

Anne Leinonen: WHITE THREADS

An extract

(Translation by Liisa Rantalaiho)

Helena

- And how are you today? A female voice is asking.

The bottom sheet feels rough against bare skin and the quilt tangles around my legs like a snake. I blink my eyes open and the first thing I see is a grey plastic table. I'm in my own room again, at home. But there's something strange in the bedroom, however, especially the yellow walls, I've never liked the colour yellow.

I turn on my side and stare at the floor. A plastic mat. My head is humming, I know I've slept badly though I cannot remember what dreams I saw. Or perhaps I'm no longer capable of seeing dreams.

- I'll bring you something to eat in a moment, the voice continues and the microphone snaps off.

I sit up; the floor sends cold thrills against my bare toes. It would be easier to stay and sleep the innocent sleep of the unaware but I've got to wake up. I force myself to stand up on my feet, and they carry me to the toilet, staggering. From the mirror the eyes of a middle-aged woman with dark circles underneath them stare back at me. With my hand I brush at the grey ends of the hairs on my temple.

I am Helena. Helena García Luna. I taste the words in my mouth until I feel sure that is my correct name. My memory does not deceive me, then. Not this time.

I open the mirrored cupboard and search a moment among the rows of hair spray bottles and cotton wool tops until I find the toothbrush and tube of toothpaste in a mug. I hold the objects in my hand and for a while I do not know what to do with them. They feel strange, alien, unknown beings that demand something from me. Then I squirt some paste in my mouth and my hands start to move the brush, they remember better than my head what needs to be done. Body memory. The memory of a touch. A soft feeling on my arm, something soft, warm, I miss something beside me that I'm not able to define. The rush of water covers my sobbing. I do not want them to notice I'm different today.

- Who's them? I whisper to myself, and the answers are immediately there for me. My guardians. They do not need to know that Helena is able to think again, that Helena remembers who she is.

I manage to rinse my mouth, but then I need to sit down for a while on the toilet seat and hold my throbbing head. I have to gasp for breath, each inhalation goes hard and when I breathe out I hardly know whether my lungs will be able to take in any more air.

There's something very wrong with me, that's why they have to watch my every movement. And at the same time I know that it's horribly wrong to be watched, it makes me weak and ill. Fear cramps the pit of my stomach, I turn to the toilet and try to vomit but nothing comes up.

I stumble to the kitchen and take a look at my surroundings. The big green door leads out; I know there's a long corridor outside with doors on both sides. A long downstairs lobby with plants, and behind the glass, outside air. But I'm not going out, not yet.

On the other wall there's a blue door, I open it and see a row of shirts and two-piece costumes on hangers. It's inordinately tidy in the kitchen, as if the room had just been cleaned. Inside the kitchen cupboards there's a coffee set for four persons, a couple of plates and a drinking glass.

From the window one can see a balcony with a stone balustrade, tiled roofs on high houses, television antennas, a bit of a mountain and the mute sky. The wind is waving the tree branches rhythmically. I cannot see to the streets waiting down there, but from somewhere I hear a woman speaking as she greets a passer-by: A good day to you, señor, how are you? Very well, thank you señora, I think I'll go and drop in at the butcher's before siesta.

I sit down by the kitchen table. A couple of books that haven't been worn down to dog-ears. I pile of standard writing paper, with writing on them, series of numbers, mathematical formulae. I take up the papers and look more carefully at the first one: the travelling salesman's problem with twenty-five cities, a list of localities with distances and travelling times between them. My head starts to swarm with series of numbers and answers, but I thrust them aside, I don't want to compute, not now.

There's a calendar on the refrigerator door with no year or any handwritten notes, as if my everyday life were one empty sheet: it has days but the days have no meaning. I remember that when I turned forty, I sold my house on the seaside and moved to an apartment house in the old city centre. I used to have a job taking care of animals as a veterinarian's assistant. But I'm not working any more, something has happened to me that makes it impossible for me to be among other people any longer.

But I still miss the sea smell, the rush of waves and the rough sand. I used to walk down on the beach in the evenings, when the fishers were setting up their seats and their long rods on the mole. Then, again I understand that the scenes of my childhood are somewhere far away in the past, and just as unreachable as a miniature ship built inside a bottle.

I remember things that are far away but cannot remember yesterday or the days before that. Not even weeks, only the indistinct feeling that my life has changed.

The door clicks. I take a few steps back until I feel the table behind my back. After a torturous waiting the door opens and a woman comes in carrying a tray. She has dark, short cut hair and a white coat, and she looks me cheerfully in the eyes. There is a nametag on her lapel: Rodriguez.

- What day is it today? I ask carefully.
- Tuesday, the woman answers and sets the tray on the table.
- Really? September?

The woman looks patient, but at the same time as if my questions irritated her, anyway. And when I think about it, I really cannot say what difference the weekdays or even months would make. If I do not remember, time has no meaning, either.

The woman sets the tray on the kitchen table; I smell boiled egg and fresh bread. She turns around to look at me.

- Take it easy, there's nothing to worry about.
- I know, I say, and I really do know that the woman doesn't want me any harm.
- Just call me Mireia.

She has a face one can trust. At least she doesn't want to harm me, I'm in no immediate danger; my life is not threatened. And yet I feel awkward. An unpleasant foreboding comes welling up inside me, from some earlier experience that's imprinted in my body memory.

And then I remember the source of the touch. A cat's deep green eyes flash in my mind and her gaze bores directly inside me. She is my only true friend here. She doesn't lie. She doesn't try to profit from me; she protects me from all dangers, instead. I need to find her quickly. But how?

- Do you know where you are? Mireia asks.
- I a hospital.
- Why?
- Because I forget things.

Mireia turns around in my apartment, and my thought circles around one single thing. I have a request for her, but I do not know how I ought to present it. I'm not sure of what my position is, whether I'm an easy or a difficult patient. I'm troubled with the idea that there are a lot of things I'd never be allowed to have.

- I'd like to have a cat, I tell her.

- A cat, Mireia says and a certain expression comes to her face. – Don't you ever remember?

- Just a little kitten.

- Of course you don't, she says and her voice holds her anger in check. – But this is something new. I can ask, of course, but it's hardly going to happen.

She glances at the papers on the table but doesn't pick them up. The door lock clicks shut after her.

I lift the cover off the tray and notice a tabloid folded underneath the plate and mug. I pick it up without checking the date, since I after all do not want to know about the passing of time while I've been ill. I open the centre page and see a news item about an accident near the Tibidabo amusement park. A child ran after a ball, directly to the street and under a car, he flew some ten meters in the air but fell softly on a terrace awning. The cloth checked the hit and they found only bruises on the child, though he ought to have died from the collision alone.

The news means something; otherwise it wouldn't have come to me.

I lie down on my bed and keep staring through the window at the sky that already has started to darken. *We have to leave soon.*

Mireia

I walked to the personnel coffee room and poured a full mug of the coffee the boys had made. Between the coke bottles, empty pizza boxes and computers I found some vacant space where I set my cup and sat down on my arse. My feet were hurting; I ought to buy a new and better pair of sandals.

Behind the glass there were big black cupboards where videotapes kept running and recording the lives of Helena and the boy. The cupboards were locked, only Salvatore had the key. We were not allowed to study the tapes before Helena crashed.

No one stood up for Helena's rights and that made me sick. I had started to feel it was my duty to defend her. But how would I do that? One couldn't even talk with Helena about what she really wanted of her life and fate. Helena only kept talking about cats. Maybe she'd seen the Institute's phantom cat; she talked about cats so often. Or else Helena was remembering her occupation; she just loved animals so much she lived more in their world than in the human world.

I was fed up to my ears with the same pattern repeating from week to week. We had tried all manner of things. We let Helena stay in her room alone and recover, without any disturbance. We tried to understand her panic, we treated her gently, without any irritations; and then again, bored with tactfulness, we forced her to start with a situation where she had to try to explain what had happened to her.

After each episode Helena was as helpless as a newborn, but she adapted to her environment with an amazing speed. She drew herself back to a normal state in a couple of hours. The fun just didn't last long. Rise and fall followed each other in a rhythm of two, three days. At the longest, she lasted five days, at the worst, the cycle run through in twenty-four hours. But the end result was inevitable. She always crashed.

- What's up?

Manuel appeared behind my back and hugged my shoulders. He was a novice recruited by the university, an eager young fellow working in the laboratory.

- Fortunately I'm not on duty tomorrow.

- Helena, is it? Is it that serious?

Manuel sat on the other chair and lifted his feet on the table in a relaxed manner. I had made the same complaint to Manuel before, but no one seemed to be bothered by Helena's fate.

- I suppose you've tried to tell her what's going to happen? Manuel asked.

- It's no help. To begin with, she doesn't believe it, and even if you could convince her she'll still run away somewhere, stubbornly. We haven't yet found out what drives her.

He kept nodding. He was always very polite with me, because he knew I was related to Señor Cañedo, the director of the Institute. That relationship, however, had not profited me as much as many people thought. I got an assistantship but otherwise I enjoyed no privileges. I wasn't even invited to the director's society parties where the university bigwigs lobbied their research to the sponsors.

- And she's been here now ... what, four months? Manuel asked.

- Just about.

- Basically she seems quite sane.

- She must be suffering dreadfully since she always wants to get away.

Helena was first found drifting on the streets, and was taken in custody by the city social welfare office. Nobody had reported her missing, as she had no family or close relatives to miss her. She had quit her job just before she was taken ill, so at her workplace they hadn't suspected that anything was wrong, either. We found her by the regular screening, when we were searching for eventual oscillators from institutions and hospitals.

- Helena's condition is no better, then.

I shook my head. - It must be because of her illness, we've found no other explanation. She's not able to control the oscillation. She instinctively starts to oscillate and always crashes with the same results.

- But she is clearly talented, too?

I nodded. - Just wait till she starts again to solve the computing problems we've left on her table. Last week she deciphered the travelling salesman's problem with fifteen cities. You would need a supercomputer to do that. If she didn't have that defect in her brain, who knows but what she might accomplish.

I couldn't help it; my attitude toward the patients was awe. In a sense they were omnipotent; in the medieval times their deeds were the stuff of ballades, or they were burned at the stake. I'd even wondered why no military idiot had yet come to the university and demanded Helena for their experiments. But most likely the oscillators were able to keep such probabilities far away from their life. And fortunately, life wasn't a movie.

- The team has already given up, I clarified. - Except Salvatore who still wants to study her case. But then Salvatore is new.

- He's ambitious. If he could prove something he'd be able to get funding...

Salvatore's predecessor had suddenly quit a month ago; they said he'd won a big sum in the Euro-lottery. Salvatore had been only two weeks in the house and he already expected to be able to find something the Institute's veterans hadn't yet explained. Salvatore thought Helena a freak who ought to be cut into thin slices if necessary to get answers.

Salvatore's predecessor had experimented with tighter control; but irritating the oscillators just led to trouble. Helena had been tied fast in her hospital bed, but even that had not kept her back. If the oscillators were allowed to live as they wanted and

research was only done in the laboratory with machines, nothing weird happened to anybody. But who'd have listened to me.

Everybody except Salvatore was tired with Helena. She was really of no benefit to the research at all. At the most, there was the fun of the boys betting at what stage she'd escape her room again. It was very difficult to define the exact moment, since even our most sensitive movement control devices were unable to control her movements. That's why they sometimes bet on the moment the cameras would stop working.

- But you must be excited about that little boy, anyway? Manuel continued.

I sat up straighter. – He has developed enormously, but he's not yet old enough to understand what it's about. Salvatore dares not leave him alone even for a moment, so that his abilities wouldn't develop too far. His parents visit him almost daily.

-I guess they must be shocked.

I shrugged. – They consider it a religious miracle.

- It would be fantastic to get to know him.

The incident had even made the news. In the countryside, they'd found a five-year-old boy who was able to perform miracles. Various small things had happened in the boy's family; a fire started by the gas stove had gone off by itself, and a huge crowd of butterflies had appeared inside the house whenever there was nobody else to watch. Then once it happened that the parents had woken up in the middle of the night because of awful screams downstairs. They found their sleepy son standing on the kitchen floor, and outside the backdoor, a burglar bawling of pain, one of his hands melted fast with the door handle. The miracle was so obvious and public that it interested the media only for a week, after all, and the whole matter was accepted as just a tall tale. We were able to contact the family in peace and quiet and convince them of the importance of research. The parents were so hysterical they were happy to resort to the Institute. Anything, to cure the boy.

Manuel chuckled. – We haven't achieved any results yet, either, but we've invented new approaches.

- I've heard of it.

- Next, we are going to try blind testing with a comparison group. Everyone will try to affect the random series of numbers the computer will generate.

The lab boys liked to boast of their plans. Manuel, too, always tried to make an impression on me, since he was one of the lucky ones to be chosen a test person. He let them pump various stimulating substances in his body, and afterwards sat for hours in a closed room observing whether there'd be any changes in him. I wasn't impressed by experimental research and their boasts about it – it was sheer madness to strive to oscillate. I had looked at Helena long enough to know oscillation wasn't meant for humans. When I'd spoken about my doubts, they just told me Helena's condition was an exception.

When Helena crashed she forgot everything. The boy was quite all right, as long as he stayed inside the Institute and close to the restrictor. And if he crashed, he always remained aware of his special abilities. Helena's problem was caused purely by some memory disturbance, possibly an early stage of hereditary Alzheimer's disease that nibbled at her brain piece by piece and made her forget what she ought or ought not to do.

I shied off from speaking aloud about my doubts. I believed Helena's and the boy's condition was artificially impossible to replicate. Oscillation is a mutation only one person in a hundred million carries, and it certainly couldn't be achieved by experimental research. But even in that, there's the damn probability, and probabilities are dangerous.

- Well, see you again, said Manuel. He disappeared in the long corridor that led to the multiple security doors and from there to the rooms of the scientists.

We all fumbled in the same darkness trying to find a light switch, and maybe the house had no electricity, even. And being blind, we shouldn't even be trying. We hardly knew in what kind of a bush we were sticking our head, and yet we just had to stick the head in the bush. But perhaps I shouldn't always have doubted, after all, I was paid to study the reports of the experimenters and to try to see some logic in them.

Helena

I look again at the furniture in my room and its details. The cameras have been skilfully planted in the corners, they are small but easy to find. Maybe they haven't even tried to hide them, just made them as unnoticeable as possible so I wouldn't be disturbed and worried.

I don't want to have an anxiety attack, although that's ridiculous, too; who's there to be hurt even if I cry. But some ways have been engraved in my spine as the only proper ways to behave, and a memory from my childhood surges up to pester my mind. I'm in a bus, travelling to my aunt in the mountains; I desperately want to pee but I dare not go and ask the driver to stop. I dare not, for I've been taught that it simply is not done. Finally I leak under myself and my skirt gets thoroughly wet. I only cry after I've run off the bus, when nobody can see me.

They ask me a lot questions. Do I remember what happened before I was brought here? Sure, I was working, quite normally. What about my giving notice, when did that happen? In my old life, when I was working in the veterinarian's practice. So I do remember the practice? Of course, I specialized in the care of small pets, guinea pigs, mice, but also the more ordinary pets like dogs and cats. Did anything special happen there? I can't say, what are you actually looking for with those questions of yours? Did I feel myself somehow different from others?

I realize I'm now in the condition they call my clear moment. And when I have my clear moment, I'm something more. I'm able to do things that are impossible for them. If I want to enjoy my power, I have to hurry, but whereto would I fly? Is this instinctive feeling of mine enough, that even if I'm in no danger, I still have to leave, as quickly as possible?

And how do I escape?

Mireia

The night shift was informed of the current research situation and of whether any problems were expected. That went with the terrain, of course: unexpected results, unforeseen expenses, and decisions that got stuck in the wheels of the university bureaucracy. The temptation to falsify research results was great. Presented on paper, the results sounded so unbelievable they made the sponsors keen to follow the situation on the spot.

I took leave of my colleagues and went in the dressing room to change. I skipped the shower; I could wash at home before going to bed to watch the TV.

At first, I noticed the bowl on the floor. It was filled to the brim with dry cat food, somebody's joke, obviously. Then I saw the cat. She stood at the end of the corridor and stared at me, her tail bristled up. I stopped on my tracks, careful to make no sudden move. Cautiously I tried to shuffle closer, at the same time puss-pussing at the cat.

I'd never got close enough to touch the cat and now, too, she flung herself behind the corner. I took a few running steps after her, but to no avail. Once again the ghost of our Institute had gone her way.

I took up my bag, signed myself out and closed both the sliding doors and the courtyard gate behind me. I had fastened my bicycle with its shopping basket firmly on the fence. I'd already started to struggle with its cranky lock, but on a moment's impulse, left the bicycle leaning on the railing. For once, I could walk home, it was only a couple of kilometres anyway and the evening was clear. Even the full moon had climbed on the sky.

The cat shouldn't have been in the building at all. Señor Cañedo had, of course, accused one of us of keeping an illicit pet in public premises, but I don't think anybody had smuggled her in. Who knows but that Cañedo had brought her himself? Or else she really was just an accidental stray cat that had found an open window (unlikely) and noticed an open door to the inner research premises (quite unlikely), and made her way to the apparatus past all security systems (impossible). When the morning shift had arrived, they'd found the cat lying among the equipment. The cat had been approached with extreme care. Even if the restrictor under construction was safe and its radiation not dangerous, the cat might harm the sensors. Sleepily the cat had turned to look at the arrivals, and just in the moment when she was going to be caught by the researchers she had vanished without a trace.

They boys named the cat Schrödinger, after the scientist who in his imaginary experiment had put a cat in a box with a death machine. In the thought experiment the cat was simultaneously both alive and dead, until an observer opened the box and verified what had happened to the animal. The point was that the wave function of every particle oscillated, and it crashed to a certain position in the very moment it was observed. Quantum theories had for a long time been just that, theory, with its ridiculous inherent contradictions and impossibilities; but we'd got hold of the things the theory was speaking about. We had found people who were capable of controlling the particle-waves, of transporting particles into a superposition state, and of choosing the probability they wanted among several branching possibilities.

The cat was the only animal in our knowledge that was able to oscillate. But it was impossible to test her, and to observe what happened in her brain. When you caught her and started to connect her into the research apparatus, she slipped out of your hands and disappeared either behind the bookcases or literally dashed through the wall. Like the imaginary cat in the Schrödinger experiment, our stray simultaneously both was and was not there, but you could never know where and what she was doing.

It was scary to think about what the cat might be able to do. If she could pass through a wall, she could also instantaneously jump through a person. So far she had, fortunately, been content to just disappear and reappear as she liked. There were employees who hadn't seen her even once, and there were people to whom the cat repeatedly showed herself. I'd seen so many miracles in the Institute that I believed the cat to be real and no delusion. The matter need not even be anything kind of lofty and systematic, perhaps the cat was just playing cat-chess: she wanted to see every one else, but no one was allowed to see her. Perhaps that was why she was such a damn good oscillator.

My steps had taken me to my home alley almost without my notice. I glanced at the wine bar in the corner; the first customers were there already, enjoying the evening and good company. I went through the lower gate to the inner courtyard and closed the gate behind me.

My life was like a sordid replica of Helena's situation. I lived alone, imprisoned by my recurring rhythm; after a day off I always returned to my research room. The only difference was that I remembered every day and that, if anything, was painful, to remember one's own loneliness. But that was my own conscious choice anyway; at least that was how I justified myself. I did not care about other people and their company. I'd tried dating, but living together had proved impossible. I was irritated by the other's different rhythm of life, by the clothes left on the floor, by the blue cheese in the fridge and by the closed bathroom door when I wanted a shower. When you lived alone, you could be the mistress of your own life. Or at least imagine that you were.

I made a cup of hot tea and stretched out on the couch for a while. There was a re-run of a popular quiz on the TV, but I couldn't care less about it. I turned the lights off and climbed upstairs to sleep.

I laid my head on the pillow but couldn't get to sleep. At this hour the environment was still in full sway. The woman next door was nagging her husband to fix the washing machine, a TV bawled aloud and a cricket kept squeaking irksomely right next to my window.

Maybe I ought to do something about my loneliness.

Helena

I can't get to sleep; little ants of thoughts are darting to and fro in my head. I have these clear moments and I never understand enough to hide or conceal them in time from other people. It might even be that I have nothing more to hide, that they already know everything about me and just want to verify one of their theories. Who's to know. I'm a feather drifting in the room's air, swaying to and fro but finally ending down on the floor. I can't escape, because I'm too airy even to fly away on the wind, I just idle.

And yet I'd like to have at least a small private moment for myself, when I could be myself with dignity, without anybody's watchful gaze observing me. I do not like to be watched. I want to walk among people without anybody seeing me.

I just stare at the ceiling, at the forms of twilight and the darkness oozing in from the window. The night wind waves the curtains, but it's still broodingly hot: there's going to be a thunderstorm at the sea tonight.

The apprehension inside me grows moment by moment, it seethes and swells.

What will happen if I somehow get out of the door? How do I? And the answers start to roll open in my mind like a bundle of threads with several different coloured bits. Many of them are dark but there are some white ones among them. I just have to hide all the dark threads and concentrate on the white ones, and the door will open.

But I have to be extremely careful. I'm in danger. I can get out of the door, but never out of the building, unless I carry some protection with me. I'm not able to avoid all those webs and strands necessarily interwoven with me, the thoughts of others and the invisible encounters, not unless I protect myself from their crossfire.

And for that I absolutely need the cat, and she immediately appears close by and jumps at my calf. She's my grey-furred friend, the disabused foundling whose bruises I treated at the clinic. I laugh of happiness and lift her up in my arms, and she stares past me with complete indifference. But she's there, anyway, as my safeguard.

I stroke the cat's head, she pushes at my cheek and her moustache sweeps my skin. *Hurry no time for hello. Must get away.* Yes, but how? The door is definitely locked and the patio window is so small there's no room for me to sneak out through it.

What would be the easiest way to get out of the house? How would I get the door open? The cat stares at me as if waiting for something. Then I just decide to try the door; perhaps the nurse has forgotten to lock it. The white threads. Thin, silky strands. I tremble with eagerness, for now at last I'm strong enough to make an effort.

- Let's go, I tell the cat and snatch a coat off the rack and put it over my simple housedress.

I catch the handle in my hand. I pull at the door and it isn't locked. The locking system is obviously playing up and the doors are open for the moment. There is no one in the corridor, but at any time somebody might open a door and rush into the corridor, in front of me, and then I'd have to go back to my room and they might harm me.

Go they not see us. The cat suddenly makes me bold; she radiates power there in my arms. I feel light, I know no one will come, no one will see me, I just need to walk out of this building and go wherever I want. I walk the way the white threads show me and let them lead me on.

I hurry to the lift, and from afar I see a white-coated man approaching in the opposite direction along the corridor, but he turns a corner just in time and never notices me. That's how easy it is. Lift downstairs, through several other doors. Elation dances to my pulse inside me.

The gate, inner courtyard, outer gate. Movement sensors and alarms, but they are blind and mute, all of them. I laugh at them.

Immediately outside the building the situation changes. Out here, there are so many criss-crossing thoughts, feelings and people who may sense me. I turn to look ... there is something in the house that has protected me. The cat lifts her head and sniffs at the environment. *Machine do not worry I protect.*

There's an old bicycle in front of the gate, with a lock even, but that opens easily and falls down in bits and pieces. Someone's been trying to snatch the bike and has broken the lock already, but has been disrupted in the middle of it. I put the cat in the shopping basket, get on the bike and tread on the pedal.

I drive along the winding streets, through an overflow passage, and walk the bike directly to the water's edge. I sit on the sand, to think. The sea beats at my toes. Lightning embroiders the sky but everything's silent; the thunder stays far off over the sea. The lights of a luxury cruiser are visible somewhere far away. The cat sits on the sand looking important and scratches the ground with her forepaws. She sits down to lick herself, before she steps up beside me. *We go.*

I lift her up in my arms and walk along the shoreline. I approach the city by the wharf; the area is full of empty wooden boxes abandoned by the fishmongers,

overflowing thrash cans left behind by the sunbathers, garbage bags deposited on the streets and hungry stray cats circling the refuse.

Hurry this area marked.

- All right, let's find more information somewhere.

People stagger along on the streets but they all walk by me, ignoring both the cat and me. I wipe the sweat from my brow and drift to the door of a small café; and without noticing it, I'm inside. A man with black moustache is wiping a table with a piece of cloth and spits on it before he lifts the ashtray up and wipes the surface once more. I sit at the corner table by the toilets. Somebody has forgotten a newspaper and a cup of cocoa on the table. I put the cat down on the opposite chair; she licks her paw and stops for a while to stare ahead.

I stir the drink with the spoon and sip the first mouthful. It's hot and burns my mouth but that eases quickly. I'm hungry and I snatch a croissant from the neighbouring table.

No time for play must find.

- Yes, yes, I say aloud.

I pick up the afternoon paper and flip through its pages until I find the announcements. Wanted. On sale. To be given away. There they are. Several pets. I quickly check on who wants to give away mongrel cats. All the names feel equally unfamiliar. No intuition to help me on.

Search trust us.

- All right.

I lift my eyes to the opposite wall and punch my finger randomly at the newspaper. Then I peek at what my forefinger has covered. An announcement from a lady who wants to give up her cat because of allergy. No mention of the cat's age, but perhaps the kitten is just the right age. The place is close to the Tibidado amusement park, where that little boy was saved when he was run over by a car.

The cat jumps into my arms, pushes at my face and wipes her mouth on my cheeks so hard that her chin hits mine, sharply. I startle. Now and then the cat seems deaf; I think that's because she's muffling all the sounds around herself – she likes to enjoy peace and quiet.

I step out on the street. Imperceptibly, night has turned to morning. I walk to the bus stop by the park and bus number 435 comes, well timed. I enter from the back door and entrench myself in the rear corner. The early birds load themselves in, but the bus fills from the front on. I'm left to sit alone.

They must already be feverishly looking for me, but they cannot find me yet. I jump off the bus, walk up a steep street, and everything has become crystal clear. A little blue tram is creaking down the street, its maw filled with tourists peering out from the windows. It's exotic, the city's only working tram.

The cat stretches, fretful. She doesn't want to crash, either, because she knows how miserable it feels to crash. She just wants to be home and safe as I do. But there's simply no time for moodiness now. *Must find kittens.*

The kittens were born in the spring. The cat was recuperating from her wounds, and no one in the clinic had noticed either from x-rays or heart-films that she was pregnant. I'd been on night duty when the cat started to drop them, five altogether, five little eyeless balls.

- We are very close now, I tell the cat, and now I'm actually running. I smile, because now everything is so easy and simple. I know why I'm like this; I know what I want.

Time is against us, but we have to keep fighting, time after time until we overcome. Fortunately, I'm now quicker than anybody else; in my multiple state I'm able to choose any probability, pick out the alternatives I like and combine them to a reality favourable

to myself. But there are so many observers around that I feel their perceptions and eyes battering at my body. The cat protects us both; she has created a space around me where all beings observing us become part of her world. Every time someone notices me, the cat has to support the weight of one more factor. She knows her business, but she is not indefatigable.

Then my way stops. There's a barricade on the street to Tibidado, and the workmen have drilled the asphalt open. The crossfire of eyes is too much; it's impossible to pass unnoticed. If I want to get on the hill, the only way will be to take a car somewhere or go to the metro station and drive one stop sideways. *Underground.*

Mireia

I rang the doorbell, a little nervous. A white haired woman, perhaps in her seventies, opened the door. I shook hands with senõra Sanchez and she asked me in to sit at her kitchen table.

Little espresso cups had already been laid on the table and the senõra went to turn the gas stove on.

- So nice for him to find a home, the woman said. – I got him from the house for lost and found animals; I'd have liked to keep him, but it seems I'm allergic. I get short of breath and the doctor recommended that I ought to give up animals.

The water was boiling and the woman prepared the espresso with a pressure cooker. We drank the coffee and chatted on this and that. Finally, the senõra went to the rear room and brought out a little furry ball to me in her arms. The cat was charming. His eyes were still greenish and he had a black spot on the nose. He was rather small, perhaps four months old. I held him in my arms and he immediately rolled himself into a ball and started purring.

- He's so sociable. And he only approves of canned food.

- I can afford to buy him whatever he needs.

- Fine, fine, the woman mumbled and poured more coffee in the cups. – I think such a fine cat deserves a proper home.

The woman started to talk about why she found the cat unusually intelligent; how he seemed to understand every word and to look so attentively out of the window.

- He warned me of the accident to that boy, she said.

- Of what?

- When that boy was run over by a car, she continued. – He pushed me up here to the window and we both saw how the boy flew. It was me who phoned the ambulance there...

I looked carefully at the cat, but outwardly there seemed to be nothing special in him. I offered money, but the woman didn't accept any, she even gave me a basket to carry the kitten home.

Getting a cat had been a sudden fancy of mine. When I was staying awake the night, looking out the window at the lightning-streaked sky, I realized there was no need for me to be completely alone. I could always get a pet, and why not a cat. They were independent and easy to care; a kitten would manage even a long shift in my apartment.

I said good-by to the woman, and was soon standing in a crowd at the metro station. The kitten kept mewling and turning restlessly round in the basket. I thrust my finger to him through a slit in the basket, but he drew back to the other side. He would soon get used to me.

The station controller announced that the train would exceptionally arrive on another track. I started walking along with the crowd. I glanced behind my shoulder and

bumped into someone, we both fell down. I stammered a quick excuse and stooped to help the woman up. She was Helena.

Helena's eyes turned around in her head and her look became distant and absent.

- This can't be happening, I said and snatched at her hand.

A stranger stopped by my side and asked whether we needed help.

- She's my mother, I answered quickly. – She has a problem with her memory.

- I'm sorry to hear that, he said.

I led Helena aside from the crowd and seated her on the station bench. She held my hand, her eyes were half shut; she hardly understood where she was, in fact. I asked her how she was, but she only babbled something. Helena had even forgotten how to form intelligible words.

- Why in the world do you wish to get away? Why don't you stay close to the restrictor where you can be yourself, at least for a while?

But Helena did not answer; she just stared ahead with unseeing eyes.

What must it feel like to crash? In a way she died every time it happened. When suddenly the greatness she must have felt changed over to ordinary life. Perhaps the amnesia was lucky in a way, ignorance of all that she had lost.

I'd now have an excellent opportunity to change the progress of events. I could push her into the first train to arrive on the station, push her towards the unknown and let fate lead her. Or I could hide her in my own home; care for her where other eyes would not see her. If she indeed had dementia, that would eventually weaken her health until she'd no longer be able even to breathe by herself, and would mercifully perish by suffocation.

- What do you actually want? I asked Helena. – Oh I wish you'd be able to tell what you want out of life, yourself.

But Helena did not answer; she just kept swaying where she sat. The passers-by were looking at us and I affected a smile at them. It was only then I remembered the kitten I'd acquired. The basket lay by the bench, but the hatch was open and the kitten had disappeared. I didn't even want to think or to feel guilty; the kitten had run away, and had either been trampled by people, or he would join the mass of the city's stray cats.

I fished up my handy and punched the familiar number. After three rings, Manuel answered.

- You can't guess where I found Helena this time.

I told him the place and Manuel promised to come and fetch us. He advised us to stay where we were so that there'd be no surprises.

Helena was still in the state of disorientation; she would not recover before she got under the shelter of the Institute and the restrictor. The restrictor prevented an observer from crashing the wave function. Its field destabilized our one and only reality to a state where an observation had not yet made the event real. The apparatus made it possible for me to observe Helena with my gaze, without her crashing. But we had not yet been able to make the field strong enough to protect our patients outside the building, and every time Helena escaped outside, she had to protect herself alone. She had, however, grown more and more skilled with her escapades.

Manuel arrived in half an hour. I pushed Helena into the back compartment of the van and went to sit by Manuel. He tried to pump me about how I'd happened to surprise Helena in action, but I cut my answers short.

We received a cheerful welcome and I had to tell how I'd collided with Helena. Salvatore had already run through all the videotapes, and once again the recording had broken down before the escape. The method of escape was still a mystery. Perhaps it was one of those things that would never be solved.

- We might try a new kind of test on Helena, Salvarore said.

Salvatore was altogether excited, the research had taken a huge leap forward, he said. He thought the restrictor functioned more stably. I smiled at him politely, said a few trite sentences and went back to outside air. It was siesta time, the screens were drawn shut in front of the shops, and only a few canteens were keeping their doors open. A market vendor had left a pair of unused sandals on the street. I tried them on and they seemed to fit perfectly. I left my old pair lying on the street.

I wandered into a nearby café and ordered a pint. I leaned on the counter and sipped the froth. A shiver went down my spine. The presence of other people felt disconcerting and I withdrew to the corner table, to a place where I'd be in the shadow.

Next to me a man in black was playing the slots-machine. He tapped angrily at the levers, finally punching the machine, and then marched out. I walked to the contraption and pushed at the start – the man had forgotten a twenty-cent coin in the machine. With the first spin I got three oranges and the machine gave a cheerful tinkle. I was delighted: since the machine wanted to give me money I'd take whatever I could get, of course!

When the pot reached twenty euros, I took the winnings out and crammed the coins in my pocket. At that very moment something brushed my calf. I startled and turned to look. It was my own kitten, and I didn't even have time to feel surprised before I stooped down to pick the kitten up. Cats seemed to bring good luck!

Want safety where mother? Safety, yes. In a daze I walked back to the Institute, with the cat in my arms. As soon as I got to the coolness of the lobby, the cat jumped off my arms and vanished in the middle of his flight, and only then did I understand what I had actually found at the old lady's.

Helena

I close the window shades so that the scorching afternoon sun will not blind my eyes. The cat purrs in my lap and I caress her head, softly.

- I am Helena. Helena García Luna, I tell the cat, and she stares me directly in the eyes. She understands me; at least that's how I feel.

We need each other.

I hear a miaow from the floor and a kitten pushes himself up in my lap, too. Where did he appear from? The door to my room is closed. There is a corridor behind the door, and after that, doors and a lift and alarms and the stairs out. And people one must beware of.

I make an effort, and remember that there are yet more kittens left. They did all survive. The veterinarian said it was a miracle, there were signs of torture in the mother; her fur had been shaved from the crown and the abdomen, just as they do with experimental animals.

But the kittens are all right. Somehow I just know that whatever would happen, those cats would survive. And they dream cat dreams.

Seek next hurry hurry.

- Yes, let's go seek, I say, and at the same moment I see in front of me a bundle of threads with black strands and a few white ones. I choose a thread that has the door to my room open at its end.

Translation: Liisa Rantalaiho

