

ANETTE

Even amidst the cacophonous noise from the waterfront, Gabriel picked up on the sound of distant wails. For two hours, he'd lounged on a sun bed beneath a parasol, basking in the beat of a looping *Deep Purple* CD played on his Discman. But when the music finally lost its appeal, he removed his headphones and heard the ghostly cries—faint and barely audible above all the surrounding din.

It was the first hot day of 1996, and Gabriel was perched on a slight rise overlooking Smalvik Bay. People laughed, splashed each other in the water, and threw beach balls around. Others jumped off the diving board while the rest sat or lay on colourful towels and beach mats, their skin glistening with sunscreen. Despite having his swim shorts on, Gabriel had yet to enter the water. When the sun was baking hot, he preferred to stay in the shade and unwind with music or a good book—preferably both at the same time. He didn't know anyone there except his parents at the hotel. Gustav and Marie Dahl weren't big on swimming, either. They had sent him out because they wanted some *quality time* alone, as they called it, when they were in the mood for some undisturbed time in bed. At least, that's what Gabriel assumed they were up to.

The surrounding air was full of scents—from the grilled sausages and burgers sold nearby, salt and seaweed from the sea and deodorants and sunscreen when someone passed. But it was the forlorn cries that drew

Gabriel's attention right now, sometimes clear and sometimes muffled by the hubbub of the bathers. Was it a gull's call? No, not the screeches of the countless birds soaring above the beach in quest of a feast. Occasionally, one of them would swoop down and steal a half-eaten sausage from a startled tourist's hand, much to the joy of those sitting nearby.

The cries persisted, getting louder and emanating from the same area. Gabriel noticed a gathering of children at the far end of the beach. They stood in a tight circle, mocking and laughing, apparently engrossed in some game. The surrounding adults were lying on their towels and beach mats, talking to each other or listening to the radio, and they didn't mind what was going on. He rose, looking over the heads of the children, and saw they were pushing something around in the middle of the ring, maybe a beach ball. Gabriel stood there staring at them, unsure of what they were doing.

Then he heard another despairing scream and suddenly knew it was not a ball he saw but a child being harassed, and before his mind could process what he should do, his legs were already running; he pelted off in zigzags between lying and standing and walking bodies, narrowly avoiding a man with hands full of ice cream, probably for a whole family, but caught his foot in a barely visible piece of driftwood sticking out of the sand, fell on his stomach and heard a burst of laughter from some idiots nearby, picked himself up and ran on towards the screams ahead of him, and finally arrived at the dense throng of children, but still had not had time to think about what to do, so he just charged like a bull right into the flock and ploughed his way towards the centre while wailing children toppled over to both sides like bowling pins.

Gabriel came to an abrupt halt.

A small girl was in front of him; her face was streaked with tears and smeared with blood, while the mob surrounding her instantly dispersed. The young brats fled in all directions as if they were all convinced that, if given a chance, the large kid would give each of them a severe beating.

But Gabriel was so focused on the crying girl he didn't notice the tormentors had vanished. Instead, he wrapped his arms around her, felt her shivering in the too-big T-shirt, and held her close for a long time, caressing her dark brown and long curly hair full of sand.

'You're safe now,' he finally said. 'What's your name?'

'Anette,' she replied, barely audible.

'I am Gabriel. Is your mum or dad nearby?' he asked, holding her close.

'Mum is at home.' She said nothing about where her father was. Maybe she didn't have one.

Gabriel took her hand and led her to the sun lounger where his clothes lay. Then he reached into one pocket and pulled out a handkerchief, which he carefully used to wipe away the blood and tears from her face. There were nosebleeds, but also some cuts and bruises.

'How old are you?'

'Eleven.'

'I'll be fourteen next month.' He smiled at her. 'Why were those little bastards picking on you?'

Anette shook her head. It was unclear if she didn't want to tell or didn't know the reason.

'I want to go home now,' she said after a brief pause.

'I can walk with you, so they don't bother you again.'

'You don't need to. I live very near.' Anette stretched out a thin arm and pointed. 'Bye.'

Gabriel watched her as she jogged, crossed the street along the beach, and disappeared up a side street.

The following day, he returned to the same spot. Suddenly, Anette appeared out of nowhere, smiling shyly.

‘Thank you so much for saving me yesterday.’

She handed him a chocolate bar. ‘Mum wanted me to give you something.’

He smiled back and accepted the gift. ‘Sit down next to me so we can share it!’

Her face lit up.

Gabriel returns to Smalvik on July 10th, 2016, almost to the day twenty years later. He stands where he and Anette sat back then, and looks around. Stinging nettles, thistles, and ground elder have taken over the little hill. The hot dog stand is gone. Despite the nice weather, sparkling water, and perfect sand, the beach is empty. The contrast with the crowded beach from his previous visit is striking. The majority of the town looks deserted. A disturbing number of shops have closed, many houses are unoccupied, and everything looks bleak and decaying.

Over the years, he has often recalled the good times he shared with Anette, reflecting on her expressive eyes and smile, as well as the pensive look she had when she was lost in thought. He remembers her delight in little things that he took for granted, and the way her small hands felt in his, warm and pleasant to hold.

Gabriel has frequently wondered what became of her. Now that he's finally back in the village, he's eager to find out. However, the bleakness of the surroundings has left him with a nagging sensation that Anette might no longer be living in Smalvik. He is determined to uncover every detail he can about her current life before moving on.

An hour earlier, Gabriel had been driving west along the E18 and suddenly recognised the village name on an exit sign. Reacting impulsively, tyres screeching painfully, he swerved the Ford Mondeo into the exit at far too high a speed, just managing to manoeuvre the estate car down the steep turn that led onto the county road towards the coastal town.

A few minutes later, he drove down Strandgata, Smalvik's main street.

Gabriel noticed the family's hotel was still there, with worn white paint and a faded, barely readable hotel sign. He parked close to the entrance and had just got out of the car when the front door opened, and a decrepit couple limped down the few steps.

They introduced themselves as Elly and Gunvald Vestli and told him they had owned the hotel since World War II and that it had been closed for a long time. But if he needed a place to stay, he could utilise one of the many rooms that had sat empty for more than a decade. They'd be happy to clean, tidy, and ventilate the room for him, and it wouldn't cost him much, either.

Gabriel thought the offer was generous and didn't hesitate to accept, not least because the couple said there were no other hotel options in town.

The elderly couple exchanged smiles as the white-haired man stated, 'It's really nice to have some company. It's not every day that someone pays a visit.'

Then, with a sigh, he continued, 'Many companies have been closed since the new stretch of highway was completed in 2001 and everyone started using that route to Framsund and other seaside villages. No tourists means no money, so many of us had to leave to make ends meet.'

His wife agreed with a nod, then added: 'Aside from the new road, scary things made our beach an unappeal-

ing place to bathe. Bodies have washed up on the beach on multiple occasions. Or, to be more precise, body parts.'

'Body parts?' Gabriel's eyes were fixed on her.

'Sometimes without a head, other times without arms or legs. It's happened six or seven times in the past ten years.'

'Swimming has never been one of my favourite activities,' he replied uneasily, then laughed. 'And this certainly won't encourage me to take a dip during my stay here.'

The conversation took a less disturbing twist from there, and the hosts suggested Gabriel take a brief walking tour of the town while they got his room ready.

After his disappointing trip to the deserted beach, Gabriel makes his way back towards the hotel. You might mistake the streets for being entirely pedestrian because there are so few cars on them. There aren't many pedestrians either, though. He senses rather than sees that he is being watched through slits in many of the drawn curtains he passes, as though seeing a stranger in town is an unusual occurrence.

When Gabriel enters the hotel reception, Elly Vestli is on hand to give him the key to a room on the second floor and tell him dinner will be served at five o'clock.

Even though the town looks nearly abandoned, he considers it is safest to take out all the valuables he has in the car. After three rounds, he has stuffed everything into the spacious room, which is likely the biggest and best in the hotel.

The room is cosy, with a king-size bed and a sitting area with two leather chairs facing an old TV from before the turn of the century, a 28-inch Grundig that is nearly as deep as it is broad. A quick survey reveals the elderly couple did an excellent job preparing the

room. In the bathroom, there is soap, shampoo, a bath towel, and a stack of hand towels; in the wardrobe, he finds an abundance of hangers and an extra pillow on the shelf; and in the nightstand drawer, a New Testament.

While waiting for dinner, Gabriel takes a shower and is thrilled to find it has excellent pressure—unlike the water-saving batteries commonly seen in hotels, which require three times the amount of water and time to rinse the shampoo from thick, curly hair like his.

Since the hotel's closure, the breakfast room has been converted into the Vestli family's dining room. The former hotel proprietress has prepared a wonderful dinner. Gabriel, who is not a big fan of fish, is impressed by this dish, a local speciality that features cod as a key ingredient. Being treated so well, he feels more like a close relative visiting than a random hotel guest.

'I remember you from the last time you were here,' Elly Vestli unexpectedly says as he finishes the last bite of dessert—a homemade apple pie of the highest quality. 'You were the kind young boy who cared for poor Anette Hansen.'

The older woman's wrinkled face wrinkles even more with the warm smile she sends him.

Gabriel stares at her and hesitates for several seconds. 'That's right. She just seemed to bring out the best in me. But I never knew her last name until now. Otherwise, I would have written her a letter.'

Elly says, 'She came here regularly over the next few years, asking if you had reserved a room for the summer holidays. And she was devastated every time we told her you hadn't. I got the impression that getting to know you was Anette's greatest joy in life—perhaps her only one. Then, after some years, we no longer saw her.'

Gabriel is overcome with grief when he hears this. His parents had always refused to stay in the same place twice when they went on holiday, believing that there were too many sites worth seeing to visit the same spot twice. Fortunately, he is now self-sufficient and free to go wherever he pleases. But he is concerned that he has waited too long to return to Smalvik.

‘Does Anette still live here?’ he asks, even though he believes he knows the answer. ‘I’d really like to meet her.’

Elly lets out a sorrowful breath. ‘The family moved a few years after your last visit. We can only hope Anette's situation improved, but I doubt it; the source of her issues went with them.’

Gunvald nods and looks sad, too.

Elly continues: ‘Her father was a night owl, a thief, and a violent alcoholic—that was probably why Anette was so unpopular among the other children. Pretty much everyone knew someone who had been robbed or burgled by her dad or, worse, beaten up by him. He went in and out of prison as long as they lived in this town.’

Gabriel looks at Elly in disbelief, realising how traumatic Anette's childhood must have been. However, he is thankful she waited until he finished his meal to bring this up; otherwise, it would have ruined his appetite entirely.

‘I didn't even get to say goodbye to her,’ he whispers shamefully. ‘I told her I would see her the next day, and then I didn't.’

‘She found out that it wasn't your fault. She was here looking for you the next morning, and I told her what had happened.’ Elly smiles at him.

He is so grateful he is tempted to hug her.

Gabriel retreats, settles into one of his room's two arm-chairs and tries to turn on the TV. Nothing happens. The batteries in the remote control have long since run out. So instead, he pushes the button panel concealed behind a cover at the front of the device. Then there is a light on the screen. Gabriel clicks through the limited channel selection but finds neither Animal Planet nor National Geographic or other favourites and ends up watching NRK1.

He dozes off until a segment on the evening news awakens him. A woman in her thirties has disappeared in Framsund, and they have intensified the search for her. Gabriel immediately thinks of Anette. The age fits, and Framsund is just under thirty kilometres away. But then the news announcer states she is a Syrian refugee at an asylum reception centre. This is the third unsolved disappearance from the same centre in less than a year. It is a pity for the Syrian woman if something has happened to her.

Still, Gabriel breathes a sigh of relief, turns off the TV, and goes to bed earlier than he can remember doing in years.

The mattress and duvet are both of high quality; however, he has trouble falling asleep. What the hostess said about Anette sticks with him. He tries to push it aside and does his best to recall pleasant memories from his all-too-brief stay here so long ago. Images of warm and soft pastel colours arise in his thoughts, somewhere beyond his eyes, as if filmed through a soft filter.

After the chocolate was gone, Gabriel bought Anette some ice cream. Being so tiny and frail, a few extra sweets couldn't harm her. Her huge eyes glittered as she licked it excitedly, like it was the first time she had tasted ice cream. There was a warmth in his chest he had never felt

before. Gabriel had always felt uncomfortable with girls, particularly those at school. Superior, shallow, self-centred, arrogant, laughing, loud, and exhausting. But this serious little girl was none of those things, and she was so much younger than him she could have been a younger sister. Gabriel was an only child and had no experience with siblings. So he reasoned the intense sensation of well-being he felt sitting there with Anette next to him, his desire to be good to her, to make her smile, and to see her happy, must be how sibling love felt.

Or maybe it was just pure, unconditional love.

‘Do you want to see my secret hideaway?’ Anette asked as she grabbed his hand and pulled him down the main street, up a side road, onto a parallel street to the main street, and then another side street. Gabriel had only ever held the hands of girls while the class was walking around the Christmas tree. Now, he walked through Smalvik with Anette, enjoying the warmth of her hand in his. He could have walked like that for hours.

The town's old wooden church, white and almost two hundred years old, was at the top of the last side street, with a sharp green spire reaching high into the bright blue summer sky.

In front of the cemetery, Anette opened a wrought-iron gate and led Gabriel onto a gravel path between the graves. It smelled of freshly cut grass. They took a long detour to avoid a funeral procession around an open grave and continued to the north end, where a lush hawthorn hedge marked the end of the graveyard.

Anette stopped in front of a grave near the hedge, got down on her knees, and picked up some grass and withered dandelions.

Gabriel looked at the headstone, which was made of light granite and engraved with black letters:

In loving memory
Agnethe Engebretsen
* 06.11.1943 † 04.05.1994
Georg Engebretsen
* 11.08.1941 † 04.05.1994
Forever in our hearts

‘Grandma and Grandpa,’ Anette said. ‘I am named after my grandma. Both died on the same day. I visit them at least once a week.’

She grabbed Gabriel's hand again and tugged him towards the hedge. There, she bent down and pushed aside a few branches, wriggled forward, and was completely hidden when the branches fell back into place. ‘When I'm unhappy, I can hide here, right next to the folks who loved me the most and always used to soothe me,’ she explained.

A depressing thought ran through Gabriel's head—that Anette could have reason to seek refuge at this shelter regularly.

Then, a little while later, her head appeared between the branches, and she crawled out again.

‘Do you have any secret places?’ she asked.

‘No, but there are times I wish I did.’

They wandered back to the beach, sat, and talked for a while until Anette said she had to go home for dinner. ‘See you tomorrow?’ he asked. Anette smiled and nodded, then ran. Gabriel watched her leave and already missed her.

He went back to the hotel. His parents were out. He took a shower and found a bench in the sun near the entrance to dry his hair. Shortly after, his parents came hand in hand, laughing and smiling at each other.

They stopped in front of him. ‘Are you just sitting here? Getting bored?’ his dad asked.

'I'm having a great time.'

'You should find a friend to hang out with. Try to be social once in a while.'

'I'm social as can be! I've been with a girl both yesterday and today. She just left.'

His parents looked amazed.

'How nice!' his mum said, smiling. 'What's her name?'

'Anette.'

'What does she look like?'

'Dark curls and big, pretty eyes; she's so sweet.'

'Are you going to meet her tomorrow?'

'I hope so!'

'Then we'll have to meet her!' his mum said.

The next morning at breakfast, Gabriel and his parents decided he should pick up Anette and take her to a nearby patisserie at one o'clock. He was excited about all the goodies they had there that he could treat her to.

A while later, Gabriel strolled up to his usual spot, feeling his chest warm as he discovered she was already waiting for him. He had often heard the adults use the term quality time. Now he understood the meaning; for him, it meant being with Anette.

He dashed the final few metres to her, embracing her in the morning's first hug. Then he told her they were going to meet his parents later.

Anette looked thoughtful and muttered it was a good thing she had put on her prettiest outfit.

Gabriel observed her more attentively, noting how tattered and faded her short summer dress was. He was concerned about what his parents would think of it, given their obsession with luxury and beautiful apparel. Then he reasoned everyone wasn't as well-off or as

obsessed with fashion as they were. He guessed the Adidas jumper, Fruit of the Loom sweatpants, and Buffalo shoes he had chosen this morning were more expensive than Anette's entire wardrobe. It's not the clothes that matter, he reasoned. Regardless of what she wears, everyone must like a friendly and kind girl like Anette.

They entered the patisserie shortly before one o'clock. Gabriel noticed his parents at a table in the room's rear, partially concealed behind a noisy group of young mums pushing prams. Anette bit her bottom lip. Gabriel thought she was nervous, since she was seeing his parents for the first time. He smiled as he took her hand in his and led her to their table.

His parents first stared at Anette, then at him, and then back at Anette, but without the friendly smiles he had expected to see. Instead, both their eyes and their mouths were contemptuous.

'Who is this girl you brought here? I thought you were going to introduce us to Anette.' His mother scowled, her face growing increasingly upset. It was as if Gabriel got a fist in his face.

'This *is* Anette!'

'Have you gone barking mad?' his father yelled.

'You should not hang out with a little girl. It's not proper!' His mother was red in the face.

'She's only three years younger than me. Dad is seven years older than you. That's more than twice the age difference.'

'It's entirely different. We are adults!'

Anette gasped, let go of his hand, and fled. Gabriel was about to run after her when his father got up and grabbed him by the arm, yanking him so hard that the table nearly tipped over, and the coffee spilled onto the tablecloth.

‘You stay away from that little chit, you hear me?’ He squeezed Gabriel’s arm firmly, causing him to yelp in pain.

‘What if someone we knew came here on holiday and saw you hand in hand with an unkempt child who looked like a poorhouse beggar?’ His mother’s voice was high-pitched. ‘We would have been embarrassed for the rest of our lives!’

The young mothers at the next table had turned and watched, wide-eyed, at the commotion.

‘Stupid jerks! I’m friends with whoever I choose!’

Gabriel wrenched himself loose, sprinted between the tables and trams away from his parents, got out of the confectionery, and slammed the door so hard that the windows rattled.

He ran down the street, looked back to see whether he was being followed, then dashed up the first side street. He stopped, took a deep breath, and wiped away his tears, wondering where Anette had gone. Did she run home? He then realised where she had to be.

He hurried to the cemetery, raced all the way to the hedge, knelt down in front of the dense shrubs, and could barely hear her crying over the chirping of birds.

‘Anette, come out. I’m alone.’ He parted the branches and glimpsed the huddled figure in the shadows.

After an eternity, Anette straightened up and crawled out of her hiding place.

Gabriel placed his arms around her and hugged her. ‘I’m sorry,’ he muttered. ‘I’m sorry they were so mean to you.’

‘Do we never see each other again?’ Anette asked, her tear-stained face pressing against his chest.

‘Of course we do! I don’t care what they say.’

He caressed her hair. Just now, he wanted nothing more in the world than to stay in Smalvik, get to know

Anette better, help her with her homework, protect her from bullies, be best friends, and ideally become a proper couple in two to three years. He had to get her phone number and address before the holiday was over so they could stay in touch.

They walked down to the beach. Gabriel bought ice cream, and they sat on a bench overlooking the sea. Fortunately, his parents didn't show up.

At dinner time, they split up. Gabriel and his parents often went for a drive after dinner. Otherwise, he would have suggested they could be together then, too.

'Tomorrow, you can come home to my place and meet my mum,' Anette said. 'She knows you're three years older. But it's rather messy there.'

'That doesn't matter!' Gabriel said, smiling. 'I'm looking forward to it!'

He gave her the longest hug he had ever given anyone, whispered 'I'm very fond of you' in her ear, and kissed her on the cheek before watching her until she disappeared up the side street.

He was far less enthusiastic about returning to his parents, but hoped they had calmed down by now.

When he arrived at the hotel, he noticed their silver-grey Mercedes parked outside the front door, with his parents inside.

His father lowered the window. 'Get in!'

Gabriel opened the door and crawled into the back seat. Sometimes, they went for a drive before dinner, even though it was usually after.

However, this was the first time his father started the car and sped away before Gabriel even had a chance to buckle up.

'Where are we going in such a hurry?' he asked, relieved that no one had mentioned Anette.

‘Where do you think?’ his mother said.

‘I have no idea.’

‘We're going home,’ his father barked. ‘You've ruined our holiday, you little shit!’