Slide

by Jesper Stein

Extracts translated from the Danish by Charlotte Barslund

To my brother, Peter

One thing is essential:

Accepting your damage.

Frank Jæger

(Danish author and poet, 1926 – 1977)

Pages 11 – 40

I've started the book. I'm going to write about my life with my parents. I can do it now.

I've borrowed a friend's flat in Copenhagen. I walk along Christianshavns Kanal with an unfamiliar key in my pocket and a sense of an ending in my body. I keep touching the key. When I'm not touching it, I touch a lump in my groin. I haven't seen a doctor yet, but I know I'm going to die, and it makes sense because my life is falling apart. I decide to face my illness with dignity and stoicism. Or at least try to. My imminent death feels like confirmation of an inseparable part of my experience of happiness; it never lasts, everything is on borrowed time.

I'm not ill.

I've quit drinking. My divorce has come through. My mum is dead.

That's why I'm scared.

The sun is out the day I discover that my dad intends to be unfaithful to my mum. It hangs glittering over the Bay of Aarhus, and the water bounces the light back up on the hill down which I'm hurtling, crouched over the handlebars of my green SCO bike.

It's the first day after the summer holidays and I've just started my second year at Risskov Amtsgymnasium, but we've been sent home three hours early because our French teacher is ill. I've seen Mette for the first time in two months. I'm still in love with her – and with all the others. A new school year represents a world of opportunities. They're called Berit. Helle. Pia. Marianne. Hanne. A bouquet of girls in lilac utility trousers and partisan scarves, Mao shoes and infectious laughter.

I lean into the soft curve by Rolighedsvej, pass the lilac and laburnum hedge that hide the grounds of the mental hospital down to the sea. Then into Stationsgade with its old patrician villas, fishermen's cottages and small properties. To my right lush gardens rise up towards large white and yellow houses, red roof tiles, balconies, verandas and terraces with views all across the bay. I turn into Rampen and dump my bike in the carport, our red Opel Kadett estate is there, as is my dad's bike. I walk through the bottom garden, past the bamboo, ducking to avoid branches laden with apples and reach the upper garden's abundance of the last flush of the roses.

I open the front door, calling out a 'hi'. I hear floorboards squeak from the living room upstairs. My dad, Finn, is home and I take the stairs in three leaps, then freeze in the doorway to the dining room. The silence in the room is like someone holding their breath, only the paintings roar with noise behind the large dining table with the Wishbone chairs. No music by Cornelis, no Bellman, not even Svante. The sewing table and the Børge

Mogensen sofa in the bay window are bathed in sunshine, I take a step into the room, past the portrait photographs of me and my brother on the wall, and reach the open double doors leading to the living room.

They couldn't be sitting any further apart.

My first thought is that they must have let go of each other the moment they heard the front door, the moment my greeting echoed through the house. I imagine my younger self standing in the doorway to the living room, tall and gangly in jeans and a denim jacket whose sleeves suddenly feel far too short. An uninvited guest in the archway below shelves of foreign literature. The chalk white corner sofa starts at the door to my dad's study and reaches all the way to the window that overlooks the garden. My dad sits at one end, his guest at the other.

There are no cups on the pale wooden coffee table.

'Hi,' I say.

'Hi, Jeppe, you're home early,' Finn says. He gets up from the sofa, moving with more agility than usual, then grabs his belt and hoicks his trousers up a little.

'The last few lessons were cancelled,' I say.

There is nothing unusual about my dad getting visits from former students from Katedralskolen where he has taught Danish for twenty-three years. The film director Nils Malmros stops by every now and then, as do a couple of literary dreamers whose scripts my dad reads; the student on the sofa, however, isn't French Philippe rocking rhythmically back and forth in the Swan chair nor is he Knud Kappelgaard, looking for critique of yet another manic poetry anthology.

'Hi,' she says. Her apple cheeks are flushed, she wears basic spectacles. Her vulnerable and anxious gaze seeks a calm that isn't there. Not when it meets my world weary expression or lands on my dad, who looks just as perplexed as when he goes to pay for petrol and realises he left his cheque-book on the roof

of the car before we drove off. She has her hair in a dark bob and she is twenty years old.

‘Right, I was just about to give Gitte a lift home, isn’t that right, Gitte?’ Finn says, taking a step into the room. He wipes the sweat from his forehead with the back of his hand, his shirt is stained under the armpits.

Gitte mutters something, nods and gets up. She keeps her eyes on the rya rug on her way through the living room except when her embarrassed gaze briefly meets mine. My dad stands with his arm out as if he is a guide showing her which way to go.

‘I won’t be long,’ he says.

I stand in the passage by the tall window where the old front door used to be, and watch them. My dad glances furtively back at the house. Perhaps he spots me in the window. He looks away quickly and says something to her. She raises her hand up to her mouth in a way I would see later on many occasions when she was worried or restless. They disappear behind the bamboo by the carport. I hear the sound of car doors being slammed, tyres crunching the gravel as he pulls out and drives down Rampen.

I first heard about her six months ago. We were having dinner in the kitchen. Meatloaf, melted butter, tinned carrots and peas, boiled potatoes and a salad which I had made for my mum. She mentioned that one of Finn’s students had fallen in love with him.

‘I think the word you’re looking for is infatuated,’ my dad said.

‘She sits in the front row and makes eyes at you, you told me so yourself,’ my mum retorted cheerfully.

‘Yes, Jytte, I’m not denying that. But the whole thing is really very sad. She never had a father.’

‘So you’re going to be her dad now?’ I wanted to know.

A faint smile flitted across my dad’s face, then he shook his head. My mum nodded at me with approval.

‘She has been after several teachers, including John Mogensen. Only he wasn’t interested, he’s got other fish to fry,’ my mum said, feigning indifference. It was common knowledge that my dad’s talented, younger colleague slept with many of his students.

‘Yes,’ Finn said, throwing up his hands in a gesture of apology.

The idea of anyone falling in love with my dad was a joke. So we laughed. And he joined in. Finn is no Don Juan. My mum was the first woman he slept with. It’s not that he isn’t interested in sex, there is plenty of erotic literature in his study, *Fanny Hill, The Decameron*, Erik Nørgaard’s books of erotic postcards, *Venus in Furs, The Story of O*, the novels of Anaïs Nin and stacks of Playboy magazine which “I buy also because it’s full of interesting journalistic interviews and literary fiction, Jeppe.” He is by no means prudish; we can say whatever we like, including dick, fuck and cunt. But he is a man of words and shy in action, a bashful eroticist whose knowledge has been acquired through reading. He is fifty-three years old, 1.8 metres tall, with a full beard, clear blue eyes, a finely shaped mouth with unusually red lips, his hair is dark brown, his high temples speckled with grey, he weighs around ninety-five kilos and he is not a man who takes nearly as much interest in his appearance as my mum does in his. My parents celebrated their silver wedding four years ago. They’ll be together forever, I think. No, I don’t think about it at all, they’re just there.

‘Is she clever?’ I asked.

‘Yes, definitely,’ Finn said.

‘Yes, I bet she pays attention in class,’ my mum quipped with a smile and burst into a rare, hearty laughter.

He joined in the laughter, but I wonder if he truly thought her remark was funny. Because how did she even know about Gitte in the first place? I think he must have told my mum himself, but not purely because he told her everything. Perhaps

he wanted to boast that someone cared about him. Perhaps he felt the need to state that someone found him attractive. Because she never told him. Or because he was insecure and lacking in self-esteem. Perhaps the answer lies in their twenty-eight year marriage, which had worn threadbare; perhaps he needed to signal that he was in fact still alive.

The second time I heard about Gitte was at the annual get-together at our house when my dad would invite his Katedralskolen leavers round for beer, Twiglets and potato sticks after their exams. In the run up to the party, Gitte's adoration of my dad had come up again, and although my mum was the embodiment of dignity and pride, I reckon it must have made her uncomfortable – especially given what I know about her reaction when the whole thing blew up. But apart from that I had no idea. On the day in question I was at home. I was curious. I wanted to see the girl who was in love with my dad because the situation intrigued me. The living room was crammed full of students with my dad as the centre, he spoke about literature, the ancient classics and this year's exam, and took out his guitar with the same rehearsed spontaneity as last year and the year before that, and gave us his renditions of *Veronica* and *Svantes lykkelige dag*, and nearly all the girls and a few of the young men sang along. My mum brought more beers and soft drinks. Finn was on the sofa wearing a bottle green corduroy suit and a chequered shirt with the guitar on his lap, his slim spectacles balancing on the tip of his nose. He was smoking a Green Cecil cigarette and narrowing his eyes, would look around his students and respond with his usual 'you don't say, you don't say?' Gitte was sitting on a chair in the corner away from the rest of her class with an uncertain smile on her face. I felt sorry for her. Teachers having affairs with their students happened at my college as well. It even went on in my class, but I found it inconceivable that anyone could fall in love with someone that old, and even more mystifying that the man in question could be my dad.

His leavers gave Finn a present as a thank you for his efforts; Gitte gave him a poetry anthology – to my mum's dismay. It's possible that my parents discussed her further, but I had forgotten all about her existence. Until today.

Once they have left, I sit on the bottom step of the stairs leading to the first floor and look out of the window where I watched them just now. It's one of my two favourite spots to sit in the house. Because the house is built on a steep slope, I can see through the garden and down the road, my gaze can wander between gables and treetops, glazed roofs and chimneys; further up I can see the sea and beyond it Skødshoved and Mols. I think about my mum. About what would happen if she were to find out. I have a feeling that I need to stop that from happening.

Finn returns home just under an hour later. I watch his car pull into the carport; I get up and go to the living room where I wait. I have a sense of tingling, of anticipation because something is finally happening, but it is trumped by an unease that makes me twitchy and scared, I lose any sense of order and direction. I'm in shock without actually experiencing it, as if it's my shock but it's taking place in someone else's body. After all, no one has died. Everything is normal, normal. All I have to do is break it down into smaller components. This is my home, this is my dad, this is my dad coming home from school. He walks up the steps, he goes to the kitchen, I can hear him open first the fridge, then the bread bin, cutlery jingling, he must be taking out a knife. A few minutes pass. He enters the living room balancing a sandwich in his hand, it's laden with salad and mayonnaise. Look, nothing has changed.

'So, how was your first day back at college?' he says and flops down on the tartan sofa. He opens his mouth and bites through lettuce and thick butter with gusto. A pea smothered in mayonnaise drops onto his dark brown elephant cords, but he doesn't notice. He chews while he watches me closely.

I tell him about my new teachers and new subjects, he is particularly interested in Classics, a subject he also teaches occasionally. He knows more about my teacher than I do, an old woman, who has acted as his co-examiner for oral exams several times.

'Now you might think that subject is a waste of time, but it's the premise for much of the literature you already read.'

'Such as?'

'Shakespeare had read *Medea* and *Oedipus*. *King Lear* and *Macbeth* are steeped in Greek tragedy. The same goes for Ibsen. He knew his Euripides, let me tell you. It's a useful tool to have in life,' he says.

'I'm reading Henry Miller.'

'I see. And why do you think he calls his books *Tropic of Cancer* and *Tropic of Capricorn*? Astronomy wouldn't be what it is today if it hadn't been for the Greeks.'

'Ed McBain. Is he Greek too?'

'Jeppe, listen. I'm not telling you this for fun. There would be no crime novels without Greek tragedy. More people die in a good Greek drama than in Chandler and Hammett put together, and they're murdered in the most brutal way. Greek drama is about life's great themes: revenge, infidelity, incest and betrayal.'

He shrugs as if he has done his bit, the rest is up to me.

'It's important that you hit the ground running with every single one of your new subjects so we don't have a repeat of last year,' he says, then he gets up to go to the kitchen, opens the fridge, fills a glass and drains it. He returns and stops in the same spot where I stood an hour ago when I walked in on them. I see the windowpanes as golden rectangles on the varnished floorboards in front of his feet.

'I'm going food shopping,' he says.

He turns to leave, then he pauses and looks at me.

'Mum doesn't need to know about this,' he says.

‘Then I think you should take it elsewhere.’

I've known all along that my story would start like this, but not what happens next. How will I describe my parents? How will I make them come alive? I visit and talk to their old friends and colleagues, my mum's two sisters, my brother, our ex-wives, I have long conversations with my friends from the 80s about our lives. I collect letters and photos, I read diaries and, using the Freedom of Information Act, apply for copies of hospital notes and HR files. Throughout this process I reflect on the life my parents had, and every now and then I wonder about the life they didn't have. I wonder if I do this because I myself am so tormented by thoughts of what my life would have been like without addiction. The many chances to do the right thing which I squandered along the way, the many people I have let down. The what ifs? I'm haunted by this question and I have incorporated it into my search for my parents. I'm not sure if there is any use in pondering over what might have been. Reaching my hand into the past and rearranging the pieces, opening a door they never opened, fantasising about another life for them. But I can't move on unless I include it all. Everything that happened as well as everything that didn't. I know it all points towards today. And towards tomorrow. I mustn't let it go. If I try to duck it, I won't ever understand. And I won't ever escape the state of emergency in which I exist.

My mum had two miscarriages after giving birth to my brother in 1959. Dr Møller told her not to expect to have any more children. And she had accepted that Peter would remain an only child. In the summer of 1964 her period was late and she felt the familiar symptoms, exhaustion and morning sickness. She was pregnant and she was scared of losing the baby. My brother was five years old and, in the last months of her pregnancy, she went on maternity leave from her job as a nurse

and teacher at the mental health hospital in Risskov and stayed at home. It was her life's dream to have a family, a nuclear family, two children, a mum and a dad like her own, except that her mum had died when she was sixteen years old, and she had had to take her place at home with the strict haberdasher in Kongensgade in Esbjerg. She had been hoping to read History of Art, but her father, Herluf, talked her out of it, there was no money in it, he said, nursing was safer.

I think about the life she might have had if she had been allowed to follow her dreams. Would it have been different? Would she have grown out of my dad's shadow? She was resourceful and decisive, she could read a picture, had a sense of colour and shape, might she have become the director of a museum? Aarhus Art Museum, perhaps? If the times, society and family attitudes had let her? And if she had, would it have been to my dad's detriment? Can I imagine him as her nerdy, literary appendage, reeling off a line by Ingemann or Aarestrup with an apologetic smile during receptions for great artists? And my mum as a beautiful and well-dressed woman of the world who with an assured hand guides that evening's star around a circle of Dubonnet drinkers in the town hall foyer, introducing him to councillors and badly dressed, provincial patrons while she glances discreetly but with desire at the young art historian with whom she is having an affair every Thursday afternoon at Park Hotel by Rådhuspladsen? And would she have managed to be a mother at the same time? Or would Peter and I have spent our childhood in the arms of an ever-changing army of au pairs and older women with care to spare?

Of course she would have coped with motherhood. She was highly capable and could multitask to a considerable degree. And she had plenty of ambition, enough to make sure my dad had a career, why wouldn't she have been able to have one of her own? I imagine her behind a desk, not at the psychiatric hospital with boards listing the allocations of nurses to the many

different wards, but at Aarhus Art Museum. On the windowsill is a Foersom Hegndal statuette of a young woman with her head resting in her hand, behind my mum hangs the painting of the young women in the wood which she has brought with her from her childhood home. And a notice board with plans of future exhibitions. She wears a skirt of khaki denim and a blue shirt, which stretches across her bust, reading glasses whose temple tip she chews lightly while she listens to a member of staff. Her curly black hair has been allowed to grow abundantly, much longer than the practical length for a nurse and she wears it pulled back from her forehead with a hair band that matches the amber necklace around her neck. She is tanned in my version, of course, women were in those days. The silver snake bracelet with the green agate eyes, which she only wore at parties at home, she now wears every day, pale-coloured nail varnish, blue eye shadow, her wedding band.

'Don't you worry about that,' she says. 'I'll give him a call and sort it out. Have you dealt with the insurance?'

Rather than stare at embryos in formaldehyde or take apart the nursing school's plastic torso with its soft innards, I now go exploring in the basement under the museum, holding my mother's hand. And when office works demands her attention, I sit drawing in a corner of the Wegner sofa with a view of Vennelyst Park.

'Look at this,' she says and shows me pictures from an Emil Nolde exhibition which the museum will be putting on in a few months. 'Can you see the lines? Can you see the sun?'

There is a knock on the door.

A curator enters, he has long hair and dark glasses, flares in his velvet trousers, he goes to stand by my mum's side and shows her a foreign catalogue. They study the pictures. His hand rests briefly on her shoulder, then he realises that I'm watching them and he takes it away.

Are you my new dad, I wonder, while I carry on drawing and imagine my future life. Will we be moving into an old farm south of Aarhus with sheep and horses? Or a palatial house by Marselisborg Forest? Or will we stay in Rampen and throw Finn out? Will he end up in a flat in town, mourning the loss of his beautiful, warm wife because without his Gepetto, he doesn't know how to move? Might she have had a glittering career in the arts world with three children, two little ones and one adult, or would she have called it a day and left with Peter and me? Because it finally got too much? Because she needed a mature, capable man, who could support her? A conqueror? An experienced lover, who rested in his body, rather than a man who knew every terrace and sun-drenched wall in Ecbatana, but couldn't find his own keys?

And what would have happened to Peter and me? Would I even have been born? Or would one of the two miscarriages have turned into a baby brother for Peter? What baggage would we have acquired instead of literature? Would I still have ended up a failed and drunken wannabe artist who couldn't get into the Royal Danish Academy of Fine Arts? Or would I have been able to take on my mum's inheritance and fulfil her dreams? Jesper Stein, director of ARoS Aarhus Art Museum?

The past and the present are in us all the time. Not just my parents' past, but also the pasts they never had. They are with me in my attempt to remember, recreate and reconcile myself to the past that actually was.

‘Push, please? The child needs to come out now,’ the midwife says.

It hadn’t taken long. Her waters had broken that afternoon at home and Finn had driven her to the hospital straight away. Finn’s mother was looking after Peter. For several hours she just waited in her bed in the ward. Her contractions started around ten o’clock. They weren’t as bad as the first time, she thought initially, but they went on and on, rolling across her womb like leaden waves. She began to get scared. She was a nurse and knew what to expect, she knew what was happening all the time, she knew that every minute was going by the book, but what use is knowledge when you can feel that something is wrong? When you know how much could have gone wrong in the womb during those nine months, and how much can go wrong during birth? She has a feeling that the child will die. Or be disabled. That nagging voice is always with her. She is vulnerable and she knows it. She can lose. Again.

She pushes. The midwife bends over her, her breath smells of cheese, caraway cheese she has probably just eaten. She feels nauseous and tries to focus on the ceiling where a few drops of a clear liquid have left a zigzag pattern which she tries to interpret, she counts the splashes, counts the corners, multiplies them with the splashes, her brain is in first gear, she is short of oxygen, but she carries on until she can’t suppress the nausea any longer.

‘I need a bowl, I’m going to be sick,’ she says.

‘Your stomach is empty, Mrs Larsen.’

‘Just bring it!’

A metal tray is shoved under her mouth. Her stomach knots up at the same time as a contraction.

‘You need to push now,’ the midwife says.

She pushes and retches at the same time, but nothing comes up. She hates it, she doesn't like the mess, she can feel fluid on her buttocks, it is cold and she is freezing, but there is no space in the room to say so. She doesn't like the midwife who smells of cheese, she doesn't like her manner. It makes her tense. The patient must always be reassured, not forced, she has been taught, and although she isn't a patient but a woman in labour, then she has assisted at enough births to know that this is wrong. She wishes that Finn was here though his presence probably wouldn't make much difference, but he should be here, holding her hand because this is really hard. And tough, she needs support, even if it is her second time.

'Like that, good, are you ready for another one, Mrs Larsen?' the midwife says.

Yes, if you could just stop breathing all over me, she wants to say. Instead she pushes once more. The pattern in the ceiling. She stands obsessively at it until the contraction passes. What could splash so high up? Could it be fluid, squeezed out during a birth? Images of baby heads slipping out of a burst groin along with sprays, columns, no, fountains of green amniotic fluid, quickly appear. It makes no sense.

'I can make out the head,' the midwife says.

The head? Whose head? She is so confused. She has thought about the child all day. What will it be? A boy or a girl? She would prefer a girl. A baby sister, although Peter would rather have a baby brother. She wants to give her little girl the childhood she never had, security, safety, love, but right now she doesn't care, it just has to come out. She pushes and she pushes in a rush of pain and strength. She groans loudly, grits her teeth as she pushes and it feels as if her entire abdomen explodes. Suddenly a doctor and a nurse appear, she sees the badge on the nurse's white uniform, the golden four-leaf clover, which represents happiness and love, against the red background and a small chain, and she remembers the day when the matron at the

nursing school pinned it to her uniform, oh bloody hell, she pushes, ‘congratulations, Mrs Larsen,’ the matron said, and she was a nurse and so proud, the doctor’s face comes very close, there is a drop of saliva in his black moustache, he has green eyes, she pushes, she can smell people, breathing, someone has been smoking, cigarettes and something else, something rotten, sweet, port wine possibly? She screams to make it go away, but she has to remember to breathe in as well, also through her nose, and the smells follow the breath.

‘The head is almost out, another two, three contractions, Mrs Larsen.’

She can feel it’s a lie, the head isn’t out yet, not at all, the child is stuck inside her.

‘Come on, push,’ the midwife says.

She pushes again.

‘Shouldn’t you cut?’ a male voice says.

‘No, it’s nearly out. Push, Mrs Larsen.’

‘I think you ought to cut.’

No. No. Go away. Don’t you dare cut me. She wants to shove the doctor aside, but she knows it’s a lost cause, she can hear it in his voice.

‘Perhaps you’re right.’

She is aware of them rummaging around. They wait. The contraction comes.

‘I’ll cut,’ the midwife says.

Oh, not that, not an episiotomy, poultry shears in chicken, the elastic snaps, the pain is like a knife in her groin, it feels as if the midwife twists it round where the child is coming out, and then it’s gone, but the contraction is still there.

‘Push, Mrs Larsen, push!’

She pushes through the stinging sensation in her groin. She screams as she pushes, it feels neither right nor liberating, it’s just her only option, there’s no way back from here. I’ve done

it before. She screams out the pain and the child, it has to come out now, it has to, now.

‘Right, here it comes.’

‘Remove faeces,’ the doctor says.

She pushes so hard it feels as if her entire body is drained of fluid; at the end her throat lets out a dry growl.

‘The head’s out, Mrs Larsen.’

The rest just slips out of her. She pushes herself up onto her elbows and looks down between her legs where an enormous baby lies on a bed of blood.

‘He’s a bit blue, but he’s a handsome boy, Mrs Larsen, we just need to get him breathing.’

He? A boy?

He is lifted up between her legs and the midwife cuts the umbilical cord, he’s not blue at all, she thinks, he’s pink and white from vernix. And then he screams, a crazy little compact wail erupts from his mouth, his eyes are closed, Christ, he’s angry, she laughs while he howls and breathes. The placenta slips out.

‘We just need to stitch you,’ the midwife says.

They can suture her from head to toe, it stings like hell, but she no longer cares, she just wants to hold him. Why is it taking so long? Hand him over.

She lies still and bites her lower lip in order not to cry too much. She remembers her mum, her cancer and her premature death. And the time that followed where she had to take care of everything because her father was swallowed up by grief. He had told her to be brave. And she had been. It gave her a purpose. She had helped him and her younger sister get through it. She can handle anything. Including two sons. You never feel you’re worth anything more than when you’re helping someone, when people need you. A nurse. And a mother.

She can feel them rummaging around down below, they are suturing her now. The tears run down her cheeks. Where is

he? She can hear him crying. She waits, she is good at waiting, but she can't wait any longer, she wants him now, she wants to be allowed to cry, they need to weigh him, they need to measure him, they have so many things to do, but why does it all have to take so long?

'There he is, Mrs Larsen, he's a lovely little chap.'

He is placed on her chest. His greasy, soft body, his tiny limbs, he turns his head, and she gasps when his gaze meets hers, that familiar gaze. They're Finn's eyes looking at me, he's actually looking at me, she thinks. Finn's blue eyes, and she inhales sharply from joy. Then his baby gaze darkens and implodes, pitch black eyes staring blindly into hers.

'A big boy,' the midwife says. 'Three kilos and 730 gram. 52 centimetres long. And he's healthy.'

'Yes,' is all she can say. She sighs and tries to breastfeed him. His lips fumble around her nipple. It feels as if the last embers of the grief and anxiety that have tormented her ever since she was young woman have finally been quenched. He's alive. And healthy.

'And what time is it, if you don't mind me asking? Is it night-time?'

'It's ten minutes to five in the morning, you were quick.' The midwife checks the obstetrics notes. 'Just under six hours from the first contractions.'

'It felt like a long night.'

'Yes, you were in great pain. Was it worse than with your first child?'

'No, but that was tough as well. I was bedbound for four months because I kept bleeding, but when it was finally time for him to be born, he didn't want to come out, his birth took forty-one hours.'

They take him from her and wheel her to the maternity ward. There he lies in a room with the other new-borns, and she is in a sideward with three other women who are sleeping. She

can’t sleep. In one hour, at seven, their babies will be brought to them so they can be fed. She dozes and wakes up at the sound of crying.

A nurse appears with her baby in her arms and hands him to her. She gets into a sitting position, pushes down her hospital gown and pulls out her breast. She holds him, she feels his warm scalp, so fine. She tries to get him to latch on. Come on, come on, latch on. He won’t. She lets him rest with his mouth against the nipple so he can feel the heat.

In the bed next to hers is a young, dark-haired woman who has had twins, her eyes beam with joy. She fumbles with one breast, moving the baby around.

‘Oh, come on, latch on.’ The twins’ mother looks at her. ‘Tut loves milk,’ she says, nodding to one of her babies. ‘Bjørn, however, isn’t quite so interested.’ She rearranges the baby once more, pressing him against the breast. His tiny lips enclose the nipple without suckling. ‘Come on, Bjørn, latch on.’

Jytte focuses on her attention on the boy in her arms, she touches his tiny fingers, rolling them between hers until they grip her little finger firmly. He is not suckling properly. The nurse wants to latch him on for her.

‘I can do it myself,’ she says.

Even so the nurse assists by putting a pillow behind her back. The boy’s mouth encloses the nipple, and he sucks, she can feel her breast tighten, colostrum pours into his mouth. He looks up at her. One of her hands rests on his tiny head, which is downy and warm like a radiator. He is wet below his nose, she let go off his finger and wipes it away.

‘Ouch,’ says the young woman in the bed next to her as she rearranges one baby.

‘You’ll get the hang of it,’ the nurse says, and the woman grins and says:

‘Well, if he’s anything like his dad, he certainly will.’ Her laughter is the kind you envy, it erupts suddenly like a clap of thunder and rolls along on its wings of joy.

‘Is he or she called Tut?’ she asks.

‘No, that’s just something I call her now. Her name will be Amanda.’

Like the old song, *Amanda from Kerteminde*, she thinks, what a dreadful name.

‘What are you calling yours? Is it a girl or a boy?’

She looks down at the boy. His nose is running again.

‘I’m going to call him Jesper,’ she says. She has made up her mind. Jesper it is. ‘He has a big brother, he is five, his name is Peter.’

The boy lets out a faint whistling sound as he suckles. He doesn’t seem to be able to get it right. But he is calm. And so is she. Quiet in an unquiet way.

The door opens and a new nurse pops round her head, a familiar face from a course she gave on psychiatric nursing. Her name is Mrs Lindahl.

‘How’s the breastfeeding coming along, Mrs Larsen?’

She looks down at the tiny face, the mouth reaching for the nipple. It looks as if he can’t concentrate, as if something isn’t working properly. He latches on with his lips, but he doesn’t suckle the way she remembers Peter doing, his cheeks aren’t moving.

‘Bit of an uphill struggle,’ she concedes.

She repositions him, rests her elbow on a pillow, latches him on, pressing her breast into his tiny mouth, the nipple is big, his lips tiny, but he opens and closes them, he is trying. He suckles a little. She looks up at Mrs Lindahl.

‘That seems to do the trick, just as well you came,’ she says. She milks her breast to help him along, she watches the stream shoot into her son’s mouth. She wants to flash her a

dazzling smile, but something stops her. Mrs Lindahl's brow has taken on an anxious furrow. She looks down at the boy. The milk is pouring out of his nose.

'Mind if I take a look?' she says.

'What? What is it?' she says, but she knows perfectly well what it is.

Mrs Lindahl gently removes the boy's head from her breast and opens his mouth with her little finger. She probes his palate, feeling her way while she looks her in the eyes.

'I think I need to get a doctor,' she says.

'Just tell me.'

She removes Mrs Lindahl's hand and slips her own middle finger into the boy's mouth. Searches for the palate. There is a hole. She withdraws her hand and opens his mouth by pressing his cheeks hard which forces his jaws apart. He cries. He has a cleft palate, and there is a hole up to his nose.

She worries that something else might be wrong with him. If he might be retarded. Or brain damaged. A specialist dentist arrives. He talks about plastic palates. He wants to take a mould. He sits, backlit, in an office and talks to her, white March sun blinding her eyes. Vennelyst Park looks like a negative. He says his speech will be impaired. She sucks her forefinger to stop herself from crying when she hears it.

'His development will be slowed down and he'll most likely experience pronunciations issues. You should expect years of speech therapy.'

She smiles mechanically as if she had been offered a biscuit. All she wants to do is cry. Why is this happening to her?

'But it's too early to say anything about that. Right now feeding take priority. When there's a hole up to his palate he can't create a vacuum. He can't suckle no matter how hard he tries.'

Suddenly it makes sense. Why he can't breastfeed. Why he screams. He isn't getting enough milk, in fact, he gets hardly any and he is losing weight. Three hundred grams in the first few days.

She will never be able to breastfeed him.

The dentist makes a plastic palate for him so he can be bottle-fed, but she doesn't think it works, so she stops using it. She expresses milk and gives it to him in a bottle with an extra-long spout and a big opening. Quite a lot runs out of his nose, but never mind, he manages to swallow most of it. Fortunately it's a small hole. And he doesn't have a hare lip, thank God.

Finn is pleased about that too, but it's as if he doesn't understand her worries, as if he leaves all the worrying to her. He will nod with compassion. And he keeps saying: 'It'll be all right.' Or: 'I'm sure it'll sort itself out in time.'

But she already knows that time doesn't solve anything. Time might well have other plans for you, and not always good ones. And you'll never be warned until it's too late.

Before she can take him home there are more meetings and appointments. She is shocked to learn that he can't have surgery until he is twenty-two months old. And that he will need to be in hospital for several weeks. She knows what that means. At least two weeks of total separation. There is no other way.

She stays at home with him. She watches over him, he is blond, his mind is bright, even his gaze is bright, she thinks, but also a little fragile. He gains weight although some of the milk continues to run out of his nose. For that reason she doesn't feed him yoghurt products because they make him scream, but he still turns into a little chubby cherub. She is proud of that. He starts teething at five months, takes his first step at fourteen months, but even so it's not quite the same. He is not as advanced as his brother. He doesn't speak. The only word which comes after almost two years is "rain". His favourite toy without the 't'. He's absolutely fine, the doctors say, apart from the cleft palate. But she knows they're wrong. Because the words don't come. Not at all. Finn and her try over and over. The boy smiles and looks at them with his mouth open and wonder in his eyes when they stand in front of him, point to an object, and say its name with exaggerated articulation. When they have repeated the word a couple of times, he just laughs. The sooner he has the surgery the better. For that they will need to go to Copenhagen.

She travels there with him shortly after his second birthday. They spend the night in a Copenhagen suburb with her old friend from college, Gunvor, and her husband, Per. The next morning they drive to Diakonissestiftelsen Hospital where the operation will take place. First they meet the consultant who will perform the surgery, then an ear specialist, then a dentist and a ward sister, Sister Ingrid, with whom she has spoken on the telephone several times. Jesper clings to her; she sits with him

on her lap. The consultant checks the boy's medical records, leafs through them. Then he comes over and asks Jesper to open his mouth. He refuses. 'Come on, boy', but still he won't. She can feel it now, the day is about to go off the rails. She opens Jesper's mouth by pressing his cheeks while talking to him in a reassuring voice, drowning out his increasing loud sobbing with her words.

'That'll do,' the consultant says and returns to his desk.

She strokes the boy's hair, he presses his small body against her stomach and chest. She can't hand him over, not like this.

'His prospects are good, it's a small hole,' the consultant says.

'I'm a nurse myself,' she says to stress that she is well-informed about the issue. The consultant nods indifferently.

'Will you be travelling back to Aarhus once you've said goodbye?' the Sister asks.

'No, I'll be staying nearby with a friend until I can take him home. If anything should happen, I can be here quickly,' she says.

'You should expect it to take nine to ten days from the surgery. It's scheduled for Monday,' the consultant says. 'Anything else?' he asks. She doesn't reply because she doesn't know if he is addressing her, but he must have been because he snaps the medical record shut and nods.

The time has come. She looks at the sister.

'I've brought his teddy and his favourite train,' she says, reaching into her bag for the teddy. When she produces it, Jesper takes it and holds it tight.

'As you're staying in town, he can come with you once we have taken some tests, then you can return him Sunday evening. Or would you prefer to hand him over right now? We have a bed ready for him.'

She is surprised. And confused. Everything inside her was braced for a goodbye she can't handle. But not a postponement. She says yes. She wants to hand him over now. The sister gets up.

'We'll say goodbye in the ward. Come with me, I'll show you where he'll be staying.'

Jesper refuses to get down on the floor and walk himself. He has crawled up onto her chest and locked both arms around her neck. They pass a boy on crutches in the corridor.

'We have children here with a range of issues, but children scheduled for surgery have their own ward. There are windows between the wards so they can see one another,' the sister says with a smile. They have reached ward 4, and she can see that it's true what the sister just told her. There are two children in the ward and two empty beds, one of which is for Jesper.

'Right, so how about it?' the sister says in a low voice. She has turned to her so they are facing one another in the corridor. 'I think it's better out here.'

The sister reaches her arms out to Jesper who stares at the woman with panic in his eyes; he presses himself more closely against her chest, clinging on for dear life. You know exactly what's going to happen, she thinks. She regrets not saying yes to taking him with her. What was I doing, what was I thinking?

Sister Ingrid takes a step towards her and tries to lift Jesper off her body, but it is no use. The sister places her hands on his back, his little body freezes as if her touch has given him an electric shock. He holds on for dear life, she has to prise him off her body, using all her strength, tear him free of her flesh, his sobbing grows louder, it fills the whole corridor. She catches a glimpse of the two children in the ward, sitting terrified on the lap of a nurse. She has let go of him now and he cries and his crying turns into a scream. He screams and screams and screams,

and she turns away, she turns her back on her son and walks down the corridor, but his scream follows her, it follows her right out into the street when it mingles with the traffic and the clear March air and her sniffling and sobbing, her tears, but no matter how much she cries, his scream lingers in her ears, his scream and the look in his eyes.

She doesn't tell Gunvor that they gave her a choice, that she could have kept him with her for another two days, but that she said no. It becomes her secret, her shame. She was caught off-guard. She had steeled herself for saying goodbye. She has never regretted anything in her life as much as this. She almost can't stand it. What will people think of her?

The weekend passes at a snail's pace; she visits an uncle in Vanløse and drinks coffee with an old college friend in Illum's department store. Every day she calls the hospital to hear how he is. But it's not enough. While they drink coffee in the living room, she asks Gunvor:

'Don't you think I can insist on visiting him?'

'No, I don't think so, Jytte, they won't let you.'

'But he's my son.'

'Jytte …'

'But perhaps they'll let me see him, if only from a distance.'

She steps out onto the terrace for a cigarette, she is smoking two packets a day now, but she can't help it. She lights the next one from the tip of the first. She can smell the sea, March is full of rain and wind, it reminds her of Esbjerg. She makes up her mind. She goes back inside, makes a telephone call and asks for permission to see him. Just see him. And to be kept informed about the surgery. Tomorrow. It's not up for discussion, she tells them.

Jesper is sitting on the floor, leaning against a bedpost. A train in his lap. His gaze. She can't bear it. It is empty and distant. As if he isn't there. As if she doesn't exist. Even though she is standing right behind the curtain in ward 5. The toy train lies still in his hand. She thinks about his singing, the four notes he always chants monotonously as he rolls his trains across the varnished floorboards back home in Rampen. Laaa-laaa-laaa-laaa. Trains, always trains, back and forth. As if he were, well, she can hardly make herself say it, retarded. His surgery was two days ago, they have closed the gap in his palate, it went well, they say. He is wearing stiff sleeves so he can't bend his elbows and touch his mouth. She eases the curtain and peeks into ward 4. The tears start to come, she gasps, she tries to suppress them, but they turn into a sob. Behind her she can feel the hospital sister moving closer to her as if trying to stop her emotional outburst.

'It's not a good idea, Mrs Larsen, most of the time it just makes it worse.'

She knows exactly what she means, and yet she says in an utterly flat voice:

'What gets worse? And for whom?'

'For you, Mrs Larsen, I know how hard it is not to be with your child for twelve days, but the absence is often made worse by seeing them,' the nurse says, touching her upper arm.

She snatches her arm back and hisses:

'Be quiet, you've no idea what you're talking about. He's my son. It's my son in there. Don't you understand anything at all? I belong with him.'

'I think I do understand, but we have rules; you're a nurse yourself, you know them and he's fine. I'll leave you here on your own and I'll be back in ten minutes. You mustn't go in there and you know it, the stitches might burst open.'

Burst open? Two days after surgery? Because a child sees its mother? But that's absurd. It's barbarian. She remembers her feelings of powerlessness and desperation when Peter had

his tonsils out, and she had to hand him over for a week. Only one visit a day was allowed. The boy looked increasingly miserable with every day that passed. When they came home, Peter said that the nurse, Mrs Vendelboe, had told him that if he didn't do what she told him and fell asleep on the dot, then he would never get to go home. She had taken Peter to the bathroom, lifted up the lavatory seat and told him to pull the chain. And so they flushed Mrs Vendelsboe down the loo. Every evening for weeks. That was bad enough, but this. Twelve days. With no visits. It's inhuman.

Jesper glances around the ward, then at his train. As if seeing it for the first time, his face momentarily lights up with joy, he tries to push it along, but can't do it properly with the stiff sleeves in his hospital gown. Tears well up in his eyes, she retreats behind the curtain, but his crying still reaches her. She can feel the sister behind her and says:

'Are those sleeves really necessary?'

'Yes, they're even more essential now than at any other time. After two days the wound begins to itch and it's crucial that they can't stick their fingers into their mouths.'

Don't you lecture me on wound healing and cells and scar tissue and itching, she feels like snarling into the face of the sister, but all she does is nod.

'How has he been? Is he eating?'

She doesn't listen to the answer. Instead she breaks off:

'I just feel so awful about this … having abandoned him.'

'I know, but he'll be fine, don't you worry, and you'll see him again in less than a week, and everything will be as it was before. Except he'll be well.'

She ignores her, the nurse, though she knows she is only trying to make her feel better, that she is probably annoyed that she forced though this visit. Seriously, if we allow all the parents to blubber behind a curtain over their post-operative children, soon we won't have time for anything else, she imagines her

saying to her colleagues once she has left. But she is not just any parent, she is a nurse, and she knows that the words she hears are a lie, the sister might mean well, but they have no effect on her. She remembers her time at Gentofte hospital when she did part of her training at the paediatric ward. The worst bit wasn't the children screaming when their parents dropped them off. The worst part was their screams when the parents came to collect them. Because they didn't recognise them after two weeks in hospital. The screams of the children and the parents' horrified faces. She feels a deep rumble in her chest, an all-consuming urge to just march in there and tear that damned hospital gown off him, hug the air out of him and take him with her.

The phone line is open every evening, and she calls to find out how he is. And she hears about bowel movements and natural yoghurt and mashed potato and rye bread pudding and that he is doing fine, and two days before she is due to pick him up, the doctor tells her that the wound has healed nicely. And she hears everything, but the nagging voice in her head won't be silenced, it intrudes while she tries to focus on natural yoghurt with cream or was it rye bread pudding with cream and natural yoghurt with egg, all the foods Jesper may eat. Her ever-present anxious voice doesn't care, it's not interested in special diets for little boys who have had surgery or incisions to the palate which have now healed, it just goes on and on and on inside her, it never provides any answers, but is always there with its questions: Will he recover? Or will he end up lisping, stammering and stuttering for the rest of his life? Will he be teased? Has the separation estranged them? Is this her punishment? Because she dares to dream about the best?

The night before she is due to pick him up, she calls Finn.

'If he recovers from this and gets through it without any permanent damage …'

‘But of course he will, sweetheart …’

‘You can’t know that. Some children never learn to speak properly after that type of surgery, and he’s already behind.’

‘I don’t think it’s that bad, many two-year-olds don’t say an awful lot …’

‘No, but whatever happens, then I’ll continue to stay at home with him until we’re sure he’s OK. He’s not going to nursery until he’s absolutely ready. We’ll just have to find a way. I’ll stay at home until he turns three. At least. He’s not going to be teased the way Peter was. I won’t allow it, Finn, he must have his mother with him until he’s ready.’ Then the tears come back and with them, her true feelings. ‘I don’t want to let him go ever again, Finn. I don’t think he should go to nursery at all.’

‘But we’re talking three or four years, Jyt, I really don’t think we can afford that,’

But right now none of that matters. She holds him in her arms, he cries, but he is hers, and he shows no signs of wanting to get away from her. In fact he clings to her. He cries every time he looks at her. If she presses him against her sweater or her neck, he stops. After a little time, he will raise his head to breathe and look about him, he fidgets with her blouse or her earlobe or her necklace until he loses interest and gazes up at her, and when he looks into her eyes, when he truly sees her once more, he starts to cry, but she knows he isn’t crying because she is a stranger to him. He cries because he has missed her, because he is hers. And now she is back. They are together. And they will never be parted again. Never ever.

The tears continue even when they are back home in Risskov. They take turns sitting by his cot, singing to him, night after night. He is desperate for eye contact, he fights to stay awake and she understands him from the bottom of her heart. He looks at her, he twists and turns in his cot, changes position, he smiles

every time their eyes meet. If she leaves, he'll cry. After an hour his eyes start to close, the lids tremble and glide shut, then they open briefly, the eyelashes, he closes them again. At last. He is asleep. His breathing grows heavy, she looks at him and right at this moment in time she feels serene and happy because he is fast asleep, his face is at peace. She knows it is but a brief respite because the tears lurk nearby. Sometimes minutes may pass, but the tears will come back when she gets up, when the balance in the air in his room is disturbed, when she steps away from the chair and the floorboards squeak, when she opens the door to the passage and tries to slip through the gap in order not to let in too much light, when she closes it, when she tiptoes across the carpet in her nylons, when she enters the bedroom, when she undresses, when she climbs into bed where Finn is waiting, when he touches her naked shoulders, when he kisses her … the crying will come, it is absolutely certain. Jesper can't sleep. And he cries if she or Finn isn't there.

So she brings him to their bed even though Finn is against it. He would rather have him stay in his cot so they can have sex undisturbed. But it makes no difference, she says. If I have to spend another hour by his cot watching over him, I'll be too tired to do it anyway.

'Why can't he just sleep like other children?'

'There's a name for it as it happens, Finn, it's called separation anxiety, he's scared that we might leave him.'

Pages 105 – 109

I remember it as happening in the days just before the new college year starts. The weather is fine. Anders and I have been swimming in the sea, we're wearing T-shirts and shorts, we're tanned, we enter the house, walk up the stairs, through the door to the living room. My parents are sitting on the sofa, crying. It feels like walking into a wall with your eyes wide open, Anders stops behind me, mumbles something and beats a hasty retreat.

My mum steels herself, wipes her cheeks with a tissue, then she looks at me, her eyes are red and pained.

'You have to tell him yourself,' she says in a firm voice.

My dad wrings his hands, squirming on the sofa a short distance from her.

'Well, Jeppe. I've had to tell your mum that I'm having an extramarital affair. It's an unhappy situation …'

'… which you have inflicted on us.'

My mum is composed and she looks at him.

'Yes.' He hesitates. He looks at her apologetically, but there is also defiance in his eyes. 'Your mum has asked me to move out at once. Apparently she finds that necessary.'

His eyes meet mine, then he looks away. It's Gitte, I know it immediately.

'But … where?'

'I'll go to the cottage.'

I'm more surprised than shocked. Suddenly I miss my brother terribly. He's in Greece with his girlfriend.

'And then what? What's going to happen?'

'I can't tell you, Jeppe, it's impossible to say right now. Your mum has asked me to accept the consequences of my actions and move out. If that's the case, then that's how it has to be.'

'But what on earth had you expected?' she says.

‘I don’t think we should discuss that in front of Jeppe,’ he says and looks at me.

‘No, but the least you can do is tell him who she is, can’t you? That you’ve fallen for a student.’

‘I don’t think that Jeppe needs to be dragged into …’

‘The one who was in love with him, Gitte is her name, he has been seeing her for a year. It’s completely …’

My mum stares into space, her right fist is clenched, she presses it against her mouth. A Prince cigarette lies lit in the antique tin ashtray, a slim column of smoke rises straight up into the air and dissolves under the shade of the PH lamp.

That evening my dad drives off in the car. I walk up to the living room. My mum sits on the sofa, smoking. Her cheeks are wet.

‘I don’t know what to say. I’m just so shocked,’ she speaks in that voice she reserves for emergencies, it’s low and faint and fumbling. I remember it from a holiday in Sweden where we were driving through a forest and suddenly a huge bus came towards us on the road, and my mum yanked the steering wheel sharply to the left and we ended up on the roof in a ditch and dried spaghetti from the hamper in the back exploded all over the car. Afterwards she sat on a tree stump, smoking, and said: ‘There was nothing else I could do, it would have crashed right into us if I hadn’t done what I did.’

‘Where is he?’

‘He has gone to get cigarettes. I guess he’s calling her.’

‘But is he moving out?’

‘I’ve thrown him out.’

‘But where is he going to go?’

‘The cottage, he says. I don’t know. He can’t stay here if he isn’t willing to end it. What was he thinking?’

‘No.’

‘Well, I don’t want to bother you with that. We’ll find a solution, but he’s moving out tomorrow. Peter will need to be told as well.’

My dad sleeps in Peter’s old room on the first floor, we call it the guest bedroom now, I can hear their footsteps on the floor up there and fragments of their conversations down in the living room where I’m sitting on the sofa. ‘But she’s a child and you’re fifty-three years old.’ And a little later: ‘She’s looking for a father, not a lover, don’t you understand?’ Only my mum’s voice carries intelligible sentences down the stairs because her pitch is higher than Finn’s whose responses I hear only as grunts. It’s as if he has already left. In her powerlessness my mum takes charge of everything. She is the one leading the way. I’ve no idea what is going to happen. ‘We’ve been married for twenty-nine years, you can’t just throw those away … the children? Have you thought about … Jesper?’ More grunting. At one point a door is slammed. Hard. I go to the kitchen, I open the door to the passage and listen out. I can hear my dad knock on the door to the master bedroom. My mum shouts something.

‘Jytte, please, let’s talk about it.’

The door is opened.

‘We’ve just been on holiday for two weeks,’ she says. There are tears and rage in her voice.

‘Yes.’

‘But why? Why come home and tell me now? What was the point of Provence?’

‘I didn’t want you to miss out on the trip.’

‘Miss out? Miss out? Twenty-nine years? What sort of nonsense is this? You selfish bastard.’

The next day Peter returns from Greece. He is just as stunned as I am. We sit in my room and talk, he questions me, and I tell him

about it, about yesterday, about them crying on the sofa, about meeting Gitte a year ago.

'What an idiot,' he says.

And a little later:

'I mean, it's obvious that they haven't been getting on for a long time, but even so I didn't see this coming.'

I'm angry with Finn and so it feels good to hear Peter call him an idiot. I'm angry because he has hurt my mum.

'Me neither, I guess I was thinking he just had a bit on the side.'

'Yes.'

'What do you think will happen now?'

'I don't know, Jesp. I really don't.'

'But do you think they'll get a divorce?'

'It's either that or he'll come home again. It's hard to imagine him with her, isn't it? What would he do? Move into town? I can't see him leaving this place.'

My mum sits in her usual place in the kitchen, I sit alone on the bench.

'Well, here we are, just the two of us.'

She has made rissoles, my dad usually cooks those. She serves them with melted butter.

'How was school?'

'It was good, it was nice to be back.'

'We'll be all right.'

'OK.'

I've no idea what to say. I have so many questions, questions I don't want to have and that I don't know how to ask. My mum's gaze is distant, wet and miserable. She has cut only a small piece off the rissole on her plate, a boiled potato lies in a puddle of melted butter with a pile of peas next to it. She rests her elbows on the table, looks away from me, out of the window

at the sky which can be made out above the hedge. It's the view we all resort to when we want to get away.

'A twenty-year-old, how juvenile, what is he doing with her?'

'I don't know.'

'He says he's in love. Or that he doesn't know if he is. He says that too. He's so weak. You don't say something like that unless you are.'

Pages 117 – 120

All my life I've loathed being on my own, I've drunk out of loneliness. Now I'm sober. My children have just left after spending four days with me, and I wander around the rooms looking for my new life. I can't find it. I can't find anything. I think about my mum. Did she feel the same way? The weight of all those years? The invisible glue of love, gone at a stroke, dissolved, everything we take for granted, everything that's just life, like breathing over and over without ever thinking about it, packed lunches that need to be made, children who need comforting, lullabies to be sung, dinners to be eaten, we have our usual place at the table, we have our usual place in life, stories about friends, about conflicts, about what the boys in their class are doing, what the teacher said, about the dog they met in the street, which is 'so cute', there are children who wave, who can't stop laughing, who yell that you're 'a shit' before they get scared and start to cry and need consoling because they accidentally called you a bad word when you wouldn't let them have any more sweets, and later we laugh about it on the sofa where I tell her about my day and she tells me about her day and about a girlfriend of hers, who is getting divorced or about an article she has written, there are seconds, minutes, hours, days, months, years where we are together because we just are, it's the way she likes her eggs, she doesn't like garlic in the dressing when you make a salad, there are looks to be exchanged, many times every a day, a thousand possibly, without questions, without hesitation because we are in this together, in life, we are a unit, a family. Children and adults, the parents of those children, who had those children together, who reach out for life's greatest gift and throw stones into eternity. There were rituals, appointments, patterns, things that just worked and were never questioned or considered critically, in contrast to now where everything is up for grabs, an

endless land of opportunity which I have to populate with choices and actions, a process that make me feel powerless and apathetic. I long for what there was: Headaches and hiccups and foreplay and no foreplay and not enough foreplay and periods and caresses and sore throats and hunger and hugs and grief and fits of laughter and fatigue and orgasms and exhaustion, my hand on her back on bike rides when we were going uphill, sunshine in the garden, a cup of tea on a chair and a sudden touch, she caresses my neck, her breathing in my presence, there are hundreds of things I can't put into words, but I can feel them now because I never noticed them before, because I took them for granted, because they were just there, they were a part of this mass of days that constituted several years of marriage, indescribable, imperceptible and invisible. And now they are gone. I sit alone in my house. I can feel them now. Because they are gone.

I think about my mum. What did she do? Did she miss his bad habits, his constantly suppressed belching, him licking his fingers and the greasy stains on his trousers? Did she pick up a sweater from a chair like I did and press it against her lips, her nose, did she inhale twenty-nine years of life together while the tears welled up in her eyes?

The weeks surrounding Finn's moving out are the foggiest for me. I have no recollection of what he packed, no mental images of the removal chaos I know from my own life, open crates, piles of stuffs for which there is no room, but it must have been pandemonium – especially for him, surrounded by towers of books. I kept a diary for most of my time in college, but it stops in the summer of 1982. My brother remembers nothing. All I have are snippets from the people I have contacted in my attempt to go back in time.

My mum went to work. Every day. She acted as if nothing had happened. Her colleagues were told that Finn had moved out and that they were getting a divorce. That was all.

Finn's colleagues don't remember it any differently. 'He told me he was getting a divorce'. Phrases such as 'Jyt and I haven't been getting on', 'my marriage is dead', and 'I've moved out, that's just the way it is', are all that are left from those days. Gitte doesn't appear to have been mentioned as the cause at the beginning.

He stayed in the cottage until he could move into a flat in Falstergade.

'But he's with her, of course,' my mum said. She repeated that Gitte's mother had called to say that she feared for her daughter's life. On hearing that Finn had gone. That was the catalyst that triggered their final split. It had felt like a form of blackmail. That was the real reason for it. Not that their marriage had run its course or because their reconciliation didn't work out.

Did they see one another while he moved out? Did she try to get him back? Possibly. I know what he would have done if she had. He would have given her a hug, humoured her verbally: 'Yes, you might be right about that.' Then he would have shaken his head as if it was something inevitable, thrown up his hands and said: 'But, Jyt, I really have to go.'

Only she wouldn't have given up so easily. She would have appealed to his common sense.

'What are you going to do when you get old? With such a young one?'

'I can't tell you that, it's difficult to make predictions about the future, as they say.'

'But she'll tire of you eventually and then what will you do? We were meant to grow old together, Finn.'

I imagine that she might have pleaded with him and when she sensed his refusal to change his mind, she switched to anger,

anger born from grief, but also genuine rage because this man whom she had steered through life and controlled totally, had suddenly made a choice without listening to her or needing her help, her support, her backing him up, completely without seeking her approval he had made a choice, a choice which was also the worst thing that could happen to her.

Pages 163 - 166

When I'm not with Karen Margrethe, in town or with friends, I sit in my room at my desk, reading or writing. My mum comes downstairs several times after she has gone to bed. Tonight she has been down here three times so far and I have a hunch she's not done yet. Neither sleeping pills nor wine can conquer her despair. I light a cigarette and put on a Bowie record: *What in the world can you do/I'm in the mood for your love.*

I have learned to shut off my mum's words completely; it's as if they arrive at a distance destination in my body from where they are transported to a lead-lined dump for toxins thousands of kilometres below the surface of the Earth. They are separate from me; they are not a part of my life. I write in a Chinese notebook about Karen Margrethe, her warm skin, her tense body and the crazy, light blue, shimmering ocean of her eyes when she lies next to me.

The door opens. My mum enters without knocking.

'Please would you give me a hug?'

She stands in the middle of the room in her faded, old cotton nightdress with the brown Marimekko pattern. Liver spots on her skin, turkey-wattle neck.

'That's the worst part,' she says. 'I miss physical contact so desperately.'

It's not the first time she says that. She has said it many times, not just to me, but also to my brother, and we are both disgusted by it. We have talked about it, not a proper conversation as such, we just repeat her words and pretend to throw up, and it feels good because that particular statement is the worst, but at least I can share it with him.

'Yes, I understand.'

'Please hold me?' She has taken a step back and is standing next to my bed in front of the giant blue bull's eye

which I have painted across the corner wall in my room using my school compass. My inspiration for it was the attic flat of the young hippie couple in the TV soap *Huset på Christianshavn*. Her arms hangs along her sides, her head droops a little, she waits.

'Yes.'

I get up. Slowly. And heavily as if my blood has taken on a new viscosity and turned from blood that flows freely to heavy blood, dead blood, leaden blood that makes any movement impossible. Then I go to her, quickly to get it over with. I take her in my arms. She rests her cheek on my chest. She is so small. The scent of Nivea cream and alcohol, sweet and a little acidic at the same time, her greasy, grey curls tickle my Adam's apple. I don't want to hug her, but a hug isn't a hug unless I also touch her with my hands and arms. It feels as if there is no strength in my arms, as if it's a long way around, but I do it, I hold her briefly, her hands on my back, she holds me tight, I can feel the pressure of her body, her shoulder bones against my biceps, I snatch back my hands as if I have burned myself. She continues to press herself against me. She doesn't break the embrace. That's my job, I take a step back.

'I miss it so desperately.'

She sits down on the edge of my bed. I can physically feel her longing. It sits like an imprint on my body. I know she hasn't got what she came for. And that, too, fills me with inadequacy. She asks for a cigarette, I light it while she closes her eyes, she inhales, it goes out, I light it again.

I sit down in my office chair; the bookcase behind me is filled with books I have picked up from my dad's study and the many second-hand purchases I have started making in little shops in Volden and Graven, Henry Miller's novels published by Reitzel, *Pan* and *Victoria* by Knut Hamsun, the other day I found an edition of Baudelaire's *Les Fleurs du mal* for only ten kroner.

‘I miss physical contact so desperately.’

‘Yes, mum.’ I heave a sigh.

‘He was crap in bed, but I still miss it. How will I get it?’

She stares at me. Fixes my gaze, I look away.

‘I don’t know.’

‘Why can’t you give it to me? Can’t you take his place?’

‘Of course I can’t. You’ve got to stop this, mum.’

‘Why not?’

‘Because I’m your son. I can’t go to bed with you.’

‘Don’t shout at me. I’ve come to you because I need comforting, I’m at my wit’s end, I can’t bear it if you get cross with me now, I don’t know what I have to live for if I don’t have you.’

‘I know. But I’m here. I’ll look after you.’

She looks up at me with a drugged expression, her eyes swimming without focusing; in her intoxication she feels completely open, she has bared her soul, her innermost feelings, but I know that she is far away, impossible to communicate with, in the limbo of her suffering, it’s all about getting her out of my room now.

‘I gave him everything.’

‘Yes.’

‘My best years. I gave them to him and I gave them to you, I stayed at home while he worked, I gave him my life, I gave you all my life.’

‘Yes, mum.’

‘Is that all you can say?’

‘What do you want me to say? There’s nothing I can do now.’

‘That’s right, run away, shirk your responsibility, that’s all you men ever do, but it’s pathetic, my friend, it really is, as if that’s enough!’ She shouts the latter into the air while she shakes her head. ‘Yes, it’s all very well for you, blah, blah, blah.’ She flings out a hand as if to bash my words away, and I want to grab

that hand and throw it back in her face, hit her, push her over and scream at her.

'There's nothing I can do now.' She mimics me in a girly voice. She shakes her head, then makes for the door. 'Try harder, is all I say. You could try so much harder, Jesper.'

Pages 198 – 203

I hang out at Sexbio in Paradisgade. A mild breeze whirls around the leaves on the cobblestones; they gather in circles, then fall to the ground in random patterns. I drift about.

I stand in the doorway at three in the morning. The place is closed, but still I knock, I moan something about sex, I act more drunk than I am. I try the other door in the small porch, the one that leads to the porn cinema. No one answers, but I don't leave, I stay where I am, I belong here. I hope that someone will come, it's a porn cinema as well as a sex club, someone who can use me. I look at my reflection in the window display of props and dreams. Leather handcuffs lined with pink fur, dildos, a big brown rubber dick with an absurd clitoris stimulator that looks like a misshapen killer snail, whips and nipple clamps, I want it all, there are porn movies in videocassettes with naked bodies and distorted, artificial smiles, the leaves on the shiny cobblestones whirl past me. I'm full of beer and longing, I want to feel something. The door opens and Kaj pops out his head. I don't know him, but everyone knows his name.

'What the hell are you doing here? We're closed,' he says.

'You are?' I slur my speech excessively. 'I'm up for anything.'

'You're mad. Piss off home,' he says and closes the door.

But I don't leave, I continue to hang around. I don't want to go home.

I walk to the corner shop in Nørregade where I buy extra strong beer. Then I cycle down to the port, I ride my bike up and down the area where I know men go cruising to pick up girls and rent boys. There is a metallic screaming from the cranes in the wind. I cycle right to the tip of the breakwater, I watch the cars, a young girl leans against a container. I sit down on a sloping

concrete block, lean back, my jacket slides up and I feel cold, smooth stone against my skin. A car stops near the girl, the window is rolled down, I can't hear what they say, but I can hear her voice, it sounds like a little girl's voice in the night. Do you want to play with me? Please would you pick up my ball, I've lost it. I want to save her. Or do I? She is something I long to be. A state of being no one. But where you have a body which can be used.

I get back on my bike, I ride around with the drunkard's right to be everywhere at once, forbidden and secret places. Intoxication is my entry pass, I dare everything, I want everything, but nothing happens. More cars drive slowly by like horny reptiles with glowing yellow eyes, circling the pier's barren land of stone and containers, cranes and junkies.

'What do you want?' the girl says when I pass her for the third time.

I don't reply. But I wobble on my bicycle. I leave the harsh light of the port, ride across the gangway and reach the bicycle path to Risskov. Past the iceberg that is Klintegårdens apartment building, along the route which will take me all the way to Stationsgade via the railway and the sea. There are two tarmac paths, one for pedestrians and one for cyclists. They are separated from the rail tracks by a chain link fence clamped to posts. Wild roses and bramble grow along the fence. I get off my bike and push it along the path, then dump it on the grass next to a bench, I have ridden fast and stand for a while panting in front of a green wall of tree trunks, branches and leaves towering in front of me, an impenetrable and steep wilderness where we would risk our lives climbing up to the forest when I was little. There are hardly any sounds in the night, a faint hum of distant cars and the idle sloshing of waves. Right here the darkness is massive, there are streetlights along the railway, but the bulbs are not working on the two closest to me, I sit down on a bench. I have a can of beer in my pocket and I open it. I drink. A man

sits down on a bench some distance away from me. I sit in the night in my intoxication, wishing that all the sex in the world could pour through my body. I want everything right now, I want to get into something that's bigger than me, something all-consuming which can obliterate me. Karen Margrethe? Pernille and Anders? Should I cycle past them on my way home and wake them up?

The man has got up. He comes towards me. He is wearing an anorak. It is open. A T-shirt underneath. Too short. Grubby. He hoicks up his trousers which hang from his belt. He stops in front of me and asks if I have a light.

I nod and hand him my lighter.

'Want one?'

I say yes, please. And look at him. I have seen him before. He passes me a cigarette, walking up close to me as he does so. He keeps his eyes on me all the time.

He lights the cigarette.

'What are you doing here?' he wants to know.

'I've been drinking and I'm wasted,' I say.

He sits down next to me. Eases himself up from the bench to adjust his trousers, then sits down again.

'I've seen you riding around. Are you looking for someone?'

'No.'

'Are you looking for company?'

'Maybe.'

'Do you fancy a trip to the stones?' he asks. His hair is thinning and golden, sideburns, an emerging bald patch. His eyes are brown and hungry in an uninhibited way.

'Yes,' I say, I tremble with excitement and fear as we cross the bike path. He pushes down the thick steel bands and I straddle the fence, then walk up the mound of stone chippings, crossing the rail tracks and the grass.

We sit down on the stones. A small gap between us. He looks around. Left *and* right.

Lights flash in the darkness across the sea. To my right I can see the container port's neon white depots and the big steel boxes that travel all over the world, to my left the three regularly flashing red lights from the big chimneys of Studstrupværket power station.

He moves very close to me. I don't stir. I know what's going to happen. I want to. And I don't. When he touches me, when his hand touches the outside of my trousers, I'm passive, limp. When his mouth seeks out mine, I turn my face away, I can smell raw onion on his breath, perhaps he has just eaten a hot dog.

'Come here,' he says and guides my hand to the bulge in his trousers, I touch it, he unbuttons his trousers, pulls out his belt, then pushes down his underpants to free his dick. He is still holding my wrist with his other hand.

'Touch it,' he says. 'You know you want to.'

I touch it. He lets go of my hand and puts his arm around my shoulder so my head rests on his chest. It could be me and Karen Margrethe or Marianne. We look like a picture of tenderness underneath the stars. A man and his beloved seeking solace on his chest. I move my hand back and forth, I can see it in the darkness. I haven't drunk enough not to feel shame, but I'm sufficiently drunk not to run away. He moves his hand to the back of my head and pushes, it comes closer and closer, I take it in my mouth. There is a smell of rotten seaweed and salt water, his unwashed skin, skin folds squashed together in a pair of white hospital underpants. He presses his groin upwards and it goes so deep into my mouth that I gag. I close my eyes in order to return to the darkness, but my longing dies in the smell of urine and my straining mouth. It's all real, I am my mouth, I am the neck he fixes with his grip, I am my body, it's not someone else's, it's not an object in my fantasy, I'm Jesper, my mum's tears, Finn's

absence, I can't feel anything, but I can feel everything, I just want to go home. When he comes, I swallow it. It stings my throat.

Afterwards we smoke a cigarette.

'I saw you ride your bike down the port,' he says.

I swallow.

'I saw you up by the porn cinema in Paradisgade.'

I keep swallowing; I can't get the taste out of my mouth.

'I have to go home,' I say.

I get up.

'I often ride around down there myself. I'll see you later,' he says and gets to his feet, he starts to button his trousers. I cross the railway tracks, I grip the steel band and push it down so I can step over it, I hurry over to my bike. When I'm in the saddle and have started pedalling, he steps out onto the cycle path, he says something I don't hear. I stamp on the pedals, I get up and stand on them as I push them down. The muscles in my legs work like pistons, I ride like this all the way home. My breath is in my throat, along with the taste, my lungs are burning. Before I turn into Rampen, I look over my shoulder. No one is there. I pedal uphill fast and turn into the carport, I dismount at speed, letting my bike roll the last few metres so it lands on top of my mum's brown Raleigh bike, I enter the bottom garden, my body is warm from sweat, I feel light.

The house is empty and dark, a mausoleum where everything I have ever known has been laid to rest. I know that my mum is deep in the drug induced haze of sleeping pills on the first floor. In front of the big window facing the garden I stop and look towards the yellow glow of the streetlight behind the hedge. I watch the road, but I haven't been followed.

That night I brush my teeth for once before I go to bed. I rinse my mouth several times, then I go downstairs and drink a glass of milk.

When I wake up the next morning in my bedroom, I'm horny. And embarrassed. I masturbate about the night. About the fact that I had a grown man's dick in my mouth, a patient from the psychiatric hospital. It's dark and wrong. Which just turns me on even more. When I come, there is only shame. I'm beside myself with loathing. I feel like vomiting it all up and replay the film from last night so instead I go see Karen Margrethe and fall asleep with my arm around her.

It is late morning when I wake up again, the sun is shining, I can hear birds in the garden. It could be a good day, it is summer in Risskov, but it's the weekend and weekends are the worst. My mum is up. And she has questions.

'Did you have a good time last night?'

'Were you with Karen Margrethe?'

'What about Marianne? Do you still see her?'

I mumble replies. She toasts buns. We sit in the kitchen while we eat them. I have made tea. We spread the buns with low-fat margarine. Butter belongs to Finn's world. I loathe the soft, white, watery, fatty substance. The sound of the knife across the brown crumb, the dry, scraping sound, it's the sound of a dead weekend I'll be spending with her. I get up and go to the downstairs loo where I throw up.

I forget all about the night. Until the next weekend where I ride my bike home from Stenkælderen in Skolegade. I'm drunk, pleasantly drunk, I want to go see Karen Margrethe and declare her my undying love. On the cycle path I hear the sound of crunching tyres gaining on me, he comes up alongside me, but I ignore him.

'Hello,' he says. I look at him without reacting.

'I know who you are,' he says. His voice has a slight drawl.

'Right,' I say.

'You're Jytte Funder's son. What would she say if she knew you'd sucked off a patient?'

I push the pedals hard and outride him. I go home and brush my teeth, I hide in my bed.

Page 221 - 222

I'm with Finn in his flat in Falstergade. Often. Finn is revitalized. He is on top of the world, he seems relieved, he hums, he sings Bellman, he eats and he is happy. 'Bloody hell, Jeppe'. He says that often. About films or books or people. And it's followed by a summary of the plot. Or an opinion.

I have left home. I'm unemployed. I write. I go out. I think life is pointless and hypocritical. We have continued our regular Monday dinners, but I also drop by whenever I feel like, I'm always welcome. There are echoes of our last years together on Rampen, the long, lazy afternoons on the sofas in the living room where we would bicker about who got to choose which records to play, read newspapers or books, and chat. Evenings where we would lie there excited to be watching *Tinker Tailor Soldier Spy* and TV crime dramas and discuss them in detail both during and afterwards. There is a timeless serenity to his large living room with the sofa, the TV and all the bookcases, there is food, beer or wine. A hundred kroner note or two. He is busy with his teaching and with his reviews. There are still conversations to be had about the loss of Rampen and mum's bitterness, which he struggles to come to terms with. Gitte is there more and more when I visit. Being with her is natural, she is the same age as me, she is guarded, I want to be friends with her and I want her to like me because I love my dad.

One evening when I have had quite a lot to drink, I tell them what it's like to live with mum. What it's like to still talk with her. I don't tell them everything. But I tell them about the endless litanies, the tears, the recriminations, the threats of suicide. There are tea lights on the table. Anne Dorte Michelsen sings *Mellem dig og mig*. Gitte has a clenched fist in front of her mouth and is silent most of the time.

'It has been hell,' I say.

‘Jeppe, all I can say is that I didn’t know.’

‘No, but you do now.’

‘Yes, but this is awful. It’s really tragic,’ my dad says. He shakes his head. I’m not quite sure what he means.

‘I totally get that it has been hard,’ Gitte says.

‘Yes, of course, it has been awful for her,’ he says.

Gitte raises her voice.

‘Yes, for her too, but mostly for Jesper,’ she says with indignation.

My dad looks confused.

‘Yes, of course, for Jeppe too,’ he says. ‘It’s a miserable situation for everyone.’

Pages 244 - 248

I stand on the uneven attic floor in Finn's flat, behind me are the slanted chimney and the leather sofa, which you can just about lie down in if you curl up or swing your legs over the armrest. We have sat here often watching British crime dramas, smoking cigarettes and drinking wine. In front of me is the ladder bookcase whose four sections cover the whole of the gable end wall. My eyes glide across the many slim spines, scanning them. I'm looking for a poetry anthology I want. Or several. I'm not a collector, but bookcases are treasure troves which fill me with intoxication, envy and a desire to plunder. I have access to my dad's, as I have had all my life. I find Nordbrandt's *84 Poems* with a turquoise photograph of the poet on the back, I can see it is a Gyldendal's book club edition, and I put it back. There is nothing else by him. A dog-eared edition of Rifbjerg's *March 1970* from Katedralskolen's library, which my dad would read aloud to Peter and me and we would roll around the floor laughing when he parodied the book's caricature of Poul Borum. Every page is covered by his slanted, tiny handwriting. I return it. I carry on searching shelf by shelf, Robert Corydon, Gustava, Per Lange, about whom Finn wrote his first book. I find three copies of *Gitte's Monologues*, also a book club edition, by Per Højholt, a friend from Finn's youth. My dad has reviewed all sorts of literature since the early 1980s, and yet there is nothing by Bo Green, Strunge, Søren Ulrik Thomsen, Tafdrup, Boberg or Pia Juul. All the interesting poetry anthologies have gone and I know without having to ask that he has given them to her. They are on the ground floor on her bookshelves.

I walk down the stairs. They are so crooked that only a drunken man can walk down them straight, to the kitchen where Finn sits smoking. His hand rests on the back of Rossi's head,

the dog wags its tail and stands with its jaw open and drooling. He chats to it.

‘How now, my little Rossi boy, daddy’s little rat, no, you can’t have a meatball, no, you can’t. But you’ve just had a walk, what’s wrong with you, rattykins?’

The dog whines and lifts its head to lick his hand. He looks up.

‘Jeppe,’ he says.

‘Finn,’ I say.

He carries on rabbiting to the dog.

‘That’s right, your brother’s here, it’s your big brother, ratty man.’

I pass the note which Peter and I put up on his white magnetic notice board half in jest one day when we were complaining that we never heard from him. It says:

Son 1: Peter. Born 1959.Tel 35 43 00 90

Son 2: Jesper. Born 1965. Tel 35 37 12 27

Above the notice board is a paper silhouette of Gitte in profile. I light a cigarette and sit down below the painting by Sven Dalsgaard, which hung in our holiday cottage for years. A yellow and green map with lines, a house, a magnified spider and words in English dotted around like place names. One of them is “the undivided vortex”. I think about the other Dalsgaard painting, the violet and purple one with a dinosaur skeleton etched in white on black at the centre, and with the caption “two keep coming and infinity eats from bowls”. It used to hang in the dining room at Rampen. Where is it now?

Rossi barks. Noisily.

‘Can’t you make that cur shut up?’ I say.

He looks up in surprise.

‘There, rattykins, easy now, there-there, your brother’s cross with you.’

He herds it into the passage and closes the door behind him. I’m so angry I want to throw up.

‘You shouldn’t have sold the cottage without asking us,’ I say.

He sits down with a heavy sigh.

‘I thought we had been through this? The cottage was just sitting there empty. I had to ask myself why, of course I did. It was costing me a considerable amount every month. I’m aware that it was a sanctuary for you and Peter, and that you also had many memories invested, but …’

‘Well, whatever, but what I don’t get is why you didn’t ask us if we wanted any of the furniture.’

‘But, Jeppe, none of it was anything special, well, there was the old Roman couch, but …’

‘And we would have liked some of the furniture from Rampen.’

‘Yes, so you say, I offer you my sincere apologies.’

‘You keep doing this. It was the same old story with your wedding, you couldn’t be bothered to include us then either. Sometimes I just don’t get you, it’s as if you don’t give a toss about us. That note on the notice board, we joke about it, but it’s the truth. Months can pass without us hearing from you while you’re busy pottering about in Fjerritslev, looking after Gitte because she needs to learn how to teach. Can’t she manage that on her own? The rest of us can. Would it kill you to spend just one sodding weekend in Copenhagen? You have two sons, for God’s sake, how about showing them you care?’

My eyes well up with tears of rage. It’s not the first time I shout at him, but it’s the first time I’m this explicit.

‘Right, that’s me told, I must say, well, I think I have managed to visit you from time to time …’

‘Don’t you get what I’m saying to you?’

‘Yes, and I’m listening …’

‘Then shut up and do something about it. I don’t want to talk about it anymore.’

I tear opened the door to the passage, Rossi bounces in happily.

‘Get out of my way, you ugly cur,’ I hiss. And stomp up to the attic. I open the terrace door to get some fresh air. I step outside. And look at the roofs of my hometown, the port with lights on the cranes in the distance, and the bay a dark shadow behind them.

In 1993 he retires at the age of sixty-four after teaching for thirty-five years at Aarhus Katedralskole, interrupted only by three years of university teaching. He has stopped reviewing for Weekendavisen, but there are magazine articles to be written, lectures to be held, dissertations to be assessed. And there is that book about Frank Jæger’s life and poetry, which he still hasn’t managed to crack despite many false starts and intensive research. And the dog. And holidays which he and Gitte are going on, eating pâté and tongue in Paris and wandering about in Athens, Acropolis calls for the fifth time. And Gitte’s studies and work fill his life, he takes part in the challenges she encounters of a professional, psychological and social nature as if they were his own.

One day during a visit he asks me how I would feel about getting a younger brother.

‘You mean a dog?’

‘No, I mean a brother, a sibling.’

‘I don’t fancy that at all.’

He seems taken aback, he flings out his hand.

‘Are you serious? Is that something you and her are planning?’

‘Well, we talk about it. There’s nothing unusual about that. Given Gitte’s age.’

‘Don’t even think about it, it would be utterly irresponsible. Why don’t you just get another dog?’

He goes to his bedroom. I follow.

‘A dog’s not a child.’

‘You can’t be serious, Finn.’

‘No, but it’s on Gitte’s mind. It’s natural at her age, I have to take it seriously.’

I shake my head.

‘Christ, I hope you have second thoughts.’

Gitte turns up a little later and I ask if she really thinks that Finn should be a father again.

‘It’s not so much about him, but I would like to have a child. I get what you’re saying, but it’s not that simple.’

‘You’ll be a single mum,’ I say. ‘All he’s good for is playing the funny uncle.’

Peter, too, expresses his lack of enthusiasm at the prospect of becoming a big brother again.

At one time there are rumours that she might leave him because she wants children. We hear nothing more about it. Instead new dogs arrive. Rossi dies and is replaced by Rasmus, who also gets the title of brother to Peter and me.