools, coins, and further back, animal bones, a pointy skull, bricks. The floor creaked beneath her feet. She heard the wind outside, and the door slammed shut. Marlene pushed against it hurriedly. As she left the room, she felt relieved, a sense she was leaving something heavy behind her.

On her way back she could smell the onions through the open window.

“Sorry they’re not cold!”, said Janne, as Marlene passed her one of the bottles.

“What are those things in that room?”, she asked.

Janne tossed the onions in the pan, the fried potatoes were almost translucent. Next to the stove was a bowl with two whitish fish fillets lying in a marinade.

“It’s old stuff from Rungholt.”

Marlene said, “What, really”, and they cheered, and Janne said, “Yeah, it was just over there, if you walk out onto the mudflats at low tide you can find all kinds of things.” She pointed out the window toward the water. “When I moved in here last year the whole shed was full of the stuff. I moved it all up the back. My mother collected it all when she was young.

“How come?”

Janne tipped the fried potatoes into a bowl and placed it in the middle of the wooden table and then pushed the sleeves of her jumper back up. “Maybe because she had always been interested in all the stuff that exists in other places, or that existed earlier, I mean –” She placed the fillets in the pan, took the coral plants out of the glasses, broke off the roots and tossed the little branches in with the fish. “Otherwise she would have never left here. But we don’t have to talk about my parents all night, right?”

“No, of course not.”

“What did you say your parents do?”

“Flooring”, said Marlene.

Janne grabbed two plates from the cupboard and arranged the food on them. When she sat down at the table with Marlene, their eyes met. Neither of them looked away.

“You have really beautiful eyebrows”, said Janne, and started cutting up her piece of fish.

“Thanks”, said Marlene. She could feel her cheeks turning red. She quickly grabbed her cutlery and tried some. “Oh my god”, she said. “What did you do with these potatoes?”

Janne looked up. “Just fried them.”

The slices of potato were crispy and golden brown, the onions glassy, the garlic invisible. She surreptitiously watched Janne as she ate; she chewed thoughtfully, but without a hint of surprise, which seemed unbelievable to Marlene.

“So good”, she said.

Janne took a swig of her beer from the bottle, with a smirk on her face.

“And this?”, Marlene pointed at the coral, and Janne said, “Samphire, it grows everywhere in the marshes.”

“Samphire”, Marlene repeated, and stabbed one of the little branches with her fork. She hesitated for a second; she rarely ate things she wasn’t familiar with. The samphire snapped between her teeth and tasted fresh and salty. Marlene said “Mmm”, and Janne said, “I know, right?”, and they laughed. The fact that she wasn’t the only one who had put some thought in calmed Marlene down.

Then they spoke about their weeks, about the past few days, about the workshops, about Dascha and Zappo. Janne grabbed two more beers from the back, and Marlene stared out the window, where the milky sky was hiding the sunset. The light was dying, the salt marsh was slowly losing its colours. Janne rolled herself a cigarette and smoked it by the open window. It was her first one since they had left town together.

“Do you sometimes hear the bells of Rungholt here?”

Janne blew the smoke into the twilight. “Who told you that?”

“That’s what people say.”

“Well”, she grinned, “only when the wind is really still.”

“Really?”

Janne shrugged her shoulders. “They only recently found the remains of the church in the mud. That was a real sensation. I guess we’ll see if they keep ringing, or if they’ve –”, she paused for a moment and stubbed out her cigarette “– been released or whatever.”

Marlene asked, “What do you mean?”, and Janne said, “Oh, I don’t know”. It was getting dark inside. Janne flicked the switch on a dangling camping lamp and lit a couple of candles that were scattered around the room on little saucers.

As they kept talking, she peeled an orange, almost without looking, and reached across the table to offer Marlene half of it. She ate her half almost mechanically, without taking her eyes off Marlene. Marlene told her how in the book she was reading, the character is stuck on an island, just like her, and her gaze fell on Janne’s right hand, a piece of orange peel between her thumb and index fingers. Her thumb rubbing on the white interior of the peel, sliding along it gently. Marlene trailed off.

“What’s up?”

“Nothing”, she said.

She kept going, and her gaze flitted back and forth between Janne's face and her hand, the tattooed dots and lines on her skin, her short, round nails, her slender knuckles. Suddenly it was silent. She realised she was cold. In a bar she would have said, do you want to have another drink here or at my place, but that wouldn't have made sense now, none of the things she was familiar with made sense. They looked at each other across the table. Janne dug her fingernails into the orange peel. Marlene opened her mouth without knowing what she would say. Janne beat her to it.

"I can take you home, if you want", she said, and stacked up the plates somewhat clumsily, the noise hung so loud in the room that it didn't seem real.

Marlene's heart was beating so hard that she was afraid Janne could hear it. She felt something run through her body, maybe the cool evening breeze, maybe the disappointment. "You don't have to", she said.

"Well, at least back to your bike."

In the breaking night, Marlene saw that the water had retreated from the marsh; the channels and pools lay empty and damp in the darkness. They climbed up the embankment in silence. Marlene was wearing an extra jumper that Janne had lent her. Down on the road, she took a ridiculous amount of time to unlock her bike. "All right", she said finally.

"That was nice", said Janne, and then she took a step forward and hugged her. It was the first time they had really touched, and Marlene gripped the handlebar of her bike tightly, confused. She felt one arm around her hip, the other around her neck. She felt Janne's cheek against her ear, just briefly. Then it was over. And she rode home alone through the darkness.

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The heat kept on through all of July, became a kind of underlying hum, a gruelling fact. The visitors skulked wearily through the village, even the kids ran around looking exhausted. Everyone was wearing only the bare minimum of their costumes. When no one was looking, Marlene rolled up the sleeves of her blouse and when she was sitting behind the till, she tucked her skirt into the waistband. The blackthorn bush outside the window let its

leaves hang lifelessly, the little berries that had recently appeared on the branches looked grey and wrinkled. The fields around the barracks burned and rustled dryly, even the embankment lost its rich green colour. The old people stopped lighting fires and sat on the benches in the half-light. Janne gave up on jogging, and Marlene went swimming with her for the first time at the spot near the harbour. The North Sea was cold and brisk and cooled them off for at least a moment. Arno only made salads for lunch and moaned about the weather. The news was an unending stream of reports about the heatwave, which had also hit the mainland.

But while the others were blunted by the heat, Marlene felt like a thin layer of skin that she had never noticed before was being peeled off. The weeks were at once endless and extremely present, and sometimes it seemed to her that she was the only person moving through a frozen frame. She was already gathering impressions that she would later recall: the iridescent light in Janne's wet eyelashes when they went swimming together, the pale stripes on her fingers when she took off her jewellery at night, the smell of the smokehouse in her hair, a cigarette filter stuck on her lip. Their forays in the evening through the salt marsh, the plants landing in their meals later, purslane, sea wormwood. The way Janne peeled prawns. The way she would put her fingers in her mouth to soften her tough cuticles a little, so they wouldn't hurt Marlene when they went inside of her.

Marlene was unusually receptive and easy to arouse, quickly overwhelmed. Her dreams were vivid, almost every night. When she woke up in her own bed, she would touch herself quietly beneath the open window, the curtains closed. She hardly watched movies anymore and stopped watching figure-skating videos completely. She was constantly hungry; at the shop, she took sweets from the jars, and her little fridge was completely full for the first time, though she rarely ate at home. At the Edeka supermarket she was overcome by an irrepressible desire for the fruits in the display, and she bought big, white-fleshed peaches and the first crimson cherries.

The meals that Janne cooked for her, the names she would repeat multiple times for Marlene: *chupe de camarones*, *choros a la chalaca*. Damp sheets, damp skin, a throbbing below her waist, sand between her toes, under her fingernails. Janne, looking over from across the road, a few silent words on her lips; how she would undo the buttons of her blouse with one hand. The plants Marlene pointed to as if she were learning a foreign language, and whose names Janne would tell her, sea lavender, sea milkwort, saltmarsh grass.

And there were other, almost forgotten things that reappeared. When Janne looked at her, when she sat next to her in that narrow bed and her eyes wandered down Marlene's body,

really looking at it, all those insecurities she had banished years ago came flooding back. Even though she believed Janne's compliments, even though she liked herself more than maybe ever before, she was startled by the presence of her body, which was suddenly visible everywhere. The amount of time that she spent with Janne and the comparison with another body caused her to see herself in the washroom mirror in piercing clarity. She noticed how blonde she'd become over the past weeks, how brown her hands and forearms. The creases in her belly when she sat cross-legged, in comparison to the sinews in the back of Janne's knees. She felt bigger because she was exactly the same size as Janne. Her breasts seemed soft and voluminous to her, and she sometimes stroked them absentmindedly through the fabric of her top.

On a day that was so hot that the shops in the village closed for two hours in the middle of the day, Marlene and Janne went to the church during their lunchbreak. Since Weert's visit to the island, Janne had stuck to what he had told her and stopped going over to the window anymore. Marlene had accepted it, even though she missed it.

Out the front of Edeka, a family of four was silently eating ice-creams, the cemetery of the nameless lay mute and glistening in the sun. Marlene had thought about the church every now and then since Barbara had told her about it, but she had always walked past it. As they stepped into the interior, two older women walked toward them; then the heavy door closed behind their backs, and they were alone. The walls were made of red bricks. The smell of old masonry lay in the air, the wooden pews were painted a light blue. Marlene looked at the ceiling. Dozens of model ships were hanging on strings from the wooden beams, dangling beside and above one another like mobiles, mainly sailing ships, but also the odd freighter, and even a glider. The walls were adorned with countless paintings of boats nestled among towering waves. The frames of the pictures were gold and silver, expensive, at any rate. Marlene lowered her gaze and looked straight into Janne's grinning face.

"You like it, don't you", she said.

"Yeah", said Marlene, and looked back up. They took a few steps through the pews. The coolness of the space made her shiver.

"Earlier, when people got into trouble on the seas and survived, they would have a ship or a picture made", said Janne, "as a way of showing their gratitude."

"They're all so beautiful."

“Yeah”, said Janne, and pointed at one of the smallest ships, a simple red barge.
“That’s from my grandfather.”

Marlene inspected the belly of the ship from below. “What happened there?”

Janne stepped across to her and shrugged her shoulders.

“Storm. He never talked about it much. He just used to say –“ She fell silent.

“What?”

“– that the wind suddenly let up at one point. Like in the eye of a tornado. And he said that that was the exact spot where Rungholt was.”

“Really”, said Marlene.

“That was always his great fear: being left out on the seas. When he passed away at home a few years ago, he couldn’t believe his luck. All the locals who go out to sea are afraid of that. Of never coming back.”

“Makes sense.”

“It’s important to have a stable reference point. Which is why there’s a cemetery next door, you know?”

“Do you go there sometimes?” Marlene had already wondered if anybody visited the nameless graves.

“Everyone from the island does”, said Janne, “we all go every now and then.”

They walked back to the exit. Suddenly the ships were hanging just above their heads, and Marlene resisted the urge to duck down.

“Do you remember the pirate”, said Janne, when they were almost back outside. “The one I told you about.”

“Of course”, said Marlene, “the one who lit the fires to disorient the ships.”

“He used to take up quarters there. And when they went to arrest him, he barricaded himself in the tower. So they kicked in the door”, Janne pointed at the half-open door on the back wall, “but when they got up the stairs, he was gone. Got away. Even though there is only a tiny window there.”

“Really?”

“Well, that’s how the story goes, at least.”

Marlene stared into the dimly lit stairwell, the light was swallowed up after the first step.

“It’s a good story”, she said, and followed Janne outside.

That evening she lay awake for a long time. The size of Janne’s bed had never bothered her before, but now she could feel the skin on their legs sticking together. Janne insisted on closing the door while they slept, and without a draught, the warmth that the wood gradually gave off got built up in the room. Marlene felt a movement beside her.

“Are you awake?”

“Yeah”, said Janne.

Marlene paused for a second. “Do you want to come with me to Husum?”

Janne rolled over onto her side. “In August? With Luzia and Robert?”

Marlene said, “Why not”, and Janne said, “Okay”, and Marlene asked, “Yeah?”, and Janne said “Yeah, I’d really like that”.

Janne placed her leg on Marlene’s hip. Marlene buried her face in the curve of Janne’s neck, and they fell asleep like that.

The next morning, Marlene was woken up by Janne mopping the floor next to the bed with a rag. “Hey”, she said softly. “What are you doing?”

Janne’s eyes darted nervously between the floor and the bed. “I knocked over a glass”, she pointed at the crate she used as a nightstand, “it fell off.”

Marlene lifted her head, confused. “What glass?”, she asked.

“I put it there yesterday –”

As far as Marlene could remember, there’d been no glass on the nightstand, and there was no broken glass on the floor. She suddenly had a flashback to the wet sleeping bag in the tent, the open zipper. For a moment, she felt something touching her shoulder, like fly’s legs on her skin, an eery tickling. But when she looked, there was nothing there. Janne stood up

and wrung out the rag over the basin. "It was nothing", she said, with her back to Marlene. Then she started washing up the dishes from the night before.