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It's All Dark But He's Not Afraid: Translations of Stories by Ingvar Ambjornsen

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IT'S ALL DARK BUT HE'S NOT AFRAID: TRANSLATIONS OF STORIES BY
INGVAR AMBJØRNSEN

by

Steven R. Finney
Bachelor of Arts, University of North Dakota, 1982

A Thesis
Submitted to the Graduate Faculty

of the

University of North Dakota

in partial fulfillment of the requirements

for the degree of

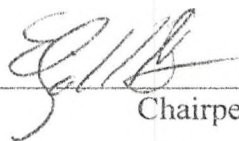
Master of Arts

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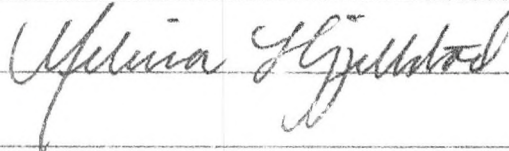
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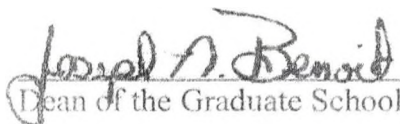


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ABSTRACT

This thesis consists of English translations of two short stories by the Norwegian novelist, essayist and short-story writer Ingvar Ambjørnsen, with an introduction in which special problems and challenges associated with the individual stories, and with the two languages in general, are discussed.

The two stories translated are “Into the Mountain” (original title: “*Bergtatt*”) and “The Cherry Tree” (original title: “*Kirsebærtreet*”). Both are taken from Ambjørnsen’s 2005 collection *Delvis til stede*.

CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION

The first bit of translating I ever did was in the summer of 1981. I had been writing fiction a few years, had studied Norwegian a total of two semesters, and was looking for a summer project to combine the two pursuits. I approached Arne Brekke, the sole Norwegian faculty member at UND, and asked if he would oversee a translation with me. He chose a story by the journalist and fiction writer Albert Henrik Moen called “Intet rom i herberget” (“No Room at the Inn”), which revolved around a refugee couple, the wife pregnant, looking for a place to spend the night in an unspecified war-torn locale. They ended up in an abandoned rail car, where the woman gave birth by candlelight. I remember struggling mightily with idioms that made no sense at all in my beginner’s Norwegian, nor when translated literally into English, and I eventually learned to look through every meaning and example given in the dictionary until I found one that made sense in the context in question. I also remember that once the initial translation was finished, to borrow F. Scott Fitzgerald’s phrase, the real work began.

At that point there was plenty I didn’t know: about the language I was translating from, the obstacles and pitfalls it held for the translator trying to bring it into English; about the process of translation itself and the multiple aims one must pursue simultaneously in order to do it well; about the author—I hadn’t read a thing by him, didn’t know what his preoccupations were, what pendulum-swing the story I was

translating might represent, either towards or away from his previous work or that of others. My fiction writing had made me aware of certain broad characteristics: style, theme, tone, motif. But my awareness of the forms these characteristics could take was still quite dim. I had done no reading about translation, but was nevertheless determined to render a “faithful” translation while having little idea what I actually meant by that.

I don’t have the translation anymore, but my guess is that it suffers from the usual slavish fidelity to the original words and syntax that marks the work of the amateur. Still, I found the project a huge thrill, and made up my mind to do more of it the following spring, which I’d arranged to spend studying in Norway. Once I got settled there, however, it soon became clear that the more substantial English-language portion of the translation process was interfering with my reason for going to Norway in the first place: learning Norwegian. Every hour spent working with the English version of a translation seemed to cost me a day’s progress in my Norwegian. What I needed was not to labor away alone in my room (I could, after all, do that in the US), but to participate as much as possible in life at the school, absorbing as much as I could of the rhythms and cadences of everyday Norwegian speech—developing what Gregory Rabassa refers to in his memoir *If This Be Treason* as my “acquired instinct.” It’s those rhythms and cadences I’ve tried to hear in my head now as I’ve worked on the translations included here.

While there’s still a great plenty I don’t know, I have done some thinking and reading about the theory and craft of translation since my initial foray in 1981. My goal of a faithful translation remains, but my idea of fidelity in translation is informed by others’ attempts to analyze and define that slippery term. I’m probably most in line with

the model Robert Weschler puts forward in his book *Performing Without a Stage: The Art of Literary Translation*—of fidelity not within a monogamous relationship between the original text and the translated one, but of a polygamous one in which the translator considers his obligations to various parties—the original, the translation, the literary culture of the recipient language and, ultimately, the translator himself as an artist who, while “constantly question[ing] his inclinations and ethical positions [. . .] has to follow his instincts” (112). I’ve also learned a bit about Norwegian—about its tendencies toward constructions that exist in English but don’t have the same effect on English readers as their Norwegian counterparts in that language. And this time around I know a bit more about the author.

While Ingvar Ambjørnsen (b. 1956) is one of Norway’s most popular and critically acclaimed writers, he is little-known in the English-speaking world, except to those few who know him as the author of the novel *Brodre i blodet* (literally “*Blood Brothers*,” though marketed in English translation in the UK under the titles *Beyond the Great Indoors* and *Elling*) on which the Oscar-nominated film *Elling* and the short-lived Broadway play of the same name are based. A prolific author known for his “powerful, realistic portrayals of the seamier side of life,” (to quote his publisher’s website) Ambjørnsen has authored more than 30 books, among them nineteen novels and three short story collections. My reading has focused mainly on his short stories, most of which are first-person narratives whose protagonists are outsiders of one sort or another: loners, liars, orphans, outcasts. These narrators tend to be intelligent, though not necessarily educated, and are often plagued by psychosomatic ailments and irrational anxieties.

Outwardly laconic and inwardly thoughtful, even philosophical, they are often caught up with questions about the reliability of perception. They communicate primarily in clipped sentences and fragments, yet are capable of occasional long, discursive sentences, and seem to enjoy wordplay, sprinkling their sentences with bits of mock-formal diction just for the sheer fun of it.

Both of these characteristics—the frequent use of fragments, the shifts in diction—pose challenges that I discuss in detail later, but first I’ll say a few things about the relationship between Norwegian and English and some of the challenges inherent in translating from one to the other.

Norwegian, as a Germanic language, is a fairly close cousin to English. Both are “subject-verb” languages in that the most basic declarative sentences in both languages begin with a subject followed by a verb. They share many other similarities in their grammars, as well as a great number of cognates, both true and false. There are, however, a number of differences that must be addressed in translating between the two. It should be said, as well, that in most cases the risk in addressing these differences is not so much that the form used in the original will be used ungrammatically in the English version, but that it will be privileged in cases where it constitutes a grammatically acceptable but stylistically inferior option. Even a translator who is hopelessly under the influence of the original language is likely to avoid outright grammatical errors. It’s the judgment call between two acceptable options that presents the real challenge.

Perhaps the most significant of these differences is the lack, in Norwegian, of continuous (also called progressive) verb forms, which in English are used mainly to

indicate the ongoing (I *am waiting* for you; I *was eating* breakfast) or the near-future (We *are leaving* tomorrow). In Norwegian, these kinds of action are indicated either with the simple present: *Jeg venter på deg* (I wait for you), *Jeg spiste frokost* (I ate breakfast), *Vi drar i morgen* (We leave tomorrow) or, less often, using an auxiliary verb such as *skal* (shall) followed by the verb in infinitive form: *Vi skal dra i morgen* (We shall leave tomorrow). In cases where the intent is to underscore either the simultaneity or duration of the action, the verb in present tense might be paired with another in present tense: *Jeg står og venter på deg* (I stand and wait for you), *Jeg satt og spiste frokost* (I sat and ate breakfast). The risk in translating these kinds of sentences into English is an overuse of the simple present and simple past tenses in cases where it might be acceptable though not the best choice (for example writing “While I ate breakfast” where “While I was eating breakfast” would fit best with what followed in the sentence).

Along with the absence of the progressive form in Norwegian, the use of the gerund is severely limited in Norwegian. In English, gerunds are used to make nouns out of verbs—to refer to an action (*to pack*, for example) either as a general concept (I hate *packing*) or a particular instance (How’s *the packing* going?) In Norwegian, the gerund is fairly commonly used in the latter case, but not in the former. In other words, you could ask a friend who was preparing to move overseas how “the packing” was going: *Hvordan går det med pakkingen?* (How goes it with *the packing*?), but would be unlikely ever to say you hated (or loved) *pakking*. Instead, you would use the infinitive form to say that you hated *to pack* (*Jeg hater å pakke*). The infinitive is also used this way in English, and in many cases is interchangeable with the gerund, which only increases the risk that the

translator from Norwegian to English will privilege the infinitive form and neglect the gerund where it might work better stylistically.

Another challenge in translating from Norwegian to English is the copious use of brief, unpunctuated interjections (called modal adverbs in Norwegian) to subtly shade meaning in statements and questions. These little words (*jo, nok, vel* are the most common), usually of one syllable and often nearly inaudible in speech, play a similar role to such English interjections as “of course” “no doubt” “as you/we (both) know,” subtly implying agreement or conveying assumptions, opinions or hopes the speaker is operating under. The translator Agnes Scott Langeland, in the “From the Translator” essay that accompanies her translation of a story by Norwegian author Kjell Askildsen in *Words Without Borders*, calls these adverbs “notoriously difficult to translate” while noting that “they help to add tension to the strained dialogue that intermittently ensues between husband and wife in [the story]” (par. 3). While I agree they can be difficult to translate, the biggest problem they pose for me is that, being small and compact, they are sprinkled liberally throughout Norwegian speech, where they do their work almost invisibly, without interrupting rhythm or flow. In translation, however, they are like little cowbird’s eggs that, once they hatch into their big, unwieldy English equivalents, overwhelm the sentences they appear in. And if every one of them is translated, the result can be paragraph after paragraph in which an “of course” or a “no doubt” perches in every other sentence, croaking out its tuneless little contribution. This problem is magnified in dialogue, where the orality especially invites the use of these fleeting adverbs in Norwegian, and where the clunkiness of their English equivalents is especially

disruptive. The strategy I adopted for dealing with these was to translate the ones that seemed most essential to setting the right tone in the sentence, playing with sentence structure to avoid upsetting the flow or rhythm, and omitting those that weren't absolutely necessary.

Besides these general, language-based issues, the individual stories themselves posed a few specific challenges. In the first of the two, "Into the Mountain," the biggest challenge, by far, was what to do with the rich and evocative title: *Bergtatt*. The word, which literally means "taken by the mountain," is familiar to all Norwegians, and refers to a type of folktale that features a creature called a *hulder*. *Huldre* (plural) are the daughters of a race of underground-dwelling supernatural mountain beings. While the *huldrefolk* in general are not particularly handsome, the young female *huldre* are extraordinarily beautiful, and are indistinguishable from young women except that they have cows' tails. Typically, the *hulder* appears to a young herdsman tending a summer pasture high on a mountainside. The innocent farmboy is quickly smitten and lured underground, where he may marry his *hulder* lover but must then spend the rest of his life inside the mountain with his in-laws. He is *bergtatt*—taken by, or into, the mountain. The term is used in everyday speech to mean "enchanted" or "bewitched," often with sexual overtones. The connections between both the literal and figurative meanings and the story are many and multilayered. Perhaps, though, more than anything, the title bestows a richness by generating resonance among the characters, all of whom would share at least some knowledge of the *hulder* tales.

Absent any *hulder* tradition in English, the “taken” part of “taken by the mountain” makes little sense. The “mountain” part, however, remains a dominant presence in the story, one that looms both literally and figuratively over characters who are either driving over, crashing into, or retreating inside of mountains. Thus, I opted for “Into the Mountain” as a variant that would take advantage of resonance generated by the various references to mountains in the story, especially the one made by the boy Kristian in the next-to-last scene, in which he explains that the hapless base-jumper who is hanging, possibly dead, from the mountainside across the valley, can go inside the mountain, where, though it is dark, he will not be afraid.

Other more minor issues in this story include proper names. The name of the main female character is Else, pronounced *EL*-seh. It was pointed out to me by a reader of an early draft that, since “else” is a word in English and is pronounced differently, it might make sense to change the spelling to reflect something closer to the Norwegian pronunciation. Hence, “Elsa.” Another name that gave me pause is that of the blind pianist who appears halfway through the story, and is referred to almost exclusively by his last name: Gjedde, which is the Norwegian name of the northern pike, a species of freshwater fish common in both Europe and North America, and known for its sharp teeth and prowess as a predator. While normally I wouldn’t translate Norwegian proper names (most of which have either patronymic or geographical origins), Ambjørnsen seems to have chosen the name Gjedde for its pike-like connotations. He makes repeated references to Gjedde’s “pointed” teeth and his strange, gliding gait. For that reason I

decided to give him the name “Pike” in English to preserve the connotation *Gjedde* would have in Norwegian.

The second story poses fewer such specific challenges. While its Norwegian title, “Kirsebærtreet” translates very nicely to its English equivalent, “The Cherry Tree,” with no unwanted losses or additions, there are two supermarkets that figure semi-prominently in the story, the names of which—*Spar* and *Meny* (“Save” and “Menu”)—*almost* work in English, along the lines of the American grocery store chain Safeway. Almost, but not quite. My solution was to identify them as supermarkets when they are initially introduced and continue to use their Norwegian names, which has the additional benefit of retaining a bit of local flavor at no cost to intelligibility.

An additional challenge in “The Cherry Tree”—one I continue to work on—is the voice of the narrator. While his voice shares many characteristics with the narrator of “Into the Mountain” (the use of fragments and short sentences, the occasional use of expressions that are more formal or elaborate than the prevailing diction of the story), he is a different character, and has his own way of talking. He is slightly wordier than his counterpart in “Into the Mountain.” He is more outwardly emotional. He is also gay, and I find that as I try to calibrate his voice, I’m very conscious of avoiding having him come across as stereotypical in any way. I’m not sure whether this consciousness is helping or hurting, but I feel I’m getting to know Willy significantly better in each draft. In my second draft I got a much better feel for the nuances of his reactions to the events of the story. I suspect it will take several more drafts for me to feel completely confident that

I'm representing Willy and his voice exactly as they should be. And confidence is a key ingredient in voice, both in fiction writing and in translation.

My general approach to translating these stories was to do my best to render the action accurately in English, aiming for maximum intelligibility, while avoiding the introduction of any strangeness (unexpected word choices, images, syntax, etc.) where the original had contained none, and trying to reproduce any strangeness where it had existed in the original, and while preserving the sense of place of the original. I tried wherever possible to honor the original's sentence lengths, including preserving fragments. There were some cases, though, where the fragments simply didn't work in English—especially those that had begun with the Norwegian subordinating conjunction *at*, which translates directly to “that” in English. The problem with beginning a sentence with “that” in English lies in its triple duty as relative pronoun (*It was the book that Lars had given him*), subordinating conjunction (*He said that Lars had given him the book*), and demonstrative (*That book? That Lars!*). As a result, the reader has only one chance in three of reading such fragments properly the first time through, and in the second and third attempts, the spell of the story is broken.

Here's a selection from the opening page of “The Cherry Tree” that illustrates a few of these issues I describe. The passage describes the results of one character's headlong plunge, while sleepwalking, over a second-story balcony railing.

Han ble reddet av baldakinen over hagedøren nede. Gul og blå men uten så mye som et brukket bein. Den natten ble vi enige om at dette at han

gikk i søvne av og til, i grunnen ikke var så forferdelig morsomt. At nå fikk vi ta saken på alvor, og kontakte en lege. (Ambjørnsen 21)

Here's a rough literal translation of the passage:

He was saved/rescued by the canopy over the garden/yard door downstairs/below. Yellow and blue, but without so much as a broken bone/leg. That night we became unanimous/in agreement about that this that he walked in sleep now and then, basically/fundamentally not was so terribly fun/funny/amusing. That now we needed to take the matter/issue/item seriously, and contact a doctor.

The first sentence is fairly straightforward, except for what to call the door. "Garden door" sounds awkward and British, and yard door merely strange—I've never heard anyone refer to a "yard door." There's "back door," which might work, but loses the sense of opening onto a back yard. Many back doors I know of open into garages or onto driveways running beside, not behind a house. I could say "the door to the back yard," but at six words and six syllables it's ungainly compared to the original single word of four syllables. Elsewhere in the story, the same door is referred to as the *verandador*—"veranda door"—which suggests it opens onto what in the U.S. we would call a deck (the other possible reading of veranda as porch seems precluded by the canopy over the door). But "deck door," with its boot-camp rhythm and thudding alliteration has a heaviness not found in the original. What do we call a door that opens onto a deck? I decided that "patio door" is the term we use, even in cases where it doesn't, strictly speaking, open onto a patio. Thus we have: "He was saved by the canopy over the patio door below."

The next sentence is the sort of fragment that translates fairly easily into English: Change yellow to black and opt for bone rather than leg, and it works well enough. One workshop reader had suggested changing “without so much as a” to “not one,” but it seemed to me to strip the sentence of the original’s rhythm and an opportunity for a little of the flavor of the original to remain in the English without calling attention to itself. The suggestion did, however, point out to me that “but without” sounded clumsy, so in the next draft I changed “without” to “not,” which worked better rhythmically: “Black and blue, but not so much as a broken bone.”

Then we have a long sentence: “That night we became unanimous/in agreement about that this that he walked in sleep now and then, basically/fundamentally not was so terribly fun/funny/amusing, which I rendered as “That night we agreed that his sleepwalking really wasn’t so terribly amusing.”

This is followed by another fragment, this time beginning with the problematic subordinating conjunction *that* discussed earlier: “That now we needed to take the matter/issue/item seriously, and contact a doctor.” Aside from the obvious need to delete the initial “that,” this sentence needed further pruning to bring it into line with the way the original read. Several of the English equivalents contained more syllables than their original Norwegian counterparts, so that the English sounded clumsy. Also, the Norwegian “sak,” besides being shorter than the English “matter” or “issue” is a more everyday word than “matter/issue/item,” which feels stagey and melodramatic in this particular sentence. To illustrate the difference, take the Norwegian phrase, “Vi jobber med saken,” which translates literally to, “We work with the matter/issue,” but is really

just the Norwegian equivalent of “We’re working on it.” Along those same lines, then, I dropped “matter” for “it” and I arrived at: “We had to take it seriously and see a doctor,” for the resulting English version:

He was saved by the canopy over the patio door below. Black and blue, but not so much as a broken bone. That night we agreed that his sleepwalking really wasn’t so terribly amusing. We had to take it seriously and see a doctor.

Despite this level of attention to individual words and syllables, along with meaning, diction, rhythm and tone, early drafts of both translations have still been too literal and marked by the kind of privileging of certain grammatical forms I’ve described: an overuse of present-tense and infinitive verbs at the expense of progressive verbs and gerunds. Successive drafts, in which I’ve incorporated comments and suggestions from other readers, have contained fewer and fewer of these artifacts from the originals. In the case of Bergtatt/Into the Mountain, which I’ve worked on over several years, I eventually did a draft without having looked at the original in a year, and that draft is probably where I got rid of most of the really persistent artifacts of the original. Subsequent comparisons also suggest I normalized or explained some of elements that were intentionally odd or unexplained in the original, a discovery that caused me to go back over the entire draft, revisiting many choices I’d made earlier and finding ways to preserve the original feel and mystery. Some of those changes, in turn, will no doubt prove to be the opposite of improvements. This back-and-forth between the often conflicting goals of fidelity to the original and a graceful style can be nerve-wracking but

ultimately leads to a text in which both the meaning and the magic of the original are recreated in the translation.

In negotiating these moves back and forth between versions that are freer and those that are more married to the original text, it's been helpful to remember one distinction Edith Grossman makes in her book, *Why Translation Matters*: "In translation the utopian ideal is fidelity. But fidelity should never be confused with literalness. Literalism is a clumsy, unhelpful concept that radically skews and oversimplifies the complicated relationship between a translation and an original" (67). She elaborates on this distinction a few pages later, arguing that equating fidelity with literalness would mean

. . . the only relevant criterion for judging our work would be a mechanistic and naive one-for-one matching of individual elements across two disparate language systems. This kind of robotic pairing does exist and is scornfully mocked as "translatorese," the misbegotten, unfaithful, and often unintentionally comic invention that exists only in the mind of the failed translator[.] (69)

Gregory Rabassa, in his memoir, *If This Be Treason*, brings this question of fidelity to a head by opening his book with a mock trial of the translator, in which he admits to all manner of betrayals enacted in the course of translation, beginning with a betrayal of the word: "[Can] a stone . . . ever be a *pierre* and a *pierre* a stone, and [can]

either of them . . . ever be that hard object we are looking at on the ground[?] . . . [E]ven if a thing can be cloned the word that designates it cannot and any attempt to reproduce it in another tongue is betrayal” (6). From betrayal of the word, he goes on to concede “the betrayal of the languages of both versions, the author of the original, his readership, and “lastly but most subtly” the translator himself: “We [translators] will sacrifice our best hunches in favor of some pedestrian norm in fear of betraying the task we are set to do. . . This last betrayal must stand before all the treasons here delineated as the most foul” (4). The translator, he says, must “know that this is the best he can do in this place and at this time,” and when attempting to find solutions, should use what Ortega y Gasset called “vital reason,” and “must put to good use that bugbear of timid technicians: the value judgment” (8). So much of translation, he says, “should be based on an acquired instinct, like the one we rely on to drive a car, Ortega’s vital reason” (8-9). The translator “must not betray his hunches. There will be carping from the critics, but he will be closer to being right that way and, in any case, will not have betrayed himself” (9).

Both Grossman and Rabassa, as well as the sections from Weschler quoted earlier, have served as powerful inoculations against the temptation toward literalism and its evil spawn, *translatorese*. And they have reaffirmed my belief that in translation, as in fiction writing, after serious and careful consideration of numerous options and suggestions by others, one’s final obligation is to be faithful to one’s own instincts, to produce a work that, to the same degree as the original, shows the unifying effects of a single clear vision and sensibility, that reads not like a translation of something else, but

as a work of art in its own right, one that answers the magic and mystery of the original with a magic and mystery of its own.

CHAPTER II

INTO THE MOUNTAIN

We were headed home from a wedding. We had to cross the mountains. I'd planned to put the road behind us in one shot, but my sister thought otherwise. She had her six-year-old son with her. She thought it was a bad idea to drive half the night with Kristian in the back seat. It was hard not to agree with her. In fact, as soon as she said it, I realized that's exactly what it was: a bad idea. I'd only planned it that way because I'm not used to thinking about anyone other than myself. Plus I'm not crazy about kids. But once we decided to break the trip into two parts, I liked the idea more and more. I could see how the long haul through the mountains in the middle of the night might have been a trial for me. And I was thirsty for a beer. Elsa made a call to the Hotel Gjestun, farther up the valley. They had rooms.

"I feel like a little kid," Elsa said. She stuffed her cell phone into her pants pocket and leaned forward to get her cigarettes.

"Why? Because you're going to spend the night in a hotel?"

She lit a cigarette. I kept my eyes on the road. It was that kind of road; you had to watch it all the time. Especially when your eyes are as bad as mine. A narrow road. Winding. On the left, past the guardrail, I could see seagulls. Their wings gray and white against the lush green of the fields half a mile below.

“Because we’re spending it at the Gjestun. One of the last big timber hotels left in Norway. I’ve driven by it a hundred times, but I’ve never spent the night.” “Well,” I said. “There’s a reason there are so few of those old St. John’s eve bonfires left.”

She pretended not to hear. “I always get a kind of Ibsen-feeling when I see it.”

I nodded. *Ibsen-feeling.*

Of course I knew what she meant. Unlike her, I’d spent a few nights at the Gjestun. The place had been lovingly restored, and even though it was mostly Germans and Norwegian-Americans staying there, you wouldn’t be especially surprised to find Doktor Stockmann sitting in front of the fireplace.

“How much longer?” Kristian said.

“Soon,” his mother said.

“Don’t be too sure,” I said.

“How come?” His little pointed nose over my right shoulder.

“Well,” I said, “there are those who never get where they’re going. And those who never come home. Hear that? It’s like a poem.”

“Oh, stop,” Elsa laughed. “Pay no attention, Kristian.”

“Is it true?”

“No,” his mother said. “It’s not true.”

“Is it true, Uncle Martin?”

“That depends on what world you live in,” I said. “I live in a world where certain people never get to where they’re going. They just disappear somewhere along the way.”

Go missing. But in the world your mother lives in, people always arrive at their destination. They come home. Or they get found. Don't forget that she found you."

"I want to live in the world where people always come home."

"Sure you do." I said. "Who wouldn't?"

"So what happens to the ones who disappear?"

"You mean the ones who go missing in my world?"

"Yeah."

"I can't say. Not as long as you live in that silly world of your mother's."

"Why don't we put on some Leonard Cohen?" Elsa said. "Really set the perfect mood for a six-year-old."

The road got steeper and steeper. When we neared a pullout on the left side, I did something illegal. I crossed the oncoming lane and parked.

She did notice. She was as lax as me about traffic laws.

I said: "Need to pee? From here you can pee all the way down on the village."

"Yeah!" Kristian shrieked. "I want to pee on everybody's head down there!"

I held him around the waist. His little feet resting on the guardrail. "Okay," I said. "Aim for the preacher, now. And then hit the sheriff, and the farmer."

With great seriousness, he aimed his stream down into the abyss.

And me? No, I wasn't going to pee. What I needed was a beer, not a piss. I'd only stopped to show Kristian the clouds.

I hoisted him down and pointed up the valley.

"Look," I said.

The boy and his mother both looked.

"My God," Elsa said. "It looks like an evil spirit."

"It *is* an evil spirit," I said.

"I peed right on the fireman's head!" Kristian said.

But then he got scared. My arms were still around him. I could feel his heart pounding.

To the south, the west side of the valley was filled with yellow afternoon light, from the bare peaks down to the grassy slopes. In the north, though, the sky grew dark as we watched. From an almost black core, a wall of lead-gray lowered itself down over the dark mountainside. At the point where the darkness devoured the sunlight, remarkable hues were appearing: copper and orange. A violent storm was heading down the valley and for a moment I saw that the boy was standing, listening.

Everything had gone absolutely still.

Almost like a solar eclipse.

When the first drops fell, we got back into the car. I turned the key in the ignition and heard sirens behind us. I waited until the police cars and rescue vans had passed, and swung onto the road.

Then came the deluge.

"This isn't good," Elsa said. Then she caught herself. "Kristian," she said, turning to the boy, "listen to it pound the roof."

"It's like being shot at with Gatling gun," I said.

"It's *machine* gun," Kristian said, for he was a very bright boy.

“Yeah, they’re shooting at our bombers. And we were just about to destroy Dresden.”

“Martin, do you mind?” she said. “I’m asking as nicely as I can.”

“It’s just rain,” I said. It wasn’t true. It was hail as big as shooter marbles.

“Why do you have to be so awful?” she said. “Why do you have to be so awful all the time?”

I didn’t know. I didn’t think I was awful all the time. A little awful, maybe. Now and then. She had always liked that about me. I was her big brother.

“That was quite the commotion,” she said, meaning the sirens. “What do you think that was all about?”

“Hard to say,” I said. “War is war. The hotel must be on fire.”

“The hotel’s on fire?” Kristian said.

Boys. Now he was sitting back there hoping the hotel was burning.

“And you just peed on the fireman,” I said.

We reached the Hotel *Gjestun*. The gray plank palace like something ripped out of a creepy comic strip. When I swung into the parking lot, I saw smoke coming from the two chimneys. An extremely well-controlled fire. The evil spirits pelted the asphalt, alternating between buckets of rain and frozen marbles.

“Let’s just sit here until the worst is over,” I said. “We’re in no hurry.”

I rolled the window halfway down and lit one of Elsa's cigarettes. My eyes went out of focus. What had I been dreaming of? Driving up over the plateau in blind darkness? I was glad to have a levelheaded sister along, with a young boy to watch out for.

"Turn on the wipers," she said. "I can't figure out what's going on."

I turned on the windshield wipers. She leaned forward in her seat. "They're just standing there in the rain."

I couldn't see them. "Sure enough. They must be crazy. Wait here. I'll get someone to help us with the luggage."

I threw open the door and sprinted across the parking lot.

A few dozen people in raingear were standing in front of the entrance. Looking out into the half-light. To the east. The mood was uneasy, and I thought of the rescue vans that had passed us. When I came into the lobby I noticed I was soaked all down my shoulders and back. Behind the desk a young man held a yellow telephone receiver to his ear. He looked like he'd just taken a reservation from a ghost.

I thought: I want no part of this game. Something's happened, but something's always happening. I want a couple of cold beers, and some dinner with Elsa and the boy. That's all. I don't want to know what's happened. A car wreck, probably. Four eighteen-year-olds went off the road. The best eighteen-year-olds on this side of the mountain. In the morning we'd read about them in *Verdens Gang*. See pictures of living teenagers hanging onto each other. Candles, placed Where It Happened. Letters, the handwriting dissolving in the rain. All that Catholic nonsense. I waited until he finished, then checked

in. I said he should give me a hand, that we were traveling with a child, but then I heard the rain let up. Once again it was absolutely still, just the way it was right before everything cut loose. People were streaming back into the foyer. Of course, I thought. They were just out watching the awful weather. That's all.

The young man behind the desk glanced questioningly at me. "Stay where you are," I said. "I've got it covered."

"Your card," he said. "You wanted to put it on a credit card."

I gave him my VISA. I'd been holding it the whole time. People were disappearing into the bar-and-restaurant area. Through the glass entry doors I could see Elsa and Kristian coming across the parking lot, each of them lugging a suitcase. When they got inside, though, it wasn't Elsa and Kristian after all, but an elderly couple. I really needed to get my eyes checked. My ears were ringing.

I went outside. The room keys were in my jacket pocket. Elsa was unloading the trunk. Kristian was off trying to coax a cat out from under a delivery van. Nothing left of the storm but drenched asphalt. The sun shone, glittering in the puddles.

Elsa pushed a lock of hair behind her right ear and slammed the trunk. "There's a young man hanging off the side of the mountain across the valley," she said. "Don't tell Kristian."

I have this memory. The first time I remember actually *thinking*. I have earlier memories but they're just pictures, images: the blue light street on the ceiling over my bed, rain against the window. Grownups' voices in the living room. That sort of thing. But here's the first thing I remember, once an "I" had awakened in me: I'm standing before the steep rock wall behind our summer cottage. I lean back and see the wet, black stone, the fir trees clawing into this impossible Jacob's ladder, and I think: What's behind this mountain? What world? A different world, of course—that much I understand. But what I don't understand is that I'm trying to get a grasp on the future. A part of me knows that, on my own, I can't explore the other side of the mountain. Another part of me, not yet awakened to full consciousness, senses the possibilities of adult life. One day I'll go over that mountain.

It was a different mountain I was gazing at now. And I'd grown old enough to wonder—not what lay beyond that forbidding wall of rock across the valley—but beyond death. So far, those kinds of thoughts hadn't occurred to me. I'd had my hands full just living. But over the last six months my eyesight had deteriorated considerably, and this ringing in my ears was getting more and more annoying. On top of that, I'd said and done some things recently that I couldn't quite stand behind, let alone explain. I got angry more quickly. I found myself in places I normally wouldn't turn up. (In Brann Stadium, for example; I've never had the slightest interest in soccer.) That I now found myself in Room 211 of the Gjestun Hotel was natural enough. I was here because my sister wanted it that way. But when I finally laid eyes on the injured base jumper hanging from the rock face across the valley, and my first thought was how much better I could see the world

through binoculars—that was something else again. But the rock face wasn't just brought closer; for the first time in ages I could see with absolute crystal clarity. I could see that he was alive. And that there was no chance he'd make it. His right arm moved weakly, as though he were trying to wave to the rescue workers in the valley below him. His parachute was tangled in an outcropping; he was hanging in midair, but it was clear he'd hit the mountain. His lower body looked paralyzed. Probably broke his back.

I set the binoculars on the windowsill. Now all I could see of his yellow parachute was a spot against the dark background. A new storm was pressing its way down the valley, which was at its narrowest, its most severe right at this point. I opened the third and last beer in the minibar. It was a few minutes before six-thirty. I grabbed the remote and turned to the news on TV2. They had the report: a twenty-one-year-old from Manchester. There'd be an update at nine. It wasn't hard to imagine reporters and camera crews running, bent over, to waiting helicopters—helicopters that couldn't take part in the rescue effort up there in The Great Inaccessible, but could at least make sure images and commentary were broadcast around the world.

I drained the beer, wanted more. I grabbed my jacket and was about to head down to the bar.

My cell rang. It was Elsa.

“I switched rooms. We're facing the parking lot now.”

“There'll be activity there all through the night.”

“What's the alternative? He can't just sit by the window and watch . . .”

“No, you're right. It was smart to switch rooms.”

"Can we talk?"

"I'm heading down to the bar," I said. "Should I get a table for a quarter to eight?"

"Oh, God, I haven't even thought about that. Yeah, go ahead. I guess we do still need to..."

"And we'll be expected to clean our plates, Elsa."

She hung up.

I imagined Kristian sitting on the bed, or maybe looking out the window, watching the cars come and go.

The bar was half-full. I saw it as if through a haze. Guests standing or sitting, the dark brown log walls, brass candlesticks, the big photograph of the hotel taken in 1912. A bar after my own heart. The mood was . . . how can I describe it? Not tense. There was an air of great seriousness. Conversation was hushed. I ordered a beer and sat down at the bar. My beer arrived, and so did Elsa. She paused a moment in the doorway, glanced around the room. I sat there thinking: It's me she's looking for. Then: What an exquisite sister I have. I'd turned out so-so, as far as appearance and temperament were concerned. But our parents had had better luck with Elsa. She'd changed for dinner. She was wearing black. The only jewelry she had on was a gold cross around her neck. Framed by her dark hair, the cross stood out against the white skin above her neckline. Both the cross and the

white skin seemed to shine—and yet how was it that could I see a little gold cross at that distance, anyway?

She ordered a gin and tonic.

“From wedding to funeral,” I said. “What’s the boy doing?”

“Can’t you call him Kristian? He’s your nephew. Watching TV, of course. I’ll get him in a little while.”

“I asked for a table by the window,” I said. “Sorry. Old habit. I always ask for a table by the window. They’ll probably have the drapes closed.”

“Oh God,” she said. “This is so grotesque. You can’t go around explaining to a six-year-old what’s happening over there.”

I didn’t see how you could avoid it. I don’t have kids, have never had much to do with them. But I do remember being sensitive to certain things when I was a kid myself. The forced cheerfulness my parents put on when I burst into the kitchen after school and effectively stopped their arguing. My father being “tired, so tired,” and the reek of alcohol throughout the whole house. That sort of thing.

“I don’t mean we have to lie,” she said. “But we can let him figure it out on his own.”

Isn’t that asking a lot? I thought. He knows, of course that you don’t want him to know. He know that what you don’t say is a kind of lie.

I didn’t say it.

Her drink came. She took a sip.

I started thinking about what I'd said in the car a few hours earlier. About these two worlds. His mother's and mine. How people in my world don't always reach their destination. Or arrive at home. They disappear along the way. He had wanted to live in his mother's world, but now reality had cast a vote for Uncle Martin's version.

"So what do we really know?" she said, giving her head a little toss. "We know he's alive. This may not be so hard after all."

I nodded. Right. We know that he's alive. And that he'll die tonight. Or maybe yet this evening, while we're eating our dessert.

"You're really good at that," I said. "It's almost scary."

I looked at my watch. Just past eight-thirty. "I'll run up and get the boy," I said. "Kristian. Take your drink in with you. We'll be down in a minute."

He wasn't watching TV, of course. The TV set flickered away, unwatched. A nature show on Discovery. Kristian stood by the window, looking down at the parking lot, where an ambulance sat with its lights flashing. Blue flashes in a circle on the dark asphalt. Broadcast, I thought: *This just in. Something terrible has happened.* He turned suddenly when I came into the room, afraid for an instant because it wasn't his mother, but then he smiled.

"There was another one out there, Uncle Martin!" he said. "But it drove away."

I went and stood beside him. Laid my hand on his shoulder.

"Are they the same ones we saw before?" he said.

"No doubt."

"But there's not going to be a fire here, is there?"

“Only in the fireplace. Besides, that’s an ambulance, right?”

“Then somebody must be sick.”

I went into the bathroom. Closed the door behind me. Was I really sick, or was it just the same old hysteria that had haunted me ever since I was Kristian’s age? I could be out playing, and it would come over me: my heart had stopped. I was dying. Or, in the middle of class, I’d feel like I couldn’t breathe. For a long time I thought I had lip cancer, a cancer that had all but disappeared. I’d tried out a few of my father’s sour pipes, had read about the curse that struck habitual pipe smokers. I was born with a small irregularity in my lower lip, but hadn’t noticed it until I became aware of this connection between crime and punishment. I worried myself into such a state that my mother finally took me to see our family doctor. The first thing he’d asked me was if I smoked a pipe. I was twelve years old, and confessed. I haven’t smoked one since. But my ears rang. That was a fact. My ears rang and my eyesight was going. Then again, when was the last time I got new glasses?

She must have quit taking Valium. Or she kept her pills in her handbag. The only medication I found among her toiletries was Advil. I rinsed my face with cold water and went back out to Kristian. He was still at the window.

I turned off the TV. “Let’s go!” I said.

Did I really not like kids? I’d said so in various contexts over the years. Now it occurred to me that this was a kind of pose. A clumsy attempt to shock. It was true I’d had little to do with them, and had a low tolerance for all the bother they brought with them. But now as we headed down the stairs towards the lobby, and he trustingly slipped

his hand into mine, I got a lump in my throat. It occurred to me that I'd done nothing to earn this blind faith. I'd barely been present in his life. Even after Elsa and Jon divorced, Uncle Martin had kept to his own affairs. In the same city, no less. For all practical purposes I'd never seen the boy, and here he was on these steep stairs, trusting me. Because I was his uncle. It felt completely foreign, strange, to be addressed as uncle. It did something to me. I went down this same stairway and was Uncle Martin. A different person.

Down in the lobby the doors to the library were wide open. It was a good room. I'd sat in there with the morning papers after breakfast the other times I'd had stayed here. Old leather-bound books from floor to ceiling. A fireplace and deep armchairs. And a full-mounted brown bear, which of course Kristian spotted and had to check out. He let go of my hand and ran in.

"Is it a real bear, Uncle Martin?"

I said it was as real as a bear could be once somebody'd shot it.

"But it's not, I mean, nobody *made* it?"

"No, he used to roam around up here on the mountain, eating blueberries."

"It's kind of funny when you think about it," he said, like a little grownup. "Isn't it? Just think if he knew he'd be standing in here. After he was dead."

"Kristian," I said. "There's something I need to tell you. But only if you can promise to keep a secret."

He looked at me, excited. "About the bear?"

“No,” I said. “About a young man. But you have to promise you won’t tell your mother.”

He promised.

They’d closed the heavy drapes. The dining room was nearly full, but the somber atmosphere of the bar had taken hold here as well. Elsa sat studying the menu at a table off in the furthest corner, next to a black grand piano. When we were halfway across the room she looked up and Kristian took off towards her.

“What took you so long?”

“We went and saw the bear!” Kristian said.

I peeked out between the drapes before I sat down. Felt the boy’s eyes on my back. They’d set up searchlights. Three blue-white strips of light ran up the mountainside. At this distance it was impossible to see whether the lights had found him. I sat down. Grabbed the menu and wondered what to make of the way they’d put the whole miserable affair under floodlights. Had they done it to make him feel less alone? Did he *feel* less alone? Or did he feel . . . *exhibited*? Hung out for public display?

The only thing for sure was they wouldn’t get him down tonight.

Kristian told his mother about the bear. How he’d been surprised by hunters as he wandered through the meadows up here, eating blueberries. Maybe even looked down at

the hotel where he would eventually end up in the library. I thought of the young man hanging off the mountain, watching his rescuers just out of reach.

“I think I’ll go for the reindeer medallions,” I said.

“And you, Kristian?” She’d already explained that her stomach was a little upset, so she’d make do with an appetizer. Was that the same gin and tonic on the table in front of her? No, it was another. Possibly her fourth.

“I’m going to have reindeer, just like Uncle.”

“That’s a bit too much for you, I think,” she said.

“No it’s not, ‘cause I’m *super* hungry!”

“Let’s order a whole reindeer!” I said, waving to the waiter. “And a bucket of lingonberries.” Thinking: not even under torture would he tell his mother about the young man hanging off the mountain across the valley. She’d never know. Kristian and Uncle Martin would see to that.

The waiter came to take our order, had brought along some paper and crayons for Kristian. The boy fell immediately into his own world; he drew with great concentration, the tip of his tongue peeking out the left corner of his mouth.

Elsa and I switched to red wine.

The food came. Beyond the bloody rounds of meat on my plate I saw Kristian’s drawing against the white tablecloth. An ambulance with flashing lights. A dead bear. Not a hint of any crashed base jumpers.

A blind man came in from the bar. A small, heavysset man with dark glasses. He was impeccably dressed in a tuxedo, a white cane in his right hand. In his left, a half-liter.

He slowly made his way through the rows of tables, carefully guiding his cane from side to side. He had an odd way of walking: upper body leaned backwards, feet sliding out in front of him. I could see sweat beading on his forehead. He had a sharp widow's peak, the sparse hair on top combed straight back, flat. It seemed as though he might be talking to himself. At any rate, his lips were in constant motion.

He came straight towards us. When he reached the grand piano, he stopped. Tapped carefully against a piano leg. For a moment he stood there smiling, head cocked. He's found what he was looking for, I thought. He stood a scant meter from our table. He probed with his cane towards the empty chair next to Kristian. Elsa remained silent. We were all three silent.

"May I have permission to set my glass here?"

He had bad teeth. His voice was low and pleasant.

"Go ahead and have a seat," Elsa said. "There's an empty chair." She started to get up to help him, but with a cautious movement he set his glass down, then found his way to the chair and slid onto it. He placed the cane against the table between himself and Kristian.

"Can't you see anything?" Kristian said.

The blind man took a big swallow from his beer and set it carefully back on the table. "Not a thing," he said.

"You'll have to excuse him," Elsa said. "He's only six."

"Oh, there's not much to excuse." He smiled with pointed, yellow teeth.

We introduced ourselves.

His name was Otto Pike.

Suddenly he cocked his head again, like he'd done by the piano. "And what do you see?" he asked, addressing himself to Kristian. "Is there anything pretty here, besides your mother?"

You could see the candle on the table reflected in each of his dark lenses.

Kristian looked doubtfully at the drawing in front of him. Elsa gave me a quick sidelong glance.

"He just drew an excellent picture," she said. "Didn't you, Kristian?"

But now the boy had grown shy and wouldn't answer. He picked up a black crayon and began scribbling hard and defiantly over the ambulance and the dead bear.

Pike laughed. "Now it sounds like you're drawing a picture for me."

"I can do that!" Kristian said. He took out a new sheet of paper.

"Yes, please do!" Pike said, chuckling. He laid his head back and his mouth opened slightly. Again those yellow, pointed teeth. "But you have to tell me what you're drawing. And what colors you're using."

"First I'll draw a big sun. A yellow sun."

"A yellow sun is good! See? I'm sitting here sunning myself."

"Then I'll make you sitting outside the hotel."

"Don't forget my sunglasses, so I'm not blinded by the sun."

"That's kind of hard."

"No, it's easy. Just draw two black holes where the eyes would go."

Elsa pushed her plate aside and looked at me again. I didn't look at her.

With great care, the boy drew a person sitting. A pair of enormous glasses, which he began filling in completely black.

“Could you see when you were the same age as me?”

Pike didn't answer. He was distracted by something else going on in the room. Four men and a woman were making their way towards the table nearest the kitchen door; it was where the staff usually sat on quiet evenings. They were all dressed in the rescue unit's yellow and red coveralls. The table had been set for them.

“Better finish your picture now,” Elsa said to her son. “It's getting late, and we have to be up early in the morning.”

“Almost done,” Kristian said.

“Don't forget the mountains and the big bird,” Pike said. Like most of the others in the room, he'd turned towards the new arrivals.

“A big bird?”

“Yeah, I'd like it if you could draw a big bird sailing up in the sky.”

“Those are the ones who were driving the ambulance,” Kristian said.

“I can see them with my ears,” Pike said. “Isn't that funny?”

The boy laughed.

“Would you like a glass of red wine?” I said. “There's an extra glass here.”

“I don't mean to impose,” he said. “I was just about to leave.”

“Oh, nonsense,” Elsa said. “Now look— Well, I mean—”

We had ourselves a good laugh. Kristian's laugh was loud and forced, the way kids laugh when they're trying to get attention.

Pike took the glass Elsa had filled. “No, when I was your age, I couldn’t see. I’ve never been able to see.”

The waiter came and took the almost-empty beer glass.

I ordered another bottle of wine.

“Anything to eat?” the waiter said to Pike.

“No, thanks much. But I would like that bottle he just ordered charged to my room. Number 244.”

I wanted to protest, but Elsa laid her hand on mine.

“Finished,” Kristian said.

The blind man took the drawing and placed it on the table in front of him. Ran his fingers carefully over the smooth surface. I thought of things I’d read about how the blind “see” with their fingertips. I didn’t know whether I believed it and, naturally, couldn’t bring myself to ask.

“Sure enough!” he said. “There’s the big bird!”

I sneaked a look between the drapes. The spotlights were still on.

“And I can feel my sunglasses right here.”

Kristian laughed happily.

Without a word, Pike rose and moved, again with that odd gliding gait of his, toward the piano, where he took his place on the stool. At the sound of his opening chord, all eyes were upon him. It was a powerful opening, and he immediately started improvising on Irving Berlin tunes. From where I was sitting I could see his fingers; they danced so playfully over the keys, his hands crossing over one another, while his

sunglasses and blind gaze stayed turned toward the window. I noticed the headwaiter standing by the kitchen. I could see that he didn't know quite how to deal with the situation. There was ordinarily piano music here in the evening, I knew from past visits. But now, for obvious reasons, the pianist had been given an extra night off. Everyone here was already feeling this absurd guilt, maybe an equally absurd shame, for being alive and healthy. *In the lap of luxury* flashed through my mind. Still, we had to eat, whether that kid out there died or not. We had to have food, and couldn't turn a tragedy into a happy ending simply by skipping reindeer medallions and salmon in favor of bread and goat cheese. But it had to be done right, with none of the unbridled, party atmosphere you can get when delicacies lie steaming on the tables and the wine and liquor start to kick in. A cocktail pianist simply didn't belong here tonight. And now a blind man had broken with decorum. There he sat spinning out cheery little melodies, his face turned toward the very misery itself. Still, I could understand the maître d's hesitation. It was the natural shyness of the healthy when faced with another's handicap. Plus there was no way to be sure the blind man even knew. Maybe he was sleeping all afternoon. Or just arrived at the hotel. It was safe to assume the staff at the front desk weren't required to inform people of what had happened. More likely the opposite.

Pike noodled away quietly and innocently enough, but the mood was such that everything muted seemed amplified, and everything innocent seemed—not sinful, exactly, but misplaced. The maître d' stood by the kitchen door, ready at any moment to abandon his post and discretely put a halt to this unpleasant pleasantry, yet hamstrung by the very decorum he was charged to defend. All eyes were fixed on the pianist. Any kind

of intervention, even just a polite request for Pike to wrap things up, would have been an acknowledgment of the uneasiness we were all feeling—something we absolutely hadn't paid for, but that fate had inflicted on us anyway, free of charge.

I felt the maître d's anxiety like it was my own, and shared his relief when, after a few minutes, Pike let his hands fall to his lap. No sooner had a murmur of conversation started up, though, than Pike started in with undiminished energy, all the time with his face turned toward the window. The tribute to Berlin was over.

"Are you lonesome tonight?" he sang in a rich tenor. *"Do you miss me tonight? Are you sorry we drifted apart?"*

His voice was almost a true copy of Elvis's. His playing was brilliant, and even though the microphone wasn't hooked up, the words carried out across the whole room, where you could've heard a pin drop among the tables.

"For God's sake!" Elsa hissed.

"Is your heart filled with pain? Shall I come back again? Tell me dear, are you lonesome tonight?"

When he began to giggle, then laugh heartily, it occurred to me that not only was he able to imitate Elvis's voice to perfection, but that he was drawing on the famous version where Elvis started laughing when a man in the front row greeted him by lifting his toupee.

The maître d' was now working his way along the row of windows, moving sideways like a crab between the wall and the tables. Why he chose the most difficult route, I don't know. A confused attempt to show a certain discretion, I suppose. Just

when he was almost to the piano, Pike took his hands off the keys and sat once again in silence. The maitre d' stopped short. He had no heart for this mission. Plus now all eyes were on him. The blind man sat with his arms hanging down at his sides, his chin on his chest, as though fast asleep.

The maitre d' retreated. No sooner had he made it back to his post, though, when Pike started in again, this time with a manic rendition of "Bridge Over Troubled Water." He abused the piano. There were zero bridges and a mass of troubled water.

Then a funny thing happened: Elsa, my sister, began to laugh. First a low giggle, which she clearly tried hard to hold back, but then she completely lost it. Sprayed red wine all over the tablecloth and roared with laughter. Before long the whole place was laughing. The little man at the piano cut loose in blind insanity and the crowd gave in completely to hysterics. An avalanche of laughter. It was as though Elsa's outburst was a sign, a signal for everyone to take a break from tact and tone. As though she released them from all responsibility. A waiter came running to the piano, but Pike refused to give in. He clung to the keyboard while the waiter hauled and tugged at him. It *was* a comical sight, and soon even the rescue party was laughing. I'll admit it, so was I. And Kristian had started in again with that grating fake laughter, his childish appeal for attention.

Then suddenly it was quiet. The waiter had gotten the lid down over the keys. Pike rose as though nothing had happened and began carefully making his way toward our table. Every now and then he did a little tapdance, snapping his fingers as he went. But now shame had taken hold of us.

"Bedtime!" Elsa said to Kristian.

“I want to sleep with Uncle Martin!”

She was about to protest, but I shook my head. “Of course you’ll sleep with Uncle Martin.” I said.

They’d turned off the floodlights. I let the curtains fall back into place. The door to the bathroom was ajar. I could see Kristian in there helping himself to Uncle Martin’s electric toothbrush. The low hum of the motor driven by two batteries. His shadow fell across the turned-down bed. He was crying. The shadow trembled.

“I got so scared when I laughed,” he sobbed. “When everybody laughed.”

I took the toothbrush and turned it off. Rinsed it under the faucet. “It’s all right, Kristian.”

“But I was so scared!”

He clung to me.

I helped him out of his clothes. Tucked him in under the white comforter, and lay down on the other side of the bed. The room was silent.

“Do you think he’s dead now? The English man?”

“Yeah,” I said. “I think he’s dead now.”

“Then I’m afraid to go to sleep.”

“No you’re not. Just go to sleep.”

“But where do you think he is now?”

“I don’t know, Kristian. Nobody knows that. That’s the nice thing about death. We don’t know a thing about it. Death is the only secret there is.”

He squeezed his eyes shut. “I can’t see anything now.”

It was a little past one when I headed back down to the first floor. The lights in the restaurant were off. Muted voices came from the bar; I went in. There was hardly anybody there. I remember that’s what I was thinking: hardly anybody. Actually, a few couples around the tables, some singles at the bar. My sister and this Pike were nowhere to be seen. I sat down where I’d been earlier and ordered a drink. Whiskey, I think. Yeah, I ordered a whiskey. I thought of the boy. Of Kristian lying upstairs asleep in my bed. Afraid to go to sleep, but sleeping anyway. Maybe dreaming of things he’d keep to himself when he woke a few hours later, in the middle of the night or towards morning, and rejoined the conscious world. *I got so scared when I laughed. When everybody laughed.*

The bartender brought my drink.

I drank. I was so terribly tired. Not intoxicated in any way; I can handle a lot. Just tired. I let my eyes drift out of focus and sat there, seeing everything as if through a haze. The brass of the beer taps gleamed. Sounds were almost unnaturally strong and clear. The clinking of glasses. Voices. No music. I thought of Kristian lying up in my bed, waking up and feeling abandoned, betrayed. Maybe I should go back upstairs. I’d once woke in an empty room, awakened by my parents’ absence. Alone in bed, certain I was alone in

the world. I got up to find the nightmare was real. Went from room to room—empty rooms, dark and abandoned. My parents, it turned out, were out in the yard. It was a summer night.

“Not that it’s any of my business,” the bartender said, “but she really shouldn’t be out driving in that kind of shape.”

I looked at him.

“Your wife, or . . . the woman you came in with.”

I dug out my cell phone and called her number. Got her recording.

I went out to the lobby, then onto the steps. The car was gone. Then I remembered. I’d left the keys hanging in the lock.

I went back inside.

“Has it been long?” I asked, pointing at my glass, which was empty except for a single naked ice cube.

He looked at the clock. “An hour,” he said.

“Any news from across the valley?” I couldn’t stand to let him see I was worried.

He shook his head, took the bottle from the mirrored shelf. “But the law will be out in full force tonight. And with a blind man for a navigator . . .”

“I think I get the picture,” I said. “Or do you think I’m missing something?”

He didn’t answer. Went over to the sink and started washing glasses.

I left the cell phone lying next to my refilled glass as a sign that I wasn’t ready to call it a night, and went up the stairs. Slid the key carefully into the lock.

He was asleep. On his side with his mouth half-open. Little hands under his cheek. Once again I went to the window and drew the curtain aside. Outside it was pitch dark. Raindrops hit the glass and I thought of the boy out there hanging from the mountainside. A boy someone loved. I went back to Kristian and stood watching him. He was breathing calmly, and the calm, exhaled by lungs that filled themselves and emptied, spread over me.

On the stairway down to the lobby, I stopped suddenly. It was the same stairway where a few hours earlier I'd held his hand in mine—this unfamiliar hand of one who, trusting completely, had called me Uncle Martin. But now I heard my sister's voice, and saw her pass quickly in the lobby below.

When I reached the lounge she was sitting at the bar, fiddling nervously with my cell phone. Pike sat next to her, fiddling with her hand.

"I can't have any more," she said and passed my cell phone over without looking at me.

"Sure you can," I said. "Just give me the keys."

She didn't seem to understand, so I took her purse and opened it. Took out the car keys and set the purse back in her lap.

Pike asked for two gin and tonics, and the bartender looked relieved. Went to work.

"Is Kristian sleeping?" she said.

"No," I said. "He decided to go for a walk."

Pike chuckled to himself. The drinks came.

“We stood down there in the dark,” she said and took a sip. “It was—repulsive. Half the village. The mountainside stretching up into nothing. What if he’d called out! But there wasn’t a sound. Nobody said anything to anybody else, and he didn’t cry out. What the hell were we doing down there—can anyone explain that to me?”

“It’s nothing to be ashamed of,” I said.

“I didn’t say I was ashamed,” she said. “I just don’t understand what I was doing there.”

“I don’t know what I’m doing here,” Pike said. “But here I am.”

She looked suddenly at me: “He went for a walk?”

“Relax. He tried out my electric toothbrush, and I got him into bed. There was nothing for him to see out there anyway. I lay with him until long after he fell asleep. It was pitch black out.”

“To hell with both of you,” she said, and rose unsteadily. Her purse fell, and when she tried to grab it she knocked her glass over.

“Let her go,” Pike said, as if I had any intention of stopping her.

She stalked away across the hardwood floor, tossing her head as she did; I saw her as she’d been as a young girl at home, exactly the way she’d left the scene every single time I told her what we both had just witnessed. What she wouldn’t accept.

My ears had started ringing again. Pike moved closer, and I noticed that the arm of his jacket was lying in the puddle on the bar. “Listen!” he said.

The sound of her clicking heels faded away down the hall towards the library and front desk. Suddenly I was aware that we were the only ones left in here. The two of us

and the bartender, who stood leafing through a newspaper at the far end of the bar. He'd made no effort to clean up after Elsa. He'd had enough of the three of us. Enough of this day.

"Were you really there? At the foot of the mountain?"

"I don't know for sure," he said. "But it felt pretty real. We stood in the wet grass. There were others around us. It's not true what she said, that nobody said anything. There were actually a lot of stupid things said."

"So you could have been anywhere," I said.

"True," he said. "She's horribly ashamed. She sat there knowing you'd told the boy what happened. And then she burst out laughing."

"I don't know," I said. "I'm not so sure she knew."

"She knew you'd spilled the whole thing to the boy. He must have got an awfully strong taste of what a strange thing loneliness can be. When you very first realize you can't depend on your mother. Or your father. They're completely different people than they make themselves out to be. Knowingly misrepresent themselves. Because they've decided it's the best thing. Not for you, as they claim. But for themselves." His hand shot up to his mouth and he chuckled contentedly. "Oh God, it's just too awful!"

"I'm worried I'm losing my eyesight," I said. "I might sound ridiculous, but for the last few months I've been afraid I'm going blind. Sometimes it's like I'm walking in a fog. And I've got this damn ringing in my ears. Every day, my eyesight's a little worse."

"Gustav, bring us two more," Pike said. "There's a good boy."

The bartender did as he was told. Started rummaging through the bottles and glasses.

"It's so idiotic," I continued. "But I can't shake it. This feeling that my eyes are going. That the outside world's disappearing. Light. Color."

"Probably just wishful thinking," he said. "Wouldn't you say?"

I didn't answer.

"I didn't hold back," he said. "We needed music."

"Yeah," I said. "And a good laugh."

"Half the world laughs," he said. "And the other half weeps. That's the way it always is. You could be hanging half-dead from a parachute or dancing across the ballroom floor. A few years ago I was at a festival for blind and vision-impaired artists in Berlin. There was a lot of buzz about a blind photographer from the Republic of Georgia."

"A blind photographer?" I imagined my sister lying naked in the dark above us.

"He came with a young female art student who made a short film about him. She led him up to the podium, and then this film was shown on a screen behind them. The man sitting next to me could see, and told me what was going on, plus the film was dubbed in German. Well, this photographer went around in this little village where he lived, photographing everything he heard with one of those slick little cameras on the market now. The kind that fits in your shirt pocket. Sparrows cackling in a hedge. A meowing cat. A motorcycle driving past. Children playing."

"And the pictures?" I said. "The photos?"

“Total disasters, naturally. Yet for over two hours nearly a thousand people, most of them sighted, are captivated by this drivel. They sat rapt, staring at this garbage. Listening to the gibberish. And what’s got them glued to their seats? The delusion that they’re taking part in a blind man’s discovery of their world. Which of course is totally absurd. Forget about the emperor’s new clothes—or camera, for that matter. It’s all about the *spectator’s* nakedness!”

“I’ll assume there were no pianos at that festival,” I said. “Or were there?”

“No,” he said. “No pianos.”

I lay down on the bed with my clothes on.

“You can go inside the mountain,” Kristian said. “There’s a big cave in there.”

“Were you dreaming?”

“No. Thinking. Can’t we say he’s sitting there? The English man?”

“Sure,” I said. “That’s a fine thought. Maybe he’s even got a little campfire.”

“No,” he said. “It’s all dark.”

“Go to sleep, now.”

“It’s all dark, but he’s not afraid.”

His hand found its way to mine.

My sister was driving. Kristian lay asleep in the back. I was smoking a cigarette.

“I shouldn’t have done it,” she said. “It turned out all wrong.”

“It’s not worth worrying about,” I said.

“I drank way too much, and then I was completely obsessed with . . .” she bit her lower lip.

“You wanted to be seen by someone who couldn’t see,” I suggested.

“No.” she said. “I think it was that he couldn’t see himself.”

Across the valley two climbers were working their way down to the dead man.

It was a beautiful day, sunshine, blue sky, and I thought to myself that we’d have a fine trip over the mountain, if we could just keep quiet about most things.

CHAPTER III

THE CHERRY TREE

How can I tell his sleepwalking from any old trip to the bathroom? I don't know. It's a bit of a mystery. Because that's how it usually starts. With a trip to the bathroom. Or out in the kitchen for a glass of water. If he's awake and conscious, I lie there half-asleep. But if he's sleepwalking, I'm instantly wide awake. It's like there's this connection between our sleeping brains. A bridge. Naturally, I'm still a little jumpy after the close call we had a year ago. He'd somehow gotten the balcony door open, and gone head-first over the railing. He was saved by the canopy over the patio below. Black and blue, but not so much as a broken bone. That night we agreed his sleepwalking really wasn't so terribly amusing. We had to take it seriously, see a doctor. As expected, we were told to be careful, but not to overreact, either. As long as he stayed upstairs, I'd let him sail his own sea. No following along behind. The patio door downstairs stays locked now, just like the door to the balcony. The keys are in my nightstand. He doesn't know that, and doesn't want to. He was quite surprised when I showed him a murky video I made early one morning with him naked, going down the stairs to the TV room. Finding the keys in the wicker basket on the desk, letting himself out into the back yard. I'd seen him do this several times, but he never believed the part about the keys. Always insisted the door was open. That we forgot to lock it.

We've watched the video several times with the doctor. First Thoralf's standing out in the kitchen, looking out the window. Yeah, he sees—and he doesn't see. He registers his surroundings, but somewhere along the way the images of the outside world disappear before they get to the rational part of his brain. At one point in the video he even turns to face me. Stares wide-eyed into the camera. But doesn't wake up. He's fast asleep. Nothing will wake him now as long as I don't touch him, which most people know you're not supposed to do. So I just stand there and let the camera run, and he stares right at me. And then he starts muttering incoherently, incomprehensibly. It reminds me of when I was little and my Aunt Agnes would speak in tongues: a melodious language I found beautiful but frightening. Unlike Aunt Agnes, though, Thoralf seems angry. These sounds are definitely not coming straight from God.

He stands there muttering and snarling, then turns his attention to something else in the room. There's nobody here but him and me, but he apparently sees something. Then he heads for the stairs, and I have to stop myself from grabbing him, holding him tight. Waking him in a way that would be brutal, yes, even dangerous.

The first time we watched the video—before we took it with us to the doctor's—Thoralf said: “Well, Willy. As we both can see, there's something seriously wrong with my head. What's next? I get out the butcher knife Ulf and Atle gave us for Christmas? Without remembering squat afterwards?”

“Now you're exaggerating,” I said.

He thought for a moment. “Obviously I'm not seeing what I'm seeing.”

The doctor sided with me. He managed to Thoralf's fears regarding the butcher knife and other nightmare scenarios. By and large, he said, a sleepwalker is like someone under hypnosis.

"Most people are content just shuffling around the house, maybe robbing the fridge. But I've heard of one case where a woman actually managed to get herself dressed and pedal several kilometers on a bicycle before she woke up. She got herself—on winter streets, no less—all the way to where she worked. But that kind of thing happens so seldom it doesn't show up in any statistics."

Well. I've never seen him get dressed in his sleep, much less climb on a bicycle. But more than once I've seen him go downstairs and let himself out into the back yard. There's no harm, really. Our little patch of yard can't be seen from any of the neighboring properties. Still, I got him to quit sleeping in the nude. He fought it, naturally. Insisted that putting on pajamas meant kissing your sex life goodbye. I managed to exert myself sufficiently in that department to convince him that the opposite was true. I even went so far as to get a pair of pajamas myself to show solidarity. Then at least we could laugh at each other, which helped a little.

"We look like an old queer couple," he said, dejected, the first time we got ready for bed.

"That's maybe not so strange," I said. "Considering that's exactly what we are. You'll see, though. It'll spice things up. Now you can't just reach over with your hand. You have to force your way past my drawstring."

He made me promise not to tell any of our friends. He can be incredibly immature for an almost-sixty-years-old.

That night. A fine, moonlit march night. We always sleep with the window ajar. The curtains danced from side to side in the breeze, letting brief flickers of blue moonlight into the room. I caught only glimpses of him standing motionless between the bed and the door. Just standing there, stock-still. Asleep. The situation wasn't without an element of humor. At some point in the night he'd stepped out of his pajama bottoms, so that he appeared now in a short burgundy-colored silk pajama top, with his buttocks bare. And his penis half erect. He looked ridiculous, and for a moment I considered getting out the video camera. But no. Too dark. Plus he'd never forgive me.

He turned and went out to the living room. Those slightly shuffling steps. Just stay right where you are, I told myself. Time to stop chasing after him like some old woman. As long as he doesn't go downstairs. I heard him cross the living room floor and head out into the kitchen. A bit later, the sound of the faucet. And then it got quiet. Okay, I thought. He's probably standing there, gazing out at nothing, or somewhere inside his own head. Or whatever it he's doing. A little later I heard his footsteps again. Sleepwalker's footsteps. Now I they sounded like they were headed somewhere, and I started getting nervous. The stairs down to the first floor are steep. So I got up, which of course I should have done as soon as he left the bedroom; I mean, what's the pleasure in lying wide awake, worrying? This idea that at some point I could stop playing the night

watchman, even if he did stay on the second floor, was more than a little naive. I'm just not made that way.

By the time I reached the living room, he was already on the stairs. Truth is, the sight of him there was actually kind of reassuring. One hand flat against the wall, the other gripping the railing. A step at a time. Carefully. I wondered if he still had that half-hearted erection, but was missed out on the chance to find out. The stairs are narrow and, fortunately, he had his back to me. Did he see or not? I remembered the woman the doctor had told us about. The one who'd pedaled several kilometers to work, after first getting dressed. Fortunately, Thoralf wasn't that advanced, but certainly he could see, couldn't he? He had no problem finding a glass from the cupboard, and always used the cold water tap. The times he'd plundered the fridge, he always went for the cold meats. But never the slightest recollection afterwards. Everything completely erased.

I followed closely behind him. Ready to grab him if he stumbled. When he was a little ways down the hall he stopped for a moment. I could almost sense the mysterious couplings in his brain. Then he did what he always did when he got down the stairs. He turned ninety degrees and went into the TV room. The key in the wicker basket had long since been removed, according to his own wishes. Still, it pained me a little to see the way his right hand searched where it once had been. I was slightly moved by the thought that somewhere in his brain the keys' location remained. The patio door key? Oh, Willy and I keep that in the wicker basket. The new situation hadn't yet sunk in. And now seeing his big hand rooting futilely in the basket made me . . . I don't know. Sometimes I get sentimental about the silliest things. But he looked so forlorn! After his fingers

fumbled with a measuring tape and an old comb, he dropped his hand and stood staring out into the back yard. And yet, really? *Staring?* Wasn't he sound asleep?

I went and stood behind him.

We stood that way, both of us taking in the same image of the outside world, but with our eyes routed to different levels of consciousness. The cherry tree out in the lawn.

I thought, is this the way it always is? Is this the way it is when we're both awake, too?

Outside, a thick fog had settled over the grass. The moon was gone. The branches of the cherry tree were like black etchings in the grey and humid air.

I woke again at eight-thirty. Thoralf lay beside me, sound asleep. He'd be that way for a long time. Deep, dreamless sleep, as though his night rambling had been a tremendous exertion. This time he hadn't woke up on his own, but had come back to bed, still wearing that wide-eyed, vacant stare.

When I finished in the bathroom, I remembered we didn't have any bread in the house. This was a Saturday. Ordinarily we did our weekend shopping together, but for various reasons we'd done it the day before. All we needed now were bread and rolls, and I decided to let him sleep.

Strange weather. Dense fog, yet here and there the wind tore gaps where the sun shone through. Traffic moved slowly, and the damp air every sound seemed amplified.

Voices. Cars in low gear. From the lighthouse, the low horn came in blasts, like a bawling ox. I'm from the interior; I've never gotten used to that foghorn. There's something really unpleasant about it. I walked along, thinking of who knows what. I doubt I was even fully awake. I'd had a poor night's sleep, and was normally slow in the morning anyway.

Spar, our local supermarket, was packed, as it usually was on Saturdays. I was glad I only needed bread—the bakery's just inside the entrance. It was crowded in there, too, but at least I'd avoid going into the supermarket itself. After a few minutes in line I had both bread and rolls. I envisioned the long, leisurely breakfast we'd have, as we normally do on Saturdays. Fresh bread and just-brewed coffee. And newspapers, of course. We're both news junkies, and love to read bits of articles aloud to each other during these epic breakfasts. As I near the bus station on my way home, I think: For God's sake, don't forget the newspapers! I wanted to grab some sweets, so after crossing the bridge I went into the little newsstand in the bus station—something I do almost every day. I'm a regular. Strike up a conversation with Dagny behind the counter, if it's not too busy. That day, however, the cramped little shop was jam-packed, and no Dagny behind the counter. I've often thought of that, in retrospect: things would never have turned out the way they did if Dagny had been behind the counter. But it was Saturday, after all. Dagny was off. At the counter was a young man I'd never seen before and—more to the point—who'd never seen me.

When it was my turn I slid a hundred-kroner bill across the counter to pay for the newspapers and a bag of English confections. I was just getting my change when it

happened. The door banged open; In fact, I think it was kicked open. People jumped aside. In the doorway was a short, stocky man in his thirties, dressed in jeans and a leather jacket. He must have run there—he was gasping for breath, and his round face was beet red. He was so out of wind he could hardly speak, but he let loose with a long stream of insults and abuse that reminded me immediately of Thoralf snarling in his sleep. At first I couldn't understand anything, except that somebody was "a pig" and was about to get beaten "to a pulp". He was so beside himself, so totally out of control, he started kicking the glass counter and punching the air. Good God, I thought. The man's crazy. Run past him and get out the door!

"Son of a bitch!" he yelled. "Give me my two hundred kroner right now, or I'll knock you flat!"

I looked around, confused, but met only scared and puzzled faces. It wasn't until he shoved me into the newspaper rack that I realized it was me he was screaming at.

I turned to the cashier behind the counter. "He's nuts!"

I grabbed the newspaper rack just before it tipped over.

"He just stole my two hundred kroner!" the lunatic continued.

"I've never seen him before in my life!" I yelled.

"Don't you try anything, or I'll knock the shit out of you!"

This can't be happening, I thought. It's a dream. A nightmare. This guy was screaming and fuming at me, and I'd never even seen him before. He was so possessed, so filled with hatred towards my person. He was going to beat me with his bare hands if I didn't come clean here and now.

I was terrified. Scared out of my wits. Never been in a situation like this in my life. My heart was pounding so hard I could feel it all the way up in my throat. I couldn't hardly talk, but I turned again to the guy behind the counter. "Help me!" I said. "I have no idea what he's talking about. It's got to be some terrible misunderstanding!"

I heard my voice; it was like it was coming from somebody else.

The attacker grabbed my arm. I shook myself loose. Again, the newspaper rack threatened to fall over. The other customers pulled back. Away from me, from us.

"That's enough!" the cashier said sharply, to the both of us.

This can't be true, I thought. He's talking to *us*! I wanted to protest, explain, but I couldn't get a word out. My heart felt like it was in my throat—like it was choking me.

"Goddamn you," the madman fumed. He turned to the others. "He swiped two hundred kroner from me!"

I saw his face as if through a haze as he came at me once again. There was something about his expression that I couldn't quite figure out. I thought of bad Polish amphetamines, of sleep disorders and paranoia. But there was a genuine pain in his features, too. There were tears in his eyes. Again and again he went on about these two hundred kroner, while he gripped me by the collar; I tried to push him away again, but he held fast, and we tumbled over.

"Please, somebody, help!" I heard my own voice, from someplace far away.

"Somebody call the police!"

And again and again, as my heart pounded in heavy, thunderous beats I could feel all the way up in my eardrums now: This can't be true. This can't be happening.

He got to his feet again, dragging me with him. On the verge of fainting, I saw the fear-struck faces around me—and the cashier coming round the counter. For a moment I thought it was over now, the cashier was taking charge. Instead he took me by the arm and the lunatic by the collar, and he threw us both out.

Next to this miserable newsstand is a narrow passageway between the bus station and the underpass to the harbor. The way was crowded with people, but now I knew: there was no help to be found. Once again my attacker started shoving me, and again I saw the terrified faces of the people going past. Some of them looked away. Hadn't I been one of them, on more than one occasion? Someone who looked away and thought, let them work it out between themselves? I noticed my shirttail outside my pants. I looked like—not a bum, exactly—but about as unbalanced as I felt. For a moment I thought of just collapsing—something might happen then. But you just don't do that. Again the shoving—he shoved me around in the crowd some more while he ranted about his two hundred kroner. Eventually he got me between some waste bins, and I was almost relieved to think that this was the end of the line. Whether this miserable acknowledgment gave me back my speech, I don't know, but I managed to gasp out a “please.”

He didn't ‘please,’ but at least he paused a moment. Like me, he was sweaty and worn-out, and he stopped to catch his breath while he stared me with these moist, wide-open eyes.

“Would you please tell me what's going on?” I said.

“What’s going on, he said, “is that you’re going to pay me back the two hundred kroner you stole from me a little bit ago,” he said. “And if you don’t,” he continued, hysteria edging into his voice again, “I’ll bash your teeth in.”

There really wasn’t much to think over. My teeth are nothing to write home about, but then again, two hundred kroner doesn’t get you much at the dentist’s. Either way, you might as well forget about any kind of justice.

“Fine,” I said. “But tell me why you think I stole your money.

He started in on me all over again.

“*Now stop!*” I yelled. And maybe because my voice was finally as loud as his was, he actually did. Plus I’d started rooting for money in my pocket.

“You came out of *Spar* a little while ago,” he said, and now he sounded almost normal.

“That’s right,” I said. “I got some bread and rolls in the bakery.”

I felt the bills against my fingertips.

“And I was standing outside,” he continued. “Right?”

“Sure, that’s possible,” I said. “I was caught up in my own thoughts. I didn’t see you.”

“I was standing outside, digging in my pockets—just like you’re doing now. I couldn’t find my money.”

Trembling, I pulled a bill from my pocket. It was a five-hundred-kroner bill.

"I didn't realize it until you were way down the street," he continued. "Even though I'd actually watched you bend down. I didn't realize it was the two hundred kroner bill you were reaching for.

"No, listen, you've got to get this straight," I said. "I . . ."

And then I stopped, remembered I'd been to the bank and cashed a check the previous day. I was standing there with eight thousand-kroner bills in my inner pocket—I'd forgotten to take them out at home. I needed to start playing my cards a little smarter. The whole situation was more pretty absurd. Here was this lunatic demanding two hundred kroner, while I actually was in possession of a tidy sum, which he could snatch at any moment. These two hundred kroner he supposedly lost—of course, I didn't believe it for a minute. I was still leaning toward the theory that he was either crazy or stoned—or probably both. An impression that got even stronger when he grabbed the five-hundred out of my hand, and said, "C'mon, now, let's put this behind us, huh? I'll go into the kiosk and break this. You took two hundred, not five. I'll be right back!"

As soon as he was out of sight, I started running. I ran all the way home.

I mean, what was I to believe?

When I got home, Thoralf was in the shower. Lucky thing—I was a total wreck. I went into the kitchen and washed my face with cold water. Got rid of the sweat. I couldn't do a thing about my heart. It had found a new rhythm. Actually an old one—one

I was supposed to avoid. One I'd been warned about: No running. Long walks, sure, but no running.

I sat at the kitchen table and went back over what had happened. Couldn't stop thinking about it. The shock that went through me when that door was kicked open and I realized it was me he was talking to. The meaningless shame I felt when I was labeled a thief like that, in front of all those strangers. The despair, when I realized that there was nothing I could do: they believed him. Or simply didn't want to deal with it, regardless of the truth. The incredible sense of loneliness that I only now allowed myself to feel. Until this moment, it hadn't quite taken shape, but now it came on like a wave: Don't tell Thoralf about this. Don't tell anyone.

I emptied all the money out of my various pockets. The eight thousand-kroner bills, plus a handful of coins. At the kiosk I'd paid with a hundred-kroner bill. At no time had I even had a two-hundred on me!

So I'm walking out of the bakery at *Spar*. I thought. I'm out of the bakery, I'm going along, lost in my own thoughts. People are streaming back and forth, but no stocky man on the sidewalk, digging in his pockets. I definitely don't see any bill lying on the asphalt. Not a thousand and not a two-hundred. So I don't reach down but continue on to the newsstand for newspapers and candy. Then the door bangs open. He saw me. He saw me reach down. He's so positive he goes right for me, picks me out of the dozen or so customers in the newsstand.

You couldn't believe him, of course. Or more correctly: He'd served up an obvious lie. The question was, what was behind that lie? As far as I could see, there were

two possibilities. Just two. One: he'd been hallucinating. The other—and I had a hunch this was it—was that he was an accomplished thief. I thought: If he plays this scene out in other parts of the city four or five times, he'll pick up a quick thousand kroner. One look at me and you'd know I'm no prizefighter. And there are plenty like me—people who'd gladly peel off a few hundred to avoid getting their pretty smile ruined. Probably most are willing to pay just to avoid being publicly accused of stealing. He doesn't ask for five hundred. He doesn't ask for a thousand. He asks for what most people consider a trifle. And how long did the whole thing take? Ten minutes? Not a bad hourly wage.

Still, didn't add up. The despair in his eyes just didn't fit.

Thoralf came out of the bathroom.

“What in the world is wrong with you?”

“There's something wrong with me?”

He shook his head and sat down across from me at the table. “How long have we been together? A week? Or almost fifteen years?”

“I just went out for a walk,” I said.

“Really. You went out for a walk. And now you're sitting here shivering so bad your whole body's shaking. For God's sake, Willy, I can see your heartbeat through your shirt. Have you been running?”

“No,” I lied.

He laid his hand on mine. "You can't be running! I want you around for a long time."

"Can we talk about something else?" I said.

"Why, what are we talking about?"

"Don't make everything so damned difficult. Thanks to you I hardly slept last night. I needed some air. Maybe I walked a little too fast, but that's it."

"Why are you lying to my face?" He looked me over. "Where are the newspapers? Didn't you even buy any rolls?"

"Sorry," I said. "I forgot all of it."

I hadn't given a thought to the newspapers and bread. They all must have wound up on the newsstand floor.

"Come on," he said. "We'll go and get some."

"No," I said. "Absolutely not. I don't feel very well. I think I've done enough walking for today."

He left the house without a word.

Slammed the door.

I went into the living room and lay down on the sofa. My heart was pounding like holy hell. Once again, I thought: What's going on? I get up and it's a perfectly normal Saturday in March. I go for bread and rolls, newspapers and candy. Then the world's turned upside down. If I'd fallen and broken a leg, or arm. Been run over. That, I'd understand. But this? And then it hit me: it's not over yet. The nightmare had only just begun. We live in a small city. If this guy wasn't just passing through, I was bound to run

into him again. And now he knew I was the kind who paid. With my luck, he lived right in our neighborhood.

But he went to get change!

Nothing made any sense.

We ate breakfast.

Thoralf sulked. Answered in monosyllables and mashed the butter into his bread. Why couldn't I just tell him what happened? Because I was ashamed. Because I have a low tolerance threshold. An episode like the one I'd just been through, Thoralf would simply have added to the list of oddities life has to offer. I can guarantee he wouldn't have paid the guy so much as a *kroner*. He'd have faced the challenge and stood his ground, even if it meant being pounded flat as a pancake. I had another reason for keeping my mouth shut: I couldn't bear seeing Thoralf take on the role of protector. He'd move heaven and earth to restore my honor—that is, his own. When he gets all self-righteous on my behalf, it's really unbearable.

On the other hand, this silent treatment of his was also unbearable. As I said: I have a very low tolerance threshold.

"Let it go," I said, and filled our cups. "I went for a walk, and I ended up in an uncomfortable situation. But it happened to me, in my life, and there's nothing more to say. All right?"

He had his eyes glued to some article.

"All right?" I repeated. "I never ask you what sort of embarrassing situations you get yourself into when you go to London or Berlin with Klaus and Raino. Not to mention when you go by yourself."

He looked at me skeptically.

"You were sleepwalking again," I said.

Now he was thoughtful. "For once, I can sort of remember. Normally I have no recollection of my little excursions. Only I thought it was a dream."

"It probably was that, too," I said.

"I was standing in the middle of the living room, talking to you."

"Close. You were standing there talking *at* me. I didn't answer. I can't understand your gibberish. You sound like a Catalan."

"You said that you loved me."

Could I have said that? And then forgotten? No. He hadn't spoken to me. Not last night.

"And you? What did you say?"

"I don't remember. But I remember you stood there and said you loved me."

"And then you went back to bed?" I offered.

He closed his eyes. "No. Downstairs. A little later I'm standing there, looking out at the yard. At the cherry tree."

"You were digging like crazy for the key to the patio door."

"The cherry tree was in full bloom."

"But you know it isn't."

"Sure. But the point is, some of this adds up. And that's new. It's never happened before. Yes, dammit. I even remember that I wanted to go outside! I wanted to go out to the tree. Were you with me the whole time?"

"I was standing behind you. You couldn't see me."

I thought of the stranger. I must have been standing right behind him while he dug in his pockets for that miserable two-hundred-kroner bill. I hadn't seen him.

"So what happened, anyway?" Thoralf said. "Did you get . . . *aroused* someplace inappropriate?"

It was more than a week before my heart settled back down. Thoralf nagged me to go to the doctor, but I shrugged it off. You have the heart you're born with. It pounds, it beats, and one fine day it stops. All my anxieties are tied to life. I'm not afraid of dying.

Yeah. All my anxieties are tied to life. Without really giving it any thought, I started shopping at a different supermarket. My subconscious simply made a decision, and I found myself among the shelves at *Meny*. It's quite a hike, but I still made it there a couple times a week. Just the thought of going into *Spar* made me nauseous. And for all I cared, the newsstand at the bus station could just as well be shut down. I'd never set foot in there again. Thoralf still has a few years left before he retires, so I do most of the shopping during the week. And since the unpleasant incident, that means going to *Meny*.

The following Saturday Thoralf had wanted to go to *Spar* as usual, but I said no. Claimed I'd seen mouse droppings among the packages of cracker-bread, but I think he understood that it was another kind of crap we were talking about. He went with me to *Meny*. My irregular heartbeat had given him quite a scare; it was almost touching how accommodating he was now. Even pointing out that the meat counter at *Meny* was better than the one at *Spar*, though it was more or less a tossup.

And still. I was due for another round of shame. I'd lost the last one—had backed down. What a bully.

In the middle of April I ran into him again. My attacker—or whatever the hell you'd call him. Ironically enough he was just down the street from *Meny*, standing outside the bookstore. I'd just been in getting groceries, and was loaded down. He spotted me. He was standing right by the case of discounted books, staring at me. I panicked, and my heart was racing again. My first instinct was to turn around. Run. Grab hold of somebody and beg for help before something happened. This time, at least, my shirttails would be tucked in, and I wouldn't be hysterical. But then I caught myself. Told myself that you'll never really get past this guy. Turn away now, and some other day he'll be standing just around the corner. And the strange thing: being alone made me feel stronger.

Well. There he was. Standing next to the case of discounted books, watching me come towards him. Face totally expressionless. I felt my knees go weak, but my legs kept carrying me. I was more angry than afraid. He'd been invading my thoughts for weeks. Had stolen time from me. A couple of times—it must have been just before I fell asleep—I'd imagined that he was right—that I'd actually bent down and helped myself to his two hundred kroner. Just a fleeting notion, really. A kind of dream.

Would I have walked past him if he hadn't stopped me? I don't know. Probably. And felt relieved about it, too.

But he took me gently by the arm, and said: "Listen--"

In the seconds that followed, it was like I'd been yanked out of the world. *Listen.* I heard the cars in the street. I heard rainwater dripping on the asphalt from a leaky gutter. Somebody said, from far away: ". . . *but then I just went . . .*" A woman's voice. A woman walking past. With an older man. The sunlight bore down on the street. For some reason I remember that one of the discounted books in the case was Leonard Cohen's *Beautiful Losers*. How fitting. Thirty-nine fifty.

"I owe you three hundred kroner," he said. "You stole two, and gave me five. It's been bothering me."

My heart again. This charade was no good for me.

He took out a brand-new wallet and opened it. Showed me a crisp new five-hundred.

He nodded towards the door of the bookstore. "I'll go get change."

Now it was my turn to grab him by the arm.

"All right now," I said. "Let's stay nice and calm this time. We're both calm now, aren't we?"

I wasn't calm, but my voice didn't give me away. I heard myself say we should both stay calm. I sounded calm.

"That's fine," he said. "I just got so damned mad."

"So what happened? Tell me what happened."

He pushed my hand away. It wasn't an unfriendly gesture.

"Let me get change now, and we'll be done with this."

"You can get change until you're blue in the face, but we won't be done with this. You owe me five hundred kroner, or nothing."

I surprised myself. Suddenly I realized I'd do anything to avoid accepting this particular three hundred kroner. It had nothing to do with the money, of course. It was all about my understanding of reality. And his. These two things that couldn't be reconciled.

He stood there with the bill in his hand and looked at me blankly. Something about his body language told me he'd hoped to avoid this. Like me, he'd had his sleepless nights, lying awake hoping to avoid exactly this. And then I came out of *Meny*, and there was no way around it. Here we stood.

"I might easily have done the same myself," he said. "I've thought of that. And I saw how scared you were."

"But I didn't do it," I said. "I'd had a bad night's sleep, and was caught up in my own thoughts. You might find it hard to believe, but I've never stolen a thing in my life."

I didn't bother mentioning that I'd had over eight thousand kroner on me that morning. But no two-hundreds.

"So let's just say," he said. "You came out of *Spar*, and the two-hundred was lying on the sidewalk. You reached down and picked it up. Maybe you didn't notice me. Like I said, I might have done the same myself. Mind you, not if I'd seen you standing there digging in your pockets. My conscience wouldn't allow that."

I couldn't stand it anymore. He seemed so utterly and totally honest. And as though echoing that thought, he said:

"You seem like an honest guy. I've got nothing against you. I would have believed you any time and anywhere. If I hadn't seen you. But I did see you. With my very own eyes."

And now? I thought. What do you see now with your very own eyes? An amateur thief who steals in his sleep? I started thinking about all the nights I'd stood over Thoralf in that dark living room. The vacant sleepwalker's gaze that held my own. His nighttime muttering, that strange language that rolled so aggressively out of him. And my own silence, which on one occasion had been interpreted as "*I love you.*"

As we stood there, a little puzzled by each other—now the bottom had fallen out of the whole thing—his eyes drifted from mine; a sound was pulling him over into something else. A baby crying. A stroller, parked by the discount books. I'd noticed Cohen's *Beautiful Losers*, but missed the stroller; now it all fell into place.

"Just a minute," he said. "I'll get some change."

On the way to the bookstore he stopped at the stroller and stroked the screaming baby with his finger.

Then I ran.

I'm not allowed to run, but here I was running again.

I didn't give a damn about my heart. Could just as well beat out its last stroke somewhere around the halfway point, as far as I was concerned. Might even be fitting.

A few nights later Thoralf was sleepwalking again. I woke as usual when he got out of bed. His shuffling steps over the living room floor. The sound of the running water in the kitchen. I let him go.

But when I heard the stairs creak, I got up. By the time I reached him, he'd stopped, halfway down to the first floor. Right hand on the railing, as always. With his left hand he was stroking the wall carefully, as though inspecting the surface of the wallpaper.

I stood on the step above him and looked right down on the top of his head. The beginnings of a bald spot I hadn't noticed before. And I thought about my tormentor, who was tormenting me considerably less these days. That was the last Saturday of the month, I thought. That's when it happened. It was his last two hundred kroner. He saw me reach down. With his very own eyes, he saw me reach down. It was his dignity I ran off with.

Thoralf was on the move again, and seemed more sure-footed now. Down in the entry he didn't stop as usual, but continued right into the TV room. No digging for keys. He just stood there and looked out into the yard, towards the cherry tree.

"It's blooming now," he said. "Can we agree on that?"

I put my arm around him. "Yes," I said. "It's blooming now."

"You'll take the three hundred kroner," he whispered after awhile. "Next time you see him, you'll take the three hundred kroner. Promise me?"

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