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**Extracts from**  
**The Twentieth Day (Tjuendedagen)**

**by**

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Translated from the Norwegian by Barbara Haveland

**Extract 1**

**4. You three**

Some days later (and now it begins) she was away at a conference. It was one of those weeks when you did not have the children, so you would have the house to yourself for a few days. You used to always like being alone, you could listen to music, and at such times maybe it felt as if doors opened and opened for you. You came home from work and she was not there, and you knew that she would not be home, and you had to keep yourself busy, tidying up the house, cutting the grass, washing clothes, folding clothes, trying to keep things alive round about you. An occasional evening you went back in to the office, to save lapsing into a kind of listless, aimless brooding.

What does it take, I think you asked yourself. And it was not a question which required an answer. It was not a matter of what it takes to solve a concrete problem, something which will, sooner or later, solve itself anyway. It was a matter of something bigger, or something very, very much smaller, something inevitable and past help. It was a matter of what it takes to keep going. How is this life to be borne? What does it take to get yourself through the days? Who were you when she was not there, when you could not hear her voice, when you were not conscious of the way she moved, in the garden, on the stairs, on her way from one room to another? You had got out of the way of being alone, that was how you explained it to yourself. As soon as she was home again you became warm and loose, you saw yourself in a better light, were more alive than you had found it possible to be when alone.

I don't know. Maybe that was how you thought, or maybe I am confusing my own life with yours. I mean: of course I am, isn't that what's known as being involved? I imagine that I speak understandingly of you, when in fact it is only myself and my own inclinations that are being expressed.

But your life went on as normal, you had a wry, jocular conversation with one of the neighbours, who popped in to pick up a pair of electric garden shears you had borrowed from him weeks before; you spoke on the phone, first to your kids then to someone from the office. And you went for a long bike ride in the hills. Your plan had been to take a quick dip in a small, secluded tarn, but you reached it to find other people there, two men of your own age, grown men with expensive bikes, and they were swimming, had whipped off their cycling shorts and tops and gone skinny-dipping, exactly as you had meant to do, but there was no way you could do that now. You rode on and found another lake, but the evening air was starting to feel cool against your skin and you had lost the notion for a swim, so you turned for home. Your limbs had grown warm and

weary, just as you had wanted them to be and when you got home you showered and watched the news and eventually it was dark enough for you to turn in for the night. You lay down on the bed and waited for her to call.

She called, and apologised for ringing so late, and only then did you realise that you must have nodded off, but now you were awake again. She told you about her day and asked about yours. And then she said:

“He’s here.”

“Who?”

“Do you remember the guy I told you about?”

“The one who sparks off energy in the organisation?”

“He has a name too.”

She said his name. Her voice, warm and airy, and then it was transmitted straight into your ear. A perfectly ordinary name, and yet something happened to her voice when she said it, or to you when you heard it. A dark dye dissolving in a glass of clear water, and you said:

“Have you taken him up to your room?”

“I’ve only seen him,” she said. “This is a big place, lots of people. He’s here with a bunch of others, he’s taking part in another seminar.”

“Has he seen you?”

“Not yet. I don’t think.”

“But he’s bound to see you.”

“I expect so.”

“Good.”

“How do you mean?”

“I mean *good*. It’s a sign.”

“I don’t believe in signs.”

“Okay, but *take* it as a sign, why don’t you. Seize the opportunity.”

“To do what?”

“Whatever you want.”

A silence which lasted just long enough. At your end, at hers. Already you were licking the salt of jealousy from your fingers.

“Do you mean that?” she said.

“Yes,” you said.

“But do you really *mean* it?”

“Yes.”

“How can you mean it?”

“It can’t do any harm, can it?”

“You don’t think so?”

“Do you think so?”

“No, I don’t think it can do any harm, not to us. I could never fall for him. I’m quite sure about that.”

“Well, then it can’t do any harm, can it?”

“But I don’t want anybody but you.”

“Yes, but you *have* me.”

“Well anyway, I don’t dare. And anyway, I couldn’t go through with it. And anyway, I’m not like that.”

“You can do anything you set your mind to - I should know.”

“Well, this I can’t do, that’s for sure. Not on my own, at any rate. You’d have to come and help me.

You had sat up on the edge of the bed, or you wandered from room to room, or you stood at the window. Light cloud, the trees lightly swaying and her voice light in your ear, and everything that could come to you seemed, you felt, to come from her, and then it came to you, and it came so lightly.

“Would you like me to take a run up and help you get to know him?”

“You can’t drive up here now?”

“Yes I can, I’ll take the day off. Actually it suits quite well.”

In all probability it did not suit at all well for you to take a day off without any warning, and she must have known this too, but something had opened up in front of you, a doorway which you could not resist stepping through.

“I’ll get in the car first thing tomorrow and drive up. I have some overtime to use up, I’ll take a day or a day and a half of that, bring some work with me and use your room while you’re at the conference. It’ll be nice to stay at a hotel with you again. It’s been a long time. If you dare to smuggle me up to our room, that is?”

“Oh, yes,” she said.

Or:

“Oh, yes – *come*.” Maybe that’s what she said.

“I’m looking forward to seeing you,” I said.

“I’m looking forward to seeing you too. I miss you.”

“And I’m looking forward to seeing him. I can hardly wait.”

“That’s not so important, let’s just forget about him.”

“Oh yes, you say that now.”

“Yes, I say that now. And I’ll say the same thing tomorrow.”

The next morning you got into the car and set off. There was a pile of CDs in the car, a mixture of her music and yours, music she was in the habit of playing very loud to herself in the car in the mornings, so this was the music you listened to as you drove out of town. I don't know this, but I think that's how it must have been, at any rate I like the thought of you in the car, listening to the music you used to listen to when I knew you.

## Extract 2

On the Friday morning you went into the office early again, you had meetings all morning and no chance to think about yourself or her. When she sent you a text message you did not have time to read it properly, you merely gathered that she was on her way home. You had decided to pick up some catfish at a fishmonger's you usually came by on your bike, you had found a recipe you thought she would like. Catfish with tomato and olive salsa. Something like that.

You strode briskly down the corridors with papers in your hand, opted for the stairs rather than the lift, drank cold water instead of coffee. During one of your meetings a young government secretary got your first name wrong, she did not realise it herself and no one else seemed to notice either, but you heard it, and you liked it, liked the feeling that the room around you had expanded, as if you had managed to open a secret door.

At the end of the day you received a text message to say that she was home. And: that you had to call her. So you went back and read the previous message. It said: *driving home now, am not alone. lets talk later.* Let's talk, you thought to yourself, a mite pedantically, but it wasn't like her to make mistakes, not even in text messages. She must have written it in a hurry as she was leaving. Or there was some other explanation. And of course there was Some Other Explanation: well, what did that mean, that she wasn't alone? There was only one conclusion to be drawn from this and once you realised that you had to sit down. But then you could not sit there any longer, so you got up, went to the window and looked out at the hot streets as you called her number. She answered straight away. There was an immediacy to her voice, an intimacy and an attentiveness. She was at home, you recognised the sounds, she was wearing high-heeled shoes and you could hear her walking across the kitchen floor (the muffled click of her heels) and into the hall (the sharper click over the tiled floor) while she was talking to you.

“He’s here now.”

“Oh, yes?”

“I was supposed to go with some other people, but they had to leave earlier.”

“Oh, yes?”

“Yes. And he offered to give me a lift.”

“Good.”

“And on the way back in the car I invited him home.”

“Oh, yes?”

“Yes.”

“That was a good idea.”

“Do you mean that?”

“Yes, really. Is he there now?”

“We just got in. We talked almost non-stop all the way home. We talked about what you and I talked about, too. That there was something - no, *is* something – we wanted to ask him. And he’s been very open with me.”

Did she say that?

Well, it says here that she did.

I have tried to imagine what happened in that car. So: her and him sitting side by side in their respective seats. One driving, the other watching the countryside go by. At ease. They were colleagues of sorts and something had opened up between them, something that was neither collegial nor ordinary friendship. He put his arms around her and she began to cry, was that how it was? And you became obsessed with the idea of her broadening her sexual horizons. Although you did not put it that way, you would have called it broadening her *personal* horizons, wouldn’t you?

Because that was how you spoke and I expect that really was how you thought of it, and that you liked to see how she brightened up when she spoke of him, another man. Although there must have been other reasons too, I'm sure.

Back to her, and them in the car, sitting side by side. She said something, about one of her workmates being so great or so lovely or so nice.

"You're nice too," he said, seizing the opportunity.

"Do you think so?"

"You don't mind me saying?"

"No."

"I really like you."

"You do? Well the feeling's mutual. I really like you too."

And then he said:

"What I mean is, I like you in a way that's not entirely uncomplicated, you might say.

What with us working together, as we do. And you being married.

And she said:

"I knew what you meant."

He drove. She gazed out of the window at the Norwegian countryside. The reserved fir trees, the pale-green, rather feminine birches. In my mind's eye I see what used to be fields but were turned into a golf course and now lie desolate and forsaken, soon to revert to fields once more, as part of some 'open farm' to which city folk can bring their kids to see the sheep or whatever you do at such places. The grown-ups pushing the children ahead of them into the barn, the children being coaxed into sticking their fingers into the mouths of new-born calves; and this is something that will be forgotten the moment it occurs, or will never be forgotten: the feeling of a rough animal tongue on a pale, smooth childish hand.

And then: her hands. The fact that the one lies on top of the other on her lap. Her hands overlapping on her lap, between her legs. And his hands, so lonesome as they scaled the steering wheel. His hands looked like two naked bodies crawling one behind the other along a plank, or a bench in a gym, or across a suspension bridge. She felt a sweet twinge – or, what’s it called: a stab of sweetness – down there, between her legs. And it could be that he felt something similar at the very tip of his thing, just there. A tender little twinge. And then: he took a deep breath and said:

“I would so like to sleep with you. For us to sleep together without any clothes.”

### Extract 3

## 7. The New State

What is it that runs through an entire population, that manifests itself in every single person, as if it were something borne on the air? What is it that is conveyed through a language without those who speak the language so much as noticing it, as if it goes without saying? And what is it that filters down through the years like a spirit, like a ghost, like an omnipresent darkness or a soft, shifting light? What is it that darkens or lightens up faces, touching everyone, more or less simultaneously, in different places, all unmarked, and without the faces themselves remarking on it.

You wanted to be one of the mass. You wanted to see yourself as a member of a greater whole. You wanted to be one of those who took responsibility for the whole, for all the others living in the world with you. This desire to be one of the mass may simply have been your way of recognising your own identity, it was one of your distinguishing features, marking you out while at the same time allowing you to lose yourself in the crowd.

Presumably this was how the pair of you chose names for your children. Parents tend to experiment with names which will bring out certain qualities, set their children apart from all others while at the same time endowing them with a sense of affinity. They feel their way, pronounce sounds, look at one another and shake their heads, dismiss these sounds, try others, on and on until that name is uttered in which the face shows itself, the way that face seems to be, seems as if it will be. The way the parents hope and believe it will be. Then comes the endless repetition of the name, the sound made again and again by every mouth, so that everyone will get to know it, so that the child will assume the qualities which are seen as going with the sound? The name is

pulled down over the face in much the same way as a woolly hat may be tugged down over your eyes so you peer out at the world through the dark, knitted weave. The name is repeated until it seems to belong to the bearer, isn't that the way of it? And isn't that how you two ended up choosing the same names as had been chosen by so many other members of the urbane Norwegian middle-class at exactly the same time? You wanted to stamp your children with a mark unique to them, a sound intended to render them markworthy, and so you wound up marking each of them out as just one more among all the others in that batch. Thus, for example, with short girls' names ending in 'a', names that were easily called, easily sung, easily caressed by the voice. Boys' names that had been borne by fishermen and farmhands a century before; bluff, hearty, manly names, conveying mildness of manner and firmness of purpose; preferably with a forceful consonant in the first syllable, one which would cause the name to roll off the tongue when introducing oneself.

I see this as being one of those topics with which you entertained the people you worked with. Whenever someone new joined your department you would inquire as to the names of their children, if they had children, in order to gauge the year in which they had been born. And from that you could, with a relatively high degree of accuracy, guess the age of the parents, their class, their social aspirations and cultural preferences. Demographics, statistics, population movement. Individual occurrences which showed themselves to be super-individual patterns when considered at group level.

You started work in 1990. A few years prior to this the great reorganisation of the Norwegian central administration had begun. Roughly speaking, the idea must have been - in Norway as in much of the Western world, as it happens - that a vast state bureaucracy is a colossus which feeds off itself, an inefficient, alienating and ever more costly way of organising public services. The word 'state' was in itself outdated: it was too readily associated with Soviet

communism, hostility towards the individual, restrictive regulations, corruption masquerading as petty bureaucracy. The state stood for the opposite of personal initiative, enterprise, adaptability.

The state was not sexy enough, but now at long last it was going to be. That was the feeling. One of the first things you were handed when you started the job was a brochure entitled “The New State”. It was lying on the desk in the first office you were allocated. Massive piles of it, hundreds and hundreds of brochures stacked on the desk and up against the walls. The brochure about the new state had been distributed to the press and to all public offices. But no one knew what to do with it and no one knew where to send the rest of the enormous print-run, so a portion of it had been consigned to your tiny office.

Other than that the room was empty when you walked in, with just the desk and a chair and the empty bookshelves; no computer either, not yet. But in the middle of the desk and up against the wall were piles of this little brochure with a naïve drawing of a grinning lion on the cover.

The state, which you had just joined, was to be made new. As many government bodies as possible were to be disestablished, reorganised, converted into state-owned limited companies. As many public services as possible were to be sold off to private enterprise or, at any rate, run along the same lines as the private sector model. Not that this was how it was worded in the brochure, it's unlikely that any public servant would have stated it quite so plainly, not back then; that would have been regarded as politically crass and inept. Only later did that start to happen, bit by bit. But it was there in the air. Everyone knew it, both those in favour and those against. And yet one could not possibly be against it, or so it seemed, it came of its own accord, and with super-individual force, or so it appeared – the privatisation of the state's functions and properties had to do with adapting to a global trend which could not be controlled. It could be fought, it's effect lessened, but it could not be stopped.

This is how it must have looked to you, I imagine, and no doubt to many others in the same situation as yourself. You applied for a job with the department because you believed in the concept of the mass, believed in stricter political control of the distribution of costs and benefits. You had been looking forward to being involved in public service, you wanted to be part of this endeavour to care for the welfare of the mass.

**Extract 4**

I think of you. Of your face and your hands, your close-cropped head and the economical way in which you had begun to move. You with your neat and yet grubby suits, you with your clean hands, you hunched over the bars of your bike, wearing sunglasses, earphones and a suit jacket that flapped and fluttered around you as you steered the bike around the cars and trams and buses in Oslo. Was there some part of you that fought against it?

And isn't that why I am writing about you, is that not what I am trying to show? Which is to say: the transition, the passage, the actual departure from everything familiar? The point at which you lost sight of yourself, where, for a short while you were free, where, for once, you did not have to make sense of yourself and everything around you in a far too constructive, preconstructed and conclusive fashion.

You had been lying beside him on the bed, you had kissed, and then it had hit you, as forcefully and unexpectedly as a peasants' revolt in an immature state, like the voice of revolution in an inexperienced body, or the sort of stuttering and stammering and mumbling and singing that heralds a deviation from an otherwise focussed speech.

Or simply this: that you wanted more. More of him, perhaps; at any rate more of this thing of which you knew nothing. It was as if you always had to go a little further, as if it would never be enough for you to hold someone's hand and have a perfectly normal conversation. As if it was not even enough for you to see the woman you were married to come to herself with another man. Now you wanted him to lie under you or over you and you threw yourself on top of him, I think, and he was surprised, but kissed you back as if he also wanted more of you. As I'm sure he did, just then.

And never before, I don't suppose, had you felt your face scraped by a rough male chin, by another man's stubble. Never before had a man cupped your face in big, beefy hands and drawn it to him. He kissed you roughly on the mouth, bit your lips, slapped your face, pushed you down onto the bed, rolled you over onto your stomach, lay on top of you, bore down on you. And you felt his breath on your ear, his hands on your bum. He laid you open, stuck one finger, then two, inside you.

"Does that hurt?" he asked.

"I don't know," you said.

"You just have to say," he said.

"Yes," you said. "It hurts a bit?"

"Hang on," he said. "Don't move, please."

He got up to fetch something and returned to you. It was her moisturiser, you realised later, and he smeared the cold, fatty greasy moisture inside you. Moments later you were warm and smooth and damp in there in a way which must have embarrassed you. Then perhaps he slid a pillow under your hips, and as you lay there underneath him, for the first time presumably you learned what it is like. Yes? Or *was* like. To lie under a body that is bigger than your own, arrange yourself for another person. He was taller than you, his body was larger and heavier than any body you had lain under before.

And what could you gain from all of this except the knowledge that it left you with less freedom of movement than you were used to? And that you wanted him to weigh down on you so heavily that it would affect your very self. And then he entered you. At first you hardly felt it, then you became aware that his thing was there, inside you, and that it was starting to grow, inside you, and that soon it would be too big. And that he was driving inwards and upwards, and that he was starting to move, and that he seemed to be swelling.

A push and a thrust. Another push and another thrust. And another and another, and so it continued, and it was so dark and so stifling and he was too deep inside you. And yet you wanted it, and you wanted to be laid open and flayed, wanted to be taken and have things done to you, laid open in such a way that he could take you and spread you wide and flay you and do things to you. And did it feel as though he burst your insides asunder, causing your eyes to close and your mouth to gape? And your hands to fall open, and did it feel like dying?