CHAPTER ONE

It was Sunday, September 1992, a little before seven. I had been out the night before, the last hour in a bar that was once a pharmacy on Tollbugata, but I hadn't left with anyone. That was almost unusual at the time, during that year, for more often than not I would head into Oslo city centre and against my own nature go to bars and cafés and walk through the doors into the smoke-filled loud premises I suddenly felt so at home in, and still against my own nature would take a close look around and think, where shall I spend the night. When I left the café or pub or bar a few hours later, I was rarely alone. When those months lay behind me, I had been to more bedrooms, in more houses, in more parts of the city than I would have thought possible for a man like me. But it stopped of its own accord, I'd wanted to be like a fire, but there were more ashes in my fire now than there were flames.

So when the phone rang that morning, I was lying in my own bed. I had no wish to answer it, I felt dead tired. I had been drinking, yes, but not much, and definitely not after eleven, and had taken the Tåsen bus up from the city and got off at the junction where today there is a roundabout and walked on past Sagene church towards Bjølsen

in the light drizzle. When I entered my apartment, I felt perfectly fine and was certain that by now I was no longer under the influence.

What made me so tired were the dreams I was having. It's not easy to explain already here, on page two, what it was about them that made me feel so exhausted, I will have to come back to that. I had planned to stay in bed at least an hour longer and then get up and put the kettle on for coffee and sit down at the desk, and if possible write for a couple of hours even though it was Sunday. But the phone would not stop ringing, so I swung my legs out of bed and walked quickly to the living room to pick it up, and that I did because it felt unlawful just to let it ring. I have always had, and still have, the notion that answering the phone is mandatory and if I ignore it, I might be taken to court.

It was Turid's voice. It had been a year since she left and took the girls with her and moved to a terraced house at Skjetten. She was crying, and as far as I could make out, she had her hand close to her mouth to muffle the sound, and so I said, Turid, what's wrong, but she wouldn't answer that. Are you at home, I said, but she wasn't. But Turid, where are you then, I said, but she didn't know. Don't you know where you are, I said, and she kept crying and said, no. She didn't know where she was.

Damn, I thought. If she's crying like that and is not at home, then where are the girls. There were three of them,

after all. They were certainly not staying with me, and her mother was in Singapore. My mother was dead, and my father was dead, and my brothers were on the whole dead. Do you want me to come and get you, I said, for I assumed she didn't have her car where she was, and she kept crying and said yes, that's why I'm calling, I have no one else, and I thought, if you have no one else, then you don't have much. But that was not what I said, I said, but then I have to know where you are. What does it look like where you are standing. There's a train station here, she sobbed, the building is yellow, but there's no train. Well, I said, it might be a bit early, it's Sunday, you know, and then she said, no, that's not what I mean, what I mean is there are no tracks for the train to run on.

I thought for a moment, where could it be, there weren't many places to choose from within a reasonable distance, it had to be Bjørkelangen, I couldn't think of anywhere else. Jesus, it was fifty kilometres, or more, maybe sixty, why was she there, without a car, without anyone, at this time of day. But I couldn't ask her that, it had nothing to do with me, I could mind my own business, which more or less I did. All the rest was over and done with anyway. I didn't even miss it, I thought, after such a long year, but when I had finished that thought, I couldn't say for certain that it was true.

I know where you are, I said, I'm leaving in five minutes. Thank you, she said, and I said, of course it will take me some time to get there. I am aware of that, she said, and

I thought, how can she be aware of that, she doesn't even know where she is.

A red telephone booth, an abandoned yellow-painted station building she could probably see from the booth. If I was right, it shouldn't be too difficult. It could of course be some other abandoned railway station many miles in a totally different direction, but none came to mind.

I took a quick shower, pulled my short James Dean jacket on, and with half a bread roll in my hand I hurried down the steps, out to the parking place right by the bus stop in front of the yellow brick building I lived in on Advokat Dehlis plass at Bjølsen, and got into my thirteen-year-old station wagon, a champagne-coloured Mazda 929.

I got there in forty-five minutes. That was fast. Faster would have meant prison.

At the junction by the petrol station on the way into Bjørkelangen I turned left and drove all the way down past the Felleskjøpet grain cooperative whose yellow logo had been painted directly onto the sky-high cylinder-shaped silos, an ear of grain in the middle, and on either side of it the letters F and K painted green. Then I turned right on Stasjonsveien at the next junction, where the little hotel with the café was; all the windows dark now, not a lamp lit, so I supposed it had been closed since the last time I was here, it was hardly unthinkable, for how could it pay to run a hotel, at Bjørkelangen.

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A bit further down the road stood the red telephone booth, as expected, not far from the old station building. I drove down there and parked in front of the station, and there was a bus stop too, the last one on the route by the looks of it, but Turid I could not see.

There was no bus at the bus stop, it was completely still, and my car was one of three parked by the station. The other two were a sedan and a station wagon, both Volvos, both blue, both had seen better days. At Bjørkelangen everyone probably knew which car belonged to whom, and so the Mazda stood out in its somewhat rusty champagne-coloured state of decay with plates no one had seen around here, and perhaps one resident said to another, who the hell does that car belong to, when he saw it through the window of one of the houses nearby. The thought of it made me restless. What counted now was to get in fast and get out just as fast, and of course she wasn't sitting out here in the limelight in front of the station building, so I walked around to what strictly speaking was the front or at least had been when the shiny rails ran into the station here, all the way from Sørumsand in the west and came out again going east, this time with the train on top of them, and the conductor on the footboard, he leaned out with his green flag flapping, and with the whistle in his mouth he blew: off and away! And he blew again, he was proud of that whistle and the sound that it made, who wouldn't be.

But the rails had been narrow gauge and had lost the battle for the future a generation ago and more, but still,

only two decades back the train ran unsuspecting out here to Bjørkelangen, turning south towards Skullerud, to the lake and the steamboat that could carry you down through the sluices from the deep inland all the way to the outer Oslofjord and on from there to anywhere in the world, to Spain, to America, if that's where you wanted to go, and it wasn't really far to Sørumsand nor to Skullerud and the dialect pretty much the same, and the rails had been torn up a long time ago and carted off as scrap metal and new ones were never laid.

She was sitting on the grass with her forehead on her knees on the slope down to the little river I knew was called Lierelva. I knew everything about these places spread out across a wide area of eastern Norway. I had driven through them and past them countless times, alone in the daytime and night-time too, sometimes with the girls in the back seat, all three of them, or just one, in that case Vigdis, who was the eldest. I had driven and driven again until I was tired of it, I was incredibly tired of it right now. Of the roads. Of the cars, of Mazda and Ford, of Opel, of any brand at all, of manuals and automatics, of petrol-powered cars and cars that were diesel powered, of quiet-running cars and cars that spewed coal-black smoke out over the tarmac in a miserable tail from their exhaust pipes. I hadn't worked out how much carbon dioxide I emitted on these trips. It was probably a criminal amount, and honestly, it bothered me, I thought about it often, I lay awake at night counting litres of fuel, counting cubic metres in my sleep,

but what could I do, should I take pills, how damaging was the pharmaceutical industry, certainly very damaging, though I didn't know with what substance or how; toxic runoff into the ground, crap in the air, or just narcotically destructive in general.

What I could have done was to keep a journal during that period. It would have been enough for a book of several hundred pages, it might have been interesting, I thought, geographically, topographically, biographically not least, I was restless and had been for a long time, and it was hard then to keep away from the car. This last year I had used it as dope. What else was I to do in the evenings. It was Oslo city centre or the Mazda, and as often as I went to bars, I went out and sat behind the wheel.

I could see from her shoulders that she was still crying, and I thought, how can she keep it up for so long. It was hard to understand. But then I didn't know what had happened and did not intend to ask, it was her life, not ours.

After a pointless, failed attempt at a fireman's lift I managed to get her into the passenger seat. It wasn't easy, her legs were like rubber, apparently having no joints, and at first I thought that she was drunk, and she probably had been, maybe very drunk, but she wasn't drunk now, she said, I'm sorry Arvid several times, and I said, just relax Turid, we're doing fine, though we would've been doing even better if she hadn't relaxed quite so much. I had never seen her in a state like this, not once in all our long life together, and now I was forced to put my arms

around her, but her body didn't feel like I knew it from before, it was confusing, I had expected at least a mild form of recognition in my palms or something like recognition, but now her body felt private, and at the same time more distinct, yes, that was it, like a body not moving away but a body coming towards me, but that was not how the land lay, her body was not coming towards me at all, and then I had to place my hands so they didn't settle where they once had settled, just a year had gone by since the last time, but right now I couldn't remember whether I still held her in my arms then, I was certain I didn't, I was too afraid, walled up in my own self, anything could happen if I held her in my arms.

I parked by the terraced house right after hers to make it easy to take the shortest route across the lawn to the flat she lived in, at the very end of the row, and in that way avoid being seen by her closest undoubtedly nosy neighbours. I assumed it was a consideration. Would you like me to come in with you, I said, and immediately thought, I shouldn't have said that, I really didn't want to. Would you, she said. If you like, I said, and she said, oh, that would be so nice of you, almost gushing with gratitude, and that made me embarrassed, it felt humiliating, I got mad, she had said on the phone that she had no one but me, but I didn't want to be her shining knight, her saviour, and get nothing in return but gratitude. What use was gratitude to me. And when the year before we'd stood face to face for the last time in the flat we shared on Advokat

Dehlis plass at Bjølsen, she smiled and said almost wistfully, I was so certain we would grow old together, and her friends who were not my friends, but several years younger, as Turid herself was, were standing outside on the pavement by the heavily loaded van, a Volkswagen Caravelle, I remember it clearly, it was garishly yellow, and it was sunny out there where her friends were, and it struck me that their clothes were particularly colourful, almost hippie-like, I would never have worn clothes like that, and I said, then you have to give me what comes before, what comes after now, but before old age, what's in the middle, but she wouldn't give me that, she said, she couldn't, and I said, okay then, goddammit.

But it was true that the last year we lived together the days and the nights had slid into each other so slowly that in the end they stopped altogether and everything was on hold, and more and more often in the evenings I couldn't bring myself to lie down in the bed where she had already been lying for an hour or more. We'd become like magnets with identical poles turned towards each other, plus to plus, minus to minus, I could thrust myself towards her and instantly be knocked out of the bedroom as I passed the threshold and fly backwards into the living room as if from a heavy blow to my chest and slide across the floor and hit the wall on the opposite side, and this happened again and again, so instead I remained sitting on the sofa playing the records she could easily hear through the wall and know which ones they were. It was the music from

when we were new together and I still didn't know who she was, who hid inside her body, nor she who in mine, who I was, and the only thing we wanted was to find that out, for I was flying back then, I was carving myself out of the person I had been, I was in love, that was why, those were the records I played. But eventually I gave up the records too, and well after midnight I would go down the stairwell with the nearly hundred-year-old, many of them cracked, star-patterned Moroccan tiles I'd always liked so much on every landing and then out through the gateway from the backyard with the old stable that was now a garage for the neighbour with the longest seniority who every Sunday could be seen standing on a stool in the cobbled courtyard in his absurdly spotless boiler suit polishing his ancient Volvo Duett he hadn't driven one metre as far as I knew, and below the gateway ceiling it was pitch dark on my way out to the Mazda which was parked in the marked-out space in front of the tenement, close to the bus stop. And I got into the passenger seat and tipped it back as far as it would go, and half sitting, half lying I settled there with my warm coat pulled tight around me, hoping for sleep after the day bestowed upon me, until the first buses came down the hill from the plain on top where the big bus depot stood in the semi-darkness and the sports fields and the margarine factory in the same dark. And the buses came, almost invisible and silent they pulled into the bus stop and swung their doors open with a sound that later was easy for me to remember, a discreet and intimate sound so close up, a soft and

well-oiled exhalation from the doors, because the buses were new, probably, and after that the sleepy steps of the people travelling; two steps up and one step inside to the driver at the very front and their muted voices and every word between them turned down low as if they were embers of yesterday's fire, and all of them sounds that were rarely heard by anyone other than someone like me. I could see them all in my mind's eye, their cars parked in places like this, along roads and streets, by bus stops, in garages and driveways, with men in my situation, half lying, half sitting in their seats with their coats and cars pulled tight around them, trying to doze off for a few hours alone and finally being gathered up in the dark of night by soft hands and soundless winches, hauled together in long rows, one after the other, bumper to bumper, button to button, headlight to tail light, in a fellowship ranked by the man's age and the brand of the car, as if waiting for the last rites, for oblivion, sleeping in a foetal position, their unshaven cheeks against the cold backs of their hands, barely breathing in the cold darkness.

Not once did it strike me that she could have come down the stairs, out into the dark in her nightdress and boots and opened the door to the front seat and asked me to come back in, come back up, up to the warm bed, said, but Arvid, you can't sit here, it's so cold, why don't you come up where it's warm. That would have changed everything. But not until I realised that it had never crossed my mind that she could have come down, nor could

remember having wished for it a single time, did it dawn on me that all was lost.

Now I walked behind her across the lawn to the terraced house, and my shoes sank into the soft grass, and so did hers, for the ground was still damp from the night and the rain, and from behind I could see that her right stocking had run from well up under her skirt to down over her thigh towards the back of her knee where her skin was exposed, dull and white in a broad stripe with the shimmering fabric on either side, and I thought, when did she start wearing stockings like that. Not in my time, that's for certain, and before me there was nothing, there was nothing before you she had said early one morning the first spring we were together, and I remember how I blushed with pride like a child. But now I couldn't keep myself from staring at the skin on the back of her thigh through the ladder in her stocking, and I felt a sudden thump in my stomach, and a pillar of red rising to my close-cropped hair, but she couldn't see that, she couldn't see me or my gaze, but walked unsuspecting and dejected across the grass towards the house, and the feeling was one that was hard to remember from a year ago or more or whether it had been there back at the beginning. That sudden thump. But I knew that it hadn't, this was something else, and I suppose I might have been ashamed of that feeling, seeing her as I saw her now before me, the bent back, her desolate palms.

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We made it into the hallway, I shut the door behind us, and she leaned against the wall and closed her eyes, and something confusing met me there in the hall, for even though it was the woman I had been married to for so many years who lived in this flat, and my three daughters, my own children, who also lived here, the atmosphere, the air, the smell, everything I could feel, could touch and see was completely alien to me. I didn't recognise a thing, which was not so strange, since in fact I had never been inside her flat but had refused to cross the threshold and always stayed outside on the flagstones in the sun or rain, waiting, or waiting in the car in the parking space until I could see the girls coming around the corner with their bags carrying extra clothes and perhaps their school things, but still I had expected something that was not yet a thing of the past; a last remainder of what was me, which all four of them each in their own way had brought with them from Bjølsen, a small but still noticeable absence, a bottle not quite filled up again, but there was nothing there. I was as if erased.

I had to help her get her shoes off, she couldn't manage on her own, she bent down, and then she just fell over, and I pulled the little chest of drawers from below the mirror and helped her up from the floor and said, now sit here Turid, and she did what I told her, and so I went down on my knees to undo the laces of her shoes, an iconic sight, I would imagine, but still a posture I had never been seen in, kneeling before her, even though we had been together for fifteen years.

Now she leaned forward with one hand on my shoulder, and then the hand slid slowly off past my neck, and her head followed, and her hair tickled my ear on its way down. Finally her forehead lay heavily against my shoulder on one side, and her right hand hung loosely down my back on the other; an embrace, if you like, it could hardly be called anything else. These were awkward circumstances. She didn't move, and her cheek lay close to mine, and her warm breath seeped under my jacket, down over the skin on my back. I could feel it clearly. She wasn't crying any more, each breath in the right place after the one before, and it was excruciating, I couldn't move anything except my fingers around her laces, and I thought, has she fallen asleep there on my shoulder, she was so quiet all of a sudden, did you fall asleep Turid, I said. No, I'm not asleep, she said almost in my ear, can I just sit like this for a little while, and I said, that's fine, you can sit like that for a little while, if you want to. It wasn't fine at all, but what the hell could I say.

When her shoes were off, I managed to support her across the threshold and into the living room, and I wondered if it wouldn't be the right thing to help her into bed, which was where she belonged just now, but I couldn't cope with seeing her bed, or, I wouldn't mind seeing it, the strangeness of it, the painfully attractive newness of it, the surge in my stomach I knew would come, but I couldn't, although everything inside me yearned to, I had to get out of this, I had to get away.

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We crossed the floor and I carefully loosened my grip and lowered her slowly in front of the sofa so she could sit down, but then she just kept sliding all the way to the floor until she was kneeling with her neck bent and her palms heavy on the carpet and started crying again, and then she pulled herself together and crawled the few metres over and sat with her back slumped against the wall between the kitchen door and a cabinet that used to stand in the hallway at Bjølsen. She had painted it an insistent blue, to remove all memories, no doubt, and I could barely recognise it.

I could have sat down on the sofa, it would have been easy and perhaps the normal thing to do, but I didn't sit down, I said, Turid, where are the girls. What, she said. Where are the girls, I said. Oh, the girls, they're with a friend. She mentioned a name. I didn't like that at all. Why were they with her. Why are they there, I said, and she said, she was the only one who said yes. But did they want to go there, I said. Not so much, Turid said. She let her forehead sink to her knees. Turid, I said, do you want me to fetch them for you. I felt I had to ask, I was worried. Would you, she said, and I said, sure, I can do that. Thank you, that would be so nice of you, she said. Maybe you could wait until this afternoon. Okay, I said, then I'll wait. I really didn't want to wait, but it was still early in the morning. Turid, I said, is there anything I can do for you before I go. She turned her face so I could see it, it was wet with tears, and she said, do you have to go, and I said that I did. But I wish you would stay, she said, and

I said, that's understandable, but it wouldn't be the right thing for me to stay. I wish you would, she said, there are things I want to talk to you about, I have no one else, she said for the second time that day, and I felt the sudden yearning for her, not for the woman she had been when we were together, but for the one she was now, and I knew only too well it was because I was the stronger and she the weaker; her defenceless body, her broken will, and I said, goddammit Turid, don't come to me with your life. And I meant it, I didn't want any of it.

I caught a glimpse of the incredulous look in her eyes before I turned and walked straight out of the living room and out through the hallway where the chest of drawers from below the mirror stood blocking the way, and I pushed it roughly to the side, but then I might as well move it back where it belonged, and so I did, making sure it was perfectly centred, and out on the steps I shut the door behind me with a bang. I walked across the lawn and got into the car, and my heart was thumping and I sat there for a good while breathing heavily until it turned quiet and I was able to drive off.

PART TWO

CHAPTER TWO

I cannot remember exactly the first time I took the bus down to Oslo city centre to walk the streets of an evening, go to bars, visit pubs and cafés, but it must have been shortly after Turid marched out, the same month, most likely, and therefore one long year after the ship burned with my loved ones in it, as they put it on the news, his loved ones perished onboard a burning ship, in a cabin, in a corridor, they vanished at sea, they fell out of this life not far from a duty-free shop.

What I remember is sitting in my usual seat at the very back of the bus, on the way down from Bjølsen, Sagene, wearing my best clothes, which was my reefer jacket, the same old, but with new brass buttons I had bought from a helpful lady with needle and thread at the Button House behind the Parliament building, and every button shiny bright with an anchor stamped on it. I wore a yellow neckerchief with the knot at the back and outmoded, undramatically flared trousers to accentuate the sailor style. I was freshly showered, my hair freshly washed, I was making up for what was lost, whatever lost there was, I was thirty-eight years old, everything was blown, I had nothing left.

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It was already autumn, or something like autumn, it was hard to say. In any case it was chilly. At the bus stop right below my flat I pulled the jacket collar up against the wind from the north, but there was no wind from the north, it was quiet everywhere, it just felt like the right thing to do that day, and it certainly looked better.

When I got off the bus at the end of Storgata the sky was black above the city, but the shop windows were full of light and the lamps shone along the streets, and in the streets two shimmering pairs of tram rails ran like liquid silver between the cobbles, in the asphalt, and the neon signs hung sated with yellow over the doors of the book shop, the shoe shop, with red and blue in the humid sticky Oslo air, each drop tinted in the drizzle and the colours inverted on the moist pavements, and in the replete, almost plump space between the buildings the air felt extra cold against my cheeks as I came walking in the warm reefer jacket, past Strøget, past the Opera Passage, with pockets full of my own hands, and just there, as I turned and looked in through the big not very beautiful building, it dawned on me that I had never done this alone before, that I had always travelled downtown with Turid to meet other young adults we knew, communists and poets, trade unionists, welders and lathe operators from Akers Mechanical and Myra Workshop, to drink beer and talk politics and books at Cordial, Dovrehallen, Lompa, places like that, even after we had children. But then it slowly ebbed out. Turid turned away and found new

friends, who did not become my friends, and in the last year I had gone down to Gamla on rare occasions to have dinner with Audun, my brother in arms from Veitvet, and even more rarely to meet one or two of the few other friends I had who were only mine, or had been before Turid and I became a couple. But for the most part it didn't go well. I was too restless, I couldn't sit still and always ended up apologising and getting out before the session had ended, and at times it was taken badly.

Anyhow, I wouldn't want to be with any of them now, certainly not with Turid, nor with friends, not even Audun, and that gave me a feeling of recklessness. Being alone in an apartment was one thing, in my own flat with everything that was mine, the books, the pictures on the walls, the Buddha on my desk, or inside a bus or on the Underground with my father's satchel and an old Pax edition of the more than thousand-year-old Chinese poet Du Fu's poems in my lap, or perhaps Bertolt Brecht's *Tales from the Calendar*, and if so, an early Lanterne edition; another thing was to step out into the world where roofs flung up and walls burst open to the flooding city. It was risky, but honestly, if everything went awry I could easily find a taxi and be back home within fifteen, twenty minutes before panic took hold. It would have been worse in San Francisco, in Berlin or London. That taxi did not exist.

But Oslo was my own town, and I thought it would be okay.

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