MY TIME IN THESE WOODS

(Min tid i disse skogene)

by

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For where your treasure is,

there will your heart be also.

MATTHEW 6:21

BOOK ONE

(1932-1941)

Chapter 1

That evening as he watched Ingeborg walk down the road leading from the farms, Johannes put on his coat and followed her. It was one of those early spring evenings of which there were so many in Hesland: calm, clear, cloudless and with swallows circling the sky above the outbuilding. He did not know where she was going, all he knew was that he would follow her. Ever since the day Ingeborg had come to Hesland to work on the farm, he had been terrified that she would leave. It had been his deepest, most private fear: losing her. She was like no other woman he knew. There was something dark and mesmerising about her. Something he could not resist. She was twenty-eight years old, two years younger than him, and so tantalizing that it almost drove him insane. It was torture. He did not dare to even think about what would happen if she turned him down. Nor on this evening, as he followed her, did he have any idea of what he was going to do, all he knew was that this was his only chance. For a while he kept at a suitable distance from her. Then he sped up. Slowly but surely he approached her from behind. He caught the scent of her hair, her clothes, finally she must have heard his footsteps on the gravel road because she stopped and turned.

‘Oh, it’s you?’ she smiled.

They continued, now walking together until he knew they could no longer be seen from the houses. They reached the cool shade under the spruces. It was not until then that he said:

‘Where are you going?’

The old school was about half a mile south of the farms and even before they reached it, Johannes had realised that it was now or never. He asked if she wanted to look through the windows of the old classroom, which was unchanged since his own school days. He was embarrassed at his suggestion and his cheeks reddened as he led the way. She cupped her hands like a funnel against the glass. The panes were filthy on the outside and dusty on the inside; she could not possibly be seeing very much.

‘That was where I used to sit,’ he said, pointing into the dim room. ‘Right by the window.’

Then they walked around to the back of the building where stinging nettles grew in a shy, rustling forest against the wall. They sat down on the steps leading to the door. Moss grew on every step and moisture seeped up through their clothes. He had no idea what to do or what to say. They were sitting so close to each other that everything around them faded into a mysterious background – the wind in the grass, the shadows of the nettles, her breath, hair, hands. He had no idea how to kiss a woman, but when she leaned towards him and pursed her lips, it was as if he learned it that very instance.

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Just under a year later they were married in Grinnum, the parish from which she had come, some fifteen miles from Hesland. That was in April 1933, four months before Ingeborg's thirtieth birthday. It was the first time his father met her parents, and it would prove to be the last. Two years after the wedding his father fell ill. The district doctor came to Hesland one Sunday and paid his father a visit in his bedroom while Johannes and his younger brother, Peder, sat silently in the kitchen, hearing their melancholy voices through the wall. Then followed ten months in a sickbed until his father became so emaciated that he could no longer stand up. He stopped eating. He barely slept. He could not hold down fluids. On the day of his death all that was left of his father was sallow skin stretched over sinews and bones. Johannes had to admit it: His father's death that day was a blessed relief.

It had always been the plan that Johannes would take over the family farm although he could not recall a single occasion where anyone had actually said so to him. It was self-evident, a tacit understanding, and he lived with this self-evident knowledge until one autumn evening some months after his father had been buried. Johannes had come in from the barn to read the newspaper in the living room as was his wont

at this time of the day. He sat alone, surrounded by the crackling of logs in the stove and the silence of the house, until he had finished the newspaper and his thoughts started circling around Ingeborg. Sometimes she would go for an evening walk, she would simply leave the house without saying where she was going, but this evening was different. Johannes went to open the front door several times. He paused on the doorstep, gazing into the floating, foggy rain that streamed through the light from the outdoor lamp, but he could not make himself call out her name. He just stood there, listening in silence, as if he feared his own voice.

When it was coming up for eleven o'clock, he put on his clogs and went outside. It was pitch black and the path to the forest behind the farmhouse was slippery, it was the path that led to Heslandtjønna. However, he knew the path so well that he could have walked it with his eyes closed, but even he was forced to turn back eventually. Peder had gone to bed when he returned, but Johannes stayed up until well past midnight without Ingeborg coming home.

She did not come.

Finally he went upstairs to bed. He lay there rigidly, listening to the silence, unable to sleep. And yet he must have nodded off because he woke up at dawn when somebody opened the front door. When he came down to the living room, Ingeborg was sitting on the divan with her hands in her lap. Her

hair was wet. And it struck him that she seemed frightened, as if she had witnessed something terrible.

‘There you are!’ he said. ‘Where on earth have you been?!’

She stared straight at the door where he was standing without shifting her gaze. It was as if her disappearance had merely been preparation for this very moment; he would enter and ask her where she had been and she would look at him, her eyes seemingly filled with terror. And then she would utter the sentence which she had spent the whole night trying to articulate.

‘I can’t be here any longer,’ she said. ‘I can’t live here anymore.’

Chapter 2

Johannes never got to the bottom of where she had been, but as she sat on the divan that morning, he sensed the outline of what was to come. She had changed since the death of his father. She might flare up over nothing, especially when Peder was around. At first he thought it was some kind of performance on her part, that she was acting up and did not expect to be taken seriously. When he realised that it was not just an irrational whim, that it was genuine, he waited a long time for it to pass and somehow burn itself out.

But it only grew worse.

When the brothers sat in the living room in the evenings, she would roam the meadows, wander alone in the woods or sit at the edge of the wood, staring at the farmhouse. When he tried to talk to her, she would shy away from him and not speak a single word to him for a long time afterwards. Once when he tried to approach her, she screamed and ran into the woods. She no longer slept in the same bed as Johannes, instead she would lie down on the divan in the living room where his father had lain in the hours before and immediately after his death. To begin with the brothers did not talk about what was happening. It was the same as when their father fell

ill and everyone knew which way it was going: they just carried on as usual and waited for the bad thing to go away.

But it did not go away, and he understood that it was caused by something inside her that she could not control, something which in the beginning, he had interpreted as tantalising, erotic almost, but which was now showing its true nature. He could not get anywhere near her and when he asked her why, she was incapable of giving him a sensible answer. Instead she started to cry. She would pace up and down the barn on her own, sobbing to herself, but when he felt sorry for her and tried to comfort her, she would flinch or get angry, she might explode with rage if he as much as put his hand on her shoulder. This, too, he tried to face with the same attitude of calm and steadfastness as his father had shown when faced with death. He waited for her to calm down, but she did not calm down. It did not go away, it did not pass.

It did not pass.

Soon he understood that there was little he could do except consider the impossible: He would have to give up Hesland and move away for good. Not for one second did he contemplate a life without her. He understood that he had a choice to make, but not for one second did he dare to entertain the thought of losing her now that their real life together was about to start. When push came to shove it was a simple choice and yet impossible at the same time. The thought of leaving the

family farm went from being absurd to potentially possible. Soon it was no longer just a possibility, but something which had to happen eventually.

When the notice of a farm being auctioned off appeared in the newspaper, the page stayed open on the table. Kleveland lay some twenty-five miles from Hesland, in the far western part of Finsland, the neighbouring parish. The farm had belonged to Berthel S. Kleveland, who had died that same winter. It was an option.

They agreed that he would go to Finsland.

The night before the auction he sat with Ingeborg in the living room at Hesland, which had looked the same for as long as Johannes could remember. The house was practically unchanged since his earliest childhood, and he felt dizzy at the thought that he might have to leave behind everything that was an integral part of him. It was inconceivable. He felt physically sick just thinking about it. He got up and stared out of the window, but what he was really seeing was a dark, turbulent maelstrom which he vaguely understood was his own, uncertain destiny.

‘Johannes?’

‘Yes?’

‘What are you looking at?’

‘Nothing,’ he said.

Then he turned and smiled faintly.

‘Are you feeling any better?’ he said.

He did not know if it was the eerie light in the living room or the spring darkness outside, but it struck him that everything about Ingeborg appeared in an unreal glow. It was as if she did not exist, as if her entire being had been a shadow person he had summoned up in his mind, a fantasy woman who had slowly become manifest and real and had eventually had taken control of him.

‘Johannes?’

‘Yes?’

‘Come here,’ she said. ‘Come over here and sit down.’

He sank onto the divan next to her, but rather than stay where she was, she got up, went over to the table and turned down the flame in the lamp so the darkness outside morphed with the room. Johannes saw how her figure became grey and blurred, and he felt how the whirling unease and doubts which had ravaged him, still fluctuated like a chilly sensation between his body and his clothes.

‘Why did you want me to sit down?’ he said.

At the same time he heard the bed creaking up in Peder’s bedroom as if his brother was lying upstairs and listening through the floorboards, also waiting for her reply.

‘Because I want to tell you something,’ she replied.

She picked up some withered leaves from a potted plant. It was a burgundy azalea. It had been sitting there for a

long time. His sister had brought it with her on one of her last visits from Oslo.

‘What is it?’

He heard the sound of dry leaves being crushed. Then she came back to him. She was not yet thirty-four, but her body was still exactly as Johannes remembered it from one of the very first times when he had trembled so violently that she had to help him with the laces in her bodice. Now she undid everything herself. She stripped naked in front of him. This had never happened before. She undressed slowly. It happened so unexpectedly and he was taken aback, his face grew hot as did his chest, his heart. Finally she was completely naked. He dared hardly look up. He could make out her milky, round hips before she came so close to him that he could feel the warmth of her skin and a wave of sweetness from her pubic hair. Carefully he raised his hand. It shook as he touched her.

‘What was it, Ingeborg?’ he said. His voice was hoarse. He was practically whispering. ‘What were you going to tell me?’

Chapter 3

He arrived at the auction before anyone else. It was the first time he had seen the houses in Kleveland, the view westwards and the surrounding woods. It was April 14, 1937. Johannes did not speak to a single person. He saw no one he knew. Yet he continued to fear that there might be someone in the crowd who knew who he was. There was a cart next to an ash tree and at eleven o'clock, a man climbed onto the box seat with a willow stick in his hand. It was the local sheriff. A buyer from the city got his hands on two pink doors; Jens, a man about whom Johannes knew nothing at this point, secured himself a harrow that had barely touched the soil. A frail, old woman standing near the sheriff's feet bought a faded picture of *The Agony in the Garden of Gethsemane*. At last came the turn of what everyone had been waiting for: the farm and the woods. Gripped by a powerful sense of purpose, Johannes made his way to the front of the crowd until he was right next to the cart. It was not until then that he shook off the last remnant of doubt and the only thing that was clear to him now was that the farm had to be his no matter what he had to pay for it. In the distance Johannes registered other bidders, but he never turned around. He was indifferent to them. It was as if everyone around – men, young people, children and old women – vanished, as if the

earth had swallowed them up, until there was just Johannes on his own in front of the cart with the sheriff. He saw nothing but the face of the sheriff. He could have reached out his hand and touched the sheriff's shoes and yet he shouted as if to drown out a murmur of voices deep inside him. He could hear his father's voice. His mother's from somewhere back in a distant childhood. Those of Peder and Siri, his sister, who had died many years ago. And then there was Ingeborg's. It was impossible to make out what they were saying, they talked over one another while Johannes stood alone in front of the sheriff, bidding on a farm miles away from Hesland, a farm and some woods no one in the family had seen, but which he now knew had to be his. It was not until the sheriff whacked his stick against the shafts, that Johannes came to his senses and felt someone seize his arm. It was the old woman who had bought the religious picture. She grabbed hold of him as if she was clinging to what was left of her own past. She must have realised that Johannes was shaking.

'So it's you!' she burst out. 'Imagine that it ended up being you!'

Some people came over to shake his hand, he noticed how the gathering slowly began to disperse, his heart stopped pounding and then the woman told him that her name was Gunvor and that she had been Berthel's housekeeper on Kleveland these last twenty-eight years.

‘Are you cold?’ she wanted to know.

It was Gunvor who had sat at the spinning wheel that had just been sold and it was her who had churned butter in the butter churn and opened the doors of the pink cupboard. They were her possessions which were now being scattered to the four winds, but Gunvor and Berthel had never married, although perhaps it had been a kind of marriage. They had no children. There were no descendants. She herself was over seventy. She was left with nothing but a picture of *The Agony in the Garden of Gethsemane*. She had worked a small patch of land into a garden behind the house where lilies would grow early in the spring, Gunvor told him, there was also a cherry tree in the woods with the sweetest cherries you could imagine.

‘But you’ve got to pick them early or the birds will take everything!’

She refused to release his arm. It was as if she wanted to warm him up, comfort him, as if she wanted to keep her hold on him until he understood that now it was his, the farm and the woods, the lilies and the cherry tree. But Johannes did not understand, he could not comprehend that during a few hours that morning he had uprooted himself from the soil from which he came, and now it was too late to change his mind. It was all too late. He had made his choice and there was no turning back. He was still trembling when he came home to Ingeborg and told her.

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Johannes drove the removal crates on his own the long way to Kleveland, he carried the crates from the cart and put the box with his mother's books upstairs. It took him longer than if he had asked Peder or anyone else for help, but he had made up his mind: He was going to do it all alone. In the bedroom there was an iron bedstead without a mattress, it was Berthel's bed, the bed where the previous owner must have slept every night his whole life. Perhaps it was also where he had died, it might explain the absence of a mattress. After the last load Johannes wandered around the rooms. Apart from the bed the house was practically empty. It was already the middle of May, spring had arrived, his footsteps echoed. The sunlight was pouring in, creating swirling patterns through the windows, he stopped and listened. It was like being under water. Through the living room windows he could see an ash tree cast an immobile shadow over the barn. The house smelled of linen and ammonium, lilacs and old timber. For a long time he stood by the window without moving, then he went upstairs again and sat on the iron bedstead while his eyes trailed the floral wallpaper on the walls. For a long time he could see nothing but the flowers.

Everything they needed was in the barn: a slate sharpening stone that lay comfortably in the hand, a scythe and a rake whose handle was black from the grime of countless hands. Ingeborg swiped the sharpening while Johannes held the scythe, just like she used to do on Hesland, the sweat glistening under her eyes, she looked at him and smiled, and he had an embarrassing moment when he thought she loved him.

He mowed the fields closest to the farmhouse while the morning rose steaming, raw and acidic from the ground. It was the same scent and the same song that had come from the scythe on the meadows back home. And yet nothing was the same. Johannes mowed, Ingeborg hummed, and the grass landed in long, dark stripes that glistened in the grey dawn the next morning. Never before had he been so surprised at himself. Even now, several months after the auction, he could still not believe that everything around him was real. He looked at Ingeborg as she raked up the grass. He looked at her as she turned with her back to him. He thought of her as his eyes adjusted to the darkness in the barn. He wondered what it was that held him so tight and would never let go. What was it about her that had made him hand over the family farm to his brother, leave Hesland and start a life that was not his? He drove posts at an angle into the stubble field to make a hayrack and stretched wire tautly from post to post.

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It was Jens, his neighbour, who showed him the woods. They agreed to meet on the first Sunday in June, a brilliant summer's day. They started by walking along the boundary lines. Jens had brought with him a map which he held, rolled up, in his hand. Where the boundary lines intersected, a cross was supposed to be carved into a rock. They found only one. They wandered across moorland and could smell bayberry in the morning sunshine. They walked through the heather and clouds of pollen rose around their boots. Every now and then Jens would stop to check the map as if he had no idea where they were.

'It's an old map, you see,' he said. 'Not everything adds up. There have been many changes.'

Berthel's woods had never been properly surveyed, but there was little doubt that they were talking well over two hundred and fifty acres. It was one of the biggest farms in the region, Jens stated without taking his eyes off Johannes. They walked through narrow glens some distance north of the buildings. Dragonflies the size of willow warblers shot up from the marsh grass and bounced over the dead calm water. The wooden channelling meant to control the water supply to the sawmill was so rotten that the sides came off in their hands. No

timber had been cut at the sawmill since the last century, but the building itself remained.

‘My father lost a finger in there,’ Jens said. ‘On his right hand. He could barely sign his own name for the rest of his life. So he would just put a cross whenever he needed to. Which wasn’t often.’

Jens showed him the boundary line to his own farm in the east, to Skogen to the north, Haugedal to the north-west and Skålneset further south. Several hours later Johannes had a better understanding of just how much forest he now owned. There was far more rough timber than he had imagined. Far more than in the woods at Hesland. It was a gold mine. He would be able to fell timber every winter for years. For ever, it struck him.

When it was time to go to church, they rested on a pine-covered ridge from where they could look down at farms built by people no one knew anything about nowadays. There were the fertile fields: Ringægra, Dugan, Slåttefida; names he had already learned. They sat chatting with a natural ease that had come from their morning in the woods. Johannes told him a little about Hesland which was in the neighbouring parish some twenty-five miles to the south. Jens had never been there.

‘I’m not as well-travelled as you are, you know!’

He could not put it into words, but there was something about Jens that made Johannes open up more than he had

intended to. They were the same age, but Johannes felt that Jens was the older. He seemed to have lived longer and acquired a suitably pragmatic view of life. He was married to Kristine who was somewhat younger than him. They had two children. Johannes had seen them run around with some kittens along the hawthorn hedge towards the road, a boy and a girl. Jens spoke in an old-fashioned vocabulary which cast a special light over even the most everyday subjects. He used turns of phrases that made Johannes think of his own father. Sentences that would have tripped easily off his father's tongue, but not his. Jens chewed on a straw while Johannes talked about his doubts about buying the farm. It was a relief to tell someone, just saying it as it was to someone who listened, yet at the same time he had no idea why he opened up like this to a man he barely knew.

'Sometimes nothing turns out the way you thought it would,' he said. 'It ends up being something else. And there's nothing you can do about it. But then it feels right.'

'Yes, you have a point there,' Jens replied.

'In time it ends up feeling right.'

Jens leaned forwards with his elbows over his knees and his hands folded in the empty space in front of him. His face was sweaty and shone like bronze. Johannes thought he was composing a response, but in the end Jens just spat out the straw and smiled into the air, and Johannes detected a mild

scepticism as if Jens could make no sense of anything that Johannes had told him.

‘You can see the sea from up here,’ Jens then said after a while. ‘In the autumn, on a clear day,’ he added and pointed southwards. ‘There, about there. Right above the treetops. There’s the sea.’

The line of spruce tops shimmered in the heat along the ridge. Johannes shielded his eyes from the sun and, for a moment, he really could see the sea; the big, foggy blue sea which was less than fifteen miles away, a few hours with a horse and cart.

‘And you can hear church bells,’ Jens added and got up. ‘If the wind is in the north. I heard them once with my father. I was just a boy. We didn’t tell anyone. But we heard them. Church bells. I’m sure of it.’

He turned to Johannes and raised his hand over his eyes against the sun.

‘The sea and church bells, Johannes. What more do you need?’

BOOK TWO

(1945-1951)

Chapter 31

It was the worst winter since they had come to Eftestad. Near a corner of the house the snow settled in a drift that looked like the wing of an angel lying on its side with its hands tucked under its cheek. Johannes never found out what had happened, where Ingeborg had been, what she had bought, it could not be clothes because she came home wearing the same skirt, blouse and woollen coat in which she had left. She had not done any shopping, but all the money was gone. She offered only one explanation:

‘I got lost.’

‘But why were you on your own?’ he said. ‘After all, Ester was with you?’

She just looked at him and repeated:

‘I got lost.’

She was reluctant to tell him about the night in the flat above the Blue Cross café. Her reaction might look like a kind of shame, but she was not ashamed, she just did not want to talk about it. To her it seemed a trifling matter or it quite simply had not happened. Soon she appeared to have forgotten all about it.

She no longer asked for his forgiveness.

In time he realised that he would never get an explanation. So he left it alone, pushed it aside. It was easier that way. It struck him as being one option: He could make up his mind that it had never happened.

The cold weather made the world ever smaller. An icy hand rose through the old church floor, clutching at his heart. Everything homed in on the stove in the one room where the fire was kept going day and night. They used no other rooms in the house. The intervals between the good days grew longer. She wandered around listlessly and he was constantly woken up by her voice in the dark. He woke up when she said his name. Or perhaps it was a dream, someone in the dream was talking to him. It was colder than he could ever remember it being. In the morning he would scrape ice off the inside of the windowpane. Not since the war, he thought. And even then the cold hadn't been that severe. Not since the war, and not even then.

It was January 1951. He saw everything through ice.

Ingeborg's visits to Ester had stopped. They already felt like a long time ago. She sat at home in the one room, cutting buttons off trousers and blouses and old skirts with the handmade scissors. She never stopped but let the fabric pile up on the floor. She did not sort anything according to colour or pattern, it just landed on the floor around her. She had no thoughts, no plans, she just cut everything into pieces.

He went to the woods for several hours without achieving much. When he came home, she was still sitting there, everything was as when he left, except that the room was now icy and the casket with the buttons had been upended. He had to sweep up everything with his hands. She had opened the window. It was not until the evening that the room was properly warm again, then she got agitated about something that had happened, something she had thought or seen, and it was almost impossible to interrupt her.

There was always something she had seen.

It was to do with Olav. She had seen him in the late afternoon twilight before Johannes came back from the woods. First she had noticed him from the window, loitering by the barn. She had gone outside and watched from the doorstep as Olav disappeared inside the barn. She had called out to him and wondered if she should follow him, but when she got to the barn door, she had changed her mind and gone back inside the house. She had felt scared.

‘He was there today as well,’ she said. ‘He keeps coming and going. He’s talking to someone. He’s meeting someone. Someone is helping him.’

‘Helping him with what?’

‘You need to go outside and look for yourself, Johannes.’

‘Olav is an old man,’ he replied. ‘He’s confused and his legs aren’t what they used to be, you know that. He wouldn’t be able to walk all the way down here. He’s not walking anywhere. He doesn’t know who he is anymore.’

She put down the scissors and looked at him. Hard.

‘I know what’s going on, Johannes.’

‘You do?’

She nodded.

‘So what is going on then?’

‘You need to go outside, Johannes,’ she replied. ‘You need to go outside and take a look.’

It had grown dark. His outdoor clothes had yet to dry. Slowly he pulled on the cold, wet trousers and the jacket whose sleeves were stiff with resin, then he headed for the door.

‘Wait, Johannes! Wait!’

He stopped and turned on the outside light at the same time.

‘What is it?’

‘I’m watching you.’

It was a starry night. He walked along the cleared path to the barn and knew that she was waiting in stockinged feet on the doorstep with her arms folded across her chest. He did not need to turn to see her standing in the glow from the outside light.

‘He’s there, Johannes!’

She called out to him.

‘I know he’s there!’

‘Go back inside,’ he said. ‘You’re not wearing any shoes.’

Once inside the barn, he lit the lantern. It was not that long since he had finished his evening chores and the milk in the bucket was still lukewarm. He had intended to linger there for a little while, then go back, but knew instantly that she would see right through him. He was afraid of her eyes. He knew that she had not listened to him, he knew that she was still standing on the doorstep. He opened the door to the cowshed and entered the sweet warmth of the animals; to begin with he could not see much. The animals got up, the horse turned its head, its eyes shiny under the forelock. He took a few steps inside and could not help but feel her eyes at the back of his head. She was staring right through the wall. He walked slowly, aware that her fear was infecting him and waking up his old terror. Now it rose in front of him in the darkness like a fully grown man.

‘Olav?’ he said. ‘Is anyone there?’

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It went from bad to worse. She would sing for much of the night. It was no longer snowing and it was fine weather for

sledging, but he did not go to the woods or to the mill or anywhere else. She sang hymns. Her lips swelled up. He had to concentrate on essential tasks. The cows needed milking morning and evening. The milk needed taking to the roadside. He could not go too far, only as far as the crossroads. It was no longer possible to be with her in the one room. He constructed a makeshift mattress in the attic from straw and some old hay sacks. The temperature was minus seventeen Celsius. He would climb the ladder and lie down, fully dressed, with the lantern from the barn within reach. In the faint light he could see his own breath rise from his mouth like grey roses. A myriad of ice crystals sparkled on the rafters above him. He lay in a grotto of cold and ice and floating roses, thinking of all the times he had listened to her singing, from that day in the barn at Hesland and now in the glow from the lantern with only the naked ceiling above him. It felt like sleeping outdoors, but he was scared of sleeping in the barn though it was warmer there because of the heat from the animals. He had to be somewhere he could hear her in case she went outside. He had no choice. She might freeze to death. He had to stay in the icy grotto in the attic.

He had never experienced a winter like it. It carried on relentlessly through Candlemas and Lent with fresh snowfall and a subsequent drop in temperature. The volumes of snow made it impossible to walk anywhere but along the narrow path he had cleared. It was as if the snow had acquired

consciousness as it whirled through the light. The snow was a force of will refusing to surrender, it would never give up, it settled wet and heavy on the woodshed and caused the spruces in the yard to kneel. Or it was the opposite, it struck him: The snow had no will of its own. It just fell. It was unstoppable. It had no thoughts. The snow just carried on until it had crushed everything.

One afternoon he sensed a presence right inside the door as he entered. Completely unprepared, the first blow hit him across the back below his shoulders, but he felt no pain, only panic. His instincts took over and he quickly took evasive action, tore open the door to the right and sought cover in the drawing room.

‘Ingeborg,’ he said. ‘Ingeborg!’

He could hear how his voice trembled, it was as if he was pleading with her, begging for mercy, but he felt safe as long as he could see her. He grabbed one of the spindle back chairs and held it up in front of him. She appeared in the doorway and he counted himself lucky that he could still see her, that it was not dark in there, that he was not deep in snow, that he had both arms free.

It was not until then that he saw what she held in her hand.

‘Ingeborg,’ he said. ‘Put it down, Ingeborg.’

She took a step towards him.

‘No,’ he said. ‘Put it down. Do as I tell you. Put it down.’

When he realised it was the poker, the pain arrived. He felt something warm trickle between his shoulder blades and he knew that it was blood. His back was bleeding, the blood ran warm and quietly under his shirt. The wound was throbbing, but that was as bad as it got, nothing was broken, he could move his arms. Nor did it get any worse, including afterwards when he lay in the icy grotto in the attic, and that was a sort of relief. It would pass, the wound would heal on its own, but he would rather she had slapped him with her hand. If only it she hadn’t hit him with the poker, he thought. If only she had slapped him with her hand.

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He was constantly mulling over Anna’s words, he felt her light touch and knew that ultimately she was right. He was living a life that no one could live. Yet he soldiered on. It was all he knew. It was a matter of waiting, like he always had done. Waiting for spring. Waiting for the rain. Waiting for the snow. Waiting for the good days that might come back.

It grew colder again.

The sacks froze and stuck to the floor in the attic, he tore them loose and made up a kind of bed for himself in the

drawing room where the temperature might be a few degrees above freezing, enough for the muscles in his neck to soften and allow him to doze off during the night. He would lie there while she sang. He could hear hymns and he knew them in part himself. No, he knew them by heart. She sat with a hymn book, flicking through it. She must have taken it at Emma's.

There were nine hundred and thirty-seven hymns.

It was like the snow. It was never ending. There was no conscious thought. She just carried on until everything was crushed.

He caught himself singing along, he was singing inside his head whether or not he wanted to. They were the hymns Mr Nome had taught them at the school in Hesland, words that were drilled into him, which he would never forget, just like he would never forget Mr Nome standing in front of the children in the classroom, waving his hand. He would stand at the edge of the podium, old Mr Nome, with his grave, elongated face, his thin hair and the tips of his black shoes sticking out over the edge of the top step in front of the blackboard. There he would stand, singing. Like Johannes had once sat at the back of the classroom, singing, all those years ago. And now he was lying in the icy drawing room in Eftestad, singing along with Ingeborg inside his head. He could hear Mr Nome's quivering voice and his own. Ingeborg was singing. Mr Nome was singing. And Johannes was singing. It was impossible not to.

He had to sing. He heard his own childhood voice. It was *Love from God, our Lord.*

Finally he could not say which was worse. The singing or the cold or the poker. Finally he had to admit to himself that there were limits. A cross in the rock. He had to do something. He could not go on like this.

He had to sleep.

Dazed he staggered from the farm to gorge. It was still dark, it was just after seven in the morning. He reached the crossroads and walked onwards on the frozen road while his shoes creaked and groaned as if he were walking on broken glass. He reached the house with the gable where a solitary lamp was glowing over the door. He knocked for a long time before he heard footsteps coming down the stairs and a figure appeared behind the crocheted curtain in the framed glass. It was Kristofer.

‘Good heavens, Johannes! What’s happened to you!’

Still hazy he stared at Kristofer’s face before he realised it: She had hit him when he put logs on the fire last night and he had been unable to defend himself. Perhaps there was blood on his cheek. He did not know. She had hit him, but not with the poker. She had hit him with her hand.