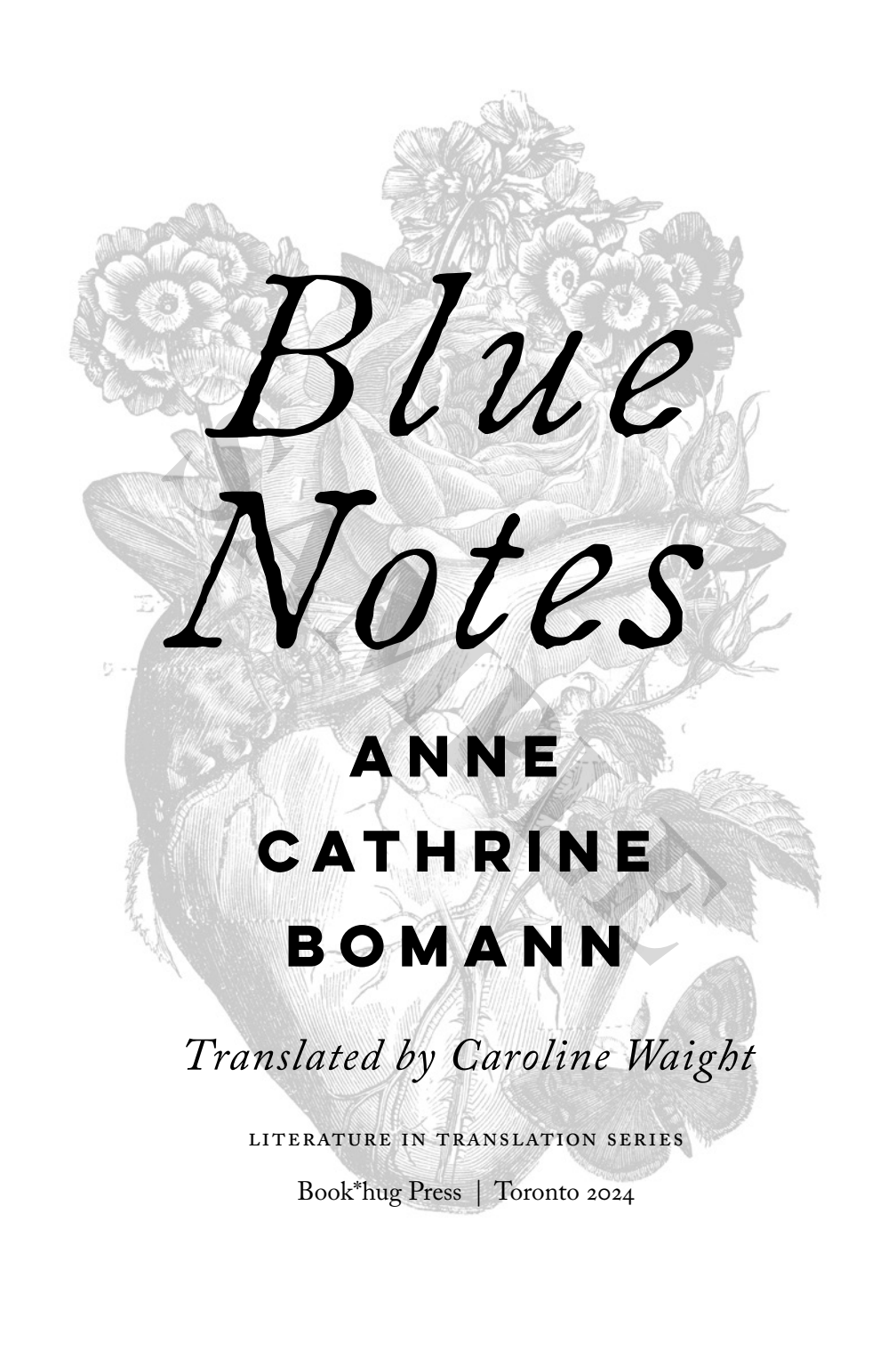




*Blue  
Notes*

ANNE  
CATHRINE  
BOMANN

*Translated by Caroline Waight*



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*April 2011*

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## **ELISABETH**

ELISABETH LOOKED INTO THE NURSE'S eyes and tried to understand what she'd just said. Grey eyes, with streaks of something darker, and if she stared long enough it was as though they lost all meaning. They became something someone had spilled, two murky stains that might at any moment dart elsewhere on her face.

"Autopsy?" she repeated.

"I realize this is a difficult thing to wrap your head around, but if we can find out what went wrong here, Winter might be able to help prevent the same thing happening to another little boy or girl." The nurse put her hand on Elisabeth's arm. "Actually, for some parents, it can make an unfortunate situation like this a little less meaningless."

At last Elisabeth blinked, taking a step backwards to escape the clasp hand. "I'd rather you didn't touch me, if you don't

mind," she said. "And stop talking about cutting into my son. He's right over there, and he isn't dead yet."

The nurse pursed her lips, deepening the smokers' lines around her mouth, and it struck Elisabeth how incredibly ugly she was in her shapeless scrubs. The dirty hair and grown-out roots.

"Thank you," she said, turning her back. "I'd like to be alone with him now."

She went over to the bed. Winter wasn't there anymore, that was obvious. Only the body under the oversize duvet, curled gently in all that whiteness, surrounded by machines like lapping mechanical waves. She realized she'd started breathing in time with them again.

"My little heart," she whispered. "I don't want to be here without you."

And she didn't. When she imagined leaving Winter here, when she thought of getting into her car and driving away while he stayed, there was such a fierce shudder in her chest that for a moment she thought she'd lose her footing.

So there she stood, trying not to think of anything much. Just letting the seconds run over her like water. She stroked Winter's downy cheeks, grinning at the sight of his little milk teeth pressed into his lips, almost as though he were sitting on the floor back home, engrossed in one of his drawings. His hand did not respond when she squeezed it in hers, but she squeezed it anyway.

*Mom.* His voice struck her as soon as she closed her eyes. *Come and look, I've drawn a spaceship!* Her little boy, conjured by years of injections and hormone treatments, perfect on the surface, but with the sickness lurking underneath his breastbone. Would it have been easier to lose him if it had happened in one swift tug? In a car accident, maybe, or after a bad fall at the playground? She had no idea. She knew only that this was the worst thing that had ever happened to her, the most impossible.

"I'm going now, my little darling."

She whispered very close to his ear, telling him there was nothing to be scared of. She kissed him and stroked his hair one last

time. Then she straightened up, her head swimming from months of fear and lack of sleep.

In the corridor outside, she bumped into the nurse from before. “You can switch them off now,” she said. “But you’re not cutting him open.”

The nurse looked like she was about to say something, but Elisabeth continued past her, making for the exit. The hard clack of her heels was flung up against the walls and back into her face like a slap. “But aren’t you going to be there, then?” the nurse called after her. “Elisabeth, aren’t you going to come and say goodbye?”

# CHAPTER ONE

*September 2024*

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## SHADI

IT WAS EMIL WHO SUGGESTED Shadi go somewhere other than home to write.

“Don’t you think it would be a good idea to get out a little bit?” he asked, and she had thought it would be hard to concentrate. But it turns out the panoptic effect of other people’s glances and their diligently hunched backs keeps her going. And not just that. All the rituals that run like paths through familiar terrain back at the flat—they’ve got no room here, where everything is new.

She opens her dissertation. The first task must be to try to distinguish between normal grief and the kind that was given its own diagnosis a few years back. Persistent grief disorder. When she looks it up in the International Classification of Diseases manual, she finds various symptoms that must be present in order to be diagnosed. For one thing, the event the person is grieving must be

at least six months in the past, and it also must be a bereavement. It's not enough, as she first thought, to simply get divorced or lose your job or something, no matter how bad that might feel.

The reading room smells of warm, summer-browned bodies and bags containing packed lunches, which people take to the public areas in the library or the park across the road. Some people write with music in their ears; others sag over the tables and doze until they wake with a start, peering guiltily around them. A guy with a beanie is snoring gently to her right. Someone has opened a window, and the wind plays with the rough curtains. Glancing at the clock, Shadi decides to finish the section she's working on, although her belly is crying out for food. Forty-five minutes later she grabs the box of yesterday's leftovers and walks out alone into the sharp light, while her cardigan saves her seat.

Returning from her break, she goes first into the kitchenette, where another guy from the reading room is pouring water into two stacked plastic cups. He turns toward her and smiles, so she feels obliged to stay.

"You want one?" he asks.

"Yes, please." She follows him with her eyes as he pours in far too much water and puts the kettle back on to boil.

"Guess you're writing a dissertation too, huh?"

She nods. "Psychology. What about you?"

"Political science." He rolls his eyes. "Puts you in dire need of some instant coffee after lunch, doesn't it?"

He opens the fridge, takes out the plastic bottle Shadi herself put in there that morning, and pours milk into his coffee. *Hey*, she wants to say. *Hey, don't do that*. But she says nothing, just stands there feeling the glint behind her eyes as he turns the bottle upside down and shakes out the last few drops.

"Right, back to the grindstone." He gives her a wink, but her face is stiff and uncooperative. On his way out of the little kitchen, he steps on the pedal of the garbage and dumps the bottle, chosen specially at Netto and rinsed late last night with scalding water as she stood at the sink.



“Have fun!”

After that, work slows to a crawl. She keeps replaying the scene from the kitchenette, imagining all the things she should have said. *Hey, you do know that's my milk, yeah?* Anyone else would have spoken up, wouldn't they? Or they would have offered him a bit, just so long as there was still some left, and then everything would have been fine. Why is that always so hard for her?

Bit by bit, she gets back into her rhythm. She hauls piles of articles about grief out of her bag, leaning forward to decipher the fine tracks of the lettering across the paper, taking meticulous notes on everything she can use. As the hours pass, the reading room empties around her, and by the time she finally decides to head home there are only two of them left. Shadi and a thin, red-haired girl in the corner, who apparently lives off the jumbo raisins in the jar in front of her.

Shutting her laptop, she stretches her aching back. The song she's had in her head for days comes back as soon as she gives her thoughts free rein. How does it go again? They sing it at family parties—on the rare occasions they're all together—and although to Shadi's great regret her mother never taught her or her little sister Persian, the rhythm is alive inside her somewhere.

Against the background of the tune, she walks home through the city. The sun hangs large and heavy on the horizon. Today, for once, she's the one coming home late. Emil is on the sofa with his computer in his lap when she walks through the door, and he looks up. She goes over to him, still wearing her jacket. There's a certain power in being the one awaited, she thinks as she kisses him. The one who comes in from outside and sets the air in motion.

**THORSTEN**

LOOKING UP EVERY SO OFTEN from his notes, Thorsten registers the September sun like a warm hand against his cheek. On the university lawns outside the window, kids are sitting in groups on the grass, and once in a while their shouts reach him even in the office. It would be a nice change to sit outside and have a chat with them, but there's rarely time for that these days, and anyway, he's expecting a visit.

When he reads the keywords he jotted down after his first meeting with Birgit, it's easy for him to recall what she looked like. Not her clothes or her hair—he's not so into that type of thing—but her stooping posture, which added several years to her actual age, and the way she kept folding her damp tissue over and over. Seems like not much has changed, he thinks, when he pokes his head out and catches sight of her on the bench. Her hands are shaking weakly; all her movements are hesitant, as though protracted in time. Once she's finally gathered up her things, he leads her over to the sofa.

"So here we are again," he says, smiling, but Birgit's only response is a vague grimace. "Can I offer you something? Maybe one of these?"

He holds out the biscuit tin. "Today is the last time we're going to meet. So for once there are no questionnaires to fill out. We're just going to have a little chat, and I'm sure we'll wrap the whole thing up nicely."

She nods. The vanilla biscuit is a foreign body in her hand. She sits crumpled on the sofa, and Thorsten can't help comparing her with his own mother, who is around the same age but radiates an entirely different aura of vitality.

"I'd like to tell you again how happy we are that you wanted to be part of our project," he says. "It will make a tremendous difference for a lot of people. We're busy analyzing the tests you and the other participants have completed, and it won't be long before we get a general grasp of things."

“And then you’ll figure out if the pills work?”

Birgit’s eyes are red along the lower lid, as though they’re turning wrong-side out. She looks ill, thinks Thorsten, but then again, she’s looked ill for as long as he’s known her.

“Yes,” he says, “and how, crucially. We’re especially interested in what occurs in the brain when people take the pills, and how they affect the way you grieve.”

Suddenly Birgit seems to become aware of the biscuit in her hand. She takes a bite, her jaws driven as though by an invisible motor that might lurch to a halt at any time, and she looks exhausted. Thorsten wants to do something for her but doesn’t know what, so for lack of a better idea he pours water into her glass.

“Once everything is ready we’ll be in touch, and you can read our conclusions for yourself. Of course, neither of us knows whether you’ve had the placebo or the active treatment, but—”

Birgit cuts him off. Instantly her eyes are watchful, fixed on his. “If I’ve been getting the real pills, then that garbage doesn’t work, I can tell you that for sure!”

Thorsten nods. “You’re still very upset about your husband’s death?”

She brushes a crumb off her trembling lower lip. “It’s the same as it’s always been.”

Thorsten leans forward in his chair. They’re so different, these final conversations. Just this week he’s spoken to a young man who kept repeating how grateful he was for having taken part, but obviously there have been a few disappointed participants too, people for whom this is another hope lost. That’s just the nature of the beast.

“I am sorry about that,” he says. “I think you should talk to Miguel about it. He’ll be letting you know if you’ve been getting Callocain or not.” He raises his hand to signal that he’s understood Birgit’s opinion on that topic. “And he’s also the one who will look after you going forward. You will get the help you need, Birgit. I promise.”

Once she’s gone, Thorsten opens the window. He has a few minutes before his session with Mikkel, the last patient before his

part in the trial is definitively over. All the tests have been carried out, he has spoken personally with nearly two hundred of the four hundred or so participants, and although there have been a few stumbling blocks along the way—as there always are in clinical research—they’ve exceeded all their expectations. Not only is this the first study of its kind to focus on grief, but it also has the quality he prizes most highly in his working life: it’s going to make a difference. It’s not going too far out on a limb to say so, surely, because no matter the results, they will affect the way people with persistent grief disorder are treated and understood in the future. This study will help to define the approach to grief in Denmark, and if that’s not worth showing up to work for, then he doesn’t know what is.

He checks again but the corridor is empty, and after another couple of minutes he looks up Mikkel’s number in the list of participants. The phone goes straight to voice mail.

“Hi, Mikkel, Thorsten Gjeldsted from Aarhus University here. I’m calling because we had an appointment at one-thirty, and you haven’t turned up. I’ll be in the office for another couple of hours yet, so if you can make it when you get this, you’re welcome to drop by. If not, I’ll try to catch you in the next day or two. Bye!”

Mikkel’s story is the one that has made the biggest impression on Thorsten. He and his little family were involved in a car accident at a junction on Silkeborgvej, and in the days that followed, first his girlfriend, then the couple’s newborn daughter, died of their injuries. Describing her brother at an introductory session, Mikkel’s sister Louise had painted a picture of a well-liked and socially active young man who was perhaps a little too much of a live wire. Mikkel, just like Louise herself, had emerged surprisingly unscathed from a pretty troubled childhood. But ever since the accident he’d been doing steadily worse. Eventually, all his sick days lost him his job as a teaching assistant, and by the time the trial started, he was literally struggling to get out of bed.

A gust of wind knocks some papers to the floor, and Thorsten shuts the window. It’s his distinct impression that Mikkel has been

doing better over the past couple of months, but he's still keen to wrap things up properly. There's an increased risk of suicide when people are grieving, and although thankfully they've had no deaths so far, it's always the first place his mind goes when someone misses an appointment. The last thing he does before he leaves the office that afternoon is to call Mikkel again. But still, there is no answer.

SAMPLE