

I WALK BACK UP THE HILL TO MY HOUSE. Daylight breaks in full red and yellow, the temperature rises, I feel it on my face, and no doubt most of the snow will soon melt, maybe already by this evening. No matter what I have said before, that would be a disappointment just now.

There is a car parked in the yard beside mine. I can see it clearly from down the slope, it's a white Mitsubishi Spacewagon, rather like the one I considered buying myself as it looked robust and suited the place I had bought and was going to move to, and that was how I saw my situation then, after I had made my decision; as slightly robust, and I liked that, I felt rather robust myself after three years in a hall of glass where the slightest of movements set everything crackling, and the first shirt I fell for after the move was a red-and-black checked, thick flannel one of a kind I had not worn since the Fifties.

Someone is standing in front of the white Mitsubishi, a lady, by the looks of it, in a dark coat, bare-headed, and her hair is fair and curly for natural or more technical reasons, and she has left the engine running, I can see the exhaust rising noiselessly and white against the darker trees behind the yard. She stands, relaxed, waiting with one hand to her forehead or in her hair, looking down the road to where I am walking up, and there is something about that figure I have seen before, and then Lyra catches

wind towards her. I have not heard any car approaching, and neither did I notice any tyre marks in the snow when I came out on the road from the path, but then I was not expecting any car, not at this time of day. It cannot be more than eight o'clock. I look at my watch and it says half past eight. Ah, well.

It is my daughter standing there. The elder of two. Her name is Ellen. She has lit a cigarette and holds it the way she always has, in stretched fingers away from her body as if she is on the point of giving it to someone else, or pretending it is not hers. That alone would have made me recognise her. I swiftly calculate that she must be thirty-nine now. She is still an attractive lady. I do not think it's me she takes after, but her mother was certainly good looking. I have not seen Ellen for six months at least, and have not spoken to her -since I moved, or well before, actually. To be honest, I have not given her much thought, nor her sister, for that matter. There has been so much else. I get to the top of the slope and Lyra is standing in front of Ellen, wagging her tail and having her head patted, and the two of them do not know each other, but she is fond of dogs, and they trust her at once. It has been like that since she was little. I seem to recall she had a dog herself when I went to see her last. A brown dog. That is all I can remember. It's quite a while ago now. I stop and smile my most natural smile and she straightens up and looks at me.

'So it's you,' I say.

'Yes, it is. Did I surprise you?'

'Can't be denied,' I say. 'You're out early.'

She smiles a kind of half smile that soon fades, and

takes a drag on the cigarette, exhales again slowly and holds it away from her body with her arm almost straight out. She is not smiling any more. That rather worries me. She says:

'Early? Maybe it is. Anyway, I slept so badly I thought I might as well get an early start. I left about seven, as soon as the ones supposed to leave the house had actually left. I've given myself a day off, I decided on that long ago. It didn't take me much more than an hour to drive out here. I had expected it to be longer. It felt good, in fact, that it wasn't any further. I just arrived. About fifteen minutes ago.'

'I didn't hear the car,' I said. 'I was in the woods, down there by the lake. There was plenty of snow.' I turn and point, and before I have turned back she has stubbed out her cigarette in my yard and taken the few steps towards me and put her arms round my neck and given me a hug. She smells good and is still the same height. Which is not so strange, you do not grow much between thirty and forty, but there was a time when I was away travelling most of the year, back and forth, back and forth in every possible direction in Norway, and both girls had grown each time I came home, or that is how it seemed to me, and they sat so quietly side by side on the sofa, and I knew they were staring at the door where I would soon come in, and it made me confused, I recall, and uneasy at times, when finally I did come and saw them sitting there, shy and full of expectation. I feel a bit ill at ease now too, for she hugs me hard and says:

'Hi, my old dad. It's good to see you.'

'Hi, my girl, the same to you,' I say, and she does not

let go, but stays in that position and says very softly into my neck:

'I had to call all the town councils for eighty miles around and more to find out where you lived. I've been doing it for weeks. You don't even have a telephone.'

'No, I suppose I haven't.'

'No, you certainly do *not*. Damn you,' she says, and thumps me several times on my back, and not that lightly either. I say:

'Steady on, I'm an old man, remember,' and she may be crying then, but I am not sure. Anyway she is hugging me so hard it's difficult to breathe, and I do not push her away, just go on holding my breath, and I put my arms round her, maybe a bit on the tentative side, and wait like that until she loosens her grip, and then I let my hands sink down and take a step backwards and breathe out.

'You may just as well cut the engine now,' I say, gasping a little and nodding at the Mitsubishi standing there humming faintly. The first rays of sunlight flash on the newly polished white paint and dazzle me. My eyes smart, so I close them for a minute.

'Oh, yes,' she says, 'so I can. You *do* live here. I didn't even recognise your car, I thought maybe I had come to the wrong place.'

I hear her walking round her car in the snow and move a few steps to the side and open my eyes as she opens the car door, leans in and turns the key and switches the lights off. There's full silence. She did weep a little, I can see.'

'Come in for a cup of coffee,' I say. And I really do need to sit down, my legs are giving out after my walk

through the snow. As I said, I'm an old man. Have you had breakfast?'

'No,' she says. 'I didn't take the time.'

'Then we'll have something. Come on.'

Lyra brightens up at the word 'Come' and moves up the two steps to stand in front of the door.

'She's lovely,' my daughter says. 'When did you get her? She's no puppy, is she?'

'Over six months ago. I went to the animal sanctuary outside Oslo where they find new homes for animals. Don't remember the name of the place. I took her at once, there was no doubt, she just came up to me and sat down wagging her tail. She almost offered herself,' I say, trying a small chuckle. 'But they didn't know how old she was, or what breed.'

'It's called the A.R.A., the Association for the Re-homing of Animals. I went there once. It looks as if she's a bit of everything. In England it's called British Standard, which is a nice way of saying they are a mixture of everything you could possibly find in the streets. But she really is lovely. What's her name?'

Ellen went to school in England for a couple of years, and got a lot out of it. But she was grown up then. Before that there were several years when she didn't get much out of anything.

'Her name is Lyra. It wasn't me who thought that up. It said so on the collar she was wearing. Anyway I am glad I chose her,' I say. 'I haven't regretted it for a second. We get on really well, and she makes living alone much easier.'

Those last words sound a bit self-pitying, and disloyal to my life here, I do not need to defend it or explain it to anyone, not even to this daughter of mine, whom I do like

a lot, I must say, and she has come out here early in the morning on dark roads through several counties in her Mitsubishi Spacewagon from somewhere right on the outskirts of Oslo, from Maridalen actually, to find out where I live, because I probably have not told her that and have not even given it a thought; that I *should* have done. That may seem strange, I see that now, and her eyes turn moist again, and that irritates me a little.

I open the door and Lyra stays on the doorstep until both Ellen and I are in the hall. Then I let her in with a small well-drilled gesture. I take my daughter's coat and hang it on a free peg and follow her into the kitchen. It is still warm in there. I open the small door to the stove and have a look, and, as I hoped, there are still glowing embers in the firebox.

'This can be saved,' I say, and open the lid of the woodbox and sprinkle some kindling and strips of paper over the embers and then arrange three medium-size logs round them. I open the ash-pan cover to make a draught and straightaway there is a crackle.

'It's nice in here,' she says.

I close up the stove and look around. I don't know if she is right. I had hoped it would be nice in time, when most of my planned improvements have been launched, but it is clean, and tidy. Maybe that was what she meant, that she had expected something else from a single elderly man, and what she saw surprised her in a positive way. If it did, she does not remember much from the time we spent together. Untidiness does not suit me and never has. I am actually a meticulous person; I want everything in its place and ready for use. Dust and mess make me nervous. If I once get slack over cleaning, it is easy to let every-

thing slide, especially in this old house. One of my many horrors is to become the man with the frayed jacket and unfastened flies standing at the Co-op counter with egg on his shirt and more too because the mirror in the hall has given up the ghost. A shipwrecked man without an anchor in the world except in his own liquid thoughts where time has lost its sequence.

I ask her to sit at the table and then I fill the kettle with fresh water for coffee and put it on the cooker, and there is a hissing sound at once. I must have forgotten to switch it off when I used it this morning, and that is really quite serious, but I do not think Ellen took any notice, so I just ignore it and cut some bread, which I put in a basket. I suddenly feel angry and slightly sick, and I see my hand is shaking, so I keep myself at an angle to hide it from her when I pass her to fetch- sugar and milk and blue napkins and all that is needed to make this into a meal. I really had my fill a couple of hours ago and am not hungry yet, but even so I set out enough for the both of us, as she might feel embarrassed sitting there eating on her own. After all, it is a long time since we saw each other last. But actually I would rather not, and then there is nothing more to do that I can think of and I have to sit down.

She has been gazing out the window at the view of the lake. I look the same way and say:

'I call it Swan Lake.

'There are swans on it, then?'

'There certainly are. Two or three families, that I've seen.'

Then she turns to me. 'Tell me. How are you really?' she says, as if there were two versions of my life, and now

she is not on the verge of tears at all, but sharp-voiced as an interrogator. She is playing a role, I know, and behind it she is the one she has always been, at least I hope she is; that life has not turned her into an old nag, if I may be forgiven the expression. But I take a deep breath and pull myself together, shove my hands under my thighs on the chair and tell her about my days here, about how well I am doing, with carpentry and chopping wood and my long walks with Lyra, that I have a neighbour I can cooperate with at a pinch, his name is Lars, I say, a clever chap with a chainsaw. We have a lot in common, I say, smiling what is intended to be a secretive smile, but I can see she is not with me there, so I do not take it any further, but tell her I was a bit anxious about all the snow I knew would fall now that winter is really coming, but I have sorted that out, as she can see for herself and must have noticed when she drove up to the house, because I have made an arrangement with a farmer called Ashen. He drives a tractor with a snowplough and can do my clearing when it's needed, at a price of course. So I do get on, I say, and manage a smile, then I listen to the radio, I say, all morning when I'm indoors, and I read in the evening, various things, but mostly Dickens.

She smiles a real smile now, no moist eyes, no sharp edges.

'You were always reading Dickens at home,' she says. 'I remember that well. You in your chair with a book, miles away, and I'd go up to you and pull your sleeve and ask what you were reading, and at first you didn't seem to recognise me, and then you replied "Dickens", with a serious look, and I thought that reading Dickens was not



the same as reading other books; that it was something quite unusual, which perhaps not everyone did; that was how it sounded to me. I didn't even know Dickens was the name of the author of the book you were holding. I thought it was a special kind of book that only we possessed. Sometimes you read aloud, I remember.'

'Did I?'

'Yes, you did. From *David Copperfield*, as it turned out, when I was grown up and realised I had to read those books myself. Those days you never seemed to get tired of *David Copperfield*.'

'It's a long time since I last read that one.'

'But you do have it, don't you?'

'Oh, yes, I certainly have!'

'Then I think you should read it again, she says, and resting her chin in one hand with her elbow on the table she says:

"Whether I shall turn out to be the hero of my own life, or whether that station will be held by anybody else, these pages must show."

She smiles again and says: 'I always thought those opening lines were a bit scary because they indicated we would not necessarily be the leading characters of our own lives. I couldn't imagine how that could come about, something so awful; a sort of ghost-life where I could do nothing but watch that person who had taken my place and maybe hate her deeply and envy her everything, but not be able to do anything about it because at some point in time I had fallen out of my life, as if from an aeroplane, I pictured it, and out into empty space, and there I drifted about and could not get back, and someone else was sit

ting fastened into my seat, although that place was mine, and I had the ticket in my hand.'

It's not easy for me to say anything to that. I didn't know she had been thinking that way. She never told me. For the quite simple reason, of course, that I was not there when she needed to talk, but she can have no idea how often I have had the same thoughts and have read those first lines of *David Copperfield* and then just had to go on, page after page, almost rigid with terror because I had to see if everything fell into its rightful place in the end, and naturally it did, but it always took a long time before I felt safe. In the book. Real life was something different. In real life I have not had the courage to ask Lars the obvious question:

'Did you take the place that was rightfully mine? Did you have years out of my life that I should have lived?'

I never thought my father travelled to countries like South Africa or Brazil or to towns like Vancouver or Montevideo to make a new life for himself. He did not take flight, as so many have done, from actions committed in anger and passion or from a life in ruins after capricious blows of fate, he did not go off head over heels, shielded by the silent summer night with fearful, squinting eyes as Jon did. My father was no sailor. He stayed by the river, of that I am certain. That was what he wished for. And the fact that Lars does not talk about him when he is up at my place, the fact that Lars has not mentioned my father, not one single word in the time we have known each other, must be because he feels he wants to spare me, or because, like myself, he cannot make his thoughts come together around these persons, himself and myself included; come into that one point, because he does not have the words

for it. I do understand that. It has been the same for me almost all my life.

But that is not what I want to think about now. I rise quickly from the table, bumping into it on my way up, and making it jolt so the cups jump and coffee spatters over the tablecloth and the yellow cream jug overturns and milk floods out and mixes with the coffee, and a stream runs down, heading for Ellen's lap, and the reason for that is the sloping floor. A difference of five centimetres, in fact, from wall to wall. I measured it long ago. I should have done something about that too, but it is a huge job to lay a new floor. It will have to wait.

Ellen pushes her chair back quickly and gets up before the small stream reaches the edge of the table, and she picks up a corner of the cloth and folds it back and stops the flood with two napkins.

'Sorry. I was in too much of a hurry,' I say and to my surprise I hear the words come out of my mouth in short bursts, as if I had been running and was out of breath.

'Never mind. We just have to get this cloth off promptly so we can rinse it in the sink. No harm's done that a spot of washing powder can't put right.' She takes control of the situation in a way no-one has done in here before, and I make no protest; she has moved everything on the table over to the worktop in no time and puts the cloth under the tap to rinse the stained part and carefully wrings the cloth out and hangs it to dry over a chair in front of the warm wood stove.

'You can put it in the washing machine later on,' she says.

I open the woodbox and put a couple of logs in the stove.

Actually, I don't have a washing machine,' I say, and it sounds so poverty-stricken when I say it like that, I have to laugh, but that little chuckle does not come out so well, and she takes it in, Ellen, I can see she does. It really is not easy to find the appropriate tone in this situation.

She wipes the table with a cloth she wrings out thoroughly several times under running water as it is full of milk, and you want that well out to prevent the smell, and then she suddenly turns stiff, and with her back to me she says:

'Would you rather I hadn't come?' As if she realised only now that this might be a possibility. But it's a good question. I take a little while to answer. I sit down on the woodbox trying to gather my thoughts, and then she says: 'Perhaps you'd really rather be left in peace? That is why you are out here, isn't it, that's why you have moved to this place, because you want to be in peace, and then here I come bursting into your yard and disturbing you at the crack of dawn, and it wasn't anything you wanted at all, if it was up to you?'

She says all this with her back to me. She has dropped the cloth in the sink and grips the edge of the worktop with both hands, and she does not turn round.

'I have changed my life,' I say. 'That's what's important. I sold what was left of the firm and came out here because I had to, or things would have turned out badly. I couldn't go on the way it was.'

'I understand that,' she says. 'I really do. But why didn't you tell us?'

'I don't know. It's the truth.'

'Would you rather I hadn't come?' she says again, insistently.

'I don't know,' I say, and that is also true; I don't know what to think of her coming out here, it was not part of my plan, and then it strikes me: now she will go away and never come back. That thought fills me with such sudden terror that I quickly say:

'No, that's not true. Don't go.'

'I had no intention of going,' she says then, and only now turns from the sink. 'Not yet anyway, but I would like to make a suggestion.

'What's that, then?'

'Get yourself a telephone.'

'I'll think about it,' I say. 'Honestly, I will.'

She stays for several hours, and when she gets into her car it has already started to get dark again. By then she has been for a walk with Lyra, at her own choice, while I had half an hour's rest in bed. My house is different now, and the yard is different. She starts up with the door open. She says:

'So now I know where you live.'

'That's good,' I say. 'I'm glad you do,' and she waves briefly and slams the car door and it starts to roll down the slope. I go up the steps and turn off the yard light and walk through the hall to the kitchen. Lyra is at my heels, but even when she is behind me the room feels a bit empty. I look out at the yard, but there is nothing but my own reflection in the dark glass.