

SIX AND SEX WERE HIGH ON THE LIST OF WHAT HE WANTED – NOW.

Six beers from the garage and sex with the boyfriend.

'Boyfriend' – how could one word be the cause of so much strife and trouble? That's just not fair. Where was said 'boyfriend' now? Now, when he needed him the most? At work. Typical. Could the psychiatric patients not care for themselves – just one day a year? No, they couldn't. That's why they were patients – that's why they needed a doctor. But right now, he himself could use some physical care from that very same doctor.

When he got home, should he stop in the garage for beers – and another newspaper? Maybe one of the other papers had more on the PM's speech.

Yesterday had been tough. An entire day forced to listen to Pia Kjærsgaard's outrage, Vestager's self-righteousness, or Løkke beating about the bush would have been easier to get through than what had happened. At least those has-beens once had points to make. A day like yesterday and then straight into a night shift – it just wasn't fair.

January the first, a week after the big jump – from the closet – and the day with many other big jumps – should have been a day of relaxing on the couch while the boyfriend gently scratched his scalp and the ski jumpers toppled down the hill at Garmisch. He had not experienced a ski jump, but most of the foundation on which his life rested had toppled – or at least the core parts which he had thought it rested on.

New Year's Eve had gone OK. Two sets of friends came over for dinner, and the champagne flowed freely after the queen's appearance on TV at 6 p.m. Their attempt at homemade sushi went beyond all expectations. Lars and Mogens had been more than a little doubtful when they heard the menu. For a mechanic and a pig herdsman, sushi was probably also putting a big strain on their friendship, but then again, who doesn't dare ...

At about 2 a.m., after the friends had left, and as the boyfriend was strutting around with nothing but his bare arse and a toothbrush, his mother called.

Through the booze that almost tangibly fell out of the phone all the way from Thyborøn – his childhood town on the west coast – she raved on about wanting to talk. She wanted to talk about what had happened and been said on Christmas day.

'There's nothing to talk about, Mum, you've said what you want – and I've told you how my world is made up ... no, there's nothing more to talk about – unless you change ... do you intend to change, Mum? ... Yes, I was saying something. I was about to say that only if you change your mind, do we have something to talk about. Have you?... I thought so. Bye, Mum.'

Had he been too harsh on her? No, if anyone had been too harsh, it was her.

'Who was that, darling?'

'My mother.'

'What did she want?'

'To talk.'

The boyfriend was standing in the doorway with his toothbrush in one hand, white foam in his moustache, and the other hand scratching the middle of his chest.

'She wanted to talk at two a.m. New Year's morning? She wishes us a happy New Year?'

'Hardly. She wanted to talk about Christmas Day. But she was too drunk for it to make any sense – it would only make matters worse.'

Make matters worse? That covered it very well – it wasn't even an understatement. Too drunk indeed.

It was incredible. There she was in all her holiness, preaching morality to all who listened, while she necked beer and schnapps behind closed doors – drinking so much that even the hardened fishermen at the

harbour couldn't keep up. That was a feat – heaven knows that once they got away from their wives, they didn't hold back.

When his boyfriend entered the bedroom a little later, he was sitting on the bed with his head in his hands. 'Hey darling, up with the mood. Her is who she is – but so are you. That is..., who you are – not who she is.'

Kamal, for fuck's sake, you are so sweet. You still make those minor mistakes with her and she, even though you have lived here for many years now. It is charmingly clumsy, in a way that only you can do. And when I correct you, you'll just stand there with those puppy eyes and flap your arms.

'Yes, yes, yes, I do not speak Danish very well – it is a tough language.'

'I knew it.'

'You knew what?'

'Nothing – I was just thinking about what you were going to do, and then you did it.'

'I don't understand.'

'Bet you don't. But you're right – she is who she is. And I can't do anything about it.'

But she tries with all her might to change me – to change us. The thought was so obvious; it was almost legibly above him in a thought bubble.

Christmas had been OK, as Christmas is when you, as a 32-year-old, come home alone to spend Christmas with the alcoholic widow of a priest, your brother who is at University studying theology, and his wife and their baby from late November. There had been the uber-traditional Christmas food: fried duck, pork roast, red cabbage, and the ever-present rice pudding for dessert. Followed by the ever-so-traditional cold Christmas luncheon the following day. Mind you, not till after the entire flock had attended church, both Christmas Eve and Christmas morning. It just wouldn't be proper if the priest's widow and her family did not come to church. 'Let's face it: What would the neighbours say, Mathias?' his mum had said when he had tried to get out of going on Christmas day.

What would they say indeed? What would they say if they knew what was going on in the clergy family? If they knew how many schnapps the priest's widow put away while she wrote another post for the church magazine about the curse of alcohol? If they knew how many port bottles she had hidden in the deep bookshelf behind the collected gold-bound works of H.C. Andersen and Kierkegaard? If they knew why the pastor had jumped out of the bell tower on a July morning at half-past six? Just when Jens Christian, the milk-tanker driver, had parked the tanker in the small notch in the main road next to the church to get half a pack of Cecils – the strong unfiltered cigarettes only smoked by fifty-plus men with stone lungs. What would they say if they knew? He was sure they all talked about 'the why', but none of them really knew. Jens Christian had looked up to admire the beautiful morning sun and had therefore witnessed the priest tumbling out of the north-facing opening in the tower next to the bell wearing absolutely nothing but his Rolex – how had he been able to afford that? The same Rolex that stopped seconds later when it crashed into the discarded granite tombstones stored at the foot of the tower. Yes, I wonder what they would say if they knew anything about the real reason behind the priest's tumble.

On Christmas Eve, they had not talked. She had been cooking – and covertly drinking.

He had arrived at 3 p.m. straight from work. Just in time to join the family at church. Bad timing. So, it wasn't until Christmas day after lunch that they had time to talk, sitting in the living room on the green velvet sofa by the coffee table from Grandma's home. They sat like they always did in the living room: none of them ever sat in the big armchair – it had always been Father's seat, so it was always kept empty. Not even the old grey male cat, Tiger, dared sit in it. In the same way that no one sat in the chair at the end of the dining table facing the window – it too had always been the pastor's chair.

It was as if the conversation wasn't going anywhere: 'Well, thank you, yes, the job at the hospital is going well ... Yes, it is somewhat different from what I did in Aalborg; Holstebro hospital is so much smaller, so I can do so much more varied stuff ... No, I don't miss Aalborg, and no, not the other places either ... And how are you doing? Has anything happened to folks I know? ... Mrs True is dead? ... Well, of what? ... A blood clot in the heart?'

Yes, it wouldn't be in the brain. She clearly didn't have one. He was not able to keep that thought at bay – Mrs True had always been a bimbo – even before the term was invented.

'And she was only fifty-five? Sure, it was a tad early. Yes, I would like more coffee. And no, I'm still not taking either sugar or sweetener ... and yes, I have received the usual Christmas card from the host family I had in Colorado when I was an exchange student there ... yes, it was one of the best experiences of my youth ... yes, I say that often.' In the end, he had been unable to keep the irritation out of his voice.

How dull can conversations be when there is nothing to say?

He had something he wanted to say, but how? Did he just say it straight out? Why not? It was amazingly simple when it was boiled down to its essentials.

It was idiotic, but he sat there like a little boy who had stolen apples from the principal's garden and now had to admit it. 'Admit it' – it sounded like something criminal – something dangerous. It wasn't – not criminal in the legal sense.

But it was as if he couldn't find the right time to say it. Say what he had decided to say before he left home in Holstebro. Say it approximately eighteen years too late. But now it was time, now that he could put a face to the term. Yes, now was the time to make it known.

But then fate, or some other higher power – or, realistically, just chance – presented him with an opportunity, right in the middle of the biscuits, when only he and his mother were left in the room. His brother was studying in his old room; the schoolteacher was out walking with the pram.

'When did you say you were going back to Holstebro? Surely not tonight, right?'

'Yes, mother, I need to go today. Firstly, I have to be on duty tomorrow morning at eight, and secondly, I promised Kamal that I would be home tonight.'

'Camel? Who is Camel?'

'Kamal, mother. Kamal. It's him I ... it's him I ...'

The words just would not come out. They had stood lined up perfectly in his throat, but they would not come out.

'Yes, I know you share the house with your colleague who is also doing his internship – I don't understand why the hospital can't give you a house or an apartment each.'

'Mum ... Kamal and I don't just share the apartment – which is actually a house ... we are ...' The traffic jam in his throat had gradually become so large that a larger leather-clad police force on motorcycles was needed to straighten it out.

But suddenly, the dam burst. 'We are boyfriends, that's what we are. Yes, Mum, Kamal and I are a couple.'

The relief of saying it out loud was so great that it felt like all the kilos of Christmas food were just rattling off his sides. And there were many kilos ...

'Well, is Kamal not a Muslim name? Your boyfriend can't be a Muslim.'

Did that mean that him being a male was not a problem? It was a problem that the man was a Muslim. Which he wasn't. This was perplexing to say the least.

Did he not know his mother well enough after all?

Oh, yes, yes, he did:

'*He's a Muslim, and he's a man.*' His mother looked and sounded puzzled, offended, and strung up at the same time.

'Catholic and a man, mother.'

She sat theatrically, in the manner in which only Mrs Hyacinth's neighbour could sit: straight up on the couch – with the Royal Copenhagen cup hovering over the saucer, shaking her hands so much so that the coffee dripped onto her cotton dress – the neat one that only came out for special occasions.

In between her brief, almost heaving breaths, she kept repeating 'Muslim and man' again and again. All the while, she looked desperately around the room to see if there was anybody who could give her some moral support.

He on the contrary stayed calm and unperturbed – like he did when asking for a scalpel during a complicated ear operation: 'Catholic and man, mother. Catholic and man.'

Why was Kamal's religion important? After all, it did not define Kamal in the same way that religion defined her.

While she gathered herself, set the cup back on the table, and wiped up the coffee she had spilled, he just sat and watched the whole session as if at a distance. It was as if he was in the show and yet was watching it all from the first row of the balcony.

It took a while before it came, but when she finally let go, it was as if the deluge was flowing: all the St Paul quotes, all the scriptures from the Old Testament, all the worries about what the neighbours and the new pastor and all his colleagues in the hospital would say – it was all there. It was all there in one big religious mess. Even the classic Leviticus 18:22: 'You shall not lie with a man as with a woman; it is an abomination.'

Then, with no recordable pause, she went on into worries about what she had possibly done wrong, whether her husband's death had had anything to do with it, whether or not it was just something he had imagined, a fashion fad, an idea, something that would pass? Something he would grow out of. Because surely it could not be the Lord's teaching that she, the one who was always at church – that her son should be '*one of those.*'

'Thank you, Mum, I'm fine.' His sarcasm was totally ignored – it was also just said in the three seconds it took her to draw in a new deep breath.

'Promise me you'll say nothing about this to anyone, and especially not up here. You absolutely cannot bring him home – I mean, we have never had anyone like that up here before.'

He just had to correct her on that assumption: 'Yes, we have, Mum. I lived here until I was nineteen. I haven't become gay overnight. I've always been. Even when I lived here, I wasn't the only gay man, not even then ...' He sounded almost triumphant when delivering that message.

She was now standing up against the wall with her cardigan pulled tightly all the way up around her chest, a chest that could give Linse Kessler, the big-boobed celebrity, a run for her money. 'I don't want to hear it; I don't want to hear that word in my house.'

He left before the schoolteacher returned home with the pram – just got off the couch, went into his room, and packed his bag. He stuck his head inside his old room and quickly said goodbye to his little brother, who was sitting, studying for his exam – dogmatics. His little brother was sitting with an almost visible question mark painted on his forehead. Apparently, he had heard something – but not enough.

With the dogmatic Leviticus still echoing in his ears, he left with no further explanation. 'I'll be off. Call me later if you want to know what happened.'

He did not know how he had managed the trip back to Holstebro. Which way had he driven? Had he seen someone he knew? He could not have answered if someone had asked. Had the Odde Sund Bridge been up or down? Had he seen the train at Bremdal? No idea.

At home in the yellow house with the flat roof, candles were burning everywhere, and the Three Tenors were sounding from the speakers.

'You said it, yes? You told them you're gay? That you have a boyfriend who is good-looking and is not into high heels, dresses, or lacquer and leather?'

'No darling, I didn't even get so far as telling them about you – I got so far as to use your name and the word boyfriend in the same sentence – then the world was overturned. But you're right, you're beautiful.'

Typical of Kamal, making a little joke about it – in the middle of all the seriousness.

'And what?' Kamal obviously wanted to know more.

'Yes, then it ended with me leaving – she is probably still talking to herself.'

'I don't think so – your little brother has called.' He knew more apparently.

'David? David called, when? What did he want? And why not on my mobile?'

'Something about your mother not feeling well ... something about calling the A&E, something about him wanting you to call and listen to her. He called twenty minutes ago; he said your phone didn't connect?'

He cast half a glance at the phone and found that it had run out of power – again.

Damn it. He had known that it wouldn't be perceived as the best of news, but he could not lie anymore ... but the A&E.

Suddenly it struck him: it was a lie. She was not fucking sick – it was her usual trick to make him feel guilty – and she'd got his little brother in on it.

'OK, so they called the doctor – surely he can recognise hysteria just by the symptoms.' His voice did not express how adamant he was about it.

Kamal looked at him quizzingly: 'You don't think she's sick?'

'She's a hysterical bitch – a hysterically oppressed bitch, that's what she is – it's an attempt at emotional blackmail. She wants me to come crawling back to apologise for who I am. I'm not doing that.'

He did not do so – neither went back to his mother nor reacted to what had happened.

His little brother tried to contact him a few times more – left messages on both his mobile phone's voicemail and the little black answerphone in the office. None of the messages mentioned more about either A&E or any other doctors. They were messages full of blame. Messages without the slightest sense of empathy for how he felt – no questions about whether he was comfortable, whether Kamal was OK, how their lives were shaping up – only blame and Bible quotes in a holy mix. At least it seemed like he had got something out of studying theology.

The only reason he had gone home for Christmas was that Kamal had had to work Christmas Eve, and he hadn't wanted to be home alone in the yellow house on Christmas Eve. Seen in the rear-view mirror, that had been a big mistake.

Kamal and he had both been on duty in the days between Christmas and the new year. Kamal had been drowning in psychiatric patients. It was as if all the patients they had been discharging for the last three months for continued treatment at home with psychoactive drugs had all tried to quit their pills on Christmas day. The result of that small experiment was, as always, that their surroundings could not cope with them after twenty-four hours, after which they found themselves in Ward P, behind locked doors, again.

In his own units, they were still struggling with spending government money so they could get the waiting lists down. On the third, fourth, and fifth days after Christmas, he operated flapping ears and crooked noses, removed both tonsils and polyps. '*The KPIs. Don't forget the KPIs!*' So, to hell with the fact that the patients would probably rather have waited until the next financial year to get bandages around their skulls – that would not have counted towards the KPIs. The Key Performance Indicators ran the health service these days – not the doctors.

He carried out the operations, but to say that he put a lot of heart and soul into them would be an exaggeration. It was almost like an assembly line. All the while, the damning voice of his mother was in the back of his mind. Why the fuck did she take up so much space?

It had been there for a long time – his mother’s voice – even before he went home for that Christmas visit, but now it was ever present. He had known what she would say. But he had also had a vain hope that, for once, she would leave all her religious mantras and take an interest in the people she walked amongst.

It was as if the damn Bible and all the rules it contained overshadowed everything else for her and her fundamentalist faith, he thought. Hell, this was a book that had been written over two thousand years ago and had been revised and reviewed so many times since. What it contained was selected texts that fit into the editor’s frame of mind. All the original texts were now gathering dust in the Vatican’s basement. It was a book with the texts that suited the tastemakers of the time. They were probably the right ones at the time, but no one dreamt they would be abused two thousand years later.

Would the world collapse – or blossom – if someone published *The Bible Revisited – Now with Deleted Scenes?*

Hello, he thought. *The world is out here – yours is a dream world – a world that does not exist – a utopian world.*

The first morning when they had both been off together was December 30. Over breakfast, while sitting in their robes, sweaty after intense sex from about five o’clock, the talk had focussed on New Year’s Eve.

Kamal was curious: ‘Do you still want to have guests over? I mean, after all that happened at your mother’s?’

‘Yes, Kamal, we told Lotte and Beshad and the others to come a long time ago; we can’t cancel it now.’

‘No – I know that, but are you OK with it?’ His concerned look was endearing.

‘You bet. My mother shall not spoil my entire life; Christmas Day was plenty. She has created the situation as it is now – not me.’

Before they went downtown to shop, however, Malene, Kamal’s colleague, called and cancelled because her husband’s mother had fallen ill, so they had to go to Helsingør.

‘OK, then it will only be my brother and his girlfriend and Lars and Mogens and us. It’s a shame Malene couldn’t come – she’s so much funny.’

‘Fun, Kamal. She’s so much fun, not so much funny.’

‘Yes, yes – you know what I means.’

Malene was a lot of fun. But Christian was as dull as a mortician, so they wouldn’t miss him. Beshad was Kamal’s little brother, and Lotte, his girlfriend. They also lived in town. Beshad was an occupational therapist; Lotte would soon be a preschool teacher and was now writing her bachelor thesis. Mogens was one of his old friends, and Lars, his husband. *Yes, Mum, another example of you being wrong. There had been gays before in the village’s history. And yes, I’ve been with Mogens, but please don’t tell anyone. Imagine if it came out that the priest’s son and the chairman of the fisheries association’s son had had sex together. That they had enjoyed it. Even multiple times. That they had tried many different things – also with a visiting fisheries inspector from Copenhagen. No, better not tell anyone that.*

Beshad and Lotte knew about Kamal and himself. They had not had any big concerns – though Beshad loved to call them nicknames, which he had picked up from the kids in the youth club he was volunteering at. Kids – and brothers – can be cruel.

Beshad and Kamal’s mother had died before he met Kamal, but she had known her eldest son was into men. She had been Catholic – though more in name than in virtue. She had reportedly commented on the news at the time with a statement that the Pope would probably not like it – but that he lived so far away, so not to worry. She had been a very tolerant woman, considering all the things she had been through since she had had

to flee with her sons in the dead of night. They had fled the night religious fundamentalists had killed her husband. Fleeing Iran via a UN refugee camp to Denmark, with two children aged six and nine, couldn't have been easy.

Strange – Catholics were otherwise reputed to be some of the most intolerant, especially to homosexuals – but you couldn't paint them all with the same brush – just as you couldn't with all Muslims, Jews, conservatives, or redheads. Perhaps it was precisely the intolerance she had endured that had made her so inclusive. He often felt he would have liked to meet her.

Although he had told Kamal that he would not let his mother's outburst spoil New Year's Eve, it had stuck in his mind somehow. Apparently, it was clear to see. Lotte confronted him in the kitchen whilst cleaning up after the successful dessert: flaming baked Alaska was always a safe bourgeois retro hit – but not recommended by either the nutrition unit at the hospital or leading food bloggers. However, the combination with sushi had not been seen before. Bloggers – had they known about it – might have approved.

'What's up with you? You look like something the cat dragged in through the hedge backwards.'

'It's not that bad.' He tried to shrug it off – but did not succeed.

'Yes, it is – is there anything wrong between you and Kamal?'

Between him and Kamal? On the contrary – it was because there was something – something good – between them that all this shit had happened.

He planted himself on the granite tabletop and explained. 'No Lotte – it's my mother. But honestly, I don't want to be bothered by it now. She has found out that her older son is into men. She can't imagine a bigger disaster.'

Lotte put her hands on his shoulders. 'OK, I get you. Do you want to talk about it now or later?'

'Listen – I know you mean well – but I'm not going into therapy over it. It's exasperating but I ... we should move on – maybe it'll be without her in our lives ... then so be it.'

He made an extra effort the rest of the evening so it would not be obvious. And it worked – no one else asked about his mood afterwards.

When the New Year came, Kamal and Beshad said in unison that it was as if they were living in Tehran during one of the major Iraqi bombings. Although the fireworks were impressive, they were also frightening with all the bangs all around them. The fireworks drew a streak of very unpleasant memories from oblivion, resulting in five silent pensive minutes before the evening's final gin and tonic. Kamal said to no one in particular as he finished his glass, 'Tomorrow, all my PTSD veterans will return to the ward after this.'

Their guests had left after that final G&T.

'Mathias, come to bed now. I want the first sex of the year now.'

Kamal was behind the couch – as naked as on the day the nuns at the Catholic clinic in Tehran had welcomed him thirty-four years earlier. Kamal put his arms around him and hugged him so that the hairs on his chest tickled his neck. As his moustache touched his ear, he whispered to him, 'Come on, Mathias – I love you. We both have to work tomorrow. If we are to make love, it must be now. And we should – I'm horny.'

He was right, it should be now – if it was to be. And yes, he was clearly ready. Kamal's shift began at noon and his own at 4 p.m. – both long shifts. If it was to be, it had to be now.

Later, while Kamal was lying on his back, snoring loudly enough to make the curtains flicker, he let his finger make figures of eight in the jungle on his chest. He could not sleep, as he was wondering about the absurdity of the situation.

Mum, you and Dad lived a cat-and-dog life – you kept up the facade outside but couldn't hide from us at home that you weren't happy together. My twenty-fifth birthday, seven months after your silver anniversary, explained why you had got married at all. Pregnancies could be astonishingly brief back then. You had violated

the 'word of the Lord', but you shut up and hoped that no one would discover it. You lived the moral life at the expense of others. Dad had had enough of it – maybe he couldn't live with the dual standards, or maybe it was something else entirely.

I have also broken 'the interpreted words of the Lord' – and it does not matter. But I am honest about what I do and who I am, and suddenly everything is wrong. There will be scratches in your own sanctity. Maybe what you fear is that in reality the scratches will be so deep that you can see into your own misery. 'Am honest'? No, 'have become honest' fits better.

January the first at 1 p.m., the doorbell rang. Kamal had run to the gym and planned on going straight to the hospital afterwards. He himself had been cleaning up – putting the last of the New Year's dishes away, taking the empty bottles out to the shed behind the carport, and aired out both the living room and the bedroom.

He opened the door with bare feet, in a washed-out hospital T-shirt and Levi's 501s, expecting it might be a neighbour or colleague wishing him a happy New Year.

The ones who stood there were the only ones he didn't expect: His mother and his little brother.

'Er, hello – this is a surprise.'

Queen Margrethe calling to borrow a package of cigarettes would have surprised him less.

'Yes, I can imagine – but you wouldn't talk to me when I called.' His mother was indignant the minute she left the car.

'No, I wouldn't. You were too drunk to carry on a sensible conversation.'

'Mathias, Mum is never drunk – how can you say such a thing? We came here to talk to you. Came to get you on the right track.' His brother was obviously as holy as he expected him to be based on the numerous phone messages.

'David, I don't know which rock you have lived your life under and what you have chosen not to realise – but if it has not occurred to you before, then grasp it now: your Mum is a fucking drunk with no morals. But do come inside – in Sodom and Gomorrah.' He invited them in because, from the corner of his eye, he had seen a neighbour curiously looking up over the hedge while picking up fallen debris from the fireworks.

Normal people would have turned round and gone home after his 'welcome', but not these two. No, they had the will to intrude of a pair of newly trained Jehovah's Witnesses – so they marched in, left their shoes in the hall, planted themselves on the couch, and waited for him.

Consciously, he chose to stand with his back to the window so that when they looked at him, the low rays of the afternoon sun were bright in their eyes. He said nothing – just stared at one and then the other. Eventually, David broke the silence. 'Mathias, it upset me, what you said about Mum on the front stairs.'

'Really.'

'Maybe you don't realise it, but she is having a hard time with the announcements you have made – and with you storming out of the house on Christmas Day. Why did you not respond to the messages I left for you?'

Did it all have to be about him – about David? 'The last thing first: I did not respond to your messages because I did not bother to listen to the religious twaddle you said in those messages because I do not want to discuss who I am and what I am with you. Neither with you nor with Mum nor with anyone else. I am Mathias, a thirty-two-year-old soon-to-be specialist doctor; I am in love with the man I reckon will be my life partner. Take it or leave it. It's as simple as that.'

It went quiet – the only thing you could hear was a hungry blackbird at the feeding board grumbling about the lack of sunflower seeds.

'Well, dear Mathias, you can't say that; you're lost, you're going to hell, that's what the Bible says. I can't let my son be lost; I must save you.'

'Listen, Mum. We are now in the twenty-first century; your thinking is no longer viable. It may be another shock to you – but now we might as well put all the cards on the table. Mother, I am no longer a member of any

church, neither Baptist, Pentecostal, Apostolic, Adventist, nor Church of Denmark – I have opted out. I cannot endure all the condemnations that the church is flinging around, I ...'

'You have opted out – no, now the world is no longer ...'

'I have – and just like that, the trip to hell disappears too – because it requires you to believe in the rubbish and pay the union dues.'

It was quiet for a long while. David looked at their mother a few times as if he wanted to give her a signal.

'I don't know if we have more to talk about now. I would like to offer you a cup of coffee – but it is on the condition that there is no more talk about anything to do with religion – I do not want to hear it in our home.'

David once again looked at the clock and partly at his mother.

He had come with the absurd notion that if enough arguments were put on the table, Big Brother's little gay intermezzo could be flushed out with the bathwater.

'OK, you remain seated; I interpret that as a message that you would like a cup of coffee. While it is brewing, would you care to see this house of sin? Neither of you have been here before.'

David shrugged – he couldn't figure out which buttock to sit on – he had, judging by his body language, not even contemplated the thought that all the initiative could be ripped away from under him to the extent it was. 'OK, so let's see your home ... excuse me, your joint home. Listen, where is Kamal actually? I want to meet him.'

'He is at the gym and is running from there to work, just as I will do in two hours. This, as you can see, is the living room. Along the corridor are our bedroom and the large bathroom.'

Suddenly, it dawned on his mother what a tour might entail.

'I'm telling you Mathias – I don't want to see that bedroom – it's there that you ...'

'Yes Mum, that's where we sleep.'

'That was not what I meant.'

Really? Wasn't it? Imagine. Didn't realise that at all.

A picture of Kamal on the wall of the kitchen in between the two offices prompted comments. Comments that showed that what had been said on Christmas Day about Kamal's religious background had not penetrated.

'Mathias, who's that in the picture?'

'It's Kamal. It was taken this summer when we were in Greece on holiday.'

'Well, why does he have a cross around his neck?'

He had to sigh and draw a deep breath before he answered. 'As I told you a week ago, Mum, he's a Catholic – not a Muslim. Catholics often use the cross as a symbol of their faith.'

'Is he a Catholic? Well, well, they're also against ... against ... against something like that?'

'Yes mother, the fundamentalist part of the Catholic Church also condemns gays – and some of its priests also abuse little boys, but that does not mean that all Catholics follow suit and that they all condemn gays while simultaneously sodomising boys and girls at will. It is not impossible to be religious and have contact with the world in which you live. Similarly, not all Christians in Denmark are part of the Inner Mission or are black Jehovah's Witnesses or worse. In short, not all religious people are fundamentalists.'

Let's just leave it there for a moment. He knew full well that he had been gross – but now the inhibitions had been shed.

The coffee and the remnants of the New Year's Eve cake were drunk and eaten in a silence so thick it could have been cut up and placed in IKEA freezer bags. Both David and his mother were sitting on pins and needles to say something more. At one point, it seemed as if his mother was breathing in several times to say something. However, it was only later, in the hallway as they were about to leave, that she spoke.

'Mathias, I have to say this – even though it hurts me to do it. I had hoped it wouldn't be necessary.'

What's up? Come on, come on – just give me a left punch. Bring on an uppercut. He had expected anything.

It wasn't an uppercut – it was a knockdown. It was far more than he had imagined in his wildest imagination.

'Mathias, I've talked to David about it – and he agrees with me. This business with Camel ...'

'Kamal, mother, Kamal.'

'Yes, yes – this with Kamal is serious for you. But I can't live with having a son like that – I just can't. I can't make it so you inherit nothing at all, that's not legally possible – but I can limit your inheritance as much as possible – and I intend to do that as soon as I can. I no longer consider you my son – this will bring so much shame into my life that I don't want you to show up again.' She briefly drew in air before the tirade continued.

'Unless you give up this part of your life. The Lord can forgive sinners – but not sin – so can I. If you can stop doing it ... that ... what you are now doing and live a life without the lusts of the flesh, you are welcome again – but otherwise not. I can't risk having you around my grandson.'

Then she just turned round, pulled David by the arm towards the red worn Audi A2, and left without looking back. David didn't say or do anything either, he just looked out the side window, shrugged his shoulder, and sent him a look that was a mixture of abandonment and utter disgust.

Oh, fuck you then, Mum. 'Live a life without the lusts of the flesh'. If it weren't so serious, he should laugh about it – it was so much out on a religious tangent that even Mike Pence would find it wrong. It was so abnormal that even the gods – if one believed in them – would have mercy. *'I can't risk having you around my grandson' – oh, please. you sound like one of the nutters with permanent residence in Kamal's unit.* It was apparently only in Bulgarian and in the teachings of the Danish super Holy that the word for paedophile and gay is the same – paederast.

He walked inside – closed the door behind him, sat on the couch, squeezed his arm, and exclaimed to himself: 'OK, we are now half a day into a new year – due to religious madness, I am now reduced to having an extremely limited inheritance and being a paedophile and am not welcome in my childhood home. Cheers and happy New Year.'

He tried to call Kamal – but he was busy – and he had to go to work himself too. Having to gather excitement to look at people with pipes up their noses would not be easy.

At the ward, it was hectic. Even on New Year's Eve the scalpels were busy – *the KPIs – remember the KPIs.* There were lots of patients, both with and without blocked nasal pipes.

There was no time to sit down with the rest of the staff to get a quick cup of coffee till 9 p.m. Lone, the nurse's assistant who had the night shift, had arrived early. She had brought freshly baked bread and homemade jams and was talking about the Prime Minister's New Year's speech as he entered the break room. Presumably, it was another shot at the foreigners, the intellectuals, the health service, and the unemployed.

'It was good what he said. He said a lot about that the kids have to learn more in schools and that we have to break the social inheritance and that the immigrants have to have work and that we must fight all those intolerant mullahs.'

It was predictable: learn more in schools. That sounded all right – and with the new primary school bill, the country would finally get rid of the legacy of one of the more left-wing ministers of education. As for the intolerant mullahs, sure, he would have a go at them too; after all, the PM must please the ultra-right to get their votes. To do that, he must succumb to the lowest populist common denominator. In order to not piss off the Conservative coalition partner, it would seem that he had conveniently forgotten to talk about the Christian fundamentalists – they were just as terrible, if not worse.

He wasn't gripped by the cosy atmosphere around the warm organic bread, so he came up with a half-baked excuse that he should check some records and left. They could buzz him if anything came up.

Kamal called him between two patients.

'She disinherited you because you're my boyfriend?'

'Disinherited. No, she didn't – she limited the inheritance – but it doesn't matter. She thinks she can push me back into her world – but she can't. She lives in the middle of her own inquisition, here in the twenty-first century; it is a genuine pity for her. Why does she have so much hatred in her life? What does she get out of it? Do you have time to come down here? I'm sitting in the office.' Sometimes all you need is a friendly face and a hug.

'Of course, yes, I will come – as soon as I can.'

It was not long before Kamal's distinctive dragging steps could be heard in the otherwise quiet hospital corridors. Hospital corridors which showed that the hospital would soon close and be moved to Herning – or rather to a field in a marsh outside Herning, where a new monstrosity was being erected.

Without a word, Kamal entered, lifted him off the floor, sat him down on the desk, and gave him the wettest kiss – which even a Golden Retriever in heat could not have done wetter.

'Dear Mathias, that's what we were talking about.'

'Yes, I know, but I didn't think it would go so horribly wrong. She just doesn't understand anything – she only sees the world through the bottom of the bottle of altar wine.'

That was all they had time for – Kamal's phone rang. They agreed to talk at night when there was time.

His thoughts ran amok: It was not fair that religious fanatics and religious condemnations should be allowed to dominate the world. It made no difference if it was a mullah in Aalborg who says that it is God's will to cut the clit of a Somali schoolgirl, or a rabbi with Parkinson's who, with a rusty knife, cuts the foreskin of innocent boys, a money-grabbing American minister who steals money from his believers, a child of Jehovah who dies because of a lack of blood transfusion, or a widow of a priest who commits emotional violence against her son. Fanatics have a lot of hurt on their conscience.

He had to get some fresh air.

After a walk all the way around the hospital, he was back at the ward. He could smell Marie's distinctive perfume – *Opium, was it?* – before he saw her.

'Hi Mathias, I thought you were in your office. Do you want a cup of coffee? You look like someone who could use it.'

'Thank you, Marie – you are probably right. Listen, do you have time to talk? Just say no if it's inconvenient. I just need to offload.'

'Can you wait a little? I'm going to look in on the guy who was moved up here from Herning – the one who suddenly lost hearing in both ears – you know, the one who came in just when you came on duty.'

'Yes, yes.'

He had talked to Marie – a nurse who was often on night duty – about serious issues before. She was a woman close to sixty who had the ability to see through problems. She had a refreshing view on life. She came back a little later and, after reporting how the patient was doing, she sat down, took his hand between hers, and demanded that he let it out.

'Are you sure you want to listen to it?' Was it right to unburden himself to her – a relative stranger?

'Come on. I told Lone that she should take care of any calls. Problems with the boyfriend?'

At the hospital, it was no secret that he and Kamal were a couple, but it wasn't a big issue.

'Not in the way you probably think – no, it's not. But it involves him. In the sense that my mother now knows that the term has relevance to me and that the term covers Kamal.'

'... who is nice and whom they all swoon over on P.' She even made an Instagram-worthy pout as she said it.

'That too, but she's cold to that particular fact.'

'She's actually a cold bitch with religious tendencies?'

Exactly, you hit the bullseye on the first shot.

Marie was a wise woman. During the next hour, with her help, he put things a little more into perspective. Without in any way acting as if she was taking his mother's side, she still gave him some insight into why his mother acted the way she did: she had lived a life that was predictable – her role in life was determined the minute she became pregnant with the priest's child. Maybe her alcohol problem was her way of rebelling against that role and the stories of her husband's death. But it was a rebellion that did not create ripples in the harbour basin because it was going on at home. His rebellion, which was how she evidently saw him coming out of the closet, was so much more visible – and therefore so much more dangerous. That might change her reputation in the village. Her only weapon against it was what she knew best: an attack with a religious foundation.

'Mathias, maybe she's not against you at all, but she just doesn't have the tools to show it. Maybe she's so ingrained in her religious beliefs that she can't see how to break away from them. The religious scaffolding that holds her together is in fact so fragile that she does not dare to tear just a small part of it down, so that there can be room for you. Maybe she is just afraid that it will make everything – her entire life – collapse.'

'Even if you are right, Marie, it does not help me here and now.' The sigh with which he said that was loud enough to be heard from the top of the building.

'No, it does not. You are eternally right in that. But you are not Mathias-No-Friends – you have Kamal. It's him you need to build your life on, not her and her generation and her beliefs.'

'Not her and her generation' – no it wasn't, but it wasn't fair that because a bunch of old men had interpreted some old scriptures in a certain way, he now had to, in reality, live without his biological family.

Losing one's family by death, road accidents, and the like is one thing, but losing them because they don't like that their son or brother is who he is – that's not fair. It is almost medieval. That is not how you can live in 2019, at least not here – maybe in Brunei or Pakistan, but not here. But whether you can or not, he had to.

Family was a strange thing. The cliché said that you did not choose them, but you lived with them, despite how unreasonable they might be. Although you might not want them to exist, it was painful when they disappeared from your life, forced from the outside. Yes, it was a coincidence that you got the family you did, but whether you wanted it or not, they took up a significant space in your heart. Nonsense. His medical logic kicked in – it was not in the heart that the family took up space; it was in the grey interwoven folds in which Kamal excelled that the family was present – or too present.

Marie was lovely – why couldn't all the old wives be as smart as her?

Their conversation was interrupted by an emergency patient whom he had to oversee and subsequently helped to operate – a delayed fireworks injury.

By the time he returned to the unit, the day team had replaced the night shift.

Immediately after he returned to the ward, his phone rang with a message from Kamal stating that a colleague had fallen ill, so they had extended his shift. *Shit*. He had so much to talk to him about – and then he had to take care of the fools for even more hours.

After his own rounds, it was quiet. He had nothing to do with today's operations. He popped in to look at the fireworks injury patient, who was still in intensive care. Besides the ears which he had fixed, the whole of the guy's face was damaged, but not his sight – cheers for safety glasses. One of his hands was now in a bag down in the container with hazardous waste going to the incinerator – cheers for waste management efficiency.

He went to the canteen. On the way, he picked up a newspaper. He wanted to see if anything was said about the speech the Prime Minister had given. Yes, there it was – they rendered the whole speech word for

word. Lone was right – there was something about not letting the darkness of the medieval forces take root in Danish society.

All absolutely true – yet it was only half a truth. He wanted to give his own little private New Year's speech:

Dear Prime Minister, the medieval darkness is here already – at least in some places. It is thriving. Perhaps not in the circles you move in. But where we are, it has a strong foothold. It is very well, Prime Minister, that you let your bile float towards the mullahs and the fundamentalist imams, but they are in fact not the biggest, at least they are not the most widespread, religious fundamentalists we have. It is very well when you say that the Bible, the Qur'an, or other holy scriptures must not suppress our freedom, must not stand above the law, but that is not something we should fear will happen – it is already happening today. Before that comes into focus, nothing will change – and you, you will not get your liberalist wonderland. When you only call for a fight against the Mullahs and the Imams, you are only telling half the truth and thus creating more dissatisfaction, because then the Christian fundamentalists can continue unchallenged with their mental terror, Jehovah's Witnesses can continue to conceal that their members are abusing children, without the public being told; they've almost got your OK to do so. Catholics can still fuck their choir boys in the confessional booths. The Jews can cut their boy children into their faith. They can live their lives under the radar of condemnation while you are chasing imams. You are right when you say that it takes so little to create some joy in everyday life. That's right – it would be very little, for example, for one's mother to forget her medieval religious mantras and start living in the century the rest of the world is living in, and for the country's prime minister to stop using his New Year's speech to fill us with half-truths.

Now, if only the shift would end so he could go home. He had an entire list of things he wanted to do now, rather than sit here alone in a sterile hospital canteen. The day after his mother and her helper had overthrown a large part of his old foundations, he and Kamal now had to choose the building blocks for a new one.

Six and sex were high on the list of what he wanted - now.