WALKING MAN

Novel by Niels Fredrik Dahl

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If I still long for Europe’s waters, it’s only for

One cold black puddle where a child crouches

Sadly at its brink and releases a boat,

Fragile as a May butterfly, into the fragrant dusk.

It’s early morning, I’m sitting on the veranda that looks out over the park and the long, narrow street that gleams like a river at dawn. I’m looking out for my father. He’s been dead fourteen years now, and still I look for him. I hope that he’ll come walking up the deserted street towards me in the changing light, that he’ll grow bigger and bigger, and become clearer and clearer, as he approaches.

 When he was alive, the opposite was true. He’d often pass by where we lived. He’d walk up in his stiff, gliding gait, his eyes full of dreams and reticence, but he never came in unless he was invited, just stopped outside and looked for us behind the shiny glass panes, or bumped into us if we were on our way back from the shop or walking the dog. But I never looked for him, not like I do now.

Here on the veranda, this morning, I have Arvo Pärt’s music playing in my ears. One of his pieces with no chronology, so it’s able to hold my dead father, who’s also going nowhere, neither coming nor going.

 It’s no more than a few notes on the piano and a slow, drawn-out violin, a simple phrase that intensifies, without really changing. It’s as though Pärt composes sideways, as though the music doesn’t move forwards, but expands in breadth, layer upon layer, until finally, there is room for everything that is and everything that was.

That is how I would like to write about my father.

He used to walk the streets where we lived, streets where he knew no one, he walked everywhere, but where did he come from and where was he going? I don’t know if he knew the answer himself, but perhaps he knew that the very movement, the continuous shifting, was important to him. Perhaps he felt it was vital.

 Sometimes he stopped and stood for a while, always on the edge, he looked around, drew breath, then walked on. He kept a distance from other people’s lives. Once upon a time, when he was a child, it was possibly a survival strategy, but then perhaps became a petrification.

 When he spoke, it was the same. He said whatever he wanted to say out into the room, turned away from whoever he was talking to. There was no intention of starting a conversation. He often asked questions, but never waited for the answer.

I can’t grasp this longing, it doesn’t have a head, it doesn’t have a tail, it barely has legs to stand on, but it won’t leave me be. It wakes me at night and keeps a hold of me through the day, precisely because it’s so unarticulate, so formless and ungraspable. He’s with me and he’s not with me. Just like when he was alive.

THE STORY, IN BRIEF

It’s summer and my father has come back from the mountains for a few days, the gardens in the city are empty and overgrown. My mother, G, has stayed behind in the mountains with a friend, in the timber-frame cabin on the tree line, and the terraced house on the outskirts of Oslo always feels new and unfamiliar to him when G’s not there, when they‘re not there together. Maybe not new, as such, but familiar and unfamiliar at the same time, as though he were dreaming. He walks up the shiny, polished stairs as he would in a dream, heavy, slow, on guard Upstairs, he looks into the bedroom, the green bed, the flowery wallpaper, he wonders if it’s true, what he’s feeling, that he doesn’t belong here without her.

 He’s felt like that in other flats, when he was a boy and lived in them alone with his mother. That he was there, because she was there, and that he never completely moved in.

He has come down from the mountains to visit his mother. The nursing home is only ten minutes walk from the house, and for the rest of the year, he visits her every single day. He is all she has.

 A long, long time ago, it was the other way round, she was all he had, and she sent him away. She’ll never do that again. Not as long as she lives.

 That morning in July 1986, this day, he’s left the terraced house on the edge of the forest and is on his way to see his mother. The weather is warm and dry. There are very few cars around, and very few people. Father will soon turn sixty-five, he’s the same age that I am now, and has twenty-two more years to live, he’s wearing light-coloured trousers and a pale blue, short-sleeved shirt as he walks beneath the green trees, laden with leaves, he walks past untended gardens, where withered peony petals lay on dark green lawns like the white flashes behind his eyelids, he hears children talking down by the railway line, it’s so quiet that even though he can’t make out the words, he hears their voices with remarkable clarity, like bells ringing in the deep summer. He might even be humming to himself, Fritiof Andersson’s parade march or the Red Army’s Aviator’s March, humming and whistling through the empty streets on his way to the nursing home as the sun bakes his neck and makes his shadow short and angular.

‘Is it you?’ she says, with joy in her voice. She’s sitting in the armchair by the window. A game of Patience is laid out on the low, round table. He has a bag of raisin buns with him to go with the coffee, which he holds up so she can see. ‘Are you cold, Mother?’ he asks. She shakes her head and points to the blanket she has lying on her knees. He goes over to her, bends down and kisses her cheek. Then he opens the veranda door. ‘Just a short shock of air,’ he says, ‘it’s the middle of summer, after all.’ The room is small and rectangular, a bed, a bedside table, an armchair, a bookshelf, a small corner kitchen. On the wall, the big portrait that HS painted of her, which was taken to Egypt and back, on top of the bookshelf, a bust of Nefertiti, and on the bedside table, a photograph of my father that the Judge took in the lush, Mimosa-scented garden in Alexandria, the summer he turned thirteen.

‘Is there anything you need, Mother?’ ‘No,’ she says. ‘I don’t need anything.’ He pours some coffee into the porcelain cup and puts two sugar lumps on the saucer. He arranges the three buns on a plate. She dips the first sugar lump in her coffee then pops it in her mouth and crunches on the sugar. ‘Actually,’ she says, and looks away as she always does when she’s going to ask him for something, ‘could you perhaps put a coat hook up by the door so I have somewhere to hang my raincoat? My other clothes get wet, you see, if I hang it back in the wardrobe.’ He’s about to say that he’s probably got a coat hook at home, but she beats him to it. ‘You’re bound to have a hook at home, don’t you think?’ she says.

He’s visited her at the nursing home every day since I accompanied her there five years before. He only stays a short while, but as long as he’s not in the mountains he’ll come, she knows that. They have a cup of coffee and chat about the weather and this and that. There’s a lot they don’t talk about. There’s a lot they’ve never talked about. Neither of them have any intention of starting now, and neither of them touch the buns.

When he gets home, he packs a small rucksack, and eats a couple of slices of bread. Then he walks with determined step to the tram stop by the shop. At Nationaltheatret, he changes to the Holmenkollen line.

 He gets off at Lillevann, follows the tram tracks until he turns off onto a narrow path that runs along the lake for a while, before following the stream and boggy ground up towards Voksenkollen, to a cluster of birch trees where the stream swings in behind a hill.

He puts his rucksack down at the foot of the hill, he knows there’s a log cabin up there, he had to hide there once, he can smell the new tar on the timber walls, he hears hammering in the distance in the valley below, a tram screeching its way down towards the city, the babbling of the stream, he’s mindful of the insects, the wild flowers, moss, bracken, the green and the warmth, the summer is so heavy that it can’t be bothered to move, but lies on its stomach as though in a stupor, too luxuriant, too much of all that is good. All the sounds in the silence, the ants, the birds, dragon flies and butterflies.

 He pours himself a cup of sweet tea from the thermos, and cup in hand, looks for suitable pieces of wood among the birch trees. He has a small saw in his rucksack and takes three different pieces with him back to the empty terraced house.

He fries a large steak later on in the afternoon and has whisky and water with his food. Then he sits down on the veranda that faces the fir trees and starts to work on the piece of wood he has most belief in, rubs it down with sandpaper, first coarse and then fine. He gets the hand drill out of the shed and carefully makes a hole for a screw at the top. He puts the whole thing in a cut-off plastic bottle that he’s filled with wood oil. He stands on the veranda for a while and listens, a starling is going wild in one of the pine trees, there’s not a sound it can’t make.

The next morning, he wipes and dries the hook as well as he can and wraps it in newspaper, before going to the shop to buy raisin buns. He shares the lift up with one of the nurses. She nods at the bag.

 ‘Raisin buns?’ she asks.

 Father nods.

 ‘That’ll make Ellen happy,’ she says. ‘She loves a raisin bun.’

 She’s sitting in the armchair by the window, with a blanket over her feet. He puts down the bag of buns and the hook wrapped in newspaper, goes over to her and kisses her on the cheek, before reaching across to open the veranda door. Then gives her the package. She smiles and unwraps the newspaper.

 ‘What’s this?’ she asks.

 ‘You’re holding it upside down,’ Father says. ‘The screw goes at the top.’

 ‘Oh, I see,’ she says.

 ‘It’s a coat hook,’ Father says.

 ‘Oh yes, I can see that now,’ she says.

 ‘Somewhere to hang your wet raincoat,’ Father says. ‘I’ll put it up for you.’

 She nods.

 ‘Did you make it yourself?’

 ‘Yes.’

 ‘It’s very lovely,’ she says.

 ‘Thank you,’ Father says.

I knew Father as a body, as warmth, as breath, I knew his movements and sounds, his laughter and voice. When I was a child, he was a given, an extension of the life I was trying to live. To the point I couldn’t imagine that he existed without me.

Who he was then, without me, I have no idea. I sit here with his “posthumous” papers, mainly photographs, some letters and hundreds of old postcards. And his drawings. Father drew all his life, and there’s one motif that he returned to time and again, in all formats and materials: the view from his bedroom in Alexandria.

 He grew up with loneliness, in boarding schools, in hotel rooms, with strangers, in North Africa and Geneva. It was, I think, a glamorous but cold upbringing. Glamorous, only if you weren’t there yourself.

In 1926, when Father was five, he moved with his parents, the Judge and Ellen – my grandparents – to Egypt. My grandfather had been appointed to one of the so-called mixed courts there, and the small family lived first in Mansoura, then after a couple years transferred to Alexandria.

In Alexandria, they move into a large villa out in Ramleh, an area to the north of the centre that’s still under construction, intended for diplomats, millionaires and others who can afford it, or have their accommodation paid for. They employ two servants, Khalid and Ismael.

The Judge’s position seems to involve a great deal of socialising, there are tea parties, cocktail parties, courtesy calls, long dinner parties, charity balls and private parties in neighbouring villas in Ramleh. Ellen has one dress after another sewn by the tailor in rue Adib, Parisian fashion at ridiculously low prices, and the attractive young couple employ a string of nannies, and are rarely at home in the evening.

 Then suddenly, the Judge and Ellen withdraw from social life. The Judge stays in his office at the Palace of Justice until late at night, and Ellen hangs up her dresses up and stays home with Father, my father, her son, who stops attending the English school in Alexandria a few months later. He is to be home-schooled by his mother.

Ellen’s not a bad teacher, she likes to play, and the school day is often an extension of the small, secret games the two have devised together: for example, whenever Father says anything in English, he has to make it rhyme. She’s the first woman in her family to pass the university entrance exam, and she’s gentler than the Judge. Everyone is gentler than the Judge. Ellen has what she herself calls a cheerful disposition.

Father learns so quickly that soon it is he who is teaching her, but they don’t tell the Judge. The Judge is only ever home for a short afternoon rest before he has to go back to work.

Some notions from childhood survive all manner of correction. I believed for a long time that Father lived in a kind of harmony with the Egyptian citizens of Alexandria, that he went in and out of Bedouin tents on the beach in winter, and similarly that the Judge’s large villa in the depths of the overgrown garden was open to all. But of course it wasn’t like that.

When I asked him if his parents ever took him to one of the concerts by the legendary singer Umm Kulthum (she was also called Egypt’s fourth pyramid) that lasted for hours, he shook his head and smiled at my naivety. ‘That would have been unthinkable,’ he said.

It was some time after this that he showed me the green English-Arabic phrase book.

 ‘Read for yourself, you’ll see,’ he said.

Almost every summer they travel to Norway, they drive six thousand kilometres through Europe to spend a few weeks in a mountain hotel by Skeikampen, before heading back to Egypt, another six thousand miles, more hotels. I have a photograph of my grandfather, the Judge, in front of the open-top Essex that transported them there and back. He’s dressed in a thick leather driving coat, the wide collar upturned, a patterned cravat around his neck, he has a bandolier with a map holder over his chest, a newspaper casually stuck under his arm, he has a cigarette in the corner of his mouth. Not everyone could carry off such a pose, but the Judge does. There is something brutal and beautiful about him that makes people do as he says, I imagine, comply with his every whim.

I look through the drawings. The view from Father’s room in Alexandria is sometimes simple, quick lines full of yearning, sketch after sketch, in hard pencil, in soft pencil, in biro, in ink, in felt pen, in oil paint, watercolour, large, small, on canvas, on pieces of paper, in jotters, on the back of an old library archive card, on the back of till roll and receipts, always the same motif.

 The view from Father’s room in Alexandria is clear, beautiful, and bathed in sparkling light. The white walls that frame the open window, with green shutters folded to the side, the end of an iron bedframe, a snatch of a patterned bedspread, and outside: the sky, the sea, a palm tree, again and again. There’s one version painted in oils on canvas, where the light lies blisteringly blue over the sea, over the house, over the garden, and over the waves. He introduces small variations: sometimes a single palm tree, sometimes a boat with full sail out on the water, sometimes a simple brick building down by the shore, a tool shed, perhaps, sometimes flowering bushes at the base of the palm tree. But always the view through the open window, to the light and the sea, so deep and so blue.

I’ve often thought that this view that he tried to recreate as long as he lived is one of the pivots in Father’s life. What he had lost.

Father wakes to the same view every morning, and for a long time he also wakes to the same day, he’s alone with his mother in the big house, they wait for the Judge to come home from the Palace of Justice. Father turns eight, he turns nine, he’s eleven, days, days, days, the view is constant, but gradually the days change outside his bedroom. His mother changes as well. If he goes over to the window, he might see her standing completely still with her eyes closed in the shadow of one of the tall trees in the garden. He has to call her several times before she finally opens her eyes, raises a hand and waves to him.

His mother – Ellen – stops playing, stops smiling, looks away, looks out of the window while her pupil bends over his books, his thin neck over the desk. And then she starts to walk. To begin with, he’s allowed to go with her, but then she wants to walk alone. She can stand up in the middle of a class and leave her young son to walk up and down the newly constructed beach promenade, *le corniche* – or the Cornish, as she and my father like to call it. She walks along the seafront, and Father runs upstairs to his room so he can see her from the window, beyond the tool shed and the palm tree and the wall at the end of the garden, a white figure against the blue. He's scared she’ll disappear one day, that she’ll vanish behind the breakwater up at the north end, and that he’ll never see her again, that he’ll look out of the window and everything will be blue, he doesn’t know what he’ll do without her.

There’s only one photograph from the classroom in the big villa by the sea, in the photograph Father is sitting bent over a classic school desk (where did they get the desk from?), and his mother is sitting on a chair beside him. She’s looking at him with stern, loving and perhaps also proud eyes. It must have been the Judge who took the photograph with his Leica, and perhaps he who instructed them to sit in such a classic teacher/pupil pose. I certainly like to think that the school that Ellen ran for Father was not as strict or school-like as the picture (or the Judge) would have me believe. It’s not just her son that Ellen looks at with pride, but the whole situation, the tiny educational institution they’ve created together, the two of them, mother and son. Father’s back is narrow and bent, he’s wearing shorts and a white shirt under his patterned sweater, it looks like he’s struggling with his schoolwork, but I don’t think he did.

 I guess Father must be around nine in the photograph, in which case Ellen is thirty-six, I think she looks younger. She’s dressed in white and is perhaps ready for the day’s promenade up and down The Cornish. Yes, she’s just waiting for the Judge to be done with all this nonsense and leave, get into the Essex or onto a tram that will take him back to the Palace of Justice, where he can stay as long as he likes. That’s what works best for them all, she’s realised.

Five years later, in summer 1934, when Father is about to turn thirteen, the Judge takes a photograph of him with his Leica, in the overgrown garden, it’s June, and in the photograph, Father is dressed for travelling, on his way. It’s tempting to think that once again the Judge has given instructions, asked him to stand with his face turned towards the camera, while his body appears to be on its way somewhere else, so his face, that open, slightly lost face, is suspended there in the garden in Alexandria, without a body. Later that day, all three of them drive to Norway, as they normally do, first the boat to Venice and then hotel by hotel by hotel up through Europe, and after the usual weeks in the mountains (‘Oh, isn’t this so much better than the desert,’ says the Judge, drawing in the mountain air through his wide nostrils), the Judge and Ellen return to Alexandria, without Father this time.

I don’t know how it happened. What strategy the Judge chose, before he and Ellen left their only child behind and returned to Egypt to live without him in their failing marriage. I don’t know when he was told that he’d be staying behind. But I do know that the Judge would not tolerate protest. And I do know that when my father turned thirteen on 19 August 1934, he’d been left behind alone in Oslo, where he stayed with an uncle for a few days and celebrated his birthday with his cousins.

 Thirteen years old. He might well have grown out of his sailor suit by then. Let’s say that he’s wearing a white shirt and smart trousers, a tie and polished shoes. He has a sharp side parting and his hair has been combed down with water. Sitting at the table with him are two slightly younger boys (in sailor suits) and three little girls, all wearing white lace dresses with their hair brushed back into red ribbons. He doesn’t know any of them well. They drink red and yellow squash, and they may even have sausages. Father gulps down the squash, which he’s otherwise not allowed to drink. ‘No son of mine will have sugary drinks,’ the Judge used to say. But the Judge is not here, the Judge and his beautiful Ellen, who is Father’s mother, have left Father behind. Father drinks glass after glass of red and yellow squash until he’s no longer able to sit still thanks to all the sugar, so he gets up and races around the table, around and around the table. His cousins, the two little boys in sailor suits and three girls in white dresses, laugh, because they think he’s putting on an act, they think he’s doing it to be funny, but then the laughter falters and they stare at him wide-eyed as he runs faster and faster around the table, stopping only for a few seconds to gulp down another glass, the sugar makes him quiver, the sugar makes him snigger, the sugar makes him want to plow open the floor into a pit. He quivers and sniggers and runs faster and faster. A cousin gets up and goes to find a father or mother (not Father’s father, not Father’s mother, they’re on their way to Egypt, after all, they’ve left), let’s say a mother.

 She stops Father, she holds him tight, gentle, full of care, she says: ‘We’re going to have cake now, we’re going to have birthday cake.’ Father lets himself be held, he wriggles a little for show, but he likes to feel her holding him tight, he likes to feel her arms around him and he lays his cheek against her chest and breathes heavily as a maid carries in the cake. Thirteen lit candles.

 Father allows himself to be steered over to his chair again, where the cake is on the table waiting for him. His aunt hunkers down beside him and gives him a kiss on the cheek. Father leans forwards over the table and blows and blows and blows.

 I don’t know what he wishes.

I don’t think he wishes for what happens the moment the thirteenth candle is blown out, and it happens so fast that he doesn’t even have a chance to taste the cake. The maid comes back and whispers something to his aunt. And the aunt has to tell Father that the driver’s come, and, unfortunately, the driver doesn’t have time to wait.

 She accompanies him out into the hall, where Father’s suitcase is standing, packed and ready. Then he gets into the backseat of the big, black car that takes him out of Oslo, away from the birthday party and out along the fjord to Stabekk. ‘It’s my birthday today,’ he says to the driver. The driver is a big, solid man, who’s dressed in a kind of uniform and has a chauffer’s hat with a shiny peak. Father wishes he had a hat like that. ‘Happy birthday,’ the driver says and looks at Father in the rear-view mirror.

 The car drives into a school yard and stops in front of a large, dark building that’s partially hidden on a small hill behind the school. The driver walks around the car and opens the door for Father. ‘I’ve been instructed to take you all the way in,’ he says.

I can picture the thin, fair boy on the step outside the house that afternoon. He’s come straight from his own birthday party with his unknown cousins and the aunt who hugged him, who he leaned into with no effect. He’s wearing a white shirt, suit and tie. He’s holding a small, black suitcase in one hand. He wonders if whoever lives in the house knows it’s his birthday. Maybe they’ll also wish him happy birthday. The sturdy driver with a shiny peaked cap stands beside him. I see the door open and a woman standing in the doorway who says: ‘So this is the boy?’

 I see Father bow deeply, and that the driver gives him a gentle push in the back. He will live here for two years, until he’s fifteen.

In front of me on the desk I have a stone bust of an Egyptian woman. The woman’s red-painted lips are curved in a faint and fascinating smile. The original is to be found in Neues Museum in Berlin; the museum has not responded to Egypt’s request to have the bust returned. I inherited the small copy from Ellen, my grandmother, who died in the Salvation Army nursing home in Bestum, in the west of Oslo, in 1987. It’s a portrait of the most beautiful of all beautiful queens, that’s to say, Nefertiti – Akhnaton’s wife – from the time when Egypt was at its most powerful, around 1400 years BCE.

Sometime in May 1926, Ellen went to visit her closest friend in the city that had been renamed Oslo the year before. She was there to say goodbye before embarking on her great journey out into the world. On her way down the stairs after the visit, she was stopped by an older gentleman on his way up. She knew that it was the painter, HS. Not only did she know him by appearance, as she and the Judge had become part of a circle of artists through one of the so-called Fresco Brothers, a childhood friend, and HS was a kind of father-figure to several of them – she also knew that HS had a studio in the loft of the building where her friend lived. He held her face in his hands and said that she reminded him of Nefertiti. He said that Nefertiti means *the beautiful one has come*.

He said that he wanted to paint her, and invited her up to the studio. What happened between the time that he met her on the stairs and the time that the painting was finished, I don’t know. But I do know that HS did not paint her as an Egyptian queen, but rather as a pale, lonely woman wearing a scarf and a heavy, shapeless dress, alone, in a forest – and I know that my grandmother took the painting with her to Egypt, and never let it go, not even when everything else slipped through her fingers.

 When I was a boy and the painting had long since returned to Oslo (she had it sent back with all her dresses when the Judge found himself another woman), I could stand for ages trying to see my grandmother in the heavy, young face hanging there on the wall above the sofa.

Grandmother took great care of the bust of Nefertiti and HS’s large painting. Father took care of everything that could be thrown away. I loved to rummage around in the drawers of his bureau as a child, and he let me. They were full of used tickets from tram rides between Ramleh and the centre, slim packets of dried-out Egyptian cigarettes, empty photograph wallets from the Agfa shop, a tassel from the Judge’s fez, the Judge’s membership card for Alexandria Automobile Club, an entrance card to Stanley Beach, a pine cone from the garden by the sea, hundreds of negatives that never became prints, pages and pages of hieroglyphics that he had written himself with a thin, split pen, postcards of palm trees and ruins and pyramids, there was a hand-coloured map of the Nile Delta and the Valley of the Kings, there was a box of matches from the bar in Shepheard’s Hotel in Cairo, and a small lion figurine with wings, ivory cigarette holders and backscratchers, there were lots of sepia photographs taken from a distance of feluccas sailing down the Nile, camel drivers in the desert, water sellers at the market.

 I found postcards of Anubis with a dog’s head, who weighs the hearts of the dead, of Horus with a falcon’s head, who had the sun and the moon as eyes, and Ra with the sun-disk on his head, who created humans with his own sweat and tears, gods that no one believes in any more, Father said when I showed him what I’d found.

Most of it is gone now, thrown away or lost. But I have found a panorama of a square in Alexandria that Father drew and coloured in when he was twelve. The square is abuzz with activity: the muezzin is calling people to prayer from the minaret, old men are playing cards in the large, airy café, the ice-cream seller has a donkey tied to the front of his cart and is announcing his wares with a loudspeaker, the tubs of ice-cream are bright and colourful in the middle of the drawing, a man is turning a barrel organ and people crowd around to listen to the music, a woman is hanging out her washing to dry on the roof above the café, people are making their way to the mosque, a fully-covered woman in black is carrying a water jug on her head, a customer is being served in the photograph shop. A small, white boy wearing a safari helmet is nowhere to be seen.

Father is thirteen, and has come to Stabekk to go to school. With the exception of a few classes at the English school in Alexandria several years ago, he’s never gone to school. He boards with Headmaster K and his wife in the house behind the school, for which they are paid. The Ks’ only child – a son – drowned in the fjord a few years before Father moves in. There are no photographs, no letters, no drawings or other physical objects in Father’s papers that bear witness to the time he spent in Stabekk.

He’s surrounded by his peers every day at school, he stands in their midst as they laugh and fight and confide in each other, throw snowballs and pinch each others’ hats and put their arms around each other, he’s never experienced anything like it before, and he doesn’t understand how to take part, he doesn’t know if he’s able to step out of his loneliness and in.

Not only is Stabekk six thousand kilometres from the house in Alexandria. Not only is he alone from morning to night. Not only does the Judge not want him at home, for some reason, which hurts as well. With the Judge, even if you think it’s hard to be with him, it’s worse not to be allowed to be there. When Father walks along the roads on the hill above Stabekk and looks into the houses and warmly-lit rooms as he passes, it’s the Judge’s light that shines inside. Close, unobtainable, cold and warm at the same time. No, not only that. Most of all, it’s the longing for Mother, for Ellen. He tries to hold it at bay, he feels it gnawing at him, he has a stick in his pocket, he bites on it as hard as he can when it hurts too much, but it doesn’t help much. Where are you, Mother? What are you doing now?

At night, he dreams about her. She’s dressed in white and walking by the sea. He calls out and she stops. He runs towards her, but can’t get any closer. She says something he doesn’t understand. He shouts again, and wakes up.

 He carries the dream with him through the day, in the school yard, in the classroom, in his room in the attic. And then he understands.

The following day, he starts to do what she does in order to cope – he starts to walk.

 He’s systematic in his walking. He gets to know all the roads in and around Stabekk, big and small, he walks them back and forth, he walks up and down until he knows them all, what they’re called, where they are, what the houses look like, and then he expands his reach, walks down to the fjord, finds his way along the waterline, between the rocks and beaches, at the weekend he walks further, he walks into the forest, to Skui or Lommedalen, he borrows maps from Headmaster K, Headmaster K is a big believer in fresh air and walking in God’s own nature, Father gets to know all the paths, learns his way without the paths, and soon he starts to take the train into Oslo and the tram up to Nordmarka, he walks to cope with being alone, he walks to get away from the longing, but also to be near her, he walks through the autumn, until the first snow falls and everyone gets out their skis.

He has never learned to ski. He wades through snow up to his knees, into the trees, beyond the ski runs, then stands where he can watch the others skiing. How they move. How they glide forwards on their skis, how they shift their weight, how they use their poles. He stands at the bottom of the ski slope and observes how they hunker down before they push off, how they swing one ski in front of the other with their chest always facing the bottom of the slope, he even studies how they fall when they fall. He asks Mrs K, the headmaster’s wife, if there’s a pair of skis he can use. Mrs K is busy with her pots in the kitchen. She doesn’t answer. He asks again, maybe she hasn’t heard. Mrs K starts to cry. She sits down at the round kitchen table and weeps. Has he said something wrong, done something wrong. ‘Sorry,’ he says, ‘sorry. I apologise.’ She shakes her head and waves a hand to indicate that it’s not his fault she’s crying. He goes over to her and puts a hand on her shoulder. She places her large, dry and warm hand over his. Now he knows how Mrs K feels. She weeps a little longer, then she dries her eyes with the back of her hand and smiles at him, her face red and blotchy and swollen.

 She leads him down into the cellar, it smells of damp and fruit and earth down there. In a corner, there’s a pair of skis and two poles, Mrs K pulls out a large canvas bag and empties the contents onto the floor. Mittens and a hat, a thick pullover, an anorak, there’s a scarf, long-johns and a woollen vest, there’s a pair of ski boots.

 ‘He was slightly taller than you,’ Mrs K says, ‘but you’ll grow into them.’

He teaches himself to ski. He gets up at dawn and snowploughs down the hill from the house, over and over again, he skis around the school yard long before anyone else gets up, in the dead boy’s clothes and on the dead boy’s skis.

When he’s not out walking, I leave him to sit in the small attic room with a view to the school yard, reading. He reads, for example, the scout handbook from cover to cover, again and again, he prepares himself for the day he’ll become a scout. The Judge had said that when he was in Norway, he could become one of Baden-Powell’s boys. The Judge doesn’t say Scouts, he says Baden-Powell’s boys, as if the Judge and the founder of the scout movement, Robert Stephenson Smyth Baden-Powell, the great British hero of the Boer War, were old friends. Cut from the same cloth. And now, every afternoon and evening when he’s finished his homework, Father sits and prepares to become part of that community: to walk through the forest and fields in knee-length shorts, to do good deeds, to meet like-minded people in honourable competition, to make friends, to be part of something.

I can remember being thirteen, the same age that Father was when he arrived in Stabekk. I had a football under my arm, it was summer, I was wearing shorts and a worn, towelling t-shirt. I was on my way home for dinner when I saw Father walking up the road from the tram stop. He was wearing suit trousers, a white shirt and a grey woollen tie, he had a heavy leather bag in his hand, and the suit jacket over his other arm. I remember him as wearing a hat, but he probably wouldn’t have a hat in the middle of summer. He looked closed, as though he was somewhere deep inside, unapproachable. I did what I sometimes did when I saw him before he saw me, I hid behind a shed near to the Italian stonemasons’ place. I watched him walk past.

 I wish I hadn’t behaved like that all those times. I wish I hadn’t kept my distance from him.

 Because now, when it’s I who walks the streets, up and down, I think for him the opposite was true. It wasn’t he who was unapproachable, distant and a mystery. It was the world. It was everything else. And it was the others.