

At the end of the
rainbow

Lydia Bottenburg

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*Oh, the tree of life is growing
Where the spirit never dies
And the bright light of salvation shines
In dark and empty skies.*

Bob Dylan

for Mathias and Margot
My greatest pride
My deepest love

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Prologue

From the crematorium speech on November 29, 2021:

Should we whisper or shout, remain silent or try to find something appropriate to say? And there are always those words, words you never thought would find a place in your life. Words you knew from afar, never up close, and suddenly they stand at the door with only the stark nakedness of themselves in an empty suitcase. And yes, they bring sorrow, they bring pain.

Indeed, suddenly there is an entirely new vocabulary in my life. Words that I seldom used before, now containing so much suffering. Words that symbolize grief, pain, and sorrow. Words that encompass a time which is no longer there and which will never return again.

At the same time, I miss so many words. Words to convey what I feel, words to describe my pain, the longing, and the emptiness. Words I have to search for because they are elusive in my thoughts; words I have to create and learn to pronounce.

I notice that my vocabulary lets me down; I don't find a sufficient variety of words and synonyms to describe my feelings. When I reread what I've written, I see that I constantly use the same expressions: 'very bad,' 'incredibly sad,' 'deeply touched' ... there is little variation. There is also not much variation in my emotions and feelings; it's mostly bad and incredibly sad, and of course, I'm deeply affected, but unable to articulate the profoundness of it all.

That's also what I often heard, especially in the beginning, and repeatedly read in the cards people send me: *There are no words for this, or: Words fall short.* It's true, those words don't come readily.

There are no simple words that clearly describe my feelings. The complete, absolute devastation and the pain that tears me apart, cleaves my soul, and pierces my heart – no single word seems capable of capturing that feeling. No readymade sentences, sayings, or slogans. I try to use figurative language but, even there, I falter. No metaphor is sufficient; no analogy equals what I feel. Although: there are no greater truths than clichés, I have discovered that as well.

At the same time, language confounds me. I mix tenses; I start in the present tense, then realize I should use the past tense, then address Mathias in the second person and then speak about him in the third person. It's confusing.

I am constantly searching for words, words to frame my feelings, to articulate my pain, to explain to other people how I am doing, or to remember Mathias – both for myself and for others. I want to find words to express my disbelief and bewilderment, seek vocabulary that explains what I cannot comprehend. Language is my best anchor.

I appreciate it and am grateful when others find the words for me. A friend who sends a message that touches me, a passage from a book, just a small piece of text, or suddenly a fragment of a sentence from a random conversation. It can suddenly be a lifeline, a straw to grasp for the next few minutes.

I have always been a language person; as a child, I devoured books and filled notebooks with stories. Dutch was my favourite subject in school, and afterwards, I chose to study Dutch and History in teacher training. I never ended up teaching, but worked for many years in communications and marketing, and I continued to write, both professionally and privately, even if the latter was limited to diaries and letters.

I never realized that, throughout my life, I was practicing to one day write my child's story. Now I know that it had to be this way.

Writing also helps me in my grieving process: by searching for words to tell the story and describe my feelings, it gains more substance, more meaning, and my pain becomes more tangible, no longer just a bottomless pit of sorrow.

Writing helps me manage my emotions: by assigning words to them, they become more intelligible, and articulating the suffering eases the worst pain.

I create a whole new world with a new and completely different relationship with Mathias. A relationship of words, of feelings, and of memories. A relationship without physical presence but filled with great love and gratitude.

I am left with only language and my memories, but memories are language too. I must find the words to hold onto my child's memory and pass it on to others. If I don't find the words, I don't honour Mathias in the manner that he deserves. If I don't find the words, I can't convey how influential he was, how profound the loss is.

Writing helps me remember. If I don't write everything down, I will forget many events and details. And if I forget, eventually, Mathias will be forgotten. I want to record my memories, especially capturing what happens just before, during, and long after his death.

I seek vivid language to describe the striking images, the images he gave me, that he gave everyone, and to hold onto them.

When words fall short, I use them all. Perhaps one word may offer the solace I seek.

This story, my words, are the words for Mathias.

1. November 23, 2022

Today, exactly one year ago, in the dead of night, I had the police at my door. They delivered the worst news a parent can receive: your child is dead.

For a full year, I have lived without my son. It has been the heaviest, saddest, most painful, and most intense year of my life. Every passing day, I missed his laughter, his voice, and his presence.

I said goodbye to Mathias multiple times and in different ways, never to see or touch him again. Every day, every hour, even every minute, I mentally said goodbye again.

But amidst that sorrow, there have also been moments when I celebrated Mathias. Moments of joy. At his funeral, during Christmas, on his birthday, when we buried his ashes in the summer, when we commemorated his day of passing with his friends, and every time I thought of him with a heart full of love and a head full of beautiful memories.

I've been supported, comforted, and carried, but also let down, disappointed, and disillusioned. Friends held me up, while others let me down. I've had wonderful reunions with old acquaintances and met new, beautiful people. I've sat in a corner and cried, but also travelled, learned, and laughed. Every day was a new battle, but also a new opportunity to rise. And so, all the seasons have passed: a stormy autumn, a mild winter, a gentle spring, and ultimately, a hot, dry summer.

For months, I've been wondering what happened to my child. And that quest doesn't stop. I'll likely keep digging for new insights, answers, and explanations for the rest of my life. I've searched for reasons and motives,

for hard facts and evidence. I've dissected everything to reconstruct the last hours of his life and understand why he died.

Like a determined detective, I've thoroughly investigated every source of information and every detail, no matter how small or seemingly insignificant. I've spoken to everyone who might have known more, and I've turned over every stone in my path until I knew everything there was to know.

My quest for answers sometimes unfolded differently than I had expected or hoped. It led me to places and events that I would have preferred not to know about. It was painful and became more painful as I discovered more.

In certain respects, my quest ended the familiar and beloved image I had of my child, but at the same time, it provided me with more clarity and became an essential part of my healing process. It even gave me something that resembled relief. I know enough now.

If there's one thing that anyone who knew him well can say with certainty, it's that Mathias would have never wanted this. I'm sure he would have been furious with himself for such a foolish act. He would have regretted ending his beautiful life so abruptly.

Mathias, the spirited, joyful, energetic young man who enjoyed life so much, unknowingly walked toward his death: in the middle of the night, on the highway, completely unaware of the traffic around him. This happened because he was under the influence of a 'research chemical' that he had easily and inexpensively bought online.

Mathias, the boy who always helped everyone and never judged, would want to tell this story himself, to warn others about the danger of those research chemicals. That's why I'm doing it for him. I am the voice he no longer has, because I am his mother. And even now that Mathias is gone, I remain his mother. Mathias is with me; he is a part of me. I will carry him with me forever, and I will continue to care for him.

2. Mathias

On April 4, 1995, Mathias Jan Willem Van de Wouwer was born in Antwerp, as the eldest and only son of Patrick Van de Wouwer and Lydia Botenburg.

I was twenty-six years old when Mathias was born, and I was exactly twice as old when he passed away at the age of twenty-six. Mathias, my eldest child, made me a mother and shaped me significantly into the woman I am today. I learned so much from my child. His cheerfulness and optimism, his down-to-earth nature and patience, his perseverance, and his social engagement with the world inspired me and brought out the best in me. I am certain that he was a greater role model for me than I was for him. I have become a better person thanks to my son.

When Mathias was fifteen months old, his sister Margot was born. From that day on, they were inseparable.

Mathias was an ordinary child. Simply put, a delightful child, not a special child as parents of deceased children sometimes say. He had no extraordinary qualities or talents; he was simply 'our Mathias,' whom we loved deeply.

As a young adult, he had developed into an exceptional human being. A bit of a magician. Someone who helped others, gave his smile as a gift, and left a bit of happiness and energy wherever he went. A dreamer with a big heart and open arms. Someone you naturally grew to love, and we all did. His parents, his sister, his dog, his friends, but also his colleagues, travel companions, neighbours, and everyone who happened to cross his path, briefly or for a longer while. We all loved Mathias. We have all been deeply

touched in our hearts by that extraordinary young man and his sudden death.

Mathias was an easy-going child. He was strong and healthy, breezed through elementary school without any problems, and had plenty of friends, interests, and activities. He wasn't particularly sporty or musical, not particularly creative or exceptionally talented, but he was spontaneous, cheerful, and easy to get along with. We never had major issues with him, not even during his teenage years. He had a remarkable way with words, enjoyed reading a lot, and could express what he thought and felt clearly from a young age.

One striking aspect of Mathias was his special connection with animals. Whether they were big, small, beautiful, ugly, or even intimidating, he adored them all, and they adored him in return, always gravitating towards him.

Dogs were his most favourite animals. He had a whole collection of dog books and could name every breed by heart. Every animal automatically became a friend to Mathias, and the feeling was mutual. I once found him, around the age of ten, completely at ease, lying between the enormous paws of a gigantic yak at a circus somewhere in southern France. My heart skipped a beat, and I asked him to stand up and come to me cautiously. He obeyed, somewhat surprised. He had no fear of animals.

The biggest obstacle in his development, in my opinion, was his ADHD. In the first year of high school, he faced some learning difficulties, leading him to seek help from the school's counselling service, where they discovered his condition. As a young adult, he had not 'outgrown' his ADHD and continued to struggle with it. He was quite chaotic in his daily life, had a constant whirlwind in his mind, was incredibly forgetful, and had no sense of direction or time. It was a small drama every morning to catch the bus to school or work on time. Studying proved to be impossible.

At the same time, he had a fascination for things that genuinely interested him. He could immerse himself completely in a new hobby, wanting to learn everything about it and being passionate about it for a while. It

was enjoyable to witness and often, even for us, his family, very educational. Dogs, water turtles, bonsai trees, mushrooms, survival techniques, squatting ... Mathias knew all the details, and if he didn't know something, he would immediately look it up. We heard his 'Wait, let me Google it quickly' daily.

Both his father and I, as well as his teachers and educators at the boarding school where he stayed for three years, tried to emphasize the advantages of his ADHD because there were certainly some. He was always full of energy, resourceful, helpful, and blessed with a strong sense of empathy for others and their emotions. Additionally, he had a delightful sense of humour. Life was never boring with Mathias around.

He exuded calmness and confidence to other people, especially those with physical or mental disabilities for whom he dedicated himself daily. Where there was chaos, he brought calmness, even though his own mind was never quiet. Yet, he didn't know stress and never worried about what was to come because it would most likely turn out differently. With a few well-chosen words, he could bring you back to reality when you were worrying too much, had lost your composure, or were making a mountain out of a molehill. And if those problems did exist, he either chased them away for you or made friends with the moles.

From his mid teenage years, he developed a much more alternative lifestyle than his peers. He let his curly hair grow into long dreadlocks, became a committed vegetarian at the age of fifteen (he never ate meat again in his far too short life), developed political interests that were mostly anarchist in nature, and dedicated himself to making the world a better place for the environment, humanity, and animals. It started quite modestly: he was an enthusiastic and loyal leader in the youth organization, he volunteered at a dog shelter in Spain during school holidays, and he chose the direction of 'Disability Care' in high school.

It ended on a grand scale: he worked on complete construction projects in developing countries, held a responsible job in the disability sector, and had his own squat in Melle.

Life with Mathias was a party, literally and figuratively. No discotheques or local nightclubs, but 'free parties' under a bridge, festivals from France to Albania, and everything that should and should not be part of it. Experimenting with different drugs, occasionally indulging in alcohol, consciously or unconsciously tripping ... He didn't shy away from it. He always made sure to be well-informed before trying anything and that he was in a safe environment. He took his responsibility for his work and friends very seriously. He never showed up to work under the influence. Never. There were days when he needed a lot of coffee, but he always showed up, never calling in sick.

Perhaps he was just lucky because everything always went well. Until that one night when luck deserted him.

In this heart wrenching and incomprehensible story, we, his parents, his sister, and his friends, are absolutely certain: it was an accident, a foolish mistake that resulted in a tragedy.

Mathias was an incredibly joyful, lively, and positive young man who lived with passion and had a clear mission: to make the world around him a bit more beautiful. He worked with people with intellectual disabilities and participated in volunteer projects abroad. He had countless friends and was always there for everyone with advice, action, and a listening ear; he never left anyone out in the cold.

Ann, the mother of his best friend, wrote on the card I received from her after his death: *his last words to me were 'you're welcome.'*

That is Mathias in a nutshell. He meant so much to the people in his life, and he didn't even realize how much. He had no idea how valuable he was; he just wandered around, trying to make the world a better place, bringing joy to everyone, and enjoying life to the fullest. He had so many dreams, and his life had so much future: he was full of plans and ideas, wanted to have so much fun, had so much love to give, and so many loved ones to share it all with. He lived life to the fullest: life was an adventure to which he wholeheartedly said 'yes.' He lived the life he wanted to live.

If I had to describe Mathias in one word, it would undoubtedly be 'joyful.' He was such a joyful boy, and he made everyone around him joyful

too. It was so wonderful to have Mathias in our lives; I enjoyed having an amazing son for twenty-six years.

I have always encouraged him in everything he did, given him the freedom to follow his own path, no matter how far it led away from me. I always had trust in him: he never acted thoughtlessly, carefully prepared for everything, and always made sure he was fully informed before starting something new.

He often thanked me for the trust I placed in him and the freedom I gave him. He knew I was there for him when needed, and he often took advantage of that. He was always grateful and never took my help –financial, practical, or emotional – for granted.

And always, the day would come when I heard his cheerful voice again: ‘Hey, Mom,’ and he would enthusiastically and humorously recount his adventures. I hung on his every word and was so proud that I drew all my happiness from that. That’s what I’m most grateful for: the pride he gave me. It was a privilege to have Mathias as my son.

On the night of November 23, 2021, Mathias was struck by a car and killed instantly. Mathias, the boy with the most beautiful smile and wise eyes, was so mangled that I was not allowed to see him again. He was not laid out, he never came home again, and no one could say goodbye. There was only a closed casket.

And now there is only emptiness. A spirit of joy and freedom, a source of love and energy, has been extinguished. The world has lost a wizard.

3. Bad news

Monday night, November 23, 2021, at around half past three, the doorbell rings repeatedly. We are in a deep sleep and don't hear it right away. Someone pounds hard on the front door, and now Dimitri hears it and gets up. I am still unaware and only wake up when he stands beside the bed.

'What are you doing?' I ask sleepily.

'They're knocking on the door,' he replies.

How strange, probably some drunken guests, I think in my half sleep, and I shrug it off, assuming Dimitri will handle it. I hear him go downstairs and open the front door. From my bed, now more awake, I can hear everything. But I don't feel like getting up; I'm warm and comfortable here.

'Does Lydia Bottenburg live here?' I hear a male voice ask.

'Yes, but she's sleeping,' Dimitri replies, sounding a bit irritated.

Now I perk up my ears. This doesn't sound good at all.

'Is she the mother of Mathias Van de Wouwer?' the same voice asks.

I am instantly wide awake. This is going terribly wrong. They've come to tell me that my child is dead.

I jump out of bed, put on my bathrobe, and quickly go to the bathroom. When I come downstairs, two police officers in full gear are waiting for me in the living room. They are wearing bulletproof vests, are fully armed, have walkie-talkies and each with a face mask. They stand there astride, dead straight and motionless, thumbs tucked under their vests. Standing to attention, ready to deliver the dreadful news.

'Please have a seat, madame', says one of the officers.

I comply, but I feel a bit rebellious; I'll decide whether I sit or not.

'We have bad news. Your son, Mathias, was involved in a car accident, and he didn't survive.'

He says it in a dry, emotionless manner. There's no trace of empathy in his voice.

Yes, I already knew you came to tell me that, I think to myself, but it can't be. Those two idiots in their combat gear must be mistaken. Only other people die in car accidents, not my beautiful, sweet boy. And I make it clear to them: 'It can't be.'

'Unfortunately it is, madame.'

I freeze. There's no reaction from me – I don't cry, scream, or faint. I sit there motionless, arms wrapped around my middle, in a state of shock. Dimitri puts his arm around me, but I push him away. If I deny this very loudly, then it's just not true.

Even though everyone in this cold, dark room seems to believe it, I refuse to go along with their absurd ideas.

'I want to see him,' I say. 'I want to go to him.'

'Unfortunately, madame, you're not allowed to see him anymore.'

What do you mean, I'm not allowed to see him? He's my child, and I decide whether I'll see him or not. I'm furious. My child. Mine!

Those bearers of bad news with their bulletproof vests are ruthless.

'From half past 11 onwards, you can go to the undertaker. Here are the details. And here's a brochure from Victim Support.' And they leave.

They didn't waste too many words, but then again, how many words are there to tell a mother about the loss of her only son?

I cry a little now; I don't understand what's happening. Just a few hours ago, I received a text from Mathias with a photo of a pile of food and broken glass on the street. He had fallen off his bike, and all his groceries were scattered across the road. The beer glasses that he had bought as a St. Nicolas gift for Dimitri were shattered. The bottles of Karmeliet beer too. We used to call such mishaps 'pulling a Mattike.' And now he's dead?

Until now, everything in Matti's life had gone smoothly. He was never seriously ill, rarely even sick. Yes, at the age of twelve, he was diagnosed with

ADHD, which explained a lot. His chaotic mind and concentration difficulties suddenly made sense. He learned to cope with it and took medication for a few years: Ritalin, Concerta, Strattera ... He tried them all with varying degrees of success. During his trip to Africa at the age of seventeen, he decided to stop taking them completely. It no longer suited him.

He once resat a grade; in the fourth year of high school. Funnily enough, it put him in the same class as his sister, which turned out to be handy for Matti; Margot always had her agenda in order, while his was rarely up to date. He failed again that year, but it didn't matter anymore; he changed schools and found his calling: caring for people with disabilities. That was what he wanted, and that's what he did for the rest of his life.

I remember one terrifying moment, a moment when I feared for my child's life: August 18, 2011. On that day, Mathias left for the Pukkelpop festival – with loads of luggage and even more enthusiasm – along with his friends from our village: Thibault, Pieter (who would later become successful with their band Equal Idiots), Sam, and a few other boys whose names I've forgotten.

A little after six o'clock that evening, a severe storm erupted over the festival grounds. The wind was so powerful that trees toppled over, heavy tents collapsed, and panicked people trampled over each other in search of a safe spot. Mathias lost his friends in the chaos and had to fend for himself. Fortunately, he was smart enough not to seek shelter in a tent or under something that could collapse.

I heard the news on the radio and called Thibault's mother. She suggested that we go to her house to wait for news together. Her husband was on his way to the festival grounds to see if he could find the boys. Margot and I spent hours at her house, waiting and hoping for contact with our boys. The network was overloaded so it was impossible to make contact by phone. We could only sit in front of the TV and watch live footage while trying to stay in touch with Thibault's father. We were worried and quite scared.

Around eleven o'clock that night, I got a call from Mathias: the storm had subsided, and he was safe. He insisted on staying in his tent on the

festival grounds that night and coming back by train the following morning. I let him do as he pleased; he needed to figure it out his way, after all, he was sixteen years old.

The next day, he came home with half of his luggage, covered in mud and barefoot. He was emotionally affected and deeply impressed by all the suffering he had witnessed. He talked about it for weeks. Five people had died, and many others were seriously injured. It was terrifying, but he wanted to stay. I understood that.

It's four o'clock. Now I need to reach Margot first to tell her that her brother is dead. I know she's not alone; Gaétan, her boyfriend, is with her, so I dare to call now.

She answers immediately: 'Mom, what's wrong?' Panic is evident in her voice. Does she believe it too?

'It's Matti,' I barely stutter.

Her anxious 'nooo' cuts through me. She believes it too.

'We're on our way,' she says.

Forty-five minutes later, they arrive. Two young people, pale and silent, their devastation evident on their faces.

Margot sits beside me and holds me tightly. 'Mom, I'm going to be there for you a thousand percent. You don't have to go through this on your own.'

She cries. I don't, I'm numb. Or maybe I am crying; I don't know anymore.

We tell them what we know so far, but it's not much. It seems Mathias was walking on the highway and was hit by a car. How could that happen? We have no idea.

Dimitri calls the police in Ghent; his call gets transferred a couple of times and finally reaches an agent from the dispatch team who received a report from a passerby that night and had seen the surveillance footage. He explains that the footage showed someone wandering and stumbling on the highway and it appeared that there was a dog with him.

The word 'wandering' sticks in my mind. It could mean that Mathias was intoxicated. Alcohol? Drugs? It's possible, but it would surprise me. It was an ordinary weekday evening; he was working today. Why would he do such a thing? I don't understand.

What now? It's almost six o'clock.

Patrick! Oh God, his child is dead too, I suddenly realize. Has he been informed yet? We can hardly call him to ask. Imagine if he doesn't know yet. But he lives in Haacht, 40 miles away. Alone in that big house of his mother, whom he cared for until she passed away in July. My heart goes out to him; I feel deep empathy welling up inside. We need to support him, try to be there for him.

Patrick and I had known each other for four months when, in the late summer of 1994, I discovered I was pregnant. It was more or less planned but maybe not as soon as that. It was to prove a little unwise, but we would only come to realize that afterwards, we were in love and happy.

Patrick was ten years older than me; he was thirty-five and the eldest of six children. His brothers and sisters already had children and he did not want to be left behind. He yearned for a family of his own, preferably a large one. He had come out of a difficult relationship, had started to study again in order to find a new direction in life and tutored French to pay for his studies.

This is how our paths crossed: pupil and teacher in French. I fell immediately for this tall, handsome man with his dark curly hair and his exquisite French. Notwithstanding the fact that Patrick was unemployed and still a student, and that I myself, so much younger than him, with little life experience and never intending to stay longer than a year or two in Belgium – I was born and bred in the Netherlands – it would all be fine, so we thought. We rented the ground floor of an old mansion in the centre of Antwerp. It was summer and the world was our oyster.

Patrick was very motivated to find a job but was only able to find temporary translation assignments at a bank. My parents arranged some furniture for us and meanwhile I worked excessively long hours for too little money.

It was difficult and, despite the fact that things more or less worked out ok, the resulting stress had put a great strain on our relationship and on my pregnancy. After six months I was obliged to rest and lie down. The dermatology practice where I worked resolutely closed its doors to me: there was no room for a pregnant assistant. I was out of a job. Yet more stress.

We had a small wedding on Epiphany Day: the snow was half a metre deep in Antwerp, nobody reached the Town Hall on time and the ceremony commenced two hours later than planned. It didn't matter, we were together. Our honeymoon was a weekend in Paris, that was all we wanted.

Towards the end of the pregnancy everything was more or less in order and there was finally some peace. All checkups looked good; we were in joyful expectation of our new life. Unfortunately it soon became apparent, once winter arrived, that the cozy ground floor with five-metre walls and one gas fireplace only had a nice warm ceiling: the wind and snow easily found their way inside through the old terrace doors. It was not an ideal place for a baby and a mother who would be pregnant again within six months.

The last home where Mathias lived in his much too short life, also has high walls and bad windows, which let the wind through. Even now the winter is cold, even though it's late November.

We decide to drive to Haacht to tell Patrick in person what has happened, that his child has had a fatal accident. We dress warmly in sturdy shoes, thick winter coats, and scarves. It's cold, and I can't seem to warm up; I feel frozen from the inside. We bring a bottle of water and some cookies for the journey.

Gaétan heads back to Antwerp to start his workday, while Margot will later call her workplace to let them know she won't be able to come in today. I'm supposed to start work at noon, and it's already 7 AM. The early shift team is already there, so I'll need to contact my supervisor later. Organizing ... that's all we can do now, the only thing that gives us some semblance of control.

Dimitri drives, Margot sits in the back, and during the ride, we talk about the accident. We repeat the few details the officers told us at our

home and the additional information from the officer in Ghent over the phone. What happened? What was Mathias doing there? How did he end up there? Apparently, he was with his dog Baloo. Did Baloo escape, and did Matti go after him? It's difficult to comprehend, no matter how hard we try to make sense of it.

At half past seven, I receive an SMS from Patrick: 'Be strong, Lydia. This will hit us hard.' He already knows. He must be in shock, two parents who have just lost their child, and he sends such a succinct message ...

Margot calls to let him know we're on our way to see him. He hardly reacts.

When we arrive at my ex-mother-in-law's house, the house I know so well but seldom visit, the front door is open. We enter and find Patrick in the kitchen. He has COVID. He's sick, feverish, and indeed in shock.

Around six this morning, a female officer had been to his home with that dreadful news. His messenger was empathetic and calmly delivered the news that his son had been in a fatal accident. I'm thankful for that, a father all alone ...

'We're here to pick you up. We're going to Melle, to Matti's house, to see what we find there.'

He nods in agreement and responds resignedly to everything.

'Make some coffee first,' I tell him. He complies, slowly and absentmindedly.

We have a cup of coffee, but he doesn't want to eat. He sits at the kitchen table with a scarf, hat, and face mask. It's cold and dirty in there.

This place has always held me spellbound. The large house in the middle of the old garden, built in the 1950's, once very modern and still elegant, though neglected for years, holds a treasure trove of memories.

My mother-in-law raised her six children here during the sixty years she lived in this house. Later, she warmly welcomed her fifteen grandchildren, their parents, and countless friends and acquaintances, and showered them with love. The door was always open, everyone was welcome, and you could always find a whiff of magic, a bit of inspiration or some

encouragement, and, at the very least, a bite to eat. There was always music. The old grand piano had never been silent. Countless books, art objects, and souvenirs from travels and people long gone filled the space. Amidst it all, there was Mamie, always with stories, declamations, and piano playing; it was never quiet there.

Now it is. Only Patrick still lives there, but he will also be leaving soon. The house is being sold, and this place will disappear forever.

We hurry to Melle now. I'm getting restless because I want to be with my child. Father and daughter sit in the back, and Patrick keeps his face mask on. It's quiet in the car; we are all lost in our own thoughts. What is there to say? How terrible it is? That we don't understand?

I have one overwhelming feeling: hope. That's what I'm focusing on. I hope so much that it's just all a big misunderstanding and that we will find Matti at home shortly. He must still be asleep.