

Rooms for Rent – Synopsis by Hans Gunnarsson

A young couple, Tilde and Josef, have made the decision to seek out Tilde's biological mother, whom she has never met. Tilde and Joseph are both adopted, a coincidence they once viewed as a nigh on poetic confirmation that they were meant to be. Joseph, for his part, has never for a moment contemplated going in search of his roots and it is with reluctance and a mounting sense of ill-boding he accompanies Tilde on a journey south through Sweden, toward an unknowable destination – Tilde's birth mother is unaware of their coming; she knows nothing about the daughter she gave up so many years ago. Certainly, she has no idea she recently became a grandmother, to Joel, who was born with Down's Syndrome and is in the car with his parents. Perhaps, Josef muses, it is the very circumstance of Joel's birth that has awakened Tilde's desire to know more about her background.

Further south, in rural Småland, Britt-Mari runs a dilapidated bed and breakfast with her adult son Tord, who has a long history of mental illness. It is not long before the reader begins to suspect that Britt-Mari is Tilde's mother, and that all is not right with Tord. The relationship between mother and son is also groaning under the weight of unresolved conflicts and unspoken feelings, which Britt-Mari turn over and over in her mind as she broods on the sorrows of her past: the memories of the unwanted pregnancy, Tord's teenage psychosis, his father's suicide and the inexplicable assault of a random woman Tord committed as a grown-up. Can her son really be trusted? And was she right to allow him to return home after so many years in various mental health institutions? How well does she really know him? Her apprehension and powerlessness grow as she observes Tord from a distance, trying to understand his erratic, evasive behaviour. And how is she to interpret the enigmatic and literal disappearance act he pulls every time he goes out on the lake in the rowboat?

Rooms for Rent gradually becomes a tragedy of virtually Ancient Greek scope, told alternately from Britt-Mari's and Josef's respective perspectives. The action occurs within the course of a single long, sultry summer's day. Britt-Mari waits for the arrival of her only confirmed guests, a couple with a small child, while Josef struggles with increasingly urgent doubts about their journey into uncertainty. When the gloomy B&B looms up before him, his unease blossoms into anxiety. And Tilde's insistence on meeting her mother alone, without him and Joel, does nothing to allay his fears. But she gets her way. He lets her go and drives off to find somewhere to pass the time – which soon has him not only utterly lost but also embroiled in a confrontation with a couple of threatening rednecks in a modified Volvo.

Meanwhile, Britt-Mari welcomes Tilde at the reception. She finds her guest strange, but figures her behaviour must be the effect of either sunstroke or a quarrel with her husband. Something about her appearance, furthermore, seems vaguely provoking to Britt-Mari. The banjo strumming coming from Tord's room adds further stress to the tense situation. She shows Tilde upstairs and leaves her to settle in, oblivious to the fact that the woman who just checked in is her daughter; something has persuaded Tilde to keep mum. Possibly, she has belatedly realised that her strategy was rash and that she should have listened to Josef.

Britt-Mari leaves the B&B to spend the evening with her neighbour and close friend Irene. But once there, she is overcome with nagging worries. Her mind keeps circling back to Tord and that woman, and to Tilde's husband and child who do not seem to be coming. After calling Tord repeatedly, she decides to return to the B&B. As she approaches the house, the first thing she sees is Tord slinking around the corner and sprinting toward the jetty. She watches him climb into the boat and row out onto the lake with firm strokes, before going inside to check on Tilde. The door to her room is ajar; she pushes it open and immediately spots Tilde on the floor:

What have you done? she gasped inwardly. *What the fuck have you done?* And it was a tripartite you, an accusation aimed as much at herself as at the woman lying prone by her feet, her head bloodied and her arm at an unnatural angle.

In shock, she bends over Tilde, who suddenly opens her eyes and looks back, which frightens Britt-Mari into picking the massive, bloodstained glass ashtray up off the floor:

... and how everything seemed to have converged in her like in a prism, the in equal parts repressed and visceral rage that had seized her when the woman had called out weakly for her mother.

Mummy.

Mummy.

Mummy.

Three times she had brought the ashtray down. Three blows, eyes shut tight. Then she had got to her feet, sobbing, gasping, and staggered over to the open window from which she could see Tord far out on the lake.

Then she had heard the car pull into the yard.

She kills to protect her son, unaware that the person she is killing is her daughter. Or as Tord prophetically puts it in one of the vignettes that precede each chapter:

Blind, she opens her eyes.

Blind, she smashes the mirror, her own blindness.

Reflected in the shards, she tears her own flesh.

The tragedy has reached its conclusion.