

LITERARY DOSSIER



TOVE DITLEVSEN 2026

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1. CHILDHOOD

Edvin says that I'll get lots of spankings in school because I'm so odd. I'm odd because I read books, like my father, and because I don't understand how to play. Even so, I'm not afraid when, holding my mother's hand, I go in through the red doorway of Enghavevej School, because lately my mother has given me the completely new feeling of being something unique. She has on her new coat, with the fur collar up around her ears and belt around her hips. Her cheeks are red from the tissue paper, her lips too, and her eyebrows are painted so that they look like two little fish flicking their tails out toward her temples. I'm convinced that none of the other children has such a beautiful mother. I myself am dressed in Edvin's made-over clothes, but no one can tell because Aunt Rosalia did it. She's a seamstress, and she loves my brother and me as if we were her own children. She doesn't have any herself.

When we enter the building, which seems completely empty, a sharp smell strikes my nose. I recognize it and my heart stiffens because it's the already well-known smell of fear. My mother notices it, too, because she releases my hand as we go up the stairs. In the principal's office, we're received by a woman who looks like a witch. Her greenish hair perches like a bird's nest on top of her head. She only has glasses for one eye, so I guess the other lens was broken. It seems to me that she has no lips – they're pressed so tightly together – and over them a big porous nose juts out, its tip glowing red. 'Hmm,' she says without introduction, 'so your name is Tove?' 'Yes,' says my mother, to whom she has hardly cast a glance, let alone offered a chair, 'and she can read and write without mistakes.' The woman gives me a look as if I were something she had found under a rock. 'That's too bad,' she says coldly. 'We have our own method for teaching that to children, you know.' The blush of shame floods my cheeks, as always when I've been the cause of my mother suffering insult. Gone is my pride, destroyed is my short-lived joy at being unique. My mother moves a little bit away from me and says faintly, 'She learned it by herself, it's not our fault.' I look up at her and understand many things at once. She is smaller than other adult women, younger than other mothers, and there's a world outside my street that she fears. And whenever we both fear it together, she will stab me in the back. As we stand there in front of the witch, I also notice that my mother's hands smell of dish soap. I despise that smell, and as we leave the school again in utter silence, my heart fills with the chaos of anger, sorrow, and compassion that my mother will always awaken in me from that moment on, throughout my life.

(Tove Ditlevsen. "Childhood", in *Early spring*. Transl. Tiina Nunnally. Seattle: Seal Press, 1985. Chpt. 3)

Original version

BARNDOM

Edvin siger, at jeg vil få mange bank i skolen, fordi jeg er så sær. Jeg er sær, fordi jeg læser bøger som min far, og fordi jeg ikke har forstand på at lege. Alligevel er jeg ikke bange, da jeg ved min mors hånd går ind gennem den røde port til Enghavevejens skole, for i den sidste tid har min mor indgivet mig den helt nye fornemmelse af at være noget enestående. Hun har taget sin nye frakke på, med pelskrave op om ørerne og bælte om enden. Hendes kinder er røde af silkepapiret, læberne ligeså, og øjenbrynene er malet, så de ligner to små fisk, der slår med halen ud mod tindingerne. Jeg er overbevist om, at ingen af de andre børn har så køn en mor. Selv er jeg iført Edvins omsyede tøj, hvad ingen kan se, for Tante Rosalia har gjort det. Hun er syerske, og hun elsker min bror og mig, som om vi var hendes børn. Selv har hun ingen.

Da vi kommer ind i bygningen, der synes fuldstændig tom, rammer en skarp lugt mine næsebor. Jeg genkender den og bliver beklemt om hjertet, for det er angstens allerede velkendte lugt. Min mor mærker den også, for hun slipper min hånd, mens vi går op ad trapperne. På inspektørens kontor bliver vi modtaget af en dame, der ligner en heks. Hendes grønne hår ligger som en fuglerede ovenpå hovedet. Hun har kun briller for det ene øje, så måske er det andet glas gået i stykker. Det forekommer mig, at hun ingen læber har, så fast er de knebet sammen, og over dem springer en stor porøs næse frem, hvis spids er glødende rød. Nå, siger hun uden indledning, du hedder altså Tove? Ja, siger min mor, som hun næppe værdiger et blik endsige en stol, og hun kan læse og skrive fejlfrit. —Damen sender mig et blik, som var jeg noget, hun har fundet under en sten. Det var uheldigt, siger hun koldt, vi har jo vores egen måde at lære børnenemet på. Skamrødmen vælder op i mine kinder som altid, når jeg har været anledning til, at min mor bliver krænket. Borte er min stolthed, ødelagt er min korte glæde over at være enestående. Min mor rykker et lille stykke bort fra mig og siger forkomment: hun har lært sig det selv, det er ikke vores skyld. Jeg ser op på hende og opfatter på samme tid flere ting: hun er mindre end andre voksne damer, yngre end andre mødre, og der er en verden udenfor gaden, som hun frygter. Og når hun og jeg frygter den sammen, falder hun mig i ryggen. Som vi står der foran heksen, mærker jeg også, at min mors hænder lugter af opvask. Jeg afskyr denne lugt, og mens vi i fuldkommen tavshed forlader skolen igen, fyldes mit hjerte af det kaos af vrede, sorg og medlidenhed, som min mor fra denne time og livet igennem altid skal vække i mig.

(Tove Ditlevsen. *Det tidlige forår: barndom, ungdom*. Erindringer: Gyldental, 2015 [1967] Kap. 3

2. YOUTH

One evening a handsome and serious young man ask me to dance. He's badly dressed, and while we dance, he tells me that the next day he's leaving for Spain to take part in the civil war. He lays his cheek against mine as we dance and even though it scratches a little, I like his caress. I lean a little closer to him and I can feel the warmth of his hand on the skin on my back. I get a little weak in the knees and feel something that I've never felt before at anyone's touch. Maybe he feels the same, because he stays standing with his arm around my waist until the music starts again. His name is Kurt and he asks if he can walk me home. 'You'll be the last girl I'm with before I leave,' he says. Kurt has been unemployed for three years and he would rather sacrifice his life for a great cause than rot in Denmark. He lives on welfare. When he was working, he was a driver for a taxicab owner, and he's never learned anything other than how to drive a car. He sits down at our table, and Nina smiles happily because I've finally found a young man I may be able to hold on to. We've agreed to keep away from unemployed young men, but it's hard to find one who's not. At ten o'clock, Kurt walks me home. It's clear moonlight and my heart is rather moved. I'm walking through the streets with a man who soon will suffer a hero's death. That makes him different in my eyes than all the others. His eyes are dark blue and almond-shaped, his hair black, and his mouth red like a small child's. At home in the entryway, he takes my head in his hands and kisses me very tenderly. He asks me if I live alone and I say no. He himself lives in a room with a vile landlady who doesn't let him have girls visiting. While we're standing embracing each other, my mother opens the window and yells, 'Tove, get up here now!' We jump apart terrified, and Kurt says, 'Was that your mother?' I can't deny it, and now we have to part. And Kurt has to go down by Trommesalen in order to get food from a sandwich store where it's handed out at midnight, but you have to get in line a couple of hours ahead of time. I stand watching him as he walks down the almost empty street. He's not wearing an overcoat and he has stuck both hands in the pockets of his jacket. He's going to die soon, and I'll never see him again.

(Tove Ditlevsen. "Youth", in *Early spring*. Transl. Tiina Nunnally. Seattle: Seal Press, 1985. Chpt. 11)

Original version

UNGDOM

En aften inklinerer en køn og alvorlig ung mand for mig. Han er dårlig klædt, og mens vi danser, fortæller han mig, at han dagen efter skal rejse til Spanien for at deltage i borgerkrigen. Han lægger sin kind mod min, mens vi danser, og skønt den kradser mig lidt, synes jeg om hans kærtegn. Jeg læner mig lidt tæt ind til ham, og varmen fra hans hånd går helt ind på huden af min ryg. Jeg bliver lidt svag i knæene og føler noget, jeg aldrig før har følt ved noget menneskes berøring. Måske føler han det samme, for han bliver stående med armen om livet på mig, til musikken igen begynder. Han hedder Kurt, og han spørger, om han må følge mig hjem. Du bliver, siger han, den sidste pige jeg er sammen med, før jeg rejser. Kurt har været arbejdsløs i tre år og vil hellere ofre sit liv for en stor sag end rådne op i Danmark. Han lever af socialhjælp. Da han arbejdede, var han chauffør for en vognmand, og han har ikke lært andet end at køre bil. Han sætter sig hen til vores bord, og Nina smiler glad, fordi jeg endelig har fået en fyr, jeg måske kan holde fast på. Vi er eller enige om at holde os fra de arbejdsløse fyre, men det er vanskeligt at finde en, der ikke er det. Kl. 10 følger Kurt mig hjem. Det er klart måneskin, og mit hjerte er lidt bevæget. Jeg går gennem gaderne sammen med en mand, der snart skal lide heldedøden. Det gør ham i mine øjne anderledes end alle andre. Hans øjne er mørkeblå og mandelformede, håret sort og munden rød som hos små børn. Hjemme i opgangen tager han mig om hovedet og kysser mig meget blidt. Han spørger mig, om jeg bor alene, og jeg benægter det. Selv bor han i et værelse hos en harsk værtinde, der ikke tillader, han har piger på besøg. Mens vi står og omfavner hinanden, åbner min mor vinduet og råber: Tove, se så at komme op! Vi farer forskrækket fra hinanden, og Kurt siger: var det din mor? Det kan jeg ikke nægte, og nu må vi nødvendigvis skilles. Kurt skal også ned ved Trommesalen for at modtage mad fra en smørrebrødsforretning, der bliver uddelt ved midnat, men man skal stille sig op i køen et par timer før. Jeg står og ser efter ham, da han går ned gennem den næsten tomme gade. Han har ingen frakke på og har stukket begge hænder i lommerne på sin jakke. Han skal snart dø, og jeg ser ham aldrig mere.

3. DEPENDENCY

We're getting married on one of the first days of August, and we ride our bicycles to City Hall holding hands. We arrive too early, so we walk over to Frascati and have coffee. While we drink it, I sit there observing Ebbe's face and I think there is something soft and naive about it, something defenceless, so I feel like protecting him. Suddenly I say: Your top lip really sticks out. I don't mean anything hurtful by it, but he looks at me belligerently. It doesn't stick out any more than yours, he says. Insulted I say, Mine hardly sticks out at all. Yours covers almost your whole face. His face turns red with anger. Don't criticize my looks, he says. The girls in school were crazy about me. Lise only married Ole because I wasn't interested in her. Irritated, I say, you are so conceited. Meanwhile I'm thinking in wonder: we're fighting, and we've never done that before. Silently Ebbe pays the waiter. His dark jacket sleeves are too long; he borrowed his wedding suit from his brother. In the Lantern Club they don't wear shabby clothes because they're poor; it's because being well-dressed is seen as ludicrous. Ebbe runs his index finger around his stiff collar, which is also too big, and he walks in front of me with long strides, back to City Hall, without saying a word. Then he stops and flips his hair back with a toss of his head. He says, if you don't take back that thing about my top lip, I won't marry you. I start to laugh. No, I say, that's too childish. Are we seriously going to become enemies over whose top lip sticks out more? It can be mine then. I pull my top lip down over my bottom lip and try to stick out my eyes so I can see it. It's a half mile long, I say. Come on, we're going to get married. And we do. We move into the apartment and we hire a woman to clean, because I'm starting to earn a lot of money. Her name is Mrs Hansen, and when she comes to interview for the job, Ebbe says emphatically, can you peel carrots? She says she thinks she can. Ebbe explains to her that carrots are very healthy, considering so many things are unavailable now. Since then she has always been amused that there are never any carrots in the house. The days pass like a drum roll before a solo. I read books about pregnancy, motherhood and caring for an infant, and I can't understand why Ebbe isn't as interested in all of this as I am. He says he almost can't believe that he's going to be a father. He also can't believe it when he sees my name in the newspaper.

(Tove Ditlevsen. "Dependency", in *The Copenhagen Trilogy: 3*. Translated by Michael Favala Goldman. London: Pinguin, 2019. Chpt. 6)

Original version

GIFT (BOG)

Vi bliver gift en af de første dage i august, og vi cykler ind til rådhuset med hinanden i hånden. Vi kommer for tidligt og går over i Frascati og drikker en kop kaffe. Mens vi drikker den, sidder jeg og betragter Ebbes ansigt og synes, der er noget blødt og uskyldigt over det, noget forsvarsløst så man får lyst til at beskytte ham. Pludselig siger jeg: sikke en lang overlæbe du har. Jeg mener ikke noget ondt med det, men han ser stridslystent på mig: den er ikke længere end din, siger han. Min er ikke særlig lang, siger jeg fornærmet, din fylder næsten hele ansigtet. Han bliver rød i hovedet af vrede. Du skal ikke genere mit udseende, siger han, pigerne i gymnasiet var vilde efter mig. Lise tog kun Ole, fordi jeg ikke ville have hende. Hvor er du indbildsk, siger jeg hidsigt og tænker undrende: vi skændes jo, det har vi aldrig gjort før. I tavshed betaler han tjeneren. Hans mørke jakkeærme er for langt. Han har lånt bryllupssættet af sin bror. I lygtekredsen går de ikke bare dårligt klædt, fordi de er fattige, det er også, fordi velklædthed opfattes som en latterlighed. Ebbe kører pegefingern rundt langs den stive flip, der også er for stor, og går foran mig med lange skridt. Da vi uden at sige et ord er kommet hen foran rådhuset, standser han op og slår håret tilbage med et hovedkast. Hvis du ikke, siger han truende, tager det med overlæben i dig igen, vil jeg overhovedet ikke gifte mig med dig. Så kommer jeg til at le. Nej, siger jeg, det er for barnligt. Skal vi i ramme alvor være uvenner over, hvis overlæbe der er længst? Det må da gerne være min. Jeg trækker den ned over underlæben og prøver at skele ud af øjnene, så jeg kan se den. Den er en hel kilometer lang, siger jeg så, kom nu. Giftes skal vi jo.

Det bliver vi også. Vi flytter ind i lejligheden, og vi ansætter en kone til at gøre rent, for jeg er begyndt at tjene mange penge. Hun hedder fru Hansen, og da hun kommer for at søge pladsen, siger Ebbe indtrængende: Er De i stand til at rive gulerødder? Det mener hun nok, hun kan påtage sig. Gulerødder er nemlig meget sundt, forklarer han hende, nu hvor der er så meget man ikke kan få. Siden morer hun sig hver gang hun kommer til at tænke på det over, at hun aldrig ser en gulerod i huset. Dagene går som en trommehvirvel før et solonummer. Jeg læser bøger om svangerskab, moderskab og spædbarnspleje, og jeg kan ikke forstå, at Ebbe ikke er så interesseret i alt dette som jeg er. Han siger, at det er så uvirkeligt for ham, at han skal være far. Det er også uvirkeligt for ham, når han ser mit navn i avisen.

4. THE FACES

The little ballerinas danced across the grass with a sweetness and innocence in their movements, as if there were still mother's milk in all their limbs. They were dancing to music that only they could hear. Their radiant skirts were lifted by the wind and the delicate, completely identical faces wore enraptured, solemn expressions, which nothing from without seemed to disturb. The grass was greener than any other grass in the world, except for the grass on the lawns of Søndermarken during her childhood; on Sundays she would lie there on her stomach between her parents, whose youthful laughter filled the whole world. Suddenly a long shadow fell across the lawn, as if a storm cloud were passing in front of the bright sun. A gigantic policeman emerged from the trees in the background and approached the dancing children with steps as stiff as a wound-up robot. The children didn't seem to notice him at all. He went over to one of them, just as her curry-colored skirt flew up and revealed her golden legs - her calves had the mature curves of a grown girl.

Something flashed bright and clear through the air, and the girl fell to the ground like a doll. The knife was sticking out through her back, and the blood spread over the grass like a red, flaming flower. The policeman fumbled with his fly and threw himself on top of the murdered child, whose face turned slowly, like a sleeper whom no dream can disturb. She saw that it was Hanne's face, and she wanted to scream but could only manage a faint whisper. The other children kept on dancing as if they hadn't seen a thing. She wanted to stand up but something was holding her tight around the waist, and she heard a clear, authoritative voice very close by.

'Are you awake?' it said. 'Do you know where you are?'

Something blue and white fluttered past her, and she looked into a face as smooth and fresh as a newly laid egg.

'Yes,' she said, and her vocal cords felt as dry as hay. The horrible sight had vanished, and she had probably just been dreaming. They always said that she had been dreaming whenever they didn't want to have witnesses to something she had seen or heard.

'Yes,' she repeated with difficulty, holding her hand in front of her eyes to shut out the bright light, 'but I don't know where I am.'

'You're in the toxic trauma center. You've been unconscious for 48 hours.'

(Tove Ditlevsen. *The faces*. Transl. Tiina Nunnally. Seattle: Fjord Press. 1991. Chpt. 5)

Original version

ANSIGTERNE

De små balletpiger dansede hen over græsset med en sødme og uskyld over deres bevægelser, som stod modernælken dem endnu i alle lemmer. De dansede til en musik, som kun de selv kunne høre. Deres strålende skørter løftedes op af blæsten og de fine, ganske ens ansigter havde et henrevet, alvorligt udtryk, som intet udefra syntes at forstyrre. Græsset var grønnere end noget andet græs i verden med undtagelse af barndommens græs på Søndermarkens plæner, hvor hun om søndagen lå på maven mellem sine forældre, hvis unge latter fyldte hele verden. Pludselig faldt der en lang skygge hen over plænen, som drog en uvejrssky forbi den klare sol. En kæmpemæssig politibetjent dukkede frem fra træerne i baggrunden og nærmede sig de dansende børn med skridt så stive som en optrukken robots. De lod overhovedet ikke til at bemærke ham. Han gik hen mod en af dem, hvis carryfarvede skørt netop blæste op og afslørede de gyldne ben, hvis lægge havde en voksen piges modne runding. Noget blinkede skarpt og klart gennem luften, og pigen faldt til jorden som en dukke. Kniven stak ud gennem hendes ryg, og blodet bredte sig over græsset som en rød, flammende blomst. Politibetjenten famlede ved sin buksegylp og væltede sig ned over det myrdede barn, hvis ansigt drejedes langsomt som hos en sovende, hvem ingen drøm forstyrrer. Hun så, at det var Hannes, og hun ville skrike, men kunne kun frembringe en svag hvisken. De andre børn dansede videre, som om de ingenting havde set. Hun ville rejse sig, men noget holdt fast om livet på hende, og hun hørte en klar, myndig stemme tæt ved sig.

- Er De vågen, sagde den. Ved De, hvor De er?

Noget blåt og hvidt flagrede forbi hende, og hun så ind i et ansigt så glat og friskt som et nylagt æg.

- Ja – sagde hun og følte sine stemmebånd så tørre som hø.

Det rædselsfulde syn var forsvundet, og så havde hun vel drømt. De sagde altid, at hun havde drømt, når hun så eller hørte noget, de ikke brød sig om at have vidner til.

- Ja – gentog hun besværligt og holdt hånden for øjnene for at lukke det skarpe lys ude, men jeg ved ikke, hvor jeg er.

- De er på forgiftningscentralen. De har været bevidstløs i to døgn.

5. THE ADULTS 1

In the morning
yearning is
detached from its object
and is like
a thirst
no earthly
spring can quench.

The longing is
not for anyone
in particular
only life is
divided into a
before and after.

Once
it was good
to wake
and know
you were
only dreaming.
Now you are living
inside the dream
and know that
in reality
all the
adults are away
and are never
coming home.

(Tove Ditlevsen. "Five poems from "The Adults" by...", *Los Angeles review*.
Transl. Cynthia Graae and Michael Favala Goldman. [L.A., December 9, 2021]

Original version

DE VOKSNE 1

Om morgenen
er savnet
løst fra sin genstand
og er som
en tørst
ingen jordisk
kilde kan slukke.

Længslen gælder
ikke nogen
bestemt
kun er livet
delt i et
før og efter.

Før var
det godt
at vågne
og vide
man kun
havde drømt.
Nu bor man
inde i drømmen
og ved det
er virkelighed
at alle
de voksne er borte
og aldrig
kommer hjem.

(Tove Ditlevsen. *De voksne*. København: Gyldendal, 1969)