# Norma

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# Norma

SOFI OKSANEN

Translated from the Finnish
by Owen F. Witesman



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# Norma

# One

If everything goes well, by August we can sit back and enjoy good food, sleep, and spa treatments. We can raise a glass to a future in which you receive everything you've never dared to dream. Then my work will be done, and I won't regret the price of your new life one bit.

After the funeral, nothing went back to the way it had been. As Norma fell behind the other guests and slipped onto the road leading to the cemetery gates, she still tried to make herself believe it was possible, though. Her mother wouldn't have been offended that she'd already ordered a taxi, and Norma didn't care about any of the rest of it: relatives she hardly knew, scheming heirs, the fate of the ancestral home of the Naakka family, which was sure to come up over the Karelian pasties and savory sandwich cake as her grandmother interjected observations spun from her brittle memory. Norma would leave the farce behind to try to return to normal life and meet her mother's death head-on. No more avoiding places that reminded Norma of her. No more being late to work. No more taking taxis instead of the metro, and no more bursting into tears each morning as she tore at her hair with a metal-toothed comb. She wouldn't forget to eat or drink enough, and she wouldn't let the life she and her mother had spent so much work building together fall apart. She would prepare for her workday the next morning just as before: she would pick the lint from the back of her blouse and pack her purse with baby oil to tame her curls, diazepam and meclizine to calm her mind and body. Into the bottom of the bag she would toss a travel-size bottle

of Elnett hair spray because that was the smell of a normal workday, the choice of women who had their lives in order. That was the kind of woman she intended to be.

After armoring herself for the day to come, she would enter the Sörnäinen Metro Station, melt into the flowing mass of humanity, and allow the escalator to carry her to the platform as on any other day. The air current would flap the hem of her skirt, people would browse their phones and free newspapers, and none of them would remember the tragedy that had happened on that same platform. Only she would think of it as she prepared to confront the tension that had dominated her workplace through months of labor negotiations. She would realize that nothing in her life had stopped other than her mother's life.

There was no sign of her taxi. Norma leaned against the cemetery fence and allowed relief to swim into the bubble formed by the benzos and scopolamine. She had survived the funeral. She hadn't spotted deception in anyone's commiseration, or hypocrisy in words of sympathy. She hadn't fainted, vomited, or had a panic attack even though some people had come close enough to hug her. She'd behaved like a model daughter and was finally ready to remove her sunglasses, which had begun to slip down her nose from sweat caused by the heat. Then, just as she was shoving them into her bag, a man she didn't know came up to her to express his condolences. Norma pushed the glasses back on. She didn't want company.

"The others already went that way." Norma motioned toward the restaurant where the reception was being held and pulled the brim of her hat down lower. Instead of leaving, the man extended his hand. Norma ignored the greeting and turned away. She had no interest in interacting with strangers.

But the man didn't give up. He grabbed Norma's hand. "Lambert," the man said. "Max Lambert. One of your mother's old friends."

"I don't remember her ever mentioning you."

The man laughed. "Did you and your mother talk about all your friends? It's been ages. When we were younger, Anita and I had some real adventures together."

Norma pulled her hand away. She could feel the man's grip on her fingers like a stamp pressed into her skin against her will, and he had used the past tense referring to her mother. It sounded like an insult. Norma hadn't moved on to that stage yet, and this man didn't look like one of her mother's friends. Norma and Anita Ross's life had been cloistered, their social contact limited to the circles required for their work. What few acquaintances each had had, the other knew, and this man was not one of them.

The man's hair was slicked back, and his hairline with its widow's peak looked like that of a younger man. The same couldn't be said of his skin. The harsh rays of the sun had carved deep lines in his face, and his tan couldn't conceal bags and broken blood vessels beneath his eyes from years of devoted alcohol consumption. The previous night's beer stank on his glistening temples. The man's suit was also yesterday's vintage, the knees of his trousers hanging loosely. Everything about him sagged, fitting poorly with the serenity of the surrounding conifers. However, he spoke politely enough, his suit was a black appropriate to the occasion, and the fabric looked expensive. His cologne was fresh Kouros, not something that had been sitting on the shelf for years, and his shampoo was salon quality. That was where Norma's examination ended. Her nose was plugged by drugs and sorrow, and the antinausea patches behind her ears pumped hyoscine steadily into her veins, so she couldn't read the man any more carefully. When she noticed a lock that had escaped from her ponytail twisting like a cork-

screw, she panicked and glanced at the clock on her phone. The taxi should have come by now.

The man took a pair of mirrored sunglasses from a pocket and put them on. "May I offer you a ride?"

"No, thank you. I have a taxi coming."

The man's laugh was that of an old gambler, and he sidled up closer to Norma. Something in his voice reminded her of the chatter of a gaggle of tourists. You could always find some wag in the group who talked louder than the others and cracked jokes that everyone laughed at even when the punch line fell flat.

"Well, please get in touch soon. We can take care of all this unpleasant business so you can continue your life."

The man produced a card from a tarnished case that must have been silver and shoved it into Norma's hand. The gold chain that encircled his wrist glinted in the sun. He might have won the case in a game of cards or stolen it. Cinematic possibilities flashed through Norma's mind: What if her mother had had an affair with this man, and what if Norma had sisters and brothers she didn't know about? Even worse, what if this man was her real father instead of Reijo Ross? Why was she even thinking like this? What if the man had simply come to the wrong funeral?

By the time Margit called, the taxi was nearly in Kallio. Norma answered after the sixth ring. Lambert's card still rested in her lap, and she snapped its corners as her aunt attempted to persuade her to come back to the reception. The cardstock was sturdy and expensive, a cream hue with embossed gold lettering. There was no title and no address. On a whim, Norma asked her aunt whether Max Lambert had come to the memorial service.

The name didn't mean anything to Margit. Norma's guess about

the wrong funeral must have been correct, and she was just about to roll down the window and throw the card into the wind.

"Wait, do you mean Helena's ex-husband?" Margit asked.

Norma started in surprise. She must have numbed herself too much for the funeral. That was why she hadn't made the connection: her mother's best friend had the same last name as the man who had just introduced himself.

"Why on earth would Max Lambert come to Anita Ross's funeral?" Margit asked. "That's impossible."

"I think I just saw him. Isn't he there now?"

"No."

"Could he have come in Helena's place?"

"Don't you remember how Helena and Lambert split up? Your mother would never have wanted that man here."

In the background of the phone call, Norma could hear the muted voice of the priest and the clinking of plates. When she heard Lambert's name, Margit had sounded bitter, but now her tone turned impatient. Even so, she spoke of Helena with respect, as if Norma's mother could hear them—no one treated Helena with as much compassion as Norma's mother had. And for a moment, her mother was alive again, in this conversation that still adhered to her wishes.

"Those years resulted in a few good children but otherwise only sorrow. Think about what happened to Helena." Margit took a drink of something, and the glass tinkled. "Forget the whole thing. You must have been mistaken."

Crazy Helena's husband. Norma's mother couldn't abide anyone calling Helena names, and she had rarely spoken of her visits with her friend. However, over the past few years, her mother visited Kuopio more and more often, and Norma had deduced that Helena was either better or worse. But she hadn't asked. Hospitals reminded Norma of the fates that deviants always faced, and

she'd already heard plenty of those stories from her mother. She had enough torment. And she didn't know Helena personally—she could barely remember her. It wasn't until this very moment that she realized she hadn't asked Margit whether anyone had notified Helena of Norma's mother's death, if Helena was even lucid enough to understand anyway.

"Those friends were only trouble." Margit was becoming agitated again, but her words formed slowly and her mouth was full of cotton, as if she'd taken a sedative.

"Friends, what friends?"

Norma wondered whether Margit would recognize Lambert anymore. He'd left for Sweden decades ago with Reijo Ross, and neither had been seen in the old town since. They hadn't even come home to bury their own parents.

"Do you mean Reijo? Is anyone there from Reijo's family? Maybe Lambert came with one of the Rosses."

"Rosses? Please! The past is the past. No good will come of digging it up."

Norma's aunt was probably right, and her mother would have agreed. She had wanted to keep these people where they belonged, in the past. But if no one had been in contact with Reijo, Lambert's old friend, or with Helena, where had Lambert heard about the accident? Norma didn't remember what the obituary said, whether it mentioned the funeral. Margit had handled that too. The report in the newspaper had definitely not included her mother's name: *A woman died after falling under a metro train in Sörnäinen. According to the police, there was no foul play.*

Norma pressed another pill out of its blister pack and dropped the business card into her bag. Directory Information said that the

man's phone number was either private or a prepaid account with no address attached. Her mother would have known what to do. Although the false ebullience of the summer radio playlist didn't fit the day, Norma asked the taxi driver to turn it up. It covered the sniffing. The helplessness. She was over thirty and still used to her mother solving most of the difficult problems that confronted her.

Her mother would never have left her alone to cope with a shady old man who affected her hair like an electric shock.

Back at the reception, Marion glanced at Alvar, who shook his head imperceptibly. There was no sign of the girl. Nor of Lambert. Marion cursed to herself. She wished she could have talked to Norma first.

"More coffee?" The woman who asked was in her fifties and seemed a little lost. A restrained smile was frozen on her face and had remained even when she accidentally tried to enter the men's restroom and ran into the door.

"Beautiful ceremony. Just like Anita would have wanted." Alvar's familiar tone dispelled the need for an introduction. He acted as if they were Anita's old friends and trusted that the woman would blame her own weak memory rather than presuming to ask who they were.

"We didn't really know what to do," the woman said. "The funeral home said that in cases like this, cremation is most common. But we decided to do the burial this way because of my mother's condition. She would have been too upset if we'd violated tradition."

So this was Anita's sister, Margit. She had stood next to Anita's mother at the grave. Elli Naakka had seemed frail and distant, just as confused as Anita had said. The old woman had been startled

when the other woman burst into tears and faltered as earth fell on the casket, patting her hand as if offering comfort to a passing acquaintance. She hadn't recognized Margit or understood that they were burying her own daughter. That had reassured Marion, but she still wished the elderly woman could have understood what was happening. She wanted to see her tears.

Alvar placed his hand on Margit's shoulder and took the coffeepot from her. "I can help you pour. Your decision about the burial was very considerate."

"Of course we didn't tell Mother what happened," Margit said. "If you speak to her, don't be surprised if she talks about a stroke. You must be one of Anita's friends from the post office."

Marion extended her coffee cup to her brother to buy time to think, but Alvar simply said yes. Apparently Anita hadn't mentioned getting fired or her new job at Shear Magic. That wasn't unusual; people were always ashamed to lose their jobs, even these days, and Anita definitely wouldn't have wanted to explain her new work to this crowd. The speeches during the reception all recounted memories of summers at the old house in the country and other such drivel. They had little to do with Anita's real life. Marion felt the irritation smoldering in her breast flare again. People who didn't know Anita shouldn't be seeing her off. Anita would have hated an event like this. She would have wanted wine and dancing and ABBA. And Helena, not Lambert. As the priest spoke at the grave, Lambert had whispered to Marion that they'd worried for nothing, everything was going fine. No one brought up Helena, and no one seemed to remember Lambert, let alone his children, Marion and Alvar. Time had done its work.

"We had no way to know that Anita was dealing with anything like this," Margit continued.

"Depression can be treacherous," Alvar agreed.

"You didn't notice anything either?"

"Maybe Anita was a bit more withdrawn lately," Alvar said, turning to Marion for confirmation. She would have to say something. But she couldn't. She fumbled in her pockets for a tissue but couldn't find any unused. Alvar handed her a napkin. Marion pressed it to her eyes.

"Anita was never very social," Margit said. "I should have called more often. I should have made her tell me how she was doing."

"How is Norma holding up?" Alvar asked. "This must be hardest on her."

"Norma is so much like her mother. She keeps things to herself."

"If there's any way we can help . . ."

"Thank you. I'll remember that," Margit said. "I'd like to talk to some of Anita's other co-workers, but I just don't recognize any of them." She then reported how she'd called the switchboard at the post office to ask them to let everyone know about Anita's funeral, but the woman who answered the phone hadn't known Anita.

"The post office has so much turnover these days," Alvar said.

The conversation was beginning to move in a bothersome direction. Marion would let her brother handle the rest. She edged away, and Alvar gave a small nod as he continued to pour coffee. Margit seemed to have forgotten all about looking for Anita's co-workers by the time they reached the second guest with an empty cup. The coffeepot had been a cunning move on Alvar's part, allowing him to circulate naturally through the entire group.

The men of the family still stood around as they had in the cemetery, stiff and uncomfortable in their suits, hands clasped behind their backs. Lambert had done the same. It was a masculine way to express piety. But it didn't fit Lambert, least of all at Anita's funeral. It seemed false. As Marion moved among the guests, words flit-

ted by her that expressed shock and confusion, lamentation that no one had sensed anything—as if any of them could have, given how few people had even seen Anita since she moved to Helsinki. Marion didn't understand why this crowd had shown up. Perhaps to assuage their guilt at having lost touch or in order to be able to gossip to the other people in the village about the tragedy that had befallen the Naakka family. People's reaction to violent death was always the same. They were hypocritical but full of curiosity, and the rumors would continue for decades, especially if the death couldn't be explained with rationality but rather its lack. Marion would still try to reach the girl, but then this charade would be over and she would leave.

Norma climbed out of the car, ripping the scopolamine patches from behind her ears and inside her elbows, and lit a cigarette. She would throw these clothes with their cemetery smell into the backyard trash bin, cut away the sorrow of the day, and open the bottle of red wine she'd stashed in the kitchen cupboard to make waiting for tomorrow morning more bearable. She just had to open the gate and enter. Over the past few weeks, that step had become the most difficult.

Twelve years before, everything had been different. The same gate had welcomed her and her mother, opening as if by itself—their move to the city had felt like the best decision ever. Norma had just received her graduation cap when they left behind the Naakka home and the oppressive village community surrounding it. They'd found perfect apartments in the same building, considering it such a stroke of luck that they celebrated by riding from one end of the metro line to the other and back again.

Twelve years later that symbol of urban life had ridden right over Norma's mother, one day after she returned from a vacation to Thailand. Norma couldn't help wondering whether she could have stopped it. Would she have picked up on some sign of her mother's mental state if she'd called that night? If she'd climbed those few extra stairs to her apartment?

Instead she'd spent her evening out with an occasional lover. During those hours her mother had sent one final message to Norma: *Dinner tomorrow? I have presents!* Norma hadn't read it until the morning. Even if her mother had called, she wouldn't have answered. She'd needed to forget the mood at work after spending the last week watching the expressions of the managers and the executives as they slipped down the stairwell. The janitor, who was always in the know, had begun avoiding the smoking spot, which was a sign that the negotiations were not going well. The thought of having to rehash all that with her mother as soon as she returned home made Norma anxious. Instead she had focused on her glass, a forgettable man, and emptying her mind. She would see her mother the next day.

When Norma received the call at work, she thought it had something to do with the labor negotiations and hurried to the conference room, ready to show off her best qualities. But what she found was a pair of police officers. The female officer's hair smelled of birch shampoo, healthy living, and high doses of vitamin C. Norma's locks curled tighter, and the thought flashed through her mind that she was going to survive the cutbacks—no one would fire a person who had just lost her mother in a tragic accident. Later this embarrassed her. In that moment she should have been thinking anything else.

News spread instantly through the building, and her purse filled with crisis hotline cards. Her closest co-worker whispered about an article she'd read in the paper, according to which the metro hired only drivers who could survive seeing someone throw herself on the tracks, because it always happened sooner or later. This reminded Norma that the train operator had been the last person to see her mother alive. Her mother's last second, last

step, last breath. Probably everything had happened so quickly that the driver hadn't registered any of it. But that person should have been Norma, not a train operator, not the perfect strangers on the platform.

When the old woman's gaze came to rest on Marion, Marion realized she had made a mistake. Confusion parted like a curtain as the old woman stood up with surprising agility and attempted to spit at her. The priest standing nearby jumped, and heads turned toward Elli Naakka. After a moment of silence, everyone began covering up the embarrassing incident with the clinking of coffee cups, spooning more food onto their plates.

"Maybe she thought you were Helena," Alvar said.

Her brother had appeared unobserved at her side and began leading Marion, who stood frozen in place, toward the door of the restaurant.

Marion's mouth was dry, and her hands trembled. This was exactly why she didn't want to see anyone who remembered Helena. "I don't look that much like her," she whispered.

"Of course not, and no one else here would connect you to her." Alvar brushed her hair out of her eyes. "Put it out of your mind. Anita's mother has dementia."

But Elli Naakka's gaze was sharp and full of accusation. She did understand she was at her daughter's funeral; she blamed Helena and wanted to say that this never would have happened if not for Helena's deranged presence in Anita's life. No, Marion knew she was letting her imagination run away with her. Elli Naakka didn't understand what had happened. Marion had approached the old woman only so she could tell Lambert that she'd tried at least. She'd been sure she couldn't get anything out of Elli Naakka, that the old woman wouldn't even recognize her.

"Try to calm down. Remember why we came here. Is there anyone you remember seeing with Anita?" Alvar asked.

Marion shook her head. They were spying on Anita's funeral, and that was sick. Marion glanced at her brother's pupils. Normal. Only the slightest tension in the wrinkles around his eyes revealed that her brother must have recognized someone he'd fought with as a child, maybe someone who'd chanted Crazy Helena. And yet he was still able to be here sober and converse with these people politely. After Marion left, Alvar would join the ring of smokers outside, passing around the flask in his pocket and creating a natural connection with the men of the family. He would probably be able to find out everything they needed. Lambert would be pleased and give his son another bonus. Marion never got those, unless you counted having her own salon.

Alvar noticed his sister's fingers tearing a napkin and took the shreds from her. The floor looked as if a molting chicken had been walking around.

"Do you need anything?"

"No, I'm fine."

"Give your own eulogy for Anita later at home. I'll tell Lambert you did your best here."

The window was open: street dust covered the sill and had blown onto the clothes lying on the couch. Margit's shirts covered the pile of Norma's mother's dresses. The dishes on the counter were Margit's, not Norma's mother's. The disk in the CD player was Suvi Teräsniska, one of Margit's. The smell of Shalimar had been replaced by an imitation scent. The apartment no longer felt like her mother's home, and Norma began to sense that she'd made a mistake allowing her aunt to ensconce herself here and handle all the funeral arrangements. She had accepted the offered help, because after one attempt she hadn't even been able to go into the apartment. The sight she met on the threshold was unbearable: the apartment looked as if her mother were simply out running an errand and would be back at any moment. That was why she'd let her aunt find her mother's favorite dress, let her remove the ABBA concert ticket attached to the edge of the mirror, let her take the Shalimar off the dressing table. Margit collected all the things her sister would have wanted in her casket, even though she didn't know anything about her.

Only Norma knew why the Shalimar should go with her mother. In the hospital after Norma's birth, her mother had awoken to the smells of bergamot and lemon and had suddenly been utterly, completely sure that everything would be fine. They would survive,

despite it all. They would survive together, just the two of them, and they wouldn't need Reijo or anyone else. Later her mother had recognized the scent in the village drugstore and purchased the perfume, ignoring the cost. This was the smell of the greatest turning point in her life. Norma lit a cigarette. She alone had let her aunt foul the scene of the crime—when she noticed herself thinking of her mother's home as a crime scene, she was startled and swept her hair aside as if wanting to brush the thought away. As she tried desperately to find a rational reason for her mother's actions, she strained to see mystery where there was none. Max Lambert's appearance probably had a perfectly natural explanation.

Norma lifted the lid of her mother's laptop, then closed it again. The computer wouldn't contain anything from her mother's youth, which was where the hunt had to go. All the photos from when she was younger were in an album in the closet, but now that shelf was empty. Finally the photo album turned up on the nightstand, blank spots on its previously full pages. Margit had made it here first, too. According to her aunt, Norma's mother hadn't left her a letter, and Norma had trusted Margit, but now she didn't know why she had. Her mother hadn't even told Margit about being fired, let alone about her new job. Margit didn't know Norma's mother, not as Norma did. She wouldn't have known where to look, and it was beginning to seem that Norma's laziness might have led her aunt to destroy some piece of evidence connected to Lambert. Norma nearly called Margit to press her about the photographs. She even took out her phone but then threw it back in her purse. Her anger was unreasonable. Margit had a right to a few pictures. She had gone to so much trouble, taking care of the funeral and handling the rent for June and July so there wouldn't be any rush clearing out the apartment and she would have a place to sleep if Norma needed her support a little longer.

Norma shoved the computer into her bag, along with the bank

codes she found on the table. Then she lit another cigarette and began leafing through the album. Her aunt had wanted shots that included herself and Norma's grandmother, rejecting photos of Helena and Norma's mother as young women, or of Helena with her children holding cotton candy at an amusement park. In the pictures, Norma recognized Helena's daughter, Marion, who as a teenager looked like a young Helena. The madness hadn't taken root in Helena until later. The Helena of the photo album had a direct gaze and a dulcet smile.

Norma turned to the final page and was about to stand up when she noticed a photo of two couples enjoying a jovial summer day: there were her mother and Reijo Ross leaning against each other looking at the camera. Next to them a younger version of the man Norma met today had his arm around Helena. Under the portrait was a Polaroid snapshot. In it a later edition of the same man smiled alongside Marion, holding a baby in his arms. On the back of the photo was an inscription written in a shaky hand. It was signed by Alvar. He had taken the photo himself and asked Norma's mother to visit soon.