



Jan
Kjærstad

I Am The Walker Brothers

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“

Only she could stand like that on a flight of steps, leaning against the railings. Plenty of schwing about her whole body, a flic-flac, obvious even in winter clothes. And her Peter Pan bootees. She was wearing a little fur hat, but she could have worn anything at all – a cake tin, a paper bag – she would have been just as irresistible, and something happened to my blood pressure or heart rhythm or breathing, and I had to take a step forwards so as not to lose balance, and she was alone, and some of us began to say flippant things, and some of us began to shove each other and some of us began to act big in the most bestial way, and all of us clustered together so all our fluff jackets squeaked real chaplin against each other. She stood there, just like that, in a little fur hat and caused utter chaos.

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But then, after Christmas, I noticed a change, and one day in the playground she said in passing: "I heard about that with Andreas. Hell, that was awful." Shiny eyes.

And now she was standing there, leaning against the railings, and while the others were floundering around and saying no-cortex things, I tried to catch her eye, but I didn't succeed, and we didn't get passed, she paralysed us, or seemed impenetrable, and of all things I began to think of Leonidas and the Persian army and even thought it was way off target, I knew what the reason was.”

“I am the Walker Brothers”

Odd Marius Walaker is fourteen years old and feels like he's two people – the Walker brothers.

It's autumn 1983 and Odd Marius is living with his parents in a quiet street between the church and the fire station in Frogner, a middle class part of town in central Oslo. Deeply in love for the first time, he is advised by Ancient Greece, his beloved teacher, to write down his thoughts and feelings now that he's young. The reason is, Ancient Greece tells him, that otherwise he is bound to forget them.

And so throughout 1983 and 1984 Odd Marius writes in his journal eagerly and frequently, using an old carpenter's pencil, about most of what he thinks and does – which really is plenty. The fact is that even on the surface Odd Marius Walaker's life is radically different from the lives of others his age. He has an affair with his neighbour, Mrs Haram. He expels teachers from class. He is knocked down on the lawn outside his school by four girls wanting to circumcise him. He has long conversations with Ancient Greece. He answers people's love letters. He speculates on the identity of the person terrorizing the city with book bombs. He asks himself whether he can save his parents' marriage, and not least what he can do to help when his best friend's kid brother is reported missing.



But beneath all this, Odd Marius is the Walker brothers, wandering around town dressed in a blue Mao jacket and with a book about the sea in his backpack. Odd Marius is a person with a new conscience, a person feeling that vast rooms are opening up to him, full of possibilities possibly yet unseen by anybody else. The problem is though, that this insight will be gone when many years later, he, as the head of the Government, will be called to steer his country through the worst crisis in Norwegian history.

I Am the Walker Brothers deals with a young person's body, but even more so with his imagination, his mental resources and his undreamed of powers.

A mosaic of a coming-of-age tale seen through the observant eyes of a teenager, *I Am the Walker Brothers* is a vibrant, humorous, wonderfully written book showing a new, more playful and casual side to Kjærstad's literary work. Writing a novel narrated by a fourteen year old boy is a daring venture, but Kjærstad has succeeded brilliantly.

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JAN KJÆRSTAD

Jan Kjærstad occupies a prominent place in contemporary Norwegian literature. He has a Master of Theology from the University of Oslo, and he made his debut as a writer of fiction in 1980 with *KLODEN DREIER STILLE RUNDT*, a collection of short stories. He has written a number of novels and short stories and he has published picture books and essays. In 1984 he received the Norwegian Literary Critics Association's Prize for *HOMO FALSUS*, eller *det THE PERFECT MURDER*. The fact that he was honored with Germany's prestigious Henrik Steffens Prize in 1998, awarded to Scandinavians who have significantly enriched Europe's artistic and intellectual life, also illustrates his international appeal as an author. His trilogy *THE SEDUCER* (1993), *THE CONQUEROR* (1996) and *THE DISCOVERER* (1999) makes a monumental contribution towards renewal of the art of novel writing in Scandinavia. In 2001, Jan Kjærstad won the Nordic Council's Prize for literature for *THE DISCOVERER*.

"The Conqueror is the story of a sensationalist, in every sense of that word. It is also one of the most important novels you'll read this year, and if you should read it out of sequence with its predecessor, and with a further wait for *The Discoverer*, I suspect that matters less than not reading it at all"
(The Sunday Herald)

Praise for Kjærstad's books:

"One of the most influential writers of his generation. Say his name, and I think of Milan Kundera, Martin Amis and Frank Zappa"
(Linn Ullmann)

"He exists. The perfect novelist exists and his name is Jan Kjærstad and he comes from Norway"
(Dagens Nyheter)

"Read, reader, read - great books are so rare"
(Die Welt)

"Kjærstad's novels are redolent with the fantastic profusion of the stories they tell, of all that flows forth from them, presented in ever-new guises"
(Die Zeit)

"An enormously accomplished and compelling novel by one of Scandinavia's outstanding contemporary writers"
(Paul Auster)

The Seducer is a playful, interrogative meditation on storytelling, the imagination and Norway: a book that, without blushing, will remind you to take note of the miraculous details of life, as well as to strive for the new, spectacular and different at all times. ... he champions Antarctica, Pluto and the Comoros islands, visits China and Zambezi river, discusses Duke Ellington and Liv Ullmann. In the end the novel is encapsulated in this description of the dreams of his youthful friends: 'so grand, so outrageous, so extravagantly naïve, and, above all: so insanely beautiful'
(The Guardian)

"I read the Norwegian writer Jan Kjaerstad's energetic blast of a novel, 'The Seducer', in one. It's irresistible and playful"
(Ali Smith, Books of the Year, TLS)

"Veering from the broadly comic to the beautifully sad, with detours for deadpan meditations on the "Norwegian national character," this book is not just big [] but big-hearted."
(The New York Times)

The Seducer succeeds at being a great work of fiction, and a terrific read ... Kjærstad is a compelling storyteller, who ties plots and images into an interlocking whole ... *The Seducer* reads like fast-flowing conversation, elegant and lively"
(The Independent)

THE KILLING JAR

Is everything I record here vitally important to me? In that case I've got to write about Andreas' disappearance, but to be able to write about Andreas I've also got to write about Simon and Nathan. After Tuvalu and my new-found zest I've felt this great urge to look back at certain events – and the most natural thing to start with is the butterflies.

It was two years ago, I was at Simon's place and we heard this racket coming from the living room, a sound as if something broke, and then a bad-tempered voice and a child crying. We were sitting in the kitchen eating and Mrs Borg, whose name's Agate and is ottoman brilliant at playing the piano, had dished up these delicious Bhutan sandwiches for us as usual – bread with egg and tomato. Back home I mostly ate egg on cod's roe paste, but Simon hated caviar in every shape or form, even more after he got to taste 'the best in existence' – Russian caviar, Beluga brand – for his mum had got this neat blue tin from a builder with good contacts in the Soviet Union and one evening she spread the black pearls out on two small pieces of toast and let us have one each, with the result that Simon shouted out Nero! and Caligula! and called it cod liver oil in solid form and threw up for hours afterwards, since when Beluga has been one of his favourite terms of abuse. Eggs, on the other hand. You get really horny from eggs, Simon claimed. In the army they only gave you eggs the day before leave, he grinned. Simon made sure he stuffed as much egg as possible into his face and he always finished off these orgies by tugging at his balls and letting out a blissful Amen!

The row from the living room kept going and Mrs Borg began to hum and I pretended I was studying the wallpaper with the fine floral motif, but I knew Mrs Borg was feeling desperate even though she kept on standing at the kitchen unit softly singing something from the Pentecostal Hymn Book. Simon and I tiptoed over the door. In the living room, surrounded by bits of glass, Nathan was standing almost like a predator over Andreas, with a claw-like index finger right up close to his face. When I think about it, Nathan had that same glowering look on his face last summer when he discovered that

Andreas had borrowed the towelled headband from his tennis bag and used it during carnival.

Even when I was only at primary school, Nathan had dragged me into the living room to look at his butterfly collection – I mean some of the palladio flat wooden cases he'd hung up on the wall, and he used to proudly tell me how he'd caught them with his net and put them to sleep in the killing jar and prepared them back home. Andreas, only a tiny tot, had stood next to him like an obedient lackey, rattling off the names as Nathan pointed to the glass: apollofjäril, citronfjäril, blåvinge, guldinge, näselfjäril, tistelfjäril, amiral, påfågelöga. Andreas evidently wanted to please his father by using the Swedish names, but Nathan did not give him so much as an approving glance, not even when Andreas off his own bat showed me a kartfjäril – a map butterfly – and got me to look closer to see if the wings really did remind you of a map and they did, and when I think of Andreas' later enthusiasm for treasure maps, I can understand that he was particularly infatuated with this butterfly.

Nathan stopped scolding Andreas when Simon and I came into the room, and Nathan asked him almost indulgently to fetch the dustpan before starting to chat with us in his usual way and because of his strange intonation and the Swedish words he peppered his Norwegian with I couldn't help smiling when Nathan talked – it was like hearing Uncle Melker trying to speak Norwegian – and Nathan constantly drew my attention to words that mean one thing in Norwegian and another in Swedish – a spider, for example, was called edderkopp in Norwegian, but spindel in Swedish. Dress was the Norwegian for suit, but in Swedish it was kostym – and that made sense to me because I always felt I was in fancy dress costume when I had to put on posh clothes. And a swallowtail, which we called svalestjert said Nathan as he showed me his collection, was called makaonfjäril in Swedish. And he didn't disguise the fact that Sweden had a better name for it than Norway, closer to the truth, so to speak. For what was the name of the species? he said, looking at me as if he was a bit disappointed I didn't know. Well, it was Papilio machaon he went on, making use of the occasion to give me a long lesson on how the names of these species contained a whole sphere of Greek culture, and so it wasn't perhaps all that surprising that for a long time I thought Nathan was just as learned as Ancient Greece. "I'm sure you know," he said, "that it was a Swede, Carl von Linné, who gave names to everything, sort of took over the task God gave Adam." Nathan stared at the cases in front of him in fascination and I felt they were

OK and not so OK, and mum has since told me about a book that was also turned into a film about a man who escapes from a prison and this man was known as Papillon.

Nathan looked earnestly at me: "I stopped collecting butterflies a long time ago, Odd Marius. Now I catch people in my net."

A smile. Teeth so white they looked like dentures. A whiff of leather. I didn't think it then, but I do now: Will they be put to sleep too, placed in a killing jar?

We were standing among all the bits of glass on the floor and Andreas came back with a dustpan and brush and a striking lack of congo in his eyes, and I noticed that he shot a contented, almost happy, glance at the case that no longer had any glass. I didn't understand a thing, for as yet I hadn't sat with him in the park at Uranienborg church listening to the church bells when they chime before the service. The first Sunday we sat like that, Andreas pointed to a butterfly that was fluttering past and insisted that butterflies were really angels and that the church bells was their music, and shortly afterwards I got to see the lovely drawings he had made where the angels were equipped with the most unbelievable wings – an red admiral angel, a peacock angel. So I was unprepared when in the living room I asked so softly that Nathan couldn't hear: "Why did you break the glass in the showcase?" Andreas looked at me as if he couldn't believe I was asking something so obvious: "I only wanted to let the angels out," he whispered.

For a long time I basically agreed with Nathan: the trouble with Andreas was that he had too much imagination. When last autumn I was going to teach him how to make a periscope, I discovered that he was suddenly wearing two keys round his neck. The second, a new one, he had apparently found. I asked him what he wanted it for and once again was met by that surprised look, as if he refused to believe I didn't know: "It's the key to Paradise," he said.

I thought this a bit chaplin. But then I thought: Can I borrow it off you to open up Mia?

"That imagination will be the death of him!" was one of Nathan's refrains. And then, one dark autumn evening, Andreas wasn't there. What did Nathan do then? "Now we must pray," was the last thing he said before going in that evening, with drooping shoulders. Wasn't that resorting to the imagination a bit, too?

That was just as much why I liked listening to Nathan talking or praying on the radio, for it was as if it didn't have anything to do with reality – it reminded me of a fairytale. I've got this ancient portable

radio that's upholstered in some fabric with a crocodile pattern and since it's a Courier, I pretend that the programmes may contain important messages, and all of last year I sat a lot in my room and listened to Nathan, for that was something brand-new in Norway, a local radio station, and when Simon said his father was a pioneer, it sounded copernican tough. I also wanted to be a pioneer, a trailblazer, within some area or other. Are the words courier and pioneer related?

In the broadcasts Nathan prayed with a strong, fervent voice, and even though I didn't go to church, I liked to listen to Nathan Borg, perhaps because I knew him or because these heavy words – lovingkindness and forbearance and exoneration – appealed to my imagination; even more the Swedish words he wove in, Bob-words like *fönster*, *myra*, *glasögon* and *solfjäder* for window, ant, glasses and fan. And Nathan talked about God and answered questions from people who phoned in, and perhaps I didn't listen all that closely, but I got the impression that he was never in doubt, as his voice sounded firm and comforting when he answered people who told him about their problems or when he said that the time was ripe or that Jesus would soon come – and he often said that Jesus would soon come – and he used chunky sentences and words I didn't understand – disquieted and privily and exultation – and even the fact that species of butterfly had become extinct because the old cultural landscape had been ruined he took as evidence for his belief that the latter days had come, it was one of the many signs of Christ's second coming, he said to Simon and me once, and since his eyes were both sad and expectant, I was uncertain if they were expressing pessimism or optimism.

But none of this could stop Andreas disappearing. One evening he didn't come home as he usually did.

Can something bad happen to you when you live in a fairytale street, between the church and a fire station? And have a father called Nathan Borg?

The police started a search that same evening, and the following morning people in the neighbourhood fincombed the area. Mum and dad were also out searching, for they knew something about this (about A's that disappeared) and I went along with them and it was brutal, the whole whipped-up atmosphere was brutal, and at the same time it was Sunday with chiming church bells and powerless angels, and in my mind's eye I could see Andreas, dead, in various places, in various way. Nathan also took part, but his mother couldn't face it. Agate Borg sat there at home, out of her mind with fear. Or maybe she

played the piano, something from the Pentacostal Hymn Book, let the chords form a fervent prayer for she – more than anyone – knew how unsuspecting Andreas was, and everyone thought of the possibility but no one said it out loud: a man had passed by with a frightful, black net. Maybe place him in a killing jar. I could see Andreas, lying on a mounting board, his wings outstretched.

THERE IS A CERTAIN PLEASURE IN CRYING

To kidnap a child. Hit and run. You come out of nowhere, do something illegal and vanish. Like when Simon got me to run into a big kiosk way down town and grab a packet of chewing gum and rush out again – and the woman behind the counter didn't seem to even react before I was miles away, excited at how easy it had all been.

Strangely enough, we saw a film called Hit and Run a while after all that with Andreas. It was a January evening at the Frogner cinema and the film was bad, but I wasn't all that taken with the film because I had noticed the field of energy in the cinema the moment I sat down and it didn't take many seconds before I discovered her four rows further forward, but when the film was over and I had twenty opening lines ready, she had gone and we were just a noisy herd of youths drifting homewards along the snow-filled streets, and we took the short cut through Lille Frogner avenue, and when we had reached the narrow bit with the stone flight of steps in the middle, there was this bang bang bang, because the first one of us suddenly stopped and we all collided into each other's backs, and there she was, standing alone, leaning against the iron railings.

I hate feeling my body go numb and all my wits evaporate every time I'm standing in front of Mia. "Were you at the film, then?" A voice boldly from the middle of the herd. "Waiting for someone, then?" someone else said. "Santa Claus?" said a third in a piping voice. Mia just stood there leaning against the railings that divided the steps into two lanes. Not a word. Her lips a ruler-straight line. The fearless BB eyes with no messages. There was enough room to pass on either side, but it was as if she was blocking our path.

Only she could stand like that on a flight of steps, leaning against the railings. Plenty of schwing about her whole body, a flic-flac, obvious even in winter clothes. And her Peter Pan booties. She was wearing a little fur hat, but she could have worn anything at all – a cake tin, a paper bag – she would have been just as irresistible, and something happened to my blood pressure or heart rhythm or breathing, and I had to take a step forwards so as not to lose balance, and she was alone, and some of us began to say flippant things, and

some of us began to shove each other and some of us began to act big in the most bestial way, and all of us clustered together so all our fluff jackets squeaked real chaplin against each other. She stood there, just like that, in a little fur hat and caused utter chaos.

The others all suddenly seemed three to four years younger, but I was in possession of the W potency and full of ch'i. Admittedly, Mia was also horrid to me in the time leading up to Christmas and called me stupid and bloodsucker and idiot and things I didn't know. "You're base," she said during a break, and I had to go home and look it up, doubly humiliated.

But then, after Christmas, I noticed a change, and one day in the playground she said in passing: "I heard about that with Andreas. Hell, that was awful." Shiny eyes.

And now she was standing there, leaning against the railings, and while the others were floundering around and saying no-cortex things, I tried to catch her eye, but I didn't succeed, and we didn't get passed, she paralysed us, or seemed impenetrable, and of all things I began to think of Leonidas and the Persian army and even thought it was way off target, I knew what the reason was.

The Tuvalu incident opened my eyes to Ancient Greece, perhaps the most gobi of all our gobi teachers, I mean by that he's retired, but because of special circumstances he's still teaching part-time and he started to teach us history a couple of years ago. "I am an emeritus," he informed us, "and, as you know, emeritus is the term for a retired soldier in the Roman army." Just a comment like that was enough to send waves of laughter along the rows of desks. We are of course without mercy towards him. A gnome. An anachronism – and I know what that word means. He came into the classroom with cycle clips round his trousers. Cycle clips – well, I ask you! And he always took his jacket off, stood there and taught us in black trousers and a strikingly white, newly ironed shirt, as if he was in Hellas, on a Sunday. To have him was a pure holiday, and we dozed throughout the lesson while we drew talk bubbles with funny remarks on the illustrations in our textbooks or tipped our chairs backwards and mobbed him as perfidiously as we would (perfidious is a word I, paradoxically enough, have learnt from Ancient Greece), but he just pretended to ignore it and only on one occasion – when he was telling us about the 20th century for once, something about the Second World War – I saw that he had tears in his eyes, and since somebody laughed, he said "Est quaedam flere voluptas", and I knew what that meant: There is a certain pleasure in crying.

Rather than teach like the other teachers did, he stood in front of the maps and told stories, and he had glasses with thin metal frames and what I would call an outdoor face, full of wrinkles, as if he hadn't spent all his time reading, had stood at the helm of an open boat throughout a long life, and even though our syllabus was from 1814 onwards, he spent many lessons going through Antiquity with us, with special emphasis on the golden age of Greece, so that was naturally why we started to call him Ancient Greece.

I also found this amusing for a long time – a guy who stood there in black trousers and a sober white shirt telling us about Sparta and Athens and Themistocles and the Persian wars as if this was more important than anything else, and he never wavered, even when rubbers and bits of paper were flying round him, and suddenly – I can find no other reason for this than the Tuvalu incident – I started listening. Was this also my first hint of the ma-ma nature of existence? To be able to throw rubbers, mob, and listen at the same time? Some of the things he told us about we had already done in an earlier class, but he managed to make me see it in a new light, or it was a bit as if I already knew something of what he said but was completely dependent on it being mentioned before I understood that I knew it. I understood, for example, or believe at any rate that I understood, that these Persian wars in particular were crucial historic events, a huge clash between the peoples of the West and the East, and when he got to the Roman Empire, he always spiced his stories with Latin quotations, some of which he repeated so often that we almost learnt them against our will, and much of what he said made me start doubting the teaching we were presented with in the other lessons, or maybe it was more than I suddenly realised how arbitrary everything was and that it could quite certainly be explained in other ways.

During a lesson when I was trying to draw his hands in the position he liked to hold them in while he was talking – outstretched and towards each other, formed like a bowl – I found myself enjoying his stream of words, as if the stories were just as important or nutritious as the packed lunch with goat's cheese and salami I ate in the open air, or Mrs Borg's Bhutan sandwiches, and the map behind him didn't only show Europe but an area where treasures of knowledge lay buried, and I secretly began to look forward to his lessons.

"Sure to be a right sod," Simon said. "A paedophile like all the old men in ancient Greece."

I have noticed one thing in particular: As an introduction to

the story of Pericles, he said that Greece in the 4th century BC was a miracle. This entire era, the emergence of democracy and a profoundly thought-out culture was an incomprehensible 'pocket' in the world's development, he claimed. After that lesson, I wondered if maybe I myself am in such a pocket now, in my own life. Something incomprehensible and unique. I think: In that case I must be on my guard, bloody well keep abreast of things.

So it was thanks to my almost mobbed-to-death teacher that I stood in front of Mia on that narrow path and glimpsed a special connection to King Leonidas and his few Spartans who stopped the Persians in front of the narrow passage at Thermopylae, but the association was ruined when Mia turned and showed her profile, and as if at the signal from a traffic policeman the others started to saunter slowly down the flight of steps, making amoeba-like jokes they hoped she would overhear.

What now? Four seconds and four possible choices. I could come up with a Walker-like smart-ass sentence about the importance of Lech Walesa getting the Nobel peace prize last year, an invitation to an exchange of opinions that at the same time would get me to realise that Mia was a waste of time, a lost cause; or I could walk straight past her, without glancing in her direction, carry on until I came to USA where I would work my way up from a shoeshine boy to the richest man in the world only to die unhappy with Mia's name on my lips; or I could spin on my heel and go off in the opposite direction, become a missionary in China and turn world history upside down (and die unhappy, etc.); or I could take five steps forward and put my arms round her, not say a word, but twine myself round her until we formed a double helix. Instead of which, I stood stock-still, noticing the almost intolerable openness of the situation, for I was at a crossroads and on all the signposts it said ma and ma and ma and ma, and not even my Watson gaze could help me choose between the diametrically opposed meanings of the ma's.

I would rather go for a fifth option, for if all the others disappeared, she might perhaps walk home with me. Perhaps. For that was how she was – first snub after snub, and then: a smile, a little encouragement, so that I could put up with new insults for several months. So I hung back, and when Simon cast a backward glance, I signalled to him that he was to go one, and he grinned, but he took the hint, and without a single word of abuse, for Simon often said that Mia had an all-rubber cunt, not that I knew what he meant by that except that it must be something of a babylonian attraction in his universe.

I have gradually learnt a thing or two about Mia. Her real name is Miranda, Miranda Enersen, and it was probably her who early on started to use Mia. In primary school we sometimes called her Mia Miaouw Miaouw, certainly because she was as unpredictable as a cat. Her parents are divorced, and she has just moved to Josefines gate, to a father who clearly isn't short of money, and I see him waiting from time to time in his Mercedes Geländewagen – the dent's gone again – outside the school, and if Mia's late, he sits there leafing through something Simon calls a Time Manager, and Simon claims they drive down to the brand-new Café Check Mate where they guzzle something called cappuccino.

Cruddy Beluga! said Simon and held his nose.

As if this wasn't weird enough, Mia also has a punker in the family, a formidable elder sister who years back started going around with carrot-dyed hair and things dangling from her leather jacket and a red-check skirt and black, tall, army-like boots that could kick open the doors of vaults. She's been arrested by the police on several occasions, including the time when she was one of those occupying a house down in Skippergata, and even though Mia protests against her sister by dressing in pastel-shade clothes from BikBok and Poco Loco, I sense that this punker potential is in her too – at any rate she's got the same aggression for once I saw Mia's sister tear a strip of some old ladies in Bogstadveien: "What are you staring at, you old cows! Never seen a safety pin before!" It was just like hearing Mia. Mia Sexy Rotten.

Now that we were alone on the steps, I fixed my gaze on that painfully becoming fur hat and got ready to comment on the lousy film, apart from the fact that my insight into the ma-ma nature of things made me suspect that even Hit and Run at a certain level was innovatively good, and since I hesitated in serving a brilliant ice-breaker line, he stamped the snow of her Peter Pan booties instead and started walking towards me, and she seemed really soft, was all fur and Mia Miaouw Miaouw, and I thought for a hallucinatory moment that she was going to embrace me, that something had come over her, a revelation that I was Mister Right, but she just wanted to get past.

I stood there irresolute, blocking the path. "Out the way," she said. Or rather snarled. It was impossible for me to stir my stumps. "Stop looking at me with those sheep's eyes!" she said, suddenly looking like her punker sister. "Out the way, twit." And since I was standing there like a single-cell organism, she repeated it extra-

clearly: “T.w.i.t.”

Then she was past me. I stood there my heart pounding, sucking in the air where she had stood and watching her springy steps carrying her flic-flac body back towards Frognerveien. She hardly had any business in that direction, but evidently would rather make a long detour than walk alongside a t.w.i.t.

Despite this, something was different, for even though I was standing there with a stitch just as physical as if a doctor had sewn it into my skin, another feeling was part of it too: happiness. I was crushed, and I was drunk with joy, and I had no trouble keeping both emotions in my consciousness at the same time. Est quaedam flere voluptas.

On the way home I was already beginning to formulate how I could write all this, and it's Ancient Greece's fault that I am writing and it's Ancient Greece's fault that I'm trying to put it down as a kind of story, for in a lesson after he had read for a change from Herodotes about how the Persian army leader Mardonios was killed in the battle of Plataiai, he said that we ought to start to write, and while the others were lying like dead Persians over their desks, I found myself listening, and not just listening but hanging on every word, and I thought that this was meant for my ears and that this was something Ancient Greece said because he saw that I was following his lessons. “Imagination, my dear pupils, is man's most important asset,” he said. “Why? Because understanding presupposes imagination,” he said. “And nothing trains the imagination better than listening or reading or writing stories,” he said, and for a moment he reminded me of Nathan, for his language was powerful and insistent as if it had been taken from a holy book and it sank into me. “No stories are stronger than the ones you are experiencing now,” Ancient Greece said. “Write them down, otherwise you'll forget them,” he said. “Our brains are created to be able to remember stories,” he said. “Write diaries, call them what you will. Tell stories to yourself, and shape them as stories” – he held up the Herodotes book – “it's easier like that.”

I started to write after that lesson last autumn, and first of all I wrote about the meeting with Mia in Skovveien, up at the school, and I know it sounds chaplin, but I think of being my own classical Greece, a copernican liberation and expansion of thought, and that I can draw on all this later on. Suddenly I might be out of this miraculous pocket and back in barbarism. Or go down by sleeping sickness.

I started by calling it drafts and I liked the word because it reminded me of drawing and got me to see the stories as sketches,

something unfinished that nevertheless captured something essential, though now I call it records, for everything I write about Mia at any rate would fit a case record. And yet: Nihil impossibile arbitror.

*Dear Lady Oracle,
Can you tell me how to make an impression on a girl who's 'got
everything'?
It will soon be her birthday, and I would like to buy her a present that's a
bit out of the ordinary.
Yours,
Lovesick*

*Dear Lovesick,
You must use your imagination and buy something original – maybe just
a bit reckless. If I was you, I would think about giving her a leopard-skin
pillbox hat that costs ten thousand kroner. That will do the trick.
Best regards,
Lady Oracle*

EVERYBODY'S GOT A HUNGRY HEART

Andreas disappeared on a Saturday in late November, and on that silent and heavy and infernally miserable Sunday many people in the neighbourhood went round looking for him. I did too, and I thought that because of my Walker-like acuteness I must be able to listen my way to where he was, but it didn't work like that, and I have often sat in class with the feeling of possessing a new ability and have sent telepathic telegrams in the direction of Mia's classroom: WILL YOU COME HOME WITH ME AFTER SCHOOL STOP I HAVE SOMETHING I WANT TO SHOW YOU STOP. Nothing happens, of course. But on this misty and cold and monstrous Sunday in November I still dreamed even so that I, thanks to my Watson gaze, would be able to discover Andreas inside a window or tied up in a car or sleeping in a gateway, though in many ways I hoped I wouldn't find him, at any rate not injured, or even worse: dead. Better to live in hope.

Nathan was out of his mind with worry, but furious too, and I was standing quite close when he raged at the police for doing so disgracefully little, for Nathan Borg is a temperamental man, and I'll never forget the summer day we were all in front of the TV screen, us four 'lads' as Nathan used to say, to see Björn Borg win his sixth Wimbledon title, but it didn't turn out like that, for that year his new arch-rival John McEnroe won, a figure that to Mr Borg seemed to represent the Beast he so often talked about on the radio, and Nathan had to get up and breathe in and out deeply when McEnroe argued with the umpire about a ball that had been called out or when he hit his mean volleys at the more stationary Swede, and after the match, when the TV only just avoided being flung into the container outside, Andreas asked for a few kroner for an ice cream, but instead he was given a sock round the ear, a clip that sounded like a whipcrack in the room, delivered with a precise backhand, and I thought that Nathan

ought rather to have a punchbag handy, like mum.

Even when the other, the adults, went it for a Sunday dinner that probably tasted awful, I kept on looking for Andreas, for I had become used to walking around the town after the incident on the Slottsplassen, to carry out what I called holoholo expeditions, when I put on a rucksack and just set out, almost at random, for I am the Walker brothers and I draw hands and I interview people and I put in safety pins and I collect hippocampus thoughts and I can stop up at unusual street lamps or special drainpipes from the roofs or a fine wrought-iron fence or a display window that is so artistically done that it seem to contain an important message, and at the same time the strangest word combinations can float up into my consciousness, expressions like “the ability to sublimate” and “beyond good and evil” and “natural selection” and “the banality of evil”, and I do not understand what it is, just that it seems to exist at some level or other and that it now rises up in me as potential, ready for use.

On my walks I always wear the blue Chinese coat and a thick sweater underneath if it's cold and in the winter now a palladio black and white scarf as well, just like the one Bob wears on one of his covers, and thanks to the large pockets I'm equipped for a journey to the world's end, and I set off with the Tuvalu coin and the tin of safety pins and the sketch book and the cabinet maker's pencil and the Swiss Army knife and the dictaphone , and in the bag I've got the Book of the Sea and a bottle of water and a packet of Gjende biscuits, but nothing of all this helped me on that grey and babylonian despondent Sunday afternoon in late November when I, full of jellyfish thoughts trawled the eastern districts of Majorstua, and only a few weeks had passed since I had been sitting together with Andreas in the window alcove at the Borgs' playing with paper aeroplanes – he'd come with a stack of paper, and was full of open-mouthed admiration when I taught him how to fold, as if changing a rectangular piece of paper into a graceful glider made me the world's greatest origami master, and I suddenly know what origami is without knowing why I know it, and Andreas watched how wonderfully the planes sailed away when we sent them out the window, and suddenly he said, with those very serious eyes of his: “Can you fold me so I've got wings? So I can fly?”

I remembered that Andreas had said several times that he wanted to be an angel. And the reason: Because then he could fly.

Not until too late did I look more closely at the other side of the sheets and discover that they were Nathan's sermon, perhaps

something he was going to use that same evening, and we ran down into the street and collected the planes and smoothed them out again and placed them back in the drawer of his writing desk, and I tried to tell Andreas off, but he just laughed and the keys round his neck jangled, and I don't know what Nathan thought when he saw the creases, or maybe he was simply glad because he felt that now his words had wings.

I started to trudge home from Majorstua, checked gateways into front yards and studied half torn-off ads on the columns, as if I hoped to discover something unexpected, something that could draw my thoughts out of a familiar pattern, put me on the trail of a missing boy, a little chap who was so fascinated with everything that could change. And where in the all the galaxies was he now? Had he been tempted by some stunted being who wanted to change him completely? I shuffled along the pavements and didn't feel good, even though I was in Sorgenfrigata, carefree street, and I was tormented with despair, for this is something else that's new after the Tuvalu incident, I feel things much more strongly, such as this sympathy to the point of desperation for a little far too curious little lad, and before I got home I had to sit down on the long flight of steps that goes from St. Dominikus church up to Ole Fladagers gate, and I drank a little water and ate a Gjende biscuit and took out the Book of the Sea and opened it right at 'Ocean currents' and the first thing my eye fell on was a passage about wrecked ship that drifted around and that were reported by other ships, which resulting in new knowledge about the ocean currents, and I stayed with that thought for a while and I thought about Andreas and I thought of the currents in a city and even more about the treacherous undercurrents in a city, about forces that could pull you down and let you come to the surface somewhere a long way away.

What thoughts were running through Andreas' head now? If he was alive? I sat with a view of the small Catholic church and was annoyed with myself because I could usually answer things, and I had even been Gudrun's secretary, and recently I've been helping her more than usual because she's working so hard on her ships. For Gudrun's got this column in a weekly magazine for young people where a female friend of hers is editor. So Gudrun answers readers' letters, and it's letters with questions about love and things like that which aren't so simple, and when she's in good form, Gudrun is as nifty on her keyboard as Mrs Borg is on hers when she plays Chopin's Prelude No. 3. After dad, Gudrun's probably the cleverest person I

know, and I like being at her place and the flat feels like a really good zijincheng since there are lots of rooms there that I've never been in. There are plaits of garlic hanging in the kitchen and in the windows there are pots with herbs and on the bench there are always fresh tomatoes and avocado and paprika, and at the end of a work session we often just sit opposite each other talking, quite often with a slice of pizza each, and we've prepared the pizza earlier in the evening, for pizza is artists' food, Gudrun says, and then I have to answer yes, because the Earth's flat, but I know what she means for we often spread the filling out over the round flat circle of pastry, the sauce and the cheese, mushrooms, artichoke hearts, strips of beef, red onion and green paprika, as if we are painters experimenting with our palette, and Gudrun has two deep, low leather upholstered armchairs, and the hide is full of scratches, as if a tiger had been savaging them, and when we sit there opposite each other, she talks to me as if I was an equal, or as if she needs me – "my muse", as she calls me. "You've got something I've lost," she always repeats, and I've no idea what that is.

I've no qualifications for being able to answer the letters to that column, although it's mainly boys who write in, but Gudrun says that I mustn't underestimate myself and that I will soon be an adult, and to begin with I did it because I was fascinated by her computer and wanted to try out the keyboard and see the yellow signs line up after each other like small sparks on the black screen. I wrote slowly, and I liked that, and because of the W potency I can always come up with something to write, even though it's short, and Gudrun's really chuffed and asks me where I get it all from, "You're a love genius," she says, but if only she knew, and I haven't said a dicky bird about Mia, I suspect Mia might think I'm a couple of inches short of being a love genius, she'd probably view me more as a hormone-stiff tom-cat out in the dark wailing his Miiiaaouw!

Gudrun is the only person I know who's got a data processing machine, and trying it out has made me interested in computers, for it's more fun learning commands in Word Perfect than playing around with an Atari or a Commodore, and I tear out things I can find in newspapers and magazines, everything about operative systems and programming languages and assignments people think these machines can be used for, and maybe inspired by dad's logbook I paste it onto sheets of paper that I put in a ring binder, and I imagine this will equip me for the future, and on the back of the binder I've written 'Fiat lux', as a gesture to our old teacher and his strong

preference for Latin.

I've been a lot up at Gudrun's writing on the computer recently, while she's working in the workshop, or the shipyard as she refers to it, and I like to follow things on the screen, for it's as if I'm writing in fire on a black board, and I feel almost all-powerful, and when Gudrun reads my answers she sometimes gets so livened up that she puts a record on and dances, for music seems to inspire her, and sometimes she catches hold of me by the arms and heaves me out onto the floor and shouts Ooohooo! with her eyes, perhaps because we're in the middle of a sound firework display, but as a rule she dances alone and she really lets herself go, and I secretly look at her springy thighs, and I can't help thinking about her pubococcygeus muscle, and I'm both a bit shameful and bewitched at the way she moves her body to the rhythm and the trance she seems to glide into, and she always goes for the same records, Bruce Springsteen, "my source stone", as she says, and right now she's clearly inspired by the album called The River, and sometime she plays the track with the refrain line "Everybody's got a hungry heart" ten times in a row, and it fits pretty well with the book mum told me about that Gudrun's double, Carson McCullers, wrote, The Heart Is A Lonely Hunter, and basically it fits pretty well as a description of my own thudding heart right now.

TAPED INTERVIEW NO. 4

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To be honest I first felt like asking you to clear off. Here I am sitting on my own considering our new national shrine, and along comes a tiresome sod and asks about something so completely bloody impossible and [lorry engine, voices shouting]. But then this strange memory popped up. Here, take a seat. What's your opinion about the marvel?

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Well, with a mother who's an architect you ought to have more reason to be taken aback by this enigmatic structure. Looks like the beginning of a pyramid, doesn't it?

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It happened a long while ago, I'd almost forgotten it. Or rather, repressed it. It's got to do with my uncle, a bit of a loner. No kids, of course. Rumour had it that he had some deep secret. Worth millions. Or more. Mind-boggling sums. Dad told us about it. We were four brothers. You'd be hard put to find four more unlike each other. Got any brothers?

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Not bad. The Walker Brothers, I like that. You've plenty of imagination, lad, you'll appreciate this story. Take a look at those walls... Pretty good, eh? I've heard that the whole caboodle's going to cost between three and four billion kroner! Would you believe it! And then they try with all the tricks of the trade to camouflage the precious object among these ancient shacks. You can't see the bloody thing! A house for our anti-hero Askeladden, isn't it! A hidden treasure chamber. And right in the whore's district. Great. But my

uncle. We didn't have much to do with him. A bit sort of taboo. He was on the Eastern Front during the war. So you're in a bad position. This country didn't do a blind thing during the war. Just sat there quaking and hoping for the best. Apart from the seamen of course. And those who blew up some bridges when they saw what way the wind was blowing. But, bloody hell, we wanted our revenge afterwards! Good grief! God help the girl who'd winked at a German. Then there was no lack of action. Bloody hell, enough to make you spit. Not to say I want to defend my uncle going off to the Eastern Front and fighting for the Germans. I don't know, I think he mainly did it out of defiance. As I said, an odd bastard all his life.

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Yes, a secret. People tried to pump him. My dad too. As time passed, this rumour grew up. Ever heard of the Amber Chamber?

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Thought not. A whole room full of heavy panels full of amber and gold. Built at the turn of the 18th century in Prussia, but soon dismantled and sent as a gift to Russia, where it ended up in the Catherine Palace outside St. Petersburg. People called it the eighth wonder of the world and things like that. Would you believe it? Six tons of amber! But then the Second World War came along, and the Russians didn't manage to dismantle it and hide it out the way before the Germans were right on their doorstep. So the Germans were suddenly left holding this fairytale treasure again. But then the fortunes of war changed, and with the Russians at their necks, the Germans packed the whole lot into 27 heavy boxes and cleared out at the last moment. Good bloody grief! It's said it was hidden for a while in what was then Königsberg. But after the war, no one's seen the slightest glimpse of it. Take a look at that nitwit there, the ponce in the suit and blue helmet. Going to inspect something inside the new bank building. Do you think they still have any gold in the vault there?

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Well, the rumour was that my uncle knew where the Amber Chamber was. Where it was stashed away. I don't know how this got out. He drank quite a bit of course after serving his time for the war adventure out east. Maybe he let it out by mistake when he was drunk, who knows? Anyway, dad told us this story before he died. During the last days of the war my uncle apparently met this German

who claimed he'd been one of the six who drive the amber treasure in three lorries from Königsberg to a new hiding place. It was their commander who was responsible for finding a suitable place, he was to report back afterwards. On the way back the small convoy was bombed by Russian planes. Everyone was killed except one, the soldier my uncle met. Would you believe it? Since he was the only one who knew where the treasure was hidden, he thought it was better to share the secret with someone else, in case anything should happen. He was prophetic. The day after, he was shot in a skirmish, but my uncle managed to escape.

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Why tell anyone? Maybe it gave a kick to go round knowing it. As well as to know that a hell of a lot of people were searching for the Amber Chamber after the war, both Russians and Germans. A bloody loner, right? But then he died. And we four brothers, the only relations, were called in to this lawyer. Uncle had written a will. Ever experienced someone estate being divided up?

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You don't doubt man's in-born devilry after such a seance, at any rate. Good-bloody-grief! The Second World War all over again. Uncle didn't have all that much, but the will divided up his property and effects in quite a cunning way. You should have seen the snide looks we sent each other. Everybody was dissatisfied with everything. Yes, me too. Then, finally, the lawyer took out an envelope. All four of us knew what it was. Uncle's secret. A letter that contained information about where the Amber Chamber was. A piece of information worth countless millions. The lawyer read out from the will and said that I was to have this letter. Would you believe it?

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Right. If looks could kill, and so on. I remember how certain I felt. There was no plan. To begin with I was giddy with excitement, but a second later, without looking my three brothers in the face, I knew what I had to do. I calmly picked up my lighter and set fire to the letter, let it burn while holding onto it before throwing it into the ashtray and making sure no one put it out. I'm strong.

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No, I've never regretted it. Never. Do you smoke? Good, don't

start either. [Click from a lighter.] Look, there comes that conceited ponce out again. Looks pretty pleased with himself, maybe he's found a directors' bog for them they can blow a couple of million extra on. We never build anything impressive in this country, and when we finally build something, it's a like a money bin. Jesus Geronimo Christ! I wouldn't mourn for a second if someone planted a bomb under the whole crapheap.

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A safety pin? Haha, I don't think it'll help, but you can always try. You're sohelpme a bit of a nutter, you are.

LESS IS MORE

Earlier I was more taken up with dad and dad's wisdom. Now I'm just as taken up with mum and everything she knows, about Carson McCullers for instance, or perhaps I ought to say that I've got more curious about mum, like the fact she sometimes only says half-sentences or I only know they are half-sentences when the second half comes. "He could have been a film star," she often said about Nathan Borg and a long time passed before I heard the rest and I didn't understand it before all this with Andreas. Something tells me I don't know more than the half about mum, either.

"Your mum's dangerously dishy," Simon says, "you'd better be careful. Do you know that Aga Khan's been flirting with her?"

The more I write, the more I realise how necessary it is to look through certain periods again and when it comes to mum I think of a day we were leaving the city centre, from Karl Johans gate, and we sat down on a bench under the tree-tops in Slottsparken, we always sat down on a bench in Slottsparken if the weather was nice, and that was the autumn they'd begun to pull down a whole row of houses in the main street, those that faced Studenterlunden, and mum took out a bag of buns we'd bought at Samson's cake shop on Egertorget square while she was still talking enthusiastically about the new buildings that were going to have copies of the old facades.

My curiosity had increased after the visit we paid up at Vettakollen, in those roads that seemed to belong to another part of our solar system and I hadn't just begun to take more notice of houses but of mum as well and in time I came to see more of the houses she'd designed, for she never tired of looking at electric switches and shelves and doorways and bells and fittings and window sills, or she could stop up in front of a door and say that the difference lay in the spaces between the spaces and she could wink at me as she said it

as if it was a secret just between the two of us.

Sometimes I got mum to sit down with me in the sofa and leaf through books I found on the shelves and mum had lots of books and that day we sat enjoying the palladio autumn weather in Slottsparken, we'd also looked in at Tanum bookshop as usual, which that year had to move out into barracks as tall as the National Theatre, for mum always had to go in and see if anything new about architecture had come in, so that was why we could sit in the sofa and leaf through books that showed buildings by Frank Lloyd Wright and Adolf Loos and Eileen Gray and Alvar Aalto and Kenzo Tange and Luis Barragán, and for me these were sounds on a par with dad's Shang, Zhou, Qin, Han, Sui, Tang, Song, Ming, Qing, a sound like that of huge bronze bells, and mum was most interested in their houses and she pointed and said what she liked and what she didn't like and she explained to me the not completely obvious difference between Eileen Gray's villa E-1027 and Le Corbusier's Villa Savoye and she explained how many ways you could build something so simple as a single-family dwelling and I liked her explanations and her examples, and her nice smell and her hands when she gesticulated and I often wished she would never stop talking.

But had she never thought about designing anything bigger? I asked on the day we were sitting under the tree-tops in Slottsparken. A skyscraper or a museum or something like that?

She laughed and said that houses were big enough. And could anything be more important than a house one was going to live in?

But what about the new SAS hotel? I wanted to know, for the towering building was only seven years old, and mum had pointed to the black facade as we walked up Slottsbakken.

"I've got nothing against tall buildings," she said. "Remember I've lived for many years in New York, in Manhattan."

At that moment she was smiled at by a distinguished-looking man passing us and she smiled back. I took a quick look at her. Black turtleneck sweater under a thick black autumn coat. Simon wasn't completely off the ball, I'd also noticed that mum was what people call an attractive woman, she always dresses elegantly and she's good with make-up, and while I'm writing this I feel uneasy again when I think of mum and dad. Before, everything was fallingwater. Now I'm not sure. After beginning to answer these letters for Gudrun I've become more observant and I remember that Sunday evening I didn't only ask myself if something was wrong at home but I knew it: something was wrong and it probably had something to do with

Andreas, for he'd been gone for over a day then, and I was tossing up theories about where he could be and it was as if my anxiety became contagious and took over my own living room and created a fear that mum or dad could suddenly disappear.

Ancient Greece is right. It's important to write things down – I've discovered how fast you forget things, and I've almost completely forgotten the stories dad told me at my bedside when I was small, about Admiral Zheng He for example, who sailed the seven seas, even before the Europeans found the sea route to India, and I've almost completely forgotten how often mum and dad used to hug each other when I was a child, that they even hugged each other, at least once in a while, as recently as the autumn mum and I sat in Slottsparken, and the other evening when I was lying in the living room, it struck me that I was lying in the sofa that mum and dad always used to occupy, specially after dinner. They read the paper or talked together or both and laughed a lot and I could hear them talk about all sorts of things or play music for each other, specially Simon & Garfunkel, and it seemed the whole time as if one of them was amazed or surprised at what the other one said, and they often lay there intertwined, and I noticed how they constantly touched each other and how dad's hand stroked mum's thigh, or the other way round.

Mum & Dad.

One of the things I like best about James Watson's book about the double helix is that more than talk about what creativity is – linking two things, two bases, two helixes – it demonstrates the strength of being two, for it took two of them to solve such a difficult problem as the structure of the DNA molecule. Watson & Crick. Simon & Garfunkel. Mia & me. Life = two.

We often went for rides in the car in those early years, in a Volkswagen, a 'Boble', and dad insisted he bought the car because his name was VidarWalaker and this meant he got his monogram for free on the bonnet, a V on top of a W, and the day he founded his own religion, he could use it as a symbol of unity, he joked, and even though I'm a tad embarrassed now that we haven't got a bigger car, not least when we collided with Mia's dad, I thought it was great to sit in it when I was small, specially when it rained, for then the Boble became a bathysphere on its way down to the ocean depths, or a capsule somewhere in outer space, both a trieste and an apollo, and we drove out to Ulvøya or to Hvalstrand or to Baafarveværket or to Jeløya, and it was just like in the reader: Dad drives. Mum talks. Odd

Marius laughs. We hurtled around Østlandet in a tiny bubble with dad's monogram on the bonnet, and there were just the three of us, and we were inside a protected bubble, and everything was palladio.

On Saturdays or Sundays we could also go for walks together and mum called dad 'my Malboro man', because apart from those khaki clothes and the pilot's jacket he also wore in autumn and spring such a long beige coat of waxed canvas, and we often took a walk out to Frognerparken and stopped off at the inn there, Herregårdskroa, where mum and dad shared a bottle of white wine and I drank Solo and ate cake and we knew which table had the most sun and the best view of the waterfall below the bridge and where the river started where Ragnar Tangen claimed he had seen a ten-kilo killer pike and perhaps because of the yellow walls there everything has got this golden gleam in my memory, and the same applies to the visits to Moltemyra when this place with pavement tables started up between Karl Johan gate and the National Theatre, for it was a joy to sit under those yellow parasols and eat a huge ice cream dessert while mum and dad sat close by me and drank out of tall beer glasses, that was if we didn't stroll over to the outdoor service place at St. Hanshaugen or out to Rodeløkken, the place with waffles on Bygdøy, or take the nice walk on the other side, along the lake through the pine wood all the way to the café on Huk, and there was me between Vidar & Nina, me in a crossfire of good-humoured conversation, and everything was so golden and everything was so bright and I didn't think about it, I took it as something that was self-evident and something that could never come to an end and only now do I remember how dad used to touch mum and that he still smelt her hair or her neck as if herbs grew there, and only now when all this has stopped and I'm trying to write it down do I remember it.

Mum once showed me a house in a book that lay close to a small waterfall and it had been built of various materials and also consisted of parts that pointed in different directions and seemed almost to hang in thin air, and the name of the villa was Fallingwater. That's what a love relationship ought to be like, mum said. Conflicting elements but in perfect balance. And close to a running source. I thought that the whole of life should be like that, that the whole of life should be one big fallingwater.

Now there's something wrong. There's something that's not right about a mum and a dad in their separate rooms. A dad in an armchair, on his way into the depths. A mum in the sofa, weightless in front of the TV screen. Dad collecting depths and mum collecting dreams,

and neither of them puts on 'Mrs Robinson' in the living room any longer. Dad fills his room with jazz and mum hers with chamber music. "Three or four instruments show you the architecture much more clearly than a symphony," she once said and I thought: like a house as opposed to a skyscraper. At the same time there's something restless about her, and I noticed it already when we were sitting on the bench in Slottsparken and she began to talk about Manhattan. She had mentioned it before, but I hadn't listened, but now she was an architect-mum as well, and I was mature enough to hear more. "You went to school there, didn't you?" I had seen a photo of her from that period, strangely young and in weird clothes and against a background of sky-tall buildings.

"I studied architecture at a university called Columbia."

"Like Blindern here in Oslo?"

"A bit like Blindern. But more elegant. Older, more impressive buildings. More ivy climbing up the walls, if you know what I mean. And most important of all: with students from lots and lots of nations."

"So you've got friends abroad?"

"Yes, I have. Still write to several of them."

I had seen that, specially around Christmas lots of envelopes came with exciting stamps on them. And Simon had misunderstood one of mum's humorous remarks. It wasn't the Aga Khan who had flirted with her, it was Louis Kahn, the architect.

"For a long time I also wanted to design buildings that were characterised by a new style," mum said, "a style that all countries could share. Steel and lots of glass. Simple, pure lines. And that included skyscrapers, solid office buildings. As a young architect I was all in favour of the highrise buildings being planned along Karl Johans gate. That was why I got so eager when I saw they'd pulled down these old houses now." She laughed, as if feeling ashamed, and muttered something about resembling the aggressive male architects, testosterone-stiff, and there was that word again, and I felt like banging her on the shoulder again, and I don't know why, maybe because I refused to accept that hormones should be used as an excuse – at any rate not when trying to explain something that was so terribly complicated, like tall houses. All in all this was anticipating something I've repeatedly experienced after my awakening, or whatever I should call it: a desire to protect against all traditional models and gobi theories.

"I thought you only designed houses," I said after my irritation had died down.

Mum got this mischievous, almost teasing expression on her face and told me something I didn't know before. When she came home from USA, she started an office together with some other young architects. They took part in competitions for large, prestigious projects but never won anything, and they wrote articles in the papers that we soon ought to build a new opera house, and they spent so much time on these competitions and all that writing that they eventually had to shut down the office. She laughed.

"Wasn't that a bit stupid?"

"Oh yes, it was a bit stupid as well."

"Was it then you began to design small houses?"

"Not small houses. Single-family dwellings. And I'm good at designing houses."

When I think about it now, I'd be surprised if there was anything seriously wrong at home, for mum's right, she's good at designing houses, and not least she's ottoman brilliant at dealing with all the complications in connection with the building process. Mum's a Mikado artist. If there are problems between her and dad, she'll sort it out.

"Are you sorry you never got to design a skyscraper?" I asked when we were sitting under the tree-tops in Slottsparken.

She smiled once more and gave me another bun, as if it was a prize for a good question, even though it was hardly a cardinal question. "No, I'm not sorry. But it is a bit strange. All those years in Manhattan, and then I end up most interested in the Norwegian wooden house tradition. That's how it is," she said. "Sometimes you have to make a big detour. Or adapt."

