

© Forlaget Oktober 2009. Translated from the Norwegian by Barbara Haveland. No part may be published in book form or electronically or translated into any other language without a prior written agreement with Aschehoug Agency, P.O.Box 363 Sentrum, NO-0102 Oslo, Norway (epost@aschehougagency.no) Foreign rights available from Aschehoug Agency.

Extract from
***17. roman* (Novel 17)**
by
Dag Solstad

Bjørn Hansen was retired now. That was alright by him. He made up his mind never to return to the shed in the backyard of the condemned (still) tenement not far from where he lived, but to find other things to do. It's not all that hard to find things to do. He was actually quite fit, a little the worse for wear maybe, a mite stiff in his movements, when bending down and so on, but fit and well, if a bit slow. He might get a bit lonely, though: it wasn't, he concluded, as if he had any friends. But he did have his books. It would have been worse if it had been the other way round, oh yes, it would have been unbearable had it been the other way round.

Late one evening, two months after he retired, he wrote a letter to his son, Peter Korpi Hansen in the town of Bø in Telemark. This was not long after he had posted a birthday card to little Wiggo, the second time he had done so, and now he wrote that he would quite like to visit his

son, his wife Thea and little Wiggo in Telemark, where he had never been. He was thinking he might come down in two weeks' time on the Friday afternoon and return to Oslo the following Sunday afternoon or evening. He awaited with anticipation their reply to this suggestion.

As soon as he had finished the letter he got out an envelope, slipped the letter into it, sealed it and wrote his son's name and address on the front, then he put on his outdoor things and went for an evening stroll, to find a newsagent's which sold stamps and then to look for a postbox into which to pop the letter. This he found and returned home feeling relieved. That was that done. Quickly and efficiently.

He received a speedy reply saying that he was welcome to come to Bø on Friday the such-and-such and that he would be met at the station when the train he had mentioned arrived there at 13.17. Time to check out one's wardrobe, Bjørn Hansen said to himself out loud. As it turned out most of his clothes, while pretty well-worn, were perfectly serviceable. He would not have considered buying anything new had he not, for some reason, been set on acting the grand gentleman, or smart, elderly gent. But why should he do that? Or rather: why shouldn't he? When he was going to be meeting his son (and his wife and his eleven-year-old son) for the first time in twenty years? It might actually be a good idea to present himself as a smart, elderly gentleman, it might lend him the veneer of self-confidence which he would possibly have more need of now than ever before. But this was not to be. He inspected garment after garment, and in the choice between smart and new or worn and well-tried in every case he opted for the latter. Even when it came to the light-coloured, but somewhat threadbare spring coat (or autumn coat, if you like, since this was in the autumn). I could at least treat myself to a brand-new coat, he muttered crossly to himself, nobody could object to that. But there was to be no new spring (autumn) coat for Bjørn Hansen.

He did, however, get a new suitcase. For the simple reason that all of the suitcases he owned were on the big side, and if he were to turn up at Bø lugging one of them they would think

that when he had written that he would be returning to Oslo on Sunday afternoon or evening he had only said this so as not to seem presumptuous, while the big suitcase would tend to suggest that he was, in fact, meaning to stay with them for quite some time.

And so it was that Bjørn Hansen was to be seen, on this Friday morning in mid-September, on a glorious autumn day with the sun shining in a bright blue sky, standing on platform 7 at Oslo's Sentralstasjon, waiting to travel south on (*Dag?*) Sørlandsbanen to the parish and railway town of Bø in the heart of Telemark, on a train departing at 11.17 a.m., in his light-coloured, spotlessly clean (straight from the dry-cleaner's), but threadbare spring (autumn) coat and with his new, light and elegant little suitcase of genuine leather by his side. Here came the train! It stopped, Hansen located his carriage and joined the queue of other passengers getting into it; then the sixty-seven-year-old man clambered, with some difficulty, up the steps and into the carriage, found his way to the window seat he had reserved, opened his case and took out a book before setting his lightweight suitcase up on the baggage rack; this done, he made himself comfortable, having first removed his spring (autumn) coat and hung it on the hook next to him. He opened his book, *The Sickness unto Death* by Søren Kierkegaard, in which he was once more about to immerse himself. The journey could begin.

As soon as the train moved off it ran into a tunnel and stopped again almost immediately at an underground station, Nationaltheatret it was called. And it struck Bjørn Hansen that it must be a long time indeed since he had travelled anywhere by train, because this station was totally new to him. He had heard of it, but never come through it himself, which was to say that Bjørn Hansen had not travelled by train since the days when Oslo had had two main railway stations, Østbanen and Vestbanen, and Sørlandsbanen, the line serving the south (*Dag?*), had run from Vestbanen; twenty years ago that must have been, maybe even longer. This thought had not occurred to him when he had booked the tickets a few days earlier because he had grown so used to

the new Sentralstasjon: he often popped into the station for one thing or another, to buy a newspaper or a hot dog at the kiosk, living, as he did, not far from there, and although he had known about it he had given no thought to the fact that there was a new tunnel and a new railway station in that tunnel. Now, however, a jolt ran through him. How narrow his world had been for the past fifteen years, what an isolated life he had led. He had more or less chained himself to one fixed point around which he had roiled in a remarkably small circle, all the while hearing time ticking away. He lost himself in *The Sickness unto Death*. Until Drammen, where someone came and sat down in the empty seat to the outside of him. He did not like this, he never had done, he had always preferred it when the seat next to him remained empty, he found the close presence of other, unknown, persons on train journeys stifling, but he had always put up with it, as he did now. He buried his nose in a book, reading. But he was conscious that the train was travelling alongside Drammenselva, which is to say, heading inland, and he had trouble concentrating, why didn't I bring a detective novel instead, he asked himself, that's the right reading matter for a journey, not the heavy, long-winded sentences that Kierkegaard is so fond of, and he put down his book and gazed out at the river, making its lovely course down to salty Drammensfjord. Through the village of Hokksund with its oversized station building; one worthy of a medium sized Norwegian town of fifty thousand people, and then further inland, across Drammenselva and into the hills, the mountains. Past Vestfossen and then they were approaching Kongsberg. For God's sake, it's been eighteen years, show a little bit of interest at least in how the old place is doing. He peeked out. Caught a glimpse of the Hospital on the right and a flash of Numedalslågen's foaming falls on his own side before the train pulled slowly into Kongsberg station and stopped. He had once lived in a block of flats not far from the railway station; he looked for it, but could not see it. The whole area around the railway station looked totally different, Bjørn Hansen did not recognise the place. There seemed to be a completely new street layout, or traffic system, which made it impossible for him to get his

bearings, at least from where he sat, in a railway carriage, by the window. Even so, it's odd that I can't spot the block of flats in which I actually lived for so many years, until fifteen years ago, Hansen thought to himself, in some amazement. The man who had occupied the seat next to him had got up and left the train here at Kongsberg. He had been about the same age as Hansen, but he had shown no sign of knowing or recognising him. Another man took the empty seat, one of those who had got on at Kongsberg and walked down the rows of seats in the carriage, hunting for one to commandeer. This man was much younger, but oh, so fat, Bjørn Hansen thought, he'll be all over me and my seat as soon as he's settled, he thought, and I'll be wedged up against the wall. The train pulled out of the station. Hansen tried, from this new angle, to catch sight of the tower block in which he had lived for fifteen years, but had no luck this time either. He could see tower blocks, certainly, but none of them bore any resemblance to the one he had lived in, or not enough of one for him to identify it or to be able to say, yes, it might have been that one, not, at any rate, without such a large grain of doubt that it would seem stupid of him to claim that this could well have been the block in which he had resided. But he recognised the area where Busk the dentist and his wife Berit had lived, he could not see their house, but he recognised the area. I wonder how Berit and Harald are, he thought as the train rolled slowly out of Kongsberg. It's been a long time. There's no knowing whether they're both still alive even, they'll be retired at any rate, and one of them could be gone, maybe Busk the dentist is a widower now, or maybe it's the wife, Berit, who's been left; for all I know they could both be dead and I wouldn't have heard a word about it. Not even if Turid was dead. Yes, maybe Turid Lammers, the woman he had lived with for years, was dead, he had no idea. On the other hand: people live so long these days, in our walk of life that is, pointlessly long in fact, he thought resentfully. By now the train had left Kongsberg far behind and was racing full tilt across the hills and into Telemark. No stations at which to stop, only signposts saying Sølverket – Saggrenda – tunnel – Meiheia – 683 masl – and Hjuksebø station, where

modern express trains no longer stop, but zoom through, at reduced speed it's true, on their way to Nordagutu, Bø, Lunde, Gjerstad, Vegårdshei and so on, all the way to the end of the line: Kristiansand, or Stavanger. Bjørn Hansen had always liked travelling; fate had, however, rendered this a neglected passion. In theory, though, he had always travelled a great deal by way of maps, so when, just before Hjuksebø station, he glimpsed a vast lake down below, far in the distance, he knew that it was Heddalsvannet, which was part of, or should have been part of the amazing Skienvassdraget. The train was now passing through a rather rugged, forest-clad range of hills, but suddenly it came out into a clearing offering a view right across Hedddalsvannet to the hazy blue mountains on the other side. Hansen observed how Heddalsvannet grew narrower and narrower. He found the constantly recurring sight of the steadily straitening Heddalsvannet quite fascinating. Here he could actually see with his own eyes just why, some hundred years ago, the final stage of the canalisation of Skienvassdraget had come to nothing: this waterway which would have linked Notodden on the northern shore of Heddalsvannet with Oslo Fjord and maritime Norway, nay, the World. This grand plan, to connect Skien, lying at the head of a narrow side fjord (Skiensfjorden), with another side fjord (Langesundsfjorden), then Oslo Fjord and thus with Skagerrak, the North Sea and the Baltic; to form a link, in fact, between the oceans wide and Notodden in the heart of Norway, the Norwegian backwoods, just about as far out in the sticks as you could get; this beautiful vision, or link, had been thwarted by the all too narrow and, hence, all too shallow southern part of Heddalsvannet. But this same all too narrow and shallow fact was sparkling so blue in the fine September sunlight, arousing in Bjørn Hansen, as the train pulled into Nordagutu station, a banal yearning for beauty (*Dag? or: sense of wistfulness, or: rush of sentimentality*). Would that we were there, as the carol says (*Dag: okay?*). Not at Nordagutu station, but down there by those sparkling blue waters of which had come into view each time the train rounded a bend and emerged into a clearing in the thickly wooded landscape. Now, though, the train had stopped at

Nordagutu station, that one-time travel hub where Sørlandsbanen and Vestfoldbanen met, deep in the heart of Norway. The fat character whose body had completely taken up the seat next to Bjørn Hansen twisted his great bulk around and peered past Hansen and out of the window. His fellow passenger had behaved impeccably, he had filled his seat to the limit, but not a millimetre more. So Bjørn Hansen looked kindly on the other man as he gazed past him and out of the window. The train moved off again and Hansen looked at his watch. In twenty minutes he would be in Bø. Suddenly he crumpled up, as if struck by lightning, as they say, sometimes with good cause. Oh, hell! He had forgotten to buy presents! He had actually forgotten to buy presents for the people he was going to visit in Bø, the people who were now waiting for him at the station. His son, whom he had not seen in close on twenty years. And his son's wife, who was his daughter-in-law, but whom he had never met. And his only grandchild, his grandson, young Wiggo aged eleven. And he had not merely forgotten to buy presents, the thought that he ought to do so had not even entered his head! Not once since he had written to them weeks before and announced his desire to visit them had this thought occurred to him. Now one could, of course, debate the soundness of turning up laden with gifts to see a son you'd been separated from for twenty years; the same went for that son's wife, his daughter-in-law, although in the latter case it could hardly be regarded as tactless to appear with a small bottle of eau-de-Cologne in his suitcase, but as far as his son was concerned he honestly did not know. He would probably be embarrassed if he, Bjørn, were to give him a present; if he gave him anything it ought to be a good bottle of whisky, but he doubted whether his son would appreciate that. He had a suspicion that his forty-year-old son would view such a gift as a pretty cheap, not to say dirty, trick and there Bjørn Hansen had to agree with his son. After all, they had had no contact with one another for almost twenty years. But a little bottle of eau-de-Cologne for his wife would surely go down well. It certainly couldn't do any harm. Well, in any case it was too late now, he was on a train, and not some luxury train with little boutiques selling exclusive

perfumes, and it made no odds now anyway. But to forget to buy a present for his grandson! That was embarrassing. He could say it was an oversight, too right it was an oversight, occasioned by his realisation that he could not give Wiggo's father a bottle of whisky without it seeming embarrassing, yes, it was an oversight, but was it an embarrassing oversight? Was it so terrible? Sitting there helplessly on that southbound train between Nordagutu and Bø, Bjørn Hansen felt it was. What was he to do? He squirmed in despair, but he could not think what to do. Not to bring a present for his son, well, there was nothing to be done about that; not to bring a present for his wife, that was also fair enough, seeing that he could not possibly give her husband a present, but to show up without a present for their son, his own grandchild, a little boy of eleven, his descendant in the second degree, that was out of the question. What was he to do? The minutes ticked by and soon he would be in Bø. And then it came to him! A brilliant idea, every bit as brilliant as the September sunshine outside the window here in the depths of Telemark. He would give his grandson a brand spanking new Thousand Kroner Note! And this he would pick up at Bø Savings Bank! Bjørn Hansen breathed a sigh of relief. Just at that moment someone nudged him in the ribs. It was the fat bloke who had occupied the seat next to him. He held out a silver cigarette case and asked if Bjørn Hansen would join him in a cigarette. "D'you think it's okay?" Hansen asked, somewhat nonplussed. "Of course it's okay," the strange man said, opening the case and offering him a cigarette. Bjørn Hansen took one, then the fat stranger took one, pulled out an elegant cigarette lighter and lit Hansen's cigarette. They each took two blissful drags, whereafter the fat stranger produced a nifty little portable ashtray, complete with lid, which appeared to be big enough to take the ash from at least two cigarettes plus their butts, and this he held in his left palm, handy for them both to use. The two gentlemen sat side by side smoking their cigarettes in the long railway carriage en route from Oslo to Kristiansand (and Stavanger). While they were smoking an announcement over the loudspeaker informed them that they would be arriving at Bø in two

minutes. Bjørn Hansen looked out of the window and saw that they were passing through a densely built-up area, he noticed that the train had slowed down considerably, but he calmly finished his cigarette, then stubbed it out and waited for the generous stranger next to him to do the same. By this time the train had come to a halt and only now did Hansen turn to his neighbour and inform him that this was his stop. His neighbour promptly got up to let Bjørn Hansen out and stood quietly by while he took down his lightweight suitcase, slipped *The Sickness unto Death* into it, grabbed his coat and put it on, bade his unknown travelling companion a cordial farewell and walked down the carriage to the door.

Translated from the Norwegian by Barbara J. Haveland