

Bjørn Sortland

*The Minute of Honesty*

sample translation from the Norwegian by  
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*... but even Mona Lisa must have had the Highway Blues,  
You can tell by the way she smiles*

Bob Dylan

*Don't die without knowing the cross*

Prince

**pp 9-57**

## EASTER SUNDAY, 27 MARCH

*THE PAKISTANI TAXI DRIVER sees that I have a backpack, so he gets out of the black Mercedes, opens the boot, takes my bag.*

*- Thanks, I say, and get into the back seat.*

*I close my eyes behind my sunglasses. Fortunately, it is cool. Back again. Finally. I should be there in twenty minutes. Then everything will be alright, I have to believe that everything will be alright now, at least some of it. I can't run away any longer. The journey is over. The most important day of my life is today.*

*- Where are you going? he asks with a touch of accent that I think he will always struggle to get rid of.*

*- Ullevål Hospital. There's an extra tip in it for if you get me there fast, I say and lean back against the leather seat.*

## SATURDAY 12 MARCH

I WAKE UP SUDDENLY, it must be the middle of the night, there is something wrong with my eyes, a gritty feeling, almost as if they are crying on their own. The numbers in the blue display of my clock radio show ten to two. I have slept for three hours.

I didn't know that eyes could cry all on their own.

- Mum! I shout and turn on the Pooh Bear lamp I can't bring myself to part with. It doesn't get better with the light on, which is hard and painful. I don't often call her, she is in the room in the matter of seconds.

- There's something in my eyes, I say.

- Let me have a look!

Mum sits down, cradles my face.

- I can't see anything. Perhaps you've been swimming too long in chlorinated water.

- It's just a bit uncomfortable, I say and close my eyes.

- Could you turn off the light, please?

She switches the lamp off. Holds me the way she did when I was small and ill, frightened by feverish hallucinations. It feels good, being held. I can't remember the last time someone held me tight. It helps.

- Shall I take you to the casualty ward? Mum asks.

- No. It's probably the pool water at the Aquatic Centre. They pour an insane amount of chlorine into it. I was there for two hours yesterday. I was hoping Camilla would show, but something came up.

- You were there on your own?

- Yes.

- Hasn't it happened a few times now that she doesn't turn up?

- No. Not all that often.

I know Mum is looking at me, even with my eyes closed.

- I think it's getting better now. I'm tired, that's all.

Know that Mum is still looking at me with Mum-worried eyes.

- You should go and see Larsen in Bogstad Road, just to be on the safe side, she says.

- He's nice and very good. I want him to take a look at you. I'll ring and make an appointment tomorrow morning.

- Do I have to? I ask.

- Yes, you have to, Mum says.

- Tell me a story, I plead.

- About what?

- Tell me about that time when you ... were an ambulance officer way up north in Finnmark.

- There isn't much left to tell, Frida.

- You've never told me if you were in love with that ambulance driver.

- I wasn't.

- I don't believe you.

Mum sighs. The way she has done many times before. My favourite thing is when someone tells me a story, tells me about something they know, anything, I love, yes, love it, and go all soft just from hearing someone telling me stories, preferably something long and complicated that takes a lot of time, about the French Revolution, for instance (Aunt Iselin, high-school teacher with ambition, she's awful, but knows a lot about the French Revolution, or Uncle Torstein, who will tell you in great detail everything he knows about large refrigerating ships that freight fruit all over the world, or Dad, who talks about fonts or letters).

People's faces become lovely when they get the chance to tell a story. About something they know something about. Mum likes to talk about when she was in the ambulance service in Finnmark, long before she met Dad.

- Come into my bed. There's plenty of room now, Mum says in her unsuccessful brittle-bright voice.

I pick up my pillow and duvet and mosey to her bedroom and get into her bed like I used to when I was four. Mum even rubs my back. And then she tells me about the resident -doctor-ambulance-driver in Finnmark again. I know for sure that she was totally in love with him. She denies it, as usual.

- YOU HAVE AN APPOINTMENT AT 12 O'CLOCK. Larsen is always so obliging, Mum calls to me.

- How are you feeling? I'm making breakfast.

- Much better than last night. Do I have to go?

- You have to go. You don't want to take any chances with eyes.

Mum has actually made breakfast; eggs and bacon and juice and cappuccino in the shiny espresso maker they bought in Florence a long time ago. When everything was fine. The Garden of Eden, just about. Mum and Dad drove around in Toscano, and I was there, too. In Mum's tummy. There are pictures of me, at least of Mum's big stomach. The three of us. In front of a tower. I don't know where it is, but it looks very much like Florence. The first time I was abroad.

I think Mum really wants to put away the espresso maker, but uses it in some sort of defiance. We eat much better breakfasts now than we used to. I think Mum puts extra energy into this meal to prove that we are just fine, even if perhaps he won't come back all that soon. The radio is playing an old song that Mum, Dad and I all really like, *Fly Me to the Moon* with Frank Sinatra. It is extremely inappropriate, yes, unworthy of the national radio station to play that song at this very moment.

I go to the optometrist on my own. Mum wonders if she should take time off work, but it's *too much*. After all, I am seventeen, and feel even a little more grown-up in the light

of day. The March light is quite strong now, so I put on a pair of cheap petrol-station-sunglasses. And, every cloud ... and so on. Suddenly I have a good excuse to buy new ones. Easter is around the corner. Irresponsible to enter the Easter holidays without proper sunglasses.

In Larsen's optometrist shop a blond woman smiles mechanically at me and points to two chairs and a small table full of magazines, among them *People's* fat Easter edition, which I don't have time to immerse myself in before Larsen himself comes out of his little room. I feel a tiny needle-head lump of dread-ache in my tummy. I wasn't at the Aquatic Centre yesterday.

- HELLO, HELLO, FRIDA! says Larsen, with an already nice Easter tan and suspiciously white teeth.

The optometrist shakes my hand and nods towards a chair. I sit down. Mum has probably pep-talked him. I wait for him to ask me heaps of stuff, but he doesn't.

- Well, Frida, let's have a look. Put your chin on this chin-rest, and your forehead against the band up here, and I'll examine your eyes.

He points to a white contraption that I have problems describing. A bit claustrophobic, this chin-rest, but I suppose it could be because I have to keep my head totally still. I notice that Larsen peers into what looks like some sort of binoculars, looking at my eyes while I sit and wonder where to fix my gaze. Camilla has contact lenses, but I've never needed to wear glasses, to me an optometrist is a place where they have stylish sunglasses.

It is quiet and warm in the optometrist's office. I sit for a long time and look into nothingness, I'm asked to look at a particular spot on the wall, while Larsen looks at my eyes from the side. It is intimate, in a way, I can hear his breath, a few centimetres from my face.

He leans back, I hear him fetch something, I close my eyes for a few seconds. The ball in my tummy has grown a bit bigger than a needle-head, but it is still just a tiny little lump.

- You can sit back now. I'm just going to brush this fluorescein strip over your eyes, there's a dye on it that, well, makes it easier for me to see anything unusual.

I take my head out of the chin-rest, and Larsen approaches with a kind of thin paper-strip with something yellow on it. It is uncomfortable when the strip goes across my eyes, but not painful. I have no idea what makes him see better now, but for some reason I don't feel like asking either. I have to lean my head forward again.

It is as if time stands still.

Has ten minutes passed? An hour?

It is no longer just a little, but very uncomfortable to sit like this and stare. My eyes sting again. I don't want to show him, but suddenly I panic, I can hear my own breath, too, now, I have to close my eyes, I feel I can lose my sight at any point in time, at this very moment. I want to put on my petrol-station-sunglasses and go home to bed.

- Frida, Larsen with the white coat and white teeth says, and I suddenly think that he says my name in a sort of warm way that is designed to make me feel safe and calm. But it has the opposite effect on me, I feel unsafe and jumpy. When he removes the lamp again, I feel strange and dizzy.

- I think you may have something on your eye, a few small irregularities. I can't be sure, but I want you to see an eye specialist.

- Do you think they are ... very serious irregularities? I ask, and in that moment I know that the floor beneath me is a drifting icefloe. It didn't start last night. Have felt it several times in the last two days.

- I think at least we should find out what it could be.

- Could it be something dangerous?

He takes a breath, I see that grown-up men, too, can be nervous about giving people bad news. My eyes don't leave his, I look straight at him, don't know if it helps. If I want to, I am good at staring people in the eyes until they look away.

- Do you know what a cornea is?

- No, not really. A sort of glass in front of the pupil?

- That's right. In a sense it's the window of your eye. And you have a kind of wound [lesion/ sore/ injury] on this glass of your eye, Larsen says, whose smile is no longer white and broad.

- Only on one?

- No. It's quite uncommon, but you've got it on both.

I refuse to let go of my suspect corneas.

- What does that mean?

- It means that you are possibly developing an infection of some sort in your eyes.

- A dangerous infection? I can hear that I have used the word dangerous twice already.

- No. But I want you to see a specialist. An ophthalmologist. It's routine for an optometrist to refer clients to a specialist if he suspects an irregularity.

- Will it take a long time to get an appointment?

- No, no. We'll organise it immediately. You're just going up the street. He's there now. I'll ring him after you've left. We know each other.

Larsen gives me a piece of paper with an address on it. The doctor's first name is Morten. I don't know if I'm reassured by the fact that the health system is suddenly super-effective. Even at the Drop-in Hairdresser you have to wait longer than this. Especially on a Saturday.

- What about payment? I ask.

- I'll organise that with your mother, Larsen says.

- HELLO HELLO FRIDA! My name's Morten.

Have they all attended the same course or what?

He doesn't even have a white coat. But he has the same equipment as Larsen. Chin on chin-rest, forehead against band. His voice is cheerier than Larsen's, so either he is shallow, or this infection is not as dangerous as the impression I got. Perhaps Larsen is so old that he simply refers people all over the place, just in case.

- I agree with Larsen, we're talking about a bacterial infection. I'll put you on a course of antibiotics which you have to follow to the letter. No shirking. And then you must come here for regular check-ups for a while, the first one on Tuesday.

Finally I can pull my chin away from the lamp system. A slit lamp, eye-doctor Morten calls it. Or a bio-microscope. He is careful to explain what everything is called. Probably to make me feel very safe. He, too, uses this yellow contrast substance, but he puts the drops straight into my eyes, it doesn't hurt, but it runs down my face. Everything is really a wetter repetition of the optometrist's setup.

- Can a bacterium like this be dangerous?

He leans back, turns and starts to write on his computer.

- To be safe, Morten says, - I want another doctor to have a look at you as well.

Oops! The little lump in my stomach grows to a medium-sized potato.

- I didn't mean to say that you're a bad doctor or anything, I just ...

He turns back to me.

- No, no. The people at Ullevål Hospital will do some tests, find out the kind of bacterium we're talking about, if any, and recommend the correct medicine, if what I'm giving you to start with doesn't do the job. Bacteria can become resistant to antibiotics, but we'll try Chloramphenicol first. A few drops. And an ointment.

He writes something on his computer and prints out a couple of sheets from a printer that longs to be pensioned off.

- Ullevål Hospital?

- Dr. Bøe. One of the leading specialists. The unit that used to be at the General Hospital is now at Ullevål.

He tears off a sheet from the printer, signs it and gives me the prescription.

- Go to the chemist now, you should start the course immediately. Once every second hour the first twenty-four hours, it's a hassle in the beginning, I know. But only four times a day after that. And the ointment at night. That should finish off the little bacti-bastards. They'll call you during the weekend, I'm sure they'll fit you in on Monday.

He must see that I don't look totally happy. This is suddenly a very big deal. How common is it to be called by Ullevål Hospital on weekends?

- They *will* call you. Don't be frightened. It's just that we want to take extra good care of young and healthy people. If you take precautions, things usually work out okay.

He shakes my hand and winks clumsily. When I get outside, I blow my nose. A little yellow, gooey contrast substance comes out of my nose, at first I'm scared to death, but it has probably just run through the tear canals.

I COME OUT INTO THE STREET AGAIN, and walk up the whole Bogstad Road, towards Majorstua.

I decide to hang out in town. I stop and buy Miss Sixty sunglasses in a shop on Majorstua, I take the first pair I see.

I go to the chemist across the street and exchange the prescription in my pocket for antibiotics. Chloramphenicol. Who invents all these drug names, making them sound as if they actually will make you well again? A tribe of chemist-writers who come up with some words and then Latinise them?

- You've two repeats left, Mrs. Chemist says.

I cough. Like a comic strip villain.

- Can I have all of them now? I ask.

- No, you can't.

- I'm going away, I say and cough a bit again.

- Very far. My doctor said I could. Why don't you call him and ask. I don't suppose eye drops are dangerous narcotics, exactly?

I hold my breath.

- Okay, she says after a long pause. She is almost as old as my grandmother, who died last summer. Of cancer. She had been sick for a long time. It was still immensely distressing. I tried to find out if the almost-as-old-as-grandma Mrs. Chemist feels sorry for me, if Chloramphenicol is a medicine that only very rare and terribly difficult and horribly dangerous cases are given.

Mrs. Chemist doesn't feel sorry for me. I suppose she hands out morphine and methadone and all sorts of things all the time. But she gives me the whole lot. Drops and

ointments and everything. Without making a phone call. I must look like an honest girl, then.

Afterwards I'm totally wrecked. I sit down at the Coffee Girls Café outside Colosseum Cinema and order a latte, which I drink slowly while I draw on the bill. A couple of ice-skates for figure skating. They don't look much like it. I am a huge pessimist. Always think the worst might happen, perhaps that is why I'm always so restless, never manage to turn off my thoughts. I think I'm like my Dad in that respect. Mum says that Dad is so restless that when the car ashtray is full, he is ready to buy a new car. And I don't know if this has anything to do with anything, but Dad is good at drawing, and I wish I had a talent like that, that I had inherited a little more of it. I draw a pair of hockey skates too, but in order to see that they are hockey skates, I have to draw a hockey-stick and a puck as well next to them.

I find the bottle of antibiotics, but can't be bothered to read through the instructions, I just put drops in my eyes, drip-drip-dripdrip-drip-drip. I may as well start at once, so I won't regret that I hesitated, in case things should turn really bad. I put the receipt in my pocket. I'm already exhausted by all this. All I need now is a tedious Easter holiday, go to the movies and ... well, I don't know. Write a little. I stand up go to the Frogner Park. When we were about twelve or something, Camilla and I talked about what we would rather lose, sight or hearing. A hypothetical idiot-discussion. I said hearing.

- But then you can't hear music, Camilla said. - If you lose your sight, you can date a nice guy, even if he's ugly.

- Sight's more important, I said. - It's good to be able to see the person you're with.

- Wouldn't you have gone date a nice guy, even if he wasn't all that good-looking? Camilla asked.

- Would you? If you're utterly honest? I asked. And then, as usual, we totally strayed from the subject. We had many of those sick what-if discussions when we were twelve. Just like Mum and Dad, I suddenly think. They talk about the same thing, yet still don't. Correction: Talked. Now they don't talk to each other at all. They are on opposite planets.

I still wonder about sick things, like would I have exchanged my sight, if it was possible, would I make a deal with God to become blind for ever if Dad, whether he is really gone, or is just having a bit of a break (from what?), or a crisis, could come back and stay with us for ever. If God could guarantee it. Would I have agreed to go blind then? But I have a feeling that God wouldn't offer such guarantees.

The cure should kill it. Is there a tiny, tiny chance that all the steps will go wrong, that something bad will happen to my sight? So I won't be able to see anymore, so I'll never again see the good-looking boy who is reading some magazine or other over there on the bridge, never see the sun again, the green trees, the Monolith sculpture which I once said looked like the piles of corpses in the concentration camps when the teacher asked what it resembled, and then ticked me off. Won't I, in the worst-case scenario, see this for much longer? Could something terrible happen, something that will make these Chloramphenicol drops in my pocket fail to do the trick after all? Could my corneas be destroyed? I don't suppose it is possible to use an extra set of contact lenses? Could I become blind, in reality. Just be able to hear sounds in a large, black darkness, but not see, not see anything, just fumble my way around? White stick, Braille, guide-dog, guide-boyfriend, there is bound to be special equipment I have never thought about or heard of. Because I never thought that one day I would be unable to see. I try to concentrate with all my might on not panicking. Concentrate at the good-looking boy who is reading his magazine over at the bridge.

I don't go home. Not that I have all that many other places to go. If I'm going away, where would I go? I take the metro down to Parliament House. Walk slowly down the main street, Karl Johan, towards Railway Square. I see a beggar who sits with his paper cup in front of him.

- Can you give me 50 kroner for an umbrella? he asks.

It is cold, but it doesn't rain, and I usually don't give them anything, after all, we live in perhaps the world's richest country and blahblahblah.

- Why look so ugly, do you think I can get dope for a 50 note?

I think about Bartimaeus in the Bible. We have a small book at home about the blind Bartimaeus who sits and begs outside the city gate. Grandma believed in God and had a small, light brown wooden cross without Jesus on it that she carried with her everywhere, especially in the hospital towards the end, and she worked in a Christian bookshop where they sold bibles and other Christian things. The book about Bartimaeus was the only Christian book Dad liked, he said it was genuine, there were good drawings in it. When Jesus walks past, Bartimaeus roars. His face is just a huge, fiery red scream, an enormous scream for help.

I give him fifty kroner.

- Thanks, the umbrella-druggie says.

I close my eyes – open – close – open – closeopencloseopencloseopencloseopen. Still a little of that sand-feeling I had last night, and a few times other times before that. But only a little. Things come and go.

Closeopencloseopencloseopencloseopen. Possible that the March sun is especially bright today, but I can see absolutely fine.

OH YES, I HAVE PLANNED all along to end up here at Oslo Railway Station. Railway stations give me a good tummy ache. Railway stations and airports.

Mum has told me that she often went to the railway station in Bergen on Friday nights when she was fourteen, and just stood there, by herself, and looked at those who came and those who went, people who gave each other goodbye hugs or welcome hugs. She liked to stand there by herself and watch and cry both from joy and grief. Perhaps it sounds a bit off, but I really understand what she means. It is a bit bizarre that I don't cry all that easily over really serious things, but bawl my eyes out over things that have nothing to do with me, like love comedies and random people who are leaving each other at airports.

The woman in the ticket booth looks nice. She is really quite attractive, with long blond hair and pretty but sad eyes. She looks like her name is Bente. It also looks like Bente has given up something, herself, maybe, and doesn't know how pretty she is. Maybe no man has told her how pretty she is in a long while? The guy she lives with has to be an IT nerd called Ivar, who is still building up his own business, it's a real hassle, but the IT branch could well be on the way up again, and he hasn't been at home apart from sleeping for the last six months. At work he eats pizza, so it is useless to tempt him with a simple Greek salad and a glass of white wine.

- Do you have an InterRail brochure? I ask.

She sighs and rummages around before she hands me one with a blond and sporty girl on the cover.

- How many countries can I travel to?

- At least thirty. I haven't counted exactly, Bente says and looks incredibly tired.

She turns over the brochure and shows me the map on the other side.

- Everything's here. The different colour codes show the various areas you can buy a ticket to. Or you can take the whole package and travel to all of them. For three-thousand-and-four kroner. In one month.

- Can I buy a ticket at any time, like I would be an ordinary local ticket? And just go at once?

- Yes, all the year round. But there aren't many who travel outside the season. I think InterRail's on the way out, people are flying instead.

- Super deal, isn't it, I say. I can hear my extremely positive voice emerging.

- Yes, Bente says in her flat voice. She looks as if she has never travelled on InterRail, and that all trains have long since departed. Bente is most probably going to sit in this ticket booth all Easter. IT-Ivar has neither the money nor the inclination to take time off work.

I really feel like saying something nice to her, something that will make her feel warm and happy. That IT-Ivar is waiting for her at home with a dish he has made especially for her, he hasn't just bought a couple of Mars bars and a large coke, oh no, he is trying his hand at a relatively advanced Moroccan lamb casserole or something that takes half a day to prepare, and in addition he has bought a bottle of fairly expensive wine he has read about in the paper, and now he has lit forty-nine candles around the clean flat and bought a CD for her with soft guitar-music, it is under her pillow in the bedroom with two tickets to Paris, with hotel reservations, they're leaving next weekend already. Sorry, Ivar would say to Bente when she, tired and worn-out, comes through the door and starts to take off her Railway Corporation ticket-sales-uniform, I almost forgot the most important thing in my life. You, Bente.

- Anything else I can help you with?

She looks at me, knits her eyebrows anxiously together. As if I have hypoglycaemia or an epileptic fit or something.

- Thanks, I say.

There are lots of people in town tonight. Everyone looks as if they have something fun and meaningful to do [they are about to do]. Saturdays are truly *the* day for feeling lost and lonely.

I should have told Mum about this thing with my eyes first, but I'll see her later tonight regardless. Should I tell Dad first?

Where is he? What is he doing this minute? Is he just dragging his body around town the way I am? These days he talks like a tele-marketer selling Teflon frying pans. Doesn't really give anything of himself, I don't know how he is, if he is lonely or what. Does he have any friends at all? He was supposed to live at Ruben's place, an old school mate I have never heard of before.

I look at my watch. I have been mucking about town for six hours. On a Saturday night. If I had heard about some other girl in my position, I would have said I felt terribly sorry for her. I walk up to Saga Cinema to see if there's a movie I want to see. I probably should do it while I have the chance, I don't suppose there are cinemas for the blind, and it is not really quite enough just to listen to the creepy sounds or the romantic music. Perhaps I could see two movies while I'm at it. Mum and I have done that on occasion. But I leave the cinema again. It's unbearable to go to the movies alone. I have stored 66 numbers in my mobile phone. None that I can actually call.

MUM PRETENDS THAT SHE has not been worried and tries her best to look happy and bright when I arrive home.

- You were away a long time. How did it go? What did Larsen say?

- It went okay, I say in my light and happy voice, and realise that I haven't thought about how I'm going to lie to Mum.

- Do you need new glasses or something? Besides those fancy sunglasses you're wearing on your forehead? You're going to wear them inside as well?

By now, my eyes are wandering in all directions.

- No, nothing as dramatic as getting new glasses. I've only got a small infection. I've already got antibiotics. I don't suppose the chlorine they pour into the water in public pools is all that good for you, all the little brats who piss and what's worse in the water, in addition to all the stuff from grown-ups who've had a sauna or been to the gym and sweated and that sort of thing.

I take off my sunglasses.

- What kind of infection? Mum asks.

- They're not really sure.

- From the water in the Aquatic Centre?

- Yes, perhaps. But this will clear it up, I say and pull out the packet of Chloramphenicol and give it to her. And think about something I've heard or read somewhere. If you tell part of the truth you can hide the big lie.

- I'm mainly going to use drops, they're supposed to work quite fast. And ointment at night.

I pull out the ointment too.

Mum reads the labels on the eye drops and the ointment, but doesn't look as if that makes her any the wiser.

- Is it on the eyeball itself, or around the eye, or what?

- On the eyeball, I think. Apparently it's something that just happens now and then.

I'm not sure.

I can't be bothered mentioning either that I haven't just been to see Larsen, but also to eye specialist Morten. I don't mention the word cornea at all.

- Can it be dangerous?

- No. But he wants to send me to an eye specialist for a second opinion. Just an ordinary check-up. We'll see. Just to be on the safe side. They were going to call. Nothing dangerous. They just wanted to check.

- They make me fart, but I'll make a few fajitas for us tonight anyway, Mum says. - It's Saturday after all.

- Lovely, I say and hear this too-happy tinge in my voice that might give away that I'm lying about something.

- Did you have to buy the sunglasses to protect your eyes?

- Yes. Larsen recommended it, I say.

- He said that I have to get a proper pair, good quality. The March sun can be quite dodgy, apparently.

- You've always wanted to have your cake and eat it too, Mum says and sighs. - Don't tell me how much they are. By the way, there's a film on telly.

A lot has changed since Dad left. I don't have the full picture yet, but you can feel it in the whole house, and it is not just the breakfasts. Mum and I sit in front of the television a lot and watch whatever happens to be on. The breakfasts may be better than they used to be, the evenings are worse.

Once more I think that now, this minute, it would have been great to have a sister or a brother.

- I don't quite get this story, Mum says and goes to get the fajitas.

- Me neither. There are incredibly many shitty films, actually.

This one is about a young and handsome man who works in the advertising business and who meets a terminally ill woman, and has his life turned totally upside down over just a few days and becomes decent and nice and suddenly understands that money is just rubbish and I don't know what. It's totally believable – not. We gorge ourselves on fajitas, but I want to see the film to the end, don't know what's wrong with me, but that is how I am, must always see the whole film or finish reading the book once I've started.

I am sure we will be fine, it is not the first time a man leaves his wife and child. That is the sort of thing I might have said to someone else. But I cannot brainwash myself with these it'll-all-be-fine thoughts. It is I who am the child. I wonder if they would have got along better if they had had more children. It is as if Mum is the ice-hockey player and Dad the figure-skater. I don't know for sure, they are very different, but they do have the ice in common. But Mum and Dad don't know that, I suddenly think, that they actually have the ice in common, the water, the water that flows and drowns, carries and saves. Or cracks.

I get up, can't stand to watch it anymore.

- Shall we go and sit on the veranda? Mum asks. - It's cold, but we could light that gas thing.

- That would've been nice. It's just that I'm really really tired, I say. – I've got to go to bed. This thing with my eyes makes me want to sleep all the time.

Mum looks sad when I go to my room.

But it is true. I feel unbelievably tired. I turn on my Pooh Bear lamp and try to read a weird book Dad bought me once, that I often read, but I can't do it now. Not even with new sunglasses. I switch off the light, go to the bathroom, brush my teeth and put the drops and the ointment in my eyes.

Go back into the dark room and wish someone could hold me. Someone who is not Mum. Or Dad.

#### SUNDAY 13 MARCH

DO YOU WANT TO COME TO the morning meeting?

Mum puts her head through the open door. She is very careful when she asks if I want to come with her to her church. She has been there three Sundays since Dad left. In the middle of the week as well. It is not an ordinary protestant church with steeple and a minister wearing a chasuble and a baptismal font and an altarpiece and organ music. It is a Free Church. I don't know if there is a big difference, Mum says there is some difference. They say meeting, not service. They stand and pray with closed eyes, and there is much more singing and things like that. I haven't been to church for a long time, and don't remember it as anything special. It doesn't get more genuine either if you stand with your eyes closed. Now they are probably escalating in preparation for Easter [to prepare for/ because Easter's coming]. Jesus moved in with Mum when Dad left.

- No, I mumble. - It'll be an hour before I'm ready.

- Okay, Mum says. And I can hear that she tries to say it casually and artlessly, so my conscience shouldn't suffer. I don't know if Mum herself is a believer, or if she just needs something to believe in. Or because she believed when she was little. Perhaps I should have gone and prayed to God, at least. On account of my eyes. And everything. It sure couldn't hurt. Do they pray for sick people there too?

I lie in bed and try to go back to sleep for a long time after she has left, but I still have a bad conscience because I didn't go with her. No way can I go back to sleep, so I get up, wash my eyes and put drops in them, have a quick shower and a cherry yoghurt for breakfast. I don't know what to do. So I browse in the video shelf in the living room. Find a

movie Mum doesn't know I have taped, some terrible rubbish, probably. But it is set in Italy. Florence. *Hannibal* with Anthony Hopkins. The sequel to *The Silence of the Lambs*. Well, there are actually many classy images from Florence in it. The whole city looks like a fairytale town, but they probably film only the coolest places. After a while it turns really nasty and bloody. In the end, Hannibal Lecter sits and eats the brain of a man who is still alive. I want to stand up, but remain sitting. Honestly, the sequel is shitty compared with the first movie, but with incredibly cool images. I close my eyes. This is too much. Finally I fast forward past the brain-eating. And then the movie is finished. It will take three days to get it out of my head. I wonder if everything we see does something to us, if it is stored inside our heads and influences [affects] how we think.

Don't brood over it anymore.

The next movie I try is a love story I know really well because I have watched it at least twice before, *Les Amants du Pont-Neuf - The Lovers on Pont-Neuf Bridge*. It is about a woman in Paris who runs away from her parents because she has contracted an eye condition which is incurable, apparently. And she wants to live and see as much as possible of all that is beautiful before everything goes black. Oh yes. Very accidental that I watch that particular movie just now. But it makes a much stronger impression on me than I had thought. Especially that the main character - Juliette Binoche - doesn't give a shit about anyone and chooses to live like a bag-lady just to experience life, or something, before her world goes dark. She lives among other homeless people in Paris, and meets an old alcoholic who used to work as a caretaker at the Louvre, and who still has the key to it. He lets her in late one night after closing time and shows her a picture of one of the apparently most famous artists in world history. Rembrandt. It worries me that I don't know much about Rembrandt.

I ring Camilla's number, but hang up before it starts to ring. She is with Even, for sure. I can't face hearing what a fabulous Easter holiday she is going to have with her new boyfriend. If she can be bothered telling me anything at all. I really can't face talking to Camilla, so it irritates me terribly that I ring her again after all.

- Hey-there-how-are-you-okay-no-well-yes-nothing-special-and-you?

- You still don't have any plans for Easter? Camilla asks. I hate knowing that that I'm boring her. For some reason the second year of high-school has been full of crap. I have kept to myself too much and have discovered that I have quite simply been struck off members' lists of clubs I didn't even know I was a member of.

- Yes, I tell her. - I'm going away after all. But not skiing.

- Where are you going then?

- To Paris. To shop.

- That's not really you, is it? Camilla says.

- I want to buy books, and only books, I say. - Me and Mum.

I hope at least that Camilla will say that I'm an artistic type, who is intelligent and probably reads poetry and goes to the Art Film cinemas and watch Russian movies only eleven people in Oslo have heard about.

- Okay, Camilla says.

- I'll call you later, Camilla, I've got a call waiting, I say, as if it is The New Boyfriend who is calling. - Ciao.

And yes. Because finally. Finally someone is ringing me. I don't know the number. Who could it be?

I hear an efficient male voice, Karsten-something-or-other, who tells me that I have an appointment at Ullevål Hospital tomorrow morning at eight thirty. I shall go to the reception and ask for Dr. Bøe in the Eye Unit.

- Thank you, thanks a lot. It was good of you to call, I say as enthusiastically as if I had been told that the film I had ordered at the library had arrived. Karsten at Ullevål Hospital could hardly be called The New Boyfriend.

I dress and go out. At half past twelve I am outside Oslo Railway Station again. Go in from the harbour side, and up the escalator. I draw several queue-tickets, stand for a while and let people behind me pass me in the queue, just so I can buy a ticket from the sad ticket-Bente.

- Can I help you?

I don't know what to say this time either to make her a little happier. It doesn't look as if IT-Ivar has cooked a complicated Moroccan lamb casserole and lit forty-nine candles lately.

- You don't want to come with me, do you? I ask when I have paid and finally received the ticket that actually costs just about everything I have in my account. - Probably not a lot of people who travel in March?

Bente looks surprised at me for a tenth of a second before her face becomes an ordinary ticket-seller-face again.

- That would've been nice, she says in her flat voice, it is possible that she even believes I am pulling her leg. Oh! If ticket-Bente had only believed in that tenth-of-a-second moment of surprise she experienced when I asked! Ivar be damned! He will discover you all over again when we get back, you will look radiant after a trip around Europe, he will realise that he has forgotten how lovely you actually are! Serves him right! Perhaps we will both meet a gorgeous and clever boy!

- You're paying half-price for the ticket on the Norwegian part of the journey, Bente says and presses the button, dingdong!, which changes the red number on the –take-a-queue-ticket display.

#### MONDAY 14 MARCH

MONDAY MORNING I AM UP AT THE BREAK OF DAY, can only eat half a yoghurt for breakfast, and the mirror tells me that I have dressed more soberly than usual. I still don't think I look nice enough, even if I'm only going to a doctor's appointment.

Ullevål Hospital is a huge place, with lots of buildings. I feel very small here. A little girl with dread-ache in her tummy. I manage to find the eye unit, that is easy, you are expected to find it blind-folded. On top of that, a woman in the reception tells me where to go. I haven't been to hospitals very often. Only for routine check-ups or tests. There is a waiting room, but I don't have to wait for very long. I imagine that a Genuine-General-Hospital-Specialist has brown kind eyes and firm, warm hands. Someone who can fix things that others can't. Genuine-General-Hospital-Specialists are like fighter-plane pilots. They can hit the right spot when they have to. They are the ones who dare to push the red button.

But I go into the office of a man with reddish-grey beard and brown eyes and a 'very busy man' expression. Not anywhere near as nice as Mum's old ladies'-friend-optometrist with the suspiciously good teeth, or Morten the ophthalmologist, for that matter. No red button. He sighs and looks at his watch when I enter, smiles a bit like a Lego-man, perhaps his image is to look very busy.

- Frida? is all he says as he gives me a limp handshake. Same procedure today, chin and forehead into the slit lamp.

- Yes, Dr. Bøe says after a long while. – It is most probably a bacterial infection. We'll take a sample and cultivate it to see what kind of bacterium we're talking about.

- And after that?
- You continue the treatment you're on now.
- But if it doesn't get any better?

Dr. Bøe sounds a tiny bit irritated by now. He must have very many more important patients than me to take care of, people who sit in the waiting room with great glass shards in their pupils and punctured eyeballs.

- I don't want to speculate about that. If we can't control it with medication, and it turns out to be a troublesome bacterium, it would mean that you slowly - or very fast - will sustain damage to your cornea.

- And that means, in the worst case scenario, that I lose them?

- *In the worst case scenario*, as you say, your corneas may sustain damage, Frida. There will, if worst comes to the worst, be scars. That would mean that you most probably will have to get new ones. And that's why we act now, to prevent that happening later. But as I said ...

- New what?

- New corneas, Dr. Bøe says.

- And without corneas ... I'll lose my sight?

- Yes, that would be one outcome. You can't see without corneas. But we won't be thinking that far ahead now.

- Is it straightforward to get new ones, I mean, like getting new contact lenses?

- No. You'll have to get healthy corneas.

- Who from?

Dr. Bøe twists a little in his chair.

- From a donor.

- Is that a simple thing? Are people willing to give away their corneas?

- No, but it happens. You can come out from the lamp now.

- How? I ask and lean back in the chair. - From dead people? Car accidents?

Today's-Most-Difficult-Patient. Dr. Bøe sighs heavily, probably has to dig out everything he has learnt at the patience-for-doctors course.

- If someone dies in a car accident for instance, or perishes some other way, it's possible to get corneas from them, he says while he carefully puts a cotton bud in my eyes. I blink several times afterwards.

- But at this point in time there's no need to exercise crisis-management. Take the medications. We'll test you again in a week. Ring at any time, day and night. Even if you only feel worried, or think you notice something, we're always here for you.

And then he smiles again. A bit of a Lego-man doctor, but he probably means well.

- So I would, in the worst case scenario, get spare parts, corneas, from the eyes of a fresh corpse?

- Yes, the specialist says and strokes his beard. Without blinking with his brown, bacteria-free eyes. - In the worst case scenario, that is the solution.

I feel I'm putting a damper on the mood.

- Do the eyes of a deceased person work as well as those of a living? What am I saying? Deceased person?

- Yes. They are just as good as your own. But in your case it wouldn't even need to be assessed. Generally, I would say, a young lady like you will be a high priority.

- But it's not a thousand percent certain that there will be a donor?

- We can never guarantee anything. But there's a kind of donor bank for these sorts of things in Denmark, among other places.

- Is it a complicated ... operation?

- No, it's the simplest type of transplantations there is.
- Have you performed such an operation?
- Yes, many times. Ullevål Hospital is the only place doing transplantations in Norway. And we have several doctors here, a large team. We work closely together in cases like yours.
- Okay, I say. My head feels empty, cannot think of anything else to ask. So I just stand up.
- Do you want me to contact your mother? Dr. Bøe asks. And he looks, perhaps, a little more worried than when I came in?
- No, I say. – I'll tell her myself. Thanks for being straight with me.
- Fine. At the moment, this is not all that serious. The chances of your treatment working are very good. Morten Dahl will follow up to start with. He is very good. But you are over sixteen, so you can make all the decisions yourself.
- I'm seventeen. Thanks, I say and am about to stand up and leave. But my dread-ache grows huge all of a sudden, like a pumpkin in an American Halloween horror movie, and pushes me back on the chair again.
- Be totally honest: What's the chance, percentage-wise, that you have new corneas that work, if I really need them?
- Don't give it another thought, Bøe says.
- You're sure about that?
- Yes.
- Eighty percent?
- I don't want to speculate.
- Will it get worse if I travel, do I have to take it easy? I ask into the air.
- Just now the combination of stress and new conditions is not the best for you and your eyes. Take it easy.

On the tram to the city I try to call Dad. Again. It is a bugger that he doesn't answer today either.

I close my eyes. Try not to think about anything at all. But my head is in turmoil. When I open my eyes again, the tram has stopped. I look out the window. On a grey building close to the tram tracks someone has sprayed in big, bright orange letters: Love me! I take it as a hint, a message. It frightens me, at least.

That too.

What do I do when I don't even manage to decide what I'm most afraid of? I don't think Dr. Bøe of Ullevål Hospital knows what the outcome might be. Not quite. It could come to a bad end. To sum up: I have enough medication. Check-ups won't help if the treatment doesn't work. It might take a few weeks before they know what they are dealing with or that the treatment isn't working after all. Suddenly they have to operate, and it isn't successful. Or they don't get suitable corneas in time. Or everything goes wrong, and when I wake up from the anaesthetic, Dr. Bøe has to tell me that the twenty percent that threatened to go wrong, did go wrong after all. But I cannot see Dr. Bøe's face when he tells me. Because I am blind. Forever.

I suspect that doctors always talk in a calm voice, no matter what, they have served their residencies way up north in Finnmark for seven years and learnt to talk in a calm voice. Just like pilots. But it doesn't help that the captain speaks in a calm and dark voice if both motors are on fire. There are many stories about things that don't end well, too. Besides, it's not Dr. Bøe's eyes we are talking about here, doctors see that people will go blind or die every day, no big deal. And they are trained just like the captain of an aeroplane to tell people in a calm voice to fasten their seatbelts when the burning plane is

about to explode over the mountain range, which regardless we will smash into in half a minute.

Take the metro home again. Walk across the big square. The flat is empty, Mum's at work.

I have to do something. It is my sight, my life. I cannot just sit and wait. For what? To get better? To get worse? Both are equally awful. Then, out of the blue, I make a decision: Eighty percent chance is too much, or too little, according to how you look at it. According to how you look at it! I must not brood any longer. Must do something. Now.

I CALL THE SCHOOL and explain that I was absent today because of illness, that I have a doctor's certificate until after Easter, at least, without telling them what is wrong with me. I can do without involving the whole class.

Suddenly I have a good plan. Yes, it is crystal clear now, as if it has been there all along. I have doubts, of course I do. About more than one thing. That is how it is with us pessimists. I wonder how much and for how long you think about doing something wrong, before you actually do it. Longer than what you yourself think. I think, anyway.

*I didn't think*, many people say. *I just lost my head, and then I was pregnant.* I don't quite know if I believe that. I believe many people know perfectly well what they're doing when they do something wrong. I, for instance, have a terrible tummy ache when I close the door to the guest room, even if I'm alone in the flat, and log on to Mum's net-bank and transfer seventeen of the thirty thousand kroner Mum has saved, the child benefits she has laboriously saved over the years. It is a big advantage to have the same bank, transferring the money to my account takes a few seconds. For a long time now Mum has had her own, largely untouched high-interest account where she deposits this money. She would hardly check it now, doesn't know how it works anyway, it was I who set up the bank accounts and organised the pass word and everything. Dad, too, let me take care of the bills, I'm the digital guru in the family. Mum says she isn't online with anything at all when it comes to computers and other technical things. *All the hard disks crash when I enter a computer store*, she says. I even read the electricity meter, Mum says that all those numbers make her head spin.

Seventeen thousand kroner richer.

I actually haven't thought about it for all that long. It is almost an impulse action. But if what I believe is really true, that I plan to transfer the money back shortly, does it make it less wrong? And is there something called an almost-impulsive action? Anyway, I suddenly have seventeen thousand in my account. I do like my Mum. But now I have shown another side of Party-poopier Frida. Lying and stealing Frida. Delinquent Frida who started her career by stealing from her mother.

I turn the computer off. Then I go to the bathroom, open the cupboard to get a toothpick to pick out a quarter of a peanut that has got stuck between two molars. There I find a small box with tiny pills that I haven't seen before, with a red warning triangle on it.

Grown-ups should protect themselves better against their children.

I try to call Dad again, hang up in frustration after six rings. If he had heard my thoughts, I think I know what he would have said about honesty:

*- No, dear Frida, everything's so simple when you're seventeen years old. Later in life, you'll see that everything's relatively relative.*

*Relatively relative.* What is that? Oh yes, lying on top of a new woman without clothes on, for instance, when you actually have another woman at home that you're married to? Is that relatively relative?

I am exhausted. I lie down on the sofa and fall asleep, don't wake up before half past three, race to the Vietnamese guy and buy ingredients for a salad I know Mum really likes.

Of course, Mum is very glad to see that I have laid the table on the veranda, found cushions and everything, have even vacuumed the synthetic carpet that's supposed to look like a lawn.

In the end I say it this way, just when Mum has a piece of fetta cheese on her fork:

- I'm leaving tomorrow, I say. – With Inter Rail. Have bought tickets and everything.

Mum does seem to get a tiny little (pill?) shock.

- Where?

- To Italy. Florence. I don't have anything else to do just now.

- But money? Mum asks. My chest hurts.

- You don't have much, do you?

- A bit. Dad's sent me some.

- So he's behind this? Have you told him what you're going to use it for?

It's also a tiny pill shock to discover how easy it is to lie. As easy as eating caramel pudding. Because Dad and Mum haven't spoken with each other for a long time. Mum doesn't know anything about Dad, either.

- He's not behind it, I say. – And I do have my savings account.

- You have money there, do you?

- Yes, a little.

Mum swallows hard. She wants to say a lot of things, I think. But there isn't much she can say. She knows she cannot heap shit on Dad to me.

And I don't have to say anything about my eyes. I hope neither Dr. Bøe nor Larsen nor Morten will make a summarising phone call to Mum.

I can see that she doesn't know what to say.

- I'm seventeen, Mum.

As if that makes me more trustworthy.

- I don't want you to leave, just so you know. But I travelled myself when I was your age, and I've a feeling it's going to be difficult to forbid you. Are you travelling with someone?

- No, I say and look at her and hope my eyes don't move. Even if I'm wearing sunglasses.

- I'm glad you're not lying, at least, Mum says.

I look into the air, just in case.

- I'm sure you'd have checked if I told you I was travelling with Camilla. So I won't take that chance.

- I suppose I would've.

- Isn't InterRail a bit passé? she asks with a slightly scared voice designed to make me stay at home.

- Maybe. But I want to travel anyway. That's all. I'm old enough. I will come back.

And it strikes me [occurs to me] that perhaps that is what she is most afraid of, that I won't come back?

- Mums are supposed to be afraid for their daughters. Or you wouldn't have been a good Mum, I say. Still wearing my sunglasses.

But Mum looks at me with narrow eyes. She isn't that easily impressed by my girlfriend-chat voice. She is not one of those who bursts into tears at all times.

- When?

- Tomorrow, I say. – I've actually been thinking about it for weeks. And saved more than you think. I just haven't had the guts to tell you, I lie. Or do I? Something in me may have been thinking about it for ages, for all I know.

- I'll give you some money, Mum says.

- There's no need, I say.

I really hope that Mum's computer-angst stays the same. Afterwards I will pay her back. Cross my heart.

I go to bed. I'm good at that. Must be fully rested for the journey.

**pp. 87-103**

I'VE TRAVELLED ALL THIS WAY. From Oslo to Florence. The city I was in last when I was inside my mother's stomach. Where should I actually go now?

I sit down inside on the bottom step of the staircase. Wait for ten minutes. It's quiet and hot and half-dark in here, I can only hear the sound of scooters and cars passing outside. Outside there are the tourists, running around in the sun in one of the most-frequented cultural cities of the world. I suddenly feel afraid. Least of all do I dare take a look at the large buildings and famous bridges, churches and museums today. Or find the tower where the photo of me and mum's stomach was taken. I get up and go outside once more, but stand waiting for a while, would like someone to come running after and me and say it's all nonsense. Or that someone, dad, just passed by and said: *Poor dear, have you travelled all this far?*

I haul on my backpack once again and start to walk. Not far from the Cathedral I pass a man with no legs who's sitting on the pavement with a drawing block, resting his hand with the pencil against what is left of his thigh. He is gazing into thin air, as if he doesn't notice all those walking past him. The pencil drawing is of a lady, one of those classical sculptures who – to crown it all – hasn't got any arms. The saddest thing of all is that it's not a particularly good drawing he's done.

My phone rings. It's an Oslo number I don't know. I feel a stab to the chest. Probably ophthalmologist Morten or ophthalmologist Bøe. I don't answer. Immediately afterwards, a message is left on the ansaphone. Which I know I can't listen to, for when you're abroad you have to have a code for left messages, and I can't remember that code, don't know how to get hold of it either.

For lack of any other brilliant ideas I start walking towards the railway station again – it's a defeat, but there's a McDonalds there at any rate. It's terribly sad if you think about it, but I don't think about it, McDonalds is the only thing here that's a bit familiar. Am I a little sniveller longing to be back with her mummy?

There's a long queue at McDonalds. I sit down.

Am I going to get onto the train and travel north again and forget this miserable attempt to get out into the big wide world? Yes, it's quite possible. Very possible. I've almost decided to do that when I hear a voice.

'Well now,' the voice says, and I turn towards the sound. 'I thought maybe that you... no... no... I understand. I'll have a bite of lunch first. Then we'll see. Yes, yes... I'm sitting at a local trattoria.'

I can't help hearing. He's talking Norwegian. And he's lying – he's not at a local trattoria at all. He's at the worldwide family restaurant McDonalds.

He hasn't got a tray with a burger on his table. He's just sitting there. With a mobile in one hand. That he's not talking into any longer. If there had been a competition for who had the brownest eyes in the whole universe, he would have won. He puts it down, stares ahead for a while before picking up a book, a blue, thick one: *The Art and Architecture of Florence*. He doesn't look at it all that long, puts it down and gazes into thin air again. He's thinking of something else. It looks to me as if he's a bit in the dumps. And there was something sad about his voice. *Our little homespun psychologist*, I can hear Camilla's voice say at the back of my head. Well, dumps and dumps. He's not exactly snuffling and sobbing at the same time, there aren't any tears running down his cheeks. He's just sitting there completely silent. I always wish there was – a tear running down his cheek. Nothing wildly dramatic. Just a small tear.

It's not good, wishing other people to be in the dumps. But then I could have gone over to him and stroked his cheek. Just cautious, like. Yes, I get the feeling I'm looking at a guy whose girl has just dumped him. Or perhaps not. Maybe I just have the need to feel someone's worse off than I am. I not completely right in the head. Seen too many French films. I don't manage to look away before he catches sight of me staring at him. They're insanely brown.

'Sorry. I heard you talking Norwegian,' I blurt out while he's still looking at me. 'I wonder if you know what time it is?' I can hear I'm a bit surprised at the thin, dull sound of my voice. It's been several days since I spoke to anyone.

'Haven't got a watch.'

'Oh, right,' I say.

He's got dark hair, is slim slash thin, with a freckled nose, maybe a bit of a squint. There's a cigarette stuck behind his left ear. And his hands. Slender. Perfect. If they should have to do something, they look as if they could both play an instrument and slaughter a deer. They look so lonely, don't exactly know what to do with themselves right now. And he smells good. A smell I am unfamiliar with. And even though I know I haven't, I've got this feeling I've seen him before.

Fortunately, I've got sunglasses on.

'You look Norwegian,' he says. 'I'd have seen that even if you hadn't spoken to me.'

'How come?'

'Your trainers. No Italian women walk around in as un-sexy shoes as Norwegian girls do. German girls, perhaps, they also like tramping around forests and fields.'

'You don't perhaps?'

'Nature's best at the cinema,' the young man replies.

'My trainers are extremely practical, I say. 'And I don't try to be incredibly sexy.'

His hands still don't know what to do with themselves. They are almost... indecently naked. Have they stroked a girl's back recently?

'Don't get me wrong. I'm just acting tough.'

Now he's the one who's fortunately having a bit of a hard time of it.

'It's quite OK you don't think my trainers are sexy,' I say. 'I'm an extremely tolerant and adult girl. I've applied to start at a school of contemporary charm from this autumn. So then everything'll improve.'

He's still looking straight into my eyes, and even though I'm wearing sunglasses, I finally look away. The worst thing is he's right. I've only seen young women here wearing high-heeled stylish ankle boots. Like the ones the girls who ride Vespas have. Like a thousand other girls in the streets here. Travelling to Italy doesn't give my self-confidence any bonus points. I'm a Nordic iron lady who hasn't realised that the prime purpose of ankle boots is not to be practical.

He's got thin lips, too. I hadn't thought about that before, but I like thin lips a lot.

At last his hands do something. They fetch the cigarette from behind his ear. Not only does he read chunky art books, he also has a lighter with an art picture on it – a lonely blue figure. Is it a well-known picture? No idea. Edvard Munch? No.

He lights the cigarette. Smoking's hardly allowed here – he looks a bit nervous. And he doesn't inhale the smoke properly, just takes it in and puffs it out again.

'Do you like travelling alone?' I ask. Well, that was a really lousy line. I've possibly already revealed myself as being a tiny bit desperate. Loneliness is easy to spot, a bit like chicken-pox. Maybe he's not travelling on his own either.

'On the whole it's fine travelling along, the days are OK, the evenings are worst. It's not much fun eating dinner alone in an expensive restaurant, for example. It's a drag.'

Finally someone who admits he's alone.

'What do you do during the daytime, then?'

'During the daytime I have love trouble.'

*Love trouble!*

'What else does someone with love trouble do apart from sitting in McDonalds?' I ask.

'During the day I just smoke, or sit in McDonalds,' he says. 'Or go round with headphones on and listen to old songs like *Nothing compares to you* with Sinéad O'Connor – that's a good love-trouble song. Or I watch sad films in a cinema, or walk around looking at all the pigeons and all the loving couples who look so happy in this stylish city. That sort of thing.'

'It sounds almost... fine to me,' I say.

He just keeps looking at me. Maybe he really has love trouble?

'Sorry,' I say. 'I didn't mean it like that.'

'No, that's OK,' he says and runs his fingers through his short front hair, just to have something to do, I think. 'I'm only acting tough again. I only said that to make myself interesting.'

'Awful thing to do, to kid about something like that,' I say.

'What about you, then?'

I take a deep breath. Like the second before I'm going to dive or run sixty metres.

'Have you seen a film called *Les Amants du Pont Neuf*?' I ask. A suitable sort of mysterious question to ask someone with an art picture on his lighter and who likes to act tough. His gaze wavers a bit.

'No,' he finally says.

'I'm glad he doesn't lie about something he hasn't seen. For I think he's the type who might – a pretty vain sort of guy. So vain that he perhaps is a little bit honest now and then.'

'Why do you ask? Have you got love trouble too?'

I discover it's going to be difficult to explain my life right now on the basis of a French film.

'I'm looking for my father – he's done a bunk,' I suddenly hear myself say. 'And I'm *not* saying that so as to make myself interesting,' I lie.

'Has your father really *done a bunk*?'

I give a little cough.

'Yes. In a way. He's always done a bunk. He's your typical dreamer. Or someone who would like to be an artist. He's forty-two. I think that's why he's done a bunk from mum and me. And this time I don't think he'll come back.' This is the first time I've said any of this out loud.

'What sort of artist?'

He asks the wrong questions. He ought to be a bit more considerate and caring towards a girl like me.

'I don't know. I don't know if he really wants to be an artist either. He just wants to work with something artistic, I think. He actually ran his own small design agency, did brochures and annual reports and all sorts of things. But he paints watercolours on the side, roughly the sort of thing that everybody wants. I don't think any professional artists think he is a artist, if you understand what I mean. Rikard Riis – heard of him? And, as I said, I don't know if that is what he really wants. See?'

'Yes... perhaps,' the young man says, to no one in particular.

But I know he doesn't understand. I really don't know what dad wants. I thought perhaps that I knew. I even feel like defending him. He's no fool either. He's not bad, it's

just that he doesn't paint proper art. Not any longer, at any rate. But I've seen his old sketch blocks in the attic. There's a lot more there I think is far better at any rate than the townscapes and flowery meadows and children's faces with large eyes that he paints now. There were some pictures of mum too. She was naked. Embarrassing to look at them. Impressive, though.

'But we all want to be a bit of an artist,' I say. 'Express something that's... important to us inside. I just don't know if there are enough people who are interested, if the public's big enough.'

'No... perhaps not,' says the maybe-maybe-not-love-trouble young man. 'Much art and design are more or less the same. Some people think that the concept of art is just rubbish when so many artists actually work for advertising firms.'

'How come?' I ask.

'I'm usually very *didactic* once I get started. But right now I'm starving,' the young man says. 'Feel like joining me and eating something?'

'At a *local trattoria*?' I ask.

'You've been eavesdropping,' he says and puts out his cigarette in an empty cola beaker on the next table.

'Impossible not to.'

He gets up, looks at me and smiles a bit crookedly. He's not *so* supercool after all, then.

'I've got a little money,' I say. 'And we *are* in McDonalds.'

'I know a place that has good baguettes. Cheap too. Well, as cheap as you can get them here in Florence. A baguette bar. Do you know what the time is?'

I look at my wrist, where fortunately there is no watch. Trick question. I blush.

I suppose I ought not to be so interested really, but I don't give a damn if I seem lost and desperate. Now I may be able to avoid having to eat alone this evening. For the first time on this trip I haven't the faintest idea what the time is. That was probably why I asked.

Besides which, I *am* a bit lost and desperate.

'So you weren't going to take the train?' I ask when we leave the station.

'No,' the young man says.

'Then what are you doing here at the station? Just sitting here, acting tough and smoking illegally in McDonalds?'

'This station is a functionalist gem, from an architectural point of view. I just wanted to look at it. And of course sit here and act tough a bit in McDonalds.'

'OK,' I say and know my gaze is a bit blank. *Functionalist gem*. It sounds as if he's read it in a brochure or a guide book.

'Functionalism is a tendency within art, especially within architecture. Around the 1930s. But even though Florence isn't exactly best known for its functionalist architecture, this railway station is really famous. Those who built it wanted to do something completely different than do some sort of late-classicist or some really trashy Renaissance style thing so many centuries later ...'

My gaze is now so blank that I really need my sun glasses to protect me from the world.

'OK,' I say. 'Yes, well, there's quite a lot of art and stuff here, in Florence, isn't there.'

What am I saying? *Art and stuff*. Intellectual kamikaze.

'Yes, there is. There's a lot of *art and stuff* in Florence. There's actually nowhere else in the whole world where there is so much art. I don't think it's saying too much to claim that Florence is actually the birthplace of the history of Western art. Nothing less.'

He looks at me. Is he poking fun at me?

'OK,' I say and feel the Bibbi-Jeanette factor rising. 'Dad is, as I mentioned ... extremely interested in art. That's probably why he came here.'

Now I'm quite sure he's poking fun at me.

'My name's Jakob, by the way,' the young man says and holds out his hand. It's firm and warm.

'Frida,' I say, thankful at least that my name *isn't* Bibbi-Jeanette.

'The first name of one of the world's finest and most interesting artists is Frida,' Jakob says. 'Frida Kahlo.'

'OK,' I say.

What's the matter with me? Why have I suddenly got such an urge to smell his neck that I can hardly stop myself?

WE JUST START TO WALK. I couldn't care less if we find a good baguette bar or not.

Jakob stops at a small octagonal building just in front of the Big-Ben-cream-cake Cathedral. I hadn't really noticed it before today. A woman in front of us is holding an umbrella with *101 Dalmatians* on it high above the heads of a flock of perhaps forty Japanese tourists who are standing looking at some heavy gates that look as if they are made of gold.

'What are they all looking at?' I ask.

'They're looking at the relief on the Gate of Paradise, which is the finest of the decorated gates at the Battistero, the baptistery of...'

Jakob suddenly swallows his words and falls completely silent.

'Of what?'

'Sure you want to hear? I often give lectures to people. About art and stuff. I simply can't stop. People aren't always as interested as I would like. I am an absolute nerd. I've heard that nerds have bad antennas for other people. I've no proper hobbies, there were very few scouting trips to forests and fields when I was young, not a lot of playing the clarinet – I've got no access to a hobby workshop or lathe, or all that many friends. I read away all my childhood. For better or worse.'

'You're just saying that to sound exciting and shy.'

'Yes,' Jakob says. But actually *looks* shy.

'Why are you interested in art of all things? Why not stamps? Cars? The royal family?'

'I don't know. Stamps and cars are a bit too domestic. Maybe because I'd like to find something that lasts. What is it people want to look at for centuries? A picture is so immediate. Everyone can look at it. Illiterates and deaf people.'

'Not blind,' I say.

'What? ...No. Not blind people.'

Jakob takes out a cigarette and sticks it behind his ear. Does he do that to act tough, or quite unconsciously?

'Tell me!' I say. 'Someone has to get a bit of pleasure from all the things you've been reading. You're sure to be dead clever. And in spite of the fact that dad is always on about how important art is, I know practically nothing. We learnt even less at school, a tiny bit about Picasso and Munch – I don't think the teachers know all that much really. Tell me about the Gate of Paradise. Is it really paradise they're thinking of?'

Jakob cleared his throat. It really looks as if he's worried about performing. I like that.

'Early in the 15th century, the authorities and those in charge in Florence wanted to mark the fact that the Black Death had finally died down, and a competition was announced as to who could make the most beautiful gate for the Baptistery. After a certain amount of toing and froing, the artist Lorenzo Ghiberti won. A kind of programme committee selected ten important stories from the Bible that he was to illustrate. The first motif was taken from the story of Adam and Eve who were evicted from the Garden of Eden, and the last was of King Solomon being visited by the Queen of Sheba. Ghiberti has in a way covered the several thousand years of all the Old Testament in just ten pictures. Well, the choice is perhaps a bit strange, for us protestants at any rate – why for example have they chosen a slightly more unusual text about Noah instead of a picture of the ark itself that Noah built?'

'Yes why, tell me,' I say.

'But that's how it goes with selections. I think I would have chosen most of the same stories myself. Ghiberti's workshop spent 21 years at any rate completing the door. Somewhere else I've read that it took 27 years. If you read art history, it turns out that much of the information from that period is a bit approximate – we don't actually know all sorts of things as well as the authors pretend we do.'

'But you must have found out a bit?' I ask.

'Yes, and you can see most of it with your own eyes. Ghiberti's winning entry broke enough with the earlier Gothic style for many people to consider the Gate of Paradise to be the very first Renaissance work. But I don't. Even if Ghiberti was absolutely great on perspective, I think the Renaissance actually began earlier.'

'I believe you,' I say. For what am I meant to say, *actually*? I can't at any rate judge whether Ghiberti was the first to be great on perspective. I don't actually know at all what the Renaissance was. Something to do with art and stuff, sure. But what? I feel a bit freaked out that this guy knows so much. What have I done with my life? He can't be more than two years older than me at most. As long as he doesn't think I'm just a baby.

Jakob fetches his cigarette from behind his ear and lights it.

'The strange thing is that all the guided tours have a regular stop here – these doors have been seen, filmed and photographed by millions of tourists from all over the world. The old Italian painter and art historian Vasari called the doors the most perfect and beautiful work of art in the world. It was Michelangelo himself who thought that the gates were worthy to be those into Paradise itself. But because of the air pollution they were taken down – the ones here now are copies, fakes actually. Ghiberti's originals are kept at the Museo del Duomo. But there aren't many people who go there.'

'So what?' I ask. And regret saying it immediately. Why hadn't I thought of something a bit more IQ to say? Dad hasn't done a proper job with his daughter's classical education. Admittedly, I've heard of Michelangelo. But I'm having trouble with old Vasari. Old Ghiberti as well.

'No, so what?' Jakob says in a dull voice, and I'm really sorry I said that. Couldn't I have said something that was just a teeny bit less dense.

'So these are not the originals. It was just that,' Jakob says, gazing at some point in the air I can't locate. 'People often go for what's second-best.'

'Sometimes you sometimes only have what's second-best?' I say, without an inkling as to what is going to happen next.

'Yes ... perhaps,' he says again. 'I've passed by here several times a day recently, and one day I had this tremendous urge to see the originals. Felt it was absolutely necessary in some way.'

It sounds now as if he is trying to apologise. I feel squishy inside when he tells this, no matter if he is both clever and conceited. And, of all things, I suddenly want to stroke him on the cheek. There on the cheekbone. It looks soft and hard at one and the same time. I don't do it, of course. I wish the world was such that you could stroke a guy's cheek without it being stupid. Or that I dared. I've read somewhere or other that if someone strokes you cautiously over the cheek, you're so vulnerable that the first reaction you get is to find out if this means something dangerous.

'I just wanted to say that I'm still very hungry,' Jakob says.

'Sorry,' I say. And I really mean it. 'Let's find those baguettes.'

'What about you, then?' Are you interested in royalty?

'Queen Sonja is incredibly interested in art and stuff,' I say, while I jog along behind Jakob like an infatuated schoolgirl.

