*Revelation to Johannes* by Jonny Halberg

Translated from Norwegian by Lise Lærdal Bryn

Published by Kolon Forlag 2023

Rights by: Gyldendal Agency

Contact: anne.cathrine.eng@gyldendal.no and nina.pedersen@gyldendal.no

Part One

1

A light drizzle had fallen the whole journey from Stare. I stood by the railing on the MS Storejarl with Patrick Buene, who had attached himself to me since we embarked. Not taking my hints that I wanted to be left alone, he jabbered away about all sorts, from toll stations to disappointing shrimp yields. I had carried my bike up on the deck and put it between us. Now he leaned on it.

We sailed around the Mostertangen rock. The ferry’s horn blared as we passed the promontory. Ahead, Skatøy Bay was laid out in a half-circle, featuring white wooden houses, a metal-plated hall owned by Equinor, the labyrinthine docks, shops, a big new school and an under-construction apartment development out on Selnes, and the new brick church above the city centre, which could have been built by Mormons; otherwise, there was a hodgepodge of buildings, with a backdrop of green waves of fields, knolls and fir-clad crags. I leaned into the current and considered what to say. I didn’t want to make excuses for myself. The very last thing I wanted. What I’d done, I had to stand for.

Patrick tried a smile on his pointed vulpine face.

“Have you come back to stay now?” he said.

“No. I’ve come to sort out the business with my father. Once that’s done, I’ll go back and buy a new place to live. I’m recently divorced,” I said.

“Oh dear,” Patrick mumbled, and looked out over Prestodden, where eiders flew around the rocky shallows, letting out their choo choos, and the terns suspended themselves above a shoal of brisling, let go, and hit the water surface with soundless splashes.

“My condolences, again,” he said, and sighed.

I looked out at the Trossa Isles, which hovered above the water surface in the distance. Never to land in fair weather. “How long was he gone?” Patrick stammered.

“Eight days. He returned early Sunday morning, went into the doctor’s office, and hanged himself,” I said.

Patrick kept his eyes on the eiders.

“Have you found out where he’d been staying?” he said, scratching at a mouth sore with long, dirty nails. His hair could have nested birds. He must not have showered in days.

“No,” I said.

“Dreadful,” he lamented, and looked like he had more on his mind.

“What is it, Patrick?” I asked.

“Nothing,” he said, weakly.

It could have been anything. Patrick was the type to get lost in the weeds. The bigger picture wasn’t his strength.

“What were you doing in town?” I asked.

“I’ve bought a present for my mum. Her birthday is tomorrow,” he said.

“You’ll have to pass on my congratulations to Inger Lise. What did you buy her?”

“A shawl. She gets such chills,” he said, and watched a hot dog wrapper flying by with interest. “I saw you on TV last year. Good stuff. Especially that joke about the band of fat men and teenyboppers on a Denmark trip,” he said and laughed, trying to catch my gaze with his roving green eyes.

“I’m not funny,” I said.

“You’re joking? If anyone could be called funny, it’s you,” said Patrick.

“No. I haven’t a funny bone in my body,” I said.

He looked at me, perturbed. I put a hand on his shoulder.

“Have no fear. I’ll make you laugh again before I leave,” I said.

He looked over his shoulder at the queue forming by the exit. “I have to pick up my bag. Once again, I’m sorry for your loss. If you need any help, get in touch,” he said, then ran off.

There came a thud from the bow. The hull rocked. I looked at the crane above Verftet, at the boathouses and white buildings on the waterfront, all lined up in a row. Another thud, not as loud. A few quiet men with fishing rods cast long lines by the harbour. Behind them towered a concrete skeleton waiting to be turned into luxury apartments. *Here builds Selmer Furuholmen,* it said on a banner. I carried down my bike, hung my bags on the rack, and walked it onshore. The first thing I noticed was the salty air. Both the sea and air on Skatøy held more salt than anywhere on the mainland.

I biked by the little bay where I had spent so much time growing up, stopped and looked at the waves breaking against Makrellberget. Below the WWII-bunker grew tall, pale rushes, swaying in wind, and further in, the rolling dunes nodded along. I strolled across the grass towards the strip of sand. It smelled like meadow flowers; between the strands of grass were beach yarrow**,** watermint,flaxgeranium, and bird’s foot trefoil.In my youth, after starting a herbarium, I had known what all the plants here were called. Now, many of those names were gone from my memory. The area above the beach was set to be expropriated and have houses built on it, a development with a view of both the harbour and, in the distance, the mainland with its mountainous backdrop. A decision was due regarding the construction of Norway’s second-longest tunnel, but it was taking a while. I’d read that there had been trouble with budget overexpenditure long before the project had even been approved.

I leaned into the wind and started up the final slope.

Our house lay on a hill, surrounded by a small storehouse, the *kårbolig –* a cottage a farmer retires to once his son takes over –, a tool shed, and a detached, concrete garage. A farm had once been run here on Kaupang, but that was a long time ago. When my mother was young, they had kept hens and horses. I remembered the horses my grandfather, Gabriel, would lead across the yard, with me in the saddle. Owning a horse conveyed a certain status. Back then, I took for granted that coming from Kaupang gave me advantages. It wasn’t something we ever talked about, but I noticed the respect it garnered me from my peers. My childhood home had been quite stately when I went to high school. My grandfather, after all, had been a local industry baron, with a herring oil factory on Naustodden. That time was long past. Now there wasn’t much left of it, and there were certainly no advantages to be reaped.

The main building was rundown. Father hadn’t kept it up. The kårbolig had long been ailing, but now sported a fresh coat of paint. The tool shed had turned a strangely pale beige. They used to keep Kaupang in good condition. But the last time my mother sent me pictures from home, the farmhouse had already begun to decay. Now the paint flaked on every wall. There was moss on the roof tiles. I walked through the iron-wrought gate.

In the yard, in a pile of twisted scraps of iron and yellow sheets of glass wool, stood two rusted kerosene barrels. A four-wheeler without a steering wheel corroded next to the garage. It had been left there by Emil, my mother’s little brother, who had owned the first four-wheeler on the island. A stack of thick planks lay in front of the tool shed. Shredded plastic flapped this way and that in the window. Between the tool shed and the garage lay strewn more scrap-metal. The weathervane on the storeroom gable leaned to one side, as if someone had tried to break it off, or it had given in to the northwestern wind.

Gabriel must be turning in his grave, I thought, and walked past the thick birch tree in the yard. The wind rustled its leaves and pushed the clouds across the sky, the gulls were bobbing on the strong breeze, and the wire between the house and the storeroom began to whistle.

On the lawn, a drying rack whipped back and forth, laden with bedsheets and undergarments. The rack turned away from the sun, stopped, then turned back towards the sun and stopped again. I walked my bicycle into the basement entrance, put it in the drying room, and began to amble around the house.

The door opened. Margrete, who had been my father’s secretary for sixteen years, emerged. She now had white hair and a web of wrinkles, but her mild eyes were the same. When she saw me, she took off her glasses, polished the lenses, and put them back on.

“Johannes. I’m so glad you came,” she said.

“I was delayed. How are you?” I said.

She walked down the steps. “I’m managing. But all this is terrible. I can’t quite comprehend it yet. Nor can Toril. You’re needed here now,” she said, and gave me a hug and her condolences. When she did, tears welled in my eyes. I had been prepared for stony silence and side-stares from all those who had cared about what had happened. After all, Margrete was what one might call a true believer, and didn’t take questions of morality lightly, even if she was one of the least judgmental people I knew.

“And how’s your health?” I said.

“My hip occasionally goes on strike, but I’m hanging on. And how are you? After what happened? I just can’t believe it. Why would your father do such a thing?” she said.

“I don’t know. I haven’t talked to him since I started doing my own thing,” I said.

Margrete looked down, seemed to be about to say something, shook her head.

“We can’t think about all that right now,” she said, let out a shaky hiccup; and for a moment, as she wiped her nose, I saw that she knew something about my father that she didn’t want to reveal. But she didn’t say anything. And I couldn’t ask, not now.

“He talked about you. You might not have known that,” she said.

I asked when he had done so.

She wiped her nose. “All the time. He didn’t speak poorly of you, but he was sad. The trouble began about two years ago. He started painting the kårboligand was going to renovate the inside. I asked why he did the kårbolig before the farmhouse. He answered that he needed something to do. And then he started talking about his childhood, about Willy and how Willy had helped with all his parents’ madness,” she said, wringing her hands.

“Did he tell you anything about his adolescence in Koppang?”

“No, not much,” she said, and looked at me again.

“He never wanted to talk about his boyhood. There were only hints. As far back as I remember, he said there wasn’t much to garner from that heap of dung,” I said.

“I shouldn’t have said anything about it.” She sniffed. “Take care of yourself. And be kind to Toril,” she said, and gave me a hug.

2

I walked into the entrance hall. It didn’t look the way it used to. They had hung up two drawings my father had done, I could tell from the style. He had been good at drawing. The hall table with the landline was gone. The clothes and shoes were in the same spot as before. Otherwise, the “foyer”, as my mother used to call it, had become strangely bare. I walked over to the pictures. One was a portrait of a woman that seemed familiar.

“Is anyone here?” I asked the thin air.

No answer. Our house was big, with rooms aplenty over the three floors, chambers where the furniture was covered in white sheets, inlaid with a heavy silence, as if one could feel that there had never been any fun to find in any of them.

I looked into the small parlour, which was at least twice as big as a parlour in a typical Skatøy home, and saw that they had put parquet on the floor, bought a new red sofa and new armchairs. The fireplace, which had been re-bricked American-style, now stuck further out into the room. The room smelled freshly of green soap. I opened the door to the larger parlour and looked at the sheet-covered furniture spread out over the rough plank floor, could make out all the old landscape paintings and portraits of my forefathers I knew so well, more due to memory than anything I could actually see in the dim lighting from the velour-curtained windows. Grandmother and Grandfather hung there, too. They looked stern in their picture; although only Ellinor had made a habit of wagging her finger and keeping moral standards. Gabriel had worked hard, played his guitar, and run his mouth. Not a day passed that they hadn’t disagreed about something. Arguing nourished them, my father once said.

I went back out. “Hello. Anyone here?” I shouted. There came a sound from the end of the corridor, around the door leading to my father’s office area. I took off my shoes, peeked first into the TV-room, then Ellinor’s sewing room: no mother. I opened the innermost door, to what had been my father’s resting room, smelled that same scent of green soap, and walked over to the desk, where some accounting ledgers leaned against a bookend, along with Robert Levin’s autobiography and a book on the history of Koppang. On the table there was also a plastic mat on which someone had placed electric writing machines, and a ring binder filled with what I assumed were photos from Mum’s childhood, or from the first years after my parents had moved to Kaupang.

I opened the ring binder. Father had put old drawings in the plastic sleeves. I flipped through them. He had mostly drawn fantasy animals. In one drawing, a black snake coiled up from inside a gaping human mouth, it bared its huge, sharp fangs and had yellow eyes. He had drawn tiny oval pupils in the yellow; the snake’s gaze looked evil and alive. In the next, a troll stood out in the forest, among tall trees. It was sunset. The troll, too, was gaping. The broad figure had a yellow front tooth. In one moss-grown hand, the troll held a kicking stag, which it had brought up to its open mouth. The stag was so lifelike I could almost hear it yelping, on its way into the troll’s hairy muzzle. I didn’t recognise these drawings. What I remembered, were drawings of pastures and bridges crossing tranquil rivers, and portraits of pretty village girls. I flipped through the binder again. Beneath me was an idyllic waterfall between grey boulders, stooping pine trees on both sides. The waterfall rushed into a frothing pool. It was a peaceful image, but then I looked closer and discovered two big eyes staring up from the froth under the surface. There was no head or face to be seen, only those eyes between the foamy waves.

I closed the binder and went over to a clipping from a newspaper hanging on the wall. My father had been interviewed by *Skatøy Bulletin* on what it had been like to arrive at Skatøy and have all the victims of the Alexander Kielland accident in his hands. The introduction read: *“Everyone knows someone who was affected,” says Johannes Kammerstuen, who has started a new medical practice on Kaupang.*

I went out into the corridor. It was quiet. An old wall clock ticked on the second floor, in my grandparents’ old bedroom. That was all. It happened that the clock would stop and start again by itself, but no one knew why. I was on the verge of shouting one more time, but the door to the bathroom at the other end of the hall slid open. My mother was wearing a white bathrobe. She dried her hair with frenetic movements. When she spotted me, she jumped, as if she had been caught doing something wrong.

“I was in the bathtub,” she said, then hung up the towel, before coming over and grabbing my shoulders. “My dear boy,” she said and put her arms around me. I put my arms around her, too, and said that I couldn’t understand it. But I was home now. And as long as she wanted me at Kaupang, I would do whatever I could to make things the best they could be for her. It was clumsily said, but I was at a loss for good words. It had been nearly four years since I had last seen her. My father I hadn’t seen in a decade. Once, I called my mother’s phone and he had answered. When he heard it was me, he said: “I don’t talk to telemarketers,” and hung up.

I sat myself in the winter garden outside the small parlour. Two deer were grazing under the oak trees behind the garden. In the garden, the branches were heavy with green pears, red apples and blue plums; the rest lay in the grass, rotting. I had heard from my mother that he had stopped taking care of the garden. She had taken charge of the berries and fruit, but was no gardening enthusiast. I watched the deer, who lifted their heads and sniffed, moved their ears, looked around. How would I justify my actions? Was using my own father as the subject of a stand-up routine something I had to justify? They were all things I had experienced, I usually said, but it still felt like a betrayal.

She had put on tight jeans and a black t-shirt. Mum started running at fifty, but eventually settled herself on a mountain bike. She looked good. Long, black hair, a tan and slightly long face, bowed lips and keen, dark eyes. She had always been beautiful, and at the age of sixty-nine, she had kept her shape in a way that nearly defied nature. She rightfully had chapped lips and a red nose, from two days of crying.

“Here,” she said, and handed me a mug of hot chocolate.

“How are you? Are you well?” I said.

“I have a bit of a cough. But you’re speaking to a doctor’s wife. How about you? Are you getting any sleep?”

“I sleep the sleep of the just,” I said.

“Don’t joke. Where’s your car?” she said.

“I had to sell it. Buying someone out of their flat is expensive,” I said.

She started crying, pulled out a couple of tissues, and blew her nose so hard the winter garden rang with the sound of it. I opened a window for some fresh air.

“What made him pack his bag?” I said.

Mum was about to blow her nose again, but froze with the tissue held at her mouth.

“We fought. I wanted him to come out of his funk. He just walked around, silent. I almost didn’t recognise him. He followed me with this accusatory stare. He could suddenly stride up to me and blame me for all these things I’d never even heard of,” she said.

3

I dumped my bike satchels on the floor, leaned my backpack against the bed, put away trousers, underwear and socks in the drawers, found my journal, which I’d taken out on the ferry, and looked at the only thing I had written: *What now?* I shut the journal and sat at the desk. On the wall above me was a photograph I had once put up, which my father had taken while I sat in the music room reading *Anna Karenina*. I couldn’t have been more than fourteen. He wanted it to look like I was studying Tolstoy’s *masterful prose*, and not show me as I was, a hyperactive brat who overplayed his own significance and had zero interest in the loves and intrigues of the Russian aristocracy. I threw the photo in the wastebasket, and then stood standing in front of the photograph of my mother, taken in Bergen. She was eighteen, with big, brown eyes, a black mane, and a defined jaw, and she looked like Maria Callas, one of Father’s favorite soloists, whose arias he used to play over the sound system, to my mother’s annoyance.

I sat down on the bed, felt how hard it still was, and took out a sympathy card that had been attached to one of the flower bouquets. On the card it said: “With deep sorrow and the deepest compassion.” And the signature, in blue felt pen: Jarl Ragnvald Gjeipe. What on Earth? I turned over the card. An imprint of a white cross in the stiff paper. Jarl Ragnvald was someone from my school years I had no desire to ever meet again. I didn’t owe him anything. Nor did he owe me anything. That wasn’t it. Well, maybe he would say I owed him an apology after I had mined some memories for a show a few years back. But apart from that? I just didn’t like him.

Mum had interrupted her nursing studies in Bergen, done one year of a teaching degree, and ended up a half-educated teacher at Skatøy Bay Secondary School. One day, it became time for me to step up from primary school to secondary. I was made aware of the fact that I would attend the school my mother taught at. Hide away at the back of a classroom as she lectured up front, run into her in the corridor with the whole class laughing at me behind her back, or be caught with a cigarette behind the bike sheds? I told them I didn’t want to start at Skatøy Bay, so they had to get me into the school in Konnevik, an industrial area with modern buildings and modern teachers, or out on Åklesanden, which was even further away.

I ended up at Åklesanden. Suddenly I so wanted to go there, first and foremost because Åklesanden was considered the bad part of town. People from Åklesanden were the descendants of America-wayfarers, who returned to Norway after working as nannies and pavers outside Chicago or in New Jersey. So, as well as having a big harbour and two white, sandy beaches, Åklesanden was where the residents cultivated everything American as if it were their own. My parents refused, but I didn’t give up. It had to be Hicksville. During those fights, I lost my appetite and stopped eating. Nothing they tried would work. I sat at the kitchen table and stared at the seeds my father had told me to “peck up”. He loomed over me and said that if I didn’t eat them, I would no longer be allowed to have any friends over. I knew that what he did was wrong, and I defied him, but just as I was about to give up and swallow some of the seeds, my mother took the plate and threw it in the bin. “I’ll get him to eat,” she said. Father left the kitchen, slamming the door. Mum stroked my hair.

The following autumn I started at Åklesanden. I had to get up at six-thirty to make the bus. The first day of school went well. But when I walked across the schoolyard after the final bell had rung, I was stopped by five boys outside the gym. One of them was Jarl Ragnvald Gjeipe. He had moved to Skatøy from Bergen, and didn’t draw much attention to himself. His mother, Gerd Gjeipe, ran the sports café. The leader, a boy in Year Nine, stood in front me and mockingly asked how big I was. “It’s not the size that matters,” I stuttered. I tried passing them, but he stood in my way. “Oh? What matters then?” he said. I pushed him away and was kicked for it. Then someone hit me with a stick. I fell, hit my head against a rock, and saw something red, thick as oil paint, flow by. Someone kicked my ribs. Someone stepped on my face. A heel was driven into my chest. While I lay like that, I saw the dark-haired boy from Bergen standing alone to the side, watching me get beat up while he chewed at a thumbnail. His gaze was fierce and fervent. That was all I remembered. When I came to, no one was around. It was raining. I dried my jaw with some grass and hobbled over to the nearest bus stop. When I reached it, I saw the sherrif’s Chevrolet driving slowly down the High Street. I turned away. In the bus I sat at the very back, stared out at all the small businesses that made up the village of Åklesanden, and thought about how I had to stand by the choice I had made.

For a full week they kicked and beat me behind the gym. Every time, Jarle Ragnvald Gjeipe stood to the side and observed the festivities, with that strange, feverish stare.

The following Tuesday, I put a stop to it by walking up to a tall and flabby maths geek in the schoolyard. I picked a fight with him, exchanged blows until noses were bloody. After the duel, I received a handkerchief from a girl in my class. And some days later, the same girl came over at breaktime and asked to meet in the library.

At home, I said nothing. Father took me to his doctor’s office, sat me on the examining table, and asked where the grazes and black eye were from. I made something up. Of course, I had once looked up to him and often walked around his office and wished that I, too, could one day prescribe pills and patch people up so they could return home and heal. But this time was different. Not telling the truth was thrilling. I remembered he became brusque, said that we had to trust one another and not cover up things that were important, things he and my mother should know about. “I will *never* let you experience what I did, all that stupidity and violence. If someone is bothering you, I’ll go after them,” he said, furious.

4

It was evening. Mum was in the basement, tidying away some old junk. We’d had our closest neighbours, the Mathiesens, at the door. They, too, came with flowers. I don’t think my parents had exchanged a single word with Mr. or Mrs. Mathiesen in at least ten years. But the flowers and condolences were duly accepted, as were good nights and stay strongs, and then the matter of finding a final vase. I found a big sundae glass and stuffed the flowers in it, heard the doorbell ring. I trudged out to the entrance hall, set my face into sorrowful folds, and opened the door.

Outside, on the steps, stood Hedvig. She held a bouquet of yellow irises in front of her face.

Hedvig Dahle was my second cousin. She had moved away to Stjørdal at nineteen. Later, she moved to Trondheim. She married an Italian, had a son with him, and then divorced. Eventually, she lost parental rights to her son.

And now she lived alone in a house by Ihle Beach, outside Konnevik.

“You’ve probably got some like these already, but I wanted something to give you,” she said from behind the bouquet.

“I haven’t been given anything, but I’ll gladly take them,” I said.

She looked around the irises.

“Johannes?” she exclaimed.

“I caught the first flight in this morning,” I said.

She held onto her irises. All I could hear was the rustling of the cellophane.

“So here we stand once more,” she said, and made a grimace.

“Indeed. Thank you for being there for my mother,” I said.

“I didn’t do much. Thank the others,” she said.

“But you’ve been here for two days,” I said.

“Where’s she disappeared to?” she said, and looked into the hall.

“She’s in the basement, sorting out all the flowers. It’s good to see you,” I said.

She looked at me. She, too, had dark eyes, very dark. You noticed it when Hedvig looked at you.

“You’re so skinny. Aren’t you eating? You’re not unwell, are you?” she said.

“Don’t worry about it. All this just feels quite strange,” I said.

“I’m only sad,” she said, and walked around me and into the hall.

Typical Hedvig. No: “Oh, how awful. You have to be strong now,” or any expression of sympathy.

Hedvig and I hung out when we were kids. I liked her voice, her eyes, her smell. She was lively, clever, and cheeky, and she didn’t seem to care about the fact that Eva and Torbjørn, her parents, gave her lashings for all the things she got up to. It wasn’t right, but they were Jehovah’s Witnesses. No one did anything. The Dahle family lived in Kjærvika, a little settlement some kilometres away. I biked to Kjærvika, she biked to Kaupang. Later, things would happen that would bring it to an end.

But now, on the veranda, I again felt how similar we were; it was like no time had passed. What she felt, I had no idea. My father had been a help to Hedvig, both in her youth and after she moved back. I knew she couldn’t stomach my stand-up shows, certainly not the ones that targeted the medical profession, but probably not much of the rest, either. Or, like my father’s older brother, Uncle Hallvard, yelled that time he turned up at Laughteras I stood onstage: “And you say all this about your father, your own flesh and blood? Take a look at yourself, you arse!”

She put the irises in a vase.

“Mum said you came right after. When did you arrive?” I said.

“Early on. Toril called Heidi Maria, Margrete, and myself. Not Ottosen or that other doctor, I can’t remember his name. Margrete didn’t feel up to going inside. I went round the back and in through the office door. Toril and Heidi Maria had already taken him down. Heidi Maria had laid a blanket over him. Your mother sat in front of the big wood cabinet with her legs straight out, staring into space. It took a while before I was able to get a response from her. She didn’t recognise me,” said Hedvig, and sat down in a cane chair, stroking her long, slender fingers over some leaves. “I wanted to have a look at him, but Heidi Maria pulled me away. After that, I went out to Margrete. The two of us looked after Toril for the rest of the day. She told us about how she’d fought with him before he left. And more. That was all she’d say. I don’t know what she meant by it,” she sighed, stopped stroking the irises, and looked up at the sky, which was the same shade of white as chimney smoke on a freezing winter day.

“You wrote me that email. Are you still as angry as you were then?” I said.

“I loved Johannes. What you did, was spitting on your father. It was wrong, and it wasn’t funny. The whole bay talked about it. And Konnevik,” she said.

“I don’t think you’re aware of how he behaved at home,” I said.

“Maybe not, but I had an adolescence, too. You don’t turn yourself into a victim. It’s pathetic,” she said.

That stung.

I responded that I was no victim. That what I had done, was this little something called comedy. Besides, I wasn’t bitter. I did those shows because it made people laugh. I got to perform my own stuff, go to go on tour. I went on TV. I was broke and I needed money. Nothing more to it.

Hedvig had let herself go. Not by much, but enough that her age was visible around her middle and backside. She noticed my gaze, and flung her dreads behind her neck. I wanted to find a pair of scissors and chop them off. I hadn’t always felt that way. The first time I saw them, they knocked me out. No one on Skatøy had dreads. She had just turned sixteen. Now she was over forty.

“How’s Andreas?” I said.

“Basically healthy,” she said.

Mum had told me about how Hedvig went off the rails in Trondheim, that she was fired from her costuming job at Trøndelag Theatre due to drug problems, and that Pepe, or Giuseppe, got parental rights for Andreas and moved them to Italy. Later, they discovered Andreas had leukemia.

“They’ve lived there for four years,” she said, and looked at me defiantly, as if expecting a reprimand.

“Has he visited you?” I said.

“He’ll come,” she said decisively.

“You think you’ll be able to get him up here now?” I said.

“Of course I will,” she said.

5

I unpacked my clothes and toiletries and books and laptop, hung things up and tidied, sat on the bed and opened the nightstand drawer. In it, lay a Bible. It was my grandmother’s old leather-bound one. Father quoted the Bible, read from it constantly. It was part of my education, he claimed, but I knew it meant more to him than that. As a boy, he had been read to by his sister, who was deeply Christian. He had kept busy drawing locusts and frogs and other great plagues from the biggest of all books.

I picked it up. It was strange, I thought, that some people not only still took the Bible seriously, but also literally. The existence of a God seemed so distant and old-fashioned to me that I could no longer talk to Christians about questions of faith. That there could be a God steering our lives seemed absurd. The thought that there was life after death created such a wealth of unanswered, practical questions (does paradise look like a kind of ethereal, empty room; how many can fit there, after so many millennia of people dying, and for all eternity; doesn’t the afterlife become a terribly dull affair, if only peace reigns and happiness is constant?) that I took it for granted that life ended after the heart stopped. Whether there was anything such as divine power I was less certain of.

But I had also read from The Holy Scripture, and opened the bookmarked page, saw that it was Luke, on the page recounting Jesus’s story about the missing son. I closed the book. He had done that on purpose.

On my way down, I remembered that for a period, my grandmother had wished absolutely that I be converted. Father brusquely told her to leave me be. I remembered that I, wanting to stop all her nagging about meetings we should attend together or my joining the choir, became more and more in doubt as to what to do. But one day, I found the solution. In a bid to make my grandmother stop going on about Jesus, I said I would become a priest. Then she would surely be happy and stop her evangelising. It didn’t go that way, of course. In the following weeks, she besieged her grandchild with Bible quotations, parables, and sermons, until the smoke of burning bushes steamed out of my ears.

I stood by the refectory table that my grandfather had planed in his time, randomly flipped through the book, and found a blue-inked cross in the margin next to King Jeconiah’s release from Babylonian capture. It was, as always, a hard time in Jerusalem. Had this city ever experienced anything other than invasion, butchery, torture, pestilence, and fire? I remembered Ellinor telling me about Jerusalem’s captivity. The devastation of the town. Humans that lay rotting in the streets under the siege lead by Emperor Titus. But, as the old woman said, her eyes flashing: Israel’s people never gave in. They didn’t abandon their dream of making the holy city theirs. I remembered we sat in the small parlour and that Father was fussing with the fire after it had died out, laying down logs and stabbing it with the poker so sparks flew. My grandmother looked over at him and said that Jerusalem’s children didn’t ever lose their way, despite all the suffering they’d had to endure. They sat as captives in Egypt and Babylon, the great whore offering *earthly* temptations presenting herself to the Jewish people, boding debasement. But God’s Chosen didn’t let themselves be led astray, didn’t give up their *faith* and throw themselves into godless pursuits of whoring and drinking and music and myriad other sins. But Father, I remembered, poked the poker even harder at the fire and got the flames to blaze up the sooty brick, pretending not to hear. What he was thinking, I didn’t know. But I thought about how he was a doctor. There was nothing to wonder about. Ethical guidelines had to be formed by human reasoning, not by commandments that had been written down two and a half thousand years ago. If we were to do good works, we had to do it here on Earth, not wait until we stood before Heaven’s pearly gates and were reunited with our departed nearest and dearest. That’s what I believed, up until he answered her saying he had “always been a passionate reader of Revelations”. And added: “There is more written there, dear Mother-in-Law, than even you could dream of.”

You see, there was a book at the end of The New Testament. Father had been obsessed with it. I found the right page and read.

This is a revelation from Jesus Christ, which God gave him to show his servants the events that must soon take place. He sent his angel to present this revelation to his servant John.

I had as a young man heard that John had recorded the revelations on Patmos, under the influence of the hashish he smoked. Whether I had this from Jens Bjørneboe or some other questionable source, I couldn’t remember. I thought that this was a stupid explanation, and left the Revelation alone, but whenever I heard mention of the book, I imagined monsters rising from the sea, and angels that broke the seals (what even were seals?) under thunderclouds, and dark days of clashes between fantastical characters from Heaven and Hell, large-eyed beasts and harbingers; until the Son of Man came riding in on glorious clouds to save the faithful few. Once (at twenty), I sat down to look into what all of this really was, with the hope that in the final pages I would find something I could use for a show. The Book of Revelation was said to be dynamite, but I wasn’t impressed. The opening was prosaic (clearly necessary to appeal to the congregations in Asia, to whom the book was targeted) and reliable, without any of the force I was expecting; the Book of Revelation should at least have had a pithy opening line that gave a searing taste of the forthcoming apocalypse. At twenty years old, I bent over the silk paper in belief that Judgment Day would show up in the last chapter, sweep away humanity with gales of blood.

It was windy again. The woodwork creaked in the attic. Soon it would be night. I put away the book and looked down at the wood of the table, full of knots, branched rings and ridged edges that that ran parallel to each other, like the markings on a giant hornet. The last thing I read was:

Behold, he cometh with clouds!

I got up at half past three, and though I hadn’t slept since leaving home, I felt wide awake. I put away the spiritual guidebook of the western coast, and opened the window overlooking the garden, stuck out my head, felt the wind pull at my hair. What I could do was take pills and have a hangover. Or I could go for a bike ride so intense my restlessness would wear itself out.

I pulled on a cycling baselayer, thermals and Adidas joggers, a T-shirt, my Adidas pull-over and windbreaker, found my cycling gloves, terrain trainers and a hat, went out into the corridor and paused outside my mother’s bedroom. She had put on an ambient, evenly synthetic soundscape, which underlaid her fitful snoring.

The attic creaked again.

I went downstairs, stopped, and looked down the corridor at my father’s office. I could have sworn I saw something move in front of the waiting room, a figure that emerged from the corner and stepped back into the shadows. Now, I’d never much cared for supernatural phenomena; hunting for something you could put your hand through but never capture wasn’t an activity that particularly appealed to me. But I decided not to go to the end of the corridor and find out what was there.

I shook it off, felt someone staring, laughed at the imagined ghost, walked to the front entrance and jumped, my mouth gone numb.

It was Mum’s mobile phone. Ringing in the little parlour.

I went over to the fireplace. The phone lay on the tea trolley. I picked it up. There was a number on the screen, but no name.

“Hello?” I said.

“Yes, hello?” said a man on the other end.

“Yes, hello?” I said.

“Hello?” said the man.

“Who is this?” I said.

“Who are you?” said the man.

I held up the phone, looked at it, put it to my ear.

“Hello? Who is this?” I said.

“I wanted to speak with Toril,” said the man.

“Uncle Hallvard?” I said.

“And who are you?” said Uncle Hallvard.

He spoke clearly, and he was drunk. If he had still been sober, he would have spoken unclearly and stuttered. Uncle Hallvard. It was the first time I’d talked to him since he ruined my night at Laughter.

“Johannes. I arrived today,” I said.

“Johannes? Is it really you?” he said.

The signal was interrupted. He must have been extremely drunk. I was about to put down the phone, but it rang again.

“Hallvard? Mum’s sleeping,” I said.

“Fine. Tell her we can’t come to the funeral. Tyra is unwell. She has chest pains,” he said with the same clear voice.

“I’ll tell her. It may be just as well,” I said, and braced myself for a fight about how poorly I’d treated his brother, which he wouldn’t remember a word of in the morning.

6

I showered, dried myself, and stretched post-bike ride. After hanging up my towel, I brushed my teeth and looked at my reflection in the mirror: Before me stood a guy with metallic blue eyes and long, light-coloured hair, little, pale wrinkles under his eyes. There was a cynical twist to his mouth, which I had never been able to get rid of, a half-smile that hung there without me being able to do anything about it; this was simply how my lips had set over the course of the years.

Mum was in the kitchen. She had boiled eggs, put out some jam, brown cheese, and ham, and warmed up a loaf of bread. Now she poured orange juice and ice cubes into a glass mug.

I emptied the espresso cup and felt a warmth unfold in me. She nodded towards the table. I sat down.

“Aren’t you wondering about anything to do with your father?” she said.

“Was he preoccupied with questions of faith towards the end?”

“If Johannes had been converted, you mean?” she said.

“No. But he grew up with Aunt Inger, who read out loud from the Bible. And he loved her.”

Mum downed her espresso. She dragged her index index finger around the bottom of the tiny white cup, swiping up the rest of the coffee, and sucked her finger.

“Why do you ask?”

“I found Ellinor’s Bible in my nightstand. Did you put it there?”

“I don’t know what to call it. I’ve seen him with that Bible of his over the last few years. But a Christian? He read it like any other book, I’d wager. What you don’t know, is that he struggled with his health. He didn’t say anything, he never said anything about his health, but he had backpains, often got dizzy, and had lots of headaches. But would he go to the doctor about it? Isn’t that how doctors always are? He’d gotten all the help he needed, he said.”

“From who?”

“Someone called Willy. He was a communist and didn’t live far from the dive your father grew up in. He taught music at his primary schooland must’ve still felt some warmth for that scabby little forest troll who was so musical and good at maths.”

“No one’s ever told me about this,” I said.

“Well, you never asked. Willy taught your father both the piano and the saxophone. And gave him some rent money, so he could go to Kongsvinger and get a studio flat there when it was time for college. That’s what I know,” she said.

“I’ve never heard about that,” I said.

“It was Tyra who told me about Willy,” said Mum, and stayed sitting and staring ahead, her expression sombre.

We walked over to the office area. I could hear the distant bleating of goats on the hill up towards the cairn. I opened the door to the waiting room, which was closest to the garden, so he had a separate entrance for his patients. It was Grandfather who had suggested my father move out of his rathole at the council building and start a private practice on Kaupang. They had more than enough room.

It smelled like soap and scouring paste. The portable radio was tuned to Channel P2 as usual, the only channel the patients ever got to listen to before they were called in. Next to it was a small pile of reading material: *The Evening Post*, *Skatøy Bulletin*, *Hunting and Fishing*, *Classical Music Magazine*, and a tall stack of fashion magazines.

“I woke up at the crack of dawn from a noise in the garden, put on some clothes and walked around it to see if a ladder or trellis had fallen down. And then I looked over at the office and spotted something hanging behind the window,” she said, then started coughing and gasped for air.

I peered through the crack in the door, certain that he would still be in there, tall and skinny and with that pointed chin covered by a ginger beard. But the only thing I could see was his white coat hanging on a peg by the sink.

“What did you do?” I said, a painful tug in my stomach.

“I must’ve run over to the orchard. Suddenly I was standing behind an apple tree. I tried to start breathing again, picked up my phone, and called Heidi Maria. I can’t remember what I said. After that I called Hedvig. Hedvig called Margrete. Heidi Maria arrived fifteen minutes later, the blue lights on. Hedvig turned up, too. By then we’d taken him down,” she said with a lifeless voice.

“C’mere,” I said, and put my arms around her, held her. She whined like a dog that knew it had done something wrong. That was what I thought. I didn’t make anything more of it.

“I shouldn’t have seen it. But it was too late. Heidi Maria had laid him down on the carpet. The floor was soiled. There was something there,” she sniffled, and couldn’t go on. Her knees buckled. I sat her down in a chair. Mum hiccupped and said I should go in and get it over with.

I pushed open the door.

“By the radiator,” she said.

I looked up at the iron hook that had been fastened to the ceiling.

It was silent in there, the type of rubbery silence you find in a room where every object has the same purpose: to heal. There were things hanging on the walls (drawings, some small stones, and a pinecone animal made by a child) that said that this wasn’t only the realm of a doctor, but of a person who cared. I could still smell the scent of tincture. He had displayed a bunch of old instruments and medical devices in the glass cabinet. Behind the panes were antiquated pill containers, cough remedy bottles filled with morphine syrup, syringes with fear-inducing points, thick needles and thread for sutures, a speculum that could have been made by the British sculptor Henry Moore. Why he had placed all these props behind glass in the big cabinet and made his patients even more anxious when they were already struggling, was beyond my understanding. He probably hadn’t realised how the instruments affected other people. They were at any rate displayed as part of some educational programme he felt that the island folk needed to be exposed to.

I walked over to the Snellen wall chart, and looked at the bottom two rows of letters. I was beginning to become near-sighted. The letters on the second-to-last row floated outwards.

If I go blind, he probably would have considered it appropriate punishment, I thought.

I went to the desk and turned on the computer, tried different passwords, looked under the hard disk where he used to stick a post-it with the password, turned it off, and thought that there must have been a reason he chose to walk into his own office and fix a rope to the ceiling there and not the tool shed or kårbolig. But it might not have been all that complicated. The medical practice was his life. The older he got, the more he worked. His office was his home.

The little medical cart was in the corner, laden with cotton wads, cotton buds, microscope slides, fixative spray, and spatulas. He had used it to climb up. He hadn’t chosen the examination table, which gave better support. I walked away and stood in front of the glass cabinet, picked up the brown medicine bottles, metal tools for digging around in abdominal cavities and chests, flipped through medical journals, and looked over the row of medical textbooks. Most of them were about lung and eye diseases.

The office was chilly. In this room, where he had treated psoriasis, eye injuries, and bronchitis, sutured torn ear flaps (along with a ravaged nose), and closed wounds after fraternal fights, I had started learning what humans were made of. I saw blood, tendons, flesh, and layers of fat; strangely, one of the most frightening things had been a biopsy. I remembered he wriggled a small cylindrical needle into the arm of a chubby young woman and extracted a yellowish tissue test, held it up and showed it to me. I had felt unwell for the rest of the day. Nausea still swelled at the thought of him letting me stand there to watch this Mengelian procedure.

The hook had been fastened to the ceiling for as long as I could remember. I had never considered what its use was, before my mother one day looked up, laughed, and told me I used to hang from it. No such thing as nursery school existed in those days. Both my parents worked. Father from home. Mum was a teacher. He carried the basket into his office every morning and hung it up. I lay there in that basket, like a born again Baby Moses. I thought about how I hung there from a rope, in a woven basket lined with flannel, while he talked to his patients. In the basket, I was rocked back and forth, back and forth. I had stared at the ceiling medallion, babbled and made tiny bubbles with my mouth, slept, or wailed so Father had to stop what he was doing, excuse himself, and lift me out of the basket and walk around with me.

The medallion had cracked. According to my mother, he had tied the rope to the radiator before moving the cart under the hook, climbed up with the rest of the rope, and put the noose around his neck. I went over the window and opened it, leaned out, and gagged. The wind had calmed down. Fog licked at the treetops. There were no sounds to hear. I spat, and was about to close the window again, but then spotted my mother standing on the lawn filling the mower with petrol. I pushed the window further open, retched, and spat again. I thought that the office smelled like rotten fruit, even though it had been thoroughly scrubbed.

There are two ways to die with a rope about your throat. Either you break your neck. A blow you don’t get the chance to register. Or you are slowly strangled. What if he had climbed up, balanced on the cart, kicked it away, fallen twenty centimetres or so, felt the rope cut into his neck and thought, if only for a second, that he didn’t want to die? Had he, as the rope tightened, had time to think, no, not now! What if he had put his fingers around the noose and tried to clutch himself to it. His toes barely brushing the floor, just that little bit too high to support his weight. What had he been thinking? Had he been thinking? Or was the end simply a muddle of yellow and green shards of light exploding on his retinas? A chasing pain through his head? And then after that?

I crouched and looked under the ECG apparatus.

There was a black spot on the floor. It had sunk into the wood. My tongue grew in my mouth. It felt like it had swollen and blocked my airways. I went over to the sink, spit up some phlegm, put my mouth under the tap and drank, but my throat closed and the water wouldn’t go down.

7

We were going up to the cairn. I pulled on my parka, laced up my hiking boots, walked out into the garden, and stopped in front of the compost pile, which hadn’t been turned in years. A few metres away was an area where the grass was high. We had once had a strawberry patch there. Something had happened to the strawberries, but I couldn’t remember what.

I walked over to the oak grove and looked out at the pasture that belonged to Mathiesen. A deer grazed on the stubby ground. It lifted its head and waved its ears. And then I remembered what had happened.

We got a cat when I was seven. Father didn’t think much of cats. I liked them, especially this one, a tomcat I called Fenrir. He was short and black and slender, and he had a white patch on its breast. Besides, he was playful, and neither bit nor scratched. A couple of years after we got him, he disappeared. I walked around with the feeling that he would never come back, and tried comforting myself with my mother’s reassurances that cats sometimes disappeared for weeks before suddenly turning up again. But Fenrir was and remained gone. A week passed, then a week and a half. I became more and more despairing. Father talked about the course of nature, how Fenrir was an animal, not a human. There was little comfort to be found in his insinuations. I asked around at all the neighbours’, hung up posters with photos of the cat in shops and on poles. Then, one June day, came the message. Mrs. Mathiesen had found the cat under a bush in their garden. It was alive, but just barely hanging on. I came with my father. We crossed their huge property and talked to Mrs. Mathiesen, looked under the bush. There Fenrir lay on his side, foam around his mouth. Father crawled in and took him out, carried him to the car. He held Fenrir by his scruff. I said that I wanted to carry him in my arms, but he didn’t answer, kept pinching the scruff with his index finger and thumb, and put the cat down on a black bin bag in the backseat. We got in and drove off. He didn’t say a word. I turned around and stroked Fenrir, who looked at me with drowsy eyes, and asked what was wrong with him. Father said that we would have to have a look when we got home. He was not a vet.

He had recently become more and more irritable. It wasn’t long after Mum and Eva had fallen out. Their conflict had arisen due to Eva’s jealousy of my mother, and the fact that Eva had become a Jehovah’s Witness. It didn’t help that Mum used to sunbathe braless on one of the beaches in Åklesanden. Father thought the whole matter silly, but at the same time, he had been helping Hedvig behind Eva and Torbjørn’s backs. A couple of weeks after Eva and Torbjørn had cut off ties with our family for good and started spreading rumours about my mother’s immorality, Father became irritable. He could be set off by anything, and let it go out on me and my mother. I couldn’t understand it, nor could I understand how, upon examining the cat in his office, he had concluded that Fenrir had been bitten by an adder and couldn’t be saved.

I asked how he could know. He answered that Fenrir had all the symptoms, the foaming around his mouth and how he was lethargic and had spasms, and on one leg he had discovered two tiny holes. I asked to see the holes. He indicated a spot on one of the hind legs. I couldn’t see anything, so I asked for a magnifying glass. He found the ophthalmoscope, screwed off the cap, and held it above the leg. I still couldn’t see anything. He put a hand on my shoulder. “I know it hurts. But we have to put it down. The cat can’t lie here and suffer,” he said, and patted my head.

I felt ill when he said that and wanted to protest. And I did. Couldn’t cats become better after adder bites, like people? “No,” said Father, and looked at me with pity, “one may hope so, but it’s deadly for a cat to be bitten.” I started shaking. He removed his hand from my head, went into the storeroom, and came back out with the hunting rifle he kept in a cabinet. I become so weak at the knees that I had to sit down. “What are you doing?” I said. “This is the easiest way. It’ll be quick. I don’t have morphine,” he said, and then asked me to pick up Fenrir and take him to the garden.

I refused. My father sighed.

“We can’t leave it here,” he said, now irritated.

“I want to take him to the vet,” I said, in tears.

“Holmboe is in Oslo. We’ll have to do it ourselves. Either you come along with the cat, or I’ll carry it under my arm and go out on my own,” he said, loading the rifle.

I put my hands under the bin bag and carried him outside, put him in the grass by the rows of red strawberries. Fenrir moved again. There was a bit of yellowish white foam at the corners of his mouth. He was awake; he looked up with two black eyes, but wasn’t able to fix his gaze.

“Look. He’s getting up,” I shouted.

My father walked forward, lifted the rifle, aimed, and fired, but the bullet didn’t hit its mark. Fenrir rolled over. Father had shot his left foreleg.

I looked away.

My father swore and loaded again. I could heard Fenrir whimpering where he lay on the bin bag. Father lifted the rifle, put the butt to his shoulder, and fired again. I couldn’t see where he had hit. But Fenrir went still. I couldn’t hold it in any longer. I ran for my mother, who wasn’t home, but out on a walk with two friends, so I ended up in my room and lay there, certain that Fenrir hadn’t been as sick as my father had made him out to be. He had been coming to just before Father fired the first shot. I had seen his paw and front leg fly across the grass, and I tried to erase the image from my mind.

“Go to hell!” I shouted into my bed.

That evening we sat in the music room and drank hot chocolate. I didn’t enjoy it, even though hot chocolate with whipped cream was one of my favourites. Father read the newspaper. Occasionally he peeked at me over the top of the page, studied me with interest. I pretended not to notice. Finally, he put down the paper.

“That was painful, today,” he said.

I picked up my mug of hot chocolate.

“Fenrir was probably over in the grove and likely just wanted to have some fun with the odd, long creature. And then the little guy crawled off as if wanting to play, and Fenrir would’ve wanted to join in, so he started jumping around it, touched it with his paw a few times, and then bam! his playmate struck,” he said, so abruptly I started and spilled some hot chocolate.

He fetched me a napkin, sat down, and stared out into space.

“Yes, it’s terrible. First you feel just a little prick, and then it starts to hurt, throb. Poor Fenrir became dizzy and sore, his hind legs started tingling, and eventually the pain spread up his backside and paralysed him. And then he probably got scared and decided to find somewhere he could hide. He didn’t know what was happening. Animals can feel pain but have no clue where it comes from.”

“I don’t want to hear this,” I said, and coughed, the spit stuck in my throat.

I sat there, softly sobbing, dried my tears and noticed my father staring at me with such interest, as if studying some phenomenon he rarely got to witness.

“And then Fenrir crawled under the bushes. He curled up there. Under the branches, where he felt safe. But he wasn’t. He started to shake. And then something knotted up in his body, so that he stiffened. After a while, it became hard to breathe. And all of this could have been avoided,” he said, and moved his chair closer to mine, “yes, the worst part,” he said, “was that if you had been nearby, if you had reached the cat in time, you could have carried Fenrir home and saved his life. But you didn’t. And how could you have? You had no way of knowing what had happened. But just think, if only you’d been there,” he said and picked up the paper and read on. I ran to my bedroom.

After Fenrir was shot, something changed. I knew that my father could have saved him. He could have done so much more. He had shot Fenrir without trying anything else. It was beyond my understanding. But after that, I viewed my father as if from a distance, as someone I could no longer trust.

My mother came out of the house, spotted me, and then looked down, fumbling with her phone. The people on this island, I thought, still remember the time he saved the somewhat retarded twenty-year-old whose heart stopped at the fishyard in Konnevik and no longer had a pulse, but whom my father had managed to bring back to life with a defibrillator. It was luck, but afterwards, he had leaned over the boy, held him with both hands, and hugged him. It wasn’t the kind of thing doctors usually did, but he was so moved he couldn’t speak. How could I tell the people who had witnessed that about our cat? I told my mother what had happened. She avoided my gaze, assured me that he had known what he was doing. Nothing I said helped.

I shouted. She put down her phone.

“Where did you go?” she said.

“I got tired of waiting,” I said.

We climbed over the fence below the crag and followed the path up the hill. The cairn belonged to Kaupang, but was used by Sunde for their grazing goats. They stood and munched to our left and right. I imagined what it would be like with no animals on the island. Skatøy without sheep, goats, cows and bulls, the hens that pottered around and clucked, the occasional crowing cock, was not Skatøy.

We reached the cairn. Mum collapsed on the bench next to it, gasped for air, spat white.

“That was nice,” she panted.

I stared at the sea, towards the mainland and southwards, and then turned to the rest of the island. The roads wound across fields and pastures, past small white and green and red houses, around two big farms with white-painted farmhouses. The green knolls, the hills and cambers and crags, the slanted slopes up towards Heia, the round tops that lay there and enticed hikers to a view where you could see by the horizon that the Earth was round.

Mother coughed and pressed her fist to her chest.

“Something’s irritated my lungs,” she said.

“I can drive you to the doctor,” I said.

“No, no. It’ll pass. How are you? Are you sleeping?” she coughed.

“Naturally I sleep,” I said.

“You’ve got to sleep. But let’s just sit,” she said.

A couple of seagulls flew by right in front of us. I liked gulls. They weren’t cute. They weren’t friendly. They were just how nature had created them; always on the hunt for more food, not crafty and unobtrusive but shrieking, as if fighting for their lives.

Mum sat and looked over Skatøy. I asked if she had gotten ahold of Rolv Radøynes.

“We have an appointment tomorrow. He promised to bring suggestions for a gravestone. The hymns need to be chosen. And then there’s the speeches and the solos. We need to agree on all the proceedings. What are we going to sing when we lower him into the grave? Who’s going to carry him? What should we write on the wreaths? And someone should play, or sing. Do you think you could play something?” she said, giving me an uneasy look.

“I’ve been considering *St. James Infirmary*,” I said.

“I don’t think *St. James Infirmary* is very suitable. I think we should have *A Sky Full of Stars*,” she said.

“*A Sky Full of Stars*?*”* I exclaimed.

“Lillebjørn Nilsen is so full of hope,” she said, hiccupped, and started to cry.

“I’ve no doubt. But I’m the one who’ll be playing it,” I said.

She wiped her tears and blew her nose, but couldn’t stop.

“I found a note in his room. I was going to give it to you later, but I can’t wait,” she said, and passed me a ruled sheet of paper ripped out of a ring binder.

I read.

*Dear Johannes,*

*I know it is cowardly to give up. But cowardice is the least of my worries now. There is much I should have done to make right what happened. But I’m not writing this to make my excuses. I’m writing to tell you that you mustn’t believe that I’m taking the way out because of you. What you did was vulgar, but I’m not so weak that I’ve let it affect me. I’m ending it here in the knowledge that at least I wasn’t a self-obsessed blowhard whose life revolved around making cheap jokes and banal audience engagement.*

*Your father, Johannes*

I put the sheet on the bench, looked up, and saw a sea eagle circling above us. It sailed so high up that I couldn’t make out its white tail feathers. I read the letter one more time.

“I refuse to take the blame for this,” I said.

“I don’t want you to take anything,” Mum hiccupped.

“I sent him emails. You can read them,” I said.

“Does it matter? He wrote to you. *You*, at least, got a letter,” she snarled, two angry streaks on her cheeks.

I held up the letter.

“You said I’ve been unforgiving. What do you call this?” I said, then crumpled it.

Mum stood up from the bench, walked past the cairn, and followed the path back down towards the houses. I uncrumpled the paper and stared at his neat handwriting, without reading the words.

The bad weather rose out at sea, with black and grey cloud boulders that rumbled. Soon, the bad weather would whip in over the Trossa Isles and Mistra, throw the sea in pitches, and produce white breaks that crossed the fairway. Even I, who never had any weather change sickness, felt it closing around my skull. My thoughts fragmented in the still air. Mum clasped her neck and sighed, shrugged off her rain jacket, pushed up the sleeves on her jumper, and began sifting through the junk that Father had thrown out in the yard. She grabbed a shower hose and tried to untangle it from a washing machine cable. She pulled and tugged and pried, and then finally let out a curse I hadn’t heard in years. “You cunt,” she snapped and threw down both cable and hose.

“You made a fool of us in front of half the country. I can’t make sense of it. What possesses an intelligent man to do such a thing? What did we ever do to you?” she said, coming over to stand before me. I didn’t move.

“It wasn’t you. And I don’t think I crossed any lines. That time he locked me in the cellar because I skipped school, did I ever use that?” I said.

“He locked you in the cellar?” she asked, her voice weak.

“And that time he locked me in the cupboard under the stairs and left me sitting there for four hours. You remember that,” I said.

“I don’t. You’re telling me this now?”

I stayed standing. So did she.

“What about all the times I tagged along on home visits? I remember standing in a ditch, slapping a drug addict who was about to pass out while father injected Naloxone. I had just turned nine. And then that time I was told I was coming along to amputate the leg of that concrete mason. What was he thinking? And what do you think that was like for me? I’m not complaining, I loved it, even when I was scared out my wits, I couldn’t believe I was so lucky as to have a father who would bring me along to so many things. It was years later that I realised how it had begun to eat at me.”