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## MY STRUGGLE - FIRST BOOK

by

Karl Ove Knausgård

Excerpt 1 (pp 7-20)

Part 1

To the heart, life is simple: it beats for as long as it can. Then it stops. Sooner or later, one day or another, this thumping movement shuts down of its own accord, and the blood begins to flow towards the body's lowest point, where it gathers in a small pool, visible from the outside as a dark and spongy spot on the slowly whitening skin, all the while the temperature sinking, the limbs stiffening and the bowels emptying. The changes of these first hours happen so slowly and are performed with such an inevitability that there is almost a touch of ritual about them, as if life capitulates according to set rules, a kind of gentleman's agreement, which even death's representatives observe, as they always wait until life has withdrawn before they start the invasion of this new landscape. Then, however, it is irreversible. Nothing can stop the enormous swarms of bacteria which start to spread through the body's interior. If they had tried just a few hours earlier, they would have been met with immediate resistance, but now everything is silent around them, and they penetrate deeper and deeper into the damp darkness. They arrive at the Haversian canals, the Lieberkühnske crypts, the islets of Langerhans. They arrive at Bowman's capsule in Renes, Clark's

column in Spinalis, the black substance in Mesencephalon. And they arrive at the heart. It is still intact, but robbed of the movement, which its whole construction is built around, there is something strangely desolate about it, like a plant the workers had to abandon in great haste, one might imagine, the motionless vehicles glowing yellow against the darkness of the forest, the empty barracks, the fully loaded cable cars hanging in rows up the mountainside.

At the very moment life leaves the body, the body belongs to the lifeless world. The lamps, the suitcases, the blankets, the doorhandles, the windows. The fields, the swamps, the streams, the mountains, the clouds, the sky. Nothing of this is strange to us. We are continuously surrounded by the lifeless world's objects and phenomena. There are still few things that arouse a stronger aversion in us than seeing a human being caught in it, at least if you judge from the efforts we make to keep the dead bodies out of sight. In larger hospitals they are not only hidden away in their own, inaccessible rooms; even the way to them is hidden, with their own lifts and their own basement corridors, and even if you should get lost and find yourself in one of them, the dead corpses being wheeled past are always covered. When they are being transported from the hospital, they always leave through their own exit, in cars with darkened windows; on the church grounds they have their own windowless room; during the burial ceremony they lie in closed coffins, until they are lowered into the ground or burnt in the ovens. It is difficult to see that this procedure could have any practical purpose. The dead bodies might as well be wheeled through the hospital corridors uncovered, let's say, and be transported from there in an ordinary taxi, without this posing any kind of risk to anyone. The elderly man who dies at the movies may just as well be left in his seat until the end of the film, and throughout the next session as well. The teacher who dies of a stroke in the schoolyard does not necessarily have to be driven away immediately, there is no harm done if he lies there until the caretaker has time to deal with him, even if that is not until late afternoon or evening. If a bird should land on him and start pecking him, what does it matter? Is it better, what awaits him in the grave, just because we cannot see it? As long as the dead are not lying in the road, there is no reason for haste; they cannot die all over again. The cold periods in winter ought to be particularly favourable in this respect. The homeless who freeze to death on benches and in doorways, suicides who jump from tall buildings and bridges, elderly women who collapse in stairways, accident victims trapped in their car-wrecks, the young boy who falls into the harbour half-drunk after a night on the town, the little girl who ends up under the wheels of a bus, why this haste to hide them away? Decency? What could be more decent than letting the girl's father and mother see her there an

hour or two later, lying in the snow next to the accident spot, her shattered head visible, as well as her whole body; the blood-splattered hair and the clean parka? Open to the world, without secrets, that is how she would have been lying. But even this one hour in the snow is unthinkable. A city which fails to keep its dead out of sight, a city where anyone can see them lying in streets and alleyways, in parks and parking lots, is no city, but hell itself. That this hell reflects the circumstances of our lives in a more realistic manner makes no difference. We know this is how it is, but we refuse to see it. Hence the collective act of suppression, manifested in the sluicing away of the dead.

Exactly what is being suppressed is not easy to say, however. It cannot be death itself, its presence in society is much too great for that. The number of dead people mentioned in the newspapers or shown on the news every day varies a little according to the circumstances, but from one year to the next the number is probably fairly constant, and, as it is spread across so many channels, as good as impossible to escape. *That* death, however, never seems threatening. On the contrary, it is something we want to have, and gladly pay to see. If you add the enormous masses of death produced by fiction, the system that keeps the dead out of sight becomes even more difficult to understand. If death as a phenomenon fails to frighten us, why then this discomfort over the dead bodies? It must mean either that there are two kinds of deaths, or that there is an opposition between our concept of death and death the way it actually occurs, which, after all, are one and the same: the essential thing in this connection is that our concept of death has such a stronghold on our consciousness that we not only become shocked when we see reality deviate from it, but also try to hide it with all the means at our disposal. Not as a result of a conscious deliberation of any kind, which has become the case of rituals such as the funeral, whose content and meaning in our time are negotiable, and thus have been moved from the sphere of the irrational to that of the rational, the sphere of the collective to that of the individual - no, the way we remove ourselves from the dead has never been an object of discussion, it has always just been something we have done, from a necessity no one can explain, but everyone knows: if your father dies on the lawn on a windy Sunday in autumn, you carry him inside, provided that you can, and if you cannot, at least you cover him with a blanket. But this impulse is not the only thing we feel in relation to the dead. Just as conspicuous as having to cover up all corpses is the fact that they are always brought down to ground level as fast as possible. A hospital that transports its dead up, that builds its autopsy rooms and stretcher halls on the upper floors, is almost unthinkable. The dead are stored as far down to the ground as possible. And the same principle is transferred to the agencies that deal with them: an insurance company can have offices

on the eighth floor, but not a funeral parlour. All funeral parlours have their offices as close to street level as possible. The cause of this is not easy to decide; one might be tempted to believe that it depended on an old convention, which initially had a practical purpose, such as a basement being a cold place, and therefore the most suitable place to store the corpses, and that this principle has been preserved until our days of fridges and cold storage, if it had not been for the thought that transporting the dead up through the buildings actually seems to be *against nature*, as if height and death mutually exclude each other. As if we were in possession of a kind of chthonic instinct, something deep inside us that must lead our dead down towards the earth from whence we came.

Thus it may look as if death is distributed through two different systems. One is associated with secrecy and weight, earth and darkness, the other with openness and buoyancy, ether and light. A father and his child are killed as the father is trying to pull the child out of the firing line in a town somewhere in the Middle East, and the image of them, with their arms around each other as the bullets hit their flesh, as if their bodies shudder, is caught by a camera, sent up to the thousands of satellites circling the earth, and shared out to the world's television sets, from where it glides into our consciousness as yet another photo of the dead or the dying. These photos have no weight, no physicality, no time and no place, nor do they have any connection with the bodies they once came from. They are nowhere and everywhere. Most of them simply glide through us and disappear, a few stay, for different reasons, and live their lives in the darkness of our brains. A downhill skier falls and cuts the artery in her thigh, blood is pumping like a red tail after her down the white hill, she is dead before her body stops. An airplane takes off, flames shoot out from the wings as the plane rises, the sky above the suburban houses is blue, the plane explodes in a ball of fire beneath it. A fishing boat sinks one night outside the coast of Northern Norway, the crew of eight drown, the next morning the event is described in all the newspapers, because it is a so-called mystery; the weather was calm and no distress signal escaped from the boat, it just disappeared, something the television news stations emphasised that night by flying over the site of the accident in helicopters, showing pictures of the empty ocean. It is overcast, the grey-green swells are heavy and calm, as if in possession of another temperament than the choppy, frothing tops breaking out here and there. I sit alone and watch it, some time in spring, probably, because my father is working in the garden. I stare at this ocean surface without hearing what the reporter is saying, *and suddenly the outline of a face emerges*. I don't know how long it is there, a few seconds perhaps, but long enough to make a huge impression on me. At the very moment the

face disappears, I stand up and go to find someone to tell it to. My mother is working the night shift, my brother is playing a football match, and the other kids on the housing estate don't want to listen to me, so it has to be Dad then, I think, and hurry down the stairs, stick my feet into my shoes, pull on my jacket, open the door and run around the house. We are not allowed to run on the estate, so just before I enter his field of vision, I slow down to a walk. He is standing at the back of the house, down in what will be the kitchen garden, and is hitting a rock face with a sledgehammer. Even if the hollow is only a few metres deep, the black, upturned soil he stands on and the cluster of rowanberry trees growing densely outside the fence behind him make the dusk down there look darker. When he straightens up and turns to me, his face is in almost total darkness.

I still have more than enough information to know where I've got him. It doesn't appear in the facial expressions, but in the body posture, and you don't read it with your thoughts, but with your intuition.

He puts down the sledgehammer, takes off his gloves.

- Well? he asks.

- I saw a face in the ocean on telly just now, I say, and stop on the lawn above him. The neighbour has felled a pine tree earlier that afternoon, and the air is filled with the strong smell of resin from the logs lying on the other side of the stone fence.

- A diver? Dad says. He knows I am interested in divers, and probably cannot imagine that I could find anything else interesting enough to come out and tell him about it.

I shake my head.

- It wasn't a person. It was a sort of picture in the ocean.

- A sort of picture, he says and pulls a cigarette packet from his shirt pocket.

I nod and turn to go back.

- Wait a minute, he says.

He strikes a match and bends his head slightly forward to light his cigarette. The flame digs a little cavern of light in the grey dusk.

- Right, he says.

After pulling deeply on his cigarette, he puts one foot on the rock and starts to stare across to the forest on the other side of the road. Or perhaps it is the sky above the trees he is staring at.

- Was it Jesus you saw a picture of? he says and looks up at me. If it had not been for the friendly voice and the long pause before the question, I would have thought he was making fun of me. He finds it a little embarrassing that I am a Christian;

all he wants is for me not to be different from the other kids, and of all the kids in the neighbourhood, his youngest son is the only one to call himself a Christian.

But he is really wondering about this.

I feel a flutter of joy because he actually cares, and at the same time I become a bit offended that he underestimates me like that.

I shake my head.

- It wasn't Jesus, I say.

- That is almost good to hear, Dad says and smiles. Far up in the hill there is a faint whistling of bike wheels against tarmac. The sound grows quickly in strength, and it is so quiet on the estate that the low, singing tone forming inside the rustle grows to a loud and clear sound when the bike rolls past on the road outside a moment later.

Dad takes another drag of his cigarette and throws it half-smoked over the fence, coughs a few times, pulls on his gloves and picks up the sledgehammer again.

- Don't give it any more thought, he says and looks up at me.

I was eight years old that evening, my father was thirty-two. Even if I still cannot say that I understand him or know what kind of person he was, the fact that I am now seven years older than he was then, makes certain things easier to understand. For instance, how big the difference was between our days. While my days were packed with meaning, and every step opened up for a new possibility, and every possibility filled me to the brim, in a way which now is incomprehensible, really, the meaning of his days was not gathered in isolated events, but spread out across surfaces so large that they were impossible to capture with anything but abstract concepts. "Family" was one, "career" another. Few or no unforeseen possibilities would have revealed themselves in the course of his days, he must always have known, roughly speaking, what each would bring and how he should relate to it. He had been married for twelve years, he had worked as a secondary school teacher for eight of them, he had two children, a house and a car. He was elected to the local council and served on the Executive Committee as a representative of Venstre, a left-to-centre political party. During winter he did philately, and not without progress, within a short period of time he had become one of the foremost stamp collectors in his part of the country, while in the summer half, gardening occupied every spare moment. I have no idea what he was thinking this particular spring evening, nor what kind of image he had of himself as he straightened up in the half-darkness with the sledgehammer in his hand, but I am quite certain that inside, he felt he had a good understanding of the world around him. He knew who all our neighbours were, and what social position they had compared to himself, and he

probably also knew a few things they themselves would rather keep secret, both because he taught their children and because he had a sharp eye for other people's weaknesses. As a member of the new, well-educated middle class, he also had a solid knowledge of the larger world, brought to him every day by newspapers, radio and television. He knew a good deal about botany and zoology, as he had been interested in that while he was growing up, and if he was not particularly well versed in the other science subjects, at least he was acquainted with their basic principles from his high school days. He was better in history, which he had studied at university, along with Norwegian and English studies. He was, in other words, not an expert on anything, apart, perhaps, from pedagogy, but knew a little about everything. In that respect, he was a typical secondary school teacher, mind you, from the time when teaching secondary school still had a certain status. The neighbour who lived on the other side of the stone fence, Prestbakmo, worked as a teacher at the same secondary school, as did the neighbour who lived above the tree-lined slope behind our house, Olsen, while one of the neighbours who lived on the other end of the ring road, Knudsen, was a school official at another secondary school. So when my father lifted the sledgehammer above his head and let it fall against the rock this evening in spring in the middle of the 70s, he did it in a world he knew and was comfortable with. It was only when I reached his age that I understood that there is also a price to pay for this. When one's view of the world grows larger, not only does the pain it causes decrease, but also its meaning. To understand the world is to place yourself at a particular distance from it. The things that are too small to see with the naked eye, like molecules and atoms, we enlarge; things that are too large, like cloud systems, river deltas, stellar constellations, we shrink. When we have brought it within the reach of our senses, we affix it. What we have affixed, we call knowledge. Throughout childhood and adolescence, we strive to establish the correct distance to objects and phenomena. We read, we learn, we experience, we correct. Then one day we arrive at the point where all necessary distances have been set, all necessary systems established. This is when time starts to move faster. It no longer meets any obstructions, everything is set, time floods through our lives, the days disappear at a furious pace, before we know it, we turn forty, fifty, sixty ... Meaning needs fullness, fullness needs time, time needs resistance. Knowledge is distance, knowledge is standstill, and the enemy of meaning. The image I have of my father that night in 1976 is, in other words, double: On the one hand I see him the way I saw him then, through the eyes of an eight-year-old, unpredictable and frightening, on the other hand I see him as someone my age, through whose life time keeps blowing, snatching with it increasingly greater fragments of meaning.

The sound of sledgehammer against rock rang through the housing estate. A car came driving up the gentle slope from the main road, passing with its headlights turned on. The neighbour's door opened, Prestbakmo stopped on the doorstep and pulled on his work gloves, while he sort of sniffed the bright evening air before he grabbed the wheelbarrow and pushed it across the lawn. There were smells of gun-powder from the rock Dad was striking, pine from the logs behind the stone fence, and newly dug soil and forest, and in the faint wind from the north, a scent of salt. I thought of the face I had seen in the ocean. Even though only a couple of minutes had passed since I last thought about it, the image had already changed. Now it was Dad's face I saw.

Down in the hollow he stopped hammering.

- You're still there, son?

I nodded.

- Back inside with you.

I started to walk.

- And hey? he said.

I stopped, turned my head questioningly.

- No running this time.

I stared at him. How did he know that I had been running?

- And don't stand there with your mouth wide open, he said, - You look like an idiot.

I did as he said, closed my mouth and walked slowly around the house. When I arrived at the front, the road outside was full of kids. The oldest ones stood in a group with their bicycles, which in the dusk almost looked like they belonged to their bodies. The youngest ones were playing Kick the Can. Those who had been caught, stood inside a chalk circle on the footpath, the others were hidden in the forest below the road, out of sight of the one guarding the can, but not out of mine.

The lights from the bridge masts glowed red above the black treetops. Another car came driving up the hill. The car's headlights lit up first the bike-riders - a brief glimpse of reflectors, metal, parkas, black eyes and white faces - then the playing kids, who had only taken the one sideways step necessary for the car to pass, and now stood ghostlike and stared at it.

It was Trollnes, Sverre's parents, a boy in my year. It didn't look as if he was with them.

I turned and followed the red backlights with my eyes until they disappeared over the hilltop. Then I went inside. I tried to lie on my bed and read for a while, but

couldn't settle down properly, and instead I walked into Yngve's room, where I could look out at Dad. When I saw him, I knew where I had him, and in one sense that knowledge was more important than anything. I knew his moods, and had learnt to anticipate them a long time ago, with the help of a form of subconscious categorising system, I have later thought, where the relationship between a few stable characteristics was enough to determine what I had in store, so that I could make my preparations. A kind of meteorology of the mind ... The car's speed up the gentle hill towards the house, the time it took him to switch off the engine, grab his things and step out, the way he looked around when he locked the car, the nuances of the different sounds that drifted up from the hall when he took off his coat - everything was a sign, everything could be interpreted. Added to that was information about where he had been, how long he had been away and whom he had been with, before the conclusion, which was the only part of the process I knew, was drawn. What I feared the most, therefore, was when he just *arrived* ... When I for some reason or other had been *unobservant* ...

How on earth did he know I was running?

It was not the first time he, incomprehensibly, had exposed me. One evening that autumn, for instance, I had hidden a bag of sweets under my duvet, because I suspected that he wanted to come into my room, and that he never in a million years would believe my explanation about how the money to buy it had fallen into my hands. And quite right; as he entered, he stood and looked at me for a few seconds.

- What do you have hidden in your bed?

How *could* he know?

Outside, Prestbakmo switched on the powerful lamp which was mounted above the platform where he used to work. The new island of light that rose out of the darkness was full of things, which he stood staring at, utterly motionless. Stacks of paintboxes, jars of paintbrushes, logs, stumps of plank, folded tarpaulins, car tyres, a bicycle frame, a few toolboxes, packet of screws and nails in all shapes and sizes, trays with milk cartons full of newly sprouted flowers, sacks of lime, a coiled up water-hose, and propped up against the wall, a board with all tools imaginable outlined on it, probably meant for the hobby room in the basement beyond.

When I glanced over at Dad again, he was on his way across the lawn with the sledgehammer in one hand and a spade in the other. I took a couple of quick steps back. At the same moment, the front door was opened. It was Yngve. I looked at my watch. Two minutes to half past eight. When he a moment later walked up the stairs with the

characteristic, jerky, almost duck-like gait we had developed so we could walk fast inside without making a sound, he was out of breath, his face flushed.

- Where's Dad? he said when he had entered the room.

- Out in the garden, I said. - But you're not too late. Look, it's half past eight *now*.

I held out my arm with my watch.

He walked past me and pulled out the chair from the desk. He still smelt of the outside. Cold air, forest, gravel, tarmac.

- Have you touched my cassettes? he said.

- No.

- What are you doing in my room, then?

- Nothing, I said.

- Can't you do that in your own room?

Below us the front door was opened again. This time Dad's heavy steps walked across the floor downstairs. He had taken his boots off outside, the way he always did, and was on his way into the washroom to change.

- I saw a face in the ocean on the news, I said. - Have you heard anything about that? Do you know if someone else has seen it too?

Yngve looked at me with half questioning, half dismissive eyes.

- What're you babbling about?

- Do you know that fishing boat that sank?

He barely nodded.

- When they showed the place where it sank on the news, I saw a face in the ocean.

- A corpse?

- No. It wasn't a proper face. It was the ocean that formed into a sort of picture of a face.

For a moment he looked at me without saying anything. Then he spun his forefinger around on his temple.

- Don't you believe me? I said. - It's really true.

- What's true is that you're a loser.

When Dad at that moment turned off the water down there, I thought it best to go into my room, so I wouldn't risk meeting him in the hallway. At the same time I didn't want Yngve to have the last word.

- You're the loser, I said.

He couldn't even be bothered to reply. He just turned his face to me, stuck out his upper teeth and blew air in and out between them like a rabbit. The gesture alluded to my teeth, which were protruding. I twisted my head away and got out of the room before he could see that I was crying. As long as I was alone, I didn't mind crying. And this time it had gone well, hadn't it? Because he hadn't seen it?

I stopped inside the door of my room and wondered for a moment if I should go to the bathroom. There I could rinse my face in cold water and remove the traces. But Dad was on his way up the stairs, so I had to make do with drying my eyes on the sleeve of my jumper. The thin layer of fluid that the dry material dragged across the surface of my eyes, made the room's flat surfaces shiver, as if the room had suddenly sunk and was now under water, and this performance was so captivating that I lifted my arms and swam a few strokes as I walked slowly towards my desk. In my thoughts I was wearing a metal diving helmet from diving's early history, when they walked on the bottom of the ocean with shoes of lead and thick elephant-skin-like suits, with an oxygen-hose fastened to the head like a kind of trunk. I breathed through my mouth in small hisses and trudged around on the floor for a while with the heavy and slow movements of an old-fashioned diver, until the terror that the performance bordered on, slowly began to seep into it like cold water.

A few months earlier I watched the television series *The Mysterious Island*, from Jules Verne's novel, and the story of the men who are stranded with a hot air balloon on a deserted island in the Atlantic Ocean made an enormous impression on me from the very first image. Everything was charged. The hot air balloon, the storm, the clothes from the 1800s, the barren, unsheltered island they had landed on, which probably was less deserted than they thought; mystical and inexplicable things were constantly happening around them ... But in that case, who were the others who were there? The answer came abruptly towards the end of one episode. There was someone inside the underwater grottos ... a series of human-like creatures ... in the light from the torches they carried, you could see glimpses of smooth mask-covered heads ... fins ... they looked like some kind of lizard, but walked on their feet ... they had containers on their backs ... one of them turned around, he had no eyes ...

I didn't scream when I saw it, but the fear the images filled me with, were impossible to get rid of; even in the middle of the day, terror could strike me when I thought about the frogmen in the grotto. And now my thoughts began to transform me into one of them. My hissing turned into their hissing, my steps became their steps, my arms became their arms, and when I shut my eyes, it was their eye-less faces I saw in front of me. The grotto ... the black water ... the row of frogmen with torches in their

hands ... It went so far that it didn't help to open my eyes again. Even if I saw that I was in my room, surrounded by my own, familiar things, the terror would let go of me. I hardly dared to blink out of fear that something should happen. I sat down on my bed, stiffly, pulled my schoolbag towards me without looking at it, threw a glance at the timetable, found Wednesday, read what it said, *maths, social sciences, music*, lifted the bag onto my lap and leafed mechanically through the books in it. When that was done, I took the open book from the pillow, sank down against the wall, and began to read. The seconds between every time I looked up slowly turned into minutes, and when Dad shouted that supper was ready, at exactly nine o'clock, it was not fear that had me in its power, but the book. It took strength to tear myself away from that, too.

## Excerpt 2 (pp 29-37)

As I sit here writing this, more than thirty years have passed. In the window in front of me I can vaguely see the reflection of my own face. Apart from the eye, which glistens, and the bit just below it, that reflects a little light, the whole left side is in shadow. Two deep furrows run down my forehead, a deep furrow runs down each cheek, all of them filled with darkness, in a way, and when my eyes are gazing and serious, and the corners of my mouth turned down a touch, it is impossible not to think about this face as gloomy.

What is it that has marked it so?

Today is the 27<sup>th</sup> of February 2008. The time is 23:43. I, who am writing this, Karl Ove Knausgård, was born in December 1968, and am thus at the time of writing 39 years old. I have three children, Vanja, Heidi and John, and am married for the second time, to Linda Boström Knausgård. All four are asleep in the rooms around me, in a flat in Malmö, Sweden, where we have lived for a year and a half. With the exception of some of the parents of the children in Vanja and Heidi's kindergarten, we don't know anyone here. That is not a loss, at least not to me; I get nothing out of social life anyway. I never say what I really think, what I really mean, but always adjust my opinions according to the person I am talking to at any given time, pretending to be interested in what they are telling me, apart from when I drink, when I usually go too far the other way, only to wake up to the angst of transgression, something that has only intensified with the years, and now can last for weeks. When I drink, I also get blackouts, and lose total control of my actions, which usually become desperate and idiotic, but also now and then desperate and dangerous. That is why I don't drink anymore. I don't want anyone to reach me, I don't want anyone to see me. That is what must have marked my face, that is what must have made it so stiff and mask-like, and almost impossible to associate with me when I happen to come across it in a window on the street.

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The only thing that does not age in our face are the eyes. They are just as clear the day we are born as the day we die. Their blood vessels may burst, that is true, and the membrane may weaken, but the light inside them will never change. There is one painting I go to look at every time I am in London, which touches me just as much every time. It is a self-portrait painted by the late Rembrandt. The late Rembrandt's paintings

are usually characterised by an almost outrageous coarseness, where everything is subordinate to the expression of the one moment, as if almost shiny and holy, still unsurpassed in art - with the possible exception of what Hölderlin achieves in his late poetry, as incomparable as this actually is, because there, called forth by the language, Hölderlin's light is ethereal and heavenly, is Rembrandt's light, in front in colour, those of earth, metal, matter - but just this picture, hanging in the National Gallery, is painted a touch more in the school of classical realism, down-to-earth, closer to the young Rembrandt's expression. Yet what this picture represents is the old Rembrandt. This is old age. All the details of the face are visible; all traces life has lodged in it may be trailed. His face is furrowed, wrinkled, ravaged by time. But his eyes are clear, and if not young, at least beyond the age that characterises the face otherwise. It is as if someone else is looking at us, from a place within the face, where everything is different. It is difficult to come closer to the soul of another human being. For everything that affects Rembrandt's person, his good and bad habits, his body odours and body sounds, his voice and his choice of words, his thoughts and opinions, his ways of conducting himself, his body's faults and flaws, everything that defines a person to others, has ceased to exist. The picture is over four hundred years old, and Rembrandt died the same year it was painted, so what is depicted here, what Rembrandt has painted, is the very essence of this human being, the core it woke up to every morning, and which at once fell into thoughts, but was not thoughts itself, which at once fell into feelings, but which was not feelings itself, and which it every night fell asleep from, in the end forever. The core time fails to tamper with in a human being, and which the light of the eyes comes from. The difference between this painting and the other paintings by the late Rembrandt, is the difference between seeing and being. That is, in this picture he sees himself seeing, at the same time as he himself is being seen, and it could only have happened during the Baroque, with its penchant for mirror-within-mirror and play-within-play performances, and beliefs in the connections of all things, where the art of craft was also pushed towards a level no one before or later has reached, that such a painting was possible. But it is in our time it exists, it is for us it sees.

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The night Vanja was born she lay there looking at us for several hours. Her eyes were like two black lamps. Her body was bloodied, her long hair was glued against her head,

and when she moved, it was with a reptile's slow movements. She looked like something from the woods as she lay on Linda's stomach, staring at us. We could not get enough of her and her gaze. But what lived inside it? Calmness, solemnity, darkness. I put my tongue out, a minute passed, then she put her tongue out. There had never been so much future in my life as then, never so much joy. Now she is four years old, and everything is different. Her eyes are alert, they fill just as quickly with jealousy as with joy, with anguish as with rage, she is already skilled in the world, and can be so impudent that I can totally lose my temper and find myself shouting at her, or shaking her until she starts to cry. But often she just laughs. The last time it happened, the last time I was so angry that I shook her, and she just laughed, I had a sudden impulse and put my hand on her chest.

Her heart was hammering. Oh, how it was hammering.

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It is a few minutes past eight in the morning. It is March the 4<sup>th</sup> 2008. I sit in my office, surrounded by books from floor to ceiling, listening to the Swedish band 'Dungen' while I think about what I have written and where it is going. Linda and John are sleeping in the room next door, Vanja and Heidi are in kindergarten, where I dropped them off half an hour ago. In the enormous Hilton Hotel outside, which is still in the shade, the lifts glide up and down endlessly in their three glass-shafts on the hotel's façade. Next to it is a red brick building, which, judging from all the bay-windows, arches and overhangs, must be from the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century or the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup>. Beyond that you can glimpse a corner of The Magistrate Park, with its leafless trees and green grass, where a multicoloured brick house with 1970s features finishes the view, and forces your eyes up towards the sky, which is clear and blue for the first time in several weeks.

After having lived here for a year and a half, I know this view, and all its expressions throughout the days of the year, but I am not attached to it. Nothing that I can see from here means anything to me. Perhaps that is exactly what I have been looking for, because there is definitely something in the lack of attachment that I like, perhaps even need, but it has not been a conscious choice. Six years ago I was sitting in Bergen writing, and although I had not planned to live in that city for the rest of my life, I had no plans to leave neither the country nor the woman I was married to then. On the contrary, we imagined having children, and perhaps moving to Oslo, where I would write more novels and she would continue to work in radio and television. But the

future we had, which I suppose was merely a continuation of the then present, with its everyday routines and dinners with friends and acquaintances, holiday trips and visits to parents and in-laws, everything enriched by the children we imagined having, failed to transpire. Something happened, and from one day to the next, I left for Stockholm, at first just to get away for a few weeks, and then it suddenly became my life. Not only did I change city and country, but also all the people. It is strange that I did it; it is even stranger that I never think about it. How did I end up here? Why did it end up like *this*?

When I arrived in Stockholm, I knew two people there, none of them well: Geir, whom I had met in Bergen for a few weeks in the spring of 1990, twelve years earlier that is, and Linda, whom I had met at a seminar for first-time published authors at Biskops-Arnö for a few days in the spring of 1999. I sent an email to Geir asking if I could stay with him until I had found somewhere to live, and I could, and while there I rang two Swedish newspapers to lodge a 'Flat wanted' ad. I received over forty replies, from which I selected two. One was in Bastu Street, the other in Brännkyrka Street. After having inspected them both, I decided on the latter, until my eyes fell on the list of residents on the board in the hallway, and found Linda's name. What were the chances of that? More than a million and a half people live in Stockholm. If the flat had fallen into my hands via friends and acquaintances, the coincidence would not have been so great, because all literary milieus are comparatively small, regardless of the size of the cities, but this had happened via an anonymous newspaper ad, read by hundreds of thousands, and the woman who had answered it, was obviously unaware of the existence of both Linda and myself. I changed my mind from one moment to the next, it would be best to take the other flat, because if I took this one, perhaps Linda would think I was stalking her. But it was a sign. And it became filled with meaning, because now Linda and I are married and she is the mother of my three children. Now she is the one I am sharing my life with. The only trace left of the previous one, are the books and the records I took with me. I left everything else behind. And while I used to spend a lot of time thinking about the past, almost a morbid amount of time, it strikes me now, and therefore didn't just *read* Marcel Proust's novel *In Search of Lost Time*, but practically devoured it, the past is now hardly present in my thoughts. A lot of the reason for that are the children we have, I would think; that life with them here and now takes up all the space. They banish even the most recent past: ask me what I did three days ago, and I won't remember. Ask me how Vanja was two years ago, Heidi two months ago, John two weeks ago, and I won't remember. A lot is happening in our small daily lives, but what is happening always happens within the same frame, and more than anything

else, that has changed my impression of time. Because while I used to see time as a distance to be travelled, with the future as a prospect far ahead, hopefully a bright one, and at least never boring, it is now woven together with my life here and now in a totally different way. Should I describe it with an image, it would have to be of a boat in a lock chamber: just as slowly as unalterably, life is lifted up by time, which trickles in evenly from all sides. Apart from the details, everything is always the same. And for every day that passes, the longing grows for the moment when life reaches its edge, for the moment when the gate opens and life finally trickles forwards again. At the same time I recognise that exactly this sense of recurrence, this sense of confinement, this immutability is necessary, it protects me, because the few times I leave it behind, all the old torments return. Suddenly I am once more taken over by all sorts of thoughts about what was said, what was seen, what was thought, as if hurled into the uncontrollable, sterile, often degrading and in the long run destructive, sphere I lived in for so many years. The longing to move out from it is just as strong there as here, but the difference is that the aim of the longing is, in fact, feasible there, but not here. Here I must find other goals, and be content with them. The art of living, that is what I am talking about. On paper it is not a problem, there I can easily conjure up an image of Heidi, for instance, climbing out of her cot at five o'clock in the morning and toddling across the floor in the darkness, only to stop and turn on the light a second later, and stand in front of her Dad who peeps up at her half asleep, and say "Kitchen!". Her language is still idiosyncratic, giving the words another meaning than the common one, and "kitchen" means muesli with blueberry yoghurt. Likewise, a candle is called "happy birthday!". Heidi has big eyes, a big mouth, a big appetite, she is in every way a ravenous child, but the robust and vulnerable happiness she lived in for the first year and a half of her life, has moved into the shade of other, previously unknown expressions of emotions this autumn, after John's birth. The first months she used almost every opportunity she had to try to hurt him. Scratch marks on his face were the rule rather than the exception. When I came home after a four-day trip to Frankfurt this autumn, John looked as if he had been in the war. It was difficult, because we did not want to keep her away from him, so we had to try to read her moods, and adjust her access to him accordingly. But even when she was in a brilliant mood, her hand could shoot out quick as a flash and hit or scratch him. By the same token, she also began to have temper tantrums, of a force I would not have thought possible only two months earlier, at the same time as an equally unfamiliar vulnerability appeared in her: the slightest hint of hardness in my voice or behaviour, and she would bend down her head, turn away and start to cry, as if her rage was something she wanted to show us,

vulnerability something she wanted to hide. As I am writing this, I become filled with tenderness for her. But that is on paper. In reality, when it really counts, and she is standing there in front of me, so early in the morning that the streets outside are still quiet and there is not a sound in the house, shining with joy at the thought of a new day, and I get to my feet with an effort of will, get into my clothes from yesterday and follow her into the kitchen, where the promised yoghurt with blueberry taste and the sugar-free muesli await her, what I feel is not tenderness. And if she then oversteps my limits, for instance by relentlessly nagging me to watch a film, or by trying to get into the room where John sleeps, in short, every time she fails to take no for an answer, but drags it out into infinity, it happens not infrequently that irritation turns into anger, and when I then talk harshly to her, and her tears begin to flow, and she bends her head down and turns away with sunken shoulders, I think that she deserves it. There is no room for the insight that she is only two years old until evening, when they are asleep and I sit up and think about what it really is that I am doing here. But then I am outside it. Inside it I don't have a chance. Inside it, it is about getting through the morning, the three hours of nappies that have to be changed, children that have to be dressed, breakfast that has to be served, faces that have to be washed, hair that has to be brushed and tied back, teeth that have to be cleaned, quarrels that have to be prevented, blows that have to be averted, overalls and boots that have to be put on, before I, with the collapsible double pram in one hand, pushing the two little girls ahead of me with the other, get into the lift, which more often than not becomes an arena for pushing and shoving on its way down, get out into the hallway, where I heave them into the pram, put on beanies and mittens and push them into the street, already filled with people on their way to work, only to deliver them in nursery ten minutes later, and that done, I have the next five hours free to work, before the routines required by the children start all over again.

I have always had a great need to be alone, I need large stretches of loneliness, and when I don't get that, which I have not had the last five years, the frustration can sometimes become almost panicky, or aggressive. And when the one thing that has kept me going all my adult life, the ambition of one time writing something extraordinary, is threatened in that way, my only thought, which gnaws like a rat inside me, is that I have to get away. That time is running away from me, disappearing like sand between my fingers while I do ... yes, do what? Wash floors, wash clothes, make dinner, wash up, shop, play with the children in playgrounds, take them home and undress them, bathe them, look after them until they are ready for bed, put them to bed, hang up clothes to dry, fold clothes and put them in wardrobes, tidy up, wash tables, chairs, cupboards. It

is a struggle, and even if it is not heroic, it is against a superior force, because no matter how much work I do at home, the rooms overflow with mess and dirt, and the children, who are cared for every minute they are awake, are more obstinate than I have ever known other children to be, for periods of time this is a madhouse, perhaps because we have never managed to get the right balance between distance and intimacy, something that obviously is even more important the more tempers there are in the home. And there are quite a few here. When Vanja was about eight months old, she began to have strong emotional outbursts, occasionally almost like fits, and was for a while impossible to reach, she just screamed and screamed. The only thing we could do was to hold her until it was over. It is difficult to say what the reason was, but it often happened when she had absorbed many new impressions, such as visits to her grandmother in the countryside outside Stockholm, or when she had been with other children for a long time, or when we had been in town for a whole day. She could then stand in total distress and scream with all her might, inconsolable. Sensitivity and determination is no simple combination. It did not become easier for her when Heidi was born. I wish I could say that my behaviour was restrained and sensible then, but unfortunately that was not the case, because my anger and my feelings were also aroused in these situations, which thereby escalated, often in full view of the general public: it happened that I tore her from the floor in one of Stockholm's shopping-centres, beside myself with rage, threw her over my shoulder like a sack of potatoes and carried her through the city while she kicked and hit me, screaming like possessed. It also happened that I met her howls by yelling back at her, throwing her down on the bed and holding her there until it had passed, whatever it was that was riding her. She was not old before she found out exactly what would drive me insane, namely, a particular type of scream, not tears or wails or hysteria, but situation-less, purposeful, aggressive screams, which could make me lose all control, rush to my feet and over to the poor girl, who was then shouted at or shaken until the screams turned into tears and her body softened, and she could finally accept solace.

### Excerpt 3 (pp. 282-291)

Yngve bent forwards to unlock the car door. I noticed a white string that was coiled around the roof rack, it was shiny and reminded me of the kind you tie around presents, but surely, it couldn't be?

He opened my door and I got in.

- That went well, I said.

- Yes, he said. - Are we driving up to grandma then?

- Yes, let's, I said.

He indicated and drove onto the road, took the first left, then left again, into Dronningen Street, and soon we saw grandma and grandpa's house from the bridge, yellow and almost towering on the heath above the small marina and the harbour basin. Up Kuholm Road and into the small street, which was so narrow that you had to drive a short distance down the hill, and then reverse back and onto the walkway, before you could drive up and park in front of the stairs up to the house. I had seen my father perform this operation perhaps a hundred times while I was growing up, and just the fact that Yngve now did exactly the same, moved my tears all the way to the edge of my consciousness, where only a jerk on my thoughts prevented them from breaking out again.

Two large seagulls flew off the stairs when we came up the small hill. The space in front of the garage door was full of garbage bags, the seagulls had been busy rummaging through them and had torn out all sorts of plastic filth and tossed it around in their hunt for something to eat.

Yngve turned off the engine, but didn't move. I didn't move either. The garden outside was completely overgrown. The grass was knee-high, like that in a meadow, yellowish grey in colour, and flattened by the rain in some places. It was entangled with everything, covering all the flowerbeds, whose flowers I would not have seen if I didn't know where they were, because now they allowed themselves merely to be suggested as small glimpses of colour here and there. A rusty wheelbarrow lay on its side against the hedge and looked as if it had grown into the tangle of shrubs. The ground beneath the trees was brownish from rotten pears and plums. Dandelions grew everywhere, and here and there I could see small trees growing as well. It was as if we had stopped by a glade in the forest and not in front of a villa in the middle of the city of Kristiansand.

I leant forwards in my seat and looked up at the house. The gutter had rotted, and the paint had peeled off in a few places, but the decay was not as noticeable there.

A few raindrops hit the window pane. A few more crackled softly against the car roof and the bonnet.

- Gunnar isn't here, at least, Yngve said, and undid his seat belt. - But I guess he'll come down after a while.

- I suppose he's at work, I said.

- Even during the summer holidays, you can count on the accountants, Yngve said drily. He pulled out the car key and put the key ring in his pocket, opened the door and stepped out.

I would rather have stayed in the car, but of course I couldn't do that, so I got out as well, slammed the door shut and glanced up at the kitchen window on the first floor, where grandma's gaze had always greeted us on arrival.

No one there today.

- Hope it's open at least, Yngve said and walked up the six steps which once had been painted dark red, but now they were just grey. The two seagulls were perched on the roof of the house next door and followed our movements closely.

Yngve pressed down the doorhandle and pushed the door open.

- Oh fuck! he said.

I climbed up the steps, and when I followed him through the door and entered the hallway, I had to turn my head away. The smell in there was unbearable. It stank of decay and piss.

Yngve stood in the hallway and looked around. The blue wall-to-wall carpet was covered with dark stains and smears. The open, built-in wardrobe was full of bottles, and bags of bottles. Clothes were scattered everywhere. Several bottles, clothes hangers, shoes, unopened letters, leaflets and plastic bags lay strewn across the floor.

But the worst thing was the stench.

What the fuck could produce a smell like this?

- He's destroyed everything, Yngve said and slowly shook his head.

- What's that bloody awful stench? I said. - Something lying around rotting somewhere?

- Come on, he said and walked towards the staircase. - Grandma's waiting for us.

Halfway up the stairs we found empty bottles on the steps, perhaps five or six on each, but the closer we came to the first floor landing, the more we found. The landing right outside her door was almost covered with bottles and bags of bottles, and on the

staircase continuing up to the second floor, where grandma and grandpa's old bedroom used to be, every step was chock-full, apart from a few centimetres in the middle, where you could put your foot. Mostly there were large plastic beer bottles, and vodka bottles, but there was also the odd wine bottle.

Yngve opened the door, and we walked into the living room. On top of the piano there were more bottles, and underneath it lay bags full of them. The door to the kitchen was open. She was always sitting in there, and she was today too, by the kitchen table, her eyes fixed on the tabletop and with a lit cigarette in her hand.

- Hi, Yngve said.

She looked up. At first there was no sign of recognition in her eyes, but then they lit up.

- So it *was* you who came, boys! I thought I heard someone open the door.

I swallowed. Her eyes were almost sunken into the eye sockets, her nose protruded and looked almost like a beak in her emaciated face. Her skin was white and shrivelled by wrinkles.

- We came as soon as we heard what'd happened, Yngve said.

- Yes, oh yes, it was terrible, grandma said. - But you're here now. That's good, at least.

The dress she was wearing was discoloured by stains and hung loosely around the horribly shrunken body. On the upper part of her chest, which the dress was supposed to cover, her ribs lay like spokes beneath her skin. Her shoulder blades and hip bones stuck out. Her arms were mere skin and bones. Blood veins ran like narrow, dark-blue cables across the back of her hands.

She stank of piss.

- Do you want some coffee? she said.

- Yes thanks, Yngve said. - I wouldn't say no to a cup of coffee. But we'll make it. Where's the kettle?

- Well, I don't know, grandma said and looked around.

- It's over there, I said, and pointed to the table. There was a note next to it, I twisted my head a little so I could read what it said.

*THE BOYS ARE COMING AROUND TWELVE. I'LL COME DOWN ABOUT ONE.*  
*GUNNAR.*

Yngve took the kettle and walked over to the sink to empty the grounds. It was filled with piles of dirty plates and glasses. Along the whole bench were discarded wrappers, mostly for microwave meals, many of them still full of leftovers. Among them lay bottles, for the most part the same large plastic bottles, some with a few drops left

in the bottom, some half-full, some unopened, but also bottles of spirits, the cheapest vodka you could buy, and some half-bottles of Upper Ten Scotch. There were dried coffee grounds, crumbs, shrivelled food scraps everywhere. Yngve pushed one of the piles of wrappers away, lifted up some of the plates and put them on the bench, before he rinsed the grounds out of the kettle and filled it with fresh water.

Grandma sat as she did when we first came through the door, looking down on the table in front of her, the cigarette, now gone out, in her hand.

- Where do you keep the coffee? Yngve said. - In the cupboard?

She looked up.

- What? she said.

- Where do you keep the coffee? Yngve repeated.

- I don't know where he's put it, she said.

He? Was that Dad?

I turned and walked into the living room. For as long as I could remember, it had only been used for festive seasons and special occasions. Now Dad's huge television set stood in the middle of the floor, and two of the large leather chairs were pulled out in front of it. A small table full of bottles, glasses, packets of tobacco and over-flowing ashtrays stood between them. I walked past it all, and looked into the inner part of the living room.

Clothes were strewn in front of the sofa suite against the wall. I could see two pairs of pants and a jacket, a few underpants and socks. The smell was horrific. There were also some overturned bottles, and a few packets of tobacco, a few dry bread rolls and other rubbish. I walked slowly across the floor. There was excrement of the sofa, some of it smeared into it, and here and there a few lumps. I bent over the clothes. They were full of excrement, too. On the floor, the varnish was corroded in large, irregular patches in a few places.

By piss?

I felt an urge to break something. Lift the table and hurl it at the window. Tear down the bookshelf. But I was so weak, I only just managed to walk over to the window. I leant my forehead against the glass and looked down on the garden. The paint on the garden furniture, which was overturned, had peeled off almost totally. It looked as if it grew out of the earth.

- Karl Ove? Yngve said from the doorway.

I turned and walked back.

- It's bloody awful in there, I said, in a low voice, so she shouldn't hear.

He nodded.

- Let's sit with her for a while, he said.

- OK.

I walked into the kitchen, pulled out the chair on the other side of the table from her and sat down. A ticking sound filled the kitchen, it came from a thermostat-like contraption which was probably meant to turn off the hotplates on the stove automatically. Yngve sat down at the short end, pulled out a packet of cigarettes from the pocket of his jacket, which he for some reason had not taken off. I was wearing my jacket too, I discovered. I didn't want to smoke, it felt dirty, on the other hand I needed to, and pulled out my cigarettes. The fact that we sat down, stimulated grandma. Once more, her eyes lit up.

- Did you drive all the way from Bergen today, then? she said.

- From Stavanger, Yngve said. - That's where I live now.

- But I live in Bergen, I said.

Behind us the kettle crackled on the hotplate.

- Oh, so that's how it is, she said.

There was silence.

- Would you like some coffee, boys? she said suddenly.

I met Yngve's eyes.

- I've already put the kettle on, Yngve said. - It'll be ready soon.

- Oh yes, so you have, grandma said. She looked down at her hand, and with a sudden movement, as if she only this minute discovered the cigarette it was holding, grabbed her lighter and lit it.

- Did you drive all the way from Bergen and down here today? she said and pulled on the cigarette a few times before she looked at us.

- From Stavanger, Yngve said. - It only took four hours.

- Yes, the roads are really good now, she said.

Then she sighed.

- Oh well. Life's an itch, as the old woman used to say, she couldn't say b.

She laughed a little. Yngve smiled.

- I wouldn't mind a bite to eat with the coffee, he said. - There's some chocolate in the car. I'll go and get it.

I wanted to tell him not to go, but of course I couldn't. Instead, as he disappeared out the door, I stood up, put down the cigarette I had only just lit on the edge of the ashtray, walked over to the stove, and pressed the kettle into the hotplate to make it boil faster.

Grandma had sunk into herself again; she was staring down at the table. Her back was bent, her shoulders drooping, and she was rocking softly back and forth.

What could she be thinking about?

Nothing. There were no thoughts in there. Couldn't be. Just something cold and dark.

I let go of the kettle and looked around for the coffee tin. Not on the bench next to the fridge, not on the opposite bench next to the sink, either. Perhaps in a cupboard? No that's right, Yngve took it out. So where did he put it?

There, damn it. Above the fan, that's where he had put it, with the old spice jars. I took it down, and pulled the kettle aside, even if the water had not yet boiled, opened the lid and sprinkled a few spoonfuls of coffee into it. The coffee was dry and seemed old.

When I looked up, I saw that grandma was watching me.

- Where's Yngve? she said. - He hasn't left, has he?

- Oh no, I said. - He just went down to the car for something.

- Oh, she said.

I took a fork from the drawer and stirred the coffee, then tapped the kettle a few times against the hotplate.

- We'll let it brew for a bit, it'll soon be ready, I said.

- He was sitting in that chair when I came upstairs in the morning, grandma said.

- He was so still. I tried to wake him. But I couldn't. His face was all white.

I felt sick.

I could hear Yngve's steps on the stairs. I opened the cupboard to look for glasses, but couldn't find any. The ones in the sink were too awful to even think about using, so I bent forwards and drank a few sips from the tap, just as Yngve came in.

He had taken off his jacket. He had two Bounty bars and a packet of Camels in his hand. He sat down and tore off the paper on one of the chocolate bars.

- Would you like a piece? he said to grandma.

She looked at the chocolate.

- No thank you, she said. - But you two go ahead.

- Not for me, I said. - Anyway, the coffee's ready.

I put the kettle on the table, opened the cupboard again and took out three cups. I knew that grandma used sugar, and opened the tall cupboard on the other wall, where the food was kept. Two half loaves of bread, almost blue from mould, a bag of mouldy buns, a few packets of soup, peanuts, three cartons of ready-made spaghetti

meals, which should have been kept in the freezer, bottles of spirits, the same cheap brand.

It doesn't matter, I thought, and sat down again, lifted the coffee kettle and poured the coffee. It had not brewed properly, from the spout gushed light-brown water, full of tiny coffee grains. I took off the lid and poured it back.

- I'm glad you're here, grandma said.

I started to cry. I took a deep, but cautious breath, and put my head in my hands, rubbed it back and forth, as if I were tired, not as if I were crying. But grandma didn't notice anything anyway; once more it was as if she had disappeared into herself. This time it lasted for perhaps five minutes. Yngve and I said nothing, drank our coffee, stared into the air.

- Oh well, she then said. - Life's an itch, as the old woman used to say, she couldn't say b.

She grabbed the red rolling machine, opened the tobacco packet, Petterø's Menthol, pressed the tobacco quickly down into the groove, threaded an empty casing onto the little tube at the end, snapped the lid shut and pulled it hard along the thread.

- Perhaps we should get our luggage, Yngve said. He looked at grandma. - Where can we stay?

- The big bedroom downstairs is empty, she said. - You can sleep there.

We stood up.

- We're just going down to the car, Yngve said.

- Are you? she said.

I stopped in front of the door and turned to him.

- Have you looked in there? I said.

He nodded.

On our way down the stairs a violent wave of tears welled up in me. This time there was no question of trying to hide it. My whole chest was shaking and shuddering, I couldn't breathe, a few intense sobs swept through me, and my face contorted, utterly out of control.

- Ooooooooooh, I said. - Ooooooooooh.

I could feel Yngve right behind me, and I forced myself to keep moving down the stairs, through the hall and out to the car, where I continued across the narrow lawn between the house and the neighbour's fence. I lifted my head and looked up at the sky, tried to take deep and even breaths, and after a few attempts the shaking subsided.

When I got back, Yngve was bent over behind the open boot of the car. My suitcase was on the ground next to him. I picked it up and carried it up the stairs, put it on the floor in the hall and turned my head towards Yngve, who was right behind me, carrying a backpack and a bag. After a few minutes outside in the fresh air, the stench in here seemed even stronger. I began to breathe through my mouth.

- Are we going to sleep in there or what? I said, and nodded towards the door to the bedroom grandma and grandpa had used for the last few decades.

- Let's see what it looks like, Yngve said.

I opened the door and looked in. The room was ravaged, in the sense that clothes, shoes, belts, handbags, hairbrushes, hair rollers and make up stuff were scattered everywhere, on the floor, on the bed, on top of the chests of drawers, and there were dust and dust balls everywhere, but it was not defiled, not in the way of the living room upstairs.

- What do you say? I said.

- I don't know, he said. - Where do you think he slept?

He opened the door to the next room, to what had once been Erling's room, and walked in. I followed.

The floor was full of garbage and clothes. A table that looked as if someone had smashed it to pieces lay under the window. We saw piles of papers and unopened letters. Something that had to be vomit had dried to a jagged, yellowish red spot on the floor right beneath the bed. The clothes were covered in dirt and dark stains which had to be old blood. One of the garments was dark from faeces on the inside. Everything stank of piss.

Yngve stepped over to the window and opened it.

- It looks like junkies have been living here, I said. - This looks like a bloody junkies' nest.

- Yes it does, Yngve said.

The chest of drawers against the wall between the bed and the door was strangely untouched. There were the photos of dad and Erling with the black student caps that must have been taken when they enrolled at the university. Without the beard, dad looked remarkably like Yngve. The same mouth, the same look around the eyes.

- What the fuck are we going to do? I said.

Yngve didn't answer, he surveyed the room.

- We'd better tidy up, he said.

I nodded, and walked out of the room. I opened the door to the laundry, which was an annex under the staircase by the garage. When I breathed the air in there, I began to cough. In the middle of the floor was a pile of clothes as tall as me, it almost reached the ceiling. This must be where the smell of decay had come from. I turned on the light. Towels, sheets, tablecloths, trousers, jumpers, dresses, underwear, they had chucked everything in here. The bottom layers were not just mildewed, they had rotted. I crouched down and stuck a finger into it. It was wet and sticky.

- Yngve! I said.

He came and stood in the doorway.

- Look, I said. -This is where the smell comes from.

I heard steps from the top of the stairs. I stood up.

- Let's get out, I said. - So she doesn't think we're snooping.

When she came down we stood in front of our luggage in the middle of the floor.

- Can you stay in there? she said, opened the door and peeked inside. - We'll just tidy up a bit, and then it should be fine.

- We were wondering about the room in the attic, Yngve said. - What do you think?

- Can't see why not, she said. - But I haven't been up there for a long time.

- We'll go up and have a look, Yngve said.