

Lessons in a Foreign Language

A short story by Lezanne Clannachan

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Ella eats her way through pickled herring, fried eel, some kind of salty, amber-coloured jelly with an unpronounceable name. She thinks about Newt, crying himself to sleep in the company of a stranger and eats faster, cramming in mouthful after mouthful as if her empty plate could bring an end to the lunch.

The woman to her left, with weathered-oak features, offers her another slice of dense black bread. A hitherto undiscovered building material, Ella thinks, pushing it about her plate. She's tempted to say as much but Michael has made her promise to consider before she speaks today. Think of it as panning for gold, he'd said.

The Danish language gallops and clatters around her. Ella keeps herself quiet, letting the merry-go-round of noise spin away. She stiffens as Michael stands to address his new colleagues. He offers heartfelt gratitude for the warm welcome he and his lovely wife Ella have received since they landed in Denmark three days ago. Landed. As if they'd dropped from the sky and were staggering about, trying to regain their balance. At least, that's how she feels. Michael landed like a gymnast. Heads turn, people smile in her direction and her opportunity to slope away is lost.

Further along the trestle table, a woman catches her attention. With hennaed hair, a red silk blouse and a string of crude-cut gems, she stands out; a garish flower against the Scandinavian pebble-and-sand of the lunch party. She is making no attempt to hide how tedious she finds the whole affair.

'All Danish children.' Ella's neighbour nudges her. 'Attend børnehave.'

Børnehave. She's heard the word enough times in the last three days. It sounds like a drunkard slurring Burning Hell.

'Mine won't be. I quite like my son actually.'

The woman smiles, uncomprehending. Their conversation is a game of tennis both serving simultaneously, both missing the incoming ball.

'Who's that? With the red hair?'

'Nah, ja. Carolina Pedersen.' Said with light dismissal as though the name explains all.

Ella is not the only person to have noticed Carolina. Further along the table, a man with beach-yellow hair and a white linen shirt, bobs and weaves his head to catch her attention. The woman looks everywhere but him.

Laughter erupts, a break-out of appreciative handclapping. Michael bows his head in acknowledgement of the quip he has fed the audience like a penny in a jukebox; the drop and click as they catch the humour. Sitting down, he meets her eye. Ella smiles back, nods.

Carolina's admirer stretches across the table under the guise of offering bread to his fellow guests. The henna-haired woman's gaze bumps over him as if he were a piece of furniture and Ella smiles to herself. Carolina has been aware of his attention all along. Patting the thigh of a grey-haired man at her side, she leaves the table.

Her admirer tracks her exit. Then he turns his head towards Ella, catching her with a wink before she can look away.

Newt is curled up, knees to chin, thumb resting in the corner of his sleep-slackened mouth. His breath hiccoughs with the aftershock of violent sobbing. The babysitter had never known a child to cry for so long. Ella had paid her an extra ten kroner and waited in silence as she gathered up her cardboard books.

Standing over the cot, she is caught in the longing to hold him; to lift his fringe away and blow across his damp brow.

‘No more babysitters,’ she whispers. ‘I promise.’

Michael is listening to his Easing Into Danish CD, hocking random words out into the silence. Newt, turning a wooden brick over and over in his hands as if discovering endless new dimensions, flinches every time. Before she can scoop him up, he throws the block at his father. It catches Michael’s ankle. Tearing off the headphones he frowns at his son who pre-empts him with a furious wail, the sound rising and dipping like a police siren. Ella picks him up, face averted from the padded onslaught of his fists.

‘What’s that all about?’

‘That silly language. Sounds like you’re swearing at us.’ Her son pushes his hot, slippery face into her neck, tangling hands into her hair. ‘You scared him.’

‘Newty, come here.’ The irritation drops from Michael’s voice, in its place nothing but love and patience. It’s always the same. Just as she’s poised for confrontation he disarms her with a quiet rush of kindness. ‘What’s wrong, my boy?’

‘There’s nothing wrong. He wears his inside on the outside. That’s all.’

Newt kicks off her as he scrambles into Michael’s arms. Father and son stand clasped together, sealed like oyster shells. Ella turns her attention to the hotel room’s cluttered, airless space. Gathers up toys and dinosaur socks to make it feel bigger.

The Admiral Copenhagen overlooks a finger of sea working itself into the city’s heart. The wind blows flat off the water, rattling the lobby’s glass walls. As Ella manoeuvres the pushchair outside, it blasts through her. Closing her eyes, she rocks with it before adjusting Newt’s blanket in the pushchair. She should call Michael with the news that their house – a bungalow within walking distance of Vedbaek Beach – is ready.

‘You’re Michael’s wife.’

Ella opens her eyes. Carolina’s admirer squints at her over the cigarette he is struggling to light. Summer sky eyes, sharp angles, thick blond hair. There is a plastic symmetry to the man’s features which makes him both attractive and unknowable, the traits of his personality buried beneath. She is struck again by the otherness of the Danes. How unprepared she had been for this degree of alienation.

‘Yes, I am Michael’s wife, Newt’s mother and Mr and Mrs Preston’s daughter.’

He bows his head with a smile. ‘Jannick.’

‘Ella.’ She looks out over the water, gathering up her hair. ‘Ugly, isn’t it?’

‘You might not think so in a year’s time.’

A year’s time. Unravelling before her like a bolt of material. ‘I didn’t want to move here.’ The words are out before she can stop them.

‘You’re here now.’ He sighs grey smoke. ‘You should make the most of it.’

‘I saw you at the lunch.’ Seeing Newt stir, she rocks the pushchair, earning a few more minutes of naptime. ‘Do you work with Michael?’

‘I’m just visiting. Catching up with old Kverner colleagues.’

‘I wish I was just visiting.’ She decides it wouldn’t hurt to wait a while before telling Michael about the empty house in Vedbaek.

Michael gets up an hour early to oil the chain and check the tire pressure of his new bicycle. Ella lies in bed with a flailing Newty, watching him.

‘Michael – the great fixer of unbroken things.’

‘The eternal boy scout.’ He grins through the spokes of the upturned wheel.

‘You’ll always find something wrong if you look hard enough.’ She has never received a gift in original tissue paper or a bouquet of flowers that hasn’t been picked through in anticipation of a wilting plant at its centre.

On Newt’s first birthday, Michael took him to a paediatrician to make sure his speech was developing as it should.

He’s only one, the consultant had said. Let’s give him a chance.

‘Prevention is always better,’ Michael is saying as Ella rolls away, wrapping Newt in the safe cave of her bedclothes.

Once Michael has wobbled off along the cobblestones outside the hotel, she tries to invent new games for old toys. Newt is restless, itchy inside his own skin. They settle on a one-game-fits-all throwing activity. As she retrieves scattered cars and Lego, there is a knock at the door. She opens it to find the henna-haired woman holding out white paper bags stained with melted butter. The smell of burnt sugar fills the room.

‘My husband Sven works with your Michael,’ says Carolina.

Over breakfast, Ella learns the foodstuff claiming to be Danish pastry from her local bakery back home was a stodgy imposter and that Carolina has come to rescue her from boredom.

‘I’ll show you the real Copenhagen. Forget castles and the Round Tower,’ she says, tearing the buttery pastry into sections which she doesn’t eat. ‘Maybe our husbands will also be friends.’

‘Thank you, that sounds great,’ Ella says, hearing how inadequate her choice of words are, even in her own language. Brushing pastry flakes from the front of her T-shirt, she adds, ‘I met someone called Jannick the other day. Do you know him?’

Carolina nods, shrugs. ‘I think I know who you mean.’

But Ella catches a sudden quickness in her eyes.

‘What’s Sven Pedersen like?’

‘A magician when it comes to numbers.’

‘But his personality?’

Michael finishes his mouthful, grinning. ‘Pretty much that.’

‘There’s quite an age difference between him and Carolina, isn’t there?’

‘About fifteen years. Why?’

‘Don’t you think there’s a risk?’ She jiggles Newt on her lap. ‘With such an age gap?’

Michael lowers his wine without taking a sip. ‘Risk of what?’

‘Nothing. I don’t know.’ Ella presses her mouth to the crown of Newt’s head. Michael’s frown deepens as their son plunges his fingers into her cooling mashed potato.

‘Newt needs to go to nursery. It’s unfair not to socialise him.’

‘Socialise him?’ Heat rushes her face. ‘Like a dog?’

‘Does he have to do that?’

‘He likes to eat off my plate.’ Ella lifts her chin away from Newt’s potatoed fingers as he prepares to dive in from greater heights. ‘Otherwise he feels he’s missing out.’

‘Loving him.’ Michael squats down beside them, pulling his son’s fingers through his folded napkin. ‘And letting him do whatever he wants, aren’t the same thing.’

Newt looks up at his father’s soft tone. The most recent doctor said there was nothing wrong with his hearing, his vision, his speech. Ella could have told them that. Her son is a fledgling being, feeling his way into an understanding of the world.

‘Don’t worry,’ she whispers. ‘You’re staying right here, with me.’

But Newt isn’t listening as he starfishes his hands against Michael’s cheeks, squashing his nose against his father’s. Michael takes him from her arms.

Ella stacks the plates onto the room-service trolley, her fingers slipping in béarnaise sauce, peas trickling to the floor. She thinks about Jannick and the way he was looking at Carolina.

The water casts ripples of light against the slick walls, making Ella feel drowsy and off-balance as they move between the fish tanks. The aquarium glass distorts her vision, illuminating the fishes’ chemical colours. Newt is quiet in her arms. He points at something orange against the sand.

‘That’s a.’ She was going to say starfish but the shape throws her. Lopsided with rounded stumps in place of two lost limbs. ‘Yes, a starfish. Looks like he’s survived a battle.’

Her son spreads his fingers and frowns at them.

‘Spiders can also survive if they lose a leg. A lizard can lose its tail to escape. You can even cut a worm in half and both bits live on.’

There’s a word for it but she can’t remember. The ability to sacrifice an integral part of the body and survive, moving into a new life. She thinks about her mother trying to hide tears at the airport. Thinks about Newt’s favourite red tricycle at the Sunshine Toddler Group and the conversations there, like bundles of knitting to be picked up and added to, week after week.

The things she has surrendered until the shape of her life is no longer recognisable.

‘Found you.’ The watery light tinges his hair green, rolling along his clothing as if he were a sea-bed hallucination.

‘Jannick. What are you doing here?’

‘The girl on Reception said you were going to the aquarium.’ Jannick ruffles Newt’s fringe who clamps his hand to his head to prevent the stranger from stealing his hair. ‘I thought maybe you wanted some company.’

‘Oh. Yes.’ Ella looks away.

‘You must be lonely.’

She dismisses the suggestion with a light laugh. ‘I’ve got Newty.’

‘What about grown-up company?’ His words are slow and deliberate like presents being unwrapped, but when she tries to meet his eyes, his gaze slides away. ‘You need friends.’

‘Carolina Pedersen visited me yesterday.’ Ella watches his expression, picking at Newt’s ice-cream gelled hair. ‘Do you know her?’

‘I’ve heard the name.’

‘She might become a friend.’ In her distraction, she forgets Newt’s aversion to being pawed. He pinches her thumb between fingernails like chips of broken glass. Ella winces.

‘He is angry?’ Jannick cocks his head, studying her son as though he were a specimen in a tank.

‘Yes he’s angry.’ Ella moves him to her other hip. ‘He’s lost in a foreign country, can’t understand a word people are saying and the food tastes like building material. He hates it.’

‘Anger is OK.’ Now his eyes latch on to hers. ‘It’s a pure emotion.’

‘Pure?’

‘Unlike love which is contaminated,’ Jannick says and she senses a cinema reel of private thought playing out in his head. ‘With lust, greed, hope, fear.’

‘Not the kind of love I feel for my son.’

Newt, in a sudden fury of boredom, bucks and twists, his head catching her lip. Ella manages not to cry out, lowering him to the floor.

‘He doesn’t say anything?’

Before she can snap to Newt’s defence, Carolina’s admirer tilts her chin with two fingers. ‘You’re bleeding.’

Ella sucks her bottom lip, blinking back stupid, idiotic tears. ‘He understands everything I say.’

‘I didn’t speak until I was nearly four,’ Jannick says. ‘Then one day I looked at my mother and said, I don’t like potatoes. They taste like mud.’

‘Exactly.’ Ella catches hold of his sleeve. ‘He’s storing everything up. It’s what I’ve been telling Michael.’

‘Is Michael listening?’

She catches herself before she can shake her head. ‘Of course.’

Releasing his arm, she joins Newt at the vast central tank where sharks and stingrays circle in blue silence.

‘What do you miss most about England?’

‘Singing.’

Jannick gives a quizzical smile. ‘You can’t sing in Denmark?’

‘I was having lessons. I was going to do something with it. Local theatre or a choir. Something small.’

He is nodding. ‘Something just for you. That’s no small thing.’

They face each other, hidden from the world in an underwater cavern. For the first time since she landed at Kastrup airport, she feels as though her feet have connected with the ground.

‘You should make friends with Carolina.’ Jannick moves away. ‘I’ve heard she is also lonely.’

They complete the aquarium’s circuit twice before stepping out into sheering daylight and the bellow of traffic. She sees Jannick slot back into the painted picture of the city. It leaves her feeling exposed, her lack of belonging visible to strangers like a stain on her clothing.

‘I’m meeting Carolina for a coffee tomorrow afternoon. In the Admiral foyer.’

‘Yes, I’ll come,’ he says, without looking at her.

‘I met Sven when I was sixteen,’ Carolina says.

‘That young?’ Ella shields her eyes. The sun breaks against the water, scattering across the foyer’s glass surfaces, brilliant and penetrating as though a protective screen has been peeled away. Carolina leans back, her arms sprawled above her head, letting the sun sink into the caramel layers of her recent tan, lighting her from within.

‘We got married three years later.’ Before Ella can comment, she frowns at her watch. ‘What time did you say Jannick is coming?’

‘I didn’t.’ Ella thinks back to the luncheon a week ago when Carolina had pretended to be unaware of Jannick’s gaze. ‘How did you know he was coming?’

Carolina smiles. ‘I think we need another coffee.’

‘When did you see him?’

‘Coffee first, confession later.’

Ella catches her reflection in the mirror behind the bar, her face bleached and lifeless under the same Nordic sun that made Carolina glow. Jannick has an air of promise about him, she thinks. It could jam a person’s ability to interpret signals, letting them read their own reflected desires instead. She should warn Carolina.

Ella returns with two lattes to find Jannick in her seat. Carolina flicks her crossed foot like a cat’s tail, smiling. They only notice Ella as she places the drinks before them. Making an excuse about Newt who is still asleep in his pushchair, she walks away. Their attention closes like a puddle reforming after a footstep.

Ella can’t sleep because of Carolina’s phone-call. For the first time she regrets the empty house in Vedbaek where she might slip out of bed and walk to the beach.

Let's go to Louisiana Museum on Friday, Carolina had said. Jannick is coming too. Don't tell Michael of course. She sees the two of them leaning across the coffee table, their focus locked on each other. It is OK, she decides, to keep a secret that belongs to someone else.

Thursday starts well. Ella and Newt eat lunch by the canal in Nyhavn, watching tourists shuffle onto the barges. Newt picks at her breaded plaice and sucks the lemon slice making Ella throw back her head in laughter seeing his hoovered-in expression. A young woman leans across from a neighbouring table, her English fluent. 'Such a lovely, little boy. You must be so proud.'

Ella smiles, lifts Newt from his high chair and wraps her arms tight about him, her lips against the delicate whorls of his ear. His small body relents its shape for the draw of a breath before stiffening. Sometimes she sees herself and Newt as incongruous shapes; a triangle and a circle butting and rebounding against each other, in contrast to the seatbelt click of father and son.

At least today he is happy and amenable, climbing into the pushchair by himself. As they walk, Ella sings The Wheels on Newty's Bus in a gruff, Viking voice, making him giggle. Back at the hotel, she lets his naptime come and go, reluctant to interrupt their game of racing cars on the bathroom floor.

It starts with the tipping of a glass. Water soaks his top, pitching him into immediate distress. He refuses to submit to her fingers as she fiddles with the button at the back of his neck. Struggling against her frantic plucking, he pulls away in a jagged movement that chokes him, his neckline hooking against her fingers.

'Newty, please. Be still for a moment,' Ella begs but Newt cries and wrestles with such committed fury that he vomits up his lunch. Her knees slip in regurgitated fish, head ringing with his hoarse shrieks. A hot, stinging panic mushrooms through her. 'Calm down. I can't help you like this.'

Newt skids on the slimed mess of the bathroom floor. Falls in slow motion, his head double-thudding against the floor. She feels the noise in her stomach.

'Newty,' she screams, trying to scrabble him up. Scissors, she needs scissors, cut the bloody top off him. He doesn't mean to, but the toe of his shoe, hard as a swung conker, smacks against her chin. 'Ow. You little shit.'

She falls back. Away from the thrashing, howling form of her son and the terrible word that hangs above them.

'What are you doing?' Michael is in the doorway. He has heard her shrieking, the word she used against her son because his face is white, his mouth an appalled square. Newty flops at his feet and his father wipes away vomit and tears with the sleeve of his jacket. Ella scrambles up, lurches to the sink and scalds her hands, her face with water. She can't think of a single word to say whilst Michael strips Newt as though plucking petals off a flower and lifts him into the bath. Ella watches with the sense of waking from a nightmare. Normality restored with the soothing rush of water, her son surrendering a weak chuckle as his father tickles his feet with a jet of water.

'There, my boy.' Michael's voice mending the rents and tears in the air. 'All better now.'

Neither of them notice her leave the bathroom.

The air is dead, the water turned to polished stone. Ella lights her second cigarette with the embered stub of the first.

'Ella is escaping again.'

She looks up to find Jannick, his smile becoming a frown as he sees her face.

‘What’s the matter?’ He joins her on the low wall, the length of his body – from shoulder to knee – sewn against hers.

She manages a wretched laugh. ‘You caught me having a moment, that’s all.’

‘It looks bigger than a moment.’

‘Not really.’ As she says it, it feels true. Her son’s face twisted with outrage over her inept mothering, Michael’s expression – all fading, losing their keen edge.

‘I read an article once.’ Jannick lights a Prince cigarette, jerking its sandpaper smoke into his chest. ‘About the False Self and the True Self.’

Ella licks the pad of her thumb and scrubs under her eyes. ‘What’s the False Self?’

‘The part of you that says yes when it wants to say no and bites its tongue when it wants to scream.’

‘In other words, good manners.’ She’d screamed at her son. Lashed out at him with a vicious word. ‘Perhaps it’s better to hide one’s True Self.’

‘There comes a point when a person gets exhausted by hiding how they feel.’ Jannick takes a double puff, squinting across the water. ‘Sometimes you want something it shouldn’t. You get sick from wanting.’

His look is direct, untempered as the light that makes her eyes water all the time. Ella licks her lips, grinding her cigarette under her sandal. ‘I want to go home. I’ve been paying the hotel bill from my own money for a week now, making excuses to Kverner about why we’re not moving into the house in Vedbaek.’

‘Does your husband know?’

‘No.’

‘There, you see.’ Jannick flicks his cigarette at the water. He stretches, cricks his neck.

‘Michael and I had dinner the other night with the Pedersens.’ She slides a glance at Jannick. He’s sitting so close she can see a red glint in his fair stubble.

‘How was Carolina?’

‘You’re quite taken with her, aren’t you?’

‘It is thanks to you that we met,’ he says.

‘Is it?’ She sees again the light flare in Carolina’s eyes when she first mentioned Jannick. ‘I was wondering if you knew each other from before? When you worked for Kverner.’

‘I only saw her from a distance,’ Jannick says. ‘You brought us together.’

Michael is pacing. ‘When did you last speak to them?’

Ella hesitates. ‘Yesterday or maybe Monday.’

‘And they said there’s a problem with the plumbing?’

Newt pushes out of her arms, his cheeks red. Ella picks up a dinosaur picture book and fans him, leaning in to catch the stirred air. ‘I probably misunderstood. I’ll check again tomorrow.’ She takes off Newt’s socks to cool him down.

‘Until we move out of this hotel room, our lives are on hold.’ Michael joins them on the floor, meeting the soles of Newt’s feet with his own. They push and growl at each other. ‘I’ve got a surprise for you.’

From his shirt pocket, he takes a card and hands it to Ella. Black embossed music notes rise from the letters of a Danish name she can’t pronounce. Michael reaches over to cup her knee. ‘Best singing teacher in Copenhagen, El.’

‘Lessons?’ The warmth of his hand flares up her leg, drawing a prickle of heat across her forehead. ‘I can’t have lessons here.’

She can feel his effort not to withdraw his hand. ‘Newt can spend two hours at the crèche in Kverner during your lessons. It’s a floor below my office so I can check on him.’

Ella is shaking her head. ‘I don’t think so.’

Michael stretches his full length across the green-bristled carpet as she moves away. ‘You need to pick up the reigns of your life, Ella. He’s three years old already.’

Newt crawls onto his father’s chest and lies there like a tiger drowsing on a branch. ‘It’s why I took this job.’

‘What are you talking about?’

He can’t look at her, stroking a hand along their son’s spine, over and over. To soothe himself. She wants to slap his hand away.

‘I’ve seen you slowly withdrawing from everything and everyone since Newt’s birth. I don’t think you even realise it.’

‘So your solution, great fixer, was to bring me here?’ She can see Newt doesn’t like the sound of her voice but she can’t stop. ‘Where I have absolutely no-one.’

Newt pushes Michael’s hand away.

‘I thought a moment of isolation would jolt you into action, force you to connect with people again.’

Stepping over them, Ella wrestles the window open an inch before the safety-catch jars. If she looks at him, her True Self is going to go fucking mental. She swallows the draught of air, wipes her damp palms on her skirt.

‘On that subject, Carolina and I are planning a trip to the beach tomorrow.’

‘Great idea.’ Michael’s voice lifts. ‘She seems really nice.’

The hope in his voice snips her explosive wires. Leaving her, as ever, holding the diffused bomb of her anger.

‘El? I can’t bear you to be lonely.’

Ella sighs, letting her shoulders drop. Then she lies down on the floor, resting her head where Michael’s shoulder hinges to his chest, her hand on his stomach. Newt’s eyes are dark, watchful slits. He reaches for the hem of her sleeve, folding his fingers in and out of the material.

Carolina drives with Jannick beside her, Ella and Newt in the back. Something has changed since the last time they were all together. The two of them had been silly, feverish with excitement as they rushed around the Louisiana art museum, exclaiming at paintings they barely glanced at. She’d lost them in the gallery’s sunlit rooms for a while.

Came upon them breathless, laughing as they emerged from an empty antechamber. There you are, they said, wrapping arms about her waist.

The silence between them is new. It is the aftermath of words spoken, understandings reached.

It is only once Ella has laid out towels, buckets and spades, that she realises Jannick and Carolina aren't joining her on the sand.

'We're taking a walk,' Jannick says and heads for the shoreline. Carolina lingers, saying nothing. Then she plants a quick, dry kiss on Ella's temple before running after him. Whilst morning moves into afternoon, Ella and Newt build sandcastles, dip their toes in the melted-ice sea, eat sausages and sweet bread from the kiosk. When Ella runs out of ideas to keep Newt entertained, he becomes fretful, suddenly aware of sand rubbing the sun-flayed streaks on his arms. Ella takes a few steps away from the towels to scour the beach. Jannick and Carolina are nowhere to be seen. A panicky feeling surges up from her stomach like a flock of pigeons exploding into the air. The afternoon glare bounces off the hotel windows behind them, filling her eyes with tears. Through watery vision, she sees a woman with auburn hair disappearing behind the pine trees fringing the car park.

'Don't move, Newty. Stay there.'

Reaching the road, Ella looks back at Newt but he is still whacking the sand with his spade. She sprints to the car park, getting as far as the entrance and finding no sign of Carolina or Jannick.

She returns to find the spade but no Newt. Ella blinks at the space where her son had been sitting.

'Newt?' Her voice is weak with disbelief. Taking a few steps forward the enormity of the beach hits her, rooting her, unable to turn left or right for fear of following the wrong direction. The North Sea rushes away to the horizon. Ella drops to her knees.

'Newt,' she screams. 'Newty.'

A hand grasps her shoulder, a face looming, a jabbering voice. And a smile, grotesque with optimism. Ella scrambles to her feet, shaking free of the woman but her eyes follow the pointing finger.

There. There is her son. Sitting beside a group of toddlers in red, identical sunhats. It takes Ella a moment to shake off the horror, to step back into the life she had lost, for one breaking moment, beside the empty towel and the abandoned spade. She lurches forward, a cresting wave of relief but once again the Danish woman – breasts swinging loose under a pink sarong – touches her arm, shaking her head.

'You must be calm,' she is saying in a thick-tongued Danish accent. 'The boy is happy.'

Ella lowers herself beside Newt. He and a thin, freckled boy take turns to bash a plastic shark with their spades; the boy gabbling in Danish, Newt saying nothing, both understanding each other perfectly. When Newt finally notices her, he smiles. Lifting his chin, he presses his lips together and she hears it. The gentle hum of the letter 'm' taking shape inside his closed mouth.

Jannick and Carolina find their way back to the beach as the sun drifts towards the horizon. They hold hands and ask jolly questions about sandcastles and swimming, hearing none of the answers. No-one speaks during the drive home. Nearing the hotel, Carolina spins in her seat, reaching for Ella's fingers. 'Lets go to the beach again next week.'

Ella removes her hand from Carolina's hot grip. 'We can't, I'm afraid.'

'But why not?' Now they both stare at her. Their faces clear, untouched by the day's sun. No longer smiling.

'There won't be any time. The house in Vedbaek,' Ella says, leaving the car. 'Is ready for us now.'