

A N O V E L

Three steps behind

a story about never walking alone



T O N Y

Three Steps Behind

a story about never walking alone

PROLOGUE

He followed the edge where the asphalt met the cobblestones, that sharp line so easy to walk along. As long as he kept to it he knew where he was going, more or less. But the world tugged at him from every direction. A gull lifting off. A boat that knocked against the jetty. A rope, thick as his own arm, lying and sunning itself on the stone. He stopped at each thing and half-turned toward the giraffe, as if to say look, and the giraffe rattled forward its three steps and stopped too. Ahead of him the pram rolled on. His mother's shadow slid over the stones, long and calm, and he let it go before him like a guiding thread. He didn't need to look up so often. The shadow was there, after all, and as long as it was there everything was as it should be. It was only when the cobblestones

ran out that he truly lifted his gaze. For beyond them there was nothing more to walk on. Only light that trembled, and that stillness water has just before you understand that it is water.

The shadow had stopped. He looked up, and there she stood — his mother, the pram, the whole world he came from, three steps away. As near as the giraffe had always been. He had not walked a single metre alone.

His mother began taking things out of the pram, and perhaps a moment of rest was waiting now — for him and for his friend, who had also stopped when no one was pulling the string any longer.

His mother always brought something extra good. Maybe it'll be ice cream, he thought.

But what was set out was that jarred food, and something to drink. Then he knew the ice cream would have to wait until later. He just managed to think that he could nag a little — before a spoon was already on its way in, with something that actually looked rather good.

After a spoonful or two he had forgotten the ice cream for a while.

Now he was into his food, and he was determined to have a spoon of his own — because his friend had to have some too. He needed that. Someone so small who had walked so far on such a little body, it must be heavy indeed.

His mother said he could pretend, that the giraffe was fed with an empty spoon. But that he didn't understand. How would the giraffe grasp that there was no food on the spoon?

And what had happened to his mother — didn't she need food and drink too after the long walk? That's something I'll bring up when we get home, he thought. For now his mother had brought out dessert.

Being a little boy with his friend in tow can be heavy. After the meal and the dessert the boy had fallen asleep in the pram — and woke in a completely different place from the one he remembered when he was last awake.

*Where am I? Why is the pram moving? Where is
my friend?*

He grew calmer when he felt that the string was still in his hand. There, on the shelf below, the

giraffe lay sleeping too. Good, he thought. So my friend got a little food after all. Because if he hadn't got anything from me, the giraffe would surely have turned quite cranky.

The pram rolled on, and the wheels sang against the stones in their own way — not sharp like the giraffe's wooden wheels, but in the same rhythm. Tightened and slackened, tightened and slackened, except now no one was pulling. It just went of its own accord.

He didn't need to hold the string tightly. It lay in his hand anyway, soft, and at the other end his friend slept. Ahead of him was his mother's back, and behind them both the afternoon had begun to lean toward evening.

So he closed his eyes again. Someone else was carrying him now, someone else was keeping track of the way. And the last thing he thought, before sleep took him once more, was that it was good not always to have to know where you're going — as long as you have someone to not know together with.

CHAPTER 1

He had always known where his hands were. That there now lay a woman beside him was harder to explain. What actually happened yesterday?

The morning sun reminded him that a window needed opening in the caravan. He knew perfectly well how it was done. But she lay on exactly the side he had to cross to reach it – and there, mid-movement, he was stopped.

He got past her, out of the caravan, but left the door ajar to let in a little fresh morning air. Once on his feet he went and fetched what he needed – the shower was in a wagon a little way off. Afterwards he brought breakfast for them both. The staff who had buttered the sandwiches and brewed the coffee must have been up at the

crack of dawn, he thought.



She opened her eyes when he came back. And when she saw what he was carrying — breakfast, put together for them both — the smile came before she could say anything.

“You've been up a long while,” she said.

“Someone has to,” he said, and set the tray down between them.

They ate for a while without saying much. It wasn't silent in an uncomfortable way — more like when two people don't yet know how much to say, and so let the coffee and the morning do the talking. He noticed he didn't remember everything about yesterday. But he remembered

that it had been good. That was enough for now.

Outside, the camp had begun to wake. He heard it before he saw it — a bucket clattering, someone whistling off-key, and far off, beneath everything else, the low sound he always listened for first. The horses.

He set down his cup. “I have to go out to them,” he said, and she nodded as if she already knew that sentence was coming.

He went out to the horses.

They heard him coming. One head after another turned toward him over the stall doors, ears pricking, and one of them — the one he'd fetch first — gave that low, almost murmuring whinny that was meant just for him. He took the halter from the hook where it hung, her hook, and she let him slip it on without moving from the spot.

He led her out toward the smaller paddock. The rope lay loose in his hand, tightened and slackened, tightened and slackened, and she walked half a head behind him — not because she had to, but because she wanted to. Neither of them pulled at the other.

Then the others, one at a time, impatient, with small stamps and snorts, until they all stood out in the morning light. The stalls had to be mucked out and put in order, and he set about it without really thinking; his hands could do this in their sleep.

This morning felt lighter. Maybe it was the new woman — the one who'd been helping him with the animals lately, the one who now lay still in the caravan. He didn't quite know. But he let the moment be what it was, and enjoyed it.

Now he'd brush his favourite — the one who could be quite contrary with the others who tended her, but who stood perfectly still for him. Then he'd plan for tomorrow's journey to the next place.

It had turned into a week at Fagerhult, a little north of Jönköping. Now the whole circus would move on toward Hammarö, just south of Karlstad. A fairly long journey.

Hammarö would be the year's last stop with the circus. After that he had holiday weeks to take, and then it was homeward — up to Mälarvägen 17 in Strängnäs, where his parents lived and where he himself had grown up.

But right now he was still at work, and that was enough daydreaming. It wasn't only the horses that needed tending; a circus company like this had a good many more animals than that. And it was he who bore the responsibility, together with his colleagues. Not just grooming and feeding, but paperwork too — feed to order, and everything else that came with keeping a whole menagerie alive.

And in the middle of it all the phone rang. A horse owner who was having a little trouble with his horse.

The man had got a tip about him from a friend — about his feel for horses — and now that the circus was nearby anyway, he wondered if he had time to come and at least take a look at her. He'd be paid, of course, and mileage on top. The owner lived in Järphult, ten minutes away by car.

They booked a time for the evening, when he was free and the day's work was done.

Everything seen to, and a hearty lunch from the canteen in his stomach — then off he went toward Järphult.

Calming a horse was something he could do in his sleep. Stay calm himself. Lower the horse's

head. Speak in a hushed voice. Move it to a safe place.

He stayed a couple of hours. When he felt the horse had settled enough, he wrote down a few tips on a note — things the owner could do himself to carry on, and keep the horse calm going forward.

Now he'd go home and sleep, to have the strength for tomorrow and the journey to Hammarö.

There was a lot to do in the morning. Not just getting up early — everything around them had to be packed into the wagons, and he reckoned they'd be ready to set off around noon. There by evening. About two hundred and forty kilometres, and with the whole convoy — heavy animal wagons and stops for the animals — it still made a journey of four or five hours.

One more week. He counted the days almost the way he had as a child waiting for Father Christmas.

He had missed his parents. Perhaps most of all his mother's pork with onion sauce — and getting to sit and chat with his father about things only the two of them could.

Both were retired now. But his father had written for years for Strängnäs Tidning about the trotting races, about the meets at Sundbyholm, and he knew it inside out. The bookshelf at home bore witness to it: breeding books, pedigrees, everything a trotting enthusiast could wish for.

His mother had worked in a clothing shop in central Strängnäs — women's clothes and hats, nothing that had ever caught his interest.

The season's last performance stayed in the body in a different way from the others. When the lights went out and the tent began to empty, everyone knew it was over for the year, and the departure after Hammarö was quieter than usual — as if even the animals sensed that something had gone to rest.

Then it was eastward. Past Örebro, through Eskilstuna, mile after mile rolling by and leaving summer behind. And it was as if every mile carried him closer to something more than a place on the map. A bridge of road and memory: the further east he came, the more clearly his childhood rose up in him. He drove, and he remembered, and he didn't always know where the one ended and the other began.

Now he was on Enköpingsvägen, and the bridge over to Vargholmen was not far off. Soon the water would lie on both sides of him — and on the other side waited what had once been his whole world.

CHAPTER 2

Mum and Dad were already standing in the driveway when Julian rolled into their parking spot. What a hugging fest it became — Mum saying over and over, oh, how we've missed you.

Dad helped him with one of the suitcases, while Mum went ahead and talked almost the whole way in. Once inside the hall he caught the smell. His favourite dish, lasagne, was already out on the kitchen table, waiting.

On the table there was wine, beer and water. Maybe there'd be a glass of wine to go with the good food. Now several hours of talk awaited about everything that had happened these past months — how he'd been getting on, and who was looking after the animals now while he was on holiday.

He was ready for the questions. It was almost as if he had an answer key for what was coming.

What they didn't know, though, was that he was invited to a small party later, with his old childhood friends. But that was in the evening, and there was plenty of time for both talk and rest before then.

Right now he wanted nothing more than to just relax a few hours with his parents.

Dad came in and said the bags were already up in his room — he still had his old boyhood room. “Come and sit down now, so we can eat while it's hot.”

Time went quickly. Before heading out with his friends he needed a moment's rest. The bed was like a magnet and pulled him almost at once down into a deep sleep.

He woke without at first knowing where he was.

A ceiling he hadn't seen in a long time, a moulding he recognised all the same. The light fell in slantwise through the blind, just as it always had, and for a moment he was both man and boy at once — as if the years between them weren't so long after all.

He lay there a while. The room was its old self in the way only old rooms are: smaller than he remembered, but full of things he'd forgotten he'd forgotten. And as his gaze wandered up the wall it stopped at a shelf.

There it stood.

A little wooden giraffe, on four wheels, with a string tied to its nose. The colour had faded, and one ear was worn where a child's hand had once held on too hard. But it had stayed. It had stayed the whole time — while he grew, travelled, became who he became — and waited for him just as it had always waited. Three steps behind.

He didn't get up at once to take it down. He just lay there and looked at it, and something in his chest tightened and slackened, tightened and slackened, like a string one has never quite let go of.

Hugo, that was his name, the giraffe. The toy that had been his very best friend. There were other toys still on the same shelf, but none had ever been such a friend as his beloved Hugo.

Now he had to drag himself up out of bed. A shower, to freshen up and rinse off the dust of the road.

He could take the bike. It wasn't far to Lillgatan – a ten-minute ride at an easy pace.

Lillgatan, with its cobblestones and the row of stones down the middle, was a pleasant neighbourhood. One of his friends lived there, and that was where the party was to be held.

He had to take Mum's old ladies' bike – the only one with air in its tyres. He packed the wrapped bottle of wine and the flowers he'd picked at home, to give to the host. Home-picked flowers feel more personal than a bought bouquet, he thought, and hoped it would make up for the rest.

Once there he put the bike aside and rang the bell. The door was opened by Ludvig's mother. He was rather taken aback. She was dressed up – a black skirt with a small slit, a white, pretty blouse and a pearl necklace that caught the light. Her blonde hair was carefully combed.

She explained that Ludvig had gone to Stockholm and forgotten to say. It felt a little awkward to stand there with a bottle of wine in one hand and a bouquet in the other.

He had time to wonder briefly why she was so dressed up. But the thought passed quickly.

Helene, that was her name, said he could come in anyway. She was alone, and it might be nice to have someone to talk to for a while. Julian felt it was a little strange — but not entirely wrong either. Helene had always been easy to talk to.

And he couldn't help noticing what he'd always noticed: that Helene was beautiful in a quiet way, the kind that has nothing to do with age. It made him a little shy, there in the hall, in a way he hadn't quite expected. He who had never been shy with anyone felt the heat rise in his face.

He asked if she knew where the others had got to, the ones who were supposed to be at the party. But all he got in answer was that the evening had been called off, and that she hadn't heard anything more.

“Take off your coat and come and sit in the living room, and I'll get us something to drink. Is wine all right, or would you rather have something else?”

“Wine's fine,” he said.

She set out glasses and plates, cheeses and grapes, a few kinds of crackers. And now he began to feel a little uneasy — but he pushed it

away. We've talked before, after all, he thought.

There were many questions, which he tried to answer calmly.

That he'd grown so big so fast — how time flew. “I remember you boys running around with your toy animals,” she said. “Yours was the giraffe, Hugo.”

“Yes,” he said, and smiled. “That's a few years ago now.”

“You and Ludvig are the same age — you turn twenty-five this year too, don't you?”

“In November. I think I'm a month or so younger than Ludde.”

“Twenty-five. Then you count as properly grown up.” She smiled to herself. “I was twenty when I had Ludvig. Remember it like yesterday.”

She told him how much you could manage at that age. Dancing on Fridays and Saturdays, sometimes Wednesdays too — it all depended on which dance band was playing at Danspalatset.

“But make sure you eat something. And we really must toast — to a pleasant evening. You'll stay a while, won't you?”

“I'd like that,” he said.

“How nice. One gets a bit of company in the house then.” She topped up the glasses. “I don't often bring out wine any more. And less often still do I have a pleasant fellow to talk to. Like you, Julian.”

“But you must tell me about your work at the circus. I'm so curious — what it's like, where you live when you're out on the road.”

And Julian told her, about what he loved so much. That he lived in a caravan. That the whole company was like one big family — they had their own cook, someone who handled the finances and bookings, all like a business but on wheels. “And you know I've always been fond of animals,” he said. “They're the ones I look after, together with a colleague.”

That the colleague was the one he shared the caravan with, he said nothing about.

He talked, and the time simply went. Helene sat listening intently, slipping in a question now and then. Nearly an hour vanished almost without a break.

“Julian, would you like another glass? I'm going to have one anyway.”

She filled his glass too. More wine might be a mistake, he thought. But he said nothing, and let her pour.

They stayed on the sofa, closer to each other now than when the evening began, without either of them quite deciding it. The conversation had grown slower, the silences longer — but it wasn't the uncomfortable kind of silence. It was the other kind, the kind that says more than words.

Helene set down her glass. She looked at him, a moment too long, in a way a twenty-five-year-old doesn't misread however hard he tries.

“You've turned into a fine man, Julian,” she said softly. “You do know that, don't you?”

He didn't know what to answer, so he said nothing. The heat in his face was back, stronger now.

She reached out and laid her hand over his, where it rested on the sofa. Just that. A hand over a hand. But it stayed, and he didn't pull his away.

The room was utterly quiet. Somewhere far off a car went by, and then nothing.

Helene rose slowly and stood before him. She held out her hand to his — not as a question, more as an answer to something already said without words.

Julian looked up at her. And after a moment that felt longer than it was, he took it.

She led him away from the sofa, through the house, without a word. He followed. The string was slack now — neither pulled at the other. They moved at the same pace, as if it were already decided.

In the dimmer light at the far end she turned to him. She was sure in a way he wasn't, and it was she who took the step, as she had all evening — a hand against his chest, fingers resting over a heart beating far too fast.

“Don't be nervous,” she said quietly. “Tonight there's only us.”

All the way it was she who led, with a calm certainty he'd never met before. No hurry, no hesitation — as if she knew exactly what she wanted and had all the time in the world to get there. He let himself be led. For once it was someone else holding the reins, and he felt everything tense in him slowly give way.

She took her time. Began with him — unbuttoned his shirt, one button at a time, let her fingertips follow the edge of the cloth, near enough that he felt their warmth against his skin before they even touched him. He stood still and let it happen, undressed at her own calm pace until there was nothing left to hide behind.

And then she kissed him. First at the throat, where the pulse beat too fast, then up along the jaw, slowly, and at last on the mouth — a kiss without hurry, deep and warm, as if she had the whole night and meant to use it. He felt the last of his hesitation give way beneath it, felt something hot draw through him and leave him breathless.

Only then was it her turn. The blouse, one button at a time, and then she let it fall. Stepped out of the skirt with the same calm. Then the bra, which she let slip off without hurry, aware of his gaze but untroubled by it — a woman at ease in her own body. He couldn't help looking at her. She was beautiful, in the way that makes a man lose the thread of a thought. Only the pearl necklace was left, pale against her skin.

The light from the street lamp outside fell in between the slats of the blind and laid thin stripes over them both.

Her hands were warm and sure. She touched him the way one touches something one is in no hurry with, drew him down onto the bed with her, skin against skin. He felt her breath against his throat, the scent of her — wine and something floral and something that was only her. Each time he wanted to hurry she stopped him gently, with a hand, a whisper, until he understood that wasn't where they were going — not yet. The waiting itself became almost unbearable, and that was exactly what she wanted: for him to feel every moment instead of rushing past it. There was no hurry. There was only this.

He closed his eyes and stopped thinking. Let her set the pace, let the hour grow long, let the world outside the window shrink to nothing. And when at last it could no longer be held back it was she who showed the way even there — just as calm, just as sure — until everything dissolved and he no longer knew where he ended and she began.

Afterwards they lay quiet. He looked up at the ceiling and listened to her breathing beside him, how it slowly settled. And he felt something he couldn't quite name — as if he'd become both lighter and heavier at once.

“Now we sleep, Julian,” she said at last, her voice already heavy with sleep. “You can stay. Ludvig won't be home for three days.”

And he stayed.

The morning after

Julian woke to the smell of coffee. From somewhere in the kitchen came the scent of something freshly baked too — she had made scones. How and when had she managed it, he thought, and lay there a while listening to the sounds of her out there, as if the house already knew how it was to be.

Helene came into the room in her dressing gown to wake him, but saw that he was already lying awake. She leaned down, gave him a hug.

“Good morning, my young lover,” she said, and kissed him.

“Now we'll have breakfast,” she said. “Come.”

Breakfast was laid out in the kitchen — coffee, fresh scones, butter and marmalade, juice in a cold jug. She had made it nice, as if it mattered that it was him, of all people, who was to eat it.

They made small talk about nothing in particular. About the weather that promised to turn warm, about the scone recipe she'd had since Ludvig was little, about the circus and the odd hours you get used to. It was easy between them now, in a way it hadn't been the evening before — as if the night had loosened something and left only the simple behind. He noticed he was laughing, really and freely, for the first time in a long while.

Helene looked at him over her coffee cup. There was something in her gaze, the same calm certainty as the evening before.

“We do have a few hours,” she said, and smiled. “Ludvig won't be coming home.”

She rose, held out her hand — the same gesture as the evening before, the same silent answer to something that needn't be asked. But this time it was he who drew her close.

Something had shifted over the night. He hesitated no longer, and when they came into the

bedroom, where the morning light fell softly through the blind, it was he who led. Calmly, without hurry — with the same sure hands that had always known where they belonged, whether against a skittish animal or against her. He let her feel what it was to be led for once, not to have to hold on to anything at all.

And Helene, who the evening before had decided every step, smiled and let him. Gave herself over, as calmly as she had once taken the lead.

For her it was something she hadn't felt in a very long time. She let her eyes close and thought she ought to stay here, just feel, not think. That she ought to say something about how it was — but the words weren't enough, and perhaps that was just as well.

What she couldn't guard herself against, though, was the thought that crept in amid all the good: how would she manage without him afterwards? Without this young man who had come into her empty house one evening and filled it with something she'd forgotten she missed. In three days Ludvig would come. And long before that Julian would be on his way

somewhere else.

She pushed the thought away. Right now he was here. Right now that was enough.

Outside the window Strängnäs woke to a new day, and somewhere out there, three days off, Ludvig was already on his way home.

CHAPTER 3

Julian took a quick shower and cycled home to fetch the car. A trip together to Sundbyholm — a place he was very fond of.

He had already planned to treat Helene to dinner at the castle. Seared pike-perch from Lake Mälaren with poached red onions, herb-tossed green peas, parsnip purée and dill butter sauce. To sit down and eat in that setting was utterly lovely.

They agreed he'd come in half an hour. He was a little foolishly excited. Now he just had to take it easy on the bike — getting sweaty and needing another shower would be madness.

Back home he popped in and said hello to his mum and dad, and told a little white lie: that he was going to Sundbyholm. Which was true — but

not with Ludvig, as he let them believe.

Now back to Lillgatan, where Helene stood waiting for him just as planned.

The surprise — that they'd be dining at the castle — had to wait a little. For now it was mostly small talk in the car, about how everything had unfolded, and Julian was happy to the core.

The drive would take half an hour or so. He wanted to tell her so much — and he could feel that Helene sat calm beside him and was enjoying it too.

So he began to talk. About the circus first — about the mornings with the horses, the smell of sawdust and coffee, how a whole company can become a kind of family even though it lives on wheels. About the strangeness of never really having an address, and yet always feeling at home as long as the animals were near.

And then, without quite noticing, he slid into things he rarely told anyone. About Hugo — the wooden giraffe that had stood on the shelf all these years, that had waited for him just as he'd left it. About how as a little boy he'd pulled it behind him on a string and talked to it like a

friend. Helene smiled, for she remembered the boy, but she never interrupted him. She just listened, and perhaps that was why he told her more than he'd meant to.

He heard himself saying things he'd never said out loud before. And she let him, calmly, her eyes sometimes on the road, sometimes on him.

Helene listened to him, and smiled in the right places, but part of her was somewhere else.

She thought she ought to say something. That she ought to remind him, and herself, of what this actually was — a young man, half her life young, and her own son's friend. That there were words for a woman who did such things, and none of them were kind. That in a few days Julian would vanish back out onto the roads, and she'd be left alone in the quiet house, with her rooms and her routines and her evenings that all resembled one another.

But then she looked at him — the way he told her about his wooden giraffe with his whole face, open in a way grown men rarely are — and the words somehow wouldn't come. For the first time in a long while she felt seen. Not as Ludvig's mother, not as the woman in the house on

Lillgatan, but simply as Helene. And it was hard to want to put an end to something that felt like that.

So she pushed the thoughts away, just as she had that morning. She decided not to decide anything at all. To let the day be what it was, and pay for it later if she had to.

Before he knew it they turned off toward Sundbyholm.

The castle rose before them, still in the afternoon light, with Lake Mälaren gleaming behind. Julian glanced at her to see if she understood where they were headed.

“We're not going to...” she began.

“Yes,” he said, and couldn't hold back the smile. “Dinner. At the castle. I've already booked.”

They had parked the car and gone in, and now they sat at the table with Lake Mälaren outside the window and the food before them. Seared pike-perch, poached red onions, a dill butter sauce that made him close his eyes for a moment. Everything was just as beautiful as he'd hoped — the castle, the light over the water, her across from him.

Helene ate slowly and let her gaze rest on him between bites. She thought that she didn't want this to end. Not tonight, not in a few days, not at all. And at the same time she knew that it must — that he would travel on, that life would take over. So she made a quiet pact with herself, one she didn't intend to tell him: that perhaps they could see each other now and then, when he was in the area, no promises, no demands. Just sometimes. It would have to be enough. She would let it be enough.

There was something between them at the table that couldn't be mistaken. A hand that almost reached across the cloth before drawing back. A look that lingered a touch too long. Both of them felt it — the urge to just lean over and touch the other, to be close the way they had been the night before. But here, among white tablecloths and other guests, they had to hold it back. And perhaps that only made the longing greater, that not being allowed, that waiting.

Julian met her gaze and smiled. Neither of them said anything. They didn't need to.

After the meal they walked out toward the point a little beyond the bathing beach, still

making small talk about all sorts of things. He'd known for a long time that there was a bench at the very end — a fine place to just sit and breathe in a little nature.

Julian wanted to ask how they could go on seeing each other. He never said it out loud; it became more a thought he carried with him as they walked. He wished it could go on forever — and at the same time he knew how foolish it sounded, for it was only day two. He had fallen foolishly in love with an older woman. With his friend Ludvig's mother.

It was Helene who finally broke the silence.

“You're out travelling the whole season,” she said, lightly, as if she'd been thinking about it for a while. “I could come and visit now and then, when you're playing somewhere nearby.”

Julian looked at her, and something lifted in his chest.

“But not in the camp,” she added, with a small smile. “I'll book a hotel. A room of my own, where we can be in peace. I'm too old to sleep in a caravan among circus folk.”

He laughed, but he understood. She wanted to come to him — but on her own terms, at her own

pace, with a door that could be closed.

The walk back was a completely different one from the walk out. Now there was something to look forward to, something that didn't end with tomorrow. It would be no trouble to meet. It wasn't "forever," not what he'd dreamed of deep down — but it was a yes. And right now that yes felt like more than enough.

And a weight lifted from his heart. He was free, after all — what had happened in the caravan that last night was just that, a last night, no beginning of anything. No one was waiting for him back at the camp. At least that was what he told himself, because it made everything so much easier just now.

He asked if they should get an ice cream before getting in the car. But Helene said she couldn't fit in any more.

"You have one," she said, "and we'll sit on the bench by the boats."

"No, I'm fine," said Julian. "Let's head home toward Strängnäs again."

Once there, Helene said he could put the car in a particular spot and come after her shortly. The evening lay open before them — they'd have

each other once more.

Julian took stock of himself, and noticed he was rather tired. He quietly hoped the night would mostly be about rest. Or.

A voice called his name, softly. “Julian?” Oh — he'd fallen asleep on the sofa.

Day number two, and he'd dropped off at once. But it was also the first days of his holiday, and there'd been a lot of work with all the animals lately. Helene understood that he needed to get to bed, not sit slumped asleep on the sofa.

So in to see to what needed seeing to, and then down into bed instead. They lay a while and talked, cuddled a little, before they had both fallen asleep.

They had one more day together. In the morning they talked about maybe taking a trip to Strömsholm.