

## ***Father's long journey***

I

– *Mama, do you love papa?* I asked my mother once in my distant childhood. We were in the kitchen at the farm, in a little town on the west coast of Norway, it was a winter evening. The kitchen walls were blue, the ceiling lamp was lit and it was dark outside. Mother rattled the pots and pans; she was cleaning up after the evening meal. Throughout the years things had always been the same: By nine o'clock in the evening she would have finished the barn chores, milked the cows, and cared for the horse. Then she would come back indoors and bring the day to a close.

Grandfather and grandmother were about to go to bed in another part of the house. Their muttering could be heard through the wall. We, the children, at the time there were five of us, had gotten milk and pieces of bread with brown cheese. My big sister was somewhere outside, my small siblings sent to bed. I was alone with my mother.

The objects surrounding us, at the moment when I asked her that question, resurface now—the black wood-burning stove by the fireproof shield, the big ladle hanging on a hook by the faucet, the cheap illustration on the wall: Jesus knocking on the door. I see the radio, the piles of dishes on the kitchen counter, the pots on the stovetop. I especially remember the glare from the ceiling lamp. So this must have happened after we got electricity and threw away the kerosene lamps. And it would have been before we gave up breeding sheep, and before I started school, but after we got the radio that ran on electricity and not on batteries like the old radio.

Maybe I was six years old. If so, the year was 1955.

I had discovered there was something called love, and I wondered what it could be. When I finally found the courage to ask mother, I was anxious because I didn't know if she would get angry. But I wanted to know the meaning of such a strange word, and I wanted to see the expression on her face when I asked.

I asked my question about love with a shy grin, and was prepared for a scarce answer. When the evening chores were done, all she ever thought about was getting to bed, as she got up at dawn every morning. I wasn't looking for a final answer; I wanted to see mother's reaction. If the question was improper, she would say that I had to ask father when he came home. Father was a travelling preacher in the Inner Mission and away from home seven months a year.

But this time mother did not answer carelessly and absent-minded, as she usually did. She stopped in her tracks and stood there looking at me with an expression on her face I had never seen before. She opened her mouth and closed it, twice.

Then, in a voice I did not recognise, she said the words that were to weigh upon me for fifty years:

– I *did* not love your father so much when we first got together, but I *began* loving him, because he was faithful, and faithfulness is as important as love.

A door to the unknown was opened that night. There was something in mother's and father's life that wasn't to be talked about, but now she had let me know that it existed.

## ***Mother's life turned upside down***

### II

The evening that turned Mother's life upside down must have been in the spring of 1944, in late February, March, or April. She and a girlfriend had gone to the Lillehammer Movie Theatre to see a film called *I'll Even Fetch a Star for You*.

When the girls came back out on the pavement and into the spring evening, they were approached by two German soldiers who asked if they might invite them for a cup of hot chocolate or a glass of wine. The girls had the evening off, it was Saturday night, they said yes. They were crossing a boundary and they knew it. It was just that they didn't want anyone telling them, grown-up young women, what was right and what was wrong.

In the small town by Lake Mjøsa, there were more German soldiers than there were inhabitants. Lillehammer was not a city under siege; it had been invaded. Now the Wehrmacht was busy establishing Lillehammer as the central headquarters for operations in Norway. Thousands of soldiers from construction battalions were sent to Lillehammer in the period from 1942-1944. Among them was the German officer Paul Wilhelm Schaeper, who on this particular evening turned to some Norwegian girls and asked if they'd like to go to a café.

No one will ever know which of the girls made the decision to go along. It was a whim, it was just for fun. They weren't planning to get involved in anything, and they had no intention of getting a boyfriend. Just because you talked to someone, didn't mean you had to go to bed with them!

The Germans asked if they could keep them company, and buy them something or other, and the girls agreed. They offered cigarettes and chivalry. He who later has heard only the reverberation and the silent memories from this spring in my mother's life, how is he to approach this? No one has told a different story to the one I'm telling now.

But how can one leave it untold, what had such consequences it would mark many people for their entire lives and that caused a new human being to be born? There is no other way than to write them out, those German soldiers in their green uniforms, and the two Norwegian girls, and so here we are, right in the midst of a spring evening, before the ground is warm and while there are still snowdrifts in all the entryways and shady gardens!

The girls who have been to the movie theatre have their winter coats on. It's Saturday night, and they're certainly not taking their coats off, not at first, at that café at the Breiseth Hotel. At other tables there are other Norwegian girls who are also in the company of young German men. And then it just so happens that Paul Wilhelm Schaeper from the district of Hesse in Germany asks my mother if they can meet again.

Nobody can tell when it started, and nobody can say precisely when they were together for the last time, nobody can confirm whether they met ten times or twenty, or where these meetings took place. For these reasons, the nature of this story will never be clear. Mother would never tell me about Schaeper, what he looked like, or what kind of guy he was, and others who might know what really went on, remain silent out of loyalty to her.

But one thing she insisted to be true: This was not a casual relationship, an affair of the moment, she had not been seduced, and in her opinion she had made no mistakes. To her, the story of Willi Schaeper, as his fellow soldiers called him, was a love story. She loved this soldier, she insisted on that, I have heard her say so myself. The young girl from Øyer was so carried away that she didn't care what the rest of the world thought or believed. She would have walked through fire to be with him.

## ***Once again I send you my regards***

### III

The path back to life is endlessly slow. He is released, only to rest for a long time. For a month he is in Trondheim Hospital, and when he's finally released, they do not go back to Hoem, but to Gudbrandsdalen.

He convalesced in Øyer with mother for two months. They left from the Øyer train station in Gudbrandsdalen on the eve of Pentecost in 1948. It was summer and there was sunshine everywhere. Olaug Nylund, Mother's sister-in-law, recalls the emissary, that Hoem fellow, lifting Kristine's little daughter up from the platform and carrying her into the train compartment. He showed the whole world that now the child was going with them to their farm in Romsdal. And that's how he got his wife to come back home. When they climbed off the bus at Hoem that afternoon, the bells of Vågøy church were ringing in Pentecost.

Nobody can say what it was like. But I can hear mother singing to Wenche, who is falling asleep on Father's farm for the first time. But I stand, unimportantly, like an invisible witness, outside the house somewhere, that's all I can do, and I can hear through the thin walls, on that light early summer evening, that there's a couple inside, going to bed. *I almost lost you*, she says. And then I hear her crying softly, and then he starts crying too. They weep together, they cry almost imperceptibly, because they don't want to wake Wenche and not grandmother and grandfather, but I think they put their arms around each other, and they weep from sorrow and happiness, because everything is as it is.

And the crying goes on for a long time, and then it goes quiet. And afterwards, they get up again and drink coffee, and they come out on the steps and sit there in the summer night, which is so light in these parts that restless hearts can find no peace. And they talk, and then they laugh, they shush each other, but then they forget everything around them, and they laugh and laugh.

And then the Day of Pentecost dawns, and when the holiday is over, they saddle the horse and drive to the peat bog and they stay there all through the day, the first of what will amount to more than ten thousand work days at the Bakken farm in Romsdal for mother over the next forty years.