

## *From In Search of Life*

I am pacing back and forth. I need to leave home. I need to leave. It is one of those moments when suddenly everything feels clear. Or maybe those experiences happen just once. Maybe that is what people call *intuition*. Something's coming, I feel it. Something to break the spell of this boring loneliness. I can hear my father's footsteps echo through the large hallways and I don't feel like hiding. I feel like finally sticking up for myself and tearing every thought of his down, down, down. No longer the footsteps, the controlling, the strangeness of his caring.

'Dahlia,' he calls. I hope he knows that the calmness of his voice won't conceal its purpose: he is going to make a demand. I hope he knows that my name is not Dahlia, nor will it ever be again. That name, it belongs to a different time, the time we were still a family, when Mum was still here. When I called this house my home.

I sometimes cringe about my birthday this summer: I got downstairs and noticed a simple piece of cake on the dining table. There was no one around. I still wonder whether that cake was actually meant to be birthday cake, or just simply a piece the cook left there for me. Perhaps the big twenty-two isn't a much-celebrated age. Perhaps my father just doesn't care. I have stopped trying to make an impression on him. Answering his questions with a yes or no seems simplest and least cruel.

I say nothing and am still in the giant room. There are all sorts of fancy antique chairs and soft cushions but I'd rather just stand alone. This house has many of these undefined rooms, full of expensive furniture that has only been touched by the people who moved it here. The room I am in now is my favourite, perhaps because it's most undefined. No wooden toys that explain 'play room', no electronics to explain 'study', no huge table to

explain 'second dining room'. All of which do not matter, of course, because the lives being lived in this house are not ordinary.

My father opens the door and scares me witless, although I knew he was coming.

'Would you like to eat dinner at six or perhaps a few hours later?' He smiles and walks towards me, embraces me stiffly. I hope for a feeling of warmth, every time. That is the scary part. I can't stop it.

'Dear girl,' he whispers.

'Six is fine,' I answer. My father smiles contentedly and I see he is wearing his favourite navy turtle-neck; something significant must be happening tonight. Politics. I glance out the window. There's no car outside so this event must be taking place inside the house, which means it'll be something personal. It has been like this for as long as I can remember. My father's a CEO in the food industry, and he operates on a clear schedule. He owns a neat row of navy turtle-necks, dangling side by side in his walk-in closet.

'Let's play some chess, maybe?' my father says and I switch focus. As if he doesn't play enough mind games.

'I'd rather go outside for a bit, if you don't mind.' Oh, my politeness. I wonder if he remembers any informal words, or jokes, even. From when he was my *dad*. My father and I, we live in the same house. That is our relationship. This huge house, surrounded by a whole lot of outstretched fields, oak trees, and dense forest. It's near the borders of what used to be the Netherlands and Germany. Mum died of the Megafu when I was fourteen, and it's as if Dad decided that was the end of my life, too. The last two years of her life, Mum taught me at home and I learned about old languages, literature, art, mathematics, physics, biology; you name it. Dad didn't hire a new teacher. He didn't know what to make of me, so he just left me alone. It's not like he's violent towards me, or anything like that. There are days when I don't even see him. I can walk through living rooms and bathrooms and bedrooms and extra living rooms and extra bathrooms and extra bedrooms and never bump into him. He just doesn't allow me a life of my own. While he's busy expanding his riches, I am withering away without a lesson learned. As long as he owns this house though, he owns me.

My father's hands move to my wrists, where they subtly but firmly suggest I play chess. I decide I could use my strength, mentally, and dismiss

the idea of going outside in favour of playing a game with *daddy*. The way my brain works now scares me a little – I actually never used to be a bitter person.

We play chess. He wins.

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At six o'clock I'm in a silky green dress. I think it might be of Asian design as the tag uses letters I am not familiar with. I have no idea how my father got hold of this piece: most of our clothes are produced locally. The dress was on my bed and could not be ignored. My room has several surveillance cameras in hidden places that I am aware of. I don't think about men watching me – anymore. It isn't worth the fight. If I didn't put on this expensive dress, my father would be at my door in an instant, asking whether I was enjoying my present. It's crazy how he can be so controlling and uninterested at the same time.

The dress flows around me when I walk down the stairs towards the dining room. I say a quick hello to Matti, the army superior in charge of protecting the front side of the house. Once – it was his first week, bless him – he tried to touch me on the hip and I had to jump around a chair to avoid him being killed. These army men are dead stupid. Just two weeks ago I heard one being shot on the front lawn, because he had tried to give me a polite goodnight kiss on the cheek. At least, I think it was him, because I didn't see him again. My father then called in two others to drag away his body. I'm not sure if it is in their army rules to not touch me, but I really do hope so. I wonder whether my father finds it emotionally difficult to murder people who don't know what they are murdered for. Would other companies treat their armies likewise? These days, my father fully relies on Matti's opinion of the army fellows and doesn't exactly bother to do any shooting himself. It's odd. If Mum had still been here, Dad would have treated their company's army very differently. Mum would probably not want the company to have an army at all. To be fair though, all big companies have them these days. It's the companies that make the world's decisions. For all I know, my father's up there with some other CEOs, running Western Europe. He probably is. Let's be vocal about what's happening around here,

no need to hide it. That job is more important to him than running the household, and keeping his daughter sane.

My schedule has been more or less the same for the last eight years. After dinner I go to my room and read some of my mum's favourite poetry and immerse myself in a world of Greek gods who cheat and slaughter and obsess over mortals. My favourite god is Artemis, of the forest. She is the goddess of wilderness and wild animals and apparently also protector of young girls, which is why I often tried to pray to her. I don't even feel ashamed to say it, though I know gods don't exist. My father must have heaps of footage of me running around my room doing some kind of wild dance in the spirit of Artemis. When I got bored of reading I would ask Matti or Jakob for some paper, spread it out on the floor and start drawing female faces. The pencil on the paper gives me peace. I've never drawn them too symmetrically, the faces always have some kind of flaw. Mostly it's crooked smiles or droopy eyes or noses that people would likely consider too big. Afterwards I throw the piece of paper into the fire and watch the flames move into the face and consume it. This way, I won't know if I'm accidentally drawing the same face each day. So I won't go completely mad. Around ten, my dad knocks on my door and says 'Good night'. He doesn't open the door; he doesn't need to, he knows I'm there. I pass out on my bed, mostly from boredom. Sometimes he doesn't show up and I just get a polite nod from Matti or Jakob. A nod that says, hey, it's okay to go to sleep. Try not to think of tomorrow, when everything will be the same again.

Before Jakob, there was another man, called Lars. Lars used to be my favourite guard, he always winked at me when he knew I was doing something I loathed, like eating alone. Then, when he was the only guard on duty, he would start little conversations with me while I was having dinner.

'What is your favourite colour?' he would ask, all of a sudden.

'All of the colours not in this house,' I would say as a stubborn seventeen-year-old.

'Such as?' he spoke softly so that his voice wouldn't reach the other room. I looked up from my plate of carrot mash and met his eyes. They were icy blue and I grinned to myself as that would be such a lame thing to say to him. I was a sarcastic teenager. The idea of cliché romance didn't stimulate me.

‘I like when there’s days where the sky turns pink at twilight,’ I said, muffling my voice too. This was a weird experience for me, talking to someone, one-on-one. Talking about perfectly normal matters but at the same time hiding our conversation. After that my father came into the room to get Lars to escort some guests out. Nevertheless, that night when I was drawing faces, Lars supplied me with coloured pencils instead of the black one I would normally use. Even though I wasn’t going to draw pink skies with them, it was a nice gesture. I don’t know how he got away with it.

Lars knew he was my favourite, he could sense it in my young girl way of moving around him and trying to not look directly at him. He thought I was in love with him. That’s why he tried it.

One Thursday night in April when my dad and his guests had had dinner in the garden because of the unexpectedly warm weather, I was skipping up the marble stairs to the front door in my summery skirt. I had been invited to dine with the guests and I had enjoyed being outside having conversations with living people. Suddenly, I felt a hand on my arm and was pulled behind one of the Roman pillars that lined up the front of the house.

‘Finally,’ said Lars and I must have looked at him quite dumbfounded, because he added: ‘Alone again.’

I don’t know why he thought the pillars were a good hiding place. They were right outside the front door, awfully close to the garden.

‘We are always alone together,’ I said, naïvely enough. In my defence, I had never in my life experienced an encounter of this kind before. I was about twelve when I left school to be home-schooled by my mother, and that was exactly the stage when children still did the whole ‘I don’t want to play with boys – boys are icky’ kind of thing. And as I said before: I was a sarcastic teenager. Romance? It wouldn’t have crossed my mind as something that would happen to me. My only brief moments of, what shall we call it, fascination? These have always been initiated by Lars.

But because I didn’t know what was happening, I could not have warned him.