Ingvild H. Rishøi

STARGATE

*A Christmas Tale*

Gyldendal

Translated by Wendy H. Gabrielsen

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Sometimes I think about Tøyen. Then I see that part of the city so clearly.

People carry grocery bags out of Kiwi and push prams through the snow, they run to school with their backpacks thumping, and at breaktime the caretaker stands outside the gate smoking. Then the snow melts and brown Christmas trees are left in front of blocks of flats, and lawns get greener and full of dandelions, and on it goes. People walk straight and stagger about and walk straight again, babies are born and old people die, and at breaktime the caretaker stands by the gatepost, blowing smoke into the sky.

Then he thinks about me. He understood everything, I understand that now. Then he looks over the rooftops and remembers it all.

“Is that you standing there?” said the caretaker.

He went over to his gatepost and took a packet of cigarettes out of his pocket. And I stood where I always stood, and I answered what I always answered.

“Yeah,” I said.

“You know that’s not allowed?” said the caretaker.

Then I answered what I’d learnt from Dad.

“Rules are made to be broken,” I said.

It was snowing a bit. Behind us someone shouted *ip dip sky blue, who’s it not you!* The caretaker bent over and lit his cigarette. Then we continued our little chat.

“You know that’s not allowed?” I said.

“Rules are made to be broken,” said the caretaker. “Have you given away all your food again?”

I nodded. The squirrel had already been there, Tøyen’s only squirrel, and its finest. It knew when it was breaktime, and that’s when it came. The caretaker held his cigarette between his lips and took his packed lunch out of his pocket. He undid the silver foil, broke the börek in two and gave me half, still steaming hot. His wife was so good at wrapping things up.

“It’s the circle of life,” said the caretaker. “You give to the squirrel, I give to you.”

“What’s the circle of life?” I said.

“Philosophy,” said the caretaker. “You know, here I’m the caretaker. But in my homeland I was a great thinker.”

He turned and blew the smoke away from me.

“That’s what so good about being an immigrant,” he said. “You can always say what you were in your homeland.”

“But do you tell fibs?” I said.

“Never,” he said. “Or come to think of it, in my homeland I was one of the biggest liars in the country. I won a competition. The national lying championships.”

“Wow,” I said.

“Something else,” he said. “Have you seen that poster?”

And he pointed with his cigarette between his fingers.

*Christmas tree seller wanted*, it said. *You must be: hardworking. Responsible. The outdoor type.*

It was stuck to a lamppost. At the bottom were strips of paper with a phone number on.

“How about it?” said the caretaker.

“I don’t think you can get a job when you’re ten,” I said.

“I wasn’t thinking about you,” said the caretaker.

He went over to the lamppost and tore off a strip of paper and came back and put it in my hand.

“Show your dad,” he said.

Snowflakes melted around the bit of paper.

“And if he applies for the job, he must say he knows Alfred,” said the caretaker. “He’s the one that drives the Christmas trees for them.”

“But is that true?” I said.

“True enough,” said the caretaker. “I know Alfred, you know me, and your dad knows you. It’s the circle of life.”

I nodded.

“Come to think of it,” said the caretaker, “you might as well take the whole thing.”

Then he went back and pulled off the Sellotape and rolled up the poster.

“You’re not allowed to hang up posters here,” he said.

“But what if someone else wants to apply for the job?” I said.

The caretaker stuffed the poster into my jacket pocket. Snowflakes landed on his tight little woolly hat.

“Exactly,” he said. “You’re dealing with a great thinker.”

When I came home, Dad was sitting at the kitchen table. He looked up and shielded his eyes.

“Is that the sun coming in?” he said. “Where are my shades?”

He smiled, I smiled too. Then he stopped smiling.

“Come and sit down a minute,” he said.

He rubbed his forehead. But I really didn’t want him to get started. *Kids shouldn’t have to live like this*,he says, *tarmac and all that crap*, and then he says *but you’re not stupid, you two, no one would say that, and you’ve had some good times too, you remember the tent that summer? You remember the cabin that winter?* and I answer yes and no and yes, but I really didn’t want him to get started, so I unrolled the poster and laid it on the table.

“A Christmas tree seller,” said Dad.

The poster rolled itself up. I unrolled it again and held it in place. He glanced up.

“But a Christmas tree seller,” he said. “That’s a job for country folks from Toten, Ronia.”

“But it’s better than nothing,” I said.

Then he had another look at the poster. And suddenly he got up and went and picked up the kettle. He turned on the tap and said: “You’re not stupid, you know. You never have been.”

He filled the kettle. I love it when he drinks coffee. And when he gets his sweatpants and puts them on, and when he looks out of the window and starts to wander about, I love it, and I remember all the jobs Dad’s had. The best one was when he worked at the bakery, then he brought home huge cinnamon buns, and I could take them to school the next day. The others peered into my lunchbox and said *shit*, and Musse said *you’re always so lucky,* and Stella said *you know it’s not allowed?* and Musse said *chill, Stella, everyone’s lunch in this class is full of sugar anyway*. But it was good when he worked at Kiwi too, and when he cleaned the trams, then the others said *your dad works at Kiwi, doesn’t he? Can you ask him to get me a discount on chocolate milk? Your dad cleans the trams, doesn’t he? Can you ask him not to wipe off what my brother writes?* The only job I didn’t like was when he was a poet and wrote that thought was an eel in a trap and sold his poems outside Narvesen kiosks, I didn’t like that, but I love it when the kettle starts to boil, and that’s all it takes. *You two dream too much*, Melissa always says. *If dreaming was a job, you could’ve moved straight up to Holmenkollen with all the cash you made.*

The water boiled. Dad lifted up the kettle. And my head was already full of dreams. Because I knew where they sold Christmas trees, and I thought I could run there after school, and Dad could wander round among the trees, in his fisherman’s sweater, and I could stand at the petrol station watching him smile at the customers and put their money in his thick wallet. Then he’d get paid, and for Christmas we could give Melissa, I don’t know, something she really wanted, and Dad could buy it and come home and wave me into the bathroom whispering *look at this, isn’t it just right for a sixteen-year-old?* I reckoned Dad could be the one that delivers the Christmas tree to our school, too. I knew exactly what would happen. Meron would lean against the window shouting *here comes the Christmas tree! Here comes the Christmas tree! Look, it’s Ronia’s dad!* And the teacher goes *sit down, sit down, stay in your places*, but everyone runs over to the window, yeah, everyone runs over to the window, and down there we see the head, and she’s walking across the playground to meet Dad. Her arms are hugging her knitted coat. Then she points at the gym. Her knitted belt flaps around in the wind, and Dad smiles his big smile, Dad drags the tree through the gate, and everyone in the class calls out *wow*. That’s what I dreamt.

Dad stood by the window looking out. It was still snowing. He held his cup against his chest. Our kitchen was so empty.

“Maybe we could have a Christmas tree this year, then,” I said.

“What?” said Dad.

“If you get the job selling Christmas trees,” I said, “can we have a Christmas tree?”

“Of course,” said Dad, turning to face me. “And you know what, Robber’s Daughter, I bet the employees get a discount and all.”

“I bet they do,” I said.

“Or maybe they get one for free?” said Dad, and I nodded, because that’s what I thought too.

“Robber’s Daughter,” Dad would say. “You’re my Robber’s Daughter and my Treasure Chest and my Oil Fund.”

He called us his Star and Moon and Macaroni and Molasses. He called us Ronia, the Robber’s Daughter and Melissa Moonlight, he’d come in the door saying: “Where’s my Robber’s Daughter and my Moonlight?”

“We’re in here,” we’d say. “We’re just sitting in here eating Oat Krunchies.”

“But do you reckon he’ll get the job?” I said.

I was resting on Melissa’s arm. Car headlights lit up the ceiling.

“No,” said Melissa. “Of course I don’t.”

She kept picking at the tear in the wallpaper.

“But if he gets it,” I said, “then you’ll want us to have a Christmas tree as well, won’t you?”

Melissa stopped picking at the wallpaper.

“You think it’s nice to have a Christmas tree too, don’t you?” I said.

“Ronia,” she said, “a Christmas tree costs maybe six hundred kroner.”

A car horn honked outside. Someone shouted *look where you’re going, man!*

“It’s slippery,” said Melissa. “There’s black ice.”

“But Melissa,” I said. “Don’t you think people that sell Christmas trees get a discount?”

“But he doesn’t sell Christmas trees,” she said. “That’s what you keep forgetting. Try and think about something else.”

But I didn’t want to think about anything else. I scrunched up my eyes until my head was full of Christmas trees.

“But if he does,” I said. “Don’t you think it’ll help if he says hi from Alfred?”

“Sure,” said Melissa. “Can we go to sleep now?”

“But if he says hi from Alfred and if he gets the job and if there’s an employee discount,” I said. “I’m just wondering: Would you want to decorate the tree straight away? Or would you want to wait till Christmas?”

Melissa looked at me.

“But I don’t want to have dreams like that,” she said.

“Just a little one?” I said. “Just a tiny little dream?”

“Oh, for Godfuck’s sake,” she said, but she’d given in, I knew it. She looked up at the ceiling, her body went soft, and she held my hand under the duvet.

“Okay then,” she said. “If we get a Christmas tree.”

“Yeah,” I said.

“Then we’ll take it into the sitting room,” she said.

“But can you say that it’s in a cabin?” I said.

She looked at me.

“I don’t get it. You know exactly what I’m supposed to say,” she said. “So why can’t you just say it yourself?”

“Sweetest Molasses?” I said.

She closed her eyes.

“Okay,” she said. “We’re now inside a cabin. Deep, deep in the forest. With a log fire and all that. And then, on Christmas Eve itself, in the morning, when it’s still dark …”

“Yeah?”

“Then we’ll go into the sitting room and turn on the Christmas tree lights,” she said. “And then it’ll look … amazing.”

“Yes,” I said. “Like in The Little Match Girl.”

“Don’t think about that,” said Melissa. “It’s the saddest story in the world.”

“But do you remember the tree?” I said. “Don’t you remember the tree when she stands outside looking in?”

“She’s delirious with fever,” said Melissa. “Don’t think about it. The girl dies in the end, you know.”

“She doesn’t die,” I said. “She’s with her grandmother.”

Melissa took a deep breath and shook her head, but then she nuzzled her face against mine, her mouth right up against my ear, and she spoke softly, about Christmas decorations and log fires and smoke drifting high into the sky, deep, deep in the forest.

Then you must find the path. You’ll know it when you see it, because it’s just like a portal in the forest. There’s snow on the trees, and they bend over you when you start walking. And you start walking. It’s easy, because the snow on the path has been trampled down hard. Then there’s an opening in the forest, and you see the small lake, which is flat and white, and the hill where the fox has its den, and at the top you see the wooden fence, and you just follow it, and you know what you see after that.

“Girls!” called Dad. “I got the job.”

It was the next day, right after school. We were sitting at the kitchen table, and my mouth was full of Oat Krunchies and milk. Then Dad stood there in the doorway. He smiled, letting his leather jacket drop on the floor. He came over to us and tossed some papers down on the table.

“I got it,” he said.

Melissa put her spoon down in her bowl.

“Congratulations,” she said. “When do you start?”

“Tomorrow,” said Dad.

“You should set your alarm, then,” said Melissa.

“This job’s just perfect,” said Dad. “I start at ten.”

“Miracles can happen,” the caretaker used to say. “Sometimes there’s just no other alternative, and that’s when a miracle happens.”

When we came home the day after, he’d gone. We sat at the kitchen table again, eating Oat Krunchies again. It was dark outside, and Dad wasn’t there.

“Do you think he’s at work?” I said.

“I don’t think anything,” said Melissa. “Thinking is for nerds.”

“But if you had to guess.” I said. “Where do you guess he is?”

Then the front door opened, I jumped, and Dad called out: “Hey, it’s nice and warm in here, girls!”

Melissa stopped eating. Dad kicked off his shoes and came over to us. He was wearing his fisherman’s sweater and it was full of needles. He put his mittens to dry on the radiator. He’d just been at work, then he’d come home again. He opened the kitchen cupboard and flung a whole packet of spaghetti into a saucepan, then he went back into the hall, pulled out the drawers and said he needed more mittens.

“You have no idea how wet Christmas trees get in this weather,” he said. “People that don’t work with them haven’t the slightest idea.”

Later he sat down at the table and started to tell us about it. He’d just been at work, and then he’d come right home, and I knew what Melissa was thinking, it’s not going to go on like this, that’s what she was thinking, but it did.

It did go on like that. Every day we had spaghetti. Every day he told us about work. He said that his boss was a kind of dictator and that the silver firs were as fat and heavy as pigs, but he was smiling. He squirted ketchup on his spaghetti, said that he had a stiff neck and bum and fingers, and Melissa twiddled spaghetti round her fork looking down at her plate, but I stared at Dad, because miracles can happen. They have happened. He told us what November’s like in the Christmas tree business and about the felling and the stacking and the nursing homes that need two or three Christmas trees one after the other, because that’s how long Christmas lasts in a nursing home, and *old people can’t have plastic*, said Dad, *old people deserve the smell of fir.* He talked while he washed up the saucepan. While I did my homework. And while I brushed my teeth, he sat on the lid of the loo talking about the Christmas tree nursery in Enebakk and the one in Moss and what kind of tree we would buy, a fjord spruce, if we were lucky and there were some left after he was paid, and in the end he sat on the edge of my bed untangling my hair and talking about silver spruces and Norway spruces and Sitka spruces and loads of other spruces I can’t remember anymore.

And then came Monday and Tuesday and Wednesday, and he told us about the cabin we’d buy if he just got a permanent job, then came Thursday and Friday, and he told us about the path and the wooden fence and how we’d sit on the doorstep looking up at the Plough, and then came Saturday, and there was a knock on the door.

Dad let go of my hair and got up from the bed. We weren’t really the kind of people that got knocks on the door. Only Aronsen ever knocked, *I’m calling the police*, he’d say, but he never called the police. But when I was little, I used to think he would. He’d stand there in his dressing gown and I’d cling on to Dad’s leg crying *don’t call them, don’t call them*, until in the end Aronsen looked down and said, *hush, I’m not going to call anyone, I’m just trying to get your dad to get a grip.*

Dad went out into the hall. I heard him open the door. I found the corner of the duvet and sank my teeth into it.

“Well, hello,” said Dad.

“How are you?” said a woman’s voice. “I haven’t seen you for a while.”

It was Sonia.

“I was just curious,” she said. “Nothing’s happened?”

So it was Sonia. I’d met her at Friends, I’d seen her reaching over to Dad across the table. And I hated Friends. *That place should be called Foes*, Melissa used to say. *That place should be closed down.* And I’d met her at Stargate too, and I hated Stargate too, and the stars over the door and the darkness inside and that their table was tucked away in the corner, so you had to go all the way through the darkness to find him. And Sonia would always be sitting there smiling, and she’d sat on our sofa too, talking to me, and I hated the smell of her breath, and now she was in our hall asking Dad if something had happened, because *a lot of us were wondering*, said Sonia, *we have to look after each other, you know, no one else does.*

“Nothing’s happened,” said Dad. “I’m just working.”

“Oh, that’s alright then,” said Sonia. “But you’ll pop by soon, won’t you?”

I kept chewing and biting the corner of the duvet cover.

“We’ll see,” said Dad. “I have to get up early, you know.”

Then they talked too quietly for me to hear. But after a while Sonia spoke up.

“Ten o’clock?” she said. “In that case you can sleep in, can’t you?”

“Yeah, I suppose so,” said Dad.

“Why don’t you stop by tonight?” said Sonia.

I stopped chewing. The air rushed in my ears. Dad cleared his throat in the hall. The neighbour flushed the loo.

“Not tonight,” he said. “I’m going to take it easy.”

I felt dizzy. Sonia said something in the hall, but I couldn’t hear what because my heart was beating so loud. I had to lie on my tummy and squash it flat, so it wouldn’t beat itself up.

He went on sitting on my bed. He sat there every night. He untangled my hair and told me stories, about the narrowest paths and the deepest forests, saying their names too. *Finnskogen*, he said, *Djupsjøen* and *Femundsmarka*, *but now it’s late, and Oil Fund must go to sleep.*

Then one day me and Melissa came home. We kicked off our shoes and went into the kitchen and opened the fridge and it was full.

“What?” I said. “Look at this!”

“Right,” said Melissa.

I glanced at her.

“But look,” I said. “It’s all the food for Christmas!”

“Yep,” she said. “Let’s eat it then.”

She took bread out of the breadbin and cut lots of slices. She got out plates and cheese and ham and liver pâté, there were elves and sledges on the milk carton, she poured out glasses of juice and milk and Christmas soda. She buttered the bread thickly, and we had four slices each, but she didn’t look at me.

We were drinking Christmas soda when Dad came home with several bags. He put them down on the work top and smiled.

“How could you afford all the food?” said Melissa.

“What?” said Dad. “Hello, by the way?”

“Hello,” said Melissa. “How could you afford all the food?”

“I asked for an advance,” said Dad. He leaned over the bags and took out a packet of O’boy.

“Here you are,” he said to me, holding up the chocolate powder. “Isn’t this what you like?”

I nodded.

“And you got one then,” said Melissa. “An advance?”

“That Eriksen, he’s a nice bloke,” said Dad, opening the fridge. “So he said yes.”

“What’s an advance?” I said.

“What do you need the advance for?” said Melissa.

“Is this an interrogation?” said Dad.

“I’m just asking,” said Melissa, “what you need it for.”

“To pay the electricity bill,” said Dad, ripping the plastic off a packet of kitchen rolls. “So we can enjoy ourselves. Have food and fun at Christmas. And kitchen rolls.”

“What’s an advance?” I said again, but no one answered, and Dad went into the bathroom and turned on the tap.

That afternoon Melissa sat on her bed picking at her hands. After a while she got up and looked out of the window. Dad was in the kitchen and the bathroom and the sitting room, he was in different rooms the whole time, and the afternoon passed by, but no one made any spaghetti. Then it was the evening. Dad poked his head round the door.

“Okay,” he said. “Just wanted to let you know I’m going out for a bit.”

“Okay,” said Melissa. “Then I’ll join you.”

She got up and stood in the middle of the room, under the light bulb.

“Why?” said Dad.

“I thought I’d get something in the shop,” said Melissa. “You’ve got that advance, haven’t you?”

“What’s an advance?” I said.

Neither of them looked at me, they just glared at each other.

“It’s money,” said Dad.

“That you get before you finish the job,” said Melissa. “Your pay is what you get afterwards.”

“It’s alright to have a nice time,” said Dad, “with Christmas coming up. It’s alright to have a bit of fun.”

“Hmm,” said Melissa. “You were thinking of going to Stargate then, or what?”

“Hmm?” said Dad.

“You were thinking of having a bit of fun at Stargate?” said Melissa.

“No,” said Dad. “I’d actually planned to go and buy Christmas presents for you two. Is that okay? Do I have your permission, Melissa?”

Melissa didn’t say anything else after that. Because Dad just glared at her until she had to look away, until she went and sat on her bed again.

Later on, when I was lying under the duvet, I realised what I should have done. I should’ve said *but we don’t want any presents this year*. I should’ve gone up to Eriksen and said *don’t give our dad an advance*, I should’ve gone to Aronsen’s and said *could you look after our dad’s wallet*? But I hadn’t done anything like that. I’d gone out into the hall with Dad and stood there like an idiot saying *are you going to buy presents? Shall I tell you what I want?* And suddenly I couldn’t remember anything I wanted, but I said things anyway, I said things I’d wanted ages ago, *a skipping rope*, I said, *a baby doll and magic markers*, and Dad said *yeah, that sounds fine*. But then he lifted his leather jacket off the coat stand and said *bye, girls. I might be a while, there’s some people I owe a bit of money to as well.*

“Can I come over to your bed?” I said.

Melissa nodded.

I rested on her arm. A dog barked outside the window.

“Life goes on as usual,” said Melissa.

“I should’ve said easier presents,” I said. “It’s hard to find all those things.”

Melissa looked at me. Her eyes are so lovely, so murky.

“Especially at night,” I said.

“He’s not buying presents,” she said. “He’s at Stargate. Or Friends.”

Then I curled myself up, hard, like a little stone.

“That place should be called Foes,” I said.

Melissa turned to face me. She pushed the hair away from my face.

“That place should be closed down,” I said.

“I used to think like that too,” she said.

“What?”

“I don’t think like that anymore,” she said. “It wouldn’t make any difference, you know. You remember when they banned him from Stargate? Then he just went to Friends. And if you’re thrown out of Friends, then you just go to Kiwi.”

She stroked my eyebrows with her index finger. First one, then the other. The dog kept barking outside.

“That’s Ladyman’s dog,” said Melissa. “It doesn’t realise how little it is.”

I snuggled against her neck. The dog went on barking.

“There’s no point in hoping for anything like that,” said Melissa.

But I can’t not hope. That’s just how my brain is. So then I hope someone smashes up Stargate and turns off all the beer taps in the world, but that won’t ever happen, there’s always beer gushing out from somewhere or other, and my head went black. I had nothing more to say. It just goes on and on. I just think and think and think, and then the night comes, as it always does. It was the last night in November. I lay there quite still, resting on my sister’s arm.

Then days like those start again. I’ve had them before and I know they’re coming, so I also know they always come to an end. I know exactly how: They end one day with Dad sitting in the kitchen saying *sorry, girls, things will be better now*, and Melissa pulls out the drawer and finds a spoon, and Dad says *girls, please forgive me*, and I nod, and Dad says *Melissa, you too?* and Melissa goes over to the fridge and answers *I don’t exactly have any choice*.

And then we know it’s over. His hands shake, and when he holds his cup there are ripples in his coffee, but he looks up saying *how about a little fry-up?* Then he goes out to the shop and comes right back. The days become lighter and the nights dark and still. Then we have sandwiches. Then there are bills in tidy piles and cheese and bacon and eggs. *Melissa Moonlight*, says Dad, *this is the last time, but do you think you could come here a minute? Do you think you could call these people for me?*

And Melissa sits at the kitchen table ringing round and saying different things. Sometimes she says *we simply never received the first bill*, and sometimes she says *he’s actually lying right here with double pneumonia*, and once she just said *hi there, we’re two motherless children with an alcoholic father, could you give us two more weeks?* So then the spring or summer or autumn comes and Dad gets a job and stands by the sink washing our lunch boxes, and at bedtime he comes into our room to say good night and stands in the doorway looking at us, then he pats his pockets saying *where are my sunglasses? My eyes hurt!* And in the end Melissa cheers up too. She starts going out in the evenings. I can hear her laughing outside the window. I don’t like it. But Dad says *she’s a teenager, Ronia, shall we play cards?* Then there are summer evenings when it rains against the windows and we play Casino at the kitchen table, or summer days when we pack our bags and go out to an island, and me and Dad smile at each other under water, and me and Dad float out to sea and he looks up at the sky saying *this is how kids should live*. Later we sit at the water’s edge, and he lifts up a crab and shakes its claw saying *how do you do, how do you do*, so I don’t get scared. Or it’s autumn and dark and he talks about the cabin we’re going to get. He carries me into the bedroom, and he says he’s carrying me through the snow, that we’re in a big forest, but we’re safe in our cabin. He puts me into bed and says the snow’s several metres deep. He tucks the duvet in round my feet. *There you go*, he says. *Lift up your little piggies*.

That’s how it ends.

But before it ends, it has to continue. And it continues by him losing this job or that job, and the fridge becomes empty, and then those people turn up and sit on the sofa saying *hello there, is that you, Ronia*, and I don’t answer, because how do you answer that.

“When do you think he’ll come back?” I said.

“Thinking is for nerds,” said Melissa.

“But what do you think?” I said.

I was snuggled up against her neck. There was a damp patch where I’d been breathing.

“I think you should go to sleep now,” she said. “Close your eyes. I can tell you about that cabin of yours.”

Then there must be a forest with snow on the trees. And sometimes there’s a small lake and sometimes a marsh, but there’s always a path lined with overhanging trees and the forest always goes on forever, and there’s always a cabin all by itself, right in the middle. Go over to the doorstep, brush the snow off your boots. Shut the door behind you. Use a hook to keep the door shut, because no one’s going out again that night, and outside there are foxes lurking around, and hares jumping, and wolves howling in the distance, but inside our cabin the log fire’s burning, while we sleep, the whole night through. And when we wake up, we just need to blow on the embers.

“You’ve got to wake up,” said Melissa.

I opened my eyes. It was light.

“I’m going now,” said Melissa.

“Why?” I said. “It’s Sunday.”

She stood by the window buttoning up her shirt, a white shirt I’d never seen before.

“Yeah,” she said. “But I’m going out.”

I got up. The floor was cold. I went over to the window and saw what she saw. Everything was covered in sun and frost down there, and Ladyman was mincing about with his dog in his bag. The day was in full swing, and I don’t like waking up when everything’s already in full swing. And there was Musse too, running off in his denim jacket, with his dad running after him, probably going to the mosque, they’re always going to the mosque and they’re always late. I turned to face Melissa. Her shirt was too white. I don’t like it when she goes out. And I don’t like it when there’s so many people doing so many things, and I don’t like seeing Musse and his dad, because I’m jealous of people that believe in gods, that always know where they’re going, that just run across the street under their god’s huge hand, but we don’t believe in a god. *Jesus was a great medicine man*, Dad always says, *and that’s all there is to it*, so I hardly ever know where to go, I can only think of one place, and that’s to go after Melissa.

Melissa went out into the hall. I went after her.

“Why are you going out?” I said. “Where are you going? What happened yesterday?”

She went into the bathroom. I sat down on the loo lid.

“Sonia brought him home, that’s all,” she said.

She opened the cupboard and took out her makeup. I pulled my T-shirt down over my knees. She leant towards the mirror and, holding her eyelids up then down, drew black lines along the edges, with her mouth open. And she really didn’t need to say anything else. I could picture it all. Sonia had no doubt stood there in the corridor in her stupid boots, holding Dad up, and then she’d said *here we are, then*, and Melissa had to say thanks as Dad crashed down inside the flat.

“She explained what’d happened,” said Melissa.

“What had happened?” I said.

“He made a fool of himself,” said Melissa. “You don’t need to know the details.”

She went back into the hall. She tied up her basketball shoes and put on her coat.

“Come here,” she said. “Are there lots of hairs and stuff on the back of my coat? You can’t have hair on your clothes when you apply for a job.”

“You’re going to apply for a job?”

“We’re keeping that job in the family,” said Melissa.

Then she wound her scarf round her neck, the red one. After that she smiled at me in the mirror and said: “I’ll get the job. They must be desperate, it’s now they need people.”

She stood close to the mirror, peered at herself, moved back, leant forwards again and in the end glanced at me saying: “Do I look nice now?”

“Yeah,” I said. “Your hair’s a bit messy, though.”

“Messy hair,” said my sister. “I bet Herman Eriksen will like that.”

And he did like it. Or maybe he liked her makeup or her scarf, or maybe they were desperate, like she said. Whatever it was, she came back. It was the evening by then. She kicked off her shoes and let her coat fall on the floor. Then she went into the kitchen and said: “I got the job back.”

She sat down at the table and rubbed her face.

“I started straight away,” she said. “Could you get me some Oat Krunchies and a dry pair of socks?”

I got her Oat Krunchies and a bowl and a spoon. I stood beside her like a waiter and poured in the milk. She looked up and thanked me, with her makeup smeared all over her cheeks. I got her some sugar and some socks. She shovelled Oat Krunchies into her mouth with one hand and rested her forehead on the other one.

Then she glanced up.

“What?” she said. “What is it?”

“Aren’t you pleased?” I said.

“Oh,” she said. “Sure.”

She put her spoon down on the table.

“I got less money than Dad,” she said. “I don’t like to beg either.”

“I bet you didn’t beg,” I said.

“Yeah, I did,” said Melissa, lifting her bowl to drink the rest of the milk.

“Yeah,” she said again. “I begged alright.”

Later I lay next to her in bed. Her body was stiff.

“Those people really annoy me,” she said.

I nudged my toes against her leg.

“They said they’re doing us a favour,” she said.

She wriggled about and kicked off the duvet.

“And then they deduct Dad’s advance straight from my pay,” she said. “It’s so fucking light in here.”

She got up and started pulling the blind down. She said she couldn’t sleep with the car headlights shining on the ceiling, but the blind hadn’t worked for ages. She tugged and pulled at it anyway and in the end something or other broke at the top, and the blind was left hanging at an angle.

“There,” she said, and went back to bed. “Perfect.”

She plumped up her pillow, lay down and closed her eyes. But she didn’t go to sleep, I could feel it.

“My head’s full of trees when I close my eyes,” she said. “They’ve brainwashed me, for Godfuck’s sake.”

“Yeah,” I said.

“And I didn’t like what they said about doing us a favour,” she said.

“No,” I said.

The dog started barking outside. Melissa groaned.

“But aren’t they doing us a favour, really?” I said.

That just made her groan again.

In the end I understood what they meant by a favour. She had to start at six in the morning and work for two hours before school, and after school she had to go back and work till they closed. The boss said they were making allowances for her, but it wasn’t true, Melissa said, because *everyone knows that the worst bit’s getting the display set up in the dark when the trees are cold and wet, not coming at ten when the sun’s out and everything’s done.* But that’s just how it was. She had to be there in the early mornings, late afternoons and weekends, that was the favour, and Dad’s advance would be taken straight from her pay, and when the others came at ten, the display had to be ready.

“There’s no point either,” she said. “Who buys a Christmas tree at ten in the morning? Who goes and buys a Christmas tree after breakfast and carries it with them to the office?”

“No one,” I said.

“Anyway,” she said, “tomorrow morning you’ll have to sort yourself out because I’ve got to go at six to set up the display.”

“Okay,” I said.

And after a while I said: “But what’s the display?”

“Trees,” said Melissa. “Everything about that job is trees.”

“Your sister,” the caretaker used to say. “I’ll never forget her. She kind of ruled the playground all by herself.”

“Yeah, Militia,” the caretaker used to say. “She’s someone you’d want on your side in a war.”