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Hannes
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Today is the anniversary. It's exactly the same time, right down to the day and the hour. It's been a whole year, my friend. My dear friend, Hannes. It's the hour when I kneel down in your blood and urine, when your head rests on the cold asphalt for what feels like an eternity. I see the blue flashing lights and hear the sirens. The crowds of people around us. Then, finally, the emergency helicopter. "Fuck", from your bleeding mouth. Then you shut your eyes, but not completely; they stay open just a little. If I lean right down over you, I can still see your eyeballs. All of a sudden, hands are tearing me away, while others reach for your lifeless body. Your blood trickles slowly into the gutter and takes my heart with it. Both disappear into the distance.

I can hardly remember anything of the weeks that followed. An echoing pain weighed down on me like lead. Then I started to write to you, Hannes. I wrote down my life for you, and it stopped me from losing my mind. I wish I could have spared you many of those lines, my friend. Others made my fingers twitch with ecstasy at every single word. Now it's time to let go of the letters, and today I hand them over with deep gratitude. They saved my life.

I have to write this down, here and now, because I can't talk about it, not with anyone. I'm writing out of rage and disappointment. An immense, indescribable, unnatural rage, Hannes, that's what it is. I really believed that once they peeled you out of those bandages everything would go back to the way it used to be. That you would stand up out of your bed like a phoenix from the ashes and we would wander down the corridor side by side and make a dash for the exit. But that didn't happen. Nothing happened, nothing at all. You lay there just like before, not even moving your little toe. Lay there with all your tubes and machines, not moving. You're not dead and not alive, neither ebb nor flow; you're stuck somewhere, lost at half tide. I sit on the windowsill in your hospital room and look out at the old chestnut tree. I'm so angry at you that I don't want to look at you anymore. I stopped visiting you too (not that you would have noticed). I've hardly left the house in the last two days and I've had no contact at all with the outside world.

At some point, after so many hours of rage and disappointment, everything suddenly turns upside down, shifts somehow. The rage shifts from you to me. I slowly realise that you're not to blame for my disappointment; I am. I was really naive enough to believe that once the bandages were gone, everything would be okay. As if they could have stopped you from opening your eyes or making a sound. How stupid I was! I feel like a complete idiot, and that's not exactly a good feeling to have. As I said, I haven't been to see you for a few days, my friend, and in the end I realised that makes it much worse. I feel worse when I sit around at home doing my head in over it. So I'd prefer to sit on your windowsill and look out at the chestnut tree. Look at the chestnut tree and hope for a miracle. And it gradually dawns on me that it probably would take a miracle to bring you back to life. I can't help you and I can't talk to anyone about it. I can't talk to anyone, because I'm always the one saying that everything's going to be okay. That things are on the up, because you're a fighter. That things are on the up, because the bandages are gone. I tell them about the progress you're making, all the while noticing that you're not making any. It's enough to make you sick. I like writing here. I can offload all my frustration without it hurting anyone. Perhaps I should just write down everything that's happening. So you can catch up on things when you're back again. You hear stories about these coma patients that wake up at some point and don't have the faintest clue of what happened. But if I write everything down and you read it later, you'll know. Anyway, I'll think about it. By the way, I spoke to



your mother on the phone for a bit just now. I didn't understand a word she said though, because she was crying so much again.

Later: I just watched *Law and Order* and had a pizza. Neither were anything to shout about. To be honest, I didn't really register either because I was thinking about you, Hannes. Because I'm thinking about what it will be like when you come back. What it will be like when we're all together again, Kalle, Rick, Brenninger and the two of us. When we'll all go to the ice stadium to watch some lousy game. Or down to Bagger Lake to skim stones. When we'll spend night after night planning our holiday and still not agree on where to go. And then we'll end up going to Spain again after all, and once we're there we'll decide – yet again – to go somewhere different the next year. We'll take a pew at Sullivan's and sink a few beers. It'll be great, my friend. But, at the moment, it doesn't look like any of that's going to happen anytime soon. Basically, things looks like shit. I'm saying this because we've never lied to each other – so why start now? Today is the 26th of March, and it's already over six weeks since you went into the coma. I've decided that I'm going to write everything down for you. Just so you can be up to date once you're okay again, Hannes. Yes, that's what I'm going to do. And tomorrow I'm coming to see you, before my shift. Because my night shift starts tomorrow, my first one ever.

It's kind of strange, being all alone with the nut jobs, but on the other hand I guess things are more peaceful there. I've done my first few weeks there now, and I'm telling you, all those stupid jokes we made about it beforehand weren't that far from the truth. The patients or inmates, or whatever you want to call them, according to the house rules they're referred to as 'psychologically instable persons.' Anyway, the house rules are seen as the most important thing here. The only nun, Sister Walrika (small, fat, with a voice like a fog horn and a tongue like a viper) is completely set on making sure the house rules are obeyed to the letter ...] I've nicknamed the home the 'Tool Box', because they've all got a screw loose (I'm sure you could have figured that one out for yourself). Anyway, in the coffee room a few days ago Walrika took a peek in my diary, where I write down my shifts; and I'd written 'Tool Box' in big letters. She demanded an explanation, and I'm telling you, the tone of her voice said it all. Bizarrely though, she didn't get angry when she heard my answer. She said she believed me that I meant it affectionately, not spitefully, the whole tool box thing. And that she didn't think the expression was all that bad. But she told me to keep it to myself. And I did, I swear. But somehow it's doing the rounds, with the staff and the inmates, and they're all amused by it too, isn't that nuts? So, as I said, tomorrow is my very first night shift, and I've been told that it's normally quite peaceful then. They said to bring something to read and to just make sure I don't fall asleep. The night shift starts at 7pm after dinner and ends at 7am after breakfast. So I'll come by to see you again tomorrow around 5 and – who knows – maybe a miracle will have happened. Til tomorrow.

Uli.

Tuesday, 28.03

I went to see you yesterday like I promised. Your mother was there too. She didn't cry this time, quite the opposite in fact. When I came into the room, all careful and quiet, she jumped up from her chair, making it tip over backwards and hit the floor with a huge crash. She was really worked up (I'm intentionally avoiding the word 'hysterical!') and told me you'd reacted. What to, she didn't say. She just kept saying it, again and again, that you had reacted, and she was really worked up. I came closer and looked at you, but I couldn't see any change. You were just as pasty as ever, and your open mouth hung feebly down over your chin. Your lower lip, weighed down with a tube, bulged outwards, sticking out like it wasn't really part of you. Your



eyelids still weren't completely shut, they were open just slightly, and if I leant over and looked closely I could see your eyeballs. It's creepy, my friend. But you didn't react, not to anything. At least not while I was there. And let's be honest, Hannes, if you don't react to a chair crashing over, then what? I sent your mother down to the cafeteria and told her to get herself a nice coffee and relax a little. And she did. She looked a lot better today than she has done recently too, she had some colour in her cheeks. Probably from getting worked up because you reacted. So some good came out of it. After she left, I sat on the edge of your bed and read you the sports pages from the paper. Even the ice hockey results from yesterday's matches, and you didn't react to them either. Then I picked up your hand, lifted it and let it fall. It plonked down on the blanket like a stone. So much for reacting. When I think of how annoyed I used to get when we arm wrestled. I barely had a chance against you. And now your arm falls weakly back to where it was, without putting up any kind of fight. God, Hannes. Then I carried on reading the sports pages. After a while your mother came back and said I should read something poetic now and then; Schiller or Goethe or something melodic, not the ice hockey results. But I had to go to work, I was running late anyway. [...]

Friday 31.03.

Seriously, Hannes, it's spring now and you just lie there, not moving. When I cycled home this morning everything smelt of spring. And you know that once spring's here, summer isn't far away. And this would be the first summer in twenty one years I'd be spending without you. The thought makes me shudder. [...]

Everything's quiet at work, but I do have one thing to tell you: We've got this small balcony on the upper ground floor there, right next to the kitchen, and I take off there now and then to have a cigarette. I'm really quiet so no-one hears me, tuck myself into the corner so no-one sees me, and shut the door so no-one smells me. And yesterday – completely out of the blue – Walrika is suddenly standing out there on the balcony with me. I almost swallowed the cigarette right down just to avoid getting a rollicking (after all, it says in the house rules that you must 'refrain from smoking in the entire grounds of the home, including the external areas!'). She looks at me, long and calm, and the cigarette's smouldering between my fingers. I didn't dare carry on smoking it, nor throw it away, and soon it was properly burning between my fingertips. After what seemed like an eternity, she asked: 'Is it burning?' I nodded, and she said: 'Then why in God's name aren't you using an ashtray, Uli?'

"Because smoking is forbidden in the entire grounds of the home, including the external areas" I say. Then she pulls out - wait for it - a pack of ciggies from under her robes and says: 'That only applies to our guests. We don't want them to put themselves or us in any danger now, do we?' And then, with her foot encased in those black lace-up shoes, she pushed a small ashtray out from its discrete hiding place on the floor behind the window shutter. Then she smoked a cigarette, only half of it admittedly, but it still counts. Then, when we went back in, and without looking at me, she said: 'But that's my only vice!' I couldn't believe it: Just imagine this fat little nun standing there in front of you, with a huge cross around her neck, puffing away happily at a cigarette. You'd be speechless. [...]

Sunday, 02.04

Servus, Hannes, today is my sacred lie-in day, and it's already half two in the afternoon. I had breakfast in bed, and I'm still lying here, writing to you about the last few days. I probably won't shower until this evening, then I'll head off to the ice stadium. The Ice Bears are playing today, and it could be the last game



of the season if they lose again. God, I wish you were here. I went to see you yesterday, everything was just the same [...] I read you the letter, as much as I'd written so far anyway. They're my thoughts, like the ones I've told you my whole life, and that's what I miss the most. That everyday drivel. About nothing. About God and the world. You were my diary, and I was yours. But now I'm writing it down instead, so that later you'll know what happened in the time you slept through. Anyway. I sat on the edge of the bed and read to you. But you didn't react.

After a while, Nele came in. Strangely enough we've both been to see you almost every day, and yet we've never run in to each other. She came in the door, looked at me and, without any warning, went for me with her fists flying. She drummed wildly on my chest and kept shouting: 'You and your stupid motorbikes! You and your stupid motorbikes!' It wasn't in the least bit funny. And for some reason I just couldn't get a grip of her hands. She was screaming like crazy, and still you didn't react. Luckily Dr. Mustachio came in and got her away from me. She went over to your bed for a moment and kissed you on the forehead. Then she was gone. Honestly, Hannes, I so wanted to say something nice to her, something friendly or comforting, but honestly, I didn't have a chance. We were pretty speechless after she left. You, because that's how you are now, and me because I didn't have anything left to tell you. So I left too.

Damn it, I could see you in the rear-view mirror, the whole time. And then suddenly, on that endlessly long curve, along that endlessly high wall, you just disappeared from my sight. I rode on a little further, I was even grinning, because I thought you must have braked on the bend. Then I finally turned back and...fuck! Fuck, Hannes!

I popped into Sullivan's on the way home today for a beer. Rick, Kalle and Brenninger were there, and there was a live band on. It was full and loud, like every Saturday, but for me it was too full and too loud. So I went home and – can you imagine – there's Nele leaning against my front door, in the light of a street lamp. She was waiting for me. And do you know what happened then, Hannes? I told her to piss off and just walked straight past her into my place. She stood there, her face swollen with tears and all wet (it had been raining) and I just left her standing there! And do you know why, my friend? Because in the course of the evening I realised that none of us has the right to make accusations towards anyone else. Because we're all suffering just the same. Rick, Kalle, Brenninger, your parents, Nele and I. And I don't know who else, but all of us for sure. So she shouldn't be starting on at me like that. I hope she got it.

I'll write again tomorrow; I have to head off the ice stadium now.

English translation by Jamie Searle