

No One Is Alone

by

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«We tell each other stories in order to live» is from Joan Didion's opening sentence in the book *The White Album* (1979).

Leave your mind and your shoes here.

CHAPTER 1

The day began like all other days. That is how stories like these begin. The extraordinary borrows strength from the ordinary, the things that just happen every single day: a feeble light in the east, the colours of the horizon, the clouds growing slowly into their true form, and the dew from the grass, the faint glow of the night that disappears as the heat takes hold.

Morning. 24th August 2003.

A day like all other days.

This early, the Frogner Park was almost deserted. Here and there a jogger emerged into the morning light. A man in a black t-shirt and Adidas shorts was on his way out the entrance from Kirke Road, a woman dashed across the open space between Frogner Stadium and the tennis courts, two men in blue tracksuit pants and white t-shirts ran past each other on the lower side of the fountain and nodded in mutual respect at being here, like this, at this time of day. It was a quarter to seven. Another warm summer's day was forecast for Oslo. At Herregårds Inn a middle-aged woman was airing her black Labrador, and a man in his twenties, dressed in a dark suit and open shirt, walked towards the bridge across Frogner River on his way towards a waiting bed in Elisenberg Road.

The sky spread itself over them, and the day took them in. They belonged here. This was their day. They all felt the cool current that was still in the air, and they all sought places where the sun was now taking hold, where they finally could shake off the darkness and meet the light. Each in their own way. A Sunday in August.

At the same moment that the owner of the Labrador turned to go home, and the young man's mobile phone received a text message, seven Ford Transit vans drove into the almost empty car park at the Frogner Pool. The cars entered in a row from Middelthun Street, applied the brakes and cruised towards a small group of eight men and women who were gathered around one of the few parked cars in the car park, another van, another Ford Transit. Only fifty metres away, at the entrance to the pool, three men in their late sixties were watching the sudden traffic. They exchanged quick glances, because it was unusual to see so many cars here this early on a Sunday morning. One of them flinched outright as they drove past. He pulled his hand through his short, white hair. He had started to do it again. Flinch. As if an old fear had returned, without his knowing why.

Just a few minutes ago he had wandered alone through the cemetery and the park, and passed the eight people in the car park. He had nodded briefly to them, but they didn't return his greeting. They hardly looked at him, and he kept walking towards the entrance to the pool, on his way to his daily morning swim.

All eight wore white clothes. Eight men and women dressed in white from top to toe. He thought it was strange, almost ridiculous, to see adults dressed like that, and so early in the morning. But who knows, these days? he thought. It could be a yoga class or an Asian martial arts club using Sunday mornings in the park for meditation and exercise. He had seen their kind here before, and felt a small sting of bittersweet joy over words like 'their kind', and a world which, for a moment, was just the way he thought it was. He let his eyes glide over the deep-green trees at the entrance to the avenue, and looked for hints of yellow and red. His eyes looked up at the sky which was blue and cloudless. The sun had begun to warm. He was going for a swim, and didn't really want to spend his time on people who dressed funnily and stood in a corner of the car park. They were that kind of people. Let the city absorb them.

Another elderly man came walking from Majorstuen Road and stopped next to him. He was wearing a Hawaiian shirt, and his bare arms were summery and tanned. They greeted each other, talked briefly about the nice weather and how good it was to live now, before the second man glanced over at the eight people in the car park.

Despite the white clothes, they could easily distinguish them from one another. They could see women and men. Hair colour, height and approximate weight. Thin and fat. Large and small breasts. The two men looked at each other and laughed. Meanwhile a third man, also in his late sixties, who had stripped to his waist in the rising heat, came towards them, stopped next to them and asked what was happening. That was when the seven cars came driving along Middelthun Street and turned into the car park. The three men stopped laughing. The first of them flinched. A kind of symbol was painted on the front of the bonnets, but none of them could work out what it represented. The vans stopped, and as the engines were turned off, the doors opened and out streamed five, ten, twenty, no, fifty, men and women.

All of them dressed in white.

Besides the three elderly men, a woman in her thirties had just come running from the avenue in the park. She had jogged past the group of white-clad people over to the ticket booth in front of the entrance to the pool. In addition, a young man came sauntering from Kirke Road, carrying a shopping bag. The pool didn't open until seven o'clock, but that

was only a few minutes away. They were all going for a swim, a morning swim. That was why they were standing here waiting. The day would open up to them the way it always did. And they would live it as they had planned. Swim. Eat breakfast, lunch, dinner. Go to the movies. Sleep. Because there was a quiet happiness in that, in the slow automatic routine that was their lives, a happiness that had led them to the front of Frogner Pool at seven o'clock on a Sunday morning. They were that kind of people. They were happy. It was a warm morning in late summer and the water held 21 degrees centigrade.

The three elderly men tried to keep the conversation going. They had stood like this and talked many times this summer, waiting for the doors to open - talked about the great weather, the bad times, the prices of public services. But it wasn't easy to keep the conversation flowing anymore, because they couldn't help looking at the amount of white-clad people.

The man who had stripped to the waist strained his eyes to see what the symbol on the cars was supposed to represent. His eyesight was no longer what it used to be, he needed new glasses, but he could still see the simple form of the circle and what was inside. It was a drawing of a human being. He thought of Leonardo's masterpiece, "The Vitruvian Man", which the symbol resembled. This was something he knew. But instead of a body, the figure in this circle consisted only of thin lines - two arms, two legs, a body. A matchstick boy. With a round ball for a head. The kind he had often drawn when he was a kid. He sighed resignedly and asked his two friends what they thought all this could be.

- Who knows, these days?

The white-haired man understood now that the white-clad people could not be practitioners of tai chi, or questing people in search of cleansing their chakra. Eight souls filled with small demands on behalf of their own lives. No, the group had been fundamentally changed by the arrival of those in the vans. The number altered the relationship between them, and for each new man and woman who joined the eight, the features of each individual disappeared. He tried to count them, but found he couldn't. He tried again, but their faces dissolved and were lifted up into something he couldn't put a name to. It was as if each one of them was a confirmation and a repetition of the same face. The same mouth. The same eyes. One single person dressed in the same colour. Uncountable. Because what were they now but this entity of white?

A few metres away a woman in her thirties was bending and stretching after her run. Her heart was still pumping after the final surge up the avenue and across the car park. She saw the white-clad people and thought about words like "clan", "tribe", "kith

and kin", words pointing to a design of another and more fundamental order, something coming after the individual, or perhaps before. Perhaps that's it, she thought, while she stretched her right hand towards her toes and felt the slow pain in her thighs. Are we together before we are alone? The question came into her head without her quite knowing what it meant. But it was a question that seemed to fit what she saw in front of her. As if the individual can only come into being within the mass that surrounds it. In the moment it steps out of it. Only then do we become woman, man. Only then do we get a name. And then she pictured one of these white-clad people suddenly moving away, removing herself from the others and walking over to those who were standing in front of the pool, telling them her name.

My name is Kristin Sørli.

My name is Agnes Fjeld.

My name is Anne Franzen.

No, stop thinking about it, she told herself, and jumped up and down a couple of times to feel her body again, let it decide for her, let it tell her who she was.

But she couldn't stop.

She landed softly on the tarmac, lowered her shoulders, and started to search for other words. Surely there was another word that could describe this more precisely, a word that captured all those over there in all their white glory? She had counted them, one by one - sixty-five, sixty-six, sixty-seven - every man and woman who had joined them. Because more had arrived. They came from different directions, in small groups of two and three. More white-clad people. How many would they become? She put her right foot against the wall to stretch the muscles in her calf, while she searched for the one word that she knew would tell her everything. And then it came to her. The word that gave the whole thing meaning. The word that opened one world in order to point to another.

Faith.

The word was faith.

These people have faith.

It was faith that gathered them here.

The woman put her arms behind her head and rotated her body slowly to stretch her back. She felt joy at having placed the group, or the movement - she wasn't quite sure what to call it - and in that way removing some of the chilling aspects of the sight. She let her body sink and stretched her arms towards her toes again. Blood was pushed into her face, and she could feel her pulse throb in her temples. But what brought them here? What

was it in their faith that gathered them here? She felt that she was still curious, but now, now that the word had been found - *faith, faith, faith* - in a more detached way, with the modern person's eye for extreme phenomena. *I was there. I saw it. Terribly interesting.* She stood up and looked at them again. Are they waiting for a moment to come? For a story to begin? Or maybe not, no, isn't it rather an ending you can glimpse here? Isn't it obvious by their clothes and their eyes that this is not a beginning, but an end? Her breath came more evenly now, and her heart was almost beating at its normal rate. Yes, they are waiting for an end, she thought, but what kind of end?

While the small group of morning swimmers stood and watched the white-clad people over in the car park, another man was on his way towards them from the other side of the road. They didn't see him at first, but when the man with the Hawaiian shirt let his eyes roam for a moment, he made all the others aware of who was on his way over. The man who had stripped to the waist squinted to see more clearly. It took a few seconds, but then he, too, saw who it was. From the other side of Middlethun Street, Oslo's Mayor came walking towards them, the elderly and distinguished Mayor from the country's conservative party. And next to him, two white-clad people (even more of them!) walked with determined steps towards their friends in the car park.

The Mayor nodded briefly to the two people as they walked past him, as if in appreciation of their presence here, this early. They looked at him, but didn't nod back, and the Mayor was almost disappointed. He was used to the city's residents recognising him by now, used to children and young people stopping and staring, something that filled him with a quiet joy every time. At the beginning of his term as Mayor, he had, admittedly, been a little ashamed of this, as if he had discovered a vanity in himself he didn't think he possessed. But as time passed, he became used to it and took pleasure in this feeling of quiet joy, at the same time as he became more confident in his position as Mayor and foremost representative of Norway's capital. But these two men made him uncertain, and the uncertainty was reinforced when he saw where they were heading. The cars, the symbols, the clothes. Who are these people? What do they want? He wondered if he actually should have known something about this, if he actually had access to information about these people, who they were, about their intention and objectives. He hadn't had time to skim the newspapers this morning, and in addition, he was becoming forgetful. He had turned seventy-one. No, he didn't know anything, and suddenly had a feeling of being abandoned, left out, and as if one thing followed another, he felt a stab of fear. He shook his head, took a deep breath, and instead of asking the two, now walking straight ahead of

him, about what they were doing here and why, he walked with determined steps towards the entrance to the pool.

The small group of morning swimmers had for a moment averted their eyes from the white-clad people, in preference of another spectacular sight. The Mayor of Norway's capital was on his way towards them, as large as life! "Hi, Per!" the man in the Hawaiian shirt was bold enough to call out, and the Mayor came up to them and answered with a relieved smile, "Good morning!" and "What a gorgeous day it's going to be!" and "Looks like summer's going to last for a long time this year!" All of it with feeling and conviction. The woman in her thirties hadn't seen the Mayor here before, in fact, she had never seen him at all, except in newspapers and on television. As a matter of fact, she was not very interested in him and his party, which she under no circumstance was going to vote for at the election this autumn. Still, she was happy that he was a morning swimmer. There was a promise in that. An assurance that the city was in safe hands with such a man at the top, a man who got up early to swim, to prepare his body for the day's decisions. Because isn't it a fact that the brain functions better after a cool swim? And then she pictured his body, the loose skin hanging around him, the chest-fat and the stomach, and, before she knew it, his sex, like a pine cone.

- What could it be? the Mayor asked.

They had talked about the weather and the election, but finally it was no longer possible to avoid them.

- We don't know, Per, the man with the white hair said. - We thought perhaps you could tell us?

- Sorry, was all he could say.

They stood in silence for a few seconds. Tried to catch words from the white-clad people in the car park. But they hardly seemed to speak to each other. They just stood there, a white patch beneath the sun, closed around itself.

- They're waiting for the world to end, the man with the shopping bag suddenly said.

The four men turned and looked at the young man who had so far been silent. He could be no more than twenty-something.

- I heard it on the radio, he continued. - They belong to a religious sect that believes the world's going to end.

- When? asked the man who had stripped to the waist.

- Today, I think.

- Today? the Mayor said.
- They call themselves The Son of Man, the young man said.
- What? the Mayor said.
- The Son of Man. That's the name of the group.
- The Son of Man, the Mayor repeated quietly.

The young man laughed shortly.

- The end of the world is nigh. And we're standing here, waiting to swim.

No one else laughed. No one said anything. They were a small group of five to start with, now six, with Oslo's Mayor among them. They were strangers to each other, but they still belonged to a kind of community. Because they are men and women who go jogging at first light, who get up at the crack of dawn to go swimming, while others are still in a deep sleep, encircled in their own dreams and blind to the light over Frogner Park, at seven o'clock on an August morning. Have they ever seen it? They wondered about things like that while they waited for the gates to open, while they walked and felt the heat from the sun against their skin, while they jogged and felt their muscles working and pulling the body around itself.

And then this.

The Son of Man. The end of the world.

And here we are, waiting to swim.

One of the pool attendants suddenly appeared from nowhere and opened the gates. It was seven o'clock. The man who had arrived first, the one with the white hair, looked briefly at his watch just to confirm that the time was right. The Mayor was already on his way past the ticket booth and greeted the attendant with a warm "good morning!" and the man who had stripped to the waist slung his bag over his shoulder and said loudly that he looked forward to having a swim. For a moment, the white-haired man considered staying where he was. He would really like to see this. Wouldn't he? Be a witness. Spend time trying to understand. Because how could they actually believe the world was going to end? The Son of Man, he thought. The Son of Man. He shook his head. Just those words! He could see that they were starting to move now, slowly, towards the avenue and the park. And as he turned to follow the others inside, he caught himself wishing that there had only been eight of them, that it had only been yoga.

While she was changing in the dressing room, the woman in her thirties couldn't get rid of the thought of the faithfuls out there. The name suited them. The Son of Man. And she felt she envied them, not a lot, just a little. Because they know. They believe. Their

future is decided. And they meet it, awake and prepared. Dressed in white. She stood naked and looked at herself in the mirror. She had seen them, it was unavoidable, they were there, and even if she could no longer see them, she felt a growing apprehension at the doom they were waiting for. She let her arms fall to see her body in its entirety and heaviness. What do I believe in? she thought, and the thought didn't disappear until she stood on the diving board, let her weight bear down on her legs, and hurled herself into the air and down into the water that swallowed her whole.

The woman with the Labrador had fed her dog and was drinking coffee at her kitchen table. She turned on the radio. One of this summer's most popular songs was fading out, and it was announced that Oslo could expect yet another sunny day, with temperatures above 20 degrees, yes, this day would be like many of the other days we have had these last weeks, the radio host said before he put on another song. In Elisenberg Road the young man had divested himself of the dark suit, got into bed and fallen asleep.

He had failed to read the text message.

CHAPTER 2

The kiss didn't last long. But he had kissed her, and she had returned the kiss. He could feel her lips move. The tongue that barely touched his. They were in bed, wearing nothing, looking at each other. They kissed, they were naked, but he was unsure of what would happen now. He stretched his hand out and put it on her hip and carefully caressed her thigh. She was warm. She continued to look at him, without moving or letting on what she thought about having his hand just there. Her thirty-six-year old body. Without a trace of wrinkles. Her hair was blond and short. Her skin soft and smooth, apart from the scar on her right thigh, a mark left there by the teeth of her neighbour's German Shepherd, sometime in the late 70s.

When they met friends they had not seen for some time, they pointed out how great she still looked. You haven't changed one bit, they said to her, and he gazed at her and thought they were right. But here, beneath the duvet, the thought of her never changing was mixed with his desire for her. He put his arm around her waist and pulled her close. He heard her say his name, as if that should tell him something, before he kissed her again.

She returned his kiss this time too, something that aroused him even more. She noticed and pulled away a little. He tried again. Slowly caressed her body. Touched her breasts, her cheek, her stomach, and finally moved his hand between her legs. She wanted this, didn't she? He hugged her carefully, while he looked at her and said, "Helene." She shook her head faintly and repeated "Harald."

She turned on her side, with her back to him. His hand followed her movement along her hip and her thigh.

- You know the way it is.

Outside it was pitch dark and the snow was falling. Just an hour ago, when he was running across St. Hanshaugen on his usual course, the sky had been nice and clear, he had even seen a few stars, and had tried to remember what the constellations were called, without success. Now he could only see the reflection from the streetlamps outside, glittering in the snow that fell against the window pane. The snow was falling heavier now. What at first had been single tiny snow flakes had grown imperceptibly to a steady, even fall.

Now and again they fought like this. Tried to convince each other that this is what they wanted. Confirmed what they had had for eight years soon. Love. Marriage. Why was it so difficult? At one time they had known what they wanted, but now it was as if they were guided by something else, outside themselves, something that finally had led them here, at separate sides of the bed. Alone. Harald looked at the snow falling outside and knew why.

They could not have children.

He could not count the times he had said just that to himself the last three years, since they had taken the tests. We can't have children. That was one reason. But there was another reason.

His hand was still lying motionless on her hip, just a few centimetres from her sex. She didn't push it away. He looked at her and rested his face on the pillow by her blond hair and breathed in.

By chance, Harald had seen her kissing another man a few months ago. He was young. He was dark. But that was all Harald knew. He had been suspecting something for a while, after she had arrived home late several evenings that summer, with the same excuses, *I ran into Julie, we just had a coffee. Mum rang, she asked me to drop in. Ran into Julie. Dinner. Mum rang.*

Harald never confronted her about this, and when he saw her in the street that Thursday in October, it was in many ways too late. He was buying a lamp. He remembered that. He was in a shop in Bygdøy Avenue, and then they were suddenly there, on the other side of the street. He didn't recognise her at first. She had just had a haircut, and he hadn't quite got used to it yet, but then he suddenly realised who it was. At that moment they kissed, unblushingly, a long, heavy kiss that made a passing woman turn around and smile.

- Isn't it a bit cold in here? she said, and pulled the duvet up to her face.

She smelled of the shampoo they both used.

- Maybe, he said and let his fingers stroke her carefully.

That was the other reason: She slept with other men.

They couldn't have children, and she slept with other men.

Now his hand rested in the hollow between her hip and her waist, the place he once said was the most beautiful on a woman's body. He remember that he had felt a bit ashamed as he said it. There was something banal about designating this part of her body as the place of all women's beauty. Not at least did it hint of an experience he did not

possess. But she hadn't laughed, she had just kissed him and taken his hand from her hip and put it to her sex. He forgave himself that time, he was in love and wanted her, and banality was unavoidable. Later that evening, he had said, "I love you," and she had answered, "You must never leave me."

He wanted to win her back, and that was why he had not said anything when she came home that night in October. It was past eleven and she had been at Julie's. When she saw the lamp, she showed genuine pleasure, hugged him and said it was lovely. He held her a little longer than usual, kissed her cheek. She smelled of salt, as if she had cried. They decided to put the lamp in the living-room, by one of the armchairs, where they sat and read. She went to have a shower. When she came to bed, she said she was tired, and fell asleep.

The snow was falling heavily now. Harald watched the flakes settle on the window sill. It had started to blow as well. He could hear the wind push against the glass, like a cautious hand. He felt the warmth from her body and tried to put the weight of his whole arm on her hip. He still wanted her. It was still the most beautiful place. But he said nothing.

Now and again he would wonder if he really knew her. They had been married for five years soon, been together for eight. And when he thought back, those years emerged as rich and full. They had gone on holidays to various countries. Had jogged together along white beaches on three continents. Moved several times. Renovated two flats. And around the things they had acquired - the books, the shower curtain, the old radio - small stories had evolved that were theirs, a language that anchored their love in reality. But now and again all this disappeared. As if it were not these stories that told them who they were for each other, but something quite different.

Just a few days ago, Sunday, he was sitting alone in the kitchen, looking at their photo album. There were pictures of the family. Pictures of weddings, christenings and birthdays. Pictures of Christmas, Easter and summer holidays. Harald enjoyed sitting like this, looking through the album, causally turning the pages back and forth, feeling the strength of the bonds that tied him, as son of Hans and Mona, as brother of Monika and uncle of Line and Jonas. As husband of Helene. All the names that were a part of him. His muscles were still sore after having played indoor hockey with two friends from university. He was worn-out, but happy. Despite the children they couldn't have, and the other stuff, that was exactly the word he would choose. It was what the exercise did for him. His body

was heavy and drowsy, and his head empty, and with the photos as proof, his life stood forth as something beautiful and rich.

While he had been turning the pages, he had come across three photos of Helene. They were in three different spots in the album, and were taken over a period of time. But the motif was the same: Helene in front of the bench in the kitchen. That was all. The first must have been taken just after they had moved into the flat in Geitmyr Road, just a few weeks before the wedding. In that picture, there were a few opened boxes on the kitchen table in the background, with KITCHEN written with a black felt pen on the side. The other picture was taken during preparations for a party. She had wet hair and wore a simple black skirt and a white bra. The third was taken just after the trip to Copenhagen in December. He could see some tax-free shopping on the kitchen table, a Jameson whisky and a white Toblerone. It was the last picture of six from Copenhagen. The following pages were blank, waiting for new travels, new parties, new weddings, new birthdays. But they didn't take many photos now. And they still lived in Geitmyr Road.

Harald turned the pages back and forth to find the differences between the three photographs. Tracing the time from one year to the next. And he found a few things. A new hairstyle. Longer hair. A sunburnt shoulder. Other clothes. But it was not the differences that struck him, it was the similarity. She stood exactly the same way in all three pictures, with her body half turned to the side, and with her face peeping up at the camera at an angle. She was smiling. But just a little. She had not changed, that was what had struck him, as if the eight years they had been together had not left a single trace. She still looked great. She had not changed one bit.

Who was she?

- Why don't you talk about your job instead?

She had turned on her back, but still lay buried under the duvet, so that he couldn't see her face.

- I don't know, he said.

He looked out the window. Tried not to think about anything.

- Tell me about one of your patients. It's always such fun to hear about them.

- We don't call them patients, Helene. They're clients. I've told you this before.

- Don't be grumpy, Harald.

The words were uttered in a light tone. Fast and light-heartedly, as if this was not a criticism, just a request. Harald tried to answer in the same light-hearted voice.

- I'm not grumpy.

- It sounds like it.

He turned to her again and smiled. He didn't want to have an argument.

- A client, then. Tell me about a client, she said.

Her short hair peeped out from the top of the duvet, but her eyes were hidden in there somewhere. He tried to get a glimpse of them, hold her gaze, but all he could see was the outline of her forehead, the rest of her disappearing in the darkness.

- I've got to observe client confidentiality, Harald said. - You know that.

- It hasn't stopped you before.

- No ...

- So tell me.

- I don't know.

- Don't be grumpy.

Nicholas Berg, he said quickly. - We can talk about Nicholas Berg.

- Who's he?

Harald felt a brief pang of guilt, but at the same time he was glad to be able to talk about something else.

- Do you remember last year? he said. - Towards the end of August. The religious sect who believed the world was coming to an end. It was on the news, and in the papers. The people who sat in Frogner Park. Do you remember?

- Yes ..., she said and tried to picture the images from the media coverage. - I think so.

- It was the 24th of August. The world would come to an end on Sunday 24th of August 2003, at eight am.

- What was the group called again?

- The Son. Or The Son of Man. It was often just called The Son. They were convinced the world would end. At eight o'clock exactly.

- And Nicholas Berg?

- He was a member of the sect.

- Oh.

- And that's not all ...

- What do you mean?

- He's the son of Josef Berg.

- The film director?

- Yes.

- The man who disappeared?

- Yes.

- Josef Berg's son is your patient?

He could hear that she was impressed.

- Client, Harald said. - He's my client.

- Sorry. Client.

Outside, the snow was being whirled around by the wind. Harald could hear wind gusts sweeping through the streets, coming and disappearing again. He breathed deeply, in and out.

- He was in the Frogner Park, he continued. - Sat there with the others. There were over seventy of them, men and women. Seventy-two, if I remember rightly. But then it didn't happen. What they all thought would happen. The world didn't come to an end.

- And now he's with you?

She tried to hide a yawn.

- Why don't you go to sleep, Harald said.

- No, keep talking. I don't want to sleep. I want to hear more about Nicholas Berg.

She turned on her side with her back to him, and he put his right arm around her waist and pulled her to him. He felt her hip against his groin. Her neck against his chin. As if they were one.

- He was admitted to Lovisenberg Hospital just a few days later, Harald continued, his mouth close to her ear. - Several of them were. Some of the members committed suicide. Their leader tried, too, but they saved him. They managed to save him.

- I think I remember this, Helene said. - What was his name?

- Borman. Olav Borman. They called him Master. Or just Olav. In his previous life, he was a writer, a poet. He published two volumes of poetry towards the end of the 60s.

- What happened? Helene said.

He could hear the sleep in her voice.

- He was found half-dead in the house The Son used in Homansbyen. But then the doctors managed to wake him up again. He was arrested, and charged with fraud, I think. I believe the court case is coming up sometime in spring.

- The Son, Helene said and laughed briefly.

She was breathing evenly into the pillow. It wouldn't be long now.

- Josef Berg had actually made a film about them, Harald continued. - In the middle of the 80s. A documentary. We saw it not all that long ago. It was shown on the day of the event last year. Do you remember?

- Nicholas was one of them? she asked.

He breathed in the smell of her clean hair. He remembered that he had been astonished at how fair it was when he first met her, and he could still feel traces of the astonishment, here, while he lay close to her, in the heat of her body.

- Yes, he said. - He was one of them.

A new yawn. Her body was pushed up against his. The wind and the snow.

- Poor Nicholas, Helene said.

Harald lay there listening to her breathing. She was asleep now. He was sure. She was asleep.

- What is it you're always saying? she whispered.

- What?

- Your theory.

- Do I have a theory?

- We tell each other stories, she continued, as if she had not heard his question.

- We tell each other stories in order to live. That's your theory.

- Is it?

- Stories in order to live, she repeated. - Is that what Nicholas has done?

She laughed briefly, and was about to say something when her body suddenly jerked. It was as if she shivered from cold for a moment, only to find warmth again immediately. She fell asleep. He lifted his head and looked at her. Yes, she was asleep now. She had fallen asleep.

Harald had early on thought that the expression 'falling asleep' suited her. Most often that was what happened, like a fall. They could lie and make small talk, like now, exchange anecdotes from the day that was over, feel the thing that was their marriage, and then suddenly she was gone. He felt her body jerk, often in the middle of a sentence, and then there was only her breathing, sleep. A jerk and then a fall. A body which no longer resisted whatever it was that kept it awake, and a mattress that received it, softly yielding, like an old lover who forgives everything. In the beginning of their relationship he had been a little jealous of this way she fell asleep, as if it was an expression of an abandonment she never quite showed him. Now and again it could seem as if the only times

she really needed him were when they were watching horror movies on DVD. Then she cuddled up to him and put her head in the crook of his arm, like a frightened child.

Helene slept with her back against him, warm and naked, in the way they always fell asleep, she up against him, and he with his right arm around her. Like two spoons. But he could not sleep now. Instead he listened to the sounds from the winter outside, the howls the wind created when it hit the small cracks in the wall, howls reminding him of all the howls he had heard in the horror movies out in the living-room. She loved those movies. Collected them. Collected sharp, clean howls warning of great danger and the usual shudders. She snuggled up to him. Hid her face against his chest and asked him if it was soon over.

- Why do you watch them when they frighten you so much? he asked her once when they were watching a film they had already watched twice before.

- I *want* to be frightened, she answered, and huddled closer to him, while the curse was carried out on a young, blond girl at a deep lake, in a dark forest.

But the truth was that he enjoyed it. He enjoyed that she jumped and came to him for consolation and protection. He enjoyed thinking that she was scared of something he merely saw as cheap effects and popular psychology. *His father killed, that's why he, too, must kill*, someone explained on the screen, and Helene's body rested heavily against his.

But that was a long time ago now. When had they last seen a film like that?

He looked at her. She had turned around and slept on her back now, an arm tossed carelessly around her head. The old astonishment that she was his welled up in him. The fair skin with a hint of blue. The small upturned nose. The small freckles across her face, as if they had been scattered randomly, from her nose down. Nothing had changed. The small ears. And the blond hair. When they were on their honeymoon in Vietnam, everyone thought she was Swedish. 'My flicka', he had called her, my Swedish girl. That was five years ago, and she had long hair then. Helene had laughed and called him her Swedish boy. The same thing had happened several times. In Mexico City. In Berlin. In Venice. In Copenhagen. He thought about the photos in the album. It was the same girl who was lying here now. Exactly the same. A few years ago he had jokingly said that she could play a role in one of the films they used to watch. She was just as blond and just as beautiful, and the forest was just as dark. She had laughed and said that someone had put a curse on her.

The wind assaulted the window again, the curtain was lifted for just a moment, then fell back again. He heard a car outside, and in the background, a few faint voices. He sat up. Put his feet on the floor and felt the cold against his skin. He picked up the sweaty

tracksuit and put it in the laundry basket. He found a clean pair of tracksuit pants and a jumper in the wardrobe, put them on and walked quietly towards the door.

- Where are you going? he heard from the bed.

- Are you awake?

- You woke me up.

- I can't sleep, he said. - Just go back to sleep.

- Close the door behind you. There's a draught. And bring a glass ...

But she was drifting off again. Sleep took her.

Harald walked through the living-room into the kitchen. He filled the kettle and turned on the stove. The backyard was covered in a layer of new snow. He sat down at the kitchen table and flicked through the newspaper. He didn't take in a single word. He just sat and looked at the pictures of men and women from different parts of the world. Pure faces that just looked at him, without the words getting in the way. Smiling, serious, crying and angry faces. Nameless. He suddenly felt an urge to run, one more time, run through a silent, sleeping Oslo, until his body was nothing but a heaving heart. But he knew he wouldn't do it. Not in this weather. He folded the newspaper and put it in the recycling box. He walked into the living-room and picked up his bag at the desk. The water was boiling. He got a cup from the cupboard with "The world's best uncle" on it. He had got it for Christmas two years ago from Monica's twins. He poured the hot water into the cup and watched as it changed colour. The teabag disappeared. Sugar and a dash of milk. He also found a bottle of Jameson and poured himself a glass. He pulled out a cigarette from the packet on top of the fridge. He opened the window just a crack and felt how his skin contracted in the cold air. Small snow flakes landed on his arm and melted immediately.

- Cheers, he said to himself.

Then he drank and felt the heat of the alcohol spread through his heavy body. He put down the glass, lit the cigarette, and inhaled. He could see the reflection of his own face in the window.

- Why can't you sleep at night, Harald?

- I don't know.

He had started to do this lately, talk to himself when he was alone.

- Don't you?

- No, he said and inhaled again.

- Still, you're here.

- Yes. I'm here.

He threw the cigarette out into the darkness, and watched the glowing end fall, disappear. He closed the window and opened the bag that was propped up against the table leg. He took out two books, a pencil, a few small, yellow post-it notes and a white folder. On the outside was written a single name in big, black letters.

CHAPTER 3

- Why were you dressed in white?

- We thought that was the colour we'd meet.

- Afterwards?

- Yes.

- And what does that mean? To meet a colour?

- I don't think you'll understand.

- Try me.

- To us, the white was the beginning, the end. White was everything. White was nothing.

- Can you explain that?

- What did I say? You wouldn't understand.

- But I'd like to.

- A canvas. The white is the canvas. And we were dressed in white to ascend into it.

The way the whole world would ascend into it.

- I see.

- Good.

- And then?

- And then what?

- What happened then?

- I don't remember much from that day.

- Still. Try.

- To describe what happened?

- Yes.

- What do you think?

- I'd really like to hear it in your own words.

- Alright.

- So what happened?

- Well what can I say? Nothing happened. That's the point, isn't it. Not a thing.

Nicholas Berg looked straight at Harald. He almost seemed to smile. They sat across from each other in the little seating group by the window that he used for the conversations with his clients. Harald in the armchair and Nicholas in the sofa. It was light

outside now. The dark winter morning had succumbed to a blue sky and a clear sun which was reflected in the new snow and turned everything, absolutely everything, into a brilliant white. Harald could still feel the effects of the two glasses of whisky. He'd had two glasses. How many hours before he had actually fallen asleep? Helene had already left by the time he got up. She usually exercised a couple of times a week, early in the morning before she went to school, jogging alone in the park, or cycling at the Sports Institute. Harald had eaten breakfast alone.

In his notes from the first conversation he had used the word 'mournful' to describe Nicholas. And that was exactly how he would describe his smile now. A mournful smile. Harald tried to hide a yawn, put his hand over his mouth and looked at him. He was dressed in a white shirt and grey trousers. His hair was black, his face long and narrow, with deep-set brown eyes below brows that almost met in the middle. His shirt looked freshly ironed. In his notes he had also used the words 'tormented', 'dark', 'beautiful'.

- Are you tired? Nicholas asked.

- A little, Harald said. - You know, winter. He smiled and shrugged disarmingly.

- It's quite alright.

Nicholas turned and looked out the window. With calm and even movements he began to stroke the green IKEA sofa with his left hand. On the table between them two cups of coffee were getting cold.

- Let's just continue, he said.

*

Nicholas had arrived twenty minutes late. He had apologised and explained that he had been on the phone with his sister, who was alone at home with a twisted ankle. Harald had said goodbye to another client (single child, headache, loss of direction), and while he waited for Nicholas he had once more looked through his folder.

Nicholas Berg.

Born: 1970.

Places of abode: Oslo, Chicago.

Profession: Photographer.

Marital status: Single.

A copy of the police report described the circumstances under which he had been found after that Sunday in August, and the journal from Lovisenberg Hospital documented

his condition and recorded the prescribed medications. In addition, Harald had made notes from several entries on the net: an article about *The Son of Man*, an essay about Josef Berg's documentary, and a speech written by Olav Borman himself, called "A New White World". From that, he had underlined, among other things, this paragraph:

They shall all wake up. And it will be a shock to them. They shall be shaken out of their dreams, in that way to meet Shyam. The light. Finally the time has come.

There will be no more sleeping people left. For God will arrive. A world shall fall.

And a new one shall open up. A new white world. Without sleep.

A few days ago he had also bought a few books. One was *Notes About the Art of Film* by Josef Berg, published in 1998, the year before he disappeared. It was a short book of seventy-two pages which, according to what Harald now had read, consisted of small childhood portrayals and reflections on film theories. He had looked through it in the kitchen last night, and read bits and pieces at random. 'Film is the ability to see the human being in its own context,' it said. 'Film is light. Light is film,' it said somewhere else. And a few pages later: 'Film is to see without pain.' Finally he had stopped at a story where Josef Berg told about his first film experience, at a movie theatre in a Hamburg laid in ruins in 1946, eight years old. Josef could not remember which film it was, but he had become sick afterwards. Really sick. He then linked this event to the actor Klaus Kinski, who played the lead in Josef's second film, *A Man Without Means*, from 1978, and who died in 1991 of the same illness he finally dies of in the film. 'As if it were contagious', Josef Berg wrote. He continues:

I don't know what this implies. I only know that it scares me, and that my life is going to be influenced by this, whether I want it or not. It is not possible for a person who gets the opportunity to participate in such insights to remain passive; these insights have occurred against my will, and they have disrupted or changed all my previous notions of the world and my own fate. In a sense I have been split, I feel responsible for others; I have become a tool, a medium who is compelled to live to influence others.

Harald closed the book and studied the small photo of Josef Berg on the inside sleeve. He was a thin and tall man, with a loose, black beard. He was looking to the right. He was smiling. But only a little.

A tool. A medium.

Harald put the book away.

On the net he had also found other and more obscure articles about Josef Berg. About what he ate on the set, his fascination for birds. He had also seen a photo of him which several people claimed was proof that he was still alive. The photo showed Josef standing in a garden, holding a child by the hand. Harald could not understand what the proof consisted of.

Another webpage was dedicated to the rumours of his last and still undiscovered film. Because of course there were rumours of such a film, a film he was supposed to have finished just before he disappeared. But even if no one had seen the film, and most of the film historians Harald had come across dismissed it as fabrication and rumours, stories were still circulating about what it did to people. In the articles he found, there was hardly anything about the content of what the film was about, only what had happened to the people who had seen it. Like the accountant who had left his family without a word. Like the two architects who had committed suicide. Like the video distributor who had seen God.

A tool. A medium.

A new white world.

Harald yawned and put down the papers. He realised it worried him that this material could send him on a wild goose chase. The rumours surrounding the film had little or nothing to do with Nicholas, of course. No, he just had to stick to his job. Listen to his client. Outside, the snow was still falling. He looked at his watch. It was more than half past one, and he thought that he must go to bed. *I just listen*, Harald used to say when people asked about the methods he used with his clients. *I just listen*.