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Novel 11, Book 18

Dag Solstad

When this story begins, Bjørn Hansen has just turned fifty and is waiting for someone at the Kongsberg Railway Station. It has now been four years since he separated from Turid Lammers, with whom he had lived for fourteen years, from the very moment when he arrived at Kongsberg, which before that time barely existed on the map for him. He now lives in a modern flat in the centre of Kongsberg, a mere stone's throw from the railway station. When he arrived at Kongsberg eighteen years ago, he had only a few personal possessions, such as clothes and shoes, plus crates and crates of books. When he moved out of the Lammers villa, he also took away with him only personal possessions, such as clothes and shoes, besides crates and crates of books. That was his luggage. Dostoyevsky. Pushkin. Thomas Mann. Céline. Borges. Tom Kristensen. Márquez. Proust. Singer. Heinrich Heine. Malraux, Kafka, Kundera, Freud, Kierkegaard, Sartre, Camus, Butor.

When he had thought about Turid Lammers in the four years which had passed since the breakup, it had been with a sense of relief that it was over. At the same time he'd had to admit, with an amazement that verged on grief, that he was no longer capable either of understanding or bringing back why he had been taken with her. It is beyond doubt, however, that he had been. Otherwise, why would he have broken his marriage to Tina Korpi and abandoned her and their two-year-old son to follow Turid Lammers to Kongsberg, in the secret hope that she would have him? It was because of Turid Lammers that he had ended up at Kongsberg. Without her, or his now forgotten enthrallment by her, he would never have ended up here. Never. His life would have been altogether different. It would never have occurred to him to apply for the position of city treasurer at Kongsberg—in fact, he would not have dreamed of applying for a position as treasurer at all, but would probably have continued in the ministry, made a passable career there, and today in all likelihood been head of a government office, or have moved on to a high position in the Communications Administration, the Norwegian State Railways, or something of the sort. But never city treasurer. Never Kongsberg.

It troubled him that he was unable to bring back his fascination with Turid Lammers, at the time when he met her. A skinny, nervous woman, that was how he remembered her. When he met her she had just returned from France, where she had lived for seven years, with a wrecked marriage behind her. She settled in Oslo and immediately took a lover. The lover was him. Was it his fascination with the effects which women's nerves produce on their surroundings that got him caught in her meshes? Those restless mood swings? After half a year her father died, and she moved back to the provincial town she had come from, Kongsberg. Here she settled down in an old villa, took over the management of a flower shop, with her elder sister, and took a job as senior master at Kongsberg Secondary School, where she taught French, English and drama.

Her father died in September. She went home for the funeral and the settlement of the estate, and returned to Oslo after one week. For a month she lived as before. But then she suddenly decided to move back to Kongsberg. She told her lover on Wednesday evening, and by Sunday she was gone. When she said she intended to move, he first felt relief. At long last he could restore normal order to his life. He was married to Tina Korpi, and they had a two-year-old son together. He had not told Tina about Turid, it was a secret erotic adventure on his part. Actually it suited him well that she went away now, to Kongsberg and out of his life, without leaving anything else behind in his consciousness than the memory of a bit of stolen happiness.

But then he came to think that he couldn't let her down. He had to go to Kongsberg, to her, otherwise he would have done something he was going to regret for the rest of his life. Indeed, it seemed to him, this clear conviction that he would have regrets made returning to Tina and their son, to continue as before but now without a secret love, impossible. And so he disclosed his secret to his wife and broke out of his marriage.

Beside the relief he had initially felt when Turid said she was now going home for good, there was also his sense that it could not last; he had already then seen clearly what fourteen years later would result in his leaving her. He had no illusions that she would give him happiness. But when it dawned on him that she really was gone, he missed her so terribly that he was seized by a veritably moral urge to remain close to this woman who was constantly sending out nervous signals to her surroundings, who never was at rest, who was full of ideas all the time, every hour of the day.

It is possible that he told Tina he had found love and that he could not betray it. In all likelihood he did. It bothered him that he couldn't recall anything about Turid Lammers from that time which justified these big words. Apart from a few insignificant episodes, like Turid and him walking arm in arm along some pavement. Then Turid catches sight of a banana

peel, right in front of her on the pavement. She bends down without letting go of his arm and picks it up. Then she flings it into the middle of the street and says, merrily: 'I hope the cars will skid on it!' Good God, he had thought (then or later), this is her way of solving her problems. He was employed in a ministry, as he had been ever since he took his university degree in economics six years previously, and had already been promoted to office manager, no more than thirty-two years old. His lover was also thirty-two, a senior master. And so she picked up the banana peel from the pavement and simply flung it somewhere else. To the cars. Completely wacky, he must have been fascinated. But also uneasy, at any rate with a view to a possible life together with her (but that must have been later). Was it episodes like this that made him tell Tina that he had found love and could not betray it? The alternative would have been to say he was having an adventure and that he couldn't give it up. That, however, he could not have said, despite the fact that it expressed to perfection why Bjørn Hansen, a poor boy from a Norwegian coastal town, this successful young civil servant in one of our ministries, left his wife and two-year-old son to set out for Kongsberg and an uncertain future. His obsession was with the adventure, which had sucked him in, so intensely that he could barely breathe, and not his love of Turid Lammers. The allure of it. Deep down Bjørn Hansen knew that the most desirable happiness on this earth was a brief happiness, and now he was experiencing it by seeking out Turid Lammers secretly in her little flat at St Hanshaugen in Oslo. He had never lived so intensely before, because he knew he was in a place where he would not stay long. It was a dangerous game. Stolen happiness. And since Turid Lammers was the object of all this stolen happiness, he also started saying to himself that it was his love of her he could not betray. But it wasn't true. Turid Lammers was nothing apart from the adventure, the circumstances around their relationship. Her mimicry, her glances, her gestures, which would send shudders through him, those small wrists, so beautiful and French in their grace, her way of walking—everything received its lustre from

the circumstances around their relationship. He knew all that. To tell the truth, he was fully aware of it. He had played this game quite consciously, cultivating these stolen moments. He ought to have told his wife: I cannot possibly be certain that this is love, because I barely know her. I know her only from specific situations, where she is the object of my fascination. But these situations fulfill so many of my inmost desires, well, of what I expect from life, that now, when she has betrayed these situations by breaking out of them, I have to set out after her in an attempt to find her again.

The only thing he regretted about this break was that he had not told his wife straight out how things were. Otherwise he accepted that everything had turned out as it did. He still recognized, eighteen years afterwards, that he had done the right thing in abandoning an unsuspecting wife and his small child sleeping in an adjacent room. In order to look for her who represented adventure to him, even though he knew that the adventure was now over by the very fact that he was breaking out of his marriage to follow Turid Lammers. He had no hopes of restoring what had been, but he wanted to preserve the reminiscences of it, her, that is, to breathe in the same room as she. He could not let her down. He had discovered in this deliberate infidelity an intensity and suspense which he could usually only observe with fascination, but without fully understanding, in art and literature.

So he had left. After telling Tina Korpi that he was a prisoner of love and had to follow the bidding of its voice. Tina Korpi seemed to be in a state of shock. Stunned, so to speak, she sat on a chair just staring at him as she repeated, time and again, 'So that was why, I should've known.' He had feared that there would be harrowing scenes, and particularly that, while it was taking place, they would scream loudly at one another and thus wake up their son, who was lying in the adjacent room, so that they had to go in and soothe him and he, perhaps, to pick him up. But that did not happen. Bjørn Hansen packed a few personal belongings, which he brought to the car walking back and forth several times, while she,

stunned, was still sitting on her chair every time he came back, repeating her wailing, 'So that was why.' Ready at last, he had gone.

He drove to Drammen, under the amber lights from the street lamps suspended over Europavei 18, through the town along the eastern bank of the Drammen River, and then up towards Hokksund, still along the eastern bank of the Drammen River. At Hokksund there was a fork in the road, with one road leading across the river toward Kongsberg, Notodden, Numedal and Upper Telemark, the one he would take. But before doing that he stopped outside Eikerstua, a roadside pub just before the fork, and went in. It was late in the evening, but there were still clients on the premises, consuming open meat patty sandwiches and drinking coffee, motor-car owners like himself or lorry drivers, whose heavy, massive vehicles were parked in front of the roadside pub. Bjørn Hansen went straight over to the telephone booth and dialed Turid Lammers' number. He was very nervous, he felt, as he inserted coins into the slot telephone and dialed the number, for he had not let her know in advance that he was on his way to her place. (I do not want to be the lover of a married man, Turid Lammers had said when she moved to Kongsberg, in a perfectly sober tone which had given him no reason whatever for thinking that she wished he would contribute his share to her not having to.) He heard her voice, while at the same time hearing the krone pieces rattle into the box, so that he could talk and know that she heard him. He related what had happened and that he was in a roadside pub some twelve miles north of Drammen, near the exit to Kongsberg. He asked if he could come and she said yes.

He took his seat in the car again and drove towards Kongsberg. All at once he was in the middle of Norway, the inhospitable, wooded, remote and (apart from those who lived there) out-of-the-way Norway, even though he found himself only forty-five miles from the nation's capital. It was in the middle of winter, with a heavy snowfall. The road was narrow, though it was a state highway, slippery and winding. High snowbanks left by the plough,

cold, compact snow. Flat fields buried in white darkness, gorges and hollows. Scattered farms. Spruce forests. A lone lamp in the night, fixed on the wall of a haphazardly placed modern one-storey building, swept by white whirling snow. Frozen lakes. Icebound rivers. Bedraggled spruces. Icicles hanging down from crags that dropped steeply over the roadway and were illuminated by the headlights of Bjørn Hansen's car. The trip required far more time than he had calculated, because he had to maintain a low speed in this wintry landscape, which he bored deeper and deeper into along the narrow, winding and slippery road, until he suddenly, on a steep downhill slope, realized that he found himself in the outskirts of a city, and soon thereafter he turned off the main road and drove into the illuminated city of Kongsberg.

It was late evening, but there were surprisingly many people in the streets, due to the fact that the last movie programme had just ended; it was ten past eleven. He drove around rather randomly trying to catch sight of a cab-stand. He found one near the railway station and parked there. He walked over to a taxi-driver who sat in his car waiting his turn. He read him Turid Lammers' address from a slip of paper, and the cabby gave him a meticulous explanation how to get there. Five minutes later he had parked in front of a large but rather run-down villa which, judging by the address, was the place where Turid Lammers lived.

She did not stand in the doorway waiting for him. He rang the bell, and a goodly while passed, he thought, before she answered. But when she did open, she seemed glad to see him. She had made a fire on the hearth. She was waiting for him with food and drink. She seemed calm and relaxed, far more relaxed than he had expected to find her in the large drafty villa she had inherited.

As it happened, he would live in this old villa for fourteen years. As Turid Lammers' partner. And he still lived in Kongsberg. Early on he commuted to Oslo, to his position in the ministry. Who was Turid Lammers? In Oslo she had been an attractive woman in the

whirl of the big city whom he had met by chance and become taken with. Now she had come home, had even moved into her childhood home, and lived in surroundings which had only existed as sporadic (and very charming) peculiarities of her person earlier on. As her lover in Oslo he had mostly been occupied by the French aspect of her past, those seven years in France, which had made her wiser (he assumed) and simultaneously conferred upon her movements that acquired grace which he (on account of the sidestepping adventure they received their glamour from) could not live without. Especially her gestures. The mediterranean way of using the hands as an aesthetic accessory to what the mouth expressed had fascinated him, in an all but childish way, and had caused him barely to listen to what she said, being so occupied with the way she said it. And so he had only en passant got to know the small-town side of her, which then emerged within the context of her exotic southern manner. A Frenchwoman who talked about her impossible sister at Kongsberg. But now all this became the reality which Turid Lammers, and thereby also he, lived with. The Lammers family had in its time owned half of Kongsberg and environs. Forests, farmland, stores, building lots, woodworking factories etc. But when her father died there were only a flower shop and a service station left, in addition to the old Lammers villa. The sister got the lucrative service station, managed by her husband, and Turid got, after many ifs and buts, the villa, while the flower shop was taken over jointly by the two sisters. All this led to a wrangle that was not yet over when Bjørn Hansen, after fourteen years, at last moved out of the Lammers villa and acquired his own place. It was basically a question of who represented their legacy, the Lammers name, in the most correct manner.

Ostensibly Turid Lammers was high above such matters, and her partner, Bjørn Hansen, thought so too for a long time. She was anti-bourgeois in her very being, despised fussing over money grubbing and her sister's way of raking it in, as she put it, meaning it quite sincerely, and when a two-hundred-years-old sauceboat slipped out of her hands and was

broken on the floor at one of the parties they gave in the Lammers villa, causing the sauce to ooze out among the broken porcelain fragments, she laughed, and her eyes veritably sparkled as she exclaimed, 'This is a historic moment! Two hundred years fell out of my hand and was reduced to nothing!' To a standing ovation from the guests. But Bjørn Hansen knew that the sight of the broken sauceboat affected her painfully. For when this happened he had lived with her, as her husband, for two years.

That he had not done, however, when he returned from Oslo and the ministry one evening and, slumped over the latest issue of the daily paper, Lågendalsposten, she pointed at an ad. Bjørn Hansen considered himself a slow, introvert and not very spontaneous person. The ad announced an opening: the position as city treasurer at Kongsberg had now become vacant for qualified applicants. Bjørn Hansen read the ad, then gave Turid an inquiring glance. Was there something in the wording of the ad that had awakened her anti-bureaucratic sense of humour? But Turid again pointed at the ad and said, 'For you, my dear. City treasurer—that would be something for you, wouldn't it?' Bjørn Hansen looked at her again. He laughed. 'Well, why not?'