Cappelen Damm Agency *Fall 2022*

In Roy Jacobsen's latest novel, *The Unworthy*, we follow a gang of boys and girls from an apartment building on the eastside of Oslo during the WWII German occupation. They live in poverty, but get by creatively swindling, stealing like magpies, falsifying documents and committing extensive burglaries. They don't shy away from exploiting the Enemy, either. With this pack of children, a lauded writer has rendered a brutally frank and warm portrait of a time, a place and an everyday life that thus far have been absent from the stories told of WWII. This is a Roy Jacobsen novel of best mark.

The Unworthy is wise, brutal and entertaining. A gem of a story, written by an author in his right element.

The Unworthy

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CAPPELEN DAMM AGENCY

Reviews

A worthy and powerful reading experience
Dramatic, interesting and exciting ... a fantastic picture of an environment and a time that not everyone knows today.
Nettavisen, six/six stars

New first-rate novel by Jacobsen
… once more Jacobsen wields the language in a nuanced, confident manner..
Stavanger Aftenblad, six/six stars

About ignorance
The Unworthy has to be one of Roy Jacobsen's best novels.
Klassekampen

Brutal war novel from Roy Jacobsen
Roy Jacobsen is, as always, a master of details, environment and working methods.
VG, five/six stars

Good news from the Eastern front
... the narrative offers surprising, humerous and cheeky touches that show Roy Jacobsen at his best.
Dagsavisen

Exciting like a thriller
The characters are credibly drawn, the milieu renderings almost filmatic.

Dagbladet, five/six stars

The indifferent
[Roy Jacobsen] has done it again. Created an evironment and characters that will be remembered.
Bok365, five/six stars

In full vigour
Roy Jacobsen impresses again, both as a storyteller and a portrayer of people … an organic and unpredictable literary universe, as asymmetric and restless as life itself.
DN

Roy Jacobsen

1954

Roy Jacobsen has, since his literary debut in 1982 with the short story collection Prison Life, evolved into an original, strong and analytical writer with special interest in the underlying psychology at play in human relationships and actions.

He is a storyteller with obvious political engagement. He has twice been nominated for the Nordic Council's Literary Award: for The Conquerors in 1991, and Frost in 2003. He was also short-listed for the IMPAC Dublin Literary Award in 2009 for his novel The Burnt-Out Town of Miracles. He was shortlisted for The Man Booker International Prize in 2017 for The Unseen – as the first Norwegian author ever. His books have been published in 36 territories. Other important novels are The New Water, Borders and Child Wonder.

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The Unworthy
Roy Jacobsen

Roy Jacobsen - The Unworthy (De Uverdige)

Translated by Don Bartlett & Don Shaw

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Chapter 1

Another punch in the face. Carl stared down through his fringe at a fried herring with diagonal cuts in the skin, burnt chives and half a potato, today's offerings. He contemplated the thin veins in the crockery that had reminded him of cobwebs for as long as he could remember and concentrated on the time that had to elapse before, once more, he could set eyes on his father, his formidable adversary across the table, who had planted his fist beside two herrings and three potatoes, holding a fork that was sticking up like a tree in the ground – his mother's distraught breathing, big sister Mona's barely audible, and little Agnes who was doing her best to chew with her mouth closed, this odd medley of sounds and movement that was an essential accompaniment when the family of five assembled around the dinner table.

Carl said it again:

You arsehole.

He didn't yell, just stated unequivocally a son's grim view of his father.

The fork jerked, but stayed where it was. The master of the house leaned back, causing his wooden chair to creak, and the others from their designated places around the fracas gawped at his pumping Adam's apple and the hollow of his hairy neck, where another storm was brewing.

But nothing happened.

Their father dropped his head, his chin on his chest, gave a snort no one could interpret and fixed his eyes on the food, grabbed a knife too and began to eat, and asked with his mouth full – without the slightest emotion in his voice – whether Agnes could tell the difference between black and white. This was a game they played, a father and his youngest daughter.

Agnes hesitantly smiled down at the remains of her meal and, as expected, said no, so that her father, with a wry grin, could begin to tell the anecdote about the two nuns and the two magpies that God had abandoned as he was unable to tell them apart, the family's oldest music hall routine, which ends with a tower toppling and deciding everything in the magpies' favour. Their mother – whom both the children and husband call Mamma – sighed with relief, grateful and resigned, stood up and finished the rest of her meal, her back turned to the family, balancing her plate on five fingers, the fork clutched in her right hand, every last morsel, and then placed the plate in the stone sink with a clatter, poured herself a glass of water, gulped it down and shouted, far too loudly, that Carl should eat his food, it wasn't every day they had herring, and get on with his homework.

Carl shifted his gaze from her carelessly tied apron strings to his father's clean-shaven jowls, avoided his eyes, and let it wander over to his elder sister, Mona, who in the course of the last year had changed in body and soul and was now beginning to resemble a shapely but angry hour-glass. With sturdy hips and thighs, full and lightly sloping shoulders, a transformation Carl knew both confused and irritated her, but which had her sworn admirers among the boys in the street, although none dared to say as much openly. As a result, Mona struggled through her puberty with a sullen and contrary expression rather than a teasing and self-assured smile, fully aware that without lifting a finger she had changed over the year from a beanpole – which she hadn't been happy with either – to a stunning beauty.

Wasn't she a bit on the plump side?

No, it wouldn't have mattered if Mona had been even more curvaceous. If there was a fault it was her moods and her sharp tongue, not her figure or her sparkling eyes, her hungry lips, her quick wits or earlobes that were impossible to take your eyes off. Carl saw all this from the street - his own sister - it was both impressive and revolting.

Now she was staring at her brother with a mixture of contempt and admiration, a good sign, Carl decided – alright, she didn't understand him, but at least she hadn't given up hope that one day some good would come of him, the street's toughest slogan, also children's: Nothing good will ever come of you. Teachers to pupils, parents to children, adolescents to young kids, small boys and girls to even smaller boys and girls.

No good will ever come of you.

If there was one neighbourhood where not a single soul would ever become anything, it was this.

Carl had placed his dirty hands on the table, palms up, and gazed down at the latticework of white creases in his skin, compared it with the cobwebs in the crockery, again glanced at Mona's ambivalent smile, then at his father, and said:

Nothing will ever come of you.

Mamma screamed, Mona clapped her hand to her mouth and Agnes gasped.

But his father sat as though screwed to the chair, bent forward and munching the last of a dinner he had only half an hour ago praised to the skies, not because he had personally had anything to do with it, or because it was herring, but because for once there was enough for everyone, while he calmly nodded in time with his son's damning words, as if to confirm them, or at least to reflect on his reprobate son having such a depressing view of his own father, well, yes, it was something to think about.

Carl got to his feet and ran, defiantly hungry out of the door and down the stairs, two or three steps at a time, the last five in one leap and felt the soles of his feet burning as he yanked open the front door and allowed himself to be swallowed up by everyday life and sat down on the lowest stone step outside Knud Graahs gate 7 in an occupied capital city in Europe and wrapped his arms around his legs and thrust his forehead against his knees.

On the pavement between the street and the house, Olav and Roar had turned a wreck of a ladies' bike upside down. Olav, holding an adjustable wrench in his right hand; left-handed Roar holding a spanner in his left; Olav trying to straighten the buckled rear wheel; ditto Roar with the front wheel. An old bike they claimed they had found outside the mill, presumably damaged by a grain truck, which they had spent all day trying to repair, they hadn't even been to school.

It didn't look promising, but a bike is a bike, even if it hasn't any brakes or tyres, which they had stolen from one they saw locked outside Dagny Salangen's Meat & Fish and Grocery Store and probably didn't belong to anyone. Now they straightened up and stared at Carl, exchanged looks, Olav shouted, what did he want?

Carl didn't answer. Olav shrugged and adjusted the wrench. On an oily rag in front of him his tools lay neatly arranged like brushes in a paint box, equipment they had largely borrowed from Martinsen, the workshop that kept giving. The hot afternoon sun slanted down, the cooing of pigeons, the chirping of sparrows in bushes and guttering, not a breath of wind. Carl wondered whether to rip off his shirt. Three storeys above him the kitchen window opened and the shrill voice of Mona penetrated to the roots of his hair, he was to come up and finish his food, for the love of God.

Come on, Charlie boy.

Trills of malicious laughter. Carl noticed that Olav and Roar had straightened up and were holding a hand above their eyes to study her, Mona, who had probably leaned out of the window as far as she could, the boys' broad grins, sarcastic, provocative remarks back and forth, the window slammed shut, and once again they could concentrate on the bike, still grinning and uttering words no one could hear.

The front door behind Carl opened. His father came out and dropped something in passing, a soft thud on the stone step, his lunch, nodded briefly to the bicycle repair boys, turned, donned his hat and strode down the street, disappeared between the pillars leading to Hans Nielsen Hauges gate, to depart from this world once again.

Carl noticed something unusual about the lunch packet, it must have been prepared by his father and not by Mamma, no one could make it the way she did. He unwrapped the paper and found two slices of wholemeal bread pressed together around the cold herring he had left in the heat of the battle, it resembled an American hamburger, a soldier's rations, he held it in both hands and ate the skin and bones and herring and bread and margarine with his eyes closed and had to pause twice to regain his breath.

Olav came over and stood in front of him, wiping his hands on a rag, and asked if it was good.

Mm.

Herring?

Mm.

What I was going to say was we need some valves and cable for the brakes.

And …?

Olav hesitated, surprised that Carl didn't understand what he was getting at, and said;

We thought you could go up to Not-a-Jew and ask him if he has any.

Me?

Yes, you.

Why? He's *your* father.

Yes, and what do you think the odds are of *me* getting any? He doesn't like Roar either.

But he likes *me*?

That's what he says. Carly's the only kid in the street who's got anything about him.

Is that what he says?

That's what he says.

Olav was Carl's best friend, a good year older than him, twelve centimetres taller and a difficult and demanding, but rock-steady friend. Stooped and lanky, coarse features and closely cropped hair, no doubt because he looked like a haystack with such unruly locks, which his mother vainly tried to keep in some sort of order. Strangely enough, she had high hopes for her son, Olav, who had declared of his own accord that he would do both secondary and upper-secondary school and be something, as people say, which his father doubted, not because Not-a-Jew lacked confidence in his son's abilities, but because no one went to upper-secondary and besides he had given up trying to understand his own offspring and he had even begun to be afraid of him.

Olav never did his homework and at home never said a word about school, teachers, pupils, subjects, nothing. When his parents received a letter from his form teacher, six months before his final exams, to say that their son was not doing well and got nothing out of the lessons, Not-a-Jew eyed a slight chance of getting the boy into an apprenticeship. But Olav declined anything that resembled good advice, he would finance his own schooling, and insisted that he was doing fine, it was the teachers who didn't understand, he got better grades than most.

Olav had a slight squint in his left eye, an ambiguous look that gave him an immediate advantage. People wondered if Olav was actually looking at them, or if he was looking *past* them, because they didn't deserve to be seen, or whether he was looking *through* them, all combined with a heavy, fearless solemnity. Olav only laughed with the greatest reluctance. He had two twelve-year old siblings, the twins, Lasse and Minne, and the family lived like everyone else in one room and a kitchen, not only financed by the father, but to an increasing extent by Olav too, wherever the lad got the money from, which he occasionally gave to his mother.

Well, what do you say? he said to his friend, Carl.

I don't know, Carl said, sitting on his own personal doorstep, as if he were the owner.

So it's the same as normal.

Which is?

You get a smack in the kisser *before* you go up or else you go up *without* a smack in the kisser.

Carl smiled, crumpled up the lunch wrapper and threw it at his pal, who ducked adroitly.

That makes it easy, doesn't it.

True.

Olav was about to turn his back on him when he caught a glimpse of a swollen cheek, leaned forward and lifted the hair on the left side of his face.

You've already been given one?

Carl said nothing.

Olav: Quite a few, maybe?

Carl shrugged.

I need keys.

Of course, Olav said, twisting his long body round half a turn, stuffed his left hand into his right pocket and pulled out a bunch of keys the size of the caretaker's, coaxed two of them off and handed them over.

And don't hang about up there. We're in a hurry.

Carl crossed the street and went into Brettevilles gate 29, a poor copy of where he lived, but with different smells and customs, different shoes, different doormats and yellower walls, different names on ceramic and brass nameplates, even a different echo, which was an oddity since everything was so similar to his own building. He went up three floors several steps at a time, fried onions, gravy, boiled milk, up to the loft, unlocked the door to a dark passage that ran through the whole complex – eight units in one gigantic circle beneath the sky, or a rhombus, around a courtyard, a sombre and alluring domain that no child was allowed to enter.

A blanket of sun-warmed dust descended on him, the pigeons' cooing and the barn swallows' bat-like toing and froing. He switched on the light and made his way between the storeroom doors to the next section door, unlocked it and switched on another light, ran back and switched off the first, orientating himself by the light from the new door, locked that behind him as well and continued to yet another door, repeated the procedure, his fingers trembling – it was barely three years since he had ventured in here for the first time, holding a flickering candle, which went out and was such a severe test of his manhood that he decided - after having sweated his way all around the block and rushed down the stairs at the far end where he stood unscathed in the sun in Hans Nielsen Hauges gate - that this would never happen again.

By which he meant the fear would never happen again.

The very next day he was back, after lying awake, wondering what was wrong with him. Carl, a scaredy-cat? He could have taken Olav along with him, Vidar, Jan, Roar, anyone … But he realised that fear has to be overcome alone. And without a light. He unlocked the first door and allowed his eyes to get accustomed to the residue of light that exists in any darkness. Be patient. Don't run. Calm, determined, more alone than ever before, a boy alone on the earth, no increase in pace, no fantasies, pulse, a swallow in his face, it is nothing, and most important of all: no telling anyone about it.

Keep the triumph to yourself.

This had been difficult. Until one day Olav happened to mention in passing that he had done the loft walk yesterday, alone. And Carl, equally nonchalantly, had answered that he had too, several times, ages ago. Olav had sent him a searching look and asked a few pertinent questions about doors and light and keys and hidden pipes, which Carl had answered, equally pertinently, he had downplayed everything.

Now he was standing outside Not-a-Jew's storeroom door, Olav's father, who worked for four hours at the accounts office in the mill and the rest of the day behind this unpainted wooden door in a loft in the north of the city repairing all sorts of things for neighbours, a monk in his own hermitage, which anyone could visit if a tap leaked or a shoe needed soling, if a brass hinge had to be straightened or a kettle required a new handle. Not-a-Jew worked with metal, wood, leather, paint, glue and varnish, everything, he was an ordinary, decent man who, rather than busy himself with liberating the nation from the German yoke, did his utmost to help people to bear it.

2

Not-a-Jew's real name was Arne, but in a moment of confusion during his childhood he was called Aron, and he had at first thought it much smarter than the one he had been given at his baptism, so he had started using it himself, even with a certain pride, it was an emblem, until in the Thirties it became less attractive to be associated with the Jews, an issue Arne alias Aron hitherto had not considered, so to be on the safe side he began to say that his name *wasn't* Aron, but Arne, which was true, though maybe all too late, he realised. His name was Arne and he was from Guttormsgaard in Hadeland, the second-youngest of seven brothers, who one by one became farmers, foresters and log-floaters, like his father and grandfather before him and all Aron's uncles and cousins, there was nothing else.

Aron was injured the first winter in the forest and after a lengthy time off work he was sent to the city with five kroner in his pocket, where he wandered around the harbour until he was taken on a cargo boat bound for the Philippines. But it never reached the Philippines. It went to Miami, Port Moresby, there were a few trips on the American lakes, not that Aron, as his shipmates still called him, adapted to life on board, he was sixteen and walked with a limp, it was his left leg, after the accident in the forest, he turned seventeen, he turned eighteen, nineteen … and one foggy autumn evening he went ashore in Antwerp, with half of his four-year pay, initially to join his shipmates for his baptism of fire in a brothel. Instead a miracle took place in Aron's Hadeland heartwood, as he stood, the last man in the queue outside the legendary Café Tromsø, when the door slammed shut behind bosun Salvik and the doorman fixed his eyes on Aron and asked if he had the money, geld, monnaie. The guardian of the holy shrine wanted to see ready cash.

Yes, of course Aron had money, but he was shaken by a cold shiver and stared in confusion down at his crooked left leg, examined the tips of his polished shoes, looked up again at the rough-hewn character, with tattoos on bulging forearms and a gold ring in his left ear. Aron opened his mouth and simply answered, no, he didn't have any money, he shouted it out, no money!

He turned on his heel, strode down the deserted harbour street and veered left, where he knew the Norwegian seamen's church was, went in and said he wanted to go home, to Norway. A fair-haired young woman rose from a chair behind a narrow reception desk, peered uncertainly at him and asked a few simple questions in resonant Sørland dialect, which Aron answered with brief nods and in a roundabout manner, he could hear himself that he was at the end of his tether, and his whole body signalled that this was urgent, this visit had a time limit that mustn't be exceeded, otherwise he would go to pieces.

The young woman seemed to have witnessed desperation before, said wait here and went to fetch a young man Aron recognised as a priest, even though he was wearing a jumper and jeans. His name was Georg Harvila and introduced himself with a firm handshake, his parents were Finnish, but he was born and bred in Sagene in Oslo, so no worries there, he said with a reassuring smile and led Aron into a library and sat for an hour listening to what the seaman had to say about the four depressing years of his young life he had spent on the ocean waves, words Aron had formulated carefully, night and day, but which now he could only remember fragments of. In addition, he discovered that actually he had never spoken to anyone about his problems. At least not to anyone who listened. When at length he had said

his piece, Harvila shook his fair curls, above a forehead with a conspicuous number of furrows, and stated in no uncertain terms that this was not the way the Norwegian merchant fleet should treat its men. Aron had to go home. Harvila would personally take care of the shipping company and ensure that Aron received his full wages and would not be branded as absent without leave.

Aron said he didn't give two hoots about his pay.

My word, Harvila said.

Aron had a sense that Georg Havila was human. And three days later he was back in Oslo, with full pay, and three addresses on a sheet of paper bearing the Seamen's Church logo, no doubt Harvila's personal friends.

First he got a job as an assistant at a leather factory, as a favour, his left leg still wasn't much to write home about. Then he got a job as an errand boy with Samuel Starman, the Jew, in Sandakerveien, number two on Harvila's list. And shortly afterwards he also became the man's bookkeeper as they both – to the amazement of each – discovered that Aron had a clear brain, or at least an inner orderliness, a sound head for figures.

But only three years later he found himself out on the street again as the eldest son in the house was now old enough to take his place.

Aron had to resort to the third address on Harvila's piece of paper and ended up at Bjølsen's mill, here too in the accounts department, thanks to the references Samuel had given him, a relatively well paid full-time job, which eventually he – in accordance with his wishes – had reduced to part-time.

Over the next few years Aron saved up a fair stash of money, seen through his eyes, and lived in simple, cold, attic rooms, he washed and mended his own clothes and ate only one hot meal a week, at the home of his old employer, Samuel, who had a bad conscience about having sacked his friend. Samuel liked to play chess with him. Every Christmas he gave Aron a big hamper of food as well, along with money he hadn't earned. And eight years after coming ashore, to the day, he met his beloved Lilian at an outdoor restaurant in the countryside.

A warm, lilac-scented evening in May on a peninsula in Oslo fjord.

Aron had planned to celebrate something or other, eat well and drink two glasses of beer. They sat at separate tables in a large garden with fairy lights in the trees. They struck up a conversation. They found out they were the same age and liked the same everyday things, they ordered another beer, which Aron paid for. A teaspoon fell with a clink onto the gravel, also to the sound of her giggles, Aron picked it up and so they were sitting at the same table. This all happened so seamlessly and naturally this lazy summer evening that Aron went back to her lodgings in Maridalsveien and never moved out again. He wasn't allowed to move out again, Lilian said with a solemn expression on this the first Sunday morning they woke up in the same bed, Lilian didn't like being alone, in fact she hated it, here's a cup of coffee.

Aron sat up in the narrow bed in a room that looked perilously similar to his own, with the only duvet in the house under his arms, and gazed at the unassuming and unmade-up face of spirited Lilian, a crooked front tooth, wild, unkempt curls, dark eyes and high cheekbones, robust and soft and accommodating, and he noted that she grew more and more attractive with every word that rolled out of her perfectly formed mouth.

It transpired that Lilian was nineteen.

Yes, I lied to you, Aron.

You added *nine* more years?

Yes, I know. You're twenty-eight. Don't you like me being nineteen?

Yes, I do. It's not a problem.

Neither did Aron think it was demeaning or unambitious that she was a domestic help and looked after unruly kids in a rich household.

He couldn't imagine a more exciting career.

Lilian was planning to go to college.

No need.

Do you mean that?

Of course.

Thank God for that, Lilian said.

But then there was Hadeland. Aron's childhood.

Soon after he had returned home from Antwerp, he had sent his mother a letter. And as she hadn't replied, he addressed the next to his father, with more less the same wording, I'm back home, Aron's back in Norway.

There was no reply this time either. A few more months passed, and he sent a Christmas card, signed Arne, their son, he wrote those very words, their son.

Still no response. But he still couldn't bring himself to getting on the train and visiting his family unannounced, standing in front of them, alive and well, on the doorstep of his childhood home, a prodigal son, for fear that something might have happened to them, his parents or his brothers.

Strangely enough, he felt no longing to go home, only a slight curiosity at sporadic intervals, and the weeks went by, spring came and went, summer and autumn. The years passed. Until one spring day when he was walking through the Grünerløkka part of town with Lilian, past a shabby alehouse where people were in full swing celebrating behind grimy windows and suddenly one of his elder brothers stood on the step outside waving his long arms, Alf. Without any introduction, he said he had come from a log-floatingjob by Lake Maridal and was downing the proceeds with his workmates. Alf immediately recognised his younger brother, but seemed neither surprised nor interested, as though they had seen each other only yesterday or as if Aron were any old neighbour, he didn't ask *one* question about his seafaring life and showed no interest in what his brother might have been doing for all these years, but ogled Lilian all the more, who was nicely turned out, heavily made up and rolled her eyes at this uncouth boor from the woods.

Aron collected himself and asked how his mother and father were.

Fine, they're building pigsties.

I see, Aron said, and was gripped by a feeling he knew all too well, but had forgotten, the feeling of not being present, of being invisible, and said curtly, good to see you, Alf, turned round and walked on with Lilian, never to see the family again, not one of them.

Aron didn't attend his parents' funerals, which he happened to see in a newspaper, a death notice that described the 78-year-old and recently deceased Peder Johan Guttormsgaard as a widower. So both his parents had departed this world. From the list of relatives Aron ascertained that all six brothers were alive, some with wives and children with unfamiliar names, which made it even clearer that Aron hadn't belonged anywhere before he moved in with Lilian in Maridalsveien.

Not long after, he asked for Lilian's hand in marriage, on his knees as in films, the way Lilian wanted, with a flower in his buttonhole, he had combed his hair, polished his shoes and there was a crease in his trousers. She had pinned her hair up, according to the dictates of the time, red nails and nylon stockings. She claimed she was from Bærum, but Aron never saw any of her friends or family, and the

number of wedding guests was limited to ten, six of whom came from the household of his old friend and employer, Samuel, and his wife Sara, their eldest son Gabriel, two daughters and the new-born David, plus three men from the mill. It seemed as if the encounter with Aron's elder brother, Alf, had opened a sluice-gate in Lilian too. She drew even closer to her husband and confided in him that she too had once found it necessary to break with her family. It was just as incomprehensible as it was in Aron's case.

I see, Aron said, thinking they were an even better match for each other, only to forget all about it when their first son was born soon after, Olav, a handsome and obedient creature who made their lives even more complete. The following year, thanks to Aron's savings, they were able to move into a one-room flat in Åsen, with running water and a lav, five years later he was able to halve his hours at the mill and finally start doing what he had always dreamed about, working for himself, repairing things, for others, in a nondescript loft in a wonderful apartment block.

But at the age of three, his son, Olav, began to change, he became sullen, contrary, and listless, didn't want to stop using nappies, wet the bed after he started school and took all the attention away from the next two children, the twins, Lasse and Minna, who arrived when Olav was twelve, and who, as far as Aron could see, were in danger of having to bring themselves up. The parents began to hope there wasn't anything wrong with Olav - none of his school reports contained any criticism. Perhaps it was talent he was suffering from, of the mystical type? Maybe he was an artist in the making?

Then a new habit established itself in the flat. Lilian started going out, also at strange times of the day, apparently to visit female friends, of whom Aron still saw nothing and only heard vague titbits and whom he immediately forgot about again. A cousin was also mentioned, but she didn't make an appearance either. Often Lilian came home late, and when Aron (she never called him anything else, even if he had been protesting for long enough. I'm not a Jew. I'm Arne!) asked what she was actually doing, she answered that someone in this house had to earn some money.

What d'you mean? Arne said, and was again struck by the icy chill that had haunted him across the oceans, not a single night without the pistons' rumble and roar through the hull and his body. He tried to conceal his horror, from himself as well, to no avail. Not that Lilian exploited this apparent character flaw, neither did she call him thick in the head, or ever claim that he was inadequate, or complain that they had three children and he didn't earn enough up there in his loft existence. So Arne never questioned her inexplicable absences. And when the Occupation was a fact and people got used to the shrieking in newspaper columns, the tramping of boots in the streets and the shortages in shops, Lilian stopped going out, from one week to the next. This change too struck Arne as incomprehensible, as this too came without any explanation, all he could do was take note of this historical fact, as he saw it.

Arne was just glad that Lilian stayed at home.

In the afternoon he could sit on the kitchen bench and watch her restless hands seeing to the cutlery and utensils in the washing-up bowl, in the drawers and cupboards, listen to her routine cries of resignation and the familiar sighs, usually because of the twins, who never put a foot wrong, and also enjoy the wan smile she occasionally sent in Arne's direction, hadn't dinner been up to scratch today?

Yes, indeed it had, considering the times.

You can thank Olav for that, she went over and whispered in her husband's ear one day.

Olav?

Yes, she confided, in a voice that suggested she shouldn't be divulging the very thing she was now divulging, Olav often brought food home, she had no idea where it came from, but neither did she ask and Aron shouldn't either, don't you think?

Anxiety further tightened its hold on Arne: Weren't Olav and his pals doing errands for Samuel on their bikes?

Yes, but there are a lot of them doing it.

They must earn *something*?

Yes, let's not talk about this now.

3

There was a knock at the storeroom door behind him, and Arne immediately realised it was his mysterious son's best friend, Carl, as Olav never visited him here, nor did anyone else for that matter. Those who wanted something repaired gave it to Lilian down in the flat, where they also collected the goods later and paid. Arne had a certain amount of confidence in Carl and a faint hope that he might be a support and a safe haven for his son, not quite sure why, so he swivelled round on his chair, undid the hasp and told him to come in.

Come in, Carly, and take a seat.

Carl came in, upturned a beer crate and sat down and stared at the cluttered work bench, the homemade drawers and shelves stacked with tins of cough drops and tobacco and tea caddies containing nails and tacks and screws and nuts and washers of all shapes and sizes, a rainforest of laces and leather and strings hanging from hooks in the ceiling, glue, shoe lasts, pots of enamel and paint as small as thimbles on intricately made racks, and exotic tools, some acquired by Carl and his friends, a pipe wrench he recognised, a sheet metal scriber and eight screwdrivers they had found at the site of a burnt-out building, fitted with new, oiled wooden handles that protruded like shiny chess pieces from holes made to fit each one, in the shelf above the bench, all discreetly illuminated by a tailor's lamp, the shade so thickly covered in dust and grime that any light went downwards and made the atmosphere more concentrated and the room larger than it was, it smelt of confined adult male.

Carl said he needed a brake cable for a bike, and two valves. Arne asked what size. Carl said, I don't know, and Arne opened a coffee tin, emptied the contents on the bench and rummaged through to find five valves, two the same size, and looked up with an enquiring expression.

We'll give them a try, Carl said. And then there was the cable, they could cut it themselves and adjust the clamps.

And the puncture repair patches?

Oh, yes, I forgot about them.

Arne tossed his head and pulled out a drawer containing small coins, snus boxes and what looked like a pile of picture postcards, tied together with a strange

ribbon, banged the drawer shut as though he had burned himself and pulled out another, started rooting through the contents while asking, with his back to Carl, where they'd got the bike, was it stolen?

No.

Good. Here, this is all I have. And where were you thinking of selling it?

Outside Halléns, where the rich old dears go. Jan and Vidar will see to that.

The youngest boys?

Yes.

Well, that's probably wise, Arne conceded with a resigned smile.

We're gonna paint it too.

Have you got any?

Martinsen has.

Without a pause, Arne asked if Carl had been brawling with his father.

Why?

Arne nodded towards a pile of magazines at the back of the work bench, propped up against them a flaking mirror, where Carl saw a shifting version of himself sporting a swollen, red cheek. He said yes and that it didn't matter.

An arsehole is an arsehole, Carl said.

Arne turned to face him and said wait, when Carl showed signs of leaving. Arne wanted to say something to him, even though it was none of his business, he stressed.

Well? Carl said, waiting.

Arne told Carly that he should know his father was a tough nut.

What d' you mean?

Arne looked as if he only now realised that he had touched on something he should have left untouched, averted his eyes and flapped an oily left hand as though searching for a way out, but failing to find one. Carl glaring straight at him didn't improve matters. Arne had clammed up. He repeated:

Erling's a hard man.

And left it at that.

Carl stood up wondering if he should say thank you for the cable he had wound around his left arm, slowly stuffed the valves and the repair kit in his pocket, to give the man another chance to explain, but Arne remained unforthcoming and introspective, so Carl said thank you and went back the same way, through three doors, without switching on the light, ran down the stairs and out into Knud Graahs gate as if it were no achievement at all.

In the meantime Jan and Vidar had arrived; four pals sat and knelt around a clapped-out bike they had now lugged onto the grass. Carl passed Olav the cable and valves and Olav didn't make a single enquiry about his friend's meeting with his father in the attic.

Carl sat down on the granite steps again outside number seven, his steps, rested his chin in his hands and took in the same sight that had met his eyes daily ever since he tottered out here as a two-year-old: children of all ages, spirea bushes and lilacs, with and without snow, cooing and shitting pigeons, flocks of invisible sparrows in the bushes and thickets, mothers and fathers scurrying here and there beneath an unchanging square of a sky, which was white, grey and blue, and in the middle of this scene he watched Olav unfurl the cable to measure it, Roar cut the end off with wire-pincers while Jan and Vidar buzzed around with oil cans and the

generally well-maintained tools from Konrad Martinsen's wonderland workshop, this was Carl's world, the boys' domain.

And the girls'.

The door opened behind him, and Mona emerged with her entourage in tow, laughing and almost dancing into the rampant lilac bushes, where Carl and Olav had set up a tram-stop bench that they had dismantled one night in Birkelunden and transported here in separate pieces. More girly sounds from the bushes. An expectant silence before the greenery was pushed aside and Mona came out again and walked languidly towards the bike mechanics and stood in front of Olav, one hand on her hip and a provocative smile on her lips, and asked him if in all seriousness he believed he could sell that old heap.

Olav straightened up and looked at her with those ambiguous eyes of his, grinned for once and calmly extended an oily hand and grabbed her left tit, as if to weigh it. Mona screamed and slapped his hand aside and ran back to the lilac bushes. More loud laughter and giggling. And another silence before little Tone came out and walked halfway towards the boys, stood like a sculpture and screamed in an ear-piercing voice that no one was allowed to touch Mona's boobs.

But you can have a look at my fanny.

She pulled her faded dress over her head so that Knud Graahs gate's adolescent generation could have a much too brief glimpse of a slim, lissom girl's body, from her bare grass-stained feet up to a white rose of a navel, abruptly pulled her dress again and wrapped it around her like a bashful nun, then made a face and turned her back on the world's disbelieving eyes.

You haven't even got any pubes, Vidar ventured.

Yes, I have.

Let's have a look then.

Not on your nelly, you creep.

Tone was welcomed with triumphant cheers in the bushes while the impressed four boys looked at each other. Carl was about to shout from the steps that they'd had a good eyeful, but his voice didn't carry, it cracked and he blushed. Olav glanced over at him, in a way Carl knew. That smile of Olav's. And they converged around the bike again.

They were repairing a bicycle.

Until Olav stopped, gazed at the shadow that had fallen across the apartment block's top row of windows, Graahs gate's precise sun dial, passed the adjustable wrench to Vidar and walked towards the pile of sand outside Dagny Salangen's grocery store, which they called Rettferdigheten, where his young siblings, Minne and Lasse, were playing with five other children, and grabbed them to wild protests, shook the sand off them and carried them, one under each arm, through the street and into number two, not to reappear.

Olav didn't come out again until the whole building lay in shadow and the lilac bushes were silent. The gang of boys had taken the bike down into the coal cellar in number seven, Carl's cellar, and they had painted it bright red, until the paint ran out. The rear rack was black. They had straightened the front fork, adjusted the mudguards, removed a faulty reflector, there was something wrong with the crank axle bracket, the bike's heart and soul, you could say, and Olav had the idea of taking a dusty old gentlemen's bike, which must have belonged to a neighbour who couldn't ride it, and removed the axle, which could be held in a vice and re-threaded to make it fit.

Carl asked where he had been.

Olav said his mother wasn’t at home; he had fed the little-uns and put them to bed.

Carl took note.

They called it a day and went home.