

Ingeborg Arvola

Little sister's gift

-So this is your latest architectural success?

-Look at this! When we go past the living room windows we can see our reflections, can't we?

-Yes...

-The windows are tilted outwards, he tells her enthusiastically.- It's brilliant. When you stand in the living room you can literally look down right across the world. This is a house fit for kings!

-Miriam and her family behave like royalty at least.

-Don't tell me you know them, sister?

-Miriam buys her clothes from me and her house from you.

-At the same price?

He laughs silently and texts a message on his cell phone.

-What did they say when you wanted to spend Christmas at home?

She asks suddenly.

-We had to be prepared to see she is having a hard time.

-Is she dangerous?

-No, not dangerous. They don't think she is self-destructive either.

The car turns into a parking space in front of the shopping centre.

The heater switches off with the engine, and immediately he feels his sister's coldness.

She says -To begin with I thought that this was a ridiculous idea, but yesterday I actually started looking forward to seeing you, and...

- I don't believe it, look! The brother jumps out of the car. – It's the Olsen couple, my newest clients. Just go on ahead, sister.

My sister and my brother. They're decorating the tree. They find the gilt balls and hang them on twigs. Brother dries my cheeks when I cry. Sister says that mother is for sure better off now, although I am not crying for her. There are little slimy monsters in those Christmas balls. I don't know how they have ended up in there, perhaps they are angels supposed to be hatched out by humans. Some kind of birth must be what it's about, but as it is, the monsters cannot breathe. Moist snouts press against the inside of the balls. The gasp like fish. My brother ought to see this, he who says that all living things need airy rooms to live in. Air, he says to my sister, whilst the monsters suffocate. He hangs balls on twigs and glances over to me with a quick smile. I throw a ball onto the parquet floor. It turns into a crushed eggshell in amongst the Christmas parcels. The monster leaves a thin pencil line of blood and slime as it eels its way into a Christmas box. I reach for more balls, but sister stops me. Her hands hold my wrists. She pushes me into a chair. My sister is so cold. She keeps a cold grip on herself. The contact drains me. I am a tap and the warmth runs out. I explain about Jesus who was born in a stable, and whether the stable was perhaps a shell, which had to be broken, but sister doesn't hear people who speak quietly. She dries away the traces of monster and keeps sending quizzical glances at my wrists.

The brother and sister look enquiringly at one another as little sister rips the paper off the largest present. The gift box is empty, quite empty, although little sister does not seem to take any heed

of that. The fragile bony hands finger the air in the box. The mouth forms happy words of quietude.

-Is this your idea? asks brother.

-No, answers sister, - but see how glad she is.

-There was more than enough air, whispers little sister, almost explaining, and a translucent finger points first here, and then there. Light from the Christmas star captures the blood vessels beneath the paper-thin skin of her face. – Just as green as the dresses you make, she whispers to her sister.

They assume she means the wrapping paper, although it is yellow. They look at each other and shudder with a kind of affection for little sister. Some people are matches and straw. They can break, just as loud sounds break a tired voice. Little sister folds herself across the empty box and gives a ghostly smile. Brother gets the feeling that she could dissolve, turn to a flake of paper in water and a flake of ash in the air. He pours himself yet another brandy.

-After the funeral I put on her sweater, says sister in a low voice.

–You know, the one she always used. I slept in it and when I woke up I thought at first that I was lying with my head in her lap.

-She was tired, says brother. –The business of little sister was too much.

-I have never put my head in anyone's lap, continues sister.

The monster has doubled in size. It bites its own tail, squeezes its reptile's feet against its body when I reach out my index finger. It becomes an avocado, firm yet soft. Warm, I say, and touch the

lighter coloured breast skin with my finger. A heart beats in there. The monster simmers with life. My brother and sister say I should come into the living room, it is getting late. They are single pears on leafless peartrees. The monster darts under the bed. I nod. My brother and sister can't bear to be in the living room without me. There is too much air in there. My brother has built a tunnel in the ceiling. Far up above the fir tree is a glass ceiling. Thoughts sent from one person to another are sucked up into the tunnel and disappear. My brother has always been afraid of closeness. If we sat too close when we were small, he would hit us. I try to slink past them. My sister is so cold, and my brother full of loss. He misses all those he thought he could perhaps love in spite of it all. They need me more than they know. Their arms reach out for me. They think they are helping me towards the sofa, but in fact it is I who support them. I can put up with the Christmas tree, now that the monsters are lying suffocated in the balls. A beautiful mourning. A decorated body. There is nothing anyone can do for them. Soon they will have dried into dust and fragments of bone.

The brother watches the news. He rolls his sip of brandy across his tongue, adjusts his watch. The gift from sister is extravagant. Buildings someone has bombed into oblivion flicker across the screen. He starts to wonder about the reason for this gift. Is he really worth such an expensive watch? If so, then is he worth it in the role of brother, or as a successful architect? When he thinks of the empty gift she gave little sister the watchstrap digs into his wrist. Does sister see him as being greedy? Mother called

him greedy when he didn't want to help with the Salvation Army Christmas celebrations. That was last Christmas. He puts the watch on the coffee table. No, sister is calculating. She has given him the watch as an act of vainglory. He is to tell people that the watch is from her, and they are to believe that her creations are valuable. He hears his own snigger, and sister raises a slim eyebrow. On the screen, patients with blood-soaked bandages lie in hospital beds, their faces made unrecognisable by the new virus.

-Sorry, he says into the air.

- I am glad I don't work in the branch responsible for these new diseases, says sister, and cuts a slice of apple with the fruit knife.

-You just dress the people who are, he says and senses the smile at the corners of his mouth.

The sister frowns. The slice of apple hangs like a threat in the air. He shrugs disarmingly.

-I give them the house they want, and you give them the clothes...

The sister eats the piece of apple. He throws a glance at little sister. She is incapable of giving anyone anything, either house or clothing. This irritates him. She will never have to take responsibility, she only demands others' responsibility, demands and demands, she demanded of their mother every single day without ever being satisfied, only wanted to die, as if she were an island alone which could sink into the sea without drowning others, as if she had no mother with sparse white tufts of hair...

Little sister is a flickering presence in the deepest corner of the sofa. Her eyes are fixed on the TV screen. They are unnaturally large. Tears course down her cheeks.

-Damn, he mumbles.

-I'll change the channel, says sister sensibly, and the infected patients disappear in favour of a flock of birds flying in formation across the sky.

He sits down beside little sister, hears the gurgle in her throat, the sob and words she uses seldom. Irritation becomes empathy. He lays a protective arm across the fragile shoulders. Little sister's fists are clenched so tightly that her nails have cut into the skin.

-Damn, he repeats, and prises them open.

Halfmoons of blood are revealed, barely visible in the dim light. He puts his fingers against the wounds and presses. Even little sister's blood seems thinner than others'. The drop running down her palm is not dark red at all. It is more like a child's watercolour. Sister gets the disinfectant and plaster.

They sit bent over little sister's hand, and neither thinks of turning up the light to see better. It is as if they prefer to bend even lower, until their foreheads touch one another and they notice that they have the exact same shape of forehead, which causes them delight, for some reason or other. They smile in embarrassment at little sister's closed eyes.

The window is open wide. The monster must have enough air. It lives on air. It grows like weeds in spring. Its avocado skin glows with heat, the nostrils widen out and look like funnels. Its eyelids have grown large. The monster winks, and winks again before plunging into me like a cone-shaped almond cake. When

my brother comes in it eels its way down into a slipper. He closes the window and sits on the edge of the bed. He asks if I am happy, but does not wait for the answer. He thinks he is sitting here because of me, but it is the monster that draws him in. My brother feels its presence as a sensation of hunger. When sister also stands in the doorway I have to weep again. Her body is wrapped about with a grey desperation which increases with every smile she smiles. She gives me a handkerchief and looks wonderingly down into the empty gift box. Afterwards they push me down in the bed. Their hands make contact across the duvet. They snatch them away. My sister has frozen knuckles. All you need is a good night's sleep, they say, shutting the door. The monster stands hunched on the wall listening to something I can't hear.

The brother asks the sister whether they should go to the service. They decide that they really don't want to. For a moment they stand paralysed, one at each end of the kitchen. They sense the dizzying compulsion towards one another before they can tear themselves free. The sister decides she wants a bath, and the brother leans heavily against the freezer. He is certain that he has a tin of freshly frozen squid. He mumbles recipes to his own hands before pressing a button, and music flows from invisible loudspeakers.

I am building a tower of dried tangerine skins. I cut a heart into the leather-covered sofa. I blow warm air into envelopes and

tape them shut. I press my fingertips into grapes. My brother's and sister's silence devours the house, and it grows dark. They so want to speak to each other, but I cannot help them. I start to run. I bump my knees against furniture. I find no doorhandle and I find no monster. There is no point in looking for the monster, I know. It will arrive when it wants to. It is born at Christmas just like Jesus himself. I have to lie stretched out on the floor. I have to press my kneecaps against the carpet. I have to wait. Not run. I have to be a snowflake in closed rooms and wait.

-You should have let her stay out there.

-You should not have given her an empty gift.

They look down at little sister. Only her eye-whites show.

-She used to lie like this when she was little, whispers the sister.

-I want to be a family, at least now at Christmas. You and I are too few.

-No parents, no partners, no children.

-Clients and customers.

Little sister turns the whites of her eyes towards them, strands of dried tangerine skin stuck in her dry tufts of hair.

-How about a bath, asks sister with a strangely mild voice.

-I'll run the water, adds brother hastily.

-It really is a lovely bathtub, he hears sister say as he goes out.

My brother and my sister. They have said goodnight at last. The monster leans over the bed, as hot as roasted chestnuts. It is fully grown and needs more air with each passing moment. I open

the window. The ceiling lamp sways when the monster moves. Its wings rustle like silk. The winter darkness sets into my skin. I back towards the bed. The monster lies down with me. This is the last night. Soon the monster will leave. I lie under wings of silk and breathe monster breath.

Sister swallows two pills with tap water. Her skin looks good. Her nails are well kept and curve towards one cheek. She examines the drops of water which run down her chin. She always dries away drops of water. Once, a long time ago, she dried away melon juice which ran down her chin. A man was feeding her melon. He begged her to let the juice flow, but when he glanced away she dried her chin. It was the only thing to do. When he discovered it he said that she was cold, so confoundedly cold. Now, she lets the drops of water flow. Most of them drip into the basin, but one drop rounds her chin, continues down her throat, follows her collarbone and turns into her nightshirt. The drop runs out onto her left breast and stops at the nipple. The sister shudders. She pulls at the nightshirt and looks down. The drop of water has frozen to ice. She is so cold, so confoundedly cold. Her footsteps are silent on her way to the brother's room. She halts outside his door.

The brother leans against the inside. He listens to his sister's breathing. He thinks her hand is lying against his, the door between them. The evening's alcohol follows his bloodstream like a lazy relative. He is tired. At the back of his tongue is the

woman's face he would like to have seen again. Beate and Kristin and Lotta. He swallows, and swallows again. The hand against the door loses its warmth. Sister is so cold. She always reminds him of those people he has known, who have been markedly warmer, who have had warmer feelings for him, not for his being a successful architect, but for himself as a human being. Man. Beate and Kristin and Lotta said they loved him, and he replied, sorry, but...unreciprocated feelings, he said, and blah blah honesty. He told them they deserved better. If he were to be really honest, he loved them all, loved them perhaps too much. He doesn't know. He had a sickening feeling of losing himself in their women's bodies, and each time he got rid of one of them he heaved a sigh of relief, bought a new set of knives or a new shirt, and had a chat with his sister or mother. His sister was sensible and distant, and his mother, full of complaint. She expected grandchildren and it was his job to beget her some. No, she had no hopes in this direction where his sisters were concerned. Little sister always had been... odd, and they weren't very old before his sister's glass of milk would freeze over if she held it too long. In a flashback he sees his sister reading a Donald Duck comic with full concentration. Now she is breathing on the other side of the door and her cold is frightening, it frightens him far more than his own or his women's feelings have ever had the power to do previously. His fingers are numb. Sister breathes, sister waits. At last he opens the door with a perception of being required to share her frost, and the mood he had been in since collecting little sister makes him threaten to say yes.

They look at one another in the dark. They smile tentatively.

-We are the same colour, whispers sister and plucks at his pyjama sleeve.

-Plum-coloured, says her brother even though it is too dark to see any colour.

-Plum-coloured, agrees his sister, and moves a small step closer.

The monster stands with its snout against the window. The morning light mixes with the air outside the window. There's a flutter of silken wings. I am drawn closer. The monster says it longs to be outside. I nod. I long to be outside too. The light is faint and mild. I open the window, but it is not enough. The monster looks at me with deep eyes. It explains that it needs more air. It needs the whole sky. It is going to cross the sky and fly even further. The wings in the air are fish in water. The monster needs all the air in the world. My arms wave in the air. Just like this. The monster is going out flying, it will fly further and further. It will fly to the sun. It will fly all the way, so far that its skin will burst into flames and shrivel to dust and smoke. The monster will kiss the sun. It will sacrifice something so that others can be happy. It will fly into the sun and disappear. It will create Christmas peace and Christmas joy. I can let my own skin burn away so that others' skins can be pure. The burned ash can swirl backwards throughout the universe. One day the rain will be black and people will understand that the ash can be smeared onto the wounds of the infected. The wounds will close, dry into scabs and leave only faint scars. A miracle! The monster breathes

on the glass, licks the windowsill. I breathe on the monster. I hold it in my arms even though it is too big. The monster burns, but I am hotter. We are fire. We long for the sun. I lead it through the quiet house.

The door in the hall is also too narrow. In any case it needs speed for take-off, explains the monster. I look around. I think of stairs and mountain tops, and go on ahead up to the top floor. The monster is a cat at my heels. My hand brushes against a wing, and I am afraid I'll lose my balance. The monster simmers with life. I crackle. In the bedroom lie my sister and brother. They look small in that enormous bed. I shiver. My sister has lowered the temperature to freezing point but my brother takes no harm. His arms are covered in blue flannel, they hold around my sister as if she needed protection. It looks nice. Their breath is frosty and their cheeks red. The monster doesn't want to look at them. It is longing, longing so terribly to be outside.

The door to the roof-terrace opens silently. We stand on the tiles. We have to go up onto the roof. I say I also want to go to the sun. These wings are large enough for two, says the monster. I turn carefully. It is a little windy. We climb upwards. The monster wants maximum speed. We are leaving the atmosphere. We are going far, and further than far. The monster finds a round flat patch on the roof. This is the top of my brother's glass tunnel. Way down below us is the living room. There is the star, still lit on top of the Christmas tree. The monster widens his nostrils. The light shines through its thin skin. So beautiful. My heart pains me. I am more alive than ever before. We have to jump when we take

off. We have to jump twice and stretch our arms up to heaven. Then we will get to the sun. The monster's voice is comforting. It is good not being alone now. The silken wings flutter in the gusts of wind. They unfold like a skin-coloured sky. I sense my own smile. I stretch out my arms and jump, jump.

The crash awakens the sleepers. They know already what has happened. The open veranda door is a blinding wound. The sister runs out, jumps onto the roof and leans into the broken windowpane. She sees her sister and the overturned tree. She sees her brother take hold and pull little sister free of the tree branches, as thoughtlessly as when they were small. If she is not dead, she is certainly seriously injured, and then one ought not to move the body. She wants to shout down to him but her voice does not work. She eases herself carefully backwards, runs in from the terrace. Her neck is painful. She has slept in a bad position, did that once before too, when they were small and went on a tenting trip. That was little sister's first attempt. She threw herself off a rocky ledge, floated in the water face down, looked like a bundle of rags, she recalls, and her brother was so thoughtless. Ran into the water with his clothes and boots on, splashed about and nearly killed himself, whilst she undressed methodically. Get your clothes off, she shouted as she swam past, get back on land, she shouted, spitting water. She swam to her sister and turned over the silent body, slapped her cheeks, blew into that pale mouth while she swam towards land. Swam and blew. Flat out on the smooth rock, little sister threw up

water and seaweed. Sister tore off her clothes, dried her roughly, forced her into her own clothes. She equipped her brother with a sleeping bag. They then hurried home. The tenting equipment stayed where it was. She remembers her naked arms around little sister. It was only when they got home that she realised that not only her arms but her whole body was naked. Mother wept over little sister. That was when she first noticed the cold at the base of her spine. It gnawed its way inwards. She shook with cold, and her back ached from the nape of her neck all the way down her spine, because she had slept all skewed the night before. Her sister's head had been like a stone on her shoulder. A stone in childhood. A stone in her spine.

Her brother stumbles towards her. He knots his arms about her, sobs after breath against her cheek. His nose is wet. Little sister's arm is stretched out against their legs, she sees, and moves them away a bit. Branches of fir tree and broken Christmas balls surround the fragile form. The Christmas star lies twisted in a corner, still alight. Broken shards of glass reflect the light. There is a draft from the open tunnel. The morning light looks inquisitively down on them.

I'd better call the police, says sister and realises that she still has no voice. The police, she says, but cannot hear it. The brother nods in any case, his eyes glued to her mouth. She moves, step by step, towards the telephone. She dials the number.

-Police here, says a voice.

There has been an accident, says sister, but cannot hear her voice. This is for real. She has lost her voice. Her neck is a well of pain.

Terrified, she looks at little sister's body.

-Hallo? Says a woman's voice. –Is anyone there?

Sweat breaks out under her arms. Her mouth makes a strange grimace. She cannot control it any more. Uuaaeah. It sounds like moan.

-I'll take over, says the brother. She sees the tears on his cheeks.

Sees the hand which takes the telephone. –There's been an accident...

Afterwards, they lean their foreheads together. Their feet are naked.

Brother's are cut by the glass. Hers have nail polish. His pyjamas are blue while hers are lemon-yellow. Only their foreheads are the same, exactly identical, and their touch fills them with calm. A shy closeness winks from the margins of the tragedy.