

IN THE WAKE

It was something to do with a face. I had never seen it before, yet I did recognise it, but as it comes to me now, the thought of it is unpleasant. Someone gave me a gin. I had had enough already. I see my hand around the glass, the glass is full to the brim, and then I do not remember anything more except that face, and now I stand with my forehead against the glass of this bookshop door, and I kick at the door. They have to let me in. I do not know how long I have been standing here. I have been out of this world and now I am back, and I don't feel well. Why doesn't someone come and let me in? I kick the door. People are passing on the pavement behind me, but I don't turn round, just squeeze my face to the glass and my nose is flattened and I stare at the rows of books. It is dark in there, but light outside. It is morning, the sun feels hot on my neck, but I dare not turn round. That glass of gin was yesterday and miles and miles from this street in central Oslo.

Someone gives a little cough and says: "I don't think there's anyone there yet. It's probably too early."

I know that voice, it's the lady from the kiosk next

door. I have known it for years. She is right behind me. I could pick her out with my eyes shut in the middle of Aker Brugge on a crowded Saturday afternoon in June. I've been buying Petterøe 3 tobacco and *Dagbladet* and a Kvikk Lunsj chocolate bar from her since 1981. And then I remember. I do not work here any more. I haven't worked here for three years. I stand perfectly still holding my breath and wait for her to go away. It is a good idea not to breathe, my side hurts every time I suck the air in. But then I have to breathe, and there is a squeak from my throat or further down, and the pain in my side is there at once. It is lung cancer, I'm convinced it is, and I feel so sad because I have lung cancer and will certainly not be here for long.

It is quiet behind me now so she must have gone, and then I start to cry, with my nose pressed to the glass door, and I look in at the rows of books, see that the shop has grown since I stopped working there, more floor space with more shelves for many more books I shall never read because I am going to die of lung cancer.

I am forty-three. When my father was this age I had just been born, and he never touched a cigarette in his whole life. He only had a drink with Sunday dinner; one pint because he deserved it. The body should be a temple of life, he said, not a whited sepulchre. He was a skier and a boxer, and when he breathed, the air went straight into his lungs, and did no harm at all for the

air was much cleaner then. If he ever coughed, it was because he had a cold, and he rarely did. Now he is dead, but through no fault of his own. If I die now it will definitely be my fault. That is the difference between us, and it is a big difference.

I cough and look down; I see my hands. They have an emptiness I cannot account for and they are dirty, there are grazes on both palms, but I feel no pain. They just hang there. Then I remember a high grey wall and its rough surface, I am falling and holding on at the same time, and I remember utterly still water in a pool, chlorine blue water with black lines on the bottom. It is a public swimming pool, and it is not yet open, it is quite silent, only a man all in white walking by the side of the pool, and I try to work out just where it is that I am standing watching this from, but I can't. I am all over the place, I am like God, I am omnipresent. I can see the clock on the wall quite clearly, but I cannot make out what the time is. There is a palm tree in one corner. It is Bislett baths, I think. Then the grey wall is Bislett stadium. But I have not been to Bislett stadium since I was ten and with my father and saw Raufoss beat Vålerenga FC two-nil. He was shattered. Didn't say a word all the way home.

I feel the sun on my neck, it is burning or *something* is burning, and maybe it is Sunday. I don't remember. I see only my eyes in the glass and the books beyond, and I don't know what day it is.

“Go and see what the weather is like,” my brother would say every time it was Sunday morning and winter, and I would have to get out of the bottom bunk and go to the window and pull the heavy curtain aside and look out through the frost flowers.

“It’s sunny,” I say, “sunshine and fine weather.”

“Sunshine,” he says, “fucking shit.”

“Fucking shit,” I say, and the snow was so white it hurt your eyes, and the smell of frying bacon floated up from downstairs, and we knew that *he* had been awake for several hours, preparing the skis and loading the rucksacks. Now they were ready in the hall with the thermos and sandwiches in the side pockets and extra sweaters and socks and ski scrapers and three lots of Swix varnish in case of a sudden thaw or if the mercury dropped, and two oranges apiece and perhaps a Kvikk Lunsj chocolate bar if we were lucky, and the rucksack would be sure to weigh twenty kilos each.

But that is a lifetime ago, and he has been dead for nearly six years. I remember an office on Drammensvei with a red cross on the door, a fireman is showing a video from the inside of the boat with a landscape of half-naked, prone bodies: THE CORRIDOR OF DEATH, the front page of *Verdens Gang* said, that video was on the inside of my eyes; skin, I see skin, velvety dull in the flickering light of a lamp moving onwards, restless shadows between elbows and hips, shoulder blades and necks, a sea of hushed softness where nothing moves

but the light which brings life to what is not living. The camera runs and pauses for a moment before what has turned black, where the flames have devoured it all, finished the job, and then it swings into a cabin where a woolly penguin lies alone on a bunk, the door to the bathroom ajar, the dark crack hiding the bath's obvious secret. My feet are freezing as I stand here with my nose to the door remembering the cold creeping into my feet that time in that office, and my stomach wildly burning. But my face was calm, and the woman sitting next to me said:

“Rewind, for heaven’s sake, I have to see that penguin one more time.” An air-raid shelter in Baghdad was what I thought, for a year had passed, I do not know where, and it was spring 1991 with surgical bombing, electronic warfare, a war on the screen, a video game.

“Rewind,” she said again and again, and the fireman *did*, goddamnit, and she turned to stone.

I really don’t feel well. The cold crawls from my feet to my hips and I start to tremble, my teeth chatter, my forehead shudders against the glass as it does when you sit on a bus with your head against the window, gazing out, and the diesel engine makes everything vibrate. I think I am going to be sick, but I mustn’t be sick here. People go by on the pavement, and it can’t be Sunday because I hear from their voices that they are young, students from the business school next door,

and as they pass me they stop talking, and I will not turn and look at them looking at me. I look down at my shoes. They are scuffed, my shirt is hanging out of my trousers below the unzipped jacket, and I see my belt dangling in front of my half-open flies. They were not like that yesterday. When did those trousers come undone? Perhaps I have been raped. Perhaps someone dragged me into a doorway on my way past Bislett stadium or into a changing room at Bislett baths and grossly abused my butt while I was out of this world. I close my eyes and concentrate, hunting for traces all through my body; some remnant soreness, and what I do discover is that I feel wretched. It isn't easy to say what is what. I have to see a doctor. I may test positive. There are people in this town who would not blink twice at planting a seed in my blood, a virus that will tick and go deep inside what is me and one day after several years, when I least expect it, explode like a time bomb, one day when my life does not look as it does right now, a day when I have the sun on my face.

I take a deep breath. The pain in my side damn near makes me jump. It's my lungs, I had forgotten. I groan. Someone behind me stops and says something I do not want to hear. I stand very still, waiting, and then I hum a bit, and the someone walks off again. I raise my right hand to feel whether my hair is wet. It is bone dry and feels as stiff as a doormat and far from clean. I could do with a shower, a shower and a steam bath. I like steam

baths these days. I did not before. I always dreaded the walk from the bus stop to Torggata baths and then up the stone steps to the cloakroom and the showers, and it was cold in the changing room and in the shower room before the water was turned on, but when the warm water ran through my hair and down my neck, over shoulders and stomach, it felt good, and I closed my eyes and wanted to go on standing there. It was fine, for a moment everything was just fine.

“Open your eyes and come along,” he said and opened the door to the steam bath and I went in, because nobody had told me that you could say no. I went in and there was a blazing creature with a power that sucked each breath from my throat much faster than I could keep up with, and very soon I was empty, and fighting for air.

“It’s important to sweat all the shit out,” he said, “turn your insides out and really cleanse yourself,” but I could not sweat. I stood in the steam, dry and thin, and saw the naked men along the benches, heads in hands, glistening, panting, with their big stomachs on their thighs and their big cocks, and none of them could speak because the creature had swallowed the air and pushed against the walls, and there was no space left for anything else. And I could not sweat. I was eight years old, my skin burned, and I did not know it was important to be cleansed, that the inside of my body was not clean, where my thoughts lived, and the soul.

I walked unsteadily across the floor to the trickle of water running from a tap on the wall and into a porcelain sink, and I drank and drank, and when I had finished he came over, filled his hands with water and let it run over the stones so the stove spat loudly and fresh steam poured forth, and the men on the benches grumbled. He laughed and bent down, put his hands flat on the floor and swung himself up into a handstand, stretched his legs up together and with his heels lightly touching the burning wall he smiled upside down and started to do push-ups with his head tapping the floor and his legs straight up. His cock bounced against his flat stomach with a sound I could have done without, his muscles swelled under his shiny skin, and sweat poured down his chest. He could breathe where no-one else could, and I counted to myself half aloud: ten, eleven, twelve and on as I always did when he did that kind of thing. I kept my eyes on his body, up and down, up and down, and knew I would never look like that if I lived to be a hundred, not *that* graceful, not *that* solid, and I remember the hospital chapel where we had to fetch the coffins many years later. They were ranged in a line along the wall, and outside, the long black cars waited in line on the drive. We could see them through the windows, the cars stood quite still with their back doors open, and one driver had his back turned and his elbow against the bonnet, smoking and looking down at Holberggate, and the

man from the undertakers cleared his throat and said: "First, I ought perhaps to say that the coffins probably are not as heavy as might be expected." He ran a hand through his hair, looking desperate, and we glanced at each other, my brother and I, and then we bent down, took hold of the handles and lifted, and we just stared straight ahead when we realised he was right.

I am so tired. I lean my whole weight against the door. I could fall asleep now, and maybe I *am* asleep, and dreaming, or maybe remembering a dream. I am in the apartment at Veitvet. My mother and father are there, and my two younger brothers. I know they are dead, and I know that they know, but we do not talk about it. I try to figure out how they could have come back. Suddenly I cannot remember where their graves are, but it can't be far away, maybe on the lawn by the hedge beside the road. The apartment looks as it did then, in May of that year; half-empty bookshelves, a pile of pictures on the coffee table, cardboard boxes on the floor. The clock on the wall has stopped. They go around helping me, giving me things they think I should have, and I find books I imagine my daughters would like. I take a few small things for myself and sneak them away, put them in the pocket of my jacket, and then I feel bad because I am cheating my brother, so I take them out again. All the while I can hear them talking softly in the living room. I go up to the next floor and into the room that once was mine. I open the

window and put my head out. On the balcony below me, my father is standing in the sun. He stands quite calmly, his eyes closed and arms crossed. He fills his shirt completely. It is quiet, he is fine, but I don't like the neighbours to see a dead man standing on the balcony sunning himself. I close the window and go down again. At the bottom of the stairs is the old wooden bookcase with carvings along the top and the sides. I sit on the floor and lean my head against the middle shelf as I have done so many times before. I press against the books and then everything broadens out and I can look in. There are rows of books in many layers, it is a whole room with yellow light streaming in from a window I have never seen before, and it fills me with wonder, and yet everything is familiar. I take hold of Tolstoy with one hand and Nansen with the other and pull myself right in. It closes behind me and the whole time I hear them talking softly in the living room.

I straighten up, my face lets go of the door and I stand without a foothold in the world, listening. I hear no steps from either side and then I undo my jeans and push my shirt down as well as I can as fast as I can, and try to do up my flies. It's not easy, my empty hands are stiff and have hardly any feeling, and the buttons are obstinate. One of them gets into the wrong buttonhole, but I get it done eventually. I try to do my jacket up, but the zip is ruined, it's hanging loose, several teeth are

missing at the bottom so I can't fit the ends together. Maybe someone has tried to tear it off. I think about the dream and remember I had it several years ago, that I wrote it down, that I put it away somewhere. So I have not been asleep. I look around me on both sides. It is all quiet on the street. I take a few steps along the big display window, the glass glitters, it is spring sweeping in from the fjord and brushing my neck as it passes, and the latest books are behind the glass. Rick Bass has brought out another collection. I have been waiting for it. I like his stories, they are full of landscape and air and you can smell the pine needles and the heather a long way off.

I must get out of this town. I clench my fists and then I get it. My briefcase has gone. I turn and look back, but there's only a bundle of newspapers by the door. I look all the way down the street, past the business school to the city workers' offices on the corner, but there's nothing there, not a shadow, nothing but fag ends students have dropped on the pavement and an "open" sign outside the little sixties café.

It was only an old leather briefcase of the kind working people used a long time ago, they had them on their laps in the bus on the way to work, and in them the *Arbeiderbladet* and sandwich box and betting slip. We found three of them left in the bedroom cupboard when we cleared out the apartment. None of them had been used, so he must have been thinking ahead to the

days of his pension and bought them cheap out of surplus stock, and they had lasted longer than he had expected. He had written his name in marking ink on the inside of the flap in letters he learned at school some time in the twenties, and as my brother used a yuppie briefcase I took all three. I use them constantly, there have been shots of me in the paper carrying one of those cases, and when people come up behind me calling and I turn round, they say: "Hi, Arvid, I recognised you by the briefcase."

There was a fat notebook in that case almost filled with writing, and my glasses which cost 2000 kroner and a book by Alice Munro, *Friend of My Youth*. I am reading it for the third time, I have all her books, because there is a substance there, and a coherence that does not embellish, but conveys that nothing is in vain no matter what we have done, if we only look back, before it's too late.

I don't know. I don't know if that is true. I am a bit dizzy because I dare not breathe deeply, it hurts so much every time I try that I hold back, and then there is not enough oxygen for the brain. I wipe my hands on my trousers, clear my throat and walk into the kiosk. There is room for three inside if you keep your elbows tucked in. She is squeezed between the counter and the shelves of cigarettes. I take the *Dagblad* from the stand and say: "Dagbla' and a Coke."

She says nothing and her eyes grow round with

surprise behind her glasses, and they do not look at me but at something just by my ear. I raise my hand, but there is only my ear. I try again and she gives a little cough again and a cautious smile, standing very still. She does not understand what I say. The sound of the words is perfectly clear in my head, but they are not the ones that she is hearing. I don't know what she hears. Then I see the fridge full of bottles on the outside of the counter. Of course, it is self-service. I turn and take hold of the handle, and because I feel so weak I pull it rather hard so I will not be embarrassed if it wont open at the first try. The door flies open, the fridge shakes and two bottles come sailing out, crash to the floor and roll away, but they do not break, they are half-litre plastic ones. One is a Fanta, the other a Coke. I bend down and wince as the pain in my side stabs at me, and I pick them up like a very old man and put the Fanta back in the fridge and the Coke on the counter. She doesn't say a word, just looks straight past me with her round eyes. I feel in my jacket pocket and mercifully find my wallet there. It is a miracle, I realise that. I open it cautiously. The Visa card is in its place and the bonus cards for Shell and Fina and Texaco and the library cards for Lørenskog and Rælingen. But no sign of notes and coins. She looks at my wallet and I take out the Visa card instead and then she stares at it as if it were a completely new invention. I look at the till. It might date from the early sixties, and anyway it does not have

a card facility. I don't know what to do. I am so thirsty I can think of nothing else. She clears her throat and says distinctly and very slowly with generous movements of her mouth so I can read her lips: "You need not pay. It's on the house." She looks straight at me for the first time and gives me a big smile. It is an offer I cannot refuse. I ought to say something. I lick my lips, but my mouth is totally dry, my tongue swollen, and then I just pick up the Visa card and the newspaper and the Coke and back out of the kiosk. The light is blinding, so I walk diagonally across the street to avoid the sun and over the car park where there used to be a Texaco station and between the museums towards the University Hall and the railway station. Halfway there I can hold out no longer. I stop and open the bottle. The brown Coke spurts out of the nozzle all over my trousers, my shoes and the newspaper. I start to weep. I have been on my way down for a long time, and now I am there. At rock bottom. I hold the bottle away from my body until it stops running and then, weeping, drink what little is left, and I throw the empty bottle into the nearest litter bin. I chuck the wet paper after it. Without glasses I couldn't read it anyway. And then I walk on.

to worry about. Right. He wears a white shirt under his grey jacket, and there are spots of blood on the collar. It looks dramatic, as in a film. He puts his hand on my shoulder and I *feel* that hand, he says thanks again, and then he points at my bare feet. It is so cold on the floor I am curling up my toes. Smiling, he pushes me towards my door, and then he opens his arms and puts them around his family and leads them gently and firmly upstairs, talking in a low, intense voice in a language I do not understand. The little boy is still crying. They have only been here for a few weeks, but he has learned to say “thanks”. That will come in handy, no question. They are from northern Iraq. That is all I know.

I stay at the bottom of the stairwell listening to his voice fading and their steps fading on the way up. I could have invited him in, he could have come down when the children were in bed, and we could have had a drink or a cup of hot chocolate if that’s what he would prefer, being a Muslim, and we could talk about having a family, that it’s not that easy, or we could talk of Saddam Hussein, anything he likes. Maybe he can speak German, I know a bit of German, more people than you’d think know German, and the last thing I hear before the door slams shut two floors up is the boy crying loudly. With no stranger watching he doesn’t hold back. Silence settles on the stairwell, and it is very cold. Beneath my thin T-shirt the elastic bandage is tight and uncomfortable, and I shiver uncontrollably.