

VAIM
Jon Fosse

translated by Damion Searls

Sample: opening pages of the novel

Translator's Note: Ten Norwegian kroner is roughly one US dollar (or 70 British pence); two hundred and fifty kroner is about twenty-five dollars (eighteen pounds)

So, I said, well here we are, I said and I ran my fingers through my beard, that graying beard, I wasn't young anymore, definitely not, but I wasn't an old man either, you could probably say aging, yes, an aging man, neither more nor less and now it was about time I stopped taking these little boat trips to Bjørgvin, what was the point, docking at the quay of The Wharf in Bjørgvin and not using my time there to do anything but sit in a bar or café, yes, usually The Fowl, that's what they call the place, but sometimes The Food Hall or The Last Boat, or The Country Inn—other than going someplace like that or just staying in the cabin of my boat there wasn't really anything to do, or, well, the first day, or first couple days, there'd be something I needed to buy, yes, always, this or that, one thing or another I'd thought I could use and that I wrote down on a sheet of paper on my living room table back home, something I couldn't get at The Vaim General Store but that I could use, it was always different, it could be anything, yes, little by little I had gotten everything I really needed but a needle and black thread to sew a loose button back on, yes, that's what I needed to buy this year, but actually it was a lot harder than you'd think to buy a single needle and a single spool of black thread in the city of Bjørgvin, Norway's second biggest city, it was almost unbelievable how hard it was, you'd almost think that the shopkeepers and shopgirls didn't want to bother selling something as little as a needle and spool of thread, because I'd walked from one clothing shop to the next but none of them had anything like that for sale, no, they said, no, we don't carry that, and you'd have to say that there was something a little bit mocking in their answer, and in their face behind that answer, and when I asked where I might be able to buy that the answer was always the same, no, we don't know, sometimes they would add that in this shop they don't sell needle and thread, only ready-to-wear clothes, and now if I wanted to buy myself some new clothes, if I could afford it, and I have to admit that one of them, or maybe more than one of them, had hinted that I needed new clothes, but I didn't need new clothes, I was doing just fine with the clothes I already had,

because I didn't look like a beggar or anything, no, even if some people probably thought I did, but these clothing stores were packed with clothes and that was probably the reason for this hinting, and for why they didn't want to sell me a needle and thread, but whatever the reason there would be someone bowing to me, in a suit, dammit if he wasn't wearing a pink tie, and he would say that if I wanted to buy myself a needle and a spool of black thread I would need to go to a tailor's, and when I ventured to ask them where I might find a tailor this shopkeeper's assistant, or maybe it was the store owner for all I knew, just laughed, he laughed long and loud with his mouth wide open and said how should he know, and then he said that back in the day there always used to be a tailor on Skostredet, but that was a long time ago, because it's been a long time since there've been any tailors in Bjørgvin or probably out on the coast in Strileland either, he said and then a woman came in through a door behind the counter, in a suit with a pink tie, and she stood behind the counter and leaned over and asked a bit impatiently if there was something she could help with and the man in the suit and pink tie said yes, so, um, well, and then I mumbled that I wanted to buy a needle and spool of black thread and she asked if I needed it to sew a loose button back on and I said yes, that's what it was, and she said she could get that for me, yes, and then she disappeared through the door she had just come in through and the man in the pink tie said yes, yes, you see, the things I don't know, the things I can't do, and I asked if he'd just started working in the shop and he said he'd been working there his whole life, since he was a little boy, because the woman who'd just gone to get a needle and thread was Mother, as he put it, yes, she was the owner of the shop, and he had never gotten any farther in life than to work as a shop assistant for his own mother, he said and she believed in selling anything she could, he could say that for sure, yes, she'd sell her own grandmother if it came to that, yes, that what they like to say about enterprising salespeople in Bjørgvin, he said, so now his mother had probably gone upstairs to their apartment to find a needle and some

thread in her own sewing kit, it wasn't the first time she'd done that, yes, go get something from the apartment to sell it, that's how his father's wardrobe had disappeared, not at all once of course, it took its time, but eventually everything got sold, so I'll get my needle and thread, the man who was also her son said, and then we stood there not saying anything and then the door behind the counter opened and she herself came in, and she held up a spool of black thread and there was a needle stuck into the thread, I could see it and yes well here you have your needle and thread, she said, the widow, mother, and owner of a clothing shop in Bjørgvin, yes, I have everything for sale anyone could want, she said, with maybe a little pride in her voice, and her son in the suit wearing a pink tie shrugged, and he wasn't exactly young, more like a male old maid by the look of him, but how can I think such a thing, to tell the truth I'm no less of an old maid than he is, probably more of one actually, since it seems like I'm a lot older than the son with the pink tie, and besides I had nothing womanly about me, not at all, but that guy, the son, in the suit, with the pink tie, yes, he was as feminine as he was masculine, and that's probably why I'd hit on that phrase, *old maid*, yes, and his mother was both acting like a man and looking pretty good doing it and she held out her hand with that spool of thread with a needle stuck into it and she said to me

That'll be two hundred and fifty kroner, she said

and I stood stock still, two hundred and fifty kroner for a spool of black thread and a needle, yes these Bjørgvinnere sure knew how to gouge money out of people, everyone knew that, but this was above and beyond even for Bjørgvin, this was outrageous, exorbitant, yes that's the word, exorbitant, there's nothing else you can call it, I could buy myself a new shirt for that, several shirts, and avoid the trouble of sewing the button on too, because it's always a hassle, just getting the thread through the needle always takes me a long time, my eyesight isn't the best, and even my glasses don't help much when it comes to seeing the eye of the needle

Well, the woman standing behind the counter said with a kind of swagger

Well, what'll it be, she said

and I had to just buy that needle and thread from this awful woman, owner of a clothing shop in the city of Bjørgvin, mother of a son in a pink tie, there was probably nothing else I could do, I thought and I took my wallet out of my jacket pocket, but really, no, I couldn't, I couldn't pay that much for a little needle and a little thread on a spool that most of the thread had already been used from, yes, as far as I could tell there was only a little thread left on the spool, maybe not even enough to sew a single button on with, no, really, but once you start something you have to finish it, once someone's said *a* they have to say *b*, as the saying goes, and if I said no to buying it now it would be kind of humiliating, yes, I'd probably look like a pauper in the eyes of the lady behind the counter, and that's exactly what I didn't want, I didn't want to give her that pleasure, I'd rather she have the somewhat dubious pleasure of having cheated a man, of having cheated a dumb hick from Strileland even, I thought as I stood there with my wallet in my hand and I took out a two-hundred-kroner bill and a fifty and I put them down on the counter, I lay the money down without saying a word and as soon as I put the bills down they were in that woman's hands, and then I stood there like a fool looking at the spool with a needle stuck into what was left of the black thread and she, the owner of this clothing shop in Bjørgvin, didn't say anything and I didn't either, I was glad I wasn't going to give her an answer and her son, in the black suit and the pink tie, where'd he gone off to? I looked all around the shop and it was a big and nice shop, I had to admit that, and there, way in the back, in front of a mirror, was the son, grooming himself, running the palm of his hand over his hair, straightening his tie, standing up straight to his full height making himself look as thin as he could and I put the needle and thread in my pocket and thought now, yes, now I've got to get out of this hellish shop, the sooner the better, and I headed for the door without saying a word and behind me I heard the mother and son

saying as if with one voice thanks for coming in, hope to see you again, if there's anything else the gentleman needs or wants, thanks for coming in and hope to see you again, I heard behind me, and the words were still echoing in my ears even after I was back out on the streets of Bjørgvin and never again, never again would I set foot in that clothing shop, never, never, I thought, because I'd never been cheated worse than that in my whole life probably, I thought, and now I had to get back home to Vaim, I thought, and why did I always take these boat trips to Bjørgvin anyway, they never really meant anything, these excursions, when I had a few days free from work then yes I'd just go to Bjørgvin, but it wasn't so often nowadays either, I thought, not in the past few years anyway, yes, for many years now I'd only taken one trip a year on a summer's day while back when I was younger, yes, back then I would constantly be coming to Bjørgvin, one or two days off and I'd head out, and back then I was a regular customer at the bars, and the reason why was probably that I was hoping, even though I didn't want to admit it, yes, I was hoping to meet someone, yes, someone to share my life with, as they say, but "not this time," as they say, yes, and now I've gotten so old that the hope is gone, I'm alone and I'll stay alone, yes, that's how it is when it comes to that and that's how it'll stay too, yes, so now I took these trips to Bjørgvin just to buy something I couldn't get at The Vaim General Store, but actually there was and is little or nothing I couldn't get there, they sell most things, all kinds of things, yes, it was only things like this needle and thread that made me think I'd better go to Bjørgvin to get that, although, strictly speaking, one button more or less didn't matter since really I just putter around and take care of myself in my house, my home, my childhood home as they say, where I was born and where I hope I'll die, the same way both of my parents passed away there, I lived there while they were alive and then after they died too, yes, then I lived there alone, since I was an only child, yes, I've lived in my childhood home my whole life, and now since I live there alone there's no one to see or notice if a button is missing, yes, and if it's a button from my pants I can

always just keep my pants up with a belt, and I have plenty of belts, or even with some rope if it came to that, which it hasn't, but on the other hand yes it's good to have a needle and thread around, you'd have to say, and I'm sure that I have some too, it's just that I forgot where I put it, or, yes, well, it's pretty much certain that it's in the desk drawer where I have my other sewing things that I inherited from my mother, I threw away most of what she left behind, although it took me a while, but the things I could use, like a needle and thread, yes, I kept those, I'm not that big a fool, but, yes, but then why in the world would I travel to Bjørgvin to buy a needle and thread even though I most likely had what I needed at home, yes, well, I guess I just thought I should, so actually I was just looking for an excuse to take a little boat trip to Bjørgvin while I was off for the summer and didn't need to go to work, even though maybe I was getting, yes, kind of sick of these boat trips, yes, and really it would be nicer if I wasn't always in the boat by myself, there was only one time I had company, as I think they call it, and that was when Elias was with me, but that was many years ago now, and also it took years before Elias agreed to come to Bjørgvin with me, I asked him over and over again if he wanted to come with me but he'd hem and haw and say he was no sailor, he never felt comfortable on the water, but finally, one beautiful summer's day when he dropped by to visit and I mentioned I was taking a boat trip to Bjørgvin he said he'd love to come, sure, and the next day there he was standing outside my house with an old gray rucksack on, and then we walked down to the boat and set out, but he sure wasn't much of a crew, the good man, he got pale after just a little time at sea and he didn't have much talk in him, he just sat there, pale and kind of run-down, then we docked at The Wharf in Bjørgvin and he had a little talk in him, and then I mentioned that we could go drop by The Strileland Liquor Store and he was totally terrified and he said no, no, and that's the only thing I can remember him saying on that whole trip, and so obviously Elias didn't come on the boat with me again, but we drop by and visit each other a lot, yes, once a week or so

he'll look in on me or I'll look in on him, in his little house, even though we're so different we stick together, yes, it's fair to say that he's the only friend I have in Vaim, yes, Elias, yes, I don't remember when he came to Vaim and moved into that house but it was many years ago now, and I also don't remember when we met each other and started dropping by each other's house but it was many years ago, and one thing's for sure, that after that failed trip to Bjørgvin I never again asked him if he wanted to come on the boat with me, we never brought up that whole Bjørgvin trip again, to tell the truth probably neither he nor I liked thinking about it, but anyway it's good that I have Elias to talk to, because there's no one else I see in Vaim, and the part of that trip I remember best is probably the look on Elias's face when I asked him if we should stop by The Strileland Liquor Store, at the time I used to stop by there whenever I came to Bjørgvin and buy a bottle or two of liquor, but there was something in Elias's face when I asked him if we should go there that, well, that maybe he wanted to forget, but we never talked about it, so there was no trip to The Strileland Liquor Store that time, and now it's been many years since I've been in there, and it was probably called that because it was on Sea Lane and people from Strileland always used to come to Bjørgvin by boat and tie up at The Wharf, yes, even now that lots of people had their own car there were lots of people who did that, come to Bjørgvin in their own boat, yes, and most of the people from Strileland bought what they wanted to drink at The Strileland Liquor Store, the ones with their own car too, yes, that's how it was and is, I think and I barely noticed the street I was walking on I was so worked up about having bought that needle and thread, one needle and one barely half-full spool of black thread had cost me two hundred and fifty kroner, but what's done is done, so now I just needed to get back to my boat, my nice little motorboat, and then I needed to get back to Vaim, because I didn't have much to do in Bjørgvin to tell the truth, back in the day, when I was young, a mere youth, yes, I would always look forward to these boat trips to Bjørgvin, being in my

boat for the hours it took to get to Bjørgvin, and then finding a place to tie up somewhere along The Wharf, yes, and that was kind of exciting too, because especially on summer days there might not be much space along The Wharf, and as for tying up to another boat, to its side facing away from The Wharf, the way some people did when The Wharf was full of boats, no, I've never done that and I never will either, it would feel too crowded, and too aggressive, no, I'd never be able to relax if my boat was tied to another boat, I wouldn't be able to sleep even, I'll be damned if I would dare to cook myself a meal on board, not to mention use the head, no, never, so if there was nowhere to dock along The Wharf I would turn right around and sail slowly out into The Bay and then set my course for Sartor, because there were lots of good harbors out there, and nice quays too with shops on land where you could tie up and spend the night in peace and quiet, yes, my goodness I felt like the best thing to do would be to just set out from Bjørgvin and head towards Sartor, yes, maybe go to Sund, because there was a good quay there that there was always room to tie up at, and there was a shop there, The Grocery Store, that sold everything you can imagine, yes, maybe even more than The Vaim General Store, yes, so if only I'd thought of it I could definitely have bought myself a needle and thread there, and probably for almost nothing, yes, I should think so, and next to The Grocery Store there was also a little house they'd opened a café in, The Tearoom they called it, and they sold coffee and cake there, and you could also buy dinner, but they served only one dish a day, one dinner meal, and then one dessert, usually meatballs with brown sauce and mashed peas, and the dessert tended to be rice pudding with a red sauce, and that food was nothing to shake a stick at, not at all, and when I was there I'd had meatballs and rice pudding more than a few times, so maybe, yes, maybe I should set out and go to Sartor today, to Sund, yes, why not really, because actually, and to tell the truth, I had little or nothing left to do in Bjørgvin, the years when I did were past, yes, maybe that was the reality, in any case now that I'd let that big-mouthed lady sell me a needle

and thread for whatever price she came up with I was a fool, so I should just get out of Bjørgvin, the sooner the better, yes, I should definitely just go right to my boat, yes, with this lousy needle and this confounded half spool of thread, and then I should unmoor the boat and set a course straight to Sartor, to Sund, and I'd buy myself some excellent meatballs and rice pudding at The Tearoom there, I was really and truly looking forward to it, yes, the mere thought of it made me happy, so then it was settled, simple enough, off to Sartor we go, off to Sund we go, that's how it was and I picked up speed as I walked down the street, yes, not that I had any idea what the street was called, and it didn't matter either, with my spool and my needle in my jacket pocket I walked straight to The Wharf, I wasn't going to let any more Bjørgvinnars trick me out of any more money, not on this trip anyway, no, I thought and I went on board and so, I said, so now let's set out and I stopped myself and thought now what do I mean by that, by saying us, because it's just me, I thought, no, no, well, it's me and the boat that make up us, it's me and Eline, and what on earth led me to believe that the boat should be called Eline back then, yes, well, I remember the reason, but I don't really like to think about it, because Eline, she was the secret love of my youth and now it's been a long time since I got this boat, and back then Eline was probably still my secret love, because I'd never told anybody about that crush, no I don't like that word, but it's probably the exact right word I need to use since there probably isn't any other better word to call it by, to name it, yes, to describe the feelings I had for Eline back then, or maybe there's some other word for it but I never learned it, but it's such a childish word, well be that as it may that's what I called my boat, my motorboat, Eline, and that was even while Eline was still living at home with her parents in Vaim, so what must she have thought, Eline, when she saw the boat tied at the quay below The Vaim General Store with her name in big letters on both sides of the cabin, yes, Eline probably must have realized that the boat was named after her and it must have made her uncomfortable, yes, she must have been downright

embarrassed and thought wasn't that shameless of me to use her name and just go ahead and name my boat after her even though we had hardly ever spoken, so what did that mean, she must have thought, yes, it must mean that I'd fallen in love with her, no, how embarrassing, and why would I of all the young men in Vaim do that, that's what she must have thought, yes, something like that, and I can still remember being moored at The Quay below The Vaim General Store and being in the cabin and when I slipped out from behind the curtain I saw Eline standing there with some other young people and they were pointing, without saying a word, first at the nameplate on the boat and then at Eline and then they laughed and guffawed and made fun of both me and my boat, that was what they were doing, and Eline, yes, well, she was standing there and laughing too, so of course I cringed in shame and it took a long time before I dared to come out of the cabin and back onto land, that's for sure, but not long after that Eline moved away from Vaim, I didn't know why, but probably to start a job somewhere, and since then I hadn't seen her, but even so many years later I still felt so close to her, yes, it felt almost like I was back in my younger years, but it couldn't be true that I still felt the same for Eline as I did in those bygone days, back then, no, that would be impossible, my feelings for the boat can't help but be mixed in now, because there I was standing in Eline's cabin, again, like I've done hundreds, yes, thousands of times before, and the motor was purring and running and the boat was gliding with proud dignity out into The Bay, the water was almost perfectly calm and the sky was light blue with some fair-weather clouds for the sun to hide behind and now I left Bjørgvin behind, just let it be, and I'll be damned if I knew when the next time was I'd be coming back to Bjørgvin, on the boat Eline, most likely never, I thought and the thought did me good, because in that case maybe the humiliation I'd suffered today, when I'd had a needle and thread foisted off on me for a totally shameful price, would lead to something good, nothing would be better than if it did, of course, I thought and the boat glided in stately fashion out into the Bay,

out into Bjørgvin Fjord, now I feel good, I thought, this is a fine, sturdy boat, built by a boatbuilder in Strandebar, the one with the best reputation, Aga was his name, and the boat was twenty-seven feet long, the cabin had a head up in the bow behind a door, and a hole in the ceiling for daylight, and, yes, to air it out, there was a skylight in the cabin too, and other than that there were two berths on each side, and a long narrow table in the middle, there were cupboards on the wall of the cabin between the cabin and the wheelhouse, and if you went through the cabin door you'd be in the wheelhouse, with a captain's wheel and a good chair to sit in on the starboard side, and under that there was even a sink you could pump water up into from a tank all the way in the bow, behind the head, you just had to slide the captain's chair forward and you could see the sink in all its glory, and on the port side there was the galley, two hotplates with a kerosene burner, and underneath was the cupboard with shelves for plates and bowls and knives and forks and food and whatever else needed to be stored there, another cupboard with shelves was under the sink on the starboard side, yes, and in the middle was the engine box, where the loyal engine did its trusty work, it always started, and ran steadily, and on summer days like now it was nice to sit in the fresh air, because at the stern there was the rudder, and there was a space underneath that too where the fuel tank was, and benches to sit on there too, on both sides and at the stern, and there were nice cushions, yes, both on the berths in the cabin and on the captain's chair and on the benches in back, and everything was always in good repair, new filter and oil change in the engine every spring, and a diesel filter of course, woodwork inlaid with pinewood tar, everything on board the ship was maintained just as well as could be, yes, it was an excellent boat, it was probably just the thing with the name that had gone wrong but there was nothing to be done about that since changing a boat's name was bad luck, I wasn't much of a sailor but I knew that much, and this boat made me so happy, yes, I'd had it for so many years now and spent so many happy hours, yes, days, and nights, in the boat, I couldn't even count

them, no, but if the weather was good for a boat ride I went for one, that's how it was, yes, me and Eline, yes, you'd have to say we were as close as an old married couple [...]

[He goes to The Grocery Store, gets cheated again, spends the night on his boat, and wakes up hearing a woman's voice call his name, Jatgeir.]

[...] and then I went out on deck and I looked up at the quay and there, there on the quay, yes, there was, yes, I couldn't believe my eyes, because there she was, Eline Eline! yes Eline, my old secret love, was standing there, standing not far from the edge of the quay and looking straight at the boat I had named precisely Eline, not really knowing what I was doing, but that's what I'd done, and I'd heard that Eline was moving to somewhere on Sartor to live, but now, no, now I could see perfectly clearly, because wasn't that my old secret love standing there looking down at the boat with the name Eline proudly on display on both sides of the cabin, now Eline was standing there, because she really was, she who had given the boat its name without knowing it, because I never, of course I never said anything to Eline about my love for her, never, never in my life would I have dared to say something like that to a woman, no, I wasn't that kind of person, not me, no, and for Eline to be standing there now just a few feet away from me in this beautiful summer night with the light coming up, no, this wasn't real, this was a dream, I was seeing things, it was a mirage, it must be, because that couldn't be Eline standing there a little way back from the edge of the quay saying my name, no it wasn't possible, and I stared at her as she stood there and again she said Jatgeir, Jatgeir and I couldn't do anything but trust my own eyes and ears, because if I didn't do that then I was living in a dream anyway, not living on earth and Jatgeir, Jatgeir she said again and there was a kind of sad summoning in her voice, yes, almost like she was calling sheep to come back in the

evening, like *seesssoo seesssoo*, Jatgeir Jatgeir like that, and now I had to answer something, the very least I had to do was give some kind of answer, yes, I thought

Yes, I said loudly