

Jens Petersen

Till Death Do us

(Extract from a novel)

Alex raises the pocket mirror and sees his distorted reflection, scrapes his teeth with a carved beech stick, rubs his armpits, wets his face and then shaves with the last blade from the damp jute sack. He looks in the mirror and wipes away the blood, straightens up finally, coughs and listens to the vibration of the mucous threads in his bronchial tubes. The air smells of winter. He presses his hands into the small of his back, looks at the towers of the thermal power station on the opposite bank, the rubbish in the reeds – thin branches, a snow-covered bit of rubble, the frozen body of a fish. He coughs once again and spits in the river.

The trailer is over there, in the shadow of the bridge piers. The other campers are long gone, are coming back in the spring or never, as some of them long ago grew old. His lips tremble. Two more hours to midday he thinks. He has cleared the narrow path, extinguished the fire in the drum, trimmed the struggling bush again and poured the old petrol from the power unit into a water bottle. Clouds are moving across the sky. A dog crouches by the path along the river.

During the night he dreamed of Nana. She was wearing her shroud. Her body was tiny and withered, with hands like rusty rakes, lying flat on top of one another and tied over the dried-out breast. She lay on the bier in a

room with cold electric light. When Alex had finally woken up, he was lying with a buzzing head as if in a fever and tossing and turning between the stinking sheets. He felt for her body, tugged the sleeping bag into place, took her hand and stroked it.

Nana, he whispered.

Now he's crouching on a boulder by the river bank, screwing up his eyes and in the midst of the grey icy morning is listening into himself. They're alone; the first walkers will not come until later, only the bedraggled dog is roaming around in the reeds. It urinates against the boundary post and finally limps off in the direction of the wood, head down, tail drooping, a black wound on its backside.

Alex switches on the camping stove, stirs coffee into the cloudy water and places the pills from the dispenser on the narrow table, two big yellow ones, which taste bitter, and a sugar-covered white one with the name of a bankrupt company on it. Nana is huddled on the mattress and, mouth open, is listening to a symphony concert on the radio. Alex sees her lids blink, twice.

Do you think so, he says.

Another blink.

It's all right, says Alex. Just a moment.

He bends down and takes one of the disposable syringes out of the refrigerator. Inside him everything has been tense for the last couple of

days; he has never had such cramps, never has his head been so empty and yet so heavy, so full of sharp pains, tweaks and this restlessness. Sometimes he thinks he can hear voices. That would be it. If he was hearing voices, he wouldn't take another step, but it's only a kind of murmuring, and usually it ebbs away to nothing.

He presses the cannula onto the syringe, then pushes it almost as far as it will go into the little bottle with the morphine. The stuff is too weak to harm Nana; it doesn't even take away her pain. He hesitates, then walks the short distance from the stove to the bed, hears the tapping of his feet on the laminate. Sometimes he sees himself as he clumsily tries to open a fastener or scrape together pills that have fallen on the floor. As he sings, reads something out or holds Nana's hand; as he supports her and talks to her, almost, as if he was trying with his spittle to stick something together which has burst into millions upon millions of hard parts.

Nana huddles on the mattress and stares at the naked wall. With her index finger she taps the frame of the old bed, a metronome of veins and sinews, skin stretched across it.

Here's coffee.

A weak blink.

I'll put sugar in for you.

He sits down on the edge of the mattress and looks at her, then wipes her mouth with the corner of the blanket and places the pills one after the other on her tongue. He leans over a little and kisses her slack eyelids.

She blinks and smacks her lips; he brings the dirty cup to her lips and watches as the coffee dribbles down her chin and leaves finely ramified stains on the blanket. The music goes on playing. Mendelssohn, thinks Alex. He didn't like Mendelssohn before. Today he's glad that Mendelssohn is filling this emptiness.

The dog's back again outside.

A blink.

I don't think, he says, that it belongs to anyone. I think the dog is alone.

A blink repeated three times.

It's OK, says Alex. When it comes again, we'll take it in.

The plate from her birthday is still on the table, white bread with smoked fish and a couple of leaves of lettuce. Alex doesn't want to eat any more. Nana can't. For the dog, thinks Alex; he must make sure not to forget to put the plate outside the door later, before they leave. He sees a spot on the wall and wipes across it with his sleeve. He puts the cups in the cupboard in their places, blows his nose and finally takes the crumpled wrapping paper from the table. He had given her a ring, as he did every year. Nana is wearing thirteen rings on a thread round her neck, because her fingers are swollen and inflamed. Alex had played guitar, lit a candle and finally sat down in front of the chess board and given a commentary on every move; Nana had watched him with her mouth open. Later he had read to her from his diary and massaged her shoulders and back with a warm glove.

Sudden silence. The radio batteries have run down. Alex looks everywhere, feels a quiet panic inside. He looks in the drawers, under the bed and even in the rubbish bin. Finally he takes the batteries out of the yellow plastic casing, shakes them and gains a couple of minutes. A third, a fifth: the motif flies past his ear and right through him.

Then they're outside, at first behind the trailer, where Alex supports Nana as she squats and breaths out condensed breath. While they wait, they shiver. Alex leans forward, looks in the hole in the ground and shovels snow over it with his foot. Her pain-tortured face, her scrawny rear, her blue-frozen, long fingers... He should have gone to the village and bought liquid paraffin at the chemist's; his head had been full of all the other things.

On a scrap of paper Alex had noted:

1. Look for clothes, wash.

He had dealt with that the day before. He had gone to the river and scrubbed all her old stuff with a root brush. The power unit was still warm enough to dry the things; now he's wearing his best shirt. She'll wear the cardigan they found on their last trip to the sea.

2. Polish shoes.

He had done that too – Nana's brown boots, scratched, well worn, the leather faded.

3. Nail up the windows.

What on earth for, he thinks now. What they've collected would be stolen or at the very least turned upside down by the people who spend their nights by the river, grilling there and getting drunk. As if a couple of pieces of chipboard could stop any of them... at any rate he's put his watch in an envelope and given it to the petrol pump attendant on the road to Engsiek as a present.

He carries her into the house, sets her down on the stool and starts to put on her bra, the cardigan and the woollen skirt. Her knee joints crack. Once she slips to the side; he just manages to hold her. Her skin smells of damp humus and semolina. The smell is so familiar, that he misses it – physically misses it – when he's outside, shopping or fishing in the summer. In between he stands up, apologises for his fingernail scratching her skin and kisses her on the lips. Finally he carefully puts her spectacles on her nose

How's it going?

A blink.

Shall we leave?

Outside he checks the tyres and pours a pailful of cleaning water into the radiator. He bends over the cold metal, scrubs the windscreen, greases rubber coatings and lubricates the sunroof with a couple of drops of floor polish. Then he bends over the bonnet and begins to polish traces of the past few years out of the dull paint. A hawk. A stone which fell from the

sky on the road to the forest. He presses his lips together, scrubs and thinks of nothing. The sun comes through the clouds, for the first time since the beginning of the year. He looks over to the trailer on whose dull metal shell the sunbeams paint a patch of light.

They drive on the motorway. The brightness dazzles them; gleaming white, only here and there does frozen earth peek out from under the snow like a dirty pockmark. Electricity pylons on the horizon, cold and stiff. The forest begins behind the hills north of the canal. Suddenly there's drizzle as there was when they met; he flashes the indicator, presses the brake pedal and turns off.

He had thought of driving until he couldn't go any further, perhaps to the Öresund and of steering the car against a bridge pier on a country road. He had thought about giving her poison, Phenobarbital, in a shadowy apartment in Zürich. To let her drink it from a glass, while some stranger stands opposite her with an impassive expression. Asking her beforehand to sign a piece of paper, that that's what she really wants. Then he had seen the photos: How people roll their eyes, how their limbs clench in their last difficult struggle. All the seconds in which one knows one is dead and is yet still living, in which one presumably thinks, perhaps regrets and hears the echo of one's heartbeat in one's head.

They drive east, towards the sea. Before Engsiek there's the forest. The old mill is on the B 76, by the fields.

Let's stop, says Alex, and halts right by the side of the road. He winds down the side window, grabs Nana's coat and turns her a little on the seat, so that she can look out. Her glasses are greasy. He takes them off,

cleans them with a paper handkerchief and then adjusts them on Nana's nose. Nana screws up her eyes and nods, at least he thinks so.

The mill is still standing, but the front part of the restaurant has collapsed like puff pastry filled with air. The plaster has crumbled away, the door is hanging off the hinges and the village boys have scrawled their messages on the wall beside a window, admiration for Hitler and other crap, just as they did when Alex' parents met here for the first time. That had been in winter, too, the fields bare and desolate, the mill wheel stolen by looters, in the dried-up river bed a wolf that had starved to death. They had spent the nights on the wooden floor next to the millstone, in a fur that had come from Kiev with his grandfather's coffin.

Will we go on?

A blink.

He flashes the indicator and drives on.

They stop at traffic lights, then at a petrol station, where he gets out and buys a bar of chocolate. He breaks a piece off, carefully opens Nana's mouth and places the chocolate on her tongue.

What do you think, he says.

Nana doesn't say anything, but Alex sees from her eyes that it tastes good.

Do you remember, he says, what you cooked at the mill?

Steamed red cabbage. Boiled veal. Pancakes with forest berries. Glazed pears. Duck breast à l'orange. Trout from the Westensee, whose stomachs, when she could still do it, she slit open with a knife, to pull out the bloody innards. She set the innards aside and later made soup with them. Alex had been secretly repelled, would rather have gone outside and sorted boxes, swept the yard or polished the dull glasses. But he could never bear to be alone for long; every time he had returned to the kitchen, shoulders hunched, had sat down on the stool and watched Nana. Her hands, stained and smooth, with nails she had filed and cut and sometimes even painted. The apron. The low-cut neckline. Her feet in white sandals. This woman with the sensitive face, stinking of fish, her fingers shining. A couple of times Alex had suddenly climbed on the table, had grabbed her shoulders and kissed her on the mouth; once they had even made love among the dead fish.

He stops at the side of the road again, breathes deeply twice and puts another piece of chocolate in Nana's mouth. He sees how his hand trembles. Saliva dribbles from her lips. He catches the saliva and rubs his fingers dry on his trousers.

They have never been able to forget their time at the mill, the daily work and being together in the evenings. Later they went there every Sunday. Nana was already very weak, but the threshold of the dining room was low, and Nana only weighed 80 pounds. Alex lifted her out of the seat every time, carried her like a bride over the threshold and set her on a chair. The mill had already been sold again; the new owner served them grilled sausage and coca-cola. Usually they were alone; only now and then during the holidays did a young family drop in. Alex brought his

grandfather's binoculars and they watched the deer grazing in the twilight at the edge of the forest.

Tastes good, Nana had said once and bit into the sausage. The devil can cook.

She had never wanted a wheelchair. Crutches yes, but no wheelchair. When she could no longer walk, Alex had once slipped in the entry to the mill in winter; he had fallen backwards and hurt his behind on the cobble stones. Frightened, Nana lay on his stomach and had looked at Alex through her tinted glasses. She waited until he was standing again. Then she laughed out loud. Tears ran down her cheeks, she waved her arms about like a penguin, and she laughed, and Alex laughed with her and tried to pull her up from the cold ground. The cook, a thin young guy with a goatee beard saw them through the window and finally came running out of the kitchen; meanwhile the tears on Nana's chin had turned to ice.

Alex turns onto the forest track and drives more slowly now. His feet are numb. There's no feeling in his hands, in his whole body; he hears nothing and sees only the track in front of them, the glittering, slushy snow. It is as if the gift of human beings to enter into contact with the world has left him for ever. The clearing, the sun shining on it. He changes gear. Suddenly a shadow at the window, a boy scout, fat, with a peaked cap and a walking stick. He greets Alex. Alex hesitates for a moment and returns the greeting. Two more scouts are sitting wrapped in blankets on a tarpaulin at the edge of the clearing and talking on their phones; they have put up their tent in the thicket.

Alex comes to a halt and gets out. They're everywhere; one of them is even sitting in a tree and looking at the meadows at the edge of the wood through a telescope.

Good afternoon, says the fat one with the cap.

Good afternoon, says Alex.

The fat boy looks over to the car and nods to Nana.

Are you lost?

No, says Alex. We often come here.

We do too, said the fat boy.

There you go, says Alex

What do you want to do then, says the fat boy.

Nothing, says Alex.

Do you need help?

No thanks, says Alex. But thanks for the offer.

What's wrong with the woman? Is she your wife?

She's pretty ill.

I'm sorry, says the fat boy.

It's all right, says Alex.

He knows the boy; he's the son of an old eccentric, who was once friends with his father. The boy probably doesn't remember him any more, because it's years since they met. Images of a fair come to Alex's mind, with a ferris wheel, candy floss and circus acts; a stand with fish rolls "fresh from the mill stream" at a time when the mill still belonged to his mother. His mother, as she sold the fish, at first meticulously, in local costume, and years later stooped, a cigarette in one hand, her hair sticking up everywhere, her eyes already red from alcohol in the morning.

Why doesn't she die like the others, his mother had shouted. Put her in a home, so that you can take care of the mill. To live for her, for a cripple. We need you!

She had cried and held Alex' shoulders.

His father had sat there and stared at the floor.

We'll give you something, he had said, so that she can be in Rebborg. That's not so shabby. You can't ruin our future!

Alex goes into reverse gear and turns the car. The fat boy stands stiffly at the edge of the track and salutes. For a moment Alex thinks of driving to the trailer; he feels cold sweat running down his back.

What is it? he says. What do you think? What should we do now?

He turns the rear view mirror to the side and sees Nana's face in it, expressionless, facing the road. They go on driving for a while. Then he stops again, this time by an open field. In the distance a railway embankment. He waits almost five minutes; not a single car comes by. He shuts his eyes, listens to Nana's wheezing breaths, their rise and fall. He tries to put a bit of chocolate on Nana's tongue, but his hand is shaking; the bar falls to the floor.

Say something, says Alex. Please.

Nana stares in front of her.

He undoes the seat belts, first hers, then his; then he takes off her scarf and lays his head in the warm hollow beneath her chin. For minutes he hears her breathing. He wants to be there always, on this day, which is rainy and yet sunny, wants to lie there always, on her thin breast, holding her, and listening to her breathing, and thinking what she's thinking.

Then he gets out, goes to the boot, takes out the box and puts the cold revolver into his jacket pocket. He sits down in the car again and winds down the sun roof. He strokes Nana's cheek, covers her face with the scarf, holds the barrel to the back of her head and presses the trigger.

Once you have pressed the trigger, you will wait thirty seconds. You will force yourself to look. That will be a problem: to look at her. You will look at her, and if she is still breathing and moving, pull the trigger a second time. But you have read about the signs of death: Some of them

only appear after an hour. You will not have that much time. You will feel her pulse, and if her eyes are open you will close them. You will clasp her body as long as it is still warm. Then you will place the barrel in the hollow under your chin. Place your free hand on hers. Perhaps look at the sky.

Alex stares through the windscreen. Something is coming along the railway embankment. First he sees the red in his field of vision, then in front of his inner eye the word TRAIN forms. He turns to Nana, tears the scarf from her head and gives her a push, calls her name, but where her face was, Alex sees only a pulp of damp hair and congealed blood. He screams; he clings to her, weeps and screams and strikes the dashboard with his knees and fist. The gun has fallen to the floor; Alex bends down, but can't reach it. A vacuum is crushing the organs in his chest; he cries out her name, bends down, pulls open the door, kneels on the frozen earth and searches the floor of the car for the revolver. He bites a hole in the inside of his cheek. Finally he feels the butt.

He stands up, goes away from the car, stops for a moment. He doesn't know where he is, what day it is, and what his name is. He tries at least to remember his name, to remember something that connects him to the world, to himself.

Suddenly a sentence comes to mind: *Then you will place the barrel in the hollow under your chin.*

He places the barrel under his chin.

To the car first, he thinks.

He goes back to the car, pulls open the door and heaves himself in. What he recognises of Nana is pale, has become almost transparent. He carefully nudges her; her hand falls out of her lap onto the handbrake, a dull thump. He thinks she's breathing. He holds his breath and stares at a point beyond her breast.

Perhaps she's breathing.

He must get help. He sees the inside of the skull in which the blood has coagulated into a black knot. He pushes against the back rest. He takes a deep breath and puts the barrel of the gun between his eyes, against his temples, finally puts it in his mouth. Where's the heart? In the middle, he thinks and puts the barrel to his chest. You have to aim exactly in the middle. Alex sits there, panic-stricken. He stares at the railway embankment, at the field in front of it, the brown-sprinkled white of which has turned into a chaos of exploding colours. He weeps and screams and then he falls silent. He counts to himself. He listens, hears his heartbeat and lets the revolver sink down, gets out of the car, stands still at first and then starts walking. He walks for a while. He doesn't think of anything. He cannot think of anything any more. He marches towards the railway embankment.

(Translated by Martin Chalmers)