

The Experiment

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It was actually on the tour that I really got to know Tomas. “Music for the Masses” was the name of the project, or “Notes for Idiots” as Tomas called it.

The whole project was arranged by a performing arts company. The idea was absolutely brilliant: A small string orchestra, where Tomas and I played violin, and four popular artists: three pop stars and a comedian were bussed around Sweden. We started in Umeå and finished up in Malmö. At every location where we played, several local choirs had been invited to sing behind the performers. The choirs didn’t receive any payment, they just did it for fun. In addition, each choir member had a number of relatives and friends who wanted to see and hear their friend, or sister, or co-worker perform with a popular artist, so it wasn’t particularly difficult to fill the theatres and sports halls where we played.

Before the tour began, we were going to have a concert at Globen Arena, this time with a large orchestra. A few months earlier, I had received a call from a man called “the Baker”, whose role was the stage manager of the project. He told me what it was all about, that he needed people to the second violin section, what the pay was, and asked if I wanted the job. I immediately said yes. Just before we were about to hang up, he said: “We also need a section leader, do you know anyone?”

Now, it is always a bit humiliating to get asked if you know someone who can do a job that you can do yourself. I had done some section leader jobs in the last few years and felt quite suited for the job, but “the Baker” didn’t know that of course. And I didn’t say anything about it either during that first call. I just said that I would think about it, and we hung up.

During the rest of the day, I gathered courage. I spoke to my husband and called a fellow violinist to get some support. My colleague said: “The way it works in the world today is that if you want something, you have to ask for it.” He was right of course, and the next day I called “the Baker” back and said: “I can be the section leader.”

“The Baker” had gone completely silent when I made the proposal. He asked if he could think about it and after we hung up I felt certain that he must have thought I was completely insane, arrogant, and pompous. “The baker” was the spider in the web when it came to orchestra jobs in the Stockholm area. Perhaps I had burned my bridges for a long time to come. But the next day, he called back and said: “Let’s do it. You will be the section leader.”

So now I was sitting in Globen, on the podium, at the very front of the second violin section. The entire concert was going to be recorded so that it could be broadcast on Television at a later date. What had I got myself into? I was terrified.

¹ The Experiment can be required in Swedish from Anna Schulze. Write to: anna.schulze@lnu.se.

The Orchestra had rehearsed for a couple of days, but the dress rehearsal was the first time that we played together with the choir and soloists. During the rehearsal itself, we were informed that we would also be performing “Hebrew Slaves Chorus” from Verdi’s *Nebukadnessar* - that would serve as the “pièce de résistance” by the invited choirs. Someone quickly handed out the parts and the conductor, a man called Per, gave the downbeat, “Va, pensiero, sull’ali dorate” – “Go, thoughts, on wings of gold” the choir sang, while we played the orchestra’s swaying accompaniment. A few bars into the piece, the second violin had a rest for a few bars, and that was when we discovered that there was an error in that part. There were too many or too few bars of rest written in. The parts were completely wrong when we came in again, because something was off. We found our way back to where we supposed to be, but it was obvious that there was a typo in the part. After the run-through, we tried to call the conductor’s attention to the situation. He leaned forward and tried to hear what we were saying, but so much was going on: engineering, direction, the famous artists that were standing around impatiently. Then someone came and pulled him aside and he was soon deep in a conversation with someone important.

On the desk behind me sat a woman who held a permanent position with the Stockholm Philharmonic Orchestra. An orchestra where I worked as a substitute, and I was worried about my reputation. Next to her sat Lena, a former classmate, whose entire expression clearly showed her great skepticism about having me as the section leader. And then to my side, was Tomas. We had seen each other many times before as I often filled in as a substitute at Folkoperan, where he had a contract. We had met in other freelance contexts as well, but we didn’t actually know each other.

So, there we sat, Tomas and I with our faulty part, and the clock ticking closer and closer to the concert and TV recording.

Lena proclaimed loudly, what she believed the problem was. I tried to understand what she meant, but everything was so chaotic, and I had a strong feeling that she was wrong. Besides, the way she was trying to take over really wasn’t okay. She definitely would not have done that if the woman from the Philharmonic orchestra had been the section leader.

With the conductor still engaged in his conversation, it was clear that no help was coming from those quarters. I looked at Tomas and said: “Let’s ask if we can borrow the score.” Per let us borrow it, so we took it and our part and went to one of the huge concrete spaces backstage. Back there we met a composer I knew going back and forth with a stroller. He was married to Maria, the pianist whom I had a duo with. Maria was nursing their three-month-old baby. The composer kept the wheels rolling so to speak, pushing the stroller around backstage while Maria rehearsed.

We spread out the sheet music on the floor and squatted around it: Tomas, the composer and I. We counted the beats and compared our part with the rest of the score and soon discovered the problem. I noted the necessary changes in the part, while the composer stood up and picked up the baby, who had woken up, from its stroller.

It was time to get changed. “We’ll have to tell the others when we’re on stage,” Tomas said. We parted ways and I quickly changed and put on my make-up with shaking hands. Then I dashed towards the stage with my violin, bow and pencil in the hope that I would have time to make the changes. But everything was already so delayed. The rehearsal had taken longer than expected, and now it was only a few minutes until the concert.

I turned around and tried to explain that there would be an additional two-bar pause. The woman from the Philharmonic Orchestra leaned forward as if she was having difficulty hearing what I was saying, while Lena continued to look skeptical. I was about to stand up and write the changes on their score so that even musicians behind could see it, but the lights were dimmed, the audience fell silent, and the concert began. There was nothing I could do, but sit tight and hope

for the best. It was a television recording. The Arena was sold out. Several thousand expectant, dressed-up people filled the parquet and other seats. All I could do was rely on the others to follow me when I showed the cue. Or rather, that they would not start playing until I showed the cue.

"The Hebrew Slaves Chorus" was part way into the program. The conductor gave the downbeat, and the TV cameras swept over us. Bar by bar we steadily approached the critical moment. We arrived at the incorrectly notated pause. I counted the beats slavishly and out of the corner of my eye I saw how Lena demonstratively picked up her violin. She took the lead herself, as if she had been the section leader. The others in the section followed her uncertainly. I felt a small sense of satisfaction at how bad it sounded. I kept counting: two bars remained, one bar remained. I raised my violin and led the entrance. Everything came together. We had solved it. Tomas and I had solved it.

I turned my head discreetly, while I played and smiled at Tomas. He smiled back. At that moment there was no one in the entire arena who had greater confidence than we did. It was as if we were leading all the slaves in "The Hebrew Slaves Chorus" to freedom.

When it was time for the intermission and as the audience began to leave, Tomas leaned towards me and said: "They didn't believe in us, those bastards." I shook my head in agreement. "I have the urge to throw tomatoes at them", he continued. He paused briefly as he loosened his bow. Then he looked up and said, "And by that I mean canned tomatoes."

After the concert at Globen, the tour commenced. We were flown to Umeå and then traveled by bus down through Sweden. I didn't know anyone very well. Maria, with whom I had the duo, wasn't on the tour itself. I really wished that she, or one of my close violinist friends had been there. As always in those situations, I had the feeling that everyone else knew each other extremely well, and that I was the only outsider.

Felicia, who sat in the first violin section, and Gunhild who sat in the viola section, were also on the trip. They had a quartet together with Tomas and a cellist, who wasn't on the tour. Of course, they knew each other extremely well.

Felicia was the primary player in the quartet and also the one who had put the group together. Their concept was simple but effective; they played pop songs in a quartet setting. They were adapted entirely for playing at parties. Their repertoire included: ABBA, Elton John, Roxette, Madonna, all kinds of things. Recently, they had started rehearsing an arrangement of Tomas' favorite song "I Will Survive" by Gloria Gaynor. They seemed to have a lot of fun in their quartet.

Sometimes, before the concerts when they were unpacking at different places, Tomas started playing the accompaniment for one of the songs they were working on. It served as a signal: Felicia and Gunhild would immediately pick up their instruments and play along. There was something enviable about their obvious camaraderie whenever Tomas played the opening bars of "I Will Survive."

Felicia sat together with Gunhild on the tour bus. Tomas sat on the other side of the aisle so that he could talk to them. I sat alone a couple of seats behind Tomas. Theoretically, the person I could have been close to was Lena. But she had been demonstratively annoyed with me ever since the Globen concert. Now that the tour was underway, it was abundantly clear that this was the frame of mind she intended to maintain. I tried to talk to her after the first concert of the tour in Umeå. I said that I wanted to have a good collaboration and a pleasant atmosphere in the section, and that it was important that we treated each other with respect. She may have toned down the hostility a little after that, but she was still very unfriendly. When I wanted to change some bowing, she reached reluctantly for the music stand, lifted her pen and wrote it in, all the while maintaining a facial expression that said it was the stupidest bowing suggestion that she had ever

heard in her entire life. She never met my gaze and barely spoke to anyone else either. It was also extra sensitive because there were only three people in our section on the tour. It was so strange to have someone with such a critical and weary attitude in such a small section. She didn't exactly disappear in the crowd.

Tomas was a few years older than me. Closer to forty. He was a rather short man. Sometime at the beginning of the tour, he told me that he had an identical twin. For some reason, I asked him, because with Tomas it seemed okay to ask such things: "Were you the smaller twin who had to lie in the incubator?" He looked at me and answered briefly, "Yes, that was me." He was very well trained, and at the same time there was something androgynous about him.

In one of the first cities we came to he asked me if I wanted to go for lunch. I was glad that he asked. We found a Chinese restaurant where we sat almost alone under dragon lampshades and red tassels. There was something about the way he spoke, the way he moved as he sat across from me and ate deep-fried shrimp. For some reason, I felt really happy. I was happy to look at Tomas and listen to his bright voice.

We talked about Lena and how incredibly reluctant she was about participating in the tour. Tomas looked thoughtful and then he said, "I wonder if she's a lesbian." I didn't really understand what that had to do with anything, but I replied, "Ask her." It was obviously a joke. The idea of asking seemed extremely inappropriate. But to my surprise, Tomas replied, "Yes, I'm thinking about it. I can just ask things like that." "Has anyone ever asked you?" I said. He looked at me and said, "I'm gay, yes." He added, "It's pretty obvious, isn't it?"

And it was in a way. All that androgyny. Suddenly, I realised what it was that I was feeling when I was sitting there. I felt elation. When I was with Tomas, I felt glad to be a woman. I had rarely felt this way before. I often viewed it as a kind of losing ticket, lower salaries and a lot of other things. But Tomas, with his feminine way of moving, his facial expressions and his bright voice, made me see femininity in a whole new light. I liked how he talked and how he moved. I realised that femininity could be something desirable.

The day after we had that lunch, and when it was time to continue on the tour bus, Tomas slumped down on the seat beside me. I was so happy that he chose to sit with me, and after that we sat together for the rest of the tour. As the days went by, I realised that Tomas was probably one of the best violinist friends I had ever had.

It was a great tour. Apart from Lena's constant sulking, we had fun. Felicia and Gunhild were also really nice people to be with. On the few nights we were off we went bowling, or sat in a pub. It was a good time. Actually, I had never liked myself as much as I did on that tour. Somehow, I became a much braver person than I normally was, now that I had Tomas by my side. We were each other's allies, we had each other's back.

The tour came to an end. We all returned to our freelancing lives. When the Globen concert was broadcast, Tomas and I watched it together at his apartment in Bromma. When the part with the ill-fated beats came up, we toasted each other with our mugs of tea.

I continued to work in the duo with Maria. We rehearsed, and I spent a lot of time on the phone, trying to sell concerts. Tomas, Felicia and Gunhild continued working in their quartet. Tomas and I often saw each other at Folkoperan. Sometimes we ended up at the same desk in the orchestra. I really enjoyed sitting with him. Our music was as tight rhythmically as we were privately. Sometimes we were part of the same church performances. I used to pick him up with my car if we had to go far. The feeling I got on the tour, of being much stronger when I was with

Tomas, persisted. It was a friendship that I drew strength from. When I sat in an orchestra foyer or a parish hall between rehearsals and concerts, I dared to speak my mind in a completely different way when Tomas was around. And I think he was much more forthright when I was with him too.

Sometimes, I would invite Tomas over for dinner. My husband also liked him, and in turn Tomas thought my husband was a real catch. Once we invited him, Gunhild and her partner, an oboist named Jesper. It was in September, and many flowers were still in bloom, and when it got dark we went out into the garden. In those days, people still smoked, and the glow from my and my husband's and Jesper's cigarettes glowed in the darkness.

It was around this time that doubt started to creep into my life. Was this really what I was supposed to be doing? Would I continue freelancing, and how long would I be able to do it? Our family's finances relied mainly on what my husband earned as a conductor. I enjoyed the duo I had with Maria. But it was clear that I was carrying the heavier workload, when it came to the exhausting job of selling in concerts. That was something that had begun to irritate me. Maria was also sometimes very difficult to collaborate with. She needed a lot of support in a way that I wasn't used to. My husband worked in many European countries, and it was hard to find a balance as a freelance musician with two small sons and a husband who was constantly away.

How long would I be able to keep going?

I thought about trying to make one final effort and audition for a permanent position with an orchestra. Quite simply, I would apply for any and all auditions that were advertised. I asked Tomas if he was also considering auditioning. He just shook his head firmly and said "No, I'm not going to do that." I asked why. He answered, "I'm turning forty this summer and I'm too old to handle rejection."

There was something about the way he said it, he just made a flat statement. Most people would probably have seen that as a flaw, something they could work on about themselves or that kind of thing. But Tomas just stated it as a fact. It was inspiring somehow. I thought, that's another way of looking at it. You can simply accept yourself as you are.

At the same time, the issue of freelancing and how burdensome it could be at times, was something that Tomas and I talked about a lot. "Where do all the old freelancers go?" he asked one day when we were sitting in the car on the way to a gig. I had picked him up in Farsta Strand, where he had had an errand at the home of another freelance musician. Yeah, where do all the freelancers go? "It's like they turn thirty-five, or forty and sometimes forty-five," he continued, "but then suddenly, one day you don't see them anymore. Where do they actually go? What happens to everyone?"

What he said was true. There were few freelancers who actually held out until retirement. This was also the case before Musikalliansen existed, which created a certain amount of financial security. Before it existed, you had to fend for yourself in a completely different way.

So, what did happen to all the freelancers? Some started studying. Some took up teaching. Some got administrative or leadership positions at various concert or opera houses. Some started working with something completely different, anything at all. In most cases, the former freelance musician did very well in the new situation. There was something about it, if you got through the music academy, then survived a number of years as a freelancer, you could handle just about anything. It was like having done the world's most comprehensive military service.

During that time, when Tomas and I tried desperately to grab every church gig that came up, often with the humiliating payment of 999 kroner, which was set to avoid a taxable cut-off point, I didn't feel much like a winner.

When I woke up in the mornings, I was filled with a strong feeling of anxiety. What would become of me? How would things turn out? What kind of life was this anyway?

It was obvious that Tomas was thinking the same thing. One evening when we were packing up for a performance he said: “Do you know what? Sometimes when I wake up in the morning I think: how long is this experiment going to last?” He laughed. I laughed too. I said, “That’s exactly what I wonder too.”

But then there is everything else that goes along with being a musician. Like the music itself. The feeling one gets when sitting in the orchestra at a performance and working together to make it all happen. The timing, that varied so much between different singers and conductors, and what happened in the room on just that night. To perceive everything that was happening around you and to be one with it. To be the one who carried or the one who was carried. To be a part of the collective in the orchestra pit, who no one saw but everyone heard. Who sat there in the darkness with the music stand lights pointed away from our faces, listening together, seeing together, breathing together. There were nights when I thought that sex was so incredibly overrated. That this, was what closeness was. We will never get closer than this. What happened in the orchestra pit was the ultimate intimacy.

One evening during intermission I said, “You know what I’ve been thinking?” Tomas had accompanied me outside to keep me company while I smoked. I continued: “That there are a lot of people who don’t play violin.” Tomas nodded. “And of course, they have experienced things.” I lit my cigarette. “But really, it’s almost like they haven’t really lived. It’s only when you have a concert or a performance that you are really living.” I took a drag from my cigarette. “Have you ever thought about that?” “Yes,” he said. “I have thought about that.”

It became summer. Tomas turned forty. He celebrated with his brother, the larger twin who had not been in the incubator. I had a concert with Maria that evening, but we went there afterwards. My husband and sons had been there earlier in the day. My husband told me afterwards what my oldest son, who was six at the time, had said. “This is the greatest party I’ve ever been to, really good food and lots to do.” He had eaten Chili con Carne and danced all night in the garage where they had set up a kiddie disco.

Maria also liked Tomas. I had the feeling that she was almost jealous that I had such a good friend.

Things were coming apart at the seams with Maria. I felt like I was carrying a heavy load and on occasion we banged heads. Similarly, things were getting worse between Tomas and Felicia. He thought she was very dominant and increasingly he felt like she was taunting him.

Sometimes we talked about leaving the life of being a violinist.

Tomas had an amazing tenor voice. He was an experienced choir singer and was thinking about developing his singing career further. For my part, I started taking writing courses. I didn’t intend for it to become a career, but I needed to do something else. I needed a distraction from the constantly nagging worries about getting gigs. I was also very unhappy that my cooperation with Maria was falling apart. I turned to writing as a form of solace.

Writing soon began to take up more and more of my time. At the same time, I started teaching at a music school, which provided a certain amount of stability. I no longer had time to play at Folkoperan. Around the same time, Tomas took a leave of absence from there and started studying at an opera program.

Things turned out as they so often do, that one sees each other a lot because you are colleagues or had the same assignment and travelled together by car or train. Drank coffee in the same

orchestra foyer or stood around talking while unpacking. Then life changes and gradually you don't meet in the same way anyway. But we did keep in touch and saw each other occasionally.

"Where do all the old freelancers go?" we had wondered. At least now we knew where we had gone. But there were others who kept fighting. Felicia and Gunhild moved on to new projects, as did Gunhild's partner Jesper.

Tomas completed his opera program. He invited my husband and me to his graduation performance. He sang beautifully. It was only about a year before my husband and I went our separate ways, it was one of the last things we did together as a couple.

I continued writing. My first book was published by a reputable publishing house. Tomas came to the book release. He complained dramatically that it was during the Pride festival and that he was forced to leave the festival grounds for over an hour. Shortly after that, I was offered a job as a teacher for a writing course at the school where I had studied. That's how I came to leave the life of a musician.

After that, I didn't meet so many musicians anymore. I was busy establishing myself within a new artform. When the next book came out, I was tired and depressed after the divorce and didn't feel like having a party.

That Christmas, I received a large envelope from Tomas. In it was a printout of a photograph on plain A4 paper. Tomas looked into the camera with big, shining eyes. I understood that the photo had been taken by another musician colleague. A man who took a lot of photos and who often used Tomas as a model. I had always wondered if there was something going on between them, but I had never asked.

Tomas had written on the photograph: "My retreat will soon be over, and then I'll be in touch!" I hadn't understood that he saw our lack of contact as some sort of retreat. I thought that we just had a lot going on. But I was glad that he had reached out to me, it showed me that he was thinking about me. I found a Christmas card in a desk drawer, and sent it to him. I wrote: "My card is much more boring than yours, but anyway - looking forward to hearing from you when your retreat is over, hugs!"

But after that, months went by and he didn't get in touch.

I thought I would be the one to reach out, but something always came up: the phone rang, or an assignment had to be completed and it slipped my mind.

When I wrote my third book, I spent a week in a house on Gotland that was made available to me by my publisher. One evening, I received word from Tomas on Messenger. He wrote: "I'm doing an internship as a stage design assistant (a carpenter in practice) at the Orion Theatre. I'm a hit in my overalls! Everyone here likes me and I'm really enjoying it." I was delighted to hear from him. At the same time, I wondered why he had written that everyone liked him, as if there was something unusual about that. Tomas was so easy to like. After that we didn't hear from each other for over a year. Perhaps, I felt that the ball was in his corner. I was about to write to him on several occasions, but put it off again and again. I had so much to do, and pretty much didn't see anyone who wasn't associated with the school where I worked or the publishing house.

Another year passed and I received another message on Messenger. It was also about a retreat. He wrote that he was on a retreat in Skåne. This time, a proper, organised retreat, with healthy food and meditation. He wrote that he was doing well, and felt that he was developing and that he'd be in touch later on.

The weeks went by, and he didn't get in touch. I took it as a sign that he needed time and that it was up to him to take the initiative. He had written that he'd be in touch. So he would have to be the one to do that.

A few months later, a short story I had written was nominated for a competition on Sveriges Radio. I posted information about the competition on Facebook. A few hours later, I received a message from Tomas asking me something about how to vote. I replied to him. That was the last time we heard from each other.

Where do all the old freelancers go? Suddenly, one day you don't see them anymore. I thought to myself, well this is how it goes. It had been several years since I last saw Tomas. One day, when the contact surface is no longer there, you drift apart. But I thought of him often, of all the good and funny things that he had said. Of how nice it was to sit next to him in the orchestra. His special sense of humour. I thought of the strength I had felt when we sat in Globen with the TV cameras sweeping over us. Of the euphoric feeling I got when we got it right in "The Hebrew Slaves Chorus". The friendship with Tomas was a place I could always go to gather strength. It was where I knew I was strong.

I met a new man. My life was filled with new activities and friends. The boys grew up, I wrote more books, and I was busy. But every time I heard "I Will Survive", I saw Tomas in front of me: how he stood in some unpacking room and played the intro, and looked concentrated.

Still, I intended to get in touch with him. But I always put it off. When Facebook reminded me that it was his birthday, I wrote on his timeline. Messages like: "Congratulations Tomas, hope you are doing great!" Or: "Hey Tomas! I don't know how much you are on Facebook, but if you see this, I wish you a fantastic birthday!" Because to be honest, it had been a long time since I had seen any activity from Tomas or heard anything about him. But on the other hand: I really didn't know what Felicia or Gunhild were doing either.

One evening, during the intermission of a chamber concert, I ran into Jesper, who had been in a relationship with Gunhild. Jesper and Gunhild had parted ways many years earlier, even before I left the music world. He was known as a talented oboist, and I had played with him on many occasions where he always played incredibly well.

I asked him how he was doing and what he was up to these days. Without hesitation he replied: "I'm disabled. I don't play anymore." I asked him what had happened, and he replied, "One day, it just didn't work. I couldn't play anymore." He took a sip of wine from his glass and continued, "I've also been diagnosed with autism spectrum disorder. It might have something to do with it."

He looked sad. I was surprised by what he was telling me. I had always seen him so connected to his musicianship, and I thought it must be tough for him to not be able to play anymore. "So, what are you doing now?" I asked. He said that he was on sick leave and had been for a long time. But then he brightened up and said, "But now I have a job opportunity coming up. My contact at the Employment office has made it possible for me to start working at Musikverket."

"That's great," I said. "It sounds like a job that could be really interesting." He nodded, and then he said, "But Gunhild, on the other hand, is doing really well. She has started writing her own songs. You know, she sings so beautifully."

I remembered that from the tour. Gunhild and Tomas had sometimes sung in harmony on the bus, and I commented on it once: "How beautifully you sing in your quartet."

"You should go listen to her sometime," Jesper continued. "She usually sings at a place in Hökarängen, and it's not too far from where you live." He added, "Her songs are really good."

When the concert was over, I said goodbye to Jesper. It had been good to see him. I thought about that time in the garden when we had stood smoking in the September darkness. Even now, I could smell a faint scent of cigarettes on his jacket. Somehow, it cheered me up that he still had that smell. It tied the meeting to that memory.

A few months later, I actually ran into Gunhild on the commuter train. She told me about the songs she was writing, that she was thinking about making an album, that she had a lot of concerts and was now working on an arrangement for a string quintet. And that Jesper had gotten that job at Musikverket. He was enjoying it a lot. When we arrived at the station where I had to get off, I asked if she was on Facebook. She said she was, and we decided to keep in touch that way.

When I got off the train, I realised that I hadn't asked if she had any contact with Tomas or Felicia. It was a shame that I hadn't. But on the other hand, I could always contact them myself.

Now when I thought of Tomas, I imagined him in overalls in a theatre environment, walking around with a tool belt and using all his muscles. And I imagined him singing. He must have continued to develop as a singer. Maybe he sang tenor arias in Bach cantatas around Easter and Christmas. Perhaps he was in opera productions. Maybe he even played the violin again. When summer came and it was his birthday, I wrote "Happy birthday, Tomas. I think of you often and wish you all the best!"

It was autumn. Winter came early, with snow already in November. I was on my way home from the city on the commuter train. We passed Farsta Strand and for some reason, I always thought of Tomas when we passed Farsta Strand. It was just because I had picked him up there once.

What was he doing now? It had been many years since we had been in touch. How was he? I realised with full force just how much I actually missed him. How nice it would be to see him.

I took out my phone and went to his page on Facebook. As soon as I did the search, it struck me that I had never done that before, never gone to his page. I had only written greetings when it was his birthday.

I got to his page and there were my birthday greetings. One after the other: "Congratulations Tomas. Hope you are doing great!" "Happy birthday, I think of you often!" "Hey Tomas! I don't know how much you are on Facebook, but if you see this, I wish you a fantastic birthday!" "Happy birthday, Tomas. I think of you often and wish you all the best!"

They were all messages from me. No one else had written anything there. Well, one person, a woman named Karin. She had written: "Miss you and your lovely tenor. See you on the other side."

Tomas was not on a retreat. He was not building sets for a theatre. He was not playing the violin. He was not singing any Bach cantatas. He didn't laugh his special laugh, and he didn't speak with his bright voice. Tomas was dead. He no longer existed. I could never call him. Never see him again. It was over. And as I realised this, I understood what he had meant that time in the unpacking room. When he had laughed and asked: "How long is this experiment supposed to last?"

That he had not meant that the experiment was the life of freelancing.

What he was thinking about when he woke up in the morning was about life. It was life that was the experiment. He had said that he wondered how long life was supposed to last.

My station arrived and I almost lost my balance as I stepped off onto the platform. It was a few weeks before Christmas. Wet snowflakes fell and lay like slush over the asphalt. It was around six o'clock in the evening. It was dark and the streetlights were on. I didn't know where to go. It felt impossible to just go home. I stumbled around: past the centre and into the church. It was empty. All I heard was the echo when I gasped for air. I put a hundred kronor in the candle box, and lit candle after candle until it felt silly. What did it matter that I lit a bunch of candles? I also wrote in the Church's prayer book. Something about everyone must get help, I don't remember exactly.

I came home. We had dinner. I didn't want to say anything when the boys were around, especially since I hadn't officially confirmed that he was gone. After dinner, I went into my study and pulled out one of the desk drawers. I found the picture that Tomas had sent that Christmas with the inscription: "My retreat is almost over." I shouldn't have just left him alone. It had been the wrong decision.

Later that evening, I asked my husband, "If I just say Tomas to you, do you know who I mean?" "Yes of course," said my husband. "You talk about him all the time. At least once a week." I told him that I had been on his page, and that everything suggested that he was gone.

I wrote a message to Gunhild. I wrote that it seemed like Tomas was no longer with us. "No," she wrote back, "he's not. He took his own life nine years ago."

The next evening, I told the boys that a friend of mine had died. I didn't say that he had taken his own life, but I said, "You probably don't remember this, but you went to a party at his place when you were little." And my oldest son said, "Yeah, I remember. I danced with a guy in a garage to Maja Piraya all night long." I was glad that he remembered.

So much time had passed. For so long, I had thought that Tomas was just somewhere else, doing carpentry, singing, playing or on retreat. But it wasn't like that. He had been gone for many years.

I also realised something else. That the last message I received, when he wondered how he could vote for my short story, would have been not long before he died. We hadn't actually grown apart. I had drifted away. But Tomas had actually died. "It feels stupid writing about this," Gunhild wrote back to me that evening. "We need to meet and talk." And then she wrote: "And of course I wonder if you heard about Jesper?" I answered that I hadn't heard anything about him, since that time she told me that he had gotten that job at Musikverket. She replied: "He also took his life last spring." And then she wrote again: "We should meet up."

I met Gunhild a few days later at a lunch restaurant. She told me what had happened to both Tomas and Jesper. Now and then she stroked my arm as she spoke. She explained that Tomas had become quite difficult in his final days, very stuck in certain patterns of thought and that it had been easy to get in an argument with him. He had called her on that day, but she hadn't managed to answer. He left a message: telling her what he had done, and that he was at the hospital, not knowing how things would turn out. When she listened to the voicemail, she tried to call him back repeatedly. She had also called the hospital, but they had referred her to the family to get information. After that, she had written a letter that she had taken over to his place and dropped through his mailbox.

A few days later his twin brother called her. He had found the letter on the doormat of the apartment in Bromma.

Tomas had left the hospital shortly after leaving that message. The nurse had gone to get something, some kind of antidote, and when she came back, he was gone. He had collapsed on the street. An ambulance had arrived quickly, but at that point there was nothing they could do.

She also told me about Jesper, how he had also become difficult. There had been so much darkness. She hadn't always had the strength to see him either, and it tormented her.

In the months that follow, I go to the forest every day. After walking for ten minutes, I start to cry. Day after day, I walk around there in the forest and cry.

I think about Tomas and how much I liked him. About how I never understood how he really felt, even though we talked so much.

After that winter, I don't want to go to the forest for several years. People often talk about how much they love the forest, that it is a place of calm and contemplation. But I'm starting to hate the forest. It's the place where something terrible has happened. It is in the forest that I fully realise that Tomas is gone. Actually, that both Jesper and Tomas are gone. I think of Gloria Gaynor's song, "I Will Survive". The song that Tomas liked so much, and I think about how he didn't do that, he didn't survive.

Gunhild performs in a park close to where I live. She sings so beautifully. She has a band with her: one man playing the guitar and another playing the double bass. Her songs are about light and happiness, a lust for life, and joy. On courage and hope. Sometimes she plays the viola, it sounds like a curtain fluttering in a light breeze on a summer morning.

She finishes her album. I attend the release party. She performs the songs with a string quintet. Everything is so nicely arranged. It sounds beautiful in the theatre foyer where they play.

After that, Gunhild goes on tour through Norway. She does a lot of things all the time. She performs on different stages in the Stockholm area and around the country. Her experiment continues.

One day, I see that Felicia is going to play at the church close to where I live. The same church as the one I ran to when I released Tomas was dead. She will be performing piano trios by Clara Schumann. I buy her a flower and ask the organiser to give it to her. Afterwards, we hug each other. We haven't seen each other for many years, and she says to me: "Do you remember that tour? What a time we had! And that strange Lena."

We say nothing about Tomas.

He is just there.

A few weeks later, I happen to see a clip of Felicia playing in a quartet in another church. As an encore, they perform one of the old ABBA songs. She plays so beautifully.