

Encirclement

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Jon

Saltdalen, 4th July, 2006. Touring.

We roll slowly into the town centre, if it can be called a town centre, a small roundabout with a few houses around. I lean forward in the seat, look around, not a soul in sight, it is totally dead, silent, there are not even any shops here, just a closed café and a grocery shop with darkened windows. Are we going to play here, it doesn't really look as if anyone lives here, I don't understand who would want to live here anyway, who would wish that on themselves. I lean back in the seat, wind down the window, and put my elbow out. Cool, fresh air spreads across my face, good air. I lean my head back and close my eyes, I breathe in through my nose, smell, there are so many smells in the air after it has rained, this smell of wet earth, smell of lilacs. I open my eyes, lean forward again. This place is bloody deserted, dead, not a damn soul to be seen, and almost not a sound to be heard, only the drone of our engine. And the sucking sound of tyres rolling across wet bitumen. Who on earth would want to come and live in a place like this.

- If we'd had time before the concert, I'd have tried out the fishing, Anders says. Supposed to be a great salmon river here!

I turn around and look at him, grin. But he looks as if he means it, sits there in the backseat and looks back at me, nodding to his right. And I crane my neck to look where he is nodding. A cardboard sign hangs in a window on the other side of the street, "Fishing licence sold here", it says, written with a black felt pen in running-writing sloping down to the right. I turn back and look out of the front window again.

- Oh well, I say. Apart from in-breeding, I suppose there's nothing else to do here but hunting and fishing and things like that.

I turn to Anders and grin again, but he has turned his face away and doesn't look at me, it doesn't seem to have registered. I turn and look out of the windscreen again.

- And sports, of course! I add. Skiing and things! But not team sports, won't be enough people here for team sports! I say.

Time passes.

Lars takes a right turn, and we roll down a gentle slope leading to the harbour. We get a glimpse of the blue, shimmering sea far below, a few seagulls circling around a green container. But not a single soul to be seen, it is bloody dead everywhere, the middle of the day and the place is deserted, I lean forward and let my eyes wander from side to side, I grin and shake my head.

- Fuck this! I say, wait, and shake my head again. Looks like the Norwegian Centre Party has quite a job ahead if they're going to fulfil their aim of a vigorous rural society! I say. I wait again, and then I turn to Lars, look at him and nod. If you happen to hear fast banjo music, you'd better step on it! I say and chuckle. But he doesn't laugh, he just sits there with both hands on the wheel, staring straight ahead, perhaps he hasn't seen *Deliverance*, all Lars cares about is music, has no interest in films, at least not in films like that. I turn back and look out again.

- Well fuck this place, I mumble. Glad I don't live here!

A second passes.

- Here too? Lars asks, he asks in a low voice and without looking at me.

- Not a damn soul to be seen! I say.

- No, he says shortly.

I look at him again, don't say anything, wait. What the hell is wrong with him. He sounds so serious. Looks serious, too. His face is sort of taut, closed. He stares stiffly ahead of him. I wait a few seconds, don't take my eyes off him.

- What's wrong with you? I ask. I look at him, he doesn't answer, he just sits there, straight arms, both hands on the wheel, staring stiffly ahead of him. There is utter silence in the car now, no one says a word. But what *is* this, Lars is not usually like this, he is almost always in a good mood, positive and optimistic, almost always.

- What's wrong with you? I ask again.

- With *me*? he asks, in a loud voice, pushing his head forward a short centimetre as he speaks.

Utter silence.

I stare at him, bewildered.

- It's just that I'm sick and tired of you always being so negative! he says.

- Negative? I mumble.

- Yes, negative! he says, stares stiffly out the window, waits, swallows. Every place we come to is a dump, he says. All the food we eat is terrible, all the people we meet are morons!

I just sit and stare at him, cannot get a word out, because what is he talking about, am I negative? I wait, turn around and look forward for a second, turn to Lars again, cannot think of anything to say, because he has never said anything about this before, this came out of the blue, that I'm negative, am I negative? A few seconds pass, and then I turn my head. I look at Anders in the backseat. He sits and stares intently out of the window, pressing his forehead against the glass and pretending not to see me, as if he has missed it all, I look at him for a couple of seconds, and then I suddenly realise that they have talked about this, discussed this with each other, and that they agree that I'm negative. And now I feel my heart starting to beat a little faster than usual, my pulse is racing. I stare at Anders, and feel my mouth opening of its own accord, I sit here and gape, open-mouthed. I close my mouth again, swallow once, and then once more. I turn back to Lars, look at him.

- You're exhausting to be with, he says. Just bloody exhausting! The whole damn tour's been a strain!

He still doesn't look at me as he speaks, just sits there and stares stiffly out of the windscreen, his face is taut and white, and he swallows rapidly. I don't take my eyes off him. I don't say anything, don't know what to say. Because this came out of the blue, I had not seen this coming, that they think I'm negative, and exhausting to tour with.

- It started off badly, and it's just got worse and worse, Lars says. And then he clears his throat, still without looking at me. I don't think you understand how much effort it takes, keeping you in a more or less good mood, he says. You walk around pouring shit on everything and everyone, you bad-mouth everything between heaven and earth. Don't you see how exhausting it's for us, who have to listen to it?

I listen to what he says, and I understand that he has been rehearsing this, I can hear it in the way he speaks. Hear that he actually means it, too, it may sound as if he is pulling it out of thin air, but I can hear that he really means it. I stare at him. Wait. Don't know what to say. Must be careful not to blurt something out, must take care with every word I say. Because I must put up with this, must be adult enough to take such

criticism, not become unprofessional and just pounce on him. But it came out of the blue, I had not seen it coming, they have been laughing at my pessimism all along, making fun of my gloom and doom and my harsh comments. I have often made myself seem gloomier and more pessimistic than I really am, been prickly and sarcastic just to make them laugh, all the time believing that everything was as it should be, that they enjoyed my company as much as I enjoyed theirs, that they liked me as much as I liked them. Because I like them a lot, don't think I have ever felt so much at home in a band before, neither musically nor socially, and despite being so much older, that is how I feel.

A short time passes. I turn my head slowly to the right, rest my cheek in my right hand, and look out the open window, lift the other hand, and scratch the bridge of my nose. And then I suddenly start to cry. The tears just come, as if there are cracks in an internal dam I didn't know about, my eyes fill up and tears start to run, cold tears stream down my cheeks. I turn my head a little more to the right. Dry my tears, swallow. But what the hell is this, I sit here and cry, what the hell's wrong with me, haven't cried for I don't know how long, and now I sit here and cry, start crying for a trifle like this, because they tell me I'm negative, what the hell is wrong with me, it is so stupid it is laughable. A couple of seconds pass, and then suddenly I start to laugh, it just bursts out of me, a guffaw escapes, I roar with laughter, I'm making an effort to laugh at how ridiculous this is, it is just a ridiculous little thing, and I try to laugh away the tears, but it is impossible. The tears keep running, and now I sit here and both laugh and cry, sit here like a hysterical woman, I sound totally mad, sound as if I'm about to lose my mind, and the others don't say a word, I suppose they have no idea what is up with me, because this is not me, it is so unlike me as it could possibly be, and now I must pull myself together, this won't do.

I wipe my nose with a finger and sniffle. I clench my teeth and stop laughing. Cough a little, clear my throat. I'm not laughing any longer, but I cannot stop crying, I'm crying silently, my lips are wet from tears, and the taste of salt stings my tongue.

Utter silence.

- Where's this cultural centre then? Anders suddenly asks. Wasn't it supposed to be outside the town centre? he says, trying to change the subject, he pretends nothing has happened, wants to give me some time and a chance to dry my tears and pull myself together, so I won't lose face any more than I already have. Well, I don't know about town centre, who can say what's the town centre in a place like this, he continues, trying to agree with me now, to agree that this place is a hole, as if that would make things better.

Another silence.

I just sit and cry. And Anders and Lars don't say a word, they don't understand this anymore than I do. Because this is totally unlike me. I feel empty, numb, as if all strength has been sucked from my body. I'm just more and more exhausting to be with, Lars said, sour and negative. But why have they not said anything about this before, they have always joked about my pessimism, always laughed at my sarcasms. How can I change when they never say anything, when they just play along. They could have given me a hint or two at least, all this time I thought they liked me as much as I like them, yet all this time they thought that I was exhausting to be with, negative. I twist my head even further to the right, press my lips together, and swallow.

- Stop the car! I suddenly hear myself say, hear how sulky I sound, sulky and determined. I put my hand on the seatbelt latch, push down the red button and undo the belt, staring straight ahead as I'm doing it.

- Come on, Jon! Lars says, says it with a pleading voice.

- Stop the car! I say.

- Listen! Lars says.

I turn to him, stare at him.

- Stop the car, damn it! I say loudly.

Total silence. A second passes, then Lars brakes. Carefully. Pulls over to the curb and stops.

- Come on, Jon! Anders says.

But I open the door, climb out.

- Listen! Anders pleads.

- Jon! Lars says.

But I slam the door, and start to walk, walk fast and straight ahead, don't look back, don't know where I'm going, only that I need to get away, disappear.

Vemundvik 6th July 2006

Dear David

I sat on the bus on the way to the cottage when I read that you had lost your memory, and when I got over the shock and started to think about how I could help you to remember again, without my quite understanding why, one memory kept coming back to me, a memory I have decided to start my letter with. In my mind's eye I saw the two of us on one of our many and long walks in and around Namsos city centre. I didn't even know that I had this memory in my head before I suddenly sat there in the bus and felt how it was to be seventeen years old and roaming the streets, just you and I, side by side, wandering aimlessly. I seemed to remember we had the idea that we set out on these trips because we were bored and had nothing else to do with our evenings, but when I think back on the discussions we had, how much we had to talk to each other about, how engrossed and engaged we could become and how we used to hurry off in another direction when we saw someone we otherwise would have had to stop and talk to, I think it must be obvious that we also regarded our walks as something meaningful in themselves. If we didn't think about them as meaningful, we surely must have experienced them as such.

And perhaps it is this kind of unconscious experience of meaning which is the reason for a fairly undramatic and ordinary memory popping up first and shining the brightest when I read your advertisement. I don't know, but quite a lot of what I'm referring to in this letter, opinions you had, descriptions of events that took place without me, or of people you knew but whom I never met, I certainly learnt from these discussions of ours.

When we were in primary school, I didn't know much more about you than that you were the stepson of a pastor, that you played football and that you could throw a ball the furthest when it was sports day at school. I don't quite know why I noticed the two last things, perhaps because I myself was so bad at throwing ball and playing football. I used a girlie underarm when I was throwing ball, and I had a reputation for being the first and, for the time being, the last in Namsos Secondary School to do a throw-in when awarded a penalty kick, a reputation I otherwise claimed to be proud of when I got to know you.

Our friendship started in the first year of senior high-school. There was a kind of demonstration against drugs in the gym hall, and I had decided to wag school, I remember. I had adopted a sort of anarchic and freakish image at that time, and I tried to convince everyone, myself included, that it was the anarchist's free-thinking views of what the leftist, anarchist magazine 'Gateavisa' had taught me to call "consciousness-expanding tactics" that made me throw my bag over my shoulder and walk towards the exit, if not demonstratively, at least with the cruising gait and the kind of phoney indifference and artificially lethargic body language that teenage boys often adopt to hide how insecure they really are. That wasn't it. Dad was in prison with a drug conviction around that time, and it was misguided loyalty to him that made me refuse to take part in the demonstration, and when the headmaster suddenly called out my name and told me to come back at once, and sit down, and when everyone turned

around and stared at me, I was suddenly overcome by all the emotions I had managed to keep more or less in check until then, and I started to cry in front of the whole school. Most of you knew that my Dad was in prison and what he had done, but at that moment you were the only one who understood the connection between this and my totally unexpected breakdown, and after a few seconds of utter silence, with the teachers and the more than three hundred students staring at me, in astonishment, I heard you ask the headmaster, loudly and clearly, "How would you like to take part in a demonstration against your own father?"

Later, after I had fallen in love with you, and my feelings had edited my memory, I saw you in my mind's eye as a kind of James Dean when you said this. In my memory you were sprawling on one of the benches, your elbows stuck between the wall bars behind you, and you smiled as you looked straight at the headmaster with calm and confident eyes. Today this image has faded, of course. All I'm sure of is that you were wearing a white t-shirt and that you said what you said.

In the beginning I felt that you had exposed me, in a way, and I was furious with you for that, but the more distance I got to what had happened, the more grateful I was, and soon I felt almost touched because you had defended me in the way you did. I admired you for the courage and the sense of justice you had shown, and in the period before we became friends and began to see each other regularly, I made sure I turned up accidentally in places I knew you would be. If I learnt that you would be at a particular party, I did everything I could to get in to the same party, if I learnt that you were going to the movies, I dropped everything and went to the movies, and on my way to school or town, I almost always walked past the house where you and Arvid and Berit lived, just because it gave me an opportunity to meet you or at least get a glimpse of you. That it took a few minutes longer didn't matter.

But at the same time I tried to hold on to some sort of dignity. I kept my distance and was never pushy, I smiled and said hi when we met, but I never dared to start a conversation, and considering that you were the kind of tough, silent type who only said the bare essentials, and rarely anything else, I can hardly understand how we came to talk to each other at all. But we must have, because before the year was over, we were inseparable.

Of course, I don't have internet in the cottage, so when I wanted to email your psychologist to find out how I could help you, I had to go to a neighbour. He let me in, and he let me borrow his computer, but he was grumpy, unfriendly and obviously impatient to get rid of me again, so unfortunately, I didn't have time to ask all the questions I should have asked. But I understood from the only email your psychologist was able to send me, that you were in the isolation ward and that was why I wasn't allowed to visit you, which was what I really wanted. All contact had to be in writing. And when I was writing letters to you I must not only try to bring your memory back, as I understood it. Even if none of the letter writers succeeded in making you remember again, it was important that you knew as much as possible about who you once had been, what kind of life you had lived, the friends you used to spend time with, who your relations were, and where your family was from, etc, and so your psychologist encouraged me to include absolutely everything I knew about you, not just the things you and I did together. So before I continue to tell you about the two of us, I shall try to write down the little I know and remember about your background and about the life you lived before we knew each other.

In the hallway at your place hung an aerial photo of a white house nestling among the rocks on the shore of Otter Island. Before Berit got married to Arvid and they moved into his house in Namsos, you lived in this house with her and your grandfather, Erik, a man I only know from an old black and white photo which shows him as a young, sturdily built road worker with ruffled hair, broad, round shoulders and an ample black moustache that protruded like pigtails on both sides of his face.

Berit had acted as housekeeper for your grandfather since your grandmother died some time at the beginning of the sixties. When she was seventeen or eighteen, she moved into a bed-sitter in Namsos and started nursing school at the same time as my mother, but she got pregnant with you after barely a year, and so she was forced to leave school and move back to Otter Island. No one knew who your father was, for some reason, Berit refused to tell, and she kept it a secret for as long as she lived, from you as well.

My mother used to talk about Berit from this period of her life, and she described a thin and pale young woman with red hair, freckles and a small snub nose. She talked about how shy and lost she looked, and about how surprised she was when she turned out to be exactly the opposite. Like so many who have survived a tough childhood, she had been hardened, and according to my mother, she was totally unafraid and not the least bit shy, the way people from the country often were when they came to the city to get an education. She had a glib mouth and talked when she breathed in as well as out, she didn't mince her words, no matter whom she was speaking to, and if someone did her an injustice, she could be mercilessly impudent, and she knew no bounds when it came to hurting and humiliating the guilty. Physical flaws, speech impediments, a shady past; she took the liberty to mock everything, and she was so pertinent and eloquent that the listeners couldn't help but laugh, no matter how much they tried not to. And if the victims gave as good as they got and commented on her bad teeth, for instance, she would just grin shamelessly. Self-pity and sentimentality were luxuries she could never afford, and she didn't let anything upset her. "Yes, if someone had told me at the time that this girl would find herself a clergyman, I would've died laughing!" my mother used to say.

Your grandfather also had problems getting used to his daughter marrying a pastor. According to you, he was an atheist and a dyed-in-the-wool Moscow communist to the day he died. He used to shake his head and chortle at much of what Arvid believed in and stood for, and he never seemed to tire of asking for tangible descriptions or rational explanations of various miracles and wonders described in the Bible. "Can you explain that thing about the virgin birth so that a simple man from Otter Island can understand it?" he could say, and if Arvid ignored the ironic undertone he knew was there and answered seriously, your grandfather sat there and listened with a smirk on his face, and when Arvid had finished talking, he sniggered and shook his head condescendingly; "Yes, those were the days!" he would say. "Things like that don't happen nowadays, that's for sure!"

These conversations were like party games to him, you told me, and he would tease Berit in a similar way by reminding her of what sort of family and what sort of social environment she hailed from. When they were together, his language would be even a little juicier and coarser than normal, and often he would just accidentally remember episodes from the old days that all had one thing in common - they were inappropriate in the Christian environment Berit was trying to fit into and become part of. "What about that New Year's Eve you drank all the men under the table," he could

say, while he laughed loudly and heartily, and when your mother didn't react the same way, he played surprised and puzzled. "But don't you remember?" he asked, and as he sat there and gloated and waited for an answer, Berit's face was white with fury.

You used to chuckle when you told me all this, but when it happened, you felt uncomfortable and uncertain. Again, Arvid tried to pretend he didn't let it upset him. According to you he could become bitter, frustrated and angry, but he wanted to make you and your mother believe that it was beneath his dignity to let himself become agitated and distressed by things like that, and so he just sat there and smiled and exercised infinite patience and tolerance. Actually, this fits my experience of him as a person after you and I became friends, and I began to spend time at your place. It is possible that the memories from that time are coloured by what I learnt later, that Arvid developed psychological problems after your mother died, but I still seem to remember that he appeared to be the type who always tries to conceal a chaotic inner life with a calm and steady exterior, and who, without knowing it himself, is always exaggerating and so, in the end, seems frightening. He had a smile that was so mild and good-natured that it was difficult to believe in the love it was meant to radiate, and he spoke in such a slow and subdued and sincere voice that I, at least, felt nervous around him and not calm, the way I was meant to feel.

Many misinterpreted this kind of behaviour, however, and took it as proof that the stereotype of the solemn and sanctimonious pastor was right in his case. "It's easy to be meek and good and bear over with people when you're convinced that you yourself are going to heaven and everyone else to hell!" as my mother said. But none of us who really knew Arvid thought of him as solemn or sanctimonious. On the contrary, it felt as if he had a sincere wish to be, and be perceived as, an ordinary man who happened to be a pastor, a man most people regarded as one of their own. True, he didn't succeed in this. When he, who was otherwise so calm, donned the blue and white football scarf and stood in the stands and yelled when Namsos played, he made a lot of people laugh and look at him with the same contempt they reserved for politicians who behaved in this way. They interpreted it as an act, and an effort to court the man in the street. In addition, Arvid, like so many clergymen, had a tendency to steer every conversation into a discussion about God, and this often created a distance to people and made them feel uncomfortable. If we sat outside on your steps on a winter's night and admired the starry sky, for instance, I could be sure that he would start to talk about the star of Bethlehem, as if accidentally, and if there was a nature program on television that showed how well some animal species had adjusted to their environment, I just sat and waited for him to express astonishment at the existence of people who in all seriousness believed that something as fantastic as that could be a fluke.

You said yourself that you hated that particular side of him. When you were younger, you often experienced how the atmosphere changed when he entered a room. He could silence a loud and lively discussion just by showing up, and an uncertain and slightly nervous mood would settle over the people who were present. There were always those who made a point of talking and acting normally, but they were in such a minority and hence so visible that the effort was almost always more forced and embarrassing than heroic, and they either gave up and fell silent, or they did like everyone else: they began to talk about things they thought it was safe to talk about with a pastor in the room. They reeled off trivialities about the weather and expounded theories that no one with half a brain could disagree with. And while you

sat there, hot from shame, Arvid noticed nothing of what was going on around him, according to you. Today I'm not so sure that you were right. I remember Arvid as both intelligent and attentive, and I can see that these situations must have been just as painful and unpleasant for him as they were for you.

The uncertain, slightly nervous atmosphere caused by Arvid's entrance, was also to a degree present in your home, I noticed. There was something a bit stiff and forced in the way you all talked and behaved. It was as if the ostensible calm that Arvid radiated acted as a model of behaviour and an ideal to aspire to for the whole family, and yes, not only the family, but friends of the family as well. It was as if most people in this Christian environment strived to appear as mild and kind and charitable as possible, it was as if they had to remind each other all the time and at all costs of how much they loved each other. When I was at your place, I always had a feeling that although it was allowed to disagree about things, it was not allowed to start to argue, it was alright to be irritated and annoyed, but it was frowned upon to raise your voice. All the mood swings and temperature changes were supposed to be hushed up and glossed over, not just the troughs but also the peaks. It was fine to be happy, but you didn't have to be ecstatic, a smile would suffice. And if someone should still let themselves get carried away, the others would be demonstratively silent for a few seconds, or they would smile mildly, only to start talking about something else altogether.

But despite, or perhaps rather because of this unspoken demand that one should always be in control of oneself, intense and emotional eruptions happened now and again. I remember one I had come back to your house, your mother had just washed the floors, and Arvid came trampling in with his boots full of blue clay, and I witnessed an outburst that showed me a little of the Berit my mother had described to me. True, it was not a trivial thing for her that someone walked in with dirty boots just after she had cleaned the house. Where our mothers come from, a housewife had the right to demand respect for keeping a nice and clean house, and much of their self-esteem depended on their husbands and neighbours bestowing such respect on them. When my mother had cleaned the house, she never tidied away the squeegee and the bucket and the washrag in the cupboard where they belonged, she always put the squeegee against the wall in the hallway, placed the bucket next to it and hung the wet washrag over the rim, where they remained until the next day, so no one who dropped in would forget to comment on the fresh smell of green-soap or offer other comments that showed their appreciation of my mother as a dutiful and hard-working woman. So in light of that, not to take your shoes off when you came in was a gross insult, you might just as well have told her that she was worthless.

But the fury Berit unleashed when Arvid came in with his dirty boots was still disproportionate to the violation he was guilty of. "You bloody pig!" she screamed at him, and just to hear someone use that voice and those words in your home, startled me so much that I sat there with open mouth. Her sweeping everything off the kitchen bench made an even stronger impression. Her underarm moved like a scythe over the bench top, cups and plates and glasses and cutlery hit the floor with a deafening racket, and when a terrified Arvid had pulled himself together enough to ask what on earth was wrong with her, she hit out with both hands and grinned hysterically; "I'm just being like you, I'm making sure I've got enough to do all evening," she said, and then she burst into tears.

I never heard, nor can I imagine, similar outbursts from you. When you were at school or with friends, you acted, as I've mentioned, the somewhat tough, silent type, and at home you pushed this image even further and assumed a hard, almost callous manner, especially towards Arvid. You were not directly hostile, it was more as if you took the rule to be in control to the extreme, it was as if you had decided not to express any emotions at all, and you often acted in a mechanical, almost bureaucratic manner. If Arvid asked you to do him a favour, let's say, you did what he asked without grumbling, you didn't answer when he asked, you didn't even look at him, you just got up and did exactly what he asked of you, and then you went back to where you had been before he asked. You behaved as if he were your boss and not your stepfather. And when he talked to you and tried to get a conversation going, you often answered with one-syllable words, and in an indifferent and monotonous tone of voice. "Good", you would say when he asked how one of our trips to the cottage had been. "No!" you would say if he asked whether we had caught any fish.

In such situations I often felt sorry for him. He smiled and pretended it didn't hurt him, but I could see that it caused him pain that you were so dismissive. When I confronted you with it on one of our walks, you were surprisingly short-tempered, I remember. You couldn't stand the friendship and the boundless patience he showed you, you told me, you didn't believe in the love all this was supposed to prove, and you didn't know how to defend yourself against it. You could pity him, too, and be overcome by a guilty conscience when he tried to smother you with his goodness, and you often felt pressured into being good to him, but you didn't want to be, you said, not because he was married to your mother and because that still made you jealous, the way it had when you were a little boy, but because being friendly to him filled you with a feeling of losing yourself and becoming just the way he wanted you to be. You felt that he was consciously trying to shape you and raise you in his own image. He always had, you said, he had just changed tactics and become more sophisticated than before. When you were younger he used to read to you and tell you stories from the Bible, he subscribed to a Christian children's magazine for you, he took you to church with him and to Sunday school, and he frightened you with Satan and eternal damnation when you prayed together in the evenings. He did everything he could to lead you along what he thought was the right and proper path, but to no avail, and instead, he consciously put all his energy into using the power of example, and ingratiating himself. He was friendly and loving because he thought that was the only way to win you over, you said, not only he, but the whole Christian environment your family was part of, were engaged in this conversion project, they prayed for you, they tried to persuade Berit to be more persistent when it came to getting you involved in the Christian youth scene (especially the choir, as you had a pretty good voice), and they were close to shameless in their efforts to make the life of a Christian seem idyllic.

Even if I thought you did Arvid an injustice when you were so dismissive towards him, I was impressed with the strength you showed towards him and the rest of the Christian flock. They had managed "to tame your mum", as my mother expressed it. True enough, she was a secret smoker (I remember the floating, half dissolved butts in the toilet bowl and the tobacco breath she tried to camouflage with the help of chewing gum, usually the PK brand, but now and then it was Extra, and you suspected that she let loose a little of her old self when she on a rare occasion visited her old girlfriends out on Otter Island, but that she had changed her lifestyle and truly

received Jesus, no one doubted for a minute. For a period of time she even agreed to come to the get-togethers at an aunt of Arvid's, but that became too much. She couldn't stand sitting for hours embroidering prizes for the next charity bazaar, while she drank coffee, ate homemade waffles and listened to women twenty and thirty years older than her laughing their heads off and feeling naughty when they mentioned the word "fart", as she said.

But no matter how hard Arvid and all the others tried, they didn't manage to "tame" you. On the contrary, the more they tried, the further away they drove you, and during the period they were at their most persistent, you referred to Arvid and his circle in hateful terms. You tried to assume an ironic and slightly indifferent tone, but behind the grin and the laughter lay hidden fury, frustration and grief, and you spent many long evenings at my place because you didn't want to go home until you were sure that Arvid had gone to bed. We never talked about the fact that this was the reason the clock turned eleven and twelve and even twelve thirty before you began to yawn and say that tomorrow was another school day, but I understood it, and you knew that I understood it, and I could see that you appreciated that I was there for you without asking any questions. For me it was a totally natural thing to do, and I knew that you would do the same, the day I needed someone to be there for me.

Namsos, 5th July, 2006. Home to Mum.

I put my hand on the doorhandle and push it down, try to pull the door towards me, but it is locked, she never used to lock the door, something new she has taken up, so much black dross roaming the roads since the refugee-housing popped up, so she doesn't dare to leave the door unlocked, she says. I stretch out my hand and ring the bell, once, and then once again. Put my hands in my pockets and try to look relaxed. Take them out again, put them on the railing, calmly hoist myself up and sit there and look at the yellow, dappled glass in the front door, waiting, but she doesn't appear, so I jump down again. Just have to go and get the key and unlock the door myself, the spare key should hang where it always does. I walk over to the shed, flip up the hook and open the door, suddenly the sound of a drawn-out groan, a long wail. Sounds like I should oil the hinges while I'm here.

- Oh hello, I suddenly hear mum's voice saying, so it's you?

I turn and look at her. She stands in the doorway, looks a bit worse for wear.

Funny how old she has become lately, she stands there and smiles feebly.

- So you're at home? I say.

- Yes of course I'm at home.

- It took so long before you answered, so I thought you were out and about, I say, and close the door to the shed behind me.

And then she laughs her sad laughter.

- Yes well, where would I go? she says, smiles sadly to me, wants to tell me how rarely she gets out of the house these days, tell me how lonely she is, somehow. I have only just arrived, and she starts up like this.

- Well, how should I know, you could live a life of wild abandonment, for all I know, I say, trying to make a joke of it.

- Is that what you think, she asks, laughs her sad laughter again. No, I don't get out and about much these days.

I look at her, don't say anything. It always starts like this, I have been here for half a minute, and she is at it, it is so damn exhausting, but I hold on to my smile, walk smilingly towards her, just have to ignore her whinging, no point in saying anything. I put my hand on her shoulder, and give her a hug. Her tobacco breath brushes my face, and I feel her cheekbone knocking lightly against mine, a hard cheekbone. She puts her hand carefully on my arm, she only just touches me, and she lets go almost at once, leans against the door and stretches out one arm, gestures me inside.

- But come on through! she says.

- Thank you, I say and walk into the hallway, which is hot as an oven. A fly buzzes in the window sill, lightly knocking against the glass in the small hallway window.

- Yes well, this is a nice surprise, she says.

- Yes isn't it, I say, look at her and smile, bend down and take off my shoes.

- I've got some coffee out on the terrace, she says, points to the terrace door with one hand and closes the door to the hallway with the other. Go out there and sit down, and I'll get you a cup!

- Oh that sounds nice, I'm dying for a cup of coffee, I say, try to sound happy, positive, try to lift her up into a somewhat more cheerful mood.

I stroll into the living-room, calmly, with my hands in my pockets. The sunshine streams through the window, and a gleaming grey blanket of tobacco hovers above the coffee table. I stroll out onto the terrace, sit down in one of the cane chairs and look

out over the garden. The flowerbeds need weeding, and the grass is too long. I should mow the grass afterwards, perhaps, help her a bit. And then mum comes out on the terrace, a board creaks a little as she steps out on the terrace floor.

- Yes well, she says, her voice suddenly a little too bright, the kind of voice that is trying to cover up something, she glances nervously at me and smiles quickly. At least you've given it a go! she says, puts the coffee cup in front of me.

I look at her, don't understand right away what she means.

- Well, you win some and lose some in this life! she says, says it with this voice that is too bright and overly cheerful. And suddenly I realise what she means, she pretends to believe that I have given up my music, that that is the reason I'm here and not on tour, she tries to convince me that she believes that I have given up trying, given up staking everything on the band, and so she acts relieved, acts happy about it so that I will feel guilty when I tell her that I haven't given it up after all. True enough, I have cut out the band and Lars and Anders, but she knows nothing about that, she is just putting on an act, besides I haven't given up trying, I want to keep trying.

- So there we are then, she says.

- Mum! I say, and try to smile indulgently.

She pretends not to hear me.

- I suppose that's just the way it is! she merely says, avoids looking at me, smiles feebly.

- Mum! I say again, a little louder. A couple of concerts were cancelled, and we got a few days off, that's why I decided to drop in, I say, I just say it, don't have the strength to tell her that I have left the band, that will make her even more convinced that it was a mistake to stake everything on it.

A short second passes.

- You'll have to pour the coffee yourself! she says, ignoring me, doesn't even look at me, just bends down, picks up the coffeepot and puts it on the table in front of me, smiling feebly. I'll just make a mess, she says, tries a small laugh. I've changed my pills and the new ones give me the shakes something terrible.

I look down and hide a small sigh, look up again, I'm about to repeat that I haven't given up the band, but I don't, there is no point, I pull myself together and look at her.

- Have you told the doctor, then? I ask, taking the coffeepot and pouring for us both, black, thick, brewed coffee. I look at her, see her sad face and the overly bright, brave smile, feel irritation rising in me.

- Nah! she says, and she sounds almost grumpy now, the corners of her mouth stretch, her head sways a little, and she looks grumpy, too, all of a sudden.

- But you've got to do that! I say.

- Nah! What should I do that for? There's always some kind of side-effect, no matter what kind of pills you take, she says.

Silence for a short second. And then it is as if she suddenly realises that she has gone too far, she takes a deep breath as she leans across the table.

- Well, no, she says quickly, nervously, in effort to pull herself together, she tries to smile. I suppose I should talk to the doctor.

- Of course you should, you can't go on like this, I say, I try to swallow my irritation and meet her half-way, try to give her a little of the sympathy she is after, improve her mood by playing along, talking illness with her.

- Yes well, I'll see, she says, looks down at the table.

- There's more than enough wrong with you already, you shouldn't have to cope with another thing as well, I say, knowing she likes to hear things like that. I look at her, notice how she lights up a little, her head sways, she smiles her brave little smile again.

- Oh well, I'll live, she says.

- Yes, thank God, I say, with a small laugh.

She looks at me with a quick smile, a somewhat different smile, suddenly, she enjoyed hearing that, her smile is a bit more genuine now. And I just have to continue in the same way, have to say something I know she likes to hear, no matter what it is, just say something that will help her mood, don't have the strength to stay here with this heavy cloud surrounding us, don't have the strength, at least not now. I look at her, about to ask if she has been in a lot of pain lately, but the phone suddenly starts ringing. She looks at me and smiles, puts her hands on the arm-rests and stands up, slowly. A small grimace of pain flits across her face as she is half-way up, and she puts her hand to her back with a quick movement, stands with her eyes closed for a short second, and then she starts walking, her first steps are stiff and slow, then they seem to improve, become softer. I follow her with my eyes, look at her narrow shoulders and her slightly hunched back, worn crooked. I can feel my guilty conscience nudging me, she is all alone in the big house, aching everywhere, living with pain day in and day out, no wonder she needs to complain a little, I suppose, no wonder she has a need to pour it all out when finally there is someone here, surely I can make allowances, she has sacrificed more for me over the years than anyone could ask for, and the least I can do is to listen to a bit of self-pity without becoming depressed and irritable. I grab the coffee cup and take a sip. Put it back again. Sit there and look out over the garden, it is totally overgrown, the flowerbeds haven't been weeded for ages, and the hedge looks like a bloody tangle, big and uneven, it has spread to the lawn, too, little nasties are sticking up here and there. After a short while, mum comes back, she holds her tobacco pouch in one hand and a lighter in the other, looks at me and smiles. And I smile back.

- That was Eskil, she says and sits down. He's coming for a visit!

I don't say anything right away, just look at her. She puts her hand into the tobacco pouch, pulls out a pinch of tobacco and spreads it evenly over the paper.

- I see, I say, lift the coffee cup and put it to my mouth, don't feel like seeing Eskil, but I try to appear unconcerned, slurp some coffee, clear my throat. When? I ask, trying to smile.

- He's on his way, but he has a few things to do first, so I suppose he'll be here in the afternoon sometime, mum says, smiles as she wets her cigarette, puts it in her mouth.

I look at her and nod, feel my mood darkening.

- Just Eskil, or? I ask.

- What?

- Is he on his own or is Hilde coming too?

Mum looks at me, surprised.

I don't know, she says, crosses her legs as she lights her cigarette and inhales. I didn't ask, but ... she'll come if she comes, she says, waits, and then she suddenly looks at me and grins. She's always so busy, that one. I don't know how long it's been since I saw her, but it's been a long time.

- Hmm! And how long since you've seen Eskil, then? I say, knowing I shouldn't ask, it is a sore point that Eskil almost never comes to see her, but I cannot stop myself.

She looks straight at me, just for a split second, and then she gives me a quick, pale smile.

- Oh well, she says. But Eskil has his politics, you know. On top of the job. It's a bit different.

- You didn't see him any more often before he was elected to the council, I say, cannot stop myself, it just falls out of me.

Mum holds tightly on to her pale smile, takes another puff.

- Oh well, we won't talk anymore about it, she says, blowing smoke out of her nose, I hear the little rushing sound as she does it.

- Alright then, I say, grin a little, my mood darkens, I feel grumpy all of a sudden.

We lift our coffee cups at the same time, take a sip each and put them down again, a soft clatter, and then we fall silent.

- I ran into Wenche the other day, mum says.

I look at her, don't say anything right away. Here she is, going on about Wenche again, never gives up, I'm so sick and tired of it.

- Really, I just say, don't have the strength to ask how she is or anything like that, don't have the strength to talk to her about Wenche, all I can say is, really.

Brief pause.

- She's good, she says, smokes.

- Good, I say, I say it as I breathe in.

Pause.

- We must've been chatting for half-an-hour, at least, mum continues, looks at me and smiles quickly. It was so nice to see her, she says, waits. And by the way, she asked about you?

I look up at her, feel the irritation rising in me. I open my mouth, I'm about to snarl something at her, but stop myself, look down at the table and wait for a brief second. I look up at her again.

- You can keep at it for as long as you like, mum, I say, trying to talk as calmly as I can, forcing out a smile. But Wenche and I will never get together again, no matter what, I say.

- But ... I haven't said a word about that, Jon, have I, she says, in her surprised and somewhat wounded voice, playing the innocent now, I know only too well that she is trying to give me a guilty conscience because I left Wenche, gave up my job and staked everything on the band, but she feigns ignorance, just looks at me with sad eyes.

- OK, I say in a voice that is short and a little hard. Good.

She looks down, sighs and shakes her head faintly, sits there with one leg crossed over the other and her glowing cigarette in one hand, looking sad.

- It's wrong, whatever I say, she says. Whatever I do!

Silence. I look at her, know that she says things like that because she wants me to protest and tell her it is not true, but I don't say anything.

- All I want to ... she says, and then she falls silent, she sighs and looks down at the table while she slowly shakes her head. No I don't know, she mumbles, takes another puff of her cigarette.

Silence.

I look at her, the small shoulders, the thin body, worn and bent, distorted from many years of hard work and illness. She is not all that old, but she looks old, worn out. A couple of seconds pass, and then I feel my guilty conscience rising up again, don't want to have a guilty conscience, but there it is, nevertheless. I turn my head. I take a

breath and let it out again, soundlessly, I sigh without making a sound, and then I turn to mum again, must try to rise above her self-pity now, bite my tongue and give her the consolation she asks for, must try to be big enough to do that. A brief second passes. I open my mouth and am just about to say I'm sorry, but I don't, cannot bring myself to, cannot let her go on like that any longer, it isn't bloody right, I have told myself often enough, and now I must damn well pull myself together and not give in to it.

Silence.

- Thought perhaps I could mow your lawn, I blurt out.

She doesn't say anything, just nods, looks like a wounded animal.

- You have any petrol for the mower? I ask.

- The can's in the shed, she says, doesn't even look at me.

I look at her, the feeling of guilt is growing inside me, I'm filled with irritation and a guilty conscience at the same time, don't quite know what to say.

Silence.

- No, I say, put my hands on the armrests. May as well do it sooner rather than later, I say, so it's over and done with.

- Yes, she says, stubs out the cigarette in the ashtray.

My back is sweaty after mowing the lawn, and I itch, I twist a little, rub my back against the blanket, and then I close my eyes and lie totally still, feel the sun burning hot on my skin, feel the sweet smell of newly-cut grass. After a little while I suddenly hear the sound of car wheels crunching on the gravel. I sit up, sit totally still, sit and listen. It is Eskil, he was not supposed to arrive until late afternoon, but it is him, I know the sound of his car, his big four-wheel drive. After a brief second, a sense of reluctance fills me again, I'm almost overcome by a feeling of panic, and I stand up, bend down and grab the blanket, do it automatically, something in me cannot bear to see Eskil, and I walk over to the berry bushes, quickly before he comes around the corner and sees me. I spread the blanket over the patch of grass behind the biggest blackcurrant bush, and then I lie down, take cover behind the berry bushes, it is too stupid, really, lying in hiding, it borders on being sick, but it cannot be helped, I just cannot stand the thought of him, want to postpone seeing him as long as I can. A couple of seconds pass, I hear the little rustling and crackling sounds from an engine that has just been turned off, hear the sound of a car door being opened, the click. And then the sound of yet a car door. So Hilde has come, too, I mumble to myself, that is something at least, he usually controls himself a bit when she is there.

Silence.

- But we've come for a visit! I suddenly hear Eskil say, he says it in a gruff but subdued voice.

No answer.

- Okay? he says.

Still no answer.

- Oh fuck off! he says.

I lie very still and listen, hear the crunch of shoes on gravel. And then the sound of a car door being slammed hard.

- Now you pull yourself together! Eskil snarls in a low voice.

The corners of my mouth twist up into a grin, cannot help gloating a little, apparently everything isn't as rosy and harmonious as Eskil likes to make out, and I feel a mean pleasure ripple sweetly through my body. I turn cautiously on my side, stretch

my hand out and make a tiny gap in the blackcurrant bush, stare. They come around the corner of the garage, Eskil first and Hilde just behind him, both looking grim. And then suddenly Eskil turns around and lifts his finger at her. He says something, but I cannot hear the words, can only hear that he is angry, he talks in that low, snarling voice of his, and Hilde just stands there and looks him straight in the eyes without saying a word, but she too looks angry, determined.

And then suddenly the front door opens and mum comes out on the doorstep.

- Well well, so there you are, she says, dries her hands on her white and blue chequered apron, stretches out her arms and walks down the stairs, walks over to Eskil. And Eskil takes off his sunglasses, holds out his arms too, stands there and smiles with outstretched arms. They embrace each other, rock from side to side, for a long time. Bloody sick to watch, as if they haven't seen each other for a year, Eskil doesn't come often, I know, but still, there is a limit, fucking ridiculous. And then mum puts her hands on his arms and pushes him away from her, stands there and inspects him.

- Have you lost weight? she asks, making her voice worried, but is obviously happy.

- Oh mum, Eskil says, laughs.

- Yes but you've lost weight, mum says.

- No I haven't, Eskil laughs.

- You make sure you eat well?

- Oh mum! Eskil laughs again.

- You do, don't you? mum says.

- Yes I do! Eskil laughs.

I look at them, try to grin a little, but don't quite make it, the grin turns sore and acrid. I look at Hilde, she stands in the background and tries to smile and pretend everything is fine, but I can see that she, too, thinks the two of them behave ridiculously, that she finds their little act embarrassing. A couple of seconds pass, and then mum walks over to Hilde, puts a hand on her arm and gives her a hug.

- How nice that you could come too! she says.

- Yes, Hilde says, squeezes out a smile.

Mum turns, walks sort of casually over to Eskil again, takes his arm, smiles while she says something I cannot hear, and Eskil smiles and lifts his eyebrows, plays happy and surprised, cannot quite hear what he says either, but it is something about looking forward to it, and then they start walking, they walk arm in arm into the house, smiling, with Hilde making up the rear. I turn over on my back again, feel how I turn sour inside, go mouldy, should never have come here, could not have known that Eskil would arrive, but still, should have gone somewhere else, dammit, anywhere but here. I close my eyes, take a deep breath and let it out in a long sigh, try to calm down a little, I shall survive this, too, no reason to stay here longer than have to, just have dinner and coffee, and then go somewhere else, make up some sort of excuse and piss off, don't have to stay the night. I swallow, feel myself calming down by the thought, relax a bit more. I put my hands under my head and close my eyes. It is silent, not a sound to be heard.

- So this is where you're hiding? I suddenly hear.

I open my eyes and look straight up at Eskil. He stands above me, grinning, with a pair of Ray-Bans pushed up on his forehead. His face is suntanned, and his white teeth look even whiter than they normally do, they shine down at me. I don't say anything right away, just try to look surprised.

- You're here already? I ask.

He takes his time answering, stares into my eyes and grins, makes no effort to conceal that he knows I was trying to hide, is just as tactless as always. I look at him, feel my irritation rising, but make an effort to ignore it, try to smile.

- So you didn't hear the car? he grins.

- Must've nodded off, I say.

- Right! he says.

I look at him, try to hold on to my smile, but don't quite make it, it turns into a sort of sheepish smile, I can picture it and become irritated at myself, should have done a three-sixty and admitted that I was trying to hide, but I don't, cannot bring myself to. Instead I squeeze out a long yawn, trying to make it look plausible somehow that I had nodded off.

- Why don't you come and join us inside? he says. Or do you want to sleep a bit longer?

My irritation grows, I feel my whole body being filled with a strong reluctance but I pretend everything is hunky-dory, pretend I didn't catch the irony of his voice, his sarcasm.

- Coming, I say, rub one eye, pretend to rub the sleep from my eyes, and then I get up. He nods and grins, and then he turns and starts to walk away. I wait a second or two, and then I bend down, grab the blanket and shake off the newly-mown grass, roll it up and put it under my arm, follow him, make sure I walk a little slower, just cannot stand having to talk to him on the way in. I walk a few metres, and then I stop and pretend I have stepped in something, I make a face as I lift one foot, stand on the other foot and feel beneath the heel, stand like that until Eskil has disappeared through the terrace door, and then I start to walk again, force my legs to move across the lawn and up onto the terrace, my reluctance growing, but there is no way around it, I walk across the slightly creaking terrace floor and into the living-room. I stop at once, hear mum laughing in the kitchen, followed by Eskil's bragging laughter, his laughter that drowns out everything. A short second passes, and then Eskil says something, I don't quite hear what, but mum laughs loudly and calls him a big fool. Everything is the same as it used to be. Eskil entertains in his usual, smug manner, and mum laughs at everything he says and does. I feel I grow more and more resentful, cannot bring myself to go in to them, cannot bring myself to stand there and pretend to find Eskil as entertaining and as funny as he is trying to be.

- Hi Jon, I suddenly hear.

I turn around. And there is Hilde, she stands in the middle of the floor holding a packet of Prince Mild. She gives me a friendly smile. She is always friendly, damned if I know how Eskil got her, damned if I know how she can stand living with him either, but he doesn't deserve her, I know that.

- Hi, I say, walk over to her, put my hand on her bare, sun-kissed arm, just near her tattoo, she has a tattoo of an Asian sign of some kind. It's been a long time, I say, give her a hug.

- Yes, she says. Haven't seen you since Grete's sixtieth birthday.

- God, don't remind me. Long time since I've been so drunk, I say, with a small laugh.

She doesn't laugh, looks straight at me with a careful smile, a somewhat strange smile, smiles as if she feels sorry for me, I cannot understand why she would feel sorry for me, but that is what it looks like, as if I did something at mum's sixtieth birthday, as

if I made an ass of myself or something, cannot remember that I made an ass of myself, but of course it is possible, I was hopelessly pissed. But don't think about that now, it cannot have been too serious if no one has mentioned it to me.

- So how are you? I say.

- Oh you know, she says, looks at me and smiles, her smile quite normal now. I'm fine! she says. And you?

- I'm fine too! I say, trying to sound a bit up-beat, smiling at her.

Two seconds.

- And the band? I suddenly hear Eskil say.

I turn around, he is sauntering towards us, his sunglasses still on his forehead, he looks at me and grins.

- How's the band going? he asks again, winks lazily as he speaks, radiating a sort of confidence, calm.

- Good! I say, try to smile at him too. We're pushing ahead!

He nods, waits a little.

- You aren't getting a bit old for all that, then? he asks.

- Old? I ask.

- To keep dreaming about becoming a pop star, he says.

- I'm not exactly dreaming of becoming a pop star, I say, feel my irritation returning, but I keep smiling, smiling.

- No, that's true, he says. You're an artist!

I look at him, want to give him a taste of his own scorn, but I cannot bring myself to it, cannot stand the thought of starting something, nothing good will come out of it. I look at him and chuckle instead, pretend to take it as a joke, pretend not to notice the sarcasm of his words. I turn to Hilde, look at her and smile, but she is not looking at me, she stands there and smacks her lips, while she looks at Eskil with eyes that warn him to back off. Her eyes have a mock, weary expression, as if to tell him that she is getting tired of him.

- Is something wrong? Eskil asks. He looks at her and lifts his eyebrows, exaggerating his innocence.

- No, Hilde says.

- You look tired!

She doesn't answer, just looks him straight in the eyes.

- You sure there's nothing wrong? Eskil asks.

- There's never anything wrong, Hilde says.

- Really! Eskil says.

- Yes, really! she says.

I bend down, pretend to scrape at a small spot on my shorts, take some pleasure in the fact that they argue, but feel a little uncomfortable as well, it is a little embarrassing. A short second passes, and then I pretend to remember something I have meant to ask mum. Oohh, I say, scratch my chin as I begin to walk, I cross the living-room and enter the kitchen. Mum has her back to the door, she stands at the stove stirring the gravy. She turns and looks at me, smiles, behaves as if everything that happened this morning is forgotten, things seem quite different now that Eskil has arrived, as if she doesn't feel so burdened anymore, as if she never feels burdened when Eskil is around, she is almost cheerful now.

- Thanks for mowing the lawn for me, Jon, she says. Turns back again, stirs. I look at the gnarled veins in her hand, her worn-out hand.

- Not a problem, I say.

Two seconds.

- Can I give you a hand with something? I ask.

She turns to me again, smiles.

- No, no! she says.

- Sure? I ask.

- Oh yes, she says.

Another two seconds.

- Oh let him give you a hand! I suddenly hear Eskil saying.

I see how mum's face lights up immediately. She stops stirring and looks to one side, smiles.

- What are you mumbling about, you big fool, she says loudly, happily.

And then Eskil comes towards us, saunters up to us. He removes his sunglasses from his forehead, and bites them lightly while he grins, this lopsided smirk he thinks is so charming. He looks at mum, pulls his sunglasses out of his mouth.

- Let the boy help you! he says. You know how much he enjoys it!

He puts his free hand in his pocket and leans against the doorjamb, stands there looking smug. And mum looks at him, smiles.

- You big fool, she says.

Eskil grins, stands there enjoying the whole situation. Like all ordinary people, he enjoys being called a big fool. I stare at him, feel the irritation growing, something caustic is taking shape inside me, an ugly anger.

- Your brother is such a big fool I'm at my wits end, mum says, she turns to me and shakes her head, smiles. I don't know what to with him, she adds.

- Don't you? I say.

She looks at me, a little puzzled. And this bitterness, this caustic feeling seems to grow inside me. I'm on the verge of saying that I have many good suggestions as to what she can do with him, but I manage to bite back the words, I just stand there. It is very quiet, and mum and Eskil are looking at me, and now I have to say something, no matter what it is, just say something.

- I'm going down to the river for a swim! I blurt out.

Another silence.

Mum looks at me, wrinkles her nose.

- Now? she asks.

I yawn and shrug lightly, try to act normal, but don't quite succeed.

- Plenty of time before dinner, I say, look at her and squeeze out a sort of tortuous smile, turn sideways and look at Eskil, he grins and looks straight at me. I hold his eyes for a brief second, and then I look down, feel my head starting to burn, feel that I'm blushing, I stand in the kitchen, red in the face from both anger and shame.

- You don't need me here, do you? I say, and I hear how bitter I sound, hear the self-pity of my own words. And now I feel that I become even hotter, and even more embarrassed.

- But Jon, mum says. I'm sure your swim can wait till later. When are we ever here together, the three of us.

I look at her.

- The three of us? Hilde doesn't count, then? I say, say it so loudly that Hilde must hear it. I look at mum, manage to squeeze out a smile.

Utter silence.

I look at mum, see how her mouth sort of twists upwards, how her eyes change colour and go dark. She stares furiously at me, and I bleed inside, I burn inside with shame and a smouldering anger, but I look straight at her and hang on to my smile. A brief second passes, and then she just turns back and keeps stirring the gravy.

Silence.

I just stand there, red and smiling. And Eskil looks at me. He lifts one eyebrow and shakes his head resignedly, stays silent. I don't say anything either, I hang onto my smile as I walk out of the kitchen, bleed inside, but try my best to seem completely indifferent, stroll through the living-room and out the terrace door, my back burning.

Vemundvik, 10-13th July, 2006

The wish to leave was one of several things that united us. We had a mutual wish to leave Namsos and never come back again. Already at the age of eleven or twelve, I hung up a big poster of New York by night, and in the evenings, before I fell asleep, I often lay in bed imagining how it would be to live in that particular street, in that particular skyscraper, behind that particular window. Already then I had a feeling that the life I was meant to live was not possible in the small, lazy timber-mill town where I lived, and I was even more convinced of that when I met you, because we developed a sort of mutual contempt for the small-town life we had grown up with. We enjoyed bad-mouthing and laughing at Namsos and the Namsonians, we reached a sort of kinship intoxication as we aimlessly sauntered the streets and tried to surpass each other in contempt for the town and those who lived there. We wanted to get away from city streets that were dead after four o'clock in the afternoon, away from the wind and the rain that swept in from the fjord and lashed the grey chunks of buildings from the 1950s, away from the hotdog stand where noisy teenagers with moonshine and grape-soda in their chest pockets used to gather on Saturday nights, and where a heavy smell of fried chips mixed with the sharp stench of burnt rubber from the Ford Taunuses screeching down Harbour Street. We cultivated the notion of people from Namsos as boorish and navel-gazing and us as open, curious, and with our gaze turned towards the big world out there, and we could never get enough of telling each other how small Namsos was, how isolated and sheltered from the rest of the world. "I suppose Ben Hur's going to come to Namsos Cinema, too", we would say when we talked about films we thought sounded interesting that were shown in major cities, but that we had to suffer waiting for perhaps another two or three months, if they came here at all. "He probably thought I was talking about cigarettes", I said once when the shop assistant in one of the two record shops in town told me they didn't have any Prince at the moment. We pretended to be upset and frustrated, even angry, when things like that happened, but in hindsight it is easy to see that we revelled in them, and were dependent on them so we could feel as clever, socially aware and cultural as we would like to be. "Put aside an evening or two a year for a cabaret, and they'll all become supporters," I said when the public opposition to building a cultural centre was at its peak. And you, who had just started to smoke and struggled valiantly to look relaxed and sophisticated when you held the cigarette, laughed and shook your head wearily at these backwater peasants who shut themselves away in their houses watching the Bill Cosby show and other brain-dead television programs, and who, as opposed to us, never seemed to understand that art and literature and music were what gave life meaning and the only things worth discussing.

Moreover, when we discussed art and literature and music, especially if there were other people around, we adopted a somewhat elaborate, convoluted form of conversation. We would often stop in the middle of a sentence, and take long thinking-pauses with our eyes closed, blowing air out through our noses and pretending we were thoroughly reflecting on a topic, because we thought it made us look and sound clever and intellectual, and besides, it gave the impression that what we worked out what we were talking about on the spot, which was obviously true on occasion, but just as often they were things we had learnt by heart, as it were, from newspapers and journals we would go and read in the library. Actually, it was in one of those journals we learnt

about the Beat-Generation for the first time, and this discovery brought with it a new era, because it was the liberal view of sexuality expounded by those literary heroes of the beat-generation, that prepared us for giving in to the sexual attraction we were gradually beginning to feel for each other.

We had been on the verge of having sex on an earlier occasion. Much less drunk than I tried to appear, and with a nervous laughter that was supposed to stress that this was just a bit of fooling around, I asked you to pull down your pants so I could suck you off, and with a laughter that was just as uncertain as mine, you did as I asked. But just as I went down on my knees, I looked up and met your eyes, and even though I knew that you really wanted me to do it, my courage failed me, and the whole thing ended in the two of us breaking into a false and almost hysterical laughter. Both then and in the weeks to come we were so eager to show each other that it had all been a big joke, that it is almost difficult to imagine that only six months later, we would take every opportunity afforded to us to have sex.

The first time it happened, we were in my room. We had been out in the sun all day, we were sweaty and hot, and relaxing at opposite ends of the bed, while we were talking about the hole in the ozone layer and the fact that none of us could remember our parents rubbing us in with sunscreen when we were little, although we were both sure we used to be outside from dawn to dusk all summer. In the beginning you pretended not to notice that I was lying there looking at your sweaty, glistening body, but after our eyes had met a few times, it was getting difficult to keep pretending, and finally, when all the unsaid things had created an intense and titillating mood and none of us were capable of concentrating on the actual conversation any longer, you found something to connect what we said and what we thought: "I've got a mole in my groin that's a bit dark," you said, and with that you gave me the sign I had been waiting for. Without daring to meet your eyes, I asked you to pull down your shorts so I could have a look, and desperately struggling to look as if this was about the mole and only the mole, you did as I asked. Even when my fingers began to search under those thick, black pubic hairs, causing your cock slowly to become erect and crooked and softly touch my lightly trembling hand, we tried to continue the play-acting. But when I found the mole after a little while, and in a muffled, hoarse voice said it was nothing to worry about, we had to make a choice. Either we did what we both wanted to do, or we continued our game, fooling around and pretending that it had just been an innocent examination of a mole. And that was when I suddenly thought of the Beat-Generation. While we had tried to see your ordinary Namsonian as hampered by narrow-mindedness and feelings of shame passed down by generations, we had tried to see ourselves equally as brave, emancipated and experimental as Allen Ginsberg, William Burroughs and Jack Kerouac, and if it hadn't been for my aspiring to those ideals at that very moment, I wouldn't have dared to take you in my mouth, the way I did. If it hadn't been for Ginsberg, Burroughs and Kerouac, I would probably have felt ashamed afterwards as well, but I didn't, and neither did you. On the contrary, I would say. To have sex with each other was a sort of proof that the self-image we had created was right, and so we were almost proud afterwards. We lay there next to each other, naked and sweaty and satiated, while we blew smoke-rings, listened to Dear Prudence and tried to look as if what we had just done was as normal for us as eating a sandwich or watching television.

In the spring of 1988 we got to know Silje Schiive, and throughout the final couple of years of high school the three of us were close friends. Her father was dead, and she lived with her slightly eccentric artist mother and a cranky red tomcat named Laurence, after Laurence Olivier.

Silje had a kind of charming arrogance. Her dim and listless gaze and her absent-minded manner, her habit of forgetting things and appearing distracted and a little careless, gave the impression that she was not especially interested in what was happening around her, and this apparent lack of interest and involvement attracted many young people and not-so-young men who each wanted to prove that he was the only one worthy of catching and keeping her attention. Of course, Silje was aware of this, it was often a conscious act on her behalf, and now and then she would exaggerate and act deliberately distracted. She could pretend that she didn't see people, or didn't hear what they said, or she could yawn demonstratively while they were talking to her. But as opposed to what you would think, she didn't lose any of her charm when someone on a rare occasion exposed her, accusing her of making herself interesting and playing hard to get. To the contrary, she delighted in the exposure and answered her accuser with laughter and self-irony, thus turning the whole situation to her advantage, and became even more attractive.

But her arrogance was not always charming. She could be unreasonable, impertinent, and ruthlessly honest, and many people were scared of being in her vicinity, because you could never know when she would blurt out an uncomfortable question or a hurtful comment. She would often bring up things many people wondered about, but didn't dare to ask, and often she would say things many of us agreed with, but didn't dare or were too polite to speak about. And she almost always expressed herself in a way which made her difficult to attack, she could play ignorant and hence innocent, she could use humour and hence make out the other person to be a wet blanket if he or she stood up to her, or she could confuse people until they believed that what she said was said out of kindness and with the best of intentions; "God, you're brave, I'd never have dared to cut my hair so short if the back of my head had been that flat," she said once when a girl with whom she had a score to settle walked into the classroom with a new haircut. But she was at her most merciless when she got the least whiff of discrimination against women. She was the kind of feminist who could hurt a boy in the most shocking way on behalf of all suffering women throughout history. The fact that there were men who raped and beat up women, seemed to justify her commenting on the size of her poor victim's penis, and that all men from southern Europe were supposed to be womanisers, gave her allowance to trick a nice Italian musician-friend of mine into believing she was interested in him, only to reject him in a particularly humiliating way. "Hopefully I gave him just a tiny idea of what women in his country suffer," as she said afterwards.

I can't quite remember how we became friends, but I remember that we were both very surprised to meet a girl who were genuinely interested in the same things we were. Despite the reckless and almost threatening aspects of her character, we enjoyed her company from the beginning, and there were times we were sleeping and eating almost more often at her place than our own homes, something Oddrun, Silje's mother, greatly appreciated. If you want to stay young, you've got to mix with those who are young, she used to say, and when rumours began to circulate that she had an abnormally high sex-drive and liked to surround herself with young men, she laughed her raw, hoarse laughter, and it didn't even occur to her to be more careful and keep

her distance. On the contrary, Oddrun liked to provoke, and to create a scandal. I remember one time you were supposed to help her change the washer on her garden hose tap, and when she noticed that the pensioned army officer in the house next door was watching you from his living-room window through his binoculars, she suddenly pulled you to her and kissed you smack on the mouth. Once the two of you were back inside, she couldn't stop laughing. "He's going to sit glued to his phone till tomorrow morning, I just know it," she said.

Oddrun didn't seem to care the least what people said about her. She could sit on her veranda and get drunk on a Tuesday afternoon, with people walking past on the road below. She would go into the newsagent's and buy Penthouse no matter how full of people the shop was, and instead of hiding them in her bedroom, she put them on a bookshelf in the living-room. But according to mum, she had not always been like that. Silje's father had been a Freemason and a business man with a reputation to uphold. He had demanded of Oddrun that she should be a model wife, to say the least, and it was only when he got some kind of lung disease and died at the beginning of the 1980s, that Oddrun "insisted on becoming a bohemian and doing all the things her husband used to forbid her to do," as mum put it.

Silje pretended to be upset over Oddrun's eccentricities, and the way she sometimes created little scandals and gave fuel to the gossip-mongers, but her attitude to it all showed that she was actually proud of and looked up to this side of her mother.

"Oh mum," she might say and roll her eyes. "For Christ's sake, you make me blush," she could say and cup her head in her hands. But as opposed to both me and you, who were constantly embarrassed and blushing on behalf of our mothers, she never did blush, on the contrary, she just laughed loudly and heartily, and the next day already, she would entertain friends and acquaintances with the latest piece of news about her mad bohemian mother. Oddrun on her part, understood that Silje just pretended to be shocked and upset, and she countered her daughter's play-acting with more play-acting of her own: "What?" she would say, while she wrinkled her nose and pretended not to understand what was so sensational about something she had said or done.

And we admired and looked up to her as much as Silje did. She was widely read, knowledgeable and intelligent, and we couldn't quite figure out how a woman like her could take the time to talk to us as much as she did, that she could ask us to come in for a cup of tea even when Silje was not at home, that she could invite us to her parties and treat us exactly as she treated all the adult guests.

Actually, she didn't have parties at her place, not like mum and other adults I knew had the occasional party, she had soirees. And when she had a soiree, she served cocktails in tall, wide glasses, in which she placed swizzle sticks with glazed cherries, and her guests, who were often familiar faces from the local cultural crowd and the odd ones from the trade- and commerce sectors, circulated and made small-talk until it was time to sit down to dinner, which was not stew or a meat casserole served with a bottle of beer, which I was used to when the adults had parties, but some French-sounding dish or other with mushrooms she had picked herself, always served with a fine wine, which, as a rule, came from the same region as the dish, and which, according to Silje's mother, complemented the meal perfectly.

Oddrun couldn't open a bottle of wine without sighing and shaking her head resignedly at Namsos Cellars. They could hardly produce a single bottle of wine worth

drinking, she had to order almost everything in advance, and the sales staff didn't have the faintest idea about the wines it was their job to sell, she used to say. When she went to buy wine, she always ended up lecturing them about wine, and not the other way around, which is what should happen.

As opposed to Arvid and Berit, mum could buy a bottle of wine on the rare occasion she had people coming for dinner, but no matter what kind of food she served, the wine on the table was either a popular Hungarian red or the most common Norwegian red, because they were cheap and they were good enough, according to mum. Should I be careless enough to point out that not every kind of wine went with every kind of food, she would inform me with biting sarcasm that unfortunately, she wasn't as cultural as I would like her to be, or she would act wounded and sigh something or other about doing the best she could, and that she was sorry if that wasn't good enough. For her, to open up for and receive new knowledge was synonymous with admitting defeat, or so it seemed. Everything she didn't know or couldn't do, she saw as a threat and as a reminder that she wasn't good enough, and not as a source of a richer life. By the way, this was also reflected in the conversations that were being played out at the dinner table. If, for whatever reason, someone took up a subject that had not been discussed a thousand times before or that possibly did not meet common approval, it would cause a certain mood of anxiety that felt a little like the mood the pastor, Arvid, caused wherever he visited. On such occasions, mum and all the others who knew the unwritten rules of the way people communicate around here would immediately put a series of steps into action so as to bring the conversation around to something safe and familiar again.

When we sat at the table at Silje and her mother's place, all this was totally absent. No topic was too small and no topic was too big, and it didn't seem to make the least difference whether the opinions were offered by a furious or by an ecstatically happy soiree guest. While Arvid and Berit and the whole Christian flock valued the qualities of self-control and prudence, here the opposite reigned; the only thing that was not well received was lack of fervour, and lack of interest in the topic under discussion. "The Lord likes you hot or cold, if you're tepid, he spits you out," as Oddrun the atheist used to say.

And it was a treat for us to be present. We tried to appear as sophisticated and self-assured as we possibly could, but I'm sure it shone through that we were fawningly proud and grateful. We admired everyone for everything they knew and could do and for everything they had experienced. Oddrun herself had a studio in the attic where she painted pictures of birds, her recurring theme, a lively and loquacious guy with a grey ponytail and a Lenin-badge in his lapel had been present at the 1968 student revolution in Paris, and a type in a suit with abnormally strong glasses had been a hippie and driven across USA in a rainbow-coloured Combi. We had only been on camping holidays in Sweden a few times, and as strange as it might sound these days when travelling abroad is so cheap and common, that was as far as my mother, Berit and Arvid had ever been.

We soaked up everything these people talked about, we took in all the stories, comments and reflections, and when we were at school or at a party with friends our own age, we repeated everything they had said, and pretended that we had come up with most of it ourselves.

Even the time after dinner was different from what we were used to. In our homes, it was always the women who cleared the table and went into the kitchen

afterwards, and while they did the washing-up, they liked to talk among themselves about things that concerned them. Mum's favourite topic was illness and suffering in general, and suffering children in particular, and as far as I noticed this was a popular topic of conversation with the other women, too. Meanwhile the men sat in the living-room and waited for the women to serve them coffee, so they could spike it. They rolled their own cigarettes and exchanged sturdy opinions about the government budget and someone with a water-leakage in his basement, and now and then they would call out something to the women which was supposed to be a bit brazen and improper; "What about that coffee! We're drying out in here!" And mum and the other women would put their heads out of the kitchen door and pretend to be angry. "Oh shut up, you good-for-nothing, or you won't get anything at all!" And then they would all laugh.

After dinner at Silje's place, on the other hand, it was just as natural to find the men clearing the table and helping with the washing-up as the women, and the conversations that followed were a continuation of those that had been going on during dinner, and I, at least, didn't notice any difference between women and men. Oddrun contributed just as passionately to discussions about progressive taxation, German interwar literature and Soviet foreign policy as the men did, and as opposed to mum, who might pluck up the courage to tell a joke on the odd occasion, but never a joke that crossed the line for what was considered proper for a woman, Oddrun was just as saucy and outspoken as the male guests. After a drink or two, she often started to joke about how many sexual partners she had had and about how easy it was to trick men into doing all sorts of things, "you only need to show a bit of cleavage, and they'll do exactly what you ask them to," I remember her saying late one night, and neither of us, or anyone else, thought of her as indecent or loose because of it.

However, when people got drunk at Oddrun's place, they could behave in ways that would have been utterly unacceptable at the parties for adults you and I were familiar with. A scrawny woman with long, white hair, protruding eyes and a past as an actor at Trøndelag Teater, took off all her clothes and went out onto the veranda and sat down, and there she sat, smoking and staring challengingly at everyone who walked past on the footpath below. It would have been inconceivable for a friend of mum's or Berit's to do anything like that, no matter how drunk and how far from home they were, and even if it had happened, it would have been a personal catastrophe and a source of eternal shame if it had come out. But the next morning, when we were sitting at the breakfast table, the same white-haired woman came out of a bedroom, and contrary to what you would think, she had neither forgotten, nor did she pretend to have forgotten the episode, she didn't look the least bit ashamed, she laughed till she cried while she told us about the expressions on the faces of the different men who had walked past, and everyone else around the table laughed just as loudly and heartily.

But irrespective of how free of prejudice Oddrun, her friends and Silje were, we never dared to reveal what you and I had together. None of them would have had anything against it, of course, we knew that. But paradoxically, that was exactly why we kept it from them. Because if Silje got to know, she would, as the most natural thing in the world, tell others. She simply wouldn't understand that it could be a cause of shame for two men to sleep together, and even if we had begged her not to say anything, and even if she had solemnly promised not to do it, she would still have done it, and afterwards, she wouldn't have understood why we were so upset. "But for God's sake,

relax," she would have said. "What does it matter." She had a self-confidence that made her invulnerable, and she behaved as if everyone around her were, too.

But after a while, mum started to have her suspicions. She didn't say anything straight out, but it became obvious that she was feeling less and less comfortable. She might react with a little sigh or a resigned, almost sour expression when I said I was going to your place, and by chance I discovered that she had told you that I wasn't at home several times when you had rung and asked for me, although she knew I was in my room, practising or listening to music. At first I thought it was her illness and that she was so dependent on me helping her around the house that made her do this. She had struggled with chronic joint and muscle pain for a long time, but throughout winter and spring, the pain had become unbearable, and when, on top of that, she lost much of the grip in her hands, she could neither continue to work nor do all the things that needed to be done in a house. She never said anything directly, but she let me understand that it wasn't too much to ask me to stay at home more often and take a bigger share of the housework, and I thought the sudden dislike she took to you was one of her ways of telling me this. But when I discovered that she didn't react in the same negative way if I went out meet someone else, it began to dawn on me that it must have to do with you, and when I realised that, I began to notice that she behaved differently towards you than she used to. She wasn't directly hostile, but she was curt and less chatty, and when you and Silje were here at the same time, she was cheerful around Silje, pretending interest and curiosity, while she ignored you in an obvious but childish way.

Besides, more and more often I had the impression that she tried to test us to see if we were gay or not. When your name came up, she started to talk pointedly about HIV and AIDS suspiciously often. True, the virus was relatively new at that time, and much was written about it in the newspapers, but still, it couldn't explain all the times she suddenly and totally out of context began to talk about what a long and painful death it caused, how long it would be for medical science to find an effective cure, and how she agreed that everyone infected with HIV should have to wear some sort of badge, so that everyone else could take precautions. "But of course it's first and foremost gay people who get infected, so that's okay then, isn't it," she might offer, while carefully watching my reaction. For a long time I tried to ignore her when she went on like that. I pretended that I had no idea why she was saying these things, I yawned and tried to look as if it had nothing to do with me, and I both hoped and believed that this would make her give up, gradually, but it didn't, and one day you were here and she steered the conversation, via some strange detours, to a male hairdresser she was convinced was gay, although he was married with children, I decided I had had enough. "We're not gay, mum," I said.

At first she turned a beetroot red, and then she became angry because I had said it out loud and thereby broken the unwritten rule for the way she believed these things should be aired, but a minute later she was happier and more cheerful than I remembered seeing her for a long time. Suddenly she thought she would have grandchildren to spoil after all, and a daughter-in-law to teach, and a son she could talk to her girl-friends about without lying or blushing. Eskil, my brother, could have given her the second and third thing, for that matter; however, to mum's great sorrow he contracted mumps in his teens and became sterile, so it was up to me to provide her with grandchildren and raise a new generation, and she had let me understand that on more than one occasion.

I was as uncertain about whether I was gay, heterosexual or bisexual then as I am now, but that didn't make it less painful to hear her talk and behave the way she did. You just thought it was ridiculous, and sometimes you had to pull yourself together to stop yourself from laughing when she sat there and tested us, but even if I agreed, and even if much of what she said was so stupid that you wouldn't think it could be hurtful, I always felt depressed afterwards. I wasn't able to understand it then, but today I realise that it was the fact she could place certain conditions on her love for me that caused me to feel what I now remember as a dull sense of shame.

As opposed to mum, I don't think either Berit or Arvid thought we were more than mates at this point in time. Well, Arvid thought and behaved as if he lived in the heaven he occasionally believed in, and as there certainly were no gay or lesbian people in that heaven, I don't think it even occurred to him that we could be together in that way. Berit was far more observant and down to earth, and under otherwise normal circumstances, she might perhaps have been able to see what mum saw, but the silent, tough and almost insensitive manner you assumed when you were at home, became more and more extreme during 1988-89, and it made you almost impossible to read and understand, not just for Arvid, but also for her. Once we dropped in to your place to get a camera we needed for one of our eternal art projects, and you felt you had to have something to eat to raise your blood sugar level a little before we went on our way, I remember that you asked Arvid if you were "allowed to" make yourself a sandwich. Both I and Silje thought it was a joke, but when we saw that Arvid didn't smile, but reacted by sighing resignedly and then leaving the kitchen without a word, we realised that this was more or less normal.

I would have thought that Berit was worried about you when you behaved like that, and perhaps she was, but at the same time, it seemed as if she admired this side of you. I think she read your defiance and all those little rebellions of yours as signs of an inner strength and courage, and on many occasions I watched her hide a small smile when your behaviour would probably have worried most other mothers.

May-Brit Akerholt
13/08/2008