

The Orheim Company

By Tore Renberg

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I was drunk when it happened

Hello.

Jarle?

Are you there?

The world is alive: wet foliage, drenched lawns, topsoil floating from flower beds and gardens, stripes on house fronts, sparks under the lamp posts, flooding drains. Bergen is under water, it is the middle of the night and autumn in Norway. It is pouring down over the university, washing in over Bryggen, and the waters are rising in Allégaten. But are you there?

No. You aren't.

You have sunk into a deep, dreamless state of hibernation, and you have vanished. There is nothing inside you to suggest that you exist. Everything is terminated. It is not dark in the country where you are, but it is not light, either. It isn't warm, and it isn't cold. The surface is gut-smooth and dead. Emotions have set, everything is barren. In these sparse depths only the simplest forms of life can survive. Only tranquil, undisturbed sleep.

But Jarle?

Someone wants to get hold of you.

Hello?

Jarle?

The telephone is ringing. Are you there?

Nothing is better than the state you are in now, simply sleeping, not feeling anything at all. How, Jarle Klepp, 24 years old, did you manage to get there? The warming spirits, the heavy beer, the alcohol that has pumped you full of paralysis and invincibility. You sat in a basement flat in Danmarksplass drinking steadily, steadfastly, for eight hours: beer, gin, tonic, red wine, whisky, spirits. You felt the warmth spread, you felt your thoughts detaching themselves from their usual places, you felt your courage rising, and everything that normally seems impossible, or embarrassing, has become simple.

But Jarle!

The telephone is ringing.

It is the middle of the night and someone wants to get hold of you.

You have to wake up, Jarle.

Are you there?

It is a pitch black night in Nygårdshøyden, a waterlogged November and autumn. Outside the windows, the trees stand bare; along the pavements the faded leaves lie in the rain. A few hours ago you were staggering through the streets, humming songs from the 90s, happy and masterful. *Here we are now, entertain us.* A drunken student, midway through your Philosophy course at the University of Bergen. With your legs wide apart, you pissed into a flower bed outside the Sciences Building. You tottered in and out of the light from the street lamps, with the pouring rain above your head and the tarmac beneath your feet on your way home to Allégaten. You came closer to your flat, came closer to Lene who was in bed asleep, and gradually your Dutch courage began to dissipate, gradually you stopped flying. You began to sink. Feet soaking, muscles aching, joints worn, mood grim. What were you doing? Sitting there yelling, shouting to a fellow student that you wanted to hear a different song, leaning across the table and talking about the American elections in the light of deconstructionism? Staring hard, and without any embarrassment, at the erect upper body of the girl sitting next to you. Then you had to go home. You were wet, you were cold and there was only one solution: collapse and sleep. Into the street, sharpen up, walk straight to the entrance door, blink, aim with the key for the keyhole. You missed, dropped the key on the floor and the noise resounded against the walls. You tried again and again until you managed to unlock the door to the flat you and Lene rent for four thousand kroner a month. You stumbled into a chair and paused for a second to hear if she was awake, to peep into the living room to see if she was sitting there, waiting for you, angry. No. Not a sound. You swallowed your breath, flipped off your black shoes, held out your rain-soddened coat, moved around in stockinged feet as quietly as you could. Into the kitchen. Tore off a piece of paper from the kitchen roll and wiped your forehead and glasses. Stretched for a large glass, filled it with water and drank. Then you gingerly opened the bedroom door.

Yes.

She was asleep. Wasn't she?

Then you crashed out. Disappeared into a deep noisy drunken coma, a blessing for you and hugely irritating for her, who had to listen to the heavy breathing of the stinking body, who had been tossing and turning for hours, waiting for you, just to hear you stumble across the parquet floor. A few minutes later you were flat out on your back. Your mouth open, gurgling noises coming from your throat, snoring, spread out in the bed with your legs apart and your arms untidy, like a child in the sun or a Roman Emperor.

Some seconds after you fell asleep, something happened somewhere. A cool puff of air over your cheek, like a light hand, perhaps breath from a mouth, but you didn't notice it.

Hello?

“Jarle!”

The world is alive and something has happened.

“Jarle! The telephone's ringing!”

He wakes with a start from his amphibious night. The telephone had awoken Lene a long time ago. She has wriggled up onto her elbows, the borders of her eyes red. She shakes the body heavy with alcohol and immediately he is dragged up from the depths. Bewildered, he opens his eyes wide, feels his drunken body resist, hears Lene shouting and the telephone ringing. “*Ugh?*”

He knows who he is, he remembers where he was, but he is not proud of it. There is a hammering against the walls of his skull, and Jarle has a quick look at the alarm clock: 5:30.

“Jarle, the phone's ringing.”

“Ugh?”

“Who the hell can be ringing at this time?”

“My God, just answer it, will you,” she says, turning her back on him.

He shuffles into the cold room and Lene mutters “You’re still drunk”. Jarle takes a few steps to stabilise himself and opens the living-room door. His heart increases its rhythm as his emotions, which a short time ago were prevented from working, are back on the job; his teeth ice up and his temples throb; the telephone is ringing, now, and it shouldn’t.

Half past five?

He walks over to the telephone on the writing desk by the window, under the poster of *Wings of Desire*, beside the draft of a philosophy assignment and a pile of books about Hegel, Adorno and the Frankfurt school. He looks at the instrument, thinking that the ringing will stop at that moment. Someone must have dialled the wrong number. You can go and lie down again. But his pulse throbs in his ears and he thinks the thought that Jarle Klepp cannot think: his mother. Something has happened to his mother.

“Yes, this is Jarle.”

He says it in a low voice, somewhat sternly.

“Jarle, it’s Mum here.”

He breathes out.

“It’s the middle of the night, Mum. Is something up?”

“Jarle.”

His mother says his Christian name for the second time in moments.

“Yes?”

He clears his throat.

“Erm, Jarle,” his mother says.

“Yes?”

“It’s your father,” she says.

“What?”

“Your father.”

“Dad?”

“Your father is dead,” she says.

“Dad?”

“Yes.”

“Dad?”

“Yes.”

“Dad?”

Jarle sinks down into the chair. He grabs his philosophy assignment as a reflex action; his eyes run over the title page: “The Light of Ambiguity – Hegel’s Linguistic Imprecision as an Epistemological Gain”. He turns the assignment over and puts it face down onto the table.

“Dad? Why?”

“I don’t know. They haven’t said much yet. His heart stopped.”

He hears Lene coming into the living room behind him and her voice saying: “Jarle? Is there anything the matter?” He stares in front of him, at the drawing by Bruno Ganz from *Wings of Desire*, tries to remember the poem from the film: *als das Kind Kind war, ging es mit hängenden Armen, wollte, der Bach sei ein Fluss, der Fluss sei ein ... Strom? Strom? Yes, Strom ... und diese Pfütze das Meer.*

Mother’s voice: “It happened last night“

How did it go on? *Als das Kind Kind war, musste es nicht, dass es Kind war –*

“Jarle? Are you going to come home?”

He turns round. Looks out towards the street. It is raining as if it is never going to stop.

“Yes,” he says finally. “I’m coming home.”

Lene comes closer.

Jarle is sober, Dad is dead and he feels her putting her arms around him. She whispers Jarle, Jarle, Jarle, just his name, but he wriggles out of her embrace.

“I’m sorry,” his mother says.

“Are you?”

“Yes. It’s terribly sad.”

Sad?

Should it be sad that he’s gone, should it be *sad*?

He sees Lene standing there with her arms down by her sides and only now does he realize that she is naked. She is so pale. She is too thin, he thinks. She is beginning to be skinny. There are no tits on her any more. She is so petrified of becoming fat that she only eats air, water and nothing else, and ends up becoming a frail bag of bones covered with transparent skin.

Lene comes towards him as he hears his mother repeat how sad it is. She stands in front of him, a scrawny wisp with prominent hips, stretching out her arms.

He pushes her away, looks out onto the street again.

“Yes, Mum,” he says. “Yes. Of course. We’re coming to Stavanger. Yes. Naturally. I’ll call the airport now.”

Lene puts out her white arms and begins to cry. She wants to hold him, but Jarle does not react. He gets up, says ‘Bye’ to his mother and puts the phone down.

“Your poor father,” Lene whispers.

He walks past her. Jarle does not take his eyes off the window panes. The rain running down the glass, the endless stream of water pouring down from the clouds.

Lene snuffles.

“Stop it,” he says brutally.

Jarle wipes the back of his hand across his eyes and feels his fingers getting wet.

His hands are shaking. There is a quiver at the corners of his mouth and his eyes become misty. He bursts into tears and hides in the space between the door and the book shelf, trying to cover his face with his arms.

The world is alive.

Radios are switched on in long-haul vehicles, small children open their eyes and babble themselves into consciousness, the power grid takes the strain, the temperature rises as the sun rounds the corner of Norway. The November morning becomes light, Bergen is on its feet, and the keenest students are up. Since Jarle remained on the floor with his face to the wall, Lene has packed for both of them. She has called a taxi, put some food inside him, tried to give him a gentle hug, but he was unable to respond. They drove to Flesland with a talkative driver and Jarle talked more to him than to Lene. The taxi driver commented on both the weather and Bill Clinton – “well, he’s better than most” – and Jarle answered with an academic smile – “most are better than most” – while staring at the windscreen wipers dispersing the rain. Lene was annoyed by Jarle’s questions about the weather and the news, his request to the driver to turn up the radio. She wished he had let her hold his hand, but he hadn’t. He thought it was fine to avoid the insistent closeness, her all too skinny body, he thought it was fine to chat about nothing with a taxi driver from Northern Hordaland, who

could have no idea that this student, to his own surprise, had just been crying for two hours because his father had died.

"This is hard, Jarle. I can understand that."

They arrive at the airport, early in the morning towards the end of November and stand in front of the counter. Jarle looks down at his shoes. They are black, shiny.

He doesn't understand why it should be so hard.

What was going to happen now? Dad six feet down, Dad, like the leaves and the rain and the wind. What happens when people die? Autopsy? Perhaps not, he thinks. That is probably only when the cause of death is unclear. Funeral, at any rate. Perhaps you can get to see the dead body? Do I want to? he wonders, looking at Lene who is talking to a lady behind the counter. I think I do. But Dad has died. Funeral. My God. What if nobody comes. Shall we say anything? What shall we say at the funeral when there is nothing to be said. When the deceased isn't someone you can say 'he was a good man' about, what *do* you say?

While Lene was getting the plane tickets and gently stroking the vein on the back of his hand with her forefinger, it strikes Jarle that perhaps he is the one who will have to say something at the funeral. Jarle can feel himself becoming nervous as they sit down and wait, the early-morning types around them, people with small black cases, wearing a silver-grey tie and dark suit. Is he going to have to stand in front of ten people in church and say something? And if so, what?

Lene wants to hold him again; she places her hand around his and this time he lets her do it.

He'll have to lie.

It's as simple as that. He nods quietly to himself as Lene says: "Jarle? We have to go. It says: Go to gate." He understands that he has the choice between the impossible - saying it as it is - and the lie. Saying: my father lived a good life.

"How are you? Better?" Lene asks in a low voice while they are queuing for the flight.

"I don't know what to say."

She gives him a reassuring smile. "You don't have to say anything."

"I mean, at the funeral."

"Do you have to say something then?"

"Probably have to."

"You can say something nice, can't you? One nice action, that's all?"

He watched Lene giving the tickets to the man behind the counter. She doesn't know Dad. So far she has only met Terje Orheim, whom she considered to be easy-going. She could give a better speech than me, he thinks. She could talk about Terje Orheim. The work colleagues could give better speeches than me, he thinks. The neighbours could give better speeches than me.

Terje Orheim?

Oh, Terje. He's dead, you say? How terrible. So young. He wasn't even 60, was he? Terje, yes. Never short of a snappy reply. I can remember that. A glint in his eye, you know. Personal.

Terje Orheim?

Is he dead? Head teacher at the Technical School? No. Well, I thought he would live to be a hundred. He was well liked, though. Strict when he had to be.

Terje Orheim?

Yes, I heard about that. He was always so considerate. Not simply Save the Child and the Salvation Army and surface things like that, he was the type to see inside people. Yes. He saw inside people.

Terje Orheim?

Do you know what I remember about him? Always gave you a thumbs-up. He was a thumbs-up type of man. Wasn't he. You noticed that too, didn't you?

"Can't you just say something nice about him?" Lene asks again. "Something that gives an image of how he was?"

"My God, I was drunk when he died," he answers.

"Jarle, don't say such things."

"I don't know what to say."

They go on to the early-morning flight. Lene nods courteously to the stewardess who welcomes them on board. "It's not your responsibility," she says, "to talk about your father's life or anything like that. It just has to be a few words in commemoration. Don't think about it. You have to think of yourself now."

He looks at her, and suddenly he wonders who she is. This skinny skeleton working her way towards adult anorexia says that he should think of himself. She stands up, reaches up on her tiptoes in front of the small luggage lockers, and her hips almost disappear. She stretches her gaunt body, puts in her travel bag and jacket, and he thinks: Who is this? Shall I think about myself?

"Lene," he says roughly when she sits down, as if she had said something indecent. "This is something you know nothing about. I can't think about myself without thinking about Dad."

"No," she says meekly, lowering her eyes.

"And you've got to eat," Jarle says. "You're too thin."

The backs of the seats are put into an upright position. The aeroplane takes off. The stewardess goes through the safety procedures and Jarle follows closely as if they are going to crash during the ascent. It is only a short trip from Stavanger to Bergen. They have to break cloud cover and meet the morning sun up above. It is November and Dad is dead. All he can think is: I have no idea what to say because if I tell the truth it is too hard to hear.

He half turns his head towards Lene. Her heavy eyelids over her eyes - that was part of what he fell in love with. These heavy eyelids over her large eyes, enormous and round, set in a lean face. Where did it all go? I don't know her, he thinks, and she has no idea who I am. To him she seems beautiful as she sits there, more beautiful than earlier that chaotic morning - more beautiful because I know less about her, because she knows less about me?

Halfway during the flight he falls asleep. It is only now that he realises he had been drinking for several hours the night before, and he nods off. For a minute maybe, maybe five. It isn't a dreamless sleep, it is a light sleep during which the brain is in high activity, and he doesn't know if he is dreaming or thinking, but what Jarle remembers is how as a child in the 80s he used to wake up in the middle of the night, at home in their terraced house to a rumpus coming from the ground floor. He was asleep in the basement, protected under posters of Depeche Mode, Duran Duran, and Frankie goes to Hollywood, and it was the weekend, and he always slept lightly at weekends. He squeezed his eyes together, felt the horror shoot through his body. He heard a plate crash on the kitchen floor, a chair being knocked over, the stereo suddenly being put on at maximum volume, and Louis Armstrong singing: *Oh, what a wonderful world.*

Jarle is woken up by the stewardess asking if he wants coffee. He does. Lene puts three fingers up to her light blonde hair and tucks her fringe behind her ear. She smiles at him, and he thinks that this morning while we are flying through the clouds and the morning sun hits the window, she looks at me with greater affection in her eyes than for a long, long while. But she doesn't know me.

"Have I told you about how I used to wake up during the nights when I was small?"

"No," she says. "You never want to say anything about the time you were a child. I only know that they are divorced, and that ... yes, but we don't need to talk about that now."

"Have I told you about 1988?"

"Nope, don't think so." Lene takes his hand. "Shh, Jarle, " she says. "We don't need to talk about that now."

"I've never told you about the trip to Hardangavidda National Park?"

She shakes her head.

"No? Or the time I had to save Dad's life?"

"No," Lene repeats as the captain's voice on the intercom wishes the passengers a good morning, gives them the cruising altitude and says that it is a bright autumn day and the weather in Stavanger is good." "Save his life? What do you mean, save his life?"

She smiles hesitantly. "Was that in 1988, too?"

Jarle nods.

"Oh, then perhaps you can talk about that at the funeral?"

Jarle opens the plastic milk container, pours the milk into his coffee and stirs.

The early-morning flight is almost full. Lene holds his hand, the bright autumn light shines through the window and Jarle thinks: Dad is dead.

He watches the milk whirling round in the coffee cup, it follows the pull of the teaspoon, whirls from a chalky white to beige, and he thinks that it looks like pictures he has seen of the universe: the world is alive.

Then he leans back.

Closes his eyes for a few seconds.

Right.

So he has gone.

Finally.

A gentle breath brushes across his cheek, like a light touch from a cool hand or a puff of air. A nerve twitches in his neck and he gives a start. Opens his eyes.

"Lene?"

He looks at her. She is sitting with her hands in her lap.

Did she stroke my cheek? Did she blow on me?

She looks at him. She repeats herself.

"That sounded good, the time you had to save his life. You can talk about that, can't you?"

"No," he says. "I can't."

We are never going to talk about this

The thing to do is keep your mouth shut. When you know what is what, the thing to do is breathe calmly and keep your mouth shut. Because you have to tolerate a lot in this world, that is what Dad said. When Jarle grumbles about something, Dad often used to say, well, you can stand there grumbling, but it won't help.

Dad is right about that.

The thing to do is keep your mouth shut.

As Mum does. Then Dad doesn't lose his temper.

It was good that Mum came downstairs to him that night, he thought. It was good that she didn't just sit alone. When Dad knocked her flying and she banged her jaw on the coffee table and then he fell asleep in the armchair, she was right to come to him. They had to stand together and keep their mouths shut. They could support each other, he and Mum. He was big enough now, eleven years old, going on twelve.

Sara had no idea what to do with herself. She was ashamed of herself, keeping Terje's alcoholism a secret from the world, and she still didn't believe Jarle understood what was going on. They had protected him well. So that he wouldn't suffer.

Many an evening she had wanted to go downstairs to his room. Put a sleeping bag on the floor. Sleep beside him, without waking him, just to avoid sleeping next to Terje. But every time she had come to her senses, for she knew it wasn't right to do that. Jarle shouldn't be dragged into this.

But now? How long would it go on?

She should ring Ragnhild and ask for help, but she didn't dare, it was too shameful. She could talk to her mother, but that was the last thing she would do.

Sara stopped thinking and went downstairs. Jarle was sound asleep, wasn't he? She just wanted to go into the room, stand there in the dark and look at him, perhaps stroke his hair before leaving, feel that something was working.

Jarle was lying in bed with his eyes open when she came over to his bed. It was just as if he had been expecting her, she thought, and she heard him say: "What is it, Mum? Should you be here? Do you want to sleep in my bed?"

He understood it now. Mum had never fallen down the stairs, and Dad's eyes glowed at the weekend because he stopped off at the Vinmonopol every Friday after work. He came in the door of their terraced house, said 'Hi' to Jarle and went up to his office where he hid two bottles of Smirnoff Blue behind the typewriter.

Jarle understood it now, and tidying the room didn't help.

But it still didn't get any easier. It was simpler when he thought Mum was in a grumpy mood, when he thought his father was the best in the world. Because, of course, he still was. When the weekdays came, he was still the best. It was just that Jarle was no longer frightened of the dark, but of Dad. The unpredictability of life was no longer mystical, like deep forests, fairy tales and sagas, it was hard and real, and it was all about his father. He had understood that Dad drank, that Dad wasn't good to Mum, but why was he good to Jarle then? Why did he have to drive him to football training all the time, be great with him and the other boys, if he wasn't good to Mum?

Occasionally he used to think he could say that to Dad, after he had had a lie-down after dinner and was about to watch Comedy Night on TV, for example. He used to think he could stand up in front of his father, put on his best smile and say it. Hi Dad. Can't you be as great to Mum as you are to me?

But he didn't dare.

Perhaps he could make a suggestion? Something which would help, would distract them – Mum and Dad could make something together for instance, maybe build something in the garden, a shed perhaps.

No.

It was best to keep your mouth shut.

One night Jarle dreamed there was a knock at the basement door. In the dream he was small, much smaller than usual. The knocking became more insistent and he went out into the hall, wearing socks and a jacket. He reached for the door handle and just as he opened the door to the cold, dark night he peed himself, and a man was standing there, and it wasn't Dad, but he looked like Dad, and the man said: "You must never tell this to anyone." Jarle peed in his bed as he was dreaming, but he answered the man: "No, I'll never tell a living soul."

There is a lot you have to tolerate in this world.

You have the choice. Jarle knew that. Either you are a young boy and don't understand a thing. Or you are eleven years old, going on twelve, and behave like an adult. The thing to do is keep your mouth shut.

As Mum did.

Take last weekend, when Jarle had been allowed to stay up longer than usual and watch the crime slot on TV, and Dad fell asleep on the sofa. Jarle had looked over at Mum, who just nodded and went 'Shhh'.

They were quiet, they sat in silence watching television, but Dad woke up later. He rolled over, talking loudly with the voice Jarle recognised from when he was small and lying by the deep freeze without being able to understand anything at all. Dad cleared his throat and sat up on the sofa looking at him. His eyes shining.

"Well, well," Dad said.

Mum's eyes wandered off, Jarle thought.

"Well, well, well, that was that."

Mum continued to watch TV.

"So you're still up, are you, young man?" Dad said with a smile.

Mum's eyes wandered off again, Jarle thought.

"Yes."

"Well, well, well," Dad said again, slowly. "My goodness, Sara," he winked at Jarle. "Are you here, too?"

Jarle glanced over at his mother, didn't quite know whether to smile or not, so he made an attempt at a wink, as his father had done.

"Hi, Sara. Are you there, Mummy Cunt?"

Jarle could see his mother swallow hard and almost chew her own tongue.

"Hi, Sara, are you there or am I talking to the sofa?"

Now Mum was nodding, he could see.

"You know, Jarle ..." Dad held back. He wasn't smiling any more; he had a nasty expression on his face. Dad leaned forward, until he was looking Mum in the face: "While I have you here, Sara, your pudendum, where did you get it sewn up – at Ragnhild's?"

Mum didn't answer. She didn't look at Dad, she didn't make any comment. Instead she looked at Jarle and asked: "It'll soon be time to go to bed. Do you want some ice cream before you go downstairs?"

"Yes, please," Jarle said.

They had stopped singing *Jeg vet en deilig have, der roser står i flor*. I know a lovely garden where the roses are in bloom. Jarle was not a little boy any more, but his mother always went downstairs and said 'Goodnight'. She spread his duvet over him and wished him a good night's sleep.

"But Mum?"

"Mmhmm?"

"What's a cunt?"

"Jarle, please. Go to sleep now."

"But Mum. What is Ragnhild sewing? Is she going to visit us again soon? I like her even if Dad doesn't. Will you ring Ragnhild? Shall I ring her for you? I don't just like the things Dad does, and I don't think you're moody. I don't."

"Jarle. Jarle." Sara tried to catch the boy's eye; he had started to cry. She held him in her arms. "Now and then," she said, "we just have to look the other way, don't we."

He nodded.

"Sometimes," she went on, "people are simply not themselves. And if we don't look at them, perhaps they'll become themselves again."

That was well put.

It is exactly what he thinks himself, but in a different way.

Tolerate. Keep your mouth shut. Look away.

So my father will become Dad again.

That is what he is waiting for. He feels grown up now when he understands what the adults are doing. Things are not always so easy, as Dad says. He will soon be twelve and his understanding of what is going on is not so insignificant, and he has understood one thing: what has begun can soon come to an end. In spring he had mumps, then it passed. He had Grandpa right up until last year, then he died. He was in goal at first, then he was a striker. He was in love with Marianne, then it finished. The end and goodbye are never far away. So that's where he puts his trust, that one day he will wake up and see Dad has returned, Mum and Dad will talk and Dad will be good to her again. One day he won't need to drink so much any longer, Jarle is sure about that. All he has to do is stay calm, do as Dad says and bite his tongue.

Some weekends he thinks it has stopped. Like the Saturday Dad was standing in the car port washing the car, without that shiny look in his eyes, without going up and down to his office.

"Let's go for a little drive, Sara!"

The voice reached them in the utility room in the cellar where they were waiting for the tumble drier to finish so that Jarle could have his football kit. They peered through the window. Dad was standing and shaking his head.

"Eh, Sara! What about going to town? It's so long since we've done that. Isn't there anything you need? Don't you need new clothes?"

Jarle stared at the rotating drum and tried to hide a smile. He knew immediately, even before Mum realised.

"Yes, but we have to go shopping, Jarle and I, and he has to go to Kalhammeren and play football."

“Oh, we’ll have to skip that for once,” Dad said, squeezing the sponge. ‘He’s never missed a game. We need a bit of time together, don’t we, eh? Just the three of us?’”

Jarle didn’t take his eyes off the drum, he just sensed what he could understand, clenched his teeth and knew, he knew: it’s over now. Everything will start again.

He gently put his hand in his mother’s.

“Yes, Mum, don’t you? Isn’t there anything you need?”

Sara shrugged her shoulders. “Me?”

“And you, Jarle? What about the cassette you were nagging us for?”

Had he caught that correctly? Jarle wanted a cassette?

“Yes ...”

Terje put down the bucket and shook his hands, spraying the soap into Mum’s face.

“Yes. What are we waiting for?”

During the drive to town Jarle sat looking at his mother, trying to make eye contact with her, so that they could nod to each other and agree that now it was all over.

Terje grasped the steering wheel with his small hands. It was spring outside. He rolled down the window, pointed at the funfair they were setting up by Siddis Ice Arena, said they would have to go there one day and pointed at the people walking around Lake Mosvann.

“A konditori?”

The clear blue eyes sparkled, and he turned to Sara.

“Doughnuts, teacakes, almond fingers – you can remember that surely! When I met you, you couldn’t walk past a cake shop without your tongue smacking against your palate.”

Jarle heard his mother laugh, the stuttering laugh leapt out, it was like small rubber balls hitting the windscreen, bouncing off the roof and continuing to bounce around the car.

“Right, so let’s go to a konditori!” Terje said, slapping his hands against the steering wheel. “Konditori, konditotri, kondatritro! But first of all something for you. What would you like?”

“But Terje, I ...”

“Shall we drive up to your mother’s? Long time since we’ve been to see Else.”

“No, we don’t need to do that,” Sara said meekly. “But I could do with a new coat. If you want to ...”

“Want to? Of course I want to! Shouldn’t my wife have a new coat? Jarle, shouldn’t Mummy have a new coat?”

“Yes, she should!”

They parked beneath Valberg Tower, walked across the cobbled stones in Kirkegaten. The first thing Jarle caught sight of was the record shop on the corner: *Fåssen*.

“Oh, yes,” Terje said, patting Jarle on the head. “We’ll pop in before they close. First of all, Mummy needs a coat.”

They trawled up and down the streets until Mum found one which was not too expensive and looked really nice. Then they went to the cake shop where Jarle had cocoa and a bun while Mum had a teacake and drank coffee and Dad finally had a cigarette.

Dad winked at Jarle.

Jarle pretended not to see.

“So. Goodness, we probably won’t make the record shop now. What do you say, Sara?”

She smiled. “Noo, I don’t think we will.”

Jarle swallowed the rest of the bun, slurped down the cocoa and jumped to his feet.

“Yes, we will!”

Up Kirkegaten they all went, the Orheim family, and the tough weekends are forgotten. It is over, Jarle doesn't give it another thought, because it obviously is, everyone can see that, here they are, the Orheim family, and they are no different from other families, they are just as happy as all the others, can't you see? This is my mother, see how nice she looks in her new coat. And this, this is my father! Just so that you know, Stavanger, this is my father! Into *Fåssen*, to the counter, queue up, hands sweating, this is Jarle's fourth cassette, a proper one, one with a cover and pictures and texts. He has three more, by Stavangerensemblen, which Uncle Steinar gave him for his tenth birthday, Blondie, which Uncle Steinar gave him for Christmas and the Monroes, which he bought with the money he earned delivering newspapers. And now this will be the fourth, which he has wanted ever since last year. He moves forward to the counter, behind which stands a thin man with very little hair, and, as clearly as he can, because he has been practising, he says:

“*Seven and the Ragged Tiger* by Duran Duran.”

The cassette is put into his hands, Dad pays, and it is his, all his. No-one can take it off him, he is going to listen to it when he gets home, when he goes to bed in the evening, when he gets up in the morning, and on Monday he is going to tell Leif Tore, Thomas and Marianne that he, Jarle Orheim, has *Seven and the Ragged Tiger* by Duran Duran.

Because now it is over.

They leave the record shop, and Jarle sees Mum smile at Dad as she points to a shop across the road, and Dad shakes his head, gently, not firmly, as he says “Okay, okay”. They stroll down to the jeweller's where Mum wants to show Dad something, and Dad says, “I suppose you think I am made of money now, do you, Sara?” But he doesn't say it nastily, just gently, and Mum says “Not at all, not at all, but you should see it anyway.”

“I'll go and look at the troll,” says Jarle.

They nod, and he crosses the street, to the big wooden troll in front of Arnt Michalsen. The bent troll with the long nose and the hiking stick, which the tourists always stand in front of when they take snaps. He is taller than the troll now. He is holding a Duran Duran cassette in his hand and the troll seems old, he thinks, old and small. He feels disappointed, it is as if it doesn't work any longer. It just stands there looking at him, lifeless and small, and all he can think about is the Duran Duran cassette and how good it must be, because he has seen the single from it, *The Reflex*, on Sky at Leif Tore's house, he has recorded it off the radio, and it is dead good.

“Jarle?”

He turns round. A lady and a man are standing in front of him. They are old, he thinks, and his eyes wander. Does he know them? The lady has white, wavy hair; her cheeks and forehead are wrinkled. She squats down in front of him. Big, round eyes. She looks strange, as if on the verge of crying, then she repeats his name: “Jarle?”

“Hello,” he says, bewildered.

“Is it you?”

The man standing directly behind her clears his throat, but he, too, is looking at Jarle. He seems stern, Jarle thinks, he has severe eyes. He has the feeling he has seen him before. He is wearing a brown suit, polished shoes, and in contrast to the woman crouching beside him and saying his name, with the watery eyes, the old man hasn't got any wrinkles, even though everyone can see that he is old.

“Is it you?”

Jarle wants to get away. He thinks it is horrible that two old people stand in front of him, asking him if it is him, he thinks the woman is spooky, spooky because she keeps

staring at him, as if she owned him, as if he were hers, and the man behind her frightens him, the stern man studying him with severe eyes.

“Come on, Johanne. We have to go. That’s enough. Bye bye, Jarle.”

“Stop that,” he hears the woman say. “Let me have another look at him!”

“Don’t you understand?” the man says sternly. “This is unpleasant for all concerned. Come on. Now. Immediately. Take care, Jarle, and say hello to your mother from Gunnar and Johanne.”

Jarle stands by the wooden troll, unable to move. He feels the woman put her arms around him, and he is unable to say anything. He sees Mum and Dad coming out of the shop, he wants to call them, but what should he say? The lady is squeezing him tight, so what should he say? Then he sees his mother stop dead in her tracks on the other side of the street, he sees her shoulders jerk, and Dad – what is Dad doing? He glances in Jarle’s direction, a furious glance, and Jarle senses that it is starting again. Everything that finishes starts again, only because he is standing there and cannot get away, embraced by a sniffing old lady with white hair and wrinkled cheeks. Jarle feels her chin against his shoulders, sees his father charging across the street without looking at him, the old man or the sobbing lady. Dad hurries into the multi-storey car park, and the only thing Jarle can do is close his eyes and cling tightly to the cassette he is going to play when he gets home.

He can hear his mother coming, hear her saying: “I’m sorry, dear, I’ll have to take him with me,” and he can feel the old lady’s arms releasing him, her outstretched fingers fumbling for his cheeks. Now Mum is holding his hand. He is no longer eleven years old, he feels like a small boy, but he doesn’t want to open his eyes; Mum in one hand, the cassette in the other, Dad in the car park and the stern man behind the old lady with the wavy hair. Then he hears the man say: “We have always regarded you highly, Sara. You must never doubt that,” and once again he can feel the old lady’s gentle fingers stroking his cheek, hear her sniffing as she says: “Will this never end?”

Jarle opens his eyes.

‘I’ve got a cassette,’ he says.

The old lady places two fingers across her mouth and smiles.

“Duran Duran,” Jarle says.

The old lady with the wavy hair nods and blinks.

“And my grandmother is dead,” Jarle says. “She died when I was small, that’s why I can’t remember her, and my grandfather did that, and he died when I was even smaller, but he deserved it because he dug his own grave, and in the end he was left on his own, and my grandmother was the one to suffer, who had never done anyone any harm, quite the opposite, she was the kindest person in the world, but now we have to go because Dad is waiting in the car park.”

Sara takes Jarle by the hand, and they walk up the street. Quickly, Jarle thinks. Now we are walking quickly and we are never going to turn round, and we are never going to talk about this.