

**WHEN
TIME
RUNS
OUT**
**ELINA
HIRVONEN**



MANILLA

PART ONE

*Compassion is an unstable emotion. It needs to be
translated into action, or it withers.*

SUSAN SONTAG

Regarding the Pain of Others



1

When he was a child, he responded to smiles with a smile. He had two front teeth in his lower jaw and a dimple in his left cheek. When someone smiled at him, his face melted into sunshine and his dimple appeared so soft and delicious that it was tempting to press a finger into it and tickle gently, just to hear the laughter that shook his entire body.

When he sat in his buggy on the tram, strangers would lean over him, smiling and chatting as if they had always known him. He would smile back and point with his chubby fingers at the trees, buses, diggers and street lamps that were visible beyond the windows and say: 'Dat!' And people looked in the direction in which he was pointing, smiled and said: 'What a lovely tree. What a lovely digger. What a lovely motorbike. What a lovely child.'

When the people got off the tram, shielding their faces from the cold wind and the rain, they smiled for such a long time that they no longer remembered why.



Helsinki, some time later

He listens again to Pink Floyd's 'Nobody Home' – a song which he has listened to many times each day, for years. When the music ends, everything in him feels light. This is the last time.

His smile is light, his fingers lighter than a fly's wings. He stands in the middle of the city, on a roof which he has always wanted to climb. In his left hand is a semi-automatic small-bore rifle. It was astonishingly easy to steal it from the boot of a car parked beside the shooting range. Ever since he decided to put his plan into action, everything has been astonishingly easy.

This is something I'm good at, he'd thought as he filmed his message and posted it online, packed the rifle into its bag and dressed in a black windcheater, black trousers and soft-soled trainers in which he would be able to climb well. The music moved his body; as he left home he felt like taking a couple of high leaps,



leaving the mark of his knuckles in the ceiling with his fist, smashing a hole into the ceiling and marking the wall with the sole of his shoe, running nimbly over the cars, blowing obstacles from his path, like dandelion seeds, feeling so intensely in the moment that nothing could check his speed or his strength.

Now his movements are slower than usual, as if everything were happening underwater. The city is his dream and the sounds of police cars, ambulances and escaping people come distantly, from the other side of the water's surface.

The only thing he can see clearly is the woman he is aiming at. The woman is younger than his mother and so ordinary-looking that she could be anybody. Beside her is another woman, so old that she will probably die soon in any case. He rests the weapon against his shoulder and zooms in on the younger woman's head with the variable scope as if he were making a movie.

The weapon fires when you press the trigger. After the first shot you can fire again without reloading. The trigger is cool beneath his finger. Only a small movement is necessary. The click of the trigger and the kick of the rifle butt against your shoulder. His finger is not trembling. He narrows his eyes. The old woman is shouting something at the younger one, who turns her head away.



They may be mother and daughter, he thinks, as he sets the rifle down for a moment, shaking his arms and taking a deep breath as if after a long dive. Then he raises the rifle again and takes aim at the woman, who is holding her hat as she runs for safety.



3

Laura

I pour some sea salt into an oven dish, scrub a swede clean and set it in the middle of the bed of salt, a round swede-moon. *This will be a good night*, I think. I have studied the art of positive thinking. Eerik, my husband, would laugh if he knew. Everyone who knows me would probably laugh at me. I have always considered that kind of thing stupid, and said so. But now I have decided to fill my mind with positive thoughts, to smile until my brain begins to feel pleasure, and to love myself so much that it will be easy for others to love me too. Otherwise I won't manage. I am fifty-eight years old and completely healthy. I do yoga in the mornings and lift weights in the evenings. I very probably have decades of life left and I have decided to learn to enjoy them.

I am on my way to the university to talk about the climate catastrophe. After that I will fetch Eerik from the airport. In the evening our son Aslak is coming round for dinner.



I lay the table with mismatching plates and put a tall red candle in a wine bottle. It makes me laugh a little: in almost forty years together Eerik and I haven't acquired proper flower vases, candlesticks or complete sets of crockery. Whenever I put a flower or a candle in an empty bottle I remember what it was like when we had little money and plenty of time, what it was like to go to parties thrown by people we didn't know, to wake up to languid Saturday mornings with friends, to order pizza and watch movies whose words we all knew by heart.

I am making Aslak's favourite dish, swede braised until it is soft, then fried until it is sweet and crispy. With the exception of a short period in his youth, Aslak has been a vegetarian all his life, and I am extraordinarily happy about this. As a child he would begin to cry if he saw newspaper advertisements for marinated chicken strips or wafer-thin slices of ham.

'How can anyone live in a world in which living creatures are made into *strips* and *slices*!' he said, his tears falling from his cheeks onto the newspaper. I took the paper from the floor and folded it up, stroked his head and said: 'My love, the world is always changing. You can be part of making it a better place.'

I put the swede in the oven, set the timer for two hours and pull on the clothes that I nearly always wear when





I am lecturing to young people: a simple dress, thick tights and high boots. I glance at the mirror. I have short hair whose iron-grey stripes gleam, depending on the day, bravely or sorrowfully, and there are wrinkles around my eyes – wrinkles I haven't got used to. I hardly use any make-up, but nevertheless, occasionally at the chemist's or in an airport tax-free shop, I find myself reading the label of a new cream and hoping that the cream might be the solution. That it might return me to a time when everything was supposed to be possible.

Soon we are sitting at the sturdy, wooden kitchen table. When Eerik and I moved into this flat, we wanted a long table for a large group of friends. Through the years I often planned dinner parties which we would hold when we had time, when everyday life loosened its grip, when Aslak was going through a better period. I came up with complicated dishes and thought about how to invite friends who didn't know each other. We would eat for a long time and open one bottle of wine after another, the children would say goodnight to everyone in their pyjamas, the evening would continue on into the night and we would talk and laugh and in the morning we would wake up having had too little sleep, but full of energy after a happy evening. Those dinners never happened, and we sat around the big table, a long way from one another.



At that table Aava and Aslak, in their high chairs, ate their first solid food – half a teaspoon of mashed sweet potato. At that table they blew bubbles in their milk glasses and giggled when we told them not to. Years later they sat silently in their places, I talked too much to sustain the conversation, both Eerik and the children chewed their food with glum faces and I was sure that he was thinking of grinding me with his teeth.

I imagine our conversation.

‘Aslak. You can’t go on like this.’

I say it out loud. The words thud into the room where there is no one but me; they take with them the weight that has spread within me. It has made my breathing laborious and my steps heavy.

‘We won’t abandon you. We want to help you find somewhere where you can work out what is weighing you down. You’re young, sensitive and intelligent and you have a lot to give. We hope that you will have a good life and be able to do the things that are important to you. Don’t you want to do that too?’

I think of Eerik’s so very familiar posture, which over the years has become ever so slightly stooped, as if he were carrying a burden that was too heavy. Eyes the colour of a winter sky and a gaze that, even in the happiest of moments, has a trace of disquiet. Fine wrinkles at the corners of his mouth, and a chin, covered in grey stubble, which he always rubs when he hears

something he doesn't like. I think of Aslak's head, sunk between his shoulders, eyes hidden behind his heavy eyelids, teeth biting his lower lip. I think how everything in him could withdraw still further inside, how his whole body could look for a tortoise's shell to protect it, under which it could hide.



4

A cold wind penetrates my cape-like coat. I wrap it more tightly around my body and try to ring Aslak. I want to make sure that he really is coming, that he is not planning to cancel our arrangement on some pretext whose implausibility would show clearly how little he values me and Eerik.

This happens often. We ask Aslak round, he promises to come, but he does not come. We pretend to be disappointed and suggest a new time, feeling guilty about how relieved we are. Meetings with Aslak are complicated and awkward. I hope for something that will never happen, and Eerik is desperately correct. Even Aslak tries, when he is in the mood, to play the part of a grown-up son. After such occasions Eerik rolls a joint, although he has been trying to give up smoking for almost thirty years. I go for a run, running such a long way in the forest that the world grows dim as if I were drunk.

All the same I go on arranging get-togethers whose spoken aim is to cheer Aslak up and to show that we



care. The unspoken aim is that something should finally change.

On Mother's Day I persuaded Aslak to come into the centre of town for brunch. I had booked a table in a restaurant in a renovated banking hall; in front of it seagulls strutted and inside it sat well-dressed families in which even the small children behaved well.

I was wearing a sea-green silk dress, Eerik straight trousers and his best shirt; I had also bought Aslak a new sweater. He arrived with his hair greasy and his skin pale and waxy, dressed in a bobbly T-shirt that smelled of sweat.

'He can't come looking like that,' whispered Eerik, but I hugged Aslak. That day the sky was bright, the smell of the sea was in the air and I had decided to be a happy mother.

I grasped Aslak by the shoulders and piloted him into the restaurant. Eerik paced past me, his eyes on the floor, and the waiter directed us to the table with a smile despite the pungent smell emanating from Aslak.

We ate many tiny starters, a hot main course, cheese and a dessert. Eerik was silent throughout the entire meal and I talked constantly, smiling until my cheeks ached. I passed food to Aslak and ordered drinks, champagne in honour of the occasion, although Eerik raised his eyebrows: in his opinion it was better to





drink water with Aslak. I put my arm around Aslak and talked about books and movies he knew nothing about, bands that he had listened to years ago, and memories, the few we had in common that I dared speak about.

‘Do you remember when we were on the cycling holiday in Copenhagen? You and Aava sat in a box bike eating melon?’

‘Do you remember when you learned to skate – you let go of the support and suddenly raced round the rink?’

‘Do you remember when you programmed your first robot . . . when you wrote an essay and the teacher gave you full marks?’

After the meal I paid the bill, got up with a smile and went to the toilet, locked the door and burst into tears. When I returned, Aslak had already gone. Eerik stood silently by the cloakroom waiting for me, then walked silently out before me.

Aslak doesn’t answer. This often happens. When I try to let Aslak take responsibility and don’t pay his bills, I cannot reach him for weeks and finally I become so anxious that I take it upon myself to look after all his expenses. I don’t tell Eerik about this. He thinks I treat Aslak like a child and that is why he seems stuck in the nest, a fledgling grown enormous who doesn’t





know how to fly. I leave Aslak a message and run to the metro station.

Beside the entrance is an old beggarwoman on her knees; I turn to give her money and she says thank you in Finnish. I'm startled.

'What a sentimental nationalist you are,' Eerik would say if he was with me. He feels it is perverse of me to avoid gypsy beggars as if I did not see them but to stop whenever I see an elderly Finnish person with a cup in their hand.

When I look more closely at the woman, I notice that she has applied rouge under her sharp cheekbones and wound her scarf around her neck in the manner of French women twenty years ago. For a moment I see myself in her place, in a too-thin coat with a cardboard cup in front of me, trying in spite of the circumstances to look dignified.

I want to speak to my daughter Aava. She lives in Mogadishu and never calls me. Not even when the place where she lives, a small island surrounded by a wall and high watchtowers whose barracks are home to foreign workers, was bombed and her neighbour died.

I am always the one that makes the approach, Aava the one who ends the conversation. Aava leaves and doesn't come back for a long time, pays a quick visit to Finland and only has time for one meeting, even that a brief one, during which she glances around her as if





checking for an escape route. When I suggest another meeting, a joint day out or trip, a couple of days when we could get to know each other again, Aava leaves again. She goes to countries where there is too much blood and too little water, to camps quickly jerry-built amid wars, their dry streets swarming with children whose parents were born in the same camp.

I am proud of Aava. My daughter has the courage to go wherever she wants, to survive anywhere. I would like to say this to her. I would also like to say that you don't always have to cope, and when you can't bear it any more, you can come home. I tried once.

'Do you really not get it? It's home I want to stay away from,' Aava said, and I smiled as I learned to do when I was a child and something inside me was crushed.

I love Aava, of course. And admire her. But my admiration is not as pure as I would like it to be. Aava is a better version of myself. She does important work all over the world and lives a life that I thought for years that I would live sometime. Aava doesn't have to negotiate her decisions with anyone, and she doesn't know what it feels like when passion fades. When she comes home, she can close the door and be quiet; she can go whenever she wants to and mourn her own sorrows alone.





Ava doesn't respond. The metro station door opens; warmth blows in my face, and the smell of urine that has dried in the corners. *Everything is fine with me*, I think. In my life many things are almost ridiculously fine.

Three young girls are obstructing the escalator and I can't get past them. Hanging from their shoulders are gleaming bags from a designer shop, in their ears headphones decorated with diamonds. Something in their faces makes it clear that it is not worth asking them to step aside. I try to imagine the sounds that are flooding into their ears: are they listening to the streets of Brooklyn or the shores of the Maldives or a secret whispered by a beautiful boy?

The girls' faces glow with health; their bodies are muscular and trim in just the right way. They touch each other gently, and everything about them breathes a deep satisfaction and confidence that the glances directed at them are full of approval.



A year ago a young woman – perhaps the same age as these girls – shot three people in the Helsinki metro. Unlike most other gunmen, she did not leave any clue, any message about her thoughts. According to the policemen who examined the case, there was so little trace of her background that it looked as if she did not exist. She was twenty years old, had dropped out of school, was not in or out of employment, her parents had died, she lived in a flat inherited from her mother, did not socialise or use social media; no one claimed to be her friend. The neighbours said that she went orienteering once a week in the forests near her home. Almost nothing else was known about her.

For a moment pictures of her were everywhere. The pictures showed a slim, long-limbed woman, a face that was good-looking in an ordinary way: high cheekbones and large eyes, a calm gaze and an unsmiling mouth. The pictures stayed in my mind for a long time; I thought about the woman in the darkening forest, a lamp on her forehead, running through the dense spruce forest, along paths fringed with blueberry bushes, full of sounds that no human being had manipulated. I thought of her looking for one cross after another and returning to the red-brick house at the edge of the forest, to the home which, according to the police, looked uninhabited.

The fact that the woman did not leave a message, any explanation for her action, was dumbfounding. In



some extraordinary way we have grown used to killing. We have grown used to the feeling of insecurity caused by violence, to the grief which everyone wants to share, to the huddles of candles in the streets and in the school playgrounds, to the hearts and cloying ballads of social media which people try to share after such events. We have learned to deal with death and a daily insecurity, but not with the silence of a killer. At a time when everyone is constantly receiving messages, it felt incomprehensibly presumptuous. Not because she had killed, but because she didn't even try to explain why.



6

‘Hope is an essential part of human nature. If we lose the hope for a better future, what is left to us?’

Before me are fifty environmental science students. They are among the purest and most fortunate of their generation, those to whom the rest of us entrust our hopes. They do not care for alcohol or tobacco, they like cycling, crocheting and hanging out with their friends, dream of time rather than money, hope for a long romantic relationship and switch languages without pause. The same is probably true of their thinking. They have personal carbon monitors and shares in solar energy companies, and they know that if they choose well they can also even make money from protecting the environment.

When I was young, I believed that if we acted together we could ward off environmental catastrophe and bring peace to the world. When I was a little older than these students, deaths on the borders of Europe were still newsworthy events. No longer.



There has been fighting in Egypt, Libya and Syria for so long that no one remembers where it all started, malaria is so widespread in Greece that tourists no longer go there, half of the young people of Spain have moved to Argentina and Chile, and the Swedish prime minister is a former skinhead. In Europe almost half the people have stopped voting in elections. If things go badly for you, you die before you're sixty; if they go well, you can live in a private nursing home until you're 100. We have grown used to snowless winters, endless rain and floods whose power is always surprising. We have grown used to refugees who wander from one European country to another and to the fact that walls are being built round new housing estates.

'Everyone is of equal value!' I shouted as a young demonstrator outside the House of Parliament, believing that, if we only tried hard, if we were to apply ourselves with enough diligence, the world could indeed become a better place for everybody.

When I speak to young people, I am still full of hope. They may succeed where we did not. What looks now like an inevitable move towards the destruction of humanity may develop in unexpected directions. We may create versions of the future, imagine alternative worlds, new visions; one of them may one day come true. But we cannot be certain. The power of humankind may surprise us not only





in destructiveness and selfishness, but also in wisdom, reason and the creation of the new.

‘Nothing is more pointless than to imagine the entire world revolving around you,’ said my grandmother when we were travelling by tram to the centre of town. She always got up to offer a seat to people who were younger than her but who looked more tired.

‘Your generation has everything most people in the world will never have. That is why you do not have the right to think only of yourselves.’ Granny grew up in a little farmhouse with eleven siblings and was present, as a child, when two of them were buried. As a young woman she worked in a factory, and later as maid to a rich man; she was the first to wake and the last to go to bed in the house, but there was one thing she would never compromise over.

‘If you want to achieve something in life, you have to be content when you look in the mirror,’ she said. She stood in front of the little mirror in the hall, adjusting a gossamer-fine net over her hair and carefully brushing mascara onto her eyelashes, which curved so beautifully that in another place and time her face might have made her famous. In the tram, Granny held on to the pole with a hand clad in a pale-brown nappa leather glove; from her wrist rose the spicy scent of perfume. I



stood next to her, trying to stay upright in the swaying carriage.

My grandmother could have been something completely different, I thought. The idea was dazzling. She could have written books or acted in films. She could have defended oppressed people or participated in decisions about the country's affairs. Instead, for most of her life, she prepared food for a man whose sense of taste was so impaired that he could not distinguish between fish and meat, polished silver spoons and ironed shirts which had to be washed once a week and which always had to be hung up neatly. All the same, Granny always behaved as if she had been able to do whatever she wanted. If life was a disappointment to her, she hid this from everyone else.

At the university, I talk about a subject that I have been talking about for all my adult life. About why climate change is treated as if it were merely a question of practical economics, although the bigger questions are about ethics.

'Your generation will solve the great ethical questions of humanity,' I said at the beginning of my lecture, and the students raised their gaze from their reading devices and concentrated on me, fifty pairs of eyes whose brightness lit up the entire space.

'Do we consider the lives of people who live far away as being as important as our own? Do we care what



kind of conditions future generations will live in? Do we have the right to seek the short-term advantage of a minority regardless of what it means for the majority of the human race now and in future decades?’

I show the students pictures of Arctic areas where bright water glitters beneath the ice sheet, or the Amazon, where dry land is conquering the rainforests, or the Mali village covered by desert sand which women leave, carrying their children.

The students look at the images in silence, their fingers stroking the edge of their desks. Their serious faces still have a hint of the roundness of childhood.

‘Many people have decided that there is no longer any hope,’ I say.

‘But sustaining hope when problems seem impossible is the most important thing there is.’

The last picture is of Canada. It shows hands in blue plastic gloves, covered in oil. Environmental activists from all over the world are cleaning up an oil spill in the Arctic with native people and workers from the oil company. I look out of the window at the street lamps, which are coming on, pull my mouth into a zip-tight smile and seek the words that I wish to believe myself.

‘Do you remember that catastrophe?’ A few of the students nod.

‘For me it was a kind of turning point,’ I continue.

‘Before it happened, I talked and wrote continually about how destructive it would be to drill in the Arctic.





I met ministers, members of parliament and CEOs of oil companies. Each one of them promised to familiarise themselves with the studies I presented them with. They smiled at me as if I were a child. When this happened, I was enraged. I thought the human race had no future. I wanted to go and live alone on a far-away island. But when I saw pictures of people who had arrived from different parts of the world starting to cleanse the area together, I realised that giving up hope was a symptom of my own inability to imagine a better world, not on what could really happen.'

As I put on my coat I glance at my phone. Eerik is at Heathrow.

See you soon. I've missed you. ♥ My Eerik has at last, at the age of fifty-nine, learned how to use the heart emoji.

We met at an old gravel pit almost forty years ago. Eerik had a camera round his neck and was explaining how the derelict area could be transformed into a meadow, the gravel pits made into ponds where local residents would be able to swim. Eerik was wearing a frayed jumper and gumboots; he had shaved his head but left a few long hairs at the back of his head. I was reading environmental politics and was funding my studies by writing articles for political papers. Eerik was studying to be an architect and his diploma project was the renovation of the gravel pit into a park for





local residents. We arranged an interview at the spot where Eerik was taking photographs for his project.

When Eerik loped up in his dirty boots to shake me by the hand, his eyes glowing with his imagined landscapes, I did not want to let go of his hand. We walked round the vast wasteland and Eerik told me about a Swedish mine which had been transformed into a fabulously lit open-air theatre, and an English landfill site that had been planted with grass. From above, the lawn looked like a woman's body.

'I am really inspired by the idea that a run-down, even devastated, landscape can be reshaped to become beautiful,' Eerik explained, drawing curves in the air with his hand as if he were painting the landscape he was designing. Our arms touched; Eerik smelled of the forest and of sweat, and I grasped his face with both hands.

We undressed each other at the bottom of the gravel pit; the sharp stones scratched our backs. We took the train back to my home and made love many times; on the other side of the window we could hear the chirping of wagtails, the sounds of drunks and police sirens. We spent three days and three nights together; my flat smelled of wine, sweat and lavender oil, and the sun shone all the time.

I never liked dating. After I moved away from home, I wanted clear boundaries between myself and other people. I wanted to keep my mind and my body as a



sealed package; I was prepared to concern myself with the future of the globe, but not with the private sorrows of any one person. I took men home with me, friends and strangers, but at the point when they began to talk about dating I stopped returning their calls.

With Eerik, we never talked about dating. He arrived in my life like an early spring, and suddenly the world was full of light. When we weren't together, I thought about his skin. I cycled to lectures thinking about my hand running up and down his belly and nearly ran a dog over. When we were together, I undressed him. We ate quickly, we went for quick runs and sometimes to the cinema, but all the time I was waiting for the moment when I could grab the hem of his shirt. I didn't want to meet his friends or introduce him to mine. I wanted to keep him in a warm room with David Bowie playing and spend the whole day naked.

During our years together I have often hated Eerik. I have wanted to go away and never return. I have gone away, and I have always returned. I have been in love with another person, and I know that Eerik has too, even though he has never told me.

But nevertheless, after all the moments of uncertainty and weariness, after all the nights filled with lonely wandering, after all the disappointed glances and concealed bitterness, I always cheer up when I see Eerik's face in



the crowd. At the end of a long day I wait for the time when we can cook together, open a bottle of wine and talk about the details of the day that have made us laugh and the sorrows we conceal from others, and ask questions to which only the other knows where to look for answers.

As I tie my scarf I imagine Eerik walking to the arrivals hall of the airport pulling behind him the suitcase on which I have written his name. Eerik knows me better than anyone else, and sometimes I have to leave for precisely that reason. We embrace in the hall amid the other people, I press my face against his ancient sweater, inhaling the scent of coffee and aeroplane; my clothes carry the scent of the autumn weather and he brushes away a leaf caught on my coat collar. We decide to take the bus to the centre of town and walk home from there, to stop for a drink or just walk hand in hand; in the biting cold weather he's the warmth of a familiar hand, and a shared sense of humour cultivated over many years, brings us home long before we have opened the door.

Eerik has spent a week in Zambia, where he is planning the transformation of an old copper-mining area into a public park.

'Children could plant their own trees here,' he explained, his drawings before him, his eyes gleaming in a way that makes everything around him shine. I want to hear everything about the trip. I want to see if



he has remembered to protect his face with sun cream
or whether his nose is peeling again.

In the university corridor a teaching assistant approaches
me. I wave to her and she grabs my hand hard, as if one of
us were in danger of falling.

‘They’re asking for you,’ she says, nodding at two
policemen standing by the wall.