

SUMMER SISTERS II

THE NIGHT OF LIGHTS

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[pp. 5 – 39]

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1. Are You Still Awake?

The hands on the clock simply refused to move forward. Helen carefully opened the door to Paul's study. His serious face was lit up by the blueish light from his computer screen. As a student, her boyfriend had worked with tracing paper and soft 6B pencils, but now he did the lion's share of his work on the computer. When he was on a deadline, this sometimes included night shifts. At his standing desk, the architect fine-tuned the details for a competition entry, designing and discarding. For weeks, Helen had followed intently as a virtual residential landscape grew on the computer from an industrial wasteland, in which studios, freehold flats and social housing merged into a whole. Helen planted a kiss on the back of his neck.

'Do you fancy an evening walk?' she asked.

'It's three o'clock,' Paul said after a quick glance at his Apple Watch.

'Do you fancy a morning walk?' Helen replied.

Paul put down his electronic pen.

'When was the last time you got seven hours sleep?' Paul asked anxiously.

'Uninterrupted?'

Voices fought for attention in Helen's head every night. Most of them just wanted to sleep. But one of them, the most persistent, just didn't let up and kept firing off new questions: what shall I do on my thirtieth? Celebrate? With Amelie? With the family? Go on a trip? Why are the neighbours so loud again? Is it even a

good thing to plan a holiday given the state of the world right now? Where is the receipt from the dry cleaners? Why is no-one from the family getting in touch? How is Mum? Has the cancer spread again?

‘I’m a night owl,’ Helen said.

‘Who is active during the day,’ Paul replied.

‘Oh rubbish, it’s not that bad,’ she said, trying to placate him.

And yet Helen’s thoughts had been revolving around sleep permanently for months now. Sometimes she spent the whole night calculating how much time remained before her alarm clock would relentlessly force her out of bed. And, of course, that would always be at the very moment that she had just dozed off. In the mornings, she wanted to sleep; in the afternoons, she almost fell asleep; in the evening, the whole thing started again. Until she collapsed in the lab one day at 10.20 in the morning.

Helen struggled to open her eyes. The neon lighting was blinding her. Three pairs of eyes hovered over her. Puzzled, she recognised the worried gaze of her Indian research assistant Shivani and a colleague from the next-door lab. Suddenly they moved aside and made room for the huge pale blue eyes of Dr Schmitt, which flashed from behind thick horn-rimmed glasses.

‘What happened?’ the company doctor asked.

Helen was too dazed to reply.

‘She just collapsed, just like that, in the middle of a sentence,’ said Shivani, clearly shocked.

‘I think I just haven’t had enough to eat,’ Helen stammered.

In fact, she had been feeling shaky and odd all morning.

Dr Schmitt was not letting her get away with a white lie.

‘Fainting always has a deeper cause,’ he said. ‘It’s best we check out what’s actually going on.’

‘I am perfectly healthy,’ Helen said. ‘There is nothing wrong with me.’

He examined the bump on her head. ‘No stitches needed,’ he said disappointedly. ‘Too bad, my assistants always love to do those.’

She was overwhelmed by his forthright honesty. Helen immediately remembered why she always put off going to the doctor.

‘Are you stressed?’

I am now, she thought.

‘Not that I know of,’ Helen said.

Wrong answer. Dr Schmitt pierced her with his x-ray gaze.

‘Everyone has stress,’ he said reproachfully.

‘No more than usual,’ she said.

‘Perhaps that is already too much,’ he concluded logically.

‘I haven’t been sleeping well for a few nights,’ Helen said. ‘I will be all right.’

Dr Schmitt shone a light into her eyes. ‘Both pupils are reacting and at the same time. That’s good. If there is no movement, we need to check whether the patient is still alive.’

He grinned from ear to ear as if he expected applause for his brilliant diagnosis. Helen smiled wryly: ‘I feel brilliant.’

‘And how long have you been suffering from insomnia?’ the doctor asked.

Helen could have named the precise date. Since her mother had invited her to the traumatic place where she had spent childhood holidays and confronted her with a surprise husband. Since she had spent five days with her sisters. Since she had started thinking about her father again. Since her short trip to the Dutch coast. Since Bergen.

‘Two, three weeks,’ she said.

The truth would have been twelve months. But she wasn’t the least bit interested in telling the eccentric company doctor about her personal life. Shivani calling him down here was totally over the top.

The company doctor scrutinised her with his watery eyes.

‘And in truth?’ he asked.

‘A bit longer. A few weeks, max.’

‘Bed rest,’ he replied tersely.

‘Absolutely no way,’ Helen said decisively. She thought it unlikely that the words ‘bed’ and ‘rest’ would actually go together for her in any case. She jumped up and immediately slumped down again. She was still feeling dizzy.

‘Three days, then the weekend, the bank holiday ... you urgently need a break.’

‘My desk is overflowing. We have to finish the test series by next week ...’
Helen said weakly.

‘And then you wonder why you can’t sleep?’

‘I don’t wonder,’ Helen said.

‘I can refer you to a colleague. I work with a very good psychologist,’ he said.

Helen refrained from any further discussion with Dr Schmitt.

‘It’s just my hormones,’ she said quickly. ‘My period is due.’

‘One week’s bedrest,’ the company doctor said. ‘And not a day less.’

2. Birthday Presents

‘A week? Impossible,’ Helen complained.

Once she was installed on the sofa at home, she felt almost restored. Shivani brought her a pot of wonderfully spicy curry in the evening.

‘The capsaicin in chilli stimulates the mucous membranes,’ she explained. ‘To make the pain more bearable, the body releases endorphins. That’s why chilli makes you happy.’

Helen was touched by her research assistant’s kind gesture. She seemed genuinely worried about her. Like a mother, she thought. And yet she couldn’t remember her own mother ever having cooked anything special for her when she was sick. Henriette had never been that sort of mother. She chose to keep her distance from her four daughters when they had a cold. ‘I don’t want to catch it,’ she had always said. ‘If I can’t function, then everything here will collapse.’

Helen sighed heavily at the thought of her mother. The dust had still not settled following her hasty wedding a year ago. On the contrary: the family trip had opened up old wounds in Helen. She had not been herself over the last year, she had to admit. Having to confront the place where she had spent her childhood holidays had permanently upset her equilibrium. Now her forced immobilisation meant she had even more time to dwell on things.

Helen pondered endlessly over the reason the family had drifted further apart since their trip to Holland together. Never had the four sisters been closer than during the endless summers that they traditionally spent on the North Sea coast in Bergen as children. ‘We are summer sisters,’ Doro had always said. But there was hardly any sense of unity left now.

There had been no opportunity for everyone to come together since her mother’s wedding.

Her mother’s health had significantly improved thanks to the chemotherapy and radiation. Whenever the treatment regimen gave her breathing space and some respite, she got in her camper van to explore the world with her Dutch husband. However, Henriette was conspicuous by her absence in the lives of the four Thalberg sisters. She skipped Christmas, which they usually spent together; she spent her own birthday alone with Thijs, and declined invitations from her daughters. The only thing she never missed was Doro’s premieres. She loved strutting across the red carpet with her eldest daughter, who had achieved fame as a costume designer. Ever since Henriette and Thijs had set off on a long tour south six weeks ago, even the steady stream of written advice had dried up.

As eccentric and exhausting as her mother was, she had always kept Doro, Yella and the twins Helen and Amelie together in some strange way.

Helen had never expected family glue to be so porous. The Thalbergs were well on their way to becoming one of those families that only met for funerals. And what scared her most was that, without a mother, there was a risk the summer sisters could break apart. Dark thoughts robbed her of sleep.

Over the past few months, Helen had tried everything to get her nocturnal restlessness under control: going to bed earlier, going to bed later, staying up all night, regular sleeping times, counting sheep, apps that played the sound of the ocean, audio books, complete silence, renouncing coffee and alcohol, a warm drink at night, camomile tea, no drinks at all after 7pm, moving her bed, adjusting the temperature in the bedroom, swapping her pillows, removing the carpet, new pyjamas, new curtains, relaxing baths, evening walks, sport, sex, window open, window closed, no evening news, no exciting films after 10pm, no electronics in the bedroom. Nothing helped.

‘You need to get help,’ Paul said.

‘They will just prescribe some pills,’ Helen said, although she knew that Paul meant a different type of help. ‘I am a walking instruction leaflet,’ she added hurriedly. ‘I deal with side-effects all day long – it puts you off pills forever.’

Instead of medicine, she bought a pregnancy test. What if her missed period wasn’t down to stress? What if she really were pregnant? For quarter of an hour she lost herself in the unfamiliar idea of what it would be like to be expecting. Like a

bullet train she raced through the pros and cons, which she had mulled over loads of times and discussed with Paul.

The result left her with mixed feelings: it was negative. That was pleasing and worrying at the same time. If she had been pregnant, that would have explained the state she was in. This way she still had the nagging feeling that something was psychologically wrong with her.

There was a pile of books about insomnia next to her bed that she studied late into the night. All she found in them were ever new, wonderful ways of describing her problem.

‘Insomniacs’ heads are lit up like the inside of a fridge,’ she read to Paul. ‘Normally the light goes off when you close the fridge door. In the case of insomniacs, the light stays on permanently.’

Paul chuntered into his pillow next to her. The way he had been chuntering for weeks now. Many of her efforts not only kept her awake but Paul as well.

‘There are co-alcoholics, I am a co-insomniac,’ he said when they met in the kitchen at three in the morning once again. ‘We live in the fridge together.’

‘A well sorted and tidy fridge,’ Helen added.

In their already minimalist flat, there was not a single messy corner, no untidy drawers, no papers that had not been filed away, no speck of dust and no un-

polished shoes. Helen had spent long nights sorting their bookshelves alphabetically and throwing out every superfluous piece of kitchen equipment. She had driven over to the recycling centre several times and had delighted all the charity shops in her area with her discarded household goods until every distraction had disappeared from the flat. Everything remained messy in her head.

‘If things go on like this, I won’t live to see my thirtieth birthday,’ she said.

‘Perhaps you should listen to Dr Schmitt and investigate the cause more,’ Paul tried again.

‘So that a psychologist can tell me after 87 therapy sessions that I can’t sleep because I haven’t come to terms with the loss of my father.’

Even without the help of a psychologist, she knew that her father’s death on a Dutch country road during a stormy night had scarred her forever.

‘It can’t be a coincidence that the insomnia started after the trip to Bergen,’ Paul said carefully.

‘Therapy is not for me,’ Helen stated. ‘I would just be taking a space from someone who really needs help.’

In reality, she didn’t want to delve deeper into her complicated past.

Helen was always amazed by Paul’s good relationship with his family. He loved visiting his father at the petrol station. On birthdays he was hugged, kissed

and quizzed by the whole extended family. He chatted effortlessly with his aunts and uncles and didn't forget a single one of their special celebrations.

'Family is a gift,' he always said.

Helen wasn't so sure.

After a week's forced break, she returned to work without her main problem having changed in any way. She listened enviously to Shivani telling her sister the latest gossip. How did others manage to keep in touch with their families so effortlessly? And she herself was actually a twin. She read about the special, almost symbiotic relationship that people who were conceived at the same time could develop. Many articles reported on twins who had been separated and who grew up far apart from each other and yet followed similar paths in life. In no universe would she and Amelie choose the same dress in two shops a thousand kilometres apart. Their mother had liked to dress them in the same clothes as children and always found them particularly adorable when they sat on the sofa like dolls. As a fraternal twin, she was no closer genetically to Amelie than to Dora or Yella. The truth was that there was no invisible bond between Amelie and Helen that mysteriously connected them. It was more like an invisible wall. Nonetheless, without saying it, those around them expected the two of them to form a unit.

'What are you doing on your thirtieth?' Yella wrote in the summer sisters chat group.

‘Paul and I are moving house,’ Helen replied before Amelie could answer. ‘We have finally found an affordable flat in Frankfurt with a balcony.’

The move gave her a welcome excuse not to celebrate. Helen didn’t like being the centre of attention. When her colleagues in the lab sang ‘Happy birthday’ under Shivani’s enthusiastic direction, she wanted to curl up and die. Her young research assistant gave her the longest 45 seconds of her working life. Helen had no choice but to accept the serenade with a slightly frozen smile. She had just breathed a sigh of relief that it was over when Rita from accounts began a new song. Rita loved her because she was the only one of the 724 employees who delivered her travel expense claims perfectly and on time. Rita knew all the verses of her chosen song. Helen hoped in vain that the flickering candles on the cake would set off the fire alarm. If Shivani kept this up, the lab team would sing their rendition in canon next year. Helen was happy to spend the evening alone with Paul. They ate new potatoes with butter and salt in the still-empty flat and drank lukewarm white wine from plastic cups. She was happy.

Until she sank into her bed and rolled from one side to the other again. It suddenly felt wrong to have celebrated her 30th birthday without her family. It was a sort of phantom pain that always accompanied her. If she was honest, she wished she were closer to her sisters.

At six o'clock in the morning, in her new kitchen, she puzzled over what she needed: a double espresso, a week's worth of sleep or a hug from Paul? At least she could rely on him.

'You can wait forever for something to change,' he said. 'Or you can make a change.'

'You sound like a calendar quote,' Helen said.

Paul looked hurt.

'I feel great,' Helen said. 'I just don't sleep well.'

'Then do something about it,' Paul said irritably.

The insomnia began to spread like a cancer to other areas of her life.

It was bothering her. She was thirty now. Shouldn't she have left her childhood problems far behind her by now? Was that the task she had to accomplish? Perhaps the reason she couldn't sleep was because something was fundamentally wrong in her life? Perhaps she had to start precisely where it hurt before she could heal? And sleep. Finally sleep.

'Family is like an instrument that you learn,' Yella had once quoted her therapist Dr Deniz. 'You have to put effort and love into it before the instrument loves you back.'

Paul had got it before she did. If she wanted to find her inner peace, she had to act. Spending time together was key. Spending time with the summer sisters.

Helen spent nights on end poring over Berlin holiday plans, sent around Doodle requests and tried to reach Doro on the phone to arrange a date for a meeting. Ludwig told her that her older sister would be in Amsterdam all summer working with a world-famous opera director. The puzzle pieces just didn't want to fit. Until she had an idea while watching *The Godfather*, wrapped in a blanket in Paul's arms. If she wanted the family to come together, she would have to get active herself and do the job properly. Don Corleone became her shining example: she had to make her sisters an offer they couldn't refuse.

3. Everything Like It Used to Be

‘Helen is inviting you?’ David asked, surprised.

Yella nodded. ‘To Villa Vlinder.’

They had spent their last summer as a family in this holiday home more than twenty years ago. Now Helen had rented the villa for twelve days.

Our father was looking forward to the Lichtjesavond so much, Helen wrote. And then that damned storm came. I want us to come together again as a family on the first Wednesday in August in Bergen when the whole village is traditionally lit up by candlelight. I want to celebrate Lichtjesavond with you. Accommodation, childcare, sun, sand and sea - all inclusive. My treat.

‘If you get lost, you have to return to the place where you took a wrong turn,’ Yella quoted her father’s mantra.

Helen had hit the nail on the head. They had not treasured their father’s memory enough over the last few years. Johannes Thalberg had loved the annual *Lichtjesavond*, which was the highlight of their summers on the North Sea coast every year. Yella understood her sister’s message. The holiday meant more than just summer fun. It was a tribute to their father, who had died far too young. Amelie had been living in Bergen for six weeks after months of commuting between Wuppertal and Holland, and Doro was planning to join as soon as the prestigious commission for the opera allowed. There was just one problem.

‘David can’t join,’ Yella told Helen.

Her writer husband had received a paid residency in Riga that would turn her into a single mother for two months. The holiday would be a perfect break for her during this time.

‘Just us sisters and the children,’ Helen had then suggested. ‘Our men unbalance everything anyway.’

Yella was thankful that Helen refrained from asking any further questions. Even without any additional information, the level-headed chemical scientist understood that David’s long absence was not a good sign. Unlike Doro, who never kept her opinions to herself, and Amelie, who shared her problems with anyone who would lend an ear, Helen was not one of those chatty people who had to analyse and comment on everything.

‘Paul is deeply relieved that he doesn’t have to go with us,’ she said lightly. ‘He is eternally grateful to have a fantastic excuse to work through the summer.’

Yella knew the likes and dislikes of the man who had once been her fellow student. Helen’s boyfriend suffered from a chronic phobia of nature and hated wearing shorts, hated wasps and the feeling of sand under his bare feet. Never in his life would the stubborn suit-wearer lie on the beach of his own free will. Aside from their architectural features, the avowed city dweller was suspicious of villages such as Bergen.

‘I grew up around tarmac and I make my living from stacking stones,’ Paul always said. ‘For me green is work material, not relaxation.’

Yella understood only too well what Paul really meant: four Thalberg women together was too much. For all concerned.

But Yella was very pleased with the invite. Her tight family budget would never have permitted a summer holiday in a lavish villa. She was even happier when her younger sister told her that she had a pharmacology course in Berlin, which meant they could travel together.

Everything ran smoothly until they got to the Dutch border. Six hours of travel and two generous breaks in the journey lay behind them. While Helen showed no signs of fatigue even after an exhausting week of seminars, Yella felt the tiredness in every bone of her body. Worn down by a long school and kindergarten year, by nightly holiday preparations, turf wars at work and arguments with David, she was looking forward to twelve relaxing days at the North Sea coast. While Helen took the wheel, Yella took care of the children. As a temporary single mum, she had prepared for the holiday with military precision with snacks and activities for Leo and Nick. They had belted out songs as loud as they could, deciphered number plates, searched for random numbers and scribbled in colouring books, played ‘I spy with my little eye’, tried the catch-out game, listened to an audio book, eaten some biscuits, sung some more, eaten chips at the motorway service station and

charged around the playground there. Exhausted, the two boys had dozed off on the back seat at around 10pm. Leo had pulled his cap down over his eyes; Nick was asleep with his mouth open, still holding a sandwich he had started eating. Tiredness had overtaken him between bites. Yella managed to hold out until the border near Bad Bentheim before she dropped off in the darkness. She only woke again when Helen turned off the A9 onto the Alkmaar Ring and she was jolted out of her sleep by the change in background noise.

‘I must have dozed off,’ she said, feeling guilty.

‘We don’t both need to stay awake,’ Helen said generously.

Yella sighed contentedly. She never felt like she needed to pretend with her younger sister. Helen fulfilled her part without expecting a lot of praise. It was wonderfully cosy being in the car with her. Yella felt a new special connection to her youngest sister since their last stay. She snuggled into her warm coat and stared out of the window expectantly, hoping to recognise something. At one o’clock in the morning, the country road that ran in a straight line through the Dutch countryside belonged to them alone.

Happily, she rolled down the window and stuck her head out into the cool air for a moment. It smelled of the sea, holidays and childhood. The blue sign announcing Bergen appeared in the distance. Beneath it, large LED letters announced the *Lichtjesavond*, the Night of Lights. 21 years ago, storm Ira had prevented them from taking part in the event, which had been held in the village since 1926. Now

they would finish what had been left unfinished and join in the celebrations. Until then, they had twelve days in which they would do nothing but spend time on the beach with the wind and the sea. Yella couldn't wait to show Leo and Nick her Holland, and to spend time with them in the water and among the sand dunes.

The anticipation was also written all over Helen's face when they passed the ruined church, where scattered pub-goers were enjoying their last beer on a wall. Yella pulled out her camera to send her mother a photo of the village's landmark. This would mean their mother could participate in a small way.

Helen swept into the *Eeuwigelaan*. The dreamy avenue with its huge trees that leant inwards looked even more magical at night. Both of them were caught up in their own thoughts as the car jolted over the cobblestones.

'Everything like it used to be,' Helen said.

She was observing and hoping in equal measure.

Holidays at last! Relaxation at last. Summer sisters at last.

We've arrived safe and sound, Yella announced to David in Riga, where he was waiting for the news in his writer's residence. An invisible umbilical cord connected him to his family even from 2,000 kilometres away.

Marvellous, he wrote back immediately. *Then I can go to bed now. And don't forget: what you dream the first night in a strange bed will come true.*

Yella sent a heart emoji and got eight back. Since he had set off for his writing residency, he had bombarded her with expressions of love. She sent another heart back.

Helen steered the car into the narrow residential street on the outskirts of the village and stopped a moment later in front of a heavy iron gate with a sign in ornate script: *Villa Vlinder*.

‘Finally,’ Yella said with relief.

Her happiness lasted all of ten seconds.

4. A Stone Ghost

‘That’s where we are staying?’ Leo shouted from the back seat.

At night, the villa seemed a lot gloomier than in the photographs that Yella had shown her sons at home. The lights above the door flickered ominously, as if they really were marking the doorway of a haunted house.

‘I’m not going in there,’ Leo called out. ‘It’s creepy.’

Yella sighed. At quarter past one in the morning, she was longing for her bed.

‘Come on, we’ll find your room,’ she said. ‘I think it has a bunk bed in it.’

‘I’m staying in the car,’ the seven-year-old said resolutely.

A cursory glance at the holiday house had been enough for him to reach his verdict. With Helen’s help, the four of them had managed the trip from Berlin to Bergen without any problems. Now they were in danger of failing at the last few metres.

‘The house will look totally different in the morning.’

‘The house looks dangerous,’ Leo insisted.

Her oldest child’s imagination was full of fantasy creatures that complicated his life. Thousands of invisible enemies disturbed his everyday life anew each day.

Garnished with a pinch of excitement, travel nerves and fatigue – a perfect recipe for a family disaster.

‘It’s just a house,’ said Yella in a fake happy voice. ‘And it’s waiting for you.’

‘The house looks dangerous,’ said Leo with a shaky voice. ‘There's a ghost in there. He's looking at me.’

Yella gulped. Immediately the image of her father, who had spent the last days of his life in this villa, came into her mind's eye.

‘I bet you have a great room,’ she said weakly.

‘I am staying in the car.’

How many of these exhausting moments between helplessness and anger had Yella experienced with Leo in the last few months? Her first-born had inherited his father's fertile imagination and could get hopelessly carried away by imaginary horrors.

‘I see what you mean,’ Helen intervened.

‘Leave him alone,’ Yella tried to warn her.

Before she could intervene, Helen added fuel to the fire: ‘You're absolutely right. Someone is looking at us,’ she said.

Yella sank down. Unlike her sister, she had seen Leo's condition escalate at record speed dozens of times.

‘Can you tell us more about this ghost?’ asked Helen.

‘I don't want to look,’ said Leo, now on the verge of tears.

Yella had deliberately dressed her sons in jogging suits. In an ideal world, she would carry two sleeping boys from the car straight to the beds in the villa after the long journey. In the not-so-ideal reality, panic-struck Leo woke up peacefully slumbering Nick, who immediately realised that he had sat still long enough.

‘I want to get out, Mummy,’ cried one. ‘Out.’

‘I want to go home,’ cried the other. ‘I want to go to Daddy.’

‘I want to go to Mars,’ sighed Yella.

She got out to free Nick, who was impatiently kicking against the passenger seat from his child seat, while Helen remained unperturbed.

‘Do you recognise a man, a woman or something else entirely?’ she calmly asked Leo.

The little boy squeezed his eyes shut in horror.

‘Take a really quick look,’ Helen urged him.

Leo opened one eye and turned his head towards the house and back in a matter of seconds.

‘A bad man,’ he said. ‘He’s not looking forward to seeing us one bit.’

‘Old or young?’ Helen continued impassively.

‘Old.’

‘And what does he look like?’

Yella glanced towards the villa and realised all at once what Leo meant. Twenty years ago, the house had been overgrown with ivy and half-covered by a huge oak tree. The tree had obviously fallen victim to the ravages of time, and the façade had been stripped of all greenery. Only now did the house reveal its true character. The striking bay window of the villa stood out from the dark red brick façade like a fat nose, above which two high windows with cosy red and white striped canopies looked out at her. The streetlights were reflected in the panes and gave the imaginary pupils a special glow. The sun blinds gave them the appearance of critically raised eyelids. A clean-cut, curious face stared at her from the brickwork. As if *Villa Vlinder* itself could not believe the illustrious guests who had rented a room for the next twelve days. The solid wooden dark entrance portal gave the brick building that eternally astonished impression.

‘The house is surprised,’ he replied.

Yella secretly agreed with *Villa Vlinder*. She was still surprised that Helen had actually rented the time-honoured village mansion, which had inscribed itself forever in the annals of the Thalberg family. It was in this house that news of her

father's accidental death had reached her two decades ago. Was he still haunting the place? Had a part of his soul remained in Holland?

Helen nodded seriously: 'You can do something very special, Leo,' she explained. 'Your mind is searching for patterns. You yourself, all by yourself, make a face out of the dots and lines. I can do that too. Yesterday, a bad-tempered grandfather got stuck in the foam of my cappuccino.'

Leo looked suspiciously at the house. He still wasn't comfortable with it.

'I bit a face in the cheese a while ago,' he said hesitantly.

'That's the way it is with houses,' Helen said. 'Paul has a whole book on house faces. There's even a word for when things get faces. A very difficult one. Pareidolia.' The boy repeated the word devoutly. Yella marvelled at how effortlessly Helen redirected Leo's panic. Scientific explanations apparently calmed him more effectively than encouraging words. She had to remember that for the future.

'You have to look at it from the side,' Helen said, 'then the face will disappear by itself.'

To her surprise, Leo got out of his car seat voluntarily. Instead, his uneasy feeling had spread to Yella. She eyed the creepy brick face suspiciously; it followed her every move as she heaved the luggage out of the boot. Yella hoped that the optical illusion was not a bad omen. Everyone interpreted something different about the walls, which dated from the 1920s. Paul, who had discovered the house, had praised its special architecture, which was also recognised abroad. Helen, above all,

emphasised the opportunity to prove that they had grown out of their childhood. Yella only saw a face that commanded respect. Her eyes remained fixed on the façade. Since when had her nerves been so taut that she let a couple of lines and two dots upset her? Maybe Leo had inherited his nervous imagination not from David, but from her.

‘We're going to overwrite all the bad memories,’ Helen had announced.

The creepy stone face made her doubt whether this form of confrontation therapy was actually healing. She had given too little thought to how it would feel to return to the fateful place.

‘It's just a house,’ Helen said.

Yella hoped her sister was not mistaken.

5. A Late Guest

Cold North Sea wind flitted hastily through the leaves; Yella's footsteps crunched on the gravel path. They hesitantly approached the imposing entrance door when it suddenly burst open. Yella and her sister gave a sharp cry of shock. In the backlight they made out a gaunt man who looked frighteningly like their father.

‘There you are at last,’ a soft voice called out.

It took Yella a moment to realise that the ghost in the doorway was none other than her sister Amelie, who had pulled her hair back severely, wore a pair of workman’s trousers and an old jumper inherited from Johannes Thalberg. Without the girlish blonde curls and her ultra-short flower-patterned dresses, the illusion was complete. Yella had never been so acutely aware of how much Amelie looked like her father. Her little sister had wanted so much to know more about Johannes Thalberg. Apparently she had changed her tactics and had slipped into his skin instead.

‘Welcome to Bergen,’ Amelie called out.

Helen had also noticed the incredible resemblance. It had taken her breath away too.

‘Hello! It's me!’ Amelie said irritably. ‘You're looking at me as if I were a ghost.’

Helen was the first to regain her voice. She hugged her twin sister.

‘You look different,’ she said with a dry throat. ‘You look well,’ she added.

‘I just filled up the fridge for you,’ Amelie reported. ‘There are bicycles in the shed. I’ll see you tomorrow.’

Her voice almost cracked.

‘Aren’t you staying?’

Amelie shook her head. ‘I’m still getting used to my flat share. If I move into a villa now, they’ll never believe that I’m serious about a sustainable lifestyle,’ she said cheerfully.

Her sisters’ awkward expressions made her pause for a moment.

‘Believe me, I’d like a holiday too. Or a weekend without appointments or events. Lying in bed all day watching Netflix, that’s what I’d like.’

‘We have a spare room and a huge couch with a TV,’ Helen said. ‘What’s stopping you?’

‘Fear. Fear of missing out on life if I stay on the sofa. While I’m watching ‘Selling Sunset’ in my sweatpants, something big is happening in our compound that my friends are still telling their grandchildren about.’

Amelie didn’t sound the least bit unhappy. She had this tendency to throw herself headlong into something new. Even in the past, Amelie had taken every friendly glance as a marriage proposal. She always went all out. For one evening, for weeks or a few months. Only to pursue something new with the same energy. For a while it had been the unpackaged organic supermarket in Wuppertal, now her

new love was *Het Cultuurdorp*, the cultural village, an alternative living and working project. Amelie ignored her sisters' disappointed faces.

‘We're having a concert tomorrow night,’ she said. ‘You'll come, won't you?’

As quickly as she had come, their little sister disappeared into the darkness on her bicycle. Another ghost who had suddenly materialised and just as quickly disappeared again.

Yella breathed heavily. The summer sisters had arranged to celebrate life together. And to renew those beautiful memories that forever linked them to Holland and Bergen. She would not let her spirits be dampened by one rejection, and even less by Amelie's stony face, which only existed in her imagination. Yella decided to follow the example of her refreshingly level-headed sister. The illusion could be explained scientifically. There was no ghost from days gone by waiting within the walls. She would do everything in her power to fill these venerable walls with life and new stories.

Yella heaved her heavy suitcase over the threshold. Exhausted, she closed her eyes and was surprised to feel the indentation in the stairs that had been made by the feet of former residents. As a child, she had sat on this smooth stone step. Her bottom had fitted into the hollow perfectly, as if a stone seat had been created just for her. A smile flashed involuntarily across her face.

As she pulled the front door closed behind her, her eyes fell on the house opposite. A figure was silhouetted against an upstairs window in the darkness. This time it was not her imagination. Yella cautiously raised her hand in greeting, but received no reaction. She hoped that she had not made a mistake in taking a holiday at *Villa Vlinder* of all places.

6. Wind Force 9

What you dream on the first night comes true, David had written. Yella had read his saying to the children full of anticipation. But did it also apply to Helen? What if you couldn't fall asleep at all? As it was so late, Helen and Yella had decided they wouldn't explore the house properly until the following day. As usual, she turned restlessly from one side to the other.

How she would love to stumble into Paul's study now, have a last glass of red wine with him and go through the day together. There was no-one else in the world with whom she could start a discussion about world politics as easily as with Paul at two in the morning. Or she would polish shoes. Shoe-polishing always worked. Like her, Paul was not a fan of sleep, vagueness and street dirt in the flat. But now there was no Paul to pass the time with. She had to fill the void herself.

Helen had already unpacked her suitcase, neatly folded all her clothes and put them in the wardrobe, placed her reading matter on the bedside table, sorted toiletries by size and colour-coded her shoes. Now what? She was too tired to read, too wakeful to sleep. After the accident, she had gone through a phase of chronic insomnia. At that time, she had taken refuge in books and read through half the night. Secretly, of course. During the day she tried to be a perfect daughter for Henriette. The role of the drama queen had already been filled in the family. Maybe even several times over. Helen didn't want to be a problem, so she wasn't allowed

to have one. As long as she got straight A's on her report card, no-one asked terrible questions like, 'So, how are you?'

As an adult, books no longer helped her. Helen found it hard to bear the nightly silence in Bergen, the holiday standstill and the endless night stretching out before her.

Sighing, she searched through the refrigerator, lovingly stocked by Amelie, for a home remedy that could help her sleep. With the hot milk, sweetened with a tablespoon of honey, she washed down her disappointment that her twin sister preferred to stay elsewhere. After years of creeping estrangement, it would not be easy to bring the family together. Even Doro, who had agreed enthusiastically at first, kept quiet about whether and when she would come. In the sisters' chat group, contradictory messages accumulated from which one could only conclude one thing: on the busy costume designer's list of priorities, her family was at the bottom. Helen had made her sisters an offer by renting the villa. To actually get the sisters to sit down at the same table, it would probably take more than an imposing roof over their heads and an approaching anniversary.

Deflated, Helen switched on the lamp and went over her ideas for the holiday. How much of the programme could she manage with two small children? She couldn't move forward without Yella.

'Why don't you come to our morning meditation?' Amelie had invited her.

But it was too early even for that. The small hand of the clock was moving agonisingly slowly towards three.

Helen wondered at the irony of fate that she could not rest in this, of all places. She had slept when the summer storm swept over Holland, she had slept when her father left the house in the middle of the night, she had slept when her mother returned from her performance in Amsterdam, she had slept when the news of her father's death came. It made her furious to this day that she had missed the decisive moment in her family history. Her picture of the events of the night of the accident was vague and incomplete.

Her family was not much help in filling in the gaps. For two decades, the entire family had been avoiding the subject as if it were an iceberg that, if they collided with it, would drag them all to their doom. Undeterred, their mother had urged the sisters to look ahead. 'Life must go on,' was her constant motto.

In this way they had avoided talking about the summers they had spent together in Bergen, but also, and above all, about their father. The silence they imposed dragged not only the accident, but also all the beautiful memories, into the grave of oblivion.

Helen opened her laptop. Paul was probably right. For months she had been trying to avoid the bitter truth. For decades she had taken refuge in a world that was all about facts and figures and not about feelings. Perhaps if she wanted to regain

her inner peace, she finally had to dare to go down into the depths of her own biography and touch the darkest chapter of her childhood. With trembling fingers, for the first time in her life she dared to enter the date of the night of the storm into a search engine.

She was surprised to find that the storm that had cost her father his life had its own Wikipedia entry. She soaked up every word about the storm, which, appropriately enough, had been christened Ira. Ira, she knew from her Latin lessons, meant rage and fury. The storm front with the ominous name had passed over the Netherlands on Wednesday, 1st August 2001. The texts linked by the KNMI, the *Koninklijk Nederlands Meteorologisch Instituut*, helped her to understand how Ira had developed within a few hours. Helen knew very little about meteorology. She glanced at the explanations of the development of the depression in Brittany, from where the wind had made its way north-east to the Dutch coast. In *Ijmuiden*, twenty kilometres as the crow flies from *Villa Vlinder*, wind gusts of up to 102 kilometres per hour had been measured and gusts of wind force 9 had swept over the land for over an hour. The dunes could hardly withstand the force of nature, and people were even less able to do so. At force 5 and 6, it was already difficult to brace oneself against the wind. If you had the wind behind you, it was even more dangerous.

Her father had not been Ira's only victim. The storm, she read, had claimed four other lives in the Netherlands. In Amsterdam, tram traffic was stopped; train traffic in North and South Holland was shut down; and the A4, A9, A12 and A44

motorways were closed because of fallen trees and heavy rain that obstructed visibility. A Dutch KLM plane made a spectacular emergency landing at Schiphol airport at around 10.45 pm. At about the same time, her father had had an accident on the country road towards Bergen aan Zee. Ira had hit the VW bus with full force and it had been forced off the road. The storm, after devastating their lives, moved on towards Sweden.

Summer storms, she learned, had a shorter duration than their autumn and winter counterparts, but could develop the same destructive power. The warning time was shorter, which could suddenly put water sports enthusiasts and car drivers in life-threatening situations. In flat North Holland, there was no high ground that could slow down the wind. Moreover, trees in full leaf were much less able to withstand gusts of wind and torrential rain.

Her eyes remained fixed on a section of text: 'Heavy rain that obstructed visibility'. According to the family story, her father had left the house to get a glimpse of the storm and the whipped-up sea on the beach.

'Dad didn't want to miss this spectacle of nature,' was the standard sentence.

As a child she had accepted this explanation; after all, her father's love of the natural beauties of North Holland had been very much in evidence. Helen was electrified. Heavy rain? Why on earth had he left *Villa Vlinder* in such poor visibility? Helen put it to the test and found a website that provided data on past moon

phases. The 1st August 2001 had been a pitch-black night. Whatever their father had wanted to see, it was not likely to have been the beach and the waves.

[END OF SAMPLE]