

Karl Ove Knausgaard

BOOK ONE
My Struggle



Translated from the Norwegian by Don Bartlett

archipelago books

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Part 1

~~For the heart, life is simple: it beats for as long as it can. Then it stops. Sooner or later, one day~~
this pounding action will cease of its own accord, and the blood will begin to run towards the body's lowest point, where it will collect in a small pool, visible from outside as a dark, soft patch on even whitening skin, as the temperature sinks, the limbs stiffen and the intestines drain. These changes in the first hours occur so slowly and take place with such inexorability that there is something almost ritualistic about them, as though life capitulates according to specific rules, a kind of gentleman's agreement to which the representatives of death also adhere, inasmuch as they always wait until life has retreated before they launch their invasion of the new landscape. By which point, however, the invasion is irrevocable. The enormous hordes of bacteria that begin to infiltrate the body's interior cannot be halted. Had they but tried a few hours earlier, they would have met with immediate resistance; however everything around them is quiet now, as they delve deeper and deeper into the moist darkness. They advance on the Havers Channels, the Crypts of Lieberkühn, the Islets of Langerhans. They proceed to Bowman's Capsule in the Renes, Clark's Column in the Spinalis, the black substance in the Mesencephalon. And they arrive at the heart. As yet, it is intact, but deprived of the activity to which end its whole construction has been designed, there is something strangely desolate about it, like a production plant that workers have been forced to flee in haste, or so it appears, the stationary vehicles shining yellow against the darkness of the forest, the huts deserted, a line of fully loaded cable- buckets stretching up the hillside.

The moment life departs the body, it belongs to death. At one with lamps, suitcases, carpets, door handles, windows. Fields, marshes, streams, mountains, clouds, the sky. None of these is alien to us. We are constantly surrounded by objects and phenomena from the realm of death. Nonetheless, there are few things that arouse in us greater distaste than to see a human being caught up in it, at least if we are to judge by the efforts we make to keep corpses out of sight. In larger hospitals they are not only hidden away in discrete, inaccessible rooms, even the pathways there are concealed, with their own elevators and basement corridors, and should you stumble upon one of them, the dead bodies being wheeled by are always covered. When they have to be transported from the hospital it is through a dedicated exit, into vehicles with tinted glass; in the church grounds there is a separate, windowless room for them; during the funeral ceremony they lie in closed coffins until they are lowered into the earth or cremated in the oven. It is hard to imagine what practical purpose this procedure might serve. The uncovered bodies could be wheeled along the hospital corridors, for example, and thence be transported in an ordinary taxi without this posing a particular risk to anyone. The elderly man who dies during a cinema performance might just as well remain in his seat until the film is over, and during the next two for that matter. The teacher who has a heart attack in the school playground does not necessarily have to be driven away immediately; no damage is done by leaving him where he is until the caretaker has time to attend to him, even though that might not be until sometime in the late afternoon or evening. What difference would it make if a bird were to alight on him and take a peck? Would what awaits him in the grave be any better just because it is hidden? As long as the dead are not in the way there is no need for any rush, they cannot die a second time. Cold snaps in the winter should be particularly propitious in such circumstances. The homeless who freeze to death on benches and in doorways, the suicidal who jump off high buildings and bridges, elderly women who fall down staircases, traffic victims trapped in wrecked cars, the young man who, in a drunken stupor, falls into the lake after a night on the town, the small girl who ends up under the wheel of a bus, why all this haste to remove them from the public eye? Decency? What could be more decent than to allow the girl's mother and father to see her an hour or two later, lying in the snow at the site of the accident,

full view, her crushed head and the rest of her body, her blood-spattered hair and the spotless padded jacket? Visible to the whole world, no secrets, the way she was. But even this one hour in the snow is unthinkable. A town that does not keep its dead out of sight, that leaves people where they died, on highways and byways, in parks and parking lots, is not a town but a hell. The fact that this hell reflects our life experience in a more realistic and essentially truer way is of no consequence. We know this how it is, but we do not want to face it. Hence the collective act of repression symbolized by the concealment of our dead.

What exactly it is that is being repressed, however, is not so easy to say. It cannot be death itself for its presence in society is much too prominent. The number of deaths reported in newspapers and shown on the TV news every day varies slightly according to circumstances, but the annual average will presumably tend to be constant, and since it is spread over so many channels virtually impossible to avoid. Yet *that* kind of death does not seem threatening. Quite the contrary, it is something we are drawn to and will happily pay to see. Add the enormously high body count in fiction and it becomes even harder to understand the system that keeps death out of sight. If the phenomenon of death does not frighten us, why then this distaste for dead bodies? It must mean either that there are two kinds of death or that there is a disparity between our conception of death and death as it actually turns out to be, which in effect boils down to the same thing. What is significant here is that our conception of death is so strongly rooted in our consciousness that we are not only shaken when we see that reality deviates from it, but we also try to conceal this with all the means at our disposal. Not as a result of some form of conscious deliberation, as has been the case with funeral rites, the form and meaning of which are negotiable nowadays, and thus have shifted from the sphere of the irrational to the rational, from the collective to the individual – no, the way we remove bodies has never been the subject of debate, it has always been just something we have done, out of a necessity for which no one can state a reason but everyone feels: if your father dies on the lawn one windswept Sunday in autumn, you carry him indoors if you can, and if you can't, you at least cover him with a blanket. This impulse, however, is not the only one we have with regard to the dead. No less conspicuous than our hiding the corpses is the fact that we always lower them to ground level as fast as possible. A hospital that transports its bodies upward, that sites its cold chambers on the upper floors is practically inconceivable. The dead are stored as close to the ground as possible. And the same principle applies to the agencies that attend to them; an insurance company may well have its offices on the eighth floor, but not a funeral parlor. All funeral parlors have their offices as close to street level as possible. Why this should be so is hard to say; one might be tempted to believe that it was based on some ancient convention that originally had a practical purpose, such as a cellar being cold and therefore best suited to storing corpses, and that this principle had been retained in our era of refrigerators and cold-storage rooms, had it not been for the notion that transporting bodies upward in buildings seems *contrary to the laws of nature*, though height and death are mutually incompatible. As though we possessed some kind of chthonic instinct, something deep within us that urges us to move death down to the earth whence we came.

It might thus appear that death is relayed through two distinct systems. One is associated with concealment and gravity, earth and darkness, the other with openness and airiness, ether and light. When a father and his child are killed as the father attempts to pull the child out of the line of fire in a town somewhere in the Middle East, and the image of them huddled together as the bullets thud into flesh, causing their bodies to shudder, as it were, is caught on camera, transmitted to one of the thousands of satellites orbiting the Earth and broadcast on TV sets around the world, from where it slips into our consciousness as yet another picture of death or dying. These images have no weight, no depth, no

time, and no place, nor do they have any connection to the bodies that spawned them. They are nowhere and everywhere. Most of them just pass through us and are gone; for diverse reasons some linger and live on in the dark recesses of the brain. An off-piste skier falls and severs an artery in her thigh, blood streams out leaving a red trail down the white slope; she is dead even before her body comes to a halt. A plane takes off, flames shoot out from the engines as it climbs, the sky above the suburban houses is blue, the plane explodes in a ball of fire beneath. A fishing smack sinks off the coast of northern Norway one night, the crew of seven drown, next morning the event is described in all the newspapers, it is a so-called mystery, the weather was calm and no mayday call was sent from the boat, it just disappeared, a fact which the TV stations underline that evening by flying over the scene of the drama in a helicopter and showing pictures of the empty sea. The sky is overcast, the gray-green swell heavy but calm, as though possessing a different temperament from the choppy white-flecked waves that burst forth here and there. I am sitting alone watching, it is some time in spring, I suppose, for my father is working in the garden. I stare at the surface of the sea without listening to what the reporter says, *and suddenly the outline of a face emerges*. I don't know how long it stays there, a few seconds perhaps, but long enough for it to have a huge impact on me. The moment the face disappears I get up to find someone I can tell. My mother is on the evening shift, my brother is playing soccer, and the other children on our block won't listen, so it has to be Dad, I think, and I hurry down the stairs, jump into shoes, thread my arms through the sleeves of my jacket, open the door, and run around the house. We are not allowed to run in the garden, so just before I enter his line of vision, I slow down and start walking. He is standing at the rear of the house, down in what will be the vegetable plot, lunging at a boulder with a sledgehammer. Even though the hollow is only a few meters deep, the black soil he has dug up and is standing on together with the dense clump of rowan trees growing beyond the fence behind him cause the twilight to deepen. As he straightens up and turns to me, his face is almost completely shrouded in darkness.

Nevertheless I have more than enough information to know his mood. This is apparent not from his facial expressions but his physical posture, and you do not read it with your mind but with your intuition.

He puts down the sledgehammer and removes his gloves.

"Well?" he says.

"I've just seen a face in the sea on TV," I say, coming to a halt on the lawn above him. The neighbor had felled a pine tree earlier in the afternoon and the air is filled with the strong resin smell from the logs lying on the other side of the stone wall.

"A diver?" Dad says. He knows I am interested in divers, and I suppose he cannot imagine I would find anything else interesting enough to make me come out and tell him about it.

I shake my head.

"It wasn't a person. It was something I saw in the sea."

"Something you saw, eh," he says, taking the packet of cigarettes from his breast pocket.

I nod and turn to go.

"Wait a minute," he says.

He strikes a match and bends his head forward to light the cigarette. The flame carves out a small grotto of light in the gray dusk.

"Right," he says.

After taking a deep drag, he places one foot on the rock and stares in the direction of the forest on the other side of the road. Or perhaps he is staring at the sky above the trees.

"Was it Jesus you saw?" he asks, looking up at me. Had it not been for the friendly voice and the

long pause before the question I would have thought he was poking fun at me. He finds it rather embarrassing that I am a Christian; all he wants of me is that I do not stand out from the other kids and of all the teeming mass of kids on the estate no one other than his youngest son calls himself Christian.

But he is really giving this some thought.

I feel a rush of happiness because he actually cares, while still feeling vaguely offended that he could underestimate me in this way.

I shake my head.

“It wasn’t Jesus,” I say.

“That’s nice to hear,” Dad says with a smile. Higher up on the hillside the faint whistle of bicycle tires on tarmac can be heard. The sound grows, and it is so quiet on the estate that the low singing tone at the heart of the whistle resonates loud and clear, and soon afterward the bicycle races past us on the road.

Dad takes another drag at the cigarette before tossing it half-smoked over the fence, then coughs a couple of times, pulls on his gloves, and grabs the sledgehammer again.

“Don’t give it another thought,” he says, glancing up at me.

I was eight years old that evening, my father thirty-two. Even though I still can’t 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 it easier for me to grasp some things. For example, how great the difference was between our days. While my days were jam-packed with meaning, when each step opened a new opportunity, and when every opportunity filled me to the brim, in a way which now is actually incomprehensible, the meaning of his days was not concentrated in individual events but spread over such large areas that it was not possible to comprehend them in anything other than abstract terms. “Family” was one such term, “career” another. Few or no unforeseen opportunities at all can have presented themselves in the course of his days, he must always have known in broad outline what they would bring and how he would react. He had been married for twelve years, he had worked as a middle-school teacher for eight of them, he had two children, a house and a car. He had been elected onto the local council and appointed to the executive committee representing the Liberal Party. During the winter months he occupied himself with philately, not without some progress: inside a short space of time he had become one of the country’s leading stamp collectors, while in the summer months gardening took up what leisure he had. What he was thinking on this spring evening I have no idea, nor even what perception he had of himself as he straightened up in the gloom with the sledgehammer in his hand, but I am fairly sure that there was some feeling inside him that he understood the surrounding world quite well. He knew who all the neighbors on the estate were and what social status they held in relation to himself, and I imagine he knew quite a bit about what they preferred to keep to themselves as he taught their children and also because he had a good eye for others’ weaknesses. Being a member of the new educated middle class he was also well-informed about the wider world, which came to him every day via the newspaper, radio, and television. He knew quite a lot about botany and zoology because he had been interested while he was growing up, and though not exactly conversant with other science subjects he did at least have some command of their basic principles from secondary school. He was better at history, which he had studied at university along with Norwegian and English. In other words, he was not an expert at anything, apart from maybe pedagogy, but he knew a bit about everything. In this respect he was a typical school teacher, though, from a time when secondary school teaching still carried some status. The neighbor who lived on the other side of the

wall, Prestbakmo, worked as a teacher at the same school, as did the neighbor who lived on top of the tree-covered slope behind our house, Olsen, while one of the neighbors who lived at the far end of the ring road, Knudsen, was the head teacher of another middle school. So when my father raised the sledgehammer above his head and let it fall on the rock that spring evening in the mid 1970s, he was doing so in a world he knew and was familiar with. It was not until I myself reached the same age that I understood there was indeed a price to pay for this. As your perspective of the world increases not only is the pain it inflicts on you less but also its meaning. Understanding the world requires you to take a certain distance from it. Things that are too small to see with the naked eye, such as molecules and atoms, we magnify. Things that are too large, such as cloud formations, river deltas and constellations, we reduce. At length we bring it within the scope of our senses and we stabilize it with a fixer. When it has been fixed we call it knowledge. Throughout our childhood and teenage years, we strive to attain the correct distance to objects and phenomena. We read, we learn, we experience, we make adjustments. Then one day we reach the point where all the necessary distances have been set, all the necessary systems have been put in place. That is when time begins to pick up speed. It no longer meets any obstacles, everything is set, time races through our lives, the days pass by in a flash and before we know what is happening we are forty, fifty, sixty . . . Meaning requires content, content requires time, time requires resistance. Knowledge is distance, knowledge is stasis and the enemy of meaning. My picture of my father on that evening in 1976 is, in other words, twofold: on the one hand I see him as I saw him at that time, through the eyes of an eight-year-old: unpredictable and frightening; on the other hand, I see him as a peer through whose life time is blowing and unremittingly sweeping large chunks of meaning along with it.

The crack of sledgehammer on rock resounded through the estate. A car came up the gentle slope from the main road and passed, its lights blazing. The door of the neighboring house opened, Prestbakmo paused on the doorstep, pulled on his work gloves, and seemed to sniff the clear night air before grabbing the wheelbarrow and trundling it across the lawn. There was a smell of gunpowder from the rock Dad was pounding, of pine from the logs behind the stone wall, freshly dug soil and forest, and the gentle northerly breeze a whiff of salt. I thought of the face I had seen in the sea. Even though only a couple of minutes had passed since I last considered it, everything had changed. Now it was Dad's face I saw.

Down in the hollow he took a break from hammering at the rock.

“Are you still there, boy?”

I nodded.

“Get yourself inside.”

I started to walk.

“And Karl Ove, remember,” he said.

I paused, turned my head, puzzled.

“No running this time.”

I stared at him. How could he know I had run?

“And shut your maw,” he said. “You look like an idiot.”

I did as he said, closed my mouth and walked slowly around the house. Reaching the front, I saw the road was full of children. The oldest stood in a group with their bikes, which in the dusk almost appeared as an extension of their bodies. The youngest were playing Kick-the-Can. The ones who had been tagged stood inside a chalk circle on the pavement; the others were hidden at various places in the forest down from the road, out of sight of the person guarding the can but visible to me.

The lights on the bridge masts glowed red above the black treetops. Another car came up the hill. The headlights illuminated the cyclists first, a brief glimpse of reflectors, metal, Puffa jackets, black eyes and white faces, then the children, who had taken no more than the one necessary step aside to allow the car to pass and were now standing like ghosts, gawking.

It was the Trollneses, the parents of Sverre, a boy in my class. He didn't seem to be with them.

I turned and followed the red taillights until they disappeared over the summit of the hill. Then I went in. For a while I tried to lie on my bed reading, but could not settle, and instead went into Yngve's room, from where I could see Dad. When I could see him I felt safer with him, and in a way that was what mattered most. I knew his moods and had learned how to predict them long ago, by means of a kind of subconscious categorization system, I have later come to realize, whereby the relationship between a few constants was enough to determine what was in store for me, allowing me to make my own preparations. A kind of meteorology of the mind . . . The speed of the car up the gentle gradient to the house, the time it took him to switch off the engine, grab his things, and step out, the way he looked around as he locked the car, the subtle nuances of the various sounds that rose from the hall as he removed his coat – everything was a sign, everything could be interpreted. To this was added information about where he had been, and with whom, how long he had been away, before the conclusion, which was the only part of the process of which I was conscious, was drawn. So, what frightened me most was when he turned up *without warning* . . . when for some reason I had been *inattentive* . . .

How on earth did he know I had been running?

This was not the first time he had caught me out in a way I found incomprehensible. One evening that autumn, for example, I had hidden a bag of sweets under the duvet for the express reason that I had a hunch he would come into my room, and there was no way he would believe my explanation of how I had laid my hands on the money to buy them. When, sure enough, he did come in, he stood watching me for a few seconds.

“What have you got hidden in your bed?” he asked.

How could he possibly have known?

Outside, Prestbakmo switched on the powerful lamp that was mounted over the flagstones where he usually worked. The new island of light that emerged from the blackness displayed a whole array of objects that he stood stock-still ogling. Columns of paint cans, jars containing paintbrushes, logs, bits of planking, folded tarpaulins, car tires, a bicycle frame, some toolboxes, tins of screws and nails of all shapes and sizes, a tray of milk cartons with flower seedlings, sacks of lime, a rolled-up hose pipe and leaning against the wall, a board on which every conceivable tool was outlined, presumably intended for the hobby room in the cellar.

Glancing outside at Dad again, I saw him crossing the lawn with the sledgehammer in one hand and a spade in the other. I took a couple of hasty steps backward. As I did so the front door burst open. It was Yngve. I looked at my watch. Twenty-eight minutes past eight. When, straight afterward, he came up the stairs with the familiar, slightly jerky, almost duck-like gait we had developed so as to be able to walk fast inside the house without making a sound, he was breathless and ruddy-cheeked.

“Where's Dad?” he asked as soon as he was in the room.

“In the garden,” I said. “But you're not late. Look, it's half past eight *now*.”

I showed him my watch.

He walked past me and pulled the chair from under the desk. He still smelled of outdoors. Cold air from the forest, gravel, tarmac.

“Have you been messing with my cassettes?” he asked.

“No,” I answered.

“What are you doing in my room then?”

“Nothing,” I said.

“Can’t you do nothing in your own room?”

Below us, the front door opened again. This time it was Dad’s heavy footsteps traversing the floor downstairs. He had removed his boots outside, as usual, and was on his way to the washroom to change.

“I saw a face in the sea on the news tonight,” I said. “Have you heard anything about it? Do you know if anyone else saw it?”

Yngve eyed me with a half-curious, half-dismissive expression.

“What are you babbling on about?”

“You know the fishing boat that sank?”

He gave a barely perceptible nod.

“When they were showing the place where it sank on the news I saw a face in the sea.”

“A dead body?”

“No. It wasn’t a real face. The sea had formed into the shape of a face.”

For a moment he watched me without saying anything. Then he tapped a forefinger on his temple.

“Don’t you believe me?” I said. “It’s absolutely true.”

“The truth is you’re a waste of space.”

At that moment Dad switched off the tap downstairs, and I decided it was best to go to my room now so that there was no chance of meeting him on the landing. But, I did not want Yngve to have the last word.

“You’re the one who’s a waste of space,” I said.

He could not even be bothered to answer. Just turned his face toward me, stuck out his top teeth and blew air through them like a rabbit. The gesture was a reference to my protruding teeth. I broke away and made off before he could see my tears. As long as I was alone my crying didn’t bother me. And this time it had worked, hadn’t it? Because he hadn’t seen me?

I paused inside the door of my room and wondered for moment whether to go to the bathroom. I could rinse my face with cold water and remove the telltale signs. But Dad was on his way up the stairs, so I made do with wiping my eyes on the sleeve of my sweater. The thin layer of moisture that the dry material spread across my eye made the surfaces and colors of the room blur as though it had suddenly sunk and was now under water, and so real was this perception that I raised my arms and made a few swimming strokes as I walked toward the writing desk. In my mind I was wearing a metal diver’s helmet from the early days of diving, when they bestrode the seabed with leaden shoes and suits as thick as elephant skin, with an oxygen pipe attached to their heads like a kind of trunk. Air wheezed through my mouth and staggered around for a while with the heavy, sluggish movements of old divers from bygone days until the horror of the sensation slowly began to seep in like cold water.

A few months before, I had seen the TV series *The Mysterious Island*, based on Jules Verne’s novel, and the story of those men who landed their air balloon on a deserted island in the Atlantic had made an enormous impact on me from the very first moment. Everything was electric. The air balloon, the storm, the men dressed in nineteenth-century clothing, the weather-beaten, barren island where they had been marooned, which apparently was not as deserted as they imagined, mysterious and inexplicable things were always happening around them . . . but in that case who were the other? The answer came without warning toward the end of one episode. There was someone in the underwater caves . . . a number of humanoid creatures . . . in the light from the lamps they were

carrying they saw glimpses of smooth, masked heads . . . fins . . . they resembled a kind of lizard b
walked upright . . . with containers on their backs . . . one turned, he had no eyes . . .

I did not scream when I saw these things, but the horror the images instilled would not go awa
even in the bright light of day I could be struck with terror by the very thought of the frogmen in th
cave. And now my thoughts were turning me into one of them. My wheezing became theirs, m
footsteps theirs, my arms theirs, and closing my eyes, it was those eyeless faces of theirs I saw befo
me. The cave . . . the black water . . . the line of frogmen with lamps in their hands . . . it became s
bad that opening my eyes again did not help. Even though I could see I was in my room, surround
by familiar objects, the terror did not release its grip. I hardly dared blink for fear that somethin
might happen. Stiffly, I sat down on the bed, reached for my satchel without looking at it, glanced
the school timetable, found Wednesday, read what it said, *math, orientation, music*, lifted the satch
onto my lap and mechanically flipped through the books inside. This done, I took the open book fro
the pillow, sat against the wall and began to read. The seconds between looking up soon became
minutes, and when Dad shouted it was time for supper, nine o'clock on the dot, it was not horror th
had me in its thrall but the book. Tearing myself away from it was quite an effort too.

We were not allowed to cut bread ourselves, nor were we allowed to use the stove, so it was alway
either Mom or Dad who made supper. If Mom was on the evening shift, Dad did everything: when v
came into the kitchen there were two glasses of milk and two plates, each with four slices of bre
plus toppings, waiting for us. As a rule, he had prepared the food beforehand, and then kept it in th
fridge, and the fact that it was cold made it difficult to swallow, even when I liked the toppings he ha
chosen. If Mom was at home there was a selection of meats, cheeses, jars on the table, either hers
ours, and this small touch, which allowed us to choose what would be on the table or on o
sandwiches, in addition to the bread being at room temperature, this was sufficient to engender a sen
of freedom in us: if we could open the cupboard, take the plates, which always made a bit of a clatt
when they knocked against each other, and laid them on the table; if we could open the cutlery drawe
which always rattled, and place the knives beside our plates; if we could set out the glasses, open th
fridge, take the milk and pour it, then you could be sure we would open our mouths and speak. On
thing led naturally to another when we had supper with Mom. We chatted away about anything th
occurred to us, she was interested in what we had to say, and if we spilt a few drops of milk or forg
our manners and put the used tea bag on the tablecloth (for she made us tea as well) it was no hug
drama. But if it was our participation in the meal that opened this sluice gate of freedom, it was th
extent of my father's presence that regulated its impact. If he was outside the house or down in h
study, we chatted as loudly and freely and with as many gesticulations as we liked; if he was on h
way up the stairs we automatically lowered our voices and changed the topic of conversation, in ca
we were talking about something we assumed he might consider unseemly; if he came into the kitch
we stopped altogether, sat there as stiff as pokers, to all outward appearances sunk in concentratio
over the food; on the other hand, if he retired to the living room we continued to chat, but more wari
and more subdued.

This evening, the plates with the four prepared slices awaited us as we entered the kitchen. On
with brown goat's cheese, one with ordinary cheese, one with sardines in tomato sauce, one with clo
cheese. I didn't like sardines and ate that slice first. I couldn't stand fish; boiled cod, which we had
least once a week, made me feel nauseous, as did the steam from the pan in which it was cooked, i
taste and consistency. I felt the same about boiled pollock, boiled coley, boiled haddock, boile
flounder, boiled mackerel, and boiled rose fish. With sardines it wasn't the taste that was the wor

part – I could swallow the tomato sauce by imagining it was ketchup – it was the consistency, and above all the small, slippery tails. They were disgusting. To minimize contact with them I generally bit them off, put them to the side of my plate, nudged some sauce toward the crust and buried the tail in the middle, then folded the bread over. In this way I was able to chew a couple of times without ever coming into contact with the tails, and then wash the whole thing down with milk. If Dad was not there, as was the case this evening, it was possible of course to stuff the tiny tails in my trouser pocket.

Yngve would frown and shake his head when I did that. Then he smiled. I returned the smile.

In the living room Dad stirred in his chair. There was the faint rustle of a box of matches, followed by the brief rasp of the sulfur head across the rough surface and the crackle as it burst into flame, which seemed to merge into the subsequent silence. When the smell of the cigarette seeped into the kitchen, a few seconds later, Yngve bent forward and opened the window as quietly as he could. The sounds that drifted in from the darkness outside transformed the whole atmosphere in the kitchen. As of a sudden it was a part of the country outside. *It's like we're sitting on a shelf*, I thought. The thought caused the hairs on my forearm to stand on end. The wind rose with a sigh through the forest and swept over the rustling bushes and trees in the garden below. From the intersection came the sound of children, still crouched over their bikes, chatting. On the hill up to the bridge a motorbike changed gear. And, far off, as if raised above all else, was the drone of a boat on its way into the fjord.

Of course. He had heard me! My feet running on the shingle!

“Want to swap?” Yngve mumbled, pointing to the clove cheese.

“Alright,” I said. Elated to have solved the riddle, I washed down the last bite of the sardine sandwich with a tiny sip of milk and started on the slice Yngve had put on my plate. The trick was to eke out the milk because if you came to the last and there was none left it was almost impossible to swallow. Best of all, of course, was to save a drop until everything was eaten, the milk never tasted as good as then, when it no longer had to fulfill a function, it ran down your throat in its own right, pure and uncontaminated, but unfortunately it was rare for me to manage this. The needs of the moment always trumped promises of the future, however enticing the latter.

But Yngve did manage it. He was a past master at economizing.

Up at Prestbakmo's, there was a click of bootheels on the doorstep. Then three short cries came through the night.

“*Geir! Geir! Geir!*”

The response came from John Beck's drive after such a time lag that everyone who heard concluded that he had been considering it.

“*Right,*” he shouted.

Straight after, there was the sound of his running feet. As they approached Gustavsen's wall, Dad got up in the living room. Something about the way he crossed the floor made me duck my head. Yngve ducked too. Dad came into the kitchen, walked over to the counter, leaned forward without a word, and closed the window with a bang.

“We keep the window closed at night,” he said.

Yngve nodded.

Dad looked at us.

“Eat up now,” he said.

Not until he was back in the living room did I meet Yngve's glance.

“Ha, ha,” I whispered.

“Ha ha?” he whispered back. “He meant you as well.”

He was two slices ahead of me and was soon able to leave the table and slip into his room, leaving me to chew for a few more minutes. I had been planning to see my father after supper and tell him they would probably be showing the story with the face in the sea on the late-night news, but under the circumstances it was probably best to ditch that plan.

Or was it?

I decided to play it by ear. After leaving the kitchen I usually stuck my head into the living room to say good night. If his voice was neutral or, if luck was with me, friendly even, I would mention it. Otherwise not.

Unfortunately he had chosen to sit on the sofa at the back of the room, and not in one of the two leather chairs in front of the TV, as was his wont. To gain eye contact I could not just poke my head in at the door and say good night, en passant, as it were, which I could have done if he had been sitting in one of the leather chairs, but would have had to take several steps into the room. That would obviously make him aware that I was after something. And that would defeat the whole purpose of playing things by ear. Whatever tone he replied in I would have to come clean.

It wasn't until I was out of the kitchen that I realized this and was caught in two minds. I came to a halt, all of a sudden I had no choice, for of course he heard me pause, and that was bound to have made him aware I wanted something from him. So I took the four steps to enter his field of vision.

He was sitting with his legs crossed, his elbows on the back of the sofa, head reclining, resting on his interlaced fingers. His gaze, which had been focused on the ceiling, directed itself at me.

"Good night, Dad," I said.

"Good night," he said.

"I'm sure they'll be showing it again on the news," I said. "Just thought I'd tell you. So that you and Mom can see it."

"Showing what?"

"The face." I said.

"The face?"

I must have been standing there with my mouth agape, because he suddenly dropped his jaw and gawked in a way I understood was supposed to be an imitation of me.

"The one I told you about," I said.

He closed his mouth and sat up straight without averting his eyes.

"Now let's not be hearing anymore about that face," he said.

"Alright," I said.

As I made my way down the corridor I could feel his glare relinquishing its hold on me. I brushed my teeth, undressed, got into pajamas, switched on the lamp above my bed, turned on the main light, settled down, and started reading.

I was only allowed to read for half an hour, until ten o'clock, but usually read until Mom came home at around half past ten. Tonight was no exception. When I heard the Beetle coming up the hill from the main road, I put the book on the floor, switched off the light, and lay in the dark listening for her: the car door slamming, the crunch across the gravel, the front door opening, her coat and scarf being removed, the footsteps up the stairs . . . The house seemed different then, when she was in, and the strange thing was that I could *feel* it; if, for example, I had gone to sleep before she returned and I awoke in the middle of the night, I could sense she was there, something in the atmosphere had changed without my being able to put my finger on quite what it was, except to say that it had a reassuring effect. The same applied to those occasions when she had come home earlier than expected while I was out: the moment I set foot in the hall I knew she was home.

Of course I would have liked to speak to her, she of all people would have understood the fact of my business, but it did not seem like a burning necessity. The important thing was that she was here. I heard her deposit her keys on the telephone table as she came up the stairs, open the sliding door, say something to Dad and close it behind her. Now and then, especially after evening shifts on the weekend, he would cook a meal for when she arrived. Then they might play records. Once in a while there was an empty bottle of wine on the counter, always the same label, a run-of-the-mill red, and on rare occasions, beer, again the same Vinmonopolet label, two or three bottles of pils from the Arendal brewery, the brown 0.7 liter one with the yellow sailing ship logo.

But not tonight. And I was glad. If they ate together they did not watch TV, and they would have to if I was to accomplish my plan, which was as simple as it was bold: at a few seconds to eleven I would sneak out of bed, tiptoe along the landing, open the sliding door a fraction, and watch the late news from there. I had never done anything like this before, nor even contemplated it. If I wasn't allowed to do something, I didn't do it. Ever. Not once, not if my father had said no. Not knowingly at any rate. But this was different since it was not about me, but about them. After all I had seen the image of their face in the sea, and did not need to see it again. I just wanted to find out if they could see what I had seen.

Such were my thoughts as I lay in the dark following the green hands of my alarm clock. When it was as quiet as it was now, I could hear cars driving past on the main road below. An acoustic racetrack that started as they came over the ridge by B-Max, the new supermarket, continued down the hill cutting by Holtet, past the road to Gamle Tybakken and up the hill to the bridge, where it finished as quietly as it had begun half a minute earlier.

At nine minutes to eleven the door of the house across the road opened. I knelt up in bed and peered out the window. It was Fru Gustavsen; she was walking across the drive with a garbage bag in her hand.

I only realized how rare a sight this was when I saw her. Fru Gustavsen hardly ever showed herself outside; either she was seen indoors or in the passenger seat of their blue Ford Taunus, but even then, though I knew that, the thought had never struck me before. But now, as she stood by the garbage can removing the lid, chucking the bag in and closing the lid, all with that somewhat lazy grace that so many fat women possess, it did. She was never outdoors.

The streetlamp beyond our hedge cast its harsh light over her, but unlike the objects she was surrounded by – the garbage can, the white walls of the trailer, the paving slabs, the tarmac – which all reflected the cold, sharp light, her figure seemed to modulate and absorb it. Her bare arms gave off a matte gleam, the material of her white sweater shimmered, her mass of grayishbrown hair appeared almost golden.

For a while she stood looking around, first over at Prestbakmo's, then up at the Hansens', then down at the forest across the road.

A cat strutted down towards her, stopped and watched her for a moment. She ran one hand up her arm a few times. Then she turned and went inside.

I glanced at the clock again. Four minutes to eleven. I shivered and wondered briefly whether I should put on a sweater, but concluded that would make everything seem too calculated if I was caught. And it was not going to take very long.

I crept warily to the door and pressed my ear against it. The only real element of risk was that the toilet was on this side of the sliding door. Once there, I would be able to keep an eye on them and have a chance to retreat if they should get up, but if the sliding door was closed, and they came toward me, I wouldn't know until it was too late.

But in that case I could pretend I was going to the toilet!

~~Pleased with the solution, I cautiously opened the door and stepped into the passage. Everything was quiet. I tiptoed along the landing, felt the dry wall-to-wall carpeting against my sweaty sole~~ stopped by the sliding door, heard nothing, pulled it open a fraction, and peered in through the crack.

The TV was on in the corner. The two leather chairs were empty.

So they were on the sofa, both of them.

Perfect.

Then the globe with the N sign whirled round on the screen. I prayed to God they would show the same news report, so that Mom and Dad could see what I saw.

The newscaster started the program by talking about the missing fishing boat, and my heart was pounding in my chest. But the report they showed was different: instead of pictures of calm sea a local police officer was being interviewed on a quay, followed by a woman with a small child in her arms, then the reporter himself spoke against a background of billowing waves.

After the item was over there was the sound of my father's voice, and laughter. The shame that suffused my body was so strong that I was unable to think. My innards seemed to blanch. The force of the sudden shame was the sole feeling from my childhood that could measure in intensity against the force of terror, next to sudden fury, of course, and common to all three was the sense that I *myself* was being erased. All that mattered was precisely *that* feeling. So as I turned and went back to my room, I noticed nothing. I know that the window in the stairwell must have been so dark that the hall was not reflected in it, I know that the door to Yngve's bedroom must have been closed, the same as the one to my parents' bedroom and to the bathroom. I know that Mom's bunch of keys must have been splayed out on the telephone table, like some mythical beast at rest, with its head of leather and myriad metal legs, I know that the knee-high ceramic vase of dried flowers and straw must have been on the floor next to it, unreconciled, as it were, with the synthetic material of the wall-to-wall carpet. But I saw nothing, heard nothing, thought nothing. I went into my room, lay down on my bed, and switched off the light, and when the darkness closed itself around me, I took such a deep breath that it quivered while the muscles in my stomach tightened and forced out whimpering noises that were so loud I had to direct them into the soft, and soon very wet, pillow. It helped, in much the same way that vomiting helps when you are nauseous. Long after the tears had stopped coming I lay sobbing. That had a soothing effect. When it too had worn itself out I lay on my stomach, rested my head against my arm, and closed my eyes to sleep.

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As I sit here writing this, I recognize that more than thirty years have passed. In the window before me I can vaguely make out the reflection of my face. Apart from one eye, which is glistening, and the area immediately beneath, which dimly reflects a little light, the whole of the left side is in shadow. Two deep furrows divide my forehead, one deep furrow intersects each cheek, all of them as if filled with darkness, and with the eyes staring and serious, and the corners of the mouth drooping, it is impossible not to consider this face gloomy.

What has engraved itself in my face?

Today is the twenty-seventh of February. The time is 11:43 p.m. I, Karl Ove Knausgaard, was born in December 1968, and at the time of writing I am thirty-nine years old. I have three children – Vanja, Heidi, and John – and am in my second marriage, to Linda Boström Knausgaard. All four are asleep in the rooms around me, in an apartment in Malmö where we have lived for a year and a half. Apart from

some parents of the children at Vanja and Heidi's nursery we do not know anyone here. This is not loss, at any rate not for me, I don't get anything out of socializing anyway. I never say what I really think, what I really mean, but always more or less agree with whomever I am talking to at the time. I pretend that what they say is of interest to me, except when I am drinking, in which case more often than not I go too far the other way, and wake up to the fear of having overstepped the mark. This has become more pronounced over the years and can now last for weeks. When I drink I also have blackouts and completely lose control of my actions, which are generally desperate and stupid, but also on occasion desperate and dangerous. That is why I no longer drink. I do not want anyone to get close to me, I do not want anyone to see me, and this is the way things have developed: no one gets close and no one sees me. This is what must have engraved itself in my face, this is what must have made it so stiff and masklike and almost impossible to associate with myself whenever I happen to catch a glimpse of it in a shop window.

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The only thing that does not age in a face is the eyes. They are no less bright the day we die as the day we are born. The blood vessels in them may burst, admittedly, and the corneas may be dulled, but the light in them never changes. There is, in London, a painting that moves me as much every time I go to see it. It is a self-portrait painted by the late Rembrandt. His later paintings are usually characterized by an extreme coarseness of stroke, rendering everything subordinate to the expression of the moment, at once shining and sacred, and still unsurpassed in art, with the possible exception of Hölderlin's later poems, however dissimilar and incomparable they may be – for where Hölderlin's light, evoked through language, is ethereal and celestial, Rembrandt's light, evoked through color, is earthy, metallic, and material – but this one painting which hangs in the National Gallery was painted in a slightly more classically realistic, lifelike style, more in the manner of the younger Rembrandt. But what the painting portrays is the older Rembrandt. Old age. All the facial detail is visible; all the traces life has left there are to be seen. The face is furrowed, wrinkled, sagging, ravaged by time. But the eyes are bright and, if not young, then somehow transcend the time that otherwise marks the face. It is as though someone else is looking at us, from somewhere inside the face, where everything is different. One can hardly be closer to another human soul. For as far as Rembrandt's personhood concerned, his good habits and bad, his bodily sounds and smells, his voice and his language, his thoughts and his opinions, his behavior, his physical flaws and defects, all the things that constitute a person to others, are no longer there, the painting is more than four hundred years old, and Rembrandt died the same year it was painted, so what is depicted here, what Rembrandt painted, is this person's very being, that which he woke to every morning, that which immersed itself in thought, but which itself was not thought, that which immediately immersed itself in feelings, but which itself was not feeling, and that which he went to sleep to, in the end for good. That which, in a human, time does not touch and whence the light in the eyes springs. The difference between this painting and the others that late Rembrandt painted is the difference between seeing and being seen. That is, in this picture he sees himself seeing whilst also being seen, and no doubt it was only in the Baroque period with its penchant for mirrors within mirrors, the play within the play, staged scenes and a belief in the interdependence of all things, when moreover craftsmanship attained heights witnessed neither before nor since, that such a painting was possible. But it exists in our age, it sees for us.

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The night Vanja was born she lay looking at us for several hours. Her eyes were like two black lanterns. Her body was covered in blood, her long hair plastered to her head, and when she stirred she moved with the slow movements of a reptile. She looked like something from the forest lying there on Linda's stomach, staring at us. We could not get enough of her and her gaze. But what was it that lay in those eyes? Composure, gravity, darkness. I stuck out my tongue, a minute passed, then she stuck out her tongue. There has never been so much future in my life as at that time, never so much joy. Now she is four, and everything is different. Her eyes are alert, switch between jealousy and happiness at the drop of a hat, between sorrow and anger, she is already practiced in the ways of the world and can be so cheeky that I completely lose my head and sometimes shout at her or shake her until she starts crying. But usually she just laughs. The last time it happened, the last time I was so furious I shook her and she just laughed, I had a sudden inspiration and placed my hand on her chest.

Her heart was pounding. Oh, my, how it was pounding.

. . .

It is now a few minutes past eight o'clock in the morning. It is the fourth of March 2008. I am sitting in my office, surrounded by books from floor to ceiling, listening to the Swedish band Dungen and thinking about what I have written and where it is leading. Linda and John are asleep in the adjacent room, Vanja and Heidi are in the nursery, where I dropped them off half an hour ago. Outside, at the front of the enormous Hilton Hotel, which is still in shadow, the lifts glide up and down in three glass shafts. Next door there is a redbrick building which, judging by all the bay windows, dormers, and arches, must be from the end of the nineteenth century or early twentieth. Beyond that, there is a glimpse of a tiny stretch of Magistrat Park with its denuded trees and green grass, where a motley green house in a seventies style breaks the view, and forces the eye up to the sky, which for the first time in several weeks is a clear blue.

Having lived here for a year and a half, I know this view and all its nuances over the days and the year, but I feel no attachment to it. Nothing of what I see here means anything to me. Perhaps that is precisely what I have been searching for, because there is something about this lack of attachment that I like, may even need. But it was not a conscious choice. Six years ago I was ensconced in Bergen writing, and while I had no intentions of living in the town for the rest of my life I certainly had no plans to leave the country, let alone the woman to whom I was married. On the contrary, we envisaged having children and maybe moving to Oslo where I would write a number of novels and she would keep working in radio and television. But of the future we shared, which actually was just an extension of the present with its daily routines and meals with friends and acquaintances, holiday trips, and visits to parents and in-laws, all enriched by the dream of having children, there was to be nothing. Something happened, and from one day to the next I moved to Stockholm, initially just to get away for a few weeks, and then all of a sudden it became my life. Not only did I change city and country, but also all the people. If this might seem strange, it is even stranger that I hardly ever reflect on it. How did I end up here? Why did things turn out like this?

Arriving in Stockholm, I knew two people, neither of them very well: Geir, whom I had met in Bergen and saw for a few weeks during the spring of 1990, so twelve years previously, and Linda, whom I had met at a debut writers' seminar in Biskops-Arnö in the spring of 1999. I emailed Geir and asked if I could stay with him until I had found a place of my own, he said yes, and then I phoned in a "Flat Wanted" ad to two Swedish newspapers. I received more than forty replies, from which I selected two. One was in Bastugatan, the other in Brännkyrkatan. After viewing both, I opted for the

latter, until in the hallway my eye fell on the list of tenants, which included Linda's name. What were the chances of that happening? Stockholm has more than one and a half million inhabitants. If the flat had come to me via friends and acquaintances the odds would not have been so slim, for all literary circles are relatively small, irrespective of the size of the town, but this had come about as a result of an anonymous advertisement, read by several hundred thousand people and, of course, the woman who responded knew neither Linda nor me. From one moment to the next I changed my mind, it would be better to take the other flat because if I were to take this one Linda might think I was pursuing her. But it was an omen. And one laden with meaning, it turned out, for now I am married to Linda and she is the mother of my three children. Now she is the woman with whom I share my life. The sole traces of my previous existence are the books and records I brought with me. Everything else I left behind. And while I spent a lot of time thinking about the past then, almost a morbid amount of time, I now realize which meant that I not only read Marcel Proust's novel *À la recherche du temps perdu* but virtually imbibed it, the past is now barely present in my thoughts.

I believe the main reason for that is our children, since life with them in the here and now occupies all the space. They even squeeze out the most recent past: ask me what I did three days ago and I can't remember. Ask me what Vanja was like two years ago, Heidi two months ago, John two weeks ago and I can't remember. A lot happens in our little everyday life, but it always happens within the same routine, and more than anything else it has changed my perspective of time. For, while previously I saw time as a stretch of terrain that had to be covered, with the future as a distant prospect, hopefully a bright one, and never boring at any rate, now it is interwoven with our life here and in a totally different way. Were I to portray this with a visual image it would have to be that of a boat in a locked life is slowly and ineluctably raised by time seeping in from all sides. Apart from the details everything is always the same. And with every passing day the desire grows for the moment when life will reach the top, for the moment when the sluice gates open and life finally moves on. At the same time I see that precisely this repetitiveness, this enclosedness, this unchangingness is necessary, it protects me. On the few occasions I have left it, all the old ills return. All of a sudden I am beset by every conceivable thought about what was said, what was seen, what was thought, hurled, as it were, into that uncontrollable, unproductive, often degrading, and ultimately destructive space where I lived for so many years. The yearning is as strong there as it is here, but the difference is that there the goal of my yearning is attainable, but not here. Here I have to find other goals and come to terms with them. The art of living is what I am talking about. On paper it is no problem, I can easily conjure up an image of Heidi, for example, clambering out of a bunk bed at five in the morning, the patter of little feet across the floor in the dark, her switching the light on and a second later standing in front of me – half asleep and squinting up at her – and then she says: "*Köket*. Kitchen!" Her Swedish is so idiosyncratic; her words carry a different meaning from what is usual, and "kitchen" means muesli with curdled blueberry milk. In the same way, candles are called "Happy birthday!" Heidi has large eyes, a large mouth, a big appetite, and she is a ravenous child in all senses, but the robust and unadulterated happiness she experienced in her first eighteen months has been overshadowed this year, since John's birth, by other hitherto unknown emotions. In the first months she took almost every opportunity to try to harm him. Scratch marks on his face were the rule rather than the exception. When I arrived home after a four-day trip to Frankfurt in the autumn, John looked as if he had been through a war. It was difficult because we didn't want to keep him away from her either, so we had to try to read her moods and regulate her access to him accordingly. But even when she was in high spirits her hand could shoot out in a flash and slap or claw him. Alongside this, she was

beginning to have fits of rage, the ferocity of which I would never have considered her capable two months before. In addition, an equally hitherto unsuspected vulnerability surfaced: the slightest hint of severity in my voice or behavior and she would lower her head, shy away, and start to cry, as though wanting to show us her anger and hide her feelings. As I write, I am filled with tenderness for her. But this 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 and not a sound can be heard in the house, she, raring to start a new day, I, summoning the will to get to my feet, putting on yesterday's clothes and following her into the kitchen, where the promised blueberry-flavored milk and the sugar-free muesli await her, it is not tenderness I feel, and if she goes beyond my limits, such as when she pesters and pesters me for a film, or tries to get into the room where John is sleeping, in short, every time she refuses to take no for an answer but drags things out ad infinitum, it is not uncommon for my irritation to mutate into anger, and when I then speak harshly to her, and her tears flow, and she bows her head and slinks off with slumped shoulders, I feel it serves her right. Not until the evening when they are asleep and I am sitting wondering what I am really doing is there any room for the insight that she is only two years old. But by then I am on the outside looking in. Inside, I don't have a chance. Inside, it is a question of getting through the morning, the three hours of diapers that have to be changed, clothes that have to be put on, breakfast that has to be served, faces that have to be washed, hair that has to be combed and pinned up, teeth that have to be brushed, squabbles that have to be nipped in the bud, slaps that have to be averted, rompers and boots that have to be wriggled into, before I, with the collapsible double stroller in one hand and nudging the two small girls forward with the other, step into the elevator which as often as not resounds to the noise of shoving and shouting on its descent, and into the hallway where I ease them into the stroller, put on their hats and mittens and emerge onto the street already crowded with people heading for work and deliver them to the nursery ten minutes later, whereupon I have the next five hours for writing until the mandatory routines for the children resume.

I have always had a great need for solitude. I require huge swathes of loneliness and when I do not have it, which has been the case for the last five years, my frustration can sometimes become almost panicked, or aggressive. And when what has kept me going for the whole of my adult life, the ambition to write something exceptional one day, is threatened in this way my one thought, which gnaws at me like a rat, is that I have to escape. Time is slipping away from me, running through my fingers like sand while I . . . do what? Clean floors, wash clothes, make dinner, wash up, go shopping, play with the children in the play areas, bring them home, undress them, bathe them, look after them until it is bedtime, tuck them in, hang some clothes to dry, fold others, and put them away, tidy up, wipe tables, chairs and cupboards. It is a struggle, and even though it is not heroic, I am up against a superior force, for no matter how much housework I do at home the rooms are littered with mess and junk, and the children, who are taken care of every waking minute, are more stubborn than I have ever known children to be, at times it is nothing less than bedlam here, perhaps we have never managed to find the necessary balance between distance and intimacy, which of course becomes increasingly important the more personality is involved. And there is a quite a bit of that here. When Vanja was around eight months old she began to have violent outbursts, like fits at times, and for a while it was impossible to reach her, she just screamed and screamed. All we could do was hold her until it had subsided. It is not easy to say what caused it, but it often occurred when she had had a great many impressions to absorb, such as when we had driven to her grandmother's in the country outside Stockholm, when she had spent too much time with other children, or we had been in town all day. Then, inconsolable and completely beside herself, she could scream at the top of her voice. Sensitivity and strength of will are not a simple combination. And matters were not made any easier when Hei

was born. I wish I could say I took everything in stride, but sad to say such was not the case because my anger and my feelings too were aroused in these situations, which then escalated, frequently in full public view: it was not unknown for me in my fury to snatch her up from the floor in one of the Stockholm malls, sling her over my shoulder like a sack of potatoes and carry her through town kicking and punching and howling as if possessed. Sometimes I reacted to her howls by shouting back, throwing her down on the bed and holding her tight until it passed, whatever it was that was tormenting her. She was not very old before she found out exactly what drove me wild, namely a particular variety of scream, not crying or sobbing or hysteria but focused, aggressive screams that regardless of the situation, could make me totally lose control, jump up, and rush over to the poor girl who was then shouted at or shaken until the screams turned to tears and her body went limp and she could at last be comforted.

Looking back on this, it is striking how she, scarcely two years old, could have such an effect on our lives. Because she did, for a while that was all that mattered. Of course, that says nothing about her, but everything about us. Both Linda and I live on the brink of chaos, or with the feeling of chaos, everything can fall apart at any moment and we have to force ourselves to come to terms with the demands of a life with small children. We do not plan. Having to shop for dinner comes as a surprise every day. Likewise, having to pay bills at the end of every month. Had it not been for some sporadic payments being made into my account, such as rights fees, book club sales, or a minor amount from schoolbook publications or, as this autumn, the second installment of some foreign income I had forgotten, things would have gone seriously wrong. However, this constant improvisation increases the significance of the moment, which of course then becomes extremely eventful since nothing about it is automatic and, if our lives feel good, which naturally they do at times, there is a great sense of togetherness and a correspondingly intense happiness. Oh, how we beam. All the children are full of life and are instinctively drawn to happiness, so that gives you extra energy and you are nice to them and they forget their defiance or anger in seconds. The corrosive part of course is the awareness that being nice to them is not of the slightest help when I am in the thick of it, dragged down into a quagmire of tears and frustration. And once in the quagmire each further action only serves to plunge me deeper. And at least as corrosive is the awareness that I am dealing with *children*. That it is *children* who are dragging me down. There is something deeply shameful about this. In such situations I am probably as far from the person I aspire to be as possible. I didn't have the faintest notion about any of this before I had children. I thought then that everything would be fine so long as I was kind to them. And that is actually more or less how it is, but nothing I had previously experienced warned me about the invasion into your life that having children entails. The immense intimacy you have with them, the way in which your own temperament and mood are, so to speak, woven into theirs, such that your own worst sides are no longer something you can keep to yourself, hidden, but seem to take shape outside you, and are then hurled back. The same of course applies to your best sides. For, apart from the most hectic periods, when first Heidi, then John, were born, and the emotional life of those who experienced them was dislocated in ways that can only be described as tantamount to a crisis, their life here is basically stable and secure, and even though I do occasionally lose my temper with them, they are still at ease with me and come to me whenever they feel the need. Their demands are very basic, there is nothing they like better than outings with the whole family, which are full of adventure: a trip to the Western Harbor on a sunny day, starting with a walk through the park, where a pile of logs is enough to keep them entertained for half an hour, then past the yachts in the marina which really capture their attention, after that lunch on some steps by the sea, eating our panini from the Italian café, that a picnic didn't occur to us goes without saying, and afterward an hour or so to run

around and play and laugh, Vanja with her characteristic lope, which she has had since she was eighteen months, Heidi with her enthusiastic toddle, always two meters behind her big sister, ready to receive the rare gift of companionship from her, then the same route back home. If Heidi sleeps in the car we go to a café with Vanja, who loves the moments she has alone with us and sits there with her lemonade asking us about everything under the sun: Is the sky fixed? Can anything stop autumn coming? Do monkeys have skeletons? Even if the feeling of happiness this gives me is not exactly a whirlwind but closer to satisfaction or serenity, it is happiness all the same. Perhaps even, at certain moments, joy. And isn't that enough? Isn't it enough? Yes, if joy had been the goal it would have been enough. But joy is not my goal, never has been, what good is joy to me? The family is not my goal either. If it had been, and I could have devoted all my energy to it, we would have had a fantastic time of that I am sure. We could have lived somewhere in Norway, gone skiing and skating in winter, with packed lunches and a thermos flask in our backpacks, and boating in the summer, swimming, fishing, camping, holidays abroad with other families, we could have kept the house tidy, spent time making good food, being with our friends, we could have been blissfully happy. That may all sound like a caricature, but every day I see families who successfully organize their lives in this way. The children are clean, their clothes nice, the parents are happy and although once in a while they might raise their voices they never stand there like idiots bawling at them. They go on weekend trips, rent cottages in Normandy in the summer, and their fridges are never empty. They work in banks and hospitals, in law companies or on the local council, in the theater or at universities. Why should the fact that I am a writer exclude me from that world? Why should the fact that I am a writer mean our strollers all look like junk we found on a junk heap? Why should the fact that I am a writer mean I turn up at the nursery with crazed eyes and a face stiffened into a mask of frustration? Why should the fact that I am a writer mean that our children do their utmost to get their own way, whatever the consequences? Where does all the mess in our lives come from? I know I can change all this, I know we too can become that kind of family, but then I would have to want it and in which case life would have to revolve around nothing else. And that is not what I want. I do everything I have to do for the family, that is my duty. The only thing I have learned from life is to endure it, never to question it, and to burn up the longing generated by this in writing. Where this ideal has come from I have no idea, and as I now see it before me, in black and white, it almost seems perverse: why duty before happiness? The question of happiness is banal, but the question that follows is not, the question of meaning. When I look at a beautiful painting I have tears in my eyes, but not when I look at my children. That does not mean I do not love them, because I do, with all my heart, it simply means that the meaning they produce is not sufficient to fulfill a whole life. Not mine at any rate. Soon I will be forty, and when I'm forty, it won't be long before I'm fifty. And when I'm fifty, it won't be long before I'm sixty. And when I'm sixty, it won't be long before I'm seventy. And that will be that. My epitaph might read: *Here lies a man who grinned and bore it. And in the end he perished for it.* Or perhaps better:

*Here lies a man who never complained
A happy life he never gained
His last words before he died
And went to cross the great divide
Were: Oh, Lord, there's such a chill
Can someone send a happy pill?*

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