Echoes of the City II

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The pigs don’t appear to be too concerned. They are going to die very soon. They just don’t know they are. But how can Jesper Kristoffersen know? Perhaps the pigs are perfectly aware that they are going to die and there is no escape. So they don’t try to make a run for it. In fact the pigs have given up. Or it might be that they have a certain style, in other words they are acting nonchalant. That makes it even worse. One after the other they go into the pen, where there is a man in a blue coat waiting for them. He places an electric stunner on the pig’s neck. The anaesthetic, which is death’s red carpet, works at once. The pig has barely dropped to its knees before it is hoisted up by a chain attached to its rear left foot and transported via rails in the ceiling, the paternoster carousel system itself, past another man who cuts the main artery with a shiny knife as it passes. Jesper is dazzled by all the luminous red blood spurting out in a jet that never lands. He can’t look any more. Yet he can’t stop himself. Now the pig is sucked into a rotating bristle remover, where it swirls around between the cylinders in a wild ballet. The pig is no longer a pig. It doesn’t resemble a pig. Then the final shave awaits, for who wants to have such hair in their food, then another man stands at the ready with a bigger knife to open the steaming carcass. He makes an incision in the stomach, it is as easy as pulling down a compliant zip, spills out the intestines as quickly as others might clean their nails and hangs what will be eaten on the numbered hooks rumbling slowly down to an elderly gentleman with round glasses and tweezers. It is impossible to bypass him. He is the Ministry of Agriculture’s very own priest. His job is to dissect, approve and stamp. Only then can these delicacies, the pig’s vital organs, be sent on to the meat hall where the packers soon load the goods onto lorries so that the drivers can finally deliver them to the town’s many butcher shops, where customers can buy chops and ham, not only for Sunday lunch but perhaps for a very ordinary Wednesday lunch, too. These are good times. There is meat. The apprentice Jostein Melsom takes care of what is left over. He lugs intestines and bones into the huge basins, hoses down the walls and scrubs the floors. Then he turns and waves through the steam. Jesper can’t take any more. He makes for the nearest door and directly behind Oslo Slaughterhouse he sinks to his knees and vomits. He vomits over his shoes and briefcase. He vomits over his hands and his new wrist-watch, which says half past one. He vomits over the playing of the glockenspiel in the City Hall tower. He drowns the deep tones in gastric juices, mucus and snot. Then he is as empty as an umbrella, rolls around and lies on his back. The sky is in motion even if in all its blue it doesn’t move. There are some flashes of light on the black water at the mouth of the Akerselva, or wherever it is now, perhaps it is the knives being sharpened again. Jesper has no idea. He is on the wrong side of town, as far away from Fagerborg as it is possible to be. It is August, soon it will be September. Autumn is already a nip in the air over the fjord. Jostein appears above him. He has five minutes, lights a fag and grins.

‘Wimp.’

‘Shuddup!’

‘What?’

‘The pigs,’ Jesper says.

‘What about them?’

‘They moo.’

Jostein flicks his fringe.

‘Cows moo.’

‘Cows?’

‘Or bulls.’

‘I’m never going to eat meat again.’

‘Then you’ll starve.’

‘Not if you eat cake instead.’

‘Cake? Have you got any cake?’

‘I should never have come here.’

‘What did you say?’

‘Nothing.’

‘Why did you come then?’

Jesper gets up, wipes the briefcase with his forearm and takes the fag out of Jostein’s mouth.

‘Your hearing gets even worse when you smoke.’

He takes a last deep drag, spits out the butt and has to walk in a circle.

‘Why did you come then?’ Jostein persists.

Jesper manages to focus his eyes again.

‘To invite you to a birthday party. If you wash your hands first.’

‘It’s not your birthday.’

‘It’s my mum’s.’

‘How old is she?’

‘You don’t ask ladies.’

‘I’m asking you, aren’t I.’

‘And then I’ll have to ask my mum.’

‘Don’t you know?’

‘Half past five.’

Jostein tosses his head back and laughs.

‘Are you completely deaf or what?’

‘Forty.’

Then that sound is there again. It is already two o’clock. Wasn’t it half past one a minute ago? Jesper is desperate. He is in a hurry. He will soon be fifteen and is pressed for time. It shouldn’t be like this. You should have lots of time when you are fifteen in August. You should have your whole life in front of you. You should have the rest of the day and the day after. You should at least have the next moment in front of you. But what makes him most desperate is that no matter where you are in this town sooner or later you end up in the acoustic shadow of the City Hall tower. It is inescapable. It is the same whether you stand at the top of Blåsen Hill, dig a hole in the Royal Gardens, sleep on Huk beach, swim under the Bridge of Sighs or are driven in an open carriage, you cannot escape. The two friends, Jesper and Jostein, as different as two peas in a pod, go their own ways, except that Jostein has to go back to the pigs, or rather the pig detritus, while Jesper runs away with his briefcase under his arm, like a dysfunctional messenger-boy on a bike missing both wheels. He crosses Youngstorget, where farmers vie to shout the lowest price loudest and women wearing headscarves haggle over and pick at all the vegetables that make the stalls groan and fill the square with a soft, yellow light redolent of rain and earth. There are pumpkins, dill, tomatoes, cabbages and cucumbers, they are the fruits of the summer, what was left over after the sun went down, but unlike with the pig, which is a closed chapter, the summer rises from the dead. With the summer there is always more to be reaped. Yes, Jesper is going to stop eating meat and join the turnip club who live off air-burgers and potato peelings. Then he can become even thinner and perhaps get a tan too. He doesn’t need to. Being pale is fine so long as he is thin, because he definitely doesn’t want to be fat and pale. *Blackboard Jungle* is on at the Centrum cinema. Three girls are studying the pictures of Glenn Ford in the glass display case outside and don’t notice Jesper, who certainly notices them. They have tight skirts, slender necks and are weak at the knees. Up in Grensen, two police officers lift a tramp into a Black Maria. Jesper stops for a moment. There is something familiar about him, about the unkempt, decrepit man. Jesper has seen him before. But all tramps have fought in the same war and so they look like each other. Now he knows. He is the man who was walking in the water at Vestkanttorget some time ago. Jesper sprints the last bit down to Karl Johans gate, which is sometimes called *Strøket* or *Stripa*, depending on whether you live in the West End or east of the Akerselva. Today, a Thursday, it is just Karl Johan. He goes into Musikkforlaget, squeezes past the seething mass of kids sharing two headphones out of which *Rock around the Clock* can be heard all the way to Færder Lighthouse, finds the classical section and this is actually what he had come to town for:

‘Satie.’

The assistant, who looks like a grieving dog with over-sized ears, leans across the counter and repeats:

‘Satie? Erik Satie?’

‘Yes.’

‘What do you want? To listen, buy or play?’

‘Play.’

‘Let me guess. Gymnopédies?’

Jesper nods.

‘One, two and three.’

‘Young man, now you just wait here and do not mix with the hoi polloi.

The assistant disappears for a while. Jesper waits. He has no intention of mixing with anyone and especially not with this rabble. He turns his back on them. But unfortunately he cannot avoid hearing the driving rhythm in the floor. This is the beaten track. It is tempting and superficial. It is dance music. It is ephemeral. But there is something else that strikes Jesper. It is sixteen minutes past two and he has missed the intermezzo at the City Hall. Is this where salvation is, at Musikkforlaget? Is this where silence, or to be more precise an absence of chiming, is to be found? The assistant returns, places the music on the counter and gently blows the dust off the sheets. They are a thing of beauty and fragile: 1. *Lent et douloureux*. D *major/D minor*. 2. *Lent et triste*. *C Major*. 3. *Lent et grave. A minor*. The dust settles again, somewhere else. The dust doesn’t disappear. Jesper takes the money from one of his back pockets: two notes and a coin. It is the right amount. The assistant carefully rolls up the sheets of music and wraps an elastic band around them. Jesper drops them into his briefcase, which doesn’t become noticeably heavier. He can feel no difference. Music weighs nothing.

‘Thank you.’

The sales assistant extends a hand.

‘Åge. It’s me who should thank you.’

Jesper shakes the hand, which is dry and flaky.

‘Jesper,’ Jesper says.

‘You’re Norway’s hope for the future, Jesper.’

Then Jesper has to go back past the gang, who can’t stand still and are deafer than Jostein. In Karl Johans gate patches of dull light descend over the pavement. Ibsen and Bjørnson guard the doors to the National Theatre, one with his coat apart, the other as withdrawn as an embittered tortoise. Over by Pernille, the open-air restaurant, it will soon be the last round for this year. When the first leaf falls, the beer taps are turned off and the parasols are folded up and preserved in the giant herbarium. However, the waitresses are still serving trays of foaming beer in tall glasses between the tables, where young men in tweed jackets are always waiting for someone. Outside Myhres Tobakk, Jesper collides with a man who is more interested in opening his blue packet of cigarettes than looking where he is going. The man immediately starts mouthing off, but fortunately changes gear before hitting the accelerator.

‘Jesper?’

Jesper nods.

‘Jesper Kristoffersen?’

Jesper nods again. He feels ill at ease, almost embarrassed. This is like being caught red-handed. The man lights a short cigarette and the smoke that rises from the chimney is pretty black.

‘I can see you don’t recognise me,’ he says.

‘Morning, Rudjord.’

‘Not bad! How are you doing, Jesper?’

‘Fine.’

‘You haven’t finished school yet, have you?’

‘No. Why?’

‘As you’re roaming around here with a briefcase under your arm, I thought for a moment you’d become an office monkey.’

‘Haven’t got that far yet.’

‘But time doesn’t exactly stand still, does it?’

‘Time tells, Gjensidige excels,’ Jesper says.

Rudjord laughs and the whole of Karl Johan inhales.

‘How’s your mother?’

‘She’s forty today.’

‘Forty? I suppose you’re having a big party then?’

Jesper shrugs.

‘Just us.’

Rudjord drops his cigarette on the pavement and slowly grinds it in with his shoe.

‘Haven’t you got a satchel?’ he asks.

‘Yes.’

‘You’re not skipping school, are you?’

‘Got the last lesson off.’

‘Say hello to your mother. From me and everyone at Dekrek.’

‘OK.’

‘And by the way can you ask her to give me a ring one of these days?’

Jesper doesn’t hear the rest. Instead he runs through Studenterlunden, which Ewald, his father, turned into a spoonerism to suggest what really happened in this park, catches up with the Briskeby tram and jumps off on the bend. Soon there will be no more time. Soon time will be up. Which is all that is waiting for him. Everywhere is waiting. He sets a PB down to Jørgen Moes gate and if he could have slid up the banisters to the second floor he would have done. His satchel, by the way, is under the staircase. He can fetch it on the way out. He takes the stairs in three strides and presses the bell. He rings once again. After a couple of years, at twenty to three, that is, Enzo Zanetti opens the door and is still attired in a dressing gown and you can see the beard growing on his face. He probably shaves with a lawn-mower more often than the City Hall bells ring.

‘Have we got a lesson?’ Enzo asks.

‘Not until Monday.’

‘So why are you here?’

‘I’ve bought Satie.’

‘Go home and practise. And take it easy. The pianist who spends longest on Satie without letting go of the keys wins. Do you understand?’

They are interrupted by a voice from the depths of the flat, there is always a woman calling, she sounds as though she has her mouth full of boiled sweets:

‘Where are you, Tutti?’

Enzo’s eyes begin to wander and he pulls the dressing gown tighter around him. His toenails are bent, almost yellow.

‘It’s my mother’s birthday today,’ Jesper says.

‘Is it? Say happy birthday from me.’

‘If you’d like you can come at half past five.’

‘And one more thing, Jesper. No one calls me Tutti. Absolutely no one. Nor you. Do you understand that too?’

Enzo Zanetti closes the door long before Jesper can say that he has probably understood and even if he hasn’t, he won’t call him Tutti anyway. Nor a drunk. He slides down the banisters instead, both thighs very nearly start smoking and he imagines the fire engines in Briskeby racing out with ladders, hose pipes and parachutes. Then he slings his satchel over his shoulder and finally he hotfoots it to Majorstua school. She is standing at the gates. The satchel on her back is bigger than his; it is as big as a house. Her hair is short and dark, but the long summer, the longest in living memory, has lent it a new glow. Some of the light has stayed with her. And this light, or its reflection, is held by a slide on the right-hand side, so that it doesn’t fall into her eyes. She is wearing grey shoes, green stockings and a blue dress that reaches down to her knees. Jesper instantly knows what he should have bought his mother: the dress she tried on at Steen & Strøm. But perhaps it won’t fit any more. Perhaps her taste has changed, as so much has happened since then, it is a hundred years ago, at least. Or do you like the same things for the rest of your life? Will Jesper wake up one morning and not like Satie? It is a staggering thought. It is a chasm. It is akin to death. Otherwise the schoolyard is deserted. Only a pigeon is sitting on the edge of the drinking fountain. He stops in front of Stine, breathless.

‘Have you been waiting long?’

‘Just until you came.’

Jesper laughs and takes her hand. But as they are about to go man with a crooked back passes the flagpole. He resembles a lonely crab at the bottom of an empty pool. It is Løkke, his old form teacher, who rode into the sunset and only half came back. Now Løkke sets the table in the school canteen every morning, serves the Oslo breakfast to his pupils and gives private lovesickness lessons. Too late. He has seen them, unfortunately.

‘Well I never,’ Løkke says.

Jesper thinks they have got rid of him, but Løkke always has more to say.

‘Which school are you at?’ he asks.

‘Fagerborg.’

‘The food’s not quite as good there, is it?’

‘Packed lunches.’

Løkke stands there rapt in thought and the chances of slipping away are minimal. He seems to be blocking the way with all his anxiety and wisdom. He is a wall. He would have been a boon to a handball team. He looks at Jesper again.

‘Packed lunches? Ones you make yourself?’

‘Yes. Or the old folks do it.’

‘Old folks?’

‘Mum.’

‘What sandwiches do you make?’

‘Cheese. And caviar, maybe.’

‘And cod-liver oil?’

‘Not on the sarnies.’

‘Sarnies?’

‘The sandwiches.’

‘No, of course not. You take the cod-liver oil separately. In a spoon.’

‘I take it before I leave.’

‘It’s also perfectly possible to take it in milk.’

‘Milk and cod-liver oil?’

‘Is that your girlfriend?’

‘Who?’

‘The girl whose hand you’re holding.’

‘That’s my sis.’

‘Who?’

‘My little sister.’

Jesper lets go of Stine’s hand, which she holds over her mouth to stifle her laughter. The pigeon takes off from the fountain. Its shadow flits in all directions.

‘Well I never,’ Løkke repeats.

This time they are rid of him.

On the way home they drop into Samson’s in Majorstua. Jesper has ordered a cake. There isn’t room for forty candles on it, but he couldn’t afford a bigger one. In fact, it is doubtful whether forty candles would have been a good idea anyway. By the time you light the last one the first one would probably have gone out. Jesper pays using the money from his other back pocket. This is the right amount, too. Then he carries the cake along Kirkeveien, on the left-hand side, while Stine keeps a lookout to make sure as few people as possible see them. Rumours travel fast in Fagerborg and this is supposed to be a surprise. But is it possible to carry a cream sponge cake along Kirkeveien without attracting attention? And it isn’t a very good idea to run while holding a cake. If you fall on your face, you will definitely be noticed, but once on the ground it won’t make any difference anyway because the cake will be ruined. The coast is clear. Seeing Stine ahead of him, Jesper has an odd thought: one day she will overtake him. She started at school six months early. He started a whole year late. Will she end up looking after him? That is a long way off, at least as many years as there are between them, but everything that is a long way off comes closer anyway. Now the coast isn’t clear. Dr Lund comes round the corner by Ole Vigs gate and there is no escaping him, either.

‘Strange man,’ Dr Lund says.

Jesper doesn’t respond. Nor is he sure if this is a question. In which case Dr Lund is equally strange. Dr Lund turns to Stine instead:

‘And who’s going to eat this wonderful cake?’

‘Jesper.’

‘Is it his birthday?’

‘Mum’s.’

‘Say hello from me and many happy returns.’

‘She doesn’t want a birthday.’

Dr Lund turns back to Jesper.

‘A piece of that cake means two and a half circuits of Frogner Stadium. How far will you have to run if you eat two pieces?’

‘Five circuits.’

‘And five circuits is two thousand metres. We may as well do two and a half more and that’s three thousand. Will you join me?’

Jesper shrugs.

‘I’m not hungry,’ he says.

‘Well, you look a bit pale and dejected to me.’

Dr Lund places a hand on Jesper’s forehead and works overtime, but can’t feel a temperature, only expectation and pressure of time. So finally they are rid of him, too. They walk the last bit, past Marienlyst, and reach the safety of the backyard. It is best to use the kitchen stairs when something has to be kept secret, even though no one can keep a secret in Fagerborg, especially those who have one. Jesper planned this, several weeks in advance. But now he changes his mind. Where is his mother usually? In the kitchen. They can’t just burst in. So they go through the cellar and take the main staircase. A new plan: Stine rings the bell while Jesper waits with the cake on the ground floor. The coast is clear again. Mum isn’t at home. Stine has the key around her neck and has to stands on tiptoe to open the door. Mum? They shout her name to be on the safe side. She doesn’t answer. They hurry into the kitchen and put the cake in the refrigerator. Then they settle down to wait. Mum doesn’t appear in the first half-hour. Nor in the second. They set the table in the dining room. That is where they find the note: *Hi. Had to go to a Red Cross meeting. Could be late. Heat up the leftovers from yesterday. Ring 22 18 76 if there’s a problem. Did you remember to buy the sheet music, Jesper? Love, mum*. At half past five the doorbell rings. Jesper opens the door. It is Jostein. He has cleaned himself up. At any rate he doesn’t stink of pigs. He stinks of Old Spice. What is more he has put on a suit that is eight sizes too big. They go into the dining room and sit down. Jostein puts his present on the table, a round baton-shape in grey paper, probably salami, casts a glance at Stine, immediately looks away and blushes. Actually, blushing suits Jostein. Then his pimples aren’t so obvious.

‘Isn’t your mum even at home?’ he asks.

‘She’ll be here soon,’ Jesper says.

‘Why’s she having a party then?’

Stine holds a hand over her mouth, as she is wont, and tries to stop herself laughing, but she snorts between her fingers. Jostein blushes even more. Jesper sends his little sister a stern glare. There is only one person who can laugh at Jostein, and that is Jesper.

‘Did you fall in the bristle remover or what?’

‘One of the pigs escaped.’

‘Escaped?’

Jostein looks down:

‘Reckon she didn’t want to die.’

‘She?’

‘Sow.’

‘Do they know they’re going to die?’

‘How should I know?’

‘Did you find it?’

Jostein looks up.

‘Aren’t we having any cake?’

At six Enzo Zanetti turns up as well. He always comes late. He calls it his Italian half an hour. At least he has cut the lawn on his face and clipped the hedge. In several places on his mug he has stuck bits of paper he has torn from a newspaper, probably *Aftenposten*. You can almost read the headlines from the last three years on his jaw. He is a news agency in person. James Dean is dead. Thomas Mann is dead. Albert Einstein is also dead. Enzo’s hands are shaking again. He is shaking so much he will soon be able to play piano four hands on his own. In a low voice he asks:

‘Is your mother in the kitchen?’

‘She’ll be here soon.’

Jesper accompanies Enzo into the sitting room. He puts a bottle on the table and lays a flower beside it. He has probably picked the flower on the way, perhaps in Valkyrien, where there are wild tulips growing. It is the first time he has been here in fact. He says hello to the rest of the company. Stine curtseys as if this were a dancing school. Jostein, who hasn’t forgotten that he called Enzo Zanetti a drunk and pinched his lighter, forgets to bow and asks:

‘Guess what the difference is between Jesper and me.’

Enzo retreats. Not only does the boy stink like a piece of old liquorice, he is brazen as well.

‘Jesper plays the piano. You don’t.’

‘What?’

‘You don’t play the piano. Jesper does.’

Jostein tosses his head back and laughs.

‘I earn money and Jesper doesn’t!’

Enzo Zanetti sits down on the piano stool and fingers a key, a C which quivers through the room, untrue. This is his way of saying a note is untrue, not false. Then he heaves a deep sigh and looks at Stine again.

‘Would you be so kind as to fetch me a glass of water?’

Jostein is brazen again.

‘If he’s allowed to drink, we can eat the cake.’

The telephone rings. Jesper gets up and puts a finger to his lips. Then he goes into the sitting room and lifts the receiver from the cradle.

‘This is the Kristoffersen household, hello.’

But it isn’t his mother. It is fru Hall, the former widow, fru Vik. She gasps at the other end, which is in Nordraaks gate.

‘Jesper?’

‘That’s me.’

‘My goodness. Has your voice changed already?’

‘Haven’t been listening.’

‘I hardly recognised you.’

‘It’s still me.’

‘Yes, now I can hear it is. Suddenly I thought it was …, no, I’m going all doolally.’

‘Who did you think it was?’

‘No, no, forget it. Tell me what you’re up to, Jesper. It’s been such a long time.’

‘Twiddling my thumbs.’

‘Sorry? Twiddling your thumbs? But you still play the piano, don’t you?’

‘I’m starting on Satie now.’

‘Promise me you’ll let me hear you play one day. Will you promise me that?’

‘If it’s worth hearing, yes.’

‘I’m sure it will be. Can I talk to the birthday girl?’

‘She’s not at home.’

‘Isn’t she? On her birthday?’

‘She’s at a Red Cross meeting.’

‘My word.’

‘Yes.’

‘I thought there was something as I hadn’t been invited.’

‘I don’t think she likes turning forty.’

‘You can console her with the thought that it gets worse with age.’

‘It must be terrible for you then.’

Fru Hall, former fru Vik, laughs, but her laugh sounds rusty and strained, it is altogether a harsh laugh. Then she lowers her voice:

‘You’re taking care of my flat, aren’t you, Jesper?’

‘Sort of.’

‘Could you just pop by. And make sure everything’s alright. When you have the time. Maj has a key to the kitchen door.’

‘OK. Now I think I have to go.’

The harsh laughter sounds different now and is more like small sobs, or perhaps she has something stuck in her throat.

‘It was so nice to talk to you, Jesper. Give Stine my love. Is she well?’

‘She started school in the autumn.’

‘Golly. At school already? I’m sure she’s good, isn’t she?’

‘Better than me.’

From the dining room comes the sound of a bottle being opened.

‘Are you having a party anyway?’ Fru Vik asks.

‘We’re just repairing.’

Jesper hangs up and joins the others. Enzo Zanetti is drinking from the screw-top. There is no room for more than a sip at a time. The matt spirit smells strong and is reminiscent of rotten apples. The sun, sinking between the blocks of flats on the other side of Kirkeveien, gathers itself for a moment into a tight ball and the last daylight hits the bottle and fills the dining room with a restless, green shadow.

‘Wasn’t that mum?’ Stine asks.

Jesper shakes his head. Jostein, who appears peeved and sullen, presumably because of the cake, is about to say something, probably regarding this much-rumoured cake. The telephone rings again. This time Stine goes to answer it, but Jesper won’t let her. There has to be some order. When Maj isn’t at home, Jesper is next in line. Stine can answer the telephone if he is out, unavailable or has moved out for good. It is mum. Jesper can hear that at once and he puts a finger to his lips. Stine does the same and turns to the room, where eventually there is silence.

‘It’s just me,’ mum says.

‘Oh, is anything wrong?’

‘No, no. Why should there be?’

‘I don’t know.’

‘I just wanted to say I might be a bit late home.’

‘Late?’

‘So you don’t need to wait up for me.’

‘Right.’

‘That was all.’

Jesper switches hands and an awkward thought strikes him: he is sad about everything he is looking forward to.

‘That was all,’ Maj repeats.

Worried, she hangs up, worried because Jesper always seems worried, perhaps it is her that worries him. Then she turns to the other women waiting in the hallway. The meeting is over. She has been given a present by the board, a vase from Glasmagasinet. It is much too nice. Anyway, she didn’t want anything. The chairman, fru Lund, performed the ceremony. And as if that wasn’t enough. Now they are going to Dagligstuen in the swish Hotel Continental. Maj doesn’t feel like going. She doesn’t like surprises. But she has no choice. The secretary, Else Larsen, has already booked a table. On their way down the steps they meet Dr Lund. He seems to be in a sombre mood, makes way for the ladies and prefers to pass in silence. However, the Board of the Fagerborg Department of the Norwegian Red Cross, Oslo District, is excited and does not let him off the hook so lightly. Fru Lund laughs.

‘I can see my husband’s run too fast today.’

Dr Lund can’t let that remark go.

‘That, I’m afraid to say, is what I haven’t done.’

The ladies behave like schoolgirls and want to comfort him:

‘Did you lose?’ the secretary, Else Larsen, wants to know.

Dr Lund takes two more steps and cannot quite make up his mind whether he should be in a better or even worse mood.

‘Losing is a term that men of my age have stopped using. But I was beaten.’

‘By whom, may I ask?’

This time it is the deputy chairman, fru Vanda Aasland, who asks. Dr Lund doesn’t take this well.

‘By Putte Dedekam. The little retard. In our heyday he was barely on the podium. And he’s had two coronaries since then. What can you say?’

Fru Lund, his wife, sighs aloud, but the sigh hides laughter and condescension, the way you console a dejected child.

‘That you’re going to run more than ever now.’

The ladies hurry on, but Dr Lund puts out a hand and stops Maj.

‘Happy birthday,’ he says.

‘Thank you.’

‘Forty. A big day.’

‘I’d prefer not to be celebrating it.’

‘But apparently that’s not what everyone else wants.’

‘No, they’ve already booked a table, so I can’t exactly say no.’

‘I was thinking more about Jesper and Stine.’

Maj looks up:

‘What about them?’

‘Didn’t you know?’

‘What? What don’t I know?’

Dr Lund shrugs, but knows it is in vain. The diagnosis is already out:

‘They’ve bought you a birthday cake,’ he mumbles.