A WORKER'S HEART I

Novel by Carl Frode Tiller

Pages: 351
Publishers: Aschehoug

Sample translation

Chapters 1 & 4 (pp.7-9, 49-98)

Sample translation supported by Norla

Foreign rights by Henrik Francke, Oslo Literary Agency
henrik@osloliteraryagency.no

My first memory

Norway, the country where I've lived all my life, has changed radically in the past few decades, and with it, those of us who live here, including me, not least me, in fact, I barely recognise myself.

Naturally, a whole host of minor and major events have led us to where we, and I, are now – just thinking about it is overwhelming, it exhausts me, like now, for example, I don't know where to start, I feel like giving up before I've even begun, but I won't, I can't, so, without really knowing where I'm going, I might as well start with my first memory.

It's from when I was five and was in hospital in Namsos. I'd had stomach pains and lost a lot of weight, so after they'd taken blood tests and done all kinds of examinations, I was admitted for a gastroscopy. I had no idea what a gastroscopy was, obviously, but it dawned on me as I lay there in the bed, surrounded by five or six adults, I realised I was going to have a long tube forced down my throat, all the way down to my stomach and I panicked, and I have a clear memory of how I shouted and screamed, lashed out, kicked, twisted and turned as the doctors and nurses in white uniforms tried to hold me down, how they pushed me back down onto the bed as one of them, the consultant no less, forced open my mouth and pressed in a plastic tube that for some reason made me think of gooseberries – it was the colour, I think, a kind of transparent greenish colour.

As an adult, I've heard psychologists say that experiences like that – which weren't so unusual in the seventies, when there was a very different attitude to children – can cause trauma in a child on a par with that caused by sexual abuse. Which is no doubt true, it certainly doesn't sound unreasonable, but whatever the case, looking back, I don't see any connection between that experience and the problems and challenges I've faced later on in life.

It was painful, though, and something that made it all the more painful was that Dad was one of the people helping to hold me down. I'd been on my own in the hospital for the first few days, without Mum and Dad – which wasn't that unusual at the time either – but now he was standing there, at the end of the bed, tasked with holding down one of my legs. Not that he's to blame, obviously not, nor are the doctors and nurses, they were only doing what they thought was necessary for me to get well again, and as I said, the attitude to children was very different

back then, there was no awareness that experiences like that stay with you, people thought they just passed, were forgotten, vanished.

On the rare occasion that Dad does talk about it, he never says that he helped to hold me down. He doesn't mention the pain and anguish it caused. Not at all, he's packaged it all into a good, amusing little story.

Having outlined the situation, he says that the consultant, who apparently was a conceited, authoritarian snob who spoke with an Oslo accent – as people with authority often do in Dad's stories – had a terrible stammer and that I, raging mad, bit hold of his finger as he forced the tube down.

'T-t-t-trond, s-s-stop, i-i-it hurts, s-s-stop,' Dad puts it on when as he tells the story, then he laughs loudly and shakes his head as he describes the blood running down the consultant's finger and the nurses rushing back and forth with antiseptics and plasters.

And so not only does he draw attention away from my pain and his – because it must, naturally, have been a traumatic experience for him too – he also transforms me from being a passive victim to a someone who resists, someone who stands up against authority and refuses to be controlled.

Or well, transforms, really? Maybe not. Because I was hitting and kicking and twisting and turning, as I remember it, I *was* resisting, so my resistance isn't something that Dad made up in his version of what happened, I remember it clearly, all too well.

Or could it be that my memory of what happened has been coloured by Dad's story? Could it be that in his story, Dad made me into a strong and proud little boy and I've taken on that role as a part of my own narrative, if you like? That I've added the hitting and kicking later, or, if not added, certainly exaggerated? And maybe this, in turn, is a kind of attempt to avoid the potential trauma and damage mentioned earlier. Not a conscious attempt, obviously, but rather that both Dad and I have chosen to highlight my resistance because we instinctively understood that the opposite, a story where I give up immediately and am passive, where I'm more sad and upset than raging and rebellious, would have led to shame and self-loathing in the long run. Could it be that – without saying as much – we understood the power of narrative and used it, quite automatically?

pp.49-98

A SPANKING

In summer 2004, we went on a fourteen-day package holiday to Tenerife. For the first week, we were on our own, just Therese, Helga and me – Astrid wasn't born yet – and then in the second week, Therese's childhood friend, Åsne, came to join us with her son, Sondre, and new partner, Karl Morten.

'What do you think of him?' Therese whispered. She picked up the sun cream as she glanced over at Helga, who was taking a break from the pool and was sitting under the parasol with a coke, playing on her DS. She was still wet and a small puddle had formed on the tiles under the sun-lounger.

'Who?' I asked.

Therese looked at me and nodded in the direction of the pool. I lowered my book and dropped my sunglasses from my forehead onto my nose and followed her nod. She was talking about Karl Morten, he was standing in the middle of the pool with Sondre, who was sitting astride an inflatable shark that they'd just bought from the shop next to the hotel. Karl Morten grabbed the shark by the tail and whooped as he started to spin it around, creating a big whirlpool in the glittering, blue water.

I looked at Therese and gave a slight shrug.

'It was late when they got here last night,' I said. 'Haven't really had a chance to get to know him.'

She sat looking at me for a while, and then she giggled.

'Is it *that* obvious?' I asked.

'Really.'

'For everyone, or just you?'

'I don't think Åsne and Karl Morten have noticed,' she said.

'A good thing too,' I said.

Karl Morten swam under the shark, then popped up on the other side and pushed Sondre further out into the pool with such a splash that water landed on the tiles by the edge where two young women were standing drinking piña coladas; they exchanged irritated glances, then moved over to the sun loungers a couple of metres back. Sondre squealed in delight.

'And you, what do you think?'

Therese stretched out a foot, shook the suncream bottle and squeezed out a strip from the top of her thigh to the middle of her knee cap. There was a long exploding sound that made me think of empty tomato ketchup bottles, and how it made Helga laugh when I pretended to be annoyed and told her to stop farting at the table.

'He seems to get on well with Sondre, at least,' Therese said.

I pushed my sunglasses back up onto my forehead and looked her in the eye, with a smile.

'Stop it,' she said.

I laughed.

'Damn you,' she said, then laughed and shook her head as she started to rub in the cream with both hands. 'Åsne is a lot happier, that's the most important thing.'

'That's true,' I said.

She shook the bottle again and ran a strip of suncream down her other leg. I dropped my sunglasses back onto my nose, lifted my book and started to read.

'I hadn't realised she was that desperate, though,' Therese said, a moment or two later. 'Sorry,' she followed on immediately and lifted a hand to her mouth as she instinctively looked up to the hotel balcony to where Åsne was smiling and waving to Sondre and Karl Morten while she hung a beach towel over the railing to dry. 'That's not fair. I didn't mean it. Honestly.'

I laughed again.

'I'm blushing,' she said. 'Jesus.'

'Ok, ok,' I said. 'Let's give him a chance.'

What I didn't tell Therese was that I already knew Karl Morten. He'd introduced himself as Karl Morten Pedersen from Rørvik, but he was actually originally called Karl Morten Ness and for the first nine or ten years of his life he'd lived in Prærien in Namsos, in the same six-apartment

block as me; we lived on the ground floor to the far left, and he lived in the flat directly above us. We hadn't seen each other since then and there was nothing to indicate that he'd recognised me, but he was the spitting image of his father at the same age, so I recognised him immediately, it *was* him, Frank's little brother. Frank had been my best friend in the late seventies and early eighties.

Frank and his family were working class, like us. Nearly everyone around there was. The posh people lived on the east side of town, in big, modern houses with double garages, or old houses with pillared porches and fountains and fruit-ladened trees in the orchard, while the working class people lived in Vika, Gullvikmoen, Prærien and Byåsen on the west side, in semi-detached houses and small blocks of flats, or small, old self-built timber houses with draughty single-glazed windows and newspaper insulation in the walls.

The divide between the upper and lower classes in Namsos was more marked back then than it is now. But there were divisions in the working class as well, the biggest of which was between "decent people" and those who weren't. "Scroungers", as my mum used to say. People who didn't work, even though they could. Who drank and fought and neglected their children. Who cheated and stole. Tricked and fooled. Who let their houses fall to pieces, their gardens go to seed, and filled their yards with rubbish and junk and old cars and other vehicles that they seemed to be constantly repairing at all hours of day and night. Irresponsible people.

Frank's parents were scroungers in Mum's eyes. Dagny and Reinert, as they were called, are dead now, but Dad still loves to tell stories about them. Like the time when Reinert was absolutely plastered and pulled up the balcony railings for firewood on Christmas Eve, or when the two of them inherited a house down south and left Frank and Karl Morten with their grandparents and went to sell the house and all that was in it. Only, they didn't come back. They were gone a week, two weeks, three weeks, and still they didn't come back, no one knew what had become of them. It wasn't until two months later that they showed up again, just as broke as when they left. 'They drank up an entire house,' Dad used to say to round up the story. He loved saying that: 'Remember the time Dagny and Reinert drank up an entire house. Haha. They downed a whole bloody house.'

Dad didn't mind me being friends with Frank. He was forever telling me that we all have a responsibility to ensure that no one is excluded, so he actually thought it was good that I hung

out with him. But Mum didn't like it. She didn't say as much, but it was obvious to everyone. She would pretend not to hear the doorbell when she knew it was Frank, and if she did open the front door, she sometimes made up excuses why we couldn't be together. 'We're about to go out,' she might say, or 'Trond hasn't got time right now, he's helping me in the house.'

I could tell she didn't like herself when she behaved like that to Frank. It made her unsure, and she was full of self-loathing when she turned him away, you could hear it in her voice. Then afterwards she felt guilty and wanted to make up for it. 'I can dry the rest of the cups myself, why don't you pop up and see if Frank wants to come down, I can make you some waffles,' she might say, and then when Frank came down she'd be all welcoming and smiles.

She felt sorry for Frank and Karl Morten. After all, you can't choose your parents, she used to say.

There was a period when she made me take three packed lunches to school. One for me, one for Frank and one for Karl Morten. She told me not to make a fuss about it, and definitely not to let the other children know, so the handover always happened on the way to school, most often out on the stair before we even set off.

But that was put to a stop.

'Do you think I can't feed my own children?' Dagny said when she found out. Or not exactly when she found out. It turned out that she'd known about it and accepted it for a long time, she probably even appreciated it and was grateful, but then one day – after she'd had too much to drink – she decided she'd been humiliated and got angry, all the same. I was sitting by the fence with one of the other children, fiddling with a Rubik's cube, and Mum was hanging up the washing, when Dagny lurched across the back green with a packed lunch that one of the boys had clearly forgotten to eat. 'So, you think you're better than us, do you, handing out food like that?' she said and stopped right in front of Mum. 'Eh? Is that why you do it?'

Mum had some clothes pegs in her mouth and a sheet in her hands, so she couldn't answer, but probably wouldn't have said anything anyway, because she didn't like attention and certainly not that kind of attention, she would withdraw immediately.

'Here! You can have your charity back,' Dagny said, holding out the packed lunch.

Mum didn't have enough hands to take it, so Dagny threw the packed lunch down on the grass right at her feet.

‘And by the way, my boys don’t like brown cheese!’ she said, then turned on her heel and walked back towards the building. ‘Fucking communist,’ she muttered.

Mum’s cheeks were burning as she bent down and picked up the sandwiches, she didn’t look at me, or the other housewives who’d heard the commotion and were standing by their kitchen windows round about watching. She dropped the packed lunch down into the plastic laundry basket where the washing had been, and hurried in without looking up.

Mum hated Dagny from that day on and she had even more reservations about my friendship with Frank. ‘He’s a bad influence on Trond,’ I heard her say to Dad. Dad thought she was exaggerating, and stood his ground, but then other things happened that made him doubt too.

One spring day towards the end of the 1970s:

Frank and I went down into the communal basement to get a spade, which we were going to use to make a dam in the stream on the other side of the gravel pitch, and there, asleep on the concrete floor, having pissed on himself and in a pool of what we thought at first was blood, but turned out to be red vomit, we saw another neighbour, Henriksen, the old alchy who lived to the far right on the ground floor. Whenever we found him like this – which was fairly often – we normally took all the empty beer and spirits bottles with a “V” on the bottom back to the booze shop and used the deposit money we got in return to buy sweets from the Orient Kiosk or Habu – usually a bit of this and that, which we pointed out to the old man serving as we hung over the counter; ‘one of those and one those and two of those’, we said, followed by ‘how much money have we got left now?’ for probably the fifth time, and when we’d spent our money, we walked home each with a white paper bag in our hand, chewing and sucking all the sweets that we’d bought and others that we’d stuffed into our pockets whenever the old, half-deaf shop assistant in a dust coat had his back turned and was saying ‘do you mean these?’

But not this time

‘I’ve got an idea,’ Frank whispered.

‘What is it?’ I asked.

As soon as he’d explained, we put all the bottles into a metal tub that we found in the nearest cupboard and then when we’d attached a piece of string to one of the handles and tied the other end around Henriksen’s ankle, we lifted the tub up onto a shelf a bit further down the passage and went back up the basement stairs and sat down and waited for Henriksen to move

and the metal tub to fall on the floor. Which it did, not long after – with a clatter and bang, followed by a roar from Henriksen. We'd meant to give him a fright, but not be *that* big a fright, because even though we did know, we hadn't taken into consideration that he'd been in the merchant navy during the war and still had nightmares every night that woke him up screaming, bathed in sweat and convinced that he was onboard a ship that had been hit by a torpedo.

'Bloody kids! Just you wait!' he shouted, as we shot out through the door, across the back green and into the woods beyond the washing lines.

When I got home an hour or two later, Mum was standing folding the laundry in the living room and Dad was changing the fluorescent tube in the strip lighting in the kitchen. He didn't see me to begin with. He'd just unscrewed the rectangular, ribbed, white plastic shade and was standing looking at all the dead flies that had accumulated there since he last took it down.

'And how did they get in there, anyway?' he said, then tipped the shade out through the open kitchen window and knocked on it gently to make sure that all the flies were emptied out.

Mum didn't answer. She stood there looking straight at me, and I instantly realised that Henriksen had been there and told them what had happened, and I knew what was going to happen next, I could see it on Mum's stern face.

'Hey,' Dad said, and when Mum still didn't answer, he turned to see if she was there and then saw me, he didn't say anything to begin with, just stood there looking at me gravely, waited a bit, and then he looked at Mum and she looked at him, it was like they wanted to reassure each other that they agreed about what was going to happen, just a second or two, and then Dad turned back to me again and Mum put a folded brown flannel shirt down on the drying rack and went into the kitchen, and closed the door behind her.

'Is there something you want to tell me?' Dad said. His fair hair was a bit longer than usual, it was almost in his eyes, and he lifted a hand slowly and pushed it to one side as he walked towards me. I took a step back, my heart hammering, and I looked at him and swallowed. He shook his head. 'Henriksen sailed throughout the war. He sacrificed life and limb only to be spat on by society afterwards. That's why he is the way he is today, that's why he drinks, and you know that only too well, we've talked about it many times before! And yet you torment him!'

I felt the guilt building, mixed with dread.

‘It wasn’t my idea,’ I mumbled. I didn’t want to be someone who blamed others, but I did it all the same, it was the truth. ‘It was Frank’s!’

Dad half opened his mouth, narrowed his eyes, as if he couldn’t believe what he was hearing.

‘Are you blaming your friend?’

I could feel my cheeks burning with shame, and didn’t say anything, just stood there staring at the floor.

Silence.

‘You know what you have to do,’ he said.

I turned, without meeting his eyes, and went into my room, I undid the button on my jeans and pulled down the zip and stood there looking out at the three metal whirligig washing lines that were turning slowly in the wind, with a regular, high pitched squeak that could be heard even though the windows were shut. And then Dad came in. He didn’t say anything, the bed creaked when he sat down just as it did when he used to read for me in the evenings a few years earlier, I swallowed, hesitated, then turned around and lay down across his knees, still without looking at him, he pulled my trousers bit further down my thighs, and I closed my eyes and gritted my teeth, and then he began to spank me.

It didn’t last long and it wasn’t even that painful, but it was humiliating, and as always when I lay there with my arse in the air and felt the sting of his hand, I harboured a rage and desire for revenge that was so great that I knew I’d feel guilty when I thought about it a few days later. I don’t really want him to die, I might think then, I didn’t mean it, I take it back.

‘And in the future, you’ll be good to Henriksen, won’t you?’ he said. ‘Do you understand?’

I didn’t answer, I kept my eyes lowered as I pulled up my trousers, they were full of tears, and everything was blurred, unclear.

‘Trond?’

‘Yes,’ I mumbled.

‘Good,’ he said and pushed his fringe to the side again as he stood up. ‘That’s the end of it then.’

But of course it wasn't the end of it, not for me, and not for Dad either, because he always felt bad after he'd given me a spanking. He never said it out right, but he'd show it by giving me something or suggesting something he knew I'd like. That day, for example, he thought that maybe we could have pancakes for dinner. He didn't come to me with the suggestion, that would have made his shame too obvious. He said it to Mum instead, but loud enough for me to hear, so I'd know it was his idea.

'Oh, I don't know,' Mum said, reluctantly, not because she didn't want to or couldn't be bothered, but because it was part of the game that Dad would have to persuade her, making it clear for me that I was getting my favourite dinner thanks to him, and only him.

'Oh, go on, please,' Dad said. 'Trond has asked for pancakes so many times, and it's a while since we last had them.'

'Oh, alright then,' Mum said, and immediately got ready to make pancakes with blueberries, sugar and bacon, and pea soup to start with. I sat upright on the bed and scowled at the light-brown wooden door with stickers on it, listening to Mum and Dad's voices blend with hissing of bacon when it was put in the hot frying pan, the kitchen fan was on and I'm guessing the window was open too, but the delicious smell of fried bacon still made its way into my room from under the door. My tummy was rumbling, but naturally I was too proud to be won over by a plate of pancakes, not on your life, I didn't want it, I didn't want anything from them, I wanted to run away and never come back, I could just picture their reaction, loud and clear, when they realised what they'd made me do, how upset they'd be, how frightened and desperate, I revelled in it, the anguish and guilt tearing at their hearts, the tears in their eyes, I didn't want to let go of the image of those tears, certainly not Dad's tears, I wanted him to get what he deserved.

A while later, the door was pushed open and Mum popped her head round.

'Dinner's ready!'

I didn't answer, I just sat there glowering out of the window at the whirlygigs that were being turned and turned by the wind, and the raindrops falling from the white washing line at a slight angle through the air, and a wifey hanging over her balcony railing hitting a rag rug with a carpet beater made from plaited bamboo, hard, again and again, the sound echoed between the blocks and the dust swirled up and sprinkled down to the ground.

'Trond!'

‘I’m not hungry!’

‘But it’s pancakes.’

‘Don’t care.’

‘Trond, please. Come on now!’

‘I said I’m not hungry!’

Mum sighed and waited a bit.

‘Shall I keep some for you then? So you can have it later?’

‘Don’t care.’

She sighed again.

‘Alright then,’ she said, and closed the door.

Silence.

I tried to steel myself, conjured up the images of their tearful faces once again, the grief and pain when I ran away for good, but it didn’t help. The smell of bacon was irresistible, and I knew that at some point or other, I would swallow my pride, and sure enough, no more than a minute or two after Mum had left, I got up and went into the kitchen, tried to saunter in casually – as if I had an errand in there. I often did that in those situations. It was a kind of giving myself a way out. If Mum or Dad were all smug and humiliated me even more, for example, by smirking and saying “ah, so you’re hungry after all?” I could pretend that I actually had something else to do in there, I wouldn’t answer, I’d just fill a glass with water and go straight back to my room, for example.

But they weren’t being smug this time. They smiled and acted as if nothing had happened. Dad was talking about the new canteen at the sawmill that was so far away from the planes and saws that people chose to eat beside their machines instead, and Mum told him about the newly-qualified doctor from the east who thought he knew everything, but who would have killed a patient from Nærøy if one of the auxiliary nurses hadn’t noticed that he was about to give them a triple dose of medicine. ‘He’s been a bit less cocksure since then!’ she said with a laugh, as she put her knife and fork down on the plate and reached for the pouch of tobacco at the end of the table.

When I finished eating, they were ready for an after-dinner nap, and I was, as usual, told to go out and play.

As soon I was out, I gathered up a handful of small stones, went around the corner and got ready to throw them up at the window of Frank and Karl Morten's room, as I normally did instead of ringing the bell when I had reason to believe that Reinert might be either drunk or in a bad mood, like now, when we'd done what we'd done. He was always nice to me, but I was frightened of him all the same, he was so angry and temperamental, and when he was drunk, it didn't take much for him to start lashing out. I was sometimes woken in the middle of the night by thumps and bumps and heavy footsteps and Dagny screaming or begging for mercy, and when I met her the next day by the entrance or in the basement or outside, she'd be wearing sunglasses, like the battered women do in films. Frank and Karl Morten got their fair share too. I'd witnessed it several times, because it made no difference if I or the other kids from the street were there, Reinart would hit them all the same, only slap them to be fair and probably not as hard as when he was alone with them, but still, he hit them even though we were watching. Frank and Karl Morten hated him for it, and he knew it, but it was as if he managed to supress it or at least live with it by blaming what he jokingly called "my Italian roots". 'It's because of my Italian roots,' he used to say when the situation had calmed down again, so that anyone listening would think of an Italian father like the Italian fathers in films; hot-blooded, temperamental men who might blow up and lose control and dish out the odd beating or two, but who generally were kind and loving, family men above all else, so that women and children still adore them, no matter what.

Frank lifted the catch and pushed open the window.

'Are you coming out?' I asked.

'Just need to finish eating,' he said. 'Come up and wait.'

I guessed it was safe and did as he said. Their flat was identical to ours, but very different all the same. It was so bare. They had no pot plants in the windows, no carpet on the floor in the living room, no cushions on the sofa, and other than a painting of a gipsy woman with big breasts and a white porcelain swan on top of a unit, there was nothing to make it homely. There was an enormous leatherette corner sofa, a coffee table with burn marks and a red leather chair with a hole on the armrest that had been covered with gaffer tape, and that was it.

When I came in, Frank was sitting in the kitchen eating cornflakes with raspberry jam so the milk was red, and Karl Morten was on the other side of the table, hunched over a maths book

where he hadn't solved a single question, but had drawn several versions of the English bulldog that was on the tobacco pouch lying on the windowsill, and Dagny was standing behind him looking over his shoulder. She smiled and said hello when she saw me, then pulled some strands of tobacco from her tongue, put a newly rolled cigarette in her mouth and looked down at Karl Morten's maths book again.

'Multiplication?' she asked.

'It's the same as times' tables,' Karl Morten said.

'Why the hell don't they write that then?'

'Don't ask me!' Karl Morten said. 'But can you do it, or can't you?'

'I could once upon a time,' she said. 'I was actually quite good at maths when I was at school.'

'What the hell do I care if you were good back then,' Karl Morten said. 'Can you do it *now*?'

'Oi! You watch your mouth,' Reinert said, coming from the hall, he walked straight over to the cooker where the coffee pot was hissing and gurgling.

Karl Morten rolled his eyes and Jesus Christ without making a sound.

'Can you do it or can't you?' he asked again.

'No, what do you expect?' Dagny said, as she struck a match over the long side of the matchbox, closed her eyes and lit the cigarette. 'It's more than twenty years since I learnt maths, and haven't had any use for it since, just saying,' she added, blowing smoke out through her nose as she shook the match vigorously to extinguish the flame.

'What about you, Dad?' Karl Morten said.

Dagny sniggered.

'Do what?' Reinert asked, without turning towards us, he pulled the lid off the coffee pot with a loud slosh and put it down on the cooker with a clatter. They just carried on boiling the grounds, so he didn't add any fresh coffee, just stirred it all round with a spoon.

'Do your times tables with big numbers!' Karl Morten said.

Reinert turned around, and was about to answer, but then he saw Dagny.

'What the fuck are you laughing at?'

'Nothing,' Dagny said.

‘Are you taking the piss out of me in front of the kids?’

‘No, take it easy, man!’

Reinert glared at her for a while, almost threatening, and then turned back to the cooker, pulled the spoon out of the coffee and put the lid back on the pot.

‘I’ve done more bloody maths in my lifetime than you have,’ he said, without looking at her, as he reached up and took down a cracked yellow and blue Leeds mug from the cupboard and poured himself half a cup of thick, almost porridge-like, jet black coffee, and then turned to her with an aggressive nod. ‘Or do you think you can be a chippy without being able to do your sums, eh?’

Dagny blew some smoke out of the corner of her mouth, hard, aimed at the floor.

‘How would I know?’ she said.

‘Exactly!’ he replied.

‘Have you been a chippy?’ Frank asked with his mouth full of cornflakes, he clearly wanted to take things down a notch or two by changing the subject.

‘Mhm,’ Reinert responded, using his front teeth to push the coffee grounds to the tip of his tongue, then he leaned over the sink and spat it out.

‘A chippy, right!?’ Dagny said, with a chuckle.

‘Eh?’

‘You were a minion!’

‘Ok, ok, an assistant! I still worked for a fucking joiner’s company.’

‘For about fifteen minutes at the end of the sixties!’ Dagny said.

‘You give it a break now!’ Reinert said, scowling furiously at Dagny, but she didn’t look in the least bit afraid, she shook her head and grinned as she held her cigarette over the sink and tipped off the ash.

‘I worked there for a year and half, at least,’ Reinert said and gulped down some coffee.

‘Ok, help the boy with his sums then,’ Dagny said. ‘Shouldn’t be a problem for you. Mr Carpenter.’

Reinert said nothing, he stood there staring at Dagny in a manner that said just you wait until we’re alone, but she still didn’t look frightened, it looked like she was enjoying herself.

‘We’re waiting with anticipation,’ she said and sniggered.

Reinert kept his eyes on her for a moment or two longer, then he went over to the food cupboard on the other side of the kitchen, without a word.

'Thought as much,' Dagny said.

I didn't usually get help from Mum and Dad with my homework either. If I'd asked, I would probably have got it, but I didn't, partly because I managed alright on my own, but mostly because parents were not as tuned in and interested in what their children were doing at school back then, certainly not where I came from. Mum and Dad had no expectations or goals that I would do well at school. They wanted me to get there on time. Behave well. Do what the teachers asked me to do. Those were my only duties, and as long as I did that, they were happy. They might nod in acknowledgement and say that I was clever at the end of the school year when I showed them the short, typed letter where the teacher said how well I'd done, but there wasn't much enthusiasm.

'Good orthography? What's orthography?' Dad might ask.

'I don't know,' Mum said.

'Ah well. That's good, Trond,' Dad said. 'Just you wait and see, they'll make a teacher of you one day.'

He'd say this with a smile. To show that he naturally didn't expect me to go so far as being a teacher. For Mum and Dad, education was not the way to climb the ladder and make a career. They might have realised that later, but not at the time. Back then, they saw school as a place where I would learn to read and write and do maths sufficiently well to get by in life. To read the newspaper. To understand the contents of letters and forms and bills. To do my tax return. Things like that. They took it for granted that I'd work in the sawmill, or become a decorator, car mechanic, plumber, joiner, plasterer or something else that would easily fall into the category they called "normal jobs". I don't think they even considered the possibility that I would go on to further education and aim for very different careers, it was beyond their imagination.

But their attitude to school was still far more positive than Dagny and Reinert who saw school as a punishment and the teacher as a tormentor, that absentminded man with his spectacles and brown corduroy jackets, who stuck his nose into things that were none of his business. Who called them in to teacher-parent meetings where he kept asking about how things

were at home, and who felt better when he criticised them for not giving Frank a compass and protractor and proper packed lunch, for never covering his schoolbooks, for forgetting his gym kit or swimming trunks, and not having skis when it was ski day.

I have no idea what Mum and Dad thought about my teacher, but they always talked about him with respect, certainly when I was there. Dagny and Reinert, on the other hand, could never demonstrate enough how little respect they had for "Mr Professor", as they called him. When Frank had a teacher's note home with him because he'd been in a fight or been rude, Reinert scoffed and said the teacher was a "fucking Jessie", and once when Frank produced a letter calling them in for a meeting, he ripped it up in front us and threw the pieces out of the open window behind him. 'If the nosey parker wants to talk to me, he can come here,' he said, his voice even more raspy and raw then normal, probably because he'd had a long night with too much drink and cigarettes. 'And you can quote me!'

Frank got embarrassed when Reinert behaved like that, but pretended to be impressed and often forced a laugh and looked at me in a way that made me realise he wanted me to laugh with him – presumably because it would then be easier to persuade himself that his father was just as mean, unafraid and wilful as he tried to make out.

And I did what Frank wanted me to do, I laughed. But it wasn't easy, because I was also embarrassed on Reinert's behalf. Not because he so obviously wanted to play hard. Not that in itself. Dad tried to play cool too, especially when his mates were round. I noticed that he spoke differently then. Rougher. Louder. More sweary. But he never tried to play tough in front of me and my friends, he didn't need the affirmation from kids that he was as cool as he wanted to feel. He wasn't *that* insecure. But Reinert did, and that's what made us embarrassed for him.

It was that inferiority complex that stopped me from offering to help Karl Morten with his maths homework. I could do multiplication with big numbers, and if it had only been me, Frank and Karl Morten there, I would have helped him straightaway, but I knew Reinert well enough to know that he would feel humiliated if I did, certainly now, when he'd failed to persuade us all that he could do sums with big numbers. So even though I wanted to show everyone how smart and clever I was, I just sat there, completely silent, with my hands in my lap while I waited for Frank to finish his cornflakes.

I looked at Reinert, he was unnaturally straight in the back, as he always was. He didn't say anything, he'd taken a couple of sugar lumps out of the cupboard and held one down in the cup until the coffee had soaked into it so that it was pale brown and shiny, and then he popped in his mouth and sucked and smacked his lips as he continued to glare at Dagny.

'Trond will be able to do it,' Frank said, and looked at Karl Morten as he put the spoon down and picked up the bowl with both hands. 'Trond's shit hot at maths,' he added, then tipped the bowl back and drank the rest of the raspberry-coloured milk.

'I am *not*,' I said, and felt my cheeks burn immediately, I was about to blush. Karl Morten pushed the maths book over the white, greasy oilcloth towards me without saying anything, and I leaned forwards and looked at the exercises. I swallowed, was nervous about how Reinert would react, but at the same time, I'd experienced similar situations so many times before, not just with Reinert, but with other grown ups too, even Dad, he didn't like being reminded of how little he knew either, so I'd kind of worked out how to get away with it, I just had to play unsure, pretend that I couldn't do things as well as I actually could.

'Hm, let me think, how do you do these?' I said. I scratched my head and acted as though I was thinking. 'Um … can I borrow your pencil?'

Karl Morten handed me the yellow school pencil that was all chewed at the end, and I started to explain, "I wonder if …", "I think maybe …" etc., etc. And on I went. And it had the desired effect. Reinert wasn't angry, to the contrary, he saw it as an opportunity to convince everyone that he could do his sums after all. Of course he could, sort of, well, nearly, he stood behind me and watched what I was doing, nodded gravely and sipped his coffee and said yes, he believed that was how you did it, yes, mmm, ah-ha, that's right, exactly, correct he said, and if he knew that we'd seen through him – and I was sure that he had – he had no problem hiding it, that's to say, for a short while, because when he then noticed that Dagny was standing there looking at him with a smirk on her face, he got angry again.

'You!' he said and pointed at her. 'You're asking for it!'

'Asking for what?' Dagny said. She pushed open the kitchen window and flicked her still glowing cigarette down into the back green, and then turned back to Reinert with a grin.

'I mean it!' Reinert said.

There was a knock at the door.

‘Yeah, yeah, sure you do,’ Dagny said, she looked at Reinert and shook her head as she went to open the door. ‘Hello,’ we heard her say, moments later. ‘How can I help you?’

‘I’d like to have a word with you.’

I felt a chill run through my body. It was Henriksen, I recognised his voice.

‘I’m all ears,’ Dagny said.

‘Could we maybe talk inside?’

‘We’ll talk here,’ Dagny said.

‘It’s just a little …I’m not sure you’d want the neighbours to hear.’

‘I don’t care about the neighbours,’ Dagny said. ‘What is it?’

And then Henriksen started to tell her about what had happened in the basement. We were good boys at heart, he said, he knew that, but we didn’t understand the consequences of what we’d done and he felt that Dagny and Reinert had a right to know, the metal tub could have landed on his head, he could have been killed.

‘But you’re standing here, aren’t you?’ Dagny said. ‘Alive and well. As good as.’

I heard Reinert chuckle as he went out into the hall and down towards the door, the Leeds mug still in his hand.

‘Tell me, do you think this is funny?’ Henriksen said.

‘Yes, in fact, I do,’ Dagny said.

‘Jesus!’

‘Calm down now, Henriksen,’ Reinert said. ‘It was time to get up anyway.’

Laughter.

But then Dagny turned.

‘Don’t you dare talk badly about my boys.’

‘Should have known there was no point in trying to talk to you two,’ Henriksen said.

‘Talk!’ Dagny said. ‘Do you think we were born yesterday? Do you think we don’t know why you’ve come here and why you want to come into the flat to talk? Do you think we don’t know that you’re after a dram? A kind of plaster on the wound.’

‘Bloody idiots,’ Henriksen shouted from somewhere down the stairs.

‘Cheeky bastard!’ Dagny shouted. ‘You come here trying to trick your way to some drink, but you never offer us anything yourself! You even dilute your moonshine with red soda

so people thinks it's meths and you can keep it all to yourself. I've never met a meaner bastard in all my life!'

'Says you, who steals clothes from the washing lines round here!' Henriksen shouted back.

'Shut your face!'

'You shut your face!'

The same evening, when Frank and I were sitting on the step outside the basement, making projectiles from the coils of detonating cord that we'd found on the building site in Gullvikmoen a couple of days earlier, I asked Frank if he dreaded going in, if he was scared he'd get a belting.

'Belting?' Frank said, and put a piece of the light green detonating cord in the mouth of the pliers. 'What for?'

'What we did to Henriksen, obviously!'

He turned to me as if to check if I was joking.

'He's a war sailor,' I said.

'So?' he said, with a brief snip as he cut the right length which he then bent and put in the Tupperware box with the other pieces.

I was about to explain, but then didn't. I shook my head.

'Nothing,' I said, and strung one of the pieces on to the elastic, lifted the catapult and aimed at an oil drum, I closed one eye, pulled the rubber so far back that small, white cracks appeared in the red rubber, waited a moment, then let go. There was a low, kind of singing sound when the projectile hit the metal.

'Are *you* scared you're going to get a beating?' Frank said.

I shrugged.

'Maybe not a beating,' I said. 'But I'll definitely get a proper telling off.'

Frank laughed, a laugh I recognised from so many times before. A laugh that expressed his joy that he was not alone in getting an earful every now and then. I gave him a grin that was meant to say that getting told off was a pain but I wasn't too bothered. That I "took it like a man", as it said in cartoons and my Wild West books.

Shortly after, when we'd got our bikes and were winding the rest of the detonating cord around the spokes, I sat there thinking about Dad and Reinert. I couldn't find the words back then, I was too young, but on some level or other, I understood that the way in which they had responded to the Henriksen episode said a lot, if not everything, about who they were. About the difference between them. Reinert, who was utterly unpredictable and ruled by his moods and impulses. Who fought if he felt like fighting, and did nothing if he felt like doing nothing. And Dad, who gave me a beating – or spanking, as he preferred to call it – to teach me the difference between right and wrong.

But that wasn't the only reason he punished me. And it certainly wasn't the only reason after the Henriksen episode. Even though he probably hated it, and even though it made him feel bad and he tried to make up by offering me pancakes, there was a small part of him that liked it. And I knew why, or at least, I had an inkling. It wasn't because he liked to dominate and humiliate me, and certainly not for any perverse reason. It was because he liked the idea of being someone who was on the side of the weak and the oppressed, who would fight for them – in this instance, merchant sailors in the war. I'd got the same feeling a few times before, and I think that was why I felt an anger that verged on hatred whenever he hit me. Because I felt used, forced into a kind of mini-drama that basically allowed him to play the role of champion of justice.

By the time we'd sunbathed and swum enough for one day, I still hadn't mentioned that I knew who Karl Morten was. Not to Therese, not to Åsne and not to Karl Morten himself. I don't know why, but I just couldn't bring myself to say anything, nor did I tell him I was from Namsos. When Åsne introduced me and Therese to Karl Morten, she'd said we were from Trondheim, so I just let him carry on thinking that, because if he found out I was from Namsos, then he'd maybe link my name with growing up in Prærien and remember me, and if not, he'd definitely ask whereabouts in town I'd grown up, and if I knew so-and-so, etc. and then he'd find out who I was anyway.

After we'd showered, rubbed in some after-sun and put on light, summery evening clothes, Therese and I lay on the hotel bed and relaxed, arm in arm, in the air-conditioned coolness, and enjoyed watching Helga, who was sitting on the tiled floor, in her own world, playing pet shops, before we all met again down in reception.

Sondre was tired and didn't want to go out, so Åsne suggested that we could eat at the hotel, but they didn't have any tables for another hour and a half, so we ended up wandering down to the promenade to look for a restaurant all the same. It was still scorching hot. I could feel the sweat on my face and back, my thin shirt stuck to my skin, so I had to keep putting a hand back and pulling it loose. It was uncomfortable, but when we reached the small square where the promenade started, I felt a cool breeze coming in from the sea and it was much better.

'I'm actually not that hungry yet,' Åsne said. 'How about you?'

'I could wait a while,' Therese said.

'Well, I'm thirsty,' Karl Morten said.

'I have a suggestion then,' Åsne said. 'You gentlemen can go for a coffee or a beer or whatever, while us ladies take a look around the shops.'

'Most sensible thing you've said all day,' Karl Morten replied. 'Apart from what you said when you were on all fours this morning,' he added, looking over at me with a grin. I was embarrassed for him and bent down as if I was busy tightening the strap on my sandals.

'Jeez, Karl Morten,' Åsne giggled 'There are children here.'

I waited until they'd started to walk again, then stood up and followed along behind them, over the cobbled square with a fountain in the middle, and fruit and vegetables stalls and souvenir shops around the edges, then down onto the promenade, which was jostling with life. There were waiters outside all the bars and restaurants trying to lure in the sun-tanned tourists. Some were polite and all smiles, others were more insistent and stood in the way of people or followed them and pointed at the restaurant, giving them the evening menu in broken English.

'Swedish? Är ni från Sverige?' one of them asked as we passed a fish restaurant, with a huge fishtank outside. A man in his early thirties with greased back hair and a smarmy smile. He gave Therese a cheeky look as he sauntered towards her, but she just lifted a hand and waved him off in irritation.

If it had been a couple of days before, her reaction would have been completely different, she would have taken the opportunity to joke about the fact that she and I – of all people – were on holiday in a place like this. Though we'd never admit it, but before we'd had Helga, we'd always considered package holidays as naff, and as we still had a problem with seeing ourselves in that situation, we'd established a kind of ironic game whereby we distanced ourselves in

various ways by exaggerating. The first morning we were there, I'd grabbed three towels and pretended to beat an unaware German tourist to the best sun loungers – and a hearty laugh from Therese, and when Therese ordered drinks at the hotel bars, she always insisted on having umbrellas in them.

This is not me, I don't really belong here – that was what we were trying to say by behaving like that, and if the man from the fish restaurant had approached Therese a couple of days earlier, she would no doubt have done the same, she would have pretended to be surprised and charmed by the fact that he was speaking to her in Swedish, she would have asked where he'd learnt Swedish and perhaps even pretended to be Swedish herself.

But now that Åsne and Karl Morten were here, we didn't. We hadn't agreed anything beforehand, we hadn't ever spoken about it, it was somehow just obvious that neither of them would understand the humour, so we stopped.

'Why don't we sit down over there? There's plenty of empty tables,' Karl Morten said. He looked at me and nodded to a restaurant on the other side of the street. There's a reason why there's not many people there, I thought when I looked over at the cheap white plastic tables and the neon sign saying Pizza in capital letters in the colours of the Italian flag, but I didn't say anything, I just stood there and smiled.

'The girls can pick us up when they're done shopping,' he said, pulling his shirt loose from one armpit, leaving a large and growing dark sweat-stain, just like mine.

I wanted to say no, but naturally I said yes, and when Therese, Åsne and the children carried on, Karl Morten and I went over to the restaurant and sat down at a wobbly table with a view of the water and the beach, where a gang of local boys with bare chests were cheering and shouting as they played football.

There was almost no other guests, so the waiter came over straightaway, and while he wiped our table, I ordered a coffee and Karl Morten ordered a beer and a Jägermeister.

'Teetotaler?' he said, as he pulled a packet of Marlboro from his pocket and took out a cigarette. I was mid-yawn and didn't have time to answer.

'I'm guessing you don't smoke either,' he said.

I shook my head.

'No, I don't,' I said.

He lit the cigarette, inhaled and leaned back in his chair, blowing the smoke out through his nose.

‘So, you like animals then?’ he said.

I raised my eyebrows and waited a moment. ‘What makes you ask that?’

‘Hitler was a teetotaler and didn’t smoke,’ he said. ‘And he loved animals. Just wondered who I’m dealing with.’

I looked at him. If he’d said it with a smile rather than a grin, it might have been funny, but now it just sounded appalling, and it was as much as I could do to force a smile.

The waiter appeared with our order. I smiled and said thank you, whereas Karl Morten just grabbed the beer without a word. He down the Jägermeister in one, letting out a long ‘aaaah’ as he put the glass down on the table.

‘Finally human again,’ he said.

No need to exaggerate, I thought.

‘I’ll have another one, please,’ Karl Morten said.

The waiter nodded, and disappeared with the empty glass and tray. I tore the end off a sachet of sugar, a quick rip, poured the sugar into the coffee and gave it a good stir.

‘I hear you work for Adressa,’ he said.

‘Mmm,’ I replied.

He nodded, swallowed a mouthful of beer.

‘Journalist then, eh?’

‘Yes,’ I said. ‘Arts and culture.’

‘Oh, right, you work for the gay mag, then?’ he said. It seemed as if he thought I’d never heard anyone call the arts supplement the gay mag before. As if it was a sarcasm he’d just made up, right now, and he was very pleased with himself. He laughed and looked at me expectantly.

I couldn’t be bothered to laugh, I didn’t even smile.

‘Yeah, that’s right. The gay mag,’ I said, and closed my eyes when I nodded.

The waiter came back with another Jägermeister. He smiled when he put the glass down in front of Karl Morten, who didn’t say thank or smile back, he just took the glass and downed the contents in one and put it back on the table with a small thud. I was worried that he might

order another one right away, but fortunately he didn't. Not long after though, he'd finished his beer and snapped his fingers at the waiter and mimed that he wanted another.

'I just need to go to the toilet,' I said.

'Absolutely, not going to stop you,' he said.

"I'm not going to stop you", I thought, what kind of thing was that to say. I got up and made my way over to the other side of the restaurant, where the floor showed obvious signs of a mop being sloshed around but was still so sticky from beer and soft drinks that my sandals got stuck and made a quiet ripping sound whenever I lifted a foot. I didn't actually need to go to the loo, thank goodness, as the toilet seat was filthy and it stank of piss, I just needed a break, and when I'd locked the door, I closed the seat lid and sat down.

I sat there and thought about the past week, and what a lovely time we'd had. Every night, after Therese and I had had sex, and were lying in the hotel bed like spoons, sweaty and satisfied and ready for sleep, I'd relished the feeling of how much I was looking forward to waking up again the next day, but now, after Åsne and Karl Morten had arrived, I wasn't so sure I'd look forward to it, not so much at least.

I sat there for so long that I began to worry that Karl Morten might come looking for me, so I flushed the toilet, washed my hands and went back.

He'd drunk a third of the beer and almost half of yet another Jägermeister, and I decided that if he ordered anything more, certainly if he ordered more spirits, I'd say something, after all, it was a family holiday.

'Big job?' He spoke without looking at me. He was more interested in something behind me, and he didn't even seem to notice that I failed to answer. I pulled out the chair and turned around as I sat down, and spotted a young, Scandinavian-looking girl. She appeared to be waiting for someone, she was sitting on her own, looking around as she picked at the label on an empty Coke bottle.

'Do you know her?' I asked.

'No,' he said and grinned. 'But I wouldn't mind getting to know her.'

I thought he was joking, but he clearly wasn't because he continued to stare.

'She can't be much more than sixteen,' I said. 'Max seventeen.'

'So what,' he shrugged. 'We wouldn't need to talk.'

He laughed.

I drank some coffee.

‘My brother’s son is seventeen, and his girlfriend is sixteen. Man, you should see her,’ he said. He used both his hands to indicate big breasts. ‘I always wear my sunglasses when I go to see them, put it that way. In case she’s there.’

I looked straight at him and raised my eyebrows.

‘Oh, come on,’ he said. He closed his eyes and tossed his head. ‘Don’t make yourself out to be better than you are.’

‘Actually, I’m not.’

He shook his head and laughed, grabbed his beer.

‘Don’t tell me you deny yourself any fun in life,’ he said. He took a drink, put the glass down again and wiped some foam from his lips. ‘Sounds bloody exhausting. Having to control yourself all the time, I mean.’

‘Sometimes I don’t manage,’ I said. I looked him in the eye and smiled, but he picked up on the aggressive tone. At first he looked surprised, then he pointed at me and leaned back in his chair with loud laugh.

‘Now,’ he said, ‘now I’m beginning to like you.’

I didn’t say anything. I leaned over to one side and caught the waiter’s eye and pointed to my empty coffee cup. He nodded, filled a new cup and came over with it.

‘There you go,’ he said. He looked at me and smiled as he put the cup down on the table, and I thanked him and smiled back.

‘I think he likes you too,’ Karl Morten said. ‘But maybe in a slightly different way from me.’

I looked at him with the same smile that I’d given him earlier.

‘Do you have a nice side as well?’ I asked. ‘You know, in addition to all the others?’

I wasn’t being funny, but he obviously thought I was, he pointed at me again and laughed loudly, just like before.

‘I like you,’ he said, he almost sung it. ‘I like youuuu!’

Better rein myself in here, I thought, just keep smiling and pretend it was a joke.

‘Ah well,’ he said. He took another drink of beer, put the glass back down and sat looking out at the sea where a red, kind of fuzzy sun was dipping below the horizon. He pointed to a small fishing boat that was tuff-tuffing in towards land as the seagulls circled screaming overhead, and then told me that he’d always dreamt of being a fisherman when he was younger. ‘I lived in Rørvik in North Trøndelag from when I was twelve to twenty, and when I saw what young guys with no education could earn from one trip, I wasn’t in any doubt. They threw their money around. Bought rounds for everyone in the pub, bought whatever they wanted. Big cars and motorbikes, you know, that kind of thing,’ he said. He sat and followed the fishing boat for a while, in a kind of dream, and then he turned back to me. ‘But, well, it never happened,’ he said and wrapped his fingers round the beer glass. ‘And probably just as well, it only takes a sea shanty to make me feel sick.’

He looked at me and smiled, and I smiled back. We each took a drink, and then he started to tell me what he actually did now. He’d been self-employed ever since he moved from Rørvik to Trondheim, he said. He’d run a takeaway in Heimdal for a while, but for the past seven years he’d been the owner and manager of a cleaning business with four employees, two women from Thailand, one from Russia and one from Bosnia.

I was worried that he might follow this up with an excruciating joke with sexual or racist innuendos, but thankfully he didn’t, quite the opposite in fact, he talked about how reliable and good they were. Never any trouble, he said, great work ethic.

Maybe he was alright after all, I thought, there are people who get all cocky and sarcastic to mask their social anxiety, maybe he was just nervous?

Naturally I wondered how Frank was, but I didn’t want to give myself away, so I couldn’t ask, I didn’t even dare fish a bit. I looked at Karl Morten and smiled as he continued to talk about himself. He told me more about his business. He had plans to expand, he said, the middle class can’t be bothered to clean their own houses anymore, or maybe they just don’t have time, what do I know. Since all the oil money had started to flow into the country, more and more people definitely wanted cleaners, so he could earn a pretty penny.

He emptied the rest of his glass and turned to the waiter who was wiping the next table.

‘A beer and a Jägermeister, please.’

‘Ok,’ the waiter said. He threw the cloth over his shoulder, looked at me and nodded at the coffee cup with arched eyebrow.

‘I’ll have a hot chocolate and cream instead,’ I said.

He nodded, and was about to leave when Karl Morten stopped him.

‘And can we have the bill at the same time?’ he said. The waiter nodded, and Karl Morten turned to me with a grin. ‘Might as well pay for them before the others get back. That way Åsne won’t know how much I’ve drunk, she tends to worry, you see.’

‘If it worries her, wouldn’t it be best just to drink less?’ I said.

He sat and looked at me for a while, and then he started to laugh. He sat back in his chair and pointed at me.

‘*Now* I know who you remind me of,’ he said. ‘Ever since I met you for the first time, I’ve had the feeling I’ve seen you before. Fuck, it’s Dagfinn Høybråten, And it’s not just your morals that remind me of him. Your eyes are the same. Those light blue eyes that kind of … make your blood freeze. I mean, no offence, like!’

And then the waiter was there. He put the tray down on the table, lifted off the beer and Jägermeister and hot chocolate and handed the bill to Karl Morten. He was about to leave, but it was obviously necessary to clear all evidence, because Karl Morten asked him to wait, said that he wanted to pay now, and leaned back in the chair as he stretched out a leg and put his hand in the pocket of his khaki shorts. He took out his wallet, gave the waiter a banknote, drank up the Jägermeister while he waited for the change. He was well on the way to being drunk already, I could see it, his eyes were shiny, watery.

I took a sip of hot chocolate.

‘I have to go to the loo again,’ I said, and this time I really did need to go to the loo.

‘You should get your prostate checked out,’ he said.

I pretended not to hear. I just stood up and made my way to the toilets.

One spring day, Frank and I were out walking their dog, Ruffen, when Sonja Holte came walking towards us with an English setter on a lead.

Sonja Holte. Three years older than us. She was a drum majorette and was always at the front of the constitution day parade on 17 May. In a red uniform, with shining white boots as she

tossed and twirled her stick. I didn't like her. None of us did. She lived in Prærien as well, but in a red detached house that had once belonged to one of the town's sawmill owners, and it was like a mini-palace compared to all the small workers' houses and council flats around it. Obviously I'd never been to her house, but I had been in the orchard to steal apples, and from what I could see from there – the oak-lined drive, the broad stone steps with a sculpture on either side, not to mention the enormous chandelier that was visible through one of the reception room windows – it all would all make it seem perfectly natural for a butler to appear, or servants dressed in black and white.

Once when the whole school was gathered in the gymnasium for a debate in connection with the up-and-coming school elections, she'd put up her hand and said that she refused to believe that there were families in Norway who couldn't afford to buy new bikes for their children and that made quite an impression on me. In my group of friends there were plenty who wouldn't even dream of asking their parents for a new bike, and I'd learnt to cycle on Mum's huge, heavy ladies' bike and was happy to use it, until Dad managed to get hold of a cheap bike at the annual police auction. I was nine.

But at the same time that we disliked, well, hated Sonja and her gang, we couldn't help admiring them. We would never have admitted it, not to each other or ourselves even, but that's the truth. Because they had things that we wanted. Not just slalom skis, bikes with twelve gears, a speedometer and bullhorn handlebars and – a few years later – Levi 501s and shirts and sweaters with the Lacoste and Martinique and Poco Loco labels. They also had a self-confidence that we envied, the knowledge that they were something, that their opinions mattered, that they were heard, included. No matter where they were, they took it for granted that they were included, and that meant that they radiated a certain something, I don't know what to call it, but something that might rub off on us, at least.

And that's why both Frank and I felt reluctantly honoured when she suddenly decided to stop. Never in our dreams could we have imagined that she would deign to do anything like that, certainly not here, right in front of the corner shop where anyone could see us. But she did. She even smiled.

'What kind of dog is that?' she asked.

‘We don’t know who the dad is,’ Frank said. ‘But the mum’s a mix between a Norwegian Buhund and some kind of terrier.’

Sonja pulled a face that made me think of hair in food.

‘Oh … is it a *bastard*?’ she said.

It was only later that I realised she’d known all along it was a mongrel, and that she just wanted to show her disgust in a spontaneous, and therefore, believable manner.

When do children learn to behave like that, I might think today. When does one become so strategic, calculating, so mean? Early on was clearly the answer, when they have a good mentor.

Whatever, I wouldn’t have remembered the episode if the two dogs hadn’t started to fight right after that, and Sonja said that Ruffen bit her when she bent down to separate them. He didn’t. It was nothing more than a scratch down the back of her hand, but that didn’t matter.

A few hours later, a black Audi Quattor pulled up outside our block of flats. Frank and I were writing in felt pen on the plaster cast of a girl who had fallen down from the transformator and broken her arm a few days before, when we saw Sonja’s father get out of the car and go over to a boy in a Marius sweater who was doing a wheelie on a chopper with plastic ribbons and hard cardboard discs attached to the wheels with clothes pegs, so it sounded like an engine when they flicked over the spokes.

‘Can you tell me where Reinert lives?’

The boy braked leaving a dark brown skid mark in the gravel.

‘There!’ he said, and stood balancing on the pedals as he nodded to our six apartment-block. ‘But I saw him go into the van a while back, so I don’t think he’s home.’

‘The van?’

The boy pointed to the old caravan that stood by the edge of the woods on the other side of the gravel pitch. It originally belonged to the sports club and had been used as a hotdog stand when there were local matches and ski competitions, but ever since a gang of youths had smashed the windows and lit a bonfire on the floor and blown apart the kitchen fittings with a taped bundle of firecrackers that we called “zeroeight”, it had been parked up over there and become a kind of den for some of the Prærien alchys.

Sonja's father was calm, but determined, as he strode over, and the kids roundabout stopped whatever they were doing and followed, one by one, on foot or on bikes, they knew something was about to happen and didn't want to miss it, they waved and called to others along the way and suddenly there was a whole swarm of little and big children heading towards the caravan. Frank looked uneasy, almost frightened, his face was white and rigid. He didn't say anything, but started to run after the others, and I followed him.

Sonja's father rapped on side of the caravan twice and at the same time called out and asked if Reinert was there.

'I think so,' we heard Reinert say.

Laughter.

'Can you come out?'

A couple of seconds later Reinert appeared in the doorway, as straight-backed as always. He had a rollie in his mouth and the smoke stroked up his face and made him narrow his eyes so they looked like two black lines.

'Fucking hell!' he said. He stood there looking at Sonja's father for two, three seconds, and then he turned towards whoever was sitting inside. 'You sure it wasn't meths you had with you?'

'Huh?' we heard someone say.

'My eyesight's starting to fail me, that's for sure,' Reinert said, without turning back towards us. 'I swear I saw His Majesty Gunnar Holte outside.'

Reinert turned to Sonja's father with a smirk.

'Just joking,' he said. 'But, well, what do you want?'

Sonja's father explained why he was there. He spoke with a confidence that had no bearing on his small stature. He was neither threatening nor angry, his attitude was more like a boss giving out orders to his employees. Brief and informative, but with an unspoken expectation that his orders would be followed: the dog had bitten Sonja on the hand and had to be put down as soon as the vet opened in the morning.

Reinert stood leaning against the doorframe, smoking, until Sonja's father had finished speaking, then he dropped the butt down onto the gravel, walked down the steps with calm deliberation. He still didn't say anything, he looked down as he lifted his foot to crush the

cigarette with his clog, then he raised his eyes and looked Sonja's father straight in the face with a grin. He was about to say something, but before he managed, Dagny appeared in the doorway. She looked at Sonja's father and then turned her back, pulled down her trousers and leaned forwards so her big white arse shone up into his face.

Hysterical laughter and enthusiastic whoops from the children.

'Mum! Don't!' Frank shouted, but Dagny carried on, she bent her torso even further forwards and swung her bum low from side to side.

'There!' Reinert said, pointing to Dagny's backside without taking his eyes from Sonja's dad's face. 'That's your answer!' he laughed.

'Best Boys' Club,' Mum said when she heard what had happened with Dagny and Reinert a few days after the show at the caravan. 'You don't want to mess about with that lot.'

I thought that Sonja's father was a member of club that was actually called "Best Boys' Club", and it was only later that I understood that Mum was referring to an informal network of important men who met in cafes and at dinners to discuss and make decisions, both important and trivial, men who protected and covered for each other when necessary, and who didn't need the police or court to punish anyone they thought deserved to be punished: tenants could be evicted for no reason, for example. Or people could lose their jobs or be reallocated to the shit jobs with new employees and summer temps. Or they might not get the planning permission needed for their new garage after all, or the road that they'd always used to get to their cabin might suddenly be closed to the public.

The possibilities were endless and the sanctions always legal, albeit deeply unfair. Reinert, for example, was told that he no longer had a job at the timber yard on the east side, where he'd been working three days a week or whenever needed. No one could prove anything, but it was general knowledge that Gunnar Holte was a friend of the manager there, so everyone knew what had happened.

Dad – a union man and communist – got really worked up and wanted to discuss politics when he heard about things like that, whereas Mum simply snorted and made a few comments which might well be full of contempt and smouldering rage, but basically showed she thought

there was little or nothing to be done about it. Better to accept that things were the way they were than risk being disappointed, and becoming bitter and unhappy.

'Don't you go getting involved again, please,' she said, when she heard that Reinert had asked to talk to Dad about how to deal with the situation, but naturally, Dad had already agreed, and that very evening, Reinert knocked on the door. Mum disappeared into the kitchen and closed the door when he came in, and I was sent to my room, but could hear everything that was said in the living room through the thin walls, Reinert crying and saying that he didn't expect Dad to help him again, he was embarrassed to ask, especially after what had happened the last time, but he didn't know what else to do, and he had no one else to go to, and actually there was no one else who could help him, you're a working man like me, but the powers that be listen to you, he said, they respect you, everyone does.

Dad said there was nothing he could do to get Reinert his job back, if he'd had a contract, it would have been different, then it would be a matter for the union, but unfortunately that wasn't the case.

'But what I *can* do, is to see if there's anything for you at the sawmill,' Dad said. 'One of the old boys is retiring next month, which means there's a part-time job going in sorting.'

'Oh, *could you*?'

'I can't guarantee that you'll get the job, but I can ask.'

'Thank you, thank you,' Reinert said. 'Goodness, it's what I've always said, if anything goes wrong, talk to Evald.'

When Reinert left, Mum was annoyed, well, angry. Naturally, she had listened to the whole thing as well, and she couldn't believe that Dad never learnt.

'How long did Reinert manage to hold done that job you got him before?' she asked as she put a washing up bowl of soapy water down on the table, a little too hard, so it spilled over and left a small, shiny pool on the surface. 'As a bin man? Was it even six months before he was back on the booze and started missing his shifts?' she asked, and wrung out the torn, fraying handtowel that was now used as a cleaning cloth. The water ran and dripped down into the bowl and the soap bubbles blistered between her red fingers.

‘He deserves another chance, everyone does,’ Dad said, from where he was sitting on the sofa, watching her, as he reached for the tobacco.

Mum laughed and shook her head. She wouldn’t meet his eyes, she didn’t like eye contact when she was angry or disagreed with him, nor when she was angry or disagreed with others, which was why she always tried to find something to do while they discussed or argued about anything, like now, it was a Monday, and she’d dusted and cleaned before the weekend, as she always did, but set about cleaning the living room again all the same, her hands and movements faster and more abrupt than usual.

‘How many chances do you think a man should have?’ she said.

Dad sighed, pulled a cigarette paper from the orange Rizla packet and started to sprinkle the tobacco.

‘You don’t know Reinert,’ he said. ‘He’s not had an easy life.’

‘*Easy life,’* Mum retorted, and started to dust the second to top bookshelf, where the Nordic Crime Club collection was kept. ‘There are plenty who haven’t had an easy life. But we don’t carry on the way he does.’

Dad gave another sigh, a bit heavier and more exasperated than the last.

‘Well, well, let’s see what happens,’ he said. He licked the cigarette paper so it was shiny and transparent, rolled up the cigarette and put it in his mouth. ‘He may not even get the job,’ he added, striking a match down the long side of the box and lit the cigarette.

Mum continued her dusting. She didn’t bother to lift the flower pots, ornaments and photographs, as she normally did, she just wiped round them.

‘”You’re a working man like me,”’ she parroted after a while, with a derisive laugh.

‘What do you mean?’

‘All that fawning!’

‘What fawning?’ Dad said, he had his elbows on his knees and looked at Mum as he blew the smoke out through his nose.

‘Sitting there talking as if you and he were allies. Saying things that he thought you might like. Words like working man and powers that be and … well, words I’m sure he doesn’t normally use, but that he knows that you and the people you associate with do.’

She shook her head with a snort, as she dunked the cloth in the soapy water.

‘I’m surprised he didn’t manage to squeeze in the word “comrade” somewhere,’ she said. She snorted again as she wrung out the cloth. ‘And the fact that he sat there singing your praises. All of it, ingratiating and calculated, and, of course, you weren’t to be fooled!’

‘I wasn’t fooled,’ Dad said. ‘I understood perfectly well what he was doing, good god, I’m not stupid. But I also know that he was doing it because he’s desperate. Do you really think Reinert enjoys brown-nosing people? Well, he doesn’t. He was only doing it because he thinks it’s the only way to get him out of the situation he’s in, because he thinks that’s what it takes to get help, that’s what he’s been taught, it’s what we’ve all learned, that’s the way things work in a class-based society.’

‘Don’t start,’ Mum said. ‘Please!’

‘But it’s true,’ Dad said. ‘People should accept their place on the social ladder, and shouldn’t get organise and make demands and talk about rights, but come, one by one, cap in hand, to ask for help – and only when absolutely necessary.’

‘Oh, Jesus! Spare me!’ Mum muttered, and dropped the rag into the water with a splash, picked up the washing up bowl and left the room.

The others had arrived when I came back from the toilet. They were sitting at the table, showing what they’d bought. Åsne had put out three dishes – she thought it was such fun to buy local crafts whenever she was abroad, I heard her say, but the plates weren’t exactly handmade, they were mass-produced souvenirs, the motifs and colours were imitations of tradition local art, to be fair. I could tell straightaway, and wondered what Therese’s reaction was when she saw the plates, she who really knew her arts and crafts. I guessed she’d tried to hide what she really thought, but wasn’t so sure she’d managed.

‘Hello, hello,’ I said and sat down. I was about to ask Helga if I could see what she’d bought, but didn’t get the chance.

‘You’ve got some cream in the corner of your mouth,’ Karl Morten said.

I wiped my mouth with my hand and looked at my fingers. He was right, there was a bit of cream.

‘Or … maybe it wasn’t cream, eh?’ Karl Morten said.

‘Karl Morten!’ Åsne said, in mock dismay. She slapped him lightly on the upper arm.

He shrugged, and opened his hands, palms up.

'*I* don't know what he was up to in the toilet just now. He disappeared at the same time as *him* over there,' he said, and nodded towards the waiter. 'I mean, he does work for Adressa's gay mag, after all, so it's possible it isn't cream,' he said. He looked over at Åsne and laughed, and Åsne joined in, shaking her head as if to say he was bad.

'What are you laughing at?' Sondre asked.

'Right, let me explain,' Karl Morten said, in a teacherly fashion, folding his hands and leaning over towards Sondre. 'There are men who like men, and there are men who like women.'

'Don't, sto-op, you crazy man!' Åsne said. She had wrapped the three plates up again and stacked them as she looked at Karl Morten.

'*What?'* Karl Morten said, with exaggerated innocence and another shrug. 'I'm just trying to explain some of the realities of life to the poor boy.'

'Oh dear god,' Åsne said, and put the plates back in the bag.

'Ok, ok,' Karl Morten said. 'I'm sure Trond can take a joke.' He looked at me with his watery, alcohol eyes and grinned. 'Isn't that right, Trond?'

'Sometimes,' I said.

'Well, I guess we should find somewhere to eat,' Therese said, quickly. She was uncomfortable, but tried to sound cheerful. Åsne, on the other hand, didn't seem to notice what was happening and appeared to be genuinely happy.

'Can't we just eat here?' she said, and gestured as she looked around. 'Seems alright here.'

I glanced over at Therese. I, of course, knew that she would be as keen as me to eat elsewhere, I just wanted to gauge how she thought we should react to the suggestion. She said nothing, but the way she closed her eyes and waggled her head told me we'd go with the flow, it was so fleeting that no one else noticed, then she bent down and took off one of her flipflops, held it up and shook some fine, white sand onto the already dirty floor, then put it on again.

'They've got pizza, so we're happy,' Karl Morten said. He looked at Sondre and smiled. 'Aren't we, Sondre?'

'Yay, pizza,' Sondre whooped.

'Ok, we'll eat here then,' I said.

Having got a pile of plastic-laminated menus and taken a few minutes to decide, we were ready to order.

'And one of those,' Karl Morten added, when he'd said what kind of pizza he wanted. He held the menu up to the waiter and pointed, presumably because he was afraid that Åsne would see what he'd ordered to drink and say something about it being too much. He handed the menu back to the waiter and stood up. 'I need to go to the toilet,' he said. 'One beer in, one beer out,' and off he went.

'*One* beer,' I muttered.

'What was that?' Therese said.

I smiled and shook my head.

'Nothing.'

Once we had all ordered what we wanted to drink, we sat and talked about what we could do over the next few days. Therese wanted to rent a car and drive to the top of Mount Teide, Helga wanted to go to a zoo where they had shows with dolphins and orcas and sealions, and Åsne wanted to go on an organised bus trip to a village that was known for its ceramics – *world famous,* as she said. I wanted to arrange as little as possible with Åsne there, so said we could just see what happened. If Åsne and Karl Morten wanted to go on the bus trip the next day, I would go for Teide or the zoo, or the other way round, I thought, it was fine to be on holiday together, but I wasn't prepared to do everything together, all the time.

The waiter brought over our drinks. A beer for me, coke for the children, a glass of rosé each for Therese and Åsne, and a bottle of red wine for Karl Morten. Just as I thought, I said to myself.

'A bottle?` Åsne said. She looked at the waiter and raised her eyebrows.

Karl Morten came back from the toilet at the same time. He tried to look surprised.

'But there are three of us,' he said. And then he made a show of noticing the glasses for Therese and Åsne. 'Oh,' he said, and sat down. 'I ordered for the three of us, that's why I got a bottle. Sorry. I forgot to mention it before I went.'

'I'm sure you can change your order,' Åsne said. 'The bottle's not been opened yet.'

'Oh, not to worry,' Karl Morten said, putting up his hand. 'You might want another glass later.'

‘Ok,’ Åsne said.

Karl Morten looked at the waiter and nodded. The waiter opened the bottle and poured him a glass.

We continued to discuss what we wanted to do.

‘Well, cheers,’ Åsne said, after a while. ‘Nice that we could come on holiday with you.’

‘So nice that you wanted to come with us,’ Therese said.

We all raised our glasses, and had it not been that Karl Morten drank so fast, everything would have been fine, or certainly tolerable. But he finished his first glass and poured another before Åsne and Therese were even halfway through theirs, and when the food arrived and he poured a third, Therese looked at me and pursed her lips in a kind of “oh-oh, not good” way.

‘One for the other foot to balance up,’ he said.

‘Are you a spider, or what?’ Åsne said.

It was, no doubt, intended to be a humorous way of asking him to slow down, but Karl Morten was not interested in being pulled up for his drinking, not matter how it was put. He gave Åsne a smile that was anything but friendly.

‘Fuck that,’ he said, as he put the bottle down.

There was silence.

And then it seemed to dawn on Karl Morten what he’d just said. He looked at Therese, looked at me, and back at Åsne again. He attempted a laugh.

‘Didn’t mean it,’ he said. ‘God.’

More silence.

Åsne was red in the face, she kept her eyes trained on her hands as she lifted up a slice of pizza from the wicker basket and tried to pull loose the long, shiny strands of melted cheese that stubbornly refused to let go of the pieces that were left. A bit like a darker version of Lady and the Tramp, I thought to myself, and grabbed a serviette to mop up a small, quivering puddle of coke that Helga had spilt on the table. I waited until the liquid had been sucked up and the serviette had turned light brown, then I scrunched it up and dropped it into my empty beer glass. As though to make a point that I, for one, would not be having any more alcohol, I thought, when I realised what I’d done.

‘Is the pizza good, Helga?’ Therese asked.

Helga nodded without looking up from her plate. She looked uncertain, almost frightened, and I felt the love welling up inside me. I reach out and gently stroked her back. Dear, sweet Helga, she'd been so excited about coming here, and I was damned if I was going to let Karl Morten spoil her holiday. I was about to tell him, but who knew how Karl Morten might react, so I couldn't. If he got angry or annoyed, I risked making the children even more anxious, and that was the last thing I wanted to do. I leaned forward and gave her a reassuring smile, and Helga smiled back, albeit fleeting and wan. I'll talk to her when we get back to the hotel, I thought, I'll explain that there's nothing to be frightened of.

'I'm sorry, Åsne,' Karl Morten said. He'd got to the stage when you realise you're slurring your words and try to hide it by speaking very clearly. 'That came out wrong. I know I sounded annoyed, but I'm not, not with you … I was just thinking about something else, and well … slip of the tongue, is that not what they call it?' he said. He tried to laugh again.

'That's ok,' Åsne said.

She tried to smile, but didn't quite manage, and her cheeks were still red. It was painful to watch. I bent over my plate and carried on eating, while Karl Morten tried to get the conversation going again, he said that his pizza was good, but would have liked a little more cheese.

'How are your pizzas?' he asked.

'Good,' Åsne said

'Yep,' Theresa nodded.

After a few more seconds of silence, Therese and Åsne obviously tried to pull themselves together and talk like nothing had happened, but it was obvious to everyone that that was exactly what they were doing, and the more they tried, the more awkward it became.

'How about dessert?' Karl Morten said, when everyone had finished.

He tore the packaging from a toothpick, put the paper in the ashtray and stuck the toothpick between his teeth.

'I don't want anything,' Therese said.

'Nor do I,' Åsne followed.

I didn't say anything, just shook my head. Karl Morten turned to the side, pulled out the toothpick and spat a pizza crumb over the fence and into the dark, then he put the toothpick back in his mouth and casually reached for the wine bottle.

‘What about you, Sondre and Helga, surely you want a dessert?’ he said, without removing the toothpick, so it bobbed up and down in the corner of his mouth, and made his voice sound strange. He looked at the children and smiled as he filled his glass .

Sondre and Helga both shook their heads, but said nothing, Sondre was staring hard down into his lap, and Helga was gathering up all the leftover pizza crusts into a paper bag that she’d got when they were shopping.

‘Well, that’s a new one on me,’ Karl Morten said, putting down the bottle. ‘Children not wanting dessert.’

No one said anything for a while.

‘Shall we ask for the bill?’ I said.

Therese and Åsne looked at me and managed to squeeze out a smile, and both nodded. I looked over at Karl Morten. He appeared to have given up on his attempt to brighten the atmosphere, that’s to say, the disgusting grin had returned.

‘Yes, I guess it’s time for bed,’ he said. ‘Nearly half past eight and we’re on holiday, after all!’

He laughed and took another sip of wine. I didn’t say anything, I didn’t know what to say, I glanced over at Therese and Åsne. They turned away and made out they were busy with the children. Åsne started to pick at Sondre’s shorts where she thought she’d seen some tomato sauce, she said, and Therese asked what Helga was going to do with the pizza crusts. Helga didn’t answer, instead she got up and went over to the exit where a stray dog was sitting, with scars on its face, its ribs sticking out on both sides, and then she emptied the crusts out on the floor and stood watching while the dog devoured them greedily. She’s so kind, I thought, so caring.

I wasn’t sure what the staff would think about feeding stray dogs, so I waited until the dog had finished eating before I called the waiter over and asked for the bill, and five minutes later we were on our way back to the hotel. We walked together, to begin with, but when we crossed the square with the fountain and stalls and started up the hill towards the hotel, Karl Morten started to lag behind. Five metres widened to ten, ten to twenty and soon enough we couldn’t see him when we looked back. We could hear him whistling somewhere in the dark, but it was quickly drowned out by the intense sound of the cicadas in the dusty, pungent eucalyptus

trees that grew on either side of the road. I looked over at Åsne. She couldn't be bothered now even to pretend that everything was alright. There was no point. Therese and I both knew that she was embarrassed and upset, and she knew that we knew, so walked without saying anything, hand in hand with Sondre, just ahead of Therese, who was holding Helga's hand. I stopped every now and then to see if Karl Morten was behind us, but I couldn't see him, not even when we were at the top of the hill and had a view all the way down to the little supermarket on the corner that was all lit up, some hundred metres away. He'd probably gone back to sit down at one of the bars along the promenade.

We turned into the cobbled area outside the hotel, still without saying anything. The troubadour was playing a surprisingly good rendition of Deep Purple's Soldier of Fortune, and if everything had been as it should, I would have suggested a last drink in the bar, but that was obviously out of the question now.

'See you in the morning,' Åsne said, as she and Sondre stepped out of the lift.

'Yes, see you then,' Therese replied.

I noticed that they exchanged a look and smiled in a way that said we'll talk about this later, when we're alone.

When we'd taken the lift on up to the sixth floor and let ourselves into our room, Helga helped herself to a bottle of coke and some crisps, and lay down on the bed to play on her DS, and Theresa and I went out and sat on the balcony, she with a white wine, me with a gin and tonic. We sat in silence for a while. The troubadour had taken a break, and the sound of the waves washing slowly onto the beach, only fifty metres away, blended with the laughter and voices from the hotel bar, and the familiar tune of Super Mario in the hotel room.

'Fucking hell!' Therese said. She looked at me and shook her head. Her mouth was half open, her eyes wide. 'There's no words! What an awful person!'

'Yes,' I said.

I felt the ice cubes collide with my front teeth as I took a sip of the G&T. I still felt I couldn't say that I knew him from before, I had no idea why, I still don't, for a long time I thought it was about shame, but I was wrong, because I wasn't ashamed of growing up where I had. I might, sometimes, in situations where my academic knowledge was lacking, but not in situations like this, where I might, contrarily, feel a sense of pride. In Therese's eyes, I

sometimes even took on the role of ambassador for harsh realities when I talked about my upbringing in Namsos in the seventies and eighties, and even though I was offended when she said it, I knew that she was right. It wasn't that I lied when I spoke about it, but I had a tendency to leave out anything that didn't fit in with the expectations of growing up in a rough, working class environment. Perhaps because I wanted to make my own achievement into something greater than it actually was. Or perhaps because a strong working class background gave me credibility when I spoke on behalf of the Trondheim Labour Party and legitimacy to stand for election – as I did back then. I don't know, but it definitely wasn't shame that stopped me from saying that I already knew Karl Morten from when we were kids. I think it was more that I was afraid that he would demand some kind of loyalty from me, if he found out that we had a shared past. That he would expect me to show understanding for the fact that he was who he was. That I would excuse his behaviour to the others and maybe even help him, sit and listen patiently to his pitiful story as he got drunker and more sentimental, for example.

I somehow associate the reluctance to acknowledge him with something about all the good stories my dad told about Dagny and Reinert, "they bloody well drank up an entire house, haha" and "he used the bloody wooden railings from the balcony for firewood on Christmas Eve, haha". I think those stories – which no doubt have shaped my memories of what it was like to grow up at Prærien and Gullvik in those days – have helped me to distance myself from a lot of what happened. That they've changed something that was horrible, painful and uncomfortable into something I can laugh about.

And maybe it was that, that's to say, the distance between what actually happened, on the one hand, and the stories and memories of the same events, on the other, that made the greatest impression on me when I met Karl Morten in Tenerife. Perhaps the meeting with Karl Morten put me in touch with a time I had embellished. That I had a nostalgic relationship to that time, but no wish to go back. A reality I knew and took for granted at the time, but that I wouldn't be able to adapt to now, not at all, I barely managed an hour in a café with a half-drunk and unpleasant Karl Morten.

'Would you like another gin and tonic?' Therese asked after a while.

I looked over at her wine glass. It was half full, so she didn't need to go in for another. I was about to say that I could get one myself, but I didn't, I realised that she felt a strange sense of gratitude, and I didn't want stop her from doing something nice for me.

'Yes, thank you,' I said.

She gave me a warm smile as she put her hands down on the arms of the white plastic chair and stood up. I closed my eyes, leant back my head and sat there enjoying the smell of the sea and eucalyptus and the warm wind that caressed my face. When Therese came out again, we continued to talk about what had happened. We used words like awful, uncomfortable and mean when we spoke about Karl Morten, but it was all said with a poorly disguised glee. A little while later she put her left hand on the table that was between us, and I cupped it in mine. We sat there without saying anything, then she turned to me. She smiled, a different smile from the one before.

'I want you,' she said.