

The Thousand Tiny Miracles
of Living Twice

THE THOUSAND
TINY MIRACLES
OF LIVING TWICE

KATARINA WEST

ANGEL AID BOOK I



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In memory of my mother

LIISA WEST

Who cared for everyone who came her way

Just like an angel



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Thanks

Coming Soon!

Author's Note

About the Author

Also by Katarina West

Thursday, 23 June



*Irene wants to die, Aaron wants to help Irene, and Mimi jumps
into the sea.*

1.

Clothing Problems

THE THURSDAY WHEN IRENE Nylander's first life comes to an end is sunny. It is the first hot day of the year, the kind of cloudless Nordic summer's day you come across in tourist-board brochures, Pippi Longstocking books and old Ingmar Bergman films. A classic Scandinavian sunny summer's day; the sort of day when buxom milkmaids with blonde pigtails get kissed behind the barn, barefoot children smudge their faces with wild strawberries, and the nearby lake twinkles in the sunshine, glimmering with the promise of a long summer to come.

And since hot summer days are something of a rarity in Finland, today everyone is obliged to be happy. Oh yes – it's the law. After all, winters in the North are so ruthless that when a fine day eventually materialises, every honest taxpayer must peel off their clothes, wear sunglasses, show off that recently acquired Greek suntan and flirt with strangers.

For Irene, however, shy and chubby as she is, days like this are hellish. That's why at four o'clock in the afternoon she is still fussing around in the sparkling Nylander kitchen, even though she should be on her way to Helsinki for a girls' evening out with Saara. Cold

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dread has engulfed her heart, thick and hard, like a layer of February ice.

Her mother-in-law keeps tapping the granite worktop with her manicured finger, not bothering to hide her impatience. Finally she sighs loudly. 'For heaven's sake,' she announces in her haughty drawl, 'all you need to do is warm up some Saarioinen tuna pasta.' Being terribly image-conscious, she prefers French and Italian food, even if it's just a ready-meal from the supermarket.

Irene looks at her mother-in-law and plasters a smile across her face. She feels irritation fizzing in her stomach and rising towards her head. Ignore it, she tells herself. Have some compassion. She's old and unwell. But somehow it's easier to be compassionate at Soups4Smiles, the Helsinki canteen for people on the breadline where Irene volunteers twice a week.

Her mother-in-law peers at her, her eyebrows raised. With her cream-coloured Ralph Lauren blouse, string of pearls, and wavy blonde hair coiffed to perfection, Harriet (or Horrible Harriet, as Irene has nicknamed her, like in the children's books) looks like all the other elderly ladies in Helsinki's well-to-do Swedish-speaking circles. She has lived with Irene and Henrik for years now, and Irene spends most of her free time catering to her needs. But Horrible Harriet is never satisfied – and nothing gives her more pleasure than to let it be known that her beloved son Henrik married beneath him.

Just then the microwave oven plinks. Irene snaps back into the present and serves her mother-in-law the steaming pasta.

Horrible Harriet picks up a fork and stares at Irene suspiciously. It seems that she has finally noticed that, instead of her customary uniform of baggy leggings and oversized T-shirts, Irene is wearing a flowery dress. The contours of her round hips are clearly visible under the rose-patterned fabric.

Clothing Problems

‘Where are you going?’ Horrible Harriet asks, her voice tense all of a sudden.

Irene hesitates.

Evidently Harriet hasn’t remembered that it is her birthday – her fiftieth birthday, in fact. Actually, it’s better that way. The less she knows, the less she has to carp at.

‘I’m off to Helsinki,’ she says hastily. ‘Remember? I’m having a girls’ evening with Saara.’

‘And you’re leaving an old woman all alone?’ Harriet’s nostrils widen with righteous indignation.

‘I’m just going for a quick dinner somewhere.’ Irene’s voice is desperate.

‘Well, as long as you eat a light salad,’ Harriet concedes, looking critically at Irene’s generous figure. ‘You know, that dress is way too small for you.’

Instinctively Irene touches her stomach. A hot swell of humiliation rushes through her, then turns into irritation, for the second time. She tries to ignore both, lest her eyes get moist.

But the worst thing is that Harriet is right: the fabric is so tight around the stomach that she can hardly breathe. And Harriet does know about these things. The entire Nylander family is awfully stylish, her own regional-tennis-champion of a husband included.

Irene racks her brain for something to say. When nothing materialises in her head, not even a movie quote (which is strange, because Irene is a sucker for movie quotes, even if she never gets them quite right), she hurries off to the bedroom.

Usually the Nylander master bedroom looks like a showroom in an anonymous mail-order catalogue, but today it is in complete disarray and smells fusty. The double bed is still unmade, with blankets and pillows lying rumbled at its foot and chocolate

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wrappers scattered all over the baby-blue sheet. Glossy magazines are lying higgledy-piggledy on the floor, mixed with Cate Blanchett Blu-ray movies. And then there's that Häagen-Dazs carton, the one that seduced Irene into ending her diet yesterday evening. Now it is empty, and the spoon inside it is brown with dried chocolate ice cream.

Only her husband's side of the bedroom looks neat. Which makes sense, because Henrik has been in Stockholm on business for the last three days. Though Irene knows that there's more to his absence than business.

'Irene!' comes her mother-in-law's voice from the kitchen. 'I can't find my reading glasses.'

Feeling almost rebellious now, Irene ignores her and instead stares at her image in the full-length Ikea mirror.

Mirror moments are always critical for Irene. Sometimes, if she is on a diet, she pulls down the Venetian blinds before observing herself. The low light makes everything softer, more tolerable. It gives her hope. That someday, even she...

But on other days, when she's at her most despondent, she forces herself to look at herself just the way she is. She opens the blinds so that the bedroom is washed with light. Then she studies her colourless skin, her dishevelled hair, the puffy bags under her eyes. She stares at her double chin, that soft roll under her jaw that refuses to go away no matter how little she eats.

She doesn't know if all of this is merely a reality check or a way of punishing herself. Either way, it invariably makes her so disappointed with what she sees that she then has to head straight for the kitchen to get some Häagen-Dazs.

Today is no different. She looks like Kathy Bates in *Misery*. But without any make-up or shiny, professionally blow-dried

Clothing Problems

hair. And with an extra dozen kilos to boot. And a flowery dress so tight that it is slowly strangling her.

This shouldn't come as a surprise. You can't eat Häagen-Dazs and watch Cate Blanchett movies till the small hours without looking like death warmed up the following day. Not when you've lived for half a century, anyway.

But that's exactly what she did last night. Because Henrik didn't come back early from Stockholm, even though he promised he would and even though it was the night before Irene's birthday and she had been cooking all afternoon.

'Irene!'

Irene sighs and looks out of the bedroom window at the Olari shopping centre, the epitome of suburban paradise, some fifteen kilometres from Helsinki, and the place where she works as a shop assistant. Only today she has the afternoon off.

It's her birthday, after all.

That last train of thought makes her unexpectedly determined. She grabs her mobile and dials Henrik's number, adamant now that he must come home, because dammit, it is her birthday, her *fiftieth* birthday, and that should mean something, shouldn't it? But his mobile goes straight to voicemail.

Irene's heart grows cold. She closes her eyes. She wants to forget it all, the grim reality of her wretched marriage, even if just for one day. When she opens her eyes again, her gaze focuses on the pile of gossip magazines on the floor. She studies the perfectly chiselled celebrity faces smiling out from the covers. There's Angelina Jolie giving a speech in front of the blue-on-white UNHCR logo. Angelina is one of Irene's idols; occasionally at Soups4Smiles she feels a bit like her, even though she never... Anyway, never mind.

Below the photo of Angelina is one of Natalie Portman, spotted on the streets of New York, checking her mobile. Plus there's that

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brunette starlet, whatshername? The one who is rumoured to be dating Leonardo DiCaprio.

Irene racks her brain, momentarily forgetting her own problems. Ah, yes. Mimi Kavanough.

Irene stares at Natalie Portman, her heart so full of longing, it feels as if it's bursting. If only, she thinks, not daring to finish the thought. She bends down to pick up the magazine. She needs to see Natalie Portman's face better, to suck in all that glossy perfection.

'Irene.' Harriet's voice is ever so polite, despite the undeniable undercurrent of resentment. 'Irene!'

Irene raises her head. She smiles resignedly at her image in the mirror, her heart tight with something she can't quite explain.

'Happy birthday,' she whispers to herself.

Then she walks towards the kitchen.

2.

OMG... There's a Demon in Little Heaven!

WHILE IRENE STUDIES NATALIE Portman's face, a group of angels is chasing a demon around an old stone building that resembles a church. This demon-chasing isn't happening on Earth but in a heaven close to the heart of the Kingdom of All Heavens. It is a prosperous place (not unlike Finland) and so small that it consists only of a stone building perched on a pretty

OMG... *There's a Demon in Little Heaven!*

hilltop, and wooded slopes that drop down to a river valley below. Unsurprisingly, it is called Little Heaven.

The fracas started when Aaron, Little Heaven's notorious punk angel, told a group of fieldworkers entering the Progress Room what he'd just seen.

'Dudes!' Using one of his favourite words, Aaron waved his hands, his blue eyes widened in panic. 'Help me! I've spotted a demon in here!'

That was it. All hell broke loose, as quickly as if someone had sprinkled petrol on the floor and thrown a burning match at it.

Aaron has stopped gesticulating now. He stands in the corner of the Progress Room, his skinny arms akimbo. He's so riveted by the demon-hunting scene that for once he is absolutely still – he's not fidgeting, or swaying to the music in his head, or playing air guitar with Eric Clapton or Freddie Mercury or Guns N' Roses. He feels laughter bubbling up inside him – wonderful, joyous amusement – but deep down there is also a little bit of genuine alarm. For a tiny part of him has started to believe his own words.

The thing is, you never know. There *could* be an evil spirit in Little Heaven.

'Quick, somebody!' someone shouts. 'Onions and garlic! We need to sprinkle onions and garlic all over this hall!'

'I've got some hawthorn and fennel!' another angel cries.

The fieldworkers are all action. Dressed in dungarees or tunic-like shirts and knee-length trousers made of rough cotton, they look, in Aaron's view, like Russian peasants of the early twentieth century. Even though he has to admit that he doesn't know much about Russian peasants, let alone the early twentieth century.

Studying Earth's history has never been his forte.

OK, OK, OK. *Studying* has never been his forte.

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Aaron continues observing his friends. The inhabitants of Little Heaven are in no way Kingdom VIPs or powerbrokers – no, they're just good, honest angels doing their charitable work as best they can.

There are tall angels and short angels, and dark-haired angels and fair-haired angels, and fat angels and skinny angels. Some of them look like men and some of them look like women, but all of them are holding an improvised weapon of some sort in their hands. He spots brooms, shovels, horseshoes and rakes, and even carpet beaters and feather dusters. Another bubble of laughter rises inside him, and for a moment he has to battle with himself to keep his choirboy face solemn.

'I've brought some chamomile tea,' a short angel cries, rushing into the hall with a tray in her hands. 'Chamomile burns away the darkness, so demons hate it!'

A big bear of an angel, complete with bushy eyebrows and a rabbi-like beard, turns to look at the tea tray. 'Depla,' he reminds her coolly, 'we're angels. We can't drink.'

'Where did you see the demon?' one of the angels suddenly asks Aaron.

At that, several angels turn to look at him. Before he has time to answer, they bombard him with questions.

'Did it look like a snake?'

'Did it say anything to you?'

'Did it try to harm you?'

'Did it try to abduct you?'

'Contemporary demons no longer resemble snakes,' someone points out. 'Nowadays they can resemble anything at all. Even... er... beavers.'

'Oh, please.' The rabbi angel snorts. 'Have you ever heard of a demonical beaver?'

OMG... *There's a Demon in Little Heaven!*

'It's in the *Encyclopaedia Angelorum*,' comes the testy reply. 'See for yourself!'

The angel group is all action again, beating the air with their weapons, debating, fussing about.

Aaron grins. He can't help it.

Because, honestly, this prank is in a class of its own. This one is pure artistry.

Picture a big vaulted stone hall with a row of mullioned lancet windows rising almost to the roof. Picture how the Progress Room is usually: a haven of silence and studiousness, with angels coming and going, leather-bound dictionaries tucked under their arms and the quiet buzz of conversation echoing beneath the lofty ceiling. Picture the Evaluation Committee monitoring the humanitarian situation on Earth (for Earth is the speciality of Little Heaven). Picture administrator angels writing 'Lessons Learned' reports or 'Transparency' mission statements, and others communicating with the Kingdom's Bureau of Charity.

And now look at it: a riot of chaos and confusion, with a motley crew of angels shouting, jumping, sprinting backwards and forwards and waving their weapons in the air as if engaged in swordplay.

Honestly, if it wasn't for the fact that their skin was glowing softly... or that their earlobes were pointed and shiny... or that their eyes looked like two burning fireballs...

Well, you would think that these frantic figures were humans.

Aaron can't control himself any longer. He turns his head sideways and, though no sound emerges, his willowy body is shaking with laughter.

That's when Moshe walks in. He has been preparing to leave for an emergency meeting of the Council of All Angels, which – this much Aaron knows – he will attend as an observer in his

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capacity as leader of the youth wing of the Goodwill Party. Aaron doesn't know why the Council is holding an emergency meeting, and nor does he care. In all likelihood it has something to do with the turmoil in Twilight Heaven.

Whatever.

'What's this commotion?' Moshe asks suspiciously.

Curiously enough, he directs this question at Aaron, even though Aaron is completely still. It is as if he already knows who is behind this.

'Why aren't you on monitoring duty?' he adds.

'Aaron spotted a demon in here!' a young angel shouts with unmistakable enthusiasm.

'Aaron?' Moshe demands.

Aaron has no option but to look him straight in the eye. The expression on his best friend's round face is becoming increasingly impatient under the brim of his grey fedora. Needless to say, Moshe's brown trench coat is as immaculate as ever, and his black shoes are polished to perfection.

Aaron sighs. He loves Moshe like a brother, he really does. Honestly, he would give his angel life for dear Moshe.

But the problem with Moshe is that he never loosens up. Moshe is an angel who never cracks a joke.

And what is heaven, if not a place of eternal joy?

'Aaron?' Moshe repeats insistently.

Aaron looks at his hands. He looks at Moshe. He smiles a little; he can't help it.

'OK, OK,' he admits, spreading his arms apologetically. 'Just kidding.'

Moshe looks at him for a split second. Then he turns on his heel and strides towards the door.

'Wait,' Aaron cries, rushing after him. 'I can explain!'

Irene Waits, and Observes a Bellicose Pigeon

But Moshe has already opened the door and shut it noisily behind him.

3.

*Irene Waits, and Observes a
Bellicose Pigeon*

BACK ON EARTH, IRENE is sitting on an old wooden bench in the Esplanadi park, right in the heart of Helsinki. Her posture is uncharacteristically erect. With her hands in her lap, she gazes at the russet-coloured paintwork.

A robust, combative pigeon parades around the bench, searching for tasty leftovers. Whenever other birds venture near, the pigeon chases them away, flapping its wings and making hostile sounds. Irene observes the bird strutting up and down, its feathers ruffled.

She glances at her watch for the hundredth time. It's almost six-thirty. Late afternoon, early evening. Late middle-age.

Saara hasn't arrived.

If only I was home, or at Soups4Smiles, she thinks suddenly. If only this wasn't my birthday. I wouldn't have to be here.

Helsinki really isn't for unfashionable people like me, she reminds herself. And as if to emphasise this, the city centre is positively glowing in the evening sunshine, like a photo feature in a travel magazine.

The maples and poplars on the Esplanadi have recently burst into leaf, making the park a riot of Disney green, almost too lush

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and bright to be true. People are sitting on the grass, mostly young people, couples and groups of friends in their twenties and early thirties. They're chatting, their faces turned towards the sun. Some are sunbathing; others have brought picnic baskets and blankets. The air is quivering with golden sunbeams and there's a fresh sea breeze. A band of old men in black suits is playing folk songs, the nostalgic melodies mingling with the hubbub from the traffic and the faraway clatter of trams. A group of people have stopped to listen to them: it is a scene you wouldn't see during the cold, dark months.

Suddenly she can't take it any longer. She's certain that the smart city people are throwing glances at her. Everyone has noticed the sweat on her forehead, the uneasiness in her eyes, the rolls of fat clearly visible under the flowery dress. An overweight middle-aged woman sitting alone on a bench.

How sad is that?

She has waited for Saara for more than an hour. If Saara doesn't come right this minute, she will go back home. This sensible thought gives Irene an unexpected boost, and for the umpteenth time she tries to call her friend. But just like before, no one answers. Irene puts the mobile on the bench, and thinks.

She'll wait another five minutes. Saara is always late, after all. It is almost as if she's got the right to be late. In their friendship Saara, outgoing and ambitious, has always played the part of the leading lady, whereas Irene sits in the audience, dutifully listening to her monologues.

For a while Irene ponders which movie might best represent their friendship. There is, of course, *What Ever Happened to Baby Jane?*, in which Bette Davis plays the role of a former child star and Joan Crawford her paraplegic sister. Irene frowns, shaking her head. No, no. Then there is *Beaches...* And *Bagdad Café...*

Irene Waits, and Observes a Bellicose Pigeon

And *Fried Green Tomatoes*... And... And... She sighs. Frankly, she has no idea which film embodies their friendship.

But she knows that Thelma and Louise they are not.

Saara and Irene became friends twenty years ago. Irene and the handsome Henrik had just got married, and Irene had started to work at the Finnish Red Cross. The novelty of it all, the sheer wonder of falling in love and doing what she loved most, made her blossom. For a while she even wore brightly coloured designer clothes that fitted her mood and shape perfectly. Yes, it was Irene's golden era.

As incredible as it might sound now, Irene had more going on in her life than Saara, who was ten years her junior and a fledgling writer on a national glossy magazine. Saara had just moved to the capital and didn't know anyone there. Irene even invited her to stay in their flat until she found a place of her own.

That was the start. Then Horrible Harriet moved in, Irene gave up her job, and her relationship with Henrik began to suffer. Meanwhile Saara was promoted to deputy editor and started to buy Gucci leather shoppers with bamboo handles; she even flew to London to interview Sharon Stone. The two of them remained friends, but only because Irene tolerated Saara's whims: they met when Saara had time to meet, and when they met, their conversations were all about Saara's life.

Abruptly Irene flicks her mobile on. After reading a chirpy text message from Soups4Smiles (which lifts her mood a few notches), she tries Saara's number for the very last time. This time, as if by magic, someone answers.

'Saara?' Anxiety has crept into Irene's voice. 'I'm here. In the Esplanadi.'

'Oh, hi,' Saara says absent-mindedly. Irene hears people talking in the background.

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‘We were supposed to meet today,’ Irene says. Her throat feels tight.

Saara doesn’t reply. Somehow Irene knows that her attention is elsewhere. She has the strange feeling that Saara is smiling at someone.

‘We arranged to go and eat together tonight—’

Saara sighs. ‘Look, I wanted to call you.’

‘Oh?’ Irene says in a little voice.

‘I don’t think I can make it today.’ Again, there’s a playfulness in her voice that is not directed at Irene.

‘You can’t?’ Irene stares at a blonde pushing a Bugaboo stroller. With her pink velour tracksuit trousers and tiny tank-top she looks like a Hollywood actress straight out of a yoga lesson.

‘I might have a big celebrity interview next week,’ Saara says. The playfulness is gone: now she sounds professional. ‘I can’t tell you any more right now. Except that it’ll be a *major* thing. You can read about it on my Facebook page later today.’

‘Oh.’ Irene looks at her hands. Her dress suddenly feels very tight.

‘I have to work this evening,’ Saara says, sighing. ‘There are a zillion things to organise for this interview and I’ve got to do them today.’

Irene is so stunned, she doesn’t know what to say. ‘But—’ She searches for the right words. ‘We arranged this weeks ago—’

‘I know, I know,’ Saara interrupts irritably. ‘You know what my job’s like. I can’t possibly guarantee I’ll be free at a given moment.’

Then she launches into a monologue about her busy life. Irene listens to her. She blinks away her tears and hastily looks elsewhere when an elderly lady with a poodle sits next to her on the bench.

Edith Piaf with Fennel and Capers

'Look,' Saara says finally, 'I might be able to do lunch on Saturday. You know, for a girly chat, that sort of thing.'

'I can't,' Irene says, her voice more desperate than she intended. 'Today is my day off. Because it's my birthday.'

She hears Saara suppressing an irritated sigh.

'And I'd love to celebrate it with you,' she says, her voice unmistakably tense now. 'But you know how my work is. I mean, it's nothing like selling a few photo frames in a shopping centre.'

Don't let her treat you like this! a voice inside Irene cries. *She's got no right to do this to you! Get angry! Tell her to go to hell!*

But instead Irene says nothing. She just listens to Saara. She nods and agrees. When they finish the phone call Irene hears herself nearly apologising for having called Saara to remind her about their dinner.

Very generously, Saara promises to keep next Saturday afternoon free.

4.

Edith Piaf with Fennel and Capers

IRENE LISTENS TO THE silence of the disconnected phone line, realising that Saara has hung up.

I've made a mess of my life, she thinks suddenly. I gave up my dreams for the sake of my marriage – and look where I am today. Whereas Saara never gave up anything, and now she's more successful than ever.

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Out of sorts, she stands up and walks towards Market Square. Usually she loves to wander round its open-air food and hand-craft stalls, to see the screaming seagulls circling in the air and the white ferries leaving for the islands.

It's a place that holds dear memories for her, for this is where Henrik took her on their first date. It was 30 April, Vappu, the festival marking Walpurgis Day, and as usual, Helsinki was in exuberant carnival mood. As the two of them stood watching university students doing their ritual crowning of the nude statue of *Havis Amanda* with a student's cap, Henrik wrapped his arms around her and kissed her gently. She still remembers how the air trembled with spring light, popping champagne corks and balloons, and the promise of true love.

Today, however, that memory is painful, and with every step that brings her closer to the harbour, her anxiety increases. Cafés have set out their chairs on South Esplanade and stylishly dressed people are seated outside, fingering their mobiles, chatting, observing the passers-by. Good-looking Vikings in casual summer suits and daunting-looking women with big Jackie Onassis sunglasses and tanned legs. Though their eyes slip coolly over Irene, she becomes so nervous that she turns on her heel and starts to walk back to the bench with the bellicose pigeon.

She slumps down, wiping the sweat off her forehead. It might be evening, but it seems to be getting hotter by the minute.

She is tired. Her skin is clammy. Her cheeks feel hot. Her fleshy thighs have been chafing against each other for hours now and they're itchy. Her dress is so tight, she can't breathe properly.

Me! Me! Me! her body screams all of sudden. *Me, ice cream! Me, ice cream!*

Irene jumps to her feet in a panic. No, no, no. She won't break this diet.

Edith Piaf with Fennel and Capers

Want ice cream! Want ice cream! WANT ICE CREAM! her body screams, like a toddler having a tantrum in a supermarket checkout queue.

Irene sits back down on the bench. She closes her eyes, trying to concentrate. Her head is a battlefield of shouting and screaming. *Ice cream! Please, please, please!*

I could go for a proper birthday dinner, she realises suddenly. It's my fiftieth birthday, after all. I'll eat in style. I'll celebrate alone. Without bingeing.

So appealing is this thought that she stands up again. She heads back to South Esplanade, where she has reserved a table at a restaurant called Montparnasse. In Saara's opinion it is one of the It Restaurants in Helsinki at the moment.

Normally Irene would shy away from trendy places like Montparnasse, but today isn't like any other day. Today is her fiftieth birthday. Besides which, she must prove to herself that there is still something left in her life.

She takes a deep breath, opens the door and walks inside. Montparnasse is full of people and looks almost too picturesque to be true – like a Paris bistro straight out of *Le Divorce*, a film that Irene has seen a record fifteen times. Scattered around the sun-drenched room are dainty wrought-iron chairs and tables draped with crisp white cloths. The floor tiles are black and white, and the walls are panelled with hazelnut-coloured wood and mirrors. Somewhere in the background Edith Piaf is lamenting the loss of a lover.

A waiter comes over to Irene. He is a young man with an athletic, well-toned body, brown eyes and a Hercule Poirot-style moustache.

Speaking Finnish with a singsong foreign accent, he shows Irene to her table. Obviously it is a corner table close to the

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kitchen and bathrooms. That's where you put lonely middle-aged women.

Then he brings her a basket of bread and some water. He runs through the menu of the day. Irene feels uncomfortable, aware of her weight, age and silly dress.

'I'll take the trout with fennel and capers,' she says hastily, pushing away the wine list. She would like to have had roast beef, but somehow roast beef sounds like giving up. Whereas trout is healthy. Trout is Gwyneth Paltrow. Trout is slim models in Adidas ads.

The waiter nods, puts away his little notebook and disappears.

Half an hour passes. It's unbearably hot. People are coming and going, greeting friends, chatting, laughing. The kitchen door opens and closes, and each time this happens, mouth-watering smells waft into the dining room.

No one remembers Irene, seated alone in the corner. Even her waiter has forgotten all about her. He's rushing between the tables, nimble and quick, smiling at everyone, especially at young attractive women.

Irene is irritated: she'd like to snap her fingers and complain about the service. Or leave altogether. But instead of daring to do either, she eats the entire basket of bread. She realises what she's done only when the basket is empty.

That's when she spots him. Her husband... Henrik.

It's surprising that she didn't notice him before, because he is already halfway through his first course, which can only mean that he arrived at Montparnasse before she did. He has a glass of red wine in his hands, but he's not looking at his wine.

No, Henrik is looking at Saara, Irene's friend. For Saara, who was too busy to meet her, is sitting opposite Irene's husband, laughing, her head tilted sideways. She's wearing one of her trade-

mark fifties-style dresses: this one is white, with a cinched waist and a flared skirt.

Fifties-style clothes are Saara's thing. She even has a weekly column entitled 'Fifties Girl'. Irene reads it religiously every time it comes out.

Irene stops munching the last remaining piece of bread. She stops breathing. Her body freezes. Her limbs feel heavy, so very heavy, as if gravity has increased tenfold all of a sudden. She knows something significant has happened, that this is the great divide: from now on, nothing will be the same.

Even the room around her comes to a standstill. Everything is silent, and very still.

Or maybe it is Irene's soul that has died a little, whereas the outside world continues as before.

She feels like standing up, screaming and tearing her hair. She feels like crying and moaning, the way Palestinian mothers do on the evening news when their sons have died in bomb attacks. For she knows that she has lost her husband. From now on he is dead to her. Gone. She has clung to her marriage for years, but as of now it is over.

She doesn't cry, however. She doesn't scream. She just sits and watches her husband dining with her friend.

At some point Henrik leans towards Saara, touches her cheek, and kisses her. Saara puts her hand on his shoulder (she has tulip-red nails, Irene notices), and responds to his kiss. Then she leans back, still looking at him. She hits him playfully with the menu, as if to reprimand him for his amorous eagerness. They laugh.

That's enough. Irene stands up, leaves money for a dish she won't eat, and rushes out of the restaurant.