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Tore Renberg:

Charlotte Isabel Hansen

(Pages 17-25)

What does the world want with one more child? Is there a need for another naive, contented, blonde worry, who will be curious to know how far away the moon is or who will rack its delicate brains about whether flowers can cry and who the person is who picks leaves off trees in autumn?

Four weeks before the quietest day of 1997 Jarle came home from an exhausting discussion hour in which he had tried to get a group of first year students to understand the difference between signifié and signifiant as opposed to sign and referent. The fact that the chicken-like freshers were unable even to grasp the simplest elements of modern semiotics, a thorough knowledge of which was an essential prerequisite for any understanding of recent literary theory, irritated Jarle, and he was still annoyed as he opened the letter that was to change his life. When you receive a letter from the police it is natural to wonder why, and to Jarle, who always went around with a bad conscience and a fundamental feeling that he had done something wrong, or a terrible premonition that he was going to do something wrong, getting such a letter was downright terrifying. His nervous fingers were afire when he saw his name on a letter from the police department,

and he ran upstairs to his apartment as though hotly pursued, locked himself in and sat at the kitchen table where he placed the letter.

He walked around the kitchen table three times.

He picked it up, held it in his hands on that August day on which a short time before he had said aloud, almost angrily: "signifiant and signifié have an exclusively semiological relationship. You have to get that into your heads. If you can't, don't even think about even trying to approach the tiniest article by Derrida or Genette or Paul de Man!" The letter from the police. To him. To Jarle Klepp. He ransacked his brain for something he might have done wrong. Was it illegal to have intercourse in the open air?

Had someone, an elderly lady perhaps, seen him standing in Nygård Park one late July evening, his trousers around his ankles, his hands on both of Herdis Snartemo's hips, who for her part had her outstretched hands around the tree trunk, her neck bent forward, her back straightened, her hair cascading down over her head as she said: "Come to me, Master of Delights, come! Be! My! Guest!" Had an elderly lady seen Jarle entering this battleship of a woman? Had an elderly lady walking her dog that evening seen him, proud and happy, boarding the vessel that was the abundant lower regions of Herdis Snartemo, and found the whole thing so disgusting and base that she had sent a letter to the police accusing him of disturbing the peace?

Or was the problem a domestic dispute?

Had the neighbour, the woman next door with the protruding tortoise eyes with whom he had never exchanged anything more than a few short pleasantries, reported him for domestic violence and disturbing the peace after things had got out of hand at the party he had held at the beginning of August when no one had wanted to stop drinking before daylight? Had she seen him?

Jarle nervously breathed in and out.

He sat by the kitchen table and opened the letter.

Jarle read and gaped in amazement.

What?

Was it possible?

He dropped the letter, picked it up again straightaway and re-read it.

Was that really possible?

A child?

A little child?

Did he, Jarle Klepp, have a child?

Was he, Jarle Klepp, a father?

To a child?

Subsequent to information received by the police from one Anette Hansen, he was summoned to submit to a DNA test in order to ascertain whether he was the father.

Anette Hansen?

And this *child* would soon be seven years old, a seven-year-old girl, and he was supposed to be the father.

No. No. He was sweating, he blinked, his mouth went dry. No, that could not be right. Jarle rose from the kitchen table, walked around it three times with the letter in his hand, bent forward momentarily under the tap over the sink, turned it on and drank the water, then went to sit back down. OK. Easy now. Take it easy now. First of all, it's quite impossible. That has to be the starting point in this matter. Someone has made a mistake. It simply cannot be true. Take it easy now. *Seven years ago?* No. No. Could he have made someone pregnant *seven years ago?* In – when would that be – back in – yes – 1990?

Anette Hansen?

Who the hell is *Anette Hansen?*

Absolutely impossible. Not a chance.

He scrutinised the letter for the third time shaking his head, insulted but self-assured. No. Never. This child, and this, from what he could see, unhappy, psychotic mother had lived in Skien, according to the letter. Laughable. Skien? He had never even been to *Skien!* What the hell would he have been doing in *Skien!* And now this mother had seen fit to *fabricate* a father for her child who – sorry about that! – was supposed to be *him?*

Somewhere you have to draw the line. And it's right here, he thought. Society has gone seriously awry if anyone can just foist a child on a perfect stranger and demand that they call you "pappa". Where's the sense of propriety? Jarle thought,

shaking his head. Where's the stability? What sort of splintered society is this? This is where you draw the line, he thought for the second time in the space of a few minutes. This is where I draw the line for getting mixed up in things which have nothing to do with me. And how would he go about clearing his name against these accusations made by this Anette Hansen?

Anette Hansen.

What a name. It sounded almost made up, that was what he reckoned.

Christ almighty.

Anette Hansen.

Of all the common names people went around calling themselves: Anette Hansen? Jarle stopped. The letter slipped from between his fingers and he watched his right hand begin to tremble.

ANETTE HANSEN!

His throat swelled, he felt the vomit rising and he threw up all over the sink.

ANETTE HANSEN!

Timid little Anette Hansen?

Jarle walked to and fro across the living room floor. 1990? Was that possible? He gulped, put his head in his hand and paced the floor. If this were really true – if so little was required – then – then – yes, then – Jarle opened the veranda door and took a deep breath. Jesus Christ! He couldn't remember a thing about it! She was only in the ninth class! She was in mid-puberty! Or perhaps at the latter end?

It had been a monster of a party. Year before the last at senior high, must have been. Yes, penultimate year. Party at the house of some arrivistes in one of the opulent detached houses on one of the so-called 'town islands' outside Stavanger. The concert with his band had been disastrous and together with his pals he had gone to the party and knocked back as much alcohol and soft drugs as he could and large parts of the night were one black crater in his memory. Anette Hansen. My God. He couldn't remember how he had met her. Or what he had wanted with her. Had she just been too pretty? Had she caught his eye late at night in the maelström of drunkenness and rock and noise? Had she been standing there like a candle in the mist with sparkling eyes and bashful lips? He couldn't remember.

Anette. Hansen. All he knew was that he had woken up in a double bed the next day and there had been a girl from the ninth class lying beside him, wearing socks on her feet and nothing else, panties round one leg, thighs apart.

What did she look like?

He couldn't remember.

Who was she?

He had no idea.

After all he had never spoken to her.

As far as he knew he had never exchanged a single word with her.

Who is this person who has children with people they have never spoken to!

Me?

Is it me who has children with a girl I have never spoken to?

Jarle gave a short, distinct cough.

Well. They might have spoken in the throes of drunkenness on their way into the room in January 1990. Impossible to say. As far as he knew, nothing had happened between them apart from sexual intercourse.

Which had resulted in a child.

A little child.

Who was turning seven now.

Who, almost seven years after her birth, was now to have a father.

Christ.

What does the world want with one more child, he thought angrily, and threw the letter in the corner next to the LPs. What on earth does the world want with another blonde girl – he imagined this girl he was to be father to with shoulder-length blonde hair. What does the world want with one more girl tripping around in tiny red shoes playing with ... whatever it is small girls play with. What on earth does the world want with one more naive, jolly, little girl who will be curious about ... whatever it is small girls are curious about.

How far away is the moon?

Can flowers cry?

Or who takes the leaves off trees in autumn?

And what on earth is a girl of almost seven to do with Jarle Klepp as a father?

I haven't got time for this! He thought that August day in 1990 while peering at the summons to the doctor's surgery and the famous paternity test.

Anette Hansen's claims were well founded. Jarle Klepp was the child's biological father. The DNA test was duly performed by the authorities and he had to accept that he, a researcher of Proustian onomastics whose research was such that his Swedish tutor, Robert Göteborg, had on repeated occasions declared his enthusiasm ["Jarle, this work is both very well thought through and beautifully presented"] – he had to accept that he was a father.

That he had been a father for seven years.

Without realising.

Every day gone by, every studious day and every alcoholic night during the whole of his academic 90s, he had been a father. Of ever such a small child. And every day this child had got up and done what children do – whatever that is, thought Jarle – and already almost seven years had passed, and he was the father.

It was quite incredible.

You go round having intercourse here and there with various degrees of protection, and various degrees of success, and then on the one occasion when you were not present, did not exist as anything other than a body, screwing, it results in a child. Which in turn makes you a father.

And then you – *the father – the very source* – are not even told about it?

You're a father, but you don't know?

How many children did he actually have out there?

Would he now be forced to regard every child passing by in the street, sitting on the bus, buying Pokémon cards at Hernán's as his own? Would every pair of small, innocent eyes point him out and ask: *Pappa?* Would every five-year-old playing in the sandpit with a spade in its hand and pebbles in its mouth turn to him, look him in the eyes and ask: *Jarle Klepp, are you my father?* Not that he had been to bed with that many women in his life, but nevertheless if this Skien child was chance, did it not open the door to worldwide male angst?

The angst of being father to all?

And what about future sexual activity? Would he be forced to think, whenever there was a favourable onshore wind and he sailed up Herdis Snartemo's hot fjords to anchor, that what he was *actually* doing was preparing the ground for a child? Would he have to think twice whenever Herdis Snartemo lowered her bra for him to put his mouth around one of her small firm breasts because he knew this was the first step down the corridor to the maternity clinic? Would he, as it were, hear a child's cries whenever he looked at Herdis Snartemo's bottom? Which made his palms crackle with excitement at the very thought. Which started above his spine and did not stop until it was some way down his thighs. Eh?

Christ.

And, putting his desires to one side, did he have *time* to be a father?

It was obvious that he did not. A tiny glimpse in Jarle Klepp's direction was enough for anyone to know. Good father or bad, modern or old-fashioned, he did not have time to be one. That much was obvious, he thought on his way home from the surgery where, blushing, he had undergone the DNA test and a plump doctor said "Mhm, mhm, right, yees, right, is that riiight, yes, mhm, mhm. Jarle Klepp, isn't it? Klepp? Jarle? Congratulations! You're a father!" No. It was more than obvious. Being a father requires a presence, he mused as he walked along Lungegårdsvann lake, presence and dedication. He had both, but they were suited for Proustian onomastics, for the special field he had chosen for his thesis in literary science, for the fascinating subject he had discovered in Marcel Proust's twelve volume work, this French writer's almost manic obsession with proper names and the conspicuous avoidance of the narrator's own name. That was where his presence and dedication chiefly lay. And ought to lie.

So he didn't, he concluded, have time to be a father.

Not to mention suitability.

And that, after all, was more important, he told himself. If he was *able* to be a father, was he cut out for fatherhood?

Of course he wasn't.

(Pages 62-71)

The Butterfly

Just a few days before Jarle turned nine, Diana Spencer married Charles, Prince of Wales. In 1981 Jarle from Madla, in Stavanger, was not sitting with his head full of linguistic theory, he was not walking around with a shorn skull pondering Proustian onomastics, he was a fully paid-up member of his own childhood. He was soaking up the world; he was greedily and happily opening the doors wide to his senses. Pop music poured out of radios, girls poured forth from street doors, and all of a sudden they were like wonderful butterflies, colourful, fluttering, flirting, and all of this Jarle met with desire, with the feeling that this was his, which indeed it was. During the period after the fairy-tale wedding in England Diana made her mark on contemporary society with her gentle shyness, she soon grew into the world's most admired and copied woman, and so it was that the sensual years of childhood when a boy begins to smoulder were characterised by girls sporting Diana-blouses, Diana-hairstyles and Diana-lipstick. It might sound convenient, but it would not be laying it on too thick to say that this would always characterise Jarle's taste in, and view of, women. Diana's sympathy, which became her hallmark and profession, her unstoppable commitment to peace, to the sick and the poor, her efforts in the fight against AIDS seemed both to Jarle and the rest of the world to melt into that anguished expression beneath the fringe hanging over her eyes. This feature lent her a responsible, maternal aspect, and of course today it is easy to smirk at such things, but it makes a child feel good, and secure. When Jarle saw Diana on TV, always so nicely dressed, always so warm and cheerful, he was filled with a feeling that someone was keeping a kind eye on him, and it was exactly this feeling he had when in the company of his own mother and his mother's mother. In his world all three – Diana, Mum and Grandma – had been born to be kind to others.

The difference between Diana and the other women in Jarle's very young life was that she cast down her eyes, making him tingle from the neck downwards. She made him blush in his stomach, she caused a slight tremble in his tongue and she made Jarle wonder who he was and why he had been put on this earth.

She herself could not help it, but it is obvious that Diana's wanton eyes, her teasing mouth, her tilted neck and her cool legs, the way she lowered her head a fraction while maintaining her gaze, marked the world just as much as did her efforts for peace, the sick and the poor. Now, one could say that this is woman's oldest problem, that when she tries to be taken seriously she still has to cope with being desired, so much so that many men will struggle to listen to what a woman says, however much they actually try, simply because the desire to sleep with her, so to speak, will always be stronger than the desire to hear what she has to say. That was how it was for Jarle with Diana. In the last years of his childhood she was always there with this double nature, kindness and wantonness, and Jarle was receptive to it and it never left him. In all the girls he was to meet later he looked for Diana's wonderful blend of idealism and human nature, of the desire to help sick children and the desire to give him her body.

So – how can it be that on the day that Great Britain was burying Princess Diana, the day Jarle met his daughter for the first time, he was not aware of what was happening when such an important woman was being inhumed?

On 31st August 1997 Princess Diana was chased through the streets of Paris centre by eager paparazzi in pursuit of a photo of her and the Egyptian multi-millionaire Dodi al Fayed. What had once started as warmth for the People's Princess from the entire world had degenerated into a nightmare for Diana, and on this evening the grotesque outcome was to be a car crash in a tunnel under Place de l'Alma by the Seine. Most people alive today remember this event as a turning point in history, a symbol of how far the celebrity community had come, and Diana, who until then had been the symbol of the fight for good, of the loneliness and unhappiness of the famous, became the first victim of modern media-reality. What happened in the weeks after the accident was striking: the

tears of the world gushed forth without end. The quantity of flowers and genuinely felt written tributes in front of Buckingham Palace was too great to be counted, the grief of the British people became the grief of the whole western world, and when the day Diana was to be buried came, the whole of mankind was sitting passively in front of TV screens. No one went out into the streets. No one did what they normally did on that Saturday, 6th September 1997.

With the exception of Jarle Klepp.

Of course he had heard about Diana's death a week before, but now a lot of time had passed since 1981, and the feelings he had had for her as a child, when he loved both the Princess and the girls who dressed like her, had long been forgotten, so much so that, faced with an idiotic society of media hysteria and stupidity, he only reacted with anti-royalist sarcasm and analytical irony. At the student canteen or outside the reading room, the accident was registered, it was talked about for a day or two, without much sympathy, then Jarle and his friends returned to weightier subjects, such as Proustian onomastics, the future of feminism, or, in Jarle's case, how soon a letter would come from the editor of *Morgenbladet*, as well as the considerable irritation he felt at having a daughter planted on him – information which he, as mentioned, did not share with anyone else. While the rest of the world was stricken with horror reading the tabloids and taking part every day in the debate about the role of the media, and grieving every day that a good person had been lost, and waiting in suspense every day for the British royal family to make a public announcement about Diana and counting down to the funeral of the century, Jarle was locked in a closed world of semiotics and academic polyphony. That was where he liked to be most. And when the weekend came, neither he nor Herdis Snartemo, nor Robert Göteborg, nor the closer circle of brilliant candidates, the professor's chosen ones majoring in literary science in Bergen, thought about Princess Diana. Instead they rounded off the week with a huge party and post-party session at the home of Robert Göteborg, who preferred to drink with his brightest students than with colleagues. In this circle of outstanding brains Princess Diana was not discussed or even spared a thought. Non-identity was discussed, the historical avant-garde's relevance to modern poetry was discussed and first year students

incapable of seeing the difference between signifiant and referent were mocked and laughed at. In the wee hours, lots of good stories were told, at three Robert Göteborg took out the aquavit and gathered his students around him, and when he – yet again – told them about the time he met Jacques Derrida, a quiet and respectful atmosphere spread through the room.

Jarle nodded repeatedly, the way old folk do when someone says that everything was better years ago, and Hasse Ognatun narrowed his eyes and placed a clenched fist in front of his mouth, the way football supporters do when a decisive penalty is about to be taken, while Arild Bømlo closed his inscrutable eyes. Herdis Snartemo crossed her impressive upper class legs, and to Jarle it seemed her lips were beginning to glisten.

‘Liberté,’ said Robert Göteborg, breathing out through his nose.

‘Liberté, égalité, fraternité,’ completed Herdis Snartemo.

‘Ou la mort !’ Hasse exclaimed, removing his fist from the front of his mouth.

‘Ou la mort,’ Göteborg joined in. ‘This Frenchman, a direct heir of the spirit of the revolution, and yet the very voice of the world spirit, this combination of both, personified...’ He paused for a few seconds as if to prepare those around him further for what was to come in Swedish: ‘...do you know, my friends, do you know that this great man, born in Algeria, and thus in reality an African, do you know that this simple and unfathomably complicated man has a cat?’

Jarle and his friends – keen Hasse Ognatun, who was doing his major on footnotes and parenthesis in French prose of the 1800s, and surly Arild Bømlo, who was majoring on Maurice Blanchot – opened their eyes wide. A *cat*? Derrida? A *cat*?

Robert Göteborg, who for the occasion had donned a red velvet suit jacket, a yellow silk scarf and tight striped trousers, ran a fleshless hand to his ear and fondled his earlobe.

‘Yes, that’s how simple the father of deconstruction is,’ Göteborg said with a snake-like smile, ‘Yes, yes, boys. You heard me correctly: the father of deconstruction has a cat! I have met the cat. Yes, indeed. Its name is Georg Friedrich! And do you know, boys, that he cultivates cacti?’

‘Unbelievable,’ Hasse said, grabbing his side with a grimace. ‘Cacti?’
‘Your back?’

Göteborg nodded to Hasse, who returned the nod.

‘Rub in some avocado,’ Göteborg said, winking in such a way that no one in the room knew whether he was poking fun at them or telling the truth.

The young students loved to hear Robert Göteborg tell stories. They loved to see the fascination sparkling in his eyes, they loved his teases, the chameleon-like creature’s surprises, and they loved to see him laugh from under his pointed south Swedish nose. Even Arild Bømlo, who never let himself get enthusiastic, who almost never opened his mouth, who was known for his enormous lack of glee, had colour in his cheeks when Göteborg started to glow. The students loved to see him put his right hand to his earlobe, which he always did when he turned reflective, and every time he told stories about his meeting with Derrida – forever new episodes from this one meeting that stretched into eternity – they waited for the ritual conclusion, him standing up, running over to the chest of drawers and clasping the photograph of the master and himself.

‘Oh yes,’ said Göteborg, looking at the photograph, ‘What a man, eh? What a thinker!’ And then he touched his earlobe and added: ‘And what humanity.’

This was Jarle’s world. Like one of the chosen at the institute he relished the privileges of the initiated – he who had arrived in Bergen seven years earlier, coruscating and uncertain, with epic novels in his bag and a socialist brain, now at the heart of the academic élite.

The evening before Diana’s funeral Jarle was extra-excited and in party mood because he was trying to forget what was to take place on the following day. His daughter was coming. So he drank a little more than he usually did, and he glanced more often than he usually did in the direction of Herdis Snartemo.

Jarle had never been in an exclusively physical relationship with a woman before, and he had never been in a relationship with a woman who was six years older before. All of this was a new experience, and in the months that had passed, it had, by and large, filled him with a feeling of liberation, just being

an object for her desires and vice versa. The winter's flurry of rows with Lene had taken their toll on him, and he thought it might be time to stop investing such colossal amounts of emotion in all relationships. However, recently he had begun to regard Herdis, the upper class woman, the future of feminism in Norway, as his. Since they had sexual intercourse several times a week and both were agreed that when he sailed his boat up her fjord, it was just because they both liked it and nothing else, he began to get used to her as a person. He had seen her without make-up on. He had seen her go to the toilet. He knew the names of her parents. He had gained certain insights into her meaninglessly affluent childhood and teenage years. It was inevitable. His brain told him that a relationship with Herdis Snartemo was out of the question. But his habits told him that in fact he was in a relationship with her. And it was with this annoying feeling, quite drunk from the alcohol at the Christmas dinner and still as helplessly lustful for a woman sitting at the other end of the sofa on that Friday evening, that he began to wonder whether she was also in a relationship – purely physical? – with Robert Göteborg, who was sitting between them and touching his earlobe while talking about Jacques Derrida's cat and humanity.

He noticed how he became nervous if she left the room – what was she doing now? Where was she going? He noticed how he straightened up and sought her favour when she returned – where had she been?

That's just nonsense, he thought with irritation, to say that I am in an exclusively physical relationship with her. Either I have to go in deeper, or I have to get out.

Jarle did not find out whether he should go in deeper or give up entirely, and nor did he find out whether she was also in a relationship with the professor that evening. True to form, Göteborg drank far too much and fell asleep, opening a possibility for Jarle to attend to Herdis' innermost pleasures after the last guests had left. Towards the end of the party Jarle feigned tiredness, slumping down on the living room floor and closing his eyes. After a while he heard people getting up, he heard Hasse moaning and groaning on his way into the hall about 'the epic pain I'm caused every day by my bloody back', and he heard him say 'Jarle will have to pick himself off the floor when he wakes up

tomorrow'. Arild, of course, said nothing, other than that it was a long walk home. For his part, he pretended he was asleep so as not to make public that he was staying behind to pluck her roses and ride the waves.

Herdis' body was unusually supple and she could fold in the middle with ease, a bit like the way you bend dolls or toy figures. And that was what happened that night. When the apartment was free of late-night guests, the rich man's daughter lay down on Robert Göteborg's sofa, exhausted from the drinking, folded up into a feminist superball and allowed Jarle to step out of his simulated sleep on the floor and make his entrance. He boarded her, grabbing the back of her ankles for support, and stupefied with alcohol, he took his time, while he wondered whether this was something Göteborg also did - folding Herdis up into a ball, while he wondered whether the Morgenbladet editorial staff had read his review, while he reminded himself that he had to go and see Hernán early the next morning to find out if he had ordered in the weekly intellectual newspaper, while he tried not to think about the following day's bus trip to Flesland airport and was oblivious of the funeral preparations in England, until Herdis Snartemo said, at half past four, in an even gentler voice than usual, 'Oh, you're a toy, you are, my fuck pal.'

Toy?

Me? he thought, watching her breasts wobble to the rhythm, the way that a garden bush sways in the wind, or the way a ball bobs up if you hold it under water and then let go. *Me?* he thought, shouting a happy hurrah inside as he felt her joy tighten around his happiness, whereupon he couldn't be bothered to wait any longer, and discharged the meaning of life into her burning hot subterranean darkness and completed intercourse. He clambered off her, and Herdis was purring as she turned to arrange herself on Robert Göteborg's sofa. He dressed, and noticed that she was asleep as he tumbled through the doors to catch a few hours' sleep before he had to get up to collect his daughter from Flesland airport.

And a few hours later there he was. Crouching down. Head a bit sore. With a piece of paper in his hands. And she was walking towards him. His daughter. Orange horse in one hand. Pink apple-shaped rucksack over her

shoulders. A sign on her chest, over the spangled glitter top: 'I'm travelling on my own'. And his heart throbbed, seeing Charlotte Isabel's nicely cut Diana-fringe, which went right down to her eyes, and he realised that the reason for the strange silence that day was that the world was going to bury the People's Princess, England's butterfly.

(Pages 82-89)

The first experience they shared, as father and daughter, was Princess Diana's funeral.

They watched the extended broadcast from the sofa in the flat in Møhlenpris, and Charlotte Isabel sat with her pony in her hands during the whole programme, and at regular intervals she combed its hair with a gold-coloured comb and said that all horses liked being combed. As the live transmission from England went on, Jarle answered her questions, and he found pleasure in being able to help her to pronounce Buckingham Palace, and pointing out Charles, Tony Blair and the Queen, and explaining why there was no king there when there was a king here in Norway. He didn't need to point out William and Henry, Diana's sons, because she knew what they looked like, she said with a faint girly blush. They discussed the car accident, which made Charlotte Isabel's eyes moisten, because she was so, so sorry for those who died, and when she thought of how much it must have hurt when the car crashed, it almost hurt her, as she put it. Jarle made a vague move to turn the conversation to media in society and explain to her about the paparazzi who had to assume their part of the blame for the accident, but she was nowhere near as interested in this. It was enough for her that there had been an accident and that *a Princess had actually died in it*,

and if a Princess can die in one, then everyone can die in one, even Mummy who is up in an aeroplane, as she said – which Jarle could not deny, even though he did try to reassure her by saying there were no paparazzi chasing after her mother in the sky.

Jarle and Charlotte Isabel saw the flowers laid in the streets in England, they saw close-ups of the English nation's tributes to the Princess, they saw people crying and speaking about how a woman they didn't know meant so much to them, which was broadcast all over the world. They saw the long procession with the catafalque, they saw the celebrities who attended the wedding, and Jarle pointed out Steven Spielberg, and asked her if she had seen *E.T.*, which she had, and it was very sad, she said, especially when E.T. had been lying in that ditch longing to go home. He pointed out Tom Cruise, and Elton John, and he tried to explain to his daughter why it was that Diana was called the People's Princess. It was because the people liked her, he said, whereupon Charlotte Isabel asked whether there were any princesses people didn't like, which Jarle considered a smart question and made him feel some pride at her quick-witted response. After all, she is only seven years old, he thought to himself. Almost seven and she is already reasoning; she has a bright, alert mind. That's not bad, he reflected.

After an hour of the programme Jarle spread some Prim cream cheese on a slice of bread – he had remembered to buy it from Hernán the day before – and the girl ate it on one of his black plates, saying she loved bread and Prim; did he love bread and Prim? Well, answered Jarle, he hadn't really tasted it. He should, she said, because bread and Prim was the best thing in the whole wide world, but it was funny eating off such a black plate, because at home she had one with a Moomin troll on and one with Pippi Longstocking on and one with horses on, but none that were just black; didn't he want to have some plates with something on, or did he just want plates that were black just like all his clothes and his sofa and his table? Yes, Jarle said, thinking once again that she must have a bright, alert mind to notice that he might have had rather too many black things around him; yes, perhaps he could get a few plates with motifs on now that she was visiting?

As the hours passed that Saturday in September, 1997, Charlotte Isabel curled her legs beneath her and asked if he had a rug. She really liked that, she said, really liked watching TV covered with a rug, because Mummy always did that. Mummy, she said, always lay on the sofa watching TV covered with a rug and eating crisps, and she liked doing that too, even though Trond didn't like either her or Mummy just lying there on the sofa. Did he have any crisps by the way? No, Jarle had to admit that he didn't, but it didn't matter, Charlotte Isabel said, because they were going out to buy Saturday sweeties after the funeral, weren't they? Yes, indeed, they could do that later, said Jarle, feeling all sentimental when he realised that the system of Saturday sweeties, which was so inured when he was a boy, still prevailed. So Jarle said that, of course, they would go out and buy sweeties afterwards, they would buy as many sweets as they could carry, and he dug out a patchwork rug his grandmother had crocheted – yes, your great grandmother made this, he said, wrapping it around her legs while he visualised Anette Hansen, whom he had slept with once, on a sofa somewhere in Østlandet, lying in front of a TV eating crisps, day in, day out.

'Well, talking about your mother,' he said that afternoon when the funeral ceremony in Westminster Abbey was beginning, 'what does she actually do?'

'Do?' Charlotte Isabel gave him a strange look and pulled the rug right up to her chin. 'At the moment she's flying.'

'Right, no, work, I mean. Your mother. What work does she do?'

'Oh,' said Charlotte Isabel, sticking her small fingers through the big stitches in the rug. 'There are holes in this rug, well – Mummy, she works at Rema, of course.'

Jarle nodded and tried to hide his reaction. At Rema, of course, he thought, unsurprised by the answer, trying to control himself and keep his prejudices on a tight leash. So she's working, he thought, in a supermarket.

Hm.

He had actually guessed it would be something of the kind.

After having seen her childlike handwriting in the letter, after having seen how she expressed herself, and having briefly mused on the cheese spread

and the bread and the dancing and the trips to Southern Europe, the thought had already crossed his mind that she would be doing that kind of work, if she was working at all.

And it turned out she was.

The mother of my child is a supermarket cashier, no less, he thought. And now she's off south to the sun.

Where did he stand with regard to that? As a student at the Institute of Literary Science, with a self-image belonging to the academic class, it was difficult for Jarle to tolerate being in a 'relationship' with a check-out lady. Don't get me wrong, he said to himself, as though talking to someone else, I'm absolutely clear that someone has to work in supermarkets, and that you are not by definition a lesser person for that, but it's obvious, he added to himself, that we move in very different circles, Anette the check-out lady and I. We have different ambitions and desires in our lives. She chooses to be horizontal watching TV and eating crisps after work. I choose to read articles in which Theodor Adorno makes deconstructive interpretations of Hegel or in which Roland Barthes analyses the cratelist impulse in his own name. But despite these differences we have in fact made a child together. We have, once a long time ago, been so attracted by one another that we let nature take its course.

Did we say anything to each other at that time?

Jarle tried to think back.

Had Anette and he talked earlier that evening in 1990, had they looked in each other's eyes? No. He couldn't remember a thing. Not even what she looked like. Nothing at all. Not one detail. Small tits? Big tits? My God, she was only in the ninth class, fifteen years old!

Is it thinkable that, if they had not drunk themselves legless, any more than sexual intercourse would have come of it?

Well, he said drily to himself. More did come.

A daughter.

'I love Princess Diana,' whispered Charlotte Isabel and asked for more Coke as Elton John was singing *Candle in the Wind*. 'Do you, Daddy?'

‘What?’ said Jarle, torn out of his thoughts. He filled her glass. ‘Do I what?’

‘Do you love Princess Diana?’

He looked at her. The little person beside him.

‘Yes,’ he said without feeling that he was lying. ‘In a way, I can say that I do.’

‘Cool,’ said his daughter, fizzing the pop between her teeth. ‘But Charles doesn’t.’

Jarle looked at her. ‘What do you mean?’

‘Charles,’ said the daughter, gargling the pop in her throat. ‘He stopped loving her. That’s what Mummy says. She says he’s stupid and loves someone called Camilla. But he’s at the funeral. Can you see, Daddy? That he’s at the funeral.’

Jarle nodded. Just six years old, he thought, soon seven. And such grown-up thoughts. ‘Yes,’ he said, ‘Charles is at the funeral.’

‘Shhh,’ said his daughter. ‘Now we have to be a bit quiet, Daddy, because this is a very nice song, and we have to think a bit about William and Henry, don’t we, and about Princess Diana, who is actually dead. OK?’

He looked at her. Children, he thought. No doubt about it, they have their own world.

‘OK, Daddy? William and Henry? And Princess Diana?’

‘Yes,’ he said. ‘Now let’s think about Princess Diana, who is actually dead.’

‘And in heaven,’ added Charlotte Isabel Hansen.

‘Maybe,’ Jarle said casually, wondering whether he should take an atheistic standpoint or at least slip in something about not everyone believing in all the heaven stuff.

‘No! Daddy!’ said Charlotte Isabel excitedly before he could say anything. ‘Of course *she* will be going to heaven! She helped the poor people and those with AIDS, didn’t she!’

Towards the end of the TV programme Jarle noticed that Charlotte Isabel was calmer than she had been earlier in the day. She didn’t talk as much as he had already got used to, and he thought her eyes had a different look to

them. Yes, well, he thought, that's not so unnatural. She has a lot to mull over. After all, she has just accepted all of this. Her mother going on holiday. Sitting here with me. It must be at least as odd for her as it is for me.

He looked at her.

Just so long as she doesn't start crying now, he thought.

It's good she's got that pony. Which she can comb when she feels like it.

The day in Bergen was fading.

The live broadcast from England was over, and father and daughter went out of the doors of the apartment block. They had packed her rucksack, and Jarle had seen how many small clothes you can get into a big rucksack – as well as two dolls; a teddy bear; a pink toilet bag with smiling dogs on; a puzzle of a castle, a princess and at least eight racoons; and a number of nicely wrapped birthday presents. Charlotte Isabel had asked to be allowed to put the parcels up somewhere in his flat so that she could look at them until her birthday party, and Jarle had had to remove a sizeable pile of literary theory books from one of the book shelves to make room for them. The daughter had changed her clothes, right in front of him, and Jarle saw her delicate body, her girl's back and felt he ought to turn away.

When Jarle showed her where she was going to sleep, in what he called 'your room', Lotte fell silent. On the floor inside the tiny little study lay an old mattress. The room smelt of stale nicotine even though he had been airing it for several days. On the wall hung a poster of a bony Giacometti figure which, Jarle noticed, the girl considered spooky. Beside it was a Blur poster of snapping dogs in mid-leap. And on the door hung a large portrait of Theodor W. Adorno. Beside the computer there was a framed photograph, and when Charlotte Isabel asked if it was of Jarle's father or what, he had to admit that, no, it wasn't; it was of a man called Marcel Proust. And when Charlotte Isabel asked if he was a friend of Jarle's or what, he had to admit that, no, he couldn't rightly say he was that either, then mumbled, mostly to himself: 'In spirit though, in spirit though.'

The book shelves in the study were full to overflowing, and the same was true of his desk, the light was dim and Jarle could see Charlotte Isabel's toes curling up on the cold floor.

'Is this ... my room?' she whispered.

'Yes,' he whispered back. 'Just make yourself at home.'