

From *One Eye Closed*

(*Et øye lukket*)

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I was in the garden centre's greenhouse, repotting red geraniums. It was an overcast morning, before opening hours, in early May. It was actually my day off, but I'd offered to cover for a colleague who was ill. I had no other plans, after all.

I had both hands wrist-deep in a bag of peaty soil when my phone, which was in my back pocket, rang. I wiped my hands on the towel that hung from the trolley, the one I always keep with me when tending the plants. The trolley also contained a range of smaller tools, two bags of potting soil, a plastic waste bucket, and the gloves I should have been wearing. I fished out my phone. It was an unknown number, but I swiped to the right anyway and listened to the man who politely introduced himself. I recognised his voice, but was unable to place him. Torstein Enstad spoke with an eastern dialect, but rolled his 'r's. He told me he had called me twice before. Once eleven years ago, and once around ten years prior to that.

'Okay?' I said, clamping the phone between my ear and shoulder.

'If you remember me, then perhaps you'll understand why I'm contacting you?' He didn't wait for an answer, simply moved on to his next question. 'Is it still in your possession, *The Horse in the Bog*? The painting?'

I remembered him then.

I inserted another plant into a plastic pot and filled the space around it with earth.

'Yes,' I said, nodding, even though he couldn't see me. 'Yes, I still have it. Or at least, I assume I do.'

It was an eternity since I had last seen the painting. Which my husband had painted, and which I had moved down to the basement storeroom a few years after he died.

I gently packed down the soil around the plant's roots.

‘So you haven’t sold it to anyone else?’

‘No,’ I said. ‘As far as I remember, I promised to contact you if I ever became interested in selling it. It’s been in the basement so long I don’t even know if the paint has cracked. I took the canvas from the stretcher and rolled it up.’

I heard him sigh.

‘Rolled it up,’ he said.

‘Yes,’ I said, ‘but only very loosely. Like a big pipe, if you know what I mean. Not too tight.’

To that he said nothing. Instead, he explained that his client was still alive, but had grown very old.

‘He’s also ill. So this is the last time I’ll be contacting you on his behalf. Would you consider selling the painting to him before he dies?’

I wouldn’t, and standing there like that, with my shoulder pressed to my ear, was starting to give me a pain in the neck. I wanted to end the conversation, so I said that I was at work and had no plans to sell anything other than geraniums.

‘You’re not even interested in hearing what he’s able to offer?’

‘No, I’m afraid I’m not.’

This sounded unsympathetic, but I wanted to be clear. I now also recalled that his offer had been ridiculously low the last time we spoke. I wiped my hands again, then put the phone to my right ear.

‘He’s willing to pay one hundred thousand kroner to own, or perhaps simply rent the painting, for the little time he has left. The offer has no deadline, which means you don’t have to decide today. As far as he’s concerned, the offer stands for life, one could say.’

One hundred thousand kroner. I wasn’t prepared for such a sum – it was the equivalent of several months’ salary. The amount would cover over half the bill for the water damage the neighbours had sustained downstairs, and for which I was partly responsible.

‘Are you there?’ he asked after a while.

‘Yes,’ I said. ‘Yes, yes, I’m here. It’s just a very high sum. Surprisingly high, in fact.’

The man let out something that sounded like a brief laugh, and it irritated me.

‘Who is he?’ I asked.

‘He’s someone who has never forgotten that painting.’

‘Why does this have to be so secretive – what’s his name?’

‘There’s nothing secretive about it – on the contrary. He’s a discerning old man who was once completely bowled over by *The Horse in the Bog* at the Autumn Exhibition in 2001.

He went back to see the painting several times – until it suddenly vanished. But he’s never forgotten it. The reason I’m not telling you his name is that he has cancer, but is unaware of just how ill he is himself. He doesn’t want to know, and has entrusted all medical discussions to his daughter. It therefore doesn’t feel right to name him. But he isn’t a famous collector or anything like that. And now time is running out for him.’

Hang up, I thought. End this conversation. I don’t give two hoots if he loves the painting. If selling it would mean I could pay off my debts. I don’t want it to be seen again.

Before I could reconsider, I had tapped the red symbol on the phone. It was rude, and immediately gave me a bad feeling. Torstein Enstad had done nothing more than convey interest on behalf of an old, dying man who wanted to see Peter’s painting, which I had squirrelled away. I looked up at the yellow-and-black sticker on one of the large shelves containing pots and old-fashioned items, domed birdcages intended for hanging cacti. *Please take care! Watch out for your surroundings.* I became overwhelmed by a kind of *now* and found the number he had called from. Torstein Enstad answered right away and simply continued our conversation, as if he assumed we had been accidentally cut off.

‘My client,’ he said, ‘is never going to make a big deal out of owning the painting, if that’s something you’re concerned about. It will never be displayed again. All he wants is to see it, the original.’

‘Is it actually you who’s interested?’ I asked.

‘No,’ he said. He neither laughed nor sneered at my question. ‘It isn’t. If it was I would have said so, you can trust me on that.’

‘I don’t know you – I don’t know what you would have said or not said. Or if you can be trusted, for that matter.’

‘No, I suppose you can’t know that, but you can take me at my word when I say that it isn’t me.’

‘Okay,’ I said.

‘My client first spoke with me about how he wanted to buy Sunde’s painting all the way back in the autumn of 2001. But we came to understand that it wasn’t for sale.’

‘That’s right. Peter didn’t want to sell it.’

‘And when your husband died the following year, we agreed not to contact you until some time had passed. It seemed so callous, to ask about making a purchase in the midst of your grief.’

So *that* was something they had discussed. *In the midst of your grief.* I remembered he had called around a year later, and that I had turned him down.

I thought about the water damage, the expenses I would be able to cover.

‘I’ll have to speak with my daughter,’ I said. ‘Peter was her father, after all.’

‘Naturally,’ he said. ‘Talk to Bo about it.’

I stiffened, perplexed at his use of her name. It sounded intimate, in an almost threatening way.

‘The name,’ he said. ‘You said exactly the same thing the last time we spoke, in 2013. That you would have to speak with your daughter, Bo.’

‘And so – even after all these years – you haven’t forgotten that’s her name?’

‘No. Because I called my sister the same thing when she was little. Her name is Ingeborg. And because it’s actually a boy’s name.’

We had named her after the wonderful Bo Vilhelm Olsson from the book *Mio, My Son*. But I didn’t say this out loud.

‘I’ll think about it,’ I said, glancing at the clock. It would soon be time for the morning meeting.

I just wanted the conversation over and done with. It didn’t matter who the old, nameless man who wanted to buy the painting was.

I looked up through the huge glass roof, at the white clouds moving slowly across the sky. It was twenty-two years since Peter had died. It had been June when they found him. A hot day in June.

‘Yes, think about it. I’ll pass that on,’ Enstad said, before adding: ‘But I won’t expect to hear from you. I presume you’re too old to change now.’

Had I heard him right?

‘Excuse me? You know nothing about me,’ I said.

‘I think that’s a reasonable assessment, given the circumstances,’ he said.

This left me speechless, and all I managed to catch was his brief ‘thank you for your time’ before he hung up.

Afterwards, I couldn’t focus, and I had trouble repotting the rest of the plants. I spilled soil on the floor, and one of the yucca palms I took down from a shelf toppled from my trolley as I wheeled it into the warehouse. As I made my way over to the area beside the tills where all the employees gathered every day before the shop opened, I felt unwell.

Aina from garden furniture handed me a cup of coffee, as she always did. I smiled and thanked her, but stood there without drinking it as Harald, the centre manager, told us about the previous day’s takings and how to register the local two-for-one offer on roses, which wasn’t the same as a member offer. When he talked about the previous day’s losses, eight

shrubs and several petunias that had been in too poor condition to sell, I lost all concentration. Instead, I heard Enstad's voice alleging I was incapable of change.

It was a little after five when I let myself into the apartment in Majorstuen. I took a seat at the dining table and called Bo. As usual she didn't pick up, and as usual I felt rejected. But then I remembered she'd recently come down with the flu – maybe she wasn't quite over it yet. She probably had her phone on silent because she was asleep.

I really wanted to tell her about Torstein Enstad. To tell her about the huge sum of money. To ask her what she remembered from the time after her father took *The Horse in the Bog* down from the wall of the Kunstnernes Hus gallery, long before the exhibition had ended. But maybe she didn't care.

Or, I thought, as I had so many times before – maybe Bo didn't pick up the phone because, deep down, she was angry at me. Because she had never quite been able to forgive that for a few formative years of her childhood, I was absent, concerned with nothing but my own grief. Or so she claimed, at least.

I went into the kitchen, heated up yesterday's leftover lasagna and ate it standing up, with a fork, straight from the dish.

After a while, I glanced at my phone again to see if Bo had messaged to say she would call back soon, but the display was empty.

I thought of *The Horse in the Bog*. A large crane in flight above a swampy landscape, a summer-blue sky, and at the bottom of the image, as if sunk in darkness, the head of a rocking horse.

I googled cranes. On a worldwide basis, eleven of fifteen crane species are threatened due to disruptions to or the destruction of their habitat. But the common crane, *Grus grus* – the only species that breeds in Norway – has actually increased in population in recent decades. The cranes mate for life.

On a site run by ornithologists I ran my eyes down a thread of questions.

How can a crane tell the difference between its partner and the others? They all look exactly the same. From Leo, aged 10.

Hi Leo! Cranes can recognise their partners just like us humans, and not only that – they can recognise one another from several kilometres away! Best wishes, Håkon.

I thought of Bo again. She was so small when she lost her father, just six years old. But still he had managed to pass his fascination with peat bogs on to her. And it wasn't long

before she was replying ‘biologist’ whenever anyone asked her what she wanted to be when she grew up.

I looked through the kitchen doorway and into the living room, at Peter’s old armchair, where he had often sat reading. After Bo and I were left alone, if I needed to go out to buy groceries or had other things to do that felt important, I would ask her to sit quietly in it. And she always did as she was told, listening to her audiobook, until I came back.

It was Peter who had bought the apartment, sometime in the early 1980s, when he moved to Oslo from Bergen. Ninety square feet in Schultz’ gate, albeit on the side that didn’t get the evening sun. I moved in two years after we met, in 1994.

The apartment soon became worn, but it was mine, and the mortgage was paid off. It was my security, probably worth a fortune now.

I thought of the painting again, down in the basement storeroom, where it had been for perhaps twenty years.

Was it excessive, this fear of acting contrary to Peter’s wishes? He hadn’t wanted the painting to be returned to public display. *Never again*, he had said. But he didn’t destroy it, either. And he had been a caring person, who probably would have liked the thought of pleasing an old, dying man. And then there was the water damage. The pipe that had sprung a leak, the water that for months had dripped unobserved, until it became visible last winter as a damp stain on the living room ceiling of the family on the floor below. Upon closer inspection, rot had also been found, so the entire ceiling had to be replaced. A fair chunk of the cost would of course be covered by the insurance, but not all of it, because I’d been stupid enough to put off replacing the old radiators as the building’s board had ordered us to do. Soon the bill for one hundred and fifty thousand kroner would fall due. By selling the painting, I would rid myself of most of the problem.

As if precisely these thoughts were what led me to a decision, I pushed myself away from the kitchen counter and went out into the hallway, where I tipped the contents of a small blue dish out onto the top of the chest of drawers: the key to the basement storeroom and seven different coins. It was an age since I had seen the coins with their engraved animal motifs: squirrel, wood grouse, elk, bee, great tit, elk hound and horse. I had collected them as a child. My father had told me that Prime Minister Trygve Bratteli had said the animal coins were the most beautiful things ever to be produced in Norway. And Bratteli had been a resistance fighter, imprisoned in Sachsenhausen during the war. My father had said it just like that, as if the two things were somehow connected. I put the elk hound coin to my nose; it

smelled of a mixture of dust and metal. It was once a shiny fortune; now it was worth nothing at all. Who had I been, back when the cost of a paper cone filled with caramels or rusty marbles was a few five-øre coins featuring elk, or ten-øre coins featuring bees?

I put the storeroom key in my trouser pocket and the coins back in the dish, then descended the four flights of stairs, which people had descended and ascended since the interwar period. Each step of the concrete staircase had a depression worn in the middle. On the ground floor, I unlocked the heavy door that led down to the basement. I found the light switch on the wall to the left, a white Bakelite one, whose small peg I had to flick up to turn on the ceiling lamp. There was a distinct smell of mould and damp. The basement storerooms were arranged along one short and one slightly longer passage, in an L shape; mine was at the very end of the longest one. I found the door marked with apartment number 21, the digits written in pencil and only just visible. It was several years since I had last been down to the basement, but the key still turned smoothly in the padlock, and the door was easy to open. The storeroom had deep, practical wooden shelves and yellowed cladding on the walls. I reached up towards the metal chain attached to the bulb that hung from the ceiling, pulled it, and almost miraculously the storeroom was illuminated by a soft, brownish light. The bulb was covered in a layer of something sticky furred with dust. I stood still for a moment, to orient myself in this burial chamber of mine and Peter's objects. In the brownish-yellow glow everything almost seemed like an old photograph. Crates marked *Crockery* and *Glasses*, boxes of books and old LPs, a portable cassette player, a dark bag of clothes whose contents I could no longer remember, a pair of skis from the 1980s.

A deep humming came from a pipe, but otherwise there was an unusual silence in the basement. I jumped at the sight of a spider that hung in a web between two of the boxes on the middle shelf – the light from the lamp had caused it to move. I shuddered. Despite the fact that killing it would bring bad luck, I took a book from a box, *When Someone Splits* by Anna-Greta Winberg – I remembered that the novel had made quite an impression – opened it somewhere around the middle and slammed it shut over the spider. I stood there for a while, pressing the pages together, before I put the book back and reached a hand between the boxes, where I thought I had put the painting, wrapped in a sheet. Sure enough, I felt the sheet, and pulled out the roll.

Maybe the paint had cracked, or the canvas had been ruined. If so, selling it would be out of the question. I turned off the light, locked the storeroom door after me, and carried the rolled-up painting up the stairs.

Swaddled like the baby in the manger, I thought.

It had taken me almost three quarters of an hour to complete the brief stroll around half the block, from Welhavens gate to Wergelandsveien. I used to be able to march along at quite a clip, but my stride had grown ever shorter, and now I was forced to grip my wheeled walker so hard that my old knuckles turned white as I cautiously shuffled forward, my right hand ready to depress the brake. I've always been afraid of losing my balance, but since growing old it had become an all-consuming anxiety. I also had a sharp pain in my right knee. A couple of weeks earlier, in mid-May, I had fallen and ended up with the walker on top of me after one of its wheels came to an abrupt halt in a hole in the pavement, because I, in a fit of vanity, had dared to gather a little momentum. Outside the Lorry Restaurant, people flocked to help me up. A well-meaning man even lifted half a pint to my lips and made me take a sip, as if I were a child. The entire episode hurt both my pride and my leg, although not as much as the large bruises that appeared afterwards might suggest. A real shiner over my left eye and a haematoma on my cheek. I couldn't even remember having been struck in the face.

The sweet and ever-helpful Irish community nurse said the bruising was due to the blood-thinning medications I was taking. 'You'll bruise if someone so much as gives you a peck on the cheek!' she said in her charming accent, then gave me a smacker on the side of my face that wasn't beaten up.

The haematoma had faded quite a bit since then, but I was walking even more slowly than usual.

When I stopped in front of Kunstneres Hus, I noticed a young woman who did the same. She came and stood right next to me. My eyes were constantly running, whether due to the wind or my age, so I took my right hand from the brake and rubbed my thumb and forefinger over my eyes in a single movement, then looked back towards the gallery.

'Is that where you're going?' she asked, nodding towards the beautiful building.

Yes, that was where I was going. To the place I had sought out so many times before.

'Are you going to see the exhibition?' she asked.

'Not exactly,' I replied.

She couldn't have been more than seventeen or eighteen years old, but it's hard to tell a woman's age nowadays. Young people look both older and younger than they did in my time. I had not long since spoken with a community nurse I never would have guessed could

be older than twenty, but who claimed that she was thirty-two. She pursed her lips in a peculiar way, with the corners of her mouth turned upwards. Like an ironic smile. I presumed it came from a wish not to look sullen. It's hard to blame a woman for that.

This one, who was now standing in front of me, asked: 'Would you like me to help you up the steps?'

She had pulled her hair into a tight knot on the top of her head, and looked at me with large eyes and raised brows.

'Thank you. That's very kind,' I replied, adding: 'I like to come here, you see, but I struggle a little with the steps because there isn't a handrail. So if you have the time?'

'I have time,' she said.

'Ah, I'm sure you do – you have your entire life ahead of you.'

'Handrail,' she said, and smiled.

I parked the wheeled walker behind one of the bronze lions that stood before the entrance.

'It won't get stolen, will it?' she asked.

I laughed, but heard that it sounded like a cough, so I shook my head and said: 'I'm not worried about it getting stolen. But should that happen, you'll simply have to help me home. I live just over there.' I nodded in the direction of Welhavens gate.

'Deal,' she said. 'And besides, it's parked next to a lion.'

I felt the urge to tell her about the lions.

'It's actually two lion cubs, playing,' I said. 'They were made by a man named Ørnulf Bast. He was once one of the most famous artists in the country. He saw these two lions in a dream, apparently.'

'Oh, right,' she said, and offered me her arm.

She was wearing a white shirt that was tucked into the waist of her jeans at the front, but hung loose at the back. I was wearing my thin, dark blazer over my short-sleeved blue chequered summer shirt, and my pale chinos. I liked the pale chinos, despite the fact that my daughter, Kirsten, said that my eyesight had grown too poor for light-coloured clothes, because I no longer noticed the stains.

As I hooked my arm into the girl's, I realised I had forgotten to put on aftershave. But just after that, I realised that I hadn't shaved for some days, either. My beard grew so much more slowly now than it used to.

'I've never been inside,' she said, nodding towards the red brick building.

‘Maybe you’d like to come in and have a look?’ I asked, and immediately heard that it sounded a tad presumptuous. But the little encounter had made me happy, and I didn’t want to put a damper on my mood.

‘Maybe,’ she said. ‘Have you been here many times?’

‘Oh yes,’ I replied.

We reached the steps, and I stopped. How I wished I could walk up them myself, as I used to, so light on my feet. Because I now saw myself from the outside. The decrepit old man with such poor balance that he was forced to cling to an unknown girl. There was nothing wrong with her, of course, but the situation suddenly made me feel so alone.

‘Have you changed your mind?’ she asked.

‘Oh no, I’m just telling my legs to get a move on,’ I said, and made it up the first two steps. She continued to hold me by the arm. After a brief pause, I made it almost all the way up to the platform, where the railing awaited. Come on now, I told myself, and took another step – finally I could grasp the black metal rail. But just then I grew dizzy, everything spun around me, and had the girl not immediately supported me with a firm grip and safely led me over to the terrace with its tables and chairs, I might have fallen backwards, and then it would have been game over.

She released my arm and placed her hand against my back instead. Oh how I despised this helplessness!

‘Let go of me,’ I said brusquely.

But she didn’t withdraw her hand until I had sat down on a chair at the closest café table, and then I felt the shame flood me.

‘I’m sorry,’ I said, taking a breath. ‘For speaking that way. What I meant to say is thank you.’

‘It’s fine,’ she said.

But it wasn’t fine. I sat there, smelling of frightened old man. I wanted to buy her a cold drink, or some other token, for being so considerate. But maybe she wasn’t actually considerate, maybe she was just someone who wanted a chance to brag to others about a good deed she had done.

‘Well, despite having my entire life ahead of me, I think I ought to get going. But would you like me to order something for you first?’ she said, taking a glance at her phone.

‘No thank you,’ I said. ‘No thank you.’ I shook my head, and gently patted my skull – I did still have a little hair to keep in check. And I was relieved that I hadn’t asked if she

would like a cold drink, because then she would have declined, and it would have been embarrassing for both of us.

‘You know, I think I’ll just sit down for five minutes after all,’ she said suddenly. ‘Is that okay?’ She took a seat before I could reply.

‘Naturally,’ I said. ‘I always have five minutes.’

We both laughed a little at that, and the knowingness in her laughter pleased me.

‘You said you live close by?’ she said.

‘Yes,’ I said. ‘You too?’

‘I’m actually from Ski, but I live in Grønland now. And I have to move this summer.’ She smiled. ‘I’m on my way to see a flatshare in Majorstuen, where there’s a room for rent. Have you always lived here?’

‘No,’ I said. ‘I’ve lived in several places. But I’ve lived in Oslo since I was seventeen.’

‘And now you come here on your walks?’

‘I’ve come here for many years,’ I said. ‘I love this building, it was opened by King Haakon on the first of October 1930. On my birthday, four years before I was born.’

She looked up at the building’s façade.

‘Wow, 1930. That’s before the Second World War.’

‘Yes.’

‘So you’re ninety years old?’

‘I will be, in October. If I live that long,’ I said.

‘I’m sure you will,’ she said. ‘Has the building looked the same for all that time?’

I nodded.

‘Yes. Unlike me.’ I smiled with my lips pressed together – she had most likely already noticed my ragtag teeth when I laughed, but still.

A waiter came over and asked if we’d like to order anything.

‘I’d very much like to buy you a cold drink,’ I said. ‘For saving my life, I could almost say. Because without your hand...’

‘Then I gratefully accept, and I would love a Pepsi Max.’ She looked up at the waiter, a beautiful young man with long hair in a ponytail.

‘And a glass of white wine for me,’ I said. ‘An ordinary semi-dry. No other mumbo jumbo that I have to make decisions on.’ I winked at her, the way I used to wink at women.

‘Then I’ll have one too,’ she said. ‘No mumbo jumbo.’

Surely that had to be all right? I was an old fogey, long since beyond suspicion of indecency. Age, gender, time – it was all on her side. For me it was a case of either humiliation or self-sacrifice.

She laughed.

‘You look as if you think I’m under eighteen!’

‘To be honest, I’m no longer able to discern people’s ages.’

‘Twenty-three,’ she said. ‘Marthe.’

‘Helge,’ I said.

I had grown used to communicating using only first names, despite the fact that I didn’t think it sounded entirely natural. Even the community nurses had no surnames – they were called simply Rita and Mohammad and Kajsa. And the nicest of them all: Irish Fiadh.

‘It isn’t often I sit out here,’ I said.

‘No?’

‘I mostly sit on a bench inside, to the left of the stairs. They let me sit there.’

‘The ticket ladies?’

I smiled again. I had smiled more this morning than I had in a long time.

‘The ticket ladies,’ I repeated. ‘They let me sit there.’

‘And then you think about your life?’

She was quite something, this Marthe. I felt suddenly blessed, as if time was running backwards and I was sitting here on some occasion long ago. That with the help of some magic, the wheeled walker had become my old bicycle. That it was the summer of 1958, and I had cycled up here, standing up to pump the pedals and wobbling back and forth, with Aud sitting sideways on the crossbar.

‘My life? Well yes, I suppose that’s what I do?’

Did I not know with certainty, since I allowed the words to hang there in the air between us as a question? Could I not even admit it to an unknown girl?

‘Yes,’ I said. ‘I like to sit on that bench, just inside the doors, and think about my life.’

‘That sounds nice,’ she said.

Everything seemed simple and easy for Marthe. Now the waiter arrived with two glasses of white wine balanced on a round, black tray. He set one of the glasses in front of me, the other in front of her. The sunlight twinkled in both glasses, and the waiter bowed slightly and took a short step backwards before he disappeared through the door to the building. The same door people had been walking through for almost ninety-four years.

I took a substantial swig, and then another. That was the difference between being eighty and almost ninety – the inebriation immediately rushed to my brain, making me both melancholy and lightheaded. I ought to watch out. Because if I wasn't careful my words, too, might flutter off, almost like when a serviette is caught by the breeze and blown away.

A serviette that blows away. I imagined it, as if in a film. A white paper serviette that rose and fell with the wind.

I swallowed yet another couple of gulps of the wine.

Marthe asked me about the first time I visited Kunstnernes Hus. She looked at me as she had a little while ago, her eyes expectant and questioning, her brows raised.

'It was before the war, I was just a boy,' I said. 'I saw Picasso's famous *Guernica*.'

'Guernica?' she said.

'Yes, an immense painting. I probably didn't understand it at the time, I was just a child, after all, but when I grew older, I learned that Picasso had painted the suffering of the Spanish people. But what I did understand was that this was the city's most beautiful building. Erling, my father, was enraptured by this kind of architecture, he said it was better than everything else. Finer than the National Theater and the Royal Palace and Parliament. He worked for the architects Gudolf Blakstad and Herman Munthe-Kaas. Their office was in the functionalist building that now houses the Saga cinema. They designed that building, too.'

I was ranting now.

'I see,' Marthe said.

'This building was designed to attract all the world's light. Since you're so good at taking stairs, you should go up to the top floor one day and see how the light floods into the skylight hall.'

My words had gathered speed, momentum. I liked it.

She nodded: 'I'll do that.' Then she lifted her glass, and I did the same. 'To Kunstnernes Hus,' she said.

'To Kunstnernes Hus,' I repeated.

'And to us!' She laughed – not in a condescending way, more as if she was enjoying herself.

My vision blurred slightly, I had to blink a couple of times, and there was the waiter, back already and asking if we'd like another glass. We both gratefully accepted. The waiter said he would be right back with two more glasses of white.

‘During the war, the gallery was closed for three years,’ I went on. ‘Almost everything was destroyed, apart from the beautiful murals by Per Krohg, which you can see on the ceiling in the stairwell.’

‘So you didn’t come here then?’

‘No, at that time it was converted into a fortress.’

I didn’t want to think about the war.

‘Really?’

Had it been a real fortress? I had only seen photographs, and later read that after the Nazis laid waste to the building not a single artwork remained in the halls. *Emptied, right down to the last drawing pin*, it had said in the newspaper. And men had stood guard, sporting swastikas on their arms.

I took another swig of wine.

‘Were there barbed wire and trenches around here?’ Marthe made a circular motion with her right index finger. I nodded.

‘I believe so. And the room with the skylight was used for storing weapons.’

More than this I didn’t know.

‘But then you came back here, after the war?’

It had taken a long time for me to come back. Many years. But one day Aud had wanted to see an exhibition.

‘I was a grown man by then. It was in the sixties, I think. I wanted a change.’

A pair of crows in a tree made a sudden racket. They screeched, scolding each other, alternately swooping down to the remnants of a hamburger bun on the grass.

‘Just look at those two,’ I said.

We watched them for a while, but then she asked: ‘What kind of a change were you looking for back then?’

I had wanted to walk up here, to this beautiful building, without growing anxious. But to embark upon a search for the words required to explain this – I quite simply didn’t have the strength.

‘*Fourteen Young Artists* – that’s what the exhibition was called. In the mid-sixties,’ I said.

There had been articles about the artworks in the newspapers, about how they were supposedly so modern and interesting. So I went along with Aud. But I had felt that everything we looked at was depressing. Aud had accused me of moaning and groaning; she told me I could either go to the restaurant while she went round the rest of the exhibition, or I

could simply grin and bear it. I had done the latter, and then it was as if the building, in some miraculous way, had opened itself up to me.

Now the waiter came back. He didn't simply pour the wine into the glasses we had already drunk from, no, he whipped out clean glasses and set them on the table, as if we were at a truly fine restaurant. Then he held the bottom of the bottle as he poured, concluding with a little twist.

This wine tasted different than the last one, a little sweeter, perhaps. I wasn't sure, because everything seemed to have less flavour these days. I closed my eyes and tried to discern the taste, but surprisingly the thing that welled up inside me was Marthe's question about barbed wire and trenches. I opened my eyes at once, and saw that the friendly young face before me had taken on a concerned expression.

'Are you not feeling well?' she asked.

For Marthe, this war was probably a grainy black-and-white film she had seen at school. Out of focus, an infinitely long way away, and narrated by a man with a staccato newsreel voice as people ran or stumbled at breakneck pace, accompanied by the sound of howling sirens.

'No, I think perhaps I'm not?' I said, and everything wavered slightly again. And why was I constantly answering with questions, as if this were a day on which I could say nothing straight out?

'Do you want to go home?'

'No. No, no.' I shook my head. I didn't want to go home. Because sitting here with a glass of wine and a random stranger gave me an unexpected feeling of lightness, or maybe it was just that a restlessness in me had stilled. Regardless, I wanted to hold onto the moment.

'I'm just feeling a little dizzy,' I said. 'But I'd very much like to tell you about the first time I sat on the bench inside, when I started to think about my life, as you put it. If you're interested, that is.'

'I am,' she said. She took a decent drink from her glass before she placed both her forearms on the table and leaned forward.

I had to take both this moment and a little longer to find the right words, so she would understand. I wanted to reach a certain feeling.

I felt the stabbing pain in my knee and shifted a little in my chair to find a new position. The knee hurt, just like the story. A fall that was over and done with a couple of weeks ago, but which still caused small tremors of pain to run through my body. I wanted to

hop over most of it, wanted to rush past *Fourteen Young Artists*. I could start when I was a sprightly man of almost seventy, or thereabouts. Yes, the story could begin there.

‘The new century had just begun. Around when you were born,’ I said. ‘Aud, whom I was married to for almost forty years, had passed away, and I went to see the Autumn Exhibition alone, it’s held every year. We used to go see it together. That year some fluttering red fabric had been strung up, which you could pass through, as if you were blood running through veins. And there within the silken red fabric I heard two mature women discussing something they had just seen.’

One of them said: *Would you hang that on the wall?*

Yes, why not? said the other.

But what are they supposed to symbolise, the things at the bottom? The first woman said.

Everything that lies below the surface, maybe? said the other.

I didn’t hear any more because they moved on. But my curiosity was piqued, and I kept my eyes open for the kind of painting it might be, one that would tell me something about everything that lies below the surface.’

I drank a little more wine.

‘Did you find it?’ Marthe asked.

I nodded.

‘Yes. I soon understood which painting they had been talking about.’

‘So what did it look like?’

I took too long a pause. As Kirsten likes to say: *Get to the point, Dad.*

‘It was an oil painting. Looking at it opened something in me,’ I said. ‘I had the sense of recognising something. Without me ever having seen it before.’

‘Oh, right. I know that feeling. Like a kind of strange longing?’

‘Yes. Exactly. A strange longing. Apparently you understand the way an old man speaks?’

‘But what did the painting show?’

‘Indeed, what did it show? It was like looking at something at the edges of my memories.’

‘But surely it was *of* something?’

A shimmering, living peat bog. A swampy area dotted with small pools that reflected the blue sky and white clouds. High above flew a crane, aslant, captured at the moment it was about to pass by. And at the bottom of the painting, beneath the peat, lay my rocking horse.

I explained this to her.

‘What do you mean by *your* rocking horse?’ she asked.

‘At first I thought it simply couldn’t be true. That I was losing my mind, or conjuring something up through sheer fantasy, as if in a dream. You know, layer upon layer, where only the tiny, uppermost part of the dream is visible.’

I looked at her, and she nodded.

‘Yes,’ she said.

‘But at the bottom of the painting was a blue rocking horse with red rockers. The horse had eyes, and I recognised them.’

I hesitated.

‘You recognised the eyes of a rocking horse you once had as a child?’

‘Precisely,’ I said. ‘Because it was so special. Blue, as I said, with red rockers. And there were two eyes painted on either side of the horse’s head – one closed and one open, one above the other.’

‘And the horse in the painting had that too?’

‘Yes. And there were also other things.’

‘Like what?’ Her entire face shone with a child’s curiosity.

‘An almost invisible skull – I didn’t notice that right away. But it was eerie. Because apart from the vivid colours of the rocking horse, everything else at the bottom of the painting was murky and hard to make out. It was brownish and dark, like earth.’

‘But what else did you see?’

‘A headboard and a book. The skull was slightly to the left of them.’

Marthe looked at me and smiled.

‘So where is it now? The painting?’

‘I’m not entirely sure. With someone else. I tried to acquire it once, but it was impossible. But I can’t forget it.’

She nodded.

‘That’s why you come back, isn’t it?’ she said. ‘You’re looking for that same feeling, the way you felt back then?’

I nodded, feeling my throat thicken. Not with grief, but with relief. Who was she, this girl?

I saw that the woman at the table behind Marthe was staring at me. She appeared neither sceptical nor curious – she was simply staring, as if at something in the far distance, or as if I were a man flickering past on a screen.

‘I went back to see the painting several times. But when I went there with my daughter, Kirsten, to show her, it had been removed,’ I said.

‘Who painted it? There’s probably an image of it somewhere online – I can google it.’

‘I don’t even know whether it exists any more. It was a long time ago, after all. The painter’s name was Sunde. He died the year after the exhibition. It was in the newspaper.’

I was ten years old and afraid of being discovered. That someone would see me as I hurried down the hill towards the factory and the railway station. My father had forbidden me from going up to the peat bog in the mountains, saying that the son of marketer Sunde wasn't going to make a fool of himself by acting like some lonely wretch, wandering around alone like that. But it made no difference to me what my father or anyone else said. I was bound by the deal I had made with the crane – that was all that mattered. I had promised to return.

I was wearing decent plimsolls, a red T-shirt and jeans. In my bag were my new drawing supplies, my packed lunch, my water bottle and an extra jacket. I had decided not to stop by my mother's workroom, and Anne-Beate was away at scout camp.

The moment I crossed the bridge over the Dalelva river and passed the houses on the other side, I slowed my pace. From this point onwards I would encounter no one. Nobody ever climbed the steep slope here. I took a few steps up through the underbrush and stopped to look. It was August, and the air had a clarity to it that suggested summer was on the wane, although the days were still warm. The mountains encircled the village like an enormous royal crown. Two mountainsides shone green in the sunlight, while on the opposite side other mountains were in shadow. The river ran through the valley between them.

It was ten-thirty in the morning, but I hadn't eaten yet, and nor was I hungry. It was almost a week since I'd last been here, because I had been ill. But I wasn't unsure of the way, I had made many journeys up here after my first visit to the bog.

As usual, I first drank a little water from the stream, then set both my palms against the smooth, round stone at its bottom, allowing the water to trickle softly and amicably over my hands.

Then I found the almost invisible path that led up the incline of the mountainside. I snapped a thin, flexible branch from a grey alder, which I used to beat back tall bushes and nettles that scratched or stung. The swish of the blows was like the sound of excitement. I occasionally struck myself lightly on the back, too, to slap away a few late-summer mosquitoes. After a time, I cast the branch aside; I wanted to make as little noise as possible for the rest of the way. The midges and mosquitoes would find me regardless. I thought of them almost as I did my father – that they were something I simply had to tolerate. Relief would come with the wind further up.

At the crooked birch, which looked like an old beggar woman from a fairytale, her head bent and hand outstretched, I turned off to the right and ascended an even steeper slope before I cut diagonally to the left beside the two large, reddish rocks that looked like pyramids. Onwards through a cleft, and then deeper into the landscape, towards the wetlands. It would still be a while before I could sit down on the fine, dry tongue of land that stuck out into the bog.

It was Mrs Jensen in the kiosk who had told me about this place, last summer.

It was a warm afternoon, and I had gone to buy a newspaper for my father. But I had dressed in a T-shirt instead of a long-sleeved sweater, so the purplish-blue print of his hand was visible around my upper arm.

Mrs Jensen placed that day's *Verdens Gang* on the counter of the hatch, and on top of it a butterscotch caramel I hadn't asked for. Then, without further ado, she told me that there was an incredible peat bog in the mountains that hardly anyone knew about, but which her father, now dead for donkey's years, had talked about constantly in his old age. Wetlands where, at one time, a pair of cranes had lived.

'Nobody believes there are cranes around here, because they don't come to the west of Norway very often, and they're extremely good at hiding. That's how they've survived for millions of years. My father said the cranes returned to the peat bog annually for more than sixty years. When he grew old and could do little more than sit in his chair in the living room, he used to go up there in his imagination. He conducted the directions in the air in front of him, swinging his old hand around rocks and scrub and allowing it to rise towards the ceiling wherever the way was steep. Of course he never saw the crane chicks, because the crane is the smartest of all birds. Even though the pair might make their nest right in the middle of the bog, where they took turns sitting on the eggs, each summer the chicks left the nest without my father ever observing it. Speaking almost like a priest, he once told me that seeing those two cranes was like looking at something divine. Holy, you know?'

She brushed her hands over the thin, pale-blue coat of her kiosk uniform and nodded encouragingly at the caramel.

I opened the tiny gift, put the sweet in my mouth and closed my eyes in a moment of sheer pleasure.

'How could your father know that the cranes had been there for sixty years?' I asked.

'That's a good question,' she said, looking thoughtful. 'Which, unfortunately, I don't have an answer to. Maybe someone in the generation above him had also seen them. I'm just telling you what he said – that anyone who's seen a pair of cranes dance in the peatland, or

heard the screech of a crane, well, he's seen and heard the most beautiful thing in all of nature and can die happy.'

Mrs Jensen held out her hand, and I set the crumpled-up caramel wrapper on her palm.

'My father also said that it's hard for us humans to understand that the birds live differently than we do,' she went on. 'Not in time and space, but in the magnetic field, floating on air currents and following signals we don't understand. The Native Americans feel a connection with cranes.'

Then this woman, who I knew was named Britt, even though nobody ever called her anything other than Mrs Jensen, and who was married to Mr Jensen, explained the way to this peat bog to me, even though she had never been there herself. Because she had listened when her father spoke of it. She said I should cross the river and make my way up beside the little stream – she remembered two stones her father had said looked like the Egyptian pyramids – and explained roughly where I should turn off into the mountains, to the left.

After Mrs Jensen told me about the cranes, I searched for the peat bog a couple of times without finding it. I asked my grandfather, who lived in one of the small workers' cottages where my mother grew up. He was a widower and machinist at the worsted yarn spinning mill. But he only shook his head, and said he had never heard of any such bog.

'But that doesn't mean it doesn't exist. Ask Kåre Gammelrud,' my grandfather said. 'He knows the mountains better than anyone.'

I knocked on the retired teacher's door and presented my errand to him.

'If it hasn't been dug up and emptied of peat,' Gammelrud said, 'then it must be this one.' He unfolded an old, well-thumbed map across a small coffee table and tapped an index finger against the blue area at the outer edge.

'Emptied of peat?'

Gammelrud shrugged.

'Yes. People have always used the top layer of the bogs – the peat – for fuel and for building with. You know, peat roofs.' He made the shape of a roof with his hands.

'But surely they can grow again afterwards?' I asked, thinking of the boggy wetlands I was constantly stumbling across. 'There are bogs all over the place.'

'That's what people think,' Gammelrud said, looking over at a worktable that stood beneath the window. I thought it must have been Mrs Gammelrud's, when she was alive.

He crossed the room, and said we could sit in the two chairs there. On the table stood an electric sewing machine beneath a transparent plastic cover. It took up most of the space, along with a box of dressmaking pins, two pairs of scissors, and a black pipe in a tin bowl.

‘But it takes nature many thousands of years to create a peat bog. They grow by just a millimetre a year. So how old is, say, a five-metre-deep bog, do you think?’ He looked at me encouragingly.

‘Is it... five thousand years old?’

‘Correct,’ he said, and nodded.

‘But you said that people empty them?’

‘Yes. And they do so in spite of the fact that the peat bogs are utterly indispensable – they’re like our lungs. They store carbon, restrain floods, purify water and are home to thousands of species. But thrust a spade into a peat bog, and you puncture it and it dies.’ Gammelrud took a pin from the table and jabbed it into the air. ‘Puff!’ he said. ‘Long ago, there were so few humans that while we used the bogs, we didn’t use them up. Today there are lots of us, and we drain or remove entire peat bogs in order to build houses and roads. And the peat – its ground up and sold as cheap soil to people who want pretty gardens. When the marguerite daisies are in bloom, nobody thinks about how the soil they are growing in was stolen from a holy bog.’

I had heard he had been a good teacher. My mother sometimes said: *Any knowledge I have comes from Kåre Gammelrud.*

‘What do you mean by holy?’ I said, thinking of Jesus on the cross and the glory of God. I imagined Notre Dame in Paris, which I had a postcard of, and the picture of the Western Wall in my Christian study book. But a swampy, murky peat bog – could that be holy?

‘Holy in the way that water is holy,’ he said. ‘Water and peat bogs are synonymous with life.’

I nodded.

‘Would you like a fizzy drink?’ he asked.

‘Please.’

‘I know I have a Donald Duck pop left over in the fridge after my grandchildren were here on Sunday.’

Gammelrud went out into the kitchen. I heard him open the fridge and pop the lid from a bottle. Then he came back and set a glass of fizzy pop on the sewing table, without so much as a single admonition to take care not to spill it. He picked up the pipe and sucked on it several times, as if drawing on it, even though it wasn’t lit.

‘I don’t think many people go up there anymore,’ he said. ‘I’ve heard talk of people looking for buried objects from the war a couple of times, but that’s a while ago now. I’m sure you’ll find it, the peat bog.’

I took small sips of the pop while Gammelrud told me everything he knew about peatlands. He described in detail the perfectly preserved bog bodies that had been discovered, and the people who wandered over the mountains to Bjørgvin and settled there beside the living wetlands. He gesticulated with and sucked on his pipe, and told me about criminals and murderers whose bodies had been sunk into bogs. About cramped living conditions and lean years with terrible grain harvests; about outside threats and diseases that caused children to suddenly die.

‘As a general rule, the people were dead when they were surrendered to an eternal life in the peat bogs, but not always, because the wetlands were also cleansing. They could cure disease and set sinful people free. Like a force one could put one’s faith in – like a god. And since people lived so close to death, it was important that they stayed in the right forces’ good graces by sacrificing whatever they could,’ he said. ‘It was believed that the bog had a kind of consciousness that could be of assistance, if only one gave it good gifts. People therefore sunk their most important possessions into it. Clay pots, wooden dishes and food, fabrics and shoes.’

‘They put them in the bog, even when they had so little?’

‘Yes. Either as a prayer for, or to give thanks for, a good harvest. And I’ve read that the bodies of both people and animals were sunk in small forest lakes – which over the centuries have become peat bogs.’

‘But all this was a long time ago, wasn’t it?’

‘Well, as I said, I’ve heard rumours that people hid valuable possessions in the peat bogs when the Germans came, in the 1940s. But after the war, the items – whatever they might have been – couldn’t be found.’

‘Gold?’

Gammelrud smiled.

‘What do I know?’ There was a brief silence before he continued. ‘A bog is always the same and never the same.’

I saw the crane the very first time I came up here. After I’d been sitting on the tongue of dry land for a couple of hours it was suddenly standing there, fifty or sixty metres away. I hadn’t heard the sound of its enormous wings, nor heard the melancholy call from its long

throat – I simply looked up from my sketch pad and there it stood. Utterly calm, on an island of moss and grass at the edge of the bog.

I didn't move the hand in which I held my pencil – I hardly breathed. The only thing I did for the next hour was study the enormous, beautiful bird as it stared back at me. Luminous, ash grey, black and white. Its head and cheeks and the front of its long throat were black, while sweeping backwards from the eye it was covered in chalk-white feathers. The red patch at the back of its head was a bright signal red that transitioned into pale pink. And the bird's thin legs were perfectly balanced on the uneven ground.

Later, I also saw it as it dashed back and forth across the bog, kicking up huge wisps of heather and peat as it hunted for food. Its beautiful beak snatched up snails, roots, small seeds and maybe even the occasional snake with the utmost precision. At other times it would swagger slowly around the edge of the bog, moving its head from side to side, perhaps at a scent or a sound that had arrived on the wind, but then its steps seemed playful and free of any hunting instinct. And the bird almost always allowed me to follow it with my gaze.

If the crane took flight because it heard a twig snap beneath a hoof, or a wood grouse flapping heavily between the trees, its short tail feathers enabled it to quickly leave the ground. And when it landed again, half an hour later, it appeared to reassure itself that I was still sitting there, out on the little tongue of land.

I came up here in winter, too, a couple of times, but it was hard going. I waded through deep snow and balanced my way across slippery ice, in the morning mist, until I finally reached the peat bog in the cold, low sunlight. I stood still, the freezing air filling my nostrils, but found no trace of the bird. I had the sense that no living crane could endure such conditions. Still, I emptied my bag of corn beside the trunks of a couple of large trees.

But now it was late summer and warm. When I was last here, a week ago, I had closed my eyes in the sun and dozed off for a few minutes. I thought, or maybe dreamt, that the crane didn't actually exist – that it was no more than a sort of wish inside me. When I opened my eyes again and saw it utterly clearly, glimmering there at the end of the bog, beak to the ground and a slight breeze ruffling its dark feathers, relief flooded me. The bird simply stood there, keeping one eye on me and emitting its trumpet-like *ka-ku, ka-ku*, which I imagined to mean *I exist*.

Now, as I walked, I thought about Mrs Jensen, who had told me about the bog. How she always had time for me. Whenever I went to the kiosk and was unable to decide what I wanted, she would simply say: 'Take all the time you need.' Behind her, one of her four sons, Hans Petter, often sat on a stool. He walked with a strange, almost heavy kind of gait. I

thought he might be a little odd in the head, because even though he was almost grown-up, he was often with his mother.

I told Mrs Jensen that I'd found the peat bog and seen the crane. I even said that her father had been right – the crane *was* special. Then she placed her thickset forearms on the counter, leaned almost her entire body out of the kiosk's hatch, and said: 'You're not the first person to have a childhood that isn't a bed of roses. But you'll get through it. It can help to know that.'

Those were her exact words.

In a book I found in the school library, I had read that cranes that fail to pair up don't survive very long. That they are meant to live with a mate, that they are meant to migrate to far-off climes in the winter, and that without a flock they wither from loneliness and a lack of food. My crane had no parents, nor any other grown cranes to tell it in which direction it ought to fly to find a female to dance for, or where it should migrate south in the autumn.

Now the ground gurgled beneath my feet, the entire landscape around me squished with moisture, and I knew that as soon as I had passed the stream and the wet and shining rocks, I would be there.

I heard the cackling of a ptarmigan, and immediately afterwards saw two eagles circling high in the sky. I followed them with my eyes until they vanished, then paused and waited for them to come back, but they didn't reappear.

Rarely did anyone at home ask where I went, or where I had been all day. I imagined that my mother felt a sense of unease when I was out. She sat in her little workroom behind the living room, bent over her *tricot*. I was still very young when I learned that *tricoter* is French for knitting. My mother knitted sweaters and cardigans for the factory as she listened to the radio, as many other mothers did.

My father had generally left for the office by the time I got up, strolling confidently down to the administration building in his hat and coat, as if he thought the entire factory was waiting just for him. I didn't know if he had always been that way, but my mother told me that after the spring of 1955, he was paid a large sum because he had closed the deal that meant the factory would supply the official sweaters for the Norwegian athletes at the Winter Olympics in Cortina the following year. Apparently, it had also been my father's idea to print knitting patterns in colour and send them to yarn shops all across the country. The patterns had even been printed in a popular women's magazine. When cross-country skier Hallgeir Brenden won a gold medal and was photographed wearing the factory's Olympic sweater, and

thereafter with the actress Sophia Loren sitting on his lap, my father received yet another extra payment, which he used to build the large, glassed-in veranda that made our house one of the finest in Dale.

I felt both nervous and hopeful. What if the crane had left while I was ill? I didn't know what I would do without the bird, although it would also be a relief if it had finally gone off to find itself a mate.

I crossed the stream, and then the thing that never failed to please me happened – everything seemed to expand, and then the bog was there full of water, which in some places overflowed to form small pools, while the forest remained on the outskirts, birch and alders revealing themselves in the light over where the landscape grew narrower and vanished down towards another valley. And the tongue of land to the left appeared to be waiting for me, along with a pleasant breeze.

I couldn't see the crane. At first I thought it must be hunting for food behind the trees, or maybe it was off flying somewhere.

Everything I saw made me smile. The landscape with moss in shifting yellows and greens and the occasional faint shade of red, buzzing insects, the odd toad, butterflies, luminous cotton-grass and the chirruping of birds. I noticed in particular the tiny bodies of the birds, which swelled with song. Every time I saw them it seemed a miracle that a small handful of feathers, a few drops of blood and a couple of twiggy legs to stand on could create such life!

Soon, in around a month's time, the birds would gather, those who would leave for the winter. But that was still some way off.

I walked out onto the sun-dried tongue of land, took my jacket from my bag and sat down on it. In an ant hill a short distance away the ants were hard at work repairing a hole.

I still couldn't see the crane.

Up here, everything else seemed small and unimportant. My father's admonitions were nothing to do with me. I took out my sketch pad and the coloured pencils he had given me the day before. I couldn't remember ever having received a gift from him prior to this, unless it was for a birthday or at Christmas. The box was large and possibly expensive, and the sketch pad featured thick sheets of paper. I would never grow tired of drawing the crane. I had drawn him dancing at the edge of the bog, drawn him when he deferentially ducked his head, and when he jumped and threw his wings wide – as if he wanted to show me that he could do all that was expected of him, everything that was required.

A couple of weeks earlier I had shown my father the drawing I was most satisfied with, the one of the crane dancing. My father nodded in appreciation and said that the drawing was good, even if the proportions were slightly off.

‘What do you mean?’ I had asked.

‘That it doesn’t depict reality. The legs are too short, the head a little too small. But the shade of red on the head is nice,’ he said, but in a kind voice.

The strange thing was that although my father might never have seen a crane in his life, what he said was right. I could see it myself – that in the drawing the legs were too short and the head too small, compared with reality.

‘I’ll change it,’ I said.

‘You don’t need to rub it out. You can just draw another one, since you’re so talented,’ he said.

Encouraged by his praise, I told him about the peat bog. About the crane and my walks up there.

‘It’s even more beautiful than in my drawings,’ I said.

‘Go wandering up there alone, do you?’ he said.

That evening he stood in the doorway to my room.

‘Listen,’ he said. ‘I want you to stop going up there. I don’t like it. And besides, it looks like you’ve got yourself some funny ideas about it.’

Then I had fallen ill, with a fever and a sore throat, and after a few days my father gave me the sketch pad and box of pencils. Twenty different colours, lying there one after the other, each in its own little bed, from white and pale yellow on the left side to dark brown and black on the right.

The crane still hadn’t appeared, and by the time afternoon rolled around, I understood that he had left.

I saw it in my mind’s eye. In the morning dew, on one of the days I was home ill, a female finally stood out on the bog, and the crane had felt an entirely new attraction. In every bone of its body, in every black-and-white feather, in every vertebra of its neck. In its expressive head, in its watchful and curious eyes – and not least in its huge wings.

Maybe I thought that nature was unfolding as it should, that the crane had finally found a mate. I tried to feel happy for it, and stood to leave. I put my art supplies back in my bag, shook out the jacket I had been sitting on and tied it around my waist. Even though I still hadn’t eaten, I felt neither hungry nor thirsty.

Now, as I stood, I noticed something dark in a depression in the ground a little way up ahead. The body of a bird. It was as if something knocked out my thoughts, and they became a single, immense *no*. I leapt across the wet ground as the word repeated inside me: *No! No! No!*

I gaped at the crane as strange sounds and cries erupted from my body, sounds I could not stop. The crane was even bigger than I had realised. I had never seen it up close like this before – it was the size of a small person. Its neck lay at an appalling angle, almost perpendicular to its body. And the head, its beautiful head, lay at the very end of this twisted neck, eyes closed, beak slightly open as if in a half-strangled scream, the patch of red now blanched and pale. A little dried blood was visible beneath the feathers.

I was trembling, my legs were unable to bear my weight, and I fell to my knees in a tuft of grass. I passed a hand over the bird's body – it was cold. Still, I thought, it couldn't have lain here very long, maybe only since the morning, because had it been here much longer surely an eagle or some other predator would have eaten it? When I had got up that same morning, perhaps it had still been alive? As I was brushing my teeth and getting dressed, maybe it had been losing the battle for its life. Or perhaps it had suffered convulsions due to an illness of which I had no knowledge.

I should have come up here earlier, even though I was ill. I should have snuck out at night.

I gently stroked the coarse beak, the tiny feathers between the bird's eyes. I had never drawn the crane with eyelids. I didn't know, had never thought, that it might have eyelids. I looked at one of the bird's long, strong legs, saw that it was broken at the knee joint, and cried.

He shouldn't be left lying there like that. I bent down and managed to get my hands beneath the bird's body and lifted him up, heavy and cold. His long neck had only partly stiffened and ended up dangling, head down by my thighs. Then I draped his head and neck over my right shoulder as I stroked his feathers. I held him like a child. Inhaled his scent. His neck smelled of dry earth and congealed blood, and his feathers were soft.

'Come back,' I sobbed. 'Come back.'

I carried him as carefully as I could. Made my way towards the trees that stood like an enclosure around the peat bog, where there was drier ground. Where I had found the crane standing on so many of the occasions I had come up here. I found a small patch of heather and carefully laid the bird down. Set some moss under his head, and stretched out both his wings as far as I could.

The crane would not be buried. It would not become a bog body, preserved in the oxygen-depleted ground for all time. It would be eaten by other animals, and whatever remained would turn to dust. At the same time it would fly away, higher and higher – it would be able to see itself from above. Perhaps it would be afraid, because of course it would never have done that before, but its wings were made for journeys of that kind. The body would stretch itself all the way out, and the bird's head would lead the way like the point of an arrow.

As I made my way back, I turned and saw the crane lying stretched out on the green and brown ground, as if it were already in the midst of its journey, so high up that it could see everything below.

At the two iron-red rocks on the way down, I saw the two eagles in the sky, soaring in circles.

At dinner my father praised my mother's food. He didn't seem irritated – on the contrary, he spoke with a pleasant tone. Good fishcakes. And afterwards, when my mother asked, 'Would you like coffee and something sweet to go with it, Kristian?' he gratefully accepted, which he otherwise rarely did.

I kept trying to imagine the world from above. I looked down on myself and my mother and father as we sat there around the low table out on the glassed-in veranda; looked down on my father as he spread a blanket across his lap. I looked down on my mother's anxious, expectant movements as she held out the porcelain platter of buttered pancakes with sugar yet again.

'So tell me about your day, Peter. Since you're off school now,' my father said.

'I haven't done anything special,' I said.

Some emotion crossed my father's face, but it wasn't rage. It seemed like compassion.

In the evening, after I had gone to bed, the strange sense of seeing everything from above was gone. I heard my father's footsteps on the stairs; they stopped outside the door to my room. There was silence for a few moments. Then he continued on his way, into the bathroom.

Kristian Sunde, Oslo, 1942

The unfamiliar dining room was attractive. The entire apartment, which covered eighty-five square metres and was from 1910, was well maintained. I was twenty-seven years old and knew that I would never live like this. The property was west-facing, its layout practical, on the second floor and with no opposite neighbours, in Tøyen. My first impression was that it was perhaps a little messy – a few coats still hung in the hallway, and a bag stood open on the floor. But it wasn't my job to clear up; I simply had to put a value on the remaining effects. Someone from the administrators had already been here and taken everything Jewish to the warehouse in Bislett.

I glanced up at the ceiling: no cracks.

It was the end of November, almost three-thirty in the afternoon, twilight already falling. I went over to the doorway and twisted the round, black switch on the wall. The dining room was filled with a soft, golden light from three of the four hand-painted glass lampshades on an Art Deco lamp. If I could manage to get hold of a new bulb, the lamp would go for a fine sum. Light bulbs were difficult to obtain, but luckily I had an acquaintance in the lamp shop down on Youngstorget. On the table below the lamp a pale blue tablecloth had been folded to one side; on the other stood two breakfast plates scattered with a few dry breadcrumbs. But no glasses, no basket of sliced bread. No cutlery. It looked abandoned. The table was solid, of the kind that was modern around the turn of the century. It might be able to be listed for sixty kroner.

The wallpaper in the dining room was newfangled, with small red and blue triangles on a greyish background. Had I lived here, I would have replaced it with something more welcoming. Something pale yellow, with tendrils of cornflower blue, perhaps.

I took a deep breath. The air was stale, stifling. The apartment had stood empty for some weeks, but I had no idea who the previous tenants were, other than that they had been Jews. The landlord who had given me the key to the front door had said he was interested in getting new tenants in quickly, but understood that procedures must be followed.

I had told him I was employed by an auction house, but failed to mention that we worked on assignment for the Liquidation Board. The company paid me well and I didn't ask too many questions – questions only made everything complicated.

I went into the living room, which was a little smaller than the dining room. I turned on a cast-iron standard lamp; its pale-yellow shade cast a warm light. The living room was tidier, in spite of the small, empty crate that stood at its centre and the few small, carved wooden figures that lay spread around. I picked up a duck. It was polished smooth and painted yellow. I put it in the crate. I did the same with a slightly larger figure, a brown-painted dog with pleading eyes. And a car. Simple in shape – maybe it was supposed to be a Ford. So children had lived here. Against the wall stood a green two-seater sofa, a low table with an empty vase, and two low-backed moss-green chairs, situated diagonally on either side of the sofa. All together, these might be worth around one hundred and ten kroner. On the wall behind them hung a painting in a gold frame, and on a bookcase I could see several books. *Gyldendal's Conversations Lexicon* was on the bottommost shelf. I went over and picked out a title I had heard of: *Hunger* by Knut Hamsun. It was an attractive volume, leather-bound.

The double windows were half-covered by beige curtains in a shimmering, velvety fabric, with straight-hanging side panels and a narrow, gathered pelmet at the top. I turned off the cast-iron lamp then pushed the curtains all the way open, turned the lock mechanism on the inner window and pulled it into the room. Then I opened the outer window and set it on the hasp.

I breathed in the fresh air. There was no light outside – this was the third autumn of the war – but I knew every street and alleyway around here all the same. This was the part of the city in which I had grown up, and I still didn't live far away.

I pressed my thighs against the radiator below the window; it was warm, even though it should have been turned off. The apartment could do with airing out a little more, so I went back to the dining room and pulled down the dark cardboard curtain. The sight that met my eyes amused me. On the blackout curtain, a large H7 – the royal cypher – had been painted at the centre of a wreath of daisies. I went back into the living room and looked at the painting on the wall behind the sofa. A mountain range, a fjord, blue sky and old houses surrounded by boulders. The sunlight in the painting gave it a sense of reality, with detailed shadows. I touched one of the mountains and some of the tufts of grass with my fingertips, before reading the signature at the picture's bottom edge: *Copy, K. Johansen after H. Gude*. I wanted to take a closer look, so I took the painting down and leaned it carefully against the table. On the back, written in dark ink, were the words: *Painted in 1931 by Kjartan Johansen. Copy of Hans Gude's 'Fjord Landscape from Balestrand'. (From 1848.)* Below this, in turn, was written in pencil: *Original sold from Blomqvist, 1932.*

A copy, then, but one that nevertheless gave the impression that you were looking at a truly fine painting. I hung it back on the wall, but remained standing there, considering it for a little while longer. It was hard to imagine the original could be any better.

When the air grew chill, I closed both the inner and outer window, catching sight of my reflection in the glass pane. I couldn't stand here like this for long – the authorities had ordered that all blackout curtains must be drawn before darkness fell. But for a little while I could see myself as if in a doubly exposed photograph. It made me feel as if I were squinting at something.

I knew that my appearance was ordinary. A teacher at my elementary school had once said as much by way of explanation for not remembering my name. I was five foot nine, and I had short, dark-blonde hair, a narrow face, and slightly downturned eyes that I knew could give me a somewhat mournful look. The first time I kissed a girl, she said that my mouth was sensitive. I liked my mouth, with its rather large lips, but the war had whittled me down, as it had done most people.

Out in the hallway I took down the hat that I had set on the hat rack when I came in. There was a dark blue women's hat there, too, and a brown flat cap. On the hook below it, a pale grey summer coat and a simple women's overcoat with a belt. The open bag on the floor was full of clothes.

I picked up a child's knitted sweater, a larger cardigan and two pairs of woollen long johns.

Beside the bag stood a pair of brown children's boots with worn soles, and a pair of low-heeled women's shoes. Could somebody have started packing but then not managed to take their warm clothes with them? Strangers who were nothing to do with me. My task was to be neither sentimental nor full of ideas.

I set the hat on my head and tugged the brim a little further down over my forehead. From my right trouser pocket I took a packet of cigarettes, and drew one out. I had obtained the cigarettes through a trade with a colleague. I tore off a match and lit the cigarette, took a deep drag, and then said to an imagined landlord: 'This apartment might just have the qualities I'm looking for.'

I slowly blew out the smoke. No – I spoke the words to a young woman instead. A well-off landlady, with a fur coat and high heels that click-clacked against the parquet. No – she was alone, and she didn't have a fur coat, but a skirt that was tight across her bottom, a fitted blouse and sheer tights.

I went back into the living room and looked at myself in the window again, straightening my spine and wrinkling my brow. Then I pulled down the blackout curtain in here, too, and lost sight of myself. Here there were no flowers or H7, but someone had painted in attractive script: *Few are like father, no one is like mother.*

I thought about my own father, who was convinced that everything in life was better if you simply believed in God, joined a union and worked hard. But Gudmund Sunde had worked himself to the bone and was still unable to afford anything other than the damp rat's nest that constituted his lodgings down in Grønland. He was fifty-five years old, and he'd been a metalworker at Akers Workshop for almost his entire life. He therefore constantly intoned that I ought to remember how lucky I was to have landed the role with the auction house; how I should be grateful for the fixed salary and the small apartment I was so fortunate to rent. My sisters hadn't been so lucky, he liked to remind me: Grete was a cleaner at various schools and lived in cramped quarters with her husband, while Anne, two years my senior, was a housewife with three children living with her in-laws. Our mother died so many years ago that I hardly remembered her now. It was diphtheria. But I remembered the voice of the man from the undertakers' – he had used the term *poor man's disease*.

I thought it was the auction house that ought to be grateful, having recently persuaded me to join the Nasjonal Samling, since the Liquidation Board demanded it. That I had no education had almost seemed like an advantage, since I could learn the profession from the ground up. So no – in my opinion the road to this job hadn't been about good fortune or luck, but about an understanding of value, and about timing.

I had first been employed at the Christiania Glasmagasin homewares store, where I started as a call-in sales clerk. But rumours about me had quickly begun to circulate, and after a few weeks I was transferred to a temporary position in the sales department, because I – in all fairness – had been full of good ideas and quickly appropriated the sales language of the customer service agent. Before Easter, for example, I made yellow eggs painted with facial expressions, which I set in the new and exclusive glass bowls from Rosendahl. Customers could choose to take home a smiling, surprised, sceptical or winking face with their purchase. And prior to the constitution day celebrations on the seventeenth of May, I drew a colourful poster advertising the store's spring offers: a beautiful blonde woman in a modern kitchen, with several triangular saucepans sitting on the same hotplate. I then got that year's newly crowned Oslo Princess to stand in one of the shop windows and mime preparing food with the triangular saucepans from Høyang. And then I called the *Aftenposten* newspaper, whose

reporter wrote about the long queues of customers hoping to buy the pans (which had naturally contained several of my acquaintances).

After that, I had received an enquiry from the Nasjonal Samling, who offered me a job designing posters for them – I would be paid handsomely for the work, they said. But I had declined.

Anyway – during my final six months at the homewares store, the shop's takings increased by almost twenty per cent, as if no world war was lurking just a little further ahead on the calendar.

Just before the war broke out, one of my colleagues took a job at the auction house, and he was the one who convinced them to employ me, too. He claimed that if they didn't offer me a job at once, one of their competitors was sure to snap me up.

So my father's assertions about luck were not correct. It was rather that my talent ran in an entirely different direction than welding iron and steel down at Oslo's docks.

Keeping my hat on, I went over to a dresser that stood against the wall. It was yellowish in colour, with ornamental cut-outs carved into the cupboard doors, and might be worth around forty kroner. Of the three doors, the one to the central cabinet stood ajar. There were some coffee cups inside it. In the right-hand cabinet there was nothing. The last cabinet, too, was empty. Perhaps the previous owners had done as many others had, and sold their crockery and cutlery down in the square or on the black market. Or maybe the men from the administrators had taken more than just the Jewish items with them. Or perhaps the owners had hidden everything away until this terrible war was over. I imagined silverware in secret cupboards, hidden behind the wallpaper. Above the dresser hung a medium-sized photograph. A wedding photo. An elegant, dark-haired bridegroom with combed-back hair and a serious face, his gaze turned towards the photographer. He was wearing a dark suit, a white shirt with a starched chest, and shiny black shoes. He had placed a hand against his bride's back. She was smiling cautiously. I thought it seemed like a relieved smile. Her face was oval, her eyes dark, and she too was looking at the photographer. Her hair, sticking out from under her white veil, was wavy and swept across her forehead. She wore a long, white silk dress and white shoes.

I stood there, looking at the couple who had probably lived here. Beneath the wedding photograph there were traces of the marks left by another picture; the wallpaper was darker within the small rectangle, and there was a hole left by a nail.

I knew I shouldn't be standing there like that. I wasn't there for the couple in the photograph. I went into the kitchen, pulled down the blackout curtain and turned on the

ceiling lamp. The kitchen featured a modern countertop with overhead cabinets, a spacious sink and an additional slop sink. In the slop sink was a colander. I picked it up and put it in one of the kitchen drawers alongside some ladles. As if I were at home. On the long rack beneath the overhead cabinets there was flour in one of the small drawers, a little grain in another. The rest were empty. In one of the drawers under the counter I found a tin with a hinged lid. I opened it, then stuck a fingertip into its brown contents and dabbed some onto my tongue. It tasted burnt; bitter chicory. Without stopping to think, I poured the coffee substitute into my trouser pocket. Nor would it be immoral to take the flour and the grain. If I didn't take it, it would either go to waste or someone else would help themselves to it. Most items were rationed nowadays – it would almost be wrong *not* to take it. I tipped both the flour and the grain into the empty coffee tin and clamped the lid shut.

I went back out into the hallway, opened my briefcase and put the tin into it, settling it all the way down at the bottom. Then I took out the new public papers that had been handed out to everyone in the office. Again, I read that the administrators could do as they wished with the valuables that had been left behind in the vacated or seized properties: kitchen utensils, money, objects, clothes and other items. As a kind of extended arm of the administrators, I was therefore completely within my rights to take a little simple coffee substitute.

It also said that 'in accordance with the new State Police regulations, furniture or objects may be sold from the company's warehouse in Bislett, or everything may be handed over to the Ministry of Finance's Liquidation Board and their scheme to donate free furniture to wounded front fighters.'

The people in the photograph had no names. When I arrived, I saw that the plaque on the door had been removed, and that to the right of the door frame were marks left by something small and cylindrical. What could that have been? I imagined they might have set out for Sweden in great haste. That they might have told the landlord he could just sell any items that remained. It was hard to know anything at all, all kinds of rumours were circulating, and besides, it was impossible to feel sympathy for everyone.

I opened the door to the master bedroom. Here, too, I pulled down the blackout curtain before flicking the switch that turned on the ceiling lamp. Two pale-grey bedframes with high, rounded headboards were pushed together, mattresses in each of them, but no pillows, sheets or blankets. So they had taken along something on which they could lay their heads, and something to spread over them. A number of items of clothing lay on the mattress closest

to the door, as if everything had been heaved out of the wardrobe and left there. Beside the bed, below the window, stood a blue cradle.

I set aside the hat and picked up a pair of dark-brown trousers with creases down the front, and a white shirt. Good quality. Without thinking, I took off my own trousers, rolled them up so the coffee substitute wouldn't pour out onto the floor, and tried on the dark-brown ones. They were an excellent fit, and far more elegant than mine. I tried on the shirt, too. It fit well – the man in the photograph must have been around my size. This was no more immoral than finding clothing at a flea market. Besides, the man who once wore these things hadn't bothered to take them with him.

In the wardrobe hung a dark dress and a silk blouse, each on their own coat hanger. I thought of Anne's worn and darned clothes, and took out the silk blouse. The dress I left untouched – it wouldn't fit her, anyway.

On the back of the wardrobe door I saw a small photograph, of a family gathering outdoors. It couldn't be all that old – the summer dresses looked modern, and no one was wearing a hat; on the contrary the men were wearing loose shirts with their braces visible. The women lay in the grass around a blanket with bottles of wine and a basket of food. Wasn't that the couple from the wedding portrait? I went all the way up to the photograph, and yes, there was the man with someone who looked like him, a brother perhaps – and the woman lay in the grass along with two others. Her dark, wavy hair hung loose around her face and she held a wine glass in one hand. In this photograph her expression was serious.

I walked around the beds again and took a closer look at the cradle beneath the window. It had no mattress, and inside it was a box of earplugs, a book about architecture, and a smaller book containing foreign characters that the people from the administration must have overlooked. The cradle was decorated with various painstakingly painted birds at the head end, along with the initials *J.I.* and the year *1906*. The foot end was also painted with birds that encircled or sat around white-painted letters and numbers: *H.I. 1934* and *M.I. 1937*.

I thought: two generations, and children three years apart. It was a truly lovely piece of furniture, with cut-outs carved along the sides. I gave it a gentle nudge, and to my surprise felt the sudden urge to cry at the tiny movement it made. This soft side of mine was irritating. The cradle might go for fifty kroner.

When working for clients who were present, I used to say: Life isn't a jigsaw puzzle, but it's still good to be a piece in someone's life.

I had read it in one of father's union booklets, but I thought it sounded good in a variety of contexts.

I picked up the book about the history of architecture and flicked through it. Churches and Roman columns, beautiful Parisian apartment buildings and Greek temples. Between the pages about Art Nouveau was an envelope. It's outside was blank, but it was filled with something, and I opened it. It was a bundle of banknotes. I had found money before in other apartments, and naturally always registered the sums as part of the estate and handed them over to the firm's treasurer. Now I counted hundreds, fifties and a few tens. Two thousand three hundred kroner in total. I stood there with an entire year's salary in my hands. It made me jittery. I counted the notes one more time – I had counted wrong, it was actually two thousand two hundred and ten kroner, but a huge amount all the same. I took a deep breath and passed a hand over my face. Counted again. Yes, two thousand two hundred and ten.

Who kept that much money in an envelope? Might it have come from some illegal activity? I looked at the banknotes. Maybe their owner had been saving up, setting aside the money little by little? It was equally irritating to me that someone might have been able to squirrel away such a fortune that way.

In a flash I thought of my life in my damp apartment, and felt that *I* was the one who should be living in these rooms, with a future wife and two children. Suppose the money was mine, and I could pay to rent these rooms? Suppose that one day I could afford to get my licence and buy a car, that I could roll down the window to ask a beautiful woman if she'd like to go for a ride?

Why not?

I sometimes liked to imagine what my mother would say, if she were still alive. I often attributed encouraging and positive statements to her. In this situation, she probably would have said: *Why shouldn't you be able to live here, the same as anyone else?*

Only once before had I truly desired a property I had visited for work. I had been sent to appraise items in a red house in Smestad with a glassed-in veranda and an apple orchard. I had imagined the rooms containing my own furniture, conjured up a girl serving my wife and I cups of tea in the evenings. The scene had appeared so vividly to me that I had contacted the bank. But despite being able to answer yes to the first two questions put to me by the man behind the counter, I had been forced to shake my head to the rest. Yes, Norwegian citizen. Yes, permanently employed. No, not associated with any Jewish community. No, no assets, no, no one who could help me out financially, no, nobody who could be my guarantor. No, no prospect of any inheritance.

I owned nothing.

The house in Smestad was purchased by a self-assured doctor and his wife, who had twelve-year-old twins, a boy and a girl. I had been there at the same time as them. The former owners were dead, and their heirs wished to sell both the house and its contents. The two children had quarrelled constantly, and on that August day in 1940, while the family was viewing the house for the second time and about to walk up to the edge of the property, the son had cried that he didn't want to leave Moss. He had thrown apples at his father, screaming that the place was a shithole. The doctor had neither told the boy off nor blushed at his son's bad behaviour; in an utterly calm voice, he simply said that this was where they were moving. Of course, he explained to me, they would be keeping their country home in Hvaler. So I mustn't feel too sorry for the boy, he would still be able to visit his old friends during the summer holidays.

Afterwards, when the family had gone and I was left to turn off the lights and make sure everything was in order, I had grabbed the poker from beside the fireplace and slammed it down with such force that a large chip was left in the mantelpiece and white plaster fell to the floor. For several minutes afterwards it had been like an overwhelming discharging of some force in me, a descent into complete calm. Of course I swept up the plaster, but I never mentioned the chip in the fireplace. Nor did I ever hear anything about it.

I now slipped the envelope containing the banknotes into my trouser pocket. I would think about it later. Then I went into the hallway and opened the last door, into a small children's bedroom, which was little more than a box room beside the parents' room. It contained bunk beds with duvets and pillows with flowery covers. Above the bottommost bed, a line drawing was pinned to the wall with drawing pins. It depicted a house. The room had a narrow window that faced the rear courtyard; here, too, there was a blackout curtain, but since the ceiling lamp didn't work I didn't bother to pull it down. On a hook I saw a child's knitted brown cardigan with wooden buttons and a white pattern around the neck and cuffs. I would take it for one of my nieces. At the end of the bunk beds stood an old, blue rocking horse with red-painted rockers. Would anyone spend money on a rocking horse nowadays? I gently stroked its back, and yet again I felt the sudden urge to cry. Maybe I would have children one day? The horse did seem a little threatening, however, with its four, large eyes. On each side of the head, there was one eye that was open and one that was closed. The rocking horse didn't need to be sold – I decided I would come back for it the following day, borrowing a vehicle from the firm. I would also take the copy by Gude with me. I found the light in the painting uplifting.

I went back into the dining room, turned off the lamp above the table, and in the living room twisted the flat switch on the cast-iron lamp. Again, I imagined my mother. Allowed her to say that my future prospects would be so much brighter if I could simply live somewhere a little more refined. That an apartment like this one would be something to show a girl. Not to mention how proud my father would be. With the sum of money in my pocket I could speak to the landlord. And should he try to make things even the slightest bit difficult for me, one of the men at the collection centre had mentioned that he knew someone who assisted with the takeover of seized apartments, 'based on verbal agreements, followed by immediate contractual confirmation.' I would never threaten the landlord into giving me a rental agreement, but I had heard that people no longer had any idea which estate administrators were responsible for the abandoned premises that were now scattered all across the capital. Besides, the landlords were losing money due to the rents not being paid.

I touched the envelope in my pocket. No, maybe not, after all. The money wasn't mine. But I was spared having to think on this unpleasantness any further, because now the doorbell rang loudly and shrilly out in the hall. I wasn't expecting anyone, but went to open the door. A woman in her thirties was standing there. In her hands she held a large, brown serving bowl with a tea towel draped over it. She was wearing a dark, knee-length coat and a wool hat with a decorative hatpin. Some blonde curls stuck out from beneath it. I looked at her, curious, because she didn't speak. Then she gave a quick smile and explained that she was 'just your typical nosy neighbour.' She made a little gesture with her head, as if to show that she had come from the apartment across the hall.

'I saw you arrive, and wondered if it might be the new neighbours.'

I realised I was wearing the trousers and shirt of the man who used to live here. Maybe she recognised the clothes. But I had nothing to hide, and put one hand confidently in my pocket.

'I work for an auction house, we appraise the contents of abandoned apartments,' I said.

'Oh, I see. Yes, this one has stood empty for a while, as far as I know.'

I nodded, thinking: yes, of course she would know that.

The woman leaned to one side to peer into the apartment's hallway.

I was no stranger to curious people who wanted to see how their neighbours lived.

'They're nice, these apartments,' I said.

‘Aren’t they? We’re extremely satisfied, at least. We’ve lived here for five years. Decent landlord, nice and quiet, respectable people in all the stairwells. But it isn’t quiet in the way of an old people’s home, either, if you know what I mean.’ She gave a little laugh.

I looked at the serving bowl. Its contents smelled cloying and iron-like.

‘It’s for my mother,’ she said, pulling the tea towel aside.

It was freshly whipped blood pudding. A black, not yet entirely congealed mass, flecked with white chunks of fat. The smell and the sight of it almost made me gag.

She put the tea towel back in place.

‘My mother lives just a couple of blocks away. She comes from a farm out in Lier. Her brother helps us, sends us what he can spare.’

Again she peered into the apartment over my shoulder.

‘I knew them a little,’ she said.

I wanted to know nothing more about them, wanted only to end the conversation.

‘I have a little more work left to do,’ I said. ‘So if you’ll excuse me...?’

‘Agreeable people. But they weren’t, how should I put it, important figures in our life. And I don’t know where they went. It’s ages since I saw the boy.’

‘That kind of information isn’t in the papers, either.’

‘As I said, I didn’t know them especially well.’

I noticed her neutral tone of voice. She couldn’t know what kind of man I was, standing there in the clean, dark-brown trousers. I could just as easily have lied about my position and be a lawyer from the Property Office, or somebody from the Nasjonal Samling’s statistical office.

She, too, could be anyone, this well-dressed woman with an uncle on a farm in Lier.

The tea towel did nothing to mask the heavy smell of dark, half-congealed blood. I was about to repeat that I had to get back to work, but she spoke first.

‘Well, I had better get going. The kids need putting to bed, too. It isn’t always easy, even if their father is home.’ She gave another brief laugh, and I nodded sympathetically.

I could never get used to it, the way that strangers constantly wanted to explain unimportant things to each other. But that was how it was in those days – people explained trifles and trivialities because they were afraid of being suspected of something, something they weren’t even sure they could define themselves.

She walked down the stairs, but I remained standing in the doorway in the hard light of the stairwell lamp. I heard her voice from somewhere on the floor below: ‘We’ll just have

to hope some nice people move in one day!’ And then she said something further, of which I caught nothing but fragments, but I thought it was: ‘Someone like them.’

I gathered up my things and checked that everything was in order, then walked down the stairs and out of the building. There were ashes on the pavement, and I heard the jangling of a tram somewhere. Snow would soon begin to fall. I began to walk towards the tram stop, but I felt confused. It was as if the money in my pocket was a comfort, but simultaneously a source of excitement. The feeling of facing something new and unknown, a choice and an opportunity. I looked at my watch. It was no later than five-fifteen. I had thought much more time had passed.

Up there on the second-floor were the apartment’s windows. All dark.

A little later, as I stood holding onto the leather strap that hung from the roof of the tram, I once again saw my reflection in the windowpane. The image trembled along the tracks.

After a while the electricity cut out, and the tram came to a halt between two stops. People shouted to the conductor that they wanted to get off, that he should open the doors. A couple of men began to force open a window. When I saw how a third man forcefully tore a pointed, red fire axe from the wall and swung it at the window with all his might, I thought: *decisiveness*. It’s the only thing that matters if you want to get anywhere.

The rolled-up painting lay on the table in front of me. It seemed such a short time ago, autumn 2004, or maybe it was 2005, when I had discovered the painting behind some long dresses in the wardrobe. I had found a pair of pliers, removed the canvas from the stretcher, and rolled it up in a white sheet. Then I had fastened a pair of ski ties loosely around it and taken it down to the storeroom. I had wanted it out of sight.

Now I thought: isn't it strange to want to buy expensive artworks at the very end of your life? Isn't that when people get rid of things?

I went over to the bookcase, held a glass beneath the tap of the red wine carton, and filled it. I swirled the liquid around the glass a little, its scent heavy and dark. After a few mouthfuls I would no longer think about the dying art collector, and instead hopefully feel nothing but a pleasurable sense of calm. I didn't drink very often, just the odd glass after work now and then.

I went back to the dining table and passed a hand over the sheet. Would it be a relief if the painting were to be destroyed?

I just wanted to stand there for a few minutes, without unwrapping it. To feel the seconds and the minutes and the alcohol trickling through my body. *Don't run from the feeling.* That was what my doctor, Salima Taseer Bugge, had said during those years. Don't run from it; instead let the emotion run through your body.

Bugge was from a Pakistani family, and in late summer 2002 she was already a mature woman. Late fifties, perhaps – the same age I was now. She had thick grey hair and an empathetic appearance, with an experienced and interested gaze.

'You're not going to die of grief,' she said. 'In a while – I don't know when, but in a while, you'll no longer notice it every minute of every day.'

'It makes me...' I had said. But I was unsure what grief actually *did*. It made me disoriented. About the time of day. Where I was.

'I can't find my way anywhere, I can't escape. It's got inside me, and its *doing* something.' I began to cry. 'And Bo... I'm not the person she knows anymore.'

Bugge had nodded.

'Will I ever be myself again?' I had asked.

‘Many grieving people experience a loss of self. But not forever. You’ll come back, or perhaps it’s more correct to say you’ll *move on*. After a time. What I can say is that your grief will catch up with you if you try to run from it. A patient I once heard give a presentation used another image: he said he tried to observe his grief as it ran through his body. First for a few seconds, then in minutes and hours. Run through, and away.’

Run from. Run through. I had thought it sounded stupid and oversimplified.

Afterwards, as I was on my way out, Bugge had asked:

‘Do you feel abandoned, Erika?’

‘No,’ I replied. ‘I don’t *feel* abandoned, I *am* abandoned. It’s a fact that Peter went up there to that peat bog, that he abandoned me there. And it’s a fact that hurts.’

For several weeks it had surged through me, taking all sleep and hunger and patience with it.

I had become a widow. A single mother. But after a few months I gradually became myself again after all, attentive to how Bo was growing, week by week. How she added words to her vocabulary. And then more long months passed, and I could drink a few glasses of wine and forget my grief for so many hours that I felt guilty about it.

In the spring of 2003, I changed job. I gave up my role at the small florists and started working at the garden centre. Filled my life with daffodils, then summer flowers, and later poinsettias at Christmas. And for many years my mother came to visit us by train and made dinner. She helped Bo with her homework, and on Sundays they went on hikes in the forest or took trips to the Natural History Museum. So that I could rest, or do something else. It was my mother who fielded Bo’s many questions, who bore witness to her intense interest in biology. For a long time, she was also the one on the receiving end of most of Bo’s greater and smaller sorrows and joys.

Later, there were other losses. My father’s years-long and confusing silence, which ended with him passing away in his sleep in a home for dementia sufferers. And my mother, who with aged steps was now approaching the end of her life in a care home in Asker. I visited her as often as I could, helping out with practical matters, and worried about her every time I left.

The plant nursery at Høn, where I grew up, had been sold back in 1993. After a few years the two greenhouses and our home were torn down, and later a large apartment complex was built there.

I took a couple more swigs of the wine.

Bo, in anger, once said that she had grown up during the time it had taken me to stop being selfish. I didn't contradict her. Because there was much about her childhood that I didn't remember. This became evident again just weeks ago, when she told me that she and Mathias were going on a week-long trip to Berlin in the summer. That they had bought tickets to see *Hedda Gabler* at the theatre there.

'But you don't understand German?' I said.

'Um, yes I do?' Bo said.

'You do?'

'I studied German in middle school and all through high school, that's five years in total.'

She didn't say this in an offended or surprised way but simply informed me of it, as if she were telling a stranger.

The wine had the desired effect. I managed to set aside my thoughts of Bo, and I was no longer irritated at Torstein Enstad or his art-collecting client. Now I looked at the sheet, removed the two ties, and unrolled the painting across the table. There were neither tears nor cracks in the image, but it was perhaps smaller than I remembered. Still, it was large: ninety centimetres tall, and perhaps one hundred and ten centimetres wide. I recognised every brushstroke. The canvas wanted to roll itself back up again, so I took out four cups and set one at each of the grey, unpainted corners. I bent down towards it and inhaled the faint smell of oil paints.

I had once disliked this painting, but now I thought it seemed distinctive, alluring, with the light slipping in from one side to create strange shadows that brought everything to life. A wetland landscape on a warm summer's day. The sky was clear, while the peat bog was illuminated in various tones of green and brown. In a couple of places the sky was reflected in muddy pools, the ground alternately dry and sodden. In the background grew a pair of low trees with oil-black branches glinting through their foliage, and above the landscape, high in the sky, flew a crane with dark eyes and a burning-red mark on its head. Its powerful wings were turned down, painted at the instant before they would once again lift towards another beat. The bird's legs were outstretched behind its body, ruler-straight. And at the bottom of the painting, in the darkness, was what I remembered a critic had called the Gothic part of the work. Part of a headboard with the date 1906 painted on it, and a transparent yet visible cranium.

And the head of the old rocking horse with the two eyes, one beneath the other, one open and one closed, along with the spine of a book. The objects almost seemed to be growing there in the dark.

I would never see the peat bog where Peter was found. The police had offered to take me to it, but I declined. The idea had repulsed me. Elsa, his mother, had also declined, but maybe she wouldn't have managed the steep ascent regardless. But Peter's sister, Anne-Beate, had been to see it. In August 2002 she hiked up there in the drizzle, accompanied by a young vicar and a man from the police. Apparently it had taken them a long time, but they had made it all the way up there and out onto the tongue of dry land. There, under the tree, Anne-Beate said, she had laid a wreath of pinecones, which she had made herself.

Bo started school that autumn, and I enquired with her teacher, a fine educator, about whether she, too, ought to be allowed to see the place where her father was found. But he told me that Bo talked about Peter so much as she played that she was probably already processing her grief in the best possible way.

Still, over the course of that autumn I felt that Bo didn't really understand that Peter was dead. I was gentle, but strove to be as clear as possible: 'Pappa isn't coming back, you know that, don't you? Because he's not alive anymore.'

But not long afterwards, as we were eating dinner, she had asked:

'Where is he dead now?'

'Do you mean where *is* he now? If he's in heaven?'

'No, *where* is he dead?'

'He was found beside the peat bog, like I told you. In Dale, where Grandma lives. That was where he died.'

Bo helped herself to some spaghetti with tomato sauce.

'What does he eat while he's there?' Her expression was inquisitive and serious.

'I don't know how long he was there before he died. Before his heart stopped beating. He had several cans of food with him, and had eaten some of them. But, well, he was also good at finding food in nature.'

'Has anyone seen him since?'

I wanted to take her seriously, so I asked: 'Do you think he's become a ghost, Bo?'

'No, of course not!'

'Pappa died, several weeks ago. You do know that, don't you? He isn't at Grandma's house or in his studio. His heart stopped beating while he was sitting beside the bog. We buried him, remember?'

Bo put a spoonful of spaghetti into her mouth and chewed. After a while, she asked:
‘Can’t they find it out?’
‘Who? Can’t who find what out, Bo?’
‘You said there’s a man and a woman finding him. And that he’s sitting against a tree.’
‘They *found* him. He *was* sitting against a tree. Not finding,’ I said.
‘So they’re not finding out what’s happening?’
I shook my head, thinking that what mattered most was that I was clear.
‘No. They couldn’t say for certain how he died, but they could see it was a natural death. That’s what it’s called: a natural death.’
Bo nodded.
‘Maybe he’s just getting lost?’ she said.
‘I don’t think so. Pappa had been to that peat bog many times before. Including when he was a child.’
‘But nobody dies for real in a bog. Or disappears completely. Pappa said that all life lives in the bog. That everything exists there – for real. Only you can’t see it.’

I stared down at the painting. His signature was in the bottom right corner: *P. Sunde, 2001.*

Before he had started work on the painting, he had spent a week in July visiting his mother. This wasn’t unusual; it was something he did every summer. But unlike in previous years he had been distant and irritable when he came home. He even suggested that we ought to move.

I had thought he was depressed. He stayed in his studio for days at a time. I felt rejected; was anxious and clingy when he came home. A friend felt Peter was being sly and calculating, that his behaviour was a way of controlling me.

But then he started working on *The Horse in the Bog*. It was an intense period, but nevertheless, things seemed more normal again. When the painting was done, around Easter 2001, he brought it home. Bo had been fascinated, pointing and asking questions. What’s that? Is it a head? What’s that bird called? Why is there a horse there? And Peter had told her about cranes, and that the thing that looked like a horse was a rocking horse – one which in reality was down in our basement storeroom.

‘But there it’s dead, buried in the earth,’ Bo had said, pointing at the rocking horse in the painting.

‘No, because it’s in the bog, and as long as we don’t destroy the bog, it will take care of everything that sinks into it.’

Peter had started to explain carbon and the atmosphere to her, but soon realised these concepts were far too advanced for a five-year-old to grasp. In the end he had broken off and said:

‘The point of a peat bog is quite simply to take care of it, so it doesn’t disappear.’

It was a colleague, or a friend, who convinced Peter to submit the painting for the state art exhibition – the Autumn Exhibition – but he wasn’t happy when it was accepted. And none of us went to the exhibition opening.

Apart from a critic in an art periodical, who believed that the painter’s task was to keep clichés in check, and that to paint was consequently to exclude everything unnecessary – ‘that is, the very opposite of this heavily symbolic daubery’ – and a critic who believed that painting as an art form in general was dead, the painting that now lay on the table had been described as original, Gothic, ambitious and mysterious. The *Aftenposten* newspaper’s reviewer concluded by writing: ‘The bird appears to vibrate above the entire scene. With this painting, Peter Sunde proves that he is an artist of stature.’

In a longer piece in the *VG* newspaper, the information officer at the Kunstneres Hus gallery was quoted as saying that ‘audiences are most interested in *The Horse in the Bog*, the exciting painting featuring the strange horse and skull.’

Indeed, the more press coverage and attention the painting received, the more off kilter Peter became. I couldn’t understand why he wasn’t proud. Every time I asked, he caustically replied that I could take care of the plants, and he would take care of the art.

When a collector offered thirty thousand kroner for *The Horse in the Bog*, he became downright distressed. He had never before sold a painting for such a sum, it was almost unbelievable. The founder of a furniture factory then offered forty-five thousand for it, but still he declined. And when he also rejected a savings bank foundation, who wished to purchase the painting for fifty thousand kroner, and I told him that our washing machine had fallen apart, I realised that he would never sell at any price.

‘Something will always be broken,’ he replied.

After three or four weeks, Peter demanded that the painting be taken down. He naturally encountered resistance, and the head of the gallery said it was impossible. When he still demanded that it be removed, he was told to *stop acting like a child*.

One day, with members of the public present, Peter ascended a stepladder and took down *The Horse in the Bog*. There was an almighty uproar – a young security guard had tried to stop him, but didn't want to tear the work from Peter's hands for fear of damaging it. Instead, he took out a camera and photographed Peter as he carried the painting out of the main entrance as alarmed members of the public looked on. Afterwards, the security guard sold two of those photographs to the *VG* newspaper. Later, a journalist from the paper also called, and I begged Peter not to agree to an interview, but he didn't listen to me.

– *Why did you take down the most talked about work at this year's exhibition? Is this a so-called stunt, for further attention?*

– *This isn't a stunt. I didn't understand the reach it would have. It's making me downright unwell. And that I should earn money from it? Just the thought makes me feel ashamed.*

– *But you submitted the painting yourself. And you aren't forced to sell it?*

– *I wasn't prepared.*

– *What do you mean by that? Isn't attention what all artists want?*

– *Only when it's deserved.*

– *Why couldn't the painting remain on display until the exhibition is over? The painting was chosen from among several hundred submitted works – isn't this insulting to the artists who were rejected?*

– *This is no insult.*

The telephone conversation was reproduced in the paper's Spotlight pages, exactly as it had unfolded, beside a photograph of Peter on the stepladder, under the headline: *Looking a gift horse in the mouth*.

I removed the four cups from each corner of the canvas, allowing the painting to roll halfway up again. Then I saw Peter's elegant, slightly angular handwriting on the back of it, the words faintly written in black ink: *To Ragnhild*. I looked at the name as if at an apparition. *Number one*.

It was my sister, Åsne, who had jokingly referred to Ragnhild Mørk that way. While I was deemed *a really good number two*.