

Outlet

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Translated by Emese Mayhew

“Outlet”

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1.

With a sigh, I immerse myself in the warm water. I get the shower gel off the side of the bath, let some of the cold liquid glide out of the bottle and rub it warm between my palms. I work it into my legs. Then move onto my breasts, my armpits, my neck and my face. I take a deep breath and try to relax.

I turn off the tap so the bathroom goes quiet. The spotlights in the ceiling are dimmed to half-capacity. I deliberately didn't turn the fan on. It always annoys me when that thing is on. Time for myself. Damn, I can't remember when the last time was.

I cup my hands and trickle water onto the foam on my knees which stick out of the bath. They are still a bit tanned from my holiday in Tenerife. The holiday where it all went so terribly wrong with Marcel. The jerk. Just take a look at those legs. Maybe a bit tanned alright. But that doesn't hide the fact that they are well into their forty-first year, just like the rest of my body. I hardly dare to stand in front of the mirror any more, that's how deep the creases are around my eyes. And my neck. Not to mention that tummy and the by now countless grey hairs that crept into the brown.

I squeeze my knees together. Will I ever squeeze them around a male body? A young and lean body? Just spare me the body of a sixty plus, please. I know that I can have one of those easily enough, but I am not ready for that yet. Not yet.

I rest my head on a rolled up towel against the side of the bath and sigh again. Here you are, Janne Derks. Left to fend for yourself in a tiny apartment in the suburbs. Forty-one years old and this is the outcome. No man. No money. No child. And too old to ever have one. Rare moments are these, when I am in the bath or under the shower, that I feel the blood pumping around my veins again, my head clearing. He kept me sweet for long years. No, Jan, I am just not ready for children yet. Give me some more time, honey. Maybe after I have finished my MA. No, I need some time for myself at the moment. Why did I fall for it? For all those years? I knew it already at twenty-two dammit. That guy is not a keeper.

I should have broken up with him when I was at uni and gone for Eric instead. That would have been the right time to make a clean break. But I should definitely have done it at least ten years ago. And another ten years flew by before I finally started to see the light. Until that holiday where he himself came out with the announcement that he wants me out of his house. The house where he lay in our bed fucking that little tart from work. For God's sake.

Typical. How could I be so stupid? It's all my fault. I can't relax. If I take the time to think it all over, I only blame myself for everything that went wrong. It's no use. I can't turn back time. The past is in the past. The only thing left is to do my utmost best to live the second half of my life - if I have that much time left - the way I want to. I know, I know. *I'm not the only one*. Far from it. Evi is on her own, Karin is on her own, Sanne is on her own. If you are a woman of around forty and you find yourself in a stable relationship, you can count yourself lucky.

But still, I will need to get used to this. As a little girl, I imagined my life to be quite different. Yesterday Evi asked if I wanted to go out in town. Going out in town! And not on a shopping spree, but in the evening for a drink at the pub. Going out is something I haven't done since my mid-twenties. If that's how it needs to be done, sipping wine at the bar whilst trying to catch a man, then it's not worth it for me. Seriously, I would rather let the ground swallow me up as a hopeless forty-year-old - excuse me, forty-one-year-old - than expose myself on the dating scene again.

This is just not working. Relaxation is no longer an option, it seems. I turn the knob at the end of the bath to open up the outlet to drain the bath water. I pull my knees up and stare at the frothy water that begins to swirl into a little whirlpool. As a child it used to make me nervous. I believed that I could get sucked up by the swirling water down the plughole. Now it doesn't even seem such a bad idea. To let yourself get carried away with the bath water. As the water drains away through the outlet, I can't help but watch the swirling vortex. It's like a kind of meditation. I start to feel light and easy and for a moment I think that I need to hold onto something otherwise I will be swallowed up by the plughole.

The water in the bath is becoming very shallow. The plughole is starting to sputter. I focus on the silver lid under which the water disappears. I feel like I have stopped breathing. A rush of

adrenaline goes through my body. In panic I want to jump out of the bath, but my body has stopped responding to the signals from my brain. The vortex swallows me up. Yet as the comforting sounds of running water fill my head, I hear a voice inside me saying that 'it's alright'. Panting and with my heart racing, I give up resistance and let myself be carried away by the sensation.

2.

I slowly open my eyes. For a brief moment I had expected to be spewed out into the dark cavern of the sewers. But I find myself just sitting on my knees in the now empty bath. Still panting. And with a body that feels rejuvenated by some long overdue vigorous sexual activity.

I feel younger and more energised than I have for a very long time. Suddenly a shudder shakes me. Goosebumps. I look around. I laid a towel out ready, didn't I? Over there. Over the designer radiator.

I shake my head in confusion. Designer radiator? I stand up and grab a towel. It's soft, lovely and warm. Like it has just come out of the drier. Whilst I am drying myself, I examine my feet and the plughole next to them. That's the outlet from the house in Reiger Street. Marcel's house, from the time when I could still call it my home.

Am I going crazy? Did the hot water go to my head? That could be a credible explanation. You are not getting any younger, hey, Janne? And you have been a bit mentally unstable lately.

Carefully, I carry on with drying myself, whilst trying to ignore the turmoil inside of me. My brain is looking for connections and a logical explanation. I hardly dare to look around, but I already know. I am not in the tiny bathroom of my three bedroom flat, but in the spacious one from our semi detached house.

Having dried myself and got out of the bath, I put on the grey towelling robe that I have once borrowed from a hotel (correction stolen); I still haven't found the explanation of what has just happened. Except that the whole separation and my moving out to the the suburbs has never taken place. But that idea is absurd.

I look into the mirror, the condensation is clearing slowly but surely. 'At least 5 years younger,' I mutter to myself. The crow's feet are less noticeable and there is hardly any grey in my hair. And in my eyes I see twinkling, that I assumed long gone.

The bath of every woman's dreams. A bath that simply takes a couple of years off you! From the landing I glance into the bedroom. An unmade bed and on the floor Marcel's boxer short. Who else could they belong to? With trembling legs I walk downstairs. To the living room full of memories. The seating area with the knick-knacks on the windowsill and the cushions on the sofa. Everything the way I decorated it. It's back. It had never gone away.

I feel my heart in my throat as I walk bare foot over the beautiful warm wooden floor panels into the kitchen. There in the corner, next to the American style fridge, there is a kitchen clock on the wall which, besides the time, also shows the year. The clock which I gave to Marcel as a present and which I bought in that quirky little shop of curiosities.

I have to catch my breath as I glance at it.

Thursday, 17 December 2009.

It's real. Instead of December 2015, it's December 2009.

I bite into my arm until I nearly scream in pain.

A mobile starts ringing somewhere behind me. A ring tone that I haven't heard in years. That little tune from my old Nokia. I turn around and see the phone on the dining table. The vibrations make it travel along the wooden table top, whilst its screen is lit up green.

That's my good old 3310.

One step at a time, I approach the table, focusing on the antique little phone. Just as I am about to pick it up, I see the name on the screen.

MARCEL MOBILE.

My first instinct is: ignore it. Let the loser stew in his own juice. But the telephone's urgent ringing and buzzing continues and in the end curiosity wins. I pick up the phone and press the green button.

'Yes', I hear myself say, my voice unsteady.

'Hi honey, it's me.'

The disgusting voice of the man who screwed up my life. Or rather, completely ruined it. I can hear the insincerity under his smooth tone.

'I just wanted to say that I will be very late home tonight. It's a bit crazy at work.'

I sense Natasha, the intern, smirking in the background. She was the one he had an affair with for years before he plucked up the courage to kick me out.

'That's fine,' I hear myself say. 'I'll see you when I see you.'

'See you tomorrow. Kisses.'

I hang up on Marcel.

Kisses. Please, I am going to throw up.

My head is in turmoil. The sweat from my armpits is running down my body. For a brief moment I believed that I had received a second chance in life. Thrown back a couple of years through a time warp. So that I can have another go at saving my relationship. So that maybe I could still have a baby. But it's hopeless. I don't even want it any more. I want to get back to my own present, even if I look younger now. I simply can't bear to go through all that cheating, lying, break-up and everything else all over again.

I go upstairs again, back to the bathroom. I peek over the side of the bath, at the plughole. Whatever had happened, whatever crazy leap time had made, it definitely had something to do with that plughole. I am pretty sure of that. But that was the plughole in my apartment. Could I go back? Or will I have to live with this six years extra time forever? Should I try to teach Marcel a lesson, knowing what I know given that I have lived in the future?

No. Marcel, his far-too-young girlfriend and the house that is written in his name, make me feel sick. I want to get back to my own life in my own little flat, even if it's miserable. I let the towelling robe drop to the floor of the bathroom and step into the bath. I have no idea how I have done it in the first place, but I think that I need to re-create the circumstances of the time warp in order to make a return trip possible.

I turn the shower on, wait until the water warms up and let it wash over my face and body. With my foot I push on the plughole cover. I watch as the water line slowly rises.

The water needs to be high enough, I tell myself. And then I need to let it drain out so that I can get carried away with it. I chuckle at these insane ideas. It's too bizarre for words. Do I really believe that I can time-travel through the plugholes of my previous homes?

After a minute or so I am too impatient to wait any longer. I turn both taps off at the same time and lower my naked body onto my knees in the shallow water.

'God help me,' I whisper to myself and lift the cover off the outlet. When the water starts to swirl, I worry that I should have used some shower gel too. But as these thoughts are racing through my head, my breathing and pulse quicken and I feel myself becoming as limp as a wet flannel.