



KJELL ASKILDSEN
The Dogs in Thessaloniki

oktober

THE DOGS IN THESSALONIKI

Translated from the Norwegian by Agnes Scott Langeland

We had our morning coffee in the garden. We scarcely said a word. Beate got up and put the cups on a tray. We might as well put the chairs up on the veranda, she said. What for? I said. It looks like rain, she said. Rain? I said, there's not a cloud in the sky. There's a nip in the air, she said, can't you feel it? No, I said. Maybe I'm wrong, she said. She went up the veranda steps and into the living-room. I remained sitting outside about a quarter of an hour longer; then I carried one of the chairs up on to the veranda. I stood for a while looking over at the forest on the other side of the wooden fence, but there was nothing to see. Through the open veranda door I could hear Beate humming. She's heard the weather forecast, of course, I thought. I went back down into the garden and round to the front of the house, over to the post box beside the black wrought-iron gate. It was empty. I closed the gate which for some reason or other was standing open; then I saw that someone had thrown up just outside it. It rather upset me. I fixed the garden hose onto the tap beside the basement entrance and turned the water on full force; then I pulled the hose along behind me to the gate. The jet hit slightly off the mark, and some of the vomit squirted into the garden; the rest got spread out over the tarmac. There was no drain nearby, so all I accomplished was to move the yellowish substance four or five metres away from the gate. But it was a relief after all that the foul mess was a bit further off.

After I had turned off the tap and rolled up the garden hose, I didn't know what to do. I went up on to the veranda and sat down. Some minutes later I heard Beate starting to hum again. It sounded like she was thinking about something that pleased her; she may have believed that I didn't hear her. I coughed, and it went quiet. She came outside and said: Are you sitting here? She had put on some make-up. Are you off somewhere? I said. No, she said. I turned my head towards the garden and said: Some idiot or other had thrown up just outside the gate. Oh? she said. A really disgusting mess, I said. She didn't answer. I got up. Do you have a cigarette? she asked. She got one and I gave her a light. Thanks, she said. I went down from the veranda and sat at the garden table. Beate stood smoking on the veranda. She threw her half-smoked cigarette on to the gravel in front of the steps. What's the point of doing that? I said. It'll burn, she said. She went into the living-room. I stared at the thin wisp of smoke rising almost straight up from the cigarette, I hoped it wouldn't burn. After a while I got up, I had a feeling of homelessness. I went down to the gate in the fence, over the narrow strip of pasture and into the forest. I stopped just beyond the edge of the forest and sat on a tree stump, almost hidden behind a thicket. Beate came out on to the veranda. She looked towards where I was sitting and called my name. She can't see me, I thought. She went down into the garden and round the house. She went up on to the veranda again. She looked once more over at where I was sitting. She can't possibly see me, I thought. She turned round and went into the living-room. I got up and walked further into the forest.

When we were sitting at the dinner table, Beate said: There he is again. Who? I said. That man, she said, at the edge of the forest, just beside the big . . . no, now he's gone away. I

got up and went over to the window. Where? I said. Beside the big pine tree, she said. Are you sure that it was the same man? I said. I think so, she said. There is no-one there now, I said. No, he went away, she said. I went back to the table. I said: You couldn't possibly see that it was the same man at that distance. Beate didn't answer straight away, then she said: I would've recognized you. That's different, I said. You know me. We ate a while in silence. Then she said: By the way, why didn't you answer when I called to you? Called to me? I said. I saw you, she said, and you didn't answer. I didn't reply to that. I saw you, she said. Why did you go round the house then? I said. So that you wouldn't realize that I'd seen you, she said. I didn't think you saw me, I said. Why didn't you answer? she said. It wasn't necessary to answer when I didn't think you had seen me, I said. I might well have been somewhere totally different. If you hadn't seen me, and if you hadn't pretended not to have seen me, this wouldn't have been a problem. Dear me, she said, it isn't a problem, is it?

We didn't say anything more for a time. Beate was continually turning her head to look out of the window. I said: It didn't rain. No, she said, it held off. I put my knife and fork down, leaned back in my chair and said: You know, sometimes you irritate me. Oh? she said. You can never admit that you're wrong, can you, I said. I certainly can, she said. I'm often wrong. Everybody is. Absolutely everybody is. I just looked at her and I could see that she realized that she had gone too far. She got up. She picked up the sauceboat and the empty vegetable dish and went out into the kitchen. She didn't come in again. I got up as well. I put on my jacket, then I stood a while listening but it was dead quiet. I went into the garden, round to the front of the house and out on to the road. I walked eastwards, out of town. I was really quite upset. The gardens around the villas on either side of the road were lying empty,

and the only sound I heard was the fairly steady hum from the motorway. I left the houses behind and crossed the large level stretch of ground which runs right down to the fjord.

I arrived at the fjord just beside a small outdoor café and found a seat at a table right at the water's edge. I bought a beer and lit a cigarette. I was warm, but I kept my jacket on because I reckoned my shirt would have sweat stains under the arms. All the café guests were behind me; in front of me was the fjord and the distant, forested slopes. The buzzing of low-pitched voices and the slight gurgling of water amongst the rocks on the shore put me in a drowsy, vacant frame of mind. My thoughts followed their own apparently irrational paths and were not unpleasant; on the contrary, I felt an extraordinary sense of well-being. So it was all the more inexplicable that, without any noticeable transition, I was gripped by an anguished feeling of desertion. There was something very all-encompassing about both the anguish and the feeling of desertion that in a way suspended time, although it probably only lasted a few seconds before my senses brought me back to the present.

I went home the same way I had come, across the broad level stretch of land. The sun was drawing closer to the mountains in the west; a haze was lying over the town, and the air was completely still. I noticed I was reluctant to go home, and suddenly I thought, and it was a clear, distinct thought: If only she were dead.

But I continued on my way home. I walked through the gate and round to the back of the house. Beate was sitting at the garden table; directly opposite her sat her elder brother. I

went over to them, I felt completely calm. We exchanged a few trivial remarks. Beate didn't ask where I'd been, and neither of them suggested that I should keep them company, which in any case I would have declined, with a plausible excuse.

I went up to the bedroom, hung up my jacket and took off my shirt. Beate's side of the bed was unmade. On the bedside table was an ashtray with two fag-ends in it, and beside the ashtray was lying an open book, with the cover face up. I closed the book; I took the ashtray with me to the bathroom and flushed the fag-ends down the toilet. Then I undressed and turned on the shower, but the water was only lukewarm, almost cold, and my time in the shower was different and much shorter than I had intended.

While I was standing at the open bedroom window getting dressed, I heard Beate laugh. I finished dressing quickly and went down into the utility room in the basement; through the window in there I could watch her without being seen. She was sitting leaning back in her chair, with her dress rucked far up over her spread thighs and her hands folded behind her neck so that the thin dress material was stretched tightly across her breasts. There was something indecent about her pose that aroused me, and my arousal was increased by her sitting like that in full view of a man, albeit her brother.

I remained standing looking at her a while; she was sitting not more than seven, eight metres from me, but on account of the perennials in the flower-bed right outside the basement window, I was certain that she wouldn't spot me. I tried to catch what they were saying, but they were talking too quietly, remarkably quietly, I thought. Then she got up, her brother

got up too, and I went quickly up the basement stairs and into the kitchen. I turned on the cold water tap and fetched a glass, but she didn't come in, so I turned the water off again and put the glass back in place.

When I was calm again, I went into the living-room and sat down to leaf through a technical magazine. The sun had gone down but it wasn't necessary to put on the light yet. I leafed backwards and forwards. The veranda door was standing open. I lit a cigarette. I heard the distant sound of a plane; otherwise everything was quiet. I grew uneasy again and I got up and went into the garden. There was no-one there. The gate in the fence was standing ajar. I went over and closed it. I thought: She is probably behind the thicket watching me. I went back to the garden table, moved one of the chairs a little so that the back of the chair was facing the forest, and sat down. I convinced myself that I wouldn't have noticed if someone or other had been standing watching me from the utility room in the basement. I smoked two cigarettes. It started to get dark, but the motionless air was mild, almost warm. A pale crescent moon had risen over the hillside in the east, the time was just gone ten. I smoked another cigarette. Then I heard a faint creaking from the gate in the fence, but I didn't turn round. She sat down and put a small bunch of wild flowers on the garden table. What a lovely evening, she said. Yes, I said. Do you have a cigarette? she said. She got one and I gave her a light. Then she said in that childishly eager voice I'd always found so difficult to resist: I'll get a bottle of wine, shall I? - and before I had made up my mind what to answer, she got up, took hold of the bunch of flowers and hurried across the lawn and up the veranda steps. I thought: Now she's going to pretend that nothing has happened. Then I thought: Nothing has happened, has it? Nothing she knows about. By the time she came out with wine and two glasses and even a blue

checked tablecloth, I was almost completely calm. She had put on the light above the veranda door, and I turned my chair so that I was sitting facing the forest. Beate filled our glasses, and we took a drink. Mm, she said, delicious. The forest was like a black silhouette against the pale blue sky. How quiet it is, she said. Yes, I said. I held the packet of cigarettes out to her, but she didn't want one. I took one myself. Look at the new moon, she said. Yes, I said. How slender it is, she said. Yes, I said; I took a sip of the wine. On the Continent it lies on its back, she said. I didn't answer. Do you remember the dogs in Thessaloniki which were stuck together after they had mated, she said. In Kavalla, I said. All the old men outside the cafe yelling and carrying on, she said, and the dogs howling and struggling to get loose from each other. And when we left the town, there was a thin new moon like that one that was lying on its back, and we wanted each other, do you remember? Yes, I said. Beate poured more wine in our glasses. Then we sat silent a while, for quite a long time. Her words had made me uneasy and the silence afterwards only increased my unease. I searched for something to say, something distractingly commonplace. Beate got up. She walked round the garden table and stood behind my back. I got scared, I thought: Now she is going to do something to me. And when I felt her hands at my throat, I jerked away, throwing my head and shoulders forward. Almost at the same moment I realized what I'd done and I said, without turning round: You frightened me. She didn't reply. I leant back in the chair. I heard her breathing. Then she left.

After a bit I got up to go inside. It had become completely dark. I had finished the wine and thought up something to say; it had taken some time. I took our glasses and the empty bottle with me, but after a moment's consideration I let the blue checked tablecloth lie. The living-room was empty. I

went out into the kitchen and put the bottle and the glasses in the sink. The time was just gone eleven. I locked the veranda door and switched off the light; then I went upstairs to the bedroom. My bedside light was on. Beate was lying with her face turned away and was asleep, or pretending to be. My quilt was turned down and on the sheet lay the walking-stick I had used after the accident the year we got married. I took it and was about to lay it under the bed when I changed my mind. I stood with it in my hand and stared at the arch of her hip under the thin summer quilt and was suddenly almost overpowered by sexual desire. Then I went quickly out of the room and down to the living-room. I had taken the walking-stick with me and, without really knowing why, I struck it across my thigh and broke it in two. The blow hurt me and I became less agitated. I went into the study and put the light on over the drawing board. I switched it off again and lay down on the couch, pulled a rug over me and closed my eyes. I saw Beate distinctly in my mind's eye. I opened my eyes again but saw her all the same.

I woke up several times during the night and I got up early. I went into the living-room to remove the walking stick; I didn't want Beate to see that I had broken it. She was sitting on the sofa. She looked at me. Good morning, she said. I nodded. She continued to look at me. Have we fallen out? she said. No, I said. She looked at me with a compelling gaze I couldn't fathom. You misunderstood, I said. I didn't notice that you got up, I was sitting in my own thoughts and when I suddenly felt your hands on my throat, I realize though that you got . . . but I didn't know that you were standing there. She didn't say anything. I looked at her, met the same inscrutable gaze. You have to believe me, I said. She withdrew her gaze. Yes, she said, I do, don't I.



THE DOGS IN THESSALONIKI

When this short story collection was published in 1996, it was an instant success with the critics. Arbeiderbladet described it as *“flawless, sad, beautiful and deeply pessimistic... but still with the same incomparable ability to express a universe with a couple of sentences.”*

The Danish newspaper Information wrote that Askildsen had entered *“a league of his own within Norwegian and Nordic storytelling.”* The same year, Askildsen was awarded the Brage Honorary Prize.



A man and a woman in an isolated house and nothing around them or almost; the wild Norwegian nature or the urban desert; alcohol, cigarettes and ghosts; mothers, fathers and lovers who have disappeared. These are the elements of their daily universe. Kjell Askildsen's couples, be it brother and sister or man and wife, all have a secret, a mystery that haunts them. A silent drama of language and spirits unfolds, a drama full of aborted quarrels and inextricable conflicts.

This Askildsen collection is more thematically unified than his earlier work. He conveys the games people play and their sub-dialogue, in a clean cut, reflection-free prose.



“simply admirable... When the reader has gotten acquainted with this literature, it is unlikely that she will ever be able to erase it from her memory”

CULTURAS, SPAIN

“Askildsen’s dry, absurd humour is not unlike that of Beckett ... His short stories are packed with irony, and the dialogue is sharp and expressive”

Times Literary Supplement



“His ability to weave dialogues together – quick, few in words, sharp, not like in the movies, but like in real life – and situations – always from well-adjusted homes where everything appears pure pleasure, but that hide bitterness, strain, disappointment – manages to trouble the reader.”

Que Leer, Spain



“There are few authors and few books I anticipate with such high expectations. No current Norwegian writer can say so much in so few words. No one leaves you with so much food for thought and reflection as Kjell Askildsen... I have always had to return to his books. I never finish with them.”

Aftenposten



“In Kjell Askildsen, Norwegian literature has a European author second to none of his contemporaries. Luckily, this is something that Europe is about to discover”

(Jens Christian Grøndahl, Danish author)

ABOUT THE AUTHOR:

Kjell Askildsen (b 1929) is the unrivalled champion of the Norwegian short story. His stories are translated into 20 languages, and his texts are read, studied and discussed at universities all over Europe. He is - and has been - an icon and inspiration for several generations of authors.



Askildsen entered the literary scene in 1953 with the collection of short stories *From Now on I'll Take You All the Way Home*, which received glittering reviews in the Oslo press, but was banished from the library in his home town, as it was considered immoral. It was not until 1987, with the appearance of the short story collection *A Sudden Liberating Thought*, that Askildsen's writing really caught the notice of the reading public.

Askildsen's hallmark is his seemingly plain voice that quivers with a latent desire to communicate, and is frequently couched in a very black and cynical humour which, but for a deep well of irony, might seem dispiriting, even depressive. His human insight and masterly penmanship enable the few words he uses to convey an instantaneous perception of life as it really is, and then to turn that perception into a literary feast.



BIBLIOGRAPHY AND FOREIGN SALES:

EN PLUTSELIG FRIGJØRENDE TANKE (A Sudden Liberating Thought), short stories, 1987: Armenian (NOR-DAR), Bulgarian (Delakort), Czech (Mlada Fronta), English (Norvik Press), Estonian (Loomingu Raamatukogu), Finnish (Like), French (Le Serpent à Plumes), German (Wolfgang Butt Verlag), Icelandic (Mål og menning), Italian (Besa Editrice), Persian (Hedayet Art Centre), Polish (Swiat Literacki Publishers), Romanian (Pandora), Russian (Text), Serbian (Ljubisa Rajic), Spanish (Lengua de Trapo), Swedish (Forum)

ET STORT ØDE LANDSKAP (A Great Deserted Landscape), short stories, 1991: Armenian (NOR-DAR), Czech (Mlada Fronta), English (Norvik Press), Estonian (Loomingu Raamatukogu), Finnish (Like), French (Le Serpent à Plumes), German (Wolfgang Butt Verlag), Icelandic (Mål og menning), Italian (Besa Editrice), Persian (Hedayet Art Centre), Polish (Swiat Literacki Publishers), Romanian (Pandora Publishing House), Russian (Text Publishers), Serbian (Ljubisa Rajic), Spanish (Lengua de Trapo), Swedish (Forum)

HUNDENE I TESSALONIKI (The Dogs in Thessaloniki), short stories, 1996: Czech (Argo Publishing), Danish (Per Kofod), Finnish (Like), French (Le Serpent à Plumes), Icelandic (Mål og menning), Spanish (Lengua De Trapo), Swedish (Forum)



PRIZES AND AWARDS:

2009: The Swedish Academy's Nordic Prize

2004: The Norwegian Academy's Prize
in remembrance of Thorleif Dahl

1997: The Oktober Prize

1996: The Brage Honorary Prize

1995: The Dobloug Prize

1991: The Critics' Prize

1991: The Aschehoug Prize

1987: The Norwegian Language Prize

1983: The Critics' Prize



“A great storyteller ... Sincere, devastating and merciless ... comparable to Hemingway and Carver with regard to style, and to Kafka, Beckett and Camus in terms of content”

(El Pais, Spain)

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