

# ALMOST AUTUMN

MARIANNE KAURIN

TRANSLATED FROM THE NORWEGIAN BY  
ROSIE HEDGER



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SUMMER IS OVER.

The leaves in the dusty streets congregate in great piles along the tenement buildings, dry and crisp, yellow and red, all awaiting inevitable disintegration. The air is bracing and tinged with something, a scent, a rupture. Before long the wind will gather pace and the rain will pour, hammering against windows and asphalt, creating deep furrows in the gravel. Before long the earth will become damp and cold, teeming with reptiles, worms, and beetles that eagerly take all that they need from the soil. Before long the ground will become hard and impenetrable; before long there will be snow. A hard shell will form over the freezing water and white, frosty, rigid blades of grass, giving rest to all that is dead.

The sun continues to shine, faint and low in the sky, the light falling at an angle across a gateway in the Grünerløkka district of Oslo. Out of the gate emerges Ilse Stern. She walks quickly, smiling. She turns around where she stands on Biermanns gate, the street she's lived

on her whole life. The gray tenement building stands like an empty shell in the dwindling afternoon light, a dormant wall of bricks and closed windows. From the outside it looks like any other tenement building. Four floors, dark curtains, a wrought-iron gate leading to a passageway that houses rubbish bins and a shady backyard beyond it. There is no movement to be seen in the windows of the third floor. From outside it is impossible to see all that moves inside, every breath and pulse and life within.

Ilse hurries around the corner and out onto Toftes gate. She has done it. She has successfully made her way out of the apartment without her mother ruining her plans with her usual incessant nagging. Not a word about her inconsiderate attitude, or how she only thinks of herself, no demands to consider this or that or the other, and nothing about being back at home before curfew.

They were both having a snooze after their meal when she left, her mother and father snoring in perfect harmony. Sonja and Miriam were in Torshovdalen Park. Miriam had pestered Ilse to go with them, please Ilse, come with us, we can race each other down the hill. Ha! As if a race at Torshovdalen Park could measure up to Ilse's plans for that Saturday afternoon; what kind of suggestion was that, today of all days?

Like a snake, Ilse had slithered stealthily around the cramped apartment to avoid waking her snoozing

parents, their heads lolling forward as they napped. Her mother's handbag hung on one of the pegs in the hallway. Ilse looped the handle over the hook and carefully opened it, rummaging around in the tangle of tissues and receipts until she finally located what she was looking for. She stood before the kitchen mirror and applied the lipstick in thick layers. She pouted, cocked her head to one side, closed her eyes, felt the cool of the glass mirror reflect back onto her face, watched as her breath created a light film of condensation on the surface. Red, pink, full-lipped, ready for kissing. She had brushed her hair one hundred times, first on one side and then the other. She had gazed at her reflection for a long while, checking her profile from the right-hand side and smiling. The kitchen floor was covered in dark hair by the time she had finished. Her mother didn't like it when she brushed her hair in the kitchen; it's unhygienic, Ilse, you'll get hair in our food. Ilse bent over to pick up the stray hairs, gathering them into a ball in her hand and throwing them in the bin. She left a note on the kitchen table before leaving: "Out for a walk." No further explanation.

She feels the warmth of the sun on her face and basks in the light, dust blowing up from the road and the leaves crackling beneath her feet as she wades through them. Toftes gate stretches out before her like a broad avenue; she just needs to follow the road down and

straight ahead. She is on her way. Everything begins now. She is wearing her summer dress, the white one with red polka dots that Sonja sewed for her; it's too late in the year to be wearing such a lightweight dress, she knows that, but all the same, if there is one day to wear her summer dress, to really show off her best side, that day is today. It has short sleeves and is made from fine cotton, and one day during the summer, well, on the sixteenth of July at just past four o'clock in the afternoon, to be exact, Hermann had seen her wearing it and had commented on how well it suited her. Now she feels the way that the cold air blows through the fabric, goose bumps rising, the fine hairs on her bare forearms standing up like black antennae. She'll have to keep her arms behind her back so he won't notice.

Ilse quickens her pace as she makes her way along the narrow footpaths through Birkelunden Park. There is no music playing in the pavilion today, there hasn't been for some time now. Her family often used to spend their Sundays here with many of their neighbors from the same building on Biermanns gate; food in baskets, bottles of pop, and plenty of blankets to go around. She and Sonja would run around with Hermann and Dagny and the other children. Ole Rustad from the fourth floor would ask his wife to dance, moving across the grass with aplomb as he sang and everyone laughed. Things are so different now, so quiet; everyone seems

to be on their guard. Paulus Church is just across the street. She looks up at the spire. When she was young, Sonja had convinced her that a man lived up there, a servant in the church with a wooden leg and long, tangled hair. Sonja had told her that the man held a girl captive in a specially created dungeon, starving her until she was no more than a skeleton in spectacles—because she had spectacles, the girl in the story. Ilse had always squeezed Sonja's hand tightly as they crossed through Birkelunden Park, right up until she must have been twelve years old. She had had so many nightmares about the bespectacled skeleton, had taken so many detours to avoid this very place.

The large birch trees whisper in the wind. The streets seem wider than usual; there is less dust, less litter. There are four words in her head, four words that have popped up out of nowhere, like a chorus, a march: Everything starts this autumn. Everything starts this autumn. One, two, three, four. Everything starts this autumn. Something is waiting for her; *someone* is waiting for her. The leaves may plummet from the treetops, the earth may become hard and impenetrable, the rain may fall and the wind may tear through the streets, and the war, the stupid war, it can carry on regardless, because she, Ilse Stern, fifteen and a half years old and in her summer dress and lipstick, she is heading for something warm and red that beats strong, and there is nothing that can stop her.